

Resonance, Decisions, Freedom: The Music of Peter Zummo

With accuracy and humor, Peter Zummo (born 1948) often describes his unique music as “minimalism plus a whole lot more.” He is an important exponent of the American contemporary classical tradition whose compositions explore the methodologies of not just minimalism, but also jazz, world music, and rock, while seeking to create freedom in ensemble situations. Zummo’s realization of the contemporary urge to make music that behaves like “Nature in its manner of operation” (John Cage) is to encourage spontaneous, individual decisions within a self-structuring, self-negotiating group of performers. His scores provide unique strategies (such as a “matrix of overlapping systems,” freely modulating repetition rates, etc.) and materials for achieving that aim.

Zummo has also designed new instrumental techniques for the trombone, valve trombone, dijeridu, euphonium, electronic instruments, and voice, and performed and recorded his work and that of others worldwide.

The origin and nature of these ensemble freedoms and instrumental techniques form the subjects of this essay.

(The composer’s comments, in quotes below, are from an interview on August 24, 2006, in New York City.)

Instruments (1980)

Following his early classical music studies and graduation from Wesleyan University, Zummo moved to New York City in 1975. “At the time, I was aware of the Fluxus movement, the Grand Union [a New York-based ‘anarchistic democratic theater collective’ (Steve Paxton) of avant-garde dancers formed in 1970] and that generation of free-thinking artists. I respected them a lot. I considered myself half a generation behind them but shared their mindset of free-ranging exploration. *Instruments* was my answer to a militaristic sort of minimalism [in which all the notes are fixed in a traditional score allowing no variability or individual expression, a kind of Newtonian clockwork universe] that had become popular at the time. I had a much freer-flowing notion.” *Instruments* was premiered on April 22, 1980, at Dance Theater Workshop in New York City, during a concert with dances by Stephanie Woodard.

Each of the seven movements of *Instruments* presents phrases ranging from simple (two notes) to complex for combinations of trumpet, marimba, cello, and trombone. One of the simple phrases is a half-step figure arising from the pitch distortion that a mute can cause on one particular note on a horn; removing the mute resulted in a two-note phrase. The piece is not in pulsed, metered time; rather, the players repeat the phrases at their own repetition rates.

That rate can fluctuate, so the instruments are heard as though playing in different tempi, with the parts phasing in and out of sync. In the midst of this phasing, the ensemble members look for the approach to a rhythmic unison. At that moment, the group moves to the retrograde version of the phrase. “There is a point of focus, a burst of clarity, and everything goes out backwards.” A coda ends each movement: one playing of the reversed phrase, more or less together.

“My wife, Stephanie, has remarked that when the individual has the freedom to play repeated phrases in this way, the physicality of the experience propels you to discover what should come next.”

Instruments: The Recording Session (1980)

Instruments was recorded in a Soho loft with a full-track Nagra tape recorder and, in “classic” monophonic recording style, used only one microphone, a Sennheiser 421.

“Musicians arrived at different times, so I recorded duets, trios, and quartets. The windows at the end of

the loft were open, and there were street noises as well. Recording the acoustics of the room, I captured ‘phantom,’ low-frequency difference tones that resulted in a slower-moving repeated rhythm.”

The Same Thing Only Different

Similar elements to those used by Zummo may be employed by other composers with quite dissimilar results. Each piece can’t help but have its own character. For example, Peter Gordon’s music (see Selected Discography) is also influenced by the so-called “Downtown sound” mix of rock, jazz, minimalism, world and, since the mid-twentieth century, drone music. Gordon’s lively *Intervallic Expansion (If I Trust You)* (1975) for two saxes, guitar, bass, clavinet, and percussion is modular, like Zummo’s “phrases,” incorporating polymetric reggae and funk rhythms with a continuously moving sax line harmonized initially in thirds and expanding to greater intervals. In contrast to Zummo’s practice, the intervallic modulation here applies solely to the harmony, and the other parts have their degrees of pitch and rhythm limited to accompaniment with occasional improvisation.

