**Scratch Orchestra**

Edward Venn

The Scratch Orchestra grew out of an Experimental Music class run by Cornelius Cardew at Morley College (1968-73). Though a number of people contributed towards the discussions that led to the formation of the ensemble in 1969, it is Cardew, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton who are most frequently cited as the founders. (This is in part due to the three composers contributing £5 each to open the orchestra’s bank account.) Cardew wrote and published the “Draft Constitution” of the orchestra in 1969, and the first meeting took place in November that year.

The Scratch Orchestra consisted of musicians and non-musicians, and was devoted to the exploration of experimental music. The constitution, written in a deliberately formal style, favoured a democratic, open form of governance, though in practice Cardew’s leadership was pivotal to the ensemble. More specifically, a range of activities were described: mental discipline (members were encouraged to write down ideas frequently for “scratch music’”– accompaniments that could be performed alongside, and as a background to, other scratch musics); collaboration (in the form of improvisation rites such as in the Nature Study Notes); irreverence (“popular classics” ranging from Beethoven to Schoenberg were to be performed in an ad hoc style); and imagination (“research projects”). Compositions such as Cardew’s The Great Learning were performed too.

In addition to its roots in recent experimental music such as that by Cage, Wolff and LaMonte Young, the orchestra also had strong connections to 1960s happenings, Fluxus and the countercultural movement. Dadism and surrealism were more distant ancestors. More generally, the self-conscious “Englishness” of the ensemble — a gently anarchic, liberalist, apolitical attitude — and its anti-elitism (anyone in principle could join; the ideas of the younger members were valued as much as, if not more than, those of the older participants) gave the ensemble its distinctive character.

During the first year of its existence, the Orchestra gave numerous concerts, recorded part of The Great Learning for the BBC, and went on a tour to rural Cornwall and Wales. Gradually the tenor of the activities shifted towards site-specific or community-based events. Nevertheless, a concert given in Notting Hill shortly after race riots there in June 1971 highlighted the disjunction between the orchestra’s activities and social reality; civic opposition to the orchestra during a tour to the Northeast in the same month heightened the growing political sensibilities of its members. Cardew convened two meetings in late summer 1971 to air and address escalating tensions within the group, out of which arose a Scratch Orchestra Ideological Group to study the works of Mao Tse-Tung. The ensuing politicisation of the orchestra provided renewed impetus for some members and disenfranchised others, and the ensemble’s activities effectively came to an end by 1974.

Though short lived, the scratch orchestra played a pivotal role in the developing sensibilities of a number of musicians. Prominent composers and performers who participated in Scratch Orchestra activities include Cardew, Michael Chant, Brian Eno, Christopher Hobbs, Parsons, Eddie Prevost, Skempton, Dave Smith, Keith Rowe, John Tilbury and John White.

KEY WRITINGS ABOUT THE SCRATCH ORCHESTRA

Eley, Ron, ‘A History of the Scratch Orchestra, 1969-72’, in Cardew, Cornelius, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism and Other Articles* (London, 1974)

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

KEY DOCUMENTS BY SCRATCH ORCHESTRA MEMBERS

Cardew, Cornelius, ‘A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution’, *Musical Times*, cx (1969), 617–19

*Nature Study Notes: Improvisation Rites*, ed. Cardew, Cornelius (London, 1969)

*Scratch Music*, ed. Cardew, Cornelius (London, 1974) [with introduction]