

In Memoriam, Henry Brant  
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I first met Henry Brant in the late 1970s when I studied composition, orchestration, and 16th century counterpoint with him at Bennington College in Vermont. This eventually led to a thirty-year friendship with discussions of music that have been among the most important in my life.

Henry Brant was unlike any other composition teacher I've ever had in that he offered a meta-perspective on the process of composing. Instead of suggesting that a particular theme should be developed or that a particular note might sound better as a Bb, he taught how to write quickly, how to think hierarchically, how to make deadlines, how to ask for commissions, and how to avoid writers' block. He also was the first to suggest to me that there might be a place in my musical language for the various non-"classical" styles I played, such as bluegrass, klezmer and jazz. This directly led to my writing such works as Silicon Valley Breakdown and Cluck Old Hen Variations.

Throughout the years, I have discussed many incipient projects with Henry and invariably he would offer key insights and suggestions that would lead me in fertile directions. As an example, in 1992, I was planning a concerto for RadioDrum-controlled Disklavier piano and large ensemble. I discussed the project with him, including my plan to use a string orchestra. He suggested I instead employ an ensemble of plucked strings. When I pressed him to elaborate, he suggested mandolin, guitar, harp, harpsichord, harmonium, bass and two percussionists. This became the seventy-minute work, "The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World," premiered by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players in 1998. Such interactions were always at the very start of a project. Then, at the conclusion, I would play him the result, he would offer his thoughts and then ask "what next?"

Anyone who has spent time with Henry Brant cannot help but be impressed by his vital, daring, unbounded imagination. Coupled with an acute analytical sense and a mastery of the nuts-and-bolts of his craft, the music he wrote is without precedent. He was a maximalist in many senses. Stylistically, he combined extremely diverse material into polyphonic wholes that somehow made sense. Emotionally, his music has great scope, ranging from the most serious material to highly satirical elements, often presented simultaneously in such a way as to suggest the cognitive dissonance of modern life. In terms of instrumentation, he employed African drums, Balinese gamelan, jazz ensemble and steel drum band, often in the same work. The scope of his wit and compositional topics (though he insisted he did not write program music) are evident from the fanciful titles of his works, often with political references such as "Homeless People", "Labyrinth", "Signs and Alarms", "Statesmen in Jazz" (1945, for Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin), "All Souls Carnival", "Peace Music for UN Day" (1955), "Ghost Nets", "Prisons of the Mind," "Immortal Combat" and "If You Don't Like Comets, Get Out of the Solar System."

Why is Brant's music not better known? First, it is difficult to represent spatial music on recorded media. Secondly, the sheer number of musicians involved in some of his works presents an organizational and economic challenge. Thirdly, he was always more interested in writing new works than in promoting old ones.

I see Brant as fundamentally an orchestral composer who painted large strokes with a broad brush. He preferred writing for large ensembles and sought the most emphatic expressive gestures. He once said, "some composers write for orchestra as if it were chamber music, I try to write my chamber music to sound orchestral." (In fact, it is surprising to note that his catalogue includes more chamber pieces than orchestral works.)

His approach to orchestration was refined during his years as a film composer when he had access to whatever instrumental combinations he might desire (eight bassoons? No problem!) He once said "there are three ways to orchestrate: after the composition, during the composition and before the composition. I prefer the last of the three." Thus, orchestration was a fundamental pre-compositional decision. He often used cooking analogies for orchestration and referred to particular combinations as "recipes." Conversely, he would complement a tasty soup as "well-orchestrated."

While most of his works are for extremely contrasting ensembles, he also had a particular fondness for groups of like instruments, as is evidenced by such works as "Orbits" for 80 trombones, as well as works for flute choir, works for Carleen Hutchins' violins of different sizes, and a work for 100 guitars. Incidentally, he felt that plucked strings were an under-used timbre in western concert music—he included mandolin parts for me in several works.

Henry Brant's orchestration deserves a treatise of its own and, in fact, one has been written by Brant himself. Over the thirty years I have known him, I have seen him come back again and again to the orchestration book in between composing gigs; with each visit to Santa Barbara, he would show me the latest chapter and more recently I have been involved in proof-reading and editing. Many of us thought he would never finish it, but he did manage to get it done in his last years. The work, entitled "Textures and Timbres," is a condensation of a lifetime of experience. Soon to be released, it is, in my opinion, the most significant orchestration book since that of Rimsky-Korsakov.

Brant's approach is based on classifying instrumental combinations that can combine harmonically, in terms of timbre, articulation and dynamic level. He groups timbres not in terms of instrumental families but in particular instrumental sub-ranges. For example, he lists the lower fourth of the bassoon with the oboe and straight-mute trombone, while the upper octave of the bassoon is grouped with the flute, fiber-mute horn and clarinet; the middle of the bassoon is considered a separate timbre from any other. The book goes far beyond that, classifying all types of musical textures in terms of a few fundamental categories such as monophony, harmony, imitative counterpoint, similar polyphony and contrasting polyphony.

All of this is motivated by and in the spirit of practical music-making. Brant was a consummate professional who wrote music that could be easily put together with a minimum of rehearsals. He used clear economical notation and was able to achieve great textural complexity with a minimum of rehearsal problems. His instrumental and vocal writing is idiomatic and maximizes the "bang-for-the-buck" of each player in the ensemble.

Similarly, Henry Brant had a hands-on approach to composing. He advised his composing students and friends to be performers and conductors as well, and to be as involved as possible in the performance of their works. Whenever possible, he wrote himself parts for his pieces. When he was not conducting, he performed on such diverse instruments as pipe organ, mouth organ, percussion and flute.

Much has been written about Brant's iconoclastic maverick approach. Much less well-known is how deeply he studied and absorbed the classics, from Josquin to Ives (he named his son after both of these). Rather than being intimidated by these masters, he felt free to connect with them by rewriting their works. His arrangement of Ives' Concord Sonata for full orchestra is a masterwork in its own right. (The Innova recording by the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Dennis Russell Davies is not to be missed.) He made an arrangement for wind quintet of the Beethoven Op. 131 string quartet. He created a new Mozart viola sonata from a piano sonata. The list goes on.

His seminal paper on spatial music ("Space as an essential musical parameter") lays out the fundamentals of the sanest approach on the subject of any 20th century composer. Simply put, he observes that space weakens harmonic relationships and strengthens polyphonic independence. Following this principle, he used space to make contrapuntal complexity more intelligible. He explored the possibilities of spatial distribution more rigorously, and with more variety and depth than any other composer in history.

He was always experimenting, always curious, always looking for and finding new ideas for his music from the most diverse sources. In the 1980s, in a huge abandoned room at the former Artificial Intelligence Lab of Stanford University, he had me run at breakneck speed while plucking the E string of a violin, in an attempt to determine whether rapidly moving sound sources could be musically emphatic. He decided that they could not. Another time, on a visit to Santa Barbara, he took me on a musical tour of the neighborhood houses of worship, including a Mexican church's rock band and the chanting at a Greek Orthodox church. His works include a piece for four Jewish cantors and one shofar. He once strung a violin with two E strings and two G strings, being of the opinion that these strings are superior to the A and D strings. He was not happy with the string quartet as a combination and experimented with substituting a tenor cello (an octave below the violin) for the second violin. This eliminated the large gap between cello and viola and the duplication of the violin range. He wrote works for barges of musicians, for fire truck sirens, and for music boxes.

It is sad to lose such a great spirit, but we are thankful that we had him for so long. The best way to honor him is to disregard fashion and continue composing, performing and

conducting new adventurous exciting music. When asked how he could produce at such a prodigious pace even at an advanced age, he would respond "I love my work."