

AN ANALYSIS OF MARY HALVORSON'S IMPROVISATIONAL AND COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Paul Mock

I think Mary [Halvorson] fits into a space as an original guitar player who uses improvisation in her music, which is an incredible accomplishment if you ask me... But I think you could definitely also say that Mary is a composer and that she's been very concerned on how composing informs her improvisation. In that sense, I would say that she is definitely related to Anthony Braxton. I know she has some relationship to me and my guitar playing.... She's done a lot of different things and she's really focused on a composition in a more elaborate way than I have.¹

-Joe Morris

Mary Halvorson has established herself as one of the leading figures of free improvised music since the turn of the millennium, collaborating with many avant-garde jazz and free improvising musicians including Anthony Braxton, Bill Frisell, Ambrose Akinmusire, Susan Alcorn, Weasel Walter, Xiu Xiu, Marc Ribot, and Tomeka Reid. In 2017, Halvorson won *DownBeat Magazine's* Best Guitarist, Rising Star-Jazz Artist, Rising Star-Jazz Group, and Rising Star-Composer categories in the international critics poll.² She would win best guitarist again in 2018 and 2019.³ To cap off these accomplishments, Mary Halvorson received a "Genius" Grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 2019 alongside other artists, scholars, scientists, and writers.⁴ Despite these accolades—and the many reviews of her albums and

¹ Joe Morris, interview with the author, October 7, 2021.

² "Wadada Leo Smith, Mary Halvorson Among Winners in *DownBeat* Critics Poll," *DownBeat*, June 26, 2017, <http://downbeat.com/news/detail/wadada-leo-smith-mary-halvorson-among-winners-in-downbeat-critics-poll>.

³ "DownBeat Announces Winners of the 2018 Int'l Critics Poll," *DownBeat*, June 25, 2018, <http://downbeat.com/news/detail/downbeat-announces-winners-of-2018-critics-poll>. "Salvant Tops 2019 *DownBeat* Critics Poll," *DownBeat*, June 24, 2019, <http://downbeat.com/news/detail/downbeat-announces-winners-of-2019-critics-poll>.

⁴ Colin Dwyer, "MacArthur 'Genius Grant' Winners Attest To 'Power of Individual Creativity,'" *NPR*, September 25, 2019,

performances, interviews, and opinion pieces in the jazz press—there has been a marked dearth of scholarly literature dedicated to analyzing her music and her guitar playing to date.

This article is intended to open the door to a more critical discourse about Halvorson's artistry, achievements, and her position in the intersecting jazz, avant-garde, and free improvising communities. Throughout, I draw extensively on interviews I conducted with Halvorson and one of her early mentors, guitarist/educator Joe Morris. Mary was generous enough to provide me with a copy of her original score for her composition, "Too Many Ties (No. 6)" (2008) which I reproduce here with her permission, in tandem with excerpts from my own transcription of the piece. Analysis of "Too Many Ties," as well as her performance of McCoy Tyner's "Aisha," coupled with detail about her musical education and development under the tutelage of Anthony Braxton and Joe Morris, explores a core element of her practice: how she approaches composing and interpreting music in a meticulous manner while still preserving space for the adventurous and sometimes chaotic aesthetic of free improvised music.

BACKGROUND

Mary Halvorson was born on October 16, 1980 in Brookline, Massachusetts. Halvorson's first foray into the world of music was when she played violin as a child. In seventh grade she first heard Jimi Hendrix and decided to switch to guitar, starting lessons with jazz guitarist Issi Rozen shortly thereafter.⁵ She began listening to records from her father's LP collection around the same time, which included works by famous jazz artists such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Thelonious Monk. During high school, she expanded her listening range to include the work of Wes Montgomery, Ornette Coleman, and Charles Mingus.⁶

As an undergraduate at Wesleyan University, her studies led her to Anthony Braxton, a member of the University's music faculty. She became enthralled with his musical philosophy and approach to music education. Shortly after, she dropped her biology major and dedicated herself to music full time. In her new major, she took classes and participated in ensembles taught by Anthony Braxton

<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/25/763748204/macarthur-genius-grant-winners-attest-to-power-of-individual-creativity>.

⁵ Nate Chinen, "Unflinching and Full of Grace on Guitar," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2016, C2.

⁶ Mary Halvorson, "Mary Halvorson – Guitar Power," interview by Alain Johannes, *D'addario and Co*, YouTube, November 24, 2015, video, 11:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ieyikc_SNY.

and began private lessons with guitarist Joe Morris.⁷ Halvorson completed her music degree at Wesleyan University in 2002, performing her senior thesis concert with Joe Morris.⁸

Like most musicians, Mary Halvorson can claim a long list of influences from various genres, including but not limited to Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and avant-garde jazz guitarist and free improviser Sonny Sharrock.⁹ Avant-garde woodwind player, composer, and educator Anthony Braxton and guitarist/multi-instrumentalist Joe Morris are undoubtedly the two musical figures who have had the strongest influence on Halvorson.¹⁰ In an interview in 2021, Halvorson spoke to me about her creative process, her musical philosophy, and the influence Braxton and Morris had on her development. She opened by briefly touching upon her appreciation for various genres of music and how she tries to learn whenever she is able:

The music I play is influenced by all kinds of things, probably jazz is the biggest influence because that's what I studied, that's a big part of what I grew up listening to. But I like to remain open. So I like to collaborate with people from all different backgrounds and styles and I like to think if I made an album that has nothing to do with jazz at all, if that's what I felt like doing, that that would be cool too. I do make a conscious effort to try not to be boxed in, and it's impossible not to entirely, but I think partly by working with different people and making different types of records and things like that, you can try to remain open to anything and that is something I do value.¹¹

Although associated with the “avant-garde jazz” label by journalists and critics, Halvorson expressed an active resistance to this designation, and concept of music genres in general. It appears the broad stylistic range of her mentors informed her thinking in this regard:

I'm not a big fan of labels. I understand why they exist because you know if you're putting a record in a record store, you have to categorize it, put it somewhere. So I understand why people put labels, but I find them often... what's the word I'm looking for? Reductive. Because then you're putting

⁷ Chinen, “Unflinching.”

