

20 YEARS OF APARTMENT HOUSE: ANTON LUKOSZEVIEZE IN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER FOX

Christopher Fox: *Apartment House has a reputation as the principal UK ensemble for experimental music, in all its different forms. When you began the ensemble, did you have a clear idea about what musical direction you were going to take, or has it changed over time?*

Anton Lukoszevieze: At the beginning there was no sense of a ‘musical direction’, it was just a small group of us pursuing an enthusiasm for a wide variety of contemporary and experimental music. As time went on I think things did change, not in terms of a ‘career’ or a ‘direction’ but of aesthetic considerations. Initially, the enthusiasm embraced major American experimental figures such as John Cage and Christian Wolff, alongside European continental composers such as Dieter Schnebel, Klaus K. Hübler, Helmut Oehring and Gerhard Stäbler, for example. All of these composers, the European ones in particular, were rarely (if ever) played in the UK, and usually only in the context of music festivals or the BBC Radio. Growing out of this, the figures of Cornelius Cardew and Michael Parsons entered the arena, alongside younger composers whom I found interesting, composers such as you, Laurence Crane, James Clarke, Jennifer Walshe, Tim Parkinson, John Lely, Joanna Bailie and James Saunders, to name a few.

Looking back at all of the concerts and first performances (over a hundred), the thing that has determined the trajectory of the group has basically been a kind of social Chinese whispers. You meet a new composer, you like their work, they may live in a certain country, they invite you there, they have other friends in other countries, and so things develop and spread in different ways. Also, after 20 years one would think one had exhausted exploring music of the 1950s and ’60s, but still I find works that I think are valid and worth resurrecting, that still excite me, which is one aspect of how I work. This is complemented by composers working today in many different ways. I think things have changed over time, in that, now I can look at certain composers and focus on them in terms of new works or recording and performing their music as a project, so to speak. But I think an innate fascination is the main driving force.

Is there anything about that growing collection of composers that links them together, apart from being played by Apartment House? For example, what drew you to Henning Christiansen’s music, which you have recently revived?

I think, as I believe John Cage once said, that today’s contemporary music world is like a delta of many rivers converging and diverging. Diverse pluralism is the characteristic in a way, but still one can make a sense of different types of music, different scenes. There is no dominant aesthetic or style, I think, in Apartment House programmes, but there is always diversity and exploration. We have performed

apparent polar opposites, such as the music of Anthony Braxton, Luc Ferrari, Kunsu Shim, Mauricio Kagel and Zbigniew Karkowski, for example.

The link that connects a lot of the composers we perform is something I call 'art'. I am drawn to people who make art from music, turn art into music, use processes, systems, forms, source materials in similar ways to artists or poets, not just composers who compose music. I think I would call it 'making' and I think this distinction between what I might call 'creative music' and 'composed' music started with Marcel Duchamp, perhaps.

Regarding Henning Christiansen, I've known of his work for nearly 20 years, through explorations of Danish music and in particular a period of time in the 1970s when certain composers, such as Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen and Ole Buck made work that was labelled as the New Simplicity. Henning was one of the early protagonists in this 'movement'. Then there was his early association with Fluxus performances in Copenhagen and his subsequent collaborations with Joseph Beuys in the late 1960s. In Henning's music lurks also the ghost of Erik Satie, whose music Henning particularly loved. This period of the late '60s contains music by Christiansen that is particularly amazing and wonderful to me: strange chamber works which are constructed from simple cells, repetitive modal harmonies and a contemplative spirit, but not like American experimental music; they are more iconic or sculpted in a way.

Where did the group's name come from?

Well, it is really quite simple. I wanted a seemingly 'neutral' name for the group, one that didn't contain the word ensemble, sinfonietta, contemporary, or group, for example.

