Introduction

In the preface to the second edition of Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, the possibility of a sequel is mooted.[1] This is not that book. It is not a history of experimental music, it does not present an exhaustive overview of current practice, and there is no attempt to categorically define experimental music. As the title suggests, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* is a sourcebook and commentary on selected work by experimental musicians. It is in two parts: nine authored chapters exploring aspects of experimental music, and fourteen interviews with experimental musicians, which contextualize and exemplify each other respectively. Whilst focusing on notated music, the texts encompass related aspects of performance, improvisation and sonic art, with many of the interviewees being referenced in the opening chapters as might be expected. Through both these approaches the book considers a range of issues pertinent to recent and historical developments in experimental music, including definitions of experimentalism and its relationship with a broader avant-garde; experimentalism and cultural change; notation and its effect on composition; realizing open scores; issues of notation and interpretation in live electronic music; the performance practice of experimental music; improvisation and technology; improvisation and social meaning; instrumentalizing objects; visual artists' relationship to experimental music; working across interdisciplinary boundaries; listening and the soundscape; and working methods, techniques and aesthetics of recent experimental music.

Although the book does not aim to define experimental music explicitly, this is an emergent feature of much of the writing, particularly with regard to its location in relation to other contemporary arts practices. As Christopher Fox points out in Chapter 1, 'Why Experimental?, Why Me?', the distinctions made by Nyman between experimental and avant-garde music seem less clear with time. The continuum of possible innovation fans out as we look back to work that now seems less diametrically opposed than might have been the case 35 years ago. Fox's chapter takes this as its starting point, before exploring the relationship of his own work, and that of Kagel and Volans, to the experimental tradition.

1 Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. xv–xviii.

Given this situation, it becomes meaningless to define experimentalism in a closed way: rather a series of indicators might suggest where much of this work is located. Such referents include not trying to build on the past, but starting from scratch; seeking to discover or test something as a prerequisite; not working with traditional formats (sounds, instruments, forms, media, institutions, people); challenging our assumptions about music, art and life, and the apparent boundaries between them; questioning the relationship between composer, performer and audience; having a nebulous relationship between score (where present) and sound, and between the end result and its constituent parts; accepting circumstantial outcomes as readily as planned outcomes; music in which the idea or concept is as interesting (if not more so) than the sound; existing only in the moment; and taking an idea or parameter and following it to an extreme degree. Other musics clearly present some of these features in isolation, but it is only through their intersection that the nature of experimental work begins to emerge.

The following three chapters address the relationship between composition, notation and performance. An examination of the role of notation as the mediator between idea and realization is one of the principal emphases of experimental music practice, and an understanding of the strategies its practitioners take to this information exchange is central to its study. Chapter 2, Michael Pisaro's 'Writing, Music', deals with the essentiality of inscription in its widest sense in the compositional process, exploring the ways in which the act of writing directly affects the resultant music. Pisaro suggests that written music must confront ideas about writing, and that this in turn leads to a consideration of the role and nature of the score. His chapter presents a framework for notational practice, exemplified by a catalogue of notational types, examining the way in which this variety leads and is required by the work.

As a result of this multiplicity of notational approaches taken by composers, the problem of developing a methodology for realizing scores is more pronounced than with music for which a clearer and more unified performance practice exists. The indeterminacy of much experimental music in particular allows for the presentation of multiple readings of the same text, all of which might retain a validity with regards to their authenticity despite radical differences. Whilst this could imply the need for consolidation, imposing narrow restrictions on realization strategies would render this work moribund. Instead, as Philip Thomas notes in Chapter 3, 'A Prescription for Action', it is vital that performers look within the work to find its implied (and often unique) performance practice, substituting investigation for a more generalized interpretation. In his chapter, Thomas explores David Tudor's idea of work-as-interpretation, discussing this within the context of classic and more recent examples of experimental music, as well as more prescriptive complexly notated work.

This situation is compounded by the development of live electronic music in the 1960s, where the growing use of networked systems and home-made instruments further destabilized the relationship between score (where present) and sounding result. In pieces such as Cage's *Variations* series (1958–67), the creation of a meta-composition requires much of the performer when preparing a realization: whilst

the derived notation might be specific, the performed actions can result in a wider and often relatively uncontrollable variance. Ronald Kuivila examines this situation and the role of the score in live electronic music in Chapter 4, 'Open Sources: Words, Circuits and the Notation/Realization Relation in Live Electronic Music'. He comments on the way that these pieces were tied into the performance practices of individuals and the equipment they developed: the music was locked into their experience and circuitry as opposed to their more conventional location, the score. These relationships define the way this music evolved.

