

FREEDOM AND INDIVIDUALITY IN THE MUSIC OF CECIL TAYLOR

Thesis

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“The freedom to want your own particular hip self is a freedom of a somewhat different and more difficult nature.”
-LeRoi Jones

Introduction

By its very nature, improvised music deals with the relationship between an individual and a group, and therefore issues of freedom and individuality. Structures in improvised music, whether spontaneous or predetermined, reflect conceptions of individuality and freedom; both the conceptions of those who created the structures, and those who perform within them.

In an attempt to examine closely the relationship between freedom, structure, and individuality, I have chosen to examine a performance which took place at the 1995 San Francisco Jazz Festival. The group was named the Cecil Taylor Creative Orchestra, which consisted of forty-three improvising musicians from the SF Bay Area, including myself, under the direction of Taylor, who also performed. The event itself, two one-and-a-half hour sets of continuous sound and movement, was so complex and varied it is impossible to talk about in any complete way. However, issues of freedom, individuality, and structure were central to the event, and can be understood through a close examination of certain passages. The reaction to the performance was strong—some audience members walked out, others gave a standing ovation, and the reviews, for the most part, were incredulous.¹ The impact on the local improvising scene (and on myself in particular) was profound, and it is now seen as a landmark event.

¹ For a description of the event, see the review by Philip Elwood, "Surviving Cecil Taylor's Musical Avalanche," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 27, 1995: C 11.

In order to understand as completely as possible the way in which freedom and individuality came about and functioned within the performance, it is necessary to understand how they emerged in Taylor's music. Therefore, this essay is organized into three separate parts, the first two of which will provide necessary background material for the analysis of the concert in the third. **Part I** is in two halves. The first discusses the relationship between jazz and society, and how jazz mirrors cultural and political ideologies. The second half gives a brief overview of the beginnings of free jazz music in the fifties and sixties, with a focus on the connection between the social, political, and spiritual movements of the time, and Black Nationalism in particular, and how they formed the basis for a new musical understanding of individuality which emerged in Taylor's work. In **Part II**, I will examine the liner notes to Taylor's 1966 recording *Unit Structures*. In these notes Taylor lays out, in poetic language, his conception of his music's relationship to the body, from which he derives a particular understanding of improvisation and individuality expressed in music, and how this understanding functions in a group context. These conceptions are crucial to understanding his formulations of musical structure, formulations that he continues to develop through the present. **Part III** will focus on the concert. I will begin with describing the rehearsal process leading up to the festival performance, and how that process developed a specific conception of group identity among the orchestra members. Next, I will closely examine two specific episodes from the performance, which are designated **Tape Selection 1** and **Tape Selection 2** on the cassette provided with this paper. These examinations will focus on the way issues of freedom, individuality, and structure manifested themselves during the performance, how they fit in with the conceptions laid out

in **Parts I** and **II**, and how they conformed or differed from the conceptions of the performers. With this understanding, I will then compare the Taylor performance to a performance of a Pauline Oliveros piece, “Approaches and Departures—Appearances and Disappearances,” which took place six weeks before and dealt with similar issues.

Through this examination, I hope to explore how conceptions of freedom and restraint in relation to individual and group identity operate within the context of improvised music.

Part I: Jazz and Society

In a recent interview published in *American Heritage* (reprinted in the March 1996 issue of *Utne Reader*), trumpeter, educator, and jazz spokesperson Wynton Marsalis commented on the connection between jazz and democracy:

Jazz is a music of conversation, and that's what you need in a democracy. You have to be willing to hear another person's point of view and respond to it. Also, jazz requires that you have a lot of on-your-feet information, just like a democracy does. There are a lot of things you simply have to know.

In jazz you have the opportunity to establish your equality—based on your ability. That's the chance you have in a democracy. It doesn't mean you're going to be even, but you do have an opportunity. And often things won't go your way; they'll go the way the majority takes them. So you'll have to go with them and make the best out of a situation you might not like.

The principle of American democracy is that you have freedom. The question is "How will you use it?" which is also the central question in jazz. In democracy, as in jazz, you have freedom with restraint. It's not absolute freedom, it's freedom within a structure.

The connection between jazz and the American experience is profound. Believe me, that's the heart and soul of what jazz is. That's why jazz is so important. And that's why the fact that it has not been addressed has resulted in our losing a large portion of our identity as Americans. Because the art form that really gives us a mythic representation of our society has not been taught to the public.²

² Tony Sherman, "The Music of Democracy: Wynton Marsalis Puts Jazz In Its Place" *Utne Reader* no. 74 (March-April 1996): 29.

Marsalis makes explicit in this statement the implicit connection between the organization of group improvisation and social/political conceptions of freedom.³ By their very natures, improvisatory groups are small societies—collections of individuals reacting to each other, and the parameters of the improvisational context reflect conceptions of freedom, social organization, and democracy. This aspect is, in fact, far from hidden from the musicians, and many of them, as the quote above demonstrates, talk about it quite openly. The manifestations of the “mythic representations,” however, vary tremendously, and provide a clue as to what is meant when their creators talk about them. For example, the neoclassical forms of jazz which Marsalis promotes have specific, and in my opinion rather narrow, parameters of expression, or “restraints” as he refers to them; certain types of discourse are not allowed, and therefore the music manifests a particular type of democracy, which allows a particular type of freedom.⁴

³ Musical interactions based on social/political ideology are by no means the sole purview of African-American musical traditions, although it can be argued that African-American musical structures have profoundly influenced most other American and European improvisational constructs in the latter half of the twentieth century.

⁴ For example, Marsalis says “Jazz means learning to respect individuality. You don’t have to agree with me, I don’t have to agree with you. . . . it’s learning how to reconcile differences, even when they’re opposites.” In a couple of paragraphs, he states “You have to want to make somebody feel good with what you play.” Later in the interview he opines, “It was with the type of things that that late-period Coltrane did that destroyed its relationship with the public. That avant-garde conception of music that’s loud and self-absorbed—nobody’s interested in hearing that on a regular basis. I don’t care how much publicity it gets. The public is not going to want to hear people play like that.” Clearly, certain individuals’ voices, influences, and lines of thought are excluded in Marsalis’ democracy, where all communication seems, ultimately, determined by what he thinks “the public wants to hear.” (As of present, I have been unable to find a definition of democracy which takes as its basis that all communication should “make somebody feel good.”)

free jazz as a “mythic representation”

“Free” or “avant-garde” jazz (music which, interestingly enough, Marsalis would exclude from the jazz canon) are also “mythic representations of society,” and were, in some instances, created with the issues of socio/political freedom particularly in mind. In an interview with Len Lyons, Cecil Taylor addresses this issue. Lyons had asked Cecil about his piano technique:

You want me to talk about certain things, but I’m prepared to talk only about the things I think are important. I’m interested in the cultural importance of the life of the music. The instrument a man uses is only a tool with which he makes his comment on the structure of music. That’s why the evaluation of what a cat says about how he plays music is not too far from the noninteresting things he does when he is playing. That person wouldn’t have too profound an understanding of what has happened in the music and the culture. We have to define the procedures and examine the aesthetics that have shaped the history of the music. That’s much more important than discussing finger dexterity. We might as well discuss basketball or tennis.

[Lyons] *“Well, what does distinguish your approach to the music from the other approaches?”*

The history of the people, the culture, even the things they forget consciously. The way they cook, speak, the way they move, dress, how they relate to the pressures around them. What you experience in life informs (in-forms) you. If you work on One Hundred Forty-fifth street in Harlem and years later in Tokyo, where you are taken to see the sights, you experience . . . the environment, listen to the sounds, watch the movement.

You’ll be able to see that there are not these separations between things. There are different aesthetic choices made. What happened in the latter part of the eighteenth century in Africa had a profound effect on painting. The concepts of musical organization now have to be broadened to accommodate the worldwide awareness of music.⁵

⁵ Len Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists* (New York: W. Morrow, 1983), 304.

The “mythic representation” Taylor explores has broad parameters— there is an attempt to allow large-scale cultural influences to exist in his work without attempting to subsume them under a totalitarian structure; they are to emerge on their own, through the individuality of the players. Most interesting here is his comment on the relationship between musicians and musical structure; musicians are “commenting” in it, struggling with the tension between the “restraints” of structure and the experiences which “in-form” the individual. Yet this “mythic representation” Taylor postulates is not a form of musical anarchy, as his music is often incorrectly presumed to be. Structure does exist in Taylor’s music, although it operates in a way which may seem anarchistic from Marsalis’s point of view.

The Social/Political Environment of Taylor’s Early Music

While it is literally impossible to describe the multiplicity of forces that influence and shape an artistic movement, there are three interwoven cultural forces which I will discuss as being central to the development of Taylor’s music. These are the incorporation of bop into the “mainstream” conception of jazz, the civil-rights movement and the accompanying focus on black consciousness and aesthetics, and finally the musical focus on spirituality. My approach has been greatly influenced by the work of Ronald M. Radano, particularly his book *New Musical Figurations*.⁶

His view is summed up in this paragraph from the introduction:

⁶Ronald M. Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique* (Chicago:

Today, the nebulous categories of popular and art blur into a complex and encompassing web of subverted binaries, perpetuating Marshal McLuhan's vision of an "all-inclusive oneness," a world in which "fragmentation is the essence." The previously stratified categories of culture . . . have begun to look like outmoded constructs. Urban music in the postwar United States has come to resemble an extended series of fusions and oppositions existing in the matrix of mass culture. The patterns of interaction and conflict, too complex and intertwined to be sorted out systematically. . . relate inextricably to former hierarchical divisions as well as to the new institutional formations that affect the contours of American life as a whole. These have not only encouraged stylistic intersection, but have challenged the effectiveness of the standard categories by which we define musical practice. Former classifications of musical genre, while perhaps still somewhat useful as means of distinguishing aspects of style, appear less and less helpful in providing an accurate appraisal of the complexities of contemporary artistic life.⁷

bebop and the "mainstream"

The history of jazz music itself is an "extended series of fusions and oppositions." One of the most pronounced was the "bebop revolution" of the late forties, with Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonius Monk as the progenitors. This radical music rose up in opposition to "mainstream" jazz, a term first applied to small group, swing oriented jazz, mostly dance music. Bop was aggressive and intellectual compared to swing, and received hostile reaction and dismissal by many critics (though certainly not all) who denounced it as "cold, unemotional, and harmful to the future of jazz."⁸ Charlie Parker himself had distanced his music from the "mainstream," stating "Bop is no love child of

University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁷ Radano, 12.

⁸ Leonard Feather's description of Nat Hentoff's denunciations in "A Plea for Less Critical Infighting, More Attention To The Music Itself" *Downbeat* (Dec. 16, 1965): 13.

jazz. . . [it] is something entirely separate and apart.”⁹ There were inevitable comparisons between this black “art” music and the European canon, and Parker commented in 1953: “They’re different ways of saying things musically, and, don’t forget, classical music has a long tradition. But in 50 or 75 years, the contributions of present-day jazz will be taken as seriously as classical music.”¹⁰ But by the mid fifties, there was a deliberate, and evidently quite successful, attempt to formulate jazz history along the lines of the European canonical model. Critical approaches had been broadened to not only incorporate bebop into the “mainstream” aesthetic, but to describe it as a historical inevitability. While many American critics pushed for this, such as Ross Russell and Leonard Feather, the most extensive work was André Hodeir’s book *Jazz: It’s Evolution and Essence*. The clearest example of this type thinking appears in the chart in chapter two “The Evolution of Jazz and the Idea of Classicism” which lays out the various “Ages” or “Periods” of jazz: Primitive (c. 1900(?) - 1917), Old time (1917 - 1926), Pre-Classical (1927 - 1934), Classical (1935 - 1945), Modern (1945 -).¹¹

This attempt to create in jazz an analog to the European canon of music fell prey to the same exclusionary and homogenizing principles as the model which it sought (and continues to seek) to emulate. By codifying certain aspects of the music, a formulation as to “what jazz was” was created, a formulation which pronounced a new stability which undid the “harmful” effects of bop. However , the conceptual framework which gave rise to this construct was, in many

⁹*Downbeat* (September 9, 1949): 20. Reprinted in December 1990.

¹⁰*Downbeat* (July 2, 1964): 40.

