CONVERSATIONS

Article received on April 18th 2018
Article accepted on May 16th 2018
UDC: 78:929 Џонсон Т.(047.53)

Jelena Novak*
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

MUSIC THAT KNOWS WHERE IT'S GOING
Conversation with Tom Johnson[1]

Tom Johnson's biography was taken from Johnson's website http://www.editions75.com, with author's permission.

Tom Johnson, born in Colorado in 1939, received his B.A. and M.Mus. degrees from Yale University, and studied composition privately with Morton Feldman. After 15 years in New York, he moved to Paris, where he has lived since 1983. He is considered a minimalist, since he works with simple forms, limited scales, and generally reduced materials, but he proceeds in a more logical way than most minimalists, often using formulas, permutations, predictable sequences and various mathematical models.

Johnson is well known for his operas: *The Four Note Opera* (1972) continues to be presented in many countries. *Riemannoper* has been staged more than 30 times

* Author contact information: artina@beotel.net

[1] The conversation took place at Tom Johnson's studio and archive in Paris on November 25, 2017. I am grateful to Dejan Marković and Frits van der Waa for help with the transcription of the interview and to Katarina Kostić who translated it for the issue of the *New Sound* in Serbian.

in German-speaking countries since its premier in Bremen in 1988. Often played non-operatic works include *Bedtime Stories (1985), Rational Melodies (1982), Music and Questions (1988), Counting Duets (1982), Tango (1984)*, *Narayana's Cows (1989)*, and *Failing: a very difficult piece for solo string bass (1975).*

His largest composition, the *Bonhoeffer Oratorium (1988-92),* a two-hour work in German for orchestra, chorus, and soloists, with text by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was premiered in Maastricht in 1996, and has since been presented in Berlin and New York.

Johnson has also written numerous radio pieces, such as *J'entends un choeur* (commissioned by Radio France for the Prix Italia, 1993), *Music and Questions* (also available on an Australian Broadcasting Company CD) and *Die Melodiemaschinen*, premiered by WDR Radio in Cologne in January 1996.

The principal recordings currently available on CD are the *Musique pour 88 (1988)* (XI), *An Hour for Piano (1971)* (Lovely Music), *The Chord Catalogue* (1986) (XI), *Organ and Silence* (2000) (Ants), and *Kientzy Plays Johnson* (2004) (Pogus), *Rational Melodies* and *Bedtime Stories* performed by clarinetist Roger Heaton (Ants Records AG12) and *Symmetries* (Karnatic LabsKLR 010).

The Voice of New Music, a collection of articles written 1971–1982 for the *Village Voice,* published by Apollohuis in 1989, is now in the public domain and can be downloaded at www.editions75.com. *Self-Similar Melodies*, a theoretical book in English, was published by Editions 75 in 1996.

Recent projects include *Tilework (2002–2005),* a series of 14 pieces for solo instruments, published by Editions 75 in 2003, *Same or Different (2004),* a piece com-

missioned by the Dutch radio in 2004, and the *Combinations for String Quartet,* premiered in Berlin on the MärzMusik festival in 2004, and more recently, scores such as *Kirkman's Ladies (2005), Networks, Septet,* and *55 Chords for two electric keyboards*, all derived from combinatorial designs. As a performer he frequently plays his *Galileo*, a 40-minute piece written for a self-invented percussion instrument.

Johnson received the French national prize in the Victoires de la musique in 2001 for *Kientzy Loops (2000)*. The latest orchestra score is *360 Chords,* premiered in July 2008 by Musica Viva in Munich.

When did your interest in music begin? And when did your interest in mathematics begin and how did these two things happen to cross?

Well, my parents say that before I was thirteen they couldn't make me play the piano and practice like I was supposed to, and after thirteen they couldn't make me stop. I had a very good teacher at around that age, named Rita Hutcherson. She is dead now, but, that was my passion and I played a little 'cello and clarinet and continued just studying music theory and composition at Yale, and afterwards took private lessons with Morton Feldman for two years. But, around the age of forty I was already starting to do counting music and logical progressions and was interested in algorithms and how to make music that knows where it is going and music that has some intelligence and not just subjective dreams and autobiographical choices and so forth – and emotions.

