

Notes and Opinions

Pitch into Time: Notes on Anthony Braxton's Lower Register

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"In my music system every composition has an original reality, a secondary reality and a genetic reality . . .
2) secondary reality: taking out the flute part from an orchestra piece and using it for one hundred tubas or something . . ." (Braxton).

There is a marked emphasis on extremely low frequencies in Anthony Braxton's music. On his *Charlie Parker Project 1993*, he played "Scrapple from the Apple" on contrabass clarinet. In a performance of "Composition No. 361" at the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville in 2007, one segment featured virtually every member of the 12+1-tet playing a low frequency instrument—bassoon, bass clarinets, tuba, electric and acoustic string basses, bass trumpet, trombone. These barely compare with Braxton's most extreme flights to lower pitch. He's often played contra-bass saxophone, an instrument so rare only around twenty-five are estimated to exist. Early in his career, he was particularly interested in writing for tuba. There is his tuba quintet, "Composition No. 4," first recorded, however unsatisfactorily, in 1971. There is also his speculative "Composition No. 19" for 100 tubas. Composed in 1971, it was finally performed in 2006 in Brooklyn by a group assembled by tubaist Jay Rozen. Perhaps no composer has ever pursued this low frequency terrain with Braxton's passion.¹

What makes this tendency fascinating is multiple. The lower the range, the more we struggle to identify notes and their relationships. Listening becomes akin to ear training, as we make distinctions between bass frequencies usually reserved for players of extremely low-pitched instruments. We stretch to hear because we are operating at the limits of our hearing and the beginning of inaudibility. Pitches become ambiguous, as the lower a note on a tuba or contra-bass clarinet is, the more it vacillates between pitches. The effect is so central to Braxton's initial low-frequency impulse that he expands on it, describing "Composition No. 4" for five tubas (1968) as "Twenty two pages of approximate pitched notation" ("Anthony").²

The loss of precise pitch that we experience amid low-frequency notes is simply the point of entry for a more mysterious terrain. In some circles, it's a dangerous zone. There is a certain nihilistic mythology and a general fascination around the destructive potency of sub-sonic frequencies. Nicola Tesla experimented with small sub-sonic generators, reportedly having an accident that he and his associates concealed as an earthquake. When a reporter queried if such a box could destroy the Empire State Building, Tesla answered in the affirmative. William S. Burroughs once speculated on a sub-sonic weapon that would take the form of an 18-foot police whistle that could kill at three-miles. Part of what's interesting about these speculations is the *visual* component: the small box, the skyscraper, the enormous *police* whistle (a totalitarian state expressed in the form of a toy).³ Perhaps there is something of the same fascination with scale in reaction to Braxton's enormous contra-bass saxophone, an eight-foot high instrument that he wheels about on a platform (more benignly, and I think appropriately, its scale returns us to childhood). One interesting note about the destructive power of low frequencies is that soldiers break step when crossing a bridge, so that the steady rhythm does not bring the bridge down. There's a strange corollary in Braxton's "Composition No. 19 for one hundred tubas" from 1971. The music, schematic rather than note-specific, is described as "twenty pages of schematic music and instructions to be prepared for four groups of marching ensembles—twenty-five musicians in each—in any order and for any length" ("Anthony"): music for 100 *marching tubaists*.

At the same time that we are working on the notion and danger of comprehending pitch, we are also at precisely the place where pitch begins to enter inaudibility and resurface as time. The poet Ezra Pound articulates an interesting notion on music in "The Great Bass: Part One", wherein rhythm is tied directly to pitch: "Down below the lowest note synthesized by the ear and 'heard' there are slower vibrations. The ratio between these frequencies and those written to be executed by instruments is OBVIOUS in mathematics. The whole question of tempo, and of a main base in all musical structure, resides in the use of these frequencies" (73).

This follows from the measurement of pitch in cycles per second (e.g., middle C = 256 cps or hertz; A above middle C = A440, formerly A435). As we descend to lower frequencies, we descend an octave every time the cps is halved: thus C an octave below middle C is 128, two octaves 64, three octaves 32, etc. As we descend, we move to pitches that are inaudible, usually those below about 20-15 hertz. However, we also reach oscillations that can be heard as time, not pitch. Thus the C six octaves below middle C might be

described as a metronome rhythm of 240 beats per minute. We have thus used the same measurement to move from a description of pitch to a description of time.

While I know of no direct connection between the thought of Ezra Pound and Anthony Braxton, I'd suggest that a preoccupation with low frequencies may ultimately engage this special territory, just as late serialism (Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen) began to extend serial techniques to durations and dynamics. It is a symmetry that is sensed. In Braxton's particularly utopian thought, in which time is subject to various compressions and expansions, it seems particularly appropriate that he would concentrate on this unheard but felt (internal organs will vibrate whether in sympathy or distress) region of sound where pitch turns ineluctably into rhythm.

While much of the speculation about low frequencies aims at a kind of science-fiction precision, the reality is that low frequency instruments are quite unstable in pitch (the contra-bass saxophone may be the most *definite* of these instruments). To create a large ensemble of tubas, even before you give them freedom to determine pitch, is to invite discord. Pressed further, they become a massed microtonal roar. It may be that to play bop on a contra-bass clarinet is to have rhythm pass pitch in velocity. We are on the threshold of a new world, and that world consists in its relationship to time.

Notes

¹ A Braxton associate, bassist Joe Fonda, has assembled a band called Bottoms Out that consists of baritone saxophone, tuba, bass clarinet, bassoon, and string bass and drums. The repertoire includes pieces in closely-voiced chords distributed among bass instruments.

² The recording appears on *The Complete Braxton 1971*. Braxton's dissatisfaction with the recording is expressed in Lock.

³ See Herman for a discussion of both the Tesla and Burroughs stories along with Vladimir Gavreau's research into the "sound cannon."

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