

Preface

Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas

With this music you learn the prime qualities needed in performing: discipline, devotion, and disinterestedness. I think a study of his music should be a part of every music student's education.¹

... something of a trade secret, treasured by musicians as different as György Kurtág and Sonic Youth.²

... something totally strange, unlike anything else you know.³

The strangeness that Frederic Rzewski detects in Christian Wolff's music is perhaps the reason that there has been relatively little critical response to Wolff's music. As will be evident throughout this book, there are numerous published interviews and writings by the composer, but almost no extended discussion on the part of others.

Sixty years after the composition of Wolff's earliest published work, such a discussion is overdue. Many of the notational, technical, aesthetic and social ideas that Wolff's music opens up seem increasingly relevant. There is a renewed interest in experimental music internationally, particularly amongst an emerging generation of composers and improvisers, and Wolff's music is more recorded and performed, by a wide variety of performers, than ever before.⁴ Furthermore, Wolff continues to compose prolifically, as well as taking part in performances across the world (especially, in recent years, with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company). His musical activities have certainly not diminished since his retirement from Dartmouth College in 1999.

This book is intended to assert Wolff's standing as a composer who is distinct in almost every way. However, it is somewhat inevitable that Wolff is usually discussed within the context of the influence of John Cage, with whom Wolff

¹ John Tilbury in Michael Parsons, 'The Contemporary Pianist', *The Musical Times* 110/1512 (1969), p. 151.

² Christopher Fox, Programme booklet, 25th Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (2002), p. 17.

³ Frederic Rzewski, 'The Algebra of Everyday Life', in Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writings and Conversations*, ed. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlägel (Cologne, 1998), p. 10.

⁴ Almost half of the recordings listed in the discography date from the year 2000 onward.

associated particularly in the early 1950s. Counteracting this, Michael Hicks, in his chapter “‘Our Webern’: Cage and Feldman’s Devotion to Christian Wolff” addresses the nature of the relationship between Wolff and Cage, and with Morton Feldman also, by demonstrating the influence of Wolff upon the two older composers. Amy Beal likewise contextualizes Wolff’s position in relation to the musical and ideological debates of the time by tracing and expanding upon his series of lectures at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse in the 1970s.

Three chapters examine Wolff’s compositional concerns, two of which focus upon bodies of work which are less usually discussed in relation to Wolff’s technique and aesthetic, namely the solo piano music (which covers the entire span of Wolff’s compositional career) and the orchestral music (in chapters by Philip Thomas and James Saunders). Christopher Fox takes two works, written almost 20 years apart, exemplifying Wolff’s late compositional style.

A book of this length must take account of the political dimension, both implicit and explicit, of Wolff’s work, in particular the music of the 1970s. David Ryan’s chapter uses the work *Changing the System* (1972–73) as a model for situating Wolff’s political involvement within wider but related trends in composed music of the time. Stephen Chase examines Wolff’s work where he has made his political sympathies clearest in setting words to music, reflecting on the problematic marriage of art and leftist politics.

Finally, chapters by Clemens Gresser and Philip Thomas reflect upon performance issues. Gresser examines the group of pieces known as the *Prose Collection* (1968–) and the unusual performance implications of these works, which may be performed by musicians of any background and experience, whilst Thomas draws upon his experience of performing many of Wolff’s works, both solo and ensemble.

There is no attempt to be exhaustive in this account, or to present a survey of all the music. It is hoped that the range of expertise represented by the authors of this book – composers, historians, musicologists, performers – is demonstrative of a variety of approaches to understanding and evaluating Wolff’s music and ideas. We would like to thank all the authors for their contributions and for their help in putting this book together. We would especially like to thank Michael Parsons, who has known Christian Wolff and his music since the 1960s and who was critical (along with others involved with AMM and the Scratch Orchestra) in introducing his music to the UK, for writing the Foreword to this book.

There are many others whom it would be impossible to thank here, particularly the many scholars and performers who have answered persistent e-mails and phone calls in relation to even the smallest details of the worklist. People who have been especially helpful in this respect and in others include Michael Hicks, John Holzaepfel and John Tilbury. We would also like to thank Tiff, Naomi and Jack Thomas for their patience and support and for not complaining when the computer was ‘out of use’. We are extremely grateful to the University of Huddersfield and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who enabled much of the work toward this project to be achieved through their Research Leave schemes. Also, Heidi

Bishop at Ashgate has been always helpful and swift to respond to the most arcane of questions. Most of all we would like to express our enormous gratitude to Christian Wolff, who has patiently and tirelessly spent hours of his time with us in person and responding to countless e-mails. Without his cooperation and support this book would be much the poorer, as would our lives without his music.