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Reconstructing *November*

Around 1992, La Monte Young gave me a cassette tape copy of a piano piece by Dennis Johnson, a friend of his from his UCLA days. The piano piece was titled *November*; the annotation on the tape indicated a composition date of 1959, and a performance date of 1962. By reputation, the piece is supposed to have been six hours long, very slow and somewhat improvisatory, and Young has consistently credited the piece with having been the inspiration and predecessor to his *Well-Tuned Piano*, on which he began working in 1964. Unfortunately, the surviving tape of *November* contains only just over 112 minutes of music before it cuts off abruptly. Johnson remembers the tape having been made in the home of Terry Jennings, on his mother's piano. The tape is interrupted by a few caesuras, as though someone was clicking the microphone on and off. Voices murmur in the background. Occasionally a far-off dog barks.

La Monte has said that he met Johnson in 1957 at UCLA; walking through the music building, he heard someone practicing Webern's Variations for piano, opened the door, and there was Dennis Johnson.¹ Johnson was born in late 1938, so he was presumably nineteen at this time and La Monte was twenty-two. In Young's "Lecture 1960," first given in that year at Ann Halprin's dance workshop and later published in the *Tulane Drama Review*, Johnson is described as having performed a piece called *Din*, in which at least forty performers placed among the audience in a darkened hall made various noises by clapping, screaming, shuffling feet, and so on.² Asked after the concert by a critic if the

Composer and author Kyle Gann's most recent book is *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press, 2010). From 1986 to 2005 he was new music critic for the *Village Voice* and since 1997 has taught music theory and history at Bard College.

group was “part of Zen,” Johnson replied, “No, but Zen is part of us.” Johnson is also known for a work titled *The Second Machine*, based on only four pitches taken from Young’s *Four Dreams of China*. Another known work is a jazz piece written in chord changes called the *109-Bar Tune*.

At one of the Berkeley concerts, Johnson conducted Cage’s *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for twelve radios (a feat I also duplicated in college). Claiming that he had created a piece that was completely indeterminate and outside the composer, Johnson once handed La Monte a piece of paper on which he had written the word “LISTEN.” Johnson was also apparently the person who told La Monte about Cage’s 4’33”, though according to Young this happened after 1962.³ Besides playing the piano, Johnson sang and played the hichiriki, a Japanese double-reed instrument used in Gagaku. Johnson was supposed to accompany Young to Darmstadt in 1959, but caught pneumonia and had to stay in New York with electronic minimalist composer Richard Maxfield. Later, Johnson became a mathematician and did no more public work in music after around 1962.

The 1963 book *An Anthology* by Young and Jackson Mac Low contains a humorous handwritten letter from a contributor identified merely as Dennis. This is, of course, Dennis Johnson, who clearly possessed a kind of faux-adolescent sense of humor. Though he doesn’t give his full name here, the handwriting is identical to that on the score of *November*, and in “Lecture 1960” Young quotes a joke from this letter, attributing it to his friend Dennis Johnson.⁴ Once Young was detailing for me all the idiosyncrasies of his friends in the early minimalist movement, and I finally asked, “La Monte, are you telling me that of all the people in that scene, you were the *normal* one?” Young replied, “I guess I was.”

In 2007 (thanks to composer Dan Wolf, who provided an address), I was able to contact Dennis Johnson, who sent me a copy of his slightly garbled and at places self-contradictory score from which the pianist improvises *November*. From analysis and comparison of the score and the partial recording, I have prepared a performance version of the work, which Sarah Cahill and I (alternating each hour at the keyboard) premiered in Kansas City on September 6, 2009.

The cassette tape is problematic in many ways. The first side contains 65 minutes of music and the second 47, though these may have been elongated by slower playback, since the tape is very old and doesn’t seem to play smoothly. Thirteen minutes into side A there is a 52-second gap, and when the music resumes, it seems to jump back into the opening material; however, the logic of that portion of the score indicates the possibility of returning to the opening motif. There are a couple of other momentary blips later on side A, though the music seems to continue smoothly at these points. Side B appears to pick up where side A leaves

off. The sound quality is poor, and the pitch often wavery, meaning that I often had to pitch-shift different sections by varying amounts to match up the chords I heard with those in the score.

