

Anthony Braxton's Legacy as a Composer, Thinker, and Teacher

A Panel Discussion with James Fei, Anne Rhodes, Tyshawn Sorey, and Katherine Young, moderated by Paul Steinbeck

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Paul Steinbeck: I thought it might be nice to start not with an orderly procession through a particular series of topics, but with a story about what brought you to Anthony Braxton — and along with that, tell us about your first meeting or encounter with Braxton. James?

James Fei: Well, I spoke a little bit about this in my talk, but I think one thing I didn't mention, and which is the case for a lot of people of my generation, was not necessarily about the first time encountering his music, but getting a sense of the person and the body of work through Graham Lock's book *Forces in Motion*, which was really an important point of entry. Not only did it give you a sense of the scope of his work, but it gave you a sense of his personality and the way he thought about music and life in community. So that was a really important point of entry. And I think the first time I met him, he was playing at the Knitting Factory. This was before I studied with him, and I saw him play a solo concert, which, it's a cliché, but it changed my life hearing that concert.

Katherine Young: I got to first know about Anthony through the community of people that worked with him, and—I alluded to this in my talk as well—I kept meeting all these people who had worked with Anthony. His name kept coming up as I was starting to improvise in Chicago and New York. And then I played a concert with Jessica Pavone. So Jessica Pavone is really the person who connected me immediately with Anthony. She's a violist and composer based in New York—if you don't know her work, you should check it out. She wrote a piece for my quartet I had at the time, and she had been working with Anthony for a while already. I wrote some pieces for my quartet as well, and we did a concert at Wesleyan, and Anthony came because he knew Jessica, and then that was how I first met him.

Anne Rhodes: I was studying classical voice at Boston University and met some people in the Contemporary Improvisation department at New England Conservatory. At that time, I had just started getting an inkling that classical voice wasn't where I was going to land. A few years later, I had an opportunity to move to Middletown that had nothing to do with music, and while I was there, I heard that there was this legendary musician and professor whom it would be interesting for me to get to know. You could go in and sit in his ensemble, you didn't have to be a student. So, I sat in on his ensemble. The first semester, he was on sabbatical, so the ensemble was run by Chris Dahlgren, who was his TA at the time, and I became immersed in his music—very similarly to what James described in his talk as his first ensemble experiences at Wesleyan: “well, this isn't really accurately reflecting what's on the page, but we keep going with it.” And then Anthony came back the next semester. I don't remember the very first time we met, I think it was more me sitting in the ensemble and Anthony leading the ensemble, but he was very friendly and welcoming. That semester I sat in on his composition seminar and I really didn't have much of an idea of what was going on, but it was enjoyable and he was so warm that I kept coming back.

Tyshawn Sorey: I was a junior in high school when, actually by accident, I happened upon Anthony's work. At that time I thought of an idea, of this great idea or whatever of being a musician and composer. Growing up in the housing projects in Newark, New Jersey, which is twelve minutes from New York, you're not taught that, you're not taught to want to be a composer or to want to do these things. So when I went to the New York Public Library and happened upon a copy of *New York, Fall 1974*,¹ the cover of that record looked so interesting to me. I was somewhat familiar with the work of the AACM, but it would be that recording, *New York, Fall 1974*, where I see a Black man holding a pipe, and on the back of that I see these graphic titles that are on there, something I've never ever seen before on any CD or album jacket or anything, that really made me want to listen to this and find out what this is about. And so I played the recording and it knocked me out. It was unlike anything I'd ever heard, and at the same time, it was something that I could investigate a little bit more for myself, in terms of what I wanted to do as a musician, which was to pursue all of these different avenues of not only so-called improvisation but composition as well. I would go on and listen to his body of work.

Then, maybe three or four years later, a very good friend of mine, and also a former student of Anthony's, André Vida, had asked me to partake in a recording project that he was doing, and Anthony was scheduled to be on that recording too. That record is called *Child Real Eyes*.² We did this in 2002 at the Rare Book Room out in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Later I would occasionally run into Anthony here and there in Europe, but there's one thing I will never forget that Anthony had told me upon my first encounter with him. He had asked me if I had a music system or if I had a catalog of work or anything like that. I was just twenty-two years old, like, “what did I have?” I had a few pieces, a few

things that I was very unhappy with at the time, and one thing that he said to me is: “no matter what you’re hearing, write it anyway, because there’s always going to be somebody who is going to be interested in playing your music and who’s going to be interested in working with you on your work—and then develop your cohort of musicians, have a cohort of musicians around who really believe in your work, and as long as you believe in it, you’re going to get everybody around you to also believe in what you’re doing.”

