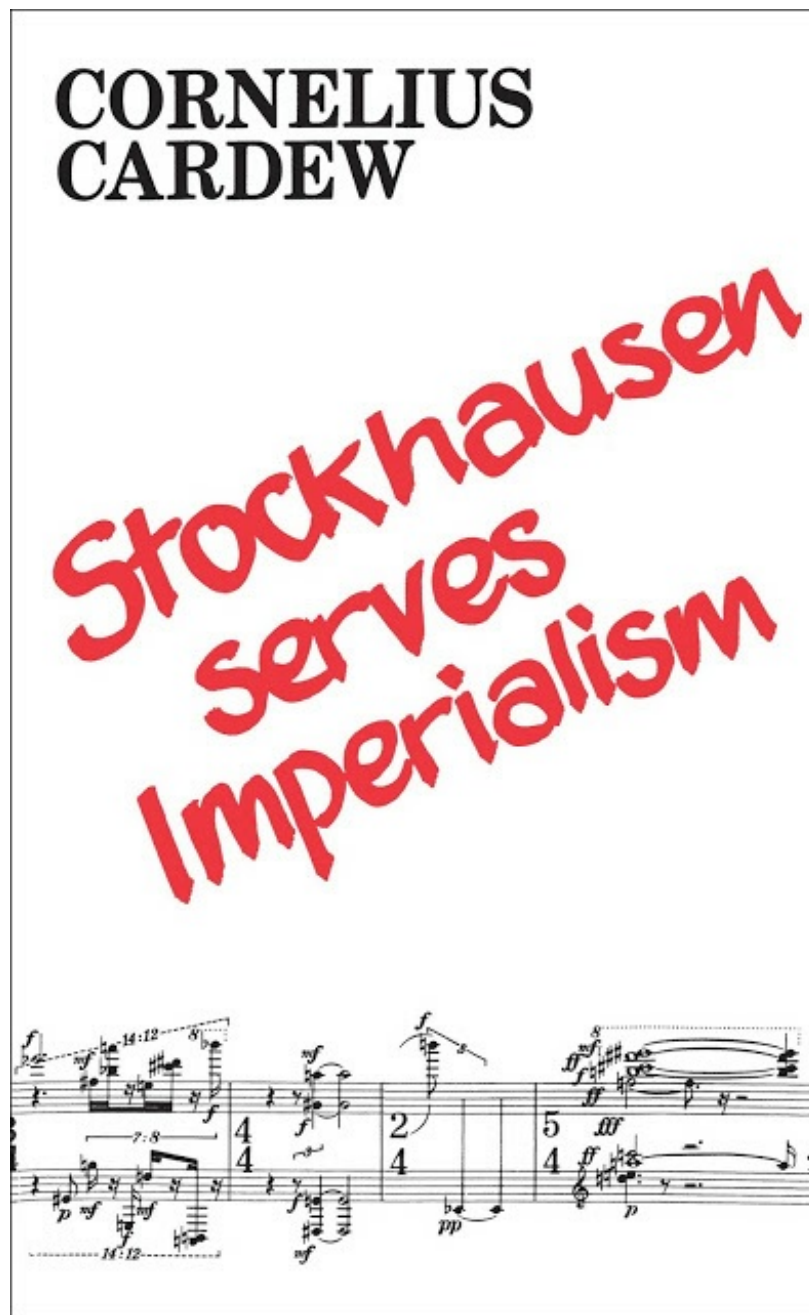


# Cornelius Cardew | Stockhausen Serves Imperialism

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Cornelius Cardew

*Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*

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Cornelius Cardew was a choir boy at the Canterbury Cathedral at a very young age, and studied piano, cello and composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London at 17. He moved to Cologne, Germany after being awarded a scholarship to the Studio for Electronic Music. After a year, he began working as an assistant to composer Karlheinz Stockhausen.

"As a musician he was outstanding because he was not only a good pianist but also a good improviser and I hired him to become my assistant in the late 50s and he worked with me for over three years," Stockhausen later recounted. "He was one of the best examples that you can find among musicians because he was well informed about the latest theories of composition, as well as being a performer."

In 1958, Cardew attended a series of concerts in Cologne by John Cage, which had an enormous influence on him. The encounter, according to the *New York Times*, "provided the impetus for a radical shift of direction" in his work. Many of his most celebrated pieces - both solo and with the infamous Scratch Orchestra - show a clear debt to Cage.

*Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* serves as a violent attack on both Stockhausen and Cage, according to Cardew's own forward. The book denounces their work primarily through a Marxist lens:

"The American composer and writer John Cage, born 1912, and the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, born 1928, have emerged as the leading figures of the bourgeois musical avant-garde. They are ripe for criticism. The grounds for launching an attack against them are twofold: first to isolate them from their respective schools and thus release a number of younger composers from their domination and encourage these to turn their attention to the problems of serving the working people, and second, to puncture the illusion that the bourgeoisie is still capable of producing 'geniuses.'"

