Indeterminacy as a Means for Practical Complexity in Henry Brant's "Instant Music"
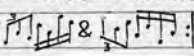
by Joel V. Hunt

Henry Brant rejected notions of indeterminacy in his music, claiming that even in his most complicated spatial compositions, the element of chance is "not much greater than in an average classical work."[1] However, an examination of his manuscript collection, housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation, reveals a more extensive and deliberate involvement with indeterminacy, which first manifests itself as a foundational characteristic of his spatial technique and culminates as an agent for practical complexity in his "instant compositions."[2]

As is consistent with all of Brant's spatial music, his "instant compositions" employ indeterminacy in the relationships *between* spatially separated superimpositions of rhythmically and/or stylistically distinct modular units, but they are unique in that they also employ indeterminacy *within* each unit.[3] That is, while Brant's spatial compositions typically layer two or more highly determinate blocks of music (each bound by traditional notation) within a relatively flexible combinatorial scheme, his "instant compositions" layer two or more highly indeterminate blocks of music (each guided by written instructions, graphic notation, or abbreviated traditional notation) within the same flexible scheme. By relaxing control *between* and

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1   Quoted from the LP cover: Henry Brant, *Kingdom Come / Machinations* (LP, DC-7108, Franklin Lakes, N. J.: Desto, 1970). Brant defined "indeterminate music" as "music, in which accident and chance are looked upon as primary musical ingredients." See "Space as an Essential Aspect of Musical Composition," *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, ed. Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York, etc.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967; reprint New York: Da Capo, 1978), pp. 223–42, esp. p. 234. However, current definitions encompass any music in which the composer has deliberately relinquished control of the sounding outcome.

2   Maria Harley likens Brant's spatial technique to Witold Lutosławski's concept of "controlled aleatoricism," as both superimpose fixed elements in an approximate manner to form complex textures. "An American in Space: Henry Brant's 'Spatial Music,'" *American Music*, 15 (1997), no. 1, pp. 70–92, esp. p. 79.

3   Charles Amirkhanian used the term "modular unit" to describe the independent blocks of music that Brant layers in his spatial compositions. "Speaking of Music: Henry Brant." Other Minds Radio, KPFA-FM, February 9, 1984.

① **1989 (ROSEWOOD)** Spatial Assembly for Guitar Orchestra   HENRY BRANT

BAL-CONY

Right — SCRAPING. long & short glisses on 3 lowest strings. R.H. only, thumb & 2 fingers — also —

Middle — HAND-FLUTTER, on back of guitar (low to high)

Left — PERCUSSION on back of guitar R. thumb only. 2 pitches, higher & lower part of back
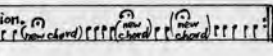
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STAGE

back — ALL SOLOISTS. Each guitarist plays a different, known, SLOW piece in E minor or A minor. Molto rubato, & with pauses.

front — fast, short, CHROMATIC FIGURES highest 2 strings (high); lowest 2 strings (low):

AUDIENCE

right — 2-note chords, PONTICELLO, SLOW, highest 2 strings (high positions): lowest 2 strings (low positions):

left — ¼ tone TRILLS on 2 strings, p & i

Ⓑ

BAL-CONY

Right — 4-NOTE CHORDS, repeated. All chords = same L.H. position. R.H. "plucking" — each finger on a different string. (new chord) (new chord) (new chord)

Mid. — with SLIDE. slow, ascending slides in L.H. R.H. arpeggiates the chord ↑ as each new fret is passed:

Left — with SLIDE. slow, descending slides in L.H. R.H. arpeggiates the chord ↓ as each new fret is passed:

Ⓒ

STAGE

back — NATURAL HARMONICS. 1st & 2nd harmonics on each string. Most of the players in this group need to use a CAPO. Also, 2-note & 3-note chords. Use ALL R.Hand techniques.

front — Triplet figuring (each open string) rapid descents across the strings:

AUDIENCE

right — LOW E, TUNING DOWN. Twist peg slowly, in both directions. Pluck Slowly.

left — SINGLE LINES, in repeated-note TREMOLO (unmeasured) long DESCENTS, big range, chromatic writhing at bottom; long ASCENTS, chrom. writhe at top.

Ⓓ

BAL-CONY

Right — wide "VIBRATO" using SLIDE (extending over several frets.) Rather big skips between vibrato-areas = a kind of vibrato-chordal "melody"

Mid. — ZIGZAGS with SLIDE. Start fast at middle of fingerboard and slow down as intervals expand. R.H. strikes at every high & low point.

Left — ZIGZAGS with SLIDE. Start slow at low end of fingerboard, go as high as possible; speed up as intervals contract. R.H. strikes at every high & low point.

Plate 1: Henry Brant, *Rosewood: Spatial Assembly for Guitar Orchestra* (1989), cue score, p. 1, sections A–D (Henry Brant Collection).

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within modular units, Brant achieved intricate textures that would be impossible to produce by conventional means.

Brant defined "instant composition" as "planned improvisation without notation."[4] To realize an "instant piece," he outlined performance instructions for a series of modular units, positioned them on a cue score according to their approximate placement in time, described verbally in rehearsal the desired effect for each unit and the plan for coordination of localized events and structural articulations, and synchronized the performance as conductor by means of a variety of special gestures. With this process, Brant developed a dynamic framework for ensemble improvisation that limited the musical outcome while leaving the specifics of surface detail and structural design to the discretion of performers.

