Kobe Van Cauwenberghe's Ghost Trance Septet Plays Anthony Braxton

Compositions No. 255, 358, 193 and 264

Ghost Trance septet

Kobe Van Cauwenberghe: electric guitar, nylon string guitar, bass guitar, synths, voice
Frederik Sakham: double bass, electric bass, voice
Elisa Medinilla: piano
Niels Van Heertum: euphonium, trumpet
Teun Verbruggen: drums, percussion
Anna Jalving: violin
Steven Delannoye: tenor saxophone, bass clarinet

How to play Anthony Braxton?

Anthony Braxton, born 1945 in the South Side of Chicago, is undoubtedly one of the most innovative composers, multi-instrumentalists and music theorists of our time. In the introduction to his Catalog of Works, published in 1989, he wrote down some general notes on how he would like his compositions to be treated. Since then, his body of work has undergone immense expansion and numerous astonishing twists and turns. However, the recommendations he made to all potential performers and interpreters remain unchanged:

"a. Have fun with this material and don't get hung up with any one area
b. Don't misuse this material to have only 'correct' performances without spirit or risk. [...] If the music is played too correctly it was probably played wrong.
c. Each performance must have something unique. [...] If the

instrumentalist doesn't make a mistake with my materials, I say 'Why!?' NO mistake -- NO work!' If a given structure concept has been understood (on whatever level) then connect it to something else. Try something different -- be creative (that's all I'm writing).
[...] and be sure to keep your sense of humor".

Some of Braxton's compositions from the seventies, which he wrote mainly for his working bands (quartets, quintets), have been interpreted relatively frequently by other musicians over time. They now belong to the extended canon of contemporary jazz. These pieces are only a tiny part of his complete work, which number no less than 700 compositions, including pieces for solo music, for duo, small and large ensemble, small and large orchestra, choir, puppet theater, dance performances and opera. We can consider ourselves fortunate that Braxton himself tirelessly ensured that he was able to perform as much of his "material" as possible and document it on recordings.
Recordings of his works without his participation are, for a composer of his outstanding stature, somewhat rare. His compositions can be found on about sixty albums by other musicians, mostly titles from his early work period, namely the aforementioned quartet works. That's a modest response, one might think, considering the incessant flood of jazz releases which include, for instance, tracks by Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk or John Coltrane. Comparison with the standard-setting classics of modern jazz is inappropriate, however. Braxton's compositional oeuvre certainly contains distinctive jazz components, but taken as a whole he moves very confidently outside the jazz idiom from the very beginning and outside any other known musical idiom

as well. He speaks of the transidiomatic essence of his work, which he aptly calls creative music. Perhaps its most striking characteristic is the infinitely inventive blending of notated, partially fixed, intuitive and improvised components.

In his extremely idiosyncratic, uncompromisingly advancing work he is primarily concerned with divergence, diversity, transformation and restructuring (and consequently less with homogeneity, preservation and consolidation). He has never allowed himself the slightest bit of nostalgic recollection or stagnation throughout his career of over fifty years. His quoted advice to the interpreters of his music, "if a structure concept has been understood then connect it to something else", corresponds to his own handling of compositions and models. He uses them as aesthetically sophisticated modular systems. Each one has a specific identity, but can also be fragmented, restructured, and combined with every other piece of his system. His hope is that the collage or synthesis of his material will provide the players with fresh experiences, surprising discoveries, and environments for creative participation. Braxton's musical world is well thought-out and at the same time thoroughly enigmatic, a universe of incalculable possibilities, unpredictable, open, yet completely free of arbitrariness.

None of his numerous structure concepts has fascinated and captivated him as much as the Ghost Trance Music (GTM). This model marks the beginning of his creative period of Tri-Centric Modeling in the mid-nineties, which continues to this day. The core of Tri-Centric Modeling consists of a total of twelve music "prototypes", not all of which have yet been completed. The GTM has an important role in it, as it forms the musical heart or ground floor of the whole. Between 1995 and

2006 Braxton completed 138 compositions from this prototype. GTM encompasses a variety of musical traditions. Inherent in it are the Ghost Dance rituals of the Native Americans, which can last several hours, the repetitive continuums of Minimal Music, the rhythmic diversity and trans-tonality of African music, the parallel sound events of street parades, the intensity and improvisational passion of jazz, and much more. GTM is nevertheless anything but an eclectic mix of styles or genres. It is an unmistakably independent concept from Braxton's creative workshop.

