

THE WIRE

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MICHAEL HARRISON

REVELATION: MUSIC FOR THE HARMONICALLY TUNED PIANO

By Marcus Boone

New York based composer/pianist Michael Harrison cut his teeth as La Monte Young's piano tuner for *The Well Tuned Piano* in the 1980's. He is the only pianist, aside from Young, authorized to perform this epic piece. A longtime student of the late Indian raga masters Pandit Pran Nath, and, more recently, Ustad Mashkoor Ali Kahn, Harrison has continued Young's exploration of Just Intonation on a specially redesigned 'harmonic piano' with a pedal to modulate pitches around any key, allowing the piano to play 24 pitches per octave. This customized instrument uses only a single string per note (in contrast to the three on a regular piano) giving a harp-like effect that was heard to great effect on Harrison's debut, 1992's *From Ancient Worlds*.

In contrast to that CD's delicate orientalisms, *Revelation*, a live recording made in 2001 at New York's Lincoln Center, has more in common with Young's piano works, in particular the 'tone clouds' discovered in *The Well Tuned Piano*. These are basically clusters of pitches played together rapidly with both hands to form a chord-like matrix which stretches out in time in an almost drone-like fashion. Used with Just Intonation tuning, the technique produces remarkable sets of overtones as the pitches resonate with each other, building into a pulsating, shimmering wall of sound in which all kinds of ghost-like sound effects and structures appear.

Although the effect is best heard live since it is an acoustic phenomenon, the CD captures the strange beauty of Just Intonation, allowing the listener to experience the way notes that initially sound 'out of tune' become compelling as the ear 'retunes' itself away from the murky approximations of conventional Western equal tempered tuning back towards perfect pitch. In particular, *Revelation* sets out to emancipate the comma -- the tiny excess of pitch in natural tuning systems which Western equal temperament sought to tame through its insistence on regular intervals.

A formidable pianist, Harrison's playing is less jazzy than Young's, but he shares with his teacher a fascination with reconciling form and improvisation through raga-like structures, which beckon towards an unexplored universe of sound relationships.