The intervallic nature of *Instruments* was influenced by Zummo’s studies with Carmine Caruso and Roswell Rudd.

Carmine Caruso and Intervals

Caruso, who had played saxophone in society bands, trained brass and other players above a barbershop on 46th Street for decades. He became a guru to brass players throughout the world, showing them how to proceed confidently on their journey with their instrument.

“His routines, which I still do every day, were calisthenics exercises, so you were not to concern yourself with the musical result. The training was largely based on intervals. Monday was seconds, Tuesday thirds, and so on. When you do these exercises with the dynamics, it’s really brutal.”

By the second lesson, Zummo claims, Carmine knew you better than did your own mother. “I asked him, ‘If I jog and build up strength, will that help me?’ He said that it’s not about strength, it’s about sensitivity to the balance between the blow and the resistance. You have to test that sensitivity at the extremes—with other people, with the stereo turned on loud. I also use trucks, the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner.

“After a decade, he tried to push me out. He said, ‘You’re the doctor now; make up your own exercises.’ Later he said, ‘You come into this world with nothing. The only thing you can take with you when you leave is knowledge, hence teaching, and that is love.’ He was that kind of teacher. A trumpet player once called him and said, ‘Carmine I’ve got a problem. I have to drink before the gig, I can’t go on sober, what should I do?’ He said, ‘Practice drunk.’”

Roswell Rudd and the Standing Wave

At Wesleyan, Zummo was still playing trumpet (as he had from the age of ten), studying with Ken McIntyre, Sam Rivers, and several other jazz people. He wanted to learn to improvise so he briefly studied other musics, including South Indian veena and voice. “But I decided they were not the answer—not in my genes. Then I got a job teaching at a prep school, and the headmaster said, ‘I’m so happy you’re here, my son wants trombone lessons.’ I realized he’d mistaken me for a trombone player (thank goodness it wasn’t saxophone).

“So, based on my knowledge of the trumpet, I began teaching trombone. It felt just great. The slide was just too good to be true, and with the bigger mouthpiece, you could really do more. Listening to free-jazz players, along with Jim Fulkerson and Stuart Dempster, I realized the trombone brings out the idiosyncracies of individualistic people who are way out there on their own paths.”

The first time Zummo heard the jazz trombone great Roswell Rudd play live was at the New York City club, St. James Infirmary. Rudd, who was largely self-taught on the trombone and French horn, had

quickly graduated from playing Dixieland at Yale to working in the 1960s with free-jazz avant-gardists like Herbie Nichols, Dennis Charles, Archie Shepp, and Charlie Haden, and to co-leading the New York Art Quartet in 1964. He eventually recorded the legendary albums *Flexible Flyer* (1974) and *Regeneration* (1982).

“His playing flipped me out. We later met in a practice room at the Ansonia Hotel, where I had three lessons in nine months. Roswell had a pedagogy for what is called chromatic improvisation. The exercises start with breathing in and out through the horn, completely emptying and filling the lungs and only gradually bringing the lips together with the necessary tension to make the traditional sound. He used ‘statics’ and ‘cyclonics’ to describe the air turbulence, and likened the airflow in the mouthpiece to water in a stream hitting edges and making little swirls. The player hears that sound, and brings the tone in underneath as a kind of a ghost within this noise.

“The second exercise was holding the slide in seventh position, so you can play more of the higher partials. Then you improvise without moving the slide. He said, ‘Sing the blues on a bugle call.’ You make as much music as you can within a severe restriction. If you find a difficult spot, you stay there and work it. You use the overtone series up to where it’s past chromatic and becomes glissando. He drew a diagram, a series of concentric circles with a dot in the middle, and said, ‘This is like the overtone series.’ He pointed to the center and said, ‘We’re here.’