The scores, which can be up to eighty pages long, generally consist of two parts. In the main part, the so-called "primary melody" unfolds. Usually, a performance begins with all instruments playing it in unison. This can go on indefinitely (Braxton dreams of night-long performances), but it can also be broken up after a few minutes or even seconds, as determined by the ensemble. The second part of the score is a short appendix containing "secondary material". These are mostly three or four six-line miniature compositions. Braxton expects a creative, quite liberal handling of the material. In the notation of the primary melody suggestions are made (always with the option to ignore them), at which points of the performance one could move away from the main route to the paths of the secondary material. These options are indicated by triangles placed in the head of a note. And there are more symbols as well.

If a square is visible on a note, it signals to the performers that they can include passages from any of Braxton's compositions.The musicians select this "tertiary material" in advance and then decide during the performance with whom from the ensemble they want to interpret

something from it. Finally a third symbol, the circle, signifies that the performers may engage in a period of improvisation. Again, they decide during the performance whether or not they actually want to improvise alone or with others. Braxton's understanding is that GTM is not a platform for extensive solo improvisation. He hopes for imaginative, incisive contributions that are in service of the overall sound architecture. Van Cauwenberghe's Ghost Trance Septet follows this guideline on this record with bravura. All of the musicians have their spotlight moments on this album. But no one tries to advance themselves into the foreground with soloistic extravagances.

The GTM model has undergone substantial changes during Braxton's eleven years of involvement with it. There are at least four different manifestations, which are called "species", with one exponent of each heard on this release. The differences primarily concern the primary melody. The first GTM compositions radiate a strict regularity, the – in the score not predefined – tempo is consistant, the beat steady. With each species this regularity is rhythmically shaken up. In the most recent compositions, the melody is made up of a number of rapidly swirling figures that have as much to do with a trance state as a roller coaster ride has to do with yoga exercises.

Braxton conducted a GTM ensemble for the last time 2012 at the Biennale Musica in Venice. Since then, he has drawn on the 138 compositions in other conceptual contexts, but the GTM model as such is history for him. Who will carry it into the future? Until recently, the younger generation of creative musicians did not seem to show interest in the model that one might have expected in view of its overwhelming potential. But the tide is gradually beginning to turn. We owe this not solely, but in

the main, to Belgian guitarist Kobe Van Cauwenberghe. In 2020, on his CD Ghost Trance Solos (ATD10), he managed the feat of creating sparks out of the intricate structures of GTM as a soloist. Inevitably, one began to wonder what this fabulous musician, trained in contemporary composed and improvised music, might be able to pull out of the model with an ensemble of like-minded musicians. Now we know!

The musicians of this Belgian-Danish septet have excellent reputation, whether in the art of improvisation, the interpretation of new music, or both. Braxton's work is made for exploratory instrumentalists with such expertise. After the Ghost Trance Septet's performance at the rainy days Festival on November 13, 2021 in Luxembourg, the composer (who was booked for a trio concert at the festival) was sitting in the audience and could hardly contain himself with emotion and excitement. Understandably so. I dare say he had never experienced his GTM concept from the listener's perspective as varied, elaborate and fluid as on that day.

In Luxembourg the septet performed Composition No. 255. On this extraordinary studio recording this composition extends over the first side. At the beginning we are drawn into the stoic lockstep of the primary melody, which staggers at certain intervals, indicating that No. 255 is an example of the second GTM species. Shortly before the unison is about to dissolve for the first time, after about three minutes, numbers, syllables and words can be heard briefly spoken or if you will, sung. That means that this piece also belongs to the subspecies of Syntactical Ghost Trance Music, whose onomatopoetic libretto can be executed in whole or in part, or ignored (a fully sung choral version can be heard on Braxton's box set GTM (Syntax) 2017 (NBH908), an

entirely instrumental version for instance on GTM (Iridium) 2007, Vol. 2 (NBH025); the recommendable comparison of the versions reveals a lot about the elasticity of Braxton's compositions). It is pure pleasure to listen to the septet as it strings together one sonic shape-shift after the other. Braxton's older compositions are skillfully, yet often discreetly, incorporated into the meandering stream – the highly accelerated No. 34, the quartet earworm No. 40f as well as No. 168, once written for a duo session with James Emery – in order to flow smoothly into the home port of the primary melody.

On the second side of the record we experience an even more magnificent miracle of emergence. From beginning to end the structures, the atmospheres and the emotionality of the music change constantly. The primary melody of Composition No. 358 introduced at the beginning conveys the feeling that one is moving on a shaky ground that could break away or mutate into something else at any time. And it does. The piece was written by Braxton for a three-day engagement of his 12+1tet at Manhattan's Iridium. The fiery live version is documented on the terrific box set 9 Compositions (Iridium) 2006 (FH12-04-03-001). This is an example of the fourth species. This last GTM series bears the telling names Accelerator Class or, in this case, Accelerator Whip. The corresponding works are characterized by a good portion of rhythmic uncertainty and divergence. The septet succeeds in shaping every single moment in a distinctive way. Forms are created, overwritten, dissolved, sometimes at the same time. In certain moments the mood is playful and dreamy, then suddenly the coordinates shift, entropy rises, bubbles and evaporates. Familiar melodic fragments mix into the atonal hustle and bustle. After about eight minutes, the fancy march No. 58, one

of Braxton's most charming orchestral pieces, arrives from nowhere, mesmerizing the entire ensemble and throwing it into carnivalesque turmoil for a few minutes. A section from No. 168 is again interspersed. The musicians also draw additional rhythmic inspiration from No. 108d, one of four Pulse Track Structures with which Braxton once used to destabilize the metric balance of his quartet music.

When the breathtaking lockstep of Composition No. 193 greets us on the third side of this double album, there is no doubt that we are dealing with the first GTM species. It takes about five minutes for everyone in the ensemble to gradually detach themselves from the primary melody. As if they needed a refreshing breather, they slow down the music and let the sonic substance become fleeting and transparent like a fascinating mirage. With new energy and like adventurous travelers, they pick up speed again afterwards. Compared to Braxton's original version, to be heard on Tentet (New York) 1996 (BH004), the basic melody disappears relatively often from the listening field, but nevertheless it seems to run through the colorful activities like a red thread. The Pulse Track Structure No. 108c, the airy slow pulse piece No. 48 and, shortly before the finale, the dynamic repetition patterns of No. 6f serve as collage material.

Finally there remains the third species, which, compared to the second, shows more polyrhythm and incoherence and less regularity and stringency. The Ghost Trance Septet selected a previously undocumented example, Composition No. 264. With a fine feeling for contrasting timbres (the choice of instruments is almost always left to the musicians in the GTM) and exciting tempo changes, the territories of the score are executed. The Pulse Track Structure No. 108a, small parts of the duos No. 101 and No. 304 and two well-known quartet

pieces serve as enrichment material. One of them, the "post-be-bop thematic structure", as Braxton says in his Composition Notes, of No. 40b stands out clearly and distinctly from the rest of the proceedings after about nine minutes. The repetitive motif of No. 40o, on the other hand, appears like a fleeting memory a minute before the end, and no sooner has it been perceived than it has disappeared.
The Ghost Trance Septet does everything right on this production. Whereby "right" is not meant in the sense of correctness, which Braxton dismisses in his recommendations to performers above, but in the sense of astonishing creative, daring, lustful, sensitive, and thrilling. How to play Braxton? Whoever holds this album in his hands can put a very convincing answer on the record player. Over and over again.

TIMO HOYER
Author of the book Anthony Braxton – Creative Music (Wolke Verlag, Hofheim 2021)

Disc 1

1. Composition No. 255 — 23:13
   (+ 34 + 40F + 168)

2. Composition No. 358 — 23:57
   (+ 108D + 58 + 168)

Disc 2

1. Composition No. 193 — 24:50
   (+ 108C + 48 + 6F)

2. Composition No. 264 — 23:31
   (+ 40B + 108A + 101 + 304 + 40O)

All compositions by Anthony Braxton

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In the end, I am looking for a music prototype that will have the flexibility that will be needed in the next time cycle. The actualization of the Ghost Trance Music seeks to establish a living music entity that is:

a. organic - always changing (and transitory – building on itself)
b. systemic - mechanistic (and operational)
c. poetic - narrative logistics (and story telling)
d. imaginary - dream space occurrences (and adjustment extraction decisions)
e. intuitive - (real time encounter experiences with flexibility)
f. explorative - (with respect for the unknown)
g. conscious - artificial intelligence (and cyber intelligence)
h. symbolic - (including gestural positioning)
i. encouraging - (be nice – or at least don't try to be negative)
j. inclusive - (I have stolen from everybody and every culture) (smile)

Anthony Braxton, liner notes 'Quartet (GTM) 2006'