



Ezra Sims

by Kyle Gann

Ezra Sims is probably best known, even among those who haven't heard a note of his music, for his wry response to a musicological misprint in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. In the '60s, that edifying tome, then edited by Nicolas Slonimsky, attributed to Sims a work he hadn't written,

a String Quartet No. 2 dated 1962. In 1974 Sims gallantly agreed to ameliorate Slonimsky's embarrassment to the extent that he could by writing a piece entitled String Quartet No. 2 (1962)—scored for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, and cello. As Sims notes, a title is not necessarily a description, and he cites as precedent the

White Knight's song in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (the song was called "Haddock's Eyes" even though its title was "The Aged Aged Man," etc.) The score is dedicated to Slonimsky, "that he (or rather *Baker's*) may now be less in error."

This classic and oft-noted absurdity is far from the only bit of humor in Sims's output; he has a piano piece charmingly called *Grave Dance*, and a song cycle titled *Brief Glimpses into Contemporary French Literature*, whose recurring refrain is, "There is no need of André Gide." But for some of us, Sims (www.ezrasims.com) is important less for the dry wit threaded through his work than for his status as one of the leading composers (along with Ben Johnston) of microtonal music for traditional acoustic instruments. More specifically, Sims is the doyen of a Boston-based microtonal world in which 72 equally spaced pitches per octave constitute what is virtually a lingua franca. Since 1964 Sims has written in his own notation, which inflects pitches upward or downward by a twelfth-tone, a sixth-tone, or a quarter-tone; and the local microtonalists (James Dalton being the one exception I know of) all seem to swear by the same notation.

The advantage of 72 tones per octave (or as it's known among the cognoscenti, 72tet, or 72-tone equal temperament) is that it renders close approximations to some of the lower but still more exotic overtones not in common use. (Please excuse the theory for the moment, we'll resume practicality next paragraph.) A cent is defined as one 1200th of an octave, and with a new pitch every 17 cents one can achieve pretty clean 7th, 11th, and 13th harmonics. Despite his equal-step grid, Sims in fact makes it clear that overtones are what he's generally aiming for. At least in most works, he typically selects notes from the 72 possible to form an 18-note scale based on the 16th through 32nd harmonics, with a few "tendency tones" to fill it out. The varied transposi-

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tions of this 18-note scale ultimately necessitate all 72 pitches.

Another advantage of the 72-tone system, with its mere three extra accidentals, as the Bostonians love lecturing the rest of us, is its practicality for live performance (as opposed to Johnston's notation with its open-ended accidental system and difficult-to-find perfect consonances). Every sixth pitch is a familiar one on the piano, and the rest can be interpolated via a regular system that requires little explanation. As a result Sims's output consists primarily of chamber music, and he has a special penchant for combining winds and strings, and for playing the strings and winds off against each other. Like his String Quartet No. 2 (1962), *Musing and Reminiscence* (2003) and *Landscapes* (2008) reprise the two-wind/three-string combination; his Sextet of 1981 is scored for clarinet, alto sax, horn, and three strings; *Night Piece* (1989) is for flute, clarinet, viola, and cello—with a background computer tape; and there's a Flute Quartet (1982) and Clarinet Quintet (1987). Sims also has some delightful piano music and choral music using only the usual 12 pitches (12tet), and some orchestral work, but it's the small wind-and-string groups in which he brews his microtonal aesthetic.

And a well-focused aesthetic it is. Sims tends to start off with a close set of pitches, often in repeated notes or in tremolo, whose evolution into wider and more complex harmonies evolves in accelerando. His music's journey is always linear and easily followed by the ear—a wise thing, given the wild unfamiliarity of the ground

he likes to cover. For some reason that psychologists will have to explain some day, composers who love splitting the half-step also love applying the same mathematics to rhythm, and Sims (much like Johnston) is fond of suggesting different tempos running at the same time. Quintuplets are everywhere, as well as fours-in-the-space-of-five. Tempos of fast movements run extremely fast, slow movements can be almost stationary. Between the 72 pitches and the phasing rhythms, it looks like extremely difficult music to play, but the types of difficulty are closely limited. So consistent is Sims's language that I imagine once you learn to play one piece well, the others come much more easily.

