

ANTHONY BRAXTON

Standards (Brussels) 2006

*Invisible, as Music -
But Positive, as Sound -*

E. Dickinson, Poems

by Erika Dagnino
(Translation by Marco Bertoli)

POSITIONS FOR LISTENING.

In the proceedings of any art performance, the position of the listener/watcher (assuming she/he is unconditionally involved in the experience) does increment/intersecrete/compensate the position of the performing artist on a perceptive standpoint, without either of them losing their own individuality. Perception is here a spur to move over, to push the horizon farther; a mean to associate ideas, to prime all the senses. On the other hand, perception might come off - to a certain kind of listener, or in certain times of her/his life - as nothing but evidence of nothing being there beyond her/his own senses, her/his own self. What we are dealing with here is an actual frailty, as much unavoidable as it is hypothetical, where senses are, at once, vehicle and limit of transcendence, and transcendence is the very *shadow*, poetical and musical, inside the artwork and what the artwork hints at. Therefore, we are faced with different settings of perception, as much possible as never real, where the subject exceeds the sum of her/his own gestures and ends up reacting - being an interaction of fragments withholding an inexorable quantum of spirituality, a natural unity. If artist and audience are one in the form of subject, then we cannot rule out a whole and implicit range of undertones, overlapping and repeating.

In an old Irish folk tale, a sentry gets so absorbed in his task of watching to the effect that "his eyes narrowed and became pin-points, and he ceased to be a man and became an optic". That is, the person in its entirety is pared down to a perception, actually nothing more than *one* sense, a *total sense* which takes over both dimensions, psychic and physical, of the subject. Let's now try and apply this peculiar effect to the artistic process: to what extent does it command attention? Or else, in spite of it being a form of hypnosis which leads to empathy through detachment, appealing to intellectual as well as emotional faculties: might it allow for a sort of estrangement?



Granted, when the senses kick into the performance setting, they break the subject down into its immediate fruition/creation, and the subject, in turn, splinters in many micro-segments (as it were). Anyway, it is the inner recomposition of the work of art as a whole to allow for a global reassumption, beyond the very limits of disseminated feelings along with the body itself, but also as a combination of segments mutually subdivided and independents for the listener/watcher as well as for the performing musician. Let's delve further down into the musician's zone, considering a musical instrument whose sound emissions do not flow univocally. Contemporary American drummer Donald Robinson mused about the peculiar physical demand (be it in a live performance or in a recording session) of this instrument to its player: to disseminate her/himself all over its several parts. Is the artist ever overcome by a sense of dispersion of her/his body, of his/her limbs as though they were separated by the rest of his body, at the same time functioning in perfect autonomy? How is it possible to go back to a "global reassumption"? "All drummers have to practice what is known as 'independence': their aim is to create different rhythm patterns using different limbs, keeping their bodies centered nonetheless. The drummer succeeds when he doesn't lose track of the starting point, that is the point where the pattern or the idea first sprung. Improvisations proper often need to be cut down into segments and worked out in advance. Therefore, here is the question: where, when and why we use certain patterns, ideas or improvisations? To me, all this and then some is what makes playing drums so exciting"².

Let's reconsider for a minute the concept of *elsewhere*. Elsewhere is where music poses itself in relation to reality; but we can also imagine a journey to elsewhere, both as nature and as direction. The dimension of the journey may at times prove itself impossible to the subjectivity of some people. Think of Samuel Beckett's novel *Mercier et Camier*: writing is the only elsewhere, the only connection, and not in a geographical sense. It is rather like drawing circles around oneself and one's journey – but, philosophy and the old diatribe *realism vs idealism* aside, we wonder if the negotiation of senses eventually is the only possible journey for both musician and listener. Might music, whose semiotic action passes through our senses, take us *elsewhere*, its nature hinting spontaneously to another dimension?

According to Swedish composer-saxophonist-flutist Biggi Vinkeloe, senses trigger a synaesthesia: "You can use any sense for listening; you can try and hear, feel, smell music and let the sound speak to your imagination... We can also open up our mind and discover 'new territories': music can be very visionary, too"³. And again, talking about matching different sense in performance: "I remember events, colors, sounds, movements, words, emotions and trying to turn them in to tones, intervals, melodies, sound, rhythm patterns"⁴.

REAL SPACE AND DISLOCATION.

The aesthetic signature of my music system is "navigation through form".

A. Braxton, *Thoughts*

The theme I choose to start from must be powerful but simple and bright in its own mysterious way.

Then I proceed to inhabit it as if my home.

A home with rooms and windows and flights of stairs and dark corners and sudden flashes of light.

G. Mimmo, *About Improvisation*

While and after listening to these 6 CDs by the Anthony Braxton Quartet, at the same time summoning the antithesis between dislocation and architecture, we find ourselves considering the matching of space and dislocation, movement and architecture, concurring on a certain level. Architecture evokes something firm and solid; a meaningful construction, both literally and metaphorically, possibly fantastic but never arbitrary (not to mention the instance of moveable architectures, continuously reshaping themselves as if built in smoke). How can we settle the antithesis of dislocation and architecture, boiling it down to the sign/shape > sound/shape association?

