Understanding Wolff through Music: Problems with Reading Politics into His Early Work (1950–1976)

Dave Riedstra

ABSTRACT

The composer Christian Wolff has a reputation for writing political music. In this paper, I discuss the problem of ascribing solely such an origin to the hallmark techniques of the composer's early output (until about 1976, including works such as *Burdocks* and *For 1, 2 or 3 People*). I define political as that which promotes norms of social behaviour and organization (and thus has implications for governance). I delineate four potentially political aspects of these works—the individuality of sounds, performer freedom and interaction, accessibility to listeners, and settings of topical texts—and suggest that these aspects are responses to musical concerns rather than, as Wolff later said, "a kind of metaphor, if you will, for a social situation." Not taking these works as consciously politically motivated, I suggest that the social views one might find in them are artefacts of Wolff's personal beliefs. Considering the music in this way offers a richer understanding of the composer's personality and his musical decisions.

> A composition (score) is only material for performance: it must make possible the freedom and dignity of the performers; it should allow at any moment surprise, for all concerned, players, composer, listeners: it should allow both concentration, precision in detail, and release, or collapse, virtuosity and doing things in the ordinary way. No sound, noise, interval, et cetera as such is preferable to any other sound, including those always around us, provided that (a) one is free to move away or towards it, and that (b) sounds are not used deliberately to compel feelings in others: let the listeners be just as free as the players.[1]

Beginning in the early 1970s, the music of Christian Wolff has employed textual elements which overtly reference contemporary social and political issues. Probably because of this he has earned a reputation as a politically-minded composer. This has been furthered by critical dialogue concerning his music that routinely frames it as political statement—a dialogue in which the composer participates. For instance, in a recent lecture Wolff suggested that "[Experimental] music becomes a kind of metaphor, if you will, for a social situation; it suggests a way of organizing your thinking, your attitude towards the world which suggests that the world could be different."[2] One way this can be understood is as pertaining to the complex performer interactions Wolff began employing in the early 1950s and has continued developing throughout his career.

The present discussion will describe the problem of ascribing a purely political origin to the compositional techniques which Wolff began developing in the period before and during his self-described "political awakening" in 1972. I take 'political' here to mean that

---

1 Christian Wolff, "... let the listeners be just as free as the players: Fragments to make up an interview" (1971) in *Cues: Writings and Conversations / Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche*, ed. Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel (Köln: MusikTexte, 1998), 86.

2 Christian Wolff, "Experimental Music" (lecture, Institute of Musical Research, London, UK, May 12, 2014), accessed April 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3I6WwY4ftdI.

which pertains to norms and normativity of social organization and behaviour, particularly those norms which Wolff later explicitly espoused (such as Marxism). I will outline four broad categories of potentially political aspects of this music (individuality of sounds, performer freedom and interaction, accessibility, and settings of topical texts), describe why they might be considered as such (taking into account the composer's statements during that period and after it where possible), then examine the historical context and musical lineage of these techniques to problematize the notion of politicality as their primary motivator. Instead, I will propose that these techniques are responses to the musical problems with which Wolff was concerned. In doing so, I hope not to accuse the composer of historical revisionism, but rather to suggest that any political views one might draw from these early works are the result not of conscious compositional intent but rather of a non-conscious worldview.[3] Understanding the music in this way affords telling insights into the character of the composer.

INDIVIDUALITY OF SOUNDS

Almost from the moment he began studying with John Cage in 1950, Wolff was exploring musical ideas that characterize his entire output. Despite his relative inexperience, these early works should not be written off as juvenilia. Wolff was only seventeen when he wrote *Nine*, a work that Morton Feldman hailed as "'the masterwork' of the period."[4] Furthermore, the high calibre of his collaborators (including Cage, Feldman, David Tudor, and

[3] By "non-conscious worldview" I refer to a system of values which the composer took for granted and to which he did not explicitly refer.

[4] Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund, *Christian Wolff* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 16.

Frederic Rzewski) and the consistency with which he developed his materials argue for the sustained consideration of his early output.

