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'IT'S NOT SOMETHING ONE CAN DELIBERATELY SET OUT TO DO': CHRISTIAN WOLFF IN CONVERSATION

James Gardner and Christopher Fox

ABSTRACT: In 2002 Christian Wolff was a guest composer at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and during the course of the festival he was interviewed by Christopher Fox and by James Gardner. Fox's interview took place before an audience in the Lawrence Batley Theatre on 25 November; Gardner's interview was recorded in private in the George Hotel, Huddersfield on 27 November, and edited excerpts from that recording were subsequently used in a programme produced by Radio New Zealand. The conversation presented here has been compiled by James Gardner from his transcriptions of the two interviews and presents a wide-ranging discussion of Wolff's musical preoccupations across every phase of his compositional career, from the early piano pieces of the 1950s, to his involvement with indeterminacy in the 1960s, to the political concerns evident in his music after 1970, to the works of the last three decades in which indeterminate and determinate methods of composition are combined.

Freedom, and The Orchestra Problem

CF: In the Festival last year Howard Skempton played a solo concert of his accordion music and on the front row, gazing intently at the instrument, was György Kurtág. And I've discovered there's a link from that to Christian's *Ordinary Matter* which was played by the University Orchestra on Friday afternoon. The piece has the most beautiful final cadence, and when I asked Christian about it he said, 'Oh well, I kind of stole it'. So maybe we should start with where you stole it from, Christian.

CW: It's a song of Kurtág's.[1] The text is a Beckett translation of a Chamfort maxim – a rather gloomy one, as you sometimes get in Kurtág. This one is simply for solo voice, so it's one line and very beautiful, and it was dedicated to me, so I paid particular attention to it. So I took that line: I simply reproduced it for the orchestra and then added a second line to it, to provide a descant, so to speak. And that resulted in the harmony that you heard.

[1] György Kurtág, 'oblivion, sweet oblivion', from . . . *pas à pas – nulle part* . . ., Op. 36 (1993–98).

CF: It was quite a surprise for me to discover that you'd written *Ordinary Matter*, and that it was preceded by another piece[2] for more-or-less symphony-orchestra-size ensemble, because up to that point the only orchestral piece of yours I knew was *Burdocks*, which is an orchestral piece in the sense that you say it's a piece for orchestra, but it was written for the Scratch Orchestra, so it was a different sort of orchestra. What was it about moving to that most hide-bound of ensembles – the symphony orchestra – that attracted you?

CW: [laughs] The commission. [audience laughter] That's the short answer.

I've wanted all my life to write orchestral music. I had actually written a few smaller ones, just to try it out, but in the nature of my career, I've never had much opportunity to write orchestra music. And I finally did get a commission from Donaueschingen, and wrote a piece called *John, David*, and that was my first experience.

I always had mixed feelings about orchestras because the political image or metaphor that the orchestra presents is not to me a very attractive one – one person in charge, a very hierarchical situation.

JG: So how do you approach writing for orchestra, and how can you use an egalitarian, non-hierarchical model in an orchestral context?

CW: It's not easy. [laughs] With *John, David*, I played it safe. I was warned about the orchestra. That was the Südwestfunk Orchester, the standard Donaueschingen orchestra. And I was warned that they had to learn six new pieces in about three weeks, so there wasn't going to be time to … because to do something in the spirit, say, of *Burdocks*, takes a little while. You can work with amateurs, where the spirit is there to begin with, but to do that with professionals is very difficult. So I had to begin with the fact that these were professional players, and the only way the egalitarian spirit comes out is that I make a particular effort to ensure that everybody gets a chance to play. But that's also a musical function; it's partly a sound that I like. I hate full string sections, so I always specify exactly how many I want, and I see to it that violin number ten gets a solo! The guy was so shocked, he suddenly found himself playing all alone, he couldn't believe it! [laughs] It was very funny.

But that's a very modest line to take, and I figured that under the circumstances there wasn't a whole lot I could do, and I would write a more-or-less straightforward piece, and I could imagine a good performance of it and the piece would be OK. As it happened, it wasn't that great a performance, and I found the experience fairly dissatisfying, mainly because of the rehearsal situation, and partly because of just the atmosphere in the orchestra [laughs]. It was just not very nice.

So my next chance to do an orchestra piece was for a festival at Ostrava which Petr Kotik, a Czech-American composer/conductor/organiser had put together, and he had somehow managed to get hold of an orchestra to work with on a kind of easy

[2] Christian Wolff, *John, David* (1993, 1997–98).

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basis. It was not one of the great orchestras of the world, but it was OK – it was the Janáček Philharmonic, in Ostrava in the Czech Republic – a little bit out of the way, but they were willing, and they were able, and they were available, and so I made this other piece, which was much freer, much more flexible. I think the problem with most orchestra players is that they have a very high opinion of themselves. So it's almost as though they're doing you a favour by playing new music. Whereas the players in the Janáček Philharmonic were much more modest. They were less experienced, but they didn't have these preconceptions.

Ordinary Matter is scored for three orchestras, and the impetus for that was a revival that Kotik did of Stockhausen's *Gruppen*. He wanted more repertoire, because *Gruppen* requires over a hundred players, and a special set-up and it's a nuisance to put on, and if you're doing it – it's only a 20-minute piece – you want to do something more with that situation, and so he commissioned pieces from various other composers – Alvin Lucier was one and I was another one. First of all I reduced the number – there were crazy things, like a dozen percussionists and so forth so I cut the orchestra down to about 80 – and also made the material such that it could be done flexibly, because when would I have another opportunity to get the three orchestras together? Well it happened rather sooner than I expected, but the material is such that you can do it with the full 80 or you can do it theoretically with as few as two: there's a duet for harps.

CF: And you challenge the hierarchy of the orchestra, first of all by having three conductors, and then there are movements where the players seem more or less free.

CW: Having three conductors was another way of dealing with the issue of a conductor in charge; at least this was a triumvirate. And the material is flexible. It runs a gamut from things that have to be very precisely performed to places where every individual player is independent and functions as an individual, so the players are basically on their own. In Ostrava we did a slightly different ordering of the parts, but there are two sections at least where the conductors basically cue a start and then the players are on their own, and I like that a lot. The piece opens with the usual ritual with everybody coming out, conductors coming out, bowing and so forth, taking their position, ready to go, giving a downbeat, and then just [laughs] folding their arms and waiting for three minutes while there's a whole lot of orchestra music going on, which is completely independent of the conductors. But within this larger context, you have to deal with issues of drowning other people out, or not being able to be heard. All that has to be worked out. And to get a conventional orchestra to even consider not playing under a conductor's beat is already . . . I mean, Lutosławski has people kind of noodling around a bit for a couple of bars, but that's not serious and it's kind of controlled, anyway. But to just let go and actually give them three minutes in which to play this little phrase of yours, while everybody else is doing that too . . .

JG: And the new piece?

