

BEN JOHNSTON
Ponder Nothing
MUSIC AMICI

New World Records 80432

Ben Johnston: Search for a Language

Avant-garde music spent the 1960s stretched along Interstate 80. The focal points of that route were four college towns (not only the universities therein): Ann Arbor, Oberlin, Urbana, Iowa City. Milton Babbitt was in New York, Schoenberg had died in Los Angeles, and both coasts were in the grip of Schoenberg's 12-tone orthodoxy. But the Midwest was free of such dogmatic influences. There, academic freedom wasn't an oxymoron, and artistic experimentation exploded in every possible direction: multimedia, electronics, conceptual art, alternate turnings, the incorporation of pop music, jazz, and 12-tone systems into a heterogeneous language. Ben Johnston, Salvatore Martirano, Robert Ashley, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, Roger Reynolds, Edwin London, Ken Gaburo, all conspired to create an irreverent, anything-goes scene.

Radical without being avant-garde, Ben Johnston was central to that scene, and yet stood individualistically aside from its main currents. For 35 years--1951 to 1986--he taught at the University of Illinois, in touch with such avant-gardists as John Cage, La Monte Young, and Iannis Xenakis. (Johnston has since retired to North Carolina.) His music, though, is more communicative than that of most of his colleagues, and, perhaps, sounds less experimental than it is. The core of Johnston's output is his nine (so far) string quartets, the most important contribution to that repertoire since Schoenberg and Bartok. His best known work is his String Quartet No. 4, a series of variations on the hymn "Amazing Grace", a piece whose daunting complexity doesn't detract from its direct emotional appeal. With its roots in Southern hymnody and jazz, his music can be enjoyed by those who have no inkling of the theories behind it.

The one modern movement that can claim Johnston's lifelong allegiance is microtonality, the practice of using different pitches than those found on the modern piano. In 1950-51, Johnston went to California to work with microtonal pioneer and instrument-builder Harry Partch. Not skilled as a carpenter, he didn't follow Partch into instrument building, and it took him ten years to figure out how to start eliciting microtones from conventional instruments. Johnston uses potentially hundreds of pitches per octave in his music, not to experiment, nor to arrive at as-yet-unheard dissonances, but to return to a kind of musical beauty our culture turned away from centuries ago. Learning to speak a language of hundreds of pitches, though, was a slow process that occurred in many stages. The six pieces selected here provide, not just an overview of Johnston's career, but a series of seminal junctures, the turning points in his search for a language.

The Septet (1956-58) for woodwind quintet with cello and contrabass, marks the height of Johnston's early neoclassic period. Debts to Stravinsky--recurring structural figures, ostinatos that repeat pitches in unpredictable rhythms--are obvious. The more direct influence of Johnston's first important teacher, Darius Milhaud, is apparent in the bitonal textures. The first movement centers around reiterated octaves and a Hindemithian theme of perfect fourths in mirror counterpoint. The lyrical second movement is graced by a neo-Baroque flute melody, flowing despite its mercurial metric divisions; like all Johnston's best music, it looks complex and sounds simple. The Septet's unusual scoring was meant to leave the winds free for melodic functions by using the strings for the bass lines, as can be heard in the final movement's French horn-bassoon duets.

Partch had set 17 poems of the Chinese T'ang dynasty poet Li Po (701-762) to music, and in 1955 Johnston set three that Partch hadn't used, in translations by Ezra Pound, for soprano and two violins. "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" is a complaint by a court lady waiting for her lover. "The poem is especially prized," Pound noted, "because she utters no direct approach." Johnston sets this vignette in freely atonal counterpoint in 7/16 meter. The score of "Taking Leave of a Friend" is marked "In stillness and space," expressed by near-silent harmonics and sighing half-step motives. The dramatic pizzicati of "Lament of the Frontier Guard" bounce back and forth between the two violins, and anxious repeated notes portray the battle the guard imagines as he views the ruined village.

If the *Three Chinese Lyrics* represent motivic atonality, and the Septet neoclassicism, *Gambit* (1959) evinces the next step in Johnston's search: serialism. Of the six movements, Interlude 1, Prelude 2, and Interlude 2 use 12-tone rows. Choreographer Merce Cunningham commissioned the piece, asking Johnston to give him only a detailed rhythmic analysis in advance. Scored for 12 instruments, *Gambit* (Cunningham's title) blended ideas that were "in the air" in 1959, and ended up as one of the mixed-genre pieces common in the 1960s in the Midwest. Repeated brass figures recall neoclassicism; Prelude 1's steady-rhythm drum and piano patterns and long silences stem from John Cage's prepared piano music; Interlude 1's opening pointillism is a response to Anton Webern; the same movement's trap-set solo is jazz out of context; and Johnston originally included a chance element by letting the movements be played in any order. No wonder the piece confused Cunningham, who said that its rhythmic structure was too fast, changing and detailed to make good dance music!

