

ARCANA
MUSICIANS ON MUSIC

EDITED BY
JOHN ZORN

GRANARY BOOKS / HIPS ROAD 2000

Copyright ©2000 by John Zorn, Hips Road and Granary Books
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means
without express written permission of the authors or publisher

Book design by Philip Gallo.
Cover design by Heung-Heung Chin.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arcana: Musicians on music. / edited by John Zorn.
p. cm

Discography: p.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-887123-27-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Musicians as authors. 2. Music--20th century--
history and criticism. I. Zorn, John, 1953-

ML90.A73 2000

780'.9'04--dc21 99-047434

First published in 2000

Printed on acid-free paper

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Granary Books, Inc.
307 Seventh Avenue Suite 1401
New York, NY 10001

<http://www.granarybooks.com>

Distributed to the trade by D.A.P./ Distributed Art Publishers
155 Avenue of the Americas, Second Floor
New York, NY 10013

Orders: (800) 338-BOOK Tel: (212) 627-1999
Fax: (212) 627-9484

CONTENTS

Preface	
<i>John Zorn</i>	v
Chapter 1	9
Plundering Ecophonemics	
<i>John Oswald</i>	
Chapter 2	
The Counterpoint of Species	
<i>Scott Johnson</i>	18
Chapter 3	59
Treatment for a Film in Fifteen Scenes	
<i>John Zorn</i>	
Chapter 4	
An Adventure	
<i>Frances-Marie Uitti</i>	67
Chapter 5	78
Teaching Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Memoir	
<i>George E. Lewis</i>	
Chapter 6	
Soul Mechanical	
<i>Ikue Mori</i>	110
Chapter 7	112
Pidgin Musics	
<i>Chris Brown</i>	
Chapter 8	
Aural Architecture: The Confluence of Freedom	
<i>Myra Melford</i>	119
Chapter 9	136
That Silence Thing	
<i>Anthony Coleman</i>	
Chapter 10	
An Approach to Guitar Fingering	
<i>Bill Frisell</i>	140
Chapter 11	145
One/Two	
<i>David Shea</i>	

PLUNDERSTANDING ECOPHONOMICS

*Strategies for the Transformation of Existing Music
An Interview by Norm Irga with John Oswald*

JOHN OSWALD

You are often asked *how you get away with doing these plunderphonic projects.*

The assumption is that any sort of creative activity that blatantly refers to some other existing creative activity has potentially dire legal consequences.

Does it?

The initial activity of creating the music is something i presume i'm allowed to commit in the privacy of my own studio, and nobody else will care. It gets more complicated when a large number of people want to hear the fruits of this creative activity. So i've experimented with different strategies for dissemination, some of which are a little unorthodox.

First there was *Mystery Tapes*, where nothing at all was revealed to indicate what the sounds were. Everything was anonymous, and ideally also unfamiliar; or at least each thing was of a mysterious state of existence. I can't say much else about *Mystery Tapes* without spoiling the premise.

A performance corollary to *Mystery Tapes* is *Pitch*, where sounds are presented in absolute darkness. Both in *Pitch* presentations and in *Mystery Tapes* any fixation on things like the wardrobe, gender, race, hairdo, and even species of musicians is totally avoided.

Plunderphonics is, in a way, the opposite of *Mystery Tapes*. *Plunderphonics* is the radical transformation of very familiar music. In keeping with this obvious familiarity it doesn't make much difference whether i credit the sources or not; but when i started to conspicuously cite my sources there was a tendency elsewhere in the music business not to reference obvious quotations. I remember looking at the credits and thank-yous to a Public Enemy release. There were over three hundred names; everyone was mentioned except James Brown, whose sampled essence was the pervasive element in their music.

So they didn't credit him because they hadn't licensed the samples?

