Chapter 6

Changing the System: Indeterminacy and Politics in the Early 1970s

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Changing the System is a piece by Christian Wolff for a variable number of musicians (a minimum of eight players in two quartets) but clearly suggesting the possibility of large-scale performance groupings with multiple quartets or other possible configurations. It was written over December 1972 and January 1973 and marks, along with Wolff's other compositions of the time, something of a compositional sea-change for the composer, both formally and in terms of its content. As with *Accompaniments* (1972), and *Exercises 1–14* (1973–74), *Changing the System* is a transitional piece for Wolff, sitting somewhere between the earlier more abstract works and his later tightly woven, more traditionally notated music, which settled as the decade progressed. Nonetheless, his music of the earlier 1970s presents powerful arguments in questioning the very fabric of collective music-making (the 'orchestra' or ensemble), its place in the world (social interaction), and its potential role as an agent for change (the problematic of the political), and, crucially, exploring how meaning is actually generated by the performative act of engaging with the music itself.

'The system' alluded to in *Changing the System* might, for some, place the content of this piece firmly in the political rhetoric of the late 1960s and early 1970s, whereby the political organization of society was viewed as the product of *the* 'system'. This represented the imposed social system, subsumed by state control, which was seen to generate economic and social inequalities, war, a culture of consumption and distracting spectacle, and the brutalization of every aspect of society transforming it into a productive machinery serving, above all else, the reproduction of a stagnant, yet aggressive, capitalism. Such arguments, in the air at the time, would retain a loose appropriation of the traditionally Marxist base/ superstructure model whereby the economic substructure effectively 'produced' the cultural superstructure which, at the same time, attempted to mask its political subservience to the former by, in every which way, declaring its 'autonomy' from the political. However, by the late 1960s this traditional Marxist model would become more complicated or even inverted – whereby work upon the cultural superstructure might be seen to pre-empt or suggest changes in the economic base. This shift was also inflected by many different causes – a broadening of political demands, representations and positions which took firm root in the following decade of the 1970s. Important here is the kind of knitting together of a popular

leftist front of workers, students and the intelligentsia, drawing ideas from cultural theory, such as Structuralism, from so-called Western Marxism (the Frankfurt school, for example) and intellectuals such as Foucault, Barthes and others. This came to a head in 1968, most famously in the student riots in France, Italy and Germany and elsewhere that year. Here was the ferment of, at least in theory if not in failed practice, a broader alliance against the 'system' – an amalgam of students, intellectuals, minorities, and race-orientated and gendered manifestos, as well as the traditional revolutionary 'base' of workers.

Wolff, involved as he was in teaching for most of his working life, would have been well aware of these debates; as an American he would also have been witness to the growing anti-Vietnam-war stance amongst students and within the broader American social fabric. Each of these events would spark a political consciousness and position that would move to change his work. But, importantly, in *Changing the System*, there are other senses of 'system' at work here: the musical systems of the piece which are activated by the choices of the performers themselves and also, more broadly perhaps, the system of contemporary classical music-making itself – not forgetting Wolff's own system of composing: this too was being changed. Here, the title itself reveals a kind of leakage and fluidity between the musical and the political: indeterminate in its final meaning. I intend here to look at a broader political agenda and context for this piece; its form (or openness); its relation to other pieces of 'new' and experimental music with overt political programmes; and its relation to other examples of Wolff's music around this time.

Raw Materials

In terms of its score (or more accurately its parts), *Changing the System* includes two pages of melodic material (indeterminate hocket material with pitch sources); two pages of four-part chords; six pages of percussion parts; four pages of vocal material with text; and three pages of instructions. It is split into Parts I and II, Part I consisting of designated melodic hockets (identified as Ii and IIii) and chords (IA and IB), Part II utilizing percussion (IIa) and a vocalized text (IIb). How these two parts are put together is, apart from Wolff's suggestions in the instructions, open to the performers. Both parts explore the relationship between melody and chords. Ii provides two systems of hocket material with two pitch sources (a and b) to be used with each. Performers choose from either one of these pitch sources freely when playing from this material. These pitch sources in themselves can be read in either clef, which gives them less the role of a fixed scale, but more the suggestion of intervallic consistencies or a harmonic field within which these hockets take place. The top line is for four players, designated 1–4, and marks out the sequential passing of sounds between these four players in short phrases – for example, in the first phrase of the first system of Ii player 4 begins, player 3 must then immediately pick up from player 4's sound, followed by player 2 following suit, and finally player 1.

Example 6.1   Christian Wolff, *Changing the System* (1972–73), section Ii, upper system
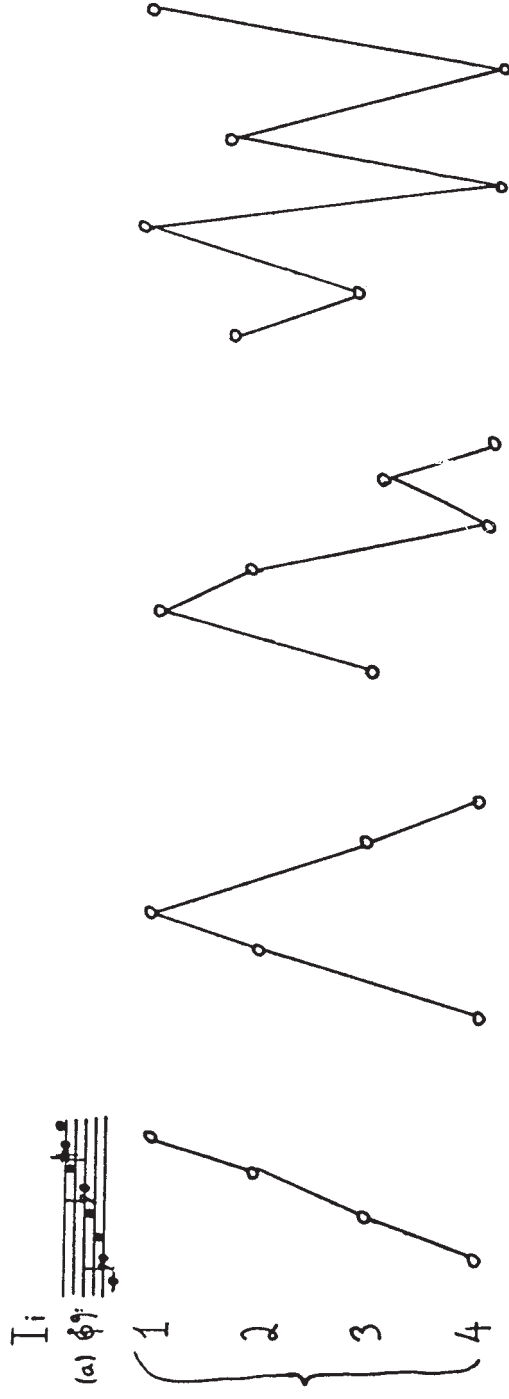
The sounds made should relate to pitch source (a), but are free in terms of duration, timbre and dynamic (the player responding to the previous sound by way of either continuity or contrast). In the next phrase, it passes from player 4 to 2 to 1 to 3 and then back to 4. Each of these phrases is to be repeated like a loop until, taking the first system as an example, player 2 chooses to move the material on (by coming in after player 4 rather than player 3 – this then signals that the second phrase of the first system is operational). Player 3 initiates the third phrase and player 2 the fourth. Each of these phrases grows in scope – from four events in the first phrase to seven in the fourth.

The second system of Ii is indicated for three players rather than four, with each repeated phrase constituting six events (relating to pitch source b). In the first phrase movement goes from player 3 to player 2 to 1, and then back to 3 to 2 and 1 again. Each phrase makes variations on the directional flow of this passing from one player to another. So, although this page (as with the others) might seem minimal in its indication of given material, the resulting realization can bring complex results, as here, where we have the notion of two different propositions amongst the two systems: an evolving growth of phrases for one full quartet in the first system, and, in the second system on the first page, a constancy of phrase lengths, again with different players initiating the move on to the next phrase.

