

## **Cornelius Cardew: Radical Composition and Radical Politics**

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Cornelius Cardew (1936 - 1981) established himself as a pioneering composer of avant-garde and experimental music in the 1950s and 1960s. Originally trained in the serial manner, then acknowledged by critics and peers as a leading figure of the English musical avant-garde, Cardew eventually turned his back on the experimental music of his first period in favor of a politically motivated, traditionally accessible musical style.<sup>1</sup> Cardew's political development evolved with his musical output, beginning apolitically during his serial period, moving towards anarchism during the 1960s, and finally composing in a politically motivated, tonal style. This paper will briefly outline the major periods and stylistic shifts in Cardew's work and political thought, before examining intersections between Cardew's musical and political motivations, along with some of the contradictions present in his work.

### **Cornelius Cardew - A Brief Biography**

From 1953 to 1957, Cardew studied music at the Royal Academy of Music, in London, and established himself as a respected performer and composer, with his early works using the current technique of total serialism.<sup>2</sup> Between 1958 and 1960, Cardew served as assistant to Karlheinz Stockhausen, working at the Studio for Electronic Music in Cologne.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, Cardew encountered the music of John Cage, and met Cage and the pianist David Tudor when they gave a series of

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy D. Taylor, "Moving in Decency: The Music and Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew," *Music and Letters* 79 (November, 1998): 555 - 556.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

performances in Cologne in 1958.<sup>4</sup> The indeterminacy of Cage and the New York composers (Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff) became an important inspiration for Cardew, and he turned away from total serialism towards experimental music.

In 1966, during work on his landmark graphic score *Treatise* (1967), Cardew joined the free improvisation group AMM. From 1968 - 1971 Cardew was also a leader in the Scratch Orchestra, an anarchic collective which focused on experimental music and improvisation. Though extremely influential to other experimental musicians and composers, these groups would eventually disband as a result of internal political conflicts.

During the early 1970s, Cardew underwent a process of transformation and self-criticism. Cardew became more politically aware and involved, and published *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (1974), a notorious book in which he subjects his former mentors Stockhausen and Cage to scathing criticism.<sup>5</sup> During this period, Cardew began to write political songs, using Romantically tonal musical material, contrasting sharply with his previous music.

Cardew continued to write songs in a political vein until the end of his life, though he privately expressed disappointment with the music.<sup>6</sup> Starting around 1978, he helped form the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), and was involved in the leadership of the Communist Party, though the full extent of his involvement remains

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<sup>4</sup> Tilbury, "A Life Unfinished," 62.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, (London: Latimer New Dimensions Limited, 1974) Note: Pagination derived from Ubuclassics Reprint, available at <http://www.ubu.com/historical/cardew/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Tilbury, *A Life Unfinished*, 973.

veiled in secrecy and paranoia.<sup>7</sup> Cardew was killed in a suspicious hit-and-run accident on December 13, 1981, and many of his friends and associates suspect the involvement of the British Government or the Nazi Party. As a Socialist leader and organizer, Cardew was no doubt unpopular with these groups, particularly during the Cold War years.

### ***Octet '61 for Jasper Johns and Indeterminacy (1961 - 1965)***

In the early 1960s Cardew, along with many other composers, began to experiment with performance indeterminacy and new approaches to notation. Cardew's *Octet '61 for Jasper Johns* (1962) provides performers with 60 symbols, many based on traditional musical notation, and loose instructions for their interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Performers then make their own performance scores from these notations. Cardew was influenced by John Cage's rejection of "the commodity fetishism" present in music, especially in total serialism.<sup>9</sup> Rather than placing importance on the musical object - score or recording - these composers wanted their music to be about the process of making music. They were operating largely outside of academia, and rebelling against the established Cold War idiom of total serialism and rigid formalism. Much of this experimental music did not carry an explicit program or meaning, and some of the composers (particularly Cage) resisted attaching any meaning to the sounds. This put the music outside of the realm of socialist realism, while the use of indeterminacy,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 977.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Cardew, "Octet '61 for Jasper Johns," *The Musical Times* 103 (January, 1962): 35 - 38.

<sup>9</sup> John Tilbury, "Cornelius Cardew," JEMS: An Online Journal of Experimental Music Studies, <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~chobbs/tilburycardew.html>.

improvisation, and electronics also removed the music from the realm of serially composed “formalist” music.

