

*Anthony Braxton & György Szabados & Vladimir Tarasov – Interview at Jazz Festival Kanjiza, 13.09.2003*

**Question:**

New Orleans is only the beginning and there was nothing before, nothing before that was important and behold, this system of tradition has been very closely taught. Can you please explain to me what you mean by that?

**Anthony Braxton:**

Let me first say, I thank you for your question. In my opinion there has been a creative music tradition over the last 2000 years that has not always been understood. When I think of the great Trans-European musics, I think of the evolution from the Greek songs to the Gregorian chants, to the modern era and the emergence of the New Orleans musics. And my hope is that in the future we will start to separate our concepts of race and politics from the subject of music, because music transcends political dynamics, music transcends nationalistic dynamics, and so I hope for in the future a holistic view point takes into account a composite reality, so that we can help our children to understand the beauty of being alive and the importance of all music. Music is not politics, music can inspire all of us to do our best. And I feel that in this time period especially we are seeing a kind of a distortion of the subject of music... a distortion that in many cases will say the African musics are somehow more important than the rest of the world but in fact in my opinion all of the musics are important.

For myself, I think of myself as a professional student of music, and as a student I am free to continue to learn because there are still so many areas of music that I have not learned about, and so my response to your question is that we find ourselves in a period of profound manipulation; as you know the United States of America right now has decided to just go to war against Iraq without the United Nations, now we have a big problem. As far as I am concerned, the idea that the New Orleans musics are superior to the world culture is part of America's problems, part of a psychology of nationalism, but in fact in my opinion the dynamic implications of the New Orleans musics says thank you to world music because all of the musics are connected.

I tell my students without the great trans-European musics we would not have tonality, we would not have a system of music that totally relates... Part of the challenge of learning and discovering music, in my opinion, is the discovery of composite humanity in Universality, and that information should make one humble, not aggressive. And so to answer your question I feel that we are in a period of time where there are many new possibilities. America has made a serious mistake.

But in the future, I still believe that there are positive possibilities if we can find a way to bring people together and continue to play music. For instance, I learned a great deal by playing music with this great man and this great man. And it is not an American thing. America is only a part of the world; it's not the whole world. And so that would be my response to your question.

**Question:**

Mr. Braxton what kind of challenge brings to you where you work with a new group of musicians and every new encounter concerning these two gentlemen that we have here now, and as well as most of your compositions are very simply called composition number so and so, if it is a special story concerning this long piece that we heard tonight, that was certainly the biggest part of the concert, the biggest motivation for tonight's concert, so if you can tell us some story about that.

**Anthony Braxton:**

OK, for the first part of your question I would say this: for the past 35 years I have been working to build a music system, a system that reflects the role models I have learned from, and I feel very fortunate and grateful that I was able to discover what I wanted to do in my life. At the same time, I've always felt it is very important to get away from my music and play other people's music, so that I can continue to learn. I am only a professional student of music, I am not a master, I am a happy student, and part of being a happy student is having the good fortune and the good luck to meet and to know these guys, because when I play Mr. Szabados' music, I have to change, it is not Braxton, I have to try to play the best I can play to play his music correctly. It's a different challenge. This is why I value so much the friends I have met and the musicians I have worked with in Europe.

I would also say this: I thank the Europeans with all my heart. Without Europe I would not have had a music career because there's no work in America. So, it's very interesting, life is interesting and complex. I come from Chicago, but when I meet these guys I feel like, ahh! my brothers! And so on one hand I try to evolve a music system that reflects my interest. I try to evolve it in the spirit of John Coltrain, Karl Heinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Ornette Coleman, Hildegard von Bingen, and Johann Sebastian Bach.

And at the same time, because it is dangerous only to play your own music I try to get out of my music and play sometimes repertoire standards, play a little Bach, work with Vladimir, he's a great musician, and play this very difficult music of Mr. Szabados.

He is impossible. He works us very hard and I love it.

**Question to György Szabados:**

What has brought together tonight these three recordings and these three persons coming from different spiritualities, what has joined them in music?

**György Szabados:**

Experience taught me in life and I think people made the same experience earlier, and they have sensed the fact that in the arts and also in the mindset of the people almost identical phenomena appear in different places of the world at the same time. And sooner or later, these emerging phenomena find each other. Tonight, after the concert, we have been talking about these subjects for a long time, and we even clinked glasses on it. We became aware of the fact that we belong to the same family. This means that today in the world completely different aspects help to create and realize meetings and to shape certain differences in the views. Not kinds, not classes, not philosophies are followed, but the timelessness, which is the most archaic thing in the world. Thus the quality of motionless, of consistency, is followed and contacts are created according to spiritual levels – this is the latest, what I can say about the subject at the moment.

