

Twenty-first century music was diminished by postmodernism years, even decades ago. Identifying the utterances or movements precipitating this dilemma is problematic because the resulting postmodern music hyperspace is all but unmappable. Particularly for sensibilities weaned on modernism's liberal cousin—the sixties pluralism preached by such unlikely pulpit-fellows as Leonard Bernstein and Ralph J. Gleason—the uselessness of the modernist compass in navigating this music hyperspace is critically debilitating, fracturing the relative, if not unified, field that kept such contrary figures as Miles Davis and Virgil Fox within a degree or two of separation.

The modernist narrative of twentieth-century music is predicated on signifying chains, which link persons and places to map the development of musical ideas. Jazz history provides a wealth of examples of how the movement from signifier to signified creates dialectical arcs supporting the modernist ideal of progressive dynamism. An evolution of rhythm and ensemble can be invoked merely with the names of Baby Dodds, Max Roach, and Anthony Williams. More important, such signifying chains infer an ongoing trajectory, an open set that will inevitably be extended. The implicit continuum posited by such signifying chains is the place from where the modernist music narrative derives its “capital M” meaning.

Yet, in the postmodern sea of randomly looping video monitors, this progressive dynamism drowns in disjointed images, and even a heroic modernist narrative such as that of jazz is reduced to pastiche. As a plate in a book or cover image for a recording, the typical jazz-performance photograph—saxophonist leaning forward, his forehead and temples marbled with raised veins; bass player hunching over his instrument; drummer tilting his head back, eyes half-closed, mouth wide open—provides a wealth of historical context. As a drop in the sea of postmodern images, however, the same photograph merely contributes to the misidentification of disassociation as style, breaking the signifying chain.

In stipulating that personal identity flows from the unification of the past and a hypothetical future with the present, Jacques Lacan equated the breakdown of the signifying chain with the onset of schizophrenia. Twenty-first century music seems to be in the throes of such a malady. Atavism has been largely marginalized as either the embalming agent for museum culture or the search engine for samples. In addition to atrophying previously dynamic genres, this condition also ruptures the trajectory of such centuries-long agendas as liberation politics (Beethoven; Frederic Rzewski) and Christian ecstasy (Hildegard von Bingen; Olivier Messiaen).

This would indicate the creation of new signifying chains. However, there is a tautological feature about postmodernism that transmogrifies any potential signifier, morphing it into another symptom or index of the postmodern. To a considerable degree, Anthony Braxton avoided this snare with his Ghost Trance Musics, whose anthropologically-tinged Utopian mythos evokes a “past” and whose structural and methodological expandability implies a “future.” Still, it is an immense, hermetic system that may still prove to be resistant to extension or modification by others.

The viability of new signifying chains may well hinge on the ability of intellectually digestible procedures or structural features to provide an underlying connection among its practitioners, while promoting individualism—something like the blues, but without the entangling issues of cultural appropriation. The experimental practices that shaped twentieth-century music are rife with possibilities for such an endeavor. Yet the odds of transcending mere conceit and realizing music that is strongly and immediately felt are long. Far more often than not, the scholarship and polemics fueling the music are more engaging than the work itself.

Longer still are the odds that an artist can initiate or extend respective signifying chains as a composer and as an improviser, each centering on techniques that are by any measure arcane, and have the two converge in a major work that affirms such age-old musical values as beauty and soul. By expanding on the direct string excitation techniques pioneered by George Crumb, Denman Maroney has transformed the piano into a “hyperpiano,” an instrument as distinct as the electric guitar is from its acoustic predecessors. With *Fluxations* entailing one of the more mind-bending, counterintuitive propositions for Western musicians—what the composer and Maroney collaborator Earl Howard has dubbed “pulse fields”—a signal convergence seems at hand.

An approach to time used by such American experimentalist icons as Charles Ives and Conlon Nancarrow, pulse fields are rhythmic relationships expressed as ratios such as 3:4:5. Although they are polyrhythmic, they should not be considered to be synonymous with polyrhythms. Unlike most polyrhythms—3 over 2 being the most common example, as the 2-beat rhythm lays the foundation for the shadings of the 3-beat rhythm—pulse fields are not hierarchical, but relative, with no dominant pulse. A pulse field plying three pulses can take 60 beats or more to resolve, instead of resolving relatively quickly, like 3 over 2.

Unsurprisingly, a pulse field can present a rhythmic ambiguity that is beguiling to the listener, but is vexing to the performer, which partially explains why pulse fields have remained more a tool for through-composition than for works that privilege improvisation. Maroney is a rare example of a composer/improviser who has made pulse fields both an ongoing platform for his writing and his improvising, one that is relatively well documented.

