Improvisation and Collaboration in Anthony Braxton's *Composition 76*

Paul Steinbeck

Abstract This article examines Anthony Braxton's *Composition 76*, a landmark work for three multi-instrumentalists. The score for *Composition 76* employs graphic techniques (colors, shapes, and codes) as well as traditional notation on five-line staves. Original transcriptions of two studio recordings illustrate the strategies that the performers use to realize Braxton's complex score, uncovering the structure of a composition previously thought to be resistant to analysis. The article also sheds light on the diverse influences that can be seen in the graphic score—and heard in the performances—from John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen to the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.

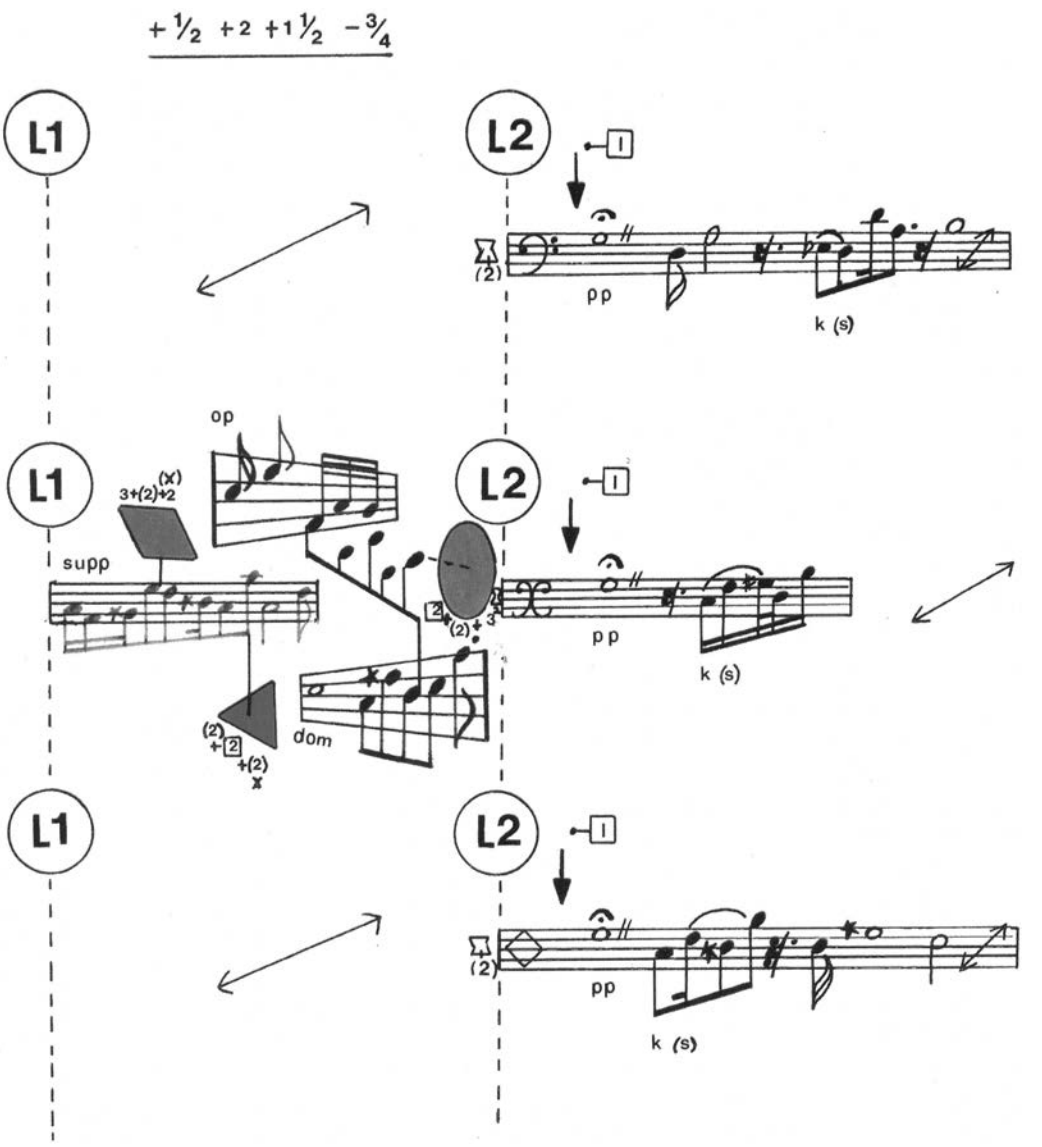
Keywords experimentalism, graphic notation, improvisation, multi-instrumentalism

SINCE 1966 Anthony Braxton has composed four hundred pieces of music, but few have garnered as much attention as his *Composition 76* (Braxton 2014). Braxton created *Composition 76* in 1977 for the album *For Trio* (Braxton 1978b), released by Arista Records, a major label that gave Braxton's music unprecedented exposure. Excerpts from *Composition 76*'s vivid graphic score were prominently displayed on the *For Trio* album cover, inspiring much scholarly and critical speculation about the piece's workings (see Example 1).[1] These studies, however, were undertaken without access to the entire score. Braxton's Tri-Centric Foundation published the complete score only recently, in conjunction with a 2015 exhibit at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, where *Composition 76* and graphic works by other composers were shown alongside paintings, videos, and installations inspired by the Black Arts Movement (Beckwith and Roelstraete 2015, 72–73).

I thank Richard Cohn, Douglas Ewart, Andrew Jones, Brian Kane, Daphne Leong, Yonatan Malin, Brad Short, Robert Snarrenberg, Carl Testa, Keith Waters, and *JMT*'s reviewers for their contributions to this article.

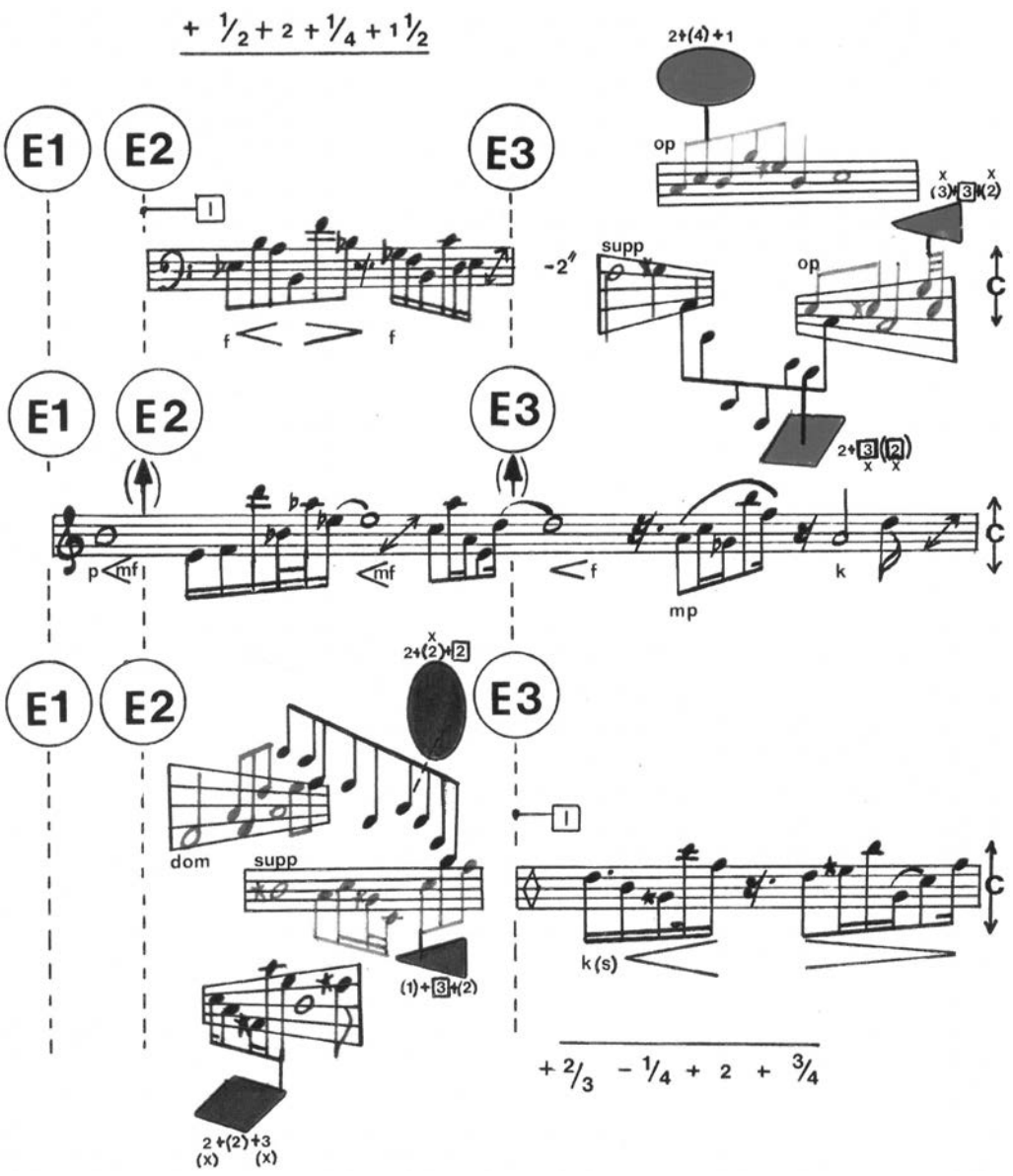
1 Driscoll 2015, 11–13; Heffley 1996, 317–22; Lewis 2008, 364; Litweiler 1984, 276; Lock 1988, 6, 170, 222, 290, 330–31; Lock 1999, 157; Lock 2008, 10, 19n28, 20n44; Radano 1993, 214–16.

DOI 10.1215/00222909-7127682



Example 1. Score excerpts from the cover of *For Trio*. Braxton, *Composition 76*, modules {L1}–{L2} and {E1}–{E2}–{E3}. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

Listening to the Arista recording with the *Composition 76* score at hand can reveal much about the piece—including the strategies that Braxton and his fellow performers employed while realizing *Composition 76*'s complex notation, which combines five-line staves with colors, geometric shapes, and symbols that link composed passages to spaces for improvisation. Some of these scoring techniques had appeared in Braxton's earlier music, but many



Example 1 (continued). Score excerpts from the cover of *For Trio*. Braxton, *Composition 76*, modules {L1}–{L2} and {E1}–{E2}–{E3}. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

were developed expressly for *Composition 76* and then integrated into subsequent pieces. An analysis of *Composition 76*, therefore, can also offer insights on Braxton's later works—and on the formative influences that shaped his compositional practice, especially Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

Beginnings

Braxton was born in 1945 on the South Side of Chicago. He took up clarinet and saxophone in high school and continued his music studies in the military, spending two-plus years performing with armed forces bands, principally in Seoul.[2] Braxton returned to Chicago in 1966, just in time to connect with the AACM (Radano 1993, 113). Founded in 1965, the AACM was a South Side community organization dedicated to creating opportunities for African American composers and performers. Virtually all of the association's original members were trained as jazz players. But Muhal Richard Abrams, the AACM's first president, was less interested in preserving jazz and more intent on helping his colleagues expand their musical horizons.[3]

The main forum for Abrams's ideas was an ensemble he called the Experimental Band. Viewed from a distance, the group resembled a traditional big band, with woodwind and brass sections, drummers, bassists, and Abrams himself at the piano (Lewis 2008, 60–62, 68). By 1966, though, the Experimental Band's sonic palette was rapidly expanding. Many band members became multi-instrumentalists, proficient on a number of instruments, sometimes from different families (Lewis 2008, 362–64; Steinbeck 2017, 46, 49–50).[4] The musicians also started playing what they called "little instruments"—small percussion, found objects, and other instruments representing a range of musical practices from around the globe (Braxton 1985, 1:428; see also Radano 1993, 99; Steinbeck 2017, 45–47, 49–50). With all of these new instruments at the ready, Abrams's bandmates could create an astonishing array of soundscapes, from dense passages made more colorful by the addition of contrasting timbres to sparse textures inhabited only by bells and small percussion (Jost 1994, 169–70). The Experimental Band also pioneered distinctive approaches to composition. One major compositional discovery was graphic notation. In both Europe and the United States, experimental composers were using graphic scores to represent unconventional sounds or to prompt performers to improvise. Abrams and the members of his ensemble adapted existing graphic techniques and invented others, developing novel notation systems that bridged the gap between jazz and postwar experimentalism (Lewis 2008, 58–60, 82).