So this would lead into further meetings with Anthony in Europe and elsewhere over the years. Then finally I made a decision in 2009 to quit playing music as a “side person”, because at that point I was twenty-nine years old, I had already been doing a lot of work in different ensembles playing as a drummer and doing this and that. I just got sick of it. I found that the idea of being on the road touring and doing all this stuff with people all the time, nine months out of the year, was not for me.

So I forced the issue to then begin studying composition with Anthony in 2009, along with Alvin Lucier. Studying with him, there was so much that I learned, not only in terms of composition itself, but the many different ways one can interpret what composition is. During my studying with him, I also served as his teaching assistant, and I would conduct his music for his students. I would take a lot of chances with the music, and he was so open to a lot of the different things that I was doing with the music, where sometimes I would juxtapose pieces together. I was also thinking about that with my own music, and it wasn’t a thing where he said, “you’re doing my music wrong,” or “this is not how you’re supposed to do my music.” At that point, I was already familiar with the Tri-Centric Thought Unit Construct, I was already familiar with what was going on there, I had the *Tri-Axium Writings* already and the *Composition Notes*. So I’d studied his music pretty extensively even before I got together with him. I had an understanding about how the music system worked, but at the same time I was doing things that I thought might in some way reflect a lot of what his interests are as a composer, and so he gave me a space in which I can openly explore these concepts.

I guess this ties into his legacy as a composer. That was one of the things upon my coming here that I was thinking about, that the concept of a composer is never fixed, you should be open to all of these different definitions of that term. Especially being a Black composer, because as I said before, you’re not really taught that in places that are economically depressed, where you’re just taught to want to be some famous celebrity or something like that. That wasn’t really the thing I was interested in, and Anthony, to his credit, understood this. He understood that no matter what background you come from, you should define your own terms and stick to them.

That speaks to his legacy overall as a composer. And so through being at Wesleyan and working with him during the two years that I was studying with him—from 2009 to 2011—this was a critical moment for me to self-define whatever it is I’m looking for in my own model, and that is the model of mobility.

Again, this also speaks to his legacy as a composer, because he created a range of musics going from ritual and ceremonial works, opera, so-called jazz or whatever you want to call that, you have a lot of vocal music, a capella music. There’s always a different syntax for every composition that he’s written.

This was something that I also wanted to do, and upon working with him, that just intensified my interest in studying the work. Self-definition was really the way for me going forward, and as was evident by Braxton’s talk yesterday, that was the thing that he was trying to communicate with all of us, which is to do this music with as much care and with as much love and as much value of yourself and of humanity as possible. Do it to the fullest extent possible, and define whatever it is you’re doing, no matter what anybody says, and find a way to self-define.

Steinbeck: What is it about Anthony Braxton personally that has enabled him to grasp this notion of openness, of multiple possibilities, of radical self-definition—what is it about him personally that allowed him to take hold of that idea for himself and then instill it in you and in so many other people? Where does that come from, what is the source?

Fei: I think he’s an inherently curious person and he’s always open to change. But I also think he wasn’t like the way he is now when he was twenty-two. So he talks a lot about the idea that not making a mistake is a big mistake, but in his younger days, he would talk about how he wanted to play everything perfectly, and you can hear it in the recordings. You don’t play like the example that George Lewis played yesterday, you don’t end up playing like that without being obsessive. He would talk about his younger days, when he made a mistake he would be thinking about it for weeks on tour, and so his ideas continue to change. That’s a radically different notion than he has now, of what performing his music should be. So this notion of openness has changed, and that’s the part that’s enabled him to arrive at whatever it is now — and it is going to be different in ten more years. He was always curious about all these different ways of organizing his music—and also the people doing it and what they bring. I think it’s the acceptance, or actually the desire and necessity of change.

Young: I was thinking about the story you told, Tyshawn, about him asking you, “what’s your body of work, where’s your catalog?” And one of the things I remember about working with him that stuck with me was this idea of music as your life’s work. He talked about it as your life’s work. I remember the lesson where he asked me, “let’s confirm here if music is your life’s work, and if so, then, okay, let’s get to it.” And then it’s not only your life’s work, but your life becomes about music and it requires a certain amount of rigor. It’s a gift or, as Braxton talks about it, a beautiful thing that music came into our lives, and that we have this privilege to be able to make music. But at the same time, if you’re going to set upon that path, then you better be ready to work really hard and

show up. He is incredibly inspiring as a mentor and a teacher, just in terms of how hard he works and how much he's open to change. Another concept that stuck with me from working with Anthony is the question of "what is a work?" or "how do you define a piece?" It wasn't like, "I wrote a score!" Okay, great, that's fine and that's a part of it, but you write the score, then you find the people to play it, you record it, you tour it, and maybe then you could say, "okay, the piece is done-ish." But things aren't done when you reach the bar line in your notation software. So the ideas of rigor and process and there's always more you can do, I think, are part of this engine that propels him to always be trying and exploring, and it is also part of the energy that he dissipated so generously to all of the rest of us. To be in his presence, you're like, "okay, I got it! I got to get to work!" It was really super inspiring.

