

Review of Pärnu Contemporary Music Days 2023

by Joseph Monzo

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I was fortunate to be able to be a participant in Pärnu Contemporary Music Days 2023 (PNP2023), sponsored by the Estonian Arnold Schoenberg Society. This event was a wonderful week of microtonal music from 21 to 29 January, consisting of 6 long days of ear-training and rehearsals from 10:00 to 22:00 Saturday through Thursday, final rehearsal and a concert on Friday 27.01, and an all-day Symposium on Saturday 28.01 followed at night by a concert with entirely different music, all of this in Pärnu, and finally combining both concert programs into a final 3-hour concert with intermission in Tallinn on Sunday 29.01.

Readers unfamiliar with the terms "microtonal" or "xenharmonic" (which are synonymous) may learn a lot from my Tonalsoft Encyclopedia (<http://tonalsoft.com/enc>) and the Xenharmonic Wiki (<https://en.xen.wiki>) (also in German, Spanish, and Japanese), and also by reading or joining in discussion on several Facebook groups. Succinctly, these terms refer to musical tuning systems which use pitches different from those in the familiar 12-tone equal-temperament, commonly abbreviated 12-et or more often 12edo ("12 equal divisions of the octave"), which is the "normal" tuning built into all standard guitars, pianos and other keyboards, and also the basis of most orchestral wind instruments. One type of tuning is based on small-number ratios of the pitch frequencies, which provides very pleasing harmonies without the "beats" always found in tempered tunings; this is known as "just-intonation" or JI. Other tunings are "tempered", which means that the tuning of the ratios is adjusted to varying degrees so that the notes may have several different "meanings", representing a variety of ratios. The first form of temperament in Western music was known as "meantone", because in JI the second degree of the diatonic scale (i.e., a "tone" above the tonic) needs two different rational tunings to be correctly in tune with the most fundamental chords, and meantone solved this problem by having a tone midway between those two, fulfilling the duties of both. Almost all of the "common-practice" repertoire of European music from about 1600 to 1900 was based at least in part on meantone tuning.

Various EDOs other than 12 have been the subject of experimentation as far back as the 1500s with 19edo and 31edo, both of which (along with 12) also belong to the meantone family. Early in the 20th century, as some composers began to feel that the resources of 12edo had been exhausted, many became interested in using "quarter-tones" (24edo), which simply places a note exactly midway between each of those in the 12edo tuning. Then, starting around 1960 and really picking up by the 1980s, some composers began getting interested in other EDOs. With the advent of the internet around 1995, interested parties found it much easier to communicate, and since then there has developed a great interest in the theory and practice of all forms of microtonal music. Because of the construction of keyboard instruments, it has often been necessary to limit a microtonal tuning to a 12-tone subset of a larger whole. A big exception to this is that guitars may be fretted to larger divisions of the octave which are complete.

One tuning which gained interest early on was 22edo, which divides the octave into 22 equal parts; thus, it is somewhat similar to the quarter-tone system, but it gives much better approximations to some of the small-number ratios which sound so good in JI. One important fact to note is that 22edo is not in the meantone family of temperaments; so it actually provides two different versions of the "whole-tone", and also two different semitones, two different minor-3rds, two different major-3rds, and also similar pairs of notes for all their octave-complements, the 6ths and 7ths. It also provides three different versions of the "tritone". This makes 22edo function fundamentally differently than what most musicians are used to, and this opens up really new sonic worlds to explore.

Two notable early proponents of 22edo were Ivor Darreg in California (1960s to 1990s), who probably composed the first real pieces in this tuning, and Paul Erlich in Boston, who wrote an important paper about it in 1998. For 3 consecutive years, PNP has been devoted to exploring 22edo in depth. The two main coordinators have been Andrus Kallastu of Pärnu, and Hans-Gunter Lock of Tallinn. PNP2021 and PNP2022 took place entirely in Pärnu, but this year's event also included the concert in Tallinn.

