

Scott Johnson/David Van Tieghem

# Seriously, Just Kidding

BY KYLE GANN

Scott Johnson has claimed, and others have claimed for him, that he has created a hybrid music, at once classical and rock and roll. It would be more accurate to say that he has humanized a number of avant-garde gestures by placing them in a more vernacular context: still no mean achievement. For a guitarist-composer whose first album, *John Somebody* (Nonesuch), made a respectable splash, he is laudably determined not to be pigeonholed. His July 29 concert (following percussionist David Van Tieghem) of solo and ensemble pieces neglected his early interest in speech-music in favor of a well-defined fusion polyphony. It highlighted Alice Tully Hall's condescendingly titled "Serious Fun!" series (gee, Lincoln Center, thanks for tolerating us wild and wacky downtowners this once, sorry about the gum under the seats).

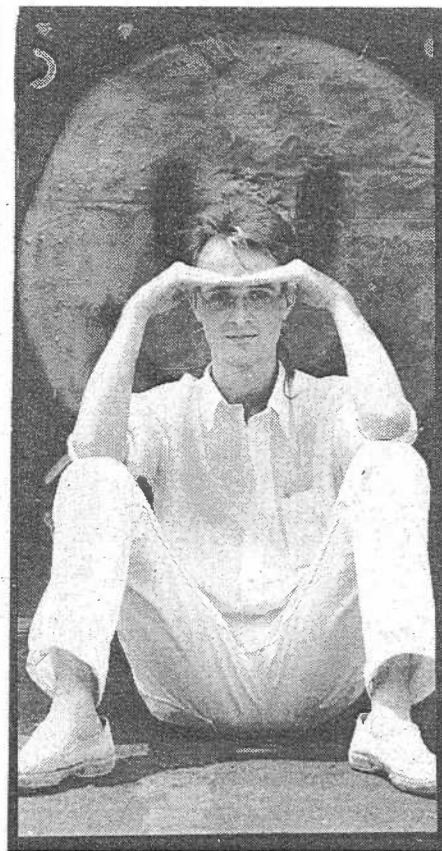
The pieces that stayed closest to *John Somebody*, two works for guitar and tape played by the composer, were the least satisfying. *U79* spun Hendrix-style melodies over a chirpy tape loop, and the early #3 (1982) was a randomly hopping hymn to the descending diatonic scale. Counterpoint is the dimension in which Johnson's music suddenly takes on depth; the pieces for saxophones, electric guitars, marimba, and trap set, ably conducted by Peter Aaronson, took up where *John Somebody* left off. *Simple Engines*, *Khaibit B*, and *Before Winter II* added a rock beat and nicely drawn dissonant lines to a basic jazz septet conception; the last in particular sounded like *La Creation du Monde* had Milhaud been impressed by '60s rock instead of Harlem jazz.

If Johnson's aims are diverse, his output defines a consistent musical personality. His roots in visual art, and in rock and roll, shine through each work, both positively and negatively. As a rocker, he doesn't develop his ideas, and as an ex-sculptor, he has trouble structuring time; like most performances by visual artists, the last few minutes of every piece resembled waiting at the laundromat for the dryer cycle to finish. His music (*John Somebody* included) is doubly unpredictable because it doesn't know itself what it wants to do. Every piece darts and rambles like a man with no place to go and plenty of enemies to avoid; even an honestly felt cliché would provide an occasional resting point. Of the five works, only *Khaibit B* (an arrangement from a string quartet written for Kronos) ended before you wished it would, and only *Before Winter II* could boast a clear, memorable form: its slow, midwork chorale for electric guitars made for a needed contrast.

And yet, Johnson's virtues are equally patent. His music's rhythmic liveliness can be traced not only to his trap set accompaniment and changing meters, but

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to the speech rhythms that entered his vocabulary via tape pieces like *John Somebody*. In the ensemble work his counterpoint is complex and fluid enough to make one want to examine the score, yet the lines never get in each other's way. Best of all, his textures possess a sculpted definition that has been lacking



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Johnson: minimalism minus the harping

from avant-garde music for several decades (although those textures were marred at Alice Tully by buzzy amplification. Why mike saxes? The damn things can knock a man over at 20 paces.) Gutsy and memorable, Johnson's music provides minimalism's sharp delineation without its harping ideology.

That such formless and indulgent music could be made from such exciting materials is a typically downtown contradiction. Still, the coherence of Johnson's polyphony is a goal that more new music needs to set for itself, especially in its downtown-improv manifestation. He's already got one of the most distinct person-

al sounds of any composer around. If he learns self-criticism, excises the flab from his forms, and disciplines his convention-flouting melodies into some sense of intuitive rightness, he could transcend his own hype. As it was, the audience's steady outward trickle and concluding bravos exactly reflected a music that could be at once tiresome and ingratiating. The cutting edge may be blunt these days, but this is it.

If Johnson was Serious, percussionist David Van Tieghem provided the evening's Fun. Van Tieghem's bio stated that he had begun by banging pots and pans in his parents' kitchen at the age of five. Most artists sublimate their early expression into more subtle forms, but Van Tieghem has pursued his early dream unadulterated. Here's a grown-up man who looks at a comb and wonders what noise its bristles would make flicked and amplified. Have you ever asked yourself what a suction-cup dart would sound like hitting a milk carton, or three ping pong balls bouncing in a steel drum? It's about like you'd expect.

What saved Van Tieghem's theatrical playtime, *Bump in the Night (Part 2)*, from pompous, flower-child-naïveté was a self-effacing irony that followed every device with an implied "(sic)." The amplified comb was subsequently applied to his hair, and the message he created by whirling a didgeridoo like over a digital light projection offered the astounding revelation: "This is an illusion." Here, too, was the first time I had seen a vibrator used for public musical performance. If a statement emerged, it was to make fools of the composers who had bought \$5000 synthesizers to gain the same sonic results. The safety net for Van Tieghem's devil-may-care aesthetic pratfalls was a tape track of drones and ostinati that left the performance free to engross with its variety, though not its content. Context is everything, and "postmodern" is performertalk for "just kidding, folks." ■

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