I wanted music that was clear and comprehensible and music that was even predictable, and so counting was the first thing to do: 1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 4, 4, 4, 4… things like that. The *Rational Melodies* come along around 1982–3 and that was more counting music, but it was around this time that I thought: hey, Tom, you really are trying to do mathematics and you should study a little more. I took a course in Calculus in a very low level university night school and I passed the course, but barely, and I had to work a lot, and all these 19- and 20-year-old students were getting A's without working at all, because they were young. It's much easier to learn mathematics when you are young. Anyway, I decided it was a little too late to really learn mathematics, but I could try, and when I saw 1988 coming up I thought, there are 88 keys on the piano, so let's try and write music for 88, and I started going to a mathematics library. I couldn't understand 90 percent of what you find in a mathematics library, but I went back to Euclid. Euclid did not only write geometry, but the majority of his writings are number theory. Very simple, basic number theory. And things like that.

There is a very simple Fermat theory and Pascal's triangle. That I could understand. In fact I even studied that in high school. And so I wrote a piece about

Pascal's triangle and another piece about Mersenne numbers, which is all to the power of 2 minus 1, and I wrote this anthology *Music for 88*.

I'll never be a mathematician, but at least I started to know basic things, and then in 2000 there was a monthly meeting that happened at IRCAM about music and mathematics. It was called MaMuX – Mathematics, Music and X, and there I met some really good mathematicians who were interested in music, and other musicians who were interested in mathematics, and had very important contacts with them and learned about tilework, which means tiling. Mostly you tile two-dimensional surfaces – that's what tiling usually means. But we were tiling one dimensional surfaces – that is to make rhythms that tile together and things like that, but I am giving a very long answer to a very short question (laugh)…

You were also part of the downtown scene of composers that started doing minimalism in music and actually you were writing criticism at that point in the Village Voice. You were doing composition also so you knew very well what was happening around. Did you find yourself part of that scene?

Yeah, I was definitely part of the scene. But people knew me as a critic and when you are the critic everybody wants you to write about them. They don't think about your music. So, it's always a little difficult… I had to write about everybody else's music, they never thought about playing mine, though some people were playing my music. This is 1971–1982. I wrote for the *Village Voice* every week. But it didn't stop me from composing. In fact, *The Four Note Opera* was premiered in 1972. *An Hour for Piano* in 1973 and counting music was starting and so forth. So I was doing my music. I just wasn't known so much among composers. But I was very much part of the minimalist music movement and some people say that I really was the first person that talked about minimalism as a musical movement, although the idea really came from minimal sculpture, which was a little earlier in New York.

Anyway it was a very nice period. We were a very cooperative community. There was not just Glass and Reich but many more somewhat lesser-known people. Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier who came down from Connecticut regularly, Phill Niblock, who was very important in the movement and had a performance space where many of the concerts were given, and other people that performed with Glass, and Bill Hellermann, who just died, and Pauline Oliveros who would sometimes arrive, although she never lived in NY, living mostly in California …

But the core of us were living in New York, and the Downtown scene, focused around the Kitchen in lower Manhattan, was opposed to the Uptown scene, based around Columbia university and The Group for Contemporary Music. In the early 1970's they had all the money and all the prestige but by the late

1970's we had all the money and the prestige. It was a quite a change: from official contemporary post-Webern music to the new minimal music. It was a real transition, very perceptible during the 1970's. And of course after *Einstein on the Beach* in 1975–1976, it was internationally recognized.

Do you remember any specific composition or any specific composer's idea that you recognized as very important for you at that moment?

There were lot of very important influences and we used to talk a lot. Lot of times influences were more from talking than actually from listening to pieces. I used to talk with Robert Ashley about how we have to get away from scores, have to find other ways of writing music. If you're just putting dots on lines it's the old language. If you want to find your music, you should find other ways. And that was one of the things that helped me with *Nine Bells*, which I was working on then with my suspended bells. I couldn't carry papers around when trying to hit the bells, and looking at the bells. I had to memorize this piece anyway, so I just forgot about notation and wrote the piece with no notation. It was only ten years later that I made a score, because other people wanted to do it. All that really came from discussions with Ashely, who was trying to get away from paper, because he wanted to have a talking band. Speech can't be notated anyway. It has the inflections because it has to be rhythmic. You know how people talk. How PEOPLE talk. HOW people TALK. You can't notate that, you have to just know how you are talking.

Also another thing was in the air. When you talk about Nine Bells. There was a lot of performance art there.

