

Anthony Braxton's Arista Recordings

“I thought Three Compositions of New Jazz would top the charts and sell a million copies! I thought the kids would be dancing in the streets to it!”

--Anthony Braxton

That confession has caused me many a rueful chuckle over the past four decades. Referring to one of the first recordings of his iconoclastic music, circa 1968, the artist's words capture so well the Peter Pan spirit of the times just before its comeuppance. We countercultured baby boomers took the promises of the zeitgeist then so seriously, so proactively, on so many levels, all so impossibly naively. Love—as social justice, all human potential fully realized, universal brother/sister-hood...cosmic forces and entities terrible to some and wonderful to others, riding our music like some wild, bucking bronco—would sweep away the old and usher in the new. All lions would assume their new positions with all lambs in the new heaven on the new earth, and our dawning adulthood would see us sauntering off through the sunset of the old and into the sunrise of our brave new world, without a night in between them.

Between 1968 and 1975, when the first of the 13 LPs reissued here came out, that night had fallen. It fell hardest with the assassinations (John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, a few years after Malcolm X), the Chicago Democratic Convention and Kent State violence, the worst and the end of the Viet Nam war, the rise of Nixon and his fall in Watergate.

More music-specifically, we saw a golden age of rock music come and go through Woodstock and Altamont, and the rise and fall of Fillmores East and West. More jazz-specifically, Miles Davis stirred things up much as his fellow Columbia recording artist Bob Dylan had by “going electric”—helping to launch the “fusion” of

rock and jazz, along with some of his most illustrious former bandmates leading their own new groups.

More *Braxton*-music-specifically, those seven years also brought the deaths of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Eddie Condon, Mezz Mezzrow, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Kid Ory, Gene Krupa, Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, and Pablo Casals; and New York debut performances of new music by Karlheinz Stockhausen (**Stimmung**, and **Hymnen**) and Krzysztof Penderecki (**Utrenja**). They also saw the Apollo expeditions to the moon, and the Mariner probe's first pictures of the surface of Mars.

Such details, as grab-baggy as they seem, are in fact pointedly reflective of Braxton's public persona then and since, and of the musical/cultural range and specifics pertaining here. He was an artist in touch with just such a diverse cross-section of his time and culture; the names and events above might well have come up in his interviews and writings about his work, or in the dedications of his compositions to people, as influences and inspirations.

The Business

The reference to Columbia Records is more than casual in this context, too. Clive Davis, president of the company from 1967-72, formed the Arista label in 1974 by consolidating Columbia Pictures' legacy labels Colpix Records, Colgem Records, and Bell Records. (He named the new entity after New York City's secondary school honor society, to which he had belonged.) A scan of Columbia Records during his tenure there, and of Arista's roots in earlier pop and rock scenes and its own diverse roster over the years since, suggests explanations other than quixotic delusion for Braxton's initial high hopes for his music's mass appeal.

Unlike his Columbia colleague John Hammond, Clive Davis had relatively little personal involvement with jazz, but like Hammond he was involved with the acquisition of some of the biggest rock

artists and groups of the time. When he made a production deal with Steve Backer (Backer's Productions) to develop Arista's jazz line, he was bringing on board the perfect instigator of something that was not your father's jazz scene.

Backer had promoted rock artists for MGM/Verve and Elektra labels before moving to ABC's Impulse Records (1971-73). In his book *The House That Trane Built: The Story of Impulse Records* (2006), Ashley Kahn describes Backer as "a rock promotion man and jazz enthusiast" who brought to the label "a certain rock-generation sensibility," "an understanding of the new forces in youth culture like the rock press and FM radio," and "an appreciation of studio recording innovations and a willingness to employ them on jazz sessions."¹ John Coltrane, like Miles Davis and other jazz stars then, already had a fan base overlapping with rock's. Backer was the best positioned and skilled, and the most inclined, to cultivate such crossovers even further. His success in doing so for Coltrane's material and torchbearing artists at Impulse prepared him to do the same for Braxton's even more challenging projects at Arista.

When he heard Davis was launching Arista, Backer pitched his vision of a jazz line. His words to me in 2008 are close to what he told writer Michael Ullman almost thirty years ago about the Arista deal: "My philosophy centers on the idea of yin and yang, or balance: between 'inside' and 'outside' in the music, between old and young, acoustic and electric. I was just looking for the common denominator of quality in all the different kinds of music.

"I saw the artists I promoted at Impulse as an extension of Trane's music (Archie Shepp, Marion Brown, Sam Rivers); they were the less commercial, more 'out' players. Keith Jarrett and Gato

¹ (212)

Barbieri, whom I signed and who sold more albums, gave me the latitude to cultivate the others.

“Similarly, Anthony was the central figure of what I wanted to do with the Arista label then. I couldn’t and still can’t think of a better artist to paint the picture I wanted to paint with Arista than him. After him I signed Muhal Richard Abrams, Oliver Lake, Henry Threadgill’s Air, Cecil Taylor, and started up the Arista Freedom label—but Anthony was the first. This was also the moment for fusion crossovers, so the more commercially successful Brecker Brothers gave me that same latitude to present my riskier artists as Keith and Gato had given me at Impulse.

“It was noted at the time how rare it was for an artist as idiosyncratic as Anthony to be signed and promoted so aggressively by a major label,” he says.

The combination of Davis’s benign indifference to the jazz wars of the time and his comfort with Backer’s proven success in both rock and jazz markets, and Backer’s personal taste for Braxton’s music, opened the door to a signing and sustained cultivation of Braxton as the new label’s signature artist that did prove to be something of a rare perfect storm of good fortune for all concerned.

The Artist

It may seem strange to those who think of Anthony Braxton as the penultimate outcat to recall (or learn for the first time) that he was once *the* prime candidate for the crossover marketing and promotion offered by a major label. Coltrane and extended psychedelic rock jams, Miles Davis and funk and rock guitar and electronics, Keith Jarrett and New Age, later, all made more sense. Braxton’s overlaps were rather with the most forbidding European and American avant-garde art music. What kind of crossover potential did that hybrid portend?

In 1974, though, he was in many ways also the man to watch in jazz. True, he had shocked some jazz-purist ears with his double LP **For Alto**, a groundbreaking recording of original music for solo alto saxophone; additionally, his Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) roots were themselves suspiciously radical and musically questionable to many establishment types in the jazz community; granted, his Paris trio's nickname was "the slide rule boys," a pejorative akin to "egghead;"ⁱ and okay, Braxton did spend some quality time around the post-John Cage Wesleyan University turf of new-music improvisers/composers such as Alvin Lucier, Richard Teitelbaum, and Frederick Rzewski after returning from Europe in 1970.

But he had also shown how his singular vision and voice could work in the collective context of the Circle band (1970-71) with pianist Chick Corea, bassist Dave Holland, and drummer Barry Altschul, all duly seasoned and pedigreed leading jazz artists; and he had released his **In the Tradition** recordings and other similar, well received by the mainstream jazz press, on a variety of labels that demonstrated his proficiency and comfort with standards and post-bop material, language, and similarly illustrious bandmates. Moreover, offsetting those who didn't share his experimentalist vision of the future of the music were those who found it an intriguing alternative to the more commercial and less musical (by their lights) trend toward jazz-rock fusion.

Starting out with music on the clarinet in school, Braxton took private lessons with a "strict, correct teacher from the German tradition" named Jack Gell, at the Chicago school of music.ⁱⁱ His adolescent tastes ranged from the early rock of his time (The Platters, Frankie Lymon, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley) to the cool sides of jazz (Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond, Ahmad Jamal). He cut his teeth as both player and composer-arranger in high school, college, and army bands. In the army, while in Korea, he discovered the music of Arnold

Schoenberg, Albert Ayler's **Bells**, Coltrane's **Ascension**, then returned to Chicago.

Fellow reedsman Roscoe Mitchell got him into the AACM, Chicago's South Side collective, founded by pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, dedicated to the supplementary alternative cultivation of the local musical arts: composition, improvisation, education, performance, business. In 1969, Braxton and fellow AACM'ers (the late) violinist Leroy Jenkins and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith moved to Paris and worked and recorded as a trio there. Soon after returning to the States, Braxton joined the Circle group. Between the end of that (1971) and the first Arista LP (1974), Braxton performed and recorded extensively, mostly as a leader, throughout Europe, Japan, and North America.

Braxton's recorded output had already earned him the adjective "prolific" (which has applied ever since) by the time Arista signed him. From his first sessions on the Delmark label in 1968, he had gone on to release over two dozen more on several labels, spanning the musical terrain from most mainstream to most adventurously original in those six short years.

The Producer and the Deal

Backer today describes himself as "a jazz fan before I was a rock fan." He came up listening to West Coast jazz, and took lessons from the original Jimmy Giuffre 3 bassist Ralph Pena. Like Braxton's, his tastes moved from Paul Desmond to late Coltrane in the same short and intensive period. He had liked **For Alto** and other of Braxton's most adventurous Delmark records. It was a letter he got from Braxton himself that planted the seed that later sprouted.

"When I was general manager at Impulse, Anthony wrote me a letter from Europe, which I really dug. It was funny. 'Dear Steve, here are ten reasons why you probably won't sign me: I won't get

played on the radio, I'm too far out' ...things like that. Humorous, very erudite letter.”

Backer told two good friends whose informed judgment about both music and music business he respected—Bob Thiele, the first general manager of Impulse, and Robert Palmer, whom he regarded as the best journalist and critic of the music then (he wrote the liner notes to Braxton's **Five Pieces 1975**)—that he was considering signing Braxton as his first and foremost major artist. Both approved the choice (Thiele had seriously considered signing him himself, but “just hadn't gotten to it”).

The Arista signing promised the promising young musical innovator and his fans a respectable, sustaining platform and context for his bold initiatives, an alliance between the '60s visionary and the '70s practical aspects of the artist as a young husband and father. He had a new family, bought his first home, in the country near Woodstock, New York. No longer living abroad, signed to a major American label with annual renewable options—a man with “a barn of his own,” to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, which became his studio for composing, playing, and home recording—it all bode well for an American-dreamlike future, critical acclaim, a measure of well-deserved fame and *good* fortune, if not the latter sans that qualifier.

Thus came the moment of the Carter after the Nixon-Ford years, and the moment in the music business that could accommodate the Braxtonian vision. The work Braxton had done on his other labels, from the edgiest self-initiatives to the more conventional gestures, had prepared him well to rise to this fortuitous occasion. The range of LPs and tracks within each of them here, accordingly, demonstrates a thoughtful presentation and balance (recalling Backer's word) of the traditional and the innovative then. On balance, however, it might indeed be most pithily characterized as “not your father's jazz scene.”

In short, he was finding his path through the “me” decade to be not so much about a fall of quixotic idealistic social-cultural activism and a retreat into self-interested individualism as it was, hopefully, about trying to mature the vision from carefree, rootless youth into engagement with the world as it was—the family, business, the mainstream political/social—and to try and sow the seeds of change for the better from the inside.

This Writer

Having profiled both Braxton and Backer as that solid and efficacious mix of open-minded idealism and practicality, and of similar genre-and-style-crossing musical tastes, I should disclose a few details about my more personal history with these LPs. (What we’re leading up to here is how a dream can begin one way and take a sudden turn another, for better and/or worse, when it ends. Backer, Braxton, and I, though our profiles have been more public and our involvements with the music more up close and personal than many, are not that different from thousands of other musicians, writers about the music, and fans who came up in those years, got caught up in such sounds and visions, and bore and grew with them wherever they led over the time since. The value of getting to know us in this text lies as much in that commonality as in our uniquenesses.)

I came of age in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I was exposed to and clicked with the Beat and jazz scenes there from age 10 (thanks to a rather bohemian father), when I started taking my first music (guitar) lessons. At 13, in junior high school, I took up the trombone. My budding serious involvement with music carried me into and through all the books about and recordings of jazz, blues, folk, and Western classical and contemporary concert music I could get my hands on. It carried me into and through the burgeoning folk and later rock scenes in Berkeley and the Haight-

Ashbury then, and the live jazz scene up and down the West Coast from SF to Monterey to LA.

This Writer's Relevance

When I was old enough to start sitting in on local jam sessions myself, around 1967, I became acquainted with the man around whom revolved the most interesting part of the SF jazz scene then, Donald "Rafael" Garrett. He played bass and reeds, and had moved there from Chicago, where he had worked with Muhal Richard Abrams in The Experimental Band, something of a precursor to the AACM. He called his own local initiative the Rafael Garrett Circus, a working-cum-rehearsal band. I was too young and green still for professional gigs, but he let me and other music students sit in on sessions in his garage. Oliver Johnson, who would play with Steve Lacy for many years in Paris, and record with Braxton there, was part of that regular group, and the friend who got me into it.

Garrett would play and record with John Coltrane's group when it was in town. He stayed in touch with the Chicago scene, so I became aware through him of Braxton's early Delmark recordings as they came out, took them in in the spirit of their time, in real time, my reception and understanding of them shared and shaped by one of the savviest insiders from the culture and circles that spawned them.

