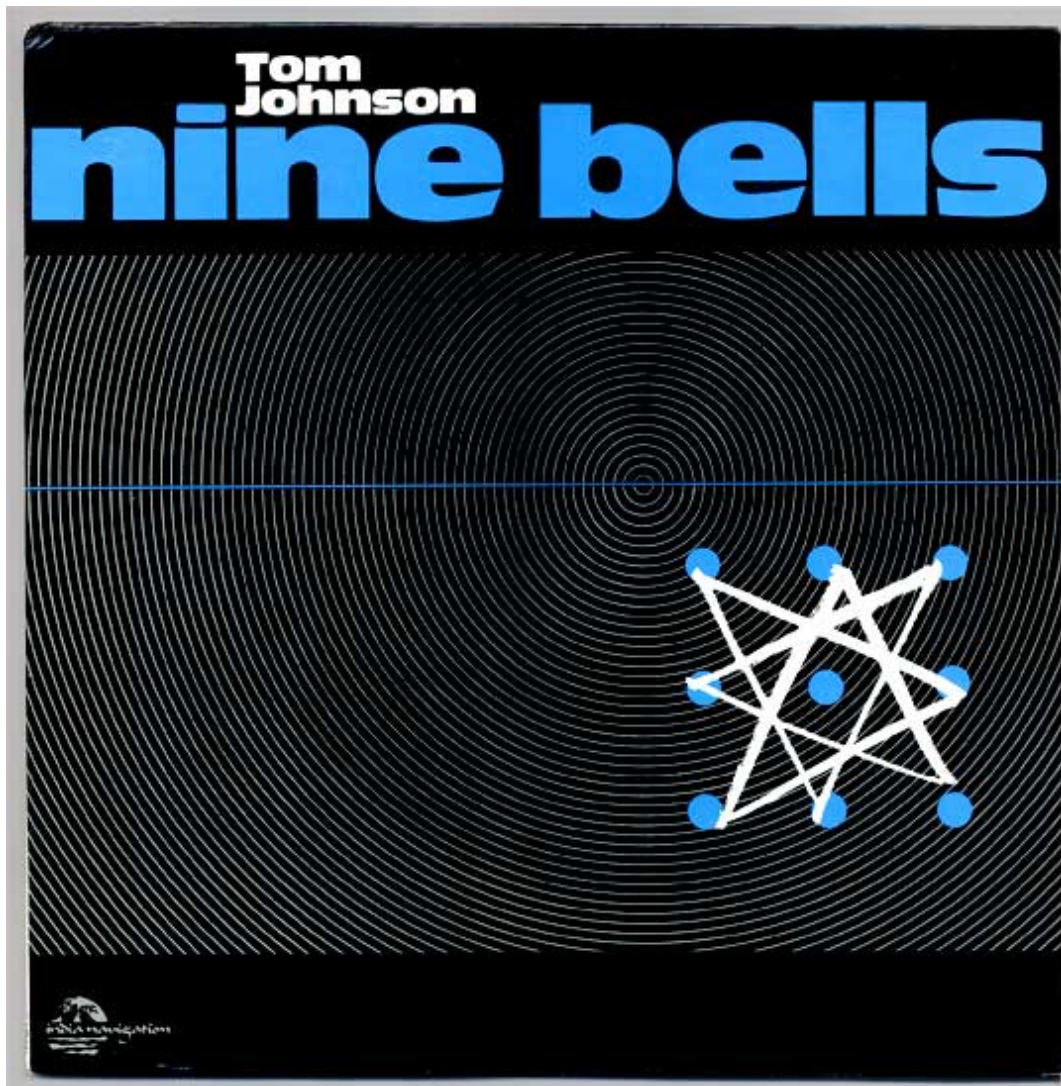


Las nueve campanas de Tom Johnson

Escrito por Marta Macho Stadler
Viernes 22 de Septiembre de 2017 13:30

Compuesta en 1979 por [Tom Johnson](#), *Nine Bells* explora los posibles caminos que unen nueve campanas de diferentes tamaños –la música que puede componerse dependiendo del orden y la intensidad con que se toquen– suspendidas en una cuadrícula de 3×3, cada una de ellas situada a distancia de 6 pies de las campanas contiguas.



