

American Music Review

The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music
Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Volume XLIX, Issue 2

Spring 2020

“Getting the Layers Going”:

Karen Borca’s Big Band at “Unit Structures: The Art of Cecil Taylor”

Michelle Yom

Unit Structures, Cecil Taylor’s celebrated 1966 album, provided the name for a four-day conference exploring his art and music that I organized for last fall at the CUNY Graduate Center and Brooklyn College.¹ One reason for the choice of this title was the multiple ways in which the phrase “unit structures” could be read. The grammatical function of “structures” is particularly ambiguous. As a verb, it refers to a singular unit, the subject. As a noun, it designates a plural and suggests a multiple. This ambiguity has an effect on the idea of unit, which in this grammatical construction implies a crossover between singularity and multiplicity. From the improvisational process that he describes in the liner notes, to the names of his bands such as the “Cecil Taylor Unit” or “The Unit,” the phrase “unit structures” figures aspects of Taylor’s practice into an effective metaphor.

In the record jacket alongside the title, Taylor provides a description of his compositional practice in poetic prose. Named “Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture,” the essay describes a state of being located in an improvisation of becoming where beginnings and endings are in a constant state of overlap.² As the title of the conference, the phrase “unit structures” hovered over the four days in continuation of Taylor’s impact. The conference was like a performance, which I thought of as an event where different players aggregated in the halls of CUNY to structure ideas, debates, and as well, stimulate and assume positions. There is no room here to mention all the stimuli, but the interested reader may refer to the conference program.³



Big Band rehearsal at Brooklyn College, led by Karen Borca

Like much of Taylor’s music, the conference began with Taylor’s voice in a poetry listening session. In my mind, however, the “unit” that started and ended the conference was the big band workshop which rehearsed on the day after the poetry session, before any of the paper presentations, and concluded the four-day conference with a concert. The big

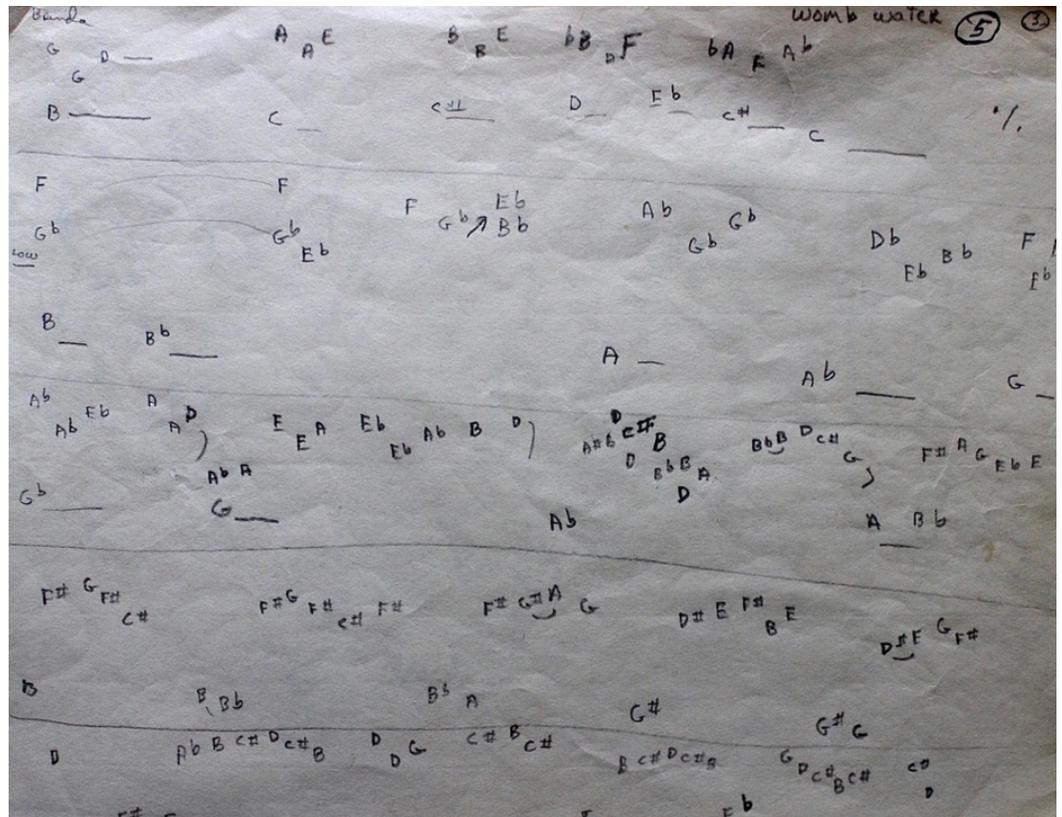
Getting the Layers Going (cont.)

