# **Tom Johnson** (b. 1939)

### **COUNTING TO SEVEN**

Dedalus: Didier Aschour, Amélie Berson, Cyprien Busolini, Alessandra Giura Longo, Tom Johnson, Thierry Madiot, Fabrice Villard, Deborah Walker; voices and percussion

80831-2

#### Counting to Seven (2014)

1	French	1:31
2	Maninke (or Malinke)	4:22
3	Okinawan	2:33
4	Irish Gaelic	2:20
5	Tajik (or Tadjik)	5:11
6	Amerindian	3:59
7	Muruwari	2:52
8	German & Turkish	4:34
9	Indonesian	4:39
10	Russian	1:23
11	Mandarin	2:14
12	Swahili	1:52
13	Japanese	1:17
14	Georgian	3:06
15	South Pacific	4:07
16	Hungarian	1:08
17	Crobo (or Krobo)	11:30
18	Hebrew	1:32

TT: 60:09





om Johnson (b. 1939) IS A KEY FIGURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC SCENE whose voice as a composer is instantly recognizable. A major champion of minimalism in the 1970s as a writer, he remains one of its most important adherents as a composer, although the word 'minimalist' does not cover everything that his music does. The characteristic elements of repetition and sparse material are there, but his extensive use of mathematics and, especially, counting, makes him unique.

What attracted Tom Johnson to write so many pieces based on the counting of cardinal numbers is that this is a universal human activity. His use of numbers has nothing to do with symbolism or mysticism: "For me, numbers are just arithmetic, there's no mystical significance, and in different situations different numbers are more important." Through consistent use of numbers, Johnson has developed a systematic approach to the invention of music as important to his work as serialism was for Schoenberg or chance for Cage—although his system is of an entirely different order. Counting appeals to Johnson's rationality and his need to be accessible. "From the 1960s onwards I wanted to write music that had a certain logic to it and was self-explanatory," he says. "I was no mathematician, I knew how to count: 12345, 1 22 333 4444... or 1 121 12321 1234321... But I wanted to do more."

In 1988, Johnson joined a mathematics class run by Michel Waldschmidt in Paris and learnt how to count in Z/8, a circular world that begins with 0 and finishes with 7.

<sup>1</sup> Johnson in Michael Blake, "Michael Blake in Conversation with Tom Johnson in 2018," Contemporary Music Review, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2020), p. 462.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson in Girard and Lucia, "Conversations with Tom Johnson," Contemporary Music Review, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2020), pp. 422–423.

Language is another human universal and is equally important in Johnson's work. Counting developed in every culture according to the need for it and body counting was once widespread. David Attenborough has described the Biami people of New Guinea "touching first their fingers one by one, tapping places up their forearm, their elbow and continuing up the arm and ending on the side of the neck," a remarkable survival, in 1971, of this counting technique. As soon as numbers were spoken, they acquired hundreds of different forms, some more restricted with three or four sounds used repeatedly in combination, others less so.

Counting to Seven is a set of short pieces lasting about 80 minutes, of which eighteen pieces are presented here. Although obviously vocal because they are text-based, some of the pieces include percussion. They can be performed by almost any group of at least seven people and are not written for trained singers or actors. It was around 1980 that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> David Attenborough with Jonnie Hughes, *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future*, Witness Books, London, 2020, p. 50.

Johnson developed a series of twelve solos in twelve languages called *Counting Languages*, under the inspiration of sound poets such as Charlie Morrow and Jerome Rothenberg in the United States and Henri Chopin, Bob Cobbing, and Bernard Heidsieck in Europe. He then wrote *Counting Duets*, (also called *Counting Music*), a set of five counting sequences for two performers speaking in one language. Some years later, after a performance by Vincent Bouchot from the ensemble Dedalus, Johnson "reworked everything for seven voices. I changed the title to *Counting to Seven*, added about 30 languages, well-known, little known, living and dead, and put together an 80-minute version, which we began performing in 2014." The first concert performance by Dedalus was in Montpellier in 2016.

When Johnson first began to think about making such an extended piece, he had studied French, German, and a little Spanish, knew some Russian, and had picked up some Japanese during military service. The additional languages mostly came from chance encounters with native speakers: Malinke from a young man he met in Senegal, Tajik from attending a residency in Tashkent, and so on. He also consulted dictionaries and lists, including the inventory of numbers 1–10 in 5258 languages on Mark Rosenfelder's incredible Zompist website.

