

# WIRE

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# SCHEMATIC FOR THE PEOPLE

**Treatise, the graphic score** Cornelius Cardew completed in 1967, is music you can see and philosophy you truly hear – the most profound statement the composer would make about two polarities that framed, and determined, his progress as a musician and eventual political activist: freedom and control. By the time Cardew began to conceptualise *Treatise* in 1963, he had been back in the UK for three years. From 1957 to 1960, he had been holed up in Cologne working with Karlheinz Stockhausen, first as an awestruck student, later as his loyal but increasingly sceptical assistant. His task: to bring to fruition as workable, functioning music notation the byzantine pre-composition plans Stockhausen had envisaged for *Carré*, a new work for four choirs and four orchestras.

*Carré* was the 'sequel' to *Gruppen* (1955–57), Stockhausen's epoch-moulding composition that bounced material around three spatially dispersed orchestras, giving the audience sitting between them a 3D sonic thrill. Barely a decade on from his own first compositions, Cardew now found himself at the pivotal hub of the Central European avant garde, charged with making creative decisions on behalf of New Music's most symbolically powerful, forward-thinking auteur. To a restless and progressive British composer of Cardew's generation – born in 1936, thereby obliged to find his creative feet in a parochial 1950s New Music scene that was comically behind the times and proud of it – Central European composers like Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and Luigi Nono represented artistic Nirvana beyond anything imaginable at home.

As a student at the Royal Academy of Music, institutionally hostile to New Music during the mid-50s, Cardew had already put himself out on a limb by mounting performances of 'dangerous' post-serial works like Boulez's two-piano *Structures* (with Richard Rodney Bennett) and *Le Marteau Sans Maître* (for which, assuming no British guitarist would be up to Boulez's technical demands, he learnt the instrument himself from scratch). In Cologne, however, Cardew was finding his daily encounters with Stockhausen maddening and far less liberating than he had anticipated.

"I have been rather an island in the sea of Stockhausen disapproval," Cardew reported home as Stockhausen's magical elixir began to evaporate. Disillusionment set in slowly, but accelerated as his critique became ever more pointed. In a later bulletin home, Cardew even referred to Stockhausen as "Führer", and complained about his habit of

"pronouncing everything that others do as really too, too simple to be worth listening to." Moreover, he found the deferential, near-cult adoration Stockhausen demanded from anyone entering his orbit highly unpalatable and disconcerting: "The church militant in its worst guise," he wrote.

Personal friction aside, Stockhausen recognised in Cardew a quality that would blossom during *Treatise*'s painful gestation period and sustain him through his future stylistic repositionings: that he had unerring intuition for what symbols, when placed on manuscript paper, could best motivate musicians to *play* – and *think* about the sounds they were producing. Although *Carré* is rarely considered top-notch Stockhausen, even by aficionados, Cardew reportedly found the premiere disheartening. "It seemed not even Karlheinz was convinced of the validity of the indications in the score, and was therefore inclined to lay down the piece like a law," he wrote in a review published by *The Musical Times* which worked towards a strikingly damning conclusion: "The piece was nurtured up to the point when each orchestra was rehearsing separately... but thereafter it was bullied in atavistic maturity, realising only a fraction of its musical potential." Cardew's charge – that Stockhausen's notation was inadequate to express the grandeur of his vision – was extremely serious. Instead of enabling The NDR Symphony Orchestra to play, musicians and singers had become slaves to Stockhausen's ego. He was attempting to motivate through the fear of failure.

When Cardew acted on this realisation by crossing the floor of the ideological house, shifting his allegiance largely away from Europe and towards American New Music – especially the various open-form, graphic and indeterminate techniques of New York School composers like John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Christian Wolff, plus La Monte Young – it was his first strike of many against, as he saw it, a shifty elite acting in self-interest.

But was Cardew treating Stockhausen even-handedly? Visionary composers who question idiomatic limits, as their burgeoning concepts of harmony and timbre rub against the accepted instrumental grain, have ordinarily been vindicated by history. Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, Stravinsky's *Rite Of Spring* and everything Varèse wrote, existed in necessary creative tension with established protocols, and with the desire of instrumentalists to feel technically secure when performing. Cardew made no complaint about that. Instead he was pursuing a line of thought

Before his commitment to revolutionary politics required him to subjugate all his art to the demands of the class struggle,

## Cornelius Cardew

raised important questions about control and freedom with his groundbreaking graphic score *Treatise*. Reopening the book on the composer's legacy, Philip Clark takes today's New Music scene to task for its refusal to face up to the challenges that shaped Cardew's work.

