

Lawrence “Butch” Morris can move an improvising ensemble in any direction with the wave of his hand. Thomas Stanley visits with the composer and cornetist and gets to the bottom of his singular method of “improvised conduction”. Photos by Michael Galinsky

The rehearsal at Tonic was scheduled for three o'clock. I arrived at 3:15 and was soon followed by The Conductor – Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris – wearing a rumpled beige raincoat and a tweed cap. There was a need for a stage modification before the rehearsal could start – a platform for the conductor. As he sent the club's staff searching for a short list of tools and materials, the man who would change music scooted around on his hands and knees in the cluttered crawlspace beneath the stage. Eventually he emerged with three heavy boards, rough and dark like the ceiling joists. I helped him strap six upended milk crates together to provide a base for the boards. Morris asked for a power drill and with a fistful of long drywall screws driven in at a shallow angle, secured the three planks to each other and the whole contraption to the edge of the stage. The jury-rigged platform was exactly the same height as the stage. He tested it with his weight, rocking to and fro as he might during performance. After adding an additional screw or two and deeming it sound, The Conductor mounted his homemade rostrum and continued to prepare the field where his next conduction would be released.

Like each flight in a space program, every numbered conduction is a unique opportunity for challenge, discovery, and transcendence. Likewise, the precarious viability of both kinds of mission is safeguarded by a meticulous process of preparation. As with the space program, small details can have calamitous effect. Positioning of the musicians is important, not just sonically, but in terms of lines of sight. If a player cannot see the conductor, the music cannot happen. Details were accruing. Information was already being coordinated, processed, executed. The vocalist won't be able to see there, but the piano could be moved a bit. No, take the electronics out of the house entirely. Just leave them in the monitor. And suddenly harsh sounds emanating from an ungainly table-full of sequencers, laptops and effects boxes begin to mesh ethereally with the rest of the music.

The Conductor is cunning, efficient, and very much in control. His crew knows what is on the line and that the chain of command is as much a part of the integrity of the vessel as the platform of milk crates, duct tape, and boards that form the cockpit from which the ensemble will be piloted.

“Conduction (conducted improvisation/interpretation) is a vocabulary of

ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation, and provides instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing, or form.” That's how Morris defines the musical method that he's been developing since 1985. He holds a process patent on conduction and when you see it on his website, it is capitalized and followed by a conspicuous trademark symbol. While Morris has a full life as a composer, instrumentalist and bandleader, it is conduction that has become the central thrust of his creative life, his largest contribution to music, his trademark.

He's long past the days when he had to convince others that conduction was a legitimate system for making music. “More importantly, I'm past that point with me,” he asserts. “I mean it's kind of like in the beginning I had to get over being self-conscious about doing these things. And it took me a while, but I did. I got over being self-conscious about it. The rest, I'm not trying to prove anything as far as I'm concerned. I'm just trying to get on with the next step. I think I've completed the first step.”

Also behind him are questions of where and how his music is connected to the broader arena of human musicality. “To call Conduction an experiment is a grave error,” Morris writes. “Anytime you synchronize the spirit and still give it liberty, you open many doors to the primus, where the intimate necessity of possibility reigns, where we find and realize our individual and collective freedoms.” If he is reluctant to label his music as experimental, he equally resists describing it as an alternative to more conventional modes of production. “I don't want to have nothing to do with anything called ‘alternative’”, The Conductor blasted during a discussion with friends in Tompkins Square Park. The allure of alternatives is false and tainted with subordination to that which one is alternative to. The Conductor is cunning and that alternative bag is too obvious a cage to trap this tiger. Rather we are to understand that conduction has come forward in the service of all music, at all times and at all places. Conduction is a supplement to music, a theoretically consistent catalyst available for the asking to any who would hear in their music an opening into historically unprecedented dimensions of expression. It

is not a compositional strategy. It is not a style.

The performance at Tonic on the last Saturday in March was a part of the Swiss Peaks festival curated by Christian Marclay and featured a variety of improvisers with roots in the land of chocolate and discreet banking. Butch had been handed a large ensemble that featured at its core reed player Hans Koch, cellist Martin Schütz and percussionist Fredy Studer. It also included four alp horns, four electronic musicians, a pianist, a vocalist, a cellist, and an accordion player. The massive alpine horns (yes, like on the Ricola commercial) could not conceivably be placed on stage so they were positioned immediately in front of it, a pair of horns on either side, their blonde lengths crisscrossing on the floor behind The Conductor's back. Morris explained that during the course of performance, he would only be able to give the horns a few regulatory cues and would then leave them on autopilot while he returned to face the ensemble. “They don't need to see me. They need to play. But you,” he said playfully to Hans Koch thrusting with his power drill, “you better look at me tonight.” Koch who has played with Morris on several dates since about 1990 smiled as he rolled a cigarette from a yellow pack of tobacco. Koch is a conduction veteran and sees the excitement in this music in its ability to gather “completely different sounds.” Koch is unflinching in his assessment of the scale of The Conductor's ambition: “I think he would like to conquer all the music and at the same time he would like to set the music free.”

