

Do Not Seek For Things Outside Yourself: The Compositional Journey of Tyshawn Sorey

by George Grella

“Ce qu’on ne peut dire et ce qu’on ne peut taire, la musique l’exprime (Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent).”

— Victor Hugo

For anyone who came to Tyshawn Sorey’s own records through his incredible drumming—what seemed a superhuman ability to take the complex sequenced rhythms of IDM, like those from Autechre, play them back and make them swing—in groups led by Vijay Iyer, Steve Lehman, and others, the quality of his composing was (and still is) stunning and disorienting.



Tyshawn Sorey. Photo by John Rogers

His first album as a leader, 2007’s *That/Not* (Firehouse 12 Records) has seemingly identifiable facets of free jazz and highly abstracted song forms. It also has four “Templates” built around a consistent, context-free, cadence, the fragmented and seemingly mocking “That’s Blues, Right?”, and, on the first of the two CDs, the beautiful, mesmerizing forty-three minute piece “Permutations for Solo Piano” that, in title and aesthetic, responds to and updates the New York School of John Cage, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. Expressively the album has a dense, rich interiority that is Sorey’s voice, and is so substantial, broad-ranging, and fully formed that it presented him as a complete and accomplished composer.

And so it has gone in his discography. With the exception of *Oblique-I* (Pi Recordings, 2011), which is complex, fascinating modern jazz, his albums collect his art and craft as a composer at the avant-garde edge of the Western classical tradition. Last year’s *Versimilitude* (Pi), broke out of the niche of jazz/improvisation/new music and into the consciousness of music critics looking for the contemporary extensions of the Western classical tradition, i.e. new composed music. Sorey was now known publicly as a composer.

Sorey has been at pains in the past to point out what should be clear to anyone listening honestly, that his composing has essentially nothing at all to do with jazz—other than the fact that he’s played plenty of jazz as a musician. But jazz musicians who embark on a serious career as a composer still run into two powerful, reflexive responses: from the outside is the embedded notion that a jazz player creates jazzy music, some sort of notated version of what they play, an ensemble score that passes jazz flavor through non-jazz

musicians (an example of this is Wynton Marsalis' compositions for classical groups, and that they reinforce the above response is no aspersion on their considerable musical quality); from the inside is the idea, more cultural than aesthetic, that the jazz musician who aspires to be a composer in the traditional sense must use musical gestures and clichés that signify specific compositional ideas and means from the classical canon.

And so we have had decades of jazz musicians who have tried to demonstrate their bona fides as a serious composer by awkwardly and superficially parroting moments from the past, with stabs at fugue and sonata form. Worst of all has been the notion that writing atonal music is proof that one is a classical composer. This shows an ignorance of actual history, in which each passing day shows atonality as both a historical curiosity and an aesthetic and technical dead end. And as two releases from last year, Adam Rudolph's *Morphic Resonances* (Meta Records) and Jen Shyu's *Song of Silver Geese* (Pi), show, the result is an awkward affectation, music that is barely competent and has nothing at all to do with the musician's true personal voice.

Sorey has a new album out his month on Firehouse 12, *Pillars*, a three-CD set of electro-acoustic music for an ensemble that includes Sorey himself conducting and playing percussion and improvising new music players Stephen Haynes (trumpet), Ben Gerstein (trombone), Todd Neufeld (guitars), Joe Morris (electric guitar, double-bass), Carl Testa (double-bass), Mark Helias (double-bass) and Zach Rowden (double-bass). *Pillars* is a further extension of Sorey's compositions—it's driven from deep, internal imperatives, the music taking shape out of personal exploration and discovery, rather than as a response to existing structures, forms, and even styles. This is so even with the strong sound of (non-jazz) free improvisation—there are some faint echoes of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, but those sound less like Sorey's design than the influence that the earlier group has had on the individual musicians performing *Pillars*. The music of complex composers like Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy can sound like improvisation, but their materials are notated to the nth degree of specificity. Sorey controls his materials in a different way, with an extraordinary talent for and confidence in empty space, in shaping time in such a way that the listener experiences the right balance of repose and suspense. And if/when he creates space for his musicians to improvise, it is with the guidance and information that is the discipline of the composer.

His music can flirt with standard forms and harmonies, a major seventh chord here has the ear thinking "jazz," "Movement" on his 2014 Pi release *Alloy*, sits in an evocatively ambiguous space between a 20th Century song-based ballad and 19th Century romanticism. Ultimately, though, his music is technically about time. That may be intuitive coming from a drummer, but time is different than rhythm—rhythm subdivides the linear and consistent flow of time, while Sorey thinks of the large-scale, and deeper, means of how music defines and describes time itself.

Time is one of the most substantial elements of *Pillars*—the three parts amount to nearly four hours duration. One can listen straight through this digitally and experience abstract music that communicates immediately and transparently through it's unerring expressive and emotional logic. Time breaks down into events, sounds and musical gestures dropped in, accumulating sensations. The music is non-narrative but dramatic in that what reaches the listener has force and substance. There are consistent elements woven through that build a solid, organic form across the four hours. The music isn't about easily defined states like happy and sad, it's about the foundation of an inner life and a mind that circumscribes inexplicable yet

enormous and powerful thoughts and feelings. *Pillars* fulfills Victor Hugo's words, and it could only be done by a composer with a confident, even ruthless, sophistication, and an absolute and fearless knowledge of what is inside himself.

CONTRIBUTOR

George Grella

GEORGE GRELLA is the *Rail's* music editor.