**Cardew, Cornelius (1936-81)**

Edward Venn

Cornelius Cardew was a leading figure in British experimental music in the 1960s, and in the 1970s a committed political activist. His earlier music, particularly that inspired by Cage, demonstrates on-going concerns with the relationship between composer and performer, not least in the emphasis placed on improvisation. His later politically motivated music abandoned avant-garde and experimental principles in favour of a direct, tonal idiom. He died after a hit-and-run incident in East London.

Cardew’s musical education was conventional, firstly as a boy chorister at Canterbury Cathedral (1943-50) and then at the Royal Academy of Music (1953-7); an enduring fascination with Wittgenstein’s *Tractutus* demonstrates a philosophical nature too. Cardew familiarised himself early on with early twentieth-century serialism and increasingly with the continental avant-garde: aged 19, he gave (together with fellow student Richard Rodney Bennet) the London premiere of Pierre Boulez’s *STRUCTURES I*, and he taught himself guitar in order to participate in the 1957 London premiere of *LE MARTEAU SANS MAÎTRE.* Many ofCardew’s compositions of this era reflected such interests, as in his PIANO SONATA NO. 2 (1956).

A scholarship from the Royal Academy of Music enabled Cardew to travel to Cologne to study electronic music; following this, Cardew served as an assistant to Stockhausen (1958-60), assisting in the production of *CARRÉ*. It was there that he encountered the music of Cage and other American experimentalists, the music of whom he continued to promote for over a decade, and which had a decisive influence in his own development. The fruits of this encounter were a series of scores including *AUTUMN ‘60* (1960), *OCTET ‘61 FOR JASPER JOHNS* (1961) and *MEMORIES OF YOU* (1964), which intermingled traditional and non-traditional notations, foregrounded indeterminacy and afforded the performer a high degree of creative input into the work. *SOLO WITH ACCOMPANIMENT* (1964), from the same era, addressed issues of foreground and background that were to be increasingly significant in later years.

The intertwined issues of notation and creativity (and with it the relationship between composer and performer in the creative process) occupied Cardew deeply in the 1960s, resonated with Wittgenstein’s exploration of language in *Tractatus.* All this came together in *TREATISE* (1963-7), a 193-page graphic score, in which Cardew treated 67 symbols (both musical and graphic) in a discursive manner that has certain parallels with Wittgenstein’s process of argumentation. More importantly, the score, for an unspecified number of performers and instruments, was conceived as a means to stimulate creative, improvisatory realisation.

In 1966, Cardew became involved with AMM, a free-improvisation ensemble that had grown out of a jazz improvisation background; his own input into the ensemble reflected the musical and ethical concerns of *TREATISE*. The collective ethos of AMM, within which all sounds were permitted, explored and subjected to interplay with other sounds and performers, in turn fed into Cardew’s compositional aesthetics.

In 1967 Cardew was appointed Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music; he also taught at Morley College. The Experimental Music class delivered at the latter provided the background from which the SCRATCH ORCHESTRA (1969-72) was formed. It was with this ensemble that Cardew first performed *THE GREAT LEARNING* (1968-70), a seven-hour choral work based on Confucian scriptures. The work encapsulated Cardew’s musical and social beliefs at the time, incorporating graphic and traditional notation, requiring trained and untrained musicians, calling for rehearsed and spontaneous activity (not all of which traditionally ‘musical’). The music of this era had a pronounced ethical underpinning: performers were required continuously to make decisions, to listen to others, to think about the consequences of their creative actions. The Scratch Orchestra also engaged in site-specific activities.

The increasing social awareness of the Scratch Orchestra in the early 1970s, shaped by the writings of Marx and Mao Tsetung, had a decisive role in Cardew’s politicisation. Radio broadcasts critiquing Cage and Stockhausen, published along with a repudiation of his own earlier music in *STOCKHAUSEN SERVES IMPERIALISM* (1974), situated modernism in all its manifestations within bourgeois culture, irrelevant to the needs of the working man. In the last decade of his life Cardew remained committed to this new cause, writing and lecturing, and composing revolutionary music that adopted a populist tonal style. Such works included two PIANO ALBUMS (1973, 1974), but there were also numerous works composed for particular events, continuing to a certain extent some of the practices of the Scratch Orchestra.

At the time of his death, Cardew had been enrolled on an MA in music analysis at King’s College London, with the explicit purpose of deepening his own musico-political awareness. Tentative moves towards increased tonal and textural sophistication in Cardew’s final works, such as *WE SING FOR THE FUTURE* (1980) and *BOOLAVOGUE* (1981), suggest that a withdrawal from the extreme reactionary stylistic position of the music of the 1970s was underway. The lack of clarity surrounding the hit-and-run incident that resulted in Cardew’s death has led to claims that it was a politically motivated murder.

KEY WRITINGS ABOUT CARDEW

Barrett, Richard, ‘Cornelius Cardew’, in Finnissy, Michael and Wright, Roger (eds), *New Music 87* (Oxford, 1987)

Dennis, Brian, ‘Cardew’s *Treatise* (mainly the visual aspects)’, *Tempo* (1991): 10-16.

