



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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