Iii again uses both pitch sources (a and b), this time complicating the nature of the events passed between players (short phrases here rather than single sounds). As mentioned, the pitch material used in Ii and Iii can be read in treble or bass, while the pitches on the chord pages (IA and IB) are designated by clef, although in their construction they evolved out of systematically reading adopted notes in the two clefs to generate further pitches. As Wolff has explained: 'Make a four-note chord; read each note of the chord in either treble or bass clef, making always four-note chords – you can make 15 more chords that way. I first used that idea in *Accompaniments*'.[1] This results in each of these chords evolving systematically with one note being changed at a time. This gives a harmonic drive or direction to the music, and their expansiveness (sometimes with a wide spread and often covering a very low register) can give the music an 'epic' quality unusual for this composer. They are orchestrated; that is, distributed between the instruments with the proviso that they can play the lower notes within their range. While the instrumentation for the piece is open, this condition regarding register will place the sounds in a lower region, at least for one of the groupings (IA). Putting part I together consists of developing a relationship between the melodic and chordal materials. Wolff's own suggestion is to alternate phrases and lines of chords between two groups, which also allows for the probability of these materials going out of phase with each other. But there are many ways of putting this together especially with a situation of multiple quartets.

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[1]   E-mail correspondence with the author, 2008.

Example 6.2   Christian Wolff, *Changing the System* (1972–73) part IIa, page 1,
               upper system

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(1)  ↘1    2    1    1 ↘1  ↗1    1    4    3 ↘2      1    1    1
       p    f    p    p   p    f    p    f    f    p       f    f    f

(2)   2 ↘3   1    1    1    2 ↘3   1    1    3   ↘4 ↘1    1
       p    f    f    p    p    f    f    p    p    f      p    f    f

(3)   3    4 ↘1   1    2    1    1 ↘1    1    1       2    3 ↘4
       p    f    f    f    p    p    f    p    f    p       f    p    f

(4)   4    1    4 ↘2    1    1    1    1 ↘1    4       3    2    3
       p    f    f    f    f    p    p    f    p    f       f    f    p
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Part IIa of *Changing the System* consists of a number score (to be realized by percussion). As in other compositions, Wolff steers clear of 'glamorous' percussion and encourages the use of simple percussion or everyday objects capable of making sounds of four gradated resonances (marked 1, 2, 3, 4; 1 being of least resonance). He encourages four categories of sonic material: wood, metal, stone and friction (as in a güiro), each assigned by the players to the numbers according to resonance. Each member of the quartet will cue a sound event as the quartet progresses through the material, improvising collectively, and responding to the pace of the music as it is established. Often these cues are distributed across the quartet for each sound, but sometimes a player will cue a succession of up to five sounds in sequence. A further instruction relates to circled notes, which denote sustained sounds where a player can step outside of the percussive requirements if necessary; these sounds can be sustained through the next four or next 18 sounds, or the next cued sound.

Part IIb is a vocal score with a text by Tom Hayden, the former student activist, from an interview published in *Rolling Stone* in 1972. The text is as follows:

> Well don't make the same mistake we that we made, of thinking that the Peace Corps or the New Frontier was the simple answer, that you could find a place for yourself in there and use new, modern imagination to solve the problems of the poor people of the world, because that would be a misreading of the possibilities of working within the system. It's the system itself that sets the priorities that we have, that distorts the facts, that twists our brains and therefore the system would have to be changed in order to change priorities and to make it possible for to really see what's happening. That's the danger.[2]

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[2]   Interview with Tom Hayden by Tim Findley in Rolling Stone 28 (9 November 1972), p. 32. The context of the passage is the 1972 presidential election and a response to a question by Richard Flacks regarding the Democratic Party candidate George McGovern's anti-war ticket and the possibility of change *within* the current political system.

Hayden's text is fragmented through a system of hocketing as the quartet of speakers/singers pass short phrases, words or syllables from one to the other.

Changing the System presents, through quite different materials, a linear, horizontal approach (the hockets) and vertically coordinated aggregates (the chords). These are the raw materials of the score, and the performing group must initiate a time plan for working through, and activating, these materials musically. As Cornelius Cardew said of his earlier *Autumn 60* (1960), 'nobody can be involved in this music in a merely professional capacity'[3] – meaning that each performer must be actively engaged, and must take responsibility for what he or she does within their designated quartet, as well as globally in forming the whole.

Experimentalism in a Social Context

Changing the System is essentially an indeterminate piece with respect to its performance. Its roots lie in the development and discussions of the New York composers around Cage in the 1950s. Both Cage and Wolff seemed to share particular characteristics in their development of indeterminacy which set them apart from their colleagues Earle Brown and Morton Feldman. Firstly, the use of silence is generally far more accentuated in their work, and, secondly, there is a greater tendency toward discontinuity: 'When silence, generally speaking', suggested Cage, 'is not in evidence, the will of the composer is.'[4] Silence – unintended sounds – for Cage, from the late 1940s on, had acted as a kind of de-centring of the composer's will and intention: a critique, ultimately, of both normative codes of communication and self-expression. While, for Cage, this appeared to look towards a Zen-inspired approach to music-making and attending attentively to 'being in the world', for Wolff this kind of de-centring offered a more pragmatic way of dispersing intention and opened up the possibility of new kinds of continuities (or rather explicit *dis*continuities) which affected the conditions of performance:

> [continuity] can be shifted among as many categories as you wanted to identify, say, from duration to noise to colour to something not usually regarded as musical (a scraping foot, a radio transmission) to a specified high C to an indeterminate sound ('auxiliary') outside the collection in a given piece to the absence of anything specified (silence).[5]

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[3] Cornelius Cardew, 'Introduction to Four Works' (1966), in *Cornelius Cardew: A Reader*, ed. Edwin Prévost (Matching Tye, 2006), p. 75.

[4] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (New York, 1961), p. 53.

[5] Christian Wolff, 'On John Cage' (1982), in *Cues: Writings & Conversation*, ed. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlägel (Cologne, 1998), p. 150.

Once this space of musical continuities is opened out, it follows that these actual conditions of production are analysed and thought afresh. This is where formal questions lead to social ones, and where Wolff and Cage shared and inherited similar problems regarding the social conditions of indeterminate performance. Cage had made clear the kinds of performance conditions he wanted in his lectures on indeterminacy at Darmstadt in 1958[6] – requiring a new form of interaction between composer and performer. That same year Wolff developed elaborate cueing devices in *Duo for Pianists II* (1958), the first of his pieces, together with *Duo for Pianists I* (1957) that are indeterminate and specifically mentioned in Cage's lecture. If the extended use of silence and indeterminacy in both Wolff and Cage's music in the 1950s and 1960s clear out old composing and performing habits they also lead to the re-positioning of the entire frame of music within the social sphere: new sounds, new contexts, new formats lead to changes not only in the performer's and composer's role (or even 'behaviour') but also, in terms of the audience, the necessity of new modes of listening. As Roland Barthes once pointed out, 'It compels the subject to renounce his [or her] inwardness'.[7] This exteriorization on the part of each of the participants within experimental music creates a space beyond (though not necessarily exclusively denying) normative conventional modes of operation. Wolff's music has continued with these concerns right up to the present, even, paradoxically, when the materials appear more conventionally 'musical' than his earlier compositions. In the light of this, *Changing the System* has a coherence to its harmonic and melodic materials that was denied the works in the period of extreme indeterminacy of 1957–68.

