

## Graphic Notation

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In theorizing how the socio-political realities of improvised music act as a model for the potential reorganization of human communities, critics and scholars often overlook the need to consider the myriad ways in which these potentials are first realized *in the music itself*. This is not to suggest that existing work is avoiding this task; instead it is meant to call further attention to the fact that there exists “a rich and relatively underexplored world in which the startling range of musical practices associated with improvisation connects with an equally compelling and demanding range of social practices associated with improvised music” (Fischlin and Heble, 19). Implicit in this statement is the necessity for both musical *and* social practices to be explored, an exploration which will allow for the relationships between them to be better understood by all those involved in creating, experiencing, and theorizing the social potentials of improvised musics—whether musicians, academics, students, teachers, or other members of the public.

One of the most exciting and best-known ways that improvised music has helped to act as a method of re-envisioning social organization is through the use of graphic notation and open systems of musical composition<sup>1</sup>. Open systems and graphic notation are methods of musical composition and expression that allow for a range of individuals, often from radically different musical and cultural backgrounds, to create music together regardless of perceived skill level or musical knowledge. By

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<sup>1</sup> Theresa Sauer’s discussion of graphic notation helps to define the term. She writes, “in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the post-atomic age, new notational forms began to emerge, and composers were challenging the idea of the score.” She observes that the “many fascinating philosophies” motivating various composers’ use of graphic notation “result in an amazing variety of scores and notational styles. Not only do they look different from the scores of traditional Western notation, but they are also performed differently with different mindsets, different structures, or even different sounds.” (10)

‘open work’ and ‘open system,’ I refer to a term often attributed to novelist and cultural theorist

Umberto Eco, who writes that open works are compositions characterized by:

the considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he [sic] chooses to play the work. Thus he is not merely free to interpret the composer’s instructions following his own discretion [...] but he must impose his judgment on the form of the piece, as when he decides how long to hold a note or in what order to group the sounds: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation (167).

Significant and widely varying contributions to the open work concept have been made by a diverse range of composers and performers that include Pauline Oliveros, Anthony Braxton, John Cage, John Zorn, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Butch Morris, and George E. Lewis (and that is to name only a few!); further investigation of graphic scores has been done by Canadian composers such as Jesse Stewart, Lori Freedman, Joe Sorbara, Germaine Liu, and Jean Dérome, who had graphic scores documented and exhibited in late 2009 as a part of the *Hearing Visions Sonores* project (see: <http://www.improvcommunity.ca/hvs/>) at both the University of Guelph and McGill University.

Indeed, as suggested by the incredible variety of artists mentioned above, the concept of the open work and the use of graphic notation are a hallmark of much experimental and improvised music. As George E. Lewis suggests:

After 1950 composers began to experiment with open forms and with more personally expressive systems of notation. Moreover, these composers began to designate salient aspects of a composition as performer-supplied rather than composer-specified, thereby renewing an interest in the generation of musical structure in real time as a formal aspect of a composed work. (131)

Lewis has also expressed a deep—and legitimate—concern with the ways in which the historiographical rendering of graphic notation and open forms such as *indeterminacy* have been used to previously downplay the influence of African-American improvisative aesthetics on Western compositional processes in the postwar period (see “Improvised”). However, it should be understood that the process of experimentation and exploration within open forms, graphic notation, and “the

generation of musical structure in real time” is an inherently multiracial, multiethnic, and multigendered discipline that reaches amicably across social and musical boundaries. Lewis has touched on this understanding in a more recent article: “[t]he reality is that in a transcultural sociomusical environment, each one [‘trans-European’ and ‘trans-African’ musical cultures of the twentieth century] is a part of the other” (*Afterword*, 168). If one can understand graphic notations and open systems of musical composition in this way, one can begin to see that these alternative methods of organizing musical events embody the egalitarian social practices that lie at the heart of improvised music.

Perhaps the most significant way in which graphic notation and open systems can help to encourage alternative social formation is by helping to break down hierarchies associated with, and reinforced by, the ‘traditional’ Western system of notation. As guitarist Derek Bailey has asserted, “much of the impetus toward free improvisation came from the questioning of musical language. Or more correctly, the questioning of the ‘rules’ governing musical language” (*Improvisation*, 256). Indeed, one of the most pervasive tropes of Western ‘classical’ and ‘jazz’ musics is that so-called ‘serious’ musicians are able to read and interpret musical ‘language’ written out on staves and in a variety of different clefs. This trope largely serves to reinforce the hierarchical relationships that exist between the composer, performer, and listener within certain sub-styles of these musics, which can in turn serve to reinforce a host of connected socio-cultural stereotypes and assumptions (see, for example, Taruskin, 1995; Kramer, 1996; Lock, pg. 8).

A brief consideration of the theories of ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino may provide some insight into why it is that graphic notation is a more effective method of breaking down socio-cultural barriers, while also helping to re-envision the ways in which members of a community organize themselves. As Turino has written, the practice of music-making itself acts as:

[a] primary way that people articulate the collective identities that are fundamental to forming and sustaining social groups, which are, in turn, basic to survival. The

performing arts are frequently fulcrums of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance. (2)

Turino investigates this thesis through a discussion of different methods of community-based music making in both Western and non-Western settings; in assessing the various successes of these methods of music-making in “allowing people to intimately feel [...] part of the community,” he invokes and adapts psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of *flow*. Turino suggests that community-based forms of music-making, which encourage group participation and dancing, encourage flow: “a state of heightened concentration, when one is so intent on the activity at hand that all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear and the actor is fully in the present” (4).

If it can be agreed upon that graphic notations help to act as a method of resistance to the oppressive standards imposed by rigid adherence to ‘traditional’ Western systems of musical notation, and that more inclusive methods of music-making allow for individuals to better experience the positive benefits of flow, then it follows that open methods of musical composition allow for individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds—whether musical, racial, cultural, gender, etc.—to create music together in a more-inclusive manner. It is the kind of music-making that can act as both a celebration and a transcendence of the differences that exist between the diverse individuals found within any society. This helps to show the great emancipatory potential of musics that employ open systems and graphic notation, whether exclusively or as a part of a larger series of works. It is the kind of emancipatory potential that can work to fight against oppressive social norms, while helping to provide inspiration for individuals attempting to re-envision communities, and other methods of social organization, on a larger scale.

## Works Cited and Further Reading

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## Video Clips

John Zorn, from Derek Bailey's "On The Edge":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXkAr4w4cjY&feature=related>

Two-part documentary on Zorn:

PART ONE: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7jyzXY1JAo&feature=related>

PART TWO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQkM3jpw768&feature=related>

John Zorn conducting the "game" piece "Cobra" in Tel-Aviv, Israel (01/04/2008):

ONE: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyAq4bv2Xe4>

TWO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OR7PsYLt28&feature=related>

THREE: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRjpXNpKdAA&feature=related>

FOUR: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfbzCNjPxG0&feature=related>

FIVE: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtZ3x7kSuv0&feature=related>

SIX: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEArbm5efpY&feature=related>

Anthony Braxton Interview:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1kTvh5SUxc>

Butch Morris – Conduction #188:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thq\\_6OyEQXM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thq_6OyEQXM)

Greg Tate leading Burnt Sugar in a Conduction, from a concert at Tonic in NYC (2007):

ONE: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1hZ1t-vbms&feature=related>

TWO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPMvFYwNjmw&feature=related>