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## A Bit Off Key and Proud of It

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI  
Published: May 21, 1997

To concertgoers with no musical training, the concept of microtonal music must seem forbiddingly complex. But the sound of it is familiar to anyone who has heard a jazz singer bend a tune with "blue notes" or an Indian sitarist play a raga.

The term microtone simply refers to the notes that exist between the 12 pitches that somewhat arbitrarily divide the standard octave. Any instrument with the capacity to slide, including the human voice, of course, can activate these spaces between the pitches.

Composers who ask performers to utilize these in-between notes are dealing with microtones, and there are whole organizations that propagate the practice, including the American Festival of Microtonal Music, which is presenting a weeklong series under the direction of Johnny Reinhard called MicroMay '97.

The first concert was on Friday at New York University's Loewe Theater. A good example of what makes a microtonal piece microtonal was Elodie Lauten's "Discombobulations." Its musical materials were nothing special, just some undulant repeated riffs for flute (Andrew Bolotowsky), specially tuned guitar (Jon Catler) and synthesizer (Ms. Lauten), over which the soprano Meredith Borden sang elegiac melodies in a stratospheric range. But the performers are adept at playing between the standard pitches, so the result was like some lilting minimalistic music that was slightly off pitch in a pungent and intriguing way.

Mr. Bolotowsky demonstrated more of his skills at playing microtonally in Frank Wigglesworth's wistful "Twin Songs" for meantone-tuned baroque flute, and in a ponderous work for solo flute by Joseph Gabriel Maneri with a title too long to cite.


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Ms. Borden, joined by Mr. Catler on another specially tuned guitar, also performed Mr. Catler's "Nightbird," which, with its exotic harmonies, sounded like some strange flamenco dance. It is hard to make a high-flying, bobbing microtonal vocal line not sound simply like a singer singing consistently flat, a recent example being Madonna's Oscar-night performance of a ballad from "Evita." But in Mr. Catlin's tortuous vocal work, Ms. Borden's microtonally tinged singing was confident and convincing.

There were also works by Edgar David Grana, Mr. Reinhard (a work for tape called "Circles"), and Wendy Carlos, whose "Afterlife" for six-person chorus, violin, fretless bass, cello, percussion and tape received its premiere. With its slinky bass line, and chorus chanting slightly sour "ahs," it sounded like some switched-on mini-response to Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloe."

The remaining festival concerts are tonight and tomorrow night in St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia University, and on Friday night at the Loewe Theater.

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