

## **Joshua Pierce, Piano**

### **John Cage**

#### ***Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano***

**November 20 - Academy Of Music, 4 p.m.**

**Wroclaw, Poland**

### **Michael Harrison**

#### ***REVELATION: Music in Pure Intonation***

**November 19 - Academy Of Music, 4 p.m.**

**Wroclaw, Poland**

### **PROGRAM NO. 1**

**Joshua Pierce, Piano**

### **John Cage**

#### ***Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano (1946 – 1948)***

1. Sonata 1
2. Sonata 2
3. Sonata 3
4. Sonata 4
5. First Interlude
6. Sonata 5
7. Sonata 6
8. Sonata 7
9. Sonata 8
10. Second Interlude
11. Third Interlude
12. Sonata 9
13. Sonata 10
14. Sonata 11
15. Sonata 12
16. Fourth Interlude
17. Sonata 13
18. Sonata 14 & 15
19. Sonata 16

*Sonatas and Interludes* is approximately 45 minutes in duration

PROGRAM NO. 2

**Joshua Pierce, Piano**

**Michael Harrison**

***REVELATION: Music in Pure Intonation (1999-2005)***

European Premiere of Complete Version

1. Revealing the Tones
2. Night Vigil
3. Revealing the Commas
4. Tone Cloud I
5. Homage to La Monte
6. Tone Cloud II
7. Night Vigil II
8. Vision in the Desert
9. Scherzo
10. Carillon
11. Tone Cloud III
12. Finale
13. Tone Cloud IV

We encourage the audience to experience the transporting nature of this groundbreaking work, which will be performed in its entirety of approximately 90 minutes without pause.

*Revelation* was awarded the Classical Recording Foundation Award (2006), IBLA Foundation International Competition Grand Prize in Music Composition (2004), Peter S. Reed Foundation Individual Artist Grant (2001), and was composed with support from the L'Atelier Retreat Center and the American Academy in Rome. Both the music and tuning for *Revelation* were directly inspired by La Monte Young's magnum opus *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964-73-81-present). CD available from Cantaloupe Music and at [www.michaelharrison.com](http://www.michaelharrison.com)

## Program Notes

By Stuart Isacoff

This concert program grew from pianist Joshua Pierce's artistic collaborations with two groundbreaking composers. John Cage and Michael Harrison each created new sound possibilities for their day, transforming the piano far beyond its traditional boundaries. Each produced music of high virtuosity, requiring an interpreter of extraordinary stamina and sensitivity. And both *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* and *Revelation: Music in Pure Intonation* are major statements that leave an enduring impact on the direction of contemporary music.

As an icon of twentieth century music, John Cage is in many ways the spiritual father of such leading composers of our time as Philip Glass. It was Cage's genius to challenge many of the assumptions underlying Western art. While composers like Igor Stravinsky wrote of the composer as "a human being who is sensitive to nature's many voices... but who in addition feels the need of putting them in order and who is gifted for that task with a very special aptitude," Cage declared that chaos was as important a principle as orderliness. After attending routine studies (with composer Arnold Schoenberg among others) he became dissatisfied with the traditional approaches. "I never had any feeling for harmony," he once told me. "For this reason, Schoenberg said I would always come to a wall." Readings in Eastern philosophy and studies in Zen Buddhism with D.T. Suzuki left him with a new viewpoint based on the idea of ever-expanding possibilities: "We know that life's more fully lived when we are open to whatever..." he wrote in his book, *Empty Words*.

Cage began embracing sounds of all sorts, whether harmonious or not (he even came to enjoy the sound of traffic outside his lower Manhattan loft). He started using chance operations to write music, enjoying the idea of a process that still retained an element of the inexplicable. "I want people to be mystified by what's happening," he said. "As I am mystified by the moon or by the change of weather. The reality of our life is a mystery."

For Cage, harmony and even melody became secondary considerations. "I gradually dispensed with structures," he told me, "due to my interest in the equivalence between space and time, and in process." The *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, written between 1946 and 1948, consists of 19 sections—each with an emotional component found in Indian musical aesthetics, such as "the heroic, the erotic, the wondrous, the mirthful, sorrow, fear, anger, the odious and their common tendency toward tranquility." The composer frees the piano of its usual tonal component by turning it into a "prepared" instrument through the use of bolts, screws, nuts, rubber and plastic inserted into the string section. The pianist thus becomes, says Joshua Pierce, like "a one-man percussion ensemble." The separate sonata sections are in two- and three-part forms, and Sonatas 14 and 15 are linked and labeled "Gemini—After the work by Richard Lippold," a reference to a sculpture by a friend of Cage's. The overall effect of this work is like that of taking an exotic journey in sound.

