

HAROLD BUDD
LOS ANGELES REDCAT/
CALARTS THEATER
USA

BY RICHARD HENDERSON

Considered in the larger measure, a Harold Budd concert works much like any number of his keyboard-centred compositions. Lulling ostinatos crest and fall, flashes of unexpected colour materialise, precisely mapped intervals of silence between plangent phrases presage the graceful tumult just around the bend. Central to his writing, every bit as much as the soft-pedalled piano that is Budd's sonic thumbprint, is the notion of embedded disquiet, an unsettling turn of events waiting in the wings.

So it was with the career overview evening handsomely mounted by SASSAS at the CalArts Theater (literally an avant culture 'back door' venue within the gleaming new Disney Concert

Hall complex). Even as the packed house surrendered to the hushed thrall of the composer's works, old and new, a subtext to this particular evening chilled the air, for it was billed as Harold Budd's final concert performance.

Budd was once an instructor at CalArts, making the choice of venue for his swansong all the more poignant. This could also explain why, for both the concert's organisers and the musicians who took the stage, the programme seemed a defining labour of love. The first portion featured Budd's compositions as performed by other musicians. With awe-inspiring control, recalling the slow zoom comprising Michael Snow's film *Wavelength*, percussionist Alex Cline travelled over the surface of a gong during "Lirio", a 1970 piece predating the Ambient keyboard work and collaborative efforts for which the composer is still best known. Clive Wright held an E-bow to an amplified hollow-

bodied guitar, summoning achingly slow glissandi from its strings. His brief recital of two recently penned pieces brought to mind (once more) the subtle Country & Western thread that runs through the life of a composer raised in the Californian desert.

Jon Gibson flew in from New York to duet with Budd during the concert's second half. Gibson's soprano saxophone and bass flute merged effortlessly with the composer's tidal piano rhythms; their pairing spoke worlds about technique, about the willingness to listen intently and, more to the point, about empathy and mutual respect. During their set, the evening truly took on the sheen of a singular event.

The programme offered heartening evidence that the generative force behind albums such as *The Pearl* and *Luxa* (a beautiful rendition of the latter's "Sweet Earth Flying" was a highlight of the Budd & Gibson duets) continues unabated.

There was recent writing for string quartet, by turns vivacious and sombre, some of it a preview of his *Avalon Sutra* album forthcoming from David Sylvian's Samadhi Sound label. Still, much of Budd's composing — like that of fellow Californian Terry Riley — springs from improvisation and the inherent joy of playing. Although it has often resulted in his being slotted near New Age bins, his deceptively mannered keyboard mien conceals a breakneck spirit, which perceptive listeners link to the riffs of Lennie Tristano or Art Tatum. As such, it's hard to avoid a feeling of palpable loss, given Budd's decision to confine himself to working on manuscript paper.

The recently written pieces for strings and guitar, however, held sufficient promise for another complete lifetime's work. Considered in this light, we are willing to allow Harold Budd the break. □