Christian Wolff in Interview
Invited paper given for Christian Wolff at Orpheus, Orpheus Research Centre, Ghent, Belgium, 28 and 29 September 2015

Virginia Anderson, Experimental Music Catalogue

Abstract

For the conference: In 1972–3, the American composer Barney Childs began work on a book of interviews with modern composers. Unfortunately, Childs could not find a publisher for the book and abandoned the project. The interviews have remained, unpublished and almost unseen, for over forty years. This paper will introduce Childs’ interview with Wolff in June 1972. Here Wolff and Childs discuss their concerns, including composition (his recent composition *Burdocks*), performance, and education. As I have just received this interview, this paper will have no definitive conclusions. It will, rather, examine the interview as time capsule, as a kind of research expedition.

Update, 6 March 2017: The present paper appears as it was given in 2015, as a spoken text. Since this conference paper, I have received all of Childs’ interviews, and have now almost finished editing the original interviews before writing contextual essays for the final publication of his book and the realisation of his dream. Thanks so much to Christian Wolff for his support of this early stage of this project and to William Brooks, convenor of the Christian Wolff Study Days, who always gives me the best advice regarding experimental music and its research.

Paper:

Well, as the abstract implies, this isn’t actually a formal research paper. It’s more like the beginning of research. For years I’ve known of this interview, and a number of others, but only two weeks ago I was able to get access to it. At the moment, I’m at the fun part: reading the material and finding context to build a story. So, first, I’ll start with this interview by Barney Childs with Christian Wolff.

Background

Barney Childs (left) was an American composer. He’s probably best known these days for his writings on the aesthetics of notation, time, and indeterminacy, and for editing *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, a collection of writings by twentieth-century composers, with Elliott Schwartz. Childs’s next project was a collection of interviews with a number of composers, which would include what my friend Jim Fox called ‘an odd lot of note pushers’, some of whom appear here. And Christian Wolff. The interview transcript came with a letter from Wolff dated 27 May 1972, referring to Childs’ letter of 17 May. Wolff refers to his move to Hanover, as this was the spring of his first year working at Dartmouth, and suggests meeting up, either at Hanover, or Martha’s Vineyard, where he’d be from mid-June. Wolff suggested several composers for interview, including Frederic Rzewski, Philip Corner, Philip Glass, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma. And he wrote of West Coast composers, ‘I should certainly miss Pauline Oliveros, if she weren’t included’.
Although the pdf I’ve received is missing a date, the meeting was that summer, possibly in June. Barney recalled the meeting as idyllic, sitting (as I remember it) on a porch, and talking through the afternoon. The transcript of the interview ranges over topics that interested both composers, including notation, performance, music in education, musical ethics, and compositions, with a special focus on Wolff’s then-new composition, *Burdocks*, in its performance for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and by the Scratch Orchestra of England.

One of the interesting parallels between Childs and Wolff is that they both trained in other areas: Wolff in classics; Childs in English literature and poetry. Both men had worked outside of music. Childs had finally got a job in a music department in 1969, at Milwaukee College Conservatory, and had moved to a joint lectureship in music composition and poetry at the University of Redlands, just as Wolff had started in 1971 at Dartmouth. Wolff seems joyous: ‘I’m now partly connected with a music department for the first time in my life. It’s fantastic. Actually, you know, it’s all right for me to use the piano if I want to. I’ve never had that before!’. Wolff had taught one music course, and was expecting to teach two in the upcoming term.

Scratch Orchestra, *Burdocks* Concert Programme, front and back covers

**The origin of *Burdocks***

Wolff described his first course, *A Practical Introduction to Music*: ‘[t]heoretically it’s for beginners ...I’ve got very interested in [that] in the last few years, getting people to make music who don’t necessarily have any professional training, who may never have played an instrument at all.... Because after all...you can always teach people to sing and drum in some form, so that...really the barriers are not so great’. Now this sounds like the Scratch Orchestra, which I’ll talk about in a bit. And it may have influenced a course in experimental music Childs developed a few years later. Barney fought to allow non-music students in it and he insisted on having a practical element: the students played and they composed. Wolff also encouraged his students to compose, though it was not a requirement: ‘the last thing we did was a concert almost entirely of student compositions’.

Wolff assigned the students Paragraph II of Cornelius Cardew’s *The Great Learning*, a section of Cardew’s mammoth indeterminate work dedicated to the Scratch Orchestra. Paragraph II, a process piece for groups of singers and drummers, was eminently suited to the Practical Introduction to Music students. And his new work, *Burdocks*, also is intimately connected to the Scratch Orchestra. Wolff said, ‘I confess I had them in the back of my mind when I did the piece’. *Burdocks* had other performances that year. It accompanied a Merce Cunningham dance piece, ‘Borst Park’, at the Brooklyn Academy of
Music, 8 February 1972. And the Scratch Orchestra mounted a performance with other groups at Cecil Sharp House in London on March 28. Wolff was very much interested in the quality of amateur performance, especially the Scratch Orchestra, which welcomed performers of all and no experience, and he appreciated the indeterminacy wrought by playing music on an unfamiliar instrument. Wolff said of this amateur performance, 'It's a very nice experience, a mixture of comic and clarifying. Because the pieces might be awful; everyone is so tired of them — and suddenly to see them in this light; they take on a whole new light'. Here is the programme from the London performance, front and back covers. The Burdocks Fairy seems to me to be a perfect representation of English 1960s retro Edwardiana.

