

Pierrepont, Alexandre. 2015. *La Nuée. L'AACM: Un Jeu de Société Musicale*. Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses.

Reviewed by Yves Citton

The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which recently celebrated its 50th birthday, is certainly one of the most important musical movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This much we know. This thick and dense book, written by French anthropologist and musical theorist Alexandre Pierrepont over a period of almost twenty years, demonstrates that, on top of inventing new ways to make music, the members of the AACM also invented better ways to make a society. Subtitled *A Game-Play of Musical Society*, it offers a profound and joyous analysis of the many strata simultaneously developed in Chicago beginning in 1965 by African American musicians who had no alternative but to invent new social relations in order to survive economically and thrive artistically as creators, in a country doubly biased against African Americans *and* against artistic experimentations and lifestyles.

The author originally conducted this research as a dissertation in anthropology, spending years searching for documents, collecting data, recording and transcribing long interviews with the main as well as with the less famous characters of this epic play. A dozen years and a few thousand pages later, Alexandre Pierrepont had gathered a unique wealth of information on the AACM, more than enough to fill this book—but this was not the most important dimension of his work. Pierrepont is an activist, an organizer, a poet, and a creator himself, but first and foremost he is *a thinker* and *a writer*: somebody who carefully researches data, somebody who mobilizes anthropological and political theory to shed light on this data but, more importantly, somebody who thinks through historical facts and aesthetic theories in order to pave new ways to understand the unique human realities that are at stake in creative improvised music. His book has all the depth of scholarly knowledge expected from a heavy book of French philosophy, but it is written—and deserves to be read—as an adventure in thought, as an exploratory travel through amazing and unsuspected intellectual landscapes.

The book's prologue situates its approach within the brand of post-colonial theory and cultural studies that has become quite familiar to the Anglo-American audience, but which remains somewhat exotic to a majority of French readers. "25 Propositions about the Insisting Presence of African-Americans in US Society" opens chapter 1, which is devoted to

“The AACM in History.” Pierrepont reconfigures the history of “jazz” by locating the genre-formerly-known-as-jazz within what his previous book theorized as “the jazzistic field” (Pierrepont 2002). Instead of imprisoning drummers, pianists and sax players into a fortified definition of “the essence of jazz” (rhythm section? swing? improvisation? lyricism?), he (un)frames “jazz” as a dynamic field of interplay between ever-changing influences and reinventions of itself. Against all those who attempt to fence in jazz territory within the boundaries of their (generally backward-looking) definition of the proper way to play or compose, Pierrepont defines the jazzistic field as a concrete utopia of diversity-and-freedom-at-work, endlessly exceeding any static definition that can be given of itself.

Re-inscribing the AACM within history, the goal of chapter 1, therefore leads him to consider Chicago, during the past century, as a source of ever renewed mythologies and sonic materials, as a place of emergence for new ways to orient oneself in the social world, and as a site of multiplication of inherited identities. When chapter 2 turns to the history of the AACM itself, it does start with a very accessible and didactic survey of the various phases (seven in total) that the Association went through from 1961 to the present, but the chapter soon moves on to revisit history in terms of inclusions and associations, rather than mere succession.

Chapter 3 analyzes in greater depth the implications of the AACM being “an Association,” a term intimately linked with that of “society.” The AACM is studied first as a cooperative, with its rights and duties, its founding charts, its governance, its modes of financing and, most importantly, its informal but strongly structured practices of solidarity. Here we explore the micropolitics of an institution that managed to support creative African American musicians, not only in the face of personal rivalries and human jealousies, but against deliberate measures and powerful attempts by the US government and local authorities to undermine self-determination among African Americans. A second section focuses on the “Respectful Anarchy” which relied more on the sense of responsibility and on elective affinities than on formal regulations, fostering self-realization and self-determination. The third section addresses issues of African American identity, secrecy and openness, inventing original forms of collective subjectivation. The fourth section is devoted to what was probably the backbone of the AACM longevity: the unique care and intelligence with which it conceived of and organized the transmission of its values and knowledge (musical, artistic, ethical, social and otherwise) to younger generations of Chicagoans, from music schools to universities.

The fourth and last chapter extends the previous analyses by integrating them into the musical originality of the concerts and recordings pro-

duced by the various members and collectives of the AACM. These fifty years of music coming out of Chicago illustrate one very particular and unique instantiation of the jazzistic field—which unfolded in very different shapes in San Francisco, St. Louis, or Amsterdam—and they constitute a paradigmatic example of its most fundamental dynamics: combinatory, transformational, multi-determined, multi-directional, and multi-dimensional—constantly reinventing the relations between the near and the far, the present and the past, the traditional and the exploratory.

The book's title (*La Nuée*) is a fairly rare word referring etymologically to a big cloud, which can peacefully fly above our heads, but which can also result from the awesome eruption of a mighty volcano. Metaphorically, it is used to describe a dense and powerful multitude—of birds flying in the sky, but also of humans anarchically moving towards a common goal. It may not be an overinterpretation to read this title as a (not-so-cryptic) reference to the political theory of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose trilogy (2000, 2004, 2009) provides an elegant conceptual framework to account for the emancipatory collaboration of singularities equally eager to foster their free creativity and to care for the commons that support their cooperation.

