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**From Birmingham to Belfast: improvising and experimenting with students**  
**Hilary Bracefield**

THERE is no doubt that the people behind the Experimental Catalogue (begun in 1968 by Chris Hobbs with Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman joining in) were largely responsible for disseminating and fostering the rise in indeterminate music-making in the 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom. In Birmingham, however, the start of an experimental music group had another impetus. This article, based on a paper given to the EMC2 conference at De Montfort University in March 2017, is a personal account of the events in Birmingham from 1971 and in Belfast from 1977.



Hilary Bracefield, paper, 24 March 2017

The start of an improvisatory music group at Birmingham University must be credited to the lecturer Peter Dickinson. He had studied at the Juilliard School in New York and encountered the music of John Cage, Henry Cowell and Edgard Varèse. On return to England he had worked on improvisatory music with students in London. Just before he left Birmingham to go to Keele University (where he set up an important centre for the study of American music) he collaborated in March 1971 with a lecturer in drama, Jocelyn Powell, to mount a performance of John Cage's *Theatre Piece* (1960) in an evening concert at the Barber Institute at the university, a series to which the general public always came. The eight performers included a dancer, an actor, a gymnast, a singer, a cellist, a percussionist, and myself on chamber organ and harpsichord on stage and on piano in the pit, requiring some clambering up and down. Peter Dickinson, who had seen a performance in New York, thought that though our realisation was different in many ways the effect was in fact the same. There were two reviews: one in the *Birmingham Post* and one in the second issue (Summer 1971) of *Contact*, the new journal of contemporary music. Both remarked on the ludicrous juxtaposition of the piece with a first half of music by Debussy and Hindemith and a billing of 'a concert of 20<sup>th</sup> century music'. It posed a problem of the 1970s with any avant-garde music. Do you slip a piece in with more congenial

fare and hope the audience is converted, or do you have the courage of your convictions and programme a whole concert and risk tiny audiences? We got our audience that night but just bemused or annoyed them. I have endeavoured ever since not to take part in a concert of experimental music mixed with anything else, and have largely succeeded.

Peter Dickinson did not stop with organising the performance of *Theatre Piece*. The first issue of *Contact* (no. 1, Spring 1971) contained on page 15 a manifesto written by him. In it he says:

There is much to be learned from exploratory work, playing from graphic or verbal notations as well as more conventional indeterminate pieces.... [it] is a means of increasing awareness in all kinds of music—it is not mere improvisation.

He references Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Cornelius Cardew as well as the groups AMM, Intermodulation and the Scratch Orchestra, and announces that a performing group had been formed based on the music department at Birmingham University:

It will aid realistic discussion of the ideas surrounding avant-garde music today. And it will do this far more successfully than a visit from outsiders who disappear after the concert before any awkward questions can be asked. The first meetings of the group upset equilibrium at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, but when it was explained that the activity aspired to the condition of music, all was well.

I have no idea who the outsider performer may have been, nor do I have recollections of problems with the first rehearsals of the group (except from the Professor of Art with whose department we shared the Institute), but having assembled us in November 1970, Dickinson left us to our own devices. In May 1971 the 'Birmingham University Improvisatory Group' as it was billed, gave its first public performance in the music department's regular lunchtime concert series. There were twelve performers including John Casken, Tony Carver, Graham Buck and Paul and Martin Hindmarsh. The programme began with 'Meeting Point' from Stockhausen's collection *Aus den Sieben Tagen* (1968). Dickinson in his manifesto had pointed out 'the spiritual demands made of [Stockhausen's players] in every kind of musical decision, even though no note is actually named in the score', and we had started our rehearsals by trying out pieces from the set. But the other three items in the programme were by members of the group: *Death Crescendo* by Terry Loane, *Triple Concerto* by Keith Potter and *The Windows* by Chris Villars. The latter two of these pieces became staples of the group. In *Triple Concerto*, verbal parts handed out just before a performance decided on a soloist for each of three sections; *The Windows* used the surrealist poem by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) declaimed and sung by me and responded to spontaneously by the group. I am afraid this became a party piece for me for life, together with John Cage's *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948). Otherwise, I normally played percussion, tuned and untuned, having no other advanced performing skills (I arrived at Birmingham from New Zealand to do research, but as a mediocre pianist and choir singer only).

The new group was then invited by Jolyon Laycock, director of music at the Birmingham Arts Lab, to support a concert at the end of May by, of all people, the famous (or notorious) folk singer Davy Graham, making a comeback. The group was now named Embarkation, a name which continued until the eventual break-up during 1973. This time, in two sets, we performed three of the pieces from *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, *Triple Concerto* and a new piece by John Casken called *Visu*.

