

# On Screen

## Films & DVDs



Still from Mathieu Amalric's *Zorn 2010–2017* (2017)

### **Zorn 2010–2017**

**Mathieu Amalric (Director)**

2017, 54 mins

Any attempt at a career overview of a living composer and performer as prolific and maximalist as John Zorn seems futile. Yet the Dutch festival November Music made a brave attempt in 2017 with a concert marathon spread over a variety of venues, each performance appropriately covering a single aspect of Zorn's 40-plus year career, from his childhood fascination for the church organ to his recent exploration of medieval forms of vocal music. The event culminated in Essential Cinema, with an electric band setting early experimental films to live soundtracks and the New York composer finally strapping on his alto saxophone for a cathartic scorch in the last minutes.

The 14 hour tour de force opened with a screening of the documentary *Zorn 2010–2017* by Mathieu Amalric. The French film maker is primarily known for his shape-shifting acting roles – the villain opposite James Bond in *GoldenEye*, the tragic lead

in *The Diving Bell And The Butterfly* – has shown a striking interest in music. In 2017 he directed two films about soprano/conductor Barbara Hannigan, as well as a biopic of another Barbara, the French singer-songwriter.

Far from a summary of Zorn's recent years, *Zorn 2010–2017* avoids interviews or archival footage in favour of a show don't tell approach more in line with Zorn's ethos, capturing the composer and various ensembles up close during rehearsals and performances at various festivals.

Amalric includes himself as a wilfully naive subject even as he comes up with unexpectedly revealing material, such as the ever so level-headed Zorn kissing an amulet around his neck before a concert, or musing on the qualities of newly acquainted drummer Nate Smith.

The exchange of words between director and composer is limited to, for example, startlingly basic questions about Zorn's saxophone paraphernalia. But Zorn himself seems comfortable, constantly circling around the stage, not so much conducting

in the style he has become known for, with gestures and cards, but approaching the musicians, giving one on one directions, rearranging and annotating scores on the spot.

The movie is as much the work of Amalric operating the camera as it is that of editor Caroline Detournay processing many hours of material into a flowing, breathing montage, focusing on non-verbal interchanges between Zorn and the performers listening to each other and reacting. As Zorn has stressed many times, building and nurturing a community is the most important aspect of music to him and *Zorn 2010–2017* illustrates that.

It is interesting to compare the film to an earlier, more Q&A style documentary on Zorn by German director Claudia Heuermann, *A Bookshelf On Top Of The Sky: 12 Stories About John Zorn* (2002), which attempted a jump-cut style montage in line with the sudden changes and varying moments characteristic of Zorn's work. Despite the slightly awkward inclusion of the director's autobiographical

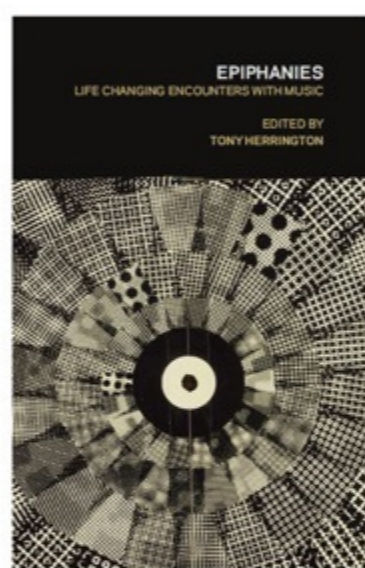
experiences, Heuermann's film significantly captured Zorn's 1990s projects Naked City and Masada, and because it discussed controversy surrounding the word radical in Radical New Jewish Culture, the impromptu movement initiated by Zorn as a free-spirited alternative to traditional Jewish music – that is, Rad Jewish versus Trad Jewish.

So Heuermann bore witness to an important juncture in Zorn's career, and Amalric has recorded the composer's communal approach; but there's still much more for film makers to unravel, since Zorn has such a deep relation to the visual, from his childhood interest in horror and his early relation to the New York film, art and theatre avant garde, to his original soundtracks and acclaimed reinterpretations of film scores (Italian westerns, cartoons, spy movies). But perhaps that would be touching on the mystery that Zorn seems to hold so dear and only hints at in his album art, sleeve notes and titles.

Marinus de Ruiter

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