

CHRISTIAN WOLFF - CHANCEY GARDENER

[The Wire, issue 202, December 2000]

Plunged at age 16 into the musical experiments of John Cage and his circle, Christian Wolff is America's most enduring minimalist composer. Now well into his sixties, his New York School explorations have reached beyond strict composition into the musics of avantists from AMM to Sonic Youth. Words: Andy Hamilton. Photos: John Fago

"Chance is used as a way of discovering things," declares Christian Wolff, the American composer whose consistent vision has been to use the force of hazard to 'shape' his enduring, distinctively sparing works. "You could call it a heuristic device," he continues. "Cage once said he looked forward to performances to discover what he'd composed, to be surprised by it. I recall somewhere in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina the story of a painter who got stuck while working on a painting. He gave up on it, put the canvas away in some corner of his studio. Some months later coming back to it he noticed a grease spot or smudge had appeared on it, and then he knew just what to do to finish the picture."

But today, Wolff is anxious to spell out the differences between himself and his teacher and mentor, that grandmaster of chance John Cage. Wolff's vital contribution, from early in his career right up to the present, has been in involving the performer in what he calls "working actively with contingencies". He respects the autonomy of performers; for him, the score is an element in a conversation. "We collaborate, the performer and I," he elucidates, "so this isn't really chance. But mostly there are several performers, and when they listen to each other, this may affect how they each make their choices... so they too collaborate, which again is not a matter of chance." Also unlike Cage, he's been sympathetic to free improvisation, while his later music took on an explicitly political orientation totally foreign to his precursor's anti-aesthetic.

But despite these clear differences of emphasis, Wolff's name inevitably remains linked with Cage and his immediate circle. Wolff was born in 1934 in Nice, France, but brought up in America. Along with fellow composer Earle Brown, he is now the only surviving member of the so-called New York School of the 50s and 60s, of which Cage was the key figure; the other members, Morton Feldman and David Tudor, as well as Cage himself, have all passed away during the last decade. While aged 16, he was a student of Cage for a brief six week period, during which time he provided the catalyst for Cageian indeterminacy. His father Kurt was a publisher in Germany whose authors included Franz Kafka; with the rise of the Nazis, he fled with his family to the USA. There he had recently brought out a translation of the Chinese I Ching (Book Of Changes), a copy of which Wolff presented to Cage. The older composer was captivated by the charts at the back, and chance composition was born. Wolff maintains that the change was coming, that his mentor would have found some other route; but in Cage's subsequent reminiscences it became a fond moment of inspiration.

Although Wolff is recognised as a member of the New York School, throughout his more than 40-year composing career his music has not become terribly well-known. But recent years have seen it come into greater prominence, with a growing discography and a couple of major orchestral commissions, notably "John, David" of which more later - the kind which had never come his way before. His use of indeterminacy in the late 50s and early 60s was apparently an inspiration for John Zorn's later "game-strategy" pieces. But recently his music has been taken up by some other unlikely avantgarde sources - he assisted in the performance of two of his pieces on 1999's magnificent Sonic Youth release Goodbye 20th Century, and earlier this year he appeared at the Other Minds Festival in San Francisco with a group of luminaries from inside and outside New York's downtown peripheries, including percussionist William Winant, Gordon Mumma, Bob Ostertag, DJ Spooky, Hamza El Din, and others.

In the event, Wolff's period in New York was brief - he left to study Classics at Harvard University and for many years has earned his living teaching classics and music at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. In that sense he's an 'academic composer', but in name only - he's not a member of any musical

establishment. I spoke to him over a very faint transatlantic phone-line; so faint, in fact, that some of the recording turned out inaudible. But he kindly responded to repeated and further questions with a typescript, complete with painstaking handwritten corrections and additions - Wolff clearly isn't an enthusiastic user of new communications technology.

