The shock of the new

June in Buffalo series brings the best new composers to Buffalo
—and you’re invited to hear their work

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T MAY COME as a surprise to some readers to learn that as a music center, Buffalo has a world-class reputation that is very well known and admired by critics of contemporary music as widespread as Darmstadt, Germany, and Tokyo.

"New music" is a very broad term that refers to what might loosely be called the lineal descendants of classical music, although elements of folk, rock, jazz and other musical forms are often metamorphosed into its line and texture.

Among the many genres under this broad umbrella we find such divergent 20th century styles as minimalism, neoromanticism, serialism, electronic music, a recent trend called "the new complexity," and many other, un-categorizable styles by composers of quite individual voices.

"New music" has a far smaller public following than mass-hyped popular music forms. But Buffalo is a big frog in this lesser pond, and makes a far greater international splash in that art form than it does in pop music.

What makes all this pertinent is the opening on Monday of an important week-long event called June in Buffalo, sponsored by the music department of the University at Buffalo.

It's tempting to call June in Buffalo a festival, but that wouldn't be quite right, because most music festivals aim to attract a large listening public to concerts, most often with some defining slant or unifying bias.

June in Buffalo, on the other hand, welcomes anyone who wants to come and listen to its largely free series of concerts.

But it exists primarily to serve younger composers on the way up. And what will June in Buffalo present to these young composers and the specialized audience its performances attract?

As far as those emerging composers are concerned, June in Buffalo's artistic director, UB Professor David Felder, offered this explanation.

"We have a very demanding situation here," Felder said, "with 30 younger composers meeting in small, three-hour master classes, workshops and seminars, presenting their work for evaluation by a senior mentor, along with commentary and dialogue with their peers. This is a way for all sorts of critical and far-ranging compositional issues to be raised."

But in addition to the interaction with their colleagues and senior advisers, the composers will also hear their works tested in the crucible of live performances, to which the public is also invited.

For this wider audience, Monday's 8 p.m. concert in Baird Hall on the UB North Campus will raise the curtain on seven days of events, including nine concerts and 37 new compositions by 34 young composers and their four distinguished faculty mentors.

Many of these works will be receiving their world premiere performances.

June in Buffalo will close on June 13 with a 4 p.m. Slee Hall concert by the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. This is the only concert for which there will be an admission charge, a modest $5. Publicists call this "a crazy, wild one-hour concert, followed by an equally crazy and wild free beer and hot dog fest outside Slee Hall."

June in Buffalo was the 1975 brainchild of the late Morton Feldman, then the Edgard Varèse Professor of Music at UB. Feldman's idea was more along festival lines, to present, largely as retrospectives, the work of distinguished contemporary composers. Younger composers were invited to attend lectures and master classes and to absorb what they could from the elder statesmen.

During its original incarnations, Elliott Carter, Jannis Xenakis, John Cage and George Crumb were among the composers so honored. But the funding for this activity dried up, and following the 1980 festival June in Buffalo was put in mothballs.

The importance of June in Buffalo's activities on the national music scene, however, was not lost on David Felder, then a festival organizer and faculty member at California State University, Long Beach. So when Felder was offered a position at UB beginning with the 1985-86 academic year, it was the opportunity to revive June in Buffalo that tipped the scales in Buffalo's favor and brought him here. As he approaches his eighth installment of the rejuvenated June in Buffalo convocations, Felder is very pleased with the progressively higher caliber of composers attracted to Buffalo.

"For us," Felder said, "it's especially gratifying to have had so many applicants from Europe, Asia and South America. Not only does this allow us to present the work of important emerging composers from other musical societies to the Buffalo audience, but also to create a whole different flavor to the week's activities, with interactions of composers from around the world. It's a really important goal for the festival."

Felder was understandably reluctant to single out any younger composer as "most outstanding," but did mention a few to illustrate their geographical diversity.

"We have two Italian representatives of the 'new complexity' school," he said, "Luca Belcastro and Maximo Botter, both here with their interesting works."

He described "new complexity as a relatively recent development in composition, largely a reaction to minimalism, in which extraordinarily thick textures and busy linear progressions predominate. Examples previously heard hereabouts would be Michael Finnissy's "English Country Tunes" for piano, played here by the composer in the North American New Music Festival three years ago, and Brian Ferneyhough's string quartets played by the Arditti Quartet in the Albright Knox Art Gallery."

"We have two Japanese composers," Felder added, "from Tokyo named Atsuhiro Yimaji, and another from Tokyo but living in Paris, Atsuhiko Gondai, so there's a marriage of two different musical cultures. We also have English and Australian composers named Luke Stoneham and Leslie Thompson."

Felder also observed that there will be four premieres of works by local Buffalo composers.

There'll be a new work by Michael Zajonc called 'Maxwell's Demon,' Vincent Hamb-
What to listen for

The complete listing of June in Buffalo concert dates, times and venues — all this week except when otherwise noted — is as follows:

June 7, 8 p.m., Baird Hall — Works for solo instrument or duo by Jose Luis Castillo Rodriguez, Ken Steen, Christopher Kaufman, Mikel Kuehn, Leesigh Thompson and Amy Williams.

June 8, 4 p.m., Baird Hall — Guitarist David Starobin and Meridian Art Ensemble in works of Vincent Hammers, Mario Davidovsky, Michael Starobin, Ira Taxen, John Halle and Frank Zappa.

June 8, 8 p.m., Slee Hall — Works for solo instrument or chamber ensemble by Luca Belcastro, Hye-Jeong Hwang, P.Q. Phan, Arlene Sierra and Pieter Snapper.

June 9, 7 p.m., Allen Hall — Works for varying chamber ensembles by Jeffrey Ryan, Atsuko Gonda, Nicholas Hopkins, Christopher Morgan Loy, Paul Zercher and Laura Schwendinger.


June 10, 8 p.m., Baird Hall — Works for solo piano, voice and/or chamber ensemble by Donald Erb, Brian Banks, Amilcar Vasques Dias, Kurt Sandor, Julian James Wachner and Atsushi Yamaji.

June 11, 8 p.m., Slee Hall — Music for solo instrument, computer, voice, chamber ensembles and what’s described as a “Veloce tap dancer” by David Felder, Paul Elwood, Massimo Botta, Richard Bailey and Bernard Rand.

June 12, 8 p.m., Baird Hall — Music for solo piano or chamber ensembles by Harvey Sollberger, Paul Elwood, David Peters, Michael Zapora, Davy Temperek and Jason Uchi.

June 13, 4 p.m., Slee Hall, $5 admission — Jesse Levine and Charles Weurten conduct the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, David Felder’s “Between,” with percussionist Steve Sicks and Weurten’s “Rambouts Squared.”