

The Claremont Colleges Present

Ben Johnston @ 80

A Celebration of the Music and Legacy of a Microtonal Master
MicroFest 2006

— P R O G R A M —

All works composed by Ben Johnston

Alap for double bass

Tom Peters

Excerpts from *The Tavern* for baritone voice and guitar

John Schneider

1. Prelude
2. "Who Says Words with My Mouth?"
3. "The New Rule"

Duo for Violins

Mark Menzies and Melinda Rice

1. Fuga
2. Aria
3. Toccata

Ponder Nothing for clarinet

Sam Torrissi

Knocking Piece

Nicholas Terry and T. J. Troy

Suite for Microtonal Piano

Gayle Blankenburg

1. Alarum
2. Blues
3. Etude
4. Song
5. Toccata



Ben Johnston

Alap is the name for the first section of a performance of an Indian raga. In this metrically free section, the performer slowly and artfully exposes and builds the mode and pitch space for the raga. Johnston's *Alap* from 1996 creates a raga from the eighth through the sixteenth partials of E and their inversion based on the tone B. Its sectioning reflects in the numbers of thirty-second note values the number of cents between the successive tones of this fourteen-tone scale. The tempo is chosen to result in a three minute duration, not counting the last three bars, which are recapitulatory.

Tom Peters, double bass soloist, is a Grammy-winning artist known for his interpretations of contemporary music. He takes a special interest in music for double bass and electronics. His concerts have been broadcast over Nordwest Radio in Germany. He has premiered solo works for the bass by composers such as Mary Lou Newmark, Alex Shapiro, Richard Derby, and Robin Cox. Tom is a member of GRAMMY-winning Southwest Chamber Music, the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra, and Ensemble Green. He is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, and studied with James Van Demark, Warren Benfield, and Jeff Bradetich. He has championed the mind-boggling difficulty of John Cage's 26' 1.1499" for string player and is featured in a series of solo recitals in Pasadena's Branson Theater at Boston Court.

The Tavern (1998) for baritone voice and just intonation guitar was written for John Schneider. It is a setting of poems of the famous mystic poet Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi, known as Rumi (1207-1273). The translations are by Coleman Barks.

Who Says Words With My Mouth?

All Day I think about it, then at night I say it.

Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?

I have no idea.

My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
and I intend to end up there.

This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
street.

When I get back around to that place,
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
The day is coming when I fly off,
but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?
Who says words with my mouth?

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
I cannot stop asking.
If I could taste one sip of an answer,
I could break out of this prison for drunks.
I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

This poetry, I never know what I'm going to say.
I don't plan it.
When I'm outside the saying of it,
I get very quiet and rarely speak at all.

We have a huge barrel of wine, but no cups.
That's fine with us. Every morning
we glow, and in the evening we glow again.

They say there's no future for us. They're right.
Which is fine with us.

The New Rule

It's the old rule that drunks have to argue
and get into fights.

The lover is just as bad. He falls into a hole.
But down in that hole he finds something shining,
worth more than any amount of money or power.

Last night the moon came dropping its clothes in the

I took it as a sign to start singing,
falling up into the bowl of sky.
The bowl breaks. Everywhere is falling everywhere,
nothing else to do.

Here's the new rule: break the wineglass,
and fall towards the glassblower's breath.

This that is tormented and very tired,
tortured with restraints like a madman,
this heart.

Still you keep breaking the shell
to get the taste of its kernel!

John Schneider is an internationally recognized 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 twenty five 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. For the past two decades, the artist has performed almost exclusively on the Well-Tempered Guitar which uses different patterns of fretting according to the key or tuning system required. Recitals include Renaissance and Baroque repertoire in their original temperaments, as well as contemporary music in alternative tunings by such composers as Lou Harrison, Ben Johnston and others. Since 1991, Schneider's concerts also include vocal works of the maverick American composer Harry Partch (1901-1974), which he sings while accompanying himself on replicas of Partch's Adapted Guitars (steel stringed instruments refretted in just intonation) and the Adapted Viola. The 1990s also saw the creation of his chamber group Just Strings, which is devoted to the performance of music in alternative tunings. Since 2000, Schneider has recreated many of Partch's unique instruments to perform the composer's singular chamber music, and in 2002 he commissioned the first Just National Steel Guitar, and now regularly performs and records the works by Lou Harrison, Terry Riley and others written for the instrument.