I wish to refer to the fact that the science of history (which is not in the service of some power but tries to recognize the things in their reality), comes slowly to the conclusion that once in archaic times, there was a homogenous culture on the Earth. And I suspect that due to the fact that people born in the farthest places of the world begin to make art with the same attitude – and the essence of this attitude is that we play music freely, with the least binding force. While we have to know everything about music; this homogenous culture begins to emerge from the depths of our soul, of our spiritual being, since we keep this culture in ourselves, and it begins to talk again. Sure, there are differences in certain characteristics because we all come from different places and different cultures, but what is interesting in this process is that a melting process has begun and (looking) in its depth we see an emergence of a dimension, which is beyond man – or deeper than man self.

**Anthony Braxton:**

You mean the CDs? I was very surprised to have a present of CDs consisting of music that we did in the 1980s including concerts with Mr. Szabados. It is part of the past. I feel very fortunate that I have been able to come to Europe and meet people like Mr. Szabados and Vladimir. I've been studying his records, long before I met him. I had all the Ganelin Trios musics. I have always felt close to Russia. And so I was very surprised to have a present like this. I will take it home and enjoy it, and I will make a copy of it and send a copy to this man (= Szabados) and I will charge him 10,000 dollars. Ha ha ha. 10,000 Euros.

**Question:**

I would like to ask all of you and possibly have already an answer to that question, but what does it tell you that you have met here in Kanizsa at this place, this real place.

**Vladimir Tarasov:**

We always talk now about the family's here, and it's really true; the world is small the family is small. When I come to Kanizsa, you know – for me Kanizsa is associated with the names of two very good friends of mine, Joseph Nagy and Zoltán Bicskei, whom I know for 20 years this year, yah. Who made our concert and festival when he was working in Novi Sad, and the age is the same, I was here in 83, and Braxton in 84. So this is kind of, you know, it's not about the place, it is about the people, this is really a family. Zoltán moves tomorrow to another village and we come and make the same, you know.

And than continue about the family. ...

When we play actually piano, alt saxophone, and percussions, everybody is asking us, remember when we played abroad or we played in Russia, this was a communist country in this time ...

Why do you, why you did want to take another musician, probably a bass player, we would with pleasure but we didn't find the bass player to fit to our family, that's the truth, from 280 millions people we did not find! That's true. And for me like for the drummer who have double education like jazz and classical. I tell to my students because I am also teaching, that sound is very important but the same important is the space between two sounds. And there are several musicians in the world, with whom I would like to play, and György and Anthony, this was my dream to play with, my colleagues, because I feel the air between the sound, it is not only sound but was something inside. When I heard from Zoltán about the possibility to realize that idea, believe me I was very happy about.

Thank you.

**Question:**

Why are today's authentic kinds of music pushed out from jazz festivals?

**György Szabados:**

I don't think so, that a crowding-out takes place. It is a question of the viewpoint where we find the world's center, or from where we look at things; this is all relative. Public awareness is normally judging and looking through the eyes of authorities. Therefore, people think that these festivals which we call jazz festival – which is not the good word for the event happening in Kanizsa regularly - thus they consider this as crowding-out or a peripheral phenomenon or place, although this was never the case. Take the example of Greece: when the Greek culture was born, which is the foundation of our European culture - or at least those who treat it think so - it was a very small place where such people used to live in a given moment, which created an elementary culture having its effect for the next several thousand years. Although this culture was not original because it was based on a way of thinking borrowed from the Orient. Thus, it was made into

European, or rather Mediterranean, shaping the oriental or archaic or traditional way of thinking, but the European culture was born from it. We always have to look at the genius loci, the spirit of a place: what spiritual quality is dormant in it or is going to evolve from it.

I would like to add that the word jazz festival is a good name in this case because the phenomenon jazz (and I can see in the world only phenomena because there ARE phenomena in the world) was a very important phenomenon at the turning of the 19/20th centuries. Because thanks to the music of the blacks it helped to arise from the ancient times, from the archaic culture, such an effect to conjure up a life space through the improvisation, the improvisativity – and this is its essence – into the world's music culture, which consequently fertilized the way of thinking not only in the field of music – it fertilized the thinking of the whole civilization. It had a liberating effect and we know that music is the most effectual power, stronger than anything else.

I would like to ask a question from both of you:

What does it mean for you the Hungarian folk root, the Hungarian folk music, and how much did you feel this kind of feeling in the concert today?

