

Stockhausen Serves Imperialism

Cornelius Cardew

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Originally published in 1974, this collection of articles by Cornelius Cardew is both a document of one of the strangest and most fertile periods in British composition – riven by struggles over cultural democracy, musical form and political sectarianism – and a bad conscience to experimental music. Cardew had been one of a few British musicians to take up the practices of the postwar avant garde and follow them through to their full conclusion. By 1974, he had denounced such indeterminate forms as “gimmicks”, to be seen simply as cultural components of the system of imperialism. His own work, produced increasingly for official purposes of the Maoist Communist Party of England (Marxist-Leninist), took on the form of trite tonal singalongs.

Stockhausen, for whom Cardew was a student and later assistant, is the focus of only one of the essays, which are mostly given over to Cage and his school, including a lengthy piece in which Cardew denounces his own major works. His critiques are articulated throughout in the least subtle idiolect of 1970s British Maoism. John Tilbury notes in his biography of Cardew that he came to Marxism late in life, and his prose has the quality of someone repeating concepts he’s just learned.

The introduction asks, “[what] are the relations of production in the field of music in bourgeois society?”, a question that Cardew attempts to answer through studying musical form: peeking behind the curtain of cultural politesse, art music’s claim to be indifferent to class stands estranged as the ideology of the class that owns the planet’s wealth. Thus Cage’s

desire, as noted in a Tilbury piece included here, “to strip his work of subjectivity, to free it of emotional content”, comes to seem an expression of technocratic power that invests the graphic score with cold objectivity: “The appreciation of emptiness in art fits well with imperialist dreams of a depopulated world.”

Despite the often alarming leaps and conceptual poverty of Cardew’s arguments, he hits on important points that experimental musicians all too often skirt over. As he notes of Cage, concepts such as experiment, indeterminacy and radicalism frequently become magic solutions to political problems, normalising the class society they benefit from. “Randomness is glorified as a multicoloured kaleidoscope of perceptions” imputed to postwar “electronic consciousness”: that’s right of course, but it pays no attention to the

economic level of “oppressive chaos” in late capitalist societies.

For as *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* shows, Cardew’s U-turn didn’t come from nowhere. Rod Eley’s essay “History Of The Scratch Orchestra” up to 1972 details from a partisan perspective how the group broke apart as the implications of their collective, anti-professional approach played out in public. A small set of Maoists, including Cardew, Tilbury and Keith Rowe, criticised what they saw as the “bourgeois idealism” of their experiments in collective performance, seeing incongruity between their roots in art music and the kind of engagement with the popular they wanted. But this was a contradiction neither faction could solve on their own, and the collapse of Cardew’s music and thinking is a testament to the utopian potential and real difficulty of the times.

Dan Barrow