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Interview: Derek Piotr

By

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[Derek Piotr](#)'s a young dude from Poland who now lives in New England, and will be a household name by the time you're finished reading this interview. At least that's my hope – the electroacoustic composer has released one of my favorite albums of the past couple years, 2013's *Raj* (which I [reviewed here](#)), and he followed that up with one of the most head-spacey releases in recent memory, the gorgeous *Tempatempat* ([reviewed here](#)). (Also, check out my [review of the “Deliver” Remixes EP](#), just for fun. It was my introduction to Derek's music!) Now, after a grand tour of Critical Masses' Dubai HQ, he's on the our couch for an in-depth interview. It's going to be game-changing.

OK, there are a few things in that last paragraph that aren't totally true, but I promise you we're going to expand to Dubai in the near future. Anyway, Derek and I caught up via e-mail, and we talked *Raj*, *Tempatempat*, woodwinds, “the future,” and speaking in tongues. He pretty much confirms what I've believed all along – that his catalog is wild and beautiful and filled with intrigue.

That can't just be me. Everybody's about to feel some of this.

Critical Masses: You've released two albums in the last two years, 2013's *Raj* and 2014's *Tempatempat*, and as I've gone back and revisited them, I stick by my initial reactions that they're very different recordings. *Raj* is much more extroverted, a bit more kinetic, whereas *Tempatempat* reins in some of that a bit more and feels introspective and tranquil in comparison. Were you consciously experimenting with specific techniques or sounds in each, or was the difference more in your headspace/personal mood when you were composing/recording?

Derek Piotr: With *Raj*, I knew pretty early on that I wanted the record to feel really brash and crude, and intentionally processed the recordings that way. I felt like the album I'd worked on before that, *Airing*, was fairly intricate and low-key, and I decided to just go for it. I think every musician should try and write something completely rough and alarming once in their career. I think, especially with all the injustice that gets reported nowadays, that we all have a kind of anger in inexpressible frustration within us, so it's good to get that energy out. I've also noticed I tend to seesaw between more subdued/intricate stuff (*Airing*, *Tempatempat*), and more roughshod immediate (*AGORA*, *Raj*). For instance the album I'm working on right now is comparatively quite direct – simpler beats than on *Tempatempat* and mostly single vocal lines, not a bunch of interwoven ones.

I can totally see *Raj* as some sort of a backlash against something, especially compared to your other work. Was there anything specific that fueled the tension there? And following it, *Tempatempat*, as a more meditative recording, seems like maybe you're trying to calm yourself down after the outburst, retreating to within yourself, to regroup and revitalize. Was it a conscious exercise to approach *Raj*'s follow-up in that way?

I don't know that *Raj* was necessarily an intentional backlash against anything, more an outcry in general. The recording quality was foremost on my mind. I wanted to tip my hat to noise records I enjoy, specifically some of the Black Pus stuff, as well as some of the blown-out archival Sublime Frequency recordings. I think of *Raj* as pretty life-affirming actually, I don't like records that complain a lot. I don't think I respond to records that are world-weary because the world is such a great place to be in! So the title means both "paradise" and "kingdom," so it's maybe more a fortress than a piece of weaponry...

I think of *Tempatempat* as kind of blooming out of *Raj* ... it's like a distended evolved version of it. The break on "Flow Through Light" [from *Raj*] is reused in "Mandala," but I treated it less bluntly and with more depth ... The records are twins in a lot of ways, or I guess just evolutions of each other...

[grave](#) from [derek piotr](#) on [Vimeo](#).

I'm a big Black Pus fan myself – I always got the sense that there was some Trent Reznor influence in *Raj*, but from what you suggest about the "life-affirming" qualities of the album, it seems likely his presence was only sonic, rather than spiritual. I don't tend to think of Trent Reznor as a happy dude. (Brian Chippendale on the other hand seems like a much more ecstatic person!)

Actually I don't listen to Trent or NIN at all. A lot of times I get comparisons made to quite known people (common ones are Aphex Twin / Stockhausen / Thom Yorke) and I honestly don't spend much time listening to any of them, I just have peripheral knowledge of their work. Although I did just get the new Thom Yorke album and there is one track I'm totally in love with...

Curious, which track? I have it as well, and I wasn't terribly enamored with it on first listen, but I also haven't really paid attention to it too closely...

I really love "The Mother Lode." It has a real warmth and somehow an optimism that I think the rest of the tracks lack, or much of Radiohead's work in general. He let his guard down for once, and it shimmers!

[sand defacing all surfaces](#) from [derek piotr](#) on [Vimeo](#).

I like the idea of “*Tempatempat* … blooming out of *Raj*” – the former also, as you suggest, seems to have more of a depth to it, in the sense that it stretches and flows a bit more naturally. But I also like the idea of them being twins, defined together in some way. What comes next then? What blooms out of *Tempatempat*? Would you even consider that an apt assumption, or have you left the worlds of *Raj* and *Tempatempat* behind?

