

**O, FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING:**

**ANTHONY BRAXTON'S**

**SPECULATIVE MUSIC'S**

**WINNING WAY WITH WORDS**

MIKE HEFFLEY

Anthony Braxton is one of my favorite authors of speculative fiction.<sup>1</sup> For me, he's right up there with the writers of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Rig Veda*, for his invention of myths and mythical characters; with the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, for his esoteric-cum-poetic lingual fast tracks to enlightenment; with Homer, Lucian of Samosata, and Aristophanes, for the elements of improvisation, irony and drollery, and dubious heroisms added to the mythic-esoteric mix. He's a torchbearer of Plato, Sir Thomas More, and Jonathan Swift, for his utopic/dystopic themes; an heir apparent to H.G. Wells and Ralph Ellison, for his unique treatment of invisibility. His vision of sentient Artificial Intelligence keeps company with Mary Wollstonecraft, Isaac Asimov, Steve Barnes, Phillip K. Dick, and the geniuses behind the current *Battlestar Galactica* television series. His work sits companionably on my shelf next to that of David Lindsay, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams for its

---

<sup>1</sup> "Speculative fiction" has come to subsume "science fiction" as the better descriptor of that genre as it evolved from narrowly hard-scientific "what-if" premises to the softer-scientific ones (spce-fic also encompasses "soft science fiction") encompassed by the humanities—from a literature of technology to a literature of ideas, both yet more so than of character studies. In tagging Braxton's *music* as speculative, I'm using the term as musicologist Marius Schneider did for his *speculative musicology*: music as a *speculum*, a reflection of cosmic and natural order. I will use the word "speculate" and "spectacle" here in the light of that nuance of reflection. For an interesting discussion of Braxton's music along these lines, see David Rosenboom (in Zorn 2000: 205).

Heffley-2

theological/philosophical concerns couched in childlike fun and wildness. I often ponder the subaltern themes and visions of Franz Kafka, Doris Lessing, Ursula LeGuin, Samuel Delaney, Octavia Butler, and Walter Mosley when I take in his music.<sup>2</sup>

I don't mean to make the case for Braxton's written texts *alone* as comparable to those of world literature and its genres; rather, his employment of that mother of all technologies—the tool (*techne*) language is, generally; and his way of using it, specifically—I hear and read as a driving force behind, first, his music, and, further, his body of work as a whole in the world over time. His music heard can also be “read” as extensions of his way with words, beyond complementary homology and into “further utterances” of them. Such extensions, read as texts

---

<sup>2</sup> Braxton's texts have evolved over the years from the earliest quasi-scientific liner notes to the more ruminative abstractions of *Tri-Axium Writings* (1985) to the more poetic-vignettish additions to those elements in *Composition Notes* (1988) to, in recent decades, the most literary style of his music-theatrical projects (eg. Compositions 173, 174) and his most recent compositions notes and *Trillium* libretti. In that range is found redolences with pulp science fiction, religious fables, philosophical epigraphs, and narratives around the themes mentioned. See Sources for specific titles resonant with Braxton's concerns.

Heffley-3

and narratives themselves, do inform and satisfy me as a vibrant part of the literary-imaginary universe invoked above.<sup>3</sup>

Braxton's music and its relationship with language have developed in an unbroken line from his first original gestures in the 1960s to his *Trillium* opera series, a line as traceable as a good genealogy. In 1996, when I worked as his graduate teaching assistant to help produce and premiere *Trillium R (Shala Fears for the Poor)* at New York's John Jay College, it was something of a summative gesture of all that had come before. Braxton is also an author in the more conventional sense, and that aspect of his work—the libretti for his *Trillium* series of operas, which are themselves developed from his *Tri-Axium Writings*—will be the focus of closest study here.<sup>4</sup>

Before focusing on them in some detail, a scan of their development from his work as a whole will serve three purposes: foremost, it will establish the macro-context in which the small piece of work examined in micro-detail here lives; at the same time, it will be a way to glance at how Braxton does and does not use technologies and tropes—all branching from the overarching

---

<sup>3</sup> See Cowley (in Young 2002/2007: 204) for an endorsement of “sound poetry” as a “return to its source close to the spoken word” in the contemporary musical discourse of Braxton’s purview. Toop (1995: 135) makes a direct connection between the burgeoning of what Braxton would call “creative music” in the years of his own work and the emergence of semiotics, contending that the new untheorized sounds were rich fodder for “the science of signs” (indeed, I would further note, the postmodernist discourse itself got underway in earnest around then). See also McLuhan (in Cox and Warner 2006: 71) for an evocative music-contextual look at the phonetic alphabet as an audio-visual tool for enabling the kind of trans-cultural universalism Braxton aspires to with his music.

<sup>4</sup> See Braxton’s opening discussion of the *Trillium* operas in the liner notes to *Trillium R* (Braxton House BH-008). *Tri-Axium Writings* discusses historical, social/political, and philosophical issues in the abstract; the *Trillium* operas couch those issues in the plots and characters of the libretti.

Heffley-4

root *techne*, language—to present what he has to present, in contrast and comparison to others in similar contexts; thirdly, it will allow me to present and argue for my reading of the artist's *oeuvre* and public persona as a seamless text comprising subtexts of speculative fictions.

*Six short tall tales long told*

*Trope One: the humble but plucky saxophone that dreamed it was a talking grand piano, then an orchestra comprising every instrument in the world, then the whole living multiverse and all life forms in it...then woke up and realized that it was indeed, all three...*

Ashmenton and Ntsockie (we will meet them shortly) are two from the pool of twelve characters (six males and six females) who enact the stories of (a planned) thirty-six one-act operas that can be performed alone or in any combination and sequence (*Shala* combined four of them, to make the one four-act *Trillium R*). These characters, some with made-up names suggesting glossalalia, are conceived as archetypes in human form. They play a range of different roles from act to act, sometimes villainous, sometimes virtuous, from the human perspective—much like Hindu *devas*, or Greek gods. The effect is of a tableau of reincarnation, each act a life, or of a view of the same timeless human dramas playing out in different people and times and places.

These characters are personifications of the twelve "sonic units (language types)" Braxton worked out on his alto saxophone over time, beginning in the 1960s, when he first conceived that instrument as a tool for composing (as an alternative to the piano). Ashmenton, for example, is the character who grew out of the second "house" (Braxton has also called his sonic units "houses," or "lands"), the house of "accented long sounds."

These sonic units began as his "language musics:" musical gestures such as long tones, trills, multiphonics and others to which he felt led as a player working in "physicality and moment dynamics" as means to his own personal voice and statements. Each unit functions as a "word," of sorts; the words are combined and sequenced (into his "geometric schemes," improvised or composed gestures in the given "language"), and each such sequence ends and transcends itself as one of twelve "identity states."

Heffley-5

Keeping with the language analogy, the identity states correspond to that elusive essence the "sign" "signifies," the meaning that emerges from the sonics as phonics and their interrelationships in the flow of musical time. Conceived as the one "moment" circumscribing that flow's infinity of moments, these states include "dreams" and "sound imagery," to name two that pertain most directly to the process of composing the operas.<sup>5</sup>

The *technology used here, then, is that of the acoustic musical instrument*—still and long Braxton's favored one, both as player and composer. Many others have used it in arguably more eloquent ways, but few in the same "speculative" way. Some have given us memorable characters—Hawk, Bird, Trane, Machine Gun—but these are more characters in a tale already underway, however major, than this particular kind of tale itself. Pythagoras, the ancient Chinese *literati qin* players, John Cage, Harry Partch, Karlheinz Stockhausen would the more apt comparisons—those who have spawned and spun philosophy, system, mythoi, cosmology from such instruments. The alto saxophone has been Braxton's stylus, his draftsman's compass. Even when he has used it as a virtuoso improviser, the drafts of *that* text are subsumed in his larger opus as composer-cum-system-builder.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See Heffley (1996: 233) for a look at Braxton's own chart of his system.