In terms of sound material, very early on Cage was set on having as open a position as possible as to what was viable in terms of material: 'I begin to hear the old sounds' he suggested in *Lecture on Nothing* '– the ones I thought were worn out, worn out by intellectualization – I begin to hear the old sounds as though they are not worn out. Obviously they are not worn out. They are just as audible as the new sounds'.[8] And in a slightly later essay, 'It goes without saying that dissonances and noises are welcome in this music. But so is the dominant seventh chord if it happens to put in an appearance'.[9] What Cage is alluding to here is of course context. And, as Wolff himself pointed out, Cage suggested, 'The trick is suddenly to appear in a place without apparent means of transport'.[10] Hence, a major triad

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[6]   Reprinted in *Silence*. Although Cage suggested his first fully indeterminate composition was the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* of 1958, previous works contain overt flexibility and indeterminate elements for performers (*Music for Piano* (1952–56), *Winter Music* (1957), and numerous others). Feldman's graph pieces of 1950–51 and Earle Brown's *December 1952* appear to have been developed somewhat independently.

[7]   Roland Barthes, 'Listening', in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley, CA, 1985), p. 259. Barthes is referring to Cage's music here.

[8]   John Cage, 'A Lecture on Nothing', in *Silence*, p. 117.

[9]   John Cage, 'Experimental Music', in *Silence*, p. 11.

[10]   Christian Wolff, 'On Experimental Music Now' (undated), in *Cues*, p. 222.

can be just as shocking as a cluster if dislocated from its normal environment. Such musical democracy was what demarcated the European avant-garde – with its seasonal taboos – from the open-ended approaches of 'experimental music'. Wolff too, by the early 1970s, seemed to be searching for a language that went beyond the austerity of his earlier practices, a language that would have more possible connectivity with the outside world rather than the hermeticism of avant-garde formalism. Although with Wolff this break – if we can call it such – is not as dramatic as with other composers, *Changing the System* has very clear roots in earlier works while looking resolutely forward.

Within experimental music new developments positioned themselves outside of a dominant musical culture of atonality, thus reacting against the mannered angularities of the post-war European avant-garde, in particular the minimalism of Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and a composer/performer very close to Wolff, Frederic Rzewski. What some of these composers – Riley and Glass in particular – were to develop was a different relationship with their audience. While retaining the emphasis on process from previous experimental music but delimiting the material to relatively accessible modal motifs, Riley enjoyed, by the mid- to later 1960s, a crossover and cultish following within a rock-music audience. Although this popularity of minimalism was not initially a given, as Wolff commented,

> It's easy to forget that early minimalism was received as 'experimental' – Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Phil Glass's music all explored diatonicism – but at great length – it would be fine for the first ten minutes and then the audience would be squirming. It could be as uncomfortable for them as a Cage piece, and this was its experimental edge.[11]

However, by the late 1960s Wolff was aware that the issue of the audience would need to be worked upon as much as the composer–performer dialectic. In his earlier music, after experiencing the often disastrous receptions of the New York composers' pieces, he decided to 'let the chips fall where they may and not think about audiences. And that left me with the performers, which seemed to me much more interesting'.[12] But increasingly Wolff saw a discrepancy between the highly introverted and rather abstract nature of his music and its performance with the growing wish to explicitly connect with his emerging political consciousness. It was a gulf between the audience and the performance situation that bothered Wolff at this time, 'the way the resulting music seemed to affect its audience – as something remote, abstract and "pure"'.[13] The example of minimalism – eventually at least – had shown a process-based music that could connect differently with

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[11]   Interview with Christian Wolff and the author, 1993/98 in *Dal Niente 1* programme, November 1998.

[12]   Christian Wolff, 'Conversation with Cole Gagne' (1991), in *Cues*, p. 248.

[13]   Christian Wolff, Programme note, in *Cues*, p. 498.

audiences, and the possibility of a broader, more extrovert music that could still be somewhat attached to experimental procedures. Wolff's music by contrast had developed, since the late 1950s, into a form of extremely intimate chamber music. Pieces such as *For 1, 2 or 3 People* (1964) require the development of a rapport between the players to such an extent where they can *really* interact, and even second-guess each other's moves. Significantly, the works up to 1968 are written for soloists, or duos, trios and formations of smaller groups (*Nine* (a nonet) from 1951, *Septet* of 1964 and *For 5 or 10 People* of 1962 being the larger of these groups). Almost stressing this concern with intimacy, Wolff's practice from the early 1960s was to allow a doubling or tripling of forces (*For 5 or 10 People* again, or *Pairs* (1968) – for two, six or eight players). This allows for an accumulation of autonomous groups working together – another characteristic of *Changing the System* – retaining something of their internal networks but also with the potential of the groups reacting to each other in some way. Given Wolff's material at the time, which entails usually a sonically fragile and transparent sound-world due to its very open scoring of cueing devices, notated (but also indeterminate) pitches, noises and timbral changes, this possibility of an overlapping of density ensures the utmost transparency in its accumulation of potential forces while retaining the intimate nature of the sub-groups.

During the period immediately following 1968, the works generally allow a less prescribed conditioning in terms of numbers of players: the *Prose Collection* (1968–71) and *Edges* (1968) are both for *any* number of players. The first of these were written for Wolff's talks in art schools in England in order to motivate untrained musicians and for them to experience participating in the kinds of things Wolff was no doubt addressing in his talks, while the second reflected to some extent the experience of improvising with Cornelius Cardew and AMM in that same year. Both these works, then, accept not only an indeterminacy of performance but also of participation – not only regarding how many participants, but also their contribution – necessitated by working with a broader range of musical and even non-musical backgrounds. This latter aspect was taken up by Cardew with the formation of the Scratch Orchestra in 1969, co-founded by Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, and, in particular, with his settings of Confucius in *The Great Learning* (1968–70) for a whole range of musical and even 'non-musical' participation. The example of the Scratch Orchestra, as an idea at least (Wolff thinks he hadn't actually heard the orchestra at the time but was aware of them), prompted the composition of *Burdocks* (1970–71).

With this work, Wolff took his chamber music into a more 'public' format, creating one of the distinctive works of the 1970s in that it is one that clearly looks towards the issues of alternative collective music-making on a large scale. Even if realized in a small ensemble (which is possible, as the composer's own recordings show) Wolff's description of multiple 'orchestras' implies thinking on a different scale.

More conventionally trained orchestral performers involved with Cage's larger orchestra works often treated them destructively. Most famous is the debacle of

Atlas Eclipticalis (1961–62) with the New York Philharmonic in 1964 at the Lincoln Centre, where musicians ran riot destroying the contact microphones that augmented the sounds. Wolff was present at that concert, and as Cardew later observed, 'the performance was a shambles and many of the musicians took advantage of the confusion to abuse the electronic equipment to such a degree that Christian Wolff (usually an even-tempered man) felt compelled to rush in and protest against the "extensive damage to property"'.[14] Cardew, by the time of writing that recollection in 1974, was a committed convert to Marxist-Leninism and came firmly down on the side of the musicians, alluding to the 'sharply antagonistic relationship between the avant-garde composer with all his electronic gadgetry and the working musician'.[15] This antagonistic relationship, between the composer and the traditional institution of the orchestra is indeed a political one, but perhaps not in the way that Cardew read it. There is a clash, one that Cage encountered often throughout his working life,[16] between the demands of new music and the ownership of certain traditional skills that the professional orchestras represent. When those conventional skills are circumvented trouble can arise, and this was certainly acknowledged by both Wolff and Cardew in their avoidance in the late 1960s and 1970s of conventional orchestra set-ups[17] and the adoption of 'alternative' notions of larger group ensemble playing, growing out of their concerns with individual performers and the social interchange of music and environmental sound. Even Karlheinz Stockhausen, when prefacing a performance of his *Gruppen* for three orchestras (1955) in 2000, lamented the fact that younger composers tended to accept the *given* of the orchestra as institution, and that his generation was all for reinventing and changing it.[18] It almost goes without saying that the orchestra is not only an 'image' or popular representation of classical music, but also an embodiment of social relations in society as a whole, constituting, as Jacques Attali has noted,

> a total spectacle. It also shapes what people see; no part of it is innocent. Each element even fulfils a precise social and symbolic function: to convince people of the rationality of the world and the necessity of its organization. In accordance with the principles of exchange, the orchestra has always been an essential figure of power. A specific place in Greek theatre, it is everywhere a fundamental attribute of the control of music by the masters of the social order. … The constitution of the orchestra and its organization are also figures of

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[14]   Cornelius Cardew, 'Stockhausen Serves Imperialism' (1974), in *Cornelius Cardew: A Reader*, p. 159.

