Conducting Experiments
Theorizing Sound through Conductors' Movement in Experimental Music

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Abstract: *Experimental musicians have long questioned traditional aesthetic attitudes towards sound. In this chapter, I examine how conductors' movements in American experimental art music both shaped and reflected these changing conceptions. Drawing on examples from the 1950s to the 1980s including John Cage, Butch Morris, Earle Brown, Walter Thompson, John Zorn, and Frank Zappa, I argue that conducting styles are aligned with experimental musicians' distinctive approaches to sound. For example, Cage envisioned the conductor as an expressionless utility for timekeeping, in keeping with his interest in non-intention, while Butch Morris's conduction technique makes use of bodily and spatial metaphors to encourage intuitive improvisation. Focusing on the conductor's movements—rather than composers' words—reveals hidden artistic priorities and assumptions, while also offering an opportunity to address the performing body's status as a mediator of both the aesthetic and the social.*

Despite John Cage's insistence that his compositions were devoted to letting the sounds "be themselves," it is this dictum, rather than any particular sound, that most reliably persists in listeners' minds.[1] In fact, in looking back at post-war experimental music as a whole, it seems that the aesthetic theories that accompanied this music have received considerably more attention than the sounds themselves. This state of affairs, while seemingly incongruous, is by no means an outlier among artistic movements in the twentieth century. As Georgina Born succinctly observes, "modernist art invests an unprecedented

1 Cage expressed this sentiment frequently from the 1950s onward. For an early example, see John Cage, "Experimental Music," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 7–12, 10.

power in exegetical texts."[2] While Cage and his coterie frequently sought to distinguish themselves from European arch-modernists such as Pierre Boulez, Born emphasizes how the United States experimentalists' music was nevertheless still "constructed in discursive texts," reflecting a modernist sensibility that was ultimately "theoreticist and determinist."[3] The reception of Cage as more of a philosopher than a composer—a view which even Cage seemed to encourage at times—exemplifies this tendency.

Nevertheless, as many have pointed out, the extensive theorizations of experimentalism were frequently frustrated by the sonic realities of performance. As Cornelius Cardew once pointedly observed,

> contrary to his own 'beautiful idea', Cage himself, in his performance of [*Variations I*] with David Tudor [...] never let the sounds be just sounds. Their performances were full of crashes, bangs, radio music and speech, etc. No opportunity for including emotive material was lost.[4]

Anecdotes like this, in which theory is found to be inconsistent with both the sounds themselves and how they are received, call into question the role of theory in experimental music more broadly. In this chapter, I want to experiment with a different approach: examining experimental aesthetics of sound as expressed not through words—or through sounds—but through movement. I will attend to the movements of the conductor—that is, the conductor of experimental music—and consider how these movements both shape and reflect how experimental musicians conceived of sound from the 1950s to the 1980s. I argue that these conceptions were frequently predicated on discursive negations that resulted in the conductor withholding conventionally musical or expressive bodily movements. This observation foregrounds the role of the body in experimental music, offering an opportunity to address its status as a mediator of both the aesthetic and the social.

2 Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 42.

3 Ibid., 57.

4 Cornelius Cardew, "John Cage: Ghost or Monster," in *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (Ubu Editions, 2004), accessed 5 July 2022, http://www.ensemble21.com/cardew_stockhausen.pdf, 34–40, 37.

The Hands of the Clock

Despite the postwar experimentalists' special attention to the conceptual and theoretical implications of their work, experimental music was initially envisioned along the lines of what it wasn't, rather than what it was. As Born has emphasized, the post-Cagean experimental tradition was defined "through a series of negations," while Rebecca Y. Kim notes Cage's parallel rejections of conventional art music, popular musics, and jazz.[5] From Derek Bailey's aporic notion of "non-idiomatic" improvisation to Morton Feldman's "obliterating" repetitions, experimental music was enmeshed in a negative sonic aesthetics that trafficked in rejection and disavowal.[6]