From then on the group's performers came and went, as is usual with students. Later members who went on to have musical or music education careers include Andy Adamson, Geoff Abbott, Melvyn Poore and David Roberts. As well as a number of university lunchtime concerts, Embarkation gave nine more public concerts (according to my records): in the Barber

Institute, Birmingham Arts Lab in Tower Street, Carr's Lane Church Centre (a popular venue at this time) and in the Cockpit Theatre in London. After that I performed with a group called Twenty-three, comprising Peter West, Graham Buck, Chris Villars and David Jones, into 1974. By this time, I was lecturing at Worcester College of Education so performing in the Birmingham area became impractical.

Where did our music come from? In the spirit of the Experimental Music Catalogue and the Scratch Orchestra, some from ourselves. As well as *Triple Concerto*, *Visu* and *The Windows*, Graham Buck's *Solo System* had regular outings.

I can tell from the scores I have accumulated, purchased, or copied in that mysterious early format, that much was tried out, but a regular number of pieces became staples. These were pieces the group was comfortable with and confident of performing in public. That was an important consideration.

Stockhausen's *Aus den Sieben Tagen* remained popular, but of all the pieces in the collection, I have only ever done four in public: *Right Durations*, *Meeting Point*, *Night Music* and *Set Sail for the Sun*. They usually worked well and were enjoyed by audiences. A lot of the other pieces were actually unsuitable to perform at all, but remained important talking and thinking points for the group.

From John Cage's repertoire, purchased from Peters Edition in London at great cost, given that the pieces were photocopies in a statutory folder, we tried *She is Asleep* (1943), which I used to perform with Keith Potter, *45' for Speaker*, published in *Silence* (London, Calder and Boyars, 1971), *Radio Music* (1956), *Suite for Toy Piano* and some others. Although I would perform *4'33"* (1952) for students in class, I never gave it in concert.

Cornelius Cardew's *Autumn 60* (1960) was often rehearsed, but only once given publicly, in 1973 in a concert of music by him, including *Solo with accompaniment* (1964). We also worked on parts of *Treatise* (1963-7) but again did not play any of them in public. Cardew himself gave a workshop which members of Embarkation attended at Birmingham Arts Lab in February 1972. It concluded with a public performance of some of the pieces worked on. So I was introduced to Paragraph 7 of *The Great Learning* (1968-71) and David Jackman's *Georgina Cries*.

Richard Bernas from Gentle Fire came to Birmingham to play Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*, and brought with him Graham Hearn's *Art Must Be Fed*. We included it in two joint concerts with the group CPE (Chris May, Phil Gebbett and Ed Fulton) in November 1972, one at the university and one at the Cockpit Theatre in London.

But of all the Experimental Music Catalogue's actual collections which I religiously purchased, it was *Prose Pieces* by Christian Wolff which stuck with us. We particularly took to *Play*, *Song* and *Stones*. The latter caused a riot in an early concert in St Francis Hall, the interdenominational student centre in the University.

Embarkation eventually petered out during 1973. As well as its own concerts it took part in a performance of Annea Lockwood's *Bell Piece* with the composer David Jones in November 1971 and in a production of *Sur Scène* (1959) by Mauricio Kagel in the Elgar Room, University of Birmingham in July 1972. And the group sort of came full circle in November and December 1972 when it was part of two performances of a John Cage *Music Circus* in Birmingham University Great Hall and the Round House in London; as with *Theatre Piece* apparently the first performances in England and again devised by Peter Dickinson and Jocelyn Powell.

From those years of student-group performances I learned the importance of regular serious rehearsal and discussion and the importance of becoming a closely-knit group who trusted each other to make pieces that worked when performed in public. Members who deliberately regularly disrupted pieces would destroy group feeling. Looking back over all three years I think we did embrace the ethos of experimental music and created some memorable concerts.

I moved to Northern Ireland to work at Ulster Polytechnic (in 1984 Ulster University) in October 1976. The only way to continue to perform experimental music was to start a group with the music students. I had been a bit of a shrinking violet in Embarkation. I had never contributed a new piece nor led the group in any way. But now I had to bite the bullet. In 1977 I started the Mushroom Group (named after John Cage's love of and interest in mycology, and thinking of nurturing young people who were in the dark about experimental music). The Northern Ireland students were indeed rather ignorant of any avant-garde music, having been brought up on grade examinations, the Boards' youth orchestras, A Level music examinations and church choirs.

To start the initial group off, and regularly with each new cohort, I found three pieces worked. Firstly, was my own and only composition *Twenty-Seven Sounds*. Each person, while listening to everyone else, played just twenty-seven sounds, then stopped. It couldn't be easier and proved a useful ice-breaker. The second was *Georgina Cries*, the David Jackman piece. This worked at the end of the first session with any group. It is basically a group yell, and as I could do circular breathing and therefore last longer than anyone else, it relaxed everyone whenever I used it. I have to say we never performed it in public, but rehearsals brought many curious people to the door of the Recital Room of Dalriada House, where the music department of Ulster University then resided. For an actual piece, usually tried after *Twenty-Seven Sounds*, John Casken's *Visu*, with a recognisable artistic score and easy instructions was a comforting starting-point for each manifestation of the group, and often as the first piece of a concert.