What characterizes Wolff's apparent compositional perspective during this period is a concern for the individuality of sounds and the thorough examination of them. This trait is present in the use of space in these works and in the complementary notions of non-intentionality and asignification— 'let[ting] the listeners be free.' These concerns are likely the results of the study of species counterpoint and analysis of Webern that formed the first exercises of Wolff's formal tutelage under Cage. Wolff might have found license to a liberal use of "silence" (rests) in the writing of Webern's Symphony (which Cage had him analyse).[5] The space between the events in these works suggests a hearing of sounds as separate phenomena, trivializing the relationship to the preceding and succeeding events and cognitively grouping each as an individual unit. One might also speculate that Wolff was reacting to Webern: where the latter drew a maximum of topical significance from a minimum of materials, the former attempted to minimize the degree to which he imposed meaning on the sounds.[6] We might even take this affinity toward

---

[5] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, 10.

[6] The composer Helmut Lachenmann gives a brief treatment of topics in the fourth movement of Webern's *Fünf Stücke* (op. 21) in "Hearing is Defenseless without Listening", in which he describes Webern as "Mahler in birdseye view, radically reduced to the slightest signal, prescribed like a deflated balloon to be blown up at home." Helmut Lachenmann, "Hearing [Hören] is Defenseless—without Listening [Hören]: On Possibilities and Difficulties," *Circuit: musiques contemporaines* 13, no. 2 (2003): 33–36, accessed October 1, 2013, http:// id.erudit.org/iderudit/902272ar. One can draw a parallel to musique concrète in the asemic characterstics of Wolff's music, as, for example, Seth Kim-Cohen has done with Cage in Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 149–174.

transparency as having developed from Wolff's early preference for "Classical masterworks," the harmonic textures of which would have sounded spartan and clear relative to the music heard in mid-twentieth-century New York.[7]

Cage incubated this interest, encouraging Wolff to write using a small number of pitches.[8] Wolff took this careful consideration of compositional materials to a material level, focusing closely also on the material (sounding) results of a piece's performance, and composed music that facilitates that consideration. Wolff also learned Cage's nested proportional forms as well as the use of gamut-style composition, adopting compositional non-intentionality as the next step in respecting and observing the properties of individual sounds.[9] However, Cage explains that "it was Wolff who made clear to me the necessity to renounce any interest in continuity. It was he who, in order to 'let the sounds come into their own,' wrote

---

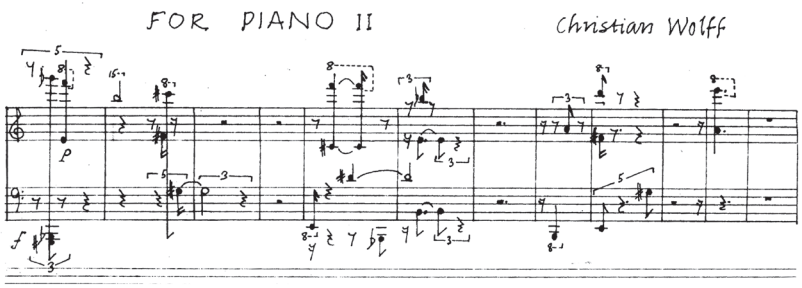
7 Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, 6–8. Christian's parents were musically knowledgable and exposed him to "a repertoire dominated by Bach at one end and Brahms at the other." The boy Wolff preferred that gamut's earlier music, probably following cues from his parents. "David [Lewin] and Christian sometimes arrived at the seminary [the Quaker Society of Friends Seminary on Sixteenth St, which they attended] around 7:30 (an hour and a half before classes started) to practice four-hands scores at the piano …. The repertoire consisted of classical masterworks, mostly Bach and Mozart." Christian "sometimes booed the new music he heard" at concerts and "disliked popular music" such as Broadway and hit radio, but was fond of Dixieland jazz.

8 Christian Wolff, "Taking Chances: from a conversation with Victor Schonfield" (1969) in Cues, 70. "Around 1951–52 my pieces had very few pitches, resulting from exercises Cage had set me."

