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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Cunningham, David. 1979. 'Review of Christian Wolff's London Concerts, March-April 1978'. *Contact*, 20. pp. 36-37. ISSN 0308-5066.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF'S LONDON CONCERTS MARCH-  
APRIL 1978

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I should say at the outset that I did not really enjoy much of the music in the Wolff concerts to which I went (but what do I mean by enjoy?). I liked the ideas in the experimental aspects of the compositions, but they seemed to have one important failing: that the experimental elements were used with a preconceived result in the composer's mind — not, perhaps, as explicit a result as with straightforward composition, but nevertheless reducing the experimental element to only a kind of closely controlled indeterminacy. From a purist experimental point of view that is an implicit criticism in itself, but for the moment I will advocate the above as an approach to composing, particularly in view of more recent 'abrasive' works by other experimental composers.

'What do I mean by enjoy?', comes in here. I tend to think that there are basically three primary ways of 'enjoying' music: sound, concept and context. I (and I would assume others too) can enjoy a piece if it operates in a subjectively interesting fashion on one of these levels, but preferably on all three: 'Art serves the whole man'.

Inherent in what I am putting forward is the idea that 'sound' is interesting in itself regardless of context, heritage or whatever. In the past what I have seen as being the most successful experimental music has tended to have a very strong and often very attractive sound, and in many cases this has a lot to do with non-experimental decisions taken by the composer or performer about instrumentation and to a lesser extent presentation. For instance, in Steve Reich's *Drumming* the basic piece has been presented in a (by experimental standards) climactic fashion, the sound becoming less sparse and more lush and vibrant at each stage. I am convinced that the basic attractiveness of the sound has played a major part in its success. The same goes for Glass, the Obscure records and, of course, for Terry Riley.

I found most of the Wolff pieces using indeterminacy interesting on an 'ideas' level. However, this interest tended not to generate sounds that were subjectively interesting, stimulating and strong. There were exceptions to this — some very beautiful moments indeed — but generally the pieces lacked any kind of decisive use of the (in many cases large) range of instruments and textures available. This was due in some measure to a tendency on the part of the ensembles to play the pieces in an 'avantgarde' style, taking advantage of the free dynamics to turn some potentially pastoral moments into a bit of 'plink-plonk' music. This perhaps represents an attitude more experimental than the one to which I am inclined.<sup>2</sup> However, I think that one of the crucial things about playing from scores is deciding in advance how to approach them to the performance's advantage.

The concert at Goldsmiths' College on March 7 presented what I see as two contradictory approaches to composition from Wolff. From *Exercises and Songs* (1974), exercises 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10 and 14 were played, interspersed with four songs: *Teacher, Teacher* (from a blues text) and *After a Few Years of Prosperity* (from a text by Rosa Luxemburg) by Wolff himself, and *Dark as a Dungeon* and *Woody Guthrie's Union Maid*. The contradictory side (as I see it) was represented by *For Prepared Piano* (1951), *Tilbury 2* (1969), *Exercises 15 and 16* (1975) — all played by the pianist John Tilbury — and *Dark as a Dungeon* (1977), a virtuoso clarinet piece derived from the song and played by Ian Mitchell.

The latter pieces I found very difficult to listen to in any kind of constructive way: they appeared to (merely?) expose virtuosity. I did not find that kind of virtuosity very interesting. Taken as a whole, the pieces did not sound very

attractive. There were too many 'avantgarde' bangs, burps, squeals and thumps which sounded as if they had been deliberately introduced to correspond to some kind of aesthetic which demands that any piece should have a huge dynamic range, no matter what else the composer is trying to do. I have had plenty of opportunities to ask Wolff why he writes like this, but it is so alien to my interest in music that I cannot think of a way to ask him without causing some total misreading of my question. I also did not want to appear rude. Despite the fact that I disliked these pieces intensely, a lot of other people did enjoy them very much. There is the possibility that I totally failed to understand this music, and am very wrong about it. However, that possibility would seem to smack of more than the usual elitism.

But now for the good news: the exercises, played by a ten piece ensemble including the composer,<sup>3</sup> were (mostly) mellifluous and delicate, introducing textures from the occasionally unorthodox instrumentation with a unique although sometimes weak flavour. The exercises consist of little scores in only one unmarked clef, which can be read as either treble or bass (or, I suppose, a C clef or anything else). The scores are read and played in a kind of shaky unison, and the material is all based on little invented scales. This gives the performance a melodic, up and down feel. The important thing about the scoring for unison is the verbal instruction to treat unison as 'a point of reference'<sup>4</sup> rather than as a fixed relationship. Each phrase is very short, so within the phrase individual musicians can speed up or slow down on their own initiative without disturbing the piece 'too much'. This lends the music the 'shaky unison' mentioned above. What comes out is a systematised extrapolation of the synchronism of the Portsmouth Sinfonia, although in that case the error was often more extreme. The synchronism of the Portsmouth Sinfonia was achieved by imprecise interpretation of what I suspect was dubious conducting; Wolff's technique requires that there is a gap of slightly uncertain length between each phrase (the phrases are actually marked off in the scores) so that the players cannot settle: '... what's involved is a kind of group activity with just that turn in it that allows it to move freely'<sup>5</sup>