[15]   Ibid., p. 160.

[16]   See John Cage, 'Letter to Zurich', in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *John Cage: Writer: Previously Uncollected Pieces* (New York, 1993), pp. 255–6.

[17]   This would be both a pragmatic and critical position in many ways. Wolff has written for conventional orchestral forces in the mid-1990s and since (see Chapter 4).

[18]   Royal Festival Hall, February 2000.

power in the industrial economy. The musicians – who are hierarchically and anonymously ranked, and in general salaried, productive workers – execute an external algorithm, a 'score', which does what its name implies: it allocates their parts. … They are the image of programmed labor in our society. Each of them produces only a part of the whole having no value in itself.[19]

If this division of labour is fundamentally ingrained within the production of large-scale western classical music, then so is the necessary correlative image, that of the conductor. Attali, again, sees this in no uncertain terms: 'The ruling class – whether bourgeois industrial or bureaucratic elite – identifies with the orchestra leader [conductor], the creator of the order needed to avoid chaos in production. It only has eyes for him'.[20] Division of labour, production, command: these lie at the heart of the orchestra, and the society that supports it.

Changing the System in many ways addresses the above issues and the problematic of making large-scale public music, rethinking the notion of the orchestra, as well as the idea of self-directed ensembles governing their participation in relationship to the whole (while it can be performed simply as an antiphonal octet, the score clearly looks to the possibilities of larger-scale ensembles). Formally it relates to *Burdocks* and the earlier cue-based pieces for multiple duos or trios, as well as a piece called *Lines* for a quartet of strings (1972), but it is much more compact in terms of material, more distinct in its parts, and more audibly systematic. The latter might well be a response to Frederic Rzewski's hypnotic yet hard-nosed minimalism, as in the piece *Coming Together/ Attacca* (1972) – drawing on texts from a murdered participant in a prison riot that was brutally suppressed. *Changing the System* – coming as it does hard on the heels of the more infamous (due to its Maoist text) *Accompaniments* (1972)[21] – partakes in this announcement of Wolff's 'waking up' politically, with their use of social texts. It was the text initially in these pieces that gave them their political allegiance. Typically Wolff gives little indication in the score as to how Tom Hayden's text should be delivered, 'speaking, singing, but not overly elaborate' and that 'the sense of the text should be clear (though not necessarily all at once or continuously)'.

So what is the identity of the piece? The materials – spoken or sung text, together with the instrumental and percussion parts – are each to be 'formed' in some way into a performance. Which players perform these sets of materials is open, in that nowhere does Wolff indicate specialist singers or percussionists, and one clear possibility is that each performer moves through these various roles. Each group should have assigned time coordinations (when to start) and know their roles in moving through the material. As we have seen, each of the two

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[19] Jacques Attali, *Noise: Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, MN, 1985), pp. 65–6.

[20] Ibid., p. 67.

[21] See Chapter 7.

parts of *Changing the System* basically explore melody, harmony, but also, we can add here, rhythm; parts I and II do not need to unfold successively but can operate simultaneously depending on the performance situation. While melody is indeterminate through the implementation of an abstract system of hocketing (chosen freely by the players from the associated pitch set as they perform), the instrumental harmony is fairly fixed (apart from the timbre of instruments left open). Rhythm, however, in the entire piece is dependent on the players' own sense of pace, whether from the hockets (choosing longer or shorter responses) or the pacing and duration of the chords.

Time is central to *Changing the System*: the time of the entire performance; the different time senses of individual quartets or performing units; the *experience* of time on the part of performers and listeners. It is a situation of what Jean-François Lyotard called (speaking of Cage and experimental music in general), 'the "liberation" of sound-time from metronomic constraint' which 'modifies a great deal the sensitivity of the ear (I mean mind) to rhythm'.[22] Lyotard suggests here a rhythm that possesses, in itself, a radicality – beyond the 'cultural' determinations of the metronome or the 'natural' capacities of the body. In Wolff's work it is also beyond the mechanical constraints of the chronometer (as so often present in Cage), creating a new fluidity in terms of temporal relationships between bodies. As we will see, this in itself becomes part of the content of *Changing the System* – just as much as the text or the given material of the score: a performative sense of time (tasks to be done in an unfolding frame of time) within a context of cooperation. If the articulation of time (rhythm) is open or 'floating', then the materials of the piece provide a sense of progression – of working through (although there is nothing stopping performers from creating quite rigid rhythms from the material). This 'progressive working through' is most pronounced in the chordal structures of Part 1 – whereby there is a sense of harmonic development (not in the traditional sense, but it gives a drive to the piece that was certainly not present in earlier works). What Wolff is doing, fundamentally, is opening out his materials into a temporal condition – a condition of change – one that will transform the score into real relations. How this will be done, how it will be 'processed', is particular to the situation of performance realization. This, in effect, is the *work* of the ensembles involved in the piece; the materials are set in motion by work, and work effects change, as the composer states: 'Change is work and can be scary as well as exhilarating'.[23] This also leads to questions: Wherein lies the political content of the piece itself? Can we have a politics of indeterminacy? And how does this fit in with more conventional narratives of what political art actually 'should do'?

22   Jean Francois Lyotard, 'Obedience', in *The Inhuman*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge, 1991), p. 169.
23   Wolff, 'On Experimental Music Now', p. 218.

Politics and the Avant-Garde (1)

> I have discontinued composing music in an avant-garde idiom for a number of
> reasons: the exclusiveness of the avant-garde, its fragmentation, its indifference
> to the real situation in the world today, its individualistic outlook and not least
> its class character (the other characteristics are virtually products of this). I have
> rejected the bourgeois idealistic conception which sees art as the production
> of unique, divinely inspired geniuses, and developed a dialectical materialist
> conception which sees art as the reflection of society and at the same time
> promoting the ideas of the ruling class in a class society.[24]

So wrote Cornelius Cardew in the preface to his *Piano Album* of 1975. It is a
statement drenched in history, one that reflects debates that go back to 1930s,
but suddenly becoming vivid once again for the 1970s. The debate amongst
artists had during this time transformed from a position of how to engage with
the world through an aesthetic reading of it, to how to change it. From the present
perspective it is perhaps hard to appreciate just how dominant the template of
left/right politics shaped the discourses and production of culture right up to the
1970s, and how the events of the early twentieth century, in particular with the
fallout from the cataclysmic schism of the revolution in Russia, cast such a long
shadow until that time. Marx and Engels, filtered through Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin
and later Mao, provided the maps regarding how culture could be seen to operate
and how to participate 'correctly' as a politically conscious or engaged individual.
The dual spheres of influence – east and west – of a socialist realism (seen by the
West as a stagnation of development and repression of artistic freedom) and a
free-market artistic economy (seen by the Soviet Union as merely expressing an
atomized decadence of a corresponding decadent bourgeois society) would for a
long time be played out in a cultural gridlock. On the one hand there would be the
popular realist outlook favoured by officialdom in Moscow and, on the other, an
unremitting logic of cultural formalism producing seemingly ever more remote
abstractions. Realism, as Bertolt Brecht – before deconstructing it for his own
purposes – defined it, had its own utilitarian value:

> It is in the interest of the people, of the broad working masses, to receive a
> faithful image of life from literature, and faithful images of life are actually of
> service only to the people, the broad working masses, and must therefore be
> absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular.[25]

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[24] Cornelius Cardew, 'Programme Notes to the Piano Album' (1973), in *Cornelius
Cardew: A Reader*, p. 275.

[25] Bertolt Brecht, 'Popularity and Realism', in Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison
(eds), *Modern Art and Modernism* (London, 1982), p. 227.

