

Guest Editorial

by Larry Polansky

[Within the field of Just Intonation, it is difficult to imagine two more divergent viewpoints than those voiced by David Doty's Inaugural editorial, and by Larry Polansky's guest editorial, below.

We believe it is necessary and appropriate to risk controversy in order to present the broadest spectrum of thought and opinion; which will, in turn, stimulate further thought, discussion, and progress.

It is in this spirit that we offer the contents of these editorial pages. ☺]

I think it is important, at this point, to bring up the difference between what I will call inclusionary fanaticism, or composition, and preclusionary fanaticism, or cultism. As artists we attach ourselves in various ways to various ideas, and the nature of that attachment, more so even than the nature of the ideas, is to me the significant determinant in the nature of our art, and more, in the all important relationship to the work of others.

As I've said before, the use of rational frequency relationships is simply one part of the complex and beautiful web of translations between the acoustic and psychoacoustic. It is clear to me that composition at some level must address the fundamentals, and later the more complex ramifications, of human perception and cognition. This is what first attracted me to the use of rational tunings. Any logical or aesthetic argument about music must eventually seek as its axioms the nature of the perception of that music. There can (and should) be a continuous and evolving search for the radicalization of that same perception, and an equally important (r)evolution of the human ear and mind by composers. Sadly, however, it would constitute a musical movement of mammoth proportions if just a few composers simply turned to the physical and psycho-physical for a short time, and occasionally divested themselves of the burden of our not-so-interesting music history.

So the uses of Just Intonation are of course interesting, and of course essential. Yet they are not more. Just Intonation is no more an aesthetic decision, nor a reason to "draw the lines," than is the recognition that the ear is the primary intended receptor for the composer. One cannot, with any sense at all, be a "Just Intonation composer." Contrary to my greatly respected and good friend Lou Harrison, Just Intonation is not the best intonation. There can be no best intonation, as there can be no best form. The use of Just Intonation must be viewed as one experiment in many to evolve the musical mind, and not as a socio-political musical act. ("Well, we'll rally 'round the flag, boys, we'll rally once again.")

So, returning to the distinction between inclusionary and preclusionary, to the difference between composition and cult, we must view areas of our compositional mind, like rational tunings, to be individual spokes in the wheel of music which the world fabricates. And we must also believe that though countless spokes be added to the hub, each has to be true. Next to us on the wheel may be the investigation of equal temperaments, and next to that a musical line which assumes the unimportance of frequency perception. This is what I mean by inclusionary fanaticism -- that it is essential that we investigate our ideas with all the integrity and depth of thought that we can marshal, yet with the ever-present notion that the paths we limit ourselves to are radiant ones, in the sense of spokes on a wheel, all emanant from the same center, following independent radii to produce one, hopefully perfect, wheel.

That's where newsletters come in. A wise friend once told me that you can pick the most absurd hobby possible, then narrow that down to its most limited sub-specialty, and you can always find one person who devotes all their time to it. It's the model train syndrome. But don't misunderstand me, it is that activity, combined with the very gifted few who are lucky enough to be able to design more than one or two spokes on our wheel, that give the circle its strength and integrity. Just knowing that there are those I can call who can answer any question I have about just tunings, or for that matter about nineteenth century virtuoso American mandolin music, makes it possible for me to
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of tones. One way of coming up with such a scale is to make sure each tone (other than 1/1) involves a different prime number. For a harmonic pentatonic, this means going at least to harmonic 11, giving a 4-D scale. Two such are: 1/1, 5/4, 11/8, 3/2, 7/4; and 1/1, 7/6, 3/2, 5/3, 11/6; the latter lacking the implied fundamental of the series. I find the second one particularly charming. Another 4-D pentatonic, with no semblance of a 3:2, is harmonics 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, which is similar to the first 5x7 scale above in character. (Admittedly, the 14:13 step is almost "small", but doesn't sound too dissonant.) And finally, one odd scale that is 5-D, lacking a clear 1/1 and any 3:2, harmonics 7, 9, 10, 11, 13. This one really stretches the ear.

I hope this personal tour of some Just-Intoned pentatonic possibilities has been stimulating. The scales discussed above vary widely in sound, from the familiar to the shockingly different, but all are, in my opinion, good, useful pentatonics. In fact, I have used most of them in compositions, and all of them in improvisation on my fretted guitar. While I have tried to describe some of their features, the only way to get any clear idea what all these various pentatonics are really like is to play with them and listen to them. ④

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continue my work.

And that's why we need this newsletter, and that's how we need this newsletter. We need to not proclaim and justify (excuse the pun), but to study and investigate. In the Talmud, that document which uses introspection and recursion to an almost surrealist extreme, one senses a prevailing attitude against proselytizing. It's as if the authors were only barely aware that they were studying just a very small part of a very small faith of a peripheral people. To them, the fate of the universe rested on their activity. In

an intentionally ridiculous comparison, but a valid one, so does it on publications like this newsletter. Scholars like John Chalmers, with his table of 1200-tone equal temperament (indispensable), and Bill Colvig with his chart of the width of superparticular ratios (fascinating, and never published!) are like the old Talmudic scholars debating for years on the significance of a minor conjugation in Numbers. The subject matter is of course trivial, the discussion not. As the Tao says, "... the way can be seen without leaving the room" -- the proper exploration of the mundane will lead us to the sublime.

In fact, I am personally not all that interested in Just Intonation anymore. My studies of it have led me to believe that there are more complex tuning systems at work which are equally integral to the human ear and mind, and perhaps in a later issue I'll discuss this at more length. In fact, if we ignore the notion of equal temperament, we are going to miss out on one of the single most relevant technological advances ever made for rational tunings, that is, the advent of cheap high resolution DAC's and computer synthesis systems like those on Macintosh computers, which are by nature frequency dividers. (In this respect it was some revelation to me to finally view a low cost computer system that was not constructed in this way. Recently, at a seminar at Mills College, Ron Kulvila showed that the common Mountain Hardware card is inherently in Just Intonation!) For years my compositional interests have strayed from pitch as a prime factor in formal structures, and I find myself often using rational tunings merely out of habit. However, I expect to return to the investigation of pitch in my work, and I see other experimental composers (like James Tenney, Lou Harrison, David Rosenboom, and others) breaking new ground in this regard, and so I am very much interested in this newsletter keeping up the intellectual activity necessary for my eventual return of interest, and in it substantiating itself and being a vehicle for discoveries about the use of pitch.

Yet I am equally interested in it not taking a stand, because "stands" are by nature preclusionary, and inhibit growth. This publication must always consider what it is interested in, not what it is not. And when it finds, despite itself, that it is interested in what it was not, it must become so with vigor. ④