Cage and indeterminacy

It was Wolff's piano teacher Grete Sultan, later a noted performer of Cage's music - she recorded the Etudes Australes in the 70s for Wergo - who first steered him towards the then little-known composer at the dawn of the 50s. Wolff has described Cage, who took few individual students at that or any other time, as "my first and only composition teacher". Since he was only 16 at that time, Wolff had little previous musical culture or training to "unlearn" - unlike the other members of the New York School including Cage himself. Though it has been derided as mythical, he's happy with the 'New York School' label. "If you want to use the designation it's fine, though I was actually myself in New York only till I left to go to college in 1951...I think what bound us together to a certain extent, was our devotion to the music of Webern."

For those who don't know the history of the New York School, this connection may seem surprising. Anton Von Webern (1883-1945) was the inspiration of the post-1945 generation of European modernists - Stockhausen, Boulez and other composers associated with the Darmstadt school. The New York composers had no association with that modernist tradition at all, and Cage's ideology - if you can call his anti-aesthetic stance an ideology - couldn't be more different from the Europeans. Wolff, who studied Webern under Cage, has said that he I can't shake off the serialist composer's influence: "I still like clean, transparent counterpoint".

Wolff's earliest pieces from 1950-2, including Serenade for flute, clarinet and violin, and For Piano I, were completely written out, using very few pitches; he then moved to more complex but still through-composed pieces using lots of silence. But like Cage, he became intrigued by the role of chance - or indeterminacy, as he prefers to call it - in music. In 1957, through a collaboration with his near-contemporary, the composer and pianist Frederic Rzewski, indeterminacy made a significant appearance in his output. But Wolff's use of it has been quite individual, and distinct from Cage's. As he explains: "From a practical point of view, Cage was initially interested in using chance as a compositional device. Once he had used it, he had made a composition which was then performed the way it was written, it was fixed. I have very occasionally used chance in this way. But what I became interested in introducing wasn't even chance so much any more, but the element of what we called indeterminacy - not at the point of composition but at the point of performance. So my scores might be made without using any chance procedures at all, but they were made in such a way that when performers used them, unpredictable events would take place."

Wolff prefers to describe the results of this approach as "working actively with contingencies". As with Cage, many of Wolff's scores are graphic, but they call for special skills in their realisation on the part of the performers. Whereas in Cage's music, each player works through the musical events prescribed in the score really regardless of what other players are doing, Wolff has focussed on the unpredictable possibilities that arise from each performer attending to what the others are doing. He expands on the difference between this "contingency process" and chance procedures: "My composition might consist of time spaces - so many seconds, and fractions of them, within which various kinds of material are indicated. Say, a choice of three pitches from a collection of seven, two dynamic markings and some colour articulation like a pizzicato. The performer then has delimited choices, as well as areas that might be quite free - for instance, the spacing of the sounds within a given time space."

"Mostly there are several performers," he goes on, "so that what they do will partly combine by chance, though when they listen to each other, this may affect how they each make their choices, and so they too collaborate, which again is not a matter of chance."

Contrasts between Cage and Wolff are spelled out usefully in Michael Nyman's recently reprinted book from 1974, Experimental Music. Nyman points to an interesting paradox in Wolff's music: "In

performance the players seem to be in a state of perpetual crisis, yet the music sounds calm, relaxed and unruffled, unlike the avant-garde variety which often sounds as though it is actually the expression of crisis."

Minimalism

Wolff's earliest and strikingly precocious pieces, written when he was 18 or younger, are interesting precursors of American minimalism. I ask him what affinities he feels with Reich, Riley and co. "Well, my earliest music could be called minimalist. That's the pieces using just 3 or 4 or so notes - LaMonte Young liked those pieces. When Terry Riley and Philip Glass and Steve Reich came along about 15 years later I thought it was wonderful, it cleared the ears out after all that complicated music of the 50s and 60s. It was also a kind of good-time music, strongly pulsed, diatonic, energetic - after the ascetic music that preceded it. I also thought its strength was in its scale - those pieces went on for very long times."

