Chapter 2

Christian Wolff in Darmstadt, 1972 and 1974

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Author’s note: The following essay on Christian Wolff’s experiences at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse in 1972 and 1974 is interspersed with edited and annotated excerpts from an interview I conducted with the composer on 26 June 1997.¹ The interview focused on American composers and their relationship to European contemporary music circles from the 1950s to the mid-1990s. Wolff’s direct comments will, I hope, effectively and more broadly supplement my written summary of specific events in the early–mid-1970s.

Christian Wolff (b. 1934) first went to Darmstadt in 1956:

I was [in Darmstadt] in 1956, but I was just passing through. I’d been on a Fulbright [scholarship] in Italy and was on my way home. The timing was just such that I could just stop in. David Tudor was there so I partly went to see what he was up to. It wasn’t so much serialist and aleatoric as it was Americans and Europeans – more almost a cultural thing rather than a musical one.

I was in the Army, and I got stationed in Stuttgart from the end of 1959 through 1961. I know that during that time I certainly went to Darmstadt at least once. I was also passing through Cologne in 1960, which had a kind of major scene. Darmstadt was just two or three weeks in summer; but Cologne was a more permanent scene. Stockhausen’s studio was there … and De Kooning. Mary Bauermeister was a focus of it, and Nam June Paik was there. Cage passed through. Cornelius Cardew was staying there for a while during that time, that was the first time I met him. There was a very lively scene going on there, which involved a sort of back and forth between Americans and Europeans. Americans would pass through. I took part in a concert at the Bauermeister studio, actually a very famous concert, it’s the one where Nam June Paik … For instance, we did a performance of Cage’s Cartridge Music [(1960)] and the participants to the best of my memory included Cage, David Tudor, Paik – I’m not sure if he actually took part – Cardew, and possibly Kurt Schwertsik was there.² [...] And doubtless, obviously, there are all of these

¹ The interview excerpts are italicized. Thanks to Noah Meites for research assistance and transcription work.
² This and other concerts involving American musicians are documented in Wilfried Dörstel et al. (eds), Intermedial, Kontrovers, Experimentell: Das Atelier Mary Bauermeister in Köln, 1960–62 (Cologne, 1993).
names I can’t remember now. But in terms of American music and European music and their interaction, [Cologne was significant], while Darmstadt is a kind of seasonal event.

When Wolff accepted an invitation to lead a series of seminars in Darmstadt during the summer of 1972, he became the first American composer to give a series of composition seminars there since Milton Babbitt in 1964, and he re-established the presence of American experimentalism after a period of partial neglect. Wolff arrived in Darmstadt amidst a storm of ideological discourse that lingered in response to the unstable political atmosphere of the early 1970s in western Europe. In his composition seminars of both 1972 and 1974, Wolff spoke about the context for avant-garde music in the United States, introducing qualities often associated with experimentalism: isolation, non-conformism, and lack of support. He discussed new works by his contemporaries Alvin Lucier and Pauline Oliveros, who were, at the time, barely known in Europe. He also introduced the mostly European audience to several recent, political and/or ideologically driven works: John Cage’s *Song Books* (1970), Frederic Rzewski’s *Coming Together* (1971) and Wolff’s own *Burdocks* (1970–71) – as well as provocative new works such as Philip Glass’s *Music in Similar Motion* (1969). Wolff also drew emphatic connections between American composers’ engagement with environmental issues and the natural world and their ‘ahistorical’ and ‘atemporal’ compositional attitudes. Recordings of Wolff’s 1972 and 1974 seminars are archived at the International Music Institute in Darmstadt (IMD), and the conversations preserved there illuminate then-pressing concerns about audience, accessibility, elitism, ‘popular’ music, virtuosity versus amateurism, progression versus regression, minimalism, the return of tonality, the reception of avant-garde jazz, and the future of ‘new music’. The ways Wolff introduced this music and raised this set of questions sheds light on an intriguing clash of cultures. The following essay describes the contents of and reactions to Wolff’s spirited seminars, and outlines his views about how the patronage and reception of American experimental music at Darmstadt was – and still is – different from other American music of the same generation:

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Somebody like Charles Wuorinen or Milton Babbitt are just completely ignored there; they just have no presence whatsoever. Whereas here [in the USA] they are just sort of standards. And I think that was the case then. The one exception to that is Elliott Carter, who – and I don’t know quite how or why – always had strong European connections in England, in France, and in Germany. In fact, it seems to me – I don’t know when the DAAD started exactly, or when it started to bring musicians to Berlin … but Carter was in Berlin for some reason, whether it was the Americans that sent him there, but he was on some kind of a fellowship. He then was asked to nominate other composers, American composers, to come and I remember being struck because he had Frederic Rzewski come.

28 July 1972

During the plenary session of his first seminar, Wolff characterized American experimental music as detached from economic concerns and therefore free to experiment uninhibitedly. He also criticized the aggressive, imperialist behaviour of the United States, and questioned to what degree such considerations might be relevant to a discussion of American music:

[The United States is] the country which represents the most spectacular developments of Western capitalism. … America represents roughly six percent of the world’s population, and it consumes roughly sixty percent of the world’s products. … The other fact about the United States I think we should have in the back of our minds is that they have been conducting a war of extraordinary stupidity and inhumanity.

Wolff left these facts in the air without further comment.

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4 Milton Babbitt had just one teaching appointment at the Ferienkurse, in 1964, though he had been invited on several occasions since 1958.

5 Elliott Carter was a DAAD Artist-in-Residence in West Berlin during the calendar year of 1964.


7 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Wolff and other people present at his seminars are taken from the recordings archived at the IMD. Further sources on proceedings at the 1972 and 1974 Ferienkurse include the Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik XIII and XIV (Mainz, 1973 and 1975). The 1973 issue (covering the 1972 Ferienkurse) includes papers on music and politics by Carl Dahlhaus, Reinhold Brinkmann and György Ligeti. The 1975 issue (covering the proceedings of the 1974 Ferienkurse) include responses to situation-driven questions by Wolff, Kagel, Xenakis and Stockhausen.
Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff

_Burdocks_, a piece Wolff had finished the previous summer, was the first composition he chose to discuss. (The title refers to a resilient type of thistle with edible taproots, common to New England where Wolff lives.) He explained that in the past he had avoided writing orchestral music, because it seemed improbable that an orchestra would play it, given the music American conductors favoured. It is worth noting that many American composers of Wolff’s generation avoided writing orchestral music for similar reasons.