This was before sample licensing had become a common procedure. The unfortunate aspect of sample licensing is that if you absolutely can't afford the fee (which is negotiable and can vary extremely) or if they just say "no," absolutely, your thing won't happen. Even though you may have already created the music. The plunderphonic pieces i had created at this time were initially private experiments. They were done well before i thought of releasing them. If i had retroactively asked permission from let's say Dolly Parton to transform her voice and she had said absolutely not, then i would have felt obliged not to play

that piece for anyone, which i feel would have been unfortunate for everyone, including Dolly Parton. It's imaginable that Dolly Parton would be more sensitive about her aural-sex transformation¹ than most. But part of the valid-

ity of life in the public arena is the freedom to parody. Witness the common image of everyone laughing except for the person who is the subject of the joke. Humor is a healthy sort of cruelty. It's like a vaccination. And parody is not necessarily funny. Plunderphonics is not necessarily funny. Plunderphonics is parody that is not necessarily funny. Or not necessarily not funny either.

Did you send Dolly Parton a copy of the finished product?

Yes i did, via her management—Velvet Apple in Hollywood. No reply. But it matters more how people generally react to Dolly Parton's sex change than what Dolly Parton thinks about what is after all her foisted-upon-the-public image. So i avoided asking permission. I absolutely avoided selling the thing; and i probably set up a situation of unfair competition by doing that, because i was giving away for free a record which was a lot more interesting and various and loaded than the records of all the people i had electroquoted, which were being sold. The free thing was obviously a better value.

Following the plunderphonic CD there were a couple of instances of a musical source or the business partners of a source initiating plunderphonic projects. Elektra paid me to transform anyone i chose from their roster, past or present, and an invitation from The Grateful Dead to transform The Grateful Dead paid for itself.

And in between these two examples you created Plexure for Avant.²

Plexure is another angle on plunderphonics altogether. In this case i'm once again an outsider: no one is inviting me or permitting me to do this. In *Plexure* i'm not picking on a singular per-

2. John Oswald, *Plexure*, CD (Avant 216) 1992.

former. I'm scanning a whole genre. And i'm not providing references to all sources, for two main reasons: one: pop is so rarely original that a reference is usually a subreference to some antecedent which is in turn...somewhat infinitely.

But there are a finite number of quotations in the piece. You've said there are about a thousand.

There are approximately a thousand songs being referred to. There are several thousand morphs; each with reference to a composite of pop hooks. These are based on correspondent similarities among various pieces. The reference game is potentially an infinite genealogy. Plexure-bits are references. Each source fragment has been blended with other similar fragments. The spectre of appropriation amongst the quoted material is rampant in these aggregates. Perhaps this is a practical fail-safe mechanism. Any perceived infringement is embedded in the proof of its dire lack of originality.

So, anyway, what you hear are not strict electroquotations. In fact there are some hand-drawn waveforms in there, which are like tracings of a sound.

How do you do that?

A sonic snapshot of a sound can be reproduced as a printout of an intensity-by-time graph. These are like two single-line worms across the page (the left and right components of a stereo image). These drawings can be placed on a tablet-like surface. A waveform can be traced accurately, or transformed in some aspect by a pen which has a function similar to the more conventional computer mouse. The waveform can be made sharper or smoother—harmonics, for instance, can be given a different emphasis. This type of coloring is not integral to the compositional intent of *Plexure*, but it was an early way of attempting sonic-image transformation. It's a method which is only practical for very brief durations of sound. Initially i drew a hyperrealistic image of a sung word, sort of a Chuck Close-like sonogram, just for the satisfaction of having done it. This was before i got Larry

3. Part of the computer program *Sound Hack*.

Polansky's Spectral Mutation function³ which enables something analogous to the sort of visual morphing you see in motion pictures in which there is a transformation which convolutes between a recognizable initial image and a recognizable final image.

So there are at least a thousand songs being directly referred to. Although in preparing a database for *Plexure* i directly cloned about twelve hours of fragments of commercial pop CDs, each a few seconds long, these exact facsimiles have gone through the sender bender blender by the time they get to the end listener.

So instead of Bruce Springsteen you get Bing Stingspreeen...

Yes, a fictional, Frankenstein-like assemblage of raw parts. These credits concocted of plunderphonies are, by-the-way, a further red herring; so you won't find anyone related to, for instance, Mariane Faith No Morrisey on the track of *Plexure* which is thusly credited.

