

A Creative Orchestra in Darmstadt

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In August 2023, the American composer, multi-instrumentalist, and theorist Anthony Braxton was the guest of honor at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse, the famed summer course for composers and performers of contemporary music. Braxton's invitation to Darmstadt was a lifetime in the making. Since the inception of his career in the late 1960s, he had written more than seven hundred compositions, given countless concerts around the world, and received many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (1981), a MacArthur Fellowship (1994), a Doris Duke Artist Award (2013), a Jazz Masters Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (2014), and a United States Artists Fellowship (2020). But this was Braxton's first visit to the prestigious Ferienkurse. In decades past, the summer course had been the site of historic concerts and lectures by several of his musical "heroes," from John Cage and David Tudor to Karlheinz Stockhausen.¹ And now, at long last, it was Braxton's turn.

Braxton's presence in Darmstadt was also a major step forward for the Ferienkurse. Founded in 1946, the summer course had never before invited someone quite like Braxton—and after his visit, it seemed as if the Ferienkurse would never be the same.

Braxton's invitation to Darmstadt had been in the works for some time. Back in 2017, the Ferienkurse and three other European arts institutions launched the Defragmentation initiative, tasked with assessing curation practices in the field of contemporary music. One year later, the initiative presented its findings during a four-day conference that was held at the 2018 edition of the Ferienkurse. The initiative's working group on gender and diversity found that from 1946 to 2016, there were 4750 pieces programmed at the Ferienkurse, only 334 of which were composed by women. Moreover, just two of 4750 were written by composers from the African diaspora, an incredibly low number.² The 2018 Ferienkurse featured three pieces by Black composers, with more expected at the next summer course in 2020.³ But that course had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and when the Ferienkurse returned in 2021, it was scaled down, with fewer concerts than usual.⁴ Therefore, the next edition of the summer course, slated for 2023, would be the first to respond in full to the findings of the Defragmentation initiative—and create, in certain ways, a new kind of Ferienkurse.

Meanwhile, in Karlsruhe, a hundred kilometers south of Darmstadt, the German scholar Timo Hoyer was seeking a home for a conference dedicated to

the work of Anthony Braxton, entitled "50+ Years of Creative Music." Hoyer had been planning the conference since 2018, just before he started writing his monumental book *Anthony Braxton—Creative Music*.⁵ The conference was originally scheduled to take place in Hamburg in June 2020, when Braxton would celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday.⁶ But COVID-19 intervened, and Hoyer's attempts to move the conference to Munich (in 2021) or to Antwerp (in 2022) came to naught.⁷ So Hoyer and a new conference co-organizer, the Belgian guitarist Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, contacted the Ferienkurse, and soon everything fell into place. Braxton was already scheduled to be in Europe on August 1, 2023, for the premiere of his opera *Trillium X* at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague.⁸ After the *Trillium X* premiere, Braxton could come to Darmstadt, where Thomas Schäfer, the Ferienkurse's artistic director, was busy implementing the recommendations of the Defragmentation initiative's gender and diversity working group. Schäfer himself had led the working group, along with the British scholar and musician Georgina Born and the American composer, trombonist, computer musician, and scholar George E. Lewis (who had been collaborating with Braxton since the 1970s).⁹ With the help of Lewis, Hoyer, and Van Cauwenberghe, Schäfer could make Braxton the central figure of the 2023 Ferienkurse. There would be five concerts of Braxton's compositions, a two-day conference about his music, and a five-day workshop on his scores for creative orchestra. During the Ferienkurse fortnight, from August 5 to August 19, there was a Braxton-related event nearly every day. As one observer put it, "the biggest name at Darmstadt in 2023 was Anthony Braxton, and he seemed to be everywhere."¹⁰

