

Los Angeles Times

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MONDAY, MAY 16, 2005

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MUSIC REVIEW

An ode to the wayward comma

Forget English grammar — Michael Harrison's 'Revelation' is piano tuning at its exuberantly dissonant best.

By MARK SWED
Times Staff Writer

Michael Harrison's "Revelation" is a caressing, cataclysmic, monumentally over-the-top ode to a comma. It lasts 90 nonstop minutes. It is played on a piano curiously tuned. The piece was finished this year, and Joshua Pierce's astounding performance of it at Los Angeles Pierce College (no relation) on Saturday night as part of this year's MicroFest was a local premiere.

No, no, no, this is not some kind of whimsical musical evocation of the latest flimsy bestseller about grammar.

The comma is a technical term in tuning. To be able to play in all keys, the modern piano's well-tempered tuning requires a fudge factor to make everything even. The intervals between notes are not mathematically pure. If they were, a C at the top of the keyboard would be ever-so-slightly out of tune with one seven octaves below.

That fudge factor, a harsh, beating dissonance, is called a comma. Harrison has retuned his piano in special ways to mystically exalt in the consonance of mathematically pure intervals but also to exuberantly celebrate the highly provocative dissonance of the comma.

In his talk before the premiere, the composer mentioned the power of small things. Split an atom and you get a bomb. Split a minute musical interval — the comma in Harrison's tuning has the complex mathematical ratio of 64:63 (an octave is 2:1) — and you also get a bomb. A sonic bomb.

As the leading disciple of La Monte Young, the quirky genius of alternate tuning and generally weird piano playing, Harrison takes many of his cues from Young's six-hour "The Well-Tuned Piano." Like Young's music, Harrison's has an overall mood of spiritual reverence.

Young, whose piano technique is akin to that of Thelonious Monk (which is to say, invented), has stumbled on some pretty striking new ways to pulsate a piano. Tune the instrument in such a way as to create special ringing resonances and then start the fingers shaking, and you might think all the bells of the Vatican have entered your skull.

Harrison, a classically trained pianist, uses a slicker virtuoso keyboard technique than Young while still incorporating many of Young's discoveries.

"Revelation" has, for instance, four Youngian "tone clouds," each louder, more vibrant than the last. By the hallucinatory end, it's all stars and rainbows.

Perhaps the most surprising quality of "Revelation" is its straightforward sensuality. It is very easy to listen to. To call it La Monte-lite is unfair, but it has elements of New Age friendliness, along with heaping doses of old-fashioned, jaw-dropping virtuosity that simply pull the listener along.

Like an Indian raga, it opens with a kind of tuning foreplay, a fondling of the new pitches and intervals found in the tuning.

The piano at Pierce was a splendid monster, a 9'2" Blüthner, and once the pure consonances had mellowed us out, Harrison slowly released the dissonances. The notes fight with one another and produce an acoustic phenomenon of beating. They make rhythm. And when the tremolos start roaring in the tone clouds, it is as though the beasts have been let out of their cages.

To exploit all this unconventional harmony, Harrison tends to keep his musical ideas fairly simple. In two sections titled "Night Vigil," the textures were lush and Chopin-esque but with phrases answering phrases in predictable sequential fashion. Still, the sounds are new, and they make, at least at first, everything else sound new.

The real sophistication comes in the keyboard writing. Harrison's music, until now, has been intended for him to perform in his dreamy, improvisatory, transcendental way. "Revelation" was notated at Pierce's request, and the pianist adds a whole new dimension of phrasing.

Pierce is an old-school virtuoso who likes to mix things up (he is best known for his excellent Cage and Liszt recordings). His stunning performance Saturday was a feat that will not be soon forgotten.