Suite (I) (1954)

Suite (I) was written with the pianist David Tudor in mind and in the wake of John Cage’s Music of Changes and the piano music of Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen: hence the technical difficulties of performance, some of the rhythmic complexities, and the fragmented-pointillistic textures. It’s in three parts. Ten of the piano notes are prepared, with various metal and rubber mutes; one additional note produces a buzz if played mezzo-forte or louder. No prepared sounds appear in the first part (unless the pianist makes a mistake); the next two parts then are a timbral metamorphosis. There are gamuts of durations freely used and gamuts of pitches and prepared sound, treated unvaryingly (that is, no transpositions, no composing with intervals, just working with a collection of sounds). Each part has its own rhythmic structure.

Duo for Pianists I (1957)

Duo for Pianists I was written after an experiment in “composed” improvisation played by Frederic Rzewski and myself, undertaken to make a sound akin to that represented by Suite and similar pieces but without the notational complexity and solo performance difficulty. There is one rhythmic structure, marking out eight times eight time-spaces in the proportions \( \frac{1}{2} : 10:1 : \frac{1}{2}: 4 : \frac{3}{2}: 12:2 \); and each performer determines (before and during an actual performance) varying degrees of what he or she actually plays, mostly drawing on given material, specifications (for instance, two pitches from a given source [gamut] of six pitches; or the dynamics forte and threefold piano; or three repetitions of a prepared sound [freely determined] using piano key and plucking the prepared string; or \( x \), that is, anything at all); these specifications have to be observed within given time spaces: thus the notation \( \frac{1}{4}: 2a \) indicates play two sounds from pitch gamut a (choose any of six pitches in that gamut or any one to be played twice) and play in any way (dynamic, articulation, combination, that is successively, simultaneously or overlapped, et cetera) anywhere within \( \frac{1}{4} \) second. These durational spaces run from \( \frac{1}{16} \) of a second to thirty-six seconds. The notation for example 2:0 means two seconds of silence. Each pianist has the same sets of material but occurring in different time spaces (say 2:2a for one player, 6:2a for the other), that is, the same rhythmic structure is used in both parts but read differently.

Duo for Pianists II (1958)

Duo for Pianists II is an “open form” piece (an idea introduced by Earle Brown, I think); that is, it consists of a number of discrete sections which can follow one another (and be repeated) variously and differently in any given performance. How this happens is determined for each of the two
pianists by cues (certain kinds of sound, for example a high loud one, or a length of silence) which signal whatever next section is to be played or repeated. When these cues are heard is unpredictable for each pianist and requires great alertness and flexibility in responding.

For Pianist (1959)

For Pianist is an attempt to involve a single player in situations like those of pieces (such as Summer, Duo for Pianists I) in which several players rely on what they hear from one another, unpredictably, for cues. The pianist, for example, is to make a sound "as softly as possible." At the moment of playing he will make it just that way, or more loudly, or the sound will be inaudible. Whichever results will determine alternate paths he must directly follow. The piece is made up of ten pages of such paths or continuities, sometimes bifurcating, overlapping, and drawing the pianist into labyrinthian complications. The continuities are sequences of time lengths, fractions of a second to half a minute within which numbers of sounds are given with varying degrees of specification, for example giving for a single sound only its amplitude or for several a choice of two or five pitches. The player, when he is free to do so, makes the final specifications, tending in the larger spaces of time to vary his choices at every performance. An interchange between the score's fixed determinations and the player's use of its free spaces and loopholes, between his dependence on suddenly arising necessities and his freedom to choose just as he plays underlies the music.

For Five or Ten Players (1962)

For Five or Ten Players was my first attempt at writing for unspecified instruments in variable numbers (so a few years later For One, Two or Three People) where performing tasks are specified (for example so many pitches, given choices of timbre modifications, of dynamics) and situations (for example coordinations which depend on what is heard from other players, resulting in unpredictable durations).

