

The Algebra of Everyday Life

Your first encounter with the music of **Christian Wolff** leaves you with the impression you've just heard (or played, or read) something totally strange, unlike anything else you know. And yet, upon reflection, you realize it is at the same time something completely ordinary and normal, as familiar in its way as any number of repetitive actions characteristic of everyday life—getting up in the morning, going to school, work, church, washing the dishes, performing the daily tasks of home and family.

Weird little tunes, sounding as if they had been beamed at some remote point in the universe and then bounced back again as a kind of intergalactic mutant music; recognizable melodic and rhythmic patterns, somehow sewn together in monstrous pairings, sometimes reminiscent of the demons of Hieronymous Bosch, composites of animals, fish, flowers, and common household objects: There is order, but also constant interruption, intrusions of disorderly reality upon regularity and lawfulness, combining to create an effect of both familiarity and strangeness: Shklovsky's *ostranenie*.

You could say this music is surrealist—not reproducing familiar forms, but revealing, behind these, life's unpredictability. You could say it is political; improvisatory; concerned with collaborative, non-hierarchical forms of social organization; but you can't really say what it is like (although John Cage came close when he said, after a performance of the *Exercises* in New York, that it was like the classical music of an unknown civilization).

It does not fit neatly into any categories; it does not belong to any school, neither of New York nor of Kabul. It preaches no doctrine and occupies no territory, although it does continue in some way the European written tradition. While the composer has spent most of his life in school, and is unquestionably a member of the American academic elite, his work can hardly be called academic. (Curiously, this elite has paid almost no attention to his work as a composer.) It is hookey-playing music, between schools. It even refuses to sit on the maverick's stool in the corner, as a warning to others.

The essays contained in this volume, gathered together over a period of roughly forty years, are as interesting for their omissions as for the information they contain. They reveal a restless mind, keenly aware of the (often fine) difference between knowledge and hokum; thoroughly grounded in the classics, yet constantly prodding this (apparently solid) ground, searching for quicksand beneath. He poses many questions, not always accompanied by answers—for example, how does he do it? One is never sure whether he chooses to conceal the tricks of the trade, like a traditional master craftsman, or considers the details trivial and uninteresting, or has simply forgotten them.

Particularly revealing are some of the later lecture-texts, in which he does attempt to disclose something of his personal view of his work and its relation to the world—not a “theory,” perhaps, but more like a confession, unsystematic and direct, like the music, sometimes with pithy pragmatic observations (“What can you do? You do what you can”). He points out the relation between music and child care: the necessity for thinking in short gasps of time, forgoing the luxury of continuous undisturbed solitude. The grand scheme of things, the consistent adherence to some great idea looming over the whole, becomes less important than simply getting the day's work done, with all the big and small unanticipated changes that life may have forced upon the original project. The result is a sometimes crazy patchwork of intended and contingent patterns, like a quilt (compare Feldman's interest in rugs), like life, as lived by someone whose thought is subject to repeated interruptions: changing diapers, getting the kids to school.

It is difficult to define Wolff's politics exactly, although clearly political ideas play an important role in his work. Is he merely a lily-livered liberal? A Communist? Or something even worse? I like to think he expresses a form of common sense, both traditional and revolutionary at the same time—just as

communism, as practiced in families and villages all over the world, has existed for centuries (compare Kropotkin). Such “common-sense” music might play a part in some mass collective movement in the next century, in three ways:

1. This music, unlike most so-called “new music,” is not designed for passive consumption, whether in concert performance or as a piece of plastic that you buy in a store. It is primarily meant to be played, rather than merely heard (although, of course, a good performance is worth hearing). Although some of it is virtuoso stuff, an important part of Wolff’s considerable output can be performed by amateurs. Anybody with the will and a certain understanding can do it. This idea of music as something you do, rather than something that is done to you, is both ancient and forward-looking.

2. Wolff’s political music does not merely use texts, for example, to convey political ideas. The music is itself an illustration of these ideas. In *Wobbly Music* or *Changing the System* the coordination of the players is democratic, something that might seem obvious, but in fact rarely happens in written music. So we do not have people onstage talking revolutionary rhetoric while submitting to the same old authoritarian forms.*

3. In the macho world of contemporary music, Wolff is a rare example of a male composer who has been able to express, if not exactly a feminine aesthetic, at least one which shows sensitivity to women’s experience.

This political component is of course also related to the question of improvisation. Improvisation is the art of the possible, and as such affects vastly differing strata of the population: The pauper must improvise in order to survive; but then so must the merchant, the general, sailor, thief, and magician. It could therefore, theoretically at least, provide a partial model for some kind of post-revolutionary language that would promote reconciliation and unity among different classes of people; and for a while, during the sixties, such ideas were widespread and exerted considerable influence on large numbers of artists (myself included).

