

# The Full Spectrum of Musical Color

By Brett Campbell

Pasadena, Calif.

Imagine lifting the lid over your piano keyboard and discovering, along with the ebonies and ivories, another set of keys—red or green, say—that play different pitches than the standard 12 per octave. In effect, that's what the devotees of microtonal music have been doing since the California maverick composer Harry Partch began building his unique 43-tones-per-octave instruments during the Depression. At the seventh annual MicroFest, continuing throughout May in various venues in the Los Angeles area, some contemporary composers are taking full advantage of the many tones "between the keys" to paint new and colorful soundscapes.

"The best microtonal music uses new sounds to create new musical emotions that never existed before," explains guitarist, music professor, and radio show host John Schneider, who for the past two decades has been a principal microtonal maven. "In the world of art, it would be as if someone sent us a paint box from Mars, with all these colors we've never seen before. All these composers who are exploring this world have found a new vocabulary of meaning and feeling—in spite of the fact that microtonality has been around forever."

Much of the music made in human history was actually written for the "pure" intervals that exist in the natural overtones of instruments—a tuning system known as "just intonation," in which sounds are produced by dividing the length of a vibrating string or column of air into halves, thirds, fifths, and other

## MICROFEST 2003

[www.microfest.org](http://www.microfest.org) or (310) 313-4931

Remaining dates: May 23, 24 and 25

rational ratios.

Different keys really had different sounds, affording composers infinite nuances of expression, but, because some keys became too dissonant, limiting available harmonies and key changes. And just intonation's many possible forms made it hard to combine in the same orchestra instruments that might have been built in different tunings.

As instruments began to be mass produced in the 19th century, a standardized tuning system called "equal temperament" emerged, in which the distance between any given pair of notes was roughly the same no matter what octave they were played in. For all its practical convenience, however, equal temperament was, to the sensitive ears of microtonalists, an imperfect compromise: It destroyed the natural beauty produced by pure intervals, made some intervals quite dissonant, and deprived composers

of far too many options beyond its major and minor modes. As Partch said, an artist has five shades of red, so why should composers have only one C sharp?

Recovering the lost tunings that Bach and earlier composers used was one of the prime motivations of the 1960s early-music revival, and those medieval, Renaissance and Baroque tunings drew Mr. Schneider and many others into the microtonalist camp. "It wasn't curiosity" that attracted him to just intonation, Mr. Schneider says, "it was lust! I loved it so much from the moment I heard it, but I didn't know why it sounded so good."

Mr. Schneider and other guitarists opened this year's MicroFest with a concert of microtonal guitar music, including "Scenes From Nek Chand," one of the last compositions by that other great pioneer of microtonality, Lou Harrison, who, days after reading Partch's book on the subject in 1949, bought a tuning hammer for his piano and "never looked back," producing characteristically melodic microtonal music for keyboards, harp, gamelan and instruments he built himself. Stringed instruments such as guitars are more readily retunable than wind instruments, and "Nek Chand," written for a specially built National Steel guitar, recalled the languorous "slack-key" Hawaiian guitar music popular in Harrison's youth in the 1920s.

The May 9 concert was a tribute to Harrison, who died in February, featuring music he wrote for the gamelan orchestras of Indonesia. Any worries that microtonal music must sound weird or out of tune were immediately alleviated by his ravishing "In Honor of Aphrodite" for gamelan and chorus, and other lyrical works on the program, performed by the Donald Brinegar Singers and the Harvey Mudd College American Gamelan.

The recent surge in so-called world music has introduced microtonal music to an increasing number of Westerners—the sounds are found in the scales used in much vocal music from Arabia and Africa and the sitars of India, and in other cultures that didn't adopt equal temperament. The May 16 concert featured a tribute to composer Terry Riley, one of the inventors of musical minimalism, who began writing microtonal music in the 1960s after falling under the

spell of traditional Indian music. He's since written dozens of works in just intonation, including the topical "Baghdad Highway," premiered here along with a new documentary about his life by filmmaker Cecilia Miniucchi.

The May 11 concert showed another reason for microtonality's growing popularity: technology. Synthesizers and computers have made it possible for composers to write in any tuning they wish without having to construct or retune a whole set of instruments.

Bill Alves's "Mass Destruction" (which might well have been titled

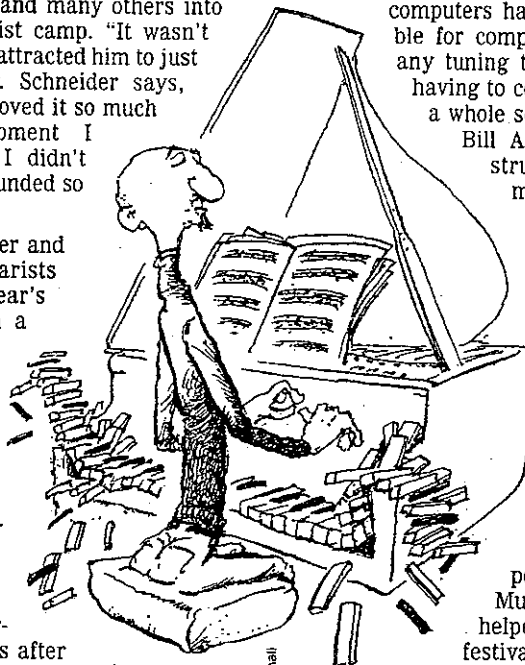
"George W. Meets Jimi H.") combined blazing electric viola and computer samples of some of the less felicitous words of the leader of the free world. Mr.

Alves, a composer at Harvey Mudd College who helped organize the festival, also contributed an effective digital realization of Harrison's landmark 1955 "Symphony in Free Style," the computer approximating the timbres of recorders and viols for which Harrison composed the work. Due to the difficulty of obtaining retuned instruments and sympathetic musicians, it has never been performed by real instruments.

That points up the difficulty of performing microtonal music in the Western classical/art-music establishment: Musicians who've devoted years to internalizing the equal temperament that's so dominated Western music for a century have to retune their instruments—and ears—to embrace this wider spectrum of sounds. But more and more composers are listening. And this MicroFest shows that more and more audiences are too; MicroFest attendance has risen steadily.

Just as different artists can use the same color quite differently, composers—including rock and electronica bands like Sonic Youth and Radiohead—are using microtones to paint diverse sonic canvases in so many styles that listeners can easily find some they enjoy. After prolonged exposure to the rich, kaleidoscopic world of microtones, returning to equal-tempered music was for me like going back to black and white after spending a weekend immersed in color.

Mr. Campbell last wrote for the Journal on the late composer Lou Harrison.



William Brannahl