The Experimental Band's performances were just as multifaceted as their scores. There were through-composed passages, episodes of open improvisation, and everything in between (Lewis 2008, 69; Radano 1993, 79). Although the Experimental Band never recorded an album and did not appear in concert as frequently as other AACM ensembles, its advances in instrumentation, composition, and improvisation became highly influential

2 For an in-depth account of Braxton's early years, see Radano 1993, 28–75.

3 The definitive history of the AACM is Lewis 2008.

4 For further historical context about the AACM's practice of multi-instrumentalism, see Campbell 2006.

in Chicago and beyond. Many group members adopted the Experimental Band's practices in their own work and went on to earn worldwide acclaim as composers and performers (Radano 1993, 86–87).

Braxton became one of the Experimental Band's most prominent alums. He joined the ensemble in late 1966, only weeks after he had left the army and come home to Chicago (Lewis 2008, 147–48). Within a year he was leading his own trios and quartets that featured his new friends from the AACM. In many ways his early ensembles continued the investigations of the Experimental Band. Multi-instrumentalism was the order of the day: on Braxton's debut album, *Three Compositions of New Jazz* (Braxton 1968), he played eight instruments: alto and soprano saxophones, clarinet, flute, accordion, bagpipes, bells, and snare drum. He also explored a number of scoring techniques, writing traditionally notated pieces (*Composition 2*), wholly graphic works (*Composition 10*), and hybrid scores that integrated standard and experimental notation (*Composition 3*) (Braxton 1988, 1:9–26, 173–83; Radano 1993, 127–31).

In 1969 Braxton and six other AACM musicians set out for Paris, at the invitation of a French drummer and record producer who had expressed interest in their work.[5] Braxton experienced some successes in Paris but failed to gain the acceptance of French critics, who viewed him as not black enough for jazz and too black to be a composer of experimental concert music (Lehman 2005, 1–2, 4–5; Steinbeck 2017, 70–77).[6] So in 1970 he left Paris, settling not in Chicago but in New York (Radano 1993, 155). There he joined Frederic Rzewski's experimental ensemble Musica Elettronica Viva, as well as Circle, an avant-garde jazz group led by Chick Corea (157–58, 163–64, 177–78). By 1971 Braxton was ready to take on France again, and he relocated to Paris, where he would be based for the next three years (Lock 1988, 94–96; Radano 1993, 180–81). All the while, he was plotting his return to America.

Braxton's homecoming opportunity arrived in 1974, when he signed a contract with the new label Arista Records. Braxton had finally become a critical success in Europe, and Arista producers figured that he could achieve the same level of renown in the United States. The label's bet soon paid off. The sales numbers for Braxton's first few Arista albums reached well into the five figures, quite good for releases in the jazz category. However, in an echo of his early reception in France, many American critics struggled to reconcile Braxton's image as a jazz improviser with his ongoing work as an experimental composer (Radano 1993, 249–56). To be sure, Braxton never claimed to be only—or even primarily—interested in jazz. This perspective was hardly

5 The AACM expedition was led by the four members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell, who arrived in Paris in early June 1969. A few weeks later they were joined by Braxton and his bandmates Leroy Jenkins and Leo Smith. See Lewis 2008, 217–25; Steinbeck 2017, 61–69, 78–80.

6 For additional information on the Paris experiences of AACM musicians and their colleagues from the St. Louis–based Black Artists' Group, see Looker 2004, 192–205.

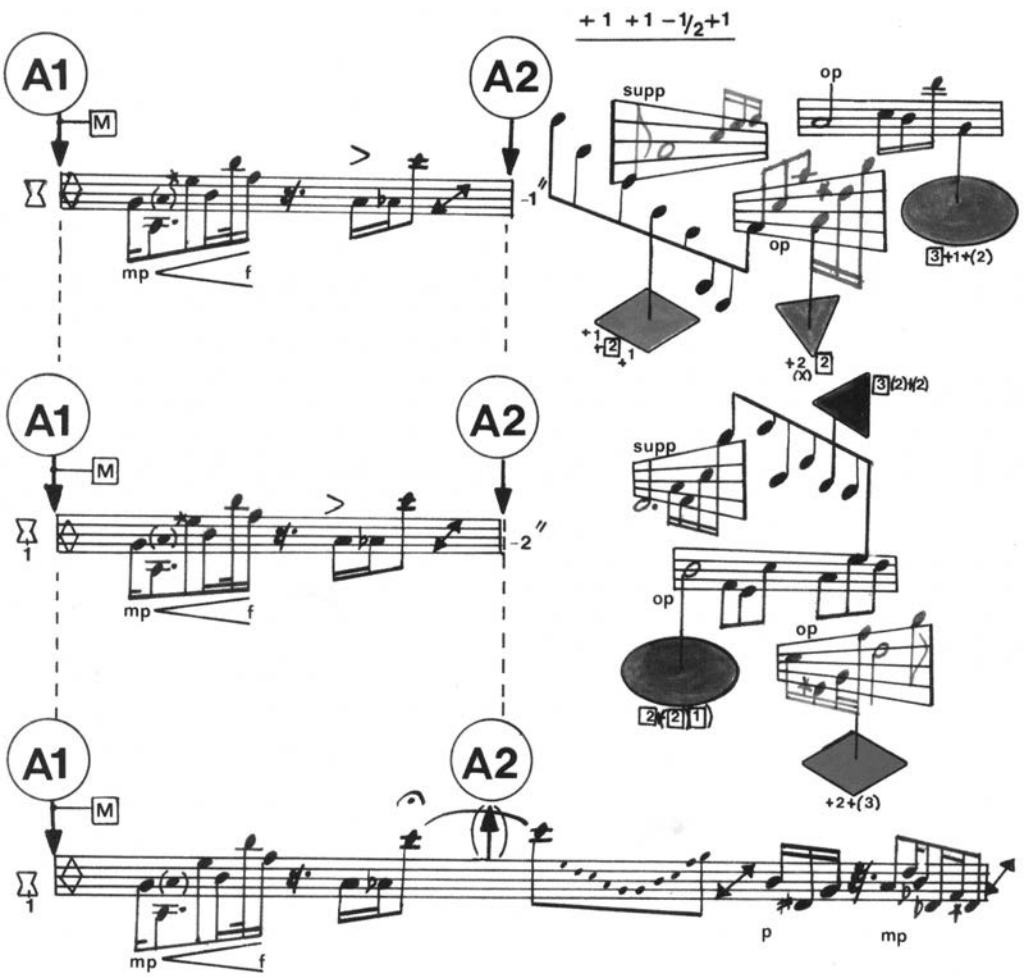
unusual for an artist who came up in the AACM. But to many members of the jazz community, Braxton's refusal to put their music first was controversial. Braxton might have tried to salvage his jazz bona fides by putting his compositional pursuits on hold. Instead, he doubled down on experimentalism (256–67). By the late 1970s Braxton was recording a series of avant-garde compositions for orchestras and chamber ensembles. By departing so dramatically from jazz orthodoxy, Braxton all but guaranteed that Arista's executives would eventually drop him from the label. Now he was in a race against time, rushing to record as many projects as he could before he lost Arista's financial backing (Lock 1988, 131–32). The four albums that followed would be among the most significant of Braxton's career (Braxton 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1982).

Composing for creative musicians

For Trio was the first album in Braxton's farewell-to-Arista series. This forty-one-minute LP contained just two tracks: contrasting performances of *Composition 76*, for three multi-instrumentalists. *Composition 76* was the first Braxton piece to employ "modular notation," his term for a scoring technique that represents composed as well as improvised passages with a shared graphic syntax (Braxton 1978c). The score of *Composition 76* is made up of forty-one unique "modules" written on twenty cards that can be arranged in any order (Braxton 2014). There are also a few "structural sequences": through-composed sections where the trio plays in unison rather than in the polyphonic textures of the modules (Braxton 1988, 4:149). On the Arista LP each take gets its own pair of structural sequences, one of several differences between the two album sides. But the performances are primarily distinguished by the musicians' real-time interactions with Braxton's modular notation.

Each of the score's twenty cards contains "both fixed and open material," in Braxton's (1978c) description. Although the words *fixed* and *open* can be glossed as "composed" and "improvised," such an interpretation does not entirely capture what Braxton and his collaborators are up to. In many fixed passages, the performers must choose which clef to use and even which instruments they will play, decisions that can transform the register and timbre of the notated lines. Additionally, the fixed material is notated in various colors—blue, red, green, purple, brown, and orange—each of which corresponds to an emotional state that the performers are asked to bring out (see Example 2, module {A1}).[7] The fixed material, in short, is formed in dialogue with the musicians, not dictated to them.

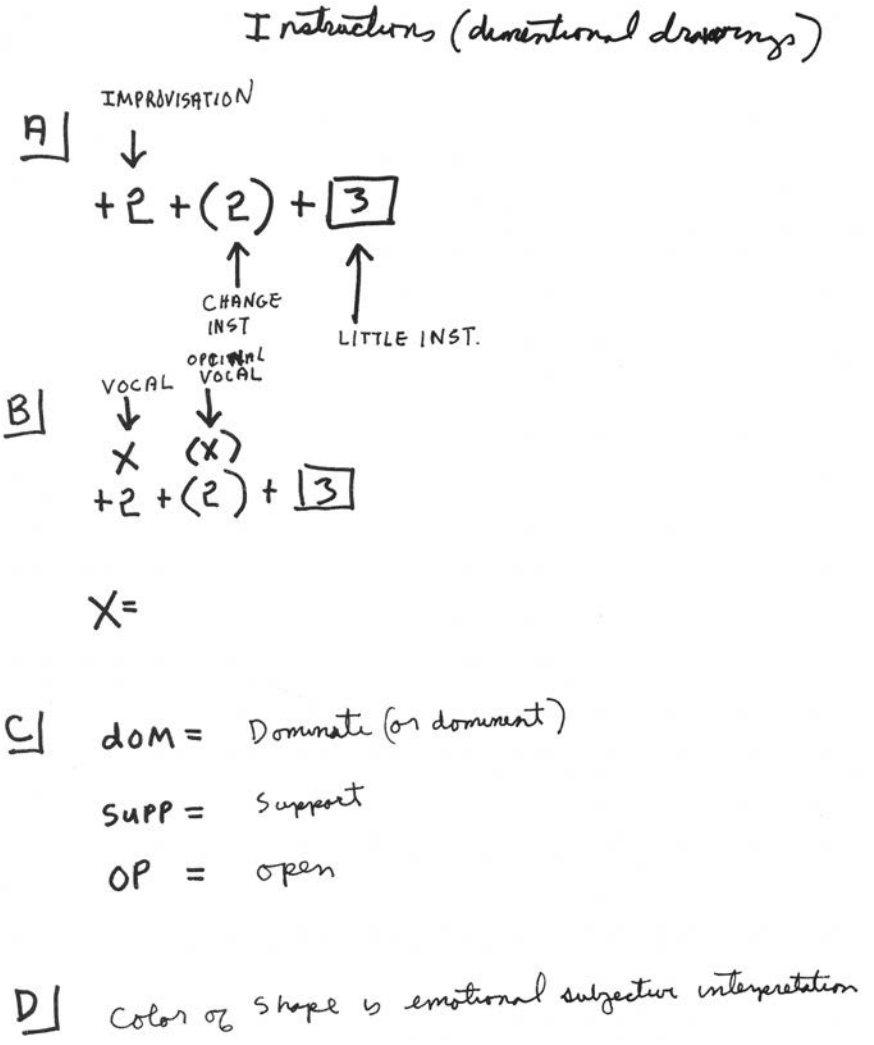
7 According to Braxton, the color-emotion correspondences in the *Composition 76* score are blue, "somber or moody"; red, "explosive or intense"; green, "calm, restrained, or contained"; purple, "vibrant or pulsing or energetic or vigorous"; brown, "complementary or harmonious or balancing"; and orange, "strong, lyrical, or bright." See Lock 1988, 222.



