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MicroFest

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MicroFest

Authors

Aron Kallay, John Schneider, Karen Clark, Jim Sullivan, Sarah Thornblade, Kate Stenberg, Rick Shinozaki, Charlton Lee, and Kathryn Bates Williams

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CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

Conservatory of Music

presents

MicroFest

Ben Johnston

premieres

April 25, 2012 ■ 8:00P.M.

Salmon Recital Hall

Program

excerpts from Suite for Microtonal Piano (1977)

- 1. Alarum 2:40 - 5:45
- 2. Blues - 9:29
- 3. Song 9:41 - 13:08
- 4. Toccata 13:20 - 15:42

Aron Kallay, piano

The Tavern (1998)

Text: Rumi, (trans. Coleman Barks)

- 17:40 - 1. Prelude
- 21:52 2. Who Says Words With My Mouth
- 22:00 - 3. A Community of the Spirit
- 24:47 - 4. A Children's Game
- 5. The Many Wines
- 6. Special Plate
- 7. Burnt Kabob
- 8. The New Rule

John Schneider, voice & microtonal guitar

41:22

~ intermission ~

2:28:10

Parable (2000)*

Text: Rumi, (trans. Coleman Barks)

- 1. Prologue
- 2. A Mouse & a Frog
- 3. The Long String
- 4. The Force of Friendship

Karen Clark, voice
Jim Sullivan, clarinet
Sarah Thornblade, violin

Program

2:32:35

String Quartet #10 (1995)**

- 1. Brisk, intent
- 2. Solemn
- 3. Deliberate but as fast as possible
- 4. Sprightly, not too fast

Del Sol String Quartet

Kate Stenberg and Rick Shinozaki, violin
Charlton Lee, viola
Kathryn Bates Williams, cello

* first performance

** Southern California premiere

Program Notes

Suite for Microtonal Piano (1977)

The piano is tuned to a selection of overtones from the 5th octave of the harmonic spectrum of the piano's lowest C (33Hz.), which can be used to tune the scale by ear. In succession, touching the nodes for the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 11th, 13th, 17th & 19th partials followed by tuning the G-D, D-A, E-B and Bb-F as just (beatless) fifths produces a scale capable of magnificent expressivity. The title of the opening 'Alarum' comes from a Shakespearean-era stage direction meaning 'a grand entrance'. But *alarum* is also an archaic word for alarm, a call to arms, and this opening fanfare immediately trumpets a new soundworld to us. The 'Blues' uses notes that would not be out of place in a B.B. King guitar solo, or a Billie Holiday croon – but the fact that they are not bent or sliding notes makes them all the more piquant, especially during the fast 'jam' section that taps it's foot in 13/8. Both the 'Song' and 'Toccata' hearken back to older forms and seemingly familiar harmonic language, yet the traditional tensions between consonance & dissonance are remarkably heightened via just intonation. Though originally written for an acoustic instrument, Aron Kallay's 'Physical Modelling' piano allows an instant retuning of all its virtual strings, a recent invention that is now allowing a new generation of composers to much more easily explore the new avenues of tuning that Johnston first explored in his *Sonata* (1964) and this memorable *Suite* from the following decade.

The Tavern (1998)

“We set out to do *The Tavern* as a collaboration, because John Schneider knows the guitar as very few (maybe not any) know it. I was long ago convinced that the frets, which are movable, and based on deciding upon a set of pitches needed for each particular tuning, ought if possible to become the next step in the history of the guitar in performance. Our work to make *The Tavern* is a major step toward this goal. It is a setting of Coleman Barth's translation of Rumi. It's a Sufi idea of what it is to come as a beginner to that particular brand of spiritual discipline and how, in one aspect, it is a lot like getting drunk in a tavern. In other words, to paraphrase Rumi, it's necessary to have that intoxicating element there, which is both a tremendous source of energy and a danger. The danger is obvious, especially in the Muslim tradition, since drinking is *out* - that's not done. It's definitely on the wrong side. So, what we're talking about there is a metaphor, but at the same time the metaphor is out. We're talking about something which is psychologically not safe. But, on the other hand, it is necessary - and the reason it is necessary is that there has to be a dissolving of the ordinary ego. When you do that, what are you going to put in its place? It is a little bit like drunkenness. It's not that simple, but the sacrifice you have to make is nothing short of organizing and re-organizing your entire life. I'd say getting into any spiritual discipline is going to be like that. I remember a conversation

