From Coltrane to Magma and beyond: Interpreting musical meaning through composition.

Ву

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A thesis

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the work *A Love Supreme* composed by John Coltrane, his influence on the band Magma, and their composition, *Zëss*. By applying Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework to the work of Coltrane and Magma, I suggest that the spiritual concerns of these composers was the primary motivating factor in the creation of their music.

I argue for a definition of Coltrane's musical work, particularly *A Love Supreme*, as 'arranged spontaneous spiritual music', acknowledging that Coltrane's spirituality was a vehicle for the music and, simultaneously, the music was a vehicle for his spirituality.

I also discuss the composer of *Zëss*, Christian Vander, who has a deeply cemented love of John Coltrane's music and spiritual concepts, both of which coexist in the music of his band, Magma.

My composition synthesises and expands on the work of both Coltrane and Magma. Descend, based on Dante's *Inferno*, contains my own interpreted meanings of *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss*. The story of *Inferno* is similar to that of Coltrane's and Vander's commitment in their spiritual lives, and in this project I make my own interpretations to access my own spirituality through the act of composition.

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Introduction

Composers, musicians and audience members experience musical performances in different ways. Whether the performance is a live concert, a recording, or is a composition in progress, individuals will relate to that music on their own terms. These participants are all united by one overall fact, which is, that they will all interpret the music uniquely. Each will find that the music will have, or will not have, a significance that means something to them. Sometimes these meanings will resonate with others, and, in the case of some of the world's most famous compositions, these meanings will resonate with many.

The music of John Coltrane has a significance that has inspired a diverse range of people, significance that connects across many boundaries such as race, spirituality or political motivations. Coltrane has inspired many musicians and composers to utilise his musical techniques to further their own work, and to advance their musical abilities through commitment to their craft. Coltrane has also inspired people to understand their own spirituality. In particular, Coltrane's album A Love Supreme (1965) has had an influence that has been felt across time and throughout much of the world since its release. Countless musicians from genres such as modal jazz, rock, avant-garde jazz and free jazz, among others, point to Coltrane as inspirational and significant in their development. One example of a musical group that has acknowledged Coltrane's influence is the French ensemble Magma. The music of Magma combines Coltrane-like improvisations and arrangement techniques with classical music, choral music, folk and rock fusion. Critics and other outsiders have labelled their music as avant-garde rock or progressive rock, yet to their fans the genre of their music is known as 'Zeuhl', a word that originates from Kobaïan, a language invented by the band. Their long-form composition Zëss, which premiered in 1979, seems to draw explicitly on A Love Supreme, which is evident in the use of similar thematic material, harmonic structures, musical intensity and conviction of the performance.

I too have been influenced by John Coltrane as a composer and as a musician. Most recently this influence took shape in participating in the live performance of two classic albums for the 2016 Wellington Jazz Festival.¹ My quartet performed the music of *Coltrane's Sound* (1960) and *A Love Supreme* (1965) in two separate performances. The response from the audiences at these performances was encouraging. I acknowledge that there is meaning to this music that transcends the players and the notes, and through writing this exegesis and composing music inspired by it I have assimilated some of those meanings to advance my own creative work.

This thesis is an exploration of the work of John Coltrane, of his influence on the band Magma, and of my composition *Descend*, a five-movement suite that synthesises and expands on the work of both Coltrane and Magma. As there is a wealth of information available regarding the music of *A Love Supreme*, including transcriptions and analysis,² my work here will focus on the spiritual aspect of this music, offering examples of how Coltrane's music and spirituality intersect. From the release of *A Love Supreme* until his death, Coltrane's musical works were predominantly spiritually focused. The meanings contained in each work during this period explored new and/or deeper areas of his spirituality.

The music of Magma also has intentional spiritual meanings. This is often portrayed in their narratives of the religious and world events on their fictional planet 'Kobaïa'. The music of *Zëss* describes a great cosmic ritual, the moment when everything becomes whole again at the meeting of the Master of the Universe (named Zëss) - and the audience of the enlightened. While this is a completely fictitious scenario, the music and lyrics are delivered with complete conviction and has generated a level of reverence among audiences similar to that for *A Love Supreme*.

¹I was invited to present as part of the Classic Album Series by the Rogue & Vagabond, a bar in Wellington. This series of music pays homage to great jazz recordings.

²See for example Ake 2002; Kahn 2002; Porter 1999; Berkman 2007; DeVito 2010; Hester 1997; Kofsky 1970; Ratliff 2007.

In this exegesis I argue that these works primarily reflect their composers' spiritual rather than musical concerns. By applying Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretive framework to the work of Coltrane and Magma, I suggest that even though the music itself can be analysed and understood in its melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, timbral and other functions, the appeal of this music is due to how these elements intensely evoke the spiritual. My composition *Descend* is based on the poem *Inferno* by Dante Alighieri (1320) and contains my own interpreted meanings of *A Love Supreme*, of *Zëss* and of *Inferno* itself.

In his discussion of taking an interpretive approach to understanding culture, Geertz states that "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the continent of meaning and mapping out its borderless landscape" (Geertz 1973: 20). He suggests that we try to understand what aspects of culture mean to people, and how those meanings interconnect — he uses the term "webs of significance" (Geertz 1973: 5).

As music is an element of culture (and, in many ways, *is* culture), it can also be understood as a vehicle for meaning. Thus, rather than simply trying to understand the intended meanings of individual musicians and composers, an interpretive approach can instead seek to understand what meanings that music has for yourself, based on your own interpretations of it. For example, if I tried to fully understand exactly what Coltrane was meaning with each note, phrase and melody of *A Love Supreme* it would be impossible. What I can understand is how Coltrane's work has been interpreted through various lenses of meaning. My aim is to present the perspectives of those who have taken influence from this music, and to document the discourse that surrounds it. By understanding the interpretations of Coltrane's music by these individuals, assessing those interpretations and then looking for similarities, I can draw conclusions about how his music has been interpreted and add my own interpretations to the mix. Through

investigating the webs of significance spinning out from Coltrane and his music, I can get closer to understanding why this music means so much to so many people, and to me.

Magma, formed in 1969, have interpreted Coltrane's music in their own way. Band leader Christian Vander is their chief composer and lyricist;³ he is also a devotee of Coltrane's music. Vander states that many of his musical and compositional techniques have come directly from Coltrane: "Someone had to pick up the pieces, go on searching the way he had" (as cited by Stump 1995: 37). In Zëss, Magma channels the influence of Coltrane through use of extended and evolving vamps, chanting, modal improvisation, repeated and rephrased melodies, and other musical and discursive techniques. By interpreting Magma's music, their concerns and their motivations, as well as presenting the perspectives of those who have taken influence from their music, I can (as Geertz suggests), guess at the interpreted meanings, assess those guesses and draw conclusions about how important spirituality is to these compositions. My interpretations will be mostly with regard to the music itself, its reception, interviews the band has conducted, and my personal interview with Christian Vander.

Magma's music is indicative of a sonic direction that Coltrane may have taken, as they extend Coltrane's sound palette with their use of synthesisers, Fender Rhodes pianos and drum machines — all indicative of advancements in music technologies in the 1970s. Coltrane's interest and experimentation with new technology such as the Varitone⁴ shows he was interested in increasing his sonic palette electronically. The use of this amplification and effects unit was part of his desire to "expand the means of expression" (DeVito 2010: 273) also heard through use of soprano and alto saxophone, flute and bass clarinet.

³ Vander also fulfils various musical roles in performance as the drummer, pianist, and/or vocalist.

⁴The Varitone was an electronic wind device that acted as a pickup to amplify notes through a speaker. Effects could be added and notes could be doubled without the use of a microphone. Although there are photos of Coltrane playing the Varitone, no known recordings exist.

By understanding others' interpretations of *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss* and contributing my own interpretations, in doing so I also develop a greater understanding of why these pieces are important musically and socially. These works are also important spiritually, and, as mentioned above, they access spirituality in a number of ways.

When I was composing the music for the creative segment of this thesis, I had to come to terms with my own spirituality. I do not have the same spiritual beliefs as Coltrane or Vander. I was raised in a secular family, yet I was exposed to various religious doctrines as and when I enquired about them. I have an appreciation as to why people have spiritual beliefs, and why these beliefs are important to them, but my views on spirituality have developed from the perspective of an outsider. As Geertz suggests, I do not need to understand exactly what Coltrane's spiritual concerns were in creating *A Love Supreme*, but I can (through his interviews) understand what they meant to him. Similarly, as I am not an inhabitant of Kobaïa I can only access those fictitious spiritual beliefs from the subjective position of an earthling. It is interesting that every person, fan, and member of the band is thus also unable to directly access the spirituality of Magma, as they are all approaching the music from the position of a non-Kobaïan. Even so, Magma's spirituality has developed into something that is intriguing and meaningful to so many. In my approach to my composition Descend, I have sought to compose music at the intersection of Coltrane's and Magma's belief systems, music and social concerns.

My original compositions draw on Dante's *Inferno*, which serves as a catalyst for creativity to provide an accessible way to interpret ideals of spirituality. Not only does *Inferno* have a wide audience, but it also provides a narrative that I have found to be open to musical representation. The translated text suggests interesting rhythms and melodies; the journey of the central characters can itself be taken as a metaphor for a long form through-composed body of music. Following my interpretive approach. I draw out the

meanings contained in *Inferno*—acknowledging that my interpretations are partial and incomplete—and present musical conclusions that are original, yet intersect with *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss*.

In this exegesis, I present various concepts that repeat and flow throughout the different chapters. The first is that spirituality has primarily inspired the musicians in this study to compose large-format works. The personal concepts of spirituality that the composers have employed are open to interpretation, and their meanings have been extensively interpreted. Secondly, the building blocks of musical techniques and form that intersect with the processes involved in the creation and performance of the music, need to be understood as they occur at the intersection of music and spirituality. These processes also contain important meanings which can, and have been, widely interpreted. Thirdly, all interpretations are at best incomplete. Any interpretations that have been made throughout the course of this exegesis by myself or others, simply seek to highlight particular individuals' own interpretations of meaning.

Chapters Overview

In the first chapter I present the musical, social and personal concerns of John Coltrane, leading up to the recording of *A Love Supreme*. The many musical techniques that he developed are examined, as well as the perspectives of other musicians influenced by these techniques. By drawing explanatory conclusions about these techniques and his personal beliefs, I use this background information to discuss his journey in the development of *A Love Supreme*.

The second chapter focuses on *A Love Supreme* itself, and most importantly I consider how the music delivers a spiritual message. Through interpreting various opinions of those who have been influenced by this work, I present some conclusions about why this work is significant both musically and spiritually. I also investigate Coltrane's journey

through spirituality by examining the people that influenced him. I draw from the many interviews Coltrane gave before his death in 1967. These interviews highlight Coltrane's various spiritual concerns and developments.

The third chapter concerns the formation of the band Magma. By the time band leader Christian Vander composed his masterwork Zëss, the band had spent a decade composing and touring. They had also invented a vocal language for their music and a complete historical and social universe for their compositions. This chapter reviews those creative processes and provides a background to understanding the significance of Zëss.

Chapter Four examines the work Zëss. Musical analysis of key features of the music will be connected to the spiritual themes, as is also done in Chapter Two with regard to A Love Supreme. I present the meanings this work contains by those who have interpreted this music, and I present the views of the composer, Christian Vander. By investigating these perspectives, I draw conclusions about how his music has been interpreted.

In the fifth chapter I discuss how poetry has been used by Coltrane and Vander to establish a means for the audience to connect with and interpret the meaning of their musical works. I also discuss how, as a response to this, I have used poetry in my own composition *Descend*.

The sixth chapter analyses the key musical concepts from Coltrane and Magma I have chosen to bring to my music. This takes the form of musical examples of the techniques that have influenced my composition. I also discuss spiritual examples, where I present my own interpretations, based on my outsider's perspective, of the spiritual concerns that have meaning to me. I will reveal how I am bringing together these meanings into my compositional work, and how this informs and advances my development as a composer.

This thesis explores the meanings in the music of A Love Supreme and Zëss, and how those meanings inform my composition, *Descend*. Coltrane and Magma share aspects of spirituality - which I consider to be the driving force behind their music. Although both pieces of music do not explicitly mention their thematic message in the music itself, they are both commonly interpreted as being works of spiritual intent. Presenting those interpretations and constructing my own meanings from them, I not only gain a deeper appreciation for these composers and their work; I also gain insight into how I might advance my own creative compositional skills.

Chapter One

John Coltrane: Advancing towards spirituality

During his life Coltrane (b. 23 Sept 1926) had a prodigious recording career, recording albums for the record labels Pablo, Prestige, Blue Note, Savoy, Atlantic and Impulse!, resulting in over 53 albums as a leader, 16 live albums, 32 compilation albums, and numerous recordings as a sideman and co-leader with Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk, among others. Many of his works were released posthumously, including *Expression* (1967), *Om* (1968), *Cosmic Music* (1968), *Living Space* (1968), *Selflessness* (1969), *Infinity* (1972) and *Interstellar Space* (1974).⁵ Various reissues of Coltrane's music have appeared recently, one such reissue is *A Love Supreme* (1965, reissued in 2002), which features expanded versions of this important recording and an expanded ensemble on several tracks.

This chapter will focus on the musical advances made by Coltrane in his development up to the recording of *A Love Supreme*. There is a plethora of information in published works that document details of Coltrane's early life⁶, which I do not seek to cover here. My concern is to examine the musical techniques that inform Coltrane's works leading up to 1964 as I demonstrate that *A Love Supreme* was the pinnacle of Coltrane's musicality up to that point. John Coltrane was a reluctant interviewee (DeVito 2010: xv), and when not performing his focus was always on practising. However, his interviews are many and his opinions are well documented—as are the opinions of many who have been influenced by him. In this chapter I will also present interpretations of those who have

⁵ With the advent of the compact disc in 1982 came an even greater interest in Coltrane's music. The ability to add more minutes of music to each disc enabled the reissue of some of Coltrane's best-loved works, now available with added alternative takes from his original recording sessions.

⁶ DeVito 2010; Kofsky 1970; Ratliff 2007; Thomas 1975.

found meaning in the musical techniques Coltrane developed, whether critics, musicians or Coltrane himself.

John Coltrane's key musical developments

John Coltrane was a dedicated and thorough practitioner of the saxophone. David Ake notes that Coltrane had a "near mythological reputation as an incessant practicer" (Ake 2002: 130). Coltrane would practise for hours before the gig, during the intermission, after the gig, and would even walk off stage while his band would take over to practise in the dressing room. Practising for Coltrane was not just about obtaining greater facility and endurance on his instrument, it was also about developing new musical techniques and working on them until they were ready for the bandstand.

One of his first important musical developments was his so-called 'sheets of sound', a phrase first named by jazz critic Ira Gitler in the liner notes for Coltrane's 1958 album *Soultrane*. This technique was that of playing densely improvised lines of fast arpeggios and patterns in rapid succession, sometimes sounding like glissandos. This was a vertical approach to improvising⁷ within the harmony of the composition, and is a technique that would frequently appear in Coltrane's playing up to around 1960 (Porter 1999). Historian Frank Kofsky suggests this technique was one of great importance, stating that:

If for no other reason than the immense advance in rhythmic-harmonic sophistication and technique they required of a performer, Coltrane's sheets of sound belong in the front rank of contributions to the literature of jazz Improvisation. (Kofsky 1970: 260-261)

Sheets of sound is a technique that requires incredible facility on an instrument, coupled with a deep knowledge of harmony and the ability to think quickly. In 1958, during a conversation with Ira Gitler, Coltrane would acknowledge the limitations of this technique

⁷ A Vertical approach to improvising involves playing up and down the arpeggio's of the chord.

"...it is not a thing of beauty, and the only way it would be justified is if it becomes that" (cited by DeVito 2010: 43). At this point in time, Coltrane was already demonstrating that he was searching for something in his music that went beyond mere technique.

