

Tom Johnson/Phill Niblock

8178-Chord Wonder

BY KYLE GANN

This is not really a composition," composer Tom Johnson announced before he sat down March 22 at Roulette's piano to play his *Chord Catalogue*, a succession of the 8178 chords possible in one octave, "but a list. I didn't invent the scale. All I've done is figure out a way to play every chord combination in it without playing the same chord twice and without leaving one out. It's the most extreme thing I've done in this direction."

Extreme and, one would think, extremely simple. A lesser man would have arranged those 8178 chords in some symphonically meaningful, or else quasi-random order, but Johnson proceeded methodically up the chromatic scale from two notes at a time, three, four, so on to 13. Before each section he would disconcertingly inform us, "the 715 four-note chords... the 1287 five-note chords..." His modest promise that we would "get the idea of the piece" within a few minutes wasn't really true. Two-note chords were predictably dull, three-note ones little better. But four notes began to sound almost like functional tonality in this denuded context; five sounded noticeably lush, and reminded one of the era in which harmony was enriched by ninth chords and similar possibilities. By the time we reached 10-note chords, the information overload was such that differences were hardly perceptible, a situation reminiscent of serial music. Far from being "heavy-handed minimalism," as Johnson claimed, *Chord Catalogue* was a pointed lesson in music history and the relativity of perception.

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so were hilariously brilliant. Each audience member was handed a five-page pamphlet entitled "Program Notes to be read while hearing *An Hour for Piano*." These were as arbitrary and repetitive as the music, filled with constant injunctions to "try not to allow the program notes to distract you from concentrating on the music. They are intended to increase your ability to concentrate on the piece..." Reading and listening made for an infuriating self-imposed project, and yet if any music could be followed

ingly casual, *Pascal's Triangle* was dark and mysterious. Due to the nature of the process, it was often difficult to hear changes from chord to chord, or to convince oneself that anything was changing at all. As in serial music, the piece evinced a gap between conception and perception; listening was like straining to glean meaning from a hermetic ritual.

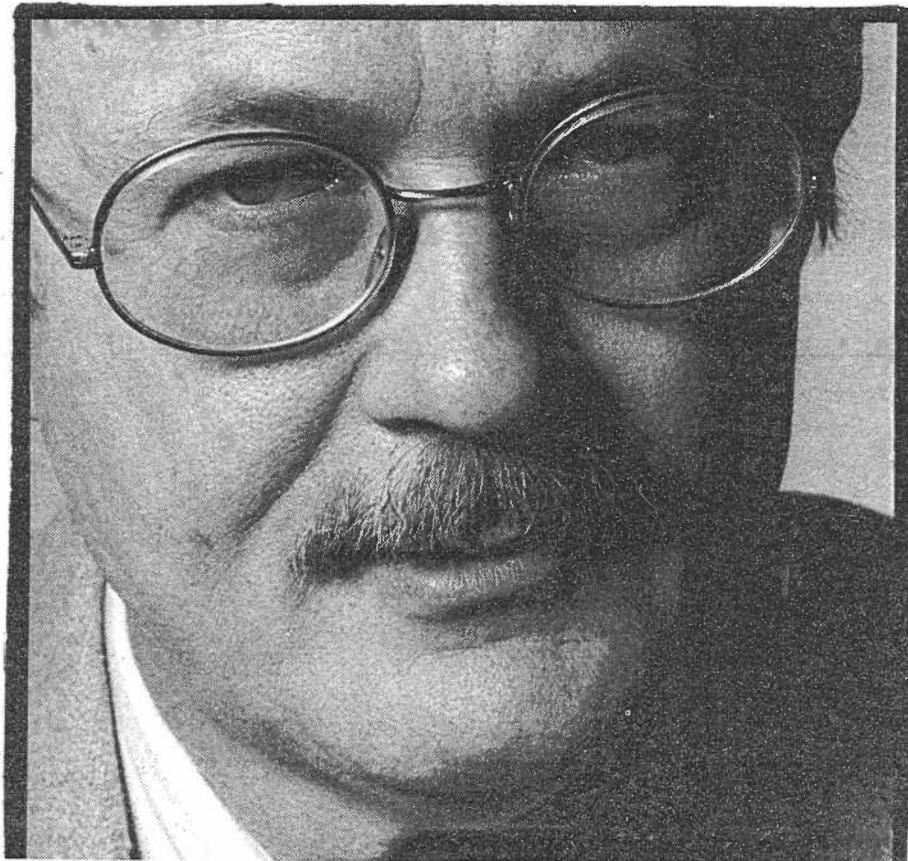
Johnson is perhaps the only composer around who will confess to being a minimalist, but his music is as much conceptual as minimal. Even in his operas, the

