In 1950–52 I began with minimalist pieces using small numbers of pitches (three to nine) in static configurations, and then (1953–56) went on to more complex, through-composed ones using intricate structural devices to produce "discontinuous" continuities, including a lot of silence. In 1957, as the immediate result of a collaboration with Frederic Rzewski, I started making pieces variously indeterminate. Ranges of choices were given to the performers—time-brackets, source pitches, variously applicable playing specifications, cueing systems, rhythmic notations determined not by pulse but by coordinations, both predictable and not, between players. Because of the range of the performers' choices, both at the times of preparing and during the process of actually performing, and because of the unpredictable interactions between performers that would result, the music inevitably and variously changes with each performance. The changes of course also reflect the performers' individual natures and, as time goes by, changing aesthetic and social climates (I think, for example, of early performances by David Tudor and recent ones by John Zorn).

By 1962 indeterminate scoring included, partly in response to John Cage's *Music for Piano* and *Variations* series, instrumentation or sound sources and number of performers (*For Five or Ten Players*, *For One, Two or Three People, Pairs*, et cetera). One result of being in London in 1967–68 and performing with Cornelius Cardew and the group AMM was *Edges*, a piece requiring experience with free improvisation. I also began then the series of *Prose Compositions*, variable in sound sources, scored as verbal instructions and performable in ways accessible to non-musicians. The next years, from 1969 to 1972, I think of as transitional. There are some oblique responses to the musics of Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass—in the use of more periodic rhythms, quasi modal pitch sequences, and sometimes a tendency towards more extroverted gestures (*Tilbury 1, 3, 4; Snowdrop; Exercises*). Pitches or melodic contours and note to note rhythmic movement are now mostly specified; instrumentation, numbers of players, overlays, spacing (silence and the larger rhythms of phrase continuity), dynamics, timbre inflection, and articulation are left open to the performers. A common feature too now is improvised heterophony.
Burdocks (1970–71), for one or more groupings of players, brought together and proceeded from a number of interests, including: an image in my mind (I hadn’t actually heard them) of the Scratch Orchestra, a varied community of musicians (classical, folk, experimental, jazz, et cetera), both professional and amateur, and non-musicians, joined in a populist-anarchist spirit, initially more or less guided by Cornelius Cardew with Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons; hearing a recording of Ba-Benzele Pygmy music (quasi improvised by the whole community); and the structural idea of the piano part of John Cage’s Concert for Piano and Orchestra which required the continual introduction of markedly different or new compositional ideas, a kind of pastiche of newness.

During this time, because of the United States war in Vietnam, various personal experiences and closeness to other musicians similarly affected, I decided to make my political thinking and feeling (emerging and changing) somehow part of my musical work. The first results were: Accompaniments (1972), a piano piece for Frederic Rzewski, requiring the pianist also to use his (or her) voice and play percussion, with a text related to the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the sixties; and Changing the System (1972–73), an extended piece for eight or more players, with a text produced during the 1968–69 student upheavals in the United States. Musically the piano piece is mostly extroverted and decisive, though the score leaves important decisions, especially about selection of material, to the performer. The ensemble piece has far more indeterminate features, but is meant to draw its energy from a combination of the content of the text (about the need for systemic social change) and from the musical interactions of the performers who enact—and explore—ways of change. Subsequent treatments of texts, mostly through-composed, are Wobbly Music (1975–76) for chorus and instruments, using texts from the largest radical labor movement in the United States, the International Workers of the World (IWW, most active just before World War I); “I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman” (1985), for solo female voice and instruments, on a poem by the feminist writer Susan Griffin; and From Leaning Forward (1988), a song cycle for soprano and baritone with clarinet and cello, using poems by the political activist and writer Grace Paley.

In the mid-seventies, with String Quartet Exercises out of Songs (1974–76), I began a long series of instrumental pieces drawing material from political folk music, traditional and contemporary, from the United States, Europe, China and Black South Africa. These include Braverman Music (1978) in which there is a set of variations on the German concentration camp song “Moorsoldaten”; a number of pieces made out of free variations on the feminist labor song “Bread and Roses”; Exercise 21 (1981) which draws on a United States Black slave liberation song, “O Freedom”; and Rosas (1989–90), part of which uses a Black South African freedom
song. The songs provide a kind of “content” for the music, that is, finding them both musically and politically congenial I have them as a point of expressive reference, and I hope that recalling a song will be an opportunity to recall its political occasion. The songs also provide specific musical material to work with, pitch intervals (modal in source) and rhythmic articulations (clear, direct).

Sometimes pieces are tributes to and reminders of people whose progressive political lives I have admired (for example, Harry Braverman, radical worker and socialist labor writer, or the Rosas, Rosa Luxemburg and one of the heroines of the United States Civil rights movement, Rosa Parks). Sometimes the tributes are more personal: to Morton Feldman (For Morty), for example, or Merce Cunningham (Merce), both of whom I have known since I was sixteen years old.

So—there are changes over the years and continuities. Among the latter I would mention particularly respect for the autonomy of performers, a desire, at all times if in various ways, to make a score one element in a conversation, an inducement to exploration, something flexible, reusable, consistently useful. I have of course also the hope that for listeners the conversation of score and performers is the source of the character of the music itself, and that sometimes this process suggests to the listener that she or he could do it too, perform or make a score. I also continue to think that all music, on a wide spectrum from plain and simple to intricate, is melody; and at the same time that each individual detail of a sound matters also entirely for its own sake—this is a respect for, quite simply, sonority as such. I would never regard a score, whatever the degree of indeterminate elements there are in it, as a fixed object (that would be a model falsely drawn from the visual arts: music is more clearly comparable to dance or theater). (I am not therefore unduly anxious about the specific identity of any given piece, though some element of recognition, especially if combined with elements of surprise, is usually a pleasure.) Among the changes I would mention an increasingly explicit orientation towards “realism”, in the sense of human, social life.

Written at the request of percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky, who organized, from 24 to 26 May 1993, concerts by Christian Wolff under the motto “Bread and Roses for John,” in the program book of which the text was first published.

Christian Wolff