



Anthony Braxton, playing a contrabass clarinet in Germany, May 26, 2007

ANTHONY BRAXTON

Music as Spiritual Commitment

By Josef Woodard ; Photo by Hyou Vielz

For one dense, time-leaping hour last May, a braced and happy audience at the Victoriaville Festival in Quebec was served up a thrilling and unusual retrospective of the Great American Phenom that is Anthony Braxton. Then again, unusual is usual for this thoughtful jazz legend, inherent experimentalist and process redefiner, still one of the more fascinating figures to emerge from the avant-garde end of the jazz and new music spectrum.

In the case of his piece “Echo Echo Mirror House,” performed by a septet in Victoriaville’s Colisee venue, musicians—all of them younger than Braxton—both improvised and cued off of an elaborate system of trolling and dipping into snippets from the leader’s decades-long recorded history, contained on iPods at the ready. Donning his signature sweater, Braxton guided the ensemble with encoded hand gestures and lent his live input on multiple variations on the saxophone family, in what became a dizzying and delicious, Charles Ives-ian mash-up of sounds from the past colliding with the unfolding present.

By turns structured and free, anarchic and controlled in a creatively systematized way, the experience was, in a word, *Braxtonian*.

Apart from this neatly abridged and vertically stacked retrospective, or the broader portrait lent by a four-night festival at New York’s Roulette last fall, getting a fix on what Braxton is about and who he is at the core becomes complicated. He is a ferocious but angular saxophonist, creator of multiple ensemble situations, an academic (teaching at Mills College and currently at Wesleyan University), a MacArthur Fellow and self-impelled theoretician whose ideas and include his “Tri-Axium” philosophy of art.

Born in Chicago in 1945, Braxton fell in with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in the ‘60s, and moved on to become an important component of the ‘70s

avant-garde scene, playing with Chick Corea and Dave Holland early on, and sympathetic allies Barry Altschul, Gerry Hemingway, Marilyn Crispell and fellow Chicago-born iconoclast George Lewis. Braxton has built up a large discography on such small art-minded labels (mostly European, his primary base of support over the years) as Black Saint, hat ART, Leo and Victo.

In more recent times, Braxton has fostered a new, young set of collaborators and conspirators, culled from students and other smartly equipped players, with much organizational and co-conspiratorial help from trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum, and such otherwise emerging artists in their own right as guitarist Mary Halvorson and bassoonist Sara Schoenbeck.

One of Braxton’s more ambitious and in-progress efforts is decidedly off the jazz grid. His *Trillium* opera series, which he envisions eventually as a 36-act compendium covering a 12-day festival, may or may not ever be completed. A four-disc set of the *Trillium E* operas was recently released on the New Braxton House label, and the music is a multi-level maze of ideas, science fiction asides, social satire and other less easily described narrative detours, with music ranging from contemporary classical syntax to the outskirts of jazz and beyond.

As Braxton explained, “The opera complex system is something I have been working on for about 25 years or so. And because it takes some-

thing like from six to nine years to complete a four-act opera, the Trillium Opera Complex system must be approached in a very deliberate kind of way. This project is the template fantasy grid for the complete ritual and ceremonial musics.”

In a wide-ranging interview with Braxton, the expansive-minded artist described a prolific, creative life very much still in motion. In conversation, as in his music, Braxton shuffles easily between intellectual erudition—including coded words and phrases all his own—and direct, down-to-earth expressions. Ditto, his opera work, as when a dissonant wash in *Trillium E* suddenly yields to the telling phrase “Life in space is rough, but art in space is even rougher.”

Braxton is at a point late in his career when the many strains of work behind him and ahead of him are keeping his work ethic fully engaged, regardless of who’s listening or who’s hiring. He’s listening to a higher calling.

