New Sounds / Brooklyn Philharmonic

Shifting the Scales

By Kyle Gann

From the audience Michael Harrison's piano looks like a normal concert grand, but it doesn't sound like one. For one thing, it has 24 pitches per octave instead of 12, though only 12 are available at a time. Each note has two strings instead of the three, and the hammers shift back and forth between them, striking only one. Consequently, the piano sounds less resonant and more delicate, like a hammered dulcimer. Harrison has altered one of the pedals, which now shifts the hammers back and forth between the two strings of each key; the two sets of strings are tuned to subtly different scales.

Harrison's "Harmonic Piano," as he calls it, isn't the first 24-pitch acoustic keyboard. Hans Barth (with Charles Ives's help) invented a quarter-tone piano in 1928, and toured with it in the '30s. Harrison isn't interested in quarter-tones, though. He's La Monte Young's piano tuner, the only other person besides Young to have performed *The Well-Tuned Piano*, and his aim is just intonation. Just intonation allows mathematically pure (and thus perfectly consonant) intervals, but its problem is, once you've tuned an instrument to a just tuning, you can only play in the key it's tuned in. Harrison's scale-shifting pedal allows him two keys, each perfectly tuned. That piano is a partial but ingenious solution to a centuries-old problem, and it received its first public demonstration February 11 at Merkin Hall during John Schaefer's "New Sounds" program.

Flanked by David Torn's atmospheric digitized-guitar improvs and some old and new pieces by Meredith Monk, Harrison played three works. *Ancient Worlds*, with its excerpts entitled "The Eternal Sea," "Anthem," "Magic Rain," and others, dated from 1985 and could be forgiven for sounding extremely *Well-Tuned*. *The Swan Has Flown to the Mountain Lake* was more distinctive, a feverishly ornamental jazz fantasy that seemed to transcribe Indian ragas for keyboard. I might have liked *The Skeletons Come Out To Play* except for its title, for the piece's plinky texture and spooky ostinato sounded naïvely pictorial.

The best thing about Harrison's music (available on the new Fortuna release *In Flight*) is its subtlety of hue, the way the piano's color changes when he shifts tunings. That shift gives the ear a firm sense of what tuning is all about, and of what kind of finely shaded spectrum we might achieve in the third millennium. Unfortunately, Harrison confines his rhythmic interest to the level of Keith Jarrett-y pop syncopations, and rarely aims at more than a series of pretty effects. There's none of the structural tension that Terry Riley and Lou Harrison deploy to turn similar textures into far more compelling movements. The tuning sparkles, but over the long haul you start feeling like you ate too much cotton candy. It's too bad, because Harrison's pianism is delightful, and his instrument is an indisputable landmark in Western tuning's circuitous history.

MICHAEL MACIOCI

Michael Harrison and his well-tuned Harmonic Piano

Bernadette Speach's *Within* for piano and orchestra was long delayed in its premiere, but it was finally brought to audition February 15 at Cooper Union by Ursula Oppens and the Brooklyn Philharmonic under Lukas Foss. The subdued, one-movement concerto wasn't quite what I expected, though it was loaded with good tricks. First of all, Oppens began on celesta, rolling graceful chords against single flute notes. This was the introduction to some lushly transparent orchestral textures, chords echoing from choir to choir like Messiaen in a perturbed mood. At last, Speachesque repeating figures began in the piano and spread slowly into the mallet percussion, forming a background for the remainder of the work.

What was intriguing here was the careful intrusion of a downtown-improv sensibility into a traditional genre. Speach gave Oppens an honest-to-god cadenza, which the latter handled with her usual exquisite taste. Oppens rolled angry chords within a static texture, and then, at the end, merged into motives that the viola echoed and spread into the orchestra. The effect of having the subsequent orchestral passage grow out of an improvised cadenza was one I hadn't heard before, and it created a nice illusion that the orchestra was privy to Oppens's thought process. At last, just as the piece began chugging along, it suddenly stopped, mezzoforte, in medias res. As startling as a Philip Glass ending with only a fifth of the macho, it put a surprising spin on an introspective, aptly titled work.

In fact, the concert's entire first half was enjoyably moody. (As usual these days, I rushed out at intermission for another concert. I wish some mastermind were coordinating schedules.) Alvin Singleton recently said that his aim is to "combine the spirit of James Brown with the organizational skill of Lutoslawski." His *Again* was a growling work of dense textures and throbbing string clusters, made from repeated motives in a manner similar to that of Lutoslawski's late style. Percussion solos provided the sparks that ignited *Again*'s fragmented episodes, and the piece's violence never broke beyond smoldering, as though afraid of what might happen if it gave up control. *Again* (which I first heard in 1981) was a rugged example of a '70s style, but not nearly as stunning as the more recent orchestra works on Singleton's new Nonesuch disc.

Eighty-three-year-old Louise Talma was present for Foss's forceful direction of her *Full Circle*, a dark, dissonantly tonal work whose sections eventually led back to their beginnings. Well-shaped solos on viola (Janet Lyman Hill), clarinet (Steven Hartman), and piano (Kenneth Bowen) complemented the bittersweet flavor and left an impression that Talma's work, by now, ought to be better known. ■