“It’s more personal than we think”: Conducted Improvisation Systems and Community in NYC

By

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Introduction

In the New York City area, conducted improvisation is becoming more and more an integral part of creative music practice. Many large ensembles use some form of conducted improvisation, such as Karl Berger’s Improvisers Orchestra, Butch Morris’ Nublu Orchestra (until Morris’ recent passing), Adam Rudolph’s Go: Organic Orchestra, and the various ensembles of Anthony Braxton which incorporate Braxton’s “language music” concept. There are also several ensembles of note outside of the New York area using the principles of conducted improvisation as developed by Butch Morris et al, including J.A. Deane’s group in New Mexico, and Gino Robair’s group in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the realm of contemporary classical performance, there are dozens of conductors using the “Soundpainting” semiotic language of Walter Thompson (soundpainting.com). Additionally, a growing number of musicians who have played in the aforementioned groups have started using the varied semiotic languages associated with those ensembles. One interesting example is New York based drummer/bandleader/instrument builder Kenny Wollesen who has begun to use some Butch Morris Conduction techniques in his marching band, the Himalayas.

Although conducted improvisation is known by many names (including Soundpainting, and language music) I will use the term “conducted improvisation”
because I feel that this term is the clearest way to describe the practice, and includes in its name the two essential elements. I also use the term “creative music” to describe what many outside observers would label “jazz”, “free jazz”, or “avant-garde jazz.”

**Defining Creative Music**

Some musicians, such as Yusef Lateef with his term “autophysiopsychic music”, (Lateef n.d.) have coined their own words to describe the diverse kinds of music that they perform. Many musicians and scholars have become uncomfortable with the word “jazz” because of its racialized connotations. Ornette Coleman states: “I still have that ‘black jazz’ image, I’m supposed to exist on a certain level and that’s it” (Coleman in Williams 1973: 22-23). Echoing this sentiment, Anthony Braxton, whose music and scholarship is a subject of this thesis states that:

Jazz is the word that’s used to delineate the parameters that African-Americans are allowed to function in, a ‘sanctioned’ zone. That’s what ‘jazz’ is. ‘Jazz’ is the name of the political system that controls and dictates African-American information dynamics. For instance-how can I say this?-the European and Euro-American definers have defined the music to the point where it is now so-called ‘understood’. (Braxton in Lock 1988: 91)

Creative music is a term that was first brought to broader attention in 1965 by the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, an organization of African-American musicians that was created on the South Side of Chicago with Muhal Richard Abrams as its first president (Lewis 2008: 135,139). From the beginning of its use by the AACM the term “creative music” was associated with the
composition of original music and individual approaches to organizing improvisation, as Lewis recounts in an interview with Afropop Worldwide’s Simon Rentner:

I think eventually the people who weren’t that interested in composition, who weren’t that interested in personal modes of expression, found less and less reason to be there. The others who were there found more and more reason to be there. (Lewis in Rentner 2014)

Although the term was brought to wide attention through the AACM, John J. Becker’s essay “Imitative Versus Creative Music in America” in Henry Cowell’s influential collection “American Composers on American Music” (originally published in 1933) predates that usage by almost 30 years. Becker writes:

The modern and ultra-modern composers of America today have recognized this very definitely. They are developing a distinctly individual, new, and beautiful music. They rebel violently against any sort of imitation. They recognize the difference between imitative and creative music more than any other living group (1933:190)

Becker concludes that, “Laws are made for imitators. Creators make laws” (Ibid.). Although Leo Smith has read Cowell’s book, and professes his admiration for the music of many of the writers collected in it (1974: 111-112), he insists that the article was not an influence on the AACM’s adoption of the term. Smith claims that African-American composer/improvisers used the term “creative music” as early as the 1940’s, and that the organization’s name was derived from this usage (Smith 2014)\(^1\).

Early uses of the term by members of the AACM, especially in Leo Smith’s self-published 1973 document *Notes* are associated primarily with “black music” and

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\(^1\) I met Wadada Leo Smith at the premiere of Anthony Braxton’s opera Trillium J (4/19/14) and these statements are derived from a brief conversation that we shared.
Smith frequently refers to creative music as “creative black music”. In *Notes*, although Smith acknowledges the importance of other world musics that incorporate improvisation, Smith primarily explains creative music in essentialist terms. Smith draws clear distinctions between European derived musics that are based on composition and African-American and world traditions that are improvisation-based.

Smith writes, in his article “(M1) American Music”:

> IN AMERICA there exist two distinct traditions of art music-creative music and classical music. I use the term creative music to apply to improvised music brought alive by the creative improvisor, either through reference to a score provided for his or her exploitation or through absolute improvisation; the term classical music refers to composed music brought alive by the performer through interpretation of a score (1974: 111).

In addition to addressing contemporary creativity, musicians associated with earlier jazz traditions are referred to as “creative musicians” (1973: 24-26). Clearly, Leo Smith uses the term to describe all improvised music that has developed from the African-American tradition, including jazz identified musics such as bebop and swing. Additionally, Smith refers to other improvised world traditions as “creative music.” Although Smith mainly writes about creative music from the African-American tradition, he does write of the importance of world musics to a larger sense of creative music practice. Although many of Smith’s statements about creative music as black music in *Notes* may be read as essentialist, Smith ends the first part of his writings on a universalist note.

> finally, we must seek out other cultures that have improvisation as their classical music (india, pan-islam, the orient, bali, and africa) and make lasting
cultural commitments with them. for the days are set in time that this vast world of ours can only survive unless we, as humans, become earth-beings committed in our cultural and political aspects to a pan-world future. (1973: 35)

The term “creative music” began to shed its essentialist connotations with the development of the Creative Music Studios, an organization and school created by Karl Berger and Ornette Coleman in 1972 (Ratliff, 2008). Karl Berger was a German pianist and vibraphonist who had studied with philosopher Theodor Adorno before meeting composer/improviser/multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry in Paris in 1965 (Panken 2011). Berger explains:

I basically started a project under Adorno’s guidance, because I still wasn’t sure whether I wanted to just do music or wanted to also be dealing with philosophy, particularly with this field. But that soon faded, as soon as I met Don Cherry, because then there was strictly no more time (Berger in Panken 2011)

Creative Music Studios was an organization that featured among its teachers a diverse group, including musicians and composers such as Fredric Rzewski, Leo Smith, Trilok Gurtu, Nana Vasconcelos, and Babatunde Olatunji (Sweet 1996). The musicians and composers that attended and taught at CMS were all interested to some degree in improvised music and composition and music from different world traditions.

Adam Rudolph and Anthony Braxton, both originally from Chicago (and subjects of this thesis), were also participants in the CMS. Rudolph taught there in 1980, and ’81 with other members of the Mandingo Griot Society (Rudolph 2014).
Additionally, Braxton was a member of the AACM, and many of Adam Rudolph formative experiences in Chicago were with members of the organization\(^2\). Butch Morris (also a subject of this thesis), originally from Los Angeles, was a member of the UGMAA musical collective organized by Horace Tapscott. Tapscott, like many other musicians from Los Angeles (including Morris) was never afraid of using the word “jazz” to describe much of his music. However, UGMAA, like other African-American musical collectives that emerged in the sixties, has been tied by scholars and musicians to the creative music movement\(^3\). Because of the importance of the CMS, the AACM, and Anthony Braxton in particular to the early history of conducted improvisation, I see the conducting systems of Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris, and Adam Rudolph emerging from a larger creative music tradition.

\(^2\) Rudolph grew up around many musicians associated with the AACM (including Joseph Bowie, brother of Art Ensemble member Lester Bowie, with whom he has had a long musical relationship), but suggests a stronger connection with Don Cherry. Rudolph goes as far as to say: “You know, I got to tell you, you mentioned the broad stroke thing of the AACM and the Creative Music Studios, and those are not my primary influences. I don’t feel…I don’t know how you approach your participation in the Organic Orchestra but I don’t really feel that it’s coming out of that at all.” (Rudolph, 2014). Although Rudolph primarily associates the “AACM sound” with musicians such as Anthony Braxton, Braxton himself has questioned lumping his music together with other AACM artists (see Jost 1975: 174).

\(^3\) UGMAA (then known as UGMA) was originally founded in 1961 (Looker 2004:152) a few years before the term “creative music” was popularized by the AACM. Tapscott never really embraced the term “creative music”, but it has been applied by scholars such as Jason Robinson (2005) and Michael Dessen (2003), who studied with AACM member George Lewis, to the music of many of the African-American musical collectives of the 1960’s. One of the few festivals in which both Butch Morris and Adam Rudolph’s ensembles performed was the Los Angeles “Creative Music Festival” (produced by Wadada Leo Smith in 2007) Tapscott’s music was also performed (other performers included Smith and AACM founding member Muhal Richard Abrams) (Wahl 2007)
In this chapter I am following the precedent set by scholars such as Jason Robinson, whose 2005 dissertation “Improvising California: Community and Creative Music in Los Angeles and San Francisco” uses the term “creative music” to describe a range of improvised music traditions in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. The creative music tradition as I understand it describes a broad range of musical expression, but somewhat paradoxically also describes music coming out of a specific cultural context. Clearly the term “creative music” itself divorced from its cultural context is hardly a useful definition of a music, as Adam Rudolph says:

But the confusion is, if you say creative music does that mean that Stockhausen is not creative music? It’s like, to me the term creative music isn’t really giving you any kind of distinction at all. I mean all music is creative, right? (Rudolph 2014)

“Creative music”, however, is an important term with a long history associated with the AACM, Creative Music Studios, and some of the other American musical collectives that developed in the 1960’s.

**Creative Music and Conducted Improvisation**

Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris, and Adam Rudolph, the three artists whose musical systems are the subject of this thesis, all have strong ties to the jazz tradition, yet the music that is created through their conducted improvisation systems (not to mention their written music) can be hard to categorize. Additionally, all three musicians have different degrees of comfort with the word “jazz” itself. As Butch Morris explains:
A conduction, [Morris] insists, ‘is not jazz, this is not classical--not free, it is what it is…The one thing it does have, no matter where it’s done, that makes it akin to jazz is combustion and ignition. To me this is the essence of swing’. (Kelley 2004: 406)

Morris clearly has a strong connection to the jazz tradition, but sees his practice of Conduction as essentially different from established traditions.

Adam Rudolph also recognizes his music’s relationship with the jazz tradition while simultaneously distancing himself from it:

The foundation of what I'm doing comes from the African-American improvisational tradition, which is often called jazz so that's the glue that allows all musicians to perform together…but stylistically, my music might sound like anything, depending on what I imagine in the composition. (Rudolph in Rule 1992)

Following in the footsteps of mentor Don Cherry, Rudolph generally eschews all musical categorization explaining that:

I don’t really think that that’s my job in a way. Luckily my job is to make the music and yeah, people love categories, I mean in all things in life. And of course you do need to know the difference between a bicycle and a chair. But …you know people are usually not fond of categories. (Rudolph, 2014)

Anthony Braxton’s views on his music in relationship to jazz have been well documented by Lock (1988) and Radano (1993). In his own Triaxium writings, Braxton explains in a chapter entitled “Creative Music from the Black Aesthetic” why
he thinks that genre distinctions are particularly problematic when exploring what he views as a creative music continuum.\(^4\)

One of the most basic distortions that have come to permeate black creative music is the notion that every given thrust extension must necessarily represent a breakage in the composite identity of the music...The end result of this phenomenon is directly related to the progressional ‘jazz is dead’ death wish that has regularly been a feature in the information dynamics surrounding this music. (Braxton 1985: 240)

Beyond the political and cultural implications of describing the music of these three composer/conductors as jazz, the ontology of music generated by each of their conducted improvisation systems is largely dependent on the musicians that interpret each individual’s conducting. Listening to a Conduction by Butch Morris of Sheng Skyscraper, an ensemble that Morris assembled of mainly West African and Chinese traditional musicians, it would be hard to describe the music as “jazz” or “free jazz”.

Similarly, Adam Rudolph’s music with its emphasis on percussion and incorporation of musicians with backgrounds in many different world traditions resists such easy categorization. As Rudolph says:

I don’t really like the word ‘jazz’, it doesn’t really fit my music and I think that people who do like to play that music don’t really understand...what I’m doing. (Rudolph 2014)

In his dissertation *Open, Mobile, and Indeterminate Forms* Guy DeBievre has a hard time situating Rudolph’s music. Instead of focusing on defining his

\(^4\) There is a long history in jazz and creative music of musicians refusing to categorize their music, Duke Ellington famously said that “There are two kinds of music. Good music, and the other kind” (Peterson 2005: 8).
performances using genre based categories, DeBievre uses the German-derived terms for popular and art music, “e-Musik” and “u-Musik,” ultimately concluding that Rudolph’s music belongs to both and neither (DeBievre 2011: 108). I would argue, however, that both the performances of Morris’s Sheng Skyscraper and Adam Rudolph’s music clearly would fit into the creative music tradition embodied by the cross-cultural experimentation of the Creative Music Studios. I would add that creative music as theorized by Smith, Braxton, Lewis and others is not a genre distinction, but rather a distinct mode of musical production that encompasses a variety of genres.

Beyond looking at the views of the creators of these systems it is important to look at how the musicians that perform the music view themselves. As Scott Currie writes in his dissertation Sound Visions, creative music is the preferred term for performers (to the extent that musicians categorize themselves at all) of the downtown New York scene (the area examined in this study) in the 21st century: Currie (2011: 21) explains, “Many musicians on New York’s Lower East Side . . . prefer ‘creative music’ . . . while most Europeans favor ‘improvised music’.” Additionally, the term “improvised music” has acquired the meaning of music that is completely improvised free from any system of organization, and is closely linked with Derek Bailey (1993) and ideas about “non-idiomatic improvisation.”

The term “free jazz” is also inaccurate when describing the conducted improvisation systems of Braxton, Morris, and Rudolph. Although Eckhardt Jost’s book Free Jazz is a classic of scholarship on creative music, the term itself has little
utility describing these three systems that are based around specific and clear rules⁵.

As Graham Haynes explains:

I would say the thing about Conducted Improvisation that’s different than regular improvisation is you actually DO have rules. You have rules for improvisation, if you’re just playing free then there’s no rules. (Haynes 2013a)

George Lewis also speaks to this problem in relationship to characterizations of the music of AACM artists:

As George Lewis has argued, however, the use of ‘free jazz’ to describe the music fails to do justice to the compositional ideas of many artists and the collective organizations that they founded to nurture their creative activities. (Monson 2009: 255)

In terms of their own individual terminology Adam Rudolph prefers to use Yusef Lateef’s term “autophysiophysic music” and even suggested simply calling his performances “Go: Organic Music” (Rudolph 2014). Butch Morris preferred to refer to his music as Conduction®. Anthony Braxton often uses the term creative music, but also refers to his concept as “tri-centric music.” If I were to describe the music by any of these three terms I would be privileging the concept of one conductor over the other. In addition, the musicians who perform with these conductors each have their own personal ways of describing their own performance practice. Out of respect to all of the people that I interviewed I choose to use the terms “creative music” and “creative musician” because it was the most useful, historically accurate

⁵ To be fair, Jost himself acknowledged the difficulty of categorizing both the music of the AACM and Don Cherry. In the case of Don Cherry Jost writes “we could probably derive a name for what he plays: Doncherrymusic” (Jost, 1975: 162,169)
and neutral way to describe the systems and musical practices of these three composers and the musicians that perform with them.

**Issues Explored in this Thesis**

While some scholars such as Thomas Stanley (2009: vii) have posited conducted improvisation as a major disruption to the tradition of improvisation as well as Western art music, I see it as a natural outgrowth of the progression of creative music from the idiomatic to what Anthony Braxton calls the “trans-idiomatic” (Lock 2008: 16). In this thesis I will explore the systems of three important composers/conductors who each have created their own conducted improvisation systems: Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris, and Adam Rudolph. In many ways this is a comparative study, and I am interested in creating a system for categorizing different kinds of conducted improvisation languages. I will be exploring the structures of these three systems, as well as formulating a systematic way to organize conducted improvisation gestures.

In addition to formulating a more analytical approach to investigating the phenomenon of conducted improvisation in creative music I will also explore what I will refer to as the “conducted improvisation community” in New York. There is significant overlap in the membership of the ensembles of the conductors that I examine, and there are significant ways that community building is an important aspect of these ensembles. In many ways the conducted improvisation community can be explored as what Mark Slobin (1993) has referred to as an “affinity group” of like-
minded improvisers. I will explore some of the factors and traits that unite this community of improvisers, as well as how the idea of “community” is articulated in these ensembles.

Beyond simply examining the conducted improvisation systems as theoretical constructs I will look at how these systems function(ed) under the batons (or in the hands) of Braxton, Rudolph, and Morris. I will also examine the circumstances that led to the development of each conducting language, as well as the musical lineages that each system belongs to and the impact of those lineages on the structures of the conducting systems themselves.

Another important aspect of this thesis is an exploration of these systems as pedagogical tools. I argue that each of these three conducting languages has been designed (and has evolved) as a type of pedagogy for teaching new ways of hearing and conceptualizing musical performance. Related to this, I will examine the dual function of these composers as bandleaders and pedagogues, and how this duality expresses itself in rehearsals and performance. I am also interested in exploring the interplay between musicians’ personal vocabularies and the systems that they are working in at any given time. I will address the latter in detail in my section on the music of Adam Rudolph through transcriptions of two of his pieces and extended improvisations by longtime members of his ensemble.

I have very few specific models to work with in this thesis and I believe that this is the first comparative study of conducted improvisation systems. I intend this thesis to be a beginning of finding a way to analyze and theorize about conducted
improvisation systems and other newly invented systems in creative music. I am primarily interested in focusing on the commands, the way they are implemented as an improvisational, interactive process between conductor and ensemble, and the aesthetic of the conducting style of the three composers involved. In many ways I will be looking at the practice of conducted improvisation as real-time arranging, dialogue, and negotiation.

Although it would be easy for me, as someone who has experience in the ensembles of some of these conductors, to write this thesis in a completely reflexive manner, I am trying to avoid this in an effort to provide a multiplicity of perspectives. As much as possible I am interested in highlighting the insights and opinions of the musicians that I have worked with in these ensembles, many (if not all) of whom have more experience than I have playing in this tradition. Therefore, another important goal for this thesis is to highlight not only the voices of the creators of these systems but also the voices of the musicians that have given shape to the music that they have conducted.

My Personal Experience with Conducted Improvisation

My serious engagement with conducted improvisation began with Butch Morris in January 2012 at the Stone, a no-frills music venue in New York City’s Alphabet City neighborhood owned and operated by John Zorn. Morris held a semi-open workshop in which a variety of musicians learned his Conduction® techniques,
as well as some of his written music. (Using Conduction in conjunction with written music is referred to as Induction.) Morris trademarked his term Conduction in order to protect his control over a practice that he spent decades developing. When Butch Morris returned to NuBlu, a club just a few blocks from the Stone where he frequently conducted his ensemble, after a brief hiatus, I was invited to sit in, and performed with the group weekly until what would be Morris’ final New York conduction later that year. Morris demanded total presence and attention of his musicians and if anyone gave any less, Morris would call them out, sometimes on stage.

Morris encouraged his musicians in no uncertain terms to try and make the music as fresh as possible. Performing with the Nublu Orchestra was a revelation and gave me a whole new perspective as a performer. Often I would have to perform three hours a night with complete focus and attention to Morris, a much different situation than what I was used to in many of the ensembles that I was used to performing with. There is a lot of discourse around improvisation (especially “freely improvised” music) as a way to get away from explicitly thinking about form and content and focusing on the more intuitive, emotional aspects of the music. However, with Morris the music required total involvement and complete use of one’s intellect, memory, and attention. This experience was extremely valuable to me and opened my eyes to new ways to approach, create, and compose music.

After performing with Butch Morris, I would go on to perform with Karl Berger’s Improvisers Orchestra, and Adam Rudolph’s Go: Organic Orchestra. Upon
arriving at Wesleyan and learning that Anthony Braxton also had his own system for conducting improvisation, and knowing of his influence on Walter Thompson and Soundpainting, I started to become seriously interested in the history of conducted improvisation, a relatively new phenomenon in the history of music.
Chapter 1: Introduction to Conducted Improvisation Systems and History

Along with Anthony Braxton, two important early innovators of conducted improvisation are Sun Ra (Braxton 2012, Haynes 2013, Stanley 2009: 49) and Frank Zappa (Robair 2012, Stanley 2009: 49). Earle Brown is also often mentioned as one of the originators of conducted improvisation, but his system was limited to altering pre-existing material. As Brown explains “There must be a fixed (even flexible) sound content to establish the character of the work, in order to be called ‘open’ or ‘available’ form” (Nyman 1999: 70). Although Anthony Braxton (2012) and other innovators of conducted improvisation have claimed Brown as an influence, this aspect of requiring a “fixed sound content” and some type of notated material to manipulate is much different from the early Braxton and Zappa systems, which in Zappa’s words, allowed the conductor to “make a piece of music out of absolutely nothing” (Zappa 1973)
Sun Ra

Sun Ra, born Herman “Sonny” Blount, would come up with a personal philosophy that would influence many musicians of his generation, including Pharoah Sanders (who Ra personally encouraged to go by the name Pharoah) (Szwed 1997:197), and John Coltrane. Ra was one of the first Afrofuturist musical practitioners, and also had a large impact on later generations of musicians, including George Clinton (Rollefson 2008: 84), Horace Tapscott (Tapscott and Isoardi 2001: 145), Anthony Braxton (Braxton 1985: 276), and anyone that would use the term Arkestra or cosmic imagery.

According to Anthony Braxton, the conducting language that Ra used is not widely known to the public outside of his close-knit group of collaborators (Braxton, 2012). John Szwed’s biography of Sun Ra only briefly mentions his conducting language, simply stating:

The Magic City like many of his compositions from this period, was sketched out with only a rough sequence of solos and a mutual understanding which came from grueling daily rehearsals. Sun Ra gave it order by pointing to the players, and by signaling with numbers which referred to prepared themes and effects, and with hand gestures that directed the musicians what to play during collective improvisation-What composer Butch Morris would later call ‘conduction’. (Szwed 1997: 214)

Even though the term “conduction” is not entirely appropriate (Morris himself would call what Szwed describes “Induction” and only uses the term Conduction for music that doesn’t rely on pre-composed material), one gets a relatively clear picture of some of Ra’s early conducting vocabulary.
According to Graham Haynes, a cornetist who frequently performed with Butch Morris, one gesture Ra would use was similar to Morris’ “crossfade” gesture (Haynes 2013a). This gesture would cue one group of musicians to fade and eventually stop playing and another group of musicians to start playing and gradually get louder, similar to the action of a cross-fader on a mixer.

**Frank Zappa**

Frank Zappa is well known as an innovator in many aspects of musical practice. From the early in his career Zappa was interested in experimental music practice (see his bicycle music on the Steve Allen show (Zappa 1963), and he contributed greatly to expanding the vocabulary of what was possible in popular music performance, as well as continuing to be a pioneer in and advocate of contemporary classical performance.

Over time, Frank Zappa came up with a system to create, in his own words, “a piece of music out of absolutely nothing”. This is important because earlier systems were primarily designed with the purpose of conducting and altering pre-composed material. It is clear from watching video of Zappa conducting that he is indeed creating music solely based on the interpretation of his hand signals. There are a few video recordings of his improvised conducting that give a clear picture of some of his semiotic vocabulary. Some excellent examples can be found on Zappa’s pseudo-documentary film *Baby Snakes* (Zappa 1979). Zappa also used his semiotic language to alter existing musical structures and had signs that signaled tempo and time
signature changes as well as volume and intensity of attack (Zappa 1979, Robair 2012).

In his autobiography, Zappa explains some of his genre-based conducting language.

[If I twirl] my fingers as if I’m piddling with a Rasta braid on the right side of my head – that means: ‘Play Reggae.’ If I pretend to twirl braids on both sides of my head, it means: ‘Play ska’ . . . If I want something played ‘heavy metal,’ I put both hands near my crotch and do ‘Big Balls’. (Zappa and Occhiogrosso 1989: 94)

Zappa’s genre change cues can also be seen as an important precedent to game pieces such as John Zorn’s Cobra, which use genre/idiom change commands (although in a less prescriptive fashion).

Muhal Richard Abrams and the Experimental Band

Another important influence on two of the conductors profiled in this thesis is Muhal Richard Abrams, who formed the Experimental Band in the early 1960’s. The Experimental Band was a group that functioned as a platform for the artists of the AACM to develop and rehearse original music and explore original concepts. Although he did not have a highly formalized system of conducted improvisation, by the mid 1960’s Abrams had developed an original conducting style that had a formative influence on both Anthony Braxton and Adam Rudolph. Leroy Jenkins describes his conducting style:

There was Kalaparusha [Maurice McIntyre], [Christopher] Gaddy, Charles Clark, Thurman Barker, Roscoe, Lester Lashley. Muhal was conducting.
bringing us in, bringing us out. I thought it was Muhal’s band, but really it was just Muhal’s night to experiment with his ideas. He was doing a form of conduction, really. (Jenkins in Lewis 2008:135)

Roughly around the same time that Frank Zappa began to develop his conducted improvisation vocabulary Anthony Braxton began the development of his own “language music” system of conducted improvisation. Originally developed as a system to extend the possibilities of his solo music performance, the language music system has been extended to all areas of Braxton’s musical practice. The language system is a collection of twelve gestural “languages,” which are all signaled by a number. For example, one represents long sounds, two represents accented long sounds, etc. Braxton uses this numbered system during many of his notated compositions to extend the possibilities of structured improvisation. Braxton also realized early on in the development of his system that these different language units could be cued during performance, and as early as 1969 he was using this system to organize spontaneous conducted performances of large groups of musicians. (Braxton 2012)

**Historical Trends Leading to the Development of Conducted Improvisation**

The impetus towards conducted improvisation varies widely from individual to individual, but some common themes are the expression of a certain degree of discontent with the way large-group free improvisation is often realized and to have a greater flexibility to alter different source material (improvised or notated).

According to Stanley:
Morris questioned the efficiency of the process. ‘I’d hear something happen and think to myself, “I wish we could save that and use it again later in the performance”. But that was unheard of; there was no going or looking back,’ he reflects. ‘That music was lost to the ages and into the ears of the listeners’ (Morris 1995: 2). The question of how to bring to large ensembles the form, focus, and flexibility of small group improvisation (like the trios he worked with in the mid-80s) had been a stubborn one. (Stanley 2009: 81)

One can easily see conducted improvisation as an extension of and direct reaction to the greater freedom of improvisation that began to take place in the late 1950’s with Ornette Coleman, and was further developed through the large ensemble “energy” playing of John Coltrane’s ensembles typified on albums such as “Om” and “Ascension.”

According to Anthony Braxton, his language music system was based on the revelation that too much freedom was often not useful in terms of musical expression. Although deeply influenced by the perceived freedom of Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane’s music, Braxton found out during his first freely improvised solo concert that he was not interested in free improvisation. According to Braxton:

I was influenced by the possibilities that opened up in the time-space of the 60’s, and by that I’m saying I was looking for ways to simplify in some ways. I mean having signals and a language music, a music of vocabularies was the second degree of my solo music work. When I started to play solo concerts after the first concert I started to factor what I now call ‘sonic geometrics’. At the time, in the sixties, I called it conceptual grafting. What am I talking about? I’m talking about the decision to isolate improvisations based on sonic
geometry from the twelve language variables that we now work with. For me this was a way to lessen the possibilities of bumping into the same idea all the time. I didn’t want to have every improvisation do the same thing, and the first solo concert I did I was thinking ‘freedom, freedom’. The sixties talked about freedom, so when I went and gave a solo concert with freedom, free improvisation, I discovered I wasn’t interested in free improvisation. Why? Because free improvisation didn’t give me the results I wanted, and what am I saying by that? I’m saying, I kept falling into repeating [myself]. By the time the first concert was over…musically, it wasn’t as interesting as I would have hoped. As I went through the music, because I recorded it, I asked myself, how can I avoid this? The question became, what constitutes identity from a trans-idiomatic perspective? (Braxton 2012)

Although one may look at the type of improvisation that many creative musicians engage in as “free” due to the lack of idiomatic markers, such as a strict time feel, or cyclical harmony, an important feature of creative music from the post-1960’s era has been the attempt by various musicians to create new forms and systems for trans-idiomatic improvisation and expression. Examples of this include systems based around graphic materials such as Wadada Leo Smith’s “Ankhrasmation” system, or Anthony Braxton’s “Falling River Music” graphic scores.

One of the important things that happened in creative music during the end of the 1960’s was a move away from “free” or “energy” music. According to Smith:

I believe there was a change, yeah. I think that if you look at the way the music had evolved, there was a drastic shift coming out of the post ’60s energy music to a much more systemic music, which is what I was looking for and was interested in. Systemic music meaning you had a reduction of energy
and an implementation of more elements that were akin to concepts, systems and language. And if you look at the music I produced during that period – Divine Love, for example – the music on that record represented that shift away from the energy field of playing music to the kind of systemic, thematic ways in which you could manifest the creative process (Smith in Freeman 2010)

Conducted improvisation clearly can be framed as coming out of the post-1960’s lineage of movement towards creating new forms. Signals themselves necessarily imply formal constraints upon the music. The hand signals often imply very specific instructions to the improvising musicians. Even when the signals allow a greater deal of freedom, there is often a great deal of verbal communication between the conductor and the improvisers as to what should be happening during the freer moments.

The very existence of a conductor necessitates that the band should be more or less on the same philosophical page when performing, and a good deal of conducted improvisation group rehearsal inevitably is listening to the conductor not only explain hand signals but also what the ideal realization of those hand signals should be, as well as how the band should approach the music and function as a unit. In a very real way, the conductor and his (or her) system and musical philosophy become a regulating factor, moving the music away from an experience of a group of individuals trying to move the music in many directions towards a more organized interplay.

Another consideration that led to the formation of conducted improvisation was the necessity of giving some kind of coherent organization to the large
improvising ensembles that were attempting to address the newly expanded options related to improvisation that were ushered in in the 1960’s. Dealing with larger ensembles there ideally needed to be some degree of organization in order to produce coherent music.

Although conducted improvisation has come about as a strategy to organize large groupings of improvising musicians, many practitioners of conducted improvisation actually seem to believe on some level that there is an idealized form of group interaction that is transcendent, where the group interaction allows the group to become more than the sum of its parts. This is reflected in the fact that almost all systems have signals that allow the group to self-regulate. In fact, repression of individual ego and submission to the collective is a common theme among the conductors of larger ensembles. This is reflected in Adam Rudolph’s comments during rehearsal that he would actually like to use fewer hand-signals and rely more on sensitive group interaction (Rudolph 2012). It is also reflected in Karl Berger’s frequent signals for his Orchestra to improvise with one another without any prompting while he goes to play the piano.

**Cultural Context of Conducted Improvisation and the CMS**

The kind of organized collective expression that is a hallmark of conducted improvisation is also closely related to the kind of political and societal organization that was emerging in the late 1960’s where traditional Western models of community and hierarchical rigidities were being challenged. This connection is not at all
surprising when one considers that a lot of the early research and development related to conducted improvisation occurred at the Creative Music Studios in Woodstock, NY, an important locale in the counterculture of the 1960’s. The CMS was a music school/center founded by Karl Berger with the help of Ornette Coleman in 1972. It was an important meeting place for musicians from the different regional, historical and conceptual camps of creative music. The west coast tradition was represented by Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry; the AACM was represented by Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, and later on George Lewis, among others; Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland, of Miles Davis fame were also there, along with Lee Konitz from the Tristano school.

Between 1972-1984, the years of its primary existence, many important figures in the world of conducted improvisation were participants in workshops there: Anthony Braxton, Karl Berger, Walter Thompson, and Adam Rudolph were all at one time associated with the Creative Music School and listed as important figures by Robert Sweet (1996). Much of the philosophical underpinning of the CMS is very reminiscent of the collective non-hierarchical organization that is associated with the 1960’s counterculture. According to a New York Times piece written by Ben Ratliff about the CMS:

During the eight-week terms at the studio, students were not called students; they were ‘participants’ who sometimes ran the classes. Mr. Berger emphasized a rhythmic training exercise called gamala taki to connect jazz to other musical languages around the world. There were meditative group-
singing exercises in the morning, and visiting teachers from around the world sometimes played and danced with students around bonfires (Ratliff 2008). The breakdown of hierarchical structure that one sees in the CMS philosophy, where students are not subjugated to the authority of a traditional teacher/student relationship is often paralleled in the world of conducted improvisation. In contrast to the total authority that the conductor has in highly notated Western concert musics, the improvising conductor enters into a dialogue with the ensemble. This isn’t to imply that the conductor can be followed any less, especially in the music of Butch Morris, wherein the hand gestures are NOT suggestions, but are direct orders. However, the improvising musician is free to interpret the gestures with as much leeway as possible depending on the system. Sometimes, there is not much leeway: for example, if Adam Rudolph cues a specific ostinato, that ostinato must be played until it is cut, or if Butch Morris designated something as a “sound memory”, it must be played exactly the same (or as close as reason would allow) each time it is cued.

Although the conductor must be followed strictly, the improvising conductor often merely sets up parameters for interpretation. Pitch material and strict rhythm are not usually specified and many of the cues set up interactions between musicians in which musicians are at their full discretion to choose what kind of material they want to improvise. However, even though the improvising conductor allows for musicians to practice a degree of agency that would be unthinkable in Western concert music the conductor is very clearly in charge. The conductor is usually a bandleader who also has the authority to control who is and who isn’t part of an ensemble.
Furthermore, the conductor is often credited as the composer on recordings even though a conducted improvisation is by nature a collaboratively realized work.

Much as the loft scene in New York acted as a meeting place for musicians trying to create new musical languages, the CMS acted as a melting pot of creative music activity and a place to share concepts with a larger community. The physical isolation of CMS not only brought people closer together but also gave musicians and composers the space to continue to develop their systems. Furthermore, musicians were able to work out their concepts through teaching. According to Leo Smith:

I was successful by teaching there and being able to work out how to look at what I was dealing with with my system, I know the same thing was true for Anthony Braxton. All of us, instructors and so-called students were able to get into a great deal of research that benefitted other musicians (Smith in Sweet 1996:61)

The CMS was highly influential because of the opportunities for musicians to collaborate with a diverse group of world-renowned performers and composers. Additionally, the imperative to create a personal pedagogical system seems to have been a great organizing tool for many of the artists who taught there. One might argue that the pressures of having to teach one’s personal concept to a groups of students forced musicians to codify and define their practice in ways that they wouldn’t have otherwise.

As teachers, creative musicians and composers got a chance to further develop their pedagogy and musical concepts, and to educate the next generation of creative musicians. As students, participants got to receive knowledge first hand from some of
the most influential musicians in creative music practice. Adam Rudolph, who was of the younger generation who participated in the CMS, explains the value of experiential learning and personal oral transmission of knowledge and culture.

Improvisational music is an oral tradition, and so it works better when the actual performing artists are the ones educating. Because, a lot of times, what’s imparted to a younger musician is something that sometimes can be formalized, and other times just has to do with a way of living or looking at the world or a creative stance. It’s not so much about technique or technical matters. Just being around and living together in those situations and having the actual, active artists come through here-and they’re not full-time teachers, but they’re just there—is the key…Everybody has their own story and their own way of dealing with [creative improvisation]. So, when you have a variety, a range of artists coming through who are enlightened to these things, the way that they express it, one (artist) might touch one student, and another might touch another (Rudolph in Sweet 1996:93)

Indeed, for many reasons the CMS became an important laboratory for research in the developing practices of conducted improvisation, and many of the important figures (Anthony Braxton, Walter Thompson, Karl Berger, Adam Rudolph, and John Zorn) in conducted improvisation, were either “students” or “teachers” there (Sweet 1996). To a certain extent the philosophies of hands-on learning and oral transmission of knowledge are kept alive by many of the practitioners of conducted improvisation. A good portion of an Adam Rudolph rehearsal is dedicated to the cultivation of a similar pedagogical, and philosophical environment, as well as the passing on of knowledge that he gained from working and studying with artists such as Don Cherry and Yusef Lateef.
Typology of Conducted Improvisation Gestures:

Activational, Modificational, and Direct Commands

As far as I know, there have been no published attempts to generate an organization or typology of conducted improvisation across methods or systems. Each of the composer/conductors that I am studying has their own classificatory systems (especially Butch Morris) for different kinds of gestures, but there has been no broad etic system devised to compare gestures across systems. Accordingly, I have devised my own system to classify conducted improvisation gestures and semiotic vocabulary.

Based on my familiarity with the conducted improvisation vocabularies of Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris and Adam Rudolph, I have identified three different types of commands. Although one could argue for subgroups of these commands, I think a separation into three provides the clearest picture of how these commands actually function in performance.

The first of these categories is the *activational* command. An activational command begins an event. A clear example of an activational event would be a number cue in Braxton’s language music: if a conductor cues language number one the instrumentalist responds by playing long tones. An activational cue simply sets an event in motion. Another example of an activational command is Morris’ “repeat” command, wherein a musician has to invent and repeat an ostinato until another
command is given. Again, the command activates an event with specific parameters. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, activational cues vary widely from system to system, but for introductory purposes I will simply reiterate that an activational cue sets an event in motion that becomes the responsibility of the musician to continue until that musician is cued to stop or do something else.

The second category is the *modificational* command. A modificational command modifies an activational command already in progress. An example would be a cue that changes the speed or pitch content of an event that has already been set in motion, such as the up and down thumbs of Anthony Braxton and Butch Morris that change whatever event is happening up or down by a half-step. Another example would be a cue to change the volume of an event already in progress, whether that event is a solo, composition, a repeated ostinato or something else entirely.

Modificational commands simply modify whatever is happening in the ensemble.

*Direct* commands on the other hand are cues that are gestural in nature and must be obeyed in real-time. Examples of direct commands are precisely cued hits, held notes, or Morris’ “literal movement” cue. In many ways direct cues are the most determinate type of cue, and allow the conductor the greatest degree of control over the ensemble. Direct commands do not require the addition of a modificational command and may have multiple parameters. For example, if a hit is cued, often the conductor will specify the volume of the cue beforehand. Sometimes directed sustained notes will be conducted with one hand while the volume of those cues will be conducted with the other hand.
These three types of cues can be mapped onto a spectrum correlated with degrees of determinacy and indeterminacy with activational commands/indeterminacy on the left and direct commands/determinacy on the right. Direct commands allow the improvising conductor the greatest amount of control over the ensemble. Of course this paradigm breaks down when composed music is involved. As I will later demonstrate, an activational cue of a specific rhythmic cycle or bass line in Adam Rudolph’s music may represent the most determinate kind of music making in the spectrum of conducted improvisation.

Additionally in Morris’ music a fourth type of command is at work, the record/playback command. There are two specific types of cues in this category: the “mimic” and “memory” cues. In “mimic” cues the player has to imitate another instrumentalist who has already received an activational command to create an event. This can be thought of as analogous to recording and playing back an event that another player is creating. During “memory” cues the instrumentalist is called upon to remember exactly what he/she is playing at the moment that the cue is called and then must play that event back as close to verbatim as possible when instructed.

I have constructed this framework to help me analyze not only the conducted improvisation systems themselves, but also the way that those systems are put into practice in real time by different conductors. Looking at the proportion of activational commands to direct commands would give a clear picture of conducting style, for example, how controlling the conductor is. Clearly, the degree of control that the conductor is searching for can also be dependent on the degree of restraint and
familiarity with the system of the players in the ensemble. Although it is only a first step, I see many important analytical uses for this framework.
Chapter 2: Anthony Braxton’s Language Music

Anthony Braxton (b.1945) is a pioneer of creative music and has more than a few books dedicated to his life and music (See Lock 1988, Radano1993, Heffley 1996, and Broomer 2009). In addition to the works written about him by others he also has also published an extensive amount of his own writings and philosophy, including the three volume 1500-plus page Triaxium Writings and the 2700-plus page Composition Notes.

Braxton, who was born and raised in Chicago, was an early member of the AACM. Although he is often associated with the AACM, he has had a somewhat complex relationship with the organization. In an interview with George Lewis, Braxton sums up both his ambivalence with, and affection for the organization stating: “I quit the AACM several times, but in fact, in the end, I see all that as irrelevant” (Braxton in Lewis 2008: 480).

Although his music has been extensively studied, little has been written on his conducted improvisation vocabulary and his place in the history of conducted improvisation. The lack of material on Braxton’s conducted improvisation practice is particularly surprising given his status as a seminal figure in conducted improvisation history. Although composers such as Earle Brown, Sun Ra, Muhal Richard Abrams, and Horace Tapscott used some form of conducted improvisation in the 1960’s, Anthony Braxton in 1968 was arguably the first composer to begin to create a highly developed formalized system.
Language Music

Language music, which forms the basis of much of Braxton’s conducted improvisation system, is not only a conducted improvisation strategy, but was originally developed in 1967 as a way to expand Braxton’s musical palate for solo improvisation.

For me this was a way to lessen the possibilities of bumping into the same idea all the time. I didn’t want to have every improvisation do the same thing and the first solo concert I did I was thinking ‘freedom, freedom’, the sixties talked about freedom, so when I went and gave a solo concert with freedom, free improvisation, I discovered I wasn’t interested in free improvisation. Why? Because free improvisation didn’t give me the results I wanted, and what am I saying by that? I’m saying, I kept falling into repeating [myself]. By the time the first concert was over, it was like….musically, it wasn’t as interesting as I would have hoped, as I went through the music, because I recorded it, I asked myself how can I avoid this. The question became, what constitutes identity from a trans-idiomatic perspective? And the second solo concert would begin my solo musics. The second solo concert, I would have a piece with trills, I’d have a piece with intervallics, I would have a piece with gradient logics, so sound mass logics, another piece with rhythm, another piece with repetitive logics. This way of thinking would give me a chance of not necessarily bumping into the same idea in the same way. From that point I transposed the language music’s twelve elements into a form where I could use it with an ensemble. (Braxton 2012)

The first large ensemble composition that Braxton mentions that utilizes language music is Composition 11 (Braxton 1988a), which Braxton wrote in 1969 for Muhal Richard Abram’s Experimental Band. The Experimental band was an
important workshop for creative musicians associated with the AACM in Chicago. As Abrams explains in a 1974 interview in Downbeat magazine, the Experimental Band was actually formed before the AACM in 1961 with more established artists who were more interested in playing mainstream jazz.

[T]his event was approximately four years before, in 1961. What happened was the more experienced musicians in Chicago decided to form a big band. It was Eddie Harris, myself, Victor Sproles, a few other cats. I think Herbie (Hancock) wrote an arrangement or two for it. We had a couple of rehearsals and then personality conflicts erupted. I didn’t get involved but just watched it transpire. So I thought there wasn’t any reason for the ideas to drop to the ground. I began to recruit the younger musicians around the area. They weren’t as adept at their stuff yet, but they were willing and that was enough. In the beginning, the band at times would sound so bad that the owner of this club, the C&C, wanted us to cool rehearsals there. What I did was start rehearsing the band in my house. Roscoe (Mitchell) and Joseph (Jarman) were around then, so was Jack DeJohnette, but they were a lot younger, of course. Herbie wasn’t actually in the band. So we rehearsed regularly and it became the Experimental Band. (Abrams in Townley 1974)

The Experimental Band would become an important forum for many of the members of the AACM to introduce new concepts, and Abrams himself used a rudimentary form of conducted improvisation that Anthony Braxton describes as “directing traffic” (Braxton 2012). Essentially Braxton describes Abrams’ system as a basic conducting language that primarily allowed Abrams to cue sections and soloists. Ultimately, the Experimental Band would become an important pedagogical model for Braxton and other AACM associated artists that would become educators. Abrams’ willingness to recruit younger less experienced musicians would become an
The Experimental Band would also become an important setting for Braxton to learn and grow as a musician in a supportive environment, one drastically different from that of his more formal training. Radano profiles Anthony Braxton’s negative experience with his traditional, Eurocentric music schooling in the early 1960’s:

When I was going to music school, many of the things that they would talk about I couldn’t relate to: counterpoint or…Of course when I was going to school, [the teachers seemed to believe that] black people didn’t exist. They didn’t talk about relationships between Asian, African, and Western musics, they only talked about Gregorian chants. They stopped before Schoenberg…The vitality that was so important to the music [of the classical era], through present so-called education, had become a formulated phrase. (Braxton in Radano 1993: 60-61)

The Development of Language Music as a Conducted Improvisation Vocabulary

Although Anthony Braxton originally designed language music for his solo musics, as soon as one year after its initial use he would go on to develop a system to conduct larger ensembles using these twelve elements. Braxton explains:

I was influenced by the possibilities that opened up in the time-space of the 60’s, and by that I’m saying I was looking for ways to simplify in some ways, I mean having signals and a language music…When I started to play solo concerts after the first concert I started to factor what I now call ‘sonic geometrics.’ At the time, in the 60’s I called it conceptual grafting. What am I talking about? I’m talking about the decision to isolate improvisations based on sonic geometry from the twelve language variables that we now work with in class. …the use of improvisation in real time, the language improvisations
would be born at different workshops as a way of being able to pull something together very quickly, and that was another factor that accelerated the significance, to me, of having a sonic geometric vocabulary. It meant that at a given workshop at some university, or with a new group of people, we could have a quick understanding. The twelve postulates could be run down very quickly, and we could do a concert based on that. So, by 1969, ’68, I was doing language music concerts as an extension of the language music solo musics (Braxton 2012)

From the beginning, Braxton’s conducted improvisation language was employed to create musical structures in order to organize large ensembles of musicians who had never played together. Braxton also hints at the value of language music as a pedagogical tool since its inception.

Influences on the Development of Anthony Braxton’s Conducting Language

Braxton insists that beyond the basic kind of conducted improvisation that was being practiced by Muhal Richard Abrams in the Experimental Band, he had very few models to work from in developing his conducted improvisation vocabulary. However, Braxton does point to the work of composer and trumpet player Earle Brown as an important precedent:

I’m telling you. To my knowledge NO ONE was working with anything like that. Earle Brown might be the closest guy, but he was more working with compositional constructs that were mobile. ‘Available Forms’ being an example that WAS important, as far as I’m concerned, and took the music in another direction. I certainly would encounter and learn about ‘Available Forms.’ I thought ‘Available Forms’ and the great music of Earle Brown was very important. I thought it then, I think it now, and one of the reasons that I
think his music has been kind of pushed to the side is that he is in that bridge space. A space similar to the space that I’m in, in the sense that he was interested in so-called ‘jazz,’ he was interested in experimental musics. (Braxton 2012)

One can see many conceptual similarities between Brown’s music and the music of Anthony Braxton as well as the other conductor/composers that are profiled in this thesis. As I mentioned in the introduction, there are important differences between how individual musicians and composers think about conducted improvisation, free improvisation, and chance based indeterminacy. Brown explains the special quality that his material and conducting strategies gave his music.

The performances that I know of these pieces, and have conducted of these pieces (which are now very many), have a very special quality. And their quality is not at all the quality of Cage's kind of chance music or of a kind of totally free music, which would include the possibility of quotation. By scoring these graphic suggestions, I considered that I was activating and keeping busy one area of the performer's mind while provoking another area of his mind, an activity in which it was possible to create ‘new’ kinds of forming and ‘new’ kinds of note-to-note realizations (Brown 2008: 7)

Not insignificantly, in the same essay Brown also writes of his background as a trumpet player in the African-American improvised music tradition. Brown goes on to explain how he believes this background has influenced him to create a music differentiated in many ways from that of his New York School peers.

In Earle Brown’s performance notes for his open form pieces such as Available Forms, he specifies the parameters and basic principles of his conducting
language, presumably to a conductor familiar with working in the context of Western art music.

The conducting technique is basically one of cueing; the notation precludes the necessity and function of ‘beat’ in the usual sense (although the conductor does indicate the relative tempo). The number of the event to be performed is indicated by the left hand of the conductor — one to five fingers. A conventional (right-hand) down-beat initiates the activity. The relative speed and dynamic intensity with which an event is to be performed is implied by the speed and largeness of the down-beat as given with the right hand. (Brown 1962: Conducting Notes)

However, unlike Brown’s music, which was largely determined by its pre-composed, conventionally notated score, Braxton’s language music deals with a much more elemental, gestural approach to music. Language music is comprised of twelve different units that Braxton refers to as “languages.” One of the things that makes Braxton’s approach to conducted improvisation revolutionary is that language music frees the performance from any pre-composed material. In Brown’s Available Forms not only is the musical material specified, but the instruments that play material within each event are also clearly specified. In language music the twelve gestural languages are the generating principles of the music and each language can be assigned to any player. Although in some ways more restrictive than language music, Brown’s conducted improvisation instructions do contain some modificational cues that would continue to be important in subsequently developed systems.

[T]his material is subject to many inherent modifications, such as modifications of combinations (event plus event), sequences, dynamics, and tempos, spontaneously created during the performance…any two-hand cut-off
signal affects the entire group. The conductor may wish, however, to modify only one event among two or more events being performed simultaneously. To do this he signals the number of the event to be modified with his left hand; then indicates the modification — a hold or cut-off — with only his right hand. (Events not indicated by the fingers of the conductor’s left hand continue to proceed normally.) It is absolutely essential that the orchestra members clearly understand this difference in signaling: a hold or cut-off by both hands affects an entire group; a hold or cut-off by only the right hand affects only the event indicated by the fingers of the left hand. (Brown 1962: Conducting Notes)

Braxton’s language types consist of twelve different kinds of musical gestures (Figure 1.1), which can be cued and combined. In Braxton’s conducted improvisation vocabulary, each musical gesture is cued by through the conductor’s raising the amount of fingers that correspond to each language (with eleven and twelve being indicated by a raised fist in the left hand and one and two fingers held up in the right hand, respectively). Then each event is given a downbeat, which doesn’t have any tempo significance, but rather cues the musician or group to begin playing within the given language. For example, if the conductor wishes to cue a long sound he/she will raise one finger; if the conductor wishes to cue an accented long sound he/she will raise two fingers, and so on and so forth. Essentially, Braxton has transposed Brown’s idea of cuing events into cuing what he refers to as “language types.” Whether Brown was the first musician to use this method of cuing events is unclear but Available Forms does predate the formation of the Experimental Band.
Figure 1.1 Language Music Sheet (w Geometric Scheme and Identity Type Classifications) Braxton, n.d.a
Language Music Improvisations in Anthony Braxton’s Notated Music

Although language music continues to be a part of Anthony Braxton’s strategy for creating music with his orchestra, it is only one strategy out of many. Braxton is arguably one of the most prolific composers of creative music in the 21st century and traditionally (and non-traditionally) notated material continues to be an important part of his overall concept. Jason Hwang, a frequent collaborator of Braxton’s (who also has a long history performing with the other composers profiled in this thesis) describes the experience of improvising within a larger structure/composition generated by Braxton:

Braxton has written a lot of music and the music has a language in itself. So you’re influenced by that when it launches into conducted improvisation, you’ve been playing this written music and it gives…I think he even works with our social reactions to looking at music. For a trained musician to see a piece of written music, they’re trained to play it with precision and correctness, and all that. He will write some very difficult compound rhythms, like 11 over 3 or 7 over 4 and that’s going on all over the orchestra. There’ll be a…even if it is precise it may sound…it’s not the typical ensemble unities, feeling that you might have from…I hate to say more traditional music…there will be that sound of, there’s a texture of individualistic energy. And so even if it’s hard to hear the relationships between your part and another exactly, our training as players gives us the purposefulness to approach our part, and he uses that socialized response of purposefulness for most musicians and that’s part of the energy in the music (Hwang 2013)

In addition to his use of language music conducting in his professional ensembles, language music has been an important component of his pedagogy in his
student ensembles as Professor of Music at Wesleyan. In *Mixtery*, a festschrift in honor of Braxton’s 50th birthday, accordionist and Wesleyan alumnus Ted Reichman discusses the larger significance of language music to Braxton’s overall pedagogical approach.

At the beginning stages of the work with the class (at the beginning of the semester it’s a class, but by the end, it’s an ‘ensemble’), we work more on language improvisations...than we do later in the semester, as we start to gear up for a concert. Those introductory improvisations serve to gradually train the group in the skills required for improvisations in the compositions. We work on hearing each other and focusing on creating a unique sonic environment each time. Braxton always talks about ‘the transparent space,’ a type of sound that brings out the nuances of each instrumentalist’s ideas, while preserving the clarity of the overall ensemble concept. These improvisations get the class ready for the quite different, but also quite similar improvisational situations within his pieces. (Reichman 1995: 160)

**The Structure of Language music**

I categorize language music as a content-based conducted improvisation system. Most of the language music cues revolve around directing individual musicians or groups of musicians to play within certain language types. Through the addition of a triangle symbol gesture created with the thumb and index finger of both hands, different language types can be added together to create hybrid language types. For example, if the improviser is working in language type one (long sounds) and a triangle is indicated by the conductor and a language type three (trills) is specified, the improviser would continue playing long sounds but would also add trills while
playing those long sounds. When the conductor presents an upside down triangle and then breaks it apart, that symbol takes the improviser or group out of the state that was specified earlier.

In addition to specifying which language types the improviser should be using, Braxton’s system contains gestures to include or exclude groups of improvisers, as well as modificational gestures to slow down or speed up the material that the musicians are playing (indicated by moving the horizontal fingers of the right hand closer or further away from the vertical palm of the outstretched left hand), gestures to raise or lower pitch content, and volume controls. Additionally, each activational language cue can be transformed into a direct cue when the conductor points with his/her right index finger to his/her right eye. For example language type four (staccato line formings) can become directly conducted hits through this type of modification.

Although the first ten language states are gestural in nature, language number twelve (sub-identity formings) can be drawn from any pre-existing material. Demonstrating language number twelve for a recent NEA profile, Braxton played the standard “All the Things you Are” in order to show his audience that language twelve can incorporate any pre-existing material regardless of genre. Additionally, language number eleven (gradient formings) is a language that implies a progression from one state to its perceived opposite, for example from soft to loud or slow to fast.

As an educator, Braxton gives as brief an explanation of each of these languages as possible, leaving the interpretations up to the individual musicians.
However, when he does demonstrate the less apparently obvious languages, such as language number five (intervallic formings) it is clear that he has a very specific conception of each language. I initially interpreted intervallic formings as gestures using widely spaced intervals, but listening to Braxton’s own interpretation it became clear that intervallic formings can include arpeggios and what might be described in more traditional jazz parlance as “patterns.”

**Sonic Geometrics and Mapping**

In addition to their primary significance, Braxton has gradually expanded the significance of each of the twelve languages types. For each gestural language type there is a corresponding “geometric scheme” and an “identity state” (see Figure 1.1). Beyond these three definitions, Braxton also has created a concept that he calls tri-metric modeling. These are a group of twelve subgroups similar to “identity states” that are loosely aligned with the twelve language types (see Figure 1.2).

Although one would expect these to more closely align with each language type, such as harmonic logics with multiphonics (language number six) or gradient logics with gradient formings (language number eleven), Braxton’s systems are often in a state of redevelopment. Despite the fact that each number is not clearly co-related with its corresponding language type number, tri-metric modeling is clearly linked to the language system complex. In a 2001 interview Michael Heffley asks Braxton about tri-metric modeling and he offers the following explanation:
Tri-metric modeling, modeling on the plane of three to the third power….Starting from language music, long tone as an idea that happens in experience. Then in the house of the rectangle, long sound as the operating premise in drones….finally, long sound as a statement of a continuous state involvement, and from that point, the twelve language models (Braxton in Heffley 2001)

Braxton is essentially acknowledging that tri-metric modeling is an expansion of the meaning of each language type transposed into other realms of creative activity, including formal and symbolic structures in music. For example, Braxton looks at drones as having a distinct correlation to the idea of the long sound represented by language one. In his system of tri-metric modeling as shown in Figure 1.2, Braxton also includes in section X. extra-musical concepts such as ritual & ceremonial symbolism.

Tri-metric modeling is another expression of Braxton’s attempt to create a holistic original musical universe that is governed by a logical (though often changeable) order. Braxton has used a combination of all of these systems that have grown out of language music as not only a way to generate music but also as a way of understanding and investigating musical and ritual phenomena outside of his own personal works.

Ronald Radano points out that:

The language complex had become the precompositional ‘laboratory work’ for the creation of a stylistically free, ‘scientific’ music. By developing a personal system and a vocabulary to identify its workings, Braxton could bypass aesthetic limitations and stylistic conventions. Science, math, and system would assume the status of ‘objective’ categories that transcended
conventional social limitations as they aligned him with an elite group of composers…with similar empirical orientations (Radano 1993: 228)

Although Braxton originally created the system to “identify its [own] workings,” the system would become for Braxton also a way to understand and identify the workings of musics across cultures.
Figure 1.2 Tri-Metric Modeling Sheet (Braxton n.d.b.)

TRI METRIC MODELING

Stable
Mutable
Logics
Synthesis

I. Line Ferming Logic
   1. Menopheny - (drones)(static)
   2. Menopheny - (melody)(active)
   3. Polyphony
   4. Mutable Fermings

II. Sequential Sonic Actions
   1. Repeated Sonic Actions (pitch)
   2. Repeated Structural Events
   3. Repeated Form Schemes

III. Intervallic Recognition
   1. Pitch Distances
   2. Phrase Distances
   3. Structural (Concept) Repositioning

IV. Harmonic Recognition
   1. Tenality
   2. Polytenality
   3. Transtenality
   4. Atenality

V. Structural Recognition
   1. Defined (Concept) Time Spaces
   2. Defined Language Materials
   3. Geometric Recognition
   4. Form Time/Space Recognition

VI. Rhythmic Recognition
   1. Tempo Function (Stable)
   2. Tempo Function (Multiple)
3. Velocity (Pulse)
4. Polyrhythmic Events
5. Multiple Events (Combination)

VII. Register Focus—Recognition
1. High Sounds
2. Middle Sounds
3. Low Sounds

VIII. Gradient Logic
1. Accelerating Sonic Events
2. Retarding Sonic Events
3. Sonic 'Blending' Strategies
4. Louder/Softer Events

IX. Sub Identity Logic
1. Thematic (Melody)
2. Target Architecture Strategies
3. Motivic Relationships

X. Symbolic Logic
1. Ritual & Ceremonial
2. Image Association
3. Descriptive Musics

XI. Sound Mass Logic
1. Multiphenics
2. Timbre
3. Density
4. Defined Pitch/Sound Combinations

XII. Time/Space Geometric Logic
1. Sound Length (Long/Short) Character
2. Directional Strategies (Spatial Musics)
3. Acoustic Dynamics
4. Moving Sonic Strategies (Distance/Choreography)
Creative Music, Creative Analysis

In addition to using language music as a way of generating music, Anthony Braxton has also used the language music system as a way of describing and analyzing musics outside of his own oeuvre. Braxton is not alone in using his own compositional system as a method of musical analysis. Frequent collaborator Wadada Leo Smith uses his own system of Ankhrasmation to analyze Braxton’s “Composition 113” in the Mixtery festschrift. Smith uses this analysis to explain how his own Ankhrasmation system, which is primarily used to generate improvisation, can also function as a method of analysis.

Smith’s analysis operates on multiple levels: on one level it as an attempt to make sense of an Anthony Braxton composition which, as Smith describes it, is “a creative music object” which inherently contains “the known and unknown creative moment, that must reflect a single phenomenon” (Smith 1995: 97). On another level it introduces Smith’s own system of Ankhrasmation notation and analysis, and demonstrates some of its fundamental principles. Beyond a simple demonstration of his Ankhrasmation notation system, Smith also wishes to demonstrate the process of a realization of a new systems based improvisation (quite possibly in order to demonstrate the actuality of how Braxton’s music is created and differentiate it from “free jazz” that doesn’t follow a pre-improvisational “systematic” structure). Smith explains:

I’ve selected Mr. Braxton’s ‘Composition 113’ because it’s a perfect piece of improvised music to introduce my Ankhrasmation notation as a systematic language for analyzing creative world music, i.e. music created in the present;
and also to introduce the idea of systematic improvisation music (Smith 1995: 93-94)

**Mapping World Music**

In the first volume of the *Triaxium Writings*, Braxton acknowledges the importance of a study of world music, specifically African music, that is free of the trappings of Western imperialist, Eurocentric ideologies. Braxton writes:

Without doubt, the strongest factor that has served to distort the subject of world creativity is the realness of cultural racism as well as misdocumentation, The disregard for world creativity can be directly linked to how Europeans have come to see themselves and what this viewpoint has necessitated in terms of functional position. (1985a: 18)

He continues:

The study of world creativity is a necessary factor that must be dealt with because of a multitude of reasons. For I believe that there are basic vibrational laws that dictate how creativity is to function in any culture….the vibrational lack of respect of world creativity that exists in present day western culture is related to what I call the collected forces of western culture-that is , the compilation of many different many different factors taking place in western culture seeks to promote a special type of affinity alignment. (1985a: 19)

Through his own “scientific” system, Braxton attempts to study the inner workings of a traditional West African ritual. In his paper entitled “Jola Initiation Ritual: Mapping” (Braxton, n.d.c) Braxton uses the twelve language types in order to make sense of a traditional coming of age ceremony among the Jola of the Casamance region of Senegal.
In this piece, which was written for a class that he attended while a Professor of Music at Wesleyan, Braxton outlines the progression of events and their visual and sonic components. After mapping the event, Braxton then takes inventory of the language types that were used by musicians and participants during the ceremony. He includes not only the basic language types but also looks at how each musical event can be classified using identity states, and geometric schema (see Figure 3.1). Ultimately, Braxton finds that the Jola use:

1. **LONG SOUND**
   A. Continuous states, Trance musics, static or stasis time-state
   a. eight note ‘inner pulse’ (a king of ‘Ghost Trance’ music)
2. **ACCENTED LONG SOUND**
   a. quarter note beat time frame
3. **LEGATO FORMINGS**
   a. phrase grouping sounds-melodic line against rhythm
4. **DIATONIC FORMINGS**
   a. the use of songs
5. **GRADIENT FORMINGS**
   a. the use of curved horns.
6. **SUB-IDENTITY FORMINGS**
   a. Animal sound associations

(Braxton n.d.c)

Although Braxton categorizes the musical features of the Jola ceremony using language music, these individual features are not explicitly analyzed. However, Braxton’s mapping provides a window into his own conceptual organization and
understanding of musical and ritual phenomena. Of particular interest are Braxton’s comments about eighth notes being the King of Ghost Trance musics.

Ghost Trance music is a series of pieces that were initially (in their “first species” iteration) conceived as a type of ritual music inspired by courses that Anthony Braxton took at Wesleyan in which he studied the Ghost Dance movement of the late 19th century.

The Ghost Dance movement was the creation of a new religious movement by various American Indian groups in reaction to their subjugation and oppression by the U.S. government. The movement was started in 1870 by a Paiute elder named Wodziwob, who received visions while in a trance-like state (Miller 2011). Timothy Miller writes of the Ghost Dance ritual that:

The principal ritual of the Ghost Dance religion was the dance itself. Ghost Dancers also continued to perform the rituals of their respective tribes. The Ghost Dance was a fluid religion that evolved as it spread, and several distinct movements arose as descendants of the original (1870) Ghost Dance. (Miller 2011)

Ghost Trance music has become a way for Anthony Braxton to incorporate Indigenous US, African, and Afro-diasporic trance-based ritual musics into his own idiosyncratic vision. A basic description is provided on his website:

Things fell into place in 1995 after Braxton sat in on a Native American music course and studied the Ghost Dance rituals of the late 1800s. For Braxton, the Ghost Dance had great resonance. ‘The Ghost Dance music, when it was put together, that came about in a time after the American Indian had been decimated, 98 percent of their culture destroyed,’ Braxton recalls. ‘Various tribes came together and compiled whatever information they had left. And
the Ghost Dance music was described as a curtain—one side is reality for us, and the other side is the ancestors. And the Ghost Dance music would provide a forum to connect with the ancestors. That had a tremendous impact on me.’ Drawing on the example of all night Ghost Dance ceremonies (and other world trance musics), Braxton looked to construct a ‘melody that doesn’t end’ to serve as the train tracks to cohere his system. The Ghost Trance Music was born. (“Braxton Musical Systems” n.d)

Looking at Braxton’s categorization of the different moments of the Jola initiation ritual gives some insight into his analytical process. Like Smith’s Ankhrasmation analysis, Braxton’s piece introduces the reader to the concept of the system and also gives the reader a deeper understanding of the actual musical event being analyzed. Through this analysis Braxton shows potential for how personally created systems can function as analytical devices outside of the canon of traditionally accepted analytic methods.

**Conclusion**

To say that Anthony Braxton is a prolific composer with a diverse output would be an understatement. However, language music and sonic geometry are important building blocks that have helped him create a unified musical universe. The language music system also forms the basis for a larger system that Braxton has developed in order not only to create compositions, but also to analyze music with his own tools.

Braxton’s attempts to develop tools of analysis drawn from the original musical world that he has created correspond to his desire to work outside of the
Western system of analysis that he sees as limited “as an accurate [tool] for inquiring into world creativity” (Braxton 1985a: 7). Through the development of language music, Anthony Braxton would become an inspiration for generations of other composers to create their own ways of composing new systems for improvisation.
Chapter 3: Butch Morris and Conduction®

“but music’s not something like that, music is something like this (gestures towards himself), it’s more personal than we think, and then when you get down to this encounter, then you find out how personal it is” - Butch Morris (Monga, 2012)

Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris (1947-2013) was born in Long Beach, CA in and grew up in Los Angeles. Some of his early musical training was in Horace Tapscott’s Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and through that association he was a member of UGMAA (Isoardi 2006: 258). It was through Butch Morris’ music that I would first experience conducted improvisation, and although I played in his group for less than a year, the experience had a profound impact on my life and the way that I approach music. In this chapter I will focus on both the system that Morris created as well as his style as a conductor and arranger. Morris was also a great improviser and cornetist, but his work as an instrumentalist will not be explicitly covered in this thesis.

Conduction®

Conduction is a conducted improvisation system that Butch Morris worked on developing and documenting from the early 80’s (Stanley 2009: ii) until his passing in 2013. He actually began experiments in conducting improvisation in the 1970s (Henderson 1996). Morris would go on to register the trademark “Conduction®” as a

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6 For a more detailed biography on Morris, see Thomas Stanley’s 2009 dissertation.
way to control this important intellectual property that became his life’s work (Stanley 2009). The first Conduction took place at the Kitchen in downtown Manhattan in 1985 (Stanley 2009: 173). The last conduction in New York took place in June 2012 at Nublu, an important club in the downtown New York jazz and creative music scene, and I was fortunate to be a part of it.

According to Morris:
Conduction® (conducted interpretation/improvisation): is a vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation by the individual and the collective, to provide instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing, or form. It is the expedient practice of constructing, initiating, transmitting, transforming, manipulating and exploiting symbolic signs-gestures and sonic information for individual and collective interpretation and may be accessed by all forms, styles and traditions of music and musician. (Morris n.d.b: 1)

Morris’ definition gives a window into how serious he was about documenting his system and describing it correctly. In this chapter I will explore some of Morris’ intentions behind developing Conduction and look at how they have played out in his performances and recordings. I will also explore Conduction in the context of larger trends within conducted improvisation and the influences of composed and improvised music in general. Although Thomas Stanley has published a dissertation looking at certain aspects of Morris’ system (primarily a study looking at Morris’ group as a meta-instrument), to my knowledge no one has conducted a thorough analysis of Conduction as a system for creating music in relationship to
other conducted improvisation systems.

Here I examine some of the history, structure, and meanings of Conduction, especially in relation to other conducted improvisation systems and related traditions. Because Stanley has already examined at some length the origins of Conduction, I will focus on issues that are important to the practice of Conduction, Morris’ aesthetic, and the overall discourse around Conduction: the structure of Conduction, the influences of notated music practice on Conduction, Conduction as confrontation, Conduction as pedagogy, and the extended possibilities of Conduction in relation to musical experimentation and intercultural improvisation.

The Structure of Conduction

One of the most striking aspects of Conduction that sets it apart from Braxton’s language music and other conducted improvisation systems is its openness to the individual vocabularies of the participating musicians. As Butch Morris points out in the documentary Black February:

From my point of view, from the conductors’ point of view all I can give them is structure, that’s all I can give them, but they have to give me content, and that’s where the dialogue begins. Structure, content, structure, content, form; that is the dialogue. (Morris in Monga 2012)

In order to study the structure of Butch Morris’ Conduction as a conducting language, it is useful to compare it to other conducted improvisation systems. As noted in Chapter 1, Anthony Braxton’s language music is primarily based on the idea of “sonic geometrics” (Braxton 2012), a system of defining different musical identity
states (e.g. trills, long sounds), and then cuing and combining them. Conduction, on the other hand is in large part based on setting up events that are indeterminate of content.

Although the music of Butch Morris would also include commands for the band or individual musicians to trill, and Morris would cue long sounds, the cues that he used for these were more gestural than Braxton’s cues, and were usually based on direct cues rather than activational cues. In fact, almost all of Morris’s cues that explicitly related to what Braxton describes as “sonic geometries” and “languages” are direct commands as opposed to activational commands. For example, Morris’ cue for trills is a gestural cue where the rate of the trill and the length of the trill were strictly specified by a back and forth motion with his baton. This is not to say that musicians weren’t free to explore similar musical gestures and that musicians wouldn’t trill or play multiphonics (numbers three and six respectively in Braxton’s system), but that those kinds of parameters were either supplied by the musicians through individual choice in activational commands or more tightly controlled through direct commands in the case of Conduction.

Conduction is primarily what I will refer to as a structure and form based conducting language, meaning that in most cases the actual material that is being played at a given time after an activational cue is given is completely open to interpretation from the improviser/interpreter. As noted in Chapter 2, Braxton’s language music activational cues tell the improviser what kind of basic shape and technique to use (e.g. trills, intervallic constructions, multiphonics, etc.). In the
activational cues of Braxton’s system although there is still a great deal of indeterminacy, the conductor is instructing the ensemble to play something relatively specific in terms of content. However, this is not the case in Morris’ music. For example, if Morris gave the cue for a musician to repeat a phrase, the only instruction to the improviser is to repeat verbatim the phrase that he/she just created.

Clearly, the repeat cue itself is imposing a kind of discipline on the musician to play something that is clear enough and memorable enough to repeat. Reading through Butch Morris’ document “Principles of Conduction®” one gets the sense that Morris placed a high value on clarity, and designed his system as a way for instrumentalists to clarify their own musical language:

The ensemble is the collective knowledge-behavior variable complex. The ensemble is a heterogeneous state comprised of autonomous individuals. The instrumentalist acquires a programmatic clarity when sonically defining a directive… and begins to (see and) hear their judgment in relation to the (ensemble) judgment of others. (Morris 2011: 3)

Although this example is drawn from Morris’ own ideals about the pedagogical benefits of his system, there is evidence that Morris was able to achieve his stated goal. Speaking to Harvey Valdes, a guitarist who played in several of Morris’ ensembles, one of the important skills that he felt he had gained from playing with Morris was the ability to play more clearly and directly and to listen to the ensemble in a different way than he had before (Valdes 2013). Based on my own personal experience I feel that I learned to listen in a more focused way than I ever would have been able to freely improvising in an ensemble with no preset forms or
systems. In fact, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, a great deal of Morris’ system of Conduction can be examined as a type of pedagogy.

It is also important to understand the history of how Conduction developed when examining its structure. Although there are different accounts of how Conduction began and its influences, all of these accounts describe Morris originally developing a system that would give him great flexibility in altering written material. Graham Haynes, a longtime associate of Morris, bandleader in his own right and veteran of the New York creative music scene, places the genesis of many of Butch Morris’s signals and concepts during the period in the early 1980’s when Morris began conducting David Murray’s Big Band. According to Haynes:

that was a situation where David had material and it was a Big Band and Butch conducted….see, Butch used to do a thing where he would take the material and then deconstruct the material and conduct it. Because all his conductions weren’t…there were the Conductions which were pure improvisation, but then a lot of times he would conduct material and then he would abstract the material, and then, like break it up, deconstruct it, and then conduct it…I think he might have developed a lot of the stuff for the Conduction from working with…from conducting Murray’s big band and that goes back to the 80’s, he was conducting that band in ’82, ’83. You know, they had a lot of written material, so it could have been….from what I remember from playing with Butch with David we’d have, like I said, he would take a whole, he would take eight bars or twelve bars or however many bars and he would say ‘Ok, put a circle around those twelve bars, and then put number 1’, so that would be memory one, and then he’d say ‘Ok, put a circle around letter A’ and then letter A would be number two, and so
memory one, memory two, so I think he might have developed it from there.
(Haynes 2013a)

Upon examining the way that Conduction developed it would make sense that it would be a system based on altering and (re)structuring existing material. In *Black February*, Morris explains the original inspiration for Conduction:

My whole journey begins with a question. If you’re a student of music, and you don’t have a question you’re in trouble, because everything you want to know about music is not in a book. My idea, my first idea was how can I make notation more flexible? How can I take a composition that’s written from left to right, up to down, how can I move through this composition and isolate this part and send the strings here and how can I send the violins here, and the cellos there, and the trumpets there. I wanted to figure out how could I go right here. Just deal with this one idea, and then make it grow. Germinate it, and then put it back together. How do you do that? How could I do that? My conducting teacher said ‘Why would you want to do that?’ I said ‘well, here’s a detail here, and there’s a detail here, and it would be nice to just kinda lift them off the stage,’ and she said ‘what?’ Her response was ‘well, if the composer would have wanted that, the composer would have written that,’ and I said ‘well, what if I’m the composer and the conductor,’ and she said ‘well, you have a job to figure that out,’ and from that day this became my job. (Morris in Monga 2012)

With David Murray’s large ensemble as his vehicle, he was able to put his ideas into practice.
Nota
ved Music Influences on Butch Morris, “Real-Time Arranging,” and “Graphic Information”

Another important aspect of Conduction and Morris’ practice of it, is the idea of real-time arranging. Morris’ concept of real-time arranging is particularly relevant to explore given that some of the proposed origins of conducted improvisation can be found in the big band tradition where material was improvised on the spot and then cued. Graham Haynes elaborates on this phenomenon and its connection to Conduction:

[T]he way a lot of these big bands developed was conducted improvisation…a lot of times someone in the reed section or the brass section would come up with a signal for the head arrangements and then how to tell everyone, ‘ok you’re gonna play the third, you’re gonna play the root, you’re gonna play the seventh, you’re gonna play the fifth’ or whatever, and then conduct these lines and bring these lines out of the band, in time, in real time, and that was a kind of Conduction, and that was kind of the way I look at Butch working with David Murray, because a lot of the times we actually did come up with head arrangements and a lot of times even with the Conductions he would come up with head arrangements. A lot of times he would conduct, NuBlu or any other group, and he had an idea of what he wanted. He would sing to them he would say ‘Ok, dat da dah (singing musical phrase),’ you know and he would say ‘play that,’ you know that goes back to the very, very beginnings of jazz. So, when I think of conducted improvisation, the roots of conducted improvisation, to me, come from that, the beginnings of jazz where there wasn’t always notated material. (Haynes 2013a)
Morris had a well-developed career as an arranger before he began developing Conduction so it seems appropriate to look at his conducting practice in terms of arranging. Traditionally, scholarship on arranging music has been centered on written music, but I would like to explore aspects of Morris’ conducting as a form of arranging and orchestrating an ensemble, albeit in real time. Several musicians with whom I spoke told me about the profound effect that working with composer and arranger Gil Evans had on Butch Morris.

Although Gil Evans was a highly accomplished composer in his own right, he is well known as the arranger for Miles Davis’ albums *Porgy and Bess* and *Sketches of Spain* (Schuller 1994). Morris began working with Gil Evans in the 1970’s as a cornetist. Morris was deeply influenced by Evans’ arranging style, particularly his sense of orchestration:

I fell in love with Gil Evans and what he does, and later on I got a chance to work with him. That was the first time I could get inside and learn from this person firsthand. (Morris in Monga 2012)

Graham Haynes was able to elaborate on the specific ways that Morris’ conducting was influenced by Evans’ arranging, and some of the things that he thought were important about Morris’ conducting aesthetic.

I think he learned a lot of orchestration from Gil. I think his sense of orchestration was inspired by Gil. He would have instruments play…..the combinations of instruments, and the attention to the dynamics and the attention to the details of the dynamics, I think Butch might have gotten a lot from Gil Evans. You know, where he would use flutes and muted trumpets and those…that sonority. Butch had a very, very keen sense of orchestration,
very, very detailed, very, very keen, I mean he could go very far in depth with it, and I think some of those ideas came from Gil. Some of them probably came from others, but I know he knew Gil and he worked with Gil, and I think that’s where he picked up some stuff. (Haynes 2013a)

Although a Conduction has no pre-planned form or structure, one can see the influence of notated music as well as his arranging background on Morris’ performance style. One of the more unique aspects of analyzing conducted improvisation performance is the ability to examine the interplay between the structure of the system and the aesthetic of the individual conductor. In conducted improvisation, the conductor is not just changing parameters but actually composing and arranging in real time.

Some of Morris’ movements can also be seen as analogous to creating real-time graphic scores. He would often refer to these movement cues as “graphic information”. Morris (2011) himself described literal movement as a kind of graphic score. Morris actually had two different strategies for using “graphic information.” The first was what he called his “literal movement” strategy, which consisted of the entire ensemble (or whoever was cued) interpreting the same movement. His other strategy was the “panorama” strategy, which spatialized the “graphic information” so that when his baton was on an individual musician that musician alone would interpret the motion. In effect this would create a wave of sound going from one side of the ensemble to the other.

However, I don’t wish to imply that Morris actually developed the sign for “graphic information” or “literal movement” from his study of graphic scores. Stanley has already noted that Morris adapted the “literal movement” cue from Charles Moffet. (2009: 54)
Conduction as Confrontation

In the jump from alteration of composed material to creating (to use Frank Zappa’s phrase) “music out of nothing,” Butch Morris began working with even more indeterminate materials: musicians’ personal vocabularies. According to Morris this proved more difficult than deconstructing pre-composed material. Morris describes the personal nature of getting musicians to interpret and reinvent their own vocabularies through the lens of Conduction:

I’m asking for a human feeling, and in many cases that’s a very difficult thing to ask for, especially on the spot. Gimme (feigns surprise), you know. It’s confrontational in many ways, cause I’m asking you to give me musically or sonically, something that’s actually very close to you, but people don’t see it like that. People don’t see it like that. Music is something like that (gestures away from himself), but music’s not something like that, music is something like this (gestures towards himself), it’s more personal than we think, and then when you get down to this encounter, then you find out how personal it is. (Morris in Monga 2012)

Although Morris describes the encounter as a confrontation, I feel that he meant it in a positive context. Confrontation can be defined as “a situation in which people, groups, etc., fight, oppose, or challenge each other in an angry way” (Merriam-Webster 2013), but it can also be defined as a “face-to-face meeting.” The definition of a face-to-face meeting is more powerful, and powerfully ambiguous.

Based on my experience with Morris from personal communications off the bandstand, I got the feeling that an important part of that confrontation was a
confronting of the self. Morris wanted you to listen to what you were playing and honestly assess what you were adding to the ensemble.

Morris’s comments about the personal nature of improvised music vocabulary can be seen as speaking to ideas of the “authentic” in music, in the sense of communicating genuine emotion in dialogue with other members of the ensemble (community). Along these same lines Morris himself describes one of the pedagogical goals in “Intro & Principles of Conduction®”:

Based on the ‘significance’ of each directive, the nature and direction of the music at hand, the musician is confronted with their own decision as to how each directive should and could be represented sonically each time; a new rational (sic) for responsibility in musicianship; in doing so, evolves by particularizing each musicians opinions and mindset. (Morris 2011: 2)

Of particular interest is the phrase “a new rational(e) for responsibility in musicianship.” Morris’ articulation of responsibility as an important aspect of musicianship to develop implies that there is a way to play music that is not responsible. Furthermore, Morris implies that responsibility is something that has to be cultivated. This brings up a few important questions: how does one cultivate musical responsibility, and how does one learn to perform conduction in a way that they can decide how “each directive should be represented sonically each time”?

**Conduction as Pedagogy**

Conduction is also a system that has great pedagogical value and can be explored as a system for expanding the options of how musicians listen to and relate to improvised music. To be clear, this aspect of Conduction is not simply my own
theoretical construct, but appears to be explicitly spelled out by Butch Morris in his own writings. Here, I am interested in exploring the ways that musicians who have played with Morris perceive of Conduction as pedagogy and how their experiences playing with Morris have shaped the way that they listen to and think about music while they are improvising. Among Morris’ many stated goals in his Workshop description, quite a few are explicitly pedagogical, including:

- To engage the individual, ensemble and the audience in the discovery of a world of expressive possibility by refining the qualitative standard for what music is and what music can be.
- To apply new tools of analysis, new requirements and new scales of evaluation to the concept of music and the idea of musicianship.
- Ultimately, to cultivate, nurture, and educate, while keeping the collective landscape creatively and economically healthy by satisfying the artists’ need for challenge and the audiences desire to be rejuvenated, enlightened, entertained and more. (Morris n.d.b: 4)

Morris was able to create a system that was not only capable of generating music but one that also helped musicians cultivate the proper skills and aesthetic in order to play it properly. This isn’t to imply that the system would have worked without Morris’ enforcement of his aesthetic through (often heated) verbal dialogue. I also don’t mean to imply that the system was created fully formed and then implemented as pedagogy since Morris was constantly refining his system (Haynes 2013a). In this chapter I am also interested in exploring how Morris conceptualized his system as not only a system for music making but also a system that pushed musicians beyond their boundaries and limitations.
One important aspect of Morris’ own aesthetic, which seemed to define the music he conducted and had a large impact on many of the musicians that worked with him was his attention to dynamics. Another important aspect, especially in terms of getting musicians to push the capabilities of their instruments, is the imitate/mimic cue. The imitate/mimic cue directs a musician to copy as closely as possible another musician in the ensemble. In many cases this meant that a musician playing one instrument, a clarinet for example, had to imitate another instrument (sometimes even a drumset, or heavily processed electric guitar) that was completely different in terms of timbre or attack, for example. Graham Haynes explains the importance of this aspect of Morris’ practice:

Butch was always pushing the orchestration, always pushing it trying to get instruments to do things that was not their norm to do. So, yeah, I mean if he had a harp, and then he had a harp playing a gliss or something, and then he would tell the horns or the drums to play that. I mean that’s not what we’re used to. There were always things where we were being challenged, especially with the orchestration in terms of what the instrument could do. It was a learning experience that way, in terms of the orchestration, in terms of what I knew I could do, in terms of what I knew the cornet could do, and what I knew I could do and what I was used to doing. Yeah, a lot of them were extended techniques, but some of them were just challenges. Yeah, extended techniques, but things that you just never thought to do. He could have written whole books about that, what he can get out of an instrument. (Haynes 2013a) This aspect of Conduction was another way to get musicians out of their comfort zones. Through imitating an instrument that is completely different, musicians are not only being asked to play in a completely different way, but also to
listen to the instrument that they are imitating in order to understand how to properly attempt to duplicate its sound. Beyond simply cultivating extended techniques, instrumentalists are also practicing listening in a way that they may never have had to otherwise.

**Some Specific Possibilities/Extensions of Conduction**

Because Conduction is a structure-based system it is extremely useful for a variety of non-traditional ensembles. One ensemble featured in *Black February* is a group of actors reading from different text materials. The ensemble is conducted by Morris, and includes no traditional instrumentalists. Because of this, Conduction has great possibilities for post-Cageian experimentation. It is a system with the possibility of organizing any kind of sound because in most cases, as Morris points out, the improviser has to “supply the content” (Morris in Monga 2012), and the content is completely indeterminate.

This aspect of Conduction also allows for participation by musicians with no traditional Western music training. Musicians that are not literate in Western notation and play instruments in non-tempered tuning can add their individual content. I once played in a Conduction with a musical saw player who could not read music, but was able to learn and follow all of the commands that Morris presented during the session. In many other situations (including other conducted improvisation situations), this musician would be severely limited by his lack of formal music training. However, in Morris’ system he was able to supply his unique content to Morris’ conducted forms.
Because of its open structure and Morris’ social nature, Conduction, under Morris’ baton, has often served as a vehicle for cross-cultural exchange and intercultural music making. Morris has conducted musicians from many different world traditions, particularly with his ensemble “Sheng Skyscraper,” a group consisting of primarily traditional West African and East Asian musicians. American composer/multi-instrumentalist/drummer Tyshawn Sorey, who spent some of his formative years as a professional musician playing with this ensemble, writes of the experience:

In September 2003, Butch, myself and the rest of the New York/Sheng Skyscraper ensemble set off for Venice to appear at the 47th Music Biennale Festival. The piece called for a creative orchestra comprising African and Asian performers of traditional musics, as well as players from New York. Our performance of this work blew me away: Butch’s mastery of spontaneous composition led me to entirely new musical realms. That Butch was able to create a trans-idiomatic music, simultaneously embracing and altering a wide range of musical traditions, led me to the understanding that music is a direct language that can be communicated and developed with anyone, from anywhere, at any time. (Sorey 2014)

Conduction Analysis

Because conducted improvisation performances are generated in real time through the motions of the conductor, studying and analyzing conducted improvisation performance has some unique challenges. Although the conductor’s actions may be deduced and transcribed from a sound recording, the results are largely speculative. Because the conductor’s action essentially amount to a real time
visual score it is important that proper video documentation is available. Ideally, video of a conducted improvisation performance should include shots of both the conductor and the group at all times. While it is essential that the conductor is in view, it is almost equally important for the viewer to see to which members of the group the conductor is addressing his or her signs. Many of the actions of the conductor are addressed to individuals or small groups of instrumentalists. Additionally, many commands, such as the panorama command in the case of Morris’ Conduction, move throughout the entire ensemble extremely rapidly.

Each Conduction that Morris led would receive a unique number distinguishing it from all other Conductions. Each performance was essentially its own “work” created in real-time in a collaborative effort between Morris and the musicians following his baton. Morris meticulously chronicled the first 188 Conductions including the date, performers, and location of each performance (Morris, n.d.a). Conduction® 192 (Morris 2010) is one of the few films of Morris that is widely available, shot in an acceptable manner, and of sufficient length to be analyzed. My analysis consists of a narrative score of the approximately 11 minute performance. Conduction 192 is a unique performance, featuring a few regular collaborators with an all-star group of musicians who were most likely already participating in the Italian festival. The band includes former employer David Murray, Evan Parker, Alan Silva, Hamid Drake, Jean Paul Bourrelly, Joseph Bowie, along with younger Chicago musicians Chad Taylor, Harrison and Greg Ward. The band also includes Nublu (Morris’s home base in NYC) regular and bandleader On
Ka’a Davis. Ostensibly, because of the relative unfamiliarity of many of the performers with Morris’ methods, coupled with the name status of many of the musicians, this recording features soloists more prominently than many of Morris regular Conductions.

The recording opens with Morris gesturing to the bass player and vibraphonist to perform sound memory one, an event that Morris had previously “recorded” by indicating the sound memory cue. The sound memory cue consists of the conductor pointing to the top of his/her head with his/her index finger and then holding the amount of fingers (usually up to three) up associated with the sonic event that the group is providing in that instant. The cue for the group to perform the captured memory is exactly the same as the cue which captures the memory. The sound memories remain consistent throughout the duration of a single Conduction.

The fact that the performance begins with an event that was already captured lets the viewer know that the beginning of the recording is actually a midpoint of a Conduction. Morris gives the tempo and signals for them to begin. While the bassist and vibraphonist repeat their sound memory one ostinato at 0:11 Morris gestures to the horns to play two conducted long notes. Morris leaves some space and conducts two more sustained notes. At 0:22 Morris then conducts a connected phrase of five notes that approximate quarter note triplets over the fundamental ostinato rhythm. At 0:26, Morris gives the same instrumentalists, “graphic” information, fast moving shapes that Morris draws with his baton that the instrumentalists are required to interpret in the manner of a graphic score. At 0:29 Morris ends his flight of graphic
information with another sustain cue. At this point in the video Morris’ left hand, which controls volume and other aspects of the music, is not clearly visible when he is modifying an existing activational cue. Morris conducts some more detached long sounds from the group and at 0:43 motions to the trumpet player to improvise.

At 1:20 Morris simply marks time by moving his baton left and right and moving his feet in rhythm. Morris looks down while doing this so that none of the musicians are awaiting another cue. Effectively, by disengaging his eye contact he is acknowledging that his motions are no longer significant to the creation of the music. At this moment it appears that Morris is thinking and listening and preparing for his next move. At 1:28, only seconds later, Morris directs his gaze back towards the group and motions for the rhythm section to open up what they are playing.

Morris, in the rehearsals that I attended as a member of the Nublu Orchestra was very clear about what the expand cue was and wasn’t. He was very critical of musicians that would completely abandon the character of what they were playing when he gave the expand cue. Morris was adamant that when he gave that cue the instrumentalist was not to fundamentally change what they were doing or to start soloing but to add variations to the material that they were already working with. Accordingly, the rhythm section begins to vary what they are playing but stay in the same time and rhythmic feel. At 1:42 Morris cues the stage right horns to play conducted long sounds. At 1:45 Morris cues the stage left horns to play conducted long sounds and splits up the horn section cuing alternating notes between the stage left horns and stage right horns. While all this is going on the trumpet player is still
soloing. At 1:54 Morris takes a break again and pauses to listen to the band and plot his next moves.

At 2:18 Morris cues the rhythm section again and at 2:29 cues the horns to play conducted sustains, at 2:58 stringing together a group of faster sustains. In the middle of this Morris gives a cue indicating for the rhythm section to play fast (four fingers held up) but the cue is misunderstood or ignored, perhaps due to the groups’ unfamiliarity with his language. The piece continues in the same vein for about another minute. Around 4:15 Morris cues almost the entire group to trill and gives them an accompanying repeat sign indicating that the entire group should remain trilling until given a new directive. At 4:51 Morris gestures to the rhythm section to play sound memory one again and gives the downbeat at 4:54. With the drums and guitar added we get a better idea of what sound memory one actually consisted of, including a second line-esque drum beat with a lot of rolls. At 5:23 Evan Parker is given the cue to solo.

Evan Parker solos over sound memory one with Morris giving the horns more moving sustain cues and graphic information, essentially shaping backgrounds around Parker’s solo. Around 6:34 On Ka’a Davis joins Parker in a dialogue on guitar. Around 7:15 Morris takes the rhythm section out of their regular ostinato function by cuing graphic information and hits and sustained notes in the rhythm section as well as using the panorama cue, which spatializes graphic information so that only the player that the baton is pointing to plays at a given time. At 7:31 Morris cues sound
memory one again. At 7:54 he takes the rhythm section out completely highlighting some of the solo improvisation that Evan Parker has become famous for.

Around 8:15 he motions for the band to imitate Evan Parker’s increasingly abstract phrases to good effect. Morris alternates between this approach and graphic information. At 8:59 Morris cues the full band in loud sustained tones, which he quickly drops to a pianissimo and then brings back up for dramatic effect. Morris has the group sustain their notes quietly from 9:11-9:29 until he fades the entire group out (other than Parker who is still soloing). Around 9:32 Morris gives the group the “imitate and repeat” sign. This sign is accomplished by Morris pointing to a musician (or group of musicians), holding his right ear, and then pointing to the musician that the individual or group is to imitate. Parker gets the message and begins repeating a simple phrase (Figure 2.1) that is easily imitated and repeated by the group. Morris gives the

Figure 2.1 Evan Parker’s Repeated Phrase in Conduction® 192 (Morris 2010)
(transcription by author)
horn players a downbeat and each musician plays their own interpretation of Parker’s phrase at the same time in more than a few different keys. The harmonies and parallelism that this approach generates are fascinating. Parker responds by performing subtle variations on his repeated phrase. Increasingly Parker interacts with the group playing their own interpretations of his original phrase. This interaction is an excellent example of the generative possibilities of Conduction. The manipulation of a simple phrase in real time generates complex harmonies while still allowing the originator of the phrase to interact with its increasingly distorted reproduction.

At 10:12 Morris cues the group (by moving his hands out horizontally from what looks like a prayer position) to expand on that phrase, allowing it to become little by little completely abstracted with the illusion that the original phrase is slowly dissolving. By 10:28 Morris gives the group the cue (by moving his hands back together) to play the original phrase again. Parker responds by adding his own variations in a call and response fashion and the recording ends.

This is only an eleven-minute excerpt of a much longer performance with many musicians who were not intimately familiar with Morris’ system. However, this performance is an excellent introduction to the system of Conduction and some of its generative possibilities.

Conclusion

Performing with Morris was a very important part of my musical development. It was unlike any other musical experience that I’ve taken part in. The
simultaneity of complete concentration and liberation that Morris’ system and conducting called upon was truly unique. Every time I performed I felt that I had grown as an improviser, listener, composer, and thinker and had really tried to go beyond what I was used to playing and find something that was, as Morris would say a “revelation.” Clearly, not every Conduction that I played in was similarly revelatory, but during the moments when it was really happening it was an astounding, sui generis experience. Conduction is truly unique among conducting languages, and although Butch is no longer with us, I hope that the possibilities of this system that he has left us will be further realized.
“It doesn’t sound like anything else. It sounds like itself and it sounds like today”  
*Adam Rudolph describing the Go: Organic Orchestra*

Adam Rudolph began conducting improvisation with his group the Go: Organic Orchestra in 2000. I had the pleasure of seeing Go: Organic for the first time in 2003 at the Electric Lodge in Los Angeles, California. There, the Orchestra placed more emphasis on written compositions and Rudolph would occasionally perform with the ensemble. Rudolph moved to New York in 2006 and shifted his focus more completely towards what he describes as “improvised conducting.” I began playing with Adam Rudolph in October of 2012 and it has been an important part of my own musical development.

**Adam Rudolph’s Musical Background and the Shaping of an Aesthetic**

Adam Rudolph was born in Chicago in 1955. His early years were spent studying percussion and playing with musicians associated with the AACM on the South Side of Chicago (Rudolph 2013b). Rudolph studied ethnomusicology as an
undergraduate at Oberlin and travelled to Ghana in 1977, which he describes as a formative experience in his understanding of how rhythms are generated.

In 1978 Rudolph would meet one of his lifelong mentors and influences, Don Cherry. Rudolph went to live with Cherry, and another future collaborator Hamid Drake, in Cherry’s country house in Sweden. Rudolph describes meeting Cherry in 1978 when he performed on Rudolph’s first record with Mandingo Griot Society, a group that he founded along with kora player Foday Musa Suso and drummer Hamid Drake.

I met Don Cherry in 1978 when he came and he played on the first Mandingo Griot Society record we did and then he invited me to go and live with him and Hamid Drake…to go live with him in Sweden in his house in the countryside. He lived in a schoolhouse with his wife Moki and their kids and a lot of musicians were coming through there and then we went on tour in Europe after that, so this was, yeah, ’78. So that’s when he introduced me to a lot of Ornette Coleman’s concepts and that’s when I started seriously composing myself in ’78, ’79. (Rudolph 2014)

Although Cherry has been an important influence on Rudolph, Rudolph looks at his influence as more of a conceptual one. In fact Rudolph looks at the idea of influence more in terms of process than in terms of influence on genre, aesthetic, or musical material.

I think [with] Don, the idea of an influence is not so much what people are doing and trying to copy what they’re doing but it’s more HOW they do it. And the how has to do with a process, a way of thinking, a way of inventing your own processes, your own creative processes. Working with the material in very elemental way…in a very elemental, what I mean is essential way, dealing with intervals, and rhythms, overtones, patterns, you know? (Rudolph 2014)
Don Cherry’s ability to synthesize original music drawing on material from different world cultures is a major inspiration for Rudolph’s own musical conception. Equally important is Cherry’s ability to include people from all different backgrounds into his own concept without surrendering the clear direction and intention of the music.

But the other way that Don was an influence, of course, and Relativity Suite was an important recording, is that Don had a way of bringing…his concept could hold a lot of world…what we call ‘world music’, I mean everybody lives in the world…but a lot of musics from various cultures and musicians who played music from all kinds of cultures in one umbrella concept. I would say that that’s the biggest door that he opened up for me. (Rudolph 2014)

One of the most important lessons that Rudolph feels that he learned from Yusef Lateef and Cherry is the importance of a constant quest for musical knowledge, proficiency, and understanding.

[O]ne thing that I learned from Don, and also from Yusef is a certain kind of studiousness and I’ve spent many, many years very deeply involved in the study of music, especially from North India and West African cultures and the African diaspora cultures, but also Indonesian traditions and just really, of course, collaborating over the years with people like L. Shankar, and Hassan Hakmoun, and Foday Musa Suso, and so on, and Haji Tekbelek and really being immersed in these different musical cultures to the point where, not that I want to be a master or even perform that music, but have enough of an understanding where it’s like you ingest it and it becomes part of your DNA. (Rudolph 2014)

Although Rudolph has immersed himself in a variety of different drumming traditions, his intention was never to completely master any specific one, but rather to
find a way to incorporate his research into an original musical concept.

[F]rom the get go I was always looking...when I started studying tabla in the
‘70s and when I went to West Africa, I started playing hand drums in the ‘70s
and then went to West Africa in 1977 to study drumming there. It was never
with an eye that I wanted to just play that music, you know as an outcome of
that. I always loved playing it and performing it but my interest was always,
you know, how would this manifest for me as a performer and as a composer.
(Rudolph 2014)

On the surface, this kind of attitude towards learning traditional music may
suggest a kind of appropriation that mirrors imperialist exploitation of Africa.

However, Rudolph’s experiences with what Jason Stanyek (2004) describes as
“intercultural” music making with Foday Musa Suso, the Ladzekpos and many other
traditional African musicians, as well as in-depth study of Afro-diasporic traditional
musics, suggest otherwise. Indeed Rudolph is highly critical of projects such as
“Deep Forest,” which sample traditional musics and recontextualize them without any
respect for their original context.

Rudolph is fond of relating Don Cherry’s quote that “jazz is the glue” in
Cherry’s own collaborations with musicians from different world traditions (Rudolph
2013b). Rudolph echoes this sentiment in describing his own concept.

The foundation of what I'm doing comes from the African-American
improvisational tradition, which is often called jazz so that's the glue that
allows all musicians to perform together…but stylistically, my music might
sound like anything, depending on what I imagine in the composition.
(Rudolph in Rule 1992)
Somewhat isolated from the conducted improvisation community in New York, Rudolph describes developing his own system independently of other models in Los Angeles.

I started the Go: Organic Orchestra and basically, you know, contrary to what a lot of people think I wasn’t really too aware of Butch Morris. I knew his brother Wilbur Morris, I had met through Don, but I sort of started doing the Go: Organic Orchestra where I was playing also but just started intuitively started using hand signals, and being combined with these interval matrices. Not unlike what we do now with the Orchestra but sort of starting and developing it intuitively and kind of seeing what things work and refining and developing those, and what things didn’t work. So I really developed it pretty independently of other…I guess later on I also heard about what Walter Thompson was doing, and like I said Butch Morris, but at that time I was kind of unaware of what they were doing. (Rudolph 2014)

Even though he did teach at the CMS, Rudolph explains that he wasn’t really aware of Anthony Braxton and Karl Berger’s conducted improvisation concepts (although he clearly was aware of their musical output). He does, however, cite the importance of seeing Muhal Richard Abrams’ Experimental Band to his early musical development.

I taught at the CMS in I think ’80 and ’81, but that was the summer school world music program. I was there with Foday Musa Suso and Hamid Drake with the Mandingo Griot Society so of course we knew Karl, but Karl wasn’t really teaching in the summer I don’t think, he was just there organizing things. So I wasn’t really aware of his things either. I had seen Muhal Richard Abrams with the Experimental Band, you know, because I grew up in Hyde Park in Chicago so I grew up around…Steve McCall lived a couple doors
away from me, and Threadgill lived on 56th street so I used to hear a lot of that music. (Rudolph 2014)

In fact, Rudolph problematizes the general idea of a direct lineage of conducted improvisation practice.

I never saw Butch, the first time I saw Butch conduct was about 2 years ago and I just want to make it clear that I came to my own conclusions based upon high and low and gestures that made sense relative to what I was trying to do with the Go: Organic Orchestra… yeah, I mean there’s something in the air and there’s something going on but I just have to make clear this thing about…who saw who and just the idea of a sort of a lineage of these things…I think there’s a lot of it. Then you go to West Africa, to Senegal, and if you see Doudou N’Diaye Rose conducting his sabar group, he conducts THEM too. It’s like, there’s a lot of ways to do these kinds of things and I know a lot of people are doing it, but my language was…like I said I started it in California and just figured out: this is high, this is low, this is up, this is down. And a sweeping up just made…they’re very, they’re graphic demonstrations mostly of what I wanted people to do. (Rudolph 2014)

**Creation of The Go: Organic Orchestra**

The Go: Organic Orchestra was originally created as a forum for Rudolph to share the knowledge gained through his work with Cherry and Lateef as well as through his studies of different musical traditions.

[T]here’s three important things to me about being involved in improvised music and that’s: imagination, listening, and sharing. Imagination, listening, and sharing, and so the idea of sharing and all of us having an opportunity to share our ideas…but the Organic Orchestra is about my sharing the things that I’ve gleaned and that I’ve developed from my work with elders, like that
we’ve talked about before, Yusef Lateef and Don and so on and sharing those with everybody. (Rudolph 2014)

Rudolph goes on to describe the type of musicians that were attracted to the Go: Organic Orchestra.

I think what I’ve found over time is that the people who gravitate towards the Orchestra are what I like to call evolutionists. They’re people who are interested in study and wanting to develop themselves as artists. (Rudolph 2014)

He believes that the members of the Orchestra participate in Go: Organic because they are interested in learning new concepts and growing together as a collective, citing high retention rates despite little of the monetary gain that would be expected by the group’s members in other situations.

As you know, it’s not like we’ve been running around playing a lot of high-paying gigs. So this is something amazing though, Sean. After 6 years or 7 years now the New York Organic Orchestra, I got 90% of the people are the same people who came into the group in the beginning. So, they’re getting something out of it besides money. They’re getting something. (Rudolph 2014)

In creating Go: Organic, Rudolph was also influenced by the organization and collectivist aesthetic of groups in the traditional musics that he has studied.

I was very influenced by this idea of Balinese gamelan. And one of the things in the Balinese gamelan, and you find it in Africa also and in other cultures. But, this thing of Balinese gamelan for example…every village in Bali has its gamelan, right? In that gamelan you can have the person who’s maybe not super duper musical or developed or whatever but that person can be in the group and hit the gong, the big gong that will ‘goong’ every 32 bars. Then in the same group there’s the guy who’s like the super virtuosic, can play all the
instruments, can play them backwards, you know, all that stuff and is composing for the group. But they’re in the same group together. And you find this in Africa sometimes too, you know where the young kids, there’s room for them to be in there…Professionalism…sometimes musicians make professionalism into a religion. That’s not what a religion is all about (laughs). So I’m really not into that too. Everybody gets to participate. (Rudolph 2014) Although Rudolph’s work in Los Angeles was important for the initial development of his musical language and conducting system, the Go: Organic Orchestra would reach a new level of development through regular performances in New York.

**Move to New York**

Adam Rudolph moved to New York in 2006 and began a new version of Go: Organic. In New York Rudolph would find a large pool of improvisers who were already familiar with different forms of conducted improvisation. Some of these improvisers were also veterans of the Creative Music Studios program, an important hotbed of conducted improvisation development in the 70’s and 80’s (Sweet 1996: 93). Just looking at a small sample of the group, there are many musicians who have performed language music with Anthony Braxton (JD Parran, Ned Rothenberg, Jason Kao Hwang, Sarah Schoenbeck) and Conduction with Butch Morris (Graham Haynes, Steven Haynes, Jason Kao Hwang, Joe Hertenstein). In this environment Rudolph was able to further develop his conducting language with a group that performed and rehearsed on a regular basis with the downtown Manhattan (later Brooklyn) performance venue Roulette as its home base.
**Structure of Rudolph’s Conducted improvisation language**

Rudolph’s conducted improvisation concept, like Anthony Braxton’s, is largely content based. Although it is an important part of the music of Go: Organic, Rudolph’s conducted improvisations are only part of his overall concept. There are two important components to Rudolph’s material. The first component is melodic/harmonic. Rudolph has a number of synthetic scales that he has created as well as scales that he has adapted from one of his mentors, Yusef Lateef (Fig. 3.1). The second component is what Rudolph refers to as “ostinatos of circularity” (Fig. 3.3). The ostinatos of circularity are short rhythmic cells that combine and interlock with each other to create complex interwoven rhythmic and melodic textures. The most iconic of Rudolph’s “ostinatos of circularity” are created from repetition of two notes of the triplet, or three notes of the quintuplet.

**Matrices**

Rudolph’s matrices are pitch collections arranged in grid formation (Fig. 3.1). The matrices allow the orchestra to play polytonally within the same basic scale structure. Rudolph likes to use the Indian term “rasa” to describe the feeling or aesthetic inherent in each collection of pitches.

I’ve always been interested in I guess what you could call syntax in the music, and trying to open things for the musicians…you know, inspire everybody to think about things in different ways. So what I love about the matrices of course, and the cosmograms, you can look at the relationships in the intervals
in a multiplicity of ways. So in Western notation where the E is following the C, you have to play the E. But in our case with the cosmograms you can move…you have a lot of choices of things…you can go backwards and forwards, up and down. But what’s beautiful about it is that when everybody is inside of the cosmograms or the matrices, that we’re all together. I mean, we’re in an area, we’re in an arena together. It’s not just all twelve tones all the time but we’re in a certain kind of area. Yusef and I used to talk about that. We would say that intervals have a ‘rasa’, they have a quality to them. And there’s only six intervals and combining those in different ways you get all these different kinds of colorations and emotional shadings. (Rudolph 2014)

In addition to his matrices in grid format, Rudolph also has a few scales that are arranged in other more visually striking ways. The most important of these is the Triple Diminished Cosmogram. The Triple Diminished Cosmogram, originally designed by Yusef Lateef, organizes cells of three notes from each fully diminished chord into symmetrical patterns (see Fig. 3.2). Like the matrices, the Triple Diminished Cosmogram can be cued in various directions or function as the basis for individual or collective improvisations.

Each matrix can be cued as material for direct cues or individual improvisations through activational cues. Each matrix is cued by the conductor raising the corresponding amount of fingers with the right hand. After the matrix is cued, the direction in which the musician should follow the matrix is indicated by a swiping movement (see Fig. 3.5). For example, if the conductor raises 5 fingers and swipes his/her finger left to right then the musician will play the top line of the 5th matrix (pentatonic) from left to right. Additionally, if the conductor indicates a
swiping motion with all four fingers then the musician is free to use any line in the matrix in the direction indicated. The conductor may also indicate what matrix (cosmogram) that he/she would like the individual soloist to improvise in, and in that case would indicate the matrix with the fingers of the right hand and then give the “solo” cue (the traditional upward palm, “come on” gesture).
Figure 3.1. Concert Pitch Matrices I-VII for Fall 2013 performances (Rudolph 2013)
Figure 3.2. Triple Diminished Galaxy (Adapted from Yusef Lateef) (Rudolph 2012)
Figure 3.3. Ostinatos of Circularity (Rudolph 2011b)

#1 (Twenty one)

#2 (Fifteen)

#3

#4

#6 Olduvai  Drone - then on cue play & repeat melody freely yet in rhythm

#7

#8

#9

#10
Cyclic Verticalism

Cyclic verticalism, an integral part of Adam Rudolph’s conducted improvisation concept, is his “attempt to explore some of the possible combinations that arise from the process of combining these cyclic (horizontal) and vertical (polymetric) elements” (Rudolph 2005b: iv). In essence, cyclic verticalism is a way to layer multiple rhythmic and melodic elements together to create a complex texture. In many of his “signal rhythms” Rudolph (Rudolph 2013b) combines two rhythms of different lengths that eventually meet up in longer cycles. One important signal rhythm is the combination of an African inspired rhythm in 15/8 with a Middle Eastern Samai rhythm in 10/8 (at half the speed so that it takes 20 beats) (Figure 3.4). The 15/8 rhythm is repeated four times, and the Samai at half tempo is repeated three times. Both cycles take 60 beats and begin again at the same place. Rudolph describes the genesis of his concept:

So, the way I look at it is that when you move into the higher dimensions of thinking all of the elements become simpler and simpler. And I started thinking about this when I actually lived in Ghana in 1977. I saw that there were SO many different drum traditions and within all of those…and this was just in Ghana around the Institute of African Studies…and within that there were dozens and dozens of rhythm, and it would take many lifetimes to really master any of those. So I started looking at: well, what are the underlying principles of that, how is this music organized? Basically, it’s
organized from what I call…what people have called a timeline…but I call it a signal rhythm. (Rudolph 2014)
Sixty Beat Cycles

Construction

The top line will be Same'i Thaqif (page 12) – this 10 beat cycle will be repeated three times:

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In many ways Rudolph’s development of cyclic verticalism and organization of rhythm is similar to the development of other content based conducting systems, such as Braxton’s language music concept in that it is searching for basic elements that can be combined to create larger structures. The important difference is that whereas Braxton’s sonic geometries are based on loosely defined identity states that are mostly gestural in nature, Rudolph’s system is based around specific rhythmic and modal possibilities.

Although my initial description of cyclic verticalism deals primarily with rhythm, Rudolph’s layering of different sections (or members) of the orchestra playing different scales at the same time can be seen as a harmonic/melodic form of cyclic verticalism. When I asked Rudolph if the idea of verticalism could apply to his overall conducting concept he told me that it had influenced the way that he approached his music:

Yeah, I mean, with the ostinatos of circularity the rhythm…when you have this kind of rhythm independence and one thing it could be moving against another it can be orchestrated. It blows up the ability to have things…or an expansion of things…one thing can be moving against another thing and I’ve always been interested in the idea of form against form, and having a multiplicity of forms. For example if you look out the window, right? You’re going to see the window frame and then you might see the trees outside the window, and then there’s the clouds, and then there’s the mountains, and then there’s the clouds, and then there’s the sky. So, you’re seeing all those things at once, right? But they’re all different things, but you’re seeing them all at once. So, that’s what I’m really interested in and that’s what I’m looking for in the music with the Organic Orchestra too. It’s not even like an
idea of linear theme and development, and one thing follows another. But it’s more something spherical, that’s cyclic and spherical that can be experienced over and over again in many different ways. There’s layers of things going on and orbiting around each other. So, that’s really true, not only is the ostinatos of circularity and cyclic verticalism a way for me to achieve that in the music, but it’s also an influence. Like you said, it is an influence, it’s a big influence on how I think about the music. I don’t think about linear things, theme and development so much. (Rudolph 2014)

Like the other conductor/composers profiled in this thesis, getting away from a strict linear concept of musical development is important to Rudolph.

**VOCUM**

Another important aspect of Rudolph’s music is VOCUM, an acronym for Virtuosity Of the Collective UsM. VOCUM is a concept through which improvisers focus on their part of the totality of what the group is playing and sublimate their own virtuosity in service of the collective sound of the group. At its most basic level it is represented by groups of improvisers repeating different “ostinatos of circularity” in order to create a complex hocketing texture.

I wanted to hook everybody into it in the Organic Orchestra, so I just…I don’t know it just popped in my mind one day, this uh…VOCUM…which means Virtuosity Of the Collective UsM. What it is, I believe [the reason] I called it virtuosity is that most people associate the idea of virtuosity in our culture [with] running around, you know, moving around the instrument quickly, and doing all kinds of amazing things like that, but what we learn from the Babenzele is that there’s another kind of virtuosity that is about, that’s more about generating patterns, simple patterns, and playing them in the
right place, at the right time, with the right feeling. A certain kind of consistency and openness and with a varying of what you do but never losing the kernel of what you’re doing so that eventually as it happens, and it moves around and around...these things start cycling around and everybody’s holding their dynamic of what they do relative to everybody else the music starts to lift. ‘Cause it’s not linear music, it’s about the lifting through the ostinato and the lifting is actually....that’s back to what I was saying about ‘body, mind, spirit.’ The lifting is something about the spirit or mysticism of what happens, because when you play those patterns, those VOCUM, and play them over and over.... The music starts to lift and transcend and then it becomes part of this transcendent experience for everybody, a collective transcendence. (Rudolph 2014)

VOCUM in its simplest form is concerned with creating complex hocketed melodies from simple individual parts in a similar fashion to the music of the Babenzele of Central Africa (Rudolph 2012) and other cultures that use hocketing strategies. However, the concept of VOCUM can be extended to apply to other forms of group improvisation and collective ostinato based improvisations.

**Activational, Modificational, and Direct Cues**

The sound of the Go: Organic Orchestra is largely dependent on Rudolph’s materials, primarily his matrices, cosmograms, and ostinatos of circularity. In addition to these materials, Rudolph will often cue cyclical bass lines and percussion parts in the rhythm section. Like the music of Anthony Braxton, Rudolph’s music can contain a variety of material from different periods of his musical development.
Rudolph’s activational cues include gesturing for instrumentalists to improvise within a matrix. This cue is performed by holding up a number with the right hand (which corresponds to a matrix, see Figure 3.1) and gesturing to the musician to improvise. This cue can be modified by a directional swipe of the conductor’s hand that directs the improviser to play the matrix forwards, backwards, down, or up. Another way this can be modified is through a timbral cue instructing musicians to play harmonics or multiphonics. In addition to specifying timbre, Rudolph also has cues that instruct the musician to play in a higher range or a lower range. Another activational cue is to “create an ostinato.” This cue can be modified by attaching a matrix pitch set to it, or it can be completely indeterminate in terms of pitch. The ostinato, once created, must be repeated until the conductor signals for it to stop.

Rudolph also has activational cues for completely determinate material. The cue for the ostinatos of circularity involves the ostinato cue (two hands held together in a circular formation, see Fig. 3.4) followed by a number held up with fingers. Often Rudolph will give different members of the same section different ostinati (see Figure 3.3) that interlock (for example ostinati 3, 4, and 5 together). Rudolph will also cue specific bass lines and rhythms from the rhythm section by singing the rhythms or holding up a number of fingers that corresponds to the rhythm section’s separate music sheet. Although the shorter ostinatos of circularity are to be played as written, in a longer cycle the musician can choose to hold notes or lay out. For example, in a composition in 5/4 the one-beat ostinatos can be played twice, the last note can be
held for two beats and the ostinato can resume on the fifth beat. In the music of the Go: Organic Orchestra there are many levels of improvisation from complete improvisation to simple variations on fixed material.

Rudolph uses many of the same activational cues as direct cues. For example, Rudolph will often specify a matrix or cosmogram (see Figs. 3.1 and 3.2) using a corresponding number of fingers and indicate a direction for a group or individual to play (see Fig. 3.5), and then conduct the group to play the scales (a strategy that Rudolph uses on Part Seven (Fast) below). One particular strategy that Rudolph uses is to have members of a section playing within the same matrix, but have each player play the matrix in a different direction. In this way Rudolph can spontaneously generate a harmony, which stays in the same general aesthetic and feeling (what Rudolph would describe as a ‘rasa’).

Some of the modificational cues Rudolph uses are cues to stretch time, increase speed or to break up a regular rhythm (see Figure 3.5). These cues may be applied to the ensemble or soloists. The “leave space” solo is often used to regulate the development of a solo within the context of a larger musical event. “Break up rhythm” is often given to the rhythm section or the winds and strings when they are playing a regular rhythm (as in the ostinatos of circularity). Another cue, similar to Butch Morris’ repeat cue, cues the instrumentalist to repeat what they are doing.
Figure 3.5. Basic Hand Signals for Go Organic 2011 (Rudolph 2011a)
Negotiating New Systems and Personal Styles

In his “Foreward to The Gentle Giant-The Autobiography of Yusef Lateef,” Rudolph explains Lateef’s process of creating a new system upon which to base his music:

This creative attitude has served Yusef well, up to the present day. [Lateef] says: ‘when you get rid of one thing you have to replace it with something else.’ As I see it, this means first having the courage to abandon something one may have invested years in developing…Then one must have the imagination to think of a genuinely new approach that must be grounded in a foundation of deep musical knowledge and substance. (Rudolph 2005a)

In rehearsal (2013b) Rudolph has alluded to Yusef Lateef’s quote in regards to his own system. Rudolph clearly intends for each musician in the orchestra to assimilate his musical materials into their own improvisations. In his document entitled “Practice Suggestions” Rudolph gives musicians a clear method to begin to internalize his harmonic and melodic materials.

Although Rudolph focuses in rehearsals on getting musicians to improvise fluently using his scalar systems, and looks at those systems as a fundamental basis of his music, he is also dealing with improvisers from a variety of backgrounds, who have all spent time cultivating a personal musical vocabulary. An important part of Rudolph’s concept for the group is for everyone in the group to bring their own personality to his material.
I want people to play their own gestures of their own phraseology and play themselves. So, when you’re looking at a triple diminished cosmogram and then Kenny Wessel is looking at a triple diminished cosmogram and Stephen Haynes is looking at it, and Graham Haynes is looking at it. Everyone is looking at that same material, but because of the way it’s set up for the multiplicities of syntax and...everyone’s going to play it their own way and bring their own aesthetic to it. And that’s really cool, so you’re projecting your ideas too. (Rudolph 2014)

As part of the project of transcribing Rudolph’s music I thought it would be important to see how two longtime members of Go: Organic and Rudolph’s smaller group Moving Pictures interpreted his matrices and approached improvisation within the context of the Orchestra. In analyzing these solos, I relate the solo realizations to the material (matrices and ostinatos of circularity) that members of the orchestra work from in order to create solos. As Anthony Braxton explains at the beginning of his Composition Notes Book E: “I believe that the real secrets of creative music cannot be found with alien value systems (and sometimes intentions)” (Braxton 1988b: i).

Taking Braxton at his word, I believe that it is important, when analyzing music generated from new systems, to have some knowledge of the materials and structures from which the music has been generated. Therefore, it is important to take these elements into account when analyzing the actual realization of the composer’s vision.

Towards an Analysis of Conducted Improvisation Performance

Because of the relatively determinate materials and its primary reliance on cyclic verticalism, Go: Organic’s performances of Adam Rudolph’s conducted
improvisation vocabulary are a good starting point for transcription and analysis of conducted improvisation performance. Rudolph has recorded quite a few live albums since 2001, and almost without exception they feature relatively short excerpts of full performances by the group. Rudolph’s 2013 album Sonic Mandala was recorded largely in a two-step process, where the percussion tracks were first laid down, and then the rest of the group was conducted over them. While the album differs slightly from the spontaneity of a live Go: Organic performance, the basic structure of each composition is created in a similar way. Due to the restraints (time and budgetary) of studio recording, this album represents arguably the simplest, most easily transcribable documentation of Go: Organic. I also chose this album to work with because every track represents a full performance of each piece.

In analyzing conducted improvisation performance there are two important aspects to consider. The first aspect is the improvised performance of the conductor. The second aspect is the realization that the musicians give the conducted material. Often the parameters that the musicians are given by the conductor (especially in the case of Rudolph’s music) are relatively fixed. Although there is still valuable information in the more determinate elements that are improvised by the orchestra, the less determinate elements give a clearer idea of the interplay between the conductor’s concept and the musician’s personal voice.

The two pieces from Sonic Mandala that I chose to analyze both feature longtime members of Adam Rudolph’s ensemble, Graham Haynes and Kenny Wessel. Both pieces, although different in tempo, were based on a similar structure
and featured an ostinato in the same basic key. Although Haynes’ and Wessel’s improvisations feature some similar elements, there are distinct differences. The two solos are instructive in how they utilize Rudolph’s scalar system as well as their own personal vocabulary.

Part Seven is itself a three-part movement, featuring Tim Keiper on the donsongo, a West African hunters harp (“Donzo Ngoni” Spurlock Museum) with tuning pegs for each string. In this case the lowest string is tuned to G and represents the fundamental pitch of the accompaniment. The other strings are tuned to C, D, F, and G. The two tracks that I analyze come from the second and third movement (Medium and Fast, respectively). My goal in this analysis is to demonstrate that even within what I refer to as “new systems based” improvisation there is a synthesis between learned material and personal vocabularies, and to explore what that synthesis looks like in concrete musical terms.

A secondary interest of mine in transcribing Part Seven (Medium) and (Fast) is to give a full picture of what a Go: Organic performance might look like. As I have pointed out earlier, this piece is representative of a basic version of a Go: Organic performance. My hope is that the simplicity of this performance will actually give the musically literate listener a window into what actually takes place during one of Rudolph’s conducted improvisation performance.
Improvised Solos

There are some clear commonalities to the performances of Wessel and Haynes. Both players largely use pentatonic vocabulary and stay more or less within the key center of G and D. However, Haynes makes use of the G minor pentatonic scale adding the major third, clearly grounding his scale in a G tonality. When I asked Haynes if he had been conducted to use a specific scale during the session he replied that he didn’t remember but was mostly trying to follow the accompaniment (Haynes 2013b). Haynes’ first phrase, approaching G from below and playing G repeatedly on the downbeats serves to clearly establish the tonality of his solo (see Figure 3.6, measures 2 and 3). Although Haynes’ approach primarily uses the pentatonic vocabulary specified in Rudolph’s pentatonic matrix, his addition of the major third clearly takes his approach outside of Rudolph’s prescriptive scalar language.

Rhythmically, Haynes’ approach is primarily metric and he often starts or ends his phrases on or near the downbeat of the bar. Further taking the solo outside of a G minor pentatonic tonality, Haynes makes use of the b9 (or Ab) in the key of G.

In contrast to Haynes’ solo Kenny Wessel’s solo stays much closer to Rudolph’s prescribed pentatonic vocabulary. Wessel’s solo is largely based around D minor tonality, giving his improvisation a more polytonal feel against the G accompaniment. Wessel not only begins his solo on D but also repeatedly approaches D (an especially prominent example is in bar 16) from below (see Figure 3.7). Even though the donso ngoni accompaniment is slightly different during this piece and begins on D, the drone of the lower G string firmly grounds the piece in the same G
tonality as the preceding piece. Wessel only strays from the D minor pentatonic scale in bar 20 where he plays an Ab, the flat 5th or blue note of the scale. Although this note is technically the same b9 that Haynes used in his own improvisation it has a different feel based on Wessel’s earlier adherence to a D minor pentatonic tonality.

In contrast to Haynes’ more metrical approach, Wessel’s solo floats over the significantly faster tempo. Wessel’s solo mostly employs a slower triplet and quintuplet feel. In contrast to Haynes’ playing Wessel has very few phrases that end or begin on the first beat of the bar. Wessel has also seemed to internalize the quintuplet feel of the ostinatos of circularity 7-9 (Fig. 3.3).
Figure 3.6. Graham Haynes’ solo on Part Seven (Medium)(transcription by author)

Part Seven (Medium)
Graham Haynes Cornet solo and basic Dous'ngoni accompaniment
Figure 3.7. Kenny Wessel’s solo on Part Seven (Fast) (transcription by author)

Part Seven (Fast)
Kenny Wessel’s Solo with basic Donso Ngoni Accompaniment
Larger Scale Performance dynamics

Looking at the larger scope of Part Seven (Medium) gives a clear idea of how the ostinatos of circularity work in practice (Figure 3.7). At 1:49 (Figure 3.8, measure 2) Rudolph takes ostinato #2 (Figure 3.3) and applies it in a triplet feel over the duple donso ngoni accompaniment. Rudolph truncates the ostinato and has the orchestra repeat it three times. Following the concept of cyclic verticalism ostinato #2 is made to fit perfectly with the five beat accompaniment pattern. Rudolph then gives Haynes three bars of solo time and has the orchestra reenter with the full ostinato twice at 2:10 (Figure 3.8, measure 7). This process is repeated a few times until the piece ends. Although it is an extremely simple example of Rudolph’s conducting it is a clear example of both how Rudolph manipulates his basic materials and a demonstration of cyclic verticalism on a basic level.

In Part Seven (Fast) Rudolph uses a different strategy to conduct the orchestra. At 1:10 (Figure 3.9, measure 1) Rudolph signals for the group to play hits every two bars. Rudolph starts out with two hits moving to three moving back to one hit. After this section Rudolph then cues the rotation matrix (Figure 3.1, matrix VI) and conducts the ensemble around the whole box (right, down, left, up) over the accompaniment (Figure 3.10, measure 1). Wessel is clearly influenced by Rudolph’s matrix selection and switches from his D minor pentatonic material to a more chromatic approach incorporating some harmonic/melodic aspects of the rotation matrix. Wessel continues soloing, Rudolph cues hits again and after a few cued hits the band stops.
Figure 3.8. Orchestral Excerpt from Part Seven (Medium) (transcription by author)
Figure 3.9: Orchestral Excerpt: Cued Hits from Part Seven (Fast) (transcription by author)

Part Seven-Fast (Orchestra Hits)
Figure 3.10  Orchestral Excerpt: Conducted Rotation Matrix from Part Seven

(Fast)(transcription by author)
Music as Communal Ritual

Although Go: Organic often plays in venues such as Roulette with a rather traditional separation between performer and audience, Rudolph eschews traditional Western classical performance etiquette in his performances preferring a more direct connection with the audience. Like other creative music composers (the Art Ensemble comes to mind) Rudolph conceives of his music as a participatory (in the sense of an active interplay dynamic between audience and orchestra) multi-faceted event. Rudolph describes early influences on his interest in attempting to create a communal musical experience.

That was something that blew my mind when I went to Africa that it was like…you know, the whole ritual about music. And it wasn’t about people came in and paid money and sat down in the audience and were entertained and then clapped at the end. It was like everybody was involved in some way. Not everybody was necessarily playing the drums…But everybody was involved in some way. And that’s kind of a cool thing to do, I’m trying to find ways to make that sort of thing happen…it’s funny I have a lot success in other cultures, more than in New York (laughs). I don’t know if you ever went to any of those gigs at the Electric Lodge (in LA), a couple times I had everybody chanting and handclapping….. man people are kind of wanting to participate and they’re looking for something…I hate to use the word spiritual because it’s so misunderstood. (Rudolph 2014)

Rudolph also sees his music as fulfilling a spiritual need for the audience as well as the musicians involved.
but people need some nourishment. It is spiritual…by spiritual, I don’t mean religion. Religion….I mean everybody’s born spiritual, we learn religion. But we’re born with some spiritual nature whether you believe in a soul or not, and the happiness is attached to that. And I think people are looking for experiences that nourish them that way and man, being able to participate in the creative event is like the best. We’re so lucky to be able to be doing that. (Rudolph 2014)

Rudolph, who is also a visual artist, is interested in bringing multiple forms of expression to his musical experiences. During performances with the Go: Organic Orchestra Rudolph hangs large flag-like banners from the ceiling. Some of these banners drawn in black and white are reminiscent of Kongo cosmograms. Although they may look like traditional cosmograms, they were actually created intuitively by Rudolph himself. Rudolph explains their creation.

The cosmograms that are hanging up are actually…I made 12 or 10…They were actually not things that we made the music from but they were my intuitive visual representations of some music that I had recorded already. They were things that I just made. And at first I made them really small for the cover…for the liner notes of the Both/And record, one of those records that I made with the Moving Pictures…then my friend Carlos, Carlos Niño, you know Carlos from L.A.? We produced some of the Go: Organic concerts out there. He was like ‘Man, you should make those BIG. Those are incredible!' and so I did. So now whenever I get a chance for any gigs I do. Like, I had them at the Stone when I was there all week a couple months ago. (Rudolph 2014)

Rudolph also believes that his visual art helps create a unique atmosphere and is important to the overall musical experience.
I just bring ‘em to the gig and just create that atmosphere. It’s just part of creating an atmosphere. ‘Cause they have their vibration too, right? Visual things have their vibration. So, and a lot of those compositions that I played on that recording are the same compositions that we play with the orchestra, although in a very different way. So they’re kind of there…they have meaning for what we do too. They’re not just random, just something pretty to look at….in some way that was how I channeled my feelings about that piece into a visual work and then that visual work is vibrating in the room when we’re playing it. So, maybe that has some kind of influence on the atmosphere of the conditions of that moment when we play, for us and for everybody listening, for everybody in the room. (Rudolph 2014)

Rudolph continues to try and break down the performer/audience dichotomy and in the Fall of 2012 Go: Organic played a few weeks of concerts at Roulette where the audience and performers were sitting next to each other.

**Conclusion**

Although there are clear similarities between some structural elements of his conducting language and Anthony Braxton’s language music and Butch Morris’ Conduction, Rudolph’s music is highly dependent on his own original rhythmic and pitch material. Rudolph also believes that although conducted improvisation is an important part of his current concept, he ultimately envisions a point when musicians will be familiar enough with his musical language that no conducting will be necessary (Rudolph 2014). In many ways Rudolph’s goal is not that different than Muhal Richard Abrams’ original goals for the Experimental Band that he describes in a 1967 Downbeat interview, which Radano summarizes in *New Musical Figurations*: 
(Abrams) recalls that originally he had in mind an approach to group improvisation that could only be learned through written arrangements. Once the musicians had internalized that language, they were then able to build compositions without the aid of a score. (Radano 1993: 79)

Rudolph’s music is highly influenced by his own studies of world music, especially in the use of West African and Indian musical concepts on his own original ideas of cyclic verticalism and VOCUM. Not only is he inspired by the actual music of different world traditions, Rudolph is also influenced by the structure of gamelan ensembles and traditional West African music making on his ideas about individual function within a group. Inspired by the integral part of music to life and community in West Africa, Rudolph also looks for ways to further integrate the audience into music making.

With a conducting system that he describes as developing mostly free of any direct influences, Rudolph’s development problematizes a narrative of linear progression of Conducted Improvisation languages.

After a many years of study and 14 years and counting of conducting the Go Organic Orchestra, Rudolph feels that he the Orchestra has found a singular voice:

It doesn’t sound like anything else. It sounds like itself and it sounds like today. With all respect to the AACM of course and Charlie Parker, you know 50 years ago…there’s something else now. I’m trying to really reflect something about the rhythm and the feeling and the sound of now, of today, and bringing in what all the musicians are bringing to the table now. THESE musicians (Rudolph 2014)
Chapter 5: Conducted Improvisation and
Community in New York

In the few studies that investigate conducted improvisation, much of the research has been focused on the conductor/creators and how the systems that they have created work. Although these are all important aspects of the music, equally important are the people who give voice to those systems and realize them as music, as well as the community that is generated by this kind of music making. After I began performing with Butch Morris and Karl Berger I noticed that a few of the same musicians would perform in both groups. Once I began playing with Adam Rudolph I realized almost everyone in that ensemble had either played with Butch Morris or Karl Berger; playing with all of these ensembles I started to see a lot of the same faces.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define the New York City conducted improvisation community as a group of about 75-100 musicians that regularly perform (or performed in the case of Morris) with Adam Rudolph, Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris, or Karl Berger, primarily in downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn. As a member of these ensembles I was able to calculate this number largely through the mass emails that the bandleaders send out as their preferred method of communication to people that are currently performing with their ensembles. I also
used the programs and press releases that name all of the musicians that regularly play with these ensembles. Although some of these musicians live as far away as Woodstock, NY or Central Connecticut, the majority of performances of these ensembles continue to take place in a relatively specific area of New York City.

Stephen Haynes, a trumpet player and multi-instrumentalist who has worked with all three composer/conductors featured in this thesis, explains the difference he perceives between the idea of a community of composer/conductors who create the work and a community centered around the musicians who realize the work. Echoing the views of the composer/conductors profiled in this thesis, Haynes does not see a great deal of collaboration between composer/conductors:

I think the community centers around the individual people who are leading those efforts and that they’re germane to those individual leaders and their ensembles and people that follow them as opposed to the notion of a broad community that crosses between a lot of different people doing work. That’s not to say that these different people who are doing or involved in conducted improvisation aren’t either a) aware of each other’s work and or b) that they don’t talk to each other but I think it’s more leader specific and composer specific than it is a broad linked effort. (S. Haynes 2013)

Haynes does, however, see a community of improviser/interpreters that has developed organically over the years between people who have performed with these composer/conductors.

Those of us who are interested in this sort of work tend to follow and seek out experiences of people who are doing interesting work so I think that if there’s any community in the sense that you meant it with your original question it’s more likely to be found in that family of people that travels from ensemble to
ensemble over the years of doing this work, and through doing it being probably more familiar than anybody in the different techniques and different approaches and how to navigate those things, because they’re all works in progress I think in many ways. I think it’s the individual musicians or the families of musicians that do this work that are really the seat of the community if there is one. (Haynes 2013)

Conducted Improvisation Venues and Economics

Although the ensembles of Adam Rudolph, Butch Morris, and Karl Berger are made up entirely of professional musicians, their organization resembles an affinity group more than many professional situations where musicians are playing in an ensemble (perhaps primarily) for monetary gain. Although some of the most well respected improvisers in New York play in their ensembles, the pay for many of these performances, with few exceptions, is typically extremely low. Describing his own orchestra (which he conducts using an original conducted improvisation vocabulary) as “a volunteer army,” Hwang (2013) points out the stark contrast between the work he has done for commercial projects and his more creative, personally meaningful endeavors:

I think everyone’s struggling for funding and audience and I’m not quite sure how we can all of us together address that other than trying to create the best music that we can. So I hope to generate funding so that it isn’t an all volunteer army. I did a concert at the Brecht forum and there was a good fee. It’s nothing earth-shaking. You think about an orchestra…I did the source music for Martin Scorsese’s Kundun, we brought in an orchestra, and choirs, Chinese instruments, and all that…within 6 hours I spent about $70,000.
That’s people being paid union scale, and union scale is not that tremendous but that’s what it costs when you have that many people and you’re in a good studio. (Hwang 2013)

Hwang also points out the inspirational nature of these composer/conductor’s efforts to perform their music at all costs, often funded at great personal expense.

Butch…had a lot of creative drive so we played anywhere he could. So I think about that. When my energy gets low I think about these artists that had that kind of drive, like Adam keeps doing it, and Karl, and Braxton, they keep forging ahead to create, and I think it inspires everyone in the community. (Hwang 2013)

**Conducted Improvisation Community and Gender**

The jazz community in New York, even in larger ensembles, is typically male-dominated, as Down Beat’s Mitchell Feldman noted in 2001:

Lara Pellegrinelli, one of the minority of professional jazz journalists who are women, recently pointed out there are no female members of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra (LCJO), the resident ensemble of Jazz at Lincoln Center (J@LC), the world's wealthiest and most visible jazz program led by Wynton Marsalis. In an article published last fall in *The Village Voice*, one of the oldest and most influential alternative weekly newspapers in the U.S., Pellegrinelli wrote that of the 278 artists (104 reeds players, 62 trumpeters, 42 trombonists, 57 bassists, 43 drummers and 74 pianists) to appear in the program since 1991, only three have been women and all were pianists (Feldman 2001)

In contrast, the conducted improvisation community, especially in the larger orchestras, has quite a few women as members. Many of the string players in Adam Rudolph’s orchestra are women. However, there is less female membership among
the winds (only Sarah Schoenbeck and Batya Sobel, on bassoon and oboe, respectively) and no women in the rhythm section. Butch Morris’ Lucky Cheng Orchestra also featured a few women, notably Stephanie Richards on trumpet, Areni Agbabian on voice, and Sarah Schoenbeck on bassoon. The women in these orchestras generally tend to come from more of a classical background, but are often also expert improvisers.

Anthony Braxton’s orchestras contain by far the most women instrumentalists. In his *Triaxium Writings* Braxton makes his views clear on the importance of having women participate in creative music:

> My point is that there are definite signs in this period that give insight into the nature of the coming transformation and among those signs are the reality dynamics of women as a creative force to be reckoned with in the next cycle (as well as the reality dynamics of feminism as a creative force to be reckoned with from previous cycles to the present). The seriousness of creative statements by women in this cycle have already begun to effect the basic physical universe situation we now find ourselves in during this period—especially in the west, and the next time cycle will see this phenomenon expand to every level of our society. (1985b: 428-29)

Braxton’s recent orchestra performance of his opera *Trillium J* prominently featured female musicians as soloists, overall featuring 21 women in the 38 piece orchestra (“Anthony Braxton’s Trillium J” n.d.). Although containing less female membership than Braxton’s orchestra, an October 2013 Go: Organic performance in Hartford featured 11 women in a 32 piece orchestra (Carney n.d.). Many of these women
participate in both Braxton and Rudolph’s groups including Sarah Schoenbeck, Marika Hughes, Sarah Bernstein, Gwen Laster., and Julianne Carney.

Membership in multiple orchestras

Although there are some musicians who perform primarily with one ensemble, many of the musicians I interviewed for this thesis had performed with at least two of the groups led by Morris, Berger, Braxton, or Rudolph. Some musicians, such as Jason Hwang, had performed extensively with all four composer/conductors. When asked if he considered the musicians performing in each of the groups of Braxton, Morris, and Rudolph as a distinct community, he replied:

Sure…especially with those artists (Braxton, Morris, and Rudolph) because they have done conducted improvisations with consistency over the years and tend to call from the same core group of musicians…because then we build on our experiences and then bring that experience to the new music. (Hwang 2013)

Hwang goes on to explain the importance of playing and rehearsing with these large ensembles to creating a community identity:

you know it’s always kind of fun, because every rehearsal’s kind of like a party ‘cause (you see) people you (haven’t seen) in a while, and you hang out and talk so there’s the big social aspect to large ensembles. Then we get more aware of each other and a lot of informal things go on on the sidelines, people exchange CD’s, they tell you about their next gig. You might talk to someone about what they’re working on. Even your stand partner, you listen to what they’re practicing and then you talk about technique, and all these little exchanges that happen in a community happen before and after the rehearsals,
and at the rehearsal itself like ‘man, you took a great solo’ and that sort of thing, and you can hear over a period of time. It’s always fun to hear someone’s playing has grown like ‘wow man, you didn’t sound like that last year’. So, all that kind of stuff is really great as far as the community aspect of the music making. (Hwang 2013)

Performance Venues

The conducted improvisation scene in NYC, especially in the case of Butch Morris, is closely tied to the downtown NYC music scene. Morris lived in the East Village and many of his performances occurred in the East Village and Lower East Side. Graham Haynes (2013a) points out that he would often see Morris performing in a trio with turntablist Christian Marclay and Keyboardist Wayne Horvitz in the 1980’s at the old Knitting Factory, an important venue for many downtown performers. Jason Hwang points out the impact of many of the important East Village scenes on Morris’ development as a composer and conductor.

Butch was a very social person. He knew a lot of people and he started crossing out of (the) world (of jazz and creative music) into the world of downtown noise and other experimentalists in the East Village and gradually his music started to embrace all the major currents that were going on in the city and he learn how to make people from very, very diverse backgrounds that you wouldn’t associate with each other and put them in the same band and create music. (Hwang 2013)

NuBlu, also located in the East Village, was Butch Morris’ main NYC outlet as a conductor for many years. Even after his passing NuBlu has continued to be an important venue for people associated with Morris and conducted improvisation. Currently Dalius Naujo’s group Rasa Rasa, and Kenny Wollesen (conducting the
NuBlu Orchestra) are keeping the tradition of Conduction alive at NuBlu. Butch Morris’ birthday in 2014 was celebrated with a schedule including Jason Hwang’s Symphony of Souls orchestra, a duo between Adam Rudolph and Graham Haynes, and Kenny Wollesen conducting the NuBlu Orchestra.8

As noted in Chapter 4, Adam Rudolph began the NYC version of the Go: Organic Orchestra in 2006 with performances at another prominent downtown establishment, Roulette. In 2011, like many downtown NYC venues that no longer wanted (or could afford) to pay Manhattan rents (including the Knitting Factory, and more recently the Brecht Forum), Roulette would move to a space in Brooklyn. That same year Anthony Braxton would begin performing his orchestra music in New York City almost exclusively at Roulette.

As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, most performances by these composer/conductors take place in four main venues in New York: Roulette (Braxton and Rudolph) and Shapeshifter (Berger and Rudolph) in Brooklyn, and NuBlu (Morris) and the Stone (Berger, Rudolph, and Morris) in the Lower East Side/Alphabet City area. As Amanda Scherbenske (2014: 30) writes: “Venues that harbor improviser-composers within New York City creative endeavors frequently resist market challenges to support personal aesthetics.” Not surprisingly all four of these venues were opened by musicians and composers. Roulette was originally opened in 1978 in a Tribeca loft by composers Jim Staley, David Weinstein, and Dan Senn (“About Roulette” n.d.). NuBlu was opened in 2002 by saxophonist Ilhan 8 Although Rudolph and Wollesen were scheduled neither was able to make it due to transportation difficulties.
Ersahin who organized the NuBlu Orchestra that Butch Morris would come to conduct (Ersahin n.d.). The Stone was opened in John Zorn in 2005 and became a particularly important part of the downtown NYC experimental music scene after the closing of Tonic in 2007. Shapeshifter, the newest venue of the four, was opened in 2012 by Matt Garrison, electric bassist and son of John Coltrane quartet bassist Jimmy Garrison (Chinen 2013).

Many of the musicians that I interviewed for this thesis no longer live in lower Manhattan or Brooklyn. The continued existence of these venues as important places for presenting this music is a testament to the continued importance of downtown Manhattan (and Brooklyn) to jazz, creative and experimental musics.

Although Rudolph recently brought Go: Organic Orchestra to his own community in Maplewood, NJ he feels that the existence of physical community isn’t as important as it was when he was growing up in Chicago:

Yeah, (the Maplewood show) was just kind of a…that guy Jamie he has a series here and he was open to it, and so that was really fun. I do that actually at my yoga studio where I practice, I do a Winter Solstice and Summer Solstice concert there every year. It’s great to do that kind of thing. In some ways it would be kind of hipper if you lived….you know, where I grew up in Hyde Park in Chicago was a very hip, really interesting little community that way. And there were a lot of little arts centers, Hyde Park Art Center, and a lot of the AACM musicians used to play there and they used to come and play at my high school all the time and those kinds of things, so….Like I said I live in kind of a physical community like that now, but the sense of community is more just in the shared interests. (Rudolph 2014)
Some Defining Characteristics of the Community

One important characteristic of the conducted improvisation community is its inclusiveness. Although in many ensembles the level of musicianship is extremely high, there is also a great diversity of artists with vastly different performing and life experiences.

So, in the Organic Orchestra it’s not just about (how much you can play)...all these musicians from different levels of experience, and background...I mean you have to have a certain basic facility but all these different levels and experience levels can all be in the same group together. And that’s part of the community too. That’s what’s exciting. That’s where everyone gets to share...the older musicians are sharing with the younger musicians or the less experienced musicians and then the less experienced musicians are getting the benefit of being around the elders. (Rudolph 2014)

Butch Morris relates a more practical reason for the inclusive nature of the community, explaining why he “had to take a chance on people”:

You think about it, but until you have that other human in front of you, you can’t imagine what some of the responses are, and I don’t mean responses in terms of musical responses, I mean responses that involve character, a musicians character or behavior for that matter. It’s a very, very difficult thing to do, and some people can’t do it, but I had to take a chance on some people, because I need to take a chance on people. Always...if I didn’t take a chance on people, I wouldn’t know who half the good people are now. I mean, good people in the sense that they want to be there and they want to go all of these places, and they want to be challenged, and they want to rise to the challenge. They want to be confronted, and they want to live up to that confrontation. (Morris in Monga 2012)
Adam Rudolph describes the type of musicians that gravitate towards performing with Go: Organic echoing Stephen Haynes’ assertion that “those of us who are interested in this sort of work tend to follow and seek out experiences of people who are doing interesting work”:

It’s a performance group but it’s also a community. I like to look at Go: Organic Orchestra as a community of musicians who are interested in developing together, their musicianship, their artistry. It’s not a school but that’s what it’s really about. The community, I think what I’ve found over time is that the people who gravitate towards the Orchestra are what I like to call evolutionists. They’re people who are interested in study and wanting to develop themselves as artists. As you know, it’s not like we’ve been running around playing a lot of high-paying gigs. So this is something amazing though, Sean. After 6 years or 7 years now the New York Organic Orchestra, I got 90% of the people are the same people who came into the group in the beginning. So, they’re getting something out of it besides money. They’re getting something. (Rudolph 2014)

Community and the Creation of New Ensembles

One important function of this community is the opportunities it gives musicians to meet and play music together that may have never met otherwise. Adam Rudolph points out that a few groups have started out of the Go: Organic Orchestra.

One of the exciting things that happens with the Organic Orchestra, I know in Los Angeles and in New York is that a lot of people meet from different backgrounds who never would have come together otherwise meet each other and make groups, other groups. I know Kaoru (Watanabe) and Tim (Keiper) and Matt (Kilmer) and…Chris (Dingman) all created a group together. And
then I remember in California I remember one of the cellists made a group with Brahim (Frigbane)...you know, it’s on and on. (Rudolph 2014)
Similarly, the NuBlu Orchestra has acted as a recruiting vehicle for several groups including Kenny Wollesen’s Himalayas and Dalius Naujo’s group Rasa Rasa. Recently Dalius was able to bring a choir from Lithuania to perform with the group during Wollesen’s residency at the Stone. Through these kinds of interactions, Conduction is beginning to gain more of an international presence.

Anthony Braxton has formalized this function of the orchestra, using his Tri-Centric Orchestra as a vehicle to promote music by its members. 2013 Tri-Centric Orchestra concerts have premiered compositions by its members including Kamala Sankaram, Jason Hwang, Nicole Mitchell, Mark Taylor, Ingrid Laubrock, Taylor Ho Bynum and others. In its Spring 2014 festival, Braxton will present groups of members of the Orchestra in addition to his own works.

**Conclusion**

In my own personal experience my involvement in this community has been extremely meaningful. My current group is made up of musicians that I met and reconnected with through performing in the Nublu Orchestra. In fact I have developed important musical and personal relationships with more than a few musicians that I have performed with in the ensembles of Butch Morris and Adam Rudolph. In addition to connecting with new musicians and finding further outlets for my creativity, performing and studying with these groups has given me the sense of belonging to a community of musicians who are all actively exploring new ways to
create music.

With the advent of inexpensive digital recording, and the dissemination of video recordings via the internet it has become easier than ever to document and find appropriate documentation to study conducted improvisation. Although I know of no other studies in progress, my hope is that with the availability of video of conducted improvisation and more and more musicians and scholars familiar with the structures of these systems that conducted improvisation analysis (and the analysis of systems based improvisation) will become more and more of a viable field of study in the future.
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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview with Anthony Braxton 11.28.2012 Middletown, CT

Anthony Braxton: When I think about creative American musicians who have been at the forefront of looking at global reality and global creative musics, the first person I think of is the great virtuoso Tony Scott. Tony Scott, the clarinetist was the first American that I know of who began to go into the Middle East, going to different parts of the planet. Into Asia, studying music and taking that information and incorporating it into his own music. He was a real force for American creative music but he never got the credit one would have hoped for, because he wasn’t involved in Jazz politics or creative music politics he was interested only in music. He talked to me about the very first performance of Charlie Parker in New York , that’s a different subject….

In the sixties, Don Cherry, after his experiences with Ornette Coleman, in my opinion, Don would become the second American to really start investigating global musics in a way that was fresh, it was honest, it was different from Tony Scott, but it was also comprehensive like Tony Scott, and so then I go back to Los Angeles, I used to go to Los Angeles in the 70’s and go to all of Bobby Bradford and John Carter’s concerts on one side of town, and then I’d go to the other side of town and see Warne Marsh with Gary Foster, John Tirabasso, and I can’t remember the bass player…and hear their music because I was very deep into Warne Marsh’s music as well. Horace Tapscott would have another group kind of like the AACM that special group he had that Arthur Blythe and other guys came out of , and so there was a synergy happening in Los Angeles that was vibrant . It was always incredible to be in Los Angeles, I think Buddy Colette teaching Mingus, bringing Mingus into the studios, the whole scene in Los Angeles has always been far out. I would spend time at Shelly’s Manne Hole. Before Phil Woods put me down, I even had a chance to, as a young guy, meet him. I had a positive experience with Phil Woods, and one week later, the Downbeat article blindfold test put down of my music by Phil Woods would come out and that would make it impossible for me to continue to study his music or have anything to do with him. I was a young guy at that time, and the blindfold test put me down so bad where, well, I was stranded in Los Angeles. Circle broke up in Los Angeles. We went to the celebrity center, and basically, we were told that we could be very successful if we stayed in Scientology.

Sean Sonderegger: I guess one of you did, right?
AB: We went up to grade 4, and I said “I can’t handle any more of this, I want out”. Chick stayed with it and they were true to their word. Chick became very successful, quickly, within a year Return to Forever was selling records, touring all over the place. For me, Dave Holland, Barry Altschul... we were stuck on the West Coast in the Los Angeles area, and it took something like eight months for us to get enough money to drive back to the East Coast, and so while I was in Los Angeles, I tried to learn as much as I could about the music scene there, and to also, when possible, go to concerts of my friends whose music I’ve always admired. John Carter is another guy who never got credit for his music. I mean, we talked 10, 15 minutes before about American progressionalism as related to creative music, but John Carter is another example of a musician who was interested in contemporary music, creative music, ethnic-centric music, and transethnic-centric music, but there was no slot for him. And so all of these things are still in the air, in some ways things have gotten better, but in many other ways things have been secured. As you know Ben Ratliff came here. And my question to him was “what about the political dimensions of this subject” and I didn’t really go any further because I’m faculty here and he was in the house of Wesleyan, and I was not going to insult him, or attack him, or be unfriendly, or be misperceived as being unfriendly, or not a good host, and so I didn’t challenge that, but in fact, the political elites have won, actually. Whether it’s the antebellum-ness, the European-American antebellum-ness, or the African-American antebellum-ness, the New Orleans musicians, for instance. The New York Times was part of the formulation, part of the coalition that brought that movement into power. So, Ben Ratliff has more to say about the subject of political dimensions as it relates to controlling the music. So, we’re talking about a lot of things, we’re talking about a new generation of scholars who are defining creative music progressionalism, but they’re defining it in a complex kind of way, a way that on the surface, in terms of celebrating modernity, and global reality, looks like it’s healthy, but once you really focus on what’s happening, we see the elevation of Trans-European progressionalism at the expense of everything else, and we’re seeing non-European music cordoned off in a way that says “we understand what this is, it started here, and it ended here”. I saw Ken Burns on “Meet the Press” this last Sunday. Did you see that program?

SS: No.

AB: He’s a very intelligent man, and I find myself liking him, but it doesn’t change the fact that his film on Jazz is OUT-rageous.

SS: I don’t think he’s an expert on anything,

AB: He’s not.

SS: He’s a good filmmaker… but he’s not an expert, and who he relied on…
AB: He’s a corporate intellectual, his projects are financed by corporate wings, and his conclusions justify that kind of support. My contention for a long while has been, that the New Orleans paradigm is outrageous, it’s totally wrong, it’s the wrong paradigm, if we’re seeking to really understand American music. The correct paradigm in my opinion is to look at continental synergies. Whether we’re talking of the eleven restructural cycles in Europe moving to the modern era, or where we’re talking about the American experience in the 20th century. Moving to ten, eleven restructural cycle periods of the African-American, European-American composite that we talk of as Jazz. It’s really far out what seems to be happening. They’ve nailed the definition base down in a way that keeps the misconceptions of the music IN place, and it’s done in a way with total disrespect for documented history as far as what can be challenged very easily.

SS: I’m just wondering what the origin of language music was, and what your influences were in the realm of conducted improvisation, if you were influenced by, for example, Sun Ra, Frank Zappa, Earl Brown, or was it more of something you came to on your own…?

AB: I was influenced by the possibilities that opened up in the time-space of the 60’s, and by that I’m saying I was looking for ways to simplify in some ways, I mean having signals and a language music, a music of vocabularies was the second degree of my solo music work. When I started to play solo concerts after the first concert I started to factor what I now call “sonic geometrics”, at the time, in the 60’s I called it conceptual grafting. What am I talking about? I’m talking about the decision to isolate improvisations based on sonic geometry from the twelve language variables that we now work with in class. For me this was a way to lessen the possibilities of bumping into the same idea all the time. I didn’t want to have every improvisation do the same thing and the first solo concert I did I was thinking “freedom, freedom”, the sixties talked about freedom, so when I went and gave a solo concert with freedom, free improvisation, I discovered I wasn’t interested in free improvisation. Why? Because free improvisation didn’t give me the results I wanted, and what am I saying by that? I’m saying, I kept falling into repeating (myself). By the time the first concert was over, it was like…musically, it wasn’t as interesting as I would have hoped, as I went through the music, because I recorded it, I asked myself how can I avoid this. The question became, what constitutes identity from a trans-idiomatic perspective? And the second solo concert would begin my solo musics. The second solo concert, I would have a piece with trills, I’d have a piece with intervallics, I would have a piece with gradient logics, so sound mass logics, another piece with rhythm, another piece with repetitive logics. This way of thinking would give me a chance of not necessarily bumping into the same idea in the same way. From that point I transposed the language music 12 elements into a form where I could use it with an ensemble.
SS: About what year did you start conducting the language music?

AB: It was…I did the second solo concert in 1967, so late ’67 or early ’68 I would transpose that way of working into an ensemble. So, for instance, when I was working at the Woodstock Creative Studio with Karl Berger, factoring language music elements would be a part of my understanding of the new creative orchestra, so that’s how it started. It was a way to have mutable logic psychologies and improvisations, with a…you have circle, and then the rectangle would be the fixed elements. It would be a way to, with a large ensemble, have the same potential possibilities that I would have coming from free solo music to language music solo music.

SS: About when did you start at the Creative Music Studios?

AB: 1974 or something like that, and so from ’68 to ’74, I would be playing solo concerts. I mean, that was one third of my performances in that period, and with each concert I’d try to evolve my position with the language music vocabulary possibilities, and, when possible, take that information and use it with a larger group, or with a group not as large, with a chamber group. But to use that way of thinking, as a way to break out of the space I was in.

SS: How much do you think that your conducting practice is influenced by the things that you have learned as a solo saxophone player? In terms of just structuring a piece, how do you think that has informed your conducting?

AB: Oh, it’s informed my conducting totally. Everything that I have done comes from the genesis template of the language musics; of what I now refer to as “sonic geometrics”. In other words, I’ve built my music from the saxophone, in live performance, playing, and then looking for ways to translate that into a composition. I took that approach because I wanted to 1. Evolve my music and find my own way 2. I understood that as a young guy, my work was going to be used politically from many different quarters and for many different purposes. Some would say, “It’s not Jazz”, “it’s not black”, others would say “it’s classical music”, that “Braxton is advancing the cause of trans-European music”, and so I decided to generate musics from my own experience, and that would protect me from the “jazz industrial complex”, as well as the “classical industrial complex”.

Sean Sondereggger: How do you think your language music has influenced other people’s versions of conducted improvisation? For example, Karl Berger, and were you influenced by anyone else that was engaged in that practice at Creative Music Studios? I know of your relationship with Walter Thompson, and sound-painting, but I’m just wondering if there’s any other…
AB: At the time I was working with language music, to my knowledge no one else was doing anything like that.

SS: Not in terms of the specific language system, but

AB: Sun Ra, there were aspects of his work that had signals. To what extent he worked with signals, and evolving strategies and signals, I can’t really say. I can say this much, that once I evolved language musics, where I can look at it objectively as twelve templates, then I just started working from my own work, because part of what I was trying to do was find myself. Part of what I was trying to do was not imitate my heroes, because what I loved about them was that they found their own musics. So, at the Creative Music Studio, going back to that, different people had different ways of working, but I can’t recall anyone else working with signals in the way of language musics.

SS: Or just at all, any kind of signaling system… I think what I’m interested in.. I know Earl Br own did conducted things, but I’m interested in conducted improvisation where music’s generated without any pre-existing ideas of a composition, or any pre-existing ideas of written music, where the signals in and of themselves… like language music, like Butch Morris’ Conduction ®, what the first systems… I know language music is one of the first systems, but what other ones do you know of?

AB: I know of no other, and I don’t say that just to toot my own horn, I do recall, for instance, the experimental band, in Chicago, we would be in an open situation, and the signal would be, we’re coming to the next composition, and then we would align up and play that composition. Karl Berger had an approach similar to that where you’d have composition, open space, composition, open space, and to go to the next composition there would be a signal, and that would happen in real time.

SS: Do you know if he, at that time, he used any of his conducted attacks, short attacks, or…

AB: Sean, I’m telling you. To my knowledge NO ONE was working with anything like that. Earle Brown might be the closest guy, but he was more working with compositional constructs that were mobile. Available forms being an example that WAS important, as far as I’m concerned, and took the music in another direction. I certainly would encounter and learn about Available Forms. I thought Available Forms and the great music of Earl Brown was very important. I thought it then, I think it now, and one of the reasons that I think his music has been kind of pushed to the side is that he is in that bridge space. A space similar to the space that I’m in, in the sense that he was interested in so-called “Jazz”, he was interested in experimental musics. The great trumpet player Don Ellis was another person who was interested, Jimmy Giuffre…all these people…for instance, the first degree of signals for the changing restructural music, was the signal to go back into a composition from free
improvisation. Someone like Jimmy Giuffre would be a part of that movement, but Don Ellis was also very much of that transition. In fact, it became necessary for the pure European strain to isolate this guy. Now, going back to your question again, no one was working with “sonic geometrics” in real time in the 60’s that I know about, separate from the work I was doing, and the work I was doing in the beginning was simply directed towards producing a solo music that would not have every composition sounding the same, and that was really the basic idea, so that I would not bump into the same idea, and then from there, the transposition (of) those processes into a formal environment. But first, the use of improvisation in real time, the language improvisations would be born at different workshops as a way of being able to pull something together very quickly, and that was another factor that accelerated the significance, to me, of having a sonic geometric vocabulary. It meant that at a given workshop at some University, or with a new group of people, we could have a quick understanding. The 12 postulates could be run down very quickly, and we could do a concert based on that. So, by 1969, '68, I was doing language music concerts as an extension of the language music solo musics. When Walter came to study with me, we went through the traditional method and then we began to open things up, and he began to work with language music, and then 10 years later, 15 years later, he began to look at language music and bring in movement and spatial dynamics in a way that was different from what I was doing. In a way, that expanded the options, I think sound-painting is outrageous. I support Walter Thompson, and Butch Morris would start his Conductions maybe 15 to 20 years after me in the same way that Walter’s sound-painting was something like, 15 or 20 years after the language music strategies had started. Karl Berger would start his use of signals maybe 5 to 10 years after language music. I don’t recall any strategy from the Art Ensemble that was based on signals, on the playing of signals. They didn’t work like that, they had another way of working, and they achieved great results with the way they were working. Your question is about real time signals, real time conduction, and the evolution of real time experiences and conductions. To my knowledge, I can’t…when I went to Europe in '69, let me go through that experience. I played with the Global Unity Orchestra, they did not use signals, they had compositions and open improvisations, and preset choices, like, “three musicians are going to play after we play, Composition, whatever the name of it is”. “Then we’ll choose or preset choose what three musicians are going to play”, like that. So, it was a very narrow use of signals, even though, they were a wonderful creative orchestra. I think they’re still together.

SS: I think so..

AB: I went to Holland and Wilhem Breuker, my good friend, and Misha Mengelberg, they had skits that they worked out, and so their signals would evolve inside of these kind of skits. It was different, and to what extent they evolved a real time conduction system, I don’t know. I don’t know if they ever evolved it. But, they did have signals for skits.
SS: So it was more coming out of theatre…

AB: Coming out of theatre, and I’m not even sure if signals is the right word, because…

SS: Cues maybe?

AB: Cues, because what happened, I went to three or four concerts of Willhelm Breuker’s ensemble, and what I discovered was every performance was the same thing.

SS: Really??

AB: Yes. What looked spontaneous had actually been worked out within one inch, and even the humor, and the kind of accidental humor, Vaudevillean humor, had been worked out to a tee.

SS: That’s bizarre.

AB: For me in the end, it was just their approach. What I found to be interesting, for the first performance, you hear them and it’s like “Well, this is different. This is different from what we’ve been doing” and for the jokey parts, I would laugh thinking “Well, these guys got humor. The Dutch up here have always had humor”, but when you hear it the second time, it’s not funny. You understand that actually you are really hearing a theatre production, and that every component is worked out. Even the improvisation: it’s improvisation, but it’s worked out in so much detail where the musicians actually had much less freedom than a bebop musician. In many cases, much less freedom than a classical ensemble.

SS: It’s almost as if, like in an alternate universe, you did your first solo piece and instead of inventing language music, you’re like “ok, this is the solo I’m going to play for the rest of my life”

AB: Because everybody has different things that they’re looking at. I found their work to be interesting, but hearing it more than once alerted me to the fact that they set everything in stone. They set it in stone at the rehearsals, and then they performed it exactly the same way each time. I went to England and worked at the Little Theatre, with Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, Trevor Watts, Lol Coxhill, we were all from the same generation. The British did not use signals at all. Let me stop and think about this… The movement that came out of Great Britain, separate from the South African musicians, like Chris McGregor Brotherhood of Breath, is really an offshoot of John Stevens. John Stevens is a point of definition for “syntactical improvisation”, that’s what those guys have been doing. Syntactical improvisation, it’s pointalistic with the
input of Albert Ayler in vocabulary, and John Stevens guided it, and Derek Bailey’s vocabulary, Evan Parker’s vocabulary, Trevor Watt’s vocabulary was an offshoot of John Stevens, but, to my knowledge, I can’t recall any signals, real time signals happening in that music.

SS: Yeah, I don’t think there are any historical accounts, I’m sure if there were historical accounts they would be known by now.

AB: Yeah, by now they would be talking about it. Horace Tapscott, I don’t recall any signals in Horace Tapscott’s music, but I don’t know his music as well as I would have hoped that by now I would know his music.

SS: I know just based on interviews with Butch Morris, I think he had a simple, like, section 1, he would have each section numbered, maybe similar to what Sun Ra did.

AB: The AACM did that as well. Modular compositions, so you could say, 1, 2, 3, whatever and bring that in. In a way that approach brings in “Available Forms” again and shows the strength of Earl Brown’s methodology, and concept, but that is one example of a real-time signal. Either signaling in different compositions, or signaling in different modular parts of the composition, or signaling movements of a composition, so that became a new flex option, but language music was different. Language music would be a template of sonic geometry, but sonic geometry doesn’t tell you what to play. Sonic geometry only gives you whatever qualities the friendly improviser has to adhere to. Sonic geometry in the form of language music is kind of like chord changes.

Chord changes don’t tell you what to play, chord changes only give you the path of the harmonic logic, and the proficient improviser can approach that material in a way where you can navigate through form. The emergence of sonic geometrics would be akin to chord changes in the sense that it didn’t tell you what to play, but it did tell you what the template backdrop is, and if its solo music its telling you what the primary syntax quality is for (the) improvisation to adhere to. And so, in 1967 when I did the second concert of the solo musics; which was the first concert of the language musics I can’t recall anybody doing anything quite like that, and one reason I was able to do it was because…well…one, well there was Earl Brown. Two, there was John Cage, I was going to their concerts, seeing that they were opening up different kinds of things. Three, I joined the AACM, and the experimental band, we did have flex options.

SS: Who was in the Experimental Band? I’m not familiar with…

Anthony Braxton: Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, all the people that we know today…
SS: Henry Threadgill?

AB: Henry Threadgill, Kalaparusha Difda

SS: So it was like a whole AACM, not the whole but it was Muhal Richard Abrams…

AB: He was the president, in the beginning. Lester Bowie

SS: So they were all in the experimental band?

AB: We all were in the experimental band together for 2 or 3 years before we split Chicago

SS: Are there a lot of recordings?

AB: No. Well, there are recordings but none of it has been released. Muhal is kind of just keeping it..

SS: So you don’t have any?

AB: No, I have nothing.

SS: Do you have any recordings of your early conducted improvisation strategies or anything like that?

AB: Yes, Karl Berger last year told me that he has some of the concerts that we did up in Woodstock. Karl Berger called me two years ago and told me that he was thinking about re-releasing some of this material and really trying to bring the Creative Music Studio back together, he wanted me to be with him, and I told him “wonderful idea but I can’t be with you, I’m doing my own thing”. I’m 67 years old, I can’t go back to the Creative Music Studio mindset. But, he told me he had tapes of Fredric Rzewski playing the complete piano music, he had performances of the language music solo concerts and ensemble concerts.

SS: I should ask him about that if I see him…

AB: He told me he has it, he wants to put it out. He’s an old friend, I hope he’s not angry at me because I told him can’t..He wanted to have a small group together with Ingrid, his wife. She’s a lovely lady. But I can’t do that, I’m fighting for my own music at this point in my life..

SS: No, I know, you’re moving forward…
AB: There are tapes, the Tri-Centric Foundation has tapes of several of the early music. A big pile of tapes that we still are trying to process. Bill Smith sent me a box of tapes, some of the material that he sent me is over here. I gave the tapes to the tri-centric foundation, with the understanding that its gonna be archival material, and that it needs to be translated into digital information before its too late. But that material has examples of Language Music experiences. There were experiences of just language music concerts, there were experiences of transposition into what I used to call “cell structure” design, and by “cell structure design”, let me see if I can….the good thing about documentation is that you can go back to somewhere else, and let me see if I can find something here…This would be an example of cell structure (shows me comp. ? from Composition Notes) Transposition into smaller works, and transposition into larger works. This is a schematic of how things were being factored back in that period. Let me see if I can find book A….real early writings, I don’t see…In the library if you can find books A and B, it would give you examples of the score, and you’d be able to see what I’m talking about. But the idea was always: the music is changing. Free jazz in that period was all “pulse velocity”, and so after the notated material was played you need the signals to get back into some synchronous anything. So, the early history of signals, well, I mean, we could go back to Bennie Moten, those guys would be playing and then the music’s happening and then they would start a riff (ba boo ba bop….gives riff examples), that’s a real time cut-off. So, the history of signals really started much earlier. You get a real time signal to get that synchronous action. With the language music strategies, with the language music elements, from what I can say this was the first time a real-time methodology was put into use. I’m sure probably somebody was doing the same thing at the same time, because no one comes up with something out of nothing.

SS: I think the only one that’s been documented is Frank Zappa’s, but it wasn’t as sophisticated. I know he had a way of making music out of nothing but he had a more simple vocabulary than the language music.

AB: I’ve had someone else say this to me. I don’t know, I thought Zappa was ok but I was a Beefheart kind of guy. They called me Beefheart Boy Braxton. I had a complex connection to Mr. Zappa’s music, although as a young guy I came to see that he was interested in Varese, he was interested in…

SS: Well, Cage obviously.

AB: Cage obviously.

AB: Cage, back in the 60’s that was really a giant step, because musicians weren’t…musicians had blinders, horse blinders on.

SS: Have you seen his bicycle music on the Steve Allen show, this might have 64/65

AB: Frank Zappa?
SS: Yeah, he was like “you can make music out of a bicycle” and he had a horn and...he had a prepared bicycle and he was playing it on the Steve Allen show.

AB: No, I didn’t see that, and maybe if I had seen that I would have been more of a Zappa Beefheart kind of guy...In the 60’s that was really an incredible decade. Suddenly Jazz musicians were looking at modern Classical musicians, and what they don’t want you to know, the classical guys were looking at the Jazz guys, because its just human beings looking at musics that are different. Differences attract, especially global differences, and so the 60’s was a global awareness of going from idiomatic to transidiomatic. So, the idea of sonic geometrics was a step forward for me, but it was also a consistent step with the opportunities that opened up in that time period. For myself as a young guy, I was already a Schoenbergian fool...when I discovered Stockhausen, and Cage, that was really it. Those guys really completed my equation if I can put it like that. So, after a bad solo concert it just made a lot of sense to, if I didn’t want to repeat that experience, I’ve got to first of all get away from this idea of freedom because “freedom” was becoming the freedom to not learn your instrument. “Freedom” was becoming “we can just do anything”, and I found for myself, in that period, that wasn’t good enough because I was interested in composition, which is to say, definition. So, the language music materials addressed real-time decisions with signals. As things went forward, I was able to build upon the templates, and as you know, one live performance is equal to 400 theoretical performances. So, 200, 300, 400, I don’t know how many solo concerts I’ve done since 1967, I know it’s been a lot, and I know it’s in the hundreds, I just don’t know how many. Tri-Centric foundation, next month, is talking about putting out the Carnegie Hall concert of 1976. Someone found it in the attic of a person that came to the concert and recorded it. We didn’t even know it. They only have part of it, but the person who found it alerted the Tri-Centric Foundation, and so that’s gonna come out. I’m just saying that to say: I defined a state of sonic geometrics and started to actually play with it, and in having the playing experience I would later be able to have secondary categories inside of that. The whole idea of implantation would begin at that point as well. First in the solo musics, you’re playing trills, trills, trills, well what about trills in the House of 1 (long tone) ? Trills in the House of 2 (accented long tone) ? All the way through 12. So that would be a secondary use of it. What about combinations of trills with staccato line logic as a primary one and then build on that...and then later with the co-ordinate musics, the sequential musics I started to imbed compositions. Then later, I changed the model and said “everything I write is one composition, and everything should be played at one time”. So that meant, I could begin to insert compositions from the orchestra musics or the percussion musics, or the big band musics all into one unit and create a logic, what I now refer to as a logic. But, it all came from a very practical way of looking at how to avoid, in real time, coming up with the same idea, because that was the problem of the first concert. It was... I thought I was going to be a bad guy, I was a toughy-tough guy, and I thought I had done my homework, only to discover that without any kind of guideline, I was as
prone as anyone else to simply coming back to the same idea in some way where it didn’t feel full enough, because I had no guidelines. That was the beginning for me of asking the question “what constitutes identity in a transidiomatic space?” and how to factor identity for real time experiences, and the language musics would come into fruition from that intention. Later, Walter Thompson would bring in spatial logics, later, in fact around the same time….Butch Morris and Walter Thompson came out around the same time and Butch with his Conductions, would take it in another kind of way. I think he has like 50 to 100 signals or something.

SS: I’m familiar with about 20 that he uses on a regular basis…

AB: So, then he has 20, and Walter has
SS: But I know he probably has like a hundred…

AB: Variation signals, and things that evolve.

SS: Yeah, tempo, spar…

AB: And so I embrace those guys, and I have total respect for the fact that they’ve evolved their real time signals into it’s own space separate from my space. I will only say this much. When I was doing language music in New York, and running all around the planet for 10, if not 15 years, NO ONE was doing that, and I haven’t talked with Butch, I haven’t seen him in years. I would be shocked if he would dispute what I’m saying.

SS: Oh, yeah, I don’t think he would at all…

AB: I’m not saying it as ego, I’m saying it only for the historical record.

SS: I think the historical record so far definitely bears that out.

AB: Thank you, and the For Alto record was recorded in ’67, I think it was ’67, yes I think it was in ’67. I was so broke, I didn’t have enough money to buy two rolls of tape. So, I had to like use tape…erase what was on the tapes…

SS: So it’s also tape music…I came to the realization the other day that Bitches Brew is free jazz and tape music…

AB: Plus, Bitches Brew has a steady state, Joe Zawinul should be given more credit for that composition, because suddenly Jazz is played in a steady state, timbre space, a floating velocity pulse, with electronic instruments in a different kind of way. Miles, of course, did what he always did…simplify and get to the essence of other people’s compositions, not to mention he’d take the credit for the compositions whenever he
could, but all of these things in my opinion was moving towards signals, by the way, the rock musics of Miles Davis, the last period he was using signals all over the place. He had signals going...have you ever seen a performance?

SS: Yeah.

AB: At the Isle of Wight? When you see a performance, you see the old man come up and he’s giving signals, he’s directing traffic.

SS: And I mean everyone was like “Oh, Miles is arrogant, he has his back to the audience”, but he was giving signals the whole time...

AB: He was giving signals...but he wasn’t giving signals all the time in his young period...he was a movie star kind of guy.

SS: And that’s why he would play facing the audience...it’s part of that same narrative.

AB: Before he died, he was directing traffic with real time signals, and I’ve seen it but I haven’t analyzed it enough where I can talk of the signals. It seemed like he was saying “you play, you play”, he was like putting combinations together, this kind of thing. But that was different from language music. Language music was an attempt to build a model and a template for real time strategies that would have a framework or a compositional design, that was the idea. Language music in the early period was somewhere right in the middle between those real time signals from modular compositions, from big bands, or whatever, and the great work of Earl Brown, and Mr. Brown is about the only guy that I can think of, where I can say if I’m indebted to anyone, it would be Mr. Brown, even though my approach was actually very different than his approach, but in the end, he was using modular material with signals. And, I would even bow to Jimmy Giuffre, I would bow to Sun Ra because he had signals of bringing people together, but he didn’t tell them what to play. His signals were moving around people, certain ritual, and ceremonial directions and this kind of thing. Who else? Don Ellis, I mentioned him...John Coltrane had no signals, Charlie Mingus had no signals that I know of.

SS: I mean John Coltrane had one...

AB: John Coltrane... he was like my god. When he died I didn’t know if I wanted to live. In a three or four month period I discovered Karlheinz Stockhausen, and that actually helped me because I was OUT of it when Mr. Coltrane died. I wanted to spend my life carrying his lunch or doing whatever he wanted me to do, that’s how deeply I loved him and how deeply his music affected me. When he died I didn’t know what I was going to do. Suddenly I discovered Karlheinz Stockhausen, and then I went crazy again, with my next new hero because I was a young guy who needed
those kind of role models…or at least my nature would have me really fasten on to someone whose music was exciting me to no end, and Stockhausen would take John Coltrane’s role in my life, and help me to move into adulthood.

SS: Well, thank you so much

AB: Thank you, Sean.
Appendix B

Telephone Interview with Graham Haynes 3.13.2013

Sean Sonderegger: So when did you first start playing with Butch and when did you first start doing Conducted Improvisation?

Grahahm Haynes: Now I knew Butch for a while before I started actually playing with him. I mean, Butch and I used to hang out before I started playing with him, so let me see, I probably started playing with Butch around ’98 or ’99 or something. That was probably the first time with conducted improvisation. That was the first time that I actually played with somebody who did that, I mean….no, actually, no, wait, wait…I worked with Butch with David Murray, we did 2 records for DIW, and that would have been around 1992, or so, but that was a situation where David had material, and it was a Big Band, and Butch conducted…see Butch used to do this where he would take the material and then deconstruct the material and conduct it, cause all of his conductions weren’t….there were the Conductions which were pure improvisation, but then a lot of times he would conduct material and then he would abstract the material and then like break it up, deconstruct it, and then conduct it.

SS: So would he give the different parts numbers? How would he do that?

GH: He’d give the different parts numbers. He’d say this is number…you know, he would take a phrase and say “this is number 1”, he’d take another phrase, this is number 2, he’d take another phrase “this is number 3”, and then he’d hold up his finger, and then he’d conduct it, but then he would move the downbeats around, and then sometimes he’d conduct one against the other, and then he would change the keys. He had a signal for changing the key, for going up a half-step or whatever…for going down.

SS: Was it the symbol that he would use for Conduction, just like the kind of up and down thumb….do you remember what the signal was for that?

GH: What the signal was for what?

SS: For the key change.

GH: Yeah it was just up, he’d point his finger up. That was part of his Conduction, that’s actually in his book. That was part of his conducted improvisation. He would give you something….he would motion for you to create a phrase, and that had a gesture, and then you’d create a phrase, and then he would point to you and then if he pointed up that means you’d take it up.
SS: So he would use the same kind of signals with the written material that he would use in Conduction, right?

GH: Yeah, same kind of signals, yeah.

SS: So then you started performing Conductions in the late 90’s. Can you tell me about how you started doing that?

GH: Well, I used to see Butch play a lot, a lot before I actually did it with him. Yeah, I mean, you’d rehearse with him. You’d have to. You couldn’t just go and play with him, you’d have to rehearse with him. At the rehearsals he’d show you all the gestures and then he’d rehearse them with you. Similar to what Adam (Rudolph) does. He shows you what all the gestures are, and then he rehearses them with you. So that’s how I would have done it with Butch, that’s how I did it with Butch. The first time I played in the Conduction; I rehearsed with him; he rehearsed all the gestures. Well, not all of them ‘cause he was always adding to them, he was always adding more stuff. But, even until he died he was adding more gestures, but he had pretty much codified the whole thing and had a book. He had a book and maybe a video. There were certain main gestures, and then he was adding on certain nuances. The way Butch did it was very, very….the thing about him was that he paid a lot of attention to the different nuances of the dynamics. He paid a lot of attention to the orchestration, like there were a lot of gradations of soft, and gradations of loud, and he was very strict about that. It was like there was soft, and then there was softer than soft, and like pianissimo, and triple pianissimo, and quadruple pianissimo, and then you know…he was very strict about the dynamics.