“I’m a lucky guy to have been able to live to be 66 years old,” he said. “I would have never thought something like this could have happened. To still be excited about creative music and my own work, I must say, ‘What a life.’ I have made no money from my music. In fact, I am totally excited about my work and I have no regrets about the decision I made to embrace music as a spiritual commitment, music as part of the dynamics of curiosity and music as space of transposition into ritual and ceremonial spaces.”

DownBeat: It makes perfect sense that the all-inclusive medium of opera would be a good forum for your creative thinking. Is that flexibility part of what attracts you to it?

Anthony Braxton: That's it exactly. There is nothing quite like opera for bringing a creative community together. Dancers, singers, video projectionists, staging and/or building fantasy environments—the magic of storytelling. This is something I knew nothing about as a young guy. Opera would bring me deeper into the world of narrative logics and magic. As a young man, I sought to emphasize the propositional logics as a way to evolve structural premises. Later, with the operas, I would begin the process of looking at holistic structures and fantasy concepts.

Before turning 40, I could not find a way into opera, and came to the conclusion that this was a medium that had no meaning for me. It was only later, when I had the opportunity to experience the opera *Wozzeck* of Alban Berg that, suddenly, it opened the door to opera for me. Since that time period, opera has become very important to me. The challenge of poetic logics, the wonder of narrative structures has been a very nice zone to work in for a guy like myself.

Opera and jazz haven't exactly been bedfellows yet, apart from such examples as Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* and Anthony Davis' work in the medium. Is that one aspect you are interested in putting forth, the match-making of opera and jazz?

I am definitely interested in advancing the challenge of improvisation/composition and narrative modeling strategies into fresh holistic domains. In your question you use the word *jazz*, but since my music is not jazz but rather creative music—from a trans-idiomatic experience—your question must be re-cast.

Yes, I am interested in “real-time” improvisation combined into a Tri-Centric vision that includes extended structure and ritual story telling. *Trillium* is not a jazz opera or classical European opera. My work doesn't fall into the traditional categories. I have rather sought to evolve my music model organically, through research and development, as part of a Tri-Centric Thought Unit Housing.

At this point, the *Trillium* project is so far along, there must be a gnawing desire in you to get to the staging phase.

Yes. But look, there are complexities in this for me. I had a performance of *Trillium R* and went into debt for 10 years. To do a live performance costs so much money, and I have been criticized for the production of *Trillium R*, because there were mistakes in the performance. But it costs so much money to get everything completely correct and to get the scenery and produce it on the level of a Wagnerian opera.

I get the idea that this line of questioning about straddling idiom makes little sense to you. Do you have a broader view?

My experience has been a universal experience. The jazz musicians were right to reject me. And the classical musicians, including the contemporary classical world, were right to reject my work. I am not a Democrat or a Republican. I have nothing to do with either of those polarities.

Rather, I sought to build an experience context that would be in between the classical definitions, that would give me an opportunity to better experience and integrate what was happening through my experience. And so that difference would be at the heart of my decision to create another formal context.

Do these basic artistic instincts you're referring to go back to your earliest inklings as a musician, or did it develop as you got deeper into music?

It has evolved. My first opportunity to even consider theater music and theatrical devices was when I had an opportunity to experience the great music of Joseph Jarman. In fact, in many ways, this area of my work can be viewed as a post-Jarman offering, because I was profoundly affected by his work in this area. For instance, I experienced the [Jarman] composition “Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City” around 1966, '67. It blew me away and put me in a position where I had to reconsider everything I had learned up until that point.

Can you talk about the effects of the AACM on your development?

In my opinion, when the mature histories are written and documented, the work of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians will be viewed in the same way that we talk of the First Viennese School or the Second Viennese School or the serial movement from Darmstadt, or the indeterminate movement. The AACM will be viewed as a point of definition for trans-idiomatic, explorative logics.

