

CRI SD 515  
Ben Johnston

*Sonnets of Desolation* (10:45)  
The New Swingle Singers

*Visions and Spels* (26:19)  
The New Verbal Workshop

**Ben Johnston** (born in 1926 in Macon, Georgia) is best known for his work in microtonal music, particularly in the use of the ancient “just” intonation. He received his high school education in Richmond, Virginia, and his advanced education at the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign with advanced degrees from the College of William and Mary, the Cincinnati Conservatory, and Mills College. His principal teachers of composition were Harry Partch, Darius Milhaud, Burrill Phillips, Robert Palmer, and John Cage. Since 1951 he has been on the faculty of the University of Illinois where in 1983 he became Professor Emeritus of Musical Composition.

Johnston has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a grant from the National Council on the Arts and the Humanities, Associate Membership in the University of Illinois Center for Advanced Study, and a grant from the Illinois Arts Council which had made this recording possible. He has received commissions from the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, the Fine Arts Foundation of Chicago, the Polish Radio in Warsaw, and the Paul Fromm Foundation for *Sonnets of Desolation*.

The concept of microtonal complexity achieved through the most consonant and mathematically simple tuning procedures has been the foundation of most of Johnston’s works since 1961. The extension of tuning based on the first six partials of the overtone series (like common practice in early music, avoiding the compromise of temperament) occupied him until 1970, when he undertook an extension of tuning based on higher partials. Unlike much microtonal music, Johnston’s is not written for electronic instruments. Instead, he has studied and worked with traditional instruments.

Of his works, Johnston writes:

“*Sonnets of Desolation* was commissioned by the Paul Fromm Foundation for the New Swingle Singers. It is a setting of four of the last sonnets of the British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. The poems deal with spiritual crisis, with death and with faith. In composing this music I used for the first time all the overtones through the thirteenth partial, which effectively means through the sixteenth. As in the music of Harry Partch, the inverted series is used complementarily. The choral writing is in eight parts, with one on a part. Microphones are used to amplify the voices.

“*Visions and Spels* is a realization of the indeterminate composition *Vigil* (although the score, a verbal text, was not written down until after the piece was completed). It was composed by the New Verbal Workshop, of which I was, for this composition, a member. I led the improvisations and decided upon the texts to be used. The impetus for composing this work came from an invitation from Patricia Knowles of the University of Illinois Dance Department to compose a piece for the United States’ Bicentennial Year. The first version was performed in 1976, with dancers. After this performance, the Workshop decided to make an independent composition of it. The work is truly a group composition. In part, the impetus to participate in such a composition came from a negative reaction to descriptions of group compositions in mainland China, reported by Cornelius Cardew. Their approach seemed to me to be so wrongly based that I vowed to undertake the problem myself in order to make it work as I thought that it could -and should. All the texts are by North American aborigines and come from the collection *Technicians of the Sacred*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg.”

*Sonnets of Desolation* was written for the **New Swingle Singers**, who premiered the piece in November 1981 in Urbana, Illinois. Recognized world-wide as masters of the classical scat, the British octet commands a repertoire that ranges from works of the sixteenth century to the present day. The New Swingle Singers have performed at the Kennedy Center, Wolf Trap, and the Village Gate, among other notable appearances. In the field of contemporary music, the group has been closely associated with the Italian composer Luciano Berio, who has included them in his *Opera* and *La Vera storia* and has directed them in recordings of *A-Ronne* and *The Cries of London*. Recently, they recorded the five movement version of *Sinfonia*, conducted by Pierre Boulez.

The **New Verbal Workshop**, founded in 1970 by Herbert and Norma Marder, is a group of six poets, musicians, and actors who perform a medium which they call “speechmusic,” using the voice as primary instrument. All Workshop compositions are improvised: formal structures and themes are developed through exercises and rehearsals and, as in jazz, the content is different in each performance, “teetering” as reviewer Thomas Willis says, “on the boundary between music and poetry.” (*The Chicago Tribune*, April 17, 1977). New Verbal Workshop has given performances at the Depot Theater and at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts in Urbana, Illinois, and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Its activities have been supported by grants from the University of Illinois. Participating in *Visions and Spels* are Herbert Marder, Norma Marder, Joan Korb, Fred Simon, Theo Ann Brown, and Ben Johnston.