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CW: The new piece[3] is somewhere in between. At the moment I'm worried more about technical questions. I've been recently doing a sort of synthesis of the indeterminate and more determinate things and going back and forth between them. So there'll be parts of the piece where exactly what you have to do is laid out, and there'll be other parts where you have different kinds of freedoms. Sometimes the rhythms will be quite precise, but the pitches are quite free; other ones will have these floating rhythms. And then moving back and forth between the two or overlaying them, so some of the players are playing by strict beat and co-ordinating exactly, and others are floating free in that context.

JG: So there is a conductor.

CW: Yeah, there is a conductor. But there are numerous solo parts. The image is of a concerto, except that about 12 people get to do concerto-like things. They come in and out of the orchestra to do that, so that they function both as part of this more monolithic, large-scale unit, and then suddenly they're on their own. And the overlay of the two is – I haven't quite worked it out, actually – but it's going to be floating. It'll be almost such that the solo material comes in bits, and the space between the bits is free, so that I think some of the time there'll be just a reserved space for the solo, but other times ... if you look at an orchestra part, suddenly you'll have 50 bars where you've got nothing to do. Well then: there's time to do your solo. Whenever they're free they can do their solo thing. And they also have to judge that. If there's no space, if it's too crowded already, then they have to wait until there's a little space ...

JG: So they have to pay attention.

CW: Yeah, exactly.

JG: Does it use any borrowed melodic material – songs or anything?

CW: The tunes are pretty much buried, but there are a lot, and they're basically, I think, four different songs having to do with peace. It's called *Peace March 8*; I've done a bunch of pieces with that title and it seems to be an appropriate time for that. There's a four-part canon by [Hanns] Eisler [laughs] on a peace song, and then there's a song of Eisler's to a text of Brecht, which is again a peace song, and then ... what else do I have? The old anti-war song 'Down by the Riverside' – that's in there. I'm trying to think if there's any more. That might be it.

JG: But they're buried in the texture.

CW: They're buried. They run through the whole thing, everywhere – they're in the solo parts, they're in the orchestra parts. And then I'm very interested in transcription, partly because you get a totally new view of what you thought was familiar material. One of my earlier *Peace Marches* had solos for snare drum.[4] I'd been asked to make a snare drum piece, and the snare drum is the ultimate military instrument, right?

[3] Christian Wolff, *Peace March 8* (2002).
[4] Christian Wolff, *Exercise 26 (Snare Drum Peace March)* and *Exercise 27 (Snare Drum Peace March)*, both from 1988.

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It's 'tambour militaire' in French. So I thought 'what can I do to get round that?', and you have to play it with your fingers, very quietly, and they're called *Peace Marches*. So in *Peace March 8* what I've done is to orchestrate one of these [laughs] so it's drawing on an earlier piece in that spirit.

Politics and tunes

JG: One of the things you've done in your music is set up performing conditions that reflect or parallel social interactions. That seems to be a very important part of what you're doing.

CW: It is important, but it's not what I start out with. I'm really interested in making a certain kind of music and a certain kind of sound, and I discovered – more or less by chance – that one way to get a certain kind of sound is to set up these indeterminate situations, because they will produce a sound that you can't get any other way. In some ways it's simply a technical issue of how you compose. [laughs] Take this *Burdocks* performance we've just had. You could never score something like that – there's no way, and it doesn't sound like anything that has been scored, or would be scored ...

JG: But it didn't sound like free improvisation, either ...

CW: No. It has its character, and the only way to get that character is to set it up the way I set it up. Of course it pleases me a great deal that it happens to coincide with a number of other feelings I have about social relationships, and how they might function and so forth, and that's great. But it's not the other way round, so to speak.

JG: It was interesting to hear some of the newer pieces, the more 'conventional' ones, I suppose, and how they manage to avoid sounding like 'New Music' pieces. They seemed to have a character which was at one remove from the typical sound world of 'New Music', yet they weren't obviously appropriating other stylistic models, which is quite a remarkable thing to have done.

CW: It's nice that you see that. That's roughly what I'm trying to do. One doesn't work at that consciously, but I'm trying to make a music other than ... there's no point repeating something, right?

JG: Sure.

CW: And it's hard in this day and age to find a space in which one can move with a little freedom, and make something which also works, more or less ...

JG: ... because there are so many well-defined genres, already.

CW: Exactly. And so I've tried to thread my way through this space, and keep the music somehow fresh and alive. It's gotten me into a certain amount of trouble, I think, because people don't know what to make of it, both performers and audiences. This is a nice Festival, because it has a wide range of stuff, and England generally has a kind of different atmosphere, but in Germany at Donaueschingen, say, or one of those standard heavy duty new music venues, my music never ... I mean there are a few funny folk who happen to like it, but generally speaking, it's met with a kind of blank [laughs] reception: 'what

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is this stuff? It doesn't sound like Lachenmann – what's wrong with it?' [laughs]

JG: Well, bits of it might . . .

CW: Yeah, exactly – for a moment – but no, then suddenly there's a *tune*. Come on . . . [laughs] And yet it's not John Adams, so . . . I fall between these stools, and it's a little baffling to people. Which is OK with me. I don't see any harm in a little disorientation or bafflement.

JG: But it seems to me that the style, such as it is, emerges from your procedures 'down below' rather than the other way round, which might be the case with composers who start out with a style in mind and say 'OK how am I going to do that style?' whereas you're working from the ground up.

CW: That's true. It's not something one can deliberately set out to do. I keep trying to find new ways of working – techniques and things – which will lead me to that kind of a sound. But no, I can't start with an image of the sound, and then try to do it. All composers have this problem now, because there's no longer any fixed technique, so you have to make it up for yourself, and it's a crucial moment, because everything will come out of that.

JG: In your music, yes, the social metaphors are there, and the procedures are all there, and to a certain extent one can get lost in the technicalities of those things, but what you're really trying to do is make sound, isn't it? I've done two radio shows on Cage recently,[5] and one of the things I wanted to stress was that for all of the extramusical aspects of his work, he was concerned very much with sound – which is something that's often overlooked. And I think it's often overlooked in your music too, because it's taken to be primarily a metaphor for something else.

CW: Right. Exactly.

JG: Could you talk about how that happened, and how you feel about it?

CW: Well, I aided that a little bit by coming out, as it were, politically. Before then I hadn't been particularly political. I grew up in the 50s, which was this very slack period, and people were still recovering from the War, and then the Cold War set in, and McCarthy – it was not a good time. So it's not surprising that people took refuge in this rather isolated, esoteric world of new music, both European and American. And it wasn't until the mid-60s – we had the sort of civil rights thing – that's when I first woke up a little. In the background – although I didn't think a whole lot about it – I had the experience of having been displaced. I was born in France – I'm European, *somehow*, with German parents and all the rest of it – but was displaced from that world into a completely different one, both culturally and politically. So all of that somehow is in the background, though not very consciously. And things like the civil rights movement were very affecting, and I got a little bit involved with that, and then the Vietnam war.

And Cardew was so famous for being a hard-line political

[5] 'The Loudest Silence: John Cage's 4′33″' and 'What Followed Silence: John Cage after 4′33″', first broadcast by Radio NZ Concert on 29 August 2002 and 13 November 2002 respectively.

