Journal of the Society for American Music (2009) Volume 3, Number 2, pp. 259–262.
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RECORDING REVIEWS

Quartet (GTM) 2006 (4 CDs). By Anthony Braxton. Important Records imprec184, 2008.

If one were to gauge the status of jazz in America by the names of the record labels that record jazz performances, then it would seem that the music and its makers have finally garnered the respect that they deserve. Jazz evolved from being "OKeh" in the early part of the twentieth century to being "Candid" and "Contemporary" by midcentury. By the late 1950s jazz could even claim for its "Blue Notes" a certain amount of "Prestige." To follow my admittedly silly narrative to the present day, jazz has finally arrived at being "Important."[1] Given his exceedingly prolific output as a composer, improviser, and performer, his reputation for both genre-busting and genre-embracing strategies, and his pronounced influence as a creative visionary and teacher, Anthony Braxton wears the moniker of "important" very well.

There are those, of course, who feel that Braxton's musical creativity is too well documented; it has become too "important." Writing in *Signal to Noise* about a recent 9 CD/1 DVD box set documenting every note of a four-night run by Braxton's 12+1tet at Manhattan's Iridium Jazz Club, Michael Rosenstein asks bluntly, "Does the world need another Anthony Braxton multi-disk set?"[2] Phil Freeman, writing in *The Wire,* compares the fewer than two dozen recordings by trumpeter Bill Dixon, a contemporary of Braxton and an equally innovative musician, to "the relentless, obsessive audio diary-keeping of Anthony Braxton, who seems to have never had an unreleased musical thought."[3]

In just the last few years Braxton has enjoyed quite a few multidisc releases: the aforementioned Iridium live material; a six-CD box set with Alessandro Giachero, Antonio Borghini, and Cristiano Calcagnile titled *Standards (Brussels) 2008;* a nine-CD box set of his *Piano Music 1968–2000* performed by Geneviève Foccroulle; a four-CD box set of duos with guitarist Joe Morris titled *Four Improvisations (Duo) 2007;* a two-CD box set from Scotland with guitarist Tom Crean and trumpeter/multi-instrumentalist Taylor Ho Bynum titled *Trio (Glasgow) 2005;* a four-CD set of solo performances in Austria titled *Solo Live At Gasthof Heidelberg Loppem 2005;* another four-CD box featuring various ensemble configurations titled *4 Compositions (Ulrichsberg) 2005—Phonomanie VIII;* and a two-CD box with pianist Walter Frank titled *4 Improvisations (Duets) 2004.* All these multidisc releases

[1] The name *Important Records* also appears to reference the social process of listeners recommending albums to one another and not simply the sounds of the recordings themselves, because, according to Wikipedia, the record label "was created in 2001 after the management collapse of a popular North East record shop" (www.wikipedia.org, accessed 8 July 2008). The label's releases feature a wide range of contemporary artists, from Pauline Oliveros and Noam Chomsky to Merzbow and DJ Spooky (Paul Miller).

[2] Anthony Braxton 12+1 tet, *9 Compositions (Iridium) 2006,* Firehouse 12 CDx9 + DVD, reviewed by Michael Rosenstein in *Signal to Noise* 46 (Summer 2007): 50. At the end of his review Rosenstein answers his own provocative question in the affirmative.

[3] Phil Freeman, "The Great Learning," *The Wire* (July 2008): 34–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196309091135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

come on the heels of Braxton's monumental 2003 DVD-audio release featuring six-and-a-half hours of the leader in various small and large ensemble configurations performing his original compositions dedicated, in this instance, to the likes of Liza Minnelli, Johnny Cash, Oscar Brown Jr., and Florence Price.[4] Braxton's musical and philosophical ideas (and whether these can even be separated in his creative world is doubtful) have also been well documented in his own three-volume *Triaxium Writings* and in books by Graham Lock, Ronald Radano, and Mike Heffley, among others.[5] To say that Anthony Braxton is prolific and has wide-ranging interests understates the case considerably.