The next technical development in Coltrane's style is what is known as the 'Coltrane' matrix', a harmonic progression he made famous that still sets him apart from other jazz masters today. The Coltrane matrix (otherwise known as the Coltrane changes or the Coltrane cycle), substitutes different chords over the common chord progression of ii - V -I. These substitution patterns use as a basis a major third cycle, and provide a tonally unusual root movement by major thirds, either up or down, creating an augmented triad. Coltrane composed tunes with many variants of the matrix, but "Giant Steps" and "Countdown", both from the album *Giant Steps* (1960), are two of the best examples of this technique. This harmonic progression is celebrated in jazz pedagogy, and, as Ake notes, if Coltrane had only developed this one technique, it would justify his contributions to jazz education (Ake 2002: 133). Coltrane experimented with this technique in his arrangements and compositions from 1958 to 1960, and the recording and release of Coltrane's Sound (1960) signalled the final stages in its development. As with sheets of sound, the Coltrane matrix has its limitations. Kofsky argues that the chords and patterns of "Giant Steps" merely imposed a different, but ultimately no less inhospitable, group of restrictions and that "Only a supremely gifted creator—only a Coltrane, in short—had the ability to manoeuvre within each of these straitjackets and still produce something of value" (Kofsky 1970: 262-263). The Coltrane matrix has had a remarkable existence in a plethora of jazz recordings since 1960, as many artists paid tribute to Coltrane by using this technique in their own music. While discussing the significance of the Coltrane matrix, Ben Ratliff mentions two of Coltrane's contemporaries paying homage in this way. Joe Henderson released a version of "Without a Song" on his comeback album The Bridge (1962) that interpolated the matrix in the A sections of the tune. Wayne Shorter recorded his

composition "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" on the album Speak No Evil (1964), which included the matrix in its A sections (Ratliff 2007: 151). Although the Coltrane matrix has an identifiable sound, Coltrane came to recognise its limitations. With regard to these chord progressions, Coltrane stated that he was "worried that sometimes what I'm doing sounds like academic exercises, and I'm trying more and more to make it sound prettier" (as cited by Ake 2002: 133). Again, Coltrane is seeking something in his music other than technique for the sake of technique, no matter how advanced and creative it initially may have been. Seeking a way out of the Coltrane matrix, Coltrane found influence in one of his contemporaries, Ornette Coleman. Ornette's music at this time (1960) was experimental, containing free improvisation that is structured and guided by melody, and relied on the accompanist to play harmonic patterns that followed the improviser rather than a predetermined chord structure. Coltrane's thoughts on Coleman's approach was revealing: "I love him, I'm following his lead" (cited by Porter 1999: 203). Ornette's direction helped Coltrane break out of the matrix and into modality. Although Coltrane was concurrently using both techniques for a period of time (1959 to 1960), his focus for the next few years was on modality.

Modality, or modal jazz, uses musical modes instead of chord progressions as its harmonic framework. These modes are scales that can be played over a given chord in improvisation, though other scale modes can also be played on the same chord to provide a different flavour. Usually, in modal jazz, there are very few chords stated, often only one per section of music. This can be seen in the composition "Impressions" from the album *Impressions* (1963), where the A sections are eight bars of a D minor 7 chord. Porter acknowledges that Coltrane's use of modality is important, stating that:

Coltrane's harmonic excursions are not usually analysable as being in a particular contrasting key, one reason that *dissonance* is the appropriate word here and not

polytonality. This is one reason his playing on modal pieces has so much variety. (Porter 1999: 222)

Porter seems to be suggesting that Coltrane's modal pieces have so much variety because of his previous harmonic developments. To utilise sheets of sound and the Coltrane matrix, an improviser must have had an immense harmonic knowledge, a knowledge that when applied to one chord would be able to provide many directions for an improviser to travel. It is interesting to note that Coltrane experimented with modality and the matrix around the same time. The album *Giant Steps* (1960) features not only the matrix in "Giant Steps" but also modal explorations on the vamps of "Syeeda's Song Flute"; *Coltrane's Sound* (1960) features modal vamps in the opening track "The night has a Thousand Eyes" and features the matrix-infused composition "26-2".

Modality was a development in Coltrane's playing that tied in with his interest in the music of other cultures. Porter notes that Coltrane, looking away from jazz to find new sources of creativity and inspiration, found new creative ideas in folk music. Recording the English folk song "Greensleeves" and also "Song of the Underground Railroad", an adaptation of the African American folk song "The Drinking Gourd", Coltrane was showing interest in a larger pool of ideas outside of jazz (Porter 1999: 206). The most significant influence upon Coltrane outside jazz was North Indian classical music. This can be heard in his compositions that feature sustained drones ("My Favourite Things" and "Africa") and exotic scales ("Olé" and "India"), and, as Porter suggests, in the way Coltrane repeated and developed short motifs in his improvisations in "Impressions" and "Out of this world" (Porter 1999: 209). Not only was Coltrane influenced by Indian music, but also by its connections to spirituality (discussed further in Chapter Two).

Criticism and Avant-garde Jazz

Coltrane was no stranger to criticism about his music. With every musical technique that he developed, there would be a backlash of sorts from various critics to his new sound. This is evident with Coltrane's turn to avant-garde jazz. Kofsky, amongst others, has put Coltrane at the front ranks of the avant-garde jazz movement, a movement that he writes is best understood as a "response to a massive constellation of social and economic forces impinging on the urban Negro ghettos during the late 1950s and early 1960s..." (Kofsky 1970: 263). Avant-garde jazz is a style of composition and improvisation that attempts to break down the boundaries of jazz by experimenting with its defining characteristics such as rhythm, harmony, melody, structure, and instrumentation. An example of this could be the Coltrane matrix which is built from and relies on traditional jazz harmony, although it sounds unique. Coltrane had been the target of the term 'antiiazz' from as early as 1961, a phrase coined by critic John Tynan as an ignorant reaction to Coltrane's musical developments: "Coltrane and Dolphy seem intent on deliberately destroying swing. They seem bent on pursuing an anarchistic course in their music that can only be termed anti-jazz" (Tynan 1961: 40). Not only was Coltrane discredited due to his musical developments, he was also criticised for being African - American. Kofsky summarises the negative critical reactions to Coltrane's music from critics such as Leonard Feather, Ira Gitler, John Tynan, and Martin Williams. Kofsky argues that these critics disagreed with his views that:

Jazz is fundamentally a black music, all white musicians must therefore 'borrow' from black innovators, black musicians receive a disproportionately small share of the financial rewards [and] jazz reflects the dreams, hopes, fears, anger, ambition of the black community. (Kofsky 1970: 271)

Race features heavily in Kofsky's summaries; he believes that Coltrane's race played a part in the reaction to his music by his critics, who, in Kofsky's opinion favoured white jazz musicians. From my position of distance nearly fifty years from Kofsky, it is easy to think

that his viewpoints are extreme—perhaps these critics just did not understand the music yet had to write something to attract the attention of their readers. For example, historian Burton W.Peretti mentions that critic "Ben Sidran has called Coltrane's style 'a vortex of screams and simple songs'" (Peretti 1997: 142). Ake notes that although Coltrane won numerous awards in 1965, "critical and popular opinion of his music remained decidedly mixed" (Ake 2002: 135). He goes on to say that since the 'anti-jazz' term was attached to Coltrane, responses to his music became polarised. Coltrane's reaction to these negative critical receptions was to try to understand exactly what it was that the reviewers did not understand. On several occasions, Coltrane offered to meet with critics to try attempt to explain to them what his music was about. He was never taken up on his offers.

Expressionism

The period after *A Love Supreme* has been called Coltrane's fourth or last period of development.⁸ In this period his artistic growth continued with energy, traversing a more expressionistic approach due to the influence of his contemporaries, such as Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler and Pharaoh Sanders (Ake 2002: 135). One of Coltrane's band members of this period, drummer Rashied Ali, explains why Coltrane had such a following amongst musicians and audiences who understood this new direction: "Trane was elected as the dean of free music, because he was the only person that we related to... He just took it upon himself to really explore this thing" (as cited by Ratliff 2007: 158). Coltrane had the respect of his contemporaries, not because of his work ethic and high output, but also because he respected and championed the younger musicians who were also trying to find their own path. Often, these young musicians would play with Coltrane. Some of them, such as Eric Dolphy, Archie Shepp, Pharaoh Sanders and Rashied Ali, would end up being part of his band. Kofsky, a leading supporter of avant-

⁸ 1965 — 1967, incorporating the albums *Kulu Sé Mama* (1965), *Transition* (1965), *Ascension* (1965), *Om* (1965), *Meditations* (1965) and *Expression* (1967).

garde jazz also remarks that Coltrane was "the only established artist of the first rank who had seen fit to throw in his lot wholeheartedly with the new movement" (Kofsky 1970: 267).

Coltrane's life was a journey of musical discovery and development, and he pioneered several musical techniques that have been invaluable to the development of jazz composition and improvisation. Each musical development informed and inspired the next, and, by the time of the recording session for *A Love Supreme* in 1964, Coltrane had a repertoire of deeply personal musical devices that he would utilise to create an album that would become one of the most significant jazz albums of all time.

Chapter Two

A Love Supreme: The intersection of music and spirituality

A Love Supreme was recorded over two days, 9–10 December in 1964. The album consists of all original material composed by John Coltrane, and features his usual rhythm section from this period: McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on double bass and Elvin Jones on drum kit and percussion. The 10 December recording session was augmented by the saxophonist Archie Shepp and a second double bassist, Art Davis. Released in 1965, the album A Love Supreme contains the music recorded on 9 December with the quartet, while the full sextet version from 10 December was not released until the 2002 reissue. Compositionally, the album consists of four parts: Part 1: Acknowledgement, Part 2: Resolution, Part 3: Pursuance and Part 4: Psalm. A Love Supreme musically details Coltrane's progress in his spiritual journey, with each part having its own musical landscape comprising particular techniques and devices that are used to connote his message.

In this chapter I will discuss how the music from *A Love Supreme* is considered to be sacred, as well as deeply personal. Coltrane's focus was on playing original material, the jazz standard "My Favourite Things" was the only non-original regularly played by the John Coltrane Quartet in this period. By interweaving all his influences from existing jazz traditions, and Indian, African and European music with his personal spirituality, Coltrane's music broadened the definition of 'jazz'. Coltrane himself wasn't interested in defining a label for his music (Kofsky 1970: 433), however in response to the voices of his critics (as discussed in Chapter One), and in consideration of Coltrane's concerns at this point, I suggest that the music of *A Love Supreme* be defined as 'arranged spontaneous spiritual music'. This chapter will serve to document the interpretations of those who I consider view Coltrane's music in a similar way, music which, as Berkman suggests, was personal

and encapsulated the entire presence of Coltrane's expressive self (Berkman 2007: 44, 55).

A Love Supreme was John Coltrane's best known and bestselling album, with sales of roughly 500,000 copies between its release in 1964 and 1970. As Porter notes, many people purchased this album not because they were jazz fans, but because of its spirituality (Porter 1999: 232). The spiritual landscape of the United States in the 1960s was experiencing a period of growth (Berkman 2007: 45-48). Christianity was predominant, but a growing interest throughout the country in Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism signalled a turn to inwardly focused spiritual practices. David Ake argues that jazz music and spirituality were not antithetical to each other, noting that interpretations of Coltrane and his music detail a spiritual essence that was a vital part of a listener's experience (Ake 2002: 79).

Coltrane was not the first artist to integrate spirituality into a jazz setting. A growing trend amongst some jazz musicians, notably Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington, was the exploration of personal spirituality in music. African American hard bop musicians in the late 1950s drew inspiration from the gospel genre, reclaiming their music from the white 'cool' school of playing (Berkman 2007: 43). By 1964 Coltrane's music had progressed from the hard bop style of the 1950s, and Coltrane had found a way to present his spirituality with his own musical language.

Coltrane was not merely following the status quo. Instead, he was presenting his spiritual journey, his message, through his chosen art form. After many years of studying and developing his personal beliefs, Coltrane had arrived at a form of universal spirituality which encompassed a variety of spiritual traditions including Christian and African American/gospel ideas with Hinduism, Islamic and Buddhist concepts in an idiosyncratic way (Porter 1999: 232, Berkman 2007: 43). This personal version of spirituality served to inspire and inform his music, however for some, Coltrane was seen to be following a trend

of combining jazz and spirituality. Band leader and avant-garde musician Sun Ra had released many albums interconnected with spirituality. In 1965 he stated that "Nine or ten years ago, I was the first to play music at a spiritual level. Recently, Coltrane has done a piece, *A Love Supreme*, with spiritual intentions" (as cited by Kahn 2002: 156-157). Ra may have considered himself to be in the vanguard of spirituality and jazz, but *A Love Supreme* has had a much wider reach than any album released by Ra. Nevertheless, Peretti aligns Coltrane and Sun Ra as forerunners in developing spirituality in jazz, stating that this "also reflected a growing movement in the ghettos away from drugs and toward Afrocentric forms of spirituality" (Peretti 138: 1997). Peretti is drawing a comparison between the movement of jazz music from purely hedonistic ideals - 'the Ghetto' - to that of music with higher intentions, as afrocentric spirituality and universal spirituality personify the growing spiritual landscape at this time.9

Sy Johnson, arranger for the Charles Mingus ensemble notes that his first reactions to *A Love Supreme* were not positive: "I thought it was simplistic musically... I had no connection at that point with the spiritual aspect of it" (as cited by Kahn 2002: 157). On first listen, *A Love Supreme* does not obviously contain the many theoretical and musical advances Coltrane was famous for up to that point, such as the Coltrane matrix, sheets of sound or the two-bass concept.¹⁰ What it does contain is the delivery of Coltrane's spiritual message, which Johnson acknowledges as "the rest of the picture—the underlying intent of the music" (as cited by Kahn 2002: 157).

The Music of A Love Supreme

Until 1964 Coltrane's career could be mapped in the development of technical and musical devices. With the recording of *A Love Supreme*, those devices had reached their

⁹ Afrocentric Spirituality makes connections between Christianity and the indigenous spirituality of Africans.

¹⁰ Where one bass plays a pedal tone and the other a harmonic or rhythmic motif, creating a drone effect.

creative zenith and were reshaped and combined with the new energy of spirituality. Franya Berkman, scholar on the views of the public at this time suggests that audiences were starting to associate the compositional devices used on the album with Coltrane's spiritual views (Berkman 2007: 45). Berkman lists these devices as: mantra-like melodies (Part 1), static harmony (Parts 2 and 3), pentatonic improvisation (Parts 1, 2 and 3), dynamic ensemble interaction (throughout), and increasing freedom from metric constraints (Part 4). To Berkman, these devices signify both a religious attitude and a new spiritual practice in its own right.

The bass ostinato, from the first part of *A Love Supreme* "Acknowledgment", is first played by the bass, then becomes motivic material which is used to improvise through numerous key centres. This ostinato remains a constant presence in this movement whether it is implied in improvisation, stated in the melody, or is used as the bass line. Porter observes just how this musical device has come to signify a religious attitude in the composition, identifying this simple ostinato as Coltrane's basic unit of composition, "He is telling us that God is everywhere—in every register, in every key—and he's showing us that you have to discover religious belief" (Porter 242: 1999). Alice Coltrane, John Coltrane's wife, pianist and spiritual adviser, believed in 'self-realization', which I interpret as a potential spiritual meaning to this musical device. It defines that the self (the ostinato), must reach its highest potential and must not be limited in its explorations (Berkman 2007: 50).

Part 2, "Resolution", features an improvised solo by Coltrane that typifies his style during this period. Small phrases are introduced and developed in a number of ways: they are inverted, reduced, elongated, transposed and given various rhythmic variations. Unlike his earlier style of soloing, there are no constant sheets of sound; instead phrases are followed by long notes or rests - space is given almost as much priority as the notes

themselves. The improvisation develops until the only remaining direction is to turn to the main melody to finish the piece.