**Anthony Braxton:**

I think when I first discovered the music of Mr. Szabados, what attracted me to his music was that I saw a deep connection between his work and the music of Béla Bartók, for instance, and the Hungarian folk music tradition which I have always been attracted to. As a young guy I spent a great deal of time studying the music of Bartók and I was very interested in the appropriation of folk musics into the modern era, but more than that, there is a very special feeling in Bartók's music and Mr. Szabados has a very special feeling in his compositions and his improvisations, and so to have the opportunity to play with Mr. Szabados, gives me an opportunity to experience that feeling and learn from that feeling. It's a very unique feeling and vibration; it's very beautiful but the word beautiful doesn't really touch what I'm really trying to say, something about it, something about the great Russian musics. It is a very special feeling. Normally my music is talked of as being very cold and very cerebral. But in fact, I am very interested in the spirituality of the music, emotional dynamics of the music. And the dynamics of hope. And so from the beginning, when I first heard this man's music, I found myself thinking, Ooh la la.

**Question:**

I have read a lot of things about you in between, but I never heard you in between Novi Sad and Kanizsa. But the point is, you have been disputed, you have been annihilated in some articles. You have been praised, you been treated as a hero. A very big controversy.

Actually, what I want to ask you is maybe: I'm just going to quote from one of the encyclopedia I read a couple of days ago; it said like this: "Braxton is as much a composer as an innovator and he has used - this is the cue - mathematical relationships, diagrams and formula as a basis for both compositions and playing." This is Rough Guide published in England a couple of years back. But at the beginning of your career it says that you studied harmony and composition and philosophy. Does this part of your biography and this statement by this author of this article collide or they go together? This is my question. Because this is maybe what made the controversy because you're too intellectual for some of the critics, my colleagues, and to some of the audience. I'm sorry, this is my question.

**Anthony Braxton:**

Let me respond to your question. I think part of the complexities that has surrounded my work has been the problem of being of African American person as opposed to a professional African American. Yes, I am very interested in mathematics, I am very interested in philosophy, I am very interested in spirituality. I wanted to be a person and from that point to learn like anyone else. But

the problem that would surround me which would come from the African American community as well as from the European American and European community has been the difficulty of looking at a person like myself based on my work as opposed to some idea that says, oh, you're an African American and so you should only be playing Hip-hop or something. I believe that part of the gambit of the modern era has been a viewpoint that says Africa has never contributed to the intellectual dynamics of humanity; rather Africans have such a great feeling.

And on the other side, the idea is the European's are very intellectual but they don't have feeling compared to the Africans.

I see these viewpoints as racist viewpoints or distorted viewpoints and I feel that part of the challenge of the next time period will be the challenge of erecting an understanding of humanity that will allow us to move forward. And so my work, for instance if I would say ..."Up against the wall, Mother fucker" – then everyone would say 'Braxton's black. He's black'.

Why is it that if I am vulgar or if I adapt a stereotypical perspective that I am viewed as black. But in fact African Americans are like many other people. In fact I would even say this: one of the complexities of this time period in my opinion is that even the African American community and leadership has come to reduce the parameters of what it means to be black. There is a profound reductionism taking place in this time period. And my music is right in the middle. Why? Because from the very beginning as a young man I did not experience an opposition to Europe, and as such I have tried to learn from anything that I like, any music that I like; if I liked it, I liked it. I wanted to have the same right as any other human being to like what I like, and then try to do my best.

But the problem has been from the African American nationalists or even middle class sector as well as the European American and in some cases the European intellectual circles, it is very difficult to deal with the African American who has embraced universal values. Because it is very comfortable to have the generic ideas of blues and swing - blues and swing. We have the rhythm – we have the rhythm. We don't have the rhythm, everybody has the rhythm. Bach has rhythm. Webern has rhythm.

We need to find a new way to examine the wealth of creativity and information that we have on our planet. We are very lucky to be alive. And if the subject is music it is very difficult to be a good student of music if you don't respect universality. Because music is coming from every direction. No one owns music, no one owns spirituality. And so my work is in the middle of many different problems. Is it too intellectual? What do they mean when they say it is too intellectual? I have always approached my music with passion, passion for mathematics, passion for feeling, passion for improvisation. And at times non-passion. I am interested in learning.

And so I have become a convenient target for criticism and I say it is OK, go ahead, criticize. I accept the criticism. What I intended to do from the very beginning, was to do my best, and to try and be honest and to try to learn, just like anybody else. It's not black it's not white, it's not green, it's not Asian. I'm just a guy who was very lucky to discover something that I loved.