

In 2010 Microtonal Projects presented UK MicroFest 4 at The Vortex Jazz Club, London. A few weeks before the event, Kirsten Edwards and I were asked to give a one hour presentation on Resonance FM. This was in the form of an interview, so 'K' below is Kirsten and 'D' is me, Donald Boustead!

The following text was the basis for the programme although there were a few improvised sections as well. I actually never got to hear it, so I'm not sure how it turned out!

It gives an idea of what Microtonal Projects has always been about, an ethos which has continued forward into EUROMicroFest.

Music with Different Tunings

K On 31st October, Microtonal Projects give their first concert at The Vortex Jazz Club in Dalston, London. I'm Kirsten Edwards and I've been involved with Microtonal Projects for a couple of years, first by redeveloping their web site, then as co-director of UKM3, the 3rd 3-day festival of microtonal music promoted by Microtonal Projects at Riverhouse Studios in Walton on Thames. My co-director was the composer Donald Boustead, Founder of Microtonal Projects and Director since its inception in 2003. Donald, you consider the forthcoming concert at The Vortex to be an important one for Microtonal Projects, why?

D Microtonal music contains a very broad gamut of musics. My musical background is essentially – for want of a better way of putting it - from the 'serious new music' ilk. I was a university lecturer for a number of years, I have a PhD in composition etc. and, in the course of that process, was inevitably exposed to a great deal of music in the, recently, university-led canon. But that's only one small part of microtonality as a whole and, as best I can, I've always tried to indicate that diversity through microtonal projects – although it's inevitable, I think, that, because of my background the activities of microtonal projects has, or has had so far, a bias towards this particular approach. This concert is important because it addresses a new audience, a central London audience, an audience with leanings towards jazz and cross-discipline experimental music. It's also a poignant connection for me as a composer whose has always been attracted by jazz and influenced by jazz but also as a microtonalist, because there have been significant contributions from jazz musicians to microtonal exploration.

K Before we talk more about the forthcoming concert I suppose we ought to say what we mean by microtonal music?

D Yes, well there are a number of ways we could do that. We could, for example, get quite technical straight away and start talking about tuning commas and the history of tunings from Ancient Greek times onwards. This is certainly a part of microtonality, a significant part – quite a bit of maths and science combined with some fairly full-on music theory. But we won't go this way! This is, after all, the back room stuff. It's important but it's not, in my view, the main focus. This is the boiler room if you like and you wouldn't take your friends and neighbours to see your boiler would you, you'd want to sit them down and try to make them feel comfortable in your perfectly heated home! However, there might be some of us would actually just love to be looking at that boiler! It's the same with microtonality. There is a strain of microtonalist who is obsessed with boiler room activities and if you are so disposed then the Tuning List would be a good place to meet like-minded fellows. But for me, as a music creator and director, I'm more interested in the range of living spaces which can be controlled by this boiler room. I'm more interested in the music. And

the best way to say what microtonal music is, is by listening to some contrasting examples. That's why we've called this programme 'music with different tunings'. That's not a definition of microtonality – there are some who would be horrified if I suggested it was – but many microtonalists can't really agree on a definition anyway, so it's best left alone and instead we'll listen to some different microtonal music – or not microtonal perhaps according to some definitions but we're not going to care, we're just going to enjoy listening to music in tunings other than the one that has become the predominant norm in western music and that is an equal tempered tuning with 12 pitches per octave. Later in the programme, I should say, we are going to play some whole pieces, and this is something we'd much prefer to do generally, but as this is literally for the sake of example, we begin with some fragments to help emphasise the differences and to keep within our time-frame.

K The first piece is a Maestoso by Alois Haba, from his Suite for 4 Trombones Op 72 written in the quarter-tone system, written in 1950.

D Yes, for me this is a fascinating little piece - one of 5 pieces in the suite. Haba was one of a number of early 20th Century pioneers of microtonality, among others we could mention Wyshnegradsky and Carrillo and Harry Partch, who was a little later than those three, and whose music we will also hear. I wouldn't say that Haba, Carrillo and Wyshnegradsky are similar composers but they were all experimenting along similar lines – that is, developing new instruments and adapting existing instruments to play smaller intervals, by developing new notations and experimenting with different tuning systems derived, on the whole, from greater divisions of the tone than we are used to. In 12 division music, the tone is divided into 2, called a semitone. Haba and Wyshnegradsky divided it into 3 and 6, creating 3rd and 6th tones and Haba also the 5th tone. Carrillo, on the other hand, divided the tone, incredibly, into 16 parts while Wyshnegradsky divided the octave, not the tone, into 31 parts following along the lines of those theorists and instruments builders at the beginning of the 16th century who created keyboard instruments with 31 keys as a means to complete a cycle of quarter comma meantone fifths. So just among these 3 composers, excluding Partch for now, there was a wide range of exploration and activity which internationally is still largely unknown. The music, however, is often a little awkward as it's left groping for intent – aesthetically evolving as it has from an essentially 19th century harmonic system, yet laden with an expanded palette of somewhat tiny new intervals.