The fourth part of *A Love Supreme*, "Psalm", features a rubato recitation of the poem "A Love Supreme" written by John Coltrane, 11 though not a recitation as it is typically understood. Coltrane improvises the phrases of the poem on the saxophone, giving the words a melody and the sentences a musical phrase. The definition of the word 'Psalm', is generally accepted as a sacred song or hymn used in worship. Porter describes the way that Coltrane plays this poem, as almost as if he was a black American preacher, building intensity with each phrase (Porter 1999: 246). There are similarities in Coltrane's approach to a sermon; 12 his performance here is improvised, and so is the delivery of a sermon by a preacher in the gospel style. Coltrane's performance is a heartfelt delivery of a poem he composed giving thanks to God. Coltrane may have been intentionally adopting a preacher-like delivery, which Porter identifies with a specific phrase in the poem:

These words [Thank You God] are associated with a formula characterised by a minor third or fifth descending to the tonic, resembling formulas used by black preachers for such phrases as "Yes, He did" and "Oh, Lord". (Porter 1999: 247)

Although Coltrane was exploring his own personal relationship with Universal Spirituality, Porter suggests that Coltrane's medium of delivery connected directly to his public, by using identifiable delivery techniques to communicate his spiritual message. Indeed, in the following years as Coltrane embraced freer musical structures, his music escaped categorical descriptions that would limit and define what he was attempting musically. 13

The Coltrane matrix, as described in Chapter One, is one of Coltrane's most celebrated musical techniques and yet is surprisingly absent as a compositional technique

¹¹ See liner notes for the album *A Love Supreme – The Complete Masters*. Impulse!. AS-77, reissued in 2002.

¹² Perhaps due to his grandfather being a pastor.

¹³ Interstellar Space (recorded in 1967, released in 1974), is one of Coltrane's final and most free albums, comprising duets in rubato time with Drummer Rashied Ali.

from *A Love Supreme*. However, Ravi Coltrane suggests that Coltrane improvises a melodic idea that is "basically the 'Giant Steps' cycle" referring to the chordal pattern of one of his father's better known compositions, and that "You never hear it in an obvious way – I just think after he wrote 'Giant Steps', that was always an element of his playing" (cited by Kahn 2002: 118). As mentioned in Chapter One, John Coltrane had recognised the limitations of the matrix, and by the time of *A Love Supreme* he had realised that it served his music better as an improvisation technique only.

Karlton E. Hester acknowledges the importance of *A Love Supreme* as a conglomeration of Coltrane's musical techniques, stating that "*A Love Supreme* is a transitional composition for Coltrane that serves as both a summary of the ideas and experiences he had encountered and developed in the past, and as a precursor for his extended works in his final period" (Hester 1997: 97). From this album onwards, Coltrane's spiritual concerns would dominate his compositional approach, evident most plainly in the titles of his compositions. Between 1965 and his death in 1967, Coltrane released work that featured titles such as: *Ascension* (1966), an album that used a large ensemble and freer arrangements; "Vigil" and "Selflessness" from the album *Kulu Sé Mama* (1967), one of the last albums to feature Coltrane's classic quartet of Tyner, Garrison and Jones; "The Father, Son and the Holy Ghost" from *Meditations* (1966), considered to be the spiritual follow-up to *A Love Supreme*; and "Offering" from Coltrane's final studio recording *Expression* (1967).

Spiritual significance, the church

When investigating the many writers influenced by Coltrane and his spiritual music, one writer stands out. Reviewer J.C.Thomas writes that Coltrane was "more mystic than musician" (Thomas 1975: 171-172), basing his theory on the fact that many audience members witnessing Coltrane perform live had their lives changed from exposure to his

music—even though they knew nothing about music from a technical perspective.

Although Thomas makes a rather bold claim, I agree that Coltrane was more spiritually focused from this point onwards in his career. Coltrane himself reveals this to be true:

My music is the spiritual expression of what I am—my faith, my knowledge, my being... I think music can make the world better and, if I'm qualified, I want to do it. I'd like to point out to people the divine in a musical language that transcends worlds. I want to speak to their [the audience's] souls. (cited by Porter 1999: 232)

Coltrane did speak to his audience's souls, through his personal journey with music he had built up a large audience that trusted and respected him. Coltrane had developed and mastered many musical techniques that gave him the tools to musically express his spirituality. Coltrane also left a legacy of musicians that desired to reach similar goals of speaking to audiences' souls. Many fans and jazz musicians alike have reported on the connection to each other and the music that they felt at Coltrane concerts, identifying an almost tangible feeling that emanated from the music and permeated the audience. With regard to the 10 December sessions for *A Love Supreme*, saxophonist Archie Shepp noted:

new music. Like Bach and Mozart, Coltrane actually raised this music from the secular to an area of serious, *religious* world music. (cited by Kahn 2002: 68)

Coltrane's spiritual message continued after his death in 1967. Ake notes that Coltrane's position within American culture is clearly proven with the existence of the Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco, founded in 1982 (Ake 2002: 127-128). It is a Christian Pentecostal church that does not worship Coltrane himself, but rather uses his music as an example of how people can ascend to oneness with God through sound. The church holds weekly services that are part sermon and part jam sessions that incorporate Coltrane's music. Worshippers regard Coltrane as a messenger from God,

It was like being in church. Within that quartet, he created what became for me a

venerating the saxophonist's recordings, particularly *A Love Supreme, and* raising his status to that of a saint (Ake 2002: 127-128). What I find interesting about this church's interpretations of Coltrane's spirituality is that there is no mention of a Universal Spirituality. They have taken their own meanings from Coltrane's music and spirituality, and have adjusted it to suit their needs - regardless of the many spiritual beliefs from other religions that Coltrane incorporated into his own beliefs. Their goal is to spread the message of *A Love Supreme* and, in doing so, promote global unity, peace on earth and acknowledge the one true living god.

Conclusion

I have examined a number of opinions that clearly define their interpretations of the meaning in the music of A Love Supreme. The common thread is the sacred focus of Coltrane's music, and in one instance Coltrane himself is regarded as sacred. Based on my interpretations of meaning that others have found in Coltrane's music, I now define Coltrane's music as 'arranged spontaneous spiritual music'. Coltrane had many highly developed musical devices in his vocabulary, some of which he arranged compositionally into the music of A Love Supreme. These compositions serve as a means to spontaneously improvise in, enabling Coltrane to deliver his message of spirituality. Similarly, the spontaneous improvisations that Coltrane performed on this album are a summation of his musical advances, adding weight to those meanings that encompass his previous work. The spiritual value and use of this music is also well documented in the interpretations of those who have been affected by it. Although Coltrane's message in this album was one of a personal journey through spirituality, this journey has inspired others to strive for similar goals in their music. A Love Supreme exists at the very personal intersection of music and spirituality. Although music and spirituality can indeed be intensely personal, they allow the individual to access and/or connect to a wider

community, as Coltrane has shown with this album. With *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane's spirituality was a vehicle for the music; simultaneously the music was a vehicle for his spirituality. By focusing on spirituality and music and how they intersect, Coltrane found a means to express himself that was personally fulfilling, yet at the same time engaged and educated audiences and, above all, left a lasting legacy.

Chapter Three

Christian Vander and Magma: Transcending interpretation with Kobaïan

Christian Vander (b. 1948) is a French drummer, vocalist, pianist and founding member of the bands Magma and Offering.14 Vander is also the chief composer for both groups, as well as their band leader and at times their front person. At an early age, Vander was introduced to the music of many jazz masters who were performing in France. He mentioned this to journalist Paul Stump in 1995, "I was able to see and hear wonderful musicians... Max Roach, Elvin Jones, Kenny Clarke, Tony Williams later on. And Chet Baker gave me my first drum kit" (as cited by Stump 1995: 38). This early jazz influence inspired a love of music and drumming that helped to shape his entire career. More than any other jazz artist, John Coltrane inspired a growth in creativity and musical development for Vander as a composer. Professor of music and Magma enthusiast Kevin Holm-Hudson notes that "[John] Coltrane's death inspired Christian Vander to compose the song 'Kobaïa' (which translates to 'eternal')¹⁵, in response to what Vander called 'the musical chaos and the misunderstanding of mankind" (Holm-Hudson 2003: 4). Similarly, music journalist Keith Moliné notes that Vander assembled his most successful group, Magma, in 1969, "as a direct response to the death of his musical hero John Coltrane two years previously, envisioning a rock outfit that could play with the same degree of spiritual fire" (Moliné 2009: 38).

Coltrane's inspiration can be heard throughout Magma's entire catalogue of recordings, from their debut double LP *Magma* (1970), which was later renamed *Kobaïa* in subsequent reissues, to their most recent release *Slag Tanz* (2015). Vander still feels

Offering was an ensemble that focused on arrangements for Vocalists, percussion and keyboards. The textures explored were lighter than those of Magma, yet it did explore similar thematic material.

¹⁵ A brief glossary of Kobaïan terms can be found in the Appendix.

the early Coltrane inspiration today, as recounted by Moliné (2015) when interviewing Vander:

[H]e expands at length on the different ways that John Coltrane phrases the main melody of 'Impressions', he explains with an almost gauche enthusiasm how this discovery shaped his musical thinking. (Moliné 2015: 35)

Stump acknowledges that it is not only Coltrane's music that inspires Vander, but also Coltrane's broader concepts of spirituality: "Vander seems to adhere not just to Coltrane's musical vision but also his conception of music as something intrinsically transcendent" (Stump 1995: 39). Transcendent is one way to describe the music of Magma. Moliné describes it as "furiously complex and unambiguously direct", drawing comparisons between the sound of Magma and that of John Coltrane: "Magma sound as if they are trying both to dig deep into their inner recesses and reach upwards to the heavens" (Moliné 2009: 40).

Christian Vander views the inception of the band Magma as coinciding with his composition of the song "Kobaïa" in 1969. At the completion of a tour around Europe Christian Vander found himself miles from home and penniless. While living at a beach, he started thinking about taking a new direction with his music career. Picking up an acoustic guitar, he started playing the riff to a composition that eventually became "Kobaïa". Eventually finding the means to return home, Vander set to work developing this music further. A band was needed to perform it and Magma was assembled from musicians known to Vander. These musicians could deliver, as Stump writes, "explosive and frequently cacophonous semi-improvised rock", and that their formation "coincided with the belated consecration of a French rock culture" (Stump 1995: 37). Up until this point, French popular music only paid a token homage to jazz and blues music, its makeup being comprised of European folk music and parlour songs. With the advent of international rock

acts such as Jimi Hendrix. The Beatles and Pink Floyd, French musicians found a way to incorporate this new music with their traditional styles (Stump 1995: 37). Certainly, Magma's music did not only contain jazz, but as progressive rock musician Chris Cutler mentions, "Magma, somehow manage to make a kind of music using elements of James Brown, John Coltrane and Carl Orff. Thats impressive" (Romantic Warriors II: 2012). Certainly, the song "Kobaïa" from Magma's first album, Kobaïa, contains all these influences and more. At 14 seconds into the song, the funky horn section tutti passage and driving 4/4 drum beat recall James Brown's "I feel good". The 3/4 modal improvisation section at 6 minutes 38 seconds could be taken straight from Coltrane's "My Favourite Things". And the dynamic contrasts used in the middle section at 4 minutes 13 seconds is similar to those used in "O Fortuna" by Carl Orff. The documentary DVD Romantic Warriors II (2012) features interviews with Magma contemporaries, as well as with fans. One anonymous fan asks, "What do Magma sound like? You can't answer that because they're their own thing. The only bands that sound like Magma are bands that are influenced BY Magma" (Romantic Warriors II 2012). Holm-Hudson agrees that Magma have a unique sound, stating that "In Magma, Christian Vander attempted singlehandedly to create a new musical genre... blending unconventional musical influences... in a display of fiercely disciplined musicianship" (Holm-Hudson 2003: 1).

Magma have had many band members over their near five decades of existence, and Christian Vander is the only person who has been constantly involved. Notable members include vocalist Stella Vander, Christian's ex-wife, who joined Magma in 1973 for the recording of the album *Mekanik Destruktiw Kommamdoh (M.D.K)* (1973) and has appeared on every subsequent release. Bassist Jannick Top also joined in 1973, composing and arranging many works with the band until the end of 1976. Top added an aggressive yet harmonically rich bass sound to that of Magma; his playing worked perfectly with Vander's intense and syncopated drumming. Powerhouse vocalist Klaus

Blasquiz added a massive, quasi-operatic sound to the band, joining Magma at its inception and remaining to 1980. Magma was put on hold after the release of *Merci* (1984) until 1994, during which time the Vanders focused their attention on the vocally driven ensemble, Offering. Then, with renewed energy Magma resumed operations in the late 1990s. Stalwarts Stella and Christian Vander were now accompanied by younger players, some of whom, such as bassist Philippe Bussonnet and vocalist Isabelle Feuillebois have become an essential part of the Magma sound. The current line-up includes the Vanders, Bussonnet and Feuillebois, vibraphonist Benoit Alziary (adding a new, acoustic element to the sound of an otherwise electric ensemble), the tenor vocals of Hervé Aknin (who is at home covering Blasquiz's original performances and Vander's latest compositions), Jérome Martineau-Ricotti (who plays the piano on the recordings and Fender Rhodes live), along with electric guitarist Rudy Blas (who took over from long serving guitarist James MacGaw in 2016). At times Magma augment their sound with a horn section, choir and/or orchestra, but at its core their sound is based on a solid rhythmic foundation which comes from Christian Vander's drumming. Vander's approach on the drums is reminiscent of Elvin Jones, John Coltrane's longest serving drummer. Vander's style involves a loose and swinging time feel and wide open cymbal beat and punctuations of inventive and syncopated articulations that accompany the music. Vander's drumming and compositions make extensive use of hemiola, and often the rhythm section parts will contrast the melodic lines of the vocalists completely. The overall effect created is that of sustained excitement and intensity, which is added to by the lack of frequent harmonic resolution. Compositions are often lengthy with whole albums dedicated to one major suite. At times these suites are themselves part of a cycle of works that encompass a complete multialbum work, such as: Theusz Hamtaahk (2001) and Emehntehtt-Re Trilogy (2009). The most accessible stylistic descriptions of Magma's music must be those of progressive rock. fusion (of jazz, classical, funk and rock music) or Kobaïan folk music.

Magma have themselves inspired many other bands to create similar music, however none of their European contemporaries have managed to last as long. Vander's ex-wife and longtime Magma vocalist Stella Vander thinks that "Magma was one of the most powerful bands in the seventies, there was a lot of others but they're not there anymore" (*Romantic Warriors II* 2012). Univers Zero were a 70s progressive band and contemporaries of Magma, as one of their musicians, Roger Trigaux mentions in an interview, his band "came together out of a love for Miles Davis, Magma" (*Romantic Warriors II* 2012).

