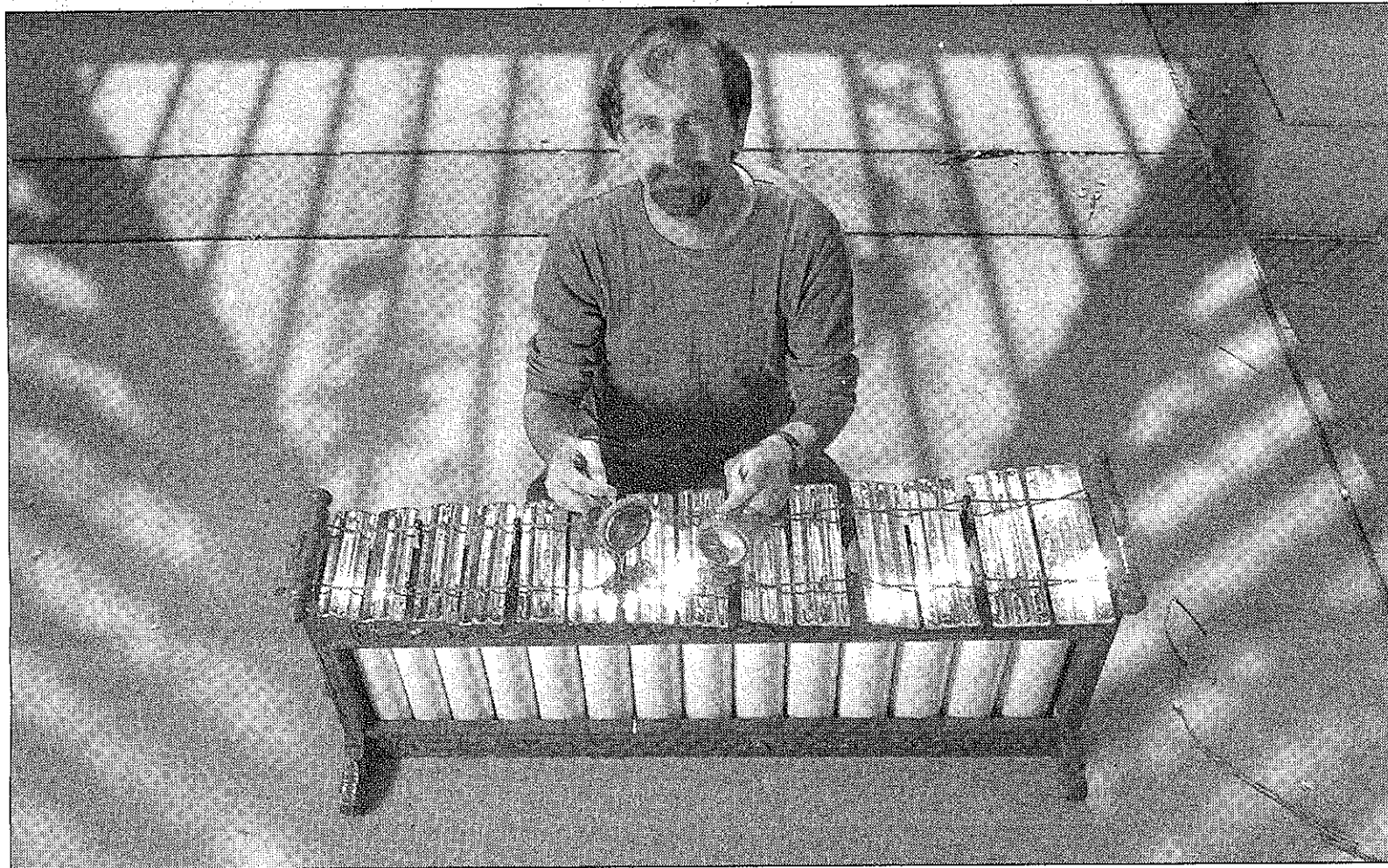


Performing Arts

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Veteran American pianist **Richard Goode** returns in recital at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Thursday, with a program of Bach's French Suite No. 1 and B-flat Partita, a Chopin group, and Beethoven's Sonata, Opus 110.