Example 2. Braxton, *Composition 76,* fixed module {A1} and open module {A2}. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

This collaborative approach is also evident in the open sections. At first glance, the open material looks nothing like the fixed material. Instead of melodies notated on single staves, there are fragmented lines on three-dimensional staff systems, some of which seem to leap out at the performer or recede to a vanishing point. Color is used more liberally, on noteheads and in the interior of geometric shapes that extend out into space (see Example 2, module {A2}). The musicians can take a number of pathways—or "routing[s]," as Braxton (1978c) would say—through these graphic arrays. But in every potential routing, the performers must develop their musical contributions in exchange with the composer's ideas. The color-filled geometric shapes are designed to elicit "improvisation burst[s]": "short improvi-

sational statements" that make use of silence as well as sound (Braxton 1988, 4:147). Attached to each shape is a special code that helps guide the musician's improvisation. Digits ranging from 1 to 4 indicate how many notes or phrases to play, parentheses tell the performer to switch instruments, boxes denote percussion or other little instruments, and X's invite the performer to improvise not with an instrument but with his voice. Additional codes suggest when a musician's improvised line should "dominate" the three-part texture, "support" another part, or adopt an "open" orientation that is neither dominant nor supportive (see Example 3). In all of these ways, the performers'



Example 3. Braxton, *Composition 76*, instructions to performers. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

improvisations are shaped by the score. Much like the fixed modules, which are hardly as rigid as Braxton's terminology implies, the open modules are circumscribed by the composition. Indeed, the musicians' improvisations can be heard as realizations of the sonic possibilities outlined in Braxton's innovative notation.

The scoring techniques used in *Composition 76* are reminiscent of a number of important graphic works by other experimental composers. In a lecture about *Composition 76*, Braxton "cite[d] as inspirations" Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Zyklus* (1959), for a soloist playing thirteen percussion instruments, as well as the five pieces in John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape* series (1939–52), some of which employ unconventional percussion akin to the AACM's little instruments (Lock 1988, 330; see also Cage 1939, 1942a, 1942b, 1951, 1952; Stockhausen 1959). All of these scores are aleatoric; in other words, the performers have to improvise—although Stockhausen and Cage would instead use terms like *indeterminacy* and *intuitive music* (Lewis 1996, 97, 116). *Composition 76* also calls to mind several other improvisatory Stockhausen works that combine winds, percussion, and voice, including *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968a), *Spiral* (1968b), and *Sternklang* (1971). However, few of the musicians in Stockhausen's orbit could have played the dozens of instruments that Braxton wanted to feature in *Composition 76*. Fortunately, Braxton could turn to another source of inspiration closer to home.

Almost all of Braxton's Arista albums were recorded in New York. But to translate the *Composition 76* score into sound, Braxton decided to venture to Chicago, the headquarters of the AACM. He wrote *Composition 76* for multi-instrumentalists—in particular, musicians who had mastered several woodwinds as well as various percussion instruments. Braxton, of course, fit this profile, as did several of his AACM colleagues, who had been cultivating their own multi-instrumental practices since the 1960s. Accordingly, in the fall of 1977, when Braxton arrived in Chicago for the *For Trio* recording session, he was able to assemble not one but two trios, both made up of musicians from the AACM. On the first performance of *Composition 76* were Douglas Ewart, Henry Threadgill, and Braxton himself; on the second take, Braxton again, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell. Each participant in the session would play at least a half dozen woodwinds, along with gongs and many other percussion instruments (Braxton 1978b).

The performers' AACM training also prepared them to engage with Braxton's modular notation, with its blend of graphics, codes, and traditional staff writing. This is not to say that the musicians had previously encountered every aspect of *Composition 76*'s notation. In fact, this may have been the first Braxton score to employ "color and shape variables," devices that later appeared in a number of works written after *Composition 76* (notably, *Composition 82* for four orchestras and *Composition 95* for two pianists) (Braxton 1988, 4:143; see also Braxton 1978a; 1982; 1988, 4:279–309, 5:1–25). However, familiarity with *Composition 76*'s scoring techniques would prove less significant

than the musicians' embrace of the responsibilities involved in performing pieces that were more about facilitating collaboration than maintaining an artificial boundary between composition and improvisation.

Each of the five performers on *For Trio* joined the AACM in the 1960s, when the members of the association were transforming themselves from jazz players into experimental composers.[8] Crucially, the association's compositional turn did not lead to a wholesale adoption of concert-music ideology. AACM members were especially reluctant to perpetuate the outmoded divide between composers and performers, inventors and interpreters. Such distinctions made little sense to Braxton and his AACM colleagues, who played all of these roles at a single concert. With every piece they composed, AACM members provided one another with platforms for improvisation. These improvisations, in turn, yielded musical ideas that became new compositions. Accordingly, the AACM began to view composition and improvisation as two sides of the same coin, two facets of a creative practice that was collaborative at its core. This, according to Braxton (1988, 4:143), is why he "integrate[d] color and shape variables into the operational scheme of [*Composition 76*]": he wanted "to generate fresh creative responses from [the] instrumentalists," who could create—collectively and spontaneously—a work richer than what he could have constructed on his own.

Listening to *Composition 76*

Braxton's two trios recorded both takes of *Composition 76* on the same day: September 22, 1977 (Braxton 1978c).[9] The first take, with Ewart and Threadgill, appeared on side A of *For Trio* and was titled "Version I." Side B of the album carried the second take, "Version II," featuring Jarman and Mitchell.[10] Listening to both album sides back to back reveals a number of differences between the two performances, some of them related to Braxton's arranging decisions during the week of intensive rehearsals that preceded the recording session (Ewart, pers. comm., November 20, 2017). On the first take, Braxton, Ewart, and Threadgill often change staff systems from one card to the next. In contrast, the performers on the second take rarely deviate from their staff assignments: Jarman plays the top system, Mitchell plays the bottom system, and Braxton stays in the middle. Another difference between the two takes is the order in which the modules and structural sequences are played (see Tables 1–2). Braxton's chosen orderings affect the performances in many

8 The AACM's "composer-centered" philosophy is explored in Lewis 2008, 69–70, 280, 361, 458, 484.

9 In this section of the article the engraved musical examples are the author's transcriptions of the *For Trio* recording. Each staff is labeled with the performer's initials. Pitches are notated in the instruments' keys, as in a transposing score. Rests are represented by Braxtonesque forward slashes.

10 The Mosaic label's reissue of *For Trio* (Braxton 2008) gave the performances new titles—"Opus 76 (Version One)" and "Opus 76 (Version Two)"—a departure from virtually all the writings about the work, which term it *Composition No. 76*, *Composition 76*, or simply *76*.

Table 1. Formal diagram of "Version I"

Modules	*Timing*
Modules {H1}–{H2}	0:00–0:56
Modules {I1}–{I2}	0:56–1:33
Modules {L1}–{L2}	1:33–2:27
Modules {P1}–{P2}	2:27–3:18
Modules {Q1}–{Q2}	3:18–4:16
Module {B2}	4:16–4:44
Modules {J1}–{J2}	4:44–5:58
Modules {F1}–{F2}	5:58–6:53
Modules {C1}–{C2}	6:53–7:45
Modules {D1}–{D2}	7:45–8:39
Modules {A1}–{A2}	8:39–9:44
Modules {M1}–{M2}	9:44–10:32
First structural sequence	10:32–12:18
Modules {S1}–{S2}	12:18–12:54
Modules {O1}–{O2}	12:54–13:55
Modules {R1}–{R2}	13:55–14:39
Modules {G1}–{G2}	14:39–15:01
Modules {E1}–{E2}–{E3}	15:01–15:46
Modules {B1}–{B2}	15:46–16:33
Second structural sequence	16:33–18:16
Modules {N1}–{N2}	18:16–19:10
Modules {T1}–{T2}	19:10–19:33
Modules {K1}–{K2}	19:33–20:10

Table 2. Formal diagram of "Version II"

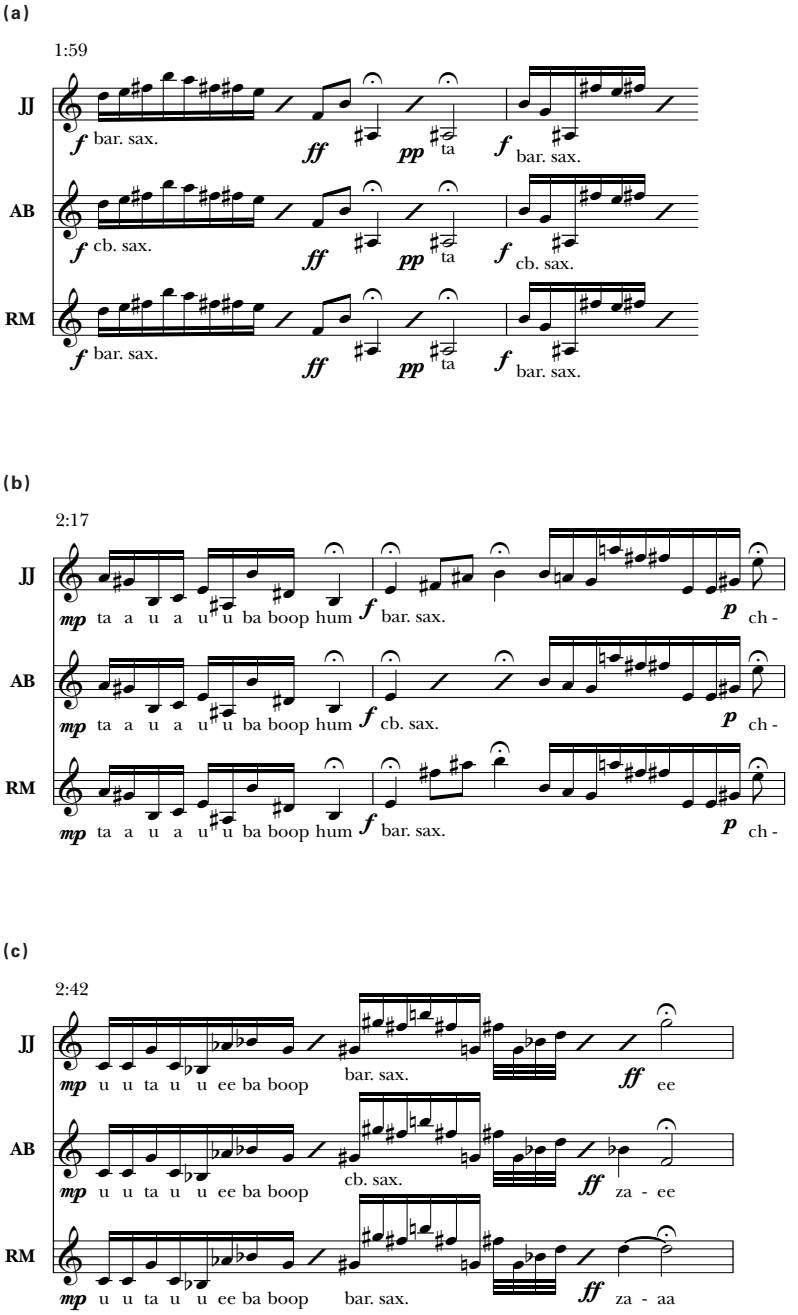
Modules	*Timing*
Modules {D1}–{D2}	0:00–0:41
Modules {S1}–{S2}	0:41–1:59
First structural sequence	1:59–3:26
Modules {G1}–{G2}	3:26–3:49
Modules {E1}–{E2}–{E3}	3:49–4:44
Modules {P1}–{P2}	4:44–6:03
Modules {B1}–{B2}	6:03–6:59
Modules {H1}–{H2}	6:59–8:11
Modules {I1}–{I2}	8:11–9:18
Modules {Q1}–{Q2}	9:18–10:36
Modules {A1}–{A2}	10:36–11:35
Second structural sequence	11:35–12:41
Modules {M1}–{M2}	12:41–13:18
Modules {T1}–{T2}	13:18–14:04
Modules {K1}–{K2}	14:04–14:42
Modules {L1}–{L2}	14:42–15:17
Modules {O1}–{O2}	15:17–16:21
Modules {J1}–{J2}	16:21–17:07
Modules {N1}–{N2}	17:07–18:00
Modules {F1}–{F2}	18:00–18:59
Modules {C1}–{C2}	18:59–19:51
Modules {R1}–{R2}	19:51–20:51

