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The Game Pieces

JOHN ZORN

Since the early 1970s, composer and saxophonist John Zorn (1953–) has been the ringleader of New York's "downtown" music scene. He has led a range of groups (among them Naked City, Masada, Painkiller, Spy vs. Spy, and News for Lulu) and has composed chamber music, film soundtracks, and electronic music. Zorn's music is relentlessly genre-crossing and referential, combining (often in a single piece) elements of free jazz, punk rock, cartoon music, cool jazz, klezmer, Heavy Metal, and avant-garde composition. Here, Zorn introduces his famous "game pieces," which consciously draw upon the "open" techniques of John Cage, Earle Brown, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Cornelius Cardew, and others to shape the performances of improvising musicians. After an initial introduction, Zorn discusses this compositional practice with Christoph Cox.

From 1974 until about 1990, a large part of my compositional time was spent devising music for improvisers, what I now call "game pieces."[1] Tying together loose strings left dangling by composers such as Earle Brown, Cornelius Cardew, John Cage, and Stockhausen, I began to work out complex systems harnessing improvisers in flexible compositional formats. Working on a blackboard, ideas would come slowly, often staying on the board for months before all the various elements seemed balanced and complete. I tried to make every piece a world in itself, and often they took over a year to write. These pieces have somehow lasted, taking on a life of their own and they are now used in schools, improvisation workshops and are performed monthly from Tokyo to Berlin, San Francisco to Sydney. They have become my most often played compositions, but there continues to be a mystery about them, an enigma.

Many people have wondered why I have deliberately chosen not to publish (or even write down) the rules to these pieces, preferring to explain them myself in rehearsal as part of an oral tradition. The reasons are many. There is a lot more to these pieces than just the rules. For one thing, the choosing of players has always been a crucial part of the performance process and the art of choosing a band and

being a good band leader is not something you can impart on paper in a written preface to the score. Although these pieces were written in the abstract and can be done essentially by anyone, they were not written in a vacuum. They were originally created to harness the personal languages of a new school of improvisers working together in the East Side of Lower Manhattan. Players that I worked with closely and often.

To do this music properly is to do it with a community of like-minded musicians and an understanding of tactics, personal dynamics, instrumentation, aesthetics and group chemistry. It's about cooperation, interaction, checks and balances, tension and release and many more elusive, ineffable things both musical and social. First and foremost it's about playing good music. I have no problem with people doing this music (after all, music is meant to be played), as long as they realize the difference between amateur/outlaw versions (without my presence) and the more "authorized" versions I organize myself. These pieces can go where anyone wants to take them, and since they live on in the underground as part of an oral/aural tradition, this becomes one of the dangers as well as part of the fun. Nevertheless there can be no such thing as a definitive version and I'm sometimes pleasantly surprised by tapes of renegade versions I receive in the mail [. . . .]

How do you situate your game pieces in relation to the tradition of "open works" pioneered in the 1950s by John Cage, Earle Brown, Karlheinz Stockhausen and others?

The exciting thing about that music was its flexibility in terms of performance. It could be different every time. One of the problems that both Earle Brown and John Cage came up against was a certain friction and resistance from classical players to work in those kinds of open contexts. Cage perversely thrived on that friction between what *he* wanted and what *they* didn't want to do. There was a drama about it. And he could kind of sit there and laugh about it in some Zen-like fashion. I don't think Earle had that same kind of sense of humor. I think he was a little more tormented by it.

He also had a background in jazz . . .

. . . which Cage clearly did not. For many years, Cage was very resistant to improvisation. It's interesting that the word "improvisation" was very dirty in the classical music world of the 60s. It was almost as if it was an insult to the composer if someone used the word "improvisation." I can understand why composers at that time felt compelled to justify their work with intellectual systems and words such as "aleatoric," "intuitive," and "indeterminate." They were trying to justify to the critical community that this was not "improvised music"—music that the performers were making up as they went along—but music that was truly envisioned by a musical mind and then passed down to the performers.

My particular thrust in writing the game pieces—as with all of my music—is to engage, inspire, and enthrall a group of musicians into doing music that *they* are excited about, so that that excitement is passed on to the audience. It's crucial that there's a close relationship and a dialogue between performer and composer. For me, this is the most crucial relation in music-making. And I think that's why Stockhausen, Kagel, Cage, Partch and eventually even Reich and Glass formed their own ensembles—steady musicians who continued to work with their music, and

who understood what they wanted. There's a lot more to music than what's on the page, in *any* music of *any* kind. What's on the page is just a sketch. You get as close as you can. But you *want* to leave things open to performers in any music, or you end up with something that's just so dictatorial. Music that's overmarked is often more than daunting to the performer. It becomes impossible. You don't want a machine to be playing this stuff. It's got to be *human*. You want to give the option for the musicians on the stage to be able to express their creativity in some kind of way, whether it's in fingering or phrasing or dynamics or whatever. I feel very strongly that there is an interaction between what's on the page and the musician that's playing it, and that there should be a level of creativity involved.

