

A Compilation of Shit I found on the Internets about "Cobra" by Zorn

Shit to Look at Online:

<http://www.4-33.com/scores/cobra/cobra-notes.html> (Score and notes)

<http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001105.html> (Philadelphia Cobra Heritage Preservation Society)

<http://www.sonic.net/~goblin/8zorn.html> (Interesting article about Cobra and Zorn)

http://www.zoilus.com/documents/at_tin_tin_tin/2004/000254.php

<http://room101games.com/OpenCobra.html> (a performance w/ visual display of rules)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcACnErg3t4> (A short, crappy video)

http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1122441/07252000/cibo_matto.jhtml (A hip-hop version ?)

Shit to Read:

What's a "game piece"? (From [John Zorn Mailing List](#))

1. A game piece, of which Cobra is the best known and most recorded (at least three different versions on Avant, Hat, and Knitting Factory), is a method of group improvisation where the structure of the piece (the rules of the game) is set by a prompter at performance time, and the players have complete freedom within the structure. It differs from free improvisation (jazz) because of the prompter. It differs from contemporary classical aleatory music (Cage, Stockhausen, Pousseur) and conduction (Butch Morris) in the complete absence of any notated musical notes of any kind. The playful and whimsical connotations of the word "game" are also relevant to Zorn's game pieces.

In the late 1970s an early 1980s, Zorn was often quoted as saying "My concern is not so much with how things sound, as with how things work." The game pieces were his most concerted early efforts at creating musical structures that didn't dictate "how things sound."

While most of the game pieces are named after a sport or game (Pool, Hockey, Archery, Lacrosse, Cobra, Tennis, Golf, Curling, Cricket, Jai Alai, Go, Sebastopol are among those recorded or other wise referred to), the term "game pieces" refers as much to the structures of the works. Just as people playing games or sports must follow certain rules which determine how they interact, but not exactly what they do (in baseball, for instance, the infield fly rule says what to do when one occurs, but there is no rule governing when a player must hit an infield fly), in his game pieces, Zorn creates structures and situations for improvisors to perform in, while providing little, if any, actual notated music.

In early game pieces, like Pool & Archery, the structures may be as simple as providing an order for the possible solos, duos, trios, and quartets available for a particular size ensemble and then providing specific ways in which participating musicians can interrupt this order. In

several of these early game pieces, Zorn provides very brief notated material, to be used by players when or if certain options occur. In later game pieces, like *Cobra* (the most recorded and performed of Zorn's game pieces), the rules are more open (there is, for example, no attempt at having all possible combinations of players perform together, and there is no notated material) and the ways in which performers can interrupt the proceedings are more elaborate.

In all of the game pieces a prompter, who does not play an instrument during the piece, keeps track of where players are within the structure, making sure that everyone knows what's going on. The prompter acts as a referee or conductor, making choices when more than one player desires to interrupt the proceedings and otherwise shaping the music as it progresses.

While these pieces, in part, grow out of the modern tradition of aleatoric and/or intuitive music created by avant garde composers like John Cage, Earl Brown, Christian Wolff, Pauline Oliveros, Jerry Hunt, Mauricio Kagel, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Zorn's game pieces differ primarily in the nature of the structured interactions and performer choices allowed, and in Zorn's use of musicians who are (often) more comfortable with improvising in several styles of music.

How *Cobra* Works

From the Downtown Music gallery web site.

2. When **Cobra** is performed, Zorn, as the prompter (sort of a conductor) stands in front of a table which has rows of cards with different symbols on each. The 10 to 13 players sit in a circle in front of him, flashing hand signals to their mouth, nose, eye, ear, head and palm. The prompter can accept their signals or not.

A segment of the game begins once the prompter brings the card(s) down to the table, giving the players a certain direction to follow, which can be changed mid-segment with different types of tactics. The players chosen for each performance of **Cobra** are just as important as the rules they must play by. The best versions of **Cobra** are those where the players really comprehend what's happening, they are both challenged and have fun and some wonderful music is made in the process. If you a chance to see/hear a version of **Cobra** performed live, I urge you to do so. It begins to make more sense by watching.

