

“Sneak Peek in Chill Setting” — John HC Thompson on FiveOne’s album preview concert at the Bop Stop

by Jarrett Hoffman



“We like to keep a very loose atmosphere at our concerts, almost like a party or a rock show, where people can move around, drink, and chat,” said FiveOne Experimental Orchestra’s artistic director, John HC Thompson. “We play a lot of nuanced, delicate music, but we don’t do it in a stiff, sit-down, traditional classical music way.”

On Friday, May 8 at 9:00 pm, FiveOne Experimental Orchestra (51XO) will offer Bop Stop listeners a glimpse of the group’s upcoming album. In addition to premiering Michael Bratt’s *Atari Punk*, they will perform works by Jeremy Allen, John HC Thompson, David Crowell, Michael Laurello, and Ted Hearne. Admission is free.

The venue is one thing that Thompson is very excited about. “The Bop Stop is the ideal setting for this orchestra,” he told us by phone. “As a night club, it has that lighter atmosphere. But the way it’s laid out, with the stage as its centerpiece, it also encourages the very focused listening that’s needed for a lot of music we play.”

“Plus, it’s a landmark Cleveland club. It’s an honor to get to play there, and I’m looking forward to seeing how our fans enjoy the space. I hope we can make it a regular stop, every season at least.”

Thompson said audience members should recognize sounds in Michael Bratt’s *Atari Punk*, for 51XO’s full ensemble with playback and click track. “The playback samples 8-bit sounds from the 1980s Atari game console, routed through several processors and

compiled to create the textural backdrop of the piece and the rhythmic pulse for the orchestra to play with. Besides the technical support, the piece requires a lot of concentration from the musicians. It's very fast, and if you miss an eighth note — boom, everything falls apart."

Since its first concert in May 2008, 51XO has given many a premiere. I asked Thompson about the experience of preparing these performances. Will the audience on May 8 hear the same piece that Bratt originally laid in front of the group? "Composers often make changes," he said. "You get feedback from performers, or you hear your piece being rehearsed. Michael Bratt is our former executive director, and we're good friends, so it's no problem to just pick up the phone and say, 'I'm curious about measure 49.' It becomes much more of a group effort than people are aware of, and it's all in the interests of the music and the audience."

Barely a month old since its premiere by 51XO in late March for NEOSonicFest, David Crowell's *Like a Machine* is "an enormous challenge to play and very intense," said Thompson, "but we enjoy it. It's a fabulous piece of music, and it's going to be the centerpiece of the album. I'm also thinking it could be our opener at the Bop Stop. It would be a hard piece to nail right out of the gate, but we'll see what the players think of the idea."

Ted Hearne's *Furtive Movements*, for amplified cello and drum set, was another piece the group performed at this year's NEOSonicFest. "It's a very cool, abstract piece and a crowd pleaser. It definitely opens up the ears to the sounds of modern music, and it features very advanced techniques for the cello, for example, controlling the bow with one hand, and with the other sliding corks vertically between the strings. It's impressive to watch and very impressive to hear. I like it more and more every time I listen to it."

51XO has performed Michael Laurello's *Tell hope everything you hear*, for guitar and tape, a couple of times over the past year in different spaces, including last November at The Screw Factory, which Thompson called "a cool place to play. It has this grungy, alternative, postindustrial grit to it that I particularly enjoy. It also celebrates the history of this city. But for the Laurello, I'm afraid that the intricacies between the guitar solo and the playback part got lost in such a cavernous listening environment.

"We played it again in February at the Market Avenue Wine Bar, a smaller space, and I think it was a lot more successful. That's not only because of the sound concerns, but also because the audience could get really close to the soloist and see exactly what goes on — all the little things in the guitar part alone, plus his working with a laptop and a mixing board. It gave the audience a picture of what it takes to be a musician in the modern age: it's not just about playing notes on the page — you might have to interface with

computers, or have a click track going in your ear so you can coordinate a lot of different elements.”

Thompson and Allen might have new pieces ready for the album, but they will be represented at the Bop Stop by *The Boll Weevil Band* and *Broccoli September*, respectively. “*The Boll Weevil Band* was originally commissioned by The Sculpture Center here in Cleveland to be played as part of an installation — a sort of mock parade with floats for a fictional holiday in a fictional town down South.

“The piece sounds kind of like a marching band — it’s a march in 4/4 — but at the same time it’s surreal and experimental. And of course, it’s 51XO playing it, and we usually do things a little bit wacky. It’s a short piece that goes through a lot of quirky shifts but maintains that march feel throughout.

“Jeremy has shaped and scored his *Broccoli September* loosely,” Thompson said. “It’s mainly a platform for improvisation, though more in the texture and the rhythm than the pitches. It’s a lush, beautiful piece and a good palate cleanser, especially if you’ve had a lot of rhythmic activity in a concert, like ours will on May 8.

“But also, you never know what you’re going to get. The piece is largely created by the orchestra on-site, and the idea is that it will not have been rehearsed, ever. We premiered it in February, and the members of the group weren’t allowed to even discuss their music. I’m dying to hear what kind of results come out the second time now. There are a lot of variables.”

Is Allen okay with a group giving a second performance of the work, considering that the first one could act as a sort of rehearsal for the second? “Definitely,” said Thompson. “The orchestra has been so busy with other music, I’m sure they haven’t even thought about it. It’ll be a clean slate, there’s no question about it.”

Any hint of a release date yet for the album? “Not yet. We’ll record several tracks later in May. Then we’ll take some time to rehearse through June and July, and we’ll probably have a second recording session later in the summer. And if we need a third session in early fall, we’ll take it. We want to make sure everything sounds how we want it to.”

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