

## Chapter 6 : Soundpainting—history, process, and system

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In the following chapter, the author discusses the origins of Soundpainting in the context of the canons of improvised and experimental musicking. Drawing on the author's interview with Thompson (Paris, March 2003), a central thread of the discussion is the history of Soundpainting and its relationship to "the tradition." In addition, the author considers the influence of Anthony Braxton on Thompson's work.

The <palette> gesture in Soundpainting is examined as a means by which the Soundpainter is able to make use of musical quotation and recursion. As a compositional device whereby the Soundpainter may "quote" from material that has been rehearsed in advance of the event, the deployment of <palettes> forms an organizational procedure in Gil Selinger's *Deconstructing Haydn*, for example.

### 6.1 Soundpainting: a brief history

Walter Thompson (2006:12) describes the circumstances in which the Soundpainting language originated as follows:

Thompson moved to New York City on 1980 and formed the Walter Thompson Big Band (now the Walter Thompson Orchestra) in 1984. During the first year with his orchestra, while conducting a performance in Brooklyn, New York, Thompson needed to communicate with the orchestra in the middle of one of his compositions. They were performing a section of improvisation where Trumpet 2 was soloing. During the solo, Thompson wanted to have one of the other trumpet players create a background. Not wanting to emulate bandleaders who yell or speak out loud to their orchestra, Thompson decided to use some of the signs he had experimented with in his Woodstock days.

During an earlier sojourn at the Creative Music School in Woodstock in the 1970s, in fact, Thompson had already begun to experiment with gestures

during that school's summer recess, in which period he organized jam sessions with the students who remained there (*ibid.*):

Out of these sessions Thompson formed his first orchestra and produced a series of concerts at the Woodstock Kleinert Gallery. The focus of the orchestra was on large-group jazz-based improvisation. It was during these early days that Thompson began experimenting with signing improvisation. He created very basic gestures, asking for a long tone or improvisation in a pointillist style, for example.

The Creative Music School (CMS) and Thompson's years of study with Anthony Braxton are clearly formative influences on his musical development. The CMS was founded by Karl Berger, Don Cherry, and Ornette Coleman, and the curriculum included workshops for the students by visiting lecturers, many of whom were luminaries of free jazz as well as experimental music (*ibid.*): "Great composers and performers such as John Cage, Ed Blackwell, Carlos Santana, Don Cherry, Anthony Braxton, and Carla Bley gave 2-week workshop/performances with the students."

### **6.1.1. "A very elaborate series of chord changes"**

The following extract originates from the author's interview with Walter Thompson (Paris, March 2003):

Thompson: I really think that Soundpainting is a direct lineage of jazz, in that, when Charlie Parker came along, and, for all the reasons, he, you know, went in another direction with the music, because he really just busted his ass, and he learned all this different keys and he tried all these different things, kind of like he (inaudible) came from the facility of the clarinet. You know, he played faster ...syncopation became a different thing...and then from Charlie Parker came the movement with Miles Davis and then the West Coast school, the Chet Bakers, and, you know, more of a Cool thing, and while that was going on, even Miles was leaning towards working with less harmonic structures like the constant changing Tin Pan Alley type changes.

And then along comes, you know, Ornette Coleman, Coltrane, and now all of a sudden it's the structures, the harmonic structures are removed in a different way... the whole centre, as Ornette says,

'harmolodics,' that melody and harmony, I mean, that the melody is implied in the harmony and how you structure that, and free jazz and then the AACM and Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell, Oliver Lake and all the wonderful things that have been going on, and Mischa Mengelberg and all that people have done in Europe and other parts of the world where they're influenced by jazz and have their own thing come out of it, and then (pause) in straight lineage from that is Soundpainting (laughter), 'cause we're sitting here speaking about my frustrations with the free jazz thing and that's my own thing coming out of that, it's out of free jazz.

It is noteworthy that while expressing a sense of frustration with the limitations of free jazz, Thompson nonetheless sees this system, for reasons to be elucidated below, as part of the "direct lineage" of this type of improvisation.

Thompson: So improvisation has gone from Charlie Parker opening up to this other thing, Miles opening up this other thing, Ornette opening up this other thing, and Anthony Braxton who was my teacher, and then it opened up with other people in all kinds of ways, people, you know, taking in Xenakis, taking in Stockhausen, the AACM<sup>219</sup> took in all of that, and those people were my influences, along with Charles Ives (pause) and so I see what I do as a very elaborate series (laughter) of chord changes...

Duby: Yes. Yes. Could be that...

Thompson: Conceptually, you know...I kind of see this as a direct lineage from jazz, not what Wynton Marsalis is doing as a direct lineage, not at all, but this, this, I see myself as directly coming from Charlie Parker. But I think I can truthfully say, honestly say, that it comes out of, you know, my work initially, from my parents, my exposure to Charles Ives's music, my exposure to people like Anthony Braxton, and that, I think, is the foundation of it.

In this section from the author's interview (Paris 2003), it is evident that Thompson is fully conversant with the histories of both jazz and so-called experimental music, both in America and Europe. His list of formative influences on his own musicking, and also in respect of Soundpainting, testifies to a high degree of eclecticism, taking in figures both from the jazz canon, as well as some of the "founding fathers" (Stockhausen, Xenakis,

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<sup>219</sup> Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians.

and Ives<sup>220</sup>) of experimental music. What Thompson is presenting in this section of the interview is a personal history of jazz improvisation from a 21st century viewpoint. Such a history acknowledges the influence of the great icons of jazz history (Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane) as well as revealing the importance of such figures as Anthony Braxton who are far harder unequivocally to classify as "jazz" musicians, in the orthodox sense of the term.

Isolating some key points from what Thompson is saying above, it should be evident that the nature of Soundpainting is to interrogate some of the assumptions and genre-boundaries<sup>221</sup> of jazz as well as experimental music. Thompson's work in the field of improvised music shares areas of interest with such groups as the Chicago-based AACM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, both of which organizations exhibit a complex attitude to commonly held definitions of what jazz is about.

Heble (2000:74), discussing the kind of jazz emanating from such groups as the AACM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, typifies a certain ambiguity on their part toward the tradition as follows:

The new Chicago jazz, despite its indebtedness to and involvement with black tradition, then, refuses simply to posit history as a kind of autonomous and recuperable narrative. By problematizing and parodying past texts and genres in the history of jazz, members of the AACM urge us to examine the ways in which we make meaning in culture.<sup>222</sup>

So saying, Heble highlights one of the key difficulties raised by a

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<sup>220</sup> Quotation with respect to Ives's music is further discussed in section 6.1.3.

<sup>221</sup> The notion of genre-boundaries suggests Wittgenstein's idiosyncratic use of the term "grammar," through which concept linguistic moves are construed as "making sense" or not.

<sup>222</sup> Heble concludes his remarks by suggesting that the debate hinges on contemporary ambivalence toward representation: "Or, in Hutcheon's (1995:34) words, representation 'now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it.'"

postmodern conception of history and culture. Postmodernism interrogates the grand narratives of the continuity of history by repeatedly posing the question: "Whose history is under discussion?" This ambivalence toward history is likewise evident in the work of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. For Heble (2000:72-3), their work is proof of "the extent to which history, for the Art Ensemble, is not simply a realm of recoverable facts":

The title of the piece, *Old Time Southside Street Dance*, invokes history; it generates expectations of musical referentiality. But the piece itself does little to fulfil these expectations. The improvisational and experimental stretches seem new (rather than old), and the very thought of someone even *attempting* to dance to this music seems far-fetched. The ironic gap between what the title of the piece leads us to expect and what the piece itself delivers is evidence of the band's awareness that any representation of the past, any evocation of 'old times,' is inevitably a reconstruction informed by the present.

As Mandel states, the AEC's eclecticism has something to do with their refusal to acknowledge the accepted definitions of jazz as a descriptive term for their music (1999:37):

The Art Ensemble's slogan 'Great Black Music—Ancient to the Future' is a working strategy, by which the musicians stake claim to all the world's rhythms and any or every compositional technique as well as the Afro-American tradition of collective improvisation. Always self-aware, often ironic, and sometimes downright sarcastic, the Art Ensemble of Chicago draws on tics and tropes of bebop, doo-wop, swing, soul, reggae, South African song, minimalism, Dixieland, sound concrete and theatrical performance art, and anything else its members come upon to redefine 'jazz'—a term they deem inadequate.

In this regard, Boulez's remarks on the pursuit of authenticity are likewise relevant (2003:47):

Today, great store is set by authenticity, by recreating the exact conditions of a particular era; to a certain extent, that can be a good thing, because in that way the score is protected from outrageous distortions. But such a pursuit of authenticity can also be rather pointless; it is wishful thinking to recreate the past exactly.

For Monson, this problem of authenticity is compounded by a linear conception of jazz history as found in some "standard historical accounts"

of its development (1998:149):

The political contexts of the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the independence movements on the African continent surely informed the accelerated conflation of musical and political freedom, but standard historical accounts of jazz in the decade prior to the emergence of free jazz tend to emphasize a linear succession of musical styles that move from cool jazz to hard bop on an inevitable trajectory toward the modernism and musical avant-gardism of the sixties.

Thompson's familiarity with the work of both the AACM and AEC indicates a similar awareness of such an "ironic gap" in his own work. In this light his tongue-in-cheek reference to Soundpainting as "an elaborate series of chord changes" reflects ironically on the ostensibly modernist complexity and difficulty of bebop, of whom the leading exemplar was Charlie Parker. Thompson's acknowledgement of the mentorship and influence of Anthony Braxton, with whom he studied composition and saxophone for six years, similarly points to a figure whose struggles with the confines of modernity have been extensively documented (Heffley 1996; Lock 1988, 1999; Radano 1993).

### **6.1.2 "Free to be not free"**

Steve Lacy (1994:75), in his contextualization of the free music of the 1960s, suggests its kinship with other creative practices of the time as follows: "Back in the 60's, we played completely (we thought) free: no melody, harmony, rhythm, or structure—just controlled chaos, automatic writing, action painting."

Lacy's point highlights the music's links to some of the artistic ferments and new tactics within twentieth-century creative endeavour. In reverse order, action painting harks back to Jackson Pollock, whose controversial approach to painting was to lay the canvas on the ground, horizontally, and to create artworks that depended on improvisation on the painter's part. Interestingly, in conversation with the author, the Austrian guitarist

Burkhard Stangl has suggested that the table guitar<sup>223</sup> concept, as utilised for example by Keith Rowe in performances by the British improvising group AMM, has its origins in Pollock's revolutionary procedure.

Historically, as Lacy states, absolute freedom of expression (as in the early 1960s) soon led to a situation wherein the music became stale, and, to solve this problem, it was necessary to introduce a set of limits or controls on what was allowable, precisely as a means to rejuvenate the somewhat static results of this conception of improvisation.

The idea of controlled chaos indicates one of the central paradoxes in improvisation as a tactical response to the dynamic tension between self-expression and the expectations of the community: a problem solved for the author in the high flowering of WEAM through the agency and mediation of the conductor. The romantic picture of the composer as the figure in whom is vouchsafed the sometimes contradictory position of guardian and extender of the boundaries of the tradition, and the conductor as intermediary through gesture, depends for its completion on the sometimes anonymous figures of the orchestral players themselves, shadowy figures in service of the orchestral *Klangideal*. Obviously, in this instance, the boundaries of chaos are patrolled by the provision of the notational strategy as symbolic language-game, and entry to the orchestra depends on the acquisition and perfection of musico-literary skills.