⁸ Mary Halvorson, “Mary Halvorson Interview,” interview with the author, August 28, 2021

⁹ Mary Halvorson, “Mary Halvorson by Steve DiBenedetto,” interview by Steve Di Benedetto, *BOMB Magazine*, January 1, 2014, text, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mary-halvorson>.

¹⁰ It should be noted that this emphasis on mentors and influence is not intended to reduce a sense of Halvorson's agency in her musical development, but rather to provide detail regarding the context in which she crafted her deeply personal and innovative aesthetic.

¹¹ Halvorson, interview.

something in a box and that's always something I've tried to avoid. And this is also partly going back to Anthony [Braxton], he was such a big fan of so many different kinds of music of all styles, all genres, and so I think just having that open-mindedness of like there's good music in every genre and there's bad music in every genre.... I don't like it when you see musicians that think their little corner of music is the only legitimate thing and every other kind of music is not sophisticated enough or you know, not whatever. Not grooving enough, whatever people say. I'm not a fan of that.¹²

Halvorson not only studied the nuts and bolts of technique, composition, and performance practice with Braxton and Morris, but also indirectly and conceptually absorbed elements of their musical philosophies. That said, one would have difficulty finding similarities between Mary Halvorson's guitar playing and compositions, and the compositions and playing of Anthony Braxton or Joe Morris. This is deliberate. Mary Halvorson told me that she goes out of her way to not copy or imitate anything that she learned from Braxton and Morris. When asked about Anthony Braxton, she had this to say:

I would say the biggest thing I got from studying with Anthony and I wasn't studying privately with him, I should point out, I mostly just took every class that he offered at Wesleyan, so it wasn't like a one-on-one instruction it was more of a mentorship where I would be in his environment... A class I took every semester—I believe it was called "Materials and Principles of Jazz Improvisation"—was basically a large ensemble playing his music, and then I would take composition seminars, he had some lecture classes and so there were a lot of different classes I took with him.... I remember early on reading a lot of his writings and just trying to understand because it felt like learning a new language, because he really has created his own language and his own universe in terms of how he thinks about music and creativity... He was always saying "Make mistakes, if you're not making mistakes, there's something wrong, because you're not taking any risk." The main thing I came away with from Anthony was that his music is so powerful and unique that I don't want to imitate that. It's hard because you have this very strong influence, but at the same time you don't want to be imitating his music because he's teaching you to find your own thing. So it was that was sort of, not a contradiction, but something that I really tried to remain aware of, that this person is clearly a huge influence on everything that I do and that this person is a huge reason, a huge part of the reason why I'm a musician... I'm sure there are also specifics in my music that have been influenced by his music because I have

¹² Ibid.

listened to his music a lot, I've performed with him a lot. So that stuff is going to inevitably seep in.¹³

Anthony Braxton

Halvorson described rehearsals and seminars with Braxton as “learn by doing” experiences. She described a large ensemble setting that was simultaneously intimidating and inviting. Anthony Braxton would have his large ensemble read and perform his own compositions, which tend to be difficult to read and contain cryptic instructions. Halvorson recalls that she and her classmates expressed anxiety about performing the music because it seemed to be out of their skill range. Despite their apprehension, Braxton would encourage his students to tackle the music headfirst, despite, or perhaps because of the possibility of making mistakes.

This recollection is consistent with Anthony Braxton’s “Introduction to Catalog of Works,” where he outlines an exhaustive list of necessary performances practices for musicians who wish to perform his music. At the start of the document, Braxton lists what he calls the “four fundamental postulates” which are as follows: “I. All compositions in my music system connect together. II. All instrumental parts in my group of musics are autonomous. III. All tempos in this music state are relative (negotiable). IV. All volume dynamics in this sound world are relative.”¹⁴ At the end of the document, Braxton lists additional comments about how performance of his music should be approached: “a. Have fun with this material and don’t get hung up with any one area... b. Don’t misuse this material to have only ‘correct’ performances without spirit or risk... c. Each performance must have something unique... d. Finally, I recommend as few rehearsals as possible so that everyone will be slightly nervous.”¹⁵

Braxton’s philosophy emphasizes the importance of performer autonomy. To this end, Halvorson recalled Braxton using his concept of “language musics” during rehearsals:

He had what he calls the “language musics” which is a sheet of twelve kind of hand signals so he’d be conducting um... so he’d be teaching us how to conduct, he encouraged us to conduct as well. Which is something if something hadn’t been said to me “Hey can you work on this conduction?” I never would have conducted myself. So he’s encouraging people to really

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Anthony Braxton, “Introduction to Catalog of Works,” Tri Centric Foundation, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://tricentricfoundation.org/introduction-to-catalog-of-works-1988>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

get involved. And he almost described it like a “mini democratic society” where he is the conductor and the composer but then he’s giving people within the group power as well. So if I want to conduct a little subsection within the group, I could do that, and at some point he might bring it back to everybody. So there was sort of conduction within conduction happening in these things and- and... just all of it, I think for me just... just trying to grasp it.¹⁶

In addition to emphasizing the importance of improvisation and performer autonomy, Braxton fostered an environment of communication, trust, and respect for fellow musicians. Halvorson recollects how Anthony Braxton went out of his way to treat every one of his pupils with the utmost dignity and respect. According to Halvorson, there was no strong presence of a student/mentor hierarchy. In her own words:

He treated everybody with respect and you know, he was really open minded and was really encouraging to everybody and I think being a part of that you know, it didn’t feel like this “he’s the teacher and I’m the student” it didn’t necessarily feel that black and white you know it felt like he’s mentoring us, but he’s treating us like serious musicians.¹⁷

According to Halvorson, these concepts, taught through the lens of judgment free collaboration and trust, had a profound effect on her own perception of overall creative musical expression, i.e., composition, arranging, and performing.