“Years later, I went to his dressing room after a performance, and he said, ‘That incoherent conceptualization I was giving you—I’ve gone so far beyond that! I’ve spent the last twenty years trying to understand the standing wave, especially in relation to counting one, two, three, and four.’ I said, ‘Roswell, I need to know what you’re talking about.’ He mailed me exercises for polyrhythmic subdivision. You might take a seven-beat thing and divide it by five, or get to a point where three-against-two flips into two-against-three, and this relates to the blues.

“Roswell can play a single half-note, where he appears to be struggling, but he’s really biding his time until a swinging line comes that seems impossible and so hot. I realized he had come up with a system that allows him to be available when this moment might happen.”

Instruments: Unisons

“When you change partials on a horn, you get a natural articulation without the tongue. You can use these articulations alternately with tonguing, to give yourself a rest.

“A related aspect is the alternate slide positions that exist for many notes. In this track, you’ll hear that when I slur from G to G, the pitch is going down, and then I click over to the same note in a different slide position. That is very sexy and makes you want to move. You have this complex curving of pitch, those tiny bends and shapes. You find similar sounds and techniques in Gregorian chant, Indian music, and the blues.”

A Matrix of Overlapping Systems

For *Experimenting with Household Chemicals* (1987–1992), Zummo formalized these slide positions into diamond-shaped diagrams based on in-and-up, out-and-up, out-and-down, and in-and-down movements, which he calls “slide logic” and Roswell Rudd calls “slide worship.” Looking at the slide from the side, and imagining the overtone series, you’ve got a matrix of overlapping systems like that of guitar strings. “I can move the slide freely within the matrix, move in an x-formation, go cloverleaf around the diamonds, and reverse direction. It’s a process, so I always surprise myself and hear something new.”

Lateral Pass (1985)

When Trisha Brown called Zummo about doing music for a dance of hers, he went to her studio, watched dance rehearsals and played the trombone, and eventually proposed an ensemble to her.

“In the relationship of music to dance, it ought to be that the music is free to be the music. And Trisha is hip enough that, when I was about to ask if these had to be coordinated, she said, ‘We can count but we don’t.’”

Lateral Pass received its world premiere on September 5, 1985, at the Hamline University Theater, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Its New York City premiere was on September 17, 1985, at City Center.

Lateral Pass: Sci Fi

The set by Nancy Graves was fantastic: neon-ish blobs that came down from above in different areas. “So I said, ‘Let’s set the tone musically and say this is going to be very far out, mysterious.’”

“I used a style of chromatic writing that came about as follows: I had heard trombonist Jim Fulkerson play Berio’s *Sequenza V* and set about on a project I called ‘Improvising Serial Music,’ in which I tried to play the pitch I had least recently played, in the timbre I least recently used, and so on, with any other parameter you care to name. I practiced playing in a manner that was discontinuous—improvising serial music and doing it as fast as I could. What I discovered was that ultimate discontinuity is not possible within the body. The music comes out organic and will have a flow, no matter what. There was a relation between serial music and bebop that appealed to me. This kind of chromatic writing in *Sci Fi* is taken by the cello phrase.

“The piece opens with cello and voice in unison. Bill Ruyle, on marimba, ghosts in; that is his sensibility. I use the Harmon mute, open and closed, to provide that reedy beat. Here again, a precise, easily notatable process results in a complex curvilinear, timbre-changing sound.”

Lateral Pass: Slow Heart

This movement expands on a two-note line with someone else answering. “We were thinking of something very open. As a whole, *Lateral Pass* is curiously like a four-movement symphony, *Slow Heart* being the slower second movement.”

Lateral Pass: Song VI

“I was by my lonesome in a basement studio of Westbeth playing with the plunger mute and two two-note musical figures. I threw the plunger and the slide out of phase by one quarter-note, so the two hands moved in opposition. I said, ‘This is great.’ The physicality made this elegant little trombonistic thing go well with dance. But when the band arrived for rehearsal, I just didn’t have the heart to bring out the big page of music I had written, so I said, ‘Let me show you what I have for the trombone. Can you find an analogous thing to do on your instrument?’ And everyone did.