Johnson explores the tonalities and rhythms that come from repeating numbers sonorously in different languages. Every piece is different, with 1–7 as the connecting thread, like a set of short stories that forms a novel through a connecting character. The languages Johnson chose include major ones spoken in large swathes of the world—French, Japanese, Hebrew, German. Some are more national—Turkish, Hungarian, Gaelic, Georgian. Some are specific to certain places: Muruwari is spoken by Aboriginal

people in northern Australia; Tajik is a variety of Persian spoken in Uzbekistan; Maninke is spoken in Guinea, Mali, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast.

Each piece lasts for two to five minutes. All rely on repetition and most on added or staggered phrasing arising from different and carefully calculated patterns of repetition. When Tom Johnson and David Sanson made an impromptu recording of the Italian *Counting to Seven* online, the Vimeo comment ended, "A nice improvised moment" (https://vimeo.com/123089895). The recording may have been impromptu but the piece, like all of Johnson's music, is anything but improvisational in structure. Nor is it rigid, because Johnson's structures flow from the material rather than the material fitting any pre-ordained system, as every piece on this CD shows. In the following brief descriptions of language and structure, numbers other than French are written in Unicode, with accented syllables in bold. Extracts from scores also remind us how interesting Johnson's works are as visual designs.

Track 1: French. French's monosyllabic *un*, *deux*, *trois*, *quatre*, *cinq*, *six*, *sept* is established in rapid 7/8 time with *sept* becoming a launch pad for staggered entries of voices repeating numbers until all seven voices have entered.

Track 2: Maninke (or Malinke). The numbers *kilin*, *fula* (pronounced '*fita*'), *saba*, *naani*, *luulu*, *wooro*, *woorowula* are spoken with high tone followed by low, and then each is repeated for as many times as it represents, with dynamics building as numbers congregate, and high and low bells and wood blocks playing a prominent role.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Tom Johnson, Counting Languages, Editions Data, p. 3.

Track 3: Okinawan. The island of Okinawa is a Japanese prefecture made famous by fierce fighting in World War II, and has developed a language independent of but related to Japanese. The numbers *tichi, tachi, mitchi, yuchi, ichichi, muchi, nanachi* are repeated in a measured way, their order varying and with differing emphases placed on different voices, creating a mood of gracious discipline.

Track 4: Irish Gaelic. The numbers (and the way they are pronounced in brackets) are aon (ain), dó (dough), trí (tree), ceathair (cah-her), cúig (coo-ig), sé (shay), seacht (shocked). When pronounced in sequence they acquire aspirations, and so what you mostly hear is, 'ah-hain ah-hain... ah-dough ah-dough'. The strident repetitions together with these aspirations make a strong, lilting piece for solo female voice.

Track 5: Tajik (or Tadjik). The numbers *yak, du, se, chor, panch, shish, haf* are monosyllabic, like French, but Johnson makes a very different kind of piece here, alternating time signatures between 3/4, 4/4, 6/4, 7/4 although the overall metrical feeling is that of a waltz. The regular unison declamation of no. 7, *haf*, helps the listener navigate through 158 bars of music.

Track 6: Amerindian. Of the thousands of languages spoken in the Americas, Johnson chose twenty in the A's including Athabascan, the language of Eddie Ketchetag, an Eskimo from Alaska who did basic military training with him. Listed below, they are read one after the other by different soloists with a dense texture sometimes resulting from repetitions. Number 6 in Achumawi, *ladimadihazmisayeqdi*, must rank among the longest word for this number in any language.