The pieces influenced by minimalism included an important set, simply called Tilbury, and dedicated to British pianist John Tilbury, currently one third of AMM. "Pieces like the Tilbury set, and the Exercises (1-14), were a kind of response to the systemic aspect of some minimalism, especially Steve Reich - 'process' music, which takes a delimited, clearly articulated idea and runs it through its permutations". The Tilbury pieces, from 1969-70, are certainly an oblique response. This is austere minimalism, largely pulseless and with lots of space. Exercises 1-14 from 1973-4, for variable, unspecified instrumentation - the excellent hatART recording, a good place to start with Wolff's music, features flute, trombone, piano and percussion - also have no obvious affinity with phase-shifting minimalism. "The Exercises were about melody," he says, "which I've always thought of as central, from the very start. It's what music inescapably does because it has to move through time and so be linear." But the pieces also reaffirmed a central concern. "They were also about how performers respond to each other, work together; the melodic material of the music is given up to freely heterophonic performance."

Cage's description - "like classical music from an unknown country" - is especially apt here. When I suggest that the "Exercises" are more euphonious than the Tilbury set, and have a kind of hieratic feel, Wolff demurs. "What do you mean by hieratic?" he erupts. "I don't like the sound of it! Religious, esoteric? No. And euphonious - very slippery notion, and in any case context-bound. What sounds 'good' or sweet - to whom? When? Try listening to, say, the classical music of Japan or Korea or China - euphonious?" Well, maybe they're easier to whistle than the earlier members of the Tilbury set. But point taken, these are always going to be tricky claims. Wolff's music is humanistic, with no apparent spiritual motivation - something that marks him out from many contemporary composers. The later Piano Preludes, from 1981, have left minimalism well behind, and are almost virtuosic. "Tilbury V" is a late addition to the Tilbury set, composed in 1996, and the contrast in style is clear - this is more pulsed, dramatic and expressive than his earlier music.

Politics

The influence of minimalism was one aspect of a more fundamental shift in Wolff's music. Though the freedom Wolff gave to the performer from the late 50s onwards has been linked with democratic idealism, in the 70s his music became explicitly politically engaged. I suggest that there are really two periods in his music - the first unconsciously political, the second more consciously ideologically mobilised. "I guess so," he responds. "I became, you might say, politicised in the late 60s". But your music was always anti-authoritarian and democratic? "Well, not right from the start. I was trying to find interesting ways of working with indeterminacy, and ways other than Cage's or Earle Brown's or Morton Feldman's". Wolff draws back: "I don't see a clear connection as such between indeterminacy and anti-authoritarianism - or any connection. Abstractly, you could say indeterminacy requires some letting go of control. But from a political point of view that's merely passive."

In the late 60s, a number of Wolff's contemporaries were moving from the specialised music of the

modernist avant-garde to music with a political orientation, supposedly of broader appeal. Most important among these contemporaries were Cornelius Cardew and Frederic Rzewski. Rzewski had earlier been a collaborator in creating techniques of indeterminacy, and Wolff was attracted by what he and Cardew were now doing. Wolff had met Cardew in 1961 in Cologne: "We knew of each other's work. It was a time when there wasn't quite so much music being produced, and you knew most of what was going on".

However, Wolff has said that he has a strong anti-rhetorical tendency - "I don't think that music should be manipulative" - and he agrees that this imposes limits on how far he took Cardew's path: "In Cardew's case, there's a kind of proselytising streak...For me, the aim is not to say 'This is what you must think', but to get people to look at things and think about them. Basically people have to do that for themselves". Cage abhorred the idea of music with a political programme, and fell out with Cardew at this time; differences with Wolff were evidently less in the open.

The contrast between Cardew's approach and Wolff's, it turns out, shows two different ways in which music can be 'political'. I ask him what he now thinks about his earlier claim that "all music is propaganda music". He said in an interview: "...we have this notion that there is propaganda music, political music, and then there's the other kind of music which has these humanistic values and this universal and so forth...I think all music is propaganda music. The humanistic so-called universal music is propaganda for that kind of music and for the society which produces it."

