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world  
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## **Working with Blacking: The Belfast Years**



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repeats) is somewhat confusing and over-complicated. The *compas* is much easier to follow and learn when transcribed as divisions of 12—flamenco *compas* is, after all, a time-line concept. The same problem arises in the transcription of the *peteneras* (p. 141) where his analysis states “The rhythmic unit of 12 beats can be written as an exchange between 6/8 and 3/4 time.” His chart (p. 142) showing the relationship of the three *compas*, on the other hand, uses the 12 beat time-line principle with appropriate accents. For a transcription standpoint, using multiple time signatures implies (at least to the novice) a deliberate compositional complexity that is not reflected in the aural product. Unfortunately, the secrets of the starting and stopping points for *bulerias falsetas* are not discussed in detail.

The last two brief essays must have been included as an afterthought. “Castanets and Other Rhythmic and Percussive Elements” is a quick discussion of the castanet’s history and role in flamenco performance—it comes complete with instructions on fingering techniques. With its appearance so late in the book (we know now that true *aficionados* sneer at castanets), one feels justified in skimming past the six pages. Like Papenbrok’s essay concerning flamenco’s “spirituality,” Holger Mende’s “Flamencos-Pictures and Notes from Andalusia,” seems a bit too idealistic and romanticized as she provides brief biographies of current *cantadores*.

Claus Schreiner explains in his preface that the theme of this compilation is deliberately restricted to “original flamenco of the Andalusian gypsies” (p. 8). But the book, on the whole, never really defines what is considered original or authentic. Instead, the authors arbitrarily used “devalued” or “diluted” and “adaptation or “compromise” in their preoccupation with defining the undefinable—flamenco.

Roy C. Brewer

**Ronald M. Radano. *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. xv, 315 pp., photos, diagrams, music notations, discography, indexes**

Ronald Radano has contributed a significant body of research on the life and art of Anthony Braxton as seen in the context of 20th century cultural upheaval and uncertainty. The publication of this book on the eve of Braxton’s McArthur foundation award is timely as it fills a vacuum of knowledge about this important figure in contemporary music. “New Musical Figurations” is also a model for jazz research<sup>1</sup>; in each chapter the author relates the political events and social change of a given period in order to better understand Braxton’s creativity and perspective.

Radano fleshes out seemingly disparate ideas and theories on art, race, culture, jazz, experimental music, and the American and European scenes without being didactic, presenting a complex of information to the reader, who is free to draw her/his own conclusions. While there has been a long standing “academic” tradition of writing on music from a perspective and with a style which is separate from, and often ignorant of, the reality of both the music itself and the people who live it as performers, this work derives its theoretical discussion from the reality of those making music, and in so doing, presents us with a living sense of America in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; who Braxton is; and where we are going. “New Musical Figurations” is a much needed form of scholarship, organically related to its subject, rather than artificially imposed upon it.

Radano does not romanticize Braxton, jazz, or African diasporic culture, but rather shows the ambiguity and conflict in the saxophonist's character, philosophy, influences, and musical style. Braxton is our window to a panoramic view of 20th-century Western music, whose major influence has been the creativity of African-American peoples.

The book has six chapters with an epilogue, and appendices covering Braxton's recordings, general recordings cited, and picture titles of 69 compositions discussed. The first chapter, "Introduction: A New Musical Balance," describes the social arena in which culture had become more complex and multi-layered in the musical epoch after World War II. This process was accelerated during the 1960s: diversity, confluence, stylistic change and interaction brought "pluralism", as well as controversy and ambiguity. The traditional hierarchy and categories of art became blurred, for instance, high and low art, popular and art music, concert music and jazz, free jazz and avant-garde experimentalism. Braxton, at the centre of controversy, "embodied, as a multi-voiced African American artist, the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in postmodern musical life, contradictions that posed a challenge to traditional definitions of jazz and the jazz musician" (p. 5). We see Braxton as a complex reflection of new artistic sensibilities.

Chapter 2, "Chicago as Aesthetic Center," explores the environment of the South Side neighborhood where Braxton spent his youth. Experience with ghetto life, a strong black community, exposure to traditional and free jazz, John Coltrane, army life, college, the civil rights movement, and Arnold Schönberg's music are woven by Radano into a fabric which allows us to see the forces which shaped Braxton's persona and creativity.

Chapter 3, "Musical Assertions of Black Identity," focuses on the origins, development and significance of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Besides its concerns for social issues and commitment to cultural nationalism, this organization had a profound impact on the development of free jazz. Radano traces Braxton's involvement in AACM, whose Afrocentric aesthetic and revolutionary style of creativity enabled him to bridge the gap between modern experimentalism and jazz. The author conveys a realistic sense of the AACM as a grassroots musicians' organization devoted to racial, cultural, social, economic, artistic and personal self-determination, whose goal was resistance to a racist society; Eurocentric philosophies, lifeways, institutions and academics; and a hierarchical, competitive, inhuman, capitalist music industry.

