

# A Review of *The Music of Ben Johnston* by Heidi Von Gunden

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**T**he work of Ben Johnston, one of the United States' most interesting composers, is not as well known as it should be. Heidi Von Gunden's *The Music of Ben Johnston* is an excellent, well-researched, clearly written history and description of Johnston's life and music [1]. It fills a gap in our knowledge of this important composer. For the past 25 years Johnston has been, along with Lou Harrison and James Tenney, a leader in the field of extended just intonation, significantly expanding on the ground-breaking work of the composer and theorist Harry Partch (who was Johnston's teacher and friend) [2]. Johnston's music combines a strong and forward-looking theoretical foundation with a personal style that is emotional, spiritual and highly musical.

Johnston is an eclectic composer. Von Gunden's book is an excellent description of his work in many genres: theater and dance music, serialism, electronic music, extended verbal techniques and even a series of pieces for the Swingle Singers, a unique choral group that uses nonverbal vocal sounds in arrangements of classical and jazz music. Johnston has also had a major musical impact through his teaching. For the past 35 years he has been on the composition faculty at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, an important center for new music. While there, he has influenced (and, to his credit, been influenced by) a large number of young and experimental composers and performers, as well as fellow faculty members Herbert Brün, Kenneth Gaburo, Salvatore Martirano, Lejaren Hiller and John Cage. Johnston's open mind and essentially curious nature have allowed him to take full advantage of the richness of influences and experiences available at Illinois. His music attests to the fertility of that environment.

Johnston is a seeker, of both musical and spiritual knowledge. As Von Gunden's book shows, his early music (before about 1960) seems to have been adversely affected by this: many paths are tried, but few resonate with Johnston's deep musical genius. This is not to say that this music is uninteresting! But in the early 1960s, Johnston's music seemed to coalesce into a remarkably individual style of great clarity and vision. This is most noticeable in the works *Knocking Piece* (1962; for two percussionists and a grand piano), *Duo for Flute and String Bass* (1963) and the monumental *Sonata for Microtonal Piano / Grindlemusic* (1962). With these works, Johnston permanently left behind a long period of 'being influenced' and began to integrate his many interests into a secure, individual and mature style.

Heidi Von Gunden is well equipped to write this book, and it is a thorough and encyclopedic study. She is a col-

league of Johnston's, a member of the music theory faculty at the University of Illinois. In addition, she has written a similar work on the music of the American experimental composer Pauline Oliveros [3] and is currently working on a book about the music of Lou Harrison.

Von Gunden's work on Oliveros benefited, I think, from her point of view as a female scholar, emphasizing the importance of Oliveros's work to women composers and musicians in the United States. Johnston and Harrison, while not women composers, are both regarded as mavericks in American music (though neither one cultivates this position). As in the Oliveros work, Von Gunden's sympathetic approach is both welcome and appropriate. She does not dismiss, for example, much of Johnston's early formative work as uninteresting, but rather searches for the most fertile aspects, which would find more complete realizations in later works.

The first four chapters of this book ("Beginnings", "The Early Years", "The University of Illinois" and "Experiments with Serialism") trace Johnston's life and the genesis of his work through the early 1960s. Johnston's early work encompassed, at various times, theater music (most notably with the director Wilford Leach), dance, serialism and jazz-influenced compositions. The remaining five chapters deal with Johnston's more recent pieces in extended just intonation and with his theoretical research in that area.

In the early chapters, Von Gunden discusses Johnston's interest in and eventual disillusionment with the teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff (1872–1949), a philosopher and spiritualist who was strongly influenced by 'Eastern' philosophies. Johnston has always been a deeply spiritual thinker and composer, and since 1970 his Roman Catholic faith has been an important aspect of his music, as in the *4th String Quartet* ("Amazing Grace"). Although Von Gunden's book describes the general outline of Johnston's lifelong spiritual search, unfortunately she does not go into it in depth. The few instances where she does discuss these matters are highly revealing about Johnston as a composer. In his early work, Johnston's spiritual side can be seen in fairly conventional musical applications of the Gurdjieff enneagram (a geometric figure representing secret knowledge [4]), such as

## ABSTRACT

The author finds Von Gunden's research on this influential composer to be unusually thorough, citing the wealth of detail the book contains on the factors that have influenced Johnston's work. The book describes both spiritual influences and the effects of Johnston's exposure to other experimental composers. The author goes on to praise Von Gunden's open-minded attitude towards Johnston's early compositions. While acknowledging the difficulty of writing about a colleague, he suggests that Von Gunden's discussion of certain major works could have provided a more extensive evaluation of their importance.