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guy, but he was *unbelievably* apolitical! He once shocked me; the year [1968] I was in London there was an election going on in the States, and I came down and said 'has anyone heard the news, what's happening?' Cornelius looked at me and said 'you're interested in that stuff?' [He was] completely indifferent. But anyway, it was the war, the civil rights movement, and then the Vietnam War. It was world-wide, that whole thing; the new interest in Marxism, and then beginning to hear about what the Chinese were supposedly doing. And a number of us were very taken with that, and were very explicit about our involvement with it – almost aggressively so. I don't know why, but that was the style at the time. And so we got labelled as 'Political Composers', which initially we were OK with, but then it became a bit of a . . .

JG: It became a millstone.

CW: Yeah, exactly. So I think that's what's going on there.

JG: And that's tended to direct attention away from how the stuff actually sounds.

CW: Exactly. Yes, exactly.

JG: To what extent do you think music can be – in any meaningful way – politically engaged? What might that mean?

CW: I try to deal with that question simply in contextual terms. You know the Feldman percussion piece *The King of Denmark*, which was played the other night? The title, it turns out, is a commemoration of the king of Denmark, Christian X. During the occupation, the Germans insisted that all Jews in Denmark come out wearing the Star of David. And on the next day the king of Denmark came out wearing the Star of David,[6] [laughs] which is really fantastic. So that's what that title is about. OK. So arguably it's a political piece, right? At least in a commemorative sense. And then during this Vietnam period, I went to see an anti-war film, and it had this very powerful music, and I was trying to figure it out – I couldn't quite recognise it. It had a faintly familiar sound but I couldn't quite place it. It was rather strong and loud and percussive. Lots of percussion. And at the end, when the titles rolled, it was 'Music by Morton Feldman'. [laughs] And I thought 'wait a minute!' 'What is this?' And then I realised what it was. It was *The King of Denmark*, but *amplified*! Close-miked, or something, so it suddenly became this very powerful thing [laughs]. Yet at the same time, it *had* been a political piece, so it did a kind of double take on the thing.

JG: So it doesn't have to be an anthem.

CW: Exactly. This is a large question, obviously, and we're perhaps in the middle of the spectrum here, at one end of which would be just straightforward political songs, which Cardew was very good about. He saw that very clearly. If you're going to do political music, you need to do stuff that can be used at demonstrations, at rallies, that people can pick up easily, that is in an

[6] In fact, King Christian X did not parade with a Star of David. Unlike other countries under Nazi rule, Danish Jews were not forced to wear an identification mark. He was, however, outspoken in his support for the Jewish communities in Denmark. For more details, see the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008043.

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idiom that's familiar, etc. That's a special genre by itself, and is special to occasions; so at this moment in history, for this particular assembly of people, this is a good song. And this is what Eisler did. Fantastic songs. If you're a good composer, and you have a knack for it, you can produce really wonderful work. So you might say that's the genuine article. Which has one interesting feature, and that is – like most music associated with something non-musical – it's basically for the converted. You don't make political songs for the Right to sing, because they don't want to sing that stuff, right? So it's an instrument of solidarity, of bringing people together, and rallying and so forth. OK. Now it's conceivable that an art, to be political, has other functions, such as pedagogical ones. And that runs the whole gamut of commemorative pieces, like in *The King of Denmark* situation, or just consciousness-raising, as we used to call it. You make people aware that there are these things out there. The fact is that music, as such, is never going to do anything politically, let's face it.

JG: . . . not in the middle of a New Music festival.

CW: No, of course not. If you want to involve yourself politically, go and do political work. That's pretty straightforward. I think what we were feeling, in the late 60s, early 70s, was a reaction against our earlier work, which suddenly seemed really cut off. And perhaps we over-reacted, and were a little bit idealistic about the possibilities of music. I think we saw pretty soon that there were limitations, because we were still working . . . even when Cornelius, when was doing political music of a concert music variety, it was at venues like New Music festivals, and it was the same old audience.

JG: They weren't about to take to the barricades as a result.

CW: No, no. It did at least generate discussion, and it definitely had an edge to it, so at least people were made to think . . . 'wait a minute'. It was the same thing that we were going through and we occasionally sparked that in other people. So it had some function. The other notion that people mention, is that the music itself becomes a kind of model. That's what you were just talking about with *Burdocks* – you can almost see a kind of co-operative system at work. And that's not a bad thing. It's very modest, though – I don't want to make exaggerated claims for it. And it's also primarily for the performers. What people who see it are getting politically is not so much from what they hear, but from witnessing the way that music is being presented.

JG: And the way the performers interact.

CW: And the way the performers interact. Which is arguably an extramusical matter.

Songs and politics

CF: Earlier in your work output is the string quartet[7] that's being played later today by the Bozzini Quartet. I think it's one of

[7] Christian Wolff, *String Quartet Exercises out of Songs* (1974–76).

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the first pieces in which you start to use existing songs as musical material. Is it the first one?

CW: No I think there's a piece for solo double bass – *String Bass Exercise out of Bandiera Rossa*. There are three parts to the quartet, and the first one is fairly straightforward and you'll hear the songs. Sometimes I bury the songs inside the piece and unless you knew the song very well you probably wouldn't catch it, but in this case it's full frontal. It starts with a Chinese folk song, a political song about workers and peasants and the unification of the working people in urban and in rural situations. The second one uses a piece of a composer who became very important to me in the 70s, Hanns Eisler. As I said earlier, many people in the late 60s became politicised – in this country Cardew most famously – but there were many others: an old friend of mine, Frederick Rzewski, composers all over the world – Germany, Japan – Yuji Takahashi and so forth, became interested in, or became concerned about, their work as composers and the state of the world about which they had feelings and felt that some connection should be attempted between those two areas. We were looking for people who had confronted this situation before, and the person who came into view was Hanns Eisler, a pupil of Schoenberg's, easily as gifted as Webern or Berg. Eisler and Schoenberg had a falling out over politics: Schoenberg was fairly conservative and Eisler was a communist; even though Eisler continued to think very highly of Schoenberg as a musical mind.

So – that's some of the background. The second part of the string quartet uses one of Eisler's Kampflieder, these political songs, and then the *Exercise* follows. Basically these are variations, but of a rather free character. Variations always bother me a little bit because they're a little predictable – when a variation starts you know it's gonna go on that way till the double bar, and then the next one, and you know that that's gonna happen, and I tried a little bit to get round that one by ... these are more like fantasy variations – they're freer and it's harder to distinguish one from another – it's simply a kind of flow generated by the initial song.