In free improvisation, the central problem is precisely how the composer/conductor of the sound-event controls these boundaries. In the context of Wittgenstein's notion of grammar as rules for making sense, it is all too easy (especially for those brought up on a diet of tonal music) to say that free music does not on the face of it "make sense" at all. When

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<sup>223</sup> In this approach, the guitar is laid flat on a horizontal surface, and the player may make use of unconventional playing techniques. For Stangl, this had quite clear connections to Pollock's laying canvases on the ground, as opposed to the conventional easel.

form and procedure are products of the negotiated micro-interactions between improvisers, as in the case of Soundpainting, and when a wide range of forms and procedures are available, one might suggest rather that the decisions are created in the moment, and the key tactic for the Soundpainter is to limit possibilities through the parameters of the gestures themselves. Górecki makes a strikingly similar point about composition in saying, as cited by Harley and Trochimczyk (1999-2001): "Composing is a terribly personal matter: the overcoming of difficulties, gaining knowledge, deciding upon a certain order, a certain method of constructing a new piece. This is important. You have to choose your way, you have to pick a proper path from an infinite number of possibilities."

Lacy's comments on the historical developments within free music are pertinent to this discussion in that he summarizes the key problem of limits and control (1994:75):

It was very exciting, revolutionary music: but after one year, the music started to sound the same, every night. It was no longer 'free.' Then came the 'post-free,' where we started to limit and control, and exploit the kind of playing we had discovered.

After some years of this, the discarded elements (melody, harmony, rhythm, structure, form) returned to the music: renovated, refreshed, wide open with possibilities. We called this 'poly-free,' because the freedom might be anywhere, in a given piece. Also one became free to be not free, if one chose.

What Lacy suggests is the element of paradox, wherein ostensibly free music could be constrained with reference to locating freedom in what must be seen as an ironic response to the domination of the major-minor system. By placing tonality in a new frame, the freedom "to be not free" was the logical conclusion of a revolutionary process in which two apparently contradictory systems (of atonality and tonality) could be ironically juxtaposed.

### **6.1.3 Soundpainting and Abstract Expressionism**

While acknowledging the difficulties of categorizing the range of musics as produced by artists variously labelled as either "free jazz" or "avant-garde," Kelley notes nonetheless how there are some identifiably common features within these diverse musical practices. For Kelley (1999):

Nevertheless, most of these artists not only identified themselves as part of a new movement, but their work taken collectively reveals some common elements. By moving away from traditional sixteen- and thirty-two-bar song structures, standard chord progressions, and the general rules of tonal harmonic practice, they opened up new possibilities for improvisation by drawing on non-Western music; experimenting with tonality, flexible parameters, and variable rhythms; and developing forms of collective improvisation based on linear rather than harmonic qualities.

As Kelley suggests, the range of possibilities available to the musicians of the free jazz period might or might not incorporate elements of what is now referred to as "world music," atonality, irregular rhythms, and an emphasis on the instantaneous and collective in keeping with some of the political aims of "the new thing." Kelley continues by highlighting the misconception that all free music was chaotic and anarchic in its results, and concludes by suggesting a degree of commonality between free jazz and abstract expressionism on the basis of their common tendency towards abstraction (*ibid.*):

The music may or may not have a tonal center; it may have a fixed pulse or some recurring rhythmic pattern, or the music may be suspended 'out of time'; and there may be composed themes or prearranged rules for improvisation. In other words, free jazz is hardly chaos, and it certainly is not uniform. By some accounts, free jazz was to music what abstract expressionism was to painting, because it embraced the abstract features of postwar modernism.

In alluding to the dramatic possibilities of silence in Monk's music, Jenkins similarly (2004a:xxxvi) links Monk's compositional style with the abstract expressionist art of Jackson Pollock. Ornette Coleman was to compare himself with Pollock in a 1981 interview, as Mona Hadler has suggested (1995b:248):

The most apparent connection between jazz musicians and the artists

of the Abstract Expressionist generation is their shared commitment to an improvisational process. There was in fact a reciprocity between artists and musicians in this regard. Ornette Coleman, an originator of free-form jazz or free improvisation, has compared himself to Pollock, stating that Pollock was 'in the same state I was in and doing what I was doing.'<sup>224</sup>

Sawyer argues that Jackson Pollock practised and refined his revolutionary painting techniques in a self-reflexive and quite deliberate fashion. Despite the apparent spontaneity in Pollock's art, his approach was a studied one, in which the refinement of technique was accompanied by solid practising (2006b:17): "Pollock worked hard to master different techniques for dripping paint, experimenting with the results, and he composed his works in advance so that they would give the appearance of maximum spontaneity."

In an interview with Topper Sherwood, Thompson points to the connection between the visual object and its musical or choreographic equivalent by claiming (1999):

Once of Cajun country and now a longtime East Coast musician and educator, Mr. Thompson says he is eager to 'break down the walls' between disciplines. 'For me, there are no lines there,' the conductor explains. 'All art is related. We can look at a painting and imagine it musically or choreographically or imagine it in terms of motion.'

The ability of seeing the potential for dynamism in an ostensibly static work of visual art, as described by Thompson, points to the rationale behind the name Soundpainting itself. Thompson's transdisciplinary impulse, the author suggests, is embodied in the paradoxical name he chose for his approach to improvisation, a name that unites both the visual and aural elements of the Soundpainting language.

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<sup>224</sup> The enclosed quotation (1981:140) is from Chad Mandeles's article "Jackson Pollock and Jazz: Structural Parallels," in *Arts Magazine* Oct. 1981:139-41. As Hadler concludes (*ibid.*), "When Coleman's Atlantic LP *Free Jazz* was released in 1961, it bore a reproduction of a Pollock—by then famous—inside its gatefold cover."

### 6.1.4 Soundpainting and quotation

Metzer (2003:23) has this to say with regard to Charles Ives's use of quotation:

Quoted melodies invite a similar effort, as the listener links them with the past from which they come. Ever the nostalgic, Ives was not content with that simple affair. He did not merely borrow past tunes but distorted them. Such treatment heightens nostalgia by doubling the distance between a melody and its origins, since to the chronological gap between a quotation and its period of currency there is added a musical one between the transformed and original versions.

Discussing the work of the composers Berio, Stockhausen, and Rochberg with regarding to the problem of "controlling the limitless sonic terrain" their new approaches to serialism had made possible, Metzer suggests (2003:111):

One connection which captivated these composers was that between past and present. In its post-war apogee, serialism, along with other avant-garde styles, had stanch'd the past, attempting to create music that could exist without the blood of tradition. Quotation allowed composers to remove these obstructions and to have the past circulate in the present. Not only could the past flow in the present but the present could also flow into the past.

Rochberg's comments in respect of the necessity of renewal share similar ground with Lacy's earlier remarks (section 6.1.1.1) regarding free jazz in the 1960s (Metzer 2003:111):

As Rochberg repeatedly asserted in his essays on renewal, new styles, including serialism, had atrophied, becoming lifeless to listeners. In attacking these styles, he focused on the act of listening, an act ignored by most serial composers writing on music. From the position of the listener, the shortcomings of this music were all too clear. It had no expressive range, what little it could express being limited to 'overintense' extremes.

Discussing Rochberg's *Music for the Magic Theater* (1965), Metzer finds evidence of extensive fragmentation in the sense that the composer's borrowings (from the tonal language of the past) point to absences and

ruptures rather than innocently nostalgic recapitulations (2003:121):

On these torn pages of the past is written the tension between renewal and nostalgia that runs throughout the work. Possessing the treasured means of resolution, the quotations point to renewal. That means, however, is never gained, as the borrowings are abruptly shorn before reaching a close. As incomplete sheets of the past, the quotations no longer point to renewal, but to things lost. Strewn throughout the composition, the tattered tonal borrowings as a group arouse a feeling of nostalgia. They reinforce the perception that the past is fragmentary and cannot fully live in the present.

Heble has argued in similar vein with respect to the Art Ensemble of Chicago and their performance of *Old Time Southside Street Dance* (section 6.1.1.1), in which the contrast between the title of the piece and its very different musical content ironically evokes a type of "down-home" nostalgia, doomed never to be fulfilled.

### **6.1.5 Soundpainting gestures as iconic signs**

The practical information on Soundpainting is contained in Thompson's workbook, which is a detailed instruction manual on the first-order level, that is, of the gestures themselves. This research does not aim therefore at an exhaustive taxonomy of the gestures as signs in themselves, but rather on what might be termed the higher-order elaborations of sets of relationships, and relationships of relationships, as elaborated in Small's reading of Bateson in this regard. At the base of this argument is found the insistence on musicking as to some extent gaining its meaning from the relationships set in motion by the contextualized confirmation, or disconfirmation, of listeners' expectations. As Attali has stated (2003:5):

Today, music heralds—regardless of what the property mode of capital will be—the establishment of a society of repetition in which nothing will happen anymore. But at the same time, it heralds the emergence of a formidable subversion, one leading to a radically new organization never yet theorized, of which self-management is but a distant echo.

For Attali, the prophetic element in musicking is its subversive component,

which interrogates the hegemony of the "society of repetition," in which mass production plays the central role. Music both acknowledges and subverts repetition, in Attali's view, and in this regard the modernist avant-garde of experimental music, free jazz, and Soundpainting share this tactical approach, a deep questioning of the taken-for-granted assumptions of music marketed as products of the "spectacle" (in Debord's terms).

The iconic element of the gestures of Soundpainting is often conveyed in a humorous manner. For example, the <rock> gesture, in which the Soundpainter clenches the fist (to mimic throwing a rock), can be interpreted quite literally "to mean what it says," but at the same time the punning visual element in this gesture lends it an ironic, tongue-in-cheek quality. In this sense, many of the gestures have a double meaning, functioning both as icons and as ironic reflections of an unproblematic iconicity.

In this fashion, that is to say, in the use of an agreed-upon system of iconic signs, Soundpainting solves the problem of the unrepeatable character of much free improvisation, which perhaps accounts for Thompson's motivation for developing Soundpainting. Mithen (2006:119), in discussing the types of gestures used by great apes for the purpose of communicating, defines these as iconic in the sense that:

The path of the gesture matches the desired path of body movement. This contrasts with the symbolic gestures used by human sign language, where there is an arbitrary relationship between the shape or movement of the gesture and its meaning—although it should be noted that the majority of human gestures, and many of those in sign language, also have an iconic element.

### 6.1.6 Recursion in an improvisation by Charlie Parker

**YARDBIRD SUITE** CHARLIE PARKER

The musical score is written in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature and a tempo of 175. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score consists of 36 measures, with a double bar line at the end. The notation includes various chords (F-, Bb7, C7, A7, D7, G7, E-, A7, D-, G7, C7, C, B7+9, E-, F#-7b5, B7+9, E-, A7, D-, E-7b5, A7, D7, D7, D7, C, F-, Bb7, C7, Bb7, A7, D7, G7, C, D-, G7, C, F-, Bb7, C7, Bb7, A7, D7, G7, C) and melodic lines with triplets and slurs. A dashed line above measures 34-36 indicates a 'QUOTATION FROM "COOL BLUES"'. The score ends with the instruction 'SOLO CONTINUES'.

