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A Turning Point in Music History

Michael Chant¹

This paper was given at a Symposium on the Scratch Orchestra on its 30th anniversary, November 21, 1999, and has since been edited. Michael Chant was a prominent member of the Scratch Orchestra.

WHAT should be the preoccupations of thinking and concerned musicians and people involved in other artistic spheres today? What issues do they face in their activities, what problems do they come up against? How do they operate in society, what is their relation to the prevailing trends as they try and chart a course in their lives and in their music and other spheres of culture?

These are some of the questions that confront everyone involved in cultural production, creative and executive, professional and amateur, of whatever national culture. They are inescapable.

In attempting a serious assessment of the Scratch Orchestra, it is from the standpoint of such questions that one begins. Because the Scratch Orchestra in the course of its practice, both musical and social, as well as its ideologising about its practice, was in its time in the forefront of confronting these questions. Its very diversity, like a microcosm of the whole society itself, gave rise to a reality where such questions could not easily be brushed aside. Society has changed in some important respects from the days of the Scratch Orchestra. But by dealing with the reality of the Orchestra from this perspective of 30 years, perhaps without people feeling they have to take sides, agree or disagree with certain positions, getting to the essence of the Scratch, it is possible to assist ourselves in drawing conclusions and debating and arguing through, what is its legacy to us. How can this legacy inform us in our present activities, and perhaps point a way to the future also.

The thesis of this paper is that the Scratch Orchestra did represent a turning point in music history. Why this is so and what kind of turning point it represented is the subject of the paper. This, so my argument runs, is why getting to the essence of the Scratch Orchestra and what it represented is so important, not only for students of music history, but for every practising musician, composer and even artist today. My contention is that a turning point is something objective, and something cannot be declared a turning point at a whim. Things move in a changed direction after a turning point compared with before.

The issue to be addressed is not so much the character of the ideology that undoubtedly had a profound effect on the Orchestra and its participants, in whatever positive or negative light one may look at it. No-one exists in this world without an ideology, and it need not be a cause for division. Those who stick by this ideology today are entitled to do so, and, if only because of their long-term fidelity to this ideology, deserve to be seriously considered. But it must be examined what were actually the motive forces. Ideologies have their limitations, but ideologising

¹ See biographical notes on the website of the [British Composers Project](#).

is an essential human activity, and the Scratch Orchestra was certainly no one-sided collective that would forbid ideologising or claim ideology was at an end, as did happen during the sixties.

The interest in re-looking at the Scratch Orchestra after 30 years is partly to put forward with an open mind what ideologies were at work. But the fundamental subject of the enquiry is to look at what made the Scratch Orchestra a turning point irrespective of people's ideologies. It will not do simply to claim that it was a heterogeneous collection of individuals with diverse ideologies, interests, preoccupations, and that was it. It was a product of the sixties in its particularities, but it went beyond that mantra of the sixties, "Do your own thing". It was a collective with a certain identity and certain shared purposes, though these evolved and changed over time. But it had preoccupations from the beginning around which ideological debates took place.

One can enumerate, for example, some of the preoccupations which were characteristic of the Scratch. How to function as a collective and the relation of the individual to the collective, how to function in the public sphere, and hence to raise the question, "For Whom?", how to develop culture which has a democratic or progressive content as opposed to the demands of the establishment that culture be self-serving or part of an "industry", how to develop a mass culture, where at the same time each individual found their place and made their contribution, how to give a crucial place to the people in the culture that is produced, and recognise the diversity of their cultures, how to join the activity of professional cultural workers with amateurs, especially the youth. These are some of the preoccupations that come to mind when considering the Scratch Orchestra in its whole development.

Most crucially, the Scratch Orchestra captured the spirit of a whole movement and sought to develop that movement as the sixties turned into the seventies. It had democratic ideals, participants from many walks of life, and a programme of taking music to the people. Thus in its ideals it stood against elitism and careerism.

To look at the essential character of the Scratch in that way lifts it out of the pages of the history books and out of the hands of the archivists and places it at the beginning of a musical development that not only has relevance today but could be said to be continuing today, in all its manifestations in the individuals and collectives that came out of or owe their motion in some way to the Scratch Orchestra.

The Scratchers were not special people. But there was a reality which happened with the Scratch - as with anything that goes on in the world, in the universe - which is not simply a sum total, or a selection of, views and interpretations about what happened. Thus one could study the Scratch in itself, and write a history - this was the sequence of events, these are the facts; and then the idea of "getting to the essence" is to look at the basis of the motion, change and development as it was manifest in reality, in the real world, and draw out the relationship between events and how one thing led to another, as well as the relationship of the Scratch to society, the prevailing ideas, the logic of music history.

