

## Music We'd Like to Hear

15 July 2009

### A portrait of Tom Johnson

**Tom Johnson    Formulas for String Quartet (1994)**

Angharad Davies, Jennifer Allum (violins), Richard Jones (viola), Becky Dixon ('cello)

**John Lely        The Parsons Code for Melodic Contours (2008)**

Jennifer Allum, Tom Johnson, Richard Jones, John Lely, Tim Parkinson, Michael Parsons

**Tom Johnson    Music and Questions (1988)**

Tom Johnson (speaking and percussion)

**Tom Johnson    Narayana's Cows (1989)**

Tom Johnson (speaking), Richard Jones (viola), John Lely (keyboard),  
Tim Parkinson (keyboard) and Michael Parsons (wood block)

Tom Johnson, born in Colorado in 1939, received B.A. and M.Mus. degrees from Yale University, and studied composition privately with Morton Feldman. After 15 years in New York, he moved to Paris, where he has lived since 1983. He is considered a minimalist, since he works with simple forms, limited scales, and generally reduced materials, but he proceeds in a more logical way than most minimalists, often using formulas, permutations, and predictable sequences.

Johnson is well known for his operas: *The Four Note Opera* (1972) continues to be presented in many countries. *Riemannoper* has been staged more than 20 times in German-speaking countries since its premier in Bremen in 1988. Often played non-operatic works include *Bedtime Stories*, *Rational Melodies*, *Music and Questions*, *Counting Duets*, *Tango*, *Narayana's Cows*, and *Failing*: a very difficult piece for solo string bass.

His largest composition, the *Bonhoeffer Oratorium*, a two-hour work in German for orchestra, chorus, and soloists, with text by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was premiered in Maastricht in 1996, and has since been presented in Berlin and New York.

Johnson has also written numerous radio pieces, such as *J'entends un chœur* (commissioned by Radio France for the Prix Italia, 1993), *Music and Questions* (also available on an Australian Broadcasting Company CD) and *Die Melodiemaschinen*, premiered by WDR Radio in Cologne in January 1996. The most recent radio piece is *A Time to Listen*, premiered by the Irish national radio in 2004.

The principal recordings currently available on CD are the *Musique pour 88* (1988) (XI), *An Hour for Piano* (1971) (Lovely Music), *The Chord Catalogue* (1986) (XI), *Organ and Silence* (2000) (Ants), and *Kientzy Plays Johnson* (2004) (Pogus).

*The Voice of New Music*, a collection of articles written 1971-1982 for the *Village Voice*, published by Apollonhous in 1989, is now in the public domain and can be downloaded at [www.tom.johnson.org](http://www.tom.johnson.org). *Self-Similar Melodies*, a theoretical book in English, was published by Editions 75 in 1996.

Recent projects include *Tilework*, a series of 14 pieces for solo instruments, published by Editions 75 in 2003, *Same or Different*, a piece commissioned by the Dutch radio in 2004, and the *Combinations for String Quartet*, premiered in Berlin on the MärzMusik festival in 2004. As performer he frequently plays his *Galileo*, a 45-minute piece written for a self-invented percussion instrument.

Johnson received the French national prize in the victoires de la musique in 2001 for *Kientzy Loops*.

[www.editions75.com](http://www.editions75.com)