

Cecil Taylor, free jazz, and modern Western music

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Though musical tradition has constantly changed throughout history, there are but a handful of people responsible for great changes in this style. One of these people is Cecil Taylor, responsible in great part for the revolution of “free jazz.” His music, though very much steeped in the African-American tradition (and bitterly defended by Taylor and his colleagues as a natural extension of that tradition), advanced “jazz” music by reaching beyond convention and drawing heavily from modern European influences. However, these influences first were adapted to the traditions and aesthetics of jazz through Taylor before their inclusion, producing a music uniquely personal and a reflection of Taylor’s own background. This process of “absorption” was not easy, and as we shall see, not without controversy and difficulty.

Cecil Taylor - background

In contrast to many other “jazz icons,” Cecil Taylor’s upbringing was much more conservative than most. Born in 1929 to a middle-class household in Long Island, Cecil’s mother held high standards of culture: she herself played piano, spoke three languages, and was involved in amateur theatre. She started Taylor on piano lessons at the age of five, and later he would take percussion lessons with a timpanist for Toscanini (perhaps foreshadowing the development of his percussive playing style). His formal musical education continued on at the New England Conservatory in 1952, where he studied for three years.

It was at the conservatory that Taylor came into contact with twentieth-century twelve-tone and serialist techniques. He received the typical conservatory training in piano, theory, harmony, solfège, arranging, etc., and during this time, his exposure to modern Western compositional practices (that is, those developments of “twentieth century music” at the time) was dramatically increased. Taylor himself comments on the bewildering effect of being exposed to so many techniques: “Then it goes into another stage when maybe you go to school for a while

and are exposed to all those influences and for a while you don't know exactly where you are.” (Wilmer, p. 28).

However, for all this Western exposure, Taylor began to feel the pull towards African-American musical aesthetics more strongly. His early piano lessons were classically oriented, as his status-minded mother did not regard the career of a jazz musician as a noble pursuit. Thus it wasn't until his arrival in Boston that he began to explore and learn about developments in contemporary jazz music, his boyhood experiences having been limited mostly to Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Glen Miller, and the like. His further enormously influential explorations into the Boston jazz club scene (home to musicians like pianist Jackie Byard, trumpeter Joe Gordon, saxophonist Gigi Gryce, as well as visits by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker) and the world of “bebop,” combined with feelings of frustration towards academia for the lack of appreciation for African-American music and culture led him to leave the conservatory after three years.

Western influences in Taylor's music

However, it is clear that the conservatory – and, with it, modern Western practices – did not leave Taylor. Even a brief listening of Taylor's music from the 50's, and more so in the 60's, will display his style of playing which many critics angrily labeled “atonal” or “anti-jazz.” These types of criticism against adopters of new “free jazz” aesthetics (like Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane in his later career) were very common at the time. And Taylor does not shy from admitting Western influence: “I am not afraid of European influences. The point is to use them – as Ellington did – as part of my life as an American Negro.” The problem, Taylor states, is to use “the energies of the European composers, their technique, consciously, and blend this with the traditional music of the American Negro, and to create a new energy.” But he does not claim to be a trailblazer in this field: “Was it unique? No. Historically not. This is what has always happened. Ellington did it.” (Spellman, p. 28)

Despite perceived similarities to “atonal” and serial techniques, Taylor seemed to prefer the music of neoclassicists like Stravinsky and Bartók to serialists like Boulez and Cage (whom he especially disliked, also to be discussed later). He describes a period of time in Boston when he was really “digging Stravinsky” (Spellman, p. 61). He also makes the somewhat outlandish statement: “Bartók showed me what you can do with folk material.” His longtime bass player also intimates an intense curiosity for the methods of his Western contemporaries:

“I know that he has a lot of scores, and even more records, of so-called classical music, and that he has been listening to classical music since his youth. He also studied privately from a classical musician when he was a kid, ... and at the New England Conservatory, where you’re definitely exposed to that kind of music. But a lot of critics felt that he has been trying to copy these musics, and I know that isn’t true. Cecil is the first cat who has used these systems ... and made them work for jazz. “... It was a funny thing, when I went up to Buffalo this year, many of the people up there were asking me all about Cecil, but when I came back, Cecil was very anxious for me to tell him how these composers were shaping their music, ‘ordering’ it, he calls it. He wanted to know the systems and the formats they use.” (Spellman, p. 34)