¹¹ André Hodeir, *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* (New York: Grove Press 1956), 24.

respects, antithetical to the African-American aesthetics it sought to institutionalize. Radano comments:

Yet the mainstream ultimately worked against itself, its visibility coming at a price: appropriated and depoliticized, this monumental recasting of jazz stood in direct conflict with values and perspectives grounded in the African-American vernacular. By revising the nature of black music to fit the tastes and attitudes of a white consensus, the construct denatured the “blues” character of an artistic heritage built upon the necessity of culturally affirmative, creative resistance. Further, by encouraging the growth of a routinized style as a basis for “serious” artistic progress, it went against the grain of a black ethos that had historically challenged codified common practice and the analytic frames of a European musical tradition. By removing the music from the social and ideological categories that had previously given it meaning, the mainstream of jazz would stand or fall according to the measures of “all fine music,” becoming, in the favored phrase, “America’s classical art form.”¹²

the political implications of the “mainstream”

Clearly, the appropriation of jazz history by white mainstream culture produced a “mythic representation” which was at odds with the experience of many black musicians, and white musicians sympathetic with black aesthetics. Whereas as jazz, and particularly bop, had previously been a voice of challenge and resistance, it was depoliticized and stripped of its context. Jazz had now even become an exponent of cold-war ideology which proclaimed a homogenized, classless and raceless society without conflict; a 1955 *New York Times* article stated that jazz was “America’s secret weapon. . . Right now its most

¹²Radano , 17.

effective ambassador is Louis (Satchmo) Armstrong. A telling propaganda line is the hopped up tempo of a Dixieland band . . ."¹³ The State Department sponsored tours by Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, and many others. Despite the inclusion of black musicians like Gillespie, most artists sent on tour were white. Critic Leonard Feather was even hired to host "Jazz Club U.S.A.," which was broadcast on Voice of America behind the iron curtain.¹⁴

jazz and the civil rights movement

One must consider this depoliticization of jazz against the rise of black awareness and attempts at cultural redefinition (or self-definition) energized by the civil rights movement and black nationalism of the fifties and sixties. The history and circumstances of this time are well known and require no restatement here; the crucial element is that it had a significant effect the reaction to the "mainstream" co-option of jazz music. For many, the struggle against the mainstream was a struggle to assume control of their own history. In his 1963 essay "The White Jazz Critic," LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) writes:

There were few "jazz critics" in America at all until the 30's and then they were influenced to a large extent by what Richard Hadlock has called " the carefully documented gee-whiz attitude" of the first serious European jazz critics. They were also, as a matter

¹³ *The New York Times* (November 6, 1955): 38.

¹⁴ It should be noted, of course, that this propagandistic unity was not all it seemed, of course. Gillespie commented at one point: "The black people are becoming more and more dissatisfied. And if changes don't take place within the next ten years, there'll be a revolution." Quoted in Frank Kofsky's essay "Black Music: Cold War Secret Weapon," *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York, Pathfinder Press 1970), 20.

of course, influenced more deeply by the social and cultural mores of their own society. And it is only natural that their criticism, whatever its intention, should be a product of that society, even if not directly related to the subject they were writing about, Negro music.

We take for granted the social and cultural milieu and philosophy that produced Mozart. As Western people, the socio-cultural thinking of eighteenth-century Europe comes to us as a historical legacy that is a continuous and organic part of the twentieth-century West. The socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro in America (as a continuous historical phenomenon) is no less specific and no less important for any critical speculation about the music that came out of it.¹⁵

free jazz and jazz history

The fifties saw a multitude of new forms of jazz; modal, “cool,” hard bop, etc. There was also an attempt by Gunther Schuller and others at “Third-Stream,” a self-conscious fusion of jazz and classical. While these forms expanded and explored the language which had now been accepted as “jazz” in extremely inventive, artistic, and individualistic ways, nothing challenged the dominant paradigm so deeply as the music variously called “free-jazz,” “avant-garde jazz,” “the new thing,” or most tellingly “anti-jazz.” New harmonic and sonic materials invoked twentieth-century developments in “classical” music. Yet these materials were not self-consciously appropriated as they had been in “Third-Stream” music, but rather were incorporated according to a self-proclaimed “black” aesthetic. These musics cast doubt on the assumptions formulated in the fifties as to what jazz was. Yet they did not reject the history which they brought into question, as perhaps Parker did, rather they embraced it. In an interview with Nat Hentoff, Cecil Taylor stated “The greatness of jazz

occurs because it includes all the *mores* and folkways of Negroes during the last fifty years.”¹⁶ In particular, the intellectual and revolutionary character of bop was seen as a foundation for this music: “[F]or jazzmen now to have come to the beautiful and logical conclusion that bebop was perhaps the most legitimately complex, emotionally rich music to come out of this country, is . . . a brilliant beginning for a ‘new’ music.”¹⁷ The revolutionary character of this music, therefore, functioned through simultaneous acceptance and rejection the constructs of jazz history. It was the mainstream conceptions of black music history, not the history itself, which “anti-jazz” artists sought to debunk. In “An Artist Speaks Bluntly,” saxophonist and playwright Archie Shepp wrote:

‘Jass’ is an ofay’s word for a nigger’s music . . . Give me leave to state this unequivocal fact: jazz is the product of the whites- the ofays- too often my enemy. It is the progeny of the blacks, my kinsmen.¹⁸

In short, “the new music” presented a radically new and revolutionary “mythic representation of society”; a representation which was itself simultaneously a “fusion and opposition” of social and musical developments.¹⁹

¹⁵ Leroi Jones, “The White Jazz Critic,” *Black Music* (New York, William Morrow & Co. 1968), 12-14.

¹⁶ Kofsky, 140.

¹⁷ Jones, “The Jazz Avant-Garde” *Black Music*, 69.

¹⁸ Archie Shepp, “An Artist Speaks Bluntly,” *Downbeat* (Dec. 16, 1965): 11. Many other musicians rejected the term “jazz.” In 1971 Miles Davis said the label “jazz” was equivalent to calling someone a “nigger.”

¹⁹ The forms this new music took were as highly individualistic as the artists who created them. Most well known, other than Taylor, were Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, and at the end of his life, John Coltrane. Coltrane is a particularly remarkable case. One of the most highly influential jazz musicians since the forties, he pioneered a variety of styles; “cool” with Miles Davis’ band; as a leader; hard-bop, modal jazz, and then finally, in the last two years of his life, the “avant-garde”. As attested to by the earlier comment from Marsalis, many musicians reject his late music, but his music developed in a clearly organic progression.

For many, of which Archie Shepp was perhaps the most vociferous, the music itself was a revolutionary statement against the white power structure:

My music is functional. I play about the death of me by you. I exult in the life of me in spite of you . . . My music is for the people. If you are a bourgeois, then you must listen to it on my terms. I will not let you misconstrue me. That era is over . . . I will say to you. . "Strike the Ghetto. Let my people go."²⁰

socioeconomic struggles in free jazz

Needless to say, critical reaction to "the new thing" was often hostile, and most musicians had difficulty in booking gigs and getting record companies to take interest in their music. One of the main problems was that the only existing venues were ones that were historically created for "mainstream" jazz, and the traditional economic functioning of jazz clubs was somewhat antithetical to the demands made by the new music. Bassist Buell Neidlinger, who played with Cecil for several years, portrayed the situation accurately:

[T]here is no economic advantage to playing music like that. It's completely unsalable in the nightclubs because of the fact that each composition lasts, or could last, an hour and a half. Bar owners aren't interested in this, because if there's one thing they hate to see it's a bunch of people sitting around openmouthed with their brains absolutely paralyzed by the music, unable to call for the waiter. They want to sell drinks. But when Cecil's playing, people are likely to tell the waiter to shut up and be still.²¹

²⁰ Shepp, 42.

²¹ A.B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (New York: Limelight Edition 1966, 1992), 8.

The political aspects of the music were highly controversial as well, and were often discounted or seen as “a million light years away from the actual notes and chords and modes and rhythms of jazz.”²² The musicians and their supporters were not silent to these reactions, and often openly criticized the critics, such as LeRoi Jones’ essay “The White Jazz Critic” quoted earlier, Archie Shepp’s article quoted above, and Taylor’s 1963 *Village Voice* article, which stated “Critics are sustained by our vitality. From afar, the uninformed egos ever growing arbitrarily attempt to give absolutes.”

Even when places to play and record were found, exploitation by club owners and record companies was often profligate.²³ Despite a certain amount of recognition, in America but especially in Europe, many of the musicians lived in poverty.²⁴ Some, like Sonny Murray, didn’t even own their own instruments. The experience of these musicians was compounded by the public exposition of corruption in the music industry when, in 1960, the Federal Trade Commission reported that bribes had been taken by 225 disc jockeys and other broadcasting personnel in order to play certain records. Dick Clark of ABC’s *Broadcast U.S.A.* television show admitted that he had a financial stake in the songs he played.

²² Leonard Feather, “A Plea For Less Critical Infighting, More Attention To The Music” *Downbeat* (Dec. 16, 1966): 13. Ironically, Shepp’s article quoted above appears two pages earlier in this same issue.

²³ Frank Kofsky provides an economic analysis of an evening at the *Five Spot* in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, 148. His “evidence” is not documented, however.

²⁴ I was informed by Marilyn Crispell that Cecil didn’t make money enough to pay taxes until he was fifty years old in 1983.

attempts at collective organization

The reaction of the “avant-garde” musicians to what Archie Shepp described as “the crude stables (clubs) where black men are groomed and paced like thoroughbreds to run until they bleed or else are hacked up outright for Lepage’s glue”²⁵ was self-organization. In 1960 Charles Mingus and Max Roach organized “The Rump Festival” to counter the Newport Festival. The truly seminal event, however, was the 1964 “October Revolution in Jazz,”²⁶ a festival of “the new music” organized by Bill Dixon. This festival, which included Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, Sunny Murray, Milford Graves, Guiseppi Logan, and many others. For a number of the young musicians, this was their first exposure. This and the next festival, “Four Days in December,” prompted Dixon, in consultation with Taylor to form the collective organization, the Jazz Composers Guild under the philosophy that “You can’t kill an organization, but you can kill an individual.”²⁷ Members of the Guild included Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Archie Shepp, Rosewell Rudd, Jon Winter, John Tchicai, Carla and Paul Bley, and several others. The racial makeup of the Guild demonstrates clearly the inclusive nature of the philosophies of many members of the avant-garde. Bill Dixon explained “[White jazz musicians] are treated significantly better, but not much better—that’s why they’re in the Guild—than Black musicians, and that is

²⁵ Shepp, 42.

²⁶ Named, of course, after the Russian October Revolution of 1917; a good indication as to the ideological leanings of the musicians and the political nature of the music.

²⁷ Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz* (New York: Serpent’s Tail 1977), 214.

simply because they play jazz, which is looked on as something 'primitive.'"²⁸

Weekly concerts were organized, and it was planned that recording and nightclub contracts would be negotiated through the Guild rather than by individual members. The Guild fell apart when Archie Shepp began individual contract negotiations with Impulse records.²⁹

The Guild was really the first attempt a collective organization, and several others followed, including the Black Arts group (organized by LeRoi Jones), the Jazz Composer's Orchestra, and in Chicago the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM). While organizations like the Guild, the Orchestra, and many other included white musicians, some, like the Collective Black Artists and the Black Order of Revolutionary Enterprise, espoused exclusionist ideology. It should be pointed out that there *was* a musicians union, the American Federation of Musicians, Local 802, and the musicians were required to belong to the union in order to work. Most of the artists, however, felt that the union was uninterested in them, except at dues paying time. Cecil himself called for "a boycott by Negro musicians of all jazz clubs in the United States. I also propose that there should be a boycott by Negro jazz musicians of all record companies . . . all trade papers dealing with music . . . and that all Negro musicians resign from every federated union in this county. Let's take away the music from the people who control it."³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ It should be noted that Dixon claimed racial friction played an element in the breakup: "[There was] a subtle, but apparent, indignation on the part of the white members . . . that a black man . . . could conceive and execute an idea that would be intelligent and beneficial to all."

³⁰ Kofsky, 144. It should also be noted that, while Cecil's musical and political focus is on racial equality and "African methodology," he was always inclusive of white musicians.

the place of the artist in society

Behind this self-empowered vision lay a rather romantic notion of the place of the jazz musician in the ghetto. If jazz musicians were freed of their poverty and allowed to pursue their artistic goals unfettered, they would “operate at a maximum capacity on all levels.” Because an artist is “so close to reality, he would be able to spell out in a language the community could understand exactly what his work is about and how it has relation to them- how it comes out of perhaps the same problems they’re struggling with.”³¹ The difficulty the musicians were having, both economically and the perceived lack of attention in the media, was seen as a form of active oppression, not just “economic inconvenience.” The large attendance at certain performances, and especially the reception in Europe, were cited as evidence for public acceptance, both actual and potential, of “the new music.”

spirituality in free jazz

Co-mingled with the collective social and political movements of the late fifties and the sixties was the religious revival, the most visible examples of which were The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X’s Afro-American Unity group, and Martin Luther King Jr. As theses movements fused religion and spirituality with political discourse, so too “The New Music” was often considered a spiritual as well as political voice. Some of the musicians made the connection explicit; for

³¹ Ibid., 144.

example in December of 1964 John Coltrane recorded the album "*A Love Supreme*."³² Coltrane was a practicing Christian, and the supreme love referred to is the love of Christ. Yet Coltrane's spirituality, like the spiritual musics of others of the movement, was inclusive rather than exclusive—for example McCoy Tyner, the pianist for his quartet at the time, is a Muslim. Sun-Ra was a mystic and practiced astral projection. Perhaps the most pronounced spiritual orientation was in the music of Albert Ayler, who based much of his music on "Negro" spirituals. His album titles included *Angels*, *Spirits*, and *Spiritual Unity*.

