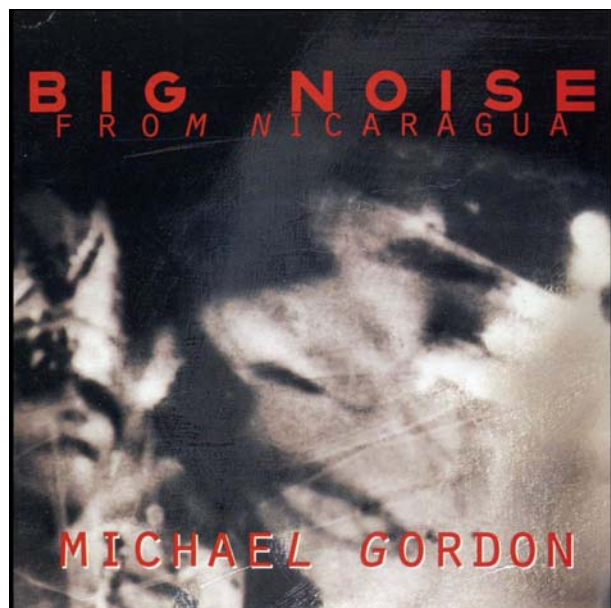


NWCR636

Big Noise from Nicaragua

Michael Gordon



1. *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!* (1983) (19:22)
Michael Gordon Philharmonic; Jon Fields, guitar;
Michael Gordon, keyboard; Ted Kuhn, violin;
John Lad, viola; Michael Pugliese, percussion;
Evan Ziporyn, clarinet/bass clarinet
2. *The Low Quartet* (1985/86) (7:39)
Evan Ziporyn, four bass clarinets
3. *Four Kings Fight Five* (1988) (23:21)
Michael Gordon Philharmonic; (Ted Kuhn,
violin; John Lad, viola; Steve Mackey, electric
guitar; Ted Mook, cello; Evan Ziporyn, clarinet;
Tim Smith, bass clarinet; Vicki Bodner, oboe;
Michael Pugliese, percussion; Lisa Moore,
keyboard; Linda Bouchard, conductor
4. *Acid Rain* (1986) (7:45)
Spectrum; Irvine Arditti & Miranda Fulleylove,
violins; Levine Andrade, viola; Rohan de Saram,
cello; Roger Dean, double bass; Philippa Davies,
flute; David Campbell, clarinet; Yvar Mikhashoff,
keyboard; Guy Protheroe, conductor

Total playing time: 60:37

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Notes

As reality drags us from the material 1980s into the soul-searching nineties, **Michael Gordon** seems the quintessential New York composer for the approaching decade. In the first place, like so many Manhattan musicians of the seventies and eighties, he's formed his own expert ensemble, the Michael Gordon Philharmonic, to negotiate his experimental forms and hard-pulsing rhythms. Second, he co-founded with Julia Wolfe and David Lang a rousingly successful festival—Bang on a Can—that offered a new atmosphere for the nineties as early as 1987. Third, he has flirted with the boundary between avant-garde and popular musics by performing in rock clubs. Fourth, he has been a leader in the move from composer-performed pieces toward larger, nonstandard ensembles, and also, with his *Van Gogh Video Opera*, a collaboration with filmmaker Elliot Caplan, toward renewed interest in opera and multimedia. No other young composer seems so in touch with the trends New York is wrestling with.

Born in Florida, Gordon grew up in an East European community in the jungle near Managua, Nicaragua. He studied composition with Edward Troupin at the University of Florida, and like so many composers active in New York these days, at Yale with Martin Bresnick. Playing with underground rock groups completed his education. That combination of influences allowed Gordon to cut through the dichotomies between high and low brow, which have imbued so many recent musical works with anxiety. Gordon's music is wildly physical, yet well disciplined in its construction, disproving a widespread eighties notion that those qualities were mutually exclusive. Gordon no longer plays rock clubs,

because he found that his symphonic forms outlasted the attention span of the average clubgoer. But his ensemble brings a raw, rock energy into a concert setting.

Few composers so justify the makeshift term “post-minimalist.” Unlike what we think of as standard minimalist fare, Gordon's music rarely repeats itself; its dissonance is aggressive, and its rhythms are extraordinarily complex. And yet, it is stripped down to essentials in a way that seems unthinkable without the mellow patterns of Steve Reich and Philip Glass as precedents. The highly inflected repetitions bespeak a sensibility formed in the 1970s, but the music's spiky roughness reacts against minimalism's placid surfaces. Gordon's aesthetic offers a logic of the irreducible, the irrational. Like an oyster coating an irritating grain of sand, he builds forms around sound-complexes that refuse to integrate, that remain inexorably what they are.

