



AMERICAN FESTIVAL OF MICROTONAL MUSIC *March 27–29, 2015, New York*

On March 27–29, 2015 the American Festival of Microtonal Music took place in New York City at the “Spectrum” Gallery at 121 Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. The festival was organized and directed by composer and bassoonist Johnny Reinhard, a long-time enthusiast of microtonal music, who has been organizing the festival since 1981 in New York. The festival has presented works by numerous composers from around the world, bringing together the most diverse styles, genres and techniques, including Renaissance and Baroque music, Classical and Romantic, early and mid 20th century, contemporary classical, as well as ethnic, jazz and rock music. As usual, this year’s festival presented a broad assortment of musical trends, as was manifested in the musical works of composers from the United States and many countries of Europe and Asia.

On March 27 the first concert of the American Festival of Microtonal Music took place. The first concert of the festival began with Johnny Reinhard’s introductory speech, where he introduced his festival and described his new invention – the 128-note-per-octave scale, on which any note played ends up being consonant, and which does not have any dissonant pitches. He also introduced the composers whose works were about to be performed and the performers who were about to play, some of whom also said a few words about their pieces and their performances, including guitarist from Istanbul, Tolgahan Çoğulu, who described his performance of microtonal music on the guitar, and David Galt, who introduced his piece “Garbled Music: a Diptych” for didjeridoo.

The first composition on the program was a world premiere of a composition by **Richard Carr**, “**Shine on You Crazy Diamond**” for violin and laptop, with the composer himself playing the violin part and supervising the electronic sounds on the computer. The piece

lasted five minutes, yet consisted of an assortment of contrasting sounds. The harmonically static accompaniment with diatonic minor harmonies and motor pulsating rhythms, adjoining the minimalist aesthetics, were joined with long, slow notes played on the violin in the high register. The diatonic harmonies were discernibly altered by microtonal intervals. These harmonies and textures alternated with more abstract, unusually sounding textures, departing from the predominating diatonic minor harmonies, suggesting a more avant-garde sound-world, along with fast, scurrying passages on the violin and in the electronic part, with the pulsating rhythm fading in and out at random intervals of time. The juxtaposition of the rhythmically pulsating sounds with diatonic harmonies, suggesting a minimalist style, and the abstract textures denoting a modernist trend formed the main idea of this piece. Altogether this produced a fantastic, intensely expressive atmosphere.

This was followed by the American premiere of the “**Fugue**” from the Suite “**Forecasts**” by Russian composer **Alexander Nemtin**, written in 1963 for the ANS synthesizer, the first electronic instrument in the Soviet Union. Nemtin became famous for completing Alexander Scriabin’s unfinished mystical piece, the “Prefatory Action” for piano, organ, soloists, chorus and orchestra, which was premiered in 1997 in Helsinki. The 11-minute-long piece featured a 12-voice fugue, written in the microtonal temperament of $\frac{5}{6}$ of a semitone (or $\frac{5}{72}$ of an octave), so that the twelve voices of the fugue would avoid the static interval of the octave. After starting with very sparse textures, with the individual voices coming in, one at a time, as proper for a fugue, the piece gradually became thicker and textures, due to the added number of voices. Towards the climax of the piece, the elaborations in its textures involved outlandish glissando movements in the middle range, while towards the close of the piece the

textures became sparse again, as the voices faded out, one by one.

Austrian composer, currently living in New York, **Georg Friedrich Haas** presented his piece for solo bassoon, “**For Johnny Reinhard**,” subtitled “in 128-tone scale, bassoon solo,” which he wrote in only three days. It was given its world premiere by *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon. The piece was rather extended in duration and had a very technical and cerebral sound to it, featuring a variety of extended notes of various durations, spaced a very short intervals from each other, some of which contained multiphonics. Despite the etude-like features of the piece, the main objective of which seemed to demonstrate these very small intervals at close proximity of each other, the piece had a certain unusual and curious kind of expressivity and dramaturgy in it, which became discernible upon close and attentive listening to it. The latter quality was enhanced by the steady rise and fall of the dynamics present in the piece. While the beginning of the piece was all in one register of the bassoon, the middle of the piece included a few spots where the register was sharply changed, which added to the dramaturgical qualities of the music. Towards the end of the piece, ample use was made of the high register of the bassoon. All of these features of the piece were splendidly demonstrated by Johnny Reinhard’s superbly virtuosic performance.

