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978-0-521-65383-1 - Experimental Music Cage and Beyond: Second edition

Michael Nyman

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Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond

This book is an eyewitness account of an Anglo-American musical tradition that grew essentially from the music and ideas of John Cage in the period after the second world war. First published in 1974, it has remained the classic text on a form of music making and composing which developed alongside, and partly in opposition to, the post-war mainstream avant garde dominated by Boulez, Berio and Stockhausen.

Starting with John Cage and his legendary 'silent' piece 4'33"', Michael Nyman considers the work of composers and performing groups who explored radical new attitudes towards the concept of the musical work, notation, time and space, and the roles of composer, performer and audience.

This reissue of Nyman's original text celebrates the fact that 25 years later we can see how far these challenging concepts have conditioned our musical thinking and changed the repertoire of concert halls, opera houses and record companies. Many of those composers who now draw crowds – Reich, Glass, Bryars and Nyman himself – can trace their roots to this early experimental tradition, or have been influenced by it, and much music that was once disparaged as obscure and remote is now finding enthusiastic new audiences.

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Experimental Music Cage and Beyond

MICHAEL NYMAN



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For Aet, Molly and Martha

I would like to express my gratitude to the following friends for providing me with advice, criticism, encouragement, scores, photos, writings, information (and, of course, for introducing me to Q.P.R.) – each will be able to put the deed to the name: Gavin Bryars, Cornelius Cardew, Martin Kingsbury, Ryo and Hiroko Koike, Alvin Lucier, David Mayor, Gordon Mumma, Michael Parsons, Kevin Power, Steve Reich, Brigitte Schiffer, Victor Schonfield and John Tilbury.

MN 1974

And – in 1999 – to Robert Worby and Penny Souster.

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Foreword by Brian Eno

The best books about art movements become more than just descriptions: they become part of what they set out to describe. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* is such a book. It sought to identify and give coherence to a whole body of musical work that fell outside both the classical tradition and the avant-garde orthodoxies that had proceeded from it.

Its appearance in 1974 consolidated a community of interests, a feeling that music should be something more than that which could be contained in concert halls or on records, that it must somehow extend itself into our lives.

The body of work that resulted from this conviction was pursued vigorously in both England and America, and seemed to find a home for itself in the oddest of places. By and large, the music colleges were not at all interested, whereas the art colleges – with their interest in happenings, pop and performance – were soaking it up. Many of the most interesting experimental composers and performers in England – Cornelius Cardew, Gavin Bryars, Howard Skempton, John Tilbury and for a time, Christian Wolff – earned a crust teaching art students.

At the time – which was the mid- to late sixties – I attended an art college which was in the same building as a very large music college. I organized several ‘musical events’ during my time there, some of which included rather big names in the new music field. I recall only one music student attending, once. Whereas the avant-garde stuff – Stockhausen, Boulez and the other serialist Europeans – could still be seen as a proper site for ‘real’ musical skills, and was therefore slowly being co-opted into the academy, the stuff that we were interested in was so explicitly anti-academic that it often even claimed to have been written for *non-musicians*. It made a point of being more concerned with how things were made – what processes had been employed to compose or perform them – than with what they finally sounded like. It was a music, we used to say, of process rather than product. In retrospect, it has to be admitted, this gave rise to some extremely conceptual music whose enjoyment required an act of faith (or, at least, surrender) beyond that normally expected of the casual listener; but such acts of faith stood those who made them in good stead for the art of the eighties.

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Foreword by Brian Eno

It seemed to us (I use the word advisedly since the same few dozen people seemed to be at every concert) that we were interested in two extreme ends of the musical continuum. On the one hand, we applauded the idea of music as a highly physical, sensual entity – music free of narrative and literary structures, free to be pure sonic experience. On the other, we supported the idea of music as a highly intellectual, spiritual experience, effectively a place where we could exercise and test philosophical propositions or encapsulate intriguing game-like procedures. Both these edges had, of course, always been implicit in music, but experimental music really focused on them – often to the exclusion of everything that lay between, which was at that time almost all other music. At the sensual end, there was La Monte Young with his endless single-note pieces, Terry Riley and Charlemagne Palestine with their tonal repetitions (both ideas unpopular with the avant-garde), Steve Reich and Philip Glass with their visceral, cyclic works. At the ‘spiritual’ end, there was Christian Wolff, Cornelius Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra, Gavin Bryars and the English ‘school’ – often producing music that was almost soundless, something to think about. In the middle, and over it all, there was John Cage, whose great book *Silence* had really got the whole ball rolling.