<sup>6</sup> Again, Rosenboom (203-32) on his "propositional music" is a good muse on this use of all music technology. In the same volume (Zorn 2000: 145-52), see David Shea's meditation on music-making as a philosophical speculum of the world beyond itself. See also Rob Young's "Slapping Pythagoras: The Battle for the Music of the Spheres," in Young (2002/2007: 71-78); Eric Porter on "Writing Creative Music: Theorizing the Art and Politics of Improvisation" (2002: 240-86); and Anthony Braxton's "Introduction to *Catalog of Works*" (in Cox and Warner 2006: 201-04). McLuhan, again (same source, 71), describes the acoustic sound space of music as "the mind's ear" of "pre-literate and post-literate humans alike" as homological to the visual "mind's eye" of Western literacy (Braxton's music is immediately post-literate, of his own design, as seen here). On the documentary DVD of his Ghost Trance Music performance (9 *Compositions (Iridium)* 2006, Firehouse Records FH-12-04-03-001), he professes his need for

Heffley-6

*Trope Two: the utopic world of T-CK (Tri-Centric Kickitabout), where all the men and boys are smart and nice, all the women and girls are likewise, and all really are trying the “good idea someone should try sometime” that Charlie Parker, among many others, defined as “civilization.”*

The technology here is the band itself: the *social technology of organizing the collective*, resulting in its internal dynamics and their effects on the rest of the world. This sociomusical technology has often been discussed as a speculum of the larger society. Deconstructing the hierarchical organization of Western ensembles from symphony orchestras to jazz bands, music collectives, especially since the 1960s, have forged and wielded their mission statements and profiles consciously to make statements about new social orders, values, and protocols.<sup>7</sup>

The character and structure of the groups Braxton assembles to play his own music have sprung directly from his way of *speaking* both to and about them, and of *writing* about his music. Both groups and music are designed to encourage a balance between individual freedom of expression, musical initiative and imagination, and responsibility to the group identity. That identity has evolved along with his music and language about it into something uniquely utopic. Whether checking into the “family” as an honored guest for a spell or working as one of its core of regulars, one becomes a “friendly experiencer” traveling the contours of the beneficent host’s

---

the “physicality” of the acoustic space and instrument, a clear step beyond the mental/visual one of his own language.

<sup>7</sup> See Braxton’s own rationale for constructing this civil utopia among his bandmates, a direct response to the darker aspects of anarchy and chaos shadowing the creative freedom and universalism he necessarily embraced in his early years as a “free” improviser (Cox and Warner, 249). Corroboratively, the editors wrote, “For many, the improvised musical performance serves to create—in the midst of existing hierarchical social relations—a *utopian space*, a genuinely democratic realm full of cooperation, coexistence, and intersubjective exchange” (251-52, my emphasis). See Fischlin and Heble (2004: 1-42) for a full-blown look at this connection in the context of the humanities discourse.

Heffley-7

compositional roadways and architectures, encouraged to relax, make oneself at home, and add to the unscripted parts of the fun and creative merriment. There are darker forces at work in the texts and sounds this crew and its captain articulate—as we will see, neither the experiences nor the experiencers of the libretti are always so friendly—but the affect of the band itself suggests a u- (as opposed to dys-) functional family: well behaved, courteous, noble, nimble, never discouraged or surly, always looking after each other, never self-exalting at each other's expense: civil society at its best, far beyond mere “professionalism.”

Braxton's most recent such group, the “12-tet” presenting his Ghost Trance Music (more on which ahead), has developed as his art's even keener speculum of its own mythical world, by his intentional peopling of it with six males and six females, “speculating” his opera's twelve characters. As he has given those fictional characters lives of their own to play out, as authors do with their characters, so too has he given up more and more of his functions as leader—conductor, orchestrator of musical events in performance—to these bandmates, leading to what he calls “multiple hierarchies.” His expressed desire to disengage from the Romantic convention of concertizing from a stage to a passive audience and to disperse into public crowds in outdoor public places is a further extension of this organizational *techné*.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> He talks about his 12-tet on the Iridium DVD. He's actually fulfilled the desire to escape the stage sporadically in various local experiences with students and others. See Pareles (2006) for a jolly account of a very public and rollicking Manhattan parade of one hundred tuba players playing his “Composition No. 19 for 100 Tubas.” At Wesleyan University, he could often be found joining in with, or drilling his own, marching bands on the playing fields. He took over the cavernous ice-skating rink to fill it with a hundred or so students and professionals playing in combinations shifting from small clusters to large groupings for a nine-hour marathon that cycled through numerous scores and improvisational strategies. Musicians and listeners wove and mingled together as the music took shape. Sun Ra (in Young, 112), famous for similar breakaways from the Romantic concertizing convention, said, “My musicians leaving the stage at the end symbolize leaving the planet alive, rather than dead.” Braxton also dreams (see DVD)

Heffley-8

*Trope Three: which portrays outer space not as a metaphor for blackness, or escape from or transcendence of physicality, or cerebrality, or oppression, or mundanity, but rather as the same as inner space, and as habitable and traversable as Earth's terrain without special spacesuits, spacecraft, or transporters (scientific technology).*

This narrative takes us into the *electronic technology of sound generation*—how it has been used iconically to evoke space travel and fantasies thereof, in both trans-European and trans-African (to use Braxton's descriptors) musics.<sup>9</sup> Braxton has worked with electronic musicians and instruments throughout his career, and many have read into the results such space analogies—but more striking to me is the absence of this theme in his most adventurously “literary” fancies, given his childhood fascination with rocket science, and the science-fiction affect of much of his work all along.

---

of shifting from the cumbersome technology of the written score to small mobile computer screens that would attach to players or their instruments somehow, freeing them up from the music stands and copious sheaves that have anchored (for better and worse?) his approach to creative music. The potential for a next more musical step—the alterations of sound, sequencing, and interactivity of all that material, once so stored—is a tantalizing thought.

<sup>9</sup> See Ken Hollings' “The Solar Myth Approach: The Live Space Ritual: Sun Ra, Stockhausen, P-Funk, Hawkwind” (Young 2002/2007: 99-113), for a pithy look at these seminal musicians' use of electronics in tandem with words to paint a space mythology; Kodwo Eshun's “Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality” (Cox and Warner, 157), on “Afrofuturism,” a linkage of black musicians and writers “for whom black identity is fundamentally connected with science fiction and electronic technology;” Paul Youngquist's “The Space Machine: Baraka and Science Fiction” (2003); and Toop's (1995: 114) look at Lee Perry and the recording studio as space craft. Toop's slant on such appropriations of studio technology outside the live-performance context (preeminently, Sun Ra's) is that it proved disappointing to its own agents in the long run, after initial excitement.



Heffley-9

I draw trope three from his conflation of human characters with cosmological “forces,” which of course are unconstrained by the usual mortality of the forms they take on (think of the *Star Trek* character Q, omnipresent/omniscient bedeviller of Captain Picard, rather than the flesh-and-blood latter, as the closer likeness of the opera’s characters). Braxton’s libretti are too archetypally unspecific to feel earthly real—they could be happening in another dimension, galaxy, or universe—yet they are also earthly and human enough to feel like the same characters another narrative might cast as ship-bound, suit-bound, technology-crutched space travelers or colonists.

I read several uniquely Braxtonian things into this twist on that tale. One recalls the AACM saying “feet firmly planted in midair.” As he has eschewed the notion of “free” as limited and reactive, he has also balked at using the space trope as a trump card standing for such freedom, or for ethnic identity, whether by working it as a metaphorical otherness, or as a liberation from or superiority to (the) ground and gravity (of inhumane social/political realities). A more Braxton-resonant image, from real space lore, is the post-moon-landing vision of the earth itself as a spaceship we’re all in together, for better or worse, rather than as something to escape from (including some of its people).

Braxton’s use of electronics has been to add their many more colors to the acoustic palette used to paint all his pictures—not to add the one silvering that will turn all those pictures into spacescapes.<sup>10</sup> If anything, they’ve injected something more like mysterious radio waves and noises coming in from space to add to the organic Brownian motion already going on down here (their mystery is that they could be meaningless space noise or communications from sentient life forms—or both). Once his scored and unscored events are set in motion, the space they suggest—with their multiplicities of lines, forms, and intervallic acrobatics—is more recursive, fractal, string-theoretically infolding into dimensions too small to detect, rather than out to wider

---

<sup>10</sup> I’m thinking of his work with synthesist and fellow composer Richard Teitelbaum over the years, and, most recently and seriously, his Diamond Curtain Wall trio with electric guitarist (with synthesizing pedals) Tom Crean and trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum (on *Trio (Glasgow) 2005* [Leo Records 2007, CD LR 487/488]).

wilds. With its *devas* who are also completely human characters, this narrative's monism counters every dualistic fancy of space as otherworldly. *This* world, inner and outer, *is* part of "space," we all *are* forces already inhabiting it naturally. No need to go anywhere, every need to be everywhere.

In *Shala*, no electronics were used, but some of the lower-tech devices did suggest one aspect of this Braxtonian space: the dance of chance:

- velcroed to the characters' limbs were styrofoam-tinfoil-hangerwire replicas of the three geometric symbols at the heart of Braxton's Tri-Metric/Centric system: the square (for fixed logics, such as notated music), the circle (for unprescribed, spontaneous musication),<sup>11</sup> and the triangle (for improvisatory alterations of fixed material). Again, these symbolize for him the forces of cosmic and universal processes incarnate in musical and human-cultural ones (besides being geometric fundamentals, of course, they have a rich history as symbols in a panoply of indigenous and occult religious systems and mythologies). The evocative effect, found also in his pictographic titles, is of invisible Platonic ideals (the abstract perfect shapes that don't exist in nature) and their contingent expressions in spacetime (people) walking around together in a visible connection;
- the characters, moving about the stage in the flow of the story, would suddenly strike poses—from Braxton's pictorial list of poses, to choose from at will—that seemed disjunct from all else, but had expressive associations of their own (such as Nazi salutes, or ballet gestures, or the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker*).

