

Christian Wolff and the Politics of Music

David Tudor, with characteristic perspicacity, noticed the influence of children (of being a parent) in Christian Wolff's music-making. "While working with David Tudor on *Burdocks*, he said that he could see the results of having small kids around—my music had loosened up."¹ Becoming a parent, bringing a human being into the world, makes one more aware of ideological constraints and pressures. A domestic culture vies with a prevailing dominant culture which is predatory, aggressive, and individualistic, a day-to-day confrontation of irreconcilable attitudes. The informality of Wolff's indeterminate music-making from the Sixties and early Seventies, culminating in *Burdocks* (1970-1), is an integral part of that domestic culture and strives to instill and safeguard values that are at odds with those from without which threaten to engulf us.

Michael Chant succinctly characterizes the essence of the philosophical issue at hand:

Collective work and experience stands against what is being promoted on all fronts as the "me" culture, where the issue, for example, becomes that art has importance because it expresses "my" life, "I" did this first, or it gratifies "me." This can only contribute to the general crisis of society.²

Music is an integral part of the fabric of our social existence. In the early Seventies raising a family coincided with a political involvement, expressed unequivocally in Wolff's music, moving (ideologically) from what he characterized as democratic libertarianism (anarchism) toward democratic socialism, which in one way or another was supported and promoted by the use of political songs and texts. In this he was not alone; several of his friends and colleagues, including Frederic Rzewski and Cornelius Cardew, had made the same commitment. In the Thirties Hanns Eisler, whom Wolff admired, proclaimed:

I have always striven to write music that serves Socialism. This was often a *difficult and contradictory exercise* [my italics], but the only worthy one for artists in our time.³

Wolff criticized his own (earlier) music for being esoteric, too "introverted"; it did not address social reality. Above all, he tried in various ways to make his new, political music more *accessible*.

But my notion is that music can function better socially if it is more clearly identified with what most people recognize as music, which is not a question of liking or disliking, but of social identity. By function better socially I mean help to focus social energies that are collective not individualistic, and that may therefore be revolutionary politically.⁴

¹ Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writing and Conversations* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 1998), p. 162.

² Michael Chant, "A turning point in music history," a paper delivered at a Symposium on the Scratch Orchestra on its thirtieth anniversary, November 21, 1999, and published by the Progressive Cultural Association, September 2002.

³ Hanns Eisler, from an open letter to the Composers' Union of the German Democratic Republic, printed in the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* on February 24, 1957.

⁴ Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writing and Conversations* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 1998), p. 352.

Hanns Eisler discussed the subject with characteristic candor and insight. One of his favorite quotes was from *The Damnation of Music* by the philosopher Me-Ti, 600 years BC:

If the nobles of the country really have the welfare of the people at heart, they should prevent and forbid music wherever it makes an appearance. For the fact that the people practise music has four disadvantages. The hungry are not fed, the cold are not clothed, the homeless are not sheltered and the desperate find no consolation.⁵

But Eisler would alter the last phrase to “and the desperate *do* find consolation.” Typically, Eisler identified a fundamental problem which Lenin, for one, encountered but could not come to terms with:

Music and poetry can turn individuals and masses away from necessity—in some cases the necessity of acceptance, in others the necessity of self-sacrifice in the cause of social advancement—towards sensuousness, toward individual gratification, toward play, toward childhood.⁶

Unlike his close friend Cornelius Cardew, who sacrificed all on the altar of revolution, Wolff never loses his *musical* focus; he always writes *good* music. For Cardew music was the handmaiden of the revolution; it did what it was told and it suffered. Not only that, the audience, too, was expected to do what it was told. At a recital at the Air Gallery in London Cardew harangued his audience:

And when I play this music I'm saying to you what actually is the case. This music is about Thälmann [a German communist who was murdered by the Nazis in Buchenwald concentration camp]. It uses the materials that developed culturally around Thälmann, around the issue of Thälmann, and how he fought against the fascists before the second world war, and nobody is going to tell me any different.⁷

For Cardew the song is subverted, invalidated, by the culture that sings it, by the audience that hears it. A revolutionary activist in a day-to-day struggle with the State, a committed street-fighter, Cardew was involved in a power struggle (class struggle), a fight to the death, literally. Wolff was never in this situation; rather it was the occasional political demonstration, involvement in progressive local politics, a defiant visit to East Berlin during the Communist reign, etc; his response to music and politics has been the same as most leftist composers, except that he did make a choice to *change* his music, and quite radically. This was a bold step from which he never looked back.