When Brown wrote his open compositions, he was trying to get classical musicians to improvise, to contribute to the shaping of the piece. You, however, are writing for a group of skilled improvisers.

Exactly. When Stockhausen and Cage created their own units, they were initiating a very eloquent dialogue between composer and performer. I took the whole process one step further, in terms of "the open work," in that, when I write music, I write music for performers, for a community of players of which I, too, am a member.

Do you write music for *specific* performers?

Well, not specific players in the way that Duke Ellington wrote for Johnny Hodges. I write for specific *kinds* of musicians that have specific *kinds* of skills. It's a community. But the critical thing is really the interaction between what's on the page and the musicians who are playing it. The page has got to inspire the musician. They've got to look at the page and say: "Wow, this is amazing. This is fucking difficult. But I can do it, and it's worth the time it takes to learn it." What you get on the stage, then, is not just someone reading music but a *drama*. You get a *human* drama. You get *life itself*, which is what the ultimate musical experience is: it's life. Musicians relating to each other, through music.

In my case, the first musicians that I became involved with were musicians that very much loved to improvise. They were musicians that were excited by the work of Stockhausen and Cage and Earle Brown. They were also excited by the work of Albert Ayler, Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith and Ornette Coleman. They were excited by the work of film soundtrack composers like Bernard Hermann and Jerry Goldsmith. They were also excited by World Music from Bali, Africa and Japan . . . . It was the recording explosion. We were the generation that benefited from that. And we looked for like-minded musicians to work with.

When I picked up the saxophone, I was not trying to put myself into a "jazz" context but into a context where I could work down and dirty with other musicians, workshopping, improvising, talking about ideas—*that* was what the "downtown" scene was all about. The old-fashioned concept of the ivory tower composer coming in with a book of compositions and then passing the tablets down from Mount Sinai did not work in that world. I knew that. I had no right to bring my compositions in unless I understood what was going on and could devise something that could not be a result of pure improvisation, something that could only happen in a context that I had created . . . something new, something different, and, of course, something that they would want to play. That meant it had to be both challenging

and fun. If it was too simple, the players would get bored. If it was too complicated, they would get lost. It was very much a matter of balance. It was also important to me to get improvisers to focus on making each moment something special. In a sense, these early lessons in composing for improvisers defined my entire compositional style. I always write from the perspective of a player. I want to excite the performer and have that excitement passed on to the listener, and I want each moment of each piece I write to be something special.

How do the game pieces instantiate and foster these ideals?

The game pieces came about from being an improviser and working with improvisers. I learned very early that it is not very exciting for an improviser to be told what to play, especially when what you can make up yourself is more interesting than what's been written for you to play. I wanted to find something to harness the personal languages that the improvisers had developed on their own, languages that were so idiosyncratic as to be almost unnotateable (to write it down would be to ruin it). The answer for me was to deal with *form*, not with *content*, with *relationships*, not with *sound*. Instructions in these early game pieces do not have musicians on the stage relating to *sound*. They have musicians on the stage relating to *each other*. The improvisers on the stage were *themselves* the sound.

I worked it out slowly. At first, each new piece focused on different areas of improvisation that I thought were critical. The *Lacrosse* piece from 1976 is about concentrating ideas in short statements (sound events), as a way of stopping people from just closing their eyes and blowing, going on and on with the same idea. With the piece *Pool* (1979), a prompter was introduced who initiated radical changes of information by cued downbeats. *Track and Field* (1981) added open game systems: trading, duos, etc. This kind of "game" idea was also used by Cardew and Pauline Oliveros. But for them a single idea would constitute the whole piece, a kind of Fluxus event that would say "look at any player in the group and play a duo with them." That might be the whole piece. I took that *kind* of idea and incorporated it into a larger context where it was just one of maybe 30 ideas that could be used at any time, cued by members of the group. There was always a critical moment in rehearsal, about half way through, where the performers began to crack up, laughing partly in exhilaration, partly in exasperation over rules that were right on the edge of impossibility. It was at these moments that I knew the piece was going to be a success. I tried to create a context where anything could happen at any moment, and everybody had equal control. It was the players themselves who were making the decisions. If there was something you wanted to have happen, you could make it happen. And so the pieces slowly evolved into complex on-and-off systems, dealing only with *when* musicians play and *with whom*. Musicians relating to musicians.

