

Tzadik Records
by Steven Sladkowski

As trombonist-scholar George E. Lewis has suggested, the purely academic discussion of improvised music is necessarily incomplete without input from the musicians who craft it (Fischlin and Heble, 19). Practicing musicians must play an active role in the process of documenting and representing the musical and socio-cultural potentialities—and pitfalls—of improvised and experimental musics. While the means of documentation of improvised music are as diverse as its performers and the sounds they create, there is perhaps no better example of musician-led self-representation than the independent record label. Though artist-run performance spaces such as Somewhere There in Toronto and collective festivals such as the Vision Festival in New York City work in a similar fashion, they have a lesser rate of audience accessibility due to the fixed nature of their endeavours; festivals and performance spaces can only be experienced in one place (whether city or venue) at a given time. Unlike festivals and performance spaces, the main commercial output of independent record labels—sound recordings—is not limited to, or firmly situated in, any one experiential space or location *per se*. A CD, book, or DVD (to name only three of the most prominent examples) can be used in a number of different ways in a number of different locations. This gives the independent record label the ability—often enhanced by technological innovations such as the Internet—to reach a wider and more transcultural community. Tzadik Records is one of the best known but least documented such labels. An analysis of Tzadik can prove very informative to a broader discussion of the link between improvised music and the formation of alternative modes of social organization.

Started by American composer-saxophonist John Zorn in 1995 and based in New York City, Tzadik—from the Hebrew for ‘righteous one’ (צדיק)—has developed a specific aesthetic vision and mandate, which contains at its base an alternative concept of community:

Tzadik is dedicated to releasing the best in avant-garde and experimental music, presenting a worldwide community of contemporary musician-composers who find it difficult or impossible to release their music through more conventional channels. Tzadik believes most of all in the integrity of artists. What you hear on Tzadik is the artists' vision undiluted (Zorn, *Tzadik*).

The promotion of an undiluted artistic vision coupled with a community-based approach to recording, producing, and documenting music is one that stands in sharp opposition to the profit-driven practices of much of the mainstream recording industry. Tzadik is not driven by the desire to make a high margin of profit from record sales. As Zorn has expressed on more than one occasion, Tzadik is instead “driven by the need to keep important work in print forever, as a catalogue” (Goldberg). In short, Tzadik exists in order to accurately represent and document the work of “a worldwide community of contemporary musician-composers” who are exploring unconventional and experimental musical territories—and the alternative communities and social potentialities contained within them—with little to no support from the dominant, mainstream methods of musical production and representation.

In a May 2009 *JazzTimes* interview, Zorn expanded on the idea of community and partly explained how Tzadik has successfully created a sustainable alternative model of operation, thus ensuring accurate representation and documentation for its musicians and their projects: “Some of our records sell 40–50,000 copies. And it’s a worldwide audience. Of course, some sell 500 copies. But it’s structured in such a way that the ones that sell help the ones that don’t sell. So we manage to stay afloat in a kind of socialist paradigm” (Milkowski, 48). As Zorn points out later in the interview, the breaking up and dispersing of finances works in such a way that Tzadik’s top-sellers such as Zorn’s recent *The Gift-The Dreamers-O’o* trilogy help to finance “esoteric project[s]” such as Zorn’s *Necronomicon*, which “[he’s] compelled to do and these artists are compelled to do and the world needs” (Milkowski, 48-49). It is worth further considering *how* this is done: how is a label like Tzadik

able to create a self-sustaining model whereby all projects released support each other and allow the record label to maintain an international audience?

