

## FEATURE

**NEARLY THREE CENTURIES AGO**, Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus devised a system for neatly classifying living organisms, a well-defined, hierarchical system based on shared physical characteristics. A mere two decades after his death, European scientists were confronted with the platypus, a creature whose bizarre mixture of mammalian and birdlike features challenged the Linnaean system.

Over the ensuing generations, Linnaeus' scientific progeny have refined, revamped, and at times been forced to completely renew their approach to cataloging the natural world. Debate rages today between those who draw lineages based on the evidence of evolutionary change versus those who draw their conclusions chiefly from subtle discrepancies in the genetic code.

Music, too, has its labels and its hierarchical family trees. And like the planet's flora and fauna, music has undergone an often gradual, sometimes seismic process of change over time to arrive at the mind-boggling variety that exists today. But while the sections in your local record store suggest a few broad, mutually exclusive categories—rock, jazz, classical, country—these genres are more interrelated, more prone to interbreeding, and therefore far more malleable, than one would be led to believe.

With support from PMP, many of Philadelphia's music groups are doing work that freely and sometimes brazenly traverses these generic boundaries, whether

## Music Without Borders:

purposely striving to forge new paths or simply following personal muses wherever they may lead.

The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts' "Fresh Ink" series showcases contemporary composers and performing artists, many of whom steer what appear to be traditional classical music ensembles in very untraditional directions. In this, its sixth season, "Fresh Ink" will present three such groups: the "amplified chamber group" Bang on a Can All-Stars, presenting two Philadelphia premieres with percussionist Glen Kotche, drummer for indie rockers Wilco; the Grammy-nominated quintet Imani Winds, world premiering a new work by jazz pianist Jason Moran; and, making their Philly debut, the young 20-piece ensemble Alarm Will Sound, whose repertoire extends from contemporary classical to arrangements of electronica and classic rock.

The process by which some musical genres have come to exist is remarkably similar to the intermingling and natural selection that has given rise to new species over the planet's history. Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley didn't arise fully-formed from some Memphis laboratory with a new idea called rock n' roll. Instead, living poor in the 1950s South where blues-singing blacks and country-swinging whites came into close (if uneasy) contact, a new form arose which fused elements of both.

In urban America, such commingling is imbued with a rich multi-cultural flavor, as evidenced by the Imani Winds, a classical woodwind quintet that often collaborates with musicians from other traditions, especially jazz. Their Kimmel Center performance will include the premiere of Jason Moran's *Cane*, a piece inspired by the pianist's slave ancestors in Louisiana, and a piece written for the group by legendary saxophonist Wayne Shorter.

Asked to categorize the ensemble, Imani clarinetist Mariam Adam offers, "It's mu-

sic that is absorbing its environment. For us, growing up as an ensemble in New York City, that means jazz, world, Latino, salsa, tango, Chinese Urhu in the subway, Middle Eastern music through your favorite falafel place. We're conservatory-trained and we still play sonatas, but the faces of chamber music are evolving."

Adam expresses reservations about the urge to label that inevitably accompanies the marketing of any artist, a trend that only accelerates as new avenues open up. "One of my biggest gripes with the age of information that we're in right now—with title bars on web sites or sections in record stores—is putting titles on everything," she says.

But the drive to describe is nothing new, nor is it quite so unnecessary as the artist-publicist dichotomy might suggest. As with animals who occupy new habitats and eventually change so drastically that they can no longer procreate with the species from whence they came, so eventually will musical genres become so developed that they hardly resemble their own parents. Certainly the traces of a blues holler or a hillbilly twang were readily evidenced in Elvis' "revolutionary" new sound, but ten years later, good luck finding the fingerprints of Robert Johnson or Roy Acuff on *Rubber Soul*.

similar kinds of musical thinking going on, and vice versa."

The goal of finding an audience is of primary importance in assigning genre designations. For some, the type of music one listens to has less to do with personal taste than it does with defining an identity: the chosen genre comes with its own look, values, social clique. Those who subscribe to these ideas can be easily marketed to; less definable choices mean less definable consumers. That leaves some artists, whose work is not so easily slotted into preexisting niches, hard-pressed to find their spot in the marketplace.