Rosewood (1989) exemplifies surface and structural indeterminacy in Brant's "instant music." Composed for the Second American Classical Guitar Congress, *Rosewood* requires an ensemble of fifty or more guitarists divided into seven spatial groups: left, middle, and right balcony, back and front stage, and right and left audience. The two-page cue score is divided into nine sections, labeled A through H (*Plate 1*). Each section contains three to five elongated rectangular blocks, which enclose surface-level performance instructions and diagram the structural organization of modular units.

Brant's instructions for the back-stage group in section A stand out as a striking example of surface-level indeterminacy. With his request for all soloists to play a different known, slow piece in E or A minor, with *molto rubato* and pauses, Brant loosely defines general conditions (key, tempo, style) and limits performer options to "known" repertoire, but relinquishes control of the exact musical content. While the overall effect may be predictable, the specific surface details are left to accident.

Whereas Brant's "all soloists" instructions require performers to play relatively conventional material, albeit in a non-coordinated improvisatory style, Brant typically prescribes more abstract gestures. For example, he requests non-pitched effects such as "scraping" the three lowest strings and knocking on the back of the guitar (first section); indefinite glissandi and slide gestures such as detuning the low E string (section C) and "zigzags" across the fingerboard (D); definite-pitched melodic passages, typically of virtuosic character, such as fast, short chromatic figures (A) and rapid descents across the strings in triplets (C); and a variety of harmonic gestures such as two-note chords, *ponticello* (A), and "big chords" with a given fingering (F). Although he often includes accompanying graphic, rhythmic, or abbreviated traditional notations, which further limit the musical outcome, Brant's instructions are typically quite unrestrictive, especially in

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4   Tom Everett, "Interview with Henry Brant," *The Composer* (Hamilton, Ohio: Composer Magazine, 1976), pp. 36–37.

terms of pitch and rhythm. As a result, when multiple guitarists within a spatial group freely interpret and spontaneously realize a given instruction, they form a highly complex texture with intricate rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic variations that would be difficult to simulate with conventional notation.

Structural indeterminacy manifests itself in the temporal organization of modular units. While the placement of blocks within each section on the cue score shows the approximate structural scheme, which in every section consists of an accumulation of modular units, the lack of exact time specifications allows the conductor freedom to decide the rate at which accumulations occur. For example, in the opening section, the balcony right group enters first and continues while the balcony middle and left groups enter in succession on cue. Thus, Brant defines the order of entrances, but relinquishes control of the exact timing.[5]

Brant also relinquishes control of the timing of localized events within modular units. For example, in section G he instructs the conductor to cue each note of a given melody to coordinate a common harmonization (a rare example of pitch determinacy). Similarly, in section H the conductor is asked to cue a series of open chords according to an approximate rhythmic notation. As a means for coordinating multiple players, localized event cues are typically found coupled with determinate-pitch notation and/or at major points of structural articulation.

Lastly, structural indeterminacy emerges as a result of variable section boundaries. While only the final section contains explicit instructions for performers to stop playing, Brant's double bar notation at the end of each section indicates full-stop delineations. These section breaks would have the structural-spatial effect of articulating nine sections that alternate balcony and stage/audience groups four times before combining all groups in the final section. However, for the premiere Brant was compelled to omit particular section breaks, allowing modular units to accumulate beyond their indicated boundaries. Brant's willingness to make structural modifications suggested to guitarist/conductor David Tanenbaum the possibility of spontaneous choice in performance.[6] In his 1997 recording, he allows section A to continue through section B, C through D, and E and F through G. His interpretation articulates five sections, the last four of which combine all spatial groups.[7] The accumulation-based organization of Brant's "instant music" allows variations in structural articulation.

Although Brant consistently rejected notions of indeterminacy in his music, his use of nontraditional notation for governing musical content

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5   Since Brant typically conducted his "instant compositions," it is likely that he did not consider the structural aspects outlined here to be indeterminate.
6   Correspondence of the author with David Tanenbaum.
7   Steve Reich, Henry Brant et al., *Y bolanzero*, Jugend-Gitarrenorchester Baden-Württemberg (CD, CAD 800879, Bietigheim-Bissingen [Germany]: Cadenza, 2001).

within modular units, and the flexibility with which he regarded large-scale organization, localized event cues, and structural articulations, make his "instant compositions" highly indeterminate in aspects of surface detail and structural design. As his primary defense, Brant claimed that his "instant music" could be repeated without substantial change in the overall effect.[8] While this observation is valid, it does not refute indeterminacy. Rather, it describes a well-designed indeterminate composition in which the composer has carefully outlined limitations within component parts and designed an intricate plan for coordination of structural and localized events. For Brant, this approach facilitated textural complexity, immediate playability of virtuosic passages, and spontaneity in performance. While each performance will be new and different, as Brant suggests, the identity of the composition will remain. However, since composition with indeterminacy has the inherent quality of diminishing the role of the composer in the creative process, it has been viewed as an objectionable practice. While Brant may have found indeterminate techniques to be of value for practical purposes, his vocal rejection of indeterminacy may have been an attempt to fend off associations with composers who took indeterminacy as the ideological basis for their music, composers with whom Brant did not identify. To his detriment, Brant was successful in this disassociation. While his approach represents unique shades of indeterminacy, his name is not mentioned in any discussion of indeterminate music. Further inquiries into the evolution of his compositional process as it relates to indeterminacy will reveal his distinct contributions to this compositional approach in greater detail.

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8   Henry Brant, *Kingdom Come* (see note 1).