

Playing a New Game of Analysis: John Zorn's *Carny*, Autonomy and Postmodernism

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[Example 1](#) shows the opening of the American composer John Zorn's *Carny* for solo piano, written in 1989 for the American pianist Stephen Drury, and revised on 'Tue, Feb 6, 1996', as the bottom left-hand corner of the first page reveals. [1] This is a music that seems to be a random sequence of quotes, references and allusions: a collage more than a composition. Discontinuity is this excerpt's only constant – as it is, indeed, throughout the entire twelve-minute duration of the piece. But this is not just a discontinuity of atonal collections, or time signatures, or pulse (species of discontinuity which are, after all, familiar from contemporary piano repertoires): virtually every bar is cast in a different genre, style, or topic. This passage (in a strategy typical of the whole work) makes a discontinuous play of the referentiality of different musics. [FN](#)

It is this feature of the piece which poses a challenge to ideologies of the musical work, and techniques of analysis and close-reading. *Carny*'s fragmentation subverts conventional notions of individual authorship. Bars 13-19 in [Example 1](#) (from the last bar on the first page) have been described by Stephen Drury in an article in *Perspectives of New Music* as 'a jazzy dominant ninth chord [bar 13]... through a bebop phrase (coloured with Xenakis) [bar 18] into out-and-out cocktail music at bar 19'. [2] Zorn seems to relinquish a singular compositional subjectivity in favour of a multiplicity of different voices. 'Composition' – if it takes place at all in any traditional sense in *Carny* – seems to consist more of rearrangement (of fragments from existing pieces, of generic references) than origination. [FN](#)

If defining Zorn as the individual author of *Carny* is problematic, it is also debatable whether the piece can be characterized as an individual or autonomous entity. Derived from (not to say parasitic upon) many other kinds of music and the work of many different composers, *Carny* appears to be a collection of fragments rather than a single 'work', and seems to be wilfully subversive of the ideals of the monolithic masterpiece. So if Zorn's creative ego is shattered into so many shards by his creative practices in *Carny*, the piece seems similarly to deconstruct conceptions of musical autonomy.

Carny's play of referentiality does not easily admit the separation of world from work which characterises many analytical practices. Faced with a passage like [Example 1](#), any account which failed to consider the identities of individual bars as references or citations and focused instead exclusively on pitches and rhythms would seem – paradoxically – to distort the immanent qualities of the music. Susan McClary has characterised one view of Zorn's music as ''hellzapoppin' nihilism, revelling in the rubble of Western civilization'. [3] But similarly 'hellzapoppin' analytical techniques, designed to deal with this kind of composition, have scarcely been developed in musicology: as Zorn himself has put it, this kind of music 'creates a real interesting game of analysis for musicologists in the future, a new kind of analysis'. [4] [FN](#)

So how is it possible to play this 'real interesting game'? One of the first ways is to recognize that, for all its novelty relative to musicological conceptions of authorship and work, understood under wider theories of postmodernism, *Carny*'s play of fragmentation and reference is, in fact, downright conventional. This, for example, is how Fredric Jameson defines the typical characteristics of postmodern artworks in his *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: 'objects that were formerly 'works' can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of... various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or... sheer process. The autonomous work of art thereby – along with the old autonomous subject or ego – seems to have vanished, to have been volatilized'. [5] Jameson's

discussion relates specifically to experimental video art, but his assessment of 'fragments' rather than 'monumental forms' and texts 'superimposed on each other' could have been tailor-made for many of Zorn's compositions – and *Carny* in particular. [FN](#)

But applying this global theory to the practice of studying individual artworks brings with it contradictory, even paradoxical, problems. Here is how Jameson himself puts it:

if we find ourselves confronted... with 'texts', that is, with the ephemeral, with disposable works that wish to fold back immediately into the accumulating detritus of historical time – then it becomes difficult and even contradictory to organize an analysis and an interpretation around any single one of these fragments in flight. To select – even as an 'example' – a single [text], and to discuss it in isolation, is fatally to regenerate the illusion of the masterpiece or the canonical text and to reify the experience of total flow from which it was momentarily extracted. [6]

'So to treat individual artworks as if they were genuinely singular works would be to reconstruct not just autonomous texts, but autonomous authors as well – precisely the concepts *Carny* seems so violently to resist. The consequences of this position for the would-be critic are nihilistic in the extreme. Defining a work as 'postmodern' in the terms described by Jameson necessarily means that it is impossible to study it as an individual entity. All that the postmodern text can represent is the infinite reproducibility of all sounds and images; and that means that individual texts, and their interpretations, become mere functions of the system, representing only the chaotic maelstrom of postmodern signification. [FN](#)

However, if we are going to try and engage with Jameson's paradox rather than simply give up in the face of the problems of postmodern textuality, it is necessary to recognise, rather than refute, the contradictions of a text like *Carny*. And the most significant of these is that, whilst the stylistic juxtapositions and superimpositions in the piece may apparently shatter key musicological paradigms, they are communicated through a wholly conventional use of the fixative powers of notation. In performance, the piece may sound as if it had been randomly constructed, but each event is precisely ordered and described. There is no room in *Carny* for improvisation, say, or for the performer to rearrange any of the sections of the piece. The piano works of Boulez and Stockhausen, to say nothing of those by Cage or the American experimentalists, are 'radical' by comparison.