9 'Nested proportional form': a compositional form in which the sequence of durations in a small section are proportionally replicated in larger formal sections. For example, a rhythmic sequence of quarter-quarter-half would create a nesting of one level deep if it were followed by quarter-quarter-half, half-half-whole. 'Gamut-style composition': a compositional technique in which a selection, often but not necessarily of sounds, is represented in a grid. A musical work is constructed from a selection of the grid's cells. For more, see Wolff's lengthy discussion in "Precise Actions under Variously Indeterminate Conditions" in *Cues: Writings and Conversations / Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche*, ed. Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel (Köln: MusikTexte, 1998), 33–50.

music vertically on the page though the music was to be played horizontally."[10]

These attributes can be found as early as Wolff's opus no. 1, *Duo for Violins* (1950). The piece uses three pitches (D5, Eb5, and E5) coloured by string changes and set in a restrained dynamic range of *pianissimo–mezzo forte*. The piece was created by means of a "row" of twelve sounds, differentiated by their pitch content and by their modes of attack and decay (whether they begin or end simultaneously or otherwise).[11] The work has an overall sustaining stasis that presages both American and European minimalism and the drone-like pieces of Giacinto Scelsi. Later works such as *Nine* (composed using Cage's gamut technique) and *For Piano I* (1952) and *For Piano II* (1953) display a greater use of sonic disconnection of sounds by silence.



Example 1: from For Piano II

A political reading of these attributes is easily accommodated by their context. Wolff's (and for that matter, Cage's and Feldman's) concern with 'letting the sounds come into their own' echoes a distinctly American brand of neoliberalism which prioritizes the ineluctable

[10] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, ed., The *Boulez-Cage Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 108, in Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, pages 14–15.

[11] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, page 12.

rights and comfort of individuals. Simultaneously, by not "push[ing] the sounds around" (as Feldman later described it), these composers evince a curiosity about the materials of their practice that subverts the more European concern of engaging with musical traditions.[12] "The Europeans Boulez and Stockhausen are thoroughly self-conscious about musical history," Wolff wrote in 1957, while "among the Americans … there is a greater freedom and intransigence, simplification and disruption, a 'cleaning the ears out,' as Alan Watts has said."[13] By avoiding engagement with these European traditions, the music dispenses with intersubjectively intelligible messages, garnering instead a more neutral signification. This is in line with the semiotic asceticism of Wolff's later musical manifesto-in-miniature, the epigraph of this paper.[14] The date of the manifesto (1970) demonstrates the degree to which these ideas informed Wolff's thought.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that such a political reading of these early works was intended by the composer at the time of their writing. As just demonstrated, the "getting rid of the glue" (to borrow Henry Cowell's description) was situated squarely in what Hicks and Asplund call the "Cage-Webern axis."[15] While this axis itself would have been divergent from the dominant contemporary musical tradition, for Wolff these were two figures of authority to follow during a formative period of technical development. So while the composer's interest was in creating something unique and new, the concern is clearly with the material rather than with a statement of individuality, anarchy, or opposition to an institution. Later, in 1957, Wolff wrote that among these experimentalists—including

---

[12] Morton Feldman, "Crippled Symmetry," *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 2 (1981), 97.

[13] Christian Wolff, "Immobility in Motion: New and electronic music" (1957) in *Cues*, 26.

[14] Wolff, "Fragments to make up an interview," 86.

[15] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, 15.

himself, the New York "school," Boulez, and Stockhausen as well as Henri Pousseur and Bo Nilsson—the "'work of art' is not presented as though it existed in an ideal and privileged isolation but is simply allowed to take its place among other 'transient phenomena.'"[16] While this 'objectivity' and 'anonymity' is in opposition to the expected 'artistry and taste,' the focus lies on the work's engagement with physical reality and not on its difference from tradition.

In addition, what little there is of the composer's own writing on these early through-composed pieces does not stray far from technical matters concerning the music itself. In liner notes to his *String Trio* (1950) and to *For Prepared Piano* (1951), Wolff describes the limited pitch set, texture, and rhythmic structure of the pieces without touching on any possible external significance thereof.[17] His note for *For Magnetic Tape* (1952) describes the piece's development in the Barron studio, its use in Merce Cunningham's *Suite by Chance*, and its materials and proportional rhythmic structure. One can see that this work was not consciously politically oriented, but that it developed from a mixture of personal impetus and contextual cultivation.