This homegrown *technology of play* broadens and maximizes the potential for those divinatory messages—surprising instances of unorchestrated synchronicity and order, epiphanous revelations and inspirations—that arise, along with more or less measures of random

---

<sup>11</sup> I use Rouget's (1985) term consciously here for its thick association with the history of trance and possession in music throughout the world and history, something Braxton's Ghost Trance Music has been influenced by. Rouget's transcultural, transhistorical scope is one I see in Braxton's own project as a composer. Here, musication can mean either improvising or composing, which Braxton does in much the same way, at least on the first pass (of composing).

Heffley-11

and mundane meanings, from such approaches, and are sought in indeterminacy by those attracted to them. The fun in giving all the characters a big box full of geometric symbols to grab and don, and lists of poses to strike at random, lies in the symbolism that emerges *of itself* when they do so. The fun in bringing to life a character called Ashmenton from the sound-induced trance that dreamed him up is to let him take over his own life, tell his own stories, not walk around the stage as a puppet-symbol of his creator's saxophone sound, strategy, or even vision (again, every good writer knows her characters have their own lives that she had better respect).<sup>12</sup>

*Trope Four: the really strange world where the sentience of Artificial Intelligence in all of its forms knows itself to be one and the same as that of biological life forms, as do the latter; there is never a question or doubt about that in either camp. The characters in this world may be complete androids, complete humans, or cyborg mixes of the two...and which they are is not at issue. The playing field is level, they are all in the same family, and their stories unfold without their essential differences being even a bump in the road.*

This takes us to the part of digital technology in music a step beyond the sound synthesis of trope three, into algorithmic sequencing and programming, and the potential for computers

---

<sup>12</sup> John Cage understood indeterminacy in music as a way of subverting the determiner; his own musical project saw human intention and narrative as intrusive, the issue of an ego that had to abdicate control over and even presence in the musical event, once conceiving and setting it in motion (a classic instance of Derrida's "death of the author," or "decentering of the subject"). Braxton both appreciated Cage's idea and thought it went too far (Carey 1984: 8-10). He developed his own music to include chance elements, but from the beginning he saw the connections between (per Lewis [1996], who has examined this distinction thoroughly) the Afrological tradition and Cage's and others' introduction of aleatorism to Western art music (Ochiogrosso 1976: 49). That meant a tradition in which *engagement* with the universe and its "divine influences" (per Cage), *participation* in rather than control over or (reactively to control) passive abdication to it was developed. See Cage on this in Cox (221-25).

Heffley-12

“smart” enough to compose, improvise, and interact with humans doing so (again, language insinuates: the “words” 1 and 0, and the sequences thereof). If Braxton’s system’s “sonic units” “speculate” electronic sound synthesis, his “geometric schemes” likewise reflect the digital sequencing and programming of those sounds. His “identity states” category signals, then, where he comes down on the question of sentience and soul emerging from Artificial Intelligence (AI) (he likes the idea). However, as with his use of electronic synthesis, his use of this technology remains on his own carbon-based footing, however firmly planted in midair its feet might seem.

Excerpts from Braxton's notes for a class on the history of AI at Wesleyan University convey the composer's thinking and feeling about this technology. He argued in a classroom debate for the proposition that “computers can think,” that “human perception is only one example of consciousness, and the study of AI should extend into trans-human states and goals,” and that “this viewpoint also extends to animal and plant consciousness as part of the greater consciousness existing on earth (including rocks and minerals).”<sup>13</sup>

That, of course, can be read as either magical or theological thinking. As the latter, it is the statement of an animist, or a pantheist. Thinking artistically, it also bespeaks any artist’s rapport with his medium. When a saxophonist pours so much of himself into this “inanimate” metal tubing with keys, it can fast become a “she,” a beloved companion, a physical design (like himself) with a mind and voice and moods and surprises of her own. Not only medium, but expression—the poem's lines, the novel's characters, the painting's images—goes, again, beyond the creator's self into an identity of its own.

---

<sup>13</sup> Class notes given by Braxton. See Frazer (1987: 139-40) for recent research suggesting that organic life may have original links to crystalline structures. I cite this to give body to the animist’s (and some modern physicists’) notion of not only animals and plants but minerals—the flesh of our computer technology—linked with humans on a continuum of consciousness. See Toop (2004: 218) on computer-manipulated sound poetry’s link to “the secret language of shamans.”

Computer technology, then, as homunculus, a simulacrum of its human maker that, however bereft of this or that crucial definitive trait thereof, commands the fear, respect, and affection of its maker for its mysterious suggestiveness of an equal consciousness, of which the maker is bereft. This model—surely the one favored by the *Star Trek* and later *Battlestar Galactica* scriptwriters, and the most literary science fiction writers tackling the issue (preeminently, Phillip K. Dick)—itself suggests why "strong" (objectivist) AI scientists such as Schank (1977) and Winograd (1986), and their counterparts in more general discourses (positivists, behaviorists, grand narrativists) and in music theory (the "total serialists," for one example) have come to seem inadequate in their overadequacy: the best systems and uses of musical-notation-cum-programming are those which spell out only so much information, leaving most to be filled in by their user.

How is all this applied to musical discourse, and to the larger cultural discourse music "speculates?" Braxton hints at his answer in another part of his class notes when he expresses his dissatisfaction with most computer music:

With the exception of a handful of composers (notably Karlheinz Stockhausen and the American composer George Lewis) I have not been very impressed with computer music—and *this is especially true for the interactive computer experimental musics*. For my musical taste, much of this music was either too mechanical or too predictable (my emphasis).<sup>14</sup>

Having had some knowledge of the specifics of his likes and dislikes, I read "mechanical" to mean overdetermined (inflation of human agency) and "predictable," paradoxically, underdetermined (deflation of human agency, such as when the rhythmic and sonic vagaries of some natural process or mathematical premise are harnessed as music, with little or no human engagement other than conception and initiation of that which plays itself out). Both of these extremes correspond to Western theological positions—Calvinism (specifically, the doctrine of predestination, God's foreknowledge of the future, thus the absence of human free will) and

---

<sup>14</sup> Stockhausen (in Cox and Warner, 370-80) and Lewis (2000) share an interest in joining the separate realms of acoustic and electronic/programmed music.

Heffley-14

Deism (the doctrine of the "watchmaker God," who creates then withdraws from the creation to let it play out its own life), respectively—that played major roles on the early American stage, yet have become historical cul-de-sacs over time, largely through challenges posed by the African-American (and Native-American, but that is another story) presence here. Paganism, animism, and what we might call "humanism" provided the rationales and impulses that provoked the mystical, occult, Millennialist and Pentecostalist turns in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Euro-American culture—in other words, those aspects of the Judeo-Christian mythos and tradition that stress the union rather than separation of spirit and matter, of heaven and earth—diverting it from those Enlightenment theologies (if we grant Calvinism as reactive against the Enlightenment) that were still essentially Platonic in their spirit-matter split.

In any case, as with the space trope, the use of robots as metaphors for subaltern or threatening others is eschewed; the drama of Commander Data as Pinocchio, or the Cylons as complex Frankenstein monsters is not indulged. At the same time, Braxton also hasn't pursued the kind of friendly co-creative partnership Lewis and others have with that technology. His use of both synthesizer and sequencer has been more Borg-like—picking up this or that sound/instrument/player as interesting additions to his existing sound cosmos/cosmology. The recording studio itself has been a tool to "speculate" his own live performances, not an instrument in its own right.<sup>15</sup>

The closest *Shala* came to anything like creative sequencing (again, not computer driven) was the act of writing each act independently, then ordering the results intentionally, an aesthetic

---

<sup>15</sup> Commander Data is *Star Trek's* token android, yearning to be human; the Borg collective comprises biological entities conditioned to go the way opposite Data's. *Battlestar Galactica's* Cylons are technology run infinitely farther than amok. "The machine must be live and intelligent," says Lee Perry of the recording studio (Toop 1995: 113), much like Glenn Gould (Cox and Warner, 113). Braxton cares only that the studio capture, not commandeer, his own live intelligence (and has exploited its technology doggedly to that end as it has evolved its greater accessibility to both approaches).

Heffley-15

decision signaled by the title given the opera (another literary comparison: author William Burroughs' process of writing by cutting up blocks of prose and recombining the pieces to form a new whole).<sup>16</sup> However, although the operas are sequential through their scores, another aspect of Braxton's music, from his early coordinate and collage musics up to the technique's culmination in his recent Ghost Trance Music series, is the juxtapositioning of such sequences.

This strategy is his biological version of AI's layerings of simplicities unto complexities not limited by either animacy's agendas or inanimacy's designs. Past musical statements are enfolded into present ones, recasting them as musical DNA, showing the present as extending teleologically back to its own evolutionary precursors. The identity state emerging from *that* trans-temporal "metageometric scheming" (my terms) might be likened to the latest iteration of android that looks more human than its earlier models (like *Battlestar Galactica's* humanoid Cylons who "evolved" from the more obviously mechanical "toasters").

