

— November 16, 2008

I am profoundly grateful to Timothy Farley, piano rebuilder, scholar, technician and tuner par excellence, for demonstrating the precious benefits there are in applying older, traditional tunings to keyboard instruments. I have found these tunings to be extraordinarily compelling and inspiring.

I had already been curious about the idea of tuning keyboard (and fretted) instruments to historic temperaments of all kinds when I first visited Tim Farley's shop — then in downtown Madison — and encountered there some of these tunings, directly.

Tim had some memorable and beautiful pianos there, rich, full, warm, colorful. I remember playing then the second subject of Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata's first movement; first, as it appears in the exposition — remarkably — in E Major, the major mediant, itself a kind of bridge in a structural bass-arppeggiation from the tonic through the mediant to the dominant; then that second group in the

recapitulation— where it answers in the sub-mediant, A, upper neighbor to the dominant, major, then its modal consequent beginning in A minor and back to a g bass and cadence to C Major.

On the Farley's pianos one actually heard, vividly, the innate differences in key colors that exist among these tonalities, bringing them alive and giving a real aural sense to the harmonic structure of the piece. Also striking was the bursting out in the Neapolitan D^b, fortissimo, before the third movement's Prestissimo, and the progression on an upward circle of fifths that follows, where one viscerally experienced the varied colorations within each harmonic change.

I also remember playing some of those passages from Beethoven Concerti which feel somehow suspended by their remoteness to their home-keys. In the second Concerto they are four measures in D^b Major in its exposition and in G^b Major in its recapitulation. In the First Concerto, in the exposition, a downward circle of fifths metamorphoses kaleidoscopically from A^b to D^b and G, and, in the recapitulation, from D^b to F, G and back to C. In the Third Concerto,

the suspended D^b in the development section, releasing into the dominant by going from its Neapolitan Six through a diminished seventh on an F^\sharp bass. In the Fourth, there is a cantilena phrase in extreme registers, in B^b Major and, in the recapitulation, in E^b Major; and the cadence to C^\sharp - the tritone! - minor in the development, desolate, lost, and, then, light-generating motion from C^\sharp , upper neighbor to B , which is V of sub-mediant E , itself upper neighbor to D , the dominant. And in the Fifth, I played the second group, in E^b minor and Major, then in B minor/ C^b Major, in the recapitulation in C^\sharp minor/ D^b Major, and in the coda, as in the ritornello, in E^b minor/Major.

In seventh-comma modified meantone temperament, to which Tim Farley had tuned his pianos, all these harmonic relationships become fully alive and meaningfully colorful in a manner that, it seems, cannot be conveyed in standard equal temperament. We can admire much in the black-and-white lines and forms of great paintings, but how much richer and more beautiful they are in full color, too!

In seventh comma there no longer seems to be a need to overly fabricate a specialness to certain varied harmonies with concocted voicings, slowing of tempo, or what-have-you; now the pitches themselves manifest these colors and atmospheres directly and convincingly. In Schubert, too, music reappearing in various, often distantly related, keys, arrived at through extensive modulation, takes on new light and character in each of its emanations, in seventh-comma.

I was fascinated by what I heard in Tim Farley's shop on that first visit, but it was not until after my next visit, perhaps twenty years later, to the Farley House of Pianos, that I started to use these tunings myself. In this more recent encounter I was so persuaded again, and intoxicated by it that I now try to have pianos, for every concert where it might be effected — sometimes one still faces stubborn resistance — as well as on my instruments at home, tuned to one-seventh syntonic modified meantone temperament.

Midway between one-quarter (pure) and one-twelfth comma (equal) meantone, one-seventh comma seems to be a magical solution to both accomodating all keys (more or less) — albeit with some wolf intervals which even, when handled with sensitive voicing, themselves add to the colorfulness and remoteness at the bottom of the circle of fifths, with their piquancy — and, at the same time, retaining an intrinsic 'variegated key-coloration'.

No longer confined to only one key in two modes, major and minor, which in standard equal are then transposed eleven times, the older traditional tunings open up the spectrum, giving distinct individual character to each of twenty-four keys. This difference is both subtle and profound — subtle enough to sometimes use this temperament without anyone noticing it, other than maybe to comment on the unusually radiant and beautiful tone of that piano; profound in emanating real differences in keys and intervals while

allowing the instrument to resonate euphoniouly. This is a revelation!

Instruments seem to be transformed by the application of one-seventh comma - poor and mediocre pianos become quite good, and good pianos become alive and glowing. The temperament even seems to improve acoustics!

I have used this tuning for all kinds of music: Dowland, Byrd, John Bull, J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schoenberg, Messiaen, Takemitsu, Elliott Carter, Charles Wuorinen and others. There being no particular historical justification at all for using this one temperament for so many periods of music, the fact that it works so very satisfyingly for all this music attests, I think, to its intrinsic viability as a general temperament for keyboard instruments.

I am grateful to Timothy Farley, who devotedly explores and presents the great value in applying traditional temperaments and, in doing so, restores a world with key-colors, giving a singing, breathing, magical life to music.

Peter Serkin