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A CELEBRATION OF
CHRISTIAN WOLFF

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OCTOBER 22-24, 2015

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Christian Wolff came to Dartmouth in 1971 to teach in the classics department and the comparative literature program. Involvement with the music department was an afterthought, considering that, in Christian's words, he had "no formal education in music at all." (See Christian's interview with Larry Polansky for this backstory.)

Christian retired from Dartmouth in 1999, having made his mark on students and colleagues in classics and comparative literature during those twenty-eight years, to be sure. But I would argue that it was (and is) his work in music that has made Dartmouth—and especially our department—so much richer than any of us can fully fathom.

This celebration is our attempt to plumb the depths that Christian has brought to Hanover, depths that defy celebration. Accomplishment, for example, welcomes attention; humility does not. Read what Philip Thomas and Frederic Rzewski have to say about Christian and his music—about how unassuming Christian can be as he has pushed people and sound and form and art to their boundaries and beyond—and you sense that Christian may be more astonished at what has happened in the world of music because of him than are those who gather for this celebration, in person and in these pages, to honor a giant.

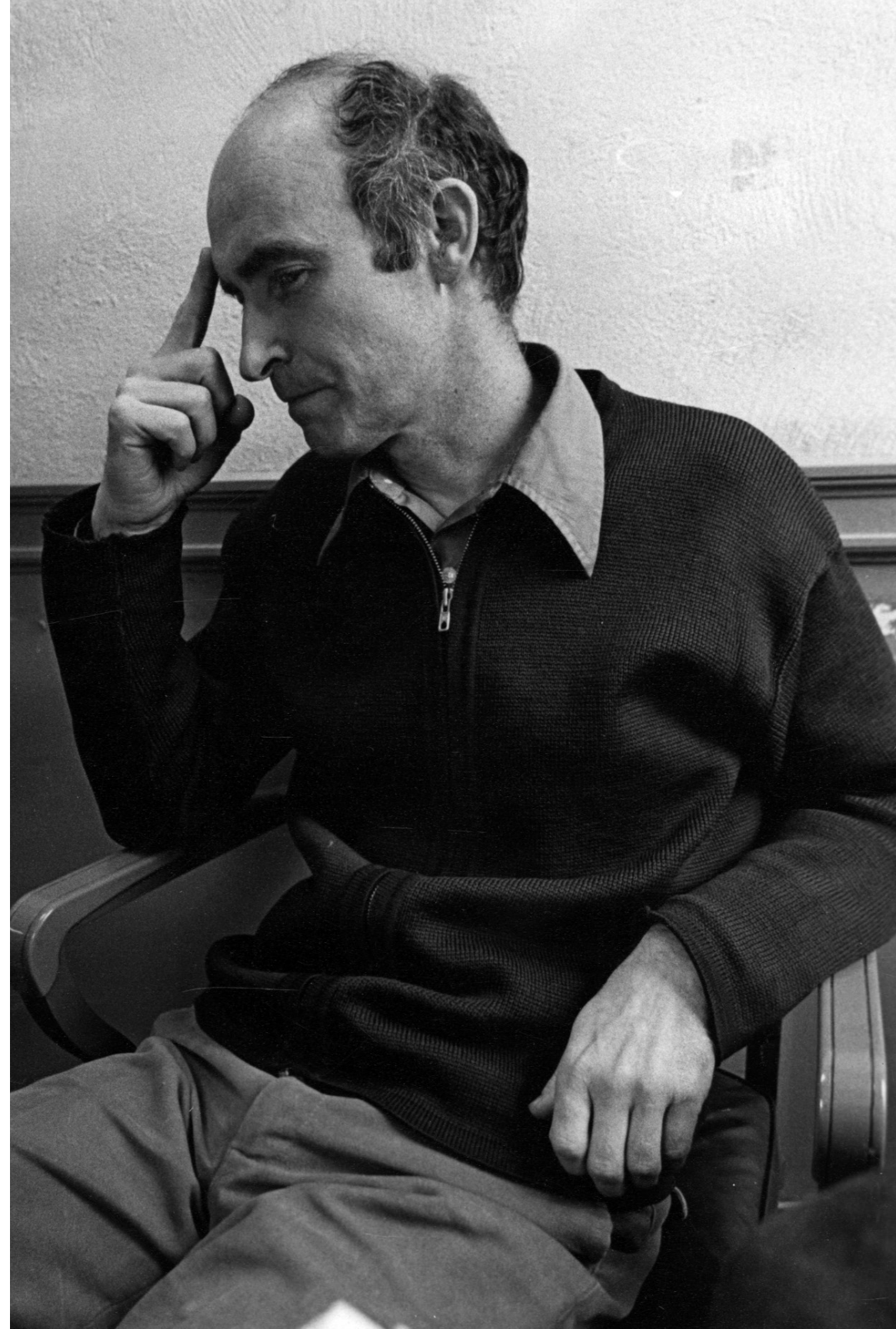
Alex Ross posits that Christian's "sounds are still independent of a master narrative; they are under no magician's spell." This evanescence—the quality of exception that forever skirts and flouts the rules—has made both the sounds and their sounder so formative in making this place what it is today.

Thanks to Margaret Lawrence and others in the Hopkins Center for making these days a reality.

Now, then: Welcome, Christian and everyone else, to this celebration!

Steve Swayne

*Jacob H. Strauss 1922 Professor of Music
Chair, Department of Music*





ESSAY: CHRISTIAN WOLFF AND THE EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES

ALEX ROSS

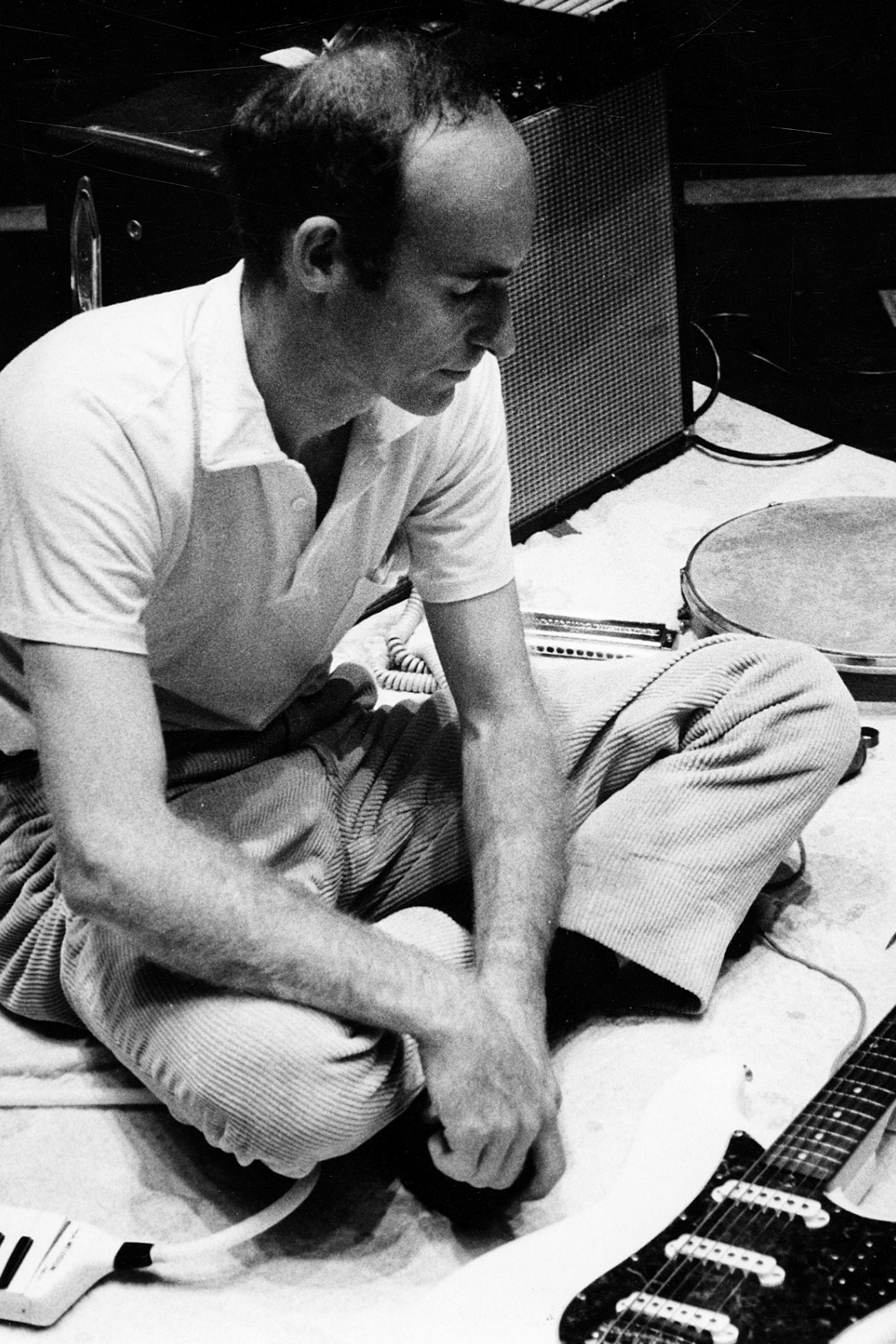
Morton Feldman once said: “John Cage was the first composer in the history of music who raised the question by implication that maybe music could be an art form rather than a music form.”¹ That provocative statement can be applied not only to Cage but also to the other members of the New York School of composition: Feldman himself; Earle Brown; and, not least, Christian Wolff, the focus of the current Dartmouth celebration.

