

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## At Last, a Space for Creativity (and Loud Music) to Flow

By THOMAS STAUDTER

CROTON-ON-HUDSON

**R**OB MORSBERGER was writing the score for a string arrangement in the music studio behind his house here one morning recently when his wife, Lisa, stopped in to drop off their 15-month-old son, Elan. She wanted to run out for an errand and hoped it might be “daddy time.”

Elan grabbed a pennywhistle to play with as his father stood by watchfully.

“Lately Elan has become interested in the purple dials on the pre-amps,” said Mr. Morsberger, guarding his electric keyboard, computers and recording equipment from wanton juvenile investigation. Sure enough, soon Elan was playing with the purple dials again.

After years of writing music for films and

### A studio behind the house, a third solo album, and the sky's the limit.

television shows, as well as plenty of pop songs, in his living room, Mr. Morsberger hired a songwriting pal with carpentry experience to convert his garage into a two-room studio, and in December the space was open for business, complete with a sizable recording area with a vintage Hammond B-3 organ.

It is a good time for Mr. Morsberger, 46, to have a place where he can hide away with his work and make as much noise as he pleases at any hour — every musical artist's dream. Within the past year he has written the music for three “Nova” programs on PBS, including a five-part miniseries called “Nova Science Now,” which included an on-camera appearance serenading a group of mathematicians on the twin prime conjecture, a famous problem in number theory.

He also wrote the string arrangements for, and played accordion on, “Dreams Don't Count,” a new album of “chamber pop” from the singer-songwriter Jules Shear.

Mr. Morsberger has also just released his third album as a solo artist, “A Periodic Rush of Waves.” His two prior albums,



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Rob Morsberger has written music for films and television shows and is now hoping to find more time to focus on a solo career.

“Waiting for Wood” and “Relativity Blues,” were credited to the Robert Secret Group, a quartet that Mr. Morsberger formed in 1985 and which has played frequently around Manhattan since then. The new release, however, is out under his own name.

“I came up with the ‘Secret’ moniker because I originally thought my real last name was too difficult for the pop marketplace,” he said. “Now, I’m more comfortable just letting my music speak for itself.”

Although “A Periodic Rush of Waves” was recorded in June 2004, the finishing touches on the album stretched over nearly two years as Mr. Morsberger and his wife attended to Elan, who was born with hypo-

plastic left heart syndrome, meaning an underdeveloped left side of the heart; he has already had two major operations with a third to come.

“Elan is a miracle to us on a daily basis,” said Mr. Morsberger, who also has two older sons, Ben, 17, and Jesse, 11, from a previous marriage, and a stepdaughter, Evy, 15. He has been married to Ms. Morsberger, a 43-year-old flutist and music teacher, for three years.

The son of Philip Morsberger, a prominent painter and fine artist, Mr. Morsberger was born in Oxford, Ohio, but spent his teenage years in Oxford, England, where his father was the Ruskin Master of Drawing at

the university. At age 11, he began playing the bassoon, having given up on piano lessons earlier.

“I liked the fact the bassoon had such a huge range,” he said. It was a poor choice in some ways, he said, “because it wasn’t an instrument that would let me explore the music that I was starting to get into around then,” such as Bob Dylan and the Beatles, which was more oriented toward guitar and piano.

“On the other hand, the experience of working and sitting in orchestras as a bassoonist for a good part of my life has had a profound effect on my musical sensibilities as a composer,” he said.

Mr. Morsberger continued his musical studies at Edinburgh University, and after taking up the piano again worked in various bands and as a dance accompanist before landing commissions for original scores with the Scottish Ballet and BBC Radio Scotland. He moved to New York City in 1985, and gained a reputation as a songwriter, playing in clubs as Robert Secret.

“I became acquainted with some of the best musicians in New York, and was able to unlearn some of the prejudices of my classical training while beginning to appreciate the beautiful simplicity of pop music,” he said.

An opportunity for Mr. Morsberger to further his songwriting skills came in 1990 when he was hired for a songwriting and publishing deal with Famous Music, the publishing division of Paramount.

“Rob was the kind of songwriter who combined art and commerce with integrity,” said Jim Klein, a fellow songwriter at Famous Music with Mr. Morsberger and now a professor in the Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts and Design at Drexel University. “He was the only guy I know who wrote songs about science, and this way before he heard of Nova.”

Indeed, the last song on Mr. Morsberger’s 1999 album “Waiting for Wood” is an ode to universal theory called “The End of Physics,” and subsequent songs have addressed the Theory of Relativity, Darwinism and sound waves. His album “Relativity Blues” even has a song about Einstein’s brain, which may explain why in the last several years he has amassed numerous music score credits for programs on PBS and A&E. But most of Morsberger’s recorded songs are about the vagaries of love, which, with their strong piano-based arrangements and Mr. Morsberger’s reedy voice, are reminiscent of Steely Dan and Warren Zevon.

“Rob comes to songwriting from the best parts of the literate side, where lyrics and topics are meaningful to him, and from a serious study of composition,” said his producer, Stewart Lerman, who is known for his work with Dar Williams, among others. “He’s able to integrate all the elements in his wheelhouse in a way few writers can.”

Mr. Morsberger, who is currently writing music for two singers, Chiara Civello and Matt Duke, along with preparing for another season of “Nova Science Now,” said he hopes to find the time needed to concentrate on his solo career.

“I’ll always want to make albums,” he said. “The minute I finish one, I’m writing songs for another.”