Figure 6.1.6: Charlie Parker—*Cool Blues* nested within *Yarbird Suite*

Bars 34-36 of the above musical example illustrate a simple case of recursion, which Hofstadter (1999:127) characterizes as follows: "(Stories inside stories, movies inside movies, paintings inside paintings, Russian dolls inside Russian dolls (even parenthetical comments inside

parenthetical comments)—these are just a few of the charms of recursion.)<sup>225</sup> As Mithen defines the term (2006:256-257):

Recursion is the manner in which a linguistic phrase can be embedded within itself, as in the case of a clause within a clause. It plays a key role in enabling the generation of an infinite range of expressions from a finite suite of elements.

In the case of the above-transcribed solo, Parker nests a fragment from his own composition *Cool Blues* within his improvisation on *Yardbird Suite*. By referring to his own body of work, Parker may be seen as affirming a form of what Sawyer defines as the ready-made element in improvisation (section 5.1). It is possible to construe Parker's quotation from an extant piece as "filler" material, because it is never used again in the solo, and also appears after a full bar's rest, in which Parker briefly pauses. It is also possible to construe Parker's nesting tactic as tongue-in-cheek, especially in view of the deliberately studied and laconic style of its delivery as utterance. Perhaps the most telling point about this phrase is that it is incomplete with regard to the original composition, in which it appears as follows:

With regard to *Cool Blues*, the author has suggested (1987:40-46) that this piece contains thematic links between the materials that Parker transforms in the course of his improvisation. In other contexts, the quotation may allude to signifyin(g), as in the Massey Hall concert, in which Parker "learnedly" (or parodically) cites passages from Bizet's *Carmen*.

### 6.1.7 A note on palettes

A central implication of recursion, as Mithen has indicated (2006:256-257), is that it allows for "the generation of an infinite range of expressions from

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<sup>225</sup> Although this quotation appears unnecessarily complicated at first glance, closer inspection reveals that the removal of the outermost brackets for cosmetic purposes then makes the phrase within the innermost brackets nonsensical.

a finite suite of elements." In Soundpainting, the principle of recursion is illustrated in numerous ways, some illustrations including for purposes of this argument, (in Mithen's sense of providing an infinite range of combinatorial possibilities) <stab freeze>,<sup>226</sup> and rather less obviously, the <palette> signal. With reference to his own *Deconstructing Haydn* recording, the improvising cellist Gil Selinger defines the Soundpainting <palette> signal in the following terms (2001:1):

In preparing and presenting this deconstruction of Haydn's *Cello Concerto in C major*, we created 'palettes' which are nothing more than brief musical quotations from the original work. Presented in their pure form, they sound identical to what Haydn wrote himself with a few slight alterations. As they appear in the piece, they are small extractions of melody, harmony or even gesture. You may hear a rhythmic idea, small melody fragment or any other extracted musical concept presented and reworked through improvisation.

The significance of the <palette> signal is chiefly that it allows the Soundpainter to initiate pre-rehearsed material into the Soundpainting event proper. For example, in Paris, the ensemble with which the author performed workshopped a palette incorporating elements of the *James Bond* theme and topical dialogue around an imaginary confrontation between George Bush and Jacques Chirac, in which naturally Chirac emerged the victor. In performances in Pretoria directed by François Jeanneau and in Bloemfontein by the author, both ensembles used Abdullah Ibrahim's composition *Mannenber* as the basis of another palette.

In Soundpainting, <palettes> provide a way for the composer/conductor to employ recursive tactics to return to pre-rehearsed original material, and this gesture is used extensively in the Soundpainting rendition of the Haydn *Cello Concerto in C major*, which forms the second part of Selinger's *Deconstructing Haydn*.

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<sup>226</sup> In this gesture, the performers are required to repeat whatever fragment they have just played.

### 6.1.8 Anthony Braxton and Walter Thompson

Derek Bailey describes the somewhat controversial figure of Anthony Braxton as follows (1992:57):

Anthony Braxton, who works, as did many of his great predecessors, to extend his tradition and not merely to celebrate it, has been at various times a favourite target of the propagandists, attacking him for: betraying his race (as was Louis Armstrong); being an intellectual (as was Charlie Parker); and diluting the musical purity of his tradition (as was John Coltrane). In short, he stands accused of just about all those things which have previously served to enrich and strengthen jazz. Braxton, recognized by the musicians who work with him as an outstanding musical figure, is unlikely to be deflected by this sort of stuff but if jazz no longer values the sort of qualities he represents then it has a pretty arid future.

One of the first problems for jazz critics has been Braxton's refusal to stay within the genre-boundaries of the field. Braxton's resistance to being pigeonholed in a particular style is demonstrated by his extensive output including recordings in many genres, from opera to jazz and twentieth century art music, as well as a body of theoretical writings (*The Tri-Axium Writings*) on music and philosophy. Wynton Marsalis, the self-appointed custodian of the jazz tradition, has refused to see Braxton as a jazz musician at all, an opinion that gives away more about Marsalis's neo-classicist (read conservative) stance than it does about Braxton's status as a pioneer and iconoclast.

Braxton's *For Alto* (1971), a two-record set of compositions for unaccompanied alto saxophone, was widely hailed as a harbinger of "the shape of things to come," and heralded a new trend in which instrumentalists (typically of the single-note persuasion) followed suit by issuing sets of such recordings during the 1970s and later. Typically these single-line instruments did not provide any harmonic framework or possibility for self-accompaniment (as in the case of music for solo piano or guitar). "Recorded in 1969, this historic album was the first lengthy document of solo saxophone improvisation" (*For Alto* CD notes). Heffley

defines the relationship between music and language in Braxton's terminology in this fashion (1996:228):

Braxton calls his solo alto music 'language music.' The way he uses the word 'language' is as people do when they say 'the language of the blues,' or 'the language of love': the particular voice with which particular sound events speak. The more general usage of the word would present trills, for example, as a *part* of the language which is music; Braxton calls them a 'language type' in their own right, a field within which (compositional and improvisational) statements can be made. 'My saxophone music,' he told Townley, 'is nothing more than language systems...which allow me to enter new areas.'

For Corbett, there are three key relationships at play in musicking, all of which are relevant to this recording of Braxton (1995:226): "There are three bodies: the body of the performer, the body of the instrument, the body of knowledge." What Corbett is suggesting is at the heart of the jazz musician's need to acknowledge the tradition while at the same time making a personal and innovative statement so as to establish himself or herself as a "speaking subject." This double bind (the tension between the individual and the tradition) is resolved in Monk's solo piano recording *Solo Monk*, in which the pianist pays homage to earlier piano stylists like James P. Johnson and the ragtime period in general in a tribute that is more ironic than purely nostalgic.<sup>227</sup>

Heffley (1996:228-9) sees Braxton's unaccompanied casting of *For Alto* as "a bold move," especially since the source material consists of Braxton's original compositions and assumes no familiarity with a shared body of tradition, as in the case of jazz standards.

If he had recorded solo a full set of standards or song-form-based jazz heads, the solo situation in itself would have been a bold move,

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<sup>227</sup> The nostalgic element is expressed in Monk's choice of repertoire, presumably from material that he was familiar with in his youth, such as *Dinah* and other fairly 'corny' Tin Pan Alley standards, while the ironic component is demonstrated by his uncanny fracturing of the rhythmic structure of such pieces, which are punctuated by long silences and re-castings of the harmonic framework in new and sometimes shocking dissonances.

but not without some promptings from both Western and African American traditions. Seen through the latter, it is a move resonant with the ancient and still current pattern of a collective voice splitting itself into an individual expression winging on the wind of the supportive background of the collective, then reuniting to do the same through another individual voice.

Heffley views *For Alto* as incorporating elements from the Western art "composer" tradition as well as significant traces of "Africanization" in its use of such quasi-vocal timbral manipulations, such as growls, smears, notes of indeterminate pitch, and so on, and explicitly links this timbral manipulation to ritual practices and the testifying tradition within religious ceremony.

One sees this pattern in nonhuman primate behavior, in countless tribal rituals around the world, in the call-and-response and testifying dynamics of churches (dynamics mirroring the Hebrew psalmist and congregation, or the Greek protagonist and chorus), and in the cycle of ensemble and solo statements in the many musical traditions.

Braxton's interaction with the collective should be seen in the light of Corbett's comments regarding the body of knowledge (1995:226), in the sense that the ensemble is imaginary, and Braxton's utterances take place in the musical space of the recording studio. The author has in mind Jenkins's assessment of Steve Lacy's solo work, in which the acoustic environment is an important variable and undoubtedly has an influence on the particular sound-world that Lacy calls into being (2004b: 206):

Lacy's solo efforts tend to be of a piece, each showing his pinpoint precision of intonation and delivery no matter what the underlying motif. One of the best to grace the market recently is *Hooky* (2000, Emanem), recorded in Montréal in March 1976. The acoustics of St.-Jean l'Évangéliste Church enabled Lacy to essentially duet with himself, in the manner of Europeans like Evan Parker.

Both recordings raise a problem with regard to a definition of musical space. Clifton's phenomenological account of music, while drawing from the WEAM tradition, sheds light on this concept by defining existence itself as a function of spatial location (1983:137-138):

Thus, 'to be' means to be located: to be here or there, near or far, present or absent, under or above, high or low. Space is presupposed in every perceptual act, since space is part of what defines the relation between perceiving subject and perceived object. Space is implicit even in the sentence 'I experience that piece as being atonal.' In spatial terms, it can be interpreted thus: 'I (the center, here) experience (activity occurring in a specific place) that (there, periphery) as being atonal (the spaces characteristic of atonal music).' But this is a reflective statement, a result of stepping out of the indwelling act, and as such it seems to imply a distinction between 'I' and 'that piece.' In the moment of lived experience, however, this distinction disappears, such that the spaces formed by music are actually inhabited by my being there, in the space-time world of that piece.

In speaking of a "musical space," one is suggesting affinities with Ramanna's notion of "discourse of place" as well as Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*, in which protagonists are constantly engaged in the game of negotiation of identity. As Bourdieu states (1990:63, emphasis in original):

The habitus, as society written into the body, into the biological individual, enables the infinite number of acts of the game—written into the game as possibilities and objective demands—to be produced; the constraints and demands of the game, although they are not restricted to a code of rules, *impose themselves* on those people—and those people alone—who, because they have a feel for the game, a feel, that is, for the immanent necessity of the game, are prepared to perceive them and carry them out.

Braxton's *For Alto* interacts with the past in drawing from such traditional jazz elements as the blues and the lyricism of ballad playing, and in this sense pays homage to what Bourdieu terms "the constraints and demands of the game." At the same time, however, Braxton acknowledges the influence of WEAM's avant-garde, by dedicating one of the most radical pieces on the recording to John Cage. This piece (*To Composer John Cage*) employs extended techniques such as honks as well as "multiphonics, pointillistic intervals, and scalar lyricism" in a way that is nothing short of revolutionary. In so doing, Braxton indicates a familiarity with other games (notably the modernist avant-garde one) and demonstrates an eclecticism that transcends the boundaries of the "traditional jazz" language-game.