The nature of the spiritual characteristics of this music are addressed LeRoi Jones' (Amiri Baraka) 1966 essay "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music):

The new jazz people . . . seek the mystical God both emotionally and intellectually . . . John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Sun-Ra, Pharaoh Sanders, come to mind immediately as God-seekers. In the name of energy sometimes, as with Ayler and drummer Sonny Murray. Since God is, indeed, energy. To play strong and forever would be the cry and the worshipful purpose of life . . . The music is a way into God. The absolute open expression of everything.³³

The religious character of the music, then, is not devotional but rather an invocation of divine energies, a trait not unlike some African religious music. Coltrane claimed to have a "vision of God" before composing *A Love Supreme*, and had "visions of God a lot of times when he was playing."³⁴

³² Interestingly enough, this album was the last of his "middle-period albums", and thrust Coltrane into his final period which was undoubtedly "avant garde". Soon after "*A Love Supreme*," he recorded "*Ascension*" (recorded July 28, 1965), a lengthy collective improvisation featuring many of the well known avant-garde players, including Archie Shepp, John Tchicai, Pharaoh Sanders and Marion Brown

³³ Jones, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," *Black Music*, 193.

³⁴ from a quote by Bobby Timmons, J.C. Thomas *Chasin' the Trane* (New York: Da Capo, 1975) 187.

Of course, not all of the musicians involved in “The New Thing” were attached to a religious tradition, but the lack of an institutional base did not nullify the spiritual characteristics of their music. While Archie Shepp (a Marxist), Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman were “three versions of a contemporary Black Secularism,”³⁵ the spiritual aspects of their music emerged “in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling.”³⁶ As Jones described it, collective improvisation is an “*all-force* put together, and is what is wanted . . . pushed by an emotionalism that seeks freedom.”³⁷ The freedom sought is a personal quest for individuality, the “freedom to want your own particular hip self.”

The investigation of the self through improvisation is at the basis of Taylor’s music in particular: “The investigation of oneself means the attempt to hear the calling of those great black minds that have preceded one, and to understand the responsibility, through the investigation of the orders that they maintain, to define what the essential and aesthetic perimeters are that make this music.”³⁸ Spirituality, then, derives from the “free” sonic interplay between the individual and the collective: The music “once free, it is spiritual.” Specifically, through the invocation of the “*mores* and folkways of Negroes” the music becomes an “actuality, [a] summoner of Black Spirit, the evolved music of the then evolved

³⁵ Jones, “The Changing Same,” 197.

³⁶ Ibid., 186.

³⁷ Ibid., 195.

³⁸ Cecil Taylor interview. J. B. Figi, “Cecil Taylor: African Code, Black Methodology” *Down Beat* (July, 1975): 13.

people.”³⁹ The music is not *about* spirituality, rather it *is* spirituality manifest—the making of the music is itself a religious event:

[The] first order to be recognized in the rhythmical celebration is indeed the homage that the musicians pay to the continuance of life, and that is not only the life of people, but the life of all things that move.

It means the magical lifting of one’s spirits to a state of trance. It means the most heightened perception of one’s self, but one’s self in a relationship to other forms of life, you know, which people talk about as the universe. It means experiencing oneself as another kind of living organism much in the way of a plant, a tree- growth, you see, that’s what it is. And, at the same time, when one attains that, one also genuflects to whatever omnipotent force that make you, made it, possible. I’m hopefully accurate in saying that’s what happens when we play. It’s not to do with “energy.” It has to do with religious forces.⁴⁰

³⁹ Jones, “The Changing Same, ” 189.

⁴⁰ Figi, 14.

⁴¹ Figi, 31.

Part II: The Foundation of Taylor's Music

While Taylor's music proclaims as its fundamental basis the "*mores* and folkways of Negroes," a history self-investigated with an "African methodological concept,"⁴¹ his formulations are also indebted to Western Art music in a more than fleeting way. Taylor attended New England Conservatory of music in the early fifties. He originally wanted to study composition, but "the department head . . . figured that he already had one Negro [composition student], and that was enough."⁴² Cecil's response to racism of the academic environment was, "that meant that to me that I had to be black if for no other reason than that they thought that black was bad."⁴³

Taylor, like Braxton and other black artists whose music has identifiable traces of Western Art Music influences, was often criticized for this aspect of his work and was told to "stop Messiaen about"⁴⁴. Taylor's answer to this sort of criticism was "I am not afraid of European influences,"⁴⁵ and in fact went so far as to say "Bartók showed me what you can do with folk material."⁴⁶ He saw himself as grasping "the energies of the European composers, their technique, consciously, and blend[ing] this with the traditional music of the American

⁴² Spellman, 55.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ This is actually a criticism of Braxton, but similar allegations were made against Taylor. Scott Albin, "Caught, Anthony Braxton Quartet, " *Down Beat* (March 25, 1976), 41.

⁴⁵ Spellman, 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.

Negro . . . to create a new energy.” This was not something startlingly new, this kind of appropriation is part of African-American tradition: “This is what has always happened. Ellington did it.”⁴⁷

developments in Taylor’s early career

Taylor’s first album *Jazz Advance* was released in 1955, when Cecil was 22.⁴⁸ For one familiar with Taylor’s contemporary work, the album seems far removed and quite conservative—yet there are distinct elements associated with his music present in this first release: “[H]is harmony, though not his rhythm, is already in a world far advanced beyond bop. His soloing consists of one contrast after another: simple dissonances versus tone clusters, wide versus narrow octave ranges, calls versus response.”⁴⁹ Taylor’s early music still uses a rather conventional rhythm-section orientation—the bass still walks and the drums still swing—the horns and the piano operate in a freer context over this “traditional” foundation.

Over the next ten years, Taylor’s style came into clear focus. The album 1961 *Into The Hot* with the Gil Evans Orchestra is a link between his early period and his “mature style.” He had abandoned traditional notation and dictated his scores, preferring the players not to notate them at all. According to Archie Shepp, who played on the album “He would play the line, and we would repeat

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ This is an extremely brief synopsis of Taylor’s early recording career. For a more complete analysis, from 1955 up until the early 1980’s, see John Litweiler’s *The Freedom Principal: Jazz After 1958* (New York: Da Capo, 1984), 200-221. I disagree, for reasons I will make clear later, with Litweiler’s assertion that *Into The Hot* is the pivotal album which begins the kind of exploration Taylor has continued up until the present.

it. That way we got a more natural feeling for the tune and we got to understand what Cecil wanted. . . 'Pots,' which a lot of critics have called a masterpiece of modern jazz, was written this way."⁵⁰ In the *Unit Structures* liner notes, Taylor would write "Western notation blocks total absorption in the 'action' playing."

Over the next few years, Taylor developed the rhythmic aspects of his music more fully with the "free" drummers Sonny Murray and Andrew Cyrille. The music of this period, particularly "D Trad That's What" demonstrates an increasing rhythmic flexibility and abandonment of the traditional 4/4 time structure. Like everything else in Taylor's music, the "abandonment" of traditional time structures was not necessarily truly an abandonment:

It seems to me that the big change we had a large part in precipitating was the dispensing of the *overt* manifestation of four. It became a concept that we no longer felt we had the necessity of stating, but understood that we *experienced* it and that it was, in many ways, the given premise of—or even the motivation of— all that we were going to do. And that what we were going to do now was to investigate the multiples possible, you see, so that the relationship of how Andrew Cyrille uses his high-hat or his large cymbal, how the high-hat divides time, how the cymbal divides time, how the bass pedal divides time, how his sticks on the snare . . . I mean, it becomes infinite.⁵¹

the beginnings of Taylor's "mature style"

While *Into The Hot* and "D Trad" contained the seeds of what was to become the mature Taylor style, the 1966 album *Unit Structures* was its fruition. The liner notes, written by Taylor himself, lay out in poetic language the musical and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 202.

⁵⁰ Spellman, 44.

structural formulations which his music has explored from that time up until the present day. The language is difficult and arcane, and expresses itself in a non-linear but logical fashion. There is also a great awareness of his artistic contemporaries. While he rejects other musical formulations, he includes certain other artistic thought, particularly in the realm of poetry. In total, these notes demonstrate a unity of vision in which language, sound, body-movement, and history are dialogic forces in a single, spiritual creation.

Unit Structures' Liner Notes

rejection of the "classic order"

The title of the notes is "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming"—a clear reference to the Black Nationalist elements in Taylor's music—this is a manifesto for a new consciousness, a revisioning of Black history and aesthetics, a culture actualized through music. Obviously aware of Western Art music's intellectual foundations, Taylor rejects them:

Time seen not as beats to be measured after academy's podium angle. The classic order, stone churches with pillars poised, daggers ripping skies, castrati robed in fever pitch, stuff the stale sacrament, bloodless meat, for the fastidious eye; 'offering' sought the righteous; only found sterility in squares/never to curl limbs in reaction to soundless bottoms.⁵²

Here, Taylor rejects the hierarchical nature of the classical paradigm—described as the centralized structure of the "podium angle." This "classical

⁵¹ Figi, 14.

order” is seen as exclusionary and divisive: only the “righteous” are allowed. But this destructive divisiveness cleaves more than the “righteous” from the “unrighteous;” it divides heaven and earth with its “stone churches with pillars poised,” which enact the “dagger ripping skies.” The separation of heaven and earth, (which, as I will discuss later, Taylor views as a continuum represented on the piano keyboard), is also a manifestation of the violent division of the body from the mind. The violent nature of this image derives from Taylor’s belief that “[t]here are not separate parts: one body and the mind enclosed.” In the “classical order” the body has become “bloodless meat.” Parts of the body itself are sacrificed, as in the castrati. The rejection of the body in music leads to “sterility,” and the repression of the natural reaction to “curl limbs “ to the “soundless bottoms” of music. This alienation from the body is so complete that even the “classical order” of dance, an art based on movement, leads one away from a relationship with body: “ballet is the studied manipulation of extremities, a calisthenic procedure away from body center. Stillness advised by death.”

relationship to concurrent musical developments

Additionally, he comments on the construction of his contemporaries who had also believed themselves to be rejecting the “classic order.” In a clear reference to Cage, he states “Measurement of sound is its silences.” But Taylor does not promote the aesthetic Cage postulates: “Acknowledging silence its definition in absence,” and, as we shall see, Taylor is interested in presence

⁵² Cecil Taylor, *Unit Structures*, liner notes; (Blue Note, BST-84237, 1966).

rather than absence. In other contexts, he was outspokenly critical of the work of Cage and his associates. In *Four Lives In The Bebop Business* Taylor states:

David Tudor is supposed to be the great pianist of the modern Western music because he's so detached. You're damned right he's detached. He's so detached he ain't even there. Like, he would never get emotionally involved in it; and dig, that's the word, they don't *want* to get involved with music. It's a theory, it's a mental exercise in which the body is there as an attribute to complement that exercise. The body is in no way supposed to get involved in it.

It's like this painter. I said, "Like that painting of yours could have been done by a machine," and he said, "Well, the human body is just a machine." The most exciting level of creativity as expressed to me by these people is like that of a machine. For them, the ultimate kicks is to be a machine.⁵³

He sees in these artists as a "reactive occult" and accuses them of ultimately embracing the same destructive elements that are the failings of the order they claim to reject. He aligns them with Boulez, Babbitt, and the other serial composers by saying "in action unknowable—detached— rationalization of inaction and detachment mathematical series, permutation and row-underlying premise = idea precedes experience." As we shall see, Taylor sees experience, the body, and their integration as fundamental to the making of music which is connected in a profound way to life.

rhythmic structure and the body

Taylor proposes, in what Archie Shepp called "natural music,"⁵⁴ a music based on the body and physical experience: "Physiognomy, inherent matter-

⁵³ Spellman, 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 43.

calling—stretched into sound (Layers) in rhythms regular and irregular measuring co-existing bodies of sound.” The foundation of this body-music are rhythms “regular and irregular,” as opposed those “measured by academy’s podium angle.” He goes to some lengths to separate this corporeal impulse of rhythm from those of the “classical order,” and the destructiveness of “academy’s” use of time.