So – we have the Chinese song, then we have the Eisler song and then in the third part the song doesn't come quite at the beginning. It begins with variations and then a little bit into the piece you hear the song which this time is an American song from the 30s called 'Which Side Are You On?' It comes from the mining district in the south-eastern part of the States. There's a wonderful film[8] about a strike which took place in the 70s with this – broke my heart completely – one moment in a big rally in a hall: this tiny little old woman comes up to the podium and starts singing 'Which Side Are You On?', and she's the woman who set the words to that song, basically made the song. The tune is actually an old English tune, I think, but as so often with these songs, there are old tunes that have new texts put to them, and so there she was in her frail, small voice singing this song to thousands of mineworkers. Anyway that's that song, and I hadn't seen the film when I did the piece, and then the last part of the quartet

[8] Barbara Koppel, *Harlan County USA* (1976).

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ends with a long sort of solo, I think the second violin mostly, which uses yet another song of my own composition. It's just there, there's no variation, you just get the whole song straight out and after a little bit of this and that the piece comes to an end with a last playing of 'Which Side Are You On'.

CF: In the pieces from 73, 74 onwards that have these tunes in the background there aren't any words associated with them and I suppose there's an argument that in a way the tunes lose their resonance because they don't have the words that made them politically effective.

CW: Right. We're getting into a complicated area here. I have also written songs, just straight out songs, and I have written some works with text. I guess the most extensive one is a piece called *Wobbly Music* which is a kind of cantata, but there you've got lots of texts, and another is *I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman*. But it's true that songwriting's not been a thing that I've done. I'm not sure why. Partly I have problems a little bit with the conventions of Western classical singing, and then I also have problems with texts ... in my other life I have worked with texts very intensely – I was a sort of philologist – so that I'm very shy about using them in songs. I suppose what you're saying also is 'If I use these songs but you don't actually know the texts of the songs, what's the point?'

CF: I wouldn't put it so harshly; it's more about what happens in your music as a result that makes the pieces so intriguing: the sense there's something going on there without always necessarily ...

CW: Well, there's sort of two things here, and they come together. One is this political orientation if you will, and there you're right – I mean if I just do the instrumental pieces based on the songs, not much is conveyed, perhaps. There are titles that come across – I get a chance, as here perhaps, to tell you a little bit about Florence Reece, who wrote 'Which Side Are You On?', and about labour struggles in the United States and whatever, so there are at least occasions for raising questions and issues, though they're clearly not musical, they're sort of by the by, but they're there.

That's one side of things, and then the other side is purely musical, and that's to do with the fact that I would say from around 69, 70, somewhere in there, I changed my way of working quite radically from the earlier pieces which were – I don't know ... sort of Webern-derived, let's put it that way. Sparse, very intense, rather introverted, specialised kind of music. You'll hear some of it on Wednesday: *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, pieces like that. Quite abstract, let me put it that way, very abstract pieces. And what happened – actually a couple of things happened, musically – you'll laugh, maybe, but I was very impressed by the early minimalist music, and I mean early: Steve Reich, but Terry Riley first of all. Already in 67, 68, I came to spend that year in London, mostly with Cornelius Cardew and he had some Terry Riley pieces, which we played, and then the early Philip Glass and Steve Reich impressed me very much. This was a period of maximum kind of concern with serialism, with total serialism, with highly complex, hyper-organized totally chromatic, rhythmically you know very involved kind of music, and so this minimal music was

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wonderful, it was like a cleaning out of the barn, a breath of fresh air, and I responded to that very strongly.

So that was one thing going on. I was looking for some more direct and simpler way of working, and then I also discovered that there was a substantial – in fact wonderful – body of political music, almost entirely folk musics. Occasionally you'd find something in jazz, there's a John Coltrane piece called *Alabama*.[9] That there was a whole body of work out there that I had known very little about and took to discovering and found very impressive and wonderful and wanted to somehow make a response to that. So all these things were coming together. And the use of the songs, can I just say, on the technical, musical level, suddenly you know when you begin with one of these songs you're beginning with something which is modal, not chromatic and does not imply functional harmony in any way, so it was sort of parallel to the standard Western classical tradition, a slightly different space, and also rhythmically more direct and straightforward. So I found that using that for material allowed me to sort of get out of these other situations that I had been in before.

CF: But the rhythmic life of the pieces you wrote in the 50s and 60s is wonderful ...

CW: It's different – it's not that I rejected the earlier work. I didn't have that need, which Cardew had – he essentially destroyed his earlier work. Not literally; occasionally when he needed the money he would play it, but then he would denounce it [laughs], tell you this was politically totally incorrect and a terrible piece, but I'm gonna play it for you anyway ... I didn't feel the need to do that but ... I think it was just a change. My own background is steeped in Western classical music: from an early age I listened to an enormous amount of music, roughly from Bach through Brahms, and that stuff doesn't go away – it's buried somewhere in there. I wanted to go somewhere else obviously. But I wanted to try something that at least looked on the page a little bit more like regular music.

Burdocks and The Scratch Orchestra

JG: We've just heard a performance of *Burdocks*, in which you participated, along with students from Sheffield and Huddersfield, and one of the questions that came up afterwards was 'has the nature of the performance changed in the 30 years of the piece's existence?' – has it become more tame, I suppose.

CW: I think not. It probably is more tame than the original performance by the Scratch Orchestra. But the Scratch Orchestra was a unique outfit, and they were ready and willing to do outrageous things, and then they did them with flair, so it was quite wonderful, but ... that spirit, I don't find that very much, now. In that sense there are definitely differences.

JG: Was that to do with the spirit of the time?

[9] John Coltrane, *Alabama* (1963), written as an elegy for the victims of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of 15 September 1963.

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CW: It could very well be, yes. We're talking late 60s here. Yes, definitely – it was a historical thing. But another thing is that the piece is generally done by students. And students, it seems to me, don't change a whole lot. Obviously there's history, and they have different sort of inflections . . .

JG: . . . the clothes and hair change.

CW: Yeah, exactly. But the general spirit of somebody who's 18 to 22 or 23 years old is – in my experience of teaching anyways – pretty much a constant. So in that sense there is a certain similarity in the feeling that these pieces have over the years. Sometimes they'll be different depending . . . the last time I did a performance like this one was in Austria. And that was a little bit more . . . 'correct'.

JG: A bit more restrained?

CW: Restrained, yeah. These were also music school kids, and they had worked very hard, but I think it's a cultural thing. There's less individualism, I guess, which you happily still get to a certain extent in Britain in that age group.

Recordings, older work, and performers

JG: How do you feel about recordings? Do you treat them as something that's merely a document? Cage used to think recordings were actively anti-musical . . .

CW: I don't have that view. They are [anti-musical] if you think you're getting the experience of the music as it was originally intended, but I think the answer to that is to say 'look, just relax' and say 'these are documentations of performances', and take them for what they are. I have found them very useful, because my work is not that well-known. It's getting better now, but for many years everybody knew my name because I was associated with Cage – but nobody had the faintest idea about my music. It got ridiculous. I was quasi-famous, but with no basis for it. So the recordings have helped a lot in that respect, though with very mixed results. People do make recordings with which I have nothing to do – they just present me with this thing and they're often not very good. I would stand behind only two or three of the various recordings out there, so it's a mixed blessing.

JG: Do the good ones tend to be recordings of the less indeterminate material?

CW: Not necessarily. No, I don't think it matters which kind of music they do.

