12-Step Programs

By Kyle Gann

Phillip Bush

Music is a footnote to the history of tuning. Until recently we thought it was the other way around. But how you tune your instrument determines what pitch combinations will sound good, and that in turn determines what harmonies you'll gravitate toward. As Lou Harrison says, equal temperament—12 even steps to the octave—"does not support tonality," and that's why 12-tone music happened. In equal temperament, *no* chords sound all that good, so why not interchange them? We gave up perfectly-tuned intervals for the sake of unlimited modulation, and the result was atonality—the characterless, democratic leveling of the notes of the scale. And now that the 12-pitch scale is being widely questioned, old music and new are unexpectedly allying against the atonal music in between. I hadn't realized the force of that alliance until Phillip Bush's "Fine Tunings" recital March 3 at Merkin Hall, a program almost as perfectly executed as it was brilliantly conceived.

Like hungry baby blackbirds, four open grand pianos gaped at us from onstage, flanked by two synthesizers. Bush played each piano only once, and no two were tuned alike. One was vanilla: equal tempered. One was tuned to the 19-limit scale of Ben Johnston's Suite for Microtonal Piano, a scale made up from the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd, 24th, 26th, 27th, 28th, and 30th overtones above a fundamental C. Another was tuned to a one-quarter-comma meantone temperament published in 1523 by Pietro Aaron, a scale in which selected keys have sweeter major thirds than modern pianos. And the last was in a 1795 "well" temperament devised by Thomas Young. A side effect of new tunings is that piano tuners are beginning to get publicity for their pivotal contribution: I'm happy to report that the older temperaments were tuned by Bill Garlick, and the Johnston piano by Newton Hunt.

One of the synthesizers was for *The Tao Salute* by Downtowner David First, for First bends pure tunings in ways pianos can't accommodate. Bush began with a rich, pulsating seventh chord played via computer module, against which the synth's sliding glissandos created beats at varying tempos. Bouncing its pitches off the Merkin walls, the buzzy sonority sounded different with each turn of my head, like the subjective acoustic effects of La Monte Young's sine-tone installations. *Salute*'s second half brought blurry octaves into focus from descending, overlapping scales, finally dropping to a pulsating unison. It was odd to see someone besides First play his drone music, but the effort of writing the piece out gave his intentions a welcome clarity.

A little more old-school, Sorrel Hays's *Bits* required Bush to blend the equal-tempered piano with a synthesizer tuned a quarter tone higher, aiming for more pitches rather than more consonance. *Bits* is a beautiful, nonlinear dialogue between the two instruments, a leisurely interplay of contours, its varied melody echoing in the piano, then at quarter-tone intervals in the harplike synth. Johnston's 1977 Suite is a just-tuning classic. Though the scale centered around C, the key of the joyous first and final movements, the second-movement "Blues" was based on D and the fourth-movement "Song" on E, each tonality taking a markedly different color from the more or less dissonant intervals above. The middle movement, with its virtuosic five-against-six (wrought by Bush with typically sturdy exactness) was one of Johnston's seemingly contradictory just-tuned 12-tone essays, and the suite exploited his most amazing effect: sliding from a horribly maltuned distant key gradually into the purely consonant home key.

The inclusion of pieces in historic tunings was a master stroke, revealing a kinship with Johnston's tuning conception despite telling dissimilarities. Bush played Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck's Fantasia (S.3) and Six Variations on "Mein junges Leben hat ein End" in the 1523 tuning, the thirds of whose chords were noticeably sweeter than they would have been in equal temperament (most delightfully the final, consonantly flat Picardy third). Heroically precise in Johnston's suite, Bush revealed himself here as an astonishingly clean contrapuntal player, elaborate ornaments rippling through his fingers with the speed and clarity of a player piano. His control was less uniformly masterful in Beethoven's Opus 110 Sonata (blurred dynamic contrasts in the second movement being the evening's sole weak moment). But he's one of those rare pianists who combine structural intelligence with a hundred color gradations; his rich palette ranged from feathery ethereality to brassy staccato, often applied in different lines at once and rendering the final fugue warm and intelligible.

FRED W. McDARRAH

Bush, bouncing pitches off Merkin's walls.

Bush warned us that differences in the Beethoven sonata's tuning would be subtle, and they were. I could hear that the opening theme, modulating into different keys, took on different hues, the third scale degree brighter or more subdued by turns. Opus 110 was an inspired choice, for in the late sonatas especially, Beethoven makes tonality itself thematic, and bounces changing keys off an invariant theme in ways that equal temperament can't fully delineate. You *know* he had a different color in mind for each key group. (Johnston calls Brahms the first composer who *thought* in equal temperament, and whose works can be tuned no other way.) And where Beethoven treaded lightly, Johnston burst into the dissonance of distant keys with devil-may-care, 20th-century abandon. To hear those key relationships as Beethoven conceived them, and to hear the parallels in tonal thinking between our era and his, was like blowing out of Kansas and finding that the world isn't black and white after all.

My recent column on Italian music announced the birth of the "tremolo piece genre," which was mystifyingly printed without the *t*. And the "Continuum Institute," of course, went into *my* computer as the Continuum Ensemble. ■