Wolff’s “game-strategy” pieces of the late fifties and early sixties have made him something of a hero for a younger generation of improvising musicians, like John Zorn and his colleagues. Actually, though, improvisation does not play an important part in Wolff’s music at all, at least not in my view—except in a broader sense, as with a basketball player, who may be said to improvise, while at the same time adhering to the strict rules governing the game. Wolff’s improvisational schemes almost always involve a finite (usually small) number of choices within a strictly defined playing field—a far cry from the “free” improvisation of the sixties.

Still, he is one of the few composers who, even in the heady sixties, took improvisation at all seriously—or indeed, even understood what it was about. Wolff was never a hippie, far from it: but, compared with the repressive orthodoxy that has been the curse of new music ever since its origins, he has been found guilty, on a number of occasions, of some far-out antinomian jazz.

For his “game-strategy” works, Wolff devised a kind of algebraic notation that accounted not only for pitch, time, and other parameters, but also for certain basic contingency-relations between players: Begin slightly after the sound of another player, slightly higher or lower, et cetera. These scores do not de/prescribe the final resulting sound-structure, but provide a map along which the players may travel, with each new move producing different results.

Many composers at the time were experimenting with similar ideas; but I believe that Wolff was able to come up with particularly elegant solutions—precisely because he was not so concerned with the final result, but with the game-process itself as a work of art. The symbolic language of these pieces, unlike

that of mathematics, does not refer to abstract values or quantities, but to real-life situations (and sometimes quite messy ones) whose interpretation may require considerable ingenuity (sophistry, some might say). Reading through these scores is rather like wading (neither swimming nor simply walking) through the muddy everydayness of the apparently ordinary, self-understood sound world—a world we don't think about, but merely take for granted.

In the performance of these works, one sifts through the muck to extract regularities and Platonic onenesses—not by systematic abstraction, but by one-at-a-time heuristic encounters with the unexpected through an interaction with a system that maximizes the probability of surprise without guaranteeing its certainty. In the muck and the murk, one occasionally makes sounds giving the same satisfaction as the solution of a complex equation—but at the same time there is a sense of the lawlessness of history (if everything happened according to plan, there would be none; it would be simply the record of missed appointments).

Refreshing and reassuring in its openness and laidbackness, Wolff's way of thinking and talking about music also has a serious and unsettling side. There is a disturbing sense of the fragility of the whole tradition out of which this music comes, a feeling that it, along with the civilization that produced it, could go down the drain at any moment. This is not "good time music" (as Wolff calls the work of the sixties minimalists), but rather more like the music that accompanies the tightrope dancer, promoting both relaxation and vigilant concentration.

The fumbling, groping rhythms of the music, its amateur—or beginner—quality, the combination of "legitimate" instruments with toys or junk, its voluntary opening to the noise of the external world—all of these things express an ambivalence that belongs neither to tragedy nor comedy, but something in between. Like the smiling mask of Dionysus in Euripides's *Bacchae* (a play which is likewise between genres) this music is both an invitation and a warning, suggesting the possibility of a sensible (and sensitive) outcome, if we are open to it, but also the possibility of everything caving in, if we're not.

—Frederic Rzewski

*Of course, democracy is imperfect. That's fine, Wolff seems to be saying: You don't have to change human nature before things can really get better. On the contrary, people can get there by themselves, just as they are, without guidance from a higher authority and without the nuisance of transitional forms (like provisional governments and prisons). The millenarian idea of "socialist man," the new Adam, some kind of socially engineered mutation, motivated by altruism and a generous concern for the species and society beyond individual self-interest, has been until now, paradoxically, the major obstacle to actually doing it. Socialism, the revolution, whatever you call the thing that replaces what we have now, has to be more than merely a bridge to a future utopia: it has to be the real thing already. And this real thing has to be something that's already there, that merely needs to be developed and expanded, not some kind of pie-in-the-sky. All you need are convincing ways to remind people how intelligent they already are, and of the kind of behavior that is needed to get where they all want to go. And here is where music really can play a useful part.

Preface to Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writings & Conversations* [*Schriften und Gespräche*]. MusikTexte, Cologne, 1998. Reprinted by permission.