Joe Morris

The other mentor who had a similar philosophy and a similar effect on Halvorson’s artistic vision is guitarist Joe Morris. As with Braxton, the lessons Halvorson learned from Joe Morris were more philosophical in nature than what is expected in a traditional mentor/apprentice interaction. According to Halvorson, their lessons focused on pure improvisation with an emphasis on generating her own improvisatory ideas with very little technical input from Morris. Morris interacted with her and gave her advice on what she could add to her overall sound, but rarely played guitar during her lessons to avoid any undue, direct influence. Morris instead played bass so they could still generate an interactive improvisatory rapport with each other. The additional benefit of Morris playing bass during the lessons is it forced Halvorson to explore sounds in her own mind with her own instrument instead of copying what Morris would do on the guitar.

¹⁶ Halvorson, interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

We were really doing improvisation. So basically, what we would do, because Joe also plays upright bass, he wouldn't play any guitar in the lessons, and it was so funny it was almost as if he and Anthony had talked, but they hadn't, about um... you know "Tell her to find her own thing!" you know? Because I was all excited to play guitar duos with Joe because Joe is one of my favorite guitar players ever. But he refused to play guitar in the lessons because he's like "I don't want you to copy what I'm doing, I want you to find your own thing." So that was a lesson in itself and to me it was the most powerful lesson of like "We're going to do a lot of improvising but I'm only going to play bass... and then we're going to talk about it." So really it was a lot of just hands on improvising and talking about it and just that idea. So I had two people kind of at the same time just being like "Experiment, take risks, find your own thing." They were sort of both saying it but it was a different approach, because with Joe we were really mostly doing improvisations.¹⁸

I questioned Joe Morris about his overall musical philosophy and his experiences teaching and collaborating with Mary Halvorson in a recent interview. When asked about Halvorson, Morris expressed respect for her artistry and ingenuity and acknowledged how Mary was a gifted player before he taught her lessons:

I remember that Stephanie Stone... when Mary walked up to me, Stephanie said "she can play!" like that to me, right? So I figured she could play and I knew she was a student at Wesleyan and I knew that she studied with Tony Lombardozzi... so I figured she was pretty good and she was pretty cool and everything and smart and so I asked her to play, and so she played and then I did what I do all the time, I kind of did a quick sort of diagnostic of what was going on that I thought I could add to, because I try to be additive and never critical. I don't go "you're doing this wrong, you're doing that wrong" I go "okay let's add this, okay don't take anything away let's add this" and I know that in walking a bass line, I could detect that the way that she expressed the pulse had some limitations and so we worked on that and I think there was a point where it dawned on me that like you know, she was doing what she wanted to do and I wasn't going to talk her out of it, but that was part of it, I wanted her to do what she wanted to do. I put her in situations so I could, on the one hand see what she was capable of, see what she wasn't capable of, see what I could add... I had her listen to a lot of her music and sort out the stuff that was working and what wasn't working um, we did a lot of playing and then gradually as I taught, she was more comfortable playing longer periods and doing more stuff, I started playing guitar with her, and she said in interviews that I never played guitar with her. I corrected her a few years ago, I said "no, remember, towards the

¹⁸ Ibid.

end, I did.” So much so that when her senior recital came along, we did a duo onstage as Wesleyan playing guitars.¹⁹

As Morris mentions in this particular quote, he prefers to teach in a matter that is constructive, additive, and collaborative instead of critical. He expressed a particular reverence for Halvorson beyond the usual degree he had for his student, however:

Mary and I are close friends, we’re good friends. I could easily say we love each other... She was trying to figure out a route to have more control over, that’s what we worked on, but she would’ve found that without me and so there was a point where I thought it was time for her, and it was like I’m telling her this just casually I was like “I don’t think these people should be asking you who you studied with or asking about me or Braxton.” I don’t mean you, you’re writing a paper, but critics who are really trying to fill their thing with stuff that’s already been written, you know this is in the first article written about Mary, and here she is you know on the cover of *DownBeat* and they’re asking that question, I mean I’ve never been on the cover of *DownBeat*, but they wouldn’t say “so what’s your relation to Mary Halvorson?” if they were interviewing me because they don’t care about that with men, but for some reason with women, they think they need to validate somebody’s position in this because to them, it’s wobbly, but it’s not. It wasn’t wobbly to me, and it wasn’t wobbly to Braxton... I was impressed the other day that she didn’t mention my name even though I was in the room, she said “I had a good teacher who’s in the room, one of them is in the room” and you know she said at one point “I’ve tried to overcome influences including with Joe” she said that, but she didn’t mention Braxton, and it’s not because she doesn’t love Braxton or doesn’t feel the influence, it’s just that she’s at the point now where she knows she’s got control at a very high level of what she’s doing and it’s time for her to just be allowed to present who she is without qualifying it in any way and another time when I’m like knocked out by how together and what a powerful artist my old buddy Mary is, you know... she’s a powerhouse.²⁰

Morris and Braxton “influenced” Halvorson most by giving her the opportunity and encouragement to develop her own musical philosophy and identity. They created judgment-free spaces for her to express herself; Braxton through his collaborative ensemble rehearsals and Morris through his private lessons and his belief that music education should be strictly additive and not critical. In these spaces, Halvorson developed a proclivity for experimentation with tone and

¹⁹ Joe Morris, interview with the author, October 7, 2021.

²⁰ Ibid.

timbre while incorporating free improvisation into meticulously crafted compositions.

