“Eyes Open at All Times!”

Rova, Butch Morris and Conduction

*No Favorites* pays homage to one of the most original creators in improvised music, Lawrence “Butch” Morris, inventor of Conduction, a method for organizing large-ensemble improvisation that he took to the world. Morris died in January of 2013, and Rova mounted their tribute at Turkey’s Akbank Jazz Festival nine months later. The program represents a working relationship that Rova began with Morris in 1988 and also reflects parallel working processes reaching back to the mid-1970s.

Rova does more than simply pay tribute. The quartet’s members build on their own work in structured improvisation, incorporate other methods of organization—from graphic scores to conventional notation—and expand their palette from the saxophone quartet to include a string quartet and an electric power trio. Extending the possibilities of large-ensemble improvisation, the combined groups create music of both depth and an ever-changing surface, the fruit of both intense commitment and a highly creative, heterodox methodology. Like previous Rova expansions—the recently revived Rova Saxophone Octet, first convened in 1992; Orkestrova 2002 playing pieces by Satoko Fujii and Steve Adams; Electric Ascension (2003–2016); Rova & Nels Cline Singers (2008); and The Receiving Surfaces with John Zorn (2010)—it achieves complex music that both requires and rewards active listening.

Butch Morris

Setting out from Long Beach, California, “Butch” Morris initially established himself as a cornetist and composer in the free jazz scene of the 1970s, exploring milieus in San Francisco, New York, and Paris and playing with creative associates like Charles Moffett, David Murray, Alan Silva, and Steve Lacy. Dissatisfied with the often shapeless large-group improvisations of the ’70s New York loft scene, Morris began to seek other possibilities for organizing improvisation, eventually hitting on the idea of Conduction, shaping an improvisation with a series of coded gestures.

Given the radical democracy of free jazz, it’s easy to imagine the initial resistance that Morris’s singular repositioning as “conductor” would meet, but Morris could achieve indisputable results, finding ways to create, contrast, and organize sound that were satisfying to the musicians involved.

Conduction was a social vision as much as a musical one, built on a principle of community in which the musicians shared in the creative process, the conductor defining the form, the musicians supplying the detailed content. That social dimension is evident in the first Conduction, both in its title and the inclusiveness of Morris’s musical circle. Recorded at The Kitchen in New York in 1985, *Current Trends in Racism in Modern America* (Sound Aspects 4010) cut across stylistic demarcations, mixing free jazz stalwarts Frank Lowe and percussionist Thurman Barker with “Downtown” improvisers with ties to avant-rock and experimental, among them saxophonist John Zorn, harpist Zeena Parkins, and sound artist Christian Marclay on turntables. They were from two different scenes and with different responses, but Morris was developing a gestural language that could create fresh concordance out of the collisions.

Morris abandoned the cornet, his individual voice, concentrating on developing the vocabulary of signs that would come to make up the language of Conduction, seeking to develop a synaptic
connection between conductor and players. In his notes to the ten-CD Testament: A Conduction Collection (New World/Countercurrents 80478-2), Morris wrote, “Conduction not only relates to the act of ‘conducted improvisation,’ it is also the electric charge and response from body to body—the immediate transmission of information and result.”

In calling this tribute No Favorites, Rova emphasizes the breadth of Morris’s inclusive vision: “50% of my background is in jazz, the other 50% is in discovering who I am. . . . I’ve got influences—I like Samuel Barber and I like Marvin Gaye. . . . You can’t ask me who my favorite trumpet player is, because if you name one, you gotta name two, and if you name two, you gotta name three. . . . I don’t have a favorite composer, I don’t have a favorite trumpet player, I don’t have a favorite nothing.”

When Morris provided a detailed statement of his aesthetics for Rova’s Improv21, a series of “informances,” he envisioned a music in which relationships conquer details of style: “. . . by stripping away predispositions to value ‘this’ or ‘that’ in music, we also construct a mirror to the kind of relationships that subsist in society, and the wherewithal of music to challenge and transform them, a community in microcosm that functions via this dynamic.” For Steve Adams, “That sense of the socio-political implications of musical organization has also been an element of Rova’s thinking since the beginning.”