### **AMM and Free Improvisation (1966 - 1972)**

In 1966, Cardew joined the free improvisation ensemble AMM. It was here that he met guitarist Keith Rowe (1940 - ). Rowe was an inventive performer who was trained as a painter and played with his guitar on a tabletop (treating it analogously to John Cage’s prepared piano), and a committed Maoist who provided inspiration for Cardew’s own political development.<sup>10</sup> AMM produced a noisy, droning music, and attempted to be free of conventions and references. David W. Bernstein describes free improvisation as:

“...an act of defiance by members of the liberated white majority, a revolt against bourgeois values in a capitalist/consumer society... Improvised music was a means to combat oppression by creating new worlds through the medium of sound.”<sup>11</sup>

During the early 1970s, AMM underwent a transition along with Cardew.<sup>12</sup>

Influenced by Keith Rowe, Cardew was studying Maoist political thought. Along with Rowe, Cardew wanted AMM to make a more political music, and the other two members, Eddie Prévost and Lou Gare, “were expected to abandon their musical practice, in an act of redemption, for the ideological gratification of a peripheral, if ambitious, political group.”<sup>13</sup> The group culture during this period was tense, and all musical activities were scrutinized. Prévost wrote “...unless there was some identifiable

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<sup>10</sup> Tilbury, *A Life Unfinished*, 283 - 284.

<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, Liner notes to *MEV 40 (1967 - 2007)*: 9. Though Bernstein is writing about Musica Elettronica Viva, a similar free-improvisation ensemble, the same holds true for AMM. The groups were friends and musical allies.

<sup>12</sup> Tilbury, *A Life Unfinished*, 649.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

and 'correct' political meaning or consequence, an action was considered useless bourgeois self-indulgence."<sup>14</sup> The group temporarily splintered around this dispute, and Cardew never returned.

### **The Scratch Orchestra and *The Great Learning* (1968 - 1971)**

During the same time he was playing with AMM, Cardew was teaching a class on experimental music to a group of people with varied backgrounds and amounts of musical experience. The Scratch Orchestra was formed in 1968 from this group of students, out of "the demand of a lot of young people who weren't trained musicians to get together to make what we called experimental music on a large scale. It has nothing in common with a conventional orchestra."<sup>15</sup> The group functioned in a slightly more structured way than AMM, and all members were treated equally - trained musicians or not.<sup>16</sup> It was during the Scratch Orchestra period that Cardew composed *The Great Learning* (1968 - 1971). Considered by some to be the "summation of British experimental techniques," the piece borrows its text from Confucius, and reflects Cardew's increasing interest in Asian thought.<sup>17</sup> Though Cardew chose his text carefully, in performance, the words and meanings were distorted and obscured by the experimental techniques used. The text becomes a cloud of phonemes, with fragments of phrases emerging and receding over time. The musical result is lush and satisfying, though Cardew may have eventually become unhappy with the way in which the text

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<sup>14</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, "Moving in Decency," 556.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Cardew, "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution," *The Musical Times* 110 (June, 1969): 617 - 619.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Anderson, "Chinese Characters and Experimental Structure in Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Learning*," JEMS: An Online Journal of Experimental Music Studies, <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~chobbs/Chinesegl.html>

was obscured. Others members of the Scratch Orchestra were unhappy with the authoritarian nature of the Confucian text and the emphasis it placed on government and hierarchy.<sup>18</sup>

### **Maoism and *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (1971 - 1974)**

Mao Tse-tung's "Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art" were an important point of reference for Cardew and other Scratch Orchestra members. For Mao, there was:

"...no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine."<sup>19</sup>

For Cardew, all music needed to serve the people. In a 1971 lecture, he adopted a strikingly similar tone to the Soviet decrees against "formalist" music:

"Abstract Art takes the separation of Artist from Society to its logical conclusion. The artist finally breaks with the outside world and gives himself up to idealist metaphysics... The effect that abstract art has on the viewer is to demand of him the same kind of isolation as that of the Artist. It demands of him that he become unconscious of his concrete existence. Whereas social progress demands of us that we become more conscious of our role in society."<sup>20</sup>

Concurrent with this increasing politicization, Cardew began a process of self-criticism that would shock many and alienate even some of his closest friends. In the program notes to his score *Piano Album 1973*, Cardew listed his reasons for his stylistic shift away from the avant-garde: the exclusivity of avant-garde musical society, fragmentation of musical styles into small sub-genres, indifference to the "real situation of the world today," the individualistic outlook of the music, and its flawed class

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<sup>18</sup> Tilbury, *A Life Unfinished*, 477.