Until the mid-twentieth century, even the most radical composers worked within the bounds of a musical grammar that had been evolving incrementally over the centuries. For the most part, the changes were less dramatic than the continuities. The principals of the New York School adopted a radically different model: they treated sounds with the same freedom that artists had claimed in visual media. Sounds became objects in space, detached from the self-perpetuating rules of musical language. Not surprisingly, this revolution involved the modification or rejection of extant systems of notation, which tend to confirm the received habits of professional musicians.

While Cage is properly considered the prime mover of this “art form” approach of composition, he never failed to credit Wolff as the originator of a crucial New York School concept: that of a flow of sounds that proceeds “without regard for linear continuity,” as Wolff wrote around 1952.² In his 1958 article “New and Electronic Music,” which Cage quoted in *Silence*, Wolff put it this way: “One finds a concern for a kind of objectivity, almost anonymity—sound come into its own . . . Personal expression, drama, psychology, and the like are not part of the composer’s initial calculation, they are at best gratuitous.”³ Cage’s music had been gravitating toward discontinuity and impersonality over the course of the 1940s, but Wolff, entering the New York School circle as a teenaged prodigy, helped to push Cage and the others to the point of an absolute break. His role can be compared to that of Webern relative to Schoenberg: he was the star pupil who seemed at times to be in advance of the master.

Wolff is now the last surviving figure of the New York School. Notwithstanding the collective emphasis on anonymity, on the liberation of sound from personality, his comrades are increasingly enshrined in a tradition that has itself become historical and is prey to the clichés of the canon. One speaks of early, middle, and late periods, of breakthroughs and consolidations and valedictions. (Feldman, to be sure, never distanced himself from such thinking, and consciously aimed for a kind of traditional greatness.) It could be argued that Wolff has remained a purer representative of the New York School idea that he articulated so forcefully in the fifties. His sounds are still independent of a master narrative; they are under no magician’s spell.

Wolff’s life and work are effectively described in Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund’s *Christian Wolff*, published by University of Illinois Press in 2012. Closer analyses can be found in Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas’s 2010 essay collection, *Changing the System*.⁴ In the wider



context of the American experimental tradition, what seems striking about Wolff's background is its strongly Germanic orientation. His father, Kurt Wolff, had been a progressive-minded publisher in Leipzig, noted

His sounds are still independent of a master narrative; they are under no magician's spell.

especially for his early promotion of Kafka, Rilke, Werfel, Robert Walser, and dozens of other authors. Wolff's mother, Helen(e) Mosel, was born to German and Austrian parents in Macedonia, and was steeped in the literature of many languages. Christian was born

in Nice, in 1934, during the early years of his parents' exile from Hitler's Germany. In 1941, in New York, Kurt and Helen founded Pantheon Books, one of the leading imprints of the postwar era.

The Wolff home was rich in music, and Christian immersed himself in the classic Bach-to-Brahms repertory from an early age. (His grandfather, the conductor and historian Leonhard Wolff, had been a member of the Brahms circle.) In 1948, at the age of fourteen, Wolff had a galvanizing encounter with the composers of the Second Viennese School and began to write in a modernistic vein. His piano teacher, Grete Sultan, sent him to her friend John Cage, who took him on as a pupil, charging no tuition. Wolff was just sixteen—"Orpheus in tennis sneakers," Feldman dubbed him.⁵ Almost at once, he made a crucial contribution to Cage's own development, giving him a copy of the Bollingen edition of the *I Ching*, which his parents had published. This inspired gift would impel Cage's turn toward chance composition.

Webern was the reigning obsession of the New York School in the early days; Cage and Feldman famously bonded after a New York Philharmonic performance of Webern's Symphony in 1950. Wolff's early works, such as *Trio I*, for flute, trumpet, and cello, have a Webernian sparseness and lucidity, being confined to intricately varied maneuvers through limited groups of pitches. But they stand apart from the often frenetic post-Webernian writing of the postwar period; their built-in repetitions of pitches look ahead to the pioneering minimalist compositions of La Monte Young and Terry Riley. As Wolff once commented to William Duckworth, he seemed poised to launch minimalism years before the fact; but, with his habitual restlessness, he moved in a different direction, first toward greater density and then toward open-ended indeterminacy.⁶

Feldman and Cage had loosened the bounds of notation some years before; Wolff took up indeterminacy only in 1957, and in his own distinctive fashion. He first devised a system of signs that direct the performer to play a certain number of pitches within a given duration, the rest left to choice. A few years later, he supplied a more visually suggestive notation, drawing dots and lines as a guide for the interaction among the players. For example, in *Duet I* for piano four hands, a symbol of dots

Christian Wolff with electric guitar, assorted percussion and melodica, recording *Burdocks* in Spaulding Auditorium, Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, August, 1971. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

connected by a vertical line indicates that players should “coordinate as closely as possible both attack and release without any intentional signals.” As Hicks and Asplund put it, such music of internal cueing was “less text than pretext for musical conversation.”⁷ Kyle Gann, in his book *American Music in the Twentieth Century*, notes that Wolff’s method influenced the “game pieces” of John Zorn, among others.⁸ But Wolff resists the game metaphor, preferring to think of his works as a species of chamber music.⁹ With the Wolff family heritage in mind, one might see him as a hyper-radicalized Brahms.

Over the course of the 1960s, Wolff’s music became ever more non-hierarchical in its processes; two classic scores, *For 1, 2, or 3 People* (1964) and *Edges* (1968) leave instrumentation open (“for any sound producing means” and “for any number of players,” respectively) and invite the participation of non-professionals. By the end of the decade, Wolff was creating works that consisted entirely of textual instructions. A famous instance is *Stones*, from the *Prose Collection* series (1968–71):

Make sounds with stones, draw sounds out of stones, using a number of sizes and kinds (and colors); for the most part discretely; sometimes in rapid sequences. For the most part striking stones with stones, but also stones on other surfaces (inside the open head of a drum, for instance) or other than struck (bowed, for instance, or amplified). Do not break anything.¹⁰

Yet, no matter how informal the plan, these pieces retain a certain classical rigor and clarity; they lack the carnivalesque air of much avant-garde music of the period. The persistent emphasis on group dynamics, on the exchange of musical signals between engaged individuals, gives the work an unmistakably human dimension, even as Wolff strategically avoids the imposition of his own personality.