<http://continuo.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/bells-front.jpg>

La música se produce al hacer repicar las campanas siguiendo caminos precisos alrededor de la instalación. Los recorridos se realizan a mayor o menor velocidad, y el sonido de estos

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pasos –raudos o más pausados– forma parte de la pieza (recordar también [Quad](#) de Samuel Beckett).

IN 3023



PATTERNS IN SOUND AND MOTION'
by Carl Stone

New York composer Tom Johnson's output is both large and broad, encompassing many different avenues of expression, including opera, works for dance, piano, chamber ensembles and orchestra. A large proportion has utilized text, either instruction pieces or pieces wherein a performer works with a text in a semi-theatrical way. His work can be broadly divided into two categories: logical and illogical. Illogical meaning intuitive, through-composed, perhaps improvised; logical meaning derived from the systematic application of processes that define both the overall form and the smaller details of a composition.

Nine Bells is a work in the latter category. The piece utilizes a set of burglar alarm gongs suspended from the ceiling in a three-by-three grid, with each bell approximately six feet from its neighbors. To perform, Johnson walks in and around the bells in various geometric formations (cloverleaf, figure-eight, circle, diagonal, oval, rectangle) at a steady tempo. While walking he strikes certain bells that he passes in accordance with a precomposed set of logical sequences. To give one example of a simple sequence: bell #1, bell #2, bell #3, bell #2, bell #3, bell #4, bell #3, bell #4, bell #1.

bell #4, bell #1 and bell #2. Logical sequence can also determine other compositional aspects such as the direction of the performer's walk, the dynamics of a bell-strike, the number of steps, etc. There are occasional wry "kinks" which then allow for the transformation into and rotation to another possibility. The work is in nine sections, or "bells," each beginning and ending with, and in fact pivoting on, a central tonic bell which changes each time in sequence. The visual nature of the piece, with the composer padding around in sneakers within the network of burglar alarms, provides considerable clarity and enables the listener/viewer to perceive the pattern more readily than if aural cues were the only information available.

Just as seeing the piece gives us important clues as to its logic, so does hearing the footsteps of the performer bind together the disjunct ringing of



the bells. At Umbrella Loft (in Pasadena) Johnson's pace hardly sagged, even though he walked approximately three miles in the course of the performance. The performance of *Nine Bells* on the record that was given over Dutch radio (VPRO) was aided greatly by the producers' sensitivity to the importance of the walk; the engineers ended up using multiple microphones to record the floor alone, to be mixed in with the sound of the bells.

Nine Bells, with its use of note patterns and cells, its de facto employment of the technical devices of augmentation and diminution, plus its clarity and formal coherence, might cause it to be placed alongside the work of the so-called pattern music composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Yet the geometry of the piece and the ingenious use of the grid system point even more aptly to the nonmusical work of artists such as Ad Reinhardt and Sol LeWitt. □

CARL STONE IS A COMPOSER AND THE MUSIC DIRECTOR OF KPFF-FM/PACIFICA RADIO IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.
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OTHER COMMENTS ON NINE BELLS

I've always been struck by the melodic grace of Tom's work; by the strong feeling in it, sometimes unabashed and sometimes restrained; by the ingenious variation of melodic fragments; by the tough-minded structures that always underlie the music's apparent simplicity (and which don't exist only on paper, as some composer's structures do, but make the actual sounds of the piece cohere); and finally by the way the tensions of performance are made part of the composition.

More recently Tom did some counting pieces at the Experimental Inter-media Foundation, intricate patterns of numbers that the audience spoke aloud with him, and which, as happens often with his music, proved more effective in performance than they'd seemed to be when he tried them out on me privately. And on May 21 and 22, at the Susan Caldwell Gallery, he performed the engagingly austere *Nine Bells*, in which he hangs nine alarm bells (bought second-hand on Canal Street) from the ceiling and for more than an hour walks rhythmically through the labyrinth they create, striking them in patterns designed to make sense both musically and visually.