With this constant morphing going on you hear pop music in a constant upheaval of novelty, which is contrary to the way pop music is usually presented. Most pop music is about seventy to ninety percent redundancy. All the information in your typical pop song can be packed into less than half a minute. Although the average pop song has increased in length from two to four minutes over the last couple of decades, that doesn't mean you get twice as much information. There are just more repeats of the same information. *Plexure* has low fat content—very little redundancy and lots of hooks, each one an attractive musical entity.

This brings up the question of value of information in music. The cost of a CD, unlike many computer programs, is not dependent on production costs. A CD which had an initial recording budget of \$50, will cost a consumer in a store approximately the same amount as a Michael Jackson CD with a \$5,000,000, production budget. Also a CD with a few variations of a few loops played over and over, will cost approximately the same as a recording of a hundred people in a symphony orchestra playing thousands of notes, which in some cases is then pieced together with a thousand edits. The price is flat, independent of the production costs. The price only varies dramatically according to format (single, EP, or album, or reissue) which in all cases can be provided on exactly the same five-inch disc. The manufacturing costs are the same.

Any attempt at standardizing a sample clearance rate would, I suppose, necessarily consider how long the sample is and how often it is repeated. It should also (but probably won't) consider the depth of the mix. Something *plexure*-like could be a sample concentrate—it would be much denser and info-rich than another piece where someone talks over one repeating loop. So far, concentrated music has not been demonstrably marketable as an acceptably pricey item, like concentrated detergent. I'm surprised when people complain that the *Plexure* disc is only twenty minutes long, given how much happens in that twenty minutes. It's music concentrate (twelve songs, twenty-four sub-tracks, a thousand references, thousands of hooks) in which the prominence of any particular reference is diluted.

How do you define a hook?

Any point in music in which you feel like you've arrived at a place of relief or well-being or familiarity or all of these. A place like home. I'm not an avid radio, jukebox, disco or MTV listener but there are often bits of these songs which will immediately, psychoacoustically meld with my nervous system. The reason may be melodic, timbral, rhythmic, textual, dramatic, or even just temporal, but the hooks are where the hits hit. My referent at *Billboard* magazine has a tendency to utter the cliché, "there's a reason you can hear why each of these songs became hits." I think it's true. Each really successful song, above and beyond marketing insinuation, has sonic viral elements, or hooks, which get inside you and stay there and become part of you. The virus is emotionally-laden information. When you hear one of these elements again you get emotionally engaged and your body sings along so even if some sociologically-oriented part of your mind is saying "i hate this song," your body will ecstatically sing along with Debby Boone in "You Light Up My Life."

The word plexure is a relatively archaic term for weaving.

From the Latin *plexura*: a plaiting or weaving together. "An intruding rose has stolen a nest among the plexures of the vine."⁴ And it also is a homonymic graft of 'pleasure' and 'texture' as in "plexually seizing." The word has more recently been used in a renegade tangent by a new age philosopher named Zindell to mean "the ability to see knowledge as through different lenses"⁵; but I just recently heard about this nonsense. It has nothing to do with my use nor the traditional meaning of the term.

4. John P. Kennedy, *Stallion: born, or a upown in the old dominion* (1832).
5. David Zindell, *The Broken God*.

It could be construed as referring to how different listeners will bear Plexure differently.

I think it's more interesting to consider similarities in the habits of listeners based on a common background of exposure to the sources and some basis of bias to these pop sounds. The major distinction among listeners is degree of recognition. Some people have listened to more pop music than others and some of them have a greater degree of reconnaissance-confirmation than others. Jim O'Rourke for instance says he can identify 340 sources (although I have yet to see his proof of this). I can't identify this many from unaided listening, and neither can Phil Strong who categorized all the song fragments for the tempo map. Everyone who has listened to the first version seems to recognize and identify at least one source. I've consequently made the most often recog-

nized references more obscure in subsequent versions. This positive I.D. function is somewhat independent of recognition overload, which seems to happen to almost everybody. This is a state of recognition without the ability to identify or put a name on something, which is immediately superseded by further recognitions which in a sense mask the previous memory tendrils by writing over one's short-term mnemonics. This is the nagging riddle flavor which constitutes the nature of the piece.

