

Multimedia Counterpoints On Henry Brant's Visual Experiments with Spatial Music

by Maurizio Corbella

Throughout his seventy-year career in music Henry Brant engaged in a significant, if idiosyncratic, relationship with (audio)visual media: on the one hand, he orchestrated Hollywood and non-Hollywood film scores by composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Virgil Thomson, and Alex North; on the other, he scored about twenty documentaries and experimental films as well as two feature films.¹ Less well known is that he integrated visual media in his spatial music. Brant's papers housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation (PSS) account for at least six completed works and five unrealized projects falling under this category, distributed over a time span of forty years from the late 1950s to the late 1990s. Relevant data about this body of works are collated in *Table 1*.

Brant reflected on the "Visual aspects of musical space" in the closing section of his best-known essay on spatial music.² There he claimed that the ideal condition for "fully and expressively" experiencing the spatial dimension of his music should be "complete darkness, without the disturbing and confusing intervention of merely functional visual impressions – such as the appearance and motions of performers and audience, and the decor and lighting of the hall – that are irrelevant to the actual communication of the music in terms of its sound." He then continued, "Totally invisible spatial music, *in the theater*, would leave the visual senses free to concentrate on visual material planned for its dramatic expressiveness."³ Elsewhere he specified that "music played by itself without any visual images is very hard on the eyes because what's in a concert hall is usually not worth looking at [...]. So, the visual senses starve, I feel, when concert music is played."⁴

-
- 1 *My Father's House* (dir. Herbert Kline, Joseph Lejtes, and Ben Oyserman, 1947); *The Big Break* (dir. Joseph Strick, 1953).
 - 2 Henry Brant, "Space as an Essential Aspect of Musical Composition" (1967), in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, Expanded Edition, ed. Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1998), pp. 220–42.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, p. 241 (emphasis in the original).
 - 4 Henry Brant, interviewed in the TV documentary *Trajectory: A Silent Film for Henry Brant* (dir. Frank Diamand, 1995). The documentary is preserved at the PSS.

Besides diverting the listener's attention from the trite performing rituals of the concert hall, the inclusion of visual elements in the compositional process responded to Brant's broader research on "contrapuntal" complexity in space. The notion of counterpoint takes on a peculiar nuance in Brant's spatial music. In Brant's view, all the instrumental groups surrounding the audience ought to be perceived as distinct entities, each with its own contrasting timbral and stylistic features. In this way, "if the music is so written that the separated groups are in a contrasted polyphonic-rhythmic relation to each other, the separation will *enhance* contrapuntal clarity and distinctness to a marked degree."⁵

The integration of visual media furthers this notion by adding a layer of "silent rhythm"⁶ to the already heterogeneous sound textures making up Brant's spatial counterpoint. In a letter to visual artist Kazuya Sakai, Brant extended his concept of contrast and separation of sound blocks to images:

In terms of texture, my work in general avoids a "blending" or amalgamating of the participating elements. Instead my object is to separate them. This means of course that, marked contrasts between the various musical constituents which the listener is aware of at any given moment. I would be pleased if this concept could apply both in the various elements making up each image and in the contrast between images.⁷

Brant's works and projects with visual media can be organized in three groups, tagged with different marks in *Table 1*: live music combined with film (*); live music combined with discreet visual events (e.g. projected slides, lights, fireworks) (°); recorded music combined with film (†). Depending on the visual medium involved, Brant devised distinct combining methods that also affected his musical writing. These methods ranged from elaborate cueing systems to musical notation in a proper sense. For instance, visual slides could be encapsulated in the musical writing and controlled in the guise of a musical instrument.