Brecht in fact used the term *realist* as a critical vehicle for actually questioning what we mean by that term, and how it might actually be experienced. But, by the mid-1930s onwards, the increasingly hard line from Moscow reflected a rigid ideological model being handed down to 'progressive' artists. This in turn encapsulated a normative philosophical base – whereby sense perceptions were 'copies, photographs, and mirror-reflections of things'[26] – corresponding to a notion of artistic practice that provided a *transparent* view onto the relevant *progressive* content of a given work. As with the core political motions, *artistic* judgement became the remit of the party machinery with an active 'party line' against which a work would be judged. How a work was sited within the proletarian world view, how it placed itself within its historical context, what ideals were expressed, became increasingly rote under the cultural hold of Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural commissar.

Needless to say, any form of experimentalism within such a climate was repressed. But, as is well known, this was not always so; the great Soviet revolution early on appeared to encourage experimentation in some quarters, and for a short while revolutionary art espoused revolutionary (avant-garde) means. The shift from Constructivism (formal abstraction) to Productivism (social utilitarianism) amongst many Soviet artists is too complex to recount here, but marks a willingness amongst the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s to embrace the demands of the revolution wholesale. Here the argument, which became increasingly adopted in the West, was that the most advanced political stance should be manifest through the most advanced formal and technical innovations. Walter Benjamin would make a similar argument in his essay the 'Author as Producer' that there was in fact a parallel between *literary* and *political* correctness. Not simply *exposing* the means of production (through realist transparency) but *intervening* within them and hence artistically transforming them to create a truly political work rather than an illustration of one. This has remained one of the most powerful concerns of the politicized avant-garde (and here we could include Wolff himself.)

Closer to Wolff's own context, the post-war European avant-garde, as its name suggests, was born of the political strife, aftermath and rehabilitation of the immediate post-war years. Within Europe, the so-called Darmstadt School of Luigi Nono, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Bruno Maderna dominated the formation of post-war musical avant-garde terrain. Many were political – some explicitly so, as with Nono, but on the whole, privately. Wolff has stated, that, 'as far as I know, no composer associated with the post World War II avant-garde has made an *explicit* connection of his music with a conservative political position'.[27] Immediately after the war through to the mid-1950s, it was easier to see a direct correlation with avant-garde procedures and tacit political allegiances (especially after the Nazis' cultural policies, which had tried to eradicate modernism or simply absorb what it could use of it).

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[26]   Lenin, quoted in R.N. Carew Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism* (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 59.

[27]   Christian Wolff, 'On Political Texts and New Music' (1980), in *Cues*, p. 124.

Dominant figures at this time such as Pierre Boulez were to polemicize and assimilate a position of radicality in purely musical terms. In Boulez's conception of history we arrive at an outline unforgivingly dialectical, unremittingly a model of progress, of 'no going back'. It also touches on the formation of acceptably 'advanced materials', which becomes a generational problematic, overriding the old form and content split, an important issue at the time, as Boulez himself explains:

> And how in fact can a composer conceive of his 'message' without a morphology – a formal scheme – capable of communicating it to a listener? This whole concept of an abstract 'message' is in fact no more than a cheap sophistry, employed only to conceal profound misunderstanding, or indeed complete ignorance, of the circumstances of a particular historical period and, more generally, of the means of expression at the composer's disposal … and it reveals an inability to understand the real relationship between vocabulary and expression.[28]

Here, the *real* relationship is illuminated by work on the language itself, and for Boulez this was the only truly radical position, where the work itself is purged of any 'impure' element such as extra-musical political references and allegiances, or, as he would put it, the mediocrity of 'defending ruins' or the fetishization of 'excessive individualism' – the point being to *advance* the language (although this is not to deny Boulez's highly personal choice of relevant poetic texts). Interestingly, Boulez's own statements adopt the fervour of political partisanship only to be applied to formal mechanisms with his vehement denunciation of any musical 'regression', which illustrates this point. Stripped of this polemical accent, his position might be somewhat similar to Theodor Adorno's approach to form, where historical and social contradictions are somehow sedimented within the materials and techniques of a given contemporary work. The greater and more powerful that work, for Boulez as for Adorno, the more complex and refracted within the structures of the work are its given meanings and their potential revelation. Adorno gave the avant-garde further licence by suggesting a kind of politics in reverse: the more it is separate from the society that produced it, the more a work's abrasive critical relationship with that society are divulged:

> Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art.[29]

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28   Pierre Boulez, *Orientations*, ed. J. Nattiez, trans. M. Cooper (London, 1986), p. 34.

29   Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London, 1997), p. 296.

Politics, therefore, in Adorno's model becomes an almost unconscious sedimentation within the forms and structures of autonomous artworks which – in an Hegelian twist – are the dialectical absorption and sublation of previous historical moments. While there is a sense of 'advanced material' in Adorno's position, this is not – *pace* Hegel – an unremitting model of progress. 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism', Adorno famously suggested, 'but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb'.[30] Art in this context shadows and contests this negative vision of instrumental progress, becoming its critical 'other', its conscience.

This implicit politics of modernity as represented by Adorno was also reflected in the rapid expansion of the European avant-garde in the 1950s – in all art forms – displaying an embrace of this faith in 'autonomy': Taschiste painting, serial composition, each jettisoned the old vehicles of representation (dear to a politics of commitment), which became all but officially outlawed: opera, accessible tonality, conventional literary narrative and figurative painting, for example. Umberto Eco, writing in the early 1960s, commented upon this flight from 'worn out' alienating forms and linguistic devices in literature and art; looking at the development of the 'new novel' in France, he observed,

> The authors of the *nouveau roman* were so often on [Jean-Paul] Sartre's side in their endorsement of political manifestos. This baffled Sartre, who could not understand how writers who seemed to keep such a distance from political issues could be so eager to be involved in them. But, as a matter of fact, all these writers (some more, some less) felt that the only way they could deal with their world was by 'playing' with narrative structures, since all the problems which, at the level of individual psychology and of biography, could be considered problems of conscience, in literature could only be reflected in the way the work was structured. Hence as they refused to speak of a political project in their art, they implied it in the way they looked at the world, and turned this way of looking at the world into their project.[31]

Much the same could be said of the composers working throughout the 1950s and 1960s with, of course, several important exceptions: Luigi Nono being one, who sought to marry formal structural rigour with deeply committed political content. But, in the very early 1950s, for many others working in Germany and Italy in particular, the need to reconnect with a broken thread of musical modernism – in the 1910s and 1920s – broken by the decade of political allegiances in the 1930s and the ravages of the war and its immediate aftermath amounted to enough of a political stance in itself. Work on form held at bay the bogey-man of *ideological*

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[30]   Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London, 1973), p. 320.

[31]   Umberto Eco, 'Form as Social Commitment', in *The Open Work*, trans. A. Cancogni (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 153.

allegiance and overt political content, but by the late 1960s this began to unravel. If the avant-garde denoted an implicit politics or even an *apolitical* but contestatory stance (weakened by its own institutionalization at this time), the turbulent events of the day demanded another response.