Magma inspired others to play similar music, a style of music that Vander named 'Zeuhl' in 1969. Zeuhl had an international appeal, especially in the late 1970s when other prominent bands began composing works in this style. These included Art Zoyd, Weidorje and Shub Niggurath in France; Univers Zero in Belgium; and Ruins and Happy Family in Japan (Holm-Hudson 2003: 5). The Zeuhl music of Magma is characterised by one dramatically arresting feature, that is, their songs express the spiritual activities and concerns of the inhabitants of the invented mythical planet Kobaïa. The songs are also sung in the native language of that planet, Kobaïan. Vander and his band mates in 1969 felt that the music they were composing was unique, and that their native French language sounded weak and not expressive enough. Also, with their Zeuhl music, the words and the music were to be inseparable (Stump 1995: 39, Holm-Hudson 2003: 1), a goal that they accomplished consistently. The two coexist to deliver the meanings of the compositions in such a way that is most palpable to the audience. However, because this language is foreign to everyone except the natives of the mythical planet Kobaïa, Magma have at times struggled to get their message across. Vander says, "People used to say grudgingly that they liked Magma, but because of the Kobaïan they couldn't understand the words. And I said I liked Coltrane and I couldn't understand the words either" (as cited by Moliné 2015: 36-37). Certainly, I myself do not understand everything that Coltrane played, but I

do not need too. Coltrane, and Magma, have musical languages that are used to deliver messages through connotation; their music invokes messages that I can interpret to understand their meanings. However, if my goal is to understand every subtle nuance of their music, then surely I might miss the point of their music in the process. Stump acknowledges that the "... abstraction provided by the Kobaïan verse seems to inspire Magma's singers to heights of emotional abandon rarely permitted by conventional lyrics" (Stump 1995:38). The language of Zeuhl is unhindered by typical vocal conventions. The vocal style of the Kobaïan language in Zeuhl music has a very Germanic feel, thanks to the extensive use of umlauts and harsh consonants (Piko 2013). This vocal style is primarily rhythmic, features an aggressive delivery (yet it can be sweet and melancholic), is performed either by soloists, three part harmony or choir, can involve long improvisations and chants, and is used in the foreground as much as it is used as a texture in the background. By nature Zeuhl is a musical language that delivers an ambiguous message. The lyrics, music and performance must be accepted at face value, unless prior knowledge of the composers intentions or an understanding of the Kobaïan language is obtained. It is true that while a loose translation of some Kobaïan terms are available online, 16 pieced together by avid fans, but Magma themselves are yet to release a definitive vocabulary. It is my belief that Magma choose to keep the meanings of this language to themselves to maintain a sense of the mystical and otherworldliness. Moliné writes that with their Kobaïan language and the combination of influences that have inspired their music, Magma have created a "form so unapologetic in its efforts to reflect some kind of universal spirituality that to sneer feels almost blasphemous" (Moliné 2009: 38). Their message is universal in that its interpretation is open to everyone, due in part to the delivery of their messages in the Kobaïan language.

¹⁶ See References "Kobaian - English Dictionary".

Magma perform spiritual music, although their otherworldly themes are often assumed to be otherwise. In a 2015 interview Vander stated that:

People mistake Magma for science fiction, I don't like science fiction. I'm not totally for progress. Progress for the sake of progress, that leads us nowhere. It's like climbing a mountain to be closer to the moon. Why? You can position yourself in the infinitely large, but you can go deep into the infinitely small. To understand the core of things, you have to go to the core. (cited by Moliné 2015: 39)

Magma's spirituality is at the core of their music. The themes captured in their compositions detail spiritual awakenings and journeys of Kobaïa's inhabitants, while simultaneously delving to the core of what is possible musically. In 2012 Vander connected the music of Magma with his own spiritual journey:

The music was born in the night. There are many kinds of music in the world. I've always said that I compose the music that is missing. The music that I don't hear anywhere else. For me the idea isn't to discover the universe, but to discover the inner cosmos. The idea is to penetrate your own spirit to discover a new universe and go deeper and deeper. (*Romantic Warriors II* 2012)

This is true also with Coltrane, who, as was discussed in Chapter Two, was on his own spiritual journey. Similarly, like the Church of Saint John Coltrane, Magma has its own spiritual followers. The now defunct website of the Ordonnateurs du Ritual Kobaïen (O.R.K), listed Vander as a prophet, stating that:

We recognise Kreuhn Köhrmahn [the Kobaïan Supreme Being] as the only and ultimate dispenser of Life, Death and Inspiration, through Space and Time. It is that to which we dedicate our physical and spiritual vessels, and which beyond any value grants us the knowledge of the Just, and the Beautiful. (as cited by Holm-Hudson 2003: 12-13)

Whether it is Coltrane being labelled a saint or Vander being labelled a prophet, both have inspired a greater spiritual awareness in their audiences.

A Love Supreme is not only a masterwork, but it also signals a new direction into spirituality for John Coltrane. Magma also have their own masterpiece albums, one of which came early on their career. *Mekanik Destruktiw Kommamdoh (M.D.K.)* (1973) was Magma's third album, and is also one that has been constantly performed throughout their career. Vander states that one of Coltrane's most loved songs inspired the whole album:

It's true that when I heard ["My Favourite Things"] by John Coltrane... I discovered these pieces of piano music echoing each other, these ever present cycles bringing the listener to somewhere else, something new. This created the impulse for *M.D.K.*, even if it's not at all similar to "My Favourite Things". (as cited by Holm-Hudson 2003: 6)

M.D.K is the third part of a three album cycle entitled *Theusz Hammtahk* (Time of Hatred), which details the story of the prophet Nebehr Gudahht. Gudahht sends a message to the people of earth that their salvation from doom is through purification and communication with the supreme being, the Kreuhn Kohrman. At the climax of the album Gudahht is transfigured into a spiritual being, completing his journey to enlightenment. Musically, this

ascension is signalled by Vander's high screaming vocal in Kobaïan that is suggestive of Coltrane's climatic soloing (Holm-Hudson 2003: 12).

Magma continued to release albums based on a single theme or story throughout the mid 1970s, releasing *Wurdah İtah* (1974) and *Köhntakösz* (1974) before returning to albums that simply contained collections of songs with differing themes. Their spiritual themes pervaded these songs, and although they still composed longer works they never successfully recorded them in the studio. This was to do with record label constraints, which at the time required the band to release albums of songs rather than one composition that took up the whole album. In live performance however, they were free to premier new long-form works, some of which were recorded live and have only recently become available. One of these long-form works is the composition *Zëss*, which tells the story of the ultimate being, the Kreuhn Kohrman (see Chapter Four).

Magma have had a long career. It is one that stretches across the decades from 1970 to today, encapsulating the performances of 59 band members on 14 studio albums and 15 live albums. At Magma's heart is Christian Vander, the sole constant driving force in a band that has only recently begun to attain international recognition. At Vander's heart is a love of John Coltrane's music and spiritual concepts, both of which coexist in Magma's music. Magma's music makes extensive use of the Kobaïan language, an invented language that delivers the messages of Magma's music through connotation. The Kobaïan language can be seen as the perfect example of Geertz's theory of an interpretive approach to understanding culture. This language, by design, is open to interpretation in several important ways. Firstly, there are very few 'enlightened' speakers of it; which encourages everyone performing it, and listening to it, to guess at its meanings. Secondly, its only purpose is to document the cultural activities of the Kobaïan people; a fictitious society that is completely foreign to those of us from planet Earth. Thirdly, it is a form of expression that combines lyrics, melodies, timbre and texture into one source that also

contains multiple musical techniques. Musical techniques, as we have seen with Coltrane, deliver meaning through connotation, rather than explicit denotation. In this way, the Kobaïan language initially inhibits communication with audiences by not expressing lyrical themes implicitly in everyday language. Instead, it encourages audiences to interpret the music and the performances as having a unique meaning, enabling a deeper and more personal appreciation for, and connection to, the music.

Chapter Four

Interpreting Zëss: Composing with Spirituality

Christian Vander has been well documented in expressing his appreciation for John Coltrane and his music. Vander has been greatly influenced not only by Coltrane's music, but also by Coltrane's spiritual practices. In this chapter I will explain how that influence has manifested in Magma's music, both in Vander's compositional techniques and in the ways Vander approaches music. By investigating the long-form work Zëss, composed by Vander, I will explore some of the interpretations that Vander has made of Coltrane's music including Coltrane's album *A Love Supreme*. Just as there are common themes in the music of both Zëss and A Love Supreme, there are also important aspects of their composers' processes that have enabled the composition of these musically and spiritually meaningful works. This chapter will reveal those processes and explore how Vander's spirituality is wrapped up in those processes.

Though Magma never released a studio recording of *Zëss*, there are three live recordings that document its performance. *Zëss* premiered live in 1979, and its first live recording comes from the concert album *Bobino* (1981). This version is 30 minutes long and was released for the first time on DVD in 2005. The second live recording (audio only) comes from 1992 on the album *Les Voix de Magma*, and features a truncated arrangement of the piece.¹⁷ At only 17 minutes long, the majority of instrumental sections are missing in order to maximise the use of the choir featured on this album. The third version, from the live DVD *Mythes & Legendes Epok 4* (2006) is similar in arrangement to the *Bobino* version (approximately 30 minutes long). Both versions feature a typical

¹⁷ The early 1990s was a period when Magma was on hold, whilst Vander put his energy into the more vocally-driven ensemble, Offering, which was active from 1983 - 2003. This album was released under the name Magma, even though it was recorded by the Offering ensemble.

Magma ensemble of drums, electric bass, electric guitar, two keyboardists and three vocalists.

Christian Vander performs in *Zëss* as vocal soloist, reciting a lengthy poem¹⁸ that sets the tone for the composition. The band is also augmented by a horn section of trumpet and tenor saxophone. Though Vander usually plays drums in Magma, he does not play the drums on any of the three available versions of this work. Instead—in the third person—he performs the poem off stage before arriving centre stage to deliver an extensive vocal solo, which is the feature of the piece. Even though *Zëss* is an atypical example of a Magma composition, I am using it to show how Vander's recitation of a poem draws influence from the Coltrane work *A Love Supreme*, which directly ties the influence of Coltrane's spirituality to his work overall.¹⁹

In researching the available sources that document *Zëss*, the music of Magma and Christian Vander, I realised that none of them dealt with the exact questions I wished to answer in this exegesis. I was able to contact Vander's tour manager and enquire about his availability for an interview, which was eventually granted on the condition that it was to be in person, with an interpreter, in Joinville, France. I travelled to France in early December 2017, and conducted an interview that was approximately four hours in length. This chapter contains many excerpts from that interview, as well as my reflections and interpretations.²⁰

Zëss translates from Kobaïan to the English word 'Master', and the form of this work is similar in some ways to that of *A Love Supreme*. I hear several distinct movements in Zëss, although these movements have never been specifically mentioned by Vander or

¹⁸ See References: Charbonneau, Frank. "Zëss: Hello! Oh Divine Master of the Universal Powers."

¹⁹ Even though I have labelled *Zëss* as being 'atypical', it is worth noting that every Magma album is musically different from the last, sometimes radically so.

²⁰ Ethics approval for this interview was granted on 21 November 2017, reference 0000025511, by the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee.

others as distinct formal delineations in the music. The first movement starts with an opening motif played by the synthesiser before a Fender Rhodes and vocals enter, developing the first theme from a sparse texture. Around five and a half minutes into the recording the next movement enters, an energetic vamp with a rhythmic underpinning reminiscent of uptempo swing, followed by a section where Vander begins to recite a poem in French from offstage. At approximately 11 minutes, Vander arrives on stage for movement three where he performs the rest of the poem in Kobaïan as the density of texture increases. This movement develops into an improvised vocal solo that is interspersed by solos from others in the band. Movement four starts at around 30 minutes into the performance, where the word 'sanctus' is used to signal the end of the piece, which ends unexpectedly with a moment of stillness and contemplation.

The French poem sets the scene for the thematic material; it is not improvised. Vander describes the theme of the poem (translated into English):

Zëss is the story of the last day. It's an implosion. There's this stadium somewhere in space. On the last day, everyone becomes everything... You can choose to be a grand master or to stay in the audience. Everybody chooses their part. Everyone is everything, even insects and animals... The entire universe is gathered. And everything is going to disappear into nothingness. This is the end. (DVD interview *Emëhntëhtt-Rê Trilogy* 2014)

Vander is not describing a cosmic judgment day, or a cycle of reincarnation. Instead he is describing a journey of enlightenment where one can either choose to attain a higher spiritual status or to remain as one is. Whatever the choice is, this is the final choice. Vander's poem mentions that the ultimate spiritual state is that of the Kreuhn Khorman, the most spiritually advanced being. The Kreuhn Khorman is a common theme in the lyrics of Magma. Notably this concept appears in their album *Mekanik Destruktiw Kommandoh*

(1973), where the prophet Nebehr Gudahht also attains this spiritual grandmaster status. The search for a higher status can be seen in Vander's own musical development, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Zëss is listed on the Bobino DVD as 'Zëss (extrait)', which in English means 'extract'. What I am therefore discussing in this exegesis must only be a partial representation of the full work. Geertz himself suggests that while interpreting meanings, we must remember that these interpretations are not complete. We can never fully understand what others are trying to communicate, as we are not them. As Zëss is not complete, we cannot possibly understand the full meaning of this composition. Whether Vander has future plans for Zëss is unclear. It has not been performed recently, and, as mentioned earlier, it has not been recorded in the studio. This is due to several important factors, one of which is that the scope of the work is immense. Vander has said that:

The end goal of this piece of music is to fuse every kind of music I like. There's an obsession with rhythm. And within this structure you would hear all kinds of music... Say, 'My Favourite Things' along with a symphony. And everything would harmonise on Zëss's canvas. It's a real challenge. (DVD interview *Emëhntëhtt-Rê Trilogy* 2014)

Certainly, composing and arranging music on this scale is a grand task, especially when Vander has claimed that the music could fill five albums in its finished version (Moliné 2009: 38). The thematic material also provides a difficult problem to overcome. Zëss tells the story of the last day of the universe, and if that story is told then does it signal the end of the world? Hopefully not, but it may signal the end of Magma's music. In my interview, Vander explained that the composition of this piece was inspired by

nothingness, a concept that he developed when practicing drums with a metronome.²¹ The problem that arises, which I understand to be the main inhibitor for finishing *Zëss*, is how does one compose or perform music that is essentially 'not there'? Is the only option to compose with the 'memory of music', or to try to portray a sense of 'no music'? Vander says that with the current ending to *Zëss*, the music "aspires, it is breathed in and is gone. What is left is nothingness, chaos" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). The themes of *Zëss*, and Magma's music in general deal with the concepts of eternity, along with major humanitarian (specifically for the people who inhabit the planet Kobaïa) and spiritual concerns. Holm-Hudson notes that "like the late music of Coltrane, Vander's compositions share an eternal perspective; indeed, his motto for the group is 'To life, to death and after'" (Holm-Hudson 2003: 5). The themes may well be eternal in nature, but *Zëss* reminds us that we have a choice: nothingness is inevitable, and we can either work hard to achieve our greatness, or, we can simply pass away.

Music is spirituality

When I asked Vander about his compositional process, he replied somewhat esoterically, "I've always worked like a medium; I receive things" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). Often Vander will experiment with a motif for weeks until the right musical direction reveals itself. He does not hurry this process, knowing that the music will lead him onwards. In this way, Vander's compositional process is informed by patience and commitment. By letting his compositions evolve in an organic and unhurried fashion, Vander can experiment with each interval, each phrase, each harmonic and rhythmic variation until they are musically perfect to his ear. To my ear, this process has resulted in some wildly involved and exciting music, which at times develops in very

²¹ When played exactly at the same time, two sound waves cancel each other out, in this case the metronome click and the stick hitting the drum.

unusual and unexpected ways. Knowing that these musical developments are so thoroughly considered, it is clear that Vander's attention to detail is at the core of his musicality. Vander told me that "Magma is the music of apprenticeship" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). Like an apprentice, every day Vander commits himself to music, honing his craft and perfecting his abilities in order to open himself to allow the music to come to him. I interpret his definition of Magma's music to be connected to his overall concept of Zëss, (as mentioned previously, this work means 'Master'). If Magma is the music of an apprentice, then Zëss is the music of a master. This alludes to Vander's own personal thoughts about this composition, which he considers not yet fully realised. Therefore, Vander has not yet finished his apprenticeship.

Vander's apprenticeship and commitment to music is an integral part of his personal concept of spirituality. In his words: "Music is not something we make. The notes themselves do the calling and we answer them back" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). Vander relates to music as a sacred entity with which he has an ongoing relationship. It is to be respected, nurtured and understood as fully as possible. Instead of directing where the music should go or how it should develop, a composer must follow its lead. In his compositional process, by responding to the music that has revealed itself through his organic approach, Vander is making his own musical interpretations, which gradually reveal his own development. He told me, "Everyday I feel more implicated in the music. Everyday we get closer to something that is truly our life" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). What Vander is saying is that by committing to this compositional process, he can create incredibly honest music that is utterly unique, music that truly represents who he is as a person. I can draw a parallel to Coltrane's concept of a Universal Spirituality, whereby through investigating many religious possibilities Coltrane arrived at a form of spirituality that was unique to him, one that represented who he was as an individual.