A lot of the music we play is quite irrelevant to certain types of establishment music groups, which are often just microcosms of orchestral formations anyway. Works like *Burdocks* by Christian Wolff or Mauricio Kagel's *Acustica* are anathema to such hierarchical organisations, because they require musicians often to be independent from each other and construct (perhaps even compose) the music in real time in many different ways. One must also learn to execute notation that requires a lot of preparation and deciphering. I like the name Apartment House, and the obvious connection is with Cage and his *Apartment House 1776*, a work commissioned for the bicentennial of the United States of America in 1976. But I also like the idea of a block, or house, with different rooms, different music, different composers, different ways of composing, different ways of performing, different instruments, different ways of interpreting, rooms on one levels, or on different floors, adjacent or far way. Things, inhabitants, converging, socialising or being active in private, or even inactive and empty, resonances of George Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* perhaps? The name of the group seemed to cover a lot and yet remain neutral. It is interesting that often promoters or festivals, especially in Germany, feel it necessary to write 'Ensemble Apartment House', as if to clarify it semantically for people, which I find absurd.

So far we've mostly talked about composers, but what about performers? Is there a particular Apartment House sensibility that a performer needs to have? Am I right in thinking that you and the clarinetist Andrew Sparling are the only constants in the group?

Performers, obviously, are what makes a group and performances work. One has to have performers who are technically brilliant, are intelligent, but most importantly a sensibility towards the multitude of styles, demands and aesthetics that are present in contemporary and experimental music. I am lucky in that I can draw on a flexible pool of wonderful talented musicians who are equally proficient in interpreting works by composers as diverse as Christian Wolff, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Laurence Crane.

A lot of the ability to play experimental and contemporary music is about having control. Control of one's instrument firstly, but more importantly control of sound production. There are certain givens today in the playing of experimental music and contemporary music: for example, that the accepted 'expressive' playing of much classical music, with vibrato and 'phrasing', is an anomaly in our music and frankly absurd. Though certain sounds may need to be modulated at times. Performers have to have the intelligence and acumen to realise this and play accordingly. Even playing something as seemingly open as Michael Pisaro's music, or complex and physically demanding as Xenakis, requires similar levels of control. Andrew Sparling has been a constant for many years, as have other players, but constancy is not so important, what is important is a commitment to the task at hand.

The ensemble's rehearsal methods are often strikingly different from other UK new music groups, with a much greater emphasis on each musician being prepared, and a lot of discussion. Is this a necessary difference because you play indeterminate music, or something which you think other groups could adopt?

You have had more experience of other ensembles' rehearsal methods than I have! But, it is an interesting point. I think using the players one does, the simple (or complex) technical aspects of the music, doing that well and the actual playing of notes correctly, is a given. They will do it well. Often it is a case of how to put a piece together, does it fulfil the composer's intentions (if there were any)? We play so many different kinds of music, which all have different demands and we don't play exclusively indeterminate music.

Some things are physically demanding to play, such as works by Rytis Mažulis, Zbigniew Karkowski or Harley Gaber, which are often very long pieces (Gaber's string quintet *The Winds Rise in the North* is some 100 minutes of nearly continuous sustained bowing). Others are cognitively demanding, as in Christian Wolff's *For 1, 2 or 3 people*, Stockhausen's *Poles for Two* and *Kurzwellen*, due to the complexity of the notational systems employed. *Kurzwellen* in particular is an obtuse, oblique and complicated score to understand, rehearse and perform. Another example is the area of text scores, some of the most challenging being by composers such as Jerry Hunt.

So this is where the discussions come into play, as to how to decipher such scores and create music from them. Some music is much more demanding than may first appear. Laurence Crane's music is perhaps the best example, where accurate tuning, uniform articulation and rhythm become hugely magnified and demand to be done cogently. These things can be quite subjective of course and come from time and experience. In one programme we might play an *Exercise* by Christian Wolff where one should not play exactly together and one has choices for clefs, octave displacement, etc. and

then a work by Laurence Crane which demands the complete opposite.

