

THURSDAY, MAY 13, 1993

# Composer's Toddler Inspires Piano Work

By Joshua Kosman  
*Chronicle Staff Critic*

Pianist Robert Helps, guest performer for the Composers, Inc. season closer Tuesday night in the Green Room, more than earned his keep with the premiere of an exuberantly witty new work by Robert Greenberg.

"Dude Tudes" is a set of six keyboard etudes, inspired by the composer's 22-month-old son. Like their subject, the pieces are short but densely packed, and though they're clearly virtuoso exercises, they wear their difficulties lightly; the point is not so much to crunch notes as to have fun.

Much of the piece's eight-minute duration, in fact, is spent racing around like a wild animal (Greenberg's string quartet "Child's Play," revived last week by the Alexander String Quartet, evokes some similar images). In the first piece, "Orneriness/Contrary Motion," dense melodic lines career hyperactively in all directions, while "Dancin' Fool/Quarter-Minute Waltz" does its few energetic turns and then vanishes.

There are gentler sections as well, such as "Angel's Hair/Legato," a dreamy assemblage of sustained notes. In my favorite piece, "Building Blocks/Chords 'n' Stuff," Greenberg piles up chunks of sound into a deliciously unruly structure. Helps, for whom the

piece was written, gave it a charged, insouciant reading.

He led off with five selections from "Various Leaves," a collection of short pieces published by the Berkeley-based Fallen Leaf Press. These included another charming nursery study, "Kellon's Counting Game" by Elinor Armer, as well as Allen Shearer's sketch-like "Windows" and "Triste Encuentro," Douglas Leedy's improbably engrossing rewrite of the Chopin E-Minor Prelude.

Helps also performed his own "Quartet for Piano," a four-movement piece from 1971 that dodges the various compositional pieties of the time impressively, without substituting anything very pressing in their place.

After intermission, cellist Lawrence Granger gave a gorgeous rendition — robust, sensitive and sweet-toned — of "Secret Thoughts," a 10-minute soliloquy by Frank La Rocca. The 1986 score is a stream of private musings that are stately, humane and just a bit sentimental.

The program concluded with Henri Lazarof's Serenade for String Sextet, a three-movement exercise in angst-laden dissonances that sounded like Expressionism without much subtext. Steven Andre Dibner conducted.