Two pieces for guitar by Turkish composer **Aşık Veysel Şaturoğlu – “Kara Toprak”** (“Black Earth”), presented in an arrangement by Ricardo Moyano, and “Uzun İnce Bir Yoldayım” (“I am on a Long and Narrow Way”) – were performed by Istanbul-based guitarist, *Tolgahan Çoğulu*. The first piece was moderately fast and had the flavor of Turkish ethnic folk music for guitar, successfully combining diatonic harmonies with microtonal temperaments and a standard melody-accompaniment texture with incursions of technical, virtuosic quasi-flamenco flourishes. The second piece began in a slower tempo, containing a greater share of rubato rhythms

and more of an improvisatory feel to it. Then, after a while, the lengthy introductory passage was succeeded by the main section, containing a faster tempo and the standard combination of a melodic line (playing Turkish folk melodies and their virtuosic elaborations) and a lively accompaniment.

“**Three Cornered Hat**” for theremin, fretless guitar and bassoon, composed by **the writer of these lines**, was given its premiere performance by *Yonat Haffka* on the theremin, *Michael Haffka* on the fretless guitar and *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon. The piece was written in response to a request by Michael Haffka and consisted entirely of graphic notation. The performers gave their own personal interpretation of the graphic score, albeit following the instructions in it of when the individual instruments should come in or stop playing and when to raise or lower their pitches. Although the performers played in a non-equal-tempered tuning, they brought a great amount of diatonic harmonies (with microtonal alterations) and folk-music elements to the piece. This was counterbalanced by the non-standard textural combination of three unusual instruments, the combined blend of which, especially enhanced by glissandi in the theremin and bassoon and the reverberating chords in the guitar, and the orderly way they entered their lines or stopped playing provided for the expressive and dramaturgical qualities of their performance. The piece had a mysterious, nocturnal mood and an exotic sound world.

“**Neo-Makam**” by *Tolgahan Çoğulu* and *Johnny Reinhard*, was basically a combined improvisation for guitar and bassoon, lasting about four minutes in duration, loosely following the style of Turkish makam, albeit in a very free rendition. The performance alternated between those sections where there was a predominance of a melody-accompaniment texture, successfully recreating a Turkish ethnic musical style, with other sections, where the two instruments played freely, not paying close attention to each other, attempting to create

exotic textures, coming close to depicting sounds of nature.

David Galt performed the world premiere of his piece “**Garbled Numbers: a Diptych**” on the didjeridoo, the famous Australian folk instrument, resembling a big tree trunk. The very appearance of this exotic instrument, as well as the outlandish sound of it brought in a very colorful atmosphere. The composer-performer was pronouncing words into the instrument, which were names of numbers. However, due to the fact that they were spoken into the instrument, the pronunciation was distorted and unrecognizable, yet provided for the non-standard type of textural development of the piece, consisting almost entirely of these sound reverberations of the spoken words.

The first concert finished with the world premiere of **Johnny Reinhard’s** piece “Trip I,” which was performed by an ensemble of *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon, *Richard Carr* on the violin, *Todd Brunel* playing several clarinets alternately, *Tolgahan Çoğulu* playing microtonal guitar, *Michael Haffika* playing fretless guitar, *Jeroen Paul Thesseling* on the fretless bass, and *Yonat Haffika* on the theremin. This was a joint jam improvisation of all the performers, staying within 128 tuning. Johnny Reinhard announced that this piece was the first part of a triptych of three improvised pieces, each one of which was supposed to be performed on each of the three concerts of the festival, all of which together were to form a single integral “cycle” in 128 tuning. The performance combined the qualities of loose simultaneous playing by musicians, not guided by any written musical score to coordinate them, together with a very harmonious blended and rhythmically coordinated performance, the instrumentalists successfully sensing each other’s playing and blending in with the ensemble. The latter quality was enhanced by steady pulsating rhythms prevailing through the entire performance, though successfully avoiding the sense of monotony. After certain periods of time one or several players would bring in a new musical idea, to which the other musicians

would blend in. This resulted in a coordinated and contrasting performance of an improvised piece, albeit containing contrasting musical sections. The coordination of the performers was so good, that the music ultimately had the sound of a written-out composition, rather than an improvised performance.