<sup>19</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art*, From Marx to Mao, <http://www.marx2mao.com/Mao/YFLA42.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Aharonian, "Cardew as a Basis," 14.

character.<sup>21</sup> He also criticized the glorification of the composer: “I have rejected the bourgeois idealistic conception which sees art as the production of unique, divinely inspired geniuses...”<sup>22</sup> Cardew often wrote of “making a musical life,” by which he referred to the importance of the process of making music, rather than the “final object” (score, recording, etc.).<sup>23</sup> He seems to be going beyond simply “allowing” performers to have greater input, and even beyond collaborative works.

In his book *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, Cardew further criticized and attempted to remove himself from the avant-garde establishment. Using Stockhausen and Cage as manifestations of the capitalist/imperialist power structure, Cardew argued that the avant-garde period is “not the latest, but the last chapter in the history of bourgeois music.”<sup>24</sup> In his criticism of Stockhausen’s *Refrain*, Cardew attacked the nature of the score as an object, the special skills and training required of potential performers, and the atmosphere of “mysticism” surrounding the performance - arguing that mysticism is often used as a tool for “suppression of the masses.” Cardew would prefer music that encourages listeners to engage with the real situation of the world around them, rather than allowing them to escape from the “painful contradictions” present in reality.<sup>25</sup> Later in the essay, Cardew argued that the ruling class uses musical culture to attack the working class in two ways: first, by promoting bourgeois culture

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<sup>21</sup> Cornelius Cardew, Performance Notes to *Piano Album 1973*, Experimental Music Catalogue, CC0021, London: Experimental Music Catalogue.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, “Moving in Decency,” 556.

<sup>24</sup> Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 49.

through the music of the classical and romantic period, and second, with mass-produced pop culture. He wrote:

“...we find tactics comparable to the ‘saturation bombing’ technique of the Americans in Vietnam. There are two main lines of attack. First, wide scale promotion of the image of bourgeois culture in its prime, the music of the classical and romantic composers (the whole education system is geared to this). Second, the promotion of mass-produced music for mass consumption. Besides bringing in enormous profits, their hope is that this derivative music (film music, pop music, musical comedy, etc.) will serve for the ideological subjugation of the working class.”<sup>26</sup>

Ironic then, that Cardew spent the last years of his life composing using the Romantic and popular styles he criticizes here.

Cardew’s adherence to Maoism is troubling as well, considering the human rights abuses committed in China during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 - 1978. Up to 1.5 million people were killed or injured during this period, a fact that goes absent in Cardew’s writings.<sup>27</sup> It is unclear whether the extent of the persecution was unknown to Cardew, or if he was simply willing to adopt the party line that those being tortured and killed were “counterrevolutionaries.” Given Cardew’s interest in improving social situations world-wide, it seems doubtful that he could have turned a blind eye had he known - but it is unknown what reactions and propaganda were present among his peers in the British Communist Party.

### **Political Songs and “Revolutionary” Tonality (1971 - 1981)**

Despite their revolutionary theme, the pieces Cardew wrote during the last decade of his life use a Romantic, tonal idiom. Cardew never wrote about the possible conflicts in expressing radically political thoughts in such a musically traditional form in the 1970s, but certainly there were more populist forms of music than a piano sonata.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew G. Walder and Yang Su, “The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: Scope, Timing and Human Impact,” *The China Quarterly* 173 (March 2003): 74.

