

Brainwashed - Arcana V: Music, Magic and Mysticism

Written by Justin Patrick

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The fifth installment in John Zorn's ongoing series anthologizing the writings, reflections, and critical insights of contemporary musicians and composers tackles subjects that are usually brushed aside in academic music journals, namely the occult. It is no secret that musicians, from time immemorial, have approached their art as if they were approaching the sacred. Magic and mysticism are twin strands woven into the fabric of musical history and they continue to excite new developments within the music of the present day. The numinous gets lip service in popular culture when the likes of Madonna parade their studies of Kabbalah, making the pursuit of arcane knowledge more of a fashion statement than an actual path and discipline. The best of independent music however has never shied away from being overtly esoteric, and is not watered down to suit the masses or make it more palatable to undiscerning ears. This book brings together essential writings from those who are comfortably at home in the intersection of magic and music, that liminal zone accessed by shamans and session players alike. As such it is a welcome addition to the library of not only the musical aspirant, but the magical as well.

[Hip Roads/Tzadik](#)

This book has some heft to it as do many of the essays it contains. Some of the writers, like William J. Kiesel in his piece "Musings on the Hermetic Lyre," display their scholarly acumen in subjects such as alchemy and the works of Elizabethan magus John Dee in a language easy for the acolyte. Others such as "Regarding the Sonic Symbolism of When and Where" by saxophonist and free improviser Steve Coleman require more of the reader. For those seasoned in the nuances of astrology, symbolism of the planets and of the colors, Coleman offers an engaging "*mancy* of sound" (italics mine) showing how an artist can weave together many different fields of inquiry, whether sacred or secular to communicate metaphysical ideas through music. There are other similar essays that require second readings for full digestion and assimilation. They give back in equal measure to the person who is up to the task.

William Breeze, also known as Hymaneus Beta of the (caliphate) Ordo Templi Orientis, a past

and present collaborator with the likes of Psychic TV, Coil, and Current 93 offers an excellent text on the intersection between microtonal tuning systems and its connection with occultism in "De Harmonia Mundi." What makes it such a fascinating read is how he draws comparison between the instrumentalist tuning his chosen tool, and how magick (spelled here with a "k" to denote Aleister Crowley's particular influence and system) is a means of tuning the human organism so that consciousness may be opened up to subtle cosmic influences. He ends the piece by turning the hermetic axiom, "To Know, To Will, To Dare, To Keep Silent" on its head, remaking it for a generation raised on basement noise shows and art rock. The new version is "To Know, To Dare, To Play Loud" breaking the silence on esoteric knowledge traditionally kept secret by various cabals. Also woven into this essay are insights into geometric mnemonic devices useful to performers, thus giving an example of the practicality embedded in mystical teachings. (The art of memory is currently one of the least regarded branches of occultism within the Western tradition.)

I was at first sad to see that Genesis Breyer P-Orridge's contribution to Arcana V was "Thee Splinter Test" which I had already devoured in *Book of Lies: the Disinformation Guide to Magick and the Occult*. Still, it is an excellent essay detailing his approach to sampling as a form of holographic magic (where each sample contains the whole of the original work it was taken from). In the end I was happy to re-read this piece which is important for anyone who wishes to understand the fundamental underpinnings of P-Orridge's transmedia art. Besides that it is a perfect fit for the context of the book and makes it available to those who may not have encountered it elsewhere.

Z'EV explores the interrelationship between "Metaphors, Mythos and Metaphonics" in his masterful essay. A holographic conception of Universe is applied and he shows how a metaphoric view of the world supposes a more fluid reality, whereas a literal view supposes a frozen or locked in reality. In the Mythos section he delineates a "universal depth of being the world over" and finally in the section on Metaphonics, Z'EV explores his term for what he suggests is "the major Trance Induction Technique on the planet" or music, giving historical examples of how it has been used in various rites of worship around the world, and how this tool for trance is hard wired into human biology.

There are many casual and fun essays as well, like "Trash," where percussionist Mark Nauseef explores the alchemy of transforming garbage into instruments for golden sound, such as the kitchen sink he found in a Helsinki junkyard. Terry Riley offers humorous and playful sketches alongside the hand written notes of his "Music-Myth", while Alvin Curran uses the performance antics of Takehisa Kosugi as a jumping off point for exploring how mystical states of mind arise from playing music whether intended or not, though he is careful to note that he has no specific formula for their production in either artist or listener.

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As a music fan *Arcana V* has set me up with some good homework. The book has 31 contributors. Some are familiar voices to me and others are new. As I read the theories and ideas of composers whose work I've just now encountered, I'm eager to go out and dig up some of their recordings. As for the old friends, like Pauline Oliveros, Meredith Monk, and others whom I've already mentioned, the book is a reminder to go back and listen to them again. Either way it is all part of the pleasure of continual listening and learning: there is always more to know and hear, whether getting a feel for new acquaintances or strengthening old ties.

This important book has drawn on a diverse and inclusive breadth of mystical traditions and teachings from around the world, as well as a broad range of musical styles with texts from their exemplary performers. If within this vast spectrum there are an extra handful of representatives from the realm of free improvisation and an additional smattering of Kabbalah within the general mix, it can be seen as the natural proclivity of an editor highly active within his own realms of personal passion and obsession. On these pages yoga, ceremonial magick, shamanism, and freeform modes of spirituality and other paths are bound together as allies. Drawing from all of these diverse traditions from the world, the contemporary magician is able to blend them together in his or her own alembic, and distill a potent synthesis. In the same way the musician working today can be fed from the vast plethora of past and present styles of music from all over the world, bringing them together in what Alvin Curran has called a "[new common practice](#)". This is a book whose pages will hatch strange and wondrous offspring in the minds of the artists who will surely read it, and I will be curious to listen to the new music it breeds.