ways. For instance, on "Version I" the structural sequences do not emerge until the latter half of the performance, but "Version II" reaches its initial structural sequence almost immediately, just two minutes into the take. This arrangement creates a sense of continuity between the LP's A- and B-sides. It also gives "Version II" an audacious opening, with the members of the trio playing an angular line on some of the lowest instruments in their arsenals: Jarman and Mitchell on baritone saxophone and Braxton an octave lower on E♭ contrabass saxophone (see Example 4).

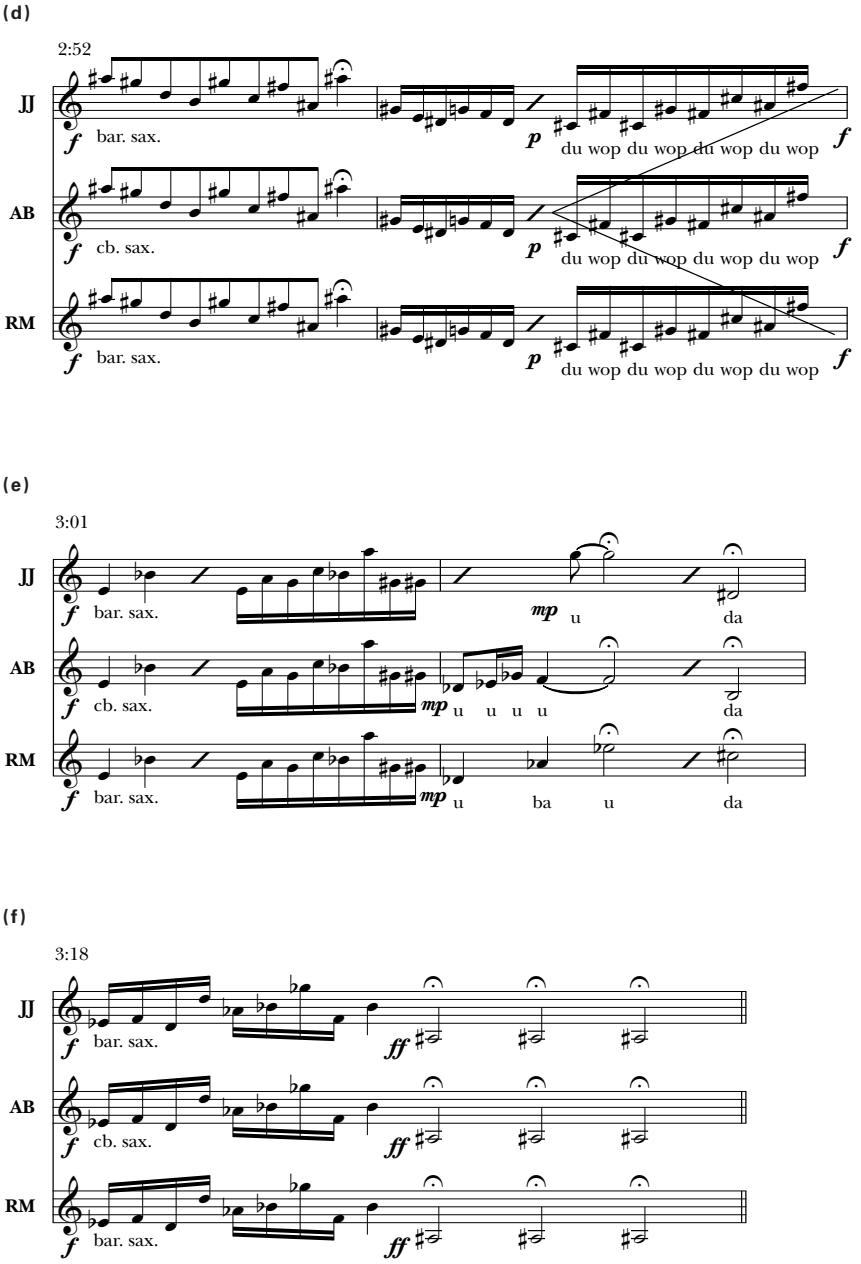
The low-register structural sequence must have been thrilling to play, but it presents the musicians with a major dilemma, just three minutes into "Version II." The next card begins with module {G1}, a solo for Mitchell. This is an open module (not fixed), with a configuration of three staves that recurs throughout the *Composition 76* score: two staves intersect with each other, and the third staff stands alone (Lock 1988, 331). Curiously, none of the three staves is coded as "dominant," even though Mitchell is the only active performer. Instead, the staves are coded "support" and "open"—descriptions that might make Mitchell wonder how to present his improvisation (see Example 5). However, Mitchell quickly finds a path through this ambiguous notation. He enters module {G1} via the supportive staff, written in blue ink. Because Jarman and Braxton are silent, Mitchell's improvisation cannot support another part that sounds simultaneously. So he flips this supportive relationship from vertical to horizontal, linking his improvisation to the fixed passages on either side.

Mitchell removes the mouthpiece from his baritone saxophone and plays a C♯4, echoing the final pitch class of the preceding structural sequence, which ended with three low C♯s. (Here Mitchell is likely reading the second-space sharp at the center of the supportive staff.) Next, he moves off the staff and lands on the green rhombus. The code attached to this shape calls for improvised phrases of two, three, and three notes, any of which may be performed with the voice, either unaided or with "airhorns" made from sections of a water hose (Braxton 1978c). The latter two phrases can also be played on little instruments, as the boxes indicate. Mitchell strikes a balance between all of these timbral possibilities, using his natural voice for the first phrase and then employing small percussion, his saxophone mouthpiece, and an airhorn. Throughout his improvisation, Mitchell plays in a "calm, restrained" manner (Lock 1988, 222), the mood indicated by the shade of green that fills the rhombus (see Example 6).

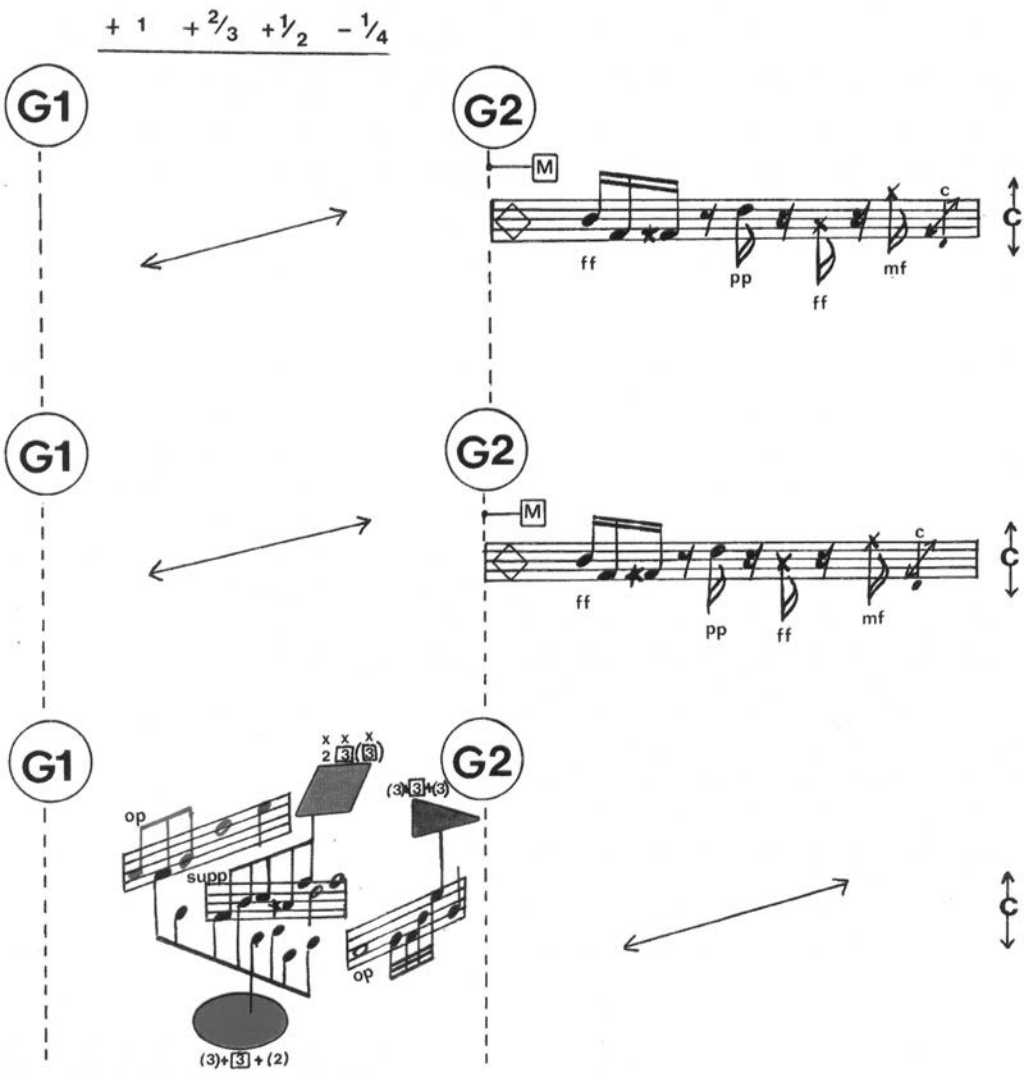
If Mitchell's initial C♯4 reached back to support the just-concluded structural sequence, his improvisation on the color-shape notation of {G1} looks ahead to the upcoming module, {G2}. By building his improvised phrases from a combination of vocal and instrumental sounds, he prepares Jarman and Braxton for what they will encounter in {G2}, where a brief instrumental figure leads into a two-note vocal phrase. Mitchell's improvisation, moreover, supports his coperformers in yet another way. The structural sequence was



Example 4. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," first structural sequence.