PERFORMER FREEDOM AND INTERACTION

Wolff's music is probably best known for those pieces which employ complex performer interaction as primary material, such as *For 1, 2 or 3 People* (1964) and *Burdocks* (1970–71). This material is characterized by its use of the performers' capacities to shape sounds in their own way as well as to listen to and engage with

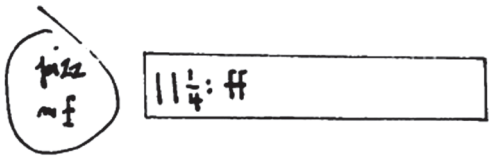
---

16 Wolff, "Immobility in Motion," 28.

17 Christian Wolff, liner notes to *String Trio* and *For Prepared Piano*, in *Cues: Writings and Conversations / Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche*, ed. Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel (Köln: MusikTexte, 1998), 494. Unless noted otherwise, all reference to liner notes are based on their reproductions in *Cues*, which are unfortunately not accompanied by original publication details.

the other performers (and occasionally the performance situation). Unlike many scores from this era which strayed from common practice notation, Wolff was structuring interactions more than he was sounds.

These interactions materialized in several different ways in the works of the period under consideration. A first system presented fields of sounding possibilities as ratios with a duration as their left term and a sound description as the right, and a complex system of cues based on them. An instance of this notation can be seen in example no. 2, from *Duo for Pianists II* (1958). This instruction tells the performer to play 11¼ seconds of anything *fortissimo* after hearing a *mezzoforte pizzicato* in the other player's part. The players' agencies are engaged in their shaping of the sounds and their constant monitoring of the other's activity.



Example 2: from Duo for Pianists II

After his military service in 1959–60, Wolff conceived a new means of expressing these interactions, resulting in the more "graphical" notation used in *For 1, 2 or 3 People*.[18] In these systems, the sounds and the cues are less thoroughly defined, leaving them open to performer choice. Additionally, while the cues of the system described above simply indicate the beginnings of new sounds, in this new system the sounds are continually modulated, requiring

[18] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, page 32.

even greater attention and collaboration between performers. Consider example 3, from *For 1, 2 or 3 People*. In it, the performer is instructed to play a long sound (with no cue to start from), change its timbre, then play a shorter sound which is to end at the next sound that the player hears. Then the player will play another short sound which starts and stops at the same time as the next sound they hear, followed by a long sound, followed by seven seconds of silence. In all of this, Wolff specifies only changes in state, leaving the specifics up to the performer.

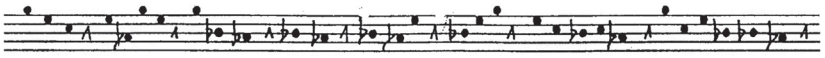
Example 3: from For 1, 2 or 3 People

A different and roughly contemporaneous form of performance indeterminacy that relies on performer agency is found in pieces such as *Tilbury I* (1969) and *Exercises 1–14* (1973–74). In it, a series of notes with imprecise rhythmic indication are given on a staff with no clef, as in example no. 4. Players are to supply their own staff and transposition, and various guidelines are given pertaining to aspects such as dynamics and timbre, but the "normal situation" as described in the notes to *Exercises 1–14*

> is unison. But, as rhythm and speed, articulation, amplitude, color, and modes of playing are all flexible, any player may try to establish what the point of reference for unison is at any point in the course of playing. If however, a movement by a player, say, in the direction of faster is not generally picked up by the rest, he must return to the prevailing speed.[19]

[19] Wolff, *Exercises* 1–14 (New York: C. F. Peters, 1974), 2.

The result is a situation in which the players are expected to listen to the others and collaborate during the performance in what might be considered a more linear version of the coordination-neumes pieces.