K The second piece is The Wind, one of the 11 Intrusions by Harry Partch, dating from a similar time to the Haba, 1949-50

D Yes, the remarkable and brilliant Harry Partch. Partch was a true American maverick who consciously strove to strip away all known preconceptions about music and start again. In terms of tuning he was inspired by the 19th century scientist Helmholtz whose book *On the sensations of tone as a physiological basis for the theory of music* he kept regularly by his side as he developed his 43 unequal pitches to the octave scale, built largely from simple just intervals. And in turn Partch left us his own theoretical text in A Genesis of a Music which painstakingly documents the development of his scale and some of the 26 instruments he build in order to exploit it. This piece is early in the cannon, and like most of the music of this period, is for just one of two instruments with voice. As Partch developed his ideas, his instruments, and a following which enabled him to teach musicians who would become part of his ensemble, his music became larger in scale and more dramatic in orientation.

K The next track is by Wendy Carlos, the title track from her Beauty in the Beast CD of 1986

D This track moves away from an experimental aesthetic to a predominantly traditional way of composing but with new scales, two scales in fact invented by the composer which she calls Alpha and Beta, which symbolise beauty and beast respectively.

K the 4th example is by another American, the composer/guitarist Neil Haverstick, or Stickman as he's often called, as is the title of the album this track comes from – and the track is called Ozzy.

D Yes, Neil Haverstick is one of a number of electric guitarists in the states who play with re-fretted guitars – in this case a guitar with 34 frets to the octave but Neil also plays a 19 division guitar. Haverstick is an extremely good guitarist and his music is generally fairly mainstream in approach – with the difference that he makes his music from crazy tunings!

K Another guitarist, another American but one perhaps better known in the UK through his appearances with Hirome at Ronny Scotts and the like, that is David Fiuczynski.

D Yes, Fiuczynski is a terrific player and highly respected as a virtuoso rock guitarist – using standard tunings – but this track, from the first KIF album reveals another interest. The track, Mectoub, uses a quarter-tone electric guitar but, as you will hear, the aesthetic is looking as much towards the East as to the West and the reason I'm including this example is to, at least to give a nod in the direction of that vast array of, mainly, Eastern musics which are, or could be described as, microtonal – music from Turkey, Eastern Europe, Thailand, Indonesia and India to name but some examples.

K Finally, in this quick aural survey, we're finishing with a straight jazz track, from the Don Ellis Orchestra's album Electric Bath.

D Yes, this is Turkish Bath with it's distinctive sitar introduction, but listen out for the quarter-tone trumpets blasting out in parallel quarter-tones – in 1964 Don Ellis commissioned a quarter-tone trumpet from the brass maker Holten and at one time Ellis has the whole of his trumpet section playing them.

K That piece actually provides the ideal link to the programme at the Vortex doesn't it?

D Yes, and that link is the quarter-tone trumpet, because since around 2000 I have been working with the British born, but now German resident, trumpeter Steve Altoft on, firstly developing both quarter-tone and 19 division trumpets, then developing pedagogical materials, repertoire and a large resource-based website called 'The Microtonal Trumpet'. One of the recent manifestations is Steve's Yasser Collection of pieces which is 19 pieces written in 19 equal divisions of the octave by 18 different composers – he very kindly invited me to write both the first piece and the last piece which is why there's 18 and not 19. At the Vortex, Steve is going to give first performances of a couple of the most recently written Yasser pieces and we're going to give a broadcast premiere to another now – it was one of the first pieces to be written and it's by Michael Parsons, called *Melody in 19 division tuning*.

K What else is Steve playing at the Vortex

D He's playing quite a big work with video, tape and text written by myself and artist Gary O'Connor called Slide, for quarter-tone trumpet, then a set of 19-div

Yasser pieces including a piece by Anne la Berge and, hopefully, if it's ready on time, a new work by Roger Redgate. It doesn't really make sense to play an extract from Slide without the other elements so instead I like to play another track of mine called Verses 2, which Steve recorded with percussionist Lee Ferguson which is written again for the 19-division trumpet and reflects my interest in jazz rhythms and textures.