"I put it rather harshly", he now says. "'Political' might be a better word than 'propaganda'. It seems to me that anything to do with culture or art, which by necessity has some public character to it, is political... Of music's got its own being. An E flat on the violin is just that, it's not political! But the performance of music always has a social setting where it's part of some kind of establishment or power centre - a concert for some kind of community, elite or variously interested parties."

Wolff explains how there were a variety of responses to that situation. "Cornelius Cardew became committed to the extent that he put direct political work (organising, polemical writing, speaking, and so on) on a par with his musical work. He did music for political demonstrations - songs. That too can be a strong and valuable form of music - remember Hanns Eisler's remarkable mass songs. From this viewpoint 'political music' is a particular genre of music...It exists as music and it comes from a particular larger view of the world which one believes in, say a kind of socialism."

"Another way is to think of the music as a kind of model, say of cooperation," he continues, "the interaction, both free and contingent, of performers which I described before. Or there's the expressive nature of the music that avoids rhetoric - rhetoric as an image of the exercise of power, of manipulation." I take it that he means that his own music is expressive but not rhetorical. "A good political song, sure, will have its rhetoric," Wolff concedes. "But even there there's also the possibility of having the music such that in its performance it doesn't simply convey some simple message: get rid of all nuclear technology, for instance. The point's really more to help people focus certain energies."

Changing The System and Accompaniments were two examples of his "political" music. The latter, from 1972, is a piece for piano and voice written for Rzewski, with a text related to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Such explicit political content is something he's since abandoned. But since the mid-70s, Wolff has produced a series of instrumental pieces drawing material from political folk music, including String Quartet Exercises Out Of Songs (1974-76) and "Exercise 21" (1981). The folk material hasn't always been explicit. "More recently, over the last ten years or so, I've quoted the tunes less often...But generally I've gone both ways. Sometimes I've gone quite extremely in the other direction, where if I didn't tell you this tune forms the material for the piece, there's no way you'd recognise it."

Why does he do this, if the material is unrecognisable? "It's partly practical... I use the song material - pitch intervals, rhythmic patterns - to make a music that's drawn out of diatonic lines and familiarly pulsed rhythms, though trying to use them in new or surprising ways." His earlier music had been more chromatic, more complex rhythmically, and often without a pulse - influenced by 50s and 60s modernism, though he never used serial procedures. But that earlier music came to seem anti-social to him. "From a combination of various new musical impressions - pop music, folk music and minimalism in particular - I wanted to work with less esoteric means".

That less esoteric approach connects with a distinctive feature of Wolff's work - his increasing desire to write music that could be performed by amateurs. Frederic Rzewski, in an article on Wolff, has generalised the point, talking of his music's "amateur- or beginner-quality, the combination of 'legitimate' instruments with toys or junk, its voluntary opening to the noise of the world". Others less favourably disposed have argued that, like Cage, his ideas are more interesting than the music, that he produces a "prolegomenon to music". Did Cardew influence him in this growing preference for amateur performers?

"I think we came upon this more or less in parallel. I've had good and bad experiences with professional musicians. With amateurs, I might have different experiences, but rarely bad. Because the amateurs are unlikely to come to the music unless they want to. They may not have the skills of a professional, but you begin at least with a good attitude. Professionals are hired guns in some cases...They may have no interest whatsoever in the music, and feel alienated from it. For these pieces [the ones for amateurs] it's less important that you have standard virtuoso skills, more important that you stretch your musicality, and that's something that a lot of professional musicians are not willing to do."

These three paras cut from features as it appeared

If you're not familiar with the music business - and even if you are - his next comments might be surprising: "Professional time is an issue too. Say you have a recording session scheduled for three hours, you've got five minutes to go and you need fifteen minutes to make the performance really good. And the player says 'No, the contract says three hours'. I've had that happen, it's fairly standard. Amateurs, in contrast, are willing to put in two, three, four weeks of rehearsal time...On the other hand there are professionals I love to write for - they really engage with the music." A recent example is percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky, who figures in his recent orchestral piece, John, David, dedicated to John Cage and David Tudor. Schulkowsky has worked with Wolff on many projects, and remains committed to his music.

