

# A LOT OF NIGHT MUSIC

BY ALAN RICH



Viktoria Mullova

## The Notes Between the Notes

I'M STILL OBSESSED WITH MEMORIES of Marino Formenti's piano concerts at LACMA; you would be, too, if you'd been there. On the third concert, he pulled off an acrobatic marvel, performing simultaneously on two pianos, tuned a quarter-tone apart, set at right angles behind him. The music itself was no mere trick: a big, clangorous piece called *Hommage à György Ligeti* by the Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas, consisting of a rat-a-tat of repeated notes in huge clusters that seemed to fade in and out around one another, with the tuning difference creating a fascinating new sound, part gamelan and part Martian, that gradually became its own language. The object of the "hommage" was well-chosen; Ligeti himself has experimented with all kinds of microtonal composition, from re-tuned pianos to the banshee wails of an ensemble of ocarinas set among the players of a "serious" symphony orchestra in his Violin Concerto. And by the way, back in 1923 our own Charlie Ives wrote a set of pieces for two pianos a quarter-tone apart (but for two performers).

There are those who protest that music's downward path began with the adoption of equal temperament around the time of Bach — a series of compromises so that all 12 tones of the scale could be the same distance apart, enabling composers to compose for keyboard instruments in all keys and to drive their music forward on the interaction of harmonic consonance and dissonance. These protesters would "free" music from such tyranny and return to the earlier system of "just" intonation, which derived its tones from the mathematical logic of the overtone series as propounded by Pythagoras and his pals. With just intonation you end up with an infinity of notes, not the paltry 12-chromatic-tone scale of piano or harpsichord. The seventh overtone, counting upward from, say, a C, comes out to something like a too-flat B-flat, and that note would not exist on a scale starting from, say, D. Singers and players of string instruments can easily "bend" toward these microscopically varied tones. Keyboard and wind-instrument players cannot. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, besides containing some wonderful music, is a celebration of the newly won right to play B-flats in the key of D.

Digression here. It's this ability or unwillingness to "bend" a note ever so slightly, to distinguish between, say, a G-sharp

and an A-flat, that adds the emotional coloration to one performance, and not to another. When Viktoria Mullova performed the Brahms Violin Concerto with the Philharmonic a couple of weeks ago, the chill around her performance came to a large degree from the dead-on but deadening accuracy of her intonation; she might as well have been playing a xylophone. Listen to the 1926 recording of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, just reissued on Naxos, in which Fritz Kreisler's willingness to bend — or obsession with bending, as some purists would have it — transforms the solo line into a loving message into your ears and mine and, or so it seems, ours alone. Or listen to Elisabeth Schwarzkopf singing the *Four Last Songs* of Richard Strauss (in the first of her two EMI versions) as if seated on your lap. That's what just an infinitesimal bending of the pitch can do.

OKAY SO FAR? THE HAAS WORK THAT Formenti played has nothing to do with overtones, of course; it was the controlled clash of two pianos meticulously tuned in equal temperament but out of tune with each other. The sound was wondrous strange, but nothing you'd want to live with. It did prepare my ears, however, for an entire evening of notes-between-notes later that same week.

This was the second event (of four) in MicroFest 2000, the latest in the annual series run by composer/guitarist/teacher/KPFK commentator/impresario John Schneider, exploring the many ways in which music can shake clear of the bonds of equal temperament and tantalize (or irritate) the ear in the mysterious realm that lies between the notes. Harry Partch was on the program, the rebellious autodidact who built his own instruments, with his own tuning systems, to assist in music's great escape. Lou Harrison, whose hand was guided by the intricate harmonic systems of Indonesia and India, sent along a new sonata for a harpsichord tuned to just intonation. But the sublime was touched even more firmly in the four works by Ben Johnston that filled the second half of the program.

Johnston, described by one perceptive writer as "one of the best non-famous composers this country has to offer," was born in 1926. Along the way he studied with Partch and with John Cage, absorbed and then rejected Anton Webern's strict or-

ganizational principles, and since 1970 has worked with the "purer" tunings of just intonation. That, of course, suggests an easy path to non-fame, but if the beguiling and totally beautiful *Suite for Microtonal Piano*, which Phillip Bush performed on this MicroFest concert (in the comfortable small music hall at Pierce College in Woodland Hills) is any criterion, Ben Johnston's music needs — no, demands — your greater attention. The *Suite*, plus a craggier but no less fascinating Sonata and an earlier work in "normal" tuning and duller for that, are on a Koch International disc, played by the excellent Bush. And from that disc you can then graduate to just intonation's true masterwork, LaMonte Young's five-CD *The Well-Tuned Piano*, on Gramavision, five hours, not a moment dull, hard to find but worth the search.

GYÖRGY KURTÁG'S *STELE*, WHICH BEGAN Markus Stenz's recent stint on the Philharmonic podium, begins with a gleaming chord on G that, for its first couple of seconds, could pass for early Beethoven. Then it suddenly, fascinatingly darkens; there are glissandos across its surface that pull it out of "normal" tuning and into mystery. The rest of the work's 14-or-so-minute length deepens the mystery. Kurtág demands strange instruments and puts them to strange uses: Four Wagner tubas on one side of the stage challenge, and are answered by, four trombones on the other side; the subtle difference in the intonations of these instruments sets up a clash. So do the infinitesimal discrepancies in the antiphony of grand piano, upright piano, celesta and cimbalom. The sounds pile up; "stele" is Greek for "pillar." Then they disintegrate; the piece holds you in its grip, but is soon over. That's Kurtág's way: the aphorism that sweeps quickly across your horizon, and then lingers to haunt you later on.

The Brahms Violin Concerto followed, the aforementioned performance with Mullova. Hearing this work is never one of my more cherished experiences, with its orchestration the texture of last week's brown gray (the winds in the slow movement excepted) and its soloist yammering hysterically into your face at close range. But I don't remember when I less wanted to hear it than this time, while still under the spell cast by Kurtág. □