Abenaki: pazekw, nis, nas law, nlan, nguedz, tbawz Abenski: bez'go, nis, na`s, yeu, nan, nukw'dus, tabaúwus Achagua: bákeeghi, tshámai, matálii, kuátru, abacaje, abaíbacage, juchamatabacage

Achumawi: Ha'mis, ha'k, 'càsdi, hadàma, làdim, ladimadihazmisayeqdi, ladimadihakayeqdi

Adai: nancas, nass, colle, tacache, seppacan, pacanancus, pacaness

Aguacatec: jun, cob, osh, cyaj, 'o', wuqáq, Wuq

Akawaio: tègina, azara, osorowa, asagorone, miararoe, puda, azàra, miaràroe Alabama: cháffàaka, tòklo, tótchìina, óstàaka, tállàapi, hánnàali, ontòklo

Algonkin: pegik, ninch, nissoue, neou, narau, ningoutouassou, Ninchouassou

Allentiac: ijkua, moga, ména, makéua, achíua, jín-ua, kúga

Amuesha: patshis, epá, mapá, patá:ts, pamuná:r, pitshap, kantshí:r

Apache: dalaá, naki, táági, dí,?í,?ì, ashdla?i, gostán', gost?igi

Aracaju+: pang, chepchep, uarätambúlae, chöpatichepchep, chöpatipang, jatang, jänio

Arapaho: jaasaaye, neesh, naasau, yeain, yawthawn, nedawdahx, nesaudahx

Arawak: aba, bian, kabyn, bithi, badakhabo, bathian, bianthian

Arikara: asco, pitco, towwit, chitish, chihgo, chapis, tochapis

Atakapa: tanu:k, tsi:k, lat, imatol, ni:t, latsik, paxe

Athabaskan: zelkei, tucha, tohchke, tenki, zielalo, koshssini, kanzeogi

Aymara: may, paya, quimsa, pusi, phesqa, sojhta, paqallqo

Ayoreo: chomară', gare', ga:dioc, ga:gáni', che:na' yimanâi~, chomerā' iji' ti, gare' iji' ti

Aztec (Nahuatl): ce, ome, eyi, nahui, macuilli, chicuace, chicome

Track 7: Muruwari. The first peoples of Australia once spoke more than 250 different languages although today less than half survive. In Muruwari, from northern Australia, nos. 1–7 are *yamn, kapu, kapuyama, kapulanta, marangka, marangkua, marangakapu,* and from their distinctive syllables Johnson creates changing groups of note values as shown in Figure 1.

# **Counting to Seven** Muruwari (Australia) Tom Johnson ma - rang-ku - a v⊪ **#** <del>%</del> VII H

Figure 1: Muruwari bars 1-2 © Tom Johnson, reproduced with permission.

Track 8: German and Turkish. The emphatic German eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, sechs, sieben alternate with the plangent Turkish bir, iki, udj, dōr, beşh, alti, jedi. This piece was originally conceived with four languages in which one Irish Gaelic, two German, two Japanese (+ woodblock) and two Turkish speakers stand in different places on the stage. Even reduced to two languages, the accents, rests, widely different pitches and rapid hocketing make this a very lively piece for men's voices.

Track 9: Indonesian. The numbers *satu*, *dua*, *tiga*, *empat*, *lima*, *enam*, *tujuh* all have two syllables—declaimed as one—on relentless crotchet beats accompanied by wood blocks. As the vocal phrases shorten, the percussion phrases lengthen until they take over, still representing in some way the sounds of the numbers.

Track 10: Russian. The numbers *odín, dva, tri, chetyre, pyat', shest', sem'* are said for the same number of times they represent—i.e. *odin* once, *dva* twice, etc.—until the next number enters. This pattern is represented in Johnson's earlier *Counting Languages* as shown in Figure 2.

Track 11: Mandarin. 1–7 in the Chinese language of Mandarin is *yi*, *are*, *san*, *sii*, *wu*, *liu*, *chi*. Diphthongs inherent in these syllables are spoken simply at first, but as they are repeated (by the whole septet in unison) they are exaggerated, until by the end of the piece the sequence of numbers becomes a heaving sea of rising and falling pitches.

Track 12: Swahili. *moja*, *mbili*, *tatu*, *ine*, *tanu*, *sita*, *saba* are presented in the two-part 'call and response' style typical of much traditional music on the African continent. A male soloist initiates each new phrase and is answered in a whisper by the chorus, but the chorus's point of entry keeps changing, which gently mediates the beautiful simplicity of this piece.

# Russian [русский язык]

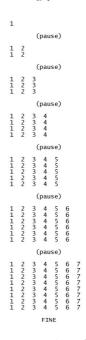


Figure 2: 'Russian' from Counting Languages © Tom Johnson, reproduced with permission.

