

CMA's Creative Fusion Series begins with Henry Threadgill, Zooid, & Oberlin CME

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Foundation, which has brought more than eighty international artists to Cleveland since 2008 under the auspices of its Creative Fusion program, has partnered with the Cleveland Museum of Art to commission six new works to be premiered over the next two seasons.

Launching the series, composer and multi-instrumentalist Henry

Threadgill will bring his Zooid ensemble to the Museum's Performing Arts Series on Friday, January 11 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium to join Tim Weiss's Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble in the world premiere of Threadgill's *Pathways*, a partly improvisatory, partly pre-determined work.

Threadgill, now 74, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2016 for his recording *In for a Penny, In for a Pound*, which the awards jury described as a "highly original work, in which notated music and improvisation mesh in a sonic tapestry that seems the very expression of modern American life."

Although he has been characterized as a jazz musician, Threadgill objects to being hedged in by that branding. He's an amiable iconoclast who has created ensembles with unusual groups of instruments — Zooid includes alto sax, flute, cello, tuba, guitar, and drums. He prefers to refer to his compositions as "creative improvised music" which allow for contrapuntal improvisation within an intervallic framework that he specifies, and according to procedures he and Zooid have worked out in extensive rehearsals over the last fifteen years.

Those rehearsals were both extensive and intense. In interviews for an [academic study](#) of Threadgill's music, cellist Christopher Hoffman recalled the difficult adjustment period when he first joined Zooid. He would come home with a sore leg from keeping time, and his neck would be tense. "And I would just hear loops in my head. Wake up in the morning, going, going, going. I basically allowed myself to be mind controlled by Henry Threadgill. And I love it."



Guitarist Liberty Ellman spoke of the necessity of "being willing and actually desiring to be in a situation of unpredictability. Which is part of the thrill of the music. Which is totally the point."

And Hoffman again: "So his thing is like, never repeat the same performance ... I think he just wants to keep himself interested. And for him, locking down and committing to anything, he's not really interested in doing that. And it keeps all of us on our toes."

Weiss and his Oberlin ensemble have their work cut out for them. Threadgill recognizes that the students will not have the benefit of the years of rehearsal Zooid has put into his music. In that earlier interview, he said, "We play in a particular language and I can teach them some aspects of it, but there's just not enough time."

We spoke by telephone with Tim Weiss just after the sixth days of joint rehearsals at Oberlin to gather some of his impressions of the piece he'll conduct on Friday evening. I began by asking him to describe *Pathways*.

"In the course of the collaboration between these ten musicians, the piece has evolved, so there is some element of it that is developed in the working process, but all the material was there from the beginning," he said. "It just got expanded or contracted, or manipulated, or massaged to yield the final product. It is a preconceived work, it is a composition. But it does bridge this space between contemporary classical music and improvised music. The piece goes back and forth

between sections that are fully notated and sections that are highly-controlled improvisations. I guess there are a couple of moments that are free, but for the most part, it's really structured. The work lasts about 45 minutes, depending on how many repetitions of certain cycles are chosen during performance. But it will never be quite the same piece twice."



Weiss went on to say that even Threadgill's fully-notated sections spring from the same materials as the improvisations. "This system is unique to his music. He limits you to certain intervals that derive from voice leading principles, and then you improvise over non-standard, non-functional harmonies. Both the bass lines and the melodic lines — and even the inside lines — are derived from this intervallic game of voice leading. While it has elements of jazz, it's completely chromatic. If a jazz musician were to try to improvise in this context using old tools of harmony, it wouldn't work."

Although Threadgill's music is complex and difficult to describe, Tim Weiss believes it has a wide appeal. "I think there's something there for the classical music lover, for the contemporary classical music lover, and for the jazz lover. It's bridging these worlds in an interesting way. He's ingenious, and really the only one who's doing anything like this. Last year we had Billy Childs here, and it was a very different thing altogether. Both musicians have a great deal of experience in the jazz world, but they're coming at writing 'contemporary classical music' — I always have difficulty with these terms — from very different avenues. Their models and principles of construction are completely different."

The Oberlin students have been very enthusiastic about the collaboration with Threadgill and Zooid. “I carefully picked six players I thought would take to this, and I’ve really been quite pleased,” Weiss said. “Initially there were some questions and even some inhibitions in terms of improvising, but they have dived right in. They’re fearless.” It helps that Threadgill has been easy to work with. “He’s a super-sweet gentleman.”

You can gain some insight into Henry Threadgill’s techniques for writing improvisatory ensemble music from “Playing it UNSafe,” two brief New Music Box videos in which the composer talks with conductor George Manahan about what his written-out scores mean. (Click [here](#) for Part 1 and [here](#) for Part 2.)

And you can watch the video of an entire 2015 Zooid program at the Library of Congress [here](#).

Listeners who may feel underprepared to fully appreciate an evening of Henry Threadgill’s music need not worry. Here’s what the composer had to say to Daniel Fischlin in 2011:

Fischlin: So for people who are coming new to your music, what do you think they have to know?

Threadgill: Nothing.

Fischlin: Nothing?

Threadgill: Nothing. I don’t believe you have to know anything about art. Some people won’t be able to engage with it. That’s just a reality in terms of any kind of art anywhere. They always say that art is universal. Art is really not universal. What they mean by universal is that all societies and groups make art. That’s what’s really universal, but an audience can’t always engage with certain things. It’s just not within its parameters to do that, you know. But I really don’t believe in ever telling people anything.

Interview quotations are taken from the [thesis](#) *Idiosyncratic Concepts in the Music of Henry Threadgill's Zooid An Applied Investigation into Compositional and Improvisational Techniques* by Gareth Keany Hill.

Zooid is Henry Threadgill, alto saxophone/flute, Elliot Humberto Kavee, drums, Liberty Ellman, guitar, Christopher Hoffman, cello & Jose Davila, tuba. The Oberlin

Contemporary Music Ensemble, Timothy Weiss, director, includes Remy Libbrecht, oboe/English horn, Lauren Anker, horn, Camille Vogley-Howes, violin, Devin Cowan, viola, Matthew Frerck, double bass, and Tyler Smith, percussion.

Tickets to the Gartner Auditorium concert can be ordered [online](#).

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