Program Notes

with John Cage where I asked him what he thought of the Sufi tradition and he said, 'I like dry wine. That's sweet wine.'" – B.J.

Parable (2000)

“The nature of a parable is to cause each person being given the parable to form his own intuition of its meaning. This parable has a Sufi origin. Since there are almost as many kinds of Sufi as there are Christian religious sects this is not much help pinning down its symbolic meaning. I am composing this at my desk on Easter morning: yet another red herring. This parable concerns a manatee---a sea-cow--- seeking a meaningful integrated life on shore. Can this be? And if it is, what does it tell us about spiritual aims?" – B.J.

String Quartet No. 10 (1995)

“Listening to the tenth quartet, especially on first encounter, we may feel as though we have entered a parallel universe in which Haydn has become a microtonalist with a predilection for complex proportional rhythms. The whole history of Western music flashes before our eyes— almost literally so in the last movement—but with all the colors different: seasons, decades and centuries all tumble into one another.

I. The opening movement is a textbook sonata structure, with an exposition (repeated), a development, and a recapitulation. The exposition presents two themes, the first in a microtonally extended G minor and the second in its relative major, B-flat; in the recapitulation both themes dutifully return in the tonic. This is eighteenth-century sonata form almost to the point of caricature. The materials, however, tell a different story. The opening music is gently polyrhythmic, with both the violin 1 melody and the cello bass line implying rhythms of 3, out of synch with each other, against accompanying patterns in the inner voices in a syncopated 4. The harmony is tonal but microtonally extended in a playful way, as though the notes “between the cracks” were making a bid for independence.

II. The fugal slow movement that follows, while formally conventional, is an exercise in richly sonorous 13-limit harmony, more tonally oriented (in an extended D minor) than in the Fifth Quartet.

III. Then comes a robust and joyful scherzo and trio, both with the customary A and B sections, but in a rhythmic language out of the world of Nancarrow: the four players are locked throughout in a rhythmic relationship in which the measure is simultaneously divided into 4 beats (violin 1), 5 beats (violin 2), 6 beats (viola) and 7 beats (cello); only on the downbeats do the players' notes actually coincide. For the musicians this is certainly difficult but, as we hear here, not impossible; the dance-like nature of the music (a quality found in much of Johnston's output) seems to propel the music along, with the barline

Program Notes

serving as a kind of rhythmic anchor.

IV. The finale, as Johnston described it to the members of the Kepler Quartet (who premiered *String Quartet No. 10*), is a “sort of a music history essay, period- by-period.” The opening, in a lilting 6/8 metre, resembles a Renaissance dance tune complete with tabor accompaniment (the viola playing *col legno battuto*), but also suggests the quasi-antique style occasionally found in the music of Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison. A brief but elegant middle section in 4/4, beginning here at 4' 37", seems to move the music a century or two onward, while maintaining the translucent harmonic character of the movement's opening (5-limit triadic just tuning, with an occasional 7-limit interval in passing). Then—to our astonished ears—the music segues into the mid-nineteenth-century traditional Irish song “Danny Boy,” in an extended harmonic world in which the 7th (and occasionally 11th and 13th) partial relationships evoke, somewhat incongruously, the harmonies of jazz. This reference is further emphasized by the walking bass line soon provided by the cello, allowing the music to—as Johnston's generation would say—let its hair down. And yet the emergence of this tune, unexpected as it is, has a rational explanation: the whole movement has in fact been a set of variations on it, with the opening Renaissance-like theme being a strict inversion of the “Danny Boy” melody and the other material directly derived from it. This is a kind of hidden ingenuity of the kind found in serialism but also in medieval and Renaissance music; in the present context Johnston's variations seem in the spirit of both of these and more. The sense of joyful abandon that the music finds as it progresses comes to an unexpected end. After the second time through the “Danny Boy” melody, the players come to rest, very quietly, on an open string—D in the case of violin 1, G for violin 2, C for viola and low C for cello. They sustain this while playing a glissando of harmonics with the left hand. The effect is striking: it is, in this context, as though the history of music has ended and all that is left is pure tone—tone with all its resonant properties, its inner, hidden, spectral structure, now fully audible.” – Bob Gilmore

