



Michael Harrison's *Revelation*
At The American Festival of Microtonal Music
by Stuart Isacoff
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Johnny Reinhard's American Festival of Microtonal Music presented three performances of **Michael Harrison's *Revelation: Music for the Harmonically Tuned Piano*** in late April and early May, with Joshua Pierce as the formidable piano soloist. I had heard an early incarnation of this work in a private recital a couple of years ago, with the composer at the keyboard. Harrison's approach, which grew partly from his work with composer La Monte Young, exploits the overtones generated naturally by vibrating strings—the series of pitches that resonates softly above every “fundamental” tone. For acoustical reasons these are obscured in the modern piano's usual equal-tempered tuning. The results here are often surprising and wondrous.

For example, in the midst of clouds of dense clusters rapidly drummed in the bass end of the instrument, an astute listener can perceive high ghost tones—sometimes bell-like, at other times vaporous—as if a choir of angels were singing along. The piece can run as long as 90 minutes, and its sections build toward a climax during which I would have sworn that Brazilian singer Milton Nascimento had entered the room and begun chanting around a high B Flat. Joshua Pierce's rendering of the score was virtuosic in the best sense: technically accomplished and emotionally committed in every moment. When the piece was pensive, he was tender and thoughtful; when it wanted to soar, he unleashed a torrent of energy.

The intricate textures and remarkable effects of *Revelation* are the result of Harrison's desire to “emancipate the comma.” This re-working of Schoenberg's famous phrase about the emancipation of dissonance registers the seriousness of his goal. A “comma” is the difference between two intervals with same name—a third, for example, or an octave—arrived at through different tunings systems. For example, a major third produced in Pythagorean tuning (based on a series of pure fifths) is wider than one produced by a naturally vibrating string. Play these two versions of the same third together and the result is a jarring dissonance. For centuries, musicians sought to avoid these kinds of clashes; Harrison incorporates them into the texture of his music.

In some ways, Harrison's vision represents the philosophical flip side of Schoenberg's. Schoenberg's revolution in Western music, through which he broke down conventional harmonic models, was by its nature horizontal: everything built from rows of tones scrupulously ordered, with no one tone more important than another. Harrison's approach is vertical: harmony built on subtle harmony, overtones wrestling or reinforcing each other—producing a concoction of sound filled with otherworldly resonances. The difference between these approaches brings to mind an age-old argument, voiced in the eighteenth century between Rameau and Rousseau, over whether music attains expressivity through harmony or melody.

Schoenberg dissolved the distinction between consonance and dissonance. In similar fashion, Harrison rehabilitates the comma into a newly welcome constituent of the harmonic universe. This gives rise to an exciting and often moving musical dimension—one that may well be the path toward music's future.

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