This has important consequences for the way *Carny*'s references to pre-existing pieces are understood. As Zorn himself explains, 'I draw upon what I consider to be the great composers... These are the people I listened to when I was a kid. It always comes back to that period in the late '60s where I was really solidifying – all my germ ideas were coming together'. [7] Quotation, then, seems to be an act of homage for Zorn: a self-conscious, even sentimental, exercise. David Nicholls has described how 'after [Cage's] *Variations IV* we can only go round and round. Thus even the most attractive, or striking, new works – for instance those of... John Zorn [and others]... – must inevitably be allusive rather than elusive, referential (and reverential) rather than radical'. [8] Far from deconstructing ideologies of the musical work, Zorn's quotations could instead be understood as attempts to position himself, and *Carny*, in the wake of the masterpieces and modernist composers he so admires. In which case, the piece is much more about conformity than revolutionary radicalism. [FN](#)

Playing *Carny*'s game of analysis means negotiating a position between the poles of the piece's putatively 'postmodern' soundworld and the conventional features of its score. But there's another important factor in sketching this approach to *Carny*, namely, the way Zorn conceives listeners' interpretations of his music. As he says, 'I cemented the idea of creating 'nodes' that can be interpreted in a myriad of ways; each person creates their own narrative... I think... of creating little prisms. When my single creative vision passes through it, it separates into all the possible colors of the spectrum. It's broken up into shards. There are many interpretations, and all of them

are valid'. [9] That tension between fixed 'prisms' of musical information and an infinite interpretability is another of the contradictions at the heart of *Carny*'s textuality. [FN](#)

Drury is one of the few to have taken up the challenges of a close study of *Carny*. He begins, as any self-respecting analyst should do, with the seemingly uncontroversial move of establishing a taxonomy of the work's diverse materials. As he describes, there are 'at least three different kinds of music. Brief chunks of music by composers from Mozart to Boulez appear note for note or under various degrees of transformation... Secondly, phrases referring more generally to genres appear... And there are entirely original passages which have no outside source'. [10] I've already identified, through Drury, the bebop and cocktail music in bars 16-19, and for an example of Zorn's supposedly original material, see the 'hammering' and 'pp' gestures in the first bar of the piece in [Example 1](#). [Example 2](#) provides an example of quoted material from the work of other composers, and illustrates the kinds of transformations to which they are subjected. [FN](#)

In bar 143 (the second of the middle system on the first page) Stockhausen is superimposed by Bartók. The left hand plays, at the original pitch, the chord that permeates Stockhausen's *Klavierstück IX*. In Stockhausen's piece, the chord is famously repeated 140 and then 87 times in the first two bars. The tempo indication, quaver = 160 (the only metronome marking in *Carny*), is taken from the performance instructions in the Stockhausen. The bar length, too (21/8), derives from Stockhausen's bar 6. The right hand, however, plays Bartók (again at the original pitch): the ostinato from the *Ostinato* in volume six of *Mikrokosmos*. Zorn may have combined these two fragments because of their strong similarity to one another in pitch terms, and their equivalence of function in their original contexts. Bartók's chord is made up of a tritone and semitone; Stockhausen's of two fourths separated by a semitone, forming two overlapping tritones. In their original settings, one of the main functions of both chords is to introduce and cement the pulse of the piece. In the Stockhausen, the chord acts as a point of regularity around which are built fast, eruptive fluorescences and contrasting moments of stasis. In the Bartók, the ostinato stabilizes the tempo of the work. By displacing the two chords in the ratio 19:21, Zorn subtly ironizes Stockhausen's and Bartók's intentions, whilst maintaining a strong similarity relationship to the music's original contexts, particularly the Stockhausen.

In bar 147, marked 'Even Slower Dramatically' and 'Desire', there is an even more obvious quote: Wagner's *Tristan* chord. The performance indications seem designed to heighten the chord's original associations. In the specific context of *Tristan und Isolde*, the chord functions as an emblem of unfulfilled longing, whilst in the wider context of music history it has become one of the most powerful symbols of late-romantic harmonic practice. Zorn even suspends the topical discontinuity of *Carny* at this point, as if to further italicise the Wagner quote: the 'slowness' and 'mysticism' of bars 145 and 146 prepare the ground for the Wagner citation, whilst the succeeding bars continue the atmosphere of mysterious suspense.

If it were possible to tell similar stories about each of the 222 bars of *Carny*, would the resulting analysis be a complete exploration of the piece and the way it means? In one sense, discovering the original sources behind every element of the work would open a significant window for interpretation. But this spot-the-quote approach could reduce the piece to an exercise in musicological detective-work. It would have little to say about the juxtapositions in the piece, and the fact that original material is recontextualized not just by the way Zorn transforms pitches and rhythms, but also by their situation within *Carny*. As bar 143 and its surroundings demonstrate, the interaction between Stockhausen/Bartók, Wagner, and the surrounding bars of generic 'swing' and 'modernist' musics, is arguably a more crucial aspect of *Carny* than the ancestry of individual bars. What's more, this hypothetical list of quotes could say nothing about how particular topics might be projected and sustained over the course of the whole piece.

