To Serena and Nicola
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Foreword by Alessandra Novaga

Andrea asked me to write something that introduces his book on John Zorn and his Book Of Heads, and I thought that if he asked me it wasn't for my skills as an essayist, but because, in the 2012, I did some concerts where I performed the opera in its full version. So, since the book is really a very accurate and passionate essay, I will not try to analyze the Book Of Heads, but I will try to talk about it from my point of view, from the point of view of someone who has got her hands on it, and in this case also the feet, if I can say so...

After listening to the magnificent edition played by Marc Ribot, I ordered the scores, and these small cards arrived, on each one there was a study that looked like a miniature, written in ink, and a legend to decipher the symbols. I started to work on it a bit, but the undertaking seemed rather difficult, especially because until then I had only attended the world of written scores. The only experience I had besides the classical guitar, was playing Trash TV Trance by Fausto Romitelli, thanks to which I bought my first electric guitar and all the equipment to perform it.

Shortly afterwards I found myself in New York, in a coffee bar, with my friend James Moore, who had just played all of them at the Anthology Film Archives, and who encouraged me to face them, “You'll see, it's really a journey”, he told me, and so, as soon as I got back to Milan, I bought some different guitars, and I got serious about it.

And it was truly a journey, an incredible opportunity to speculate around the idea of guitar. Zorn does not give indications on which type to use for this or that study, therefore understanding the flow of different sounds, given by the different guitars, is a difficult but stimulating undertaking, especially if you face the work in its entirety. I used five different ones, and it was not easy to find the space in the house to be able to recreate the necessary set, not to mention the amount of balloons that I had to inflate every day, during the preparation period! Going back to the idea of a travel, I think it is extremely interesting to do it, first of all trying to
understand what the scores say, what Zorn wants to tell us. To quote Marc Ribot, "Zorn is a true composer, he knows more about extending technique on guitar than I do. Sometimes he writes things that are impossible to do, but that's okay because he does it intentionally." In my opinion this thought unlocks the whole interpretative operation; it must be understood that the relationship you establish with those cards and their hieroglyphics must be absolutely personal. It makes no sense to ask the composer for explanations. You have to find your way, and the further you go the more the fog unravels. Then the proportion between the improvised freedom, that you have to take, and the written sign that traces you a way, becomes reality.

While I was immersed in the preparation of The Book Of Heads, my idea was increasingly outlined compared to the fact that when it was decided to move from tablature to modern notation, we have acquired greater precision in understanding the idea of the composer and a certain executive practicality, but we have also lost that spontaneity, that instinct and that thought/hands adherence, which we can only find today in jazz musicians.

For me, who until then I had only moved in the field of exact notation, The Book Of Heads was an opportunity to draw on a series of intuitions, and more compositional than interpretative skills, and this helped me a lot to broaden my horizons. The playful aspect is also very important, but I think it's also important not to ridicule them too much; you use dolls that speak, bursts or rubs balloons, mumble even, in some studies, but, especially if you deal with the work in its entirety, you understand that they are all pieces that actually help us to understand our contemporaneity in its many facets.

They help us to compare the various musical traditions, our sense of humor and the tragic, how far our interpretative skills go, and how far our autonomy of thought and, this means a lot, our physical reflexes. Shortly, it's not a small thing, if we think that all this is contained in a single work. I think it's very nice to 'see them' play, because the gestures and all the instrumental changes that take place are an integral part of the work. It's a
real show! If I think that when I played them I went around the world with five guitars, an amplifier, two suitcases and a bag full of various tools!!

Alessandra Novaga
“Composed from 1976-1978 and now studied by guitarists the world over, The Book of Heads is one of Zorn's most popular and oft-performed composition.”

“This was the presentation of Marc Ribot's concert on the website of the Venetian association Vortice. I still have a distinct memory of that concert. The Aula Magna was crowded with fans and Ribot presented himself with a true avant-garde guitarist's set: several guitars that he changed quickly with each song and that he could play at the same time, a small fan prepared with elastic bands instead of the usual blades with which he hit directly the strings, a violin bow and on the ground inflated balloons to burst with his feet rhythmically during the songs or to rub on the fretboard and on the guitar strings.

I remember a fun evening. Ribot was in great shape and alternated jazz,

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1 Notes from the obi of the cd “John Zorn James Moore Plays The Book of Heads”, Tzadik, 2015.
2 “One of the most famous and acclaimed guitarists of the "alternative" world scene, a strong collaborator of John Zorn and Tom Waits, in a single concert where all the mastery and swing of a great musician can be unleashed, between standards and improvisation, between songs and sudden accelerations.”
3 The link is still available: http://vortice.provincia.venezia.it/Ribot.html
rock and blues with very short interludes where he "tortured" the guitar with the bow, the balloons or scrambling in any possible way. Despite the presence of many young people, the public reacted to this wave of amusing anarchy with the compassionate and heavy attitude that you can, sometimes, see in the public of avant-garde concerts. Not a laugh, not a smile in front of the obvious irony shown by Ribot himself. What a pity!

A few years later, driven by my usual guitar curiosity, I bought the album "The Book of Heads" by John Zorn and finally found out what those short musical sketches with which Ribot interspersed his concert were: they were part of the 35 studios composed by Zorn, played and recorded in 1995 by Ribot himself and dedicated to and inspired by Eugene Chadbourne.

