

## **Music Metaphysics**

### **Tom Johnson**

I am not interested in the esthetics of my music, but rather in its metaphysics. Esthetics has to do with beauty, sounds, appearances, while metaphysics has to do with the essence of the music: where did it come from, how did it make itself, why is it there?

The metaphysics of music is pretty simple in cases where the source was some pre-existing music, the techniques were largely imitation, and the goals had mostly to do with making money, impressing audiences, etc. But the nature of the music we love most is more difficult to explain. It has transcendental qualities that we can't explain, it seems to come from somewhere beyond music history, beyond mere composition techniques. Those of us who devote our lives to composing do so because we believe that a musical score is much more than notes on paper. But what do we really believe, or believe in?

As a practicing Protestant, my own understanding of this can best be expressed in theological terms, but of course, metaphysical questions are not only for religious people. All composers, Buddhist, agnostic, atheist, or otherwise, must somehow believe in the music they are writing. I can not, of course, assume to know what others believe, and in fact, I am not 100 percent sure of my own convictions, which can sometimes be marred by doubts and exceptions and shifting moods. But let me try to write my own little credo here, which may also help others to understand their own beliefs.

I believe that I was called to compose. To be called is an important idea in Christianity, and not only for pastors. It is satisfying to feel that there is a reason for doing what one is doing, that one's life has meaning, that one is following some destiny. Composing music is the thing I do best, and it seems inevitable that I have followed this path. Thus the music I write is somehow necessary.

I believe that many life decisions were not my choice, that I was somehow obliged to make them, that some sort of fate or destiny was at work. In this regard I often think of my decision to study with Morton Feldman after meeting him in a composers conference in 1965. This was certainly not a question of following trends or advice. Hardly anyone in New York really respected this man at that time, and he was just beginning to write his most important music, yet I knew that this was my teacher, that only he could save me after six years of academic music study. In theological terms I could say "God was with me," and sometimes now I actually feel this, but at that time finding Feldman seemed more to be the result of a personal intentional search, and also just good luck.

I believe that a divine power is present in daily life. The sense that I am not alone is sometimes especially strong when I am at the piano, playing through some sketch. Very often I know objectively when something is wrong, because I'm making some mistake that I've made many times in the past, but sometimes I really can not explain what the problem is. I only know that there is a problem and that I must look for a better solution. At other times everything seems to be the way it must be, the idea

seems to have found its final form, and this can be even more difficult to explain. How do I know that everything is OK, that I must stop making adjustments? I just know. Something is telling me. It is comforting to say simply that I am exercising “intuition” here, as this word seems to have nothing to do with God or religion or other unexplainable things. But what is intuition really? Where does it come from? And how can we know that our intuition is really showing us the right way, and not misleading us? In the end our intuition also depends on belief, does it not?

I believe in prayer. It is rare, of course, that I think about prayer and religion when I am composing, but sometimes it occurs to me that my daily dialogue with music paper and computer files is a little like praying. In Christianity, as in Judaism and Islam, one can speak directly with a father figure, and the father figure speaks in return. It is this second part of the communication that is the most important. Listening. What are the powers that be telling me in this moment? A divine force does not generally speak in language, but sometimes strong messages seem to be coded right there in the music, trying to tell me something, trying to make me listen. Morton Feldman was always talking about listening, and in fact, his daily composing consisted mostly of that. If he were still alive, I have the feeling that he would agree with almost everything I am writing here, though he practiced no religion.

I believe that the structures in my music themselves come from something beyond myself, beyond ordinary reality. This conviction is no doubt stronger for me than for other composers, because I generally work with mathematical objects, formulas, the law of the pendulum, other kinds of deterministic and rational processes. My music tries to reflect nature, to reflect structural principles that have always existed in our world, and which were probably merely discovered, rather than invented, by human beings. A mathematical model like Pascal’s triangle has a truth more profound than any of its 20 applications, and more profound than anything we can see. Yet perhaps we may have some glimpse of this primordial structure, one of the essential building blocks of our world, if we find a particularly fine way of translating it into music and then listen very carefully. Reality is hidden behind what we normally see and hear. What we perceive is only appearances.

This way of thinking comes more from Plato than from Christianity, but like many Greek ideas, it is strongly present in Christianity as well. In Christianity this idea is most clearly stated in the phrase “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” “Word” (*logos* in Greek) is capitalized, and it makes a clear reference to another character, prominent in the Jewish tradition: Wisdom or Sofia. She, like the Word, represents the eternal wisdom that was there with the creator at the very beginning, before the creation of humans, before the creation of anything.

Of course, it is possible to invent mathematical theorems, to write music, to create other artistic works, and even to work in the garden, on the assumption that we humans are responsible for everything that is forming and growing. I often confront people who seem to feel that all forms of intelligence and wisdom are man-made. I continue to find this unlikely, however, which I suppose is what makes me a religious person, with particular ideas about the metaphysics of music.