Rhodes: The words generous and warm come up a lot when people talk about Anthony, including those people who have met him once after a concert — and those of us who have worked with him for decades. Part of that generosity comes from the fact that he does not impose his selfness on you, in the music or in any other context. But at the same time, he has a complete sense of his own selfness. I've never used the word "selfness" before, but it seems to apply. He's modeling that very clear sense of oneself as an artist while not imposing any particular idea of that on you, so it gives you this feeling that you can exist in a fully realized version of yourself — but also in community with others at the same time. You sometimes hear experimental music purists talk about "no ego" and "we don't like improvisation because there's a lot of ego in it," and working with Anthony has given me this idea that ego and self are not necessarily the same thing, that you can show what you have to offer without this sense of ego or this sense that that you need to be apart from others, that those things can exist at the same time.

Sorey: Drawing from all of these points that Anne, Katie, and James have made, I'm thinking of something that another great composer once said, the great Charles Wuorinen—I don't know how many of you are familiar with him—but something that he said was that "a piece changes its relation to its maker." In other words, your relationship to a work that you create is inevitably going to change over time. The older you get, the wiser you become, and the more you think about how open you are to the idea of taking your practice to a different level.

It speaks to the very idea of what Katie just said earlier, about when you work with Anthony: if you present a piece of music in front of him, you have a completed score for example, that's not it. Anytime you bring a work to him, that's not it. The question is always, "what are you going to do next with this?" You have a score here and that's all well and good, you may have it interpreted well, but where is it going to go after that? Just like yourself, a composition has to have a life, and by having a life, I don't mean it in such a reductive way, where

the composition has to outlive you. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about a composition having its own life, meaning that, as your relationship to the work changes, you could think, "there's something else I could have done with this, how do I apply this to the next composition?" Or, "how would I be able to apply it even to this composition, even a completed work that was already done?" Some people don't believe in the idea of revisions—I have my own complexities with the idea of revisions and not revising work that you've done in the past—but I think that because the work changes as you're going about your practice, depending on who the artist is and depending on what you're trying to establish within the music system you've created, why not ask that question?

Young: Or how does it connect to what you've done in the past and getting to that idea of a body of work—which, when you're twenty-two, you're kind of like "whoa." But one thing he might mean is that it's a collection of things that are related to one another and which can grow and inform each other and that you can learn from.

Sorey: Exactly, it's like a volume of books or a box set of recordings or something. You're always finding that next step in the work, but in order to do that you (as the composer) have to be open to that idea—which gets to James's point, when he was talking about Anthony being very open to change and not being resistant to it. All of these points are really incredible, and it reminds me of my own practice and some of my frustrations that I've had with my own compositional practice, and how I got to break through these with Anthony's ideas and all of these different tenets of his personality that have all contributed to why we value his work so much.

Rhodes: I'll go back a little bit before that. When I started at Wesleyan, I said to Anthony, "I'm not a composer, I'm a performer." And he said: "We are all composers, we are all performers, we are all improvisers. Improvisation is composing in real time." It was this very direct plain language, an introduction to his way of thinking, which really stuck with me. A few years later, I had composed a couple of things while I was at Wesleyan. I've never revisited them, but later on I composed a graphic score for a trio that I was playing in, and rather than draw it, I embroidered it on fabric, because that's what I do with my hands when I'm not doing anything else, I embroider or I knit or I sew. And I had started out thinking, "I just want to do a free hand embroidery and put it on the wall," and then I looked at it and I was like, "this is a graphic score!" I brought it to my trio and they really liked it, and when I showed it to Anthony, he said: "I'm imagining an orchestra with fabric put over the whole orchestra, with holes in the fabric with everybody's head sticking out so they can read the music." And I was like, "well, it took me a long time to do this." [laughs] But yeah, the reaction was, "this is not finished, how can you expand this beyond all reason and think of it in that context."

Sorey: Is there a recording of that piece?

