

contact

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

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

Citation

Wishart, Trevor. 1975. 'Review of *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* by Cornelius Cardew'. *Contact*, 11. pp. 44-45. ISSN 0308-5066.

STOCKHAUSEN SERVES IMPERIALISM, by
Cornelius Cardew
Latimer New Dimensions, 1974 (£3.00)

TREVOR WISHART

To review Cardew's book is not an easy task for me, for a reason that the author himself makes explicit. For whereas this review will be masqueraded as an 'objective' critical assessment in the bourgeois tradition, it is quite clear that most people reading the book will be consciously or unconsciously deeply committed to bourgeois ideology. They will be looking at it with a view to finding sticks with which to beat Marxist critiques, or at least for some way to weaken Cardew's arguments and hence put their minds at ease.

So I must begin by saying that I feel the book to be immensely valuable, and its sociological analysis of contemporary musical activities and their relation to the current state of our society to be substantially correct. I must also state my admiration for Cardew's personal integrity. As I have discovered in attempts to teach sociological perspectives to music students, there is an enormous barrier when it comes to viewing their own activities. Most students and scholars of music (especially of contemporary music) are either consciously or (usually) unconsciously irretrievably bound by an ideology of music which refuses to locate it as a mode of social communication - an ideology which Cardew rejects. The questioning of this ideological orthodoxy is looked upon with amusement, disdain or disbelief. It is to Cardew's great credit that he has rejected the easy road to becoming a bourgeois

art superstar by rejecting the very ideology on which this is based. The criticisms which I offer will hence be mere details in comparison with my overall acceptance of this book.

Even for the musician who has no sympathies with Marxist thought, the following issues which Cardew raises are of immense importance, as they have been swept under the carpet for far too long:

- (i) That musical 'form' is not the diametrical opposite of 'content', but, on the contrary, that musical structure can consciously or unconsciously convey a composer's ideas or unconscious assumptions about social (and other) structures.
- (ii) That contemporary music has been systematically dominated by visual-verbalisable conceptions, rather than by aural-musical conceptions.
- (iii) That the musical avantgarde is an extremely tiny group, with a minute audience backed up by government and state funds in universities and broadcasting stations which make it 'a big noise' out of all proportion to the relevance of its content.

It might be added that relative 'success' among the avantgarde has been achieved by composers who are consciously aware of the expression of content through musical form. Stockhausen has expressed quite evident mystical ideas through his musical processes, and Cage very clear anarchist notions, both in compositional procedure and performance/realisation. Even so, the popular myth of form versus content remains. Cardew's political criticism of these ideas is hence quite in order, whether or not we agree with that criticism.

I read the history of the Scratch Orchestra which forms the opening chapter of the book, with interest, having been a member during the Cornwall and Anglesey tours in 1970. For about a year I had been trying to get together my own political ideas and musical activities. I was particularly concerned to communicate with audiences and had mounted the environmental event 'Landscape' in Hebden Bridge earlier that year, with a view to communicating with ordinary people in their everyday work and living situation. What most distressed me about the attitude of many Scratch Orchestra members was a complete disregard for the audience, as revealed in Rod Eley's description of the Dorset cliffs event. After a self-indulgent performance in a village hall to an audience of one, who left, Stefan Szczelkun, Psi Ellison, Greg Bright and I initiated a more participatory event on a village green for the following evening. This seemed to have little general effect at that time on the attitude of most of the orchestra members. Rod Eley's history reveals how attitudes towards audiences and content did gradually change through the accumulated experience of failures of communication, leading eventually to the formation of the Ideological Group in 1971.