There has also been no shortage of authors willing to draw comparisons between Taylor’s music and that of his European contemporaries. Valerie Wilmer called Taylor the “jazz equivalent ... of straight composers like Bartók” (p. 23). Gunther Schuller (one of the main proponents of the Third Stream movement, intended to combine jazz and classical aesthetics, without compromising either) compared Taylor and “free jazz” in general to Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, crediting Taylor with doing for jazz what Schoenberg et al did for the Western tradition, that is, crossing “the borderline into the realm of atonality ... where their music often spills over into areas so removed from any center of tonal gravity, that it can be thought of as ‘atonal.’” (Spellman, p. 29).

Parallels between Taylor’s “free jazz” and the contemporary Western music

Schuller does bring up a good point, as there are many parallels to be drawn between the development of “free jazz” and developments in the European tradition in the twentieth century. First is this very basic notion of “atonality,” which oversimplifies things; however, it is true that in both aesthetics, traditional systems of pitch organization are abandoned for newer ones, mostly

based on intervals. Steven Block draws this same parallel, and believes free jazz relies chiefly on motivic relations and variation, which in turn produce intervallic invariances within an improvisation – resulting in the many pitch-class set transformations in free jazz that he has focused his attention on finding (1997, p. 207).

Related to atonality is the use of tone clusters in both Taylor's music and his European contemporaries. Clusters are commonly used in tone-color and sound-mass compositions as a coloristic element. In Taylor's music, however, clusters are not sustained chords but have a more percussive quality: they appear as short, forceful attacks, hammered with the fist or arm in rapid succession over several registers (Jost, p. 74).

Another parallel is that of the disintegration of old, longer forms into smaller and more modular forms. Taylor again has something to say on this: "Everybody who's hip knows that the Europeans are looking, really, at jazz. The long form is exhausted. Nobody writes long-form music anymore. The sonata is out, old-fashioned. That's what Webern is about. So, it means that what they're trying to get to is the kernel, the short musical statement." (Spellman, p. 38).

Another interesting parallel is that of rhythm. Free jazz unloosens – rather, destroys – the constant 4/4 pulse of the bass and drums, replacing it with "free time," where a "tempo" is felt not by a constant beat but by a more subjective overall perception of information density (Jost, p. 73). Serialized music, however, is known for its exactingly specific and unconventional rhythms. Jost points specifically at the "free" rhythm in Taylor's recording *Unit Structures*, and declares the feeling of "subjective indeterminacy" – "like that occasionally encountered in serial music" – shows just "how blurred the boundaries between free jazz and European avantgarde music have become" (p. 73). The paradox here lies in the fact that the rhythm of free jazz – improvised, without constant beat – can sound so much like serial music – completely controlled, and with strict meter.

This loss of older structures has had certain consequences on both musical styles: where traditional older, external boundaries – like those having to do with form, traditional meter,

constant tempo, motivic development – are lost, the result has been in both aesthetics that the newer formal schemes needed have been more inwardly-focused. Early atonal and 12-tone pieces seem to follow this trend (from the boundaries of the nineteenth century), just as free jazz and specifically Taylor's music searches for new organizational principles. Jost finds that Taylor's music sets up internal formal associations based on "energy contour" – that is, the manipulation of register with dynamics to produce a swelling effect.

Taylor's recording *Unit Structures*

In *Unit Structures*, Taylor replaces the traditional jazz "head, solos, head" form with his new form of three contrasting blocks: *Anacrusis*, *Plain* and *Area*. These terms come from the liner notes to *Unit Structures*, which contain somewhat quixotic poetic descriptions of these formal concepts. The title track "Unit Structures" on the album serves as a good example of this form. The piece begins with *Anacrusis*, which sets a "mood" but does not introduce any thematic material, which is needed for motivic improvisation and elaboration following Taylor's "constructivist" musical style, as he says, "based on the conscious working-out of a given material." (Jost, p. 75)

Plain is where such thematic material is introduced. On "Unit Structures" this material appears about a minute into the piece: the introduction of a simple five-note minor scale in F#, repeated up and down with little elaboration. The saxophone takes up this line almost immediately, but transforms it slightly, taking it a minor third down and syncopating the rhythm slightly. Other instruments come in and material is built in a constructivist method just as Taylor states: "The emphasis in each piece is on building a whole, totally integrated structure." (Spellman, p. 38). A little later, the two saxophones burst in with another theme, this time featuring drum hits in "time" with gaps in the theme. With no set tempo, the unison is never "perfect" but they are playing the same notes. Several more units are introduced following this, each previously worked out and separated by silences. Call-and-response type structures take

over, and the enter *Plain* section can be characterized by a combination of worked-out themes, motivic development, group improvisation, and equal contribution by all players.