Anyway, getting back to plunderphonic viability strategies, the face-tious one for *Plexure* is that it's got everyone in pop music on it so no one act should consider themselves the focus of appropriation. No one is being particularly quoted because everyone is being referentially treated. *Plexure* is a crowd shot, or let's say a panoramic view. You can't see the trees at this resolution for looking at the forest. The boundary of this forest is the first decade of the CD era, 1982-92, from a Euro-American dominant perspective, which is the way it is in pop music, 'pop' being defined as music that is popular. Beethoven is pop music and cool-period Miles Davis is pop music, and both of these are pop music on CD in the eighties, and both Elvis and The Doors were million-sellers in '92; but i've limited the scan to music generated during that decade, so the piece will eventually have a period flavor, although when i was first working on it, some of the sources were absolutely current, and nothing sounded really old, even though some songs were released prior to '82; i included them if they didn't remind me of the seventies—if they were in a sense still percolating through the fads of current musical culture in '82.

So what is the definition of 80s pop?

Oh, i have no idea. There were a variety of tangents and a few marriages of hitherto disparate streams, like funk and metal, but categorizing any period would be too much of a generalization; and categorizing any particular example is something i've found difficult to do. Phil and i thought about trying to tag each song to keep track of what we had, but i for one couldn't do it. In a record store the categories are all based on race, gender, and geopolitical distinctions, none of which describe the music. A black man in Jamaica might produce a reggae tune, but so might a white woman in Finland. For a while almost everyone did at least one quasi-reggae tune, but other non-rhythmic influences would make all this reggae less than homogeneous.

What i find i do in trying to organize relationships is to make a hyper-textual web. One selected song might be related to another in its anomalous use of flute as a soloing instrument which has a melodic shape similar to another

song in which the singer affects the mannerisms of the singer of another popular song which is in a particular tempo pocket.

Tempo in the end became the pervasive organizing element. Very little of the music from this period was tempo nebulous, or in free time. So we could measure tempo as an absolute rational value which we could apply to all the pieces. At worst there would be a choice of a tempo harmonic—a doubling or halving of the sense of the beat, depending on what rhythmic element was pushing forward in the mix to establish the pulse; and there was the odd piece that wasn't in 4/4 which wouldn't fit comfortably in our rhythm continuum, but given the overall parameters of selection, tempo was a useful organizing device which eventually became the prime structural factor.

Why have you continued to work on Plexure?

Nineteen ninety-two has come and gone. When i first worked on *Plexure* it felt like i was doing something contemporary. Most of the plunderphonic work has an historical perspective. Now, even though it's only three or four years later, *Plexure* has an historical perspective too. Also, the selection process back in '92 was a bit too arbitrary: i found all the material on CDs from a friendly alternative radio station and a friendly used record store. I knew there were some very apparent hits that i didn't have examples of, but given the wealth of material i had that didn't feel like a problem. My historical perspective is that now it does feel like a problem, and so i've done a much more thorough search for a couple of hundred pieces which i missed the first time around which according to my statistics of sales, international charting, and my personal hook meter, are essential. The great thing about the most magnetic songs is that i need much less of their essence to make their presence be suspected in the mix, than i would require of less popular items. And of course this additional material is what is being used to mask/morph those quotes which have been persistently too obvious. *Plexure* in a way is like a garden which i'm now weeding. In the past i always considered that through my recordings i was attempting to create masterpieces—in other words pieces which would not need to change; their existence would set an historical precedence, and any further modification would undermine their effectiveness. Listeners might change but there is no need for the composition to change. *Plexure* has such a complex relationship with listeners, including myself, that i haven't yet been able to pin down its masterpiece potential. I may be misguided in thinking that adding to its comprehensiveness is going to help, but, whatever the outcome, i enjoy weeding the garden.

So the weeds are the recognizable electroquotes?

Exactly, especially if its viability as a marketable item is to be considered in the equation. That's the nice practical consequence to the prime concern of maintaining the threshold of recognition.

Are there any other plunderphonic presentation strategies that you'd like to mention?