Fluxations is the first instance in which Maroney has utilized pulse fields in an album-length work, which speaks to the potential for muddle the use of pulse fields presents if the material is performed by musicians with less than impeccable ensemble and improvisational skills. For this daunting proposition, Maroney turned to some of his closest associates, Mark Dresser being foremost among them, given their fifteen-year association in co-op settings such as Tambastics (with Robert Dick and Gerry Hemingway), and various Dresser-led projects such as Force Green (with Theo Bleckmann, Dave Douglas and Phil Haynes) and the trio with Douglas that produced *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. As evidenced by *Duologues*, a program peppered with pulse fields, Dresser and Maroney’s respective innovations in “extended technique” stand in stark relief when they perform as a duo.

While the résumés of Ned Rothenberg, Kevin Norton and Dave Ballou are not as entwined with Maroney’s, their backgrounds nevertheless exemplify the rigor that *Fluxations* requires. For ensembles as diverse as his Double Band and Sync, Rothenberg has composed pieces that mesh hocketing lines of different lengths, and pieces that juxtapose Western and Indian rhythmic structures. In multisectioned works like *For Guy Debord*, Norton (also a veteran of Dresser’s projects) has devised numerous pungent strategies for integrating notated materials with improvisation. And Ballou has found a skeleton key to the jazz vernacular, opening it to reveal an array of new possibilities.

Arguably, it is the composer’s acuity for form and function that is the most essential asset Maroney’s cohorts share and bring to the proceedings, as *Fluxations* has an intricately tessellated structure. The first half of the piece has fields of three pulses, sequenced 3:4:5, 4:5:6, 5:6:7, 6:7:8, 7:8:9. The second half of the piece has fields of two pulses, sequenced 9:8, 8:7, 7:6, 6:5, 5:4, and 4:3. In the notated sections, no more than one player is free to improvise, and then only for a prescribed period, not exceeding three times the length of the operative pulse field. Maroney divides the piece with a long solo improvisation that rhythmically compresses the form and treats the materials in a harmonically free manner.

Maroney has also inlaid comparable ratios of pitch into each section of the piece. In the opening section, the 3:4:5 pulse field is mirrored by its harmonic counterpart. In just intonation, 3:4 is a perfect fourth and 4:5 is a major third; together, they yield a first inversion minor triad. As is the case with the subsequent sections, the pulse field and its harmonic counterpart are introduced arm in arm. The pitch relationships of each section then diverge in a quasi canon, the layered rhythms contributing to the centrifugal harmonic force.

The structural virtuosity of *Fluxations* is perhaps best compared to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "dream poem," "Kubla Khan." Coleridge buttressed the vivid imagery of pleasure domes and dulcimer-playing Abyssinian maidens using intricate alliterative patterns, some of which are resolved in a single line, while others take as long as a stanza. Coincidentally, many of these patterns are palindromes, a characteristic of pulse fields that Maroney is quick to point out. Additionally, Coleridge sidestepped the use of terminal rhymes, creating a more floating, oscillating meter than did his contemporaries. Maroney's pulse fields establish a comparable rhythmic feel, as the resolution of one rhythm acts as an interior accent within another, or a foreshadowing accent of another, as well as announcing its own end or beginning.

The most salient point of comparison between *Fluxations* and the great visionary poem, however, is the psychedelic impact of the respective works. Certainly, the complexities embedded in each work initially sharpen the acuity of the reader/listener. Yet there is an overloading of the senses that eventually takes hold. In *Fluxations*, that transition occurs at the end of the first movement, a painstakingly constructed mosaic of pitch relationships. Begging comparison with the opening *Andante* from Alan Hovhaness's *Mysterious Mountain*, Maroney's first movement conveys an enormity that the mind can wrap itself around only by virtue of the music's solemnity.

While Hovhaness triggered the avalanche upon the senses exclusively through notational devices such as a double fugue, Maroney has, in addition to his progression of pulse fields, perhaps the most volatile catalyst available to a composer: improvisers. *Fluxations*, however, is not a piece in which soloists run unbridled. Maroney specifies who may improvise when, and sets parameters for the improviser to operate within. While his cohorts intensify the colors and test the plasticity of Maroney's elaborate structure, there is an aura of restraint in initial statements, like Ballou's solo in the second movement. Offset by Dresser's seismic rumblings, Ballou slyly turns the austere syntax inside out.