About the Artists

Ben Johnston picked up the history of tonality where it stalled in the 16th century, and carried it into the 21st. Rhythmically, harmonically, notationally, he leaped out ahead & created the means for a future music we haven't heard yet.” – Kyle Gann (Village Voice)

Ben Johnston has been one of American Music's best-kept secrets for most of his creative life. In this, his 86th year, the Kepler Quartet's New World Records release of Volume 2 of his 10 string quartets was short-listed as BBC Magazine's Chamber Music Album of the Year, while recently his 1966 composition *Quintet for Groups* was re-premiered at the 2008 Donaueschingen Festival & awarded top prize and a recording. His **MAXIMUM CLARITY & Other Writings on Music** (June 2006) was recognized with the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award, a volume revealing not only a profound musical & philosophical mind, but an extremely adept writer of words as well as notes. It looks like the world is starting to catch up with a composer who has been quietly reinventing the future of music.

Though he counts Darius Milhaud and John Cage as his teachers, it was probably his time spent with Harry Partch that made the biggest impact on his musical thinking. As he said recently,

One of the most important differences between Harry and me was that, unlike him, I had no desire to jettison European musical traditions and practices. I was fully aware that the intonation aims proposed by Genesis of a Music undermine, on a basic level, the kind of tuning compromises (temperaments) made in European music...My resolution of this contradiction, however, eventually amounted to a kind of revisionism, asking the provocative question, 'What might European music have been like had the idea of temperament been rejected as it had been centuries earlier in China?'... What I had in common with Harry was a keen sense of independent aim – not the same aim, but an equally revolutionary one.

Johnston's marriage of pure tuning with standard musical instruments has produced an unequivocally distinctive repertoire, more talked about than heard due to the uncompromising demands made of performers. But seemingly ‘impossible’ music from the past has, in ensuing generations, become standard repertoire. One need only think of Beethoven's String Quartets, or Stravinsky's *Le Sacre*. A new generation of players has found much meaning and beauty in Johnston's wonderful scores, some of which we share with you tonight. It should soon become quite clear why *New York Times* critic John Rockwell has called Ben Johnston “*One of the best nonfamous composers this country has to offer...*”.

Aron Kallay has been praised as possessing “that special blend of intellect, emotion, and overt physicality that makes even the thorniest scores simply leap from the page into the listeners laps.” He is dedicated to expanding the repertoire by commissioning new works that challenge the idea of what it means to be a pianist in the 21st century. He has appeared on numerous new music festivals, including MicroFest, Jacaranda, In Frequency,

About the Artist

Hear Now, What’s Next, and the Other Minds Festival. Currently, Aron divides his time between practicing, performing, composing, writing about music theory and piano pedagogy, and teaching. He is on the faculty of the University of Southern California, Pomona College, and Chapman University, where he teaches music technology, theory, electro-acoustic media, and piano. Aron is the assistant-director of MicroFest, and co-director of People Inside Electronics (PiE).