Politics and the Avant-Garde (2)

> Each decade – we now think of decades or generations as the units of social time – has its hallmarks. That of the 1960s was a political and cultural radicalism. The two were yoked by a common impulse to rebellion, but political radicalism, *au fond*, is not merely rebellious, but revolutionary, and seeks to install a new social order in place of the previous one.[32]

Conservative critics such as the influential Daniel Bell bemoaned this radicalization of culture, and saw it thinly masking a desire for chaos, violence and destruction. To this, he adds to his description of the 1960s, 'a desire to make noise; an anti-cognitive and anti-intellectual mood; an effort once and for all to erase the boundary between "art" and "Life"; and a fusion of art and politics'.[33] The growth of a politically conscious counter-culture, the questioning of governmental authority (perhaps unthinkable in the immediate post-war years), the development of student politics, all this certainly sent waves throughout culture as a whole. Artists from very different backgrounds gravitated towards this 'fusion of art and politics'. Jean Luc Godard's 1966 film *Weekend* – in many ways a paragon of modernistic formal, anti-traditional narrative devices – all but formally announces his allegiance to Marxist-Leninism at a decisive moment in the film. Hans Werner Henze, often previously perceived as the establishment face of the 'new music', also in 1967, undertook a conversion to social commitment, directly spurred on by the student movement in Germany at the time. Luigi Nono, a longstanding Italian communist, allowed his politics to become ever more explicitly showcased within his music throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s. Cardew, as we have seen, underwent a rather violent conversion, repudiating his earlier works and those of his longstanding mentors, John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Many other composers followed suit in the early 1970s, many of them associates of Cardew and Wolff: Yuji Takahashi, Frederic Rzewski, Garrett List, and numerous others. For these composers it wasn't enough to accept the sublimated social resonances of a refined abstraction in music, but to forge concrete allegiances to historical and political events (Rzewski's *The People United will never Be Defeated* of 1975, for example). Wolff himself responded to this situation, as he acknowledges,

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[32] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1996), p. 120.
[33] Ibid, p. 121.

> Did events of '68 'allow political subject to emerge more directly…?' Well, I
> suppose so, though there had been political issues before, notably civil rights
> movement, and before that involvement with pacifism. The question is, why get
> the music involved? And not until 1972? I'd say there were contributing factors:
> the political events of the time, the (new) involvement in political discussion and
> actions of many more of the people I knew, including musicians.[34]

Such discussions would have been between Wolff, Cardew and Rzewski, and
both musically and politically. But if the work of Nono, Henze and Cardew is
briefly looked at in relation to *Changing the System* then it highlights some of the
differences at work in conceiving a music of political nature in the early 1970s.

It goes without saying that the ghost of 1930s committed art haunts the political
work of the 1970s. The questions around representation from the latter period
are refigured by a new generation: who is the music for? How does it represent
something other than a bourgeois world-view and tradition? How can music
engage in problems facing the world? While, in the 1930s, such questions led to
a critique of 'formalism' or modernism in favour of more accessible forms, the
'new' involvement in political discussion reflected a broader musical or cultural
linguistic spectrum. Luigi Nono, for example, felt no need to jettison an advanced
musical language in order to communicate his message; in fact, he would have
argued that both were essential to the political message: that the most advanced
means of production were necessary to initiate a revolutionary change in society.
What is remarkable in Nono's music is this balance between the demands of
abstract structures and a humanitarian content. He was drawn to commenting on
the great conflicts of the twentieth century – the Spanish Civil War, Auschwitz,
Hiroshima, Vietnam – drawing on a variety of poetic and literary sources for his
works (sometimes collage-like acting as diverse sources), whether the work of
renowned poets or the testimonies of ordinary people, such as in the writings
of condemned resistance fighters used in *Il Canto Sospeso* (1955–56). Not
surprisingly, these texts and the use of the human voice figure largely in Nono's
middle and late periods. The voice as a human witness, or the subject of history,
is a recurring theme in Nono's music – and this is where the music completely
re-interprets the text, where it carries the texts over into another register, often
splitting the syllables of the sung text into a mosaic of timbral fragments. This, of
course, caused problems for those wanting a direct political message, but Nono's
music creates a dramatic sweep, where the subject of history is ingrained within
the music itself, raising it above either accompaniment or commentary. We can
think, specifically here, of the marvellous *Djamilla Boupacha* (from the *Canti di
Vita e d'Amore* of 1962), where the eponymous subject – a victim of racism and
torture in French-controlled Algeria – is empathically presented through dramatic,
soaring, vocal lines. It is specifically this empathic quality in Nono that allows
him to create powerful musical, as well as intertwined political, content. Closer, if

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only in terms of the time of composition, to *Changing the System* is the important *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* ('Like a Wave of Strength and Light' 1971–72), which embodies, again, these strong empathic tendencies within Nono's music. As with *Djambilla Boupacha*, *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* essentially presents indignation at the loss of youth, here a Chilean revolutionary, as a catalyst for potential change – but in order to do this, in order to enact this empathy for the revolutionary subject, it requires a certain traditional dramatic structure and language (even if often brilliantly refigured or reinvented by Nono).

What marks the politics of the 1970s is a broadened world view – a concern with events in Latin America and Vietnam, 'new liberation struggles' – as well as an absorption of many aspects of the youthful politics of the late 1960s (although there were exceptions here – the most famous being Pier Paulo Pasolini's article 'I Hate You Students'[35]). Hans Werner Henze's politics and world view were certainly changed, at least for a while, in the wake of his discussions with radical student groups, including Rudy Dutschke and Gaston Salvatore in the 1960s. Henze could speak, at that time, of a world revolution, not only of a 'cultural revolution, but also changes to the system, of which an equal distribution of worldly goods would have to be the first requirement'.[36] This led Henze to ask questions regarding his own musical output, pertaining to how bourgeois music can serve 'the revolution': what is revolutionary music? How can the one be transformed into the other? Again, like Nono, Henze's music of this period, rather than adopting a heightened accessibility in its language, engaged in a belligerent avant-gardism, exploring the most 'advanced' means available to the composer. But the avant-garde itself had long viewed Henze suspiciously, as an establishment figure, and many remained unconvinced by what they saw as 'posturing' (ironically a general criticism of politically orientated music by the mainstream establishment itself). However, Henze's basic questions captured much of the mood and the problems facing newly politicized composers (even from a very different background and milieu, such as Cardew and Wolff). 'What is revolutionary music?' Henze's own musical answer was often confused; we could say (apart from highly coherent and important pieces such as *Voices* and *El Cimarrón*) that Henze was 'writing through' his uncertainties. Unlike Nono – whose language had developed and grown from his earlier pieces – where the dramatic and empathic relations between the audience and the 'revolutionary subject' are unfolded dialectically (at least ideally), Henze, in one sense, dramatizes the composer as subject struggling with both this newly found world view and a language that can emotionally express this new position. This gives some of the compositions a desperation, an excessive expressivity that might seem to say more about the composer's inner turmoil than the violence of

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[35] Pasolini's argument here – published in newspaper articles in 1968 – was with 'privileged rich-kid students' pontificating, while the 'real proletariat' were in forced employment (the police) by the state to suppress them. Pasolini's declared sympathy was with the latter.

[36] Hans Werner Henze, *Bohemian Fifths*, trans. S. Spencer (London, 1998), p. 241.

the new, revolutionary, human condition. A case in point is the *Sixth Symphony*, the 'Cuban' symphony for two orchestras, sketched there and completed in Italy in 1969. Henze in many ways stressed (and this is borne out by the music) his role as an *observer* of the revolution (or, to be more accurate, of its *results*) providing

> new metaphors for this new, socialist kind of joy and freedom but since I myself was not a revolutionary and since I was to take part in the Cuban revolution only briefly and as a visitor, I could really do no more than make an entirely personal contribution to the extraordinary changes taking place here, and taking place, moreover, in the name of humanity and human dignity. And I was able to show in my music how deeply this new and modern revolution had affected me as a person.[37]

Henze later changed his mind about aspects of the Cuban revolution, in particular what he saw as Fidel Castro's tyrannical management of it, as others previously in thrall to Mao's innovations in China had done. But the Sixth Symphony remains a paean to revolution, in all its subjective complexity, albeit from the bourgeois viewpoint of an avant-garde composer. One of the most striking aspects of the piece is the inclusion (or rather the sedimentation/integration within its textures) of two songs – *Nhu'ng ánh sao dem*, a song from the Vietnamese Liberation Front, and another by the popular Greek composer Miki Theodorakis. These act as passing moments of stasis in a general maelstrom of passionate gesture; objective elements within a subjective language. Not surprisingly, because of this overly subjective viewpoint, Henze's political engagement of this period passed over into the regained romanticism of his later compositions.

