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Franz Gertsch, *Isabella I*, 1983/84, 330 x 340 cm, acrylic on unprimed cotton, loan from private collection, museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf, Switzerland, © Franz Gertsch

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Duane Pitre

INTERVIEW BY ZACHARY WATKINS (FOXY DIGITALIS)

Duane Pitre is an American avant-garde composer and performer. His work often focuses on the tensions between electronic sound and acoustic instrumentation, chaos and discipline, as well as site-specificity and performativity. The composer primarily works with long-tones and utilizes alternate tuning schemes that focus on microtonality, enabling him to explore unaccustomed harmonic intervallic relationships. He has scored works for large string/wind ensembles, string quintet, his own Bowed Harmonic-Guitar Ensemble, and solo performers, among other instrumental configurations.

difficult, don't let it sway you from your path.

What was your first musical instrument?

An electric bass.

What was the first musical genre that you really resonated with and does this style find its way into your current work?

I'd say when I was 14 years old or so, I got into Dinosaur Jr., Bad Brains, Firehose, Sonic Youth and some others. That was the first time I felt that music was really resonating with me. Sonic aspects of Dinosaur are in my work from time to time maybe, although not in an obvious



Where are you from? Where did you grow up? You are a professional skateboarder! WOW! I always felt that modern skateboarding is one of the most exciting multimedia art forms... Combining choreography, style, music, video, language... How did your time with Alien Workshop influence you artistically?

Well I was a professional skateboarder, big difference, ha-ha. Although, I have been skateboarding some since I've moved back to New Orleans. Yeah skateboarding is undoubtedly a wonderful form of self-expression; it is an art form I believe, similar to dance. The Workshop had a big influence on me artistically; anyone who is familiar with the company's beginning would understand this. Super 8 footage in parts of the video, playing tricks on a shitty black-and-white TV and then filming the TV with another camera (experimental dubbing I suppose it would be), and things like these are methods those guys would use. It had an everlasting effect on me. They always wanted to go about doing things differently and had a forward momentum about their work, not dwelling in the past too much (your own that is, as the term "past" is relative anyhow). They taught me to do things differently, and even if that means it makes life (or your art) more

way. But I learned about My Bloody Valentine from Dinosaur, and MBV was a big influence on my musical path, more so back in the late 90's, but it is still there more or less.

Some of my favorite composers also fancy themselves inventors. Which leads me to your practice of extending acoustic instruments using electronics as well as devising new tunings. What is the role of electronics in your music?

As of the last year or so I've started including simple electronics (mainly sine tones) in conjunction with bowed strings. I have a piece called Perfect/Imperfect, which in, focuses on the difference between perfect, unwavering electronic sine tones and the human imperfectness of trying to match them (in pitch). Which results in creating something I look at as interesting and enjoyable, celebrating the "beats"! To further my exploration into bringing electronics into my music, the last half of 2009 I had some software designed for me (actually a Max/MSP patch, for those who know what that is), which works in conjunction with a touch-sensitive "boutique" controller called the Manta and some other aux controllers. Basically it becomes a tunable synth that I utilize for

Just (Intonation) tunings. I can also trigger prerecorded samples (strings, guitar, etc. that I've recorded) with this setup. I'm trying to put the ensemble in the "box," since always having an ensemble is impossible, and a lot of work. In December 2009 I finished a composition (commissioned by saxophonist/clarinetist/composer Charles Waters) titled *Mixolydian Clarinet*, for solo clarinet and electronics. This is the first time I've coupled a wind instrument with electronics. The electronics are constant, a drone, with its lower partials offset-swelling in volume, with shifting in the higher partials (harmonics). The clarinet executes long tones as well as shorter rhythmic passages. The piece is influenced by Scottish bagpipes.

What first introduced you to alternate tunings?

Well I'm not sure really... Unconsciously I'd heard them for some time but didn't really give it much thought, as I was ignorant to what I was hearing. I heard them as exotic I guess, like many others do...such as the intervals in traditional Japanese and Middle Eastern music. But, I'd say that Terry Riley's *Persian Surgery Dervishes* and La Monte Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano* were the first records that made me explore what was going on in their tunings.

What or whom are influences?