Whether other groups should adopt such ways of rehearsing is a good question and I think it depends on what music they wish to perform. But what strikes me is that conservatoires and universities are not really the places to learn how to play a lot of the music we perform. Most of them seem to be designed for an instrumentalist's future as a classical soloist, chamber or orchestral musician. These types of musicians often end up being found performing new music, but they still have a rigid mind and technique. Things may be changing, but this remains to be seen and I think a radical changing of the whole system of musical education is necessary before groups of the future can be adaptable. But, saying that, perhaps the weird fall-out of conservative educational systems is what continues to make experimental music fertile? Also, this enters into a whole different topic of the role of experimental and contemporary music in society. Lastly, with the players of Apartment House, what is essential is an open heart and head, plus a curiosity and love for performing many different types of music.

The ensemble has survived far longer than most and with no structural funding from the Arts Council. How is this possible?

Well, anything is possible! I don't really see it as survival because I see Apartment House as a way of life, alongside my other 'ways' of life and it will continue as long as I am here. There are many different factors that determine why some groups survive or not. I am probably in the least commercial area of music, perhaps after improvised music, so of course I rely on music festivals, organisations, radio stations and door money for income. It seems that a lot of established groups feel the need to become 'official' with a board of directors, private donors, sponsors, etc. and they receive regular funding. Such groups are generally looking for a career in music.

The problem with that is they tend to play more official and mainstream music that is also determined by music publishers promoting their composers, composers programming their favourite composers or venues requiring a certain kind of more commercial contemporary music, so in a way they are not free and are at the mercy of the future. I am free to play whatever I wish and have always done so. Incidentally, in this our twentieth year we finally have received some funding from the Arts Council, which has enabled me to present some concerts through 2015–16 celebrating our double-decade survival.

I'm aware of a considerable resurgence of interest in 'experimental music', whatever that is. When I began composing in the 1970s I was very strongly influenced by the work of Cage, Wolff, Cardew, especially the indeterminate scores, but the response I often got was that this was strange, old-fashioned music, music that had had its day. Some time in the 1990s this started to change. Do you think Apartment House was part of this change, and, if so, why and how did it happen?

That's an interesting question. Firstly, as to 'strange, old-fashioned' music, I think that strangeness is a positive characteristic of any art, strangeness seems to bring things into focus somehow and create something urgent and exciting. Old-fashioned is often a clichéd put-down of anything interesting, as if to say that fashion 'is' of

importance. Is Bach also old-fashioned? Puccini? Duchamp? Schwitters? Such criticisms are unimaginative. Also saying that something has had its day implies that art is just like an arrow going forwards in a straight line, discarding all in its wake; that's also meaningless.

But I think there has been a resurgence in the past 20 years and I do think that perhaps Apartment House contributed to it. In particular with the work of John Cage and Christian Wolff, Apartment House has contributed to a renewed interest and re-evaluation of their work. Cage has become, quite rightly, a monumental figure in the arts of the twentieth century and Christian just continues to make fascinating and beautiful new work, constantly looking at different ways of playing music together and using new methods of notation.

Through persistence in programming and recording music by Cardew, Cage, Wolff, younger composers such as Laurence Crane, Jennifer Walshe, you, Tim Parkinson and James Saunders, there have been changes and I think that this will continue. I think a fundamental change has been to show that works by, say, Cage, Cardew and Wolff, can be played well and to a variety of audiences. Often musicians not familiar with their music (and in particular experimental notation) will quite frankly abuse it and dismiss it as uninteresting. Whereas, one can invest the same care and dedication as one would playing Mozart or Beethoven and make Cage, Cardew and Wolff's music sound rather wonderful.

If you were beginning work with a new ensemble today, what would you do?

Nothing different. But, in a way every new concert feels like I am working with a new ensemble. Obviously most of the players are the same, in general, but each concert will have new works or 'old-fashioned' ones I have dug up from the past. These works may have different demands and requirements but it is always exciting to begin again. With a new group it would be good to find a personal space where I could rehearse and develop different projects, but in the UK this seems likely to remain an unaffordable luxury, so we would probably have to stick to our front rooms and inadequate rehearsal studios.