INTERPRETATION/IMPROVISATION

During my interview with Halvorson, I asked her various questions about her creative process when performing standards from the traditional jazz lexicon. She had this to say:

When I'm playing a standard in a solo context, I feel a little bit more free to rip it apart, and it doesn't mean that I always rip it apart, but I have that choice a little bit more. When it's just me, I feel like I can adapt the song as I see fit or just use certain elements from the song... I kind of sat with these songs and reworked them in a sense, or just tried to find a way to interpret the tune in a way that felt simultaneously true to the tune, but also maybe offered something a little bit different than the original.²¹

"Aisha"

Mary Halvorson has only recorded one album of solo guitar covers to date, 2015's *Meltframe* (Firehouse 12 Records). What follows is an analysis of Halvorson's recording of "Aisha" from *Meltframe* that demonstrates her interpretive approach to standards, providing an example of how she applies her improvisatory language to an established composition from the jazz tradition. Composed by McCoy Tyner, "Aisha" first appeared on *Olé Coltrane* (Atlantic SD1373, 1961). The original performance of this composition by John Coltrane's quartet starts with a bass figure from the piano and bass that is comprised of quintal stacks played under the chords Am9, Gm9, Am9, and Fm9. This bass line is played before Coltrane plays the main melody on tenor saxophone. Mary Halvorson follows this same formula to begin, improvising a solo loosely based on that bass line before playing the main melody.

²¹ Halvorson, interview.

The image shows a musical score for an introductory solo in guitar, consisting of seven staves of music. The first staff starts with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic. The second staff includes triplet markings. The sixth staff ends with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some wide intervals and clear articulation.

Figure 1. Introductory solo from Mary Halvorson's performance of "Aisha."²²

One of Halvorson's recognizable qualities in her guitar playing is the frequent use of wide intervals. As such, the quintal stacks of the original bass line fit well with her playing style. Another distinctive aspect of Halvorson's guitar playing that is shown in this performance is her precise technique and clear articulation. Even though this performance is rubato throughout, there is consistency in her eighth notes and sixteenth notes.

After the introductory solo, Halvorson starts to play the head as an arranged chord melody. During our interview, I asked her how she approached her creative process in regard to interpreting this composition. She indicated that

²² All musical examples contained in this article are my own transcriptions, unless otherwise noted.

her chord voicings were predetermined, but they are not based exactly on the original chord progression. These chords are of Halvorson's own design and do not always align with harmonic conventions of the Western tonal tradition, as per her intent:

I took the melody and changed the chords underneath quite a bit, but again just by ear, not by thinking "Oh, what if I substitute this chord for that chord?" I wasn't really thinking about theory, I was kind of doing it by ear and coming up with something that I liked and then I think I just went back and improvised sort of in the vibe of the bass line.²³

The chords that Halvorson constructs for "Aisha" sound harmonically dense yet are not based on conventional Western tonal theory and cannot be assigned any conventional chord symbols. Halvorson achieves this effect by omitting pitches that would define the quality of the chord: no thirds, few fifths, few sevenths, but many seconds, fourths, and tritones, all scale degrees that have potential to create chords that sound dense while not having a clearly definable quality. In addition to employing these striking pitch combinations, she smoothly connect these chords together with voice leading. For example, at the end of the first line, the middle of the third line, and the end of the last line in Figure 2, you can see instances of one chord leading into the next through stepwise motion while maintaining their ambiguous characteristics.

²³ Halvorson, interview.

The image displays a musical score for the A section of the jazz standard "Aisha" by Halvorson. The score is written in treble clef and consists of four staves of music, numbered 19, 24, 28, and 32. The first staff (measures 19-23) features a melody starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and a half note D5. A red box highlights the final two measures (22-23), showing a stepwise descent from D5 to C5, then B4, and finally A4. The second staff (measures 24-27) continues the melody with quarter notes G4, F4, E4, and D4. The third staff (measures 28-31) shows a more complex melodic line with quarter notes C4, B3, A3, and G3, followed by a half note F3. A red box highlights measures 29-30, showing a stepwise descent from F3 to E3, then D3, and finally C3. The fourth staff (measures 32-35) shows a final melodic phrase with quarter notes B2, A2, G2, and F2, followed by a half note E2. A red box highlights measures 33-34, showing a stepwise descent from E2 to D2, then C2, and finally B1. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *p*, and articulation instructions like "let ring" with dashed lines.

Figure 2. Halvorson's chord melody for the A section of "Aisha," stepwise voice leading indicated in red boxes.

As composed by Tyner, "Aisha" employs a 32-bar AABA form comprised of eight-measure sections. Following conventional song form, the A sections are mostly identical while the B section features brand new, contrasting melodic and harmonic "bridge" material. In keeping with this structure, each time Halvorson repeats the A section, she uses the same chord voicings for the melody. The only thing she will change is how some chords are articulated and the occasional addition of extra passing chords that were not present in the previous iteration. Halvorson's interpretation of the B section of "Aisha," however, is noticeably different from the A sections in many ways.

The musical score for the B section of "Aisha" consists of five staves of music. The first staff (measures 45-49) begins with a melodic line and chords, including G7 and F#m7, with "let ring" markings. The second staff (measures 50-53) continues with chords G7, F#m7, D7, Gb6/9, F#7(9#11), Dbmaj7/C, Gb7, E7, and Bmaj7, also featuring "let ring" markings. The third staff (measures 54-57) shows a melodic line with a "mf" dynamic. The fourth staff (measures 58-63) is a sustained chordal texture marked "w/ fuzz" and "ff". The fifth staff (measures 64-67) shows a melodic line with a "clean" marking and "mf" dynamic.

Figure 3. Halvorson's B section of "Aisha."

First, there are chords with recognizable qualities in this section. In the second line, the first chord with the B on top is G7, there is an arpeggiated D7 chord, the chord with F# on top is F#m7, the chord with Ab on top is Gb6/9, and the chord with C on top is F#7b9#11. In the third line, there are arpeggiated Dbmaj7 and Gb7 chords, the chord with G# on top is E7 and the chord with D# on top is Bmaj7 (see fig. 3). The second aspect about the B section that makes it stand out is the abrupt timbral and harmonic shift during the last four chords of the B section. Here she abandons the shimmery, clean jazz tone she has used up to this point, replacing it with a heavy fuzz distortion on parallel fourths that turn into a quartal stack on the last chord.

