

The Sound-Hoard Is Our Library  
Nate Wooley

In poet Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, two innocuous lines tuck away something fundamentally human:

*The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;  
The distinguished one delivered this answer:*

They come early in the poem and can be easily glossed over, but Heaney's use of *word-hoard* is an attraction worth stopping for. It's clearly a poetic, rather than philological, choice; an example of the translator's art as opposed to the translator's craft. Dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, word-hoard has been a way of describing the amassed vocabulary specific to a community; the small differences in pronunciation and word choice that may define one village from another. At the turn of this century, a small group of writers broadened word-hoard's meaning to enclose collected ideas of place and time: Robert MacFarlane's *Landmarks* is structured around a small glossary of regional land- and water-work terms culled from the British Isles; Debra Gwartney and Barry Lopez gathered indigenous words from centuries past in a lexical, historical geography of the United States in *Home Ground*. Heaney's choice of word-hoard in *Beowulf*, then—as opposed to a clearer term such as vocabulary—may still be just a poet's fancy, but it also builds upon the term's recent history of recognizing the power collective language has to shape meaning and history.

But words are not the only valid ways that humans describe their experience. Sound is as, or more, meaningful in unlocking our understanding of a specific people in space and time. Recordings are their own lexicons; a group of records, taken together, illustrate how musicians of a certain time or place value musical information—their agreed-upon gestures, preferences of density and form—the base-level principles upon which they build the personal languages used to speak to each other and the outside world. *Sound can be hoarded as well*, and the crystallization of its gestures, values, and ideas tell the sonic story of a people, place, and time.

Humans have an inherent need to frame their sense-of-self through what they experience; a need that is frustrated by the crude nature of communication: words are used to formulate the metaphors and similes that lay out an indirect context for meaning. With sound it is the same, only more difficult—more abstract—and, somehow, more direct. As listeners, we absorb sounds in large sets—songs, melodies, hooks, grooves—in hopes of creating an intimate metaphor; we are attracted to music that unlocks memories as a context for our experience as human beings. As musicians, we collect and organize small components of sound and gesture from these large sets as vocabulary. We build metaphors from this collection in order to reveal our own experience and share it with others. *The sound-hoard is our library.*

Sound-wards are meant to be unlocked and shared, not just to express what is personal to us, but to experience what we collectively hold dear. By opening the word-hoard in Heaney's *Beowulf*, the leader of the troop is asking for the action of a community, for a response. By opening the sound-hoard we, as musicians and listeners, are wringing meaning from the sounds of others as an auditory explanation of our own experience, and we give a response in kind. And, in a

frictionless world, this cyclical responding to sound brings us together. Listening to—and making—sound is a dynamic, vital community act. *The sound-hoard is the best metaphor for the way our lives interconnect.*

With this album, Mazen Kerbaj has opened our sound-hoard, and he has commissioned some of the great musical cento poets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to provide the first responses. Every sound on this recording—this lexicon of his experience—is the product of an iconoclastic musical mind, but it also represents the gestures and language that a global generation of improvisers have used to express the act of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While it would be simple for him to record a glossary of techniques, something that has been done many times already, he has given us the building blocks of meaning. His choices, like Heaney’s, are ones of art and meaning over craft and content.

This is a fine distinction to make, but one that is massively important. What Kerbaj has done here—beyond making a conceptually and musically interesting recording—is similar to the written work of MacFarlane, Gwartney and Lopez; he’s framed place and time by preserving the dynamic sounds that give it meaning. This record may have his name on it and, no doubt, it is a work of great individual artistry, but it also represents the history of a community, and this contribution should, and will, earn him an exalted place in the history of this music and our time as the first to unlock the sound-hoard.