Example 4: from Exercise 1

Various different performer freedoms are explored in other works during this period. Among these are the open orchestrations of pieces such as *For Five or Ten People* (1962) and *Pairs* (1968), the polyvalent instructions of the *Prose Collection* (1968–71), and the democratically decided arrangement of *Burdocks*. Some further implications of these are discussed below, but here it is important to recognize them as allowing for a substantial—possibly unprecedented—amount of performer control over the sounding result of the piece.

These forms of performance indeterminacy developed out of Wolff's musical concerns during this period. In the first instance, the use of a score as a less-defined source of performance material was employed as early as 1950, with his *Madrigals*.[20] This was a result of his increased workload during his study at Harvard, and was an efficient way to produce music that was just as interesting as something more rigidly defined.[21] There is evidence that Wolff attempted to continue thinking in terms of Cage's square-root form: speaking about his *Duo for Pianists I* (1957), Wolff states that "there is one rhythmic structure, marking out eight times eight time-spaces in the proportions ½:10:1:½:4:⅔:12:2."[22] Wolff's practice of composing performer interplay might be compared to Morton Feldman's

[20] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, page 23–24.

[21] Ibid., 22.

[22] Christian Wolff, liner note to *Duo I* in *Cues*, 488.

usage of graph scores, but where Feldman turned away from graphical notation to avoid performances that leaned too heavily on idiomatic playing, Wolff continued working with interactions, trusting in the musical tastes of the performers. Before 1972, Wolff discussed the effects of these measures on the performers without explicitly relating their potential relevance to any extramusical reality. In 1957 he stated that he assumes "a measure of good will" from the performers in realising his indeterminate forms.[23] This sentiment is echoed seven years later, when he discusses how, beyond being "machines of reproduction," he hopes to put performers "really in the making of the music again" and "to have made something hazardous with which we may try ourselves."[24] This dialogue hints at the democratic socialism and increased agency which these scores present their performers, but does not overtly connect musical and socio-political realms. Whence the politicization of this material, then?

In fact, the first blush of politicality in Wolff's discourse comes in the early 1970s, at roughly the same time as Wolff's political awakening. A number of important events in his life may figure in this conversion: in the immediately preceding years he had returned to America from his stay in Europe (where he was intimately involved with Cornelius Cardew and the improvising ensemble AMM), become a father for the first time, lost his job at Harvard, was hired by Dartmouth, was awarded a short intermediary position at the Centre for Hellenic Studies in Washington, and moved to New Hampshire.[25] Immediately following this chaotic personal period, Cardew sent Wolff a letter containing a copy of an article in which Cardew denounced Cage for being overly individualistic and

---

[23] Wolff, "Immobility in Motion," 28.

[24] Christian Wolff, "...something hazardous with which we may try ourselves: Questions" (1964) in *Cues*, 54.

[25] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, page 42.

for separating politics from life.[26] The resulting awkward position of being caught between two good friends incited Wolff to carefully review his own position on the matter over several months. In his reply, Wolff agreed that Cage was downplaying potentially political aspects of his music, but posited that music could, instead of necessarily being overtly "hard-hitting and tough," be "infiltrating, insinuating, subversive."[27]

It was around this time that Wolff penned the article containing the miniature manifesto of this paper's epigraph. In its emphasis on 'freedom and dignity,' the article outlines an ethical normativity but never suggests extrapolating that position to other extramusical contexts. In a later interview from 1972, Wolff stated that, in addition to beginning to read Marx, he was

> at a transitional point. I think I have learned how to do one thing—to write music which is available for a number of performers, which allows the performers to actively take part in the music, be responsible for the music …. [it] allows them to be free….I cannot find a solution to the social problems right now. I would like to learn much more about them, and what is involved in them. I would like to relate my music to them as much as possible.[28]

This provides a usable reference for his political conversion. The broader goal of "freedom" is not suggested in order to address the social problems to which Wolff admits not knowing the solution. In fact, the potential of a political reading of this music was suggested to Wolff by an unknown Marxist writer who pointed out a "strongly

---

[26] Ibid., 49-50.

[27] Christian Wolff, letter to Cornelius Cardew, July 21, 1972, quoted in Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolf* 50.

