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TYSHAWN SOREY DEFEATS PRECONCEPTIONS

The prodigious multi-instrumentalist and composer transcends the borders of jazz, classical, and experimental music.

By Alex Ross



The prodigious drummer and composer Tyshawn Sorey is currently in residence at the Stone.

Something vital is happening at the boundary between classical music and jazz. The border has long been an active and porous one, going back to the days when Duke Ellington adopted symphonic forms and Maurice Ravel assimilated the blues. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, what Gunther Schuller dubbed the Third Stream movement encompassed modernist compositions with jazz features and large-scale conceptions by the likes of Charles Mingus and Ornette Coleman. Since the nineteen-seventies, John Zorn has been crisscrossing the divide in kinetic patterns. The striking thing about twenty-first-century explorations of this terrain is that they no longer require a name or a justification; rather, a growing community of creative musicians—from elders like Anthony Braxton and Wadada Leo Smith to younger exponents like Vijay Iyer and Sylvie Courvoisier—draw on classical and jazz elements as the occasion requires. They seek not so much a seamless fusion as the freedom to move around at will.

The composer and multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey, a Newark native, who turns thirty-seven this month, is among the most formidable denizens of the in-between zone. He is currently in residence at the Stone (July 4-9), the Zorn-led venue that is in the process of moving from a cramped East Village space to roomier digs at the New School. In August, Sorey will release a trio album, called “Verisimilitude,” on the Pi label. And in the fall he will begin teaching at Wesleyan, taking Braxton’s place on the faculty. In the jazz world, he is best known for his asymmetrical, unpredictable, timbrally explosive drumming, which has given anarchic momentum to a number of Iyer’s ensemble pieces. Yet in the past couple of years he has also made his mark with imposing compositional statements: a song cycle paying tribute to Josephine Baker, which had its première at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival (and can be seen online), and a two-hour suite entitled “The Inner Spectrum of Variables,” a recording of which was released by Pi last year.

“Inner Spectrum,” a piece in six movements for violin, viola, cello, bass, drums, and piano, is a creation that defeats all preconceptions. It traverses a confounding array of styles, from limpid, neo-Baroque episodes to fogbound, static textures reminiscent of Morton Feldman. At times, Sorey sets up a dance-inflected pulse, suggesting not only jazz but also various non-Western traditions, including what Pi’s notes identify as

Ethiopian modal jazz. Some sections are improvisational, with Sorey following a technique that the late Butch Morris described as “conduction,” or conducted improvisation. How the composer finds cohesion in such variegated materials is mysterious, but it probably has to do both with the underlying force of his ideas and with the commitment he elicits from his collaborators, who include the violist Kyle Armbrust and the versatile new-music pianist Cory Smythe. Here is an extraordinary talent who can see across the entire musical landscape. ♦

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