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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Drawn to the Sound:  
Musical Shepherding in Roscoe Mitchell's Nonaah

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the  
degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Drew Jacob Ceccato

Committee in charge:

Professor David Borgo, Chair  
Professor Amy Cimini  
Professor Anthony Davis  
Professor Mark Dresser  
Professor Victoria Petrovich  
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2018



The dissertation of Drew Jacob Ceccato is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother, who without question, is the reason I have made it as far as I have.

## EPIGRAPH

“In the end, it’s all about music fundamentals”

*Roscoe Mitchell*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Epigraph.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Supplemental Materials.....	x
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Vita.....	xiv
Abstract of the Dissertation.....	xv
Chapter 1: Preface.....	1
Chapter 2: Theory & Planning.....	6
2.1: Performance.....	28
2.2: The Three Note Exercise.....	31
2.3: Trio for Five Lungs.....	36
2.4: Pareidolia.....	42
Chapter 3: Analysis & Practice.....	46
Chapter 4: Creation.....	83
4.1: Nonaah as Abstraction.....	99
4.2: Nonaah Revisited.....	117
4.3: Performance Response.....	132
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	138

References.....	143
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## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Solo Nonaah score example.....	9
<b>Figure 2:</b> Turino taxonomy on engagement type.....	23
<b>Figure 3:</b> Trio for five lungs performance diagram.....	40
<b>Figure 4:</b> Pareidolia concept from Ryan Ross Smith.....	43
<b>Figure 5:</b> Example of visual noise and pareidolic response.....	44
<b>Figure 6:</b> Solo Nonaah score example.....	60
<b>Figure 7:</b> Spectral plot from the opening them of Nonaah.....	62
<b>Figure 8:</b> Spectral plot from variation section of Nonaah.....	64
<b>Figure 9:</b> Sonogram analysis from the opening theme of Nonaah.....	66
<b>Figure 10:</b> Sonogram analysis from variation section of Nonaah.....	67
<b>Figure 11:</b> Nonaah with the first note isolated as a sonogram.....	68
<b>Figure 12:</b> Nonaah with the third note isolated as a sonogram.....	69
<b>Figure 13:</b> Fractal correlation dimension plot.....	71
<b>Figure 14:</b> Sonogram analysis of the opening variation in Lucier.....	72
<b>Figure 15:</b> Sonogram analysis of the concluding variation in Lucier.....	72
<b>Figure 16:</b> Margulis pattern recognition example.....	77
<b>Figure 17:</b> Margulis diagram on program note effect on enjoyment.....	88
<b>Figure 18:</b> Nonaah as abstraction event timings.....	100
<b>Figure 19:</b> Max/msp performance patch for Nonaah as abstraction.....	102
<b>Figure 20:</b> Introduction of visual static element in Nonaah as abstraction.....	105
<b>Figure 21:</b> Max/msp performance patch for Nonaah as abstraction.....	111

<b>Figure 22:</b> Photograph from the performance of Nonaah as abstraction...	113
<b>Figure 23:</b> Photograph from the performance Nonaah revisited.....	124
<b>Figure 24:</b> The opening score from the Nonaah Quartet.....	126

## LIST OF SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

nonaah\_as\_abstraction\_20160205\_1

nonaah\_revisited\_20170405\_2

nonaah\_in\_order

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In that same vein, I would like to thank a few other teachers who've been pivotal in this process:

Gene Bartley and Deb Smith were my middle school band teachers who showed me how to be proud of being a musician and not ashamed of my love of the arts.

Gretchen Breese who saw my frustration with complex concepts in her philosophy class at New England Conservatory and patiently helped open my mind and expand my understanding of what art could mean and how I could engage with it.

Also while at New England Conservatory, Katarina Miljkovic pushed me to explore my own musical voice through contemporary improvisation and to embrace the sounds and styles that spoke most clearly to me with a level of confidence and purpose I did not know I possessed.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends and colleagues who have assisted in developing my musical voice and helping formulate a lot of the concepts you see here. Obviously many, many people have influenced myself as well as this project and it would be impossible to name them all, yet it is important to recognize those that directly impacted this work. In that respect, I must point out and thank Rolf Bader who helped analyze and understand the intricacies of Mitchell's performance that provided a great deal of insight into the artistry within Nonaah. I would like to especially thank Kyle Motl for the tremendous amount of work he has put into this project and for the hours upon hours of music we have played together over the years, and Carson Whitley for chopping and editing the opening of Nonaah and arranging it "in order." I would also like to thank Judith Hamann, Tommy Babin, and TJ Borden for working with me on this project and playing an incredible concert as well as those that contributed either artistically or through interviews in regards to those performances. Joe Cantrell and Colin Zyskowski must be thanked for the work we did together which lead to the Trio for Five Lungs as well as Ryan Ross Smith who's visual elements were of great assistance in theorizing and planning the visual elements for Nonaah as Abstraction. In the same breath, it

is important to state how influential my colleagues were during my time at Mills College. Chris Golinski, Alex Christie, and Lona Kozik were instrumental in the early formulations of these ideas which led to the foundational underpinnings of this research; the seeds for which were sewn then and the people surrounding me at that time had a tremendous roll in nurturing those early explorations and experimentations. Finally, I would like to thank Pat Jak for his ongoing support and continued investment in me as well as the entire UCSD cycling team.

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## PUBLICATIONS

- Ceccato, Drew. *Grip It and Rip It: Energy Playing on the Saxophone*. Oakland, CA. Mills College, 2011
- Cantrell J., Zyskowski C., Ceccato D.: "The Breath Engine: Challenging Biological and Technological Boundaries through the Use of NK Complex Adaptive Systems." In: *Sound and Music Computing Conference (ICMC / SMC)*. Athens, Greece, [2014]

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Drawn to the Sound:

Musical Shepherding in Roscoe Mitchell's Nonaah

by

Drew Jacob Ceccato

Doctor of Philosophy in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor David Borgo, Chair

This dissertation presents an analysis and interpretation of the 1976 live recording of Roscoe Mitchell's performance of Nonaah for solo alto saxophone informed by extensive interviews with the artist. It introduces the idea of musical shepherding as a productive lens through which Mitchell's performance and improvisatory approach can be understood. Musical shepherding provides a novel way of understanding the act of improvising and



a method for interpreting how improvised music may be received in a more engaged and embodied way than conventional formalist or structuralist interpretations of the practice allow. In musical shepherding, each sonic occurrence acts as a bread crumb leading the ear towards a position where the experience of a sound situates and informs the listener for each sound thereafter, drawing attention and focus along a particular path. The intent is to shepherd the audience towards a position of engagement where the music acts as the ritualistic medium guiding through the liminal state towards a feeling of *communitas*. The goal is to achieve this act through improvisation where the limits of audience and performer energy both inform and shape the musical experience.

This dissertation also serves to document and interpret three performances given by the author that were inspired by Mitchell's Nonaah and were designed to create artistic situations that might implement and test the notion of musical shepherding. Although this written text is a key component of the research, the performances should be considered the primary document with text summarizing their justification and providing some limited explanation of the creative process.

## **Chapter 1: Preface**

In the same sense that music takes place over time, so too has the development and evolution of this artistic justification of my performative work. The importance of keeping the experimental nature of this process is crucial in that it shows a progression of idea, to case study, to artistic realization, to reflection, to further case study. In doing so, my hope is to preserve the entire experience, included missteps along the way, in order to show the growth of my artistic voice within this space and within this project.

The goal was always to use what I learned from this process to create my own art having developed tools derived from a deep engagement with Mitchell's own concepts and performance practice. From the outset I had to confront the notion that it might be futile, or at least counterproductive, to try and recreate or prefabricate a performance in a vein of creative practice that is predicated on it's newness both for creation and in terms of general definition. That said, there was an extreme attraction to digging into a single documentation of a particular performance practice and attempting to pull out aspects that I could use to further my own artistic trajectory. When looking at the magnitude that is improvised music, it may be difficult for some to pinpoint exactly the epicenter of artistic inspiration within such a diverse and multifarious canon with twists and turns at every point of deviation; However, for me, the journey to inspiration followed a more linear narrative. Since this is

a self discovery of a creative practice, it seems pertinent to preface the project with the context leading up to and through this particular documentation.

The departure point where this project first accelerated it's exodus from the existential tapestry that makes up my artistic pedigree came when I was studying at New England Conservatory. I first stumbled across the music of Roscoe Mitchell, and when I say stumbled, that's pretty much exactly how it came into my realm of existence. I was walking to my practice room when I heard the most unusually amazing saxophone sounds coming from the back of the Jordan Hall complex. Following my ear through the hallways, I found myself entering a performance of Mitchell's. He had been at NEC for a residency and was engaged in one of the scheduled performances during the brief week or so he was engaged with the conservatory. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and was immediately drawn to the sound! The way the saxophone moved from sounding like a rubber clarinet played by a wet tissue to a screaming adult baby was absolutely captivating. Immediately after, I started voraciously consuming every recording Mitchell had his name attached to. Everything from his work under his own name as well as works by The Art Ensemble of Chicago were in constant rotation on my Walk-man.<sup>1</sup> One recording in particular stuck out, a single solo performance of a piece called

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<sup>1</sup> Remember that this was a time when the entire extent of the internet's capacity for musical archiving was not such a quotidian way of life. I had to decide which album I wanted to listen to and commit to it for an entire day. This decision and commitment to an entire day's soundtrack was a big deal and a source of many late departures for myself.

Nonaah. There was something within the sound that beckoned for me to listen deeper. It felt like a scratch on my back that I couldn't quite reach on my own, nagging and monopolizing the functionality of my frontal cortex. At the time, I couldn't pin down what it was that kept me captivated over repeated listenings and discussions between colleagues. I completely changed my research path around this single recording. Having primarily focused on classical music, I now was deeply invested in this new sonic world unveiled through a happenstance occurrence in the back hallways of the institution.

A couple of years went by and the shift from Stockhausen to Sun Ra as primary source material for inspiration and performative methodology was in full effect. It was at this time that Mitchell became Professor Emeritus at Mills College in Oakland, specifically teaching improvisation and compositional structures. I filled out my application and made the journey from East to West Coast in order to go straight to the source. Little did I know the incredible impact this journey would have on not only my music but on my life.

Mitchell and I worked very closely together over the next few years which afforded me the unique opportunity to engage in hours upon hours of intimate conversation surrounding not only music and improvisation as a whole but specifically the fundamental philosophies and methodologies Mitchell employs in order to achieve such an incredibly moving and powerful musical voice. A good amount of those conversations are captured here and will directly speak to the theories I seek to explore. However, early on in this endeavor, the scope of my search was much broader. I understand that this

particular individual somehow had knowledge that I was in desperate need of yet was unsure of how to tap into it. In reality, I didn't yet even know what should be the subject of my search, that said, I did have a recording to analyze and access to the artist on that recording. I had what seemed like tools at my disposal but what questions should I ask?

It seemed ridiculous to ask the artist something akin to "why was this performance so good?" especially directed at somebody like Mitchell who has had such a long and illustrious musical career (that is still thriving by the way) where you could argue any performance was *the* monumental work. Instead, I questioned Mitchell as to his response to other musicians who I thought pushed the boundaries of saxophone improvisation in a similar channel. This led to my masters thesis work attempting to identify different methodological practices of energy players.<sup>2</sup> All the work and research done for that project brought me a tremendous amount of insight and appreciation for a specific kind of music but the core of my query still alluded me. It wasn't the particular style, or even the particular player, it literally was a particular performance. I realized the core of my infatuation was an obsession about a specific moment in time, a moment I wasn't even experiencing first hand yet still felt the profundity of its gravity.

The performance (which will be gone over in much greater detail in the coming pages) seemed to transcend temporality carrying with it an aspect of

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<sup>2</sup> Ceccato

the music that encouraged the listener to engage to a point that was always in flux. The way Mitchell played drew my focus deeper and deeper into the music in the same way it had drawn my physical body those years ago when I first heard it. The sound itself seemed to have some inherent essence that was shepherding me towards something that I could not quite figure out. The more I listened, the more I followed, the closer the destination seemed to get despite having no knowledge as to when or where that may be. This was where I needed to focus. Where my original hypothesis centered around playing with energy in regards to volume and density, the force in this situation was centered around moving the listener's focus and deepening their engagement with the music. This was where I centered my research. Deciphering the code that was this musical shepherding, that gravitational pull that continually drew me into the music. As a musician myself, I wanted to know if it was possible to harness this; to deploy it in my own works. Was this a tool that could be isolated and replicated outside of that single point in time?

These are the important questions and as an artist, the ones that are of the most interest. The following pages outline my attempts to identify the procedural elements necessary for musical shepherding to occur through both case studies and theoretical frameworks. The final culmination of this work is in the form of two performances attempting to re-create that focal draw that I find so captivating.

## Chapter 2: Theory & Planning

Much has been written about Roscoe Mitchell, who's work *Nonaah* is at the center of this dissertation, yet the specific events surrounding its most famous performance are not as well documented as one would expect for such an important piece of music. In order to accurately expound on the ideas and philosophies explored in this paper, it is necessary to contextualize the material that brought about its framework which means exploring the events surrounding the performance on the recording. Because this project focuses specifically on a single performance as the impetus for exploration, it is important to situate it within its historical context so as to fully understand the complete picture surrounding the artist at the time of creation. The setting and way in which events unfold tell a unique story that are the first breadcrumbs to larger musical concepts to be explored throughout this paper.

On August 23rd, 1976, an audience gathered at the Willisau Jazz Festival in Switzerland for an unforgettable evening of music. The Art Ensemble of Chicago had played the previous night and Anthony Braxton was the headliner for this evening. Braxton was slated to play a night of solo saxophone improvisations for the approximately one-hundred person audience. Since marking his arrival within the free jazz and improvised music community with the release of *For Alto* in 1968, a double LP recording of raucous solo saxophone improvisations, Braxton had positioned himself as a

premier improviser and composer and a leading voice in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a Chicago-based collective of forward-thinking African-American musicians. Braxton's music represented an intriguing expansion of the language and context for free jazz and people had begun to take notice. In light of this, there was a lot of excitement and anticipation in the room for his performance that evening. Many of the audience members had traveled to Willisau specifically to hear Braxton's unique saxophone voice and modern musical sensibilities.

All the elements for a great concert were present; an excited audience, a musician in peak form, and a wonderful setting. The only problem was that Braxton was not there to play the concert due to complications with travel arrangements. Niklaus Troxler a graphic designer by day and organizer of the Willisau Jazz Festival by night, asked Roscoe Mitchell, founder of the Art Ensemble of Chicago (AEC), if he would be willing to play the show instead. Mitchell, another extremely talented improviser, composer and saxophonist associated with the AACM, agreed to perform. In the minutes leading up to the performance, he tried to put himself in a good mindset by warming up and playing through a few etudes he had been working on while on tour with the AEC. Mitchell eventually made his way to the side of the stage to await his introduction. The lights dropped and the announcer took the stage. Because programs were printed up prior to the festival, they did not reflect the personnel change. Additionally, Mitchell recounted to me that the announcer had also not been informed of the personnel switch who proceeded to



introduce Anthony Braxton as the featured performer. It wasn't until the very last second, when Troxler ran out on stage announcing the shift did the audience know a change had been made.<sup>3</sup>

Since a recording of the concert was made, we can hear the secondary announcement and the apparent disappointment of the audience as someone other than Braxton walks out on stage.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell told me that he sympathized with the audience: "I understand their disappointment! I wanted to see Anthony myself!"<sup>5</sup> But he also felt compelled to win them over and still showcase his music in a positive light despite the hostility of the audience which is palpable even through the recording. So how does a performer go about doing just that? How does they interject their singular voice into a setting that is that unwelcoming? Are their specific steps a musician can take to ensure this process takes place?

Immediately after the introduction (arguably interrupting the very end), Mitchell enters with a deceptively simple theme consisting of nine notes played in simple quarter, eighth and triplet rhythms: the opening melody of his composition titled *Nonaah*. The crowd is still audibly restless and a few people can be heard speaking in the background; grumbling and hooting, projecting outwards into the performance space. Mitchell responds to this unrest by playing the theme again. Then again. And again. And again. The repetition

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<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *Nonaah* nessa

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

persists until the realization of its expectation becomes intuitively understood with the presentational power increasing exponentially with each incantation.

The original score, shown below, was composed to focus on the different registers and colors the saxophone is capable of achieving.<sup>6</sup>

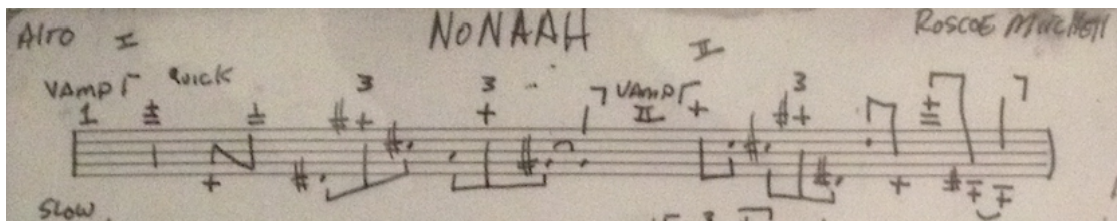


Figure 1: Solo Nonaah score example

In the original score written by Mitchell previous to the performance, a marking for a vamp over the first section indicates a preplanning surrounding this repetition. However, in this particular setting, the repetition takes on a new meaning in response to the hostile crowd.<sup>7</sup> In a similar fashion to when repetition is employed to establish a particular authority (such as when a teacher says “do I need to repeat myself?” when attempting to bring a pupil back in line) Mitchell seems to utilize this same sense of annunciation and focused re-positional repetition to establish not only a connection with his

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<sup>6</sup> This characteristic will be explored in more detail in the following chapters

<sup>7</sup> In proceeding recordings and performances, this first section often lasts around two minutes before moving onto the next section. Solo performances and recordings often have a longer duration than larger ensembles yet far from the nine minute version represented in this performance.

audience but also a particular power dynamic. Mitchell describes the events unfolding in this way:

When I went on stage to do the solo concert a lot of people were displeased because it wasn't Anthony and so I used this method of repetition inside of the piece to establish my presence. In terms of people trying to shout me down, I said to myself, well I'm going to see if I'm going to outlast these people given the fact that I have a saxophone in my hands and they're using their voices.<sup>8</sup>

This point of pre-sound confrontation reveals a power struggle prior to any music being played between performer and audience which presents an exaggerated set of challenges that were not necessarily thought of during the original composition. Despite there being a call for repetition in the score, Mitchell states that the repetition employed in this performance was different than intended when he cites a specific "method of repetition inside the piece" in regards to a specific situational response. Furthermore, the repetition moves outside of the original composition in an improvisatory manner again when it takes on another situationally specific functional use in trying to "outlast" the audiences discontent and playing over their vocalizations.

This phenomenon of utilizing repetition and variation to establish a particular power dynamic has also been noticed by other musicologists. Paul Steinbeck also noticed how Mitchell is, in a way, weaponizing the music in a

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

way that forced the audience to listen when he states the following in an article from 2016:

Mitchell's strategy for interacting with the Willisau audience is based on two elemental techniques: repetition and variation. He repeats the opening phrase again and again, showing his determination to keep playing in face of the crowd's animosity. As he later explained, "The music couldn't move [until] they respected me, until they realized that I wasn't going anywhere, and if someone was going it would have . . . to be them"<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, he introduces subtle variations to the opening phrase, demonstrating that he is indeed engaging with the festival goers—but on his terms, not theirs. If the audience members want to get the most out of Mitchell's performance, they need to stop protesting and start listening.<sup>10</sup>

In this quote, Steinbeck is observing not only Mitchell holding fast to his position while advocating, rather aggressively, for the audience to give him a chance and to shut up and listen. This not only establishes the music within the foreground of the space but also forces buy in from the audience allowing him to obtain the position of authority needed for the performance to move out of that place of hostility.

In addition to the opening vamp which introduces the piece in the tradition of an overture or exposition, Mitchell is also seemingly introducing his person and authority within the performance space. The repetition seems to

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<sup>9</sup> Martin

<sup>10</sup> Steinbeck, pg. 3

function as an attempt to spearhead a sense of self into a sea of newly revealed otherness. So much so was Mitchell focused on this aspect that he never truly moves to the second vamp called for in the score. Instead he fixates on the declarational function of the initial material. Around the 15th utterance of this nine-note theme, the audience seems to give in to Mitchell's relentlessness and sense of purpose as they begin to quiet down and settle into the performance, listening closely in order to make sense of what is sonically unfolding.

Once the audience has conceded the space and become more receptive to Mitchell's musical voice, he begins to slowly modulate and inflect each utterance of the opening theme. By keeping the notes and rhythms relatively consistent, the finer details start to find their way into the foreground of the piece eventually revealing a depth and implication of listening that could have otherwise gone unnoticed. A slightly varied attack here and a note pops out with a proclamatory thunder; a subtle constriction of the larynx give a different note a whining, constricted sound; a shifting of the embouchure starts to accentuate the overtones within the phrase. These subtleties start to give the piece it's character and richness by slightly changing minute details of the phrase in order to bring out idiosyncrasies and underlying defining characteristics of both the instrument and it's player. In the same way the eye adjusts to a sudden reduction of light, it seems as if the ear is able to listen through the initial focus on a note based phrase revealing a "thick"

understanding and an expanded more contextualized world of great detail and expression.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike a traditional theme and variations where the melody is the site of development, Mitchell instead extends the sonic color of the saxophone with each repetition by overblowing the notes slightly more with each occurrence. The effect is essentially breaking the notes apart into their fundamental overtones which is heard as a widening or broadening of the tone. The change is not necessarily noticeable from one incantation to the next but becomes much more apparent as the piece unfolds and one reflects on where the sonic journey began (in psychophysics, this relationship between a stimulus and perception is referred to as the Weber-Fechner law).<sup>12</sup> As the piece proceeds, the level of inflection is steadily increased growing with each repetition seemingly drawing the listener towards an assumed destination.

