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Mr Feldman Says.....?

Richard Ascough

On the 31st August, 1972 there was an extraordinary incident detailed below in a near contemporaneous document. First though a bit of background:

The Scratch Orchestra was founded in June 1969 with its first concert on the 1st November 1969. For the first two and a bit years it followed a similar path on the far out reaches of Experimental music. There was no particular overriding political ethos but if anything slightly anarchic. This started to change in the autumn of 1971. Following a tour of the North East a discontent file was started. This was also the beginning of Cardew's journey into Marxism. At first the two strands of thought coexisted within the orchestra. The Scratch were booked to play at the 1972 BBC Proms, with a performance of Cardew's "Great Learning Paragraph 1". With his new world outlook Cardew decided to adapt the Confucius text and to combine it with "Paragraph 2". As far as I know the only performance of this version. There were to have been political placards as well but extraordinarily there was an announcement by the BBC that with agreement of the composer and the BBC these had been omitted.

The following day the orchestra departed for a two week tour of Munich and Austria. The Munich part coincided with the Munich Olympics. The orchestra played in the Spiel Strasse outside the Olympic Stadium. They were also booked to play at the Munich Radio Station which brings us to the incident below.

Mr Feldman Says..... ?

"I hope no one here thinks this has got anything to do with Christian Wolff" This extraordinary statement was made by composer Morton Feldman, during a performance of Wolff's "Burdocks" by the Scratch Orchestra on the 31st August 1972 at the Munich Radio Station.

Let me confess I had always liked Feldman's work, but I never will be able to hear another note however PPP it is, without being reminded of this curious event.

Cage, Feldman and to a lesser extent Tudor were upset by this performance. It transpired that the nub of their argument was the playing of "Home Sweet Home" and two other folk favourites by Carole Finer on the banjo, which they maintain was not in the spirit of Wolff.

When they were told that this was a realisation of the figure seven in Piece 5, (Finer chose seven choruses each of the Folk Songs); this sent them into a frenzied activity searching the score for justification:

“Seven sounds” Cage (typically Cagean),

“I will not sleep until I find the meaning of that 7” Feldman

“There is another page of the score.... explaining the symbols”, Tudor

Apart from this their objections were technical, conducting Piece 6 to a steady pulse and keeping in phase. The spoken commentary to Piece 10; Tilbury’s playing of the arpeggio in Piece 5; a complete lack of tension.

Cage thought the New York performance very beautiful and this one very bad! When they were told that Wolff had heard most of this in London and had made no objection to it they could find no answer. Finally they thought Cardew and Tilbury had abused their “special relationship” with Christian.

While we agree that that our performance was not perfect and had its faults, was this really their only objection? If so it seems rather pedantic, or was there deeper objections? In fact I believe one does not have to look very deep. Before the concert Cornelius criticised the ivory tower approach of Wolff and Feldman; (there had been a performance of Feldman’s “Pianos and Voices 2” prior to this.

We had hit them right in the solar plexus finding their soft spot. Could one hope that we had shown them a few home truths? Maybe for a moment they wondered who their music was for. Anyway they were on their guard looking for justification. One wonders however perfect our performance had been or even if it was like their precious New York performance, they would, one must suspect, have found a reason to condemn it. Feldman was no doubt overjoyed at Carole’s playing, it gave him the right (as he saw it) to be indignant. It was for him justification; he could forget his conscience and return to his ivory tower! Leave Christian alone he’s ours, was their attitude.

It leaves only one thing to say sweet dreams Morton.

Richard Ascough 10th October 1972.

The above written less than six weeks after the event is the only near contemporaneous documents of the event apart from a tape recording of me by Dave Smith immediately after the discussion between Cage, Feldman, Tudor and me. The recording features in Luke Fowlers film “Pilgrimage from Scattered Points”.

I have not changed the original text that begins from “I hope no one” etc. I don’t think I would have written the same way now. My own music occupies the same “ivory tower” that I criticise in the text but I think it is important to reprint the text as it was.