

2003

Harmonic colour fields (Warren Burt)

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Publication details

Hannan, MF 2003, 'Harmonic colour fields (Warren Burt)', *Music Forum*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 45-46.
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Harmonic Colour Fields

Warren Burt, composer and programmer

Pogus Productions P21028-2

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Reviewed by Michael Hannan

Listeners covering the gamut of popular, classical, jazz and even Westernised world music styles have been largely desensitised to the subtleties of scales that do not conform to the idea of dividing the octave into 12 equal semitones (12-tone equal temperament), a tuning compromise forced on European music in the early 18th Century with the advent of chromatic harmony and modulation from one key to another. Theoretically singers and some instrumentalists (e.g. violinists) who can modify their intonation easily, can still make a distinction (for example) between an E flat and a D sharp, but for most of us the rigid tuning of the piano and the electronic keyboard have brainwashed us to conform universally to the notion of equal temperament tuning in our playing and listening. This was not always the case. Before equal temperament there were various different tuning systems in use (the most notable were “just temperament” and “mean-tone temperament”) and Arab music has traditionally used an octave divided into 24 quartertones (24-tone equal temperament) resulting in scales that have some intervals that are a quartertone out from the Western equal temperament scale.

In the 1920s the American experimental composer Harry Partch revived the idea of using intervals derived mathematically from the naturally occurring harmonic series. Other theorists and composers like Erv Wilson and the composer of this CD, Warren Burt, have since explored more abstract scales and their harmonic potential. Burt’s CD is a good example of the microtonal approach to composing. There are five pieces each exploring a particular “harmonic colour field”. “Portrait of Erv Wilson” uses a scale (similar to just temperament) that is not too divergent from what our ears are used to; “Portrait of John Chambers” uses the 24-tone equal temperament scale; “Adjacencies (A drone on breaking my kneecap)” mixes up 11, 13, and 17 tone equal-temperament; and “11:21:23” and “48=>53; 53=>48” both explore the chordal relationships of particular overtones in the harmonic series.

It all sounds more mathematical than musical, and this impression is compounded by Burt’s use of what he calls “plain electronic timbres”. Synthesizers that have microtonal programming features are a relatively inexpensive way to conduct these kinds of experiments but Burt’s rationale for using plain timbres is that it may be easier for the listener to focus on the harmonic qualities of his work if one is not too distracted by rich sonorities. Even so, there is a lot of interest in the way the chosen (cheap) sounds evolve timbrally and combine vertically with each other creating multiple beat frequencies.

All the pieces are long and static explorations of vertical intervallic material in slowly evolving harmonic textures. There is no intentional melodic content and no prominent rhythmic gestures. I found the best way to listen is to try to achieve a deep meditative

state. The first piece comes the closest to sounding like an harmonic progression albeit with rather dissonant chords interspersed occasionally (and disturbingly) with more standard chords like major sevenths. After that the material is much more harmonically abstract and slower moving, and therefore much easier to lose oneself in. All these pieces are impressive but the one that impresses me the most ("11:21:23) has the simplest textures and the purest tones.

I've always been a fan of Harry Partch, but ultimately a bit sceptical of the potential of microtonalism. This record has strongly convinced me that there is a lot more to it than I had previously thought. Highly recommended.