

Notes by John Schaefer

My first encounter with the music of Tui St. George Tucker came in 1984, when the WNYC radio library received an LP called *Indian Summer* from Opus One Records. The album's subtitle volunteered that the disc contained three "microtonal antiphons on Psalm texts." Given the sound of so much recent music made with just the usual twelve notes, this was a pretty daunting description. Still, I recognized the names of several of the musicians; and one of the musical brainiacs who mysteriously reside in the WNYC library - a recorder player by trade - recommended Tucker as someone worth hearing. (I've since learned that recorder players owe Tucker a deep sense of gratitude, since she has made some of the most extensive and important contributions to the recorder repertoire since Baroque times.)

And so, fully expecting a record of Music That's Good For You, I put on *Indian Summer*... and found instead a record of immediately distinctive, melodic and likeable music. It just happened to have a few surprising notes in it - piquant enough to keep you on your toes, but certainly a lot more digestible than the gnomic squawks and twitters that still held sway in polite composition circles. Here was music that was at once forward-looking yet still firmly rooted in a long and varied musical tradition; serious but not academic; full of lush ensemble sounds that reflected music's true sensual nature. It was, in short, a perfect introduction to the musical world of Tui St. George Tucker.

In listening to Tucker's music, one quickly realizes that microtonality has been one of her long-running musical concerns and a field in which she's made some of her most notable contributions. In current Western parlance, microtonality refers to any system of tuning that uses notes other than the twelve notes of the piano. Ancient tunings, Oriental tunings, scales with more than twelve notes - these are all examples of microtonality. Tucker's works make use most notably of quartertones, the notes exactly halfway between the usual twelve notes of most Western music. On a piano, you would need another key inserted halfway between C and C# on the keyboard to get the quartertone between them.

These extra notes have a practical effect: they expand the palate available to a composer of wide-ranging tastes. Tucker is such a composer: her works often include obvious references to jazz standards, stride piano, the plainchant of Medieval Europe, Baroque music, and birdsong. (Tui is the name of a species of bird native to New Zealand, where Tucker's mother was born.) Birdsong, as you may guess, is naturally microtonal. It can be approximated with only twelve notes, as Olivier Messiaen proved, but using quartertones allows for some striking evocations of birdsong - especially when played on an instrument like the recorder.

Of course, quartertones are not commonly heard in Western music, and can be jarring to the ear - and are often used for exactly that effect. But Tucker uses quartertones to *extend* tonality, not to obscure or replace it. Whether microtonal or not, Tucker's works typically have long, flowing melodies. Within this melodic fabric, the quartertones are generally approached in ways that makes sense to the ear, and often resolve in surprising but satisfying cadences.

Just where Tucker fits in the larger musical world is still unclear. It seems vaguely silly to speak of an American maverick tradition - a maverick by definition works outside tradition. But one can certainly trace a heritage of musical idiosyncrasy passed on by some of America's most important and unusual composers: Ives, Cowell, Cage, Partch, and Harrison, to name just a few. Tui St. George Tucker would seem to be part of this lineage, in that she's spent 50 years following her own muse. Her output does not fit neatly into any of this century's musical "-isms"; and as this retrospective recording shows, hers is a career of apparent contradictions:

- Tucker has created a singularly arresting body of microtonal music; but she's also written an engaging set of conventionally tuned works that reflect the diversity of American music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

