

Revisiting the Shapeshifting Scores of Burr Van Nostrand

by JASON BELCHER

Writing about Burr Van Nostrand (a favorite composer of mine, one who has become a mentor and friend) always gets me thinking back to the spring and summer months of 2011, when Malcolm Peyton (one of my teachers at the New England Conservatory) brought Burr's *Voyage in a White Building I* into our grad composer's seminar.

A setting of Hart Crane's poem *Voyages I* for a male "speaker," consort of 10 instruments, and string orchestra, this score was written over a four-year period for a mixed group of students mostly located at Yale University, where it received its premiere in April of 1969. Van Nostrand revised the score following a second performance in Boston, and later deposited it in ACA. The range of backgrounds and training of the *Voyage* ensemble members required Van Nostrand to create a hybrid score that employed verbal descriptors, graphic notation, spaces for improvisation, and timed events alongside traditional western notation. Events are carefully scored, organized by register, and often but not always moving from left to right on the page. A dense plethora of symbols and full ensemble activity in one section might then give way to a chamber-like passage surrounded by space before abruptly

shifting to a new texture that moves in multiple directions at once. Often, the interplay and sonic result of the graphic scoring is more consistent in its result than comparatively traditional aspects of the score.

Hybridity of notation and performative methods is a common practice for many of today's composers and new music ensembles. The *Voyage* score is a prescient shapeshifter from which the most detailed sounds arise from a graphic key that Van Nostrand would continue to use in his following works, including *Lunar Possession Manual* (1973).

ATTACK, DECAY, & SOSTENUTO

- ▲ = explosive attack, maximum energy
- = round attack
- ▼ = sec, extremely short!
- ▶ = forte - piano

Excerpt from the performance key of *Lunar Possession Manual*, showing qualities of attacks, decay, and sustain originally found in *Voyage in a White Building*.

I learned of *Lunar* (scored for soprano, piccolo, clarinet, violin, cello, bass, piano, and percussion) after speaking with composer Anthony Coleman, who heard the premiere performance of the work by Dinosaur Annex at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts in 1973. Looking at both scores recently, I've found that Van Nostrand was able to harness the community-generated energy that influenced his notation of *Voyage*

LUNAR POSSESSION MANUAL

A WINTER CEREMONIAL...

FOR SOPRANO
FLUTE • PICCOLO
CLARINET in B
VIOLIN
CELLO
BASS
PIANO
PERCUSSION
AND OPTIONAL DANCERS

Burr Van Nostrand

Lunar Possession Manual, p.2. After each sub-group is introduced, they are united at the 12/8 measure shown above. Initially dispersed, the entire ensemble is then contributing to a uniform trajectory.

and apply it to the scoring of *Lunar*. *Lunar Possession Manual* is somewhat more conventional in its scoring and layout, but even the most rigid execution yields the spontaneity and sonic variety of the *Voyage* score.

Like his subsequent works, *Voyage* shows the research and development of a system in which Van Nostrand sought to create a catalog of sounds and new notation for each instrument and multiple sub-groups within his ensemble. Throughout many of his works, Van Nostrand used graphics from *Voyage* to show attacks, sustain, decay, intensity of vibrato, and other sonic directives.

In both *Voyage* and *Lunar Possession Manual*, we can hear the consort carry and amplify the phonetic content as it is rendered by the solo vocalist. In *Lunar*, Van Nostrand freely sets text from numerous sources, including translations of Japanese Haiku and Ancient Greek writings, with fragments recalled from the *Voyage* text as well. Consonants, sibilants, and fricative sounds are accented and shaded by percussive attacks. Vowels are often extended beyond the speakers' rendering of them by the employment of underscoring sounds in a similar register. At times, the vocalist and consort exchange attacks in rapid succession, all in service of amplifying the phonetically-rendered text.

Lunar Possession Manual is another example of a shape-shifting score with multiple notation systems, sudden shifts, and extreme sonic contrasts. Somewhat more reliant on traditional staff notation, *Lunar* begins

where *Voyage* cannot. In *Lunar*, various factions of the entire ensemble are at first offset from one another in a moment-to-moment form. Timbral and registral oppositions are presented in succession, coalescing before the entrance of the solo soprano voice. Significant textural shifts are marked by double bar lines through the staves of the score. What begins as a dispersion of voices (between the woodwinds, piano, strings, and percussion) coalesces together after a series of short and measured frames (*above*).

A break away from fully scored events gives *Lunar* a sound and flow that toggles between spontaneity and rigid coordination. Breaks from one type of scoring to another are a common feature of Van Nostrand's work.

Another noteworthy moment from early in the score is a cut to rapid yet free attacks of the clarinet and stringed instruments (*previous page*). These sustained tones are heterophonically shadowed by the vibraphone, necessitating a cut to unmeasured notation. We can also note that Van Nostrand directs players to take cues from each other: a device that he initially explored in rehearsals of the *Voyage* score.