In the 1970s, leftist political commitments, particularly with regard to American aggression during the Vietnam War, encouraged Wolff to insert folksongs and other simple melodic materials into his music. Frederic Rzewski and Cornelius Cardew, two admired colleagues, were thinking along the same lines; in addition, the emergence of minimalism seemed to give an aura of historical inevitability to the resurgence of tonality. *Changing the System* (1973–74) incorporates a text by Tom Hayden: “It’s the system itself that sets the priorities that we have, that distorts the

...there is a double-edged urge toward economy and informality, concision and freedom.

facts, that twists our brains and therefore the system would have to be changed in order to change priorities and to make it possible for us to really see what’s happening.” Wolff’s embrace of a collaborative, consensual model, antithetical to

the cult of authority and genius, enacted in musical terms the change that the political program demanded. Yet he did not make the facile gesture of renouncing avant-garde methods; rather, he accommodated surface simplicities within a larger complex that remained unsettled at its core.



Left to right: Christian Wolff, Alvin Lucier and John Cage performing Wolff’s *For 1, 2, or 3 People* at Wesleyan University, February 25, 1988. Courtesy of Wesleyan University, Special Collections & Archives.

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In recent decades, Wolff has synthesized the various techniques that he employed in prior pieces, in unpredictable and constantly mutating fashion. Sometimes performers are given precise notation; sometimes they move through a more indeterminate environment. A composer who long devoted himself almost exclusively to chamber ensembles has branched out into writing for full orchestra. Harmonies may veer toward an almost neo-Romantic sweetness, as in *For Morty*, a 1987 memorial for Feldman; or they may recall the austere pointillism of the early period, as in the first of the *Pianist: Pieces* of 2001. All the while, there is a double-edged urge toward economy and informality, concision and freedom. This essential, elusive music evades the chilly hand of history and keeps pivoting toward an unknown future.

Alex Ross is the music critic of *The New Yorker* and the author of the books *The Rest Is Noise* and *Listen to This*.

- 1 Morton Feldman, *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures, 1964-1987*, ed. Chris Villars (Hyphen, 2006), 183.
- 2 Christian Wolff, "Statement," in Pierre Boulez and John Cage, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Robert Samuels (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 108.
- 3 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 68.
- 4 Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund, *Christian Wolff* (University of Illinois Press, 2012); Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas, *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff* (Ashgate, 2010).
- 5 Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Exact Change, 2000), 119.
- 6 William Duckworth, *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (Schirmer, 1995), 192.
- 7 Hicks and Asplund, *Christian Wolff*, 25.
- 8 Kyle Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (Schirmer, 1997), 149.
- 9 George E. Lewis, "An Aesthetic of Suggestion," in the booklet for the recording of Christian Wolff, *Duos* (New World, 2013).
- 10 Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writings and Conversations* (MusikTexte, 1998), 470.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN WOLFF BY LARRY POLANSKY

PART 1 CHRISTIAN WOLFF AT DARTMOUTH

Larry Polansky Christian, the first question I'd like to ask you is about your history at Dartmouth, specifically in the Music Department. How did you come to be there? How did that position evolve over time vis-à-vis your joint positions at the school, in Classics and Comparative Literature? What did you do as part of the Music Department?

Christian Wolff I originally went to Dartmouth to interview for a job in the Classics Department, and it looked like I had the job but there were some complications—the Classics Department didn't have quite enough room for me. And there happened to be, I should say, two things ... One is that Jon Appleton knew about me as a composer. I hadn't met Jon before that, but when he heard that I was applying he said well, you know, if you're going to come here you should also be in the Music Department. I had

no objections to that. It seemed a long shot since I had no formal education in music at all—I had no credentials, basically. Then it turned out also that the Dean of the Humanities at the time, who happened to be a friend of Jon's, was very keen on interdisciplinary studies of various kinds. And seeing that I actually had a degree in comparative literature and had been teaching in the Classics Department at Harvard, I seemed made to order for this agenda. So they worked on it and made me an appointment, which would put me partly in Classics, and the rest of my time would be divided between Music and Comparative Literature.

LP Was that interesting to you, to be in the Music Department as well?

CW Yes, yes, it was, I think (laughs), it was a challenge. Initially I thought "I can't do this!" I'd never been at the receiving end of it. But then I talked to the folks in the Music Department and saw what kinds of things I might do. The first thing that came up, I

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think—my first idea—was that I would do something related to experimental music and do a workshop in experimental music. The Department had never done anything quite like that. And that's something I had occasionally done on visits to various schools. And it sort of went on from there.

LP As it evolved, what kinds of things did you do? Did you extend your job into more usual things?

CW Yeah. I was reasonably—certainly—qualified to do the experimental music workshop, and I enjoyed doing that a lot, and in the first years it went really well. And then two other things presented themselves. I can't remember if I volunteered or not, or if they were suggested. One was the course in 20th century music. I felt reasonably qualified to do that, though I ended up doing a lot of homework for it. It's all very well to have listened to, say, a lot of Bartók, but on the other hand...

LP To talk about it, to teach it...

CW ...you have to learn stuff! And then the other course, mostly that I did, I forgot the number, but it's the introductory music theory course, it started from dead scratch.

LP Yes, we both did that. The number changed frequently over the years.

CW And I liked doing it, because I like teaching things from the very beginning. In one sense it's routine, but at the same time you also are thinking and can be talking about why these very basic things are there in the first place. So it's fun. And it's also pedagogically challenging—what's the best way to introduce people to scales, and all these different things, so...

LP I liked to think of it as the only music theory course one could teach without lying. [Both laugh]

CW Dartmouth also had this First Year seminar, which I'm not sure if it still does or not. That encouraged me to

start thinking about possible courses, because those seminars are open, you could write your own ticket. It wasn't right away, but I got interested in political music, so I offered a seminar in political music. This again involved my doing a lot of work and educating myself, but I had a lot of fun doing that.

LP Do you still have the syllabus for that course?

CW I might somewhere, yeah.

LP I know a lot of people who would really like to see that! [Both laugh] That's interesting, how many times did you teach that?

CW Certainly two or three times, maybe more. The thing is because I was teaching in three departments, my teaching loads in each one were thinned out so the cycle was moving much slower than if I was teaching in just one.

LP [Incredulously] And you went to three different department meetings?

CW [Laughs] That was the downside of this appointment. Occasionally I might cheat a little bit and tell one department I couldn't come because I had a meeting with the other one and vice versa. [Laughs] But basically I tried to keep up with all three.

LP What year did you come to Dartmouth?

CW '71 I think.

LP And you came right from Harvard?

CW No. I had a year in between at something called the Hellenic Center in Washington, D.C. It was a great scene—you got a year's stipend, and if you had a family you got a house, sort of in a little compound in a very up-scale part of Washington. They had a very good library, and a very interesting director, and you just did your work.

LP And when did you officially retire

from Dartmouth—you did a phased retirement?

CW '99.

LP So almost 30 years!

PART 2 TEACHING MUSIC AT DARTMOUTH

LP What effect did teaching music for so many years have on your musical life?

CW It was an education. I know the repertoire, especially classical music, quite well, from a very early age. But, having actually to teach—you know about teaching! The fastest way to learn something is to teach it. And I enjoyed it. My way of teaching say, 20th century music, was basic facts and things, but mostly to do analysis, because I'm curious to know "how'd they do that?"

LP So using real music as the basis for the course?

CW Yeah, I ended up analyzing Stravinsky, Schoenberg, all the way down to Elliot Carter. Or learning about the analyses of these. So that was very unusual, and interesting. And otherwise, well, for political music, again, with modest education on my part going in, I learned about popular music, and traditional music, like the mining songs, and these really interesting old recordings—I guess they're Library of Congress recordings of mining songs from Kentucky—fantastic, amazing stuff. So things like that. It was very nice.