When I moved from San Francisco to Eugene, Oregon, in 1971, I found myself joining the company of two more such savvy insiders: Malinké Robert Elliott and Arzinia Richardson, both erstwhile stalwarts and pillars of St. Louis's Black Artists Group (BAG; Elliott was one of the cofounders). Like me, and Braxton, they were withdrawing from the fast-lane urban life of the young and single artist-activist to start their new families in a more pastoral, healthy environment and lifestyle.

Our involvement with the music deepened and matured with us, though, rather than getting left behind as youthful folly. Arzinia and I both hosted our own local radio (KLCC) jazz shows, sometimes sitting in with each other—which meant I continued to get each of Braxton’s recordings as they were released in real time (free, at the radio station), and to talk with insiders in the know about the music. (BAG was inspired by St. Louis saxophonist Oliver Lake’s visit to the AACM, and the two groups have enjoyed close ties in the same musical-cultural discourse over the years.)

It was over these years of the 1970s in this bucolic and (like Woodstock) thickly countercultural setting that I took in these Arista recordings as they were released. As a regular jazz buff, I took in everything else that was going on in print and on record, but I was well primed and inclined to give these special place in my life and thought. I hung out with the BAG guys in our local jazz scene while our kids grew up and played together, I played in that scene with my own bands as a trombonist, wrote a lot of journalism about it, and helped bring and present the artists (Sun Ra, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Ornette Coleman and other similar) they knew and I got to know.

Eventually, Braxton was one such guest, and we struck up an association as fellow musicians, in 1988. That led to my formation of a big band called the Northwest Creative Orchestra (Braxton’s choice of name then), which recorded with him a CD on the Italian Black Saint label, **Eugene (1989)**. The door was thus opened for a nice little run of other such collaborations, with Andrew Hill, Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill, John Carter, Vinny Golia and others.

I went on to return to graduate school under Braxton’s academic mentorship, played with him in some of his bands, wrote a book, articles, and scholarly papers about him throughout the ‘90s in the Northeast, then returned to the Northwest. Since taking my PhD. in Ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University in 2000, my close

professional connections with him have become more distant personal ones, but still nothing but a deepening and unproblematic friendship.

All this information and disclosure is my way of setting up the context for my closing remarks about the Arista recordings as a whole slice of musical-cultural history, and as a slice of the larger whole of Braxton's and that same history that succeeded them; and for my exegesis on the music they've preserved.

We're on the eve of the complete fall of Western ideas and life values. We're in the process of developing more meaningful values, and our music is a direct expression of this...

--Anthony Braxton (from **Three Compositions of New Jazz** liner notes, 1968)

The passing allusion to the American political landscape (Nixon/Ford to Carter/Mondale to Reagan/Bush) is a fertile one to mine for a summary assessment here. I look back on the period that produced the Arista recordings as an ascent of something like a political vision and party I approved of to take—democratically, by popular vote—the reins of state away from a regime I disdained, to then (all too soon and sadly) lose office again to the old guard renewed.

As we will trace through the sequence of recordings, Braxton did indeed seem to be the man of jazz's hour at first, and seized that moment to produce a series of ever more worthy fulfillments of his promise that would seem, at the time, to have secured his subsequent decades at the pinnacle of (as he calls it) the “jazz-industrial complex.” However, the choices he made to follow them up left many of his former allies and supporters behind, and his vision was voted out and replaced by a world those of us still with

him thought *we* had left behind (including, indeed, a return of your father's jazz scene with a vengeance).

The details constituting that metaphor comprise a story beyond this one. In a nutshell, it is the story of the artist turning to a brighter, higher path of his own making and greater interest, as a composer and performer, as a teacher, and as human being and artist more of the world and all time than of a nation or a moment, a "race" or a gender, a party line or a genre.

Musically, I would shift metaphors to compare it to one of those morning periods of calm after a storm, a period that refines, contains, and presents with more clarity and restraint the forces that were raging more chaotically during the night before: something like the *Empfindsamkeit* and classical periods in post-Baroque Europe, or the swing era after early jazz, or cool after bop (the storm here, of course, being the '60s free jazz, to keep painting with those broad strokes).

Socially, culturally, and commercially, I would sum up the Arista run as a rare happy (if finite) marriage of business and art. Those of us aware of Braxton's work, and invested in its background and trajectory to that point, had a distinct sense of the potential import of this deal. It might be compared to, again, Miles or Dylan at Columbia, where uncompromising brilliance, genius, and dedication seem to get their due for once in the marketplace and critical limelight. As Backer said, it was noteworthily unusual for such a label to sign such an artist, even then. (To his credit, he stuck to his guns and renewed Braxton's option to record as long as possible, enabling [not to be confused with funding; Braxton financed the most expensive **Four Orchestras** project] the final most controversial, least commercial, but arguably most important recordings.) Obviously, such signings of artists are good for them personally, professionally—but for us fans and fellow travelers (musicians, and artists and intellectuals in other and resonant

fields) who share their visions and passions, they also come as breakthroughs on the larger levels of history and culture.

Arista signing Braxton seemed to us aficionados then that the principles and aesthetics his music bespoke, the ideas and visions he himself had voiced in interviews and liner notes, had succeeded in their challenge of the mainstream assumptions that marginalized them and centralized maximum profits and minimum common denominator, were moving in now to take over and realign the center in their infinitely better way. The artist's enshrinement of idiosyncratic vision and voice combined with transpersonal abstraction (both graphic and opus-numbered titles) bespoke the best of the post-'60s, new '70s zeitgeist: get over yourself, take responsibility for your own life, don't leave it in the hands of a fate scripted either by the forces of evil (the big bad establishment racist/capitalist world bedeviling your youth) or by fairy-tale utopianism (over-identification with some identity[ethnic/gender/ideological/doctrinal]-political group reactive to that world). Both are for wimps and chumps; step up and show both worlds what you yourself have really got, join the real party.

A phoenix—the Bird that really Lives—seemed to be rising from the ashes of the '60s.

Personally, I would sum up this music's effect on my own evolution from a twentysomething to a thirtysomething baby boomer white American man in the music something like this: as the Beatles music of that era brings back to many memories of initiation into a certain kind of consciousness that then lit the subsequent path through later years and growth, so growing along so closely with the music of Braxton and his peers, and with the individuals and communities it led me to form my closest ties with in life, served to rearrange some of my psychic furniture in a way I

would articulate so: it reversed the positions of some cultural assumptions I had inherited that needed reversing.

Towit: what formerly seemed more theater than reality—music, the arts, entertainment—became the opposite over time. The brotherhood of the musicians, the family of the music, if you will, became the primary human connection, both laterally, with fellow humans, and vertically, with all that we might call spiritual (life, mystery, God, gods).

Conversely, all that seemed more primal reality than theater—race, culture, gender, age, political ideology, religion, personal identity itself—gradually turned more and more to theater in my eyes. In no small part, I blame this radical re(dis)orientation on Anthony Braxton.

I've become more the writer and teacher (of writing and humanities to college undergraduates) than musician in my later years. But this music and its history, both personal and general, remains a wellspring of rich material for that writing and teaching. If that part of it that Anthony Braxton has added did not exist, I cannot imagine my life without a fight to the death to try and invent it.

The Music

The packaging

Backer's and Braxton's collaborative strategy for the releases was to lead with the most airplay-friendly (short) and listener-friendly (musically accessible) tracks, then to slip in the more experimental and adventurous music later. It unfolded so over the arc of the whole series of LPs as well as on the sequence of tracks through the A and B sides of each. Thus the bands and sounds closest to the "jazz" side of things at the time were featured on **New York, Fall**

1974 (1975) and **Five Pieces 1975** (1975); still close but less so were **Duets 1976** (1976) and **Creative Orchestra Music 1976** (1976); **The Montreux/Berlin Concerts** (1977) returned to the hot-jazz-like quartet, for the first live performance of the series.

This is not to say that these five, the latter a double LP, hold anything back in the way of adventurous originality—the spine of the repertoire is Braxton’s own music, including those infamous graphic titles and arcane composer’s liner notes, and the vocabulary of the compositional concepts and improvisations is enriched with everything he had taken from his oft-acknowledged influences, from Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and the AACM to Cage, Stockhausen, and others from that eclectic range—but all five of the first LPs share in common instrumentation, personnel, performance contexts, energies, and inflections the jazz-fan base would be comfortable with. Braxton is clearly the crackerjack mainstream jazz- and even studio-musician’s musician himself here, and clearly the composer-arranger *for* such improvisers/readers. The original material is punctuated by a few standards and more contemporary jazz heads.

After that, though, the music goes the most “out.” Braxton continued to release his more jazz-conventional recordings on European labels, using the remaining Arista dates for his more concert-compositional statements. **For Trio** (1978) is followed by **Alto Saxophone Improvisations 1979** (1979), then **Composition No. 82 for Four Orchestras** (1978), ending the run four years later with **For Two Pianos** (1982). Looking at those later four releases through the lens of the categories above gives a sense of their points of departure from the first five:

- instrumentation—pretty much the whole range of conventional woodwinds, from highest to lowest flutes, clarinets, and saxophones, and double reeds bassoon and *taragata*; “found” and “little” (homemade) instruments, and

- an assortment of metal, wood, and membrane percussion; an unaccompanied alto saxophone; four symphonic (not chamber) orchestras; and two pianos, zithers, and melodicas;
- personnel—five of the most illustrious and seasoned of the AACM experimentalists (Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Douglas Ewart, Roscoe Mitchell, and Joseph Jarman); Braxton alone; “serious” (Oberlin) conservatory students; two pillars of the contemporary concert music community, Ursula Oppens and Frederic Rzewski;
 - performance contexts—two different versions of one experimentally conceived and notated piece (**Composition 76**) more resonant with the then-contemporary art/academic music than the jazz community (also resonant with “amateurism,” conflating it with high culture, a gesture of cultural egalitarianism); a solo recital on a single-line instrument, something more traditional in Western art music than in the jazz tradition; and, most distinctively in the last two releases, performances by conservatory-trained players of advanced scored works encompassing diatonic, chromatic, and post-serial composition techniques, but no improvisation;
 - energies and inflections—occasionally those a jazz audience might sense, but certainly not at the center of either concept or execution.

A similar arc of mutation/evolution unfolds in the cover art and liner notes. In general, music buffs in both rock and jazz scenes then—undoubtedly fed by a common ground of exotic intoxicants—devoured cover art and liner notes for “signs” about the meaning and identity (social, personal, cosmic) of the latest music, which was always a fresh field for such speculations, mute as it naturally is in itself (unless words are included) about such things.

The first five covers do push at the edges of the aesthetic envelope of the times, but don't leap out of it into midair yet. These were the birthing years of the academic discourses of semiotics, and postmodern irony; before they were academized they were, like all such things, grassroots street consciousness at play. (I remember when the LP **Miles Smiles** came out, with a picture of same, what a surprisingly funny statement it seemed to the cognoscenti that the man had tweaked his own image so.)

New York, Fall 1974 sets the tone with a full head shot and quintessentially Braxtonian photo: the turtle-neck pullover sweater, the Sherlock Holmes pipe stemming from bemused mouth, the wire-rim glasses under furrowed brow through which came the forthright, intelligent gaze. By then the jazz world knew all this bespoke the deep and turbulent jazz scene's most intellectual and public Public Intellectual, the chess-hustling, schematic-drawing genius who also knew his way around the horn, even in (mostly) his own deepest waters. The artist was branding his new territory here, saying in effect "Remember the eccentric young upstart on the margins? Here's the same guy, in full bloom, front and center!"

On the back, another single image prevailed: photographically altered to appear transparent, Braxton's ghostly image strides through an autumnal patch of woods; again, the informed fan will assume this to be near his Woodstock home, and general countercultural associations will inevitably come to mind. The even more informed fan will know the cutting edge of the non-rock music counterculture then was getting underway with a bang in the back-to-nature setting so alluring to the urban burnouts then: German vibraphonist Karl Berger's Creative Music Studio, more on which ahead.

Underneath the picture, like a still of a crawling ticker tape, ran the six graphic/alphanumeric titles of the compositions, three on each side. Like the front cover, earlier press and recordings had

prepared us for this, so we took them in our own stride. The conventional and laudatory notes by *Coda* editor Bill Smith, a voice credible in mainstream jazz journalism, explained the significance of the edgy new talent in the scene's big picture; its text flowed around three photos of men-at-work in the studio, conveying a sense that some real business was being taken care of here by people who had proven they knew what they were doing, and were going to pick up where quixotic young hippies had left off, in the same woods, in the same spirit, in a more seasoned, richer, and educated—and ultimately more effective—way.

The **Five Pieces 1975** package built on the same lines: the same iconic pipe, this time a cloud of smoke veiling half his face (right—'cause he was smokin' now, man!); same esoteric titles, along with the standard **You Stepped Out of a Dream** (“the dream” was a fertile allusion in those days); similarly credentialed jazz critic Robert Palmer supplying even more substantive and critical-discursive notes, around photos of the same four proven-bad players, three from the old Circle band; full quartet lined up on the back cover, clearly of Woodstock-generation stock.

Duets 1976 and **Creative Orchestra Music 1976** strays from this formula only slightly, replacing the front-cover photos with contemporary art, signaling their awareness of and interdisciplinary affiliation with the visual art scene then, as Ornette Coleman had done with a Jackson Pollock painting on **Free Jazz** a decade-and-a-half earlier. Braxton himself writes the liner notes on both: shorter, more general, utterly unassuming overviews of the music from his music-specialist's perspective (jazz-specialist's, even, with his allusions to Scott Joplin, Eric Dolphy, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Charles Mingus, and Ornette Coleman).

The Montreux/Berlin Concerts packaging is the plainest, foregoing the artsy for the more music-functional aesthetics (all

photos are of musicians at their work), with writer-producer Michael Cuscuna bylining the liner notes. All told, a perfect balance between the excitingly expected and excitingly surprising.

Then comes **For Trio**, with its cover photo of a page of an avant-gardish-looking score, topped by the graphic title of the one unbroken piece presented in two versions, one on each side. This cover's statement (in my words): "The abstract universe of the music is what is front and center now, and it is speaking to you directly, not through celebrity-culture conventions of entertainment-jazz marketing. Not only the common technical notation we players work from, but also my own composerly-creative psyche's innermost subjective language are presented for your viewing pleasure in print here, unadulterated."

But decidedly not unannotated; here is where the notorious Braxton-speak spills forth like some glossalalia of meaning, not just of sound, as in those Pentecostal services where one exalted soul speaks in tongues and another chimes in with an "interpretation." Braxton's choice of words here is open to charges of solipsism, meaningless smoke and mirrors, charges not slow or few in coming. Sit with them, though, reader; let them simmer, babble, and trickle through you like a brook, and just see where they take your thinking.

In one of its many passing pools of poetic-licensed clarity, his text tells us

For this composition was not designed to adhere to either the current misconceptions surrounding the word 'jazz' (with respect to how the science of that thrust is viewed, or so-called viewed—in this time zone) nor can this work be defined in 'western art music' terms. Rather the meta and empirical foundations of this work was conceived with

respect to the spiritual and composite vibrationary affinity-arena of world culture.

In retrospect, this might stand as the moment when the gauntlet was flung that would define the course of the music through and beyond the Arista series. Not only that—it serves notice on the community of critics, scholars, and journalists, whatever axes they had to grind, that the artist himself was entering their fray, taking up their weapons (“words,” he once said, “are the white man’s greatest weapons;” yet also, from his **Creative Orchestra Music 1976** notes, “It is difficult if not impossible for me to write about how I see my work in creative music, for I have never felt that words are meaningful when applied to creativity—and yet something has to be written—for many of the mis-conceptions that surround creative music are still with us today.”)

Now his strategy is not to go above or around them, as he did by resorting to graphics for his titles, but to wield them himself, in his way—which he would do with a vengeance, starting here. Inside the jacket is an elaborate four-page foldout with the usual photos of players at work, and line-drawn schematics—but, unprecedented, the first wave of a tsunami of such text that would follow in other recordings and, mostly, his copious tomes **Tri-Axium Writings** and **Composition Notes**, is also blocked off in fine print on most of one page.

Not unlike composer’s notes on process, technique, and theory published in specialist academic journals, his describe how he customized conventions of notation, improvisation, instrumentation and voicing to suit his vision for the piece. All is clear enough, if met on its own terms and left unburdened by baggage imposed.

Having found his inner voice in print, he seems to then start flexing it on what he's been observing in the outer world, in the notes to **Alto Saxophone Improvisations 1979**.

The past couple of years have seen many changes reshape world creativity. Of those changes, certainly the dynamic acceleration of solo activity can be viewed as a major factor responsible for the expanded reality of present day creative music.

Of course, it was the “past couple of years” that marked his first musical forays beyond his clear success in the jazz market with **Creative Orchestra Music 1976**. Again, it may not have seemed so naïve and quixotic at the time, to him or anyone else, to choose to push the envelope instead of playing it safe. His relaxed tone and expansive thought in the notes evince the confidence of one who has paid dues and proven himself, thus the legitimized expectation that when he spoke the words that meant the most to him people now would listen.

Those words dwelt on what the solo music meant to him, glancing back to its first soundings in **For Alto**, defining and describing a process (“conceptual grafting”—replacing the conventional harmonic-melodic-rhythmic matrix for improvisation with various other kinds of premises) that he had previously not had the words for.

Adding to the many “firsts” mentioned and unmentioned here, **Composition 82 For Four Orchestras** was “the first completed work in a series of ten compositions that will involve the use of multiple-orchestralism and the dynamics of spacial (sic) activity.” Braxton writes in his extensive liner note booklet for the 3-LP boxed set of “multi-orchestralism” as an art and science in itself, to which he is adding his own unique contributions. The series reflects the plenum of some huge gathering of nomadic tribes into

a temporary, transient city, with hundreds of groups of musicians playing within overlapping earshots, a thousand conversations and independent activities occurring at once—colors, order, chaos, humanity, all in the simple presence and moment of itself.

Several floor plans are included, and diagrams of proposed sound trajectories and speaker placements; a human body is similarly diagrammed for its areas of “information approach” (places where the music is perceived or felt; Braxton scholar Ronald Radano links these ten approaches to “the Kabbalist metaphor of the Ten Sefiroth, in which the emanations of God associate with areas of the human body” [230]); the graphic title’s shape is superimposed on one elliptically zoned floor plan, the zones having colors, letters, and numbers; score page facsimiles are included, and photos of the four orchestras (160 musicians) in place; and the graphic, colored titles of the nine other proposed multi-orchestral works, spanning increasingly large distances, from cities to star systems.

The cover of **For Two Pianos** is a grainy close-up of an ancient Egyptian wall of stone blocks covered with carved hieroglyphics. The dawn of literacy in the world is evoked, and associations with the scholarship of Cheikh Anta Diop, Yosef Ben-Jochannon, and Martin Bernal (favoring Egypt over Greece as the African source of Western civilization) are suggested. Superimposed on the blocks is a graphic square containing the graphic title of the LP’s single featured work (a.k.a. **Composition 95**), which resembles a nuclear reactor. The AACM motto “Great Black Music, From Ancient to Future” comes to mind, and the family resemblance between the hieroglyphs and Braxton’s titles is also unavoidable.

The back of the jacket bears a photo of the two performers, Ursula Oppens and Frederick Rzewski, dressed in the hooded robes of medieval monks onstage at their facing pianos. This piece is the first of what Braxton called his Ritual and Ceremonial music, and

what I called the Golden Peak of his body of work to date in my 1996 book's retrospective on it.² It was written at the close of the Arista run, recorded in Italy—marking the end of an era for Braxton professionally as well as America politically (Carter out, Reagan in).

Looking at the arc as a whole, then, the surface beneath which the music ran tells the same tale it told: Braxton's/Arista's "not your father's jazz scene" had a bona fide heyday, reaped its due rewards in short order, then turned the corner into the direction it wanted to take...only to find itself out on a limb that stretched out from the American tree over the fence that bordered it and the rest of the world—which then unceremoniously snapped.

The music itself will tell that tale in its proper detail.

New York Fall, 1974

The Tracks

Mirroring in microcosm the same progression from "inside" to "out," Side A of **New York Fall, 1974** offers up the material easiest to grasp by both jazz and art music audiences. **23B** Braxton defines as "an atonal version of **Donna Lee**." (He had been featuring that bop warhorse in his bands of the few years previous, so undoubtedly could play it in his sleep by the time he wrote an atonal version of it—which fact says much about how the truly, radically new springs from traditional soil, in practice.) As such, it is a perfect opening track for his first LP.

The bop standard and his instrument both put him in the tradition of Charlie Parker the player, and the specification of atonality put him in the tradition of Parker (along with Arnold Schoenberg) the chromaticist composer. He extends the player with non-tonal

2

effects—high squeaks and smears on top of the bebop lines—that might be more aptly described as post-Coleman, or post-Dolphy (indeed, he also invokes Charles Mingus and Ornette Coleman in his **Composition Notes** about this piece). He extends Parker’s chromaticism (as Coleman did Parker’s diatonicism) by writing his lines free of **Donna Lee**’s chord and metrical structures (it keeps the AABA form, but has 56 rather than 32 bars) and of any diatonic key. This piece is all about establishing and then extending bop chops and theory beyond its previous parameters.

The B section line ascends much like a walking bass through an unchanging harmony, serving as a breather from the frantic, convoluted lines of the A section. Braxton’s solo is more relaxed than the straight-ahead up-tempo of the bass and drums, but it catches up with their steaming energy through a fluidity and comfort leaving behind the clunkier, stiffer phrasing so many critics had pounced on as devoid of “swing.” Energy-and-entropy of the total sound, rather than the tension-and-release of signifying around and against both Common Practice harmonic machinations and unaltered 4/4 meter, is clearly the preferred *modus operandi*.

Wheeler briefly alludes to **Donna Lee**, then improvises atonally even more than Braxton did: his European milieu peeking through? Altschul drops out to leave Wheeler and Holland to an improvised duo. Braxton returns, and the two horns chirp the solos section out together, evoking the Cherry-Coleman/Ayler-Ayler free-jazz jubilee chorus, then restate the head. Altschul brings the AACM into the evocational mix, with his little instruments and no-time percussives.

The bop rocket has left the earth (via Parker), then the atmosphere (via Coleman), and is now locked in orbit, in the new “gravitational intrigue” (one of Braxton’s favorite poetic descriptors of his music) between earth and space. The piece ends with a stop-time section.

23C, the least jazz-like Side A track, has a structure audible to the untrained ear: like the popular Christmas song “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” its form is that of a “cumulative song,” with each new verse constructed on, extending slightly, the last one. It is through-composed, and recited with no improvisations. Its verses are perky and cheeky, Stravinskyish (à la “Ragtime for Eleven Instruments,” or “L’Histoire du Soldat”). Braxton’s flute and Wheeler’s muted horn over the clattery rhythm make for a chamber-music sound that might have come from the Jazz Age-inflected European compositions of the 1930s.

The cool-jazz sound and style permeates **23D** as bop did **23B**, reminding us of Ornette Coleman’s early connections with the West Coast scene, and of the richly contrapuntal piano-less quartets there preceding his own. Again, the solos are both grounded in the cool sound and stretch it in their own new directions.

The overall effect of Side A is to show connections between the traditions evoked and the new gestures brought to them, and to suggest their easy intimacy on the continuum of the composer’s-players’ visions and voices. These three traditions—bop, modern art music, cool jazz—were old skins restored to the fiber required by the new wine.

Side B takes things out a few steps farther in three different directions. They would show themselves to be seeds bearing popular fruit in years to follow. The first track, **38A**, might have struck the typical *Down Beat*-reading record buyer then as the most radically out of place. The scene-tradition it evoked—through Braxton as clarinetist and, especially, Richard Teitelbaum as synthesist—was that of the academic-cum-avant-garde composer of electronic music. The world of John Cage, Stockhausen, and Teitelbaum’s own genre-busting group *Musica Elettronica Viva*—

a world visited most extensively by Braxton during his first Wesleyan University period, after returning from Paris—is well evoked here. Its distinction from them might be his replacement of the aleatory by the improvisatory. Electronics also evoke Sun Ra, naturally, but the distinction from him is Braxton's greater reference to and interest in the American Experimental composer's tradition, and the academic universe of scores and specialist journals devoted to technical and theoretical parsings.

As sound synthesis and computer technologies have developed since then, the piece stands in retrospect as an area of improvised (adding to taped and programmed) electronic music that would burgeon in decades to come. It also fits in well with the then-future mythoi spawned by the Afrofuturist marriage of electronic and computer technologies with experimental black music-making and science fiction. (This was during the time when NASA's greatest glories were still fresh in memory, and one of Braxton's boyhood heroes was Werner von Braun.)

Composition 37 too ignited two later wildfires. The first was something of a heyday for saxophone quartets, including Rova and, preeminently, the World Saxophone Quartet (WSQ). Indeed, the three players here (Hamiet Bluiett, Oliver Lake, and Julius Hemphill) with Braxton would go on to form the WSQ in 1977, replacing Braxton with David Murray.

The concept wasn't radically new; the Charlie Parker tribute band Supersax—featuring one of Braxton's favorite tenor players, Warne Marsh—was *au courant* in the jazz world then, but while it foregrounded the virtuoso writing, reading, and playing chops of the big band sax section, conventional rhythm and brass complements were also in its mix. Braxton's teenage experience with the *a capella* four-part harmonies of doo-wop groups in Chicago may have been in play here as well.

He uses the palette to voice the more “out” atonality of postserial music and the more “out” timbre/texture/inflections from the free-jazz years. We get a real sense of narrative (much as with **23C**, Side A’s second track), especially in the unison parts, after a slow and spacey opening. Further, we get a real sense of Braxton as a composer (like Duke Ellington) for particular people and their improvisational styles and sounds: he manages to keep their freedom and energy of voice and mind alive and intact while at the same time liberating them, through transparent orchestrations and a regulated flux of dynamics and energies, from the tyranny of the free-for-all jams driven by power plays and displays that were the occupational hazard of spontaneous, unprescribed improvs back then. Nothing here is unrelenting, heavy-handed, or monochromatic, yet all is full blown.

The second wildflower seeded by this piece was Braxton’s own major Ghost Trance Music (GTM) series, begun in the 1990s. Its often erratically-beating rhythmic heart was spawned by a musical device of **37**—repeated quarter notes, not “swung,” but sequenced hypnotically to suggest (induce?) trance.

As many jazz musicians say a slow ballad is harder to do justice to than a medium or fast piece, the post-tonal, post-metric rubato such gesture is *exponentially* harder. Both composer and improviser must draw the most lyrical lines and expressive textures and the least regimented, most nuanced rhythmic gestures out of the stasis and void of the silence and stillness. The devices Braxton uses in **23A** to meet the challenge suggest the lineage of Duke Ellington through Stan Kenton through Gil Evans: tasty voicings of low- and high-range instruments, for atmosphere. The more pointillistic-than-lyrical results beg from percussion a more-vertical-than-horizontal sense of time. Again, freed from Earth but still in its orbit...yet now turning to face away from rather than back to it, into the unknowns of silence and space beyond the reach of its pull.

Five Pieces 1975

This LP, again, springboards off tradition, this time with an American Songbook standard. This being the first of several covers offered in the Arista LPs, it is the best place to give a theoretical take on them as a subset of Braxton's predominantly original repertoire, for his relationship to them in his aesthetic and career.

For in fact, as it happens, he was the first certifiably "jazz" artist to have recorded an LP called **In the Tradition**. Barry Altschul recalls: "We were very involved with playing the music and trying to be ourselves, consciously: trying to not play like anyone else, first; and second, trying to deal with new and unfamiliar music. Braxton had some definite ideas of what things should be played and expanded on in some of his pieces. The rhythm section was more or less about a more traditional approach, with exceptions. I had to play a complicated pattern on some, and make it live.

"I always enjoyed playing with Braxton. I found it a challenge, and interesting—very creative. Each time we played his tunes, for the most part, they were different, unless they were very composed.

"Once with Circle we were on a package tour, and it was with Johnny Griffin and Ben Webster—Dexter [Gordon] might have been there—and Braxton. Art Taylor, Kenny Drew...it was a real bebop band, all living in Europe at the time.

"Out of everybody, the one who truly dug Braxton was Ben Webster. That, of course, was the biggest surprise, because he was the oldest-style player. At the end of each night, all the saxophone players got together with the bebop rhythm section to play, I think, 'Perdido.' At the time he was with Circle, he was quite shy about being onstage. But Ben Webster clearly just dug him."

In his many and lengthy interviews, Braxton has always been as effusive as the quintessential fan in his praise of established mentors and models, even crossing then-politically correct lines of choice drawn for young black militants into quintessentially white players and composers without a tentative glance back. He would go on to pepper his own art's primary output of original music with tribute projects covering the music of Lennie Tristano, Charlie Parker, Andrew Hill and others in later years.

This duo rendition of **You Stepped Out of a Dream** with bassist David Holland has the feel of a couple guys—not necessarily pros—kicking around a tune in the jazz-traditional way just for their own fun. They sound unpretentious, unpremeditated, unaware of the many exquisite interpretations any past masters might have recorded, and uninterested in a career or even a high musical moment in their engagement with the material. Accordingly, the sound can range from competent but uninspired to amateurishly stilted and slapdash. Phrasings can be chock-a-blocky rote, ideas stillborn or undeveloped, potentials unfulfilled.

At the same time, like electrons taking a quantum leap into a new and wider orbit about the nucleus-tune, the phrasing can turn on a dime from bumptious to wickedly fluid, time can stretch languidly away from plodding half-steps into an elaborate rhythmic gesture, and the vocabularies of notes can leave off automatic recitation and flow into some fresh news of the moment, or even start speaking in tongues.

The point I take from this dichotomy is that one can read Braxton's perceived deficiencies of musicianship as his indeed—but one might also hear them as reflections of the inadequacy of the conventional jazz gameplan and platform.

The jazz improviser's purview until the first steps away from it in the late 1950s and early 1960s was proscribed by simply metered

musical time, a handful of diatonic chords and keys, a few basic song forms, all recycled through only slight permutations from tune to tune, improvisation to improvisation, generation to generation. Is that all there is? Is it not a rather small and shabby dance floor, on its sheerly musical face, for the mind and body to bring its best and brightest ideas and choreographies to?

The genius of the whole African-American tradition that came to be called “jazz,” of course, lay precisely in the way it took the shabbiest and smallest and transformed it into something so much grander and deeper. The dance from Louis Armstrong to Charlie Parker had become that of a host of ever more brilliant angels crowded onto the head of a never-growing pin.

When Braxton came along, his dance instead pointed out the limits and problematic assumptions of using that pinhead for the one and only dance floor. His choreography was to draw up plans for a floor worthy of the dancers—smoother, more spacious, housed in and housing luxury. You can hear the angel’s cramped wings and awkward steps in his playing of standards, and the restless lurchings and flashes toward the dance steps that will effect a restructuring of the pinhead, not accommodate to—even reaffirm and fortify—it just because he can.

23H resumes that reconstruction project, with its intent to steer the “free” improvisation away from the extended (read: self-indulgent) solo into a loose, light collective improvisation. Its spare and elegant long line sequencing interesting intervals and phrases “vibrationally provide structural marking points for its interpreters...to stimulate them into looking ‘for other focuses’” (Braxton’s **Composition Notes B**, 75-79). The flute and muted brass voice Braxton’s line in unison over busier bass and percussion improves; their own improves come in later, pregnant with the textures and tones their written line laid down.

23G is a prime example of a strategy begun with the early (6) series of pieces Braxton called Kelvin; the term “gravallic basic” he also coined to capture its essence, and later “pulse track” would emerge. Essentially, the strategy they commonly allude to is to replace conventional rhythmic substrates of 2, 3, and 4—the lope and pace and heartbeat of jazz swing as walked in the bass and measured out in spoonfuls by the drum kit—with through-composed rhythmic attacks that add up to a jagged, asymmetrical pattern of beats.

The melodic line is post-boppish, like **23B**, and some of the phrasing on and of it sounds blocky, as in **You Stepped Out of a Dream**—but the interesting thing is how both line and execution of it sound so much less stiff and constrained when set against the 18-1/2-bar rhythmic line laid down in unison by bass and drums, to cycle repeatedly under solos and head. The solos flex against the muscle of that “gravallic base” even more than the written part, careening and leaping and flowing in ways they surely wouldn’t have done against a steady, regular, symmetrical pattern of beats. Hearing the cycled pattern enough times to start to feel it as an imprinted, entraining groove rather than random bursts leads to a solid grasp of one of Braxton’s choice mottos: “feet firmly planted in midair.”

Braxton dedicated **23E** to Albert Ayler, and declared it to be an intense engagement of the implications of “free energy music” (from Braxton’s **Composition Notes** and/or liner notes, here and ahead) The horns play slow, anthemic lines in unison over bowed bass notes, reminiscent of the kind of rubato plaints over gradually building noise and free-rhythmic activity Ayler (as also Coltrane and Coleman) employed to such poignant and powerful effect. The melody is, again, Stravinsky-ish, its phrases breathing, deliberating between silence and statement, as percussion beavers away with the bass in a quiet intensity. When the horns keep marching stately through a second recital of the piece, the percussion and bass

percolate up to a full boil, at which point the horns join them in the freedom fray. All four are gurgling forth at full throttle, Braxton biting off those wide intervals with his contrabass clarinet chops like some gargling, trilling raptor biting off the heads and swallowing whole the bodies of the primeval mammals that would someday evolve into humans. Wheeler takes the “free energy” torch in his open-harmon-muted horn, Altschul helps him lighten and untangle the former dense and heated fury into lighter, more transparent space.

This piece is a showcase of how even the headiest and most physically compelling of the forces unleashed by that Ayler-channeled “free energy music” could be harnessed and ridden, dismounted and remounted, and even tamed and trained to saunter, trot, and amble before returning to its wilderness pastures. Time starts out as a Big Bang’s potential then ends as a string of pearls of suns and stars. Anyone who likes the mercury and lava, the serendipity of free improvisation, the intensity and virtuosity but not the heavy-handed tunnel vision will love this. Critic Steve Lake wrote of it that “it might be the most extreme example yet of the dichotomy between jazz and contemporary classical in Braxton’s music.”

Side 2 ends with **40M**, a slightly different spin on the same kind of freedom. It brings to mind the forthright exuberance of Eddie Harris’s popular tune of prior years, **Freedom Jazz Dance**.

We should pull back from the blow-by-blow account of tracks to notice a few things about the arc of the whole to this point. Notice how less the jazz personality/virtuoso and how more the art-music composer those expositions depict. Any casual first listening and perusal of the two packages will provoke descriptions of schooled and skilled young journeymen in the hottest scenes of the moment then; but to give an intelligent, responsible account of the music’s character and significance is impossible without venturing into the

realm of serious analysis and theory, even if only with the prosaic toolkit of an intrepid journalist (as opposed to the scholar's heavier bag).

This is arguably the clearest sign of the nature of Braxton's approach and significance as hybridizer here: the days of "jazz" and "art music" as separate realms in a hierarchy of aesthetics and sociocultural politics—having in fact been challenged from the very first contact between African and European America and ever more effectively so through various personages along the way (from Jelly Roll Morton, Scott Joplin, James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, on up through Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus and many others)—are drawing that much closer to their inevitable end in this music. Maybe it's too much to expect except in hindsight, but couldn't writers about the music then have taken on more seriously the question of the validity, and the implications of, Braxton's well- and oft-expressed agenda of donning the mantle and planting the flag of *both* jazz-improvisational and art-music-compositional roles and identities?

In any case, based on the reception of these first recordings, that agenda seemed a workable commercial as well as a satisfying aesthetic strategy. As Ronald Radano reports in his book (252), record sales were good, critics and fans approved, and the press coverage was accordingly good and plenty.

Notice too the preponderance in these first two offerings of the number 23 (one numerology buffs and fond recollectors of Robert Anton Wilson's series of science-fiction novels about the Illuminati will take in with relish). All of these opus numbers are just alternate designations adopted to get around the problems of mixing the pictographic titles with the alphanumeric print media, and each has certain musically distinguishing features. The **23** series was conceived and designed for the playbook of a working quartet of particular players, begun with Circle and continued in

this later incarnation under Braxton's leadership. Musically, the pieces in the series are closest in structure, spirit, and sound to a conventional jazz group, with the various innovative/experimental tweaks of musical conceit and concept we've seen in each piece. In that sense, they served as something like the classical string quartet, in which composers would begin to sketch and work out ideas meant for greater development in more elaborate productions.

Creative Orchestra Music 1976 (and such large-ensemble productions to come, generally) is where the rubber of the subjective, in-the-head art of the solo player and solitary composer meets the road of the most formal outer world in full community. Braxton wrote later in his **Composition Notes C** about the project that the studio date was preceded by only two rehearsals, one the day before and one the day of the recording; he speaks of writing much of the music itself in the studio as well. It was recorded at Generation Sound in Manhattan by a sterling array of some of the most virtuoso improvisers and creative studio musicians on the New York-cum-global scenes then; and it won high critical acclaim, including **Down Beat's** critic's choice for 1977 Record of the Year. It came with his first offering of his composition notes on each track as part of extensive liner notes about his own music.

Like the LPs described above, it was also a first in two noteworthy ways: it was Braxton's first recording of his music for "creative orchestra" (and his first use of that term in print), and it came with his first offering of his composition notes on each track as part of extensive liner notes about his own music (the opening salvo followed up by the two above that offered much more of same). His words about both firsts are worth citing for their insights into that meeting of rubber and road:

I refer to this medium as Creative Orchestra Music both as a means to separate this activity from my work in notated

Orchestra music and also because I feel the phrase Creative Orchestra Music best describes this medium. For to understand what has been raised in the progression of creative music as it has been defined through the work of the Ellingtons-Hendersons-Mingus's-Colemans-etc., is to be aware of the most significant use of the orchestra medium in the past hundred years (and some).

In keeping with the lead-with-the-familiar strategy, **51** is most like the conventional big-band chart: a fast, brash romp down “post-Henderson/Ellington” lines. Supersax-style sectional writing, rhythmic riffs vamping in and out behind hot-boppish baritone and alto sax (Bruce Johnstone and Braxton) and trumpet (Cecil Bridgewater) solos, splashy clashes of brass and reeds...all pleasantly climaxing in the most open, rather than (conventionally) the most tightly, intensely orchestrated, part of the piece.

56 dives through said opening into a stark contrast of concept and sound. Its own opening sounds like some low and high musical foghorns of reeds and muted brass wafting from a dark night sea of soft metal, low bass, and high overtones. Soloists are listed—Dave Holland, Muhal Richard Abrams, Richard Teitelbaum, Braxton, Frederick Rzewski, George Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell—but are so blended in with the ensemble and scored sounds that they don't stand out as such, as in **51** and similar tracks. The lineages invoked here are “the post-Webern and AACM continuums of creative music.” It is a classic example—short, but prefiguring more such meditatively static music as Braxton and his work matured—of that part of his work “jazz” purists and identity-political chauvinists would come to denounce as Eurocentrically affected. In contrast, his own notes about it are memorably and poetically telling:

A slow pulse environment...not a complex work that contains thousands of notes and/or precision multi-structures...nor

does **56** seek to provide terms for extended individual solo realization...rather the work is conceived to establish a way of perceiving sound distance and inner purpose...as it concerns the composite ensemble (rather than “the glorious soloist”)...in this work objects (thought) are moving so fast it appears to be slow—or the slowest...almost lifelessly...a sea of drifting sounds...“Listen to the one who had the best opportunity but did not take it”...For the participating instrumentalist this work can be viewed as a series of involvements that necessitates patience and growth...Too often in this time period we tend to confuse movement and excitement with “real”—and this is not always the case...**56** is a haven for those of us who might need to lean back and compare notes (every once in awhile)...

In the tracks that follow, the oscillation between most jazz-hot and most spacey-out pieces repeats, suggesting that the white-hot boil of **51** (then **58**) was being counterbalanced by its static, softer foil in **56** (as **58** would be by **57**). (The final track, **55**, stands as a brilliant synthesis of the two sides of that musical coin.) That pattern, of high energy offset by deep stasis, would grow through playlists and individual pieces (most notably, **96**) in Braxton’s future work.

58 pulls us right back into the energy fray, with a march dedicated to John Phillip Sousa, and inspired by his **Stars and Stripes Forever**. It evokes the strong Germanic side of Braxton’s affinity for that strain in European and European-American music traditions, and reminds us of its history in the jazz tradition, starting with the itinerant German music teachers teaming up with the plethora of post-Civil War band instruments in the South to teach newly freed slaves.

Whenever I hear this piece, I recall two conversations, one with Malinké Elliott and the other with Henry Louis Gates and Werner

Sollors. Malinké spoke about stories he heard from his elders about battles of the bands in turn-of-the-century St. Louis. The neighborhoods were ethnically divided, and each sent a band marching to the center of town. There they would meet to compete by simply playing over and through each other, like armies in formation breaking into hand-to-hand combat. Whichever band was left intact and prevailing at the end won. The contests typically ended in a showdown between the black and the German bands. At an academic conference I attended in Berlin, Gates and Sollors (premier scholars of African-American and German-American history, respectively) spoke at length about the special musical ties between the two groups in that city then.

The hokey 4/4 oompah strut rambles into a breakdown of the rhythm that suggests an Indian *tala* in its complexity, or one of Braxton's "pulse tracks." It produces the same excitable soloing as did **23G**, on **Five Pieces 1975**, in trumpeter Jon Faddis, who shows the "free" and the fixed to be the match most made in heaven in the world, and in George Lewis, whose playing here, as in **The Montreux-Berlin Concerts**, informs trombonists everywhere that they can quit trying to do whatever it is they're doing, because it's already been done as well as possible. Braxton's clarinet solo adds up to his similar match-up, Ayler-like, between the fixed (primal American ditty "Little Liza Jane") and the "free" (most intense furies of rhythm, harmonies, and speedy, snakey lines).

Braxton calls **57** "an atonal ballad," and, like **56**, a collective rather than virtuoso-soloist vehicle. However, its three duos have the feel of some of the trio music with Roscoe Mitchell, who plays bass sax with Braxton's contrabass sax over a lush percussion carpet laid by Messrs. Warren Smith, Karl Berger, Barry Altschul, and the late Philip Wilson. It is a showcase of various textures woven through sections drifting by, cloudlike, by contrasting voices intoning over layers of less conversant, more punctuating sounds. "I conceived this material in terms of how it visually looked

(sounded) moving across the space of the sound canvas,” Braxton wrote.

55 is another jump back, to the big-band jazz universe, this one inspired by Ellington and Mingus. Kenny Wheeler, Braxton, and Muhal Richard Abrams all solo openly over and between blocks of sectional writing marked by extreme intervallic leaps, to disrupt the usual more tightly continuous knit of its more traditional counterpart, as well as repetitive vamps to affirm said knit.

For Braxton, this composition

moves to solidify a state of “indecision” as to the overall effect of a given note (phrase) decision—and what this means is that I myself am always surprised about “what happened” in the music.

Despite the many mentions of influences, Braxton declares here, as often elsewhere, that **55** was composed in “moment time,” spontaneously-intuitively rather than systematically. He is just as careful (and consistent) in explaining that process as more than one of (a racist-essentialist kind of) “natural” penchant for inspired improvisation, as for “rhythm” or some other kind of genius that bypasses intellect:

55 is not an affirmation of a fixed theorem (that glorifies some mathematical theorem) nor did the work happen by chance. Rather the final realness of this structure involves the integration of improvisation and preparation—and *as such* these matters can be discussed (my emphasis).

The piece serves well the needs of both the traditional and newer jazz audiences. While increasing the LP’s cachet as Record of the Year material, it gives body to what the composer would later call his “Tri-Axium:”

How we integrate our past (and the past of humanity) into future decisions will determine the success of the future (or if there is to be a future).

In fact, the musical hero named as an inspiration (along with, again, the AACM) for the final track, Karlheinz Stockhausen, himself said something to the same effect.ⁱⁱⁱ **59**'s effectiveness as a climax lies in its mix of flexibility, simplicity, and directness, and its showcase of the duo dynamic at its most exciting (a particular treat in the Mitchell-Braxton duo here, one typically less supported by a band and more subdued on other recordings). The post-Stockhausen aspect here might be read in the piece's simple isolation of, focus on, and working over the improvisational parameters and attitudes developed from the AACM foundation.

The score is a series of punches, pitches mostly open, cued in by the conductor (Abrams, here) and splayed off into chords and new accents through his spontaneous signals. The conductor effectively functions as a third player in a trio with the two featured soloists, his instrument being the ensemble. The piece has even more potential than many to create something new on the spot, and that in the most visceral, accessible terms.

Creative Orchestra Music 1976's playlist—especially backed by the Arista label's imprimatur, then so honored by the major mainstream jazz-critical community—stands as a celebration of both American culture and its international DNA in the tradition of high court musics from around the world and history, especially those that give a new voice and meaning to time-honored myths and songs. It is a flower cultivated not in the hothouse of genre (jazz, art music) but decidedly from the same richest Germanic-African soil in America that has produced its most brilliant such blooms all along, in the composer's own luxuriant garden.

The strategy of hiring musicians as skilled as classically-trained readers and commercial studio players as they were as improvisers was no doubt crucial to the success of the session. Jazz artists who had played with each other and/or had played common material in a common idiom had long been capable of doing the same kind of quick ad hoc turnaround from first rehearsal to finished recording in as short a time, but these tracks are the proof in the pudding of that “jazz scene” that was not your father’s anymore.

Not only is the reading comparable to that required by contemporary art music, but the improvisational idiom born with free jazz had grown beyond its initial wide open leaps and thrashings into a fluid vocabulary of nuance, control, and complexity that is as mastered here as bebop was a decade after its few intrepid inventors established their new idiom. (It’s also interesting that the AACM is consistently associated with the serial/postserial European composers in the continuum of influence behind those most “non-jazz” pieces.) All these fresh strengths would find even more expression in the LPs to come.

Duets 1976

Recalling the comparison of the quartets with classical string quartets, we turn to two more such “composer sketch labs,” the duo and solo LPs. The focus shifts here from young-turk showmanship and teamwork to the intimacies of intergenerational familial dialogue and, later, of naked monologue. As the **23** series constituted schematics for the quartet context, and the **50s** for large ensemble, so the **60s** and **40s** and other material chosen for **Duets** were consciously crafted or chosen to serve the more relaxed and openly interactive context of the duo.

As a next step from most accessible to farthest afield from the jazz-marketing point of view, an alto sax/piano duet, and this particular duo, had an interesting profile. The least unsettling duo instrumentation to conservative jazz tastes is one that features one

(preferably a chordal) instrument with one that plays the melody/improviser role. Pianist Muhal Richard Abrams fulfilled the dual function of being a voice from the pre-free-jazz club scene of Chicago—the mainstream, grassroots tradition—as well as the seminal scout out of that old and local and into the new and global terrain, the soil of which brought forth Braxton’s exotic fruits. Like the quartet LPs, its mix of traditional and new offered both bearings to orient and new paths to explore. That blend included the material, which again included originals with covers and public domain.

Eric Dolphy’s **Miss Ann** opens Side A—an also interesting cover to consider as a choice of repertoire easier for the jazz audience to swallow than would be an original work. Dolphy had been as much the controversial outcat a decade before as Braxton was in some circles then and even more later, and for similar musical reasons (weird playing style, involvement with Third Stream). Now his tunes were in “fake books,” and called at jam sessions, and playing the role on this LP a standard played on the last one. Braxton’s suggestion, intended or not: you’re having trouble with my new and original? Stick with me, this is just the beginning; in a few years it’ll be old school too.

As with the previous cover, it feels something like a warm-up piece. If it is a more challenging line than **You Stepped Out of a Dream** to jam to, once it has been learned and is more or less automatically rendered, it brings a looser and lighter feel to the post-bop playground, in contrast to the tighter, tenser one of a Parker line.

An alert ear will pick up the written and improvised sections from **60**. The **23** pieces were close to typical jazz lead sheets in structure—little machines with components, such as AABA sections, generally fairly determined charts; later series, such as the **40s** and **69s** (and the odd number not part of a series, such as this

one and Side B's track one [62]) would go more into suites, or collages, or fragments and vamps...simple at first, then more complex—looser, more mutable, flexible, and varied (more options than repetitious patterns of A and B). **60** sounds a series of phrases voiced by clarinet and piano that evoke, again, the contemporary art music recital. Its affect is light, and its palette delights in the melodic-harmonic language of atonality. The piece oscillates between written phrases and the open improvisations they launch.

This is a natural point to talk about a certain “conference of the birds” named Arnold Schoenberg, Anthony Braxton, and Muhal Richard Abrams. Braxton invokes both Ornette Coleman and Schoenberg in his **Composition Notes** as inspiring **60** and **62**. He has often made a point to acknowledge the influence of both as lying not so much in their respective systems (Schoenberg's 12-tone, Coleman's harmolodics) per se, but (as with all his heroes) in modeling the profile of what he calls a “restructuralist”—coming up with something fresh and original to contribute to the idiom/discourse he or she inherited, something fully informed and trained by that tradition, but then revamping and/or extending it in some way. That said, one of the remarkable aspects of his music, as also Abrams', Cecil Taylor's, Coleman's, Albert Ayler's and many others since, has been the way African-American idioms and voices have dovetailed so organically with that Western musical paradigm of atonality.

Remarkable, because it would seem counterintuitive, that such a rare and cultivated hothouse flower of Western art music theory would find such common ground with what would seem at first glance the comparatively weed-like wildflowers of free jazz and improvised music. (Indeed, critics of Braxton's music from the jazz-purist and politically ethnic camps have grouched at its atonal aspect as Europhiliac affectation.) Schoenberg was as schooled and skilled in Western conservatory theory and praxis as they come, albeit as masterfully creative as he was intellectually rigorous;

Braxton and Abrams, by comparison, are autodidacts, working musicians in a field far removed from that Viennese circle and its European and American academic offshoots. Even Cecil Taylor, who did get some conservatory training in such contemporary European music, didn't then use it as the certified acolyte, to go on to be a composer to the idiom trained, with a tenured position to match.

In fact, the piano itself has often been problematized as too charged with Western harmonic tradition—no less so in the jazz tradition, in which its very function in the “rhythm” section was more to affirm the harmony than the rhythm—to be useful to musical explorations beyond it. Cecil Taylor's way around that was to treat it like a pitched percussion instrument, and develop something more like a solo music than anything, even when playing with others. The palette that will emerge from that approach will naturally be the same as Schoenberg's “twelve-tone,” because the piano is by design a chromatically tuned instrument.

Abrams' way with that dodecaphony-by-design is more conversational, less percussive, more an additive to than radical departure from the diatonic cast of the keyboard in both jazz and art music histories. He and Braxton share in these duets the kind of musical father-son talk that had been taking place between them and their AACM family all along, showing the Chicago roots of Braxton's thinking as a composer, and as a player voicing it on his instruments. Hearing them inspires reflections on the commonalities between the Second Viennese School and the African-American vocabularies, as between, say, African art and Picasso's cubism.

It bears remembering that early jazz, European atonality (via Schoenberg, Berg, Webern), and American Experimentalism (fathered by Charles Ives and others) were all deconstructive

modernist movements that took place in the same early-twentieth-century years. While Schoenberg's idiom went on to rule the academy, the reaction in his time and place to his piano music—the *oeuvre* Braxton claims as the primary inspiration for his own “language musics” for solo alto saxophone, about which ahead—was not that his music was too cerebrally esoteric for popular tastes, but that it was too much the regression to “primitivism.”

The common ground of all three movements is the liberation of the chromatic scale from diatonic pitch hierarchies, and then the pitched note itself from the chromatic scale. To avoid getting overly technical or theoretical about this here, think of the Western system of Common Practice harmony that governed everything we called art music, folk music, popular music, and jazz, as being a 2000-year chess game of white and black pieces in which the white side, starting with the Greeks, had an intrinsic advantage. Now picture the relatively recent deconstruction of that system and its reconstruction into atonal idioms as a melting down of all the pieces into black and white pebbles on a reconfigured board to become instead the ancient Chinese game of Go: no more hierarchical armies clashing unequally on an unlevel playing field, but a richer, more nuanced complexity and egalitarianism of potential strategies for optimum gaming.

