

# Cecil Taylor

## *Algonquin*

commissioned by the Library of Congress

Cecil Taylor, piano  
Mat Maneri, violin

- 1 Part One** (30:36)
- 2 Part Two** (4:12)
- 3 Part Three** (6:34)
- 4 Part Four** (13:21)

*in concert at the Library of Congress*

February 12, 1999

### Notes by Bill Shoemaker

Cecil Taylor is a composer in an expanded sense of the term. Certainly, the pianist rejects the suggestion that he is a composer in any conventional sense. In a 1987 interview for the British modern music journal, *The Wire*, Taylor dismissed composition as “an archivist’s nightmare,” adding that “music does not exist in the notes, it exists in one’s internal cavity, one’s body, or more sentimentally perhaps, one’s heart. Certainly in one’s head. But the notes are only signs, communiqués, to the thrust of the music.” Clearly, however, if one’s vision of a composer extends beyond the generation of materials to the imparting of the full implications of the materials -- which is to say both the information that can and cannot be conveyed through a score -- then Taylor easily stands up to comparisons with Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus.

For Cecil Taylor, the first step in the compositional process is the selection of the musician or musicians who will perform the work, a rather conventional practice for composers of most stripes. However, it is a trait not immediately discernible in Taylor’s music, by virtue of the overwhelming power of his piano playing. It is also difficult to trace because of the years-long stretches where Taylor did not record and rarely performed. For the bulk of a half-century, the horizon of Taylor’s working life has seldom extended beyond the next gig or tour. Outside his historic partnership with the late alto saxophonist Jimmy Lyons, Taylor has enjoyed neither an ongoing Ellington-like, long-term relationship with a musician, or the luxury afforded to Igor Stravinsky to workshop his *Ebony Concerto* intensively with Woody Herman’s Herd over the course of weeks.

Still, there is enough evidence in Taylor’s discography to make a solid case that, beginning with his 1955 debut, *Jazz Advance*, he contoured his compo-

sitions to best fit the strengths of his cohorts. Given the intensity of Taylor's music, it is noteworthy that his compositional considerations can be quite subtle; in the case of bass player Buell Neidlinger and drummer Denis Charles, they were sufficiently subtle for the two to be widely, though haphazardly, regarded as Taylor's most conventional rhythm section. Yet, the conservatory-trained Neidlinger's rendering of Taylor's figured bass lines (a rare practice for jazz composers then and now), and the St. Croix-born Charles's affinity for the Afro-Caribbean strain in Taylor's work (best heard on "E. B." and Charles's watershed introduction to the title tune of Taylor's 1960 album, *Air*), are crucial to Taylor's early innovations in accelerating tempi, which Neidlinger coined "compression and release."

In terms of Taylor's compositional evolution, the arrival of Jimmy Lyons in 1962 could not have been better timed. Fluent in bebop, the alto saxophonist could effortlessly spool out bluesy serpentine lines, which served both him and Taylor well in the extended improvised sections the pianist was emphasizing in the early '60s trio with "the sound of breaking glass" drummer, Sunny Murray. More importantly, it was Lyons's understanding that bebop was a language built upon a vast inventory of phonon-like fragments, a sensibility that dovetailed with Taylor's emergent use of malleable thematic cells, central to such classic mid-'60s recordings as *Unit Structures* and *Conquistador*. Lyons's piquant, penetrating cry quickly became the primary voice in Taylor's ensembles until the alto saxophonist's death in 1986, prompting frequent comparisons with the role Johnny Hodges played in Ellington's music.

During the 1970s and '80s, Taylor arguably made greater strides in developing the compositional aspects of his music through his solo piano works, in part because of his preference for tonal centers such as A, B, E, and F#, which are unwieldy for horn players. A seemingly unlikely kinship with Chopin began to

manifest itself in romantic ballads tethered by bass lines played in octaves, which initially appeared as encores on such live recordings from the mid-'70s as *Silent Tongues*. Conversely, Taylor retooled the so-called locked hands style, a time-worn jazz piano device most commonly associated with the likes of Milt Buckner and George Shearing, but also employed by Horace Silver, who Taylor reveres. Taylor's extension of the locked hands style, particularly his use of mirrored fingerings and the mix of parallel and contrary motion between his hands on his pivotal solo recordings of the 1980s -- *Garden* and *For Olim* -- served two important purposes: it gave Taylor's music a more deliberate and occasionally relaxed feel; and it explicated his fascination with intervals of a minor third and smaller.

