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Miguel Zenon: El Compositor



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With his shaved head, chiseled features and clear brown eyes, alto saxophonist Miguel Zenon radiates a quiet, self-possessed intensity. Since moving to the East Coast from San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1996—first to study in Boston at Berklee and then to New York for a masters at the Manhattan School of Music—he has established himself as an invaluable new voice on the scene, a player bristling with ideas and blessed with committed collaborators capable of exploring his difficult compositions. He stands out not just for the quality of his sound—lithe and quicksilver, vulnerable yet poised. It's the capacious nature of his music, with each original piece revealing new dimensions of a seemingly infinite sonic universe governed by invisible but inexorably logical rules.

In conversation, he gives the impression that his mind is always working. Not that he seems distracted. Friendly and soft-spoken, he holds eye contact and is completely engaged. But it's hard to shake the feeling that he's contemplating rarefied realms ruled by numeric sequences, even as he's flashing a sheepish smile while describing his pre-Boston fantasy of life at Berklee ("People playing in the hallway," he says, "all these guys making music in the street").

Sitting backstage at San Francisco's Masonic Auditorium on a late-winter afternoon, Zenon leans forward as he describes his quest to find a balance between the expressive possibilities of free association, what he calls randomness, and his delight in imposing order through rigorously designed structures. At a crucial juncture in his life, when he had to choose between pursuing his passion for science or the saxophone, he decided to follow his musical muse, but he's never left behind his fascination with the patterns one can discover in mathematics.

"I like working with numbers," says Zenon, 28, who considered becoming an engineer before winning a scholarship to Berklee. "I like getting music out of stuff that's not necessarily music, working with all these formulas and numbers, trying to see how they can work out mathematically. Composers like Steve Coleman, people who are very systematic about what they do, have been a big inspiration to me."

Zenon's intense concentration has paid rich creative dividends. In a relatively short period of time, he has made himself an indispensable member of the jazz community, contributing preternaturally mature solos on recordings by Charlie Haden (*Land of the Sun*, Verve), Ray Barretto (*Homage to Art Blakey*, Sunnyside), Guillermo Klein (*Los Guachos 3*, Sunnyside) and William Cepeda (*Branching Out*, Blue Jackel). He's added a welcome jolt of energy to some of the music's most rewarding large ensembles, including *Either/Orchestra* and the Mingus Big Band. "He's phenomenal, an incredibly exciting young player," says Sue Mingus, who heard about him through the musician's grapevine. "When there's a new person on the scene, word travels like brushfire." Most vividly, Zenon spent almost five years in the seminal sextet of saxophonist David Sanchez, a group that developed a sophisticated synthesis of jazz and Latin American rhythms and song forms.

It was around 2000 that Zenon first started gaining widespread notice with Sanchez, who effectively employed his sinuous alto as a foil for his big, sumptuous tenor. Even then, Zenon's writing leapt out, as he contributed several pieces to Sanchez's CDs, such as the exuberant anthem "Joyful" on 2001's *Travesia* and the album's

cascading, catch-me-if-you-can closing track "The Power of the Word." In recent years his work as a composer has moved further into the foreground, both through his own recordings and as a member of the SFJazz Collective, the octet assembled last year by the arts organization that produces the San Francisco Jazz Festival.

Designed as both a repertory ensemble and a laboratory for generating new compositions, the Collective includes Bobby Hutcherson, Nicholas Payton, Renee Rosnes and Joshua Redman, the group's artistic director. Each musician is commissioned to write a new piece for the group each season. Zenon conceived his first contribution, "Lingala," as a showcase for Hutcherson's uncannily expressive vibraphone work. Built on a bright, singsong melody inspired by a trip to the Congo, the piece is featured on the SFJazz Collective's self-named debut for Nonesuch, which was released in May.