Sound itself was not rejected—at least in most cases—but the properties of musical sound were called into question by embracing noise, spontaneity, electronic tones, and dynamic extremes. Rather than specifying the types of sounds to be produced, composers like Cage, Feldman, and Earle Brown explored intentionally ambiguous forms of notation intended to discourage conventional musical patterns such as scales, chords, and rhythmic synchronization. These same composers took pains to emphasize that this approach necessarily reflected not only a transformation of the sonic content of their works, but an entirely novel aesthetic theory. For example, in the 1950s, Cage criticized American composers of electronic music who "call themselves experimental because of their use of this new medium." In his view, these composers simply employed electronic means to "continue conventional musical practices."[7] For Cage and others, it was not enough to simply pursue new sounds. On the contrary, the core meaning of experimental music was to be found through the manner in which the sounds were produced and organized. In practice, this often entailed meticulously purging any recognizable content.

5 Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 63; Rebecca Y. Kim, "John Cage in Separate Togetherness with Jazz," in *Contemporary Music Review* 31, no. 1 (February 2012): 63–89, 65.

6 See Morton Feldman, "The Anxiety of Art," in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B.H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000), 21–32, 25.

7 John Cage, "History of Experimental Music in the United States," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 67–75, 74.

A particularly illustrative example is John Cage's "clock" conducting technique, first called for in the 1958 composition *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*.[8] In this technique, the conductor's principal task is not to cue or indicate tempo, dynamics, or expressive qualities of the music, but rather to simply mark the passage of time without regard for the sounds produced by the musicians. In performance, the conductor imitates the hand of a clock by lifting and lowering their arm while fully outstretched to the side in a clockwise direction (from the performers' perspective). The conductor uses one arm at a time, exchanging arms at the twelve o'clock and six o'clock positions.[9]

Unlike conventional conducting techniques in which the conductor attempts to capture the expressive qualities of the music through movement, in this technique the conductor evokes the complete equanimity of an inanimate object. More strikingly, the conductor's arm movement negates any semblance of rhythm or pulse, moving smoothly at a uniform pace through its circuit without any subdivisions. Even where phrasing could theoretically be suggested–for example, the arm exchanges at the twelve o'clock and six o'clock positions–the conductor gives no acknowledgement, passing through these movements without the slightest change in demeanor, or even a cueing breath. Far from gesturing outwards towards an ensemble, the conductor seems deeply absorbed in executing the movements with almost scientific precision.

Clock Time	Effective Time	Omit
30″	45″	00″
2′00″	1′15″	00″
1′15″	1′15″	15″

Table 1: Excerpt from John Cage *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, Conductor's Part

8 For a detailed description of the clock conducting technique, see chapter 5 of Martin Iddon and Philip Thomas, *John Cage's Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

9 For a demonstration of this technique, see the video featuring conductor Jack Sheen produced as part of a long-term research project on John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* at the Universities of Huddlesfield and Leeds led by Thomas and Iddon, accessed 5 July 2022, https://cageconcert.org.

Table 1 is a transcription of a brief excerpt from the conductor's part in the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. The part is read from top to bottom, with each row representing a particular span of movement, and three columns specifying different aspects of that movement. The first column, labeled "Clock Time," indicates the absolute duration of a given span of movement. For example, the first movement in the excerpt will last thirty seconds, and the second will last two minutes. The second column, labeled "Effective Time," indicates the amount of movement that should take place within the amount of clock time specified in the first column, with one complete circle representing one minute of effective time. Consequently, in the first row, the conductor must move their arm three quarters of the way around the circle (45") in thirty seconds of clock time. Immediately following, the conductor must make one and a quarter circles (1'15") in two minutes of clock time. In other words, the conductor's arm first moves slightly faster than the second hand of a clock, then somewhat slower. The starting position for each row's change of speed depends on the ending position resulting from the movement in the previous row. The third column, which allows the conductor to omit certain durations of clock time, is only observed if the conductor wishes to achieve a performance of exactly twenty rotations (one of the performance options suggested by Cage).[10]