By the end of the section, Mitchell has played the opening phrase eighty-one times over nine minutes bringing the audience from a point of audible dissatisfaction to one of cheers and excitement. In addition to the power and amplitude represented by the sound of the saxophone and relentless repetition, there seems to be another element underpinning the effectiveness of the performance. Through Mitchell's interaction with the performance he seems to gently nudge and provoke the audience towards a method of focused listening to these finer details of sound that help define the

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<sup>11</sup> Geertz, pg. 3-30

<sup>12</sup> Murray, pg. 115-137

music creating something more than a traditional musical phrase. The obvious question would then be how is Mitchell able to achieve this affect?

In a sense, Mitchell is guiding the listener towards an intended focus in order to show what, in his estimation, is a better point of entry for this particular piece within this particular performance. In the same sense a shepherd guides a flock by gently corralling them towards greener pasture depending on a situationally specific perceived need, Mitchell seems to shepherd his listeners towards a richer listening experience specific to this performance. In doing so, he is able to provide a grounding for what to expect and where to focus thereby directing the audiences attention towards specific attributes of the music. The absence of this section wouldn't necessarily mean a poor performance but it would likely have a different effect. As sociologist Howard Becker puts it, the work would indeed happen, it will just "occur in some other way."<sup>13</sup> Through the use of this "musical shepherding", Mitchell is able to draw attention and focus towards a particular element of the piece in order to show, with out ever telling, where the important characters lie and how they will be used in order for the work to occur in a particular way through a guided communal understanding.

Shepherding, in the traditional sense, is the act of corralling a flock by means of gentle suggestion in regards to path and pace. This is most commonly represented in one of two ways. The first comes in the form of

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<sup>13</sup> Becker, pg. 5

physical movement and is often represented by the guiding of sheep or other livestock towards greener pastures. The second is spiritually or thought based and requires no physical movement but does imply repositioning in the form of idea and/or consciousness. Often in this case, the shepherd is represented by a shaman or religious figure providing guidance to a flock of spiritual practitioners in hopes of providing a better understanding. Musical shepherding falls into this second category and relies on the non-physical/idea based shepherding to guide and navigate an audience. The goal of which is to guide the listener towards a means of listening and directed focus that provides for a beneficial and hopefully more positive listening experience where the music is the primary actively projected descriptor. The successful completion and goal of navigating this liminal process is in a change from hearing to listening as defined by Jean-Luc Nancy where listening is a deeper more embodied form of hearing.<sup>14</sup>

Often, it seems that composers, artists, musicians have cross pollinated mediums by providing text based references to a particular work. This seems like a simple solution and one that is popularized with many forms of musical performance where text or announcement tell an audience what exactly to listen for. However, in my opinion, this reduces the possible affect music is able to have and undermines a music's affectatious capabilities. Along this line of inquiry, musicologist and cognitive scientist Elizabeth Margulis suggests that

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy, pg. 1-22



not only are these types of information giving ineffective but they also inhibit the ability to achieve a “flow state” as defined in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.<sup>15</sup> Margulis states that:

Descriptions likely affect listening experience by making it more conceptual. Structural descriptions isolate particular musical features (durations, counters, dynamics) and name them; dramatic descriptions isolate particular musical features and interpret them. In either case, listeners are less likely to simply let the music wash over them if they have read a description; they are more likely to listen in terms of the concepts encountered.<sup>16</sup>

This inability to reach a state of flow or allowing the music to wash over oneself as Margulis puts it, tries to show that music is not as effective when instructed prior to experiencing it in real time; that to actually listen to a piece of music and parse through its many details as they are presented allows the listener to discover for themselves these details of the music naturally as opposed to trying to search them out.<sup>17</sup>

This brings up an important question: Is there a way for a musician to point to a particular aspect of the music as important or pivotal without explicitly stating so by means of program notes, stage announcements or other means of language based communications? Is there a way *music* can be

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<sup>15</sup> Csikszentmihalyi

<sup>16</sup> Margulis, pg. 14

<sup>17</sup> Margulis, pg. 11

used in a way that provides all the information and specificity needed for a performance to be enjoyed? By opening the concert with a section of music that's purpose is to position the piece as informative as well as imply a direction of focus, a musician could be able to set the stage for the music to follow in this way.

Without the use of conventional language, a focus and understanding between audience and performer can be reached in order to better inform the rest of the performance. In a sense, this is the literal act of shepherding the audience's focus towards the elements of the music that the artist deems pivotal to its reception. Michelangelo's idea of the *intellecto*, or the ideal sculpture residing within the un-chiseled stone offers an interesting parallel. Michelangelo believed that it was up to the artist to reveal the true shape or meaning of a work of art.<sup>18</sup> With a sculpture, this intense examination and scrutiny is made possible due to the fixity of the material being worked with; the stone is not going anywhere and therefore can be examined over time without any change occurring. Music heard at a live performance is fleeting and exists only in the moment in which it is heard, immediately replaced by an ever instantaneously rewritten present. How then can an artist reveal the *intellecto* of sonic art without the possibility and luxury for such fixity? How would one draw the listener in and show them the artists intended form using nothing more than the music and the means of its presentation? Is there a way

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<sup>18</sup> Nesfield-Cookson, pg. 41

to impress upon an audience a sense of *intellecto* without prepping them through use of another medium prior to the performance?

Unlike sculpture which, through its fixity, is able to be viewed in three dimensions and rotated to accommodate viewing from different angles so as to provide time for close observation upon initial observation, music exists in a specious present always modulating and changing, only existing and experienced through its ongoing motion. This can create difficulties when a musician is presenting music that requires a particular and desired focus in order to understand the music as it is intended. This problem is compounded further when speaking of art in terms of abstraction as opposed to event based listening where clear descriptors and auditory landmarks are clear and obvious. For certain pieces, the abstraction is essential to the artists feeling of reception. Mitchell speaks to this realization where he understood the audience had begun to listen to his music as an abstraction which allowed him to move beyond the initial space and into different realities.

I had gotten everybody to the point to where they're ready to listen. After that, I could start to play in that kind of way.<sup>1920</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

<sup>20</sup> In this context, when Mitchell prescribes to listening in "that kind of way", he is referring to listening to the details of the sound; listening to more than just notes in time and instead to the amalgamation of every part making up the sound.

Mitchell was clearly conscious of a shift in perceived focus and depth of listening within the piece by making this statement. This sentiment is echoed in the writing of Musicologist eldritch Priest when he states that:

Music's abstractions, its semblances, *show* forms of vitality rather than *say* them, and in this regard music is able to articulate and set forth relations that language cannot — namely, relations that are revelatory rather than explanatory.<sup>21</sup>

It is this revelatory nature that shepherding attempts to inspire and guide the listener towards. Instead of attempting to explain an end point where the audience is told what they are supposed to understand and then left to deduce the means of navigation, the experience of realization and personal sensationalization is the end goal, through which, the destination becomes self-evident. Through this process, not only are musical understandings revealed but embodied realizations are exposed. But if fundamental understanding of abstraction is the goal, how is one to build an experience that achieves this feat and where should the focus lay and how do you drive the earmind to that point?

Mitchell has often told me that he has “always believed music is a science”, that in the same way the microscope changes how one views the world, there are ways to bring that same level of illuminative focus to music.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Priest, pg. 53

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

By changing how a subject is framed, it provides the opportunity to change perspective and allow for a different angle of observation. As Mazzola points out, it is a “very remarkable recommendation to forget about the detached ‘objectivizing’ way of listening and to delve into the sound’s innards.”<sup>23</sup> By looking at the smallest pieces and creating a fallacious sense of time the means for repeated observation and depth of exploration reveals a new world. However, this requires an attentiveness and patience as well as a provision focused on providing an opportunity for examination. In this sense, his provision seems to come in the form of musical repetition and variation on the subject being repeated.

Elizabeth Margulis, in her book *On Repeat*, describes the function of repetition to allow for just this type of reengagement and re-inspection:

Music takes place in time, but repetition beguilingly makes it knowable in the way of something outside of time. It enables us to ‘look’ at a passage as a whole even while it’s progressing moment by moment. But this changed perspective brought by repetition doesn’t feel like holding a score and looking at a passage’s notation as it progress. Rather, it feels like a different way of inhabiting a passage—a different kind of orientation.<sup>24</sup>

The repetition acts as means to actively re-enforce a series of ideas and, through the use of variation and subtle change between repeated figure, elicit

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<sup>23</sup> Mazzola, pg. 62

<sup>24</sup> Margulis, pg. 7

a state of liminality within the musical object. It allows an audience a means for deciphering the cryptographic nature of musical expression providing an inroad and foundation as something to be pushed off creating an inertia for the conveyance of development and direction.

This liminal state is signaled by the audience's acceptance of the situation signaling an important shift. It showcases a clear navigation between two states of experience on a number of different fronts utilizing repetition as means of establishing a shift from other to self. The start of the concert is marked by disapproval for a lack of Braxton positioning Mitchell outside, viewed with an otherness that warrants both verbal and nonverbal representation of dissatisfaction. In this sense, Mitchell utilizes repetition to not only assert his individuality to the audience but also to reclaim the performative space in his own mind. The unaltered repetition of the opening phrase takes the proclamatory tone as if to be stating; I am Roscoe Mitchell! NOT Anthony Braxton! I am Roscoe Mitchell! NOT Anthony Braxton! The repetition acts as an abstracted performance of self. The notion of self is based on a solidification of an idea through repetition based on what just came prior; a unity with what came before.

When Mitchell states that “I had gotten everybody to the point to where they’re ready to listen. After that, I could start to play in that kind of way.”<sup>2526</sup> he is referencing the perceived success of a navigation from where he was viewed as an outsider, to one where he had been granted access to the community of the musical performance and was going to now be allowed to present *himself* as opposed to a definition predicated on the expectation of another. At this point he could begin to engage the audience with the message he had originally intended; a musical focus that situated micro details in equal perception to the traditional means of development of pitch in time. This begs the question; how does this particular performance enact such a shift? The answer seems to be embedded within how we engage and with improvisational music and how repetition within improvisation reenforces a focused engagement.

Musicologist Thomas Turino breaks down how we engage with musical performance into two categories based on how they are framed and the communal understanding that such a setting represents. He splits this into two categories, presentational and participatory performance. To paraphrase, he differentiates the two along the premise that presentational music is where the audience sits and listens while participatory music the audience actively helps

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<sup>25</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

<sup>26</sup> In this context, when Mitchell prescribes to listening in “that kind of way”, he is referring to listening to the details of the sound; listening to more than just notes in time and instead to the amalgamation of every part making up the sound.

to shape and create the music inserting an audible and necessary element into the performance.<sup>27</sup> Turino goes so far as to create a list of musical characteristics that can be used to differentiate presentational from participatory performance based on music alone and how those attributes reinforce a particular type of engagement. Turino’s taxonomy, taken directly from his book, can be found in the table below and shows a dramatic polemic.<sup>28</sup>

<b>Participatory Music</b>	<b>Presentational Music</b>
Short, open, redundantly repeated forms	Closed, scripted forms, longer forms and shorter performances of the form available
“Feathered” beginnings and endings	Organized beginnings and endings
Intensive variation	Extensive variation available
Individual virtuosity downplayed	Individual virtuosity emphasized
Highly repetitive	Repetition balanced with contrast
Few dramatic contrasts	Contrasts of many types as design
Constancy of rhythm/meter/groove	Variability of rhythms/meter possible
Dense textures	Transparent textures/clarity emphasized; varied textures and density for contrast
Piece as a collection of resources refashioned anew in each performance like the form, rules, and practiced moves of a game	Piece as set item (although exceptions such as small ensemble jazz and Indian classical music exist)

Figure 2: Turino taxonomy on engagement type

<sup>27</sup> Turino, pg. 23-65

<sup>28</sup> Turino, pg. 59



It is interesting that Turino notes the difficulty of categorizing musics that are heavily reliant on improvisation in his final entry for presentational music. By situating jazz and classical Indian music as exceptions it invites the question as to why? Margulis, although using the same defining terms, also recognizes a softening of such a hard boundary within Turino's structure when she notes that "[w]hen elements of the participatory [...] occur in presentational styles, they don't ordinarily trigger overt participation, but they do elicit a kind of imagined, virtual participation that can serve to powerfully involve an audience."<sup>29</sup> Following this logic, it could be argued that improvisational music or music that embraces improvisational features is fully capable of occupying each and every one of these descriptors simultaneously and in doing so, creating a powerful force of communality in both a presentational and participatory sense which acts to bring the audience *into* the performance while still maintaining a sense of the performer/audience boundary. In fact, it seems that improvisation's ability to read and react to a room of listeners in real time allows for a special kind of engagement seemingly necessary for the shepherding process to really take hold.

In order to direct, there needs to be some sense of measured motion. To shepherd towards a destination, a musician needs to be cognizant of a where an audience is perceived to be. Sometimes this comes in the form of reading and understanding obvious stimuli such as shouting or head bobbing

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<sup>29</sup> Margulis, pg. 11

where other times, as suggested by Margulis, the engagement can be “a virtual engagement” that is entirely inward. Either way, an important connection to the music is being made. eldritch Priest sums this up nicely when he argues that:

Whether dubstep, a piece by Morton Feldman, or even an advertising jingle, the perception of all music entails some form of somatic comportment. That some musical practices encourage dancing or toe tapping and implicate these activities into their field of (musical) relevance does not make them more embodied, it just makes that dimension of their experience manifest or actual. Musical cultures that conduct their engagement around less animated actions, such as sitting quietly and being motionless are no less bodily. The still body is still a body doing.<sup>30</sup>

It is this internal site of doing which musical shepherding concerns itself with. No longer is an externalized projection of body the subject of engagement. Instead the navigation of the internal space of embodied sound reaching towards a sense of self within the music, represents the goal of the shepherding process. As Mazzola writes “it is a hint to a different way of thinking about music by ‘riding the horse’, by a virtual identification which is only possible, if the listener merges his/her identity with the sounding trance gestures.”<sup>31</sup> An assisted liminal guidance offered by the music provides bread

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<sup>30</sup> Priest, pg. 47

<sup>31</sup> Mazzola, pg. 62

crumbs for discovery of what Nancy describes as music's distinguishing feature.

What distinguishes music, however, is that composition, in itself, and the procedures of joining together never stop anticipating their own development and keep us waiting in some way for the result—or outcome—of their order, their calculations, their (musico)logic. Whether or not he is a musician, for someone who listens, the very instant a sonority, a cadence, a phrase touches him [...] he is propelled into an expectation, urged towards a presentiment.<sup>32</sup>

It is here where a sense of secondary space and a second level ritualized performance are enacted and one where musical shepherding could allow for a fuller engagement of embodied listening by suggesting a directed focus. The recognized experience of the ritualized performance as defined by performance theorists such as Christopher Small and Richard Schechner offers the opportunity to actively challenge predispositions and engage the mind in a way that encourages a directed burrowing within a musical polysemy. It is the attempted directing of a penetrating force aimed at breaking through the barrier that separates hearing from listening that shepherding concerns itself with.

As an artist looking to better and strengthen my own musical voice, the tools uncovered were always intended to be solidified in order to be utilized in a performative setting of my own design. To further illustrate the functional

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy, pg. 66

implications of this phenomenon, I wanted to provide outlines of potential performances that would use different methods and implementations of musical shepherding to try and achieve a similar “shared focus” between artist and audience. By embracing the concepts and philosophies outlined above, my own artistic voice can enter into the discussion and a space for me to present the evolution of these ideas can be generated.

## 2.1: Performance

In order to attempt to creatively navigate the notion of liminality involved with musical shepherding in my own artistic voice, I have outlined three different performances curated specifically to try and show different methods of the successful implementation of this idea. Each concert represents a different method of instigating a shepherding experience that tries to not only guide the audience towards an intended method of listening but also suggests a certain type of musical engagement. In doing so, I hope to show the possibility for an artist to suggest a certain mode and move towards listening which will hopefully provide for an increased level of accessibility to the non-initiated and an informative introduction to the seasoned veteran. Although it is impossible to eliminate all variables that could influence the marking of an unmarked space, as defined by Gary Peters, or the vastness of direct influence implicated by Becker's art worlds, my intent with these three program openers is to try and minimize the expectations directly tied to the improvisational process in a way that allows the performer ample freedom as well as a less self-imposed structural listening in the audience.

Repetition may be the most important aspect for the realization of musical shepherding. It is at the crux of the shepherding process that catalyzes the movement in which the melodic gestures start to melt away as the piece unfolds. Through the repetition of melodic material, the smaller

details begin to move from background to foreground (in terms of listening focus) and encourage an engagement with the atomized particulates of the sound. A question I found myself asking was how can I accomplish this? Are there different ways one could go about shepherding an audience within these guidelines?

In order to recreate similar processional happenings found within Nonaah, it may seem like an obvious step is to stage a reproduction of the performance. There are a couple simple and fairly canonized ways to go about reproducing an improvisation in this way. The most straight forward way in terms of replication would be to create a detailed transcription, a common practice and pedagogical cornerstone within the jazz tradition, with the intent to perform the improvisation as if it were a fixed solo as a composition. However, the object is then the page containing the notes as a simulacrum of the original work and becomes a representation of another and not the thing itself.<sup>33</sup> With this clearly being too static, another direction would be to treat the melodic material of Nonaah in the same degree as a jazz standard and improvise on its themes, keeping the spontaneity of improvisation while maintaining the underpinnings of the original piece. Many different incantations of the piece are possible by following within this train of thought but the *worktreue* in this sense still found in a physical score or tangible object representing a particular performance which I would like to move away from.

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<sup>33</sup> Baudrillard

The reasoning is in a perceived failure to embrace the creative element that acted as the underpinning for the mode of expression in the first place and instead attempt to recreate as opposed to simply create. With this in mind, is it possible then to take different approaches to the creative process and still create a work that provides a similar experience to Nonaah without being outwardly reminiscent and referential to the original?

In order to avoid as much direct association with the original production, each performance will embrace the sonic philosophical underpinnings of Nonaah without directly trying to recreate the performance. The three concerts share in common the strive for directing focus towards a particular depth of listening from both the audience and performers but differ in means of production. Each concert will start with a piece intended to sonically provide the kind of direction often found in program notes and concert biographies. Through the experience of the piece, both the listener and performers will hopefully be primed to receive the music in a way that prepares them for the improvisations to follow. The idea is to sonically set the stage in a way where not only are words ineffective but they are no longer necessary.

## 2.2: The Three Note Exercise

The intent of this concert will be to guide both the performers and audience members towards a method of listening that focuses on the smallest differences in phrase and gesture bringing focus to the *sound* as opposed to a traditional melody. Free jazz musician Donald Ayler suggests a method of how NOT to listen as audience and performer in the sense that “One way not to [listen] is to focus on the notes and stuff like that. Instead, try to move your imagination toward the sound. It’s a matter of following the sound...You have to relate sound to sound inside the music.”<sup>34</sup> Instead of listening for pitch in time as has been prescribed in the western classical tradition as well as the traditional jazz canon, my intent with this concert is to draw all members towards a mode of reception that progresses throughout the opening of the concert implying a deeper level of focus with the sound within sound Ayler is suggesting which is inline with a shift from hearing to listening defined by Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of “presence within presence.”<sup>35</sup>

Instead of attempting to recreate Mitchell’s initial performance which was for solo alto saxophone, I will instead look to a quote from Mitchell regarding the impetus for Nonaah’s creation for artistic inspiration. Mitchell stated in an interview that I conducted with him this past summer that Nonaah

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<sup>34</sup> Wilmer, pg. 77

<sup>35</sup> Nancy, pg. 16



was a study “to create a piece that could give the illusion of the saxophone sounding like more than one instrument.”<sup>36</sup> The freedom offered by playing solo coupled with the density possible through the expansion of the saxophones multiphonic capabilities allowed for the sound of an ensemble with the control and flexibility of a single performers mind. There was no waiting for a response or having an idea translated through the group.<sup>37</sup> By taking on the role of “the band”, Mitchell creates a setting where he has the freedom to act as he sees fit, to make drastic changes and dramatic shifts that very well could have been altered through the flow of the ensemble.<sup>38</sup> It begs the question as to if a similar musical experience could be recreated within the large ensemble Mitchell is alluding to? Is it possible to shepherd the players towards a mode of playing while also implying a mode of reception to the listener with a larger ensemble? The simply named “three note exercise” is my attempt to musically answer this question with an ensemble of six (the maximum amount of audible pitches found within a multiphonic during the original Nonaah performance) .

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<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell has composed and recorded many different versions of Nonaah for large ensemble but they seem to move away from the process based playing found in the first recording towards a more fixed through composed style often associated with western classical art music. This can be evidenced by the removal of most of the improvisation in favor of thoroughly notated parts. In addition, the instrumentation moves away from saxophones and towards traditional classical configurations such as wind quintet, string quartet and orchestra.

<sup>38</sup> Mazzola

The premise of the piece is simple. Each of the six performers chooses three notes with which they will improvise with throughout the duration of the piece. The register for each note is fixed and cannot be changed. Due to the limited possibility for melodic expression and use of pitch material for development in the traditional sense, the idea is that focus will be drawn on other characteristics of the sound for musical development. Dynamics, attack, pitch inflection, color and duration become primary identifiers of motion within the improvisation; what Mitchell calls the small parts.

Again it's about going down to the smallest part and seeing what comes out of that in terms of development in a very intimate way to where it starts to speak back to you. I'm fascinated with that kind of thing in sound of course. I think that's what's got me so fascinated with [...] the character of each note. How each note has its own character and how it creates its own acoustical space when its played properly. That's really helpful to me. In terms of development, if I'm trying to pay that kind of attention, that close attention to what's going on so that I'm not really running out of ideas. A lot of people overlook stuff that's really happening. In the end they are really struggling trying to get some time when they really had the time and if they had taken their time and really focused on the smaller things that are happening.<sup>39</sup>

It is the attempt to really embrace these small parts and bring focus to the intricate character each note represents that gave inspiration for this piece and hopefully draw an audience towards the intended focus.

