sound generation, but also on the nature and meaning of approximation.

The songs are “settings” of three characteristically American texts/musics: “No More Good Water,” a slow blues with harmonica accompaniment recorded by Jaybird Coleman of Alabama in the late twenties; Walt Whitman’s “Kosmos;” and “Hey When I Sing These Four SongsHEY LOOK What Happens,” a setting of Jerome Rothenberg’s translation of an Iroquois chant. In each, Tenney attempts to approximate the acoustics of the human voice by assigning the pitches of the instruments to the acoustic components of speech. These are transcriptions in the strictest sense, and show a wonderfully disarming lack of “compositional” technique, other than the audacious decision to actually do it!

In the first song, the blues, the flutes imitate the antiphonal harmonica interludes Coleman plays between sung lines. In the second song, “Kosmos,” Tenney recorded himself reading the Whitman poem, then transcribed his own Southwestern accent and speech rhythms. In the third song, “Hey When I Sing…,” the rhythm of Tenney’s 1971 SATB setting of the Native American song is used, and the instrumental “interludes” correspond to the soprano vocalists in the original.

Each instrument in Tenney’s Songs was chosen because of its relatively simple spectrum (very little harmonic content), so that each might be assigned to a particular formant region of the voice’s timbre. The percussion instruments are assigned to the fricatives, plosives, and other consonants, mostly composed of noise or a complex inharmonic spectra. The words are written out in the International Phonetic Alphabet method. What occurs is not so much an accurate imitation of the voice, but a composition that is solely determined by the microstructure of speech acoustics.

Tenney’s relationship to “indigenous” materials is a complex one, and he has stated it rather provocatively in an interview with Canadian composer and musicologist Gayle Young:

GT: Do you think your style has been influenced by American folk music?
JT: No, not an influence so much as a conscious use, a conscious connecting up with, but not an influence in the sense of absorbing aspects of style, aesthetic, or intention, so that, after absorbing it, one’s own music comes out determined by those characteristics.
—Only Paper Today (now called Musicworks),
Toronto, June 1978

What Tenney is after in these songs, aside from the musical/cultural interest (note that there is one black, one white, one Native American song), is the creation of a perceptual domain in which we can in some sense participate, and in another sense be relieved of the somewhat scientific nature of this musical experiment. I don’t think Tenney is particularly interested in succeeding at voice synthesis by conventional instruments—there are certainly simpler ways to go about that—but rather in a kind of sound gestalt that comes simultaneously from the scientific and artistic. To Tenney, the artistic experience is both intellectual and emotional, and he is interested in blurring the boundaries in such ingenious ways that we might perhaps cease to simplify those distinctions with such facility! The voice, with its manifold acoustic and semantic complexities, is to him as beautiful as the Whitman poem and the Iroquois song, and in the Three Indigenous Songs he expresses that embracing appreciation.

—Larry Polansky

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