Duo for violins was written in 1978 for the Dutch violinists Jeanne Vos and Bouw Lemkes. Its three short movements return to the neoclassicism of Johnston's early career, but now in the context of extended just intonation. This is Johnston's first piece to extend string writing past the eleventh harmonic, as he would continue to do in his later string quartets. The subject of the opening fugue features intervals of both the eleventh and thirteenth harmonics, intervals sometimes characterized as "neutral" because they lie in between the major and minor intervals of conventional diatonic scales. The fugue is in four parts, necessitating quite challenging double stops for the players, and features the subject both in many transpositions and in inversion. The sinuous melody of the ethereal aria which follows floats above tremolos and harmonics which ground the tonality rather like the drone of the Indian tambura. A toccata is form in which a constant motion of notes are created through a quick "touch" (from which the name comes), recalling the persistent pizzicato which underlies this movement.

Residing in the United States since 1991, **Mark Menzies** has established an important, world-wide reputation as a new music violist and violinist. He is renowned for performing some of the most complex scores so far written and he has been personally recommended by composers such as Brian Ferneyhough, Roger Reynolds, Michael Finnissy, Vinko Globokar, Philippe Manoury, Elliott Carter, Liza Lim, Christian Wolff, Richard Barrett and Sofia Gubaidulina for performances he has given of their music. There has been considerable international critical applause for Mark Menzies' leadership in ensembles formed to perform contemporary and twentieth century, such as the Bloomington-based New Vienna Ensemble, Los Angeles's Southwest Chamber Music, San Diego's Sirius Ensemble and the New York-based Ensemble Sospeso. Along with Gayle Blankenburg, Mark Menzies is a founder of a new collective ensemble based in Los Angeles, called inauthentica. Mark Menzies is featured on a large number of CD recordings. This includes *Process and Passion*, a Pogus label release of chamber music by Roger Reynolds, as well as the world premiere recording of *...above earth's shadow* by Michael Finnissy to be released shortly. Mark Menzies is currently viola and violin professor at the California Institute of the Arts where he also teaches chamber music. Drawing from his innovative professionalism and artistic leadership, he initiated a successful collaborative series called Chamber Music Wednesdays that has contributed to the programming content of concerts presented by CalArts at their new theatre RedCat at the Disney Hall complex. He currently curates a series called Classics at CalArts, a fall festival presented annually at the Valencia campus.

Ponder Nothing (1989) is a set of solo clarinet variations on the traditional French hymn "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." If the hymn gives voice to Johnston's Catholicism, the title, taken from the hymn's third line -- "Ponder nothing earthly minded" -- refers to his interest in the no-mind meditation of Zen. The piece is easy to follow: between the identical opening and closing statements of the theme, there are 13 variations, all in the key of E, and each six measures long. Microtonality is most evident in variations 5 and 11 through 13, which map the theme on to a scale that includes the 7th, 11th, and 13th overtones and undertones. Otherwise, the tuning has a purity that the tune's anonymous medieval author would have understood. -- *Kyle Gann*

Sam Torrissi was born in Sacramento and grew up in Vacaville, California. He received his MFA in "Composition/New Media" at California Institute of the Arts in 2003, studying primarily with Sara Roberts, David Rosenboom and Jim Tenney. He is now back in graduate school, this time in the department of Applied Linguistics at UCLA. His interests include the neurobiology of language learning, multi-modality in face-to-face conversation, and the evolution of language. In addition, Sam works in a lab that studies song learning in zebra finches.

Knocking Piece (1962) was originally written for a dream sequence in a dramatic production about a soldier returning to his bombed-out town and features two percussionists knocking on the inside of that revered symbol of culture, the grand piano. These performers lean over like surgeons meticulously violating the inner workings of the instrument, creating such a provocative scene that this piece has been the subject of much critical derision, even a riot when it was played in Rio de Janeiro. *Knocking Piece* consists of constant polyrhythms modulating one into another at the same proportions as Johnston's just intonation pitch ratios. It is essentially a just intonation piece slowed down so that the pitches are audible instead as rhythms.

Nicholas Terry, M.F.A., is a freelance percussionist in Los Angeles. With a dual emphasis on mallet percussion and drum set, Nick has distinguished himself as a recitalist, studio musician, and ensemble member of 20th century, classical, popular, jazz/improvisatory, and world music. Nick has performed and collaborated with Pierre Boulez, Harrison Birtwistle, Gavin Bryars, Morton Subotnick, James Tenney, the California E.A.R. Unit, Fairouz, Miroslav Tadic, Roger Williams, Just Strings/Partch, Eighteen Squared, and the Elvis Schoenberg Orchestre Surreal at such concerts and events as the Lucerne Festival, Ojai Music Festival, Green Umbrella Concerts Series, Los Angeles' MicroFest, and the Stanford New Music Festival. Mr. Terry is a graduate of the California Institute of the Arts.