Braxton's approach to standards is characterized by a steadfast refusal to abide by the accepted rules of this game. His tenor saxophone solo on *There is no greater love* (Circle, *Paris Concert*), for instance, displays a studied avoidance of "acceptable" note-choices, and sounds even more atonal and modernistic in the context of the fairly straight-ahead harmonic progression of the piece. Circle's interpretation of this standard, in adopting the traditional game plan of head and solos, and even the hallowed format of four bar call and response exchanges between the trio and the drummer Barry Altschul, is the most conservative of all the pieces on the album, but Braxton balks at modifying his language to accommodate this.

Braxton's piano playing on *Live at the Knitting Factory* is mostly couched in an atonal language at odds with the repertoire of standards chosen for the performance. Such staples as Kenny Dorham's *Blue Bossa*, which has a permanent place in the set list of corporate functions and wedding gigs, are subjected to a somewhat antagonistic juxtaposition of the language-games of jazz and experimental music in the context of Braxton's highly technical pianism.<sup>228</sup> Additionally, Braxton for the most part seldom allows the band to re-state the heads in traditional jazz fashion, thereby subverting yet another formal closure characteristic of the standards language-game. Braxton's tactic may be seen in this context as an avoidance of this traditional and somewhat telic notion of closure within the standard jazz idiom.

Similarly, Thompson (section 6.2.1) acknowledges a debt to two potentially antagonistic traditions: that of jazz, of which Soundpainting to his mind is part of "a direct lineage," as well as the avant-garde, as typified by such figures as Ives, Xenakis, and Stockhausen. It has already been noted that Thompson studied both saxophone and composition with Braxton, and a

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<sup>228</sup> While acknowledging Braxton's right to express himself as he sees fit, this antagonism sometimes seems downright perverse in its deliberate "wrongness."

not dissimilar eclecticism of approach is undoubtedly evident in Soundpainting, which combines this open-endedness with a reluctance to be boxed-in by stylistic parameters, and in so doing, acknowledges a contemporary attitude towards the fluidity of genre definitions. In the adoption of this tactic Thompson displays with Braxton an ironic ambiguity toward the rules of the game.

In Braxton's case, this is a not uncontroversial move, as it dramatizes this personal conflict in terms of the idiosyncratic musical space created by such tactics. As the Wikipedia entry on Anthony Braxton states:

Even at the peak of his renown in the mid- to late '70s, Braxton was a controversial figure amongst musicians and critics. His self-invented (yet heavily theoretical) approach to playing and composing jazz seemed to have as much in common with late 20th century classical music as it did jazz, and therefore alienated those who considered jazz at a full remove from European idioms.

For Lyotard, the site of this controversy is patrolled and circumscribed by linguistic rules, which proliferate throughout contemporary discourse (1984:40-41):

New languages are added to the old ones, forming suburbs of the old town: 'the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus.'<sup>229</sup> Thirty-five years later we can add to the list: machine languages, the matrices of game theory, new systems of musical notation, systems of notation for nondenotative forms of logic (temporal logics, deontic logics, modal logics), the language of the genetic code, graphs of phonological codes, and so on.

Although Lyotard in this case is describing written languages, it is precisely in this sense of openness to the language-games of both jazz and experimental music that Braxton is at his most controversial. These language-games may be expressed either in written form or purely through what Joseph Roach has described as 'orature.' Following the work of Ngugi wa'Thiongo, Roach has defined orature as (1995:45): "The range of

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<sup>229</sup> Lyotard is referring to Wittgenstein PI § 18.

cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals.”

Roach's central theme may be defined as the interdependence of performance and collective memory, wherein literature and orature are construed not as an opposition of schematized categories, but as two modes of language that have influenced one another interactively over time. For Certeau, orality is defined as that which must be differentiated from the scriptural (1988:134):

In very diverse ways, orality is defined by (or as) that from which a 'legitimate' practice—whether in science, politics, or the classroom—must differentiate itself. The 'oral' is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the 'scriptural' is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition. A frontier (and a front) of Western culture is established by that separation.

This frontier defines and circumscribes what is legitimate within the cultural field of Western civilization, and may be seen as a hegemonic strategy for determining what contributes to progress, and what does not. In this light, written language authorizes itself by creating this division, and negating what Certeau describes as "the magical world of voices and tradition." One should not lose sight of the possibility (or necessity, perhaps) of construing this magical world as suffused with sound, filled to overflowing with noise, in Attali's sense of the term. Soundpainting in many ways acknowledges the existence of this world, not least of all in its joyously contradictory employment of elements drawn from the language-games of the participants' collective histories.

The range and variety of extended techniques employed by Braxton in *For Alto* attest to this possibility, in that the most immediately "controversial" element in his playing is not his adoption of the linguistic elements of experimental music notation *per se*, but his thoroughly revolutionary exploration of their sonic possibilities as sounds in and for themselves. For Radano, the apparently controversial elements in Braxton's music were employed as grist to the mill of the record industry's marketing strategy

(1995a:190):

To enhance the image of stylistic coherence, moreover, publicists attenuated the radicalism of Braxton's art by shifting attention to more superficial matters. Centralizing the most diverting characteristics of Braxton's personality and creativity, they would shape a public image that on the surface celebrated pluralistic excess while maintaining the conventions of tradition. The idiosyncrasies of the caricature would, in turn, help to sell a hyperbolic story of 'controversy' that supported promotional goals while matching claims of his larger-than-life importance.

One might say that a similar process (in which the focus is on the right to curatorship of the jazz canon) animates Wynton Marsalis's elevation to the status of keeper of the jazz flame (Nisenson 2000). While many jazz musicians are antipathetic to Marsalis's status in jazz, it should be noted that he is one of the most publicly successful of those musicians who have managed to maintain a balance between classical phrasing and jazz and is rated both as an interpreter of the WEAM repertoire and a jazz improviser.

Giddins, when choosing Braxton's *Piece Three* from Creative Music Orchestra as most representative of its year of recording (1976), in a section called *Postwar Jazz: An Arbitrary Roadmap*, describes the composition as follows (2004:478-479):

Not exactly typical Braxton, but then what is? And who else would have tried something as ironic and unexpected as this brazen sendup of a march—a piece, incidentally, that actually had everyone taking a position. The jubilant theme, which owes as much to the beer garden as the military needs, modulates to a repeated oompah figure, as though stuck in a rut.

The Soundpainting language can be shown to employ two elements in common with this piece of Braxton's as follows: i) in a generalized sense that any of these tactics are available in all contemporary forms of musicking, Thompson's language may employ satirical, parodic or ludic elements at any given moment, and ii) more specifically, Thompson's use of the <stab freeze> gesture (2006:30), described as "a CD-like skip with

the material," while producing irregularly repeated bursts of speech or music, displays a similar line of thought to Braxton's compositional approaches in his 1976 piece.

## **6.2 Soundpainting as collaborative process**

The author examines the element of collaboration in Soundpainting with respect to the ideas of peer learning, live composition, indeterminacy, and extended techniques.

### **6.2.1 Peer learning**

The author attended a week of workshops in Soundpainting in Paris during 2003, in which Thompson explained the basis and content of a selection of the gestures to be used in the subsequent live performances. During these workshops, a more or less constant nucleus of actors, musicians, and a dancer were initiated into the details of the Soundpainting system, and a set of approximately 80 gestures was explored in some detail.

In comparison with the workshops which François Jeanneau had directed in Pretoria three months prior to this, the ensemble contained musicians of a generally higher calibre, who were more familiar with the demands of such avant-garde concepts as <extended techniques>, in addition to the variable of actors and dancers. Thompson began by explaining the basic terminology of the gestures as deployed in a Soundpainting event: long tones, volume, and indications with respect to tempo and dynamic shapes.

The significant point is that the acquisition of these gestures in both instances took place in a group context, as opposed to the individual's more traditional development of musical skills through practising his or her instrument in isolation. In this regard, Sawyer's remarks regarding peer collaboration and learning seem particularly relevant. Drawing a contrast between this methodology and what he refers to as transmission and

acquisition-based learning, Sawyer states (2006:187):

In contrast, learning sciences research emphasizes a new style of learning—one in which the teacher works with students in a community of learners, providing appropriate knowledge to student project groups as they build knowledge together. The teacher is always present but is not dominating the discussion; the teacher often facilitates or channels the discussion, but if students are working together effectively an experienced teacher may realize that the best thing to do is to remain silent.

In the case of both workshops, Thompson and Jeanneau acted more or less as facilitators, allowing the events to emerge from the ensemble's understanding of the gestures, rather than prescribing the content of the music. This allowed for rapid development in the degree of complexity of the proceedings, as both workshop leaders soon began to combine the signs into syntactical strings, somewhat akin to the way in which children combine simple words into sentences in their process of acquiring familiarity with ordinary language. Drawing on twenty years of research into collaborative learning methods, Sawyer suggests (*ibid.*):

Peer teaching has been shown to provide enhanced learning to both the peer teacher and the student, and cooperative classroom groups result in greater learning than competitive or individualistically structured learning environments. Collaboration in structured, in-class formats has been shown to increase students' knowledge in a wide range of subjects, including biology, mathematics, composing narratives, and computer programming.

The implications of Sawyer's point for music education are very significant, and the author will return to these in the final chapter of this work, but let it be noted in the meantime that the traditional methods of one-on-one instrumental instruction may well tend to foster competitiveness and individualism to the detriment of understanding the different demands of collaboration within an ensemble context. The aspirant musician should be encouraged to develop an individual voice, while nonetheless acknowledging his or her place within the ensemble at any given moment, and modifying their contribution in accordance with the flow of the proceedings.

## 6.2.2 Soundpainting as live composition

"For me, improvisation and composition are almost the same thing; I don't see them being separate. I don't know where my improvisation starts and my composition begins—they're one and the same." (Butch Morris, cited in Mandel 1999:63).

According to the romantic ideal of the composer as in touch with mysterious and ineffable creative processes, who pursues the muse in splendid isolation from the demands of day-to-day living, Thompson's definition of Soundpainting as "live composition" may seem something of a contradiction in terms. Attali challenges this traditional (and somewhat Proustian) view of the composer in stating (2003:143):

Composition does not prohibit communication. It changes the rules. It makes it a collective creation, rather than an exchange of coded messages. To express oneself is to create a code, or to plug into a code in the process of being elaborated by the other.

Composition—a labor on sounds, without a grammar, without a directing thought, a pretext for festival—is no longer a central network, an unavoidable monologue, becoming instead a real potential for relationships.

It must be admitted that Attali's view of composition is somewhat unorthodox, for it is a far cry from the powerful mythology of the composer as genius, the sole agent of creativity (section 5.1). Cook describes the underpinnings of this mythology (2001:14):

To understand music as performance means to see it as an irreducibly social phenomenon, even when only a single individual is involved. This observation derives its force from the extent to which the manifestly social practice of music has been conceptualized in terms of a direct and private communication from composer to listener.

Cook problematizes the "direct and private" nature of this communication as working against the "manifestly social" nature of musicking as

performance. For McClary in her Afterword to *Noise*, Attali's optimism about the future of musicking is demonstrated by his choice of terminology as follows (2003:156):

Attali's term for the hope of the future, *Composition*, seems strange at first glance, for this is the word used in Western culture for centuries to designate the creation of music in general. But the word has been mystified since the nineteenth century, such that it summons up the figure of a semidivine being, struck by holy inspiration, and delivering forth ineffable delphic utterances. Attali's usage returns us to the literal components of the word, which quite simply means 'to put together.'