Drury has described the effect of places like bars 143 and 147 as 'an implosion of references in which the meaning of each gesture collides with both the image of its source in the listener's memory and its juxtapositions in the piece as a whole'. [11] But, of course, that 'image' will only be there, and will only form part of the way the reference means, if the listener knows what that source actually is in the first place. Whilst a recognition of the *Tristan* chord may be common to most listeners to *Carny*, an appreciation of the heavily transformed reference to Ives's *Concord*

Sonata, for example, just before the end of the piece, is perhaps less easily assumed. Games, after all, are no fun when you don't know the rules. [FN](#)

But there is a still more fundamental problem with applying Drury's divisions to the piece. I've talked about Zorn's 'quotation' from Wagner's *Tristan*. My use of that terminology assumes that there is some kind of transferral of meaning from one piece to the other. Yet it is actually rather unclear what kind of correspondence exists between *Tristan und Isolde* and *Carny*'s bar 147. The whole context of *Carny* creates a continually fragmented, disjunctive music. The large-scale tonal processes associated with Wagner's opera are far removed from the world *Carny* creates for itself. In that sense, for all that bar 147 'quotes' Wagner, the piece cannot fulfil (and makes no pretensions to fulfil) the chord's structural implications. Paradoxically, precisely because of its literal, material transcription of Wagner's chord, this 'quotation' is, in reality, a distortion. Even in this most apparently clear-cut instance, *Carny* always evinces a transformation rather than transferral of meaning from an original source to its new situation.

If bar 147 is not a 'quotation' but a 'transformation', then the distinctions between Drury's categories begin to dissolve. The two excerpts in [Example 3](#) further reveal the fluidity of the boundaries between them. In bars 155-7 and 168, Stockhausen's chord from *Klavierstück IX* is transformed from its original appearance in *Carny*. The semiquaver figuration of bars 155-7 outlines two fourths separated by a semitone, the intervals of Stockhausen's chord. But it is a passage which is far removed from the relative stasis of bar 143. Zorn reassembles Stockhausen's music as a melodic line instead of a chord, and creates a motive of transition and change. Bar 168 develops this topic, making Stockhausen's original chord (at pitch, but with the left hand playing a tremolo an octave lower) the start of a glissando which leads to the high-register semiquavers of bar 169. One way to characterise this process of transformation from bar 143 (Stockhausen/Bartók) to bar 168 is that the reference has lost its allusive power and has become a set of pitches to be manipulated by Zorn; or, in other words, the referential has become material.

Although Stockhausen's chord may have been used to generate these subsequent bars, their indebtedness to this pre-existing material is perceptually obscure. If they were presented on their own, it would be difficult to say which category they would fit into: neither 'quoted' nor wholly 'original' although perhaps generically 'modernist'. In this instance – and as in so much of the piece – Zorn's processes of transformation create a weird aesthetic space in which categories of the 'original', the 'quoted' and the 'generic reference' are destabilized. What seems to be 'new' music turns out to be fake (or, at any rate, derived from an 'outside source'), and fragments that sound like replicas turn out to be freshly composed.

Zorn manipulates a continuum of referentiality in *Carny*. The changes wrought to Stockhausen's chord reveal that the 'referential' is always part of *Carny*'s 'material' – and vice versa. This doubleness stands as a metaphor for the parallel universes inhabited by the whole piece. The materials of *Carny* simultaneously belong to the piece and to the outside world. Zorn's critical relationship with all of the different musics in the piece is responsible for this rich but perilous situation. Finally, *Carny* might be said to reimagine autonomy by its insistence on world and work, reference and originality, interpretative openness and notational fixity. These complex negotiations account for the piece's situation between the total fragmentation of the postmodern text and the ideological confines of the musical work.

Footnotes

[1] The piece was revised again at some point between 1996 and 2000, as the deletion of bars 9-12 demonstrates. Tomoko Mukaiyama's 2000 recording of *Carny* (on Tzadik TZ 7330-2) is the first that does not include these bars. [Back](#)

[2] Stephen Drury, 'A View from the Piano bench or Playing John Zorn's *Carny* for Pleasure and Profit', *Perspectives of New Music*, 32/1 (1994): 197. [Back](#)

[3] Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley, 2000): 146.

[4] Cole Gagne, *Soundpieces 2: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, New Jersey, 1993): 530. [Back](#)

[5] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991): 77. [Back](#)

[6] *Ibid.*: 78. [Back](#)

[7] Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*: 526-7.

[8] David Nicholls, 'Avant-garde and Experimental Music', *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge, 1998): 531-2. [Back](#)

[9] Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*: 515. [Back](#)

[10] Drury, 'A View from the Piano bench': 197. [Back](#)

[11] *Ibid.*: 196. [Back](#)

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