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The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew.

By Tony Harris. pp.x+217. (Ashgate Publishing Limited, Farnham, Surrey, 2013, £55. ISBN 978-1-4094-4810-5.)

THE re-examination and, to some extent, rediscovery of Cardew has recently gained momentum partly due to the publication of John Tilbury's epic biography and Eddie Prévost's edited collection of writings.¹ This current offering draws heavily on both and almost acts as an unofficial companion piece to them. The fact that the musicological establishment has largely ignored Cardew² is in part due to the nervousness or even incomprehension with which many have regarded his political stance in his later years.³ This period of his work has also tended to alienate both ardent admirers and some of his closest colleagues. *The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew*, by Tony Harris, is seemingly an attempt both to provide a context for this period of work and also to demonstrate continuity with his earlier music that might not previously have been immediately obvious.

Aside from Tilbury's biography, this is the first book length treatment of Cardew and is therefore, with a number of reservations, both valuable and welcome. Harris begins with the laudable if rather grandiose desire to lay the foundations of 'Cardew studies'.⁴ How he plans to achieve this goal is not immediately obvious. His strategy does not become fully apparent until the midpoint of the book, as the argument is revealed through the text in a slightly organic way. Harris takes the brave decision to adopt 'a chronologically anomalous starting point'⁵ by choosing to begin with a consideration of Cardew's 1974 polemic *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*. This strategy is possibly quite risky, given the work's disagreeable reputation, and this chapter does little to counter this perception. Harris draws on both Adorno and Marx for his analysis. Surprisingly, whilst little attempt is made to unpick Adorno's rather convoluted language, he explains Marx's more easily comprehensible ideas in a user-friendly manner. The text becomes far more engaging as it jumps backwards with a series of informative overviews of each period of Cardew's career, presented as a series of rejections and repositionings in his musical approach. Crucially Harris identifies connecting threads that weave throughout these different periods — a sort of spine of ideas analogous to the central line that runs through *Treatise*.

Harris treats Cardew's early experimental scores with a great deal of sensitivity and the insightful and well-judged analysis of selected carefully chosen examples are clearly informed by Harris's experience as a performer. This performer's perspective is very helpful and illuminating, emphasizing how these works fundamentally engage the performer in a dialogue with Cardew. Another important strand is Cardew the performer. It is fascinating that Michael Parsons identifies his work as an improviser with the group AMM as one of his key legacies.⁶ Unfortunately Harris does not fully explore this idea and perhaps misses an opportunity to examine a neglected area of his work. While what Harris does offer on AMM is stimulating, he limits his material to show how Cardew's experience in AMM informed his thinking during the composition of *Treatise*. It is peculiar that Harris has neglected to include any direct testimony from any of the members of AMM during this period.⁷ Harris has interviewed many of Cardew's other close associates.

Had he interviewed AMM members, he might not have needed to speculate, for instance, whether AMM's use of the transistor radio was 'a nod to John Cage'.⁸

The real strength of the book lies in the sympathetic way that Harris deals with the later political work (the *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* chapter aside). As noted before, this phase of Cardew's activity is perhaps the least understood and most actively disliked, not only by his detractors but also by many of his closest allies. It is inevitable then that Cardew's political period has become a primary focus for recent studies of his work. For example, Tilbury's exhaustive biography devotes about half of its considerable length to this period.⁹ While Tilbury's treatment can be as painful and depressing as it is illuminating, Harris's highly sympathetic reading of this period, as an extension of Cardew's earlier work and ideas, sheds valuable light on the subject. Although Harris's analysis is not uncritical, he is much more forgiving of Cardew's late work than many previous authors. In these chapters, the real objective of the book begins to crystallise and Harris begins to establish grounds for what he has coined 'Cardewism', a set of ideas that inform Cardew throughout his career. Harris writes, 'I do not believe that Cardew's work is as inherently contradictory as is often assumed. Instead, I believe the various reincarnations have been reinventions of interconnected and developing sympathies with specific ideological concerns, and that these interconnections need to be understood if we are truly value Cardew's legacy'.¹⁰ Eventually he concludes, 'Here is a "composer" whose legacy and impact on any sort of continuing canon has its basis not in a catalogue of scores, compositional techniques or sonic identity, but in a set of essential values that inform an approach or an attitude toward music making'.¹¹ Harris's fascinating but perhaps rather contentious conclusion represents an important alternative to existing ways of thinking about Cardew. This is the real achievement of the book.

Harris's treatment is not without its idiosyncrasies. For instance, his tone vacillates between informality, straight academic prose and digressions into Marxist theory.¹² He also exhibits a rather curious desire to speculate, particularly on what might have happened had Cardew only engaged with The Frankfurt School, rather than Mao.¹³ Perhaps this was borne of the kind of frustrations that are common when studying Cardew's later work. Whilst Harris does identify parallels between what Cardew actually did and the work of Marcuse and Adorno,¹⁴ this kind of 'what if' speculation is not especially useful. Indeed, Harris's occasional recourse to Marxist thought outside of Cardew's ideology sometimes feels forced and is incongruous with what is otherwise a very approachable text.

