

Los Angeles Times

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1998

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Microfest Lends Ear to Beauty on Fringe

Microtonalists tend to be regarded as quaint fringe dwellers who don't, and won't, quite fit into the status quo. They refuse to accept the norm of equal-tempered tuning—with 12 notes to the octave—which has long gripped Western music, insisting that there are more expansive ways of thinking. In some senses, it's true: Microtonalists could be the sane ones in a world of mad, brainwashed listeners.

If, by consensus standards, this music is offbeat, it doesn't have to be off-putting, as demonstrated at Sunday's fascinating Microfest, the second annual microtonality festival organized by guitarist John Schneider at Pierce College. The music here was provocative, me-

lodically and emotionally grounded.

A long program touched on many of the milestones and varieties of the vast genre, including seminal microtonal composer Harry Partch's "December 1942," a set of bizarre folk songs for "adapted guitar," a weirdly re-fretted instrument played by Schneider. Schneider was joined by percussionist Gene Sterling and harpist Marsha Dickstein—they make up the ensemble Just Strings, which uses just-intonation tuning—for Lou Harrison's lovely and exotic "Three Pieces."

Schneider also demonstrated the viability of intonational re-fittings with his moving new arrangement of Arvo Pärt's popular, hymn-like "Fratres," here for both the "octaveguitar" and then a retuned guitar.

George Zelenz's "Tiers of Yearning," for an eight-piece ensemble, had its world premiere and proved to be an atmospheric suite that dazzled and soothed by turns. In this case, the tuning itself offers a built-in bittersweet nature that informs the emotional palette of the composition.

In a concert like this, the tuning process before and during pieces took on an almost ritual importance. For Sasha Bogdanowitsch's unusual song cycle "Atom Turning in the Sun of Eternity," the ever-versatile harpist Dickstein had to

fine-tune three harps. The piece takes place on a moody trans-cultural landscape in which the composer sings in an invented text and incorporates Indonesian-influenced dance movements around the stage.

Some of the most memorable moments were in solo settings. Bassoonist Johnny Reinhard's "Dune" was a show-stopper in which he explored the didgeridoo-like overtones and other new techniques on his instrument. He literally took it apart at one point, to play through dismembered parts, and generally unleashed the expressive, witty beast within an often staid instrument.

Persian *santur* player Esmaeel Tehrani's improvisation was striking in its invention, technical prowess and emotional logic. The *santur*, which is a little like a hammered dulcimer, showed off a fine example of the innate, ancient microtonal nature of music from other cultures. It's in the world, and in the air.

—JOSEF WOODARD

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