These patterns are an essential part of the piece, but so are the movement and reverberation of the bells, which sometimes gently sway and sometimes swing violently from side to side on their ropes like angry pendulums; their ringing dies out only in breaks between sections of the score, and surrounds the work with a gentle aural glow. Tom's effort in performing *Nine Bells* is made visible in a witty but doggedly literal way, because you see him striking the bells (it's obviously not as easy as it might have seemed in advance) and because you see him walking, so vigorously at one point that he ends up gasping for breath. If you ask him what it's like to perform *Nine Bells*, you know what he means when he says "I walk three miles."

Gregory Sandow, VILLAGE VOICE

"*Nine Bells*" created a feeling of time suspended, soothing calm—but never boredom. For the listener, the work lasted an hour. For Mr. Johnson it was "about three miles long."

Bernard Holland, NEW YORK TIMES

"One can either sit back, trancelike, and listen to the sounds, or else one can try to figure out the logic of the journey...I like Johnson's humor," was the reaction of Jeanne Folly in *Le Matin de Paris*.

...

Nine Bells has been performed by the composer worldwide: From the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, to the Festival d'Automne in Paris and music and theater festivals in Brussels, London, and Cologne; as well as art galleries and performance centers in the United States from PS.1 in Queens to Portland Center for the Visual Arts in Oregon.

VILLAGE VOICE

Composed by Tom Johnson/
Two Eighteen Press (BMI)

Produced by Tom Johnson
and Bob Cummins
Album Cover by Elsie Fredricks
Liner photo by Boermens
© India Navigation 1982
60 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10013


SIDE 1



First Bell



Second Bell



Third Bell



Fourth Bell

SIDE 2



Fifth Bell



Sixth Bell



Seventh Bell



Eighth Bell



Ninth Bell

En la contraportada del vinilo pueden apreciarse algunos de los caminos recorridos
<http://continuo.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/bells-back.jpg>

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En el LP grabado por [India Navigation](#) (IN-3023, New York, 1982) dura 57:30 minutos (puede descargarse en [este enlace](#)).

- 01 First Bell (8:06)
- 02 Second Bell (6:44)
- 03 Third Bell (7:22)
- 04 Fourth Bell (7:31)
- 05 Fifth Bell (8:30)
- 06 Sixth Bell (6:40)
- 07 Seventh Bell (3:58)
- 08 Eighth Bell (5:05)
- 09 Ninth Bell (3:40)

El propio compositor se encargaba de tocar su obra, hasta llegar a la edad de 55 años, momento en el que Johnson tuvo que dejar de representarla –se requiere una excelente forma física para poder realizar los trayectos requeridos durante la hora que dura la obra–. Otros artistas han interpretado *Nine Bells*, cambiando en algunos casos, la colocación de las campanas.

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En *I want to find the music, not to compose it* (ver [1]), Johnson explica:

[...] *Nine Bells* was a similar case, though here, as I walked around my bells, the logic was more **geometric** than **arithmetic**. It is often easier to see **logic** than to hear it, easier to visualize the rotations around a circle than to calculate a note sequence, and I managed to find a strict and audible logic for each of the nine movements. Later, when performing this piece, I sometimes had a very strange sensation. As I played the first note, stepped off on my left foot, and began the first cycle, the experience was very different from that of playing any other kind of music. It was the feeling of beginning something completely inevitable, something I could not stop, and it was clear that my feet were going to carry me on through the sequence, even if my memory failed, or if fatigue set in, or if the audience all walked out. I was a kind of puppet being driven by some inevitable **geometric- musical logic** that had little to do with my own will power. One could say that I had become merely a machine, but it was a very agreeable experience. [...]

Más información:

1. Tom Johnson, [*I want to find the music, not to compose it*](#), Editions 75

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2. [Tom Johnson – Nine Bells](#), Continuo's weblog
3. [Quad, pura geometría](#), Cuaderno de Cultura Científica

Artículo publicado en el blog de la Facultad de Ciencia y Tecnología (ZTF-FCT) de la Universidad del País Vasco ztfnews.wordpress.com.