From *Browbeat* magazine, 1990 (found on the web)....

You had a performance of Cobra this week at the Great American Music Hall, that's that card/war game . . .

Zorn: Yeah, that's my game piece. It's not a war game. A lot of people get upset with that stuff. Apparently, Willie Winant tried to do the piece down in San Diego, or somewhere down south at some school, and some girl student got really upset and tried to blockade the performance. Cause she didn't like the use of the word "tactics" or "guerilla systems" or "cutthroat." This military stuff. We gotta get rid of that.

How does that work? Is it difficult to explain?

Zorn: Well, what do we have now? Ten minutes? Really it's best to (chuckle) just go on to

another subject. To put it like into one sentence, it's kind of a loose system that permits improvisers to interrelate and react to each other in different ways.

And you as conductor control it by...

Zorn: I don't control it at all. It's all up to the musicians in the group. They control it. They make all the cues, and they tell me what they want, and then I act like a mirroring device so that everyone can see what the cues are.

Oh...so, you're not directing who is improvising. You're saying...

Zorn: No, not all.

You are telling everybody else who someone wants to improvise with?

Zorn: Right. Like someone will say, well I wanna do this now. So they will tell me and I'll tell everyone else with these cards. And then at anytime, anybody can...

Aren't you choosing? Like if several people are saying I want to do this...

Zorn: Well, of course. Like you have seven people with their hands up. I gotta make a choice. Y'know, that's tough. Sometimes I gotta go with someone that has an idea and make several calls in a row, because they got an idea. And sometimes I stick with just one person for a while. That may seem unfair. Then I'm like enough of this guy and then I'll take someone that hasn't made a call in a while or . . . if there are five people with their hands up and there is one person that has never made a call in the piece, then I'll take that person. And I try to be as diplomatic as I can, but it always ends up being a psychodrama up there on stage. (laughs) That's what those pieces are about.

A friend saw the show and said that when you switched from one improvisational set, I guess you could call it, to another that it was just flawless. It just jumped from one to the next...

Zorn: That's very simple. You just give a downbeat, and say at this downbeat a change is gonna happen. Some cards [are] just any kind of change. Some cards are more specific, like everybody drops out except one person. It's like a very complicated toggle switch. It's an on and off switch for the all the people in the band. I never talk about what they play, because each person has a very personal style. Y'know, they've developed a language on their instrument that nobody else can duplicate, so I wanted to find a way to harness that kind of talent in a compositional arc. What I came up with was this kind of game structure that talks about when people play, and when they don't play, but doesn't talk about what they do at all. So everyone gets gassed when they're doing it. I mean, it really is a psychodrama!

I heard it was really fun to watch.

Zorn: It's a blast to watch. It's a lot more interesting live than it is on record. I mean, it really is a theatrical event. It's a sporting event! Cause you never know what's gonna happen.

There's a lot of humor involved.

Zorn: Yeah! Usually the people in the band have a sense of humor.

Composing Game Pieces

from Future Jazz, pp. 171-173

by Howard Mandel (1999)

Zorn: When I started working to structure pieces with improvisers, my first thought was: Here is a series of individuals, each has his own personal music. All worked on their instruments, on their own, to develop a highly personal language, that's often not notatable. So my problem was: How can I involve these musicians in a composition that's valid and stands on its own without being **performed**, and yet inspires these musicians to play their best, and at the same time realizes the musical vision that I have in **my** head?

My first decision, which I think was the most important, was never to talk about language or sound at all. I left that completely up to the performers. What I was left with was structure.

I can talk about **when** things happen and when they **stop**, but not **what** they are. I can talk about *who* and in what *combinations*, but I can't say what goes on. I can say, "A change will happen **here**," but I can't say what **kind** of change it will be.

I began creating very simple structures — combinations, for example, of all the possible duets in a twelve-piece group, all the possible trios. Then I'd work them all out, order them, and the players would go through this ordering, along with another set of rules that made it a little more complicated than just going through one after another — first **these** two people, then **these** two people.

