

# Foreword by the Editors

This is not the appropriate occasion to expend a great many words about Tom Johnson: for it is *his* word that is to be found in this book, and which is its intent and purpose. Likewise, it occurs on more than one occasion that Tom Johnson does not speak of himself, but rather of others. He first made a name for himself as an exacting and very fair chronicler of New York's music scene of the nineteen seventies and early eighties. In *The Village Voice*, co-founded by Norman Mailer, one was well-informed of all the latest developments of the Downtown Avant-Garde and witnessed minimal music's spectacular rise, for over a decade thanks to Johnson's voice.

Yet Johnson is, first and foremost, a composer. As he himself will tell it, he pursued a regular course of study at University, took private lessons with Morton Feldman, and with his work on the side as dance accompanist and music critic followed his own artistic path with great stamina. He was influenced, perhaps to a greater degree *inspired* by the ideas of his New York colleagues, above all from their courage, will to persevere, and individuality. Even though Tom Johnson has been the real Tom Johnson early on, it took him quite a while before he found his true passion: music that consciously seeks that against which all composers urgently warn: predictability. Nobody would deny that Schoenberg's string quartets or Brahms' symphonies are logical and comprehensible works. Yet logic, of the sort that began to interest Tom Johnson more and more, was one that should reveal itself at the first contact with a new piece—a logic in which it not only makes sense that B follows A, but one in which no other outcome is possible.

Such a logic that stubbornly sets an ongoing process into motion, because it is logical to do so, is somewhat of an outlier in music history. It finds its ancestral home among mathematics in its many varieties, into which Johnson immersed himself deeper and deeper over the years. In the present volume we find frequent and extensive discussions of mathematics, of set theory, combinatorics, geometry, of automata, and Pascal's triangles. Some readers may feel themselves in such matters as if smoke were coming out of their ears (as was certainly the case with the editors), others will gladly accept the challenge to refresh nearly forgotten schooling, and still others will simply nod and say: *yes, exactly so*.

But nevermind where Tom Johnson of his own curiosity might be driven to wander: he knows for himself that whatever he discovers is not there for his sake. "I want to find the music, not to compose it"; this title of one of his essays is his leitmotif. This is no aesthetic statement, but much more an expression of the convictions that affected the whole of his existence.

The majority of the texts in this book were first published elsewhere over a period of more than four decades. But now is the time to present them together in a single bilingual volume—as is the tradition of *Edition MusikTexte*—so that the quality of our



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translation may always be checked against the original. Conscious of this imperative, we have also newly revised all existing translations.

Reinhard Oehlschlägel had played a significant role in the genesis of this book that goes back fifteen years. Tom Johnson's collaboration with the publisher, however, dates back even further than this. Readers of the *MusikTexte* will surely recall Johnson's beloved "Puzzle Pages."

"A hundred pages—if bilingual, then two hundred—we should have no trouble with that," Johnson said at the time regarding the book's length. How wrong he was! Deliberations went back and forth for a long while, other projects elbowed their way into the foreground from all sides, there were "ups and downs," and again and again different conceptions of how or what this book should be, what it should contain and to what ends it should serve.

Johnson had particular reservations about whether articles from *The Village Voice* should appear in this collection of his writings. An extensive selection of them was already released in 1989 by Apollo Huis in the Netherlands under the title *The Voice of New Music*, and that should be enough. This speaks of his wish, in the present day, to be seen as a composer rather than a critic.

At some point we reached an agreement with Johnson, that he should give us freedom in the selection of his texts. Today the temporal distance from his journalistic work is sufficient to allow a certain objectivity. It is generally acknowledged now that Tom

Johnson is a composer, and this composer once earned his living as a music critic. Out of the collected articles, long out of print, we have selected a few choice examples that are especially historically meaningful as well as typical of Johnson's methodology and understanding of himself as a reviewer. Of the already mentioned "Puzzle Pages," we have selected four and publish them here in facsimile for the first time.

The reader will likely come across many other items in this collection for the first time, as the original places of publication for many of them are widely dispersed. After a comprehensive interview quite essential for understanding his creative output, we have divided the texts into three main groups. The first section, "Writing Music," contains essays on his own composing, his own sense of self, and the theoretical foundations of his own actions. The second section, "Writing about Music," covers general thoughts on music, its theory, history, and spirituality, as well as portraits of colleagues and their work, recollections, and appraisals. The essays on "Minimalism in Music" differ in their English and German versions: on the English side are two texts from 2009 and 2011, on the German more-recent versions of these from 2014, which Johnson had so far only produced in French. The third group contains notes, commentaries, and introductions to his own works from Johnson's scores, concert programs, and booklets. The texts in all three groups follow the chronology of their original creation. The demands these articles place on the reader are accordingly different: the text on NETWORKS represents, for example, a veritable introduction to the structure of Block Designs, as they are important in combinatorial mathematics.

Readers of this book may find it somewhat unusual that numbers, in the case of such a composer as Tom Johnson, who has such a love of them, are largely written out. We follow here *MusikTexte's* editorial tradition, which is oriented—as in the genre of *belles-lettres*—more towards spoken language than that of the sciences. In this sense, our book should likewise not be taken as some dry assemblage of essays, but ought to reflect the many facets of the work and personality of a composer who is, in his manner, one of the most original and varied.

Our thanks go to Monika Lichtenfeld for translating with us, Michael Zwenzner for the critical proofreading of the complete work, N. Andrew Walsh for the translation of our foreword into English, and (last but not least) the composer himself for providing us with his beautiful texts and scores.