That was interesting, and people inventing instruments. Yoshi Wada was inventing his Pipe Horns with big tubes. He did plumbing, he knew plumbing, and he invented these big loud horns. Arnold Dreyblatt had the Orchestra of Sympathetic Strings. He was inventing string instruments. And a guy named Jim Burton had the Springed Instrument. It was an instrument with suspended springs, that would do Doooinnng when you pluck them. There were so many invented instruments and that was …

But when talking about specific pieces … Some pieces of Steve Reich were interesting, his *Pendulum music* was a very clear example of process music. So I was not the only one who was interested in logical processes. And he did counting pieces too, very simple ones. He abandoned that immediately, but talked about process music for a while, and it was this process music that continued to be the most important aspect of Steve Reich for me. And Charlie Morrow with

the counting piece *The Number 6*. That was a performance that left a strong impression on me. Charlemagne Palestine was there, and I don't think I was influenced by him, but he was a good example of vocal experimentation. That was an important thing that was happening too: people started making vocal music in different ways.

So many cross influences... And later of course when some people start making a lot of money and other people are forgotten and poor, and you don't see each other because people are travelling in different places than you… This conviviality, these friendships, become a little more difficult, but all through the 1970's people went to each other's concerts. It was very important that John Cage lived in town. He was the one composer that everybody loved, and he came to everybody's concerts. When he wasn't on tour he was coming down to Kitchen and Phill Niblock's loft and checking out what we were doing, because he was sincerely interested in younger composers. The only other famous composer in New York at that time was Elliott Carter, who taught at Julliard and never once came Downtown to hear new music. But Cage was so different, and of course, we liked his music a lot more than we liked Elliot Carter's music anyway. But personality differences were important.

Cage was always an inspiration for us, although you can't call him a minimalist, despite *4'33"* and some very simple pieces. Very often he wanted to perform three pieces at once. He wanted maximal things. So I can't say we were imitating his music, but maybe imitating his strength of personality, his courage, the desire to go ahead without the permission of anybody, to try to be a rugged individual in the great American tradition of rugged individuals, of which Cage was the superb example.

Do you remember any specific advice or situation that was very important when talking to Cage?

One thing that that was important was… I was talking to him once and I said, you know John, I am earning my living as an accompanist for modern dance classes and you used to do that when you were young, and I wonder what you think about that. And he said… Well, you know that's a very interesting question, I have to think about that. I'll write you a letter. The next day he wrote me a letter. A very nice letter about how that helped him to find the number systems he was working with at that time, and he encouraged me to go ahead with this occupation. I talked about that in the series that I did for an English radio station called *Music by My Friends*. I did twelve 90-minute radio broadcasts, just with me and my favorite music by these people, and anecdotes about how I knew these other composers and my opinions about their music and so

forth. The broadcast about John Cage begins playing the piano like I used to play, accompanying modern dance classes, and I read this letter and talked about him and went on to play my favorite pieces by Cage, which are mostly number pieces. I think the late works of Cage are, from purely musical criteria, the best music of his life, and I wanted people to know some of those.

You still have this letter?

Yes, sure, it will be in my archives.

Nine Bells *was one of the first pieces that I experienced from you and not live but on video. It made a great impression. One of the things that is extraordinary is the great physical endurance that you need to perform this piece.*

Well, I was young at the time. I had to retire from that piece at the age of fifty-something, because it was just taking too much breath and too much energy. I had to pause after each movement and that's not very nice.

But it also brings this spirit of performance art. Every time when it's performed it's a kind of performance art piece.

Yes, it definitely is performance art. Some people say it's dance. I always wanted to propose it to dance festivals, but the dance festival people never think that a musician can do dance, so I was never able to do it in a dance context. But it was certainly a performance. A young man's piece. A young woman's piece. I think there is a woman who has done it once or twice. Today there are at least five people in the world who have their own bells and who have done this piece.