Meanwhile, the score consists of two pages of “motifs,” numbered often out of order, with many cross-outs, alternative possibilities, and self-questionings by the composer, plus three further pages on which Johnson tried, abortively, to analyze his improvisation and arrive at a more exact notation. Johnson sent along a note with the following description:

Here is the complete “score,” if that is the correct term. It consists of “motifs” plus rules of which motifs can follow each given motif—at least that is what it should be, but I’m afraid that it isn’t made entirely clear. Items 1–15 were written around 1970–1971. Pages A + B are, I think, an attempt to make the transitions more explicit—or possibly to write down the transitions as they occur in the recording, but it was never finished, so the recording must stand as the primary ~~definition~~ example of the piece. The piece was not meant to be entirely fixed, but somewhat improvisatory, with the given transitions as the rules for the improvisation. No rules were implied about the times spent on any of the motifs, nor on the number of recurrences/recycles of any motif—they do recur in the tape.⁵

This is an enigmatic note, saying that the score was begun around 1970–71. As part of my research I had a nice conversation with Johnson on the phone, but his health is failing. Though he is only seventy-one, he warned me that his short-term memory is very bad and that he would probably repeat his questions, which he did. He confirmed, though, that the score he sent me was made after the fact, in an attempt to set down what he had performed several years earlier. Whether he was listening to the tape as he did this can’t be ascertained, though it seems plausible, because a couple of the transitions match the tape pretty exactly. By implication, though, motifs 16 through 18 were written *after* 1971 and may represent new material not played in 1962. One passage in the score is dated “Dec. 1988.” Perhaps Johnson continued adding to the piece this late. Much information is missing, and speculation can only take us so far.

In many places the relationship between score and recording is quite clear; elsewhere, notes and chords seem to have been changed, transitions are filled out in performance in a way not evident on paper, and of course the tape clarifies only 112 minutes of what is evidently a much longer work. From the score and recording, then, I have derived the following evidentiary documents toward a performance:

1. A detailed transcription (ex. 1) of the tape with all notes placed rhythmically to the nearest half-second (a sufficiently representa-

Example 1. Initial transcription metered at $\text{♩} = 60$

The image displays four systems of musical notation for piano. The first system begins at measure 175 and concludes at 30:00. The second system starts at measure 181 and ends at 31:00. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The notation includes complex chordal structures with slurs, ties, and various rhythmic values, reflecting a transcription of a piece in 5/4 time.

tive quantification for a piece this slow), in measures of 5/4 meter with the eighth-note representing one second, so that each measure is ten seconds, and each line one minute. Even though no pulse runs through the work and rhythms need not be notated, notes are patently grouped into phrases, and at this first stage it was important to preserve exact timings to avoid falsifying the phrasing profile of the original performance.

2. A cleaned-up version of Johnson's manuscript score, placing the motifs in numerical order, omitting crossed-out notes, and attempting to preserve both note variants and rules for the succession of motifs.
3. A performance score (ex. 2) involving both transcription and improvisation, based partly on the tape, grouping the notes minute by minute in proportional notation, so that the pianist can preserve the phrasing without relying on a nonexistent metrical pulse. Gaps in the tape are reconstructed using the same logic evident in the relationship of manuscript score to tape, and where the tape gives out I have constructed a continuation score that

Example 2. Final proportional notation of minutes 45–50

The image displays five systems of musical notation for piano, arranged vertically. Each system represents a minute of music, with time markers at the top right: 46:00, 47:00, 48:00, 49:00, and 50:00. The notation is written on grand staves, each with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The music consists of various chords, arpeggios, and melodic lines. In the fourth system, a measure number '14' is indicated above the first measure. The notation is dense and complex, typical of a reconstruction of a manuscript score.

contains the remainder of the motifs from the manuscript score laid out in a plausible order so that the pianist can continue more improvisatorily. I hope that the entire performance will maintain a seamless logic to the listener.