Rhodes: Yeah, on the Broadcloth album. It's called *In Stitches*.³

Steinbeck: I'd like to change the discussion a little bit. Yesterday, during the conversation with George Lewis and Anthony Braxton, it felt to me like George was trying to pin Anthony down on the notion of listening or the importance of listening, and since we didn't get the answer that George was asking for, maybe our Braxton experts can tell us about Anthony's qualities as a listener, as an aspect of his musicianship or his humanity? Or: what did you learn about listening from your time studying and working with him?

Rhodes: My ears perked up when George said that yesterday, because that is the biggest thing I've learned from working on Anthony's music. It's the first thing I say when people ask me how to approach this music, when they see something so complex. I don't know how many people have seen the Accelerator Whip Ghost Trance Music? Instead of the first species Ghost Trance Music, which has a very stable beat, or in the second species, you get some little polyrhythms interpolated in there, the Accelerator Whip is all of these massive polyrhythms one after each other, 15 over 14 over 2, 11 over 2, etc.—and 100 pages of that with added grace notes or triple grace notes. Even if you want to think of it in broader terms — "this is faster than the one before" — it's still too much math for anyone to do in their head. But so, less than a year after he wrote these, he said to me, "let's record a duo album," and it was a couple of those compositions. What you hear on that album is Anthony and me listening to each other. I may be listening to him or following him a little more for obvious reasons, but that's how that music happens. That's how you work with others on this music, and even the music that's pretty straightforward, because of the system, unexpected things happen all the time in performance. The way that you make them into a continuous performance is to just keep listening to each other. Of course this relates to free improvisation and language music and improvising together as well, but I'll let others talk about that if they'd like to.

Fei: Yes, to give an example, he's always listening. Sometimes you can literally see him on a bandstand not playing, just listening. But when I started playing with him, we were playing Ghost Trance Music. It was when Ghost Trance Music was becoming very dense and complex, and sometimes you would be playing a piece while there are three or five other things going on, improvisations, etc. Sometimes there were things that I thought went well, or didn't go well, and after a set I would sometimes talk to him, wondering whether he is hearing all the stuff that's happening. Because he oftentimes wouldn't say anything, since he wants us to find our own way and he wants the ensemble to have its own life. But I would talk to him and he was like, "oh yeah, I loved it when that happened when we were improvising." And then he would vocalize the

thing I improvised pretty literally, like a transcription almost, saying, "you were doing this and this was happening." He was basically recounting all these things that were happening.

He has this really incredible capacity to listen to the polyphony of things going on, and sometimes things that are barely audible. But the curious thing is what he does with that. He doesn't want to say, "okay, this is good," or "we'll work on that," or "that didn't work out well, we'll try to make sure that doesn't happen again." He wants people to figure out for themselves what they want to work on, so that he's not saying, "these are the things that are going to be developed." Because at that point, the Ghost Trance Music was changing in a way that he didn't know where it was going to go, and he didn't want to impose what he thought. But he definitely heard everything that was happening.

Sorey: That's the beautiful part about him, this openness to change. This is the part about ego I wanted to address, you have to be open to the possibility of not knowing what's going to be next. You have to be open to that as a composer, because as I said before, your work changes in relationship to who you are becoming at the time. So sometimes — like what you were saying, James—even he didn't have an idea of what it was going to end up being until experiencing the whole process of going through investigating the dynamic within the ensemble and how it was going to turn out over time. But I shouldn't say not knowing. I should say, actually, him being aware that the process is more important than the actual result, and then when you get a very successful result, you've been through the process and you've learned a lot as a result of that process.

Sometimes as a composer who is also a performer, it's important that you remove the ego and just be aware that even you may not be aware of what a piece is going to end up being, especially if you include spontaneous composition into a work. You have to be open to the possibility of things being a train wreck sometimes, here and there. You have to be open to that, and it's okay. Train wrecks are fine, because train wrecks are how you learn these types of things and how you get to the result that you actually want. That's a really great story that you told, and it makes perfect sense. It just goes to show this very fine line between having things be super-precise, hyper-perfect, and also letting the human element become more of the central focus in the actual result.

Young: Yes, and the human focus or the human aspect of it brings me back to the listening, because he didn't answer the question when George asked it the first or second time, but then a little while later, he briefly talked about how he remembered being in ear training and realized he could hear the pitches, and then that you could listen beyond the pitches. So I think he did answer the question, kind of. I remember noticing Anthony talking to students at Wesleyan, undergrad students or anybody really, because people would give him their albums all the time, like, "I recorded this in my dorm room on Thursday—can you take a listen to it?" He would listen to most of it, I think, and have a way of talking to

them that got beyond the surface of the music. It was never about genre, or referencing certain aesthetic priorities that one might bring to the table. He would find this way of talking about the music that was really getting at the person or something beyond the surface.