For the generation of today, the age of those who were Scratchers 30 years go, the issue of course is how to make music, how to be cultural workers, today. The issue also presents itself of what role music and culture has in life, should it be the exclusive preserve of elites to be of value, or should it have a mass appeal, involving people of every shade of ability as part of life. But the Scratch remains a valuable resource of experience, and it is important this experience is looked at in its totality, getting to its essence. This means looking beyond the events-in-themselves which took place during the Scratch's existence and analysing what give rise to the Scratch Orchestra's existence, what was the basis for its internal motion, why is it significant and what is its significance. It means looking at how the Scratch represented its participants' aspirations, and how it was a vehicle, albeit with its inherent limitations, for the realisation of those aspirations,

and, in a sense, how it was a project which as yet remains unfulfilled, and needs taking up for completion.

This aspect of looking on it as a project which still needs taking to its logical conclusion is one which is fundamental to getting to the significance of the Scratch Orchestra. And this is why to my mind it does represent a turning point. This is a reality, because, for example, if it did not represent such a turning point, then it would be of marginal significance, of interest to scholars and specialists, and not worthy of the symposium being held today, not to speak of the books, theses and other projects that have the Scratch Orchestra as their subject. The Scratch Orchestra took up music and activities which set out to have mass appeal, or have the potential of having mass appeal, and was not concerned with the preoccupations of the individual as consumer, and the gratification of their needs as consumer.

The Scratch was a voice which arose spontaneously against the prevailing musical orthodoxies, as well as the powers-that-be in society which dictate what people should do and even try to dictate what they should think. So it arose not only as a protest or a reaction against the old and hidebound in music, but also against what was reactionary in society. As such, it could be said it represented the best of the movement of the sixties, as opposed to culture which was simply "alternative" and destined to flounder. It did not simply represent a "passing phase", but gave rise to a tradition which did not disappear as people moved on to other things. It was central to music history in Britain. But not only to music history, in the sense that people's lives were also catapulted in a progressive direction. The Scratch Orchestra started something!

Although one can point to the contingent events to give an account of its origin — the experimental music class at Morley College, the need to get together a large body of performers to perform Paragraph 2 of *The Great Learning* — what was fundamental to the origin of the Scratch Orchestra was the idea of its existence. Morley College, the performance of Paragraph 2, could have come and gone and the Scratch need not have come into being. The Draft Constitution of the Scratch Orchestra embodied that idea, even though there was more to the idea of the Scratch Orchestra than just a document, as a kind of "score", that people followed or agreed to. Once that idea was there, people rallied to the Scratch Orchestra and its ranks grew. Then the Scratch Orchestra itself becomes a motive force in history. You could say the Scratch Orchestra came into existence because there was a need for such a body, such a collective. And that was its attraction, this is why it is still remembered and has relevance. The society itself was busy creating music as a consumer culture, that is commercialism, the manipulating of taste for commercial ends, and the destruction of what arises from the people. The Scratch Orchestra came along, not to withdraw from this society, as a protest, but to go to society with its own product which was to take up values which were opposed to this commercialism, on the one hand, or elitism, on the other. Of course, as soon as discussion and analysis get taken up in the Orchestra, then debate about its own values becomes the order of the day. But the Scratch in coming into existence was taking up a problem that history had posed right at the time that it was posing it. It captured the spirit of a movement. The music that the Scratch took up has been being refined ever since. Practically every single cultural person that came out of the Scratch Orchestra, just on the level of what music or art they took up, has been working within the context of this movement, these ideals, that gave humanity to what they do, as opposed to what society beckons you to do, which is serve yourself, make it big whatever the cost to anyone else, go into the past and find solace there and pretend that this is progress. And this has had a pervading influence in all the cultural circles that have come into contact with this movement.