The way Halvorson's performance of "Aisha" comes together shows her penchant for combining familiar and unfamiliar musical sounds, the expected with the unexpected.²⁴ In the A sections she juxtaposes the expected melody with

²⁴ "Familiar" and "unfamiliar" are, of course, very relative terms. What is familiar in one genre/idiom/culture could be very much unfamiliar in another. My use of this terminology is based on the presence or absence of sounds common in Western tonality and what listeners most familiar with formal Western of tonal organization typically expect. While this understanding of

unfamiliar chords made palatable through smooth voice leading. In the B section, she starts using recognizable chord qualities but then abruptly switches to an abrasive fuzz effect associated with genres far removed from “Aisha’s” source material.

This interpretation of “Aisha” shows how Mary Halvorson applies her personal aesthetic to a jazz standard through creative, interpretive choices. The way she bases her solo on the original introductory bass line, crafts chords that are dense and striking yet vague in quality, and utilizes different textures and effects shows her mastery of this balance between staying true to her own musical philosophy and staying true to the composition itself.

COMPOSITION/IMPROVISATION

Halvorson’s guitar playing is distinguished by her percussive picking style and the distinctive clarity of tone she produces on her vintage Guild hollow-body guitar, which she amplifies with subtle, pitch-bending electronic interventions. She is equally adept at picking out delicate and nuanced melodic lines and producing a spray of atmospheric noise. Over the past dozen years, she has performed solo and in settings ranging from intimate chamber jazz ensembles to genre-crossing groups of five, seven, and eight players.²⁵

Released in 2008, *Dragon’s Head* (Firehouse 12 Records) features a trio format, with Halvorson on guitar, John Hébert on bass, and Ches Smith on drums. The album stands as a significant milestone in Halvorson’s career as it was her first album as a bandleader. In the liner notes for the album, Halvorson writes about how guitar trio (guitar, bass, and drums) is one of her favorite types of ensembles to compose and arrange for. On the inside sleeve of the LP Halvorson introduces readers to the concept and motivations behind this project:

I have always gravitated towards the guitar/bass/drum trio format. It is a perfect context to express the versatility of the guitar as a solo and rhythm section instrument, and to hear the subtleties of all three instruments as they interact. I wanted to write for this instrumentation for years, but this project is the first time I have actually attempted it. This trio is also a great excuse to work with two of my favorite musicians; I wrote all of these songs with Ches and John’s playing in mind. I also took it as an opportunity to

“familiar” is inherently problematic, it is the very sort of structure that avant-garde and free improvised music actively work against.

²⁵ “Mary Halvorson,” Class of 2019, MacArthur Foundation, published September 25, 2019, <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2019/mary-halvorson#searchresults>.

experiment with different compositional forms, as well as varying harmonic, melodic and rhythmic components. The interplay between composition and improvisation is important; even within structured sections there is freedom for each musician to alter the feel, mood or energy of the piece.²⁶

While her compositional style changes depending on what, who, and how many musicians she is writing for, an exploration of the balance between the prescribed and improvised can be thought of as a fundamental element of Halvorson's creative process. On this album, and across her discography, Halvorson typically establishes a set of parameters of varying specificity that guide each structure and range of possibilities that she/her ensembles may explore, with no two tracks following the same formula.²⁷ As such, each of her compositions is refreshingly unpredictable. Not surprising, the ways in which she and her bandmates navigate between structure and freedom is central to *Dragon's Head*. An analysis of the entire album is beyond the scope of this article, however even a close reading of a single, representative track helps highlight this defining aspect of her artistry.²⁸

"Too Many Ties (No. 6)"

"Too Many Ties (No. 6)" is constructed in three main sections: a rubato, duo improvisation between guitar and bass, a section that is played in time by the entire trio, and a rubato improvised bass solo at the end. Each of these sections is informed by pre-composed elements. According to Halvorson, the first section is based on ten two-pitch cells shared between the guitar and bass:

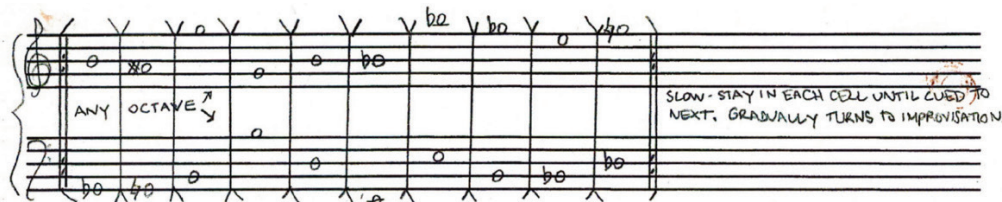


Figure 4. Section 1 excerpt from Mary Halvorson's score for "Too Many Ties (No. 6)."²⁹

²⁶ Mary Halvorson, *Dragon's Head* (Firehouse 12 Records, 2008).

²⁷ Halvorson, interview.

²⁸ See Paul Mock, "How Mary Halvorson Explores Creative Expression and Free Improvisation Through Performance, Composition, and Arranging," DMA Thesis, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2022 for additional analyses of Halvorson's work.

²⁹ Mary Halvorson, "Too Many Ties (No. 6)," (Unpublished score, 2008).

So in the first part that's out of time, it's just a bunch of cells with whole notes. So there's no bassline really, like in the first cell the bass has a G \flat or F \sharp and the guitar has a B, and then we stay in that for a minute, and then I do a visual cue onto the next cell which is a G natural in the bass and an A \sharp in the guitar, and then that keeps going through ten different cells. So if you're hearing a bassline, it's just improvised in that section because the only information John has at that point is a whole note or a pitch I should say, not a whole note, but a pitch.³⁰

While this repeating sequence of ten two-pitch cells are the parameters set in place for the first section, they inform the range of possibilities for the musicians, rather than strictly prescribe what they should play. Adherence to these parameters is relatively loose from the start and gets looser as the improvisation progresses. Below is my transcription of the first pass through the ten-cell "form."³¹

³⁰ Halvorson, interview.