In *Inside Track* (1982) (*Table 1*: #11, #14, #15), two musicians are in charge of two mechanical switching devices designed by Brant, each hooked to four carousel projectors. The players manage the switches by reading from their musically notated part. The "lights" (which is what Brant calls the visuals in the score) are an integral part of one of the four instrumental groups that make up the overall spatial concept of the piece, namely the "string-woodwind-lights ensemble."⁸ The preparatory scheme in *Plate 1* best illustrates how Brant conceived of the interaction between music and

5 Brant, "Space as an Essential Aspect of Musical Composition" (see note 2), p. 233 (emphasis in the original).

6 "A Study of 'Silent Rhythm' (Musically Controlled Light-Images and Visual Configurations) under Conditions of Outdoor Space," 1970, typescript (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

7 Letter to Kazuya Sakai [ca. July–August 1986], handwritten draft (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

8 The other musical groups consist in a solo pianist, a "street band" with coloratura soprano, and a xylophone and chimes.

year	#	work/project	description
1957	1	<i>The Fourth Season*</i>	"for four 'live,' separated, unco-ordinated [sic] instruments (violin, flute, oboe and percussion) with wordless voice, in combination with a directly painted abstract film by Len Lye"
	2	<i>All Souls Carnival*</i>	<i>Sextet (or. 1949, rev. 1957) + picture-film</i>
1959	3	<i>Peace Music for UN Day†</i>	"superimposed voice tracks in uncoordinated polytempi for United Nations anniversary film" (<i>Fountain of Hope</i> , dir. Len Lye, based on Lye's kinetic sculpture "Fountain")
1961	4	<i>Violin Concerto with Lights°</i>	"for violin solo with 9 instruments and 5 musicians who operate light-switches in exact notated rhythm which produce projected visual images of contrasted character in 10 different areas."
1966	5		
1966–67	6	<i>Project proposal†</i>	"Proposal for the <u>development and composition of a multi-spatial music-film amalgam ... and the design and construction of a totally controlled and completely portable music-film theater</u> "
1969–70	7	<i>The Cathedral of Chartres†</i>	<i>Music for a 16-minute film for the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, NYC: the exhibition used a 3-screen projection and perhaps a multi-speaker diffusion</i>
1972	8	<i>Project proposal°</i>	"A study of 'silent rhythm' (musically controlled light-images and visual configurations) under condition of <u>outdoor music</u> "
1978	9	<i>Violin Concerto with Lights°</i>	<i>see #4</i>
1978–79	10	<i>Everybody, Inc. *°†</i>	"Spatial operatic spectacle in 5 acts" <i>comprised of film and stills projections, and some amplified sounds</i> (libretto by Patricia Brant)
1982	11	<i>Inside Track°</i>	"Concerto for solo piano with three separated instrumental groups and projected images"
1984	12	<i>Skyfires (or Skyfiremusic)°</i>	"Outline for a large outdoor musical project for EXPO 86"
1986–87	13	<i>Violin Concerto with Lights°</i>	"optical/computer graphics multi-media designed by Kazuya Sakai"
1989	14	<i>Inside Track°</i>	<i>see #10 (new spatial configuration, no visuals involved)</i>
1990	15	<i>Inside Track°</i>	<i>part of the slides used in #13 were reused here, plus more new ones</i>
1992–94	16	<i>Trajectory*†</i>	"acoustic, spatial, independent MUSIC for concert/theatrical presentation simultaneously with a SILENT FILM by Frank Diamand" <i>texts from Leonardo Da Vinci's notebooks</i>
1995–98	17	<i>60 Minutes to the Beginning*</i>	"A Cosmic Spatial Opera for Live Voices with Film Environment" "a site-specific work of music, film and language on the occasion of the year 2000" (scenario by Robert Potter)

Table 1: Chronology of Henry Brant's works/projects including visual media.

