

## THE MUSICAL WORLD OF ANTHONY DAVIS



Rev. Dr. Dwight D. Andrews

*Professor of Music Theory  
Emory University  
(Atlanta, Georgia)*

Like all of us, Anthony Davis is heir to many cultures and traditions. As the "global village" becomes smaller and smaller and new technologies continue to increase our capacity to encounter the music and art of faraway places, we have gained greater access to one another across geographic, ethnic, and temporal boundaries. It is Anthony Davis' unique synthesis of these many "cultural inputs" that has earned him a special place in the world of contemporary music. His music is, at once, immediate, yet complex, familiar in unfamiliar ways, challenging, yet still accessible. His compositional voice remains clear in spite of the many different genres and forms in which he works. The following essay seeks to consider the nature of Mr. Davis' musical language, its influences, methods, and models. Equally important, it seeks to provide a context for an encounter with his latest operatic work, *Amistad*.

I write this essay from the vantage point of being very familiar with Davis' work. I have performed and conducted many of his compositions as a member of his chamber ensemble, Episteme. I also admire his music and have a deep appreciation for its ambitious nature and sweeping scope. I welcome this opportunity to offer this reflection to the general reader and hope it provides a

suitable introduction to the exciting musical world of Anthony Davis.

Mr. Davis' development as a composer can be traced back to two significant experiences early on in his career. The first is his involvement with the so-called "new music" or avant garde scene in the mid-1970s. This period included important encounters with composers/improvisers such as Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), and his participation in Smith's New Delta Ahkri. The second set of experiences centered on his years as leader of his own ensemble, Episteme. Formed in 1979 as an expandable ensemble varying from six to fifteen musicians, this group was created to explore the potential of improvisation in extended compositional forms. Although Davis and his musicians all had considerable jazz backgrounds, the work of Episteme was to explore and extend the very language of improvisation itself. Such an exploration necessitated a broadening of the compositional settings in which the new improvisations could occur. In this creative and fertile environment, Davis began his own rite of passage, refining his technical skills and developing many of the composing techniques that continue to serve him to this day.

### Davis' Musical Methods

Whether the genre is a chamber work, a piece for large orchestra, a solo work, or opera, Davis' unique voice as a composer is ever-present. There are several important interrelated methods or techniques that have become synonymous with his compositional style. At the center of his work is the issue of musical time or rhythm. And it is his rhythmic sensibility that makes his work so readily identifiable as his own. One of his favorite techniques is use of the ostinato. An ostinato is a clearly defined phrase that is repeated persistently, usually in immediate succession. The earliest examples of ostinatos in Western European music appear in the motets of the 13th century. In the 20th century, composers such as Stravinsky, Bartok, and Hindemith revived its use because of their attraction to its polyphonic and rhythmic possibilities. Davis is perhaps attracted to the ostinato for the same reasons, but his sources are different. His fascination with ostinatos began with his encounter with the piano music of Chopin and the traditional musics of Bali and Africa.

Yet the use of ostinato for Davis should not be viewed simply as an attractive rhythmic device. Rather he is interested in the ways an ostinato can create its own sense of momentum and cumulative power over extended time spans. This

notion of power in such repetitions is characteristic of the non-western cultures from which they are derived. Think about the chants of Bali, Africa, or India. Notice how their static, repetitive nature can have an almost hypnotic effect. Equally interesting, one might presume that the repetitive character of an ostinato might have a confining effect for the composer. Not so in Davis' case for he sees such musical textures as liberating. There are unlimited possibilities in juxtaposing other musical materials against the ground of an ostinato. Note one such ostinato pattern in an early work composed by Davis at age nineteen, entitled *African Ballad*. [See Example #1. Bass Ostinato in *African Ballad*.]

This example illustrates how a simple, repetitive 3-beat grouping is subtly displaced by the addition of beat 7 in each bar. The effect is that one's musical expectation is constantly being manipulated in anticipation of the next 3 group. A second example makes the point even more clear, especially with regard to the idea of musical expectation. Consider the following segment from his *Middle Passage for Solo Piano*. [See Example #2. *Middle Passage*.]

