

**TOM
JOHNSON**
**THE VOICE
OF NEW
MUSIC**

NEW YORK CITY 1972 - 1982
A COLLECTION OF ARTICLES
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE VILLAGE VOICE

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*for all of those whose
ideas and energies
became the voice of
new music,*

*and for all that I
learned from them*

Index

Index

Index

Index

Index

Preface

Introduction

Index 1972

Index 1973

Index 1974

Index 1975

Index 1976

Index 1977

Index 1978

Index 1979

Index 1980

Index 1981

Index 1982

Music Columns in the Voice

Preface

Preface

Preface

Preface

Preface

The ten years, from 1972-1982, during which Tom Johnson closely followed the developments in the new music in New York and reported his experiences in the Village Voice, constitute the most innovative and experimental period of recent musical history. A considerable number of his articles and reviews has been brought together in this collection. Together they provide a lively impression of the genesis and the exciting adventure of the new music, of the diversity of utterances that were part of it from the very start, and of the circumstances and opinions which prompted it. Johnson recorded the emergence of a generation of composers and musicians which has set out to probe once more all conventions of

the Western musical tradition and to remove the barriers between different cultures and various artistic disciplines. That process is still in full swing. Therefore it is of interest today to read how that process was triggered.

Tom Johnson has been the first champion of this new movement in music. His awareness of the importance of new developments incited him to writing essays that convey his observations quite lucidly, systematically and accurately. His talent for rendering musical experiences directly and intelligibly into language has contributed substantially to the recognition of new music. As artist and composer he participated in the new movement and so he described the development from the angle of the artist. Thus the reader becomes a sharer in the artistic process.

Our book has one serious flaw. One important and prolific composer of the evolution of New York minimalism is completely missing: Tom Johnson himself. A number of his pieces have probably been performed as much as any composition mentioned in this book, and some of them go back to the early seventies.

Tom now lives in Paris and continues writing songs, operas and other compositions. He expresses his perceptions and experiences in his own work as clearly, systematically and meticulously as in his reviews. His music corresponds oddly with the ideas of Boethius, a music theorist from the early middle ages (470-525) who opined that 'music is number made audible,' and that 'it is not just music that is beautiful because of its dependence on number, but everything.' Tom Johnson's fascination with counting as a compositional means is brought out in many different ways in his music.

The selection of the articles included in this volume and the final editing have been carried out in close consultation with the writer. I thank Tom Johnson for the attention and time he has invested in this publication and for our amicable collaboration. Next, I would like to thank all of the collaborators, and especially Marja Stienstra who of processed the text with great dedication, Peter de Rooden and Lucas van Beeck for the careful proofreading, and Ton Homburg for the design. Finally, I am grateful towards Arnold Dreyblatt, who suggested the idea of this publication to me. I am convinced that this book will find its way to many readers.

Paul Panhuysen (Eindhoven, July 2 1989)

Introduction

Introduction

Introduction

Introduction

Introduction

I was very pleased when Paul Panhuysen suggested that we put together a collection of my Village Voice reviews. I had known Paul for several years, had performed at Het Apollohuis, was familiar with their wonderful book on new instruments, *Echo: The Images of Sound*, and I was sure that they would do a good job with *The Voice of New Music*. I especially liked the idea of doing such a collection with a Dutch publisher, so that it would circulate more in Europe, where the Village Voice is generally unavailable, and where few people have ever read my criticism. It also seemed to be a good time. By now, these articles are mostly 10 or 15 years old. That is long enough to give us a little historical perspective on

the evolution of a musical idiom which has since become universally acclaimed, but not so long that the issues, and the people, are dead.

Perhaps the most important thing for me about this book, however, is that it will give readers a more complete view of the origins of American minimal music than has been available so far. I find it frustrating, especially in Europe, that so many otherwise well informed people still identify this school or movement as the work of the two or three composers they know best, and think that the music always follows the basic procedures they have heard most often.

The idea of minimalism is much larger than most people realize. It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, pieces that use only a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments, such as antique cymbals, bicycle wheels, or whisky glasses. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time. It includes pieces made exclusively from recordings of rivers and streams. It includes pieces that move in endless circles. It includes pieces that set up an unmoving wall of saxophone sound. It includes pieces that take a very long time to move gradually from one kind of music to another kind. It includes pieces that permit all possible pitches, as long as they fall between C and D. It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute.