John, David was written for the 1998 Donaueschingen MusikTage, a large German new music festival. The performance produced a live recording, recently released on Col Legno as part of a 4-CD set featuring various composers. But the experience confirmed his views about working with professionals, and Wolff frankly urges listeners not to rush out and buy it, at least for his piece. "The experience of doing the Donaueschingen thing was not very good," he complains. "It was a classic case of bad attitude on the part of some of the performers, and the result was not very satisfactory."

The percussion part for Schulkowsky is not particularly virtuosic, though as Wolff points out, 'virtuosity' is another danger word. "There's technical difficulty and musical difficulty," he states, "and they don't by any means necessarily overlap. I sometimes write pieces very difficult to play technically. And what's worse, the listener may not even notice - the difficulties are 'internal' to the playing process, though of course they colour the quality of feeling, focused stress, for instance, in a performance. But most often the real difficulties are musical - how do you, the performer, do these sounds in a way that sounds right? Mozart, for instance, is not technically very difficult to play, but musically...!"

Orchestral manoeuvres

John, David is something of a departure, given that Wolff has mostly written for chamber ensembles and solo instrumentalists. It's his first large-scale orchestra piece. The traditional symphony orchestra set-up is something that Wolff has tended to avoid. He refers to "the orchestra's conventional - hierarchical, quasi-military and often alienated - character". Is it entirely due to political objections that he's avoided it? "It's problematic, put it that way. On the other hand, it's an amazing experience to work with an orchestra. The main problem has actually been more practical. I'm not inclined to write orchestra pieces unless I've got preferably a commission. Obviously there's an enormous amount of work involved...Because I don't write much orchestral music, and I'm known mostly for chamber music, that's a kind of vicious circle. It's another world I think, to get that kind of commission. You have to be part of a

kind of musical establishment." And Wolff isn't really part of any musical establishment, as his engagements with a whole raft of left of centre musicians in recent years have proved.

These forays outside the world of strict composition began in 1967-8, while he was staying in London. Cornelius Cardew was playing cello with AMM, and Wolff joined the group on electric bass and a collection of miscellaneous instruments. He had no background in jazz or free improvisation: "That was my first experience of it... It was sort of quietly exhilarating, learning and experiencing making music without the mediation of scores, explanations, rehearsals, etc. Especially with musicians who've centrally always done that - Keith Rowe, Eddie Prévost, Lou Gare. You're simultaneously entirely on your own and entirely part of a collective activity."

So he obviously doesn't share Cage's scepticism about improvisation. "I think Cage's experience of improvisation came from 40s and 50s jazz, and that was really before the idea of free improvisation was explored". Like Boulez, Cage felt that improvisers would inevitably be repeating themselves; he was also hostile to self-expression. But he became less sceptical about Improv later on. There's some affinity between Wolff's pieces of the late 50s and early 60s and John Zorn's game-strategy pieces. What does he feel about this latter-day improviser? "I like the energy. He's got a lot of attitude, I guess I like that...But I can't imagine a music that's more distant from mine in terms of feeling."

The Youth of today

One result of his work with AMM was Edges, a piece involving free improvised elements. Burdocks, from 1970-1, also contained a heavy improvisational component, inspired by the populist/anarchist spirit of Cardew's Scratch Orchestra, which Wolff had never actually seen in the flesh. Both these pieces are featured on one of the groundbreaking albums of the last 12 months, Sonic Youth's Goodbye 20th Century. With its performances of Cage, Tenney and Wolff himself, the album was perhaps baffling to Sonic Youth's traditional fanbase. But the composer wasn't too surprised at the groups' involvement with this repertoire. "Sonic Youth, or some of them anyway, have had a long association with the downtown New York avantgarde. My particular connection probably came through the percussionist William Winant, who works both in experimental music and with improvisers. One day Lee Ranaldo called me up and said 'We're making this album, just want to let you know'...I said I'd be in New York on the date, so he said 'Why don't you come along?' It was very nice. I've never done anything quite like that... The pieces we chose - 'Edges' and part of 'Burdocks' - involved a fair amount of improvisation. Quite a cross-section of artists was involved - William Winant, Christian Marclay, Jim O'Rourke and others - so it was a kind of expanded Sonic Youth."