Back in 1972 you wrote your first opera – The Four Note Opera*. It is impressive that even four years before* Einstein on the Beach *you took questions about how opera can go further, seriously, how it can be problematized, what to do with the opera, and also to deal with all these self-reflecting questions about it. How did you come to this point?*

There were specific influences there. The most obvious I suppose is Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of An Author*. And that was the first sort of self-reference theater probably. I loved that piece, which I had not seen. I just read the text and I loved that piece, the idea. I went to a lot of theatre in the early 1970's and late 1960's. In New York there was a lot of experimental theatre going on. And sometimes people experimenting with theatre, different kinds of space and different kinds of audience. The audience has to move from one place

to another sometimes, and things like this. And Bertholt Brecht, I was learning something about him. I had a friend who understood how Brecht's theatre theory worked, and that was an important element that led me to *The Four Note Opera*. A lot of people were staging, sometimes for the first time, the plays and operas of Gertrude Stein. I saw quite a few performances of that. Stein is very different in many ways. She never specifies the characters and it all doesn't make very much sense. But she plays with language in a way, and the repetition is minimal in another way, and I think there must be a Stein influence in *The Four Note Opera* as well.

Other composers were not doing really many operas at that time...

No, no. Robert Ashley said he was doing operas. I always argued with him saying "if you are doing operas you have to accept *bel canto* voices, you have to work with singers", and he would answer "Oh, no. I want to do a talking opera. Opera just means work and I can do a work however I want".

Did you expect such a success with The Four Note Opera*?*

Oh, no. Of course not. You never expect success when you are 32 years old. You are just happy to get something performed. I mean, if you are normal. There are some people, megalomaniacs, who think that everything they do is going to be a great success, but I was not like that. I tried to attract legitimate theaters like the Metropolitan Opera Workshop and a couple of theatres that had budgets to do these plays. But I couldn't get that, so we finally did it in Cubiculo, which is a little theatre that had really no money, but they would give you space and pay for a little publicity and you could do something. The singers were not paid at all, nor the director, but this singing teacher told her students that this could be great experience, so we put this together on a "shoe string" in three weeks. The first night there were ten people in the audience, our families and two critics, but the critics both wrote very positive things, and by the end of three weeks we were sold out, all hundred and fifty seats. And the next year there was a television version on CBS, and next year the European premiere in Amsterdam, and so forth. And it just went on.

Why only piano as an instrument in The Four Note Opera?

I say in the Introduction that people always want to orchestrate. They think you need a lot of instruments to do an opera. I thought, the reason opera sounds very weak and unsatisfying when people do it with a piano accompaniment in-

stead of an orchestra is just because the music was not written for piano. It was written for the orchestra. A piano reduction is real reduction. But if you write real piano music, it can be very satisfying, and that's what I decided to do. And with the influence of Feldman, I think I knew how to treat that instrument really like an instrument and not imitating flutes and drums and things. So I say in the Introduction you have lot of freedom how to produce this piece but it has to be piano only. Because it was written for piano and you are not going to improve it by adding more instruments.

We didn't say anything about Feldman and your collaboration as a professor and a student...

Another one of twelve composers in *Music by My Friends* is Feldman. In fact, I did two broadcasts with him. The first was about my studies with him, and especially how he used to tell me to listen to sounds when they fade away, because sometimes they go up and sometimes they go down. I'd never heard anybody say that. I don't think anybody else ever said it, because nobody else ever heard that. It's funny. He'd show me and we'd listen, and sometime they go up and sometime they go down just as they fade out. Things like this taught me that I have to listen. I can't just take the notes as algebraic realities. You have to listen to what is happening. That helped me a lot to find out how to write good piano music and how to write for voices and everything. At the end of that first broadcast about Feldman I do a little analysis of *Palais de Mari* which is one of my favorite Feldman pieces. With the four-note chord that's so important at the beginning of *Palais de Mari* I demonstrate these phenomena about how sounds when they disappear can go up and go down. And people who have heard this recording say they can hear sounds that go up or down according to my explanation. By that time I had a theory about why they go up and why they go down, but that is a long story, so you have to listen to the broadcast. For the second Feldman broadcast, I wanted to do a long piece, so I chose *Piano and String Quartet*, so that you get 45 minutes of music and just 10 or 15 minutes of talking.

Did he influence you by his opera writing?

No, he wrote only one opera and it's not really an opera, its another orchestra piece with a vocal solo. Just one singer and no story or anything. No, he was not a theater man, he was a music man. That's most important for a composer.

This dimension of theatricality for your music is very important, and not only for

music theatre. Like Eggs and Baskets or Knock on Wood: "Solution 571" for woodblock solo...