Yet for all of these intricate calculations and choreography, Cage did not view the conductor as a conscious actor or agent. On the contrary, Cage felt that not only should the conductor not serve as a leader, but that they, like all of the other musicians involved, should not have any intentional interpretive influence on the performance whatsoever. As he wrote in a statement reflecting on his music:

> Thinking of orchestra not just as musicians but as people I have made different translations of people to people in different pieces. […] In […] *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* the conductor is not a governing agent but a utility, providing the time.[11]

Cage saw experimental musical performance as an opportunity for individuals to reject expression and transcend their own subjectivity in order to achieve something that was, in his view, more meaningful. By framing the conductor as a "utility" rather than a "governing agent," Cage links a musical situation to a broader distinction between political and utilitarian aims that reappears

10 Hans G. Helms's film *Birdcage*: 73'20.958" *for a composer* depicts Cage conducting rehearsals of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*.

11 John Cage, "Autobiographical Statement (1990)," John Cage Trust, accessed 5 July 2022, https://johncage.org/autobiographical_statement.html.

throughout his theoretical writings.[12] While Cage viewed the control exerted by the conductor in a conventional performance situation to be overtly political—and consequently repressive—the conductor in *Concert* is merely providing a service which has a utility to the individuals of the orchestra. Cage's understanding of the orchestra as composed of individuals was consistent and explicit. Proceeding from the assumption that "each musician is a soloist," Cage's aims were, in his own words, "to bring to orchestral society the devotion to music that characterizes chamber music. To build a society one by one. To bring chamber music to the size of orchestra."[13]

It's worth contextualizing just how radical this point of view was. The year 1958, in addition to being the year in which the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* was premiered, was also the year in which Leonard Bernstein assumed the role of music director of the New York Philharmonic. Bernstein became known and loved for his confident and expressive interpretations, and his outsize public persona. Whereas Bernstein aimed for an embodied interpretation of sound through his arms, posture, facial expressions, lip-syncing, and so forth, Cage studiously avoided any correlation between movement and music. It is hard to imagine two more contrasting approaches to the performance of music, and yet both are undeniably embodied. As if to underline this fact, it was not a musician who played the role of the conductor at the premiere of the *Concert for Piano*, but a dancer: Cage's partner, Merce Cunningham. Cage could have had the musicians use a stopwatch—he did in other works—but he clearly felt the need to create a part for the conductor who, through their body, resists all that is expressive and musical. This rejection literally embodied the tripartite aesthetic negation of experimental music: of the dance of popular music, the emotion of classical art music, and the dialectical content of the avant-garde. In place of the charismatic leader, the musical personality, here was a living mannequin—an inversion of the nineteenth-century automaton: human as machine. By withholding their expressivity—their human qualities—the conductor would come to embody an objective reference—a "utility"—against which abstract duration could be measured.

Liz Kotz writes that Cage understood musical activity to be "experimental" only if it emerged from a continuous, non-symbolic medium that was "unhinged not only from *sound* as a system of discrete notes but also from *time* as a graph-

12 For more on this distinction, see John Cage, "Reflections of a Progressive Composer on a Damaged Society," in *October* 82 (Autumn 1997): 77–92, 81–2.

13 Cage, "Autobiographical Statement (1990)."

ically-plotted system of rhythmic measure."[14] For Cage and others, this kind of work was facilitated by composing directly with magnetic tape in the electronic music studio. As Cage wrote in the late 1950s:

> Counting is no longer necessary for magnetic tape music [...]: magnetic tape music makes it clear that we are in time itself, not in measures of two, three, or four or any other number. [...] All this can be summed up by saying each aspect of sound is to be seen as a continuum, not as a series of discrete steps favored by conventions.[15]

By this logic, we can imagine Cage's famous composition 4'33", for example, as a length of magnetic tape of just under five minutes' duration. Extending this metaphor, it is as though the conductor in the *Concert for Piano* is not only letting the tape run, but changing the tape speed as it passes over the record head through the discrepancy between clock time and effective time. This additional level of abstraction completes the chain from the symbolic rhythm of musical notation to the chronometric duration of unmeasured sound to scientific notions of relativity and uncertainty, or as Cage put it, indeterminacy.