The *Area*, however, is somewhat of a “solo” region – that is, only one horn player appears at a time, with the basses, drums, and piano participating as well, and not “backing off” in the traditional sense to allow the horn player to be heard, but actively responding to contributing to the musical dialogue. Taylor during this section acts “as catalyst, feeding material to soloists in all registers, encompassing single noted lines, dyads, chord clusters, activated silence” (Taylor, liner notes). Bass clarinet and saxophone in turn play with the rhythm section.

The song returns to *Plain*, and there is an exact repetition of the main theme from the first appearance of *Plain*. More short, motivic collective improvisation ensues, and gives way to a new *Area*, featuring two more soloists, trumpet, and Taylor himself, playing only with the basses and drums but swelling pitch and dynamics several times, finally climaxing and ending his solo. The winds join in one after the other, improvising and elaborating on the five-note minor scale motive of the first *Plain* and then slowly fading out. (Jost, p. 83)

The other selections on *Unit Structures* reveal this kind of construction. “Tales (8 Whisps)” has received the added benefit of being subjected to pitch-class set analysis by Steven Block, who discovers that the motivic development described by Taylor’s “working-out” of material occur literally in the music as pitch-class set transformation operations, ranging from simple transposition operations to multiplication operations. Taylor is constantly juxtaposing more diatonic/blues, whole-tone, and octatonic material (with varying degrees of chromatic elaboration) against more “chromatic” gestures, and the reoccur in orders that reveal much more segmentation and ordering than obvious and first listening (Block, p. 186, 1990).

Distinctions from Western music

Despite all this talk of Western influence, the recording *Unit Structures* brings up some important distinctions from the European tradition. First of these is tonality: though Taylor’s

music is often described as “atonal,” Spellman reports he views this emphasis on tonality or the lack of it as “quite beside the point of his music” (p. 30). Jost also objects to such a narrow categorization of Taylor’s music. It is not completely “atonal” but rather atonality is more a means of variety – for purposes of color and structural differentiation – more a part of Taylor’s palette rather than a defining characteristic of his music. There are many tonal motives, elements, and functions in Taylor’s music – still not perhaps enough to merit Spellman’s claim that Taylor’s music is of “essentially blues content” (p. 28).

Block, in his research on the transcribed performances of Taylor, analyzes these “atonal” chromatic elaborations to find much of what is material in the blues genre. Block complains that “the surface chromaticism is so dense that past critics and analysts who have not been aware of the underlying pitch structure have incorrectly asserted that Taylor completely dismantles traditional harmony or allows texture to drive his improvisations.” (1997, p. 225) Taylor’s “constructivist” style of improvising, with its constant motivic development, in this case hides the fact that Taylor is not just playing atonally for its own sake because tonal music is “outdated” and “you can’t play tonal anymore” (as perhaps was the feeling among some Western composers?), but rather as a means to an end, as another color but not the whole picture.

Another difference separating *Unit Structures* from the Western tradition is the lack of written-out Western notation – there is no score, though it is very obvious that the main themes, structure, and forms, have been worked out beforehand. At this time Taylor was working with his musicians by ear (discussed below) – regarding it as a superior method of getting the desired results from his performers. As he wrote in the liner notes to *Unit Structures*:

Western notation blocks total absorption in the ‘action’ playing. The eye looks, mind deciphers, hand attack, ear informs. The pupil mirrors only the inner light, an ear having heard identifies. Hearing is sight face away academy’s superfluity. There are not separate parts: one body and the mind enclosed. We precede inventing. The interpretation has occurred. Emotion being aggressive participation defines the ‘acts’ particularity the root of rhythm is its central unit of change eye acting upon motor responses directing motions internal movement (wave).