³¹ Cells in all subsequent transcriptions/score examples from section one will be labeled using a decimal system. The first numeral represents which iteration of the larger formal sequence it originates from. The second numeral represents which cell in the sequence is being played, i.e. 1.2 means the first iteration of the second cell.

The musical score is divided into ten cells, each with specific performance instructions and dynamics:

- Cell 1.1:** Guitar starts with *Rubato* and *p*. Double Bass has *p*.
- Cell 1.2:** Guitar has *rit.*, *accel.*, *rit.*, *accel.*, and *rit.*. Double Bass has *mf*.
- Cell 1.3:** Guitar has *8va*. Double Bass has *mf*.
- Cell 1.4:** Guitar has *rit.*. Double Bass has *mp*.
- Cell 1.5:** Guitar has *rit.*. Double Bass has *mp*.
- Cell 1.6:** Guitar has *8va*. Double Bass has *f*.
- Cell 1.7:** Guitar has *let ring*. Double Bass has *8va*.
- Cell 1.8:** Guitar has *let ring*, *Harm.*, and *Harm.*. Double Bass has *mp*.
- Cell 1.9:** Guitar has *mp*. Double Bass has *mp*.
- Cell 1.10:** Guitar has *rit.*. Double Bass has *mf* and *Half step bend 3*.

Figure 5. Excerpt from my own transcription of the recording of “Too Many Ties (No. 6)” from the album *Dragon’s Head* (2008), first time though the ten-cell “form” of section 1, 0:00-0:53.

In this opening excerpt, Halvorson and Hébert adhere closely to the original ten cells. There is some improvisation happening, but not so much that it

obscures the composed pitch sets. The section begins with Halvorson improvising rhythms on the prescribed pitches, sometimes in different octaves, while Hébert sustains his respective pitches waiting for Halvorson to cue the next cell.

As the piece progresses, the density and interactivity of improvisation in both instruments increases. Starting in cell 1.7, Hébert begins playing in octaves, which, starting in cell 1.8, Halvorson responds to by playing octaves of her own respective pitches (see fig. 5). Both musicians experiment with timbre as part of their improvisations. Hébert does this through natural harmonics on the bass while Halvorson does so through effects pedals, particularly delay—which creates a decaying, repeated echo of the guitar’s signal. Specifically, she changes the value of the delay here in real time through an expression pedal.³² By using an expression pedal to change the rate of delay in real time, Halvorson creates a pitch-shifting effect similar to wide, loosely controlled, swooping glissandi, a sound Halvorson frequently uses while improvising.³³ These brief fluctuations in pitch are represented in the transcription through scoop or fall markings (see fig. 5, cells 1.4-10).³⁴

Halvorson starts off using the delay effect sparingly, mostly during sustained notes. She eventually incorporates it into passages with more notes creating a sound that is increasingly unstable as the piece progresses. This upward trajectory of intensity, dynamics, and density continues in the next iteration of the ten-cell sequence.

³² A flat pedal that rocks back and forth on a seesaw-like hinge which affects the parameters of an attached guitar effect depending on how far forward or back the pedal is pushed.

³³ This sort of pitch shifting effect is not a traditional usage of delay. Halvorson uses a Line 6 DL4, delay unit with an input for an expression pedal, which she uses to control the DL4. If you change the rate of delay (labeled as ms) in real time while playing, it raises the pitch if you increase the rate and lowers the pitch if you decrease the rate.

³⁴ These markings show if the change in pitch happens before or after the real pitch and if the change in pitch moves upward or downward.

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with a guitar (Gtr.) and bass (Bass) staff. Measure numbers 22, 26, 29, 32, 35, and 39 are indicated at the start of their respective systems. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, mf, p, mp), articulation (rit.), and specific musical cells (Cell 2.1 through Cell 2.10). The guitar part features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. The bass part provides a harmonic and rhythmic foundation, often using triplets and glissando techniques. The piece concludes with a final measure at measure 44.

Figure 6. "Too Many Ties (No 6)" - second iteration of the ten-cell "form," 0:53-1:44.

Figure 6, representing the second full iteration of the ten two-pitch cells, is noticeably different from the first iteration because it features much more activity across both instruments, starts with louder dynamics, and includes more complex rhythms and rhythmic interplay between Halvorson and Hébert than the previous repetition of the “form.” The first two cells serve as a transition into a more complex rhythmic interplay starting in the third cell. Here, Halvorson and Hébert start playing staccato G’s and B’s respectively (fig 6., cells 2.3-2.7). Hébert initiates these octave displacement figures and Halvorson soon follows suit. The octave displacement follows Halvorson’s compositional logic in this particular section because, if one observes the third and fourth cells, the guitar plays high G and then another G an octave down in the fourth cell. The bass plays a low B in the third cell then plays another B an octave up in the fourth cell. As such, the octave displacement reinterprets the third and fourth cells as one larger hybrid cell. Even though this section is dense with many complex and erratic rhythms shared between the two performers, it never sounds cluttered or cacophonous. Each player leaves small pockets of silence to allow the other performer to play without interruption—space that they both take advantage of. The way Halvorson and Hébert execute this section through effective usage of space, clear articulation, and limited pitch collections determined by the cells creates a texture that is frantic but not cacophonous. Both instruments are clearly heard amidst the chaos.

The fact that Hébert initiates the octave displacement motive shows that this section is truly interactive. Halvorson is not the clear leader that Hébert is required to follow, but rather they take a collaborative approach. While the score instructs to only play the next cell when cued, it is apparent that either performer has equal power to cue the next section or to generate improvised material for the other to react to.