at a rhythmic clip barely long enough to vaguely identify. The first film was the most disconcerting: the camera panned Niblock's loft until it rested on his half-image in a mirror. Amid voices and ringing phones, Niblock-on-film talked of his plans for the evening's concert—then in progress—and apologized for not showing the films of China he had planned. His embarrassment sounded genuine.

Niblock's apology over, German singer Dagmar Apel began talking, live and via video monitor, about her work in physical therapy for vocalists. The slides were now black-and-white scenes from Hungary: steeples, bridges, haystacks, and snow-capped mountains, so abstract in their chiaroscuro that many couldn't be identified. Apel's monologue sounded confessional, though not really intimate. She stole one's attention from the mute slides, except during her frequent lapses into German, which left gaps in her story for the unilingual. When she mentioned her patients, a voice from the audience asked, "Don't you love them?" Apel answered that love was a difficult thing, and that the ego keeps intruding. Was the question part of the piece? What was the piece? In the midst of such unmitigated reality, where does art end?

Next, on film, a Jamaican girl told stories of youthful beatings and the suspicious activities of the Rasta people. Two films simultaneously followed, of people working in the fields and factories of unspecified Third World countries. The sound accompanying these was unearthly: loud, buzzing, microtonal drones, 16 cellos, bassoons, and contrabasses on one tape, 16 flutes on the next, all playing tones very close together. Live instrumentalists, first Arthur Stidfole on bassoon, then Petr Kotik on flute, walked among the audience sustaining notes that couldn't be distinguished from the tape until they were practically in your ear.

Through all of this, Niblock's illusion of artistic noncontrol was superficially convincing. The films seemed absolutely uninterpretive, their subjects presented as neither normal nor abnormal, and if the taped drones granted them an eerie intensity, they did so without comment. "Phenomenological" is Niblock's word for his films, and though the philosophic meaning should require some noetic connotation, it certainly captures their as-



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However, one should really begin with the seminal work, which often comes early in a composer's career (*Le Marteau, Gruppen, Eroica*, etc.). In the case of Denver-born Tom Johnson, home from Paris for a rare American tour, it's his *An Hour for Piano*, 1971. He played it March 25 at the Whitney Museum's Philip Morris series. Neither Johnson's thorniest nor most enjoyable work, it's the piece that most clearly demonstrates his music's unique ontological ambiguity. Repetitive and yet too wandering for process music, *An Hour* is 60-odd minutes of steady piano tinkling anchored by a repeating G. Gamelan-like, single bass notes mark off the slow progression, and occasional mild dissonances appear from nowhere; with no place to resolve to, they remain frozen in midair. Ideas emerge, leave, and come back with the insouciance of figures in a cafeteria. Aggravatingly simple, boldy unpretentious, *An Hour for Piano* is the music Satie might have written had he been influenced by Cage, or that Cage might have written had he lived during the time of Satie.

No other composer has invested minimalism with such Cagean purposelessness. Minimalism was, after all, the style that reinvigorated music theater, and yet Johnson has led it down the opposite path, drained of both drama and direction. *Das Buch der Klänge* of that Darmstadt apostate Hans Otte begs for a comparison, but *Das Buch* is a little precious; like all European music from Boulez on, it exudes the obligatory "magical" aura. In a good old American tradition, Johnson's music is utterly blank. Otte's self-conscious poignancy leaves him open to charges of "new ageism," and had *An Hour* been recorded this decade, it too might have ended up in the new age bins. But new age music's "relax-or-else" message is evident in every subdominant-related modulation, whereas *An Hour for Piano* is one of the most contentless pieces ever written.