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<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

Having rehearsed this piece a number of times a few things have come to light. The first and most important is best exemplified by pianist Lona Kozik who after playing the three note exercise stated that “It really forces you to take your time with each note.”<sup>40</sup> The realization being that by limiting the amount of notes allowed to be played, it forces the player to rely on other aspects of the music in order to create interest and motion. Most players who have played this often share a similar reaction that the more times they play with these rules, the more sensitivity they have with the many different ways a single note can be played. The use of ensemble also allows for manipulation of density within the group often bringing even greater focus to the minute details that go into a particular sound. Mitchell described in an interview how the Art Ensemble of Chicago used to practice playing crescendos and diminuendos as an ensemble because it really forced you to listen to the other members in order for everything to stay together.<sup>41</sup> They would do this as a warm-up in order to prepare their ears for the music that was to follow. This piece attempts to do the same in a more enjoyable and less rudimental way.

The gradual shift in the performers towards a different method of interacting with the music ideally will eventually spill over into the audience showing them the aspects of the sound to focus on for this performance. In the same sense that the performers are finding themselves honing in on a particular vocabulary brought on by the real-time playing of the piece, the

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<sup>40</sup> Kozik

<sup>41</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

audience, through experiencing the process and altered focus are being shown how to listen and hopefully enjoy the rest of the music presented at the concert.

## 2.3: Trio for Five Lungs

The second concert in this series will focus on implying a human element to the non-human; on how to imply physicality within a laptop performance. Bob Ostertag points to the problem of the body in laptop performances in a very succinct way by stating that “The problem [...] is how to get one’s body into the unorthodox kind of performance we are talking about.”<sup>42</sup> Alex Christie, a bay area laptop musician and saxophonist, in a recent interview voiced his concern within this vein about an inability to bring the audience into an electronic music performance in the same way audiences respond to the physicality of a violin or trumpet player. He tried a number of different possible solutions in order to resolve the problem. He found that facing the audience created a barrier where sounds and gestures were lost and he could not achieve the same level of embodiment traditionally played instruments were able to achieve. He tried shifting his position ninety degrees in order to give the audience a better view of his keyboard in the same fashion a piano concerto is arranged. Even then, the delayed reaction or dynamic shape of some sounds within the patch created a disconnect between a key being struck and the sound for which it corresponds.

Finally, after a number of performances, Christie thought about the inclusion of program notes that explained exactly what was going on within the

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<sup>42</sup> Ostertag, pg. 12

patch attempting to bring the audience more inside the performance by providing a legend as to what was happening in the hopes of achieving an empathic physicality between artist and audience. This seemed like the least effective method due to audience members “only listening inline with the program notes. People would come up to me and talk about technical features as opposed to musical ideas.” Unfortunately, despite his best efforts, it always seemed that there was a disconnect between audience and musician.<sup>43</sup> Christie eventually settled on utilizing a visual element projected on a screen to draw attention away from the disparity he was feeling about how the music was being received and instead allowing the visuals to act as a kind of score for the audience to follow. Although this seemed effective, the visual element only covered up a problem that still lay beneath the surface. The problem seems to be inherent within the culture surrounding laptop performance practice. No other instrument has had to face the problem of a disconnect with the body as strongly as laptops and the digital controllers used to trigger them. As Ostertag puts it:

It is a fundamentally new problem. Before the advent of machines that could automate sophisticated processes, there was no performance *without* the body. Since the body could not be removed, no one had to worry about how to put it back in.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Christie

<sup>44</sup> Ostertag, 14

This notion of putting the body back into electronic performance was the impetus for this piece of music. Christie once stated that he always wanted to have a controller made that ranged from tiny buttons all the way to large chains, giant levers and enormous metal valves that triggered events within his patch in order to indicate intensity and sensationalize the gesture. This way, the audience could see a physical intensity to correspond to the musical intensity he was trying to express.<sup>45</sup>

For this piece, I took the element of the saxophone that brings it its physicality; the breath. The physicality and ubiquitous analogy of strained breathing will hopefully shepherd the audience towards a means of listening to the rest of the non-breath driven music with more of an empathized connection to the computer driven gestures. By presenting it at the beginning of a performance consisting of laptop improvisations, the goal is to instill a sense of organicism within the listener that is tied to the laptop musicians phrasing. Instead of attempting to show physicality through actual physical gesture this piece will attempt to imply a deeper level of listening where the audience imposes phrase structure in a way that implies a real-life representation. Kodwo Eshun would argue against attempting to reinsert the body by arguing that it defeats the purpose of electronic music; that technology offers the possibility of a “hyperembodiment” due to the cognitive dissonance it creates.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in theory, the incredibly diverse sound palette electronic

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<sup>45</sup> Christie

<sup>46</sup> Eshun, pg. 2

instruments are able to produce could give rise to heightened levels of expression, I would still like to be able to explore this particular part of that palette effectively. This seems to be a topic of discussion outside the concert hall as well with many youtube video's offering a parody of what exactly festival DJ's are doing at the DJ booth and drawing focus to the inability to distinguish physical action with musical effect. (an example of such a video can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh9C7nQHmII> ). My exploration of this problem resulted with the following piece.

*Trio for Five Lungs* is for two human performers (each with two lungs) and a third digital performer as the fifth lung. Each human performer wears a standard breathing mask often used to supply oxygen at a hospital with a plastic tube flowing from mask to a black box situated between both performers. The pressure and size of each breath is measured through a controller inside the box that then runs through a raspberry pi, which is in essence a small computer processing the incoming breath data and then sending corresponding audio out. The staging of the performance will look something like that represented in the following image.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cantrell et al



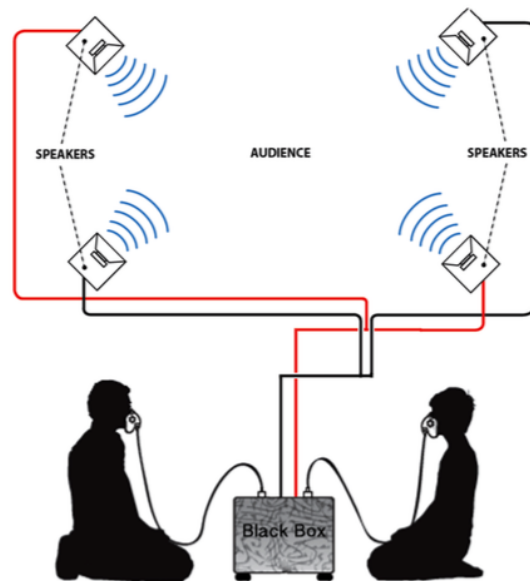


Figure 3: Trio for five lungs performance diagram

Sonically, the piece will be heard as white noise run through a filter that is gated by the amplitude of the performers breath. The deeper the breath, the further the filter will open bringing in more overtones and a sense of a digital breath (likewise, zero breath detection will result in zero sound). Each performer will have a discreet signal panned in stereo in order to achieve a sense of spatial differentiation in regards to point source. As the piece progresses, the amount of breath required to fully open the filter will get more and more difficult to achieve. The performers will continually try to inflate the digital lung until the filter completely closes and the digital lung is lost. As the digital lung becomes increasingly more difficult to inflate the performers will have to work harder and harder to achieve sonic change. Hopefully, the 1:1

relation between breath and sound allows for a more empathized listening experience. The goal is to instill a sense of physicality within a sonically digital performance and create a direct correlation between physical and musical gesture. An empathetic connection with the digital lung is also intended. The parallel between the performers with masks and different life saving strategies within a hospital is meant to try and imply a sense of life within the very simple program run inside the box. In this sense, the piece consists of two performers trying to keep a third digital performer alive for as long as possible despite inevitable failure.

The attempt is to set the stage for a listening experience where the digital sound has life; where the body is re-inserted into a digital performance. In the same sense that Mitchell's Nonaah primed an audience for a certain mode of reception, *Trio for Five Lungs* is intended to imply a level of organicism instilled within the controllers used in a laptop performance. In doing so, the palpability of the human breath will spill over into the rest of the concert informing and shaping the interpretation of musical phrasing and gesture. By shepherding the listener towards a method of listening and interpretation rooted in an empathetic response with a digital instrument, it is hoped that the audience better connects with the non-physical physicality of digital expression.

## 2.4: Pareidolia

The two approaches already presented explore methods of musical shepherding from different perspectives in terms of sonic production, however, both maintain the similarity of utilizing sound to usher in a suggested mode of listening. The final concert will focus on utilizing a visual performance in an attempt to propose a methodological expansion by suggesting a method of visual shepherding in real time intended to then be assimilated into the sonic realm. There will be no sound or performers during viewing of this score. Instead, the connectivity between senses will be tested to see if a move from event based viewing towards one of abstraction translates to a equitable mode of listening.

In collaboration with Ryan Ross Smith, founder and editor of [animatednotation.com](http://animatednotation.com), I will attempt to visually shepherd the audience from a position of event based viewing towards one of abstracted pareidolia, where the mind begins to impose structure on chaotic or abstract shapes. The piece will start with a single colored static square on the screen that changes colors at equal intervals. At a designated time, the square will divide into two equal parts each changing colors at a different rate. The squares will continue to divide and change color forcing the viewer to expand their focus from the singular square where form and structure could be understood rather simply,

to the necessitation of gist viewing. Below is a picture from an early version of the piece and is an example of what is to be expected early in the process:



Figure 4: Pareidolia concept from Ryan Ross Smith

As the piece proceeds, the squares get smaller and smaller as division increases and the color change becomes more and more rapid. Eventually, cellular division becomes obscured by the overall gestalt. At a certain point when the mind is unable to keep track of individual events, the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia will begin to impose structure on a seemingly chaotic environment. The visual white noise is nothing more than a pixel by pixel flashing but the mind begins to see waves, floating bands and

amorphous blobs coming out of the screen as the mind attempts to make sense of the stimulus. The short example of looped visual white noise below should give some indication as to this shift and the phenomenon it represents.

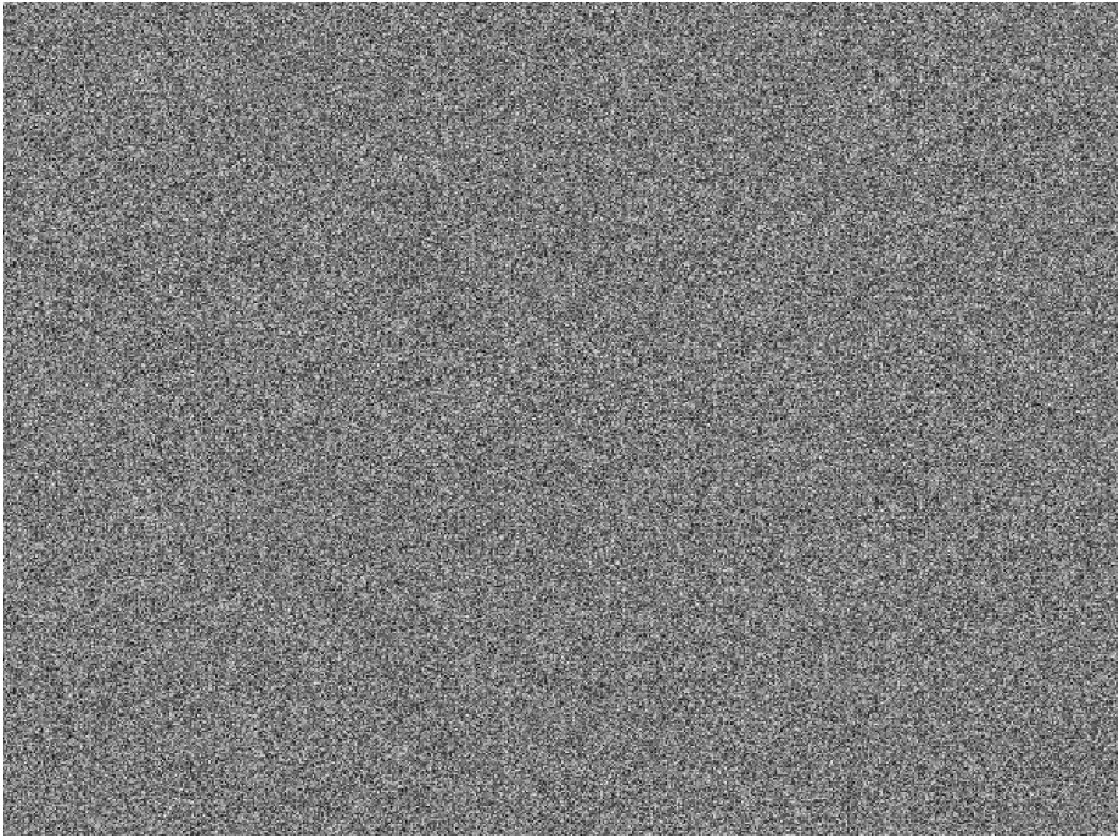


Figure 5: Example of visual noise and pareidolic response

This process brings visual acuity to the notion of transitional focus explored in a large portion of this prospectus. The hope is then that the visual experience will inform and direct audience focus for the music to follow. The moment of shift between event based viewing and pareidolic viewing will be different from

person to person just as musical shepherding is different on an individual basis. The important part is not when it happens but on the increased probability of a common arrival place so as to join in a common point of departure. In doing so, I believe to use a visual shepherding process to inform a musical performance in the same manner as the other concerts. The goal is to, the music explored within this performance more accessible and therefore more enjoyable by means of providing a context for understanding so as to shepherd along as opposed to a hard fledging.

Musically, the hope is that instead of audience members being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stimulus being thrown at them, they can take a step back, find a comfortable point for insertion and begin to burrow down into the music. The visual piece seeks to provide a gradual insertion that will hopefully be transferred from one medium to the other.

## **Chapter 3: Analysis & Practice**

Considering the organizational and fundamental goals outlined in not only the expository material surrounding Mitchell, Nonaah, and my own performances meant to further the exploration, it is necessary to spend more time defining the precise musical tools utilized to achieve the desired effect of a processional unfolding of ideas. Because the performances rely heavily on improvisation and their ability to act as catalyst for the desired musical processes to occur, it is necessary to understand not only the structural functionally used by Mitchell but also the more dialectic communicative aspects that fill out the general conceptual lattice work outlined in the previous chapter. As with any process, it is only as strong as it's ability to sustain itself and propagate outwards from it's origin point. By unpacking the connective musical elements that make up the muscle of the process, my own performances can benefit from a secondary layer of engagement and understanding, hopefully, bringing my own artistic output closer to achieving on a similar level. That said, where to begin? How does one dig into a such a specific time and place that occurred so long ago? The best place to start seemed to be by tracing the inspiration and logical progression Mitchell went through leading up to and during that time.

Roscoe Mitchell has always had an unique take on the depth he presents within music in terms of sonic possibilities. Since his first album,

*Sound*, recorded in 1966, Mitchell has shown that his understanding of how to use the perceptual element that the album derives its name from, is revolutionary not only for presenting a unique view of the possible potential of improvisational music but also by the means in which it is able to convey an artistic message.<sup>48</sup> In the performance of *Nonaah*, he showcases a concentrated focus on his prowess as a utilizer of sonic details as a means to derive musical development. He uses these details to not only shape an engaging and creative work of music from the performers perspective, but also to create a piece that leads the listener towards an intended means of a suggestion of how to listen to the music in order for it to be more affective.

The utilization of music to shepherd the listener was not necessarily an epiphany in the sense of the romanticized story of Newton and the apple. Mitchell engaged not only in a musical process but also a personal process that informed his musical development. In a sense, this process unfolding in Mitchell's personal life can be seen as an extended metaphor for the shift he is looking for within the collective focus of the audience and a sense of inserting and re-affirming his sense of self into the performance space.

In 1971, after living in Chicago and traveling with the Art Ensemble of Chicago for many years, Mitchell became tired and overwhelmed by the hectic life he felt the city came to represent. "I needed a break for myself" he told me, and he moved to the country just outside Fitchburg, Wisconsin, to a farm

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<sup>48</sup> Mitchell, *Sound*.



where he could be alone and work on his music.<sup>49</sup> Upon arriving, Mitchell stated that he immediately noticed intense silence that he had never experienced in the city and that “it was a total shock”, and something that would keep him up at night.<sup>50</sup> After a few days, he began to notice that what he was perceiving as silence was more accurately a collection of other sounds which he had simply not recognized as a part of his aural field; crickets, leaves rustling, a bird call, the sound of the wind. All these sounds had been present in the city, just overshadowed by the cacophony of metropolitan life. John Cage argued that by reframing sounds that might normally go unrecognized or unnoticed it can make it possible to draw these auxiliary sounds out of the shadows and towards a position of primary focus.<sup>51</sup> For example, Cage’s *4’33”* utilizes a perceived silence on stage to draw attention to, and highlight the sounds heard that are often dismissed and blocked out for their infringement on the performance. By changing the framing of a sound, details that might not have been given their fair share of the spotlight are able to come to the focal foreground. Mitchell’s move to the country re-framed sounds he had always heard, re-orienting the way he engaged them. He began to take this same idea and started to try and apply it to his playing style.

Being primarily a saxophonist (although he can be heard playing many different instruments throughout his career, he told me that he’s always felt

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<sup>49</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Cage, *Silence*

most comfortable and natural on the saxophone), he predictably began a search for characteristics he could exploit on the saxophone that would bring about a new quality and focus to the particulates and defining characteristics of the sound in a similar fashion as moving to the country changed his receptivity to the presence of mentally obfuscated sonic occurrences. Mitchell became fascinated with the different colors and characters the saxophone was able to produce. A high D played on the palm keys at fortissimo could start to sound like a bee buzzing directly next to the ear despite nothing being there. If a low C was played with an exaggerated subtone at a very low dynamic, subtle changes in air and lip pressure could alter the emphasis on either the pitched note or the sound of breath. The saxophone a vast color palette began to expose itself with further exploration and experimentation. Eventually, Mitchell settled in on what he felt was an interesting feature; the saxophone could sound like multiple voices if enough intervallic space was provided within a melody. *Nonaah* was an attempt to bring focus to the intense color differences exhibited by the different registers of the saxophone and a method of drawing attention to the a orchestrational coloration akin to a less formalized and more free flowing form of Schoenberg's *klangfarbenmelodie*. By playing a melody broken into the three registers on the saxophone (low, middle, high), Mitchell felt he was able to provide contrast to each color by juxtaposing them against each other drawing attention to their uniqueness and particular

character.<sup>52</sup> At the same time he was trying to find an essence to the saxophone, Mitchell was also attempting to solidify himself as an individual in the eyes of others in addition to trying to learn who he really was outside of everything he had known.

Coupled with the sonic exploration already outlined, Mitchell was also in a state of personal discovery. In the same way the country soundscape forced him to probe the state of what he was actually hearing; being alone, away from the city, the people and places he knew and defined himself by, gave way to serious internal conflict and questioning. “When I moved to the country, I looked in the mirror and I didn’t really see anything. I didn’t really see much there.”<sup>53</sup> Through the repetition of the daily life on the farm, Mitchell was able to come to terms with his new life. Not all at once, but little by little. Each new day provided a little more detail and clarity than the previous. After a while, there was the realization that this day was different, this day, although linked by chronology was seen through a different lens, (or heard through a different filter).

In a sense, the sonic search and understanding represented by Mitchell’s move to the country and conceptual realization of *Nonaah* is similar to the self reflection and resultant personal discovery Mitchell experienced as a person. By drastically altering the way in which something is experienced, we can break from expectation and bring forth a deeper level of exploration.

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<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, interview 12.27.15

<sup>53</sup> Mitchell, interview 9.15.14

As stated by cognitive musicologist David Huron, the assumptions that come from a learned behavior or understanding, although important from an evolutionary standpoint, can cause one to miss smaller details in favor of understanding an assumed whole from the point of view of power consumption.<sup>54</sup> Through the experience of moving to the country, Mitchell's focus shifted to a more detailed picture of the smaller pieces that added up to the whole changing the orientation of his attentiveness not only within the music he was creating but how he viewed himself and how he was viewed by others. At stake now was not just the reception of a particular performance but a point of conflict between an external and internal gaze erupting in a fascinating sonority. The saxophone becomes the tool and the stage his arena. Fellow saxophonist and AACM member Anthony Braxton draws attention to this responsive projection when he states that:

An instrument in this context is viewed as nothing more than a vehicle to establish the musician's spiritual and vibrational reality. Creative musicians are expected to extend the very nature of their activity—including even the sound of the instrument—until that activity affirms the whole of their 'life position.' Even the sound of the instrument is not viewed as existing in a fixed state.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Huron, pg. 5

<sup>55</sup> Braxton, pg. 249

In doing so, Mitchell offers a glimpse not only into his musical process but certain level of personal vulnerability expressed in the creation of the music and manifested by means of unexpected conflict.

The correlation between musical discovery and personal discovery is no surprise when viewed in regards to the deconstruction of the larger structures and events into their smallest parts as a general means of examination. The rest of this chapter will reflect on the musical process employed in order to draw focus to these smaller details which Mitchell came to understand through his personal and musical reimagining and reconstruction.

One of the unique aspects of *Nonaah* that forms the foundation for this process to take place is the continual repetition of a single phrase. At a time when the improvisational landscape was dominated by energy players such as Cecil Taylor and Archie Shepp, who vigorously embraced an aesthetic of maximilism in both sonic detail and sheer volume of ideas, described by musicologist Guerino Mazzola in regards to the resultant intensity as “hypergesture”,<sup>56</sup> Mitchell’s approach to repeat a single 9 note phrase 66 times over the course of 9 minutes stands out as a drastically different approach to improvisational music.