SS: Do you remember the first time you saw Butch perform a Conduction?

GH: The first time I saw him perform a Conduction? It might have been a couple years before I actually did it with him, so it might have been like ’97 or ’96 or something. Prior to that I saw him just conduct and abstract written material with David Murray and I saw him do that, and then I used to see him play cornet a lot, you know he was a cornet player first.

SS: Did he influence you to play cornet or were you already playing cornet.

GH: I…he influenced me, I mean, I was already playing. I was already playing, but I used to go and see him a lot. He had a group with Christian Marclay, and Wayne Horvitz. I used to go see them a lot, they used to play at the old Knitting Factory. I’d go see them, and then that was around the time I started putting my first groups together, so yeah I took a lot from him. He did a lot with the cornet that I use.
SS: Was that group...were they improvising, or was Butch conducting at, what was the...

GH: No, he wasn’t conducting. He wasn’t conducting, they were improvising.

SS: So they were just improvising and playing material, there was no Conduction?

GH: Yeah, and there was very little material that was written that I remember.
SS: So it was more of an improvisation situation.

GH: Yeah, but with David’s there was material, with Murray’s big band there was actually material, he would abstract...he would deconstruct the material.

SS: So you mentioned dynamics, what were some other things that you find particularly special or singular about Conduction in terms of conducted improvisation practice versus other systems that you’ve worked with.

GH: Let me think about that...the thing about conducted improvisation...everyone has their own take on it, you know, everyone has their own particular way that they do it. Butch had his system, and Adam has his system, and like I said I worked with Karl Berger, he had a system which was pretty loose, but all three of them were different and so you would have to learn all three and I would say the thing about Conducted Improvisation that’s different than regular improvisation is you actually DO have rules. You have rules for improvisation, if you’re just playing free then there’s no rules, that would be the main thing for me. I mean, you know, I’ve worked with people that have different notational...like towards the end when I was working with Steve Coleman he was working with some things where he wouldn’t notate any music but then you had to know your intervals really well and he’d give you and plus one was like a half step up and he’d put his finger down and like minus one was like a half step down, and then he’d give you something and he’d say “plus one” and he’d give you something and then he’d say “plus two”, or you know plus three or plus four or negative one, negative two, negative three, negative four. Then I noticed Threadgill, I did a couple rehearsals with Henry Threadgill, he has a system that’s similar to that, you know where you’re using...you’re creating phrases based on intervals. Other than that most of the people that I’ve worked with either have some form of notation or its just free, and the stuff that’s just free; there’s no rules, it’s just free. The stuff where there’s notation...even, like I’ve worked with people who have worked with Braxton, they studied under Braxton so they have systems that I guess that are similar, or that they have taken things from him, but its still notation, no matter how far out it is, its still notation.

SS: Can you describe any of that notation? Do you remember any of the specific systems that were based on Anthony Braxton’s?
GH: The one that comes to mind the most is… I worked with Matana Roberts, she’s a saxophone player, she studied with Braxton for a while. She had a lot of pieces that were similar to like Adam’s pieces where he has the modern notation where you have like a spiral going out and then you have to play that and then the whole chart will be like that, so you have number one, number two, number three, you have a series of numbers and there will be a series of geographic symbols that you have to play, and then you might have some notation too, and then you’ll have some dynamic markings and things. So a chart, like if I play with Matana, she might have a chart that’s 2 or 3 pages long that’s comprised of traditional notation, geographical notation, you know, she’ll have some words written and it’ll be a combination of all that. But to me there’s only free improvisation, and there’s improvisation with rules and to me Conduction falls into the improvisation with rules, it’s not free, it’s not free there’s structure, you’re creating a structure with the gestures.

SS: In terms of Butch’s music how much do you think the character of the music was determined by the choices that he made and how much of the music was due to the way the system was set up?

GH: Well, you know, with Butch, I always felt like a lot of it was determined by who was in the band, he could conduct one band and it would have one sound, and then he’d conduct another group and it would have a completely different sound. It had to do with the instrumentation, the players, sometimes it had to do with how much rehearsal time they had. With Butch you needed a lot of rehearsal, some people never really got it with him, and Butch was very hard when people didn’t get stuff. I think it was a combination of, with Butch it was always a combination of who the players are, what the instrumentation was, and how much rehearsal we had. With Adam I think it’s a little bit different because he always comes with a system of notation, rhythms and grids, you have a little bit more to work with starting out. So with Butch it was always creating something from nothing, that was the thing, you were always creating something from nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, absolutely zero, nothing. With others, you were always creating something from material, now with the way Karl does it, Karl does it the way, kind of, my experience with Karl was like he would do it more in the way that big band directors would direct a big band like you play hits and then you play long notes and you hold things out then and you create chords, and you have a gesture for all those things. But he was always starting with the material most of the time, I mean, sometimes he didn’t, sometimes he created a piece from nothing. He’d create pieces from zero, most of the time there was some kind of material with him. So, again, you’d be inside of a piece and then he would create another piece inside of that piece using the Conduction. Then, like Craig Harris, I worked with him and he pretty much used the system that Butch set in place, because again, he was conducting the same band. Butch was conducting Murray’s band and then after a while Craig Harris was conducting Murray’s band. So when he started conducting it he was pretty much using the same gestures and same approach.
It’s like you have notated material and then you open it up with the…But playing with Adam, it’s got it’s own unique…whenever you bring a system to the table it gives it a sound and it gives it a particular color and a particular approach, and then the rhythms, you have something to start, as a starting off point, and when you work with those elements, you’ll always have them as a starting off point.

SS: Have you ever conducted improvisation?

GH: Yeah, I’ve conducted improvisation with small groups. I’ve never really conducted any large, large groups, like orchestras or big bands or anything like that but I’ve conducted some small groups where I’ve done it. Most of those things were situations where you had like a groove going on under, you would conduct things over that groove, that’s how I’ve done it a lot, in the past, the few times that I’ve done it. I haven’t done it a whole lot. I have actually in the bands that I’ve had towards the end of the runs with those groups, the existence of those bands, I usually wind up doing some Conduction, because you’re always trying to get outside of what sounds familiar, and the best way to do that. See that’s the thing…the reason people I think do conducted improvisation is they’re trying to get away from what sounds familiar. They don’t want like the same clichés, the same sounds, the same approach. Conducted improvisation is the best way to do that, I think. But it takes a lot of time to develop a system, it takes a lot of time. I mean, Butch took years and years, and years. It takes time and it takes a lot of research, it takes a lot of writing down what works. It’s a lot of trial and error, a LOT of trial and error. What works, what doesn’t work, what gestures work, what gestures don’t. And then with Butch it was always, always, always dependent on the players. Some players didn’t like being conducted. Some players didn’t like people telling them what to do, ‘cause in Butch’s case, it’s like you’re not, you don’t necessarily have a lot of solos all the time, you didn’t have a lot of solos. The whole piece would be a Conduction, so it wasn’t like there was a lot of soloing, and a lot of guys came into projects with him thinking that they were going to be able to play like it was free, and it wasn’t like that, it was conducted from the beginning to the end, it was like a notated piece of music, from the beginning, it’s like a classical concert, from the beginning to the end and yeah there was some improvisation inside of that, but it wasn’t really a solo, see he was trying to get you out of the clichéd ideas that you were playing when you improvised. You know, I worked a little bit with Bill Dixon, he had a way of doing that that he didn’t really conduct improvisation per se, he let you just play, but he would lecture you for an hour before you played so that by the time that you played you had already taken all the clichés out of your playing after listening to him talk for an hour (laughs).

SS: So, when you conducted improvisation, did you come up with your own system or did you use Butch’s system?

GH: Um, I used a little bit of Butch’s and I used what worked, what seemed like it made sense to me. You know the first person that I actually saw conduct
improvisation was Miles in the 70’s, Miles was the first musician that I saw conduct improvisation, actually I may be wrong it might have been Sun Ra. Sun Ra I think was maybe the first person that I saw conduct an improvisation…then it was Miles, and then so those were the guys that I had seen first, and so I remembered gestures that they used before I had seen Butch.

SS: Do remember any of the gestures that they used?

GH: Well, Miles did a whole lot of stuff with cutting the band off. This kind of start/stop thing where he would cut the band off or he would cut parts of the band off and then have parts of the band play, he’d have the band play against each other. So, mostly with him it was just cutting off people and then have people play under that and then hits. He would conduct hits….you know, like rhythmic things. With Sun Ra it was pretty much the same thing but with Sun Ra it was always a larger ensemble and then he’d do things with the dynamics, like he’d do the thing…there’s a thing that Butch did that I think he got from Sun Ra or he got from someone who got it from Sun Ra, where he would fade half of the band up while he was fading the other half of the band down.

SS: Oh, you mean like the cross-fade?

GH: Like a cross-fade. Sun Ra was the first one I saw do that…

SS: Oh, wow. That’s cool…So when you’re talking about Miles, it’s usually in the context of a written composition but in the case of Sun Ra were they open improvisations?

GH: Yeah, it was the same, it was usually in the context of a groove. With the two of them it was usually in the context of some kind of groove that was happening. It was usually in the context of a groove…of a piece.

SS: Do you know if Butch came up with the Sound Memory cue or if he got that from elsewhere?

GH: Came up with what?

SS: You remember the Sound Memory? Like Sound Memory 1, Sound Memory 2? Do you know if Butch came up with that?

GH: Oh yeah, yeah I don’t know. I don’t know, but I think that that might have, I don’t really know but I think it might have come from working with David coming up with those written materials…I mean he had been doing that with David for a while. I think he might have developed, and I’m not 100% sure about this, but I mean I think he might have developed a lot of the stuff for the Conduction from working...
with...from conducting Murray’s big band and that goes back to the 80’s, he was conducting that band in ’82, ’83. You know, they had a lot of written material, so it could have been...you know, from what I remember from playing with Butch with David we’d have, like I said, he would take a whole, he would take eight bars or twelve bars or however many bars and he would say “Ok, put a circle around those twelve bars, and then put number 1”, so that would be memory 1, and then he’d say “Ok, put a circle around letter A “ and then letter A would be number 2, and so memory 1, memory 2, so I think he might have developed it from there.

SS: Do you remember any signs that he developed throughout your time being in the group, like was Spar, those things, were those new ones? Can you tell me which ones were newer additions since you got in the group?

GH: The newer ones that I remember him developing were...there was one where he had both thumbs faced in opposite directions and then he would point. Like he’d point one thumb up and one thumb down at the same time. I don’t remember what that was. He had a couple of new ones that...there was a period that I was working with him with NuBlu for quite a bit, but then there was a period where I wasn’t and then when I came back he had some new ones. I don’t remember exactly what those were, there was one...he would put brackets, he had this gesture for create an idea and repeat an idea, but then he would put brackets around repeating that idea. Yeah, he had something that he had developed kind of late, where he would have you come up with an idea, but that idea wasn’t necessarily a phrase, it was an idea. So, in other words there were times when...there was a gesture for coming up with an idea that you would repeat verbatim but then there was a gesture for coming up with an idea that was not an idea like a notated idea. That was mostly like the rhythm section, he would have the rhythm section...but then the rhythm section...the rhythm section and the horn section or whatever section they were all interchangeable to him. Whatever he would tell one, he would eventually switch with the other. Like he would tell the rhythm section to do certain things and then tell the horns to do things, and then he would switch. The roles were changing all the time, like the horns were playing the role of the rhythm, and then the rhythm section was playing the role of the melody. He would switch them around all the time at a moments notice. I mean, that was all the time. But then this thing with creating an idea that was somewhere in between a fixed idea and like an improvised groove, there was a gesture for that. I remember asking him a couple of times “What do you mean by that?”. There were always a lot of questions with Butch with the gestures, the ones that he had developed later because I think he was experimenting trying to find out what worked too. He wasn’t really...a lot of the newer gestures weren’t really concrete in his mind. Again, it was like trial and error, so if he introduced something new then the trial was the gig and if it didn’t work then he wouldn’t do it again.
SS: What about like when he put one finger up, four fingers up, like for the rhythm section to play faster or slower, was that a newer idea, or was that an old one?

GH: No that’s old, that’s old. But then there were certain things that he would do inside of that that were new. I noticed that there were certain things...if he had them create a phrase and then he’d put up two fingers, then he’d put up three fingers, and then he’d put up four fingers. That was an old gesture. Two was fast, three was faster, and four was fastest. He had been doing that for a while, but then there was another thing where he had the fingers pointed down which meant something else from the fingers pointed up.

SS: I think...was that the Spar cue? That was just like play something rhythmically, right? Just kind of rhythmically interject....

GH: Yeah, maybe, maybe.

SS: But that cue was new right?

GH: That cue was relatively new to me. That one was relatively new to me, the one with the fingers pointed down. You know, like maybe the last year, the last couple of years or something.

SS: So, in terms of having different instruments try and imitate other instruments, for example like (you) imitating a drum or imitating a guitar...do you think that influenced you at all in terms of extended technique? What do you think of that like just in terms of a pedagogical idea?

GH: Yeah, definitely, yeah. I mean as a texture, as an orchestrational idea because Butch was always pushing the orchestration, always pushing it trying to get instruments to do things that was not their norm to do. So, yeah, I mean if he had a harp, and then he had a harp playing a gliss or something, and then he would tell the horns or the drums to play that. I mean that’s not what we’re used to. There were always things where we were being challenged, especially with the orchestration in terms of what the instrument could do. It was a learning experience that way, in terms of the orchestration, in terms of what I knew I could do, in terms of what I knew the cornet could do, and what I knew I could do and what I was used to doing. Yeah, a lot of them were extended techniques, but some of them were just challenges. Yeah, extended techniques, but things that you just never thought to do. He could have written whole books about that, what he can get out of an instrument.

SS: Do you think that that’s influenced the way that you play at all or how you improvise, based on having to imitate a drum, having to imitate harp glissandi, and these things? Do you think that that’s influenced you at all in how you think about music or how you play music?
SS: Ok, so I guess another thing I wanted to ask you….when we were talking earlier you were talking about a lot of the things that you thought influenced Butch and influenced Conducted Improvisation. If you want to just talk a little about that that would be great.

GH: Well, yeah, I was talking about the big bands and the way a lot of these big bands developed was conducted improvisation. If you study the history of the Basie band and the beginning of the Basie band they didn’t have that many notes, they didn’t have that much notation, they didn’t have a composer, it was….Basie’s band was Bennie Moten’s band that was taken over by Basie, I think Bennie Moten died and Basie took the band over and he didn’t have anyone writing for the band, so they came up with head arrangements. I mean, you know, a lot of these bands, they had head arrangements but someone would conduct….a lot of times someone in the reed section or the brass section would come up with a signal for the head arrangements and then how to tell everyone, “ok you’re gonna play the third, you’re gonna play the root, you’re gonna play the seventh, you’re gonna play the fifth” or whatever, and then conduct these lines and bring these lines out of the band, in time, in real time, and that was a kind of Conduction, and that was kind of the way I look at Butch working with David Murray, because a lot of the times we actually did come up with head arrangements and a lot of times even with the Conductions he would come up with head arrangements. A lot of times he would conduct, NuBlu or any other group, and he had an idea of what he wanted. He would sing to them he would say “Ok, dat da dah (singing musical phrase)”, you know and he would say “play that”, you know that goes back to the very, very beginnings of Jazz. So, when I think of Conducted Improvisation, the roots of Conducted Improvisation, to me, come from that, the beginnings of jazz where there wasn’t always notated material. You wanted a section to come up with some phrase, and you had to have a way to articulate that without saying it or singing it because when you’re in real time and you’re playing with a band in front of people you’re not going to sing anything or you can’t play, it’s in real time so you have to conduct it, it has to be conducted, there has to be gestures and numbers and figures and signs to do that. So, like I was telling you before, you look at videos of Dizzy, like Dizzy’s early big bands, and probably a lot of those other bands too. I don’t know Cab Calloway, or Andy Kirk, or something like that. If you look at some of the early big bands you’ll notice that they had certain Conduction gestures, certain Conducted Improvisation gestures, or when you read these books about the histories, about the biographies and stuff they talk about that. I know Dizzy talked about that, and there are people that played with Dizzy’s big band that talked about that idea. I know, I think, maybe Quincy Jones or some of those other people, but there a lot of, when you go back to early Jazz there’s a lot of that and I’m sure there’s the same in classical music too, where there’s improvisation there’s no notation so I’m sure. I don’t know how much of it is recorded on video or it’s explained in books, I’m sure it must be somewhere. There’s a point at which you want the player to leave the page or when there is no written music that goes back to the 1800’s or something, because early classical music a lot of it wasn’t notated anyways, a lot of it was
improvised. I’m sure the classical musicians if you go far back enough there’s some form of Conducted Improvisation.

SS: You also were talking about Gil Evans’ influence as an arranger on Butch in terms of him conducting.

GH: Yeah, I think a lot of that had to do with the orchestration. I think he learned a lot of orchestration from Gil. I think his sense of orchestration was inspired by Gil. He would have instruments play….the combinations of instruments, and the attention to the dynamics and the attention to the details of the dynamics, I think Butch might have gotten a lot from Gil Evans. You know, where he would use flutes and muted trumpets and those…that sonority. Butch had a very, very keen sense of orchestration, very, very detailed, very, very keen, I mean he could go very far in depth with it, and I think some of those ideas came from Gil. Some of them probably came from others, but I know he knew Gil and he worked with Gil, and I think that’s where he picked up some stuff.

SS: I just wanted to come back to the idea of, how does imitating different instruments…we got cut off…I was just wondering how has that influenced you at all as a musician…how you play or how you think about music at all?

GH: Well, it’s definitely expanded my sense of orchestration, my sense of what the roles of certain instruments are. Any instrument can have any role and you know that theoretically but until you do it in practice, and when you do do it in practice then you actually start getting ideas about how to put pieces together in a way you didn’t have before. For me in particular, I don’t know, I would say its just opened my palette up. The whole idea of having instruments play roles that there not used to playing, its opened my palette up in terms of what I think I want an instrument to do, as a composer and will I use it? Have I used it? I haven’t used it yet but, you know….maybe I will when I sit down and write my next orchestral piece (laughs). But its definitely in my head, its in the back of my head. I mean the whole idea of stretching the range of an instrument and all those things, pushing the range of an instrument, you know, pushing the extremes of the range of the instrument.

SS: Has it changed the way you improvise at all?

GH: Yeah, well one thing that I know for sure is that its definitely got me to push the range of my instrument, this whole pushing the range, you know, like playing more in the high octave…I had a certain range on my instrument that I was comfortable with, and now when I improvise I consciously think about pushing the high register or pushing the low register, I mean really like staying there and dealing with a certain range that I didn’t deal with as much before. Increasing the range.
SS: Just one last question cuz I know you’ve got to go: So what do you think the future is of Conduction in particular and Conducted Improvisation in general.

GH: I think it’s probably got a pretty healthy future. Ironically, sadly because of Butch’s death I see, you know, like what you’re trying to do with this, this is gonna be…this is a thesis that you’re working on?

SS: Yeah.

GH: I think probably there will be more of these, and I also think that there will be more people working with the Conduction ideas that Butch used and Conducted Improvisation, and there should be more and I hope there’s more, because one thing that I know for sure is that there is going to be more improvisation in western Classical music, which there should be, and there is already. There’s more improvisation in western Classical music, there are more western Classical players that are coming into the Jazz and improvised realm. That’s happening, that’s definitely a truth that’s happening now. So as that happens, there are going to have to be systems in place so I also know that there are gonna be more people studying, learning about Conduction and I hope there will be because I want to do, there are some things that I wanted to do with Butch that I never got to do, like I wanted to write some pieces and have him conduct and deconstruct the pieces. I talked to him for years about this. Sometimes I’d give him some music and he’d look at it, and then there was a time when I was working on trying to get a commission to write a symphonic piece that he would conduct, but I never got the money, I never got the commission, but he was totally down for doing it, and I think that needs to happen more. I think that’s something that definitely needs to happen more: people writing pieces for Conduction, where there’s notation and there’s Conduction. There will have to be people that spend their lives studying Conduction and studying Conducted Improvisation and I think there will be. Ironically, like I said, with Butch’s death there will be more, right now I think there’s more of a focus on it. There’s definitely more attention.

SS: Thanks a lot Graham. I really appreciate that, you’ve given me a lot of great material.

GH: Yeah, can you let me check it out when it’s done?
Appendix C:

Telephone Interview with Jason Hwang 12.23.2013

Sean Sonderegger: What was your introduction to Conducted Improvisation?

Jason Hwang: Um let’s see now…I think probably with William Parker very early on, and mostly with Butch Morris. I was in those Conductions when Butch was really in his first phase of conducting and creating that, making a transition between being a composer/cornetist and making Conduction his main instrument, and also even before he had created the word Conduction. That would be like I’d say around 1978 no around 1980 I’d say, I’m kind of bad at years but I was in my early 20’s

SS: So you were working with William Parker before that even?

JH: William was the first bass player I ever worked with. I was introduced to him by Will Connell, Jr. Of course Will came out of Horace Tapscott orchestra, and they had been doing conducted improvisations, you know like Sun Ra had also. I never saw Horace’s conductions. Yeah, shortly after I played with Butch maybe around ’82 or so, I met Makanda McIntyre, and he had an improvising Jazz orchestra. He conducted it although his music was more like a traditional chart.

SS: Would he alter any of the structures like in Conduction?

JH: Um..No. But I think in more traditional conducting, the quality of the music, and phrasing would always be different from performance to performance. Yeah, but the music was guided by the chart more so with his orchestra music, and I almost said Big Band but he always hated, he always corrected me if I said that, he always said “orchestra”. His orchestra had strings, winds, and brass, I met Steve Swell in that band.

SS: And what you were doing with William Parker, did he have charts, or was he creating the music from the conducting?

JH: Well, I think there’s different ways of conducting and a lot of times in William’s large groups what is phenomenal is that he can conduct it from the bass and how he’s playing and what he plays really leads the band in the direction of the music, so less necessarily hand gestures, but I consider his…which he would do somewhat but not like Butch would do… but he could conduct from the bass.

SS: Do you remember any of his signals, any of his vocabulary?

JH: It would be sonic. It depends on how we would define conducted improvisation.
SS: Definitely from the bass, he wouldn’t be using any. It’s just that since you mentioned hand gestures I was just wondering if it was like codified the same way that Butch’s was.

JH: No. I’m trying to really think carefully about this. No, not really, but the band would have to be very attuned to the energy and shape of his phrases. You know, when he wanted it and how he wanted it to move and he could do that from the bass and create that flow. So, it was as a mode of conduction, there was less exertion of control over each individual player, but at least to me the conduction was occurring because we could follow his playing. It might lie outside of your definition of conducted improvisation.

SS: I mean, all this stuff is interesting.. I think I’m just wondering…and I’ve heard a lot that William Parker conducts improvisation…one of the things that I’m studying is the forms of the actual systems. Even though I’m focusing on Braxton, and Butch, and Adam, I’m interested in these other systems and I’m interested in the history of this thing.

JH: So, I’m just kind of pushing the borders of that definition. If you hear his Little Huey big band or his…I forgot, something on Ellington…that band, there is music, I mean, but then so much of it is off the page and it’s in the great tradition of improvisation, it’s about listening and feeling. Not necessarily a codified system of gestures.

SS: Cool. Have you performed Language Music with Anthony Braxton?

JH: Yeah, I’ve played his compositions and also in his opera. He has purely conducted improvisation sections in pieces directed by hand gestures?

SS: When did you start playing with Braxton, and performing Language Music?

JH: I’m so bad at years! You know the year when his group with Marilyn Crispell and Mark Dresser, and Gerry Hemingway, when they broke up?

SS: So that would be like the early 90’s they broke up? Like ‘91, ’92?

JH: I think so, and I played in one of the first groups after that. We did a concert in Turkey, in Istanbul, and that was with Joe Fonda, Kevin Norton, and Ted Reichman. He didn’t keep the band together, we just did a few gigs and then he did a lot of different configurations. I don’t think he really settled into a regular band until the past years with Taylor and others, but before that he had a lot of different configurations. And then when he got the MacArthur…again I don’t know what year that was…so maybe you’ll have to find out when he got his MacArthur, but he did a
series of concerts, of oratorios and compositions, at the Knitting Factory, and at the Kitchen, and then that was concluded by an opera.

SS: Would this be Trillium R?

JH: Yeah, the first recorded opera. Is that it?

SS: I’m pretty sure R is the first one.

JH: That concluded that, and then he went on sort of a hiatus after that opera, and then when he started his next opera I’m on that recording. We did a concert at Roulette that had excerpts of that opera plus other compositions. So, I’ve played some of his Ghost Trance music and his other compositions as well and they all had different mechanisms to integrate improvisation, conducted improvisation, multiple conductors, things like that. The other, let’s see, Makanda, Butch, and then I’ve played with Steve Swell, [he] has an orchestra. Also, Sabir Mateen.

SS: And they all conduct improvisation to some extent? And with Sabir and Steve Swell, is it more like what you described with William Parker, where they’re kind of conducting from their positions as instrumentalists or do they have hand gestures.

JH: Both of them use hand gestures as well. Certainly they lead from their horns, but in addition they’ll get more involved with setting things up with hands as far as setting up solos, duos, things like that.

SS: Would you say it’s relatively basic, or is it something that they’d actually have to teach at a rehearsal like with Butch or Adam?

JH: It’s probably not necessary to have a lot of rehearsals because a lot of the gestures are intuitive. I wouldn’t use the word basic because I think they can generate whatever, fulfill whatever their feeling and intent is without any inadequacies.

SS: I don’t mean basic in the way the music develops but I think I’m just talking about in terms of having a lot of gestures and having just a gesture, not what’s happening musically dictate what’s going on.

JH: They can do that, you know. They’ll cue some phrases as well, but the gestures are quite intuitive so its easy to really grasp them quickly.

SS: I guess that covers what ensembles you’ve performed with. I think another thing that I’m interested in is: How has performing in conducted improvisation ensembles affected the way that you think about and perform music? And I know that you also conduct improvisation, but I think what I’m asking is: in terms of being an
instrumentalist how has working with Conduction, working with these different systems, affected the way that you improvise when you’re not in those situations?

JH: Well, I think that from each of them, it’s a very dynamic way of experiencing orchestration, and you know, when you’re in an ensemble of many families of instruments and then when you hear the combination of brass, winds, and strings, and mutes or not mutes, and various ranges of each horn, etcetera. All those infinite colors within the palette and you experience improvisation. I think it is a tremendous lesson in orchestration. And so then you start to hear your instrument with the larger context, and how you can actually interact in each tonal color. So it sensitizes you to that as a player to know where on your instrument and how on your instrument you can blend inside a sound and then also how and when can you stand out from that sound, so you have a lot of those choices. And then as far as what you play in improvisation, all of those leaders want people to not only think in terms of soloing on top, but playing something that’s individual within the context, so sometimes again you’re adding something to the sound without necessarily popping on top, and then you pick your moments to stand out, and that’s just classic playing knowing how to deal with the call and response, and knowing how to deal with spontaneous orchestration, so I think over the years somehow that experience has given maturity to my playing and also of course to my writing.

SS: Do you think that it’s changed the way that you listen too when you’re playing?

JH: Yeah, in that you’re sensitized to orchestration. And I have to add that when you play with a lot of great individuals then you can be inspired by the unique aspect of each musician’s playing, and what’s characteristic of their voice, and that’s always like creative fodder for one’s development, if you can hear that and be inspired by that.

SS: So, another thing that I’m interested in is: How do you think Conduction, Language Music, and Adam Rudolph’s improvised conducting concept relate…and I guess you could deal with all of these individually, talking about each one, Butch, Adam, and Braxton, ‘cause I know you’ve worked with all three…

JH: Well, Karl Berger too.

SS: Oh, yeah definitely. I think for this one I just focused on those three systems because they’re so different and they’re pretty developed as far as the semiotic vocabulary. I mean, I’m definitely talking about Karl because as far as an organizer and getting people together to do this thing, he’s been…it seems like he’s been really important too.

JH: I think so. As far as this idea of call and response, he has a real feel for playing the orchestra, you feel like you’re playing with him playing piano. I mean, the way he
accompanies…creates flow and everything. He has that aspect. I know you wanted to focus on those three but I just wanted to not leave anyone out.

SS: Yeah, definitely. If you want to talk about Karl Berger that’s cool too, because he’s definitely an important part of it, and the CMS is an important part of it too.

JH: I don’t know when Karl started doing it, but I think he’s been doing it, probably since the ‘60’s too.

SS: Yeah, I know talking to Braxton, I think Braxton said that he was doing it when he started at CMS, that Braxton was doing it when he started at CMS and I think Karl picked up some stuff from Braxton, but I don’t know, I’d have to talk to Karl.

JH: And I know Butch has always credited Charles Moffett, that he thought Charles…and others have credited Ellington, you know, doing it also. Some of the records I can kind of tell what he conducted and what was on the chart, but his music had been notated and stuff so everyone thinks that it was just this completely composed thing when he was doing that too.

SS: Yeah, do you know when Ellington started doing that?

JH: I don’t but I remember hearing a record…when I heard that…I was listening to a record and certain backgrounds I could tell were like, you know certain attacks and stuff, to me they felt like they were conducted, but I don’t know for sure. But I know when I spoke to Makanda and he told me that he was a kid or something and he somehow was in an Ellington rehearsal and he figured out that like a lot of the players didn’t really read music very well but they rehearsed like all…you know, they were a working band, they rehearsed all the time. He didn’t really mention the conducted gestures, I forgot who told me that. But in that situation, when they were developing, reading some of the books like the bio of Prez, a lot of the time those bands were developing arrangements through improvisation and then they had someone come in and write it down.

SS: Yeah, definitely like the riff bands…

JH: Yeah so I think as far as creative process it wouldn’t surprise me if this has been going on before it was a named thing.

SS: Definitely. So you think a lot of it might have started with Ellington and those groups?

JH: Sure, I mean maybe Charles Moffett saw Ellington do it, but I don’t know. It’s a little bit unknown.
SS: Yeah, ‘cause I know Butch credits Charles Moffett with “literal motion” and that stuff…

JH: Yeah.

SS: And panorama…when was Charles Moffett doing that stuff? Probably like back in the ‘60’s, right?

JH: Yeah, yeah. Back in the 60’s.

SS: I guess after…’cause he played with Ornette in what? Like ’63?

JH: Yeah, right. I don’t know his peregrinations when he was in the San Francisco area where Butch heard him and saw him. Butch didn’t talk a lot about him but he did tell me that Charles had been doing that. You might even ask his sons. I’m not sure if they would know. I’m not sure who else would know. Yeah, you know so many people have passed away, Frank Lowe’s not with us.

SS: Do you think Charnett (Moffet) would know?

JH: Maybe.

SS: That’s interesting. And with Ellington’s band you think that it was Ellington conducting it and not coming from the section as much as with Basie?

JH: No, in some of the recordings in the 50’s, I forgot what…I’m terrible as an academic, you know I don’t remember which record. I had this impression I just heard something and I was like “OK, I think I hear that”.

SS: I mean, I never would really think that way…until you actually have to do something where you have to cite things…you don’t think about it.

JH: It was just a little qualitative difference that kinda cued me into thinking that that’s what it was and then I was reading a biography of Pres and how bands were developing music. To me its like, I may not know, to me it would be…my common sense is that its been going on because that’s what was going on in rehearsals. You know, spontaneous riffs and conducted improvisation, then “let’s try this, let’s try that”, “OK that sounds good”, or “that doesn’t”, then pretty soon you have an arrangement, and then it gets written down. It came out of that type of laboratory rather than someone, an arranger, sitting down at his desk and putting it down, which also happened, you know.

SS: Do you remember who wrote the biography or do you remember what it was called?
JH: The Pres biography was by that professor at Rutgers in Newark who wrote the big Coltrane book. If you follow up with me I’ll…

SS: With that information I should be probably be able to figure it out.

JH: I’ll drink some coffee here and see if that awakens something

SS: I’ll look it up, if I really can’t figure it out I’ll send you an e-mail or something

JH: Yeah, send me an e-mail. I just moved so all my stuff’s in boxes otherwise I’d just go to my shelf

SS: Oh, man. No, but that’s really helpful. Well, yeah, what I was just wondering was how do you think Conduction…and I think I’l just do them one by one…How do you think Conduction, Language Music, and Adam Rudolph’s conducting concept relate to their creators’ larger philosophies about music? I don’t know if you want to start with Braxton or…just start with whichever one you want.

JH: Uh, ok. Well, you know, I think the manner and system of conducting, that modality, is determined by each artist’s personality and their philosophy, and each of them are dealing with what music deals with: sound and silence, and energy. Phrase and they developed a language that was consistent with their thinking about the world and music, and also interestingly their relationship to other individuals socially, and the world. So each of them has to….when dealing with those aspects of the music, which is multi-dimensional, there’s sound and silence, there’s placement, there’s…let’s see….emotional dimensions and their own psychology. Each dimension is a portal to each other and in constant flux. I think then with Conduction® specifically each of them is dealing with conduction of improvisation, each of them are dealing with control. How much will they allow the individuals in their ensembles to make decisions and how much they need to control it to get the music to where they want the music to go. I think that’s actually…and then of course each system is….has that personable aspect of just the quality of their movement regardless of their system of signals. So, each one for example can give a downbeat and a cutoff with a very different quality and that affects the music. Oh, another person I worked with in conducting was J.A. Deane who’s worked with Butch the most and he has a very different quality to his hand gestures…Everybody does, and also how he controls and organizes, he has some cues which are essentially the same idea of Butch like panning but he delegates individual…he allots freedoms in a different way and he’s thinking in a different way. It was very interesting because it would really affect the results quite a bit. I guess I thought of that because having played with Butch and played with Dino like, I think it was in fairly close dates, it was like an interesting contrast to do. So then there’s the quality of the gesture, you know Makanda’s downbeat was different…everyone has a different downbeat, you
know…I’m just using that as an example because the downbeat you think is THE DOWNBEAT, you know? But how they give it is something and when they give it of course is something.

SS: Yeah, you know Butch’s whole thing, and I noticed it just from working with different people, that Butch’s thing is really precise especially with the baton vs. no baton thing.

JH: Right.

SS: Working with Butch and then working with Karl.

JH: Yeah, Butch was a great deal of control. But that actually evolved. In the early years he was not, in the early years too he was much more coming out of jazz sensibilities, he was coming out of the David Murray big band. He was getting experience conducting that, and he was conducting and arranging for David Murray’s Octet, and the type of musicians that he had, like the early bands had like…Phillip Wilson was playing drums next Steve McCall next Frank Lowe was there, Luther Thomas, David Murray, Threadgill, I’m not sure if Threadgill was there, but it was really coming out…

SS: Threadgill’s on some of them I think.

