

Third Stream and the Importance of the Ear

A position paper in Narrative Form
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Gunther Schuller has defined Third Stream Music as “the result of two tributaries -- one from the stream of classical music and one from the stream of black music -- that have recently flowed out towards each other in the space between the two, leaving the main streams undisturbed, or mostly.”¹ For Schuller Third Stream music fused “the improvisational spontaneity and rhythmic vitality of jazz with the compositional procedures and techniques acquired in Western music during 700 years of musical development.”²

When Gunther Schuller and I founded the Third Stream department at New England Conservatory, I broadened Schuller’s original definition very slightly. Why must the two tributaries represent only classical and jazz?³ Why not substitute one of the many styles and traditions of ethnic music? What would one label the vital percussive tribal music of Nigeria blended with the cries of the Ainu from northern Japan? About two years later my colleagues and I went a step further towards a clearer definition by describing Third Stream music as a label for an anti-label music. At the time this seemed the most relaxed and least doctrinaire meaning. But this still defines a finished product, an entity. During the last few months I have begun to use the term Third Stream as a verb. Now I am convinced that it is a process, an action, and if the final product must be labeled, a new term such as “salsa” will be coined, or it will carry the name of the author, e.g., Mingus.

I have talked with my colleague Larry Livingston, who is now vice president of the New England Conservatory and who feels that sometimes the newest word to be coined may be “streaming.” He says, “When a musician is ‘streaming,’ he or she is realizing in public or other shared forums a private voice which is constantly being shaped, enlarged, and enhanced by the presence of other musicians who are ‘streaming’ -- either in a common ensemble environment or in coexisting solo environments. In ‘streaming’ originality is as important as competence.”

To summarize, the three components of third-streaming are that it is a process, that the music is primarily improvised, and that like all great music, it is a deeply personalized vehicle for the soloist or collaborators.

However, my purpose in writing is not to record the evolution of a definition but to contend that it is the ear which really determines the direction a particular improviser takes, and accordingly the quality of the improvisation. It is the ear’s

strengths (and limitations) which are the most important elements in the creation of an individual style, not the ability to reproduce memorized, virtuosic licks at roller-coaster tempos.

When musicians have this skill, along with imagination and perseverance as well as the ability to communicate, they are blessed. In our school curriculum it is the ear which is ignored in favor of analysis, reading of scores, and especially technique (although sometimes these pursuits are not mutually exclusive). Perhaps this would be a good opportunity to back-track.

I grew up improvising constantly, and in the late 1950s at Bard College, I finally persuaded the administrators to allow me to major in "jazz," only to realize by the time I was preparing my senior performance project that my music was not considered jazz by other musicians and peers, and eventually not even by me. I used the African aural tradition in acquiring and "composing" new repertoire, but my inspirations were Debussy, Bartok, and Stravinsky, with a little sprinkling of Pentecostal music. Later I became more exposed to black music but the only pianist I could honestly relate to was Thelonious Monk. After years of productive yet often frustrating study with outstanding "jazz musicians," I finally found myself when I studied with Gunther Schuller.

Later I joined him at the New England Conservatory, where we both realized there was a need for a department which could offer a nonrestrictive, disciplined approach to improvisation without taming the genius and the madness which might be trapped in the young and undeveloped musician. So in 1972 the Third Stream Department -- the first of its kind -- was established at New England Conservatory. Today we are not alone in our work with the ear. There are people in California who are doing advanced research projects on auditory processing. Much of this research takes place in laboratories and may be of great benefit in the future. Also in California today Randy Masters of the University of California at Santa Cruz encourages students to explore a diversity of musical styles. Perhaps our program is unique, however, in that students get credit both for disciplined ear work and for finding themselves. I hasten to add that as a community of musicians attempting to extend the boundaries of improvisation, we do not hold a monopoly.

Improvisation was stressed from the start in our department, not only because I felt that there was a need for the school to explore this art form, but also because there was a much greater need for it. Improvisers had no place to study where they would not be labeled "jazz," "rock," or "church," whereas composition departments were broadening their bases, and faculty and students were acknowledging and utilizing wider diversity of sources, making ventures into the music of black America and a wide variety of foreign ethnic cultures. Thus the 18-year-old composer had less chance of being turned away because of not fitting the norm than the musician who primarily preferred to improvise.

Yet if things were becoming less rigid for the eclectic musician who wishes to notate, it was not so for most of the performers, who were seldom allowed a similar license. Third Stream for the composer was usually anything but that for the performer. In the extreme cases string, woodwind, brass, and percussion players read their parts and when there were chances to improvise, certain things happened. The "jazz combo," which usually played chord changes they had failed to

memorize, either because of lack of rehearsal time or for less forgivable reasons, stared at the written changes, cloning the expected slick arpeggiations or scale patterns. The symphonic players often ask to improvise within contexts that they may not have had the chance to assimilate. Few have developed skills of aural retention which could have been strengthened from memorization of the easier Bartok *Mikrokosmos*. Rarely have these musicians listened passionately to artists like Billie Holiday. Then after 1965 the obligatory rock groups outstaged everybody else, and afterwards all the performers walk out of their own doors, unchanged.

