

TRANSFIGURING TIME

MUSIC AS SYMBOLIC PROCESS

ABSTRACT

Semiotic theory allows us to model musical phenomena as processes of representation and interpretation. Notably, Jean-Jacques Nattiez has defined the “musical work” in semiotic terms that are more fruitful, and less paradoxical, than prior definitions. The semiotic approach is especially promising for a musicology of improvised or otherwise non-notated works. Nattiez’s approach is here illustrated, refined, and extended via an examination of several performances of John Coltrane’s 1964 work *A Love Supreme*. This practical application highlights the importance of the energetic and logical interpretants of musical symbols, and suggests a semiotic basis for normative criticism of musical performance.

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A composer's job involves *the decoration of fragments of time*. Without music to decorate it, time is just a bunch of boring *production deadlines* or dates by which *bills must be paid*.
— Frank Zappa (1989, 193)

It is annoying to musicologists that composers and performers tend to regard their careful studies as irrelevant to what musicians do. In one respect musicology *is* largely irrelevant to musicians: for an artist who has, through thousands of hours of practice, internalized the subtle details and demands of highly stylized sound production on a recalcitrant instrument, the musicologists' written explanations are not likely to provide any particularly new or helpful information. To borrow a Peircean image, a treatise on analytical mechanics, no matter how good it is, offers little to improve the intuitive judgments that are encoded in the expert billiard player's nerves and muscles.

In another respect, though, much musicology is irrelevant because its emphasis on formal internal structures and theory simply fails to reflect the musician's experience. As Naomi Cumming noted, much musicology is built upon "a persistent, if unstated, belief that sounding quality and formal structure stand on two sides of an opposition, like secondary and primary qualities in the Lockean sense" (Cumming 1999, 437). The timebound toils of composition, the precarious and particular acts of rehearsal and performance – these are infinitely variable and ephemeral phenomena. These daily facts of the musician's life are, on their face, unattractive objects for the musicologists' systematic study and general theorizing. The theory-defined "formal features" of a musical work are much more appealing: these "are assumed to have a superior permanence, as they inhere in some unspecified sense in the work's score, and the kind of cognitive skills involved in identifying them is assumed not to be purely 'intuitive' but to be founded upon the acquisition of a relevant set of theoretical beliefs" (Cumming 1999, 437). This appeal has led many musicologists to regard "the work" as a kind of atemporal form mysteriously grasped or created by the composer, who communicates that form (and whatever the form represents) to performers and audiences via the score, which is a fixed authoritative text.

There are a number of problems with this conception of the musical work. For one thing, it denigrates the way people actually produce and experience music. To regard the

work as a static and atemporal form implies that performers and audiences are strangely passive creatures; even the composer may be regarded as passive receptor and transcriber of the work so conceived. There is a looming practical problem that, while some musical works can be conceived as static entities represented by a definitive score, not *all* can be. Finally, this view gives rise to a number of familiar and apparently intractable philosophical puzzles. Where does the composition reside, and what is its ontological status, before the composer fixes its form in a score? What cognitive faculty affords a composer access to musical forms? How does musical sound or notation “refer” to the work or form? How does the work refer to *its* object? And what *is* that object – What information does the composition communicate to the auditor? Would performers even be *necessary* if audiences were sufficiently literate to read the score? The list of such problems could be extended. I contend that musicologists’ discourse often does not enhance the experience of musicians – or of engaged auditors – because it is built on a model of music-as-thing that does not match up with common experience of musical phenomena. A process model of music would, I think, much better serve both music and musicology.

Peircean semiotic theory, regarded both as an account of representation and interpretation, and as a general model of process, offers a promising alternative starting point for musicology. There have of course been a number of previous contributions to semiotic musicology, including those by Susanne Langer (1979, 1953), Leonard Meyer (1956), Wilson Coker (1972), Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1990), Naomi Cumming (1999, 2000), Kevin Holm-Hudson (2002), and Felicia Kruse (2005). Space constraints prohibit a survey of these authors’ contributions; I will proceed instead to sketch a semiotic account of the musical work as a process of representation and interpretation, employing terminology from Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s *Music and Discourse*. I will then illustrate the application of this semiotic framework with reference to John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, a musical work that is particularly hard to reconcile with the assumptions of established musicology. This application highlights the overlooked role of the energetic and logical interpretants of musical symbols, and suggests a semiotic basis for normative criticism of musical performances.

