

Sights of the second music

THE SEM ENSEMBLE from Buffalo played at the Kitchen on June 5. They are working with some radical forms of theatre pieces and static music and have come up with some interesting and original ideas. The only problem is that they don't do a very good job of presenting them.

Peter Kotik's "There Is Singularly Nothing," for example, is basically a fine piece, and it would probably work very well if Julius Eastman would enunciate the Gertrude Stein text intelligibly, so that the listener would have a little more to think about during that long expanse of time. The performance was also marred by Jay Beckenstein's soprano saxophone technique, which lacks the kind of control which would be taken for granted at the Village Vanguard or Alice Tully Hall. And why shouldn't performance standards in new music be just as high as in other genres?

They also presented an interpretation of a piece by LaMonte Young in which the four performers each reiterate a different pitch. But they had to start over because somebody was singing the wrong note. Even after they got going, the combination of sounds wasn't anything to marvel at: one rich voice, one thin voice, one shaky voice, and one pale flute.

In Eastman's "Tripod" the four performers sit at tables playing two-handed card games. There is a lot of small talk that seems improvised, and occasionally one of the performers stabs one of the others with a toy knife. If the idea is simply that people symbolically stab each other when they gossip, there is no need for the piece to go on more than three minutes. If there is more to it than that, the point is not clear to me.

I hear many long static pieces these days, and when they are done well, the results can be quite moving. But when they are not done well, they are just long and static.

—Tom Johnson