

# Los Angeles Times

TIMES.COM

FRIDAY, MAY 19, 2006

COPYRIGHT 2006/116 PAGES

## MUSIC

### REVIEW

# Johnston's unheeded eloquence

Some of his lovable works are strikingly played at MicroFest 2000. So why is this voice so seldom heard?

By MARK SWED  
Times Staff Writer

Ben Johnston requested that for the concert celebrating his 80th birthday at REDCAT on Wednesday, the audience be handed program notes only on the way out. He wanted the music to speak for itself.

It did. And it eloquent, odd, deeply affecting and downright lovable works thereby left ques-

tions I can't answer. The principal one being: Why is a major composer and authentically original American voice so seldom heard?

Johnston, now retired from academia and living in North Carolina, is not unknown and not without champions in high places. On its "White Man Sleeps" album, the Kronos String Quartet included his String Quartet No. 4 ("Amazing Grace"), which applies late-Bethoven variation techniques and Harry Partch-inspired microtonal tuning to a well-known hymn. The work's 10 minutes of magical musical transformation proved the hit of the 1987 album and offered Johnston his 15 minutes of fame.

But an even tougher question kept recurring during Wednesday's concert, which was a component of MicroFest 2006, the latest Los Angeles festival of microtonal music: How can one man have been so thoroughly absorbed in so many aspects of advanced music and culture over the last 50 years and still retain his own warm, direct, immediate voice and individual sound?

Neither a concert of works for one, two or three players nor a brief account of it can possibly suggest Johnston's range. In "Knocking Piece," from 1962, two percussionists hit the innards of a piano with various mallets. The complex polyrhythms are Elliott Carteresque. The resonances are eerie, otherworldly. The composer's fascination with the piano as a true percussion instrument was Cagean. His dramatic gesture was originally condemned by critics as vandalism, and the piece once caused a riot in Rio.

Like "Amazing Grace," "Ponder Nothing" for solo clarinet reminds us that Johnston's religious connections are worth a study in themselves. Having grown up a Southern Baptist in Macon, Ga., he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1970 by way of engagement with Zen Buddhism and the mystical teachings of Gurdjieff.

In the clarinet solo, a Catholic hymn is approached in the Zen spirit of the title, as a beautifully simple tune flowers through elaborate decorations and bluesy microtonal pitch bending, filling the hall with a numinous clarinet essence that you simply

must hear to appreciate.

There is an earthy side to Johnston as well. It was a great surprise to learn that the texts to the excerpts from "The Tavern," for guitar and voice, were not drunken existential utterances by, say, Charles Bukowski but from verses by the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi.

Also on the program were two solos for double bass. The first, "Alap," had the instrument resonating like a sitar; the second, "Progression," was jazz-inflected. Two trios for recorders brought the Baroque-period instruments into the modern world without making them *feel* modern.

Johnston's music can sound far out, especially with his tunings, but he relies on traditional forms, such as arias and fugues. Three pieces included toccatas. In the neoclassical Duo for Violins, what strikes the ear at first as poor intonation soon proves a new route to passion, as intervals start to rub ecstatically against one another in ways that would be impossible with conventional (vanilla?) tuning.

"Palindrome," for snare drum, mixes convoluted mathematics with the panache of attention-grabbing drum rolls. In an aria for solo cello, barely perceptible overtones give a lovely melody a bizarre twist.

The concert ended with Suite for Microtonal Piano. Its movements are again standard forms. Hints of Gershwin are heard in the opening and in the second movement, a blues. But the tuning changes everything, as weird

[See Johnston, Page E17]

## Performances enhance the astonishment

[Johnston, from Page E16] and wonderful resonances fill a listener's consciousness.

The evening's many performers — percussionists Nicholas Terry and T.J. Troy, pianist Gayle Blankenburg, clarinetist Sam Torrisi, violinists Mark Menzies and Melinda Rice, cellist Franklin Cox, bassist Tom Peters, the recorder trio Les Folles, and guitarist and vocalist John Schneider, the concert's organizer — were of a caliber that kept this listener in a state of continual astonishment.

The turnout was small. I doubt that any of those busy setting up the Rauschenberg show at MOCA bothered to cross the street, even though Johnston and Rauschenberg were collaborators on Merce Cunningham's 1959 dance, "Gambit."

Ben Johnston's day will come. At he's 80, and it seems quite stupid for anyone to wait a minute longer.