Gambit precipitated the crucial decision of Johnston's career, his switch to extended "just intonation." In equal temperament, the tuning commonly used for the 12-pitch scale of European and American music, the 12 tones are tuned equidistantly within the octave, even though the resulting intervals aren't perfectly consonant. Just intonation is a return to pure intervals: the frequencies of the pitches C and G should exhibit a 3:2 ratio, C to E a 5:4, and so on. (In equal temperament the ratios are irrational approximations.) Johnston decided--as Partch did, and as have dozens of younger musicians since--that music has lost much of its ability to pleasure through mistuning, and that equal temperament has desensitized our ears to accept imperfection and monochromaticism. One of the impediments to just intonation is the difficulty of notating it, and Johnston's innovation notation, which uses pluses (+), minuses (-), sevens, and arrows, along with sharps and flats, is so elegant and unambiguous that other composers have adopted it.

For most composers, just intonation implies tonality, but Johnston is unique for his works that fuse pure tuning with the 12-tone system, including *Five Fragments* (1960). Fragments 1, 2, 3, and 5 modulate systematically from one 12-tone row to another and, here and in general, Johnston's early just intonation counterpoint moves carefully among consonant intervals. The piece's form is cumulative: Fragment 1 is for solo voice, 2 for voice and oboe, 3 for voice and cello, 4 for voice and bassoon, and 5 for voice and all three instruments. The text is five passages from Thoreau's *Walden*, and the voice's melodic line mirrors spoken inflection admirably. The way the cello's busy line thins out on the words "Simplify, simplify" is only one of the nice interpretive reflections on Thoreau's thoughts.

We jump to a much later period with the Trio for clarinet, violin, and cello (1982), a gem of Johnston's mature style, rhythmically engaging and harmonically subtle. It's almost too bad to reveal that the meter is 11/16 throughout; the rhythmic bounce is too supple and varied to suspect such regularity. Eleven also pervades the piece's structure, which divides into mostly alternating 5- and 6-measure

phrases. The piece switches off between two textures in an ABABAB form (the second B is very brief). In the B sections, the cello provides a meandering pizzicato bass over which the clarinet and violin play slower melodies. Phrases return, sometimes with altered continuations, or transposed to different pitch levels, or using an undertone scale rather than an overtone scale. As a result, and typical of Johnston's late work, the Trio's lithe counterpoint falls sweetly on the ear; the complexity is below the surface.

The most recent work is one of Johnston's simplest: *Ponder Nothing* (1989), a set of solo clarinet variations on the traditional French hymn "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." If the hymn gives voice to Johnston's Catholicism, the title, taken from the hymn's third line--"Ponder nothing earthly minded"--refers to his interest in the no-mind meditation of Zen. The piece is easy to follow: between the identical opening and closing statements of the theme, there are 13 variations, all in the key of E, and each six measures long. Microtonality is most evident in variations 5 and 11 through 13, which map the theme on to a scale that includes 7th, 11th, and 13th overtones and undertones. Otherwise, the tuning has a purity that the tune's anonymous medieval author would have understood.

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann is a composer, a new-music critic for the Village Voice, author of The Music of Conlon Nancarrow, and a former student of Ben Johnston.

Three Chinese Lyrics

(Rihaku - Pound)

The Jewel Stairs' Grievance

The jeweled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
An I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Taking Leave of a Friend

Blue mountains to the north of the walls,
White rive winding about them;
Here we must make separation
And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.
Mind like a floating wide cloud,
Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances
Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.
Our horses neigh to each other as we are departing.

Lament of the Frontier Guard

By the North Gate, the wind blows full of sand,
Lonely from the beginning of time until now!
Trees fall, the grass goes yellow with autumn,
I climb the towers and towers to watch out the barbarous land:
Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert.
There is no wall left to this village.
Bones white with a thousand frosts,
High heaps, covered with trees and grass;

Who brought this to pass?
Who has brought the flaming imperial anger?
Who has brought the army with drums and with kettle-drums?
Barbarous kings.
A gracious spring, turned to blood-ravenous autumn,
A turmoil of wars-men, spread over the middle kingdom,
Three hundred and sixty thousand,
And sorrow, sorrow like rain.
Sorrow to go, and sorrow, sorrow returning.
Desolate, desolate fields,
And no children of warfare upon them,
No longer the men for offense and defense.
Ah, how shall you know the dreary sorrow at the North Gate,
With Rihaku's name forgotten,
And we guardsmen fed to the tigers.

