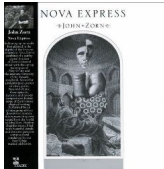


John Zorn – Nova Express (2011)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 15 July 2011 08:53 - Last Updated Friday, 26 December 2014 10:31

John Zorn – Nova Express (2011)



01. *Chemical Garden* [play](#) 02. *Port Of Saints* 03. *Rain Flowers* 04. *The Outer Half* 05. *Did Fingers Talk* 06. *The Ticket That Exploded* 07. *Blue Veil* 08. *lc 2118* 09. *Lost Words*

[play](#)

10. *Between Two Worlds*

Personnel: John Medeski (piano); Trevor Dunn (bass); Kenny Wollesen (vibraphone); Joey Baron (drums). Arranger: John Zorn.

Following 2010's relentless series of monthly releases, Nova Express is John Zorn's first major release of 2011.

For anyone new to Zorn's music, one of the most important things to realize is that his releases all come out on his own Tzadik records. While Zorn deserves all of the praise in the world for the label and what it has done for the experimental music community, his own releases often suffer from a troubling lack of self-editing. Of the already mentioned monthly 2010 releases, only a small amount of must-hear material stands out. I have also always had a problem with many of his classical pieces such as *Aporias*. While his extremely abrasive composition and performance styles are fantastic in his improv music, they often fall short in composed works, seeming merely flashy and overburdened.

Not so on Nova Express. Composing music for a jazz ensemble – while certainly not a new idea – is perfect for Zorn's musical style. It is often hard to tell moments of improvisation from the rest of the material, but on Nova Express, Zorn writes some of his most impressive attempts at the lyrical atonality that has always been his major accomplishment. In spite of the dissonance and density of much of the material, melodies are always apparent and even surprising within extremely disjunct and violent lines. In fact, "The Outer Half" features a middle section that is among the most tonal and lyrical things Zorn has ever written. It may relate to the lack of any

instrument capable of creating extreme squeaks or noises, but parts of this album, along with his recent *The Dreamers* project, can almost lead a listener to thinking the old master of noisy jazz is mellowing with age.

The comparison to the *Dreamers* is probably apt. While *Nova Express* does not go as far into the easy listening territory to which that album strived, it is rare for a jazz-oriented Zorn album not to utilize saxes, electric guitars, or something equally capable of establishing a level of aural violence. This calms the surface texture of the music, in spite of the fact that the music itself draws heavily from previous Zorn projects, ranging from *Naked City* to *Electric Masada*. Opener “Chemical Garden” especially calls to mind the cut-up techniques, game pieces, and directed improv for which Zorn is known.

As a whole, *Nova Express* is successful. Like any of Zorn’s work, it is part of a massive body of compositions and inventive ensembles that demonstrates his incredible diversity and prolific nature. Thus while it is among his most solid recent releases, that must be taken with some warning. Any fan of Zorn’s *Masada* ensembles will find much to appreciate here. Yet to anyone new to the music, there are many better places to start, such as *Electric Masada*, the *Moonchild* ensemble, *Naked City*, or, more similarly in instrumental texture, *Bar Kokhba*. While not his best release, *Nova Express* is probably Zorn’s most interesting combination of his compositional output and his jazz-oriented releases. Unlike dozens of his personal releases, this is well worth attention. --- Patrick Nickleson

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