

Not-So-Buenos Aires: The Death of Argentina's Middle Class
 The Celibate Collector: Harry Smith's Visible and Invisible Worlds
 Style: Jeremy Scott, Hot, Mullet-Headed and on Melrose

JOE HICKS' RIGHT TURN
 Why did one of L.A.'s leading lefties switch sides? BY MARC COOPER
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A LOT OF NIGHT MUSIC

BY ALAN RICH

When Fa Joins Mi...

... THE FAITHFUL FLEE: SO GOES THE RHYME in support of equal temperament. Music, your old prof surely had you believe, draws its strength from its harmonic progressions, and they derive *their* strength from the set of falsities and compromises worked out in Bach's time to enable composers to create cadences and chromaticisms in all 24 keys. There are, however, holdouts. Harry Partch used to proclaim that music started going wrong about A.D. 1000, and built his own instruments to rescue the art from the tampers. Lou Harrison's music draws much of its strength from his flirtations with Asian scales. Anybody with access to a couple of transistors can prove that the 12 tones of the familiar chromatic scale are the mere base of the mountain, whose electronically attained peak is, as they say, outta sight.

You can't drop in on new-music events nowadays without encountering some kind of challenge to the old, set-in-stone principles. Microfest 2002, the latest installment of an annual celebration of notes-between-notes, began on May 10 and continues in various venues through May 26, with Harrison himself, a birthday boy at 85, attending the May 25th event at Pierce College. At the County Museum the resident California EAR Unit dubbed its seasonal finale "Brownout" and trooped blithely across the audible spectrum. Five days later, on the same stage, the phenomenal Stefano Scodanibbio played spell-binding music on his string bass, the one instrument in the "traditional" family that rebels most clamorously against the captivity of "correct" tuning. As surcease the Philharmonic performed a whole program in D major — Brahms and Mahler — as if to proclaim that life persists in the realm of major, minor and the dominant-seventh chord. But there, too — in the slow movement of the Mahler First — the music draws delight from its tightrope acts, its purposeful "sour" notes on the edge of tonality.

MUSIC OF INEQUAL TEMPERAMENT — AND here I also include the whole range of the pre-Bach repertory in "historically informed" performance — does, of course, breed problems, for the ears of hearers and, I should think, players as well. Our Western ears ("Western" as in "civilization") are conditioned from an early age to recognize the

pull of a dominant chord resolving to a tonic; it's when that resolution is kicked out of context (as in Mozart's glorious deceptive cadences) that great music thrives on its power to hold the attention, even to shock. The problems are surmountable, of course. I cherish my five-CD set (now, alas, out of print) of La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano*, because rhythm and — yes — melody hold the attention by sheer energy during five hours of suspended, indeterminate harmony. Scodanibbio's concert began with his *Ultracuidansa*, an hourlong piece for bass and prerecorded tape, which reached me because the spiky, dark forms wrapped around one another generated an infectious aggressiveness that accorded nicely with my usual expectations in hearing a new piece.

The EAR Unit concert was, again, full of noble if sometimes strenuous invention. The best piece — on first hearing, that is — was Nick Chase's *OPUS*, which sought to integrate the newly coined gadgetry of turntable manipulation into the familiar textures of the EAR's madcap percussionists. The turntable stuff, which Chase himself played, wasn't just the needle-scratch torture I've heard (and unhappily endured) in a lot of hip-hop; these were recordings of recognizable music (didn't I hear one of the Liszt Etudes?) speeded up and slowed down by hand and fed into the surrounding brouhaha like a running series of musical puns. Laetitia Sonami's *A Blind Ride* and Anna Rubin's *Landmine* were sound-process works, with samplings electronically manipulated; Sonami's work achieved its effects via a glove embedded with sensors, which made the work as much fun to watch as to hear. Every little bit helps.

Out at Claremont College the first Microfest concert wandered widely over the map of contemporary possibility. This year's Microfest — five events in all — is all about "Global Tunings"; the first event drew upon the excellent student/faculty gamelan maintained by Claremont's Harvey Mudd College and led by Bill Alves, composer and faculty member of that school. The program drew a large if not full house; the sounds were handsome. (I would extend that accolade even to Tom Flaherty's antic *Bowling Balls*, which used a surrogate "gamelan" of kitchen bowls of various sizes and states of emptiness, played with a variety of im-

plements including combs, toothbrushes and you-name-it.)

Some of the music, including three brief, shapely works by Alves himself, drew upon traditional Indonesian gamelan techniques, extended exercises in resonant stasis. One work, however, Masashi Ito's *Water Drops*, imposed a more Western design onto the sonorities of the gamelan: melodic lines over a throbbing accompaniment and, near the end, an infusion of solid, academic counterpoint. It proved a valid venture in bridge building. Kipling's dictum to the contrary, East needn't always be East.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN D MAJOR . . . I emerged from the aforementioned Philharmonic concert twice drunk: first from Hilary Hahn's extraordinary performance of Brahms' Violin Concerto, then from Esa-Pekka Salonen's wild ride through Mahler's First Symphony. Of these two inebriating experiences, Salonen's success with the Mahler might have been easier to predict. Even so, his detailing of the work's loopy mood-swings, the sardonic cackle in the gallows-humorous third movement, the apocalyptic visions at the end (with eight — count 'em — eight hornists standing erect, the better to challenge the celestial powers) was the stuff of wonderment.

A few weeks ago someone on our Letters page accused me of the critic's cardinal sin, predictability; I wish he'd been with me that night. (No, I don't, really.) I have used my space here more than once to proclaim my allergies to a) nubile violinists still in, or recently out of, their teens and b) that particular work and most of its companions in the Brahms catalog. The 22-year-old Hilary Hahn redeemed both those hang-ups that night with a performance elegant, eloquent and suffused with a degree of lyrical intensity that, for at least the 39 minutes of its duration, made it the masterwork that had pretty much eluded my recognition over the past, let's say, 65 years. The sheer insistence of her tone production might even have elevated a lesser work that night; what it accomplished for Brahms is somewhat beyond belief. That incredible build-up of melodic persuasion that ends the concerto's first movement echoes in my skull as I write these words 10 days later. Who could have predicted? ☐



Rebel bass: Stefano Scodanibbio