[28] Christian Wolff, "What Are We Doing?: Conversation with Ildi Ivanji" (1972) in *Cues*, 90–92.

anti-authoritarian, a democratic" connection in its organization.[29] Preceding that suggestion, Wolff declared "it's [creating such a connection is] not something that had occurred to me, because I hadn't set out to do that."[30] We can point to these events—the personal upheaval, the Cardew article, and the manifesto—as markers of the point in his life when Wolff began to think of his music as effecting social or political change.

ACCESSIBILITY

From the 1960s onward, Wolff became increasingly concerned with his music's ease of access, both to performers and to listeners. The use of open instrumentation allows for any person to perform the piece, regardless of sound source. This can be read not just as an indeterminate orchestration, but also as being open to different economic statuses, as sources of low or zero cost could be used in these pieces' performance. The earliest use of open instrumentation in Wolff's output is the *Madrigals* of 1950, scored for "3 voices and/or instruments," after which it is absent until *For 5 or 10 Players* (1962).[31] Wolff's interest in "found" sound sources can be seen in *Stones* (1968), in the instrumentation description for *Burdocks*—"any instruments or sound sources (but there are places which require specific pitches to be played)"—and in his 1972 lectures at the Darmstadt *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue*

---

[29] Christian Wolff, "I can't shake Webern's influence: Interview by Gerald Gable" (1986) in *Cues*, 158. In this interview Wolff only refers to the interpreter as "a Marxist" and with masculine pronouns: "In retrospect, a Marxist once did a long paper on my earlier music and his interpretation of it was Marxist oriented, which sort of flabbergasted me!"

[30] Ibid.

[31] Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas, "List of Works," in *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*, ed. Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 219.

Musik (the International Summer Course in New Music), in which he guided attendees in a realisation of a section of that piece using stones.[32] One might also consider his usage of the electric guitar and electric bass guitar in his performing with the AMM, in premieres of his own music, and in instrumentation to pieces such as *Electric Spring I* (1966) and *II* (1966/70) as an allegiance to the musical practices of the working class.[33]

His unique scoring methods might be interpreted along a similar line. While some of the pieces are open to and sometimes take advantage of performer virtuosity (as in 1959's *For Pianist*, which pushed Tudor past his formidable skill and rendered his mistakes as cues for following material), much of this music can be performed with little or no musical training. The first set of *Exercises* requires the bare minimum of note-reading for performance, while the coordination system of *For 1, 2 or 3 People* creates a system which stands essentially outside of what might be learned in conventional musical training. Hicks and Asplund even suggest that the switch from "players" to "people" in the title of *For 1, 2 or 3 People* reflects an attitude of inclusivity to non-musicians.[34] The *Prose Collection*, composed during Wolff's tenures at art schools in the United Kingdom, may be the apex of this effort to write instructions "from which even the least musically literate could make sounds in an organized way with whatever means were available," and it is known that Wolff

---

[32] Amy C Beal, "Christian Wolff in Darmstadt, 1972 and 1974," in Changing the System, 29.

[33] At the time, the guitar was known as the instrument around which the genres of blues, folk-rock, and rock 'n' roll were constructed. The electric guitar would be prominent in the soon-to-follow Vietnam War protest music, which struck out at an unsympathetic governing class, as well as in rock and punk bands kicking back against an oppressive economic structure. Steve Waksman discusses the complicated class, race, and sexuality associations of the electric guitar in *Instruments of desire: the electric guitar and the shaping of musical experience*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

[34] Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, page 34.

wrote *Burdocks* with the image of the mix of trained and untrained musicians of the Scratch Orchestra in mind.[35] This is clearly not an attitude of sacrificing compositional intent or pandering to the public as performers (Wolff was constantly in collaboration with musicians of the highest calibre, such as Tudor, Frederic Rzewski, and Gordon Mumma, and clearly stated that the score "should allow … virtuosity and doing things in the ordinary way"[36]) but rather one with a goal to "provide material for performances which could include non-musicians."[37] This inclusivity could be seen as a reflection of the midcentury American libertarianism that ostensibly welcomed people of all stripes, and it also accommodates a Marxist reading, since the capacity to own a potentially expensive instrument and invest the time to learn it to a high proficiency may be barred by the same financial barrier that effects the proletariat-bourgeoisie divide.

