

Conference explores music of alternative tunings

■ MicroFest 2001 will offer discussions and performances of sounds off the beaten Western path.

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CLAREMONT — MicroFest 2001, a celebration of microtonal music, brings musicians and other devotees of the form to Pomona College on Friday for three days of learning, sharing and shaping sounds.

What exactly is microtonal music? Apropos of an explanation, here are a few titles from the academic papers to be presented this weekend: *Non-Temperament: Pitch Relationships of the Harmonic Series as Interrelated Diatonic Sets for Composition*. Or

maybe *The Euler Genera and an Hyperdimensional Tonelattice*.

If that doesn't clear things up, Bill Alves, associate professor of music at Harvey Mudd College, and organizer of the weekend conference, can put it more plainly.

Most Western music, as we know it, is based on 12 equally spaced notes between one octave and the next. Microtonal music does away with this standard. It might have as many or as few notes between one octave and the next as the musician desires, Alves said. Microtonal music also might base its tunings on mathematics, Asian musical traditions, acoustics of different instruments or even nature.

That's why microtonal is also known as "alternative tuning," Alves said. But

MicroFest makes for a catchier name than Alternative Tuning Fest, he said.

There is no one type of microtonal music, he said. It can be Renaissance, classical, electronica. Aspects of microtonal music have shown up in mainstream tunes. The band Sonic Youth, blues singers and guitarists such as Jimi Hendrix have tossed microtonal bits into their music by bending pitches, singing between the notes in an approach just off of standard Western sounds.

About 20 or 25 years ago, microtonal music was pretty obscure, with just a few musicians dabbling in it, Alves said. While it's still far from being considered mainstream, the number of composers and theorists involved has grown rapidly, and music fans are catching on, he said.

CONCERT SCHEDULE

- "Bill Alves: Microtonal Music with Asian Instruments," 12:15 p.m. Friday, Balch Hall, Scripps College
- "Harry Partch, The Early Years (1929-1950)," performed by Just Strings, 7:30 and 8 p.m. Friday, Lyman Hall in the Thatcher Music Building of Pomona College
- "Microtonal Music by Grady Wesley, Griffin Yadegari and Poole," 3 p.m. Saturday, Lyman Hall in Thatcher Music Building of Pomona College
- "Microtonal Music by Zelenz, Pisaro, Canright and Gann."

Technology is part of the reason, with synthesizers making it easier for musicians who can't build their own instruments to participate, he said. Cultural changes also contribute.

"I think people are more and more open minded," he said. "Not just to experiments

8 p.m. Saturday; keynote speech by Lou Harrison at 7 p.m. Lyman Hall in the Thatcher Music Building of Pomona College

- "Microtonal Music of Lou Harrison," 8 p.m. Sunday; discussion at 7:30 p.m. Lyman Hall in the Thatcher Music Building of Pomona College

For a full list of the academic conference and workshop events as well as abstracts of papers to be presented, go to <http://www2.hmc.edu/~alves/microfest2001.html>

in music, but music from other cultures or times."

This weekend's festival includes a tribute to Lou Harrison, an acclaimed composer who pioneered the use of found instruments. He also directed the Pulitzer Prize-winning Third Symphony by Charles Ives. During his

career, Harrison has worked with a diverse collection of other artists, including dancer Martha Graham, cellist Yo Yo Ma, and the Kronos Quartet.

Harrison, 83, will deliver the festival's keynote address Saturday evening. On Sunday evening, a microtonal piece for stringed instruments he wrote when he was 17 years old will have its world premiere.

"I'm scared to death. I'm working on it right now," Harrison said Wednesday, from his home outside of Santa Cruz. "I can be a blabbermouth. It's easy for me just to go on and on. I don't want to do that, though. I want to get to the music."

The concerts, workshops and academic talks are free and open to the public. Most events take place on the campuses of Pomona and Scripps colleges.