

Notes by John Schaefer

My first encounter with the music of Tui St. George Tucker came in 1984, when the WNYC radio library received an LP called *Indian Summer* from Opus One Records. The album's subtitle volunteered that the disc contained three "microtonal antiphons on Psalm texts." Given the sound of so much recent music made with just the usual twelve notes, this was a pretty daunting description. Still, I recognized the names of several of the musicians; and one of the musical brainiacs who mysteriously reside in the WNYC library - a recorder player by trade - recommended Tucker as someone worth hearing. (I've since learned that recorder players owe Tucker a deep sense of gratitude, since she has made some of the most extensive and important contributions to the recorder repertoire since Baroque times.)

And so, fully expecting a record of Music That's Good For You, I put on *Indian Summer*... and found instead a record of immediately distinctive, melodic and likeable music. It just happened to have a few surprising notes in it - piquant enough to keep you on your toes, but certainly a lot more digestible than the gnomic squawks and twitters that still held sway in polite composition circles. Here was music that was at once forward-looking yet still firmly rooted in a long and varied musical tradition; serious but not academic; full of lush ensemble sounds that reflected music's true sensual nature. It was, in short, a perfect introduction to the musical world of Tui St. George Tucker.

In listening to Tucker's music, one quickly realizes that microtonality has been one of her long-running musical concerns and a field in which she's made some of her most notable contributions. In current Western parlance, microtonality refers to any system of tuning that uses notes other than the twelve notes of the piano. Ancient tunings, Oriental tunings, scales with more than twelve notes - these are all examples of microtonality. Tucker's works make use most notably of quartertones, the notes exactly halfway between the usual twelve notes of most Western music. On a piano, you would need another key inserted halfway between C and C# on the keyboard to get the quartertone between them.

These extra notes have a practical effect: they expand the palate available to a composer of wide-ranging tastes. Tucker is such a composer: her works often include obvious references to jazz standards, stride piano, the plainchant of Medieval Europe, Baroque music, and birdsong. (Tui is the name of a species of bird native to New Zealand, where Tucker's mother was born.) Birdsong, as you may guess, is naturally microtonal. It can be approximated with only twelve notes, as Olivier Messiaen proved, but using quartertones allows for some striking evocations of birdsong - especially when played on an instrument like the recorder.

Of course, quartertones are not commonly heard in Western music, and can be jarring to the ear - and are often used for exactly that effect. But Tucker uses quartertones to *extend* tonality, not to obscure or replace it. Whether microtonal or not, Tucker's works typically have long, flowing melodies. Within this melodic fabric, the quartertones are generally approached in ways that makes sense to the ear, and often resolve in surprising but satisfying cadences.

Just where Tucker fits in the larger musical world is still unclear. It seems vaguely silly to speak of an American maverick tradition - a maverick by definition works outside tradition. But one can certainly trace a heritage of musical idiosyncrasy passed on by some of America's most important and unusual composers: Ives, Cowell, Cage, Partch, and Harrison, to name just a few. Tui St. George Tucker would seem to be part of this lineage, in that she's spent 50 years following her own muse. Her output does not fit neatly into any of this century's musical "-isms"; and as this retrospective recording shows, hers is a career of apparent contradictions:

- Tucker has created a singularly arresting body of microtonal music; but she's also written an engaging set of conventionally tuned works that reflect the diversity of American music in the 20th century.

- Born in California in 1924, she moved to New York in 1946 and established herself as both a recorder player and a composer. The sounds of the music of that time, especially New York's percolating jazz and popular music scenes, crept into her own works. But Tucker also took inspiration from the very different sounds of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, and eventually retired there in 1985.
- Tucker's career has included an important teaching component. She acted as teacher and/or mentor to many of the musicians appearing on this recording; many attended Camp Catawba, the music/poetry retreat run by Tucker and poet Vera Lachmann. And yet her music has no sense of academe. Quite the contrary: it is full of surprises, shot through with unexpected juxtapositions, quotes and near-quotes, changes of mood, and that rarest of qualities in so-called serious music – humor.

Her works are full of challenges that have engaged and excited musicians for decades; this recording is a labor of love by some of them. But Tui St. George Tucker never fell into the trap of forgetting about the listener. Just listen to the wacky opening of *Happy Birthday Dear Krzysztof*, or the glowing choral sound of her *Ave Verum*, and you're hearing an open invitation to even the casual listener.

This collection centers on the microtonal music of Tucker's beloved wind instruments, especially the recorder family. But it runs the gamut, from classical *lieder* to freely rhapsodic microtonal flights. Arguably the major works recorded here are the *Notes From The Blue Mountains*, a four-part piano work in conventional tuning, composed over an extended period in the 1960s and 70s; and 1967's *Sonata #2 for Alto Recorder*, "*The Hypertonic*," a musical glossary of the extended techniques and unusual microtonal sounds available to the capable player. They represent two ostensibly opposite but ultimately complementary parts of Tui St. George Tucker's musical world. Insofar as a single recording can, this compilation tries to reflect the breadth of that world.