“I wanted each person to play an individual rhythm, but ‘herd instinct’ took over. So, in live performance of *Song VI*, I shadowed Trisha and told the musicians to watch the other dancers. This highlighted the choreographer within the choreography. Arthur was uncontrollable, flapping and plucking, while the dancers were kicking up a storm on stage. At least, if you tell the band they don’t have to play in the same rhythm, they are freer with their entrances.”

Lateral Pass: Song IV (Quintet)

This is a set of variations on a simple descending four-note melody: C, B-flat, A, G. The melody is then put out-of-phase (shifted, or offset) and is also performed as a voice multiphonic. “That’s where you get into Mozart. His big thing was displacing the octaves as a subtle orchestration device. The notes in parentheses are the notes you will hear if, in a quiet room, you perform these voice multiphonics.

“A subdominant chord emerged in performance, and we learned to do that as a group spontaneously. I was getting into what I thought of as ‘hip’ trombone at that point: permutations of the chords, playing the

ninth instead of the minor third. This coolness. The Bartók-like line of perfect fourths is like a Roswell exercise. The low D is not on the trombone, but Carmine trained me to do low notes without the F-attachment. The dance goes out soaring. We had a false ending, which suited Trisha's sense of humor."

Composition and Society

Zummo has always felt impelled to make music that engenders a social situation reflecting modern society and not nineteenth-century German society. He feels that his job as composer is to provide material for the musicians and sufficient instructions, so they don't make arbitrary but rather logical or heartfelt decisions. (One of the mysteries of music is how "subjective" emotions are often tied to specific "objective" gestures or material, and vice-versa.)

"I'm looking for something more elegant: the idea of composer as band leader, and band leader as the unsung hero. I used the phrase 'composition of ensemble' rather than 'composition for ensemble.' It wasn't that I heard music for specific instruments, but instead I looked at personalities, people I knew well and could work with. And that's always been overriding, the persons rather than the instruments. I guess I am unwilling to compose in any conventional sense, you know, to spell it out."

But Zummo does employ a "method of excessive variations" in which he notates the self-generating cycles of music he hears in his head, usually while driving home after rehearsing or recording. He is fluent at writing down what he hears, and carries a tuning fork.

"I've written hundreds of whole-note tone rows. If I write a fragment like a pop or jazz riff, or something with syncopation, and there's a tone row on the same sheet, I put bar-lines and eighth notes in, and I've got a "found" harmonization, having nothing to do with what I heard. All of this is based on a "diary approach" to saving fragments. Everything I write, in rhythmical situations like walking, in noisy situations, I save and date. It's on envelopes, notebooks, everywhere."

More on Minimalism and Minesweeper

Like the composer Morton Feldman, who compared his music to Franz Kline's paintings, Zummo uses the analogy of the solid-color canvas, for example Robert Rauschenberg's all-white or all-black paintings, to describe his idea of minimalism. "To me it's not minimalist to fill the space with eighth-notes or arpeggios. I think of one-note pieces as minimalist. I have a whole series of them from around 1975; one is called *Minesweeper*."

This became a dance where Zummo crosses the stage diagonally from upstage to downstage, making slow sweeping motions with the trombone slide extended and aimed at the floor ahead.

"I think of drone-type pieces, or pieces where you spend a lot of time setting up a surprise. I was listening to some classical music on the radio and I noticed a flute part that sounded good. Was it necessary to be bored for twenty minutes for that part to stand out? Much of what is correctly considered composition is how long it takes to set up the sublime."

Early on, Zummo was building steel drums and dunking them in a river to quench the metal after heating it. He built zithers and tried to make a trumpet. "This interest led me to study the generation, the propagation, and the reception of sound, which led me to psychoacoustics, which then, at the stage it's no longer sound, kind of flipped over into phenomenology or philosophy. Susanne Langer [a popular philosopher on aesthetics and culture whose best-known work is *Problems of Art*, 1957] talked about studying mind by looking at the artifacts of culture, and that made a lot of sense to me."

