

Jelena Novak (CESEM, New University of Lisbon), Shaggy-Dog Minimalism in Operas by Tom Johnson

Abstract:

Back in 1978 American composer and music critic Tom Johnson created five ‘shaggy-dog operas’: *Drawers*, *Dryer*, *Door*, *Window* and *Box*. “I had always loved the Americans tradition known as ‘shaggy dog stories,’ those repetitive stories that take a very long time to tell until they finally end with some dumb punch line, usually a simple word play or an ironic remark, so my next operatic attempt, in 1978, went in that direction. The result was five chamber operas, about 15 minutes each, which I staged myself in a small loft space in Lower Manhattan.” (from *The Four Note Opera, 32 Years Later* by Tom Johnson). In *Drawers*, a solo soprano searches for her thimble; in *Dryer*, a fisherman catches fish and hangs them on the clothes line to dry; in *Door*, two women sing “yawn” a lot, and wonder whether they should answer the door; and in *Window*, two men strive to clean a dirty window. (*Box* was later abandoned and destroyed). In his article “Minimalism in Music: In Search of a Definition” Johnson among other things writes about how back in 1972 he didn’t fully realized that his *Four Note Opera* written that very same year “was also a form of minimal music”. I will discuss status and function of minimalism in early Johnson’s operas and through that prism I will illuminate the relationship between opera and minimalism in larger context.

Biography:

Jelena Novak works in the area of musicology, opera studies, performance studies, dramaturgy and criticism. She is postdoctoral research fellow at CESEM, New University of Lisbon with project “Opera beyond Drama”. She has been a founding Committee member of the Society for Minimalist Music and founding member of editorial collective TkH [Walking Theory]. In 2013 she won the Thurnau Award for Music-Theatre Studies. Her latest book is *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Ashgate, 2015). Currently with John Richardson she prepares edited volume *Einstein on the Beach: Opera beyond Drama* (Routledge, due to be published in 2017).