The Musical Work as Total Musical Fact

To compose is, at least by tendency, to offer for doing, not to offer for hearing but for writing. . . — Roland Barthes, “Musica Practica” (1985, 265-66)

Nattiez’s “musical semiology” regards the musical work as an irreducibly timebound phenomenon. It is brought into experience by innumerable acts of particular individuals, and is informed by all their idiosyncracies and by the accidents of historical context. Neither musical form, nor authorial intent, nor written score, nor performance, nor auditors’ reception are essential to or necessarily definitive of a work. Nattiez accommodates this variability in musical phenomena by identifying the object of musical discourse as the “Total Musical Fact.” Though Nattiez focuses his discussions on the canon of Western art music (“classical” music) favored by established musicology, the Total Musical Fact appears suited to accommodate virtually anything that is experienced as a musical phenomenon. (Interestingly, discussion of whether something is – or should be – experienced as a musical phenomenon is *itself* a kind of musical discourse, and hence a part of the Total Musical Fact that constitutes some work as a musical phenomenon.) Nattiez distinguishes three “levels” of the musical work conceived as “Total Musical Fact”:¹

1. The *poietic level*: “the procedures that have engendered it (acts of composition)”;
2. The *neutral or immanent level*: the organization, structures, “configurations,” sounds, and/or score that define the experienceable work;
3. The *esthetic level*: “the procedures to which it gives rise: acts of interpretation and perception.” (Nattiez 1990, ix)

It is no doubt evident that these three levels of the Total Musical Fact correspond to object, sign-vehicle, and interpretant, the three parts of a Peircean sign. A musical work is a process; the Total Musical Fact may be fruitfully regarded as a complete symbol.

¹These “levels” are logically ordered but do not necessarily correspond to actual *temporal phases* of the work’s existence: in particular, the poietic and immanent levels may occur simultaneously.

Evolution of “Revolution”: Semiotic Model of a Standard Case

We are afraid, perhaps, that without images and methods, chaos will break loose; worse still, that unless we use images of some kind, ourselves, our own creation will itself be chaos. And why are we afraid of that? Is it because people will laugh at us, if we make chaos? Or is it, perhaps, that we are most afraid of all that if we do make chaos, when we hope to create art, we will ourselves be chaos, hollow, nothing? — Christopher Alexander (1979, 14-15)

First we will consider how this model handles a “standard case,” a musicology-friendly work – Chopin’s “Revolutionary Étude” (Op. 10, No. 12).

– *Begin Illustration, with Animated Diagram of Semiosis Projected on Screen* –

Poietic level: Sometime around 1831, Chopin composes the “Étude,” combining specific technical challenges in piano playing with new melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic configurations.

Immanent level: Chopin produces, proofreads and publishes a score which represents the tempo, style, dynamics, notes and other information the composer considers necessary to guide a performance of the “Étude.” He dedicates the collection of twelve études to to Franz Liszt.

Esthetic level: Generations of students and performers practice, experiment, study, (eventually) record, and comment upon numerous performances of the work. Generations of audiences and critics hear, critique, and respond to others’ critiques of these performances.

– *End Illustration* –

There exists a definitive composer and an authoritative score for the “Revolutionary Étude,” and there is an extensive history of performance and critical evaluation that have over time established a standard of “correct” performance for the piece. Performances that conform to the score are judged competent; “new interpretations” introduce variations in aspects of the work that were not specified by the composer in the score, or were not otherwise established early in the esthetic phase of the work.² Excellence in interpretation

²In this case, the name “Revolutionary Étude” is an example of such an early additon.

concerns the tasteful exploitation of the score's indeterminacy. An interpretation that *violates* the score (e.g., by using deviant instrumentation, a radically different tempo or style, or adding whole new sections to the work) would be readily dismissed by critics and serious musicians as frivolous or offensive – *even if large numbers of people were actually to enjoy the resulting interpretation as music.*

Notice how the object of the “Total Musical Fact,” the symbolic process that *is* the musical sign, shifts and grows over time. Initially, Chopin's experience is the object, his ideas are the sign-vehicle, and the score is the interpretant. Perhaps immediately, Chopin's experience and his ideas of that experience collapse to become the object, which is represented by the score, to a performer (who could be Chopin himself). Next, the experience/ideas/score collapse and come to be regarded as the object represented by a performance to an audience. The open-ended evolutionary process of the musical symbol known as “Revolutionary Étude” has begun. Due to strong teaching and performance conventions the score soon comes to occupy central importance for performers and critics; it is easy to imagine, but impossible to produce, a flawless performance that would perfectly embody the musical form that seems to exist outside of time – but which may be glimpsed by reading the text, Chopin's score. The *score* comes to be taken as the *object* of musical representation, while the *object represented by Chopin in his composition* is not as often discussed. The score embodies the work, as token of a type, and ever awaits that performer who can represent it adequately to an audience. With this, the work becomes a thing to master, acquire, or “get.”