Instead, it is Maroney's hyperpiano that precipitates the piece's most hallucinatory passages. "Hyperpiano" is Maroney's term for a wealth of techniques, including working the keys with one hand, while sliding, bowing, plucking, strumming, and striking the strings directly with the other, using a variety of tools including bars, bowls, knives, bells, and mashers of metal, boxes and bottles of plastic, mallets of various kinds, and blocks of rubber. Using these techniques, Maroney can span from ethereal shimmers to teeth-rattling shrieks within seconds; as his approach does not involve prepared piano, it can be harrowingly contrasted with a conventionally keyed line. Direct string excitation seeps into his Great Divide-like solo like smoke; from Maroney's ensuing duet with Norton (playing vibraphone both with mallets and a violin bow), the music takes on a hallucinatory aspect. With more room for open blowing in the second half of the piece, the colors of the improvisations are more deeply saturated and their textures richer.

Additionally, the second half of the piece has a more flowing and even rushing rhythmic movement than the double-clutched rhythms propelling the first movements, which is partially attributable to the reduction of three rhythms to two in the pulse fields. A palpably cascading energy swells within the ensemble; but unlike many jazz recordings, in which the initiating spark can be traced back to a burst of percussion or a squalling saxophone, Maroney and his collaborators elude such forensic exercises. Subsequently, the music has what Marshall McLuhan called the quality of "all at oneness."

It would be a mistake, however, to articulate this as a postmodernist phenomenon. It is instead a function of an occasionally perceived universal order embedded in the ratios of Maroney's pulse fields, which, within the context of *Fluxations*, have a Divine Proportion-like determinacy in all of the composition's constituent parts. Just as the height of one's navel and one's total height have the same 1 to 1.618 ratio as the height of the knees and the height of the hips (not to mention subdivisions of fingers, toes, and other parts of the body—and that's just the human manifestations, the tip of the iceberg, when pinecone petals, leaves, and insects are piled on), the ratios of Maroney's pulse fields are revealed as the connective tissues of *Fluxations* no matter how one dissects the piece. This order asserts itself in a manner Claude Levi-Strauss had in mind when he wrote, "Myths communicate with each other through men without their being aware of the fact." A deeper meaning is conveyed, though not by such obvious means as leitmotifs.

A composer whose passions span myth and mathematics, Karlheinz Stockhausen, warrants passing mention, and not only because of Maroney's mid-seventies Finnadar recordings of Stockhausen's improvisation-propelled *Set Sail for the Sun* and *Short Wave* with the Negative Band. Their shared interests in the catalytic use of improvisation is noteworthy because the ensuing chain reactions create a dialogue in the music that supplants the exposition of structure, and subverts the traditional chain of command. While the sequence of pulse fields determines many aspects of *Fluxations*, the improvised elements of the piece create a decidedly modernist symbiosis between form and content.

Subsequently, *Fluxations* extends chains signifying innovations in instrumental technique and compositional methodology, as well as extending the increasingly important collaborative networks to which Maroney and his colleagues are linked. It also articulates a horizon that is "capital M" in meaning. In doing so, *Fluxations* pours light on the sunless sea that is the malaise of postmodernism. —*Bill Shoemaker, September 2003*

Denman Maroney (b. 1949) is known for his unique "hyperpiano" style, which involves playing the keys with one hand and the strings with the other using copper bars, brass bowls, and other objects. Maroney has won fellowships from NEA, NYSCA, NYFA, Yale, Meet the Composer, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, the Jerome Robbins Foundation, and the Michigan Arts Council. He was educated at Yale Summer School of Music & Art (composer in residence 1974), Cal Arts (M.F.A. 1974), and Bennington and Williams (B.A. 1971) colleges. For more information visit <http://www.pipeline.com/~denman>.

Trumpeter and composer **Dave Ballou** is a versatile musician. His six CDs for the Steeplechase label show his interest in the jazz vernacular and the possibilities of collective improvisation. Ballou performs on recordings with Mat and Joe Maneri, Maria Schneider, Andrew Hill, Gunther Schuller, Joe Lovano, Dave Liebman, and Sheila Jordan. An active teacher and clinician, Ballou has served on the faculty at the Banff Arts Center and the Maine Jazz Camp. He has a B.M. from the Berklee College of Music and an M.A. from the University of New Hampshire.

Mark Dresser, an acclaimed virtuoso contrabass player, composer, and bandleader, has been performing internationally since 1972 in jazz, composition, and improvisation. For a decade he performed with Anthony Braxton's Quartet, as well as with Ray Anderson, Tim Berne, Anthony Davis, Gerry Hemingway, and John Zorn. He has made more than eighty recordings, including nine CDs as leader, and received a 2003 Grammy nomination. Commissions include from Meet the Composer, the Library of Congress, WDR, the Banlieu Bleues Festival, the Brannen Foundation, Rova, and Matthias Ziegler. He has been awarded two NYFA fellowships and has been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony and Civetella Ranieri. He is on the faculty of The New School and Hampshire College.

