

Anthony Braxton's Creative Orchestra

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Introduction

Composer Anthony Braxton has written various works throughout his career, which he refers to as *Large Ensemble Music*. These works are composed for larger ensembles ranging from (chamber) orchestras, 100 tubas to multiple orchestras and so-called creative orchestras. The latter category is characterised by a combination of traditional notation and various degrees of open material and improvisation within an orchestral context. Initially, Braxton situated his concept of the creative orchestra within the big band tradition, which in certain compositions is also reflected in the instrumentation. However, the compositions themselves exhibit a much broader influence from the outset. Within the holistic vision of his Tri-Centric model, which Braxton has employed over the past decades, all his compositions are interconnected, and the previous distinction between orchestra music and creative orchestra seems to disappear: one could consider Braxton's entire Large Ensemble Musics as a creative orchestra.¹ Braxton's music, however, tends to be difficult to capture within existing music theoretical and analytical tools based on the Western 'work concept'. Peter Niklas Wilson has already observed that '[t]here are intrinsic factors (...) of Braxton's rather unorthodox conception of a musical "work" which account for a great deal of the difficulties Braxton has encountered in the realms of New Music.'² Braxton himself also seems to allude to this in the introduction to his *Tri-Axiom Writings*, where he writes that 'the reality of creativity is not limited to how a given phenomenon works but also involves the meta-reality context from which that phenomenon takes its laws.'³ Without diminishing the deeper spiritual implications to which Braxton refers, this article aims to demonstrate that this 'meta-reality context' is also linked to the social dimensions that hold a prominent place in his creative orchestra in particular. For this, I will draw on Georgina Born's theory on social aesthetics, more specifically in the field of improvised music. Born sees the

musical work not as a stand-alone object but as an assemblage or constellation of social mediations that help determine the properties of the musical work.⁴ Where the traditional Western 'work concept' invariably leaves out these social mediations, the focus in existing discourse around improvised music tends to concentrate on the local level of social interactions between musicians.⁵ But according to Born, it is necessary to also extend this local level to broader levels of social mediations in order to describe the assemblage in its completeness. To this end, she recognises four interrelated levels of social mediations with, in addition to (1) the local level or microsocialities of musical performance, also, (2) the way music creates imagined communities by bringing its listeners together in affective alliances based on musical and other identifications, (3) the way music expresses the national, social hierarchies or social relations of class, race, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexuality, and (4) the institutional forces that provide the basis for its production, reproduction and transformation.⁶ With Born's four levels of social mediation in mind, in this article I want to take a deeper look at Braxton's concept of the creative orchestra through some analyses of specific compositions and by looking at the pre-history and performance practice associated with it. In this way, I aim to offer a broad perspective not only on Braxton's repertoire itself, but also on what orchestral practice can be today.

Muhai, The Duke and Sun Ra

Braxton experimented with his initial ideas for the creative orchestra early in his career when he joined the AACM in Chicago in 1967. The AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) is a collective of African-American musicians that is widely regarded today as one of the most influential collectives in recent music history. The AACM emerged from the weekly rehearsal sessions of the Experimental Band, an initiative led by pianist and composer Muhai Richard

Abrams. These weekly sessions served as gatherings for young local musicians to try out new compositions and experiment with different forms of notation and collective improvisation. The only requirement to play in this band was to bring original material to the rehearsals. Abrams did not assume the role of a traditional leader. He was more of a facilitator who encouraged everyone to make their own voices heard. These weekly sessions with the Experimental Band remained a constant fixture within the AACM and provided an ideal platform for Braxton to test and realise his early works for creative orchestra.

The AACM studied music from various traditions, from jazz to classical and other cultures, but the composition of original material was central to the AACM's manifesto, according to Abrams: 'No one's excluded. You may not be Duke Ellington, but you got some kind of ideas, and now is the time to put 'em in. Wake yourself up. This is an awakening we're trying to bring about.'⁷ By identifying themselves as composers, AACM musicians aimed to make their individual voices heard and establish a place for themselves within the tradition of avant-garde and composed music, without being limited by existing genres or labels. They adopted the terminology of Creative Music and Creative Orchestra as an alternative to bypass the prevailing binary discourse between notation/composition and improvisation, along with the associated musical labels and social hierarchy. They did this not only to describe their own music but also that of their predecessors.

It is no coincidence that Abrams mentioned Duke Ellington in the previous quote. For the AACM, the image of Ellington as a composer represented excellence and innovation, as well as endurance and resistance within a context of ethnic stereotyping and stigmatisation imposed by external labels. An example of this is the revolutionary music Ellington made with his orchestra during his residency at the Cotton Club in 1920s Harlem, which became known as 'jungle music'.⁸ The way Ellington experimented during this period with new orchestral textures using growl effects and other unusual techniques in the brass instruments, and the sophisticated and subtle ways in which he orchestrated these effects, were unheard of at the time and had a tremendous influence, including on AACM composers.⁹ However, Ellington's experiments were not seen as innovative within the context of the large-scale 'black exotica' shows of the Cotton Club; instead, they were perceived as a form of primitivism that fit the stereotypical image being presented.¹⁰ It is this form of deep-rooted stereotyping that Abrams and the AACM sought to overcome by placing their own work and that of their predecessors within a new historical narrative, believing that the strict dichotomy in the existing discourse between classical and jazz never truly assessed this music on its own terms. Braxton delves deeper into this in his *Tri-Axiom Writings*, where he underscores the importance of the creative orchestra and positions Ellington as a central figure in a chapter titled *Black Notated Music*:

The solidification of the creative orchestra is extremely important in the evolution of creative music. This medium would dynamically outline the path of extended creative music. To experience the music of composers like Henderson and Ellington is to experience the most 'innovative' use of fixed material functionalism with improvised (or open) material. The realness of their activity (and others) would establish a new dynamism for creative music.¹¹

Braxton also mentions the renowned figure of Fletcher Henderson, known as the 'father of swing', who in 1947 led his big band at the De Lisa club in Chicago. It was there that he took under his wing a pianist named Herman 'Sonny' Blount, also known as Sun Ra. Sun Ra learned invaluable lessons from one of the greatest musicians of that time. However, he had distinct musical ambitions. In the 1950s, he formed his own ensemble called the Arkestra, which embraced a visionary Afro-futurist approach and a relentless desire to experiment, opening radical new paths for the creative orchestra. Sun Ra also held a deep admiration for Ellington, and interesting parallels can be drawn between the two composers. Both emerged from the swing music tradition but departed from the 'standard form' and ventured into longer compositions and full-length suites. Sun Ra pioneered the use of electronic instruments in his orchestra as early as the 1950s, which can be seen as a continuation of Ellington's radical sound experiments with growls and various mutes in the brass section.¹² While the heyday of big bands had passed in the 1950s, Sun Ra, like Ellington, kept his own ensemble active for decades.¹³ Nevertheless, Sun Ra also encountered recurrent instances of ethnic stereotyping throughout his career, with his innovative musical endeavours often being misinterpreted and misunderstood.

In 1961, Sun Ra and his Arkestra moved from Chicago to New York, the same year Abrams started his Experimental Band, and there are clear similarities between the two projects as well. Both had roots in jazz and a pronounced inclination for experimentation. They shared Sun Ra's fascination with extended-form compositions, the use of electronics, and the integration of theatrical elements into their performances.¹⁴ Like Sun Ra, Abrams was also fascinated by spirituality, astrology, and mysticism. However, Abrams never assumed the role of a traditional band leader as Sun Ra did with his Arkestra. In his Experimental Band, Abrams encouraged everyone to develop their own voice as an antithesis to conventional orchestral hierarchy.¹⁵ This aspect is something that Braxton would also incorporate into his creative orchestra by experimenting with multi-hierarchical strategies. In addition to the profound impact of Abrams and the AACM, Sun Ra was undoubtedly an important catalyst for Braxton to realise his great musical ambitions: 'Thanks to Sun Ra I would begin to understand different levels of responsibility, and not be afraid to move towards the visionary (...)'.¹⁶

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Composition No. 25

In Braxton's catalogue, we find some early works for creative orchestra that were created during his time with the AACM in Chicago, such as *Composition No. 3* (dedicated to Morton Feldman) and *No. 11*, but these works never received a full performance or recording. It wasn't until 1972 when Braxton was approached by Kunle Mwanga to create a new work for a large ensemble for the French Chatellerault Festival. This resulted in *Composition No. 25*, a composition lasting over an hour written for a creative orchestra of at least 13 musicians (the score specifies parts for 4 woodwinds, 4 brass, tuba, piano, bass, and 2 percussionists).¹⁷ The concert on March 11, 1972, was recorded but not released until 1977 on the Ring Music label as a three-LP box set titled *Creative Music Orchestra - RBN---3°K12 (pour orchestre)*.

No. 25 is dedicated to the master composer/instrumentalist Ornette Coleman, and in his Composition Notes, Braxton emphasises that he wrote this work as 'a context that would show the orchestral implication of post Ayler/AACM structural and vibrational dynamics'.¹⁸ With these direct references to free jazz of the 1960s, Braxton makes it clear that recent developments in jazz and improvised music have a central place in *No. 25*. At the same time, he also incorporates ideas from post-war Western art music, such as the concept of the 'open work' and aleatoric techniques found in the works of composers like Cage, Stockhausen, and Boulez. Thus, *No. 25* has a modular structure with 12 separate 'units', labelled A to L, allowing the performers to determine the order, omit certain units, or repeat them. Within the individual 'units' of *No. 25*, Braxton uses traditional notation and/or verbal instructions that define clear compositional guidelines for the entire orchestra while also leaving a lot of freedom to the individual performers.

The post Ayler/AACM structural and vibrational dynamics are evident in parts of *No. 25* where Braxton employs what he calls 'sound environments', a kind of collective sonic texture

based on his specific verbal instructions. For example, Unit A starts with 'airsounds', where all performers are asked to blow air through their instruments. In Unit G, Braxton creates a 'sound environment' using 112 bells played by the musicians with the specific instruction to create a static texture without actively trying to control the music. Once these sonic textures are established, Braxton allows room for individual solos and improvisations. It is in this emphasis on texture and the use of small percussion instruments that the influence of the AACM becomes clearly audible.¹⁹ At the same time, these static sonic textures are also related to well-known works from the 1960s by European composers like Ligeti (*Atmospheres*) or Penderecki.²⁰ Braxton's 'sound environments' do not rely on traditional music notation but rather stem from verbal instructions that are, on the one hand, linked to the jazz tradition where oral transmission of information was common, and on the other hand, Braxton documented detailed verbal instructions in his Composition Notes.

Units B, C, D, E, F, and G use traditional music notation. Similar to the approach in the 'sound environments', Braxton often employs these notated sections to create an orchestral framework that serves as a basis for improvised solos. Particularly in units C and F, the score is traditionally orchestrated and developed. These units are clearly influenced by the big band tradition, with bebop figures for the brass players and a traditional rhythm section of drums, piano, and bass, as Braxton states: 'Suddenly the music is swinging - it's really that simple'.²¹ The only distinction from traditional big band music is the absence of tonal harmony. In other passages, conventionally notated sections are given a freer interpretation, where the orchestral result depends more on the individual choices of the musicians. For example, in Unit E, the musicians start from a monophonic melody that each of them must perform at their own tempo. Braxton describes this process as 'a type of indeterminate structure which can also be found in John Cage, Duke Ellington, and some African

musics'.²² Unit E begins tutti and gradually diminishes as more and more musicians complete their parts. This transitions into a second part where Braxton reveals his most experimental side, transforming the orchestra into a kind of electronic sound installation: a 'sound environment' of 225 balloons played by performers rubbing them and later popping them. In an interview several years later, he explained, 'Well, I didn't have enough money for the electronic equipment that could make those kinds of sounds. I'm interested in the expanded reality of sound opened up by the post-Webern continuum, but I'm restricted to using cheap materials'.²³

From traditional big band orchestrations to the 'sound environment' of 225 balloons, with the means at his disposal Braxton immediately set the tone of his creative orchestra as early as 1972. The experimental structure of the composition clearly shows how the microsocalities of performance (Born: level 1) had a major impact on the final course of the piece. By dealing uncompromisingly with experiment and musical traditions in *No. 25*, Braxton, following the AACM philosophy, pursued a 'mobility of practice and reference' through which he subverted the often-imposed genre categorisations linked to his ethnic background as an African-American composer (Born: level 3).²⁴ In Europe, Braxton was widely followed and the institutional support of European festivals like Chatellerault (and later Moers, Montreux, Berlin Jazz Days, ...) gave him the opportunity to realise larger works like *No. 25*. (Born: level 4) Yet these festivals were mainly 'jazz'-oriented and classical institutions, ensembles, orchestras or electronic music studios (like IRCAM) remained out of Braxton's reach. After the creation of *No. 25*, Braxton remained in Paris, where although he had many opportunities to tour as a saxophonist, as a composer he did not get the opportunities he hoped for. 'The jazz-yoke around my neck would limit my options,' Braxton told Lock.²⁵ A new chapter began when he was offered a contract with us major label Arista Records in 1974.

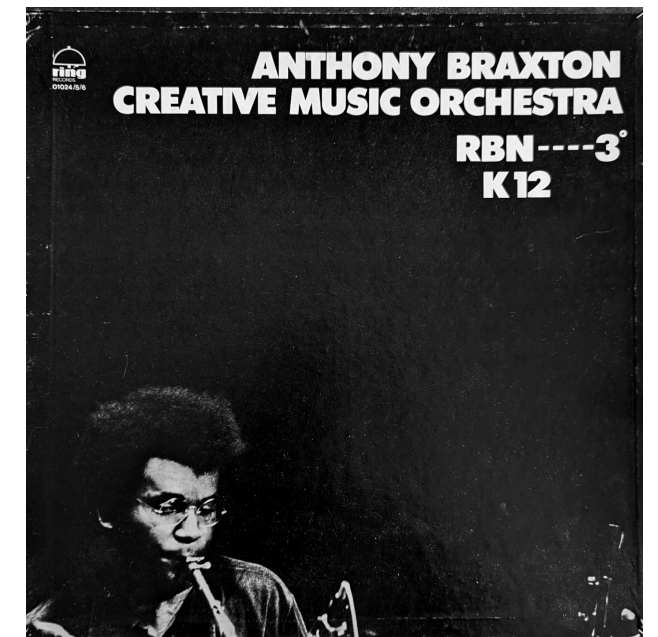
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◀ No. 25, Unit E (excerpt)
© Anthony Braxton,
Courtesy of Tri-Centric Foundation.

Album cover,
Creative Music Orchestra - RBN---3°K12.



Creative Orchestra Music 1976

The Arista record deal gave Braxton the opportunity to realise his first studio recording of several new creative orchestra compositions in 1976, resulting in the album *Creative Orchestra Music 1976*. For the recording session, Braxton assembled an impressive group of musicians with diverse musical backgrounds. There was the AACM contingent (including Roscoe Mitchell, Muhal Richard Abrams, George E. Lewis, Leo Smith), the 'post-Cage' circle in New York with whom Braxton regularly collaborated (such as Richard Teitelbaum, Frederik Rzewski, Karl Berger), the musicians from his then-current quartet (Dave Holland, Kenny Wheeler, and Barry Altschul), and various studio musicians from the New York jazz scene. The rehearsal and recording time were very limited, and the musicians only saw Braxton's scores on the day of the session. The extremely challenging scores made the usual 'one take sessions' impossible, which posed difficulties, especially for the traditionally jazz-trained session musicians. But it was this unusual social mix of musicians that would greatly determine the record's outcome and ultimate success (Born: level 1). As George E. Lewis, who was collaborating with Braxton for the first time during this session, observed:

The hybridity evident in the Braxton session called for a new kind of musician, one whose mobility of reference encompassed many histories and perspectives. (...) [T]he AACM musicians had been exploring a similar strain of multiple musicality for years, one that incorporated compositional as well as improvisative practices. Braxton's approach to composition, while perhaps anomalous to standard jazz practice of the period, was certainly no surprise to the AACM musicians, from whose milieu these approaches originally sprang. Their musical interests and backgrounds dovetailed neatly with those of the post-Cageians.²⁶

Unlike the twelve autonomous but integrated sections of *No. 25*, *Creative Orchestra Music 1976* contains six separate compositions. The A-side features compositions *No. 51*, *56*, and *58*, while the B-side includes compositions *No. 57*, *55*, and *59*.²⁷ All compositions employ traditional notation with occasional graphic elements that indicate improvisation. The works are written for ensembles of 15 to 20 musicians and clearly align with the instrumentation of a traditional big band. Braxton explains his choice of the term *Creative Orchestra* in the liner notes of the record:

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).²⁸

In other words, Braxton places his understanding of the creative orchestra in what we would call the jazz tradition, but, as in

No. 25, Braxton also draws heavily on recent developments in Western art music for the six compositions on this record. By deliberately avoiding the term 'jazz', he places himself and his predecessors outside the persistent jazz/classical binarity (Born: level 3) and seeks to connect with an audience or imaginary community that is sympathetic to this vision (Born: level 2).

Of the 6 compositions, *No. 51* and *55* feature the most recognizable 'big band sound', with homophonic passages in the brass section, an integrated rhythm section, and defined solo sections. However, Braxton gives them an idiosyncratic twist by, for example, using extreme intervals in the homophonic wind melodies in *No. 55* that are nearly unplayable at the given tempo—a deliberate strategy to achieve unpredictable results.²⁹ Braxton combines this with his own interpretation of hard bop 'vamps', using repetition as a structural parameter to shape the composition.³⁰ Similar to units C and F in *No. 25*, *No. 51* and *55* represent Braxton's idiosyncratic *confirmation of swing*.³¹ On the other hand, *No. 58*, written for a 'creative marching orchestra', stands out on the record. It is Braxton's playful homage to John Philip Sousa and the lively American tradition of the marching band, which he also links to Albert Ayler's free jazz: 'This is every music you've ever heard at the high school basketball game. (...) The reality of this work is conceived as a time warp musical context that suddenly shifts into another gear (...) to establish fresh operatives for post-Ayler creative exploration.'³²

In the remaining three compositions, the traditional 'big band sound' is far from present. *No. 56* and *57* are themeless *slow pulse environments/structures*.³³ Inspired by the Second Viennese School, Braxton experimented with various orchestral timbres, colours, and textures, guided by a combination of notated and improvised passages. *No. 59* is a double concerto for two improvising soloists that Braxton positions in the lineage of *post-Webern/Stockhausen/AACM*. The composition consists of three sections in an ABCBA form. The A section is fully written out and resembles a Webernian *klangfarbenmelodie*. The B section is composed of short accents alternating with sustained notes in the orchestra, over which the soloist improvises. The C section is a collective improvisation based on Language Type 1: *long sounds*.³⁴ When the B section is recapitulated, it is the second soloist's turn to improvise, which leads into a coda.

Compared to *No. 25*, the compositions on *Creative Orchestra Music 1976* exhibit a more sophisticated nature, confirming Braxton's reputation as a rising star in avant-garde jazz, a perception also played upon by Arista's marketing strategy. *Creative Orchestra Music 1976* became a great success and was hailed as 'album of the year' by *Downbeat Magazine*. For Braxton, the collaboration with Arista was primarily an opportunity to realise his compositional ambitions. Without making artistic concessions and supported by his producers Michael Cuscuna and Steve Backer, Braxton applied his so-called 'under the rug' strategy by pushing the limits of what he could document with his newly acquired status as a jazz superstar with each release.³⁵ In 1976, he created a second double concerto, *Composition No. 63*, at the Berlin Jazz Days, but this time for a chamber orchestra that had a more 'classical' instrumentation, including strings and an extensive harp part. The live recording of the premiere of *No. 63* was subsequently released on the Arista live album *The Montreux/Berlin Concerts*,



Creative Orchestra Music 1976 recording session, New York © Bill Smith.

somewhat hidden behind several of Braxton's popular quartet compositions that had a more recognizable 'jazz' sound. Whereas the compositions on *Creative Orchestra Music 1976* had a manageable average duration of 7 minutes, *No. 63* had a duration of 23 minutes, unusually long for a jazz album.³⁶ In the CD reissue 10 years later, *No. 63* was omitted. After several other releases, Braxton ultimately encountered the limits of this 'under the rug' strategy when he released *Composition No. 82* in 1978, an immense composition for 160 musicians grouped into 4 orchestras, inspired by Stockhausen, Ives, Xenakis, as well as Sun Ra and the stories of famous big band battles Braxton heard as a child.³⁷ Barely six months after its release, Arista removed this album from its catalogue, terminating its contract with Braxton. The collaboration with Arista and Braxton's 'under the rug' strategy were emblematic of the situation faced by an African-American composer whose 'mobility of reference' found no place within existing structures (Born: level 3 & 4): 'For an African American, you know, a young man ... I was thirty, thirty-one, with visions of a piece for four orchestras, a three-record set: how many projects like that do you see released? (...) I wanted to use the platform while it was there, I knew it wouldn't last.'³⁸

Composition No. 151

Faced with the constraints of jazz-oriented European festivals and the commercial logic of a major record label, Braxton found some stability in academia after a financially very difficult period in the mid-1980s, first as a visiting professor at Mills College (1985-1991) and then as a senior lecturer at Wesleyan University where he remained appointed until his retirement

in 2015. This career shift in the academic sphere also marked an artistic transitional period for Braxton in the early 1990s, during which his *Large Ensemble Musics* once again occupied a significant place (Born: Level 4).³⁹ A prime example of this is *Composition No. 151*, an ambitious work that Braxton composed at the initiative of German bassist and musicologist Peter Niklas Wilson and his Creative Music Ensemble Hamburg. *No. 151* was premiered in Hamburg in February 1991 and released on CD a year later on the Swiss label Hat Hut, under the title *2 Compositions (Ensemble) 1989/1991*, which also included a recording of *Composition No. 147* performed by Ensemble Modern.

No. 151 is written for an orchestra of 25 musicians, but without specific instrumentation. For Braxton, this open instrumentation is, on one hand, a logical consequence of his creative orchestra philosophy, and on the other hand, a pragmatic choice to allow multiple ensembles to perform this work.⁴⁰ Despite an extensive orchestral score comprising 143 pages of notated material, improvisation also plays a significant role in *No. 151*. Braxton himself refers to the combination of 'stable logics' and 'mutable logics'. The improvised passages or mutable logics are integrated into the score and represented by geometric figures, expecting the performer to improvise based on the 12 musical parameters from Braxton's Language Music system.

The traditionally notated passages or stable logics in *No. 151*, like the majority of Braxton's compositions, are remarkably conventional. Braxton does not prescribe any 'extended techniques' (multiphonics, key noises, slap tongue, etc.), which are commonly used in post-war Western art music and characteristic of Braxton's own saxophone playing. For

The image shows a complex musical score for an orchestra. It consists of 25 numbered staves, each representing a different instrument or voice part. The score is divided into several measures, with time signatures such as 2/4, 1/8, 3/4, and 1/8. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, rests, and dynamic markings. The overall structure is highly detailed and reflects the 'stable logics' mentioned in the text.

Excerpt of No. 151, © Anthony Braxton, courtesy of Tri-Centric Foundation.

Braxton, this belongs to the performer's personal vocabulary, something that the composer doesn't need to specify. As Braxton stated, 'Duke Ellington didn't write multiphonics - but his musicians played multiphonics. He didn't have to write them.'⁴¹ The stable logics in *No. 151* are constructed from short motifs or cells that Braxton transforms through repetition and rhythmic variation. He does not rely on traditional harmony but orchestrates the various motifs and cells into clusters. Similar to the typical chord voicings in the works of Morton Feldman, Braxton plays with density and openness in the orchestral sound by spreading the clusters across multiple octaves and then reducing them. Interwoven within this orchestral texture are the different open and improvised passages, blurring the distinction between stable and mutable logics.

However, the biggest difference from the aforementioned works is the underlying 'story' of *No. 151*. Braxton's fascination with storytelling is evident in his large-scale *Trillium* opera project, a 12-part opera cycle on which he has continuously worked since the 1980s, writing the librettos himself. But even in a number of works without libretto, he has used an underlying 'story' within which the composition unfolds. Braxton describes *No. 151* as a city with a network of streets and lanes where the characters Jason and Harvey are being pursued by the police. Typical of Braxton, he intertwines this narrative, not without a necessary dose of humour, with a musical reflection that helps clarify the identity of the composition.

"They'll never catch us now, Harvey! I know Composition No. 151 forward and backwards. I could drive these lanes with one hand," he chuckles. "The race is on!" And with that remark, he pushes the gas pedal down to the floor. Now both cars are on the highway, traveling at 70 miles an hour. From the police car a megaphone appears as the unnamed second policeman yells from the window. "You'll never get away with this one, guys! Composition No. 151 is not a monophonic structure that only addresses the needs of extended improvisation, as defined by post-Ayler, Cage or AACM (for that matter) structural prototypes, but rather, this is a tri-metric architectural reality that points to a breakthrough in form building and structural categories. This is a transparent terrain of sound beam constructions that define a way of thinking and reacting. Pull over or else!"⁴²

To perform *No. 151*, you have to navigate through the composition, so to speak. The repeating motifs in the score act as 'repeating lights that guide the instrumentalist in the same way an airfield runway uses guiding lights.' The graphic figures serve as signposts: 'You are riding along a sound road that comes equipped with the new signpost devices - U-turns only at the zzz signs or "right turns only" at the intersections.'⁴³ Furthermore, there are 'junctions' in *No. 151* that allow the performer to travel to other cities/compositions. For example, from *No. 151*, you can journey to *No. 55* or to Unit F from

No. 25 and integrate (a part of) these compositions within the performance of *No. 151*. The graphic titles that Braxton assigns to his compositions represent a 'still shot' from the story:



No.151 © Anthony Braxton, courtesy of Tri-Centric Foundation.

Braxton's penchant for story-telling, imagery and world building, in which we also recognise the influence of Sun Ra, are a way of giving his holistic philosophy and ideas a metaphorical place within his music. They require a certain openness from his performers and audience, to whom Braxton refers as *friendly experiencers*. Braxton's musical universe can be seen as an invitation for this imagined community of *friendly experiencers* (Born: level 2) to expand their imaginations and let go of all preconceived ideas about music through which, as Lock observed, 'questions such as "But is it jazz?" and "Does it swing?" seem grotesquely small minded.'⁴⁴

This holistic philosophy, in the above excerpt from *No. 151* described as 'a tri-metric architectural reality', is what Braxton today calls his Tri-Centric model.⁴⁵ Within this Tri-Centric model, mutable and stable logics are two important pillars, but there is also always a third pillar: synthesis logics.⁴⁶ This is what results from the combination of the first two, or from the connections and superimpositions of different compositions. For Braxton, the outcome of this is linked to the ritual and ceremonial side of his music and the fact that there must always be room for intuition and the unknown. We will now consider what this means for performance practice in the context of the creative orchestra.

Performance practice

As in the traditional orchestra, the stable logics of notated compositions in Braxton's creative orchestra impose the need for a conductor. A work can always be performed in its original form (or 'origin state'), with the performance practice of traditionally notated orchestral works such as *No. 27*, *No. 96* or *No.169* adhering to the traditional classical orchestral tradition. However, within the *stable logics* of Braxton's notated scores, fixed parameters such as tempo and time signatures are never set in stone. The conductor can make use of the so-called 'vibrational down' to stretch or shorten a measure as desired and choose where the downbeat of the next measure falls for

the entire orchestra to come in. 'The result is an ensemble that moves more like an organism than a clock,' says trumpeter Nate Wooley, who considers the phenomenon of the 'vibrational down' as a unique aspect in the performance practice of Braxton's creative orchestra. 'This simple concept of stretching and contracting the bar becomes a microcosm of improvised music as a whole. The musicians are encouraged to assert their individuality and then return to the welcoming arms of the community.'⁴⁷

However, Braxton's approach to the creative orchestra is always multi-hierarchical. The orchestra can be divided into subsections, each with its own section leader, and at the individual level, each musician has the freedom to make their own choices. In 2022, I had the opportunity to put it to the test with a creative orchestra of students from the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp. I put together a programme of Compositions *No. 59*, *No. 56*, *No.69Q* and *No. 58* that we performed as one continuous suite, using mutable logics or improvisation to connect the different compositions.⁴⁸ I divided the orchestra into four subsections, each with a section-leader, allowing the orchestra to play (or navigate) completely autonomously at one point, with the musicians using Language Music cues to determine the course of the music themselves. My role here was that of facilitator rather than traditional orchestra leader, highlighting the complexity of microsocial interactions in the orchestra (Born: level 1).