So if this was ‘experimental music’, what was the experiment? Perhaps it was the continual re-asking of the question ‘what also could music be?’, the attempt to discover what makes us able to experience something as music. And from it, we concluded that music didn’t have to have rhythms, melodies, harmonies, structures, even notes, that it didn’t have to involve instruments, musicians and special venues. It was accepted that music was not something intrinsic to certain arrangements of things – to certain ways of organizing sounds – but was actually a process of apprehending that we, as listeners, could choose to conduct. It moved the site of music from ‘out there’ to ‘in here’. If there is a lasting message from experimental music, it’s this: music is something your mind does.

That was a revolutionary proposition, and it still is. Nyman’s book, written from the very centre of the revolution, catches that zeitgeist. The book ends at the point when it seemed that the experimental ‘tradition’ was starting to collapse. Cardew, John Tilbury and Frederic Rzewski had become explicitly political and were busy disowning the ‘wiggly lines and wobbly music’ that they had done so much to invent. I remember a long discussion with Cardew in which I tried to convince him that his magnum opus *The Great Learning* represented a powerful new idea about social organization, and where he in turn dismissed the work as ‘bourgeois elitism’. And yet at the same time a new mass audience was quietly starting to coalesce around a new way of listening. These were people who wanted something other than the old categories of rock, jazz and classical. They wanted a music of space, texture, and

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atmosphere – and they found it in film soundtracks, in environmental recordings, in slow movements, in meditative works from other cultures, and, happily, in some of the work of the ‘experimental’ composers.

The political offshoot of experimental music seemed to lose its momentum with the untimely death of Cardew in 1980, but the other thrust outwards to the public continued. In 1975 I released the first batch of Obscure Records, and despite the ritual savaging by the terriers of the English music press, became aware that there really was a place, albeit a small one at the time, for this new music. It turned out that audiences were more sophisticated than record companies realized, and, not surprisingly, more open-minded than most of the critics who purportedly wrote for them. Obscure Records and labels like it introduced composers to the compositional possibilities of the recording process and to the mass markets, and their dependence on the classical establishment – as arbiter, medium and conduit – was accordingly reduced. Thus it was possible for composers such as Philip Glass, Simon Jeffes, Jon Hassell and Michael Nyman to build a new audience almost from scratch, an audience which has since continued to grow. In 1978 I started another label which I called Ambient which aimed to use the perceptions and understandings acquired from the experience of experimental music (and from this book, actually) to make a new popular music.

It seems now that what started as an esoteric bubble at the very edges of music has become transmuted into a mainstream. The early tributaries of that mainstream are investigated here and, looking at the book again after all these years, I realize that they are by no means exhausted.

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Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond was written between 1970 and 1972 and published in 1974. Two obvious questions immediately present themselves: why should a reprint be appropriate twenty-five years after it was first published (apart from the fact that it has been out of print for years, changes hands at ticket tout prices and is constantly stolen from libraries) and, less helpfully, why have I not brought the book up to date?

The answer to the second question is in fact contained in the first. In 1972 what I chose to call ‘experimental music’ was a minority sport, played in generally non-musical spaces in front of audiences of disciples drawn more likely from the fine art, dance or film worlds than from music; was despised, ignored or cavalierly used as raw material by the then-dominant avant garde, and the cultural institutions who supported it (except when it was convenient for Darmstadt briefly to open its doors to the ‘opposition’). I say ‘what I chose to call “experimental music”’ – but the title of the book and the musical culture it celebrates were in effect selected by others: the book was part of a series of monographs published by Studio Vista on experimental film, theatre, dance and painting; but whereas the authors of the other volumes were forced to create their own definitions of what they deemed to be ‘experimental’ in their medium, John Cage had thankfully already defined the term in relation to music and presented me with a ‘ready-made’ – a definition and an aesthetic practice that I then set out to re-define, describe, contextualize, analyse and expand in my book. Cage’s global definition of a coherent history and aesthetic of experimental music also removed the need for me to deal head-on with the tortured and futile (for my purposes at the time) question of what precisely is *experimental* about ‘experimental music’ (or is not, as the case may be) or what is *not* experimental about ‘non-experimental’ music (or is, as the case may be). But my first chapter, ‘Towards (a definition of) experimental music’, is still, as far as I know, the most stringent attempt to classify experimental music and to distinguish it from the serialism-based opposition (and to find a locus which could contain the extremes of Cageian indeterminate open systems and the closed systems of the minimalists). It threw down a challenge which has been taken up by only a few writers like Georgina Born in her brief discourse on ‘Musical Postmodernism as

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the Negation of Musical Modernism' in Chapter 2 of her *Rationalizing Culture* (1995). (Fortunately, the term postmodernism was not in vogue in 1972 and is entirely absent from this book, even though it could be, has been, argued that Cage is the first postmodernist – even though he remained an arch-modernist to the end of his days. Morton Feldman's footnote on page 2 of this volume is as accurate today as it was more than thirty years ago.)