John Schneider is a twice Latin Grammy nominated guitarist, composer, author and broadcaster whose weekly television and radio programs have brought the sound of the guitar into millions of homes for the past 30 years. He holds a Ph.D. in Physics & Music from the University of Wales, music degrees from the University of California and the Royal College of Music [London], and is past President of the Guitar Foundation of America. A specialist in contemporary music, Schneider's *The Contemporary Guitar* (University of California Press) has become the standard text in the field. He is music Professor at Pierce College in Los Angeles, guitarist for *Southwest Chamber Music*, music director of *Just Strings*, PARTCH, and is the founding artistic director of MicroFest, an annual festival of microtonal music [www.MicroFest.org]. His radio show *Global Village* can be heard weekly on Pacifica Radio's KPFK at 90.7-fm in Los Angeles & worldwide at www.kpfk.org.

Karen Clark has performed in prestigious festival and concert series throughout the world in repertory that spans medieval music, 19th century German song, and new music of the 20th and 21st centuries. In 2008 Karen joined forces with the Galax Quartet to commission new works for contralto and baroque strings on poems of the Northern California Pulitzer-poet, Gary Snyder. The San Francisco premiere of four song cycles by Fred Frith, Allaudin Mathieu, Robert Morris & Roy took place at Old First Concerts and featured Snyder who introduced the poems and performed in Whelden's setting of "Berry Feast." The recording: "On Cold Mountain: Songs on Poems of Gary Snyder" is released on the Innova label. Karen is also recorded on Dorian, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, Erato, Focus, Musica Omnia, and New Albion labels.

Sarah Thornblade is the associate principal second violin of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. She is an avid chamber musician and a member of both the Eclipse quartet (a new music string quartet) and X-tet. She has performed with Camerata Pacifica, and the Auros Group for New Music (Boston). Her playing has been described by the L.A. Times as “rapturously winning” and has been called a “marvelously versatile violinist” by the Santa Barbara News. Sarah has performed throughout the country and abroad including

About the Artist

festivals such as Tanglewood, Spoleto, Colorado Music Festival, Oregon Bach Festival, Norfolk Festival, Banff and the Portland Chamber Music Festival. She has collaborated with artists such as Glibert Kalish, Jeffrey Kahane, Andres Cardenes, Randall Hodgkinson and Warren Jones. Sarah studied with Miriam Fried and Shmuel Ashkenasi. Currently, she is on faculty at Pomona College.

Jim Sullivan explores the versatility of the clarinet and bass clarinet in an expansive scope of styles and repertoire. He has worked in small group collaborations with artists ranging from Martin Chalifour to Vinnie Golia and performs with the Brad Dutz Quartet, Ensemble Green, Jacaranda, Kan Zaman Middle Eastern Ensemble, and the Santa Barbara Symphony. Mr. Sullivan received his education at Cleveland Institute of Music, Florida State University (B.M.) and California Institute of the Arts (M.F.A.) and teaches at the Pasadena Conservatory of Music.

Del Sol String Quartet has worked its magic performing on prominent concert series nationwide, including the Kennedy Center, Smithsonian Museum, Library of Congress and National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, Symphony Space in New York City, the Other Minds Festival of New Music in San Francisco, the Chautauqua Institution in Chautauqua New York, the Santa Fe Opera New Music Series, Candlelight Concerts in Columbia, MD, the University of Vermont Lane Series and the bi-coastal 2010 Pacific Rim Festival co-presented by the University of California at Santa Cruz and Brandeis University in Waltham, MA. Del Sol’s four commercial CD releases have been universally praised by critics, including *Gramophone*, which hailed the quartet as “masters of all musical things,” and *The Strad*, which lauded the ensemble’s “gloriously opulent, full-throated tone.” This is their Southern California debut.

MicroFest has been presenting rare & unusual microtonal music throughout Southern California since 1997, having premiered works by Ben Johnston, Harry Partch, James Tenney, Terry Riley, Lou Harrison and many others. Past programs, reviews & photos can be found at

www.MicroFest.org

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