JG: Many of the earlier piano pieces do have a fixed form, but do you regard recordings of the indeterminate pieces like a snapshot taken on a particular day?

CW: Yeah, exactly. That's precisely what they are.

JG: In the Festival we've heard a range of your work from the very new to stuff dating back 50 years. How do you feel about hearing those early pieces? Is it like looking at old photos of yourself?

CW: Yeah, that's not a bad image. You'd think they felt like somebody else's work, but they don't, really. It's funny – I do remember making those pieces, and the earliest ones, very

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often, I had not known. I mean there's the String Trio, which is the oldest piece that was played – I'd forgotten about that. At the time I don't think I even showed it to Cage – it was something I did over the summer or something like that and I set it aside and forgot about it, partly because there were no possibilities for performance. So I just thought 'okay' … and then about ten years ago, I stumbled across it and I thought 'Yeah, that doesn't look too bad'. [laughs]

JG: You came across it in a drawer or something?

CW: Right. In this pile of older stuff. And I recopied it and then got to hear it and thought 'yeah, this is okay'. [laughs] So I enjoy those old pieces.

JG: It's not as if they're played into the ground, anyway …

CW: No, exactly. I'm just getting to know them.

JG: Is that true of the pieces that are played more often?

CW: Yeah. It's true, there are certain pieces, like *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, which get played a lot, and initially when I see them on a programme, I think 'oh, not again'. [laughs] But because those pieces are so variable, and so reflective of the people who play them, it's interesting to see what this particular group or combination of players will do with them, and it turns out perfectly OK. Those pieces are made, you might say, to weather; they constantly re-adapt to changing conditions. I'm quite pleased with that idea.

JG: Given their nature they'll be different every time, anyway.

CW: Exactly. The older pieces that are fixed, like on that record[10] – the piano pieces – that's really where my work began, when I wrote those piano pieces for David Tudor. I hadn't heard those for a long time, because that kind of music seemed to go out of fashion, as it were. And I have to say – it's a little immodest – but they seem to hold up pretty well. [laughs] There's a German pianist, [Steffen] Schleiermacher, who's done a CD of all my old piano music, which for some reason hasn't appeared yet.[11] But he came up to Hanover, to Dartmouth, in the States and did a concert of my early pieces and Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*. And I have to say … Stockhausen is a remarkable composer, and they're remarkable pieces, but they reeked of the 50s – they really were very located historically. And my piece didn't feel that way. I'm obviously prejudiced, but I was very pleased to hear that the music sounded as though I could have done it fairly recently.

JG: Do you feel that there's now a generation of pianists – or players in general – who are coming to terms with these pieces much more quickly than they did in the 50s?

CW: 'Yes' is the short answer.

JG: With the exception of people like Tudor, obviously.

CW: Exactly. I mean the fact is that when they were written, there was only one person on the globe who was gonna play them, so that was that. I've been very lucky to have encountered extraordinary performers and the first of those was David

[10] John Tilbury, Christian Wolff and Eddie Prévost, *Christian Wolff: Early Piano Music (1951–1961)* (Matchless MRCD51, 2002).

[11] Steffen Schleiermacher, *Christian Wolff: Early Piano Pieces* (hat[now]ART 141, 2008).

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Tudor, so I wrote a great deal of piano music in the early years, and you can't beat that, I mean this was an absolutely extraordinary pianist, not just technically, but also as a musician and musical mind. And after David there was Frederic Rzewski, Ursula Oppens, Herbert Henck – a whole number of wonderful pianists, so the impulse to write piano music was there.

JG: Do you think their experience and their example has then spread to younger pianists?

CW: To a certain extent. Pianists are a funny bunch, and relatively few of them are willing to devote themselves – certainly exclusively – to new music, so I suppose it's spread about as far as new music has spread. There's also no question that there's a lot more new music to hear now than there was back in the 50s.

JG: Do you find it now takes less time to explain things to younger players than it did, or is it pretty much the same?

CW: Well again, I have this unusual experience: with Tudor you didn't have to explain anything. In fact he explained things to *you*! [laughs] And nowadays, it's mixed. Occasionally you'll find somebody who just gets the idea right off, but often it doesn't hurt to spend some time and sort some things out. So it probably hasn't changed that much, in some ways. I love the double bass and encountered more recently Robert Black, from Bang On A Can, a wonderful musician. Trombone – Garrett List, back in the 70s – I wrote a lot of music for trombone. But I had not encountered a percussionist who I got on with. And about ten years ago I met Robyn Schulkowsky, an astonishing performer and musical intelligence, so I suddenly wrote quite a lot of percussion music.

CF: There's a wonderful percussion movement in *Ordinary Matter*, and as you say you've been writing a lot of percussion music recently which seems primarily concerned with rhythm, but in a very unminimal way.

CW: Again it's a question of preference for hearing. I'm not crazy about the mallet instruments: the marimba's OK, not in excess; vibraphone – pushing it; and then, you know, *glockenspiel* . . . [laughter] But I want to get away from pitches as such you know. But you're right. It's curious because my introduction to new music came essentially through, or was focused by, if you will, John Cage, who – when I met him in 1950 – was just emerging from a long spell of writing essentially only percussion or prepared piano music; no specifically pitched music at all, except for the very end of that period when he wrote the String Quartet[12] and the violin and piano pieces.[13] I was very interested in that, but somehow didn't . . . and the other composer who was important to me then was Varèse – again lots of percussion, and I guess I didn't feel . . . I thought that was being very well taken care of, I didn't see a whole lot of space at the time to do percussion music.

[12] John Cage, *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50).
[13] John Cage, *Six Melodies* (1950).

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Different virtuosities

CF: Many performers will open a Wolff score and think 'oh well there's not much there, that's not going to be very hard to do'. But when you start trying to put the piece together it's suddenly extraordinarily difficult, I have been involved in some performances of your music which were completely disastrous. Why is it so hard, do you think?

CW: I certainly don't mean to make it hard [laughter]. Sometimes I know I'm making it hard, but it's not out of some kind of perversity, I assure you.

CF: The players who play your music best are players who don't mind not having a fantastic number of notes to play, but play every note with extraordinary intensity.

CW: I think there are various dimensions to the difficulty. The music is rather sparse, or can be, and so as a result it's very exposed. Sometimes I'll write something purely straight 2/4 and it's all eighth notes and quarter notes, not even triplets in it, and it turns out to be enormously difficult. They think they can just sight-read and it's a mess . . .

CF: Well, one of the reasons maybe is that you come into a passage like that, and you've just been playing something where you play your note when somebody else plays something else, then you're in a free time and suddenly you've got . . .

