



In Touch, and Within Reach

Learning to understand the function of Butch Morris' "conduction."

by Brian Slattery - November 10, 2005

When Lawrence "Butch" Morris was 14, he asked his father for a trumpet. "A trumpet is only a tool to understanding the mystery of music," his father told him. "Also, trumpet players are a dime a dozen. Now let's go get you your trumpet."



In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Morris was playing cornet in the free jazz scene. Wherever he played, and whomever he played with, he was forever hearing melodies rise and fall, rhythmic pulses come and gobut with everything else that was going on, nobody in the audience could hear them. The "mystery of music" that his father spoke of remained, for Morris, unsolved.

"Free jazz asked more questions than it gave answers," Morris says. The problem was "to figure out how to give the good ideas that emerge from improv structure to be able to use the ideas."

Trying to solve that problem led Morris onto one of the most unusual paths anyone has taken in modern music: He developed a style of conducting that allows him to spontaneously compose music from what the musicians before him play. But "conduction" is not improvisation.

"I wanted to include non-improvisers, non-jazz musicians," Morris says. "I was trying to get at something that was not style-specific that whether someone came from classical, or jazz, or pop, they could play it. Not everyone is creative, improvisational but every human has instinctive, intuitive skills, and that responsive thing is what I'm after."

Morris was a jazz heavy before he turned to conduction full-time, and it has taken him all over the world, putting him in front of some of the best classical, traditional and jazz ensembles in the United States, Europe and Japan. And thanks to Bob Gorry, who heads the New Haven Improvisers Collective (NHIC), Morris came here.

Gorry put together a 10-piece band to be Morris' instrument. The back line, Jeff Cedrone and Gorry on guitars, David Chevan on upright bass, John O'Reilly on electric bass, and Steve Zieminski on drums are all members of the NHIC, among several other projects. (Chevan is in the Afro-Semitic Experience and leads Southern Connecticut State University's improvisational Creative Music Orchestra, and Zieminski plays in Prester John.) Trumpeter Stephen Haynes is a Hartford stalwart who has played with the likes of Cecil Taylor. Louis Guarino Jr., also on trumpet, and Paul McGuire on soprano sax were recruited from among the jazz players in the area. Albert Rivera is a fearsome young tenor sax player from the Bronx; he has his own quartet there, but came up to work with Butch. Chris Oleskey, a psychiatric resident at Yale-New Haven Hospital, saw an ad and ended up on alto sax.

And at the last minute, Gorry included me.

I don't have a jazz background; I don't even listen to jazz very much. I was the only guy in the group with no jazz chops and the only violin in a horn section with an amplified back line. How was this going to work?

Conduction in practice is a kind of sign language. There are signs for sustain, repeat, develop the idea, bring it back. But sustain, repeat, developwhat? That was completely up to us.

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"You're responsible for content," Morris told us. "I'm responsible for structure."

But making that structure was like writing a poem, and we hadn't learned to spell in Morris' language yet. So for the first three rehearsals, that's what we did. Morris taught us his signs, goaded us when we missed cues, peppered his commands with a "please" that was both pleading and sardonic. And at the end of the first rehearsal, we knew some letters. By the end of the second, we'd managed to say a word or two. In the third, we might have gotten through a paragraph, and a few big smiles cut through Morris' squint now and again.

But the words seemed random. It all felt very intellectual to me; it was notes and form, but it didn't feel like music yet. How would I know when it was? Then, the kind of question I normally hate asking seemed important and relevant: What is music, anyway?

"I have to constantly figure out how I can understand music from a greater vantage point," Morris says. "I have to find ways to question music, bring something to it to take as much from music as I can to give back to it. How can I take from what I love and give back to what I love?"

For 20 minutes or so of the last rehearsal, I started to see what it was about. Atonality resolved into tonality, became atonal again; melodies and grooves rose and fell. It was starting to be music; we were putting words together. But we still didn't know what we were trying to say.

Butch kept pushing us. "Don't just play notes. Know what you're going to play next. Phrase. Say something," he said. "Play something that means something."

The first set at Firehouse 12 was a full house. We stood around in the back room, looking at each other. Butch came in with a whiskey and water, saw how serious we all were. "Man, I'm going back to the bar," he joked.

The first set was all right. Sometimes we sounded like something. For a few minutes, we sounded like Sly and the Family Stone. But it wasn't clicking. The audience seemed perplexed. Butch kept cutting off the music, bringing it to a close, starting something up again that was completely different. It wasn't Butch's problem; it was ours. We were being too timid. We weren't speaking; we were whispering, stammering.

After the set, we all got a drink. Before we went on, Butch gathered us in.

"Hey," he said. "Monsters. Demons. Machines." He wanted us to give him what we had; he wanted us to bring our noise. To give him what we were.

The second set, we made music. Whether we gave to him or he pulled it out of us, I'm not sure. It was angry and sweet, raucous and gentle. Harmonies rose from dense grooves that mutated into romanticism, into pixelated rhythms. It was classical and jazz, African and Middle Eastern, funk and klezmer. It connected us to music history. And it connected us to the crowd.

Butch had finally gotten us to speak in complete sentences, and he was putting them into an order that the audience could understand. Heads bobbed, people smiled, some just stared, transfixed. At the end, everyone leapt to their feet and cheered.

Beyond the theory that can make it seem so complex, this is what music is: It's people communicating, people getting together and if that's happening, it doesn't matter whether the melodies are pretty or not, if it's in this or that style. People will get it.

It's too bad there aren't more shows like this. But hopefully, seeing and hearing more of it around New Haven will get easier. Many of the musicians in the group play local places regularly. Firehouse 12 always has something interesting going on, and the space itself, which doubles as a recording studio, is a wonderful place to hear music. The New Haven Improvisers Collective, for its part, holds workshops on the last Monday of each month at Never Ending Books. Gorry's goal is to develop an improvised music scene in New Haven. It's a real possibility, the Elm City's ears are open; let's continue to open them even wider.

www.nhic-music.org - the New Haven Improvisers Collective

Charlie Sutton

[Jazz]
Cuckoo's Nest, Old Saybrook

Ray Churchill Trio

[Jazz/Oldies/Pop]
Penny Lane, Old Saybrook

New Haven Jazz Orchestra

[Jazz]
Blues Brick Oven Pizza, Hamden

Charlie Sutton

[Jazz]
Lalibela, New Haven

Tom Ciancia

[Jazz/Pop/Standards]
Sage American Grill & Oyster Bar, New Haven

today's events

Bach's Lunch, 12:10 p.m.
Neighborhood Music School, New Haven

Bill Collins, 5 p.m.
Cafe Nine, New Haven

Nasty Disaster, 7 p.m.
The Space, Hamden

Alan Jackson, 7:30 p.m.
Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville

The Lettermen, 7:30 p.m.
Mohegan Sun Cabaret, Uncasville

From Autumn to Ashes, 7:30 p.m.
Toad's Place, New Haven

The Headlocks, 8 p.m.
Aunt Chilada's, Hamden

Wing It, 8 p.m.
Colonial Tymes Restaurant, Hamden