

Tune Up and Drop Out

By Kyle Gann

American Festival of Microtonal Music

A T-shirt showing up at concerts I attend has the 12th root of 2 in a circle with a slash through it. Computer jocks must see it and wonder, "What the heck's wrong with the 12th root of 2?" But if you don't get it, you're out of touch with music's subterranean currents. The 12th root of 2 is the frequency ratio between two adjacent piano keys in that ubiquitous Wonder Bread of tunings, equal temperament (circa 1800 to the present). And what the T-shirt and the recent citywide American Festival of Microtonal Music (June 5 to 15) both mean is: it's time for more interesting tunings.

Johnny Reinhard's microfest was more focused this year than it has been. What focus it lacked wasn't his fault, but resulted from the chaos of current tuning attitudes. There are a hundred ways of sliding out of Wonder Bread land, and each is backed by its own philosophy. Those at the extremes are pretty trivial; for example, "Music should sound spooky" at one end, "Music should be as perfectly tuned as possible"—a postulate no string quartet has ever disagreed with—

at the other. Exciting stuff comes in the middle. Face it: what people like you and me want from microtones is titillation. We know the 88 keys, we sing 12-tone rows in our sleep, and we want to recapture the heady, infantile feeling of getting our ears disoriented. The right microtones can turn jaded experts back into awestruck tyros.

If the concerts I heard didn't contain much middle, it's because not much is going on there. As with electronics, those who master the technique can't always write the music. At the June 5 concert of woodwind quintets, only Downtowner Elliott Sharp escaped the medium's leaden clichés; yet he wasn't really interested in tuning, but in creating textures from unpitched noises. In recent years quarter-tones (based on the 24th root of 2) have pretty much been abandoned in favor of rational tunings, so it was an intriguing surprise that many of the best thrills came on the June 14 quarter-tone concert at Cami Hall.

I was eager to hear works by Ivan Wyschnegradsky (1893-1979), the Scriabin disciple who in 1918 had a mystic vision instructing him to write in quarter-tones and sixth-tones (36 pitches to the octave). Unfortunately, two

of the Wyschnegradsky pieces dated from 1918, and their microtones only colored bouncy tunes. One was a song cycle, the other a cello-and-orchestra piece; Reinhard, revolutionizing music

anos at once in *The Feast of Saint Luke* by Boston sexagenarian Joseph Gabriel Esther Maneri; the piece took the evening's only atonal approach to both pitch and form, and kept the ear deliciously



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Michael Harrison: a romantic well-tuned piano

on a shoestring, played both solos on bassoon, while Joshua Pierce and Dorothy Jonas, in serviceable but lackluster performances, played orchestra on pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart. (One piece used occasional eighth-tones that Jonas inserted on a synthesizer.) To Reinhard's credit, he plays microtonal bassoon with a razor-sharp tone and blinding accuracy. When his pitch was a sixth-tone flatter than the piano's, you knew he meant it and you *heard* that interval.

The one satisfying Wyschnegradsky piece was *Dialogue a Deux* of 1958, whose shimmering, unclassifiable harmonies must have been the sonorities Scriabin ached to hear. (Wyschnegradsky's more astounding works are available on McGill University Records, and the Arditti's recorded his string quartets for upcoming release.) Pierce played both pi-

confused in two directions at once. The quarter-tone classic, though, remains Ives's *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces*, whose touching ambiguity Pierce and Jonas imbued with more spirit. The evening's other pieces were stultifyingly conservative in every respect *except* pitch.

The future of tuning seems to lie in the hands of those who follow La Monte Young up the overtone-series mountain (he's already in the 128-to-256 octave). At Greenwich House June 15, Young's protégé Michael Harrison gave the festival its emotional and theoretical climax in a healthy excerpt from his *From Ancient Worlds*, a solo on the Harmonic Piano he invented with two different just tunings (crosses between Young's and Terry Riley's) available at the shift of a pedal. Much of the work resembled—guess what?—Young's *Well-Tuned Pi-*

ano, since Harrison learned his trade as Young's apprentice piano-tuner (perhaps a quicker road to greatness than the prevalent trial and error of know-nothingism). But where Young uses austere clouds of notes, Harrison employed curlicue arpeggios and a soaring, recurring theme. This was a *romantic* well-tuned piano, deeper and more long-lined than on Harrison's *In Flight* CD, yet with an ingratiating melodicism that earned him an encore.

Microtonal was sometimes a misnomer. Eugenia Earle passionately played Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D Minor in the Werckmeister III tuning of Bach's day, and while Bach's music wasn't in equal temperament (those who claim it was are misinformed), it's hardly microtonal. I tried and tried to hear the keys change color as Bach changed keys in Werckmeister III, and although they sounded very well-tuned, I have to confess I couldn't; and when flutist Andrew Bolotowsky played Bach's B-Minor Sonata I tried to hear the B-to-F-sharp as flat as Bach heard it, and I think I did. Sensitivity to tuning is a lost capacity that may take decades to regain. But music has exploded so far outward in this century that there's no place left to go except back in, and Reinhard's directing the implosion. Administratively, he's got the country's most potentially ear-opening festival in place. We're just waiting for the music to fill it up. ■

The No-12th-Root-of-2 T-shirt is available for \$14.50 from 1/1 (Just Intonation Network), 535 Stevenson, San Francisco, California 94103.

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