

Temporal disruption and formal coherence in John Zorn's *Cat O' Nine Tails*

William Price

Department of Music, University of Alabama at Birmingham, U.S.A.
pricewm@uab.edu - <http://www.williampricecomposer.com>

Abstract

During the late 1970s, American composer John Zorn began experimenting with a technique he called "file card composition." Inspired by the work of author William S. Burrows and film director Jean-Luc Godard, Zorn assembled compositions from lists of ideas, visual impressions, quotes from his favorite books, and independent fragments of music. Related by a single dramatic subject, these ideas were then inscribed on file cards as sonic "events." Once the events were sorted and arranged in Zorn's preferred order, the composer would take the file-card score into the recording studio, where he would assemble the piece, section by section; his goal: to translate visual imagery into a unified composition.

Commissioned by the Kronos Quartet in 1988, Zorn's string quartet *Cat O' Nine Tails* originated as a file-card piece, but was eventually assembled as a conventionally notated score. Subtitled "Tex Avery directs the Marquis de Sade," the fifteen-minute work uses a variety of musical quotes, stylistic allusions, improvisational episodes, interludes, and noise elements in a frenetic and dramatic musical collage. A continuous play of fragmented and disjunctive referentiality, *Cat O' Nine Tails* exemplifies late 20th century postmodernism; however, the abrupt juxtaposition and superimposition of dissimilar materials is simply a by-product of the work's main focus: the dislocation and dissolution of musical context and the temporal narrative.

This paper provides an analysis of the musical structure of *Cat O' Nine Tails*. By applying theorist Jonathan D. Kramer's hierarchy of linearity and non-linearity as an analytical model, I address Zorn's idiosyncratic approach to time and context, and discuss how the composer simultaneously disrupts and maintains structural integrity and compositional intent.

CV

Dr. William Price, M.M. and D.M.A – Louisiana State University, is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and serves as president for the Birmingham Art Music Alliance. Price has presented guest lectures and papers on the music of Malcolm Arnold, Michael Daugherty, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Frank Zappa, and John Zorn. As a composer, Price has received awards and commissions from numerous organizations including the Music Teachers National Association, ASCAP, the Percussive Arts Society, the American Composers Forum, the National Association of Composers, USA, the Alabama Music Teachers Association, and the Louisiana Music Teachers Association.