Rhythm-sound energy found in the amplitude of each time unit.
Time measurement as isolated matter abstracted from mind,
transformed symbols thru conductor, agent speaking in angles: a
movement vacuum death encircling act, defining nothing
Pythagorean desert a waste land lit deafness before ultimate silent
arena senses ride naked in souls.
Would then define the pelvis as cathartic region prime undulation,
ultimate communion, internal while life is becoming visible
physical conversation between all body’s limbs: Rhythm is life the
space of time danced thru.⁵⁵

The juxtaposition is literally the juxtaposition of life and death. By centering rhythmic impulse in the body (as opposed to the “transformed symbols thru conductor” it becomes connected to life through the integration of “all body’s limbs”—a reintegration of the individual. The focus on the “cathartic” pelvis in “prime undulation” brings in sexuality as well, the “ultimate communion.” It signifies the connection between people, where “all body’s limbs” are of more than one body. Taylor is also a dancer, and it should be noted that in many types of dancing, and particularly in modern dance, the pelvis is seen as the center from which all movement emanates. In some forms of piano technique, movement also ultimately stems from the pelvis. It is also a double reference to

⁵⁵ Taylor, liner notes; *Unit Structures*.

the “castrati robed in fever pitch”—a jest at the physical removal of sexuality from Western music.

practice as self-exploration

To describe how this would actually function in the music is rather complicated. Taylor states: “At the controlled body center, motors become knowledge at once felt, memory which has identified sensory images resulting social response.”⁵⁶ That is, the movements made in “physical conversation” will be iterations of that which has been learned/explored in the practicing of one’s instrument (“knowledge once felt”) which will be utilized in the musical/social interaction with other players. This requires, then, a new understanding of what “practice” is: rather than learning “traditional” instrumental technique, Taylor sees practice as the exploration of the relationship between one’s body-self and one’s instrument:

Practice is speech to one’s self out of that self metamorphosing life’s ‘act’ a musical symbol having become ‘which’ that has placement in creation language arrived at . . . The pupil mirrors only the inner light, an ear having heard identifies.⁵⁷

Through practice, the musician translates the dialogic relationship between their bodies and the world into a sonic understanding or “musical symbol.” This “symbol” is more than just a signifier, rather its creation alters the signified—the “musical symbol” is not just a signifier, but an act and through this act then world itself is altered and a “feedback loop” occurs. With the actualization of the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

“musical symbol,” the musician then recognizes the “self” as an element in the world: “the ear having heard identifies.” This identification, of course, alters the musicians perception, and the external perception of the self in music mirrors the internal perception, the “inner light,” and the two enter into a dialogical relationship. The music, then, is a “self metamorphosing life’s ‘act’” in which the “musical symbol . . . has placement in creation.” Creative energy springs from this dialogical relationship: “Creative energy force = swing motor reaction exchange.”

the individual and the group

The music feeds on itself, building energy, each member of the Unit contributing.

We proceed inventing. The interpretation has occurred. Emotion being aggressive participation defines the ‘acts’ particularity the root of the rhythm is its central unit of change eye acting upon motor responses directing motions internal movement (wave).⁵⁸

It seems important to note here that the ‘acts’ are created not just from sonic input and physical self-investigation, but also from the physical response to the living bodies of the other musicians: “eye acting upon motor responses.” In this passage, Taylor reinforces the idea of rhythm as the “central unit”—emotion only defines the “particulars” of the “musical symbol.” Through rhythm, the unmistakable yet mutable imprint of the “self,” we are led to particularities of its

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

functioning, what Taylor calls the “wave”—a fluid sense of time in “rhythms regular and irregular” which become an extension of the self (and the collective selves of the Unit) through time:

Rhythm then is existence and existence time, content offers time quantity to shape: color, mental physical participation. Passage is search against mirror held- reveal the waters of greed running love an older child set to the pain in fire. To see music one sights the invasion of stopping.

Through the corporeal building of rhythm the player addresses the material of the composition, a “quantity to shape.” But even the addressing of the material, pitch content for example, is colored by the “mental physical participation.” It is a “search against mirror held,” the mirror of the pupil’s “inner light.” The shape of the content arises for the approach to the “quantity” through the individual experiences of the performers, their personal history as contained in memory. It is individual memory that Taylor is addressing in the passage “an older child set to the pain in fire”— fire is a kind of trope for the memory and experience that “in-forms” the self.⁵⁹

memory and the trope of fire

Fire and light are of particular importance in this writing, and to understand the connection of these things to the music, it is important to understand their relationship to Taylor’s conception of memory. I earlier quoted him as saying

⁵⁹ I do not know whether there is some personal history involved with Taylor and fire, some early childhood incident for example. Anecdotes from his childhood are few, and even if one seemingly pertinent existed, it would not necessarily be relevant.

“The investigation of oneself means the attempt to hear the calling of those great black minds that have preceded one.” That is, there is a kind of inner memory which connects us to the past, with the traditions and beliefs of our ancestors. Taylor states a particular instance of this as “Yoruba memoir other mesh in voices mother tongue at bridge scattering Black.” A racial memory of a universal “mother tongue” encoded in memory, particularly body memory. It scatters language among the Black people, it scatters the Black people from each other, and as fire it scatters the “Black,” the darkness. The tongues of flame are conflated with the tongues of language, the “mother tongue,” and it is this tongue of flame which gives the “subculture becoming” its voice: “a set ritual song cycle in tongues the heat Harlem long ages past rested glory from.” It is a resurrection of historical memory through the body, a recognition of the “inner light” of the the fire which the pupil is to mirror. Yet the translation and recognition of that energy into body and memory can be painful; “A flesh lighted scream the beast in God screams,” and the pupil as the “older child” is “set to the pain” in his discovery of the self in the “search against mirror held.” The ultimate translation of the trope of fire into the movements of the body which create sound is the true history of Black music, a tradition from “long ages past” which has been lost, but now is reborn in the new music: “Where are you Bud?. .Lightning. . .now a lone rain falling thru doors empty of room—Jazz Naked Fire Gesture, Dancing protoplasm Absorbs.”

The “Naked Fire Gesture,” Taylor’s music, is the “Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming.” It is a revitalizing of the spirit against the what jazz had become. Taylor addresses the mainstreamization of jazz.

As gesture Jazz became: Billie's right arm bent at breast moving as light touch. Last moments, late father no use to sit and sigh the pastors have left us gone home to die. End to slave trade in sweet meats and rum. Larger audience means incidentals to spit mirage cracked virgin, a down side up, snikker to whine.

[Swing]⁶⁰

The trope of fire gives us light, and light is one of the things Taylor uses to describe the “content” of the “quantity to shape;” part of the mirroring of the “inner light,” through the extension of rhythm, is pitch material, the “paths of harmonic and melodic light” which “give architecture sound structures.” Here, we begin to understand the larger organization of Taylor’s music. The “quantity” given in is usually pitch material, small cells or aggregates of tones (you will see examples of this in the next section where I present the “score” of one of his pieces). These note cells are usually played through at the beginning of the piece, which Taylor labels the “anacrusis”—both a musical and poetic reference. “*Enter Evening’s* anacrusis consists of 4 separate lines, unequal in length; statements with changing consecutives.” As the “paths of harmonic and melodic light,” the anacruses can be manipulate in traditional ways, such as transposition, retrograde, augmentation, and diminution, but the lines can also be conflated to form harmonic aggregates: “Attitude encompassing single noted line, diads, chord cluster, activated silence.” The improvisation, then, is the “conscious manipulation” of the anacruses through the rhythmic based individuality of the player and the “resulting social response”:

⁶⁰ Ibid.

The player advances to the area, an unknown totality, made whole thru self analysis (improvisation), the conscious manipulation of known material; each piece is choice; architecture, particular in grain, the specifics question-layers are disposed-deposits arrangements, group activity establishing 'Plain.'⁶¹

The resulting music is seen as multilayered—a landscape of sound in which “each instrument has strata”—both within itself (“timber, temperament”), but also as a strata within the “Plain” or “group interaction.” Taylor presents the realization of the “unknown totality” as a physical landscape: “From *Anacrusis* to *Plain* patterns and possibility converge, mountain sides to dry rock beds, a fountain spread before a prairie.” One of the major forces shaping this landscape is “the piano as catalyst feeding material to the soloists in all registers.” The registral implications of the piano have direct bearing on the “landscape” aspect of the music, as Taylor has specific associations with the registers of the piano: “two or three octaves below middle C is the area of the abyss, and the middle range is the surface of the earth, the astral being the upper register.”⁶²

It is difficult to talk about the form, the “unknown totality” of the landscape of this music, the “Naked Fire Gesture.” Taylor has broken down completely the older concept of form in jazz, where a particular harmonic sequence delineates the overall structure of the piece. Now the individual musicians through the “conscious manipulation” of the anacrusis, create the form—“form is possibility.” The “form” of the music is really a dialogue between an individual’s “inner light” and “social response,” where “intuition and given material mix group interaction.” It is an “opening field of question” where “content, quality and change growth in addition to direction found.”

⁶¹ Ibid.

It is on this macroscopic level that Taylor betrays the influences of contemporary poetry—both in conception and vernacular. While his poetic language is at time reminiscent of Pound, his construction demonstrates awareness of the Black Mountain poets, and in particular Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse."⁶³ In this essay, Olson lays out a manifesto for open-form poetry, in what he calls "composition by field"—like Taylor's "opening field of question." Olson states that, in this kind of poetry, the poem is "energy transferred," and that the poem "must, at all points, be a high energy-construct, and at all points, and energy-discharge." In open-form poetry "form is never more than an extension of content,"⁶⁴ which, again, is similar to Taylor's "form is possibility" and content derived from the anacrusis. Olson implores that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION," an understanding which can easily be applied to the "self analysis" of improvisation. The building blocks of this poetry are also organically rooted in the body: "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE."

While the connections between musical formulations espoused in *Unit Structures* and the poetic formulations of Black Mountain Poets is obvious, Taylor by no means wholly adopted them. Rather, it is merely another example of the kind of appropriation that he sees as part of his role "to create a new energy," and, just like his "European influences," is subjected to "African methodology."

Through his corporeal musical investigation, the "self metamorphosing life's

⁶² Figi, 31.

⁶³ Originally published in *Poetry of New York*, vol. 3 in 1950, reprinted in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York; New Directions 1967), 15-30.

⁶⁴ Olson attributes this statement to Robert Creeley.

'act,'" he has incorporated the precepts of contemporary poetry in an organic way. It is part of his experience which "in-forms" him: "Dancing protoplasm Absorbs."

Part III:
Freedom and Individuality:
The Cecil Taylor Orchestra at the 1995 San Francisco Jazz Festival

Taylor's music since the sixties: A very brief synopsis

To examine Taylor's music in practice, I have chosen to examine two specific passages from the Cecil Taylor Orchestra at the 1995 San Francisco Jazz Festival. The twenty-nine year leap from *Unit Structures* to the present is not meant to imply that there was no development in Taylor's music during that period—rather there was a continuous development, but the focus remained the same. Rather than undergoing dramatic stylistic shifts, such as John Coltrane had done, Taylor continued to refine and develop his music along the same principles that he had espoused in *Unit Structures*. The performance of the Orchestra at the San Francisco Jazz Festival represents one of the most recent, and arguably one of the most complex, manifestations of the ideology that shaped his musical formulations from the mid-sixties onward.

the 1995 jazz festival orchestra

Of the 42 musicians who performed in the "Cecil Taylor Orchestra" at the SF Jazz Festival, most were local, although a few players from Taylor's New York group were present. The skill levels of the players varied quite a bit, as did their


familiarity with Taylor's music. We rehearsed for a week before the performance, for about six hours each rehearsal.

structure and notation

There were about four or five “pieces” in total, the two main ones broken down into 15 and 32 sections respectively. We seldom rehearsed the pieces all the way through. The scores (photocopies appear in the appendix) were usually dictated by Taylor, and we wrote them down using his “letter notation,” in which the letter names of the notes are written on plain white paper, the vertical and horizontal axes corresponding respectively to pitch and sequence. For example, a C triad arpeggiated up and down would look like:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & \mathbf{G} & \\ \mathbf{E} & & \mathbf{E} \\ \mathbf{C} & & \mathbf{C} \end{array}$$

Larger leaps were usually indicated by a line, often with the corresponding interval number. For example, a leap from C to E a twelfth above would be written:

C  **E**
+12

Simultaneities were written on top of each other: **E** **G**
C

It should be mentioned that, since the familiarity with Taylor's music varied quite a bit between musicians, many musicians had some difficulty in keeping up with Taylor's rapid and rather quiet dictation. He also gave us two photocopied score pages which were written in the style described above. The musicians were arranged in instrumental sections, and the different lines or chords of the compositions were each assigned to a particular section. There was never any attempt to form smaller choirs of varying instrumentation, such as one trumpet, one tenor saxophone, and one violin; rather it always worked that all the trumpets, tenors or violins would play at the same time. While Taylor occasionally commented on the rhythm or phrasing of a passage, or structured it in some way (play forward twice then retrograde once, for example), most often the various instrumental sections were left to determine how to play the passage. He had told us "I'm not favorably impressed with conducting, so I would like you to discuss with your section how you might proceed." He occasionally gave instructions or new material composed on the spot to sections individually, so that it was sometimes difficult to gain a complete understanding of all the material. There was no "conductor score" which contained all of the parts.

the rehearsal process

The rehearsals consisted mainly of playing through the various sections of the scores in a linear fashion. It took several days for the less familiar players to understand the character of the material given them, namely that each instrumental section had a certain amount of control over their phrases. Each

instrumental section did not simply need to play through a given phrase once, but rather could organize or orchestrate their playing within the score section to create more variety, mostly along the lines of accelerating the repetitions of the phrase and/or playing it in retrograde. Taylor said that “We will decide how the sounds please us, and we will develop them as we go along.” There were no designated “solos” in the traditional sense, although sometimes individual lines would become prominent.