Much of Morris' oeuvre accumulated over the past eighteen years has involved applications of his method to an almost unbelievably diverse battery of projects – conquering all the music, behaving very much like an experimenter whose new invention must be field-tested under a variety of conditions before its utility can be widely marketed. His ensembles have drawn together a frequent flyer's potpourri of musical cultures; built common ground for the classical orchestra, electronic instruments, and turntables; and have worked both with and without notated scores. He has conducted ensembles of poets and a choir of basses, the latter being a tribute to his brother Wilber who died in August of 2002. With each of these disparate ventures, Morris has accepted the risk that his method might be trivialized, reduced to a clever trick, an elaborate but inconsequential spectacle. He has also proselytized an

entire generation of creative musicians with the gospel of structured improvisation (see sidebar).

But the eclecticism has had its cost. Having to re-teach the conduction vocabulary before each performance truncates the preparation process. As conduction ends its second decade, its author is responding to an urgent desire to cultivate a more stable team of players who can learn and function within the totality of the system and expand its creative potential. "I'm not trying to build a sect. I want people to do other things. I want them to play in other bands. I want them to do all the things they want to do and I want them to bring all their knowledge back to the ensemble. I want them to confront me with all this stuff. Does that make sense? O.k., but listen. Let's take it a step further. If I told you I could make a better musician, therefore a better music, and then therefore have a better orchestra why wouldn't you hire me? All these people crying about new music and I haven't heard it yet. I'm not saying I'm the one that's doing it, but there is a way here."

In the past year, Morris has moved to build that better orchestra working along two parallel paths known individually as Sheng and Skyscraper or together as Sheng/Skyscraper. Each project is loaded with skilled players from diverse backgrounds. With Sheng, Morris attempts to institutionalize his use of conduction to weld a transglobal musical aesthetic. Comprised of instrumentalists from the Far East, the Middle East and West Africa, Sheng hits the ear not as another contrived world music, but as a community of sounds straddling their own historical tradition and the vast plane of possibility opened up by conduction.

Shuni Tsou is new to conduction and relatively new to improvisation. The Taiwanese-born player of the Chinese bamboo flute (ditzi) was part of the ensemble for Sheng's inaugural concert in November of 2002 (Conduction No. 129). Like many of Morris' conductions, the debut of Sheng was preceded by a compressed rehearsal session the day of the performance. Tsou had mixed feelings about her first night on the frontlines of musical history. She admitted to having a difficult time figuring out exactly what The Conductor wanted and thought that if she could make him smile that her playing was at least moving in the right direction.

"Trying to figure out what Butch wants is not a part of this," The Conductor chides. "What I want is to be surprised." Asked to name the six things that came to mind when she reflected on the freshly minted experience, Tsou cited control, imagination, virtuosity, spiritual connection, sense of space, and keen observation. Four months later Sheng performed for the second time at a Lunar New Year celebration in Columbus Park. The ensemble had begun to grow into the system and the young flutist appeared to have overcome the vertigo of its imposing demands.

Skyscraper is a concept that has framed conduction projects since Conduction No. 46 in Verona, Italy in 1995. Beginning with a month of weekly engagements at the Bowery Poetry Room in the summer of 2002 and followed up by a run of similar length in the fall, the current man-

ifestation of Skyscraper consists of New York-based musicians from classical, jazz, and electronic backgrounds and was intended to serve as the vehicle for the next and ultimate phase of the conduction project – the reintroduction of the written score. "I started to do this only to figure out how much music I could make before I got back to notation and that is what's always [been] and still is my ultimate goal. I just need to get on to the next step and the next step is to introduce notation again which I've been doing with the Skyscrapers. In July and October we basically played the same composition every set for eight nights and I don't think anybody recognized it as the same composition because we were able to deconstruct it to such a state that it became something else."

