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To write: that is to sit in judgment over one's self.

—Henrik Ibsen

For a decade now, we in new music have put up a brave pretense that, in their extended, experimental forms, rock, jazz, and classical music are now all part of the same jovial, late 20th century, urban mix. There are times, however, when that pretense does unconscious harm, when we might achieve a kinder, gentler music scene by admitting that, thrown together as we are by a love of unconventional music, the pleasures we seek from it are still irreducibly diverse. Such a time came in February, when two highly visible young new music figures, Rhys Chatham and John Zorn, gave major performances, Chatham at the Kitchen February 16-18 and Zorn at Town Hall February 25.

Chatham's compositions threatened, once, to draw rock and classical music into a unified stream. It hasn't happened, nor is he likely to further facilitate such a change. As rock, his music has often been disappointing, and is growing more so. His *Drastic Classical Music and Guitar Trio* brought what was at first an intriguing minimalist focus into rock, but heard within the history of rock, their materials, their speed guitar riffs and drum patterns, weren't terribly original; nor, in more recent works such as *Minerva* and *Die Donnergotter*, has he developed them in any way a rock fan would find innovative. As a result, 10 years after he grabbed popular attention, it's now easy to dismiss Chatham, quite correctly as far as it goes, as a throwback to Deep Purple or Blue Oyster Cult.

But to ears accustomed to classical music, materials and a performance-specific quality of energy mean nearly nothing. Classical music plays with relationships between macro- and microstructures, each determining the meaning of the other; in a funny way this is as true of Cage as it is of Haydn, which is why improvisation in a Cage work sounds grossly inappropriate. "Structure is the most expressive part of music," someone once said, and it sums up the classical attitude. Idiosyncratic performance energies threaten structural relationships, which is why, since Haydn, classical music has increasingly squelched the performer in favor of the composition (and never more than in the "improvisatory" works of the '60s). Music written to satisfy classical assumptions about "the integrity of the work," even for electric guitars, will sound, as one critic wrote of Chatham's retrospective, "rigid and overcontrolled." To rock-immersed ears, that reproach clings to the entire classical tradition.

Rhys Chatham / John Zorn

Paradigms Lost

BY KYLE GANN



Rhys Chatham: Rock fans don't get it.



Zorn: a P. D. Q. Bach for our times?

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But what a classically trained musician will hear in Chatham is enormously different. His achievement is that he expanded minimalist form to accommodate the volume and the inertia-laden, resonant materials of rock. Originally, *Drastic Classical Music* did little more than shift minimalism's perceptual focus from pattern to acoustics. *Minerva*, on the other hand, constitutes an eccentric but provocative exploration of the cadence, a formal marker that classical composers have agonized over for 800 years, but which rockers have always taken for granted. Still more recently, Chatham's brass pieces have abandoned rock except for the backbeat, and have distilled his formal ideas even further. In terms of what a rocker is used to listening for, Chatham has backslid, but in terms of the structure/material relationship a classically trained musician instinctively hears, his music has grown in complexity and subtlety. Today, the pieces that first propelled him to fame seem like rough sketches next to the elegant clarity of his present work.

Perched to one side of another fence, Zorn's music has achieved a popularity that draws a panorama of blank stares in many new music circles. I've had composers with classical credentials ask me why he's made such a career out of ideas that are 25 years old, and I've been lost for an answer. Heard with the material-slighting classical ear, Zorn sounds like a throwback to the European avant-garde '60s. The open form, the "pure structure" he advocates, celebrated its 30th birthday some time ago, and it's been almost two decades since Christian Wolff abandoned the rule-oriented game pieces Zorn has imitated. *Archerly* is nearly indistinguishable from Mauricio Kagel's *Acustica* (1968), *Cobra* represents no conceptual advance over the old Everest recording of Cage's *Variations IV*. Stockhausen opportunistically attached his name to the Beethoven bicentennial by emptying out his *Kurzwellen*, refilling it with Beethoven recordings, and renaming it *Opus 1970*, and as far as expressive structure goes, Zorn's contribution is equally superficial.

MUSIC

What musical interest is here must be found elsewhere. By bringing the '60s' "Available Forms" (to use Earle Brown's handy phrase) into improvisation, Zorn's stabilized and concentrated the fragmentary tendencies of AACM experimental jazz; in a way, he's done for experimental jazz what the 12-tone system did for atonality, enabled it to create large structures whose parts are audibly connected. It's a necessary technical achievement, and if *Cobra* isn't a piece I could listen to over and over, well, neither is Schoenberg's Violin Concerto. Compared to Kagel and Stockhausen, Zorn's structures sound naïve and not pushed into sufficient variation, but they have to be that way, or else there would be no room left in them for the improviser's role. Take a different model: next to the idiosyncratic language of Roscoe Mitchell's *L-R-G*, *Cobra*'s more flexible, more com-

munal possibilities begin to sound like an interesting development. And, significantly, Zorn has achieved most of his success in circles where *Acustica* and *Kurzwellen* are not familiar points of reference.