That comes from the fact I was also a writer. I was a professional music critic for eleven years. I like to write and have written several books and I wrote the libretto for the *Four Note Opera* and I selected the text for *Riemannoper* from the *Riemann Musiklexikon*. I had written a lot of text, and I am comfortable with the written language, and when I found the story about the Indian mathematician who counted cows for seventeen generations, I wrote the text for that just to explain the mathematical formula. Writing is part of what I do.

Ant there is this component of humour, very witty humour...

Yeah, in the *Self-similar Melodies*, there's a chapter about how to make an algorithm with sandwiches. You have certain notes, and you sandwich in more notes, and then you sandwich in other notes – and at the end of this rather intellectually complicated discussion I say: "But you need a rest, go make yourself a sandwich." I can't resist this kind of humor. At least it adds a little humor to a theoretical book that is otherwise very dry and methodical.

And I remember when you explained to me how you started writing for example Eggs and Baskets*, you said that first you wanted to make a piece for kids...*

Yeah, it was a commission to do a piece for kids. So I thought: Well with visual aids, some eggs and some baskets, the kids will start to understand that there're only two ways to put one egg in two baskets, but there're four ways to put one egg in one basket, both eggs in one basket, both eggs in the other basket, two other ways to put … and so on. But then it starts to get complicated, when you have three eggs, and four eggs and five eggs, and the kids that day, they didn't understand anything. They were talking and leaving and causing problems already after three or four minutes. But the parents loved it! They were following everything, and they thought: This is very clever, to hear all the combinations. Here are the combinations, just think about them or learn about them like in a math class. So I realized this is a piece for adults. I didn't expect that, and the performers didn't either. A lot of times pieces surprise you. You think you know who the audience is, but you don't.

You said also that you like music that has some kind of its own intelligence, that knows where it goes by its own. How would you explain this?

Well, the eggs in the basket knew where *they* were going. They knew that

there was going to be all the possibilities, and you can't leave one out, and you can't repeat one. Yeah, that's a good example of music that knows where it's going.

But also in interpretation. Recently when you were commenting on a pianist's interpretation, you said that you didn't like romantic interpretation on the piano, but more music that is developing on its own, somehow.

Yeah, well, you want to let the music do what *it* wants to do, that's something that Morton Feldman always said. Let the music do what it wants to do. He meant: as a composer. But it's even better advice for an interpreter. Let the music do what it wants to do. If the music just wants to go from two notes to four notes to eight notes to sixteen notes, you shouldn't interfere with that. And every time *you* try to make it happy, or sad, or too slow or too fast, or accelerating or getting louder, you're interfering with what the music wants to do. So as a composer *and* as an interpreter, it's best to get out of the way as much as possible. And in fact that's one of my main goals, and this comes from Cage. Cage really wanted to let the music do what it wanted to do. Perhaps Feldman got it a little bit from Cage. And that's why he started writing music with chance – because he didn't want to enforce his own tastes on the music. He wanted music to follow some other logic. And he liked the *I Ching*, which was kind of fashionable at that time, and kind of new in the West, *Music of Changes*. But in my case I didn't want to work with chance, I was more interested in causality of a mathematical and logical sort.

Do you ever resist the mathematical process that you deal with? Do you resist it in some kind of musical way, or do you always respect it?

Well, there are pieces that aren't so mathematical. But if I start with an algorithm, I follow it. Let the math take control. There are other, earlier pieces that don't have any mathematical control. *An hour for piano* was a good example. Or even the *Four Note Opera*.

The piano music is a kind of constant in your whole oeuvre. Please put your piano music into the perspective. How did it develop?

Since I played the piano, piano had a very important role in my music since the beginning. In fact, one of the first really good pieces that I wrote was *Spaces,* which was a piano piece. It begins with the six chords that I wrote for Morton Feldman when I was still studying with him. Other sounds also reflect Feld-

man's taste for modern painting, different spaces working together in a painting or in a piece of music. Then *An Hour for Piano* came from modern dance accompanying and grew out directly out of that. A *Scene for Piano and Tape* was a theatre piece. It also involved piano. There was not so much piano sound, but piano was important in the theatre... later, more complicated things: *Block Design* for piano was mathematical music with a very specific sound, a nice piece that I like very much, *Twelve* was a piece with twelve-note block designs, and all the way up to the latest piano piece that is called *Slight Variations.* This is just one idea with 48 slight variations, really the same idea but in 48 sets of notes doing the same thing, and that makes a nice piano piece. And *Tilework* for piano, that was the tilework period. All of the periods of my music are represented in one way or another as piano pieces.