If the work's conceptual nature needed pointing out, Johnson's means for doing



Johnson: a confessed minimalist

STEVEN MARK NEEDHAM

while reading, it is Johnson's aimless repetition. The text showed up the wallpaper nature of the sound, while it played tricks with one's perception of the prose. "Haven't I read this paragraph before?"

I was surprised to find that I enjoyed Johnson's performance more than Frederic Rzewski's recording of it. Rzewski is too precise; he brings an intensity that the piece won't quite bear, and makes dramatic demands that it blandly refuses

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to satisfy. Johnson plays like a composer, more intent on ideas than on rhythm or tone, and his mood is involved without being concerned, as if (like *Chord Catalogue*, significantly) *An Hour* were merely a calculation to be carried out. The acoustics of the Philip Morris building also helped; if the piece had no inherent aura, the stone columns granted it an imposing physical one, rendered the sound location vague, and made the piano seem larger than life.

Next to *An Hour*, *Chord Catalogue* sounded like a further abstraction; instead of the early work's capriciousness, its notes were all lined up in logical rows, which did not make the music seem less arbitrary. *Pascal's Triangle* (1987), the premier of which followed *An Hour*, was similar in concept to *Catalogue*—possible combinations of two intervals, rather than the 13 pitches—but very different in style. Where *Catalogue* had been disarm-

focus is on the rules of the game, while the manner in which they are carried out seems relatively immaterial. Since 1973, minimalism has attempted to disavow its conceptual origins, fearful of tarnishing its newfound, audience-attracting sensuousness. But Johnson has grasped that pivot point of history by the throat, and is blithely beating it into its logical conclusion. By drawing attention to the conceptual nature of minimalism and the minimalist nature of conceptualism, he calls both forms into question. If the order of his repetition sequences is meaningless, are those of Reich and Glass really any less arbitrary?

If Johnson is the least pretentious of American composers, Phill Niblock is a candidate for the same. His March 21 film/video/music showing at his Soho loft also contained an ontological puzzle; it was difficult just discerning whether "his work" was being presented, or even a work at all. For one thing, Niblock relies so much on the contributions of others that his part was hard to isolate. What purported to be art looked so much like virgin reality that one had to search for traces of the artist's hand.

This evening began with the taped voice of trombonist Jon English describing a dream in which he had experienced approaching death: "The only thing wrong with dying is that everyone treats you as if you're dying." Meanwhile, slides of traffic scenes, mixed with more picturesque oriental countrysides, were flashed

until they were practically in your ear.

Through all of this, Niblock's illusion of artistic noncontrol was superficially convincing. The films seemed absolutely uninterpretable, their subjects presented as neither normal nor abnormal, and if the taped drones granted them an eerie intensity, they did so without comment. "Phenomenological" is Niblock's word for his films, and though the philosophic meaning should require some noetic connotation, it certainly captures their aspect of nearly pure appearance. Even in the film of himself, Niblock seemed to be the hapless victim of the process. The information overload abstracted the materials even further. Niblock's constant juxtaposition of at least two media made conflicting demands on one's attention, and only during the Jamaican girl's talk was the contest disappointingly one-sided. Other than that, everything, individually and collectively, lay just beyond the edge of comprehension.

And yet, reading closely, one could discern Niblock's brushstrokes. Field workers were often shown without faces or heads, so their reactions to Niblock's intrusion were edited out. On the arm of a half-naked scythe-wielder, the film focused on an unexpected wristwatch. The pacing of slides was controlled to limit and shape recognition. Yet try to catch Niblock in the act of directing perception, and his hand vanishes. One can hear him, like Johnson, dissembling: "No, no, it isn't a composition; it's just a list."

So if Johnson's a list-maker, what is Niblock? In "How Composers Eat," Virgil Thompson points out that a composer's "material and style would seem to be a function . . . of his chief income source." Doesn't explain everything, but it may reveal something about these composers. Johnson was the *Voice* new music critic from '71 to '82; his music indeed reveals and criticizes the assumptions of current musical styles, and in the same light, logical style that characterized his writing. Niblock, on the other hand, is one of New York's most active impresarios of new music, and in his own work he is the quintessential presenter, with a knack for getting others to show themselves. Thompson's right: as hard as we try to separate life and art, the subconscious insists on mixing them up, willy-nilly. ■