The thing is, both Chatham and Zorn appear to be on the fence between musical paradigms. What each is really doing, though, as becomes more apparent with every performance, is using material from one paradigm to solve a problem in another. Whether you hear either as innovative depends on what musical history you're closest to, and the increasing split in critical reaction suggests that, though the underlying paradigms may be obscured, they still exert a decisive influence. Our ears have different histories, and the ear without a history belongs to a dilettante. When my rock critic friends think Chatham's music is stagnating while I find it more brilliantly insightful every year; when my jazz critic friends can't get enough of Zorn, while to me he sounds like the P. D. Q. Bach of the '60s avant-garde ("his plagiarism limited only by his faulty technique")—then it's time to dust off William James's pragmatic motto, "Where there's a contradiction, draw a distinction."

It's not a new problem, just one we haven't dealt with openly. In the '60s, Dave Brubeck was held up as worthy of classical attention because he used, among other things, 5/4 meter; classical fans, some of whom knew that quintuple meter could be traced back further than Handel's *Orlando*, shrugged. Harlem jazz greats of the 1920s must have given that same shrug when Darius Milhaud made classical music history by weaving their jazz syncopations into a French ballet. It's a musico-critical axiom: when a musician infuses new life into Tradition A by stealing from Tradition B, Tradition A fans may hear a breakthrough, but Tradition B fans just wonder what the fuss is about. The jazz, rock, and classical genres have stolen from each other for decades, which was fine because, until recently, it was implicitly assumed that they're not playing in the same ball park.

Let no one think I'm saying that musicians should run back to their pigeonholes. There are plenty of pieces around with true crossover appeal, and certain music—Varèse, and Coltrane's *Ascension* come to mind—has had a tremendous influence in more than one history. Artists allergic to labels, I suspect, have mostly been burned by thoughtless or insufficient categorization: as when experimental improv people are assumed to be playing "jazz," and get misreviewed because they are lumped into a paradigm from which they've moved away. Art will always wreak havoc with boundaries, and the artist who categorizes his or her own work imposes deadly self-limitations. Let not the artist usurp the critic's work.

But in criticism—which after all need not parallel the real world—descriptive taxonomy allows us to concede that we're still seeking diverse musical pleasures, and that some of those pleasures play off of histories that have become highly elaborate. New paradigms split off from their parents like amoebas, and the postminimalist model is almost invariably misreviewed by classical critics who think it's trying to sound like classical tonality. Any particular paradigm is a slippery thing that changes with every piece that refers to it, to the point that even "the late 18th century concerto" is merely a fiction. Ultimately, all standards resolve into one—"Did you have a good time?"—but penultimately, paradigms are the different ways we've discovered to have a good time. Far from being the bane of new music, we need a critical taxonomy as the only weapon with which to defend excellent composers from intelligent critics. It's the discipline that will eventually transmit new music to the broader public it desperately needs.

Zorn and Chatham are coming from and going to different places, with different objectives and different ideas of what makes music pleasurable. They're hardly crossover composers: Chatham has sworn off marketing himself as a rocker, and Zorn, apologizing that his *Hu Die* for two guitars and speaker (in Chinese) was meant to be played in bars rather than concert halls, begged his Town Hall audience to "make some noise." To enjoy music while making noise or while keeping quiet—that's an irreducible paradigm difference, for if the classical model assumes *anything*, it's uninterrupted attention. *Hu Die*, high on atmosphere, low on information, *would* have sounded better as background music, and was coolly received. Zorn was far more engaging in his club musician persona with his band Naked City, and the most satisfying point came when they played "Snagglepus," a hilarious jazz sendup of the discontinuous structures which sound so forced and pale when he uses them with highbrow pretensions. Chat during Chatham's *Minerva*, though (as if you could), and you'd miss the spread-out melodic structure that is practically the piece's only virtue.

So let's admit that, when Chatham steals a '70s rock sound to fashion a new classical form, rock fans have little reason to be impressed. And when Zorn appropriates early-Stockhausen structures to give jazz riffs new meaning, the avant-garde is unlikely to sit up and take notice. There's no reason to force music back into narrow categories; the Great Experiment isn't over, and we have no idea how much might be left to gain from audience crossover and the confluence of ideas. But in criticism, both public and private, it might ease discourse to keep some of the old labels we had so optimistically thrown away polished and handy in case we need them. We're not really arguing over whether Chatham or Zorn are talented musicians: they both are. Our argument is between highly evolved contexts for musical meaning that no one is so foolish as to want to give up.