

The Problem with Standardizing Pitch: A Historical Perspective

Date & time: Thursday, January 17, 4 pm

Venue: EEG 302, Dept. of Electrical Engg., IIT Bombay

Abstract

The notion that musical pitch is “countable” and discreetly “measurable” was mentioned at least as early as the thirteenth century by theorist Johannes Grocheo, and to some degree, it holds true. Yet, pitch is a subjective term that is influenced by other reference pitches, instruments and their timbre, sound phenomena, and cultural traditions.

On the surface, it seems that Western classical music—with its staff notation and ubiquitous keyboard (“piano”) layout—gives the impression of a uniform musical space that is neatly divided into equal divisions that repeat. However, when “measured” the practical nature of performance and the acoustical phenomenon in instruments—particularly the modern piano—indicate that pitches are noticeably far from their theoretical position. Furthermore, the theory of pitch and tuning in the West has been continuously changing, and precise measurements and descriptions of the practice of tuning have been well documented from the sixteenth-century forward. This talk will examine the different systems of pitch in the West dating from the Renaissance to contemporary times, and hopefully open ideas on how to understand the sometimes correlated and sometimes paradoxical relationship between specific frequency and approximate pitch recognition.

About the speaker:

Shane Monds is a composer and multi-instrumentalist. He holds his doctorate in music composition and theory from Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music (USA). His writing on Western music focuses on the intersection of tuning history and composition in the West with a particular emphasis on the “spectral” school of composition—a musical style which utilizes acoustic phenomenon and sound spectrum as a driving force for musical organization. He has also written papers on thresholds for tuning awareness in musicians.

Additionally, he is an active performer of Hindustani classical music, and is currently living in Mumbai, India on a post-doctoral fellowship supporting research and writing on the Imdadkhani-Etawah sitar gharana. He studies sitar under Abhik Mukherjee (New York, NY).

You can learn more about him and listen to some of his works on his website:

<http://shanemonds.com>