In this more complicated example, focus on the piano left-hand. It has a recurring six note pattern (labeled A). Note the insistent character of the pattern and the dynamic accents that occur every three pitches. After the first statement of A,

Example #1 Bass Ostinato from *African Ballad*



Example #2 from *Middle Passage for Solo Piano*  
Rhythmic displacement of position of ostinato

*It is his ability to achieve great dynamic range  
in the midst of these limited rhythmic and pitch fields  
which many regard as extraordinary.*

an eighth rest follows (labeled b), then the A statement returns, but is now played twice in succession. The subsequent silence is now extended for a duration of 4 eighth rests (labeled c). The next A motive is presented only once, and again is followed by a b duration of silence, and so on. The schematic below demonstrates the type of internal manipulations of ostinato material common in Davis' music.

Ostinato occurrence patterns in *Middle Passage*:

A b AA c A b AA c A b AA d A d

These ostinatos provide a window to another significant aspect of Davis' style, namely his use of asymmetrical meters. Note that the *African Ballad* is set in the meter of 7/4. Meter signatures of 5, 7, and 11 as well as the practice of mixing different meters in succession (as in the *Middle Passage* example) are also favorite devices. Much of the Western music we listen to today is based on duple or triple meters. The presence of these asymmetrical metric groupings is an immediate signal that sets this music apart. In addition, Davis manages to avoid the static quality often heard in ostinatos by small temporal shifts within a given pattern. It is his ability to achieve great dynamic range in the midst of these limited rhythmic and pitch fields which many regard as extraordinary.

Davis is also adept at using small musical fragments or motives (statements too small to be considered as a complete melody) and setting them in motion against one another. I call this practice constellations and cycles of musical fragments. Imagine three musical events. The first has a duration of 4 beats, the second and third events have a duration of 2 beats, and occur in a repetitive sequence. If event A and C begin at the exact same time, events A, B, and C will occur in the same temporal relationship to one another, every 4 beats. On the other hand, notice what happens when Davis uses asymmetrical meters rather than the more familiar common time as his metric framework. The effect of such meters as 15/4 or 7 or 11 is that it creates an internal dynamic to the metric foot. Within these asymmetric frames, musical figures of varying lengths stacked one upon one another will cause figures to align with one another at different points over a cycle of repetitions. Dense layers of musical material can thereby have multiple meanings within a given cycle, because what they are occurring *against* is constantly changing. The idea here is the same material presented in a dynamically changing context. Musical examples of this may be seen in many of the traditional musics of Africa. The term sometimes applied to this technique is called hocket. It is worthwhile noting that many of the traditional African instruments used in these textures are limited to only one or two notes.

Drones are found in many musics around the world. They are associated with folk, popular, jazz and art music forms. It is interesting to note that they serve an analogous purpose in Anthony Davis' music to the ostinato and recurring pattern constellations. They effect a constant presence in the musical texture and provide a ground against which many other musical materials are set. Other familiar examples of drones may be heard in some works of jazz master John Coltrane. His version of *My Favorite Things* immediately comes to mind.

Davis' use of ostinati, constellations of recurring cycles of pitch materials or events, and even drones, have obvious implications for musical rhythm. These practices have often caused him to be considered a minimalist composer. Indeed, minimal music is often defined by the repetitive use of small melodic cells or motives. But such a description does not adequately characterize his music as a whole because of the numerous other factors that contribute to a complete musical work. For example, Davis is fond of superimposing striking sonorities against repeating rhythmic figures.