Wolff was interested in something more malleable than a traditional orchestra. He said, 'I'd never written any orchestra music — I think primarily, partly out of a kind of pragmatism, I suppose; I could just never see an orchestra playing my music!' He was concerned that in large forces, the detail that was so important to his work would be lost. Burdocks is subtitled 'for one or more orchestras'. But the orchestras could be small — as few as five people. Childs likened these small sub-groupings to a concertino, and Wolff agreed.

Burdocks Programme, London

The Scratch Orchestra augmented their forces, as Wolff explained: 'what they did was complement themselves with...a number of the smaller new music groups in London. And there are quite a few now, four or five. So that by the time everybody showed up and got organized, it was 45 people'. These groups included several sub-groups of the Orchestra, plus independent groups. They ranged in outlook from the Portsmouth Sinfonia, a group of arts students who played orchestral music without having learned their instruments to the Promenade Theatre Orchestra, a quartet of trained musicians who wrote and performed virtuosic music on toy pianos and reed organs; and from the free improvisation group AMM — which Wolff had performed with in previous years; to Gentle Fire, one of the first live electronics groups who played mostly notated music — either their own or the stricter European styles of the day. So there was a wide range of outlooks in that one large ensemble.

Burdocks Programme:

A programme by Nigel Dew and the Scratch Orchestra with financial assistance from the Arts Council of Great Britain and the London Borough of Camden.

Programme:

Budish (Arr. Canyon) - 'Chorus of Hebrew Slaves'.

Wolff - Suite.

SUITE/MISSIVIST - 40 minutes.

4 songs.

Wolff - Burdocks.

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Burdocks III score

Burdocks in performance

Burdocks has 10 movements. Wolff mainly discusses two with Childs: 3 and 6, both of which were played more than once. Burdocks 3 asks an orchestra as a whole to play 511 sounds, all different. Wolff explained the two versions. ‘the first one was free: everyone did their own notion of how to solve the problem of getting through five hundred and eleven sounds and making each one different in some way. And that was quite nice, because some people had very curious solutions’. He noted that one man had a glass, struck it and added water with an eye-dropper drop by drop, to produce 511 almost imperceptible changes (John Tilbury (p. 575) notes the opposite, that Chris May had a bowl, and said that the water was removed, if this was the same man); also another man who had 511 paper bags of differing sizes, which he popped, with some help from other performers. As Wolff said, ‘he would have been there all night, otherwise’.

Wolff said that the ‘second version that they did was simply to decide to play scales,...moving up — occasionally, if you felt, you could come down again — and the notion of difference would simply be...that any two sounds are different. So they didn’t worry too much. Just by proceeding scale-wise you could obviously make different sounds, but you could repeat a scale, because by then you’d probably be doing it in a slightly different way.... And the five hundred and eleven [sounds were]...beat by a conductor at a fairly rapid pace; and the whole thing was over in about two and a half minutes. But that was very beautiful; it’s how they ended the concert’. This is played by the orchestra quite quietly, as the sound of the PTO’s toy pianos come up high in the mix. In some ways it’s reminiscent of the stepped orchestral glissando in The Beatles’ *A Day in the Life*. And here it is [sound clip].
The fifth movement resulted in both the strictest interpretation of *Burdocks*, and in a later Scratch Orchestra performance, so I'll deal with it here. Gentle Fire, which arose out of the electronic music class run by Hugh Davies at Goldsmiths would play *Burdocks* for the Cunningham Dance Company that summer at Sadler’s Wells, London, the first time they would come in direct contact with the Cagean group. Michael Robinson, the cellist in Gentle Fire, took charge of rehearsals for movement V at Morley College, and created a handout letter for those who wished to be in the performance. Robinson divided the commentary for realisation to the six areas of the score (all ‘wheels’), defining ‘the possibilities and requirements of each spoke of each wheel so that the sound is without unnotated hesitations’. These symbols on wheel one, within the left spoke, equalled relative high and low pitches; on the bottom, tied notes, and so on.

Robinson’s way of organising group realisation is one way. There is another way: to allow each performer to interpret the symbols in a logical way of their own choosing. Take the third wheel on the left, which Robinson marked ‘5’, and this slice at the bottom right of the wheel, marked ‘7’. Robinson annotates this as ‘7 = 7 notes, sounds, events??’ That August, when the Scratch Orchestra performed *Burdocks* as part of the cultural events attached to the Munich Olympics, Carole Finer interpreted this by playing seven folksongs on her banjo, beginning with ‘There's No Place Like Home’. [sound clip]. (Michael Hicks writes in his book on Wolff inaccurately that Finer sang them, but the important issue was that Carole was learning the banjo). This act bothered Cage, Feldman, and Tudor, who were in the audience and felt that the number 7 indicated a note or a single unitary event. They checked the score, but Wolff gives no instruction for its interpretation.