I am glad to say that I did not just rest on the laurels of the Embarkation repertoire, although I used it. The first public concert outside the University that the Mushroom Group gave was an evening concert at Queen's University in February 1978. I think it was my second public performance of Cardew's Paragraph 7 from *The Great Learning*, but it was certainly the first public performance in Ireland of *In C* (1964) by Terry Riley. I had encountered the piece in Birmingham from a famous hand-written photocopy, brought to Embarkation from Manchester with David Roberts in 1973. I did not know the origin of the copy, but it circulated widely in Britain, and, from me, in Northern Ireland. It was only at the EMC2 Conference in 2017 that I discovered that it had been written out by Chris Hobbs. Embarkation didn't ever perform the piece in public, but the Mushroom Group managed it that night in 1978 spectacularly, although it was our performance of Paragraph 7 that the audience, bemused as it was by our repertoire, particularly enjoyed.

The Mushroom Group met regularly each year from 1977–95, although less frequently in the later years after I became Head of the Music Department. It usually settled down to between seven and ten performers and tried out pieces regularly in lunchtime concerts in the University. We gave about fourteen performances elsewhere in the Belfast area over the years.

Although my old favourite Embarkation pieces regularly appeared in concerts, we did offer a number of new ones. Some only appeared in the University concerts: *X for Henry Flynt* by La Monte Young, *Radio Music* and *Water Music* by John Cage and *Clapping Music* and *Pendulum Music* by Steve Reich, for example. But we added Frederic Rzewski's *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1969) and

three more of Christian Wolff's pieces: *Edges* (1968), *After a Few Years of Prosperity* (1973–4) and *Exercise 2* (1973–4). We also enjoyed playing *Fives* (1974) by Keith Potter after I had played it with the composer and others at a university research student conference at the University of Southampton. While some pieces jelled very quickly like *Visu* or the Stockhausen pieces from *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, others like *Fives*, *In C* and *Les Montons de Panurge* required a great deal of dedicated rehearsal.

Over those years we performed several large important experimental pieces. Outside Ulster University we presented *In C* at least three times and gave Gavin Bryars two Ireland premieres. The Mushroom Group performed *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1971) in public at least four times from 1984. I had the score in the American journal *Soundings* 9 (1975) and purchased the tape of the tramp singing from Gavin for £5.00. This piece often affected audiences deeply, especially those who had never heard a piece of 'experimental' music before, but had encountered it at one of Queen's University's regular series or in an evening concert at Ulster University.

It helped our profile that the regular Sonorities Contemporary Music Festival began at Queen's University in 1981. *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* was performed in the festival more than once, and in 1985 we gave *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969–), complete with lighting effects and the box of slides, lent by the composer. In another Sonorities with a theatre theme in 1993 we resurrected Kagel's *Sur Scène*, presented in the Lyric Theatre. And in European Music Year 1985, which I may be the only person in Europe to remember, we gathered together several groups totalling 92 people in the Ulster Hall to present a John Cage *Music Circus*.

So, looking back, how far did experimental music-making affect the musical scene? One will never know, but in Northern Ireland whole cohorts of students at least tried or heard improvisatory music. As most of them became music teachers in schools or peripatetic instrumental teachers, I think they were helped to loosen their own thinking and be able to teach the more flexible modern 'A' level curriculum. An education course that I ran in 1981 also gave over 40 serving teachers a taste of what they could use in schools. A number of music therapy courses I ran or helped to run spread the knowledge of improvisatory music.

I do see an influence on a number of Northern Irish composers who took part in the Mushroom Group, even perhaps many years later when an improvisatory idiom crept into their music: Peter Rosser, Ian Wilson, Stephen Gardner, François Evans, Keith Acheson and in Birmingham John Casken. A number of administrators in the arts also benefitted, Michael Alcorn, Brian Carson and Keith Acheson among others, perhaps being more amenable to exploratory music concerts.

All in all, I think the performance in student experimental music groups fired up students' thinking, expanded their playing skills and informed their compositional ability. It was helped in Ulster University by lecture courses which included study of experimental music. Of course we were lucky in that the 1970s and 1980s were an exciting era. As well as hard-core avant-garde music, there was the rise of electronic music, the myriad experimentalists in USA from Fluxus on, the Scratch Orchestra and the other British groups, and the rise of minimalism. Is it just my perception that contemporary music is rather boring today?