Stockhausen had been the subject of protests for over a decade before the original publication of Cardew's book, in 1974. Henry Flynt - the artist and musician associated with Fluxus, Conceptual Art (a term he partially coined) and (briefly) the Velvet Underground - had released several manifestos with titles such as *Fight Musical Decoration of Fascism* and *Picket Stockhausen Concert*.<sup>1</sup> He had twice protested performances of Stockhausen's music, and was joined on the picket line by artists Tony Conrad, Ben Vautier and George Maciunas (who designed his protest leaflets).

John Cage is a less common target, and is often viewed as a spiritual grandfather to Fluxus and conceptual art.

There is certainly a patricidal quality to Cardew's polemic. Branden Wayne Joseph, in his 2016 book *Experimentations: John Cage in Music, Art, and Architecture*, argues that by writing about his "softness (the corrupt ideology)", Cardew renders Cage akin to James Dean's character's father in *Rebel Without A Cause*: "overly permissive and insufficiently

strong", provoking his children "into insurrection against him".

I'm unable to distinguish if paragraphs like this:

*"Bourgeois intellectual life is characterised by constant rivalry. The exponents of different schools are uninterruptedly cutting each other's throats and striving for advantage in all kinds of underhand ways, including the formation of temporary alliances. Thus the academic composers feel threatened by the avant-gardists, for example, fearing for their entrenched positions."*

display the type of self-awareness that one would hope for, or if the irony is entirely accidental. Certainly the composer is critical of his own works also, but typically only in the way that the recent-religious-convert repudiates his past.

By 1971, a Marxist faction within the Scratch Orchestra had led to the group's dissolution, with the argument that they had failed because their methods were bourgeois. Cardew joined an anti-revisionist Marxist political party and devoted his life to militant radical politics.

He disowned his work "The Great Learning", because the text by Confucius on which it was based had been discredited by Mao and the Chinese Communist Party. Cardew would only permit performances of the piece if they were accompanied by his essay denouncing it.

He would later take on bigger targets than his former mentors, including David Bowie and the Clash. When Bowie - in character as the Thin White Duke, he would later claim - told an interviewer that he believed "very strongly in fascism", Cardew put forward a motion at the Central London branch of the Musicians Union, to expel the pop star:

"This branch deplores the publicity recently given to the activities and Nazi style gimmickry of a certain artiste and his idea that this country needs a right wing dictatorship. Such ideas prepare the way for political situations in which the Trade Union movement can be destroyed, as it was in Nazi Germany. The spreading of such ideas must be considered as detrimental to the interests of the Union and any necessary steps should be taken to prevent such ideas from gaining credence in the community. We propose, therefore, that any member who openly promotes fascism or fascist ideas in his/ her act or recorded performance should be expelled from the Union."

According to an historian of the Union there was a tie vote, but a second motion - with a more extreme condemnation of the pop star - was carried fifteen to two.

A few years later, Cardew published a text called "Punk Rock Is Fascist", where he called The Clash "reactionary". I wish it were included in this new volume, as a post-script, mostly because I can't find it elsewhere. It also doesn't appear to be included in the 2008 Cardew *Reader*.

*Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* does include supplementary writings by two of Cardew's Scratch Orchestra collaborators. Rod Eley contributes "A History of the Scratch Orchestra," and John Tilbury "Introduction to Cage's Music of Changes."

Tilbury later published a biography titled *Cornelius Cardew: A Life Unfinished*, which suggests that the composer may have been murdered. Cardew died at the age of 45, from a hit-and-run car accident outside of his London home on December 13th, 1981. The driver was never found. Tilbury leaves open the possibility that Cardew was killed because of his Marxist-Leninist beliefs, saying that the notion "cannot be ruled out", and quoting Cardew's friend John Maharg: "MI5 are quite ruthless, people don't realize it. They kill pre-emptively".

Cardew was a composer who "renounced his compositions almost as soon as he completed them" (Damon Krukowski, Art Forum) and swung wildly from belief to belief. His early death means we will never know if he might've undergone another volte-face. Would Cardew have softened his political stances? Decided that instrumental music had no role in the revolution and abandoned composition altogether? Reconciled his varied beliefs in any way?

In Henry Flynt's incendiary 1975 book *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*, he quotes a witty postcard that he received from Cardew in June of 1963, which suggests that the composer was aware of Flynt's protests against Stockhausen and high culture, and also that he was already grappling with the dilemma of his chosen profession:

"Dear Mr. Flynt, ...Since I may be depending on organized culture for my loot & livelihood I can wish you only a limited success in your movement...."

*Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* was initially published by Latimer New Dimensions in 1974, and has been long out of print. The Primary Information facsimile reprint is available from Printed Matter for \$20.00 US, [here](#).

1. Ironically, Flynt later called for the overthrow of the human race and Stockhausen would remark that the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks were "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos."