

by Chris Perry

A concert of new music by Portland composer Elliot Rubin will be presented at the Portland Art Museum Auditorium on Friday, October 12th at 8 p.m. Admission will be \$4. The music will be enhanced with a multimedia presentation which will include slides, tape, and masks, as well as a chorus and gamelan orchestra. Elliot Rubin is exploring new ways to dramatize his music.

Chris: Which of these pieces did you write first?

Elliot: Probably *Still Life* was first — I believe I finished it in January of this year (1984). It's a meditative piece. It was originally composed for just piano with two players. It's more concerned with very slow changes of not so much mood as impressions. I guess you call it an impressionistic minimalist piece.

Chris: Like an impressionist still life painting?

Elliot: Exactly. There is not any conspicuous movement going on, but you're looking at something that maybe changes with your own change of perspective. Minimalist music represents the idea that the music is supposed to convey a single mood that is created over an extended period of time. A good way to describe it is to contrast it with most conventional Western music over the last several centuries. Western music is founded on the premise of contrast (fast and slow, loud and soft, high and low). Minimalism has been very heavily influenced by Eastern music — Indonesian and Indian music — as well as new Rock music with the constant beat. It's this evenness of tone and rhythm that creates sometimes a meditative quality — it's a mesmerizing kind of effect. There's very little contrast. The change that's in it is very subtle and gradual.

Chris: Are most of the pieces on the program minimalist pieces?

Elliot: No. Just *Still Life* and the piece for gamelan orchestra — *The Effervescent Bubbles of Joy and Despair* — fall into that category.

Chris: Who is your male chorus?

Elliot: I have people from the Gay Men's Chorus, Pacific Choral Ensemble, and also from the Opera Chorus.

Chris: What's *No Exit* about?

Elliot: It's an "existentialist requiem."

Chris: Was this written with a certain person in mind?

Elliot: My father. He died of cancer last year. Even before his death I had an existentialist view of death and life... that is, nothing is fair, nothing makes sense. Death is not the sweet, glorious, peaceful, wonderful experience where you die and go to heaven necessarily. Life is Hell and then it's over. I don't feel quite that distraught, really. But in my father's case, it was very much that experience — that is, those were my feelings watching him die. He had always had a very healthy life. He always said that when he died he wanted to go quickly and quietly, and unfortunately, this was neither quickly nor quietly. It was very drawn out and painful, and extremely painful for us to watch. And in particular the piece represents my feeling about the last few hours he was alive, because it was just agonizing.

Chris: How did you express these feelings in the music?

Elliot: With a lot of non-conventional vocal techniques, a lot of falsetto, a lot of whining sounds, despairing sounds, reaching out for something that isn't there.

Chris: Are there words then?

Elliot: It's basically two lines: "Our hope is gone" — that is repeated throughout the piece in various permutations and combinations. The other line is, "Alone we face death." That's not to discount the reality of friends

and lovers, of course. Still, what was going through my father's mind at the time of death was very private... we could only communicate up to a point, and beyond that he was alone. The title was inspired by the play "No Exit" by Sartre. The idea that we're trapped in life. You know, existentialism is often thought of as a very pessimistic philosophy of life, and if anything, the contrary is true. Once one accepts that what we have is what is here and now, then we're free in a way to not rely on a promise of something better later on. We've got to make the best of what we have.

Chris: Is *Songs of Darkness* dealing with death also?

Elliot: Partially. More with the darker aspects of life. Those fascinate me. All the texts are written by Arthur Rimbaud, who was one of the founders of the Symbolist Movement in the literature of France in the 1870s. It relied on imagery very strongly, and was also very Freudian in its explorations of the darker aspects of human nature. There are three songs in this cycle. The first is called "Nocturne Vulgaire" — usually translated as "Common Nocturne." It's dealing basically with a hallucination of a storm being in a house and all of a sudden the walls the floor, and the roof just disappear, and he's in a very strange and otherworldly countryside, and at the end of it the forces of evil are all rumbling towards him, and it's a very frightening sensation, a bad trip. He wakes up, but you're left with the uncertainty of "was it real?" The second song is called "Evening Prayer," and it is anything but religious: it's very anti-religion, a mockery. The final verse in the song is sort of an ultimate insult. I don't want to give any more than that away. The third song is called "A Night in Hell." It is again sort of a hallucination of what it would be like to die and go to hell. *The Effervescent Bubbles of Joy and Despair* is a very lively piece for gamelan. Much lighter.

Chris: You seem mostly interested in acoustic instruments. Have you explored electronics — are you interested in them?

