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Paul Robinson

Tom Johnson in Paris

Tom Johnson, *Réservé aux sopranes*; Claire Alby, Annie Bion, Sara Goldstein, Birgit Keulertz (sopranos), Henry de Rouville (countertenor), Maria João Serrão (soprano), Andrea Atlanti (flute), Aude Rocca-Serra (harp), Françoise Gernigon (violin), Laurent Cirade (cello), conducted by Johnson, American Center, Paris, 29 February - 10 March 1984

Tom Johnson, an American living in Paris (currently on a scholarship from the National Endowment for the Arts) is little known in Britain, and the première of his fourth opera, *Réservé aux sopranes*, caused barely a ripple of attention on this side of the Channel. Born in 1939 in Colorado, Johnson studied at Yale and later privately with Morton Feldman. It is to Feldman that he traces his formative musical experiences. From 1971 to 1983 he contributed lively columns on new music to *Village Voice* in New York, the last of which was a well-calculated broadside on the subject of cultural isolation from European developments, aimed at his fellow minimalist American composers:

I see American minimalist composers going about their work without realizing that many European composers are now not only making use of these same formal procedures, but giving them strong content at the same time. I see all these people continuing to work with premises dating from the 60s and early 70s, and I sense that their work is gradually losing touch with the rest of the world. If the situation continues, American artists as a whole are destined to become gradually more provincial, and less relevant elsewhere.¹

This goes some way towards explaining Johnson's apparently permanent move to Paris, and also the direction taken by his new opera, which has a French text and inhabits a musical sound world that is pervasively, though understatedly, French.

Johnson's first acknowledged work is *Secret Songs* (a group of sound poems), written when he was 19, abandoned, and then revised when sound poetry became an established genre in the 1960s. Even more 'secret' are the *Private Pieces: Piano Music for Self Entertainment* (1967), a set of written instructions for solo pianist, to be realised in private. Within this work, however, are contained the seeds of a generation of pieces that became gradually more public in their manifestations. The performer is provoked into 'composing' by verbal suggestions that concentrate the mind on the immediacy of the moment by dividing its attention between the tasks given to the left and right hands and the reading of the text.

Although no more instructions are necessary at the moment, the text is continuing in order to give you time to achieve a sense of balance between the three things, so that they seem to accompany one another. You have three more sentences in which to achieve this balance before going on to a new section of the piece.²

Several aspects of these pieces exemplify concerns that continue to be central to Johnson's work. First, they extend on invitation to others to compose by involving them in the thought processes of composition by the backdoor of language; this technique is exploited even more effectively in the *Lectures with Audience Participation* (1972-5). Second, they draw an analogy between composing and playing games which is re-created in *Risks for Unrehearsed Performers* (begun 1977) and is related more distantly, to Johnson's interest in deductive number processes.

The last point is crucial to Johnson's development, for it was with the aid of number that he found an authentic musical voice, albeit on a very tight minimal rein; *The Four-note Opera* (1972), which is just that—an opera composed of only four notes—is a graphic example of the severity of the limitations that Johnson's minimalist theories place upon his work. Perhaps the later *Rational Melodies*, a volume of melodic exercises, might be seen in the light of the

tendency of composers to publish analyses of their own works: a detailed appendix explaining the structure of each melody is included in the score. But that would be to interpret the publication as primarily an analytical work rather than one designed for performance, which is what Johnson intended. Nevertheless, the appendix is useful in mapping out the possibilities and limitations of number processes in relation to their intelligibility in performance. The introduction to the volume sheds some interesting light on his attitude to logical sequences:

When I first began working with logical sequences, I was concerned with making this logic totally perceptible, even by untrained listeners, and even on first hearing. Sometimes I even reinforced the music with parallel visual activity so as to make everything doubly clear. This deliberate obviousness can also be seen in many of the *Rational Melodies*, particularly Nos. 5, 12, and 17. As I continued working in this way, however, total clarity came to seem less important, and somewhat limiting. I became open to more subtle types of deduction, writing pieces that might require two or three hearings to fully understand, and in some cases, such as Nos. 2, 16, and 20, pieces that one might have to study for some time in order to define the specific rules by which everything had been deduced. Depending on your attitude towards music and puzzles and logic, you may prefer the more obvious melodies to the more subtle ones, or the other way around, but for me there is no longer any particular virtue one way or the other. Sometimes things are simple, and sometimes they are not so simple, and they can be beautiful either way.

You can never completely pin down what you are doing, even when you are working in a rigorously logical way, and this is one of the things about deductive processes that most appeals to me. Even sequences that seem completely self-evident when we see them, hear them or think them, are ultimately about as difficult to explain as chance or sonata form or artistic quality or God.³

Again, these pieces are not exactly for public consumption: they are about composing; performance and even music are not prime concerns.

Number permeates Johnson's work, as the following list of titles indicates: *Sixty Note Fanfares* (1976), *Nine Bells* (1978-9), *Trinity: Three Anthems on Three Notes for Four Antiphonal Choirs* (1978). The reaction of readers to the discussion of number permutations may very well be 'So what?'. It certainly recalls the endless and tedious debates about serial

Example 1 *Réservé aux sopranes*, 'Le grand canon', opening of the *quinzième thème*

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The musical score is presented in two systems, each with two staves labeled I and II. The music is in 6/8 time. The lyrics are in French and describe a musical theme consisting of five notes and a scale.

