An Introduction to TOM JOHNSON'S RATIONAL MELODIES

Tom Johnson (b 1939) belongs to a generation of American composers who founded musical minimalism. We know that this term was first applied to the visual arts, notably to **Donald Judd**, **Robert Morris**, and particularly **Sol LeWitt**, whom Johnson recognizes as an influence. In music, at the same time, the composer of the *Rational Melodies* was always fascinated by the practices of **La Monte Young**, or of **Phill Niblock**, both of whom work with tiny variations within a static sound continuum. But his own writing is rooted rather in "repetitive" music, still expressed in traditional notation, and based on rhythmic pulsations and defined scales (just what is necessary for writing "melodies").

However, it is not the repetition in itself that interested him, but rather the idea of music as a process. **Steve Reich** applied this idea brilliantly in his phase pieces, and proposed a formulation for this in his famous article of 1969. But after 1975, while the same Reich distanced himself from the radicalism of his first works, and younger American composers came out with music that was lusher, more expressive, even sentimental, Johnson insisted on the unrelenting rigor of formalized processes. *Rational Melodies*, composed in 1982, may be regarded as the outcome of this research, first of all by their sheer quantity, but also by the fact that they summarize brilliantly and clearly procedures from the past, present and future: Combinations of cycles of different lengths (I, IV, XI, XVII,

XVIII), permutations (VII, X), the paper-folding or "dragon" formula (II, XIX), other automata (XVI, XX), or self-similar structures (XIV, XV).

These explanations, however, are sometimes quite unnecessary, because the logic of the works often remain sufficiently simple to be perceived directly in listening. If one thinks of the sculptures of Donald Judd or Sol LeWitt, one remembers that in minimalism the structure is generally quite evident, with a total fusion of structure and appearance. Nothing superfluous, nothing inexplicable (even though the work as a whole remains totally unexplained). Johnson's music adopts this form of obviousness, of simplicity, if you like. It has the audacity of simplicity.

- *Gilbert Delor for "Rational Melodies" (New World Records)*