It is the power of American creativity that can reunify our people, re-motivate and direct our people, as we begin to face challenges, which is to say, the Antebellum forces that have controlled information dynamics, especially since the 1960s, have produced a situation where non-marketplace creative musician-composers like myself have been marginalized out of the equation. You don't hear anything about Henry Threadgill on *The Huffington Post*. On *The Daily Beast*, there is no awareness of the great music of George Lewis or of Sarah Schoenbeck or Nicole Mitchell.

We have this incredible, universal community that is greatly appreciated in Europe or in Asia, but in America, the people are not necessarily aware of the sub-plane currents happening in this time period. I hope that the Tri-Centric Foundation will be one of the points of light.

There seems to be a new burst of creative fire in you, particularly, maybe as energized by collusion with your students and younger musicians. Is that the case?

The idea of "Braxton and his students" is not really correct, because when I work with someone, they become my students and I become their students. We learn from one another. In the 27 years I've been in academia, I have seen generations of young people evolving their work and, in some cases, I have been able to work with them, teach them, but also learn from them. I feel fortunate because of my connection to the great men and women who made the decision to embrace music as a life's purpose, not just as entertainers.

These collaborators seem to be empathetic to your aesthetic, in that they can embrace the free improvisational impulse but also your quite complex structural ideas.

I have tried to emphasize that it's important to have experiences in the mutable logic space, it's important to have experiences in the stable logic space and it's important to have symbolic transposition. Like the AACM, I try to teach my students about the wonderful discipline of music in a way that doesn't nail anyone down to any one idiomatic principle. Instead, I try to look at the wonder and the discipline of music as a way to open up possibilities rather than to produce the theory first and have the creative experience come through the theory.

Your "Echo Echo Mirror House" piece at Victoriaville was a time-warping concert experience. My synapses were firing overtime.

[Laughs] I must say, thank you. I am really happy about that performance. In this time period, we talk about avant-garde this and avant-garde that, but the post-Ayler generation is 50 years old, and the AACM came together in the '60s. So it's time for new models to come together that can also integrate present-day technology and the thrust of re-structural technology into the mix of the music logics and possibility.

The "Echo Echo Mirror House" music is a trans-temporal music state that connects past, present and future as one thought component. This idea is the product of the use of holistic generative template propositions that allow for 300 or 400 compositions to be written in that generative state. The "Ghost Trance" musics would be an example of the first of the holistic, generative logic template musics. The "Ghost Trance" music is concerned with telemetry and cartography, and area space measurements.

With the "Echo Echo Mirror House" musics, we're redefining the concept of elaboration. It's not a linear elaboration. The new holistic models are multi-hierarchical formal states that allow for many different things to happen at the same time, and the friendly experiencer can have the option of approaching the music in many different ways. Compositions, in this context, are not written to be like 5-minute or 30-minute compositions, but rather compositions that can stop and start to meet the needs of the friendly ensemble of musicians, depending on their needs.

I have designed my system, from the beginning, so that the formation reality of the music

involves everything happening at the same time. With the "Echo Echo Mirror House" music, suddenly, it goes back to the old TV commercial: "Is it live or is it Memorex?"

On the subject of keeping tabs on the many strands in the Braxton tapestry, was your multi-project festival at Roulette another way to take stock of the story so far?

I feel blessed to have the Tri-Centric Foundation and the Tri-Centric Orchestra. I have been looking for a while to find a way to build another structure, since I have been shut out of

the jazz world and classical world. I rarely work in America. And now, with the economic complexity that we're dealing with, work in Europe has become difficult for me, as well.