Wolff's early scores are a projection into the future, a utopian paradigm; they *are* political. The music-making they generate is collaborative, self-consciously giving and taking, non-judgmental, respectful, attentive, sharing, cherishing the quotidian, where *individuality*, not “individualism,” is nurtured. In short, it is strongly anti-authoritarian, “democratic.”

This is treacherous territory: Music is notoriously promiscuous, to which the history of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony attests, having been used, and abused, right across the political spectrum, from extreme right to extreme left. As for positive human attributes, if Wolff's earlier music does manage to convey such qualities, it has no exclusive rights; Democratic Socialists cannot lay claim to a monopoly. Men, and much less

⁵ Hanns Eisler, *A Rebel in Music* (Berlin: Seven Seas Book, 1978), p. 192.

⁶ Maynard Solomon on Lenin, *Marxism and Art*, edited Maynard Solomon (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 166.

⁷ John Tilbury, *Cornelius Cardew—a life unfinished* (Copula, 2008), p. 850.

frequently women, have committed acts of unspeakable bestiality; the same men have also displayed bravery, compassion, commitment, resourcefulness, and self-sacrifice, not to mention a love of art. Human complexity denies us the right to limit these claims to a chosen few. Moreover, in the struggle between art and ideology, art is often the loser. Or, as W.G. Sebald wrote: “Art is a way of laundering money.” Art capitulates. Or worse. Writing of art during the Third Reich George Steiner reminds us:

Nothing in the next-door world of Dachau impinged on the great winter cycle of Beethoven chamber music played in Munich.⁸

Wolff’s first two explicitly political pieces were *Accompaniments* (1972) and *Changing the System* (1973–4). Describing *Changing the System* Wolff wanted to represent a “focusing of concerted, persuasive but not coercive energy . . . a kind of revolutionary noise.” Crucially, the later music draws its material from songs, particularly political songs, and whereas the earlier indeterminate music deals with durational rhythm, the later music features accentual rhythm. “Rhythms are interesting because they have a lot to do with how people respond”. . . [but in public music] “some kind of rhythmic definition is necessary.”⁹

Much of Wolff’s political music uses counterpoint, hocketing (a frequent feature in the early music), stretches of clear rhythmic articulation, diatonicism, and sounds are often treated referentially; by contrast, in the earlier works it is the way in which the sounds are actually produced. In both there is a concern for freedom. But in neither is there recourse to “theory.” Some approaches are completely intuitive, others completely rationalized.

Written more than thirty years later, *Long Piano (Peace March 11)* (2004–5) begins with a peace march, one of several which Wolff began writing in England in the early Eighties. It is written in a tablature type of notation, with fingering and rhythm prescribed, but not pitches. Peace marches are usually ragged affairs, “messy,” but with a strong sense of purpose and direction. *Long Piano* begins unequivocally with a political “statement,” and yet in response to the question about the peace march from *Long Piano*, Wolff was equivocal. He simply replied, inscrutably, that “maybe it’s just to remind oneself.”

In my more recent work that content a number of times relates to a political mood, assertive, resistant, commemorative, celebrative, for instance. The connection may be fairly tenuous or subterranean; it is often discontinuous.

The music, which his desire for a political orientation created, has not changed. The “content,” broadly speaking, remains the same. All these “moods” can be found, though never self-consciously, in *Long Piano*, along with echoes, intimations, of a Western classical music which Wolff has absorbed: Bachian counterpoint, the chorales and passages where the tread is steady and regular, and the late Beethoven sonatas. In the recesses of the music there is occasionally something familiar; I detect oblique references to Beethoven’s op. 110 and the Gigue from Bach’s sixth keyboard Partita. There are more general references to aspects of Western culture, to some characteristic quality, as well as to Afro-American music. There is playfulness, too—grace, wit, and humor. And Tom Schultz’s playing is the perfect vehicle for the subtlety of Wolff’s aesthetic. One admires the clarity of his contrapuntal playing, maintaining the diverse character of the individual lines through deft touch control, which also demonstrates what Cage described (and admired?) as the “musical” quality of Wolff’s later music, by which he meant, presumably, its allegiance to the classical musical tradition.

⁸ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 63.

⁹ Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writing and Conversations* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 1998), p. 162.

Recalling Cage's anecdote of a performance of Wolff's music where the composer was asked to close the window to which he replied that it wasn't really necessary because the sounds of the environment in no way constituted a disturbance, I first listened to Schultz's recording of *Long Piano* on a Sony Walkman on a two-hour train journey (so with plenty of time to spare) from the south-east coast to London. At every stop, thus at irregular intervals, a train signal would penetrate my Walkman, a doleful descending minor third, which, however, the music felicitously accommodated—all part of what Frederic Rzewski has aptly described as a "disorderly reality." There is a rough-hewn quality to some of Wolff's music, such as the much-admired *Prose Collection*, but what it does boast, *in toto*, is a lasting toughness and resilience. In respect of its unpredictability and originality, its generous all-inclusiveness ("the musical composition of the world"), early and late, it is, uniquely, the music of Christian Wolff.

Every piece, I think, has, in addition to the abstract arrangement of its sounds . . . what I would call a content, something that it suggests, which is not the same as its sounds, though such a content may deeply affect those sounds, how they are arranged and how they appear to us.¹⁰

Perhaps it is no longer necessary to make explicit reference in Wolff's later works. The content is somehow secure, inviolable. In music and words Wolff has made his position clear.

The writing about music that I like best . . . communicates a very strong sense of the dignity of music partly by refusing to treat it as an art.¹¹

Art or no, this is composition of the highest caliber.

—John Tilbury

Pianist John Tilbury is a longtime member of AMM, one of the most distinguished and influential free improvisation groups to have emerged in the Sixties. He is also the author of a biography of the life and work of Cornelius Cardew, Cornelius Cardew—a life unfinished, published in 2008.

¹⁰ Christian Wolff, op. cit, pp. 229 – 30.

¹¹ Christian Wolff, op. cit., p. 156.

Composer's note

Long Piano (Peace March 11) was written between June 2004 and May 2005 at the request of Thomas Schultz and with the support of a commission from the Music Department of Stanford University. The request was for a piece about one hour long, and making a collection or cycle of pieces, like preludes or etudes, was ruled out.

The music that resulted seems to me like a kind of geological agglomeration. My hope is that it forms a possible landscape on one extended canvas. At first I just started writing and kept going. My tendency is to work in smaller patches. Recently, after the piece was finished, I saw Jennifer Bartlett's wonderfully engaging and cheerful work *Rhapsody*, first shown in 1976. It's a 154-foot sequence of an arrangement of 988 one-foot-square silk-screened and painted enamel plates running around at least three walls of a gallery space. An extreme instance of what I've got in mind.

I had decided not to use the commonest procedure for long keyboard pieces, variations (e.g., Frescobaldi, Bach, Beethoven, Rzewski), but sometimes there are series of patches that use tunes (for instance, the very old standby "L'homme armé" and the round "Dona nobis pacem") for material. The piece has 94 numbered patches, a few of which are blank (silence) (in Bartlett's piece there are the occasional blank squares). The 57th to 67th patches refer to eleven larger sections of a square-root rhythmic structure, each of which has eleven subdivisions whose time proportions are the same as those of the larger sections. The piece also incorporates partial versions (more or less "parodies" in the old music sense) of Schumann (the *Toccata* and one of the *Kinderszenen*) and Ives's *Three-Page Sonata*. As happens these days, an admired musical friend died while I was working on the piece, so there is also a patch for Jackson MacLow.

When I realized I'd come to the end of the piece I thought that perhaps it wasn't quite long enough, so I made an optional prelude, using mostly an alternative notation which specifies rhythmically when each of the player's ten fingers play but not what actual pitches they play, a kind of tablature for counterpoint for up to ten voices (I keep wrestling with the pitch limitations of the keyboard, the same twelve notes over and over again, which I sometimes deal with as here by writing precisely for some other parameter only).

Performer's note

What did I find so fascinating about Christian Wolff's music when I first encountered it? The unpredictable quality of the early piano pieces (especially *For Piano I* with its non-repetitive minimalism), the rather astringent transparency of *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, *Burdocks'* quirky melodiousness, the concrete, abrupt nature of *Bread and Roses*.