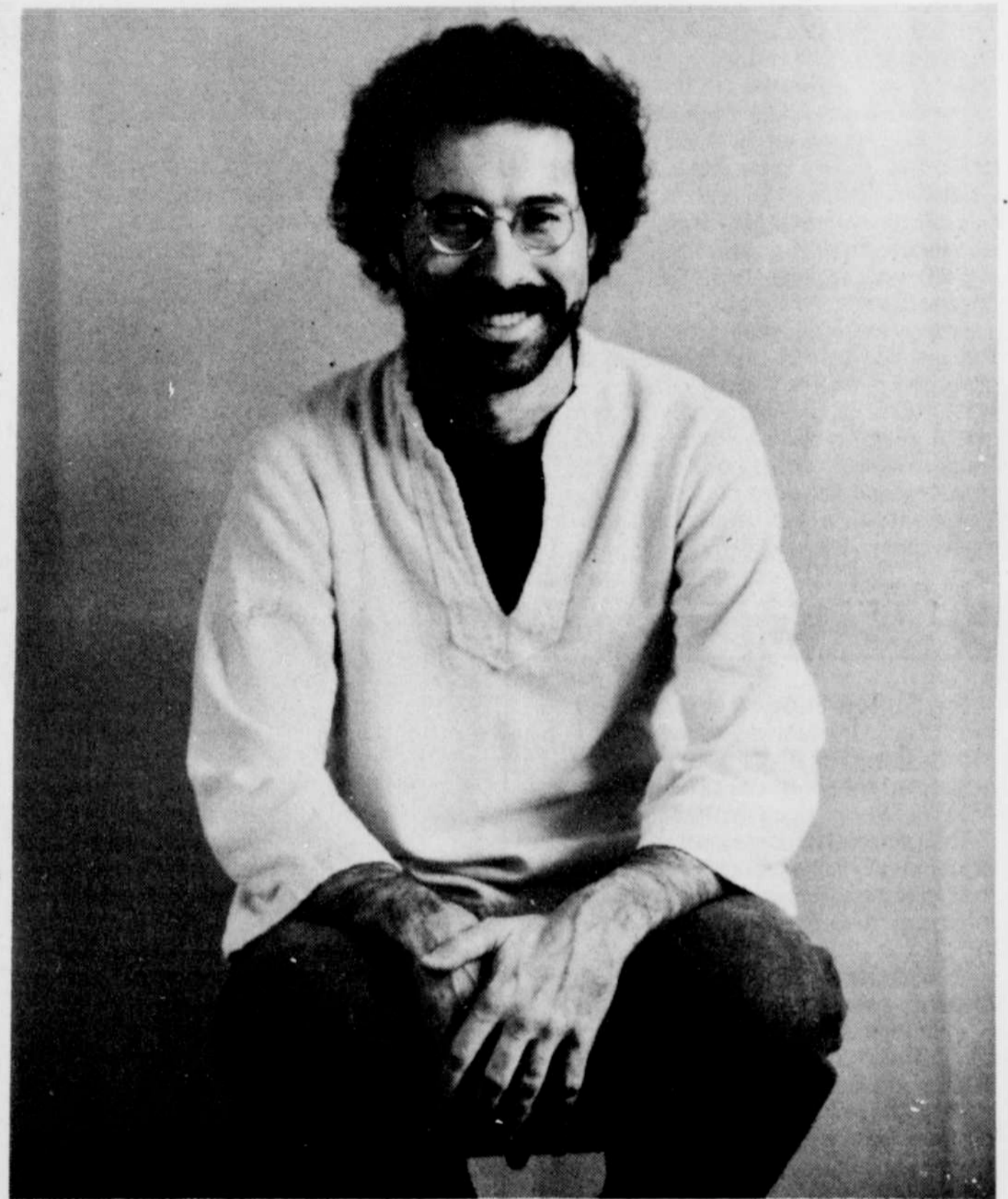
Elliot: Good question. I have worked with electronic music, with tape. In fact, there is tape used in *Songs of Darkness*. I like using it, but I'm a little bit wary still of using a lot of electronic devices. I've heard too many pieces that abuse it. It can be just a gimmick; it's easy to fall into sounding cute. The synthesizer is virtually an orchestra in itself. It takes a long time to know the potential and the right way to use those instruments. Too many people use them to imitate acoustical sounds. Well, why not use the real acoustical sound? Things do seem to be going back into multi-media presentations. In fact, I have some of that in these pieces. For example, in *Still Life* there are slides. In *Songs of Darkness*, the position of the performers changes during the piece, to enlarge the sense of space. I want to create the sense of a void. That takes space. Every piece considers the visual aspect. Most of all *No Exit* with the chorus: there is no artificial lighting used, we use candles that each performer carries, and they will be wearing masks. The masks are being designed by a local choreographer/artist/dancer named Donna Steiger. They will be very grotesque death masks; they'll be abstract, contorted faces. Nine members of the chorus will wear them. The person who plays the string bass (the only instrument in the piece) will not be wearing a mask. That is symbolic because the bass player represents the human. The chorus represents the forces of death and despair — not necessarily human.

Soloists for selected pieces by Elliot Rubin will be Ellen Johnson, soprano; Susan Stenger, flute; Michael Stirling, double bass; and John Vergin, piano; with slides by Jon Dickinson.

(continued on pg. 15)

An Interview With Elliot Rubin

*Exploring new ways
to dramatize music*



There are a lot of people who claim to be liberal, who deep down feel that being gay is not quite as good as being straight — and a way to compensate for that is by overdoing something else that's respectable, whether it's voting Republican, or being patriotic, or trying to look straight. It's all compensation, and I think that's very much the issue here when we talk about a relationship with a younger person. It's not accepted as legitimate in this society.