

M O D N E Y
A S C E N D I N G P R I M E S

Ascending Primes

1. Unity. Singularity. Self.
[Fundamental/Unison]
2. The self multiplied. Different, identical. Gateway to travel and growth.
[Octave]
3. Elemental, parallel, honest. Lithic. Terrifying laserlike focus.
[Perfect Fifth]
5. Human, heartfelt, poignant.
[Major Third]
7. Grounded complexity: earthly yet cosmic. Echoes of self and spirit.
Past and future. Vibrating with possibility. The most liminal harmony.
[Minor Seventh]
11. Serrated scream. Rich and propulsive. Interstellar.
[Augmented Fourth]

Music, with its vibrational and temporal nature, gives us the possibility of ascending to states of being that would otherwise be inaccessible. I've had this kind of elevated experience as a performer and a listener. It's rare and it's real, brought forth by some ineffable confluence of preparation, skill, communication, inspiration, and openness. It's the liminal state artists are always chasing, the pursuit of which, for me, is a spiritual practice. The integration of Just Intonation into my music-making has brought this way of being closer to the surface. The primes in sonic form are, aptly, primal. They make you feel things, things that are powerful and contradictory and that lie outside the realm of language and rationality.

The list to the left is how I hear the primes, with Just Intonation as a guiding light. Just Intonation is tuning according to whole-number ratios (as distinguished from Equal Temperament, the tuning system of the piano and the system to which we are acculturated). The whole-number ratios of Just Intonation correspond to the partials of the

harmonic series, the infinite spectrum of overtones present within any fundamental tone. Overtones which are multiples of each other share certain qualities, and these qualities are defined by prime numbers. The distinctiveness of prime numbers means that each of them represents an infinite spiral, each on its own voyage, sometimes in conflict or in harmony with the other primes, yet always relating to and encompassed by 1, the singularity.

In musical terms, beyond eliciting a gut emotional reaction, the primes generate unique grids of harmony that may be juxtaposed or overlaid. When employed in tandem with the conflicting grid of Equal Temperament and complex instrumental/vocal timbres, the possibilities for consonance and dissonance become extreme and multitudinous. Another way of saying this is that the gap between consonance and dissonance becomes wider, with pristine harmonicity on one end of the spectrum and clangorous, supersaturated noise on the other. My experience has been that these extremes – the harmonicity and the noise – each hold within them the potential for beauty and for terror.

My practice as an improviser on the violin is focused on that widening of extremes, and on cutting rapidly between disparate modes of expression. Part of the project of *Ascending Primes* is to extend the sound and the ethos of my violin practice outward to larger and larger groups, mimicking the spiral form of prime number families. The album begins with *Ascender* for solo violin with distortion pedal (representing 1 and 2, self and extension of self). While intended as a standalone piece, *Ascender* also functions as an overture, previewing fragments of material that bloom later in the album as the ensembles grow. Each of the pieces on the album are distinct yet related, inspired by the way prime overtones relate to a single fundamental pitch while retaining their own unmistakable voice.

The exceptional ability of my colleagues to modulate between Just Intonation, romantic expressionism, virtuosic notated material, and nuanced solo improvisation is emblematic of a new versatility among adventurous contemporary performers, one which integrates precision, wildness, heart, and intensity in decidedly New York City fashion. *Ascending Primes*, like the work of Ellsworth Kelly that graces its cover, is a New York project at its core, a celebration of the distinctively pathbreaking music being made here and the community of artists who make it. There is a new New York School. Though nobody has yet coined a name for it, and it hasn't yet found its fullest audience, it's here and it's happening and it's exciting and beautiful. I'm grateful to be a part of it.

1 *Ascender*

for solo violin with distortion pedal 7:14

Modney, violin

In *Ascender*, a distortion pedal (controlled by the performer via volume pedal) is used to heighten the extremes of harmonicity and noise of the violin. In acoustic violin playing, when two pitches are played simultaneously in a whole number ratio (e.g., a Major Third tuned as 5:4) a psychoacoustic difference tone may be subtly perceived. The distortion pedal reinforces this phenomenon so when two pitches are played simultaneously, a third, fundamental pitch is strongly present. Depending on the choice of pitches and technique, the results range from dense noise, to erratic rumbling subtones, and to sonorous chord progressions in three-part harmony. The musical material, ever-ascending, is analogously extreme in expressive range, from a shimmering intrada of extended intervals, to frenetic improvisation, romanticism, and Just Intonation "folk music". *Ascender* is a synthesis of my improvisational practice, modernist playing techniques, and echoes of the old-school virtuoso violin music and Appalachian fiddle playing of my youth. *Ascender* is ecstatic upward motion, vaulting into the reaches.

3 *Lynx*

for violin, cello, and electronics 9:30

Modney, violin

Mariel Roberts, cello

Sam Pluta, electronics

Lynx is tailored to the distinctive performance practice of my longtime artistic collaborators and fellow Wet Ink Ensemble members Mariel Roberts and Sam Pluta. While much of my ensemble music is an extension of the sounds and techniques of my solo violin practice, *Lynx* is built on Roberts' cello playing. *Lynx* travels to many places over its nearly ten-minute duration as violin and electronics augment and process the soloistic cello lines that form the core of the piece. The electronics feature Pluta's improvised live processing as well as fixed elements such as a software synth in Just Intonation. *Lynx* embodies 3: direct, brazen, outward-facing. In the final section, *Lynx* begins to look toward 5: poignant and introspective.

