



Evan Ziporyn

by Kyle Gann

First there was Colin McPhee; then Lou Harrison; then Evan Ziporyn. Certain North American composers have found the siren call of Bali irresistible. To them the Indonesian gamelan, with its cyclic and repetitive patterns hammered out on a wide range of metal percussion

instruments, has offered an alternative universe of melodic patterns more seductively hypnotic than the pianos and violins of the West. McPhee lived in Bali from the 1930s until World War II, when the Dutch chased him out of the island paradise they governed; he came home to write orchestral

music closely modeled on patterns of the Balinese gamelan. Lou Harrison wrote perhaps the first American music for an actual gamelan, sometimes combining it with European instruments for a new hybrid. Ziporyn—my own generation’s contribution to this phenomenon—first visited in 1981, has returned many times since, and now runs the gamelan Galak Tika at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he teaches.

Ziporyn’s musical response to Indonesian music runs deeper and is more complex than that of his forebears. He has written pieces for gamelan, notably *Amok!* (an admirably apropos title, because it’s one of the few words adopted into English from Indonesian, along with “catsup” and “gong”) and *Tire Fire*, which combines the metallophones with electric guitars. But for Ziporyn, the Indonesian aesthetic has worked its way into his entire musical style; it infuses his chamber and orchestra music, even though—unlike McPhee—he doesn’t imitate Balinese music with Western instruments. In Ziporyn’s work, the gamelan patten has fused with other influences. A virtuoso clarinetist (and bass clarinetist), Ziporyn has been involved from its beginning with New York’s Bang on a Can Festival and was a founding member, in 1992, of the festival’s hot-shot house ensemble, the Bang on a Can All-Stars.

And so in Ziporyn’s music, colors of gamelan patterning have streaked a fabric already conditioned by minimalism, and also by totalism, the rhythmically complex 1990s style that Bang on a Can has done much to showcase. Balinese music has its own rhythmic virtuosity, most obviously heard in quick, precise accelerations and ritardandos; totalist music is more about abruptly shifting gears among tempos, as in switching from a quarter-note beat to a dotted-eighth beat and back again. Both use a limited harmonic palette and a perpetual-motion type of momentum, though totalism incorporated considerably more dissonance

than did most minimalism. These strains are sometimes so difficult to distinguish that Ziporyn’s music at times achieves a true cross-cultural fusion.

Let’s take one of his best pieces for European instruments, *Typical Music* (2000), a magnificent half-hour piano trio. (He titled it thus because it was one of his first works for an existing chamber ensemble, and he had recently heard a concert promoter

reminding you that Ziporyn started out in jazz (and also garage bands—he’s complained that he never really had a *first* musical language). But there’s something in the way his rhythms interlock, the way the three instruments jump into rhythmic unison for a measure, and the curvy, note-permutational melodies that, if you *know* he’s a performer of Balinese music, gives you an “aha!” moment. Or his major piano piece

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distinguish between “experimental” and “typical” musics.) Like so many of his pieces, it opens with a rhythmically halting fanfare—abstracted, one suspects, from the bamboo flute solo improvisation that starts off a piece for Balinese gamelan—and soon really gets going. For most of the next thirty minutes, certain patterns are so constant and propulsive that you wonder how the string players manage page turns. Rhythms repeat, but change step by step. The music is basically tonal, with key signatures; but dissonant pitches creep into the note rotation, and the piece cycles slowly through the keys. Despite the music’s speed, it takes its time about getting from point to point. Listening is like a leisurely ride down a swift yet twisting river, with occasional rapids to shake you up a little. It’s really an example what I think of as a new trend of “ambient” chamber music, because it doesn’t divide into sections or phrases, it just keeps going and carries you along with it.

Now, it wouldn’t require frequent trips to Bali to write such a piece. Everything in it could be traced back to postminimalist influences. Some of the licks are even a little bluesy, major and minor at once,

Pondok (2001), which Sarah Cahill has recorded: the opening movement is in a precisely notated but freely rhythmic style that sounds almost improvisational, moving nonchalantly among eighth-notes, triplets, and quintuplets, with some nice jazz cadences arriving in mid-beat; I suspect this is his solution to the problem of capturing a Balinese melodic style in notation. Most of the rest of the piece is propulsive, in types of interlocking rhythms that look tricky, and must come naturally to someone who’s hammered away at one instrument in the midst of a gamelan ensemble.