### *Sonnets of Desolation*

Gerald Manley Hopkins

No. 1

#### **(Carrion Comfort)**

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man  
In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.  
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me  
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan  
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,  
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.  
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.  
Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod  
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year  
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

No. 2

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
What hours, O what black hours we have spent  
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!  
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say  
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament  
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent  
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see  
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be  
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

No. 3

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,  
But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks  
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;  
To do without, take tosses, and obey.

Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,  
Nowhere. Natural heart's ivy, Patience masks  
Our ruins of wrecked past purpose.  
There she basks Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills  
To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills  
Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.

And where is he who more and more distills  
Delicious kindness? - He is patient. Patience fills  
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

No. 4

#### **That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection**

Cloud-Puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-  
built thoroughfare: heaven-roosterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches.  
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, wherever an elm arches,  
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.  
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare  
Of yestertempest's creases; in pool and rut peel parches  
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust stanches, starches  
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there  
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.  
But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark  
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!  
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark  
    Is any of him a t all so stark  
But vastness blurs and time beats | level. Enough! the Resurrection,  
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's grasping, | joyless days, dejection.  
    Across my foundering deck shone  
A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
    In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
    Is immortal diamond.

## Visions and Spels

from *Technicians of the Sacred*, edited and with commentaries by Jerome Rothenberg  
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1.

Came, ascend the ladder: all come in: all sit down.  
We were poor, poor, poor, poor, poor,  
When we came to this world through the poor place,  
Where the body of water dried for our passing.  
Banked up clouds cover the earth.  
All come four times with your showers:  
Descend to the base of the ladder B stand still: Bring your showers 8 great rains.  
All, all come, all ascend, all come in, all sit down.  
(Zuni Indian)

2.

Hey you, Sun, Moon, Stars  
And you winds, clouds, rain, mist  
Listen to me, listen,  
The news is another child belonging has come to this  
    earth of ours,  
Make its path smooth  
So it can reach the top of the first hill, and the second hill  
And hey you valleys, rivers, lakes, trees, grasses  
You make its path smooth  
So it can reach the top of the third hill  
And listen, you birds of the air, you animals of the tall timbers,  
You bugs and creepers —you, too, listen,  
All of you of sky, earth, and air,  
I ask you, beg you  
Pass this child on 'til it climbs up, and over, and beyond the  
    fourth hill,  
From then on, this child will be strong enough to travel  
    on its own  
And to see what is beyond those four hills.

3.

today  
is mine (I claimed)  
(to) a man  
a voice  
I sent  
you grant me  
this day  
is mine (I claimed)  
(to) a man  
a voice  
I sent  
now  
here  
(he) is  
by *Shell Necklace*

4.

Heya, heya, heya-a yo-ho-yaho-yaha hahe-ya-an  
ha-yahe- ha-wena  
yo-ho-yo-ho- yaha hahe-ya-an  
he-yahe- ha-wena  
he-yo- wena hahe-yahan  
ha-yahe- ha-wena  
he-yo- wena hahe-yahan  
he he he he-yo  
he-yo- wena hahe-yahan  
he he he he-yo  
he-yo- howo- heyo wana heya heya  
(*Navaho*)

5.

inop inhumanut erinaliot  
For a man's mind a magic song  
Big man,

Big man!

aglgagjuarit  
Your big hands

Your big feet,  
make them smooth And look far ahead!

Big man,

Big man!

Your thoughts smooth out

and look far ahead!

Big man,  
Big man!  
Your weapons let them fall!  
(*Copper Eskimo*)

6.