Rova
Rova’s connections to Morris and the idea of conducted improvisation are multiple. Formed in 1977, the quartet were working in parallel directions to create structured improvisation.

Both Rova and Butch Morris have their roots in California free jazz. Bruce Ackley recalls Morris living in the Bay Area on and off in the 1970s: “Around ’76 or ’77, Butch came nearly nightly to just listen at the space our group of improvisers ran, the Blue Dolphin, located in the San Francisco Castro District at that time. That’s when I first met him and started talking with him about music. I think the Blue Dolphin was a real hotbed of ideas in its infancy.” Jon Raskin remarks of the scene, “We covered open improvisation, non-idiomatic improvisation, games and structures of all kinds. Conducting improvisers was part of the things we did there.”

Larry Ochs’s regard for Morris dates from the first time Rova played in a Conduction at a 1988 German festival devoted to saxophone ensembles, with the last day devoted to a Morris piece in which all the groups—ranging from new-music ensembles that strictly play composed music to hard-driving pop jazz to free jazz and the broad perspective of Rova—participated following two days of rehearsal. Raskin remembers, “the soundness of his concept was exhilarating, so much so we invited Butch to work with a large ensemble in San Francisco.”

Six months later, Rova sponsored Conduction No. 11, Where Music Goes (New World 80479-2) at San Francisco’s Great American Music Hall, expanding to become the Rova PreEchoes Ensemble, a 13-member group that presages the current “No Favorites” band, including in its ranks four strings, electric guitars, and percussion.

Then in July 1990, Rova performed large group conductions with Morris as part of the International Creative Music Orchestra. Including musicians from as far afield as Lithuania and East Berlin, the orchestra played at the Vancouver Jazz Festival and the Goodwill Games Art Festival in Seattle, in a program that featured Ochs’s, Wayne Horvitz’s, and Rova large-ensemble compositions as well.
The methodological connection to conduction runs still deeper. From their outset, Rova have been involved in exploring structured improvisation, using game strategies, cueing systems and group members acting as conductors. Ochs writes, “Since late 1977, the musicians in Rova Saxophone Quartet have developed a set of strategies—‘games,’ ‘events,’ ‘variables’—for use in structured improvisations. The goal of each structured improvisation is to compose a coherent piece of music as a group. In other words, the newly created piece, even though created spontaneously, should have an inherent logic to it, an audible architecture which facilitates and influences the ebb and flow of sonic materials. To say it in another way: In a structured improvisation, a framework is provided within which the musicians improvise; this framework defines the piece and influences its shape and feeling.” (“RADAR and Rova’s Development of Language for Structured Improvisation” [1999] http://rova.org/foodforthought/radar.html)

The series of gestures and techniques that define the structural components evolved through time, beginning with Rova’s first LP, Cinema Rovaté, and two pieces from the Trobar Clus series. Exposure to John Zorn’s game pieces led to the development of a further cued piece, Maintaining the Web Under Less than Obvious Circumstances, or The Web, performed as a quintet with Zorn in 1986, a contemporary parallel with Morris’s first Conduction recording.

The cueing language mutated into the more extensive system of the piece called Radar in the 1990s. What is most striking about the Rova cueing systems is that they open the floor to shared conductor duties with each musician assuming some of the cueing responsibilities within the structure of the piece. It’s in keeping with a band that once called a record The Crowd (honoring Elias Canetti, author of Crowds and Power, who described the conductor as the embodiment of a 19th-century leadership cult), that Rova have democratized the idea of the conductor. They also provide materials that make for subtle transitions between stages in a piece, highlighting the sense of listening to composed music. In the No Favorites program, there are multiple methodologies at work shifting from piece to piece, with the evolved Radar system apparent in Nothing Stopped / But a Future and Contours of the Glass Head.

The pieces

Each of the three extended pieces here includes a high degree of improvisation while embodying different compositional principles, the first and third employing conduction, the second graphic notation and simultaneity.

Larry Ochs’ Nothing Stopped / But a Future, dedicated to Buckminster Fuller, is the most methodologically complex of the three pieces here: The eleven musicians work their way through a score with movements and sub-movements with descriptive symbols (one wittily suggests “Play as if notated music is in front of you”), silences and solos; some of the individual parts have bits of conventional notation; the piece is performed with a conductor, composer/percussionist Gino Robair, who leads the musicians through the sequence, many of which permit free contributions, solos, and choices between strategies. There’s also a segment in the narrative that Ochs calls “Gino’s House,” introduced by Robair raising his arms above his head in the shape of a roof to signal an episode of relatively “pure” conduction.

Ochs’s multi-dimensional piece, with constantly shifting individual levels of freedom and constraint, achieves a mercurial effect. Impassioned voices arise and combine and disappear as suddenly as they arose. The outset bears a striking resemblance to the jazz tradition: Keening saxophone phrases dovetailing with one another over propulsive drums immediately suggest Charles Mingus’s assumption of Ellington timbres, a music that at once yearns and luxuriates,
and which disappears almost as quickly as it arises. Even when playing similar patterns, the strings bring different timbres, attacks, decays, and overtones that are as much cultural as physical, Nothing Stopped / But a Future reaching toward both a synthesis and distinction of voices in some ways continuous with its very patterns of contrast and interruption, its brief and contrasting episodes reaching back to the disjointive world enacted with John Zorn in the early “Web.”

The music endorses its complex methodology, its combination of notation, patterns, improvisation and conduction achieving levels of continuity, discord, change and unpredictability that could be produced in no other way. There is clearly room for free expression here, sometimes the confluence of wild, expressive voices, and that freedom is that much more intense because of the abundant structure in which it arises, a piece in which Ochs’s narrative warns, “Eyes open at all times,” and threatens to dock pay for missed cues. Nothing Stopped / But a Future is a kind of omni-directional step alternately in and out of time in which that initial yearning melody might serve to introduce the dystopian press of the title or a kind of post-historical sonic pastoral.

The Double Negative presents a very different view of this edition of OrkestRova, presenting the three sub-groups as individual units in a series of three graphic scores, before they come together in a concluding simultaneity of the three pieces. True to the “no favorites” aesthetic, it presents highly distinct sets of instrumental timbres drawn in turn from classical, jazz, and rock genres.

The first segment is a performance of Jon Raskin’s “Flower Power,” a work from 2007 that’s part of a series of graphic scores, this one an explosion of petals and leaves along with a series of vertical lines indicating drones, the players moving independently through the parts. The quartet of strings bring incredible formal instincts to the piece, a kind of melodic continuum moving through the piece, at times suggesting Samuel Barber, at others birdsong played on an erhu, while supporting figures dovetail among the players, all touching at times on a particularly spiky vibrancy.

The second and third pieces are by Steve Adams. The first of these is “Graphic #38 (for Steve Lacy),” the second “Graphic #41.” “Graphic #38” is played by Rova. Adams describes the way the two pieces work, “Graphic #38” is in three sections, and each section is based on a scale or intervallic structure that is reminiscent of ones used by Lacy. The players are free to choose from a set of options based on that mode, with the added rule that no more than three people can be playing at any time in sections one and two, which are the only ones the quartet plays at this point in The Double Negative.” Rova plays the tribute to Lacy, with Adams’ song-like alto floating out of the string piece.

If Rova assumes and purifies the strings’ lyricism, the power trio assumes the strings’ metallic angularity of line and sharp attacks in their approach to “Graphic #41.” Adams explains, “The score is read in three sections, first going once around the outer ‘satellites,’ then once around the outer triangle, concluding with the inner triangle. Letters represent concert pitches, and other elements are to be interpreted by the performer. When the guitar trio reaches the inner triangle, the string and saxophone quartets re-enter playing their scores, with the saxophones playing the third section of ‘#38.’” The simultaneity carries the work toward a new level of associations. That the players somehow shape this into a coherent whole is tribute to a fundamental musicality, a willingness and ability to both adhere to a score while shaping their lines for maximum impact.
**Contours of the Glass Head** returns to the technique of Conduction, but on Rova’s own democratic model, with the role of “conductionist” shifting when required among the quartet’s members. Originally developed for a collaboration with the InkBoat Dance Company in 2006, the piece contrasts with *Nothing Stopped / But a Future* in that its development is far smoother, more gradual, its specific sequence of improvisational techniques chosen to create a sense of large-scale evolution. For example, the second segment, called “Giants Steps” (4:40 to 7:58), is, according to Adams, “a series of group gestures working off the concept of weight, as if they were the steps of an immense creature, with silences between. This is eventually joined by a solo by Jon Raskin on baritone (6:20).” The seventh segment, “Telescope #2” (20:35 to 24:40) has players start by droning on C, then begin to introduce short notes on random pitches. These other pitches should eventually settle on one other pitch, which is held longer each time it is played until it becomes the new drone note.” When it arises, Adams solos over the new drone chord.

“*Contours*” is a high achievement for structured improvisation, each section arising with the control and precision of a score, but each imbued as well with the sense of living tissue that distinguishes improvised music. It’s music of welling depth, its drones conveying senses of a collective tuning and individual extension that are far more than merely “musical,” instead conveying a sense of social processes that are at once both represented in the music and embodied there as well, in a continuum of constructive purpose. More remarkable still is the range of sounds and processes that are drawn into this process, whether it’s a moment of skittering play from the strings, the focussed electric reverie achieved by guitarist John Shiurba, or a collective blow-out of saxophone blasts, honks and squeals that recall the grandfather of conduction, Sun Ra, leading his massed reeds in a vision of chaos. When the piece ends, it’s on a collective splintering crescendo that takes the music toward an original intensity, not the “greatest” or “highest” intensity necessarily, but an intensity that belongs uniquely to its moment.

Rova’s work here is more than a tribute to Morris’s techniques and accomplishments, resonating as well with the history of large-ensemble improvisation and a genuine need to transcend musical categories and discourses. The joy and power of this music develops directly from its combination of complexity and openness, its complexity in part a condition of its openness to other musics and ideas. There’s an on-going notion one might associate with Ornette Coleman’s 1962 Town Hall concert in which he presented his own trio, a string quartet playing his written music and then a merger of his own free jazz group with a rhythm & blues band. In the more than fifty years since, that inclusivist vision (shared by Morris with his claim to “No Favorites”) has expanded to the present work in which a class structure of genres has largely disappeared and in which instruments and ensembles are no longer segregated. Further, this music creates remarkable balances between the needs of all the communities involved, whether groups (of groups and individuals), whether musicians, conductors or audience, balancing impulses with constraints, aligning methodologies with results and creating a kind of continuous participatory democracy.

—Stuart Broomer, July 2016

*Stuart Broomer writes on music, mostly improvised, for several publications, among them Musicworks and the New York City Jazz Record. His column “Ezz-thetics” appears regularly at www.pointofdeparture.org. He is the author of Time and Anthony Braxton (Mercury, 2009) and co-author of Arrivals/Departures—New Horizons in Jazz (Gulbenkian, 2013).*
Formed in San Francisco in 1977, the **Rova Quartet** quickly became well known for its vital blend of compositions and structured improvisation, and has performed over the past 38 years at some of the most prestigious jazz clubs and festivals throughout North America, Europe, and Japan. Rova’s repertoire features works by composers at the forefront of musical creativity, including Fred Frith, Terry Riley, Wadada Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, and John Coltrane; many works were commissioned by Rova with support from Meet the Composer, the Gerbode Foundation, and others.

Rova:Arts celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2003 with concerts that featured an expanded twelve-piece ensemble, including Nels Cline, Otomo Yoshihide, Carla Kihlstedt, Don Robinson, and Jenny Scheinman, performing John Coltrane’s set-length work *Ascension*, captured live for the Quartet’s 2005 CD, *Electric Ascension*. Since then, Orkestrova has performed this work at major festivals in Paris, Lisbon, Vancouver, San Francisco, and both Saalfelden and Wels, Austria, as well as in theaters in Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia. A live concert-video from the 2012 Guelph Jazz Festival (Canada) and a documentary on *Electric Ascension* were released in 2016 by Rogue Art as *Rova Channeling Coltrane* on Blu-ray and DVD, along with a CD of the music.  

