Fall Mountain's New Music

By ROBERT PALMER

A new concert series devoted to live electronic music got off to a promising start Thursday night at the Public Access Synthesizer Studio, 16 West 22d Street, with a performance by the group Fall Mountain. Actually, the music was a mixture of electronic and acoustic sounds, with Robert Ostertag manipulating the electronics, Jim Katz in playing a violin through amplification and various tonal modifiers and Ned Rothenberg performing acoustically on saxophones, flute, bass clarinet and some ethnic flutes and whistles.

Improvisational music that incorporates fairly sophisticated electronics set-ups seems to be coming into its own now, after a somewhat tentative start in the late 60's and early 70's. The person who plays the electronics in such situations has to walk a thin line, for while equipment that is too complex will prove difficult to manipulate in the heat of performance, equipment that is too simple will not provide enough sound options to make the use of electronics worthwhile in the first place. Then, too, the problem of arriving at a shared musical language remains acute, especially when electronics are mixed with conventional instruments.

Fall Mountain seems to have solved these problems and is proceeding in a musical direction that blurs rather than emphasizes the distinctions between acoustic and electronic sounds. Mr. Rothenberg used his various ethnic flutes to produce more or less pure sounds that might easily have come from Mr. Ostertag's electronic gear, and his controlled overblowing on bass clarinet and alto-saxophone also blended easily. Mr. Katz in used his violin more or less conventionally, producing long, bluesy, crying lines, and very unconventionally as a kind of electronic percussion instrument. Mr. Ostertag drew a broad range of sounds from his electronics, and although he was impressive in a long unaccompanied solo passage, he was most effective working closely with the other two instrumentalists.

Generally, ensemble improvising is Fall Mountain's strong point. The group has arrived at a common vocabulary, no easy matter, considering the instrumentation, and as a result its conversations rarely seem to ramble unduly. Fall Mountain doesn't demonstrate the flow and structural logic of the best music of this kind either, but with the tough initial problems cut out of the way, that should come in due time.