It is in this context that it is possible to assess what is best which came out of the Scratch Orchestra, and discussion can take place about producing new works of music and art which people find of benefit in these times when the fabric of society is in crisis. The Scratch Orchestra measured up to the needs of its times in posing a project to itself. How far the content of that project hit the mark or not was not the issue. In the first flush of enthusiasm, perhaps this

question of hitting the mark was not even posed, but the project was there and that was the main thing. These days, who measures up or even considers the needs of the times? The other week, there were three days of School Proms at the Albert Hall. The young people who took part by virtue of being models of excellence in their musical fields were given union jack hats to wear and Land of Hope and Glory to sing. This speaks not only of the manipulation of the enthusiasm and vigour of the youth for chauvinist ends, but also of the nature of the whole project itself in which the youth were involved. So there is a question. What is the popular antidote to this kind of project? When the Scratch Orchestra appeared in the Albert Hall in the Proms in 1972, they were not even allowed to put up banners of their choice. Could it be that the authorities thought the Scratch were not technical experts in their field? I don't think that was the reason. Composers who set out to be big shots would have got nowhere in the milieu of the Scratch Orchestra. At the same time, there was nothing of which it could be said that it was just improvisation. The point was, within the structure, individuals flourished. Nor was the cult of amateurism promoted for its own sake, though others did do that. Everyone had their place within the project of the Orchestra, and everyone was very modest about working together in this project, without being subsumed to the whole collective, while being a member of that collective. The social form of the Orchestra was not a form which was geared to accumulating wealth or achieving fame or promoting degeneracy, which actually blocks the development of the individual, but every individual had their place.

The Scratch Orchestra was very diverse. But what does this diversity mean today? First of all, what did the diversity of the Scratch represent? More than anything, it represented the diversity of the life of the people themselves, together with their aspirations. The activity of the Scratch to its participants was anything but a sideline activity. It was the central point of their lives. It was mainly young people, say in their twenties, who were fresh in their approach to life and sincere in their concerns. They refused to be limited by what some "authority" told them they should be concerned with, whether in the musical field or generally with their philosophies of life. They were wanting to break with the particular prejudices of society that were being handed down to them. There were not many who were just interested in sounds as sounds, letting sounds just be sounds, and everything else everything else. The Scratch Orchestra, whatever it may have been, was no slave of any received wisdom. Some people call this anarchic, but I believe this is to miss the point, that the Scratch and the Scratchers were posing questions. The Scratch Orchestra set its own agenda. What I believe is particularly a travesty is the division of the life of the Scratch Orchestra into two halves, which can be caricatured as a first blissful creative half and a second authoritarian political half. The dividing line is then some "introduction of Marxism" or "conversion to Maoism". In a less caricatured version, the Scratch Orchestra broke on the back of its own contradictions, and the politics, like some inflationary universe, obliterated the innocent music-making. The point then is that one is invited to come down and side with one half or another half, and all further investigation or thought is then halted, and the reality of the development of the Scratch Orchestra and its relation to society is obscured. If one is taken in by the explanation that the Scratch was an orchestra of two halves, then it is quite possible to ask, "what has politics got to do with music?", and then somebody will come along and refute you and explain that it has got everything to do with it, or you will maintain that you will stick to your music and leave politics to the politicians. Of course, somebody else may tell you that everything is political, which you could say is true, but you won't be convinced that the creative mood of your music is alien to the masses of the people. The heart of the matter is that the Scratch Orchestra right from day one broke from the isolation that the establishment tries to impose on musicians and other cultural people from the development of society. Of course, the Scratch Orchestra was of its time, both in terms of its ranks being drawn in the main from the middle strata of society, expressing their contemporary concerns and emotions, as well as when an overtly political orientation found expression being influenced by some of the adverse features of Mao Zedong Thought, which is not unconnected. However,

being of its time was also its merit. It resonated in tune with its times. Cornelius set the tone for the Orchestra as a whole in that, far from being divorced from his time and circumstances, he and the Orchestra represented what was most vibrant in its zeitgeist. All in all, although various conclusions were reached which were not correct, the significance of the Scratch as a turning point is that as a collective of people it posed the questions: what should our music be, who should this music serve? The Scratch Orchestra gave a crucial place to the people in its cultural activities. It took the decision to take its music to the people right from the beginning. Its music may not have been "popular" in the sense that large numbers of people came to listen. But it set out to be popular in the sense that it was orientated towards the people's concerns, not to the concerns of those who look for geniuses and stars, for self-satisfaction and individual expression, or who make millions out of "popular music". Again, if the interest had just been in some chinoiserie, in something exotic or perverse, these again would not have had many takers, the Orchestra would have rejected them. But the sentiment of the Scratch was not this. I remember personally the conclusion I came to, and I was no special case, that there is no individual salvation. I firmly believe that this could be taken as the watchword of the orientation of the Orchestra and its development. The lesson of the Orchestra which I think all cultural people should consider is that of not limiting their own human personality, so that they become attuned to all that is necessary to the creation of new music and other forms of culture, culture that too is in tune with the voice of our times, music for the 21st century.