band, composed of twenty-two musicians, was led by Karen Borca, a bassoonist in New York City whose music was shaped by Taylor in the early 1970s.⁴ She was a student of his Black Music Ensemble at the University of Wisconsin and worked as his assistant during his residency at Antioch College. She also played in his ensembles after his academic residencies, including in the 1976 opera *A Rat's Mass* and the European tour in the Fall of 1984.⁵

The rehearsal of the workshop was documented on video. This article briefly reports some of the patterns that arose from my analysis of the video along with my experience of playing in the band as a flutist. I also supplement my observations with accounts of Taylor's workshops. The "charts" sent to us by Borca a few days before the first meeting had prepared us for the rehearsal, but her procedures at the rehearsal were largely based on an oral/aural practice where verbal instructions and demonstrations by voice and by instrument were the main means of organizing our structured improvisation. A particular heterophonic texture which Borca calls "layers" was her goal effect in the ensemble sound. This texture is the possible result of a collective experience, where each player's ability to hear oneself both within and against a larger unit echoes the idea of "unit structures."

Throughout the workshop, Borca strived to teach us to play Taylor compositions as he had taught them to her. According to Borca, Taylor gave preference to oral/aural instructions, as he did in 1966, "I had found that you can get more from the musicians if you teach them the tunes by ear, if they have to listen for changes instead of reading them off the page."⁶ Teaching "by ear" was also a method for Borca during the workshop. As well, she urged me to invite everyone who had applied to the workshop because she was compelled to recall that Taylor's big band practice was inviting and inclusive.

The notations we received from Borca were called *With Blazing Eyes & Opened Mouth, Between Poles of Light I, Milano Jim Frank, Milano-Frank Jimmy, The Question,* and *Womb Water*.⁷ As a collection, Borca referred to them to as "charts." Some of the music notated in the charts date back to the early 1970's when she had first transcribed Taylor's dictations to his students at the University of Wisconsin, but the charts at hand were transcribed for the 1984 European tour. As a teacher and bandleader, Taylor had dictated pitches for the students to write down using symbols of their



Borca's notation for Womb Water

Getting the Layers Going (cont.)

As crucial, if not more, was the quality of the band members' ability to be inspired by the demos. Through Ted Panken's description of a scene where Taylor is teaching in 2001, we can sense the giving/receiving dynamic of Taylor's demonstrations with saxophonist Ras Moshe Burnett:

"Play notes exactly / the way they are supposed / to be played," he intoned, punctuating his words with well-timed vertical hand-chops. "I played you just a single line. Unless you play this extension chord, you have all sorts of possibilities within that sound." After a break, Taylor read off another passage, fine-tuned each section with a total command of detail, then played the passage with his left hand and launched into seven or eight variations. Tenorist Moshe Ras spontaneously applauded, and embarked on a few minutes of spirit-catching through his horn.⁹

Borca's demonstrations were intended to clarify the sounds that were not written in the charts, but just as important was the musicians' ability for "spirit-catching," as Panken put it, which also exceeded the charts.

The detailedness of the demonstrations allowed the musicians to play melodies in unison, and the melodies in unison created the starting referent for other melodies. During a rehearsal of *With Blazing Eyes and Opened Mouth*, the attitude musicians should embody to play contrasting melodies was characterized by Borca in numerous ways: "Whatever you choose to do, really do it. I mean, don't be halfway in. Either you are with me or you are against me."¹⁰ The player chooses decisively the melody they play, which either supports or contrasts another melody. But rhythm is always played in contrast: "You'll have one rhythm here doing one thing, and another rhythm running parallel to that, which is completely, totally different than the first."¹¹ Put simply, melody is relatively delimited but rhythm is not. These "rules" are the starting point for improvisation. "Once something gets stated, you start stating it in a different manner and improvise that way. All of you as a unit, doing that."¹² The resulting texture is a heterophony created by the improvisation of melodic intention and rhythmic invention.

In an interview with me before the workshop, Borca spoke of "getting the layers going." "Layers" refers to the musical texture formed by "pockets" of small ensembles that emerge out of improvisation. To get them going is to collectively get into the groove of that heterophonic texture and its contrapuntal possibilities. In my experience as a player in the band, simultaneously hearing the sounds of my flute and the sound of the band seemed like a challenge to experience an unusual mode of listening that has something to do with accepting all the sounds. To "get the layers going," the "pockets" of small groups have to be worked out in unforeseeable but intentional ways, which takes a specific kind of group effort:

Try to figure out which line, who's going to keep which lines. So there's going to be a certain group of people who are going to be playing the top line, and another group that's going to be playing [another line]. And another group after we get done playing this last line. I'll try to break it up into three parts so we can get three different layers going on this one. The other one will work fine with two layers, so this should be fine.¹³

Through her memory of playing in Taylor's bands, Borca had envisioned a particular musical texture with two to three *layers*, each of which are made of *lines* played by single players. Each line is an individual member in a small group in relation to the whole group. The heterogeneity of each line and layer is maintained by the rule of contrast. This goal heterophonic effect, however, was not always realized, as noted in Borca's response to an instance of the band's lack of clearly opposing lines:

Getting the Layers Going (cont.)

