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A LISTENER'S LIFE LIST



Hearing Things

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At the **Mile High Voltage Festival** in Denver, it was three days of love, experimentation and pure intonation.....

Somewhere in the middle of **Michael Harrison's** solo performance of *Revelation* Saturday night at Denver's Newman Center for the Performing Arts, a perfectly rounded French horn melody rose up from the belly of the piano and hovered lazily in the air, calmly defying piano-ness. A little later, after Harrison dug into a sustained chord in the lower register, a men's choir appeared. Then a lone male voice, singing long tones.

These were sonic apparitions, coaxed from the shadows by a musician who has spent years pursuing new ways to make the piano resonate. What Harrison has found is nothing short of spectacular – at times it felt as though the instrument was literally singing, happily shaking off centuries of tempered-scale tyranny.

Harrison's tuning, a system based on whole numbers ([here's](#) a lucid explanation), transforms not just the scale and the relationship between notes, but the harmonic overtones as well – the instrument speaks in a completely different way. Some open chords yeild beautifully consonant swirls of sound, while clustered chords can suggest the terrifying dissonances of a car wreck in slow motion. Repetitive drones in a single "mode" quickly become hypnotic; starting modestly, they blossom into rich overlapping layers of transcendence-seeking chants.

Harrison's performance was the centerpiece of a weekend of inspired and strikingly accessible contemporary classical music. For me, it was also a lesson in recorded versus live experience: I'd been dazzled by the 2007 recording of *Revelation* (it's mentioned in the back of *1000 Recordings* as one of the 108 to know more about), but didn't – couldn't – fully appreciate its power or its nuanced range of expression until Saturday's performance, in the intimate and acoustically rich Gates concert hall.

(Full disclosure: I was there as a moderator, introducing the pieces and offering background on the artists, most of whom have recorded for New York-based Cantelope Records.)

Festivals like Mile High Voltage offer opportunities to witness spontaneous creativity – exchanges between artists that usually can't happen on the concert-touring circuit. Among the highlights were three distinctly different trips through Terry Riley's landmark *In C* with an ensemble featuring most of the festival headliners including So Percussion and the Denver-based collective known as The Playground. The constellation of talents, assembled by curator Peter Robles and led by Bang on a Can's Evan Ziporyn, turned out to be ideally suited to the piece – each version, including a lunchtime concert at a bank building downtown, had a different "soul."

The festival premiered a short chamber work by steel pan player Andy Akiho, "NO on To kNOW one," which alternated between frenetic polyrhythms and moments of eerie placid calm.

Ziporyn played a spirited solo set Friday, and then was joined by Harrison for two positively riveting duets in pure intonation. Initial expectations were low, because the two had never played together and, more significantly, the tuning system is so intricate. After a moment or two of furtive, cautious moves, the pair began exploring with purpose, and discovered a series of vivid landscapes – some anchored by a vast drone, others built around spooky post-jazz chord sequences well suited to improvisation. The brief set was easily the festival's most inspired "happening," one of those chance encounters that you just know will develop into a full-scale project one day.