

recurrence of the twelve tones varies. Thus, the rhythmic surfaces of the two works are in a complementary relationship: In "Playing for Time," the details fluctuate but the chromatic tones recur regularly; in "About Time," the details form a regular pulse (with occasional changes of tempo) while the larger patterns of completion fluctuate.

*Minute Waltz* (or)  $\frac{3}{4} \pm \frac{1}{8}$  is a charming little work, which, if played at the specified tempo, lasts exactly one minute. The second part of the title refers to the constantly fluctuating time signatures. Although nominally a waltz, this piece constantly trips up the listener by adding a little bit to some measures and taking away a little bit from others. The immediate surface appeal of the piece is enhanced by the prominent use of major and minor triads as segments of the tone-row, with the result that familiar materials are placed in a fresh context. Despite its festive quality, the work maintains a structural integrity, embodied in the richness of its surface detail.

—Andrew Mead

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# James Tenney

## THREE INDIGENOUS SONGS



JAMES TENNEY was born in Silver City, New Mexico in 1934 and currently lives in Toronto, where he is Professor of Music at York University. He has long been one of America's most influential avant-garde composers, theorists, and performers, although until recently his works have been known mostly to other composers and have not had a wide general audience. He has written several important theoretical works, including

*Meta-Hodos: A Phenomenology of Twentieth Century Music* and *An Approach to the Study of Form* (1961, lamentably out of print), "John Cage and the Theory of Harmony" (Soundings 13, 1984, special James Tenney issue). His compositions include more than fifty solo, chamber, orchestral, and electronic works, and he has been important as a performer in reviving and premiering the works of Ives, Ruggles, Cage, Feldman, Varèse, and many others. *Three Indigenous Songs* is scored for two piccolos, alto flute, bassoon or euphonium, and three percussionists. It was premiered in 1979 at the Ontario Arts Council New Music Concerts in Toronto, with James Tenney conducting. The work received its second and only other performance to date at the California Institute of the Arts New Music Festival in 1982 under the direction of Stephen Mosko.

THE THREE INDIGENOUS SONGS are rather remarkable acoustical/musical experiments in which James Tenney attempts to "simulate" the human voice through natural instrument sounds. The work as a whole is a provocative and beautiful comment on the nature of

sound generation, but also on the nature and meaning of approximation.

The songs are "settings" of three characteristically American texts/musics: "No More Good Water," a slow blues with harmonica accompaniment recorded by Jaybird Coleman of Alabama in the late twenties; Walt Whitman's "Kosmos;" and "Hey When I Sing These Four Songs Hey Look What Happens," a setting of Jerome Rothenberg's translation of an Iroquois chant. In each, Tenney attempts to approximate the acoustics of the human voice by assigning the pitches of the instruments to the acoustic components of speech. These are transcriptions in the strictest sense, and show a wonderfully disarming lack of "compositional" technique, other than the audacious decision to actually do it!

In the first song, the blues, the flutes imitate the antiphonal harmonica interludes Coleman plays between sung lines. In the second song, "Kosmos," Tenney recorded himself reading the Whitman poem, then transcribed his own Southwestern accent and speech rhythms. In the third song, "Hey When I Sing . . .," the rhythm of Tenney's 1971 SATB setting of the Native American song is used, and the instrumental "interludes" correspond to the soprano vocalists in the original.

Each instrument in Tenney's *Songs* was chosen because of its relatively simple spectrum (very little harmonic content), so that each might be assigned to a particular *formant* region of the voice's timbre. The percussion instruments are assigned to the fricatives, plosives, and other consonants, mostly composed of noise or a complex inharmonic spectra. The words are written out in the International Phonetic Alphabet method. What occurs is not so much an accurate imitation of the voice, but a composition that is solely determined by the microstructure of speech acoustics.

Tenney's relationship to "indigenous" materials is a complex one, and he has stated it rather provocatively in an interview with Canadian composer and musicologist Gayle Young:

GY: Do you think your style has been influenced by American folk music?

JT: No, not an influence so much as a conscious *use*, a conscious connecting up with, but not an influence in the sense of absorbing aspects of style, aesthetic, or intention, so that, after absorbing it, one's own music comes out determined by those characteristics.

—Only Paper Today (now called *Musicworks*), Toronto, June 1978

What Tenney is after in these songs, aside from the musical/cultural interest (note that there is one black, one white, one Native American song), is the creation of a perceptual domain in which we can in some sense participate, and in another sense be relieved of the somewhat scientific nature of this musical experiment. I don't think Tenney is particularly interested in *succeeding* at voice synthesis by conventional instruments—there are certainly simpler ways to go about that—but rather in a kind of sound gestalt that comes simultaneously from the scientific and artistic. To Tenney, the artistic experience is both intellectual and emotional, and he is interested in blurring the boundaries in such ingenious ways that we might perhaps cease to simplify those distinctions with such facility! The voice, with its manifold acoustic and semantic complexities, is to him as beautiful as the Whitman poem and the Iroquois song, and in the *Three Indigenous Songs* he expresses that embracing appreciation.

—Larry Polansky

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San Francisco Symphony, November 1984

*In the Songs, Tenney attempts to "simulate" the human voice through natural instrument sounds. The work is a provocative and beautiful comment on the nature of technology, artistic experiment, and the zeal for electronic sound generation—but also on the nature and meaning of approximation.*