So those two things will be juxtaposed, but the way this happened now is fine. If it happens that way, fine. You can go back and forth between those lines. I don't want to be forcing this juxtaposed stuff too much. So that sounded fine, the way you were doing it.¹⁴

The form is open-ended, even as juxtaposition is given as the goal effect. The director's resignation of control has to do with an ideal of power distribution amongst the musicians. As Nathaniel Mackey wrote, "black music--especially that of the sixties, with its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context--proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands."¹⁵ In musical form, can "personal impulse," the individual freedom, balance "group demand"? For Taylor, each player has the "right" to speak, in a section, and within the overall structure:

Each of you has the right to say, "I would like to hear this part over again." Each section has its technical problem. What is the relationship of the note to the overall structure? I can show you where everything is connected, but I don't want to be in the position of telling you how to play it. Where do you want to begin? How do you want to proceed?¹⁶

Taylor stirs the band of the 2001 Turtle Bay Music School towards the ensemble sound, which he suggests is wholly connected. But he formulates his directions as questions. The musicians must answer the questions and arrive at the ensemble sound on their own. He gives them plenty of encouragement: "'Whatever you play, play it so people who hear it can hear the magic,' he urged. 'Try to remain connected.'"¹⁷ This formula leaves (too?) much room for each player to interpret the "problem" in their own way. Solving the problem *by* playing is equally and potentially creative and destructive. It leaves room for players to abandon the efforts towards the goal effect of layers. The "layers" may be both the desired sonic manifestation and a proposal of a utopic social order. But like political orders in reality, the actualization of such intent is not guaranteed.

Taylor's big band music has been criticized sometimes for sounding chaotic. Even long-time champion of the music Amiri Baraka noted in 2005:

That night at the Iridium, what had drawn us there was not the chance to hear & see Cecil again, but that he was appearing, the Newspapers taunted, with a Big Band. Hey, we thought, that was something. The mind always creates its own world, only to be "advised" of the contrast of that world with reality.¹⁸

The possibility and the limit of an ensemble sound that could become, as Baraka writes in the same text, "near-ambient," takes us back to the multiplicity of the phrase "unit structures." As discussed earlier, the phrase puts in tension the singular and the multiple; to decide, assert, and sound a contrast or compliment in every line is to co-create the layers of the ensemble sound. The actual sound is the sum of each player's sense of the "problem," within a section and the whole band, and in tension with the imagination of desired effect. Which brings us to motive. What motive did each of us want to hear, musical and otherwise? The conference, conceived as an expanded form of "unit structures," asked that same question, and each of us played, in sections, and in the whole of the ensemble.

Notes

1. For more on the 2019 Cecil Taylor conference see David Grubbs, "Scented Parabolas: Occasions of Cecil Taylor's Poetry," *American Music Review* (Fall 2019).

Getting the Layers Going (cont.)

2. Cecil Taylor, *Unit Structures* (Blue Note Records, 1966).

3. See [the Unit Structures website](#).

4. The band members were Karen Borca, Evie Ward, Michelle Yom, Pawan Benjamin, Ras Moshe Burnett, Elliott Levin, Charles Sharp, Elizabeth Newton, Bobby Zankel, Dario Fariello, Paolo Rossi, Scott Currie, Chris Stover, Ben Zucker, Julian Velasco, Anthony Caulkins, Rafael Goncalves, Dominic Lash, Gahlord Dewald, Jeff Schwartz, Mark Micchelli, and André Martinez.

5. See Michelle Yom and Ammiel Alcalay, *Cecil Taylor: Memorial Scrapbook & Sessionography* (Lost & Found, 2019).

6. A.B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (Third Limelight Edition, 1990), 70.

7. The names of Taylor compositions are subject to change with each iteration; he named and renamed his compositions, whilst the charts may have remained the same. At the beginning of the rehearsal, the two Milanos became “Milano Jimmy Frank” and “Milano Frank Jimmy.” Borca recalls that “Jim and Frank were Jimmy Lyons and Frank Wright. That was a cue in the score probably indicating that they were soloing in those sections.”

8. Chris Felver, *All the Notes*. Directors Cut, DVD, 2003.

9. Ted Panken, “Abstraction without Compromise,” *JAZZIZ* (June 2001), 42.

10. Video transcript.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.

16. Panken, “Abstraction without Compromise,” 42.

17. Ibid.

18. Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (University of California Press, 2009), 288.