### **The Killer (after A'yu'ini)**

Careful: my knife drills your soul  
listen, whatever-your-name-is  
One of the wolf people  
listen I'll grind your saliva into the earth  
listen I'll cover your bones with black flint  
listen I'll cover your bones with black feathers  
listen I'll cover your bones with black rocks  
Because you're going where it's empty  
Black coffin out on the hill  
listen the black earth will hide you,  
will find you a black hut  
Out where it dark, in that country

listen            I'm bringing a box for your bones  
                    A black box  
                    A grave with black pebbles  
listen            your sours spilling out  
listen            it's blue  
(*Cherokee Indian*)

7.  
When Hare heard of Death, he started for his lodge & arrived there crying, shrieking, *My uncles & my aunts must not die!* And then the thought assailed him: *To all things death will come!* He cast his thoughts upon the precipices & they began to fall & crumble. Upon the rocks he cast his thoughts & they became shattered. Under the earth he cast his thoughts & all the things living there stopped moving & their limbs stiffened in death. Up above, towards the skies, he cast his thoughts & the birds flying there suddenly fell to the earth & were dead.

After he entered his lodge he took his blanket & wrapping it around him, lay down crying. *Not the whole earth will suffice for all those who will die. Oh there will not be enough earth for them in many places!* There he lay in his corner wrapped up in his blanket, silent.  
(*Winnebago Indian*)

8.  
**The Stars**  
For we are the stars. For we sing.  
For we sing with our light.  
For we are birds made of fire.  
For we spread our wings over the sky.  
Our light is a voice.  
We cut a road for the soul  
for its journey through death.  
For three of our number are hunters.  
For these three hunt a bear.  
For there never yet was a time  
when these three didn't hunt.  
For we face the hills with disdain.  
This is the song of the stars.  
(*Passamaquoddy Indian*)

9.  
The Crow-*Ehe'eye!*  
I saw him when he flew down,  
To the earth, to the earth.  
He has renewed our life,  
He has taken pity on us.  
—Moki "*Little Woman*"  
(*Cheyenne*)

I circle around  
The boundaries of the earth,  
Wearing the long wing feathers  
As I fly.  
—Anon. (*Arapaho*)

I'yehe! my children -  
My children,  
We have rendered them desolate.  
The whites are crazy - Ahe'yuhe'yui  
—*"Sitting Bull"* (Arapaho)  
*"Apostle of the Dance"*

We shall live again. We shall live again.  
—Anon.  
(Comanche)

10

### **A Song from "The Enemy Way"**

(Chorus)

*A nice one, a nice one, a nice one now gave a sound, a nice, a nice, a nice one now gave a sound, so it did.*

*Now I am Changing Woman's child when a nice one gave its sound, so it did*  
In the center of the turquoise home a nice one gave its sound, so it did  
On the very top of the soft goods floor a nice one gave its sound, so it did  
It's the nice child of a dark water pot that just gave its sound, so it did  
Its lid is a dark cloud when the nice one gave its sound, so it is  
Sunray encircles it when the nice one gave its sound, so it does  
Waters child is sprayed upon it when the nice one gave its sound, so it is  
At its front it is pleasant when the nice one gave its sound, so it is  
At its rear it is pleasant when the nice one gave its sound, so it is  
It's the nice child of long life & happiness that just gave its sound, so it is.

(Chorus)

*A nice, a nice one, a nice one now gave its sound so it did.*

*Now I am Changing Woman's grandchild when a nice one gave its sound, so it did*  
In the center of the white bead home a nice one gave its sound, so it did  
On the very top of a jeweled floor a nice one gave its sound, so it did  
It's the nice child of the blue water pot that just gave its sound, so it is  
Blue cloud is its lid when a nice one gave its sound, so it is  
Rainbow encircles it when a nice one gave its sound, so it does  
Waters child is sprayed upon it when a nice one gave its sound, so it is  
In its rear it is pleasant when a nice one gave its sound,

so it is  
At us front it is pleasant when a nice one gave its sound,  
so it is  
It's the nice child of long life & happiness that just gave its  
sound, so it is

(Chorus)

Norma: A nice one, a nice one, a nice one  
now gave a sound,

Women: a nice, a nice, a nice one now gave  
a sound, so it did.

All: A nice one, a nice one, a nice one  
just gave its sound, that's all!  
(*Navaho*)

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*Sonnets of Desolation:*

Recorded by Thomas Hayes Edited by Scott Wyatt

*Visions and Spels:*

Produced and recorded by the New Verbal Workshop

Edited by Norma Marder and Scott Wyatt

This is a composer supervised recording.

(*Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket*)