This “standard” case shows how our model can explain the origin of the musical work-as-thing concept, the view favored by strictly text-centered teachers, performers, critics and musicologists. It accords with David Sudnow's account of the classical artist's situation: the classical pianist “operates within a social organization of professional certification, excellence, and competitiveness . . . placing extraordinary demands upon a faithfulness to the score, where what ‘faithfulness’ and ‘the score’ mean is defined by that social organization” (Sudnow 1978, 53). With this standard case in hand, we now turn to a genre of music that is much more problematic for such interpreters. What we learn from the semiotic analysis of improvised jazz indicates broader possibilities for the understanding of any musical work.

The Jazz Revolution: A Traditionalist's Nightmare

Screw the tempered scale and the lute it rode in on. — Gary Giddins (1998, 468)

The music historian Gary Giddins notes that early jazz musicians introduced a new esthetic to the world, a new conception of music. The innovation had much to do with their emphasis on improvisation: “Spontaneous invention is the soul of jazz...Improvisation is the jazz musician’s richest form of expression” (Giddins 1998, 88). Pioneers like Louis Armstrong may in fact have rehearsed every “improvised” note ahead of time until the melody came together perfectly, but jazz nonetheless turned conservatory convention on its head: “Implicit in the liberties Armstrong took, and in the rise of jazz itself, is the assumption that musicians are superior to the songs they perform — a radical stance by classical principles, where a performance is evaluated by its fidelity to the text. In jazz, performance *is* the text” (Giddins 1998, 89).

The methods and implications of improvisation pervade the jazz experience. Duke Ellington was a perfectionist working with a large and changing group of musicians: the score was essential to his work as composer and performer. Nonetheless, if we seek the canonical version of an Ellington piece, the surviving scores must take a back seat to recordings of his actual performances. Ellington would allow performers to alter melodies, and would alter (or compose) songs based on improvisations his players produced. The score was rarely kept up to date, and there *is* no canonical version of many Ellington compositions:

Over time, Ellington might continue to make changes, large and small, so that the basic arrangement might appear in a dozen different recorded versions. Which is the correct one? The issue of correctness (as opposed to comparative excellence) is as spurious here as in a discussion of various blues improvisations by Johnny Hodges. (Giddins 1998, 105).

The text-centered musician or auditor may in fact be unable to *hear* modern improvised jazz as music. The classically oriented critic may be baffled at the prospect of discussing performance quality, or “comparative excellence,” without a score to serve as fixed standard of correctness. In a style of music where all the traditional standards are continually

challenged, isn't it the case that anything goes and it all sounds the same? Consider the following statement: *A Love Supreme* is generally recognized as a masterwork of American improvisational jazz, and as the greatest extended work of the saxophonist and composer John Coltrane. That one can intelligibly assert these things, and even argue for them, suggests that there *is* a way out of this normative free-fall.

I have chosen the 32-minute-long suite *A Love Supreme* as a test case for the semiotic model of music for several reasons. First, it is an *improvised* work. Coltrane and the other members of his Quartet (pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist James "Jimmy" Garrison, and drummer Elvin Jones) had already been recording true improvisation for some years when they entered Rudy Van Gelder's studio on 9 December 1964. Concerning the earlier short song "Chasin' the Trane," Coltrane had written that "The melody not only wasn't written, it wasn't conceived before we played it. . . . We set the tempo, and in we went" (Kahn 2002, 61). For the longer work of *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane had developed some ideas ahead of time, mainly concerning the overall structure and mood of the suite's four parts. In the studio, according to Tyner, "he worked out a bass line with Jimmy, and told Elvin 'this is what I'd like,' and basically, that's the way it went." (Kahn 2002, 92). He gave Tyner a basic set of chords to use, but Tyner recalled that "you could do what you wanted, keeping them in mind. That's what *A Love Supreme* was about." (Kahn 2002, 92). Jones recalls similarly sparse direction from the composer and band leader at this session:

though Coltrane "didn't give me any instruction," the drummer understood "the way the melody was geared to start. I thought I had to play something that was simple and clear. So I played half of an Afro-Cuban beat, and it worked out."
(Kahn 2002, 115)

The performance was the composition, there was never a score, and the act of composition, the poietic level of this work, was realized by four musicians and a recording engineer working extemporaneously with very little polishing or revising.