And especially in that music and politics course, I got to think about music not simply in a formal way, which is a temptation when you're teaching theory, but also about historical and political context.

LP In teaching things like beginning music theory one teaches ideas that one doesn't exactly use in one's music. Yet you have to think about them very deeply—like how to explain the Phrygian mode to your students. But

you're not concerned directly with the Phrygian mode in your own music. Yet sometimes it dribbles in...

CW Exactly. When I'm writing I suddenly realize that this configuration of notes is in fact a Phrygian mode! And then later on I think, "well, it might be interesting to have a Phrygian mode here!" Phrygian especially because that turns up quite a lot in political songs as it happens. So it interested me from that angle as well. No, no, no. It definitely sharpened my focus.

LP So you think that was a good thing ... It didn't make your music...

CW No, not at all! When I first started out, I had to decide what sort of education I should be getting. My first thought was that I should go to conservatory, and I was discouraged from that, actually, by my parents.

LP Can you think of a specific instance—not so much with political music, because that's more obvious—when beginning music theory actually emerged in your own work?

CW Right.... Actually not so much! [Both laugh] Sorry about that! Yeah, because it's pretty simple. You can think about scales and intervals and to a certain extent by the time you get to the end of the course you could do some counterpoint and some chorales, but I think it was pretty much stuff that I had already...

LP You use a lot of chorales in your pieces, and obviously counterpoint is important, but that was stuff that was already in the fabric of your... it was nothing that...

CW I had already done that stuff. Yeah. It was fun to see how Bach did that stuff, because he was very, very good at it! [Laughs]

LP But it was irrelevant how good he was, except that he was good?

CW Yeah.

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Wolff teaching in Dartmouth Department of Music, 1983. Photo by Nancy Wasserman. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

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INTERLUDE POLITICAL MUSIC AND ITS TEACHING

CW Teaching, especially the course on political music, got me to think in social, historical, political ways about classical music. For example, one of my favorite pieces out there is Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*—I just enjoy the music of it. But then, however, I began to read more, and learn more, and discovered that the libretto of the opera comes from a play that was banned in France, and was certainly banned in Austria, in Vienna. The reason that the libretto was in Italian was so that it could get by the censorship, because it's all about the possible uprising of the lower servant class.

So things like that, I enjoyed picking up, because it was about the same time, just about when I got to Dartmouth, that I got interested in left-wing politics, and Marxism, and we had a Marxist reading group. And I was also trying to apply these ideas or to see how they related to literature. So I gave a course on Marxism in literature for instance, and my music course was a kind of equivalent of that with political music, which I would never have thought of, say five years before.

LP Was that somehow influenced by Cardew, by your meeting Cardew?

CW Uh ... not really, no. I think that we all sort of fell into that political interest about the same time, it was mutual. It was Cornelius Cardew, it was Frederic Rzewski, and a bunch of others. Garrett List was very strong, and there was a guy in Berlin, Erhard Grosskopf, and so forth.

LP The examples you gave about political music—and I ask this because it comes up all the time with my students, when they talk about that—they all involve text. But miners' songs are really only political when sung—if you play them as fiddle tunes they only reference a political text. How do you teach a political music course and actually talk about the music?

CW Well, it's true, to a certain extent you can't. I mean, because it's also well known that most political songs use tunes that come from totally different origins, which are not political in the least...

LP Some old English lord being murdered by his mother!

CW Exactly. I mean that's something to talk about, but it also demonstrates that intrinsically a given political statement does not have a musical equivalent, it's entirely contextual. That's the main thing; it has to do with context. My favorite example there is not one that I witnessed myself, but heard about. There used to be a group in New York called the Musicians Action Collective, who would organize concerts in which they would include all different kinds of music, and the only thing that tied them together was some political issue or cause. It might be the Farm Worker's Union, so they'd get in some folksinger who had songs related to that, and maybe Frederic would write a piece that connected with those themes. And then there were a bunch of guys from the Philharmonic who came and played the Mozart Woodwind Quintet. And it seemed to me that in that context the Mozart Woodwind Quintet was a political piece. Even though from another perspective it's totally abstract music, but if you put it in that setting it suddenly takes on this other color, and what it shows you is that there are these serious musicians who play this old music very beautifully but who are also politically committed and are willing to do that in this kind of a context.

LP So the music itself re-contextualizes things. Shostakovich is a great example.

CW Exactly.

LP You can use music, but the notes themselves can't say anything except by association with human activity.

CW I once had a conversation with Julius Hemphill, and he said, "you know

an E-flat is an E-flat!" There's nothing polemical one way or another.

LP I like the example that one can't sit down at a piano and play "That's a cat!" One can point to a cat and play something, but one can't even play something that simple.

PART 3 MUSICAL LIFE AT DARTMOUTH

LP Maybe you can talk a little about the history of your musical life at Dartmouth? Some of the interesting things that happened? Changes that you witnessed?

CW Well, actually, in the first years, I don't know quite how it came about, but it seemed to be more important or just interesting to me to bring up to Dartmouth musicians who I found interesting and worth hearing. And I persuaded the Hopkins Center or sometimes the Music Department to bring up people like—and this was the early '70s—Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, Terry Riley, Alvin Lucier. I mean, people who at that time interested me. So I had them right there at Dartmouth. These were friends to a certain extent, so we sometimes put them up at the house—it's pretty much what you were doing in the later years. Dartmouth had never seen anything quite like that, and certainly it was problematic, because nobody would come to the concerts! [Both laugh]

LP That remained a problem through our whole time there!

CW But just to have them there, I think that ultimately did have some effect. So that was one area that was lively. John Tilbury came once and played—again this was the early '70s. And AMM came! Right away. First year. We had them playing a concert. So Dartmouth became part of the new music scene in that way. It was a kind of low-key affair, and it was great for me.

LP And they probably liked coming up here.

CW Yes, it was a different kind of environment. It wasn't like New York, or something like that, they enjoyed it. And then the next thing that happened that I think was interesting was, there was always this talk of doing a New Music ensemble, and for a while it was run by a guy called Efrain Guigui. Actually, he was the conductor of the Dartmouth Symphony for a while, and a very good conductor. He worked down in Bennington with a summer music thing there, and he wanted to do something like that at Dartmouth. In the end it didn't really fly—he wasn't there on a regular basis, and he had a lot of other musical interests. But then we had ... I don't know quite how it happened... but we managed to get Malcolm Goldstein.

LP He was up at Bowdoin College, right?

CW Yeah, but he was out of work and free. What Guigui was trying to do was make a New Music ensemble using the instrumental instructors, whose commitment to new music was... various [Laughs], not complete, and I think that's why it didn't work very well. So he gave it up. But there was a feeling in the department that we should try to continue it, and Malcolm was available, so we got him to do it. And that transformed it completely. I think he only managed to stay on for about three or four years, but those were I think the high point of new music at Dartmouth, actually until you came on. But in a sense it was even more active, because he had this group, and he did something very smart, which was that he used students. He got lucky that there were enough good ones, so that he had a fairly solid core, and then he would also bring up friends from New York.

LP And because he had students, friends of the students would come to the concerts.

CW Of course, exactly. We suddenly had an audience, because if you get students involved, their friends will come, and word gets out. And that was

a very successful venture, because he would do as many as three, four, or five concerts a year, of new music—normally it had been one if you were lucky. And we got interesting people coming up, so that was pretty good. My best memory there was with Frederic [Rzewski], and we did a performance of *Coming Together* with Frederic playing the keyboard, and a student doing the voice part. I think that's one of the best performances you can find recorded of that piece.

LP It's on my website.

CW Oh really?