www.rova.org

**Jon Raskin:** Thirty-six years ago I joined up with a group with a love of creating music using wind over reeds through brass. Improvise, compose, strategize, collaborate while exploring the gaps and edges of ideas and self-expression to make the “ensemble” be larger than the sum of its parts was the goal. Find the new, rephrase the old and grow the music was the tack as I keep sailing with this crew.  

www.jonraskin.com

**Bruce Ackley**, soprano, tenor saxophones, B-flat clarinet: Listening was first: Danny Kaye (!), the oboe and English horn, doo-wop, 45s. Choir, glee club, always singing. At 15: COLTRANE. Always records. Studied painting and photography. 1970: first soprano sax. Improvising constant, I got no rhythm section. Blues, pan-African abstraction. LACY, BRAXTON. Sound Clinic, Zorn, Chadbourne, Kaiser, Planet X, ROVA, Actual Size (playing my stuff). Always ROVA. Creating music is like creating any art: nothing is pre-ordained; all aspects of a work are subject to inquiry / discovery / open design. Form follows function. Boulez, Stockhausen, Webern, Ives, Xenakis. More listening, more Rova, more improvisation. Nested in community rich with improvisers harvesting meaning in the moments. Touring, recording, playing nightly is key to understanding and movement. LIFE pertains, music sustains. ROVA: no end in sight.

**Steve Adams** plays saxophones, flutes, electronics, and composes. He’s been in Rova since 1988 (“the new guy”) after living in Boston, where he was a member of Your Neighborhood Sax Quartet, Birdsongs of the Mesozoic, and Composers in Red Sneakers. Steve has written more than fifty compositions for saxophone quartet, as well as many others for varied instrumentation. His piece *Cage (for John Cage)* was performed at the 1993 Bang on a Can festival, and his piece *The Gene Pool* was commissioned in 1993 by Meet the Composer and performed at their festival “The Works” in Minneapolis in 2002. Steve has appeared on more than fifty recordings, and has six recordings as leader or co-leader on the 9 Winds, Clean Feed and ptMENTUM labels. He received a California Arts Council Fellowship in 2000 and teaches at Mills College.
In addition to acting as CEO of Rova:Arts since 1986, Larry Ochs currently composes for and leads Kihnoua with vocalist Dohee Lee, Scott Amendola and special guests (The Sybil’s Whisper, 2012 CD); The Fictive Five with New York–based musicians Nate Wooley, Ken Filiano, Pascal Niggenkemper, Harris Eisenstadt (The Fictive Five, 2015 CD); Larry Ochs Sax & Drumming Core (Stone Shift, 2009 CD; next CD from Rogue Art in late 2016). Current “collective” bands include: East-West Collective with Didier Petit, Sylvain Kassap, Miya Masaoka, Xu Fengxia (Humeurs, 2014 CD); Ochs-Robinson Duo (The Throne, 2014 CD); Jones Jones with Mark Dresser and Vladimir Tarasov (The Moscow Improvisations, 2016 CD); Trio Dave Rempis–Darren Johnston–Larry Ochs (2 releases on Aerophonic); Trio Cline–Cleaver–Ochs with Nels Cline and Gerald Cleaver.

www.ochs.cc

San Francisco native Tara Flandreau is a violinist/violist, composer/improviser, music educator, and visual artist. In addition to numerous classical music performances, Tara has performed and recorded with many great improvisers and contemporary composers. She particularly enjoys creating and interpreting new musical structures that straddle the intersection where improvisation and notation meet, and experimenting with the sonic capabilities of the violin and viola. Tara teaches at the College of Marin and the Marin Community Music School. As a college educator, she has many years of experience teaching music theory and composition, music history, chamber music, and conducting the COM Symphony Orchestra.

Jordan Glenn spent his formative years in Oregon drawing cartoons, taking dance classes from his aunt, making movies and studying jazz, classical, and rock music. In 2006 he relocated to the Bay Area and has since worked closely with Fred Frith, William Winant, Zeena Parkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Ben Goldberg, Todd Sickafuse, John Schott, Lisa Mezzacappa, Karl Evangelista, Dominique Leone and the bands Jack O’ The Clock, Arts & Sciences, Beep!, tUnE-yArDs, and the Oakland Active Orchestra. He composes/conducts the large, percussion-heavy band Beak, and since 2007 has lead the trio Wiener Kids with saxophonists Aram Shelton and Cory Wright.


