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Coffee

Review WEEK 1

Orchestra, Two Bands In Concert

By THOMAS PUTNAM

The marathon concert which brought together the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and two rock bands — the Grateful Dead and the Road — was a strange imbalance of ecstasy and cool. The program Tuesday night in Kleinhans Music Hall drew a good house — about 2,300 — for the benefit of the orchestra.

People came to hear the Grateful Dead, and indeed, when that group got warmed up it seemed the audience would not be content with anything less than having the Dead finish the concert by themselves.

Speaker fuzziness spoiled the first vocal number, but after the sound system was improved the group went through several numbers with good effect, including a long performance in which the beat had most of the audience clapping and, as space permitted, dancing.

The soundscape of the Grateful Dead is an interesting blend of organ, percussion (drums and resonant gongs) and guitars. Two firecrackers were set off on stage, increasing the excitement. During one number Philharmonic percussionist Lynn Harbold sat in with the Dead on drums.

Five Conductors

Following intermission Foss led a performance of his "Geod" for orchestra. This entailed the use of four additional conductors, a laser-beam light projections created by Sohovision.

If Foss couldn't give the rock audience the music it wanted, he could try to pass with a light show. But even the light show was soon pale once the few effects had been comprehended.

The idea behind the laser-beams is that they are realizations in color and design of the musical sounds. The four colors are green, blue, yellow and red. Starting from a point of color, a design blossoms in nervous lines that squiggle and dart over walls and ceiling.

The play of lines made the light show something of an animated game. But soon the agitated patterns were not very interesting. (Circular forms, used during the final part of the program, were quite beautiful to see.)

Familiar Tunes

The music of "Geod" requires five conductors to give cues to play audibly and inaudibly. Most of the music is very quiet, familiar tunes played against a soft curtain of sustained tones, with snippets of wind phrases for gentle agitation. "Taps," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Going Home" and a very slow "Merrily We Go Along" were some tunes heard.

Sounds included gentle singing from the orchestra, organ, harmonica, accordion and mandolin. The audience joined in clapping at one point, and by the end of the performance was making knocking, popping mouth sounds that seemed to fit quite well.

The program ended with an attempt to merge symphony orchestra and rock bands in an improvised jam. It didn't work very well. Jan Williams and Foss issued spoken directions (Attention: Attack . . . Gliss downward . . . Vibrato") which made the performance rather unspontaneous. Only when a rock band came alive did the jam work.

The program began with Foss at the piano, playing Bach in the "Non-Improvisation" with three groups — the Road, members of the orchestra and the Dead. Road played a set, and then there was a piece by John Cage, which included a lecture by Cage from loud speakers and live performers ströling through the concert hall.