The book contains a few strange inconsistencies that require mention. In his introduction Harris makes the important distinction between avant-garde and experimental music, and he rightly points out that the terms have often been applied 'loosely and, at times interchangeably'. Harris is, however, guilty of this loose application himself when he states, 'the publication in 1974 of his book *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* offers the most dramatic of departures. Cardew had for the previous decade been a widely lauded exponent of the avant-garde'.¹⁵ This crucial decade in Cardew's work is concerned exclusively with experimental work something which Harris goes on to discuss at some length. Perhaps more fundamentally he seems to miss the point when he writes, 'Cardew himself variously labels Cage as an "experimental" composer (for instance, [Cardew, 'Cage and Cunningham', *The Musical Times*, 105/1459 (1964), 660]), yet later refers to Cage as an exponent of the avant-garde ([Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1974), 33]) demonstrating the flexibility with which the language of the time was employed'.¹⁶ This statement seems rather odd given Harris's obvious understanding of Cardew's changing attitudes to music. The use of the word avant-garde comes from *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* and seems to be a very calculated move. When dismissing both Stockhausen and Cage it serves Cardew's purpose to tar them with same brush, as for him there was now no difference between the avant-garde and the experimental.

Given the book's title it is no surprise that Harris devotes the penultimate chapter to an exploration of a diverse (and sometimes highly personal) selection of examples to illustrate Cardew's legacy. These examples include school music, Cardew's former colleagues Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons, two performing ensembles (the Cornelius Cardew Ensemble and Apartment House), and one organisation (Contemporary

Music Making for Amateurs (CoMA)). Through these examples, Harris attempts to show the various ways that Cardew's legacy is still very much a vital force. The section on Cardew's impact on music education is manifestly of great significance to Harris; it is thought-provoking and clearly deserving of further study.¹⁷ Skempton and Parsons are perhaps inevitable choices, given that they are so often cited as cofounders of the Scratch Orchestra and they also provide interesting contrasting approaches to post-Cardew composition. Harris contends that Cardew's legacy is best exemplified by a set of attitudes rather than the music itself. This might have been further illuminated had Harris explored the work of Cardew's other less well-known colleagues, especially those who have since chosen a non-musical path. The sections on the Cardew Ensemble and Apartment House are perhaps more relevant, as the deep contrast in attitudes between the two groups' leaders, Barry Russell and Anton Lukoszevics, is both revealing and serves nicely to reinforce Harris's 'Cardewist' criteria. Harris does not shy away from criticising the Apartment House approach; indeed his objectivity is severely tested in the face of some fairly intemperate language.

Inevitably, CoMA most clearly exemplifies 'Cardewism' due to their 'music for all' focus, so it would have been surprising if Harris had not been included them. Through CoMA's inclusive philosophy we can see the social and human aspects of Cardew's legacy in action and Harris illuminates this people-centred approach consistently throughout the book. Overall, despite its infelicities Harris's study contains some refreshing ideas that provide alternative ways of examining Cardew's work and it therefore deserves to be read.

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Notes

¹ John Tilbury, *Cornelius Cardew: A Life Unfinished* (Harlow: Copula, 2008); Eddie Prévost (ed.), *Cornelius Cardew: A Reader* (Harlow: Copula, 2006).

² It would be fair to say that practically all of the significant work on Cardew has come from outside the traditional British musicological establishment and this book is no exception. It is significant then, that though an established academic press have chosen to publish on Cardew for the first time, its author comes from a background of performing experimental music and music education.

³ Of course, allied to this is the dominant position held by the avant-garde in establishment culture, which was both threatened by his experimentalism and was later publicly attacked by Cardew in his polemic *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*. The fact that he had so publicly left the fold is probably not something that is forgiven easily, especially since Cardew had once been regarded as a significant figure of the British avant-garde.

⁴ Tony Harris, *The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 6.

⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid*, 121.

⁷ Lou Gare, Christopher Hobbs, Eddie Prévost, Keith Rowe and Lawrence Sheaff.

⁸ Harris, *Legacy*, 42. Actually the answer to this one is also to be found in an interview with Keith Rowe, which is already in the book's bibliography: 'Was the radio part of your concept? No, that came later through the connection with Cardew and John Cage.' 'Keith Rowe, An Interview by Dan Warburton', *Paris Transatlantic Magazine* (2001) <www.parisTransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/rowe.html>.

⁹ Tilbury's book is over a thousand pages long, the second half of which sometimes feels like a man struggling to come to terms with his subject's choices.

¹⁰ Harris, *Legacy*, 125.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 148.

¹² Ibid, 93. The Pythonesque list of communist party factions is both revealing and amusing.

¹³ This idea is an extension of a remark that Tilbury makes in the biography.

¹⁴ At the risk of engaging in speculation myself, perhaps Cardew would have felt that Adorno was too closely associated with the avant-garde to have been much use. Equally he may have taken exception to Adorno's rather dubious ideas about Jazz.

¹⁵ Harris, *Legacy*, 9. I may seem overly pedantic, but distinctions between avant-garde and experimental music have been often mischaracterised. Given that Harris makes a point of drawing our attention to this distinction, it seems odd that he would muddy the waters here.

¹⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷ I find myself increasingly drawn to many of the ideas that Harris discusses here in my own work with trainee primary school teachers. It is striking that even in current books on the area, many ideas are drawn directly from experimental music in general, sometimes unknowingly. In this, perhaps more than in any other area of music, these ideas have become part of the mainstream.