It should also be noted that the instrument sections were often given words or phrases to chant or vocalize. The manner of the vocalizations was subject to the same manipulation that the instrumental lines were. For example, the most extensively orchestrated vocal part consisted of the words ANO-DOR-HYN-CHUS,⁶⁵ of which Taylor said: “Each participle has meaning—another form of music, music that comes from the way you pronounce the word.”

Finally, we were instructed in one composition (section 15, p.2 of the score that begins with the violin chord **G, F#, F, E**) to move about the space. We were told to begin in positions of our choosing, move about, and then return to our starting positions, in what Taylor called the “physicality of the inner dialogue.”

While some musicians expressed uneasiness with the vocalizations and the movement, the group generally became comfortable with the compositions. With the consistent linear reading of the scores, we had established a kind of group identity: We understood the orchestra as an entity which performed these scores in a linear fashion, and had clear, established roles as individuals within that

⁶⁵ Taylor described this word as “the name of an animal,” but was unspecific as to what animal. Apparently it is a kind of South-American bird with long claws. There were numerous references to Native American peoples, African and Afro-Cuban deities, Aztec methods of spatial measurement, healing images, etc. It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace down all the

entity. Each performer knew her or his specified role within their instrument section, and how that instrument section related to the orchestra as a whole and our progression through the score material. There was a clear sense of the limited freedom allowed. Each piece would progress as a kind of semi-determinate orchestral composition, on a microscopic level subject to individual variation, but macroscopically fixed in a strict sequence of events. Performed in this linear manner, the pieces were actually quite conservative structurally, although the sonorities were complex and the vocalizations unusual and recondite. This prompted one musician to comment to me that the compositions “sound[ed] like contemporary music.” I took this strange comment to mean the popular conception of “contemporary music in the Western Art tradition” as complex and dissonant, but still performed in a strict, linear note-by-note fashion. This particular musician is well schooled in jazz, but has had little experience with the wide variety of forms contemporary music actually takes. An ensuing discussion prompted another musician to compare these compositions to the work of Edgard Varèse, and another said that he was reminded of Karlheinz Stockhausen. These reactions pointed up an interesting and important aspect: As stated above, these compositions, while often quite beautiful and enjoyable to play, were rather conservative formally, and to a large extent seemed to abandon the musical and artistic formulations Taylor began developing in the sixties. For instance, the phrases he gave each section were not “anacruses” upon which to “mirror the inner light” as described in the *Unit Structure’s* liner notes; rather they were short passages, a limited sectional input

allusions made in the concert, however if it were ever done, I am sure it would be exceedingly interesting.

into a larger, rather rigidly structured whole. It seemed he was more or less fulfilling the traditional European model of “composer”—composing a score in isolation which would be realized by the agents of the orchestra. While the performers were given more freedom than they would have been in a traditional symphony orchestra, and there was no conductor to “transform” the “symbols,” the differences between “academy’s podium angle” and the music we had been rehearsing, especially in retrospect, seem more cosmetic than anything else. I began to wonder if he was somehow trying to justify his music along the “European canonical” lines—was he trying to create a jazz equivalent to Varèse? And if he was inviting that comparison, did the comparison really hold up? It seemed quite out of character for him to invite such comparisons in the first place.

In retrospect, I think the rehearsal process fulfilled certain assumptions and expectations that many of the musicians (myself included) had brought to the music.⁶⁶ The comment that it “sounds like contemporary music,” for example, demonstrates the expectation and justification of the music functioning along the lines discussed above, that is a “jazz” version of Varèse. These considerations aside, the framework created for the varied group of 42 musicians did work in giving each player a certain amount of freedom while fulfilling a clearly assigned role in the orchestra. Our relationship to the music and to each other, our identity as a group, was clear.

⁶⁶ The expectation was not without some justification, however. In February, Taylor had been in the Bay Area for a week stint at Yoshi’s NiteSpot with his quartet. While there, he formed an orchestra, just for rehearsal purposes. Many of the members of the Jazz Festival orchestra participated in those rehearsals; I had just observed them. Those rehearsals also consisted of

the final rehearsal

All of this, of course, radically changed in the concert. The first hint of what was to come came at the end of the final rehearsal. While various instrument sections were rehearsing their parts, the general noise level of the room was quite loud, and several of the tenor sax players began free improvising together. One of the percussionists joined in, and within ten minutes the whole orchestra had erupted into an unorganized jam, everyone playing at once at full volume. Taylor sat down at the piano and played for about fifteen or so minutes in the midst of this. The music continued for close to an hour, until it was time for us to give up the rehearsal space. It should also be noted that not all the musicians participated in the jam; several simply put away their instruments and seemed annoyed at the proceedings. Several left before it was over.

As we left the rehearsal, one of the musicians said to me “Wow, I guess we really needed to let off some steam.” He was referring to the long, focused hours of playing through the scores, an activity which is not traditional, and rather confining, for jazz players, particularly those that most often do “free” improvisation. The confinement to the given material had eliminated the “Plain” of group improvisation; there was no chance for any kind of advancement into “an unknown totality, made whole through self analysis (improvisation).”

Additionally, there was an uncertainty as to what exactly was going to happen at the concert. Up until the last rehearsal, we were uncertain whether Taylor was going to perform with the group at all; it had been suggested that he

playing through scores in the same manner described above. No performance was ever intended or given.

was going to perform solo in the first set, and that we would play the second set. When we left the final rehearsal, we had been told by Peter Apfelbaum and India Cooke, who were responsible for organizing the musicians, that Taylor would perform with us on the concert, but nothing was said as to the ordering of pieces and whether Taylor would perform solo. How the actual performance was going to proceed was still unclear.

Finally, the “steam” was also due to a certain amount of disappointment within the group that no one was really getting a chance to “play with Cecil.” The desire to “play with Cecil” itself was complex—it was an artistic desire to play with a powerful and historically important musician, a desire to have one’s “talent” recognized and affirmed by an established artist. “Playing with Cecil” was also a potential career advancement if he decided to use you as a member of his small group, the “Unit;” working with the “Unit” is one of the few gigs for “avant garde jazz” musicians that pays a living wage, and is highly prized economically as well as artistically.

The end of that final rehearsal demonstrated the disparity between what seemed expected of us as orchestra members, and our individual desires and expectations. The resulting tension, for so many days controlled by the ordered structuring of the scores which asserted group identity above all else, had finally erupted in what seemed like an anarchic convulsion of individual expression.

instructions for the performance

This tension became the center of the performance. When we arrived at Yerba Buena center a couple of hours before the concert, and after we had set up our

chairs and arranged the seating (Taylor's piano was set up a little left of center stage, a little behind the clarinets but in front of the guitarists and percussionist, placing him truly in the heart of the orchestra), we played through a few sections of the scores and then Taylor gave us some instructions for the performance. We were told to take all the chairs off stage. The performance was to begin with Taylor reading some poetry and we were to enter the stage and move about slowly without our instruments, although the percussionists could play throughout. The vocalists were given some phrases to perform, and we were told we could vocalize as well if we desired. When Taylor spoke a specific passage (I believe it was "circles turning"), we were to arrange ourselves into various geometric designs. Some players noted that the designs related to the architecture of the auditorium. We were to then continue moving about the space, slowly bringing our chairs on stage, dragging them across the floor to produce sound. After this, Taylor was to begin playing the piano, at which point we were either to leave the stage or at least stop moving. After a bit of his solo playing, the percussionists and guitarists would join him, and then the rest of the orchestra would reenter the stage. When we were all finally in place with our instruments, we would commence with the first composition, which would be the one labeled "A," which contains the words "ANO-DOR-HYN-CHUS" discussed above. There was no instruction as to how we were to proceed after that.

the performance

The beginning of the first set more or less followed the structure described above, which lasted for about the first twenty-five minutes. Each idea, the movement, the chanting, began to become more more expanded by individual players; for example a couple string players brought their instruments with them. Taylor himself often departed from what he said he was going to do, wandering on and off stage- which someone later described as “playing peek-a-boo.”⁶⁷ When the orchestra returned to the stage after Taylor had been playing solo for a while, several of the horn players began improvising with him. Taylor stopped playing and wandered off stage, and the improvisation died down after a few minutes, at which point the strings began their tremolo on the note A, which begins the composition. A fair amount of improvisation—horns trading phrases, Taylor and others chanting, percussionists filling,—continued over the beginning. When the first composition finally began, Taylor played constantly—an individual voice set against the community identity. The progression through the piece was fitful and slow; nobody was exactly sure how to proceed, and the progression kept breaking down as Taylor, or someone else, would interject themselves while the group tried to figure out what to do. Rather than progress in a smooth and orderly fashion as we had done in rehearsal, the unexpected interjections of Taylor and others caused the progression to become disjunct, leaping from once place to another when members of one instrumental section would recognize cues from other sections.

⁶⁷ From a description posted on the internet news group rec.music.bluenote the day after the concert.

Analysis of Tape Selection 1

A good example of the way the orchestra began to operate in the performance is in sections 10-13 of the composition labeled “A” (the first selection on the tape, which begins in section 10—the reader may also wish to refer to the graphic diagram **Tape Selection 1** in the appendix, which may help with further clarification), which began about 40 minutes into the first set. The orchestration of sections 10-12, a layering of the lines from different instrumental sections, had a certain building character to it, and with Taylor’s insistent playing against this material, this feeling was augmented. About midway through section 12, there was a high “cry” from one of the saxophones, and over the next twenty seconds there was a dissolution of the score— the tenors continued their line briefly as other players joined the screaming saxophone, then the tenors finally abandoned it as the whole orchestra erupted into a group improvisation, reminiscent of our final rehearsal, for about a minute and a half. The climax was punctuated by a series of high **B**s then **C**’s from the trumpets and a couple saxes. When they stopped, the improvisation quickly ended with a whoop and a loud descending series of clusters from Taylor.

After this outburst, there was a moment of pause while the orchestra reoriented itself, and the violins began section 13 with a glissando from **C** up to **C** a couple octaves up, informing the rest of the players what we were doing next. The tenors then came in clearly with their material, the altos hit their first chord. Taylor had been vocalizing against this material (at times not audible on the

tape), and vocalist (Trudy Morse) begins singing “ORA,” which was from the opening vocalizations. This unsteadied the ensemble a bit, and the strings began their chord (**D#**, **D**, **C#**) without the trumpets. Hearing this chord prompted the trombones and piano (me) to began playing our **E-F** diads. The numbers **4 3 2** refer to repetitions of the chords (four times, three times, then two times), which we clearly articulate (although not as together as we could be). The trombones continued with their next passage, the glissandi, while I continued with material based on the diads, as indicated by the words “continue till basses,” which refers to the phrase below the dotted line which begins **C** up to **E flat**. The tenors and trombones continued through their next two phrases, but when the altos came in (**E** up to **F** below the dotted line), one of them, Marco Eneidi, began an improvised phrase based on the rising motif, but did so in a way that was connected to the material given by the piano. This began a brief group improvisation which started among the altos, but quickly spread to the other saxes and to the guitars, while the tenors continued with their descending **D** to **G** line beneath the improvisation. When this burst quickly died down with a sigh from one of the vocalists (Ijoema Thomas), Taylor came in with the word “endlessness.” There was a pause, with a few vocalizations, as the orchestra attempted to assimilate the meaning of this outburst, and how to proceed. The basses continued after a moment with their line, the percussionist’s **4-3-2-1** pattern abandoned. The line itself was not totally clear (compare it with the clarity of the tenor and trombone lines at the beginning of the section). As they continued, some of the players tremoloed, reminiscent of the pedal **A** at the beginning of the piece, and there was some sparse vocalization from other members of the orchestra. The line did not end clearly either; there was no

definite **B-flat, A-flat, D-flat** chord to mark the end of section 13. The cymbal sound, which was supposed to begin section 14, did not enter, and the identity of the group was once again suspended. After a moment, some of the players began the clapping, which according to the score, was supposed to follow a percussion section with cymbals, glockenspiel, and sticks. The clapping itself rippled across the orchestra, but became disorganized and dissipated rather than becoming a focusing event, and soon the strings entered with a line from an entirely different composition.