The only logical development of this desire to communicate creative action to the audience was, for me, to initiate creative activities by others, which I was to do later in 1970 in the event Carnival, a

street carnival on a deprived housing estate. The ideological development of the Scratch Orchestra was, however, to lead towards the discovery of a revolutionary role for the musician as an artist-communicator in the conventional sense. The first prerequisite of this search is an acceptance that music can itself convey ideas, that there is no dichotomy between form and content, but only between experience of the score and experience of the music in sound. Cardew went on to join the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), a party taking its lead from Mao Tse-Tung, and began to develop a clear ideological line in the criticism of society and musical contents expressed within that society. The content analyses of Stockhausen's Refrain and Cage's HPSCHD presented in this book exemplify this approach, as does the ensuing ideological argument.

My principal criticism of Cardew's current thinking is not of this type of content analysis, which seems to me to be valid and necessary. It in fact relates only indirectly to what is said in this book. It is a criticism of certain types of Marxist thinking. Whereas most Marxists are all too ready to historically locate and sociologically analyse the ideas of other thinkers, they are often unwilling to do so with those of Marx himself: the first failure of true dialectical materialist thought which can lead down the slippery slope to Stalinist authoritarianism. For such thinkers Marx's ideas are not only not criticised, but subsequent ideas which might cause us to modify a basically Marxist world view are automatically labelled as bourgeois-reactionary, and hence dismissed. This is particularly relevant to the case of music and musical communication.

Marx's philosophy is firmly rooted in the world of 19th century bourgeois rationality and materialism, even though his writings are revolutionary with respect to that world. However, such a world view cannot give a satisfactory explanation of musical communication, as it is rooted in verbal-rational conceptions. (McLuhan's over-view is undoubtedly mistaken and reactionary, yet I am not prepared to dismiss some of his insights.) Hence while I agree absolutely with Cardew that music is not in any sense 'a pure experience' (nothing can be: everything takes place in a social situation which gives it context and meaning), the 19th century verbal-rationalist view tends to see it as no more than its visual-verbalisable social function. My own view is that music is an alternative mode of communication to the word, that it can communicate very clearly and precisely (if skilfully handled), and that in its social context, or with the accompaniment of a few words, either in the music or in an accompanying text, its meaning can be made highly specific.

In this book, Cardew says, with respect to The Great Learning, that "these forms communicate non-verbally, they also communicate ideas", and in paragraph 63 of the copious notes he goes on to detail the ways in which the musical forms do communicate. This analysis of The Great Learning in fact illustrates the view of music I have put forward. However, in the more recent works for piano it would seem that

the verbal-rationalist view has prevailed. These works are accompanied by copious programme notes whose ideological soundness is usually beyond dispute, but the attempts to write a parallel music in a popular idiom are unsuccessful. These pieces have only the external trappings of popular musics, which seem to be consciously placed there in accordance with the verbal-rationale of the programme, rather than felt through musically. The intent of the text is not felt through the music. Hence a successful communication in music is not achieved, even though the succession of musical events may be consciously perceived to follow the accompanying text. It seems to me that in this instance the verbal-rationalist bias of Marx's philosophy is overriding musicality; verbal-rational preconceptions of musical form are pre-empting musical communication as such.

If we seriously wish to use music, in itself, to convey ideas, revolutionary or otherwise, we must develop the ability to communicate musically. To the argument that the quality of the composition doesn't matter, but only its ideological content, we should retort that unsuccessful music has no ideological content: it is the programme note which has the content. Hence why not confine ourselves to communicating in words? This long digression on Cardew's recent music is particularly important since, as I have noted, there is a strong link between certain aspects of his Marxist thought and Cardew's current musical practice, and hence criticism of this music, at least from the viewpoint I have adopted, is not irrelevant to a critique of those ideas.

Having said this, I do not wish to reject the basic analysis of social relations and their relevance to musical practice which Cardew outlines in the book. My intention is rather to suggest approaches to writing better revolutionary music. Lastly, though, I would like to point out the possible dangers of any uncritical Marxist position. Just as the 'genius' image and 'mysticism' of Stockhausen are means of placing the artistic ego beyond criticism, so adherence to a 'correct line' can be the same thing for a Marxist artist. Correct Marxist political thought must not be used as a means to defend unsuccessful music against criticism.

* * * *