Expanding the piece's length to the alleged six hours presents some difficulty. Approximately half the material on the score is used in the tape, which means that it is fairly easy to imagine how to double the length of the tape. However, there are also two passages of material on the tape not reflected in the score, which could well mean that the original six-hour performance, if it did run that long, contained more material than has survived. A six-hour reconstruction using the extant material might be needlessly repetitious. Nevertheless, I tried to use in the improvisatory, second half of the reconstruction the same kinds of logic, additive pro-

cess, repetitions, motivic rhythms, and harmonic connections apparent in the first half captured on tape.

One of Johnson's criteria for moving from motif to motif appears to be pivot notes, though in this he is not entirely consistent. Many of the motifs are notated with numbers of motifs that they should either proceed from or proceed to. In the improvisatory part I took these as suggestions, but felt no more limited by them than Johnson was in the first half. My score begins, then, with an exact transcription of the 112-minute tape, and then proceeds to a series of motifs, comprising virtually the remainder of the manuscript-score material, listed in an order that I feel echoes the kind of motivic-succession logic apparent in the taped section of the piece. It is, of course, entirely within the spirit of the work to ignore the transcription and improvise straight from the motives in the ms. score but, given the sketchiness of Johnson's notation, it is best to take him at his word and study the transcription as a guide to what effect the work should create.

I will now run through the score and make more specific points about the work's structure and content. Johnson numbers the motifs in eighteen different areas. The first six are numbered with Roman numerals, the remainder with Arabic, which idiosyncrasy I have retained. Some, but not all, of the numbered areas are unified by being all in the same diatonic scale:

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|----------|--|
| I | G-natural minor (though with a B-natural in Ib) |
| II | G major |
| III | G-sharp natural minor |
| IV | F-sharp major (though with one B sharp) |
| V and VI | G-sharp natural minor again |
| 7 and 8 | E-natural minor |
| 9 | B-flat major (though with a dissonant D flat at one point) |

Others, however, are inconsistent in this regard.

There are three motifs in area I (ex. 3), labeled Ia, Ib, and Ib , yet in the original score, as in the recording, the II area follows Ia directly, and the Ibs come afterward. (Interestingly, the opening notes are the same ones used in Young's 1961 piece *Death Chant*, which is his first piece to use additive process, just as Dennis used Young's pitches in *The Second Machine*.) The area III material (also shown in ex. 3), which dominates the recording for about fifteen minutes, takes place largely over a dominant ninth drone on D sharp. On the tape, the pairs of treble fourths in motifs IIIa and IIIb become melodically linked, which is not obvious from the notation. Forty-eight minutes into the recording (ex. 2 again), area III's dominant drone on D sharp resolves in a kind of deceptive cadence to a simple figure on an E Lydian-mode chord, which is not present in the score. As the score's numbering skips over the number 14, I labeled this motif number 14.

Example 3. Motive areas I–IV in Johnson's original manuscript

Area IV contains melodic figures in IVa and IVb, which don't appear on the recording, but I worked them into the second half of my realization; they contain strands of melody up to seven notes long, which form an interpretive problem because there is nothing else like them on the recording. Johnson plays the motifs of area V (ex. 4) with a clear rhythmic profile that is not notated: the line C sharp B G sharp (emphasizing the lower, not higher, G sharp) is invariably played more or less as a whole-note followed by two quarters, and with the B accented. That the recording clearly reveals Johnson's unnotated intentions for this motif demonstrates how inadequate the score is at rendering his full conception. Areas 7 and 8 (ex. 5), in E minor, take up the last eleven minutes of the recording, and are so valedictory in nature that it is tempting to believe that the piece could have actually ended there. In particular, they use a motive reminiscent of the horn-fifths opening of Beethoven's *Les adieux* sonata, and keep cadencing on an E-minor chord that would sound final except that the B is in the bass.

