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# Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris, Conduction and the Network of Composition

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TITLE:

Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris, *Conduction and the Network of Composition*, Dr. Mark Zanter, Marshall University, Huntington, WV

ABSTRACT:

In *Noise, The Political Economy of Music* Jacques Attali outlines how musical practice presages periods of economic development. The current late capitalist, post-Fordist, stage resembles what Attali calls the "network of composition"; where codes are oriented toward receiving pleasure from instruments of communication, use, and exchange value is experienced not accumulated. Post-Fordism affords a climate in which new codes of use and exchange emerge through limited production, flexible labor, and increased information flow. These codes increasingly support choice, nonconformity, and free-expression.

Improvised/creative music, free jazz, and forms where self-expression, exploration of human potential freed from production signify the emergence of the "network of composition." Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris' music created via *Conduction* is one example; encouraging individuality, integrity, tolerance, critical assessment, risk-taking, responsibility, and realization of human potential. It encourages free choice in contexts where consequences of actions may be acknowledged instantaneously. In short, *Conduction* is a model for the "network of composition."

BIO:

Mark Zanter, an active composer/performer, has received commissions from the UIUC Creative Music Orchestra, CU Symphony, the American Composers forum, the WV Commission on the Arts, WVMTA, and numerous soloists. His works have been performed nationally and internationally at festivals including, MUSIC '98 (Cincinnati Conservatory) June in Buffalo, The Cortona Contemporary Music Festival, and the Atlantic Center for the Arts.

As a performer Dr. Zanter is equally at home performing standard repertoire, creative music, and jazz and has appeared with orchestras, chamber groups, and improvisers, including the *Huntington Symphony Orchestra*, the *Ohio Valley Orchestra*, *Sinfonia Da Camera*, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Leroy Jenkins, Vinko Globokar, George Lewis, Butch Morris, and Alphonse Mouzon. He has recorded with Deborah Richtmeyer, Vinko Globokar, and his work with Anthony Braxton received special mention in *Downbeat Magazine*.

Dr. Zanter is currently associate professor of music theory and composition at Marshall University, Huntington, WV.

In Jacques Attali book, *Noise*, the author sets forth the proposition of how networks of ritual sacrifice, representation, repetition, and finally composition presage stages of political economic development in industrial nations.

Essential to his text is the notion that noise is a primary element for the initiation of social change; that noise interrupts and ultimately interdicts the codes of prevailing networks, that the absence of meaning and absolute ambiguity contained within noise, fractures networks clearing the way for mutations to influence the development of new codes, which eventually supplant the old. (Attali, 33)

What I am concerned with here is not so much the process of fracturing old codes and supplanting with new, but rather how aspects of Attali's last network, that of composition, are embodied in the process and practice of Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris' Conduction<sup>®</sup>. But before this can be demonstrated it will be helpful to contextualize codes in the networks of representation, repetition, and composition.

In a nutshell Attali's networks demonstrate how various modes of production, and sociality are coded in musical practice. With them he shows how the rise of representation, through public performance, and later repetition, through the sale of mechanical reproductions of works, have coded various aspects of use-value, and exchange-value (quantity of simple labor).

He traces representation, which centers exchange-value in the spectacle of concert and cafe performance, outlining how emerging performance rights institutions in late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century France enabled through rule of law, entrepreneurs, publishers, and later composers, to obtain remuneration for their work. Through representation music becomes a commodity, offering solvent bourgeoisie the opportunity to experience—through performance—art that had hitherto been reserved for aristocrats. The public concert becomes the venue in which institutions of representation begin asserting notions of ownership for music that was once either the property of the Sovereign, or the ubiquitous music of the "street" (In the U.S. copyright is framed in the Constitution around the same time. *The Congress shall have Power [ . . . ] To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries 1787.*) Further, the emergence of the concert spectacle in representation, especially with regards to orchestral performance, is related to our current discussion, as we might compare the role of the conductor—the silent marshal of a specialized labor force where each member has prescribed duties and functions, including the "sound ideal" for orchestral musicians—their musicianship; with the roles of both performer and conductor in the Conduction ensemble in the network of composition.

