UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Tracing Experimentalism and Tradition in “Sound”

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

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Professor Steven Schick, Chair
Professor Anthony Davis
Professor Stephanie Richards

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Tracing Experimentalism and Tradition in “Sound”

by

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Master of Arts in Music

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Professor Steven Schick, Chair

This thesis is in three parts. The first part is a research paper which investigates the ways by which Roscoe Mitchell’s piece, *Sound* (1965), is a landmark of experimentalism while retaining important influences of the broader jazz tradition. The second part is a piece titled *Many Centers* for solo drum set, composed and performed in April 2018. The third part is a short album titled *Time Studies*, recorded in June 2018.

TRACING EXPERIMENTALISM AND TRADITION IN "SOUND"

Roscoe Mitchell's piece, *Sound*, is a striking, radical departure from prior music in the "jazz tradition." It is sparse, never presents any sort of pulse or rhythmic grid, largely disregards pitch, and utilizes a wide range of timbres. Even the music of Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and Cecil Taylor contains prominent sonic characteristics and idioms of bebop such that the label "free *jazz*" generally seems fitting. *Sound* on the other hand, bears no obvious musical resemblance to jazz beyond its basic instrumentation. In many ways it sounds more like John Cage than Charlie Parker. The twenty-minute work is the title track on the first commercial recording by the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music, Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound* (1965), and is an important artifact of the AACM's earliest experiments. This paper investigate this revolutionary piece of music—why does it sound so different? What makes it significant? What were the reasons behind these musical decisions? Yet through this radical break from convention, *Sound* also retains a strong connection to its jazz forebearers.

In *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka traces the history of the blues and its musical outgrowths up until the early 1960s, looking at the music's relationship with the black experience and mainstream society. One of Baraka's central hypotheses in *Blues People* is the presence of a through-line throughout African American music history that is "the result of certain attitudes, certain specific ways of thinking about the world." He continues, "The Negro's music changed has he changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or… *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*" (Baraka 1999, 153). He illustrates how

African American music goes through repeated cycles of overexposure to and dilution by mainstream (white) American culture and subsequent revitalization (220). In this paper it becomes apparent that *Sound* retains a strong connection to that tradition and its musical and ideological values.

Experimentalism often appears antithetical to tradition, working to dismantle it. This piece provides an important example of experimentalism that engages positively with tradition, allowing both to exist simultaneously. I wanted to explore this relationship more thoroughly, hoping that it can offer a new example to modern experimental musicians in a search to understand our traditions and how to engage with them. As George Lewis eloquently summarizes the situation:

> For some time, historians of experimentalism in music have stood at a crossroads, facing a stark choice: to grow up and recognize a multicultural, multi-ethnic base for experimentalism in music, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions and methods, or to remain the chroniclers of an ethnically bound and ultimately limited tradition that appropriates freely, yet furtively, from other ethnic traditions, yet cannot recognize any histories as its own other than those based in whiteness. (Lewis 2008, xiii).

It is my hope through this paper to make a small contribution to move us towards the first option.

This paper frequently references a "jazz tradition." Such a notion that there even is a "jazz tradition, a history of styles linked by a common set of values that scholars can trace to its earliest days, has proved both a useful and troubling concept for the music's

champions” (Anderson 2007, 2). Since my focus is on tracing specific ideas of Baraka and Lewis within this piece, I feel it suffices to use the term “jazz” in a general sense.

The dominant music history often excludes black experimentalists, confining them to the world of jazz. While this paper focuses on the relationship between *Sound* and jazz, the AACM’s work crosses borders of genre, race, geography, and musical practice (Lewis 2008, x). The AACM branded themselves as “performing artists” with “universal” appeal (118), and their “challenges to conventional notions of sound, time, form, personality, tradition and genre were not new only to jazz, but to music more broadly” (Lewis 2008, 41). Furthermore, while I emphasize the differences between *Sound* and earlier styles, I heed George Lewis’ caution against looking at tempo and harmonic structure as a defining boundary, and their absence as a mark of “progress.” As he writes, “the constant, anxious repetition of the canard that jazz is somehow intrinsically doomed to endless recycling of ‘clichéd conventions’ becomes essential to the marginalization and subsequent erasure of African-Americans as experimental music makers” (Lewis 2004, 22).