In relation to the Plucking *CD you said that you didn't want to work a lot with a mixture of different traditions of music, because it could turn to some kind of colonialism. What is your approach to different musical traditions?*

I have always been against "world music" because it usually means that some poor African comes to play with some poor Spanish flamenco player, and they are improvising together, and somebody else is making all the money, saying he is doing "world music" because cultures are meeting. That does not interest me so much, but I love all the instruments of the world. It is lovely to talk just about plucked instruments because there are plucked instruments on every continent and they make a lovely family. I don't think of this as colonial though. It is European-based because the piece is written in European notation and it will usually be performed in European situations, where you can find musicians from Iran and Africa and Korea, Japan, all in the same town, and can get them together to play.

So you enter here in the area of music and politics in a way.

Well, I don't do political music, but I like the idea of the world cultures. I go to the zoo in Paris very often, it's one of the oldest zoos in the world. I love going back and watching all the monkeys again and again. The tapirs are one of my favourite animals, and all the different parrots and flamingos who always make different sounds. I think it is a kind of U.N. for animals, and they all seem to get along very well together.

Except that they are in jail.

Yes, but in the U.N. if you are obliged to sit at those meetings day after day, that is a kind of imprisonment too, isn't it? (laugh). Anyway, they seem happy, they are very well-fed and well-heated and happy together and they can get to know one another. The one from Sahara might be right across from the one who came from Alaska. International cooperation is very important for everybody to think about these days.

Let's go back to the opera, to the rest of the pieces that you created. How did you arrive at the idea of the Riemannoper*? Obviously you wanted to make fun of those very serious German musicologists who talked about music in a kind of formal way.*

I've always been interested in music references, reference books, in Grove and Larousse...

To make fun of them?

No, they already seem funny! Musicologists, and especially the second rate musicologists, who write for books like that, usually graduate students who don't know very much, but they want to pronounce the absolute truth of what this is and what that is, to define everything. It is kind of ridiculous. I thought, you know, it would be nice to find the Larousse definition of baritone and that is already kind of funny, you can make an aria about that. And I thought about that – an *Opera selon Larousse*, or *Opera According to Groves*, but I finally thought that an opera according to the *Riemann Musiklexicon* was even better, because the German musicologists are even more authoritative, they know even more than the English and the French (laugh). Their definitions are already kind of funny. If you gonna write Aria da Capo you give the exact definition, not just approximate, but very exact. You have to give the page number. In an opera you never give references, but in this opera you have to give your references so that everybody knows that that came from page 88 in the *Riemann Musiklexicon.* I had a lot of fun with that. I think the German version is better than the English and the French would have been. But maybe someday somebody will do an *Opera according to Groves*, and that could be very nice too.

And your Un'Opera Italiana*, in which relation does it stand to the tradition of Italian opera?*

Un'Opera Italiana started already in the late seventies in NY. By that time *The Four Note Opera* was getting to be pretty well-known, I hadn't written the

Riemannoper yet and I wanted to try to do a 'big opera', and I thought – let's do it in the Italian tradition. So maybe that is similar to my obsession with German traditions in the *Riemannoper*, I wanted to explore Italian traditions. I did some persiflage and not very serious sketches in NY. When I moved to Paris I went to the library more often. Somehow I became more serious in Europe than I was in NY, so I went often to really research Italian opera. I listened to more Vivaldi operas that you would ever want to listen to probably, and I looked at many different marriage scenes, and at pastorales in different operas, because I thought, in opera I should have a pastorale and a marriage scene, and of course love scenes, a seduction scene... So, everything from Monteverdi to Verdi is there in a minimalist interpretation with lots of Italian tradition. I sent the 1991 score around to all the big operas in the world (you have to have an orchestra and a chorus and good singers) and nobody wanted to do it, and it sat on the shelf for another fifteen years. The final edition came out in 2006. "MMVI" it says on the cover, in the great Italian tradition. They always use Roman numerals for the date, MMVI. My assistant, copyist, webmaster and great friend, Javier Ruiz, was very important there, because he designed the whole edition – he found all the Italian typography, ornaments, a lovely edition. Even if no one ever performs the piece, the edition is already a work of art, but someday it will be performed, I think. It just has to wait.

Musicologists and theorists are included in this piece?