Musically, there are many through the years like My Bloody Valentine, Dinosaur Jr., La Monte Young, Terry Riley, John Cage, traditional music of Japan and India, Organum and other Medieval music, Morton Feldman, Zeppelin, Sabbath, Eric Satie, and tons more.

Unmusical influences, which seem to be my main influences these days, are plenty as well. But worth mentioning are nature and architecture. Trees are the big one for me. For many years I've wanted to find a way to "transcribe" different trees (ones I could physically be in the presence of) into sound, but I just couldn't figure out a way to do it where it made sense to me. I didn't want to write the music just off the way the tree "felt" to me, I wanted the tree to dictate it. Well recently I've come up with a formula that will work, I believe, it still needs some work, but when done I'll be able to "plug" a tree into the formula and it, in conjunction with the performers involved, will write itself. But in general I love being around nature, even if just walking through leaves and whatever. But I have to have a balance; I like the city as well. My music starts off very visual to me, a lot of times I see it first, sometimes literally. And many times it is something natural that inspires it.

How do you begin writing a new composition in a new tuning?

Basically put, I figure out what "aural hues" the piece calls for (which I come about via some concept usually), and then explore to find the intervals that match that required color palette.

How do you approach scoring these compositions for other performers to play?

All depends on what instrumentation involved, I suppose. My piece *Origin*, written for an ensemble of bowed "harmonic-guitars" (which are unconventionally strung electric guitars [utilizing multi-unisons] tuned to justly intonated intervals), has the guitar strings bowed "open" (not fretted). So the guitarists don't have to worry about

the tuning, as the tuning up of the guitars is taken care of by myself. Other pieces use more "traditional" notation, with instructions on the tuning adjustments (i.e. notating a Minor 7th with "-31 cents" written by the note, making it the Just interval of 7/4).

Are you a tuning fascist?

Ha-ha-ha, I know you say this because you also work in Just Intonation, and many who do are tuning fascists. Unfortunately a lot of people think we are all like this, and get REALLY defensive. I've had people slightly "attack" me (in a snide way) even when I didn't bring up the topic. I believe that some people assume that people who work in Just Intonation think equal temperament, or whatever tuning they work in, isn't "cool enough" or "different enough" or some craziness like that. I do what I do because it satisfies me, so I really don't get that train of thought. I don't diss man! Ha. Some have the "Why be so structured?" vibe. The thing is, I need structure in my life, or I am not happy... I think we all need structure in some form or fashion. But not to the extent of being a fascist. But yeah I also work in quarter-tones, equal-temperament, as well as non-systematic microtonal tunings. I'm into tuning for the sound they produce; I work by ear, not "paper," although I love the theoretical side of music, very much.

Talk about your records... How do you record your large ensemble works?

The largest ensemble I've recorded with in the studio is a 7 piece. The rest have been at live performances, which yield results favorable to me (aside from some noises you get at such performances). Some of these recordings have made it as releases of mine, such as the Quiet Design Records release (CD) of a 22-piece ensemble performance of my piece ED09, from a live performance at Roulette in NYC. An 11-piece performance of the same piece performed at The Stone (also in NYC) was also released on 12" vinyl by Root Strata.

Do you use the studio to capture the piece "purely" or do you experiment?