Zenon introduced his new commission, "Two and Two," at the Collective's Masonic Auditorium performance shortly after our interview. Based on interlocking 10 and 11-beat cycles, the precarious piece generates off-kilter momentum while the horns swoop and circle around each other. It's the work of a musician fully in command of his own idiom, a glimpse of a bracing aesthetic vision that is further revealed on his new release for Marsalis Music, *Jibaro*. Destined to end up on numerous lists enumerating the best albums of 2005, *Jibaro* is an emphatic statement by Zenon as an improviser, composer and bandleader, a perfect example of his astonishing concentration. Like his two previous albums, 2002's *Looking Forward* (Fresh Sound New Talent) and last year's Marsalis Music debut, *Ceremonial*, Zenon's new CD features the same core group of musicians: Venezuelan pianist Luis Perdomo, Austrian bassist Hans Glawischnig and Mexican drummer Antonio Sanchez.

"In many ways it's an extension of David's group," Zenon says, noting that he, Glawischnig and Sanchez all worked and recorded with the saxophonist. "I've been lucky, I've made three records with the same people, and to tell you the truth, they've always been my first choice. I write the music thinking of them, and they've been really committed. Even though sometimes I go crazy with the mathematics and formulas, they really respect it. They work on it hard to make the music sound the way I want and for their personalities to come through."

The band's dedication to his music has inspired Zenon to keep writing at a ferocious pace, an output that pushes his collaborators to their limits. "He always has new music for us to sight-read, and it's very complicated," says Perdomo, who was born and raised in Caracas. He moved to the U.S. in 1993 with a scholarship to the Manhattan School of Music, which is where, five years later, he met Zenon, who also plays on Perdomo's stellar 2004 debut *Focus Point* (RKM). For Perdomo, Zenon's mercurial compositional vision demands the highest level of attention. "His music keeps changing," Perdomo says. "By the time we're finally getting it down, he already has 10 new songs ready for us. It's very fun to play, but when I'm practicing Miguel's music, or Yosvany Terry's music, for that matter, it's so demanding that it's like I'm practicing technique at the same time. It's killing two birds with one stone."

Like Perdomo, Zenon is part of a new generation of jazz musicians developing an expansive pan-American sensibility, combining a mastery of jazz's harmonic vocabularies with traditional Latin American rhythms and song forms. It's a movement that has outgrown the old term "Latin jazz," coined shortly after the initial encounter between Chano Pozo, Dizzy Gillespie and Mario Bauza in the late 1940s. Where the music of the pioneering Latin-jazz bandleaders—Machito and Tito Puente, Cal Tjader and Mongo Santamaria, Eddie Palmieri and Jerry Gonzalez—revolves almost entirely around Afro-Cuban rhythms, for the new generation Cuba is but one star in a constellation of distinctive musical traditions. Cuban musicians such as Yosvany Terry and Dafnis Prieto are central to this loosely affiliated movement, but a good deal of the creative energy is flowing from South America and Puerto Rico, driven by artists such as Panamanian Danilo Perez, Venezuelan Ed Simon and Puerto Ricans David Sanchez, Edsel Gomez and John Benitez. (Brazil, as is so often the case, is a whole other story.)

"It started with Danilo and David Sanchez, mixing our Latin roots, with all the jazz harmonies," Perdomo says. "But there are a whole bunch of other musicians doing the same thing. It's not something that we've been thinking about, this movement; it just kind of evolved. The Latin influence is always going to be there, even if

you're not playing a standard Latin song. But personally I don't consider this Latin jazz. When I'm writing music I'm not thinking of Latin jazz. It's like Miguel's album *Jibaro*, which is traditional Puerto Rican music. It's got the melodies, but you can't tell it's Puerto Rican music."

Jibaro takes its name from a style of music associated with the Puerto Rican countryside, though the term can also refer to the rural people of the mountains, with their mix of Spanish, African and indigenous ancestry. Traditionally played by small conjuntos combining strings (guitar, cuatro and sometimes bass) and hand percussion (bongos and guiro) backing a clarion vocalist, the music is ubiquitous across the island. In his typically exacting fashion, Zenon uses each track to explore a different aspect of the *jibaro* tradition. "Sometimes I'm the vocalist and sometimes I'm not," he says. "I try to do it in a way where I avoid making it sound really obvious, taking the key elements, and composing a piece. Each style in *jibaro* has a specific thing that differentiates it, but I didn't want to follow verbatim the way they play it."