System 1:

- Staff I: *Le quinzième thème gravit une p'tite échelle avec ces cinq notes*
- Staff II: (Empty)

System 2:

- Staff I: *et descend alors suivant la même p'tite échelle jusqu'au bout*
- Staff II: *Le quinzième thème gravit une p'tite échelle avec ces cinq notes*

permutation in the 1950s and 1960s. But Johnson's saving grace is his quietly confident and humorous way of handling potentially arcane material, and the fact that, unlike the serial theorists, he has no intention of developing a specifically musical language. It seems eminently possible that Johnson will switch his mode of expression away from music back to words or to spoken drama or to virtually any medium susceptible of manipulation by means of number.

It could be said that it is through theatre, rather than abstract music, that Johnson has found a public voice; I should perhaps say 'opera', since he has chosen that generic term to designate *The Four-note Opera* and *Réservé aux sopranes*. *Réservé aux sopranes* is a direct descendant of *The Four-note Opera* (the two operas in between are *The Masque of Clouds* and *Five Shaggy Dog Operas*). Just as in *The Four-note Opera* Johnson exploits what might be called 'musical tautologies', the continual presentation in music and words of the structure of the opera. The opera is about itself and nothing else: the six singers are purely musical 'characters', named after solmization syllables (Do, Ré, Ré, Mi, Sol, La); the work has no plot.

Johnson wrote his libretto in French. His original reason for doing so was the purely practical one of comprehension by his intended audience, but as he worked on the text, refining it and making the language more colloquial, he found that he was achieving a simplicity and a neat irony that would have been difficult to attain using English. The work is in three parts. 'La procession' (40 minutes) has 24 scenes (numbered 19 to 42), each no more than a couple of lines long in the libretto and made up of instructions and text. The work begins:

(...)

Soudain, il y a parole.

Scène 19: *Le premier soprane donne une petite explication et rechante le thème avec des mots:*

Maintenant, les mots et la musique vont ensemble.

Scène 20: *Le deuxième soprane chante le thème avec des mots:*

Maintenant, les mots et la musique ne vont pas très bien ensemble.

Scène 21: *Le troisième soprane chante le thème avec des mots:*

Maintenant, tout va bien sauf à la fin.

'Le divertissement' (25 minutes) consists of permutations on the names of the 'characters'. 'Le grand canon' (50 minutes) is a series of 21 *thèmes* with a finale. The text of each *thème* comments on the music, and together they comment on the nature of opera. Even the lay-out and orthography of the libretto are part of the game:

LE TROISIÈME THÈME. C'EN EST QU'ÉDURÉCITATIF. IL NE VEUT RIEN DIRE.

Le qua^atrième n'est qu'un p'tit exer^{cice} tout en oc^{ta}ves.

notes
cinq et
ces descend
avec alors
échelle suivant
p'tite la
une même
gravit p'tite
thème échelle
quinzième jusqu'au
Le bout

(Example 1)

A simple example of Johnson's theatrical wit is the 19th theme:

Le dix-neuvième thème travaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaille le souffle.

The music consists of a repeated phrase, which, with each repeat, rests longer on the word 'travaille'. The sopranos are finally driven to the end of their capacity to hold their 'souffle' and the structure collapses.

I suggested to Johnson that much of the humour of *Réservé aux sopranes* consists in the parody of opera, but that by the very choice of so well-established a whipping-post he had robbed the work of some of its effect. His response was that opera itself was not the target, but that illusion in operatic narrative was. The term 'opera' is applicable to the work only insofar as the six singers at times sing in an operatic manner, and Johnson points out that, in a similar way, to describe the works of Robert Wilson as 'operas' is to take far too much of a liberty with the generally accepted meaning of the word.

Réservé aux sopranes luxuriates in the sound of the voice in a way that easily transcends any of the potentially tedious aspects of minimal music. Haunting melodies, sharply focused rhythms (a waltz at one point), and sensuous vocal textures are immediately attractive. But the impression that these characteristics give of Johnson's handling his material more freely is an illusion: the work is rigorously and logically structured—indeed, according to Johnson, *The Four-note Opera* is 'chaos by comparison'.

The French text, inventive use of simple modal materials, and the instrumentation (flute, harp, violin, and cello) of *Réservé aux sopranes* prompt comparisons with Satie's *Socrate* and even Stravinsky's *Perséphone*. These resemblances were emphasised by Henry Pillsbury's direction of the first performance. The singers (it was a delightful irony that despite the title of the work one of the vocal parts was taken by a countertenor) were clad for 'Le divertissement' in Greek-looking robes and moved between what might have been intended to be the pillars of a Greek temple. But at other points, the direction seemed out of sympathy with Johnson's conception; especially in the introduction of dramatic interpretations, which though amusing in themselves led the opera astray into the realms of light entertainment. Any notion of characterisation seems erroneous in this work since Johnson sees the singers not as characters, but as human representations of musical phenomena; this was most effectively realised in 'Le divertissement', where the singers, who stand for crotchets and quavers, moved from one pillar to another, adopting the pitch associated with each pillar as they reached it.

It is interesting to contemplate how long the Cageian aesthetics of non-intention and non-manipulation will continue to sustain American composers. As Johnson's music becomes itself more interesting the aesthetic that guides it seems less and less important. Will minimalism continue to provide him with a basic technique from which, as in the past, he can create his music, or might it ultimately impose such limitations on his development that the only escape will be renunciation?

¹ 'European envoi', *Village Voice* (11 January 1983).

² *Private Pieces: Piano Music for Self Entertainment* (New York: Two-Eighteen Press, 1967), p.7.

³ *Rational Melodies* (New York: Two-Eighteen Press, 1982), p.3.