What becomes evident from such a close examination of these few minutes of music is that the orchestra itself was struggling for its identity. Our understanding of our roles within the music, our intent to play the scores straight through with limited freedom, had been shattered by Taylor's lack of instruction, the addition of further vocalizations and movement at the last minute, and his consistent layering of his own piano playing and vocalizations against what the orchestra was doing called into question our roles as individuals and as a group. The group identity was vacillating between an anarchic collection of individuals expressing themselves simultaneously, and an orderly orchestra progressing through the fixed music we had rehearsed for many hours before. At the times when our former identity seemed poised to take over, Taylor or any other member of the orchestra asserted some kind of individuality against, though not necessarily in opposition to, the orchestra as a whole. These assertions pushed the orchestra in one direction or another; the cry from the saxophone at the end of section 12 pushed the group toward individuality, the violins' glissandi at the beginning of section 13 reasserted our identity as an orchestra. Marco's entrance in section 13 worked right in between—his assertion was orchestrated by the

score, but his choice of how to proceed, by picking up on the energy of the piano and the extreme manipulation the pitch material given to him, led us on a course right between the extremes. Each member, then, became free to participate or not participate as she or he wished, and acceptance of group identity became one among a myriad of options.

the rest of the first set

The section discussed above took place right at the end of the instructions given to us by Taylor. After the end of the composition, there was no place given to go. However, as I hope I have demonstrated, the way we progressed up until that point provided a direction in itself, and the rest of the concert fluctuated between the myriad of directions that became evident in the first part of the first set. Many of the musicians moved about the space, sometime forming groups to play together, sometimes just moving. Many of the players wandered over to Taylor when he was at the piano and played with him. At times, members of some particular instrumental section would move back to their seats and play a line from one of the compositions, and the rest of the orchestra would follow and portions of one composition or another would be played. Several times, when the orchestra would be in their seats in the midst of a composition, one of the players would stand and “solo” with Taylor— another kind of dynamic which I will talk about later. The end of the set settled down to Taylor soloing at the piano. The whole performance lasted over an hour and forty minutes.

analysis of Tape Selection 2

When asked what he wanted for the second set, Taylor said “Let’s just pick up where we left off.” The orchestra had become used to the spontaneous organization and disorganization, the pull and flow between individual assertions and group identity, and the disjunction between the two were getting stronger. A good illustration of this comes in Marco Eneidi’s solo, which took place about thirty minutes into the set. During the solos most of the orchestra would remain quiet, and usually seated, while a single player stood and played. A “solo” was really a dialogue between Taylor and the player, the percussionist, and occasionally guitarists. Soloing fulfilled the player’s desire to “play with Cecil,” and became the ultimate assertion of individuality. The relationship between the individual and the group becomes more complicated at these points. Eneidi is also a powerful and accomplished musician, who is very familiar with Taylor’s music and has performed with him a number of times before.

The portion I will talk about (the second selection on the tape—also see **Tape Selection 2** in the appendix) begins in section 7 of the composition which begins with the violin chord **G, F#, F, E**. It is immediately apparent upon listening to the vocalizations of “having made gestures,” that the group as a whole is using the material more as “anacrusis” rather than just a phrase to play through—the whole orchestra has picked up the phrase, not just the vocalists, and the variety of responses create a rich texture; a “plain” of activity where the individuality, the “strata” of each voice is definite yet supports a group identity. Taylor plays delicately against this material, clearly set off from the group yet responsive to its shifts. Here we can see how these scores, which had once seemed to alien to

Taylor's musical formulations, has, through the struggle between group and individual identities, become a clear manifestation of his aesthetic.

The tenors played slowly through their next line, as did the trombone, who waited until the tenor's crescendo on **E** to accelerate the end his descending line. Even in this short passage, the group's identity can be seen as more solid than in the earlier selection; more spontaneous choices about how to perform the material are being made based on the playing of other sections and players. The orchestra functions as a single unit more effectively, moving smoothly instead of haltingly as before.

The trumpets, altos, and bass clarinet entered next with their **F#, E-flat, D** chord, but the differences are interesting. It is hard to tell, but I believe it is the bass clarinet which actually began the passage. The trumpets and altos quickly followed, but in very different ways. The trumpets stuck closer to the score, playing together on the **F#** in a clear and mannered way four groups of six repetitions. The altos and clarinet, on **E-flat** and **D** respectively, merely used the notation as a suggestion, and played quick repetitions without regard for the number or grouping of repetitions. Taylor picked up on and augmented this energy, beginning in a low register, then moving quickly to a higher one in sync with the altos. The trumpets held their last note as a counter and support of the insistence of the altos, but then dropped out. The altos, however, had asserted themselves clearly as a section against the rest of the orchestra, and the new assertion of the identity of this group unhinged the previous clarity of orchestral identity. The trombone and bass clarinet played their chord (**D, D-flat, C**), and some of the tenors played their chord (**B-flat, A-flat, F, E**), but it did not necessarily create coherence, rather it added to the increasing energy and

dissolution of the group identity. Next, Eneidi parted ways with the repetitive altos and continued with their next line, the one underlined with the number (17). Free from the group, he freely interpreted the line; the first phrase was transposed up a half-step, and he resolved from **B** to **B-flat** rather than down a major seventh to **C**. He then played another phrase, one which was not written in the score, but was audibly based on the line which preceded it. While several other horn players also parted from the material, Eneidi was really setting himself up for what was to come. At the end of the phrase, there was a slight and momentary ebb in the group sound, and here was where we got the first burst of soloistic material which bears Eneidi's unique stamp. The end of this phrase was punctuated by a cluster chord from Taylor, who seemed uniquely aware of the occurring situation. By punctuating Eneidi's phrase, he was helping to draw him out and distinguish him from the orchestra. Taylor continued in the upper register of the piano, but the orchestra was held in stasis for moment— the sound had not died down sufficiently for Eneidi to wholly emerge from it, and his interjections remained one among many. The group as a whole was unsure of who they were for a moment, just as Eneidi was unsure of his place yet. For close to thirty seconds the identity of the orchestra hovered, not proceeding to section 9, although a few instrumental sections played through some of their lines, and not fully capitulating to the anarchic expression of individuality, although interjections from several horn players suggested that direction. The coherence of the group had been fragmented by the short but strong assertion of Eneidi's unmistakable identity.

In the last ten seconds of this episode, Eneidi began a varied repetition of a phrase, something which I suspect he had developed out of the material from the

end of section 8, although by then it was beyond recognition. He expanded this material through those last ten seconds, as the group attempted to reorient itself, so that when there was a break, a hesitation in which the percussion dropped out momentarily, Eneidi easily stepped into the vacuum. I believe this is the place where he stood up to clearly demonstrate his intention.

The beginning of the Eneidi-Taylor dialogue was interesting. To begin with, there was a clear connection between him and Taylor, an obvious familiarity with each other's playing. The exchange of information between the two was rapid, and provides an excellent example of what in *Unit Structures* Taylor described as "the piano as catalyst feeding material to the soloists in all registers." Additionally, the phrase that Eneidi used as the jumping off point of his solo is an excellent example of the function of the "anacrusis". The interaction between Eneidi and Taylor, then was the "Plain," where "patterns and possibility converge." The percussion and guitars supported this relationship. However, right at the beginning, where the majority of the orchestra had let Marco step forward, the string section began playing a phrase. They dropped out quickly, but one violinist (I am unable to identify the performer) remained playing incongruously over the top of the Eneidi-Taylor interaction. To be fair, I must remark that the recording is not necessarily an accurate presentation of what the musicians heard on stage, for most of the concert, and especially the during passages of significant volume, the strings were inaudible. At this particular moment, I am sure no one heard the violinist but him or herself.

With the refocusing of the group onto Eneidi, the orchestral identity had once again been fragmented, but when the tenors entered with a spontaneous ascending chromatic crescendo, the identity had solidified as supporters of the

soloist: The tenor line and the brass stabs which accompany it were clearly created to aid and amplify the dialogue between Eneidi and Taylor. There was also a participatory aspect to the accompaniment, but the instrumental sections were functioning on the terms laid down by the predominant individuals. Following the climax of the supporting orchestral assertions, Eneidi and Taylor continued, energized by the interjection of the group identity into their dialogue— an inversion of the previous relationship had now come about. Instead of the group identity taking precedence and individualistic musical assertions interjecting themselves and jostling the whole, here the identities of Taylor and Eneidi took precedence, and the orchestra reacted to them, actually recreating its identity based on its relationship to them.

At the end of this passage, one of the trumpet players joined in, as an individual, with a short blast from his horn. The other trumpets joined him, and the focus on the Eneidi-Taylor relationship shifted into a group dynamic of individual voices. As some of the tenor players and a guitar joined in, Eneidi dropped out, and within a few seconds, the whole thing dissolved. In this case, the additional entrance of several individuals into the music dissipated the group focus instead of increased it, since the music had been so concisely constructed along Eneidi and Taylor's interaction.

As the short group improvisation dies out, Taylor continued along the lines he established in the dialogue with Eneidi. As the tenors came in with their line that begins **C - A-flat - G -F**, the orchestral identity that had been in operation during sections 7 and the beginning of 8 returned, but Taylor's continued forceful individualistic assertions against the group dynamic of the orchestra forced the tenor phrase to come out. The trumpet, borrowing the F from the

chord at the end of the score section, punctuates the group dynamic, reinforcing the identity of the orchestra as performers of the score. When the chord swell that marks the end of score section 9 arrived, the entire orchestra had solidified in their identity. Eneidi, who moments before had been defining the criteria for musical exchange, returned completely to a functioning member of the group, indistinguishable from the rest of his section and reinforcing the group dynamic. It is at this point that Taylor changed his playing to accommodate the direction the orchestra was taking. The tenors repeated the phrase demarking the end of score section 9. Since the orchestral identity as performers of the score was clear, this line was performed in a more delicate manner than before; it became a simple melodic passage rather than a forceful reassertion of group identity. The chord swell was also more delicate this time, and the orchestra moved easily into section 10.

Taylor's music as an "actual society"

As I hope I have demonstrated above, Cecil Taylor's music is not merely a "mythic representation" of society, but an actual society. It is a society struggling to find its identity as both a "Unit" and also as a collection of individuals. The definition of an individual to the group is unfixed and in constant flux. There are times where an individual voice is given room for unfettered expression, times where she or he lays outside the group plays asserts their individual voice against the group identity, and times where they willingly join in as an active participant of group identity. This, I believe, is what Taylor meant when he said

“The instrument a man uses is only a tool with which he makes his comment on the structure of the music.” In the context of Taylor’s aesthetics, the instrument becomes the identity, the “strata” of the individual, and the way he or she defines that strata in relationship to the entire “Plain” of group activity, the depth to which he or she has “mirrored the inner light,” determines how they operate in that environment. I used the example of Eneidi’s solo because I thought it was a particularly successful moment in the music, a riveting “Naked Fire Gesture.” When I mentioned this to him after the performance, he said “Yeah, I knew I wanted to do it at some point.” Eneidi knew how to operate successfully in the environment Taylor had created; you can hear through the second example how he begins to set himself up, skillfully nudging and redirecting the orchestra until a space for him is created. He also exerts a similar influence with his more subtle actions in the first example. He is able to do this because he is an accomplished musician in this idiom. He has a distinctive and powerful sound—in Taylor’s terms he has found his “speech to oneself,” discovered his individuality through his body-rhythms and is able to translate that into sound. And this individuality fits well with Taylor’s. The dialogue between them is a manifestation of the “rhythmical celebration . . . the magical lifting of one’s spirits to a state of trance.” The multileveled interaction between Eneidi, Taylor, and the orchestra, between the individuals and the group as a whole, is clearly what Taylor describes as “the most heightened perception of one’s self, but one’s self in a relationship to other forms of life.” As I stated earlier, the sonic interplay between the individual and the collective is what creates the spiritual aspects of the music, the “religious forces.”

individuality and multiple aesthetics

However, not every musician in the orchestra was able to function as skillfully as Marco Eneidi. As I stated before, Eneidi has worked with Taylor several times before, is very familiar with this idiom, and has found a unique and powerful voice on his saxophone. He is very comfortable in the kind of environment which the performance created, just as he is comfortable in shifting his role in relationship to the group. There were a number of complaints from other members of the orchestra, such as the inaudibility of the strings, and the seemingly incongruous playing of some of the musicians, such as the violinist at the beginning of Eneidi's solo. The whole "playing with Cecil" aspect was problematic. Some of the interactions were quite remarkable, while others, particularly those who were less familiar with the specifics of Taylor's music, were described by some as "embarrassing." In those moments, the assertion of individuality seemed more of an empty gesture, even egotistical, and their playing and Taylor's seemed not like a dialogue, but rather an incongruous projection of sonic disunity. The intensity of Taylor's playing easily overshadowed the soloist, who seemed unable to react to Taylor's assertions. Again, an example of this is the violinist at the beginning of Eneidi's solo; for a substantial period of time, he or she does not follow the direction that the soloists or the rest of the orchestra is taking, and is not asserting any kind of clear alternative direction—rather he or she is just "noodling" on their instrument, absently playing, oblivious to his/her surroundings. It is quite a while before he/she begin the scratching sound with his/her bow, which fits more comfortably with the other sounds being produced at that moment. From this

perspective, one still has to wonder why he/she is playing at this particular moment at all. Yet many people have found this kind of incongruous playing quite beautiful; Chris Brown described this particular moment as “Ivesian.” This points up an important element in the kind of freedom allowed in this performance: While any member could really do anything at any moment—move anywhere, make any sound—not all activities were equal, or had equal effect on the group. Nobody stopped the violinist from playing, but his or her ineffective assertion of individuality seemed to be ignored by the orchestra in favor of the highly skillful, and notably much louder, voice of Eneidi. Yet an aesthetic acceptance of the incongruous accepts that the violinist’s playing may not be unsuccessful at all; in fact the more I have listened to this passage, the more I find it impossible to hold it to a single aesthetic standard. In a group of individuals, multiple aesthetics, and multiple definitions of success and failure according to those aesthetics, coexist. What I find fascinating about this particular passage is that it is a moment where these seemingly contradictory aesthetics flourish without canceling each other out.

gender and Taylor’s formulations

While the violinist demonstrates an aesthetic multiplicity within the proceedings of the concert, there was also a deeper force at work on the ways individuals related to the group, which was brought to my attention in an exchange just prior to our beginning the second set. The makeup of the orchestra was diverse, both racially and gender-wise, but men far outnumbered women. As we were assembling ourselves on the wings, waiting for the second set to

begin, I was standing next to tenor saxophonist Jessica Jones when French Hornist Krys Bobrowski walked up to us. Jones commented to Bobrowski “Oh good, I didn’t want to be alone over here. All the other ones are over on the other side.” She was referring to the fact that, except for her, Bobrowski, and pianist Dana Reason, all the other women were string players or vocalists and entered from the other side of the stage. I said to her something along the lines of “Feeling outnumbered, huh?” and she replied “Oh yeah. Didn’t you notice all the women? We were the ones standing up taking all the solos.” I should mention that her tone was ironic and funny rather than bitter, (she has a great sense of humor) and the three of us laughed. When I mentioned to Jones that she could take a “solo” if she wanted to, she replied “No. That’s just not me.”

