

Forgotten Tones, Old Instruments, New Music

Invoking 16th-century tonality and investigating historical instruments as a basis for musical invention.

16th-century Ferrara, Italy was a hotbed of experimentation in the field of microtonal harmonic systems. Composers such as Nicola Vicentino, Luzzasco Luzzaschi and Luca Marenzio aimed to rekindle the fabled power of Ancient Greek music by extending the quarter-comma meantone system of the day into a 31-tone temperament, to create music with increased harmonic complexity and emotional intensity. Long overshadowed by the 12-tone temperament that emerged as the standard in western music, technological and artistic innovations from the 1940s through to today have rekindled this 31-tone system across musical genres (classical, jazz, electronic) and in fusions of western and non-western musical traditions. But this rich microtonal system, with its significant advantages for the performance and creation of both tonal and non-tonal music, remains relatively niche, partly because interested musicians face multiple barriers to entry: the scarcity of specially constructed instruments (most notably keyboards), use of multiple systems of notation, and a lack of repertoire accessible to musicians without extensive prior theoretical and aural training. To address this issue in my artistic practice as a composer, I am currently focusing almost exclusively on this 31-tone system to build a deep understanding of its properties and capabilities, and I am collaborating with a range of musicians to create accessible music that serves as a study for composer, performer and listener alike, while also making full use of the intricate sonic palette for the purpose of creative expression. To date, this artistic research has concentrated on historical western instruments, which are particularly flexible for retuning and usually played by musicians with an awareness of and interest in different tuning systems (an interest that frequently goes unnurtured). In this presentation, I explain my process of investigation from the conception of the different 31-tone tuning configurations through to the collaborative process of working with performers to develop the repertoire, and I share short examples of recent new compositions.

James Batty, *Fragments* for harpsichord: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NI4EjaZSh30>

(Presenting as an individual doctoral researcher, rather than a student-supervisor dialogue)

AEC European Platform for Artistic Research in Music (EPARM) 2024
Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana (Ljubljana, Slovenia)

Parallel Session



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James Batty is a British composer and historical keyboard player based in London. His music explores themes of interconnection between humans and the natural world through a musical language rooted in his passion for alternative tuning systems. James is working towards a PhD at the Royal Academy of Music, London, supervised by David Gorton.

His recently formed ensemble, the Picardy Players, presents new and old microtonal music in the context of multi-sensory audience experiences. James's commissions and collaborative projects have also been performed by the Riot Ensemble, Noxwode, pipa player Cheng Yu, CHROMA, the BBC Singers and Opera North, with performances at the Spitalfields, Cheltenham, Norfolk & Norwich and Davos Festivals. Two albums of his microtonal music have been released commercially ("Until I Set Him Free", "Sanctuary (Overtones and Deviations)") and received critical acclaim and radio play worldwide. Other recent projects include a miniature ballet with choreographer Cameron McMillan.