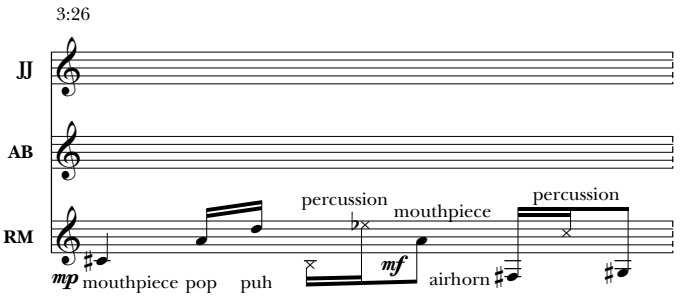


Example 4 (continued). Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," first structural sequence.

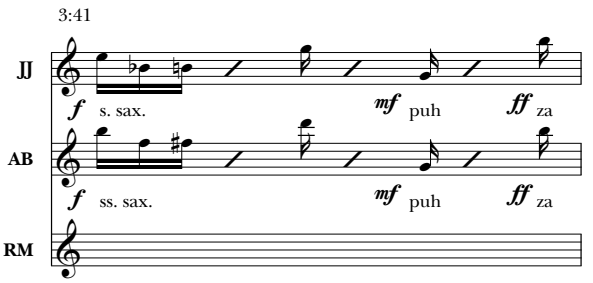


Example 5. Braxton, *Composition 76*, modules {G1}–{G2}. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

dense and energetic enough to make almost anything played after it sound out of place. But Mitchell's sparse, quiet performance of module {G1} creates an extraordinarily effective contrast: a clean slate, sonically speaking, for what comes next. When Jarman and Braxton finally enter, on soprano and sopranino saxophones, respectively, it feels like a natural response to the spaces and silences of Mitchell's improvisation (see Example 7). As Mitchell would say, "Every time you interrupt space in a very confident, secure manner, then music happens" (quoted in Palmer 1981).



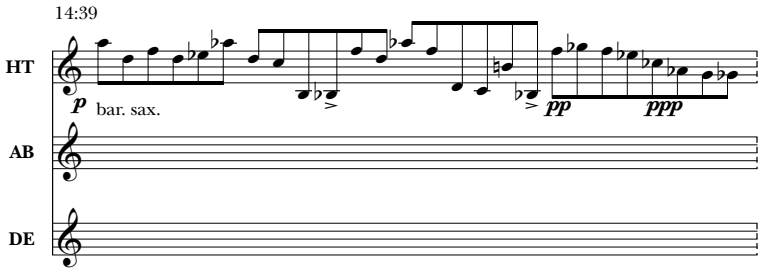
Example 6. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {G1}.



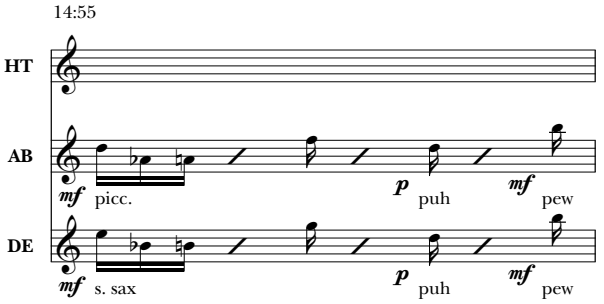
Example 7. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {G2}.

In "Version" I, modules {G1}–{G2} have a rather different effect, for reasons related to musical form. The card containing these modules occurs two-thirds of the way through the performance, rather than near the beginning of the take, as in "Version II." Moreover, the {G1}–{G2} card is preceded not by a through-composed structural sequence for low-register saxophones but by modules {R1}–{R2}, featuring open-ended material for woodwinds and voice (see Tables 1–2). Like {R1}–{R2}, module {G2} is written for woodwind instruments and vocals, which has important consequences for {G1}. Here the musicians do not have to use {G1} to bridge the gap between two divergent passages. Instead, they can take the opposite approach, using the module to generate contrasting textures that will keep the {R1}–{R2} and {G1}–{G2} cards from sounding too much alike.

The solution that the performers devise for module {G1} is based on register and timbre. In {R1}–{R2} the primary instruments are Braxton's clarinet and Ewart's flute, and the opening phrase of {G2} is also designed for high-register woodwinds (see Example 5). In between these modules is {G1}, a solo notated on the bottom staff system. Usually this system would belong to Ewart, but the lowest saxophone in his arsenal is an E♭ alto, an instrument similar in range and tone color to the clarinet that Braxton played during



Example 8. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version I," module {G1}.



Example 9. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version I," module {G2}.

{R1}–{R2}. So Ewart trades systems with Threadgill, who brought a baritone saxophone to the recording studio. Threadgill improvises a few phrases on baritone sax, landing intermittently on B♭3, sounding as concert D♭2, the instrument's lowest pitch. He concludes {G1} with a decrescendo, setting up the dynamic contrasts of the next module (see Example 8). After Threadgill plays his last note, the other musicians wait a few seconds before entering with module {G2}. Braxton and Ewart play the first phrase on piccolo and soprano saxophone, respectively, and then end the module with their voices, performing the two-note vocal phrase with crisp plosive sounds that are more percussive than songlike (see Example 9).

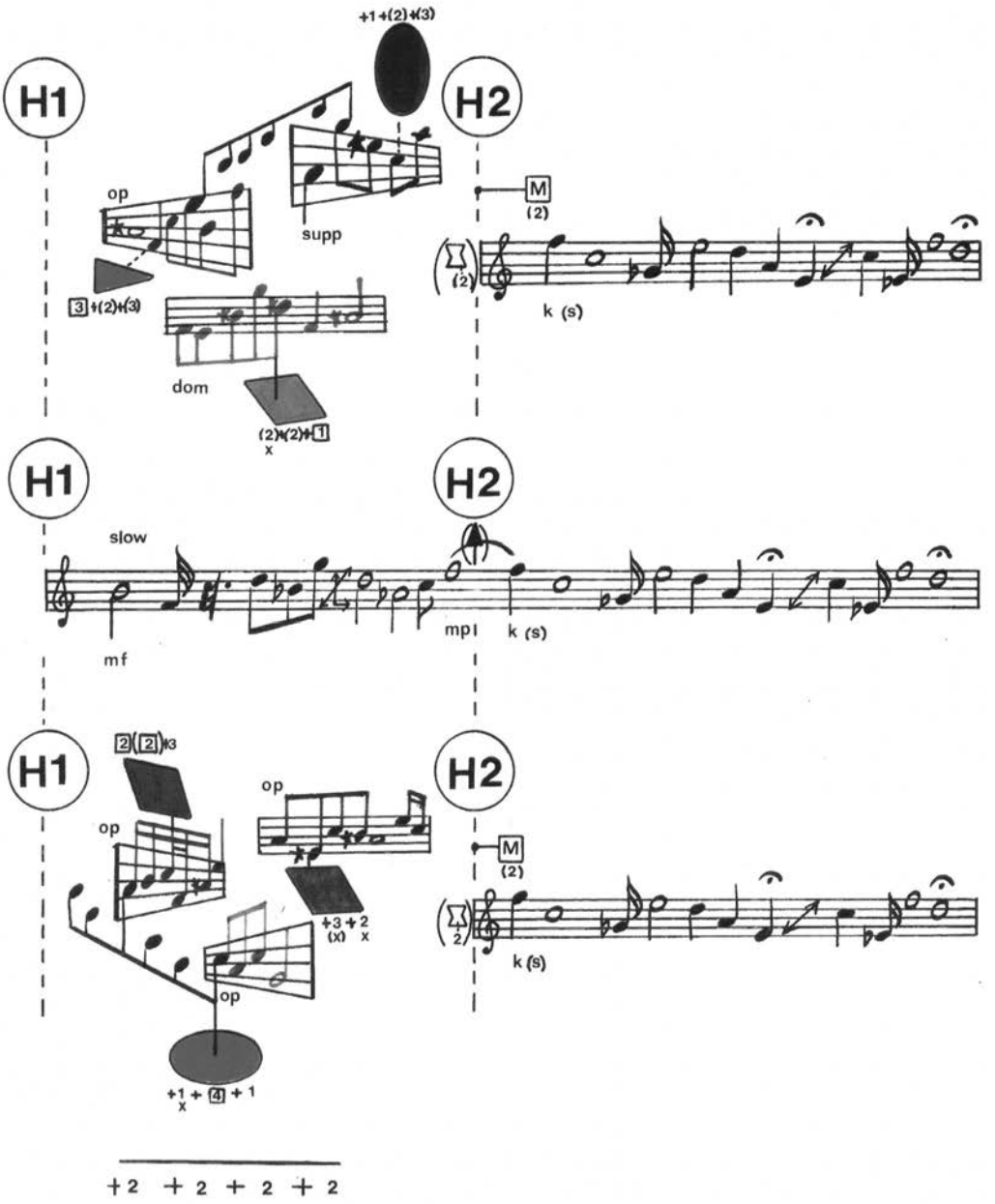
Formal considerations can significantly influence how the performances unfold, as shown in each trio's rendition of modules {G1}–{G2}. The musicians think carefully about possible paths from one module to another, and the decisions they make frequently center on finding the sounds—and silences—that can best prepare the next module. These aims, though, can be achieved in a variety of ways. Indeed, Braxton's two trios seem to develop distinctive strategies for performing their modules, and this gives each take a unique feel. In "Version I" Threadgill, Braxton, and Ewart often proceed quickly through the fixed material to spend more time exploring the open portions

of the modules. Sometimes they interpret the open material rather freely instead of adhering to the notation, and these passages tend to sound more improvisatory, with fast-paced, linear melodies that depart from the steady rhythms and wide intervals of the *Composition 76* score. In contrast, Braxton and his collaborators on "Version II" tend to devote equal time to the fixed and open material, and their improvisations typically begin with gestures derived from the notated contours, colors, and codes. This approach allows Jarman, Braxton, and Mitchell to move effortlessly between fixed material, open material, and passages that are mostly improvised yet sound as if they were composed.