Track 13: Japanese. The numbers *ichi*, *ni*, *san*, *yon*, *go*, *roku*, *shichi* are spoken quietly as a female duet. Each person says her number seven times, ending with a prolonged syllable and a gentle wood block comment. It is the simplest of all structures in *Counting to Seven*: 1111111-/2222222-/3333333-/4444444-/5555555-/6666666--.

Track 14: Georgian. The numbers are *erti*, *ori*, *sami*, *otkhi*, *khuti*, *ekvsi*, *shridi*. 1–6 have two syllables on two quavers at the same pitch, but the 7th pair of quavers (*shridi*) has a falling tone. Johnson assigns this phrasing to all seven voices in turn, but some have rests, and so a kind of regular-irregular polyphonic chanting results. "I couldn't help thinking of the choruses I have heard in Orthodox churches," says Johnson, and so "the music went in that direction." <sup>5</sup>

Track 15: South Pacific. Johnson chose seven of the thousands of languages from this part of the world listed on the Zompist website:

Chomorro: hacha, bugua, tulu, fatfat, lima, gunum, fin
Mathai: aitem, ailu, aital, aifat, ailim, ainom, aifit
Mokem: chakh, thuwakh, taloj, pat, lemakh, nom, khujuh
Ivata: asaq, dadowak, tatdog, apat, dadima, anem, papitok
Balaesan: inja, dorua, totolu, rapat, lelima, rorong, pepitu
Ali: tei, ro, tul, au, lim, limte, limto
Ngariawan: ba-sin-ta, i-ru, i-ra-da-bits, i-ra-da-i-tu, i-ru-da-bits-da-i-ra,
i-ra-da-i-ru-da-i-ru-da-bits, i-ra-da-bits-da-i-ra-da-bits

After each language is plainly stated with percussion punctuation, they are mixed together, which results in increasing rhythmic complexity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Tom Johnson, program note to *Counting to Seven*, Editions 75, Paris, p. 3.

Track 16: Hungarian. Johnson learned the numbers *egy, kettő, három, négy, öt, hat, hét* on a trip to Budapest. Perhaps because he found the pronunciation difficult in this language that does not have Indo-European roots, the piece is a short and straightforward solo, in which the seven numbers are rapidly repeated in different sequences.

Track 17: Crobo (or Krobo). The numbers are *kaki*, *enyo*, *eten*, *eway*, *enwo*, *efa*, *bago* in this rare (and almost dead) Ghanaian language. It may be the most obscure language in *Counting to Seven* but it generates the longest and most difficult movement. It's a tease: Every time *bago* is reached it feels like the end but the music takes off again with another *kaki*, then another, each time with a new energy coming off a language that Johnson makes sound vibrantly alive.

Track 18: Hebrew. The numbers *ahat*, *shtayim*, *shalosh*, *arba*', *chamesh*, *shesh*, *sheva*' are repeated prayerfully in this male solo and by a process of accumulation similar to that used in the Russian piece this provides a gentle closure to the collection.

Johnson was more concerned in this last piece than in any other about the politics of his choice of languages. If Hebrew is there, why not Arabic? someone might ask, for example. Every continent is represented, nevertheless, languages spoken by hundreds of millions of people are celebrated, and *Counting to Seven* remains, in the words of Didier Aschour, "a moving celebration of human invention in all its singularity and universality."

#### -Christine Lucia

Christine Lucia was born in London and spent more than 40 years in South Africa where she wrote extensively on South African music. In 2020 she co-edited with Michael Blake an issue of Contemporary Music Review in honor of Tom Johnson and she now lives in France, where she publishes African music scores online at www.african-composers-edition.co.za.

<sup>6</sup> Didier Aschour, Introduction to Counting to Seven, Editions 75, Paris, p. 1.

Johnson is well known for his operas: *The Four Note Opera* (1972) continues to be presented in many countries; *Riemannoper* has been staged more than thirty times in German-speaking countries since its premiere in Bremen in 1988. His largest composition, the *Bonhoeffer Oratorium*, a two-hour work in German for orchestra, chorus, and soloists, with text by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was premiered in Maastricht in 1996, and has since been presented in Berlin and New York. Recent compositions include *Knock on Wood*, *Deep Rhythms I–VII*, *Soicher Harmonies*, and *Twelne Years Later*.