T.J. Troy combines an eclectic knowledge of percussion from around the world with his innate musicality to create a distinct and powerful voice in the world of contemporary percussion. Known for his high-energy performance and broad range of disciplines, T.J. performs in a number of ensembles, including MESTO, the Elvis Schoenberg Orchestra Surreal, Tabla Rasa, Freshly Squeezed, and Just Strings, an ensemble specializing in the music of Harry Partch. He has taught classes and workshops at the California Institute of the Arts, La Sierra University, the Oakwood School, and currently serves on the faculty of Bethesda Christian University, a position he has held since 2004. T.J. is an active performer and composer for television and film; recently, he was awarded the Gaia Award from the Moondance International Film Festival, for his score to Den Serras' film, *Seven Swans*, co-written with composer Leon Rothenberg. His compositions have been performed by the University of Michigan Creative Arts Orchestra, the CalArts Percussion Ensemble, Condensation, OK Composer, and Freshly Squeezed. T.J. received his Bachelor of Music degree in Percussion Performance from the University of Michigan, and his Master of Fine Arts degree, specializing in Percussion, from the California Institute of the Arts. His principle instructors have been Michael Udow, Julie Spencer, David Johnson, John Bergamo, Randy Gloss, and he continues his study of North Indian tabla with Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri. Currently stationed in Los Angeles,

Suite for Microtonal Piano (1977) uses an instrument tuned to the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 11th, 13th, 17th, and 19th partials of the harmonic series, making all the instrument resonate acoustically with the lowest C of the keyboard. The first movement's title, "Alarum," is a Shakespearean stage direction meaning a grand entrance, but not only of the piece, but of the different harmonics, which gradually make their appearance in this fanfare. In the second "Blues" movement, Johnston takes advantage of this tuning to find the natural "blue notes" blues singers will tune to, such as the exquisitely flat minor seventh. The application of serialist techniques in the next movement, "Etude," may seem out of place in a tuning that so firmly implies tonality, but what emerges is a resonating cloud of overtones that would never be heard in equal temperament. The difficult polyrhythms in this movement are applications of the same pitch ratios and a reflection of Johnston's belief in multilevel holistic organization of the dimensions of music. The darkly poignant "Song" which follows demonstrates the many colors available in just intonation's continuous spectrum of consonance. The final virtuosic "Toccata" also explores this tonal spectrum, contrasting a middle chromatic section with outside sections again based on the harmonies of the opening "Alarum."

Gayle Blankenburg has performed extensively to great critical acclaim as a solo pianist, chamber musician, and vocal accompanist. She was a roster artist with Southwest Chamber Music from 1996 to 2003, with whom she regularly performed and recorded. Among recordings for Southwest Chamber Music on Cambria Records are her performances of Elliot Carter's newest song cycle, *Of Challenge and of Love* with soprano Phyllis Bryn-Julson and the *Carlos Chavez Invention* for solo piano. She has also performed with Phyllis Bryn-Julson at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, in New York City, and in Vienna, Austria. She is currently a founding member of the LA-based ensemble "inauthentica" with whom she has recently recorded works of Richard Cameron-Wolfe with soprano Lucy Shelton, and with whom she will soon record Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* with soprano Jennifer Goltz. She has performed much of the standard chamber music repertoire with members of major orchestras across the country, including members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and is currently on the piano faculties of the Claremont Colleges, teaching at Scripps College, the Claremont Graduate University, and Pomona College. Ms. Blankenburg was a student of the distinguished pianists Menahem Pressler (of the Beaux Arts Trio) and Abbey Simon at Indiana University, where she received the Bachelor's and Master's degrees in piano performance, and was also awarded the coveted Performer's Certificate.

Ben Johnston's works will also be featured at the next MicroFest concert, May 17 at the RedCat Theater, Disney Hall, Los Angeles. Microtonal masters continue to be honored with the Pacific Symphony's festival of Lou Harrison, May 19, 24, and 25 and the ensemble Partch presenting Partch Dances! at RedCat on May 30. MicroFest will also present a new Anaphorian Shadow Play directed by Kraig Grady at the Folly Bowl, Altadena, May 27 and 28. For ticket information, directions, and other information, please see www.microfest.org.

MicroFest would like to thank the Garrett Fund of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of Harvey Mudd College, Scripps College, and the Pomona College Music Department for sponsoring tonight's program. Thanks also to tonight's performers and especially Ben Johnston.