CW: That's true. You do have to change gears, and sometimes rather quickly, from different kinds of notation, different kind of playing. Somebody once remarked to me about a distinction which between music that plays itself and music that you really have to work to make it work. And I think the examples given were the music of Ravel on the one hand, which plays itself – it's immediately clear what has to be done, it'll sound gorgeous if you've got the chops to do it – and Debussy. Mozart is also a good example. It's not technically hard, it's perhaps not even musically that hard, but how often do you hear Mozart played in a really satisfying way? You know – not to compare myself obviously . . . [laughter]. But I'm afraid I fall into that category. The music has a kind of fragile quality . . . it's very easy to play it and it won't work. I've had the experience of hearing a piece for the first time and thinking 'Oh my god, I've really messed this one up completely, this is a disaster, forget this piece', and then maybe a year or so later somebody else will play it or even the same people will try it again and everything falls into place, it's fine. So it's that funny moment – you have to stay with it and then it clicks and then you discover how you have to do it. And in some ways that's more to do with a kind of musicality than technical issues. It's not, it's not, you know, playing.

CF: No – the paradox is that there are amazing virtuosi who play your music wonderfully, but there've also been some very fine performances given by amateur musicians or musicians whose technical shortcomings would disable them from playing a lot of other music.

CW: That's important to me. And I do write two kinds in a way roughly speaking. When I'm working with a virtuoso musician, I'm going to give them something to do, there's no question about that. It seems a waste if you've got somebody like

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Schulkowsky or whoever and I think they really like a good workout, whereas there's other music of mine which perhaps even paradoxically the virtuosos might have some trouble with, because it's so simple, or it's so different in orientation. It's definitely meant to be available to people who have not had 20 years of conservatory training, but simply have a certain kind of musicality and willingness and devotion; but there are lots of people like that out there.

I don't want to trivialize it, but if you give children pencil and paper they are remarkably artistically gifted – they can make wonderful things – and then somehow they lose that. And I would imagine musically it's much the same. I mean there are certain technical things we have to be able to do, which is perhaps a little different, but I think there's a similar kind of capacity there in far more people than one would suspect. I've hoped over the years to occasionally tap into that.

CF: Pieces like *Burdocks* and the *Prose Collection* definitely fall within that category, pieces that you don't have to be brilliant to play . . . which is just as well, because I played in *Burdocks*.

CW: [laughs] Yeah – the prose pieces are the extreme case. They were started in Britain on that first visit, 67, 68, when I was asked periodically to talk to people about my work, and I found most of the people who wanted to hear about it were mostly in art schools in those days. I found after a short time that I didn't care just to talk, because there wasn't really much context within which to do that, and I thought it would be much more interesting to try to involve the people in playing music, and discovered of course that there were any number of guitar players, and many other people willing to try almost anything, but very few able to read music, so that's how I came to make pieces which were basically prose descriptions – anybody can read some prose and figure out from that what to do. And that's where those came from.

And then it depends what situation you're in. If you're in an informal kind of school situation, OK. If you're going to put on a concert at the Huddersfield Festival, in front of a big audience, then maybe you'd think about it. Each situation brings various kinds of responsibilities and possibilities, where you deal with those as they come along. But I know exactly what you're talking about. I've had awful moments when I can see that people have worked very hard at something and it still isn't working, and what do you do? At some point you just have to be realistic and say 'look this is great' – and they presumably have gotten something out of doing that – 'but I don't think we can do this in front of an audience'.

Composing and the day job

CF: Looking across all your work, you have moved between these different sorts of situation, and I wondered whether you felt that the sort of life you've had, where you've had a day job which was at times quite unrelated to being a composer, made that easier or more difficult.

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CW: I don't know on this particular issue whether I can connect the two. There are other ways to connect. Freddy Rzewski and I both discovered – we both have rather large families and any of you who've got small children know about this – that when you do start having small children, life is very different – your working life particularly. And we both found ourselves making musical structures with very small units. Something you can do, say, in half an hour, if suddenly by some miracle it's quiet, you know you have a little free time, and that's the kind of life I've led, you know has had musical repercussions of that kind and … well it's also true, I guess, but again I don't think it has to do with this amateur/non-amateur mode of playing music.

In connection with *Burdocks*, when I did that and then presented it to my friends, David Tudor had a look, and then when he saw … there's a tune in *Burdocks*, it's my very first tune at that point, but it's a real, genuine tune, I mean you can actually whistle the damn thing. And David looked at this and he said 'Hmmm' – and we'd just had our first two kids in quick succession – 'I think I see where this is coming from'.

CF: Lots of composers teach, but not many composers teach classics, or comparative literatures.

CW: Actually for the latter part of that time, I did teach music too, and mostly I taught a kind of workshop in experimental music, which was basically what I'd been doing in Britain when I was visiting art schools – it was a performance-oriented course, and would take anybody. I would take people with no musical background at all, as long as I was persuaded that they were serious, and willing to work. So it's not quite as bifurcated … but it's true, I had an academic career, and I had certain things to do for that which had absolutely nothing to do with music.

CF: Do you think that changed the way you thought about music?

CW: I don't know. I don't think it's affected the music as such. I mean it might have, I suppose, if I'd been a full-time composer and concerned about pursuing a career … I like to think it wouldn't have affected the work. I might have written more at an earlier stage, and that might have changed things, but I don't think so. I mean there had been composers with relatively small outputs, who were full-time, so to speak, composers – Varèse, Satie, various others, so I don't think I can say that that affected me. It did – I think maybe you mentioned that in your essay – it did give me a kind of … I don't want to say distance or detachment, but I didn't have any anxiety, put it this way, about the career.

CF: Looking through your worklist and reading the interviews and your writings in the book that MusikTexte published of your collected writings,[14] I'm struck that the way you've talked about *Ordinary Matter* earlier is very much the way you've worked throughout your life as a composer: you've tended to respond to invitations, rather than necessarily waking up one morning and thinking 'I must do such and such'. Would that be oversimplifying it?

[14] Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writings & Conversations/Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 1998).

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CW: No. There's certainly a number of pieces I've written simply because I wanted to write them, or, if you will, I had to write them, but generally speaking I prefer to know who I'm talking to, so to speak. The audience – you never know, right? You can't control that – and I don't really want to – but I do like to know the players, so I tend to write in response to either situations where I know people will be interested in playing, or when I get asked, or when I get commissioned.

Again I was extraordinarily lucky – I've been really very lucky in my life – because of this initial encounter with Cage, and those musicians around Cage, David Tudor particularly, so that at a very early point – in fact right at the beginning – my work was already performed. So I got over that hurdle right away and I didn't have to worry about it anymore. And if some years went by when not a whole lot was happening as far as the career went, it was OK, because I had already experienced that and I could get on with what I had to do, and I did already have a network of people who were interested in the work. Not a very large one of course, and certainly not one that would sustain a living, but I always had some kind of support, and that made the difference.

Interpretation

CF: One more question, about the newest piece that we'll hear, the new *Exercise* that you've written for Apartment House.[15] One of the things that you seem to have been doing since the mid-80s is that all the things that you'd done in the 50s and the 60s and then in the 70s with the arrival of the political material are now all more or less present in most things that you do. Is that what happens in the new piece as well?