The next critical event in Taylor's career was his 1988 Berlin residency, a month of concerts and workshops that kept Taylor in prolonged close quarters with principals of European improvised music. The European improvised music movement that began in the 1960s was partially a natural outgrowth of American free jazz; Taylor profoundly influenced such central figures as Dutch drummer Han Bennink and British saxophonist Evan Parker at an early age. The Europeans were also reactionary, assertively creating music distinct from American antecedents; by 1988, their independence had long been a given. Their embrace of Taylor came at a time when his early integration of poetry and movement into his performances was greeted with bafflement and worse by Americans; in contrast, Europeans saw this as evidence of Taylor's ongoing artistic growth.

Though the residency, documented by the monumental 11-CD set, *Cecil Taylor In Berlin '88*, did not trigger immediate changes in his music, it did change Taylor's modus operandi. The Cecil Taylor Unit, which had fluctuated

between a trio and a septet over the course of a quarter-century, and was comprised almost exclusively of African-Americans, ceased. From the late '80s through the mid-'90s, Taylor's working band was the Feel Trio with bass player William Parker and British drummer Tony Oxley (Oxley first performed with Taylor as a duo during the Berlin residency; subsequently, he has been Taylor's most constant collaborator). Given that Taylor's Units in the '70s and '80s had only occasionally included violinists Ramsey Ameen and Leroy Jenkins with only marginal impact, it was intriguing that he increasingly turned to violinists and cellists in the late '80s and '90s; and that, with the exception of cellist Muneer Abdul Fataah, Taylor engaged mostly European string players with a strong classical background, most notably violinist Harald Kimming.

It was therefore as logical as it was surprising that Taylor chose Mat Maneri to perform *Algonquin*, the violin-piano duet commissioned by the McKim Fund in the Library of Congress in 1999. It was surprising because Maneri's forte is not the thrilling pyrotechnics Kimming ignited on the pianist's 1989 recording, *Looking (Berlin Version) Corona*. Maneri has the bearing of an old soul, which resembles that of his father, saxophonist and clarinetist Joe Maneri. This is best heard through their respective affinities for folk music, the source of the elder's pioneering microtonal aesthetic. The scope of traditions tapped by the violinist is impressive; he has drawn upon South Asian music to interpret John Coltrane on the 2001 solo CD, *Trinity*, as well as contributed to the phantasmagoric British soundscapes of Incredible String Band co-founder Robin Williamson's 2003 *Skirting The River Road*.

Maneri's true gift, however, is the rendering of these materials with a unique sound, a voice that is both languid and melancholy, whose technical underpinnings are not instantly traceable. Maneri's distinctive intonation is due

to his familiarity with the Baroque bowing style, which was introduced to him by Robert Koff. The ease with which Maneri negotiates the frequent conflicts between bowing technique and jazz phrasing stems from studies with Miroslav Vitous. While Maneri generally does not employ the type of long, intricate line commonly associated with Baroque music, his solos have procedural and structural similarities to the conventions of subject and answer, and of alternating expositions and episodes, found in Baroque fugue. This is particularly evident on *Trinity*; at various points, his improvisations bridge multiple motifs, and the development of thematic materials yield separate voices.

