

Cover Story

Michael Harrison: A Portrait



Michael Harrison - Photo by Matt Capowski for I CARE IF YOU LISTEN Magazine

Michael Harrison has many regions in the map of his musical life. He is a pianist, an improviser, has studied Indian classical music and developed a spiritual practice around singing *raga*, and is a composer active in the Just Intonation (J.I.) within American composition. In speaking with him, it was clear that Harrison has developed a cartographer's feel for careful detail and clarity as he spoke about these different streams flowing through his work. By way of background, Harrison studied with Pandit Pran Nath and Lamonte Young and performed with Young and Terry Riley, both of whom are involved in Indian classical music and associated with the J.I. . He was Young's composition assistant and piano tuner for *The Well-Tuned Piano*. Through involvement with all three, he became involved with Just Intonation (J.I.). He has been interviewed and has written about his previous work with J.I., most extensively about his concert-length piano work, *Revelation*, and the tuning system he developed for the piece.

Just Intonation refers to the use of pure ratios between pitches. One of the most intriguing aspects of J.I. is that tones can be arrived at through different combinations of ratios and consequently will result in slightly different frequencies. For instance, if you move from the lowest C on the piano to the highest C on the piano (7 octaves) you arrive at a frequency 2^7 higher than the lowest, a ratio of 128:1. But if you approach that same C by stacking fifths—picture the circle of fifths—you come to a frequency slightly higher: $3^{12/2}12:1$, roughly 129.746:1. This slight mismatch in tones is called a comma, and different tuning systems can result in different commas. Harrison's concert-length *Revelation* for piano draws on an original tuning developed by Harrison which embeds a 64:63 comma, tuning the C-sharp, F-sharp and G-sharp keys slightly lower than C, F and G. This allows alternate versions of pitches to be available to the pianist in a

fairly intuitive way, with white keys as “in the key” and black keys as “alternates.” Harrison’s description of the tuning system for *Revelation* can be found [on his website](#).



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In recent work, Michael Harrison has begun exploring several new territories, born from working with electronics and recording, and from intuitions born in improvisation. His most recent exploration was with the programming language/environment, [SuperCollider](#) by Soundforge. This has allowed him to work more intuitively with more complex ratios within J.I. and resulted in a work, *Harmonic Studies in Just Intonation*, which is the lodestone for several new works. His next work for Contemporaneous, *Khôra*, is one such piece, which will hopefully join two previous works for Contemporaneous as a CD. Harrison

and Contemporaneous plan to raise funds for the commissioning of *Khôra* and the recording project. Harrison is also working on a piece for violinist Mari Kimura, for electronics and violin, which will pitch-shift recorded sounds of the violin to extend far above and below the conventional range of the instrument. The Manhattan School of Music's Tactus ensemble will premiere yet another work drawing on *Harmonic Studies...* on February 16 at the Ades Performance Space.

Another recent development in Harrison's work is a shift toward writing for larger ensembles, an area that emerged from a compositional development that arose during an earlier piece, *Just Ancient Loops*, written for cellist, Maya Beiser. This is a multi-tracked studio piece that is performed with the live cellist playing one line against layers of pre-recorded lines. As Harrison explains:

"Compositionally, having all those layers to work with, I got to work with counterpoint in a way that I had never worked with before. Of course there is counterpoint in *Revelation* but not really to the level there was in *Just Ancient Loops*. Part of the challenge is if you have one timbre—you know, the cello—and if you're going to have many different layers of it, how do you differentiate between those layers? It becomes really interesting. Of course you can use pizzicato; you can use harmonics; you can use *col legno*; you can do different things to create different timbres, but ultimately it comes down to having different types of lines."



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Both conceptually and practically, this piece is what led to several works for the chamber orchestra, Contemporaneous. David Bloom, the conductor of Contemporaneous, heard Maya Beiser perform *Just Ancient Loop* and asked Harrison if he would write for the group. The first piece, *Orchestral Modules*, is in equal temperament, while the second, *Tessellations*, is in J.I., with the projected third, *Khôra*, drawing on the advanced tunings made possible in *Harmonic Studies*...

"Starting about four years ago, I experimented with doing my daily practice at the just intonation piano. It definitely affected my composition and my improvisational abilities. Because actually it was the one thing that tied in all the aspects of my musical life, which are composition, improvisation, piano, just

intonation and *raga*. It was then that I started incorporating elements of Indian music into composition. As I would improvise at the piano, I would come up with ideas and then I would notate those ideas and use them in compositions."

The direct incorporation of materials from Indian classical music resulted in a work, *Jaunpuri*, for pianist, Kimball Gallagher. The piece can be played piano solo or, whenever possible, adds Indian vocalist and/or tabla, as it will be on April 15, 2015 at Zankel Hall. Within this vein of works incorporating Indian materials are also Harrison's *Raga Preludes*, the *Raga Prelude No. 1* from 2012's *Time Loops* CD with Maya Beiser (Cantaloupe CA21086) and *Hijaz Prelude*, performed by Harrison and Beiser this past May at Atlas in Washington D.C. Most currently, Roomful of Teeth premiered *Yarman Alap* and *Tarana* after a two-week residency on Indian classical music at MASS MoCA this past August. Harrison has sketches for four projected pieces for the group, including a piece based on a rare Indian vocal work in a 12-note Raga Bhairavi and a piece in extended J.I.





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As Michael Harrison has pressed further into the map of his musical life, something magical has happened. The map is folding in on itself, with the seemingly distant now adjacent regions overlapping, simple lines becoming multi-dimensional. ■

David Dies

David Dies is a composer and a music theorist. He lives in Minneapolis, MN.