Taylor, Timothy, ‘Moving in Decency: The Music and Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew’, *Music and Letters* vol 79 no 4 (1998): 555-576.

Tilbury, John, *Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981): A Life Unfinished* (Matching Tye, 2008)

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WORKS

On Another’s Sorrow, chorale (c. 1948)

Prometheus Unbound, small ensemble and voices (1952)

Three Early English Lyrics, treble voice, clarinet, viola (1953)

Canto VII, tenor (1954)

String Trio (1954)

Introduction, Theme and Variations and Coda, two pianos (1954)

Kyrie, two sopranos and ensemble (1954)

Little Suite, piano (1954)

Six Variations in F on a Swiss Air, piano (1954)

Songs, countertenor and guitar (1954)

Two Mirror Studies, cello (1954)

Variations, two pianos (1954)

Fantasia for 2 pianos (1955)

Piano Pieces (1955)

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1955)

Recitative and Aria, piano (1955)

Second String Trio (1955)

Short Pieces for piano duet (1955)

Three Rhythmic Pieces for Trumpet and Piano (1955)

Three Short Piano Pieces (1955)

Variations, for ensemble (1955)

Duets for Ruth, for two pianos (1956)

Fantasy, mezzo soprano and string quartet (1956)

First Rhythmic Study for mechanically controlled instrument (1956)

Mikrokosmos, orchestra (1956)

Piano Sonata No. 2 (1956)

Study, mezzo soprano, vibraphone and guitar (1956)

Quintet 1957 (1957)

Septet with Percussion (1957)

String Trio (1957)

[Untitled], piano (1957)

Voice from Thel’s Grave, voice and piano (1957)

Piano Sonata No. 3 (1958)

Two Books of Study for Pianists (1958)

Ansatz, two pianos (1959)

February Piece I (1959)

Octet 1959 (1959)

Arrangement for Orchestra (1960)

Autumn 60 (1960)

February Piece II (1960)

February Piece III (1960)

Third Orchestral Piece (1960)

Febrary Pieces (complete) (1961)

First Movement for String Quartet (1961)

for Stella, guitar (1961)

Octet ‘61 for Jasper Johns (1961)

Ah Thel, mixed chorus with optional piano (1962)

Movement for Orchestra (1962)

Bun No. 2 for Orchestra (1964)

Material, for ensemble (1964)

Memories of You, for piano (1964)

Solo with Accompaniment, for any solo instrument and accompanist(s) (1964)

Bun for Orchestra No. 1 (1965)

Three Winter Potatoes, piano (1965)

Volo Solo, for virtuoso performer on any instrument(s) (1965)

Sextet-The Tiger’s Mind (1967)

Treatise (1963-7)

Who is Oscar Niemeyer, film music (1968)

Schooltime Compositions (1968)

Schooltime Special (1968)

The Great Learning (1968-70)

Unintended Piano Music (1970)

Fight Sterilization! (moral and physical) by the lackeys of Imperialism, for chorus and ensemble (1971)

Octet ‘71 (1971)

Soon, unaccompanied voices (1971)

10,000 nails in the coffin of Imperialism, unspecified number of performers (1971)

Sweet FA, Opera in five acts (1971)

The East is Red, violin and piano (1972)

Three Bourgeois Songs, voice and piano (1972)

Bethanien Lied (1973)

Four Principles on Ireland (1973)

Lied der Anti-Imperilaisten (1973)

Long Live Chairman Mao (1973)

Piano Album 1973 (1973)

Statement of May 20th 1970 (1973)

Piano Album 1974 (1974)

Thälmann Sonata, violin and percussion (1974)

Thälmann Variations, piano (1974)

A Law of History (1975)

A Suite of Wolff Tunes, arr. (1975)

Consciously (1975)

Nothing to Lose but our Chains (1975)

Resistance Blues (1975)

Four songs from Brecht’s Exception and the Rule (1976)

‘Change the World’, from Brecht’s Measures Taken (1976)

United (1976?)

Vietnam Sonata, piano (1976)

Vietnam’s Victory, brass quintet (1976)

Mountains, bass clarinet (1977)

Smash the Social Contract (1977)

Ford Workers Song (1978)

Our Party’s First congress (1978)

Pakistan, oboe (1978?)

Great Indian People, solo voice (1979)

I want my rights (1979)

Revisionist Somersaults and the Opportunist Opposition (1979)

The Founding of the Party (1979)

The Worker’s Song, violin (1979)

We are the Workers of Ontario (1979)

We Sing for the Future (1979)

An Opportunist has come back home (1979)

CYUB Song (1980)

There is only one lie, choir and piano (1980)

We Sing for the Future, piano (1980)

Boolavogue, two pianos (1981)

The Festival (1981)

Somebody spilled the beans (1981)

KEY WRITINGS

Many of Cardew’s writings, including *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, can be found in *Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981): A Reader* ed. Prévost, Edwin (Matching Tye, 2006).