Another approach is to choose to integrate (parts of) other compositions into a single host composition or *primary territory*. The 'junctions' in *No. 151* are precisely implemented in the score for this purpose—to travel to or establish connections with other compositions. At any time, a cue from the conductor can bring the entire orchestra back together at a specific intersection in *No. 151*. In Braxton's Tri-Centric model, it is also perfectly possible to perform different compositions simultaneously. To make this possible, Braxton suggests working with a system of three conductors: there is (1) the *origin* (or principal) conductor who conducts the main

composition. They are assisted by (2) a *synchronous conductor*, who can also make independent choices, and finally, there is (3) the *polarity conductor* who is entirely independent of the other two conductors. The performers in the orchestra choose which of the three conductors to follow. This results in a multi-hierarchical situation where Braxton's holistic philosophy is fully manifested. Trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum provided the following illustrative testimony about a performance of Braxton's orchestral work *No. 96* in his 'Tri-Centric manner'.

Several levels of activity can happen at once. For example, by the middle of the concert, Braxton might be soloing over the rhythm section playing '134', while Aaron [Siegel] conducts the brass section in a language [music] improvisation, while I conduct the string section through part of '96'. Or it all might break down to an unaccompanied clarinet solo. Or with the help of the additional conductors cuing and signaling, the music can also re-assemble back into one of the primary compositions.⁴⁹

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In Braxton's creative orchestra, the *mutable and stable logics* constantly intertwine, turning the traditional hierarchical orchestra model on its head, as Bynum puts it: 'You improvise in a compositional manner; you apply composed materials in an improvisational manner, at all times one's creativity is fully engaged.'⁵⁰ The combination of *mutable and stable logics* is linked to the third pillar in Braxton's Tri-Centric Model: *synthesis logics*. It is the most elusive of the three pillars, allowing room for intuition and highlighting Braxton's fascination with the unknown. This is where Braxton's application of freedom in his music can quickly be misunderstood or misused. For Braxton, freedom is never arbitrary and always stems from a form of discipline:

I'm not interested in transformation that hasn't been set within a discipline that allows for surprises, that allows for exploration and that accepts the unknown on the same level as the known.⁵¹

With freedom comes responsibility, even in the creative orchestra. This is something Braxton learned from Muhal Richard Abrams and the AACM. This fascination with a discipline that embraces 'the unknown' is also something Braxton shared with Sun Ra. Although Sun Ra was known as a bandleader with a strict hierarchy, his concept of discipline always stemmed from a kind of natural affinity with music, never from the impulse to suppress individuality. Sun Ra encouraged his musicians to seek out the unknown by, for example, suddenly playing a completely different set at a concert than what they had just rehearsed. Creative handling of such situations was part of the discipline he expected from his musicians. It was never about perfection: 'If you can't play it perfectly right, then play it perfectly wrong,' as Sun Ra put it.⁵² It is the same discipline that Braxton expects from his musicians. In his *Introduction to Catalog of Works*, he provides the following instructions:

- Don't misuse this material to have only "correct" performances without spirit or risk. (...) If the music is played too correctly it was probably played wrong.
- Each performance must have something unique. I say take a chance and have some fun. Try something different—be creative.⁵³

The *synthesis logics* and Braxton's fascination with the unknown also translate into what he calls a trans-idiomatic performance practice. His creative orchestra embraces all musical genres and their associated performance practices (whether classical, jazz, or others), but it inevitably forces the *friendly experiencer* (both performer and listener) to step out of their comfort zone and explore uncharted paths. Like in all of his works, but on a larger scale here, Braxton's creative orchestra provides an inclusive platform where musicians from different backgrounds can come together, and where everyone's contribution shapes the course and collective experience of the performance (Born: level 1 & 2).

Conclusion

With this article, I aimed to provide a broad overview of Braxton's creative orchestra. Rather than formulating a clearly delineated musicological analysis or description of this unique repertoire, my aim was to approach them as an assemblage or constellation of social mediations following Born's theory of social aesthetics. This allowed me to address several crucial (social) aspects that are too often overlooked within traditional analyses, while at the same time respecting Braxton's compositional intentions. Where throughout the text I already gave sporadic references to the four levels of social mediation postulated by Born, by way of conclusion we can now summarise Braxton's concept of the creative orchestra through these four levels.

The impact of the microsocial level in the creative orchestra is evident in the way the musicians and conductor(s) have to navigate within the mutable, stable and synthesis logics of Braxton's compositions. Even in the modular structure of an early work like *No. 25*, we can hear how the seeds of his later holistic Tri-Centric model are already clearly present. In turn, the social mix of musicians in the 1976 Creative Orchestra Music recording session was decisive for the end result of this record, a trans-idiomatic approach that Braxton would continue to pursue in his later work. This combined with the multi-hierarchical performance practice makes the creative orchestra a kind of micro-society in which everyone can make choices at different levels and contribute to the collective result.⁵⁴

The second level of social mediation makes itself felt in the way the creative orchestra manages to bring together an imagined community of listeners and performers that Braxton aptly calls *friendly experiencers*. These friendly experiencers approach Braxton's creative orchestra (and by extension his entire oeuvre) on its own terms and are not guided by external definitions of what orchestral music should or should not be. They experience no social hierarchy in the practice of improvisation versus composition, even, and especially, in an orchestral context. The friendly experiencers wander around Braxton's holistic universe of imaginary worlds and



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Creative Orchestra of the Royal Conservatory Antwerp, DE SINGEL 5_6_2022 © David Laskowski.

compositions-as-cities, accepting the known on the same level as the unknown.

