

## **“Zusammenkommen in der Musik”**

**Kobe Van Cauwenberghe on Ghost Trance Music. A conversation with Tatjana Mehner.**

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**Your occupation with the music of Anthony Braxton is part of a research project at Antwerp university. Please tell us more about this work!**

I've been intrigued by Anthony Braxton's music for some years now, but it wasn't until 2016 when I read Nate Wooley's Braxton Issue from the online magazine "Sound American" that I really got a sense of the uniqueness and vastness of Braxton's musical universe. Reading about Braxton's work and especially the more recent compositional systems such as Ghost Trance Music, really opened a new world for me. At the same time it also made me realise that engaging with this repertoire would challenge everything I thought I knew as a (new) music interpreter. Although it definitely is possible to approach Braxton's music intuitively without too much preparation, I wanted to get a deeper understanding of it from my position as a performer and that is basically what my research project is about. What started as a two-year research project where I focused on Braxton's *Ghost Trance Music* system, has now become extended to a Phd-project in order to cover more of Braxton's unique compositions and musical systems. It has also become my conviction that this incredible repertoire is just one of many metaphorical elephants in the room when it comes to broadening or diversifying a still very eurocentric canon of post-war western art music. With this research I also hope to contribute to broadening this canon.

***Ghost Trance Music* challenges the traditional roles of composer, performer and even listener in a unique way. How do you experience this within your concerts?**

This could be said for most of Braxton's music, but Ghost Trance Music (GTM) is probably the first system he developed that pushed his vision of a unified holistic body of works to new levels. For Braxton all of his compositions are connected and he developed GTM as a kind of navigation system enabling the performer to make these connections in any given performance. All GTM compositions have in common a central or "primary" melody, which is the starting point and a central thread throughout any given GTM performance. But the performers can also decide individually or in subgroups to depart from this primary melody and integrate improvisation or any other composition or part from Braxton's catalog into the performance. The challenging part for me when I first started working on this repertoire, was understanding the level of openness in these scores, with often very detailed and complexly notated parts. The notated material is never an end in itself in Braxton's music, they can also be a jumping off point to other musical materials. The role of improvisation here is no less important than notation. Improvisation in Braxton's music is linked to a system called Language Music, which consists of a list of 12 sound categories to guide improvisation. Navigating through a GTM performance means navigating through all of these elements and forces you as a performer to make a lot of decisions on the spot. I was lucky to find an incredible group of musicians who were willing to join me in this project, which then became the Ghost Trance Septet. Coming from

different musical backgrounds we surprisingly easily found common ground in exploring and navigating Braxton's complex GTM system, which turned out to be incredibly rewarding and fun to do! Lastly, also as a listener you kind of have to make intuitive choices as it is impossible to "take it all in" so to speak, and to find your own way inside Braxton's universe.

**Braxton within *Ghost Trance Music* refers to a Native American ritual. How important is the knowledge about this for the reception?**

Braxton often refers to listeners of his music as "friendly experiencers". This also indicates how to best approach his music, with an intuitive attitude and an open mind, looking for a "friendly experience". In that sense it is not necessary to know the background of his music systems. But if you take a deeper look into Braxton's music and philosophy, you'll see that the ritual and ceremonial are a very important element of his work. GTM was indeed inspired by a Native American ritual, the Ghost Dance, a ritual through which surviving native tribes sought to connect with their ancestors. With Ghost Trance Music Braxton found a way to lift the curtain of his own past work and connect it to the present. In an interview with Stuart Broomer he mentions that the Native American music also inspired him to look at other forms of "trance" music from all over the world, and how he looked at these larger extended time parameters as a basic element of the Ghost Trance Music compositions, instead of structural parameters like serialism or indeterminacy. Again, as a listener it is not necessary to know this information, but for me as a researcher and performer I find this very valuable as it gives insight into Braxton's compositional process and way of thinking.

**You are dealing with Braxton's music within solo as well as ensemble projects. How do you experience the difference?**

There's a strong communal aspect at the core of Ghost Trance Music, it invites musicians to come together, regardless of their musical background, and finding a common language through performing these pieces. The music allows for a constant interplay between the musicians, giving them agency to push the music in different directions by making their own choices or giving hand cues to the other players. This is what Braxton calls the transidiomatic and multi-hierarchical part of his music and it's what emerges most clearly in a group performance. This pluralistic aspect is what makes this repertoire really unique and so with the Ghost Trance Septet I wanted to bring together a mixed group of musicians coming from both improvised/jazz and notated/classical scenes. Whether you're more grounded in improvisation, or more familiar playing scores, Braxton pushes you out of your comfort zone and that's where things get really interesting. And so it's been really fascinating to see how everyone engaged with this music both as a collective and individually. We didn't do much talking, we just played.

At first I didn't intend to do a solo performance of Ghost Trance Music, but I sort of accidentally stumbled into it when I was working on a GTM score at home by myself using a looping device to create different layers. At some point I lost control of what I was looping, but the result was really interesting and so instead of trying to regain control, I decided to add more layers, an additional looper, several samples and some randomising electronic sound effects. Much like a "non-human agent", the loops and electronics then start adding to the different musical layers which are so typical

for GTM. Although I still have a slight preference for performing GTM in a group, which has more to do with my general preference of playing in a group rather than solo, I found both versions to be equally challenging and rewarding for me as a performer. To me it shows the incredible interpretational possibilities of Braxton's repertoire, I feel I'm really only scratching the surface of what is possible!

**You have been playing *Ghost Trance Music* in several countries. How was it received by the audiences?**

From the few experiences I had, which were limited to Europe and the US, I got the sense that Braxton as a composer is still perceived very differently in the US than in Europe. This hasn't so much to do with GTM specifically, but so there's a strong community around Braxton's work in the US where a younger generation of musicians coming from very different backgrounds, often former students of Braxton, approach his music regardless of any preconceived ideas about genre, about the role of improvisation, not being bothered about the question whether it's jazz or not, etc... This is reflected in the audience's reception as well as in the writings of a growing amount of critics and academics. This open attitude seems less present in the European music scene, not within the musicians themselves necessarily, but more within the institutions and festivals where the often artificial categories of improvised music or jazz versus composed music are still strongly represented in the programming and writing, which is then also reflected in the audience's reception of the music. Braxton has obviously very often toured in Europe and still does, but it seems his music here is still very much associated with him performing it and I have the impression this is why in Europe he is mostly perceived as one of the great saxophone improvisers and less so as a composer. But you don't need to look far to see the sheer scale of his compositional output, and then if you do look a little closer you'll discover an incredibly original, unique and fascinating musical world of which *Ghost Trance Music* is just one aspect. In this context I should also mention the great work of the Tri-Centric Foundation, whose mission is to help grow the community surrounding Braxton's work and it's legacy. They have been and continue to be very valuable to my own involvement in his work and for those interested in finding out more about Braxton's music, scores, recordings, writings or anything else, do check out their website!