

Source of the River

How Medicine River came about

My journey into alternative tunings began with my discovery in my local library of Harry Partch's seminal book, "Genesis of a Music". In this brilliant rambling journey Partch takes the reader through the history and the maths of tuning systems (something that most western musicians take for granted) starting with ancient Chinese systems and graduating via classical Greek up to the translation into 12 tone Equal Temperament in the so-called Age of Enlightenment and the loss of connection with simple whole number ratios that the ear, the physical body and the emotional body enjoy.

While Partch's theories turned me on, his music left me unmoved. There was an unsatisfying lack of connection in his chippy, fast-moving textures that gave no time to appreciate the beauty and strangeness of the intervals he was using in his 43 note to the octave system.

So when I eventually got my hands on a tuneable synth (the Korg M1) I found myself playing very slowly to experience the qualities of the intervals, chords and melodies possible in different tunings.

Once I'd got my head round Partch's system I explored other tunings, from different historical periods (ancient Greek, Baroque European) and different cultures including Japanese koto tunings, Indian ragas and Arabic maqams.

But the tuning I most enjoyed playing in was and still is the system developed by the Irish musicologist, Kathleen Schlesinger. Known nowadays as the Schlesinger Harmoniai they were put into practice by Australian composer Elsie Hamilton. To me this is a tuning that makes mathematical sense, emotional sense and metaphysical sense as well.

Many people who work with tuning theory and practice get obsessed with the intellectual beauty of the numbers and forget that we as humans have our limitations. If we treat number as an endless straight-line parade from zero to infinity we run the risk of creating music that is intellectually brilliant but that does not communicate. If on the other hand we treat numbers as individual entities, if we relate to them in a right brained way and hear how they relate to each other then we set up relationships within the music and between the music and the listeners and the music communicates.

Once I'd found the scale that I enjoyed working with (basically a development of Schlesinger's system), I abandoned the theory that had got me there (you don't need the ladder any more after you've climbed it). I was then able to explore the wealth of expression in the intervals, exploring the emotions and states of consciousness they invoked.

An important discovery for me was the realisation that the tunings worked best against a drone of a single note or an open $3/2$ (perfect fifth) or a rocking between chords - and in this use of drones I found myself connecting with the many folk musics that are based on drones from Ireland to India, from Scandinavia to the Balkans and with church music before Gregorian Chant.

The pan-cultural aspect of the tunings led me to a musical space where I could be beyond culture. Or I could sit in my own western European culture and reach to almost anywhere supported by and contained by the drone.

At this point I just played, responding to the richly atmospheric voices programmed by Clive Ives on the Korg M1 and the harmonic and melodic possibilities opened up by the tunings.

I'd find a voice, I'd find a mode from within the scale and from these modes the melodies and harmonies grow.

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The first piece, "By water" is in a rational version of the Phrygian mode and it is a premonition of the song form with a strong Celtic feeling in "Yes, by water", sharing with it the same mode and the same voice.

"Moon Whales" uses a very unusual mode to bring out the melodic possibilities of a tuning that has very little relation to the normal piano keyboard.

"Solar Wind" is in Hypophrygian mode and builds harmonically to demonstrate the way that the overtones of notes reinforce each other when a rational tuning is used to create a halo of sound.

"Sumerian Dance" is in the Hypodorian mode. The dancers painted on the walls of ancient tombs return to life in this piece to affirm the ancient nature of the tunings used.

"El Pájaro Solitario" (The Solitary Bird) takes its title from a piece by St John of the Cross. It is again in Phrygian mode, alternates a simple chord movement with melodic lines to create a verse-chorus structure and a mood of wistful longing.

"Door into Nothing" is slow, quiet and almost insubstantial, occasionally providing a place to step, sometimes almost completely suspended, leading nowhere, perhaps into inner stillness.

The two "Medicine River" pieces are meditations that share the same pentatonic (five note) mode, where any of the notes can be the tonic note. The ground to the pieces is constantly in motion.

"Medicine River I" flows into "Spirit Lake", based on a rocking interval which can be heard as a sharp fifth but which is in fact based on the thirteenth harmonic giving the piece a sense of harmonic precariousness.

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