

Imagined Overtures

In the early years of the 20th century, the Berlin-based Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni pondered the possibilities for the future of music and contemplated a new beginning through the use of microtonal intervals, third-tones to be exact. In order to reconcile those third-tones—yielding an 18-tone equal temperament—with our 12-tone equal-tempered system of half-tones, Busoni suggested a sixth-tone scale which yields an octave divided into 36 equal intervals. Unfortunately, Busoni never composed any music in this new scale. A few other composers, among them Alois Hába and Ivan Wyschnegradsky, ventured into sixth-tones after initially exploring quartertones and there are folks in Boston who've upped the ante to 72 tones to the octave, but still, 36 never quite caught on the way that 24 did. In fact, Hába's 36-tone opera *Prijd kralovstvi Tve (Thy Kingdom Come)*, which he completed in 1942, was never performed in his lifetime and has yet to be performed to this day. Perhaps he should have worked with a rock band!

Imagined Overtures ponders a new way to explore 36-tone temperament by taking three electric guitars and tuning one a sixth-tone higher, leaving one alone, and tuning the third a sixth-tone lower. It is a beginning of what will hopefully be a new window of opportunity for a fascinating scale. As it is a beginning, it seemed appropriate to title the movements based on various theories of creation, all the more timely given the current creation debates, which like Busoni's new intervals, should have been resolved a century ago.

"Natural Selection" takes advantage of the two best intervals in 36-tone equal temperament: the perfect fifth (which is already a near perfect simulacrum of its just intonation counterpart in 12-tone equal temperament as well); and the natural seventh, an interval that is almost completely absent from common practice Western classical music performance except when a brass player makes a mistake. "Natural Selection" presents a series of 12 triads containing tonic, perfect fifth and natural seventh which spirals through the entire 36-tone scale. The music begins with a repeating rhythmic sequence of eight accented beats followed by a rest. When the entire cycle is complete, the final beat drops out leaving seven accented beats followed by two rests, then six beats and three rests and on and on until a single beat is left. Survival of the fittest perhaps...

"Intelligent Design" is an elaborate palindrome (the same material forward and backward) in quintuple time. The pitches are derived from symmetrical 9-tone subsets of a 36-tone row which emphasizes harmonic relationships of perfect fifths and natural sevenths. The quintuple meter juxtaposes eighth notes and triplets creating an off-kilter four-beat cycle which is partially indebted to a fabulous rhythm a student of composer Kyle Gann brought to his composition class and which Kyle posted to his blog on the Internet. At one point, the triplet takes on the pulse of the three eighth notes yielding a metric modulation that should be very easy to hear but not very easy to play. "Intelligent Design" manages somehow to reconcile Carterian rhythm, serialism, minimalism, and good old rock and roll, all through a fully ultrachromatic scale in 36-tone equal temperament. Pretty intelligent, huh?

"Exquisite Panic" is an acoustic demonstration of the simultaneous incompatibility and common ground between harmonies derived from our standard 12-tone equal-tempered scale and the new intervals unleashed from thirds of tones. The whole tone scale, a common harmonic flavor about a hundred years ago, is presented as a full 6-tone cluster, or two overlapping augmented triads, in contrast to a cluster of an octave divided into 9 equal parts, which is three overlapping augmented triads. Depending on your aesthetic disposition, the 9-tone cluster is either an amazing harmonic discovery or Busoni's worst nightmare, a sonic Frankenstein monster gone out of control. It certainly is the most dissonant chord I have ever used in my music, a chord which might be the most dissonant chord I've ever heard. One of the few texts from an organized religion that acknowledges doubt and uncertainty is the very first hymn of the Hindu *Rg Veda*, the "Nasadiya" or Creation Hymn which ends:

"Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know."

There's a contemporary religious movement that continues this saner alternative to zealotry—Robert Delford Brown's First Church of the Exquisite Panic Inc., which has but one commandment—Live!—and which proclaims there is "but one God: Hisherits name is WHO?. For example: Why is it not raining? WHO? KNOWS!"

The rock band Capital M gave the world premiere performance of *Imagined Overtures* on March 21, 2006 at The Cutting Room in New York, NY. They have subsequently performed the work at Tonic in New York, NY, and Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn, NY. Since then, Michael LeFevre led a performance of the work at the Cornish College of the Arts' PONCHO Concert Hall in Seattle and the Los Angeles Electric 8, doubling each of the parts, have performed the work extensively in California and have also recorded it on their second CD, *Imagined Overtures* (named after the piece).

—Frank J. Oteri