For eighteen years, Morris has scattered the seeds of a way of thinking about music that supports both unscripted improvisation and interpretation of written music, a way of thinking that blurs the distinction between improvisation and interpretation. Through Sheng and Skyscraper (Sheng/Skyscraper) Morris will attempt to harvest that effort. If things go his way, the twin projects will be the engine that advances conduction out of the theoretical phase and towards a body of memorable art. "This is something that I've always wanted to put together, but who's going to stay and who's not – it doesn't even really totally depend on me. So we'll see. To try to keep 25, 30 people together costs a lot of money and nobody's standing in line to give me money. I'm really not used to having my hand held out for this amount of time. Give me. May I have? I mean there's something that comes with that. I'm going to expand the whole realm of music education. Give me. I'm going to change music for the twenty-first century. Give me. So I'm offering something; whether they're accepting it or not is another thing, but I know how to run this ensemble and to do this stuff correctly. I'm saying I want to keep thirty people employed for the next five years and we're going to produce a whole lot of work. I know what we have to do. I know systematically what we have to do. Five years and I will show you results that you wouldn't think possible, but I need five million dollars and five million dollars is not a lot of money to keep 30 people employed for the next five years." The Conductor has a five year plan.

“The most difficult thing you can do is make an adult a student again. And especially professional adults in their line of work – they don't like to be made to feel like they're being made a student again. Now, I'll tell you anybody that hasn't done conduction before is becoming a student. That is a fact because you can't possibly know what we're going to do. You're not prepared for what we're going to do until you learn what this means [gives the gesture for a sustained sound]. Everything becomes dogma eventually, but musically it doesn't have to become dogma. In terms of what it produces, it doesn't have to become dogma. It's like any other language. I have to practice. This is no different. I mean you can't turn it on when you come to rehearsal and turn it off

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until the performance. You cannot. I won't let you."

Free jazz evolved out of a social logic that had a decidedly anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical bias. Its utopian premises of musical production embodied a privileged status for self-realized individuals. Its structure emerged and dissolved within its content. Conduction, Morris will politely remind you at least once, should not be confused with free jazz. It has a different social logic. It is not an open system. It is not a utopia. Utopias do not exist.

"If something exists, a system exists and you walk through the door and you start imposing your knowledge and your wisdom on something that already exists, I don't think that that is the kind of social etiquette I like to see. I'm doing con-

duction and that people understand before they enter the rehearsal. It's a system you learn and it's a system you participate in and it's a system that's used to construct music communally, or collectively. If your idea of this is to impose anarchy on it, it doesn't work here. I'm not equating free jazz with anarchy. I'm saying this is different, like bebop is different from free jazz, like pop is different from free jazz, like this is different from free jazz. That's all I say!"

During the Swiss Peaks rehearsal, there was a moment when one of the electronic musicians questioned why they were being asked to play together while the alp horns were free to play without interference. The Conductor dropped his affable front to sternly repeat a disclaimer with which he must often flag his

work. "I've been asked to do this and you've got to do what is asked of you. It's like any other project. This part is based around the horns as far as the tonality is concerned." It is like any other project. The conduction gestures are the notation and like a written score define the boundaries of the music, the limits of interpretation. Interpretation can allow many shadings of phrase and nuances of tone and dynamic, but if it is written as an A-flat quarter note, whatever else it is, it better be that. Similarly, when The Conductor asks an instrument or a section of instruments to repeat a piece of material, he expects a reasonable attempt to replicate the indicated sounds. "If you can't repeat his register, come as close to his rhythm as you can." No compositional system can survive

conducting burnt sugar

As this article was being finalized, Greg Tate received CDs from the manufacturer of a recently completed collaboration between his Burnt Sugar ensemble and Butch Morris. Burnt Sugar was brought together with choreographer Gabri Christa (Vernon Reid's wife) for a performance at Central Park Summerstage last summer. Tate proposed that the band adapt Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring" using Butch Morris as conductor. Tate pulled a handful of

motifs from the score and Morris built conductions from them while Christa adapted conduction methods for her choreography. The night was such a huge success that the musical aspect of the collaboration was reprised in the studio this past autumn.

"My original thought was to employ motifs from the score as source material for improvisation and conduction in the context of a dance concert – to sample Stravinsky as it were," recalls Tate. "I

brought Butch in because I knew he would both honor the composer and extend his legacy through Burnt Sugar's 21st century-ready ensemble of innovative improvisers. I also wanted to publicly acknowledge our relationship and debt to Butch via our use of his Conduction system. Butch rehearsed with the band for three days before the performance at Central Park last summer. We recorded several months later in October in our regular Brooklyn studio, the Fifth House. Pete Cosey and Melvin Gibbs both happened to be in town and were invited down. Pete's presence also

allowed us to acknowledge our huge debt to Miles Davis electronic music of the 70s. Working with Butch conformed my belief that conduction is the most significant contribution any single individual has made to the language of orchestral improvisation since the advances of the AACM – a means to organically and spontaneously link disparate traditions, players of acoustic, electric and digital instrumentation, and improvisers and improvising cultures in a way that privileges the extemporized seat of the pants moment and formal rigor."

wholesale deviations beyond the rules established by its formal code.