Despite Taylor's rambling poetic style, his point is reasonably clear: he views notation as detracting from true emotional expression, that is, the unison of the body and mind. This emphasis on the participation of the body – not just the mind – as essential for improvisation comes back again in his criticisms of modern aleatory.

Aleatory vs. “collective improvisation”

This clash of Western “control” against Taylor's “freedom” is further augmented by many Western composers' interest in the use of aleatory techniques at the same time as the “free jazz revolution” was taking place. Which begs the question: how much are the aleatory performance techniques explored by Stockhausen, Cage, Cardew, and other Western composers indebted to the “collective improvisation” of free jazz, and vice versa? Jost claims that Taylor's move towards collective composition had little to do with the popularity of aleatory in European music – that it was in fact a return to jazz tradition (p. 76). Taylor himself makes this distinction between Europe's written-out aleatory and his own more traditionally jazz-based (and African-American) method:

“... They [musicologists] wanted to see it down on paper to figure out its structure, its whole, but at that point I had stopped writing my scores out. I had found that you get more from the musicians if you teach them the tunes by ear, if they have to listen for changes instead of reading them off the page, which again has something to do with the whole jazz tradition, with how the cats in New Orleans at the turn of the century made their tunes. That's our thing, and not composition.” (Spellman, p. 70)

To Taylor, the main difference between free jazz improvisation and aleatory is an emotional one – jazz improvisation “comes out of a human approach” and the problem with aleatory is that “they [Western players] don't *want* to get emotionally involved with music. It's a theory, it's a mental exercise in which the body is there as an attribute to complement that exercise. The body is in no way supposed to get involved in it” (Spellman, p. 36). The ineffectiveness of aleatory in Western music is essentially a problem of experience: “You have to invent a series of games to obscure the fact that essentially what you're doing is asking musicians

to ‘improvise.’ Well, unfortunately, most of the so-called classical musicians in this country – except organ players – have not had any background in improvisation.” (Wilmer, p. 25)

He also criticizes most Western composers who use aleatory techniques fairly harshly. “Stockhausen had those cats improvising to get what he called ‘realization.’ What does that mean? ... They showed me the scores ... and they were all very pretty, all of them. ... They’re only approximations, like guides to tell you what to do with your potential. In a sense, anyone can read that and, in terms of his potential, make a thing. ... Any music that’s resulted from his creation has been accidental.” (Spellman, p. 35)

Taylor’s criticisms of his contemporaries

Taylor is well known for his controversial statements regarding other musicians, especially the Western composers of his day. Already discussed is Taylor’s disdain for what he sees as the overly “unemotional” composers of the Western tradition. Composer John Cage, for instance, particularly has him enraged, for his critique of modern jazz for “using regular intervals and for being based too much on the emotions.” (Spellman, p. 34). Taylor’s response was:

“He doesn’t have the right to make any comment about jazz, nor would Stravinsky have any right to make evaluations about jazz, because they don’t know the tradition that jazz comes out of. I’ve spent years in school learning about European music and its traditions, but these cats don’t know a thing about Harlem except that it’s there. Right away, when they talk about music they talk in terms of what music is to them. They never subject themselves to, like, what are Louis Armstrong’s criteria for beauty, and until they do that, then I’m not interested in what they have to say. Because they simply don’t recognize the criteria.” (Spellman, p. 34)

It these kinds of remarks that have marked him a controversial, but he does raise an interesting point. Taylor has obviously been trained in the European tradition – so he feels completely justified in taking elements of European music and incorporating it into his. His resentment comes from how he sees European composers attempt to use aleatory – or “improvisation” – as trying to use a technique belonging to the African-American tradition

without first studying it sufficiently. Taylor has done his homework on European music, yet Western composers like Cage and Stockhausen have not, in his view.

Taylor's music can be seen in terms of many great conflicts: he extensively uses many modern techniques of the European tradition, yet relentlessly criticizes that same tradition. His music employs great degrees of freedom, but at often sounds like the highly specific serialism of his contemporaries. He champions "collective improvisation" and "collective composition," yet scorns Western aleatory. His music parallels the development of Western concert music from "restricted" to "free," yet in many degrees he sees his music as a return to traditional methods. Despite all this, Taylor's music can above all mostly simply be described as his own – uncompromising and reflecting his own unique experience.

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