Vander's compositions, like Coltrane's, contain musical concepts that can be derived from minuscule beginnings. Often these minuscule concepts are a result of self-exploration at the deepest level, a dissemination of music down to its most fundamental existence. Vander has stated that the music of Zëss is based on a single note (DVD interview Emëhntëhtt-Rê Trilogy 2014). There is more than just one note in Zëss, but the work does start with one fundamental tone played on the synthesizer which then develops slowly into a very long musical phrase. This unhurried delivery of the opening phrase exemplifies Vander's compositional process in realtime. It is not until this opening theme develops later in the piece that we realise it was a theme, and not an improvised introduction. This is evident also with Coltrane's A Love Supreme, where his saxophone solo reveals the theme to Part 1, "Acknowledgement". We are not aware of its importance until the voice enters later, using that theme as a chant at the conclusion of the section.

Zëss is a composition that has been performed live several times, yet has never been recorded in the studio. In my interview, Vander mentioned that there is no studio recording due to the fact that he is currently unsure of the correct processes needed to compose music to follow what has already been written (Vander, personal interview 13 December 2017). The unfinished sections of Zëss require Vander to develop a new form of composition, one that falls beyond his current spiritual and musical concepts. To date, Vander has a compositional style that is unhurried, organic and extremely considered. By accepting that over a period of time the music will reveal itself to him—if he can have the patience and commitment to wait for it—he is taking part in his own personal ritual. This commitment to the process of composition is what makes Zëss such an exciting, interesting and incredibly authentic work. Zëss is completely original, it is the result of an artist seeking to reveal his true potential through music. The remaining sections of Zëss will require Vander to advance his compositional skills even further, and by doing so he will attain his own 'Zëss' status. Like his current compositional processes, this advancement is

unhurried and considered; the true way forward will reveal itself by a system derived from Coltrane's approach to improvisation, which is discussed at length in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Coltrane to Magma: Musical interpretations in action

There are many similarities between the music of John Coltrane and the music of Magma. I have touched on a few already, but this chapter explores a number of these similarities in greater depth, similarities not only in compositional techniques but also in the musical concepts for various albums. In Coltrane's later period, which I consider starts with A Love Supreme and ends with his death in 1967, his music had a prominent spiritual basis (as discussed in Chapter Two). Apart from song and album titles, during this period Coltrane rarely proclaimed his spiritual inclinations in an overt manner. Much of the interpretation of this spiritual music was left to the individual audience member. Magma, like Coltrane, have released albums with spiritual inclinations. Due to the use of the Kobaïan language to deliver their meanings, the uninitiated amongst us must also make our own interpretations. Poetry has also been used by both artists, and in doing so they have found another way for the audience to connect with and interpret their music and its possible meanings. In this chapter I discuss how poetry has been used by both musicians and present some interpretations that show its importance.

Coltrane to Magma

Like Coltrane, Vander's spirituality is wrapped up in musical processes: the rituals of composition and performance. In our conversation, Vander discussed the musical themes in the Coltrane recording, "Transition" from the album *Transition* (1965). In Coltrane's improvisation on this piece, the melody of the composition is explored and interpreted in depth. Long phrases can be reduced to core elements; motifs can be inverted, and transposed; rhythms can be changed; and new phrases can grow from the original as a result. "You could say that he played and developed that phrase to the very limit" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). To me, it is clear that Coltrane's method of

musical investigation has directly informed Vander's organic, yet considered compositional approach. Vander takes this approach of thoroughly exploring all potential ways to develop a phrase into his improvisations on the drum kit, piano and voice (see Chapter Two and Chapter Four).

Magma have always released albums that differed from their previous work, each one exploring new directions and concepts in music. Even though there are many multi-work cycles in Magma's music, each album has a unique sound that sets it apart from the others. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Vander's total commitment to music echoes that of one of his greatest influences, John Coltrane. Vander notes that:

Each recording he [Coltrane] made contained a premonition of something else, maybe a phrase he had never played before, like a signal, that was telling us what he was going to develop on the next album. For example, why did he choose the theme My Favorite Things? It's not a theme of John Coltrane, but he instinctively knew that he would be at home working within that framework. Because the mode of the theme was the very same mode he would develop in an evident, totally open way in A Love Supreme. He chose that theme because it corresponded to what was going to become his definitive mode and then went on to begin *A Love Supreme* in the same way. (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017)

These musical signals that Vander mentions are another example of this organic approach to the development of a musical passage. Coltrane, in his improvisations, was constantly pushing himself further, soloing for long periods at a time in order to disseminate musical ideas down to their most inner workings, or to develop them to the extremities of what is possible. By doing so, Coltrane would arrive at new information which he would then develop in later albums.

Most of Magma's studio recordings can be considered concept albums. Each album is a contiguous large-scale work that contains songs that deliver a narrative or a theme unique to that album. When discussing the music of *A Love Supreme*, Vander recognises that this is also evident in some of Coltrane's albums:

What those records also had, without exception, apart from an occasional blues added when something was missing, was a true ambiance. I mean you trusted the record, you said to yourself "Hey, I'm just in the mood for that", and you put it on from start to finish because it took you to that same place every time....

And that is also thanks to John Coltrane. (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017)

I hear every Magma album as being different from the others, yet each is part of an evolution. Sometimes that evolution leaps forwards millennia at a time, but the 'soul state' (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017), as Vander puts it, is always clearly defined. Vander identifies that with Coltrane's albums such as *A Love Supreme* there is clearly more than just music going on:

The music I love, like Coltrane, is not just music... I want Magma to be greater than music. Otherwise it becomes boring. There's a hidden force which must stay mysterious. It is up to the listener to decipher it according to their abilities. (DVD interview *Emëhntëhtt-Rê Trilogy* 2014)

Vander is inviting his listeners and fans to interpret his journey with every Magma release. It is his musical journey, but he is not making it alone. The other musicians in Magma have on occasion also composed for the band, but since Magma's return in the late 1990s, all new Magma compositions have been Vander's. The musicians are free to improvise their parts where appropriate, and each composition will feature at least one soloist from the ensemble. The musicians also have other roles in the band: Benoit Alziary

arranges the music for larger Magma ensembles such as choirs and orchestras that occasionally perform with the band, and Julie Vander, daughter of Christian and ex-wife Stella, sings with the band on occasion and handles their merchandise.

Linguistic connections through poetry

The most obvious connection *Zëss* makes with *A Love Supreme* is the poem itself. In Coltrane's case, the composition "Psalm" is performed on saxophone, which performs the melodic and rhythmic phrases of the poem. In Magma's case, Vander actually performs the poem with his voice. Regardless of the delivery method, poetry is the one device that is key to both compositions. Another comparable feature is the compositional plan of both works. Starting rubato, the energy increases through various movements that are linked with improvisations, each ending with a moment of contemplation. In Coltrane's case it is his dedication to God in the form of the poem: in Magma's case it is with the chanting of the word 'sanctus'. Each work ends by diminishing to silence.

The Zeuhl music of Magma contains one distinct difference to all other styles of music, that is, that the text is in the lyrical language of Kobaïan. There are other bands that attempt to use this language in their music, but to my mind these bands fail to understand that this language is only for the music of Magma — it is their sacred language that narrates only their themes. Likewise, there are fans who have tried to create a definitive vocabulary for the Kobaïan language, and a rather complete one can be found online ("Kobaïan - English Dictionary." Accessed 23 January 2018). These lists of terms and their translations are incomplete at best; at worst their interpretations are far off the mark. When discussing this with Christian Vander during our interview, I suggested to him that the Kobaïan language invites the uninitiated to make interpretations. Vander acknowledges that:

certain words are used differently for the initiated. There are also forbidden words — forbidden words are words we haven't lived. You don't use a word that you haven't experienced. Take, in this sense, the word 'death' for example. What can that mean? Death? No, not quite... words can be read differently if one knows the code. (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017)

Vander is saying that unless you have experienced the meaning of the words yourself, then you cannot comprehend the true meaning. Who then does completely understand the Kobaïan language? Certainly, Christian Vander does, and if the fervent singing of the lyrics are considered, so must his band. Magma are the initiated in this sense, and by having a complete understanding of the 'Kobaïa' (as Vander calls it), the ensemble can fully commit to delivering compelling performances. Journalist Paul Stump notes that, "The abstraction provided by the Kobaïan verse seems to inspire Magma's singers to heights of emotional abandon rarely permitted by conventional lyrics" (Stump 1995:38). In Zëss both the French and Kobaïan language are used to deliver linguistic meanings. Initially, the poem is recited offstage in French; the poet then arrives on stage and sings in Kobaïan for the remainder of the piece. Vander mentioned in our interview that the poem is actually a translation from Kobaïan into French, translated/read by one person (the narrator/translator) with another person (the witness, the Kreuhn Khorman) standing beside the narrator/translator. The point when the poem ends is the point the Kreuhn Khorman takes over, speaking in Kobaïan — the narrative has then arrived at the language of the masters. The Kobaïan is at first spoken, but as the intensity and theme develop it evolves to singing. Finally, all sense of language is removed as Vander performs a vocal scat solo. As Vander performs the poem and the Kobaïan soloing, he also pays homage musically to his idol, John Coltrane. Phrases are developed, extended and then reduced to small motifs, which are then inverted and transposed, reminiscent of Coltrane's solo on "Resolution" from A Love Supreme (See Chapter Two).

Conclusion

Zëss is a work that draws inspiration from John Coltrane and A Love Supreme, but it is much more than that. It is an example of a composer who has dedicated his existence to fully realising a concept. It also might be a living example of a musical artist demonstrating Geertz's interpretive framework in action. Not only does Vander interpret the meanings conveyed in Coltrane's A Love Supreme, such as devotion, commitment and musical development with a spiritual focus, he also extends the webs of significance by taking these much further. With A Love Supreme Coltrane was suggesting that we could come to understand God through commitment to music and self-discovery. With Zëss, Vander is suggesting that we can understand our true potential by committing fully to a personal journey of discovery.

Language, in the form of poetry, has further enabled both these artists to engage with their audiences in subtle ways. Coltrane, through playing his poem's phrase musically, has encouraged his audience to interpret the melody and performance as meaningful at a spiritual level. Vander, through the use of Kobaïan has encouraged his audience to also interpret the meanings in his music. By subtly presenting their own messages, rather than by explicitly telling the listener what they are, these artists invite us to connect with their music in our own way. We can never fully know what Coltrane or Vander are seeking to achieve with their music; they are each speaking their own language that they have developed through their own personal discoveries. The message that I then interpret from their works is that, if we can commit to fully understanding ourselves and our music then we will produce the most original and honest music possible.

Chapter Six

Combining interpretations by accessing Dante's Inferno:

A reflection on Descend, a suite in five movements

John Coltrane has inspired me to play and compose jazz, more so than any other artist. Through the music of his album A Love Supreme, I have come to understand that there is a spirituality to his music that may not be immediately obvious when listening to the music on its own. The spiritual elements that enabled Coltrane to compose this work are his and his alone; however, others have been influenced by them and have interpreted them in their own ways. As with all interpretations, these interpretations are at best incomplete — yet that does not mean that they are any less meaningful. Magma's music, particularly their long-form work Zëss, interprets the music of John Coltrane. I have been influenced by Magma's music in a number of ways, primarily through the way they have interpreted Coltrane's music in their work. As a composer, I strive to extend the webs of significance that spin out from Coltrane, through to Magma, by combining the interpretations that have the most meaning to me and by responding with my own musical ideas. My music and my interpretations will then take on a life of their own as others hear and interpret my music. Like Coltrane and Vander, I want my music to be open to interpretation. My aim is not to explain every detail of the music and its intended meaning, but rather to let others discover their own meanings in their own ways.

This chapter contains some examples of how I assimilate my interpretations of Coltrane and Magma into my own music. I take a reflexive approach to my compositions, and about the compositional process that I have undertaken simultaneous to the writing of this exegesis. The compositions I have worked on in conjunction with this text have been informed by my research, and vice-versa.

In the introduction of this exegesis I explained that I have limited spiritual beliefs, or at best an outsiders viewpoint into spirituality. In order to compose music that could be informed by *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss*, I needed a way to gain more of an insight into spirituality. I was able to do this through reading and interpreting Dante's *Inferno* (1320), an epic poem that I had read many years earlier, and one that I had wanted to portray in a musical form. I thought of several goals that I might attain by presenting *Inferno* musically. Firstly I wanted to produce a musical performance that many people could relate too, a show that would exist in a jazz context—by featuring a degree of musical improvisation to tell the story — and finally to push my composition to new heights.

Inferno is the first part of a series of three works that make up the Commedia, or, in English, the Divine Comedy. Written by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), a member of the Florentine nobility, the work was begun in 1307 while Alighieri was living in exile in Ravenna, Italy. Inferno depicts Dante's journey into the depths of Hell as he seeks a path to redemption by witnessing the suffering of those condemned to eternal damnation. Dante takes as his guide the poet Virgil, who rescues him from his sinful path in life, and returns him to the path of righteousness. My interpretations of their journey through the underworld have manifested themselves in several ways, both musically and spiritually.

Musical interpretations

Like all interpretations, mine seek to make the best of incomplete information. *Inferno* was written in Italian, yet I have been working with translations published by Penguin Books (Alighieri 2006). Though, as in all interpretations, the exact meanings have been altered in the translation process, the text provides an abundance of detail that I have drawn upon in the creative process to compose music. The composition is arranged for three voices, narrator, drum kit, electric bass, electric guitar, piano, synthesiser and

Fender Rhodes. The suite of movements I have composed is entitled *Descend*; each of the movements depicts part of the journey through Hell as told by Dante. Movement 1, "Dark Woods" lyrically describes the meeting of Dante and Virgil and their entrance to the first circle of Hell. Movement 2, "Inferno" depicts the journey through the first levels of Hell. Here, the voice is used primarily for its timbral contributions to the sound, rather than for expressing text. Movement 3, "Seek the Stars" returns the vocalists to the foreground where they describe the interactions between Dante and the denizens of Hell. Movement 4, "Rottenpockets" uses a voice in the form of narration to present text exactly as it appears in the English translation of *Inferno*. Movement 5, "Advance" completes the journey through the lowest level of Hell where Dante encounters Satan and exits Hell.²² Some of the linguistic elements of *Inferno* that have influenced my work are discussed below.

The rhythm and cadence of the phrases in the English translation at times seem to suggest time signatures other than 4/4. This enabled me to create some unusual musical themes that I interpret to be indicative of Hell. In movement 5, "Advance"²³, I introduce a 7/8 section that features a melody and lyric that fits to this time signature: "(But) night ascends (and) now its time (for) us to quit (this) hole." The lyrics in parentheses suggest an eighth note on beat 7 of the bar, leading into the other syllables which are quarter notes, providing a melodic rhythm falling on beats 1, 3, 5 and 7 of each bar. As this section of music depicts the climatic end to the poem where Dante and Virgil encounter Lucifer, it is fitting that musically this section should feel uneasy. Fast 7/8 has an uneasy feeling because it suggests rhythms that resolve earlier than 4/4 'common' time — beat 1 in the

²² There is a complete score for this suite, as well as accompanying mp3 files. I will list all following musical examples with minute and second indicators to enable the listener to listen to important excerpts.

²³ See accompanying Score, Movement 5: Advance, measure 134, (6:45).

second measure of 7/8 time falls one eighth note before the downbeat of the next measure in 4/4 time.

My compositions start from various lines in the poem that I felt were important to telling the story. These lyrics would suggest a melody after I had taken each phrase through a similar process to that of Coltrane or Vander, where I inverted phrases, elongated rhythms, transposed phrases and reduced them to their core elements. Eventually, I would arrive at a melody that sounded right to me, a melody that musically suited the subject of the lyric. Looking back at this process it seems that each 'right melody' had several musical traits. It had to be singable in live performance, it had to contain pitches that would include the thirds, sevenths and other important chord tones of the underlying harmony, and it had to be flexible enough to work over various reharmonisations to provide sonic and thematic variations.