Chapter 4, "New Musical Convergences: Paris and New York," outlines Braxton's career as a performer and composer in Europe and New York, and details his relationship to critics, new music performers such as Frederic Rzewski, and jazz innovators Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor. Radano shows how Braxton's increasing interest and activity in experimental music based on a European concert model did not dilute his commitment to a black aesthetic.

In Chapter 5, "Defining a Black Vanguard Aesthetic," the author describes Braxton's return to Europe in the early 1970s and the French critical response. He then focuses on the saxophonist's developing musical identity and style by means of an analysis of a number of solo and ensemble compositions and recorded performances from the 1970s. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Braxton's philosophical work "Tri-Axium Writings" (Braxton 1985), which seeks to impart the means to a higher consciousness, beyond the illusions dominating Western society and world culture. Creative artists of all backgrounds are those who "share an affinity for the spiritual and axiomatic character of humanly created sound, who can 'actualize' its power, and through performances, initiate greater spiritual awareness within the world community" (p. 234). This reveals a

sense of the artist as a visionary, whose work is grounded in a spiritual impetus with a global social responsibility.

Chapter 6, "Black Experimentalism as Spectacle," examines the construction and meaning of Braxton's image as a cultural icon during the 1970s. Radano argues that the institutions of "official" culture manufacture false symbols and meanings in order to perpetuate control over commodified and mass mediated art and artists. He points out that Braxton counteracts this process by constructing an ever changing public image whose illusion extends to spectacle, camouflaging his true "private realm of creative expression" (p. 267) from the destructive influences of the mass marketed corporate culture industry.

The "Epilogue: Jazz Recast," begins with the observation that during the 1980s jazz was a diffusion of independent streams without a central tradition. This situation is contrasted with the official proclamation of neoclassicism as a new mainstream of artistic certainty, heritage and value, much as the "classic" swing style of the 1930s. The author notes the institutional canonization of Wynton Marsalis as the "'pied piper' of a revitalized jazz tradition" (p. 269) amidst the political and cultural ferment of the decade, one in this reviewer's view similar to the earlier era of domestic economic depression and rise of international fascism, during which Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman were sold as the "King of Jazz". Radano stresses that in each case, the eurocentric notion of musical heritage as an evolutionary and unilinear progression denies the reality of the music's diversity of value and style, and allies its advocates with reactionary cultural politics. Braxton is therefore seen as a kind of anti-king of jazz, who, by his commitment to stylistic and aesthetic diversity, avoidance of institutional categorization, and negotiation of a wide and original expressive terrain, represents a more truly Afrocentric approach to music making, which constitutes the essence of the jazz tradition.

The author raises many issues essential to a discussion of Braxton's life and work, the contemporary music scene, African American social and musical history, and studies of culture. For example, he shows the destructive tendency since the 1930s to revise African-American music history along mainstream evolutionist lines which mimic the "official" history of European Art Music (pp. 12-21, 270-3). He also speaks of the pervasiveness and power of popular culture in our world, and of its capacity to blur distinctions between value and visibility (p. 9).

The work suggests some other avenues of discussion: Is the cultural blurring of a new globally unified eclecticism significantly different from "whitened" classicist appropriations of African American music in its capacity to negate world wide ethnic and musical realities? In what way does Braxton's experimentalism "express qualities of blackness beneath the surface of esoteric references to modernism" (p. 26)? It would be good to know the musical details of this important process to gain a better understanding of his African-American musical perspective.

Radano's research is thorough and he generates ideas and insights on almost every page of text and notes which stimulate the reader to consider a multiplicity of issues. The notes, conveniently located at the bottom of each page, reflect a wide range of sources, including books, magazines, recordings, scores, interviews, and personal communications. The sources are relevant and well-organized in emphasizing the author's discourse, but a separate bibliographical listing at the end of the book would be appropriate. The book is readable and the writing style, while academic, largely avoids the pitfalls of wordy language abstraction for its own sake.

Since "Figurations" was published in 1993 its effect would be stronger if the period

from 1980 was addressed in more detail, including a discussion of musical styles, analysis of recent Braxton works, and current social and cultural trends.

I highly recommend this book for the general reader, university courses on music and black studies, and for scholars.

Royal J. Hartigan

#### Note

- 1 The word "jazz" is used in this review only for consistency with the author's terminology. The term "African-American music", despite its implication of a diversity of traditions and styles, is more appropriate.

#### Reference

- Braxton, Anthony  
1985 *Tri-Axium Writings*. Self-published.