collaborators	premiere/other documented performances
Len Lye (visual artist, filmmaker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music in Our Time, 92 Y, NYC, 3 February 1957 • [Carriage Barn, Bennington College, VE, 25 April 1957?]
Len Lye (visual artist, filmmaker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carnegie Recital Hall, NYC, 3 March 1957 • Carriage Barn, Bennington College, VE, 25 April 1957
Len Lye (visual artist, filmmaker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • screening: UN Day, United Nations, NYC, 24 January 1959 (and worldwide)
?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Carriage Barn, Bennington College, 1961?]
?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carriage Barn, Bennington College, 25 April 1966
Herman J. Engel (filmmaker)	<i>unrealized</i> (contacts with <i>Spectemur Agendo Inc.</i> and the Ford Foundation)
Francis Thompson/Wheaton Galentine (filmmakers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • screening: The Year 1200 Exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 1970
Jane Evans (visual artist)	<i>unrealized?</i> (written for "Summer research project", Bennington College)
?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis, MN, 1 March 1978
?	<i>unfinished</i> (Act I completed with condensed score; visuals probably unrealized) (commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera)
Leslie Parke (visual artist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holland Festival, CalArts Ensemble, Royal Conservatoire The Hague, 7 June 1982
—	<i>unrealized</i> (extensive contacts with the Vancouver Expo 1986 committee)
Kazuya Sakai (visual artist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voices for Change, Caruth Auditorium, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, 26 January 1987
—	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Week of New Music, Aspen Music Festival, 30 July 1989
Kazuya Sakai (visual artist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Music Concerts, Premiere Dance Theatre, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, 9 December 1990
Frank Diamand (filmmaker, poet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percussion Festival The Hague, Slagwerkgroep Den Haag: • Phillips Hall, The Hague, 14, 16 October 1994; • Paradiso, Amsterdam, 18 October 1994; • De Oosterpoort, Groningen, 23 October 1994 • Screenings with recorded soundtrack, International Film Festival, Rotterdam, November 1994 (35mm, Dolby Digital); VPRO TV broadcast, 31 May 1995 (16 mm, TV downmix)
Herman J. Engel (filmmaker)	<i>unrealized</i> (conceived for the Corwin Pavilion, University of California, Santa Barbara)

(* = live music with film, ° = live music with discreet visual events, † = recorded music with film).

visuals as a multi-modal counterpoint already at an early composing stage, providing each musical/visual “ingredient”⁹ with concise descriptive tags (“pointillic,” “pyramidic,” “short figures,” etc.), as was customary in his compositional practice: the numbers on the left indicate the movements of the composition in which the string-woodwind-lights ensemble plays; column 1 refers to the woodwinds, column 3 to the strings (“M” stands for “music”), while columns 2 and 4 refer to the two visual streams (“L” stands for “lights”).

Turning to the score, the “Lights 1.” and “Lights 2.” staves unwind over four “pitches,” each corresponding to one push-button hooked to the respective projector (*Plate 2*). This entails that up to eight different images simultaneously and rhythmically interact with music in each designed movement.

At the *Inside Track* premiere (*Table 1*: #11), the two screens, each split in four portions, were placed in the stage area, whereas the strings and the woodwinds occupied the side aisles of the darkened hall. As a result, in the movements in which the string-woodwind-light ensemble played, the audience could see the images in front of them “counterpointing” the sound of strings and woodwinds coming separately from left and right, while the pianist played his rhythmically independent virtuoso solo in the center (*Plate 3*).

Compared to the use of slides, the inclusion of film generated livelier but overall less controllable contrapuntal possibilities. While it is safe to say that Brant derived part of his interest in visual media from his professional activity in the film industry, he did so in a counterintuitive way. For one thing, he sternly opposed synchronism, in the usual cinematic sense of pursuing a synesthetic fusion of music and images. For Brant, not only did synchronism engender hierarchical relationships between music and images, but it also ruled against the audience’s ability to perceive each unit of his multimedia dramaturgies as autonomous.

Trajectory (1994; *Table 1*: #16), including a nineteen-minute silent film by Dutch poet and filmmaker Frank Diamand, is Brant’s most ambitious work, among the ones he completed, with regard to the integration of spatial music and visuals.¹⁰ Brant planned the entrance/exit of each instrumental group based on detailed time-diagrams that were deliberately independent of the visual editing of the film sequences, but at the same time respected the overall duration of each visual segment. He explained to Diamand:

9 Brant famously used cooking metaphors when describing his concept of spatial music.

10 Diamand edited a Dolby-Stereo digital recording of the 1994 performance as a film, under the Dutch title *Afgelegde Weg, een Stomme Film voor Henry Brant*. Now included in the DVD box *Frank Diamand* (Dutch Documentary Collection, Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid, 2012).