*It’s certainly the case for me that Europe provides the bulk of my royalties. I just got my BMI report, my European one, and it’s roughly ten times what I get – none of it is very big – for performances in the United States. It’s a combination of live performances and radio play – that’s the big thing. Very often European performances are, in fact, sponsored by the radios who have tapes and then rebroadcast them. That’s when you get a little bit of income, and that’s something that just doesn’t exist in this country, not at all. So here, if you get a performance – whether it’s in New York or at some college somewhere – that’s it. That is not to say there aren’t composers who are very successful in this country. But you have to get into the symphony orchestra scene. None of us managed to do that.*

He expanded upon his scepticism: ‘The situation of an orchestra seemed to me problematical in this sense: how do you make it possible for a large number of performers all to act as individuals?’ Since most of Wolff’s music had considered that particular question – explored in many of his ‘democratic indeterminacy’ works, _For 1, 2, or 3 People_ (1964) for example – it was only natural that he would avoid writing for forces that discouraged equality and independence among the players. He added that ‘there is also a formal problem, which is to make a music with a larger number of people which could sustain a certain degree of clarity, in the broadest sense, formal clarity, and clarity of feeling’. He cited his enthusiasm for Cornelius Cardew and the London-based Scratch Orchestra, and credited them with inspiring him to write _Burdocks_ for orchestra – albeit a wholly unconventional one. Wolff has stated that he intended the work to serve ‘a varied community of musicians (classical, folk, experimental, jazz, et cetera), professional and amateur and non-musicians, joined in a populist-anarchist spirit…’._

With considerable detail, Wolff described the score of _Burdocks_, which consists of prose instructions, semi-traditional, and partially graphic notation, and requires each group (‘one or more orchestras’) wishing to perform the work to create its own realization out of the ten possible sections. The many subdivisions of these ten sections can be arranged and overlapped in various ways, and allow for any number of players (except for a few restricted parts), and any number of simultaneities. It explores a variety of parameters – production and variety of sounds; types of coordination – in specific ways. _Burdocks_ is thus a classic expression of indeterminacy, both structural and orchestral. Since Wolff wanted

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8 Christian Wolff, Programme note, _Cues_, p. 496.
his seminar participants to actively engage with the music, he suggested trying a version of Part 1c, which he characterized as a series of ‘fuses’ (elongated sounds) and ‘detonations’ (succinct sounds). Prior to the realization, the seminar discussed whether the instructions made clear what performers were supposed to do. One participant questioned whether such instructions actually led to something that could be considered music. Wolff replied that the result is music ‘because it is conducive to sound’, but he also resisted allowing a discussion about what is and what is not ‘music’. He explained:

The main criterion of any notation which is unconventional is that it produces an effect which cannot be produced by other existing notations. And in this case that’s why I use this notation, because I believe I can get sounds from it which will not be like the sounds I could get if I wrote out something like [writes something on the board.] That could, in fact, take place, but this notation [gesturing to score of Burdocks] allows a great deal else to take place.

The discussion then turned to questions central to most improvisational practices, such as the length of the piece, and how the group would know how to end. Wolff explained that continuity depended on coordination, intuition and sensitivity on the part of the players: ‘It’s like an organism, it’s like an animal, it comes to a stage in its life when it has to transform itself or stop living’. Wolff coached the musicians on listening, awareness and patience. After the brief realization of the ‘fuses and detonations’, Wolff raised several questions: Was the performance too monotonous? How would the group decide how to change it? Did anyone hear any mistakes? How would one know if things are incorrect? He explained that this music required deep integrity on the part of the performers, since only they would know if they were doing everything they could to accurately interpret the instructions. Wolff called it ‘the honour system’, since ‘each performer has to be his own boss, his own conductor, he has to be responsible, to be sure that what he’s doing corresponds to what the particular terms that the score sets are’. He clarified that ambiguity did not trouble him, as long as players were not ‘acting arbitrarily’.

Wolff proceeded through Burdocks, discussing each part in detail. He let the group play the ‘unison melody’ that constitutes Part 1e (‘unison’, though any note can be read in any clef), with Rzewski leading from the piano. Wolff played a recording of Part 2, which he called a ‘chorale’, since it consists of a cued succession of chords. Part 3 gives the instructions for an orchestra of any number of players to play 511 different sounds each – a task that, as Wolff pointed out, requires considerable pre-performance decision-making. He described two contrasting realizations, one free (performed by about 40 individuals) and one controlled (guided by a conductor). After guiding the seminar through several more sections of Burdocks, Wolff ended the session by playing a recording of three different parts of the work. He referred to the recording as a ‘chamber version’
rather than orchestral, since it included just six players: the original performers who premiered the work in Royalton, Vermont, during August 1971.\(^9\)

**29 July 1972**

The following day began with a discussion of the Darmstadt performance of Wolff’s *Snowdrop* (1970, a composed realization of Tilbury 4 (1970), named for British pianist John Tilbury); in particular, the students questioned Wolff’s use of scales and arpeggios. One commentator called the inclusion of such traditional elements of Western music ‘disturbing’. Wolff responded:

> Yes, something very curious is happening, it seems to me, in modern music, and that is to say that we’ve become so alienated from the most fundamental musical phenomenon, such as scales, such as certain simple harmonic combinations, and so on, and more generally, from a kind of directness of the music, both in its expression and its structure. And I think that may have been the trouble. I must say I was originally very surprised to see that [*Snowdrop*] got a mixed reception, I always thought of it as a gentle and pleasant piece, nothing really very extraordinary. And to see that people were disturbed by it surprised me very much. But I think it must have something to do with this phenomenon. On the other hand, it is also curious that precisely these elements are coming back – for what reasons I’m not entirely sure. Think of American music such as Terry Riley, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, all music which is diatonic, rhythmically absolutely clear, sounds beautiful [audience laughter].

These reactions, and Wolff’s response, foreshadowed discussions that would continue in Darmstadt two years later, fueled by the contentious reception of American minimalism.

> It’s hard to recover the feel of that period. There were people more or less my age who were certainly very sympathetic to the younger people and also politically fairly much to the left, and we didn’t know quite what to do. And then there were sort of musicologists like [Rudolf] Stephan and [Carl] Dahlhaus who would give lectures about politics and music which were very cautious and certainly not as far out politically as a number of people on the left would have liked.\(^10\) Heinz-Klaus Metzger has always been to the left, but at the same time he’s intellectually

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\(^9\) See List of Works, item 43, for details of the première.

\(^{10}\) In 1972, Ernst Thomas scheduled three politically oriented lectures during the Ferienkurse: ‘Politische und ästhetische Kriterien der Kompositionskritik’ by Carl Dahlhaus, a response paper on the same topic by Reinhold Brinkmann, and ‘Apropos Musik und Politik’ by György Ligeti. All were subsequently published in the *Darmstädter Beiträge* in 1973.
so rarefied and complicated and intricate in his mode of expression that he wasn’t exactly leading people to the barricades. He didn’t do lectures in Darmstadt; he was more a presence in Cologne. And he would write, I mean, he published articles in Die Reihe. And then Stockhausen was just downright conservative politically, not to say reactionary, and people even protested his concerts.