The second concert of the festival on March 28 started with an introductory speech by Johnny Reinhard, joined by Skip La Plante, a composer, who is also a builder of original instruments, for which he writes music. The concert program opened up with a premiere of **Skip La Plante’s** piece for solo viola, called “**Just Viola,**” played by *Anastasia Solberg*, a remarkable violist, who performed throughout all the years of the festival, beginning with its very first concert (on March 7, 1981). The title, obviously, presented a pun, implying that this viola piece was written in just intonation. The piece was based on an “undertone series,” which is essentially an inversion of the overtone series. The first movement of the piece possessed simplistic rhythms and a memorable diatonic melody, altered with non-standard tunings, possessing the qualities of a folk ballad. Its melodic writing almost made the impression that this was a piece for solo voice. The latter quality was enhanced to a great degree by Anastasia Solberg’s performance, which successfully caught the quasi-vocal intonation of the piece. The second movement possessed a more edgy rhythmic feel to it, albeit, without losing its singable diatonic qualities. The third movement focused on arpeggiated movement, elaborating on the microtonally altered diatonic arpeggios, to which gradually more and more scalar movement was added.

The world premiere of **Johnny Reinhard’s** “**Knin Calimari**” for microtonal guitar set in 128 tuning was performed by Turkish guitarist *Tolgahan Çoğulu*, whom Reinhard met in August 2014 in Knin, Croatia, where he organized a tour of his microtonal festival, and for whom he wrote it. The piece had a contemplative mood and, for the most part, sparse textures and rhythms, consisting essentially of short irregular

rhythmic fragments. It had a very through development, very characteristic of a fantasy, with continuous successions of heterogeneous rhythmic and harmonic units. At the same time, it did not resemble an improvisation for the instrument, since its development was a very coherent one. It made ample use of this new tuning, since the harmonies successfully blended together elements of diatonicism and chromaticism in such a way that the boundary between both was not discernible.

Following this, *Johnny Reinhard* performed **Georg Friederich Haas'** solo bassoon piece "**For Johnny Reinhard**" a second time, repeating it from last night. The second performance had a more confident mood about it, and thus the mood of the piece sounded more balanced. Unlike the previous night, when Reinhard played the piece sitting down, this time he played it standing up. The unusual technical aspect of piece, consisting for the most part of lengthy notes apart by miniscule intervals, made the second performance just about as interesting and intriguing to hear as the first, sounding almost as a new piece, notwithstanding the fact that they were separated only by one day, and that there was no element of improvisation present here, which would have greatly varied each performance.

"**The Ballad of Hobo Annie**" by **Meredith Borden** was sung by *the composer* (herself an excellent soprano, who regularly sings microtonal music), who also played the autoharp. This piece followed the tradition of Harry Partch's piece "U.S. Highball" for recitation and chamber ensemble, since it also was set to a text about a hobo traveling through many cities throughout the United States. However, in its mood, the music was totally unlike the Partch piece, since it was plaintive and lyrical. Beginning with a sad sounding melody in a minor mode, altered microtonally, intermingled with irregular arpeggios, the harp part established its accompaniment function, providing chords to a minor-mode melody sung by the soprano in a style resembling American folk and, to

a certain degree, jazz and spirituals. The text narrated a story of a hobo girl named Annie, who was homeless and who traveled from one city to another, without being able to find a home. The sad mood of the text corresponded very well to the emotional feeling depicted in the music. Towards the end of the piece the tempo became somewhat faster, and the dynamics got louder, the aim of which was to provide a greater pungent quality to the tragic story and music. After this, the initial slow tempo and sad mood returned.

Berlin-based composer **Philip Gerschlauer** had three just intonation pieces performed, titled, respectively, "**Mr. P,**" "**April**" and "**October,**" with *the composer* playing the alto saxophone, *Gabriel Zucker* playing the keyboards, *Marty Kenney* on the double-bass and *Nathan Ellman-Bell* at the drums. The piece had a constant foundation of accompaniment of double bass and drums, mostly in a regular motor fashion, albeit softly and subtly, while the saxophone and keyboard provided the melodic and harmonic development. There was a strong element of jazz, albeit modified, in the style of the music – this was enhanced by the roll of the drums and the glissandos and rhythmically agile melodic lines played by the saxophone. The beginning of the first piece "**Mr. P**" had a sad and morose mood, though towards the middle, it became livelier, though not shedding its minor mode color. Towards the very end of the piece the music returned to its solemn mood and slow tempo. The second piece, "**April**" had a very noticeable change of key, albeit, also one in a minor tonality, and followed just about the same dramaturgical design as the first movement. It had a most recognizable rhythmically punctured melody, definitely in a jazz style, which was continuously repeated in sequence and varied. The third piece, "**October**" made use of some unusual and colorful textures available for this set of instruments. It began with a more intensively dramatic mood and harsh textures, and then switched to more subdued dynamics, regular rhythms and jazz melodies.