The Ferienkurse opened on August 5, 2023, with a concert of Braxton's Language Music by conductor Roland Dahinden and the Prague Music Performance Orchestra—the same artists who had premiered *Trillium X* in Czechia just four days before.¹¹ On August 7, Braxton premiered his latest musical model, Thunder Music, a major piece for nine instrumentalists, seven vocalists, and live electronics.¹² The conference "50+ Years of Creative Music" took place on August 8 and 9, with no less than sixteen hours devoted to presentations, lecture-demonstrations, and discussions of Braxton's work.¹³ Next was the creative orchestra workshop, with four days of intensive rehearsals, from August 11 to August 14, followed by a concert on August 15.¹⁴ Then, on August 18, just before the close of the Ferienkurse, there were two performances of Braxton's Ghost Trance Music by the Belgium-based Ictus ensemble, in collaboration with another Belgian group, the Rosas dance company.¹⁵ Before and after these events, Braxton could be found holding court at the Lichtenbergschule, the summer course's headquarters, or at the Maritim Hotel Darmstadt, where everyone from the Ferienkurse was staying. Indeed, in Darmstadt Braxton was treated like a celebrity—a rare phenomenon in the informal atmosphere of the summer course, according to the German musicologist Wolfram Knauer. Knauer had attended nearly every Ferienkurse since 1990, when he moved to Darmstadt to become the founding director of the city's Jazzinstitut. In Knauer's recollection,

the only other Ferienkurse composer who had been received like Braxton was Karlheinz Stockhausen. As with Stockhausen, when Braxton entered a room, people reacted to his presence immediately, whispering excitedly to one another (“there he is!”) or falling into a respectful silence. But unlike Stockhausen, who was not particularly approachable, Braxton was much friendlier. Everyone at the summer course wanted some face time with Braxton, and he was happy to oblige.¹⁶

In addition to his newfound celebrity status, Braxton enjoyed another, unprecedented honor at the Ferienkurse. The creative orchestra that Braxton led in Darmstadt was the first such ensemble in the summer course’s history.¹⁷ Formed at the suggestion of Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, the creative orchestra was open to everyone in the summer course, and thirty-three musicians joined in, making it the largest aggregation at the 2023 edition of Ferienkurse.¹⁸ The creative orchestra also stood out in one more way. In contrast to all the other workshops and courses in Darmstadt that year—and, in fact, since the Ferienkurse’s founding in 1946—Braxton’s creative orchestra was rooted in the Black music tradition.

Braxton’s first encounter with a creative orchestra came in 1966, when he completed his term of service in the US Army, returned to his hometown of Chicago, and joined Muhal Richard Abrams’s Experimental Band.¹⁹ Abrams’s ensemble had been formed a few years earlier on Chicago’s South Side, the same part of the city where Braxton was born and raised. The ensemble started out as a jazz big band, but soon metamorphosed into a very different kind of ensemble, with variable instrumentation as well as a musical language that combined fully notated scores with multiple forms of improvisation, guided by Abrams’s novel system of conducting.²⁰ The Experimental Band was closely connected to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective organization of African American composers and performers founded in 1965.

Many of the musicians who became AACM members in the 1960s and the 1970s performed in Abrams’s Experimental Band and developed their own approaches to composing for, and conducting, a creative orchestra, including Mwata Bowden, Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Leroy Jenkins, George Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell, Amina Claudine Myers, Wadada Leo Smith, and Henry Threadgill.²¹ But besides Abrams, no AACM artist was more devoted to the creative orchestra than Braxton. Some of Braxton’s earliest works, including *Composition No. 3* (1968) and *Composition No. 11* (1969), were composed for creative orchestra. He would go on to write twenty-five creative orchestra scores, culminating in *Composition No. 151* (1990).²² After *Composition No. 151*, however, Braxton turned his attention to other forms, from chamber music and operas to his famous Ghost Trance Music. And so the group of thirty-three musicians that assembled in Darmstadt from August 11 to August 15, 2023, was not just the first creative orchestra in the history of the Ferienkurse. For Braxton, the Darmstadt creative orchestra also represented his return, after a decades-long interval, to a medium that was crucial to his development as a composer—and to

many other AACM artists who became important figures in contemporary music. As he told a Ferienkurse participant after one of the creative orchestra’s rehearsals: “It’s been magical to have the opportunity to come to Darmstadt [...] there is a positive vibration in this environment, and it’s actually very beautiful.”²³

1 Anthony Braxton, interview by author, Darmstadt, August 14, 2023.

2 George E. Lewis, “A Small Act of Curation”, in: *On Curating* 44, January 2020, pp. 11–13.

3 Ibid., p. 20. For more on the Defragmentation initiative and the 2018 Ferienkurse, see Sylvia Freydank / Michael Rebhahn (ed.), “Defragmentation: Curating Contemporary Music”, special issue *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik*, 2019.