The method of developmental process the piece employs is also worthy to note. Because the pitch material is more or less fixed, a more traditional

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<sup>56</sup> Mazzola, pg. 119

means of development surrounding ascension/descension of notes in time could not be utilized for musical development in the traditional sense of melodic contour in relation to rhythmic and harmonic progression. Instead, Mitchell relies on manipulating the micro parameters, the building blocks of sound that are always present but not necessarily focused upon as lead voices within the music making process. As the piece progresses, gradually, each note is manipulated through means of timbre, articulation, pitch inflection, duration differences and dynamic contrast in a way that is reminiscent of the early process pieces that were being created around the same time. However, it is the change in timbre that offers the starkest representation of a shift from macro to micro and becomes the driving force within the performance (for purposes of this paper, timbre is defined as the character of a sound defined by its coloring, separate from other characteristics such as volume, intensity, and pitch). It will hopefully be demonstrated that Mitchell is able to use timbre as a worthy means of development that is not only “entirely equivalent to the logic which satisfies us in melody of pitches” as Schoenberg writes in relation to *klangfarbenmelodie* but surpasses its capability for expressive depth.<sup>57</sup>

Important questions to ask would be: how is Mitchell actually propelling this piece forward? What reasons could there be to move away from conventional improvisatory techniques towards something that focused so much on the smaller pieces especially timbre? And despite the surface level

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<sup>57</sup> Schoenberg, pg. 421

similarity to process music, is there really any true connection? At this point, it is important to define a working taxonomy to differentiate between micro and macro material within a musical performance.

First, it is important to state outright that macro and micro are not mutually exclusive. They are points on size qualifiers at opposite ends of a continuum symbiotically linked. Macro structures are made up of many micro and micro function in a combinatorial relationship to produce macro; one cannot exist without the other. However, they do operate in different ways. Just as lighter objects are more receptive to dexterous and inflected movement and more easily infused with detailed movement such as ribbon dancing, micro details represent a equally ripe opportunity for expression. Musicologist Stephen Nachmanovitch defines micro and macro in terms of the expressiveness and emoting capabilities within a musical structure. He describes the relationship in the following way:

At the micro level underneath these layers of waves are waves of subtle vibration that modify and vary the pitch and the rhythm —these are the vibratos, the rubatos, the hesitations and surgings within each tone, which constitute the personal expressiveness of the individual player. Then at the macro level inclusive of the other are the very big, slow waves of change that constitute the overall form and structure of the piece, its dynamic flow of pattern from beginning to end.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Nachmanovitch, pg. 61

Although thought provoking and poetic, this definition is predicated on a certain kind of music and understanding of musical terms and their coinciding function. Since we are trying to break free of some, if not most of these relationships, an increased specificity in regards to delineating micro focus from macro is needed.

Macro details are large systematized structures within a piece of music. This would include phrases, gestures, licks, form or any of the large structural elements that provide movement or outline a musical direction. Micro-details are the smallest pieces of musical sound that can be identified as discreet sonic qualifiers. These tiny pieces are unique to themselves and cannot be decoded any further, therefore, they form the building blocks of musical occurrence. These micro components could be described in a biological sense as the genetic structure of a musical performance. Similarly to how human DNA contains 4 nucleotides (guanine, adenine, thymine, and cytosine), the genetic make up of musical sounds carry 5 unique attributes that coalesce to create a unique sonic compound which, when combined with other sonic events, produce a musical form. By considering a sound by means of Attack, Pitch, Amplitude, Density, and Duration, it becomes possible for a new world of micro development to reveal itself. Micro-gestures in turn, are the combination of micro-details that combine together to form more complex structures in the same way nucleotides build on to one another to form a genetic sequence. These micro-details are what it seems music critic and musicologist John Litweiler is referring to when he references Mitchell's work saying, "he is



separating the linear and timbral discoveries [...] and making each component the subject of a separate investigation.”<sup>59</sup> The focus of this analysis will be on the use of timbral development to create musical momentum.

Listening to *Nonaah*, it begins to be clear how an intentional focus on the micro details brings a new direction in improvisational focus.<sup>60</sup> By improvising with an intended goal of sonic exploration that attempts to emphasize the micro, Mitchell challenges the presuppositions of the standardized hierarchical way in which we engage with music. By employing extreme repetition of a simple phrase and engaging developmental material on a micro-musical level, *Nonaah* draws extreme focus to the minute details present within a musical performance in a similar manner to the process music described by Steve Reich in his text *Music as a Gradual Process*. In his seminal text, Reich describes his reaction to process music stating:

Listening to an extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to *it*, but *it* always extends farther than I can hear...I begin to perceive these minute details when I can sustain close attention and a gradual process invites my sustained attention. By “gradual” I mean extremely gradual; a process happening so slowly and gradually that listening to it resembles watching a minute hand on a watch—you can perceive it moving after you stay with it a little while.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Litweiler, pg. 280

<sup>60</sup> Mitchell, *Nonaah*.

<sup>61</sup> Reich, pg, 8-9

Mitchell is seeking out a similar result from his improvisational use of process in a way to focus on these minute details brought forward by the processuality of the music.

Unfortunately, within Reich's manifesto, he does not allow for music that utilizes improvisation as a main means for sonic realization to be included in the category of process music, stating that the "distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all of the note-to-note details and the over all form simultaneously. One can't improvise in a musical process—the concepts are mutually exclusive."<sup>62</sup> This idea of mutual exclusivity leaves little room for improvised music to engage the notion of process despite the fact that the recording of *Nonaah* engages many of the same practices Reich outlines as criteria for a process to occur.<sup>63</sup> Whether or not *Nonaah* is the representation of an implemented process within a mostly improvised work in the manner Reich outlines is debatable. Even Reich himself begins to question and counter the rigidity of his manifesto when saying that:

The choice of pitch and timbre in my music has always been intuitive. Even the choice of rhythmic structure is finally intuitive. In fact, although there is always a system working itself out in my

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<sup>62</sup> Reich, pg. 9

<sup>63</sup> It is also interesting to note that later in life Reich said free jazz pioneer John Coltrane "had an enormous impact...Africa/Brass was in E for half an hour. How can you play in E for half an hour without getting bored?" The influence and validity of improvisation seems obvious here yet is dismissed in his writing on gradual process. (Wroe)

music, there would be no interest in the music if it were merely systematic.<sup>64</sup>

Mitchell utilizes both the systematic definition of Reich's earlier manifesto in addition to the utilization of extemporaneous musical intuition in order to activate the same perceptual shift that process music engages.

The focus of process music as described by Reich, seems to be the reification of micro-details and sonic phenomenon within our perceptual space, or what he refers to as "minute details". This occurs when listening to a piece of music realized through the employment of an intentional process, which illuminates a less readily recognizable aspect of the music. These tiny inflections and sonic anomalies that often go unnoticed during the course of a performance are brought to the focal foreground by a compositional technique that draws attention to a particular part of the sonic experience, in turn, challenging a listener's presupposition of sonic framing. Mitchell actively pursues this same type of sonic exploration by means of improvisational practice, as opposed to strict compositional structure, yet still effectively draws attention away from the musical foreground in favor of a more micro detail oriented performance. Where Reich consciously focuses on "the impersonal, unintended, psycho-acoustic by-products of the intended process,"<sup>65</sup> Mitchell explores and showcases the highly personal and intended products of the

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<sup>64</sup> Reich, pg. vii.

<sup>65</sup> Reich, pg. 7

music by embracing all aspects of sound on equal terms, which in effect, achieves the same result but with a different intention. The goal of both camps seems to be the same however the method for activation differs in terms of personalization—to draw attention to the smaller details that are often glossed over within the context of a performance.

Noticing the relationship between *Nonaah* and process music and minimalist music is not a new observation, although finding similarities may be. In a review of *Nonaah*, John Litweiler concludes that despite searching in similar manners and eventually achieving the same outcome that there is indeed “no relation between him [Mitchell] and fashionable minimalist composers like Glass and Steve Reich; the acuteness of his search is the opposite of their manipulation of effects.”<sup>66</sup> Despite the condescending tone leveled against Glass and Reich, the point is made that there is an opposition in the way Mitchell explores a certain “acuteness” which separates his music. However, it is within these blatant rejections (in a similar manner to Reich’s outright dismissal of improvisation) and accusation of using “effects” to achieve a response that provide an immobility to push against. It is by focusing on the process based methods used by Mitchell within the *Nonaah* performance that these similarities will hopefully become clearer.

Despite attempting to achieve the same goal of inverting the background foreground paradigm within a musical experience, Mitchell’s

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<sup>66</sup> Litweiler. pg. 280

*Nonaah* seems to lack the process based structural underpinnings necessary to engage a process in specifically the same manor as Reich's early writing outlines. However, the lack of formulism does not preclude Mitchell from engaging with an improvisational process that achieves many of the same benefits sought after by noted process music composers.

On paper, *Nonaah* consists of nothing more than a 9-note phrase occupying a single measure of music represented in the figure below. The repeat signs at either end of the bar are presented without direction or indication as to how long the phrase should be repeated. It is clear however, that in order to maintain an interesting level of musicality, the number of repetitions will be entirely dictated by the direction of some developmental exploration.

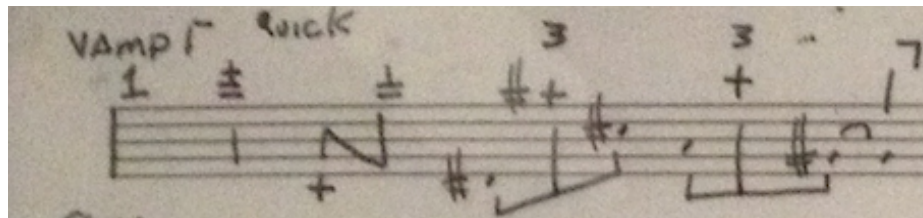


Figure 6: Solo Nonaah score example

In order for the process of sonic realization to unfold naturally, Mitchell does not dictate a precise length such as Reich's process piece *Clapping Music* which closely moderates how many repetitions are to be played and the exact

rate and means in which the rhythmic variance shall occur.<sup>67</sup> According to Reich, this lack of fixity would preclude *Nonaah* from successfully achieving a completed process. Mitchell, however, seems to achieve the effect by means of a conscious focus on micro details within each repeated cell, slowly developing the material, eventually achieving the realization of a transitioned space. In this sense, despite not strictly adhering to the criteria Reich stipulates, the result of re-situating the foreground and background material results in a paradigm reversal in much the same manner. In this sense, Mitchell is engaging in a form of what can be called improvisational process.

At the onset of *Nonaah* this shift in focus is not necessarily noticeable. The attention is still firmly rooted in the hierarchical listening habits perpetuated by years of reinforcement situating a perceived melody in time firmly in the foreground. The first note, a written E-natural, is played shyly sounding as if it is almost unwilling to speak and has to be coaxed out of the horn (it could be a number of factors that combined to create certain variables which resulted in the note to not speak with the same uniformity as the others, but it becomes clear later that this was most likely not intentional due to the clear linearity of the processional movement).<sup>68</sup> This is followed by a sharply punctuated low C that pops immediately to a high D articulated in the same fashion. The next 6 notes are played in lock step fashion hinting at a possible

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<sup>67</sup> Reich, *Clapping Music*

<sup>68</sup> From this point on, all reference to pitch will be in an Eb transposition, the key alto saxophone sounds in as opposed to concert pitch.

ritardando yet arriving on the final sustained note at the relatively appropriate time in terms of what's written in the score.

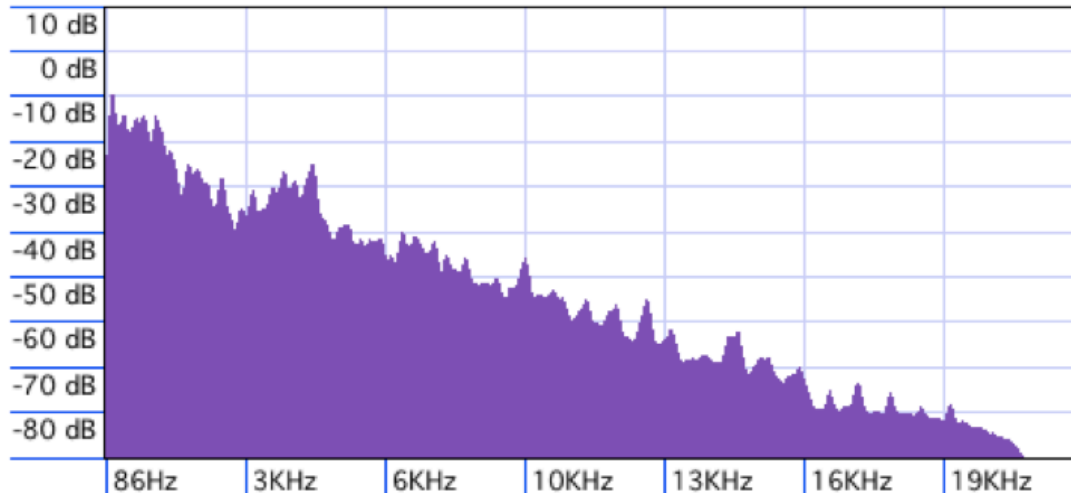


Figure 7: Spectral plot from the opening them of Nonaah

The spectral plot represented in figure 7 analyzes the first instance of the opening theme. The graph shows that in general, as pitch increases, the relative volume decreases, a more or less standard spectral plot for an alto saxophone. The saw-tooth spikes that run up and down the slope are caused by the natural resonance and acoustic properties of the saxophone resulting in the presence of partials or overtones. Each peak represents a partial within the body of a note that when combined, creates the sound quality expected for a particular saxophone. Different artists might have different sound profiles in this sense depending on their particular sound quality, but the unaltered sound of an alto saxophone would remain relatively similar. The spectral plot

represented in figure 7 is heard by the listener as the unaffected sound of the alto saxophone. It is this notion of timbre which is the micro detail Mitchell most intimately relies on for musical development.

The second time through the phrase, much more confidence can be heard. Each note is played with a more authoritative voice that erases any memory of the sheepish notes initially heard the first time through the material. The phrase stays consistent and sounds pretty uniform until the 5<sup>th</sup> repetition of the opening phrase. At this point in the performance, for the first time, a note is drastically different from what is represented on the page or from what has come before it. In this case, the written E sounds roughly an octave lower with a rather different color than the rest of the material played up until now. This octave drop can often be attributed to an incorrect voicing within the aural cavity of a saxophone player leading to a note not speaking or a sound more closely resembling that of a curious duck than a saxophone. However, unlike the first note of the piece that seemed to be erased by the uniformity that followed, Mitchell instead takes the newly introduced color variance and proceeds to inflect and manipulate the color and shape of each proceeding note ever so slightly. From this point on, the piece takes on an incredibly diverse sound palette intricately engaging the micro development surrounding timbral manipulation. It makes sense then that music critic Larry Kart said of Mitchell that his music “is homing in on first principles” and that “he is



discovering anew that when music is truly broken down into its component parts, a new order can emerge.”<sup>69</sup>

One of the most obvious examples of these “component parts” Mitchell concerns himself with in terms of the gradual development of micro details is that of timbre and density. As the performance proceeds, so too does a move from the linear partial based sound of figure 7 to a much different shape in figure 8 shown below.

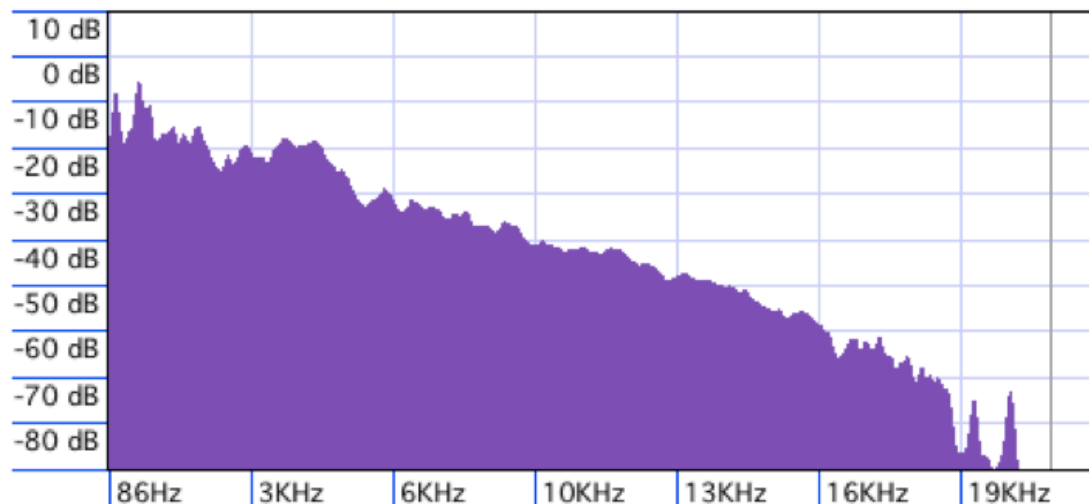


Figure 8: Spectral plot from variation section of Nonaah

Here we see where the once jagged peaks and valleys representing the overtones and partials indicative of a balanced alto saxophone sound are now much rounder and smooth. The plot sharply drops as it reaches the top of the human hearing range yet is full and thick throughout the rest. In addition, the

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<sup>69</sup> Kart

plot takes on a slope of exponential decay highlighting an increase in not only frequency presence but also increased amplitude within the higher frequency ranges. At this point in the performance, the saxophone is heard with the sound “spread out” or played in way where all the overtones within the sound are flayed out for the listener to hear. In addition, Mitchell begins using his physical voice to add even more color variety to the sound a phenomenon that is easily heard as a kind of humming seemingly coming from inside the sound.

To further illustrate this point, consider the following excerpts presented as sonogram images. In this representation, time follows left to right along the x-axis while pitch moves from lower to higher along the y-axis. Amplitude of a given frequency moves from grey/blue to yellow/white with grey/blue being the least present and yellow/white being the most. In figure 9, which is taken from the very beginning of the piece, it is clear to see the presence of fundamental pitch material with the traditional step-wise partials in gradually decaying intensity. In the final note of the phrase, most of the concentration is found at the bottom of the spectrum with much more blues and pinks in the higher register indicative of an unaltered saxophone sound just as in figure 7. As the piece progresses and the material is gradually pushed towards a brighter and harsher color palette it becomes clear that the focus is no longer on the pitch material but the motion created by timbral shift. When comparing figure 9 to figure 10 the change in sound quality and emphasis on micro-detail becomes much more apparent.

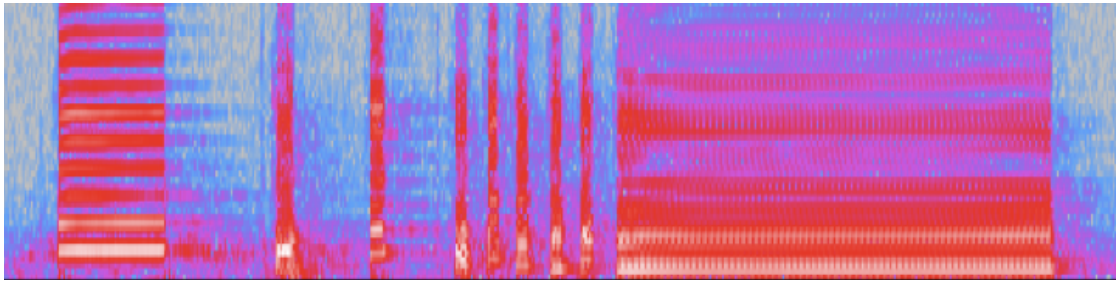


Figure 9: Sonogram analysis from the opening theme of Nonaah

The sonogram analysis represented in figure 10 comes from 5:45 into the piece where the sound really starts to open up. The timbre of the saxophone begins to sound like a brass section with a palpable density that you can almost feel hitting you in the face. At this point, Mitchell has firmly established his improvisatory agenda to draw forth the micro and has introduced and gradually increased such parameters consistently. This process unfolds over the course of the first movement culminating with figure 10 at which point the sound has reached a definitively new character. At this point in the performance, Mitchell has pushed the sound envelope in a linear pattern away from the unaltered sound seen in the figures above towards one of chaos and instability.

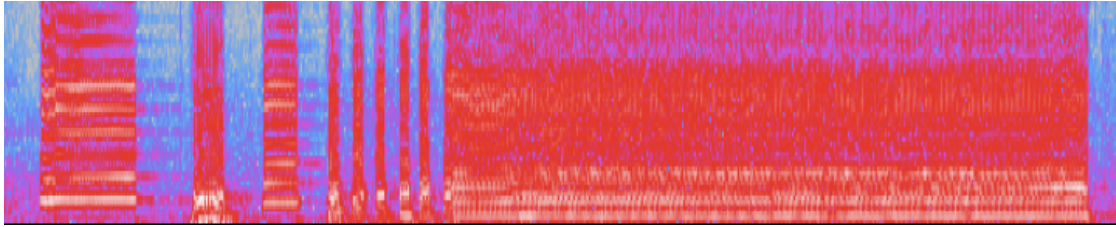


Figure 10: Sonogram analysis from variation section of Nonaah

As can be seen in the above figure, almost the entire spectrum is colored red showing an increased presence of higher tones within the sound caused by implementation of different extended techniques such as multiphonics, growling and overblowing the saxophone; a technique where a note is overdriven by exploiting the natural overtones through extreme air pressure and drastic changes in aural cavity shaping. This causes the sound to be more spread out across the sonic spectrum forcing the focal point or center of the sound to be more difficult to locate creating a wall of sound as opposed to an isolated pitch. Furthermore, the lightest areas indicating areas of the highest presence are now no longer isolated to the bottom most portion of the pitch range and now extend further up the y-axis indicating a perceivable change in sonic range from the fundamental pitch to that including heavy emphasis on upper partials. This is heard by the listener as dense, rough sounds closer to a vocal scream or broken shout than the sound of an alto saxophone. These two figures represent the *result* of Mitchell's shift towards micro development,

however, it does not adequately showcase the actual development of this process as it unfolds over time.

To draw focus to the actual change occurring throughout the nine minutes the first movement of *Nonaah* takes place, a different view of the process is necessary. In order to accomplish this, I present the following images that represents the first note of every instance of the opening phrase consecutively (a recording of this re-organization of nonaah in order, created by Carson Whitley, can be found in the supplemental materials).