This movement towards utilizing more unpredictable devices whose potential for sound-making had not been fully explored formed part of a wider reconsideration of instrumentation, which encompassed extended techniques, invention, preparations and modifications, and treating 'the instrument as total configuration'.[2] Whilst electronics provided one approach to circumventing the learned assumptions of existing performance and composition practices, the appropriation of objects, of any sound producing means, provided a parallel way forward. Specific pieces of equipment found their way into many notated compositions, such as Kagel's *Acustica* (1968–70), for which newly constructed repertoires of performative actions were developed in order to actuate them. Such instrumentalizing has found its natural place in improvised music, however, where live investigation of the sounding potential of objects is arguably the purest form of experimentation. The extent to which the object, as opposed to its tradition (where one exists), leads this investigation is discussed in Andy Keep's 'Instrumentalizing: Approaches to Improvising with Sounding Objects in Experimental Music' (Chapter 5). Keep presents approaches to assessing an object's sonic properties, framed by discussions of creative abuse, notions of performer skill and the use of referents in experimental improvisation.

These investigations into the sonic potential of objects are the concern of both notated and improvised music, but it is the degree to which the former's appropriation of the latter's practical research occurs that can be seen as problematic in some contexts. The subject is touched on later in the book through the interviews with Rhodri Davies and Evan Parker, but it is a central tenet of Chapter 6, Eddie Prévost's 'Free Improvisation in Music and Capitalism: Resisting Authority and the Cults of Scientism and Celebrity'. Prévost argues that the collaborative nature of musical exploration is not fully acknowledged through the process of writing scores, of fixing sounds and their innovative techniques of production. The result of this appropriation of sound by composers is an embedded capitalism within music: it is perhaps a notion which defines a more chronological avant-garde, where as Philip Corner suggests 'You already see where the great tradition of Western culture is supposed to go; who's the genius who will get there first?'[3] Instead, the act of improvisation is an immediate moment of discovery, one in which all possibilities reside.

Appropriation of sound to a different end is considered in both the next chapters. Will Montgomery and John Levack Drever explore the way in which a broad

2 Ibid., p. 20.
3 Geoff Smith and Nicola Walker Smith, *American Originals* (London, 1994), p. 88.

spectrum of artists has approached environmental sound as material. In Chapter 7, Montgomery's 'Beyond the Soundscape: Art and Nature in Contemporary Phonography', the aural environment and its framing as art is discussed, considering the potential distinctions made between nominally discrete areas of activity such as phonography, sound art and music. The medial position much of this recorded work occupies is balanced, often precariously, by our understanding of its artifice and presentation as an acoustic reality, manipulating our experience of the world and commenting upon it. The practice of soundwalking on the other hand explores the soundscape without the mediation of recording. Here the framing of the everyday is immersive: as participants and listeners, the experience confronts us through layered modes of listening,[4] asking us to negotiate our interpretation of environmental sound without the distancing found in the presentation of a recorded soundscape. The varied practices and purposes of this activity are explored by John Levack Drever in Chapter 8, 'Soundwalking: Aural Excursions into the Everyday'.

This enmeshing of disparate activities has been a central theme of experimental music, in part due to many of its principal exponents having arrived from separate disciplines, artistic or otherwise. The forum such work has provided encourages the recontextualizing of concepts, the testing of ideas and the acceptance of failure: it is born of an intermedia investigation. A consideration of the role of visual artists in experimental music, both as creators and as participants, and the corresponding engagement with the institutions of visual art by composers, is the subject of David Ryan's '"We have Eyes as well as Ears…" Experimental Music and the Visual Arts' (Chapter 9). Ryan focuses on the relationship between experimental composers and the visual art world, considering both interdisciplinary practice and the impact of art schools as environments for experimentation

Ultimately this book is about work: it examines creative methodologies and considers how a particular group of musicians think and act. Taking the etymology of 'experimental', it is also a book about experience: the experience of making music, of Jasper Johns's desire to 'paint it and then see it',[5] or Alison Knowles's attitude of 'being on your toes at all times, of being aware of the moment in order to find things in it'.[6] It is also a reflective consideration of this experience, an evaluation of the things found in those moments, or as Ken Friedman puts it, 'Experimentalism doesn't merely mean trying new things. It means trying new things and assessing the results.'[7]

4 See Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des Objets Musicaux* (Paris, 1977), or summarized in Dennis Smalley, 'The Listening Imagination: Listening in the Electroacoustic Era', *Contemporary Music Review*, 13/2 (Amsterdam, 1996): 77–107.

5 Jasper Johns, 'Untitled Statement', in Kristine Styles and Peter Selz (eds), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley, 1996), p. 323.

6 Smith and Smith, *American Originals*, p. 151.

7 Ken Friedman, 'Fluxus and Company', *The Fluxus Reader* (Chichester, 1998), p. 248.