Composer Keeril Makan, who will have his new piece for electric guitar and orchestra premiered by the American Composers Orchestra at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, laughs when recounting the struggle to classify his latest CD, *In Sound*, released on saxophonist/composer John Zorn's Tzadik label.

"Zorn's been dealing with this issue for

## On Defying Definition

BY SHAUN BRADY

Not all such evolutions happen quite so naturally—there are those experimenters who purposefully combine seemingly disparate elements, test tube in hand, to try and force a chemical reaction. Miles Davis continually had his finger on the pulse of new music, successfully integrating aspects of rock and funk into his 1970s electric experiments, and even dabbling in hip-hop with lesser success in his later years. Many of his sidemen from that era went on to pioneer a genre so intent on cross-over that its very name reflected that idea: fusion.

Alarm Will Sound, a group of musicians in their mid-20s to mid-30s, has very consciously expanded its repertoire in unexpected directions. They're best known for the 2005 CD *Acoustica*, an album of virtuosic arrangements of songs by electronic musician Aphex Twin. For the group, being able to draw upon two different genres helps to expand their audience and possibly even cultivate new listeners for those separate branches.

"I think that's where we feel like we're doing something really cool," claims AWS managing director Gavin Chuck. "Somebody who's coming to hear some hardcore modernist classical stuff will hear us play an arrangement of electronica and realize that there are actually

some time," Makan says, "whether he's jazz or experimental, improvisation or new music. I think they classified my CD as avant-garde/experimental, but I noticed that a lot of CD distributors are putting it under jazz. It has nothing to do with jazz, but because they know Zorn and the types of things that Tzadik promotes and produces, they think it will appeal to a jazz audience—which in itself is varied between listeners of more traditional Wynton Marsalis music or things that are more avant-garde. So in other words, I have no idea what you would call it."

The coining of terms is a special challenge in the "classical" realm. Where other genres, rock and jazz in particular, can boast a plethora of fairly coherent subgenres, classical music is more frequently defined by historical periods than stylistic tags, and recent innovations in particular have failed to generate sufficient new terminology. Terms like "new music" or "20th/21st-century classical" are non-specific and/or have

Composer Keeril Makan, photo by Scott Irvine

limited shelf-lives, while tags like “experimental” or “avant-garde” describe approaches, not styles, and may be applied across genres.

Which leaves an organization like the American Composers Orchestra attempting to redefine “the orchestra” as a sonic tool for modern composers, whatever their background, rather than an ensemble for the performance of standard repertoire. It’s an approach akin to erasing classifications in response to the platypus, not redefining them, and then throwing a few species into a room together to see which can fruitfully reproduce.

The Annenberg Center will present two concerts in the fourth year of the ACO’s “Orchestra Underground” series. ACO Executive Director Michael Geller refers to “Orchestra Underground” as the organization’s “entrepreneurial, slightly ‘subversive’ take on what an orchestra is or what an orchestra could be. In part, ‘Orchestra Underground’ is an attempt to redefine the symphonic ensemble in a flexible format that’s friendly to new technologies, multimedia, new visions and new collaborations. A large part of that is encouraging composers and artists who haven’t traditionally thought of writing for orchestra to do so. So there have been a number of artists who come out of jazz and improvisatory musics, varied world music traditions, the computer music studio, and/or the theater and dance world. I think if we’re doing our job right, we’re not advocating for any one musical aesthetic, but rather advocating for the opportunity for creative composers and musicians to engage in writing for the orchestra.”

Certain composers and artists, not content to wait for others to define their work, coin their own terminology. Baritone saxophonist Fred Ho offers the mouthful “Afro-Asian New American Multicultural Music” to describe his work, adding, “I don’t agree with classifications, but self identity and recognition of influences and inspirations are important.”

Ho’s brand of jazz brashly ventures across generic and cultural boundaries. Born in California, he regularly integrates elements from his Chinese ancestry into his multimedia works—elements both real and perceived, from traditional Chinese folk music to martial arts film tropes. Ho’s first orchestral commission came from the ACO in the midst of his battle with colorectal cancer, and resulted in *When the Real Dragons Fly!* The piece’s title comes from a Ho Chi Minh quote: “When the prison doors open, then the real dragons will fly out.”

“I wrote the piece with the intention to eliminate all forms of stratification,” Ho offers, “the tearing down of all walls and ‘prisons,’ which I believe will allow ‘true’ dragons to fly—meaning the most original, fiercest and transformative persons, ideas and works [will] be liberated and have the chance to contend and impact upon society.”

