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Malcolm Braff's approach to rhythm for improvisation: definition, analysis and aesthetic

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2017

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26461

De Wet, Daniel Jacobus Steyn (2017) Malcolm Braff's approach to rhythm for improvisation: definition, analysis and aesthetic, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/26461>

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Abstract

In this study I have investigated Malcolm Braff's rhythmic approach and particularly his application of this approach for improvisation and composition. The Brazilian born, partially West African raised, now European Braff is shown to be a product of jazz and freely improvised music of Europe, and equally, a product of church music, progressive rock of the 1970's and the Western classical canon, with influences from West African traditional music and Indian classical music. Much of Braff's motivation for his methods of creating music is spiritual and philosophical. I have interrogated his musical theories, many of which stem from his spiritual philosophies. Additionally this study describes the necessary settings, musical and otherwise, for the creation of Braff's music.

For the majority of this study Braff's rhythmic approach and the application thereof have been scrutinized through current rhythm theory, particularly with regard to rhythmic cognition, in an effort to understand Braff's theories and descriptions of practise in accordance with what is currently understood in the field of rhythm. Through careful consideration of Braff's work through the lenses of rhythm theorists, London (2012), Iyer (2002, 2004) and Gordon (2009) in particular, by looking at Braff's recordings and his explanations, I determined that his claims seem plausible, even probable. Furthermore his approach to training rhythmic audiation, advanced and otherwise, and for stretching the audiational connection between metric and tonal audiation also appear valid and useful for training musicians that wish to further their own abilities.

In addition this research revealed that Braff's approach seems to require audiation of a meter not currently defined as such in current theory. I have defined such meters as metric-bridges since they connect two generally unrelated meters, but act as a meter themselves. The metric-bridge phenomenon is a possible way to describe commonly described 'swung eighths' in jazz, altered triplets in West African music, or Brazilian sixteenths cognitively, practically and theoretically. The study investigates how Braff has utilized these metric-bridges in his own compositions and how he often improvises while audiating these meters. Since this kind of audiation is

not clearly defined in current rhythm theory, I have proposed some additional considerations with regard to the audiation of these meters, in the hope of aiding further study.

Lastly, this study investigates how Braff describes and utilizes the more advanced rhythmic devices in both his improvisations and compositions. These devices include the use of quintuplets, sextuplets, septuplets, specific Braffian rhythm patterns, rhythmic displacement, metric modulation, metric transfiguration, and musical algorithm.