*Trope Five: about the man who invented a time machine that took him back to a Native American Ghost Dance ceremony for its first run, then to any and all other such ancestors...only to discover that it was no machine but time itself, and he had invented nothing, and was in fact hurtling faster than light into the future, not the past...*

The Ghost Trance Music (GTM) series of compositions was inspired by Braxton's interest in another Wesleyan class, on Native American music, and in the history of the Ghost Dance phenomenon at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Indian wars, when the decimated tribes rallied around a pan-tribal movement to resurrect the old ways that were dying out. Textually, GTM is a gesture from the artist who had processed the post-Civil Rights Movement black-white drama in America all the way back to ancient Greece and Egypt (in *Tri-Axium Writings*) and was moving into a similar syncretism with a tribal culture that still lived, indigenously but now more marginally to the culture than African and European descendants in America. Musically, it

---

<sup>16</sup> See Burroughs (in Cox and Warner 2006: 334-40) for his rationale of cut-ups as a way to break the Foucauldian lock of language as social control. See also Burroughs (in Odier, 1974): "John Cage and Earle Brown have carried the cut-up method much further in music than I have in writing."

Heffley-16

stands as another gesture of musical time by an artist discussed by his peers as an innovator in that area.<sup>17</sup>

Using the device of a steady quarter note rhythm peppered with accents and accentuating phrases, Braxton developed overlays of complex tuplet figures and other musical gestures to ride and eventually supersede the steady beat. It was a radical turn to the temporal fundament in a seasoned composer who had been working in complex meters, “pulse tracks,” or no metered pulse (his “active existential rhythm”) through most of his career. It was an embrace of the tradition of trance music, influenced by Persian as well as Native American tradition.<sup>18</sup>

*Shala* was staged before this breakthrough, and its rhythm was shaped by language, as a kind of “text painting.” “The story comes first,” Braxton told me of his way of making the opera. (Since the music is conceived as a text painting, the human/word is restored to primacy, via an interdependence with, rather than dominance over, the rest of the world. It is thereby redeemed from both modernism's undue primacy, and postmodernism's reactively iconoclastic [decentering, deconstructive] overthrow, of authorship/humanity/language [ego, reason, thought, logic]. Humanity/language is reinstalled as *both* determined/determinant *and* not, redeemed from the either/or snare.)

After writing his own libretto on the word processor, he broke it down syllabically into one long penciled line at the tops of blank sheets of 11 x 17 paper set in the horizontal “landscape” rather than the vertical “portrait” position. Underneath that line of text he would write rhythms derived from the cadence and accents of the words, in the form of conventional notes free of staff or meter; these may have risen and fallen to suggest the pitches suggested by the inflected

---

<sup>17</sup> See Heffley (1996: 451) for a Braxton’s profile as musical time innovator. See Griffiths (2006) for a downright Proustian look at how Western music has conveyed the experience of time throughout its history. I am only one of many who have played Braxton’s music in his groups who have marveled over the way the experience can drastically slow or speed up the usual clock time sense.

<sup>18</sup> See the *Iridium* DVD for his account.



Heffley-17

speech, but mostly details of pitch were worked out after the rhythms. From those rhythms, he would rough out the flow of meters suggested by the spoken phrases; he might then add counter-rhythms that would occur to him at that point to assign to particular instruments. Often the process of beginning to derive music so from speech turned around and influenced him to write more words, or to change them slightly for delivery and/or meaning.

Pitches, while mostly as fixed (except for improvisational spots) in the orchestral parts as in the vocal parts, are not as strictly enforced. That is—not in this opera's orchestra, but in many similarly pantonal scores—Braxton does not always determine the clef or even provide a staff for a given part, and he tells players to put the pitch wherever they feel it on their instrument and in the group, adhering strictly only to the rhythm. The practical result is usually something intervallically close to what is written anyway, just by virtue of how the players do hear and interact with each other and the material—which reflects Braxton's usual indifference to exactness of pitch, favoring instead the rhythmic, inflective, intervallic and textural-timbral effects often served best by suggesting rather than fixing pitch.

Thus, even in a project such as *Shala*, in which the players (most of whom were also his regulars in his other projects) *were* provided with definite clefs and pitches, the composer himself did not put the soul of his meaning into their matrices, did not work them in rehearsal with a microscope to make sure each one was executed with a certain nuance, or an imposed or cajoled expressivity. Even the notes of the most pitch-specified parts—the singers'—all come with the "x" on their stems that denotes *Sprechstimme* ("speech voice," that half-singing, half-speaking style Schönberg used for his work).

This outline moved to score paper and, in that draft, to greater definition. Orchestration was determined, sections and instruments were worked for color, timbre, volume, texture; the pitches of the vocal line suggested their lines and harmonies.

*Trope six: about the invisible man who spent his whole life in the public eye, growing more famous for better reason every day, and finally died old and happy, never having been seen.*

Invisibility in both H.G. Wells and Ralph Ellison is not a happy state. Youthful fantasies of it are those of freedom, but exile and cloaking rather than solution of problems is the reality of their characters. Braxton's "treatment" of the theme stems from his public persona as an artist

Heffley-18

defying easy categorization, and one who has often spoken of himself and been spoken of as unseen, in exile, doing what he does off of several different radar screens. In this, of course, he is in the company of all those other men and women “not seen” in their time, from Van Gogh to Herman Melville to Charles Ives, to name a few who easily spring to mind (whether he fits in such company or not is for later generations to decide). However, many of his own choices and ways of working align him with the happier invisibility of the anonymous bards, minstrels, artisans in other times and places who have done their work for God and people more than fame or fortune. Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight.

In *Shala*, each of the characters—whose vocal parts were entirely notated, with no improvisatory sections—was accompanied throughout the drama by an associative solo instrumentalist. These were all dressed in hooded black robes, without personal identity or visible gender or race, and they did both improvise and play scored lines. They came across as invisible (in the world of the characters) shadow figures from the spirit world, influencing and being influenced by “their” people. All virtuoso improvisers, they provided some of the most striking and exciting musical moments of the entire production.

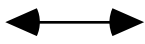
The composer, usually as visible as his bandmates or the ensembles he conducts, was hidden from sight with the rest of the orchestra in the pit, in fine Wagnerian tradition.

### *The Score*

What I mean to show with the following examples is what we might call Braxton's “trialectic” here between orchestra, soloist, and singer, something suggesting call-and-response between collective (scripted orchestra), “invisible” soloist (unscripted improviser), and (scripted) individual character. The vocal line stands as a clear point of definition, unfolding at roughly twice the rhythmic pace of the orchestra; the solo instrumentalist signifies closely on, shadows the vocal line, as well as reads, sometimes, complementary written figures spun from it; and the orchestral lines comprise a ground, chorus-like, that, as we have seen, was unearthed through that sung line's point of definition—much like Schenker unearthed his *Urlinie* from the surface elaborations on it that he saw in post-Baroque European works.

Heffley-19

(This is also very much in line with Braxton's approach to composition through the single-line alto saxophone: a surface is immediately intuited, then depths it may imply are more deliberately intuited through it—the reverse of a pianistic, theme-and-variations composer who establishes a foundation in harmonic-metric matrices and melodic flows, then elaborates on them for surfaces more arbitrary than they. Braxton's depths [in the orchestra] are rather the more arbitrary, in expressing potential implied by, and less definitive than, its actualization in the singers and soloists [the orchestral role could as well have been played through other notes; in this it is also reversing Schenker's emphasis]).



6

Flute 1 *mf*

Flute 2 *mf*

Flute 3 *mf*

Oboe *mf*

Eng. Horn *mf*

Clarinet *mf*

Bass Clarinet *mf*

Bassoon *mf*

Fr. Horn *mf*

Trumpet *mf*

Trombone *mf*

Bass Trombone *mf*

Tuba *mf*

Harp *mf*

Perc. 1 *mf*

Perc. 2 *mf*

Violin 1a *mf*

Violin 1b *mf*

Violin 2a *mf*

Violin 2b *mf*

Viola *mf*

Cello *mf*

Str. Bass *mf*



K(o)

Example 1

*Example 1 (mm. 1232-33)*

Example 1 (259c)<sup>19</sup> shows the full orchestra ending its opening eleven bars of long tones morphing through increasing shifts of pitch, duration (of from seven to one beats), and volume (*pp* to *mf*). (This shapeshifting roil moves through moments defined by conventional meter—everything from 2/4 to 6/4—moments we will later see tailoring the lengths of the sung phrases.) The double-arrow signals a grand pause, and a player picked from the orchestra during rehearsals takes the part signaled by the oval, of free improvisation. The K(o) means one should play something moderately (K) opposed (o) to what the orchestra is doing, so this will likely be a lively, bright articulation in contrast to the amorphous sound painting; the strings make four short statements, two with tremolos, during this improvisation.

The effect of the whole event is of a spark igniting out of some ruminant mass, illuminating that mass in turn. Braxton the conductor cues the entrances and exits of such improvisations and written accompaniments (and the improvisations, scored so, are virtually always conceived as *part* of the flow and texture of the score, more than some showcase of virtuosity riding wildly above it). The orchestra resumes its ruminations.