LP You gave me the original recording, and I digitized it. A lot of people have listened to it and downloaded it.

CW Oh good, oh good. It has a kind of flavor to the recording because it is the students, and of course that Frederic is in the middle of it. So things like that, the opportunity to do that...

LP There are some great players on that recording; I remember that Don Glasgo plays in it.

CW Don Glasgo—yes. I played flute I think!

LP I remember. I have the whole group annotated on my site. What about the Burdocks Festival, was that involved with Dartmouth at all?

CW Well, marginally. Strictly speaking, no, it wasn't at all. The only Dartmouth person in the first festival was Jon Appleton, but he was very enthusiastic about it. It was done on completely no money, nothing, we put people up on the farm, and fed them, and that was it. On the second festival—there used to be this thing at Dartmouth, which varied in interest, but occasionally there would be something very interesting, there was a summer music festival, Mario Di Bonaventura, and he brought some....

LP [Ernst] Krenek!

CW [Laughs] Yes. I mean you walked down the street in Hanover and there was Mr. Krenek walking down the street! [Laughs] And he might have had Henze, I can't remember. I missed some of them because it was in the summer and I wasn't around in the summer that much. But there were various very heavy dudes...

LP I think he had Henry Cowell there as well.

CW Really? That I didn't know.

LP Yes, Steve Swayne did a nicely researched exhibit about the festival at Berry-Baker Library a few years ago.

CW One of those times, Siegfried Palm for some reason was at Dartmouth—you know, the top German new music cellist in the '60s and '70s. This was, I think, during the second Burdocks Festival, and he came up for it, because word had got out that this was happening. And as a result of that I was invited to Darmstadt.

LP That was in the early '70s.

CW 1971 I think. I should say one more thing about Dartmouth and its connection with the Burdocks Festival: the facilities here are very good! And at the end of the second Burdocks Festival, for which I wrote *Burdocks*, we went down to record it, we made that recording in....

LP Spaulding Auditorium?

CW Spaulding, right. That's quite a recording, a great recording. It was a question of facilities, but Dartmouth made it possible for us to do that. Frederic [Rzewski] recorded piano pieces, and Gordon [Mumma] did most of the engineering. There was a sound engineer attached with Spaulding, an older man, but Gordon sort of took over for him. And it allowed for the possibility for David Tudor to play the organ. There's a stretch in that record-

ing where suddenly you hear the organ, and it's the organ, you know, that is never used. Tudor saw it up there, and before you knew it he was up there and the tune was banging out on the organ. So again it's the facilities and the openness of the place to do that.

This is a little bit different, but Dartmouth has, I've noticed, a capacity to take in people who are not necessarily straight ahead academic types. The English Department had a tradition of it—they might have poets, people again not academically qualified, exactly, but they're distinguished writers. Noel Perrin is a good example—not an academic at all, and yet he was a fixture there and did all kinds of interesting things. So that they would take me is also part of that mentality, which is an openness to alternatives kinds of people. That is a very valuable point of view.

LP You've been talking mostly about the early history. Is there more recent history you'd like to talk about?

CW Yes, there's one other phase, which is important to me, which we talked about the other day. It's jazz, with which I had a tenuous relationship. I listened to jazz as a kid—Dixieland—but I hadn't really kept up with it. In the early '70s, part of the new political awareness, and feelings about more diverse hirings, the Music Department pitched in with an open appointment for black musicians. And for a number of years we had this as part of the curriculum, which is now the drumming ensemble.

LP It was Don Cherry at first.

CW Don Cherry, yes, very important and interesting people. And I would catch the concerts and get a chance to hear these people play. That's where I first heard Cecil Taylor, at Dartmouth College!

LP Did you work with Bill Cole?

CW Yes, some, I think we did a couple of concerts together, improvised concerts. Actually, the next phase

would be the ethnomusicology thing. Again Dartmouth felt it should have its toes in the water there. And in the end the most interesting person they brought is still with us—Ted Levin—who himself brought very interesting musical occasions to the college, and opened up things that way. It was something I was aware of, but again the opportunities to hear those things, especially in Hanover, New Hampshire... unless somebody locally does it, that's it! And while we're at it, we can mention yourself, and my introduction to Shaker music!

LP [Laughs] Oh! That came through Mary Ann Haagen!

CW Yes, but it was funneled through you, so again, that's a nice thing about the college, there are these possibilities and occasions.

LP One could pursue one's interests, and with so much support, you could do things like bring the Shakers themselves to the college, or as Mary Ann and I did, bring Dartmouth students to sing with the Shakers!

CW I mean it's a little bit because it's such an isolated place, and so if anything's going to happen, you're going to have to make it happen, and the college does not discourage that, on the contrary...

LP They really encourage it.

CW They encourage it and support it!

LP That's a nice way to conclude, I think.

Interview conducted April 13, 2015



PROGRAM

SEPTEMBER 1–DECEMBER 10, 2015

Dartmouth Library Exhibition

Christian Wolff: beginning anew at every ending

Baker Library Main Hall

Christian Wolff: beginning anew at every ending highlights key aspects of Christian Wolff's work: indeterminacy, politics, and collaboration; and celebrates the composer's long association with Dartmouth College as a professor of music, classics, and comparative literature.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2015

Exhibition Reception

Baker Main Hall, Dartmouth Library

4 pm – Free

Sponsored by the Dartmouth Library

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2015

Panel Discussion: Christian Wolff: In Performance

Faulkner Recital Hall, Department of Music

4:30 pm – Free

Moderated by Larry Polansky (Prof. of Music, UC Santa Cruz), noted guests discuss Wolff's music as transmitted to the public over the past six decades. With Amy Beal, musicologist; David Behrman, composer/artist; Robert Carl, chair of the composition program at The Hartt School, University of Hartford; Alvin Lucier, composer; and Michael Parsons, composer/performer/writer.

In Hanover, March, 2015. Photo by Eli Burak.

Christian Wolff, *Exercise 18* from *Exercises 15–18, For any number of instruments, including solos* (e. g., keyboard, trombone), 1975. Peters edition #66727. Used by kind permission. All rights reserved.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2015 (continued)

Performance

Faulkner Recital Hall, Department of Music
7 pm – Free

Works including *music for two pianos/piano 4 hands* (1957–1982–2001), *Trio V For James Tenney* (2006), *Serenade*, (1950), *Percussionist* (2000), *Exercise 14* (1974), “*For Morty*” (1987)

The program includes the breakthrough *Duo for Pianists* from 1957 in which each pianist freely chooses variable sound configurations in the real-time process of performance. Also on the program are one of the very early pieces using very small numbers of pitches (three in this case), *Serenade for flute, clarinet and violin* (1950); a work for piano and percussion, *Trio V for James Tenney* (2006); a percussion solo, *Percussionist* (2000), and one of the *Exercises*, from a collection of pieces with open instrumentation and improvised heterophonic playing, written in 1973–4. This will be played by a larger ensemble including eight members of ICE.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2015

Performance

Rollins Chapel
2 pm – Free

Works including selections from *Exercises 1–13, 15–18* (1973–1975), *Isn't this a Time* (1982), *Pete* (2014), and *Brooklyn* (2015).

The program will consist of two recent larger ensemble pieces, *Pete*, a memorial piece for Pete Seeger (2014), commissioned by ICE and here performed by them, and *Brooklyn* (2015), a piece with open instrumentation allowing performance by six or more players, including some who are also improvisers, here Schulkowsky, Baron, Polansky, Wolff, new music and jazz composer and improviser George Lewis, and several members of ICE. Also on the program are *Isn't this a Time* for clarinet and saxophone (1982) and a selection of *Exercises* (1973–4) with a variety of performers.

