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'A Question of Language': Frederic Rzewski in Conversation about Cornelius Cardew

Daniel Varela

The American composer-pianist Frederic Rzewski had a long association with British experimental composer Cornelius Cardew. Rzewski was one of the American 'associates' of the Scratch Orchestra, having contributed several of his own pieces to the Scratch Orchestra collections Nature Study Notes and The Scratch Anthology of Compositions. Along with Christian Wolff, Rzewski has shared a concern for left-wing politics with Cardew, although, as can be seen below, with some differences. Daniel Varela, an Argentine composer and writer, met Rzewski at the Festival Internacional Experimenta in Buenos Aires, 3 October 2000, after Rzewski played Cardew's piano piece We Sing for the Future. The following, part of a larger interview about Rzewski's own music (at Perfect Sound Forever: <http://www.furious.com/perfect/rzewski.html>), is a revealing portrait of Cardew: his politics, their linguistic and philosophical basis, and the antipathy toward his works in the British press and arts scene at large.

Daniel Varela: Why [do you include] the Cardew work in your repertoire?

Frederic Rzewski: Well, I was a very good friend of Cornelius. We worked together quite a bit and I think we exchanged a great deal of artistic ideas and energies reciprocally. He took some of my pieces and made his own versions of them which he played, and I played his works a great deal. Not just the two of us: in the sixties and seventies there was a very close relationship between a whole group of people like Christian Wolff, Louis Andriessen and a number of others. We were part of the same generation and we were all more or less political. I have a sentimental attachment to that period of my life and I feel also a kind of moral duty to perform this music because I know that nobody is doing it.

[Cardew] was one of the most important composers of that generation. At the time, in the late sixties, I think you could say that he was *the* key figure in English experimental music. He founded the Scratch Orchestra. This group became, among other things, a kind of school which produced a number of artists: not only musicians, but painters too, like Tom Phillips; [also] people who became important twenty years later in British musical life, like Michael Nyman, Gavin Bryars or Brian Eno. [There are] other composers who are less known but equally interesting, like Howard Skempton, Michael Parsons and John White: people who have yet to be discovered but probably will be — I would hope so, anyway.

Cardew was a very central figure in English musical life at that time and, strangely enough, after his death it was as though he had never existed. There was a process of rewriting history, so that today very few young people in England, or anywhere else for that matter, have even heard of him. Of course there are similar things with people like

David Tudor, who was also certainly one of the key figures in the post-war new music scene. His name, too, needs to be brought out of obscurity. There are lots of young pianists who are doing new music who have never heard of David Tudor.

The main reason I'm doing [*We Sing for the Future*] is that it happens to be very good music. Not everything that Cardew wrote was equally successful. He was an experimental composer to the end of his life. Of course, when he worked with Cage and Stockhausen, he worked in what is commonly recognised to be an experimental territory, but not many people realised that in his later work he was equally experimental. He was experimental in the sense [that] he took a decision to work in a certain direction in order to see what the result would be. He did it very consistently and very logically. He was an admirer of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and he could quote long passages of Wittgenstein's work by memory. He was also an admirer of Lenin. What he admired most about Lenin was his logical consistency [and] in his own work he also worked in a very logical way. He was one of the first people to realise that one of the core problems of new music was the problem of language. His decision first to study and then to apply the principles of Socialist Realism were, I think, motivated by a perception that the idea of Socialist Realism was not necessarily based on any kind of Marxist aesthetic. [It] was primarily a question of language, of presenting ideas in a form which could be understood by large numbers of people. The fact that he also combined this artistic technique with ideological content is not surprising...

I think that his work in this area was genuinely experimental. The proof is that some of his work was successful and others were failures, artistically speaking. For instance, I think the *Thälmann* Variations, another piece for piano, is equally as good as the piece that I played last night, *We Sing for the Future*, whereas there's another piece that he wrote around the same time called the Vietnam Sonata which doesn't work very well. This is not surprising because he was working in an area in which there were very few models to be followed. He was, in a way, breaking new ground. Of course, you could say this was all old stuff and based on old ideals from the thirties, which is true in a way. On the other hand, it wasn't possible simply to take old forms from the thirties and reproduce them. No, he had to do this in his own way. I think that the *Thälmann* Variations, *We Sing for the Future* and the Irish folk songs are genuinely experimental. They are based on attempts to create a kind of fusion between the great models of the past, notably Beethoven — much of this music is in the language of late Beethoven — combined with different folk-based traditions and later on with some of the early English keyboard music.

Varela: [Like] virginal music....