The more I teach, the more I think about that and wish I were better at doing what he does, but yeah, it's really beautiful. And it also reflects this openness to the world of music that he talks about, not narrowly defining his aesthetic or what it is to be a composer. That to be a composer is supposedly only in this narrow slice of music making or whatever. It's this listening beyond the surface, to something, "the vibration."

Sorey: I love this point, because his listening is very much like his teaching as well. I would imagine we'd probably get to that in this discussion. I mean, that's the very thing that brought us all together, right? Just the fact that he taught all of us how to listen and how to effectively listen to each other, no matter what the situation is, whatever kind of music we're performing. It was never a thing about aesthetically having to match something, it's not a "do as I do" approach pedagogically. When Anthony would talk to you about your music, when he would listen to you talk about your work or when he would listen to you perform your work, he never put his own aesthetic judgments on whatever it is you were trying to create. He would deal with the music in the terms that you're trying to deal with it, and in the way that you're explaining your process.

One of the most unique things about him as a composition pedagogue was that he was able to help us deal with not only listening to each other, but listening to ourselves and listening to what it is we're looking for in our work. We may not have the answer, but he may have an answer, and then it might help us get to an even clearer answer somehow—or maybe another kind of an answer, which leads to the "what's next" type of thing that I brought up earlier. You're always walking away with questions, and as a performer or composer, that's what one should do, even if it's your own work. You have to have a set of questions, listen to those questions, and then approach these questions in the next piece or in the next opportunity that you have to play something or make music with other people.

After all, this was always Anthony's mantra, music is about people, and without people, the notes on the page don't mean anything. It doesn't matter what you write, if you don't have people to inspire you to ask these questions. What good is the work going to be for yourself? You may as well put it in the desk drawer or something. It's not going to matter in the end, unless you have an uncanny ability to not only approach the work from a human point of view but to also listen, listen to the interpreters of the music. Listen clearly to what they're doing, because interpretations, too, can change your relationship to a work—even if it's a fixed score, where everything's notated and there's no room for any spontaneity.

Actually, nothing can be played the same way twice, I don't care how hard anyone tries. If you were to listen to an interpretation of a piece, and you listen to your performers who are interpreting the score, you still have to come away with a question, you still have to come away with something that is going to lead you to another work, or, as a performer, that's going to lead you to another way of playing or approaching your instrument — not only from a technical point of view, but from a philosophical point of view. There are all these different levels to that.

Nick Hallett (from the audience): Although it seemed like Anthony wasn't answering the question that George was asking, he actually answered it perfectly in the moment, because he answered the question by talking about how he listens to George. Anthony has the most generous citation practice of any artist ever. Before he says anything about his own music, he talks about the people who came before him and the people who he makes music with in the moment. He spends volumes of the *Tri-Axium Writings* talking about the "restructuralists", or the people who allowed him to write the music that he makes, and that is essential to the way in which he teaches us how to make music, by listening to people who came before us, who enable us to make the music that we can make.

Sorey: Right, and that also speaks to his work as a pedagogue, because you have these three different areas he talks about in regard to who an artist is. You have the restructuralist, which is the person who really reinvents the traditional wheel, as it were, to turn things around and to establish new vocabulary. Then you have the stylists who perform within the limitations—or the parameters, I should say—of whatever music it is that came before them. And then you have the, what's the third again? I forget: restructuralist, stylist, and—come on, audience, somebody has to know it!—traditionalist, which is another way of dealing with a set of given parameters within a certain set of information. So you have these three different categories of who an artist is, and as a pedagogue, he makes you aware that all of these different ways of being and listening and coming up with material really exist. So it's not a question of you deciding which of these ways you want to take, but it's rather, "how does one person become aware of all of these things, and how can it reflect in their overall personality or their overall vocabulary?" After all, listening to the work that came before you—whether they're traditionalist, stylist or restructuralist, no matter what they are—listening to these different things helps you develop your own vocabulary to put together whatever things you want to put together, whether it's a composition, or music system, or whatever it is.

That, to me, is what tradition is, right? It is being aware of all of these different ways of being and becoming through listening, and through being aware of all kinds of different music, through being a student of music and always being open to learning. This reflects on how you are establishing your body of work, and to do that over a lifetime is a challenge. As a pedagogue, he makes us all very

aware that if you're going to pursue this as a life's work, then you have to be aware of these many different ideas of becoming an artist or becoming a composer, and how these all manifest in your own language or your own vocabulary. Because without any of these things, you won't have a vocabulary, there won't be anything to establish anything from. You have to have a context to establish whatever it is you're trying to create, whether it be spontaneously or on the page.