For the listener, it's a walk on the wild side indeed. The music is a pulsing, shifting continuum, dotted all round with contrapuntal echoes that maximize the tuning's oddities. Yet if conventional moorings fall by the wayside, the music nevertheless projects a sense of restraint and logic. The microtonality comes off as exotic indeed, yet the music's linear motion and motivic cohesiveness keep the ear engaged. *Music and Reminiscence* opens with a series of parallel almost-fifths between the flute and clarinet, slightly changing in size. The first movement of *Night Piece* closes with a long, fluctuating drone on a wide tritone of 633 cents—bet you've never gotten to savor that ambiguity before. The music throbs, churns, dances, hibernates through pitch complexes you've never heard before,

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and the rhythm—though you'd rarely be able to identify a meter or locate a downbeat—has a pulse-based naturalness to it.

As with so much music that fascinates me, I regret having to describe Sims's so technically. But it's thoroughly abstract, with no programmatic associations, no typical musical forms, little melody in the traditional sense, no clear relation to minimalism or serialism or New Romanticism or heavy metal or polka or anything else. It's just a unique brand of musical experience, and the only alternative to hearing it is describing how it's made, in hopes that you can imagine from that. And as Boston's young microtonalists seep out across the rest of the country from the East Coast, the sense of Sims's seminal influence is going national. He's been one of our most original underground musical legends for decades, and the mystery has built up too much pressure to keep quiet any longer. The good jokes he's gotten off in his career are merely foils for realizing how serious and unprecedented his music is.

Composer Kyle Gann is an associate professor of music at Bard College. He is the author of several books on American music, the latest of which is No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33" (Yale University Press). His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.

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Coleman and Greg Osby, pianist Geri Allen, singer Cassandra Wilson; and Talking Heads. He is now associate professor of Jazz Trombone at Oberlin and a member of San Francisco Jazz Collective.) Subsequent guitar-fusion discs, like *The Searcher*, did well commercially and critically, but Kevin was also working with free-jazz big-band leader and composer Sam Rivers, the M-BASE crew, pianist Kirk Lightsey, and doing clinics at Banff and Umbria Jazz (which is when I saw him in Perugia). His stint with Holland's band yielded *Extensions*, one of Holland's outstanding discs.

Branford Marsalis had been recording and touring with Sting (to the disapproval of many jazzbos, including younger brother Wynton) before he took over as *Tonight Show* bandleader in 1993 and tapped Eubanks. There were exquisite moments: Eubanks and crew backing titans like B.B. King, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton. Not the sort of thing, though, to win respect from the jazz community, which generally regards big-time celebrity as cause for artistic suspicion. Just read the clips on Miles Davis from the 1960s on.

But until 1995, Eubanks kept working at jazz's core too, recording albums for the legendary Blue Note label. One, *Live at Bradley's*, showcases him at the ultimate jazz insider's club tackling "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "In a Sentimental Mood," and "Mercy Mercy Mercy," with a combo of well-placed fusillades and rhythmic elasticity.

Zen Food makes clear that Eubanks hasn't lost his creative touch—or his rocker heart: "Smitty and I have that in common. We ignite things; that's what we get off on. We can bring a lot of energy without bringing a lot of confusion." "The Dancing Sea," the disc's leadoff track, blends postbop and Mahavishnu/Weather Report-era fusion into a rhythmically stimulating piece enlivened by strong solos. "6/8" navigates subtle changeups, engineered by Smith, with stretching solos by Eubanks and Pierce. "Los Angeles" feels like a freeway shuffle, spearheaded by a pull-out-the-stops Eubanks solo that reaches from Wes Montgomery to John McLaughlin and back again. Immediately infectious, the music deepens with each listening.

That sly creativity should help in Eubanks's new venture at the Thelonious Monk Institute, where he's heading the effort to bring music education to LA's schoolkids, a salute, he says, to his public schoolteacher mother and what she made possible for her own, and so many other, kids.

Gene Santoro is the author of several books on American music, including Myself When I am Real, a biography of Charles Mingus (Oxford, 2001), and Highway 61 Revisited, which examines the complex roots of American music (Oxford, 2004).