Wolff focused much of his second seminar on sound production and ensemble interaction through compositions that used only stones. One piece he asked his students to try was a section of *Burdocks*, in which each player makes one sound and ‘passes’ it to the next player, and so on. These instructions led to confusion about what constituted ‘one sound’. Wolff remarked that he frequently encountered this confusion, also the situation (as was here the case) in which the first time around the group, players made beautiful sounds, but they then quickly became restless and ceased to take the task seriously. Wolff seemed to suspect that his audience was ill at ease with being asked to ‘make music’ with stones. He addressed this concern directly: Why do you suppose we would use stones? He provided possible answers: stones are readily available nearly everywhere; they are among the most ancient instruments; they have a great sound; and they can be both delicate (rubbing) and violent (striking). A student asked if Wolff was interested in the democratizing effect of using stones, and/or if he meant to be subversive by avoiding traditional instruments and their implied concert rituals. Wolff responded that he was interested in instrumental virtuosity, but also wanted to write music that could include everyone.

*Boulez and others regarded our music as very primitive technically – yes, primitive is, I guess, the word. Not refined, not complicated, not a lot of chops being shown off. I always understood that difference, that attack on not just Feldman, but on me certainly as well. Cage is a slightly more complex case. Earle’s music somehow seemed closer to the European avant-garde music of the 1960s, so that they didn’t worry so much about him. But Feldman was clearly different. The music was so stripped down, and seemingly so simple that they just thought: this is child’s work, or something like that, as opposed to a ‘serious artist’. I can see that he would be sensitive to that and that he himself—especially after he had been in Buffalo. His control of quite a lot of the classical literature was very impressive. He would come out and start singing bits of Beethoven to you and things like that. That may have been partly because as teacher you needed to be able to do that, but also as a response to this feeling that you know, ‘You haven’t been properly trained, you don’t come from the proper tradition’ and all of these things. I think the feeling’s ambivalent. I think he, and the rest of us, feel and felt that there were tremendous advantages to this. In fact, that this was our strength: that we didn’t have this conventional

*11 Many of these pieces have since been published in *The Frog Peak Rock Music Book* (Hanover, NH, 1995).
training, and therefore our thinking was much freer and more open and we had a better chance of discovering stuff. But at the same time you can feel a little insecure if people don’t think you have all that you have to have to pass your general exams and stuff like that. So that’s what was sort of going on. Boulez is obviously a tremendous musician, a great conductor and so forth, whereas the rest of us, none of us are much in the way of performers or conductors or anything. I mean, we don’t do anything except just compose. So we’re fairly vulnerable in that kind of context.

The next piece the seminar examined – Wolff’s prose piece called, simply, *Stones* (1968) – demonstrated this point, since it had been written for a group of British art students who wanted to experience music-making. (Wolff has elsewhere described this piece as ‘an extreme instance of combining maximum transparency, flexibility, and freedom for performers with at the same time an unmistakable, irreducible identity’.) After the group played the piece, Wolff critiqued their engagement with the work, asking, quite bluntly: ‘Was it done in a musical way?’ and ‘Do you think you were performing like musicians?’ He pointed out what he interpreted as a psychological atmosphere in which everyone played just for themselves. He added a strict directive: ‘If you want to be theatrical, you have to do it in a selfless way’.

Wolff then turned to John Cage’s recent *Song Books*. Cage considers each ‘solo’ (individual piece) in *Song Books* to fall into one of two categories: ‘song’ or ‘theatre’, each with or without electronics. In Cage’s words, every song is ‘relevant or irrelevant’ to the relation between Satie with regard to Thoreau (Cage writes in his General Directions: ‘We connect Satie with Thoreau’). Wolff explained to his seminar that *Song Books* was based on the idea of being either a parasite (living off something else) or a hybrid (crossing two organisms).

*I never had the impression that there were stretches when Cage wasn’t busy and travelling, and quite a bit of that was in Germany. Germany’s where the money is, and the facilities, and also the people. Because of the early start, people like Metzger were always interested in Cage. And others. Reinhard Oehlschlägel had been very active in promoting American music – my work, and of course Cage and others. And then there was another man, at the Hessischer Rundfunk, Ernstalbrecht Stiebler. And then there was someone up in Bonn, another one, another great fan of American music. So there were these centres, and these were all people connected with radio and with access to resources. And that just sort of continued. There were a few composers, of some clout. Dieter Schnebel has always been interested in and written intelligently about Cage and the rest of us.*

As Wolff talked at considerable length about Cage’s *Song Books*, his audience grew restless. By this point Wolff seemed increasingly exasperated by the sceptical attitude of the group, and also seemed exhausted by the long classes...
and his continuous efforts to translate nearly all of his lectures (and much of the discussions) into French and/or German. (Providing adequate translation was an ongoing concern of the students active in the rebellions against the Darmstadt administration during the early 1970s.) Moreover, Wolff acted in indirect yet subversive ways: insisting on including the rock pieces despite the seminar’s reluctance to take that music seriously; talking at length about Cage at a time when open hostility toward his ideas was common in West Germany and his music had not been present in Darmstadt for nearly 15 years; emphasizing anarchist and anti-war positions – all while critiquing his students in observant, inquiring ways. He also organized listening sessions separate from the seminar class time, for the group to hear recordings that Wolff had brought to Darmstadt, such as David Tudor’s *Rainforest* (1968).

*Cage had real problems with that whole political turbulence. [It’s like if] a close friend of yours falls madly in love and you kind of put up with it, even though they turn out to be a pain in the ass, and you figure they’ll work their way through it, maybe they’ll change, maybe not. In the meantime, they’ve always been your friend so you kind of go along with them. It was a little bit like that. Feldman was basically very intelligent so that he would notice that the music changed but it was still X’s music or my music or whoever’s, and the qualities that he was interested in, in that music, as far as he could see, were still there. The politics were something else. I’m sure he had politics, though he was certainly not strongly to the left – or in any political direction. I think he had a generally liberal outlook on the world. I was struck actually by a handful of things where Feldman is surprisingly political. Do you know those radio interviews with Cage?¹³ ... I remember I was asked to do a little introduction to them ... and was surprised to see – this was the late sixties and Vietnam was already underway and so forth – and it was Feldman who raised the political questions, it wasn’t Cage. I was very struck by that. And then that piece of his, The King of Denmark [1964], which is a political piece for heaven’s sake. I mean it’s pure Feldman, but with that title. It was all about the king of Denmark coming out with a Star of David during the German occupation. But when our paths crossed, Feldman’s and mine, I knew there wasn’t any point in really talking about [political matters] because I knew where he stood and he knew where I stood and there wasn’t anything to say.*

**30 July 1972**

To start his third and final seminar of 1972, Wolff introduced three ideas that currently concerned him: music and natur, Cardew’s Maoist critique of Cage, and

music’s social usefulness. He began by expounding on the relationship between American music and nature, drawing connections between that topic and some of the music he had introduced (Burdocks, Song Books, Rainforest). The ‘nature’ he referred to included not only the obvious pastoral subjects, but the also the internal natural world (brain waves, for example) and outer space; in other words, parts of nature that are only accessible through technology. Wolff connected this concern with nature to ‘a certain tendency in American music to be ahistorical, atemporal, indifferent to history’, emphasizing that this tendency was what ‘strikes people first when they look at American music in relationship to European music’.