Oh yes, after each scene you get the panel of experts, just one musicologist, but an art historian, an Italian specialist and the biographer of the composer (there has to be somebody who is going to defend the composer) and the dramaturge, and they all make their comments. Mostly they don't like the music, but sometimes they like the music and the musicologist finds something he can identify "Ah, this is a quote from some unknown opera by Donizetti" and so forth. It is *recitativo secco.*

You know, sometimes pieces take a long time. I said the other night at the concert how Ugly Culture did the premiere of Narayana's cows about two years after it was written, and nobody else wanted to do it at all. But now it is one of my most popular pieces. Another piece called *Doublings for Double Bass* was commissioned by Bertram Turetzky. The bassist has to count and to compute the new melodies as he doubles, and Turetzky couldn't play it, and nobody else could either. Finally, 37 years after it was written, Tom Peters, a bassist in San Diego, did it – a twenty minute version! It's a lovely recording. That's what the piece should have been. Maybe now other bassists will decide to use their heads a little bit, calculate the notes, and learn the piece!

And the rest of the operas – Shaggy dog operas, for example, they are based on kind of absurd stories, what was your intention there?

Shaggy dog stories are a kind of joke, they take a long time to tell and have stupid endings. I wanted operas that did that, fifteen minute operas. So these four, premiered in 1978, are still in the catalogue and continue to be performed – *Door*, I think, is performed the most often, but *Window*, *Dryer* and *Drawers* are also done from time to time. Now there's a fifth opera, *Curtain,* which will make a full evening, and I hope that somebody will do all five, but that hasn't happened yet.

It seems that when you come to opera you have to declare something manifestly, give the stark truth, as it is. It needs to be a kind of caricature. Also the opera 200 years*, that deals with the jubilee in France, it was also your criticism, on the verge of political...*

Sometimes people think that *Riemannoper* criticizes German opera, but it criticizes German musicology much more. *Un'opera Italana* does not really criticize Italian opera either. Directors sometimes think that I'm doing a satire of Italian opera, but that's not really true, it's an *homage*, I love all Italian opera, from Monteverdi to Verdi and beyond.

The other case – more specific maybe – is *200 Years*, which was a commission for the 200th anniversary of France in 1989. So here I wanted to do something that would commemorate two hundred years, but this is a little bit the fault of Esther Ferrer, my wife, who wanted to do the libretto. She said: "Oh, it's simple! You just say seventeen-eighty-nine, seventeen-ninety, seventeen-ninety-one, seventeen-ninety-two… When you get up to nineteen-eighty-nine you're finished!" I said: "Well... that seems a little simple, but why not? Maybe it's a good idea." So that was the libretto, signed "Esther Ferrer". Well, with a libretto like this, we're already not taking French history terribly seriously. And besides, the director who was assigned to my project – a man that I loved very much, we became good friends after that – was Roland Topor. He was already known for humor and many other things – an artist.

And he said: "Well, I think, having thought about it a little bit, what we're gonna do with *200 Years* is get two hundred *sacs-poubelle*, put French history in the garbage bags and get rid of the past. We're talking about the future now." I thought: This is a great idea, it's kind of funny and kind of performance art, but not really... you're not criticizing anything bad, you're not criticizing the French performances in the wars, you're not saying that French are racists or anything like that, you're just saying the past is over! So I thought this was a good idea,

and I wrote for *bel canto* voices, setting the libretto exactly the way Esther wrote it. It's taking something and doing it just the way the libretto says, just the way the *Riemann Musiklexikon* said. It's very simple.

Is Esther Ferrer the visual artist who most influenced your work?

Haha! I suppose so. She likes prime numbers a lot and so do I. In fact, I helped her a couple of times with pieces, made suggestions and things. I can't say that we really collaborate. In fact, the opera *200 Years* is the only real collaboration I think we ever did. Sometimes we've done simultaneous performances; she does her piece, I do my piece. But we don't really collaborate. And Esther says, when people ask: "Hey, we live together, we eat together, we sleep together, you'd like us to *work* together, as well? That's enough."

But sometimes when I've a problem, I ask Esther: "What should I do here?" and I play her something. And often she gives me good advice. And I hope I give her good advice sometimes, too. We love the same people and the same styles of art and we understand each other very well, so sometimes there can be good advice going back and forth.[2]

[2] More about Tom Johnson's music is available at his YouTube channel via composer's own introduction.