While the history and the fate of the largest number of political organizations from “the Left,” over the past 50 years, look pretty grim and discouraging—with neoliberal capitalism, nationalist agendas, reactionary anti-social policies and openly xenophobic discourses seeming more triumphant every day—high- and low-browed intellectuals may be well-inspired to study what allowed a few dozen of under-privileged musicians and artists from Chicago to survive institutional racism, COINTELPRO repression, the lures of corporate labels, the defunding of cultural institutions, and still manage to support, promote and invigorate uncompromising forms of self-organization and artistic creation. Examples of such longevity and such successes worldwide can unfortunately be counted on the fingers of just a few hands. The AACM is an international treasure, not only because of the beautiful and unforgettable music it continues to produce, but also because of the sociopolitical hope carried on by its very existence. *La Nuée* is an extremely precious book insofar as it helps us understand how and why the AACM succeeded in doing what it did. It covers the many different layers that were needed to make it as solid and exemplary as it is, from the ingenuity of its material and financial organization to the spiritual values that have made it so unbeatable, because it is so genuine.

Alexandre Pierrepont's book is a perfect companion to the other impressive study on the same topic recently published by George E. Lewis, A

Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music (2008). While Lewis was a direct participant in the musical adventure of the AACM, narrating and analyzing it from the inside, Pierrepont benefits from his anthropological gaze, considering the AACM at a distance. However, since Lewis's account takes all the reflective distance expected from the most serious scholarly account, and since Pierrepont's deep sympathy and familiarity with the musicians he admires and loves make him a very participant observer, the two books unexpectedly complement (and often compliment) each other by adding Pierrepont's poetic lyricism to Lewis's theoretical rigor.

One of the many originalities of *La Nuée* is its quasi-shamanic dimension. Pierrepont does not speak in tongues, since his analyses are always very clear and convincing, but he often speaks in voices: a good portion of his book includes long quotes translated from the musicians themselves—not simply members of the AACM he interviewed during countless stays in Chicago, but also friends of Pierrepont who are also celebrated musicians, like William Parker or David S. Ware, who shed light on the music from outside of Chicago. The book thus enacts the type of cooperation described among the creative musicians: the author listens to the musicians as much as he writes about them. He never pretends to “explain,” much less “interpret,” their actions, beliefs, or history from above (the ethereal heavens of the anthropological science) nor from afar (the French university). We learn a lot when we read his book because he himself went to Chicago to learn from the creative-class-heroes he enormously respects and admires. They speak through him, the gloriously living and the too-early-departed, often quoted verbatim, often understood by a most friendly ear and a most intelligent pen. The book is *alive* because it manages to smoothly flow from the anthropological and philosophical concepts of Roger Cailliois, Michel de Certeau, Patrick Chamoiseau, Stuart Hall, and Clifford Geertz to the powerful reflections and brilliant thoughts of Henry Threadgill, Wadada Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Mike Reed, and Hamid Drake—all equally intelligent and inspiring.

Probably under the influence of Anthony Braxton, the notion of a *continuum* plays a prominent role in the story Pierrepont tells us about the AACM, and it also structures the very texture of his book. There is a continuum between the inspirations and the struggles of African American musicians from the early 1960s until today: a continuous affirmation, against all forms of oppression, that Black Lives Matter—and create a continuum between musical genres usually thought of as segregated, since it appears that some AACM members in Chicago's poorest neighborhood were much more aware of avant-garde contemporary music of the 1950s than most European intellectuals. A continuum between musical collaboration and

political organization, since the AACM provides an example of politics with a clear and concrete purpose (making it possible for artists to provide for the material and spiritual needs of creation), as opposed to so many political organizations trapped in the logic of their own self-perpetuation.

In fact, this continuum extends far beyond the book itself. After having worked for several years in organizing concerts and educational events for the Banlieues Bleues and Sons d'hiver festivals in Paris, as well as for the Museum of the Quai Branly, Alexandre Pierrepont, along with a few friends and partners, has launched his own association for the advancement of creative musicians, entitled The Bridge. With one leg in Chicago and one leg in France. It agitates, organizes, and collects funds to allow for French musicians and Chicagoans to team up in intermittent transatlantic bands. These musicians rehearse, learn from each other, share experiences, skills, and sensitivity, tour for a few weeks on each side of the ocean, record a few pieces, and continue building up the ever-changing continuum of the jazzistic field. A dozen bands have thus formed, performed, toured, recorded, and reformed after a few months, weaving a very dense fabric of musical complicity, personal friendship and social solidarity. For Pierrepont, the anthropologist does not allow the human experience to stop once the musicians get off the stage: their French and Chicago trips are a matter of full immersion, living in the neighborhoods and communities that fuel the music, rich of the cultural wealth only minorities can nurture.

La Nuée is only one aspect of Alexandre Pierrepont's work with, for, and among the most exciting creative musicians of our age. Through his tireless educational workshops in schools, his concert promotion, his numerous publications, and now through the intense collaborations made possible by The Bridge, he has become one of the central players of the "game-play of musical society" studied in his book. Rarely can one find a publication whose author lives and acts in such harmonious concordance with what he preaches. This probably is the true source of the book's lyricism, and its inspiring and contagious strength. Across the decades, the languages, and the ocean, the spirit of the AACM is alive in *La Nuée* and in its author—wonderfully and powerfully so.

References

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