Burdocks is an orchestral piece; its first large-scale, evening-length performance, in London in 1971, involved almost 40 players, and Wolff thought it was one of the finest performances he's ever received. The name originated with the Burdock Festival in Vermont which Wolff organised - the festival's outdoor venue was covered with thick growths of the weed. A rather different but equally illustrious group played the piece at the Other Minds Festival (reviewed The Wire 195): "Yes, that was again a mixed group. There was myself and Gordon Mumma, who had played in the first performance of 'Burdocks' in 1971, so he'd known the piece a long time. William Winant again was the percussionist, then we had the koto player Miya Masaoka who is an improviser in her own right, and the former cellist of the Kronos Quartet, Joan Jeanrenaud, plus Bob Ostertag, Fred Frith..."

How did these performances differ? "There are ten parts to Burdocks," explains Wolff. "You can do any number of them in any combination. For the Sonic Youth version we just took one part - a page of music, which gives you a melody, which you can play in treble and bass clef. And then you also have a couple of rhythmic patterns, which can be expressed in any way you like...And that's it. With those elements, you basically improvise. It'll always be recognisable, and have its identity, because the tune's so prominent...The Sonic Youth performance really was coloured by their sound, gritty and rough-edged, as a kind of basis. The Other Minds band had some of that grittiness but tended to be more transparent, and, a crucial difference, it was almost entirely acoustic. Fred Frith played acoustic guitar and Bob Ostertag used his electric sounds like a chamber music instrument."

Despite his involvement with the electronically-directed Sonic Youth interpretation, Wolff's preference is for acoustic music. A lot of his recent work has been for percussion: "I've just finished a solo percussion piece, for Robin Schulkowsky. Before that I did a piece for twelve percussionists". He's working on an orchestral piece for a Czech festival, to which composers such as Alvin Lucier and György Kurtág are also contributing, and where he's optimistic about the set-up; he's also writing music for zither for Georg Glasl and a piece with theremin, plus violin, horn and doublebass, for Lydia Kavina.

In fact he has problems with electronic music: "I just hear the loudspeaker all the time, as much as I hear what's coming out of it". There's a quality of presence with a live instrument that's missing, he believes. "Before sampling, there was just no way you could synthesise sounds that were that interesting, to me at least... 'Live electronics', computer-interactive... all seem to me potentially interesting. I just have no strong feelings, and practically no direct experience".

The thoughtful, reflective attitude is characteristic. So is the gentle humanism, which pervades his music. Wolff doesn't try and hit the audience over the head. His music gradually insinuates itself into the listener's consciousness - hence perhaps the fact that it has taken time for it to come into its own. As he concludes: "The music can remind people of issues, raise consciousness if you like... And then perhaps some of the music's energy will stir up something in somebody... The music expresses and gives energy and focus to feelings and views that are, at least in part, already there."

Recordings

Exercises (hat ART 6167)

For Ruth Crawford (hat ART 6156)

"Bread And Roses": Piano Works 1976-83 - Edition Christian Wolff Volume 1 (Mode 43)

"I Like To Think of Harriet Tubman": Chamber Works - Edition Christian Wolff Volume 2 (Mode 69)

Tilbury Pieces; Snowdrop - Edition Christian Wolff Volume 3 (Mode 74)

In production for Mode: Complete Violin and Piano Music - includes "Pebbles" from 1999

Doublebass Music 1974-96, including 2 solos, duo with violin, trombone, solo electric bass guitar

Piano Music 1951-59 including prepared piano

Sonic Youth, Goodbye 20th Century, (Sonic Youth SYR4) ("Edges", "Burdocks")

Donaueschingen MusikTage 1998 (Col Legno WWE 4CD 20050) ("John, David")

Writings

"Cues - Writings & Conversations" (MusikTexte, Cologne)

Thanks to Celia Ballantyne, Brian Marley, John Warnaby and Simon at Cargo.