"As I've said many times, free jazz was a great great thing and is a great great thing, but free jazz for me has presented more questions than it has answers and if it has presented something beyond individual values to music in general rather than its own categorical ideals, what has it contributed? What contribution has it made? I've played a lot of post bop and I've played a lot of jazz and I've played a lot of free jazz, but for me only certain ingredients were things that I could use to further my ideas about music. And there is very little in free jazz that I have been able to use to further these ideals except the minds of the musicians. I don't doubt that it has value. Like I said, I incubated this whole idea within the free jazz community, but I realized at a certain point it really is not limited to the free jazz or free music community. It can accept anybody that's open to contributing to this idea.

I knew that it wasn't a jazz thing in the seventies. I was teaching in Holland. I was also teaching in Belgium. I knew just from these two geographic areas that I was teaching in how different they interpreted notation. Culturally, they had two totally different takes on it. I was intent on not demanding that they play it a very particular way. I just gave them the music and just said play that. I just waited for the outcome and then I do the same thing in Holland, but this wasn't an experiment for me. I wasn't thinking about what was going to happen. And they played it totally different. And I said wow this is really interesting. Culturally, geographically, socially, they handle this differently. Each way sounded like it could be a microcosm of its own society."

Morris's music is held together by eye contact. If the musicians are not looking at The Conductor then they are lost outside the music. "I know at what speed performance can go when all these ideas are flying, when there's twenty-one people on the stage and twenty-one ideas are flying in space. When it's time to get one, I can't wait for you to stop looking at your shoes or stop looking across the stage or stop fiddling around doing what you're doing. I need you then to take this idea and here, do something with it."

At the end of the tunnel is a new state of creative *communitas*. Within the discipline provided by the conduction vocabulary there exists an opening for a new virtuosity that is stylistically liberated. With matters of macro-structure safely vested in The Conductor's hands, there is a very eastern turning towards the interiors of musical sounds. The Conduction Ensemble becomes with preparation an organism that eats music history and shits a new music that exceeds the aggregate imaginings and histories of The Conductor and his crew. It is a music of possibilities that has conceived only a future for itself. It is a community of accelerated performance that is in many respects self-selecting. "Not every musician is capable of thinking beyond the box that they come from but I feel as though as long as they're willing to sit in the ensemble that it's my responsibility to push them out of that. Otherwise, there's no reason for them to be there and no reason for me to be sharing this infor-

mation with them. I don't meet as much resistance as I met in the past. However, I tell everybody that within the hour they'll know whether they belong here or not. Because if they can't do it, it doesn't make much sense for them to be there. And a lot of people in the past went through the process only to be mutineers and saboteurs or to collect what little pay we were getting. But those people you can identify very rapidly."

"A lot of people think that this system was built to make people react rather than respond. I'm not interested in people reacting to me. I go come in and they go [he cringes as if startled]. What is that? There is a difference between reaction and response and I'm looking for response. I tell people all the time, no matter how heated this gets on the bandstand, you've got to figure out a way to calm yourself down. I say come in; you better take a deep breath and calm yourself down, because when you come in you better say something influential that can take this ensemble to a new height. That's all I'm interested in – your contribution. You know, when I was in the Gil Evans band, he used to always make me solo after Lew Soloff. Lew Soloff played the baddest trumpet shit in the world and I was always like, 'what am I going to play after Lew Soloff.' But I found a way to come in. One day I asked Gil, I said, 'why you make me solo after Lew Soloff all the time?' He said, 'I love the way you come in, because you just subvert everything he's done, you just take it in a different direction.' But I had to. I couldn't contend with him. I wasn't that kind of player. You know, there's other trumpet players that would have stood toe-to-toe with him and screamed way up in the stratosphere playing that articulated trumpet shit, but I wasn't one of those cats, so I had to figure out another way to get in and still raise the ensemble to another level. There are many contributions to music, and we're still only seeing the tip of the iceberg. I think there needs to be a new kind of musician who is able to do many, many other kinds of things before there can be what may be called a new music, and I refer to him/her as the new virtuoso. Somebody who understands way beyond this shit of looking at music and [saying] I can play fly shit and I can read anything on the page and I can solo for 30 minutes, but how can you contribute even in the smallest way to an ensemble and raise the level of playing and raise the level of music? I'm still a jazz musician. My records will be found in jazz, no matter how many miles away from jazz I am, I'm a jazz musician. I come from that. I come from jazz and R&B and that's what I also bring to it. And because I come from jazz, bebop, and post bop and R&B, it's what made me have these ideas. I think if I didn't have this background I could never see this far." ☺

Thomas Stanley interviewed William Hooker in STN#18