Wolff began to consciously consider the reception of his music around the same time as his political conversion. In a 1972 interview, Wolff stated that "the first step that I think I have taken now is to bring the composer and performer together. The next step is to bring in the audience, and that is what I am working on now."[38] In the context of the interview, this refers to their involvement in the music-making activity at the same level as the composer and performers. However, at about the same time, Wolff was beginning to reintroduce the connective "glue" which had been so absent from his music until this point. *Snowdrop* (1970), a composed realisation of *Tilbury I*, makes use of diatonic scale and arpeggio fragments (earning it a poor reception at

---

35 Ibid., 41.

36 Wolff, "Fragments," 86.

37 Christian Wolff, liner note to *Stones*, in *Cues* p 494.

38 Wolff, "What Are We Doing?," 92.

Wolff's 1972 Darmstadt lecture).[39] *Burdocks* employs a characteristic melodic fragment, and some of Wolff's text settings take the appearance of a campfire song chart, written as a melody with accompanying chord symbols. The *Exercises* are basically materials for linear connections of pitches, complete with phrase breaks. These connected sounds were a way for Wolff to avoid the "highly introverted" and "abstract" esotericism that resulted from his earlier music, and to involve a more general audience than the specialized musical elite.[40]

As before, it is misleading to ascribe a solely polemical intent to these features. Wolff's inclusivity of performers may be considered a side effect of the indeterminate coordination notations, and there can be no doubt that the flexibility of open instrumentation was a useful feature in these pieces. The individual contexts of certain pieces are also instructive to consider: the *Prose Collection* was written expressly *for* the art students of the various schools at which Wolff was teaching; any instructive intent in these situations would have been to expose the students to performance-based art. *Burdocks*, though inspired by the "democratic anarchic community" of the Scratch Orchestra, was written for an annual private celebration—it is what Gordon Mumma describes as "the biggest party piece."[41] There is no known

---

[39] "in particular, the students questioned Wolff's use of scales and arpeggios. One commentator called the inclusion of such traditional elements of Western music 'disturbing.' Wolff responded: …. 'I must say I was originally very surprised to see that [*Snowdrop*] got a mixed reception …. to see that people were disturbed by it surprised me very much.'" Beal, "Wolff in Darmstadt," 28–30.

[40] David Ryan, "Changing the System: Indeterminacy and Politics in the early 1970s," in *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*, ed. Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 150.

[41] Gordon Mumma, interview by author, February 24, 2015; Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, pages 46–47. The piece "premiered" atthe second Burdock Festival in August of 1971, in Vermont at the farm belonging the family of Holly Nash, Wolff'swife. The annual festival was originally intended to be a gathering of friends, but its music attracted a largeraudience.

documentation from this period which connects these pieces to a social or political intent.

TEXT SETTINGS

On the other hand, the didactic intent of Wolff's settings of various texts in the early seventies is unmistakable. In these settings, the text—which always refers to a political topic—features as a major component of the piece, framed in a way that prioritizes the effective communication of its meaning to the audience. All of these settings are in close proximity to his political conversion. The text for *Accompaniments* (1972) is an account of the experiences of Chinese villagers during the Cultural Revolution which illustrates "the principle of applying a revolutionary political orientation to immediate and practical problems."[42] *Changing the System* (1972) uses a portion of a speech about the need for "systemic social change," given by Tom Hayden during the 1968–69 American student revolts against the Vietnam War.[43] The *Songs* (1973) set texts from newspapers, commentary on capitalist economics, and an account of the Attica prison riots. *Bread and Roses* (1976) is a 1912 marching tune written by Carol Kohlsaat and used during a strike in Massachusetts, and *Wobbly Music* (1975–6) uses text from 1921 songs associated with the Industrial Workers of the World, an early international worker's union.[44] Wolff curtailed this direct, propagandistic use of text after 1976.

