



Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Attuning the Ears to Appreciate Microtonalism

The theories of Partch and Harrison speak volumes at MicroFest.

Music Review

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Microtonalists are the Green Party of classical music. They have an ecological mission, believing that the tuning system of 12 equally spaced pitches to the octave, common in Western music for the past three centuries, is artificial. They want to get back to pure systems found in nature that are based upon the harmonic overtone series. They agree in their joint effort to fight the system, but they are also mavericks, obsessive in their defenses of their individual arcane methods of tuning.

Like so many environmentalists, microtonalists prize self-sufficiency. They build their own instruments and make their own CDs. Their patron saint, Harry Partch, whose 100th birthday is being celebrated this year, created beautiful and unusual homemade instruments. But he is also celebrated for his profoundly anti-establishment streak, which included his becoming a hobo during the Depression.

But incorrigible maverick though he was, Partch also found favor, at least for brief stretches, at several academic institutions, as many microtonalists do today. Thus MicroFest 2001, which was billed as the first conference of microtonality, was hosted by the Claremont Colleges Friday through Sunday, and its participants seemed equally divided between those with academic affiliations and those proudly without. All the participants in the three days' worth of concerts and formal papers were, however, far from the

musical mainstream. One of the weekend's fashion statements was sandals with socks, rain or shine.

Passion ran high. A physical fight reportedly broke out at one point between two feuding participants. During his presentation, a musicologist from Mexico City described the atmosphere surrounding one Mexican microtonalist as being like a cult. "You have to go to a dark house to hear his instruments," Alejandro L. Madrid said.

As its own religious gathering of sorts, this MicroFest was oblivious to both the first night of Passover, Saturday (when an important concert and a keynote address by Lou Harrison was scheduled) and Palm Sunday (papers began at 9 a.m.).

For most of us, microtonal music sounds out of tune. But it is hard to define in what way because just about every microtonal composer seems to have a different tuning system. Partch invented one with 43 tones to the octave. Modern microtonalists become attached to their own systems, be they 19 tones to the octave or 23 or some other number, and they are ready to tell you that one system or another has the purest intervals. Among the papers were "Common Tone Adaptive Tuning Using Genetic Algorithms," "Transposed Hexanies" and "The Euler Genera and an Hyperdimensional Tone-lattice."

My own selective attendance concentrated on more general and historical approaches, and there were some fascinating points. In the Renaissance, Guillaume Costeley wrote with microtones, and it would be good to hear it sung, not presented via computer as it was during a paper on Friday. Joe Monzo, of Sonic Arts in San Diego, described Schoenberg and Webern's fascination with microtones in the early 20th century. Had the Nazis not stepped in, something might have come of that.

But fascination and obsession are two different things. Most at the MicroFest are obsessed. One heard that obsession in boring music that lingered on favored intervals but went nowhere. Occasionally something strong emerged, such as when local composer Kraig Grady hit combinations of pitches on his jiggered vibraphone that seemed to turn a listener's head into a bell. And I was sorry to miss, on Saturday night, East Coast critic and composer Kyle Gann's "Custer and Sitting Bull," which I know from other performances and a CD to be an engrossing work for synthesizer and reciter, in which microtones are used for telling dramatic effect.

But it was mainly concerts devoted to Partch and Harrison, Friday and Sunday nights, that demonstrated the lasting power of microtones. Their music reveals a large and human view of the world that encompasses many eras of history and many cultures.

Partch once dismissed his 43-pitch scale as one-quarter of one-tenth the truth. Friday's concert of early Partch (works from 1929 to 1950) was all about truth—the truth of experience. His musical subjects were the newsboys on the street corner, the hobos he met riding the rails, ancient Chinese poetry and ancient Greek scales.

His instruments are striking. The performers, Just Strings, a local five-member ensemble headed by John Schneider, had one instrument, a kithara built by Partch, a

copy of one of his diamond marimbas, and adapted cellos and guitars. Performances, lyrical and theatrical, emphasized the musical side of a composer too often known for his quirkiness.

The Harrison concert included the premiere of a work from 1935, a movement from a work for nine strings in quarter tones "Geography of Heaven," which Harrison wrote at age 17. It is a young man's moody, mystical chromatic music, the movement aptly titled "Soul Soaring Aflame."

Harrison uses many systems of tunings, some from early Western music, some from his interests in the music of the East. In his long life—he turns 84 next month—he has gleefully absorbed music from everywhere. Only a drop in the bucket of a highly prolific composer, the program ranged from stunning chromatic organ music to small serenades for guitar, pieces for harp or a score for tack piano (like those found in honky-tonk). It ended with a rush of glorious melody in "Threnody for Carlos Chavez" for solo viola and gamelan.

The level of performance was impressive. Among the Pomona college soloists were pianist Genevieve Feiwen Lee, violinist Rachel Vetter Huang, organist Carey Roberson, violist Cynthia Fogg, and percussionist Bill Alves, who organized the three-day event. In their hands, Harrison's microtones sounded no more doctrinaire than the music of Schubert, which makes Harrison the most natural microtonalist of them all.