Liner Notes for An Hour for Piano

It is important that you try not to allow the program notes to distract you from concentrating on the music.

In 1977, Tom Johnson, who was then new music critic for the *Village Voice*, wrote a penetrating article simply titled "What Is Minimalism Really About?" Over the course of the article, he presented several generalizations about the musical movement including repetition, tiny variations, hyper-clarity, and subtle perceptions, ending with the one that made the most sense to him: "It can only be demonstrated. And even then, every demonstration is going to be a little different, and no one demonstration will ever be definitive."

They are intended to increase your ability to concentrate on the piece, and not to distract from it.

As if proving his point, Johnson's article paints the most accurate portrait of minimalism I have ever encountered. It marshals its words to demonstrate minimalism's main tenets through sly literary repetitions that feature slight variations and subtle transitions. Read too quickly and you miss the article's point; read too slowly and its rhythm breaks down. When pressed to describe minimalism to someone new to the style, I regularly recommend this article.

When pressed a bit further to give a textbook minimalist piece, I rarely package the article with Johnson's 1973 *An Hour for Piano*. As an introduction, Terry Riley's ecstatically modular *In C* or Steve Reich's deceptively audible *Piano Phase* process spring more quickly to my lips. But *An Hour for Piano* represents many of minimalism's best qualities while avoiding many of its pitfalls. It is an understated watershed of a composition – simple enough to understand on first hearing, complex enough to never fully comprehend, and important enough to usher in a new mode of composition.

If you find that reading the program notes does not increase your ability to concentrate on the music, you should not read further at this time.

Describing *An Hour for Piano* is straightforward: over the course of an hour, the pianist plays six primary motives that rock along at almost one beat a second. Each motive sits firmly in G and firmly in the piano's middle register. When the hour ends, the piece ends – there is no sustained build-up, no climax, no dénouement. This list of facts, however, does not communicate the experience of *An Hour for Piano* any more than the word "repetition" accounts for minimalism. Johnson treats those motives more like textures as he juxtaposes them in seemingly random order, sometimes combining or at least superimposing them, but almost never exactly repeating them. As a result, this is music that is at once contemplative and blissful and droll. Johnson's constantly shifting and never predictable patterns bathe in such a rich single tonality and such a seeming banality of musical material that they flash a wide smirk and a well-chosen finger at the mid-century musical establishment that declared that music was a serious endeavor. Not since Satie has a composer created a music that sounds so innocuous on the surface and yet hides an undercurrent of irrepressible humor.

Above all, *An Hour for Piano* is about time, from its name to its length. From the outset, you know what to expect – an hour of piano music. However, Johnson's delicate structure plays continuously with time; for the hour you drift heedless of its passage, and it seems at once both longer and shorter than the announced duration. As a listener, you find yourself living in a landscape that appears static, but continually opens up new vistas (or at least new perspectives on old vistas). You exist in an eternal present.

Perhaps, at some later time, you will find that reading the program notes will increase your ability to concentrate on the music.

That Andrew Lee comprehends all these aspects and more of *An Hour for Piano* there is no doubt. The round richness he draws out of the piano with each note, the clear-headed concentration with which he plays, the subtle smile you can hear on his face, and the charm with which he accomplishes this substantial piece all point to a deep connection with Johnson's intent. Here is a recording to sample and to savor, a recording with which you do not mind spending your time, as you hope the hour has not passed and you have a few minutes more.

--S. Andrew Granade, 2010