	A		B	
2		L (later)	M str. chords big slides	L note pattern
4	M WW stacc. chords	L	M (later, pizz)	
6		L rest	M (later, harmonics)	L rest
8	M high. sour 5ths		M low 5ths	
10	M high, excited first	L rapid flashes	M high, excited added later	L later, added flashes
dry to get impression of accumulation into 10				
①	M pointillic all ranges	L points	M pointillic all ranges	L points
mostly only one note or light at a time, stacc.				
④	M pyramidal starts	L pyramidal	M pyramidal	L pyramidal
Alternations of the M pyramids, & L pyramids, later: accumulations of WW inst. changes				
⑤	M polyphonic short figures	2-note short figures, polyphonic, maybe canonic	M short figures, polyphonic, thickened into 2 & 3 note chords.	2-note short figures etc.
alternations of groups, then WW inst. changes accumulations.				

In writing the ^{music} passages, leave either
rests or plan holding notes for the
lights **(10) non-co-ord.**

but in ⑧, how can there be
both rests & overlapping held notes?
Answer: by extra holding notes just
with the moving passages.

Plate 1: Henry Brant, *Inside Track*, preliminary scheme (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

My "time-program" for the instruments is a musical formality (in the sense of sonata, fugue, etc.) and it illustrates my premise that a new work must have its own new formal construction plan. Each section, musically, is a series of accumulating entrances; each section having its own entrance-design and scheme of timbral deployment.¹¹

11 Letter to Frank Diamand, September 24, 1994, typescript (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

-12- (STR.-w.w.)

13 BAND

1-196 15. ---

Piano

14

LIGHTS 1.

Flute 2nd (& 3rd) time

Oboe

Clarinet

Bassoon

LIGHTS 2.

I Vln. *pizzicato*

II Vln. *pizzicato*

Vla. *pizzicato*

I Vel. *ponticello*

II Vel. *ponticello*

D.B. *ponticello*

Plate 2: Henry Brant, *Inside Track*, Woodwinds, Strings & Lights Score, p. 12 (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

Brant was well aware that visuals exert a seductive lure on audiences and that his contrapuntal goal would fail without a cautious choice of the images' types and contents. It was not by chance that he favored collaborators who could provide him with abstract, non-referential themes: among them were Len Lye, famous for his kinetic sculptures (*Table 1: #1–3*),¹² the visual artist Leslie Parke, who designed the slides for *Inside Track's* premiere in