Halvorson’s score for this section of “Too Many Ties” instructs the performers to repeat the ten two-pitch cells until it “gradually turns to improvisation” (fig. 4). Halvorson and Hébert improvise on the full set of ten cells two times before beginning this transition.

Figures 7 a, b, and c, below, represent this transition from a more structured approach to a freer improvisational mode. In this section, Halvorson mostly strays away from the notes prescribed in the score while Hébert plays, in the beginning and ending of this excerpt, many of the pitches from the structural cells in order. There are vague references to the sequence, such as the Gb, G natural in the first system of figure 7a (cells 3.1-2) and the D in the second system of figure 7a (3.5). The same can be said about the Bb, Db, Gb, and G in the last system of figure 7c, representing cells 9, 10, 1, and 2 respectively. I do

not know what Hébert's intent was, but I suspect he is using the sequence as a springboard for improvisatory ideas while not strictly adhering to it. Generally speaking, the interaction between performers here is in adherence with Halvorson's philosophy of using familiar structures to facilitate performer interaction.³⁵ This freer interaction is a departure from the relatively stricter adherence to the cells that occurred earlier in the piece and helps lead to the next major structural element of the performance.

The figure displays three systems of musical notation for guitar (Gtr.) and bass. The first system (measures 43-46) shows the guitar part with melodic lines and the bass part with accompaniment. Labels include [Cell 3.1], [Cell 3.2], and [Cell 3.3-4]. The second system (measures 47-51) features a guitar part with triplets and a 'let ring' instruction, and a bass part with sustained notes. Labels include [Cell 3.5] and 'mf'. The third system (measures 52-54) shows a guitar part with triplets and a 'let ring' instruction, and a bass part with chords and moving lines. Labels include 'f'.

Figure 7a. Third iteration of “Too Many Ties (No. 6)” section 1, 1:45-2:44 (part 1).

³⁵ Halvorson, interview.

The image displays a musical score for guitar and bass, consisting of four systems of staves. Each system includes a guitar staff (Gtr.) and a bass staff (Bass).
- **System 1 (Measures 56-59):** The guitar staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f*. A bracket labeled "8va" spans measures 57-59, with "Harm.-1" written above it. The bass staff features a bracket labeled "[Cell 3.6]" under measures 56-57.
- **System 2 (Measures 60-62):** The guitar staff continues with a melodic line. The bass staff has a bracket labeled "8va" above measures 60-62.
- **System 3 (Measures 63-65):** The guitar staff starts with a dynamic marking of *f*. The bass staff has a bracket labeled "8va" above measures 63-65.
- **System 4 (Measures 66-68):** The guitar staff includes a triplet of eighth notes in measure 66. The bass staff has a bracket labeled "8va" above measures 66-68 and a bracket labeled "[Cell 3.8]" under measure 68.

Figure 7b. Third iteration of “Too Many Ties (No. 6)” section 1, (part 2).

The image displays three systems of musical notation for guitar (Gtr.) and bass. The first system, starting at measure 69, features a guitar line with a 7/8 time signature and a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. A harmonic is indicated above the final bass note. The second system, starting at measure 72, shows a guitar line with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and a bass line with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The third system, starting at measure 74, includes a guitar line with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a bass line with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Two specific bass line cells are identified with brackets: [Cell 3.9] and [Cell 3.10]. An 8va marking is present above the guitar line in the third system.

Figure 7c. Third iteration of “Too Many Ties (No. 6)” section 1, (part 3).

Figure 7c shows Halvorson and Hébert concluding the improvised duo section of the piece. Halvorson continues her free improvisation while using the pitch shift delay, but Hébert is improvising on the initial cells again as a way to signal a transition. Here begins the second major section of the piece where drummer Ches Smith starts playing and there is clearly defined time.

Figure 8. Section 2 from Halvorson's original score (first appears at 2:44).³⁶

During this section, John Hébert repeats the notated bass line—which is comprised of the same pitches from the original ten cells, Ches Smith plays time, and Mary Halvorson freely improvises. During my interview with her, I asked her if her improvisation was based on any tonal center or chord changes and she told me that the improvisation has no parameters besides the bass line and time signature.

³⁶ Mary Halvorson, "Too Many Ties (No. 6)," (Unpublished score).

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system consists of three staves: Guitar (treble clef), Bass (bass clef), and Drum Set (drum clef). The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 72$. The guitar part begins with a slur over the first two measures. The bass part has a dynamic marking of *mp*. The drum set part is marked "Brushes" and has a dynamic marking of *p*. The second system also consists of three staves: Gtr. (treble clef), Bass (bass clef), and Dr. (drum clef). The guitar part has a dynamic marking of *mp* and a triplet in the final measure. The bass part has a dynamic marking of *p*. The drum set part has a dynamic marking of *p*.

Figure 9. "Too Many Ties (No. 6)" – start of Section 2 (2:43-2:50).

Here, John Hébert keeps playing the bass line as written with no variation and Ches Smith keeps time subtly and tastefully. His drumming starts off with simple textures, usage of space, and softer dynamics, becoming slightly more active and using denser textures as the piece continues. His drumming is consistent yet unpredictable. It sometimes seems like he has a specific pattern of downbeat snare hits, downbeat bass drum hits, and fills, but he is constantly changing up that pattern and adding in subtle extra details to create something that is complex while also being nonintrusive. Over this backing, Halvorson transitions from a more melodic improvisation with occasional harmonic relation to the bassline to an approach centered around strange timbres with pitches that are difficult to discern.³⁷ This section ends with Halvorson playing a few discernible pitches and some natural harmonic chords. Thus ends Halvorson's free improvisation before going to the next composed sub-section of the piece:

³⁷ She achieves this sound by strumming across the strings or on individual strings while moving her fretting hand up and down the fretboard of the guitar, all the while using pitch-shifting delay.