Composer's notes

The written music for *Exercises* does not specify instrumentation or number of performers, except that percussion material is specifically indicated—six items to be chosen by the performer in increasing degrees of resonance, from 1 to 6. For *Exercises 1–14* the music consists of single line phrases, sometimes two line phrases. These are marked off by a notation that represents a pause whose duration, which may vary widely, is determined by each player in the course of playing. All players have the same music. All the music is written on a single staff that can be read in any two ways, usually in treble and bass clef, as each player decides and as is possible for an instrument's range (here a third reading for

piccolo and guitar, an octave higher or lower than written, was also allowed). Each player can play as much or as little of the material as desired, in effect an improvising at the time of performance of the instrumentation. Coordination of the players as well as ways of playing—dynamics, articulation, color—are also determined in the process of playing by a kind of real-time improvised aural negotiation. The underlying rule is that unison should be a point of reference, though it may not often be represented as such. You could say that heterophony is the basic procedure.

In the group of *Exercises 15–18* each *Exercise* is differently written: *15* on two staves, treble and bass specified, with quite a lot of chordal writing, suggesting but not requiring performance on a keyboard (here on piano); *16* also on two staves, treble and bass, now in single lines, a two-voiced piece, instrumentation free; *17* is written as a single line in bass clef, trombone suggested but not required; *18* specifies four players but not their instruments except for occasional use of percussion (three items to be chosen by the players), no clefs indicated.

Most of the *Exercises* had to be recorded in one take. The dynamics of performance under the conditions described above make it virtually impossible to stop along the way and then pick up at a given point. So too editing—cutting from one take to another is pretty much impossible (we made one exception, for *Exercise 7*). We recorded many versions of each *Exercise* and finally chose a selection of those that we thought worked well and that would fit well together on a CD. This included two versions of *Exercises 10* and *18*. It's in the nature of these pieces that there will not be any final, definitive version of any one, though there might be several, different versions of the same *Exercise* that equally represent a particularly good way of doing it.

The recording took place in a barn built of stone and with a wooden roof, in the countryside of Umbria, in Italy. *Exercise 14b* is a percussion duet intended to run concurrently and independently with *Exercise 14a*. No version of *14a* seemed quite right for this CD but we liked the results of *14b* and kept it by itself, adding a recording of the sounds from an open window of the barn, from just before dusk till nightfall.

—*Christian Wolff*

Blue Sonata

John Ashbery

Long ago was the then beginning to seem like now
As now is but the setting out on a new but still
Undefined way. *That* now, the one once
Seen from far away, is our destiny
No matter what else may happen to us. It is
The present past of which our features,
Our opinions are made. We are half it and we
Care nothing about the rest of it. We
Can see far enough ahead for the rest of us to be
Implicit in the surroundings that twilight is.
We know that this part of the day comes every day
And we feel that, as it has its rights, so
We have our right to be ourselves in the measure
That we are in it and not some other day, or in
Some other place. The time suits us
Just as it fancies itself, but just so far
As we not give up that inch, breath

Of becoming before becoming may be seen,
Or come to seem all that it seems to mean now.

The things that were coming to be talked about
Have come and gone and are still remembered
As being recent. There is a grain of curiosity
At the base of some new thing, that unrolls
Its question mark like a new wave on the shore.
In coming to give, to give up what we had,
We have, we understand, gained or been gained
By what was passing through, bright with the sheen
Of things recently forgotten and revived.
Each image fits into place, with the calm
Of not having too many, of having just enough,
We live in the sigh of our present.

If that was all there was to have
We could re - imagine the other half, deducing it
From the shape of what is seen, thus
Being inserted into its idea of how we
Ought to proceed. It would be tragic to fit
Into the space created by our not having arrived yet,
To utter the speech that belongs there,
For progress occurs through re-inventing
These words from a dim recollection of them,
In violating that space in such a way as
To leave it intact. Yet we do after all
Belong here, and have moved a considerable
Distance; our passing is a facade.
But our understanding of it is justified.

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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.

Natacha Diels is a flutist and composer trained in performance and music technology at New York University. She is the founding member of the new-music ensemble Pamplemousse, for which she has made an electro-acoustic work. She has collaborated with Vijay Iyer on the theater project *Betrothed*. She performs as a soloist and with various new-music groups including Red Light Music and the S.E.M. Ensemble.

Garrett List is a trombonist, composer, and improviser with a wide range of musical involvements, from jazz to new musics, from Berio and Maderna to Cage, Coleman, Braxton, and Musica Elettronica Viva.

With Dennis Russell Davies he founded the Juilliard Ensemble and co-directed the Ensemble. He also helped found the Kitchen Center for Video and Music and has been one of its music directors. Since 1980 he has lived in Belgium, teaching improvisation at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège and continuing to be active as a performer and composer of a populist and politically-oriented music.

