

Earle Brown: A Sketch

Anybody who has consulted or even casually flicked through a survey of modern music will have come across the spare geometric graphics of Earle Brown's score *December 1952*. It has become a classic visual image, an example, perhaps *the* example, of a radical break that occurred in the 1950s between the causality of the sonic event and score. It has also been considered as perhaps the first serious invitation to the classical musician to improvise rather than "read" in the conventional sense. Much has been made of Earle Brown's early experiences with jazz in connection with this, as well as the impact of the visual artists Jackson Pollock and Alexander Calder on such scores.

Brown was a veteran of the original postwar avant-garde of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, et al. He studied Joseph Schillinger's techniques of composition in Boston, based on the ideas of the New York mathematician, composer, and musicologist who had influenced a range of composers, including George Gershwin. In 1950 Brown was teaching Schillinger orchestration—for jazz arrangements, in fact—in Denver, Colorado, where Brown's first wife, the dancer Carolyn (who was to become a central creative force in the Merce Cunningham Company) was involved with the Jane McLean Dance Company. During Cage and Cunningham's visit to Denver, as part of a tour in 1952, Carolyn greatly impressed Cunningham when she danced in one of his master classes. In the evening afterward, the Browns attended a recital of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*; after the recital Earle Brown asked Cage, "Do you think your music has any relationship to the music of Anton Webern?" Cage was surprised by the question, as Brown recalls:

"John looked astonished and said 'What do you know about Webern?!' It was a revelation to him that this young kid in Denver, Colorado, knew Webern's music. At that time, though it is hard to believe now, it was not that common to run into someone who knew this music. I remember he said he loved Webern's music, and asked me what I knew. I told him what I was looking at: Webern, Schoenberg, and Varèse, amongst others. He said 'That's incredible. What are you doing here?' I said 'I'm trying to make a living.'"¹

Before this point, Brown was already immersing himself in the avant-garde literature and painting of the time. Kenneth Patchen's poetry of the late forties, with its graphic elements, were interesting to him, as well as Pollock's painting. Brown began working on small dripped, semi-abstract, and totally abstract images—not unlike Pollock or even Henri Michaux, in order to "get the feel" of this direct, spontaneous method of working. The music he was developing before his encounter with Cage was a form of serial music he arrived at through Schillinger mathematical processes; these formed a juncture with the direction of Boulez and Stockhausen at this time, rather than Cage. Like the Europeans, Brown attempted to address the problem of greater complexities of rhythm within the framework of the twelve-tone writing. *Three Pieces for Piano* of 1951 displays the fruits of such research—it's tough, angular music, both agile and agitated—requiring great dexterity to negotiate short rapid bursts of activity spanning leaps of dynamic articulation.

Brown later realized that the kind of Schillinger-inspired techniques he was using were amazingly parallel to what Messiaen and Boulez called "cellules"—a rhythmic motive of a particular length with its own characteristics of attack, intensity, etc., which could be endlessly permuted. Another aspect of these techniques was the distribution of particular intervals as "sound masses" according to statistical usage; this might be akin to the kind of stochastic music later developed by Xenakis. A few more words about Schillinger might be useful here: namely, the coexistence of graphic elements and mathematical

¹ Conversation with the author, May 1995.

procedures. Brown recalls that very early on he had translated “graphisms” into twelve-tone works. Nicolas Slonimsky (an early pioneer of new music, Frank Zappa’s guru, a conductor, and a bon vivant) wryly notes Gershwin’s own studies with Schillinger: “[who] instructed him to fill graph paper with dots, lines, and squares, which purportedly gave Gershwin a new creative energy.”²

The Browns moved to New York at the invitation of Cage and Cunningham; Carolyn joined the Cunningham Company. Earle became involved in Cage’s new project, the realization of music entirely for magnetic tape. This was grueling, labor-intensive work—over three years the studio produced only a handful of works, including Brown’s *Octet I for eight loudspeakers*, using the leftover tape fragments of other works. His other compositions at this time, in 1952, include the piano piece *Perspectives*, and *Music for Violin, Cello and Piano*, both serial-oriented works. Yet Brown was simultaneously exploring ways of “removing the glue” in music, as Henry Cowell once put it in another context. He was led to an analysis of performing conditions in relationship to the composer/performer/score, which led to radical experiments—using film as a score with a vertical line “conductor,” coordinating players, approaching sculptural, “mobile,” even “kinetic” scores which change the performer’s relationship to the given information.