(Finger) Painting with Sound

Cage's conducting technique was one of two major practices that emerged in the early days of experimental music. The other is the composer Earle Brown's conducting technique for his open form compositions. Brown's open form works consisted of musical events scored for subsets of an ensemble that can be performed in any order. The conductor cues the beginning and ending of each event, designating each event number with one hand—usually the left—and using a placard with a moveable arrow to indicate the page from which the event is given. At the same time, the conductor uses conventional hand gestures to shape the expressive qualities of each event.[16]

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14 Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," in *October* 95 (Winter 2001): 55–89, 70.

15 Cage, "History of Experimental Music," in *Silence*, 70–1.

16 For more on this technique, see Stephen Drury, "Then and Now: Changing Perspectives on Performing Earle Brown's Open Form Scores," in *Beyond Notation: The Music of Earle Brown*, ed. Rebecca Y. Kim (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 231–48 and Drake Andersen, "(Per)forming Open Form: A Case Study with Earle Brown's *Novara*," in *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (September 2020), accessed 5 July 2022, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.3/mto.20.26.3.andersen.html.

While many of Brown's scores use traditional notation, over time Brown increasingly employed graphic and verbal instructions, introducing a great deal of unpredictability into each performance. The indeterminacy of the relationship between notation and sound is one of the central conceits in experimental music. However, the conductor's involvement introduces the possibility of the indeterminacy of a cue or gesture as well. For example, Brown's improvisatory score *One to Five*, composed around 1970, includes five distinct categories of sound, described only in the most general terms: (1) "long high notes"; (2) "quick angular melodic lines"; (3) "very legato lines"; (4) "highly fragmented lines"; and (5) "very small noisy sounds."[17] The open-ended nature of these categories illustrates Brown's interest in achieving variable responses to a single gesture. In performance, the conductor assigns one of these categories of sound to a given performer (or subset of the ensemble) using the fingers of one hand, and then uses more traditional conducting gestures to shape expressive qualities. Even though there is likely to be a stronger correlation between sound and movement in a composition by Brown as compared with Cage, indeterminacy is still thematized through the underdetermination of the musical material that corresponds to each gesture.

Brown's technique—which has precedent in big-band jazz and other improvised conducted forms—influenced a number of musicians of the younger generation, including Walter Thompson. Thompson is best known as the inventor of Soundpainting, a sign language for improvisation—or "live composing"—developed in 1974. It is unique among experimental conducting techniques in that it has made its way from avant-garde circles to the musical mainstream over the past few decades. In an interview, Thompson explained that Soundpainting was born out of two complementary needs: (1) to communicate more directly with an ensemble as a conductor, and (2) to produce sounds that he had difficulty notating.[18]

Like Brown, Thompson's work explores the creative potential at the confluence of multiple agencies, such as the conductor's gestures and the performer's interpretation. In fact, both Brown and Thompson organized performances with multiple conductors and Soundpainters, respectively. Much experimental music is concerned with similar investigations of what has more recently been characterized as distributed creativity, however this kind of practice is by no means unique to experimental music. Both

17 For more on *One to Five*, see David Ryan, "Energy Fields: Earle Brown, Open Form, and the Visual Arts," in *Beyond Notation: The Music of Earle Brown*, ed. Rebecca Y. Kim (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 80–112, 108.