Rzewski: Yes. *We Sing for the Future* is heavily influenced by that. One can only speculate where he might have gone later on if his work had not been interrupted by murder, but I would guess that he would have probably moved into a language which much more closely resembles what is commonly known as 'avant garde'. I don't think he ever really gave up the avant garde. I think it was an intellectual experiment that he did to distance himself from the avant garde and to criticise it, but I don't really feel that he ever left it.

Anyway, that's why I play this stuff, because I think it's interesting. In a sense I'm only learning now how to play it. I've played this piece many times and for quite some time. In a sense, the language is so radical — it was so inconsistent with the spirit of the time in which it was written — that it was difficult to know how to play it and it was difficult to know how to listen to it. Many people thought it was a joke and only now, twenty years later, there's a distance which makes it possible for people to treat this music for what it is, namely good music, without any kind of ideological or literary metaphors getting in the way.

Varela: But in Cardew the ideological content is very present in different stages of his work. Some people criticise Cardew's last stages [for] his commitment to ideological purposes and the practical applications [of his work], like music for public [gatherings], party meetings, [and so on].

Rzewski: But he wrote some good political songs....

Varela: For example, the problems in the Scratch Orchestra's last days [were] due to the tensions between the more aesthetically-oriented composers like Christopher Hobbs [and Howard Skempton] and the politically-oriented composers like Hugh Shrapnel or Michael Chant. Have you some reflection on these problems?

Rzewski: The Scratch Orchestra was interesting as an artistic phenomenon, not as a political one. The disputes and squabbles that went on inside it were, in a way, very English, because when all was said and done everybody could go out to a pub and still be on perfectly good terms with each other. I don't think there was ever any serious rift which

divided these people. I think that they continued to be basically friends. They may have drifted away from each other for various reasons.

On the other hand, Cornelius himself took the politics very seriously and I'm convinced, although nobody can prove it, that that's what destroyed him. I'm quite sure he was murdered and quite sure his murder was connected with his political activity. He went around sticking his nose into things that were really quite dangerous. He led demonstrations in the East End of London, in an area that was infested by Nazis. He was very prominent and visible and he had a kind of view that nothing bad could happen to him. Unfortunately, one will never know.

[Varela mentions the legal problems of political action by other English experimental composers]

Rzewski: Cardew himself was in jail for a month. He told me that there had been a demonstration, the police were moving in to arrest somebody and Cornelius saw that they were arresting the wrong person. Undoubtedly, for anyone with any experience in situations of this kind, in what was a very naive gesture Cornelius went up to the policeman and put his hand on his shoulder and said, 'That's not the right person. You're arresting the wrong person'. Of course, anyone who has been in that kind of situation knows that you must never touch a policeman. Simply for that reason he was charged with interfering, so he sat in jail for a month. If I'm not mistaken, that's where he wrote the song, 'We Sing for the Future', on which the piano piece is based.

Varela: Do you feel connections with Cardew today in your thinking or in your music?

Rzewski: Well, it's hard to say. I never was really that [hesitates] close. I didn't live in London and we only met on occasions when one of us or both were travelling so our contact was sporadic. On the other hand, I was very critical about the peculiar form in which Cornelius' political ideas were expressed because it always seemed to me that he was somewhat of a provocateur. He came from an artistic family and he went to very elite British private schools and always had been somebody who turned up his nose at the pretensions of...he was very good at debunking other people, like Stockhausen or the contemporary music establishment in general. He had no respect for these institutions whatsoever and he made no secret of the fact.

Of course he made many enemies in the establishment which someone in his position was expected to serve. You were expected to share the values of this establishment, particularly, in England. I think the upper class from which this musical establishment was very closely linked never forgave him for turning his back on the values that they represented. So after his death, when Annette Morreau organised a tour of Cardew's music in the Contemporary Music Network in which I participated, along with a number of excellent musicians from England, I was quite shocked to read the reviews of the first concert of the tour which was at the Roundhouse. [This concert] presented a broad spectrum of Cardew's production, performed by excellent musicians. The reaction of the British press was uniformly negative, not only with respect to the composer but also to the performers. I remember one of the musicians — a very good clarinetist, one of the best — was reading this review [that] said that not only was the piece that he played terrible, but also the performance was lousy. He said, 'You know, the last week, I played *Domaine* by Boulez, and the same reviewer said what a great performer I was' [laughter].

I found that quite shocking. I'd always thought that when people die, that at least you have to observe some hypocritical forms and try to say something good about them, but in Cardew's case it is quite the opposite. The reaction was even more negative after his death than during his life. They wrote, 'Well, we always knew this composer had no talent, and this concert proved it'.