

Crate-Digging: Derek Piotr – Raj

By

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(self-released, 2013)

I'm going to dispense with the introductory nonsense with this review, because if I don't, I might lose you, and I don't want to do that. See, I don't give you the easy scores at the top of each column, the percentage of quality, or how many stars out of five, any one given record receives. Quantifying is for others, not me. So there's no quick point of reference that you can glance at and then click to another page without having read what I've written. *Raj* needs something at the top though – and that disclaimer is, I love it. We're in February, and this is one of the best things I'm likely to hear all year. Start that year-end list for 2013 now, right?

Raj follows 2012's *Airing* in young Derek Piotr's catalog, an electroacoustic whiz who not only has studied at the Berklee College of Music but has also been nominated by the jury for Prix Ars Electronica in Digital Musics (Spring 2012), a high honor. His concentration on vocal manipulation and sound production made me previously compare his style to Björk's, but I'm pretty sure I was swayed by his unorthodox duet with Pakistani vocalist Carahanni on *Airing* track "Deliver." I've removed any mention of Björk from the *RIYL* designations below. (OK, maybe *Raj*'s "Open" comes close with its body-tech IDM and haunting vocals.)

Airing was good, well constructed, if a bit abstract. "Deliver" Remixes added different flavors to the track from *Airing*, and I tackled that release in a [review here](#), where I praised the artists involved for wringing such disparate takes from the source material, which I found to be "hypnotic" although not "exactly the type of song that *screams* for the *remix* treatment." It worked, though – well, I might remind you – and the different takes on the track served to accentuate the sheer wonderfulness of Piotr's compositional acumen.

But all that's past, because *Raj*, ten tracks of complex IDM, pushes the boundaries that Piotr's already pushed – and he's already pushed quite a few, approaching electronic music as a composer rather than a programmer and forcing the listener to blur his or her hearing as one would vision while looking at a particularly difficult painting. And while he hasn't sacrificed the experimental nature of his previous work, he quite possibly does something even more difficult than the university-baiting soundscapes of his other releases: he's able to weave his experimental tendencies into something much broader, using unusual sources and compositions to actually broach the threshold of accessibility. Derek Piotr has come as close to a pop record as he likely ever will.

A couple things before I move on: 1) This is a *really* good thing, because a Derek Piotr “pop” record (and I’ll stop calling it that right now, I mean it) simply means that his audience is likely to increase, as *Raj* is less museum electronic music than *Airing*. 2) Any level of difficulty and/or accessibility is entirely relative. 3) Just because there is distance between *Raj* and *Airing* doesn’t mean one is necessarily better than the other – again, relative. 4) I keep coming back to Björk, not really as a sonic touchstone, but as an example within electroacoustic music of a transitioning palate between releases. But in the end, these are mere qualifiers on the path to understanding Piotr’s entire body of work.

The distancing from his previous work comes directly with one of his best pieces, lead track “Spine,” marking a potential connection to – *double take* – Wolf Eyes’ creepier moments. Splattered electronic samples riddle its landscape, and a marshal beat – more a pulse, really – propels the track. There are a lot of tones, and a lot of silences, and I know that sounds dumb, but the sum of it is a perfect realization of mood, wherein the less you explain it, the better off you are – it’s there to get lost in, nothing more. He takes a similar, but more violent, track on “Grave,” where low-end synth bombs waste the tune’s landscape in a proto-industrial (!) bombast, as if Piotr finally received his Wax Trax! (yeah, double !!) membership card in the mail. It’s a clanger – and perhaps a frontrunner for the remix treatment (eh, Derek???), à la Trent Reznor’s *Further Down the Spiral* or something like that.

These are great detours, but Piotr’s always had his ear trained on the vocal cords, and it remains there as his fresh perspective on the human voice manifests itself throughout *Raj*. On “Amendola” he batters snippets of samples of his own voice around a vortex of clicks and whirs, never quite settling on a word or even a full sound. This results in an alien quality that, though the sounds still obviously come from a *voice* with a *mouth*, unsettles the listener. The voice is used somewhat as a chanting mantra in “Karakum,” as it buoys the track’s tramping-through-the-East-Asian-wilderness vibe. And the Technicolor washout in closing track “Flow Through Light” recalls Thom Yorke’s *Eraser*-era experiments, or perhaps the *Kid A / Amnesiac* era’s vocal masking. In Piotr’s hands, it’s beautiful in its execution, at once tuneful and mechanical, foreign and welcoming.

All to say, the voice is rendered simply another instrument at Piotr’s command, even on “Open,” the most plainly sung track here. And the way he inventively and painstakingly pieces together his tracks, while recalling such IDM luminaries as Autechre or Mouse on Mars, positions him in his own sphere of influence. Maybe these tricks aren’t new, but Piotr perfectly unearths or samples tones and immediately rips them from original context, replacing them as he sees fit. Take for example, his penchant for using pieces of sounds rather than the whole, generally his approach to building vocal tracks, and specifically to great effect on “Hutan,” where gamelan hits (I think) are presented mid-tone, so that they drop in and out of the beat in an unusual way, but still retain their identity. Oddly, halfway through the track, a dance party erupts from the meditation, and it’s surprisingly welcome. On “Sand Defacing All Surfaces,” synth patches and vocal hums are bombarded by clicks and whirs until the tune is dulled to a smooth hum. The song is thus transformed exactly as suggested in its title—imagine the glitches as sand blasting the song until little is left at the end, and you’ve got it.

It is rare to come across an album that both challenges as much as *Raj* does and allows you to access it just as easily. I wasn’t kidding when I suggested on Twitter that had *Raj* come out in 2012, it would have topped my (admittedly orderless) year-end list. It is my album of the year as of this moment, and yeah, 2013 is a month and a half old, but I can’t conceive of hearing something that makes me dissect it as much as I do this album, nor giddily press play in anticipation of hearing something so enjoyable in an idiom known for its chilliness and distance. And while Derek Piotr is a scholar and a capital-S, capital-M Serious Musician, he does not sacrifice the joy he has for his compositions in favor of stuffiness or overindulgence. *Raj* is the very heart of the electroacoustic genre, the perfect marriage of synthetic performance and human manipulation.

RIYL: Autechre, Burial, Biosphere, Mouse on Mars