He then mentioned Cardew’s recently published criticisms of Cage, remarking that he felt that Cardew’s writings simplified Cage’s position in a complex work like Song Books.14 Wolff had trouble accepting the critique, since he was in sympathy with Cage, yet he felt it was a useful thing for Cardew to have done. Wolff re-emphasized how the work reflected Cage’s interest in Thoreau’s ‘gentle anarchism’, Buckminster Fuller (‘a social engineer’ looking for technological solutions to the world’s problems), and the optimism represented by ‘progress’ in China. To conclude his opening remarks, Wolff said the following regarding how American composers’ concern for nature might be socially useful:

The music which it has produced tends in two directions which in some way imply each other. The first one is away from two things: first of all, away from the historical musical traditions and therefore, for America, away from the musical establishment, and on the whole, that has had a liberating effect. The other thing, which is a little more practical, is that it also leads away from, just physically, the concert hall. You’ll see when we describe these pieces, that they would be often totally inappropriate in a conventional concert hall. They really move out. They may move out into the hills, or they may move out into the streets, but they certainly move out, and that seems to me a very valuable and useful direction in which to go. The other thing, then, is the relationship of the music to technology. Gordon Mumma has observed that [multimedia events], of all the sort of artistic manifestations, are the ones which most readily, or most easily, transform an audience into participants – that is to say, break down the division between performers and others.

After further discussion and performance of parts of Burdocks, the remainder of the seminar was devoted to Pauline Oliveros and Alvin Lucier. Wolff drew attention to the differences between east-coast (Lucier) and west-coast (Oliveros) composers, even though both had fairly conventional musical educations, and both had been university educated. He discussed further commonalities: both were interested in aspects of nature and environment (especially as related to ecological

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Christian Wolff in Darmstadt, 1972 and 1974

concerns at the time, like pollution); both belonged to performing groups. Wolff admitted that he was ‘at a disadvantage’, since he had only heard one piece by Oliveros, the one he would describe to the seminar: *In Memoriam Nikola Tesla, Cosmic Engineer* (1969), a piece she wrote for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Wolff characterized Oliveros as ‘the closest thing America has to Mauricio Kagel’ due to her ‘similar sense of theatre’, and also drew connections between Stockhausen’s prose pieces *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968) and Oliveros’s improvisatory scores for meditative ensemble experiences. Wolff also mentioned spatial pieces that explored the resonant frequencies of a room, like Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970).

Returning to a discussion of Oliveros, Wolff read aloud from her book *Sonic Meditations* (1971), and discussed some of her telepathy pieces, after which the group performed a simplified realization of her stone piece from that collection called ‘Removing the Demon, or Getting Your Rocks Off’. The instructions ask players to locate their slowest possible pulse within their own bodies, and then to strike two stones together in a regular articulation of that pulse. This results in overlapping smacks of the stones, resonating throughout the room, and occurring in varying degrees of density. In the discussion that followed, Wolff and his audience observed that this could be considered an environmental piece, since it manifested an ‘acoustic image of an internal environment’. Others commented that the use of rocks removed the performers’ individuality – a value central to Western music for at least two centuries.

22 July 1974

[The reforms stemming from 1968] didn’t actually hit until 1974. It took a while. I was there in 1972 and 1974 and it was like night and day. In 1972 there were already murmurings, I mean people were not happy with the setup but nobody was doing much about it. But by 1974 the place had just sort of blown up. There were students – well, students is a strange thing to call them because they were people often in their thirties and so forth – but the people attending, as opposed to the staff, were really up in arms, and they boycotted stuff and had demonstrations and they ran petitions. It was sort of a typical late sixties, early seventies scene. In 1974 it was rather unpleasant because it was very polarized between the old guard and then these young turks. I myself was in between, in the middle, and got very much on the wrong side of the director, [Ernst] Thomas, who was a very conservative character and was very inflexible. He just couldn’t see the problems at all.\(^{15}\) It was about simple things, like making

\(^{15}\) Originally from Leipzig, Ernst Thomas had worked as the head music critic for the widely circulated *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and in the new music department at Südwestfunk (Southwest Radio, Baden-Baden) before serving as the Darmstädter Ferienkurse director from 1962 until 1980.
things accessible to people who didn’t speak English or German. Everything was basically in German or English – there was no consideration of people who spoke French, to say nothing of any other foreign language. The main lectures and the main events and the main sort of communications were always in those languages, so they had a hard time. And the thing was very hierarchically set up. It was sort of a star system where you had five or six big-name composers who came in each for four to six days, and went off again. Which was very different from the way it had been in the late 1950s where you could talk to anybody at any time and it was kind of an exchange of ideas, you got to look at scores and tapes and stuff like that. And that division between the kind of people who had in the meantime become established and the younger people who were just trying to figure out what was going on had become quite acute.

Wolff began his 1974 seminars by outlining three topics: first, music ‘viewed as a social phenomenon, or perhaps a political phenomenon’. (Wolff explained that this first point was inspired by the discussions in Darmstadt in 1972, but also as a response to a manifesto distributed by the Initiative zur Gründung eine Vereinigung sozialistischer Kulturschaffender [Initiative for the Foundation of a Union of Socialist Creators of Culture] in Cologne.) Second, Wolff announced that his seminars would introduce primarily music by American composers, including Wolff, Rzewski, Cage, Glass and also Cardew. The last broad point Wolff made was that he hoped that the seminar could proceed in a collaborative, interactive way – performing pieces, discussing, and perhaps creating a group composition.

Wolff then introduced Rzewski’s Coming Together, which no one in the seminar had heard. He described the piece’s qualities: indeterminate instrumentation; a melodic bass line playing continual sixteenth notes; a narrator reading a text by Attica prison inmate Sam Melville. He then played an ‘authoritative’ recording, one led by Rzewski himself (and with Steven Ben-Israel, an actor with the Living Theatre, as narrator). Afterwards, Wolff asked the students what they thought the piece intended, and whether it raised ‘the same sorts of problems that repetitive music raises’. The group discussed the uprising in Attica, and whether Melville’s text was politically effective. As the seminar began to discuss the work’s compositional characteristics, underlying disparity between the audience and Wolff emerged. One participant commented on the ‘disposability’ of the music, claiming that in ten years it could be ‘garbage’, and that Rzewski was not writing ‘for eternity’, or producing ‘great masterpieces’. Wolff replied: ‘The orientation of this composer, or of this composition, is not eternity’. He continued: ‘I don’t think it’s new with this kind of music, it’s a feeling I think that came up with the avant-garde music of the late fifties and sixties, that music was made that was really for immediate use, and would then be, as it were, worn out, or used up, or replaced by other music’. Several audience members disagreed with Wolff, and others questioned his motives in presenting this particular work in the first place. Wolff pointed out that Rzewski’s approach was not a unique phenomenon, that
many composers – Wolff himself, Garrett List, Cardew, others – were writing simplified music with explicit political intentions.

