

sistently into challenging and exciting programming. The folks at the Symphony toss us the odd bit of 20th-century repertoire now and again, but of course they have subscribers to avoid offending, and most of their contemporary offerings are ghettoized in the New and Unusual Music series. San Francisco Performances, now in its eighth season, has been making a very strong showing in recent years, importing a good blend of established stars and young up-and-comings, almost all of very high quality; but the overwhelming emphasis is still on traditional recital artists. And at the Opera House, of course, Terry McEwen's desk calendar still reads 1917.

Conversely, those organizations that do attend to more contemporary concerns — whether performing venues such as Theater Artaud and New Langton Arts or ensembles like Earplay and the Kronos Quartet — tend to do so pretty much exclusively, and the same is true of such early-music outfits as the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra or the San Francisco Early Music Society. It's almost unheard of, in short, for a single organization to cover this much artistic turf — and to cover it so ably.

THIS SEASON, for example, Baff has inaugurated a whole new performance series, OnStage Zellerbach, devoted to performances of a more unusual nature than the events that go into the regular series. The project has also marked the inception of a newly designed performance space suitable for the smaller scale of the scheduled events. The new setup will be located on the Zellerbach Hall stage itself, but will involve a mere 240 seats, arranged in tiers that can be easily constructed and dismantled between other full-house events.

"OnStage is really my baby," Baff

have been using — something more unpredictable. OnStage is designed for projects that need a different aesthetic environment from the usual setting. They don't even necessarily need to be experimental works, though many of them are. But we might try to get a work-in-progress, maybe, or a large-scale performer doing something small-scale. We just wanted this to be an opportunity to see works in a more intimate setting."

Again, the idea itself comes cheap; there's no such thing as a performing arts executive who doesn't at least pay lip service to this sort of undertaking. The proof, however, is in the execution, and here Baff's range and vision are exemplary. In its first season, OnStage will include performances by the Ellen Webb Dance Company and Keith Terry/Blondell Cummings, as well as the surreal vocal pyrotechnics of David Hykes' Harmonic Choir and the riveting jazz improvisations of the World Saxophone Quartet.

But perhaps the most important programming coup of the series is its June finale, a visit by New York's seminal Squat Theatre; in its first Bay Area performance, this group of Hungarian emigres will be presenting the West Coast premiere of "*L*" *Train to El Dorado*, a multi-media version of the legend of Tristan and Isolde. It isn't that you wouldn't have had a chance to see these performers otherwise; it's just that you won't often see them all in one place.

In addition to all of that, however, Baff is also busy dealing with performing groups that you likely *wouldn't* see if not at Cal: the welter of performers that appear on the World Music and Dance series, probably the most multifarious of all of Baff's projects. This season's offerings are a characteristically far-ranging assemblage: It includes the National Ballet of West Java, the Bayanihan Philippine Dance

around anyway). How does an arts booker whose perspectives are largely Occidental (Baff's training is in Western music and dance) cope with the range of musical culture to be found throughout the entire world?

"The World Music series is a real favorite of mine," she insists, "although this kind of event is very difficult to present. The problem is that most of the things that are really interesting are simply not packaged for a proscenium space. They exist within a particular cultural setting. And there's this paradoxical attempt to be somehow 'authentic' — to not be completely commercial — and still offer something that will hold up in a theater, with proscenium, curtains and an audience.

"Not only that, but this series is one of the hardest to book, because most of the performing groups involved don't tour this country on a regular basis. It's not like dealing with a string quartet, where you have an easily identifiable 'product' that you can latch onto. There's an enormous amount of good music and dance all over the world, but you have to actively seek it out and bring it over here. It's very difficult to do."

Who pays the piper calls the tune: The folks who do the programming and booking of performing artists decide who and what we will see and hear, and ultimately, determine the character of artistic life in the Bay Area. Baff paints a rosy (and perhaps idealized) picture of relations among the various arts presenters in the Bay Area: "We're all in this together for the long haul," she claims. "We talk to each other all the time, trying to coordinate what we do and mesh our efforts. Basically, we're all trying to find our way through the same market, motivated by what interests us." In this case, the result is as vital and engaging as anyone could expect. ■