For example, *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!*, as its title implies, is a back-and-forth struggle. If you can imagine a super-keyboard on which each key plays, not a note, but a different texture with its own complex sonorities and rhythmic pattern—and then a winding, permutational melody played on that keyboard—you might capture the feel of *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!* As a result, the piece isn't about notes, melodies, or even form, but about the clash and collision of sound-images, all of them steely and sharp-edged. Electric organ, violin, viola, electric guitar, and sometimes bass clarinet act together, playing reiterative figures in 9/8 and 6/8 meter. They are continually interrupted, however, by the marimba and drums, who fight back with their own time-

frame of quarter-notes, usually in groups of four (F-A-A-F), sometimes five or six. The bass clarinet often sits out as an observer to the conflict, growling its low E of disapproval over and over.

The percussion's intransigence eventually spills into the ensemble, for, halfway through, the bass clarinet begins barking buzzy multiphonics, while the guitar hits chords thick with half-step dissonances; these impose yet a third conflicting time-frame. The cadenza finally granted to the percussion makes it only more insistent, and, over the low E, it ends the piece by itself after the ensemble surrenders. In a Romantic conception of music, opposing elements are eventually synthesized into a new, more inclusive harmony. But *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!* essentially is anti-romantic; its refusal to find a common rhythmic ground portrays the failure, and by extension the impossibility, of musical dialectic.

The Low Quartet focuses on timbre, but in a less confrontational, even humorous way. Scored originally for bass clarinet, baritone sax, trombone, and double bass, the piece can be played, as here, by four bass clarinets, and the sputtering fusion of timbres when they're at near-unison is an amazing sound. The title is musically literal; the piece's center of gravity lies an octave below middle C, and the music never goes above the treble clef. Rising scales, staccato repeated notes, and tempo contrasts of 4-against-6-against-9 are the primary elements with which Gordon keeps his grumpy lines in closely parallel motion. Suddenly, in the piece's middle, the four break into a jazzy unison melody in a scale evocative of East European musics. This moment of clarity descends back into thumping heterophony, but that scale ends the piece, ascending through increasingly lonely fragments.

Four Kings Fight Five is one of Gordon's most ambitious works. Scored for oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, synthesizer, percussion, electric guitar, and string trio, the piece offers the peculiar experience of chromatic atonality over a drone. The title is a Biblical reference to a battle in Genesis in which four kings defeated five. They were in turn defeated by one man, Abraham, who sought to free his captured nephew, Lot. In

Gordon's work, this battle takes place in physical space: Complex polyrhythms such as 8 against 9 against 10, or triplet quarter-notes against dotted quarter-notes play against each other from opposite sides of the ensemble stereophonically, often with a common pulse in the middle. Listening with an awareness of speaker placement will clarify how the piece works.

Though atonal, *Four Kings's* climbing melodies are intuitively written, even drawn from rock harmony. Rising scales in the bass clarinet underline the piece's nicely drawn phrasing. A middle section of slowly evolving dissonant harmonies crescendos to its emotional payoff, a quietly shimmering, rhythmically complex continuum. The final section builds into an increasingly consonant mass of repeated notes, major triads with a few dissonances added. (It's tempting to hear the steady-beat maracas in this section as an homage to Steve Reich's *Four Organs*, despite the diverse tempos floating by.) At last, as the ensemble repeats in a decrescendo, a sustained viola distances itself to provide a mournful solo commentary. Gordon's pieces begin boldly and end in thoughtful self-questioning.

Acid Rain, scored for flute, bass clarinet, synthesizer, and string quintet including bass, is an intense study in tempo shifts. From the outset, the strings switch between 8th-notes and dotted 16th-notes for a bumpy gear-shifting effect, while the synthesizer rolls along in 8th-note triplets. As the woodwinds enter, the contrast comes to include varying meters as well. The overall effect is a new kind of rhythm-melody; pitch is often limited to two notes a whole step apart, while tempo shifts carry the shaping role. The entire piece isn't as corrosive as its title suggests, for shimmering synthesizer patterns and winding woodwind melodies offer the ear some relaxation.

Gordon's music is sometimes harsh and unrelenting, elsewhere cloudy and mysterious. Either way, it packs into compelling forms some of the most original ideas coming out of New York today. And it sounds like no one else except Michael Gordon.

—Kyle Gann

Production Notes

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton

Produced by Michael Gordon.

Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!

Recorded at Battery Sound, NYC, in 1985.

Engineer: Eric Liljestrang

The Low Quartet

Co-Producers: Evan Ziporyn & Michael Gordon

Recorded at Hertz Hall, Berkeley, California, in July 1990.

Engineer: Anthony Gnazzo.

Mixed by John Azelvandre, Sorcerer Sound, NYC.

Four Kings Fight Five

Producer: Steve Cellum

Engineer: Ilana Pelzig

Recorded at Sorcerer Sound, NYC, in 1989.

Acid Rain

Recorded live by Aaron Heller for WRPI-FM, Troy, New York, in 1986.

Mastered by Charles Harbutt, engineer, Sony Classical Productions, Inc., NYC.

All published by composer (ASCAP).

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Fredrica Jarcho, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, Jeannie and David Van Asselt, Madeline and Sidney Gordon, Glenn Branca, Joshua Baer, and Neutral Records.

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