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Some aspects of a political attitude

CORNELIUS CARDEW INTERVIEWED

BY KEITH POTTER

Two and a half years ago CONTACT planned to publish an interview with the well-known English experimental composer Cornelius Cardew, but for a whole variety of reasons, including the vagaries of the machine on which our discussion was recorded, the project was temporarily shelved. So when Cardew came to York to give a piano recital at the Arts Centre on the Contemporary Music Network's scheme on 21 October last year, I took the opportunity of talking to him for the magazine again.

The intervening period had seen a fundamental change in Cardew's outlook, about which he had already been talking to me in 1972 but which he had not, at the time of that first interview, yet begun to put into practice. Broadly, it was the change from an experimental attitude in music, stemming from Cage, to a political one, defined by the composer's present sympathies with the Communist Party of England (Marxist-Leninist) and exemplified by the change in his music which has been charted and described in CONTACT 8.

It was therefore no longer as an experimental composer that Cardew spoke, but as a fully committed composer of political music who has little good to say about his experimental past and all his previous works. So I began by quoting something which I had already said to another experimentalist who has recently turned to writing political music and who knows Cardew well - Christian Wolff.

It seems to me that there is a basic difference of attitude between you and Wolff. You in your attempt to write political music seem to be concerned directly to get through to a mass audience, to write music that is accessible to a mass audience. You are therefore writing settings of Chinese revolutionary songs, short tonal piano pieces and so on in a very accessible idiom, to communicate not with a contemporary music audience but directly with the population at large. By contrast, it seems that Wolff is unhappy about doing that quite so directly because of purely musical reasons. It would seem that he is hoping, first of all, to try to communicate with a contemporary music audience through the means of contemporary music: of his music as that audience has always known it, but adding this political element to it. This means that Wolff's music is much more accessible to a contemporary music audience at the moment than yours, but it doesn't make it accessible to a mass audience in the same way that yours has the potential of being. You haven't succeeded yet, I think, and I don't know whether you will, but there's

the possibility of success there at the moment which there isn't in Wolff's music. Would you agree with that?

It depends what you mean by accessible. In what sense is Christian's music accessible to the avantgarde audience? It's accessible in the same way as his old music was. It means they can derive the same things from it; they get basically the same satisfactions. Or rather some of them now don't, because it's been injected with an element of Socialist politics. But generally speaking, the language is more or less the same.

I think People's Liberation Music - performing, in a pop idiom, songs on militant working class themes and political folksongs - has the potential to do propaganda, and make music for a working class audience. So that's why it's good to develop that. But really I don't think the question of style is primary. Some composers may see the most important thing as the working class and its culture, others the ideas of Communism. Others might just say they want to support democratic tendencies in society - that they're against fascism and so on. But at whatever level they choose to support it, it doesn't matter what style they use. They should turn their abilities, including the style they've mastered, and use them in support of it. We made a big switch and came over from doing avantgarde stuff which nobody could understand to doing something which a lot of people can understand. Incidentally, the avantgarde audience can understand it too, even though it's not their usual fare.

You've been doing political music for about two years. What do you feel you've learnt from it? Has your approach to it changed?

We threw ourselves into it at the start, had a lot of experiences, made a lot of experiments and had these fierce ideological struggles with audiences and with other musicians, and learnt a lot. What's happened in the intervening period, almost without anybody noticing, is that a repertoire has built up. We now have musical material to put forward; we aren't reliant upon putting forward a Cage piece and having an ideological discussion about it - we actually have some new music. PLM has lots of songs; we've done some music for the working class movement and so on.

You're playing two Piano Albums tonight. Could you tell me something about the later of these, Piano Album 1974?

This hasn't come out as a series of short pieces like the Piano Album 1973, but is actually one half-hour long piece called Thälmann Variations, based on the Thälmann song which is still in use in German Communist circles. Thälmann was chairman of the German Communist Party from 1925 until 1933. He unified it and made it into a mass party, and led the fight against Hitler's fascism; in 1933 he was interned and in 1944 he was executed. This year being the 30th anniversary of his death there is a widespread campaign in Germany to popularise Thälmann and the work that he did, and to carry forward his line and develop it in the present situation. The piece is divided into three main sections. It starts with a very pastoral section which is an attempt to describe how the working class emerged from the peasantry and the rural proletariat. This does not present the theme in its original form. Then it develops in quite a

bourgeois, romantic tradition, before crystallising into a simple statement of the Thälmann song as it is sung in Germany today. Quite shortly after this, Eisler's song Der heilige Aufmarsch is introduced, to symbolise the energy and vitality that Thälmann brought into the German Communist Party; Eisler's song was about the building up of the armaments industry in Germany at the time when they were planning to attack the Soviet Union, and it's being used again today with new words about defending the Communist Party against the attacks of the State. Following this, there is a section based on Koechlin's song Free Thälmann! written in 1934. That's the end of the first part of the piece. Then there are three slow variations which I think of as dirges for Thälmann. And then there's a final section which is intended to represent how Thälmann's line is being developed by the Communists in Germany today. So the piece is programmatic in a sense - at least in talking about it beforehand to the audience you can outline the general subject matter. Its relevance to today is that we are facing a re-emergence of fascism in our society: it's very important to study what happened in the 20s and 30s and how the Communists dealt with the situation then. So you try to outline that situation and then present the piece, during which the audience has a chance to reflect on it. In fact it intensifies their experience of it.

So you see a fascist take-over as being imminent, do you?

I think the situation today is running parallel in some ways to that between the two World Wars. There's a lot of discussion about it, though I don't think there'll ever be a fascist dictatorship in this country. But what's certain is that you've got to fight against it, because it's what the capitalist class is going to try to achieve. They're in a very bad spot now, economically.

