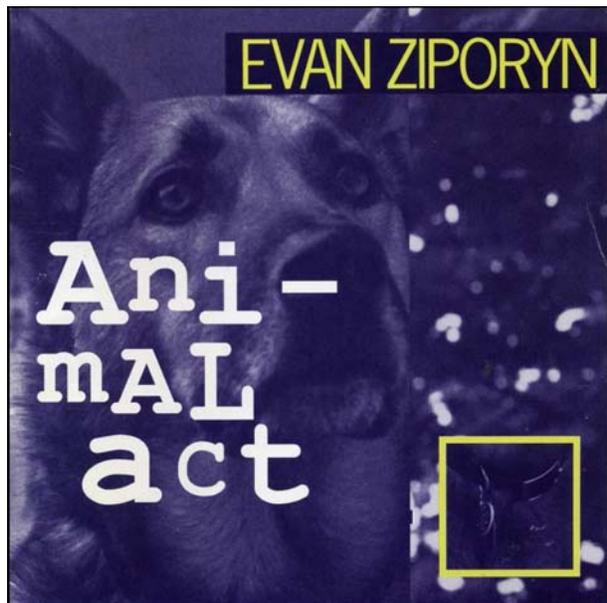


NWCR645

# Evan Ziporyn

## *Animal Act*



Evan Ziporyn

### *Animal Act*

1. *What She Saw There* (1988) ..... (12:44)  
Evan Ziporyn, bass clarinet; Danny Tunick and William Winant, marimba.
2. *Tree Frog* (1990) ..... (24:30)  
John Halle, keyboard; Mark Hetzler, trombone; Rob McEwan, percussion; Mark Messier, baritone saxophone; Woodrow Pak, guitar; David Santucci, violin; Evan Ziporyn, bass clarinet.
3. *Waiting by the Phone* (1987) ..... (12:02)  
Evan Ziporyn, bass clarinet.
4. *Walk the Dog* (1991) ..... (24:55)  
Evan Ziporyn, clarinet; Ted Kuhn, sound synthesis.

Total playing time: 74:25

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## Notes

As the world collapses into a global village, and technology offers composers and listeners an ever-expanding menu of diverse musical traditions, the idea of “world music”—with its promises of broken stylistic barriers and leveled hierarchies—begins to take on an air of delicious inevitability. **Evan Ziporyn**’s music testifies to the artistic richness of that prospect.

Born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1959, Ziporyn has the credentials of a more conventional composer: he studied music at Eastman, Yale, and the University of California at Berkeley, and now teaches composition at M.I.T. As a clarinetist and saxophonist, he has been an important advocate for new music, most notably through his involvement with New York’s Bang On A Can Festival and through his commissioning of new works. His education has also included extended stays in Bali and South Africa, several years as a performing member of the Oakland-based Gamelan Sekar Jaya, and stints in jazz and rock bands. Elements from those disparate musical strands jostle beguilingly against each other in his music, which draws from an eclectic range of styles and languages.

Yet Ziporyn’s music offers no easy one-world homily—it says as much about the powerful differences between musical traditions as about their common bonds. When elements from Balinese gamelan or African pop show up in Western art music, they inevitably sound deracinated and out of kilter—without the context that provides those gestures their original meanings, the gestures metamorphose into something different, usually unintended. By the same token, familiar rhythms and tonal formulas from close to home can become strangers when dressed up in foreign garb.

The four pieces in this collection recognize and capitalize on those discrepancies. Although Ziporyn has studied his non-

Western sources carefully, his use of them amounts to what the literary critic Harold Bloom might call a willful misreading: The falsifying and transmutation that are unavoidable anyway become the music’s source of artistic strength. Ziporyn’s distinctively far-reaching style constitutes a vibrant celebration of the fact that music is not a universal language.

Nowhere is Ziporyn’s exploration of the gaps in musical understanding more evocative than in *What She Saw There*, a bass clarinet monologue backed by the dappled chiming of marimba, four hands. The piece was written in Bali, and the composer compares it to the experience of hearing a master storyteller performing in an unknown language—a common experience for travelers abroad. The clarinet spins out an elaborate and compelling yarn whose episodes seem ordinary at first, then grow progressively more outlandish. But its eloquence is resolutely non-specific throughout. The details of this long, gangly tale come to the listener through a scrim of indeterminate gestures and linguistic uncertainty, even as the overall course of the narrative remains eminently clear.