Experimentalism in *Sound*

Sound is striking in its sparseness, expanded timbral sound world, and lack of tempo. The listener is presented with strange sounds against considerable space and silence, and with no rhythmic grid against which to measure them. To investigate the work’s sonic remarkability, I begin by analyzing the ways in which *Sound* breaks from

conventions that are generally present in jazz, including free jazz. Indeed, most recordings of the "so-called free jazz of the period" were characterized by "a relatively compact dynamic range, turn-taking in a clearly defined and often preselected order of solos, fairly constant backing of piano, bass and drums" (Lewis 2008, 141-2)—characteristics which do not apply in the least to *Sound*.

The piece opens with Mitchell playing a slow melody that suggests A minor, with additional chromatic notes and variations in tuning. The melody is sometimes accompanied by counter-lines or harmony by other horns, over a continuous cymbal roll and a discontinuous low pedal in the bass. Mitchell's phrases are short, rhythmically free, with long breaths between them. The melody is repeated once, making the whole section approximately 3 minutes—already the length of a song. Yet this is only the very beginning of the piece's expanded structure. It utilizes the standard jazz form of melody, solos, and melody reprise—with melody and solos lasting a few minutes each. In all four iterations (beginnings and endings of both takes included in the 1996 CD release) the melody and counter-lines are the same, suggesting it was composed by Mitchell in advance. The musicians are always exploring variation in phrasing, dynamics, timbre, and tuning—sometimes subtly, sometimes markedly.

At the end of the melody, small metallic percussion instruments (to my ear: finger cymbals, little bells, and other objects that could be small gongs or tin cans) transition us deeper into the piece's sparse, strange sound world. Someone (probably Mitchell) plays a short, angular, non-diatonic melody on recorder that functions as a kind of interlude.

Then, Lester Bowie enters and begins his solo of whining, squeaking, and laser-like sounds that are often unrecognizable as coming from a trumpet. Bowie is the prominent voice for two and a half minutes, towards the beginning of which he plays unaccompanied for a full minute. Each player takes an extended turn as the soloist before the melody returns to close the piece. While this form is familiar, it is not sonically obvious, and "the untrained or distracted ear would be hard-pressed to identify solistic turn-taking" (Lewis 2008, 142).

The presence of a constant tempo, outlined by the rhythm section, is a fixture of jazz dating back at least sixty years through its histories as dance and marching band music. Significantly, Mitchell's piece abandons tempo, and furthermore *sounds* arhythmic. While by definition any two sound events constitute a rhythm, the style of *Sound* is often so slow and meandering that it intuitively reads as arhythmic. In comparison, Albert Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* (1964) also abandons tempo yet the style is much more rhythmic. Gestures are played with the articulation, style, and purpose as if they were in time, or to suggest flexible, independent senses of pulse. In improvised music, the absence of regular rhythm or grid is perhaps the most salient aspect and the largest hurdle for most listeners, for "without it, they feel lost, adrift, as if there's nothing at stake" (Corbett 2016, 26). In *Sound*, this sense of aimlessness comes from more than just lack of tempo—a perceived lack of rhythm.

The sonic material in *Sound*—instrumentation, timbre, and pitch—is revolutionary. Unconventional instruments are prominent, and while the musicians

mostly stick to their conventional instruments, they play them in new ways such that they are often unrecognizable. Fielder abandons drums altogether and only plays the hi-hat and cymbals. The musicians employ a wide range of timbres, making a language out of extended techniques such that the term “extended” is irrelevant. Harmonic and modal structures are abandoned, as is any emphasis on pitch. Pitch is present the way it’s present in conversation; it’s there, but in the background. In the foreground are timbre and tone—the literal *sound*, in connection to the title.

A notable and highly unconventional characteristic of *Sound* is the use of silence, sparseness and quiet dynamics. It contrasts most jazz recordings which stay within a moderate to loud dynamic range, with a constant backing by the rhythm section. In *Sound*, rarely do more than three musicians play at once, and more often there are fewer. Soloists and accompanists take long breaths between and within phrases, making space (for either silence or others) as much as they play. The drums and bass are the most frequent accompanists, yet are by no means consistently present nor do they establish a consistent backing when they do play. In listening to the audio recording, it’s easy to forget that there were six musicians in the room, though their silent witness was no doubt an important part of the creation process. The music’s deemphasis of rhythm and pitch reinforces this expansiveness and sparseness.