Well, that's just as true, if not truer, of this country as it is of, say, other parts of Europe, isn't it? Therefore a fascist dictatorship is almost more likely to happen here than in, say, Germany.

Well, there is a democratic tradition militating against it in this country - though it's risky to rely on that... But in fact the Trades Union movement in this country has never been smashed, it has an unbroken history. In all countries where a fascist dictatorship did exist the Trades Union movement was younger, for a start, and it was then smashed. So the Trades Union movement on the continent is in a slightly different condition from that here. Also the working class here has a successful history of struggle against fascism - for instance, we broke up the Mosleyite movement in the 30s.

During 1973 you were in Berlin on the German Academic Exchange programme. Did you learn a lot about political attitudes outside this country and the different problems involved?

Even in Germany the capitalists are obliged to carry out the same measures against the working class, to exploit them and to reduce their standard of living. One comes up against censorship no more than here or in America but the fight against it on the part of the Communists is on a much higher level. For instance, they're taking a much more militant stand against it in the universities than here. And the revolutionary intellectuals are much more

organised - there's a long tradition of that in Germany. A big difference between Germany and both England and America is that there's no Trotskyite movement there. In the struggle against fascism here, for instance, you find that the Trotskyites have a totally different analysis of what happened in the 30s from ours. They regard Hitler's rise to power as directly the fault of Stalin.

The most interesting thing that happened to me in Germany was getting involved in a campaign to set up a children's hospital instead of an artists' centre. The bourgeoisie was planning to open an artists' centre in an old hospital and the Communists led the local population in opposing it and demanding a children's hospital. I wrote a song for the campaign which was used on demonstrations and so on and even whistled by kids in the streets. So it got a very wide hearing and was used. Also other people helped write it. Three of us got together to discuss what we wanted the song to express. The others not only helped write the words but also commented on the music.

In what ways did they criticise it?

They said, for example, in the second half of the verse the tune should be higher, should gain in intensity. I had the whole verse on the same plane. They were saying, basically, that what I had written didn't match the requirements of the content in certain respects. The experience of this collective method is totally different from that of writing, say, the Piano Albums. In these I'm expressing a point of view quite personally and trying to engage other people in thinking about the subjects I think are important. In Piano Album 1973 in particular the ideas are presented in a very artistic way; some of the pieces are quite precious. Earlier arrangements I did of Chinese and Irish songs are also quite sensitive and artistic. The pieces by Michael Chant and Dave Smith that I'm playing tonight approach the whole subject from different points of view. Dave Smith has done some arrangements of Albanian songs in the conventional Socialist Realist style; he doesn't present them in the artistic way that I've used in my Piano Album 1973. His pieces could be played at a political meeting - say about Socialist Construction in Albania. Michael Chant's pieces are formalist, not so emotional. For instance, in his setting of the Internationale the first verse is a simple tune, the second verse has a complex struggle going on around the melody and the third verse is a mighty unison where the working class is united. So on the formal plane he has represented his view of the revolutionary ideal.

Do you think you're succeeding at any level on your terms at the moment? Is your message getting across to the people you want to hear it? You've admitted that the numbers involved are very small.

That's not the main point. If the numbers were great, we'd have to write a different kind of music anyway, like the song about the children's hospital in Germany.

So music for a real mass audience would be different from what you're doing now?

Yes, because the revolutionary culture is really produced by the masses.

The people who write the actual notes down are only reflecting the interests of the masses. So for the time being you can say that you're **successful** if the people who hear you - never mind how many - are interested in the subjects that you bring up and if they think about them with a basically correct orientation. In a concert that would be quite an achievement. You can't expect to organise people politically on the basis of a concert.

Are you doing quite a lot of concerts at the moment?

Not really. But I'm going to make a record of some of the new pieces for an Italian company. And I'm organising an American tour. Whatever it's in my power to organise, I'll do, on the basis of this material until something new gets written.

You are also still playing avantgarde music with which you now have no sympathy: Steve Reich, Dieter Schnebel and so on. Isn't continuing to be associated with this music compromising yourself?

People who are hostile will think so. Other people will understand very well that you have to earn a living. But if you look at the history of socialist artists and composers you'll see that they've fought to survive and have produced progressive art. Even if they get victimised, like Alan Bush, for instance. It's a growing trend. We think that these people, socialist artists, are wrestling with the problems that are acute today, whereas people like Stockhausen and Cage aren't.

But Cage has always been socially concerned, hasn't he? Presumably you don't think it's sufficiently defined.

I think he's mystifying people. Anyway, Cage and Stockhausen certainly misled me and I feel quite bitter about that. They influence young composers by telling them that there are formal problems in the development of bourgeois music and that we have to come up with original, unique solutions to them and build our careers on that basis.

I don't think that was quite what Cage was saying in the mid-60s, for instance.

It doesn't matter what he was saying, it's what he was doing, isn't it? To all intents and purposes he was still practising Zen Buddhism, as far as I'm concerned. Some pieces I can still admire as bourgeois music, others are completely decrepit. Like Cheap Imitation and Musicircus, which are completely empty. He hasn't said anything in these pieces; all he's done is to create a situation in which people freak out or feel confused.

So society is much more important than music?

Music is a reflection of the society and not vice versa. Whereas, in Darmstadt for instance, we used to think that what we were doing was the heart of the matter and it just 'so happened' that there was a world around it in the throes of social upheaval.

To many musicians, music is its own reality, even today. It's their own perfectly valid world.

They may think that. But it'll let them down in the end.

[Cardew's recently published book, Stockhausen serves Imperialism (London, Latimer New Dimensions, 1974), will be reviewed in CONTACT 11.]