Momentum is a very big thing for Ziporyn. Aside from some of his early clarinet pieces, his works tend to strike up a steady pace and never depart from it, although he certainly has fun bending the tempo with polyrhythms. In keeping with its ’70s-evocative title, *Be-In* (1998), for bass clarinet quintet (!)—that’s bass clarinet and string quartet—is more laid back than *Typical Music*; but its rhythm, with an underlying 3-against-4, is totalistically poised to jump any moment into a dotted-eighth beat to shake things up. Though

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Linked to this is Junglewood (Tanglewood inspired its name), Pérez's recently launched project in the Panamanian rainforest, designed to foster eco-awareness and community outreach. The Biomuseo (Museum of Biodiversity), designed by Frank Gehry and also championed by Pérez's fellow Panamanian Ruben Blades, is yet another Panama-based initiative. Recently opened, and featured (with Pérez and the Yankees' Mariano Rivera) in *Time* magazine, it has already drawn visitors such as Al Gore, Brad Pitt, and Angelina Jolie. Its key building is called "The Bridge of Life."

The latest element is the Berklee Global Jazz Initiative that Pérez now heads.

"Putting very talented kids into music for instant gratification is irrelevant," he declares. "They need to learn how music is a social tool, by teamwork; how it works in interdisciplinary ways, like relating music to film, painting, and so on; and how it relates to real life, by recording and transcribing actual sounds, like bird calls, and making them into your music. All these offer ways to explore connections between creativity and social action."

You can hear what he means on *Providencia*. "Galactic Panama," a kind of outer-space flyover of the America's remarkably bio-diverse land bridge, is a frenetic romp, its sinuous lines featuring altoist Rudresh Mahanthappa's postbop fluidity and controlled shrieking against Pérez's agile tone-clustering keyboards, spurred by his adept longtime triomates, bassist Ben Street and drummer Adam Cruz. Mahanthappa and Pérez as duo close the album out with "The Maze," another two-part piece, totally unscripted. Pérez says, "Rudi has a unique ethnic sound. His Indian roots in microrhythms and improvisation mean that he can jump into our ongoing rhythmic percolations and create structure right on the spot, no matter what the musical environment. And naturally he brings even more aesthetic diversity to what we do."

On *Providencia*, the tracks range dramati-

cally in duration, and embrace solo piano, duos, even wordless vocals backed by jazz trio plus a classical woodwind quintet on "The Bridge of Life." Pérez got the uneasy woodwinds to improvise, noting with a smile, "I wanted them to take a leap of faith, take chances to inspire the listeners." This is just one more way in which musical expectations—about harmonic and melodic recurrence, rhythmic stability, the usual signposts that comfort musicians and audiences alike—are regularly thwarted and rerouted.

In Pérez's musical world, as in our larger one, change is the only constant. Movement is growth, development, life. It follows no set form of development or resolution, but instead offers possibilities. Here is where our special faculties—the amazing human gift of ingenuity that allows us to recognize abstract possibility, like the idea of a future or providence, just to start with—come in. What we do with that insight and power, of course, is up to us.

"If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn," Charlie Parker said, coining the epigram that encapsulates jazz's existentialist modes of thinking and being, one of the core deep-structure elements that has made it a powerful and ongoing, if often underground and unacknowledged, force in cultural change both here and across the planet. Pérez says, "The Maze" has that title because a maze can be imprisoning or liberating; it is an invitation to take risks, to take on challenges. Whatever we do has an impact on the universe." You sure can't say he doesn't live his convictions. That's one more reason his music is so vital and compelling.

*Gene Santoro is the author of several books on American music, including *Myself When I am Real, a biography of Charles Mingus* (Oxford University Press, 2001), and *Highway 61 Revisited, which examines the complex roots of American music* (Oxford, 2004).*

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mild and bluesy, its ostinatos evolve in an ambient continuum that I suspect my students wouldn't even call classical. Postclassical?

There are also times when Ziporyn quite deliberately smashes the Balinese and American idioms into each other. His *Ngaben (for Sari Club)* of 2002 is a quiet concerto grosso for several Balinese instruments and orchestra, with the winds echoing the metallophones in insouciant disregard for discrepancies of tuning. And Ziporyn's magnum opus, his 2009 opera *A House in Bali*—Colin McPhee's autobiography of the same name—accompanies the European and American scenes with Western instruments and the scenes in Bali with gamelan. Plus, the Balinese characters sing in Balinese and the Americans in English! This is a type of multicultural opera we haven't heard before. But more significant to Ziporyn's output as a whole, I think, is that he's found linkages and commonalities between New York post-minimalism and Indonesian tradition that can become so intertwined that you can no longer say with any confidence which comes from which. Bach, after all, learned to write in German, French, and Italian styles and make them all his own. With Ziporyn, that kind of musical cosmopolitanism goes intercontinental.

*Composer Kyle Gann is an associate professor of music at Bard College. He is the author of several books on American music, the latest of which is *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press). His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.*