The harmony that worked best was often informed by Coltrane's major third root movement, used in the Coltrane matrix. The opening melody that is sung in movement 1, "Dark Woods", aligns itself to work with this root movement; in this case the melody is sung over a chord progression that repeats twice: F- \triangle 7, A7#9, Db \triangle 7#5, C-7²4. This sets up the right kind of ambiance for the rest of the composition. My compositional process was further informed by the technique of transposition that Coltrane employs in his improvisation, which Vander also uses in his compositional process. In movement 2, there are two solo sections that require a soloist to improvise over a background played by the drums, electric bass and Fender Rhodes. At the conclusion of each solo, there is a tag for each soloist to improvise over, where the harmony is transposed through all 12 keys.²5 My goal here was to create an unsettled feeling, rather than one of resolution that is typically found at the end of an improvised solo. Ravi Coltrane, John Coltrane's son and a

²⁴ See accompanying Score, Movement One: Dark Woods, measures 11-26, (1.10).

²⁵ See accompanying Score, Movement Two: Inferno, measures 27 - 33, (2.34).

saxophonist in his own right, notes how this technique was used as an opening effect in the melody of Part 1, "Acknowledgment", from *A Love Supreme*:

Coltrane blows the four-note pattern thirty-seven times in methodic succession. With exhaustive precision and apparent randomness, he transposes the phrase from one key to another. (as cited by Kahn 2002: 102)

Kahn interprets this to mean that "What was an 'opening' effect to Ravi is now raised to an extreme: it sounds as if the tune is being unraveled, and reinvented moment by moment" (Kahn 2002: 102). This interpretation of the explorative feature used by Coltrane in his improvising inspired me to use this musical technique to depict musically the journey of Dante in this movement of my composition.

Both *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss* feature vocal chants, simple four-note (and four syllable) repetitive motifs that characterise a section of music. For Coltrane, the text to the chant is "A Love Supreme", found in Part 1, "Acknowledgment", and for Magma it is "Sanctus-Sanctus", found at the very end of *Zëss*. These simple chants I have interpreted to have various meanings. With "A Love Supreme", the chant unifies the music after a long saxophone solo, and by its many repetitions it is letting us know that it is a major devotional message that we are receiving in the music. "Sanctus-Sanctus" translates from Latin to "Holy-Holy", and is typically found at the start of a hymn in Christian liturgy. In this case, the repetitive use of this chant signals that the journey in *Zëss* is ultimately one of spiritual significance. It is also used as a background to an improvisation at the climactic ending of the work, which seems to imply that this journey of spiritual significance is foundational to the music of the piece. I follow Coltrane and Vander and utilise a chant in my music: movement 5 ends with a simple two-note chant of "Advance", which is repeated approximately 20 times and ends the whole composition. "Advance" has

²⁶ See accompanying Score, Movement Five: Advance, measures 194 - 211, (8.58).

important meanings to these compositions and to my process of composition. First, it is the final word of a chorus used throughout this movement that comes directly from Dante. In English, it reads "The battle standards of Hell advance" (Alighieri 2006: 154), and depicts the rallying cry used by the denizens of Hell. This is a pivotal phrase in Dante's writing, as it signals the final encounter of Dante's journey and it also starts the final section of the poem. Drawing on Coltrane's and Vander's compositional processes, I reduced the phrase to "Advance" and orchestrated it for three voices. While Dante used this cry to portray infernal progress, I have interpreted it to mean otherwise. The word "Advance" both depicts movement, in this case Dante's journey through hell, as well as personal development. "Advance" as used in the context of personal development relates to the theme of Zess, where the audience at the great cosmic ritual must advance before passing away. I also interpret it as a spiritual theme that is at the core of Coltrane's and Vander's musical practices. Their individual senses of spirituality revolve around their commitment to music, realised in the advancement of their abilities and techniques which allow them to access new information. I have interpreted Coltrane's and Vander's ultimate messages to be those of advancement, and by using it as a chant in my own music I hope to remind myself of this as I journey through my own life. I also hope to communicate this theme of advancement to my audience. If they can interpret this meaning and find the inspiration to advance in their own way, then this music will extend the webs of significance even further, and will be a fantastic outcome for this music.

The instrumentation and rhythmic devices I used in my compositions were inspired by a preliminary manuscript that Alice Coltrane put up for auction in 2004. This manuscript showed an arrangement of *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane for nonet featuring three percussionists, with one section ending with "all drums multiple meters and voices changing motif in Eb minor 'A Love Supreme'" (Ratliff 2007: 90). I too feature a nonet in *Descend*, but instead of three percussionists I have composed for three vocalists and

various rhythm section instruments. At the end of my movement 5, as a background to the chant "Advance" I employ a multiple meter technique similar to that found in Coltrane's arrangement.²⁷ Based on different subdivisions of triplets, the piano part plays the slower subdivision of half-note triplets, the Fender Rhodes plays a quarter-note triplet rhythm and the guitar plays an eighth-note triplet pattern. All these rhythms are derived from the "Advance" chant and comprise variations of long and short notes, simultaneously expanding and contracting the hemiola rhythm. This arranging technique is inspired by Coltrane's draft of one section of *A Love Supreme*, and its purpose in my composition is to remind the audience of the journey in the narrative of *Inferno*. Dante and his guide Virgil are completing this leg of the journey, but as there were two more poems in Dante's *Commedia*, this unresolved rhythmic end reminds us that the journey is still advancing.

Spiritual interpretations

Author and John Coltrane researcher Ashley Kahn specifies that Coltrane's spirituality is at the foreground of *A Love Supreme*, stating that "Coltrane's warmly stated opening figure — in E major, which, though briefly played, was an unusual key for Coltrane — serves as a benediction, a spiritual welcome" (Kahn 2002: 99). This opening figure resolves to F soon after the welcoming phrase, and the theme of "Acknowledgment" is then heard, first played on the double bass. I also hear this introduction as a welcome, but even more so as an invitation to the start of a musical and spiritual journey that Coltrane has in store for us. The fact that the key centres have changed in such a short space of time, and in an ascending motion, is also indicative of the ascension that awaits his audience. A short while later, *Ascension* (1966) was released, an album that furthered Coltrane's spiritual development. In my opening movement, I use a similar device. In this case, the key centre moves from E minor to F minor. I use minor keys to depict the theme

²⁷ See Accompanying Score, Movement 5: Advance, measures 196-202, (10.07).

of the poem at this point, that of Dante's loss and misdirection. The changing key in my composition signals that he is travelling his path in life — he is advancing — yet he is not on the correct spiritual path. At the time Alighieri wrote this work he had been studying philosophy and theology for a number of years, after becoming aware that he needed rescuing from his sinful path in life, and to return to the path of righteousness. The story of Dante's *Inferno* in that sense then is autobiographical in nature. The music I have composed for this thesis is also somewhat autographical in nature. I have combined elements of the music I love, Coltrane and Magma, with irregular time signatures and improvisation. My music looks ahead to areas I wish to explore in the future, such as composing for multiple vocalists. In this way, I draw a connection to how Vander observed signals in Coltrane's music that would point to future musical ideas (See Chapters Four and Five).

Lewis Porter identifies that in *A Love Supreme*, "The four sections suggest a kind of pilgrim's progress where he/she acknowledges the divine, resolves to pursue it, searches and eventually celebrates what has been attained in song" (Porter 1999: 232). This "pilgrim's progress" is mirrored by Alighieri in *Inferno*, where the pilgrim Dante is pursuing enlightenment through observing the suffering of the damned. Alighieri was chronicling the times he lived in; many of the sinners Dante witnessed were well known politicians and members of the Florentine nobility. Although I interpret the meaning of *Inferno* to be that of a warning, in my compositions I have chosen to highlight and arrange the text into lyrics that focus on depicting the journey. By selectively composing music to my own incomplete interpretations, rather than trying to fully interpret the personal messages that these sinners were professing, I have enabled myself to compose around a narrative that is more open to interpretation. It is my wish that an audience who hears my music can interpret my meanings in whatever way they see fit.

John Coltrane used poetry to deliver a prayer in Part 4, "Psalm" from *A Love Supreme*. With this poem I hear a sincere and completely devotional spiritual message. Christian Vander also used poetry in *Zëss*; the message contained in his poem depicts the events at the end of time where we can choose to make the ultimate progression to mastery and enlightenment. Both these poems deal with similar themes, and through Dante's *Inferno*, I have tried to depict a theme of similar gravity. As I do not share, and cannot comprehend, Coltrane's personal spiritual beliefs, the interpretations of Coltrane I have made in my compositions have been mostly musical. Similarly, as I do not share Vander's unique understanding of the Kobaïan people, I have interpreted his music practices and have used those to advance my compositional techniques. My work would not be the same without these interpretations, and whether they are complete does not matter. What matters is that my compositional work has been greatly transformed in new ways since undertaking this study.

Conclusions: From Coltrane to Magma to Bradley

In summary, I must return to my initial three overarching arguments. The first is that spirituality was the primary inspiration for these large-format works. The personal concepts of spirituality that Coltrane, Vander, and now myself have employed are open to interpretation, and the music that has resulted has, and will have, a lasting impression. Secondly, the processes involved in the creation and performance of these large format works need to be interpreted as well, as these processes occur at the intersection of music and spirituality. These processes contain important meanings which have been widely interpreted. They offer composers a means in which to explore all possibilities in their music, in order to attain their goals. Finally, as mentioned throughout this exegesis, all interpretations are at best incomplete. Any interpretations that have been made throughout the course of this exegesis by myself or others, simply seek to highlight the individual's own interpretation of meaning. It is through understanding their interpretations that I have been able to reach my conclusions, and from them understand and appreciate *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss* at a much deeper personal level.

With this exegesis, my goal was to investigate the meanings in the music of *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss*. John Coltrane developed many musical techniques in his lifetime, some inspired by studying the music of other cultures that contain an inherent spirituality. By gaining a deeper understanding of Coltrane's musical journey, I also became aware of his spiritual development. Coltrane used his personal spirituality to develop his music further. Initially his compositions were informed by his spirituality, and then later each album would have a spiritual ambiance, theme or, as Christian Vander puts it, a "soul state" (Vander, personal interview, 13 December 2017). Coltrane's music led him to spirituality, and his spirituality led him to create a deeper, more personal music, music that I have described as 'arranged, spontaneous, spiritual music'.

The music of Magma, as composed by Christian Vander, also has spiritual concerns. These concerns are informed by the work of John Coltrane, both in his music, and in his musical processes. Vander has made it his life's work to develop new, original music that is authentic to who he is as an individual. Not only does he recognise that this was Coltrane's legacy, but he also recognises that the processes Coltrane used to create music can be utilised by anyone to create their own unique music. Magma's works contain spiritual themes, but their true spirituality can be found in the compositional processes that brought them to life. Commitment, patience, humility and persistence were all required to produce *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss*; these are also traits that I developed through my compositional process to reach my own creative goals.

By applying Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework to the work of Coltrane and Magma as I originally intended to do, I confirmed that even though their music can be analysed and understood musically, the impact of this music is ultimately due to its intense spiritual evocation. I do not share Coltrane's or Vander's spiritual beliefs and their music was therefore informed by something that remains foreign to me. What I can do, and what I have done through investigating the webs of significance that extend from Coltrane to Magma, is to understand why this music means so much to so many people, including myself.²⁸ It will continue to do so as long as it is listened to, as its meanings are

²⁸ I have chosen to follow several strands down the web of significance; I could not follow them all. One strand that I abandoned was entitled "External Forces: Politics and the Civil Rights movement". This area of study was of special interest to my topic, as I could position my main points away from a widely accepted notion that Coltrane was politically motivated. Saxophonist Sonny Rollins thinks that most listeners of Coltrane's music got his message wrong: "A lot of guys try to identify John with just the sixties as if his playing meant 'well, lets go and fight' or something like that, in a narrow way. John should not be defined in my view in that narrow sense of that quote-unquote civil rights movement" (cited by Kahn 2002: 76-77). It is my belief that any influence that politics had on Coltrane around the time of A Love Supreme was minimal, as he was so inwardly, and spiritually focused. The influence that politics had on him was manifest in one important way. Live at Birdland (recorded in late 1963 but released in 1964), featured the standout track "Alabama", which was composed by Coltrane in response to the bombing of a Baptist Church by the Ku Klux Klan. According to McCoy Tyner, the pianist on the recording: "'Alabama' came from a speech. John said there was a Martin Luther King speech about the four girls getting killed in Alabama... John took the rhythmic patterns of his speech and came up with 'Alabama'" (as cited by Kahn 2002: 78-79). This was one early example of Coltrane using text and interpreting it on the saxophone, as he went on to do with A Love Supreme.

interpreted, and as new compositions are created by those who have been informed by their own interpretations. Through understanding the meanings that others have derived from *A Love Supreme* and *Zëss*, I have been able to compose music that interprets some of those meanings. By including my own interpretations of those works I have extended the webs of significance even further, positioning myself to make my most authentic music in the form of my suite, *Descend*.

Finally, I arrive at a concept of spirituality that is unique to me. Coltrane investigated many religious doctrines to arrive at his own version of spirituality, whilst Vander created a mythical world with its own inherent spiritual concerns. My personal version of spirituality lies in the process, and processes of music. The creation of this thesis was a spiritual process. I committed myself to the creation of compositions that would advance my abilities greatly. I travelled thousands of miles in pilgrimage to interview a master musician and composer. I learnt to accept my weaknesses and overcome them through education. I created music that was completely authentic to who I am. These processes were undertaken with passion, consideration and commitment; this is what spirituality means to me.

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Glossary of Kobaïan Terms

Emëhntëhtt-Rê: A priest from the Earths ancient past.

Kobaïa: A mythical planet inhabited by colonists from Earth.

Kobaïan: The language of the people of Kobaïa.

Kreuhn Kohrmann: A terrestrial super being.

Mekanik Destruktiw Kommamdoh : Name of an album from 1973. A weapon of immense power.

Theusz Hamtaahk: Time of hatred. A three album cycle.

Zébehn Straïn Dë Geustaah : A nick name for Christian Vander.

Zëss: Master.

Zeuhl: Celestial/Mystical, the genre of music that Magma invented.

Score

From Coltrane to Magma and beyond:

Interpreting musical meaning through composition.

Ву

Reuben Bradley

This score is an initial version, it will become a complete score at the time of the first performance.

A thesis

submitted to Victoria University of Wellington in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Musical Arts in Composition.