I want to put that point out there too: how much he has tremendously helped us all from a pedagogical point of view. We're all professors, we're all teaching, and we have our own careers as musicians and composers, and I thought that it was important to bring up that aspect of his work as well. And some of you who will study with him, you'll find that apparent in your lessons with him during this time here.

Steinbeck: What is something about Anthony Braxton that only you know individually? Like, James and Anne might know the same thing about Anthony, but what is something that only Anne knows or only James knows? What's your Anthony Braxton secret, that esoteric knowledge that only you have a privileged insight into?

Young: I'm not telling that! [laughter]

Steinbeck: I mean within reason, but we have spent two days talking about this wonderful musician and person—maybe there's something that we haven't learned yet, and maybe it's something that can help crystallize everything that we've covered in the past thirty-six hours?

Fei: I'm going to skip all the scandalous stuff, but if you want to slip me a tenuro note later I'll tell you some. [laughter] No, I'll start with a little anecdote. It was the first summer when I started studying with Anthony at Wesleyan. I was staying in Middletown, working at the library. I asked him if I could take composition lessons with him over the summer. I said, "I'll be glad to pay you, if you're open to it." First he said, "no, you can't pay me," but then he's like, "I have a condition for giving you composition lessons." He says, "we're going to trade. I'm going to give you a composition lesson, and right after, you're going to give me a lesson in computer music." At that point, that was about 1997, he didn't really use a computer, but he's always wanted to do electronic music his whole life. He had worked with Richard Teitelbaum and Gordon Mumma and all these people, so he always wanted to work with electronics. So I say, "of course." That summer, we met about twice weekly. I'd bring in a piece, we'd have a composition lesson, and then we switched gears. We would go to the computer music lab and I would teach him how to go through the basics of computer music. We did that for the whole summer. I remember we were still using the old Mac version of SoundHack—this is before Max MSP—and now he actually programs on SuperCollider.

But one of the things he was very interested in at that time was convolution, where you convolve one sound with another sound, usually a shorter impulse sound, and you're basically spectrally multiplying these two things. You're imposing the sonic signature of one sound to another sound, which is a common technique used for all kinds of things. At that point it was a very slow process, it didn't work in real time. You have an impulse sound, you wait, go have coffee, and then come back and listen to what happened. But he was really fascinated by these transformations of timbre by convolution, and then summer ended and we went back.

One of the things that was happening in the Thunder Music concert you just heard was that we had recorded a version of the piece without electronics the day before, which was fed into the electronic music system that Carl Testa designed. What was happening in the electronics was that some of the pre-recorded sound of the instrumentalists was convolved with the sounds of lighting, so for me this was a beautiful moment of seeing him integrating this aspect of electronic music now with something that he was working on with me during that summer twenty-five years ago.

Steinbeck: Other secrets?

Rhodes: I just can't decide. [laughter] Well, okay—nobody badger him or ask him questions about this! We were recently talking about his love of box sets, and Carl and I are ribbing him about his love of box sets. You know, it's not just the CDs, it's the boxes, they are full of goodies and they're beautiful. I've been listening to not much besides K-pop in the last couple of years, which started out as a guilty pleasure and there's now no guilt involved whatsoever. I started to say, "I listen to a lot of K-pop, and these K-pop albums are like mega box sets. The CD is an afterthought, they're these beautifully packaged products full of photocards and posters," and before I got the sentence out, he said, "oh, me too, all I listen to these days is K-pop!" [laughter] And Carl Testa, who's my husband, also likes it—well, maybe not to the degree that I do, he didn't fly to Los Angeles with me to go see BTS's two concerts. [laughter]

But the conversation that followed was so affirming. In a way, it wasn't completely shocking, because Anthony always has his finger on the pulse of some unexpected aspect of pop culture. The influence of Korean popular culture has intensified worldwide recently, so it's not completely out of the blue. But the conversation that we had was very affirming, because we really liked a lot of the same things about it: the discipline, the detail. I think what a lot of people call overproduced is what I personally like about it. There's layer upon layer, and the songs are well crafted, the dance is beautiful, and the performance is beautiful.