The American premiere of **Johnny Reinhard's** piece "**Catalpa**" was played by *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon, *Michael Haffka* on the fretless guitar, and *Jeroen Paul Thesseling* on the fretless bass. This was one of a series of several pieces by Reinhard named for trees (after "Oak," which was performed at the American Festival of Microtonal Music in April 2014, and "Elm," performed in August 2014 in Croatia). It was built in a historical American setting. The music began a serious, austere mood, albeit containing very colorful textures, which constantly changed and developed, and gradually accelerated to a moderate tempo and livelier mood, set by a dynamic accompaniment of the guitar and a swinging melody in the bassoon. Short musical episodes alternated with fragments of a text about trees spoken alternately by each of the three musicians, sometimes by two of them.

"**Gerga in 128**" by **Philip Gerschauer** was a very short yet agile piece in which quartertonal tuning gradually gave way to the 128-note-per-octave scale. Its American premiere was performed by *Tolgahan Çoğulu* on the microtonal guitar with *Philip Gerschauer* on the alto saxophone. This was a jazz piece of a moderately fast tempo, lasting about four minutes, albeit its jazz style was modified by the microtonal tunings, as well as by the sparse texture of the two instruments. While the saxophone was employed in full force, playing melodic lines, the guitar part was very sparse, and the discrepancy between the middle-high range of the saxophone and the low range of the guitar produced an unusually imaginative textural palette.

The second concert finished off with a premiere of "**Trip II**" by **Johnny Reinhard** for an improvising large ensemble of instruments, the second piece of the triptych of three pieces played one each on each concert of the festival. The ensemble of performers consisted of *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon, *Jeroen Paul Thesseling* on the fretless bass, *Tolgahan Çoğulu* on the microtonal guitar, *Michael Haffka* on the fretless guitar, *Philip*

Gerschauer on the alto saxophone, *Richard Carr* on the violin, *Nathan Ellman-Bell* playing percussion, *Anastasia Solberg* on the viola, *Gabriel Zucker* on keyboards and *Marty Kenney* playing percussion. Trip II started with slow music sounding in a mysteriously eerie mood, featuring some imaginative instrumental textures, with some of the instruments more ready to display their prowess than others. Then gradually the momentum started building up, and more instruments began displaying their soloistic initiative, while blending perfectly with each other. In this piece the involvement of the drums brought along an additional element of dynamic energy, although the drummer came in and faded out with delicacy. The bending tone of the wind instruments, joined with keyboards and some of the strings, produced some refined and exquisite textural effects. Greater initiative was taken by the bassoon and the violin in terms of playing solo lines. On the whole, this performance kept predominantly subdued dynamics and mood, rarely rising up to loud or fast music, albeit keeping a moderately steady motion, perhaps, saving the loudest and most dramatic sonorities for almost the very end of the piece, before gradually fading away to quiet sonorities at the very end.

The third and final concert on March 29 began with Finnish composer **Juhani Nuorvala's** composition "**Ruoikkohuhilu**" for alto flute and electronics with *Stefani Starin* playing the alto flute in just intonation. It was a very impressive piece, being intricately textured and subdued, both dynamically and emotionally. The expansive landscapes of Finnish forests and lakes could be very well heard in this piece, which featured lengthy melodically successive notes for the alto flute and possessed a diatonically centered harmony, accompanied by static, reverberating electronic sonorities, ranging from non-pitched to pitched ones, the latter emphasizing the tonic note spelled by the alto flute, the latter becoming more and more prominent as the piece progressed in its development.

“**Litaniae**” by Romanian composer **Violeta Dinescu**, which was performed on the viola by *Anastasia Solberg*, featured long repeated notes of a single pitch at a core, joined at first by minor-second double-stops, and after a while, developing further by having a second voice appear with glissandos up and down, as well as passages of faster, shorter-valued notes. However, the feature of holding onto single pitches presenting the roles of drone lines (first D, then G, then C) continued throughout the entire piece. Despite its seemingly elementary means, the composition was very imaginative and produced a warm response from the audiences.