Percussionist and composer **Kevin Norton** has performed his music internationally for almost twenty years. He appears on more than sixty CDs, including seven as a leader. Norton has worked with Anthony Braxton, Milt Hinton, James Emery, Bern Nix, Marie McAuliffe, David Krakauer, Fred Frith, Phillip Johnston, Joëlle Léandre, Paul Dunmall, Paul Rogers, Steve Cohn, Eugene Chadbourne, Wilber Morris, Ed Ratliff, Steve Swell, and Jemeel Moondoc, among others. He holds a Masters degree from the Manhattan School of Music and teaches at William Paterson University.

Composer/performer **Ned Rothenberg** has been internationally acclaimed for his solo and ensemble music, presented for the past twenty-five years in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. He leads the trio Sync, with Jerome Harris on guitars and Samir Chatterjee on tabla. Collaborators have included Sainkho Namchylak, Paul Drescher, John Zorn, Marc Ribot, Masahiko Sato, and Yuji Takahashi. For more information check <http://www.nedrothenberg.com>.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Denman Maroney

Billabong. With Hans Tammen, guitar. Potlatch CD 100.

Duologues. With Mark Dresser. Victo CD 073.

Fire Song. With Earl Howard, alto sax, electronics. Erstwhile CD 003.

Hyperpiano. (solo piano) Mon\$ey Music 1.

Tambastics. Robert Dick, flute; Mark Dresser, contrabass; Gerry Hemingway, percussion. Music & Arts CD 704.

Tools of the Trade. With Ned Rothenberg, reeds. CIMP CD 248.

appears on

Absolution. Absolute Ensemble. Enja CD ENJ-9394 2.

The Birth of George, a chamber opera by Lisa Karrer & David Simons. Tellus/Circe CD TE-C005.

A Confederacy of Dances Vol. 2. Earl Howard, electronics. Einstein CD EIN 003.

Mark Dresser's *Force Green*. Soul Note CD 121273-2.

Mark Dresser's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Knitting Factory Works CD 155.

Mark Dresser's *Marinade*. Tzadik CD 7063.

Mark Dresser's *Aquifer*. Cryptogramophone CD CG111.

Stockhausen Performed by the Negative Band. Finnadar SR9009. (LP)

Vision One: Vision Festival 1997 Compiled. AUM Fidelity CD AUM007/8.

Dave Ballou

Amongst Ourselves. SteepleChase 31436.

Volition. SteepleChase 31460.

The Floating World. SteepleChase 31486.

On This Day. SteepleChase 31504.

Rothko. SteepleChase 31525.

Mark Dresser

Aquifer. Cryptogramophone CD CG111.

Banquet. Tzadik CD 7027.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Knitting Factory Works CD 155.

Force Green. Soul Note CD 121273-2.

Marinade. Tzadik CD 7063.

Kevin Norton

Change Dance (Troubled Energy). Barking Hoop BKH 005.

The Dream Catcher (for Wilber Morris). CIMP 280.

For Guy Debord (In Nine Events). Barking Hoop BKH 001.

In Context/Out of Context. Barking Hoop BKH 002.

Integrated Variables. CIMP 121.

Knots. Music & Arts CD 1033.

Ocean of the Earth. Barking Hoop BKH 007.

Ned Rothenberg

Intervals. Animul ANI 101.

Ghost Stories. Tzadik 7061.

Power Lines. New World Records 80476-2.

The Crux: Selected Solo Wind Works 1989–1992. Leo Records LR 187.

with R.U.B.

Are You Be. Kazuhisa Uchihashi, Samm Bennett. Animul ANI 103.

with Sync

Port Of Entry. Jerome Harris, Samir Chatterjee. Intuition 3249.

Producer: Allan Jaffe

Engineer: Jon Rosenberg

Mixing, editing and mastering: John Guth

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DENMAN MARONEY (b. 1949)

FLUXATIONS

80607-2

In six parts:

- | | | |
|----|--------|-------|
| 1. | Part 1 | 1:25 |
| 2. | Part 2 | 11:14 |
| 3. | Part 3 | 12:37 |
| 4. | Part 4 | 11:33 |
| 5. | Part 5 | 8:28 |
| 6. | Part 6 | 2:00 |

For five players:

Ned Rothenberg, bass clarinet, alto saxophone

Dave Ballou, trumpet

Denman Maroney, hyperpiano

Mark Dresser, contrabass

Kevin Norton, drums, vibraphone

Special thanks to the musicians for their dedication and artistry and to Thomas Buckner for producing the first performance of *Fluxations* at Merkin Concert Hall in New York City on January 11, 2001 (where the same musicians performed as on this CD).

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