African-American traditions generally tolerated sounds deemed dissonant and dirty by the Western classist aesthetic that polarized them into “high” and “low” categories anyway; the black composer tradition—another respected influence on Braxton and the AACM—also included easy integration of the Second Viennese and American Experimentalist devices of serialism, post-serialist “noise,” the aleatory, the ludic and others.

60 and **62** spell and sing all such connections out, the first in a flowing, conversational way, the second more pointillistically, with more of that “gravitational intrigue” between the silences and

sounds, the more dramatic range of timbres and voices of woodwinds, the lows and highs of pitch. Both improvisations, aided by Braxton's more open and flexible forms, establish the rightness of this tonal idiom to this African-American river, make it easy listening by being easy playing.

40P steers us down the more African side of that river, in the bark of Braxton's contrabass clarinet, with its (also atonal) blues-tinged line and rhythm: the repeating cycle of rhythmic and tonal pattern, the tight and directed rather than loose and meandering weave. Mingus replaces Schoenberg with Coleman as acknowledged inspirations. Braxton: "The reality of this music moves to reawaken our memories about the last five hundred years by calling our attention to the primary basis of the 'blues'...a vibrational blues structure that reestablishes what this continuance can mean in the open space implications of the music. The blues will go on forever" (**Composition Notes C**, 150-51).

Maple Leaf Rag has the hasty, half-muffled feel of an old gramophone recording of Scott Joplin himself knocking it off casually (much more interesting than the usual polished academic renditions). Braxton's blocky phrasing and scruffy-scampy tone sound right at home here, evoking the ricky-tick feel of generic early ragtime or jazz. The more current spin comes in the patches when he blows in a pointedly different key than the score as rendered by Abrams. The more suite-like form resonates well with Braxton's own then-new, post-**23** compositions here, reminding us of the wider range of such structures in the pre- and early-jazz band books.

Nickie is a freely improvised ballad, reaching for the lush and sweet hush of romantic tenderness. Braxton plays a cool, vulnerable, lyrical alto sax; Abrams feels his way around a chord selection to match with a ginger sensitivity. Unprescribed spontaneity in such a context could serve as a composer's stepping

stone to a more finely resolved orchestration, if such were the desired result. Here, left as it unfolded in the moment, then titled in tribute to Braxton's wife, it rather says things straight from the heart of life's ultimate duo, two lovers: unorchestrated, improvised, the love and passion here are always tentative, never quite connecting, even as they swell in the desire and attempt to do so. Shifting, sliding, both reaching for something always just out of reach...and not until that process stops does it get a name, an identity to match its state.

Overall, this LP is a dialogue between past and present about the most alluring and promising futures—a deeper, softer dimension of the artist's mind at work and play in its natural fields.

The Montreux-Berlin Concerts

That combustion between the coolest (the academy-domesticated child of the original more exotic blooms of the Second Viennese School of composers) and the hottest (the pre-academy-domesticated African-American improvisation and performance, whatever the language) is passed like a torch to the next piece in the sequence here.

63 picks up the thread of **60** and **62**, from **Duets 1976**, as well as much about **56**, **57**, and **59**—**Creative Orchestra Music 1976**'s “post-AACM/Webern-Stockhausen” pieces—in its atonal pitch relationships, in both written and improvised sections. Most brilliantly, however, it gleams like a diamond peak of Braxton's signature journey through his most original materials to the fullest realization of their potential in the moment of live performance. It shines that high light over the more rugged, messier and shadier trails and scree leading up to it, for several reasons.

The earlier quartet and duo gestures were, by comparison, interesting and fun for players and listeners as postulations of the same ideas present here, and as demonstrations of what might be

done with them; the creative orchestra pieces were satisfying as such for their larger complex of instruments and interactions. All were studio projects, and as lively as any such can be. **63**, by this particular band in this particular venue, upped the ante in three dynamic ways:

- the quartet, as the classical string quartet did for Beethoven and Bartok, served here as the perfect fulcrum between the sparer, more partial sketches of the smaller groups and the full-color paintings of the largest (orchestra, be it “symphony” or “creative”). The music is flying thicker and faster, with more suppleness, muscle, viscera; the players go all the way back to Circle together, and to some of the first of Braxton’s own work as leader and composer (fellow AACM’er trombonist George Lewis’s replacement of Kenny Wheeler in Berlin increased rather than detracted from this sense of familiarity). They know both each other and the material so well that they take us instantly beyond any hint of the tentative awkwardness that comes naturally with the new and experimental. Here, orchestrating riffs and blowing solo and collective improvs on them in the language of atonal European art music makes as much organic sense and generates as much light and heat as did Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie doing the same thing with the American Songbook, or Duke Ellington with French Impressionism, or Jelly Roll Morton with French Opera and his “Spanish tinge,” or James Reese Europe with John Phillip Sousa, or Thelonious Monk with European cabaret, or Miles Davis and Gil Evans with Spanish composers. Chicago—via the AACM, and especially in Braxton’s and Lewis’s extensions thereof in this music—becomes an official sister city to fin-de-siecle Vienna and Weimar Berlin on the transnational, trans-historical “jazz map” of such connections;

- it is a live performance—the first and only such of all these recordings. As such, in this as in all its tracks, it brings an energy we hear received, reciprocated, and fed in the regular spontaneous bursts of applause throughout them all;
- it is a live performance for an audience of Berliners—Prussians, the martial home tribe that loomed so large in the American popular and concert music of the 19th century, which African Americans worked so gloriously into their 20th-century field of dominance, both in America and abroad.

If such music would so often be treated as a stranger in a strange land in its own American home, here it splashed down like some prodigal son returned (or maybe like the best friend he made promise to return in his place, with his messages, just before he died in his battles). Both martial and serial material are clearly appreciated in the same way African-American gospel music is in the Protestant churches of (especially) former East Germany where Protestantism was born, or the blues in England where its folk forms still had strong roots. In all such cases, the material originated in Europe, spread to white and black America, and came back home in the new African-American hands and voices.

The next four tracks, from Sides One and Two, were recorded in Montreux, Switzerland, in July of 1975. **40N**, inspired by South Indian classical music, opens with a bowed bass drone and cymbals shimmering, *vina*-like, under muted trumpet and clarinet improvising around a line staggered through a couple of different modal fragments. It opens up after that intro into a less mysterious, more offhand give-and-take of free improvisation. Braxton switches to soprano, then to alto sax. The piece loosens and opens even further into more pointillistic-then-fluid whimsy...the full drum kit enters...

...and **23J** bursts forth seamlessly, another of the post-bop/Coleman lines that dominated the first two LPs here. Dedicated to T.S. Eliot, it takes Braxton through an extended, probing solo that plumbs his way of bebop phrasing, from the chock-a-block through the lava flows more fluid, to the primal screams more fiery.

Again, the enthusiastic live applause signals the probable inspiration for such serious solo statements by him and the others here. Dave Holland's open *a capella* solo following reminds us of similar openings of harmonic, rhythmic, and formal-structural fields his former major bandleader, Braxton's fellow Gemini Miles Davis, had made. The reminder grows upon hearing Kenny Wheeler and Barry Altschul chime in as organically as, if more volubly atonally than, Miles playing with Holland and drummer Tony Williams.

40(O) opens with a relaxed Braxton ruminating freely on clarinet with Holland and Altschul. This piece marks the end of the **40s**, a series among others that included the "arhythmic" pre-pulse-track patterning of the Kelvin pieces, which **40(O)** also is. He describes it as "69 notes in 6 different phrase groupings in a time field of 24-1/2 beats," suggesting the ludic approach that launched many of his innovations. Having conducted and played this particular piece often as his graduate teaching assistant and sometime bandmate a couple of decades later at Wesleyan University, I can attest to the way repeated rehearsals of such material lead naturally from the initial feeling of its impossibility (to even play as written, let alone interpret creatively enough to swing with and improvise on it—shades of Mingus) to the status of catchy Stravinsky-ish ditty to downright St.-Vitus-dance-cum-earworm you could do in your sleep and never get out of your head if you tried, so you'd damn well better learn to interpret it creatively. Which, of course, the crew does here...

...to travel then back in compositional and forward in real time, to Berlin in the summer of '76, and back to the **6** series, with the Fellini-esque **6F**. Dedicated to Stockhausen, it was the very first of the Kelvin series of improvisations, those based on “a phrase-based repetition structure that establishes a fixed rhythmic pattern—with open actual pitch possibilities based on suggested contour” ...his... “first attempt to move into the world of repetition and pattern thinking.”

This rhythmic alternative to melodic-harmonic approaches to pitch generation was not so radical for its emphasis on repeated rhythmic patterns—plenty of Afrocentric approaches demonstrate that, including, closest to home here, Cecil Taylor’s likening of the piano to “88 tuned bongos”—but it is so for its conscious assertion and exploration of pulse, and patterns and cycles thereof, as a systematically (if we grant the personal-ludic the same status as system as we grant the public-paradigmatic) analyzable generation of pitch selections. Not melody lines, not chords, but rhythmic patterns are posited as pitch generators, for both composer and improviser: as in speech, where we all select our pitches and their interplay, our cadences and accents, according to the rhythms of our emotions and thoughts at play, both as individuals and as members of groups. There is a certain range—nothing precisely fixed, but also not infinite—within which our keel is evenly pitched, both to ourselves and others. That range defines the unevenly pitched as well, and we ride it through both as we will, can, and must.

6F, then, shows what such a new approach can generate after it’s been worked long enough. This one had been performed and recorded by this band often and long enough that they had only to set it in motion to make it gush with its juiciest yields. It goes much farther out with its improvisations than did three previous recorded versions. Sometimes the bass and drums hold close to the pattern, with the horns providing complementary colors. Braxton’s

first improvisation, on contrabass clarinet, is loosely anchored over the drums; his puppy whines are rejoined by George Lewis's snuffles and grunts, both moving in and out of the rhythm. A hot drum solo follows, then all four are in, noodling into a walking groove...then another written part, walky, swingy, punchy. Extended collective and solo improvisations continue to weave through romps through the written material (hello, Nino Rota).

With all due (and genuine) respect to the Kenny Wheeler version of the quartet, the George Lewis version is my favorite of all the groups here. Lewis's trombone voice and chops, his intellect, his Chicago/AACM roots and creds all so match and complement Braxton's versions of same that they bowl over an interest that would otherwise have been merely piqued (albeit radically) by comparison. That any of my fellow jazz-schooled, Western-music-schooled baby-boomer aficionados could hear anything but the strongest beating heart and blood-flooded brains of the American music tradition at its most hip and worldly in this music—the clearest present and future of its past—and exclude it from their working definition of “jazz” makes me shake my head in perplexed wonder, now as then.

40K is another perfect storm of the artist's then-new visions and the by-then-well-schooled and seasoned voices articulating them so eloquently. The comparison to the late Beethoven and Bartok string quartets is perhaps most apt here. It is a full dose of the artist's essence, unfettered by earlier (and more American) considerations of audience and market considerations, or by the special effects and complexities of the large ensemble, and beyond the sparseness and solitude of solos and duos, especially in the studio. We can feel the equilibrium of full-flown energies and potentials, the volcano at eruption's height, the lava racing to the four corners of the round earth, and that not in some uninhabited clime or island, but right where the heart of this particular

civilization can take in the whole spectacle, and either be mowed down and burned up by or survive and never forget it.

6C (composed in 1967) is another Fellini/Rota-esque circusy piece, suggesting one of Europe's first effects on Braxton's music. (My colleague Ronald Radano hears the shadow of Kurt Weill in the melody, and notes a passing allusion to the University of Southern California's football team song, "Fight On!")^{iv} The other live recording of **6C**, from around the same time as this one, is more developed and tweaked in some ways, but this one expands on it in another way, by halving the two-beat oompah feel into a more open groove that opens up the space for more low blatts and other spontaneous effects. Extended improvisation—mostly a Hold-That-Tiger-ish horn duet over rhythm—leads to more noodlings, then a fade-out, with no restatement of the head.

Following on the heels of **Creative Orchestra Music 1976's** success, both musically and critically, **The Montreux/Berlin Concerts**, arguably, even trumped it in both ways. It served up a purer, more bracing distillation of the music for those hardcore fans and critics who had ears for it, and it demonstrated the fact and details of the popular appeal of the supposedly esoteric music in live performance. As the endpoint of an arc of courageous and creative marketing of a new and challenging music to the mainstream but open-minded jazz community of critics and fans, one affirmed by largely good-to-rave reviews and reception, it would seem to be the *pièce de résistance*. Braxton's place in jazz history and careerism would seem to have been optimally launched from the firmest possible foundation.

Then came...

For Trio

When this LP's one piece was composed, in the fall of 1977, the country was well into its first Democratic administration since the

Nixon-Ford crew took over in the wake of the 1968 shakeups. Never the partisan-political activist, Braxton has nonetheless typically been attuned (as a self-confessed “political junkie”) to such dynamics in society and politics, and his work has always reflected them in various ways. Without making too much of this social-political shift, it’s safe to note that this was a time before the Iranian revolution, and during a moment of hopeful optimism after a decade of little of either in the (let’s call it) post-countercultural community. A visionary artist might feel in such a moment unharried enough to let down the guard erected by old battles and take a look around at their new, more peaceful and promising favorable outcomes.