No dynamics are specified in the scores, and I felt that the concert would have benefited from a more restrained approach on the part of the musicians. Wolff gave a talk at Goldsmiths' earlier that day in which he mentioned the oral tradition of experimental music: the way in which pieces are given what become 'definitive' performances (the most obvious example would be 4' 33" done at the piano). I felt that there was an attempt made in the performance to give the piece a 'sound' that could be described as partially avantgarde (the dynamics), partially experimental (the instrumentation's overall weakness as a texture), and that these failings are attributable to that very oral tradition. I tend to think that the music could have been given a radically different, very restrained interpretation, and a very dense texture through judicious choice of instrumentation. I am thinking, really, of possibilities in the work which were hinted at during the performance. Some of the combinations of cello, tuba and piano (among others) were very interesting; not so the assorted percussion. This was usually of a home-made variety and sounded very insipid (apart from Dave Smith's collection of curious little pieces of metal).

The exercises were interspersed with the songs which I found less interesting. While they could be seen as a gesture in the direction of the revolution, I found such a gesture in such an environment fairly meaningless.

Most of the criticisms I have made of this concert are of contradictions inherent in the pieces. In Wolff's terms, these contradictions are not faults. To some extent their exposure and consequent demystification are part of the purpose of the music. I do not find that kind of bare exposure adequate justification for what Wolff is doing. His readiness to leave gaps with the contradictions showing is all too convenient a solution when faced with a compositional dilemma. As a result, the compositions suffer from an apparent defeatism.

And so to the Air Gallery on March 22, where I listened to a concert of music by Christian Wolff and William Brooks. Wolff's works were *Bread and Roses* (1976) and *Braverman Music, Parts One and Two* (1978). William Brooks played *Bread and Roses* at the piano: first the original song version, in which he sang the text, and then the Wolff re-write. I



suspect that it is the combination of the piece itself with Brooks's playing that made me absolutely hate it.

Wolff's *Bread and Roses* is a very grim, avantgarde improvisation on the original, and Brooks played it very aggressively. It is fragmented, as with most of Wolff's music, stopping and starting in an uneasy pattern, as well as dragging out and playing around little bits of the tune. Some may say that this is exactly the function of the piece, but I was annoyed throughout by the contradiction of all these composers and students sitting around in an art gallery listening to a corruption of what they think is workers' music. This brings into question the assumption in Wolff's working principle: that demystification is a natural result of the exposure of a dilemma. You cannot really 'expose' a dilemma unless you actually create the situation that brings it about. In Wolff's position all you can do is to change the context in which the dilemma is seen sufficiently to disable whatever functional relationship the components of the dilemma were in, and thereby unmask it. Analysing it in this way (as opposed to Wolff's approach) seems to show that the exposure of a dilemma can be seen as a negative action, an undoing rather than a doing. I tend to see *Bread and Roses* as an undoing.

Happily, *Braverman Music* is easier on the ear and holds promise<sup>6</sup> as a very nice piece of music (given a very restrained if large ensemble to play it). The Keele Contemporary Chamber Players<sup>7</sup> played the piece very well, but with a touch of the avantgarde empty climax, thus giving it dynamics it could easily do without. The dynamics in the score are left free: I do not see why.

Harry Braverman was an American worker who wrote a book called *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*. *Braverman Music* is a work in two parts. The first part is a series of little pieces rather similar to the *Exercises* in shape, but not using Wolff's single staff notation or the device of pauses between phrases. This gives the part a richer and more melodic sound, more sustained and, I should think, to many ears more confident. The second part is a song (this originated in the concentration camps during the last war) followed by a variation. The variation is treated in Wolff's fragmentary style, similar in concept to the way he treats *Bread and Roses*, but altogether more coherent than that piece. The writing is strong and economically dynamic, the wind instruments forming a unison backdrop to the punctuation of piano and marimba. Rhythmically, the music is fairly interesting, developing into some concise but rich contrapuntal structures.

Wolff's other appearances during his stay in London from October 1977 to April 1978 were a lecture at the ICA on April 12 and a major concert at Riverside Studios on April 27. It is interesting to compare what was said in the lecture directly with the concert. Wolff uses quotes such as Charles Seeger's 'Art is always and inevitably a social function . . . it is propaganda . . . the better the propaganda the better the art is.' The comparison shows an obvious correlation and also major contradictions, but again this seems to be a position Wolff is quite happy to hold.