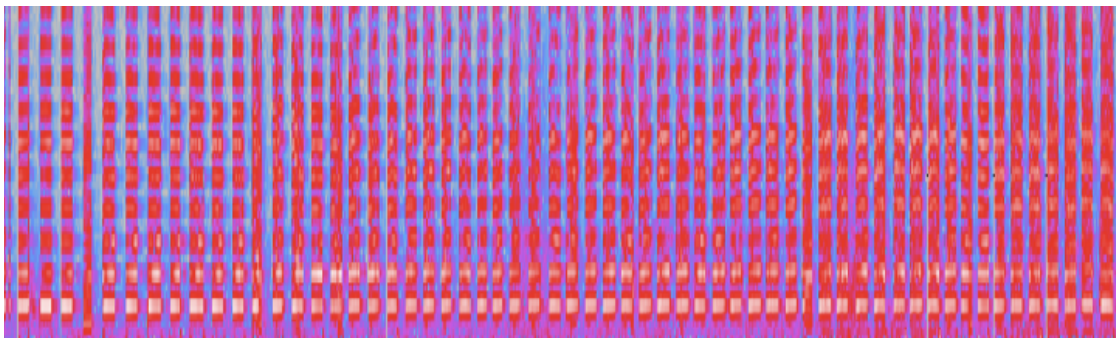


Figure 11: Nonaah with the first note isolated as a sonogram

Placing each sounding of the first note in consecutive order allows for a 1:1 ratio to be seen throughout the excerpt allowing the development to be more readily visible.<sup>70</sup> In doing so, it becomes clear that a general move towards a much fuller spectrum with the presence of more and more high frequencies is occurring. Furthermore, secondary and tertiary pitch centers can be observed

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<sup>70</sup> Whitley

to reveal themselves, represented by the lightest areas (or yellowish areas) located towards the middle/right of the spectrogram, as higher partials gain more and more emphasis. This process is even more readily observable when looking at the spectrogram of the third note of the melody laid out in consecutive order.

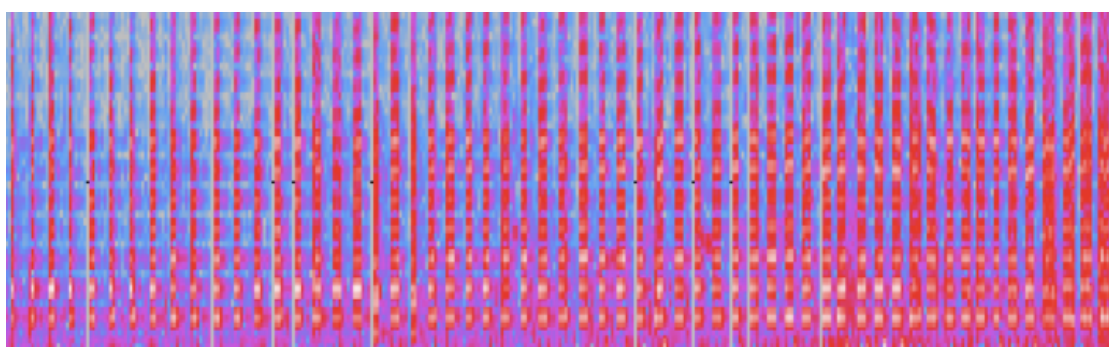


Figure 12: Nonaah with the third note isolated as a sonogram

By re-ordering the notes so as to play all like notes in consecutive order a much more detailed relation can be shown involving the actual change occurring as opposed to the end result. The gradual increase in timbre shift can be seen taking place over a long period of time negating the possible conclusion one could draw from figures 9 and 10 that a simple drastic shift happened suddenly and without precedent. In doing so, Mitchell moves, in an auditory sense, from ordered sound with clear focus represented by the natural unaltered representation of the saxophone to one that is much more dispersed and thick in terms of intensity and focus.

A possible argument against this intentional timbral growth is that by getting louder and increasing amplitude, the saxophone sound is responding naturally in response to the increased dynamic causing the elevated presence of overtones and not as a separate parameter being isolated by Mitchell. Since a spectrogram samples the sound as a whole, it could be argued that the above visualizations are simply representing an increase in volume and a natural and expected increase in the overtone series as a byproduct of an increase in amplitude. In order to bifurcate these two closely related attributes of sound, the recording of *Nonaah* was analyzed by systematic musicologist Rolf Bader at the University of Hamburg using a fractal correlation dimension plot that measures the density of a sound as an isolated attribute. His findings show a similar linear plot despite amplitude being eliminated as a variable. These findings can be observed in the figure below where time (represented in seconds) is along the x-axis and density on the y-axis.

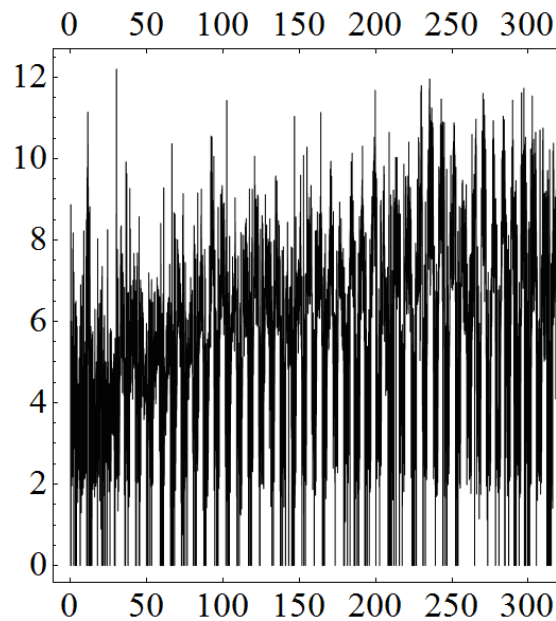


Figure 13: Fractal correlation dimension plot

As can be seen, there is a noticeable increase in density as time proceeds in a similar data plot to that witnessed earlier in the spectrograph analysis found in figure 11 and figure 12. This de-coupling of density from volume shows that in this particular instance, volume is not directly responsible for the increase in textural density and instead assists in highlighting a systematic move from one characteristic of sound to another.

In a sense, this move from homogenized sound to one of much more variance is the retrograde of the process Alvin Lucier engaged with in *I am Sitting in a Room*, one of the more famous process pieces.<sup>71</sup> Lucier utilized the human voice as the sonic starting point for his piece which recorded the sound

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<sup>71</sup> Lucier



of his voice being played back within a room, then playing that recording back while simultaneously re-recording it. He repeated this process until the “resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves” transforming the sound of his voice into a swath of reverberant melodies.<sup>72</sup> This move can be readily seen in the sonograms listed below in figure 14, which shows the initial introduction of the material, and figure 15 that shows the final effect the process has.

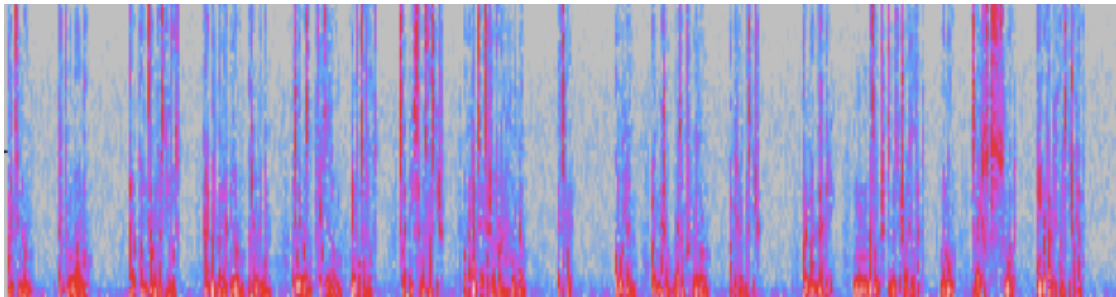


Figure 14: Sonogram analysis of the opening variation in Lucier

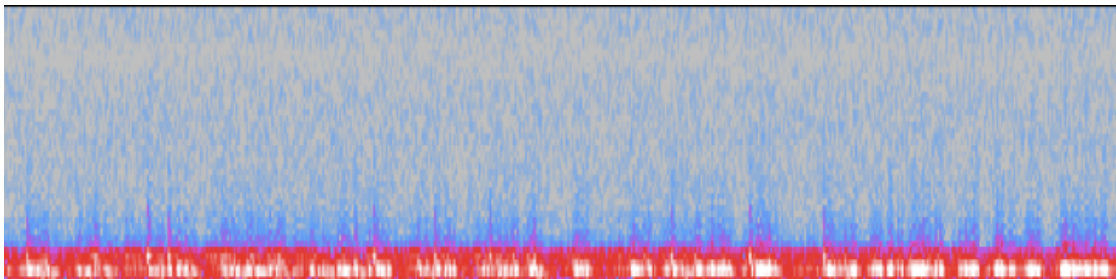


Figure 15: Sonogram analysis of the concluding variation in Lucier

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

As can be clearly seen in the above images, the material has shifted away from chaotic broad-spectrum sounds to one of reasonable order and uniformity. Despite the effect being much more drastic and more extreme from a sonographic standpoint in Lucier's piece, the emphasis on moving from a familiar sound towards a radically transformed sound while keeping the principle material constant is equally fundamental to the reception and implementation of both pieces. It is also important to note that both pieces engage the idea of drawing attention to that which is already present at the onset of the piece.

In Lucier's piece, the resonant frequencies amplified by the process, although not easily recognizable at first, were already apart of the original recording of the voice. There is a feeling of change as the piece unfolds. Little by little the character of the piece changes and we are faced with a feeling of novelty forcing us to confront how we listen. Musicologist eldritch Priest writes in response to the emergent nature of emotions that "like the red glow that appears in a bar of iron when it is heated to a critical degree, feelings are emergent phenomenon. But 'redness' is not added to the iron; it is a phase in the activity of its heating."<sup>73</sup> The process provides the 'heat' which slowly, and through use of the above practical analysis shows quantifiably changes in the focus implying a feeling of engagement with certain aspects of the piece as apposed to others. The more heat, the greater the potentiality of emergence.

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<sup>73</sup> Priest, pg. 48

Mitchell applies “heat” by slowly exaggerating a timbral shift emphasizing and bringing out colors and characters within the sound that are naturally present, although not immediately felt as essential material, making them increasingly recognizable as a primary characteristic as opposed to embellishment or secondary in any way.

In doing so a new path is forged. Once the progressive nature of the music is recognized, a direction is understood and focus applied accordingly. The result is in effect to usher the listener towards a way of listening that draws focus to the aspects of the music that the artist is intending to be the focus of the piece. In doing so, developmental motion can be understood not only along an x/y axis of melodic material in time but also along a z-axis where z represents the active shift of focus from macro material to micro.

Within *Nonaah*, the act of zooming in from a form of listening predicated on listening to melody and rhythm as principal quantifiers towards a micro focus is an important attribute that assists in creating a developmental energy that drives the piece forward. Musicologist Steve Larson describes musical force in terms of a pendulum swinging back and forth with points of instability or gestural movement as represented when momentum is overcome by gravity causing the pendulum to change direction. A phrase ascending eventually must come down and vice versa creating a form of musical gravity giving a piece its forwardness. He specifically cites different qualities of pitch in time as the only instigators of musical force within a musical work as the motor that

gives a piece its force.<sup>74</sup> The telescopic focus Mitchell showcases between micro and macro amounts to an additional axis of force causing the once two-dimensional pendulum to now swing freely not only back and forth between melodic direction but also between micro/macro in regards to primary focus and musical gists. The points of direction reversal asserted by Larson are now replaced with a three dimensional model centripetally orbiting a state of focus. In the same manner process pieces attempt to draw attention towards a shift in sonic occurrences, Mitchell is also attempting to showcase a different method of listening by means of actually listening in order to showcase the multiplicity of his music.

Mitchell is able to *show* how to listen to his music through the experience of the music itself without the implementation of programmatic material. By engaging with the performance in real time an audience member is allowed to discover for him or herself the aspects of the music that are the driving musical force outlined above. This is not to say the same would not be true for pieces that use substantial program notes indicating a particular compositional expectation such as Reich's *Violin Phase* or Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer*, just that the opportunity is not organically afforded the listener, and in my opinion, minimizing it's affect.<sup>7576</sup> The method in which Mitchell presents musical material coaxes the listener towards an intended destination

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<sup>74</sup> Larson, pg. 61-75

<sup>75</sup> Reich, *Violin Phase*

<sup>76</sup> Lucier, *Music for solo Performer*

without telling them where exactly that destination resides. Mitchell is able to accomplish this by challenging different listening tendencies means of comprehension within his performance.

When engaging with a form of music from a particular canon, one can rely upon an understanding and familiarity with a certain performance practice to fill in most large defining details. For example, when attempting to transcribe an Aretha Franklin tune down to the micro-detail level, musicologist Peter Winkler stated that the method of understanding stylistic and gestural characteristics was “conditioned by my knowledge of the style, my years of listening to this recording, my instincts as a composer and performer. I was looking for specific things in the music, and I found them.”<sup>77</sup> A pre-conditioned structure becomes a force of agency imposed upon the act of listening dictated not by the artistic direction of the music but by the minds seemingly insatiable need to make sense of a new situation. The familiarized and accepted method of understanding becomes difficult to break. This assertion of pre-coded listening and the difficulty in attempting to break it’s implied tendencies can be visualized from the following representation provided by musicologist and cognitive scientist Elizabeth Margulis.

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<sup>77</sup> Winkler, pg. 194



Figure 16: Margulis pattern recognition example<sup>78</sup>

Without context or description, the above picture can be viewed as a series of abstract black dots representing an untethered or unconditioned means of reception. The mind is able to make shapes and search for patterns freely and with a certain degree of mobility. Leonardo da Vinci describes the phenomenon as follows:

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<sup>78</sup> Margulis, pg. 17

if you look at any walls spotted with various stains or with a mixture of different kinds of stones, if you are about to invent some scene you will be able to see in it a resemblance to various different landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys, and various groups of hills. You will also be able to see divers combats and figures in quick movement, and strange expressions of faces, and outlandish costumes, and an infinite number of things which you can then reduce into separate and well conceived forms.<sup>79</sup>

However, when the suggestion of fixed form rooted in familiarity is introduced, that the black splotches are merely a picture of a dalmatian with its nose to the ground, all of the sudden, it becomes almost impossible to revert back to viewing the image as a group of abstract black spots capable of the expanse described by da Vinci. The same perceptual effect seems to shackle the listening practice outlined by Winkler and in extreme instances the direct relation can be shown through auditory illusions.

Cognitive scientist Diana Deutsch targeted the power of a structurally suggested listening practice or the ability to shift the perception of a given sonic example by strategically implying a particular association. In one experiment, Deutsch is able to shift the perception of words from common everyday speech to words sounding more like they are being sung. The same recording is heard both times but through the manipulation and control of particular repetition, a perceptual shift is experienced.<sup>80</sup> In another experiment,

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<sup>79</sup> Da Vinci, pg. 173

<sup>80</sup> Deutsch et. al.

noise is slowly transformed inside the mind into speech through the control of what and how material is heard. A recording of what seem like abstract digital bleeps and bloops is heard where no words are able to be discerned, however, after hearing a clear recording of the unaltered text, all of the sudden the previously indistinguishable noise is clearly heard as the language presented when played again.<sup>81</sup> Examples like these not only showcase the possibility for drastic perceptual changes of repeated stimulus but also highlight the power of suggestion and how it can heavily influence the way we engage with music.

These types of experiential shadings are not just visible within the control of a laboratory. Sociologist Theodore Adorno would refer to such comprehensive predispositions and codified methods of reception with what he calls “inherent tendencies” that shape and color the method and way in which we receive phenomenon in relation to who we are as people and our experiences on earth. These are naturally learned understandings that help us understand the world around us.<sup>82</sup> It is impossible to negate these inherent tendencies altogether, however, it seems to be beneficial to embrace them in order to find new understandings. In other words, it is necessary for an individual to be familiar with the notion that a dalmatian is a dog and what that image could and would look like in order for the transitional effect to take place. In this same sense, the audience cannot be entirely devoid of genre

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<sup>81</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/whyy-the-pulse/an-audio-illusion>

<sup>82</sup> Adorno, pg. 31



specific knowledge or else no semblance of sense can come out of any level of expression. How does one then re-orient the listeners perspective in order to bring the spots back to the page so a new image can forward?

In music, the confrontation is with the tendency to focus on large musical gestures indicative of a particular genre or stylistic tendencies that are created by features that closely adhere to the style being represented as listening benchmarks. They are heard, understood and glossed over without much more analysis at the cost of possibly missing certain musical details. The mind ceases to explore and this phenomenon has recently come to be known as “change deafness” which causes our ears to hear in terms of what psychologists Agres and Krumhansl (2008) call “musical gist” or large familiar chunks where emphasis is given to the rough overall shape of a musical occurrence over a detailed picture of the actual sound. In an experiment testing individuals ability to identify change in a musical excerpt they found that “people do not encode detailed information about all of the characteristics of music; rather, they form a gist of the salient properties of music.”<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, Agres and Krumhansl noted that an individual’s familiarity with a particular genre weighed heavily on their ability to detect change.<sup>84</sup> Due to *Nonaah’s*, presentation as existing within the free jazz canon as well as challenging the common understanding of what defined that genre of music canon made it difficult for listeners to pinpoint just how to listen. A sense of

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<sup>83</sup> Agres & Krumhansel, pg. 973

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

tradition or canon cannot be used to prop up musical understanding by means of familiarity alone. By removing the option to understand this piece solely in terms of a stylistic markers, it becomes more difficult for an individual to say what is vital to the pieces structure and what gets glossed over within the “musical gist”. In doing so, Mitchell is able to incite an intense probing of the music and state of active listening that catalyzes a listening process for the audience similar to that which he experienced when moving from city to farm, although requiring much less time for realization.

By engaging the idea of improvisation as a process in this way, Mitchell is advocating a method of listening that draws focus out of the “gist” and into the micro, inverting the typical paradigm of large musical structures overshadowing the smaller sometimes seemingly auxiliary details. In doing so, the listener is not only given the means to experience a piece of music, as the artist intended, but also to be acoustically guided towards the proper area of focus. Mitchell’s use of micro development in regards to timbre shift throughout the first movement of *Nonaah* showcases an intimate understanding of a particular process and a means to translate that idea to an audience in the same vein as Reich, despite Reich’s early opposition. In this manner, he gives listeners a novel musical experience in which their focus is drawn away from the macro and towards the micro providing additional techné for musical comprehension. Mitchell provides musicians and audiences with a new way to play and listen to music with his unique usage of process-based concept.

By showcasing and rearranging hierarchical listening practices and drawing focus and challenging a particular mode of listening, it brings with it benefits that spill over into something more than a genre specific methodology and becomes a general tool for processing music. By experiencing a shift in focus as discussed in this paper, an audience could use the experience as a tool to help digest complex or unfamiliar music in any representation with the goal of finding a more engaged understanding. This doesn't necessarily need to be an incredibly complex work of free improvisation; instead it probably applies to particular sections of more familiar songs that might now carry additional meaning and the possibility for re-examination and re-situating within ones personal aesthetic. To state that Mitchell's goal was to bring this all encompassing enlightenment to his audiences musical lives is incredibly overstating the affect he was going for, however, I don't think it is overly romantic to argue through the act of experiential based realization that a certain permanence is capable of being carried into, and utilized, within other modes of musical comprehension. The process and ability to seek a deeper revealing is a valuable tool no matter the medium and when successfully employed can provide a personalized and affective interaction between the work, the artist and Art as a whole.

## **Chapter 4: Creation**

Considering the spontaneity at the core of improvisation, it seems contradictory to enter into a performance setting with the intention of utilizing a predetermined technique such as the one I have outlined in the previous chapters of this document. In a way, this flies in the face of free improvisation to a certain extent especially in the context of the academic shibboleth, however, utilizing a technique such as shepherding is not intended to dictate and shape the musical outcome in the same way a game piece or imposed structure would, but instead functions to provide an accessibility not afforded otherwise through an intense focus on the micro-details that blossoms into a deeper connection with the performance as it unfolds. Starting a performance, such as Mitchell does in Nonaah, follows a seemingly surreptitious script for the purists, it is the real-time realization of this process that becomes the driving force that allows the performance to grow and move to areas of total freeness. The 'in the moment' modularity and telescopic focus regarding change and detail within the audience becomes a powerful force and general feeling that propels the improvisations into new and revealing spaces. Through heavy-handed patient understanding, an artist actively shepherding an audience can provide a space of acceptance and musical leeway giving an ongoing series of entrance points for the audience to engage. It is in these moments where an artist can expand and push against the walls of what is

known, potentially (and hopefully!) illuminating this dance between the smallest micro-gestures and large dramatic musical shifts.

The obvious follow up to this kind of pontification regarding a way of playing that all improvisors have some level of familiarity, with albeit possible interchanged buzzwords, is how does one go about planning and executing a performance that utilizes a technique such as this? What sorts of planning needs to be done and how would this effect the final outcome through the simple act of having been preconceived, how does this affect the musician(s) and what control will there be when that shepherding process is achieved during the actual performance? Are there certain aspects of the performance that are more vital to a positive outcome than others and if so why? These questions and many, many others were my basic starting point when trying to organize this research around shepherding with the end goal of applying it to my own creative practice. As mentioned in chapter one, the necessity for experimentation and acting as what Sun Ra would call a “sound scientist” in a somewhat clinical manner was necessary and the possibility for failure was high.<sup>85</sup> That said, the insight afforded through the practical attempt would do more than any amount of research or analysis. At some point, you need to just hit the gas and try.

The first and most difficult question, although at the time seemed much more straightforward, was how to take something that happened

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<sup>85</sup> Szwed

spontaneously and organically like the performance at Willisau and somehow recreate the essence of such an amazing perfect storm of artistic juggernaut? The key, as explored earlier, is the interplay between performer and audience battling, or more accurately aggressively compromising, for agency within the performative space and eventually coming to a natural agreement presenting the opportunity for a particular space and power within the performance. This liminal coalescence and act of homogenization is what catalyzes the forward motion of the music from which energy is drawn. Any prepping or pre-performance explanation would upset the balance by pinning a particular ideology to preconceived notions of a different time and space. The question remained, how to draw people in to an intended kind of listening?