Dr. Alex Kelly is a San Francisco-based cellist, composer, electronic musician. He composes and performs with major symphony orchestras, chamber orchestras, new music ensembles, string quartets, cello quartets, big bands, jazz combos, rock bands, hip-hop crews, klezmer bands, world music ensembles, theater companies, radio productions, ballet companies, modern dance companies, and circus troupes. He also composes film scores and video game music. Alex is the author of the cello technique book The Seven Points, which teaches fingerboard-mapping techniques. His live-looping solo show has been seen in a variety of venues ranging from Davies Symphony Concert Hall to Yosemite mountaintops.

John Shiurba is a composer and guitarist whose artistry includes improvisation, art-rock, modern composition and noise. Shiurba has recorded and toured the U.S. and Europe as a member of the bands Pink Mountain, Eskimo, The Molecules and Spezza Rotto, with Anthony Braxton’s ensemble, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and leading his own groups,
including 5x5 and 9:9. As a guitarist, Shiurba has developed a unique and personalized approach to the guitar. Through the use of extended techniques and unusual preparations, he expands the traditional sound range of the instrument, producing stunning, often unrecognizable results.

Christina Stanley is a Bay Area–based violinist and musician who studied violin with Li Lin, Daniel Kobialka, David Abel, Cathy Van Hoesen, and the Alexander String Quartet. She holds a B.M. from San Francisco State University, an M.F.A. from Mills College, and studied composition with Roscoe Mitchell, Fred Frith, and John Bischoff. She has been a featured composer for the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, a vocalist for the William Winant percussion ensemble, and has premiered works by George Lewis and Roscoe Mitchell for Mutable Music under conductor Petr Kotik. She has performed throughout the U.S., Europe, and Cuba.

Scott Walton is a bassist and pianist whose music negotiates the terrain between jazz, free improvisation, and the classical avant-garde. He has performed in festivals and venues throughout North America and Europe in a host of collaborative contexts, and has recorded with Alex Cline, Vinny Golia, Myra Melford, Steve Adams, Nels Cline, Tim Perkis, Michael Vlatkovich, Gilbert Isbin, George Lewis, Anthony Davis, and Bobby Bradford, among many others.

Gino Robair (conduction on Nothing Stopped / But A Future) has created music for dance, theater, television, silent film, and gamelan orchestra, and his works have been performed throughout North America, Europe, and Japan. He has performed and recorded with Tom Waits, Anthony Braxton, Nina Hagen, Terry Riley, Lou Harrison, John Butcher, Derek Bailey, Ikue Mori, Otomo Yoshihide, and the ROVA Saxophone Quartet, and is one of the “25 innovative percussionists” included in the book Percussion Profiles. Gino is a founding member of the Splatter Trio and Pink Mountain. His opera cycle, I, Norton, is based on the life of Norton I, Emperor of the United States.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY
Figure 8: Pipe Dreams. Rova Saxophone Octet. Black Saint 120167-2.

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To see the scores for the pieces as described in the liner notes, please visit http://rova.org/projects/no-favorites.html.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), In Memoriam

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ROVA: ORKESTROVA

No Favorites! (for Lawrence “Butch” Morris)

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1. Nothing Stopped / But A Future (for Buckminster Fuller) (Ochs) 19:27
2. The Double Negative (Adams, Raskin) 13:03
3. Contours of the Glass Head (Ochs, Adams, Raskin, Ackley) 27:36

Rova: Bruce Ackley, soprano sax; Steve Adams, alto sax; Larry Ochs, tenor sax; Jon Raskin, baritone sax

+ Tara Flandreau, viola; Christina Stanley, violin; Alex Kelly, cello; Scott Walton, acoustic bass; John Shiurba, electric guitar; Jason Hoopes, electric bass; Jordan Glenn, drums; Gino Robair, conduction (on Nothing Stopped / But A Future)

TT: 60:20