Standing Wave II (Communal Sensibilities)

"When you're blowing efficiently, very little air moves through the instrument, and it's the standing wave that's instantaneously present in the room and in your internal cavities. This is resonance, a physical truth

that, in the case of choral music, is a communal phenomenon. When we sing a hymn together, my sound is entering your body, and vice versa, and we are in tune, resonating. Talk about communion. I was in the twelve-voice chapel choir at Wesleyan, and in performance in the choir loft with Professor Richard Winslow; we sang Gesualdo and Monteverdi in precise, mutually resonant tuning while counting tala, which are Indian rhythmic cycles.”

Song IV (Trio)

This version of *Song IV* was played at the end of the recording session after the group had completed *Lateral Pass*. Many unique sounds arose from the trio with light touches from the processing electronics.

Often on this track, Arthur Russell sounds a C pedal point on the cello, like one of the low “sympathetic” strings on a sitar. Cello and tabla make for an unusual rhythm section here. Occasional cello scrapes fuse with the upper range of the tabla into a single effect.

The trombone frequently employs the Harmon mute without the stem and, when close-miked, produces a “woof” sound. On one low-pitched crescendo, the trombone produces a split tone, or lip multiphonic. There are improvised lines where Zummo sings an octave above the note on the trombone using voice multiphonics.

“I’m thoroughly warmed up at the end of the session and am able to do this delicate soft stuff that to me conjures the mountains and soaring, the vista.” Zummo’s music describes and exists within an evolving, self-modifying universe.

Coda (Backwards)

“Ten years ago, I started liking the way I sounded. But I can go back ten, twenty, thirty years and hear things that sound perfect to me. Roswell and I were talking about what he was currently doing, and he said, ‘It’s the same. I’m still playing the same way I did when I started exploring.’”

“And I can hear that in myself—that a person does not change. But the horn I used on *Lateral Pass* feels large to me now. I think twice about taking it on a gig [laughs].”

— “Blue” Gene Tyranny, September 10, 2006

“Blue” Gene Tyranny is a composer-pianist who has created more than fifty works for acoustic and electronic instruments and voices. His recordings are available on the Unseen Worlds, CRI, IDEA, New World, and Lovely Music labels.

Peter Zummo (born 1948) has been composing for ensemble since 1967 and for trombone since 1971, in pursuit of the evolving boundary between music-making and brass culture. From 1975 to the present he has performed and recorded the work of composers including David Behrman, Barbara Benary, Rhys Chatham, Nick Didkovsky, David First, Jon Gibson, Daniel Goode, William Hellermann, Annea Lockwood, Jackson MacLow, Phill Niblock, Larry Polansky, Elizabeth Swados, Yasunao Tone, and Yoshi Wada.

As a professor of music at Ohio Wesleyan University, he teaches in the New York Arts Program, a program of the Great Lakes Colleges Association. Since 1978, he has been Artistic Director of The Loris Bend Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit producer and presenter of music, dance, and media. He has taught master classes at the Conservatory of Amsterdam, the National Conservatory of Music, Tbilisi, and at colleges throughout the United States. Zummo received a B.A. with Honors in Music (1970) and an M.A. (1975) from Wesleyan University. Additional professional studies were with Stuart Dempster, James Fulkerson, Dick Griffin, Makanda Ken McIntyre, and Sam Rivers. He has been an Harvestworks Artist-in-Residence and has received a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship. Zummo received a Bessie

award for *Lateral Pass*.

Mustafa Ahmed's passion for the sound of the conga drums was inspired by the rhythms and percussion popularized by the "Motown Sound." Largely self-taught, Mustafa joined his first band, Downtown Sound, in 1976 and began his association with guitarist James Mason a year later. Mason and Mustafa's most celebrated work was the 1983 recording of *Your Mama* which was a Billboard Top 20 hit for several weeks. During the 1980s Mustafa worked very closely with the legendary Arthur Russell who introduced him to other composers and band leaders such as Peter Gordon and Elodie Lauten. He has been a member of the gospel group Total Praise for the past six years.

