

Leaving Well Enough Alone

BY KYLE GANN

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Tune theorist Stuart Isacoff

photo: Jennifer S. Altman

Champions of the status quo find a particularly warm welcome in today's America. The very title of Stuart Isacoff's book *Temperament: The Idea That Solved Music's Greatest Riddle* (Knopf) signals that the status quo is OK by *him*. Temperament means fudging the way we tune the pitches of the musical scale so that we have the capacity to play in all keys. By tempering pitches, we lose the mathematically pure intervals from which music originally arose. Isacoff presents plenty of evidence that losing those pure intervals, though as necessary as losing one's innocence or virginity, was still sad. "To those who know better," he finds Sir Isaac Newton saying, "equal temperament's compromised tuning is as ungrateful to the ear as 'soiled and faint colors are to the eye.'" But Isacoff's *tone* throughout hints that those historical figures who resisted equal temperament were all quaint fuddy-duddies, and that temperament is here to stay.

Actually, this erudite, entertaining, but unbelievably digressive little book ends up saying very little about its ostensible topic. There are no tuning charts, no calculations, no technical data of any kind: just a paean to the *idea* of putting the heady pleasure of all those pure overtones behind and settling into the middle-class respectability of fuzzy harmonies, wrapped with lots of Music of the Spheres philosophy and Renaissance sexual anecdotes. And although there are many kinds of temperament, offering a wide array of musical colors—Werckmeister, Kirnberger, Young, to name a few 18th-century brands—Isacoff cavalierly brushes them aside as variants of his hero, equal temperament (the equal spacing of the 12 pitches of the scale, universal only since the early 20th century), calling it the "philosophical ideal" to which all the others secretly aspired. "The general acceptance of equal temperament," he enthuses, "led to some of the most exquisite music ever written."

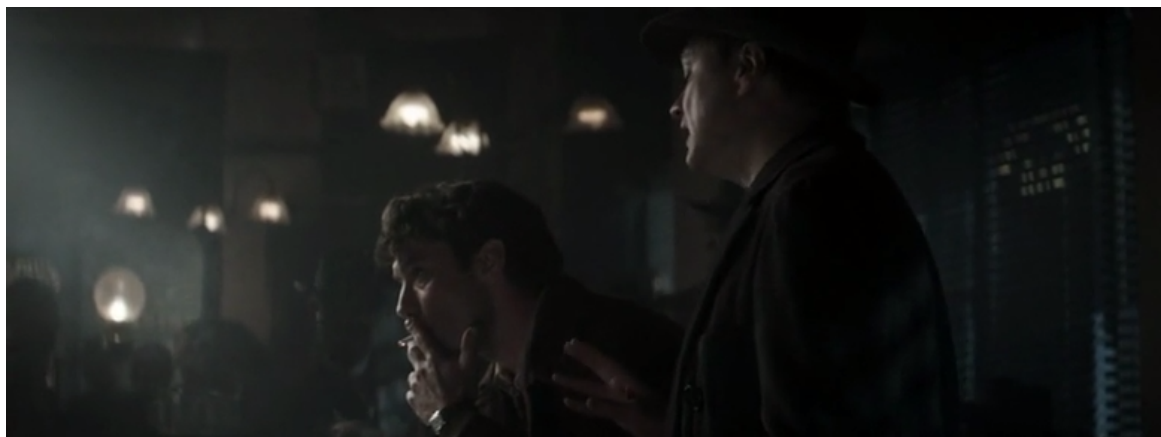
Well, we hear this argument a lot. Discontinue equal temperament, and all that Great European Music goes out the window, right? But it's not true. Bach wanted to play in all keys, and would torture his organ tuner by playing in A-flat, the one key that sounded most sour in Baroque-era meantone tuning. But that's a long way from saying that all keys should sound identical, and all through the 18th and 19th centuries, they didn't. (Isacoff's evidence that Bach preferred equal temperament is worse than specious—no more than the fact that he'll notate a prelude in E-flat minor and its fugue in D-sharp.) Chopin milked the bitterness of early temperament's B-flat minor for his "Funeral" sonata, and if equal temperament had triumphed in the 18th century, why did that century offer only one symphony in the key of F-sharp? It's Haydn's 45th, "Farewell," and even that's in dark F-sharp minor, not the jarringly bright F-sharp major.

Certainly a tuning is justified by the great music written in it. But when classical mavens like Isacoff (editor of *Piano Today* magazine) talk about "the most exquisite music ever written," it's a pretty good bet they mean the standard repertoire from Bach through Debussy. And doesn't the hoary age of that repertoire suggest that 12-pitch temperament hasn't done much for us lately? It's a terrible tuning for meditative minimalism and its variants. The automobile advanced civilization, but since fossil fuels will be gone soon, it will outlive its usefulness. Likewise, those 12 blandly tuned pitches are exhausted—no new harmonies there, very little nuance available that hasn't been done to death. Late in the century before last, Franz Liszt and Ferruccio Busoni were already pushing the necessity of finer divisions of the scale. As Morton Feldman said, "The Western tradition is strong only because its resources are so weak. You start pushing around those 12 tones, and you'll know what I mean."

In the last three pages of the book (not mentioning Harry Partch at all, and La Monte Young only once in passing), Isacoff describes hearing Michael Harrison play his own music on a just intonation piano. I've played that piano in Harrison's studio, right next to an equal-tempered grand; you play the vividly specific, spine-chilling intervals on the just piano, and then everything sounds so bland and washed-out and arbitrary and disappointing on the

conventionally tuned one. Following that experience, Isacoff casts complete doubt in his last words—"Maybe Pythagoras was right, after all"—on the premise he's pursued for 230 pages. He could have gone back and rewritten the whole book. But if it had flouted the conventional wisdom rather than shoring it up, he probably would have had to settle for a much smaller publisher.

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