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MUSIC

## CSU pays tribute to Babbitt

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Milton Babbitt never wrote crowd pleasers. One of America's most advanced composers, he created complex music that is formidable for performers to play and difficult for listeners to follow.

A brilliant mathematician, he developed "total serialism," a technique that goes beyond Schoenberg's 12-tone system by organizing rhythm and dynamics as well as pitch. An early proponent of the synthesizer, Babbitt pioneered serious music for instruments and tape. A longtime faculty member at Princeton University, he influenced generations of composers.

Babbitt, who will turn 90 on May 10, remains active as a composer and teacher. In honor of his upcoming birthday, the composer was invited to Cleveland State University for a three-day visit. The residency culminated with a recital by pianist Robert Taub Monday night at CSU's Drinko Hall. The program, presented by the Cleveland Contemporary Players, featured two works by Babbitt and three pieces by earlier composers who were also innovators in their day.

Babbitt's "Canonical Form" was written in 1983 for Taub, a Princeton graduate and internationally renowned pianist and scholar. The linear music exploits the pitch range of the keyboard with jagged phrases and intense pauses. A dispassionate intellectual exercise, the piece does not communicate a sense of beginning, middle and end. Instead, it simply exists in time and space, then stops abruptly.

Babbitt's "Reflections for Piano and Tape" integrates driving keyboard lines with the snaps, shrieks and sustained sounds of the Mark II synthesizer at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, where the work was composed in 1974. Because synthesizer technology then was not nearly as sophisticated as it is now, the music sounds dated. But it gives a clear representation of Babbitt's severe aesthetics.

Taub, a steely fingered pianist, played both demanding works with conviction, and he gave rather rough performances of familiar pieces. He shaped and shaded Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue like a precursor of Romanticism, etched Scriabin's "Black Mass" Sonata without a hint of sentimentality and tore through Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata with a sense of excitement. As an encore, he returned to the evening's theme by playing Babbitt's "Duet," a fragmentary work of spartan texture and startling brevity. The composer was present to take a bow, and he joined the appreciative crowd for a post-concert birthday party.

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