Brown’s experience of Calder’s mobiles, long before meeting Cage, had implanted in Brown’s mind the ideas of mobility as well as the relationship of temporal and spatial concepts in music, which had encouraged his experimentation. Michael Nyman makes the useful observation that Brown’s early fully notated pieces, written between 1950–52, exhibit “a Calder-like mobility in that, as the units of a mobile undergo constant and virtually unpredictable but inherent change, . . . Brown constructed rhythmic groups assembled rather arbitrarily and accepted the fact that all possible assemblages were inherently admissible and valid. The result is one static version of compositionally mobile elements.”³

In one sense, this represents the background to *Folio*, which is the culmination of Brown’s early experiments in notation and scoring, and “loosens up” the fixity but also the implied mobility of the early scores. Brown added the performer to the parameters of frequency, duration, amplitude, and timbre. Each piece in *Folio* suggests different ways of engaging with the notated information as well as endless variation. *December 1952* is the most famous of the pieces, and by mid-century had become emblematic of modern music’s sense of abstraction. Brown adamantly stressed that the score is not a picture. It is not, say, a response to the visual art of Piet Mondrian he so admired; rather, it is a graphic conceptualization of a mobile space or field of sound, and how the performers utilize this is open-ended. The interest for the composer is in how the graphic concept can unleash particular and unpredictable “energies” with each performance. Again, Nyman’s comments are useful here.

In the later fifties Brown did not continue to work with the type of notation one finds in *December 1952* and *Four Systems*; these were not what Brown considered to be works since they were devoid of content. *December 1952*, he said, was “an activity rather than a piece by me because of the content being supplied by the musicians.” (This was, of course, precisely the kind of situation Cage spent the whole of the late fifties trying to achieve.)⁴

If Brown felt any ambivalence about *December 1952*, it must be partly that its currency as an image gave the impression that he was a composer of graphic music per se, while really it represents only one

² Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 1988.

³ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music*, Cambridge, 1999 (originally published in 1974).

⁴ *ibid.*

aspect of a complex dialectic of the openness and determinacy that was initiated between different works as well as within individual ones. *Indices* (1954), for example, is a complex, fully notated orchestral piece, and an early example of the electric guitar finding its way into the classical chamber orchestra (there were in fact great difficulties in obtaining one for early performances). In the important *Twentyfive Pages* for 1–25 pianos (1953), he developed a more consistent notion of open form rather than the “open content” of the graphic pieces. Although fully notated, the pages can be played either way up, in any order, with the two line systems read in treble or bass clefs: “A temporal order can be pre-established by the performer, obtained from the composer, or arrived at spontaneously by the performer(s).”⁵

Brown attempted to find a path that embraced extreme variability while maintaining an identity for the piece in question. As he himself explained: “There must be a fixed (even flexible) sound content to establish the character of the work, in order to be called ‘open’ or ‘available’ form. We recognize people regardless of what they are doing or saying or how they are dressed if their basic identity has been established as a constant but flexible function of being alive.”⁶

The key work for such a conception is *Available Forms I* of 1961, which represents a plateau or synthesis of his direction in the later fifties, only this time attempting to bring the conductor of an ensemble into a different relationship with the players. “When time (rhythm, tempo, continuity, rests, holding a note, repeats), volume, succession, and juxtaposition are variable, the form must be left open, so that various potentials can be realized (feedback between the sound events, which are malleable objects open to infinite combinatory possibilities, and the conductor/performer . . . who becomes akin to Mallarmé’s Operator).” This idea of “events” emphasizes a strong connection with the painters at that time, to whom Brown was introduced by his friend Morton Feldman. The idea of a kind of now-ness is associated with the Abstract Expressionist painters as well as, in a different way, Cage. Brown recalls an entry in his notebooks from 1951–2: “. . . want to get the time of composing closer to the time of performing.” This is not, as is often misunderstood of open form scores, an unrehearsed chaotic spontaneity unleashed in performance, but a careful preparation of events, with elasticity and variability in mind, resulting in surprising juxtapositions and assemblages. Brown also perceived the notion of “events” in his reading of Henri Bergson and James Joyce:

Like Proust’s or Whitehead’s or Einstein’s world, Joyce’s world is always changing as it is perceived by different observers and at different times. It is an organism made up of “events” that may be taken as infinitely inconclusive or infinitely small, each of which involves all of the others; and each of these events is unique. . . .⁷

Available Forms 2 (1962), for ninety-eight players in two groups, consists of a total of forty-eight events (three of which are improvised “densities”). Each page consists of four or five orchestral events mobilized by two conductors. The construction of each event is of contrasting materials in terms of basic sonorous character: articulation, density, contour, timbre, register, etc.

Most of the work since these pieces has generally consisted of a closed formal order within which

⁵ Oliver Delaigue, “Earle Brown and France,” dissertation in *Musicology: Les Nouvelles Musiques Americaines et la France 1945–85*. Paris: C.N.S.M.D.P., 1989.