The third level of social mediation is reflected in how the broader social hierarchy linked to ethnicity played a role in the development of Braxton's orchestral music. Like Ellington and Sun Ra each in their own way, and building on the AACM philosophy, Braxton pursued throughout his career a freedom to experiment with new forms as an African-American composer, free from the formal constraints of European music and from racial stereotyping, a 'mobility of reference and practice' free from imposed genre categorisations, in an attempt to creolise the field of musical composition.⁵⁵ In this regard, the orchestra is the medium of choice that allowed Braxton to express his ambitions as a composer. It is part of a 'politics of scale', a form of scaling that enabled Braxton to create not only more volume but also more 'noise'.⁵⁶

We can trace the impact of the fourth or institutional level back to Braxton's early days at the AACM where, through Abram's Experimental Band, he found an institutional context to perform his first orchestral experiments. But it is in Europe that Braxton received his first commission to realise a large-scale work for creative orchestra and where, throughout his career, he found fairly stable institutional support in a circuit of festivals that were admittedly invariably 'jazz' oriented. Classical ensembles, orchestras, electronic music studios or festivals of classical (contemporary) music remained out of reach despite several attempts to get his work performed there too. In his homeland, Braxton received important opportunities thanks to a record deal with a major label. This gave him great visibility and catapulted him to star status in the jazz world, but when his idiosyncratic compositional intentions emerged, he soon

bumped into the limits of a major company's commercial logic. Eventually, Braxton found in American academia an enduring institutional context within which he could further develop his creative orchestra. Finally, Braxton founded his own Tri-Centric Foundation, which to this day manages his self-published scores and recordings (through the record label New Braxton House) as well as organising performances and pedagogical activities.

Although described separately here, these four levels are inextricably intertwined. Braxton's creative orchestra as an assemblage is therefore not a neatly delineated musical object; like his holistic Tri-Centric Model, it is constantly in flux and contains multiple incongruities. But as a whole, it offers an interesting and enriching perspective on what orchestral practice can be today. It calls into question the reputation, upheld by classical music education, orchestras, canon, concert halls, and many patrons and governments, of the symphony orchestra and its associated practices as a quasi-universal institution. The ongoing struggle for diversity within traditional orchestras rarely goes beyond mere representation and fails to explore the possibilities of a *diversity of practices*.⁵⁷ Composition and improvisation remain stubborn opposites within the context of classical orchestral practice, an attitude that, according to George E. Lewis, needs to be discarded if we want to renew and diversify the orchestra, not only for performers but for the entire network that sustains the culture of orchestral performance – composers, theorists, and the economic and technical support infrastructure that is crucial for orchestral music performance.⁵⁸ In that respect, Braxton's creative orchestra repertoire is one example in a wide pool of repertoire that offers a unique and extensive palette of possibilities to do so. ■

- 1 Timo Hoyer, *Anthony Braxton – Creative Music* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2021), 377 – 407.
- 2 Peter Niklas Wilson, 'Firmly Planted in Mid-Air', in *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton*. ed. Lock, Graham (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1995), 134.
- 3 Anthony Braxton, *Tri-Axiom Writings vol.1* (Lebanon: Frog Peak Music, 1985), IV.
- 4 Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw, eds., 'After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic', in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (Duke University Press, 2017), 33–58. and Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 7–36.
- 5 'We might say that a defining feature of the ontology of Western art music from the nineteenth century to the present has been a disavowal of music's social mediations.' Born, 'After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re) Theorizing the Aesthetic', 40.
- 6 Born, 'After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic', 43.
- 7 George Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 361.
- 8 For more background on the jungle Music label and Ellington's response to it, see Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 9 'They created different sounds by using half-valves and half positions on various instruments. They introduced the multi-sound tone for the trumpets and trombones through use of the flutter-tongue and the "growl" techniques and obtained a unique sound leverage by using different types of mutes (some of which they shaped to get the desired sound quality) and foreign materials (e.g., coke bottles, hats, rubber plungers, the human hand).' Leo Smith, '(M1) American Music', *The Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 2 (1974): 111. Leo Smith, '(M1) American Music', *The Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 2 (1974): 111.
- 10 Lock, *Blutopia*, 85.
- 11 Anthony Braxton, *Tri-Axiom Writings vol.3* (Lebanon: Frog Peak Music, 1985), 33.
- 12 '[Sun Ra] knew that most if not all of the electronic effects produced so far were rooted in African-American acoustic playing: the wah-wah sounds came from plungers used on horns; phasing and delay came from call and response; fuzz tones and distortion from old time "dirty" tones or mutes and hats; and multi-tonal effects from split tones.' John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 237.
- 13 Ellington generated extra income by starting his concerts with a medley of his greatest hits in order to collect as many royalties as possible in a short period of time and dedicate the rest of the concert to new work. Sun Ra founded his own record label 'saturn-records' in the 1950s to generate income and remain artistically independent of commercial record labels. See: Ken Vandermark, 'Sun Ra and Duke Ellington: Parallels in Practice for the 20th-Century Large Ensemble', *Sound American* Vol. 24, accessed 30 November 2022, <https://soundamerican.org/issues/sun-ra/sun-ra-and-duke-ellington-parallels-practice-20th-century-large-ensemble>.
- 14 There was great respect for Sun Ra's work within the AACM, but George E. Lewis refutes the claim that there is a direct linear evolution between Sun Ra's Arkestra and Abrams' Experimental Band. See: Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 162.
- 15 'In Sun Ra's organisation he had everything to say and do. In Muhal's organisation everybody could say and do.' Joseph Jarman, quoted in Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 162.
- 16 Graham Lock and Nick White, *Forces in Motion: Anthony Braxton and the Meta-Reality of Creative Music* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2018), 154.
- 17 Braxton remarks that he 'would prefer more instrumentalists, but 13 is the bare minimum'. Anthony Braxton, *Composition Notes Vol. B* (Lebanon: Frog Peak Music, 1988), 161.
- 18 Braxton, *Composition Notes Vol. B*, 192.
- 19 The use of so-called 'little instruments', introduced by bassist Malachi Favors in the rehearsals of the AACM Experimental Band, became a standard 'sound application' for many AACM activities.
- 20 Art Lange, 'Implications of a Creative Orchestra, 1972-78' in *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton*. ed. Lock, Graham (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1995), 123.
- 21 Braxton, *Composition Notes Vol. B*, 179.
- 22 Lock, *Forces In Motion*, 322.
- 23 Lock, *Forces In Motion*, 27.
- 24 Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 375.
- 25 Lock, *Forces In Motion*, 95.
- 26 Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 341.
- 27 On the original record, only the original graphic titles are shown. Braxton introduced the opus numbering only later for practical reasons.
- 28 Anthony Braxton, *Creative Orchestra Music 1976*, Liner Notes, LP, Arista, AL 4080, 1976.
- 29 '[T]he use of extreme intervallic distances in the infrastructure contours of the music involves the use of pitch as a device to distort the perception of continuity (...) The reality of this approach 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.' Anthony Braxton, *Composition Notes Vol. C* (Lebanon: Frog Peak Music, 1988), 306.