In the second measure of the *Middle Passage* example, the spare, two-note sustained sonority in the right hand (C-sharp and B) represents a sound complex that the composer will continue to develop within this short segment of the piece. The sonority is repeated in measures 4, 5, and 8

of the example. Note that in measure 8, however, the texture thickens to a new sound complex, adding three new pitches to the established C-sharp and B. This chord does not fit neatly into traditional tonal vocabulary. It is not a major, minor, augmented, or diminished chord. Rather, it is an unfolding of the preceding two-note C-sharp/B cell. Thus the C-sharp/B dyad (which represents an interval of two semitones) is now complemented by a G/A dyad in the lower system that also is comprised of two semitones. The next measure adds two more notes (E and F-sharp) to the texture that are intervallically the same as its predecessors. The final measure of the example presents yet another addition to the sustained texture. It is also a two-note mirror of the other dyads. The F-sharp/G-sharp in the inner voice of the right hand (measure 10) represents the last of a series of pitch entrances in which each dyad is intervallically the same. This mirroring of a specific intervallic cell to literally spin out a sound complex gives us a glimpse into one of Davis' approaches to the vertical or harmonic dimension of his music. It is interesting to note that the equivalence of these dyads is masked by Davis' registral treatment. The C-sharp/B cell is presented as a seventh, the G/A and F-sharp/G-sharp cells are presented as seconds, and the E/F-sharp cell is presented as a ninth. These subtle

manipulations of a single pitch idea in the harmonic domain are similar to his methods of transformation in the rhythmic domain.

As Davis continues to evolve as a composer, one senses a growing tendency toward an economy of musical raw materials and a disciplined focus on using those materials to the fullest. One also hears a denser harmonic sensibility. His sonorities are becoming more and more complex and their relationships to one another more intricate. Davis has managed to internalize his experience as an improviser. As a result, his compositions are moving away from being focused primarily on providing a setting for improvisation. This shift in emphasis away from improvisation towards a more notated score should not be viewed as a rejection of the importance of improvisation, but rather as a consolidation of the composer's method.

### The Opera

Mr. Davis' interest in the Amistad story began with his father, Charles Davis, a professor of English and Afro American Studies at Yale and Chair of the Afro American Studies Program at Yale. Professor Davis introduced Anthony to the poems of Robert Hayden and specifically to Hayden's striking poem entitled *Middle Passage*. In 1983 Davis composed a solo piano work with

*His music is, at once,*

*immediate, yet complex*

*familiar in unfamiliar ways*

*challenging, yet still accessible.*

*Amistad represents the broadest synthesis of diverse influences in a single composition by Davis to date...What sets him apart from many of his contemporaries is his ability to mold so many seemingly disparate resources into a single aesthetic unity.*

the same title and in 1991 he composed a setting of Hayden's poem for chorus. Davis' interest in the broad issues and ramifications of slavery and its continuing legacy made the *Amistad* story a suitable choice for exploration.

*Amistad* builds on Davis' previous operatic and chamber music efforts. In some ways it is probably most akin to his opera *X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X* in that it uses both jazz and blues elements within a larger formal design. Davis is not content to replicate existing jazz practice. Rather, he extends the jazz tradition in *Amistad* by using jazz conventions in new and striking ways. For example, he adapts the big band arranging practice of juxtaposing the various sections of the band against one another to the opera chorus. His melodic language also incorporates influences of jazz greats such as Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and Charles Mingus. In addition, there are influences from artists as diverse as Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and European composer Arnold Schoenberg. From Monk's emblematic angular lines to Schoenberg's dramatic and mercurial vocal lines in *Moses und Aron*, *Amistad* represents the broadest synthesis of diverse influences in a single composition by Davis to date.

It would be a mistake to call *Amistad* a jazz opera. Just as we discussed the problems of the minimalism label, the infusion of jazz elements

alone should not be the criteria for categorizing a musical work of art. Davis' eclecticism is part of a long tradition of twentieth-century composers who have refused to be restricted by geographic, temporal, or ethnic boundaries in their search for new stimuli and source material. Stravinsky's *Ragtime* reflected his interest in the rhythmic dynamism of the early twentieth-century popular American music. His intent was not to become a ragtime composer, but rather to exercise his freedom to borrow, adapt, and transform the musics of other cultures and time periods and synthesize them into his own musical voice. Davis is not an anomaly. He is part of a continuum of twentieth-century composers searching for new modes of musical expression. What sets him apart from many of his contemporaries is his ability to mold so many seemingly disparate resources into a single aesthetic unity.

