

Canon for Six Guitars

Canon for Six Guitars (1998) is a wonderful clockwork. It is a canon, as its title suggests. Until now, everything is very classic. This canon is written for six guitars, and this is already rarer. But the real novelty is that, when the canon reaches its maximum density—i.e. five voices (since in the canon passages the six guitars never play at the same time)—what you can hear is a repeating massive chord, always the same. The opening theme is mobile, changing, as can be heard at the beginning of the piece, but once superimposed on itself in five layers, it produces a completely static fixed result.

Absolutely fixed? Let's see. For if one lends an ear, the sound is perceived as slightly changing in this seemingly immutable chord. It "moves" within the sound, very weakly, as often happens in minimalist music. The six notes of the chord are spread on five guitars in a changing manner. These notes are always the same, but they constantly move from one guitar to another according to a system of permutations that can be represented as a table:

<i>fa</i>	1	4	5	4	3	4	5	2
<i>do</i>	4	1	4	3	4	2	5	2
<i>sol#</i>	1	3	5	2	1	2	2	3
<i>ré#</i>	3	2	5	2	2	1	5	4
<i>la</i>	3	2	2	1	1	3	5	4
<i>mi</i>	2	4	5	4	3	4	4	1

The left column shows the six notes that form the chord, from high to low. The following eight columns represent, from left to right, the eight half-beats that form a 4/4 measure. The numbers 1 to 5 correspond to the five voices/guitars of the canon. With half-beat all notes are played, but their distribution among the five guitars is never the same.

Only toward the end of the piece does this happen. Initially, the six instruments play separately, and then they play at two, three, and finally five voices. This is where the repeated chord is established. After that, and to conclude the piece, Tom Johnson make the six guitars heard in unison, producing a beautiful end effect.

The piece is really designed for the guitar: the chord uses all the six strings of the instrument. In the spirit of simplicity, the work of the left hand is reduced to almost nothing. No movement is necessary. The two lowest notes, the E and the A are two open strings, and the other four are all obtained by barring the first

fret. The economy of means is still a major concern in the creative process by Tom Johnson. One can imagine the piece played by six guitarists distributed in the concert space, the sounds coming from several different directions, but this is a studio recording, and it is obviously Tony Peña playing all six instruments of the recording.

Canon for Six Guitars occupies a special place in the production of Tom Johnson, both in the body of his work in the period in which it was composed. Still, one can compare it with *Voicings*, a composition for four pianos written almost fifteen years earlier. Already in this work one finds groupings of the same instruments in different ways, as well as sequences of repeated chords with notes continually distributed in new formations. It is not rare in the work of an artist that works from very different periods echo one another.

—Gilbert Delor (August 2016)