

## Interview with Giovanni Antognozzi for *Silenzio*, Rome, Italy

Intervista con Michael Harrison

Due anni e mezzo dopo la sua prima esibizione italiana ed europea, nell'ambito del Festival "4 pianoforti", ecco che si è presentata l'occasione di ascoltare nuovamente a Roma un concerto del compositore americano Michael Harrison. Harrison ha presentato, presso l'Accademia Americana a Roma, il suo nuovo lavoro, "Revelation" (edito contemporaneamente in CD e recensito in altra parte del giornale). Harrison è uno dei pochi fedeli continuatori del minimalismo storico applicato al pianoforte. Forte di studi condotti con La Monte Young e con Terry Riley, il giovane musicista ha evoluto il suo linguaggio compositivo arrivando a proporre una personalissima ed ispirata sintesi minimalista, piena di una intima liricità. Tutto il suo repertorio per pianoforte parte dalla "premessa" di un'accordatura particolare dello strumento, in "just intonation". La just intonation non è altro che un insieme di possibili accordature che propone, al contrario della forzatura imposta dall'uso dei dodici suoni per ottava della tastiera tradizionale, i suoni "esatti" derivati dai rapporti frazionari di numeri interi - la cosiddetta serie armonica - , così come descritto negli studi e nei testi di Pitagora e dei suoi continuatori. La sonorità del pianoforte che ne deriva, già diversamente applicata proprio dai maestri Young e Riley in numerose composizioni, è abbastanza desueta ad un orecchio occidentale, ma, proprio per questo, arcaicamente affascinante. Abbiamo quindi approfittato della sua breve residenza romana per incontrare il musicista americano e porgergli alcune domande, ben sapendo che gli argomenti di possibile trattazione potrebbero comunque portarci molto in là, ben oltre lo spazio a nostra disposizione.

WM: Can you tell us, shortly, how did you arrive at the new tuning you used in "Revelation"?

During the *4 Pianos* festival in Rome in November 1999, I found myself contemplating the sonic effects that result from working with "commas," or very minute, mathematically, and precisely tuned intervals. I woke up on the morning following the last concert with a radical new tuning in my mind. It came to me very clearly with all of the mathematical proportions worked out in a well-balanced symmetrical configuration. It felt like a gift or revelation. However, I am aware that this moment could only have happened as a result of twenty years of working with just intonation tunings. The tuning has so many beautiful and exotic sounds latent within it, that for the first few months, every time I played it, I discovered new harmonic regions and felt like an explorer in unknown and distant realms.

WM: In which way have you become part of the lineage of studies and applications which produced, especially in the US, so many musicians devoted to Just Intonation? Do you think you will continue to work exclusively in this field, as several composers - as Harry Partch, Ivor Darreg, La Monte Young - did, or are you thinking to comprehend, again, the "normal" instrumental practice in your work, as, for example, some new music champions, as Terry Riley or James Tenney?

In 1979, shortly after I began studying North Indian classical singing with master vocalist, Pandit Pran Nath, I started noticing that my piano always sounded out of tune, even after it had just been “tuned.” So I began studying the physics of sound and when I realized that the “out of tune” qualities I was hearing were the result of equal tempered tuning, I got a second piano and began tuning it myself, by ear, in just intonation. Later that year, I began a decade long apprenticeship with La Monte Young, tuning, transcribing, and eventually performing his 6 ½ hour magnum opus, *The Well-Tuned Piano*. My primary musical interests lie in the fertile fields of just intonation, however, I see no reason to unnecessarily limit myself and under certain circumstances I could see myself writing some works using tempered tunings.

WM: The sound of your piano is full of unusual colors, so strange for an untrained ear. The harmonics your music produces create a shimmering image, extremely full of vibrations. But, it seems to me that, in this new piece, you tried to transcend the nature of the instrument, to reach a point far away from your previous work, *From Ancient Worlds*. Could you describe your more recent steps and what new developments you see in your future?

With the “revelation” tuning I have combined carefully selected pitch relationships with new performance techniques, to create undulating waves of shimmering and pulsating sounds, with what sound like “phase shifting” and “note bending” effects and other acoustical phenomena. I’m especially interested in creating rich and diverse sustained harmonic resonances. Just intonation is by nature the most resonant form of tuning, and the piano, is one of the most resonant instruments, especially when one employs special techniques to control sympathetic resonance. The difficulty that I face is that the piano does not sustain tones like a voice or a violin, but instead, sounds decay rapidly after the initial hammer attack. So, in *Revelation*, I have sought to overcome this by exploiting the resonant capabilities of the piano whereby my audience often comments that it hears the sounds of a full orchestra. In the future, I imagine that I will compose new works for other instruments, voices and ensembles which will further develop these ideas.

WM: An element that I find reductive in the piano music of La Monte Young and Terry Riley (as well as in the work of other composers/performers), is the impossibility to see their pieces performed by other instrumentalists. On the contrary you told me of the chance to have your works performed by the world-renowned pianist Joshua Pierce (acclaimed performer of Cage and other icons of the modern music scene). Tell us more about it.

It is very important to me that my music has a life of its own and is widely disseminated among other musicians who I hope will one day pick up where I have left off. Up until now I have only sketched out many of my works for piano tuned in just intonation for the purposes of my own performances. Joshua Pierce and others are extremely interested in performing my work, and so I am now notating a complete score of *Revelation*.

MICHAEL HARRISON

***Revelation: Music In Pure Intonation***

Michael Harrison’s new CD follows his splendid earlier work, *From*

*Ancient Worlds*, and is a confirmation of all the good things we thought and wrote about him. *Revelation* goes a step forward, extending the concepts and widening the effects he began in the previous work. The structure is articulated in a long piece (in the CD you have only 72-minutes, but the complete work lasts nearly 90-minutes), divided into sections. *Revelation*, based upon an in-depth study of a new tuning that initially "appeared" at the roman concert of 1999, shows us a musician with a uniquely personal voice. Harrison's work, although in debt to the masters, Terry Riley and La Monte Young, depicts a widened musical language. His performance style, although embracing certain qualities reminiscent of Charlemagne Palestine, also reflects a surprisingly personal quality. Throughout *Revelation*, the luminous movements follow each other, and, as the romantic soul of Harrison is still well present, the atmosphere colors of shimmering lights. The harmonics produced by this new tuning (further elaboration in the stream of "just intonation") are given new life due to a "strong" approach to the instrument and the climaxes (see the final section of the work, "Tone Cloud IV") flow in "clouds" with harmonic beatings that are absolutely involving. This new work maintains the promises and "reveal" to us a musician in great shape.