The availability of music composition software, such as Apple's *GarageBand*, which requires no prior training to produce musical results,<sup>230</sup> bears out Attali's optimistic claims. What he is suggesting is that access to this mysterious process called composition is no longer the exclusive province of the trained composer. Defining composition in its simplest terms as "a labor on sounds" points to a democratization of music as signifier, at the same time making few aesthetic judgements about the value of such activity.

Thompson similarly has little to say about the relative aesthetic value of his Soundpainting compositions. What interests him seems rather to be the success of the musicking as process, not making judgements about its artistic quality as product.

The Soundpainter, as composer/conductor subsumes *at the same moment in one and the same physical body* the traditionally entrenched separation of the roles of composer and performer. This division of labour may well be termed "traditional," but is a relatively recent phenomenon. As Small points out, this role division was not always the case, as, in the Baroque period, for example, the task of conducting was often assigned to

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<sup>230</sup> *Garageband* includes a set of pre-recorded loops which may be assembled into a final composition with relative ease and speed compared to the 'pencil and paper' method of the past.

one of the musicians in the orchestra, usually the continuo player, whose part often consisted of a set of fairly skeletal instructions (figured bass), not unlike a lead sheet as found in jazz fake books.<sup>231</sup>

Both these types of notational approaches allow for a certain degree of latitude in interpretation; for the Baroque player, he was supplied only with the bass-line and the chord figurations. The decision as to how to voice the chords was left literally in his hands. For this reason, he could have an arm free at a critical moment so as to indicate a cue to the other musicians. This state of affairs could only be maintained as long as the size of the orchestra permitted, and the advent of the romantic and modern period orchestras saw a phasing out of this performer/conductor by creating a new role for a human being who basically did not play a musical instrument, but *only conducted*. With the increase in numbers of musicians within the symphony orchestra, one theorizes that the job of conductor may have initially been designed merely as a way to solve the practical problem of sight lines. The musician/conductor was *inside* the orchestra, the conductor *outside*, in the dual senses of physical space and role division.

In the case of the jazz musician, when reading from a "fake book," which consists of melody and chord symbols,<sup>232</sup> he or she supplies improvised material on an interpretive level. In addition, in this genre the notated melody is also open to a degree of rhythmic flexibility through techniques such as anticipation and delay. These techniques, in combination with the chord-scale system, are prevalent in the teaching of improvisation at beginner to intermediate level, and allow for a degree of creativity from the outset in the improviser's engagement with the material to hand.

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<sup>231</sup> In both cases, the performers are allowed a degree of latitude in 'fleshing out the skeleton' by contributing material of their own.

<sup>232</sup> This data may be supplemented with additional material (usually transcribed from the original recording) that is deemed necessary for 'authentic' performance, as in specifically notated bass-lines or rhythmic figures/grooves.

In the case of big band charts where no improvising experience can be assumed by the arranger, it is sometimes the practice to write out an optional solo to cater for such possibilities. As these charts increase in standard of difficulty, the soloist will be provided with chord symbols, and will be expected to create a solo whether by ear or through a theoretical parsing of the progression so as to work out the correct scales through a process of deduction. Parsing in this instance will involve making explicit the relationship between the function and quality of the chords relative to the key signature by making the appropriate melodic note choices within the logical dictates of the changes.

While Soundpainting may or may not draw on the languages of tonality and musical notation to achieve its aims, it is clear that a degree of familiarity with these languages may assist an improviser in interacting with the traditions of jazz and experimental music from which Soundpainting has developed.

### 6.2.2.1 Soundpainting and indeterminacy

Thompson, in conversation with the author in Paris 2003, also acknowledged the importance of the work of the composer Earle Brown, who was influenced in the 1940s by the work in the visual arts of Calder, Pollock, and Robert Rauschenberg. For Nyman (1999:56), "Brown's interest in the work of Calder and Pollock, which he first saw in 1948 or 9, accounts for the two important elements of his own work: spontaneity and open-form mobility." Brown's approach to indeterminacy was through the use of new notational methods, as Nyman describes (1999:56-57):

The 1952-3 works, assembled under the overall title *Folio*, are of greater significance<sup>233</sup> since they move directly into performance

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<sup>233</sup> Nyman is referring in this context to Brown's more determinate fully-notated pieces of the early 1950s.

indeterminacy by introducing 'invented notations of a highly ambiguous graphic nature' which provide for a permanent mobility from one performance to another, designed specifically 'to encourage conceptual "mobility" in the performers' approach to the score.'

By leaving room for latitude in interpretation through graphic indeterminacy, Brown placed an emphasis on collaboration and the contribution of the individual performer(s) to the musical process, acknowledging the element of playfulness in this approach. Clifton similarly isolates this ludic element in both aleatoric and indeterminate musicking, and it is this factor that allows him to subsume both these activities under the same heading (1983:236):

Still, I choose to gather both indeterminate music and aleatoric music under a single heading, since both involve the playful manipulation of possibilities. Composer and performer indulge in a kind of game whose result becomes identifiable with its process, since no one wins or loses.

The tactic of incorporating indeterminate elements as part of the compositional design of a piece interrogates the more orthodox conception of the performer as subservient to the composer's will, and, in so doing, makes room for a collaborative element to enter into an intersubjective musical space, and has much in common with Thompson's aesthetic ideals in respect to Soundpainting. As Nyman suggests, with reference to Brown's compositional approach, indeterminacy lets in the human element and places the emphasis on the creative process (1999:57):

If one describes an indeterminate piece as one in which the performer has an active hand in giving the music form, then Brown's are indeterminate in the literal sense. Both Brown and Cage dramatize the structural aspect of process, as Feldman has noted, but whereas Cage fixes the structure temporally, and either suggests the material or (in his earlier pieces) used the *I Ching* to let the content decide itself, Brown composes the content and allows, as he says, the 'human element to operate by opening up the form.' Brown has more recently written that he sees 'form as a function of people acting in response to a described environment...it seems reasonable to consider the potential of the human mind as a collaborative creative parameter.'

Seeing Brown's statement regarding form in the light of Bourdieu's habitus,

further parallels with Soundpainting begin to emerge. In this context, the Soundpainting signals are the "described environment" to which Brown refers, and the degree of indeterminacy is determined by the specificity (or otherwise) of a given signal. In the case of the <long tone> signal, for example, Thompson's language allows for a wide range of interpretation, from completely indeterminate to somewhat determinate to completely specific with respect to pitch, for example, depending on the degree of fixity of the syntax of the signal. Soundpainting, unlike the case of Brown's composition *Folio*, does not depend on notational ambiguity to achieve its goals of indeterminacy, but rather makes use of the degree of latitude built into the signals themselves.

In Europe, the compositional activities of the German free pianist, composer, and bandleader, Alexander von Schlippenbach, have been documented in a series recorded by two main groups under his leadership, Globe Unity Orchestra, and the Berlin Contemporary Jazz Orchestra, formed in 1988. In this regard, his comments on conducting are pertinent to this discussion (<http://www.shef.ac.uk/misc/rec/ps/efi/mschlipp.html>):

Many of our pieces need a lot of conducting, and it's a considerable challenge for me. I like to do it and am still discovering the subject and its implications on composition, especially for pieces with improvisation as an essential part. For example, we have a purely 'structural' piece of mine in the repertoire, which is basically about conducting. There's no conventional notation, just abstract semantic information for the players to interpret and react upon. But it's the conductor who gives the performance a formal structure, which can be different with every performance.

In Soundpainting, the "abstract semantic information" to which von Schlippenbach alludes is contained in its signals, and the realization of the piece, as in its "formal structure," is similarly under the direction of the Soundpainter. To the extent that von Schlippenbach's piece is "about" conducting, it may be said that Soundpainting is "about" musicking as process, and in this it certainly shares affinities with Brown's work of 1952-53. Nyman (1999:56) notes Brown's sympathy with abstract expressionism, as evidenced in the "spontaneous" aims of his

indeterminate compositions, and this genre of art also was an obvious influence on Thompson's development of the Soundpainting language.

Ron Thompson (Walter Thompson's father) was an abstract expressionist painter, and a cross-pollination of ideas from musicking and the visual arts is perhaps suggested by the very term Soundpainting itself, an apparent contradiction in terms in that it encompasses both aural and visual elements (section 6.1.2). It should be borne in mind that this is far from an antagonistic opposition, as a similar cross-pollination forms the root of many collaborative endeavours in the twentieth century. One of the earliest examples of multimedia collaboration is the 1917 staging of the ballet *Parade*, which harnessed the talents of many of the leading lights of the avant-garde of early modernism. This early instance of artistic collaboration, while not without its problems,<sup>234</sup> may be seen to have interrogated the pervasive idea of individual creativity and ownership, in turn a product of the mythology of the romantic era.

There are many instances of such collaborations during the twentieth century, perhaps one of the most notable of which being Cage's work with the choreographer Merce Cunningham, as well as the numerous examples of performance art from the 1960s onward, in which these the hitherto impermeable domains of the separate art-forms became to be seen as artificial boundaries to the creative impulse. It might be argued that the main characteristics of Soundpainting are Thompson's emphasis on the collaborative process and his reluctance to accept the creativity myth that assigns to the composer the sole responsibility for creation.

### 6.2.2.2 Soundpainting and extended techniques

In accordance with Lewis's discussion of the element of cross-pollination

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<sup>234</sup> As Rodrigues and Garratt note (2005:53), "*Parade* involved—with a great deal of intrigue and back-biting—the combined and starry talents of Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Erik Satie, Léonide Massine, and Serge Diaghilev."

taking place between jazz and various kinds of experimental music procedures (2004b), Soundpainting also draws on the commonalities between these types of musicking. In this regard, the <extended techniques> gesture (Thompson 2006:31) calls for the performer(s) to employ radical transformations to the "traditional" sound of their respective instruments. These may include the kinds of distortions of technique as described by Corbett with regard to the classical guitar (1995a:227):

In classical guitar training, for example, sounds that are otherwise obtainable—through a variety of 'extended techniques'—are proscribed by a set of hand positions that cultivate correct and well-disciplined musicianship. These hand positions are painful and by no means 'natural,' but—like penmanship—they require the development of certain muscles and the contortion of the hand into an optimal playing position to execute the score. Connected to this are correct postures, foot and arm positions.

Corbett's point seems to be that training in "correct and well-disciplined musicianship" tends by definition to exclude such tactics as extended techniques, which, as he concludes (*ibid.*), have the effect of rebelling against the emphasis on the physicality of sound as produced by the performer(s)' body:

The training of the hands, their adjustment and alignment to meet the requirements of correct technique, and thus the development of musculature incapable of producing 'bad' technique, all ensure the reproduction of music outside, off the surface of, away from the performer. Standard technical facility is therefore a strategy by which the instrument and performer are both denied a certain kind of presence in the performance, a strategy by which they are disavowed as the writing of culture and thus a strategy that protects written (preinscribed) music and the discipline of the body against exposure and detection.

In the avant-garde in general, and Soundpainting in particular, these tactics of timbral "play" point to an engagement by the performers with the embodied and physical nature of sound itself, as well as an engagement with the porous boundaries between these types of musicking. Corbett's list of some of these techniques may be useful in amplifying these points, as follows (1995a:231):

LaDonna Smith rubs a moistened finger on the body of her violin, producing squeaks and sputters.

John Zorn plays his clarinets and game calls into a bowl of water, producing distorted, gurgling sounds.