During the first few years of the Third Stream Department, we spent valuable class time exploring the music of Ethiopia, Schuller, Mahalia Jackson, *bossa nova*, and Charles Ives, as if we had to prove to the world that there were no barriers in any music. Because the ears had not been exercised, and because we moved at a rapid pace, this broad palette of diverse musical styles did not have time to sink into the students' inner selves.

Gradually I slowed down and began emphasizing the music which I thought we were escaping from, the music called jazz. Jazz was a good place to be in because street musicians use their ears to learn music and were models for emotion and improvisation. The authentic pulse in Billie Holiday's and Charlie Parker's reactions and improvisations on Tin Pan Alley tunes is often missing from well-intentioned improvisation which occurs in aleatoric music. Singers from a European background could learn much by emulating Aretha Franklin (privately) and often learn to bring this intensity and truth to their own original idiom. Or a musician interested in black and folk music can gain other insights from concert music.

So first-year Third Stream students commence their study on a smaller scale, with the 32-bar song interpreted by Billie Holiday. Written music is banned. To this day I still antagonize musicians by insisting that everything be learned by ear.⁴ This invariable command is often swallowed with difficulty by musicians who profess tolerance of diverse styles and new teaching techniques.

To the musician who has grown up without being encouraged to play by ear, preoccupied with playing Chopin preludes on the piano or the latest copy of the Real Book (an updated, trendy fake book) on the horn or guitar, learning totally by ear is as difficult as it is for the bachelor chef to create homemade mayonnaise from oil, vinegar, salt and pepper. The opposition counters that our approach is no less intolerant, and my reply is that music is an aural art. If you want to use eyes, dig Picasso, but don't come here for a musical stenography.

The student starts this process by painstakingly hearing the melody over and over again via cassette (better than the phonograph), gradually singing along with the tape and later without it. This level of emulation must be achieved before the student touches the instrument. seeing a black key starting note on the piano or depressing a valve on the horn is a visual and tactile crutch. Naturally the memory must not be assisted by manuscript paper at this time. Only without resort to instrument or manuscript paper can the ear be fully liberated and this melody really burned into the memory to become part of the musician. This is the first step of ear irrigation, development, or as students say, a gymnasium, and should precede

technical proficiency on the instrument, because so often the finger moves faster than the ear.

After bass lines and triad progressions are introduced, the ear is ready for a listening survey in the style of the music memorized. When the ear has been exercised heartily over a period of time, I find that a passive memory and a discerning appreciation can be established even when listening to music in a similar style on a somewhat casual level.

From the beginning there is a difference between this teaching and that done in many jazz or Afro-American departments. I have visited more than 50 of them on my recruiting trips. Most departments adhere more rigorously to jazz, often that between 1930 and 1960, and some recent rock. With few exceptions all musicians have music stands in front of them constantly. (I am saying this to play safe -- I personally have not witnessed this.) In the most extreme cases students are asked to arpeggiate chords dictated in the symbols on the page, or to mouth patterns (of which dozens of updated ones are published each year). Students are seldom encouraged to leave the chord or tonality in performance. Of course, there are many teaching situations where it is important to stay within the style. Solos are rarely taped or discussed privately but the musicians often get experience in reading and ensemble precision. Much can be said for the on-the-job discipline that they receive in the last two areas if this is to be their direction.

In the Third Stream discipline, Billie Holiday, the music of Sephardic Spain, different forms of black improvisation, jazz, ethnic, and contemporary concert music are heard. Here as before the music is learned exclusively by ear. When it becomes more difficult, tapes are played at slower speeds and in rare cases a student is encouraged to transcribe the particularly difficult measures, then tape the music and afterwards learn it through the ear at a slow tempo.

Transcriptions come under discussion when we start studying specific solos by significant jazz artists such as the Prestige version of the Miles Davis solo *Walkin'*. Students are invited to answer each twelve bar chorus of Davis with their own response, first in the style of that improviser and later as an extension. For obvious reasons already stated, this is handled better if musicians are not sight reading from a music stand, even if from their own transcriptions.

However, the written page is not always discouraged. Students are asked to maintain a log. At first it is merely a listing of the objectives of the material presently studied, the amount of time taken to conquer the material, the problems that arise and conclusions. From the start the improvisers must begin diagnosing their own strengths and weaknesses, and it is better if this is done first on specific memorized material where there is a right and wrong rather than our analyzing the students' first attempts at free improvisations. It is important not to be too critical of the students' first attempts at improvisation. Later the log becomes a glorified diary in which events are listed. Much later yet the individual must acquire the foresight to appreciate the priorities and the experiences which are to be processed. This log can help determine direction and develop confidence in self-review.

