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CHRISTIAN VANDER is the big-shot of MAGMA, the French group who provoked stunned disbelief among punters and critics alike on their British tours.

It is rare for drummers to lead bands, let alone those who can boast such an aggregate of sheer technical skill as do MAGMA. For he is not only a musician; his music is his lifework. Through his music, he has developed his own philosophy and cosmology, and he says, with deadly seriousness of purpose, that he will have failed in his life's work if Magma's music fails.

As a young man, Vander - of indeterminate Polish and Gypsy origins - was frighteningly precocious. One story about him has gained widespread currency.

Vander's mother was a great friend of the Belgian flautist Bobby Jasper, and moved in the circles of American émigré jazzmen who frequented Paris in the Fifties. She introduced her teenaged son, who had started to play drums and had idolized John Coltrane since the age of eleven, to J.J. Johnson. Christian dropped in to their rehearsals, and persuaded Johnson's drummer, the world-famed Elvin Jones, to let him have a go. The American drummer was astounded by what he saw. He drew up a chair and checked out exactly what the French kid was doing. That evening, to the astonishment of jazz "buffs" that had come to see Johnson, Jones ceded his stool to Vander for his first big-time appearance.

To watch MAGMA perform is an extraordinary experience. The group have been through many changes of personnel since their inception in 1969; but Vander remains its constant. Awe-struck audiences are compelled, willy-nilly, to watch him. Centre-stage, he is a lean, wolf-like man, mouth distorting, gaze fixed somewhere beyond the mechanical patterns of the everyday world, drilling out a marching rhythm on his kit. The intensity is fearful, the rhythm metronomic. His whole body is drawn into the effort. The left arm, lies down from the elbow, rolls on the snare, whips back to shoulder-height. He has the air of one demented, one for whom time is the most important of all commodities.

Now he starts to sing into the pendant microphone, all the while drumming on, as if wired to some ulterior rhythm. He chants in some weird, guttural dialect, and the sole spotlight picks out, glinting dully on his black-shirted chest, a cabalistic symbol: an upside-down crescent with six downward-pointing prongs. This is CHRISTIAN VANDER. There will always be a manic, almost obsessional quality, about the performance that flows out, tangibly, from the drummer, and controls the

flow of the music. It seems that by force-of-will as much as by physical sounds, Vander bends the musicians to his own ineluctable purpose.

That purpose is obscure, even to initiates. While avowing that total communication is his final goal, his lyrical and musical vocabulary makes it hard work to approach the centre.

He cites as his major musical and spiritual influence the late John Coltrane, admiring without qualification the American saxophonist's relentless and reckless search for spiritual truth.

Obscurely, he seems to believe that he has inherited Coltrane's mantle. He may yet prove to have the courage, technique and intellectual rigour to do so; and he certainly firmly believes that Coltrane's music will increase in stature and influence in the next decade.

But, while the form of his music took after Coltrane, its content has drawn from many sources: "Bartok, Stockhausen, Carl Orff, Wagner, Coltrane, Ellington, fragments of European folk musics and oriental drones", according to one perceptive critic. Recently the incorporation of sounds from the German choral composer Carl Orff has been noticeable, with its abandonment of melody and counterpoint in favour of rhythmic and harmonic development. Though only one of the three singers who made possible such a dense vocal sound now performs "live" with the group.

It is his lyrical vocabulary and philosophic approach that Christian Vander is most likely to confuse even his most musically literate listeners.

Vander has a mixture of Polish, German, Slav and Gypsy blood, and while he was brought up in France, he pays no particular allegiance to the country whose passport he holds. He regards French as a weak and ineffectual language and is reputed to dislike the conventional vocabulary of rock music, English.

So he invented his own language. He says that it came to him in a vision when he was sixteen; the next day he composed a piece in the language for the jazz group in which he was playing at the time. It was only later that he named it KobaŃan, after the imaginary planet KobaŃa. When he formed Magma, he had the opportunity to use and develop it. It is a curious tongue, strangely stripped of attractions: it is guttural, spiky and angular, like a degenerated and mutated central European tongue.

At first, the mythology of KobaŃa was vague but, with further use, it became more specific. It started out in Magma's first album with an evocation of the departure to a new planet of a group of Earthmen who had rejected mankind's headlong plunge into a consumerist death. But, in subsequent albums, the scenario sharpens up in focus, morally and pictorially: 'MekanŃk DestruktŃw KommandŃh' is the judgement of the prophet Nebehr Gudahtt on humankind "for all its vulgarity, its cruelty, its uselessness and its lack of humility".

Magma's most recent album was 'KÃ¶hntarkÃ¶sz', a detailed aside to the main history. It contains an elegy to John Coltrane and an incredible composition entitled 'Ork Alarm', as well as the main piece 'KÃ¶hntarkÃ¶sz' in two parts, 'On Entering The Tomb of Ã¶hntÃ¶ht-RÃ¶'.

The whole series is known as "Theusz Hamtaahk", and was initially projected as a series of nine album releases; it seems unlikely that the grand design will be rigidly adhered to, for the process is essentially one of discovery rather than projection and planning. There is something of the prophet about Vander. There can be no doubt that he is posing a "model" for an alternative world, and though we should not confuse the artist and the artefact, we may see that, in a practical as well as philosophic sense, Vander controls the imaginary world of KobaÃ¶a: its musical and lyrical vocabulary can be modulated and understood fully only through Vander himself.

Vander demands the most rigorous standards from those who work with him, and many of the personnel changes in the group have been justified by an alleged lack of commitment. But this is only a function of his own moral and intellectual rigour: in this he has probably been more strongly influenced by his assumed nationality than he might believe.

To put himself in the position of the prophet requires blamelessness, but there is a catch-22 situation when Vander comes to explain his thinking, for he claims that, ultimately, the secrets of his belief are knowable only through initiation. Though he admits that he pays allegiance to Gurdjieff and maintains that, in order to understand, in order to restructure the world, it is first necessary to experience "le neant" - the void.

It is on this philosophic presumption that he describes the music played by MAGMA as "ZEUHL" music. Music with a moral purpose, requiring total dedication. Music, for a real world.

MAGMA - in brief:

MAGMA recently underwent a dramatic personnel change; with leader Christian Vander and percussionist Klaus Blasquiz the only musicians remaining from the five-strong line-up which made 'KÃ¶hntarkÃ¶sz'.

They are now a nine-piece group, based in Paris, and comprise:

CHRISTIAN VANDER: French, Polish, German, Slav and Gypsy descent; plays drums, composes most of MAGMA's material.

STELLA VANDER: French (wife of Christian); Vocals.

KLAUS BLASQUIZ: French; Basque descent; Lead Vocals, percussionist

DIDIER LOCKWOOD: English; Brittany descent; Violin

JEAN YVRES: French; Violin

GABRIELLE FEDOROW: French; Guitar

BENOIT WIDEMANN: French; Keyboards

JEAN-PAUL ASSELINE: French; Keyboards

BERNARD PAGANOTTI: French; Bass

MAGMA have made four albums since their inception in 1969, all part of a grand design known as THEUSZ HAMTAAHK:

'Magma' (French Philips 6395.001/2 double album)

'1001 Degrees Centigrades' (French Philips 6397.031)

'MekanĀ k DestruktĀ w KommandĀh' (A&M AMLH 64397)

'KĀhntarkĀsz' (A&M MLS 68260).

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