Butch Morris might choose to turn his cornet around and press his lips to the bell of the horn, producing wet sounds that betray the presence of both surfaces (lip/metal).

By announcing the presence of the performer as embodied producer of sound, the radicalism of extended techniques is in deconstructing the whole tradition of the *Klangideal*, in which the body of the performer is controlled and suppressed in service to the demands of performance without intrusion into the traditional WEAM space of the concert hall.

### 6.3 Soundpainting: language or system?

As the primary source of information for the first series of Soundpainting gestures is contained in Thompson 2006, the author will not consider the signs as first-order information, but rather examine whether Soundpainting is best defined as a language or as a system. As defined on Thompson's Soundpainting website:

Soundpainting is the composing/conducting language developed by Walter Thompson for musicians, dancers, poets, actors, and visual artists working in the medium of structured improvisation. At present this language includes more than 750 gestures made by the composer/conductor indicating the type of improvisation that is desired of the performers.

Source: <http://soundpainting.com/>

In Thompson's workbook, however, Soundpainting is defined slightly differently (Thompson 2006:2):

Soundpainting is the universal live composing sign language for the performing and visual arts. Soundpainting was created by New York composer Walter Thompson for musicians, dancers, actors, poets, and visual artists working in the medium of structured improvisation. Presently, the language comprises more than 750 gestures that are

signed by the composer/conductor to indicate the type of improvisation desired of the performers.

Two salient differences emerge in the slight variations between these definitions of Soundpainting. The first one, found at Thompson's website, describes it as a language, as in "the composing/conducting language"), while the later version (Thompson 2006:2) considers Soundpainting as "the universal live composing sign language." It is noteworthy that Thompson makes use of the terms "structured improvisation," "composer/conductor," and "gestures" consistently in both definitions. In the first place, the system of rules is actually "in the hands" of the Soundpainter, who subsumes in one person the gradual separation between the roles of composers and conductors, which reached its apogee in the late romantic period. There are a number of exceptions (Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss come to mind most immediately), but it seems fair to suggest that this division of labour is generally entrenched, "taken for granted," in the Barthean sense. Thompson's method interrogates this division by uniting these two roles in one person who directs the musicking through gestures of the body.<sup>235</sup>

Considering Thompson's use of the term "universal," this is not to be taken in Sun Ra's sense of music as a universal language. Rather, the transdisciplinary character of the gestures means not merely that they are inherently capable of transcending the creative boundaries of the particular language-game in operation, but that the various practitioners in the Soundpainting ensemble understand and apply these gestures in a manner consistent with their particular discipline. While it is true, as Lewis has argued (1996, 2004b) that the boundaries between these language-games are far more "porous" than before, they nonetheless exist, and,

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<sup>235</sup> This is aptly illustrated by the <shape-line> gesture, wherein the musical shapes created by the musicians follow the Soundpainter's movements, thereby fusing (by means of these gestures) the central elements of mime, dance, movement, and music. In this sense, Soundpainting clearly adheres to its definition as a sign language, and, as the author has suggested, conveys its meaning through non-verbal communication.

therefore, the author is suggesting that in this regard Soundpainting is an example of postmodern incredulity towards the musical equivalent of the composer's Proustian creative retreat from the world to gain inspiration in order to return with the Promethean fire of the finished product.

Soundpainting is not carried out in isolation, and the Soundpainter is able to draw inspiration from the musicians, who converse about their individual histories and personalities in the group flow of the Soundpainting event. This process is structured through the common acceptance of the permissible range of interpretations of a given gesture. Through learning the signs collectively in the context of a Soundpainting workshop, additionally, a spirit of teamwork is engendered, which fosters collaboration and creative "profit-sharing" in the compositional process. The eclecticism of the various Soundpainting productions, in this sense, is truly a dynamic function of the continuum of relationships between the creative histories of the individual Soundpainter and the performers.

As an example, during the course of the ensemble's performances in Paris, Thompson allowed François Jeanneau to Soundpaint one half of the ensemble simultaneously by dividing the ensemble into two groups, each with its own Soundpainter "in charge." This act of Thompson's in many ways points to his own interrogation of the autocratic role of the orchestra conductor in WEAM, and provides an ironic reflection (by democratizing Soundpainting itself) of the power structures within orchestral musicking.

The central element of feedback between composer/conductor in the person of the Soundpainter is what enables one to consider Soundpainting as an example of a cybernetic system. Extending the navigational metaphor to the understanding of this type of musicking, the Soundpainter in this light may be regarded as the steersman of the ship for the duration of a particular performance. His or her governor's role in this case is mediated by gesture, allowing for results to be achieved (by means of recursion) that are combinatorially impossible with sheet music, which reflects the narrative will of the individualized composer and takes place in

linear time. It has been argued (Mithen 2006; Hofstadter 1999) that recursion allows for a potentially infinite range of combinatorial outcomes, and the boundaries of this range are traditionally set by the composer, more or less "in stone" through the medium of notation.

Thompson's preference is to view Soundpainting as a language, not a system. In correspondence with the author (19 April 2006), he highlighted a very important aspect of his reasoning in so defining it:

There are several gestures in Soundpainting which defy reasoning—irregular verbs so-to-speak. In other words, they break the rules of Soundpainting. A good example of this is the 'Watch Me' gesture, which gets used as an 'off' gesture when removing yourself from 'Shapeline' mode. Another example is the 'Synchronize' gesture—in this case, the gesture isn't initiated by a 'Go' gesture—the content is performed once the 'Synchronization' gesture is signed.

In most spoken languages there are irregular verbs—the reasoning for their existence is confusing. I can't say how this came about in other languages, but I would venture to say it's probably for the same reason—in the Soundpainting language, in each case, I had to break the rules to achieve my goals.

So saying, Thompson points to the futility of attempting to finalize Soundpainting as a system with a finite and self-consistent set of rules. In this sense, he may be said to use language, and especially spoken language, as a metaphor for music, which procedure is not only indicated in the ordinary language of improvising musicians (as described by Monson in *Saying Something*), but also in the academic discourse of jazz educators, such as Rossi (2005:11) who speaks of "developing a contemporary multi-colored language for improvisation," and Campbell (2006), whose application of the blues scale in various harmonic contexts is for the purpose of developing the improviser's "vocabulary."

Another important implication of Thompson's view of Soundpainting as a language is his acknowledgement of paradox, or *aporia* within its range of creative possibilities, through his notion of irregular verbs, defying Soundpainting's rules, which themselves have to be broken to achieve the Soundpainter's purposes. His position is akin to those of Boulez and

Schoenberg (section 2.1.3.2), who similarly admit to the impossibility of total control over the material. Thompson, however, approaches this problem of linguistic or systemic self-consistency with sympathy and regard for the performer's contribution, accepting thereby that (because of the human element) no system or language can achieve perfection. Thompson highlights an element of this paradox in suggesting (Sherwood 1999): "You know you're improvising well when you don't know you're improvising well. It's like driving a car along the highway. You tune out, and then suddenly you realize that you've been driving for the last ten miles."

### 6.3.1 The syntax of Soundpainting

Marc Duby: How do you see syntax operating in terms of music?

Pauline Oliveros: Well, I think that it's related to what I just said before: I mean that syntax is meaning, and when something new comes along, at first it may seem very unfamiliar, which you generally find is something creative, and then in the cycle of recognition of one or two people, or a small group starting to play with it and so forth, and then it radiates until it becomes a part of common practice.

(Author's interview, Johannesburg, September 2005)

In keeping with a linguistic interpretation of Soundpainting, Thompson categorizes the gestures of Soundpainting in terms of a four-part syntax that enables the Soundpainter to specify the gestures with a high degree of precision (Thompson, CD notes to *Deconstructing Haydn*):

The syntax of Soundpainting is broken down in four parts: Who, What, How, and When. The 'Who' gestures are Function signals. They indicate which specific performers are being signed. For example, 'Whole Group' means the entire ensemble, or individual performers, such as Dancers 1 and 2 or Actor 5 and Woodwind 1, may be signed. The 'What' gestures, 'Pointillism,' 'Point-to-Point With Alliteration,' and 'Minimalism in F Major With a 5 Feel,' to name a few, are 'Sculpting' signals indicating the type of improvisation to be performed. The 'How' gestures indicate dynamics, duration, and intent. The 'When' gestures, or 'Go' signals, tell the performers when and in what manner to enter the composition. For instance, 'Play' means to come in immediately, hard-edged; 'Enter Slowly' means to

wait approximately 5 seconds before entering; and 'Develop Organically' means to listen or watch and then enter relating to the directions of the other performer or performers.

The <who> gestures, accordingly, allow the Soundpainter to vary in real-time the instrumental combinations, from soloist to whole ensemble.<sup>236</sup> In this sense, the relationship between the individual and the group is not viewed as somehow antagonistic (in Lyotard's sense), but as arranged along a continuum of possibilities, governed by the number of performers contributing to the event.

The <what> gestures may be regarded as the smallest elements of the Soundpainting language, and allow for combinations through the use of linking signals, which correspond to the simple connectives of ordinary language, such as the <with> and <this (is)> gestures (Thompson 2006:39). This aspect of the language enables the Soundpainter to construct very complex musical and spatio-temporal events, by combining these gestures in any number of ways, such as Thompson's example of <minimalism in F major with a 5 feel>, which unites the elements of style, key, and time signature in a fairly straightforward gestural string. These strings may later be utilized in the event as <memory> gestures, by means of which the Soundpainter as composer/conductor returns to previously organized material.<sup>237</sup>

Thompson considers the <how> gestures as encompassing the elements of "dynamics, duration, and intent," thereby adding a further range of compositional and performance options to the Soundpainter's repertoire, while the gestures available under the heading of <when> indicate how the performer(s) begin and shape their phrases. All of these syntactic elements contribute to the wide range of stylistic potentials of the

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<sup>236</sup> This may also be pre-arranged in advance, through the <palette> gesture, for example.

<sup>237</sup> This instance serves as another example of the recursive possibilities within the Soundpainting language.

Soundpainting language, and in this sense allow the Soundpainter to imbue the event with a range of "meanings," in Oliveros's sense of syntax as a linguistic component of musicking.

### **6.3.2 Soundpainting and other gesture-based music systems**

#### **6.3.2.1 Harmony Signing**

In Tenerife 2004, the author attended a workshop in which the music educator and choral conductor Nicholas Bannan demonstrated his system of musical signs known as Harmony Signing. Bannan's system has a narrower range of application than Soundpainting, as it is largely concerned with the signing of musical responses linked to a tonal system, in which the gestures are closely linked to the position of notes within such a system. As such, Harmony Signing is not explicitly concerned with improvisation like Soundpainting, but shares a similar *modus operandi* in the non-verbal communication of musical ideas by means of physical gestures.

#### **6.3.2.2 John Zorn's game pieces**

The work of John Zorn, one of the most prominent and prolific members of the New York avant-garde, has been extensively documented by many writers in the field (see especially Mandel 1999). While a detailed discussion of his work and influence is beyond the scope of this research, Zorn's influence is widespread in the field of improvised music, and a few comments regarding his game pieces may be appropriate. His most well known game piece is known as *Cobra*, and in this set of musical and other procedures, Zorn shares similarities with and differences from Thompson in a number of significant ways.