Throughout these moments the curtain has risen onto the scene with Ashmenton, his wife Ntzockie, and their son David relaxing convivially around a humble kitchen table, finishing a meal. Ashmenton is the first to speak. Example 2.a (261) shows his second phrase. Braxton makes much use of duplet figures, from divisions of three (as at the start of this passage) up to seven, to get the phrases to float above the pulse and meters; he conducts the beat very clearly throughout to anchor such floats.

---

<sup>19</sup>. Page numbers are from Braxton's original unpublished score.

The musical score for Example 2a (mm. 1263-65) features six parts: Ashmenton, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Violin 1a, and Violin 1b. The vocal line is written in 2/4 time and includes the lyrics "I can't be - lieve how quick - ly the time has past". The vocal line is marked with dynamics *mp*, *f*, and *mp*, and has accents over the words "lieve", "quick", and "past". The instrumental parts include triplets and dynamic markings: Clarinet and Bass Clarinet are marked *mp*, Violin 1a is marked *pp*, and Violin 1b is marked *pp*.

*Example 2a (mm. 1263-65)*

Example 2.a shows six orchestra parts that echo the vocal line (the rest of the orchestra continues to play too, but these are selected for those echoes): the clarinets echo the word "believe" and the violins, more loosely, reflect "the time has past." This is the score's first example of such links, and they increasingly occur throughout. Example 2.b, some pages later (280), shows them in more developed form: the winds and harp effect a condensed presentiment of the words (in 3/4) "I will call you" with their triplet and following note; the strings and brass, conversely, expand the rhythm in their various sets of three, imaging "things settling." Example

Heffley-23

2.c (309) exemplifies an orchestral gesture mirroring the idea (of the boy's quickness) expressed, rather than the expression itself.

The musical score is for Example 2b, measures 1351-53. It is in 3/4 time, marked with a first ending bracket. The vocal line for David begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics "I will call you as soon as things set-tle". The accompaniment includes Piccolo, Flute, Alto flute, Oboe, Eng. Horn, Fr. Horn, Trumpet, Trombone, B. Trom./Tuba, and Harp. The Harp part is written in two staves. Dynamics include *mf*, *ff*, and *mp*. There are several triplet markings (3) and a quintuplet (5) in the David part.

David

1  $\frac{3}{4}$

I will call you as soon as things set-tle

Piccolo

Flute

Alto flute

Oboe

Eng. Horn

Fr. Horn

Trumpet

Trombone

B. Trom./Tuba

Harp

Example 2b (mm. 1351-53)





Heffley-26

A musical score for Heffley-26. The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves: Ashmenton (bass clef), Flute 1 (treble clef), Flute 2 (treble clef), and Flute 3 (treble clef). The Ashmenton part begins with a 3/4 time signature and contains a melodic line with a five-measure phrase and a three-measure phrase. The lyrics "he has his ways but the boy is quick" are written below the Flute parts. The Flute parts are marked with *mp* (mezzo-piano). The Flute 3 part has a *mp* marking at the beginning. The Flute 1 and 2 parts have a *mp* marking above the first measure. The Flute 3 part has a *mp* marking below the first measure. The Flute 1 and 2 parts have a *mp* marking above the first measure. The Flute 3 part has a *mp* marking below the first measure. The Flute 1 and 2 parts have a *mp* marking above the first measure. The Flute 3 part has a *mp* marking below the first measure.

Heffley-27

*Example 2c (mm. 1483-85)*

3/4

1

What are we go - ing to do, Pa?

*mp*

Piccolo

Flute

Oboe

Eng. Horn

Clarinet

Bassoon

Harp

Perc.

Violin 1a

Violin 1b

Violin 2a

Violin 2b

Viola

Cello

Str. Bass

*p*

*Example 3a (mm. 1363-64)*

Sometimes the transparencies of musical stillness and silence are preferred over imitative motion to enhance the emotional charge of the words. In Example 3.a (282), the orchestra frames the seven syllables of the first phrase with one note, thus foregrounding its “identity state” as a phrase, a unified thought, more than the musicality of its syllabic-inflective flux. It distinguishes that phrase poignantly from the single-syllable second one, “pa?” by changing notes, then resting. Example 3.b (315) is another particularly elegant (through the harp) such application, to a particularly powerful statement.

We have, then, two uses of musical rhythm that serve to showcase two different aspects of speech: its *flow* (where its reliability as expression gives way to its phenomenology as timebound acoustic flux, “mere” music more than “sheer” logic) and its *moment* (where its transcendence of its unreliable flow and flux stands forth in a timeless [and also musical] meaning greater than the linguistic sign pointing to it [again, per Braxton’s “identity state”]).

The musical score is for Heffley-30 and consists of the following parts:

- Ntzoockie:** The lead vocal part, starting in 3/4 time and changing to 4/4 time. It features complex rhythmic patterns with triplets and sixteenth-note runs. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 3, 5, 6, and 5.
- Flute 1, Flute 2, Flute 3, and Oboe:** These instruments play a melodic line that begins with a triplet of eighth notes and continues with a sustained note.
- Eng. Horn, Clarinet, Bass Clar., and Bassoon:** These instruments play a similar melodic line, starting with a triplet of eighth notes and a sustained note.
- Harp:** The harp part is indicated by a brace on the left and contains several rests throughout the piece.

The lyrics for the Ntzoockie part are: "some-how he be came strong e nough to wea-ther the mis-doc-u-men-ta-tion that sur-rounds our peo-ple".



Ashmenton

the con-cept of at-tract-ion in this con-text can helpclar-i-fy what fund-a-ment-als real-ly are

Woodwinds

*mp*

Brass

Harp

Perc.

Strings



*Example 4 (mm. 1410-12)*

Example 4 (293) exemplifies another kind of line for which such emphasis seems to be inordinately favored: "the concept of attraction in this context can help clarify what fundamentals really are" is so much the kind of Braxtonian phrase that has been represented by journalists and critics as so abstruse—and, conversely, functions for Braxton himself so like a clarifier—that I can't help but read into the spare wisps of accompaniment a clearing of the air for the speaker and his audience, and into the choice of two-beat patterns of movement a move to stress the words "context" and "concept." The ability of music to foreground this or that aspect of speech is manipulated here to bring into selected focus a meaningfulness that might otherwise be obscured or abstracted by the naked words and their tangle.

Example 4 opens up other areas of interest. First, we now see Ashmenton's "shadow" soloist. The diamond clef sign signals the player's option of any (or no) clef; the symbol in the 2/4 bar signals only an improvisation (not range or duration or anything else, despite its suggestiveness) that accompanies the speaker's next two pensive lines. The effect: Ashmenton wanders into the heart of something with his abstract generalization; that evokes a sudden thrashing of the implications of his statement's potential by the soloist, which in turn provokes Ashmenton to clarify what he means specifically in the next two lines; those lines and the soloist's improvisation comprise a duet that fleets through a few bars as such things (vague realizations, little bolts from the blue, cogitative thoughts) do come and go through life's moments.

Improvisational and written-out sections occur in roughly equal measure in the soloist parts throughout; unlike the singers' notes, naturally enough, those of the soloists have no *Sprechstimme* indications. An ear trained by only a couple of rehearsals, or even by the performance on the first half-hour of its unfolding, can instantly discern between their improvisations and their renderings of notation. The latter provide definition from a realm—thought, spirit—where it is most often either obscured (by too much merely suggestive dimness, as in the orchestra) or overwhelmed (by too much brilliant declamation, as in free improvisations), to the realm of human life (that of the singers), where it is always uncertain.

Note also the meter flow. Framing the duple rhythm in the four key words—CON-cept, CON-text, (at-)TRACT-ion, CLAR-(i)fy—are, satisfyingly, two 4/4 bars (both limned and offset

Heffley-34

by the orchestra); the 3/4 frame of the phrase's wrap-up serves to blossom its climax; finally, the 2/4 serves as both ending pause and transitional pickup to the next phrase (each of the three phrases unfolds in similar configurations of four, three, and two). Other parts of the score have condensed versions of this pattern of fluxing meters tagged by the shortest one—sometimes as short as 3/8 or even 1/8, after phrase-based meters that may themselves go down to 1/4. The effect is of a flexible iambic musicality throughout; pulses come and go through variously sequenced ups and downs, longs and shorts, strongs and weaks, rather than through well-defined channels of repetitive rhythmic bedrock.

This approach to pulse has been long and carefully cultivated in Braxton's work, and it clearly evokes the tradition of the lone *jali* singer-player-storyteller much more keenly than that of the master drummer who has developed his own soloisms through learning the interacting parts in an ensemble—reflected in the jazz drum kit—which he then internalizes and signifies on.<sup>20</sup> It also reflects the more flexible-but-taut rhythmic universe of Indian Carnatic music, itself intimately bound up with speech acts both mnemonic and poetic. It also, again, stems from Braxton's composerly orientation to the nature and role of his single-line instrument, the alto saxophone generator of the “language musics.”