CW: I guess so. Actually it does, come to think of it. The piece has five parts, and one of them looks just like one of the pieces from the 50s and 60s. But – there's a mix, which I like very much, and the musicians seem to enjoy it too, of quite precise, you know, the usual thing, you have to rehearse, and there's a score, and other things where people proceed independently and they have to sort of play by ear much more. The material they have may be fairly precise: you have rhythmic configurations and so forth, and you have to play them just so, but you're in your own tempo, and you have lots of breaks. In a way the most distinctive feature of my music are the breaks. The silences, which may be long or short, but they're breathing points. You have a phrase, and then pause. And it can be a short pause, it can be any length, can be very long. Which allows you to think about where you will play next, at what point in relationship to the other things that are going along around you. It's a notion that certainly comes from improvisation, though it's not really improvisation, because it's not what you're doing that is specified but when you do it. And also I'm

[15] Christian Wolff, *Apartment House Exercise* (2002).

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quite flexible about dynamics as a rule, so you know if you're playing trumpet and there's a flute playing very quietly, you have a certain responsibility – you have to think, you know 'Am I gonna kill this flute, or am I going to wait, 'til he's finished, or what?'

CF: But it seems to me that even in the completely notated things, the process that you're going through in moving from note to note is like that sort of improvisatory process. I remember hearing you talk about the memorial piece for John Cage that you wrote for solo violin[16] and you explained that you'd do one process for a little while, and then you got bored with that, so you did something else.

CW: Yeah, when you see those pieces, fully notated in some cases, especially musicians who are not familiar with my work, they look at it and they think 'Oh yeah, OK', and then they try it and it's completely baffling – d'you want it this way, d'you want it that way, is this the right expression and so forth, and I just have to … I'm not ready to tell them. Partly because I don't have one image in my mind of how it should work, and I'm much more interested to see what they will make of it. If they're way off somewhere, then obviously I try to help, but in some ways it's more indeterminate even than the earlier pieces where you had these sort of configurations, or scaffoldings which are perfectly clear: the pitches may be free, the durations, individual durations are free, nevertheless you know exactly what you have to do. Whereas when it looks as though everything is laid out clearly for you, it's puzzling, as though you'd encountered the music from some early nineteenth-century composer you've never heard of who's slightly quirky, and you have no idea what to do with this material, how to play it convincingly.

CF: And some composers, composition teachers, would say you should mark these changes all the way through the piece; that's the way you tell the performer to do it, but you don't do that because you want the performer to find out.

CW: Exactly. The image really is one that comes from earlier music notations. I'm not much of a keyboard player, but I can get through quite a lot of Bach, and Bach tells you really relatively little. There are a lot of notes, and it's true that if I knew more about baroque conventions perhaps this would be narrowed somewhat, but even so … you have these notes, usually no tempo indication, no dynamics, if it's organ or harpsichord, no registration indications … and then you try playing it, OK and that sounds OK, and you find a way that you think sounds good, and then maybe a year or so [later] you come back to that piece, you try it again and you do it differently, and it sounds fine that way too. That music has a kind of a number of possible ways of being used. I guess that's partly … I mean I didn't set out consciously to do that, but that seems to be the situation with my notated work.

[16] Christian Wolff, *Six Melodies Variation* (1993).

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Links with The English Experimental Tradition

CF: [to audience] I don't want to hog this, so if there are questions do ask.

Questioner: I'd be interested to hear a bit more about the links with the English experimental tradition, about how the influences went backwards and forwards across the Atlantic in the late 60s, early 70s.

CW: For me Cornelius Cardew is a critical, key figure who had this very interesting early career in that he began with an interest in European avant-garde music, went to Germany, became Stockhausen's assistant, and actually composed parts of *Carré*. But then somehow he also got interested in American music. He, I think, had all along been interested in jazz, and that may have been partly a link, and when I arrived in London in 67, as I was saying earlier, the first concert I think I was involved in with him he played Terry Riley and LaMonte Young, so he'd gotten wind of that stuff – not only gotten wind of it he'd gotten hold of the music, and then of course Cage and Feldman, and myself and Earle Brown. He essentially introduced that music to Britain.

And the other person whom I met in 67, aged 19, was Howard Skempton, who was sort of studying with Cornelius, and thinking of maybe studying with me – in fact didn't do that, it didn't seem necessary. But where Cornelius got that material from, I don't know . . . 'cause it was not easy, none of the stuff was published or anything like that, so you had to have some ingenuity and resourcefulness, but he had that. And then . . . well actually in that same year – it's really interesting how early these things are – in 68, at the end of that year, we organised a concert of my work in London, and AMM had already existed for a year or so, and I had worked with them already earlier in the year, and so that was another link, if you will. And then Christopher Hobbs, who was then a student, played in one of my pieces in that concert as well. So that's the time I think of, but you'd have to push it a little bit further back, and I can't tell you about that, because I wasn't there.

Oh, and then by 69 Michael Parsons was on the scene, and so he and Howard and Cornelius put together this amazing organization, the Scratch Orchestra, and then I think a lot spun off from that. If you're tracing the history of British experimental music I think it would have to come out of Cardew on the one hand and the Scratch Orchestra on the other.

Q: And did you ever have anything of that sort in the States?

CW: No, unfortunately not. The States is too scattered on the one hand, and New York is a very competitive place, it's very individualist, that's the typical individualistic thing; everyone does their own . . . with exceptions. I mean

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one of the interesting things about the minimalists in the early years is that they came as a group. The first time I encountered them, I was with somebody and we just said, 'let's go check it out'. I think it was Philip Glass's loft and they were rehearsing, but they were rehearsing a piece of Steve Reich's. And the band consisted of James Tenney and Steve Reich and Philip Glass and two or three other people. Shortly thereafter Glass had his ensemble, Reich had his ensemble – everybody did their own thing. But at least it was a communal enterprise. And also it was financially very carefully worked out that this was a way for four or five people to support themselves; both of those composers were concerned for the welfare of the people who were producing their music.

Cage, Feldman, and Sonic Youth

JG: This is ancient history, and I hope you'll forgive me for going back to it, but were you at the first performance of *4′33″*?

CW: No. I wasn't, actually. I was at the second performance. The first one was in Woodstock, New York, and for some reason I didn't get there.

JG: But you had a couple of pieces[17] in it.

CW: Yeah. No, I was at the second one, in New York, which I enjoyed a great deal. In Woodstock they did *4′33″* lower down the programme.

JG: Next to last – just before Cowell's *Banshee*.

CW: . . . whereas in the New York performance they did it first. Now, I went to a Quaker school, where once a week we had to do 'meeting', and the Quakers' meeting begins with silence and is mostly silent anyway. So I had no problem with silence whatever. And especially at the beginning of a concert it seems absolutely appropriate – quite wonderful in fact – to just kind of cool out, and clean your ears out, or rest your ears, and then get going with the concert. It seemed completely natural.

JG: It seems to be no accident that it was originally going to be called *Silent Prayer*, then.

CW: OK. That I didn't know.

JG: It's interesting that Cage chose the Rauschenberg white paintings as a model – because he'd also done some black paintings – and it seems to me that this was a more optimistic take on what that silence meant. It was not a nihilistic silence, it was an optimistic silence.