K The other incredible instrumentalist we have at The Vortex is oboist Christopher Redgate – brother of Roger – and whose father, we understand is a jazz musician

D Yes, and interestingly, I think, improvisation has become increasingly important for Chris. In his set at the Vortex he's playing, first, a premiere by English composer Chris Dench, then a set of improvisations. We're going to listen now to his remarkable 'Sting of the Bee' from his Berio and Beyond CD. It's perhaps worth mentioning that Christopher was inspired, in finding a book of fingerings for Baroque oboe, by the fact that the player who notated them was clearly not interested in equal tunings – in reality they were probably trying to assimilate meantone tunings – but Christopher basically took this as a 'licence to investigate' as sting of the bee illustrates clearly.

K And Chris Redgate and another of your guests at The Vortex have worked together before haven't they?

D Indeed they have, Chris and Matt Wright have worked together and improvised together. The following track, Thanington Lake is an example of this collaboration. Here, Wright ingeniously transforms the subtle live sounds produced by Redgate by means of his very personal approach to live electronics. At the Vortex, Wright is doing two sets on turntables, processing typically a wide range of sources and he's well known for holding an incredibly wide pallet from language teaching LPs to wailing opera singers ...

K and we have one final guest don't we ...

D Yes, last but by no means least, Phillip Henderson will be joining us. Phillip's interesting to me because he's from a fine art background and we first came across each other when he applied to perform at UKM1, to be precise, in the event called 'Wild Dog', which attempted to present microtonal music in the context of other art forms including film, live art, dance and mixed media. It's probably fair to say that Phillip doesn't consider himself a microtonalist as such – he would emphasise other musical elements he's interested in more, like drones for example, but, in fact, most of his music is microtonal in the sense that the pitches are unstable or, kind of deliberately out of tune and I suppose what interests me in his work is its maverick, obsessional quality as much as its microtonality. This piece is called Ceremony with Hostages.

K Ok so we've been given an outline of what to expect at The Vortex on 31st October and the majority of the music is from the UK. Is this typical of Microtonal Projects events

D Yes – what MPs wants to achieve ... (Donald to ad lib. ...)

K Finally, we ought to say that MPs is involved in quite a range of activities, what exactly has been achieved since 2003?

D CDs and publications
UKM
Wild Dog

Websites
Films at Vortex

K We hope to see you at The Vortex on 31st October.

If time, play out with Rachel's Dance Track, Andreas Böehlen (recorder)

Trumpeter **Stephen Altoft**, active in both notated and improvised contemporary music, plays with numerous leading European ensembles and, following studies with Markus Stockhausen, he developed his unique 19-tones-to-the-octave Trumpet.

Christopher Redgate is one of today's foremost experimental oboists and tonight will perform written works and improvisations that push the technical boundaries of the instrument to its limits. Christopher is currently an AHRC Research Fellow at the Royal Academy of Music where he is redesigning the keywork of the oboe.

Matt Wright's work includes scores for some of Europe's finest classical performers, digital improvisation, turntablism, website installations and large events combining DJs, contemporary music performers and interactive media. Music 'at the edge of collapse' and the dialogue between 'stillness' and 'speed' are recurrent themes in his work and he has collaborated with some of the most exciting artists in the contemporary sphere, such as Evan Parker, Francis-Marie Uitti and The Percussion Group of the Hague.

Phillip Henderson's music merges drone, rhythm and melody. He creates dense works that can be bright and fresh while heavy and stifling. He plays electric harmonium, metal detector, kit and drum machine and has been known to sing and shout. The drones almost never support consonant harmony. They usually beam out of the machinery like clashing lasers. The rhythms happily disregard time signatures while mercurial melodies spiral out of control abandoning their origin.

Other News From Microtonal Projects

- Stephen Altoft recently recorded another 5 pieces for his 19, 19-div Yasser Collection in London, produced by Donald Busted. The CD will be released by Microtonal Projects in 2010
- German recorder player Andreas Boehlen will release a CD of – mainly – microtonal recorder music through Microtonal Projects soon – the material is mastered and nearly ready to press
- Mikroblech 2- Stephen Altoft (microtonal trumpets) and Samuel Stoll (microtonal horn) tour the UK in March and April 2010. Works by Elizabeth Adams, Robin Hayward, Sohrab Uduman, Roger Redgate, Michael Pelzel, Michael Roth, Donald Busted, George Aperghis
- to mark the first anniversary of his death (on September 25th) Bob Gilmore has put together a new website devoted to the work of Horatiu Radulescu. It's online now at: <http://www.horatiuradulescu.com>