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# Journal of the Society for American Music

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*Front cover illustration:* James Tenney and Carolee Schneemann in Schneemann, *Noise Bodies* (1965). Used with the courtesy of Carolee Schneemann.

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by one of the most successful American composers of his day. The recording quality is excellent, and the programming choice effectively demonstrates Hadley's compositional range. Bret Johnson's program notes contextualize Hadley's compositions, both within his particular milieu and more broadly within the classical music canon. At times, Johnson draws connections that are a bit of a stretch when comparing some of Hadley's works to those of Honegger, Antheil, and Gershwin, perhaps in an attempt to rescue him from his reputation as old guard and anti-modernist. Although some may find reason for critique in Hadley's stylistic diversity—as a sign of a derivative composer without a strong compositional voice—his skill for orchestration and his deft stylistic variety makes for an interesting recording and helps to build a serious case for inclusion of Hadley's works on more orchestral programming, if not as a highly original American modernist, then at least as a skilled late-Romanticist.

Hannah Lewis



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*Ben Johnston: String Quartets Nos. 6, 7 & 8*. Kepler String Quartet. New World 80730-2, 2016, CD.

To my knowledge, no other contemporary American composer has cultivated the genre of string quartet as vastly as has Ben Johnston (b. 1926), who produced ten works that span a period of nearly fifty years.<sup>1</sup> Johnston, a proponent of extended microtonality, has reconciled his eclectic interests in just intonation, serialism, neo-classicism, minimalism, vernacular music, jazz, rock, and hymnody within his stage and dance music, orchestral and chamber pieces, electronic and aleatoric music, and particularly his string quartets. In the latter, he has exploited the intonational potentials of string instruments far beyond the already-established idioms of the genre. Somewhat different from the groundbreaking technological experiments of his composition colleagues at the University of Illinois, Johnston—a pupil of Darius Milhaud, Harry Partch, and John Cage—embraced the pioneering spirit so predominant at this institution, posing an essential question: “What might the European music have been like, had the idea of temperament been rejected?”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although Samuel Barber, Henry Cowell, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Elliott Carter, Conlon Nancarrow, George Crumb, and George Perle composed string quartets, they do not rival the scope of Johnston's contributions. He composed his Quartet no. 1 in 1951 and Quartet no. 10 in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Johnston, “Autobiographical Lecture,” filmed [April 2006], YouTube Video, 1:41:06, posted [November 2010], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slXIOTTYpHY>. Composition faculty at the University of Illinois—including Lejaren Hiller, Herbert Brün, Salvatore Martirano, and James W. Beuchamp—developed compositional methods with algorithms, computers, and various electronic devices.

To date, only the Kepler Quartet has so deeply explored the implications of Johnston's provocative question implemented in his string quartets. Since the premiere of the composer's Quartet no. 10 in 2002, violinists Sharan Leventhal and Eric Segnitz, violist Brek Renzelman, and cellist Karl Lavine have exclusively dedicated themselves to the monumental task of performing and recording all of Johnston's quartets, embarking on a fourteen-year journey with the cooperation and guidance of the veteran composer himself.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, New World Records released the long-awaited edition of the Kepler's recording of Johnston's Quartets nos. 6, 7, and 8. This disc follows the 2006 and 2011 release of two discs containing Quartets nos. 2, 3, 4, 9, and nos. 1, 5, 10, respectively. The ensemble's endeavor is especially impressive if we consider that in the hands of Johnston we are not dealing with sound structures paradigmatic of the genre. Except the serial, equal tempered Quartet no. 1, Johnston has systematically constructed five-limit, seven-limit, and eleven-limit just-intoned fabrics, culminating in the thirteen-limit just intonation of the Quartets nos. 5 and 7.<sup>4</sup> He has even pushed the boundaries as high as the thirty-first harmonic in the otherwise largely neo-classical Quartets nos. 8 and 10, seeking the pure sounds that the wide range of odd-numbered partials can create.<sup>5</sup>

In the newest disc, Kepler's precise realization of the intricate pitch world imbedded in the single-movement, palindromic Quartet no. 6 (1980), which comprises sixty-one different pitches per octave, is noteworthy. Inspired by Partch's hexachords and tonality diamond, the quartet integrates twelve-tone technique, microtonal modulations, minimalistic gestures, and the eleven-limit just intonation arranged as otonality (harmonic series) and utonality (subharmonic series).<sup>6</sup> In other words, Johnston constructs twelve-tone rows consisting of the odd-numbered partials as high as the eleventh harmonic, where instruments polyphonically present long and sustained themes consisting of the tones in various forms of the prime row. To shape the rhythmic aspect of the piece, he has arranged rows of tempi using the whole-number ratios of the harmonics.<sup>7</sup> Kepler perfectly conceives the quartet's pitch/tempo complexity by having each instrument play microtonal rows in

