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John Zorn. *The Gift; Songs from the Hermetic Theatre* (2001). *Chimeras; Masada Guitars* (2003). *Masada Recital; Magick* (2004). *Rituals* (2005). *Astronome; Masada Rock; Moonchild* (2006). Each of these recordings appears on John Zorn's own label, Tzadik.

Once the unruly upstart, John Zorn is now a MacArthur fellow, whose formidable catalog divides easily into early, middle, and late periods. The early period dates from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, when Zorn pioneered the practice of "comprovisation," a term used to describe "the making of new compositions from recordings of improvised material."¹ Ultimately, Zorn's comprovisation blurs the lines between active listener and composer, since both create new works when they impose structure on found sonic material. His early structuralist-modernist approach to comprovisation produced esoteric, often severely pointillist music, and evolved into the game pieces of the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in the masterpiece of strategy, *Cobra* (1984), the last early-period work.

The middle period begins with *The Big Gundown* (1985) and represents an explicit shift to a populist major-label (Nonesuch) postmodernism with a punk edge. During this time, Zorn went from modernist free improvisation monastic to foul-mouthed postmodern *enfant terrible* of genre juxtaposition. His albums from 1985 into the early 1990s are either homages to insider vernacular-literate figures or jump cut/collages of diverse musical styles.

The late period begins with Zorn's decision to release his own records (and those of many other artists) by founding his own label, Tzadik, in 1995. His recordings in this most recent period are eclectic to the extreme. Instead of juxtaposing many styles in a single song (as in his early period), or a single album (as he did in the middle period), Zorn now creates entire albums in a single style, replacing the aesthetic of postmodern juxtaposition with a steady-state lyricism. Most cuts are monotextural, and Zorn's role is mysterious since he plays on few of them.

The sheer quantity (and availability) of Zorn recordings begs the same fascinating and disturbing questions evoked by the output of fellow MacArthur Fellow Anthony Braxton (who puts out so many records that he dispenses with titles, simply giving the city and year as a "marker" in lieu of a title), or, for that matter, prolific American music pioneer Henry Cowell. One senses, in this approach, a different scaling of mass-produced work. The traditional model is to produce many copies of a few recordings, but the Zorn/Braxton model is to produce a few copies of many recordings, thus mitigating some of the effects of mass production.

In Zorn's early and middle periods, Zorn valued "structure" above all other aesthetic values; that is, the order, duration, and combination of events was of far more importance than the events themselves. This is apparent in Zorn's early game piece *Hockey* (first recorded in 1980),² especially in the "Acoustic Version" takes, in which the sonic palette is extremely limited, consisting of isolated duck call, clarinet mouthpiece, scraped violin, and miniature percussion sounds.³ The "Electric Version" takes are reminiscent of 1960s' improvisation collectives AMM (Cornelius Cardew, et al.) and MEV (Musica Elettronica Viva), but with added doses of exuberance, irony, and speed, and less introspection and gradual unfolding. In this and the later strategy classic, *Cobra*,⁴ Zorn codifies certain pro-

cedures of collective improvisation (characteristic both of experimental/"Euro," "improvised music," and free jazz) into games that are reminiscent of sports, card games, and war games, except that there are no winners or losers.

Probably one of the most performed compositions of the twentieth century, *Cobra* has been *played* in several locations internationally on a regular (weekly or monthly) basis for years in some cases. The work contains all of the elements of Zorn's artistic vision in a crazy yet efficient set of rules and procedures. It is scored for any nine or more performers and a "prompter" (conductor) who uses color-coded cards to cue different types of collective improvisation (or "cues"). Cues can follow each other quickly, in rapid succession, or, if the prompter is pleased with what is being played, a cue can linger. Performers may use hand symbols to request specific cues (which the prompter may use or ignore). One cue, for example, mandates that at a downbeat those who are playing must stop playing and those who are not playing may begin playing. Other cues indicate different kinds of rapid "trading" of sound events from player to player. The "Sound Memory" cues, numbered 1-3, are particularly interesting and revealing. When the prompter hears a texture he or she likes, the promoter shows the Sound Memory 1 card, which "saves" the music for later use. Thereafter, if the prompter holds up the Sound Memory 1 card again, the musicians must play the saved music. The "group change" cue mandates that the same "music" be played by a different group, that is, the musicians currently playing must be replaced, person for person, by musicians not yet playing, but they must replicate the same musical texture.