There are a lot of ideas in this little list, and they came from a lot of different individuals. But essentially they didn't come from individuals at all, but from a very large and rather nebulous group. Important artistic movements are not produced by individuals. They are produced when a number of talented people happen to be evolving in the same place at the same time. If the situation is right, their ideas cross fertilize, hybrids are formed, these produce other hybrids, the procreation of ideas accelerates, and gradually real breakthroughs become possible. One cannot really appreciate the phenomenon of Elizabethan poetry, for example, or cubist painting, or Bauhaus design, without considering the general context of the discoveries, and the music we are talking about here presents a similar situation.

Of course, some pieces are more minimal than others, and some of the music described in the book does not restrict its material much at all. Lukas Foss's 'Map' or Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* or a *Musica Elettronica Viva* improvisation session are all examples. It would also be quite wrong to think of John Cage or Morton Feldman as real minimalists - particularly Cage, one of whose greatest desires was to make music that would include every sound

conceivable, without any restrictions at all. Yet all of these people were active around the SoHo music scene, and the ideas of Cage and Feldman are closely allied to those of the following generation in many non-minimal ways, and it would be unthinkable to do a book about the evolution of minimal music without including such people. Besides, the book is not exclusively about minimalism. Our real subject is new music around New York City in 1972 to 1982, like we already told you on the cover.

It is clear in these articles that my own greatest interest, especially in the early '70s, was in the most extreme forms of minimalist experiments. I wrote with particular respect for the endless drones of La Monte Young, even when I had gone to sleep listening to them, and I was very impressed by some extreme minimalist exercises, which in retrospect, were rather naive. I am referring to occasions when someone would play the same gong for an hour, or repeat a few verbal phrases for a long time, or ask us to accept a completely static oscillator as a composition.

The extreme statements didn't continue very long, however, and in my last article of 1974, I am already lamenting the decline of avant-gardism and showing how many individual composers were abandoning their most extreme ideas, and my writing seems to imply that anyone who changed was a traitor to aesthetic purism.

But of course, the change was inevitable. Extreme minimalism just could not continue year after year. The audience lacked the patience to listen to no changes, however novel the presentations might be, and eventually even the composers got bored. No one does such things anymore, and today everyone agrees, once again, that the search for total stasis, for the beauty of absolute zero, was a search for a mirage. But what an exciting mirage, and how essential it was for us!

The minimalist search, the desire to restrict musical materials, was essential to almost all the composers in this book. Mostly born in the '30s and '40s, these composers were all basically reacting to the fast-changing, super-complex structures of their post-Webern teachers. And if they were sometimes overreacting, they in any case ended up in a rich new field of slow-changing, super-simple structures - minimalism.

Of course, the difficult part in preparing any anthology is selecting what to put in and what to leave out. In the years 1972 to 1979 I wrote over 40 articles a year in the Voice, and in 1980, '81 and '82 there were 20 to 30 a year. The whole pile would have come to perhaps 2000 pages, and would have been so scattered in its content as to be completely unreadable. To begin with, Paul and I simply

eliminated all the articles dealing with old music, European music, folk music, non-Western music, and everything else not pertaining directly to the subject. Then, of course, there was a crisis of conscience and a weakness of will power, and we put some of these things back in, despite all of our rules. And then it seemed obvious that the bird and the pinball machine were at least as important as the people, so we made these and other exceptions. Gradually we eliminated other articles that seemed repetitive or stupid or badly written, and tried to make sure that nothing essential was left out, and generally tried to see to it that we were presenting a more or less balanced view.

As to editing within the articles, there were very few changes. Sometimes there were general introductory paragraphs, which I thought were very perceptive when I wrote them, but which seem so obvious now that we eliminated them. Sometimes we selected one half of a column and not the other, and naturally, we also tried to correct any errors we found. Titles were often changed when they seemed too newspaper-like, and when it seemed adviseable, I also inserted notes of explanation, all written in 1989. But nothing was rewritten, and the majority of the articles appear here exactly as they did in the Voice.