18 Walter Thompson, interview with author, July 20, 2017.

Brown and Thompson also exhibited an interest in the intersections between different art forms, further complicating the translation between movement and sound. Brown consistently linked his open form works with midcentury action painting, in which a painted gesture on the canvas was taken as index of a physical movement.[19] Meanwhile, Thompson has expanded the Soundpainting lexicon to facilitate performances that include dancers, actors, and visual artists, in addition to musicians, developing these interdisciplinary dialects in collaboration with specialists. For instance, Thompson developed the movement language with the choreographers Margery Segal and Gus Solomon. As Thompson explains regarding his initial foray into dance with Segal: "Some gestures were easy to translate to movement while others were not. For example, it took us more than two weeks to codify what a Long Tone was for Dancers."[20] The result is a complex chain of mediation in which the Soundpainter's gesture, originally devised with explicitly musical connotations, is interpreted by a dancer through further movement linked to sound on a metaphorical—which is to say, theoretical—level.

Another example from this later generation of experimental musicians is John Zorn, who developed a series of compositions in the 1970s and 1980s known as the "game pieces." In these works, the structure of the composition is determined spontaneously through playful interactions between the performers. Some of the "games," like *Cobra*, employ the use of a conductor-like figure called the "prompter." The prompter is not exactly a conductor, but more like a conduit: the performers all actively gesture and signal throughout the performance, and the conductor mediates, keeping track of the progress of the game, different groupings, and designating when "guerilla operations" to overrule a prevailing musical texture have been successful. Zorn has written that he sees his game pieces as "tying together loose strings left dangling by composers such as Earle Brown, Cornelius Cardew, John Cage, and Stockhausen," though the complexity of the possible interactions in performance surpasses those in works by any of these predecessors.[21]

Zorn not only engages with the conductor's physicality, but also that of the musicians. Zorn's instructions stipulate that performers propose different categories of events or actions by making hand signals or pointing to different

19 See, for example Brown's directions for performance in *Novara* (Litolff/Peters, 2007).

20 Walter Thompson, "History of Soundpainting," accessed 5 July 2022, http://www.soundpainting.com/history/.

21 John Zorn, "The Game Pieces," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 196–200, 196.

parts of their body, including the mouth, nose, eye, and ear. The prompter acknowledges performers' requests by holding up a card, and then lowering it to signal a downbeat. As David Brackett points out, the prompter's ability to decide which signals to acknowledge (or ignore)—as well as individual performers' inclinations and actions—leads not only to musical tensions, but also potentially personal and social tensions. Zorn himself has variously compared *Cobra* to a psychodrama, a model society, and "life itself" in its improvised staging of the circulations of power.[22] Despite a significant departure from Cage's practice on a musical level, Zorn recapitulates aspects of Cage's theorization of performance as a site for modeling wider social relations.

The theatricality of Zorn's performances is intensified in the work of another conductor of experimental music: rock musician Frank Zappa. Thompson suggested that Zappa may have been influenced by Brown's open form conducting technique, though the origins and extent of Zappa's technique ultimately remain unclear.[23] In a filmed interview, the percussionist Art Tripp, who played with Zappa in the late 1960s, noted a number of specific gestures, such as a raised middle finger jerked upward indicating a high-pitched "peep" sound, or a wave-like gesture across the body with one hand indicating a guttural, almost emetic groan.[24] Zappa's physicality was an enormous part of his artistry, as for most rock musicians, yet his approach was unique. In video clips of Zappa conducting, he can be seen turning towards the other musicians on stage to direct them, like the leader of a big band, eager to evoke the rarefied role of conductor, only to bring it back down to earth with scatological force. On television talk shows, he would cue the band and audience alike during his appearances to produce flatulence-like raspberry sounds, eliciting peals of laughter. His movements—which oscillated rapidly between the comically formal and winningly crude—alternately served to sustain the frame of conducted music and to puncture it: an echo of Cage's original negation, to be sure, but a much more targeted one.

Embodiment and Social Mediation

In the final section of this chapter, I want to linger on the social aspects of the conductor's role in the experimental music ensemble. As mentioned

22 David Brackett, "Some Notes on John Zorn's *Cobra*," in *American Music* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 44–75, 55–6.