At the ICA Wolff used the Seeger quote, and also quoted from Hanns Eisler, Raymond Firtly and Cornelius Cardew. He coherently pointed out the logic in much of both Cardew's and Frederic Rzewski's thinking, and re-stated his general position in terms of these people, again talking about exposing contradictions and turning them to useful ends. Again, I cannot see this as being adequate; again, the contradictions are being exposed and, again, very little is happening to turn those contradictions to useful ends.

The concert began with Ives' Piano Trio and then continued with a sequence of three solo pieces: two versions of *Bread and Roses*, the piano version from the Air Gallery concert and a violin version (1977), and the first performance of *Cello Song Variations — Alleluia l'm a Bum* (1978) which starts as a Baptist hymn and disintegrates into a bit of virtuoso avantgarde cello playing.<sup>8</sup> The whole of the second half of the concert was taken up with *Changing the System* (1972).<sup>9</sup> This piece presents four different kinds of activity from, in this case three, quartets playing four-note chords together, passing notes around from player to player inside the group, playing chords on a variety of percussion instruments or speaking a text by Tom Hayden about the need to change the political system. This way, in theory, the groups provide an overall sound of melody and accompaniment. The internal cueing in the 'swopping notes' sections is interesting, depending on the players' alertness as much as anything.

However, there is a contradiction inside this piece between potentiality and actuality, the former being drifting chords set inside two differing slow rhythms from the other two groups, the latter an avantgarde string section working against the small collection of instruments which made up one of the other groups. Weaknesses were exposed in both, but not in an interesting or unusual way. One mistake was the use of a well-defined traditional sound which was very strong (the tried and tested combination of violin, viola, cello and piano) with what was in this situation a much less well-matched group of instruments (including electric organ and accordion), a group that could be very interesting outside this context. The combination of the groups tended to prevent them mixing. Again, as with much of Wolff's music, the dynamics (as played) had a broad range, something that tended to fragment the playing inside each group and to obscure the process. The trills and pizzicatos from the 'string section' were very annoying; and as I am of the opinion that this performance was a failure, I would point to those fragmentation aspects that the performers introduced (rather than those prescribed by the score) as the source of the weakness.

The percussion group seemed to have more idea of what was actually happening to the piece during the performance. Led by Brendan Major, who 'talked' them through a couple of false starts, they began to bang out a steady if oblique rhythm on a noisy collection of percussion instruments. They were uninhibited, it seemed, and at least made the concert memorable even if not on a musical level. *Changing the System* proceeded through various permutations of instrumental playing, speaking and percussion playing until it finally trickled to a halt. It was a rather unsatisfactory way to end this series of Wolff concerts. I felt that careful choice of musicians and instrumentation could have improved the performance of the pieces to a level that would have fully realised the potential within the scores. As it was, I did like much of *Exercises*, *Braverman Music* and something I have not mentioned yet, from the ICA lecture: a tape of *Wobbly Music* (1975) which interested me because of the sound as much as anything. There seemed to be real difference between the use of the instruments and their treatment here and the music featured in the concerts, but I do not know the details behind this recorded performance, so I will leave it at that.

Wolff's music leaves us, then, on the horns of a few compositional and socio-musical dilemmas, but with little real clue as to how to disengage from that position. At least Wolff puts his music where his mouth is, and one cannot help but admire him for that. However, the music does not seem to be getting anywhere.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>From an Air Gallery press release for the old Campiello Band (now the Michael Nyman Band). The word 'abrasive' is important.

<sup>2</sup>More experimental if the performers were doing this from a no rehearsal, semi-improvisatory interpretation.

<sup>3</sup>The members of the ensemble were Christian Wolff, Jeremy Peyton-Jones, Hugh Davies, Dave Smith, John White, Andrew Poppy, Keith Potter, Paul Robinson, Ben Mason and Alexandra Robinson.

<sup>4</sup>Christian Wolff, quoted in the concert's press release.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>According to the Air Gallery press release *Braverman Music* is a 'work in progress'.

<sup>7</sup>The Keele Contemporary Chamber Players were Peter Sargent, Sue Miller, Rob Nash, Adele Zalicks, Jane Hacker, Mike Roach and Mike Evans.

<sup>8</sup>The musicians were Douglas Young (piano), Elizabeth Perry (violin) and Rohan de Saram (cello).

<sup>9</sup>The musicians were Elizabeth Perry, Hussain Mohamed, Rohan de Saram, Douglas Young, Christian Wolff, Dave Smith, Keith Potter, Howard Skempton, Jill Box-Granger, Julia Eisner, Chris Fitkin and Brendan Major.