Cobra's cues illustrate one of Zorn's approaches to a material-neutral frame of reference, one that embraces found or grafted materials with their own structural logics. In the earlier *Hockey* we find a continuously discontinuous texture, dominated by short, discrete events, with no reference to musical genres. In contrast, *Cobra* has a more or less juxtaposed series of steady state textures ("music") of various lengths, some of which are reminiscent of various genres. A later, very similar, game piece, *Bezique* (1989), has several cues under the category of "modifiers." These cards indicate "Pop," "Classical," "Jazz," "Rock," "Ethnic," and so on, and the players must instantly render an entire genre into a miniature collective improvisation that may be cut off at any moment by the prompter. Thus the structure of individual textures is bracketed and left up to the improvisational impulses of the performers (within each cue's constraints), while the prompter selects the order and duration of these textures. This procedure is reminiscent of and influenced by film editing, in which the structural principle is the splicing together of various lengths of preexisting material, each of which is viewed by the editor to be, in some sense, a quantum, no matter how short or long. The genius of *Cobra* is that not only is the material not selected by the composer, but the structure itself is not mandated, only the process for generating structure.

During the course of the late 1980s, in the Nonesuch releases, the "material" in Zorn's music begins to assert itself more and more, revealing the eclecticism that lurked behind the structuralist-modernist orientation of the 1970s. Zorn seemed to be drawing more explicitly from his vast record collection. The highly successful *Naked City* debut album (1989) consists of deliberate jump cuts between clearly articulated styles, such as freebop, smooth jazz, hardcore, country,

Webernian pointillism, and bar blues. In the 1990s and 2000s these styles break out of their placement in linear collages and become entire pieces, albums, or series of albums.

Zorn's Tzadik releases since 2000 are unapologetically in specific niches or genres. There are eighteen volumes of "Film Works," music composed for independent films; *Astronome* and *Moonchild*, which are noise-rock "operas"; several compilations of interpretations of tunes from the avant-klezmer Masada songbook for various ensembles; *Songs from the Hermetic Theatre* (2001), an all-electronic music disc; *The Gift* (2001), a collection of lounge tunes; atonal chamber music releases, such as the Crumbesque *Magick* (2004) for string quartet, and the Schoenbergian monodramas, *Chimeras* (2003) and *Rituals* (2005) for "Pierrottesque" ensembles.⁵

Zorn's late-period releases are impeccably recorded. Technically, they bring to mind the simple, elegant fixed camera cinematography of Woody Allen's middle-period films. They are beautifully miked, mixed, and mastered with a minimum of obtrusive reverb, compression, or other processing. The bass is sometimes heavy in Tzadik releases, unlike Zorn's Nonesuch records, which can be a bit harsh in the upper frequencies. As steady states, each cut in this vast collection has charms. The breadth of styles touched on suggests the danger of glossing over the musical and sociohistorical complexity of each genre.

The listening experience of Zorn's late-period releases is very different from the frenetic rollercoaster ride of his middle-period releases. Where middle-period music takes its structural model from network television, with its cuts and juxtaposition of commercials, the late period seems very aware of an ambient, post-Internet, post-iPod, automobile-oriented style of "listening," or hearing, or media consumption, in which recorded sound from a given source is just one component of an auditor's attention/awareness. The constant shifts in context that characterized the media, and Zorn's music, have been subsumed into the stream of lived reality, such that the auditor perceives a Zorn "song" as a single, constant texture rather than something that transforms over time. Those familiar with Zorn's output may find that, in contrast to early and middle-period Zorn cuts, which are constantly surprising and refreshing, late-period cuts may not always sustain attentive listening past a minute or so, despite their initial appeal. Moreover, one often craves Zorn's unique and energetic voice, heard in his saxophone or duck-call performances on earlier releases. The performers he does use, however, are all first-rate and often provide their own unique voices. His remarkable knack for casting and tailoring material creatively to his personnel is much like Duke Ellington's.