In the network of repetition, our current situation, industrialized production, published scores, radio broadcasts of live performance, and recorded music, engender the possibility of stockpiling scores and recordings by consumers shifting the focus of both use and exchange away from the spectacle and the shared experience of "knowing and understanding" through art (Witkin, 85); to its relegation as symbolic capital, whereby stockpiled products enrich the individual's self-image. Repetition through mechanical reproduction affords the stockpiling of music thus expanding the arena of use, and bringing us to our current state where social, political, and psychological uses of music are often bound with exchange as a vehicle for consumerism.

The appropriation of musical art for these alternate purposes has several effects: the standardization of popular musical forms, the conversion of high art into a cultural commodity, and the loss of transcendent quality in artworks especially those works which have become commoditized members of the musical canon. Standardization is propagated primarily in the mass media, which focuses and shapes the desire of the consumer towards an increasingly narrow range of choices (i.e. like the Billboard top 100). In a large sense this is still operative; one need only examine a star-making machine like “American Idol” to see how narrow the path to stardom is. However, developments such as replacing mass production with small production runs, intensely designed products, increased consumption of services, consumer design input (Krimms, xxiii), and targeted marketing based on search engine strings among others—all elements of post-industrialism, commonly referred to as post-Fordism—have brought about the current situation as stated by Kotarba and Vannini:

*As individual lives become more and more focused around self-expression, the consumer system gains increasing power due to its ability to provide individuals with an increasingly larger volume of identity-expressing symbols rich with potential for enriching one’s own symbolic capital. (Kotarba, Vannini 68)*

Present day examples of consumption of music for its sake as symbolic capital are many, and the prevalent use of music as background decoration closes the deal sapping music of its power as a mode of “knowing and understanding,” (Witkin, 85) and re-appropriating it for its ability to symbolize and congeal an individual’s self-image. It would be too simplistic to claim that every individual’s experience may be encapsulated as such, on the other hand; it is difficult to imagine not being influenced by, or having contact with this form of consumerism. Nor is it difficult to imagine the experience as engendering a certain amount of alienation, or a desire for authenticity separate from any symbolic counterpart—as Attali states: the “creation of our own relation to the world.” (Attali, 134)

In this time of niche markets we may question how discreetly individual tastes can be reflected in the global arena; where this could break down, and what that means for both producers and consumers of products, information, and of art. This may also lead to speculation of what the next phase of use and exchange might be, and to Attali’s final network, composition; a network where use and exchange are melded through self-communication, self-transcendence, and the valorization of personal experience. Attali states:

*[W]e can envision one last network...in which music could be lived as composition, in other words, in which it would be performed for the musician’s own enjoyment, as self-communication, with no other goal than his own pleasure, as something fundamentally outside all communication, as self-transcendence, as a solitary, egotistical, noncommercial act. In this network, what is heard by others would be a by-product of what the composer or interpreter wrote or performed for the sake of writing it...Thus composition proposes a radical social model, one in which the body is...capable not only of production and consumption, and even of entering into relations with others, but also of autonomous pleasure. (Attali, 32)*

In composition, self-expression, and transcendence, are the primary goals, and social aspects of representation (the spectacle), and repetition (mechanical reproduction) exist as by-products. In composition external social and political forces do not mediate the experience of the individual. (Attali, 141)

When *Noise* was published in 1977 the music Attali used as an example of composition was free jazz (creative music) and the collectives that sprung up in various circles where recordings were made as documents of work in progress, and groups of musicians worked together to create, and promote the music as well as share in the profits. (Attali, 136) What I will now be concerned with is how the practicum of Conduction® affords an environment supporting the emergence of codes Attali expressed for composition.

Over twenty years ago, Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris began confronting issues concerning musicianship, musical traditions, notated, and improvised musical practice and what he saw as the potential for the development of music. Morris states:

*My interest lies in that area between where the interpretation of the symbolism that generates notation meets with the spontaneity of improvisation and that instant of perception thereof; and in the evolution of the ensemble...of the individual and collective identities and expressions that constitute music, musicianship, the extra musical and music making in a concentrated experience, for a far greater expression in the sonic arts. (Morris, Workbook, 2)*

Morris’ answer to probing the potential of musical expression was Conduction®, which he defines as:

*[A] vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation by the individual and the collective...provid[ing] instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing, or form. (Morris, Workbook, 2)*

The Conduction vocabulary consists of general directives such as: sustain, attack, develop/expand, repeat, which are precise in intent, but purposefully ambiguous with respect to musical content. The musician’s instantaneous interpretation of gestures then shapes each moment of a Conduction during performance, affording opportunity for further elaboration by the conductor and by members of the ensemble. Morris states:

*Discretion is key, as instrumentalists may use any musical means to satisfy directives [thus] expanding the volume or refining the quality of content. Based on the ‘significance’ of each directive [and] the nature and direction of the music...the musician is confronted with their own decision as to how each directive should and could be represented sonically each time; [thus] a new rationale for responsibility in musicianship evolves [through] particularizing each musician’s opinions and mindset. (Morris, Workbook, 9)*

Conduction fulfills composition’s codes of: self-expression, self-communication, personal transcendence, simultaneous production and consumption (melding of use and exchange), and entering into relations with others by allowing a universe of possible musical interpretations; and by linking each individual’s expression to the ensemble through their own self-awareness and the awareness of the conductor. The conductor serves several roles in the ensemble: initiating directives for interpretation, assessing interpretations of individuals and the ensemble, shaping and coordinating the actions of the performers within the context of the moment and within the context of the entire work as it is being produced. The conductor mirrors and contextualizes the performers’ interpretations providing an external reaction and stimulus that focuses the intention of all involved. Morris States:

*It is indeed a matter of taste, aesthetics, circumstance, adaptation, risk and choice while giving direction to the composition under construction, for both the conductor and the instrumentalist. The conductor is continually active in informing the ensemble 'where to go', and must be aware of where they are. (Morris, Workbook, 13)*

In performance all members are responsible to contribute and be cognizant of the entire composition as it emerges. When a performer understands the Conduction vocabulary and potential demands that may be placed upon them, this gives birth to the notion of a "new virtuoso"—one who satisfies beyond the audience's desire to be rejuvenated, enlightened, or entertained." (Morris, *Workbook*, 3) The virtuoso in a Conduction ensemble fulfills the requirements of each directive with integrity and with a mind towards contributing to the current musical context, and to the future direction of the work. Though such contributions may feature displays of technical virtuosity, the ultimate worth of any musical action is weighed against its contribution to the work as a whole. During rehearsal and performance if the conductor asserts this notion, virtuosic displays within the ensemble balance the empowerment, and integrity of the individual with accountability to the ensemble and the work at hand. The presence of the conductor through actively shaping the work ensures that this balance is maintained during performance, rather than at some other time, or in some other way, and the instantaneous interaction of all parties during performance encapsulates individual and social aspects of Attali's network of composition. It is also important to mention that Butch sees the value of Conduction as reaching beyond the production of musical works. He sees it as a means to illuminate new modes of: musical thinking, musicianship, interpretation, education, and to engage in the discovery of a world of expressive possibility by refining a standard for what music is and can be. (Morris, *Workbook*, 8,9)

Though Conduction exemplifies aspects of Attali's network of composition it also participates in the network of repetition, and does so through recordings of performances, which are by-products of use, existing as individual disks or as part of *Testament*.

*Testament* documents Butch Morris' Conductions from #11-#50 (1988-1995), and serves as the first record of his work with various ensembles worldwide; demonstrating that the practicum of Conduction transcends culture, style, and musical tradition (Morris, *Workbook*, 3,5). When asked why he numbers his Conductions (over 193 to-date), Mr. Morris states:

*I learned early on that documentation was going to be key to keeping track of the work I was about to undertake....so at about the 3rd or 4th conduction I decided to go back and catalogue [them] in as much detail as possible... In the end we will all need PROOF.  
(email 03/03/2009)*

Though Mr. Morris' music is often marketed as jazz—a hold over from his early years as a performer, his music transcends stylistic categorization and is often listed in a variety of genres ranging from orchestral to jazz, electronica to avant-garde. Butch also asserts that he is a jazz musician, but uses the word jazz metaphorically; claiming his right to self-expression on a "never ending journey to seek and refine a collective perception that describes, explains and expresses the continuum of music by investigating all of its potential." (Morris, *Workbook*, 3)

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