The text scores are problematic for the interpretation of Wolff's preceding music. As in the increasingly linear music of this period, the clear setting of text allows for far fewer interpretations, both

---

[42] Christian Wolff, liner notes to *Accompaniments*, in *Cues*, 498.

[43] Christian Wolff, liner notes to *Changing the System*, in *Cues*, 500.

[44] Christian Wolff, liner note to *Bread and Roses*, in *Cues*, 502; Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, page 62.

musically and morally. The listener freedom which had concerned him in his 1971 manifesto has no place in this music. Furthermore, that these settings followed his political conversion and his investigation of the "problem of what music is doing in society or who listens to it" so closely suggests that *they,* and not any of his other music, are his primary artistic address to socio-political issues.[45]

Interestingly, Wolff continues writing in his 'esoteric' style throughout this period, and there is evidence that his consideration of these pieces was unaffected by his newfound political concerns. The pairing of his 1972 string quartet *Lines* with *Accompaniments* on a 1976 LP is a telling example. Wolff's notes for the quartet discuss the details of its ensemble coordination, concluding that "the music as a whole, then, is a collaboration between the composer's score and the players' playing, and the latter becomes increasingly directed by the players' own decisions and feelings—the forming of which may have been assisted by the score to begin with."[46] His treatment of *Accompaniments* discusses the choice of text (which follows the note), certain feelings which the music was intended to invoke ("In the second and third parts, single line keyboard figures are intended to have a propulsive feeling," "the fourth part of the piece … comes as something of a release"), and explains certain musical choices ("the drum and cymbals were … suggested by their appearance in China during mass assemblies and marches," "the addition of singing and percussion playing to the pianist's tasks is to … combine his professional competence with non-professional capacities which we all have").[47] The contrast between descriptive

---

[45] Wolff, "What Are We Doing?," 92.

[46] Christian Wolff, liner notes to *Lines/Accompaniments* (New York: Composers Recordings Inc, 1976). Accessed April 6, 2015, http://www.dramonline.org/albums/christian-wolff-lines-accompaniments/notes.

[47] Ibid.

and prescriptive subtexts suggests that these may have been conceived of as parallel styles.

QUESTIONS OF INTERPRETATION

In light of this evidence, I conclude that the only reasonable speculation of intent behind the compositional decisions made by Wolff in the "esoteric" works of this period is that he was responding primarily to musical and practical concerns rather than to conscious social normativity. Therefore, instead of ascribing a political intent to Wolff's compositional decisions, we should take any leanings we read in this early music as the result of a non-conscious personal belief. These clues to Wolff's individual worldview provide more telling insights into the composer's character than a stated political agenda ever could. Furthermore, framing Wolff as having composed primarily with political intent detracts from his works' relationship with other music—both music that influenced Wolff and music that likely would not have happened without him. By considering Wolff's work in the company of these musical relations, we gain a richer understanding both of the composer and his work.

Bibliography

Beal, Amy C. "Christian Wolff in Darmstadt, 1972 and 1974." In *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*, edited by Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas, 23–47. Burglinton, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

Chase, Stephen, and Philip Thomas, eds. *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*. Burglinton, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

Feldman, Morton. "Crippled Symmetry." *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 2 (1981): 91–103. Accessed August 17, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20166669.

Hicks, Michael and Christian Asplund. *Christian Wolff*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Ryan, David. "Changing the System: Indeterminacy and Politics in the early 1970s." In *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*, edited by Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas, 143–169. Burglinton, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

Christian Wolff. *Burdocks*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1971.

———. *Cues: Writings and Conversations / Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche*. Edited by Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel. Köln: MusikTexte, 1998.

———. *Duo for Pianists II*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1962.

———. *Duo for Violins*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1963.

———. Exercises no. 1–14. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1974.

———. "Experimental Music." Lecture, Institute of Musical Research, London, UK, May 12, 2014. Accessed April 6, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3I6WwY4ftdI.

———. *For 1, 2 or 3 People*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1964.

———. *For Pianist*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1963.

———. *For Piano I*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1964.

———. *For Piano II*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1967.

———. *Prose Collection*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1973.

———. *Tilbury*. New York, NY: C. F. Peters, 1969.