But to return to my first question: this reprint is necessary for at least two reasons. The first is historical: a new generation of listeners and musicians has recently become deeply involved, for the first time, in the early work of the founding experimental composers, such as Cornelius Cardew and La Monte Young, and of seminal, idiosyncratic groups like the Portsmouth Sinfonia and the Scratch Orchestra; and the Fluxus revival continues – if Fluxus ever went away. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* is still the fundamental source of information about a musical ethic, a sense of communality, a fundamentalism, an idealism and aesthetic purity (even puritanism) which some might say has become corrupted in more recent years. Secondly, the reprint is necessary as the source book for the understanding of the origins and principles of a musical practice which has, totally against the cultural odds, proved to be remarkably and unexpectedly resilient, as even a cursory glance at the Discography included in this new edition proves. The book in no way describes a dead tradition – both Cage and the composers I corralled into the 'Beyond' (a beyond that also encompassed a raft of remarkable works that Cage wrote later in his life) have not only shown a creative growth which neither they, nor any commentator, could have predicted in the early 1970s, but some have colonized a mainstream market which would have been unthinkable when the book was written. Music formerly known as minimalism, especially, has invaded some of the bastions of High Modernism – opera houses, new music festivals, radio stations, concert halls, orchestras and conductors and institutions all previously the sole preserve of European modernism. And this has happened without compromising its integrity or losing its aesthetic identity, without becoming 'European', constantly and effortlessly increasing the size, breadth and diversity of its audience. The Discography – my one concession, apart from this Preface, to updating – not only documents the rich profusion of music that has grown from some of the seemingly unpromising roots planted and described in *Experimental Music*, it is also a self-evident index of its commercial viability for recording companies not generally over-endowed with altruism.

My prophecy, on the last page of the book, that politics would destroy experimental music, was so wide of the mark that it demonstrated that the commentator who is also a practitioner in the culture he is chronicling – as I was – can be *too* close to his material. Political music came and went in the works of Christian Wolff (who as much as possible

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remained true to his musical principles) and those of Cardew and Rzewski (who went haywire into folk-based neo-Romanticism). Equally it would have been unthinkable and dangerous to have predicted any relationship between experimental music and any aspect of pop music in 1972.

The second question I posed in the opening paragraph answers itself. Twenty-five years of music written by only those composers featured in the 1974 edition would have to fill three or four volumes the size of this book. Studies of just four of those composers – Young, Riley, Reich and Glass – have become a minor industry while there has been a deluge of books by and about Cage since his death. My own career has shifted since 1976 from critic to composer, the origins of whose music can be strictly located in many of the developments I describe here – Cage, Feldman, Fluxus, minimalism and the British found-object tradition – but which celebrates, transgresses, exaggerates and even betrays many of the principles of experimental music while remaining deeply faithful to them. And I am just one of a huge diversity of composers who should be included in *Son of Experimental Music*. I have often asked myself and others why that book has not yet been written – *Experimental Music* makes an excellent starting point. But then it has done for twenty-five years.

Such a book would have to be less ethnocentric – any number of post-experimental composers would have to be included. This book is firmly positioned on a US/UK axis since the ‘tradition’ started in the US and transplanted itself into England through both the original work produced by English composers and the unique proselytization for American experimental music in all its forms from English composers, performers and commentators. The dedication of a pianist like John Tilbury to the music of Cage and Feldman, of Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra for Christian Wolff, my own support as writer and concert organizer for Steve Reich, or promoter Victor Schonfield’s Music Now for the Sonic Arts Union, for instance – all this helped to foster this sense of unified Anglo-American experimental tradition (though it is a pity that then, as now, American culture was not exactly hospitable to our music). A few Japanese composers left their calling cards but very few Europeans fitted into my experimental worldview – I seem to remember Cardew performing music by Michael von Biel and a case could have been made for the Dane Henning Christiansen whom I discovered working with Joseph Beuys at the Edinburgh Festival in 1970. (Philip Glass and Steve Reich were entirely nonplussed by this forbidding Nordic minimalism when I played it to them at the time. And even the Anglo/American love-in was stretched to its limits in Gavin Bryars’ house in 1971 when members of the Portsmouth Sinfonia responded to Steve Reich’s electrifying revelation of tapes of his *Four Organs* and *Phase Patterns* with their own hot musical news – their less-than-gold-plated version of the *William Tell Overture*!)

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The potential writer of *Son of...* has greater access to the composers, to the music in live performance and on CD; documents, information, interviews are freely available – even the Boulez–Cage correspondence has now been published. The original bibliography shows how scrappy and limited the written sources were in the early 1970s. And some composers – for instance, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, James Jenney and Charlemagne Palestine – were invisible and inaudible to a writer/performer whose take on his subject was completely London-based. But strangely enough, were I writing *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* today, I would not do it any differently, though it would not be possible *not* to do it differently. Thank goodness I wrote it when I did.

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