These musical examples adequately convey the core of Braxton's approach as a composer working from, with, and against language. Consider now his libretto, that “story that comes first” from which such music derives.

### *The Libretto*

In this same Act Two, Ashmenton and Ntsockie are seeing their only son David off into the world to start his life as an adult. He may be going on his first trip away from home, to college, or even to war, it is unspecified. He appears only during the first few lines of the scene, which is sung mostly by his parents as proud, brave, morale-building encouragement. The boy affectionately deflects their fusses with the mix of humility and fearlessness of a good (and

---

<sup>20</sup> Although, as Floyd has noted (1995: 28), the drum ensembles themselves have a strong link to oral poetry.

untested) youth, says little else for himself, then leaves. The talk of the parents then turns cloudier.

The interesting thing about the casting of these two is that it was not scripted as a statement about race, but it just so happened that baritone Melton Sawyer, playing Ashmenton, was African American and the rest of the family white. The libretto itself decidedly *was* conceived (and written by Braxton) with overt social and political points—both the depiction of the characters and the actual lines they sing (examples forthcoming) do carry clear positions—but the racial identities were not a factor in either conceiving the characters or casting their singers.<sup>21</sup>

However, the pairing of an African-American man with a European-American woman and son, in this particular scene, obviously worked on a mythopoetic level as an all-white or all-black cast would not have. It could be read as easily as they as "humanity" more than "race," but it could also invoke American racial problems and solutions beyond the pale or ken of the homogeneous. The way it did do that for me lay in my knowledge of the way Braxton's casting unfolded, but it is a way I think I might have divined as an uninformed audience member from the sheer feel of the music, libretto, and other aspects of the production. Somehow, knowing the uncoerced universe is telling you something is more compelling and engaging than feeling you are watching a person grind an axe; it is even more so—this may sound cold—than feeling you are watching a person reveal, in all sincerity, dignity, and honesty, his or her most cherished inner truths or wounds. Of course, all three together—universe, axe, bared soul—make for the best combination.

For the rest of the scene, the couple expresses a mixture of their worst fears—the inability to help David for want of power and money in a corrupt, corrupting society—and their fondest memories of love and family life, their hope and trust in a good outcome despite the odds. Their intermittent declarations of love for each other move through this act as its unifier, the light

---

<sup>21</sup>. See Sandow (1997) for a glimpse of a very different approach to such casting at the time.

Exploring the issue of racism in the New York opera community, he writes of African-American tenor Vinson Cole, “who said two opera companies had ‘told my management that they couldn’t hire a black singer with a [white] female partner. It hurts.’”

Heffley-36

guiding them through the darkness of an evil society where good can yet survive "in the cracks" healthily enough. After airing these deepest fears, loves, and hopes, they call it a day and go to bed contented and fulfilled.

This act works as a ray of goodness against the portrayals of evil that define the other three acts. In Act One, Ashmenton is the head of a venal board of directors planning the ruin of the general economic and social good for its members' personal gain, and Ntsockie and David are among his most eager minions; in Acts Three and Four (sans Ntsockie) they are key players in, respectively, a mob-hysterical attack on innocent scapegoats (contaminated/contagious "others"), and in something more like a war room than a board room, a powerful cult's initiation of an initially-naive and later-cynical aspirant into their deepest, most esoteric evil.

Through all four acts, good and evil unfold through a certain pattern: the voices for good always end in succumbing to the greater number for evil—if they are alone. Shala's is the *one* voice for good in both the first and last acts, but both times she must confront a *collective* constituting evil, and both times her individual integrity fails. On the other hand, in the two middle acts, the love of a man and woman together, while not changing the threatening evil collective, keeps the lovers safe from it even in its midst. (Act Three portrays [different] lovers even more vulnerable and threatened than Act Two's, and craftier and bolder in response.)

Ntsockie, as Ashmenton's wife in Act Two, utters the most pointed social and cultural critiques, in lines more typically expected from male characters. Here, Ashmenton, between the two, expresses his thoughts about general sociocultural issues in terms of his domestic situation and roles (provider, husband, father); Ntsockie too speaks in her own such terms, but then breaks into a less personal, more public voice in lines such as

the reality of attraction in this context involved gaining correct information about the historical complexities of our situation and balancing that knowledge with present-day political decisions (317).

As she articulates those complexities and decisions from the high ground and climax of this scene for a good five or ten minutes, she breaks off sporadically to exchange declarations of love with Ashmenton. The man here is the earth, the home front, the woman his tree of life in her proper soil; *he* supports *her*, *she* reaches for the sky in the larger world to sing *their* best song.

When she subsides from her inspiration, his gravity wells up to receive her in the way convention would have us expect the woman to welcome the man home from his hunt.

Again, all this would carry a powerful charge as a racially homogeneous scene. The devotion of the man bespeaks qualities of manhood that counter the prevailing images (in both the opera and, by implication, the real world) of violence, misogyny, lust for power and dominance. Whatever his “race,” this man would say much to us as people and Americans. Similarly, the clear ability of the woman to cultivate a self-actualization that liberates not only her womanliness but the humanity of her collective—indeed, the former depends on the latter for its liberation—to speak as intellectual and activist, *in the context* rather than in defiance of her family ties, also says much and counters much (both images, by the way, are themselves deeply rooted and cultivated in Braxton's own publicly expressed feminist concerns and academic agendas over the years).<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, staying with this emphasis, this scene would have much to say to us too if the casting were *specified* as interracial, and gendered to the racial identities either of the two possible ways—but what it would then have in common with the homogeneously casted versions would be its feel as a script, something someone intended to tell us, something someone crafted carefully to make points he wishes us to take.

Consider what it instead says to us when we know, or intuit, that it is not prescribed nor intended so, but is the result of an aesthetic approach that values indeterminacy as something more rather than less authorially powerful and orderly, sometimes, than prescription. In this instance, it is like the difference between seeing two people who have come together for reasons they know well and moralize about—the conventional sanctity of marriage, or a statement about interracial marriage in America, something conceived and embraced by an idealist, a moralist, a

---

<sup>22</sup>. Braxton's many feminist statements in interviews and his own writings figure crucially throughout my book on him; and one of his regular courses, first at Mills College and more recently at Wesleyan, is a history of women in Western, American and African American music. Most recently, on the *Iridium* DVD he expresses the hope to see and work with more women in the creative music field.

person of principle—as opposed to two people who have rather simply fallen in love, in mystery, are compelled to make it work whatever the odds because . . . well, just because, they are that they are, they can do no other. In other words, the difference between the word of hypocrisy and the word of truth.

When we rule chance out of the aesthetic approach, we can suspend our disbelief; we can let the artist intend and shape these characters and their issues for us, assess them on the basis of their conditional believability. But once we acknowledge divinatory, revelatory results in the chance approach at all, we see that this is their nature, this similarity to life as it is, to the blossoming of any and all things out of unmanipulated potential. How, after that, can we go "back to the farm" of art bereft, or comparatively starved of it?<sup>23</sup>

Applying this acceptance to this scene, we find that it de-problematizes nuances such as, for example, the image of an African-American man taking on the supporting, nurturing role in his relationship with the European-American woman—an image problematic indeed when seen as metonymic of black manhood and white womanhood, or black culture and white culture in America. If the casting were prescribed, a conscientious critic would have to question the thought and sensitivity in the prescription. Since it is not, what can one say? The same thing one might say to such a couple in real life. What critic could himself be so thoughtless and insensitive as to challenge such a couple (or their gender-reversed counterparts, equally "problematic") on such grounds?

In fact, this question segues nicely into our concluding look at Braxton's role and persona in the arenas of music and culture.

### *Words of Power, Powerless Words*

The theorist in me turns naturally to the composer's own words about the Trillium operas:

---

<sup>23</sup>. As Braxton himself has said in print, "Given structures will make certain things happen. That's what structure is. It doesn't have anything to do with me telling somebody what to feel" (Lock, 231). Structure in this discussion includes the elements and effects of chance. Earle Brown also speaks eloquently to this fact of the unforeseen in both life and music (Cox, 193).

Trillium is conceived as a vehicle for family and cultural fundamentals/involvement as a consistent component in African/trans-African vibrational dynamics, as well as corresponding to the greater implications of the trans-European and Asian vibrational dynamics. Trillium is conceived as a world culture statement that respects composite humanity and the 'realness' of apparent existence.<sup>24</sup>

I will look down the European side to consider Braxton's work as a literary construct, and to worry through the issue of "the death of the author." I will look down the African-American side to see his music as a work of "orature" complicating, contesting, reconstructing the European fundamentals. Finally, I will look down the Asian side (including India) for theoretical frames that will account for both the plenum and the void of language that, along with the question of the nature of authorship, go far toward explaining Braxton's work as more the world's than America's (barring future very possible transformations of same, given our ever-increasingly pluralist demographics, and sheer time).

Some years back, one of my many previous studies of Braxton's music was critiqued by an anonymous peer reviewer for a journal I submitted it to. He dismissed my subject as undeserving of the attention I was paying it, because "Braxton is talking to no one but himself."