The key similarity between Zorn's pieces and Soundpainting is that both

make use of hand signals to achieve their aims. As Hamilton describes Zorn's procedures (2002:220):

Zorn's game pieces take their titles from sports and board-games such as *Lacrosse*, *Archery*, *Pool*, and *Cobra*. These pieces are 'composed' insofar as they're performed to a score consisting of a series of hand signals, each corresponding to a type of interaction from quickly traded bursts of sound to longer free-for-alls. As 'conductor,' Zorn simply relays changes to the rest of the players with a hand signal.

However, in a significant departure from Thompson's rules of engagement, Zorn makes room for a variety of "guerrilla tactics," in which, as Hamilton describes (*ibid.*), "the players are permitted to wrest control from the conductor." Although the participants in a Soundpainting event are allowed to sign a gesture of incomprehension if the Soundpainter makes a syntactical error, this is not the same as allowing a subversion of the Soundpainter's role, as Zorn does. In Soundpainting, as evident in the ensemble's performances in Paris, Thompson's abdication of "power" is voluntary, and does not involve a struggle of wills between performers and Soundpainter.

### 6.3.2.3 Butch Morris and conduction

The New York cornetist, Butch Morris, has also developed a system of signals for musical purposes. Morris's system, known as **conduction**, has been exhaustively documented (notably in Mandel 1999), and depends on a much smaller number of gestures (around 30) than Thompson's (around 750). In an interview (Mandel 1999:65), Morris describes conduction, not so much as a language in Thompson's terms, but as a "gestural vocabulary":

Through my gestural vocabulary the improvisers and audience start to hear the music happen. You don't just hear the music happen, you start to hear it happen, and then all of a sudden, it happens.

Morris, in similar fashion to Thompson (section 6.1.1), also acknowledges

the influence of the jazz tradition in inspiring to some extent his development of a non-verbal communication system (*ibid.*):

'There's a great validity in having things well thought out," Morris conceded, "but there's an excitement about the other side too. I want to create something as powerful as my heritage and something very magical at the same time. If I'm not reaching for something as powerful as my heritage has been"—Butch lists Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Count Basie, and Jelly Roll Morton among his predecessors as improvising, composing, conducting instrumentalists—'then it's not going to be meaningful in the long run. I want to create something as powerful as my heritage and something very magical at the same time.'

## 6.4 Soundpainting, conducting, and improvisation

"Conducting" is where you draw 'designs' in the nowhere—with a stick, or with your hands—which are interpreted as 'instructional messages' by guys wearing bow ties who wish they were fishing.

(Zappa 1990:176)

In an interview with Prasad (2002), Eberhard Weber has highlighted what he regards as the "awfulness" of conductors. In general, the circumstances of the social (and musical) space of the concert hall may be seen as fostering this awfulness, by concentrating virtually absolute power in the hands of one authority figure.

Prasad: Elaborate on your philosophy as a bandleader.

Weber: The best answer is that if there was such a thing as a second life—which I don't believe in—I believe I would become a conductor. This explains everything. I like to create the music I hear in my interior. As a conductor, you have the ability to squeeze the sounds and interpretation you asked for from 50 to 80 people. On the other hand, when I give it closer thought, I realize I'm not enough of a dictator to conduct an orchestra because it requires a pretty awful person. When you read these biographies of famous conductors, they are all awful people who fail in their private relationships. Often, it seems there is a necessity to be like that. I'm afraid my second life choice wouldn't be the best one, but I long for it. [laughs]

To some extent, this concentration of power represents the central dynamic of this ritualized space, and the dynamics of communication in conducting an orchestra, or conduction, or Soundpainting, clearly are dependent on the social space in which these activities occur. As described by Williams, conductors may be seen as custodians of the great tradition of European symphonic music (2001:38):

Conductors undoubtedly execute necessary functions in keeping performances of large nineteenth-century scores afloat, but on a less practical plane they also invoke, through a series of ritualized expressions and gestures, the presence of the composer—the person who channels and controls the signification of the music.

Williams (*ibid.*) goes on to define the conductor's role in Derridean terms as follows:

The conductor, then, can be understood as a supplement in Derrida's sense: the music is complete without him, but by adding to this completion he indicates an insufficiency. He is, we are to believe, someone in contact with lofty musical ideals that are unleashed at the flick of a stick, yet because they are mediated through him they are more contingent than they might otherwise seem. His authority derives from the reception history of a particular canon and from the nineteenth-century organization of the orchestra as a labour force under the control of a manager.

“At the flick of a stick”, in a practical application of Williams' view, the conductor at the height of his powers is given the right to hire and fire members of an orchestra. With such overarching power in the hands of the conductor, any member entering the orchestra on probation is actually under such circumstances on trial. According to Thompson, Toscanini apparently had a particular gesture, which summarily served two weeks notice on any instrumentalist who played a wrong note, and, whether urban legend or not, this seems to demonstrate the disastrous culmination of too much power.

In the author's view, this process of communication in orchestral conducting makes the circumstances for the creation of this type of musicking fraught with tension, and reflects the ultimate manifestation of

the nineteenth-century class system insofar as it enacts a master–servant relationship, in which the conductor literally employs a group of willing slaves in the service of the composer's wishes. Similarly, it should be noted the Soundpainter is no less responsible for the outcome of the Soundpainting event, but that in allowing for a democratizing process with respect to the musical signifier, Thompson acknowledges that the process of spontaneous, collective creation is, to a large extent, the responsibility of everyone involved (including the audience). In Soundpainting, all these relationships are understood as mutually dependent, and this is explicitly acknowledged in the Soundpainter's openness to feedback from the performers, who participate as individuals in a relationship no less perhaps ritualized than conducting an orchestra in a concert hall, but one in which the element of control in its traditional sense is radically interrogated.

When the Soundpainter's attention is focused on the individual contributions of the musicians, the possibility for feedback in the creative process leads to an emphasis on the collective process of engagement, an aesthetic central to most African American forms of musicking. In this process, the relationship of composer to performer and listener is immediate and allows for the possibility that anything can happen. In Soundpainting, the random element is mediated through the learning curve of the participants in absorbing the gestures and, to this extent, the Soundpainter does indeed play the role of conductor, by limiting the options available within the system. This is a subtractive approach which circumscribes options in a theoretically infinite range of contexts by imposing the instantaneous viewpoint of the composer on a set of events which, in accordance with the principles of recursion inherent in Thompson's language, may be 'played back' at will.

The Soundpainting website compares a Soundpainting event to a television set with a theoretically infinite range of available channels. This analogy captures, to some extent, the fluid nature of such an event (the possibility that "anything can happen"), but to the author's mind is not altogether appropriate, as watching television is by its very nature a

passive activity. The "channel hopping" analogy does capture to some extent the filmic nature of Soundpainting, in which events may be superimposed on one another, jump cuts may take place, and so on, but it fails to recognize the importance Thompson himself places on the collective and collaborative character of this form of musicking, in which Soundpainter, performer(s), and audience, all have a contribution to make to this spontaneous endeavour of musicking "in the moment."

Through the Soundpainting language, Thompson is able to integrate the two worlds of jazz and experimental music so as to produce musically intelligible results. By emphasizing the collaborative and process-based nature of this musical network, Thompson humorously interrogates the excesses of orthodox conducting, in which are enacted the sometimes negative conditions of employment for an orchestral musician in the concert hall.

Thompson's "democratization of the signifier" allows for a Soundpainting event to draw from the collective expertise and histories of all the participants, and thereby to allow for a range of possible interpretations that throw into relief the individual's moment-to-moment role in the proceedings. This is achieved by the Soundpainter's ability to constitute new combinations of players through the <group> signs. Finally, it is the nature of Soundpainting to lend itself to a new vision of performance art, one in which the fixed boundaries of collaboration across genre and discipline become deliberately blurred. This allows for a Soundpainting event to combine any stylistic elements drawn from contemporary musical and performance genres in an eclectic fashion in keeping with its contemporary approach to the fluidity of genre-boundaries.

## Chapter 7 : Conclusions and recommendations

If musicking is indeed an aspect of the language of biological communication, then it is part of the survival equipment of every human being. To music is not a mere enhancement of spare-time enjoyment but is an activity by means of which we learn what are our ideal social relationships, and that is as important for the growth of an individual to full social maturity as is talking and understanding speech.

Small (1998:210)

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### 7.1 Findings

The central concern of this thesis was stated in the following terms:

How does Soundpainting operate as a system for the collaborative creation of music in performance?

Defining Soundpainting as a form of sign language opened the way to an examination of various sign-based systems for communication, into which category both orchestral conducting and Soundpainting fall. After considering various theories of the sign (as in the work of Saussure and Peirce), the author evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of a number of theoretical and philosophical approaches (such as semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction) as analytical methodologies for Soundpainting. The semio-structuralist approach was seen as a method largely concerned with the analysis of notated music, and the author's conclusion was that it exhibited definite limitations in the area of improvised music.

The author emphasized the general need to regard music as an embodied

creative process, rather than as a reified object of contemplation, stressing at the same time that this way of considering music (as an activity) is especially appropriate to spontaneously created music, of which Soundpainting is an example. In this context, the author suggested that a number of concepts derived from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language (grammar, language-games, and the notion of language as use) might be more appropriate as analytical approaches, in that they cater for both notated and improvised musics, whether subscribing to the rules of tonality or not. Defining improvisational musical activity with respect to the language-games of traditional jazz, free jazz, and Soundpainting, the author suggested that a linear view of developments within this canon is highly problematic, in that it may tend to assume a historical continuity that does not exist, given that such language-games tend to take place in a contested performance space.

A primary research sub-question related to this inquiry was defined as follows:

- What kind of musical skills should performers bring to bear during a Soundpainting performance? This sub-question is bound up with what might be termed "the language acquisition problem," as concerned with Thompson's unique approach to improvisation.

In this instance, the author, following the work of Sawyer *et al.*, argued that the acquisition of musical skills proceeded (primarily for the improvising musician) in the solitary development of instrumental (or vocal) technique pertinent to the language-game in question, and that the competitiveness that might occur as a by-product of this learning process was to some extent offset by the collaborative tendencies, so much a part of collective musicking in the jazz idiom, whatever stylistic language-game is under consideration. Sawyer's concept of improvisation (2003a, 2006a, 2006b) as embodying the notions of skills, collaboration, and communication is relevant to this line of inquiry, as are Hofstadter's remarks regarding the computer science term "bootstrapping," and its applicability to the child's acquisition of sufficient fluency to master more complex linguistic

combinations (1999:294):

Now as sophistication increased, people realized that a partially written compiler could be used to compile extensions of itself. In other words, once a certain minimal core of a compiler had been written, then that minimal compiler could translate bigger compilers into machine language—which in turn could translate yet bigger compilers, until the final, full-blown compiler had been compiled. This process is affectionately known as "bootstrapping"—for obvious reasons (at least if your native language is English it is obvious). It is not so different from the attainment by a child of a critical level of fluency in his native language, from which point on his vocabulary and fluency can grow by leaps and bounds, since he can *use* language to *acquire* new language.

In addition, the author suggested that an awareness of the languages of both contemporary WEAM and the jazz idiom were an advantage in the Soundpainting context, as the examination of hitherto hallowed stylistic boundaries was a central issue in many contemporary artistic practices, not least of all Soundpainting itself. For example, Soundpainting gestures like <minimalism> and <pointillism> (and many other stylistic gestures within Thompson's language)<sup>238</sup> call for the performer to understand the historical origins of these styles emanating from the practices of both improvised music and WEAM.