The *Amistad* story presents several special challenges. Since the story involves many characters of different cultural backgrounds, those differences had to be drawn musically into a cohesive operatic work. One of the techniques employed in *Amistad* is the use of antiphonal choruses, one black and the other white, to dramatize the tension between the two groups in the drama. But Davis is also confronted with the task of conveying the narrative and texts of the many individual characters. Translating real time con-

versations into a musical setting is one of the true challenges of any composer of operatic music. The music must serve the text, its content as well as its dramatic import. The presence of speaking through multiple characters on stage while maintaining a cohesive musical statement is a complicated task. Davis uses every parameter of the music to solve this problem. Tempo, for example, can be an effective element in framing and differentiating characters, attitudes, and sense of place in the drama. Even *within* a character's role, tempo can suggest perspective. For example, the Goddess's music is sometimes slow and stately to suggest a sense of majesty. At other points her reverie is presented as fast, up tempo dance music.

*Amistad* presents a unique opportunity to dramatize the tension between the divine and human characters of the story. Davis meets this challenge by creating discrete musical planes from which the characters articulate their viewpoint. The characters are not only the performers on stage. Davis has also boldly elected to even dramatize the story's environment to good effect. Thus the ocean becomes an important musical thread in the story. The composer has long been fascinated by water images in operatic works and, on the suggestion of director George C. Wolfe, deftly elects to tell the story of the Middle Passage from the perspective of the Africans who were lost at

*Tempo can be an effective element in framing and differentiating characters, attitudes, and sense of place in the drama. Even within a character's role, tempo can suggest perspective.*

sea. This creates yet another plane from which to tell the story, this time from the perspective of the bottom of the ocean floor. Davis has created a series of slow, descending melodic lines to capture the deadly descent to a watery grave.

Davis' view on the difference between writing for opera and composing other chamber pieces is very revealing. He views his chamber music as the more "democratic" of the two forms. In a chamber work, musical material may be conveyed more equally amongst the instruments of the ensemble. For Davis, opera is more hierarchical. Its hierarchy is based on the necessity of the voice as the principal vehicle for the text. The vocal line must command the foreground and the orchestra takes on a more supportive and background role. At the same time, however, the composer acknowledges that his work in one medium continues to influence and inform his composing for another.

It is often said that the effective writer should tell the story he or she knows best. This is also true for composers. Anthony Davis knows several distinct musical traditions and is heir to them all. Like all distinguished composers, he has discovered a way of incorporating seemingly disparate musical and cultural traditions into a cohesive musical language that is completely his own. *Amistad* powerfully illustrates Anthony Davis' ability and affinity for synthesizing and transforming disparate influences into his own musical

voice. *Amistad* also represents the latest stage in the gifted composer's aesthetic and intellectual evolution. We have considered some of the specific musical practices that are often associated with his method. Yet we acknowledge that the power of music is always greater than the sum of its techniques and formal procedures. Music has the capacity to both engage the mind and stir the soul. Anthony and Thulani Davis have created a powerful and moving new work for the operatic stage. Our challenge is to lend both an open mind and ear to this provocative and stimulating new work.

*African Ballad* may be found on The Anthony Davis Quartet: *Song for the Old World*. India Navigation Records (1978), IN1036.

*Middle Passage* may be found on *Anthony Davis: Middle Passage*. Gramavision (1984), GR8401.

*Rev. Dr. Dwight Andrews is Professor of Music Theory at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Prof. Andrews was the first Quincy Jones Visiting Professor of African American Music at Harvard University. He is also Artistic Director of the prestigious National Black Arts Festival and plays jazz saxophone. In addition to his other engagements, Prof. Andrews is pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation in Atlanta.*