“**Poplar**” was improvised by *Yonat Haffika* on the theremin, *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon, *Jeroen Paul Thesseling* and *Michael Haffika* on fretless guitars. This piece was influenced by Johnny Reinhard’s three chamber pieces named after trees. It started with all the players saying the word “poplar,” continuing the tradition of the pieces inspired by trees. Then the music began with first the fretless bass guitar playing long notes, and then the other instruments joining in one by one with lengthy static melodic lines, which expanded in their development very gradually, acquiring more and faster notes, louder dynamics and mixing diverse textures. The theremin and bassoon (the latter occasionally playing frullato) helped bring in an eerie, mysterious atmosphere, which was also enhanced to a certain degree by the fretless guitar and the fretless bass. Gradually, the music became louder, more dramatic and more dynamic, but never reached the stage of being overly loud or hyperactive. After a certain point, the development of the music gradually began to subside, and reached a point of slow, soft and static textures at the end.

The American premiere of “**Polsky Strofy**” (“Polish Strophes”) by Russian composer **Sergei Slonimsky** from St. Petersburg, set to poetry of Antonij Slonimski, the composer’s uncle, was performed by mezzo-soprano *Meredith Borden* and *Stefani Starin* on the flute. The piece was in four movements, featuring a

variety of quarter tones and other microtonal intervals. The piece was lyrical in its mood and intricately textured. It featured elaborate contrapuntal weaving between the two rather independent melodic lines of the piece, as well as very diverse textures produced by both the singer and the flutist. The second movement was the shortest and consisted of one note, *B*, reiterated by the singer and flutist at various rhythmic durations, dynamic markings and ranges. The third movement had the greatest abundance of microtonal writing and was also the most extroversively expressive in the cycle. The fourth movement consisted chiefly of the juxtaposition of short, fast staccato notes played on the flute and lengthy notes sung by the singer, which contributed to a dynamic and colorful closing movement for this highly imaginative and impressive cycle.

“**Potion Scene**” (1931) by the classic American microtonalist, **Harry Partch**, was performed by *Meredith Borden* as soprano and *Anastasia Solberg* on the viola. The 7-minute long piece began with the viola playing in an unusually low register, possibly, scordatura, after which the soprano entered with its vocal line, presenting elaborate contrapuntal weaving with the viola line. The viola had an abundance of glissandi and adjacently played notes with close intervals, while the singer’s line was purposely elementary to follow the words of William Shakespeare, so that the singer could project the words better. The music had a mysterious, magical atmosphere, presented with a very theatrical manner. The presentation of the words and their meaning presented at least as important a goal of the piece as displaying the finesse of the microtonal intervals, and the latter also made their contribution to expressing the dramatic situation expressed by the words.

“**Bass(soon)**” by **Jeroen Paul Thesseling**, played by *the composer* on the fretless bass guitar with *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon, preceded the last piece on the program, virtually without a break. It began with very innovatively textured resonant sounds on the fretless bass guitar, combining lengthy



reverberating sonorities in the low register with short pizzicato-like sounds in the high register. After a while, the bassoon entered, playing a stretched out plaintively sounding melodic line with a microtonally altered diatonic minor harmonic center. The music continued to develop along that line, with the bassoon enriching its timbral palette with adding notes in the high register, incorporating frullato, glissandos and rhythmically recognizable figures.

The third piece of **Johnny Reinhard's** triptych "**Trip III**" proceeded immediately after Thesseling's piece, without any pause. The players were: *Johnny Reinhard* on the bassoon, *Jeroen Paul Thesseling* on the fretless bass guitar, *Todd Brunel* playing several clarinets and bass clarinet alternately, *Anastasia Solberg* on the viola, *Michael Haftka* on the fretless guitar and *Philipp Gerschlaue* on the alto saxophone. The change of piece was recognizable due to the faster tempo and

addition of the other instruments. It began with a relatively fast and rhythmically defined pace, then proceeded in a bit more moderate tempo with great emphasis on the non-standard sonorities available on the instruments, both separately and blending with each other. After a much slower section, the music turned to the moderately fast tempo of the beginning, albeit with greater emphasis on the exotic sonorities than before, after which it became slower and faded out towards the end.

Altogether, the American Festival of Microtonal Music, as organized in March 2015, presented a bright assortment of music from different countries and pertaining to different styles and genres, which greatly pleased the audience attending the three concerts, expanded the horizons of their perception of music and enriched their musical experience by exposing them to a rare, high quality trend in contemporary music.

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