In political terms I certainly didn’t notice anything happening. It was political maybe in another sense. People like Metzger and [Hans G.] Helms like to have things to write about, and they like controversy, and they like dialectic, and things like that. And we were serving it up to them on a platter. The serial music, the chance music, and the whole philosophy of control and hierarchy and then the other one, the sort of Thoreau-ian notions and so forth – all of that made a kind of interesting contrast, ideas to knock around. Political in the stricter sense. Left-wing politics emerged about the same time it did everywhere else, outside the arts, in the late sixties and into the early seventies. The ground was fertile for it. As I indicated, both Metzger and Helms were to the left of me, and when these things sort of merged they really got into it. I remember about the time I went through my political thing, which was about 1969, 1970, 1971, around then, and Helms sent me the text of a radio broadcast he’d done about my music. And I’d just started to write music that could be identified as political in an unambiguous sense, non-metaphorically, as a political text. And he didn’t know that and he’d written this whole thing with a kind of Marxist analysis of my earlier music, which tickled me. I was very pleased, but it had never so much as crossed my mind. He may have been thinking of the notion of, that they used the sort of image of the United States of America more democratically: more open, freer from traditions, and so forth, as opposed to Europeans. They put that polemically, in the situation of the Europeans which was more authoritarian, hierarchical, controlled, all of those things. So I suppose in that sense you could say that they viewed the Americans as politically freer, in some sense. I don’t think it was a distortion of what we were actually doing. But I think that whole notion that we didn’t worry about whether we could justify things theoretically or historically or anything like that was quite true.

Wolff teased out the central issue hovering in the room by asking: ‘Do any of you feel any sense of tension, or contradiction between the musical method used in this piece and its possible political message?’ He continued: ‘The musical material in this piece, is it familiar to you at all? … There’s a suggestion of rock, if you will, mostly because of the driving rhythm, and the use of the bass guitar, and the voice-over. I also think of Terry Riley, Philip Glass, Steve Reich’. While he prepared to play a recording of Glass’s music, which he felt would be helpful in this context since most of those attending the seminar were unfamiliar with it, one of the European participants spoke loudly about ‘the beat’ and ‘monotony’. The audience became agitated and argumentative. Wolff translated the various positions being voiced throughout the room, and noted again that *Coming Together* was not meant to be a ‘masterpiece’, yet it was being criticized for being melodic and therefore simplistic – basically a kind of compositional ‘cop out’, an evasion
of the responsibilities of a twentieth-century composer. Wolff concluded: ‘I don’t entirely agree with that’.

Introducing Glass’s *Music in Similar Motion* (1973) as a work with no political intention whatsoever, Wolff characterized it as pure absolute music – very different from Rzewski’s work, which was ideologically driven. After the recording had been played, Wolff asked: ‘What was this music written for?’ Someone responded: ‘Record companies!’ (Wolff contradicted, explaining that Glass produced his own recordings, and did not make any money from them.)

> We’re what you might regard as a second generation of American experimental music, the so-called minimalists, Reich and Glass, etc. Of course they had a lot of training, too, but at the same time they were very concerned to be professional in the sense of how they organized themselves, how they organized their groups, how they ran their tours. All of that was done in a business-like manner. In some ways – and it just occurs to me now – this was almost a kind of reaction to the much more funky and informal ways the previous generation had preceded, and actually had to proceed: we didn’t have a whole lot of choice. We helped each other out a lot whenever we could during the 1950s. But the thing is, we were just happy to get the work out at all. Steve Reich is so interesting, and La Monte Young is another one, because they insisted on money. They wouldn’t do anything until they saw some money up front. We were happy if we got enough money to hire some musicians and to get a space and to do it in this gallery or that little theatre or wherever, and that was it. Somehow it never occurred to us that we should also be getting paid. It seemed much more important and urgent to get the work out.

Wolff pointed to the meditative effect of restricting one’s focus to a small number of musical elements – especially over a relatively long period of time – since this clears the mind and can be freeing: ‘In that sense, the music was written very directly for an experience of timelessness’. He expanded on that idea:

> If it’s true that Rzewski’s music, or the musical material that Rzewski uses, is related to a kind of music that essentially aims to be timeless, then is there not a contradiction between that and the political content of the words? … I think this is a legitimate criticism, it’s the basic problem of the piece, that you may enjoy that hypnosis, it becomes like a kind of drug experience. And the other response is that people become irritated, and they’re both, as it were, counter-political responses. I’ve also had a third reaction which is positive, namely that the music expresses, first of all, this sense of energy, of forward movement. … The piece is somehow ambiguous, and that ambiguity will be clarified only by the context in which it is performed.

The discussion then turned from the question of how to write political music to the question of audience. Wolff offered these remarks:
Insofar as we relate Rzewski’s music to music by Glass, or Reich, or whoever, this is music directed primarily, or at least musically, to a very restricted audience, essentially the new music audience, which, as we all know, is not spectacularly large. That’s one problem, or contradiction. Let me make a tentative response to it, which is that the music makes some attempt to relate itself, to break out of the clichés of avant-garde music. That is to say it’s not serial, it’s not even chromatic music: it’s modal. It has a very steady, easily graspable rhythmic structure, and so on. There’s obviously an attempt being made to move out of the avant-garde situation, and I think Glass, Reich and Riley all have the same tendency. One of the reasons why they write … music which is very appealing to the ear at first hearing, or at least for the first three or four minutes, depends a little on how you respond to the problem of length. The length is really its most avant-garde feature, right? The sound just as sound … I think you could get quite a few people who ordinarily are not interested in new music to enjoy that sound, but not for the length of time they seem to want you to respond to it. … There is an attempt to write political music which presumably addresses itself to a large audience. Potentially it addresses itself to a large audience, or an audience beyond bourgeois circles, or something of that kind. Is that in fact the case? I think, in fact, that the composer is ambiguous on that point.

In response, the audience suggested a class conflict implicit in this music. Wolff agreed, though he admitted that he had been trying to avoid discussing it in those particular terms. At this point the discussion became very diffuse, touching on musical material, fusion between rock and free jazz, popularity and minimalism. Seminar participants criticized Wolff for a lack of precision in his use of terms like ‘popular’, and for not rigorously defining his stylistic parameters. They also examined the differences between music that is political only because of its text (as in Rzewski’s Coming Together) and music that was political in what the musicians were actually doing (as in Rzewski’s ensemble process piece Les Moutons de Panurge [1969]).

[I went to West Berlin in 1974.] I couldn’t get a full year release from Dartmouth College, so I only stayed actually four months. I went in the fall, as part of the DAAD Artist-in-Residence programme. I was invited, but I don’t know how it happened, how their nominating procedures worked. The other person who was with me for a very short time was Steve Reich, who was also, I assume, nominated. He came and he brought all his drums with him and he got an apartment, and after about three weeks he just couldn’t take it and he left. I think his main problem was that he didn’t speak German, so he felt really kind of out of it. With the artists’ residency there were no obligations whatsoever; it was very nice in that way. But there was a music festival that fall, I think it was in its second or third year, called Metamusik. If you look at the programs of that festival, it’s almost entirely
It's either what we now call world music, jazz, and then it was very strange for me because I went all the way to Berlin and spent the first two months with all my friends – and I was in the festival too, I did two concerts on it – hanging out with Philip Glass and Steve Reich, Fredric Rzewski, Velvet Underground, Terry Riley ... it was really crazy; it was completely America-centric. But it was amazing, and it was very generous and welcoming.