The "GTM" in *Quartet (GTM) 2006* refers to Braxton's decade-long engagement with what he calls "Ghost Trance Music." Rooted in his study of Native American ceremonial musics and his interest in "trance musics as a global phenomenon," GTM represents, according to Bill Shoemaker, "both a logical extension of issues that have traditionally held sway in Braxton's music, and bold new statements about the relationships between composition and improvisation, the individual musician and the ensemble, and the idea of trance being a conduit between reality and spirituality."[6]

There are numerous inroads into experiencing and performing Anthony Braxton's GTM, many of which are left intentionally cryptic by the composer himself. From a technical standpoint, Braxton uses what he calls a "diamond clef," neutral with respect to absolute pitch and transposition, to present a long sequence of nonvertical sound events for performers to realize, interpret, repeat, and depart from at various times and in various ways. As Braxton explains, GTM pieces aren't written for specific instrumentations, nor is their length predetermined: "They can start at one minute and go on for days or even years."[7] In this case, four compositions—numbered 346, 341, 340, and 338 in program order—each produce a CD-length performance.

[4] *Anthony Braxton Quartet Standards (Brussels) 2008,* Amirani 14 (6 CD, 2008); Anthony Braxton *Piano Music (1968–2000),* Leo Records LR 901/909 (9 CD, 2008); Anthony Braxton/Joe Morris, *Four Improvisations (Duo) 2007,* Clean Feed CF100 (4 CD, 2008); Anthony Braxton, *Trio (Glasgow) 2005,* Leo Records CD LR 487/488 (2 CD, 2007); Anthony Braxton, *4 Compositions (Ulrichsberg) 2005—Phonomanie VIII,* Leo Records CD LR 468/471 (4 CD, 2006); Anthony Braxton and Walter Frank, *4 Improvisations (Duets) 2004,* Leo LR 429/430 (2 CD, 2005); Anthony Braxton *Nine Compositions (DVD) 2003,* Rastascan 60 (1 DVD-Audio, 2003).

[5] See Anthony Braxton, *Triaxium Writings,* 3 vols. (Lebanon, N.H.: Frog Peak Press, 1985) and *Composition Notes A-E* (Lebanon, N.H.: Frog Peak Press, 1988); Graham Lock, *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton* (Exeter, Devon: Stride Press, 1995), and *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Ronald Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton's Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Mike Heffley, *The Music of Anthony Braxton* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996).

[6] Bill Shoemaker, "The Music of Anthony Braxton: A Living System," liner notes to *Four Compositions (Washington, D.C.) 1988* (Braxton House BH-009, 1998), available at http://www.wesleyan.edu/music/braxton/braxtonhouse/bh009.html (accessed 8 July 2008).

[7] Francis Davis, liner notes to *Octet (New York) 1995* (Braxton House BH-006, 1995), available at http://www.wesleyan.edu/music/braxton/braxtonhouse/bh006.html (accessed 8 July 2008). See also the description of "Accelerated Ghost Trance Music" posted by maparker at http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001062.html (posted 19 November 2005, accessed 8 July 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196309091135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The instrumentalists in the ensemble—here a quartet including Carl Testa on bass, Aaron Siegal on percussion, and Max Heath on piano—refer to the exact same notation, so that unison, or partial unison, playing occurs quite frequently. The score, however, also consists of various graphic shapes and color-coding schemes that present the performers with options for repeating material or departing from the notation, so that moments of unison playing ebb and flow in unpredictable ways. The group moves seamlessly and effectively between moments that feel more "composed" and moments that feel more "improvised," as well as between various textures and ensemble configurations. Braxton describes the music this way:

> [GTM] consists of a line that the musicians hold on to. And within that line are tri-metric markings that allow the possibility of moving in or out of that line in different states. So if we're talking of circle exits, we're talking about exits into mutable states [i.e., improvisation]. If we're talking of rectangular exits, we're talking of architectonic transferal constructs . . . switching to a different composition inside of the Ghost Trance composition. (In my system, a composition has origin identity and correspondence identity; that is, it can be put with any other composition in any order. It also has genetic identity; any part of it can be put with anything else). And if we talk of triangle exits or correspondence openings, than [*sic*] suddenly we're factoring in body movement and stage placement and other aspects of performance and ritual.[8]