More personally, it was the heyday of the Creative Music Studio, Braxton’s Woodstock-neighborhood institution conceived and designed to promulgate just his sort of work. Launched by German vibraphonist Karl Berger with Ornette Coleman and Ingrid Sertso in 1971, its staff and round of illustrious guests and serious music students provided the vital function of rehearsal bands for Braxton, Cecil Taylor, and other experimental composers for improvisers with few if any such outlets for their ambitious and challenging work, especially for larger ensembles.

“Anthony was a regular at CMS during those years” Berger recalls. “He workshopped a lot of the music on the **Creative Orchestra Music** record with the students. We had a kind of orchestra rehearsal every afternoon, always about 20 or 25. He would come for a week. He was a regular there for as long as he lived in Woodstock, starting in 1973.

“The 1970s was the golden age for the CMS, especially between 1976 and 1982. The practice of the big labels like Arista at the time with Anthony—of focusing on one or two more adventurous artists and really promoting them heavily—had the effect of drawing more people into the music of CMS generally. More students

would enroll to come and learn this music. The student bands became big, good resources for composers, Anthony especially. They helped him copy the parts for his Four Orchestras project, and were on hand to play through work as it was written, allowing him to hear it. In the days before computers, that was quite a luxury.”

A propo of Braxton’s disavowals at the time of “jazz” and “Western art music” as categories limiting his music, and his replacement of them with “world,” and “universal,” Berger says, “The more the CMS grew during that time, the more it became the world music center. More people from different traditions came in, and the world music genre was on the rise. Particularly the summer sessions had a lot of Brazilian, Turkish, Indian, African people there, who were bringing their own music in. The countercultural aura of Woodstock drew a healthy cross section of talented musicians, too—people who had gone through the conventional music education, training, and professional situations and weren’t satisfied with that. This was their chance to get an intensive eight-week exposure to the best players in the kind of direction they wanted to take their music.”

The double serving of the same dish (**Composition 76**, played by a different trio on each side) here is an extension on the earlier **73**, made for a previous performance by Braxton, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell at The Kitchen in New York. It was designed to maximize the possibilities of multiinstrumentalism (each player was instructed to play at least nine different instruments), of a particular kind of synaesthesia (passages were notated in nine different colors, plus black), and disparate musical ideas (“102 multiple phrase grouping components and 25 unison grouping components”—short written phrases in 19 notated sections cued in by one of the players to serve as entrances to, exits from, or parallels or supports to solo, duo, or trio improvisations (24 designated).

More summarily, this is something of a landmark piece in the composer's *oeuvre* for the way that it brings to a head three things: (1) the AACM roots as manifest in a trio of peers, begun in the late '60s with Leroy Jenkins and Wadada Leo Smith, especially through the early **6** series of compositions; (2) the appropriation/reconstruction of conventional music notation for Braxton's brand of creative music (both composed and improvised); and (3) a similar takeover of conventional musical form for such music.

As a 10-year reunion of the old gang (two different bandmates, but from the same "family," comprising the same number three), the performances invoke especially that of **6E**, from **Three Compositions of New Jazz**. More maturity and mastery here infuse the play between vocal and instrumental gestures; the play between the written and the improvised is more seamless, less forced; the serious amateur's aesthetic maxim ("if the fool will become wise, let him persist in his folly") is fulfilling its promise here. The first version shows off the gentle flow of conferring winds (flutes brooking each other and Ewart's percussion like water over rocks, sax barking away the humdrum); the second is a more active and bolder interpretation, with a wider range of reeds and vocal dynamics. Moments of rarefied atonal counterpoint and conservatory correctness give way to shocking shrieks and growls; some extreme of cold keeps meeting its counterpart in heat. While more the maze than its predecessor pieces, **76** pumps their blood with the same proportion of control and balance through its rises in the heat of freedom of invention.

The notation, too, brings together in a definitive, comprehensive score devices that had been kicking around in earlier works more loosely and casually. Dubbed here "modular notation" by the composer, it stands as a complete expression of the move from a fixed script through or around which improvisations flow to one

that allows for mutations—readings both forward and back, a variety of combinations and juxtapositions of phrases, tempos, pitch and rhythm placements—of itself. The improviser can thus improvisationally massage and manipulate the form as well as its contents, can thus co-create both with the composer. The use of color, of perspective, of abstract shapes engages sheerly visual abstractions, the subjective aspects of improvisation (indeed, Braxton likens the piece to a “Japanese painting” fueled by unadorned meditative focus and intention).

The overarching effect is something like a radical return to the roots of early Western music notation, when it was still a literate device determined by, to aid rather than define, oral-aural tradition, shared lore and craft, and material. Influences of Satie and Cage (sublimation of ego from naked will into measured, defined processes) and cubist and abstract painters (deconstruction/reconstruction of elemental components) are palpable and pronounced.

For Trio stands as a look back over the ground covered by the intrepid mountaineers to date, a laying down of the essentials for a comfortable, viable base camp from which to plot out the next trek to the summit. The concept of modular notation would expand in coming decades to the juxtaposition of works from the beginning to the most current of the opus numbers in simultaneous performances—one of Braxton’s major strategies for rising to the challenge to creative innovators voiced by Stockhausen, of integrating “all that came before” as one proceeds, as he did here.

For Four Orchestras

And so we come to the tour de force, here and now as then and there. If the rubber met the road in **Creative Orchestra Music 1976**, it left the ground and withdrew into the jumbo jet its wheels gripped on earth to soar with it roaring up to its stratospheric cruise.

Braxton's liner notes' description of **Composition 82** rested on the term "multi-orchestralism." This multiorchestral way of making music has a long and varied history, from medieval antiphony to abovementioned battles of the marching bands, among others. Braxton nods here to such battles in his own Chicago neighborhood and in Kansas City as influences on **82**; he also mentions Charles Ives' Fourth Symphony's scored simulations of such clashes, along with works by Stockhausen (**Gruppen** and **Carrie**), Xenakis (**Polytope**), Sun Ra, and parallel approaches by other cultures. Such divisions of sound have often represented the interplay between separate aspects of reality (e.g., spirit and matter), or different cultures. The concept here, however, is more unified-sensory than that:

There has always been something special about the reality of different ensembles making music in the same physical universe space that has excited my imagination. It is as if the whole of the universe were swallowed up—leaving us in a sea of music and color.

Perhaps this vivid sensory experience is the key to understanding Braxton's penchant for all of his syntheses, innovations, and complexities—they all make for that much prettier, brighter a noise (it is a more charitable explanation than to say he's lost himself in mental mazes and pretensions, anyway). As he himself writes at the end of his notes on **82**:

For the realness of multiple orchestra activity directly sheds light on the cross vibrational activity that takes place in everyday living (that being the realness of creative—and "real"—invention and how it is related to the very fabric of existence on this plane). For at the heart of my series of works in multi-orchestralism is the attempt to create a music that can dynamically accentuate (and celebrate) the multi-

complexual—*and not complexual*—realness of life on this planet, as a means to be better prepared to deal with this sector in space, and as a factor that might hopefully be positively related to what this preparation could vibrationally and spiritually reveal about “living” (emphasis mine; Braxton’s “complexities” are not affectations).

As a completely notated work performed by conservatory-trained student and professional musicians and conductors—no improvisation, not a hint of the jazz tradition here—it stands out in the Arista series as a complete and blatant extravaganza of anomaly. It appears as the *pièce de resistance* of the compositional language employed throughout the series, after that language had been plied by unimpeachable masters of the jazz tradition, to their improvisational art’s ends, in their thick jazz accents. Here it morphs radically and completely over to the contemporary concert composer’s side of things in aesthetic, performance, and sound. In its prominent dedication to “historian-writer-educator Eileen Southern,” it associates itself with a paragon of summative scholarship of African-American music culture.

Part 1 opens with short, fleeting phrases—very much the post-Webern *punktueller* affair. It gradually moves into a higher level of density, percussive continuity, complexity, all sustained at a high intensity, suggesting the Ives influence; followed by a return to an even sparser-spacier, silence-salted series of moments. These oscillations between extremes constitute part of Braxton’s signature approach, in contrast to likeminded composers in the same idiom (Feldman, Reich, Glass) who have reached for similar trance effects through unrelenting sameness. The music alternates that with more sustained sonic clouds floating by, and more clear-sky silence between them.

When the first longer-held notes occur, shortly into Part 2—for relatively brief durations, to construct some *klangfarbliche* melodic

phrases, but sounding dramatically like a swelling stream after the steady trickles and rushes before it—we shift from Webern’s language of notes and phrases to Stockhausen’s of “sound masses” wandering around. Panning of tracks in the mix simulates the central feature of sound traveling through space, itself simulated in performance by scoring it from one orchestra to another. The piece settles back into a mix of the punctual and the textural, thickening the sound canvas with more activity, layerings, and dynamic flux. **82** ends not with a bang nor with a whimper, but simply as it began (many short phrases, a few long tones).

For Braxton to choose this work for his final statement, and for Backer/Arista to let him, says the whole relationship there was summed up in that conclusion, radically disengaged from the “jazz-industrial complex.” It says that the most important thing for him was to use it as a visibly fleeting opportunity to do something he wouldn’t otherwise get to, even if it burned bridges and set him on a course he couldn’t then turn back from. It expresses the same priorities from Backer’s side.

“I thought of the four orchestras project as something that Anthony deserved to have done,” he says—as a parting reward for the success of the previous recordings, especially **Creative Orchestra Music 1976**. Its extravagance of resources, ambition, and documentation stood then and now as a statement by both artist and producer about the kind of support and recognition they thought the music itself would duly earn if America’s blinders of racism and anti-intellectual lack of cultural literacy and taste were removed.

As a synthesis of the Second Viennese School and its torchbearers, the American Independent composers from Ives on, the African-American composers tradition, the counterparts of the multi-orchestral from other cultures, and the AACM, the statement beyond the music here takes us from jazz-as-Americana to the

music of the larger “court” that is the world. If it was a foregone conclusion that this piece would effectively lose Braxton all his stock as a jazz star, it was no less destined to take him to that larger stage of not just the world that is, but of a world that should be, by his creative vision’s utopian criteria. In that world, this recording would trump all those that came before, would extend and magnify their precepts and successes, by being hailed as a major work by a major American composer, completely consistent and continuous with the previous acclaim by the jazz world on its terms. As it was, it stands more as a guerilla fighter’s parting shot just before he runs off to fight another day.

The statement in the music, beyond the music, is that the Arista years and its fruits on record amply embodied a satisfying American flowering of Braxton’s work, in the “jazz” plot of its garden...but in doing so, and moving through flower to airborne pollen, it also showed that moment to be as evanescently improvised, as idiosyncratically composed, as the music itself.

Alto Saxophone Improvisations 1979

The logical segue, then, is back to where it all began. Offered after the most developed and populous productions, **Alto Saxophone Improvisations 1979** stands as artist’s sketchbook, blueprints, and keynote of the Arista recordings as a composer’s *oeuvre*, one that still holds up as a faithful microcosm of the larger *oeuvre* it subsequently became. The first distinguishing feature of it as such, of course, is its very issuance from the solo alto saxophone.

Whereas the public groundbreaking ceremony that was **For Alto** back in 1968 was annotated with graphic abstracts and no words, this double LP caught us up with Braxton’s extensive liner notes about the creative processes he began working out through his solo alto music in 1967. He writes that his words were that (decade) long in coming because his intellectual understanding of those processes lagged behind their musical expressions; that the value

in such solo statements lay in their facilitation of artistic contact with one's deepest, purest original and authentic self, of rejuvenation thereof, thus a replenishing of the gifts one brought to the table of one's more social music; that his particular such project was in direct response to the exhaustion of Western music principles and materials brought about by Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane, and a turn to other world cultures as well as his own creativity for alternative platforms.

Inserted with the records in the jacket is a full-sized foldout of yet more notes, with abstract line drawings, microscopically detailing the considerations and processes—what Braxton calls the “language”—of each piece. The feel of the collection is that of a conventional book of études for the classical musician, only these are not sheerly technical but also conceptual sketches (indeed, “conceptual grafting” is his declared working principle here— isolating his musical ideas into separate pieces in which he can develop them) for the intrepid musical explorer/experimentalist. The best exegesis of the individual tracks here might be a quick, off-the-cuff scan of each in sequence, drawing on both those notes and the listening experience to construct an overview of the whole.

77A employs a strategy of “reverse development” of line construction: abortive self-interruptions as the moment's impulse suggests them, quantum leaps from one fragment (say, a soft-fluid high-pitched phrase) to a radically different one (slashing loud barks at the bottom of the horn). Parker/Coltrane/Ayler and Webern/Stockhausen “language continua” are named as the sound-and-logic palette here (and it is dedicated to composer Ulysses Kay). The piece stands as the statement resulting from the mish-mash of such fragments spontaneously sequenced.

The device of ascending diatonic triplets (CDE, DEF, etc.) is worked in **77C**, repeated at various points on the horn until body/mind are entrained to, entranced by that loopy musical DNA

enough to transcend and transform it into more complex and soulful phrases and statements, to singularly lyrical and mellifluous effect (dedicated to “my friend Barbara Mayfield”).