Victoria University of Wellington 2018

Descend: Movement One: Dark Woods

Reuben Bradley

















































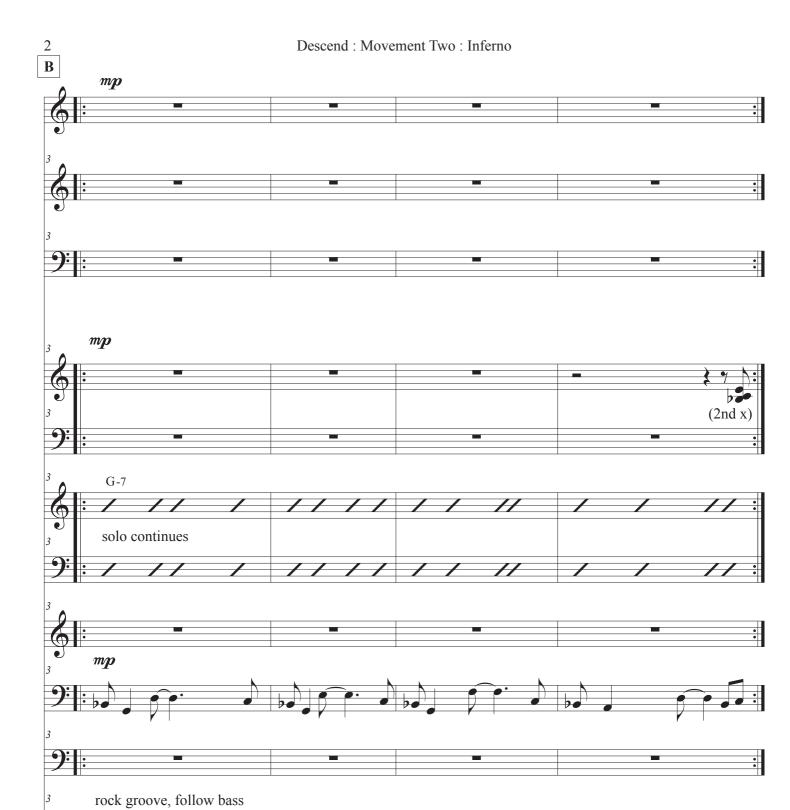




Descend: Movement Two: Inferno

Reuben Bradley













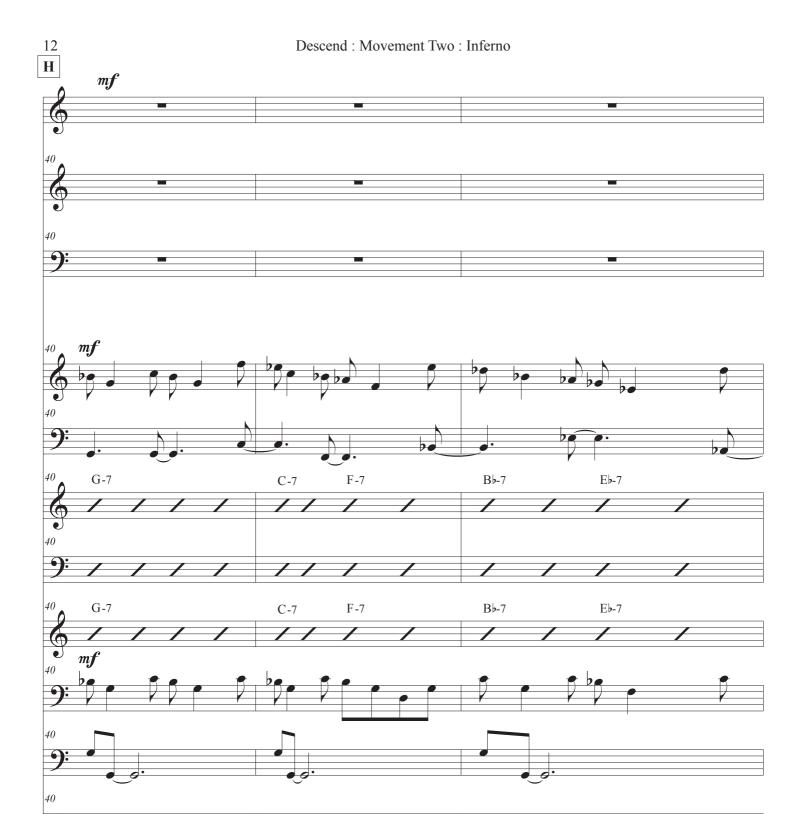


















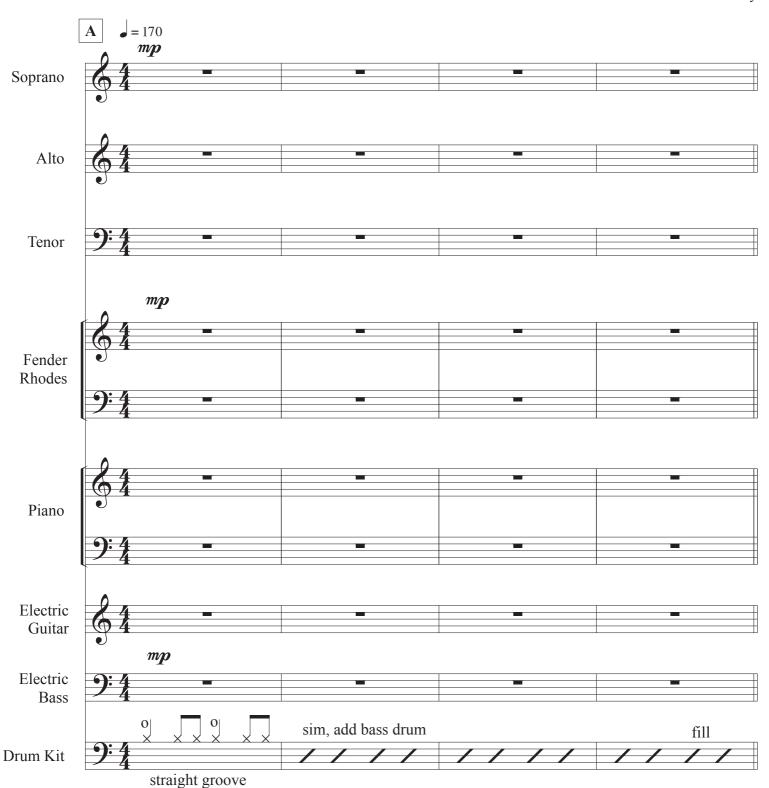


building



Descend: Movement Three: Seek the Stars

Reuben Bradley































































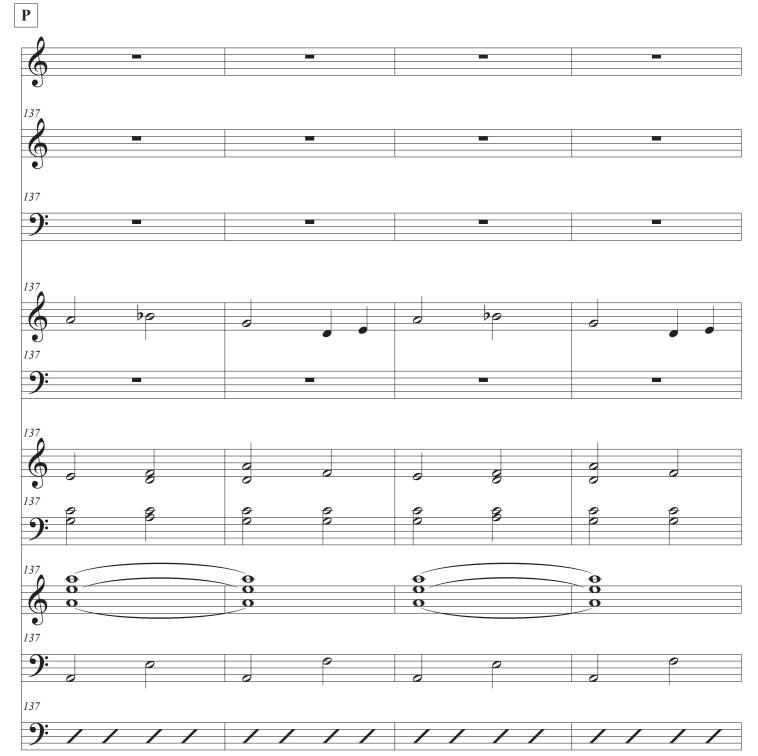


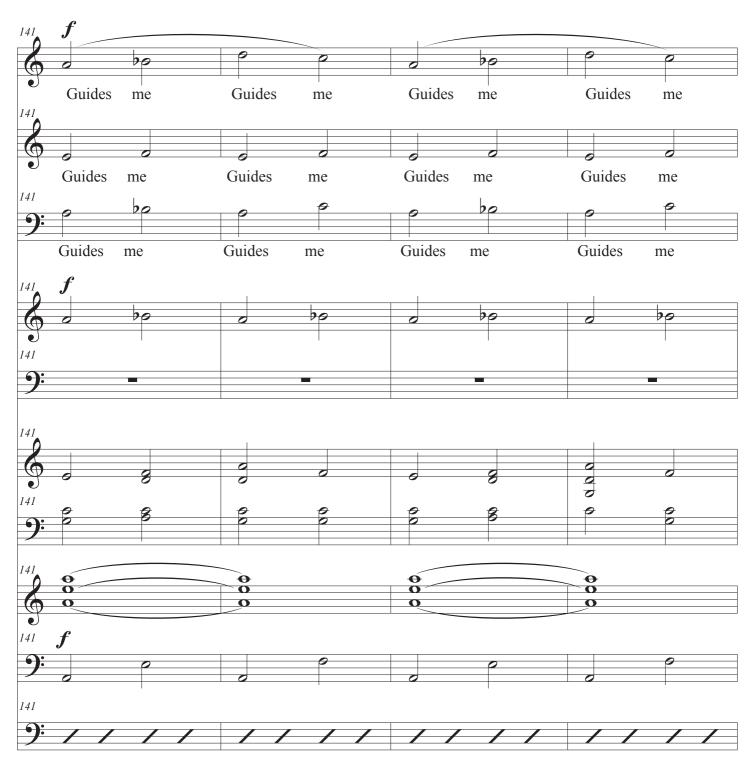






































Descend: Movement Three: Seek the Stars

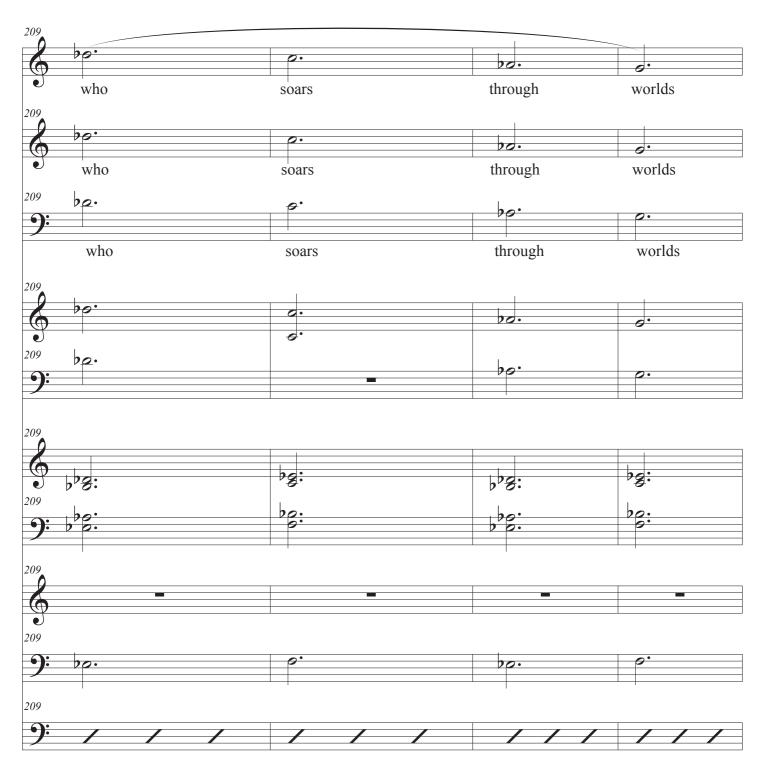




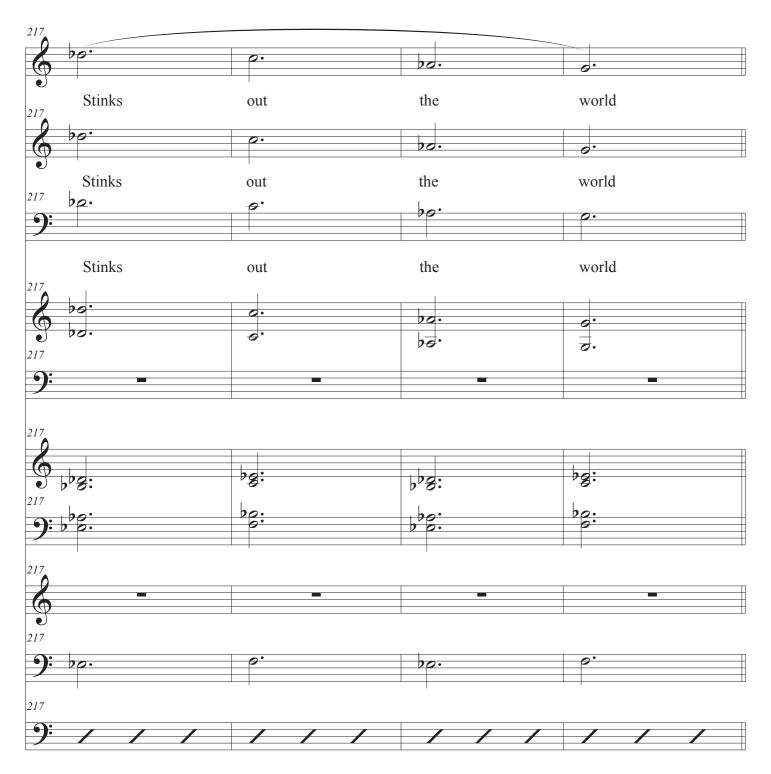


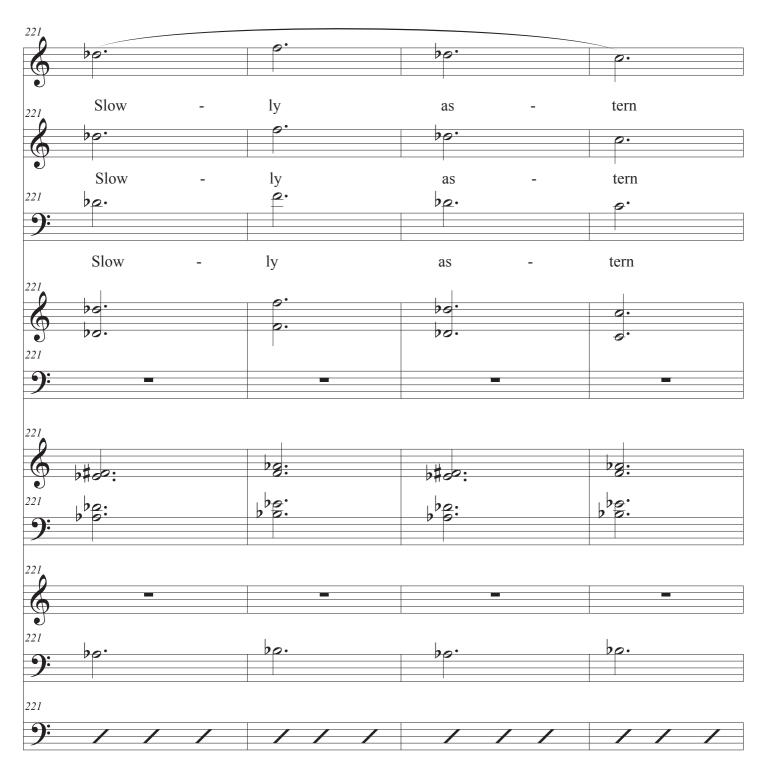


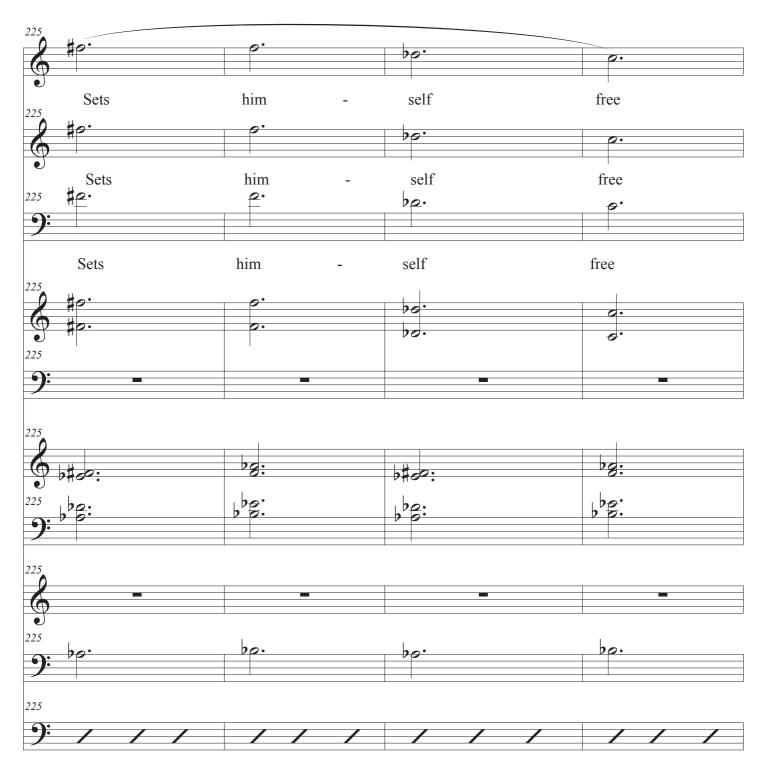


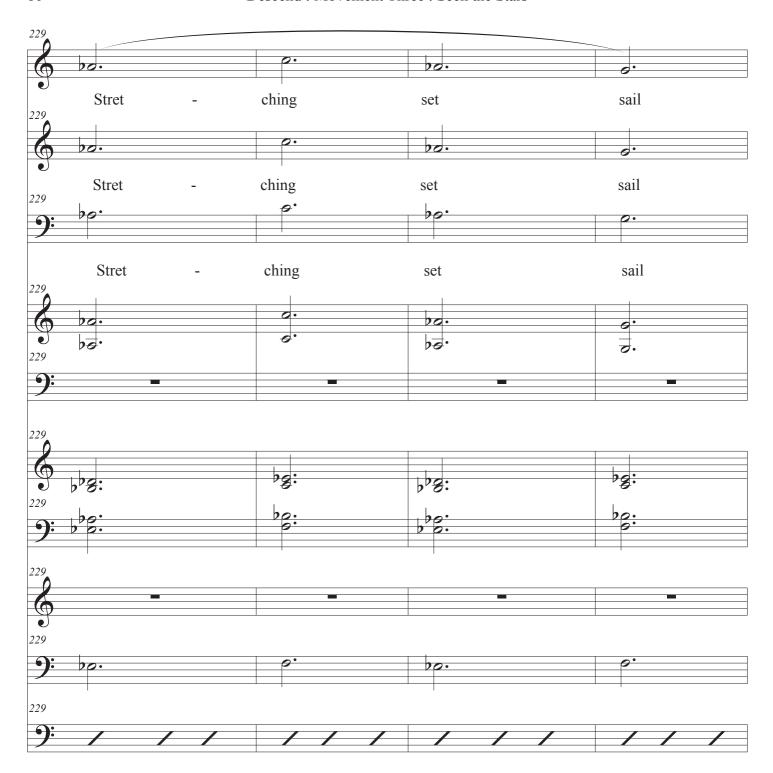


































Descend: Movement Four: Rottenpockets

Reuben Bradley





































































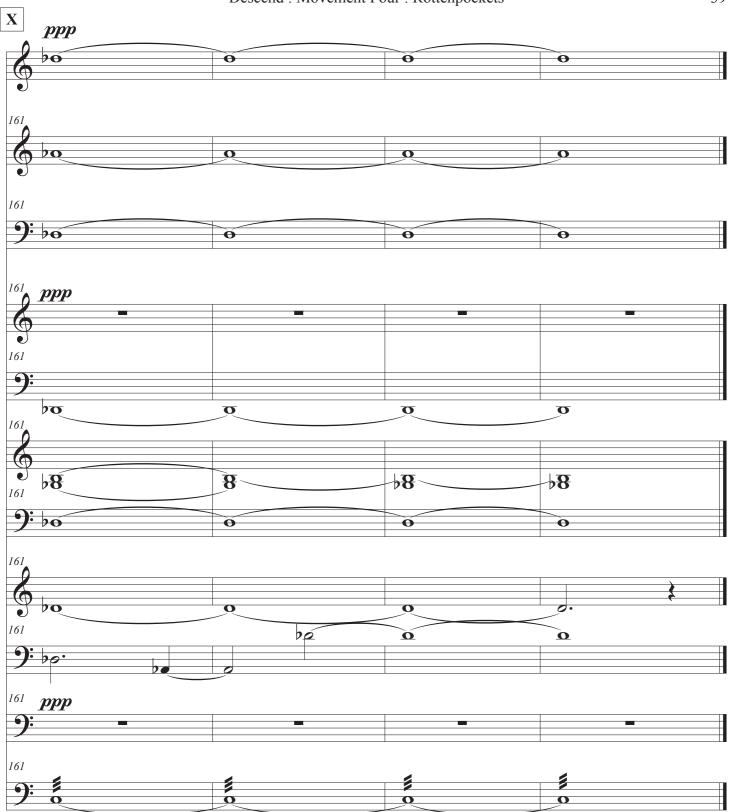












Narration

D) This way, that way, over dismal rock, there were horny demons lashing. (I saw them!)

Even at the first stroke they lifted their trotters; and none of them, f or certain, stayed for second helpings – fewer still for thirds. And, as he spoke, a devil now struck out: 'Push off, you pimp,' he said, and swung his lash. 'These aren't tarts for you to turn to cash.'

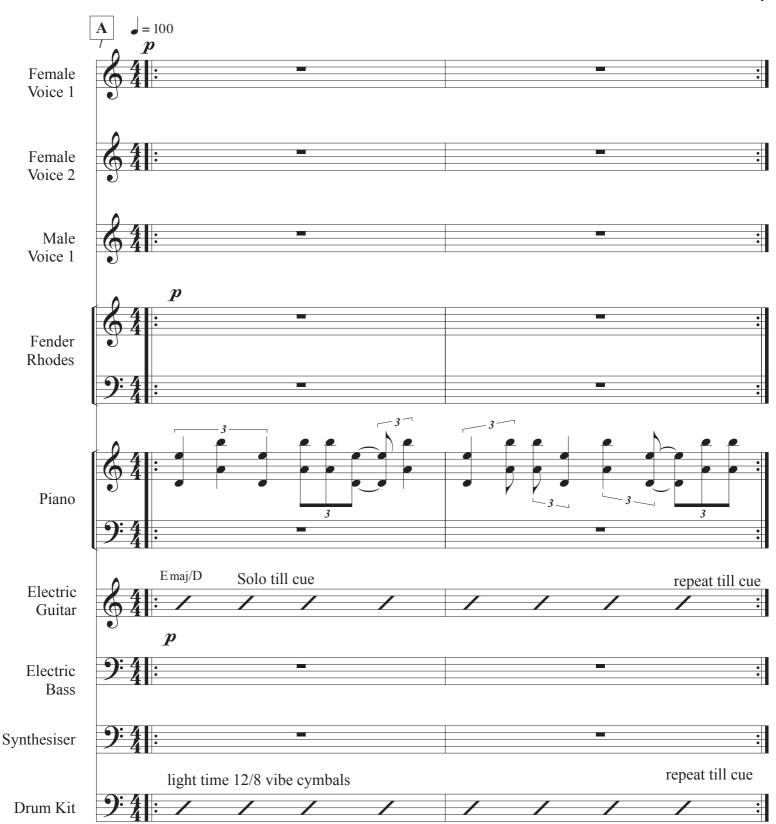
- F) When that was done, my leader now went on: Just poke your nose a little further out. Your eyes may be able to detect a slut down there, filthy, with tangled hair, scratching herself with cacky fingernails, squatting.