On top of housing more than 450 CDs, Tzadik also releases and catalogues a range of different media that allow for even more expansive artist-led self-representation. One need only consider the four-volume *Arcana* book series or the growing selection of DVDs released by Tzadik, and its parent company Hips Road, to understand this point. As cultural theorist Ajay Heble has suggested in his book *Landing on the Wrong Note*, John Zorn and Tzadik have achieved a high level of control “over the marketing, production, and distribution of cultural knowledge,” which has provided the label’s artists with, “a purposeful material base—access to media promotion, control over channels of communication, production, and distribution—for [their] musical activities” (181). Tzadik offers both intellectual and aesthetic opportunities for experimental and improvisatory artists to realize their often-multifaceted musical visions, while making all of the projects available for purchase by the general public. And like the very music it seeks to represent, Tzadik has resisted classification as a brand and company. To call it *only* a record label seems unfair and incomplete; it is also a publishing house, support network, think-tank, and promoter of dialogue and community. It is the embodiment of a socio-aesthetic philosophy that reaches out to a worldwide community of artists and audience members by supporting a diverse range of projects realized through an equally diverse range of media.

While the projects that embody the Tzadik philosophy are created, distributed, and consumed through a great many different outlets, there is perhaps none more essential in allowing it to reach the worldwide community than the Internet (Zorn, *Arcana*, vi). While Tzadik maintains relationships with CD distributors that supply franchise and independent record stores¹² and online tributaries, its online

¹ This understanding of Tzadik’s relationship with distributors comes from a conversation I had with Charlie Cares, the owner of Ground Floor Music in Guelph, Ontario. Ground Floor Music is a independent record store that regularly stocks Tzadik releases by John Zorn, Medeski, Martin and Wood, and David Buchbinder, to name a few. Mr. Cares orders through E1 Entertainment, which is one of Canada’s largest music distributors.

shop is the most direct route by which it reaches a worldwide community. Through the use of the internet, Tzadik is able to reach an international community willing to financially support artistic endeavours that seek to ask difficult questions and challenge assumptions—while envisioning an alternative to the dominant, exploitive, and profit-driven modes of social organization—which makes it an encouraging twenty-first century business model:

As the music industry crumbles before our eyes and major companies are now going belly-up and people aren't buying CDs, Tzadik is standing like a fucking oak! We have very modest sales, we break even every year...maybe make a little, lose a little, but we basically break even every year. So we're still standing here and sales are pretty consistent. We did really well this past year. People that believe in this music purchase this music (Milkowski, 49).

Modest market goals and a leaning toward economic consistency are indeed paramount to the continued success of Tzadik—and perhaps of most artist-led methods of self-representation in the twenty-first century. As the breadth of artistic projects made available by Tzadik suggests³, this type of economic policy does not imply artistic mundanity—it is instead an invigorating base from which the label's artists are able to realize complex and challenging works of art. The consistency of Tzadik is partly exemplified in the label's ongoing use of the digital realm of musical consumption that has become a central part of both niche and mainstream musical markets, and aesthetics, in the twenty-first century. A quick survey of Tzadik artists such as Jamie Saft, Marc Ribot, and John Zorn on iTunes, eMusic, and on other similar sites reveals an expanding presence with hyperlinks to other related Tzadik and similar-genre artists. By making releases available on legal-downloading websites that encourage individuals to purchase often-challenging music, Tzadik has been able to maintain its aesthetic mandate to support the undiluted artistic vision of improvising and experimental musicians who envision alternate social realities, while also responding positively to the rapidly changing landscape of recorded sound in the

³ See the select Tzadik Records discography listed at the end of this piece for a representation of the different projects that Tzadik has released.

twenty-first century. Indeed, by using the Internet as a means of providing challenging works of art laden with improvisation to transcultural and transnational audiences, Tzadik Records has demonstrated something truly inspiring: successful socio-economic resistance to the ills and excesses of the unfettered capitalism that characterizes so much of the music industry—and of everyday life in many democratic societies—is a very real possibility.

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Tzadik Records Select Discography (By Year)

- John Zorn - O'o (Tzadik, 2009)
- David Buchbinder – Odessa/Havana (Tzadik, 2007)
- Steve Coleman – Invisible Paths: First Scattering (Tzadik, 2007)
- Milton Babbitt – Occasional Variations (Tzadik, 2003)
- Cyro Baptista – Beat The Donkey (Tzadik, 2002)
- Masada – Live in Sevilla 2000 (Tzadik, 2000)
- Milford Graves – Grand Unification (Tzadik, 1998)