To decipher this statement one must know that Braxton's tri-centric philosophy integrates composition, improvisation, and the ritual-ceremonial or symbolic function of music, and that he denotes composition as a rectangle, improvisation as a circle, and symbolic functions as a triangle. Braxton describes much of his early creative activity as struggling with the (false) dichotomy between improvisation and composition: alternately putting the circle inside the rectangle or putting the rectangle inside the circle. With GTM he aimed more fully to integrate those processes within symbolic or ritual forms. According to Braxton, "The Ghost Trance Music is triangle with rectangle inside the triangle and a circle inside the triangle," a symbolic relationship he also adopted as the logo of his Braxton House online venture.[9]

Quartet GTM 2006 is attractively packaged in a ten-panel Digipak with excerpts from the four scores adorning its various sides. Inside is a twelve-page essay by Braxton written in a style that ranges from conversational to convoluted and that manages to reference things and people as disparate as Hildegard of Bingen, Tarot cards, the Dogon people of Mali, Arnold Schoenberg, Mary Lu Williams [*sic*], and an advertising slogan from Burger King.[10] In a passage that showcases both Braxton's vision and his humility, and that summarizes nicely his intentions for the

[8] Davis, liner notes to *Octet (New York) 1995*.

[9] Francesco Martinelli, "A New Set of Toys in the Triangle House: The Ghost Trance Music's [*sic*] of Anthony Braxton," liner notes to *Sextet (Istanbul) 1996* (Braxton House BH-001 [2 CD, 1996]), available at http://www.wesleyan.edu/music/braxton/braxtonhouse (accessed 8 July 2008).

[10] One Internet commentator described the booklet as offering insight into "the whys whats and whatevers of Ghost Trance Music"; see http://www.tokafi.com/news/anthony-braxton-ghost-trance-music-explained (accessed 8 July 2008).

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project, he writes: "Our hope was to not simply reproduce an idiomatic experience that re-enforces a concept of somebody's [*sic*] else's idea of tradition, but rather to find that vibrational balance that opens the gateway into 'oneness and wonder'—after all, we are still learning. Emphasis for this project was not on super extended solo statements but rather on the revolving synergies of small group interaction postulation and design." In this aim they succeed very well.

Francis Davis remarked in a profile of Braxton included in his book of essays *Bebop and Nothingness* that Braxton and Wynton Marsalis have more in common than either of them might care to admit.[11] At first glance, comparing a visionary musician with roots in the late-sixties avant-garde to one who is most often associated with the "neoclassical" turn in recent jazz may sound like a preposterous idea. But as Davis explains, "[T]hey have at least one thing in common: opposition to the common perception of black music as strictly intuitive, never intellectual." Both, I might add, have also commented on a contemporary cultural "Dark Ages." Braxton writes in the included essay: "The current cultural/political and spiritual breakdown now taking place in western culture will necessitate that certain areas of information will be going underground. That's for sure." And Marsalis, in a video titled "Blues and Swing," stated: "We are in a cultural Dark Ages now in our country, but if we survive this we will come out of it and people will be interested in things of value again."[12]

Refining his admittedly awkward comparison a bit further, Davis writes: "[Braxton] has taken the critique [of primitivism] a step further, challenging many of the most basic assumptions that we bring not only to jazz, but to music in general."[13] If Marsalis is deemed "important" in the eyes of his supporters because he has "saved" jazz from its own excesses, then Braxton may be doubly "important" for his ability to "save" us from our own tendencies to stereotype musical practices and practitioners, and, even more disturbingly, to limit the range and power of music in the human experience.

This particular multidisc Anthony Braxton release, although certainly not the definitive or essential document of his career (he tends to sound his best in the company of his peers rather than his students), is, however, an ongoing testament to a man and an artist who has never rested on his laurels or been content to work within established styles or traditions. A self-proclaimed "restructuralist," Braxton's work always feels "unfinished," in a perennial state of flux and wonder. I'm certain he would ask no less of his listeners.

David Borgo

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[11] Francis Davis, *Bebop and Nothingness: Jazz and Pop at the End of the Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 99.

[12] Wynton Marsalis, *Blues and Swing* (Sony VHS 6301122666, 1991).

[13] Davis, liner notes to *Octet (New York) 1995.*

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