The world was in turmoil then as the sixties turned into the seventies, and the world is in turmoil now, as we prepare to enter the 21st century. One difference today is that cynicism, degeneration have reached new heights, especially in the past decade. The very notion that there is a society, that people exist as human beings within this society and as collectives with their own existence, is being taken away, is being negated. To demand that society shoulder its responsibility is being even portrayed as extremism and that we should be moderate. It reminds one of the James Connolly song, "Our demands most moderate are, we only want the earth!"² Nothing positive is coming from the political parties in power and their circles. So people's minds are in a turmoil — what is progressive, what is modern, why won't their claims be met. What is the role of the musician in these circumstances? At least, they need to pose the problem of having an enlightened view, and what this means for a musician, a cultural person. What emotion are they going to arouse, which can relieve the mind and make the mind think in a cool-headed way how to create a new situation. These are the questions in today's situation. People need to be inspired, to find relief, to be assisted in dealing with the onslaughts of today's world. In the sixties, the Scratch Orchestra represented some of what was best in music and other forms of culture, at a time of, for example, protests against the Vietnam war, the abhorrence of the promotion of racism, the upsurge in the youth and student movement. Again, the issue is not so much the content of what the Scratch Orchestra produced, but that it was serious about being "inclusive", to use a present-day word, about breaking the boundaries which were imposed by the establishment — either implicit or explicit it represented the new, the questioning, that was striving to come into being. There are many things which are promoted from that time as being "alternative" which have proved to be no alternative. At a time when the sixties are being reassessed, when what is being promoted are, for example, the Stones in Hyde Park in 1969, the "underground", liberation through doing your own thing, where is the history that gives the Scratch its due place? We have to write that history, not simply by looking back on the past, but by assessing where the movement that was initiated by the Orchestra is at now, at a time when there is cynicism about the ideals of the sixties, and writing it now by our actions in renewing that project. It could be said that its significance is such that it can only be appreciated 30 years later and by participating in the project that it initiated. This is where discussion can take place.

² Available on the CD "We Only Want The Earth", Cornelius Cardew / Peoples Liberation Music — tapes and songs; musicnow independent record label; email: sales@musicnow.co.uk
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Diversity today, the reflection of society, has to take into account the cultures of the different nationalities, the fact that different classes have not been homogenised, and so on. Diversity is not cosmopolitanism, a mixing together of this culture or that culture, this "exotic" instrument with that, the old with the new, an "international language". What today is being promoted in opposition to this is emphasis, almost to the point of suggesting it is superior, on European or Anglo-American culture. The rising new second and third generations of national minority communities are in turmoil about what should be their cultures, that it is backward to develop their own cultures. In artistic and social forms, musicians and other cultural people cannot remain satisfied with a little world that is blind to everything else, nor the imposition of the type of US culture which is known as the coca-cola culture. They must reflect on what the human personality needs at this time, so that, instead of being marginalised, this personality becomes mainstream.

One of the important questions the Scratch Orchestra posed was how there can be mass participation, direct participation, in the music making. Anyone can see this was posed right from the beginning. And this is a question which still should get addressed today. Even more so is it a question for the music of the future. This is one of the most exciting questions, this vision of the music of the future. What was alien to the Scratch orchestra was the notion of an audience of passive consumers who derive some personal pleasure from what they hear and then go home, get on with their lives as before. So this is an important question that should be taken up for discussion in mainstream musical circles today, by all those whose lives were touched by the Scratch. It is not an issue that everyone is equal and should be a star. The debate and discussion that went on in the Scratch was a vital innovation. Others have delved into how that debate and discussion actually developed, so that is not really the point here. To envision the music of the future, one needs to begin to envision also the society of the future and begin to push for that now. Meanwhile, everybody gets on with making the music they feel passionate about, with this perspective. What are the conditions of performance, of social form, that will ensure this music has a future? Here one comes up against objective reality, just as the Scratch came up against this reality when it was banned from performing at Newcastle Civic Centre. One cannot just conjure the music out of the air and perform it as one pleases. The participation in the Scratch Orchestra was therefore a politicising experience.