Other activities and directions take place during the following years, but I am more and more hesitant about creating inflexible demarcations about what happens in a given year. In the past I have encouraged students to begin seriously

considering specific components of the two styles which most fascinate them, and during the senior year, along with an improvised self-portrait in the form of a senior performance recital, to begin the process of interpretation (which I did under Gunther Schuller's mentorship). I often insisted the student offer this prescription, no matter how embryonic, of what was to be a life-long pursuit as a prerequisite for the undergraduate Third Stream degree.

Now I realize this can be difficult for all but the most musically mature students, and that if the second musical tradition has not had enough time to brew and breathe, then the hybrid may not only curdle but it may sound as if the second stream were hastily added as if it were an afterthought, or worse that the musician is slumming in the second style.

Ideally it will take about six years with constant guidance of no more than two and preferably one mentor to achieve this ability for self-review. During the last two years, this intensive study would best be done at the graduate level or perhaps privately. As can be seen, our system is in constant flux.

I would like to point out that if in the first year there is stress on the training of the ear, and that if the middle year includes a broad survey of twentieth-century styles as well as discovering what lies within each student, there is attention paid--perhaps not enough -- to future goals. Four years of Third Stream can prepare students for teaching (some students who become turned on to the importance of the ear become excellent teachers, both on the private level and with added courses in education, in the public schools). Some of our student graduates are already teaching. It also prepares them as performers. If you develop your own unique sound, it may take you longer to get a break, but you cannot be replaced as easily, and there is some security in not being forgotten. Our students are also encouraged to participate in other ensembles in the school which offer different experiences. Students can always take a summer off and enroll in courses which prepare them for studio arranging, reading, rehearsing with stage bands, and so forth.

Students enrolled in a Third Stream program in a university or conservatory would probably have two hours of class and a half-hour of private lessons in their specific performance areas. At a conservatory such as ours, they are required to take private lessons in vocal or instrumental technique and interpretation, plus classes in music literature, theory, listening, ensemble workshops and the humanities. Many Third Stream students eventually choose to express the styles they develop through notated music. Of course since their backgrounds cover such a wide range of style and emotion, their grounding in notation must be very thorough, and courses such as score reading and analysis are quite invaluable. Composers have traditionally received much creative inspiration from *hearing* music as it appears on a score (e.g. Beethoven's study of Bach) although the style (classical, romantic, Gypsy, etc.) must be assimilated by ear in order for it to have full meaning to the student. There is nothing wrong with analysis as long as the students have used their ears to *learn* the music to begin with.

It also goes without saying that the aural and analytical experiences of the classroom cannot and should not replace the street playing communions, the midnight block percussive ensembles by the river, the one-to-one contact with that elder pioneering statesperson. As in other studies of music, the atmosphere of the

classroom is particularly vital for students when they are communicating and interacting with each other. Yet often students find the most substantial moments with the teacher take place in the private studio.

In the Third Stream Department we believe that there is nothing as important for the hungry improviser as a well-informed mentor with a broad spectrum of tastes, and until the last few years such an individual was hard to locate. There were very few Gunther Schullers. But as this relationship progresses, the guide must encourage the student to become the copilot, and eventually the solo pilot (hopefully not totally insensitive to occasional pertinent back-seat suggestions).

However, what Third Stream is or is not is far less significant than is the realization that the Third Stream ideal of upgrading the ear to the prominence it enjoyed during the Baroque era, when improvising was a viable form of musical expression in art music. We encourage institutions to give academic credit and recognition to the expansion of ear pedagogy as the conduit to the inner musical resources. We hope this will be of increased meaning and interest to educators and musicians whose primary philosophy in music is not improvisation.

If the edification of the ear and spontaneous imaginative expression are not encouraged by academia, improvisation will be patronized and it will only be considered an authentic art form by a handful of critics and hard-core fans; the main stream will only hear of it halfway in noisy cabarets and as practices in stage bands. It will not be the Thelonious Monks who get the attention, but those musicians who have reasonable technical facility, gained from memorizing licks.

The intensive new approaches in African aural training I have described would be of great benefit to all musicians. The aural tradition is not recently invented. Music was handed down aurally by grandparents to small children for centuries, and was the earliest means of communication. Let us hope that in the 1980s more schools will take improvisation seriously, whether the musician intends to perform in traditional or Third Streaming styles.

¹ Quoted in Whitney Balliett, *Dinosaurs in the Morning: 41 Pieces on Jazz* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), p.215.

² From a lecture, quoted in Gunther Schuller, "Third Stream Redefined," *Saturday Review*, IV, No. 9 (May 13, 1961), 54.

³ I am using the word "classical" in its common, most inappropriate usage. My apologies for use of the word "jazz," considered by many Pan-African groups as racist.

⁴ Musicians studying a score which they hear in their heads is a different matter. Often theory teachers, who themselves hear material, fail to convey to their students the importance of *hearing* before analyzing.