The details of my career at the Voice, acknowledgements of the people I worked with there, my decision in the late '70s to write more about non-Western music and less about minimalism, my gradual disillusion with New York, my shift to a life in Europe, and the gradual termination of my career as a music critic, are all summarized in the 1983 'Farewell Article' at the end of the book, so all that remains here is to express my appreciation to Paul and Helene Panhuysen and their super typesetter Marja Stienstra. It is rare for critics to see their articles collected in a book, and I am particularly pleased that this book is a rather large one. But as I said, the subject is also very large - in a minimal sort of way.

Tom Johnson
Paris, June 1989

Introduction

Introduction

Introduction

Introduction

Introduction

to the digital version

With this digital file, I am officially donating all these articles to the public domain. I have the right to do this, because the *Village Voice*, ever since its beginnings in the 1950s, has been truly a writer's newspaper, giving 100% of the control and royalties of its articles to the people who wrote them. The *Voice* was, and perhaps still is, the only large commercial newspaper anywhere

where this is the case, and of course, this is one of the things that has made this weekly newspaper a truly important "voice" in our world.

Actually, I rarely made any money when someone reprinted these articles. When people ran something without asking my permission, I sometimes got angry and sent them a bill, and once in a while I accepted reprint fees just because I knew everyone else was being paid., but journalism was never my real profession. Even when I was young, and depended on writing music criticism to pay the rent, I was primarily a composer, and I spent the majority of my time writing, publishing, and presenting my own compositions. Then, in the early '80s, when my own compositions were being played with enough regularity that I could make a living just from that, I stopped journalism altogether.

In order to make this gift to the public domain, I am indebted to the generosity of several others, who are also giving up their rights. Already in 1989 Paul Panhuysen had the insight to realize that this anthology could be an important first source for the history of new music. He helped me select the best material, obtained grants to issue it in book form as a break-even Appolohuis edition, and he has continued to support our efforts to make the book available in digital form. Matt Rogolsky spent a great amount of time rescuing the book from outdated Atari diskettes and putting it into a current format, just because he found the project worthwhile. Javier Ruiz made many additional improvements in the book's appearance, without ever asking to be paid. And finally, Phill Niblock perhaps deserves the most credit, for it was he who brought us all together and fathered the project from a distance all along.

We are not asking you to pay money to buy this digital version of the book, but we hope that you will continue the spirit of generosity. If you quote or republish something you find here, please mention where the text came from, and if you pass the file, or parts of it, along to others, make it clear that the material is strictly freeware and public domain.

Tom Johnson, Paris, February 2002

1980

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1980

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1980

Robert Rutman, Bruce Fier, and New Instruments

The European Avant-Garde Marches On

Frederic Rzewski's Thirteen Studies

Carles Santos Invents Passionate Minimalism

Harry Bertoia's Metallic Wonderland

A New York Gamelan

Aimless Major and Other Keys:
Pauline Oliveros, Phill Niblock,
Julius Eastman, Romulus Franceschini, Harold Budd

Giacinto Scelsi at Sunset

Sound Poetry for Many Reasons

Takehisa Kosugi, Pauline Oliveros, and Transcendental Experience

New Music America Takes Over a Town

The Quest-for-Freedom Theory

John Zorn and Other Improvisors

Getting Looped: Robert Moran and Others

Evan Parker's Free Sax

John Cage's Themes and Variations

March 3, 1980

Harry Bertoia's Metallic Wonderland

Harry Bertoia. Bally, Pennsylvania. It had been on my mind ever since I saw photographs of Bertoia's work in John Grayson's Sound Sculpture. But Bally, Pennsylvania isn't a place a New Yorker is likely to pass by, unless one just happens to be en route to Harrisburg or Lancaster, and I didn't manage to get there until early this month. I was a little late. Bertoia, I learned, had died almost a year and a half earlier.