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THE WORKS

1. *Ave Verum*

The Spring House Farm Choir

A strong religious element runs through Tucker's career: she has written a number of original hymn tunes, including this short choral work based on the familiar Latin text. (In fact, this hymn also serves as the basis for Tucker's 1992 evening-length piano composition of the same name.) Its format is a conventional ABAB, and both the recurring cadences and the voice-leading are squarely in a centuries-old Western classical tradition. But the work has a subtle plangent quality that comes across even more strongly in some of the microtonal works that follow.

2. *Amoroso*

Douglas Miller, clarinet

"Amoroso" – the very name implies a romantic approach. The quartertones in this piece are carefully chosen and prominently placed within a strong melodic context. In other words, they're not sound effects; they are treated in a genuinely tonal way. In that way, this is a typical Tui St. George Tucker composition. It is typical in other ways too. The four part piece does not announce itself as being microtonal. In fact the first appearance of a quartertone slips in subtly, acting as a very strong leading tone. (In the conventional *do re mi* scale, the note *ti* is called a leading tone because the ear expects to be led directly up to the next note, *do*.) The microtonal aspect becomes gradually more apparent as the first part moves on, and notes a quartertone apart begin to appear next to each other, highlighting the sharpness, the "bite," of this system of tuning. And so, when the opening theme returns, it is transformed – not in the music but in our hearing of it. What was almost daring you to listen earlier is now revealed to be as genuinely lyrical as birdsong.

The sense of playfulness that can often be heard in Tucker's music can be detected towards the end of the first movement, when a brief snatch of song, perhaps an evocation of a popular dance tune, picks it way through the quartertones. After a second movement that is more angular, using the 24 notes of the quartertone scale in a freely chromatic way, the third movement returns to a lyrical sound. As with *Ave Verum*, Tucker spins a long melodic line in several distinct parts. And shortly after what sounds like a brief snippet of birdsong, there's a very quick reference to the music of *Ave Verum*. It is microtonally disguised, but still there if you're listening carefully. The fourth movement of *Amoroso* continues to vary the sonic palette, with sudden leaps of register, pitch, and volume. Eventually, the piece settles on a birdlike trill and concludes.

3. *Der in Delphi*

Robert Kuehn, baritone

Stephen Mayer, piano

Text by Vera Lachmann

Sung in German, this song features a lovely, Schubertian melody with simple piano accompaniment. But even without microtonal features, the harmonies take some unexpected twists and turns – in the second half of the first line, for example. The song is a mercurial one, shifting moods from pastoral to unsettled to ominous and dramatic in short order. Through it all, Tucker spins another of her long melodies, full of stepwise motion, heightening the effect of the sudden melodic leaps and chromatic notes.

4. *Herzliebster Jesu*

[Variations on a Theme by Crueger]

Paul Jordan, organ

This is not a microtonal organ piece, although Tucker has composed one. (And of course some wags would say that *all* organ music is microtonal.) The opening movement is episodic, starting with a brief preamble that leads to a chorale that wouldn't have been out of place in Bach's time. (In fact, Bach almost certainly knew this tune, *Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen*, composed in the 1650s by Johannes Crüger.) The piece begins to stretch a bit harmonically in the second section, and becomes still more chromatic in the third. At this point, some of the organ's reedier stops are used. After a quick lilting passage, the work returns to a more contemplative mood.

The piece concludes with a shorter, brassy section. Its steady moderate beat is curiously leavened by occasional triplets. The mood is hymn-like, again reflecting the religious cast found in much of Tucker's music; but the work ends without a conventional resolution.

5. *Jakugo*

Catawba Singers

Samuel Bartos, recorder solo

Pearl Epstein, recorder drone

Strikingly scored for men's voices and two recorders, *Jakugo* is sung in phonetic Japanese. The first recorder provides a countermelody for the small chorus; the second player is instructed to play two recorders simultaneously, serving as the underpinning drone for the entire work. The piece is simple and affecting, with lots of pentatonic-sounding passages that evoke the sounds of Japanese music. However, the voices begin to wander considerably from the five notes one might expect from a truly pentatonic work, even as the recorders stand their tonal ground.

The melodic material becomes even simpler in the closing section, which features a call and response passage that is more chanted than actually sung.

6. *Happy Birthday Dear Krzysztof*

Ralph Zeitlin, recorder

Ensemble of strings and harpsichord conducted by Ralph Zeitlin

A lovely minuet for strings is immediately thrown into confusion by an "out of tune" version of *Carnival*

of Venice. What follows is genial, good-natured music, apparently dedicated to the eminent Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki. The strings try mightily to hold things together while the recorder goes off on its fanciful flights. Even the harpsichord seems briefly infected, too.

