



a lot of night music

BY ALAN RICH

Just at the moment when our ears were most in need of refreshment and a thorough cleaning out, along came MicroFest to accomplish exactly that. Month after month the *gnrr* had piled up in our auricular canals: all those turgidities in the Mozart piano concertos, the scary modulations that Bach drags in to frighten small children, the huff 'n' puff in those interminable Beethoven adagios — the “dull industrial gray of a global monoculture in twelve-tone equal temperament” as Lou Harrison so aptly phrased it. Yes, sir, a couple of weeks of just intonation after all that diatonic torture may have been just what the doctor ordered. (Or maybe not.)

Most major cities hold MicroFests nowadays: gatherings of musicians dedicated to preserving the various ways in which music can flourish outside the imprisoning system of 12 equally distant tones to the octave. The system is best visualized by the keys of the piano, organ and harpsichord, or the keying mechanisms of winds, which preserve the compromises — the tuning generally known as “equal temperament” — concocted by theorists around the time of Bach and Handel to sidestep the purity of the Pythagorean overtones, enable composers to work in all 24 possible major and minor keys, and modulate freely from one to another. Most American and European music composed since, say, 1720 uses equal temperament. Before these compromises, in the glory days known to true microtonal believers as “just intonation,” musical intervals and harmonies followed simple physical ratios: 2:1 for the octave, 3:2 for the perfect fifth. But this physical adherence also led to all kinds of clashes; you couldn't, for example, modulate from G-sharp to A-flat, even though on the modern keyboard these are the same note. (I oversimplify shamelessly, mostly so that I, too, can understand what I'm trying to say.)

“Microtonal,” therefore, is the catchall term for music outside equal temperament. To ears coddled in Schubert and Brahms, music in just intonation sounds — well, just weird. So does Indian music, or Indonesian gamelan, although the unfamiliar harmonies are mitigated by the exoticism of the instruments themselves. The best-known escapees from the imprisonment of equal temperament, Lou Harrison and Terry Riley — both generously represented on the MicroFest programs over the past two weeks — composed major works in just intonation, and also made enthusiastic use of the profusion of Asian scales. Another renegade, Harry Partch, postulated a scale of no fewer than 43 tones, and built his own instruments to make them possible. His music, too, was on the MicroFest roster.

I got to three of this year's five concerts. At Pasadena's First Presbyterian Church, the Donald Brinegar Singers, an excellent small chorus, sang music by Lou Harrison — including the setting of the Mark Twain text on American imperialism that I quoted with wonderment last week. Supporting them in some works was the gamelan orchestra based at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont; in one other memorable work, Bill Alves' *Luminescence*, voices, gamelan and computer-generated tones joined in a haunting, nocturnal



reverie: unearthly, far beyond the reaches of harmonic or tuning systems. At Claremont's Lyman Hall there was further amazement, most of all in a computer reworking by Alves of a musical design by Harrison — *Symphony in Free Style* — that was purposely composed beyond the reach of human performers: an intricate working out of a contrapuntal problem that begins as a knotty tangle of ideas and ends in pure, ethereal beauty six or so minutes later. (The work, in another computerized version, is included on the disc that comes with the biography *Lou Harrison, Composing a World*, published by Oxford in 1998.)

Terry Riley came down from his woodland den and had a program to himself: two big keyboard pieces, and an hourlong documentary film by Cecilia Miniucchi sporting minimalism's all-star cast. The plan had included the West Coast premiere of Riley's *A Dream*, for solo piano in just intonation, followed by the world premiere of his *Baghdad Highway* for electronic keyboard and voice; unfortunately, Pierce College — where the concert took place before an impressively large crowd — couldn't come up with a piano tunable to just intonation, so the same Korg Triton Studio 88 was pressed into service for both works. That was a loss; being in Terry

Riley's company as he performs on a just-tuned real piano is one of those experiences you don't forget.

Baghdad Highway, however, was performed as composed: Riley intoning a haunting string of lamenting texts in a twisted skein of languages — including some bitter English reflections on humanity in travail. (Interesting that two of MicroFest's leading lights expressed themselves during the festival in very ancient music wound around very contemporary tragedy.) The very young Riley landed in our midst some 40 years ago with music single-mindedly tied to Western diatonic harmony. *In C* was about nothing but C major; even if you perform it today with sitar, gamelan or Eskimo nose flute, its C-majorness remains steadfast. From this Terry Riley has come a long distance, and we can feel privileged in having been along on the route.

Cecilia Miniucchi's film captures some of this privilege. Considering the well-known outspokenness of some of the luminaries she has lured before her camera — imagine Philip Glass and Steve Reich arriving at points of agreement! — she has produced something of a document over and beyond the actual content of her excellent film. I'm only surprised that the film didn't catch fire by itself in the can.

If you were at Ojai last summer, you're probably still aglow from Marino Formenti's piano concerts: the “marathon” earlier in the week and the two astonishing recitals later on. “Why hasn't he recorded?” was a question frequently asked. He'll be back next week, but now the question has an answer. It comes on two discs from Germany's Col-Legno label. One is a recital of music by Germany's quizzical, enigmatic, unfathomable Helmut Lachenmann, including the *Serynade* that Formenti had performed at Eclectic Orange earlier last season; this will take work. The other disc, more immediately accessible, is titled *nothing is real*, and has strawberries in the cover design and a piece by Alvin Lucier named after the Beatles number in question. Better yet, it includes Georg Friederich Haas' *Hommage à Ligeti for Two Pianos With a Quarter-Tone Difference*, which Formenti played — alone! — at Ojai. Talk about your ancient intonations and your exotic Baghdad scales! These are discs to cherish. Ojai's people tell me that, for the moment anyhow, they have dibs for the U.S. market on these Formenti discs and will have a supply on sale during next week's festival. Otherwise, you're on your own: www.collegno.de