

## Alexandrins pour guitare

A real tribute to French culture, *Alexandrins pour guitare* was written in 1989, when Tom Johnson had already lived for six years in the country of Racine and Baudelaire. The work was premiered the same year on *L'Atelier de Création Radiophonique* of France Culture, a broadcast entitled “Above all, do not permit an alexandrine.”

The composer took his model seriously: according to the rhythm of the alexandrine, the music consistently of 12-notes phrases, sometimes 13 when a line ends with a mute ‘e’. The performance of *Alexandrins pour guitare* can be done “in a poetic context,” as stated in the brief preface to the score: “You can read an excerpt from Racine before playing the music, or recite a quatrain of Baudelaire between the movements.”

Tony Peña did not follow this option, and is content to make the alexandrines sound without words. The collection consists of 9 movements of varying size, between 6 and 12 phrases. All are similar, and a greater uniformity connects them, but from one to another one may observe constant and subtle variations. At first sight, the writing of Tom Johnson does not seem very strict, and the work doesn’t look as mathematical as in other of his works. Yet it is very controlled, based on the constant and unique use of a descending simple four-note motif, or rather a sequence of three intervals (1, 3, 1 semitones). Variations from this pattern are only obtained by octave changes and note superpositions.

Why the guitar? Perhaps because its number of strings is half of the famous twelve “feet” of the alexandrine? Logic suggests that each line be played on six strings, with two strings per note, but it is not. The use of the instrument, again is not systematic to this point. However, the work is very well written for the guitar, from a composer who does not practice this instrument. Phrases fall well under the fingers, with just enough difficulty to make a little exercise for the performer. On the beats, jumps, glides, wide gaps, and between the beats easy notes that come without effort. No doubt the basic pattern was designed to promote the enjoyment of the game. In any case, the Alexandrines of Tom Johnson are “guitaristic” and sound well on the instrument. The entire range is explored via the incessant ups and downs, in a regular, monochrome but also unpredictable way.

—Gilbert Delor (August 2016)