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Conducting a New Language

By MARC MYERS

At first glance, composer Adam Rudolph's music looks like a Keno card. His conductor's score is even odder, resembling the notebook doodlings of a computer programmer. But to the 42 musicians who play in his Go: Organic Orchestra, the music makes perfect sense, thanks to intensive training from their leader.



Adam Rudolph

Adam Rudolph in a recent photo

On Monday, Mr. Rudolph and his orchestra will perform selections from their sixth album, "Can You Imagine...The Sound of a Dream," at the Roulette performance space in downtown Brooklyn. "This music system lets jazz, World and classical musicians play together and improvise without being hindered by the formality of their training," Mr. Rudolph said.

To create an artistic meeting ground, the 56-year-old Mr. Rudolph had to invent a new musical language. He developed 10 different grids of notes represented by letters—all arranged in specific musical intervals. When played, his compositions typically jump from grid to grid, depending on Mr. Rudolph's direction from the conductor's stand.

When a piece begins, Mr. Rudolph delivers hand signals to indicate which grid is to be played and how the musicians are to move through the tiny boxes—from left to right, right to left, or up or down columns. How fast or slow they play, whether notes are played high or low, and how long notes are held depend on other hand cues.

"If I hold out my fist with my thumb down," Mr. Rudolph said, "I want the musicians to sustain a note and play it low on their instruments."

The fun begins when he points to individual musicians or orchestra sections to solo. They are then free to improvise by moving in any direction inside the grid—up two letters, one to the left and three down, for example.

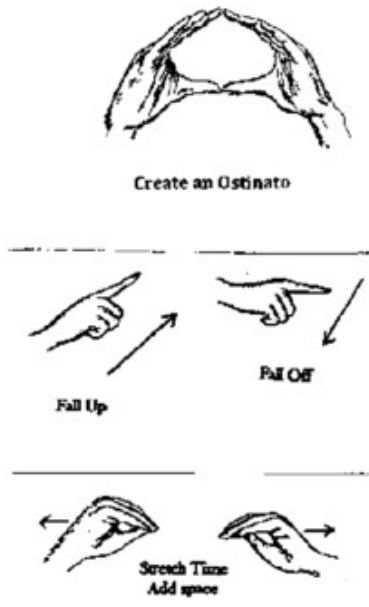
The orchestra itself is highly diverse and unusual in its composition.

For one thing, there are no saxophones. "I purposefully left them out because the instrument's sound is too closely associated with a traditional jazz band," Mr. Rudolph said. "I want a more global tonal palette."

As for the featured instruments, many are familiar but others are new to average listeners, including a stringed North African oud, a noh kan Japanese flute and a bansuri North Indian flute.

"The amazing thing about New York is that it has become a center for musicians from all over the world," Mr. Rudolph said. "Many of the musicians I met originally on my travels, or they find me through their friends."

The result is a thrashing, edgy brew that owes as much to Chicago's avant-garde jazz scene of the 1960s and '70s as it does to the orchestral works of Duke Ellington or Stravinsky. Compositions are spontaneous and rarely sound the same twice, given how much depends on the leader's mood and the reliance on improvisation.



Adam Rudolph

Some of Mr. Rudolph's hand gestures

Born in Chicago, Mr. Rudolph, a percussionist, was mentored by trumpeter Don Cherry, saxophonist Yusef Lateef and other jazz artists. He lived for a year in Ghana in the '70s, traveling to Togo, Mali, India and elsewhere to play with local musicians. "It's fascinating to me how each culture infuses music differently," he said.

He founded the Go: Organic Orchestra in 1999, finding inspiration for the name from Mr. Cherry's Organic Music Society group from the early 1970s.

Today, Mr. Rudolph leads two Go: Organic orchestras—one in Los Angeles and the other in New York, and he teaches his music system world-wide. He also leads the octet Moving Pictures, in which he performs rather than conducts.

"I want everyone in the orchestra to sound like themselves, not like a composer from 100 years ago intended," Mr. Rudolph said. "That's what jazz fans love about Lester Young and Miles Davis—they expressed their inner voices. Music touches us because it's much more than paper. It's creative energy."

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