<sup>3</sup> "Kepler Quartet's Website," <http://www.keplerquartet.com/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> In five-limit just intonation, like most Western music tunings, the prime-numbered harmonics up to the fifth harmonic produce all the frequencies. Likewise, seven-limit, eleven-limit, and thirteen-limit just intonations point to the prime-numbered harmonics up to the seventh, eleventh, and thirteenth harmonics as the foundation of all the frequencies. Partch created his eleven-limit just intoned system and built several instruments on its basis. See Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Da Capo, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> The manuscripts of the quartets are located in the Ben Johnston Papers, an extensive archive of Johnston's materials at Northwestern University Library.

<sup>6</sup> Partch's terms otonality and utonality refer respectively to a collection of pitches of a harmonic series analogous to major tonality in the common period harmony, and a collection of pitches of a subharmonic series (an exact inversion of a harmonic series) analogous to minor tonalities. Partch designed a two-dimensional diagram called "tonality diamond," where one dimension presents the otonalities and the other dimension the utonalities. See Partch, *Genesis of a Music*.

<sup>7</sup> Kyle Gann, liner notes to *Ben Johnston: String Quartets Nos. 6, 7, & 8*, Kepler Quartet, New World 80730-2, CD, 2016.

different tempi during a constant *accelerando* that leads to the doubling of the opening tempo.<sup>8</sup>

No other ensemble before Kepler has seriously attempted the daunting, three-movement Quartet no. 7 (1984). With its thirteen-limit just intonation projected on the harmonic and subharmonic series, serialism, micropolyphony in the manner of Ligeti's *Apparitions* or *Atmosphères*, hexachords, and palindromes, the quartet comes to a head in the variations of the last movement, where we encounter a proliferating microtonal row of 176 tones to the octave. It takes the instruments 177 measures to reach the beginning pitch an octave higher. For Johnston, the intentional complexity of this piece explores, as he writes, "an analogously complex psychological state, like in the music of Alban Berg."<sup>9</sup> Despite having to train their ears to distinguish the few cents of difference among each of these 176 tones and their fingers to produce these microtones, Kepler has deftly realized Johnston's absurd, yet subtle, pitch world.

In Quartet No. 8 (1986), Johnston composed a neo-classical and less abstract structure than Quartets nos. 6 and 7, and one typical of his works since the late 1980s. He structured the four movements of the quartet as sonata, binary, minuet, and rondo forms, meeting expectations of a classical quartet. However, he occasionally builds rows consisting of the odd-numbered partials as high as the eleventh harmonic and uses common tones to modulate to other overtone spectra.<sup>10</sup> The amalgamation of classical forms, conventional tonality, and sporadic just intonation gives the work a lure characteristic of Johnston's late works, which—after the burdensome Quartets 6 and 7—Kepler performs with consummate skill and taste.

*Quietness* (1996), Johnston's charming short piece for voice and string quartet in memory of Salvatore Martirano—his long-standing colleague at University of Illinois—closes the album. Johnston performs the lyrics himself, a setting of a poem by the medieval Persian mystic poet Rumi. Kepler accompanies Johnston's voice passionately, establishing the non-beating, just-intoned character of the piece.

The admirable quality of the recordings performed in different venues in Milwaukee, in addition to Kepler's superb execution, allows listeners to immerse themselves in Johnston's enduring, unique pitch world. Moreover, in the remarkable liner notes, Kyle Gann—a renowned microtonalist and Johnston's former student—offers substantial analytical and contextual insights into the quartets. This recording crowns Kepler's devoted pilgrimage through Johnston's string quartets, each one a genuine milestone of the genre, of the music in the United States, and of extended microtonality.

Navid Bargrizan

<sup>8</sup> Partch Quartet no.7 manuscript, Ben Johnston Papers, 1939–2003, Northwestern University Music Library. Kepler's is the first recording of Quartet no. 6 since the New World String Quartet's 1983 performance released by CRI.

<sup>9</sup> Johnston, "Autobiographical Lecture."

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*