Seventeen Tone Piano Project

phase two

Jacob Barton & Daniel Sedgwick, retuned pianos

Ryan Stickney, voice

Trio Life:
Stephanie Nussbaum, violin
Karen Raizen, viola
David Gerstein, violoncello

Sept. 26, 2006: 8:00 PM
Hirsch Orchestra Rehearsal Hall,
Rice University

*Welcome to Phase Two of the Seventeen Tone Piano Project. Those pianos you see up there are tuned to Seventeen Equal Divisions of the Octave (as opposed to the much more common Twelve), commonly abbreviated 17-equal, 17-edo, or 17-tet (**t**one **e**qual **t**emperament).*

This particular way of tuning is commonly overlooked. I understand how it is overlooked, but not quite why. This project represents my most active attempt (to date) to convince myself that there is much potential for arresting music in 17 and that it is worth the trouble to find it. This project does much by increasing the tuning's visibility and using usually hard-to-obtain acoustic instruments.

Phase Two in particular is the result of a call for scores, issued to the world at large (though publicized very unevenly). As hoped, I received music representing a variety of approaches. A challenge is hereby issued to you, the listener-composer, to, if the impulse arises, formulate your own approach and compose in it. I am very interested in the possibility of a Phase Three.

Mats Öljare
Of Silent Planet
Free Lancer

These are two transcriptions of MIDI compositions which Mats completed in 2000-2001. I chose these two for the manner in which they imply some ripe and juicy alternatives to circle-of-fifths based tonal systems. Our notation system stems from a way of thinking in which all other intervals arrive as a consequence of the tuning of the perfect fifth and octave. The perfect fifth, while present in 17, has much less of a stranglehold than in 12. In place of the fifth Of Silent Planet substitutes a neutral third, Free Lancer a subminor third.

Erin Watson — *shine for thyself (a meditation)*

Erin Watson, former masters student at Rice, wrote this art song in Spring 2004 for composition seminar. I realized that the funny spellings of some of the notes implied some ear-bending subtleties if tried in other tunings. Texts by Dhammapada and Yoko Ono.

John McLaird — *Ogives in a Winter Shelter Belt*

One of the definitions for "Ogive" is a diagonal rib of a Gothic vault. Eric Satie is said to have written his Ogives with inspiration from the form of the windows at the Notre Dame Cathedral.

I am a huge fan of Eric Satie. For some reason I find a corollary between the Dakota prairie where I grew up and his music. I think the connection has to do with the sense of vast space. I attempted to draw on this connection in my "Andrus Suite" and again in this piece.

On March 12, 2006 I was visiting my parents Dakota farmstead when a large snow storm enveloped the area. It was typical March snow .. heavy and wet. I grabbed my camera and walked out into the thick shelter belt of old intertwined trees that follows the property line. The deep silence of the prairie and the vault of the branches clad in the heavy snow drew me back to that Satie connection and the impetus for this piece.

Yahya Abdal-Aziz — *Tres piano e forte*

Tres piano e forte — Threes, in two movements. For Jacob Barton's two-piano 17-EDO instrument, 4 hands.

I. In 9/4 & 9/8 time in chromatic 17-EDO. 30 bars at 108 bpm.
II. In 6/4 time in 17-EDO C neutral (2323232 steps) 38 bars at 120 bpm.

Christopher Bailey — *Waltz*

This was written in part for a friend's wedding present.

Jon Lyle Smith — *Etude*

When Jacob first called for 17-tone piano scores and described two pianos with separate sharp/flat tunings for each, the idea of a bi-tonal or b-modal composition immediately suggested itself.

The melodic and harmonic material of Etude is drawn from two intervalically-mirrored octatonic scales on D:
piano 1) D E F G G# A# B C# D [tone - semitone - tone - semitone, etc.]
piano 2) D Eb F Gb Ab A B C D [semitone - tone - semitone - tone, etc.]

This notation is adhered to throughout the piece. The use of two different octatonic scales on the same tonal center creates a bi-modal effect, with semitonal clashes and pungent harmonies. The meter alternates irregularly between 13/8 and 11/8 in a brisk tempo, with frequent counterposed accents.

David Smith — *17ET Study*

Doctor Oakroot was born in a taxi with no brakes, and, he says, "I been rolling ever since. I rolled right down to Hell, pulled up the devil by his tail and brought back some dark, dark songs."

Jacob Barton — *Eighty-one ninth chords*

As Margo notes below, there are three types of thirds in 17-edo; let's call them subminor, neutral, and supermajor. If a ninth chord is five notes separated by four thirds, then there are $3^4 = 81$ of them in 17-edo. You will hear each of these once. Begin with the smallest — all subminor thirds — and end with the largest—all supermajor. The rhythm will help you keep track of the unfolding expansion. If you like the logic of this piece, I recommend the composer Tom Johnson.

Margo Schulter — *Sub arbore*

Sub arbore is a three-voice composition using the famous medieval Near Eastern lute tuning of Mansur Zalzal associated with 8th-century Baghdad in a polyphonic style based mainly on 13th-century Western European techniques. The title *Sub arbore,* or "Under a tree," suggests the kind of texture that musicians might improvise in a pleasant outdoor setting.

Although actually composed in an unequal temperament called Peppermint, the piece agrees nicely with 17-equal, and reveals two of its sides: the active regular major and minor thirds and sixths, and the rich assortment of neutral intervals such as those used in Zalzal's scale. The regular thirds of 17-equal at around 424 and 282 cents, like those of a standard medieval European Pythagorean tuning, are quite complex and active, and fit a style where these intervals seek resolution to stable ones such as unisons or fifths. Neutral thirds at around 353 cents have an also rather complex and yet distinct flavor fitting with the general texture.

People familiar with 13th-century European music may recognize the style as rather similar to either a conductus with the parts generally moving together note-against-note; or an instrumental motet such as the renowned *In seculum viellatoris*, which may have been intended for string players, the instrumentation chosen for this performance of *Sub arbore*.

Hans Straub — *Sharks*

"Sharks" is a piece in 17EDO and 17/8 meter. Deeper background (actually just the reason for the meter) is a question that Guerino Mazzola once raised, about whether there is a perceivable dependency between tuning and rhythm. (The question is not answered yet - but it does not matter...)

The title refers to the piece "Escualo" by Astor Piazzolla, from which it was partly inspired - namely quick melodic lines with alternating fifth and second steps, and also rhythmical complexity.

Daniel Stearns — *Cirrus and Pileus*

Cirrus and Pileus is a kind of peculiar homage to nature mysticism inspired by both Sigurd Olson and Michel Duncan Merle—Olson was a canoe outfitter whose spiritual experiences in the outdoors were remarkably similar to my own. Duncan Merle was a hugely prolific and wildly creative local Dadaist where I grew up in central Massachusetts, and he turned me on to the cut-method made famous by Burroughs, et al.

Taylan Susam — *past. in and. r. one. To*

b. 1986 - I study with Yannis Kyriakides at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague and comparative linguistics at Leiden University. I live in Amsterdam. I play the clarinet. :-)

Thomas Edwin Scheurich III — *Three Lonely, Uninspired Ways to Play in 17tet*

The story behind each way:

In Way 1, I started writing a few measures for this project a few months back. I can honestly say that just yesterday was when it started getting all out of hand.

In Way 2, I was polishing important, breadwinning future career skills, but I abruptly became too bored and frustrated to continue.

In Way 3, I used a computer program and a random number generator to whip up two and a quarter minutes of magic (is that the truth, or is the truth worse? You will never know.)

In Way 4, my pencil was hovering over the paper when I was subjected to a divine revelation: 3 Ways are all the world is ready for.