But all was not lost. Bertoia's studio on Main Street is still maintained by his son Val, who continues to turn out some work in his father's style, while also working on his own projects. A hundred or so of Bertoia's creations still stand in the barn behind his 18th-century house just up the road a ways. And his wife and son were quite happy to show me the remarkable instruments and tell me a little about the man who made them. The evening ended with an informal concert in the barn, which convinced me that Bertoia had left behind him a remarkable musical legacy. This is ironic, because the artist never considered himself a musician, and he remains almost unknown in the music world.

Officially, Bertoia was a sculptor. Born in Italy, he first settled in Detroit where he studied, and later taught, at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. In the '50s he left academe and, for a time, earned a living designing chairs. Gradually he began to support himself as a metal sculptor. With the endorsement of Saarinen and other architects, he received numerous commissions to create work for buildings, such as the Standard Oil building in Chicago, and his work was shown frequently at the Staempfli in New York and in several galleries elsewhere. At some point along the line, however, he began to be less interested in how his work looked and more interested in how it sounded. He referred to all of his later pieces as 'sonambients,' and while they are attractive to look at, they are really about sound. Bertoia never became interested in giving concerts, never tried to write scores for his sonambients, and never attempted to organize an ensemble to play them. Yet he must have spent thousands of hours out there in his barn, just tinkering and listening, and he frequently presented demonstrations there for various school groups and other visitors who wanted to see and hear his work. Fortunately, he also spent quite a few hours making about 10 LPs, which he issued privately. The records are adequate reproductions of Bertoia's metallic sound vocabulary, and the big amorphous textures he liked to create, but they don't entirely capture the atmosphere of the live presentation I heard in the artist's barn that night.

Mrs. Bertoia began by lighting a few candles and turning out the lights, adding a

soft glow to the clean wooden space. Then she walked casually over to a row of the smaller sculptures, consisting of clusters of thin rods welded to a base. With light touches she set them in motion, and the flexible rods began rustling against one another, producing thousands of tiny metallic attacks. Curiously, through some phenomenon I can't explain, the objects produced soft low-pitched hums at the same time.

As Mrs. Bertoia moved around the barn, setting dozens of sonambients of all sizes into motion, a rich blend of gorgeous metallic rustling began to accumulate in our ears. In most cases the instruments produce not single pitches but rather a number of prominent and not-so-prominent pitches. One is always more aware of the texture and color of the sound than of any particular pitches or harmonies, but sometimes one notices rhythms as well. This is particularly true in cases where rather heavy cylinders are attached to the ends of the rods, making individual attacks more pronounced. With most of the sonambients, a stroke of the hand will set them in motion for a good 20 seconds, but in some cases the sound fades out quite curiously and sporadically. Just when it seems that the instrument has stopped sounding, the laws of nature are quite likely to bring two of the rods into contact with one another again.

This same principle is true of several pairs of metal pieces that hang from the ceiling of the barn. Perhaps these are not really instruments. They certainly do not represent the careful craftsmanship that can be seen in the clusters of neatly aligned rods. But they make beautiful music. When set into motion these pieces clang pleasantly against one another for a while until they begin swinging in phase and do not come into contact with one another any longer. But later, sometimes much later, they are likely to swing out of sync and produce a few more clangs.

About half way through the performance, which probably didn't last more than 10 minutes but which was more substantial than many two hour concerts I have heard, Mrs. Bertoia took up a soft beater and began rolling on a large circular gong at the back of the room. The gong did not impress me as much as the other instruments, but that was probably because I wanted to hear the rich overtones and long decay time I am accustomed to hearing in symphonic gongs and Asian gongs. Bertoia's gongs, which he hammered out in his own shop, have a deeper and more direct quality and are not intended to do what other gongs do.

As Mrs. Bertoia continued making her way around the barn, stimulating several more rows of sonambients, the sound became increasingly rich. I began to realize that the barn itself was vibrating, and that the cellar underneath was providing some of the resonance. It was as though the barn itself was the real instrument.

As the short concert was coming to an end, it took a long time for the hundred instruments to make their way back to silence. But as they did I found myself making a comment that I have seldom made anywhere. 'I have the feeling,' I remarked, 'that I am in a very sacred place.' Mrs. Bertoia did not seem surprised. 'Harry always said that the barn was his church,' she replied.

The artist is buried there, behind the barn, next to one of his favorite gongs.