⁶ Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 1999

⁷ Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle*, quoted in Earle Brown’s “Form in New Music,” Darmstadt, 1966.

mobile or open sections are available, either within this closed “framing” or at particular points within the continuity. *Corroboree* (1964) for three pianos is an example of this: All of the material is given, but windows of improvisational combinations (of any given material within the piece) can occur at certain points. Another important piece from the sixties is *Calder Piece* (1966) for four percussionists, where Brown had the idea that one of Calder’s mobiles could act as a “conductor” and chief instrument. Calder produced a specific mobile for the piece, which uses a battery of percussion instruments as well as the mobile itself.

Brown continued to emphasize different ways of combining fixed and mobile forms; these might include graphic indications for “extended” techniques and improvisational mobile qualities, as well as highly wrought passages demanding playing of great accuracy. It has been said that if Earle Brown has a signature style, then it is a “quickness of line and gesture”; this is certainly a feature of his writing for small ensembles. Such a piece is *Tracking Pierrot* (1992), which takes the basic instrumentation of the Pierrot ensemble, with voice replaced by percussion, and creates open, transparent webs of soloistic lines occasionally punctuated by slow cascades of chordal blocks that can be looped or activated at any point along a given sequence. Brown’s recent work *Special Events* is a kind of follow-up to *Music for Cello and Piano* (1955), requiring an adventurous coloristic approach to performance by each of the players. In one sense, the smaller chamber works remain concerned with a gestural quality, and with a sense of form being “tracked”—assembled with changes of direction, discontinuities, and juxtapositions. To these works, we might add the compositions for large orchestra often employing massive chordal “pillars of sound,” with more extended passages of musical “stasis,” such as *Time Spans* or *Modules 1–3* from the sixties and the seventies.

What has become increasingly clear is the variety of methods and solutions Brown has brought to composition. He remains a vital link between the European avant-garde and the Americans, through important associations with Varèse, Cage, Feldman, Boulez, Maderna, and Berio, among others, and through his particular attitudes toward creating new notational systems for differing situations, which has had a profound effect on compositional and performance techniques.

One spin-off from Brown’s concertizing activities in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere, was one of the most remarkable series of recordings of new music, titled *Contemporary Sound Series 1960–73* for Time Mainstream Records. As repertoire director, Brown was responsible for programming important recordings of the avant-garde of his generation, offering a fascinating survey of performers and forty-nine composers of sixteen nationalities. We get Aloys Kontarsky playing Ives’s *Concord Sonata*, the legendary flutist Severino Gazzelloni performing Franco Evangelisti and Berio, *Musica Elettronica Viva* and AMM, the Sonic Arts Union, many premiere recordings of Berio, including Cathy Berberian’s renditions of *Circles* and also Cage’s *Aria*; Stockhausen, Maderna, Nono, Sylvano Bussotti, Niccolò Castiglioni, Isang Yun, Yuji Takahashi, Xenakis and many others. While I hope that these are reissued some day, as it stands the list is a tribute to Earle Brown’s cosmopolitan outlook, which continues to set a striking example.

— David Ryan, November 1999

Composer’s notes

It is obviously a great pleasure for me that CRI is re-releasing its 1974 recording of my work, and an even greater pleasure that I am able to add to the repertoire. The performances of *Times Five* and *Novara* (recorded in Holland) still seem very fine representations of the works and are executed brilliantly by the Dutch musicians. *December 1952* as realized by the late brilliant pianist and composer David Tudor is, in my opinion, the best of many performances he made of this graphic score. It is fascinating to hear the realizations by Michael Daugherty of *November 1952*, *December 1952*, and *Four*

Systems (all published in *Folio* (1952–54)—immensely inventive and marvelously performed on piano, tape, and computer, with the newer technology that was not available to Tudor at the time he recorded his version of *December 1952*. This recording of *Nine Rare Bits* is one of six versions that Antoinette Vischer (who commissioned the work) and George Gruntz surprised me with when I returned to Basel after my lectures in Stockholm in 1965. Although I very specifically composed the sound events, it is an “open-form” score, subject to innumerable formal shapes, arranged by the performers themselves.

Music for Violin, Cello and Piano is a very early (1952) twelve-tone serial piece in very strictly metric notation. It uses Schillinger-suggested “serial” techniques, very similar to Messiaen, as it turned out. In contrast, *Music for Cello and Piano* is a completely subjectively composed work, in what I called “time notation” (contrary to metric) which is now referred to as “proportional notation.”