Born into a large working-class family, Miguel Zenon can't really explain where his passion for music came from. None of his relatives are professional players, and there were no instruments around the house when he was growing up. Drawn to music at an early age, he started searching for opportunities to study. At 10, he asked his grandmother to take him to an itinerant teacher who regularly passed through the neighborhood offering free lessons. "His thing was, you had to get to a certain level before you pick an instrument," Zenon recalls. "You had to really learn to read well and know the rhythms before he let you pick an instrument to play in the marching band."

By 11 he was good enough that a teacher suggested Zenon apply to *Escuela Libre de Musica*, the respected arts high school in San Juan. He studied saxophone with Angel Marrero, and some friends in school turned him on to records by Tito Puente and Paquito D'Rivera. Desperate to hear more music, he started soaking up whatever jazz he could find on the radio, often tuning in to NPR and taping programs like *Jazz Set* to play along with later. The fact that David Sanchez had also graduated from *Escuela Libre* stoked his ambition. "I didn't know him then, he had already graduated, but I knew who he was," Zenon says. "He studied with the same teacher I did, so we were always talking about David. Man, this guy made it! He's playing with Dizzy and everybody, and he came out of this school. He was here, sitting in this same classroom!"

Torn between pursuing a career as an engineer or a musician, he eventually decided to study music, though he knew it would mean leaving Puerto Rico. Unable to afford tuition at Berklee, he gigged around San Juan for a year, mostly playing in salsa bands, saving up money for school. A small scholarship from the Puerto Rico Heineken Jazz Festival in 1995 paved the way for his studies at Berklee, where he proceeded to win several awards. He hit town hungry for experience. "When I got there, I was getting with everybody, practicing all day," Zenon says. "The more I think about it, it would have been the same situation at any other school. It just happens Berklee has a lot of students like me, but most of them were a lot better, and that inspired me. Wow, I thought I had something."

Within his first week of arriving in Boston he knocked on Danilo Perez's door with an introduction from a friend in Puerto Rico. Like so many musicians who have encountered Zenon, Perez was immediately struck by his sense of purpose. "I could just feel his commitment and dedication," Perez says. "It was spilling out of his body, out of his soul. He's really coming from that jazz vein. He can play changes and play Latin, and he really knows how to listen. He knows how to get in with different people and meld his sound." Stepping in as a mentor, Perez recommended him for gigs and introduced him to veteran players, most important David Sanchez.

"Danilo was my hero at that time," Zenon says. "He was a little older than David. When you hear his records, it was all originals, and I really admired the fact that he had a vision. It was so different. I would listen to him and listen to other Latino players and I would be like, this guy has really got it. When I finally met him he immediately said, come over to the house. He'd teach me stuff, spend hours with me, really patient. For me it was the break. I finally started getting somewhere when I spoke to him. He talked to me about his experiences,

how he got to where he was."

The following year Zenon joined Either/Orchestra, just as saxophonist-arranger Russ Gershon was reassembling the band after a two-year hiatus. Over the past two decades the ensemble has served as a proving ground for some of jazz's most creative players, such as Matt Wilson, Josh Roseman, Charlie Kohlase, John Medeski and a succession of superlative altoists, including Andrew D'Angelo, Oscar Noriega and Jaleel Shaw. But Gershon remembers Zenon as an uncommonly focused artist.

"He was a very serious guy who was just devouring the opportunities," Gershon says. "Miguel probably had better awareness and concentration than anyone who's ever been in the band. His mind never wanders. He's one of the few guys who would notice if I was a little lost, and cue me. It's nice to have somebody else thinking there with you."

Listening Pleasures

Eric Dolphy, *Out to Lunch!* (Blue Note)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Herbert Von Karajan, Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, (Deutsche Grammophon)

Juilliard String Quartet, Arnold Schoenberg: *Verklarte Nacht* & String Trio, Op. 45 (Sony Classical)

Intifada (hip-hop group from Puerto Rico)

Gearbox

A Selmer Mark VI alto saxophone

A Meyer mouthpiece (#6 medium chamber)

Olegature ligature

Zenon is trying out different reeds

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