Wolff then turned to a work called *Accompaniments* (1972), which he had written for Rzewski. In addition to playing the piano, the pianist must play percussion (bass drum and hi-hat cymbal, with the feet), and to sing political texts by Mao. Wolff called the piano part ‘monotonous’, as the 30 written-out chords are meant to be played one per sung syllable, though the text sets the rhythm, which is otherwise not fixed (see Example 7.1). The seminar criticized Wolff’s use of these particular texts, which he said he chose because they demonstrated how ‘ordinary activities of daily life can be subjected to or affected by political orientation’, and because the texts were not about ‘intellectual people’ but ordinary people dealing with practical matters like basic hygiene and childbirth. Wolff further explained that he felt uncomfortable with Glass’s and Rzewski’s ‘sudden leap between chromatic music and modal music’, which seemed arbitrary to him, though he admitted to liking their music. He claimed to be trying to find something in between, thus his solution with the repetitive chords in *Accompaniments*. Regarding his intentions in that piece, Wolff has written that it

marks a break from what preceded, due partly to a growing impatience with what seemed to me the overly introverted feeling in much of my earlier music, with a sense of contradiction between the situation of its players – social, cooperative, as well as calling on great individual alertness – as something remote, abstract, and ‘pure’. At the same time my interest in social and political questions had intensified and taken a more specific direction, and so I decided to attempt to make a more explicit connection between it and my music.  

23–24 July 1974

The next time the seminar convened, Wolff offered a vague definition of what he meant by ‘political’; namely, music that was not primarily concerned with individuals, or with competitive modes of self expression. He described pieces such as Rzewski’s *Les Moutons de Panurge* as ‘socially oriented’, claiming that this music

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16 The West Berlin music festival Metamusik festival took place in 1974, 1976 and 1978. Director Walter Bachauer programmed ensemble music from around the world, as well as minimalism and avant-garde rock.

is specifically designed for professionals and non-professionals. ... It is a cheerful kind of communal activity that is going on. It’s one that everybody can take part in, and that everybody can enjoy. It’s more like a game really. ... But also, in the musical expression, it conveys a sense of doing things together – unison does that, in a very simple way, but also, by virtue of the fact that people can drop out, so to speak, and can go on independently, once they’ve failed, so to speak. It’s an encouragement. There’s a kind of freedom in that, because once you drop out you go on, you do what you’re supposed to do, but you go on and do it at your own pace. And at the same time you are protected from failure, you can fail, it’s OK, you can still go on. And it makes musical sense. And you might say that this protection from failure, and the freedom that comes with it, is precisely made possible by the fact that this is a social situation.

The audience again questioned these composers’ use of modal and pentatonic scales. Wolff speculated that they were attempting to make the music ‘more accessible’, and, he added, ‘maybe, subconsciously, to make it more like folk music’. When pressed on his own position vis-à-vis modality and tonality, Wolff reiterated that he was trying to find middle ground, that he couldn’t make the jump to purely modal writing, because that seemed arbitrary: ‘Our background is chromatic’. He then posed a provocative question: Is the use of modality ‘self-conscious primitivism’ within our chromatic ‘new music’ context?

As the discussion turned to Wolff’s Changing the System (1972–73), which had been performed the night before, participants criticized the piece for being both irritating and enigmatic. They doubted Wolff’s motives, unsure if he intended to be political and/or progressive. He replied in the affirmative, in the sense that ‘the person making the music is aware, conscious, that the music he’s playing has social and/or political implications’. He added: ‘All our activities are based on and affected by our political situation, the question is whether or not we know it, and whether or not we act accordingly’. The students pushed him further: did Wolff believe that there is a connection between a specific political direction and a specific musical procedure? In other words, if he chose to write tonal music of a certain kind, would that correspond to a specific political position? Wolff replied that this was just about the hardest question he could be asked, and that at that point, he simply did not know.

[German composer] Erhard Grosskopf was ... very outspokenly to the left and I think that cut him off from a number of things. But on the other hand, he did have a German publisher. And he had connections with the DAAD, because I know he got money from them for concerts. In fact, we did one sort of alternative concert which I think we got the DAAD to give us some money for and they were very cross about it because it was a concert which was a benefit. It was very controversial thing which had started the year before. In Kreutzberg there was
Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff

a public clinic called the Bethanian. The city of Berlin decided that it was old and so forth, and they decided to get rid of this clinic and turn it into an artists’ centre. For people on the left this was very outrageous because it was free medical for working class, and it looked like a really terrible thing to do because there were no plans for any alternatives. And the artists were really caught in the middle because this was primarily intended for them, they would have space and facilities and so on, but it was being bought at the price of cutting down the health care for these people. That had started the year before, and Cornelius Cardew had been on the DAAD the year before, and had spent a lot of his time agitating against this. And then when I was there, Grosskopf organized a concert which was going to be a benefit for the cause of this clinic. They initially promised the money, but when they heard what it was for – because they of course were part of the arts establishment in Berlin and very much behind this transformation – and then suddenly saw that here were people for whom they were providing money attacking it. That was a very sticky kind of situation. We went through with it anyway and Cardew came back to join in, and Rzewski was there, and I was there, and Grosskopf was there; the four of us did this performance, and as I say it caused something of a ruckus. And Grosskopf was able nevertheless, maybe in the end he shamed them into putting up the money, he had some sort of in with the DAAD at that time.

Changing the System, an ensemble piece concerned with American experiences (with a text taken from a political speech given by Tom Hayden), provided a useful comparison to Accompaniments, a solo piece concerned with the Chinese Revolution (with texts from Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle’s book China: The Revolution Continued). Wolff projected slides of the score and explained how the music moved from voice to voice – a hocket-like idea – as the players chose pitches from scales that could be read in either clef. He emphasized the game aspect of the piece, since it presented certain rules that lent the game a specific character: ‘No two games are alike, but it’s always the same game’, he remarked. The piece also transitioned between a purely musical situation and a more explicitly political section with a text. Wolff called the purely musical situation ‘miniature models of collaborative activity’, where, for instance, a simple musical gesture like a melody is made through the cooperation of four people. Each individual chooses their notes, the durations, and articulations: ‘Individuals can act freely but the condition of that freedom is the fact that they are working together’.