A series of recorder multiphonics (playing several notes simultaneously) alternate with what sounds like a folk dance played over a cello drone. The recorder's variation of the theme becomes increasingly florid, until the various instruments finally settle upon an agreeable chord and the piece ends.

7. *First Quartertone Lullaby*

Tui St. George Tucker, Johnny Reinhard, & Robert Leprè, recorders

This 1981 work has two contrasting sections. Part one can easily be heard as a microtonal descendant of Bach's 3-part inventions; after a slow, contrapuntal start, a melody slowly weaves its way among a set of plangent chords. This section has a sort of repeating chorus consisting of a lovely set of sustained chords with a single line moving above. But that line is handed from one instrument to another – this is not a case of one “lead” recorder with two more accompanying. The overall effect is, strangely, not unlike medieval European music.

Part two is a quicker, more staccato exercise that also evokes the sounds of an earlier age – perhaps the Venice of Adriaan Willaert or Giovanni Gabrieli. It is characterized by very simple, restricted harmonic movement, and a suspicious listener might also infer here a sidelong glance at Minimalism. Through it all, the *First Quartertone Lullaby* features a very accessible and appealing use of quartertones.

8. *Notes From The Blue Mountains*

Grete Sultan, piano

Composed over a period of two decades, this work is in four distinct parts. It is a major work, and despite the use of “Romaza” and “Passacaglia” in the subtitles, clearly the work of an American composer. This performance features Tui St. George Tucker's longtime collaborator Grete Sultan, the German-born pianist who became a fixture on New York's “underground” music scene in the 1940s, and who was in her 80s when this recording was made.

I. *Romanza*. The opening movement has a slow jazz/blues feel. (This is, after all, a composer who's also written a quartertone fantasy on “My Melancholy Baby” – see pianist Loretta Goldberg's recording, Opus One #152.) Nostalgic but not sentimental, the *Romanza* is suffused with the sounds of classic American popular song. The movement is episodic; the pianist seems to be ruminating aloud at the keyboard.

II. *Moon and Pine Sonata*. The watery impressionism and exotic modes of Debussy in the hands of someone who seems to have listened to a lot of Jelly Roll Morton. This is a more animated movement, with chords moving in parallel lines and quick sprays of notes.

III. *Passacaglia for White Sunday*. Tucker's evocation of Whitsuntide, or White Sunday, is essentially a song for piano. With its harp-like figures and almost Romantic melodic material, this is perhaps the most conventionally beautiful work on this recording. But the piece still has some typically American-sounding harmonies. And the expansive chorale near the end of the movement, for all its European grandeur, contains several jazzy interpolations.

IV. *On a Mountain Road At Summer's End*. After a quick reference to the second movement, the finale brings a jazz-tinged rhapsody that occasionally scampers across the keyboard. A slower sequence of chords leads to the sudden appearance of what sounds like a folk tune or a children's song, with a simple, steadily but softly moving accompaniment. Played pianissimo, it provides an enigmatic ending to this impressive piece.

9. *Sonata #2 for Recorder, “The Hypertonic”*

Tui St. George Tucker, alto recorder

A brief, bird-like call introduces Tucker's characteristic quartertones in an agreeable setting. The rollicking passage that follows sounds for all the world like one of Philip Glass's old Farfisa organ riffs (which this 1967 work largely predates), except that it ends "wrong." This alternates with a freer, more rhapsodic section, and the second time through Tucker includes an instructive run partway up the quartertone scale – a neat trick of fingering. She then begins to play snatches of what is clearly a "tune" within more embroidered, improvisatory runs; in one of the highlights of the piece, she plays the melody entirely in multiphonics.

If Tucker set out to prove that the recorder, a familiar, apparently simple instrument, was full of possibilities that lay untapped for centuries, this sonata certainly does the job: flutter-tonguing, overblowing, the whole catalogue of tone colors available on the recorder can be found in the middle of the piece. The sonata eventually returns to a slower version of the material heard at the beginning and works its way to an obvious cadential conclusion.

The term *Hypertonic*, by the way, was coined by Tui St. George Tucker and Grete Sultan. It refers to the idea of developing a system of microtonal music that was not atonal or "non-tonic." Although Tucker's plan was to work within the system of tunings known as just intonation – based upon the naturally occurring "harmonic series"-- this music would not be conventionally tonic either; it would be hypertonic. Tucker's system is built around her decision to temper the naturally occurring microtones, that is, to move them slightly so they form a set of equally-spaced quartertones. A practical decision, to be sure, and on the surface one that might furrow the brow of microtonal purists. (Yes, there are such beasts. Microtonality can become an almost religious obsession if unchecked.) But even a purist would have trouble arguing with Tucker's persuasive body of quartertone works for wind instruments – a collection that may stand as Tui St. George Tucker's most personal and enduring contribution to contemporary music.