While Henze's political period alienated many of his admirers, Cornelius Cardew's sudden and violent conversion to a music of socialist realism caused outrage and incomprehension amongst many of his previous colleagues from the avant-garde. Yet Cardew had always had an 'outsider's point of view' – from his sometimes sceptical participation in Darmstadt, to the critique of establishment values in the Scratch Orchestra (from the perspective of benign anarchism) through to the adoption of a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninism, each in their own way stepped outside of mainstream values. If, through their respective musical languages, Nono and Henze attempted to stir the audience, to capture the reality of political and musical change, then Cardew would reject both as representing a hopeless, atomized and bourgeois world view, simply reflecting a bourgeois society in extreme decline.[38] For Cardew, the important thing was to adopt a class-based viewpoint, as John Tilbury, in his exhaustive book on the composer, comments: 'Taking a political stand is not the same as taking a "class stand", which was

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[37]   Ibid. p. 264.

[38]   Although in a 1975 interview with Adrian Jack, Cardew untypically suggests that Nono's approach is 'valid'. See *Cornelius Cardew: A Reader*, p. 239.

what Cardew was demanding ("shuffling one's feet over to the proletariat")'.[39] The option for the composer here is, as in classic Marxist positions from the 1920s and 1930s, to present the working class with a language that would be developed from the bourgeoisie in its 'ascendancy' rather than its decline. Hence Cardew attempts to infuse his music from the 1970s with Beethoven (*Thälmann Variations* of 1974) or Schumann (*We Sing for the Future*, 1979). The scherzo from Schumann's *Fantasie in C* seems to inform *We Sing for the Future*, which never steps outside of standard tonality, with its clearly demarcated themes and variations. Cardew's approach was a socialist-realist viewpoint in most respects, broadly encapsulating Brecht's notion of popularism, outlined earlier, in attempting to produce work that was 'actually of service only to the people, the broad working masses, and [which] must therefore be absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular'.[40] Yet Cardew's problems were not resolved at the time of his untimely death in 1981, and many felt that, despite the typical commitment and zeal with which it was done, his organizational work for the CPE (Marxist-Leninist) Party had far overtaken any serious concern with music. This is the first problem for Cardew: that political schematas *led* the music, defined it and construed its 'purpose'; the second, lying at the centre of the first, is that Cardew's extremely traditional, conservative analysis of class and proletarian culture was already way out of date in the 1970s. That any relatively new additions to Marxism or socialist theory were dismissed as 'revisionist' or dangerous deviations made his political contribution narrow in the extreme. It was a political position that seemed less suited to an industrially developed country like Britain, even in the economic wilderness years of the 1970s.

One of the lessons of 1968 was not only a broadening of political representation – a 'class' consciousness beyond the confines of an anointed proletariat – including disparate groupings whose only commonality was its inclusive resistance against the all-subsuming power of capital. Another discovery at that time which influenced many politicized thinkers of the late 1960s was the controversial rediscovery of the early writings of Marx, which also pointed to a Utopian critique of alienation rather than the classical purely economic analysis. This would seem strikingly pertinent to the 1960s and 1970s; as Tony Judt has remarked, it was preoccupied with

> how to transform 'alienated' consciousness and liberate human beings from ignorance of their true condition and capacities; how to reverse the order of priorities in capitalist society and place human beings at the centre of their own existence; in short how to change the world.[41]

Judt's paraphrase of Marx could almost read as a version of Tom Hayden's text featured in *Changing the System*. No doubt Cardew would have rejected

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[39]   John Tilbury, *Cornelius Cardew: A Life Unfinished* (London, 2008), p. 759.

[40]   Brecht, 'Popularity and Realism', p. 227.

[41]   Tony Judt, *Postwar: A history of Europe since 1945* (London, 2007), p. 403.

such a position as an unviable and unformulated Marxism, a reflection of his youthful position that would be dialectically mediated through the later volumes of *Capital*.

And yet, like Nono and Henze, Cardew, from a very different perspective, was asking important questions about the nature of art and politics. His continuing promotion of Wolff and Rzewski's music (and critique, we should add – seeing them principally as bourgeois avant-gardism grappling with political subject matter) created a valuable dialogue at the time, and upped the stakes for addressing the political.

In many respects, though, despite their differences, all of these positions focus on political music as a form of representation. They each require an 'image' of their subject matter to be projected through the music. In Nono's case it is the dramatic embodiment of the text that creates a vivid revolutionary subject, if one 'enters' into the music in the right spirit. Therefore, the traditions of Italianate opera and earlier vocal music are palpable influences on the moulding of such musical vividness. In Henze's case, it is the romantic struggle of the composer *as subject*, an expressionist position that looks back to, say, Beethoven as a model. For Cardew, it is the creation of a progressive working-class culture, derived from the highest achievement of bourgeois culture fused with popular or folk music, which will inspire and feed that revolutionary class, and form a starting point for a viable working-class culture. Yet these positions are, in order to inscribe these representations within the music, reliant on existent musical rhetorics – whether a rhetoric of expressivity or even one of accessibility (each of these based on conventional assumptions) – they have to plug into these rhetorical modes: individualize them in the process, of course, but, in effect, use them.

One of the great achievements of the American experimental composers was to question this very rhetoric, and reject this notion of a work having to form itself from constituent parts of a basic communicative paradigm (Cage would view this as a music that attempts to 'speak' – that is, adopt a subject position – as opposed to one that acts in the spirit of 'nature in the manner of her operation'). Which leads us indirectly back to Wolff's *Changing the System* and the question 'can we have a politics of indeterminacy'? The answer is undoubtedly yes, and, although specific pieces will act very differently, three basic reasons can be identified: indeterminacy,

1. questions the processes of artistic labour and the division of labour;
2. allows for, or even prescribes, widely different concepts of musical skill (or even intentional 'de-skilling'), to be used in the realization of a piece; and
3. questions the idea of how time is perceived as a governing principle, of events occurring in time.

Each of these aspects creates a very different musical experience for both performers and listeners, crucial to indeterminacy, and also Wolff's work as a whole.

Changing the System

Before looking at these three aspects of indeterminacy as utilized by *Changing the System*, it might be useful to briefly look at the use of text as a prerequisite for political music. For Nono the impetus of the text is clear, even if it is often refracted and abstracted through his musical procedures. Henze, too, in his most successful work of the political period utilized the clarity of text in such works as *El Cimarrón*. Almost all of Cardew's instrumental music requires a concrete relationship to song (*Thälmann Variations*, *We Sing for the Future*, *Bethanien Song*, etc.) and among his criticisms of *Changing the System* were not only the credibility of the text, but also its potential lack of audibility within a performance.

Wolff's music of the earlier 1970s connects with this notion that political music should unite with a text in order to deliver a message or figure an allegiance. *Accompaniments*, *Songs* (1973–75), and *Wobbly Music* (1975) all give texts a prominence, this giving way in the later music to folk and vernacular songs either structurally generating or being woven within the musical events and structures. For a while, it was important for Wolff to give clear political sense to the music via the text, to avoid what he felt occurred in the libertarianism of earlier pieces (reflective of social movements of the time) – as in *Prose Collection* or *Burdocks*, for example – as he commented in 1980: 'The communal movements [characteristic of the late 1960s] were essentially apolitical, that is, they set out to practice social alternatives without any coherent plan for changing society as a whole, and in the end would be compelled to depend on it'.[42] Hence the attraction of Tom Hayden's text, which addresses the failure of the foreign policy that grew out of the Kennedy era – the Peace Corps or the New Frontier – as delusional or distractive agents of change. Suggesting that the social system itself must change (rather than the Peace Corps being sent out to spread the 'good word' of American democracy) in order for people to rethink their engagement with the world, Hayden's text is both utopian and realist at the same time. In this sense it is a very American text, asking people to look at their own backyard and sort that out (rather than the implications of *Accompaniments*, which looks to China's quotidian social accomplishments). Texts such as this are fragments, from speeches or textbooks, essentially 'found texts' that are given a new public forum through the context of the music. In *Changing the System*, Wolff suggested that the text represented

> the need for fundamental change of our dysfunctional social system in order to achieve an adequate and workable and just society. I had in mind that the percussion in this piece – in conjunction with the ways the piece is done as a whole – represent a focusing of concerted, persuasive but not coercive energy and – it's hard to put it into words – a kind of revolutionary noise.[43]

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[42]   Wolff, 'On Political Texts and New Music', p. 132.