The Voice of New Music, a collection of articles written 1971–1982 for The Village Voice, published by Apollohuis in 1989, is now in the public domain and can be downloaded at www.editions75.com. The theoretical books, Self-Similar Melodies (1996) and Other Harmony (2010), are published by Editions 75 and the Two-Eighteen Press. Conversations avec Tom Johnson, interviews with Bernard Girard, was issued by Aedam Musicae in 2011, and Finding Music (2019), an anthology of writings in English and German, is in the catalog of MusikTexte. His Illustrated Music videos may be viewed on YouTube/Tom Johnson.

Founded in 1996 by Didier Aschour, **Dedalus** is a contemporary music ensemble based in Toulouse and associated with GMEA—Centre National de Création Musicale in Albi (France). Its repertoire is devoted to open scores from North American and

European music from the 1960s to the present day. Dedalus is organized as a collective in which arrangements, orchestrations, and performances are developed together. Dedalus is one of the most ardent promoters of American minimalism of the 60s/70s, offering interpretations of works by such composers as Moondog, Christian Wolff, Phill Niblock, Frederic Rzewski, and Tom Johnson. Since 2011, Dedalus has made a series of commissions from a new generation of composers who have taken up the legacy of experimental music, and musicians from improvisation, electronic, or electroacoustic music (Jürg Frey, Catherine Lamb, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Sébastien Roux).

Guitarist **Didier Aschour** is known for his pioneering work on microtonal guitar (Harry Partch, James Tenney, Clarence Barlow, and Pascale Criton) and on alternative guitar repertoire. Since 1996, he has directed the Dedalus ensemble and played with numerous other contemporary music ensembles. As a composer, he has written extensively for dance, often creating particular acoustical systems that question the relationship of music and sound phenomena. In 2016, he was nominated Director of GMEA—Centre National de Création Musicale in Albi (France).

Flutist **Amélie Berson** has devoted her work to contemporary and chamber music. She has received several grants from the Ferienkürse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt and the Yehudi Menuhin Foundation. She also plays baroque and romantic flutes and works to introduce the sonority of ancient instruments into contemporary pieces. As a founding member of Dedalus, she has been playing in the ensemble since 1996. Ms. Berson teaches flute at the Conservatory of Saint-Cloud.

After classical studies, **Cyprien Busolini** focused on contemporary music and improvisation. He is now a member of Dedalus Ensemble and Onceim (improvisation orches-

tra). He also plays regularly as guest violist with Fratres ensemble, which plays classical repertoire on baroque instruments.

**Sandra Giura Longo** is a flutist, vocalist, and performer of contemporary musical theater. She also teaches chamber music at the conservatory. Her musical experiences range from playing as a soloist to orchestras, chamber ensembles, and vocal groups. Her exploration of the expressive and creative possibilities of making music in many contexts has taken her to repertoire ranging from the Middle Ages to the present day. She focuses particularly on the performance and interpretation of twentieth-century music and improvisation, often crossing dance, theater, and visual arts.

Breather, inventor, and instrument maker, collector and player of acoustic sound objects, and bass trombonist **Thierry Madiot** has improvised with such musicians as Derek Bailey at Company Week. He likes to work with non-musicians on new music like that of James Saunders or John Cage. Mostly interested by the instrumental gestures and even more on the action of Listening (for example, he has created seven different kinds of sound massages since 2000), he is a road companion from the beginning of the Instants Chavirés (experimental music venue near Paris).

**Fabrice Villard** plays clarinet with Dedalus ensemble and frequently improvises in different contexts. He composes contemporary music for young people and teaches improvisation and non-conventional musical writing at Université Paris–Saclay. He also writes experimental poetry, performs his texts with or without music, and publishes books.

Cellist **Deborah Walker** is a new music performer and improviser based in Berlin. She is interested in multiple forms of music creation related to the exploration of sound and

interaction with other art forms. A member of the Dedalus ensemble since 2007, Ms. Walker has worked with such composers as Pascale Criton, Philip Corner, Phill Niblock, Éliane Radigue, and Michael Pisaro, in solo or ensemble projects. She also plays regularly with violinist Silvia Tarozzi. In 2020, she completed a PhD in Arts at the University of Lorraine, with a dissertation on the editor Rosanna Chiessi (Pari&Dispari) and her collaborations with Fluxus artists in Italy.

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TOM JOHNSON

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