

contact

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February 6th: Birmingham Arts Laboratory

A Day in the Life of the Arts Lab or A Performer's eye-view of a Cardew sound workshop.

I think perhaps the most impressive feature of the sound-workshop was its sense of freedom of expression, and yet unity of purpose. Never before had I participated with such a mixed bunch (about 20) of musicians and non-musicians, skilled and unskilled, playing a wide range of brass, woodwind, stringed and percussion instruments -- even a piano-accordion. But everyone there was ready and willing to contribute.

No-one knew what to expect, except that we were going to produce sound. (The term music is not used so as not to offend the conventional-minded reader). Cornelius Cardew began the workshop with a short discussion, suggesting and collecting ideas for what to do. In this way he was able to form the outlines of a concert and put forward the principles on which he would like to base that concert. The programme which finally emerged was:

Georgina Cries
Triple Concerto
Paragraph 7 of The Great Learning
Micro-macro

David Jackman
Keith Potter
Cornelius Cardew
Jolyon Laycock's Arts Lab
Workshop.

Georgina Cries may be described as an ice-breaker in terms of both the workshop and the concert. It requires no great musical skill (just a large lung capacity), and for this reason was the first piece rehearsed in the afternoon. Everyone is required to sit in a semi-circle with a drum and a pair of sticks, joining in turn with a piercing yell and giving a drum-flam when one's breath runs out. This is a highly dramatic and emotive piece, beginning and ending with a solo singer and one drum-flam from everyone, with a complex period in the middle when everyone is yelling and following each person's breath-end with a flam! A member of the audience told me that though he soon realised what was happening, he never ceased to be surprised at each verbal entry.

Triple Concerto, the next item on the programme, usually performs successfully. I found this performance particularly exhilarating. The work falls into three sections, slow-fast-slow, with a different soloist for each section. Instructions are handed out indicating speed, dynamics or musical ideas, and whether one is a soloist or accompanist. No one knows who the soloists are until each one declares himself by opening his section. Cardew himself was particularly impressive at the piano.

One of Cardew's major musical principles is the need for audience participation. This was certainly met in the first part of the next piece performed, a vocal composition, paragraph 7 of The Great Learning, a Chinese poem set by Cardew. The performers mingled with the audience and instructed them in what to do. Each line of the text is sung a prescribed number of times, only changing note when moving to a new line. One starts on a predetermined note and moves to any note which can be heard when each change is made. Thus notes with strong harmonics and notes from prominent voices tend to dominate, making the chord less complex towards the middle of the piece, but because some people inevitably sing out of tune, the chord complexity usually increases towards the end. All this however formed only the accompaniment for a long solo song (again a Chinese poem) from Cardew. When each performer finished singing they took up their instrument(s) and continued the accompaniment with 'Scratch' music. 'Scratch' music is essentially something personal. Each participant composes a simple musical (or non-musical) idea for himself to play at regular, or irregular, time intervals. Of necessity the idea should be interesting to play, as it is usually played for a long time (in our case about three-quarters of an hour). The performer should not however play regardless of what is going on around him, but should be aware of his fellows and aim to make a valid contribution (a comment on the ideal Society, maybe?). 'Scratch' music is not, in practice as easy, or disorganised as it sounds. Cardew says that experience is the only requirement for its success. Obviously most people at the workshop had little or no experience in this field, and though it was very satisfying to play, one felt that the whole was somehow lacking.