After speaking to many friends, colleagues, and other artists which whom I respect, the most resistance I received was on this front of pre-sound intervention. Often it was argued that performance notes or pre-concert discussion are a valid and legitimate way to guide an audience and inform them of the experience about to unfold. While I agree that it is the most direct way to engage a desired meaning, I find myself asking at what cost? What am I giving away by taking the essence from the deepest part of the music and resecting it from the time and space it was meant to be experience? Being scared by something surprising is predicated on the surprise itself and unexpected nature of the experience. It's difficult to startle somebody if they are expecting it and with a music that presents so much opportunity for

boundary pushing and exploration, it seems that taking the potential energy out of the performance robs the potential impact of the performance.

Providing programs as a listening companion has been standard performance practice for a number of years. The purpose of this assistance is an attempt to level the playing field so to say and try to furnish the listener with the additional information that the performer and/or composer feel are necessary to properly understand the function and meaning of a given piece of music. Details about the pieces compositional structure and influence are often provided alongside a short description of creative impetus (the irony of this document being what it is is not lost on me). There is also a section devoted to performer and composer biography complete with educational and artistic pedigree as well previously published positive reviews and kind words about the individual or ensemble. Again, the purpose is to try and guide a listener to a place where they have what is deemed an appropriate amount of information to properly understand both how to listen and what to listen for. The question still remains; does this added textual information provide for a better listening experience?

Dr. Elizabeth Margulis makes a compelling argument that not only are program notes ineffectual, they in fact decrease enjoyment within the listening experience. Early on in her report she points to a popular saying that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”<sup>86</sup> Her point is that reading

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<sup>86</sup> Margulis, pg.1

about music is not nearly as effective as experiencing it in real time; to actual listen to a piece of music and parse through its many details as they are presented. Margulis draws attention to two types of written text used within the confines of the program note. One is that of dramatic description where more subjective language is used. The other is that of structural description which engages the piece in terms of empirical musicological references relating to the function and organization of sounds in relation to the western classical tradition. In a study conducted at the University of Arkansas with a range of subjects covering a wide spectrum of consumers and practitioners of music, Margulis found that when listening to classical music (classical in this sense is defined as the music existing between the baroque and romantic movements, roughly 1700-1900). Her findings were that music played without program notes were found to be more enjoyable than those with program notes and that pieces presented alongside structural descriptions were enjoyed the least. The graph below taken from Margulis' analysis further illustrates her findings.



	Mean rating	SEM	Mean standardized rating	SEM
None	4.52	.13	.22	.08
Dramatic	4.16	.13	-.05	.08
Structural	4.02	.13	-.07	.08

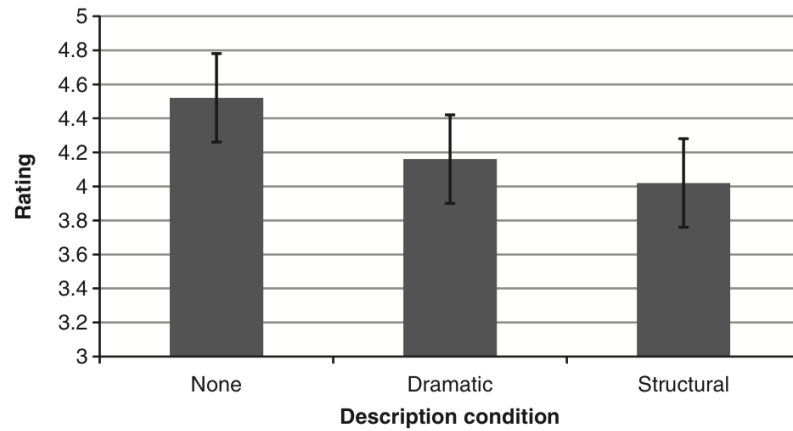


Figure 17: Margulis diagram on program note effect on enjoyment

The y-axis on the bar graph is scaled to center the data but was originally on a scale of 1-7 with 1 being an awful experience with the music and 7 being an incredible one. Although the ratings are not through the roof in terms of overall enjoyment, the indication that program notes are ineffectual is interesting. Furthermore, the fact that the more subjective descriptions supplied in the dramatic description were more enjoyable than the structural descriptions could provide insight into a better method of influence (more on that later).

A possible explanation for this finding in Margulis' words is that "this decrease in enjoyment could involve conceptualization: listeners may seek to be swept away by the music, without explicit information of its constituent

elements (cf. Gabrielsson & Lindström Wik, 2003 which showed that in moments of peak musical enjoyment, listeners reported a sense of losing themselves).” In addition she hypothesizes that when considering the written texts “especially dramatic descriptions — may interfere with the directness and intimacy with which listeners are able to experience a work. it may distance listeners, or place them at a remove — as if they were listening through someone else’s ear.” It seems that within the confines of this study an important part of listening to and understanding a piece of music is the process of actually enjoy making sense of a musical experience themselves the on the first listen. That any textual assistance actually robs them of the enjoyment associated with the real time parsing of the actual music as it is intended to be ingested.

One obvious hole, or room for questioning within this research is in the scope of the music tested. Classical music is a heavily textualized music with program notes and player biographies extending for pages of a program, however, this trend either systemic of the western classical tradition or in response to some other external stimulus has become invasive in other music not nearly as easily codified as traditional classical music. On the other end of the spectrum in terms of musical character would be freely improvised music or music that utilizes improvisation as a primary instigator and vehicle in order to express a musical idea or concept. Unlike classical music where consistency is the prime directive with differentiation between one performance of a piece and the next coming in the form of artistic

interpretation, the very nature of improvised music turns that paradigm on its head. The focus moves from familiarity and unachievable ideal with a form of music that embraces the unexpected and pushes back against the classical establishment. That said, in the same way a little brother is reluctantly allowed to play ball with the neighborhood kids, it is improvisations inclusion within the concert hall that has informed its use of descriptive text with what could be considered a far greater detriment.

Due to a seemingly lack of formal structure, harmony and traditional rhythmic function as prioritized in western classical music, improvised music can be assumed to embody a higher level of interpretational subjectivity than the examples tested in Margulis' research. Improvisation in a way presents all of and none of the possibilities in terms of potential material. Because of this, it can be argued that this higher degree of material variance presents an even more unmarkedness within the space and a maximalism in regards to abstract expectations. The only absolute is that the piece needs to begin in that moment in order for confirmation of any kind to take place. As Gary Peters points out:

This practice has to begin and the dramatization of this beginning is achieved by introducing freedom into the silence prior to the work — will or won't it begin? But this is disingenuous: nothing could be *more* certain than that such work will begin. An infinite multitude of artworks never manage to mark the unmarked space from which they are intended to be liberated-from, but freely improvised performances *have* to begin

precisely because that is their primary role within the aesthetic:  
to make the distinction between nothing and something<sup>87</sup>

This move from the un-marked to the marked space is a moment of great anticipation and incredible power for the improviser and one that is amplified by the emphasis when moving from “nothing to something.”<sup>88</sup> Once that first sound is uttered, every following sonic occurrence is heard under the shadow of that first marking of the space. As Peters puts it, “the intensity necessary for the artwork to begin must be carried over into the work itself.”<sup>89</sup> It is this reasoning that informs my critique of text based assistance proceeding improvisations and subsequent search for and refinement of other forms of shepherding in an attempt to maximize this active motion. In the end, it doesn't seem necessary. The stage is set for this type of interaction, it only needs to be enacted.

Upon entering the room, the space takes on a certain level of theatrics with its play on boundaries and intended foci. There are the obvious divisions of seats and stage as well as the physical boundaries of the building itself with all it's entrances and architectural elements. However, beneath that lies a political leaning defined by the space itself giving the performer the platform and power to lead and actively shepherd through a performance. In this sense,

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<sup>87</sup> Peters, pg. 36

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Peters, pg. 42

the space can be used as a tool to amplify the message of the performer, promoting and enhancing; guiding the audience towards a position of communality. Lefebvre writes:

(Social) space is a (social) product... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power [...] <sup>90</sup>

By tapping into the power present within the space, the performer is afforded the attentive resources to move beyond the physical page, past program notes and verbal direction, into a space of understanding and acceptance within the performance itself. However, in my view, this power is not as Machiavellian as words like 'control' and 'domination' imply. It is not a power that simply exists and can be controlled and manipulated as if accrued at rest like some sort of capitalist interest rate. The audience is not a passive participant or subject to be presided over within this power dynamic. Instead, it is a constant dance between all participants, one that needs to be enacted upon and cultivated through the act of doing in order to be harnessed and used as an actual force as opposed to simply a potential.

This interplay and enacted power can clearly be seen (and heard) in the performance of Nonaah analyzed in the previous chapters. By activating the audience through the implementation of musical shepherding, Mitchell is able

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<sup>90</sup> Lefebvre, pg. 26

to engage the power dance. That said, and I repeat, this is not a power in the traditional sense of the word. It is more a challenge of the traditional paradigm presented with musical performances and power dynamic invoked in doing so. The idea is not to control the status quo but to break free of the expected in order to achieve new truths. Foucault states this as follows:

To challenge power is not a matter of seeking some 'absolute truth' (which is in any case a socially produced power), but 'of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time'<sup>91, 92</sup>

By challenging the hegemony of the expected musical performance and repeatedly continuing to embrace that particular aspect of the performance, a musician can strive to gain trust which opens up the opportunity for expansion of understanding within the space by means of a trust based network of bodies.

The intent is to push past the boundaries present within not only a single performance but within the collective understanding of the audience and performer. The intent is to reach new and fertile ground for inspiration and revelation and in order to do so, the preconceptions and expectations must be challenged by a power strong enough to overcome long held entrenched systems. The outcome is hopefully to create new space within the existing

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<sup>91</sup> Foucault in Rabinow, pg. 75

<sup>92</sup> *Foucault: power is everywhere*

shell of the old (or facade of the present); blowing a bubble inside another bubble keeping both intact, independent in structure yet dependent in terms of situational identity. Foucault states that “in fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained [...] belong to this production.”<sup>93</sup> Each instance, each performance, each utterance presents an opportunity for the performer to enact this ritualistic truth and in turn provide a sacred reality tethered directly to a unique situation of events and identities.

The challenging and confronting of different crutches and assumptions used to understand a particular experience are helpful in defining and informing the basis for assumption and expectation yet introduce friction when attempting to move beyond the known and intuitive. This notion of re-investigation with an embodied practice can be represented by Heidegger’s notion of working with a hammer, or more accurately re-analyzing the hammer once it has broken. The tool is used without conscious attention in relation to the act at hand and its situation in the world. If the hammer were to break, the functionality is questioned and re-examination becomes necessary in order to continue the task at hand.<sup>94</sup> How does one sink a nail now that the hammer is broken? Could the handle be used? Is there a way to fasten the head back on? Do I really need to be hammering? etc. The act has been disrupted requiring inquiry as to a following procedural action. However, this does not

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<sup>93</sup> Foucault, pg. 194

<sup>94</sup> Heidegger, pg. 70

completely stop our interaction with the act at hand. Merleau-Ponty would have us believe that we find new methods of understanding our embodied world by adopting a new sense of our embodied selves after breakage occurs. He cites an example of an individual with an amputated arm. Although difficult at first, the body understands the absence and eventually no longer attempts to reach with the missing appendage.<sup>95</sup> In relation to *Nonaah*, by forcing a break from a canonical listening methodology, a re-investigation caused by this 'breaking', catalyzes an active search for new meaning. Mitchell is able to provide sonic bread crumbs through the processional unfolding outlined previously to provide a suggested re-engagement and a re-embodied act. By forcing a break in an assumed embodiment with the music, the need for a re-examination and re-defining of functionality occurs specific to the occasion as opposed to one rooted in another place and time. In doing so, an understanding can be generated specific to *this* performance in and of itself.

Nonaah was an excellent case study of just this occurrence. A musician and audience battling out within this power generation. But how does one recreate something like this? At it's core and in light of every argument I've made, it would seem any preplanning or attempt to force something like this to happen again would ensure it's failure. I do think it would be impossible to recreate the performance exactly in order to achieve the same format; there is just no way to capture the energy of a fifty year old performance experienced

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<sup>95</sup> Merleau-Ponty, pg. 81



by people born closer to world war II than world of warcraft. That said, I think it is a valid undertaking in the attempt to pull out key philosophies such as micro-gestural listening and musical shepherding and see if aspects of them can be brought into my own work.

This clearly brings us to the logical next step to my own conceptualization of a particular performance practice. The question still remained of how does one transmit an intended experience if literal directions and preparations can not be given before the moment of creation? If so much power is afforded the space and agency control over that space provides are there methods to capitalize and synthesize on this in order to more accurately and successfully shepherd a performance? Clearly, the performance outlined in the previous chapter shows how music alone is capable of transmuting an audience through a performance space. That said, and considering Christopher Small's assertion of a performance in it's entirety affecting the experience, it became interesting to me to think about other media elements that could go into informing and shepherding a performance.<sup>96</sup>

Early on in this project, I outlined three performances that focused on different methods and modes of trying to enact this process. One that removed the instrument and sonic expectations from the performance space by means of breath sounds as a source of embodied sound creation. A second where the musicians played without reference to any pre-conceived structure while a

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<sup>96</sup> Small

visual element broke down further and further into granularity with the goal of driving the audiences' focus towards one of micro-gestural detail in tandem with the visual element. The third was an attempt at recreating a similar experience through improvisation with shepherding and micro-textural understanding at its core. The goal was to see if the idea of shepherding first brought to my attention by *Nonaah* could be translated through different senses and methods. Ideally, audiences would be driven to a level of listening through these different methods to a point of focus where they are best equipped to understand and relate to the music.

As I planned and prepared the elements for each performance, it started to feel redundant to attempt each aspect over and over as if this were a medical study. The beauty of art experimentation is in its risk taking and in the attempt rather than empirically true and eidetically re-creatable results. With this in mind, I began to change my approach in order to better compartmentalize my efforts in a way that both kept the structural performative concepts I wanted to explore intact as well as allow the freedom to explore the improvisational potential of within that created space.

It became clear that I had two fundamental sects developing in my proposed output. One where mediatized sound and digital visual abstraction were intended to evoke and enact the space and the other where the musical instruments and live players took on that responsibility.<sup>97</sup> Upon seeing this

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<sup>97</sup> Auslander

(and realizing resources both for performance opportunities and fresh audience members were scarce), I decided to condense my ideas into two performances along these lines in order to avoid having to sacrifice either approach and allowing myself the ability to experience both performance practices first hand.

## 4.1: Nonaah as Abstraction

The purpose of my first performance was still quite clear; to see if, through the use of extra musical performative features, I would be able to bring the audience to a point of listening where, as a performer, I could play freely and in connection with the audience. I have already shown that it is more than possible to do this through the music as in Nonaah, yet it always made me wonder if other senses or ways of engaging our senses in an unexpected manner were capable of having the same desired effect.

I broke the concert up into the 3 different segments. The opening would consist of the breath concept outlined in the opening of this paper that would produce spatial energy. The next phase would bring the visual element, also discussed in the opening, intended to draw the audience into the micro-details of the performance. The final entrance would be that of the saxophone playing into a space primed with energy and to an audience adequately prepared and drawn into an informed position for reception. Below is a chart outlining the general structure of timing and event.

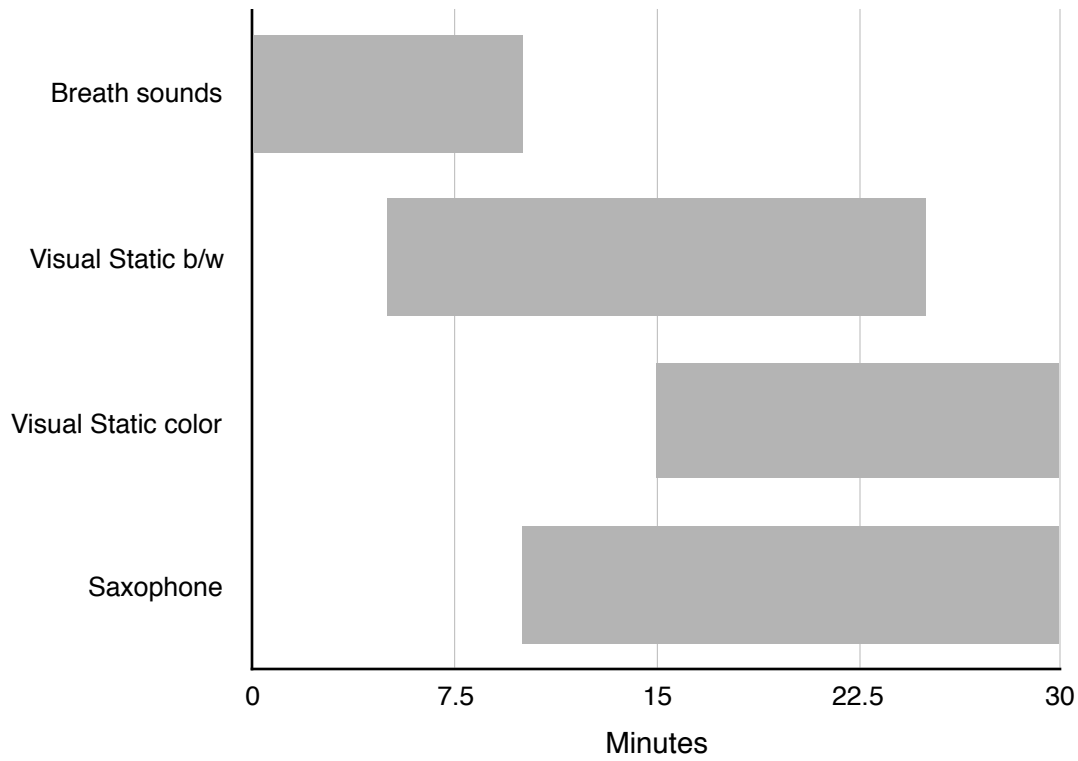


Figure 18: Nonaah as abstraction event timings

The purpose of this concert was always to embrace the fluidity of enactedness within the space and in doing so further description is clearly necessary to provide further insight into the choices and ideas behind the more intricate elements within the piece and the artistic choices I made. Obviously, it would be preferred to experience this first hand in order to generate a personalized understanding, however, the medium of idea documentation deployed here requires a more narrational voice due to its fixity.

The concert opened to a dark room with nothing but a large screen and myself standing directly in front of it holding my saxophone. No literature was

handed out before hand and no direction had been made as to what was going to happen. Even the promotional material was left purposefully vague as to try and prevent the audience from entering with expectation other than those they carry inherently and as entrenched understandings rooted deep in their personal being. The expectation here was for the lights to come up and for me to begin playing saxophone; people clearly understood the intent was for music to be presented, the concert was in the music building, the paradigm of performer audience was still firmly established, and I was indeed holding a saxophone. It was this pre-sound moment that I tried to leverage in order to challenge the audience and try to bring them into the space I was attempting to create. I conspired with my good friend and colleague Kyle Motl to play a series of recordings we made of my own inhalations at different speeds, volumes, depth of breadth, and durations that would be played at the start of the concert through speakers arranged around the audience (below is a copy of the max/msp patch we used).

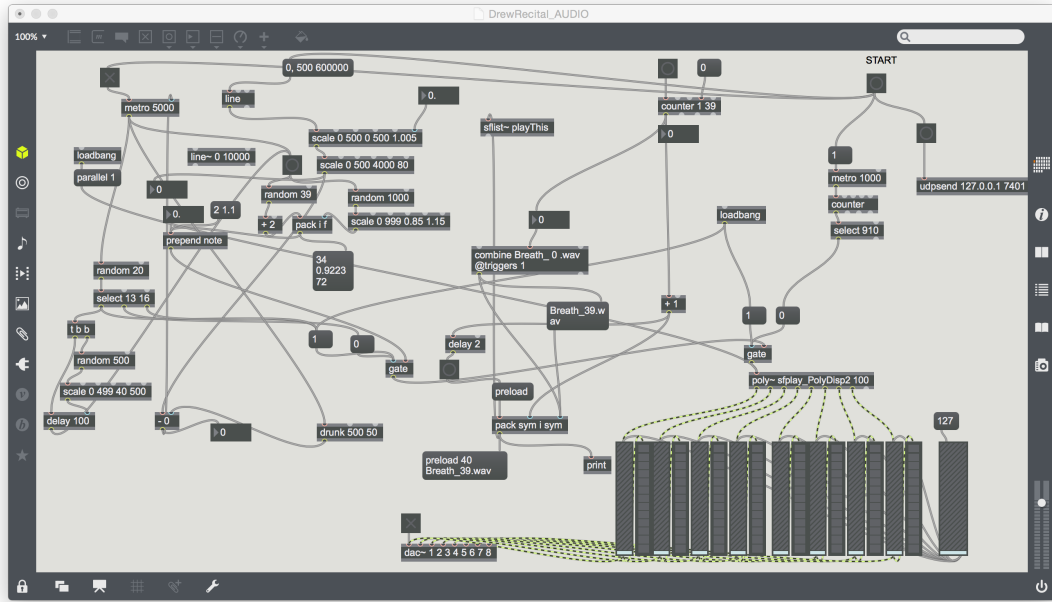


Figure 19: Max/msp performance patch for Nonaah as abstraction<sup>98</sup>

The idea was to challenge the assumptions I had as to the presuppositions the audience carried upon entrance and hopefully break their “hammer” per se in a way that drew them further into the space. Bahn et al states that “The social context of musical performance is built on shared sensibilities and embodied practices.”<sup>99</sup> Presenting the sound of strict inhalation (with no exhalation) brought about the intent from the original breath based performance description of engaging the biological response of uneasiness and tension when only hearing inhales with no exhales in continual repetition challenging

<sup>98</sup> The patch is not incredibly complex. It simply takes a series of recordings and plays them in random order over a period of 10 minutes increasing in amplitude and frequency of occurrence as time proceeds.