CW: No, no, absolutely. I think you're absolutely right. It's a very cheering piece, somehow.

JG: Did you know about *4′33″* before the first performance? Were you aware that he was writing it?

CW: Before the first performance? I'm not sure. I think he may have mentioned something about it. And I think he says somewhere that he'd had it in mind to do something like that for some time, and the Rauschenberg as it were said, 'OK now's the time'. This won't help the interview much, but when I told

[17] Christian Wolff, *For Piano I* (1952) and *For Prepared Piano* (1951).

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my mother about this piece, she was really shocked; shocked enough to write John a letter about it. And then he wrote an answer, which was absolutely astonishing, and was very much in that spirit of [a prayer meeting]. He typed it, and then on the bottom he scribbled a note about how, when reading over his letter, it seemed to him to have a very 'preacher' quality to it. And he then remarks that early on in his life he had actually had the notion of becoming a minister, so that's in the spirit of the *Silent Prayer*.

JG: You introduced him to the *I Ching*, I think.

CW: Yeah, actually I did that. He took me on for free, he didn't ask for any fee ...

JG: As a parallel to his experience with Schoenberg ...

CW: Exactly. That's what I believe. He didn't even ask me if I *could* pay or not. In fact it was very nice; it was very helpful that he did that. And he could have used the money – it was very generous. So I felt that I wanted to do things for him, and I knew he had this interest in oriental philosophy and so forth. And this book had just come out – a very nice two-volume boxed set – so I brought it along. And it happened to come right at the point where he was looking for a mechanism to use for chance procedures. He'd already started with magic squares, which were a way of producing continuities unforeseeably: he would have these charts with sound materials in them, and the sequence in which they appeared would be determined by moves on the charts. But it was cumbersome. So to suddenly to discover this thing where the system also had a chart, and a number that was quite usable (64), where you tossed coins and what you got out if it you could apply that to parameters ... it solved all his problems overnight. So he was delighted! [laughs]

JG: There's a passage in the *Writings*[18] where you talk about music not being Art, something like that.[19] Could you clarify that? Because I think one of the things Feldman said was that Cage had shown that music *could* be Art ...

CW: I don't remember saying it, but I do remember making note of Feldman saying that, and always wondering what the hell he was talking about. [laughs] I don't know if I can put this together now. It's a very intriguing notion, and the nearest I can come to it right now is that I was thinking about music in comparison to other arts. And obviously it's *not* like the other arts. But Feldman seems to have pushed that notion to the point where it was so much *not* like art – I mean there are paradoxes here, too, because of the close connection of Feldman and the fine arts – but nevertheless, he pushed this difference to the point where music suddenly ended up not being

[18] Wolff, *Cues: Writings & Conversations*.

[19] In '"I can't shake Webern's influence"', an interview by Gerald Gable in which Wolff is asked to elucidate a comment he made in his article 'Fragments to Make Up an Interview': *'In the article you wrote, "the writing about music that I like best ... communicates a very strong sense of the dignity of music partly by refusing to treat it as an art". Why should music not be treated as an art form?* I think I wrote that a bit provocatively! I was writing about an idea of Cage's, which was interestingly transformed by Cardew, of not requiring a separation between art and the rest of what we do. In other words, by regarding music as an art, it is regarded as something which is specially privileged. What is distinctive about Cage's dealing with music is that he refuses to do that'. Ibid., p. 156.

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an art at all. It's not like painting, or sculpture, or theatre, or poetry, or whatever, and it's *so* much not like them that in fact it doesn't belong to that category at all. That's the nearest I can get, but there was something else which I can't put my finger on right now.

JG: Was it to do with the real-time element of music, perhaps?

CW: That's a good point. One could think about it that way. I don't know if that's what I had in mind, but unlike the other arts, which are not time-bound that way – well, you could argue that painting is certainly bound to conditions of where the painting is hung, the lighting, things like that – but nevertheless it's so clearly an *object*, whereas a piece of music, as long as it's not on a record, just kind of floats out there, and it's gone. When it's over, it's over, and all you have is your memory. There's nothing else quite like that, and that's much more like real life. In that sense it reminds you more of conversations: exchanges between human beings, which are there one moment and gone the next.

JG: What do you see as the purpose and function of live music when there is now such a superabundance of recorded music – while holding on the phone, in the hotel lobby etc.?

CW: Well, it's to remind you what music *is*. [laughs] That's the simplest answer I can think of. I mean if we can't do that, then forget it – I don't want to be part of it. I can't imagine not being part of it, but it's got to be in that form. It has to be performance.

CF: We haven't talked very much about your involvement with improvisation, but one of the things that cheered me up at the end of the last century was the Sonic Youth double CD[20] of an extraordinary collection of things including the sixth movement of *Burdocks*. Did you work with them on that?

CW: I get a call from Lee Ranaldo, one of the members of Sonic Youth, and I have to confess I'm not very up … I mean my kids are, so when I told them Sonic Youth: 'Aw yeah!' They knew what it was about and they were very impressed. So this guy calls me up and said they're making this record and would it be OK with me if they did a couple of my pieces, so I said sure, fine. And then I said by the way when are you doing this, and they mentioned a date in New York, and I said oh that's funny, I'll be in New York then, and they said well why don't you join us? OK.

So I was told to show up at their New York studio, at a certain time, and I showed up – it was a wonderful place. They have a little bit of a double life, too, because they have an LA operation for their mainline stuff and their own label on which they do sort of more experimental things. And they also have a studio in New York which is about the size of a large closet, a very small place, with low ceiling, really dingy place except festooned with all these old instruments – they collect old guitars and old instruments. I got to play on an organ which had been in the Sun Ra Arkestra – wonderful instrument.

[20] Sonic Youth, *Goodbye 20th Century* (Sonic Youth Records SYR 4, 1999).

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Anyway I arrived and they're sitting around, and there's this music scattered about, all my music, and they said 'well – so what should we do?' [laughs] and I said 'why don't we try this piece?' Actually we're gonna do it on Tuesday – *Edges*, that's because it's an improvisatory piece – I thought it would be a good piece for this group to do. I went over the notation, explaining the pages, and then we went into the studio, and started to play, and did it for maybe 15, 20 minutes and then we stopped, you know the way improvisations do, they complete themselves, and we went back and listened to it, and said 'It's good, alright now what do we do?' [laughs] That was it, that's on the record. [laughter] It was wonderful, I've never had such a wonderful recording experience in my life. Recordings are such a nightmare usually, you do everything 20 times, and it takes days. Then the next thing was the *Burdocks* page and there we had a second step to take because some of them don't read music, so they had to learn the tune you know just by ear, because we did the part with the tune in it, and there's a rhythmic figure after that. So we just taught it to them and then we went ahead, and the same thing – we did it for about 20 minutes, listened to it – OK – that was it, that was the session, so that's how I worked with Sonic Youth.

CF: Well ... there's a natural silence there. Christian, thank you very much. More stories another time, I hope. Thank you very much indeed. [Applause.]

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