This remark struck me immediately as if someone had just read the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare and then said, "Is this guy in love with his own voice or what?" However, it stuck in my mind, and coalesced into a more general muse on words and how they are received. That muse took me over the well-trod terrain of postmodernist scholarship's wranglings over language, both spoken and written.

Beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure's analysis of language's *structure*, through the morphing of his "structuralism" into everything cultural from kinship systems and morés to cosmologies and art forms and events, the Word (per the first chapter of the Book of Genesis and the first lines of the Gospel of John as much as per Foucault) has become the Author of All, including Itself, as all has become "text." This Western intellectual history has permeated music scholarship as much as it has any academic discourse. Its potent charge has two distinct

---

<sup>24</sup> *Trillium R* CD liner notes.

resonances with traditions both oral (African-American, in Braxton's case) and literate—both equally central to Braxton's heritage and work.

In the oral universe, the spoken word has a life of its own; once such a “speech act” is “performed,” its intents and effects are not easily reversed (think of the power of blessings and curses throughout much of the traditional world, the still-vital tradition of oaths and vows in modern public ceremonies, or the life-or-death obsession with accuracy and faithful rendering in some African oral history and storytelling traditions). In the literate universe, laws and contracts, scriptures and scientific treatises constitute the very foundation of knowledge and social structures. Once “graven in stone,” as it were, you can only hope they favor you...or that you have some engravers and stones of your own.<sup>25</sup>

Conversely, language—again, both spoken and written--has also been impugned as a house of mirrors, rooted in nothing but itself in the end. Most famously among other French poststructuralist philosophers, Jacques Derrida's "death of the author" and "deconstruction" of text have reigned as the intellectual coin of the realm in the academy's recent decades; Jean Baudrillard's implosion of slippery signs into a self-referential hyperreality added insult to the injury of language's integrity. Laws are called “made to be broken,” contracts “just a piece of paper,” a man “only as good as his word.”<sup>26</sup>

Braxton's personal relationship with language—one as publicly documented as that of abovementioned discourse—reflects, as I read it, the same double edge of tryst and joust. His

---

<sup>25</sup> Pascal Boyer (2001: 273-96) writes incisively about the rise of civilizational literacy's standards over those of local-cultural orality: both realms deal in matters of the direst consequence regarding language and its social and personal significance, and both are destined to complement and clash by virtue of their different designs and functions. Braxton called words “the white man's biggest weapon” many years ago, and has accordingly shown his respect for it by wielding it back in his own force.

<sup>26</sup> See Anthony Coleman's “That Silence Thing” (in Zorn 2000: 136-39) for a musician's well-worded reservation about words.



words have been read by some with sheer bafflement, even scornful derision of them as pretentious obfuscation and solipsism; others, myself included, have engaged them with serious fascination and respect, probing them for all they might be saying.<sup>27</sup>

Fanning the focus out to African-American music and linguistic histories generally reveals the same double edge: a penchant for allusion, metaphor, dancing around—“signifyin’”—rather than directly stating a thing, on the one hand; and a rock-solid belief in the value and necessity of the personal voice and original statement as a musical and lingual gold standard, on the other—both in contrast to Western ideals of (often disastrously un-nuanced and one-sided) “truth” stated directly, and subjugation of the personal ego to one’s role in hierarchy (most pointedly here, the performer’s abdication to the composer, in music), respectively. As with Braxton’s personal experience, Eurological critics of “jazz” musicians have dismissed their improvisations of musical identity as some brand of derivative charlatanism—sometimes clownish, sometimes pseudo-intellectually pretentious—in their takes on everyone from Louis Armstrong to Ornette Coleman, all along the way, in the same arena as those who did receive them more sympathetically. In the end, it is enough to say that something either speaks for or to you or it doesn’t (or, as Braxton might say, it’s about “affinity dynamics”), to explain the variations on the reception spectra above.

Just as my analysis of his word-music dynamic was a thoughtful exposition in the same terms I might have applied to more conventional scores by literate composers, or to transcribed performances of improvisers, so was the material I analyzed. That is—as unique and original and brilliant as its conception and execution might have been—it was embedded in the Western discourse and conventions of staves and clefs and notated pitches and meters, of the jazz improviser, and of the concert composer and performer. A rationalist-*structuralist* discourse.

More specific to African-American culture, it revealed elements deemed essential to the music thereof by Floyd (1995): fundamentally, *strong bonds between speech and music* (12, 28, 32, 56, 141); *both informal and formal* in approach (27, 56, 145); high in expectations of both individual and collective, in cooperation rather than conflict (33); improvisatory, and inspired

---

<sup>27</sup> See Heffley (1996: 148).

Heffley-42

thereby (62, 141); antiphonally, timbrally-texturally, kinetically, and rhythmically conceived, and dense, its juxtaposition of compositions reflecting/extending the additive juxtapositions of rhythmic patterns of a West African drum ensemble (262); and mythically charged (274). Also specifically African American (while shared with other cultures) is the lack of understanding or respect, and instances of hostility, in critical reception, which Floyd alludes to in the context of other composers and improvisers (133, 135, 145, 229, 274—re: the “invisibility” trope). A *transrationalist-poststructuralist* description.

The *deva*-like African mythological character Esu resonates with trickster figures throughout the world. Its tradition as Hermes in the West includes the usual traits of sheer childish mischief, the outrageous and egregious pranks of the outcat—but it also includes the discipline of the scholar and seer. Hermes, like the Egyptian Thoth, governs arts and letters, draws the lines of borders (as well as crosses them freely), regulates and guides the concourse of a people. In what way do these seeming poles of constructive responsibility and disruptive irresponsibility converge? In the fact that people are resistant to change, even if it is an inevitable and desirable thing. It is experienced as an insult to the soul of what is immutably good, what tradition confirms, even when it is in fact the very engine of that tradition.

In all, Braxton’s use of language as a tool used in his work as composer resonates with the Schopenhauerian maxim to the effect that music expresses what words lack both power and precision to, not the other way around. In showing language’s power as creative agency not only of his music but of the whole theatrical production of his opera, he shows the nature of both its “trickery” and its real substance as sign: it evaporates in the moment of its meaning by invoking and evoking that which it means; in the same moment, it shows itself to signify a whole universe beyond such slippery signs, belying a prime truism of postmodern thought.

Invoking the West for structuralist and African America for poststructuralist theoretical closure to this meditation on language as both void and plenum seems a natural enough place to end it...but the song sung by a thousand tongues may need a few more eyes to theorize. Braxton himself has always professed a universalist goal for his music; his early years in Japan and Korea, and his recent decades at an academic world center of both experimental and world music have informed his work with their other tongues palpably and specifically all along the way.

Heffley-43

Moreover, the musical playing field of his purview itself is richly more multicultural today than when he first entered it. Not only is he not “talking only to himself” these days, but to many more potential hearers than ever, and from many more sources of musical *Weltanschauung* than the initial European/American modernist and African-American engagements therewith of his formative years.<sup>28</sup>

As Braxton’s music and musical field has done, my mind turns to the Indian, Asian, and indigenous shamanistic cosmos of North America for the insights that shine brightest for me. I have already likened the Trillium characters to Hindu *devas*; more broadly, his vision of “multiple hierarchies,” and of the composer “fading into his own parade” evokes comparisons of the new physics with Hinduism, in its monistic balance between the monotheistic One (Brahman) and the polytheistic Many (330,000,000 *devas*). Like the *devas* Vashni and Kali, Shala can be a benign character in one act and a malign one in another. The absolutist, monotheistic-hierarchical Western aspects of Braxton’s work are complicated by this comfort with supple multiplicity beyond either/or, beyond power-over, beyond fixed good/evil. Furthermore, Hindu mythology has it that human language is only a quarter of the language extant.

Similarly, this liberation of the plenum is grounded in the Buddhist reality of *ma*: the silence and void of *potentia* from which all *actu* springs. This ground itself is liberatory; it is demonstrated by what Indian-American pianist-composer Vijay Iyer has said about Bud Powell “teaching” him how to play certain challengingly active music: “When I hear Bud playing at these very fast tempos, there’s always this relaxation in it that I found I had to reach for in order

---

<sup>28</sup> Many of these have come into the same musical-discursive scene as Braxton and his peers emerged from and grew, as comrades and colleagues more than interlopers. The models and examples put forth by African-American collectives such as the AACM, both musically and socially, have inspired and included similar gestures from the Asian-American, including Indian-American communities. See Dessen (2000).

to really be at home inside of this composition that I had created, which was derived from the South Indian rhythmic concepts.”<sup>29</sup>

The eye of the hurricane: I’ve experienced it firsthand as a player in Braxton’s groups large and small. The more one quiets the mind, relaxes the body, the more naturally one can hear and play (and distinguish between) the most intense, complex, busy musics. Trumpeter Dave Douglas alluded to it in the liner notes for *9 Compositions (Iridium) 2006* (Firehouse 12 Records, 2007), discussing one of the live performances, “metered” by a big conspicuous hourglass at the front of the stage:

Time changes. It has been clear to me from the start of the piece that the hourglass held all the grains that we were going to hear, and as a result of knowing that I started to process the passing of time differently. In a way, through all the changes the music gave me a feeling of permanence. Of immediately knowing: We’re here. We have always been here, we always will. There is infinite variation. Music will continue. The timelessness of existing in this moment...To be honest, I saw that some of the less intrepid listeners were getting the same idea, but it was having a different effect on them.