Illustration by Karl Nawrot & Walter Warton









that could potentially inflict far more damage. He was questioning whether Stockhausen's elaborate, labour-intensive means justified ends which cut musicians out of a meaningful engagement in the creative process. He was giving an early public airing to doubts about Stockhausen's autocratic self-importance – an Achilles heel that would bring disastrous consequences in the last three decades of the German maestro's career.

Although the New York School had rampant egos of its own, Cardew found the basic guiding principles espoused by Cage, Feldman and their fellow travellers – reconnecting composers and instrumentalists; allowing sound room to breathe along its natural grain – were positive and inclusive, allowing him the clean aesthetic break that he had been seeking from Stockhausen's controlling cul de sac. In Feldman's piano piece *Intermission 6* (1953), disjointed notes hang against fragmented, broken staves that trip higgledy-piggledy across and around the page. "The composition begins with any sound and proceeds to any other," Feldman writes, inviting the pianist (or pianists) to zone into a fabric of soft, sustaining sounds and generate their own structure from listening to the moment. The fantastical geometry of wavering horizontal and vertical lines in Brown's milestone graphic score *December 1952*, and the uncoordinated instrumental parts of Cage's indeterminate *Concert For Piano And Orchestra* (1958), were not merely sets of directions about when, where and how to place fingers on an instrument. By being responsive to their needs as creative artists, these composers' notational strategies made musicians responsible for their sounds.

La Monte Young's conceptual works like *Piano Piece For David Tudor No 1* (with its instruction to feed a bale of hay to a piano... or, then again, you might not want to) and *X For Henry Flynt* (here the performer is required to repeat a loud sound of

their choosing as uniformly as possible over a long duration), also fuelled Cardew's imagination, and in 1962 he mused: "Does anything happen in La Monte's pieces? That is impossible to predict... I find that I require all the resources I possess and often more to perform a piece by La Monte... It is necessary to withdraw to an unusual distance and allow the piece to speak."

In response, Cardew's music went through immediate, indelible change. As recently as 1958 his densely written *Piano Sonata No 3* had been a nothing-special, boffin-minded satellite to Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke* and Boulez's *Piano Sonata No 2*. However, New York School ideologies licensed him to breathe air through his notation and liberate his music from the supremacy of the written score and a domineering 'composery' voice. On the page, Cardew's *Octet 61 For Jasper Johns* resembles Feldman's *Intermission 6*. Like Feldman, Cardew displays his material – 60 so-called 'musical events' ranging from single notes to obliquely spaced three-note chords and abstracted perspectives on conventional notation – over mobile-like stave fragments. What to make of, for instance, symbol 35, with an arrow pointing dramatically upwards from the middle note, and a top E qualified with a flat and a sharp accidental? Or number 37, which looks like two conventional note heads scored through with a cross? Reaching a considered conclusion about any of these symbols is not yet enough to make music. The players must listen inside the sounds provoked by Cardew's symbols and fit them into an evolving sonic environment.

In *Autumn '60*, Cardew lets musicians dovetail their own material into the unfolding soundscape, as long as the context supplied by his original material never entirely disappears. Again, players must listen carefully to ensure a balance is maintained. In the super-refined *Piece For Guitar (For Stella)* (1961),

the guitarist decides how to transform and repeat the 16 'source' modules Cardew has sketched, some rich in tonal allusion, others like an atonal white canvas. If *Carré* was a 'text' – one that, given its obscure difficulties, was always likely to be more definitive than any single performance – Cardew instead was defining a sliding scale between absolutes and more pliable rules that required thought and interpretation. The score was no longer a given, but a conduit for sound.

Not that anyone looking at the published score of *Treatise* could mistake it for anything other than a 'music thing'. Open any one of the 193 pages at random and the eye becomes drawn to two clear-cut strata of activity. Filling the top two-thirds of each page is a slipstream of intricately etched graphic symbols that insinuate sound without instructing you what to play – there are circles overlapping circles; small circles spooning against larger spheres; elongated and squashed notes hanging off broken-up staves; notes that melt against flat signs with and without a clef to indicate their pitch; staves that broaden beyond their customary five lines, sometimes to as many as 40 lines. Some of these graphically extended staves have patterings that crinkle along their width like a Mexican wave. The small, hollow circles that characterise the earlier pages are recapitulated later in the piece, but have been transformed into monolithic jet-black circles. All these elements – and many others too – are intercut, overlapped and spliced together, with tremendous 'speed' or approaching near stasis. The intensity of *Treatise's* graphic brilliance and the vividness of Cardew's fantasy on conventional notation is testament to his internal wrestling with the means of how people express musical language.

The second element the eye alights upon is a simple but more enigmatic gesture. Circumnavigating the bottom of each page is a blank stave that represents... what? The most grounding of all notational conventions, a stave is like the canvas on which composers paint contours of notes. There is a convergence of opinion that Cardew meant it to represent the perspective of the listener (or reader) of his score, a still point around which everything else travels. It makes you fall towards sound, signifying that this imagined music journeys forward in a continuum of time.