12 For Lye's relationship with Brant, see Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001), pp. 258–67.

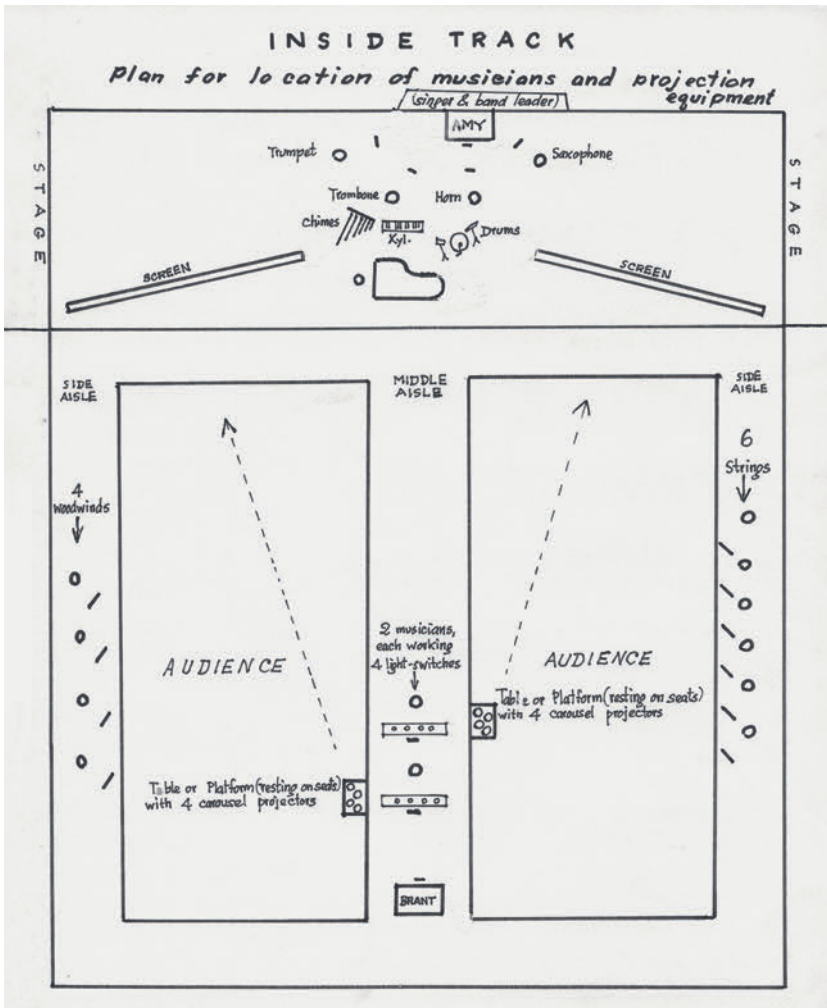


Plate 3: Henry Brant, *Inside Track*, performance plan for the premiere. Enclosure of a letter to Frans van Rossum, 14 May 1982 (Henry Brant Estate, Santa Barbara. Courtesy of Kathy Wilkowsky).

1982 (Table 1: #11, see Plate 4a), and the aforementioned Kazuya Sakai, who collaborated with him on late performances of *Violin Concerto with Lights* and *Inside Track* (Table 1: #13, #15, see Plate 4b). When Brant teamed up with documentary filmmakers such as Diamand and Herman J. Engel, he demanded that linear editing and even certain types of shots – closeups in particular – be avoided because they risked triggering subjective focalizations (and consequently subordinating music to visuals).¹³

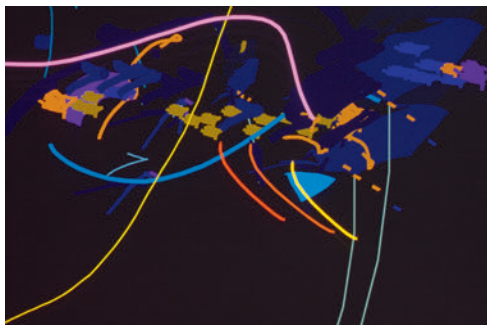
¹³ Brant's correspondence with Diamand and Engel provides several examples in this sense.

4a



Plate 4:
4a: Selection of watercolors and pastels by Leslie Parke, used for the premiere of *Inside Track* (The Hague, 1982; Henry Brant Collection, PSS; courtesy of Leslie Parke, Cambridge, NY).
4b: Selection of computer graphics by Kazuya Sakai, used for *Violin Concerto with Lights* (Dallas, 1987) and *Inside Track* (Toronto, 1990; Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

4b



Brant's rejection of synchronism aligns with his outspoken hostility toward stereophony as a means of rendering the spatial dynamics of his music. Stereophonic mixing promoted a model of auditory perception that was alien to Brant's idea of "sharply defined, specifically isolated and widely separated areas of highly contrasted tone-qualities [...], without any of them spilling over into each other."¹⁴ Notwithstanding the aversion he developed toward audio technologies in the later part of his career, Brant's earlier papers abound with experiments and projects, including technologies for audiovisual spatialization. In 1966–67 (*Table 1: #6*), Brant and Engel sought funds for "the development and composition of a multi-spatial music-film amalgam" through "the design and construction of a totally controlled and completely portable music-film theater," in which "several separate but simultaneous sources of sound, as well as a number of separate [and not contiguous] screens for projected images" could coexist. "The total effect will be polyvisual as well as polyphonic, with a specific orientation in space."¹⁵ The first work planned for this (regrettably unrealized) project was supposed to be a sort of multimedia installation on Charles Ives's songs.¹⁶ The fact that Ives is ubiquitous in many facets of Brant's experimentation with space is yet further confirmation that research in visual media was an integral part of his aesthetics.

14 Letter to Frank Diamand, September 6, 1994, typescript (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

15 Henry Brant and Herman J. Engel, "A Proposal" (1966–67), typescript, 4 pp., enclosed to a letter by Herman J. Engel, January 4, 1967 (Henry Brant Collection, PSS).

16 Untitled typescript, 2 pp., enclosed in a letter by Engel (*ibid.*).