ANNIE WELLS / Los Angeles Times

Bill Alves, an assistant music professor and MicroFest organizer, practices on a gendér, a Javanese instrument. He pushed to add a conference to this year's fest.

By JOSEF WOODARD

"In the cracks" is the operative phrase for microtonal music. This is music with notes and scales that fall between those of conventional Western music, which assigns 12 pitches to an octave. Tuning systems outside of that norm can strike many ears as weird, even heretical. Never mind that a variety of musical schemes have existed in other parts of the world since time immemorial.

Poetically enough, the culture of microtonal music too tends to fall between the cracks of existing institutional and performance channels. But that may be changing. Microtonality has been sneaking into wider consciousness through world music and such rock artists as Sonic Youth, as well as through underground scenes where experimentalism and self-determination rule.

John Schneider—microtonal performer and composer, Pierce College music professor and founder-director of MicroFest, an annual celebration of microtonality—has been in a good position to note the widening world of unconventional tuning. "Everybody I talk to, all of a sudden, says, 'I know about that music.' In every musical community, there's somebody who has gone micro," he laughs.

Fittingly, this year, MicroFest will also widen its reach. The kickoff, April 6-8, will include concerts and an academic-style conference, and there will be four

On Another Scale Altogether

MicroFest's organizers are expanding the annual event to take advantage of growing Western interest in the alternate pitches of microtonality.

performance events around the area in May that will also carry MicroFest sponsorship.

The centerpiece of the April festival, organized by Harvey Mudd College assistant music professor Bill Alves, a participant in previous festivals, will be a tribute to Northern California composer Lou Harrison. Harrison is arguably the best-known microtonal composer in the world. He will give a keynote address April 7, the night before a concert of his music, which will include the world premiere of a piece he wrote in 1935, at age 17. The work is scored for eight stringed instruments in quarter tones.

MicroFest's expanding profile in Southern California is no fluke. Microtonal events have taken place around the country, including the American Festival of Microtonal Music in New York, run for the last 17 years by bassoonist Johnny Reinhard. But Southern California was home to two influential early U.S. experimenters in alternate tunings, John Cage and especially Harry Partch, a patron saint of this subculture. Partch, who was born in Oakland and lived in many places around Los Angeles and San Diego later in his life, constructed his own musical universe out of a personalized 43-tones-to-the-octave scale and elaborate handmade instruments to make it manifest. The May MicroFest events include a Partch centennial celebration, in conjunction with UCLA, and features an instrument "petting zoo," a performance, panels and screenings of two

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MicroFest: Annual Event Widens Reach

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films about Partch.

Now, says Alves, in addition to "the Harry Partch heritage," Southern California is home to microtonal theorist Erv Wilson and one-time Partch collaborator Jonathan Glazier, who runs the Sonic Art Gallery in San Diego. The delightfully eccentric microtonal prophet and instrument-maker Ivor Darreg, who died in 1994, operated out of his home in Glendale. Other avid microtonalists here include players—mostly percussionists—and composers Kraig Grady, Ron George and Rod Poole, each of whom is putting together MicroFest concerts.

Schneider sees the strength of the microtonal community in these parts as a natural result of both the experimental tradition, on the one hand, "and the influence of the incredible ethnic salad" here, on the other. "The fact is that West Coast musicians have always felt somewhat apart from East Coast tradition, which itself is beholden to European tradition. We're about as far away as you can get from Europe. Part of

On the Schedule for MicroFest 2001

April 6-8

"Conference and Festival of Music in Alternate Tunings," at the Claremont Colleges. Most events take place at Scripps College's Balch Hall, 1030 Columbia Ave., Pomona, and Pomona College's Thacher Music Building, corner of 4th Street and Colledge Avenue, Pomona. Special guest: Lou Harrison. All concerts are free. www2.hmc.edu/alves/microfest2001.html.

May 5-6

"Her Stirring Stone: An Anaphorian Shadow Play by Isafa, A Mythical Journey in Search of a Lost Object," created by Kraig Grady. 10 p.m., Holly Matter Art Gallery, 710 Heliotrope Drive, L.A. (323) 666-0303.