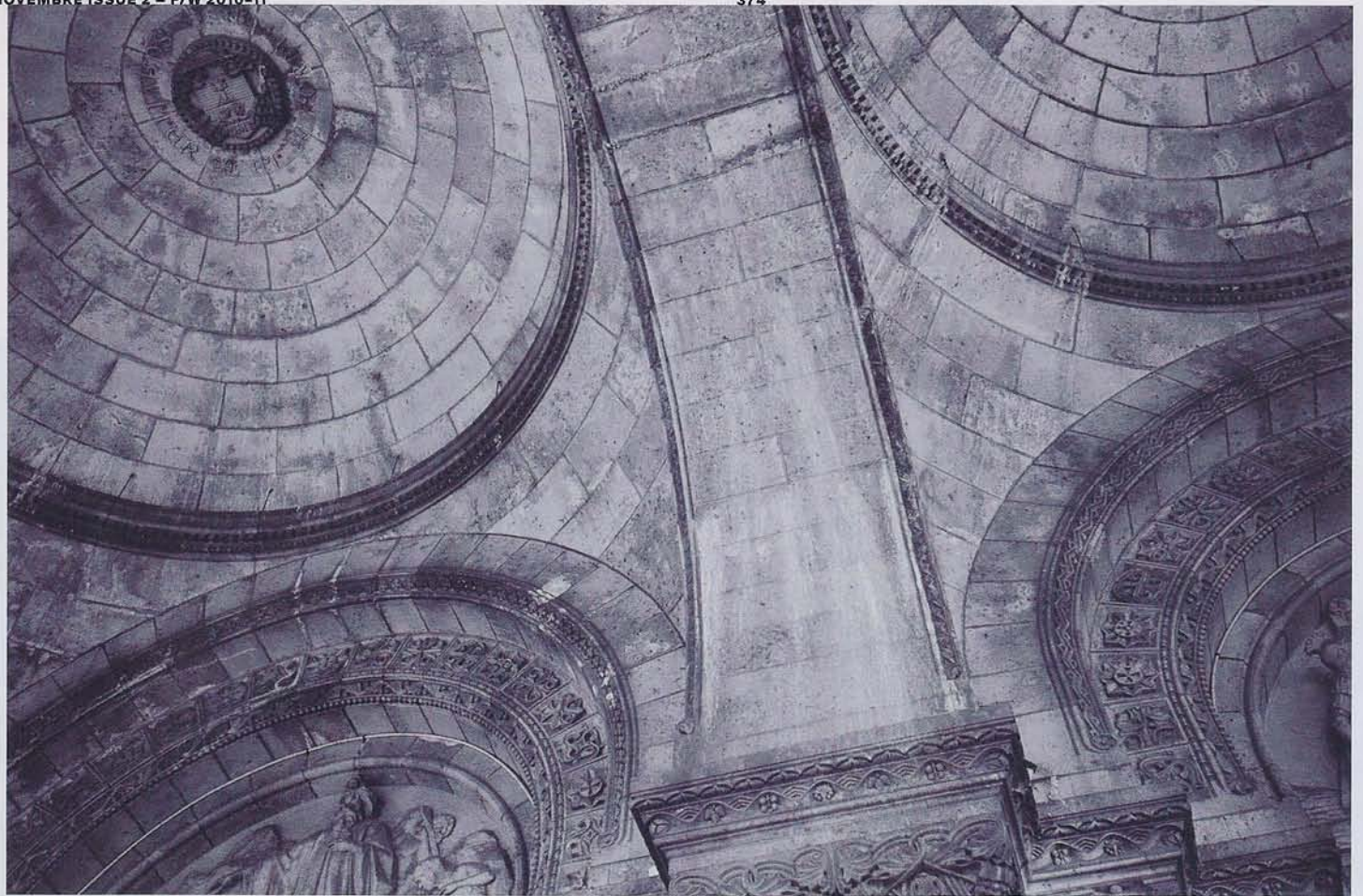
With my current scored works I try to capture it "pure" when going into a studio, same with recording a live performance of these works. Most experimentation happens with my home recording setup, and this is with different material, non-ensemble, solo sound-art type stuff.

Do you prefer analog or digital? (thank you Root Strata!)

I like a mixture of both, if applicable and tape is an option. For *Origin* it was recorded live to two-inch tape and mixed in Pro Tools. With *Perfect/Imperfect* it was recorded and mixed in Pro Tools, which worked better in this case. So it just varies.

It seems that there is a relatively new appreciation among younger generations for more abstract song forms and drone. Am I right? And if so, how does your music fit in within this movement?

Yeah, I think you are right. It seems to be hip, I'd say. I feel my music isn't right "up in it," but slowly I see this realm pay attention to what I do to an extent, either way is cool by me. The movement doesn't really have its feet in academia, but more so in the punk version of it all. I'm not just taking about the noise stuff either. Bedroom and



home recording, that route. Myself, I feel I have a foot in academia and one in this “new punk.”

Where is the creative music record industry headed?

I couldn't say really. I try not to think about it.

What new projects do you have formulating?