*Burdocks* VI

Movement 6 was very popular on the 28 March concert, and came up in several of the tracks associated with other movements. Wolff told Childs, ‘One part is...quite simply a melody,...a two-part tune which can be repeated indefinitely; and it would be one part and then the other part, or any combination of repetitions, that way, and three bits of rhythms which constitute the accompaniment. And I think they’re practically no restrictions. I think the melody—either the accompaniment or the melody—has to be represented at least at one point during the course of the performance. But you could conceivably be very restrictive; you could do it all accompaniment and have the melody come in only once’.

Wolff singled out two of about five versions in his interview: ‘the most strict one...was one in which it was almost all accompaniment....[T]hey chose just two of the accompanying rhythmic figures,
and...what they did was make these B minor chords in the given rhythms, very beautiful, for quite a
while. And then [the] bass clarinet played the melody. All of this was in one tempo. That’s the other
thing, you see; the tempos are free, so if you’re doing it individually, each person can do the melody or
accompanyment at any speed he wants’. [sound clip] The other version, by the Scratch rock band,
Cwm, was less successful for Wolff but seems to have been wildly popular with the Scratch Orchestra. ‘They did another version which was, in a way, freer; they did a rock version of it, where
they accentuated it very heavily, and amplified it loudly, and used a sort of standard rock setting... It
was a little less satisfactory—not because it was rock, but mostly because it was very ramshackle and
hadn’t been very well prepared. Which is part of the ethos of the Scratch people. It was fun, but it
wasn’t too clean’. Here’s the opening, which has some elements of the score. [sound clip] And here’s
a later section, which seems to have been aiming for a kind of Pink Floyd sound world [sound clip].

In Between Pieces (1963)

Summary

Wolff’s judgement? He said, ‘Well, I don’t know what value judgement to put on it. I think mostly it
was just too messy. I mean, on the whole; I enjoy occasional messiness. But this was, it was like a
cardboard box that had gotten very soggy and very wet; and you lost the sense of the box
completely’. Later in the interview, in talking about education and performances of Wolff’s music,
Childs said that three of his students at the Milwaukee College Conservatory, all electric guitarists,
learned Wolff’s In Between Pieces. And compared with the Scratch band, they were not messy. Childs
said, ‘They learned it as well as anybody ever learns a Schubert song’, and said that they took a year
over it. Moreover, that experience continued: ‘But I know that one of these three players who is
continuing in music now has the piece on his own; although he’s running a rock group, he’s still
[continuing]’. Childs was referring to Richard, now Rick Cox, the first name on the list of
performers. Rick has recorded many of his own works on Cold Blue Music, he’s a film composer,
and a member of the John Hassell Trio. And when I told him about this part of the interview, he
sent me a picture of this programme, which he still has posted on the wall of his studio. Playing In
Between Pieces meant that much to his life as a musician.

After that, Childs and Wolff summed up Burdocks and the 28 March performance. Childs said, ‘It
sounds like an enormously satisfactory piece’. Wolff answered, ‘I’m very pleased with it, yes.
They’ve done nice performances of it. What I like, it’s a lot of stuff, and you can just do shorter
versions of it, and they’re quite fine. But they took up the better part of an evening for this. They
broke it in half. They sort of went through it twice, really, and it was nice’. They continued with
discussion of whether Wolff was well known, and whether that was important. Wolff said, ‘The story about the guitar players, that’s very encouraging. Because that’s really what I’d like the music to do, is to permeate or infiltrate in as many odd corners as possible... It won’t get reviewed in the journals or reported in the papers because it won’t get done at official concerts, but if it gets played that way, it’s fine with me’.

**Conclusion...or a beginning?**

I’ve only focused on one part of a 40-page interview, but that’s all I have time for today. One of the interesting things about this interview is that it has been essentially unseen for over forty years. Barney Childs transcribed a number of interviews—enough for a book proposal, which he sent out to a number of publishers, who all rejected it. Childs put the interviews away and went on to other projects. I remember the transcription device—a foot pedal that operated a reel-to-reel recorder—in his third bedroom, but as he never invited me to look at them I never opened the material for the book, even when I lived there. In the mid-1990s Barney, who had become too ill to do it himself, gave the material to his former student Jim Fox, who tried to find a publisher without success. In 2003, Jim gave the material to another writer, who has had it for twelve years.

However, now, with changes in publishing, we are seeing more unpublished documents surfacing, such as Garth W Caylor, Jr’s interviews with jazz musicians in the mid-1960s, *Nineteen +*, which he finally published himself last year to great acclaim. I heard from Bill Brooks about this study day and thought, it’s time to make these things happen. Jim sent me the transcript, and is scanning other transcribed interviews and sending them to me over the next several months. So these are indeed very early days in this project, for all its great age. And what better way to start with this particular interview, which was Barney’s favourite, and which opens a window onto such a fascinating point in Christian Wolff’s career and artistic life.