23 Thompson, interview with author, July 20, 2017.

24 *Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention: In the 1960s*, DVD (New Malden, Surrey UK: Sexy Intellectual, 2008).

above, many experimental musicians, most notably John Cage, were focused on eliminating aspects of individual subjectivity from musical performance. For Cage, the solution was to resist and purge subjectivity through individual discipline. The younger generation, however, saw that multiplying the subjects involved could have the same desired effect of preventing any single individual from dominating a performance. Negotiating multiple creative agents requires attending to the social dynamics of performance, and understanding the conductor as not only an interpretive force, but also a conduit of social mediation.

An experimental conducting practice that illustrates this dynamic is Lawrence "Butch" Morris's conducted improvisation system known as conduction. After beginning his career as a jazz musician, Morris began to develop the conduction technique in 1985. (At Morris's first performance at The Kitchen in New York that same year, Zorn was among the musicians in the ensemble.) Conduction is distinct from the other techniques discussed in that virtually all of the musical material is developed by the musicians independently, and the conductor's role is to shape and organize, rather than to create. As the journalist Ben Ratliff has written, Morris

> would often begin a performance by setting a tempo with his baton and having his musicians develop a theme spontaneously and then seize on the musical ideas he wanted to work with, directing the ensemble with a vocabulary of gestures and signals.[25]

The significance of improvisation in this context suggests a strong parallel with the music of Zorn and Thompson in particular, but Morris's reliance on a shared, intuitive understanding of the relationship between gesture and sound also suggests a link with a conventional conducting language, such as that employed by Bernstein.[26] Meanwhile, a link to Brown can also be ascertained through the fact that the conductor's role is primarily one of arrangement—though in Brown's case the material was usually notated to some degree, rather than completely improvised.

Morris's gestures are precise and confident—unlike other conductors of experimental music, he used a baton—and, like Bernstein, also engage seemingly

25 Ben Ratliff, "Butch Morris Dies at 65; Creator of 'Conduction,'" January 30, 2013, accessed 5 July 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/arts/music/butch-morris-dies-at-65-creator-of-conduction.html.

26 According to Ratliff, Morris cited Bernstein's *Four Improvisations* with the New York Philharmonic, released in 1965 on the Columbia Masterworks Music of Our Time series, as an inspiration for his work.

instinctual physical metaphors for sound and action. For example, an open palm moving up or down indicates volume, the vertical position of the hands along the length of the body indicates pitch or register, and a finger pointed to the forehead indicates that performers should remember a sound. Yet Morris's process was undeniably distinctive: not only were the musicians improvising, but the meaning in Morris's gestures ultimately remained fluid and contextual. As Ratliff points out, Morris frequently found himself asking musicians to "reorient themselves to his imagination," a process that required negotiation and improvisation of a different kind.[27] I argue that this is fundamentally different from responding to signals that are contextual or ambiguous but fixed, like Brown's graphic notations, Thompson's well-defined signs, or Zorn's instructions. Morris relies on a shared understanding that emerges through interaction with the ensemble, which ultimately suggests a more overtly social valence for Morris's gestures.

During a rehearsal featured in a 1992 documentary, one of the performers asks for clarification on Morris's cueing system and he replies: "Everybody that's worked with me before should know that I'm pretty good at making eye contact with you, so you'll know that it's you."[28] This response speaks not only to the physicality inherent in the microsocial interactions of performance, but also of a community assembled through an ongoing practice and shared musical understanding. In other words, it reveals multiple orders or planes of social mediation, as Georgina Born has theorized them.[29] In this case, the microsociality of performance is mobilized through the conductor's body, while community manifests through the musicians' continuing co-presence in rehearsal and performance. The simultaneous interactions on and through multiple planes suggest a hybrid approach that contrasts sharply with more rigid conducting techniques, such as Cage's clock conducting. In this way, conduction exhibits an affinity with other hybridized experimental practices, such as Anthony Braxton's language music, in which Braxton frequently shifts between conducting and playing an instrument—or more than one.[30]

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27 Ratliff, "Butch Morris."

28 This quote is taken from an undated and unattributed rehearsal clip featured in Derek Bailey's 1992 Channel 4 (UK) television miniseries on improvisation *On The Edge*.