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Received 7 November 1988.

the *String Quartet #2* (1964). The continued importance of his spiritual search in his more recent works is suggested by this significant quotation, dating from 1976: "I am trying very hard to let every work be a religious intention, not simply an 'expression' of my ego. It means taking on quite a lot (and not writing large numbers of works)" [5].

Discussing these influences, of course, is difficult and requires sensitivity. But I believe they are more important in Johnston's music than Von Gunden's book leads one to believe. It might have been useful to include more descriptions from Johnston himself (who is so articulate about his own music) regarding these motivations.

Many of the personal contacts Johnston made in his youth came to be of lasting importance in the development of his musical ideas. Obviously, his 'apprenticeship' and friendship with Partch led to his dominant interest in extended just intonation. But Von Gunden's book clearly shows that his friendship with Cage, and his associations with experimental composers like Gaburo and Martirano at Illinois, helped to enhance Johnston's individualism and experimental tendencies, very much in the American tradition of Cage, Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles and Partch. In addition, Von Gunden appropriately documents the many formative associations Johnston has had with the virtuoso performers of contemporary music who have been at the University of Illinois over the years. The book demonstrates how the abilities and open-mindedness of these players have contributed to Johnston's adventurous and difficult, but somehow always idiomatic, instrumental and vocal writing. As an orchestrator, Johnston has always possessed a remarkable ability to write music that is a logical 'next step' in the evolution of particular instrumental techniques.

Von Gunden correctly recognizes the importance of the *Sonata for Microtonal Piano / Grindlemusic* in Johnston's development. In this piece Johnston was able to integrate his interest in complex principles of serial organization with his more recent research in extended just intonation (in particular, his theoretical ideas regarding 'scalar order'). In addition, the *Sonata* is highly emotional and, moreover, emotionally symbolic, qualities that have been characteristic of his music ever since.

Von Gunden underrates the important of *Knocking Piece*, from the same period, or at least is reluctant to comment on it. It is one of Johnston's best-known works, especially to other performers and composers. *Knocking Piece* is also a kind of landmark in the area of what might be called 'process pieces', even though its rhythmic virtuosity and complexity distinguish it from other pieces from the 1960s under the same rubric (such as the early works of Philip Corner, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Richard Maxfield and others). Even though the book dedicates several pages to the piece, describing its structure and the 'accident' of its composition (it is basically a reorchestration of an earlier and less successful work), Von Gunden seems reluctant to come to conclusions about its impact on the development of Johnston's work and on American music in general. To me, it is clear that *Knocking Piece* (and to a lesser extent the *Duo for Flute and String Bass*) serves as a turning point, and possibly as a kind of personal revelation, for Johnston as a composer. In these works, he achieved for the first time the clarity, directness of communication and impact of vision that had been absent from his music until that point.

This is just one example of an area in which Von Gunden's book could have been less descriptive and more analytical. The author, for all her meticulous analyses and careful research, is strangely neutral about the music itself, most often adopting a detached, journalistic tone:

*Knocking Piece* is an intense study of concentration. Some of the most difficult parts are unison tempi where any flaw is apparent. It is obvious to the audience that the performers must be constantly aware of what they are doing, and any hesitation in one part will immediately affect the outcome of the piece [6].

Yet this is one of the most interesting and visionary aspects of the piece. At the time it was written, it was considered 'impossible' (as Von Gunden documents). Yet Johnston knew this and constructed the work accordingly, so that the very difficulty became incorporated as a fundamental aspect of the work's emotional, musical and, in a sense, phenomenological essence. He was not simply writing another difficult work—he was harnessing what he considered to be a kind of natural process (temporal proportionality) and putting it into a form that fellow

musicians could use to alter and evolve their own notions of sound and the organization of sound.

I had a similar reaction to Von Gunden's analysis of the classic *Duo for Flute and String Bass*. While she describes the serial and programmatic aspects of this work, along with the less important investigations of experimental intonation, she does not write a word about the work's importance. From Von Gunden's description, we might be reading about any quasi-serial work from any number of composers with diverse aesthetics and personalities. But the *Duo* is pure Johnston, and indeed one of the works that to me give most eloquent evidence of his unique sense of musical economy, clarity of thought, orchestrational sophistication and extremely subtle counterpoint. The challenge of writing for these two registrally extreme instruments motivates, in the second movement ("Interim"), some of the most extraordinary counterpoint I know of, beautifully blurring the sonic distinctions between the lines.