I got out my albums and started showing him, and he was like, "you're showing me up, lady!" And he said, "these people know how to present things." That comes back to why he likes the box sets. Anyway, I don't think that's a secret, but I know it's something only I knew. [laughter] But the first few years

I knew Anthony, he would come out with these pop music things — he often talks about Johnny Mathis—or these unexpected musical interests. Especially when you first meet him, there's a tendency to be like, "oh, he's an eccentric professor." But these are deep and reasoned interests, and they are all part of his thinking as an artist and part of his legacy.

Sorey: It's pretty funny you're talking about that. I had a similar story about Lady Gaga, as we were all preparing *Trillium E*.⁴ When we were working on that, he was talking about how grateful he was for Lady Gaga, for her work, and all the production value, and all kinds of other things. It's amazing how all that stuff is never reflected in the musical result sonically. But getting back to listening, if you were to listen to *Trillium E*, for example, I remember a composition seminar at Wesleyan that I had with him where he showed us a copy of *Lulu* that was performed in a complete version. Then he talked to us about the libretto for *Trillium E* and went on to play us some of it in a MIDI version, because it wasn't realized by the Tri-Centric Orchestra yet—he only had these MIDI versions that he played for us in the composition seminar. And when he talked about Lady Gaga and showed us this beautiful production of *Lulu*, and then had us listen to a little bit of *Trillium E* in MIDI form, everybody in the course seemed really perplexed. How does Lady Gaga relate to any of what we just heard? But then when we all did *Trillium E* together in the studio, yes, there was no costume and there was no lighting and all that stuff, but somehow when you listen and you reimagine in your mind what he was talking about with Lady Gaga and why she was so influential to him at the time of putting this together, you start to see the opera in a different way.

You start to imagine "what if?" And this gets to George's point about directors yesterday, asking Anthony if he had ever worked with directors. Imagine if there was a director who was able to put together a team that dealt with lighting and that dealt with costumes and all of this stuff, similar to the way that Lady Gaga's productions were and have been. Imagine *Trillium E* positioned in that way, how would that come across to the listener or how would that come across to the viewer? How would they then perceive it? The libretto and everything have nothing to do with pop culture, but at the same time, it makes the listener or viewer reimagine the work through a whole different lens, and I think it would lead to a different kind of appreciation of it, that may perhaps be even more fruitful than when you're simply listening to it on a CD.

Steinbeck: Well, then, let's do our listening now, where we listen to questions from the assembled audience. Would anyone like to interject, tell another Lady Gaga story, or ask other questions?

Kobe Van Cauwenberghe (from the audience): What would be your advice for anyone wanting to perform or engage with Braxton's music? I'm asking because I found it very rewarding but also quite challenging at first, not having had that

experience working or studying with him directly at Wesleyan. What would be your advice for performers interested in playing the music without this firsthand experience?

Young: Anthony has documented his work extremely well and thoroughly, and he has written about it. I think you have done this, Kobe, but you can find recordings, you can find his writings about it in the liner notes, you might have to track down the actual CD—but do the research. First of all, that's what he did, right? When we were talking about his listening and citations, that's what he does. He listens and he does the research to understand the music that he is curious about. He has taken great pains to document his work so that other people can do the same with his work. So that's the one thing I would say.

Sorey: As a performer, if you're going to go head-first with Anthony's music, you have to remove whatever your notion of performing in a so-called context is. You have to remove all of that right away, because it's not the idea of Anthony's work being *anti* to whatever traditional vocabulary you're coming from, but it's about you being open to learning the language. The music system, the Tri-Centric Thought Unit Construct, is a language that you're dealing with, and it comes from many different traditions. So when you unlearn your notions of what so-called tradition is, or so-called ideas about what a given music is supposed to sound like—and Anthony puts it together in such a unique way—you're going to run into a lot of things that you haven't really seen before in a score, or even any interpretational possibilities that a work has. And so, as a performer, you have to come in there blindfolded.

Don't expect anything, because when you expect something, then your willingness to change or your willingness to learn a new system is going to go out of the window. The expectation is that you learn the language, because the only way you're going to succeed within his ensembles is to have a complete understanding of the language. Continue to listen to recordings, as Katie just said, do the reading. Sometimes the readings may seem overwhelming to one upon first encounter, but give it some time, and become familiar with the diagrams and the *Tri-Axium Writings*. Those can be very overwhelming for the reader at first glance, but just like any other language of music or any other tradition of music, this also takes time to learn, to strongly get your feet under. Don't come into it with the expectation that you're going to learn the system in one day, because that's not going to happen. The more often you do research, the more often you listen to recordings, the more often you get to be around other people who know the language—some people may know the language more fluently, ask them questions. Ask them the same questions that Paul has been asking us: "How did you get into Anthony's music? What was the discovery like for you?" Ask questions, and don't expect to learn everything in one single shot, because that's not going to happen.