JH: Anyway, that was the milieu that Butch was emerging from, and then as he. You know, Butch was a very social person he knew a lot of people and he started crossing out of that world into the world of downtown noise and other experimentalists in the East Village and gradually his music started to embrace all the major currents that were going on in the city and he learn how to make people from very, very diverse backgrounds that you wouldn’t associate with each other and put them in the same band and create music. So, his scope opened up, and then also I think his sense of control over soloists or not soloists or things like that, his control started to tighten more and more, I think, to get the music where he wanted it to go. And now so Adam…so Butch: about his language, he had a set of gestures that had to be learned through rehearsal, but I think mostly the rehearsals too was people learning how to basically pay attention so that they could respond to what he wanted at that moment. And that’s something that people aren’t used to doing, they’re used to closing their eyes and playing but you really couldn’t do that with Butch you had to really pay attention. And gradually, through rehearsals you got a sense of how he was doing things and what your parameters were as far as what you could give him as an individual instrumentalist. And he did feed off the band when he needed…he’d always say, like, play something that he liked, don’t just play a note, you know? You have to play it with meaning and purpose and then when he feels that and hears that the music can grow, ‘cause he’ll take that and he’ll use an idea with the ensemble like in one of his memory type textures. So, you really have to be in a state of complete
alertness and musicality for the music to be successful. Adam, he uses a certain amount of control, he has the harmonic grids, because he’s trying to get harmonic content that’s…and intervallic type unity that the gapped scales and the overall resonance of those grids create, and he has set grooves from his experience as a drummer, from West Africa, to the whole…various drum traditions around the world that he’s studied. So he’s giving those grooves to the drummers and then he also has gestures, you know, like Butch for creating some improvisations. But, like Butch, Adam doesn’t really feature soloists all the time. Sometimes he does but I think he’s looking for a sort of phantasmagoria of ideas and energies that it becomes pretty cinematic in a way in the whole thrust of his creation.

SS: That’s a great description.

JH: Now Anthony, in his recent music that I know, he has areas of orchestral improvisation in which he allows a lot of freedom. There’s a quality to, like, the simultaneous ideas and collisions that are in some of the voluntary changes within the structure of his music, like a player can have a choice to go to one section or another, or multiple conductors cuing different sections. He’s like a zen master because he loves the happy accidents that happen and he knows through his composition and his sensibility that what people would consider imprecision is actually quite…is within his vision. Actually there is a lot of focus in each of his compositions and he does that by exhorting a really uninhibited expression of individual players. Now, he does write a lot of notes on the page, which…traditional notes, which Adam and Butch…well Butch sometimes would write music, but I think…in the early years we would play a lot more of his written tunes but only…he did many, many concerts without written music in the last years that I worked with him. But Braxton has written a lot of music and the music has a language in itself. So you’re influenced by that when it launches into conducted improvisation, you’ve been playing this written music and it gives…I think he even works with our social reactions to looking at music. For a trained musician to see a piece of written music, they’re trained to play it with precision and correctness, and all that. He will write some very difficult compound rhythms, like 11 over 3 or 7 over 4 and that’s going on all over the orchestra. There’ll be a…even if it is precise it may sound…it’s not the typical ensemble unities, feeling that you might have from…I hate to say more traditional music…there will be that sound of, there’s a texture of individualistic energy. And so even if it’s hard to hear the relationships between your part and another exactly, our training as players gives us the purposefulness to approach our part, and he uses that socialized response of purposefulness for most musicians and that’s part of the energy in the music. Because there was a period early on when I was playing, when I started playing, and people would have written music and nobody wanted you to play it as written. You were always supposed to interpret it and that, of course, I think…I don’t hear that quality as much in today’s generation because of the degree of training. But, I think that Braxton is using our socialized response to the creative process to create something that’s his own, that’s unique.
SS: Yeah, kind of get people out of their comfort zones, I guess.

JH: Oh yeah.

SS: I guess that’s something …that all three…I mean especially Butch and Braxton were interested in, right?

JH: Um, in what regard? To take you out of your…

SS: Just, kind of getting people out of their comfort zones and their habits and…

JH: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, I think Braxton, Anthony, one of his great gifts is pure enthusiasm for music. The joy of creating, it sounds like that’s a given, but you know his star shines brighter. He loves music so deeply that it also, I think generates all those aspirations in the rest of us. Butch wasn’t always so sunny (laughs) but he would put together so many unusual groups that it would always be kind of thought provoking.

SS: Yeah, so I think another thing that I’m interested in is your own conducted improvisation system.

JH: Ah, well. I think just as a reference, one person we didn’t mention was Walter Thompson. Are you familiar with him?

SS: Yeah, Soundpainting. I didn’t want to focus on Soundpainting just because other people have focused on it…

JH: Yeah, well just as a point of reference, Walter, a big aspect of his work is creating a codified system of extensive cues that others can learn. To make this system comprehensive and exhaustive that people can learn, and I have to say that it’s a concept…I mean of course it has value…For myself its not useful because I believe that, especially in the great…the tradition of improvisation that one’s individual language is extremely important. We shouldn’t all conduct the same way. So Walter’s coming more, I guess…I hate to use those words…but a more classical European idea…I don’t know if that’s a fair way to characterize it.

SS: Well you know when I was writing this paper I was characterizing it as a more Eurological system that’s more about control. It’s more about specific…

JH: Yeah it is, it is. I am a practitioner of the art of improvisation, and so I do believe in the individual aspects of one’s Conduction or playing, to find your own voice and your own way of creating. So that’s what I value when I hear all music, is to hear one’s individual voice. I have to say, ‘cause of all the years…I had not played with
Butch…when I was doing my orchestra, I hadn’t played with Butch for a pretty good interval, and then I remember I played for him at Billy Bang’s memorial. And I could see how Butch handled melodic material and arranging and I thought “wow, you know, I really was influenced by Butch”, because the way he conducted and heard things and heard flow…I felt very in tune with. So I think he really influenced me more than I realized at that time. But I have…I use approximately 50 or so gestures for my string orchestra, and a portion of it would relate specifically to string technique to get those textures and bowings that would create a sound. My chart for “Symphony of Souls” was approximately 12 written passages and the music progressed somewhat from left to right but there were some sections that would recur and I improvised with that material. There may be say, in section 5 I may just cue the bass and cello and someone else is improvising or I might take that phrase and transpose it. I have cues for transposing phrases and that’s how I could get unison lines, through transposition cues and then that would pivot the improvisation into another harmonic plane. So then I could later on bring back that cue as written with the whole orchestra. So you could take parts of it and play with it as improvisation and then there are of course different aggregates of whether it’s a soloist, duo, quartet, you can assign aggregates and bring in the orchestra little by little. But what I discovered about it that was interesting was, you know, usually when you’re looking at an orchestral score, notes laid out, there’ll be a certain amount of notes within a chord. With the string orchestra if I just held my hand out to have a held note without anything written on the page I can have a much more complex harmonic color because it could have, there’s 38 musicians there, there could be 38 different notes and it’s not all in a twelve tone system. Some could be a microtone, a 21 note scale, or some could be with vibrato, some could not. So it was the sound of a collective that was undirected with the specificity of the note but were unified by the emotion of the moment and what the music is telling us to play. So that’s why in the liner notes I thought of that image…the music is like this tree and we see that it’s a tree, but the sound is like…you can hear every leaf in motion. There’s that individuated shimmer created by each voice and yet the composition of the music is this tree. So, I thought that’s one of the amazing things about the improvisation of a large ensemble. That’s an image and sound that you usually don’t, you can’t….I’m sure someone’s done it somewhere, no one’s done anything new, but that’s just one way to think of the sound. Recognizing that, it’s a way to harness it, ‘cause then when you do write, say, a six note chord or even a three note chord for the ensemble it can have dramatic effect, because suddenly this multitude of voices are focused into this clarion, you know, five note chord or something. So you can play with scale that opens up, diffuses, and then focuses and hardens. The same thing with improvisations; if you have a whole section improvising over a rhythm and then you reduce that to a duo…so you can constantly play with scale and so all these different dimensions of music can be breathing if you’re able to achieve a flow. I don’t, other than the written notes and all that, I don’t philosophically want to control what people play…but because I choose players who I trust, and if I release the control then the music can become something that is beyond my imagination that others expand what can
happen. It goes beyond myself, and that’s the greatest experience I think….of being in a small group or large group…is that power of improvisation to do that. So then my role as a conductor is less of controlling everything that’s happening and being responsible for every sound, but to create contexts in which people can be fully empowered to create, to sing their story within the meta-story.

SS: In a lot of ways it is similar to what Butch was doing because you kind of just set up a form and then you let people insert their own language and kind of do their own thing.

JH: Yeah. I think Butch exerted more control but I have to say, his instinct for music making influenced me more than I thought. Because of that performance for Billy…the thing that he set up…it was with strings too. I just felt like “wow, I can’t quite analyze it, but I think how he made music really got infused into me”.

SS: So you’d write the piece and you’d have numbered sections similar to I guess what Butch would do or even what Horace Tapscott before him…just number sections and cue them and kind of layer them on top of each other.

JH: Yeah, and some of the sections were full out melodies, and some were textures and motifs. So certain cues lent themselves to recurrence and other ones I didn’t really bring back.

SS: Yeah, ‘cause I remember seeing you doing that with Tri-Centric and it was really great.

JH: Oh, that concert.

SS: But it seemed like the same of the same things. You’d cue sections, you’d cue people on top of each other.

JH: Yeah, that was Taylor’s piece actually. Oh, my piece?

SS: Your piece, yeah. On the first one.

JH: Yeah, for that one…it’s true, but I had less recurring cues than I did with Symphony of Souls. But, yeah exactly, that’s kind of how I did it, yeah.

SS: Yeah, that’s cool. Then did you come up with your own cues for transposition or did you use things similar to what Butch or Braxton would use?

JH: I’m not sure if….I don’t think either of them had transposition cues. I might be wrong. Of course Butch was always doing new things that I might have been unaware of.
SS: I think just half steps, like…

JH: Did he do that? Then maybe… I don’t recall that particular cue.

SS: I guess I’m just wondering: would you transpose things in half steps or could you transpose any interval based on hand cues?

JH: I kept it…I used my skull, so when I went from my chin to the middle of my face that was a half step and then when I went from my chin to my head it was a whole step and then when I went from my chin to above my head that was a minor third.

SS: Oh, wow. That’s cool.

JH: So I just worked with those. Pretty much those intervals and then combining those I was able to create… say for example I gave a held note to a single player and then I would point to my ear and everybody would join that note, they would have to have good, perfect pitch. Then once I had that note I could actually start creating some unison lines just through transposition. I didn’t get into those ideas for the Tri-Centric piece but I did that with Symphony of Souls. I gave you the link, right? It’s on Youtube, the recording session.

SS: I’ll check it out. I don’t think you sent me the link but I’ll…

JH: Ok, my name and you write Spontaneous River. Or I’ll send you the link. It’s a really good thing to do, I mean Zach was… as far as videotaping it… especially like a lot of presenters and stuff they want to see videos and a lot of times when you get people to do live concert videos the sound isn’t good and all that. So I think it’s a good thing to do if you’re able to. You know, this was an all volunteer army.

SS: Yeah, no it’s great.

JH: Yeah, I’ll send you the link.

SS: No, it’s cool I just found it. I’m definitely gonna check it out it looks great.

JH: That was, um… we went into Systems Two and we did two complete takes and the CD that you hear is the second one. The first one had really good sections but the ideas unfolded so quickly, but the second one… the ideas… we began to develop things more subtly and fully so we chose that. The only thing with the beginning, I played an intro solo… that was recorded after the orchestra left and I added that. But then it gets into the orchestra about 30 seconds in. Now that was a session, man. I love Systems Two ‘cause they had to stay up the whole night before, because we maxed out every microphone line they had and I’m only in there like 4 or 5 hours so
like they made no money on me at all. But they were like…I knew they weren’t, they knew they weren’t but they treated me like I was the most important thing in the world. I really appreciate their professionalism.

SS: Yeah, that’s awesome. It’s a great room, great space.

JH: Oh yeah. Yeah, I think just ‘cause…those high ceilings.

SS: Oh yeah, it sounds amazing. I only got to do one session there, but it was really…

JH: Yeah, every record out of there sounds great. They’re kind of expensive to do with a small group but there weren’t too many places I could go to with 38 people.

SS: Yeah, well that’s a huge orchestra…I mean, for that.

JH: I’m thinking about doing it again this year. I’m gonna add brass and I’m going to have all of the guitars using wah-wah pedals and then with strings. So, I’d like to hear that sound.

SS: Wow, it sounds great.

JH: But everything I talk about when you hear it you can probably figure out what I’m doing as far as the transpositions and different hand gestures for strings, for glissandi, for different attacks, and things like that. I think in their own way Adam and Butch they get to those sounds in their way too for sure.

SS: Definitely some of those more gestural cues, with the glissandi that Karl and Adam use kind of get some of that stuff.

JH: Did you play with Butch also?

SS: Yeah, I played with Butch for a year at Nublu.

JH: Oh, ok.

SS: Yeah just before he passed.

JH: Yeah, I know he was rough on the band.

SS: Yeah, I know. (laughs)

JH: I know. I just think he knew he was sick and he was always pretty intense but I think those last few years he got a little bit more intense.
SS: He was pretty nice to me, but sometimes he would be like “you know, I heard you play that shit last week”, you know that kind of stuff. But it was good, though, especially ‘cause I’m young and it was definitely helpful and I learned a lot.

JH: He wrote me an email that just touched me because he thanked me and he apologized for when he was bad and I just wrote him back and I said “well, we’re human, I’m bad too sometimes”. But I think he was trying to make peace with everybody. So I wouldn’t judge him based on how he acted that year.

SS: No, I mean the last time I saw him…I saw him at Roulette when Threadgill was playing. This was after he was conducting, and he just gave me a hug. That was nice. I wanted to interview him about this stuff but I didn’t think it was really appropriate where he was at.

JH: Well, Butch made this his life’s work. I know Adam and Karl…everyone developed their language somewhat independent of each other. What’s interesting is that there are a lot of things in common with all of them. Though they kind of all took their own paths I don’t think that any of them felt particularly influenced by each other.

SS: It’s definitely interesting. Speaking with Anthony…he said that Butch was influenced by him a little bit….well, obviously Walter Thompson was influenced by him because he worked with him…

JH: Yeah, but if you talk to Walter he’ll say that he wasn’t. But I think the idea, just the idea that he was doing it influenced them. He did it, so how am I going to do it? It’s not literally like “I took this gesture from him” or something like that but I think they all were somehow mutually inspired. Yeah, Braxton was early on and to me it would be…I always knew about Charles Moffett, I don’t know how much he did or if he did it once or many, many times, I really don’t know. Then Sun Ra was doing it, so there was a whole generation before even Braxton.

SS: Yeah, and then Braxton talks about Earl Brown. He was talking about Earl Brown a little bit too.

JH: Yeah, I remember Brenda ….. told me that Earl Brown would do conducted improvisation and everyone’s forgotten about that. Yeah, that’s a good point.

SS: Then I guess…I heard Stockhausen would do some things and Miles was influenced by that.

JH: It doesn’t surprise me. I think sometimes…when I was reading…the writer of the Pres book is Lewis Porter and he also wrote a book on Coltrane and I believe in the Coltrane book he would talk about Aaron Copland’s loft and how Coltrane would go
there, Varese was there, Chou Wen-Chung. The intellectual atmosphere in New York...people from different disciplines intermingled all the time and listened to each other but the history tends to be written somewhat hermetically. No one would think that Coltrane listened to Chou Wen-Chung, right? So I’m sure they listened to a lot. Even like the modern drum kit. When Ellington had Chinese opera gongs and temple drums and woodblocks, you know? It’s ‘cause he heard Chinese opera, he’s in San Francisco. Yeah, you know “I like those sounds, let me buy some of that” and no one would ever usually associate Chinese percussion with that band. We don’t know who he talked to, he might have talked to some opera artists who showed him everything and taught him everything about those drums. Who knows, you know? But that stuff happens.

SS: Yeah, that’s great. That’s some of the most interesting things, the things that people never talk about.

JH: Yeah, those details get lost. Yeah, but I think Butch, Braxton, and Adam’s are great subjects. You’re right, they’re all really different and I’m sure it’s gonna be kind of interesting to examine their creative process and technique as to how they’re different.

SS: Yeah, definitely and I guess also how they’re the same too in some ways.

JH: But they’re all molding, sculpting the space in their own way, and definitely in their language systems, and what aspects of the music they need to control to keep the music focused and flowing. And their relationship to the written page differs.

SS: Yeah, so I guess the one last question...and thanks so much for doing this interview...related to that: would you consider the conducted improvisation scene in New York a community?

JH: Sure. You know, I think every time...especially with those artists because they have done conducted improvisations with consistency over the years and tend to call from the same core group of musicians...usually will get called, because then we build on our experiences and then bring that experience to the new music and so you know it’s always kind of fun, because every rehearsal’s kind of like a party ‘cause people you don’t see in a while, and you hang out and talk so there’s the big social aspect to large ensembles. Then we get more aware of each other and a lot of informal things go on on the sidelines, people exchange CD’s, they tell you about their next gig. You might talk to someone about what they’re working on. Even your stand partner, you listen to what they’re practicing and then you talk about technique, and all these little exchanges that happen in a community happen before and after the rehearsals, and at the rehearsal itself like “man, you took a great solo” and that sort of thing, and you can hear over a period of time. It’s always fun to hear someone’s
playing has grown like “wow man, you didn’t sound like that last year”. So, all that kind of stuff is really great as far as the community aspect of the music making.

SS: Definitely, and you were talking about your own session, your “volunteer army” and a lot of these groups are volunteer armies. So, how important do you think that sense of community is to having people actually come out to play the gig?

JH: Well, the funding in the arts has really changed the conditions and expectations of musicians unfortunately. There’s actually a vice occurring in which there are more musicians being churned out by universities, and with more musicians the level of funding has remained static and the number of venues has remained static. What’s interesting is that always…we thought that with people more educated about this area of music, and with the accessibility of recording, which wasn’t always possible. You know the old self-produced LPs in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the problem was that they had no distribution, it was really hard to get those records. So now with the internet and the fluidity and accessibility you would think the audience would be growing but I’m really not sure if it is. I think everyone’s struggling for funding and audience and I’m not quite sure how we can all of us together address that other than trying to create the best music that we can. So I hope to generate funding so that it isn’t an all volunteer army. I did a concert at the Brecht forum and there was a good fee. It’s nothing earth-shaking. You think about an orchestra, when I recorded…I did the source music for Martin Scorsese’s Kundun, we brought in an orchestra, and choirs, Chinese instruments, and all that. By the time…within 6 hours I spent about $70,000. That’s people being paid union scale, and union scale is not that tremendous but that’s what it costs when you have that many people and you’re in a good studio. A project of this size, if people were paid according to union scale would be truly exorbitant and no individual can really do that, so for a majority…I mean Braxton pays us pretty good and it’s an enormous expense. He’s really great at that and I think the rest of us hope to do that as well someday. I don’t know if that should be in your paper. Nobody wants to hear about that (laughs).

SS: No, of course not, but in a way I think it’s great that people do all these things just for the love of it. I mean, there’s something nice about that even though the overall thing is kind of dark. I’m just wondering, have you seen a change since the ‘80s or the ‘70s when you started working with Butch, in the scene or has it always kind of just been the same.

JH: As far funding, you mean?

SS: As far as funding for these large orchestras.

JH: It’s definitely changed because in New York itself there used to be about 10 or 12 concert series that would pay groups between $2000 and $3000 and each of these presenters did 12 to 15 concerts a year. And still, with all the creative people in New
York no one ever felt that was enough. You could play upstate New York, these presenters had funded series where…they’d average somewhat around there for their budgets and none of that exists now. So that’s a change, it wasn’t like a tremendous amount of money but how many times can you say someone in New York at a concert can make $500 as a sideman. I mean, not very often. I think that’s really been a change and I think in a certain way, musicians, because they never knew the better days…everyone’s in the same boat so it’s become much more self-supporting because the creative spirit never dies.

SS: Do you know about what year the change happened, when it started drying up?

JH: Oh, I think it started probably in the ‘90s…I think it began when Reagan started to cut back the NEA and then the state agencies followed. I’m not quite sure, but I was talking to Francis Wong who’s out in San Francisco and he told me it was about that time that budgets started to contract. Yeah, with Butch I did tons of…he had a lot of creative drive so we played anywhere he could. So I think about that. When my energy gets low I think about these artists that had that kind of drive, like Adam keeps doing it, and Karl, and Braxton, they keep forging ahead to create, and I think it inspires everyone in the community.

SS: Yeah, definitely inspirational. Well, Jason thank you so much for the interview.
Appendix D

Telephone Interview with Adam Rudolph 1.4.14

Sean Sonderegger: So when did you start conducting improvisation?

Adam Rudolph: Uh, when I was in, I think it was 99. But it started in Los Angeles, you know. A lot of musicians I was meeting who were interested in doing a project with me. I thought it would be an interesting way to proceed and also I had gotten to a place where I had been really fortunate to have some really great mentors in the music. You know this music is an oral tradition, we learn from the elder musicians, and so people like Fred Anderson, and Don Cherry, and Yusef. And it felt like it was time for me to really be sharing a lot of the things that I had learned with musicians. So I started it, let’s see if I can see the date here…maybe it was more like 2000, 2001, something like that I think. I started the Go: Organic Orchestra and basically, you know, contrary to what a lot of people think I wasn’t really too aware of Butch Morris. I knew his brother Wilbur Morris, I had met through Don, but I sort of started doing the Go Organic Orchestra where I was playing also but just started intuitively started using hand signals, and being combined with these interval matrices. Not unlike what we do now with the Orchestra but sort of starting and developing it intuitively and kind of seeing what things work and refining and developing those, and what things didn’t work. So I really developed it pretty independently of other…I guess later on I also heard about what Walter Thompson was doing, and like I said Butch Morris, but at that time I was kind of unaware of what they were doing.

Sean Sonderegger: I’m just wondering: Did you work with Anthony Braxton or Karl Berger when you were at CMS? Did you see them do any conducted improvisation?

AR: I did not. No. I taught at the CMS in I think ’80 and ’81 but that was the summer school world music program. I was there with Foday Musa Suso and Hamid Drake with the Mandingo Griot Society so of course we knew Karl, but Karl wasn’t really teaching in the summer I don’t think, he was just there organizing things. So I wasn’t really aware of his things either. I had seen Muhal Richard Abrams with the Experimental Band, you know, because I grew up in Hyde Park in Chicago so I grew up around…Steve McCall lived a couple doors away from me, and Threadgill lived on 56th street so I used to hear a lot of that music. But, yeah, as far as the…more of my influence was really…or inspiration I should say than influence was Don Cherry had that Organic Music Society and had done that Relativity Suite, and I had always been interested in the idea of orchestral concepts of improvised music even when I had the group in the early 80’s with Charles Moore and Ralph Jones and Federico Ramos, the group called eternal wind. Our music was very orchestral in concept. So,
anyway, like I said the combination of a lot of musicians starting to approach me to work with me combined with my really feeling that it was time for me to be sharing a lot of what I had learned over the years in my creative view/interpretation. My ongoing interest in an orchestral music anyway I came to start the Go:Organic Orchestra.

SS: Can you speak at all to how the Relativity Suite was organized conceptually and if that had any influence on your music?

AR: Well, I don’t know how Don organized the music. I mean, I worked with Don, I met Don Cherry in 1978 when he came and he played on the first Mandingo Griot Society record we did and then he invited me to go and live with him and Hamid Drake…to go live with him in Sweden in his house in the countryside. He lived in a schoolhouse with his wife Moki and their kids and a lot of musicians were coming through there and then we went on tour in Europe after that, so this was, yeah, ’78. So that’s when he introduced me to a lot of Ornette Coleman’s concepts and that’s when I started seriously composing myself in ’78, ’79. But, you know Don, I don’t know, he did that recording Organic Music Society…I think Don, the idea of an influence is not so much what people are doing and trying to copy what they’re doing but it’s more HOW they do it. And the how has to do with a process, a way of thinking, a way of inventing your own processes, your own creative processes. Working with the material in a very elemental way…in a very elemental, what I mean is essential way, dealing with intervals, and rhythms, overtones, patterns, you know? But the other way that Don was an influence, of course, and Relativity Suite was an important recording, is that Don had a way of bringing…his concept could hold a lot of world…what we call “world music”, I mean everybody lives in the world…but a lot of musics from various cultures and musicians who played music from all kinds of cultures in one umbrella concept. I would say that that’s the biggest door that he opened up for me. That’s something that I try to do that I think I’ve succeeded in doing, or working on doing with Go Organic.

SS: Yeah, definitely

AR: And I’ve had over the years musicians from Nepal, Mongolia, West Africa, Cuba, Morocco, you know all kinds of guest artists have come through from many, many…Japan…many cultures besides the people who regularly play with the group and I know there’s a way to make room for all of them to be part of what we’re doing. And that has to do with one thing that I learned from Don, and also from Yusef is a certain kind of studiousness and I’ve spent many, many years very deeply involved in the study of music, especially from North India and West African cultures and the African diaspora cultures, but also Indonesian traditions and just really, of course, collaborating over the years with people like L. Shankar, and Hassan Hakmoun, and Foday Musa Suso, and so on, and Haji Tekbelek and really being immersed in these different musical cultures to the point where, not that I want to be a master or even
perform that music, but have enough of an understanding where it’s like you ingest it and it becomes part of your DNA. You know, you eat it and it becomes part of who you are so that for me, to look at like some of the matrices that we use in the Go Organic Orchestra I can speak to somebody from India or from Turkey and explain what we’re doing in a language that they understand.

SS: Well, yeah, I mean a lot of the stuff is sort of similar I guess to maqam or raga or something, the scalar based (improvisation).

AR: Like I said it’s those elements, I mean, those things about organizing intervals are universal and the ways of approaching different kinds of modes and so on. So, like I said I’m certainly not a huge expert on maqam but I’ve played with Jihad Racy, he played in my group for years and I’ve worked with musicians from...I have enough understanding of it to make the music open enough to embrace all of those things. And the idea is, whatever culture, whatever background...and also Western classical musicians or so-called “jazz” improvisers...the whole idea’s to make the music open enough that everybody can express their own inner voice and be comfortable in what we’re doing, but at the same time there’s a kind of a unity of the sound and the direction that we’re doing. And I think that it takes more than just a really passing study of a different musical culture, or more than just hiring somebody from some culture and having them do their thing and you do your thing. I think there’s a certain kind of studiousness and spending time with the music. I mean, I studied tabla for over 20 years. That gives me another kind of understanding about that music and how it’s organized. The same with African drumming, I was playing Ewe drumming and batá for years. Understanding the essence of how that music is organized....

SS: Yeah, you internalize it in a different way when you really put that kind of study in.

AR: Sure. Like anything you do. I mean if you spend a million years, many, many years studying Charlie Parker and Donna Lee and how that music works after a while you begin...you internalize it and it becomes just part of your musical DNA at that point, you know? It’s how you breathe.

SS: So I know you don’t necessarily like the words “world music”, and you don’t like genre distinctions, but if you were going to describe your music what would you describe it as?

AR: Well, you know I don’t really think that that’s my job in a way. Luckily my job is to make the music and yeah, people love categories, I mean in all things in life. And of course you do need to know the difference between a bicycle and a chair. But nobody...you know people are usually not fond of categories. I don’t really like the word “jazz”, it doesn’t really fit my music and I think that people who do like to play
that music don’t really understand maybe what I’m doing. Although, that is the core element of what I do…as an attitude, not as a style. Don Cherry said “style is the death of creativity”. So, we’re not playing jazz from a style but talking about it as a certain kind of attitude dealing with spontaneous composition, and bringing forth the inner voice. Traditions that elicit that, creating an environment for people to be able to play with the most openness as possible, but with as much aesthetic focus as possible. I’m very influenced by the idea of raga and tala and also rasa that way too, because the idea of a raga…a rasa is the coloration that is behind a raga, it’s the emotional coloration. I’m very interested in kind of having the music zero in on what that could be potentially and really expressing…allowing the musicians, all of us to express ourselves from the heart. That’s what it’s all about is the heart quality, the soul quality that we can project through the music.

SS: I think the only reason that I ask you is because I DO have to write about this stuff. But, how do you feel about the term “creative music”, for example?

AR: You know I actually like…Yusef called his music “autophysiopsychic” and I like that term, you know? It means music coming from the mental, spiritual, and physical self. I like that, I mean sometimes I’ve been a practitioner of various forms of hatha yoga since 1975 and actually my tabla teacher told me that music in India is considered one of the highest forms of yoga because yoga means the unity of body, mind, and spirit. So I could call my music like “yogic music” but maybe people wouldn’t understand that, but I like “autophysiopsychic”. You know creative music is…I don’t know, what’s creative? Everything’s creative, and then “improvised” isn’t really…people misunderstand that term also. I would describe my music as “Go Organic Orchestra” music.

SS: Yeah, yeah definitely. I think I just like the term “creative music” to look…and I mean… I’m only doing this because I have to write about this and I’m familiar with these different systems, so I’m looking at your system, Braxton’s system, and Butch Morris’ system, so I’m thinking of putting…if I had to put them under an umbrella maybe putting them under the umbrella of “creative music” just because of your associations with the AACM and Creative Music Studios.

AR: No, I understand. And it is…you could put an umbrella to say an orchestral approach to creative…to creative…you know, spontaneous composition, or whatever. I don’t know. But, you know, there’s a lot of differences. I don’t really know much about what Braxton does but I know Butch…you know I use a score, it’s very important to me the score that we use. Yeah, you know, creative music, that’s fine, you know, I’m not going to object to it or anything like that.

SS: It’s interesting, because I also don’t like to go for these genre distinctions but when you’re talking about things and organizing it in an academic way it becomes a
whole different set of things, and kind of antithetical to what you do and what I do as a musician in a lot of ways, but it’s interesting.

AR: But the confusion is, if you say creative music does that mean that like Stockhausen is not creative music? It’s like, to me the term creative music isn’t really giving you any kind of distinction at all. I mean all music is creative, right?

SS: Yeah, of course.

AR: If it’s creative then it’s creative. You know what I mean? I don’t know it needs some kind of hyphenated…I mean, I don’t know what Braxton calls his music, I know Butch called his Conduction®, I don’t use the word Conduction because I don’t want people thinking that I’m doing what Butch did, and also he put a trademark on it, and I don’t really know what he was doing. I always respected what he was doing. So, maybe it has to be more than just creative music, it has to say something about it. I don’t know what, though.

SS: I think I’m also just thinking in terms of like…have you read Wadada Leo Smith’s *Notes*, that thing that he wrote in 1973 talking about “creative music”? I just see creative music as a specific tradition that’s looking at new systems of improvised music and composed music together with influences from different world cultures. I kind of see it as a specific thing, and a specific movement, and collection of people…that was expressed through the AACM and then Creative Music Studios. So, I mean that’s kind of one of the narratives that I see. But, I mean creative music in and of itself…just saying “that’s creative, this isn’t creative” seeing it as a barrier, as some kind of gatekeeping device…I think that’s jive.

AR: Right, well I think if you define your terms in your paper then it makes sense. Then everyone knows what you’re talking about. You know, I got to tell you, you mentioned the broad stroke thing of the AACM and the Creative Music Studios, and those are not my primary influences. I don’t feel…I don’t know how you approach your participation in the Organic Orchestra but I don’t really feel that it’s coming out of that at all. I mean that’s not how I approach it, that’s not the things that I’m thinking about. I don’t know what Braxton for example is thinking about.

SS: No, and I’m not necessarily connecting you to Braxton or anything but you talk about your early development growing up in Chicago, you talk about Fred Anderson and these people, and then Don Cherry was a big part…Don Cherry, Karl Berger, that kind of scene also seems to me….

AR: Well, no don’t say that. Not Don Cherry, Karl Berger, just Don Cherry. I never really worked with Karl…Karl worked with Don but Don was a very different kind of cat than Karl, and I respect Karl but it’s a different kind of thing. And also, the AACM, Braxton was like gone, he wasn’t even in Chicago by the time I started going
around. The Art Ensemble of Chicago was much more, had an influence on me as an early musician. I was never really a fan, or that interested in what Braxton was doing, I respected it but it wasn’t interesting to me. It just wasn’t. The Art Ensemble of Chicago was really kind of a special group and the AIR Trio also was, I used to hear them a lot. For me the thing was: those guys never really grappled or dealt with the evolution of the music in terms of rhythm and that’s been a very...as you know with the Go Organic Orchestra that’s a big, big part of what we’re doing and to say you’re doing something in world music and to not really deal with rhythm….You have to deal with rhythm because there’s these very evolved rhythm concepts that you have all over the world. Don was amazing, because see Don was a special guy because he had kind of the humility and the insight to go….He studied with the same guy I studied tabla with. He went and actually studied Indian singing, he studied tabla, you know Yusef Lateef is also my biggest influence and when I was 17 I started going to Detroit and playing. And those guys are even more of an influence on my development than the Chicago guys. Charles Moore, and Kenny Cox and those guys around...Strata was also very important too and they were more rhythmists you know. I just wanted to kind of expand that.

SS: I think I just…I wasn’t there in the 70’s, I wasn’t around, I wasn’t even born, so I see these groups of people…You know, especially reading Sweet’s book, and I’m like “Ok, Adam Rudolph was there with Foday Musa Suso and Aiyb Dieng”, you know all these cats.

AR: Right

SS: It makes it seem like all these cats are playing together and that you were there with Karl, and I think another thing that made me think that you might have seen Karl conduct is some of the gestural things that you do like…and I mean, it’s like an obvious thing, but the sweeping up and some of the really intuitive gestural conducting things are similar to what Karl does.

AR: But that doesn’t mean I saw him. Like you said it’s an intuitive kind of gesture, you know I’ve never seen Karl conduct his big group, even to this day. I mean, I like what he does but I have to just be really clear....and I never saw Butch, the first time I saw Butch conduct was about 2 years ago and I just want to make it clear that I came to my own conclusions based upon high and low and gestures that made sense relative to what I was trying to do with the Go Organic Orchestra. I mean, listen, if you really want to talk about that, you have to think about Dizzy Gillespie. Yusef told me: you heard that story that Yusef told about Dizzy Gillespie?

SS: No.

AR: Well that’s what I’m saying about these intuitive, these intuitive gestures. So the first time Yusef..James Moody had a hit out called “Moody’s Mood” so he left
Dizzy’s band and he recommended Yusef so Yusef called Dizzy and said “I hear you’re looking for a Tenor player” and Dizzy sent him a plane ticket and he went out to San Francisco and he said the first gig they came to the end of a chart and there was a whole note and so Yusef was like 1,2,3,4, out, and everybody else was still holding the note, right? And in those days not everybody would explain things to you, but then he started to see that Dizzy was drawing his arm across his chest, like kind of with his elbow bent like “daaaaa” and then he would conduct it out.

SS: Ok.

AR: And this is, we’re talking about 1949. So this whole idea of…yeah, I mean there’s something in the air and there’s something going on but I just have to make clear this thing about…who saw who and just the idea of a sort of a lineage of these things…I think there’s a lot of it. Then you go to West Africa, to Senegal, and if you see Doudou N’Diaye Rose conducting his sabar group, he conducts THEM too. It’s like, there’s a lot of ways to do these kinds of things and I know a lot of people are doing it, but my language was…like I said I started it in California and just figured out: this is high, this is low, this is up, this is down. And a sweeping up just made…they’re very, they’re graphic demonstrations mostly of what I wanted people to do. And my thing has been trying to have less and less conducting as people understand how to play inside of the concepts, and to keep it simpler. Anyway, but it’s beautiful, and the thing is too: everybody’s got their own direction and their own sound and it is interesting that it’s become a phenomenon now, that people are doing it, you know?