*The Music of Ben Johnston* is valuable as a 'blow-by-blow' description of the composer's work. The conventional serial and just intonational harmonic analyses (largely taken from the composer's own writings and analyses) are useful and accurate, and the performance histories and 'facts' of Johnston's life are also complete. Yet one looks for a more elucidating view of what makes him such a remarkable composer. Why are *Knocking Piece*, the *4th Quartet* and so many of Johnston's other works exciting, moving and intellectually challenging? What are the 'integrities' or holistic qualities of Johnston's music that transcend the sum of the analytical and historical parts? Perhaps Von Gunden is attempting to supply sufficient evidence for us to answer these questions for ourselves. However, I find it odd that a book that so obviously results from a great deal of dedication and hard work never really demonstrates why the author herself was interested enough to write it.

As such, the great virtues of this work are at times its worst enemies. Von Gunden's research is extraordinary, and her writing is clear, unbiased, rich in information and highly elucidating about the structure of the music. It is easy to understand the problems of writing about a living composer, especially one who is extremely active and may be in his most

interesting period (Johnston's recent settings of verses from Shakespeare for baritone and chamber ensemble are among his most beautiful and intonationally accomplished works).

Here I can personally sympathize with Von Gunden. In writing a similar sort of book on the music of James Tenney (a close friend of Johnston's, and a composer who is interested in similar theoretical problems of experimental intonation) [7], I jokingly requested that he refrain from writing any new music until I had finished the book. In writing about a colleague, there are problems of sensitivity and discretion. An author must be cautious of seeming to be overly enamored of the music of the composer he or she is describing. However, the opposite approach, leaning towards a noncritical and descriptive mode, can lead to misleading emphases: there *are* works that are more interesting and important than others. The writer must form some opinions. The justifi-

cation of those opinions will lead to insights about the music that will not arise from more neutral descriptions.

An important and positive aspect of Von Gunden's book is that it lays the necessary groundwork for more detailed analyses of Johnston's other music (such as Randall Shinn's study of the *4th Quartet* [8]). The later quartets, *Knocking Piece* and several other works all merit these kinds of study, and this book will serve as an important resource for future scholars [9].

#### References and Notes

1. Heidi Von Gunden, *The Music of Ben Johnston*, with Foreword by John Cage (Metuchen, NJ, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1986).
2. Just intonation is a system of tuning that uses simple integer ratios (e.g. 3:2, 5:4, 9:8) to derive pitches and intervals. The term 'extended just intonation' denotes a system in which the rational numbers are not always the relatively simple ones most often employed in historical just intonations (like the examples above); extended just intonation uses more complex fractions, which often involve relationships of prime factors higher than 5 (a commonly given 'prime limit' for many historical intonational systems). For example, the 'interval' 65:49 involves the prime factors 5, 13

and 7 and is an example of a 'just ratio' that is nonetheless the result of a more complex theoretical computation.

3. Heidi Von Gunden, *The Music of Pauline Oliveros* (Metuchen, NJ, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1983). Both Von Gunden and Scarecrow Press must be congratulated on their willingness to document the work of experimental composers outside of the academic music mainstream.
4. "An enneagram is a Sufi figure which is a circle containing a triangle and a hexagon that twists back upon itself. The symbol dates at least to the fourteenth century or possibly even to the time of the discovery of the number seven. According to Gurdjieff, who used the enneagram to explain how events conform to cosmic laws, the enneagram was a symbol of secret knowledge, and his followers credit him [with] introducing the enneagram to the West" (Von Gunden [1] p. 79).
5. Von Gunden [1] p. 133.
6. Von Gunden [1] p. 70.
7. Larry Polansky, *The Early Works of James Tenney*, in *Soundings 13* (Santa Fe, NM: Soundings Press, 1983).
8. Randall Shinn, "Ben Johnston's Fourth Quartet", *Perspectives of New Music* (Spring-Summer 1977) pp. 145-174.
9. Finally I will invoke my reviewer's privilege and note that the author has misspelled my name (Von Gunden [1] p. 73).