It wasn't the first time I met Zorn's music, I had listened to "Spillane" in 1989 at a friend's house and I was impressed. A few years later I came across Naked City, listening to their first self-titled album and to "Torture Garden" and it was love at first listening, a truly stimulating experience. Slowly, Zorn's music has become one of my favorite obsessions, to understand it better I bought and listened to tons of other music, read books, searched for interviews, talked to many musicians. Eventually all these experiences condensed in this book. I hope it will be useful to all those who wish to play this music and to those who love John Zorn and the guitar.

Why should I write an essay, a sort of a “manifesto” about some graphic scores, about some guitar's studies in an era that disdains “manifestos”? The Book of Heads are a curious thing: a mountain of concreteness without a manifesto. We are talking about an almost brazen musical architecture: composition and improvisation together, a musical architecture loved in a measure directly proportional to its absolute lack of aversion for itself and respected precisely for the historical excesses through which The Book of Heads were developed. They shows a series of strategies, theorems, and achievements that not only confer a logic and a structure to Zorn's past musical development but an uninterrupted validity and vitality capable of transcending his New York origins to
claim a role among the most interesting contemporary musical theories. I started to get interested in contemporary guitar music in 2007. Now I can say that it was a natural outlet, an obvious and compelling need. I needed new ideas to survive. I needed new spaces to explore and grow. I've always been a guitar fanatic. At that time it seemed to me that the musical genres I used to frequent, my musical gardens, my playing fields, rock, jazz, blues, folk and classical had exhausted their potential and that a cultural retreat on static positions, on known and well-practiced aesthetics, had begun. Those perimeters were starting to get tight. The Book of Heads seem to me the perfect guide to enter this new, exciting musical world, teeming with life and new forms. The first thing I did was to go in search of a music scene.

Why should it be so strange? All those who come from rock, jazz, blues, popular music dream of meeting a new music scene. The "music scene" is the Holy Grail. The pure desire of every enthusiast. The quantum leap for those who write about music. But I quickly discovered that in contemporary music, or in avant-garde music, or in experimental music things are not so simple. In these areas, in these territories there are no real musical scenes. Not in the sense in which we are used to considering them in the world of popular music. A little at time, I learned that contemporary music, avant-garde music, experimental music do not sound exactly as synonyms, but as aesthetic and marketing categories quite confused with each other and that their boundaries are as wide as they are unexplored. In addition, in recent years the concept of the music scene as previously defined has disappeared. Thanks to globalization and the possibilities of interaction offered by internet and social networks, only a few realities have managed to maintain a leading role as cultural attractors for creative phenomena and subcultures: New York, Tokyo, perhaps even London...the suburbs have almost disappeared. At the same time, continuing to deepen the fields of improvisation and composition, I realized how The Book of Heads were exactly at the center of a complex network of cultural relationships linked to these subcultures. When The Book of Heads were created music scenes were still a well-established
phenomenon, especially in such a dynamic and troubled reality as New York was. And within these subcultures, The Book of Heads could be considered not only the fruit of Zorn's creativity but also the result of a more complex web of relationships, connected implicitly or explicitly to Zorn himself. To better understand them, I have repeatedly resorted to the concept of "scenius", a neologism born from the fusion of the terms scene and genius, coined by Brian Eno, to indicate an artistic phenomenon linked to a collective scene rather than to a single person⁴.

I think that a composition, a piece must work on many different levels. It must be something that can be brought closer to the more immediate, simpler level and then beyond this evident level there should be more subtle, complex levels. Experimental music has now been able to create its own language, partly derived from the tradition, partly new. A phenomenon that has very deep origins, not only musical but also political and social. Nowadays there is a musical pluralism and my pleasure and duty is to navigate between these languages looking for the threads that holds them together. Zorn and The Book of Heads are great examples. Personally I do not conceive history in a deterministic way, as a series of facts that occur because there has been a cause that has produced certain effects. In music there is not that linearity of development that allows science (a very light vision of science) to make predictions on the basis of acquired experiences and data. Like any form of creativity, The Book of Heads are more than just an individual fact. Creation needs dialogue, interlocutors and music also needs interpreters in the most concrete sense of the term. But the interpreters do not invent themselves, as the public is not invented: they are part of a cultural and evolutionary process that implies a dialogue, which is not always peaceful. The composer, the interpreter and the listener do not belong to different socio-cultural categories. All three produce culture. The Book of Heads are the demonstration of how musical languages are not invented:

⁴ See Brian Eno talking about “scenius” at 'Basic Income: How do we get there?’ Basic Income UK meet-up at St Clements Church Kings Square, London, 3 December 2015. Link: https://youtu.be/qkD7JBspgas
they are formed and transformed, under all sorts of influences, even extraneous to music. Art is not deaf to history. The civil world, whatever the catastrovists and revisionists think and despite all its crises, transforms and changes like a living body: it elaborates symbols, living languages and objects to show its existence. The artist is the first to be immersed in it and creates not only for himself, but also for his civilized world, for its lights and shadows. Today's music is not made only with notes. A musical form like The Book of Heads is first of all a testimony, an evidence and not only a mood to be perceived, nor a pattern to be analyzed with philological scruple. Categorical statements such as right or wrong, beautiful or ugly are no longer suitable for understanding how and why a composer works today on audible forms and musical action. The Book of Heads cannot be considered a closed, precise and comfortable system, where everything happens in a predetermined way, but rather a branched system of sounds and actions, definable and meaningful only in reality and in the decisions and relationships that they imply at the time of their execution. Eventually, they became a small, pleasant obsession.