Performance

Faulkner Recital Hall, Department of Music
7 pm – Free

Improvisation sets featuring artists including Ikue Mori, Larry Polansky, Robyn Schulkowsky, Joey Baron, George Lewis, Christian Wolff

This concert will feature performances, in various combinations, by noted improvisers Ikue Mori, who uses a laptop, and percussionists Robyn Schulkowsky and Joey Baron, along with Larry Polansky, guitars, and Christian Wolff, piano and objects.

ALL PERFORMANCE WORKS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

INTERVIEW OF FREDERIC RZEWSKI BY ASHLEY FURE

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Ashley Fure As a performer, you've been a longstanding supporter of Christian Wolff's music. What first drew you to his work? What did you hear or feel when performing it that sparked such a sustained engagement?

Frederic Rzewski The use of silence, I guess. Most of the music I heard around that time ('50s) was either Stravinskyan, post-Bartók, or post-Schoenberg. In any case, it all seemed to chug on and on relentlessly. Christian's music, on the other hand, said what it had to say and stopped. It then said more with silence. It was what the Greeks called irony. I think this encounter with silence is something that has had a lasting effect on me, even today.

AF Given his focus on the interaction of performers and the dynamics of

collective decision-making, I would imagine that performing Wolff's music in an ensemble setting is quite different than performing it solo. Do you find that to be true? Do you prefer one setting to another?

FR It's usually easier when there are several people. But I have noticed that it tends to be a group of friends, who have not seen each other in some time, so that we tend to waste a lot of time instead of rehearsing. This is of course not necessarily a good thing for the music.

AF Of all the times you've performed Wolff's music, does a certain concert stick out as particularly memorable?

FR Madrid in 2008, at the national auditorium. An audience of 2,000 or so, two nights in a row, standing ovations

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each night. I never thought I would experience that.

AF As legend has it, you met Wolff in Darmstadt in '56 and then continued your friendship after returning to Cambridge. Harvard and Darmstadt were undoubtedly very different contexts at the time, though it strikes me that you and Wolff may have felt like outsiders, for different reasons, in both. Is that a fair characterization? Did you bond over that outsider status—as Americans in Darmstadt, and as experimental thinkers in an otherwise conservative Harvard climate?

FR You can't be an "outsider" if you're Harvard, just as Shostakovich could not be a "victim of Stalinism" while also in the jury that awarded the Stalin prize. Besides, Harvard was not "conservative" at that time; it was there that I made the acquaintance of people like Susan Sontag and Herbert Marcuse. I think that we both felt that we were members of a privileged élite.

AF The two groups Wolff is most often associated with—Cage, Feldman, Brown and Tudor in New York and then you and Cornelius Cardew after his move to Cambridge—often seem portrayed, in retrospect, like a rock band. There's a sense in the way the story is told of a mutually reinforcing confidence, a certain brand of hip, a collective identity that seemed to undergird and spark the individual thought of each 'member.' Did it feel like that at the time? Were you consciously creating a professional alliance, a movement, or was it more haphazard than that—just friends hanging out talking about their shared interests?

FR I'm not sure I really follow you; but I think neither of the two situations you mention can be described as a "group." I suppose that "friends hanging" is probably more accurate.

AF In *The Algebra of Everyday Life* you wrote, "Wolff is a rare example of a male composer who has been able to express, if not exactly a feminine aes-

thetic, at least one which shows sensitivity to women's experience." Could you elaborate on that point? How does Wolff's music convey that sensitivity?

**Christian's music . . .
said what it had to say
and stopped. It then said
more with silence.**

—Frederic Rzewski

FR He has written a number of pieces referring explicitly to this theme, like *Hay Una Mujer Desaparecida*. But I would say that his approach to rhythm has something to do with it as well: something to do with interruptions. But I think that is too complex to go into here.

AF As someone who knows Wolff's compositional output intimately and has watched him grow as a composer over decades, does one piece stick out as being particularly surprising? A turn you didn't expect him to make?

FR His music is always surprising, so I do expect it. But *Long Piano* might be an example. I was supposed to play it in Berlin, but suddenly found myself in the hospital; so that was unexpected.

AF You have experienced Wolff's music both as a listener and a performer. Do you find one role more satisfying? Do they offer different insights?

FR I think I like performing more than listening, but it depends on how hard I have to work in either case.

AF On this occasion of the celebration of Wolff's many accomplishments as a composer and intellectual, is there anything you'd like to add? A funny story? A well-wish? A response to a question I should have thought to ask?

FR No funny stories today, although one could well pop up sooner or later.

Interview conducted April 22, 2015

CELEBRANTS

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THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ENSEMBLE (ICE), described by the *New York Times* as “one of the most accomplished and adventurous groups in new music,” is dedicated to reshaping the way music is created and experienced. With a modular makeup of 35 leading instrumentalists, performing in forces ranging from solos to large ensembles, ICE functions as performer, presenter, and educator, advancing the music of our time by developing innovative new works and new strategies for audience engagement. ICE redefines concert music as it brings together new work and new listeners in the 21st century.

JOEY BARON, born in 1955 in Richmond, Virginia, started playing at age 9. Over the years, he has developed a unique approach to making music with the drum set, evident in his extended tenures with jazz icons Jim Hall, Steve Kuhn, and John Abercrombie. His long-term collaboration with Bill Frisell was documented and released as *Just Listen* on Relative Pitch Records in 2013. Presently, Mr. Baron’s activities include solo concerts, workshops, master classes, drum music collaborations with percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky (Dinosaur Dances CD), plus ongoing projects with John Zorn, duo concerts with Lee Konitz, and the Joe Lovano/Dave Douglas-led “Sound Prints” quintet.

AMY C. BEAL is professor of music at UC Santa Cruz, and her musicological

research and performance activities explore the history of American experimental music. She is the author of three books: *New Music*, *New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (2006); *Carla Bley* (2011); and *Johanna Beyer* (2015). She currently serves on the Board of Trustees for New World Records and on the editorial advisory board for *Tempo* magazine.

DAVID BEHRMAN has been active as a composer and artist since the 1960s. His compositions and installations feature flexible structures and the use of technology in personal ways. *My Dear Siegfried*, *Leapday Night*, *On the Other Ocean*, *Long Throw*, *Interspecies Smalltalk* and *Open Space with Brass* are among his works for soloists and small ensembles. His multimedia installations have been exhibited at galleries and museums in the United States and Europe. *Cloud Music*, a collaboration with Robert Watts and Bob Diamond, was acquired by the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2013. A recent orchestra piece, *How We Got Here*, commissioned by the BBC Scottish Symphony, was premiered in 2014. He had long associations with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, John Cage and David Tudor, and was a co-founder, with Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley and Gordon Mumma, of the Sonic Arts Union. Audio recordings of his works are on the Alga Marghen, XI, Pogus, New

Top left to right: Christian Wolff, Jon Appleton; middle: Paul Moravec; bottom left to right: Bill Cole, David Evan Jones, at a Dartmouth New Musics concert. Photo by Stuart Bratesman. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.



World, WERGO and Lovely Music labels; videos can be viewed at Roulette.org, ubu.com, and dbehrman.net.

ROBERT CARL's teachers include Iannis Xenakis, Ralph Shapey, George Rochberg, and Jonathan Kramer. His music is performed throughout the US and Europe. As a writer on new music, Mr. Carl was commissioned by Oxford University Press to write *Terry Riley's In C*; writes extensively on new music for *Fanfare*; has contributed a chapter to *The Farthest Place*, an anthology of writings on the music of John Luther Adams; and was the editor of an issue of *Contemporary Music Review* on historicism in late 20th century American music. For the latter, he first met and interviewed Christian Wolff. CDs on New World Records have included his string chamber works, and experimental/electroacoustic works derived from Japanese music and aesthetics. His works are published by American Composers Edition (www.composers.com). Other CDs of his music can be found on Innova, Centaur, Cedille, and VMM. Carl is chair of the composition program at The Hartt School, University of Hartford.