Zorn's subject matter and cover art may be disturbing to some. His fascination with the occult, coupled with his attaching his name to so many projects, suggest a belief in the magic, or "magick" (the Aleister Crowley-inspired title of a Zorn string quartet) of what he does; that the touch of a specially gifted person is uniquely transformative; that these gifts may not be passed on discursively, but must be received from a divine or diabolical source; that spiritual power is dependent not on moral purity, but on the invocation of codes. One does find in these late-period recordings, notwithstanding the bravado, and invocation of various types of darkness, that Zorn's appealing, even optimistic personality comes through. It is an enthusiastic, even generous personality, child-like, rather

than jaded in its embrace, consumption, and reshaping of musical and other information. It is an obsessive, yet sincere, humorous, and fun-loving vision.

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NOTES

1. Michael Hannon, "Interrogating Comprovisation as Practice-led Research," for *Speculation and Innovation: Applying Practice Led Research in the Creative Industries*, Queensland University of Technology, <http://www.speculation2005.net> (accessed April 11, 2007).

2. Released in 2000, recorded in 1980, composed 1978.

3. Released 2002 from recordings made in 1980. Personnel on "Electronic Takes": Eugene Chadbourne, electric guitar; Wayne Horvitz, amplified piano; Bob Ostertag, synthesizer. Personnel on "Acoustic Takes": Polly Bradfield, violin; Mark E. Miller, percussion; John Zorn, duck calls and clarinet mouthpiece.

4. Released 2002. Personnel: Derek Bailey, guitar; Cyro Baptista, percussion; Jennifer Choi, violin; Sylvie Courvoisier, piano; Mark Dresser, bass; Trevor Dunn, bass; Mark Feldman, violin; Erik Friedlander, cello; Annie Gosfield, sampler; Susie Ibarra, drums; Ikue Mori, laptop Computer; Marcus Rojas, tuba; Josh Roseman, trombone; Jamie Saft, keyboards; John Zorn, prompter.

5. "Film Works," vols. 1–18, released between 1997 and 2006, various personnel. *Astronome* (2006)—Joey Baron, drums; Trevor Dunn, bass; Mike Patton, voice. *Moonchild* (2006)—Joey Baron, drums; Trevor Dunn, bass; Mike Patton, voice. Some of the Masada Rock collections include: *Masada Rock* (2006)—Jon Madof's Rashanim Trio: Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz, bass; Mathias Kunzli, drums; Jon Madof, guitar. *Masada Recital* (2004): Sylvie Courvoisier, piano; Mark Feldman, violin. *Masada Guitars* (2003): Marc Ribot, Bill Frisell, and Tim Sparks, guitars. *The Gift* (2001)—Marc Ribot, guitar; Jamie Saft, keyboards; Trevor Dunn, bass; Joey Baron, drums; Cyro Baptista, percussion; Ned Rothenberg, shakuhachi; Dave Douglas, trumpet. *Magick* (2004)—Tim Smith, bass clarinet; Mike Lowenstern, bass clarinet. Crowley Quartet: Jennifer Choi, violin; Fred Sherry, cello; Jesse Mills, violin; Richard O'Neill, viola. *Chimeras* (2003)—Jennifer Choi, violin; Ilana Davidson, voice; Stephen Drury, piano, organ, celesta; Elizabeth Farnum, voice; Michael Lowenstern, bass clarinet, clarinet; Brad Lubman, conductor; Tara O'Connor, piccolo, flute, alto flute, bass flute; Fred Sherry, cello; William Winant, percussion. *Rituals* (2005)—Jennifer Choi, violin; Stephen Drury, piano, harpsichord, celeste, organ; Brad Lubman, conductor; Tara O'Connor, flute, alto flute, piccolo; Jim Pugliese, percussion, wind machines, water, bull roarers, gravedigging, fishing reels, paper, bowls of BBs, bird calls; Fred Sherry, cello; William Winant, percussion; Heather Gardner, voice; Peter Kolkay, bassoon, contrabassoon; Mike Lowenstern, clarinet, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet; Kurt Muroki, bass; Jim Pugh, trombone.