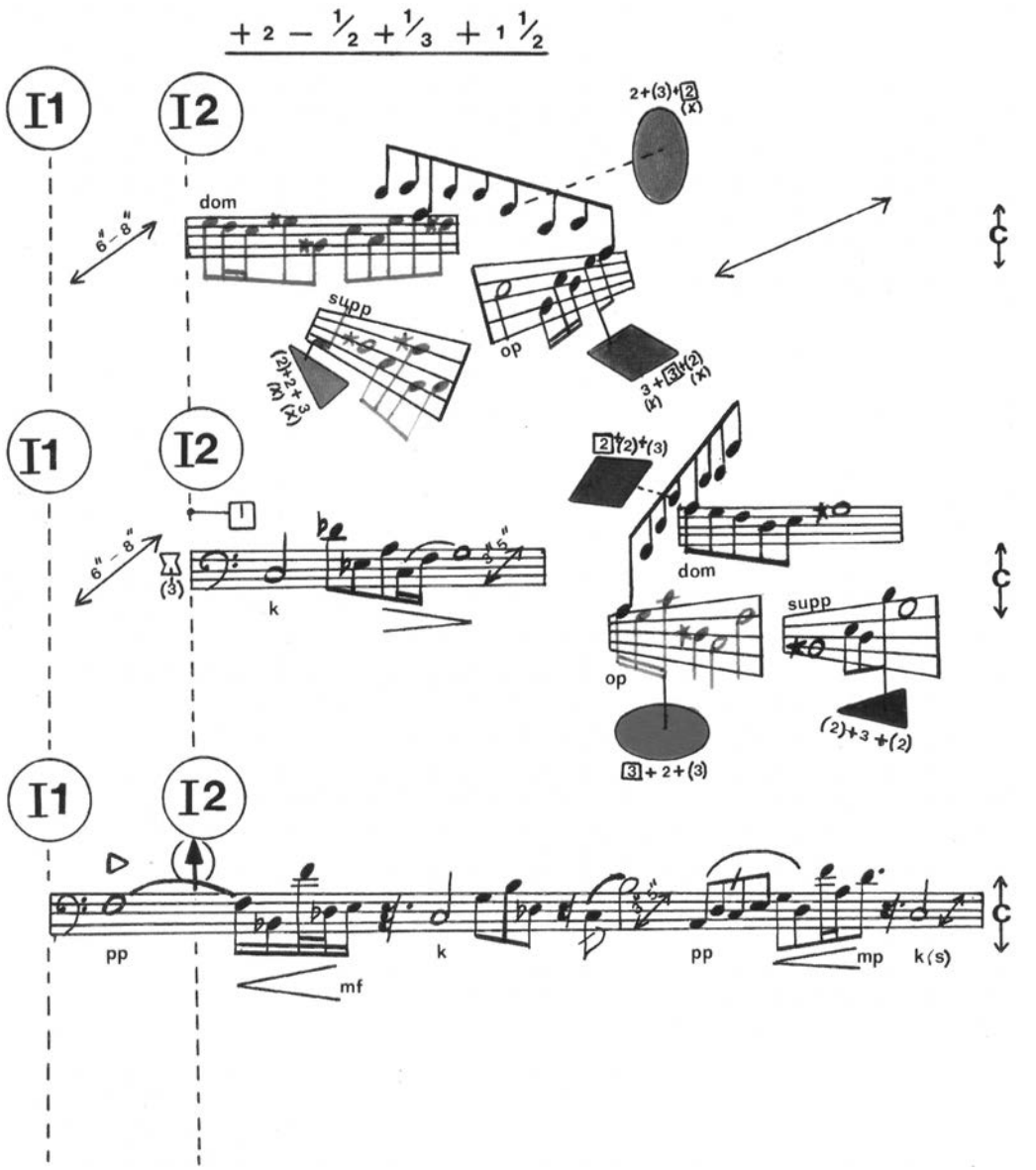
The trios' unique strategies for realizing the score can be heard in their performances of modules {H1}–{H2} and {I1}–{I2}. On "Version I" as well as "Version II," the card containing {H1}–{H2} leads immediately to the card with {I1}–{I2}, one of the few recurrent orderings on the album (see Tables 1–2). In his notes about the piece Braxton (1988, 4:145) claims that "there is no development at all in *Composition 76*," and indeed there are no passages that take a motive presented earlier in the score and develop it further—nor could there be, given that the cards can be performed in any order. Yet for both takes Braxton decided to group the {H1}–{H2} card with the {I1}–{I2} card. Although this ordering does not necessarily establish a developmental relationship, the cards do share a common element: long tones. Module {H1} ends with a long tone, which in turn introduces {H2}. Another long tone joins {I1} to {I2}, a rare piece of connective tissue in a work that Braxton characterizes as a sequence of independent happenings, a "series of events hung in space" (quoted in Lock 1988, 330) (see Example 10).

In "Version I" modules {H1}–{H2}–{I1}–{I2} are placed at the very beginning of the performance. Because the {H1}–{H2} card is not preceded by another module, the musicians do not have to switch instruments on the fly or prepare for {H1} in any other way. Instead, they may realize module {H1} as they see fit, and this passage can be heard as an opening statement, a preview of how the trio will perform *Composition 76*. The musicians enter the module together, but each moves through the material at his own pace. Braxton picks up his flute and plays the middle system's fixed line in just four seconds. Threadgill, on E♭ clarinet, operates more deliberately. He plays all three of the staves on the top system, starting with the "open" staff and then proceeding clockwise through the "support" and "dominant" staves. Then he veers off the staff, selecting the red triangle and improvising phrases of three, two, and three notes on zither, cymbals, gong, and a pitched bell. Like Threadgill, Ewart starts out on E♭ clarinet, but his improvisation is only loosely related to the notation. He plays a rapid flourish ending on E5 and then switches to harmonica and blows a few high-register chords (see Example 11).

Once Ewart and Threadgill have finished their improvisations, Braxton returns to complete the module, playing the four-note phrase that ends {H1}. The phrase concludes with a long-tone F5, the trio's cue to begin module

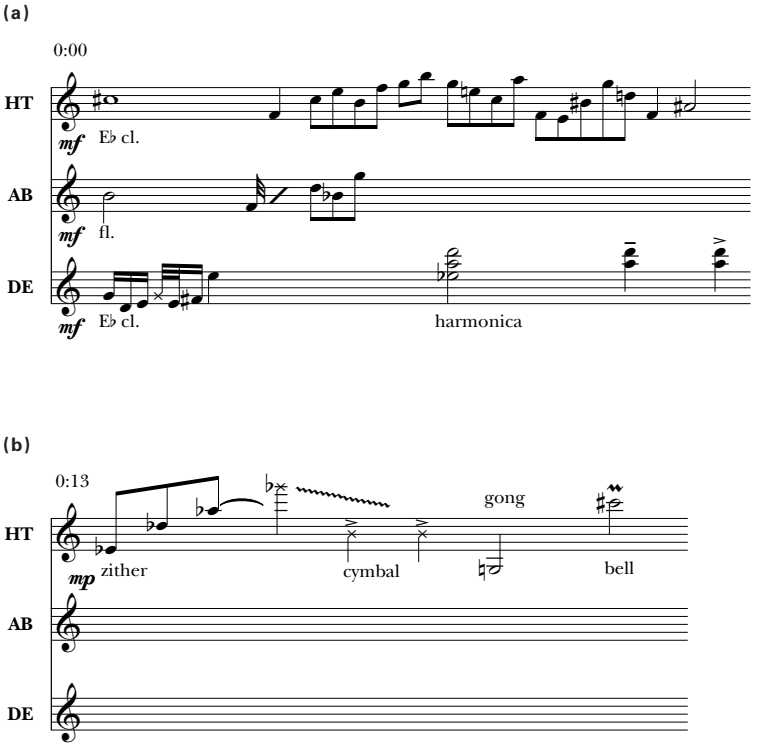


Example 10. Braxton, *Composition 76*, modules {H1}–{H2} and modules {I1}–{I2}. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

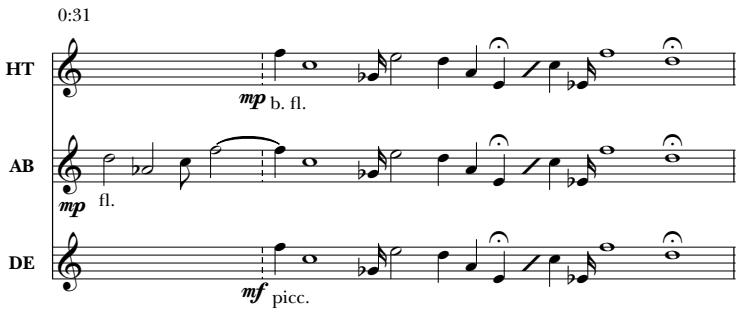


Example 10 (continued). Braxton, *Composition 76,* modules {H1}–{H2} and modules {I1}–{I2}. Courtesy of Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

{H2}. Here the score directs Threadgill and Ewart to "match instrument[s]" with Braxton, that is, choose woodwinds in the same key as Braxton's flute, so they can play the fixed melody in unison (or octaves) (Braxton 2014). Braxton's bandmates have only a few C instruments on hand, most of which belong to the flute family. Ewart and Threadgill move to piccolo and bass



Example 11. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version I," module {H1} (first part).



Example 12. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version I," modules {H1} (second part)–{H2}.

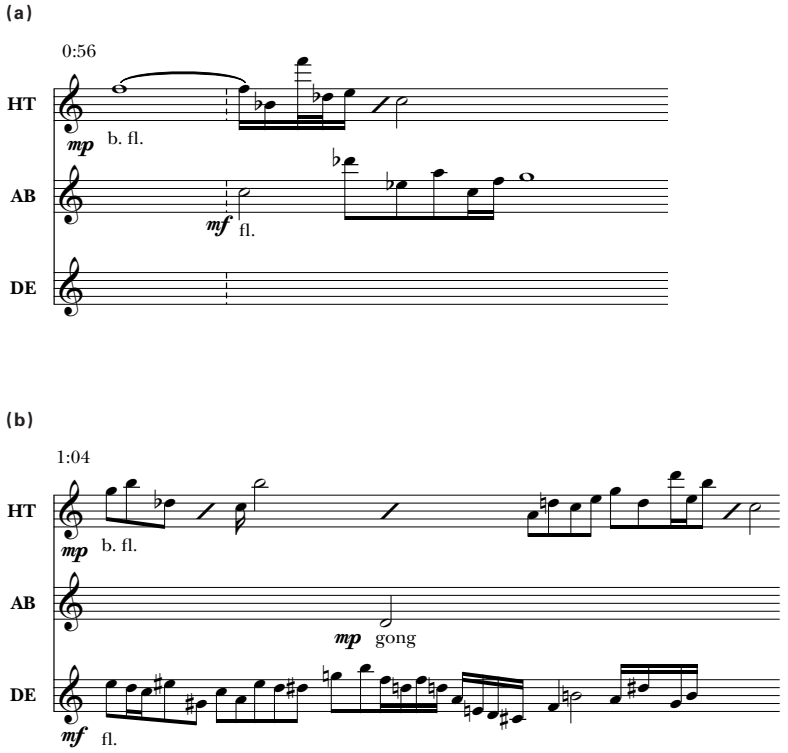
flute, respectively, and they surround Braxton's line with octaves above and below (see Example 12).

The following card, {I1}–{I2}, starts out much like module {H2}. One performer sounds a long tone, signaling the others to enter. Here the long tone appears on the bottom system—Ewart's area—but the musicians decide to

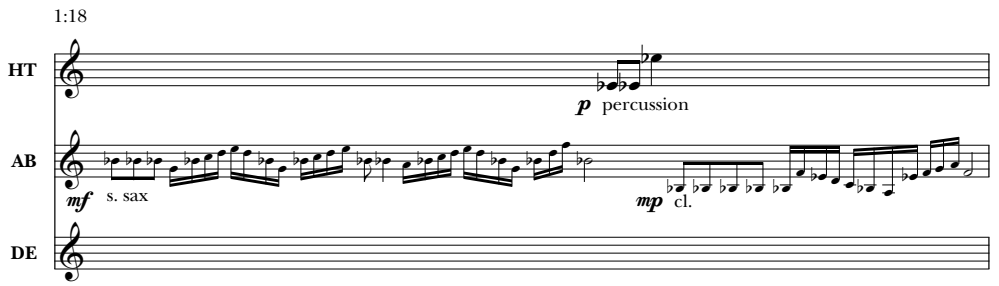
give it to Threadgill. The long tone is notated in bass clef, and Threadgill's bass flute was the lowest instrument used in the previous module. If he takes the long tone, the trio can import the flute texture from {H1}–{H2} into the new card without changing the registers in which the {I1}–{I2} melodies are written. Threadgill and Ewart's system trading is not the only liberty taken by the performers at the outset of the card. According to the score, the musicians not playing the {I1} long tone should wait six to eight seconds before initiating the next module, {I2}. But Braxton jumps in right away, staying on flute and playing the fixed melody from the middle system. A few seconds later he reaches the end of the line, creating a musical problem that Ewart has to solve. Braxton is done with the first part of {I2}, and Threadgill, who has remained on Ewart's system after playing the opening long tone, has finished almost half of his fixed line. The top system, ordinarily assigned to Threadgill, is the only territory yet to be claimed. Ewart enters here, after switching from piccolo to flute. This is an open system, like Ewart's part in module {H1}, but here he sticks closer to the musical ideas outlined in the notation. He starts with the "dominant" staff, moves off the staff to play an improvised melody in the key of D minor, and then returns to the notation, reading from the "support" staff at lower left (see Example 13).