An additional research sub-question was defined in the following terms:

- As it deliberately aims to include many of the possible genres of contemporary musical styles as part of its manifesto, under what terms and conditions is Soundpainting subject to analysis?

Aesthetic and stylistic issues were considered in the light of some of the artistic problems raised by the debate around definitions of modernism and postmodernism, in which the place of the artist as sole creator of the work, as well as the nature of the genre-boundaries of contemporary artistic practice, are interrogated. Within the social space as defined by Bourdieu, the nature of the power position in musicking was discussed, drawing in

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<sup>238</sup> These are explored in detail in Thompson (2006).

the role of the composer, the conductor and the player, and the nature of the power dynamics in the collaborative process.

A sub-area considered in conjunction with the main research question was described as:

- The nature of collaboration in creative activity, so as to describe the dynamics of the contribution of the participants in the musical process.

Although collective improvisation was a defining characteristic of early jazz, the increased emphasis on virtuosity that arose in the bebop era (and the bebop musicians' insistence on being taken seriously as artists) tended to foster competitive and individualistic tendencies in this style of musicking. In the free jazz era of the 1960s, a renewed accent was placed on collaboration, partly as a result of the avowed collectivist political aims of many of these musicians. Collaboration from a more contemporary perspective was considered as a defining characteristic of many creative endeavours, especially in the sense that a Soundpainting event draws on a range of skills, collaboration, and communication shared between the Soundpainter, the participants, and even the audience at any given time. Soundpainting moreover allows for a range of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches, in which the contributions of performers from various disciplines are seamlessly integrated into the event.

The nature of a further research sub-area was stated as follows:

- Contemporary trends in musical theory and analysis, which (in some quarters) display evidence of a radical interrogation of the assumptions of traditional musicology.

In the context of Small's definition of musicking as a process-based activity, the author interrogated some of the philosophical issues in the field of contemporary musicology, which has been informed in some cases by debates around language and legitimation from mostly European thinkers such as Barthes, Bateson, Bourdieu, Derrida, Eco, Lyotard, and

Wittgenstein. These philosophical debates were seen as relevant to the arguments of writers such as Leppert, McClary, and especially Attali, whose influence in certain areas of contemporary musicology is widespread. In addition, the author isolated a further research sub-area:

- Linguistic theory as a comparable analytical methodology, suggested primarily by Thompson's description of Soundpainting as a language about music.

In this context, the author examined some implications of critical theory as pertinent to musicking, finally to consider whether Soundpainting should rightly be viewed as a language or as a system. Examining the underlying metaphorization of music and language in the context of the semiotic debate, the author considered Soundpainting as a sign-system, both literally and figuratively, and concluded that Thompson's language reflected a move towards the democratization of the signifier in contemporary musicking.

A further research sub-area was identified as follows:

- The relationship between music and media as reflecting a triadic modality of creation, mediation, and reception.

Soundpainting, in the author's opinion, exhibits traces of postmodernism's ironic interrogation of some of the assumptions that allow the media (Debord's "spectacle") to operate by means of a star-system, in which icons are held up for public consumption. The purported individuality of this "iconic" system is maintained in all fields in which the mass media hold sway, and belies the fact that many of the products of these individuals are created through extensive collaboration with other musicians, producers, recording engineers, marketers, and so on, rather than as an entirely individualized creation. An example of resistance to the status quo was demonstrated by the formation of artist-based record companies in the 1960s, in which the attempt was made to subvert the hegemonic control of the recording industry.

The operations of a canon-system in jazz and WEAM were interrogated under the heading of the following research sub-area:

- Historically informed performance, because the jazz idiom (like WEAM) subscribes to the notion of a canon of works as well as emphasizing the importance of the creative process.

It may be seen that jazz, like popular music, is not immune from concerns about originality, authenticity, influence, and a range of what Sawyer has defined as creativity myths, many of which are pervasive and uncritically accepted as correct in some quarters. While Thompson explicitly acknowledged the importance of the canons of jazz and contemporary WEAM in the development of Soundpainting, these influences were viewed somewhat ironically, in that Thompson understands the tensions between the genre-boundaries of these types of musicking, and uses Soundpainting as a critical tool for exposing the porous nature of such boundaries.

Finally, the author examined a sub-area connected to performance and agency within improvised musicking:

- Performance and the performative, because notions of agency and identity are central to certain areas of jazz improvisation.

Considering some of the tactics adopted by musicians in the field of improvised music (with special reference to the domains of traditional jazz and free jazz), the author examined some connections between timbre and the assertion of agency in these genres. Gates's concept of "signifyin(g)" was seen as an ironic tactic adopted (mostly but not exclusively) by African American musicians to signal a protest against the established norms of musicking and the constraints of what Bourdieu has theorized as the cultural field. Importantly, Bourdieu theorizes the cultural field as a network of dynamic, rather than static, relationships and further characterizes the interactions within this hierarchy as based on conflict

and struggle (Danaher *et al.* 2002: 21-22):

A cultural field can be defined as a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities. But it is also constituted by, or out of, the conflict which is involved when groups or individuals attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field, and how that capital is to be distributed.

In the context of jazz history, the ideological issues of the musicians of the bebop era provide a prime example of the cultural field as a site of struggle, in which these musicians sought to define themselves not as mere entertainers, but as artists demanding to be taken seriously. With reference to Thompson's language for improvising, Soundpainting likewise places a high degree of importance on respecting the contribution of the individual performer to the proceedings, and, in this manner, valorizes the continuum of relationships in place at any time between the individual and the community, similarly seen as dynamic and in flux. By means of the <group> signs, Thompson is able to use the resources of various combinations of performers at any given moment within the Soundpainting event, and this is a further sense in which Soundpainting highlights this continuum of potential relationships.

The author's discussion of Soundpainting examined various tactics and strategies in this type of contemporary musical practice, which, in its eclecticism and transdisciplinary character, may be seen as sharing common ground with some of the practices of both modernism and postmodernism. Regarded as a semiotic system, Soundpainting moreover reveals an ironic awareness of the power dynamics of orthodox conducting, in so far as Thompson continually raises questions about the ideology of orchestral performance. It is in the nature of Soundpainting events to exhibit what Lyotard has termed "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (whether of jazz, WEAM, or any other type of musicking) by ironically placing the individual and group utterances of these language-games in a context in which their capacity for "making sense," according to

established conventions, is often humorously compromised.

At the heart of Thompson's language lies an ambiguous attitude towards history, in the sense that it allows for a Barthean "playing" with the notions of style, genre-boundaries, and accepted grammars by drawing on any or all of these elements at a given time. Understanding and respecting the canon, for Thompson, does not mean necessarily accepting it without question; it seems to mean, rather, a playful engagement with rules and regulations, in which these are freely combined in ways which highlight their unquestioning acceptance in other quarters. In this sense, Soundpainting is both profoundly and ironically part of what Kelley (1999) has defined as the "avant-garde," in which any or all of the elements constituting a given canon could be employed, often in hitherto unexpected ways.

## **7.2 Recommendations for further research**

Soundpainting may be viewed as an end in itself, but can also form a useful adjunct to the traditional pedagogy of jazz improvisation. In this system, students acquire improvisational vocabulary through studying written texts (transcription of jazz solos), listening to the canonic storehouse of jazz styles, engaging with a large body of jazz scholarship, practising on their chosen instruments, and so on—solitary processes that tend to emphasize a competitive element in musical skills acquisition. These activities—together with the jazz canon in which individual musicians are held up as icons—while essential to the development of the improvising musician, tend to neglect the vital collaborative element in improvised musicking, in which the whole is often greater than the sum of the parts.

In keeping with what the author has described as the metaphorization of music and language, an individual (in the context of a group performance within a given musical space) needs to know when to dominate the

conversation, when to concur with the current speaker, when to disagree, when to respond, and when to be silent. Soundpainting tends to encourage the performer's sensitive participation in a dynamic act of co-creation, beyond the framework of the rules and regulations of the chord scale system.

In respect of Soundpainting's contribution to an interrogation of the porous boundaries of contemporary art, there is scope for further study of its decided emphasis on the performer(s)' contribution to the event, a tendency that works against the sometimes tyrannical assumptions of modernist musicking, in which the performer is eminently disposable in accordance with the composer's (or conductor's) wishes. In this regard, Soundpainting's trans-disciplinary character has been emphasized, and its susceptibility to analysis as a proxemic and kinesic system for other categories of performer might well yield some worthwhile results.<sup>239</sup>

In addition, there is scope for considering how other language-games (like Indian classical music, for example) might be integrated into the Soundpainting environment, and how the Soundpainter might deal with the conflict of expectations (between the traditional and the contemporary) that might arise in such circumstances. In this context, Jeanneau's work with traditional musicians in Kazakhstan (which incorporated a symphony orchestra, a children's choir, and Kazakh musicians) provides a point of departure for examining the range of potential problems (and solutions) offered by such inter-disciplinary collaborations.

Merely being aware of the potential of one of the most basic gestures of Soundpainting, that of the <long tone>, elevates the musician's

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<sup>239</sup> There are, naturally, a very wide range of proxemic contexts within musicking. From the jazz club to the concert hall to the rock festival, there are vast differences in the performance context, the sheer scale of the event, the number of people in the audience, and so on, all of which factors tend to influence the way in which musical utterances are constituted, mediated, and understood.

consciousness to a respect for the nature of the musical space in which he or she may be said to speak. As Prévost suggests with regard to long tones, the effect of sustained attention to this process fosters a deeper understanding of the relationship between sound and the musical space from which it emerges (1995:35):

Playing a long sound and waiting for it to finish might try our patience, perhaps enough to stop the sound and turn attention away from it. But if we play a long sound and listen to it, while we have a perception of its temporal magnitude, we may never be sure that the sound has finished.

The fact of the matter is that this relationship of sound to silence (which, one might suggest, is the central dynamic in all musicking) takes place in one type of musical space or another, in which a due regard for the right to speak (and how to say what needs to be said) assumes a high degree of importance. Sometimes this relationship is constrained according to the conventions of the genre in question, in which case it is merely a matter of learning the rules of idiomatically appropriate performance, but often the removal of such constraints can be a means of allowing for the free expression and exchange of ideas.

In the author's experience of introducing novice improvisers to a small number of Soundpainting gestures, the musical results have always been worth the effort, and the way in which Thompson's language frees such improvisers from the ideological constraints of making "mistakes" is very healthy for their development. Simply stated, Soundpainting is fun, and this ludic element, besides being of vital importance in the development of musicking at a fairly basic level, fosters respect for the communicative and collaborative element in improvising.

In philosophical terms, the fluidity and dynamism of a Soundpainting event provide the context for a potentially infinite continuum of relationships between the individual performer and the group. In this manner, respect is fostered for the ultimate enigma of artistic endeavour, in which problems

may be found or solved, but the mystery can never be fully explained. In Rilke's words (as quoted in Clifton 1983:280):

The artist seems to stand above the wise man. Where the latter endeavours to solve enigmas, the artist has a far greater task, or if you will, a far greater right. The artist's function is—to love the enigma. All art is this: love, which has been poured out over enigmas—and all works of art are enigmas surrounded, adorned, enveloped by love.