Anthony Braxton's Language Music

Nate Wooley

Before delving into the multivalent current state of Anthony Braxton's musical system, it is essential to have a cursory understanding of Language Music. It becomes clear to any performer of his music, that this system is the base on which he places the superstructure of *Ghost Trance Music*, *ZIM Music*, *Trillium*, etc. to create the performances and recordings that we, as listeners, lump under the somewhat imprecise moniker of composition.

In essence, Language Music consists of a list of 12 "types" or descriptions of broad musical parameters, which the performer uses to limit their improvisation. I say limit with a grain of salt. It may be more accurate to call them starting points or springboards to musical activity. If taken individually, this system provides a structural framework for improvising—breaking the stream-of-consciousness trope that can weigh down free music. Language Music is, perhaps, best known as the basis for Braxton's sophomore effort, *For Alto*. In it, a series of solo compositions are presented based roughly on the different language types, and it is a fascinating document of the concept, while also being an enjoyably rigorous example of his mastery of the alto saxophone, a limitation that is found usually in solo work, as opposed to his performances with ensembles that typically feature a small armory of woodwinds. In each piece, Braxton very clearly, almost obsessively, works with one language type, exhausting its permutations finally before moving to the next.

When used collectively, the language types may be called upon and manipulated in real time by the conductor or conductors of the ensemble or by the performers within the ensemble, by simply holding up the corresponding number of fingers to cue players into that language type. For example, a trombonist looks at a violinist across the ensemble, holds up three fingers and gives a downbeat. The two instrumentalists then begin improvising using "trill logics," basically, using trills as their basic musical material. This use adds another dimension to the workings of Language Music by allowing for the complexity of multiple layers of dissimilar material to be inserted or deleted in real time across the ensemble; adding to the aural effect, prevalent in Braxton's music, of it existing more as a three-dimensional organism than an architectural structure.

Before going further, it makes sense to make a connection between the concepts of the Language Music, its semiology, and the way a performer may choose to engage with a specific language type. Thirteen musicians, all of whom are deeply engaged in the current period of Braxton's music have taken time out to record short solo pieces, limiting themselves to one language type. It is with great gratitude to them, as well as Nick Lloyd of Firehouse 12 Records and audio engineer Greg DiCrosta, that we're able to present these streaming examples, as well as the complete solos in a downloadable "album" format on the following page (all proceeds from downloads going to help *Sound American* and *Tri-Centric Foundation* "keep the lights on".)

| 00:21 | 00:49 | language music 1: long tones-performed by Matt Welch |

| 00:39 | 00:41 | language music II: accented long tones-performed by Aaron Siegel |

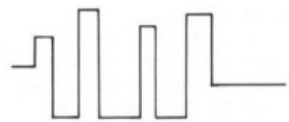| 00:05 | 00:32 | language music III: trills-performed by Chris McIntyre |

00:08   00:32   language music IV: staccato formings-performed by Anne Rhodes

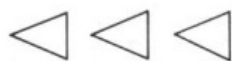00:10   00:31   language music V: intervallic formings-performed by Ingrid Laubrock

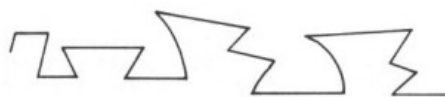00:03   01:42   language music VI: multiphonics-performed by Katherine Young

00:05   00:23   language music VII: short attacks-performed by Adam Matlock

00:05   00:43   language music VIII: angular attacks-performed by Joe Morris

00:02   00:42   language music IX: legato formings-performed by Tomeka Reid

00:00   00:42   language music X: diatonic formings-performed by Jason Kao Hwang

00:00   00:45   language music XI: gradiant formings-performed by Carl Testa

00:00   02:47   language music XII: sub-identity formings-performed by James Fei

00:00   01:44   Combinatory Logics: trillium and language music-performed by Kyoko Kitamura

While many of these language types are straight forward calls to action, some may require explanation for the fan or musician who hasn't been directly involved in the performance of Braxton's music. Chief among those are language types 11 and 12, which were later additions to the initial system and directly or indirectly make reference to other material that may be employed in a performance. Language type 11 or gradient formings refers to the change of one parameter in the performance of material. For example, the performer may be playing a *Ghost Trance Music* composition, which is then subjected to gradient formings. The performer then may perform the stream of eighth notes while accelerating and decelerating in accordance to signals from the conductor or on their own. The same logic may be used within the parameters of register, volume, or timbre as well. In our example page, bassist Carl Testa, does a masterful job of representing this language type in combination with language type three: trills.

Language type 12, or sub-identity formings is murkier yet. It signals a move from one composition to another. I tend to think of it as a portal through which the performer moves into a completely separate pre-existing compositional world. To use a non-Braxtonian example, it would be like having a hand signal in an orchestra that allowed some members to move to *The Firebird Suite* as the rest continued playing the slow movement of *Petrushka*. The presence of definite compositional material is audible, but the music becomes exponentially more complex.

One other way of viewing the Language Music is termed combinatory logics. Unlike gradient and sub-identity formings, the term combinatory logic is clear in its self description. You take multiple language types and combine them. Simple as that, but this allows the performer to move from type to type, creating a much deeper piece of music that shifts perspectives and musical material. In the special download of full solo pieces made for this issue, many of the performers begin with their assigned language type and then apply combinatory logics to round out the improvisation. And, Kyoko Kitamura gives a phenomenal reading of combinatory logic in our examples, which highlights the structural component of Language Music as it applies to the rest of Braxton's compositional systems.

The number 12 is often found in the structure of Braxton's music. There are many recordings of his Twelve+One Tet for example and the *Trillium* operas have 12 characters. This corresponds in many ways to the 12 language types that make up his Language Music. Each musical system that exists within the grand musical language is said to exist in the "house" of one of the language types, taking on its conceptual, musical, and metaphysical being as its source

Throughout the rest of this issue, and in articles coming in the next weeks on *Pine Top Aerial Music*, etc., the main focus is to maintain this concept of Language Music as the base structure on which everything else rests. While it is not monolithic or immovable, it can be thought of as a song form of a sort—in the same way that a jazz musician may use the tradition of a Tin Pan Alley tune to channel their music. Language Music can be thought of, very simplistically, as a way of channeling the artist's creativity through its specific contextual lens, which allows the result to maintain its inherent Braxton-ness.