Joshua Pierce had a close working relationship with Cage and he performs this music on

a double CD set, *John Cage, A Tribute*. “He liked my recordings,” Pierce reports, “but left me to my own interpretive devices. Cage didn’t give much direction, except to smile a lot and tell me to ‘just rest.’” Not bad advice after the difficulties of this highly complex score!

Although the two works on this program stem from very different compositional approaches, Joshua Pierce finds a commonality between these composers in their mutual concern for “sound.” “In Michael’s music, the sound of one note has its own positive beauty and life force,” he reports. “When I play I’m transported to another world. Of course, this music is very difficult to perform: you have to enjoy wading through the circuitous patterns of the work to find its essence.” The contrast between composers is, however, dramatic. “We can be extremely careful about harmony, as Lou Harrison, La Monte Young, and Ben Johnston are,” Cage once wrote, “or we can be, as I often am, extremely careless about harmony.” Michael Harrison is extremely careful about harmony.

Indeed, this composer once worked closely with La Monte Young, whose music, though deeply influenced by the East, is based not on the rejection of harmony, but on a focused probing into its minutest details. Similarly, Michael Harrison’s approach exploits the “overtones” generated naturally by vibrating strings—the series of pitches that resonates softly above every “fundamental” tone. For acoustical reasons, these are purposely altered in the modern pianos’ normal tuning. The intricate textures and remarkable effects of *Revelation* are the result of Harrison’s desire to resurrect the pure harmonies that have thus been lost, and thereby to “emancipate the comma.”

A comma is the difference between two intervals with the same name—a third, for example, or an octave—arrived at through different tuning systems. For example, a major third (Do to Mi) produced in a tuning based on a series of four pure fifths (Do to Sol to Re to La to Mi) is wider than one produced by two strings in a “pure” major third relationship (that is, resulting from two strings vibrating in the ratio 5:4). Play these two “major thirds” at the same time and a clash will result. A keyboard with fixed pitches can be tuned to offer pure fifths or pure thirds but not, over the entire length of its range, both. Over the course of history, many different approaches to tuning were tried, in order to avoid the inevitable clashes. Our modern tuning, known as equal temperament, does away with these collisions altogether—but at the cost of losing the purity and color of naturally produced harmonies.

Instead of avoiding them, Michael Harrison incorporates into his music the clashes that occur when completely pure (or “just”) intervals are allowed to coexist in a piano’s tuning. In some ways, his vision represents the flip side of Arnold Schoenberg’s.

Schoenberg broke down conventional harmonic models by “emancipating the dissonance,” ordering music through artificially chosen rows of tones rather than through the gravitation of natural tonal movement. Schoenberg freed music horizontally, and Harrison frees it vertically. His music uses harmony built on subtle harmony, with overtones wrestling or reinforcing each other—often producing a concoction of

otherworldly resonances. Schoenberg dissolved the distinction between consonance and dissonance. In similar fashion, Harrison rehabilitates the comma into a newly welcome constituent of the harmonic universe.

The results are often wondrous. In the midst of clouds of dense clusters rapidly drummed in the bass end of the instrument, an astute listener can perceive high ghost tones—sometimes bell-like, at other times vaporous—as if a choir of angels were singing along. From Michael Harrison’s perspective, the acoustic piano, which had evolved continuously since 1700, has now remained virtually unchanged for 125 years. In each age, composers have transformed the piano according to their needs; and his is the next great step in that development. The instrument you will be hearing is what he calls a “harmonically tuned” piano.

*Revelation* consists of 13 intertwined sections, and lasts about 90 minutes. It was begun in 1999, when the composer was one of four Americans to perform at a festival in Rome (the others were Philip Glass, Terry Riley and Charlemagne Palestine). “The intensive experience of rehearsing and performing my own work, as well as hearing the music of my colleagues was extremely inspiring,” he remembers. “As the week progressed, I found myself contemplating the sonic effects that result from working with commas, or very minute, mathematically, and precisely tuned intervals. I woke up on the morning following the last concert with a radical new tuning in my mind. It came to me very clearly, seemingly with no planning or effort, with all of the mathematical proportions worked out in a well-balanced symmetrical configuration. It felt like a gift; however, I am aware that this moment could only have happened as a result of twenty years of working with just intonation tunings.” The resulting work continued to evolve; the present version was 5 years in the making.

Joshua Pierce is the only pianist other than Michael Harrison to have performed *Revelation*, and the results have thus far been exquisite. It takes technical virtuosity, gifted hearing, and tremendous focus to pull it off. But the rewards are substantial. In Joshua Pierce, both composer and audience have reason to be grateful.

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Stuart Isacoff is a pianist, composer and writer. He is editor of the magazine *Piano Today* and author of **Temperament: How Music Became A Battleground For The Great Minds Of Western Civilization** (Alfred A. Knopf).