A digression. Type 'Cornelius Cardew' into the internal search engine at the London Sinfonietta website and the message comes back, "Your search yielded no results." Nor has Cardew sparked interest among other stalwarts of the UK New Music scene: his music isn't conducted by Oliver Knussen or performed by the Arditti Quartet, or ever spoken about by composers playing the generic mainstream like George Benjamin, James MacMillan and Thomas Adès. Since Cardew's dreadful, still somewhat murky death in 1981, the classical establishment has tried to ensure that Cardew's bothersome, disobedient legacy died with him.

But he refuses to go quietly. John Tilbury's lavishly detailed, discursive 1000-page biography, published in 2008, is the Rosetta Stone of Cardew scholarship, throwing up as many questions as it answers. A dedicated Cardew weekend at the ICA this month, cannily entitled *Play For Today*, follows performances of *Treatise* last July, led by composer John Lely at



The Drawing Room in East London. From a 2009 perspective, the idea that a culture once existed which could produce a work of art like *Treatise* is inspiring. A figure hitting out at the heart of the contemporary composition world today would be ruthlessly frogmarched to the margins – but even after the provocation of *Treatise*, Cardew was still respected by some at the BBC and was discussed earnestly on Radio 3, while sections from his other large scale piece *The Great Learning* were programmed at the Proms in 1972. Cardew's profile during the 1970s nails the lie that our present New Music scene is more 'inclusive' and that composers 'can write anything'. In fact, the boundaries of what orchestras and other classical institutions, who tend to favour short and amenable showpieces, deem 'acceptable' has never been so narrow and judgmental.

And the existence of *Treatise* shines revealing light on the generation of New Music composers who were born around the time of Cardew's death. He was 31 when *Treatise* was completed, but no composer of that age today feels equipped to probe so forensically the ethics by which music is created and performed. Cardew's legacy demarcates a faultline down the middle of British music. On one side, the frantic sexing-up and repackaging of sterile mainstream 'New Music' with little to say. On the other: musicians who are posing questions about contemporary music and society; about whether music is best served through improvisation or notation (and if so, then what sort?), all of whom are obliged to exist without support or reward – like the ensemble Apartment House (who recorded a disc of Cardew chamber works on Eddie Prévost's Matchless label in 2001), the sound artist Lee Patterson, composer John Lely, pianists Ian Pace and Tania Chen, harpist Rhodri Davies and guitarist Alan Thomas.

No one pretends that Cardew's legacy is easy to grasp, or possible to embrace in its totality. His immersion in revolutionary politics – initially as a member of the Mao-worshipping Communist Party of England (Marxist-Leninist) and, when the truth about Mao outed, as a supporter of Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha – did his music few favours. Pieces like *Treatise* and *The Great Learning*, and their essential 'whither music?' questions, were jettisoned in favour of politburo-endorsed songs for the Party like "Long Live Chairman Mao", "Smash The Social Contract" and "Revolution Is The Main Trend". Even when Cardew sought permission from the Party, as

the rules stated he must, to write concert music, the crude faux-Beethovenian socialist realism of the solo piano *Thälmann Variations* (1974) and *We Sing For The Future* (1980), and the dire *Boollavogue* (1981) for two pianos, find him freeloading off a dimmed residue of technique. But if you find Cardew irreconcilably tainted by his political associations, and *Treatise* of minor interest, the questions it raises – about the expressive burnout of conventional notation, and composer/performer hierarchies – remain central to any discussion of New Music and, indeed, any form of 'new music'. Had Cardew's message truly been heeded, would we again be facing the same stuffy non-acceptance that Cardew moved against at the Royal Academy of Music during the mid-1950s?

When Cardew began to associate with the musicians of free Improv collective AMM – including Eddie Prévost (drums), Keith Rowe (guitar), Lou Gare (saxophone) and Christopher Hobbs (percussion) – shortly after the group was established in 1965, he came with an agenda: he wanted them to perform *Treatise*. AMM represented a polar opposite from his experience conjuring up a notation for *Carré*, and Cardew found himself willingly sucked into the group's methodology of purist improvisation; a music that stressed the collective centring of sound above individual contributions. The music Cardew improvised with AMM, playing piano and cello, was the most genuinely 'free' of his career. It defined his golden period.