(Ezra Pound: *Personae*. Copyright 1926 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted, recorded by permission of New Directions.)

Five Fragments

(text from Thoreau's *Walden*)

Thank heaven, here is not all the world.
Every man is an isthmus or an inlet.
The universe is wider than our views.
Is not our own interior white upon the chart?
Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these.

But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither?
Herein are demanded eye and nerve.
That farthest western way that does not pause at Mississippi or Pacific but loads on direct,
a tangent to this sphere: summer and winter, day and night, sun down, moon down,
and at last earth down too.

The life in us is like the water in the river.
It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it and flood the parched uplands.
Even this may be the eventful year which will drown out all our muskrats.
It was not always dry land where we dwell.

We live like ants.
Life is a German confederacy, petty states forever fluctuating.
Even a German cannot tell you its boundary at any moment.
Simplify, simplify.
Let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand...
And keep your accounts on your thumbnail.

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.
I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect
how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains.

I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

What beautiful winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under woodenness
may at last come forth to perfect summer life?

Such is that morrow mere time can never make to dawn.

The light that puts out our eyes is darkness to us.

Only that day dawns to which we are awake.

There is more day to dawn.

The sun is but a morning star.

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Ci-Git-Satie. New Music Choral Ensemble; Kenneth Gaburo, conductor. Ars Nova/Ars Antiqua AN 1005.

Dirge. University of Illinois Percussion Ensemble; Jack McKenzie, conductor. Illinois Union Bookstore CRS 6.

Sonata for Microtonal Piano. Robert Miller, piano. New World 80203.

String Quartet No. 2. Composers Quartet. Nonesuch H 71224.

String Quartet No. 9. Stanford String Quartet. Laurel Records LR 847CD.

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Music Amici, the chamber ensemble founded in 1985 by Marti Sweet, is devoted to both new and traditional repertory for mixed instruments. Its members are active in leading orchestras and as studio musicians. Music Amici's debut disc, on the Angel/EMI label, is entitled *Sketches of Miles*, and is a tribute to Miles Davis. This recording is the ensemble's first for New World.

Marti Sweet, Artistic Director of Music Amici, has been playing the violin since the age of four. Her principal teachers were Alfred Krips and Oscar Shumsky. She has been Concertmaster of the American Philharmonic and the Spoleto Festival Orchestra and a member of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and the American Composers Orchestra, among many others.

Charles Yassky first met composer Ben Johnston at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. He has remained an ardent admirer ever since. Mr. Yassky is a producer, conductor and clarinetist. He spends much of his time making recordings heard in all mediums (CD, films, television) while maintaining an active career as a concert performer.

Dora Ohrenstein, soprano, was solo vocalist of the Philip Glass Ensemble for over ten years. She has her own touring production, *Urban Diva*, featuring works written for her by Anthony Davis, Scott Johnson, Ben Johnston, and others. In 1993 she formed Bermuda Triangle with pianist Kathleen Supove and double bassist Robert Black. A CD of *Urban Diva* will be released on CRI's Emergency Music series. She can also be heard on the CBS Masterworks, Nonesuch, Dossier, and Opus One labels.

Stephen Kalm, baritone, is a dedicated performer of contemporary music. He has performed with the Houston Grand Opera, Minnesota Opera, Connecticut Opera, Milwaukee Symphony and the Filarmonica de Bogota. He can be heard on the ECM recording of Meredith Monk's *Atlas*.

Ponder Nothing **Chamber Music of Ben Johnston**

Music Amici

Septet

- 1- Movement 1 (4:57)
- 2- Movement 2 (4:40)
- 3- Movement 3 (3:29)

Three Chinese Lyrics

- 4- The Jewel Stairs' Grievance (1:29)
- 5- Taking Leave of a Friend (3:04)
- 6- Lament of the Frontier Guard (4:17)

Gambit

- 7- Prelude 1 (0:59)
- 8- Interlude 1 (2:07)
- 9- Postlude 1 (4:03)
- 10- Prelude 2 (2:59)
- 11- Interlude 2 (1:24)
- 12- Postlude 2 (5:26)

Five Fragments

- 13- Interior (1:30)
- 14- The Life In Us (1:35)
- 15- Simplify (1:10)
- 16- Time (1:15)
- 17- More Day (1:49)
- 18- Trio (4:02)
- 19- Ponder Nothing (10:12)

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