Mitchell shares his opinion on the importance of quiet dynamics and space in a 1966 article by Terence Martin, “A lot of musicians play so loud all the time that you can’t really hear the true value of the notes. Each note has a direction, and if you play

loud, you cover up its direction, and you never really get anything established" (quoted in Lewis 2008, 151). This philosophy distinguishes him from so many free jazz recordings: his making space to foreground quiet individual sounds. Mitchell's remark is reminiscent of the Cagean idea to let sounds be sounds. He identifies something inherent within a note itself, its "direction," which need not be forced, but merely given space. Contrasting Cage, to Mitchell the connection of a sound *to its player* is important. Asked by Simon Rose in 2017 about the development of one's own voice on an instrument, Mitchell answers, "For me if I'm listening to a saxophonist, the first thing I'm listening to is the sound, that's primary for me. If I hear a saxophonist who doesn't have a sound I'm not interested" (Rose 2017, 170). This quote first reaffirms the significance of sound in Mitchell's work. More intriguing is his phrasing that a player does or does not "have a sound." Sound is not just a literal concept—he doesn't say, "have a sound *that I like*." Perhaps sound, to Mitchell, is also a metaphor for one's voice. There is a connection between having a sound worth listening to, and having something to say. This is one of several ways in which this work retains jazz values through its experimentalism.

Connecting to tradition

Sound retains few obvious conventions of jazz—perhaps only its head-solos-head structure and the standard ensemble of saxophones, horns, bass, and percussion. *Sound* connects on a deeper level, however, to values and patterns of African American music. These connections include placing improvisation at the center, vocal qualities and rough

timbres, the importance of saying something, and resistance to the silencing of black voices.

Baraka considers improvisation to be of "invaluable significance," praising musicians throughout history who "restore improvisation" to that "traditional role" (Baraka 1999, 225). For example, he says of "innovators" such as Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman that they reemphasize "the most expressive qualities of Afro-American musical tradition," and "restore jazz to its valid separation from, and anarchic disregard of, Western popular forms." They "have used the music of the forties with its jagged, exciting rhythms as an initial reference and have restored the hegemony of the blues" and "have also restored improvisation to its traditional role of invaluable significance" (225). Indeed, *Sound* places the focus on improvisation, with minimal content of the composition determined in advance. While the structure is organized around solos, the piece incorporates group improvisation as in earlier styles, blending soloistic and group expression.

The importance of the voice and vocal reference has "always been characteristic of Negro music" (227), which Baraka traces back to the origins of the blues. Coleman, Coltrane, and Rollins, "literally scream and rant in imitation of the human voice, sounding many times like the unfettered primitive shouters" (227). Louis Armstrong and early jazz musicians rejected the pure sound of the European classical trumpet in favor of the "more humanly expressive sound of the voice … the rough, raw sound the black man forced out of these European instruments was a sound he had cultivated in this country

for two hundred years" (79). These qualities in black music have origins in vocal styles in Africa that have persisted through centuries of oppression and been adapted in contexts that are not suited for them—hence black musicians had to *force* European instruments to make the sounds they want.

This emphasis on the voice is related to the importance in African American music to ideas of self expression and *saying something*. To Mitchell, a player's own "sound" was primary, and we could interpret that "sound" as a kind of unique, intrinsic mode of expression. The solos reflect each musician's unique character or feelings at that moment. In contrast to the nonrepresentational quality that was prominent in the work of white artists and musicians at the time, "the insistence by blacks that music has to be 'saying something'" becomes "part of a long history of resistance to the silencing of the black voice" (Lewis 2008, 41).

Conclusion

One of the reasons I am drawn to study this music is that the AACM is the "very group whose work problematizes" the "free jazz/free improvisation and idiomatic/non-idiomatic dialectics" (Lewis 2004, 23). The perceived "freedom" of the new music of the early 1960's came from the simple but profound focus on "original music"—young musicians' reliance on their own compositional talents (Lewis 2008, 39). Minutes from an early AACM meeting on October 2, 1965 evidence that one of the founding purposes

of the organization was for its members to have the chance to play their own compositions (Lewis 2008, 121-124).

This principal was not without debate, at first. Alden Lee questioned, “What is ‘original music’? Everything that you do has been influenced by something else. You’re going to present original music, be it good or bad?” (Lewis 2008, 123) Lee was not alone to question the quality of the music they presented in concert. This is a risk with presenting original music, and that is part of the experiment. The AACM’s dedication to that risk led to revolutionary new music and a composer-centered philosophy that expanded who and what a composer could be. Muhal Richard Abrams encouraged all members to write, saying in a meeting “No one’s excluded, you see. You may not be Duke Ellington, but you got some kind of ideas, and now is the time to put ‘em in. Wake yourself up. This is an awakening we’re trying to bring about” (quoted in Lewis, 2004, 17).