Given the strong political bent of his ideas, it’s no surprise that Ho’s genre hybridization is rife with social commentary, the multiple hyphenates of his musical identity reflecting his socio-cultural one. “Everyone is a hyphenated-American unless one accepts the racist grand narrative that European settler-colonialism and white supremacy are the primary characteristics of the American identity,” Ho insists. “I choose the opposite, that what is truly American is multi-lingual, multi-cultural... In my personal journey growing up in American society, the expressions and explosions of the oppressed have had their greatest impact upon how I see myself and my role in society and the world.”

While not as anarchic in spirit as Ho, Chinese-born composer Fang Man uses the orchestra to parallel her own cross-cultural experiences by fusing musical traditions. Fang’s clarinet concerto *Resurrection* combines western techniques with Chinese opera and electronics, and was inspired by a



**from top:**

Alarm Will Sound,  
photo by Justin Bernhaut  
Saxophonist Mats Gustafsson  
Imani Winds

non-musical source—Wassily Kandinsky’s painting *Composition V—Resurrection of the Dead*. While living in New York, Fang has become interested in jazz music, which she initially hoped to add as yet another element in her compositional mix, but ultimately shied away from in the case of *Resurrection*.

“I like jazz a lot,” she says. “It’s very rich. But I don’t come from a culture that has jazz in its blood. I don’t want jazz musicians or people who know it well to hear my music and think, ‘You used it in a cheap way.’”

Naturally, these stylistic absorptions don’t only work one way, with myriad genres and traditions being gathered under the classical umbrella. Jazz and experimental music presenting organization Ars Nova Workshop will present two series that showcase the outer limits of what could be considered jazz: “Free/Form: Composer Portraits,” a six-concert series spotlighting the compositional work of pianist Andrew Hill and saxophonists Julius Hemphill and Anthony Braxton; and, in collaboration with International House Philadelphia, “Tête-à-Tête,” a series of five duo performances with participants ranging from legendary pianist Paul Bley to Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore.

While Ars Nova does categorize itself as “jazz and experimental music,” Director Mark Christman says, “We’re always interested in artists who aggressively defy category, are defined by multiple categories, or are enigmatic.”

The series being undertaken by Ars Nova could be seen as two extremes of that continuum. “Free/Form” explores the compositional side of a music traditionally associated with improvisation, while “Tête-à-Tête” promises the more immediate, almost chemical reaction of artists pairing off and conversing with one another, sometimes across generations and stylistic approaches. Both feature artists and combinations which challenge the limits of “jazz.”

“If there’s anything I can do with regards to genre,” Christman says, “it’s to facilitate an event that contradicts it, or allows the audience to question it. Where the event falls categorically is of no value; what is important is elevating artists with overlooked or undervalued bodies of work, supporting and rewarding ambition, drawing connections, articulating relevance, and challenging ourselves.”

Then there are those whose work seems to defy categorization altogether. Slought Foundation’s “Soundfield@Slought” series, curated by bass clarinetist/composer Gene Coleman, will present five concerts by largely indefinable artists. Taiwan’s Chai Found Music Workshop utilizes traditional Chinese instruments in startling contexts, from Western

classical music to experimental sound art to rock concerts; German composer Michael Maierhof composes by means of improvising, creating works for prepared piano and amplified plastic cups; singer Theo Bleckmann’s expansive vocal range covers territory from the Great American Songbook to ethereal drones and electronic looping.

Austrian composer Werner Moebius, who combines digital sound sources with acoustic instruments, sometimes in the context of art installations, defines himself as “an artist who works with sound rather than a composer. When I begin to work on a new piece I never know exactly which form or genre it will take. I think it is worth striving for a position that can exist outside rigid or pre-determined categorizations. As an artist it’s valuable to produce works of integrity.”

While discussing the concept of genre, many of these artists seemed to echo jazz pianist—or is it African-American classical composer—Duke Ellington’s famed axiom that there are only two kinds of music—good and bad.

Alarm Will Sound’s Gavin Chuck, for instance, said, “Hopefully what we’re doing is good music from the genres that interest us. Because that’s the fun part of being a musician—you get to play what you listen to.”

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