

Overtones of Eternity

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Don't expect anything groove oriented, blissed out, or pleasant as background music.

photo: Tania Savayan

If it thinks about it at all, popular opinion may hold that just intonation—the use of purely consonant tunings based on the overtone series—is the provenance of math geeks with synthesizers. But every major new acoustic work in pure tunings kicks a few slats out of that box, and Downtown vocalist Toby Twining has produced an hour-long work that is one of the most original such things since Harry Partch. His *Chrysalid Requiem*, premiered here in 2000, has just appeared on a disc from Canteloupe, the new label from the Bang on a Can festival. It is an actual requiem, in Latin, *a capella*, and suitable for church use, which puts it in a tiny select company of American experimental liturgical works including the masses of Ben Johnston and Salvatore Martirano and the remarkable *Missa Umbrarum* of Daniel Lentz. Probably *not* coming soon to a Catholic church near you.

Seen historically, the pure tuning of Twining's 12-voice ensemble (named Toby Twining Music) is not so radical in itself. After all, in the Renaissance, before tuning-compromised keyboards and fretted instruments came to dominate musical life, just intonation was the only thing around to sing. It is still sung by barbershop quartets and backwoods amateur choruses today. But Twining's approach is truly weird and brilliant, and will not be mistaken for some less sophisticated phenomenon. This is an intricate and elaborate work, not related to any

Downtown improvisatory or minimalist tradition, and equally removed from Euro-classical convention. The Introit passes polyphonically through unusual meters such as 5/8 and 7/8, and you may find the harmonies rather jazzy for a requiem but still reverent, gloriously resonant.

While you may have by this point noticed an odd buzzing in the background, Twining's brilliantly weird strategy is unveiled only at the beginning of the Kyrie (second movement). His singers are trained in the Tibetan art of overtone singing, which they pull off with consummate control. This means that they can sing drones and, above those drones, clearly emphasize specific overtones so that it sounds sort of like they're whistling upper overtones of the note they're singing. (New Music fans will be familiar with this technique from David Hykes and his Harmonic Choir.) Singers good at this, and Twining's are, are capable of perfectly controlled melodies up and down the harmonic series.

This means that, at various points in the piece, the singers hit drones and start whistling overtones above them. Those overtones provide a ladder of pitches for the other singers to tune to, all perfectly and resonantly in tune. Occasionally, as in the Kyrie, you'll hear that whistling rise right up the overtone scale as singers sustain each note individually, and you'll realize quite audibly that you're hearing the "chord of nature" pristinely sung with no artificial aids (no audible ones, anyway—the singers are helped out here and there by computer-generated pitches via headphones). Elsewhere the singers sustain chords held as the whistling overtones provide the melody.

It is not as though the music is all therefore consonant. The singers continually venture up into 11th and 13th harmonics, halfway between the steps of our Euramerican tuning. The "Quid sum miser" sequence ends on a vibrant tone cluster containing those pitches, yet even this has a curiously restful effect. Amid sections of more conventional counterpoint, it is as though a wind from the depths of Nature herself occasionally swept through the singers and blew these unfamiliar tones through them.

Still, don't expect anything New Agey, groove-oriented, blissed-out, or pleasant as background music. No one-trick pony, *Chrysalid Requiem* is a thoughtful and labyrinthine work whose other effects include, as in the Responsory, a twinkling pointillism of tones arpeggiating irregularly through different voices. There is a certain accidental similarity to Lentz's *Missa Umbrarum*—one of the great, underrated American choral works, available on New Albion—in that Lentz's rim-rubbed wine glasses ring similarly to Twining's whistlers, but Twining's work is dark and intense rather than mellow, and through-composed in far more detail. At the Web site www.tobytwiningmusic.com you can see, in a score example, that the piece is notated in the just intonation notation of Ben Johnston, with not only sharps and flats but pluses, minuses, sevens, and arrows as extra accidentals.

Through these, Twining has contributed a new and distinctive work to a medium at least 11

centuries old, using techniques and notations derived from Partch and Johnston yet also from Tibetan chant, timbrally colorful though only voices are involved, and utterly sui generis. This is true totalism, to have covered this many bases and still be absolutely true to oneself.

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