Figure 10. “Too Many Ties (No. 6),” transition from Section 2 to Section 3 from Halvorson’s original score (first appears at 3:33).³⁸

The first part of this transitional material is a two-measure figure in 6/4 that Halvorson plays while Hébert continues to play the previously established two-measure bass line in 5/4 time. As the quarter notes in both time signatures are the same duration, the two lines line up in different spots with each repetition, eventually aligning after the thirtieth beat—Halvorson having repeated her six-beat part five times and Hébert repeating his five-quarter note refrain six times. After this, Hébert has a new figure that is notated in 6/4 time. Halvorson and Hébert repeat the last figure two times before moving onto the final major section of the piece. The texture of the drums changes when these last two repetitions occur.

³⁸ Mary Halvorson, “Too Many Ties (No. 6),” (Unpublished score).

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Too Many Ties (No. 6)" from 4:23 to 4:45. It features three systems of staves. The first system includes Guitar (treble clef), Bass (bass clef), and Drum Set (drum clef). The second system includes Guitar (treble clef), Bass (bass clef), and Dr. (drum clef). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *ff*. The guitar part has "let ring" markings above it. The drum set part includes "sticks" markings and accents (^) on downbeats. The bass part has a triplet marking (3) at the beginning of the second system.

Figure 11. "Too Many Ties (No. 6)" 4:23-4:45.

Instead of the complex and subtle interplay of the drums seen earlier, there are louder and more apparent accents on downbeats with sticks instead of brushes. This creates a sense of climax to the trio section before moving onto the improvised bass solo.

This image shows a handwritten musical score for Section 3 of "Too Many Ties (No. 6)". It consists of a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *ff*. The handwriting is somewhat messy, with some ink bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

Figure 12. "Too Many Ties (No. 6)" Section 3 from Halvorson's original score.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid.

The last major section of this piece is an improvised bass solo based on the double stops found in the score excerpt above (Fig. 12). The pitches used here are the same as in the previous composed 6/4 sub-section, and in fact, these align with the bass pitches found throughout section two and in section one as well.

Figure 13. Opening of Section 3 (bass solo), “Too Many Ties (No. 6)” 4:47-5:18.

Figure 13 represents an approximation of John Hébert’s first iteration of the bass line. Following this excerpt, the rest of the solo is an improvisation informed by the double stops Halvorson provides in her score. The subtle references to the initial cells repeat familiar material from the beginning of the piece giving the starting cells a quasi-motivic function.

Figure 14. Conclusion of Section 3 (bass solo) “Too Many Ties (No. 6)” 6:16-6:35.

The end of John Hébert’s solo shows a subtle change in texture (fig. 14). He becomes less reliant on the open E string (as in fig. 13) and starts playing more complex melodic lines and some arpeggios. Despite this shift, he is still actively controlling his dynamics as he plays while incorporating additional expressive techniques such as vibrato and glissando. The solo ends with wide intervals, longer note values, and a long pause while still centering his performance around the composed framework provided by Halvorson’s score. While he is not

explicitly playing the composed bass line, his pitch selection heavily favors the core notes of G, Gb, B, Bb, E, D, Db, while the emphasized notes in his final phrase (line two in fig. 14) are an ornamented version of the bass sequence found in the last four cells of section one (as shown in fig. 4).

This piece demonstrates how Mary Halvorson blends composition and improvisation by setting specific parameters that determine what is to be performed as written and what is to be improvised. While each section of “Too Many Ties” has a distinct texture, and the piece moves through a vary of rhythmic and metric profiles, the composition consistently calls back to the specific set of pitches that give the work a sense of coherence. One can argue that this pitch set functions at once as melody, harmony and structure for the composition. Halvorson’s four score sketches reproduced in this article (fig. 4, 8, 10, & 12), all of which draw on this pitch set, provide the framework that she, Hébert, and Smith navigate. Varying degrees of control and freedom at both the micro and macro level in each section help blur the line between composition and improvisation in this piece. The interconnected parameters in this framework provide the listener with something relatively easy, if unconventional, to digest and latch onto while also providing enough improvisational freedom for performers to take risks. It is in this regard that “Too Many Ties” encapsulates one of the core aspects of Halvorson’s compositional style.

CONCLUSION

Through a focus on primary sources, oral history, and musical analysis, this article presents a snapshot of the sources Halvorson has drawn from for inspiration and the results of her singular style. While I have discussed her musical education and early influences at length, it is important to resist ascribing any particular characteristic of her musical sensibility too closely to any one source of inspiration. As Joe Morris astutely reminds us, there is tendency in writing about jazz that seeks to validate women’s artistic and/or commercial success through their proximity to male mentors, patrons, or collaborators. To do so obscures the creative agency an artist like Halvorson brings to all aspects of her career. While shaped in part during her periods of study with Morris and Anthony Braxton, Mary Halvorson’s aesthetic and drive are distinctly her own.

As a result, and despite the “avant-garde jazz” label that is often assigned to her and her creative output, Halvorson disregards this label and labels in general. She is, instead, guided by a deeply personal, multi-faceted musical philosophy. As demonstrated in her version of “Aisha” and “Too Many Ties,” she continues free improvised music and avant-garde jazz’s tradition of manipulating

parameters on the composition/improvisation spectrum, playing with expectation in myriad ways. Her compositions and arrangements are her vessel through which she allows herself and her fellow musicians to express creativity and explore unusual sounds within set compositional boundaries.

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Dr. Paul Mock is an experienced gigging guitarist and composer. He has performed with various members of faculty from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As part of the UIUC Concert Jazz Band, he has performed at Midwest Band Clinic and the Jazz Education Network conference, and has performed with Jim Snidero, Carl Allen, and Brad Dutz. He is also a bandleader with his latest project being Mock5. He also has experience performing in other genres such as funk, neo-soul, hip hop, R&B, gospel, blues, avant-garde/free improvised music, rock, and metal. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Mary Halvorson which delves deeper into her striking compositional and improvisational styles.