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Rova Saxophone Quartet sounds out Brakhage's silence

Andrew Gilbert, Special to The Chronicle

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The writings of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, the choreography of Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham, the music of Bach and Messiaen ... it was all fair game for avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage when it came to seeking inspiration for his meticulously designed poems in light.

In much the same way, saxophonist Larry Ochs has found a rich source of ideas for organizing sound in Brakhage's spellbinding silent creations. "As an artist, you're always looking for inspiration and concepts to come up against, to push your own processes out in a different direction, or suggest ideas for form that you haven't thought of," says Ochs, a founding member of Rova Saxophone Quartet, the bracing Bay Area improvised-music ensemble founded in 1977. A longtime fan of Brakhage's work, Ochs began seeing the aural potential in the films after buying the Brakhage DVD anthology released by Criterion in 2003.

"The shorter pieces just completely blew my mind," says Ochs, sitting on a sun-drenched bench in the well-tended backyard garden of the Berkeley home he shares with his wife, poet Lyn Hejinian. "There were all kinds of ways he was organizing visuals that struck me as musical. Of course, he never wanted music attached to his films, because he thinks symphonically."

Instead of attempting to create sonic canvases mimicking Brakhage's flow of images, Ochs has created two extended works that use his films as a point of departure in "The Mirror World (For Stan Brakhage)," an evening-length program at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco's Kanbar Hall on Friday and Saturday.

The latest of Rova's annual presentations in which other artists are invited to join the quartet, the event features a sextet piece for Rova and percussionists William Winant and Gino Robair, and a large ensemble work for 15 musicians, including Winant and Robair, guitarist John Schott and cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, who has described Ochs as one of her primary creative inspirations since setting out on a solo career after two decades with Kronos Quartet.

Short films by Brakhage, presented by San Francisco Cinematheque, will be screened before, between and after (but not with) the musical performances.

While Rova's volatile improvisational aesthetic might seem antithetical to Brakhage's painstaking cinematic constructions, Ochs says he thinks the films "are very much like improvised music. You see them differently each time. If you go through it frame by frame, which isn't what he intended, it's amazing what's there."

Brakhage, who died in Victoria, British Columbia, in 2003 at age 70, was a leading force in American avant-garde film for almost half a century. Never able to support himself with his art, he taught at the Art Institute of Chicago for years, commuting every other week from his home in Colorado. He eventually landed a job at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he taught from 1981 to 2002. Though he initially adopted a neorealist style, Brakhage started departing from narrative in 1955, with his first silent film, "The Wonder Ring," a meditative spatial study of a Chicago El platform, commissioned by artist Joseph Cornell. By the early 1960s, he was producing films at a speedy rate.

Inspired by the natural world and guided by a deeply sensual inner logic, his films are often packed with fast-changing images soaked in vivid color, though he could create an intense visual experience through minute changes in monochromatic fields as well. Many of his films summon an entire cosmos in less than 10 minutes (though some works extend for hours).

For Ochs, Brakhage's work suggests a densely packed environment for presenting information, though he's quick to point out that the films are a fixed medium, while his compositions are essentially "adventures in sound," in which he sets out elaborate rules for musicians that create parameters for their evolving interactions. Many of the improvisational systems Ochs uses in "The Mirror World" have been part of Rova's creative toolbox for years, but Brakhage's films have suggested new ways of thinking about presenting sound.

"They are full of beautiful shapes, and all kinds of things get thrown at you fast, coming at all angles," Ochs says. "It's all blowing by in a way that it would probably take hundreds of viewings to be able to know when something's coming. But somehow, you feel that you're seeing it all. That's what I was thinking about with the Rova material. It's like, we throw a lot of sonic information out really fast, but everybody has a chance to hear all of it. So we're trying to make people really comfortable at the same time they're thinking, 'Wow. How is all this sound happening at the same time?' And yet it seems like it makes total sense. Because

that's the thing about Brakhage's film, they really make total sense right away. You go, 'OK, I think I know what he's trying to do.' "

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