The melodic and, in the case of the solo piano music, timbral materials from which this music is made are rarely unusual; these are ordinary, everyday things. However, Wolff's rhythmic invention is of such range and variety: complex polyrhythms, speech-like-rhythms, the music flowing at a freely fluctuating rate or proceeding in a plain, straightforward manner, silences. This mix of the unusual and ordinary results in a music unlike any other. And, in a piece of such length as *Long Piano*, the ongoing appearance and accumulation of a great number and variety of short passages results in the constant renewing and refreshing of the listener's perception.

It's well known that Wolff leaves much for the player to decide—in the case of *Long Piano*, tempi, the general flow of the music, sometimes pitches, clefs, and even rhythms. This makes the working out and playing of his music particularly engaging. Certainly, one of the fundamental pleasures of playing the piano is discovering *how* to do something. With Wolff's music you must, of course, still learn *how* to play it, but first you must figure out *what* it is that you might play.

—Thomas Schultz, May 2009

Christian Wolff (born 1934, Nice, France) is a composer, teacher, and sometime performer. Since 1941 he has lived in the United States. He studied piano with Grete Sultan and composition briefly with John Cage, in whose company, along with Morton Feldman, then David Tudor and Earle Brown, his work found inspiration and encouragement, as it did subsequently from association with Frederic Rzewski and Cornelius Cardew. He has also had a long association with Merce Cunningham and his dance company. As an improviser he has played with the English group AMM, Christian Marclay, Takehisa Kosugi, Keith Rowe, Steve Lacy, Larry Polansky, and Kui Dong. Academically trained as a classicist, he has taught at Harvard, then, from 1971 to 1999, in music, comparative literature, and classics, at Dartmouth College.

Thomas Schultz has established an international reputation both as an interpreter of music from the classical tradition—particularly Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt—and as one of the leading exponents of the music of our time. Among his recent engagements are solo recitals in New York, San Francisco, Paris, Berlin, Ghent, Seoul, Taipei, and Kyoto, and at the Schoenberg Festival in Vienna, the Piano Spheres series in Los Angeles, Korea's Tongyoung Festival, the Festival of New American Music in Sacramento, and the April in Santa Cruz Festival. In 2005 he gave a series of master classes on the piano music of the Second Viennese School at the Schoenberg Center in Vienna.

His recitals are notable for programming that celebrates the continuing vitality of the piano repertoire, juxtaposing the old and the new. Since 2002, Schultz has included in his recitals and recordings works written especially for him by Frederic Rzewski, Christian Wolff, Hyo-shin Na, Walter Zimmermann, Boudewijn Buckinx and Yuji Takahashi. In addition, he has worked closely with John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Elliott Carter. Schultz's musical studies were with John Perry, Leonard Stein, and Philip Lillestol. He has been a member of the piano faculty at Stanford University since 1994.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

10 Exercises. Natacha Diels, flute; Garrett List, trombone; Larry Polansky, electric guitar; Michael Riessler, bass clarinet; Frederic Rzewski, piano; Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion; Chiyoko Szlavnic, soprano saxophone; Christian Wolff, melodica, percussion, piano. New World Records 80658-2.

Bread and Roses: Piano Works 1976-83. Sally Pinkas. Mode Records 43.

Burdocks. The Other Minds Ensemble. Tzadik 7071.

Complete Works for Violin and Piano. Marc Sabat, violin; Stephen Clarke, piano. Mode Records 126.

Early Piano Music. John Tilbury, Christian Wolff, pianos; Eddie Prevost, percussion. Matchless Recordings 51.

For Ruth Crawford. Roland Dahinden, trombone; Hildegard Kleeb, piano; Dimitris Polisoidis, violin and viola. hatArt 6156.

I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman. The Barton Workshop. Mode Records 69.

Look She Said: Complete Works for Bass. Robert Black, double bass; Robin Lorentz, violin; Julie Josephson, trombone. Mode Records 109.

Percussionist Songs. Robyn Schulkowsky, percussion. Matchless Recordings 59.

(Re):Making Music. The Barton Workshop. Mode Records 133 [2CDs].

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CHRISTIAN WOLFF (b. 1934)
LONG PIANO (PEACE MARCH 11)

THOMAS SCHULTZ, PIANO

80699-2

Long Piano (Peace March 11) (2004-5) 59:01

1. Beginning
2. #21
3. #44
4. #61
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