GEORGE E. LEWIS is the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University. Recipient of MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellowships, Alpert Award in the Arts, United States Artists Walker Fellowship, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Lewis studied composition with Muhal Richard Abrams at the AACM School of Music, and trombone with Dean Hey. A member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) since 1971, Lewis's work in electronic and computer music, computer-based multimedia installations, text-sound works, and notated and improvisative forms is documented on more than 140 recordings. His work has been presented by the American Composers Orchestra, International Contemporary Ensemble, Ensemble Dal Niente, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Ensemble Either/Or, London Philharmonia Orchestra, Talea

Ensemble, Dinosaur Annex, Ensemble Pamplemousse, Wet Ink, Turning Point Ensemble, Ensemble Erik Satie, Orkestra Futura, Eco Ensemble, Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, and others, with commissions from the San Francisco

Christian's music redefines the composer's role; it completely overturns received aesthetic notions, discovering unexpected possibilities in familiar material: surprising, disconcerting and enlivening in equal measure.

—Michael Parsons

Contemporary Music Players, 2010 Vancouver Cultural Olympiad, OPUS (Paris), IRCAM, Harvestworks, Studio Museum in Harlem, the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, and others.

ALVIN LUCIER was born in 1931 in Nashua, New Hampshire. He studied at Yale and Brandeis and spent two years in Rome on a Fulbright Scholarship. He has pioneered in many areas of music composition and performance, including the use of brain waves in live performance and the evocation of room acoustics for musical purposes. His works include sound installations and works for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, and orchestra in which, by means of close tunings with pure tones, sound waves are caused to spin through space. Lucier performs, lectures and exhibits his sound installations extensively in the United States, Europe and Asia. His most recent work, *Orpheus Variations*, will be premiered at the New Music Days, Ostrava, Czech Republic, in August 2015. His recent book, *Music 109, Notes on Experimental Music*, was published by the Wesleyan University Press. Many of his works have been recorded on Disques Montaine, Mainstream, Mode, CBS Odyssey, New World, Lovely Music,

and Vergo. Lucier was awarded the *Lifetime Achievement Award* by the Society for Electro-Acoustic Music and received an Honorary Doctorate of Arts degree from the University of Plymouth, England. Alvin Lucier is John Spencer Camp Professor of Music, Emeritus, at Wesleyan University.

IKUE MORI started playing drums when she moved from Japan to New York City in 1977 and formed the seminal NO WAVE band DNA with Arto Lindsay and Tim Wright, which created a new brand of radical rhythms and dissonant sounds, forever altering the face of rock music. In the mid '80s Mori employed drum machines in the unlikely context of improvised music, forging her own highly sensitive signature style. During the '90s, she collaborated with numerous improvisers throughout the US, Europe, and Asia, continuing to produce and record her own music. In 1999, Mori won an Award of Distinction in the Digital Music and Sound Art category of the Prix Ars Electronica, and shortly after started using a laptop computer to expand her vocabulary, not only playing sounds but creating and controlling the visual work as well. Her works have been commissioned by the Tate Modern, SWR German Broadcasting Corporation and Shajah Art foundation (United Arab Emirates). She has led workshops at many schools, including University of Gothenburg, Dartmouth College, Stanford and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Pianist **URSULA OPPENS** has long been recognized as a leading champion of contemporary American piano music. An enduring commitment to integrating new music into regular concert life has led Ms. Oppens to commission and premiere countless compositions. In addition to her long and productive association with Elliott Carter, she has premiered works by such leading composers as Luciano Berio, William Bolcom, John Harbison, Julius Hemphill, Tania Leon, Harold Meltzer, György Ligeti, Witold Lutoslawski, Conlon Nancarrow, Tobias Picker, Frederic Rzewski, Joan Tower,

Amy Williams, Christian Wolff, Amnon Wolman, and Charles Wuorinen. Ms. Oppens has performed with virtually all of the world's major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and American Composers Orchestra. Abroad, she has appeared with the Berlin Symphony, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Deutsche Symphonie, Scottish BBC, and the London Philharmonic Orchestras. Distinguished Professor of Music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City, she served as John Evans Distinguished Professor of Music at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL from 1994-1998.

MICHAEL PARSONS has been active since the 1960s as a composer, performer and writer on music. After taking a degree in classics at Oxford he studied piano and composition at the Royal College of Music. In 1969 he was co-founder with Cornelius Cardew and Howard Skempton of the Scratch Orchestra, an experimental collective of musicians and artists from diverse backgrounds who developed an open-ended approach to sound and performance, unrestricted by traditional boundaries and definitions of music. From 1970 to 1990 he was a visiting lecturer in the Department of Fine Art, Portsmouth Polytechnic, and at the Slade School of Art. In 1996-97 he was composer in residence at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, working in association with artists of the Systems group. His early work was influenced by Schoenberg and Webern; in the 1960s he became interested, through Cardew, in indeterminacy and the music of the New York School. He has written many works for piano, instrumental ensembles, and, more recently, for voices, including *Three Sappho Lyrics* (for the Finnish female vocal ensemble Fiori), and settings of choruses from Sophocles' *Antigone*.

LARRY POLANSKY is a composer, theorist, performer, editor, writer and teacher. He is the Emeritus

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Promoting a new music and jazz concert at Dartmouth. Left to right: Jon Appleton, Christian Wolff, Hafiz Shabazz, David Evan Jones, Bill Cole; photo by Stuart Bratesman. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

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Strauss Professor of Music at Dartmouth College, the co-founder and co-director of Frog Peak Music (A Composers' Collective), and is currently Professor of Music at UC Santa Cruz. He has also taught at Bard College and several other schools. His solo CDs are available on New World Records, Artifact, and Cold Blue, and his music is widely anthologized on many other labels. His works are performed frequently around the world. Polansky is the recipient of a number of prizes, commissions, and awards, including Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Mellon New Directions Fellowships (the latter for work in American Sign Language performance). He was the inaugural recipient (with David Behrman) of the Henry Cowell Award from the American Music Center. As a performer (primarily as guitarist and mandolinist), he has premiered and recorded important contemporary works by Christian Wolff, Barbara Monk Feldman, Michael Parsons, James Tenney, Lou Harrison, Lois V Vierk, Ron Nagorcka, Daniel Goode, David Mahler, and many others.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI, piano, is among the major figures of the American musical avant-garde to emerge in the '60s, and a highly influential composer and performer. Born in Massachusetts, he earned his B.A. in music at Harvard, and later received an M.F.A. from Princeton, where he studied with Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. A Fulbright scholarship took him to Florence in 1960 to study for a year with Luigi Dallapiccola. He first came to public attention as a performer of new piano music, having participated in the premieres of such monumental works as Stockhausen's *Klavierstück X* (1962). In 1966, Rzewski founded, with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, the famous ensemble *Musica Electronica Viva* (MEV), which combined free improvisation with written music and electronics. During the '70s, his music continued to develop along these lines, but as his socialist proclivities began to direct his artistic course, he developed new structures for instrumental music

that used text elements and musical style as structuring features. *Attica*, which includes the recitation of a prison letter, and *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, a virtuosic set of piano variations, are his most well-known works of the period. In 1977, he was made professor of composition at the Royal Conservatory of Liège, Belgium, and has continued to teach there since.

As a soloist, **ROBYN SCHULKOWSKY** has premiered and recorded many of the most important percussion works of the 20th and 21st centuries. Since 1998, as founder of Rhythm Lab, Schulkowsky has taken rhythm workshops to countless cities, incorporating drumming music from around the globe. In 2005 *Space And Frequency Rhythm Lab*, created by Schulkowsky and Lukas Kühne, premiered original music for the "marimbon" in the Vanderbilt Hall of New York City's Grand Central Station. In 2009, working with 100 students of mixed social backgrounds, she created a new music theatre project based on the story of Antigone. Last year she took her "rhythmlab" to Greece and England. In Berlin and Bonn, she directed new interpretations of percussion orchestra compositions based on sketches by the composer Charles Ives. New World Records released her own composition for percussion trio, *Armadillo* (with Joey Baron and Fredy Studer). New World also released the cd *8 Duos—music by Christian Wolff*. Wolff's latest work for solo percussion and string orchestra, *Encouragement*, commissioned by the Münchener Kammerorchester, was premiered in Munich in October. In 2015 Robyn travels with *rhythmlab* to China and premieres a new work for large percussion ensemble in Iceland.