As for what's next, I am doing a “Bhadrakali” remix EP this autumn, and then will release my follow-up to *Tempatempat* in the spring. I did sort of leave *Tempatempat* behind with this new one, as the beats are very direct and there is very little vocal doubling/voice manipulation. In retrospect I thought there was a bit too much voice on *Tempatempat* … it wears the brain out maybe! So it's much more pop as well as composed, and super straightforward … there is woodwind on almost every track. For the first time since leaving school, I sat down and actually wrote out notes and composed things in the conventional way … it was the only way to communicate with the players on this record. So the tracks feature clarinet, flute, oboe, bass clarinet and a sprinkle of saxophone (I am actually not huge on the sonic characteristics of the saxophone).

For your next (presumably untitled at the moment?) record, you're actually collaborating with other musicians? Is that a first, or if not, have you worked at this level with other players before? I wonder because the perceived nature of electroacoustic/electronic music tends to be the solitary composer/producer and his/her laptop. Are you working with them in the same physical space, or is it a matter of online collaboration? (I have to admit, I'm excited to hear what comes of these sessions.)

I have worked with other musicians in the past, other producers mostly, and sometimes other musicians, but I did not collaborate with anyone on *Raj* or *Tempatempat*, except that Bartholomäus Traubeck provided me with some piano from his [YEARS project](#) and Elisa Hough provided gamelan samples. However, I took clarinet starting at age 11, and when I was about 17 I was cutting up gamelan samples that I had downloaded from Encarta's library, so in a way you could see the albums I've been working on until this point as a kind of exorcism of my preoccupations. My real goal is to create music how I truly see it, without any outside influence or distraction, and that of course is incredibly hard to accomplish. But with the woodwinds thing out of the way, I don't have any other specific sound family that I'm interested in tackling. I feel like I have some kind of blank slate after this. The record I'm at work on does have a title, *Bahar*, which means “spring” in Turkish and “sea” in Maltese.

I do most of the recording and all of the producing myself, and I try to be very self-sufficient, but I have never made much of a big thing out of doing it all alone, I think just to work towards achieving something beautiful and using any means to that end is the most important thing, so I do let others work in my music if I feel it will benefit the end result. I'd say the sessions were half and half in regards to being in the room vs filesharing.

You were born in Poland and now live in New England. Your music, though, at times has a distinctly Eastern flavor, with some specific Indonesian influence, among other things. What draws you to that? What influences from your own heritage have seeped into your music?

The Indonesian influence is something I've been fascinated by since I can remember, I was always listening to samples of music on Encarta encyclopedia and early music libraries online, not just Indonesian but Chinese opera, gypsy scales from Hungary, and I guess the thing that it instilled in me was that western notation is pretty limited, and there were many more possibilities to make something exciting besides what the piano provides. As it happened I worked with a lot of gamelan on *Tempatempat*, and I ended up singing wordless vocals for some of the tracks. It wasn't until I was all finished that I found out these wordless takes were legitimate Indonesian, and with deep, coherent meaning at that. Similarly I had a synchronous moment with my new album, because I knew I wanted to focus on woodwinds but I also had a sense of Turkish influence informing the record. And it wasn't until much later in the project that I looked at the Wikipedia page for the clarinet, and figured out it has a huge involvement in Turkish folk music. Sometimes things just present themselves neatly like that! I think it happens much more often if you make

the decision to stay open to the impossible happening ... all this being said, my Polish heritage is not terribly important to me, I think of all countries as equal, and any opportunity can present itself. I do not have a strong background in any cultures that I have focused on in my music, they have simply inserted themselves into the work, and that makes it, to me, all the more meaningful.

That's amazing – the Indonesian *language* just kind of came out of your vocal incantations? That's like some kind of crazy biblical speaking-in-tongues type moment! How did you figure that out? Can you explain some of the meaning and how it gelled with your take on the music at an emotional level? That must have been a cool discovery.

Yeah, it was amazing, I was running around like a maniac telling everyone about it. It's the kind of thing if I heard someone tell me I'd think they were crazy, but there you go. I think you need to trust your intuitive processes, this is a very extreme example of that. [The lyrics \(and translation\) are here](#) – pretty vivid and spooky!! I don't think I could write such sophisticated lyrics if I tried. (I tend to keep my lyrics pretty direct/simple when I use words, which isn't often.)

I know you also focus quite a bit on live performance – what's a typical Derek Piotr live setup like? What are your preferred venues – do you have a favorite? Do you always play live solo, or do you work with other collaborators?

I have done group shows in the past. One thing I tried to develop but didn't succeed was a group forest performance, it only happened once. It was a desire of mine to see what the flow would be like between a group of musicians out in nature, because often I find simultaneous live performance a bit stressful and comedic; nobody is ever on cue really. But my favorite venues are the small ones I think; my last show was at Launchpad which is basically a shoebox in Brooklyn ... but they had a projector for my tour visuals! So that was incredibly charming and snug.

Here's your spot to plug anything you want – close us out!

New work from a friend of mine I guess I can plug! [A-Symmetry](#).