And so the Tri-Centric Foundation and the Tri-Centric Orchestra is a way for me to have a community of men and women artists to work with, so that I can continue to evolve the science of my music. This is a good thing for me, since, at this point in my life, I would prefer to emphasize composing and research and development, and perform a little bit. Meanwhile, I don't want performance to mean bass, drums and piano five

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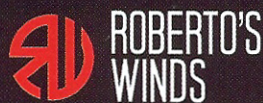
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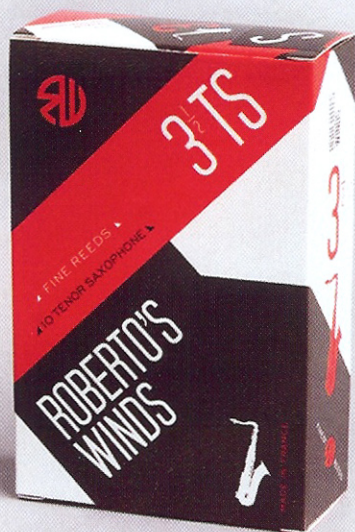
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million times for the rest of my life.

The Tri-Centric Foundation, for me, is kind of akin to a third Millennial League of Nations, where in the beginning, the old dog composer pulls together this model, but in the end, it's not about me. It's about the family and the power of community. We need to unleash the power of creativity to re-motivate our people.

Going back to the AACM ideal of creating opportunities by whatever means necessary, when working outside of the system, does it almost build that muscle to marshal resources and produce results?

Yes. The first thing that was a surprise was that it was impossible to make a living doing the music that I needed to do, and so I had to get a job. Many of the artists of the Third Millennium will have to solve the question of how to survive and, in many cases, survive separate from making a living from one's musics. That has become a very complex proposition in America.

You were talking about the 1960s and the flowering of this idea of expanding beyond our shores. But in your case, going deeper into American musical history, I think of you almost as a post-Ives-ian musician and composer, as well.

Well, Charles Ives is one of my heroes. Also, the great work of William Grant Still and Scott Joplin [are important]. I was fortunate, in discovering music, that I found there are no limits. There are so many different areas to creative music, in America and around the planet. And so, yes, Charles Ives and the great work of John Cage and Arnold Schoenberg, and including the re-structural visionary music of Alvin Lucier, is very important to me.

Do you have some fundamental curiosity about sound? Is that part of what leads you to the multi-instrumentalist place?

I would gravitate towards multi-instrumentalism because one part of my interest in playing the instruments was to have opportunities for experience in the high register, the middle register and the low register. My register experience would come about in the AACM as I learned from my fellow and sister colleagues.

You were saying that you have so many things on your plate and aren't as interested in performing. Yet I assume you still have a passionate relationship with the saxophone.

Yes. I still listen to my Paul Desmond records. I still listen to my Warne Marsh records and my Albert Ayler records. I do not plan to ever

BRAXTON'S ALLIES

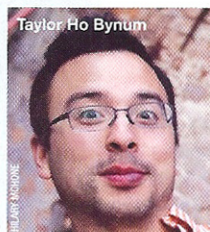
Anthony Braxton's burst of activity over the past five years has been made possible, in part, through the support and collaborative graces of Taylor Ho Bynum, a young cornet player.

Bynum, who was a student of Braxton's in the '90s and again for post-grad work in the early 2000s, has gotten involved on multiple levels in helping Braxton pursue his artistic vision—as a producer for a nine-CD and DVD release in 2007, and organizer of the eight-hour Sound Genome project in Vancouver in 2010 and last fall's ambitious festival at Roulette in New York City.

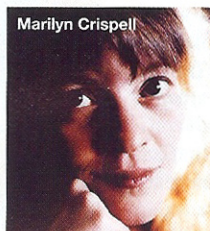
Bynum says of his elder cohort, "Anthony's absolute commitment to his work, his uncompromising artistic idealism, and his magical balance between maintaining clearly articulated and consistent musical principles yet growing an ever-evolving and innovative language that is dedicated to the pursuit of the new—all of that provides an incredible amount of inspiration and focus for my own work. He is simultaneously one of my heroes, one of my principal mentors and one of my closest friends."

