

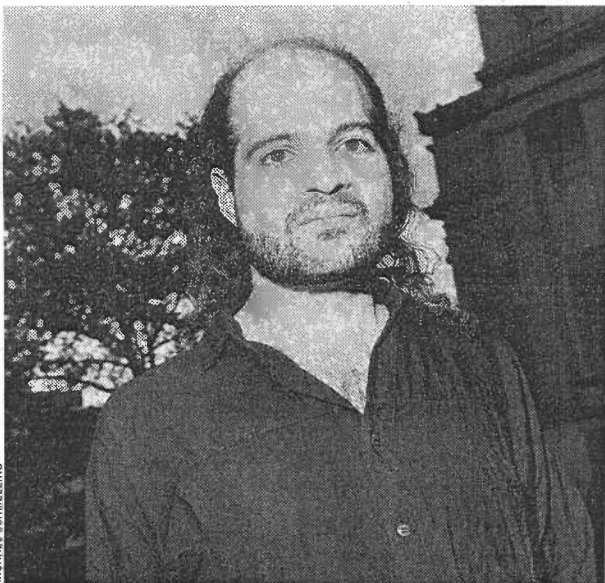
Micro Breweries

American Festival
of Microtonal Music

May 23
NYU Physics Auditorium

BY KYLE GANN

Everything that can be done in music has already been done." The next time you hear some tune-smith fob off an interviewer with that tired postmodern mantra, remember that the human ear can meaningfully distinguish about 250 different pitches, of which our music generally uses only 12. We smugly overpopulate our little musical archipelago while entire continents lie uninhabited. The Columbuses and Magellans of those continents gather annually at Johnny Reinhard's American Festival of Microtonal Music. This year, perhaps competing with the Bang on a Can festival, his "Microthon"—a term which ought to connote a teensy tiny marathon, but in this case meant a long stretch of microtonal music—cramped souvenirs from a world of unknown musics into a single day.



Joe Monzo's a noiseless patient spider captured with startling clarity the feel of a spider moving through a geometric web of pitches.

Despite rampant underground interest on the Internet, microtonality remains for most people an enigma mired in obscure numerical theories. Microtonal composers could lose that enigmatic status overnight if they banded together and reached some unanimity on what kind of microtones to use. Thankfully, they never have. One wants perfect consonances; another extreme chromaticism; another exotic melodic nuances; another wants to hear beats between sliding tones; yet another thinks he'll stumble across the promised magical effects of the ancient "harmony of the spheres."

Take Adam Silverman, whose beautifully restful *Durham* for strings was played energetically yet perfectly in tune by the Flux Quartet (Tom Chiu, first violinist). Silverman opted for harmonic variety with everything perfectly in tune, which required mercurially shifting intonations as the chords changed. Skip LaPlante, by contrast, went for maximum weirdness in a *Theme and Variations in 13-Tone Equal Temperament* for his Music for Homemade Instruments Ensemble. On stove pans, plumbing pipes, and graded two-by-fours, the group plunked and then sang a tune in an ear-bending 13-step scale, with tones eerily closer together than we're used to. Despite its difficulty the feat was a pinnacle of laid-backness, the vocal section including lyrics such as "blah blah blah blah."

Influenced by Indonesian gamelan, Patrick

Grant aimed for melodic exoticism. His ensemble combined drums, gongs, and retuned electric pianos in *Everything Distinct: Everything the Same*: clearly a difficult work and a little too carefully played, but graced by melodies that drove home the 11th and 13th harmonics with ear-tickling regularity. Elodie Lauten in her *XX* took a more atmospheric approach. Her keyboard was tuned to a Pythagorean scale—not much different from our usual piano tuning—but each note brought forth a wavering cloud of sound, while she, singing, and Andrew Bolotowsky, on flute, intoned pitches a quarter-tone away from those emitted by the keyboard. Flamboyantly uninhibited Sasha Bogdanowitsch sang melodies with pre-recorded overdubs of himself, capturing the rich vocal resonances of barbershop quartet (America's last bastion of vernacular pure tuning) in an equally mystical idiom.

The guiding spirit behind such microtonal events is always, and may always be, Harry Partch. These days every performance of his music becomes a political statement, for there is a war on between the Partch purists who feel only the instruments he invented should be used and those who will make arrangements for any adaptable substitutes. I distrust purism in all forms, yet even my standards of Partch performance were stretched by Reinhard's extremely loose rendition of *Barstow*, a classic bit of Americana based on hitchhiker inscriptions. Garnet Willis played a makeshift Chromelodeon (Partch's 43-tone harmonium) jerry-rigged from two accordions, and I anticipate heated arguments pro and con among Internet tuning circles in coming weeks.

For some reason—probably because the guitar is the most frustratingly difficult instrument to tune well—the microtonal world is inundated with guitarists. Here we heard John Growski with his 19-tone guitar, Paul Erlich with his 22-tone guitar, and Wim Hoogewerf with a 24-tone instrument. And it was a coup on Reinhard's part to end with an electronic work by Joe Monzo, who is more theorist than composer, but who has been doing some of the most important theoretical work in tuning. For example, he's developing software that will allow live microtonal computer performance based on movement through multidimensional pitch lattices. Based on the Whitman poem, his piece *A Noiseless Patient Spider* wasn't ambitious, but it did capture with startling clarity the feel of a spider moving through a geometric web of pitches.

Not all the music was so whacked out. Erlich, on guitar and synth both tuned to 22 tones, played a waltz, a rock solo, a modal improv, that sounded almost normal. With only a melodic nuance sounding odd here and there, it was marginally pop, harmonically conventional, even naive. And yet, what better music for demonstrating that we don't need to abandon the harmonies we're used to when we redivide the octave? Erlich wrung feelings we're used to from a scale we've hardly explored, and provided a reminder that musical revolutions always come from below: not from the experts who invariably have a status quo to defend, but from the amateurs who hear all the beautiful details the experts miss. With music like his, Grant's, Silverman's, and Monzo's etching new pitches in our memory, the 21st can hardly become just another 12-pitch century. ▮

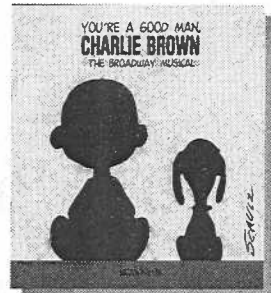
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