- 30 'Vamps are repeating figures (usually two to four bars in length) that may include an oscillation between two harmonies, a short, repeated harmonic progression, and a bass ostinato or a pedal-point figure.' Ingrid T. Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 100.
- 31 Art Lange, 'Implications of a Creative Orchestra, 1972-78', 126.
- 32 Braxton, *Composition Notes Vol. C*, 345.
- 33 Braxton, *Composition Notes Vol. C*, 331.
- 34 Braxton developed a system he calls 'Language Music' to structure improvisations. It is a list of 12 so-called 'language types', each referring to a specific sound parameter that serves as a basis for improvisation. For more on Language Music see: Nate Wooley et al., 'Sound American: The Anthony Braxton Issue', *Sound American*, n.d., http://archive.soundamerican.org/sa_archive/sa16/index.html and Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, 'Een Ritueel van Openheid. De (Meta-)Realiteit van Anthony Braxton's Ghost Trance Music.', *Forum+* 28, no. 1 (1 February 2021): 48–57.
- 35 Lock, *Forces In Motion*, 131.
- 36 Again, an interesting link can be made with Ellington's preference for making 'extended form compositions' and constant struggle with the demands imposed from the labels to make short songs. His 1935 composition 'Reminiscing in Tempo', spread over four sides of a 10" 78 rpm record, was a major statement.
- 37 Anthony Braxton, *Composition No. 82*, Liner Notes, 3-LP box, Arista, A3L 8900, 1978.
- 38 Lock, *Forces In Motion*, 131.
- 39 Hoyer, *Anthony Braxton – Creative Music*, 196.
- 40 Braxton does suggest that parts 1-8 were written for wind instruments, 9-14 for brass, 15 for guitar, 16-20 for strings, 21-23 for keyboard instruments and 24-25 for percussion. Niklas Wilson, 'Firmly Planted in Mid-Air', 138.
- 41 Niklas Wilson, 'Firmly Planted in Mid-Air', 144.
- 42 Braxton, Anthony. Notes on Composition No. 151, 2 *Compositions (Ensemble) 1989/1991*, Liner Notes, CD, Hat Hut: 1991.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Lock, *Blutopia*, 4.
- 45 Albeit with variations: Tri-Centric Construct, Tri-Centric Thought Unit Construct, ...
- 46 Braxton sometimes also uses the term 'correspondence logics' or 'ritual and ceremonial logics'.
- 47 Nate Wooley, 'System of a Down', *Wire Magazine*, Issue 422, April 2019, 45–47.
- 48 This process is what Braxton calls 'coordinate-music'.
- 49 Stuart Broomer, *Time and Anthony Braxton* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 2010), 111.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Anthony Braxton in conversation with Alexander Hawkins, Café Oto, London, 2018, www.cafeoto.co.uk/archive/2018/06/13/anthony-braxton-conversation-alexander-hawkins/ (last visited 26/05/2023).
- 52 Szwed, *Space Is The Place*, 114.
- 53 Anthony Braxton, *Introduction to my Catalog of Works*, 1988, <https://tricentricfoundation.org/introduction-to-catalog-of-works-1988> (last visited 26/05/2023).
- 54 Journalist Steve Smith compared it to a utopian model for democracy: 'There are rules to follow, laws to abide, and these are largely controlled by the ruler of the clan. But those laws are more guidelines than strictures, if followed properly, the result affords complete individual freedom within a well-defined societal structure that hums along quite musically'. Steve Smith., Night After Night, *The Man From Utopia*, [web blog], March 17 2006, www.nightafternight.com/night_after_night/2006/03/the_man_from_ut.html (last visited 11/06/2023).
- 55 'Following Kobena Mercer, this kind of critical dialogism asserts a kind of creolization of the field of music composition, while at the same moment affirming the heterogeneity and polyphony of black identity. Indeed, what Mercer calls the overturning of "hegemonic boundary maintenance" was a critical element of the Ellington and AACM projects.' Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 365.
- 56 On 'politics of scale' see: Katherine Young, *Nothing As It Appears: Anthony Braxton's Trillium J*. Doctoral Thesis, North Western University, 2017, 15.
- 57 Sandeep Bhagwati, 'Towards a Diversity of Practices', *On Curating*, no. 47 (n.d.), www.on-curating.org/issue-47-reader/new-music-towards-a-diversity-of-practices.html#Y4YhFi8w35g.
- 58 George E. Lewis, 'Improvisation and the Orchestra: A Composer Reflects', *Contemporary Music Review* 25, no. 5–6 (October 2006), 429–34.