Larry Polansky is a composer, theorist, teacher, writer, performer, programmer, and systems designer. He lives in Hanover, New Hampshire, is co-director and co-founder of Frog Peak Music, and teaches at Dartmouth College.

Michael Riessler is a clarinetist, saxophonist, composer, improviser, and teacher who has been active throughout Europe, especially France and Germany, in West and Central Africa, Russia, and Canada. He has performed with various orchestras, new-music, improvisation, and jazz groups, and with musicians including Steve Reich, John Cage, Carla Bley, Rabih Abou-Khalil, David Byrne, and Sarah Vaughan. His wide-ranging work as a composer and improviser has also involved him with theater, film, radio, and dance productions. He has had compositions commissioned by the Berlin Biennale and the Donaueschingen Musiktage.

Frederic Rzewski is a composer, pianist, and improviser. In the 1960s he followed in David Tudor's steps as the premiere pianist for new music, and with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum co-founded Musica Elettronica Viva. He also worked with such jazz composer-improvisers as Steve Lacy and Anthony Braxton. His many compositions include *Coming Together*, *Les Moutons de Panurge*, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, *De Profundis*, and *The Road*. He has taught at numerous institutions, including Yale University, the University of Cincinnati, the California Institute of the Arts, and the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, and from 1977 until his recent retirement, was professor of composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, Belgium.

Robyn Schulkowsky is a percussionist, improviser, composer, and teacher. She has premiered and recorded work by John Cage, Morton Feldman, Helmut Lachenmann, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, Luciano Berio, Olga Neuwirth, Rebecca Saunders, Kevin Volans, Wolfgang Rihm, and Christian Wolff (Wolff has written a number of pieces for her—a collection is on the solo CD *Percussionist Songs*). She performs and does teaching projects throughout the world, including in China, India, Ghana, Argentina, and Brazil. Her compositions are often for film and theater, including work with Robert Wilson and Edith Clever and a recent production of Euripides's *Bacchae* in Munich. As an improviser she has played with, among many others, Derek Bailey and Joey Baron (a recent CD of their collaborative compositions is *Dinosaur Dances*).

Chiyoeko Szlavnic is a composer and flute and saxophone player based in Berlin. She plays in and composes for a variety of experimental music ensembles in Canada and Germany. She has been a composition student of James Tenney, and in 1997–8 a grantee at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. Since 2004 her compositional work has been based on her pencil drawings and has been performed in Europe and North America.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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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Wolff, Christian. *Cues: Writings & Conversations [Schriften und Gespräche]*. MusikTexte, Cologne, 1998.

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CHRISTIAN WOLFF (b. 1934)

10 Exercises

Natacha Diels, Garrett List, Larry Polansky, Michael Riessler, Frederic Rzewski, Robyn Schulkowsky, Chiyoko Szlavnic, Christian Wolff
80658-2

1. *Exercise 18* 7:33

L. Polansky, electric guitar, percussion; F. Rzewski, piano, percussion; R. Schulkowsky, percussion; C. Szlavnic, soprano saxophone, percussion

2. *Exercise 7* 5:29

N. Diels, flute; G. List, trombone; L. Polansky, electric guitar, mandolin; M. Riessler, bass clarinet; F. Rzewski, piano; R. Schulkowsky, percussion; C. Szlavnic, soprano saxophone; C. Wolff, piano

3. *Exercise 16* 4:37

M. Riessler, bass clarinet; R. Schulkowsky, vibraphone

4. *Exercise 8* 4:01

F. Rzewski, piano; R. Schulkowsky, vibraphone

5. *Exercise 14b* 6:49

R. Schulkowsky, percussion; C. Wolff, percussion

6. *Exercise 3* 3:04

M. Riessler, bass clarinet; R. Schulkowsky, marimba

7. *Exercise 1* 2:29

L. Polansky, electric guitar; F. Rzewski, piano; R. Schulkowsky, vibraphone; C. Wolff, melodica

8. *Exercise 15* 8:00

F. Rzewski, piano

9. *Exercise 10* 3:45

G. List, trombone; M. Riessler, bass clarinet; F. Rzewski, piano; L. Polansky, electric guitar

10. *Exercise 11* 7:27

L. Polansky, electric guitar; F. Rzewski, piano; C. Szlavnic, soprano saxophone; R. Schulkowsky, vibraphone; C. Wolff, melodica

11. *Exercise 18* 10:52

G. List, trombone, percussion; M. Riessler, bass clarinet, percussion; R. Schulkowsky, percussion; C. Wolff, piano, melodica, percussion

12. *Exercise 10* 5:53

L. Polansky, electric guitar; R. Schulkowsky, vibraphone

Total time: 71:10

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