Her comment cast a new light on the proceedings for me. Jones is an accomplished musician, runs her own band, and certainly has no problem asserting herself as a soloist. Yet, from the performances that I have seen, she usually works out the set list and solo order prior to the appearance on stage. Each musician is given time to express themselves individually with the support of the group in a traditional fashion, even though the harmonic or rhythmic materials may not be typically “mainstream.” The aspect of the performance that she seemed to be saying that was “not her” was the whole dynamic of individuality expressed as a struggle against group identity—her individuality was not expressed that way. She also connected her concept of individuality—one supported and expressed through a group, rather than against it, as connected to her gender.

From this perspective, Taylor had created a music that required the musicians to actively insert themselves into the process, even disrupt it, in order to assert

their individuality. Even though there were moments when everyone was able to “blow,” when the orchestra had become the “anarchic convulsion of individual expression,” even that dynamic operated on the assumption that individuality was best expressed by casting oneself into the fray. The structure of the music did not support one’s individual identity, rather it was a constriction from which the individual was to break free, and in breaking free, the “self metamorphosising life’s ‘act,’” the musician was supposed to come in contact with “religious forces.” As Taylor himself stated, emotive and individualistic expression is “aggressive participation.” What if that was not true for everyone? It seemed clear from Jones’s comment that she believed the way the performance was being conducted, and in particular the “playing with Cecil” aspect, was really just a “guy thing”—a male hierarchical struggle. Who she was as a woman was at odds with the whole construct Taylor had presented. She was implying that the music was a form of male discourse, and therefore the basis of that discourse, Taylor’s assumptions and subsequent musical formulations, favored the way males are socialized over the way females are socialized.

Pauline Oliveros and Cecil Taylor

With this in mind, it is interesting to compare the Taylor concert to a performance some three weeks before of Pauline Oliveros’s work at Mills College. Oliveros is an interesting comparison to Taylor; they are about the same age (one year apart), and although they have taken quite different aesthetic paths, they deal with similar issues—improvisation, individual and group

dynamics, spirituality, ritual, phsyicality, and poetic imagery.⁶⁸ Oliveros, too, has sought for an egalitarian music, which would reflect as well as influence society. In her essay “And Don’t Call Them ‘Lady’ Composers,” she states “Certainly, the greatest problems of society will never be solved until an egalitarian atmosphere utilizing the total creative energies exists among all men and women.”⁶⁹ Where for Taylor equality is defined along racial and ethnic lines, for Oliveros it is along gender lines. Taylor utilizes “African Methodology” which he sees as ultimately inclusive of all people, while Oliveros’ approach is feminist, which she sees as promoting “creative interaction with everyone.”⁷⁰

“Approaches and Departures”

In Oliveros’ concert at Mills, there was a premier of her piece “Approaches and Departures—Appearances and Disappearances,” a large group piece which also involved a certain amount of improvisation. The score was a text in which the instrumentalists were instructed:

Approach a pitch in as many ways as possible. What ever pitch is selected stays the same for all options. Each performer selects and plays independently. Each approach or departure should be unique— distinctly different in style and elements.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Oliveros has also been influenced by the Black Mountain poets. The texts of “Three Songs” (1957) are poems by Robert Duncan and Charles Olson.

⁶⁹ “And Don’t Call Them ‘Lady’ Composers,” *Software For People* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984), 49.

⁷⁰ Pauline Oliveros and Fred Maus “A Conversation About Feminism And Music” *Perspectives of New Music* (Vol. 32, No. 1, Winter, 1994) 190.

For this particular performance the instrumentalists were placed outside the performance space, and their instruments amplified so as to be audible from within the auditorium. There were included several “actors,” all Mills College students, who used the stage as their “note,” entering and exiting the auditorium in their approaches and departures to the stage.

Oliveros’s conceptions of individuality

The structure Oliveros provided allowed for a great variety of individual expression and interpretation, and the focus of the performance shifted between the people involved in the realization as people entered and left the auditorium, both physically and audibly. There was no single moment where any performer really dominated the focus of the group; there were no “solos.” As pianist Dana Reason described it, “It was about a group voice, about never having your voice above and beyond anyone else’s.” This implies, however, a specific kind of aesthetic within it is assumed that one’s individual voice would feel natural, and with Oliveros, that aesthetic is one of a meditative tranquility—her own single approach and departure to the stage during the performance was described as moving “at a Wilsonian pace.”⁷²

Oliveros describes music as “a multidimensional, dynamic process unfolding as a relationship between an individual or a group of individuals, and sound

⁷¹ Oliveros, Pauline “Approaches and Departures - Appearances and Disappearances” (Deep Listening Publications, 1995).

⁷² Alburger, Mark. “Pauline Oliveros at Mills College,” *20th Century Music* Vol.2, No. 11 (November, 1995): 19.

vibrations.”⁷³ Yet that did not mean that everything everyone did, the way each individual’s “voice” was expressed, was seen as an appropriate manifestation of the “relationship”. Apparently as skilled a musician as Julie Steinberg had some trouble during the rehearsal process, and was perceived as playing “too many notes.” This was resolved during rehearsal and was not a factor in performance, but it points out that there were strict aesthetic limits on the nature of individual expression. Steinberg’s most natural interpretation of the score disrupted the “group voice,” but the aesthetic parameters of the “group voice” were the narrowly defined limits of Oliveros’ particular beliefs about the nature of spirituality through tranquility in individuality. While Oliveros herself states “I wish for my work to be beneficial to myself and all who experience it,”⁷⁴ her conceptions of the nature of “group voice” and the subordination of individuality to that aesthetic has caused one prominent feminist critic to describe Oliveros’s work as “fascist.”⁷⁵

Taylor’s and Oliveros’ formulations as gendered discourse

I do not by any means do justice to Oliveros’ work with its brief mention here.⁷⁶ I have brought it in because, if we are to consider the possibility that Taylor’s music is a form of “male discourse,” then we must look at what would

⁷³ Oliveros, “The Noetics of Music” *Software For People*, 110.

⁷⁴ Heidi Von Gunden, *The Music Of Pauline Oliveros* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1983), 151.

⁷⁵ This comment was related to me first hand. The critic, who shall remain nameless since it was not a public pronouncement, made this comment as an aside after being asked why she had skipped out of a musicology conference and headed to the bar rather than participate in an event Oliveros was conducting.

then be its counterpart, and since Oliveros's music deals with some of the same issues that Taylor's does, it seems the appropriate place to look for a "female discourse." Have we found one in "Approaches and Departures?" The question really remains unanswered— while Oliveros considers her music feminist, and straightforwardly addresses issues of gender and composition. In "A Conversation About Feminism And Music," Fred Maus mentions hierarchical struggle as "characteristically male," and Oliveros replies "That's the competitive mode. And competition is part of the human condition, it has to play a role— but not totally at the expense of cooperation and collaboration."⁷⁷ For Oliveros, then "cooperation and collaboration" would be a form of female discourse, so from this perspective "Approaches and Departures" would seem to be just that. Yet, clearly not all women find themselves comfortable with the structure Oliveros created, whether it was playing "too many notes," or perceiving the whole "cooperative" dynamic as "fascist." On a more simple level, members of both genders have found themselves resonant with each structure—Stuart Dempster with Oliveros's, and Marilyn Crispell in Taylor's, for example.

So is Taylor's music, then, a form of "male discourse?" The answer, to quote James Joyce, seems to be "Nes and Yo." If Taylor's music is constructed on "self-analysis" and the assertion of identity, then gender must play a role in the that assertion, since it is an essential part of one's "self". Yet to state that a musical formulation is purely a form of "male" or "female" discourse is to essentialize the relationship an individual has to their gender. While disjunction between

⁷⁶ There are many interesting parallels between this Oliveros piece, and much of Oliveros's work, and Taylor's musical formulations. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper, with its focus primarily on Taylor's musical formulations, to continue to explore those parallels.

⁷⁷ Oliveros and Maus, 179.

Jessica Jones's mode of discourse and Taylor's was seen by her as a disparity between their gendered selves; she stated clearly "That's just not me;" just the opposite seems true for Marilyn Crispell. In an interview with Graham Lock she describes talking with a colleague about her music prior to her explorations into jazz:

I told him, if I were going to improvise this is how I'd do it, and I improvised atonal stuff the way I do now. I said, it's really crazy, nobody would listen; he said, it's OK, you can do that, but I went no, no, no. Then, later, I heard a Cecil Taylor record and it was—YES, YES, YES! Like a door opening.⁷⁸

Clearly, the musical discourse that Taylor has created resonates deeply with Crispell's "self"—she had in fact developed a similar discourse herself prior to hearing Taylor's. When she found a connection with Taylor's music, she said that it was "Like being able to talk to someone who will finally understand."⁷⁹ Where Jones had felt a gulf between herself and Taylor's music, Crispell found a close affinity. For Jones the gulf was gendered, but Crispell does not see gender playing any kind of role. If we place equal weight on each one's perceptions, we can see that there are multiple understandings of the role of gender in Taylor's music. Just as multiple aesthetics coexist, so to do the perceptions of Taylor's music as gendered discourse—it simultaneously is a form of "male discourse" and is not. As Jones perceives, Taylor's formulations seem to favor the way males are socialized, but that does not mean that it is an essentially male construct.

⁷⁸ Graham Lock, *Forces In Motion: The Music And Thoughts Of Anthony Braxton* (New York: Da Capo, 1988), 179.

androgynous music

The question, then, arises; Is Taylor's music an androgynous discourse? In her Essay "Rags and Patches," Oliveros asks "I wonder what androgynous musical form would be?" She then immediately relates the following:

Brahms' Y'all

I dreamed: A Brahms' symphony was to be played. Someone has interpolated a jazz section. The orchestra plays. The jazz section is quite smooth. As I suspected, the orchestra starts to break down at the transition back to Brahms. The horn player completely muffs his entrance. Only miserable puffs of air come out. The conductor keeps flailing away but the string players become increasingly confused and ragged. The conductor finally agrees to stop and begin the transition again. I see the horn player putting his horn away. I tell him to go back and try again. He rejoins the orchestra. This time the solo comes through clearly. Then the horn player breaks briefly into speech about his Southern United States background. He continues playing and the solo has a decided southern inflection.⁸⁰

This passage deals directly with musical manifestations of identity, and it has interesting parallels to the Taylor performance. In addressing the issue of individual identity within a larger, established musical structure, Oliveros envisions a breakdown of the traditional European symphonic practice. Interestingly, this breakdown is the result of the "jazz interpolation"—an of "intercultural infringement,"⁸¹ and this "infringement" acts as a catalyst for the exploration, assertion, and affirmation of individual and ethnic identity, manifest

⁷⁹ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁰ Oliveros, *Software For People*, 112.

in the horn player's "decided southern inflection." Like the "anti-jazz" musicians the sixties, whose assertion of cultural identity was connected to the overturning of the "mainstream" conceptions of jazz, Oliveros sees the assertion of the horn players cultural and individual identity as a result of the overturning of traditional conceptions about the functioning of a symphonic orchestra. This also parallels the Taylor performance, where the undermining of the established orchestral identity brought about a reconfiguring of the individual in relationship to the group. Where the "anti-jazz" artists saw the establishment of individual identity as connected to race and culture, Oliveros additionally sees the connection to gender. The gender connection, however, is implicit rather than explicit: Oliveros herself states that "Brahms' Y'all" "is certainly not an androgynous form,"⁸² but she clearly raises the idea that the realization individual identity, and its connection to culture and gender, induces the breakdown of established modes of group functioning.

gender and music constructions

Oliveros proposes that the mere act of questioning the role of gender in music undermines traditional conceptions of musical form and identity, and, amazingly, the scenario she envisions through the exploration of music as gendered discourse bears a striking resemblance to the Taylor performance. The Taylor performance, however, is really the inverse of Oliveros's proposition: Through the undermining of the orchestra's identity, the disruption of what the

⁸¹ Ibid.

orchestra thought as the “form” of the music, conceptions of gender are brought into question. It should be noted, too, that the questions about the conceptions are not resolved either, as I hope I have demonstrated above, seemingly contradictory understandings of the nature of the musical discourse existed without negating each other.