[43]   Christian Wolff, 'Floating Rhythm and Experimental Percussion' (1990), in *Cues*, p. 206.

This might be seen in direct contrast to his earlier pieces mentioned above, whereby the vagueness of the floating rhythm (the 'non-rhythm' of sounds in space) gives it a 'timeless' feeling and a tendency to self-enclosure, and to 'inhibit the outward projection of sound'.[44] In contrast, the text in *Changing the System* is not just present emblematically, but also interconnects with the thrust of the music. These two characteristics, both interrelated – that is, the insertion of a politically motivated text, and the newly found systematic drive forward – musically characterize the materials of the piece. Both work to give it a particular character, as being both a political work and a highly indeterminate (but musically 'progressive') one, operating as it does very successfully at the intersection of the two. As we have seen, there can be a general political analysis of, say, an indeterminacy operating in pieces such as *Burdocks* or the *Prose Collection*. Questions of how large-scale communal pieces can be organized, musical inclusivity and temporal organization are addressed in each of these pieces, but for Wolff they remained politically weak, in that they remain merely resonant of utopian social alternatives, changing nothing whatsoever. But it could be argued that this is the fate of all political music; even Cardew's music, which attempted to get its hands dirty with the cut-and-thrust of party politics, ultimately fell victim to the mirage of an audience of 'the masses' which in practice seemed difficult to concretely materialize. On the other side of the coin are the social potentialities and possibilities that *Changing the System* opens out and emphasizes, through its development of indeterminacy (rather than a rejection of it in favour of a music of *representation*). The triadic relationship between the composer, the performers and the audience is one that is truly realized in this piece; in a good performance these conditions are palpable in the result. Putting it together requires each quartet to produce for themselves an amalgam of that triad: what to choose, how to play, how to listen and respond, what speed to play. Nothing could be further from Attali's evocation of the hierarchically organized and commanded orchestral musicians, whereby, 'Each of them produces only a part of the whole having no value in itself'.[45] The French philosopher Jacques Rancière in a recent text *The Politics of Aesthetics* has underlined this division of labour as being integral to the very concept of the political:

> This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. Aristotle states that a citizen is someone who *has a part* in the act of governing and being governed.[46]

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44   Wolff, 'On Political Texts and New Music', p. 132.

45   Attali, *Noise*, p. 66.

46   Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. G. Rockhill (London and New York, 2004), p. 12.

In one sense this is what Wolff has attempted to do consistently in his music from the mid-1950s on: to create a dialogue about *taking part*, and to enable that process to create an audible effect. *Changing the System* is no different, except that its communal nature and its political intent are more explicit and emblematic. Its politics are ingrained in the processes it initiates, rather like Rancière's observation that 'Artistic practices are "ways of doing and making" that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility'.[47]

Implicit in the piece is a relationship between performers and their professional capacities – for example, a set of eight professional instrumentalists could become amateur singers and percussionists as the piece progresses (although this is only one of many possible interpretations).[48] The proposition of finding and utilizing found percussion or using one's voice would be anathema to many a professional musician, but this is partly how Wolff both questions 'ways of doing and making' but also steps outside of the musical rhetorics that determine the means and form of most music, even that of the avant-garde. John Tilbury, writing about Morton Feldman's sensibility and his approach to sound, suggested that

> As performers of contemporary music we can move comfortably from Boulez to Berio to Carter to Henze, and we can compare their methods, techniques, indeed their personalities; but essentially they inhabit the same musical world, a world moreover inherited from their great predecessors. For the mode of sound production in which we have been trained over the years through tuition and examination in conservatoires still stands us in good stead. We can retain our traditional time honoured methods of phrasing and articulation too; if we can make sense of the *Hammerklavier Sonata* we can also make sense of Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke* and Boulez's *Second Sonata.* But above all what characterizes these is their acceptance and dependence on 'received instrumental sound'[49]

It is this 'received instrumental sound' that Wolff (as well as Cage, Feldman and David Tudor) sought to rethink; it is the belief that any sound production requires devotion, attention and the development of new and contingent musical skill-sets. Such requirements led to the development of a small group of specialist performers as well as the potential expansion of a large pool of enthusiastic amateur performers (as in the Scratch Orchestra, or the expanded projects of Musica Elettronica Viva).

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[47]   Ibid., p. 13.

[48]   This is related to *Accompaniments*, written for Frederic Rzewski both in his professional capacity as a pianist and amateur in relation to the requirements of singing/speaking and the operation of simple percussion.

[49]   John Tilbury, 'On Performing Morton Feldman', in *Dal Niente 1* programme, November 1998.

If Attali and others pointed out the alienated conditions of the symphony orchestra as a reproduction of capitalist modes of production (and we could say a *representation* of *existing* within that structure), what of the products that are churned out by this machinery? These too, no doubt, could be seen as being unconsciously formed by these forces, in what the Italian political philosopher Antonio Negri denotes as a total subsumption by capital.[50] We have to beware, here, of simply repositioning an orthodox Marxist reflection theory: that everything simply reflects and is conditioned by the economic substructure or base. But Negri's analysis is interesting in the way that it politicizes time or the usage of time once more, in such a way that is relevant to a piece like *Changing the System*. Simply put, Negri – through a complex reading of Marx – looks at the exponential growth of labour, working structures and value as emanating from a capitalist conception, and appropriation, of time: 'lived time' becomes 'work time' – which perniciously invades what was once called 'free time'. *Time as measure*, far from being simply negotiable by the worker or producer, suggests Negri, designates and controls how we live, how we relate to others, and determines our very existence. It is this sense of subsumption, a total condition almost, in late capitalism, that caused Negri to later suggest there is 'no outside' – as in the space of contestation that stands outside of capitalism. But Negri also suggests that there can be a moment of liberated time, an intervention, perhaps a disturbance, even, of how things are done or made or distributed:

> Liberated time is a *productive quality*. It is a productive rationality torn away from and isolated from the command that analysed this rationality and extorted it from the time of life. When one says productive quality one is speaking of a surplus, an element of growth, a moment of creation.[51]

In contrast to what we might call 'normative' contemporary classical music, where time structures are determined, filled and developed with events occurring at *just the right moment*, indeterminacy reflects much more of what Negri is talking about, especially the kind of performing work that is encapsulated by *Changing the System*. Here, the work of collective simultaneous quartets move towards forming the identity of the piece itself; it is not prescribed beforehand. Unlike a system of pre-fabricated time (determination), its performers are constantly on the edge of the unknown but define and shape the events by their actions. Such a situation is well known to improvisers, but a simple notion of 'spontaneity' (as it is so often mistakenly labelled) does not do this process justice, as it is – in this context – about a collective response to a constitution of moving through, shaping and making something out of, time.

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[50]   See Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. M. Mandarini (New York and London, 2003).

[51]   Ibid., p. 120.

    While *Changing the System* remains within Wolff's output a transitional piece, its position is an extremely important one, connecting as it does with other large-scale pieces from the late 1960s and early 1970s by Cardew and Rzweski, but clearly finding its own solutions to the problem of political allegiance and the embodiment of resonant social processes within a musical context. Both the political message of the piece and the experiential processes it maps out are more relevant than ever. Unlike other political works of the time, *Changing the System* escapes being simply a document of a particular period; it steps outside of illustrating an ideal, or even the issues of representation or narrative subject positions. On the contrary it is that rare thing: a universalized, non-didactic, politicized work, one that will work *within* (and possibly even disturb) the time and space of its performed context.