

Sonata a Standout on Contemporary Program

BY MARILYN TUCKER

Five vocal and instrumental pieces written in the last 10 years in freely contemporary styles were offered on Tuesday's Composers, Inc. program in the Green Room of the Veterans Building.

All of the pieces had their particular merit, but the one that grabbed the ears and held on tenaciously was David Froom's Piano Sonata. As performed by Earl Shenk, the sonata by Froom, currently teaching at the University of Utah, honors the grand tradition of 19th century sonata writing at the same time that it adds its distinctive contemporary touches.

The Froom sonata is a big one, 17 minutes long and sprawling all over the keyboard, and written in three movements with the familiar labels of Maestoso, Adagio and Presto. But while adhering to traditional form and pitch centers, this work has a free contemporary spirit in its continuous elaboration of musical ideas.

Only virtuosos have any business tackling such a blockbuster of a piece, and Shenk played it masterfully.

Another work that impressed was Berkeley composer Robert Greenberg's "Quasi un Madrigale" ("Almost a Madrigal"), a cycle of four songs set to poems dealing with memory, nostalgia and longing by 20th century Italian poets Salvatore Quasimodo, Aldo Palazzeschi and

Corrado Govoni.

Dramatic and evocative, the songs actually were conceived of as duets between a soprano (Wendy Hoffman) and piano (Shenk), both of whom negotiated the notes that spilled out in all directions with utmost nimbleness. Hoffman's soprano has a lustrous sheen, and she informed the songs with operatic intensity. Shenk was equally illuminating, creating abstract visions, for example, in a lengthy cadenza that followed the enunciation of "the merry-go-round, the calliope, the lights" in the Govoni poem, "The Little Trumpet."

Matthew Harris' "Music After Rimbaud," for flute, clarinet, violin and cello, was an attempt — generally quite successful — to give five miniature tone poems the clarity of vocal writing. The settings were often evocative to the point of being picturesque of the Rimbaud texts, included in the program in translation. The "Ophelia" poems and "Dawn" seemed particularly fine.

A Quartet by California composer David Goodman, for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, was a vivid demonstration of how the simplest of materials, in this case one or two notes, could flourish with the intensity of ordered development.

Percussionist Leon Milo opened the program performing his own "Shinui" ("Changes") for solo marimba. The piece wanted to focus on a little melodic row of notes, but kept hopping around, spilling and skittering about, and creating many beautiful and luminous effects in the process.