

# Pinned Down by the Piano

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The most important piano work of the late 20th century  
*photo: Jung Hee Choi*

La Monte Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano* is available again, and about damn time. Not on compact disc, though—the Gramavision recording of a 1981 performance that was released in 1987 has been out of print for years. But Young, or rather the MELA Foundation, has now put out a DVD of the last performance he gave in the 1987 New York run of the work (which is actually his most recent). On one continuous DVD we get to hear—and watch—Young play the longest version of the improvisatory work that he's ever done, clocking in at six hours and 25 minutes. In the first half-hour you think, I can't watch this guy plink a few piano notes for six hours. Two hours later, you're mesmerized. You've been buttonholed by the Ancient Mariner of tuning, and you ain't going to make it to that wedding, buddy.

For those who've somehow missed out on the most important piano work of the late 20th century—which wouldn't be difficult, given how hard it is to locate—*The Well-Tuned Piano* is a mammoth, continuous work for a piano tuned to a very peculiar tuning, with some adjacent steps as close together as 27 cents (a cent being one 1/100th of a half-step) and others as far apart as 204. I say the work is improvisatory, but it is based around a series of some 50-odd themes, cadences, and chords in four or five major harmonic areas. This means that although any two performances will be very different, you hear the same themes coming back from one performance to another like old friends. And if you're lucky enough to have the CD *and* the DVD,

the comparison is tremendously revealing.

First of all, Young spends far more time on the "Opening Chord" (every entity in the *WTP* has a name) than he did in 1981. More than a half-hour passes on just those four pitches, and you're not going to hear the beginnings of a change until 41.37 by the counter (as opposed to 9:38 on the CD). By 1987 Young had developed some new themes that aren't on the earlier recording. The most striking of these comes in the final 13 minutes of the performance "The Theme of Orpheus and Eurydice": It descends in parallel intervals, sometimes even in dissonant sevenths, through tiny, sliding pitch increments, letting the notes overlap for some deliciously complex sonorities. There are also some themes missing, though. In 1981 the harmonic area called "The Romantic Chord" was brand-new, and Young played around with it for an hour; on the DVD we get less than half an hour of it.

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The DVD's main advantage over the CD is, of course, that it's continuous: no changing discs. In general I think I'd rather listen without the distraction of watching Young in his silk robe, but it is a fascinating historical document. There is something hypnotic about his flat-fingered keyboard drumming, his occasional elegant hand rebound from a good riff, the casual way he'll remove his hands from the piano altogether and just listen to a chord ring. Sometimes the camera creeps upward to focus on Marian Zazeela's magenta light installation, an interesting example of ambient television. European art spaces have been running the DVD as a huge-screen installation.

Still, I feel a little about the DVD the way I do about watching Wagner operas on video—my imagination could have done more with the disembodied sound than the camera could possibly capture. The dynamic range is wider on the DVD and the beginning quieter, without the immediate presence that makes the CD's first notes so arresting. The greatest pleasure is being

familiar with the earlier performance and hearing the piece's proportions change so drastically, with some themes developed to far greater length and others merely alluded to. No true La Monte Young fan will accept either the CD or DVD as a substitute for the other, though some may balk at the stiff \$147 price tag for the latter, justified perhaps by the hefty amount of music and video. After all, *The Well-Tuned Piano* is a continent of a piano piece, and if you can't get your hands on the CD (which was selling on eBay for upward of \$200 last time I looked), this is the only way you're going to thoroughly explore it.

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*The DVD of The Well-Tuned Piano is available from the MELA Foundation, [www.melafoundation.org](http://www.melafoundation.org), or starting September 22 at the MELA store.*

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