Music and the forms of music-making have not come to the end of their development. To an extent this development has its own logic, but this logic does not make sense if divorced from the society which gives rise to it. The music of the feudal era necessarily involved writing for court and church, its forms and emotions represented what was appropriate and necessary in that ethos. It breathed these feudal values. Composers like Beethoven were inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution and their music and forms represented the dynamic of their times, speaking to the broad masses of the populace at that time. This is all well-known. The Scratch Orchestra and its participants wanted what was most advanced at a time when something new was required. It fulfilled a need. Its concern was how to develop the form and the ethos of democratic music-making. The images and sounds that inspire or live in the memory from the Scratch came from this aspiration. The building of a music for the future, for a new society, will develop and is developing out of this turning-point. It is this new idea, which is very broad in scope, which will find adherents in present-day conditions. This will assist in opening the door to progress, and the social forms where the people on a mass scale are drawn into music-making, with professionals serving and working with amateurs, will take shape. A particular culture in social and ideological form are what characterised the concerns of Cornelius and others as they developed their work in the seventies and into the eighties. Perhaps no one was more politicised by the actual living experience of the Scratch Orchestra than Cornelius himself, and this is how the Scratch Orchestra represented a turning point on this front also.

A similarly important question is that of collective expression and the work of a collective. This again was the hallmark of the Scratch. Speaking personally, it was through the Scratch Orchestra that I began to learn what it means to join a collective and be inspired by a collective and work for its aims. This was a very deep and sometimes painful lesson, but ultimately liberating. It is so because prevailing opinion tries to convince everyone that social problems are individual problems, and thereby block the individual in finding solutions. The simple aim to "make music together" turned out to have profound ramifications. The Scratch began to take account of what a modern orchestra could or should be. In a sense, the span of the orchestra was left uncompleted, and this project too demands consideration and work. The composer who simply says, "I do this," will not produce anything vital as the whole movement of society is left out of account. Collective work and experience stands against what is being promoted on all fronts as the "me" culture, where the issue, for example, becomes that art has importance because it expresses "my" life, "I" did this first, or it gratifies "me". This can only contribute to the general crisis of society.

Societies, if they are not to face general crisis and collapse, must renew themselves. How to bring this about concerns all the members of the body politic, and there is a need for everyone to be political in this sense. The question then arises, as it does in an acute form at the moment, as to what is the role of music and other forms of culture in this political renewal. Generally speaking, it has to embody those emotions and aspirations consistent with this renewal. The question "For whom?" now, when an acute problem is posed about the political renewal of society, and the role of culture in this, has to be answered in a nutshell by saying that the modern culture has to be based on humanity and on inviolable rights; a culture serving modern political requirements and serving the development of the productive forces.

Although the symposium is not focusing on Cornelius Cardew as such but on the collective of the Orchestra, I think it is important to touch on his personality. His stand in response to the politicising experience of the Scratch Orchestra and the guidance of Marxist-Leninist ideology, was to become a communist. I am not sure how widely appreciated it is that Cornelius was at the end of his life both a communist and a composer. In other words, he was not just a composer who sought to express communist or progressive ideas in his music or was using communism as a means towards making music. This fact cannot be misrepresented. The experience of the Scratch as well as the character of the personality of Cornelius gave rise to that development. In the paper given by Hardial Bains on the 15th anniversary of the death of Cornelius, the author makes the point, "An accomplished musician on the Central Committee of a Communist Party?! Yes, because he was an accomplished communist, a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary, a man dedicated to the victory of the proletarian movement for emancipation in the first place. He was all those things which the prevailing wisdom demands that an accomplished musician, a celebrated composer ought not to be. Besides, he played second fiddle to the leadership which he followed with utmost devotion and loyalty. He was so fortunate in accomplishing so much in life until the anarchy and violence of the society he worked so hard to transform through revolution cut short his life."³

In summary therefore, although there is much more that can be said, the Scratch Orchestra was a turning point in music history with a development that cannot be misrepresented. Its function also as a musical construct, a social form, for changing people's lives abides in the memory and is imprinted in the musical culture. But this is not all. It is an unfinished project, a collective which still is proceeding. At the very least, it points to salient lessons about what aims and aspirations a cultural person should take up in their lives and work. In a sense, to now

³ "The Question Is Really One of Word and Deed", Speech delivered by Hardial Bains, National Leader of the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist), December 21, 1996, at the meeting held at Marx House, London: "In Commemoration of Cornelius Cardew, 1936-1981", organised by the Progressive Cultural Association; Progressive Cultural Association, 1997, p.23.

understand the Scratch is to participate in renewing the Scratch project today. To look at it another way, the issue is to look at the Scratch from the standpoint of 30 years later, with the concerns of what is necessary to move forward into the 21st century.

It is a call worth making that not only should everyone study the Scratch Orchestra in its essence, but that the concerns which developed during the time of the existence of the Orchestra should be taken up for discussion 30 years later as fit concerns for anyone who wishes to make their contribution.