Take, for instance, *Brussels 2006*, where the sound object is concerned with an improvisational act used as compositional device: "Improvisation demands creative responsibility: the sense of form, knowledge or ability to spot contents susceptible of development; and social responsibility, in due respect for the shared musical and gestual space. Given these conditions, improvisation can turn into a composition of sort"⁶. Here, musicians and audience, each one on their own terms (let's not forget it), are crossing the common territory of standards, the buzz, lines, surfaces of an almost worn-out songbook, jazz repertoire *par excellence*, at once a homecoming and a continuity *re* the African-American roots and their aesthetical canon⁷.

This much said, "standards", as the seat of tradition and sharing, show the form and texture of a *space* which is room, house, home; whose lines, surfaces, volumes, shadows, reflections hold no secrets because of a long-standing habit. An ambient for playing and to play with in any possible fashion, be it known or unknown.

This house (or room), confined and confining, opens onto the outer world. An expansion of reality into constraint, it makes itself available to intrusions. Stillness inside and *otherness* outside (and forcing its way in), achieve a balance, a creative contribution though this dialectic *in/out*, which is only apparent. The house-room represents a space as more protective as it is familiar, but can easily turn into a trap, triggering claustrophobia anytime something feels about to happen, prompting for a reaction. Now, music doesn't elicit quite the same kind of response, while intrinsically referring to the *other*, for instance to flight. Finding oneself confined into a closed space may feel uneasy, "Loathing your room's walls / Red poppies running away in your eyes"⁸, even more so if what is best known – the place – can at once expand and coerce. Coercion is what gives expansion its momentum and allows for unease to be turned into an affirmative move, tapping into unexpected resources, more problems, solution, or at least attempt at solution, to move further from the state of things; an action imagined and nonetheless real, with all the reality of the domain of perception.

The standards have space and volumes long practiced and familiar. But various are the ways we can inhabit them: we can cut corners and push through passages, slide along walls, summoning people from the outside in, maybe having them jump over a wall or break into a window or knock down a door.

Or, as if in a labyrinth (not unknown yet), a place of many openings and countless open doors: "Come on in"⁹; "There is not one lock"¹⁰. A labyrinth which is not an unescapable maze, but a matrix of non-closures. Or yet, an everchanging, narrow room; everchanging the way perception is bound to be, even within its limited number of walls and viable passages. Narrow space in constant expansion along a forced direction, reminding the different and changing perceptive position of a musician called up to action. What is small becomes large. Tight corners acting on the multifaceted amplification of (re)action¹¹. A space tridimensional, whose depth never flattens, a hall of mirrors, itself a mirror or else a tridimensional shadow of more walls, more corners, more floors, "dark reflections in dull mirrors"¹².

Entering the space, playing the space, playing a role within the space. Room. *Playing the room*: this is how Anthony Braxton spurs his musicians towards the interaction of music and perception.

The fixed place (?) becomes a passage, pointing to something else, reformulating that everlasting of questions, the one about the physical element belonging to the habitat of the perceptive data; of music, this plastic sound-shape. We take here the liberty to rationally surmise (and intuitively feel) that the container's and the content's edges move like solids within a liquid zone, or take on a kind of liquid substance inside their own solid constitution.

A spurious solidity; egg yolk, albumen getting stringy in touching a surface.

A POSSIBLE ANTROPOGONY?

Emerging from the source, the physical reality in its optical and auditive dimensions (form, but sign too, as such going straight for the eyes; a sort of outer *facies*, external connotation appearing inside and through the sound) develops, undergoes, manifests its own 'ornament'. Furthermore, form has a natural understanding of movement notwithstanding its gravitation to a center which saves a place for the antithesis of movement and quiet. An ongoing state of flux stands, condition and springboard for a further move toward his other potential, even when revisiting old pathways, familiar zones.

Sign and sight appear unarguably to be structural components in the realm of navigation, too. Navigation – as a sequence of events unfolding to the seer – is a journey at once of sense and soul. The navigators can explore any inner movement, be it forward or backward, within themselves; they can claim those movements their own by the concrete aid of senses. This aid means isolation but not as in lack of direction or communication. Rather, isolation as hub of and passage to further interconnections under the unerring action of *sight*. Sight being informed by subjectivity, as such individual; sight being informed by multiplicity, as such plural; an analytical-conservative power aimed to transfer and transmute shapes, generating a totality and belonging to it as sum of parts; continuity of successions in existence and co-existence. A community, part of a superior cosmic unity, working inside a changing and moving system (organized, even), where single entities expand and shrink, redefining themselves by way of visible attributes, each one within its own profile; physical shapes, visible as they appear in Hildegard von Bingen's words¹³. Individual, plural activity. Collectivity and permeation where individual action sticks mainly to the perceptive movement whose nature shares both worlds; individual answer to a single message, individual answer to a collective one.