Taylor and his music

Taylor’s music is about the continuous flux and redefinition of the individual in relationship to the group and to a superimposed musical structure. Taylor, operates on a definition of individual identity that arises from the separation of oneself from the group, and within that context, the individual is actually allowed absolute freedom. However, the utilization and exploration of that freedom, and even the gendered meaning of that freedom, may mean the alienation of those who do not share the same definition of individual expression.⁸³

Finally, what is most central to Taylor’s music is Taylor himself. While Oliveros’s composition could have been performed successfully without her presence, Taylor’s certainly could not. It was he who both created and then called into question the group identity of the orchestra, and throughout the entire three hours of music, he constantly asserted his individuality, never once becoming “just a member of the orchestra.” As Alvin Curran stated, “It was if you were all riding on his back, on his energy.” In conversation with several of

⁸² Ibid.

the performing musicians afterward, we all agreed that if we had attempted this undertaking on our own, without Taylor, there without his unique, powerful, and constant assertion of individuality to focus and challenge the group, it would have seemed empty, pretentious and rather silly. With him, however, it was at times transcendent.

⁸³ The exact same thing could be said about Oliveros's piece as well.

Conclusion: Taylor's "Mythic Representation"

With this in mind, we can examine the "mythic representation" Taylor's music represents. While his music is clearly rooted in the modernist aesthetics and values of self-expression and individuality, it's ultimate realization really creates Radano's "complex and encompassing web or subverted binaries."⁸⁴ Freedom is simultaneously asserted and eliminated, the identities of the individual and the group are undermined the moment they are established. The music abandons jazz and classical traditions at the same moment it invokes them; it is simultaneously anarchic and highly organized, egalitarian and repressive, gendered and androgynous. It is about group dynamics and "social response" at the same moment it is about Taylor himself. Descriptions of the performance have usually included personal responses to the power of the music, they were "drained," and critic Phil Elwood even titled his review "Surviving Cecil Taylor's Musical Avalanche."⁸⁵ The experience of the event was so powerful, I believe, because it was an actual struggle between the very forces that make up culture. As such, the issues of freedom, individuality and the like were not laid to rest by the end according to a narrative agenda; they had been

⁸⁴ *New Musical Figurations*, 17.

⁸⁵ Philip Elwood, "Surviving Cecil Taylor's Musical Avalanche" *San Francisco Examiner*, October 27, 1995: C 11.

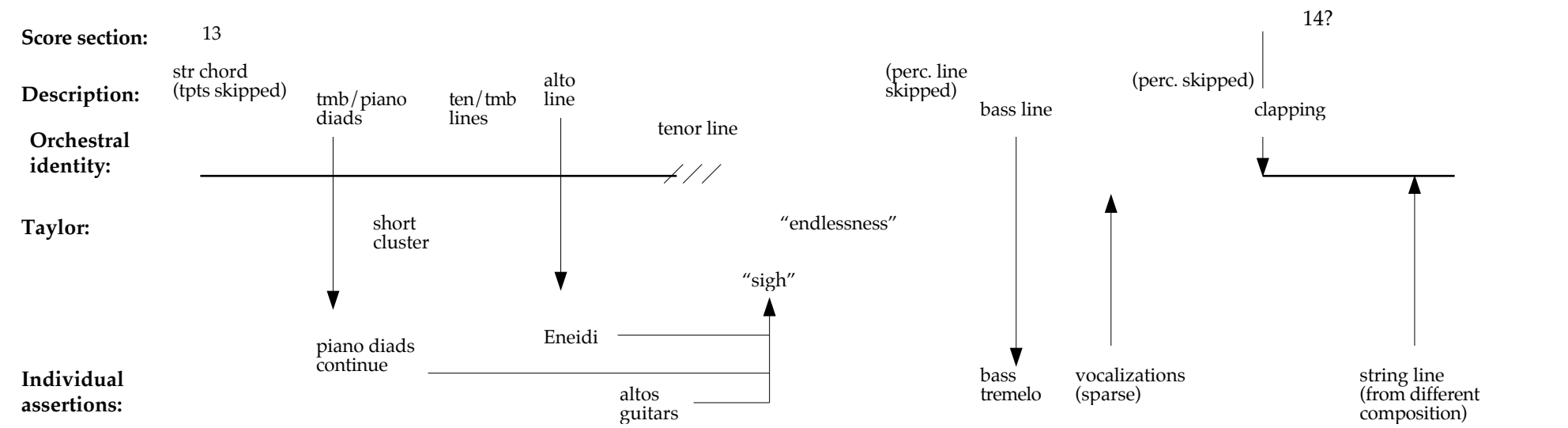
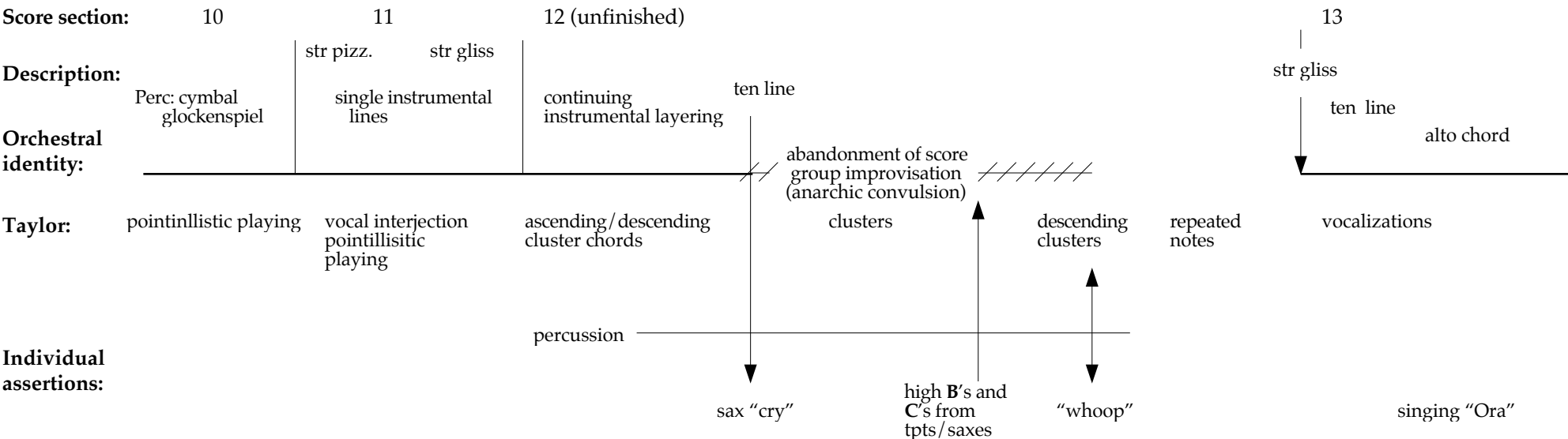
explored but the exploration led away from resolution rather than toward it; there was no closure.

In the final moments of the last set of the Jazz Festival concert, much of the orchestra had left the stage and Taylor played alone. He began by playing a slow series of ascending chords, utilizing the entire range of the piano. It seems to me that he is consciously reflecting and commenting on the entire evening, which in its complexity the spanned the “abyss,” the “surface of the earth,” and the “astral.” That night, the music was the sound of culture itself, a culture whose identity was in a constant flux, always in the process of “Becoming.”

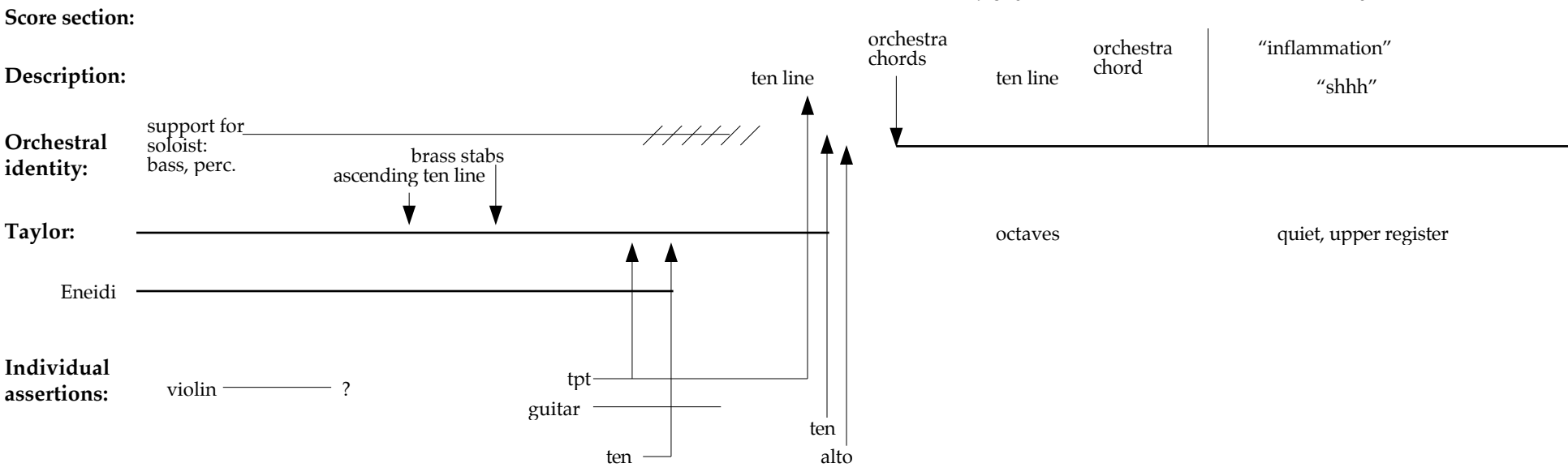
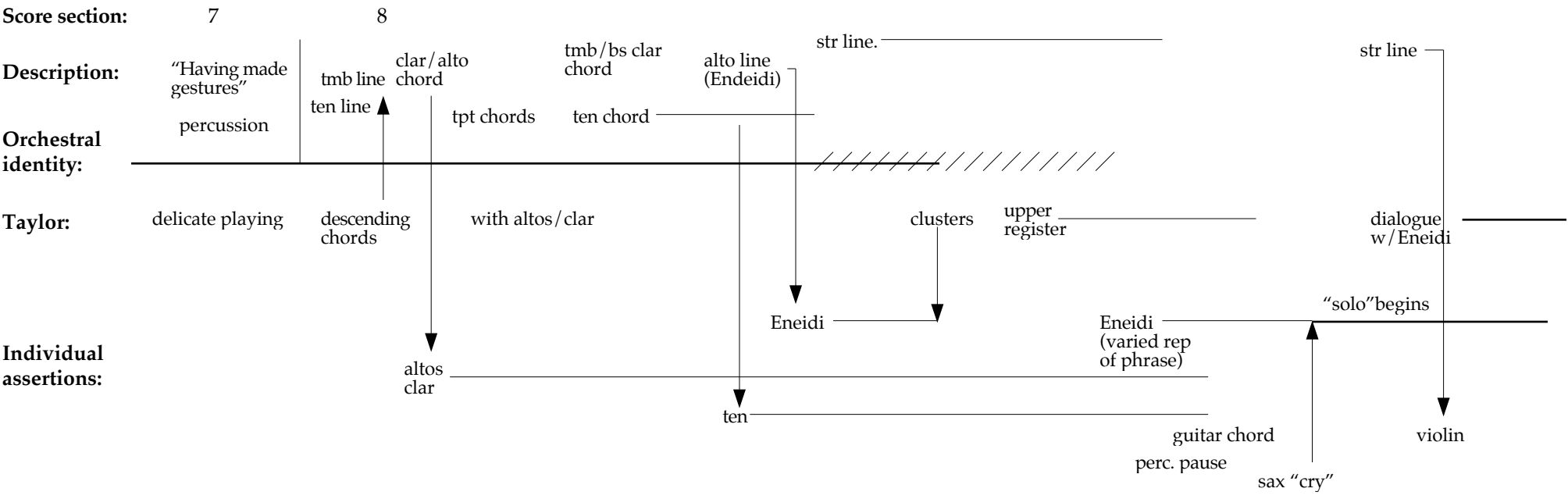
APPENDIX A:

graphic diagrams of the Tape Selections

Tape Selection 1



Tape Selection 2



APPENDIX B:

reproduction of the rehearsal scores

BB) keep watching like

$\begin{array}{c} \text{Ten} \\ | \\ E^b / B^b \\ | \quad | \\ F \quad C \\ | \quad | \\ C \end{array}$

(14) Same as (10), with ^{vs} claps 4 4 4
(perc - cymbals, sticks, glock) (groups of 4)
First sound is a cymbal Then gradually coming
Footsteps + 6/8 time + guitar

Ten: F
J Tmb
Vln: E
Cell: o.

Retro
Bb. E F F# G G# Pause, retro
Pro: undervoriz