I think 2010 will see some collaboration with other artists for me. Seems there are some possible opportunities on the horizon and it feels like a good time to do such a thing. Other than that I'll continue to work on solo performance material and compose for others (ensemble, solo, quartets, etc.). I plan on, in conjunction with my girlfriend, starting to put on shows in New Orleans. There are many people who skip the city on their tours, we would like to change that. Also, and this is a little down the line, we want to start a “sound art gallery.” Which would mainly consist of sound installations by national and international artists, this way these artists, who may not usually make it to New Orleans, can have their work exhibited here. Then maybe they will gain some “fans” here and give them a reason to come perform. The gallery would also have a small amount of performances, going about it in a selective way.

How has New York been for your art? Have you connected with like-minded individuals/comrades?

What's the new music scene like there?

Living in NYC changed my life in many ways, music being the biggest one. It opened me up to many composers and disciplines I'd maybe not have learned about if I didn't live there. I owe it a lot. And I did meet many people there; with our minds overlapping in certain areas, I'd say, but not clones, variation for sure. As far as the New Music scene, well I wouldn't say I had much of a stance in that scene. I'd have to say I was associated with the experimental or avant-garde stuff. I know it may sound “separatist” but I don't mean it that way at all. There are just so many musicians/performers/composers/etc. in NYC that it will inevitably have to break down into smaller little “scenes.” But I don't think I was ever on a bill with all “New Music.” But nevertheless that scene seems to be bustling. All experimental art is pretty saturated there, and that was one good thing about moving back to New Orleans. It seemed people (including myself) in NYC could only get so excited about it all and/or make it out to shows. There is just so much of it going on, every night in many multiple spaces/venues. I had the desire to have my music performed to those who maybe didn't “get it” fully, my music being a new or semi-new experience for someone is special to me. So with my relocation to New Orleans I hope that this can happen. With that being said, I still like to perform to those that have had much experience with this music, no doubt. Balance.

Not having a formal background in composition, aka a degree, has not stopped you from writing and performing rich and “relevant” (need to choose better adjectives here) new works for both small and large ensembles, taking part in artists residencies and new music festivals in both the US and Europe, which I must admit is incredibly inspiring! Can you speak to this observation at all?

Very nice of you to say so, thanks! And glad I could be of some inspiration, always wonderful to hear. As far as my background in composition, I was very dedicated to self-studying (still am). I've been that way with many things throughout my life. I feel I learn better that way and I'm able to focus on the aspects of the “subject” that I want. But yeah, I studied certain aspects of Western music theory, the physics of sound, alternate tunings (with a focus on Just Intonation), traditional world music (mainly of the East), notation, composers (contemporary and of old) and their work, the place of music in religion (another topic I've self-studied quite a bit), etc. Wanting to learn is one of the best feelings I've experienced in my life, a hunger for specific knowledge, I love that feeling. And to be able to self-satisfy at my own pace is wonderful.

How do you approach solo performances?

Lately that has been my primary focus, working on solo material, that is. I'm using the Max/Manta/controller(s) setup that I mentioned before, in conjunction with guitar (at times). As far as approaching this material and the performance of it, I am trying to get to a point with being happy with playing solo, as I'm happier with my ensemble works for the most part. Most of my work generally focuses on simplicity multiplied by many, creating many layers. So this has been a challenge for me (to accomplish this solo, that is). I also fancy very sparse work, with more space instead of dense drones. So since moving to New Orleans, where I have more time to work, and I don't have access to all the ensemble performers I had in NYC, I'm working on finding this balance between dense and sparse solo pieces with this new setup of mine. In the end it'll allow me to travel with my work way easier, which is something I've been after for a while now.

What is the optimal venue?

A small- to medium-sized room whose walls' surfaces allows for sounds to reflect, so the same sound(s) is allowed to enter a listeners ears at different times and be tweaked (in an acoustically natural fashion) each time it does so. Engulfing the listener in sound to where it becomes an experience more so than a performance.

What current/future projects are you working on?

I've been focusing on a single piece of music over the last couple months (and will be till the end of the year), which is a commission, via ISSUE Project Room, to write a piece for The String Orchestra of Brooklyn. This piece will be performed on March 12th, 2011 at St. Ann's Cathedral in Brooklyn Heights by the 45+ piece string orchestra. The composition is based on my interpretation of different modes of unconscious brain activity, from when we go to sleep at night and till we awake in the morning. An exercise in clear v.s. vague – what we remember and what we do not, or we think we do not. As of now it is titled Exploded Drawings Suspended in Dreams.

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