Maneri met the demands of readying and premiering a piece commissioned by one of the world's great cultural institutions, one composed and performed by perhaps the most visionary piano virtuoso of the past half-century (with whom Maneri had not previously played, even informally), all in a single day. For Maneri, this daunting task was only feasible because Taylor's purpose is to discover the music, not learn it. To this end, Taylor's assiduously, and notoriously sketchy approach to scores works hand in glove with his marathon, high-energy rehearsals; the process creates the piece as much as, if not more than, the scored elements. Comprised mostly of vertical stacks of notes with few symbols and scribbles to suggest attacks, transitions, et al., the several pieces of paper that became the score to *Algonquin* was used by Taylor as a loose guide for Maneri and himself. Maneri saw these stacks as both cluster-like cells that could be strung together like chord changes, and as individual helixes around which he could wrap contrapuntal lines. In faithfully interpreting Taylor's score, Maneri made music that is unmistakably his.

A Taylor score opens a moment of intense creativity, but only for that moment; afterwards, the score is merely part of the record, fodder for the files.

Therein lies the intrinsic conundrum in considering Taylor as a composer; especially if you accept Taylor's premise that he is a composer because he is an improviser. What endures in Taylor's music defies notation, conventional or otherwise. It begs the question: Is a score that is little more than an outline, and designed only for a single use, as legitimate as one where all aspects of performance are specified, and has been repeatedly performed for years, decades and even centuries? Given the exhilarating energy conveyed through this recording, the answer is surely yes.

~ Bill Shoemaker  
January 2004



**Cecil Taylor's** life simply does not submit itself to the ordinary rules of program biography. Some facts: he was born in Long Island City in 1929. It is recorded that in his early years, the artists he admired included Fats Waller, Erroll Garner, and, especially, Bud Powell. His mother grew up in New Jersey and was a childhood friend of Sonny Greer. Therefore, Duke Ellington's influence in the Taylor household was pervasive. As a matter of fact, Cecil Taylor's interest in music is quite cosmopolitan - and the range of his interest in things musical is matched only by his great admiration and intense enthusiasm. He graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music. In turn, Mr. Taylor has taught or been in residence for long periods at Antioch College, Glassboro State College in New Jersey, and the University of Wisconsin. Awards and grants have come his way. He recently revised, musicalized, and directed Adrienne Kennedy's play, *A Rat's Mess*, at New York's La Mama Theatre Annex. He has just completed a new piece for Diane McIntyre's dance company, "Sounds in Motion." The work will premiere in New York in early May as part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's New York season. Mr. Taylor is the recipient of a MacArthur Genius Award, an NEA Jazz Masters Award, and he was recently inducted into the Downbeat Jazz Hall of Fame at Universal Studios, Orlando, Florida.

The real story of Cecil Taylor may only be approached indirectly through words. It would take a poet of unusual invention to describe his musical composition and performance. In his many performances throughout the world, on the concert stage, in clubs, in colleges, and, happily, more and more frequently on records, Taylor inspires his listeners into the most ecstatic and involved response.

Cecil Taylor's music goes far beyond the astonishing combination of physical stamina and technical virtuosity needed to carry it out - it is an adventure into the most remarkable and nourishing realms of the mind and spirit.

**Mat Maneri** was born in 1969, and started studying violin at age five. He studied privately with Juilliard String Quartet founder Robert Koff, and with bass virtuoso Miroslav Vitous. Mat received a full scholarship as the principal violinist at Walnut Hill High School, but left school to pursue a professional career in music. By 1990, Mat founded the critically acclaimed Joe Maneri Quartet with Randy Peterson.

Mat started releasing records as a leader in 1996, and has developed four working ensembles. Pianists Paul Bley, Cecil Taylor, Matthew Shipp, and Borah Bergman have called upon Matt to perform with them in such venues as the Montreal Jazz Festival, the Library of Congress, and concert stages across Europe. Mat also enjoys a strong relationship with bassists Ed Schuller, Mark Dresser, William Parker, Michael Formanek, Barre Phillips, and John Lockwood. Never to be boxed in, Mat has also worked with Joe Morris, John Medeski, Tim Berne, Cecil McBee, T.K. Ramakrishnan, Franz Kogelman, Roy Campbell, Spring Heel Jack, Drazee Hoops, and appears on an Illy B Eats remix CD. He teaches privately as well as through the New School/NYC, and performs and records worldwide.



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