Going back to an earlier phase of Braxton's history, in the '80s and '90s, the leader

maintained a powerful and flexible band, with uncommonly gifted and ambi-idiomatic (i.e. "inside/outside") musicians: pianist Marilyn Crispell, bassist Mark Dresser and drummer



Taylor Ho Bynum



Marilyn Crispell

Gery Hemmingway. Crispell, who worked with Braxton in diverse settings, met him while she was a student at the Creative Music Project in Woodstock, N.Y., in the late '70s. Braxton was so impressed with her playing that he invited her to join his Creative Music Orchestra and took her on a European tour.

"During our first rehearsal, he suggested that I play less notes," Crispell recalls. "I think what he was trying to say was to breathe and feel the phrasing, and to be aware of the role of silence. That was a profound lesson for me, and one that influenced all the music I played subsequently."

"During the time we played as a quartet, he started to seriously develop his concept of combining improvisation and notation in a way where one could become almost indistinguishable from the other—not indistinguishable, exactly, but rather that there was a seamless flow between one and the other. I learned a great deal about composition from playing those pieces."

—Josef Woodard

give up the instruments. I think that would be a big mistake, not to mention that I love the experience of real-time playing. But as I get older, looking at the clock, I find myself very much aware that to complete the opera cycle, I need another 10, 15 years, unless I retire from academia. Maybe then I can complete the specifics of the system in the way I had originally planned.

You have a passion for exploring creative possibilities through technology, but is there a part of you that also wants to escape it and get back to the visceral, physical world?

You have a point, and I think the African-American community has a complex way as we move into the Third Millennium. The Southern strategy that Richard Nixon would set into motion and Ronald Reagan would accelerate would produce a situation where, when the New Orleans musicians came into power in the '80s, the first thing they did was to start the jazz purges. Anyone who had any originality was purged or kicked out.

In its place, they brought in a concept of the tradition that in many ways violated the tradition. The tradition has been creativity. Instead, in the '80s, the tradition would be defined as playing like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, as if nothing relevant has happened in the last 50 or 60 years. The African-American community has been retreating into an idea of Antebellum celebration that has taken the focus away from the challenge of evolution and re-structural development. This is serious.

This came about, in my opinion, because of a political decision that was based on ethnic-centric parameters, that was based upon an attempt to bring in a class of African-Americans who would themselves be put in positions to challenge the music. It's kind of like the "paddy rollers," the slaves who would go chase the slaves who escaped from the plantation and bring them back. And that's what we have been seeing since the 1980s, although in the last 15 years, things have settled down. Now, the "bad" musicians have all been kicked out, and now jazz is clean and fresh again. But it's a different jazz than the jazz that I came up with. The jazz I came up with had everything from Jimmy Smith on organ to Miles Davis doing re-structural music, to Frank Sinatra. You name it. The music has lost something in terms of spectra.

What does the future look like for you?

My hope is to have several more projects. I want to do a large project on the music of Duke Ellington. I want to do a large project on the music of Sun Ra. I want to do a large project on the great music of John Phillips Sousa. There are all kinds of ways to use the tradition, and there are so many different areas of the tradition.

Every now and then, I try to document a project in that direction. It's part of my learning, and it's also part of trying to stay fresh, not to do one thing only, but to partake of the possibilities that we have in this time period and not allow those

possibilities to get you stuck in any one category. There is everything to do, for the people who are interested in moving forward.

And who have the energy, which you seem to have an endless supply of. What's your secret?


Well, if you're going to be broke, you might as well have energy and be excited about something you love.

Is this current time period a creatively rich chapter in your life?

I feel like it's a dynamic time in my life. It's a complex time. I would prefer to have more time to do my own music work. I'm grateful to be in academia and have opportunities to work with our young people. But I'm also somewhat frustrated because time is going by very quickly. I'm not a kid anymore, and there is so much to do.

How would I describe this time period? It's really exciting and also frustrating. Yet, I also recognize that I have really had a fortunate life. I would love to complain, believe me, but the actual fact is that I have had real ups in my life and real downs.

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