

Julie Harting
Zephyr for solo quartertone flute

Program Notes

The idea to experiment with microtones occurred to me in the late 70's when I was living in Boston and going to Berklee College of Music. I remember walking down Mass Ave., across the Charles River, thinking that I wanted to create my own instruments with strange harmonies and pitches.

Around the same time, I also imagined that if I listened close enough I could hear (and write down) the sound a tree made. Not the sound of the wind rustling the leaves in the trees, not the boughs creaking in the wind, but the actual sounds the tree made – it's voice, it's inner language - hidden in its bark. And for that I would need the help of microtones. After all, trees do not speak in the 12-note tempered system.

But that is not the direction I went (I'm not very technically- or mechanically-inclined or maybe I am just a coward). I went to Manhattan School of Music in New York City where I studied with Ursula Mamlok and listened to the music of Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, Charles Wuorinen and Mario Davidovsky. I completely enjoyed (and still enjoy) the 12-tone tempered system I was immersed in. The ideas of listening to trees and making my own instruments faded.

In the late 80's I studied Schoenberg's Theory of Harmony book with Harold Seletsky, a composer living in Brooklyn, New York. Seletsky, a bit of a character, is a quartertone klezmer clarinetist as well as a 24-tone (quartertone) composer, but we never talked about quartertones. Both he and Joe Manieri (a well-known microtonal composer living in Boston) studied with Josef Schmidt, a pupil of Alban Berg's who, according to rumor, destroyed all his compositions because they could not compare to the "Master's".

Studying Schoenberg's Theory of Harmony with Seletsky was a decisive experience for me. Schoenberg's pedagogical approach is one of trying all the possibilities and of always seeking. I think it is interesting that Seletsky and Manieri, both of whom studied Schoenberg's thorough and creative approach to harmony, feel drawn to microtonal music.

The desire to search in the realm of microtones hit me again in the last few years and I started to do research. My ear is trained in the 12 tone tempered system. That was my problem. I couldn't really hear the sounds I wanted to explore. At the New England Conservatory, Manieri trains his students to hear, play and compose in a 72 tone equal temperament. That really impresses me! (What was I doing at Berklee when I should have been at the New England Conservatory?) I needed to find a

keyboard I could easily tune in different temperaments so I could just sit down and fool around at the keyboard searching for sounds I like.

So I found, somehow, I'm not sure now how I discovered it, a little box that plugs into my cheap Yamaha keyboard (the H-II TBX1 tuning box designed by Aaron Hunt). This little black box can almost instantaneously retune my keyboard in a variety of microtonal temperaments.

At the same time, a flutist I knew (Christine Perea) purchased a new quartertone flute – a flute designed specifically for playing quartertone music. So with the help of the H-II TBX1 tuning box and my cheap Yamaha keyboard, I tackled my first quartertone piece, for quartertone flute.

My first step was just to sit down at the keyboard and get used to the sound of the quartertones, deciding which intervals I liked and which I didn't. I enjoyed playing with the intervals a quartertone above and below a tritone in succession with P4's or P5's. I also like the sound of the interval a quartertone above a minor 2nd.

The piece unfolds quite slowly, beginning with a simple statement of a four-note row consisting of the intervals 0, -11, +14, -21 (an (11) interval and a (3) interval separated by a P5) along with its retrograde and inversion.



This opening introduction ends with a descending sequence of intervals -10, -11, -11, -10 (P4's (10) and the interval a quartertone above P4's (11)).

A contrasting idea is introduced.



This idea, i.e., quasi-tonal melodic embellishment with traditional rhythmic gestures, creates a dichotomy with the opening atonal and serial approach which uses larger intervallic structures and static rhythmic gestures. This dichotomy is never resolved. It is used with no dialectical engagement as a structural conceit throughout the piece.

I used Milton Babbitt's time-point system (as explained in Charles Wuorinen's book Simple Composition) to create the overall structure and also to create static rhythmic gestures.

I must admit I'm not sure I like the title *Zephyr*. There's something "breezy" about the piece, but there's something also mechanical about it, as though the wind is blowing through a strange, unknown mechanical instrument or machine. I didn't know the name of such a machine, so for now I call the piece simply *Zephyr*.