Local Transitions and Sonic Contrasts

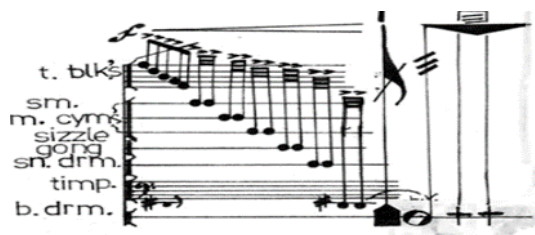
In his 2006 book *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (Bloomsbury, 2006), saxophonist David Borgo notes seven primary transition types that can be heard in Sam Rivers' *Hues of Melanin* (Borgo, p.76). Among the seven types of transition observed by Borgo, several can be applied to analysis of Van Nostrand's work, including:

Climactic Segues. Here, musical activity with a definite trajectory may not resolve fully, but instead cut to a new texture that does not recall previously developed material.

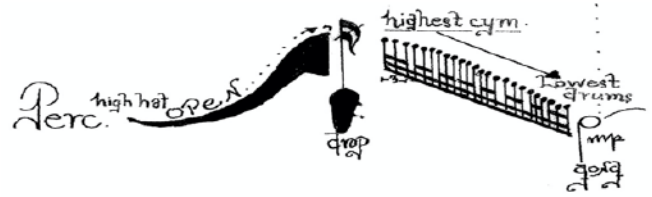
Pseudo-Cadential Segues, where a particular musical activity comes to an implied cadence point, pausing briefly before continuing.

Sudden Segues, where instant and unexpected changes in texture or material take place.

Some other transitions that Borgo observes are inapplicable to Van Nostrand's output. For example, fragmentation often develops gradually in the Rivers performance, whereas in *Voyage* or *Lunar Possession Manual*, fragmentation of an idea usually starts instantaneously. Additionally, developments of material tend not to overlap or be otherwise process-driven. Instead, overlaps of dominant material tend to cross-fade, where one texture will subside to the rise of another in a relatively short span of time, or a new event will trigger a sudden change. Short phrases from *Lunar* and *Voyage* illustrate percussion cascades that trigger sudden changes:

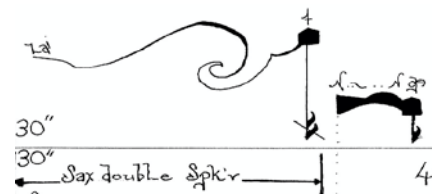


Multipercussion cascade in *Lunar Possession Manual*.



Drum Set cascade in *Voyage in a White Building I*.

Van Nostrand also uses Hart Crane's text to derive wavelike gestures in both scores. Below we see the same graphic for the word "Lightning" in each score. In each work, both the emergence of a new graphic and the doubling of that graphic are new to the form.



"Lightning" in *Voyage in a White Building I*. The speaker is doubled by the saxophone.



"Lightning" in *Lunar Possession Manual*. The soprano is doubled by the clarinet.

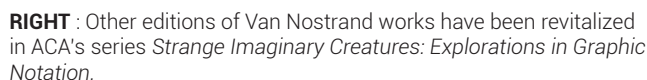
The full excerpt from *Voyage in a White Building I* (*next page*) shows the activity following Van Nostrand's setting of "Lightning on the Waves." In addition to illustrating sudden segues from one sonic territory to another, it shows how Van Nostrand's scores can change from one variety of notation to another mid-page - giving the performers a concrete visual reference for timbral changes while creating a remarkable fluidity from moment-to-moment.

Handwritten musical score for "Voyage in a White Building" by John Cage. The score is written on a grid with vertical lines and includes various musical notations, including staves for "Sax double Spt'r", "4 Fl's non solo", "6 Fl's + Flute", "Lute", "Perc", and "Hr". It features dynamic markings like "ppp", "mp", and "f", and includes handwritten notes such as "With suppressed excitement (whispering like the sea)" and "aggressive scats". The score is divided into sections marked with time signatures like 30'', 35'', and 30''.

above : Voyage in a White Building, p. 11. below : Lunar Possession Manual, p. 23.

Handwritten musical score for "Lunar Possession Manual" by John Cage. The score is written on a grid with vertical lines and includes various musical notations, including staves for "Sop.", "Col. Sopr.", "Perc.", "glock.", "claves", "bongs", "w. blk.", "t. blk.", "sm.", "m. gym.", "sizzle", "gong", "srt. dnm.", "timp.", and "b. dnm.". It features dynamic markings like "ppp", "mp", and "f", and includes handwritten notes such as "SENZA MISURA", "VERY INTENSE", "allow distortion ->", "allow Ped to sustain as long as possible", "arco (fast bow)", "pickup tamb from b dnm head & shake", and "take mallet". The score is divided into sections marked with time signatures like 20'', 10'', and 10''.

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[illegible]