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Writer

Raj – Derek Piotr and the relentless march toward a new horizon. (music review)

Posted on February 24, 2013



The world of Dance music isn't usually explored on this blog. I tend to be a listener rather than a mover – but that's by accident rather than design. I was lucky enough to stumble upon the music of Derek Piotr recently, and true to my habits, I've done my deep listen rather than an action-based response. The music is so delightfully complex however, my deep listen was well rewarded.



The first thing to say about *Raj* is its great listening. This is Piotr's third offering and the maturity is evident. He has a strong art background and his one sheet told me: He has been intern to Meredith Monk and collaborated with Antye Greie, Richard Chartier and Scanner. His works have been nominated by the jury for the Ars Electronica 2012 prize in Digital Musics. In other words he takes what he does seriously and reveals a deep and genuine interest in sound and movement response. His approach to electronic music is that of composer rather than programmer resulting in complex sound-scapes that remain accessible (where perhaps a lot of performance art isn't necessarily) without sacrificing any of the push to offer a new kind of listening experience. A deep and abiding beauty resonates throughout *Raj* and is never sacrificed for the accessible reach or the intermittent melodic bursts.



[Piotr informs us that Raj](#) in Polish means paradise and in Hindi means Kingdom. I guess this can be taken as a promise or a hope, but if track one, 'Spine' is anything to go by, it is a relentless march toward an ideal. This fits with Piotr's overall ethic, and serves as a warmup of an introduction to the rest of the album. The track starts with a haunted background drone serving as springboard for electronic beats that sound the forward march. The beat has the push of a chain-gang march but adds the heated funk lighten the load of advancing and all that is left behind in that action. The drone heats up a little under the marching beats and soon a fluttering electronic voice gives rise to the possibility of what is to come. Buzzes and scrapes of electronic noise writhe in and out, weaving snake-like through the intransigent march.

A strong switch in feel happens immediately giving rise to the promise art comes before comfort in track two 'Amendola'. The flavour is distinctly south-east Asian. Piotr uses his singing voice as the lead sound, cutting himself off mid word, mid cry, mid call, mid melody to unsettle and distort the listening experience. Its one of my favorite tracks on the (really excellent) album, the electronic scratches and noise curl around behind each note as the cries which contain their own power, are diffused into snippets of melody as if they'd taken on a detached resonance. It's a clever sound, almost as if the front noise is pushed to the back while still being the loudest sound to hear.

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

'Grave' comes in with a rush of noise and is one of the more dance infused tracks on the list of ten.

If 'Spine' heralded our march into the future Piotr suggests, then 'Grave' and 'Karakum' which follows it continue the forward soul-yank. 'Karakum' has more off center lyric voice weaving to the front and back as Piotr has trained us to listen for by this time. The beat is simple and catchy and posits itself against the more complex sounds represented by the weaving vocals. Speaking of relentless, [Karakum is a desert in Central Asia](#). It's name means 'Black Sand' and it occupies seventy percent of the land area of Turkmenistan. There is an average of one person for every six and a half miles. It almost never rains in this part of the world, and there is a mountain range in which archeologists have found human remains dating back to the stone age. Seen in the context of its name, Piotr's 'Karakum' is a wilderness roam, a march through an endless valley of death toward a promise of life. His call is an echo into a wilderness that is offset against the distorting impact of environments of the electronics. It's a stunning piece of music that lasts only 3.6 minutes, but I found myself playing over and over again.

[Defilada \(The Parade\) is a Polish 1989 documentary by Andrzej Fidyk](#). I managed to find sections of it on You Tube, though there aren't any subtitles for the non-Polish speaking. It's a film made in 1989 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary celebrations of state's founding in North Korea, which the regime intended to use to eclipse the 1988 Summer Olympics taking place that year in Seoul, South Korea. The film was praised by North Korea because it only shows sanctioned footage, however what is evident to the rest of the world, is the documentary's real aim, to condemn the totalitarian regime, through shocking contrasts of official images, and documenting artificial behavior of the populace. The message is conveyed not through commentary, but through footage, montage and content selection. Following the official guidelines, Fidyk "winks" at the viewer, showing the falseness of the setting. (this information is taken from the Wiki link provided above). Piotr's music is called 'Deflada (clubhook)' – the clubhook being a

type of squid. These references were a little lost on me – perhaps with the language barrier. Where the connections between ‘Karakum’ and its inspiration were immediately recognizable, this took more listening to get a grasp on the bridge between the sound and its motive. ‘Deflada’ is infused with the same powerhouse of a march that lays beneath each tune on the disc thus far, but this time the marching sound has a rifle tonality to it. It sounds like crowds rather than individual voice and the electronics act as a controlling force here. Definitely there is the sound of impending doom as the music progresses. I kept wishing I could understand the documentary better. The hollow voice reverb at the end is chilling.



‘Hutan’, or Forest as it is translated is a complete change of pace immediately. Light bells and sweet gong sounds dominate for the first forty-five seconds only giving way to a light easy drone whisper as they move forward. Wind and ocean sounds rise up under the bells that bounce with a sudden clang into a dance vibe at 1.29. After that the rest of the track is a trash yard of reverb and tangles of bells/gongs/tin lids resulting in one of the most accessible tracks on the album. The track ends with a light happy voice that morphs into a richer, darker humming sound into the start of the next track, ‘Deforester’. Voice becomes drone here, in a chant like homage that again, as with the rest of the album, retains its feel of progression. We start to see by this point in the album that the march toward the kingdom takes many varied forms on this planet and moves through many stages of time. ‘Deforester’ doesn’t burn out, it fades away and we’re left for a moment in a pool of silence that is rare on the album.

The above is the track ‘Karakum’

‘Open’ is quite different again, and moves more into the experimental mode, away from an obvious dance sound and with an underlying theme of ambient to carry it forward. Piotr’s voice is light while still carrying a hint of the chanting that went before it. We’re back to the feel of a relentless forward push with ‘Sand Defacing all surfaces’, a beautiful track pregnant with the East Asian sounds again. Finally ‘flow through light’ is another mish mash of sounds collecting and weaving around and over that ambient drone / march sound we’ve now become accustomed to by the end of the album.

This is a beautiful album, one you will treasure for years to come. It is highly recommended by me. [Check out the bandcamp page](#) to purchase the album here, and take a listen to all [the tracks on sound cloud here](#).

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