Trumpeter **Rik Albani** studied trumpet with Carmine Caruso and Ray Crisara, and jazz with Jackie McLean and Jimmy Owens. He holds a Bachelors Degree in Jazz Studies (University of Bridgeport) under the tutelage of Neal Slater (Director of Jazz Studies, North Texas University). Rik also earned a Bachelors of Economics (Boston College) and a Masters Degree in Education (University of Hartford). Rik has performed with Wilson Pickett, The Four Tops, Talking Heads, Lenny Pickett and others. Rik was also a seminal member of the groundbreaking Downtown new-music scene in New York, performing with LaMonte Young, Allen Ginsburg, David Van Tieghem, Ned Sublette, and others.

Guy Klucevsek has released seventeen albums as a leader and/or soloist. He has appeared as a soloist at the Adelaide Festival in Australia, the Berlin Jazz Festival, Serious Fun! at Lincoln Center, and the children's television show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. He was a member of Dave Douglas's group, Charms of the Night Sky, and has performed and/or recorded with Laurie Anderson, Anthony Braxton, Bill Frisell, the Kronos Quartet, Pauline Oliveros, and John Zorn. Klucevsek has received two New York Dance and Performance Awards (Bessies): one jointly with Dan Hurlin, for their puppet/theater collaboration, *The Heart of the Andes*; and the other for *Altered Landscapes*, his solo accordion score for David Dorfman Dance's *Hey*.

Born and raised in Oskaloosa, Iowa, **Arthur Russell** moved to California in the early 1970s and studied Indian music at the Ali Akbar College of Music, and accompanied Allen Ginsberg on cello. Arthur moved to New York in the mid-1970s, studied at The Manhattan School of Music, and performed in the Mabou Mines production of *Cascando*, playing a cello score composed by Philip Glass. Arthur formed a pop group called The Flying Hearts, and later began an association with The Kitchen, presenting a variety of artists not generally associated with the Downtown New York music scene. This reflected his own interest in exploring connections between the pop, dance, and classical genres. Subsequently, and until his death in 1992 he produced a notable body of releases that spanned those genres.

Bill Ruyle has been a percussionist/composer/collaborator for new music, dance, and theater in New York City and abroad since 1974. He has performed with the ensembles of Jon Gibson, Peter Gordon, Bill Obrecht, Scott Johnson, Phillip Johnston, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, Bob Eem, Naaz Hosseini, The Feetwarmers, The Manhattan Marimba Quartet, Last Forever with Dick Connette, Newband, Counter)induction, and The Hudson Valley Philharmonic. He has played in numerous Broadway shows and in eight "Shakespeare in the Park" productions in New York City. His own compositions have been performed nationally and internationally. Bill has taught in many educational outreach programs including The Music Advancement Program at The Juilliard School, Lincoln Center Institute, and Link Up! at Carnegie Hall.

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PETER ZUMMO (b. 1948)
ZUMMO WITH AN X
80656-2

1. *Song IV* (trio) (1985) 19:57

Bill Ruyle, tabla; Arthur Russell, amplified cello and voice; Peter Zummo, trombone

Instruments (1980) 17:58

2. I. Half-Steps 1:52

3. II. Sixths 2:06

4. III. Whole Steps 3:38

5. IV. Sevenths 1:26

6. V. Chromatic Fourths 4:53

7. VI. Unisons 2:16

8. VII. Four Notes, Large Intervals 1:47

Rik Albani, trumpet; Arthur Russell, cello; Bill Ruyle, marimba; Peter Zummo, trombone

Lateral Pass (1985) 25:57

(Score for Trisha Brown's *Lateral Pass*)

9. Sci Fi 3:04

10. Slow Heart 3:11

11. Song VI 4:30

12. Song IV*** (quintet) 15:12

Arthur Russell, amplified cello and voice; Guy Klucevsek, accordion; Bill Ruyle, marimba and tabla; Mustafa Ahmed, percussion; Peter Zummo, trombone

*** previously unreleased

Total time: 64:37

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