<sup>99</sup> Bahn, Curtis, et al.

that most basic embodied balance of breathing. The continual presentation of a biological antecedent without the expected consequent through the speakers in the hall would mark the space and be the first kernel of sonic instability the audience would have to deal with. The increased frequency of occurrence would provide trajectory and forward motion within the piece giving bearing and direction to the nervous energy created.

At this point, the object within the space was no longer myself as performer and instead I became a part of the larger presentation of sound within the room. Speaking with audience members after the concert, one colleague stated that they “forgot that I was there.”<sup>100</sup> I was no longer the epicenter of artistic creation and instead was an additional audience member existing within a shared experience. The idea was for the audience to understand themselves as part of the environment and not the traditional performer/audience binary. Mitchell utilized the tension created by an unmet expectation and capitalized on capturing that energy and using it to propel the performance forward. However, the key to his performances success was the ability to draw the audience into the particulates of sound he so masterfully manipulates. For that, I looked to deploy a different kind of process again looking to trigger a shepherding position through a different sense altogether.

Five minutes into the piece, two single pixels flickering black and white visual static were projected down from the lighting booth, the first break from

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<sup>100</sup> Lee



the a single wave event. One onto the screen, and the other onto the middle of my chest. These single light points would expand and colonize outward from their origin point dancing and scurrying as the static grew. The purpose for such a delicate entrance of an additional element was to play with audience realization.<sup>101</sup> When did the light start? had it always been going? is the light growing? These are all questions different audience members told me they were thinking during this portion of the performance.<sup>102</sup> The effect was present but shepherding and the process of Mitchell employed was more than just triggering an event, it involved more nuance and manipulation than that; a continual beckoning and drawing forth attentiveness to prescribed elements.

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<sup>101</sup> In the video of this performance there was a faulty cable that caused the blue projector screen to flicker and eventually disconnect the visual output causing the patch to be revealed. Luckily I had a stellar crew on staff that managed to handle the situation in real time. Clearly this was not ideal but that show must go on.

<sup>102</sup> Zhang

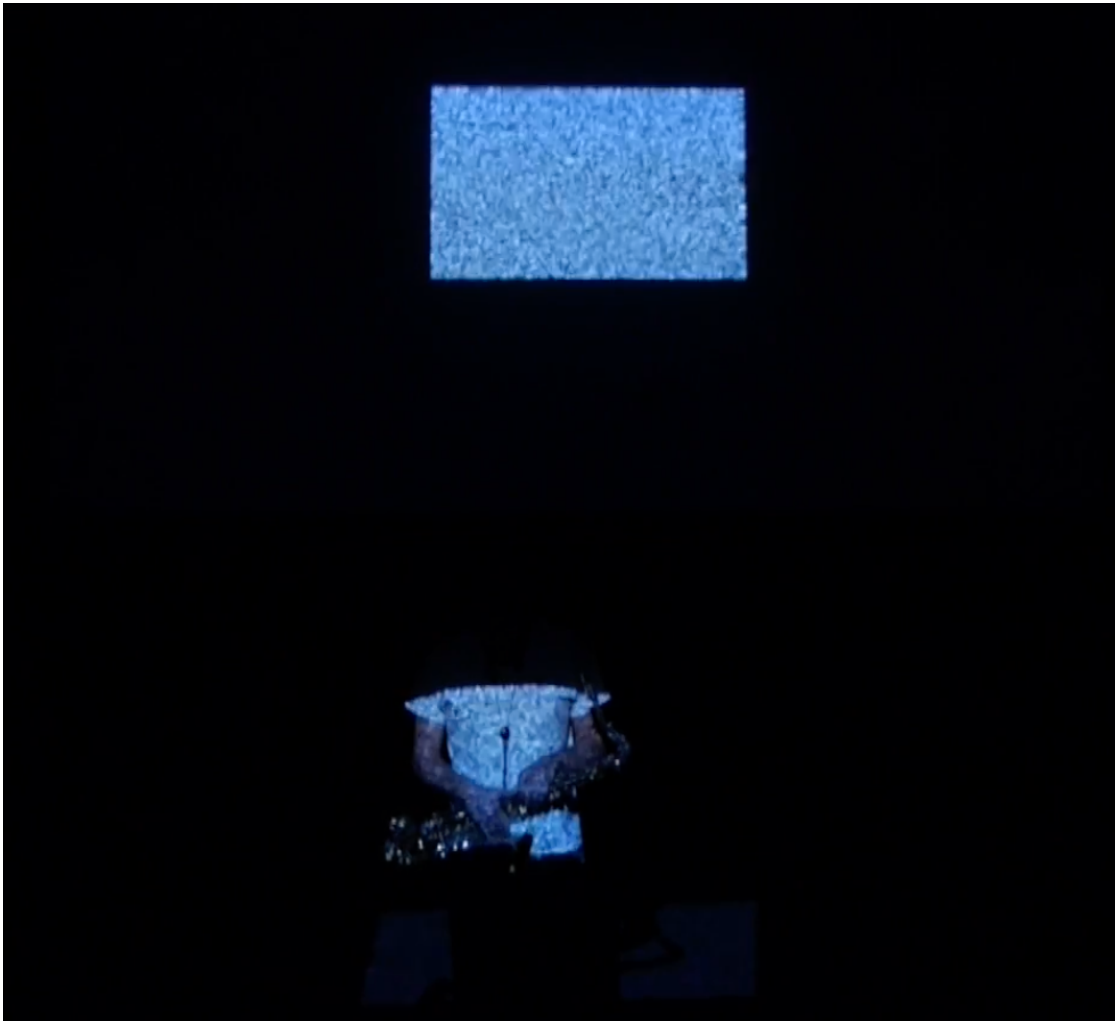


Figure 20: Introduction of visual static element in Nonaah as abstraction

In the same way Mitchell drew an audience in through a processional presentation of micro-gesture driven improvisation, using repetition and subtle variance, I wanted to see if the same shepherding effect could be achieved through a visual element that would translate to aural understanding. As the pixels grew and more and more static filled the room, the breath sounds were rapidly becoming more and more frequent and with greater and greater

amplitude. Once the static filled the screen at ten minutes, the breath sounds immediately cut out. The preparation of the space, energized by the perturbation of an expected repetitive process coming to an abrupt end cleared the way for the music to unfold at which point the saxophone entered.

Finally, the audience had an expectation realized, however delayed it may have been. A common sentiment expressed after the performance was a growing uneasiness of when i would actually play and a sense of relief when the first sounds were made on the saxophone.<sup>103</sup> The moment was punctuated and exacerbated by reversing the literal flow of sound making direction. The breath sounds had been entirely created through the sound of rapid inhalation devoid of it's sonic counter part. Once the saxophone entered, the action of sonic creation took on the inverse relationship making the exhale the point of production and the inhale being relegated to obscurity. One audience member interviewed after the fact (where I simply asked questions such as “what did you notice?” and “did any parts stand out to you?” in order to get an honest reaction without my leading them to a desired answer) even stated that they “finally felt like they could exhale” and that they “felt a sense of relief” once the saxophone finally entered.<sup>104</sup>

With the audience now primed within the space and drawn into the saxophone as the focal point of attention. It was important to pace the improvisation in a way where the energy was constantly growing and moving

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<sup>103</sup> Zhang

<sup>104</sup> Lee

towards a conclusion. This is not to say a continual linear trajectory culminating in an apotheosis finale, but more of an intricate story with different characters and subplots weaving there way at different rates and story arcs. Frank Herbert would say this is to “observe the plans within plans within plans” in the narrational sense.<sup>105</sup> This was the kind of energy I was looking to harness, a page turning novel where the reader is experiencing the unfolding in real time and experiencing the flow from expository material through the development and into the appropriate conclusion. How could I focus that oration? had I enacted the right level of power within the space that the audience would follow my ever twist and turn? Had I set the stage well enough? What could I possibly play that would be worthy of such an entrance?

In my time as Mitchell’s assistant at Mills College, the most impactful thing he ever told me during a lesson was that “if you can’t improve upon silence, don’t play; silence is perfect and you need to be pretty sure to mess with perfect.”<sup>106</sup> This is true in a sense, (the work of John Cage in pieces such as 4’33” and Iannis Xenakis’ concept of compositional windows both show that true silence is never possible, however, here I’m discussing silence in Mitchell’s terms of intended instrumental sound production)<sup>107</sup><sup>108</sup> silence will win the battle of attrition whether biological or mechanical, do to the inherent

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<sup>105</sup> Herbert, pg. 17

<sup>106</sup> Mitchell, personal conversation

<sup>107</sup> Gann

<sup>108</sup> LaBelle, pg 184

nature of sound needing to be continually acted upon in order to maintain presence and power over the silent space. With silence being the status quo, the performer needs to play in a way that is powerful enough to float above, create life where there is absence. Earlier I spoke of micro-gestures as being the building blocks of life, the DNA of sound. A single note could then be considered a single cell organism. A single sound with incredible potential and an almost blank slate to evolve depending on any number of variables. This seemed like the perfect place for me to situate my own improvisation.

The same way a single cell carries with it all the information necessary to replicate and grow into more complex forms, so too does a single note of sound. As explored earlier in this paper, a note being the aggregate of pitch, timbre, duration, amplitude, and attack are all variables inherent to a notes character is more complex when isolated by silence; where those idiosyncrasies are given space to come through to the foreground. It was here that I began the improvisation, beginning with the micro-gestures front and center, hoping that the preparation of the space had primed the audience to tune into the intricacies of the sound. I played a single note, book ended by different durations of silence to highlight the unique character and subtle changes with each gesture. Mitchell always used to say, "It's all about music fundamentals" and in this sense I was looking to embrace the essence of this sentiment by building the musical trajectory from the most primitive building

blocks I had at my disposal.<sup>109</sup> In doing so, the goal was to gradually coax the audience into the micro-details of the sound and the minute characteristics developing. Wherever I started from, pacing was paramount as to hold both the attention and any built trust that had been established between myself and the audience.

Each repetition, subtle variances were added and the piece moved forward. The speed of development was of great concern; too fast and the audience would be left behind, too slow and they would not have enough content to stay engaged with the performance. The static introduced at minute five was to act as a bridge to capture attention and reinsert stray audience members back into the performance. As the static grew, it gained enough chaotic mass that patterns would be observed in the randomly flickering pixels. My parents used to call it a “snow storm”; when the cable would cut out or an old VHS would hit the end of it’s reel and the screen would display nothing but static. I was convinced as a child that it couldn’t be random, trying to point out the patterns I was seeing to others. The key, I would later realize, was in patiently letting the patterns come out of the chaos, the key was time. It was this pareidolic phenomenon that I was looking for to help structure an unknown range of audience members.

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<sup>109</sup> Mitchell, interview 12.27.15

The mind tends to create patterns and impose structure where there is none in an effort to find understanding when confronted with a seemingly overwhelming amount of chaotic data in an effect called pareidolia.<sup>110</sup>

Likewise, to the audience, if the music becomes challenging to the point of disassociation causing audience members to stray from the path, this could also be a means for re-insertion without the performer having to account for each member individually. Sonic pareidolia would supply an internal structure allowing the participant a method of knowing situated within each individuals personal scope of reference. The audience had adequate time to look at the static that now took up a good portion of the room giving them more than enough time for the intended patterns to emerge. The hope was that the visual response would be so strong, the concept would spill over into the auditory sense and be utilized in this same way.

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<sup>110</sup> Nees, M.A., & Phillips, C.

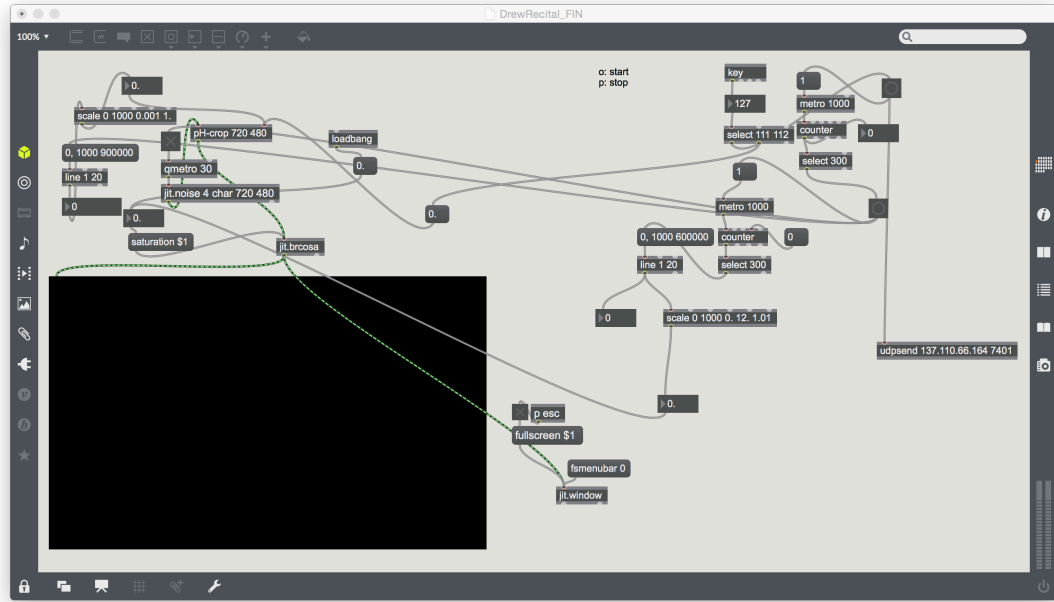


Figure 21: Max/msp performance patch for Nonaah as abstraction<sup>111</sup>

In doing so, audience members would start to generate their own structures within the improvisation providing a secondary lattice that can acts to tether them to the process and the nowness of the music.

Even conceptually, this seemed like a lofty element to deploy effectively. This response solved for moment to moment activation within the piece, it did not drive the listener to the three dimensional understanding (pitch, time, and micro-detail) I was looking for, not did it necessarily shepherd the listener towards an intended level of activation. It functioned more as an alert, yet still needed direction and bearing to supply the necessary bridge for that to

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<sup>111</sup> This is the complete jitter patch for all visual elements deployed within the piece. Both the black and white static, and transition to fully colorized static.



happen. To solve for this disconnectivity, I embedded a subprocess within the visual static to function as a large developmental arc where the audience would remain unaware until first noticed. This would bring an additional layer to the moment to moment visualization and introduce the notion that broad developmental arcs have been existing possibly unbeknownst to the listener, encouraging them to re-examine the entirety of the experience.

Half-way through the static's life cycle, a visual shift was triggered where the black and white static slowly shifted to being fully colorized.



Figure 22: Photograph from the performance of Nonaah as abstraction<sup>112</sup>

The process took five minutes to unfold providing a final event of realization and potential for expectation satisfaction that would energize listeners to stay present within both the space and the performance. After the concert in participant interviews more than one individual asked if “the colors actually

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<sup>112</sup> Here, one can see the visual shift towards colorized static occurring taking shape within the middle of the process.

changed or did [they] imagine it?”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, participants recounted feeling like the shift in color brought them back into the performance and gave them a foothold on music they found to be challenging to fully grasp, that it gave them “a sense of collaboration between the sax and the other things.”<sup>114</sup> Again, the only questions I posed were if anything was noticed and if any particular parts stood out. This realization and recognition of elemental change gave the final boost needed to carry the audience to the finale where we would come together as a momentary community, bounded by an experiential togetherness. This too would have the effect of driving listeners, who had not already done so, to look elsewhere for small details they may have missed, to think back on what they had experienced through a new lens and apply it to what they were now confronted with.

Once the last note sounded and the experience was now bookended by the natural state of the space, I was immediately overcome by the feeling of ineptitude. Did anything I had set out to do happen? Were the different sensory elements and conceptual underpinnings brought together in a way that guided the audience further into my artistic voice and musical understanding? My post concert interviews gave me clear insight into the fact that they were effective in triggering responses, but not necessarily the coherent ecosystem of understanding I had set out to create. The smoking gun in this case was how much I had to lead my interviewees towards even

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<sup>113</sup> Lee and Zhang

<sup>114</sup> Zhang

discussing the music. It seemed that instead of providing multiple inroads, I had done the opposite succumbing to the cobra effect and over stimulating where each element was fighting for sensory dominance within the field of perception.

In addition, I was acutely aware of the lack of authority I had obtained within the space during the entirety of the performance. Predicating the terms of the performance and the experiential expectation did exactly the opposite of what I had been advocating for within this particular performance practice. Instead of opening up the space and operating within a self-contained performative reality, I confined and obstructed the creative flow through my own assumptions and overthinking. Each element seemed to have the basic effect but with none of the impact and provoking qualities. The breath sound sounds didn't quite inspire enough tension, the static never conveyed the notion of micro-gestures within broader dramatic arcs, and the saxophone didn't ever win over the space and command the trust and leadership needed to bring all the elements together. Although I enjoyed the performance, separate from the stated goals of this project, and think that it isn't without its merits, in terms of an experimentation, it did not satisfy my own criteria for success. The performance never came together as a single homogenized unifying concept that was able to transcend intent and move into practical action. Looking back at the creative process, having spent months upon months thinking through strategies and methods for leveraging as many

aspects outside of the actual improvisation caused the result to be a muddled focus; a diluted product.

This left room for the second performance and second approach to this method of shepherding through the focus on micro-details. Fortunately, by chance or by design, the organizational glue I had originally set out to balance this first performance was firmly rooted with a deep focus and spotlight on the actual live extemporaneous music. This time, the music would stand front and center, expounding and highlighting, enacting power within the space through a direct dialogue between the different actors present. Liveness and nowness would be paramount and at the core of connectivity between this specific network of bodies.

## 4.2: Nonaah Revisited

This first instinct I had when organizing a music centered performance that highlighted micro-gestural development to the point of beckoning the audience's collective ear from a state of hearing to listening, a la the philosophy of Jean Luc Nancy, was to go back to basics.<sup>115</sup> "It's all about music fundamentals" Mitchell always used to say whenever I ran up against a wall where I felt like I was surrounded by nothing more than different paths circling downward towards the same aporia.<sup>116</sup> These music fundamentals always served me well when confronted with improvisational quandaries within swamps of stagnated idea generation; why wouldn't they be useful outside of that artistic space, within one more scholastic in nature?

By embracing this credo, I re-examined what it was I was actually trying to do; to find a way to effectively explore the tools and methodology employed by Mitchell within an improvisational setting to enact a shepherd like power within a performance in order to bring the space together as one cohesive communal organism. It made sense then to go back to the music that started this entire project; Nonaah. My original fear was that I would get caught up chasing the dragon of Mitchell's original performance were I to attempt a note for note recreation; constantly being experienced through the lens of a fixed

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<sup>115</sup> Nancy

<sup>116</sup> Mitchell, interview 12.27.15

point in time. I realized however, that this gravity towards an expectation and familiarity may not be the shackles I had assumed them to be but instead could be the springboard needed to find what I was looking for.

Instead of trying to recreate, I realized I needed to pay closer attention to the fine details, not just in regards to the original Nonaah performance but also to the entire oeuvre of what I had uncovered over the course of this project. I needed to further break down the piece and my understanding of it in order to see if there was a way to re-assemble the core elements into a new assemblage of musical activation. In doing so, the goal was to try and unlock some more magic from such a wonderful composition but in a way that could transcend the fixity of the original and bring it into a hear and now.

The biggest failing of the first concert was in it's inability to convey any sense of familiarity and a lack of true expository development that allows the audience to form a performance specific vocabulary to use as means of mediation. Everything about the first concert was purposely off kilter, from the setting, to the point of sound production, to the inactive actor within the space; every aspect was pushing against the establishment in some way. Looking back, it seemed this might have been a missed opportunity. By embracing certain elements of expectation within the academy of performance it could provide gravity; or better yet, something to push off of where the move away is felt as a purposeful move in opposition as opposed to a random gyration in free-floating space (not that random gyration in free-floating space doesn't sound exhilarating, it just did not fit the confines of this project).

The first obstacle to tackle was to think about the actual music being played in the space and exactly how I wanted that to blossom out into the other elements of the performance. If I wanted the music played in the performance to be at the forefront of audience attention I needed to make certain that that aspect was rock solid. In regards to standards of music quality, Mitchell often told me that “the audience can tell when you show up to a sixty minute gig with five minutes of music.”<sup>117</sup> The necessity to fill the space with not only physical presence but also with music that was captivating enough to justify the occupation of the forty or so minutes I planned to take up. What would satisfy this criteria? I was nervous about committing to an entire solo concert as I had before (albeit, a good portion of the first performance was breath sounds, however, I was still sole proprietor of artistic direction) but was not sure in how to bring in other musicians without their complete and utter buy-in to not only the notion of micro-gestural development but of musical shepherding as a whole. That said, maybe it could be possible to draw the musicians into the process in the same way the audience would be; maybe there is a way of asking the musicians to approach the music in a way that would draw them into the concept as the music unfolded.

This concept of learning by doing struck a chord with me and reminded me of work I have been doing in my other profession as a product designer. In that world, Don Norman is king. The man who coined the term ‘human

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<sup>117</sup> Mitchell, interview 12.27.15



centered design;’ a concept where an object was considered to have been designed well by it’s intended use being understood simply through use of the object.<sup>118</sup> No prior knowledge of the object is needed, aside from normal everyday exposure to what Norman calls “everyday things.”<sup>119</sup> Would it be possible then to apply something like human centered design, that is inherently focused on a fixed tangible object being directly interacted with for understanding, to something like music that is constantly existing and disappearing at the event horizon of the specious present?

In a sense, the counterpoint given to the pitfalls of human centered design acts as a glowing endorsement for its deployment in an artistic setting. Music happens in time, there is no way to pause yet still actively experience its sensory musings.