4 Max Erwin, “Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2021”, in *Tempo* 299, January 2022, p. 83. The 2021 Ferienkurse opened with a performance of *Again* by Alvin Singleton, who in 1974 was the first Black composer to have a piece performed at the summer course. Ibid., p. 87; Lewis, “A Small Act of Curation”, op. cit., p. 13.

5 Timo Hoyer, *Anthony Braxton – Creative Music*, Hofheim, 2021; Timo Hoyer, email to author, October 12, 2024. Hoyer’s book was the twelfth to be written about Braxton: see also Stuart Broomer, *Time and Anthony Braxton*, Toronto, 2009; Hugo de Craen and Eddy Janssens, *Anthony Braxton: Discography*, Brussels, 1982; Alun Ford, *Anthony Braxton: Creative Music Continuums*, Exeter, Devon, 1997; Mike Heffley, *The Music of Anthony Braxton*, Westport, CT, 1996; Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*, Durham, NC, 1999; Graham Lock, *Forces in Motion: Anthony Braxton and the Meta-Reality of Creative Music*, London, 1988; Graham Lock (ed.), *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton*, Exeter, Devon, 1995; Francesco Martinelli, *Anthony Braxton Discography: All the Records Where Anthony Braxton Appears as Composer or Performer*, Pisa, 2000; Ronald M. Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique*, Chicago, 1993; Hans Wachtmeister, *A Discography and Bibliography of Anthony Braxton*, Stocksund, 1982; Peter Niklas Wilson, *Anthony Braxton, Sein Leben, seine Musik, seine Schallplatten*, Waakirchen, 1993.

6 Timo Hoyer, email to author, October 12, 2024.

7 Timo Hoyer, email to author, March 25, 2020; Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, email to author, May 6, 2021.

8 *Trillium X* was the sixth opera composed by Braxton, and, apart from *Trillium M*, the first to be performed outside the United States. Timo Hoyer, “Anthony Braxton – Opera Composer”, in *Anthony Braxton: Trillium X*, concert program, DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague, August 1, 2023.

9 Lewis, “A Small Act of Curation”, op. cit., p. 11. For more about Lewis and Braxton’s 1970s collaborations, see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, Chicago, 2008, pp. 339 ff.

10 Max Erwin, “2023 Darmstädter Ferienkurse”, in *Tempo* 307, January 2024, p. 78.

11 Sylvia Freydank et al. (ed.), *Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2023*, Darmstadt, 2023.

12 Ibid., p. 131.

13 Ibid., pp. 132–138.

14 Ibid., pp. 150, 167.

15 Ibid., p. 157.

16 Wolfram Knauer, interview by author, Darmstadt, August 10, 2023.

17 Sinead Hayes, “Stepping into Anthony Braxton’s Musical Universe: Darmstadt Creative Orchestra”, *Talking Darmstadt* podcast, Words on Music Audio Essays 2023 series, episode 9, released September 14, 2023, <https://soundcloud.com/talkingdarmstadt/stepping-into-anthony-braxtons-musical-universe-darmstadt-creative-orchestra-sinead-hayes?in=talkingdarmstadt/sets/words-on-music-audio-essays>.

18 Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, “Performing Anthony Braxton’s Compositions for Creative Orchestra”, in: Timo Hoyer / Kobe Van Cauwenberghe (ed.), “Anthony Braxton – 50+ Years of Creative Music”, special issue *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik*, 2025, p. 98.

19 Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, op. cit., pp. 147–148.

20 For a short history of Abrams’s Experimental Band, see Paul Steinbeck, *Sound Experiments: The Music of the AACM*, Chicago, 2022, pp. 711.

21 Ibid., pp. 11, 112, 141–142.

22 Tri-Centric Foundation, “Anthony Braxton Catalog”, published June 3, 2020, <https://tricentricfoundation.org/scores/>; Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, “Anthony Braxton’s Creative Orchestra”, in *Glissando* 43, 2023, pp. 36–41.

23 Anthony Braxton, quoted in Hayes, “Stepping into Anthony Braxton’s Musical Universe”, op. cit.