Over the last few years, partly with the encouragement of written-music performers such as the Kronos Quartet, and the existence of the big instrument—the symphonic orchestra, I've been playing around with the re-writing of classical music. A lot of the applicable documents are in the public domain and as a result of this practicality there has been a quite a bit of plunderphonicizing by people other than myself. But relatively recent hi-fi recordings of performances of the classical repertoire are copyright-protected just like a pop recording. It's nice that someone gets credited for any distinction they might make. But a lot of these recordings don't seem very distinct to me. The rule to recording the classics is to commit an accurate interpretation of the score. As a result, most of these interpretations which faithfully follow the recipe are quite similar. In preparing materials for some plunderphonic transformations of recorded material I've been working in the opposite way to what I did in the GRAYFOLDED project.⁶ For that I gathered over a hundred versions from The

Grateful Dead's vaults of the band playing "Dark Star" in concert over a twenty-five year period. These versions had some pervasive similarities—the moments which were expected in order to define this music as "Dark

Star" and not as something else. But the major mass of the piece was improvisation, which encourages the opportunity for distinctions—for exceptions to the rules of "Dark Star." And these distinctions from particular performances are the substance of GRAYFOLDED. It is a particularly unusual "Dark Star."

With the classics of the classical genre I've been making conglomerates that focus on the rules rather than the exceptions. I combine the sum of normality in several performances to make a generic version which wouldn't be associated with any particular performer. This could result in a nebulous or multi-faceted version of the piece, depending on instrumentation in combination with my choice of editing techniques. Acoustic aspects such as the perspective, seating pattern, and reverberance are variable. This is something which never happens in a traditional classical recording. It's more pop-like or cinematic. It can also have some of the effects of an O.M.N.I.V.E.R.S.E.⁷

recording—it can be spatially volatile.

A lawyer who runs a recording mechanical rights organization took great exception to my concept of generic version. He said that even though specifics of what is purloined might not be detectable, I am still categorically a thief because I'm conscious of my thievery.

To my reply that it would perhaps be best that we stop calling no-loss situations (the appropriation and manipulation of intellectual endeavors) thievery, he asked if I would be upset if someone broke into my house in an undetectable fashion and perused, or manipulated or took something, and that I wasn't able to detect that this had taken place, but that I would be aware of these things happening. My reaction is that such fastidious thievery would be commendable; it sounds more like housekeeping. His scenario in part calls for a reaction to an invasion of privacy. I don't think any of plunderphonics constitutes such an invasion of privacy. It all deals with public acts and official releases. I'm not at all interested in studio outtakes, sonic laundry, or personal phone messages.

Two variations of the generic versions: one is a compilation of aspects of various arrangements of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, from the original piano score through various easy-listening orchestral confections; which is a nice bridge from classical to pop. The other is twenty-four simultaneous versions of Richard Strauss's Introduction (Einleitung) to *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which are all lined up to the first horn entry; so they begin in synch and then the musical picture gets progressively more thick and diffuse as each version runs its course at a slightly different tempo. It's a particularly wonderful transition because by the middle of the piece it sounds more like something by Ligeti; so the piece is like the soundtrack to the movie *2001* in a nutshell, with a continuum between the romantic tradition and the 20th century third-quarter avant garde.

But I challenge any orchestra that may object to their non-complicit inclusion to identify themselves in this mix. I bought all the versions of the piece on CD that I could find, but there were, or there are now more than two dozen versions (classical music is also like detergent in that there are so many competing packages of the same product—for instance there are over sixty currently-available versions of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*). It's undetectable who is in this meta-Zarathustra and who isn't. In the end my derivative version is probably the most distinct and non-derivative version of all.

7. O.M.N.I.V.E.R.S.E. *Orbital Microphonic Navigational Imaging Via Ecotonic Radial Stereo Eccentricity*. Following the cinematic convention of camera motion as in tracking, tilting, zooming etc.—a moving microphone. Featured on Gordon Monahan, *THIS PIANO THING*, CD (Swerve 001) and Christopher Butterfield, *Pillar of Smoke*, CD (unnumbered). The latter also has an ensemble piece in which a musical-chairs perspective has been edited together where phrase by phrase the positions of the players are completely rearranged or progressively tracked in relation to a fixed microphone.

Note: Further definitions of the terms used in Chapter 1 can be found at <http://www.bq.com>

John Oswald and The Grateful Dead, *GRAYFOLDED*, 2CD (Swell) Part 5/A (1969/1998) 1996.