

Anthony Braxton conducting The Falling River Music Sextet



Sonic Frontiers: Anthony Braxton At Alabama

Various venues, Tuscaloosa, US

Despite the deep history of experimental music coursing through its veins, not since the late 1970s heyday of the TransMuseq label and the Raudelunas art collective has the city of Tuscaloosa, Alabama been considered a hotspot for avant garde concerts. And yet, over the past five years – spearheaded by professor, saxophonist and composer Andrew Raffo Dewar – the University of Alabama has put Tuscaloosa back on the map when it comes to forward-thinking sonic endeavours. As the founder of the university's Sonic Frontiers concert series, he has brought a wide array of talent to town since the program's inception in 2010. This year's Anthony Braxton residency, which ran between 18–25 February at various venues throughout the city, was the largest retrospective of the saxophonist's work ever assembled in the southeastern US, complete with a month-long art show featuring his graphic scores for *Falling River Music*.

Braxton opened with a rare solo saxophone concert at the historic Bama Theatre in downtown Tuscaloosa, and his presence was felt throughout the week. His pieces were performed by both his own pupils from years past – including Dewar and several members from Braxton's Tri-Centric Foundation – as well as the university's current students, who performed some of his works on 19 February with the University

of Alabama's Percussion Ensemble and Jazz Orchestra. This student interface served as a great reminder of Braxton's continuing contribution to the longevity of creative music and his passion for touching young minds. It also underscored his lifelong commitment to musical education.

But some of the most compelling performances of the residency came during the weekend shows, as Braxton assembled several world premiere ensembles, revealing the depth of his own playing as well as his conducting skills. The Friday programme brought together a historic quartet featuring Davey Williams and LaDonna Smith from TransMuseq, along with AACM alumnus Alvin Fielder in the first performance he and Braxton have shared since 1968. The night's concerts were filled with both tension and idiosyncratic playing. The programme also saw the debut of *The Falling River Music Sextet* featuring longtime proteges Dewar (soprano saxophone), Taylor Ho Bynum (brass) and Mary Halvorson (guitar), along with University of Alabama professors Holland Hopson (electronics) and Tim Feeney (drums). The two sets proved to be a challenging and sometimes incongruous pairing. Nevertheless they presented a unique opportunity to hear Braxton in different settings. At times the quartet performance came across as stilted – as supergroup pairings tend to do when players haven't always had enough time to fully absorb their counterparts' stylistic leanings. But there were a few moments of exciting

interplay interspersed with awkward exchanges that failed to get off the ground. But the real highlight of the evening came with the appearance of the sextet, who managed to take Braxton's graphic scores and breathe dynamic range and subtlety into a commanding performance that showed off the wide-open possibilities inherent in the impressionistic direction implicit in the strokes and computations laid out on the page. Coupling the vibrant playing of the veterans of Braxton's contemporary groups – who navigated their way through the selections with imaginative and responsive dexterity – along with the newer acquaintances of Hopson's self-designed patches and homemade electronics and Feeney's deft percussion, the second set was a truly fresh expression of intuitive playing that extrapolated whole sonic universes from colour and text.

Saturday's performances were a bold reminder of how longterm relationships pay big dividends when it comes to mining the sublime depths of musical telepathy and mass orchestration. Pairing two of Braxton's most groundbreaking vehicles for sonic exploration in the forms of his *Diamond Curtain Wall Music* for interactive electronics, along with deconstructed excerpts from the *Trillium* opera cycle, each set was a tour de force of concentration and improvisation, juxtaposing the extremes of synthetic metalanguage with the melodramatic flourishes of operatic tropes turned upside down and inside

out. Reuniting the core members of the previous night's sextet – with the addition of Ingrid Laubrock on reeds and Carl Testa on bass – the *Diamond Curtain Wall* piece used Supercollider software to startling effect, eliciting low hums and gurgles alongside drone sequences that seemed to expand and contract with the exchanges happening on stage. With Braxton leading the group with hand signals in a highly evolved vocabulary established over years of interaction, the piece was a welcome start to what would be an incredible night of music.

The evening closed with a transcendent performance of stripped down selections from the usually highly staged *Trillium* sequences that served as a high watermark for the week's events. Featuring the vocal acrobatics of Kyoko Kitamura, Roland Burks, Christopher DiMeglio and Anne Rhodes and accompanied by the *Diamond Curtain Wall* brass section, Halvorson and a local string quartet, the multilinear narrative structure provided a kaleidoscopic rollercoaster ride through this sonically dense set. With elements of humour, choreography and inspired conducting on the part of Braxton and Bynum bringing the music to a fever pitch of polyphony and maddening stereophonic counterpoint, the show left the audience in awe of how its seemingly disparate elements were combined into a shockingly original whole.

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