The second feature of *A Love Supreme* that makes it a promising case study is that there have been relatively few performances or recordings of the work as a whole since its first appearance. The following is, I think, an exhaustive list of full-length recordings of the

work:³

1. The John Coltrane Quartet at Van Gelder Studios, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 9 December 1964, released on vinyl LP in 1965 (Coltrane 2002, disc 1)
2. The John Coltrane Quartet with saxophonist Archie Shepp and bassist Art Davis at Van Gelder Studios, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 10 December 1964. Two alternate takes each of “Acknowledgement” and “Resolution” have survived and been recently made available (Coltrane 2002, tracks 6-9, disc 2)
3. The John Coltrane Quartet at Festival Mondial du Jazz, Antibes, France, 26 July 1965. Live performance recorded by INA (French national radio) (Coltrane 2002, tracks 1-5, disc 2)
4. Carlos Santana and Mahavishnu John McLaughlin in a nine-piece ensemble, studio recording and one alternate take, October 1972 (Santana and McLaughlin 2003, tracks 1 and 6)
5. The Branford Marsalis Quartet at Bearsville Studios, Bearsville, New York, 1-3 December 2001 (Branford Marsalis Quartet 2002, tracks 6-9)
6. The Branford Marsalis Quartet live at the Bimhuis Jazz Club, Amsterdam, 30 March 2003 (Branford Marsalis Quartet 2004)
7. The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis at Right Track Studio, 26 August 2003 (Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis 2004)
8. The Turtle Island Quartet, studio recording, 2007 (Turtle Island Quartet 2007)

This limited number of complete recordings allows a comprehensive comparison of different interpretations of the work.

The third interesting aspect of *A Love Supreme* as a test case is that there is a canonical interpretation – the 1965 LP release – which has served in place of a score as definitive text.

³Coltrane also performed at least the first movement of the work, “Acknowledgement,” at St. Gregory’s School in Brooklyn, New York on 24 April 1965 with Jones on drums, Garrison on bass, and his wife Alice on piano, but there is no known recording of the performance (Kahn 2002, 186-93).

Subsequent releases have undermined the “definitive” authority of this text, however. As noted previously, we now have access to three different versions of *A Love Supreme* from the composer: the performances from 9 and 10 December 1965, and from 26 July 1965. Each of these recordings is the composer’s version of the work, and there are significant differences among them.

Tough *Love*: Semiotic Model of a Hard Case

If you don’t feel it, you can’t get it. — Louis Armstrong (Giddins 1998, 88)

– *Begin Illustration, Returning to Animated Diagram of Semiosis Projected on Screen* –

In semiotic terms, the object of *A Love Supreme* is twofold. The *dynamical object* would be the totality of John Coltrane’s life at that time: his musical development, especially the influence of Miles Davis’ modal jazz since 1958; his personal life with a new wife and small children; the rise of the civil rights movement and the first linkages of jazz to the Black Power movement; his increasing popularity, influence, and commercial success; and his spiritual growth. Coltrane’s spirituality was rooted in his childhood experiences in African-American churches; it was revived with his recovery from heroin addiction in 1957. Delfeayo Marsalis highlights the importance of the dynamical object when he observes that someone really trying to play like John Coltrane “would have to absorb comparative cultural experiences – which are virtual[ly] impossible to replicate in our current society – and translate the resultant emotions into musical expression” (Branford Marsalis Quartet 2002). The *immediate object*, the ground of the representation in the musical symbol *A Love Supreme*, is predominantly musical innovation (the work is his effort to bring modal improvisation to an extended suite format), and expression of spiritual experiences (the work’s title, the liner notes he wrote later, and the poem he brought into the studio as text for “Psalm” all highlight the spiritual focus of this work).