Example 4. Motive area V in original manuscript

Example 5. Motive area 7, end of the tape transcription

Past this in the score, motifs 10a and 15 appear on the recording, but 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, and the rest of 10 do not. There are some additional unnumbered motifs, and a group of three chordal motifs marked "December 1988" (ex. 6), presumably meaning that he was still adding to the piece as late as that date. In my realization I brought this 1988 material in near the end. The cassette recording and score occasionally do not match; the clearest such place is the large chord in motif 10a (ex. 7), which has a C sharp on the bottom in the score and quite audibly a D in the recording. Perhaps Johnson made a mistake when he was transcribing this motif. Per his advice, I resolved all ambiguities in favor of the recording. Example 7 also shows some of the self-arguing and second thoughts that took place in Johnson's compositional process.

In addition, Johnson's manuscript offers one intriguing example of his formal thinking. On page 4 of the manuscript (ex. 8) he was clearly trying to work out the logic of his movement among motifs in a way that would allow him to more exactly notate the score. In an example on area III, he numbers motifs IIIa-d and IVc with a kind of poetic refrain notation, so that IIIa appears as numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, and 13, motif IIIb as 2, 6, and 12, and so on. The resulting pattern gives us a succession of motifs in the

Example 6. Manuscript, new material from 1988

been that Terry Riley reintroduced diatonic tonality into minimalism with his String Quartet of 1960, but this turns out not to be true. That mythic quartet wasn't in circulation until recently, and I and other scholars were misled by Edward Strickland's *Minimalism: Origins* book into characterizing it as being in C major. What Strickland evidently meant was merely that it had no key signature. Musicologist Ann Glazer Niren corrected this notion in her talk at the First International Conference on Minimalist Music in Bangor, and played some excerpts of the piece, which is basically atonal, though entirely soft in dynamics. Riley's diatonic music came later, first toyed with in a May 1961 String Trio, later developed in *In C* (1964) and the ensuing *Keyboard Studies*. (There is an important precedent for diatonicism, of course, in Cage's piano pieces of the 1940s like *In a Landscape* and *Dream*, and some of Lou Harrison's pieces as well, but it is unclear what impact these had on the early minimalists.)

- *November* is the first static or repetitive piece to be several hours in length. Young's String Trio was approximately an hour long without a break; the rumored six-hour duration of *November* represents a major leap in the minimalist expansion of scale.
- It is the first known piece to proceed via additive process, that is, starting with two notes, repeating them and adding a third, repeating those and adding a fourth, and so on; the technique would become famous a few years later in the late-1960s music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass.
- It is the first known piece largely based on repetition of small motives, which is the technique most commonly associated with minimalism.
- In addition, *November* anticipated *The Well-Tuned Piano* in being an improvisatory piano piece whose large-scale areas are held together by occupying the same harmonic field. It also apparently anticipates that work as a model of a piece improvised from materials written out and played in any order. We might also keep in mind Stockhausen's Klavierstück XI and Boulez's Third Piano Sonata, both completed in 1957, as possible models or inspirations. I also think it is not far-fetched to hear in Johnson's two- and three-note motives the influence of Webern's *Piano Variations*.

Beyond all this historical significance, *November* is a beautiful, sensitively written work, enjoyable both to play and to listen to. Had it no historical significance at all, it would still be well worth hearing. As it is, the reconstruction restores one of the major and seminal works of minimalism, one that urges us to look at the origins of the style in a new light.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a paper at the Second International Conference on Minimalist Music, September 2009. The world premiere performance of the piece's reconstructed version can be heard at <http://www.kylegann.com/November.html>.

1. Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.
2. *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 73–74.
3. E-mail from Young and Marian Zazeela to the author, July 24, 2009.
4. *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 83.
5. Undated letter to the author, fall 2007.