What happened next was either an artistic tragedy or a positive move for class warfare, depending on your point of view. Cardew and Rowe attempted to impose a Maoist agenda onto AMM that caused an ideological split, and a similar chasm engulfed The Scratch Orchestra, the part-amateur, part-professional experimental orchestra that Cardew had originally set up along utilitarian lines. As the Party took over his life, Cardew came to view music only as a tool in the revolutionary struggle; individualist bourgeois nonsense like *Treatise* propped up oppression, and it was now, in 1974, that Cardew chose to issue his notorious polemic *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*. Cardew had traded one type of control (compositional hyper-organisation) for another (political dogma), and music lost out. Not that Cardew saw it in those terms – he was fighting a war, and during wartime normal life must be suspended.

*Treatise* bridged this trajectory between control and freedom. The work advances an ethic of music

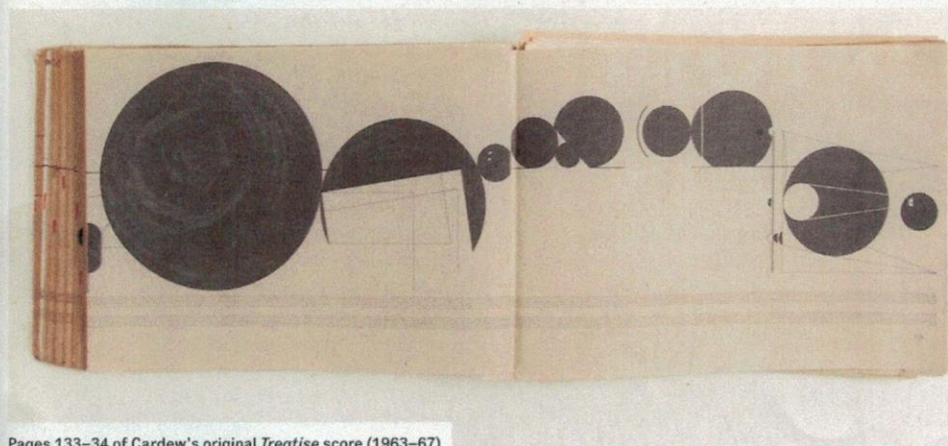
making that transcends the laying-on of rules with a trowel. Musicians must internalise Cardew's symbols, while devising rules relevant to their own situation that might, or might not, evolve as required. But this freedom came with responsibility. Cardew's graphic score ought to provoke a response distinct from the lingua franca of free improvisation – although *Treatise* is often performed by improvisors, its purpose is to channel musicians towards a transforming pool of sounds and gestures that might not occur through the machinations of improvisation. The philosophical backbone of *Treatise* came from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ('Tractatus' translates as 'Treatise'), a discourse about logic and the limits of language. Cardew applied that same thesis to sound.

As *Treatise* filters inside the subconscious, a moment arrives when one begins metamorphosing the symbols into sounds. Should individual symbols be allocated a specific musical gesture, like a trill, tremolo or a staccato point of articulation? What to make of the numbers Cardew drops inside his graphics – are these durations, potential voicings of chords, intensities of attack? Cardew's original intention was to leave his notation wholly openended, but he was persuaded to publish his *Treatise Handbook* in 1971, which itself grew into a philosophical text about sound and notation, written as a series of statements in the manner of Wittgenstein.

Cardew begins by defining notation and its function. "A composer who hears sounds will try to find a notation for sounds. One who has ideas will find one [a notation] that expresses his ideas, leaving their interpretation free, in confidence that his ideas have been accurately and concisely notated." Then an elaboration: "Notation is a way of making people move. If you lack others, like aggression or persuasion. The notation *should* do it." When performing *Treatise*, "the sound should be a picture of the score, not vice versa".

Cardew then discusses how sound can be visually represented on paper. He concedes that musical symbols like the dynamic indications of *p* (quiet) and *f* (loud), and treble and bass clefs, "are important indices for many of the basic elements", but that in a graphic score "how to get rid of them is the problem". He chides the pianist and composer Frederic Rzewski for suggesting that the published score of *Treatise* is "ideal for measuring". But measuring would impose the metric regularity of bars and tempo. Instead Cardew proposes "interpretative measurement".

The idea of interpretative measurement has special resonance for the circles that pervade *Treatise*. Under normal circumstances, a circle – that is, a note head – is a sound. A circle that has been filled in (a crotchet, or quarter note) is played twice as fast as an open circle with a stem (a minim, or half note). However, portraying a circle graphically, as a metaphor for sound, creates a notational oxymoron. By definition, circles circle back on themselves, but Cardew's empty stave reminds us that music must always move forwards in time. A tart visual dissonance that the eye hears and the ear must see coming, then confront. □ Cornelius Cardew: Play For Today exhibition is at London's Drawing Room from 5 November. A symposium, Play For Today: Cornelius Cardew, takes place at London ICA on 24–25 November: see Out There



Pages 133–34 of Cardew's original *Treatise* score (1963–67)