The sign-vehicle of this musical symbol comprises the in-studio performances of 9 and 10 December 1964. The poietic level of the work includes the immediate object, aspects of Coltrane’s world, as it is represented in these performances. The immanent level is the edited recording of these sessions. The quartet, the additional musicians in the 10 December session (which included vocal overdubbing that was used on the LP release), and

the recording engineer Van Gelder all contributed to the work's poietic level; the engineer contributed decisively to the work's immanent level in preserving, shaping, and editing the actual recording. Finally, in the course of playback and editing, Vann Gelder and Coltrane became the first to enter the esthetic level of *A Love Supreme*.

At this phase of the development of *A Love Supreme* as musical symbol, we have a completed "work" composed, recorded, edited, and heard in playback. The work exists in the world as a thing, a complete and stable symbol, and it begins inevitably to affect that world by generating interpretants (of course, I am ignoring the many interpretants that went into the initial process of generating the interpretant we call here the "completed work").

Here is where the semiotic model of music is especially helpful for moving us beyond current musicology. A great deal of attention has focused on music's suitability to represent emotion, or specifically to *convey* emotion, by representing emotional relations to an audience so as to generate an emotional interpretant.⁴ As interesting as emotion is, a semiotic model allows us to tell a much bigger story.

Consider the interpretants that have actually arisen from this work. Performers and audiences have *emotional* responses to the various parts of *A Love Supreme*, and there is perhaps a configuration of emotional responses that is common among informed and accustomed auditors. The work also creates *energetic* interpretants – physical responses – from dancing, to closed eyes, to meditation and prayer, to a command to "Please turn that off!", to leaving the room, to signing up for sax lessons. *Some* of these responses are precisely what Coltrane intended. Some are uniform for specific types of auditors. John Coltrane himself apparently saw no limit to the potential power of the energetic interpretants of music:

I want to discover a method so that if I want it to rain, it will start immediately to rain. If one of my friends is ill, I'd like to play a certain song and he'll be cured. When he'd be broke, I'd bring out a different song, and immediately he'd get all the money he needed. But what these pieces are, and what is the road to attain the knowledge of them, that I don't know. The true powers of music are still unknown. To be able to control them must be, I believe, the goal

⁴See Langer (1979) and (1953), Meyer (1956), and Kruse (Kruse 2005).

of every musician. (Kahn 2002, 192-93)

Beyond even these thaumaturgic energetic interpretants, there are also *logical* interpretants: *A Love Supreme* has generated myriad signs that themselves represent ideas. Coltrane himself was among the first affected: after editing the tapes with Van Gelder, he worked meticulously to understand and explain *A Love Supreme* in the liner notes for the 1965 LP (Kahn 2002, 144-46). As we have seen, the work of 9 December 1964 gave rise to later performances by Coltrane and others. Parts of *A Love Supreme* have been adapted to become part of later independent musical works. The rejected experiments of the 10 December sessions reappear, to better effect, in Coltrane's next major release, *Ascension* (Coltrane 2000). The musical forms Coltrane recorded – the techniques, voicings, and rhythms of *A Love Supreme* – were internalized by later composers and performers who never quoted from the work itself. The notion of jazz music as conveyor of spiritual truth has entered popular and religious culture: The Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco congregates regularly.⁵ And *A Love Supreme* has engendered countless critiques, commentaries, and studies – even a few academic papers. The musical symbol conveys and provokes emotion, indeed, but it also conveys and provokes physical reactions and intellectual meanings of astonishing variety. All of these later interpretants at least potentially affect what is narrowly thought of as the “work.” They can affect it because they are, properly speaking, a part of the work at the esthetic level.

One may question how a conference paper written years later could affect *A Love Supreme*, how important it could ever be to the music. The future, after all, doesn't ordinarily affect the past. But one conference paper has in fact decisively augmented the musical symbol *A Love Supreme*. In 1985 Lewis Porter published a paper in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, in which he conclusively identified the structure of “Psalm,” the concluding section of *A Love Supreme*. Porter's work forever changed the way the original recording and all its progeny would be understood (Porter 1985). The liner notes for the 1965 LP included a poem entitled “A Love Supreme” and signed “John Coltrane / December 1964.” Porter demonstrated that Coltrane had composed the saxophone melody of “Psalm” by sounding the syllables of this poem through the horn. Not

⁵The Church was founded in 1971 by Archbishop Franzo King and Reverend Mother Marina King after a Coltrane performance, which they experienced as a “sound baptism” in the Holy Spirit (Anonymous ND).

even Elvin Jones realized Coltrane was reading from the poem in the studio, but the legend did develop somehow and became a secret passed among musicians and Coltrane “insiders” (Kahn 2002, 123-24). After Porter, every listener can hear the words, and every performer has a tough interpretive decision to make about the melody in “Psalm”: should one duplicate the *sounds*, restate Coltrane’s *meaning*, or use “Psalm” to make one’s own *original* statement, as the composer had done? In an interview, Branford Marsalis remarked

I wasn’t even going to try to approach that. Nor was I going to sit around and meticulously write out each note, which robs you of the essence. . . . What I wanted to do was just try to play smething that would create that same kind of spiritual essence and that sense of melancholy (Branford Marsalis Quartet 2004, “Interview: The Fourth Movement”).