What follows this physiological procedure is the filtered reaction-(re)emission of the input data; a channeling, making allowance for an orphic element (juxtaposed to the creative musical element), an antecedent of an undenied for of reflexive, rational elaboration. In this dialectic of emission/absorption/(re)emission is the representation of its very fluxes laid out as networks and nodes, pathways and passages. Cosmic unity (sort of a third unique body, vibrating and echoing water, archetypal conduit of visibility and vision, air) includes and authorizes occupation in form of body and motion – let's not forget that feeling is, or leads to, acting spontaneously – , an inherently structuring, articulating, confirming discretion, unavoidable and simultaneous; poetic outlook and organizer; cue of many hearing referring to many visions. Coexistence as a sort of reflection and refraction within the third volumetric body, without loss of one's own untangible singleness; display and animation of one's own unique existence and perception: compenetrated, shared, namely crucial.

The concept of a "dream state" where the friendly experience moves inside of a world of sound/form to arrive at different destinations¹⁴.

¹ James Stephens, "But the eagle-eyed watcher watched until his eyes narrowed and became pin-points, and he ceased to be a man and became an optic." The Carl of the Drab Coat, "Fairy Tales".
www.surlalunefairytales.com/books/ireland/stephens/carlcoat.html

² Donald Robinson, Interview with E. Dagnino, Quaderni d'Altri Tempi, l'immaginazione e il potere.
www.quadernidaltretempi.eu Italy, n.16 September/October 2008.

³ Biggi Vinkeloe, Interview with E. Dagnino, Fertilitäts, Italy, Spring 2008.

⁴ B. Vinkeloe, ibidem.

⁵ For more details, see. Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation, Vol 4, No 1 (2008)
"What I Call a Sound": Anthony Braxton's Synaesthetic Ideal and Notations for Improvisers, Graham Lock.
See also www.restructures.net/index.html

⁶ Stefano Pastor, Interview with M. Maiocco, Quaderni d'Altri Tempi, l'immaginazione e il potere.
www.quadernidaltretempi.eu Italy, n.15 July/August 2008.

⁷ Braxton has been rewriting the great American songbook since the early Seventies (besides the two volumes In the Tradition, 1974, other standards can be found in several records from the mid-Seventies: see for instance *All The Things You Are* in Town Hall 1972, in Donna Lee (1975) along with *Donna Lee*, and in Dave Brubecks' *All the Things We Are* del 1974. In Trio And Duet (1975) *The Song Is You, Embraceable You e You Go To My Head*). In the Eighties the word "standard" begin to appear in titles: *Seven Standards* (1985), Vol. I; *Seven Standards* (1985), Vol. II; *9 Standards* (Quartet) 1993 ; *Solo Piano* (Standards) 1995; *Seven Standards* 1995; *Six Standards* (Quintet) 1996; *8 Standards* (Wesleyan) 2001; *23 Standards* (Quartet) 2003; *20 Standards* (Quartet) 2003.

For more details, recording dates, labels, see the complete discography: www.restructures.net/index.html

⁸ Sandro Penna, "Non ami le pareti della tua / stanza. Hai negli occhi i papaveri rossi / in fuga. Il sorriso del giovane / acrobata. Il trionfo / di lui o della tua / vita quando torna primavera". *Poesie*, Garzanti, Italy, Milan, 1997.

⁹ J. L. Borges, "Es verdad que no salgo de mi casa, pero también es verdad que sus puertas (cuyo número es infinito) están abiertas día y noche a los hombres y también a los animales. Que entre el que quiera. ...") El original dice catorce, pero sobran motivos para inferir que en boca de Asterión, ese adjetivo numeral vale por infinitos.", *La Casa De Asterión, "El Aleph"*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2003.

¹⁰ J. L. Borges, "¿Repetiré que no hay una puerta cerrada, añadiré que no hay una cerradura?", ibidem

¹¹ Steve Lacy, "Small has become large. Now when you leave this space and go back to the rest of the horn, everything has changed, and your perceptions have altered." *Tight Corners, "Findings"*, CMPA / OUTRE MESURE, France, Paris, 1994.

¹² E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Vielleicht wirst du, o mein Leser! dann glauben, daß nichts wunderlicher und toller sei, als das wirkliche Leben und daß dieses der Dichter doch nur, wie in eines matt geschliffnen Spiegels dunklem Widerschein, auffassen könne.", *Der Sandmann*, guttenberg.spiegel.de/?id=5&id=604&kapitel=1#gb_found; "Projekt Gutenberg-DE".

¹³ Hildegard von Bingen, *Liber Divinorum Operum*, Mondadori, Milan, Italy, 2003.

¹⁴ Anthony Braxton, *Thoughts*.

A writer and a poet, Erika Dagnino has contributed to literary and music magazines *FertiliInfe*, *Il Fiacre N.9*, *Quaderni d'Altri Tempi*, *SuonoSonda* and the website *musicboom.it*.

She also worked with Italian avantgarde violin player Stefano Pastor, with English poet and musician Anthony Barnett, with American poet Mark Weber, and with various visual artists. Her poetry, fiction and drama appeared on various anthologies and have won her several awards.

Among her latest works, *Ru e Fro* (novella), *Cycles* (multimedia, with S. Pastor) and *Racconti dell'ombra* (short stories).