Ewart's improvisation unfolds quickly, like everything else on the {I1}–{I2} card. By the time he plays his final note, Threadgill has completed nearly all of the bottom system. Only twenty seconds have elapsed since the musicians began modules {I1}–{I2}, and they may want to avoid arriving at the next card too early. Braxton buys his bandmates some time, moving off the page and improvising a B♭-major line on soprano saxophone. Threadgill joins in with an off-script idea of his own—three percussion accents—and Braxton responds with one more ad lib melody, this one played on clarinet, the instrument he will use in the next module, {L1} (see Example 14). Braxton and Threadgill's improvised extension does the trick, nearly doubling the duration of the {I1}–{I2} episode to thirty-seven seconds, a time span more in keeping with the minute-per-card pace the trio will maintain throughout the rest of "Version I" (see Tables 1–2).

In "Version II" the musicians encounter module {H1} not at the start of the take but just before the seven-minute mark. At this point in the performance, Braxton is playing bass clarinet, and he has the fixed melody written on the middle system, while Jarman and Mitchell have material that can be interpreted in multiple ways. Mitchell, reading the bottom system (as usual), takes the leftmost rhombus, which calls for an improvisation on little instruments. This shape is also coded as "open"—not dominant, not supportive—and Mitchell responds accordingly, playing his percussion sounds in the spaces between Braxton's bass-clarinet notes. Meanwhile, Jarman is given a system with even more improvisational possibilities, and he chooses a routing that will enable him to take control of the texture, at least momentarily. He picks up his flute and plays the line labeled "dominant" and written in red, a color intended to convey "intense, explosive emotions" (Lock 2008, 10).



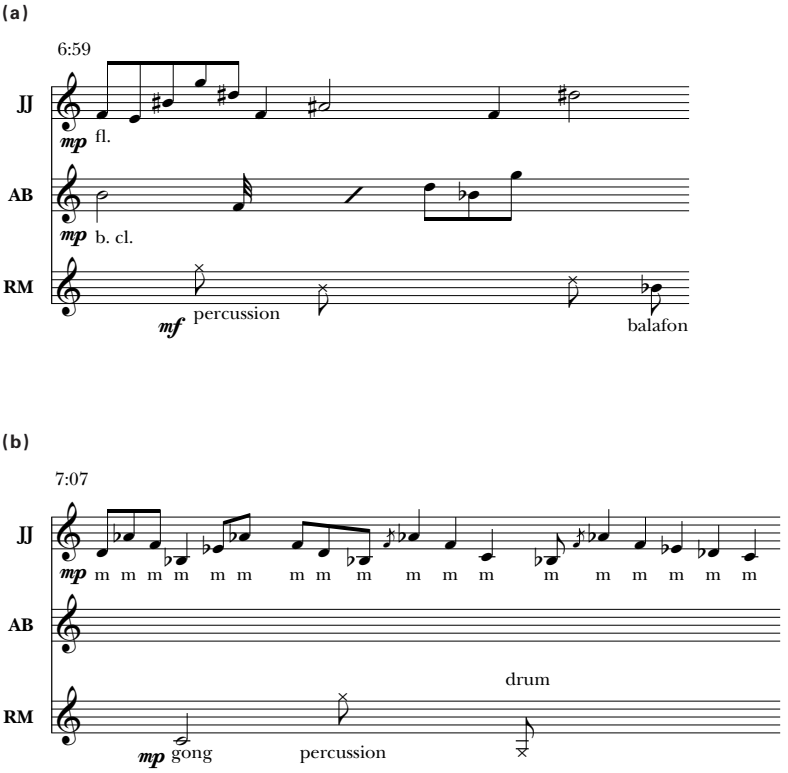
Example 13. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version I," modules {I1}–{I2} (first part).



Example 14. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version I," module {I2} (second part).

Instead of stopping there—and letting Braxton get the last word—Jarman ad-libs two more notes on flute and then jumps to the orange rhombus below the staff and begins to improvise with his voice, humming a melody that hints at the key of B♭ (see Example 15).

During Jarman's vocal improvisation, Mitchell keeps playing percussion, but Braxton rests. Then, as soon as Jarman finishes, Braxton reenters the texture, playing the last four notes of module {H1}. As noted above, this is the

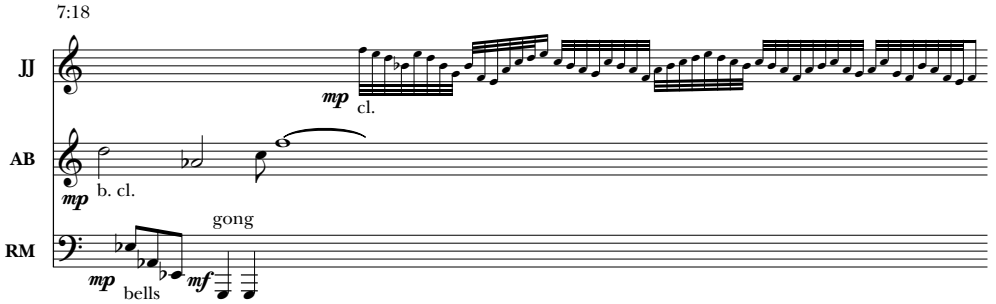


Example 15. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {H1} (first part).

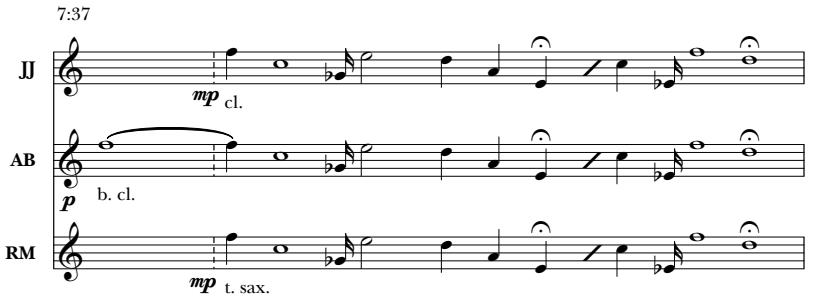
moment in the card when the other performers have to "match instrument[s]" with Braxton in preparation for the upcoming {H2} melody, which he will play on B♭ bass clarinet (Braxton 2014). Jarman switches from C flute to B♭ clarinet and plays a quick run in the key of E♭ major, decorating Braxton's concert E♭4, the long tone that links {H1} to {H2}. At the same time, Mitchell moves away from his gong rack and reaches for his tenor saxophone, which will become the third B♭ woodwind in the texture. With these instruments at hand, the musicians are ready to proceed into module {H2} (see Example 16).

Braxton pauses for an instant to breathe and then announces {H2} with another long-tone E♭4. Two seconds later Jarman and Mitchell join in, adopting Braxton's soft dynamics and measured pace. Braxton and his collaborators take their time: {H2} consists of just a few phrases, but they make the module last for more than thirty seconds, giving each note its due (see Example 17).

The next pair of modules, {I1}–{I2}, also starts out with a long tone, and now it is Jarman who leads the ensemble, shifting to sopranino saxophone and borrowing the long tone from Mitchell's system at the bottom of the card. This exchange of systems lasts for just eight seconds, the duration of Jarman's



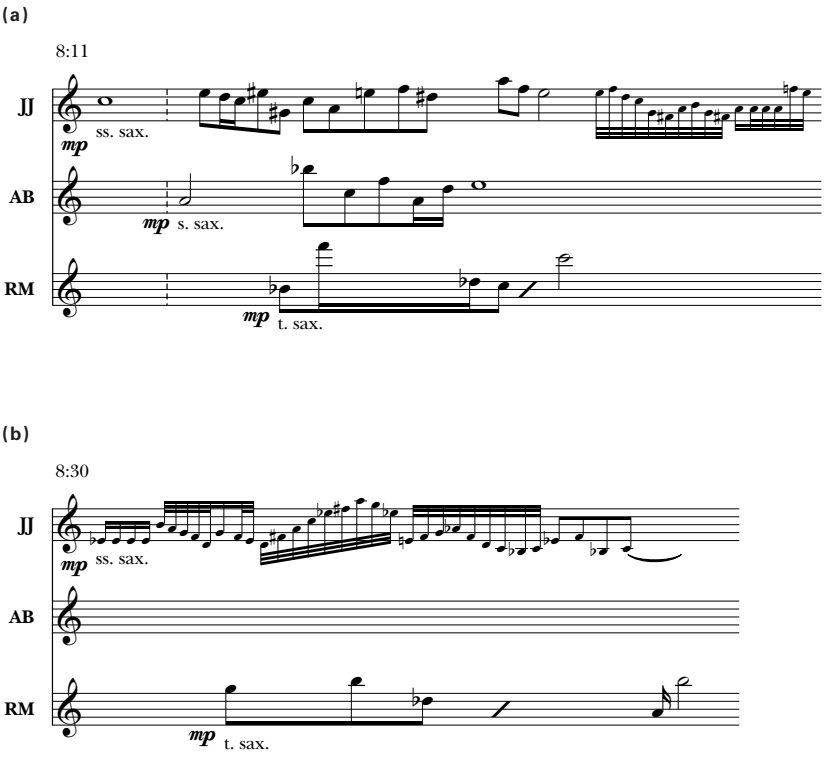
Example 16. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {H1} (second part).



Example 17. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {H2}.

long tone—unlike the system trading in "Version I," where the musicians often occupy one another's systems for extended stretches of time. Here the temporary trade-off gives both Braxton and Mitchell time to consider how they will approach {I2}. Braxton changes instruments, moving from bass clarinet to soprano saxophone, a woodwind that offers a better blend with Mitchell's tenor saxophone and Jarman's E♭ sopranino. Mitchell could switch instruments too, but instead he focuses on switching clefs. He reads the first three notes of his fixed line on bass clef, shifts to treble clef for the third-space sixteenth note, and then alternates between bass and treble clefs, never reading more than four consecutive notes on the same clef (see Example 18). This inventive strategy allows Mitchell to find the best possible counterpoint for his bandmates' lines while preserving the contour of the notated melody. It also seems to capture the attention of Jarman and Braxton, who respond thoughtfully to Mitchell's playing as they approach the second half of module {I2}.

