

Philip Thomas piano

Programme IGNM Basel, 23 januar 2011

Laurence Crane (b.1961) *Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy (1996)*

Michael Finnissy (b.1946) *First Political Agenda (1989-2006)*

- 1. Wrong place. Wrong time.**
- 2. Is there any future for new music?**
- 3. You know what kind of sense Mrs. Thatcher made.**

Christian Wolff (b.1934) *Bread and Roses (1976)*

Christian Wolff *For Pianist (1959)*

Bryn Harrison (b.1969) *I-V (2003)*

Christian Wolff *Pianist: Pieces (2001)*

Three works by leading American experimentalist Christian Wolff are programmed alongside music by three English composers, each of whom share certain compositional concerns with Wolff, expressed in very different ways. Wolff's classic of indeterminacy, *For Pianist*, written for David Tudor, contrasts with the more directly expressive *Bread and Roses*, one of Wolff's first works to use political song as the musical basis. Likewise Michael Finnissy uses a variety of 'found' material for political purposes in his *First Political Agenda*. The music of Laurence Crane and Bryn Harrison typifies recent responses to both experimentalism and complexity, whilst maintaining, like Wolff and Finnissy, highly original compositional voices.

Laurence Crane *Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy*

In the summer of 1996 the pianist Ian Pace asked 26 composers to write a short piano piece to celebrate Michael Finnissy's 50th birthday. He played them all in a concert at the British Music Information Centre in London on 11 July 1996. My piece lasts around 2 minutes. [LC]

Michael Finnissy *First Political Agenda*

Michael Finnissy is a composer frequently (always?) concerned with expressing his experience and understanding of the world through his music. Often this is made explicit through the titles of his works, which is clearly the case here. For Finnissy it is important that he positions his work in some relation to political and social issues, either those of his own or, as an act of solidarity, those of others. In particular, the experiences of the oppressed, the outsider, the alien, are recurrent themes in his music. *First Political Agenda* draws upon Finnissy's own experiences – as a composer in England – and in this sense could be said to be autobiographical. The first movement - 'Wrong place. Wrong time.' – immediately speaks of Finnissy's view of himself in relation to the world (both the real world and the, at times, un-real world of new music). It draws upon a wide range of source material from Finnissy's collection, possibly by composers with which he (unfashionably) identifies. The second movement – 'Is there any future for new music?' – draws upon the extraordinary Benedictus from Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, a spiritual response to the complexities of contemporary music production? The final movement – 'You know what kind of sense Mrs. Thatcher made.' – takes as its material one of the most English of all musical emblems, Parry's music for Blake's 'Jerusalem'. Finnissy treats the music in reverse (which, he notes, oddly recalls Puccini's 'Nessun Dorma', famously used as the theme for the football world cup tournament in 1990), but

flattens all musical meaning through the extreme dynamic and rhythmic stasis, a potent reflection upon Englishness.

Christian Wolff *Bread and Roses*

In the 1970s Wolff became, as he describes, 'politicized'. That is to say, his political consciousness was awakened in such a way that he sought to reflect his (leftist) political convictions in his music in a more explicit manner than in his previous music. Arguably his open scores of the previous decade were implicitly highly political in their very open-ness, allowing considerable performer freedom and creating social contexts within which music may be forged through dialogue (verbally and in sound through performance).

Bread and Roses was the first of many works in which Wolff expressed himself as a composer by taking as source material a song associated with the workers' movement. A fragment of the tune is heard near the beginning, but is mostly subjected to a sequence of variations. Matters of dynamics, pacing and tempo, articulation (of sound and silence) are left to the pianist to decide upon.

'Bread and Roses' was a poem written by James Oppenheim in 1912 and subsequently set to music by Caroline Kohlsaar. It takes as its inspiration the successful and famous mill strike of the same year in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in which 20,000 workers, many of whom were women, struck tirelessly against cuts in pay. During the strike (which lasted 10 weeks before the workers won their fight safeguarding the wages of over 250,000 workers across New Hampshire) many of the women held placards which read "We want bread and roses too".

Christian Wolff *For pianist*

Toward the end of the 1950s, Wolff developed a style of notation which could be described as a form of shorthand, a kind of code which, though at times mystifying, was designed to offer choice, within fixed parameters, to the performers as to sounds and pitches, durations, etc. At the same time he began to develop a music which was dependent upon the performers' responses to each other, involving cues of various kinds which determined when or how or what each performer was to play next. (Subsequently, performer interaction became one of the main characteristics of his music through the 1960s and 1970 and has remained an important part of his technique and aesthetic since.)

Naturally, when writing for a solo instrument this aspect of his writing was not possible. However, in one piece, *For Pianist*, Wolff explored how the actions a performer makes during the performance itself might determine what material should be played next. The work is notated using his code, making it indeterminate in terms of sounds produced. Pages may be played in any order, repeated or not played at all. Additionally, Wolff sets up systems whereby a task is set (such as play a sound as softly as possible) which is followed by a choice of tasks dependent upon the result of the previous task (such as if no sound was heard, or the sound was louder than desired, or the sound was indeed as soft as possible). The pianist must instantly react to this sound and move to the appropriate material.

For this performance, I have used chance to determine the number and order of pages. I have quasi-notated some of the coded material whilst others I have left more free to respond to the performing moment. But there are many choices (changing of page order, durations of pages, etc.) that will be dependent upon what happens during the performance itself.

Bryn Harrison I-V

This work is a characteristic blend of complexity and simplicity. Formally the process is straightforward: each movement derives from the previous by being slower, quieter and emptier. That is to say, notes are progressively removed from the initial piece resulting in an increasingly more sparse and fragmented texture. However, both the musical content and the perceptual nature of the music are complex. Four entirely independent lines are superimposed, laid out upon a fixed temporal grid, and characterized by a rhythmic irregularity, a kind of elasticity which is fully notated. The result is a pulseless, dense texture of interweaving lines, which simply runs continuously through each piece. There are no climaxes or goals; the music exists as if it were a smallest glimpse of eternity. The work was written for Jonathan Powell and first performed by him at the 2003 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.

Christian Wolff *Pianist:Pieces*

Over the last 15 years or so, Wolff has composed works which continue to explore notational possibilities and indeterminacy. His music has become increasingly difficult to categorise and seems to include very different techniques, gestures, forms and notations all within a single piece. *Pianist:Pieces* is such a work. Written in five sections, all of which are curiously typical of Wolff, fragmented lines (sections 1 and 4) contrast with sustained lyricism (section 2) and chordal movement (sections 3 and 5). It also includes examples of a recent notation Wolff has used in his piano writing (found also in *Touch* and *Long Piano (Peace March 11)*) which notates which fingers the pianist is to play for any given event, and with what duration/rhythm, but does not notate which pitch to play, a way of dealing with the frustration of working with the same 88 notes over and over again.

Pianist:Pieces was written for Aki Takahashi in memory of Iannis Xenakis.

Philip Thomas (b.1972) specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. His most recent solo projects have included a 12-hour solo performance of John Cage's *Electronic Music for Piano* (situated within an exhibition of Cage's visual art); the UK premiere of Tom Johnson's *A Chord Catalogue*; a survey of recent American experimental music, including premieres of works by Christian Wolff, Larry Polansky and Michael Pisaro; portrait concerts of Markus Trunk and Laurence Crane, including world premieres by both composers; a survey of the piano music of Christian Wolff, including the European premiere of his latest work for solo piano 'Long Piano (Peace March 11)' at the 2007 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, alongside premieres of new works by Stephen Chase, Tim Parkinson and Michael Parsons; and concerts of music composed by improvisers, including premieres of new works by Mick Beck, Chris Burn and Simon H.Fell.

Philip's debut solo CD 'Comprovisation' was released in 2007 on the Bruce's Fingers label (BF66). Based upon his recent series of concerts featuring music exploring improvisation and notation, it features music by Mick Beck, Chris Burn, John Cage, Simon H Fell, Michael Finnissy and Paul Obermayer. Since then he has released three more CDs: *piano piano* (edition wandelweiser) featuring two works by Tim Parkinson ("very precise, intelligent and simply beautiful music performed by Thomas at the absolute top of his game." - Graham McKenzie (director, hcmf), SOUND AND

MUSIC), and a CD of improvisations, *the middle distance*, with Simon H Fell and MUSIC), and a CD of improvisations, *the middle distance*, with Simon H Fell and Chris Burn (another timbre) – “a truly outstanding album, one that any self-respecting fan of new music in whatever form can't afford to be without.”- Dan Warburton, PARIS TRANSATLANTIC, and, most recently, a CD of piano music by Michael Pisaro.

Future CD releases include the complete works for solo piano by Christian Wolff (on *sub rosa*, due April 2011) and piano music by James Saunders.

Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent performances with them have included new works by Christopher Fox and Stefan van Eycken at the *Transit* festival, Leuven; a performance of Stockhausen's *kurzwellen* at the Cut 'n' Splice festival, London (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3); an Anthony Braxton project ('November Music', Holland, and 2009 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival), organizing and performing in a recreation of the 1958 New York Town Hall John Cage retrospective, culminating in a major performance of John Cage's *Concert for Solo and Orchestra* at the 2008 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3); premieres of new works by Rytis Mazulis together with works by George Maciunas at the 2008 ISCM New Music Days, Vilnius, Lithuania; a concert and live broadcast at the WDR studios, Cologne; a fluxus concert at the 2007 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival; and portrait concerts of the composers Clarence Barlow, Christopher Fox, Christian Wolff, and others.

Philip has worked with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company; the renowned pianist Ian Pace in programmes of experimental music for two pianos; and performs with composer James Saunders as a piano and electronics duo.

Philip is currently a Senior Lecturer in Performance at the University of Huddersfield. He has contributed articles about contemporary music performance practice to *Contemporary Music Review* and *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (ed. James Saunders). He has recently co-edited, and written two chapters for, a major new study of the music of Christian Wolff (Ashgate Publications, 2010).