I still haven't learned everything about his music after twenty-five, twenty-six years of listening to it and reading about it and everything else. I mean, I still consider myself a complete novice of his work, because he has catalogued so much information and has taught so many people. And that's the beauty of his work. This system takes a billion lifetimes to really understand, and even then you won't completely understand everything, because then you can ask yourself, "what's next, where do we go from here?" [laughter]

Rhodes: Very briefly, in a practical sense, to get off the ground playing it, I would say pick two or three or five or six musicians who you can come together with regularly, who you trust or have some experience working with, and just play through things together. Talk and play through things together, that is a great way to get into it. I will also say that Yale University Library's online archive recently published a large collection of recordings of Anthony—which were kept at the Tri-Centric Foundation—recordings of rehearsals and live performances and all sorts of unreleased material that's been produced over the last few decades, which is now available for streaming online for non-affiliates of Yale. I can tell you more about that for those who are interested.

From the audience: You haven't talked about it yet, but it was something that was very important in the other lectures of today and yesterday, which is the concept of community. I wanted to know in what way you have sensed this, as students or performers working on Braxton's music, what community means to him?

Young: I think it means pretty much everything. It means so much to him in his work.

Fei: In some ways, we were talking about it in the ensemble workshop today. Within an ensemble, especially in the case of the Ghost Trance Music, it's a little microcosm where you're running a little society. It has its disagreements, it has different personalities, it has different inclinations, and you're working it out within a musical context. You have schemes and allegiances and you form a community. You have to have enough trust with each other to jump into something that you're not sure about or maybe you don't think about. You have to build the ability to disagree and find ways to play in disagreement. So the ensemble itself can be like a microcosm of the larger community, in the way he thinks about it and the way he brings people together. I think it's the fact that so many of us who study with him or work with him—and whether you work or study with him in a band or an academic context, he really doesn't distinguish between them—the fact that we all are so different yet oftentimes interconnected, and it's the communal aspect of playing or working with Anthony's music that connects us. But it also extends beyond that, across generations. That speaks to his ideas about life, about being a person, being embedded in the music, and how when we play the music, it extends to our lives too.

Elisabeth Harnik (from the audience): I would add something to answer it from my point of view. The first time I met Anthony, it was just a short talk in the middle of the night, and he probably forgot about it. But already after some sentences, it was obvious that I felt part of the Creative Continuum, and this was very rare, the fact that you have this reality all of a sudden. Because often it's either "you do this" or "oh, I don't like this," you know, "this is not my aesthetic," this kind of division. But with him from the beginning, he didn't even know who I was or what I'm doing, he was showing interest. And this human exchange, just by talking, creates community. Because you feel part of something bigger than what two people are talking about. So it's about this Creative Continuum. He feels, and I feel it too, that we are all part of it, the ones who were before us but also the new ones.

Sorey: All of that sums up the idea that the Tri-Centric Foundation is not an insular organization. It is an organization that is about community. For Anthony, music is an act of life, it's an act of what we experience day to day, it's an affirmation of who we are as people. It basically is an affirmation or understanding of how one functions outside of music, how one functions in society and in the world, and what your relationship is to it. Without these tenets that are there—including trust, which James has brought up—without these elements, then you'll never get to understand what community is all about within this unit or this particular area of music.

As Anthony himself will attest, it doesn't matter what background you come from, as long as you are willing to function within this community, within the Tri-Centric Orchestra or within a sub-ensemble of the Tri-Centric Orchestra or whatever it is—as long as you have it in yourself to understand that all of these tenets have to be there in order to successfully function within this community, as long as you are aware of that, then he would be open to working with anybody who is invested. It's not about understanding how to work in the Tri-Centric Orchestra from a technical point of view or from a musical point of view. In order to do this, one has to feel good about the people they're working with, and that's one of the key steps in composition too: who you're working with and who you're writing for is the most important step. As long as you understand that you, as a person, can potentially function within the parameters of what the orchestra is offering or what the language of the Tri-Centric Thought Unit Construct is offering, as long as one is open to understanding what all of these things entail in terms of what it affirms, then no wrong can be done. At least that's how I've always viewed it.

Steinbeck: That's a great place to leave the discussion. Thanks to all our panelists: James Fei, Katie Young, Anne Rhodes, and Tyshawn Sorey.

1 Arista AL4032 (LP), 1975.

2 Vidatone VT5 (CD), 2002.

3 <https://broadcloth.bandcamp.com/album/in-stitches>.

4 New Braxton House 901 (4 CDs), 2011.