The first 6 days were hosted by Pärnu Koidula Gümnaasium [High School], where we had our morning ear-training workshops and afternoon and night rehearsals, with most participants having accommodations at the Guesthouse Männiku nearby. The final two days in Pärnu were moved to the central district, where we stayed at venerable Hotel Victoria and held the symposium and concerts at the modern Pärnu Keskraamatukogu [Central Library]. Participants were both local and from abroad: myself from San Diego, California, USA; Pärnu residents Leonora Palu, Kristjan Kannukene, and Andrus Kallastu; Tallinn residents and brothers Hans-Gunter Lock and Gerhard Lock; Sloviakian Matej Sloboda; from Finland, Gonzalo Muruaga and Lassi Kari; Swedish/American James Robinson; and Spanish/Austrian Augustin Castilla A'vila. Performers included: myself, Andrus, Gerhard, Hans, Kristjan, Matej, and James on choral vocals; Leonora on flute, alto flute, or bass flute; Hans on 1st violin; Gerhard on 2nd violin; Kristjan on viola; James on cello; Lassi on contrabass; Gonzalo on guitar; and either Andrus or Hans directing from the keyboard; I also had the opportunity to conduct one instrumental piece. The varied program contained pieces for unaccompanied choir, choir with instruments, and instruments alone, with one piece also for flute and electronic sounds. Composers represented with several pieces were myself, Andrus, Hans, Juhani Nuorvala from Finland, and Praveen Venkataramana from USA; composers who had one piece each on the programs were Chase Jordan, Neil Thornock, Jakob Elkin, Hans Straub, Ralph Lewis, Allen Wu, and Jusso Salonen.

The Friday concert in Pärnu featured a trio of Leonora (various flutes), Gonzalo (22edo guitar), and Lassi (contrabass), some piece utilizing all three and others either solos or duets in various combinations. The Symposium on Saturday morning/afternoon was supposed to start with my presentation, but because of some technical problems causing a long time delay, Steven Weigl graciously agreed to do his virtual presentation from Indiana (USA) first, presenting considerations of retuning some well-known 22edo songs into 12edo. My presentation followed, in which I demonstrated my Tonescape microtonal music software, whose main feature is the modeling of the mathematics of a tuning as a lattice diagram, which can be presented with various geometries and can be rotated in real-time. Timo Tuhkanen from Finland followed, with a discussion of refretting guitars, then there was a lunch break. After lunch, the three trio performers each gave a talk on playing 22edo on their instruments: Leonora (flute), Gonzalo (guitar), and Lassi (contrabass). The final lecture was given by Augustin, emphasizing that he is a visual artist as well as a composer, and how he likes to be inspired by the fresh new ideas that come from using microtonal tunings. The hallways of the library contained an exhibition of several of Augustin's visual works, which was mainly about "The Sound Of Silence", and many of which were actually created using Sibelius music-notation software.

After the dinner break, the Saturday night concert contained the vocal works and those which employed the string quartet. For me some of the most outstanding works were those by Juhani Nuorvala; despite their new-sounding tuning, some of his vocal pieces were composed in such a convincing 12th-century style that at one point while rehearsing one during the workshops, I joked that "This guy is the best unknown 22edo medieval composer!" ... of course, Juhani is a well-known Finnish composer, this was just a joke among musicians. Another excellent piece near the end was Praveen Venkataramana's "A Little Serenade", which was quite an effective chamber-orchestra composition. And the concert ended with another piece by Juhani, his rousing setting of the popular medieval text "L'homme armé" for the full ensemble of voices and instruments.

The PNP conferences have traditionally ended with a round-table discussion in Hotel Victoria's Grand Cafe on Sunday morning, tossing around ideas about what to do for future events. But this time, after the discussion, we packed everything into a few cars and travelled to Tallinn to present the long concert which combined both programs that had been given in Pärnu.

Overall, a great and very successful event, with a "total immersion" into 22edo, helping greatly to train our ears, voices, and fingers to navigate this new territory.

A link to the full program, videos of the Pärnu concerts, and a list of supporters and sponsors is available online at: <https://www.schoenberg.ee/>