Eventually Cardew began writing and performing with *People's Liberation Music*, a political rock band which played at rallies and protests, but for a long period in the early 1970s, Cardew was expressing his leftist thoughts solely in a conservative musical language. He continued to write in this manner for the rest of his life, though he confided in friends that he was unsatisfied with the quality of his political music.<sup>28</sup> Speaking of these works, in particular *Piano Album 1973* and the *Thalman Variations*, he acknowledged that the audience for these romantic-styled piano works was limited to “consciously culture-oriented youth,” not the working class.<sup>29</sup>

Though he admitted “compositional shortcomings” in the pieces, he argued that the political subject matter of the works would encourage listeners to engage with social issues. Along with possible unhappiness with the musical qualities of his work, upon his political transformation, Cardew also faced a commercial backlash. According to Timothy D. Taylor,

“Before his embracing of Maoism, many of Cardew’s works had been published by leading European music publishers such as Peters and Universal Edition. Thereafter, his works were published by small, unknown firms. One of these, Experimental Music Catalogue, seems to have been run by Cardew himself, for they published only his music, all in his own manuscript.”<sup>30</sup>

It is unclear why Cardew found it necessary to pair revolutionary political thought with traditional musical language. Had he been writing in a popular style like rock or pop, it would be easy to argue that his choice in genre might have allowed him to reach a larger demographic. Some authors have argued that Classical and Romantic musical forms similar to those used by Cardew are structurally informed by capitalism. The

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<sup>28</sup> Tilbury, *A Life Unfinished*, 973.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 782

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *Moving in Decency*, 573

musicologist Peter Manuel, in an essay comparing social structures with song forms, describes “sectionally structured, closed, teleological song forms” as “quintessentially characteristic of bourgeois capitalism.”<sup>31</sup> After a summary of the centuries-long transition in the arts from open, cyclical, or additive forms to sectional, rationalized formal structures, Manuel ties the solo song, focused on “sentimental love between two autonomous, socially free individuals” to the individualism which emerged in Western society during the Renaissance and the rise of capitalism.<sup>32</sup> The transition from traditional collective, open-form music-making to segmented, rationalized, hierarchical musical forms parallels, historically as well as conceptually, the move from communal social structures towards individualism and capitalism. *The Great Learning*, with its emphasis on group musicianship and static, repetitive textures, contains few of the traits of what Manuel calls “bourgeois aesthetic,” and is closer to Janos Marothy’s “collective-variative” forms, found in earlier societies, which lack dramatic narratives and can vary in length and structure.<sup>33</sup> If his political music is taken separately from his writings, Cardew appears to disagree with these authors, though his expressions of self-doubt regarding the musical characteristics of these works indicate that he might have been aware of similar structural contradictions.

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Manuel, “Modernity and Musical Structure: Neo-Marxist Perspectives on Song Form and its Successors,” in *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*, ed, Regula Qureshi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 45.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>33</sup> J. Marothy, “The Song as a Determinant of Form in Bourgeois Music,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 8 (1966): 101 - 103.

## Unanswered Questions

Cornelius Cardew presents a challenging case. Whereas some composers alter their philosophies and writings to match their musical output, Cardew drastically altered his music to reflect his changing social and political views. Starting from a fashionably apolitical stance during his serial phase, and moving through anarchism with the Scratch Orchestra and AMM, and finally socialism and political songs, Cardew's stylistic periods correspond with his political development. Whereas many composers were content to take one side or the other in the populist/formalist dichotomy created during the Cold War, Cardew appears on both sides of the debate at different times in his life. Cardew's late political music is the most troublesome, partially because its development was cut short by his early death. Though the ideological success of the music during that period is subjective, the rigidity of his Maoist principles seems to open the music up to criticism based on more objective criteria than simply that of taste or personal preference. Cardew argued that avant-garde and experimental music were products of the bourgeois musical establishment, and that only a populist music could further the cause of proletarian revolution. Why then, did he choose to write in a musical style from a previous era, one which he previously found to be bourgeois ammunition for class warfare? Certainly the working class during the 1970s was typically not listening to Romantic-era art music. Would it not have been more effective to use elements of popular culture to convey his message? As shown above, some musicologists have even argued that the basic structure, the entire foundation of this music, with its emphasis on hierarchy and individualism, is a product and extension of the capitalist power-structure. Unless further information on Cardew's work comes to light, it will

remain unknown if Cardew was consciously aware of these contradictions, or if he had become so enamored with Zhdanovism and Maoism that he was unable to think critically about his own work. Until that time, we are left with a body of work paired with many writings which trace a fascinating path of development, growth, and change.

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