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NY CULTURE

The Man Who Electrified the Music World

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Morton Subotnick, a silver-haired musician who moved to New York in 1966, lives in a Greenwich Village apartment that doubles as a habitat for peculiar sounds. His wife, Joan La Barbara, is a celebrated avant-garde vocalist whose repertoire includes pioneering work with experimental techniques like ululation and circular singing. Their pet parrot, Plato, is known to talk and utter strange noises, sometimes in conversation and sometimes for no apparent reason.



Electronic-music pioneer Morton Subotnick in his downtown apartment. 'I wanted a machine to make a new music that maybe wouldn't even be called "music,"' he said. *MICHAEL RUBENSTEIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

And then there's the contraption blinking and burbling in Mr. Subotnick's office studio: a music-making machine with history going back to the 1963 invention of the voltage-controlled modular synthesizer. Mr. Subotnick, 77, helped conceive it decades ago when he commissioned an electrical engineer to entertain his futuristic flights of fancy, and

he has been sorting out the implications of it ever since. His project continues with two appearances this week—a live concert on Thursday at the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center and a lecture-demonstration on Friday at Greenwich House Music School, both presented as part of the Unsound Music Festival.

"It was not a new musical instrument," Mr. Subotnick said, pointing toward his beloved apparatus, which he has recently begun playing again for the first time in more than 30 years. "It was a new metaphor. I didn't really want a machine to make music. I wanted a machine to make a new music that maybe wouldn't even be called 'music.' I thought of it as an electronic sound easel."

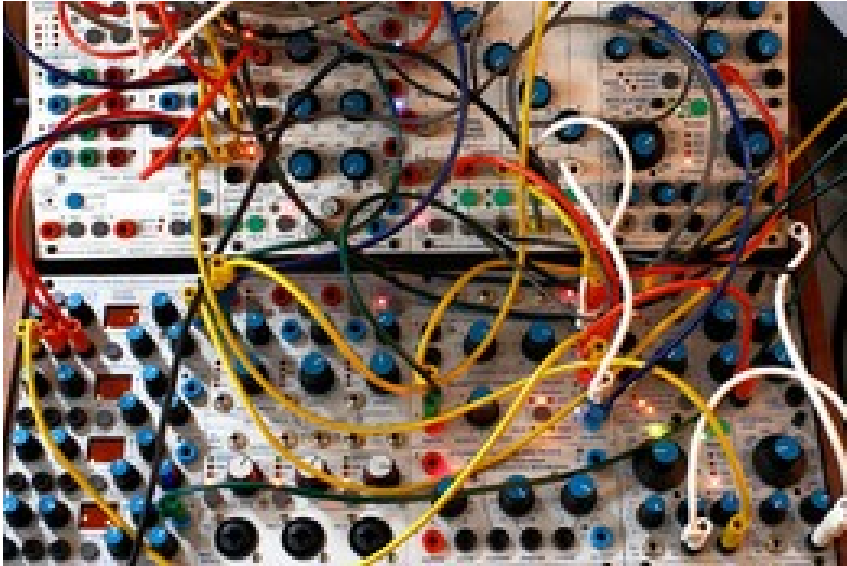
The machine he developed, in collaboration with engineer Don Buchla, played a critical role in the origins of electronic music, from its embryonic years in the 1960s to new-wave pop in the '70s and '80s, as well as more contemporary modes such as techno. In the 1960s, however, it was nothing more than the faintest impression of an idea.

"I was aware—many of us were aware—that the world was going to change and that technology and media were going to be a major part of it," Mr. Subotnick said. "This was my attempt to take a peek into the future and see what the world might look like."

What it looks like now, at least as rendered by the vintage synthesizer perched on his desk, is a wooden cabinet filled with flickering signal lights and a mad tangle of wires connecting different electronic modules. Some of the older modules Mr. Subotnick recently reacquired, on loan, from the Library of Congress, which has taken to collecting parts of his original Buchla Modular Electronic Music System. And some of them will be with Mr. Subotnick this week when he revisits his formative work as a young composer.

Among his early achievements was "Silver Apples of the Moon," a seminal electronic-music album from 1967—and a recent addition to the National Recording Registry—that mixed alien tones and timbres with insistent rhythmic pulsations. While he was working on sequences for the album, Mr. Subotnick played part of it during one of the earliest parties at the storied East Village nightclub the Electric Circus, for which he served as artistic director at the time. "We had strobe lights going," he said. "I had a beat like a heartbeat going for a long time. The place was pulsing, the room was pulsing, and the music gradually turned into the second side of 'Silver Apples of the Moon.' People started dancing. Not because I had intended them to—they just did. That's when I had a sense that it might be successful."

Indeed, Mr. Subotnick became a sort of pop phenomenon. Twice he was invited to appear on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show," and twice he declined. "He would have



Morton Subotnick's innovative music-maker *MICHAEL RUBENSTEIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

wanted to talk about something happening at that moment, but I was too busy looking to the future to stop," he said. "It was fun and games to everyone, but it wasn't to me. I had an

agenda."

Certain aspects of his agenda have been realized in just the past few years, as improvements in digital software have allowed for increased spontaneity and control in electronic music. Some of the software favored today harkens back to the sensitive analog hardware that Mr. Subotnick helped conceive, and it has also helped further strip the music-making process of its adherence to tradition. Unlike the more commercially successful Moog synthesizer, developed around the same time in the '60s, the machine created by Messrs. Subotnick and Buchla shunned the interface of the piano keyboard for a more abstract vision—that tangle of wires set free of keys, with knobs to turn and dials to adjust.

"My future was never the future of music in the direction it was going," Mr. Subotnick said, pleased to be participating still in an electronic-music realm that has progressed faster than he ever imagined. "Part of what I was doing was trying to visualize where one could go. I just hoped to get a sense of what that world would be. I didn't think it would happen for 100 years. I didn't know I would actually get to see it happen."