Braxton’s fortuitously personal encounter with Ben Webster is mined for practical value in **77D**. He works the “slap-tongue” technique he learned from the master. This is a perfect example of the generic category of “extended technique”—innovation coming by taking some technical means to some musical end, or even some undeveloped by-product of such process (say, unintended squeaks or valve noise in a sax solo), and turning it into the music itself, working it as a new “language” for the new things it might have to say. It is dedicated to Emilio and Pat Cruz, two friends and fellow artists (painter and theater, respectively) in New York.

Red Top (along with Benny Golson’s **Along Came Betty** and John Coltrane’s **Giant Steps**) have the casual, perennial-music-student feel noted above about the Braxton-Holland duo recital of **You Stepped Out of a Dream**. On the solo alto, it feels like a chance encounter with a street or subway musician, or someone playing in a practice room or through an open apartment window on a city street. That isn’t to say it is not advanced playing, just to put it in the context of the *étude-cum-sketchbook* here: an artist working for himself alone, making preparations and rehearsals that are in fact skilled and developed enough to be of general interest when done, especially to fellow artists and anyone else fascinated by what goes on behind the curtain in Oz.

The narrow parameters of **77E** are the pentatonic scale and the *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo) flute tradition. The constraints of both notes and tonal expression serve as a musical mantra focusing our meditation on the proportionately vaster pool of potential (world music traditions beyond the West and Africa) that would loom increasingly larger in Braxton’s vision and work after the

Arista years. This (dedicated then to dancer Sheila Raz) stands out now as a glimpse and seed of things to come.

Another such glimpse, one of more than a few from several quarters in the 1970s, is **26F**, a seed of musical minimalism. Repetition of phrases, punctuated by slight additions, subtractions, or alterations in their flow, is the m.o. The way Braxton writes about it, and the way one then hears it in the light of his description, makes this a prime example of what I've called his "speculative music" elsewhere.^v In its musicological context, it's a term used to discuss music as a "speculum," or mirror, of some other natural, mathematical, or cultural pattern (say, a chess game, a fractal equation, or the lunar cycle). Braxton has often expressed an awareness of and interest in this for his own work. **26F** is just such a musical homology of the process of microbiological evolution, whereby strands of DNA—repetitive chains of four basic nucleotides—combine and recombine, add and shed, to express life's dance between constancy and change. Like sonic rosary beads, a piece such as **26F** (dedicated to composer Phillip Glass) reminds us of why Einstein liked to play the violin so much, and why music has played such a complementary role in the intellectual histories of scientific theory both occult and physical. (It also resonates tellingly with the history of race and gene-based racist theories thereof.)

77F is a way of getting at the concept of "ballad," both as transportive beauty and narrative in music. Paul Desmond and Johnny Hodges are cited as masters of the concept/sound, which Braxton claims as important to his own musical self-identity. It is a window onto the processes at work on **Nickie** and **77C**, described above, and is dedicated to his oldest child, daughter Terri.

Braxton's notes about **26B** suggest that his intention with all these pieces and his inserted notes and illustrations—and the recording itself—is more that of a composer/improviser writing for peers and

aspirers as potential interpreters of his pieces than for an audience of passive fans (indeed, it is dedicated to his colleague, reeds player Kalaparusha Difda, a.k.a Maurice McIntyre): “I would ask each interpreter to create a very special universe with this section,” he writes of the second of the piece’s “5 primary construction criteria that serve as regions of exploration” (the device of high-register multiphonics, or blending the sounds of both horn and voice)—“create a music that does nothing and yet holds our attention,” he adds, koan-like.

Long and short staccato lines, extreme changes of register and speed of attack “to establish dimensionality.” The latter rationale clues an insight into his sense of technique’s musical effects: a long tone or closely stepped line will suggest one spatial dimension, and the wider the range of pointillistic leaps around register, volume, and timbre, accordingly simulates the larger and more textured the sonic simulation of three-dimensional space. These techniques and strategies are juxtaposed with florid passages that thus suggest themselves as flowers in the “space” so “coordinated” by such “tools of dimensionality.”

77G is a fabric woven with the whole-tone scale, that most symmetrical halving/balancing of the chromatic scale so much more wildly sculpted by Germanic composers, itself so fully milked by their French Impressionist counterparts. It is a platform that seems to suggest Apollonian tranquility in flow and harmony, and that’s how Braxton uses it here “for lyrical and gentle improvisations.” I detect a personal connection in this abstract to the France of his own experience as first step into the world beyond the turbulent America of the time, into the kinder, gentler European center traditionally most open to and appreciative of African-Americans and avant-gardism both. It is where he first met his wife, led his own bands recording his own music, a place of similarly “lyrical and gentle” language. It is dedicated to the birth of his firstborn son, Tyondai.

26E, as both composition notes and listening reveal, is a kind of dialogue between horizontal chromatic lines running through high and low patches of spacetime and vertical (multiphonic) moments that suggest a sonic ladder from one such line to another. The notes range between the clinical (“**Composition No. 26E** utilizes intervallic shifts”) and the poetic (“the realness of shadowlike phrases,” “worlds of vapor and mystery”), a style that would come to flourish over the years since in grander productions from the same DNA. It is dedicated to the Creative Music Studio director, vibraphonist Karl Berger.

Trills constitute the “language” of **77H**. Braxton’s performance here suggests how these solo improvisations function as études not only of the given material and technical premises, but of the improvisational/creative process itself. He has often remarked that “mystery” makes up at least a third of his music’s system. Here, as in all these solo tracks, he sets in motion the premise—start trilling—and then trusts in his intuition to turn one trill into another, different one in just the right new notes, thence into a sequence of many that will order itself into a finished musical statement. This is why his abstracts and hyperrationalism have never struck me as overly determined or clinical, despite first impressions: they always seem to generate or issue from a proportionate measure of fertile, comfortable unconsciousness.

All told, then, this and all such solo recitals continue to connect with the jazz audience Arista appealed to at the time to the extent that (1) the saxophonic voice had the familiar sound and feel of one of their own at home and the proverbial woodshed, practicing; and (2) the composer/improviser’s mind at work in the original pieces was so clearly associated with the same processes brought to bear on the familiar ground of the three jazz covers presented here. More than its predecessors, however, this release speaks

directly, even exclusively (though interested eavesdroppers are welcome), to fellow specialists aspiring to the same art and craft.

For Two Pianos

As is **For Trio**, **For Two Pianos** is also a single work (**95**), this one spanning the two sides of the LP.

If the **70s** and **80s** comprised the final ascent to the summit of the *oeuvre* to date, **95** is its peak, where the first peek at the new horizon of the higher and more mountain ranges beyond was possible. It is the first of what the composer calls his Ritual and Ceremonial series of compositions:

My original intention when composing this work was that I sensed and felt that the next immediate cycle in social reality promises to be extremely difficult [**95** was written and recorded in 1980, as Reagan was ascending to succeed Carter as U.S. president, shortly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979—M.H.]—*and there is danger in the air* for all people and forces concerned about humanity and positive participation. Composition No. 95 is composed as a vehicle to alert the spirit about serious change...Composition No. 95 is my first attempt towards solidifying a ritual and sacred music.

Like **76**, it is a merging culmination of some aspects of his work that had developed disparately in different pieces throughout the years: music for piano (his very first notated work was for piano), the play of yin and yang, the worlds of both occult “perennial wisdom” and its historical overlaps with rationalistic-technocratic science, the visual and dramatic elements of theater, and Western-traditional harmony and notation. Like **76**, the language in his composition notes about it employ the word “spiritual” a lot, a sign that it does figure in his *oeuvre* as a summative, finished whole rather than a partial, exploratory sketch. As the devices in **76**

would blossom into grander versions in larger ensembles and more ambitious juxtapositions of mutable scores, the theatrical aspects and mystical affects, and the suggestions of social oppression and resistance to it in **95** would seed later elaborations of same in productions such as the *Trillium* opera series and similar stand-alone theatrical-cum-literary (his composition notes would evolve from technical to poetic/narrative descriptions) projects.

95 is written for two performers whose gender, race, and other visible aspects are shrouded in a hooded robe. Each is to enter the concert stage from the two different directions while playing a melodica; they meet in the middle, where the two grand pianos curve into each other's shape like the circled-S symbol for yin and yang; after their piano duet, they exit as they entered, playing the melodicas to a fadeout. (On the recording, their walks to and fro are simulated by slowly panning their tracks together; their opposite genders are also plain to see in a photo of them in performance, despite the hoods. In addition to their primary status as new-music luminaries, both Frederick Rzewski and Ursula Oppens were known for their associations with music and musicians charged with leftist social-political positions and passions as well as revolutionary aesthetics.)

The sound from the opening bars is that of atonal concert music, but the feel (if we can make that distinction) is of something hatched unsystematically, in the spontaneous inspiration of the moment. This comes across in a driving cohesion of phrasing and rhythm that has avoided the trap of the stasis thereof too often the result of the absence of the usual melodic-harmonic tension-and-release inherent in tonal music. That energy is further vitalized by an overarching ebb-and-flow, a periodic relenting of attention in release, like paragraphs that ease the reading of a page. Such suggestions of moment-form's nonverbal narrative, combined with the atonal language's abstract energy, make the listening experience like a viewing of a Chagall, or early Pollock painting,

with a shoreless sea of abstract shapes and colors on which a few real objects—a ladder, a chicken, a disembodied hand—surreally float.

An additional such enlivening distinction is the contrast between piano and zither; with one player articulating the latest in complex atonal repertoire and the other scraping and plucking open strings seemingly at random (presumably both alternately, since each player is assigned all three instruments). The effect is of a dialogue between the primeval and the most modern incarnations of the family of plucked and struck stringed instruments. It evokes the same meeting of primal and cultivated Africa and the West have enacted in music and culture all along, in the same back-and-forth of roles and power points, only here in the most esoteric-*Ernst* reaches of the art and its field, rather than the folk grassroots or popular arenas.

Side Two (labeled Part 2 of **95**) opens decisively with trills and punched low notes. The declamation the music implies therein is that when all the drama of pitch relationships is played out, the field is cleared for the new (visceral, not intellectual) drama of the new (meta-visceral) meanings emanating from, not imposed upon, rhythm, phrasing, energy, silence, timbre and texture, sequence and structure through time. The pitch relationships dominating Side One are still happening, but not idealistically or ideologically; they are not the seat of the music's identity. They are ornamenting rather than ornamented by the music's other elements just listed, as horizontal and vertical clusters of those equal-tempered chromatics a composer just wants to hear for their sheer vibrational pleasure. It is a moistening approach to a musical language (serialism) many find devoid of aesthetic pleasure, too cerebral and dry, to milk and squeeze it out of its overheated mind.

Of all the works and recordings mentioned here so far, **For Two Pianos**, along with **Creative Orchestra Music** and **For Four**

Orchestras, is the one my own ears are sensitized to by my subsequent years as a player of Braxton's music in his larger ensembles. I played much more sporadically his music with him for and in smaller groups, and the difference is marked. More of the composer's thought and work, less of the improviser's, dominated the former, and I can hear that presence in this record. Parts of it feel like pieces I played and improvised on in the CD we co-produced, **Eugene (1989)**, such as the recurring ascending pattern (like **77C** on the **Alto Saxophone Improvisations 1979**) that seems to climax into infinity like some sonic barber pole, around which looser and wilder filigrees of music dance and twine like flowered vines and sweaty bodies. Such repeating motifs are often musical triggers meant to launch entrances and exits to and from the main event that is the piece, such as I would hear proliferate and magnify up close in New York minutes and compositions to come.

Like American politics, like the changes of life and time themselves, the transience and illusion of the moment was revealed, and endured, in the counterbalancing constant/constancy of the artist's dedication to his own creative processes and visions.

The new world of computer technology is one that favors Anthony Braxton's chosen arena of the independent and marginal even as it threatens that of the lucrative corporate "record deal." It turns the "life in the cracks" to which he felt consigned by such deals toward a much more truly multicultural America. It turns him toward a more multi-polar world, and away from the white over-black America and America-over-all world he inherited.

Braxton would go on from the alienation from so much of what he'd imagined his dreams to be when he set out to realize them, to work and record even more outside America in the decades to follow; to start and build a career in academia commensurate with his achievements and potential as a musician apart from cultural-

political and commercial measures, winning the MacArthur “Genius” grant and other prestigious recognitions therefor; and, most centrally, to continue to compose and record prolifically, cultivating the seeds planted in the Arista years into the lush and exotic **Ghost Trance Music** series of compositions, the **Trillium** series of operas, and more tributes to American jazz masters, as well as mentoring collaborations with new generations of students that virtually shepherded them and their new scenes of “creative music” safely and soundly past the corporate-commodification and academic-domestication of “jazz” they were born to grow up with, and into the substantive alternative scenes in cities large and small and online throughout the world today.

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Thanks to Michael Fitzgerald, moderator of the Jazz Research newsgroup, for his research assistance on these notes.

See *The Music of Anthony Braxton* (Heffley, M., 1996, Greenwood Press) for much more information and discussion along these lines.

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^{iv} Radano, 210n.

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