As Douglas suggests, this ground of infinite void constantly birthing infinite plenum is clearly a major stumbling block on the road from talking the talk to walking the walk of universality. But there is another, even greater one. The elephant in the room is that Braxton’s language-cum-music has always reached for such stars, but has also always been a peculiarly *Braxtonian* techne. Composition 40B, played on a whim alongside Composition 358, laced with improvisations by the composer and his protégés...words such as “Trillium...is an attempt to better appreciate universal ‘balances’ and vibrational oppositions as well as the beauty and unbeauty (beauty) of existence and sound wonder”... this is the music/message we should receive as universal? Maybe it does have its charms, but what music could possibly function as universal anyway? What does it mean? Isn’t this what got “whiteness” into trouble—passing as universal?

---

<sup>29</sup> From unpublished interview. See Masaoka (in Zorn 2000: 153-66) for a meditation on *ma* and the African-American music that pertains here.

Heffley-45

Where does the very idea stop being a beautiful religious or mystical vision of utopia and start being cultish hubris and rubbish?

Go back further even from Indo-European polymorphs and hierarchies, further even than fecund Asian voids: the shamanistic *Urgrund* invoked by the Ghost Trance Music was no less present in all that came before it in Braxton's *oeuvre*. It takes us to a pre-civilizational place before All and Nothing became limiting poles, before their hierarchies hatched from them. The Western mind both black and white is Christianized to see I AM as grandiose, thus either dismissed or deified. Daoism, shamanism are the contexts that counter that. Gods, people, forces, forests, trees...the lines between them all are not so clear; they too are monistic, not dualistic. Their widest balance between everything and every other thing teaches us about the farthest extreme of imbalance suggested by, say, the claim that "I and the Father are one; no man comes to the Father except through me:" exclusivity, arbitrary parochial authority, the Western core...and yet how is it different from the Buddhist truth that *Brahman* (the universal) and *atman* (the particular) are one and the same?

Braxton has done his work. If it is indeed as universal as it aspires to be, we do indeed have to come to it through him. But that simply means we have to "let Braxton be Braxton," not that we have to idolize him unreservedly, or neglect him utterly. We rather have to do as he has done, make our own cosmos on our own path, and honor him as a son/brother/father holding us to that standard.

The "thousand tongues" in my title come from a hymn by the man whose namesake Braxton's academic home is:

O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer's praise  
The glories of my God and King,  
The triumphs of his grace!

Charles Wesley could not have imagined what it was he was asking for. I am only glad to have overheard Anthony Braxton talking to himself.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Asimov, Isaac. 1983. *The Complete Robot*. Pymble, Australia: Voyager.

Barnes, Steven. 2002. *Lion's Blood: A Novel of Slavery and Freedom in an Alternate America*.  
New York: Warner Books.

Boyer, Pascal. 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New  
York: Basic Books.

Braxton, Anthony. 1988. *Composition notes A, B, C, D, and E*. Hanover, NH: Tree Frog Music.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1985. *Tri-Axium writings 1, 2, & 3*. Hanover, NH: Tree Frog Music.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Shala fears for the poor*. Facsimile. Available from the composer.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *Trillium R (1991): Shala Fears for the Poor (Composition No. 162)*.

New York: Braxton House 4-CD set BH-008.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Introduction to *Catalog of Works*" (in Cox and Warner, 201-04).

\_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *9 Compositions (Iridium) 2006*. New Haven: Firehouse 12 9-CD/1-  
DVD set FH12-04-03-001.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *Trio (Glasgow) 2005*. Leo Records 2007, CD LR 487/488.

Brown, Earle. 2006. "Transformation and Developments of a Radical Aesthetic." In Cox and  
Warner, 189-95.

Burroughs, William S. 1974. In Daniel Odier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*.  
New York: Grove Press, 33.

Burroughs, William S. 2006. "The Invisible Generation." In Cox and Warner, 334-40.

Butler, Octavia. 1979. *Kindred*. New York: Doubleday.

Cage, John. 2006. "Introduction to *Theme and Variations*. In Cox and Warner, 221-25.

Carey, Joe. 1984. "Anthony Braxton Interview." *Cadence*, March.

Coleman, Anthony. 2000. "That Silence Thing." In Zorn, 136-39.

Cowley, Julian. 2007. "The Limits of Language." In Young, 193-208.

Heffley-47

Cox, Christoph and Daniel Warner (eds.). 2006. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*.

New York/London: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Cox, Christoph. 2006. "Visual Sounds: On Graphic Scores." In Cox and Warner, 187-88.

Delaney, Samuel R. 1975. *Dhalgren*. New York: Bantam Books.

Dessen, Michael. 2000/2003. *Decolonizing art music: scenes from the late twentieth-century*.

PhD. dissertation, University of California, San Diego.

Dick, Phillip K. 2007. *Four Novels of the 1960s*. New York: The Library of America.

Eck, Diana L. 1993/2003. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*.

Boston: Beacon Press.

Eshun, Kodwo. 2006. "Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality." In Cox and

Warner, 157-59.

Fischlin, Daniel and Ajay Heble. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and*

*Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Floyd, Samuel A., Jr. 1995. *The power of black music: interpreting its history from Africa to the*

*United States*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frazer, J. T. 1987. *Time: The Familiar Stranger* (Amherst, MA: The University of

Massachusetts Press).

Gould, Glenn. 2006. "The Prospects of Recording." In Cox and Warner, 115-26.

Griffiths, Paul. 2006. *A Concise History of Western Music*. New York: Cambridge University

Press.

Heffley, Mike. 1996. *The Music of Anthony Braxton* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press).

Hollings, Ken. 2002/2007. "The Live Space Ritual: Sun Ra, Stockhausen, P-Funk, Hawkwind."

In Young, 99-113.

Le Guin, Ursula. 1974. *The Dispossessed*. New York: Harper & Row.

Lessing, Doris. 1992. *Canopus in Argos: Archives*. New York: Vintage.

Heffley-48

Lewis, C.S. 1938, 1943, 1945. *The Space Trilogy: Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, That Hideous Strength*. London: The Bodley Head.

Lewis, George. 1996. "Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives" In *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1, Spring: 91-122.

Lewis, George. 2000. "Computers, Complexity and Culture in *Voyager*." *Leonardo Music Journal* 10: 33-39.

Lindsay, David. 1920. *Voyage to Arcturus*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd.

Lock, Graham. 1988. *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton*. (New York: Da Capo Press).

Masaoka, Miya. 2000. "Notes From a Trans-Cultural Diary." In Zorn, 153-66.

McLuhan, Marshall. 2006. "Visual and Acoustic Space." In Cox and Warner, 67-72.

Mosley, Walter. 1998. *Blue Light*. New York: Warner Books.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2001. *Futureland*. New York: Warner Books.

Ochiogrosso, Peter. 1976. "Anthony Braxton explains himself." *Down Beat*, August 12, 49).

Pareles, Jon. 2006. "A Tuba Army Ushers In the Bang on a Can Marathon at the World Financial Center." *The New York Times*, June 6, 2006.

Porter, Eric. 2002. *What is This Thing Called Jazz: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.

Rosenboom, David. 2000. "Propositional Music: On Emergent Properties in Morphogenesis and the Evolution of Music." In Zorn, 203-32.

Rouget, Gilbert. 1985. *Music and trance: a theory of the relations between music and possession*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Sadow, Greg. 1997. "The Classical Color Line." *Village Voice*, April 8: 71-72.

Schank, R.C. and R. P. Abelson. 1977. *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding*. Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum.

Shea, David. 2000. "One/Two." In Zorn, 145-52.



Heffley-49

Stockhausen, Karlheinz. 2006. "Electronic and Instrumental Music." In Cox and Warner, 370-80.

Tolkien, J.R.R. 1937, 1954-1955. *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings*. New York Houghton Mifflin; London, Allen & Unwin.

Toop, David. 1995. *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound, and Imaginary Worlds*. London: Serpent's Tail.

Toop, David. 2004. *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence, and Memory*. London: Serpent's Tail.

Williams, Charles. 1933. *The Place of the Lion*. London: Pellegrini & Cudahy

Winograd, T. and F. Flores. 1986. *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.

Young, Rob (ed.). 2002/2007. *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*. London: Continuum Books.

Youngquist, Paul. 2003. "The Space Machine: Baraka and Science Fiction." *African American Review*, Summer-Fall.

Zorn, John (ed.). 2000. *Arcana: Musicians on Music*. New York: Granary Books.