

# PHILIPP ZÜRCHER'S

## Techniques for Averting the Repetitive Tedium of Looping

BY BARRY CLEVELAND

**SWISS GUITARIST AND** composer Philipp Zürcher creates unique music that straddles contemporary classical, modal jazz, and progressive rock forms, using only an electric guitar and an Echoplex Digital Pro looper. He avoids the rhythmic and harmonic monotony all too common in looped music by deftly applying advanced concepts in ways that still allow him to sound natural, as evidenced on his latest release, *Sonne 4* [mem.li].

"Two rhythmic concepts that I employ are polyrhythm and additive rhythm," says Zürcher. "Polyrhythm is about dividing a number of beats in various ways. For example, take 12 beats. You can either play four bars of three or three bars of four beats, but to create a polyrhythm you do both simultaneously. This concept is especially cool with live looping. There is a lot of fun in recording seven bars of three beats—21 beats total—into a looper, and then playing three bars of seven beats against it. Listen to 'Sonne 4,' or look at the sheet music for examples of this [see More Online].

"Additive rhythms involve adding, or subtracting, beats from an existing rhythm. For example, adding two beats to the 6/8 riff on 'House of the Rising Sun' will produce a kind of tango rhythm. Or, you could drop the last beat to get 5/8. 'South West' and 'Continuum' provide examples of how I use additive rhythms when composing. And when soloing, I like to combine groups of two and three beats in every imaginable way, which tends to sound like the rhythm of speech. Doing this in a fluent way results in a storytelling effect.

"When creating melody and

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- > Listen to tracks from *Sonne 4* on Zürcher's Bandcamp site.
- > View the sheet music for "Continuum" and "Sonne 4."



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harmony, I like to combine polyrhythms and additive rhythms with symmetrical modes. I borrowed that idea from French composer Olivier Messiaen, specifically his Modes of Limited Transposition. For example, 'Sonne 4' is mostly based on his Mode 2, also called the diminished scale or the half-tone-whole-tone scale [A, B $\flat$ , C, D $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , E, F $\sharp$ , G, low to high], and 'Continuum' is based on Mode 3, also known as the whole-tone-half-tone-half-tone scale [A, B, C, D $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , E, F, G, G $\sharp$ ]. I love these symmetrical scales because they not only contain intriguing polychords—chords constructed from two or more separate chords—but also relate well to traditional material such as major and minor triads and some pentatonic scales. So, although they are abstract constructions that may not sound

'traditional,' they can still have a natural feel.

"These concepts all work well for live looping because they are mostly based on simple units that can be fitted together like pieces of a mathematical puzzle. For example, my guitar solo in 'Alien Flowerpot' is based on a loop of two power chords that can be found in Mode 3. The rhythm is 7/8 with 5/8 added, but the feel is rather 4/4 plus 2/4. The solo expands on this additive rhythmic idea with additional freedom. The melodic motifs I am using are based on parts of traditional scales and minor triads, but the same elements are also contained within Mode 3.

"I have found these techniques to be a very practical way out of a creative rut—and, after ten years, everything now comes naturally to me." ■