The next day, the students continued to focus on how Wolff’s political agenda affected his musical structures. An extended discussion of Wolff’s intentions in Changing the System ensued. He then introduced a new set of pieces called Exercises and Songs (1973–74; he had composed 14 of the former, 3 of the latter, to date). To close, he played recordings of Exercises 1, 2 and 4, and one of the songs,

18 For further information on this situation, see my discussion in Beal, New Music, New Allies, pp. 196–7.
in a performance that included Wolff, Rzewski, Jon Gibson, Garrett List, David Behrman and Arthur Russell. On this particular afternoon at 5 p.m., immediately following Wolff’s session, Gordon Mumma delivered his lecture titled ‘Witchcraft, Cybersonics, Folkloric Virtuosity’, which touched on some of the same themes as those raised in Wolff’s seminars.¹⁹

Feldman was not represented, nor was Cage, interestingly enough, at the [Berlin] Metamusik festival. I think the feeling by then was that they had already been well enough represented and had done very well, and [Walter] Bachauer wanted to do kind of new stuff or alternative stuff, so that he went to the relatively younger composers, those who had not yet had so much of a playing. Feldman had been in Berlin before and they had concerts of his music, so it seemed less urgent. So I actually don’t recall hearing anything of his while I was there. It’s true I was only there for four months, and the musical life was really dominated by this festival, which went on, it felt like, for two months.²⁰ The other thing is: the people I hung out with then were these political people. Cage and Feldman were no longer felt to be relevant to that whole movement. Feldman was really big in Europe, and still is. He’s had an extraordinary amount of influence on lots of people. The main events, the ones that I know about best, are the ones that happened in Holland. He did really well, and I think jokingly referred to himself as a ‘European composer’. And then maybe about five or six years ago there was a little flurry of activity involving my music. Sometime in Germany, there was a stretch in there where some things were happening in Switzerland of all places, and in Sweden, and a little bit in Holland, and now again somewhat in Germany.

25 July 1974

The next afternoon, Wolff announced that he had brought along scores for the students to study: part of Cage’s Song Books; some pages from Cage’s Mureau (1970) and Mesostics re Merce Cunningham (1970–71); music of Alvin Lucier and Pauline Oliveros. He then began talking about the music of Cornelius Cardew, ‘who is completely neglected in Darmstadt, as far as I can make out’. He introduced Paragraphs 2 and 7 from Cardew’s The Great Learning (1968–70), characterizing Cardew as the most important composer influenced by both Cage and Stockhausen currently addressing links between music and politics.

Wolff turned his attention back to his Exercises. He played a recording of one of the pieces, and then explained how it works: a unison melody, melodic

¹⁹ A version of Mumma’s 1974 Darmstadt lecture was published in the 1975 issue of the Beiträge.

²⁰ In 1974, the Metamusik festival began on 27 September and ended on 20 October, and included no fewer than 60 different performance events. Two concerts were devoted to Wolff’s music.
fragments with no fixed tempo, articulation, or dynamics, which can be read in two clefs. One other basic condition is that the players play with unison ‘as a point of reference’ – that is to say, they don’t have to play together ‘but they should keep the idea of playing together in mind and should use that as a point of departure and return’. One rule of thumb, Wolff further clarified, is that the players should never reach a point where they don’t know where someone is, since it is not a matter of individual performances, it is about ensemble. Deviation from the unison is possible, in terms of speed, loudness or articulation, if the player is trying to give the music direction – ‘but he has to do it tentatively, because if no one follows him he has to fall back into the group’. Leading and following are part of the ensemble fabric, but heterophony is the goal, trying to stay together in the sound.

For the remainder of the fourth session Wolff turned back to Cardew’s *The Great Learning*, a piece set mostly for professional and non-professional chorus, using Confucius’s classic text in a translation by Ezra Pound. Each of the seven ‘Paragraphs’ (portions of text; sections of the piece) used a different compositional technique. The texts are moral and pedagogical, referring to ethical questions. After lengthy discussion of the instructions, the seminar performed the *a cappella* Paragraph 7.

26 July 1974

Eager to provide his students with practical information, on the last day Wolff gave them the distribution address for the *Experimental Music Catalogue*, put out by Gavin Bryars in London. In doing so, Wolff urged his audience to seek out compositions that were not easily available. About the Catalogue he remarked: ‘It’s also a good example of the way we should probably all go about publishing our music; that is to say, it’s not a commercial establishment, it’s run by the composers themselves, on a non-profit or minimal profit basis which is re-distributed among the participating composers’.

*It’s still part of [European] culture to engage with that kind of art, whereas [in America], it clearly is not. I mean, we don’t have much in the way of arts, but we have various interesting museums, and, again, New York is a special case. There are a few exceptions: there’s the Walker Museum in Minneapolis, there are a few places on the west coast. But they seem less connected to the music world, and they’re not as close. We’re scattered anyway in this country. In Europe it’s fairly close, and these are big important events and they’re recognized as such, and they worry about it. So there’s something in the kind of modernist cultural world that’s operating: there’s a large tradition. It’s no accident that Cage was so successful there. There’s no doubt that it is a very selective version of American music history. But I think it goes to those figures that Europeans feel they somehow can’t produce themselves, and that represent some image of what America stands for. What America represents is a kind of exotic other, like
Indians or something, and I think that the music is kind of an extension of that, or represents aspects of it, a rather rarefied one, but Feldman and others fit very well into that.

He then began a discussion about the performance the students had done of Cardew’s Paragraph 7 the previous afternoon, explaining that it was a prime example of a piece that was readily available to a non-professional group, since it could be done reasonably well on a first reading. At the same time, Wolff added, it had good musical ideas: ‘It seems to be musically substantial, it is an elegant conception, it is one that works well, that produces a very beautiful sound, a good sound, and at the same time it is satisfactory to perform’. Wolff said he had partly chosen that piece because it considered the relationship between composers, performers, and audiences in a useful way. The seminar then worked on a realization of the second part of Changing the System.

Later, Wolff initiated a discussion about the ‘manifesto’ (mentioned above) that had been circulating, and commented on various responses that had been published in the Darmstädter Beiträge as a result of the discussion that had taken place regarding Darmstadt’s administrative structure during the 1972 Ferienkurse. Underlying the conflict was music and its relationship to politics. One idea, Wolff pointed out, was that

by politicizing music, or by making it engaged music in some way, it becomes automatically demigogic, that it is a way to totalitarianism, without any specification about what kind: right, left, centre. This seems to me a sophistry. That is to say it’s a very abstract remark, and it sounds very frightening. In other words, the point made is that any attempt made to colour music in a political light immediately makes it politically invalid.

Wolff objected to this position, stating that one could not speak in these terms unless one discussed specific circumstances, specific pieces, or specific contexts in which the music appears:

In the abstract it means nothing to say that as soon as you connect music with politics it becomes demigogic in some sense. I mean, all music is demigogic, no matter what you do to it. It will persuade people, it will move people, it will stir them up, or annoy them, or do various things to them. The question is what will it do to them exactly, under what particular circumstances.