These sorts of ideas were also used by Stockhausen, for example, in *Plus-Minus* (1963) or *Kurzwellen* (1968). Instructions such as "play higher than the sound you're hearing on the radio, play lower than the sound, imitate the sound" were very open in a sense, but still related to sound, and were still tied to a timeline. Even in Earle Brown's music you were presented with a timeline. There would be a series of events that could happen in any order, but, within each event, it was *all written*. There always seemed to be information that needed to be completed for the piece to be finished. Similarly, my early game pieces often included long

lists of player permutations. *Klarina* (1974) is a complex list of all the possible combinations of three players who perform on three different instruments each. *Archery* (1979) included a series of all the possible solo, duo, and trio combinations for 12 players, which ended up being 200-some odd combinations; and you had to complete them all to finish the piece! Eventually I saw this as a bit restrictive, and I eliminated the timeline, so that the players could end the piece at any time. What remained were scores that did not refer to *sound* or *time*—two parameters traditionally inseparable from the art of music—but were a complex set of rules that, in a sense, turned players on and off like toggle switches to such a complicated degree that it didn't really matter what the content was. The music could go just about anywhere. The piece was still itself. Game pieces can sound like anything and last any length depending on the players and the moment, but they always somehow retain their own identity, the way baseball differs from croquet.

Over the years, the systems became more flexible, more varied. Post-*Cobra* (1984) game pieces began to give options to the players in terms of determining content, through the use of modifiers, which specified different parameters of sound. Each of these twists and wrinkles were devised through practicum. By seeing how players responded to various cues and situations in performance, I could come up with new ideas and situations that were unique and exciting to play. Although elements of the game pieces repeat from piece to piece, they were always contextualized and recontextualized in new ways within each piece. Each piece is a different world, and indeed, it is a mistake to play *Cobra* like it was *Archery*, or *Ruan Lingyu* (1987) like it was *Xu Feng* (1985).

In these later compositions, players are asked to relate more and more to sound in spontaneously constructing pieces. Abstract parameters like high, low, loud or quiet (in *Xu Feng*) were later joined (in *Bezique* [1989]) by specific genres like, blues, soundtrack, mood, classical, and jazz as moments that could be called upon by any player at any time, orchestrated spontaneously and cued at the prompter's downbeat. It is interesting to see the progression. In *Bezique*, each player in the group has a chance to completely organize an ordering of sound events—to "compose" a piece themselves. When each player has completed their successive piece, the performance is over. We have come full circle here, with a triumphant return to both the timeline and the world of sound. Perhaps it is fitting that *Bezique*, which consists almost entirely of sound modifiers, is one of my last explorations of the game piece medium, as in it, improvisers have themselves become composers.

NOTES

1. [*Baseball* (1976), *Lacrosse* (1976), *Dominoes* (1977), *Curling* (1977), *Golf* (1977), *Hockey* (1978), *Cricket* (1978), *Fencing* (1978), *Pool* (1979), *Archery* (1979), *Tennis* (1979), *Track and Field* (1980), *Jai Alai* (1980), *Goi* (1981), *Croquet* (1981), *Locus Solus* (1982), *Sebastopol* (1983), *Rugby* (1983), *Cobra* (1984), *Xu Feng* (1985), *Hu Die* (1986), *Ruan Lingyu* (1987), *Hwang Chin-ee* (1988), *Bezique* (1989), *Que Tran* (1990)—Eds.]

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Introduction to Catalog of Works

ANTHONY BRAXTON

Composer, reed player, and musical philosopher Anthony Braxton (1945–) came to prominence in the 1960s as a key member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective of Chicago musicians dedicated to African-American avant garde music. The AACM's members came out of the "jazz" tradition, but most rejected the term "jazz" in favor of the terms "creative music" or "great black music." Braxton is often associated with "free jazz"; yet he has always looked for ways to restrain the anarchy of free jazz by way of various compositional procedures. His work is influenced equally by jazz history and by the compositional methods of Cage, Brown, and Stockhausen. Since the late 1960s, Braxton's composition titles have consisted of abstract diagrams and number-letter combinations, reflecting his joint interests in graphic composition and esoteric spiritual traditions. Each of Braxton's compositions (which now number more than 300) provides a set of open structures and parameters for collective improvisation. In the mid-1980s, he began "collaging" his compositions, embedding one composition in another and calling upon performers to play different compositions simultaneously—a technique pioneered by Cage. In this piece, Braxton presents his conception of musical collage and simultaneity, and the holistic worldview from which it springs.

The body of "musics" that make up this Catalog of Works represent the "best I could do" when confronted with the incredible gifts of beauty that the Masters have given us in the phenomenon we call music. I perceive this effort as an evolving MULTI-LOGIC sound universe that demonstrates sonic unification on three primary planes of perception dynamics—abstract realization, concrete realization and intuitive realization. All of these matters are part of the wonderful world of sound wonder and beauty—I am so grateful for music and the "act of thinking about music/feeling." Life on earth would be impossible without music—our species could not exist without love and compassion. All of these matters are related.