The devotion to original music was not without debate at first—there was a concern that they should be allowed to play older tunes, and that it was important to retain and impart to others a “knowledge of the history” (Lewis 2008, 122). These issues were carefully considered by the AACM and informed their music. Lee’s questioning what music is *truly* original was a kind of solution to their dilemma of retaining tradition. As Jerol Donavan eloquently stated, “All the compositions that are being written in the Association came from our musical heritage. All the music that has been played in the past leads us up to this point where we can create new sounds and new compositions. Our

musical heritage is with us all the time, so I don’t see why we have to be worrying about that” (quoted in Lewis 2008, 124).

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MANY CENTERS

The initial motivation for *Many Centers*, for solo drum set, was a desire to create more original music and further my practice as an improviser. Months before the performance, I chose to work on this project with the plan of spending as much time developing and practicing this piece as I would learning a written percussion solo—an average of an hour per day over three months. This was only the second time I performed an original and improvised solo. This piece served as a short-term goal in the deeper process of my development as a solo improviser.

The composition process started with improvisations and explorations of potential material, and I kept track of short ideas or motifs that I liked, so that I could return to them. I found that some motifs naturally led to variations and sparked further improvisation, and others did not. These motifs were short rhythmic and melodic cells, often with implied tempo, dynamic, articulation, orchestration, and/or variations. For example, the first motif in the final score—written as just a string of 32nd notes and a line at the top of the page—is a long continuous stream of attacks on the snare drum (snares off), with sudden shifts in dynamics, tempo, and sound quality. Another motif is a slow pulse alternating between bass drum and hi hat pedal, against which I know I will play phrases that exist in independent and fluctuating tempos.

As I was collecting interesting fragments, I struggled to find a way to structure them in a piece. Recalling a talk by Jürg Frey at UC San Diego in March 2018, I thought, "why not make a piece that is simply a list of these motifs?" My first version of the piece

consisted of ten motifs written vertically down the page, which I played in order, each for approximately 1 minute, improvising variations and transitions. My thought was that this structure would be liberating, because in the performance I could focus purely on developing the motif at hand—decisions like when-to-move-on or what-to-do-next having been predetermined. While I think there is potential with such a structure, this version was too restrictive. By tying the performance to this list and a timer, it was hard to find a mental and musical *flow*, and phrases had to be cut short or unnaturally prolonged. Furthermore, I wanted the piece to spark further improvisation beyond the given material, and this structure inhibited that freedom.

The most important discovery in this process was a practice session in which I decided to improvise a ten minute piece based loosely on these motifs and otherwise left completely open. This near abandonment of the piece was the most successful version yet, resolving the issues I described above. In the final version, I determined only three moments in advance: the beginning, ending, and a specific phrase which would occur sometime in the middle. I left all other musical details to unfold through improvised performance. These specific planed moments, as well as the handful of other motifs I could draw from, provided an anchor for the piece and gave me confidence going into the performance, while imposing minimal restriction on my improvisational freedom.

Figure 1: Score for the piece *Many Centers* by Benjamin Rempel, 2018

TIME STUDIES

This short album is an experiment in time. Each piece has at its center one or more rhythmic cycles, which are explored in different ways. This work is inspired by varying perceptions of time and memory and my own fascination with incomprehensibly large time scales on the order of geology and astronomy.

The inner tracks, “Number Nine” and “Cascade,” are pieces for an ensemble of violin, cello, bass, drums, and percussion. They each have as their basis a single rhythmic cycle from which come the groove, melody, improvisations, and overall character of the piece. In composing these cycles, my goal was to find an unstable rhythm (i.e. odd meter) that still could feel natural; provoking the musicians in a way that could be *internalized* and not *counted*. One way the cycles maintain a flow despite the odd meter is that their endings fall back into the beginnings by the presence of a polyrhythm (4:3 in “Number Nine” and 3:4 in “Cascade”) that resolves across the downbeat.

The outer tracks are “Opening” for low drums and “Three Suns” for three tam tams. The compositions are minimal, merely establishing a basic process in which the powerful sounds of these instruments are featured. Each instrument has its own rhythmic cycle, with tempos shifting independently in or out of synchronization like celestial bodies moving in or out of alignment as they orbit.