Wolff’s further comments regarding the double bind of political music deserve to be quoted at length:

First of all, it seems that the first half of this dilemma, which says here we are doing new music, and if we do that we can’t do political music … this has two notions in it, … namely, that music is always progressing, and that it has reached
a certain stage in its progress, and we can’t, as it were, give that stage up. We can’t go back, for instance, and we have a certain responsibility, you might say, to this particular stage of the history of music. Now, with that idea it seems to me there are two problems. One is that the analogy in making a point like that is to technology, that is to say that technology advances, gets more and more sophisticated, music advances, gets more and more sophisticated, and they are somehow the same, and now that there are cars, you wouldn’t think any more of using horses. In the same way that now that we have the twelve-tone system we wouldn’t dream any more of using major or minor scales. And that seems to me absolutely ridiculous. The other thing is that the assumption again, in that statement, is that in fact new music is fantastically complicated, elaborate and esoteric. And I grant you that a great deal of it has been, and still is, but it seems to me that in the last years, even among the most, well, those figures most associated with an earlier music of great complexity, and technical advance if you will, in this language, have turned to a much simpler kind of music and to a music which in fact is interested, say, in modal harmonies, or great, plain kinds of statements.

He expanded the discussion to a consideration of the role popular music might play in new music culture, and the ‘powerful alternatives’ currently available:

At least from an American perspective there is a whole area of popular music which is indeed very vital and music of the highest possible quality, to say nothing of the people who perform it, and that of course would be in the area primarily of jazz, but of course almost any manifestation of black music would fall under this category, in other words there is a whole music here, which seems to me to, if one were to get involved with it, would be a perfectly adequate, more than adequate, if you were good enough to get involved in it, more than adequate alternative to making new music.

Audience members pointed out that some ‘popular’ music is not popular at all – the music of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), for instance. They criticized Wolff for putting all black music in the category of ‘popular’. Wolff summarized the criticism and responded: ‘The point made is that there are manifestations of jazz which could not be regarded as popular in the sense that many people are interested in listening, that have in fact become avant-garde phenomenon – they’ve slipped over into a new music situation’. The seminar reflected on these border crossings with respect to audience: ‘avant-garde’ jazz appealing to small audiences; ‘popular’ new music reaching large audiences. Wolff gave the example of Terry Riley’s rock concert-like audiences, which led students to question whether or not Riley was truly avant-garde. While Wolff said he had assumed that people would agree that Riley is indeed avant-garde, the seminar began to discuss the fundamental (and recurring) question of whether simple ideas can be considered avant-garde: do the ideas have
to be ‘new’ to be avant-garde? Wolff considered the discussion unproductive, and brought it to a close.

Instead, Wolff wished to talk about a flyer that had been released at the Ferienkurse a few days prior, called ‘Musik mit Wirklichkeit Verbinden’ (‘Connecting Music with Reality’). The flyer criticized Rolf Gehlhaar’s courses, and Wolff’s compositions.21 Wolff then read and translated the portion of the flyer that specifically questioned whether or not his political music, utilizing texts, was actually political – or whether he was just using the same musical idioms as always, the same avant-garde techniques. Wolff’s critics suggested that his musical attitude did not really reflect his political attitude; they were, namely, in open contradiction with one another, especially in a piece like Changing the System, where the revolutionary ideals of the text were not helped by the artistic treatment. Rather, the flyer suggested, the music should put itself in the service of social concerns, for the purpose of ‘liberating the masses’.

As in earlier discussions, the seminar participants expressed confusion about Wolff’s political intentions. Some said they were unclear on his attitude toward Changing the System’s text, claiming that the text could be replaced by anything; others felt that the percussion part had a playful – therefore apolitical – character, and that there was nothing in the music itself that suggested a progressive political position. Wolff disagreed, and expressed dismay that this would be the impression conveyed by the piece. He also admitted his own struggles with this topic: ‘I don’t regard myself as having solved the problem of political music in any sense, and I’m certainly very strongly aware of the contradictions, or the dangers if you like, of what I’m doing’.

The seminar gradually became emotional and contentious, regarding the manifesto, Maoism, and ongoing structural problems in Darmstadt. Wolff tried to keep the discussion on a productive level, but he was frequently overpowered by crosstalk in several languages. He attempted to regain control of the discussion, insisting that it was important that they be able to criticize one another, but that it was crucial to keep the discourse from descending into negativity. He elaborated on his own search for answers, while also making clear that he did not believe that music itself could make a political revolution: ‘You’re not going to change the world by writing any kind of music’.22

In some sense I don’t know what to do. I feel the need to do something but I don’t know exactly what to do, I’m trying. And the problem is partly because, as I see it, though I don’t think everyone sees it this way, that there are no models at the moment. There were models in the 1930s, but I don’t think there are any now. We can learn from those models, we can’t imitate them. At the moment, as

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21 Composer Gehlhaar was the ‘Composition Studio Coordinator’ for the 1974 Ferienkurse.

22 Emphasis Wolff’s.
I understand it, I don’t think it will do us much good to write music in the style of Eisler.

The seminar then discussed Eisler, and middle-class versus working-class audiences, and voiced their objections to the simplicity of musical material. Wolff again emphasized that the specific context was central to these discussions: Eisler’s first step was a political step, not a musical step, for example. Wolff stated that if the students were truly concerned with political and social questions, then maybe they should give up music and just get involved fully with those questions. But the fact remained, he continued, ‘that some of us have a deep need to do music, and for that matter, music seems to be something that we do pretty well’.

Wolff concluded his final seminar of 1974 by listing four ‘mottos’ he felt were particularly important at the time, activities he and his fellow musicians had an obligation to continue: ‘That we organize ourselves, that we cooperate with one another, that we criticize each other, and finally, that we maintain a certain sense of humour’. He ended the session by playing a recording of one of the pieces from *Exercises and Songs*, a song about a British coal miners’ strike the previous spring.

**Further Discourse**

The *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik* devoted to the 1974 Ferienkurse, published the following year, included a forum in which the four composition instructors of 1974 – Wolff, Kagel, Xenakis and Stockhausen – answered five questions and shared their views *zur Situation* (‘about the situation’). The questions sought the composers’ views regarding ‘post-serialism’, ‘nostalgia’ (i.e. the return to tonality), the ‘popularization’ of new music, political/social uses of new music, and the future role of Darmstadt for younger composers. Wolff’s contribution reiterated many points made during his seminars; in particular, he emphasized a difference in attitude between European composers and his American collaborators.

The broader, muddled, and nuanced historical context of this particular moment in music history lies beyond the scope of the present discussion, but it seems clear that Wolff’s controversial residencies at the Ferienkurse during the early 1970s contributed significantly to a particularly thorny international argument about the future of new music. While their European colleagues sought out new paths after the trails of post-war composition had seemingly all been blazed, American composers embraced the do-it-yourself collectivity so central to late-1960s counterculture. Wolff’s vehement rejection of the notion of evolution – in particular that of increasing compositional complexity – as a core tenet of avant-garde music foreshadowed discussions that would dominate European new music discourse just a few years later. The controversial discussions surrounding *Neue Einfachheit* (New Simplicity), a musical category introduced by Wolfgang Becker at WDR’s Musik der Zeit concert.
progress in Western music both revealed – and to some extent, in the long run, might have helped heal – longstanding aesthetic differences between composers on both sides of the Atlantic.