*Tree Frog* grows even more directly out of Ziporyn’s studies in Bali as a Fulbright scholar, though the sonorities are those of 1990’s post-minimalism (the piece, written for the Toronto ensemble Sound Pressure, is scored for violin, electric guitar, trombone, bass clarinet, baritone saxophone, electric keyboard, and percussion). In a vague way, it is a gloss on two excerpts from music for the Balinese shadow play: Those sections are called “Tree of Life” and “Croaking Frog,” and Ziporyn’s new title exemplifies the way Balinese elements are dissociated and recombined into something entirely new.

Although the permutations of sonorities and a few motivic connections tie the piece together, it’s largely episodic,

offering a sequence of self-contained, strongly characterized sections. Traces of Balinese music are audible throughout—a keening four-note scale intoned by the violin, or the interlocking rhythms that create bumpy, integrated textures—but they show up transformed, misconstrued, and infused with alien elements. An aggressive groove by the horns, for instance, crosses Balinese rhythms with American funk, and a later section plugs the gamelan’s busy surfaces into the harmonic world of rockabilly. The serene, billowing clouds of F-sharp minor that make up the introduction shoehorn a Balinese scale into Western pitches.

As the name implies, *Waiting by the Phone* is a partly ironic tribute to life in a holding pattern, a reflective piece that draws back repeatedly on itself in ever-widening circles of impatience. Once again the clarinet is the protagonist—worrying, pondering, exulting, and all the while turning out music of terrific beauty and fluency. Virtuosity, too—only circular breathing makes the clarinet’s long-limbed gestures possible.

*Waiting by the Phone* is the most thoroughly Western piece in this collection: Its principal model is Bach’s writing for unaccompanied strings, much of which Ziporyn has transcribed for clarinets. That precedent is clearest in the first of the piece’s main sections—in which broad melodic leaps create an illusion of polyphony—and again in the third, anchored by the regular recurrence of an emphatic low F at the beginning of every other measure. In the epilogue, the music gives way to overtly obsessive repetition, but the moral of the piece is that waiting has its own emotional texture and richness—when the phone does ring at the end, in a burst of chromatic tones, it hardly seems to matter.

The most ambitious work in this collection, *Walk the Dog*, began life as a concerto for bass clarinet and chamber

orchestra; the orchestra score was subsequently realized as an electronic tape, combining live and synthesized sounds with samples of various non-western instruments. Dramatically, the dynamic of the piece is worlds away from that of the traditional concerto, with its conflicts and (usually) reconciliation. Ziporyn’s canine bass clarinet races ahead of the orchestra or tarries behind, blithely asserts its individuality or goes along with the prevailing activities—all with a minimum of self-consciousness or confrontation.

The piece’s main melodic material—a jabbing, angular melody played in high, shrill tones—has its roots, once again, in Balinese gamelan music; but it takes on radically different stylistic guises as it winds through the piece. The clarinet’s opening speech for instance, a speculative soliloquy set over percussive low notes, mulls over the principal melody in jazz-like terms. Later, the tune recurs as the basis for a deadpan string chorale, as background to sweeping, mellifluous riffs by the soloist, and at the center of the clarinet’s explosive, winningly exhibitionist cadenza. Perhaps the piece’s boldest step is its ending, an extended cadence in E-flat that is so warm and so sumptuously comforting as to risk sentimentality. But of course Ziporyn is no neo-Romantic—in this context, the tonal close is as vital, as freely chosen, and as individual as everything that has come before.

The broadening of our horizons over the past decade or two to encompass a profusion of musical languages offers composers both an opportunity and a challenge—for as thoughtful artists are aware, living in Babel makes creation more problematic, not less. Evan Ziporyn’s music—as subtle intellectually as it is sensually delightful—turns both the problems and the possibilities to artistic advantage.

—Joshua Kosman

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## Production Notes

Produced by Evan Ziporyn

*Walk the Dog* produced by Evan Ziporyn and Ted Kuhn  
Executive producer: Joseph R. Dalton

Mastering engineer: Ellen Fitton, Sony Classical Productions, Inc., New York.

Recording engineer: *Waiting by the Phone* and *Tree Frog*: Joel Gordon; *What She Saw There*: Anthony Grazzo; *Walk the Dog*: Ted Spenser.

Editing: *Walk the Dog*, *Waiting by the Phone*, and *Tree Frog*: Joel Gordon; *What She Saw There*: Toby Mountain.

All works published by Airplane Ears Music (ASCAP).

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