29 Georgina Born, "For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn," in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. 2 (2010): 205–43, 232.

30 Much of Braxton's music is distinguished by the importance of multi-instrumentalism. See Paul Steinbeck, "Improvisation and Collaboration in Anthony

While the hybrid polystylism of experimental music in general has often been celebrated, many writers have asserted the basis of Morris and Braxton's practices in jazz, apparently owing to their Black identities. This lineage is frequently restated in reviews and even scholarly literature, despite being contradicted by available stylistic evidence and, in many cases, the artists' own accounts of their work. George E. Lewis has noted that Black artists—and others from backgrounds underrepresented within experimental music communities—are frequently marginalized through reductive assumptions about genre and style. As he writes:

> Claims of genre transcendence often feature a complementary Othering of someone else as 'genre-bound,' with criteria for the identification of genre diversity that shift according to not only (or even primarily) musical direction, but also the race, ethnicity, class position and, quite often, the gender of the artist involved.[31]

This racialized dynamic illuminates the third of Born's orders of social mediation, in which music can be seen to embody "stratified and hierarchical social relations, of the structures of class, race, nation, gender and sexuality, and of the competitive accumulation of legitimacy, authority and social prestige."[32] It is through a recognition of music's potency along this plane of mediation that Lewis identifies an evocation of the "one-drop rule" in one reviewer's revocation of Braxton's genre mobility.[33] Similarly, Morris once reflected that, "as long as I'm a black man playing a cornet, I'll be a jazz musician in other people's eyes."[34] Yet both artists found ways to resist the binary implications of racialized musical discourse seemingly invited by the mere presence of their bodies on stage: for Braxton, the integration of improvised elements with notation and several volumes of aesthetic explication; for Morris, the evocation of the European conducting tradition through the use of the baton. In this way, both artists engage in a hybridizing practice analogous to what Lisa Barg describes as Billy Strayhorn's "queer" arrangements, which occupy a similarly liminal space

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Braxton's *Composition 76*," in *Journal of the Society of American Music* 62, no. 2 (October 2018): 249–78.

31 George E. Lewis, "Afterword to 'Improvised Music after 1950': The Changing Same," in *The Other Side of Nowhere*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 163–72, 166.

32 Born, "For a Relational Musicology," 232.

33 Lewis, "Afterword," 166.

34 Quoted in Ratliff, "Butch Morris."

amongst nominally opposing musical practices.[35] In short, in this context the notion of the conductor's movement can be extended so as to encompass their very presence before an audience.

In contemporary scholarship on experimental music, there is a particular focus on the social and political aspects of performance, in which the conductor frequently figures prominently.[36] Yet the conductor is too often treated as a kind of symbol, and too little attention is paid to what the conductor actually does—and who they actually are. While it is undeniable that the conductor's technique, presence, and movements do shape and reflect how sound is understood in the experimental context, I conclude with the social—rather than the aesthetic—in order to emphasize the contingencies of this understanding. Many theorizations of experimental sound have historically proceeded from essentialist and rationalist tendencies that are as unsustainable as the frameworks they purported to negate. By reintroducing the social—alongside the embodied—I hope to have illustrated how theory is constructed through interactions between musicians: interactions that are heard, but also seen and felt.

35 As Barg writes, "arranging involves weaving together or 'composing' in time and space the formal dimensions of a song or musical material and specific bodies, voices, or sonic personalities, itself a process that fundamentally depends on collaboration and interaction," adding that "one could, of course, point to any number of compositional and improvisational practices that similarly blur the lines [...] such as graphic scores or structured improvisations/conductions, both of which function very similarly to arrangements." See Lisa Barg, "Billy Strayhorn's Queer Arrangements," in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, ed. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 183–212, 188–9.

36 See Nicholas Cook's critique of oversimplified political metaphors centered around the conductor in Cook, "Scripting Social Interaction: Improvisation, Performance, and Western 'Art' Music," in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, ed. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 59–77, 70–3.