SS: And then there’s some that you’ve been doing more lately that are less gestural, like the “create an ostinato” symbol. How long have you been doing that one for?

AR: I don’t know, I think you were around when we started doing that (laughs). Yeah, maybe a couple years. I mean, what I’ve started to realize over time…Go Organic Orchestra for me is a process itself, which means it’s a learning process and it’s an evolution, it’s like an ongoing workshop. So it’s trial and error and finding out things that work and what doesn’t work because it’s its own prototype. Go Organic Orchestra is its own prototype. Whenever you have innovative, creative processes you’re going to end up with prototypical art. So, I’m always experimenting with different processes. But one of the things that I’ve been moving towards in the last few years is trying to get the non-percussionists, the people that play melodic instruments to be more aware of and more astute with the rhythmic aspect of the music and that’s why we started going through all of that training in the workshops and I’ve been developing some hand signals that are encouraging people to be able to think about the phraseology of what they’re doing and deal with the rhythm aspect of it. Like, when you learn to play a raga in India you have to learn how to play tala also because you’re always playing in the rhythm system. So, if you’re going to learn to play a 32-bar form or a 12-bar blues you have to understand how that rhythm cycle is
moving in order to execute your ideas in it. So, the same thing, when you’re playing in the Go Organic Orchestra music and we have these big 60 beat cycles, or 35, 15 even, what I call the signal rhythms. If you don’t understand…in order to be able to really…I mean, you can do anything, but if you really want to be able to understand about the tension and release and have a mastery of the form and the phraseology of what’s happening, you have to understand the mechanics of those rhythms. So that’s why I started using the ostinatos of circularity page and added the “create an ostinato”, and really encouraging people to develop themselves in that way.

SS: I think I was also just wondering if you can talk about the development of VOCUM and cyclic verticalism. I guess you can talk about them separately, maybe starting with cyclic verticalism…how you developed that and what your influences were.

AR: Yeah, well cyclic verticalism, and by the way did you see that article that I wrote in Arcana for John Zorn’s collection.

SS:Yeah

AR: Ok, and I don’t know if you saw the introduction to my rhythm book. Do you have my book? The Pure Rhythm book?

SS: Yeah, that’s on your website, right? I’ve read about what cyclic verticalism is, but I was just wondering…did you talk about the development and how you came…

AR: Yeah, yeah, I was just asking if you knew that stuff, that’s all, so that I know what to say. So, cyclic verticalism. Well, you know it goes back…I mean I’ve been…I don’t know from the get go I was always looking…when I started studying tabla in the ’70s and when I went to West Africa, I started playing hand drums in the ’70s and then went to West Africa in 1977 to study drumming there. It was never with an eye that I wanted to just play that music, you know as an outcome of that. I always loved playing it and performing it but my interest was always, you know, how would this manifest for me as a performer and as a composer. So, the way I look at it is that when you move into the higher dimensions of thinking all of the elements become simpler and simpler. And I started thinking about this when I actually lived in Ghana in 1977. I saw that there were SO many different drum traditions and within all of those…and this was just in Ghana around the Institute of African Studies…and within that there were dozens and dozens of rhythm, and it would take many lifetimes to really master any of those. So I started looking at: well, what are the underlying principles of that, how is this music organized? Basically, it’s organized from what I call…what people have called a timeline…but I call it a signal rhythm. Then at the same time I was looking at the organization of tala in North Indian drumming, and what they call tal which is this adding units of 2s and 3s together to make rhythm cycles. And then the fundamental polyrhythm, polymeter being 3
against 2 and so in these timeline rhythms there’s always a quality of 3 and 2. 3 being
the male aspect, what the Dogon people call “nya” and 2 being the female aspect,
what the Dogon people call “tolo”, or we could call it Shakti energy or Yin energy.
So, and they have a proverb, they say “every rhythm is a marriage and interplay
between a male and female energy”. So at some point I started to realize that you
could combine these cycles as in North Indian music or also in Turkish drumming
and so on…combine them with these polyrhythms, you know, so if you take like a
12/8 timeline that you find a lot (sings slow Atsia beckor bell pattern) and if you look
at it through some kind of analysis, mathematical analysis, it’s a 5 and a 7. So then,
what if you had a 5 and a 7 and a 9? And that’s still a symmetric thing because the 5
and the 7 gives you 4 triplets but now you can have 7 triplets. So, I started looking at
those and creating those. But the thing is, not every rhythm, it’s not every rhythm that
qualifies to be what I call a signal rhythm. It’s like you travel around West Africa and
anywhere in the Bantu…or Central Africa, Congo and there’s a limited number of
rhythms that are used as the bell patterns or the signal rhythms. They’re slightly
different from culture to culture but they’re not infinite and that’s because only
certain combinations have that magical quality of that male and female dance that
goes on that qualifies them as such and are pregnant with a certain neutrality that you
can bring so many nuances to it and different kinds of emphasis. So it has to have the
multiplicity going on with it, so that’s in my thing. I’ve started creating those in the
Organic Orchestra and also in my Moving Pictures and most of my compositions.
There’s really, it’s based upon, there’s about 7 main signal rhythms that we use. And
then those are combined to make longer cycles. That’s what becomes the…so cyclic
verticalism is the concept and then they become combined. I just want to say that
even though there’s this mathematical process that… For me, for a rhythm to become
a signal rhythm, and even the rhythms that I compose, that I generate out of those,
what I call ostinatos of circularity that are longer cycles that are built out of signal
rhythms and calls, what I use…what I call as a call…They have to groove, they have
to have a body element to them. You know, I was talking before about “body, mind,
spirit”…They have to have a groove and a feel to them and feel good. Otherwise they
don’t qualify, that’s important to me.

SS: I think I’m just wondering about….with your conducting there’s a really
juxtapositional element about a lot of it. Do you think of that also as a certain type of
verticalism? Do you think cyclic verticalism has influenced the way that you conduct
melodic things and things that aren’t necessarily based on cycles?

AR: That’s a really good question, actually. Yeah, that’s…I should say, a keen
observation. Yeah, I mean, with the ostinatos of circularity the rhythm…when you
have this kind of rhythm independence and one thing it could be moving against
another it can be orchestrated. It blows up the ability to have things…or an expansion
of things…one thing can be moving against another thing and I’ve always been
interested in the idea of form against form, and hav(ing) a multiplicity of forms. For
example if you look out the window, right? You’re going to see the window frame
and then you might see the trees outside the window and then there’s the clouds, and then there’s the mountains, and then there’s the clouds, and then there’s the sky. So, you’re seeing all those things at once, right? But they’re all different things, but you’re seeing them all at once. So, that’s what I’m really interested in and that’s what I’m looking for in the music with the Organic Orchestra too. It’s not even like an idea of linear theme and development, and one thing follows another. But it’s more something spherical, that’s cyclic and spherical that can be experienced over and over again in many different ways. There’s layers of things going on and orbiting around each other. So, that’s really true, not only is the ostinatos of circularity and cyclic verticalism a way for me to achieve that in the music, but it’s also an influence. Like you said it is an influence, it’s a big influence on how I think about the music. I don’t think about linear things, theme and development so much.

SS: Yeah, I mean, I think for me that’s really one of the fascinating things about your music. And not to compare it to Braxton’s music but that’s one of the things that I think is really interesting about Braxton’s music and Threadgill’s music is that you can bring in any composition, you know, together. And this juxtapositional aspect of the music is really interesting, but it’s also interesting the different ways that they express themselves as composers and conductors. It’s really cool.

AR: I think a lot of people have that idea of form against form and Miles was doing some amazing things with his band, his groups in the early 70’s and also some things that the Art Ensemble was doing. I mean, there was a lot of…an interest in that idea of something…multiple things happening at the same time is really kind of a fascinating thing. I’ve always been interested in that. But how do you make that work so that it’s not chaos? You’re sort of in that beautiful gray area between like order and chaos.

SS: That’s great. Can you talk a little bit also about VOCUM? I guess you could just describe VOCUM and the whole thing because I haven’t been able to find as many writings. I know you talk about it a lot in rehearsal…maybe explain what it is, and I know it’s tied up with cyclic verticalism…but if you can talk about it just in terms of the ostinatos of circularity and then maybe as a larger generative device and then in terms of your work with Yusef Lateef and conversationality, like as a different type of collective improvisation. I guess…I mean however you want to talk about it…

AR: Right, well I think as I was moving towards trying to have, I guess…the melodic players in the Go Organic Orchestra start to engage the rhythm, the rhythm element of what I do, which I guess is conceptually called “cyclic verticalism”. I referenced myself back to the Babenzele and the Mbuti, the so-called pygmies. So, this for me is probably the oldest probably intact music on the planet, collective music making and actually is a kernel for everything that you might hear all the way into like Cecil Taylor or James Brown. One of the things is there’s a pitch…a melodic, pitched element that are combined with these rhythm cells that are repeated, these ostinatos.
So I just had a name, I wanted to hook everybody into it in the Organic Orchestra, so I just… I don’t know it just popped in my mind one day, this uh… VOCUM… which means Virtuosity Of the Collective UsM. What it is, I believe [the reason] I called it virtuosity is that most people associate the idea of virtuosity in our culture [with] running around, you know, moving around the instrument quickly, and doing all kinds of amazing things like that, but what we learn from the Babenzele is that there’s another kind of virtuosity that is about, that’s more about generating patterns, simple patterns, and playing them in the right place, at the right time, with the right feeling. A certain kind of consistency and openness and with a varying of what you do but never losing the kernel of what you’re doing so that eventually as it happens, and it moves around and around… these things start cycling around and everybody’s holding their dynamic of what they do relative to everybody else the music starts to lift. ‘Cause it’s not linear music it’s about the lifting through the ostinato and the lifting is actually… that’s back to what I was saying about “body, mind, spirit”. The lifting is something about the spirit or mysticism of what happens, because when you play those patterns, those VOCUM, and play them over and over, and understand how to make it feel right… and this is something drummers, hand drummers, not trap drummers, they learn that. But also it’s in the vocal traditions too, in Africa that the music starts to lift and transcend and then it becomes part of this transcendent experience for everybody, a collective transcendence. So VOCUM is partly a tool for teaching the musicians how to really understand, and as you remember from the VOCUM, you know the virtuosity… it’s only 2 or 3 notes you’re playing, so what kind of virtuosity is that? Well that’s the virtuosity of like, where do you lay that? How do you lay it? The consistency, the feel of it, the accuracy, and then being able to open up and vary it and listen to each other and dialogue with each other, but still keeping the functionality of just playing those two notes. It’s a different kind of virtuosity that’s really based upon Congo and then ultimately Mbuti, Aka, BaAka culture, you know? Forest people… it’s a very ancient kind of collective way of playing music together. And, also you can hear it if you listen to James Brown’s music too, in a way.

SS: Yeah, all those interlocking rhythms. The guitar player just playing the same thing, the stick player, no definitely.

AR: But it’s an art form, you know?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

AR: Why is James Brown’s stuff hipper than somebody else’s, you know. And the thing is, woodwind…and you know, in our…some of the musicians coming into the Organic Orchestra, even people who are virtuosic, so called virtuosic jazz improvisers or avant-garde improvisers and classical improvisers. Man… as you noticed from being in the rehearsals, this way of playing which… maybe everybody’s listened to James Brown, or Sly Stone…but this way of playing for most of them is a huge
challenge. A HUGE challenge, ‘cause we’re not really taught that way, unless you came up playing in an R&B band, you know.

SS: Yeah I’m always surprised. I’ll write stuff for like really hip new music people, and something with a little groove and the groove isn’t there. It’s not what I’m expecting.

AR: Yeah right, and listen, back to where the real…a big part of the Organic Orchestra…it’s a performance group but it’s also a community. I like to look at Go Organic Orchestra as a community of musicians who are interested in developing together, their musicianship, their artistry. It’s not a school but that’s what it’s really about.

SS: Yeah, definitely and that’s great, ‘cause that’s definitely going to be part of my thesis also. Just looking at Go Organic community, conducted improvisation community. So yeah, I mean, can you talk a little bit about your role in creating a Go Organic community or family.

AR: Well, I think it’s kind of become…my role?...I mean I’m sort of the whatever, the catalyst I guess in a way but part of it is like…it’s almost how I conduct itself, it’s this very interesting area of the combination of sort of leading and following at the same time. So like, it means being sensitive to and hearing what the musicians can do, what they want to do, but then really fulfilling the vision of what we’re trying to do musically which is always changing too. So the community aspect of it is almost like a slow motion version of what we do in concert in a certain kind of way. I don’t know exactly where we’re going, we’re in motion, we’re developing but I don’t know exactly where it’s going. But the community part…there’s three important things to me about being involved in improvised music and that’s: imagination, listening, and sharing. Imagination, listening, and sharing, and so the idea of sharing and all of us having an opportunity to share our ideas…but the Organic Orchestra is about my sharing the things that I’ve gleaned and that I’ve developed from my work with elders, like that we’ve talked about before, Yusef Lateef and Don and so on and sharing those with everybody. The community, I think what I’ve found over time is that the people who gravitate towards the Orchestra are what I like to call evolutionists. They’re people who are interested in study and wanting to develop themselves as artists. As you know, it’s not like we’ve been running around playing a lot of high-paying gigs. So this is something amazing though, Sean. After 6 years or 7 years now the New York Organic Orchestra, I got 90% of the people are the same people who came into the group in the beginning. So, they’re getting something out of it besides money. They’re getting something.

SS: No, I know. It’s a beautiful thing, like people at that level too, it’s amazing.
AR: It is. It’s a challenge, and it’s a chance to do something really unique and I think what’s amazing is that now the group is developing. It really is a group where we have…people are starting to understand the language of the music so that it’s becoming freer and freer. We’re sounding more and more like ourselves, and people are understanding how to play improvisationally and how to be spontaneous composers in the context of what we’re doing and not just playing whatever, but playing towards the center of the feeling of the music and the functionality of what they need to do. And that’s amazing, and then I feel like NOW the community feeling is really expanding where, like I said, I’ve been back to Istanbul a couple times, I have an Orchestra there, I went to Naples a few times and I was in Denmark, I’m going back there a couple times. And then of course the group in California, in Los Angeles that was the original group and I went back there last October. Most of those people came and still played. I’m gonna start…in February I’m gonna start a new group…Organic Orchestra in Austin, Texas. In March I’m going to start an Organic Orchestra in Merida, in the Yucatan, and so I’m just going wherever, and also at the University of Illinois, I was there in October. So, I’m hoping that some of these groups are going to be ongoing like the New York one. We have this Facebook thing going on now, and trying to really connect, make this connection like around the world with different people who are dealing with these same materials. One of the exciting things that happens with the Organic Orchestra, I know in Los Angeles and in New York is that a lot of people meet from different backgrounds who never would have come together otherwise meet each other and make groups, other groups. I know Kaoru (Watanabe) and Tim (Keiper) and Matt (Kilmer) and…

SS: Yeah Chris. Chris Dingman, right?

AR: And Chris, right. Yeah Chris had played in the group for years. And then I remember in California I remember one of the cellists made a group with Brahim (Frigbane) and somebody else…you know, it’s on and on. So it’s a really great thing, that’s kind of an exciting thing too. So that’s part of the community aspect of it. But I think the real thing of the community is that it attracts people who want to learn who want to develop that are interested in musical elements themselves and in evolving and growing as artists. That’s the community. Also if you have a chances Stephen Haynes might have some good things to say about the community aspect of the Go Organic Orchestra too.

SS: Yeah, definitely. And I guess a lot of that stuff kind of goes back to the Experimental Band and all these organizations. Yeah, this stuff has been happening for a long time.

AR: Well, you know but nowadays to really have an opportunity to do something like that…and one of the important things that people overlook about the evolution of this music is that most of the transformations in the music came about with groups. Of course because of the way our culture is and the media works it’s always focused on
an individual. What I mean is: John Coltrane’s quartet wasn’t just Coltrane it was the quartet, Miles Davis’ Quintet, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, you know? They’re groups. And so what’s amazing to me and what’s really exciting about the Go Organic Orchestra is that we’re a group now. I mean, basically it’s the same folks so we’re getting deeper and deeper into not only the musical elements but sort of the attitude and spiritual, mystical dynamic of what we’re doing also. And I try when we get together to really talk about those things. I think that’s why we’re making major breakthroughs and the group sounds like… It doesn’t sound like anything else. It sounds like itself and it sounds like today. With all respect to the AACM of course and Charlie Parker, you know 50 years ago…there’s something else now. I’m trying to really reflect something about the rhythm and the feeling and the sound of now, of today, and bringing in what all the musicians are bringing to the table now. THESE musicians. And the other thing about the community aspect of the Organic Orchestra that I think is really incredible is first of all, it’s a multi-generational group that you rarely see. I’ll never forget, we did a concert in Los Angeles one year and Bennie Maupin was there, you were probably there. Maybe you were there, I don’t know…

SS: Yeah, I was there. And Austin was 16, man, yeah!

AR: He was 14 man, when he played piccolo! He was 14, you know. It was just like this incredible…So, that’s part of it too. And also the skill and experience level, that’s part of the community too. See, I was very influenced by this idea of Balinese gamelan. And one of the things in the Balinese gamelan, and you find it in Africa also and in other cultures. But, this thing of Balinese gamelan for example…every village in Bali has it’s gamelan, right? In that gamelan you can have the person who’s maybe not super duper musical or developed or whatever but that person can be in the group and hit the gong, the big gong that will “goong” every 32 bars. Then in the same group there’s the guy who’s like the super virtuosic, can play all the instruments, can play them backwards, you know, all that stuff and is composing for the group. But they’re in the same group together. And you find this in Africa sometimes too, you know where the young kids, there’s room for them to be in there.

SS: Yeah, people will clap…

AR: So, in the Organic Orchestra it’s not just about…all these musicians from different levels of experience, and background…I mean you have to have a certain basic facility but all these different levels and experience levels can all be in the same group together. And that’s part of the community too. That’s what’s exciting. That’s where everyone gets to share…the older musicians are sharing with the younger musicians or the less experienced musicians and then the less experienced musicians are getting the benefit of being around the elders. The people that have a lot of background in improvisation are sitting next to someone who may be an incredible virtuosic reader, but that person has never improvised before. When I did a residency
at the Palermo Conservatory in Sicily it was incredible. It was a whole full orchestra and these violin teachers were there and these guys were in their 70’s, man. These phenomenal…Paganini…you know, can play all that stuff but had never improvised before. So this was…but by the end of it they had a chance to improvise so that’s part of it also. That idea of community, of not being like… Professionalism…sometimes musicians make professionalism into a religion. That’s not what a religion is all about (laughs). So I’m really not into that too. Everybody gets to participate.

SS: And everyone’s learning together. No one knows the stuff before they go in.

AR: Right, so even if you’re a super experienced, killing improviser you still have to deal with what we’re doing. So that’s what I’m saying, the community comes not from like the most badass cats or the most high-priced players or famous players. It comes from people who have the deep desire and interest to be learning and developing and studying. That’s the community.

SS: So I guess on the more ethnomusicological and ethnographic side, can you talk a little bit about outside of the music how you go about fostering community? I know you have barbecues, you had a performance near your house. Can you talk a little bit about that?

AR: Yeah, well. You know, I just…I’m not sure, I mean talk about it in what kind of way?

SS: I don’t know, just some things, some other things that you do to build community outside of just the music. You’ll have people over to your house, it’s not just a community of musicians but people that hang out.

AR: Well that’s just part of it. The music is the center of something, of course and that’s what we all love and have the fascination with, but of course the humanity is really what’s important, and the feeling of sharing and connectedness is what it’s all about. So, I just always try and have everyone come over just to give thanks and show my appreciation and have a good time, to be together. I wish I could do it more but…actually I’d like to do it more….actually I live….I always feel like it’s slightly an imposition on people who have to come all the way out here (laughs) but I do it as much as I can. I feel like even the workshops we do are really about a community thing, ‘cause they’re clearly not always like “oh we’ve got the performances”, but they’re always workshops too.

SS: Yeah, they’re a little more informal.

AR: Yeah, but of course. Music brings people together. I mean, performing music together and developing music together…it’s a very…kind of a human sharing. That’s that sharing thing again, you know and very intimate kind of sharing that’s a beautiful thing to do. Sometimes as musicians, and like I said, when you’re
professionals people sometimes take that all for granted. But I think that’s all part of it also. And really that family vibe, you know. It’s like this feeling of family, it’s really wonderful, and that kind of connectedness…and I’ve never been really so much about the thing…professional…you know, my daughter, she performed in my Moving Pictures groups for years.

SS: Yeah, I have the record where she read that poem.

AR: Right. She was in my recording that I did of that opera also, The Dreamer. That was another thing that I kind of learned from Don. Don would always have his kids on his gigs too and I felt like that whole thing about this professionalism thing. I’m not talking about…of course they have to do things to survive and all this but then it becomes like a religion or something and it’s not about that. Music is about sharing and joy and fun and I never felt like that I need to be a musician with a capital “M”. It’s like, what we do and really about….’cause we all love the same thing, it’s about that we love something. And we want to be free to express ourselves, so you just try and create opportunities for that for each other and to be here to lift each other and inspire each other and to make the world more bright and joyous, and fascinating. And that’s what the whole sense of community is about. So, yeah, when I say community it’s really not this thing that we all live in the same community or even that we live in the same neighborhood even. The sense of community is really about a kind of shared values and interests, and liking of each other and liking of the music and that. That’s what that is.

SS: Yeah, I though it was really great that you did that gig in Maplewood, so your neighbors….you could really bring the music to your actual physical community too. I thought that was hip.

AR: Yeah, and that was just kind of a…yeah, that guy Jamie he has a series here and he was open to it, and so that was really fun. I do that actually at my yoga studio where I practice, I do a Winter Solstice and Summer Solstice concert there every year. It’s great to do that kind of thing. In some ways it would be kind of hipper if you lived….you know, where I grew up in Hyde Park in Chicago was a very hip, really interesting little community that way. And there were a lot of little arts centers, Hyde Park Art Center, and a lot of the AACM musicians used to play there and they used to come and play at my high school all the time and those kinds of things, so….Like, I said I live in kind of a physical community like that now, but the sense of community is more just in the shared interests.

SS: But, I mean that stuff’s important too. When I was growing up, Horace Tapscott played at my high school, he’d play around. It’s important to actually bring the music back to your community, whether it’s the community that you grew up in or live in….

AR: Right.
SS: It’s a beautiful thing.

AR: That’s what I’m saying, that whole thing about sharing, and that’s where it’s at. Listen, we’re so fortunate to have been turned on to this….to be involved in creative music and have creativity in our lives. And it’s really a reflection of a way of living and a way of looking at things and it really has this…something that you love…it really gives a certain kind of freedom to develop ourselves and express ourselves, and the love of that…so that’s the community because you want to share that with everybody. I mean to be able to participate in it, and I don’t even think about that…about the audience versus the performer and all that it’s just like we’re all participating in something together. That’s why I was sort of…like that time we were at Roulette when I had the audience kind of sitting with the orchestra, trying to experiment with a way…that it could be a different kind way for people to participate. That was something that blew my mind when I went to Africa that it was like…you know, the whole ritual about music. And it wasn’t about people came in and paid money and sat down in the audience and were entertained and then clapped at the end. It was like everybody was involved in some way. Not everybody was necessarily playing the drums…if I was at one of those cult ceremonies. But everybody was involved in some way. And that’s kind of a cool thing to do, I’m trying to find ways to make that sort of thing happen. And even get the audience….a couple times even in the workshops when you’ve been there when I’ve tried to get the audience to kind of…not in a corny way like “Everyone say ‘yo…”’, but some kind of way to really be involving them more. And it’s funny I have a lot success in other cultures, more than in New York (laughs). I don’t know if you ever went to any of those gigs at the Electric Lodge (in LA), a couple times I had everybody chanting and handclapping.

SS: Definitely in Venice you get more of that.

AR: Yeah, but I think people want it though, man.

SS: No, it’s funny even on that Cannonball Sextet album that Yusef’s on, he’s talking at the beginning about how New York audiences are too hip and the audience participation back in whatever that was…’62, ’63. It’s funny.

AR: Oh really (laughs), oh yeah. That is funny

SS: Yeah, people are just too hip….

AR: Well. But then again they kind of want it. It’s a different age now, Sean. There’s a vibe, people…there is that hipness thing about jazz, blah, blah, blah…but also, man people are kind of wanting to participate and they’re looking for something…I hate to use the word spiritual because it’s so misunderstood…but people need some
nourishment. It is spiritual…by spiritual, I don’t mean religion. Religion….I mean everybody’s born spiritual, we learn religion. But we’re born with some spiritual nature whether you believe in a soul or not, and the happiness is attached to that. And I think people are looking for experiences that nourish them that way and man, being able to participate in the creative event is like the best. We’re so lucky to be able to be doing that. It’s all about sharing it, I think.

SS: I guess on that tip, I was also just wondering. ‘Cause pretty much every performance that you play you put the cosmograms up and you also refer to the matrices as cosmograms. Can you just talk a little bit about the cosmograms and your influences for those.

AR: I’ve always been interested in I guess what you could call syntax in the music, and trying to open things for the musicians…you know, inspire everybody to think about things in different ways. So what I love about the matrices of course, and the cosmograms, you can look at the relationships in the intervals in a multiplicity of ways. So in Western notation where the E is following the C, you have to play the E. But in our case with the cosmograms you can move…you have a lot of choices of things…you can go backwards and forwards, up and down. But what’s beautiful about it is that when everybody is inside of the cosmograms or the matrices, that we’re all together. I mean, we’re in an area, we’re in an arena together. It’s not just all twelve tones all the time but we’re in a certain kind of area. Yusef and I used to talk about that. We would say that intervals have a ‘rasa’, they have a quality to them. And there’s only six intervals and combining those in different ways you get all these different kinds of colorations and emotional shadings. The cosmograms are different to me than graphic notation, where, people use graphic notation which kind of tells you what kind of gesture to play. I’m not interested…I want people to play their own gestures of their own phraseology and play themselves. So, when you’re looking at a triple diminished cosmogram and then Kenny Wessel is looking at a triple diminished cosmogram and Stephen Haynes is looking at it, and Graham Haynes is looking at it. Everyone is looking at that same material, but because of the way it’s set up for the multiplicities of syntax and…everyone’s going to play it their own way and bring their own aesthetic to it. And that’s really cool, so you’re projecting your ideas too. But of course you have to become facile with it. Just like if you’re going to play a 32 bar tune you have to know how to negotiate your way through it before you can express yourself on it. So now we’re at the place where the musicians are becoming understanding about what a clustonic is and how to move through it and symmetric hexatonic scales, triple diminished patterns and becoming facile with it they become free with it and we’re all having a shared language where everybody gets to say…speak in their own…have their own statements about it. But syntax, and again it’s about…back to this thing about syntax…backwards and forwards. I can’t speak to you backwards but we can play notes backwards, right? And then that has a different kind of meaning. So just trying to make it free…Again, it’s this both/and idea. You want as much freedom as possible and at the same time you want as much aesthetic
focus as possible. Those are two seemingly opposed things that are actually….in the Go Organic Orchestra, they’re really not. It’s like the holding of opposites. And that’s really crucial, that idea of as much freedom for the musicians and at the same time within a very particular kind of aesthetic focus.

SS: I think I’m just interested in your use of the word cosmogram and the pictures, the cosmograms that you display around the stage when we play...If there’s any ritual significance because you were talking about musical ritual and spirituality. So, I was just wondering if…what the significance of those were.

AR: You can look up matrix and cosmogram and I can send you really concise definitions. A cosmogram is something that’s a symbolic representation of a cosmology, you know? In our case, it’s a cosmology, it’s a collection of…it’s a way of looking at…it could be intervals in this particular case. Note combinations. So, but how I design them is usually intuitive in the sense that I’m looking at them…but also I’m looking for ways of making it practical so that the relationship between the intervals can be accessed by the musicians. But also, yeah there’s some kind of intuition of maybe just looking at something in a different way, inspiring the musicians in a different way and it’s off putting at first for somebody, like “whoa, wait a second, I’m not used to looking at my notes like that, I’m used to looking at dots on a staff. What is this?” So automatically it puts you in another kind of mindset where you’ve got to rethink, which is good. That’s always a good thing, right? to get everybody to think in another kind of way. The cosmograms that are hanging up are actually…I made 12 or 10 I think that were based upon... They were actually not things that we made the music from but they were my intuitive visual representations of some music that I had recorded already.

SS: Ok, so those are your own individual images that you created. They’re not…

AR: Yeah, right, exactly. They were things that I just made. And at first I made them really small for the cover…for the liner notes of the Both/And record one of those records that I made with the Moving Pictures. I mean, I gave them titles it wasn’t like Braxton…but they were just kind of like my feeling about what that music was all about. And then my friend Carlos, Carlos Niño, you know Carlos from L.A.? We produced some of the Go Organic concerts out there. He was like “Man, you should make those BIG. Those are incredible!” and so I did. So now whenever I get a chance for any gigs I do. Like, I had them at the Stone when I was there all week a couple months ago. I just bring ‘em to the gig and just create that atmosphere. It’s just part of creating an atmosphere. ‘Cause they have their vibration too, right? Visual things have their vibration. So, and a lot of those compositions that I played on that recording are the same compositions that we play with the orchestra, although in a very different way. So they’re kind of there…they have meaning for what we do too. They’re not just random, just something pretty to look at.
SS: That’s cool.

AR: Even if the audience…like there’s a painting, I think there’s one that I did from Dance Drama Part 3, right? Which is something we play a lot. Of course we always reinterpret it and deconstruct it in a different way but if that’s hanging there…you know, even if nobody needs to know that, but in some way that was how I channeled my feelings about that piece into a visual work and then that visual work is vibrating in the room when we’re playing it. So, maybe that has some kind of influence on the atmosphere of the conditions of that moment when we play, for us and for everybody listening, for everybody in the room.

SS: Yeah. No, that’s cool. I had no idea if those were like traditional Kongo cosmograms…but yeah, I didn’t know that you made those. That’s cool.

AR: Yeah, and you know some of them might be by chance, just because there’s only so many….it’s like when you see a circle, right? Everybody uses a circle, that’s going to be a Kongo cosmogram and it’s going to be…an Indian, right. A mandala. Maybe some of them are not unlike…I mean I’m sure some of them are because I recognize them. But they kind of came out of my own intuitive processing, and I’m sure I’ve looked at a lot of those things so maybe some of them look like something a person would recognize. But that’s fine too, that’s ok. But they were definitely just kind of like, I don’t know man I was just kind of listening to the music and drawing one day.

SS: No, no. It’s great. ‘Cause I always saw them and I wondered about ‘em and I also wondered if they were correlated to any of the matrices or anything but now I know that they’re based on the compositions…your intuitive drawings about them. That’s really cool.

AR: But you know, and that’s funny too because I was looking at one and one definitely has like 21 sections in it, you know? It was like 14 I think, and I was like “Damn how did that happen?”…14 little triangles in there and we were playing this piece in 14. Those things are sort of there and we…and you know listen we could play those too. Of course, people play graphic scores.

SS: Yeah, as graphic information.

AR: Yeah, but you could play the newspaper. I mean, I don’t know it’s kind of…maybe they’d be interesting to play, but right now it’s like…the cosmograms…more than graphic notation I’m really interested in getting everybody to be familiar with the language of these interval systems and thinking about it in a way…thinking about how we deal with the sound, intervals…and also what that can imply harmonically and coloristically and then with these rhythms. Of course, we have a lot, lot further to go with that. But the cool thing is that eventually…and I say
this in rehearsal sometimes and I know that people may ever not believe me. Eventually we’re not going to need the cosmograms, we’re not going to need the score and we’re not even going to need me to conduct. I mean, if we play enough it’s gonna get there. It really is and I can kind of see it. We would just start and everyone would know what to do. And we’re getting there, we’re getting there and that’s very cool.

SS: Then I can write a paper on “post-conducted improvisation”…

AR: Right, right exactly. What the next thing is going to be. But it’s a beautiful process man. That’s why I’m really about just the process of doing it and it’s pretty amazing. It is so great. I love doing the projects all over the world and introducing new people to it but it really is amazing what the New York ensemble, that we’ve really just gotten so deep into it now. Like I said, I never felt…I know everybody knows something special’s going on because you keep seeing the same people coming back.

SS: And great musicians.

AR: And great musicians and we haven’t made a nickel yet, you know what I mean? (Laughs) Not that I’m not trying to. I’m trying to get us more gigs, but you know it’s like not about that obviously.

SS: That last gig was beautiful with Yusef.

AR: Yeah, oh man that was really. I mean that gig was great on a number of levels. It was great to finally have an out of town gig. That was wonderful and I got to pay everyone halfway decent, that was wonderful. It was really fantastic that Yusef came. A lot of people who hadn’t met him got to meet him. Because a lot of these things about thinking about intervals that way and so on I learned from him. I mean, I do it my way. He’s always amazed at how the Organic Orchestra sounds, he’s always like “how did you do that (imitates Lateef)?”. He hears the music, he’s like “How did that happen? Wow, I’ve never heard anything like that.” He really loved it, but you know he’s been such a big inspiration so it was beautiful. You know, he’s the one that taught me about triple diminished, and hexatonic scales and clustonics and all these things. I mean I saw them all in the Messian book too, but that’s where I learned it.

SS: I was just saying that Yusef Lateef’s been a hero of mine since I was 14

AR: Yeah, of course. Yeah, I know. Of course, man. What a great…he was a great artist and a great, beautiful, fantastic person. A really special guy, yeah.

SS: I don’t want to take up too much of your time. The idea to put them in the magic squares, did that come from Schoenberg or Messian?
AR: The matrices. You know they’re not literal magic squares like Schoenberg or Webern used where they’re like 12 tones and all that and if you know…I’ve been doing them more and more different kinds of ways. But yeah I think that’s where I first probably saw them was reading something about Schoenberg and seeing that great…it’s such a great way to see…yeah forwards, backwards…you know forwards, retrograde, and inverted and inverted retrograde and that made a lot of sense. Then I started experimenting with other ways. It doesn’t have to be all the 12 tones and it doesn’t always have to be inverted. It can be one thing going across and another going down and that’s where the trial and error comes in. I have ideas about things and looking at different relationships. But Sean, one thing that’s important for me is that I love…I’m interested in always trying different processes but at the end I’m always a results oriented person. It has to sound fascinating and it has to work for the group. So I try these different ways and keep adapting the matrices and trying new ones or new ways of organizing them to see what works and what doesn’t. What does and what doesn’t sound that interesting. So that’s only the process too. So when we play I hear it back and hear how people can interpret it and what makes sense for them and what doesn’t and I change it accordingly, but I’m trying to not change it too much because I don’t want people to have to relearn from square one again. But the one’s that don’t work I try different things. They all work for different ways. And the important thing too is that they’re all different from each other. I mean, there’s only 12 tones that we use without the quarter tones, and then there’s also these 6 intervals. So, they all have to be really distinct from each other, and that’s important. So I’m always trying to refine them that way also. So, listen. You’re in L.A. We can have part two, I mean, maybe you want to digest this and then I’m happy to talk to you more and any other time, in person or on the phone.

SS: Ok, great. Thanks so much Adam. Thanks for sharing your time with me and that’s a lot of great material, so thanks a lot.