I feel this recording to be an extremely authentic and artistically fulfilled representation of these works written between 1952 and 1965 (not all that I wrote during that time, I hasten to add). I hope that future recordings will as successfully represent my work written between 1965 and 2050 as this does the early work.

— Earle Brown, January 29, 2000

Earle Brown (died 2002) was born in Massachusetts in 1926. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and commissions from Pierre Boulez, Merce Cunningham, Luigi Nono, Lukas Foss, and Darmstadt, Radio Bremen, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Rome Orchestra, and the London Sinfonietta, among others. In the 1950s, he was particularly associated with John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. In 1952–55 he worked with Cage on the “Project for Music for Magnetic Tape”; around this time both were instrumental in introducing concepts of open form and indeterminacy to the serially dominated Darmstadt. Brown’s experiments with notation and conceptions of space-time (proportional notation) have had a lasting influence on the development of contemporary music. He was the featured composer at numerous festivals, including the Wien Modern and Formlos in Leipzig, among others. He had various residencies, including at the California Institute of the Arts, the University of California at Berkeley, the Peabody Conservatory of Music (which awarded him an honorary doctorate of music in 1970), the Basel Conservatory, and Yale University. He received the “Letter of Distinction” from the American Music Center, and was the 1998 recipient of the “John Cage Award for Music” from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts in New York. In 1999, Brown was elected a member of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, in Munich.

From CRI SD 330:

Times Five and *Novara*: Recorded in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1974 by Emile Elsen

Octet: “Project for Music for Magnetic Tape”

December 1952: Recorded by David Hancock

Digitally mastered by Dawn Frank, engineer, at Sony Music Studios, NYC

These recordings were made possible by a grant from the National Institute/American Academy of Arts and Letters, which Earle Brown received in 1972.

Music for Violin, Cello and Piano: Recorded by Bob Arnold

Music for Cello and Piano: Recorded in April 1994, by Teije van Geest

Nine Rare Bits: Recorded in Paris, 1965

Publishing credits:

Times Five, *Novara*, *Music for Violin, Cello and Piano*, *Nine Rare Bits*: Universal Edition, Vienna;

Octet: MS; December 1952, November 1952, Four Systems, Music for Cello and Piano: G. Schirmer (BMI).

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Centering: The Music of Earle Brown. San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Newport Classic NPT 85631.

Four Systems. Eberhard Blum, flute. Hat Hut 6147.

Music for Piano(s) 1951–1995. David Arden, piano. New Albion NA 82.

Music for Large Orchestra and Chamber Orchestra (available from The Earle Brown Music Foundation).

Music for Chamber Orchestra (available from The Earle Brown Music Foundation).

String Quartet. Concord String Quartet. VoxBox 5143.

Synergy. Ensemble Avantgarde Leipzig, Earle Brown conducting. hat ART 6177.

Twentyfive Pages. Steffen Schleiermacher, piano. Wergo 6612-2.

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Griffiths, Paul. *Modern Music and After.* 2nd rev. edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Nyman, Michael. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond.* 2nd edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Sutherland, Roger. *New Perspectives in Music.* London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1994.

For further information, please visit The Earle Brown Music Foundation's website, www.earle-brown.org.

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EARLE BROWN (1926–2002)

Selected Works 1952–1965

80650-2

1. *Times Five* (1963) 14:59

Govert Jurriaanse, flute; Arthur Moore, trombone; Teresia Tieu, harp; Jaring Walta, violin; Harro Ruijsenaars, cello; and four channels of tape sound; Earle Brown, conductor

2. *Octet I*, for eight loudspeakers (1953) 3:22

3. *December 1952* (1952) 6:08

David Tudor, piano

4. *Novara* (1962) 13:01

Ton Hartsüiker, piano and leader; Govert Jurriaanse, flute; John Floore, trumpet, Harry Sparnaay, bass clarinet; Jaring Walta, Roelof van Driesten, violins; Gerrit Oldeman, viola; Harro Ruijsenaars, cello; Earle Brown, conductor

5. *Music for Violin, Cello and Piano* (1952) 3:02

Matthew Raimondi, violin; David Soyer, cello; David Tudor, piano

From *Folio*:

6. *November 1952* (1952) 1:24

7. *December 1952* (1952) 3:26

8. *Four Systems* (1954) 3:28

Michael Daugherty, piano, computer, electronics

9. *Music for Cello and Piano* (1954–55) 9:31

Dorothea von Albrecht, cello; Christine Olbrich, piano

10. *Nine Rare Bits* (1965) 6:04

Antoinette Vischer, George Gruntz, harpsichords

This recording was originally issued as CRI CD 851.

Total time: 65:17

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