- H) Thais! She's there, the whore, the one who cooed to her hot panting swain ("Yeees! Good for you?"), "Angel, a miracle! My thanks indeed!"
- J) Onwards towards this warming tomb, mounting the ridge, by now we'd reached its summit the point that plumbs the middle of the ditch. I set myself to peer intently on those now-discovered depths, washed as they were with agonizing tears. I saw there people circling round that trench. And on they came in silence, weeping still as slow in pace as litanies on earth.
- L) So here though more by art of God than fire a dense black gunge was brought to boiling point, and splashed on all the banks in sticky smears. And there I came to see a dreadful brood of writhing reptiles, of such diverse kinds the memory drains the very blood from me.
- M) Behind their backs, the sinners hands were bound by snakes. These sent both tail and neck between the butts, then formed up front the ends in knots.

And near our point, at one of them (just look!) a serpent headlong hurled itself and pierced exactly at the knit of spine and nape.

For he, through metamorphosis, did not compose two species, glance on glance, whose forms disposed themselves exchanging actual substance.

Descend: Movement Five: Advance

Reuben Bradley







































































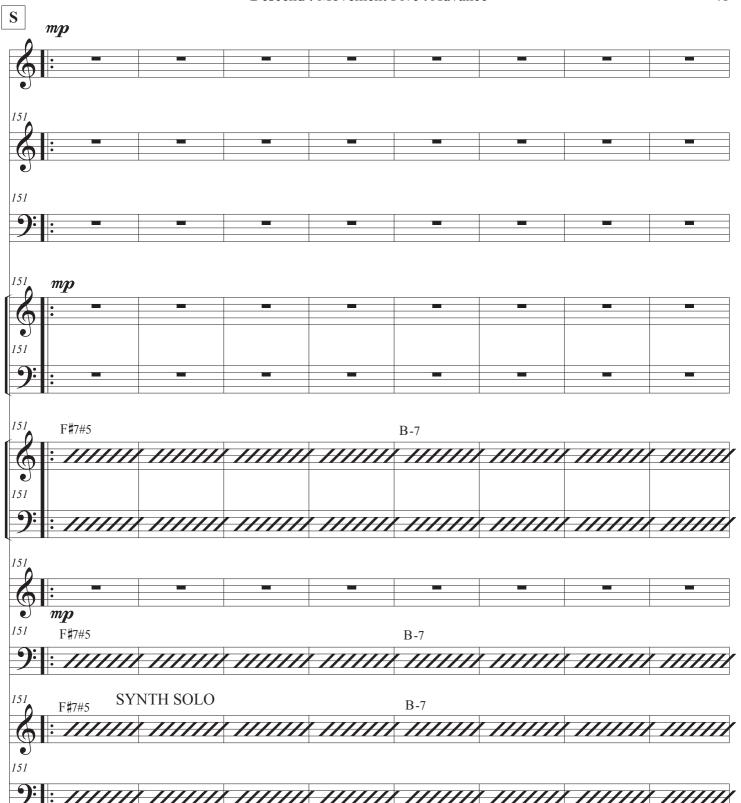


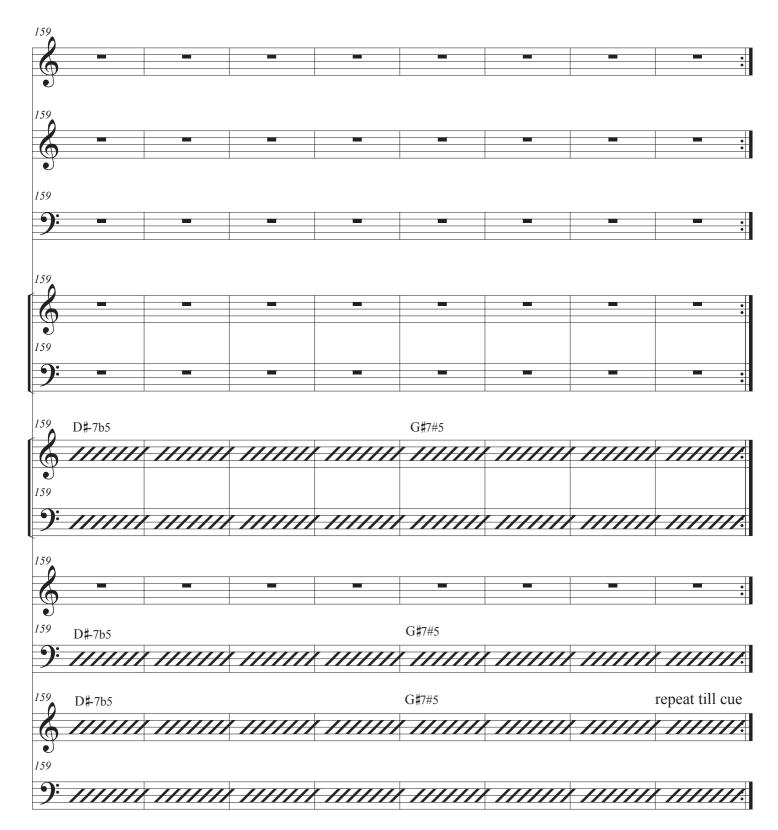


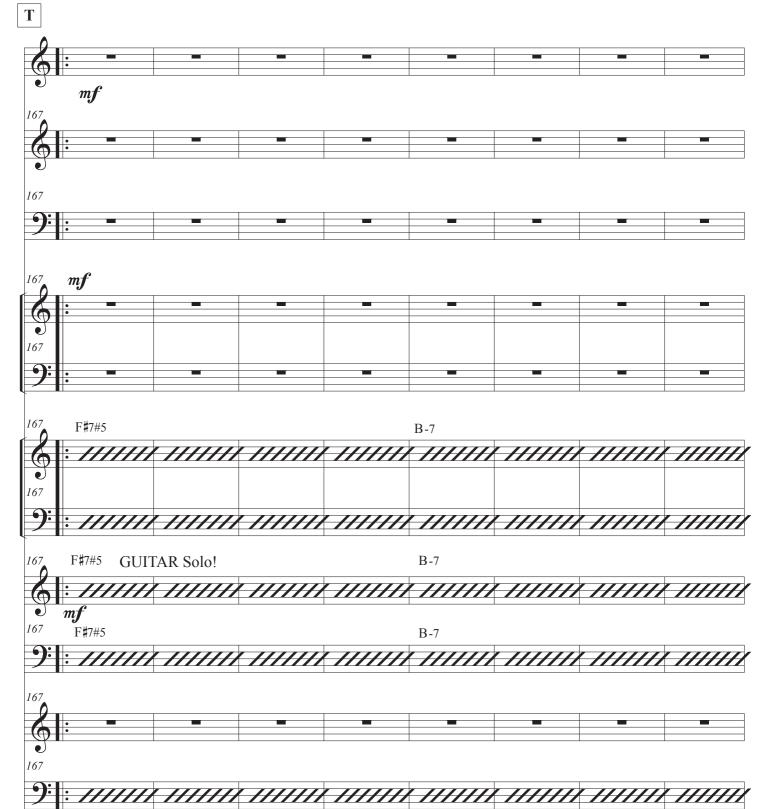


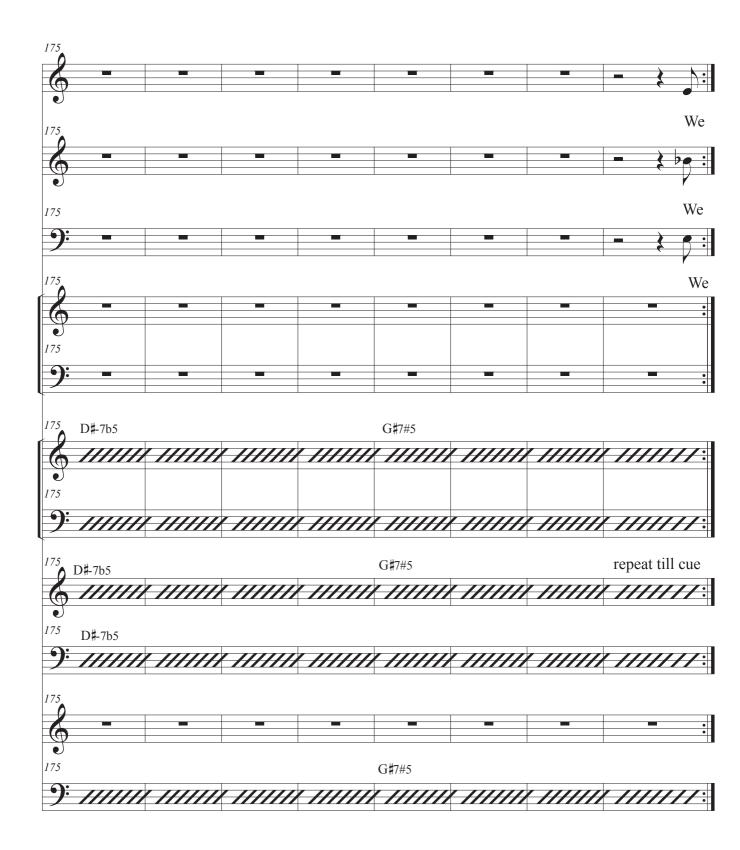




















12/8 Bell groove













FINE