Then I began devising different game rules that the improvisers would play that would make it a little more fun, a little more exciting and challenging than just reading something off a page. That's no challenge at all for an improviser.

What I came up with is a series of rules, like a trading system — one person plays, then the next person plays, then the next person plays — and event systems, where people independently perform events. Everybody can perform one event each, for example, but nobody can time it at the same time with anybody else. There might be a series of downbeats where at a downbeat a change will happen — if you're playing, maybe you must stop. If you're not playing, you may come in. That's just one example.

With each new piece, I made up new sets of rules, sometimes incorporating similar ideas and systems from old pieces but changing the sequences, or the overall way it was put together. I would perhaps get a series of fifteen systems, each one able to spark a different set of relationships among players, then figure out a way that these different system could be used by them.

What orders can they be performed in? Can several be performed at the same time? Can some be called by certain players and others **not**? Are there certain powers that certain players can have that other players can't have? The pieces got more and more complicated.

Cobra and **Xu Feng** and **Hu Die** are the most complicated in terms of structure and game that I've come to yet.

From: <http://www.omnology.com/zorn-notes1.html#howcobra>

From Eye Weekly

HE SINGS, HE SCORES

1. THE DRAKE HOTEL -- "If you're not having fun, the fault lies with you." This announcement is greeted by hearty laughs from the audience, who have been watching musicians improvising with each other for the last 20 minutes or so. It sounds absurd, the spectator bearing the responsibility for his own enjoyment. But Misha Glouberman isn't kidding.

Two hours later, most of the audience stands in front of the stage making unintelligible noises. A slim, pretty girl in a black and red t-shirt sees me pointing to my head and frantically grunting like a Neanderthal. After catching my eye, she approaches and begins gesticulating wildly. I earnestly attempt to follow her directions by varying the pitch and intensity of my grunts. After a minute or so we break it off, giggling. Later on, the audience forms groups of five or six and practice making noises with each other in various combinations, using special cards with markings like "M? (Ear 2)" and "E (Nose 3)." The atmosphere in the room is like a cross between an asylum and the best carnival in the world. Welcome to Room 101 Games' Open Cobra.

Cobra is one of several game pieces devised by New York-based improviser/composer John Zorn. Created in 1984, it uses a complex system of cards and hand signals to form a common language for the players, whose commands are regulated by a conductor figure. Zorn, who is as misanthropic as he is prolific (he famously chastised Václav Havel, Lou Reed and then-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright for chatting during one of his concerts by telling them to "shut the fuck up and listen to the music you jive-ass motherfuckers"), refuses to publish or explain the rules to Cobra, preferring that the audience should remain ignorant of the system shaping the performance.

Enter Glouberman. A lecture given by Zorn at Harvard aroused Glouberman's already-thriving interest in improvisational games, and in June he and drummer/composer Joe Sorbara jointly presented the world's first "Open Cobra" at The Drake Hotel. Others have played the game without Zorn's involvement, but Glouberman and Sorbara are the first to invite -- make that require -- the audience to participate.

People are welcome to simply watch Round One while Sorbara's Pickle Juice Orchestra demonstrates the original game (which they will also perform Dec. 3 at the ArrayMusic Studio). After the break, they must choose to either participate in the all-vocal, humming/squealing/chattering Round Two or leave -- there are no spectators. Though the crowd thins out significantly, both quitters and stayers seem delighted by the absurdity of it all. In a section dubbed "Cartoon Trades" we spit out rapid-fire snippets of noise ranging from the sublime (ecstatic screams) to the ridiculous (actual quotations from cartoons). Though the ACME anvil of self-consciousness sometimes hovers over the proceedings, it never quite lands squarely on anyone's head.

During one of the many question-and-answer sessions, someone asks the million dollar question: "Is there a point to all of this?"

"What's the point of Beethoven's Fifth?" responds Sorbara without a trace of malice. "To bring a bunch of people together to make music." And to have fun, even if they have to make their own.

DAVE MORRIS