

# Subtropics fest is high-tech wonder

By TIM SMITH  
Music Writer

The invention of the Disklavier, a computerized device that can turn a regular piano into a sophisticated player piano, has been quickly adapted for use by composers. A sampling of the possibilities afforded by this technology was presented Saturday evening by the Subtropics New Music Festival at Miami-Dade Community College.

The most intriguing examples came in all-too-brief snippets from an ambitious opera-in-progress by one of the most important electronic composers, Morton Subotnik. *An Intimate Immensity* is being written for four characters and three auditoriums — in three different cities, connected by monitors. The plot concerns the breakdown of personal freedom in an age of cyber-meddling.

Sitting in front of a computer, Subotnik clutched sensors in each hand and proceeded to “play” some of the music that will come from “cyber angels” in the opera. He stretched his fingers outward to produce and sustain tones, communicating with a Disklavier attached to a grand piano that came to life according to those manipulations. Assorted synthesized sounds, including an eerie chorus, emerged via computer to thicken the soundscape. The rather tonal music had a hint of new age dreaminess. I would love to have heard more.

J.B. Floyd gave the kinetic premiere of his *Solos and Sequences for the Yamaha Disklavier*, a kind of atonal jazz requiring tight interaction between man and machine. Gustavo Matamoros premiered his *Water, water everywhere . . .*, another interactive experiment. It involves a soft, rippling track of pre-recorded meanderings up and down the keys and live manipulation of the piano's insides. Matamoros kept moving all sorts of objects around on the strings in a sort of musical shell game; the sonic distortions were interesting, if not riveting.

To close, there was a piece for normal piano — well, almost. Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis* requires the pianist to be wired for sound so that he can not only play on the keys, but recite extensive excerpts from Oscar Wilde's prison writings; occasionally sing, hum, grunt and moan; and, at one point, slap himself silly, on the face, thighs, even rear end.

Written for pianist Anthony de Mare, who performed it brilliantly, the work stems from Wilde's own description of his life — “a symphony of sorrow, passing through its rhythmically linked movements to its certain resolution.” The power of Wilde's text wasn't greatly enhanced by the musical or extra-musical interludes linking paragraphs. But a whispered passage about the author's tragic relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas was quite compelling and the absurdist outbursts preceding a passage about “the zanies of sorrow” had undeniable theatrical power.