5 *Everything Around It Moves*

for string quartet and piano 25:06

Modney, violin

Gabriela Díaz, violin

Kyle Armbrust, viola

Mariel Roberts, cello

Cory Smythe, piano

Everything Around It Moves for string quartet and piano builds a soundscape in which juxtaposed, overlapped, tangled, and at times overwhelming possibilities carve out a space for heartfelt human expression to emerge. In the first half of the piece, a series of "rips" provide brief windows into subtly divergent material, like glimpses into parallel universes that exhibit differences both slight and extreme. These juxtapositions lead to more varied materials which gain structure before expanding in many directions toward all-encompassing noise ("everythingness"). The subsequent absence of this noise leaves a wide-open expanse for a single voice, the viola, to sing. Performed with intensity and grace by Kyle Armbrust, this viola line provides much of the foundational harmony for the music that comes before and afterward. Then, a brief series of brutally truncated phrases ushers in a tender melody in Cory Smythe's solo piano that, when taken up by strings tuned in whole-number ratios, brings the listener into a universe of elemental consonance. The quintet embodies 5: interior, heart, searching deeply within oneself. It looks toward 7: inhabiting liminality, opening up possibility.

7 *Fragmentation And The Single Form*

for septet 26:42

I	Source	7:06
II	Vox	8:24
III	Song	3:25
IV	Call	7:47

Charmaine Lee, voice and electronics

Ben LaMar Gay, cornet and synth

Modney, violin with distortion pedal

Erica Dicker, violin

Cory Smythe, piano

Dan Peck, tuba

Kate Gentile, drums

In this septet in four parts, common threads from the previous music on *Ascending Primes* develop and merge with new material in the context of a larger, louder mixed ensemble. While the first three works on the album lean toward a contemporary classical aesthetic, the septet's rhythm section and lineup of innovative musicians from the adventurous jazz community further widens the palette of expressive possibilities. In Part I, harsh juxtapositions carve out space for Kate Gentile's ecstatic drum solo to break free over richly harmonic violins and tuba (the distortion of *Ascender* returns in all its guises over the course of the septet, now processing two violins). In contrast to the starkly alienating landscape of the opening, Part II begins with an organic duo of complex warmth by Charmaine Lee and Ben LaMar Gay. This duo sets the stage for wide-ranging expressivity—from clock-like music with frenzied tuba soloing by Dan Peck, to brashly labyrinthine harmonic cycles led by strings and piano—that is ultimately overpowered by noise. In a similar spirit to the quintet, the silence following this rupture allows for a moment of unmitigated, intimate expression. Part III, written for and dedicated to Ben LaMar Gay, is a song without words. In Part IV, the distant call of violin with distortion establishes the scene for the full band to dramatically burst in with a series of solos over Just Intonation chord changes by LaMar Gay, Smythe, and me before, finally, the harmonic violin distortion that has been brewing throughout the piece overpowers everything in a culminating, immersive drone. *Fragmentation And The Single Form* embodies 7: it exists between worlds,

earthbound and skyward. The final drone, which contains overtones 1 – 11, propels us to the next...

11 *Event Horizon*

for undectet 33:03

- I Serrated Scream 9:42
- II Passacaglias 11:03
- III Ascenders 12:18

Anna Webber, tenor saxophone

Nate Wooley, trumpet

David Byrd-Marrow, horn

Dan Peck, tuba

Modney, violin

Eddy Kwon, violin

Joanna Mattrey, viola

Mariel Roberts, cello

Lester St. Louis, cello

Cory Smythe, piano

Kate Gentile, drums

Undecimal (11) harmonies have always sounded like a scream to me: aggressive, propulsive, cathartic. While septimal (7) harmonies might transport us between different aspects of the soul—a feeling of interdimensionality, the undecimal is pure speed: interstellar. *Event Horizon* begins with that cathartic scream and uses the momentum to travel to places that embody the other musics on *Ascending Primes* (sometimes tangentially, sometimes through direct quotation) and to parts unknown. An expressionist, improvised duo by Cory Smythe and me begins Part I, opening the door to a variegated full ensemble drone on primes 1 – 11 of D. After the drone dissolves and gives way to a quiet forest of small sounds, Part I concludes with an extended improvised solo by Nate Wooley over an inexorable progression in the strings that descends in register with each cycle. Part II is a triptych of repeating progressions separated by “field recordings” that have been realized acoustically by the ensemble. In the first section, a series of whole-number ratio triads intoned by violin and tuba provides the foundation for David Byrd-Marrow to take a wide-ranging horn solo. The second, featuring material reprised from the septet and reframed as a duo for my violin with Smythe’s piano, becomes the ground underneath Eddy Kwon’s fiery violin improvisation. The concluding section, first heard as a violin fragment at the end of Part I, is fully realized here as a brass chorale. Joanna Mattrey opens Part III with an earthy viola improvisation, which continues to build as the ensemble enters with material

reminiscent of the conclusion of *Ascender*. This material breaks through to a section featuring Anna Webber, Nate Wooley, Smythe, and me soloing over the full force of the band. An improvised cello duo by Mariel Roberts [L] and Lester St. Louis [R] brings *Event Horizon* to its concluding section, a warm and enigmatic place that vibrates atop a 60 Hz drone, a place we haven't yet been. *Event Horizon* provides a scaffolding for this large group of ultraversatile NYC musicians to let their creative voices shine. We are all Ascenders.

Modney

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