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From Process to Performance: Text-Based Improvisation in Henry Brant's "Instant Music"

ABSTRACT

Background

Henry Brant (1913-2008) was an internationally acclaimed composer, Pulitzer Prize winner, two-time Guggenheim Fellow, and the first American to receive the Prix Italia. Existing analytical studies on Brant's music (Drennan 1975 and Harley 1997) contribute mightily to our understanding of his post-1950 "spatial" compositions, but they are lacking in their exclusive reliance on score analysis and limited breadth of repertoire. This study references Brant's original manuscript documents, housed at the Brant Estate in Santa Barbara, California, and the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland and recorded performances. My aim is to shed new light on the compositional process with which he composed his fully notated "spatial" compositions, and examine the relationship between this process and his improvisation-based text music, which he referred to as "Instant Music."

Aims and repertoire studied

This study aims to show how characteristics that are unique to Brant's "spatial" music, non-coordination of simultaneous layers and flexibility of musical content within each layer, allowed Brant's text-based compositional process to transform into a text-based improvisational performance practice during the 1960s. I will examine the process through analysis of Brant's sketches for his 1965 orchestral composition Voyage Four, and show how his subsequent "instant" compositions, including Fracas II (1965), Town Meeting (1969), Machinations (1970), and Rosewood (1989) employ similar text-based compositional instructions to facilitate group improvisation. Finally, I will reference recordings of the above "instant" compositions to demonstrate how performers, under Brant's guidance, interpret his instructions for improvisation.

Methods

This study combines methodologies from sketch studies, score analysis, and analysis of recorded performances. I examine evidence of Brant's compositional process through sketch studies, analyze the resulting music to highlight indeterminate characteristics, discuss how these characteristics allowed Brant to resort to improvised text music, and show how the text instructions materialize in performance using recordings.

Implications

This study illuminates the ways in which Brant's text-based compositional process transformed into a text-based improvisational performance practice. It adds to our knowledge of improvisation and indeterminacy in 20th-century American music, and brings to light a previously unknown repertoire of text-music composed by Brant between 1965 and 2000 (34 compositions in total). Furthermore, this research shows how sketches and recorded performances can inform analyses of improvisation- and text-based music.

Keywords

American Experimental Music, Improvisation, Indeterminacy, Compositional Process, Sketch Studies

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