

Earle Brown, 1926–2002

TUESDAY, JULY 30, 2002 AT 4 A.M.

The last generation of famous modernists was born in the 1920s, and they seem to be passing away before our eyes. Earle Brown, one of the last figures who created the American musical revolution of the 1960s, died on July 2. (In a curious coincidence, he died the same day as jazz bassist Ray Brown, his exact contemporary, creating a week of musical mourning confusion: "Did you hear Earle Brown died?" "No, that was Ray Brown," and vice versa.)

Within the context of what's been called the "New York School"—John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff, whose freedom-inspiring musics so complemented each other—Brown always struck me as, in a way, the most European. European in his elegance, his polish, his expensive cigarettes, and the way his music fit into the sound world of the European avant-garde. Cage, Wolff, and Feldman wrote music in which conventional expressivity was sabotaged, precluded by chance processes or some procedure that prevented the performer from imposing his or her own emotional curve. Although Brown's graphic scores were not that far from Cage's and Feldman's conceptually, his music seemed to be all expressivity.

In fact, I've always thought of Brown more as performer than as composer. His music was so open that many of his best-known pieces, like the *Folio* pieces and *Available Forms I* and *II*, have little sonic identity. Brown's composing seemed to take place after the score was finished. He composed his music in the air, using the raw materials generated on paper as paint for improvised canvases. And he had a conducting technique, a very style of moving, that seemed to make that concept of music inevitable. His arms seemed long and his hands elegant, making crisp gestures that elicited flourishes of sound in ever surprising ways and with great exactitude. Those hands turned orchestras into acoustic theremins. I've never heard a performance of a Brown score conducted by someone else that seemed quite as alive and authentic as the ones he conducted himself.

Which makes his achievement the most ephemeral among the New York School, but hardly the least relevant. In an era in which Cage and Boulez were both condemning improvisation, from opposite viewpoints, for its tendency toward performer habit, Brown made improvisation respectable. The mistrust of the performer embedded in a lot of early chance scores was not an aesthetic calculated to endure, and Brown's freer notation, flinging notes across a page the way

Jackson Pollock flung paint, became a paradigm for an entire tradition of notation that specified pitch and harmony while leaving timing and order up to the player. It worked because Brown's counterintuitiveness was in his hands, and he didn't need it in his notation. Ironically, and more than those of his colleagues, his performances often sound much in the same sound world as European avant-garde music of the 1960s, but achieved with spontaneity instead of a million structural calculations and stringent rehearsal.

Of the four, Brown was admittedly the one whose music I felt never transcended its original premises. That perception might be an accident of performance history; perhaps his death will precipitate a slew of recordings of unknown work, as happened with Feldman. But Cage changed direction at many points in his career, going from percussion to prepared piano to chance to indeterminacy to theater and on and on; Feldman went through an amazing style transformation around 1970; and Wolff has gone through several phases, chance oriented, composition oriented, and political. But one heard little new music from Brown late in his life, mainly new performances of old works, and the rare more recent pieces like *Tracking Pierrot*—one of only two post-1980 works of his I've found—never left behind the pointillistic feel of the '60s avant-garde for a new, utterly distinctive sound world.

Nevertheless, Brown's musical practice may have had more influence on American music made since than any of them except Feldman, and while Feldman's influence is easily recognized, Brown's is so pervasive and fundamental that it crops up in areas you wouldn't expect. He was a kind, gracious man, a charming foil to his thornier and more provocative colleagues. I remember him, at June in Buffalo, quietly disagreeing with Cage about Zen, saying he felt its purpose was to *charm* the ego, not merely bypass it. His work was a decisive influence on younger composers in the 1980s improv movement. And he set a standard for cleanness, precision, and originality in improvisatory work that remains an inspiration.

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