

Three years ago I would've bet that equal temperament—the 12-pitch tuning system defined circa 1635 and used universally in the West since 1800 or so—was here to stay. Older composers (Harry Partch, Ben Johnston, La Monte Young, Lou Harrison) had written major works in alternative tunings, but their followers were invisible. Few young composers dared risk careers on the necessity of retuned pianos and complex alternate woodwind fingerings. After stirring minor interest for decades, the issue seemed dead, but like solar energy, pure consonance is too pretty an idea to ignore. The proliferation of guitars, computers, and homemade instruments has given peculiar tunings a second wind, and a surprising number of proponents are crawling into the light. No longer unusual in rock, computer music, and improvisation, alternative tunings may unite today's largest underground musical movement.

At its center is Johnny Reinhard. Reinhard plays, of all things, the tuning-obstinate bassoon and runs New York's annual American Festival of Microtonal Music. (It began in 1981, with 45 concerts to date.) He also edits the festival's organ, *Pitch for the International Microtonalist*, which this year arrived in the form of an annotated cassette, providing a chance to hear the microtones described therein. There are a lot of ways to slip between the piano keys, and Reinhard's criteria are catholic: the cassette includes everything from a purely tuned version of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" to a quarter-tone quartet by Russian innovator Ivan Wyschnegradsky (played smoothly by the Soldier Quartet) to a piece by Skip La Plante using instruments made from garbage, their tuning determined by chance. Reinhard, who has a passion for correcting history, throws in a Bartók violin sonata movement (expertly played by Erica Kiesewetter) with the original third- and quarter-tones re-

American Festival of Microtonal Music

Notes From the Underground

BY KYLE GANN

stored. Bartók's buddy Yehudi Menuhin had found the tunings too difficult to deal with, so he published it without them.

Reinhard's festival has varied considerably in quality and approach, to the extent that it might more accurately be called Festival of Any Music That Steps Even Slightly Outside Equal Temperament. But his May 6 concert at La Mama La Galleria, focusing on the little-explored realm of microtonal improvisation, offered some of the most dramatic tunings I've heard. The first came in a duet for conch and triton shells, blown by David Galt and Lee Gongwer. I had no idea the pitch of shell horns could be so subtly manipulated, but Galt and Gongwer spiraled neatly around each

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other's foghornish tones, converging on intervals so small they created powerful beats in the resultant blast.

Of greater aesthetic interest was a quartet improv with Zusaan Kali Fasteau on soprano sax, Annemarie Wiesner on violin, Reinhard on bassoon, and Michael Suchorsky on drums. Eschewing the devices around which improves are so often constructed (such as the ostinato, the ostinato, and, of course, the ostinato), this quartet exploited a fresher phenomenon, the harmonic series. Over and over Fasteau twirled arabesques around the



JAMES HAMILTON

Reinhard: The tuning's the thing.

upper harmonics, repeatedly accenting a poignant 11th harmonic, as Reinhard echoed her in joyous canon. The recurrent descent reminded me of Dane Rudhyar's explanation of tribal music as an attempt to bring divine energies to human level, and the pitch framework made the harmonic series sound like an omnipresent continuum, which only became audible as sax and bassoon swept over it.

Even more fascinating, though, was the way the pitch-space perceptibly curved, since the intervals at the bottom were

much larger than those at the top. (In the harmonic series, each octave contains twice as many pitches as the one below it.) As Fasteau fell further with each sweep, you could hear the tonal grid seep down from the top, dripping like paint onto a warped canvas. Curved pitch-space, originally serialism's idea, was first outlined in Boulez's *On Music Today*, but the serialists failed miserably to capitalize on it. By remapping that perceptual field with a new approach, these improvisers vividly realized a logarithmic, almost non-Euclidean music that until then had remained an enticing possibility.

This was the first improvisation I've heard transformed by the use of alternative tunings, and it seemed largely due to Fasteau's intuitiveness. Every time she participated or soloed, she created a gravitational center that pulled every note into place. She's lived, studied, and performed in Turkey, India, Zaire, Bangladesh, and a dozen other countries, and her new CD *Worlds Beyond Words* (Flying Note) offers a globe-trotting tour of influences she's integrated with apparent effortlessness. Her tunings seem to stem less from theory than from the nature of her instruments, and her amazingly lithe voice sweeps across a borderless tonal spectrum.

Other improves that night were more notable for energy than insight, but they showed that Reinhard is providing an important outlet for a growing, theoretically awake subculture that may someday knock out the European mainstream. Charles Ives's dream of children whistling in quarter-tones once sounded far-fetched, but Reinhard's efforts, Fasteau's incredible talent, and the steadily growing movement they represent made it seem right around the corner.

The *Pitch* cassette is available from 318 East 70th Street 5FW, NYC 10021. Well over an hour long, it has 14 pieces and costs \$22. ■

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