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INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP THOMAS ON PERFORMING THE MUSIC OF CHRISTIAN WOLFF BY SPENCER TOPEL

Spencer Topel How did you get to know Christian and his music, or at what point did you encounter Christian Wolff?

Philip Thomas I played this piece by Michael Finnissy entitled *Folklore* (1993-94), and I also played *Bread and Roses* (1976) by Christian in the same concert. It was the first time I played any of his music, and there was something immediately about the sound world that I liked, just the harmony and the kind of narrative flow or the non-narrative flow maybe, and that I think spurred me on to more of his music.

ST On the topic of experimental music or experimentalism in music, how does Christian Wolff fit into the history in both the United States and the U.K.?

PT There is no one quite like Christian Wolff, and his music is so original, so unique, and so hard to place, and yes people associate him historically with Feldman and Cage, but he's nothing like any of them. I mean you could argue that the very early piece for prepared piano, yes it's a prepared piano piece, it uses fairly limited material, it has an obvious Cagean influence, I mean he was sixteen when he wrote it, you kind of bear your influences then. But even then, Michael Hicks has written that fantastic chapter in the book I edited, about Christian's music, which makes a really strong case for how Christian's music influenced Cage and how it also influenced Feldman, but he's not like any of them really.

ST It's conceptual, and yet when you look at Christian's work, he is looking back as he looks forward in terms

Christian Wolff, *Trio V for James Tenney*. For Piano Four Hands and One Percussionist (page 3). Peters Edition #68174. ©2007 C. F. Peters Corp. Used by kind permission. All rights reserved.

of what he draws from traditional notational practices and counterpoint techniques.

PT I think it was Cage who said that Christian's music is like a "classical music of an alien civilization." I mean, you've got Bach and Webern in there, but it is so obscure, it's not like anybody else, and it kind of has an improvisatory quality to it, but it's not improvisation either, it's a strange textured music, with odd little melodic phrases in there, strange little hockets, rhythms based on performer interactions and things, and they create a sense of line and dealing with motivic material, which is unlike anything else I know.

ST Not to dwell too much on the person Christian Wolff, but he is extremely self-effacing and modest, and you have to sort of coax things out of him in a way, which I find really endearing, and when you actually probe, he gives you access to really incredible insights.

PT As you dig a little deeper he comes out with some amazing comments that are really perceptive and really reflective, and yet there's this fantastic childlike playfulness as well about him as a musician, that there is this man who is now eighty-one years old, who's very happy to be playing a concert of avant-garde music, sitting and blowing into this little melodica on his lap, making these little tunes, you know. I love that, because it just typifies how important the idea of play, playfulness, and childlike innocence is in the music, and it comes out in the techniques he uses in ensemble playing. That feeling of wanting to play, and the joy of playing, is absolutely the heart of his ensemble music. It makes you want to play, and more importantly, it makes you want to play with other people.

ST Considering that Christian's work contains often game-like instructions, are there any circumstances where you've taken things past the boundaries.

PT: On one level I'm interested to surprise him, but on another he's often not written very much, but what he has written I'm going to respect. Having said that, there are surprises often from him! In a performance of *Edges*, in Bologna [Italy] with Christian

That feeling of wanting to play, and the joy of playing, is absolutely the heart of his ensemble music. It makes you want to play, and more importantly, it makes you want to play with other people.

—Philip Thomas

playing as well. *Edges* is probably the most improvisatory score he's written, it's the most open and most ambiguous perhaps of all his scores.

There was another performance with Apartment House quite some years ago in Cambridge, it was one of the *Exercises*, he was playing one piano and I was playing the other and we got it really good in rehearsal...really nailed it. In the concert, it all went...I had no idea what was going on, we all got completely lost. It got a standing ovation, it was received so well, and then we repeated it, and again it was pretty hairy. I think it was Christian, I think he was pushing it to places we hadn't planned.

ST Something a bit mischievous...

PT Definitely, but he's quite good at hiding it, you know, he looks quite innocent.

ST Finally, are there any important experiences that you might share beyond my questions?

PT The most important experience for me was that very first time I met him, when I was playing *Bread and Roses*. I met with him in the afternoon, and in-

variably when you meet a composer for the first time and you're not quite sure how it's going to work out, it can be a little nerve-wracking. I looked across to him afterwards and he was sitting there, and I was just waiting for the response—the blessing or otherwise—from the composer, and he just looked at me and shrugged his shoulders and went "sure" and that was it.

It was incredibly frustrating, and yet more and more I realize it was so important because what could've he said? "No, I don't like it there or I don't like what you do there" or "Could you do this more." Well that doesn't sound like a very Christian Wolff thing to do. He's done his job with the score.

He wasn't going to tell me these things, because what would happen then? He didn't know me, and I might go then to my pupils: "This is how to play this music, I know because Christian Wolff told me what he liked," and then you get a performing tradition, and that doesn't sound like Christian Wolff either because he'd want my pupil to play it differently than I had played it. So that is really important, that simple shrug of the shoulders and the "sure." That's so important, it might appear that he doesn't care, but it's because he deeply cares.

Philip Thomas specializes in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. He places much emphasis on each concert being a unique event, designing imaginative programs that provoke and suggest connections. Particularly drawn to the experimental music of John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff, and composers who broadly work within a post-Cageian aesthetic, in recent years he has been particularly associated with the music of Christian Wolff, giving the world premiere of his *Sailing By* in 2014 and *Small Preludes* in 2009, the UK premiere of *Long Piano (Peace March 11)*, having co-edited and contributed to the first major study of Wolff's music, *Changing the System: the Music of Christian Wolff*, published by Ashgate Publications in 2010, and

currently recording all of Wolff's solo piano music for *sub rosa*. He is an experienced performer of John Cage's music, having performed the *Concert for piano and orchestra* with both Apartment House and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as well as most of the solo piano and prepared piano music, including a unique 12-hour performance of *Electronic Music for piano*.

Interview conducted April 30, 2015

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We gratefully acknowledge the funders whose generosity has made this celebration and exhibition possible, including the Department of Music; the Hopkins Center for the Arts; the offices of the President, Provost, and Dean of the College; the Department of Classics and the Comparative Literature Program; and the Dartmouth College Library. Major funders include the Leonard J. Reade 1917 American Music Fund and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The Dartmouth Library staff, including Laura Barrett, Dennis Grady, and Patricia Fiskens, were energetic and wonderful collaborators. Thanks are also due to the faculty in the Department of Music, particularly: Steve Swayne, Jacob H. Strauss 1922 Professor of Music, and Ted Levin, Arthur R. Virgin Professor of Music, whose ideas and guidance made this booklet possible; and their colleagues Spencer Topel, Ashley Fure, Kui Dong, and Michael Casey.

Our colleagues at Wesleyan University, including Center for the Arts Director Pamela Tatge, led the way with their own recent celebration of composer Alvin Lucier and generously provided advice as well as a great photograph of Wolff. We were lucky to work with a remarkable designer, Laura Grey '02, whose own affection for Christian Wolff fueled her wonderful work here.

Finally, there is Christian Wolff, a remarkable individual who creatively and good-naturedly allowed us the privilege of celebrating his accomplishments, a feat and fête that required much organizing and patience on his part. We are deeply grateful.

—Margaret Lawrence, *Director of Programming, Hopkins Center*

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