The individual is a moving target. Design for the individual of today, and the design will be wrong tomorrow. Indeed, the more successful the product, the more that it will no longer be appropriate. This is because as individuals gain proficiency in usage, they need different interfaces than were required when they were beginners. In addition, the successful product often leads to unanticipated new uses which are very apt not to be well supported by the original design.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Norman, Human-Centered Design Considered Harmful

The iterative process that lies at the essence of improvisation as a highly variable means of product development actually embraces this moving target. It is literally only capable of designing for the now operating within a real-time iterative developmental loop. That said, despite the actual object not being able to leave the past, the learned interactive tools are able to draw meaning from a previous experience and inform a forward looking presentation of new material no matter the brevity of the stimuli. The case study of Mitchell's professional success with exactly this phenomenon exemplifies this concept in practice and furthered my resolve to find more meat on the Nonaah bone in order to achieve the performance I was looking for.

The clock-work like majesty of Nonaah is in how perfectly alluring and obscure the opening phrase is and how at first listen, it almost makes sense but grates the nerves enough that one tends to respond with "what was that?" With only a handful of notes, Mitchell is able to confuse and intrigue the listener enough, always drawing them closer into the performance; each repetition giving the audience another look at the object he's trying to teach them how to use, always predicated on the the collectivity of previous iterations. In my mind it was perfect, and that was terrifying when considering my own approach to it.

Part of me really wanted to simply play the piece as Mitchell did; I wanted to feel what he felt doing what he did. However, the shadow cast was too large, the piece had made too profound an impact on my life and I was worried I wouldn't be able to step out of my own way; to find a space that

wasn't occupied by this musical giant. In this case I had developed an entrenched understanding of the object in question through my curiosity and resultant studies that I feared would prevent me from being able to break free of the gravity I had given Mitchell. But this did not mean the melody needed to be abandoned altogether, it simply meant that I could not be the one deploying it in the performance. But if not me, then who?

As a saxophonist, I had always fantasized about playing with strings. There are orchestral pieces that utilize the saxophone and I've played my fair share of standard saxophone orchestral repertoire like Khachaturian, Mussorgsky, and Ravel but I always felt like the other in the room. Even a saxophone concerto is often looked down upon in classical music circles as paying lip service to a lesser. To me, this dogmatic alterity was rooted more in convention and less in practice in part due to the saxophones powerful iconography within the jazz canon and lack of representation in early orchestral music that has become so symbolic with the identity of strings. Because of that, jazz and classical musics have seemingly been pitted against each other in the academy and cross pollination is often met with accusations of gimmickry and inauthenticity. Taking this into consideration, if presented together on one stage, the dialogue and entrenched identities associated with the visual representation of strings and saxophone both apart and together would provide an interesting means of expectation production within the space.

Having decided to incorporate strings into the performance, it was important to identify music that would continue to challenge audience expectation in a way that kept them engaged, drawing them deeper and deeper into the performance. Free improvisation was clearly an option but I was worried about bringing together the right musicians who had embodied the methodology in way that would guarantee a successful performance. I considered using a simple structure to open an improvisation where each player would pick three notes and then improvise in a way that focused on micro-details for motivic development that would draw out forward motion for as long as possible in order to simulate the organic growth and attention to detail I was looking for.

I toyed with other strategies but it eventually culminating with the realization that the most appropriate springboard into the level of artistic expression and exploration I was looking for was the object I had been studying. Nonaah was to be the material but not in it's solo form for all the reasons discussed previously. Instead, I honed in on another early version of the work presented as a saxophone quartet. The instruments that would fill out these parts would be two cello's and two double bass'. The reasoning behind that was two fold; 1. the registers and color would help support and provide lift to the natural colors of the saxophone and 2. the very best talent I had around me happened to be two cello's and 2 bass'.

This orchestration was interesting because it allowed me to play with the physical presentation within the space and play on expectation in that

regard. In the first concert, I was the sole actor within the performative space and looked for ways to upset that foci in a way that confused and inverted the performer/audience paradigm. In this instance, I wanted to take a different approach, to embrace the optics of tradition in order to push against the preconceptions that that particular setting entailed considering the inherent lineage associated with the different visual components briefly explored above. To accomplish this, the stage was to be presented in a similar fashion to a small orchestra; cello's flanking the wings with a double bass to either side, situating me at the center in the roll traditionally reserved for soloist or leader.



Figure 23: Photograph from the performance Nonaah revisited

The strings would wear traditional concert black attire with myself wearing a suit in order to stand out and visually separate myself in physical appearance. The idea was to give the visual of a typical performance setting aside from the saxophone. Even before sound was made, expectations would be established simply based on a backwards looking rolodex of personal experiences based on preconceptions about each instrument. These were the expectations that would be challenged and used as the first catalyst for performative energy and power.

Small modifications were made, slight of hand adjustments functioning to discreetly stack the deck in a way that would ensure the best possible setting for a fully immersive performance. The group was staged as close to the audience as possible in an effort to minimize the positional discrepancy between audience and performer in order to physically make the space seem more communal. The lights were also back-lit to make a rather large space appear small and encapsulated within a small illuminated window. The group was also spread out as flat as possible to almost mimic the first row of seats. Finally, the symmetrical staging provided a visual contrast to the music that conveyed a level of stability and order that would be continually challenged throughout the performance.

The quartet was interesting in that it contained the original melody but was accompanied by other equally angular and disjunct lines operating within the nooks and crannies of the original in a quasi hoquetos formulation.



Figure 24: The opening score from the Nonaah Quartet<sup>121</sup>

The original recordings of Mitchell playing the quartet version with fellow saxophonists Henry Threadgill, Joseph Jarman, and Wallace McMillian had the four parts all come in at once at a blistering tempo where they sustained the interlocking patterns for a number of minutes before jumping into the next section. Stylistically this was more akin to a through-composed classical composition than the original solo improvisation that was predicated on a

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<sup>121</sup> Mitchell, 2002

particular time and location. Instead of the audience performer interaction and enaction within the space, the quartet was more of an etude of rhythm and part melding. It begged the question if this material could function as the vessel for the space and power creation I was looking for. It seemed the perfect foundation and direction to take although this brought in other variables to consider.

I knew I did not want to play the quartet material in the same way Mitchell did. I still wanted that essence and shepherd like power enacted in the solo performance. To do this, the quartet material was taken and reformulated in order to embody those original principles. The first departure would be in the orchestration. Instead of four alto saxophones, the piece would be played by two cellos and two double bass'. As the saxophone player, I would improvise around these voices allowing the strings to mark and develop the space preparing it for my own voice to enter once buy in had been achieved. Furthermore, the lines would not be played as one. Instead, the performance would open with the iconic line (the second part from the top in the score example) and develop in much the same way explored in the previous chapter. I wanted the cello to open because of how the melody cut in that particular register. In addition, the timbral quality was ripe for the type of micro-detail manipulation I was looking for. The idea was to embrace the idiosyncrasies of the sound and the register of the opening on the cello brought a level of clarity that was perfect for this scenario.



During rehearsals, I imparted my desire for micro development within the parts played by each player. The conveyed message was to play with as sharp and crisp a feeling as possible for a dozen or so repetitions. Eventually the direction was to start moving into those micro spaces and begin pushing the boundaries of the line, slowly and gradually ending in a place of improvisation. Pacing was the biggest obstacle. Getting each player to a point where they were comfortable with tiny adjustments and small variations as developmental material. Early attempts would be at a point of total chaos after a few minutes and it took some coaching to get the ensemble to a point where the scope of gestural size was intuitively understood. Once that point was reached where a slight timbral shift was understood as a rather large event, the piece moved forward incredibly well. Each version was better and better.

As a group we agreed upon entrance timings for the performance. This time I would not allow a single event to go on so long that it lost the audiences interest like I had in the first performance with the breath sounds. With that concern in mind, I also didn't want to compromise too far the other direction and rush through potentially powerful uneasiness. I still wanted to provide a sense of uneasiness as to what was going on; if others were going to enter, how long would this repetition go on for? Is it the same line each time? What is going on?

We tried different timings and settled on a two minute discrepancy between entrances (it's amazing how long two minutes feels when repeating a single phrase over and over!) seemed to be the sweet spot to achieve this

effect. Once everybody was actively playing their parts, the direction was to push the detail based improvisation gradually away from the original part but always keeping the origin point in mind. The idea was for the audience to always hear aspects of each part no matter how far from the path the musicians strayed. In order to accomplish this, there needed to be a measured and organized move away from the original in a way that drew the audience along the continuum of development. This was where the shepherding would happen, through a guided tour of the intricacies of a series of melodies and how ideas could be extrapolated out of them, yet always in reference to a common point of exodus. The strings were instructed to push the material as far as they could without completely losing sight of the melodic underpinnings for fifteen minutes at which point they would cut off all at once where the saxophone would enter.

Ideally, at this point the audience would be fully engaged with the material and conscious of the micro level shift occurring all around them within the completeness of the ensemble's output. That realization and excitement caused by a positive confirmation of a newly discovered element would bring them closer to the intended listening space culminating with an abrupt cut off. The effect of the re-introduction of silence would briefly clear the space and draw all attention to whatever came next and in this place it would be the saxophone. This was the space I had been searching for, a position of power earned through attentive action and founded on the engagement of others freeing me to play with what felt like the complete support and encouragement

of the space. Once I had played for ten or so minutes, the other musicians would one by one filter back in improvising around the themes previously explored and developed. We would exit as our lines ran out of steam completely engaged in micro-gestural elements almost completely devoid of the original melodic structure aside from a pareidolic harkening. The hope was that through the course of the performance, audience members would have developed the tools and ability to engage the musical object to the point where the sounds confronting them that were at a time foreign, would now be understood as pieces of previous material and aspects of a larger and more intricate dance of musical complexity resulting in a level of familiarity and engagement as opposed to alterity and confusion.

The actual performance went better than I ever could have imagined. Part of that exuberance was clearly due to experiencing the pay-off of a long and invested project and seeing the culmination of that work first hand. The most intense part was when the strings finally dropped out and I began to play. The profundity of the silence and realization for the audience that I was about to play was incredible. The attentiveness to my every movement was palpable. and completely changed the material I imagined I would play. I found myself embracing the ethos of the moment and instead of springing directly into an improvisation of energy and complexity that tends to lean towards showcasing technical facility, I was captivated by the organic development the strings had so delicately navigated. Without thinking of it, I realized I was playing my three note exercise, a slight variation since it wasn't a strict structural element, but

the intent was clearly one in the same. I played single notes, manipulating every aspect of the micro-details only moving when the energy started to stagnate. Eventually basic melodies started to form and connective tissue by means of ornamentation and canonical stylistic references.

The space within the space felt very much mine to control yet never without a sense of responsibility to continually push for a deeper engagement. The consciousness of the trust I had been afforded in that moment by not only the audience but also by my fellow musicians who had entrusted me with an environment of their creation was a powerful catalyst propelling me forward. That said, I would be lying if I said that I felt no authoritarian power over the situation. I absolutely did and it felt good. The feeling of control where, if I made sound there was sound, if I stopped there was silence, was intoxicating and I found myself playing with bookended silence between episodic events almost in an abuse of power; I can therefore I will. But this was not a sustainable model and my concerns of carrying a concert single handedly were well founded because towards the end of the solo saxophone portion I started to unravel a bit, engaging in ever more ephemeral structural development and relying on the past to justify my occupation of the present. In that moment, the strings re-entered and injected a much needed element of biodiversity into the space recapitulating and defining the path and point of arrival.

## 4.3: Performance Response

After the piece had concluded it was interesting to start receiving feedback from both audience members and the performers, whom I either spoke with immediately after the performance or were formally interviewed within a few days of the event. The performers seemed to embrace the concept completely. When asked about how the focus on micro-gestures informed the entirety of the performance, one of the bass players stated that:

Because it was a repetitive figure, most of the development happens on a micro level, changing timbres, accents, and messing with slight pitch changes. Some of that arose from the idiosyncrasies of playing that material on bass. [...] Most of it has to do with changing parameters of sound production and using those changes to highlight things that are already in the musical phrase.<sup>122</sup>

This speaks directly to the notion of exposing aspects of the sound that are always present, yet often paid less attention to or generally less noticed than elements and parameters more aligned with melody and/or rhythmic structure. Another performer stated that the improvisation felt that “the ideas grew like fractals” indicating the general genetic structure of micro-details propagating outwards into the specific performative dialect forming within that particular music.<sup>123</sup> But most importantly was when a performer stated the following:

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<sup>122</sup> Motl

<sup>123</sup> Babin et al.

There was a point near the beginning when everyone had come in, before it went off the rails, while it was still locked into the piece, it became this kind of meta-creation.<sup>124</sup>

To be clear, “off the rails” in this context is meant in the complimentary sense; an acknowledgment of the intended move away from standardized structure. The idea of meta-creation, however, speaks directly to the precessional playing outlined perviously and showcases the affectatious nature the idea has.

Even what could be perceived as negative reactions to aspects of the performance from the musicians seemed to assist in supporting these claims. In discussing the performance with the musicians in the following days, allowing for enough time to reflect and think through the performance as a whole, I did hear criticism about certain stylistic choices. One performer stated that a certain voice maybe was heard from a little too much and had a “heavy handed” style of playing.<sup>125</sup> Another critique was of alluding to stylistic idiosyncrasies implying a particular direction in terms of a certain canonical trajectory.

[The musician] introduced a totally different style that brought in a totally foreign element. Like everyone moving one direction and then somebody moves against the stream.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Babin et al.

<sup>125</sup> Motl

<sup>126</sup> Babin et al.

The implication is that the process was interrupted by an abrupt change and injection of a tradition that brings with it a certain amount of rigidity in regards to structure and stylistic elements. In practice however, this is entirely based solely on an individual perception of an event; one that is heightened by the in the moment knee jerk reactions.

The music was challenging and I fully intended there to be moments where the musicians felt uneasy or at odds with each other. It was in those spaces of adversity where the process would impose itself and tether those stray ideas to the path. The functionality and re-assessment of commonalities in which to re-engage would present themselves, in essence, using what was in the moment perceived as an outlier, as a catalyst to reaffirm the agreed upon direction strengthening the resolve of the group to move together. The result was this breathing, living organism growing and interacting with the space that got stronger as it progressed furthering into it's lifecycle. What was perceived as a negative was simply a singular event, but the ripples caused from it is where the conceptual underpinning could act to draw things back together to keep the performance moving forward.

This notion of growth and development was not only understood by the players but more importantly, seemed to impact and resonate with the individual audience members as well. Colleagues in the audience from the music department praised the performance for it's energy and "existing

between genre” which seems to be hip in the department right now.<sup>127</sup> For them the performance was expected and something they were actively choosing to show up to and support. They’ve been around me and my music for the last 7 years. Most, if not all of them had at some point or another spoken to me about my project where I had explained in detail the different components to my work. The intent was never to pander to this type of audience member but to those that didn’t exactly know what to expect; who were coming into the performance with no knowledge of Roscoe Mitchell or even myself. How did this type of audience member respond when presented with this type of music?

Fortunately, my time at UCSD has taken me well outside the music department and in doing so has afforded me the opportunity to make acquaintances whom I’ve engaged with for other reason besides music. Talking these audience members was especially enlightening because of the lack of any real expectation they had other than the basics surrounding my personality and the conversations we had had up until the point of art making. It seemed this was where I could see how effective the process was and if the experience was one of inclusion and community where they felt engaged and drawn into the music in the ways outlined in earlier chapters. I was happy to hear some extremely supportive comments from this demographic of the audience. One individual asked a long string of questions focused entirely on

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<sup>127</sup> Conversation with audience members



the details. He asked if “the cello was changing the whole time or did [he] just notice it late?” followed by a similar question pertaining to the saxophone utilizing the same effect he noticed in the cello of what he described as “little changes.”<sup>128</sup> Another interviewee asked if the strings ever stopped playing the theme and that they “felt like it was always there in the back or something” showing the power the repetition and drive of micro-details had on the element of expectation; introducing development through the comfort of a known entity.<sup>129</sup> The activation is clearly visible in these individuals but was there evidence of that active listening driving through the rest of the performance? Was the detail focused awakening momentary or embodied as a usable tool utilized throughout the performance?

The most inspiring conversation was with an audience member who in recounting their favorite aspects of the performance started to talk about how “the end of the piece was the same as the beginning just without the notes.” On the surface, this is already a wonderful endorsement of the success of the shepherding process, but when digging a little deeper and noting that the end of the performance was actually straight notes, it even further confirms a state of listening through a completely different filter. When I pushed on this line of thinking asking what he meant by this statement he said that it was clear that “the focus was on the details, not the notes” and that “you wanted us listening

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<sup>128</sup> Post

<sup>129</sup> Zhang

to the different parts of the music.”<sup>130</sup> This was the confirmation I had been looking for, that an audience member could come into this performance and leave having experienced the parts of the music that I was hoping they would hone in on. Without program notes or verbal direction, the music guided the listener to a place where they learned the use, and deployed tools developed and embodied within a specific performance place and time.

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<sup>130</sup> Geier

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This performance seemed to verify my artistic inquiry and achieve the goals I set forth to achieve, however nebulous ‘success’ may be in the arts, yet there was still the underlying question as to if Mitchell heard any of his performance in my work. This is not to say I was looking for his blessing or that my performance was intended to be in anyway under his authority, more of a line of inquiry considering the profundity Nonaah and Mitchell have had on my artistic voice. Is it possible for the performance to both be an extension of my own identity while showcasing another’s conceptual framework? Furthermore, in a more musical sense, did Mitchell feel the arrangement and organization of his melody I had performed encapsulated what *he* felt was at the essence of that piece and what it was intended to do. Luckily, Mitchell and I have stayed extremely close over the years and he was happy to meet me to discuss the performance. We arranged a day to spend together doing interviews and to just catch up before Mitchell was to receive a lifetime achievement award from ASCAP in Los Angeles. It seemed apropos for this interview to happen at a time when Mitchell was being recognized for a lifetime of music influenced heavily by his work extrapolating every detail out of his original Nonaah concept.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> The actual trophy awarded to Mitchell from ASCAP had the original score of Nonaah etched into the crystal plate as a backdrop for the text, further underscoring what the piece has come to mean within Mitchell’s entire oeuvre

This was not the first time I had interviewed Mitchell about my project. I've included text from a few different sessions we had over the past eight years, however, this was the first and only one so far to happen after my performance where we could sit down and listen to it together and talk about the different aspects of the piece. In general, he really liked the performance. Throughout the recording, multiple times, he would say "nice!," "very good," "things are sounding great," and other similar exclamations of approval.<sup>132</sup> An especially excited moment when the four strings were finally playing together and manipulating the theme inspired Mitchell to state that "this thing is coming to life; it's living!" further strengthening the metaphor I've used of organic growth as it pertains to the development of a performance through its component parts.

The most meaningful comments came after the recording had finished and we started to discuss the piece on a higher level and most importantly in comparison to Mitchell's solo performance. When I asked him if he heard the development through manipulating and improvising through micro-details and gestures he stated that:

If I listen to my version with the repeated figure, I definitely heard that ... and how it transferred and how certain parts would stick out at one time and others would stick out another and that's evidence of really looking at the materials and dissecting it

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<sup>132</sup> Mitchell, interview 2.7.18

and presenting different pictures of the same material. I heard that.<sup>133</sup>

This was the key to the performances success in his opinion and the fundamental driving force to effectively transmitting the musical idea. The fact that you can draw people in and shepherd them into a particular space of listening confirms, according to Mitchell, “how powerful music is when you present it in that way... this is just as evident in my performance as it was in yours.”<sup>134</sup> It is this power that originally drew me into Mitchell’s playing in the first place and caused me to fixate so heavily on a particular performance. It is incredibly moving to have such an inspirational figure endorse and recognize the conceptual backbone to a creative project in such a concise and direct way.

Mitchell’s support and enjoyment of the performance backs up the comments made by the musicians and audience members discussed previously. His perspective provides substance to the claims I make in regards to how I shaped and understood not only his playing but how it exposed itself in my own artistic voice. However, I do not judge the success of this process solely on his approval. Each stakeholder in the build up and execution of the performance spoke to some extent supporting my original hypothesis of micro-gestures being used to shepherd listeners into a performance, moving them

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<sup>133</sup> Mitchell, interview 2.7.18

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

into a space to better understand and experience a work of art without needing the preparation guiding them to a particular focused listening. The music played has an inherent power to it and it is up to the artist to harness that force in order to effectively communicate a message.

Through this work, I have outlined one particular method of drawing the audience into a musical performance through the experience of the music itself. This is not to say that musical shepherding is the only method capable of accomplishing such a feat, but is the means in which I found it to be most effective in transmuting my own artistic idea into a tangible and functional tool. By examining not only the origination and processional deployment of shepherding in Nonaah, but also my own artistic creative process, the fundamental underpinning of shepherding's functionality can be seen in the constant attention to detail from not only the presentation of the music in a space, but a focus on the micro-details of sound within that space which provide the building blocks for a macroscopy of the overall creative output. In doing so, a performer can obtain a deeper and more meaningful dialogue with an audience opening up avenues of energy and exploration amplified and widened by the communality of an informed and trusted performative space. Such a space is necessary because it allows a message to be experienced by the means in which it was intended to be digested in its completeness, transcending expectation and drawing disparate ears towards a unique way of knowing without a prescription to a fixed path. Instead, the enacted power of the space ebbs and flows as the performative dialogue draws together around

a particular message giving all actors both the ability to push back as well as something to push off of. The goal is deeper and more meaningful art through the acknowledgement of realization and the understanding of the music and how it is alive.

The message I always strive to impress upon listeners is to listen deep into the sounds; to look to the details in order to better understand the whole. The point is not to fixate on microscopy but to show the component parts making up the whole so as to provide structure and understanding through the actual experience and engagement with the object. The idea for this work first came to me through my studies with Roscoe Mitchell and it may have been naive to think I could fully step out from the shadow cast (or that anybody can really step out from behind the experiences and impressions that lead to a particular idea and belief) by his persona and the impact of his performance of Nonaah. That said, I was able to express my own take and unique way of engaging the material in a way that spawned music I can feel proud of. At the very end of our interview, I asked Mitchell if he enjoyed my work considering how much he has been a part of it (both the research and performances) and he said “Drew, I’ve got a lot to be proud of; I’m so happy.”

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