Here, incidentally, is a case where musicology *has* proved highly relevant to musicians.

Normative Judgment in Jazz

From realizing that I can make mistakes, I have come to realize that there is an order to what I do.
—Ornette Coleman (1959)

The semiotic model of the work as “Total Musical Fact” suggests that there are many, many possible legitimate interpretations of a musical work, and many others that simply do not succeed because they do not adequately represent the object of the music. This examination of *A Love Supreme* concludes with a look at some of each, and offers a suggestion about what distinguishes the good, the bad, and the ugly. I have confined my examples to the opening of the piece, the first minute or so of the available interpretations of “Acknowledgement.” In the 1965 LP version, this opening consists of a gong strike, an assertive statement from the saxophone⁶, and then the introduction of an anchoring blues progression on the bass. This progression is eventually taken into the saxophone melody, and finally vocalized with the chanted words “A Love Supreme.” Repeated listenings to recorded variants of *A Love Supreme*, all initially with Nathan Smith, a GVSU student majoring in woodwind performance, have consistently led to the same judgments. The 1965

⁶I initially heard this as a fanfare, but on further reflection have come to regard it as more like a blues singer’s shout or the opening call from a preacher’s pulpit.

LP release sets the standard, both historically and in terms of quality of interpretation. The December 10 sessions are failed experiments which are intelligible only with reference to the later recording, *Ascension* (Coltrane 2000). Coltrane's July 1965 live recording is interesting, but breaks no new ground and only reminds one of the best features of the LP version. Branford Marsalis's 2001 studio recording is competent but unmoving. The Turtle Island Quartet interpretation is also competent and, once one adjusts to the string quartet voicing, even enjoyable – but it remains thin, lacking the sonic authority of drumset and piano in the rhythm section. Wynton Marsalis's 2003 recording with the Lincoln Center Jazz orchestra is offensively wrong-headed. Branford Marsalis's 2004 live recording in Amsterdam conveys the energy and feel of *A Love Supreme* most successfully of all the later interpretations.

On what do I base these summary judgments? A thousand details boil down to a couple of guiding insights: The successful interpretations preserve the trace of Coltrane's original immediate object, and acknowledge (without copying) the compositional and performance decisions he made on the original recording. This is an almost wholly improvised work on a few distinctive chord progressions and patterns, and it is an intensely personal spiritual statement made by a small, intimate ensemble. Coltrane's 10 December alternate takes and his 26 July live performance are the work of a group already moving beyond the structures and voicings of 9 December. The 10 December sextet breaks *A Love Supreme's* intimacy, the 26 July quartet has let the musical vocabulary of December go stale. Branford Marsalis's Quartet (like the Turtle Island Quartet) offers the right number of voices. Branford's Quartet (like Coltrane's) explicitly draws upon the blues heritage that defines the chord progressions and patterns. In their 2003 recording, Branford Marsalis and his group are finally at home with the overall pattern of the work. Wynton Marsalis's large group seems not to get it at all – they play from a score, and Marsalis uses the band's sectional sounds as if imitating the swing section from some early 20th century tone poem, while letting individual performers take their solo turns in high-energy “cut session” style. It's as if they were told to imagine the piece was written for a ballroom stomp, in 1937, by Igor Stravinski or Ottorino Respighi.