May 12

Rod Poole and guests. 9 p.m., Holly Matter Art Gallery, 710 Heliotrope Drive, L.A. (323) 666-0303.

May 19

"Microtonal Music for Original and Traditional Instruments," featuring Ron George and Ringing Tambellans; Nyoman Wenten and the CalArts Gamelan Ensemble; USC Percussion Ensemble under director Erik Forrester; and CalArts Percussion Ensemble under director David Johnson. Works by Ben Johnston, Ron George and James Tenney. 8 p.m., CalArts, 24700 McBean Parkway, Valencia, Roy O. Disney Music Hall. (213) 623-6845. \$12 at the door.

May 26

"The Partch Centennial Celebration," presented by MicroFest, the UCLA Music Department and the UCLA School of Arts & Architecture. Panels, lectures, exhibits, film screenings and an evening concert performed by Just Strings. All day, starting at 10 a.m., Schoenberg Auditorium, UCLA. (310) 396-5915. \$25 for the day; \$5-\$15, concert only.

the reason people are here is that they're looking for another way. And because of our proximity to the Pacific Rim, that influence, I think, is very strong."

Schneider got the festival bug

after joining Reinhard for a festival in Denver called Microstock. He says, "I got to thinking, 'Why not here?'"

In 1997, MicroFest began at Pierce College in Woodland Hills with just one concert. From the beginning, Schneider wanted the festival to showcase music from different stylistic quarters. Concerts have included the Indonesian gamelan and Persian music, alternate-tuned folk music and experimental composers such as Ben Johnston, who studied with Partch in the '50s and whose music was featured in last year's festival.

Schneider defines microtonality's appeal for musicians as "a new toy box." "For us in the West, it's like, what are all these colors?" says Schneider, who hosts the radio program "Global Village" on KPFK-FM (90.7). "But a lot of Western musicians don't have a handle on what to do with these things, because it is new material. I always find it instructive to turn to traditions who have had [these tunings] for centuries, if not millennia."

Schneider's long-range goals for

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MicroFest include building a complete set of reproductions of Partch's instruments—he has created three so far; starting a touring MicroFest ensemble; and creating a MicroFest record label, “a focal point for the dissemination for microtonal music.”

It was Alves who pushed to add a conference to the festival this year, and raised funds to help it happen. Most of the papers will come from microtonal practitioners rather than professors per se. According to Alves, “The academic universe, at least in the United States, as a generalization, doesn't have very much interest in microtonal music. I'm not sure why that is, except for the inherent conservatism of the academy. Of course, it was much more conservative back when Harry Partch was beating his head up against it.” Among the topics: “Visual Music: A Graphic Appreciation of Partch's Tuning,” “Making the Recorder Microtonal” and “Navigating the Infinite Web of Pitch Space.”

As a composer, Alves' own path to a belief in alternate tunings included a passionate interest in Indonesian music. He spent time studying the gamelan in Java, and had instruments built to his specifications there, which he will perform with April 6.

Alves admits that the esoterica involved in microtonality can lead to a certain cultishness. But, he says, “I certainly hope that people look upon microtonality and alternate tunings as something serious and something that is not just what a couple of crackpots are doing in California.”

The papers at the festival, he says, will mostly appeal to the initiated, but the performances should make converts to the cause.

“We've been hearing this tuning system with 12 notes for so long,” he says, “it's only natural that we fit things to it. But once you start to train yourself to listen out of that, to hear the harmonies for what they are instead of for what they aren't, it can make music a more wonderful experience.

“Microtonality is not a style but it certainly does lend to the composer new avenues of exploration,” he continues. “It can lead to new ways of thinking about music and new ways of hearing music. That's one of the most startling things that people discover when they start getting into this. They begin to hear [typical 12-tone tuning] as a kind of gray, monochrome music that doesn't offer the wonderful-sounding pure chords or very expressive nuances of pitch or other potentials that other tuning systems can offer.” □

Josef Woodard is a frequent contributor to Calendar.