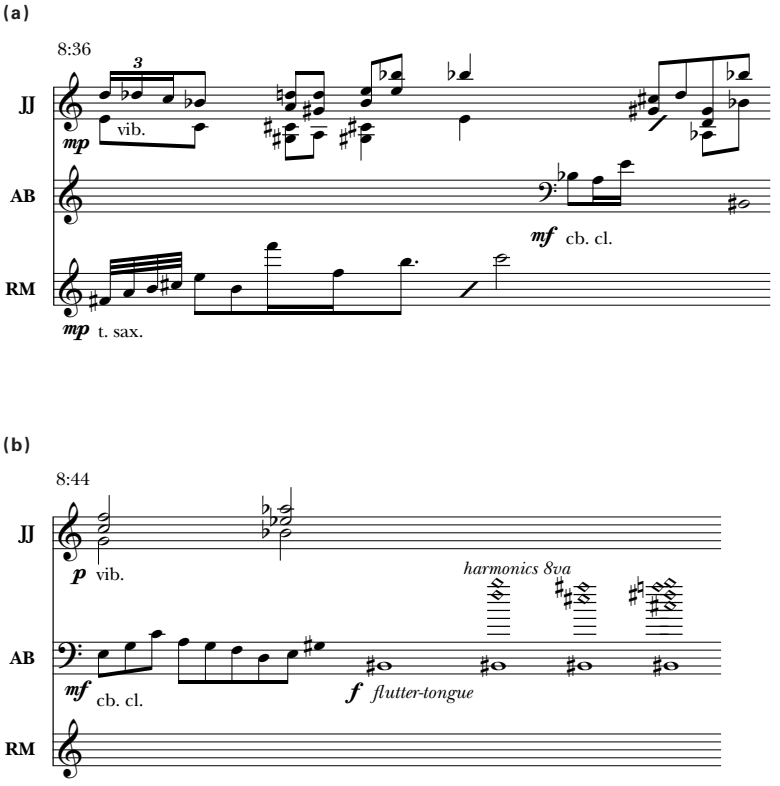
Mitchell's ingenious interpretation of his fixed melody sets the stage for the conclusion of {I2}. In a span of just ten seconds the musicians completely reshape the texture, brilliantly timing a series of staggered exits and entries



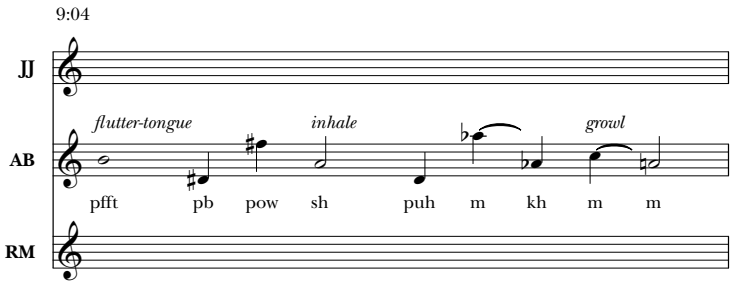
Example 18. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," modules {I1}–{I2} (first part).

without making the music sound hurried or dense. When Mitchell arrives at the rest midway through his line, Jarman puts down his sopranino saxophone and picks up a pair of percussion mallets. Once Mitchell returns, Jarman enters on vibraphone, playing the kinds of "harmonious," "balancing" chords suggested by the brown rhombus at the lower-right corner of his staff system (Lock 1988, 222). Like Jarman, Braxton pays close attention to how Mitchell's part unfolds. While Mitchell plays the remaining phrases of his notated melody, Braxton grabs his contrabass clarinet, the lowest instrument in his renowned collection of extreme-range woodwinds (Broomer 2008). An instant after Mitchell reaches the final note on his system, Braxton leaps in, three-plus octaves below his collaborator's tenor saxophone. Braxton builds his improvisation from all three of his staves: he starts with a three-note figure from the "open" staff, takes the second-line B♯2 from the supportive staff, plays the entire "dominant"-coded melody, and ultimately returns to B♯2—sounding as A♯0, the deepest pitch his contrabass clarinet can produce. Jarman, whose vibraphone could overshadow Braxton's low-register line, lets one last chord ring out and then exits the texture (see Example 19).

Now Braxton has the floor. He plays three more B♯2s, coaxing high partials from his contrabass clarinet and using flutter-tongue techniques to



Example 19. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {I2} (second part).



Example 20. Braxton, *Composition 76*, "Version II," module {I2} (third part).

break up the notes (see Example 19). Then Braxton takes the instrument from his mouth and turns his extended woodwind techniques into devices for vocal improvisation. He vibrates his lips, slap tongues the air, and growls into the microphone, closing module {I2} with an impromptu vocal solo (see Example 20).

Conclusions

Braxton's brief vocal improvisation ends module {I2} in much the same way as {H1}, earlier in "Version II," when Jarman transitioned from an instrumental melody into a vocal solo guided by *Composition 76*'s color-shape notation. Of course, not every module calls for vocals, but in those that do, the performers rise to the occasion, demonstrating the musicianship and creativity needed to realize the *Composition 76* score. Some of their vocal lines are song-like, such as Jarman's improvisation in "Version II," module {H1}, while other vocal sounds are rather percussive in nature, like Braxton's and Ewart's plosive consonants in "Version I," module {G2}. The musicians also use their voices to emulate woodwind instruments, as in Braxton's flutter-tonguing and slap tonguing from "Version II," module {I2}, or Mitchell's "airhorn" sounds from "Version II," module {G1}, where he sings into a water hose while playing percussion (Braxton 1978c). In both "Version I" and "Version II" the performers employ a broad spectrum of vocal sounds—"extended vocalization," in Braxton's (1988, 4:147) terminology—from woodwind-like tones and percussive articulations to more conventional vocal timbres. An even greater variety of sounds can be heard in their woodwind and percussion playing, where each musician has a dozen or more instruments at his disposal. Indeed, one can envision a multidimensional array of all the timbres used in *Composition 76*, with woodwinds, percussion instruments, and voices positioned along the outer edges, connected by hybrid sounds that do not fit neatly into standard categories: wind instruments played percussively, vibraphone chords that sing out like a choir, and voices projected though water hoses or saxophone mouthpieces. With such a wide range of sounds available to Braxton and his collaborators, they can summon an orchestra's worth of textures and timbral combinations as they explore the *Composition 76* score.

This is why Braxton, Ewart, Jarman, Mitchell, Threadgill, and so many of their AACM colleagues were committed to multi-instrumentalism, little instruments, and extended techniques of all kinds. These practices gave AACM artists the ability to access any sound imaginable—whatever the music seemed to require. In turn, these innovations led AACM composers to discoveries of their own, and they responded by developing new ways for performers to make music together, new ways of integrating composition and improvisation. In the fifty-plus years since the association's founding, this collaborative process inspired the creation of countless scores by AACM musicians, including *Composition 76*.[11] This suggests that analyses of important AACM works like *Composition 76* must be informed by scholarship on the association's history

11 As Braxton (1978c) wrote in the *For Trio* liner notes, "This composition has been designed as a result of the multi-instrumental breakthroughs that have occurred in the last time cycle (I am speaking of the AACM activity in particular)."

and, conversely, that historical research on Braxton and other AACM members can be considerably enriched by musical analysis.

Of the many books and articles written about Braxton, only two, Mike Heffley's (1996) *Music of Anthony Braxton* and Ronald M. Radano's (1993) *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton's Cultural Critique*, examine his compositions in any detail. More common are studies that contextualize Braxton's music by invoking aesthetic concepts drawn from his three-volume *Tri-Axium Writings* (Braxton 1985) and five-volume *Composition Notes* (Braxton 1988). Similarly, the vast majority of research on other leading AACM figures is primarily historical and does not attempt to engage in musical analysis.[12] These observations, of course, are not intended to be dismissive. Braxton's *Tri-Axium Writings* and *Composition Notes* are endlessly fascinating and certainly reward close study. For Braxton as well as his AACM colleagues, we need all the historical research we can get, especially for studies of the association's influence on intermedia performance, visual art, aesthetic theory, and social relations. But these cultural contributions are ultimately rooted in music, the practice that brought together the AACM's founders in 1965 and has sustained the organization for five decades and counting. Therefore, if we want to develop a full-spectrum perspective on Braxton and the organization widely considered one of the most significant musicians' collectives in history, we must engage in analysis that gives the AACM's music its due. As Braxton (1978c) declared, "Creative music . . . is an affirmation and testament to all the people participating in the music," from the performers of *Composition 76* to the listeners and analysts tuning in.

Works Cited

Beckwith, Naomi, and Dieter Roelstraete. 2015. *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Braxton, Anthony. 1968. *Three Compositions of New Jazz*. Delmark DS-415, 33⅓ rpm.

Braxton, Anthony. 1978a. *For Four Orchestras*. Arista A3L-8900, 33⅓ rpm.

Braxton, Anthony. 1978b. *For Trio*. Arista AB-4181, 33⅓ rpm.

Braxton, Anthony. 1978c. Liner notes for Braxton 1978b.

Braxton, Anthony. 1979. *Alto Saxophone Improvisations 1979*. Arista A2L-8602, 33⅓ rpm.

Braxton, Anthony. 1982. *For Two Pianos*. Arista AL-9559, 33⅓ rpm.

Braxton, Anthony. 1985. *Tri-Axium Writings*. 3 vols. Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music.

Braxton, Anthony. 1988. *Composition Notes*. 5 vols. Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music.

Braxton, Anthony. 2008. *The Complete Arista Recordings of Anthony Braxton*. Mosaic MD8-242, compact disc.

Braxton, Anthony. 2014. *Composition 76*. Score. Tri-Centric Foundation.

Broomer, Stuart. 2008. "Pitch into Time: Notes on Anthony Braxton's Lower Register." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4/1: 1–2.

Cage, John. 1939. *Imaginary Landscape no. 1*. Score. Edition Peters.

12 For recent counterexamples to this trend, see the analyses of AACM members' compositions and improvisations in Steinbeck 2016, 2017.

Cage, John. 1942a. *Imaginary Landscape no. 2*. Score. Edition Peters.
Cage, John. 1942b. *Imaginary Landscape no. 3*. Score. Edition Peters.
Cage, John. 1951. *Imaginary Landscape no. 4*. Score. Edition Peters.
Cage, John. 1952. *Imaginary Landscape no. 5*. Score. Edition Peters.
Campbell, Gregory Alan. 2006. "'A Beautiful, Shining Sound Object': Contextualizing Multi-instrumentalism in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians." D.M.A. thesis, University of Washington.
Driscoll, Matthew. 2015. "Diverse Practices of Graphic Notation." M.A. thesis, Mills College.
Heffley, Mike. 1996. *The Music of Anthony Braxton*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
Jost, Ekkehard. 1994. *Free Jazz*. New York: Da Capo.
Lehman, Stephen. 2005. "I Love You with an Asterisk: African-American Experimental Music and the French Jazz Press, 1970–1980." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 1/2: 1–16.
Lewis, George E. 1996. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1: 91–122.
Lewis, George E. 2008. *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Litweiler, John. 1984. *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958*. New York: Morrow.
Lock, Graham. 1988. *Forces in Motion: Anthony Braxton and the Meta-reality of Creative Music; Interviews and Tour Notes, England 1985*. London: Quartet.
Lock, Graham. 1999. *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Lock, Graham. 2008. "'What I Call a Sound': Anthony Braxton's Synaesthetic Ideal and Notations for Improvisers." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4/1: 1–23.
Looker, Benjamin. 2004. *"Point from Which Creation Begins": The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis*. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press.
Palmer, Robert. 1981. "New Sounds from Roscoe Mitchell." *New York Times*, December 4.
Radano, Ronald M. 1993. *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton's Cultural Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Steinbeck, Paul. 2016. "Talking Back: Performer-Audience Interaction in Roscoe Mitchell's *Nonaah*." *Music Theory Online* 22/3: 1–31.
Steinbeck, Paul. 2017. *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Stockhausen, Karlheinz. 1959. *Zyklus*. Score. Universal Edition.
Stockhausen, Karlheinz. 1968a. *Aus den sieben Tagen*. Score. Universal Edition.
Stockhausen, Karlheinz. 1968b. *Spiral*. Score. Universal Edition.
Stockhausen, Karlheinz. 1971. *Sternklang*. Score. Stockhausen.

Paul Steinbeck is associate professor of music theory at Washington University in St. Louis. His book *Message to Our Folks* (2017) examines the history and performances of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. His next book, tentatively titled *Sound Experiments*, is forthcoming.