This survey of my judgments is highly impressionistic, of course, but it is built upon too many supporting details to describe. Here is one example of such a set of details, centering

on what object the performers, as interpreters, believe the characteristic structures of the work are meant to reference. The repeated bass progression that anchors “Acknowledgement” provides a specific example of how one can get it wrong. Ravi Coltrane (the son of John and Alice Coltrane) regards this 1-d3-1-4 progression, one of two melodic “cells” he identifies in the work, as a universalist spiritual statement (the other cell is 1-2-5). In liner notes to the 2002 release of *A Love Supreme* he identifies its source in universal mathematical ratios:

John Coltrane was a dedicated student of many disciplines beyond music: religion, astrology, astronomy, other sciences. The books he left behind more than suggest it: he was definitely into mathematics and an esoteric application of numbers to music. So I thought about these cells as pure numbers and saw how they define ratios known as the Golden Mean, also called the divine proportion. (Coltrane 2002, 23-24)

This is a potentially fascinating window into “Acknowledgement,” but it proves hard to establish. Where can we find the Golden Mean expressed in this four-note progression? A line exhibiting the Golden Mean, such as Plato’s “Divided Line,” exhibits a ratio of 1:1.62 between two parts, and between its larger part and the whole. If it exists in “Acknowledgement” it would apparently be in the ratios of the intervals between the tonic, the minor third (a “blue note”), and the fourth. The proportions of Coltrane’s intervals are approximately, but only approximately, correct. In the blues scale Coltrane employed here, the interval from tonic to minor third is about three half-steps; from tonic to fourth is five half-steps.⁷ The proportion between the two parts of the whole interval (tonic to minor third : minor third to fourth) is about 1:1.9. The proportion between the larger part and the whole (tonic to minor third : tonic to fourth) is 1:1.5. This is not too far off the Golden Ratio of 1:1.62, but that would seem to be more variation than any serious devotee of numerology might tolerate. Notice, too, that Coltrane did not pair the 1-3-1-4 progression with another one – such as 3-4-1-3, 3-4-3-1, or 1-3-1-3-4 – that would *actually trace* the ratio among parts on

⁷The minor interval in a blues chord is actually a major third “bent” downward, or a minor third bent upward. Either bend gives the blues piece its distinctively sad dissonance. The progression used in “Acknowledgement” bends the minor third slightly upward.

this interval.⁸ One wonders whether the veteran performer and recording artist was really intellectualizing his composition this much... and if so, how Jones, Garrison, and Tyner, co-composing with him in the studio, ever caught on to what he wanted without his telling them about the scheme.

Wynton Marsalis also regards the bass progression as a statement of spiritual universalism: “It builds on the unit of the minor third and the fourth, which is a kernel of the pentatonic scale that runs through all the music around the world. Coltrane was aware of this, I’m sure” (Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis 2004). Sure, but a blues scale simply *is* a minor pentatonic scale (1-d3-4-5-d7), with an additional note, a diminished fifth, inserted in the series (1-d3-4-d5-5-d7). Perhaps Coltrane *was* stepping out into rarefied realms of music theory by deliberately embracing the universality of the pentatonic scale, or maybe he was just playing the blues. When he wrote *A Love Supreme*, the blues had been played this way for more than half a century in America and Coltrane himself had been playing the blues for twenty years.

This is the interpretive approach adopted by Branford Marsalis, who in an interview notes the use of this progression in Stevie Ray Vaughn’s “Pride and Joy” (Vaughan 1995, track 4). Marsalis sings the 1-3-1-3-4 “dirty blues” line, notes its similarity to the 1-3-1-4 progression in *A Love Supreme*, and ends the interview by saying “The subtext [to Coltrane’s music] is always the blues” (Branford Marsalis Quartet 2004, “Interview: The Blues as an Essential Aspect”). Vaughan doesn’t actually make this line prominent in the song Marsalis mentions, but it can indeed be heard as the anchoring progression in many traditional blues songs, such as John Lee Hooker’s “I’m Bad Like Jesse James” (Hooker 1995, track 14). This dirty blues line appears unaltered in the multiple melodic high instruments at the beginning of “Ascension.”

In *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane was using a configuration of notes, the blues scale, which had been developed and was well established in his musical culture; his originality is in using it in a “spiritual” setting. Its structure accords with such esoterica as the Golden Ratio and the pentatonic scale because the blues, too, is a part of “all the music around the world.” In any case, Branford seems to get a more listenable interpretation with his belief about the object of Coltrane’s musical symbol. I maintain that this is because, when he

⁸The last of these patterns does appear in “Ascension.”

approaches the musical symbol *A Love Supreme*, Marsalis seeks to comprehend, though not replicate, the place of the blues, the church, and other key influences in Coltrane's world. That world is the dynamic object of *A Love Supreme*; there is no "correct rendition" of this musical work, but competent and excellent interpretants of it preserve – as their object – the trace of that world, and all else that the work has accrued since it first came to be.

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