In Between Pieces (1963)

In Between Pieces is in two parts, the first with specific coordination between the three players (instrumentation is not specified), a score; the second with indeterminate scoring whereby coordination depends on what each player hears unpredictably from the other players (not what is seen on the score); the first procedure like that of For Five or Ten Players (1962), the second like that of For One, Two or Three People (1964), the two pieces this one falls between. At the time, while extending in small ways technical features of a rather austere or transparent music which involved the players closely and surprisingly with each other's responses, I was waiting for some larger changes—which, as the United States war in Vietnam emerged.
finally began musically with *Edges, Prose Collection* and *Burdocks* (1968–1971).

**For One, Two or Three People (1964)**

This music is drawn from the interaction of the people playing it. It requires for its performance independent self-discipline (unpoliced by a score defining fixed relationships and timings) and a capacity and special alertness for responding to what one's fellow performers are doing, the sounds they are making or changing and their silences. The responding can be variously deliberate (there is time and you are free) or must be quick and sudden (there are precise requirements which appear unpredictably). At the time (1964) I was concerned to make a lively situation for the performers, and shift about the difficult and the free areas of their playing (for example, the more usual difficulty of articulating timbre changes in a situation where you are busy coordinating with others' unpredictably appearing sounds; or, the freedom to choose any pitch at your leisure). The resulting sounds and silences were to be the music, and the fact of its emerging in this way was to be the source of its expressiveness.

In the meantime, others pointed out the pedagogical character of this activity and some social implications (for instance, a kind of democratic interdependence). Where the presence and internal activity of the players can only be imagined by the listener, these latter aspects of the music are evident only to the experience of the players. For the listener the sounds can only speak for themselves and for the devotion and skill of the players.

Two further thoughts: the score and its requirements for making this music is such that anyone seriously wishing to, whether or not musically trained or professional, can read and use it; the music might be an incentive to do that; that is, to make performers of listeners. And, a more general thought, the movement of the music (and, I think, just about all the music I have worked on) is towards melody in its largest sense (as well as, sometimes, its familiar sense of the singable line). This may not be always obvious, but then the times are not conducive to easy optimism.

**Septet (1964)**

The music is for seven players, any instruments, and a conductor with his (her) own part; in seven sections each of which is not so much a score as a collection of possible interconnections. Playing is focused primarily on coordination and sound production (timbre). Coordination is either specified, with one or more players (by signal between them); or is dependent on another's sound, whenever and from whomever it next comes, unpredictably; or depends on the conductor's signal. The conductor's part is like the players', largely dependent on cues — sounds — from the players; the conductor's control over the players is no more or less than theirs on each
make struck against one another, and found them (the sounds) surprisingly various, distinctive (and beautiful) in the qualities of their resonances. With that memory I wrote the piece half a year later, and, showed it to Cornelius Cardew, who, smiling, showed me Paragraph 1 of *The Great Learning*, which he was just working on, and which includes the chorus members' use of stones to improvise sound gestures guided by the shapes of Chinese characters, from the Confucian text his piece was setting. He had gotten the idea from the use of tuned stone slabs in classical Chinese music.

**Burdocks (1970–71)**

*Burdocks* is for one or more groupings of players. It's a collection (from which one can choose what to play) of different, distinctive compositional ideas in ten parts. The ten parts include specific notations on staves; notations indicating only durations, often depending on other sounds a player hears; and various verbal directions both explicit and suggestive. Various numbers of performers (no upward limit) can play, using any means of making sounds. Any number of the ten parts can be played simultaneously or overlapped.

I had an image in my mind (before having heard them) of the Scratch Orchestra, a varied community of musicians (classical, folk, experimental, jazz, et cetera), professional and amateur and non-musicians, joined in a populist-anarchist spirit, more or less guided by Cornelius Cardew with Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons. I had also been affected by hearing a recording of Ba-Benzele Pygmy music, quasi improvised, polyphonically, by a whole community.

**Lines (1972)**

*Lines*, for string quartet or possibly other and larger combinations of string instruments, was commissioned by Hans Otte for North German Radio Bremen. The composition began with the desire to find new string sonorities and with a formal notion related to the actual lines of the (four) individual strings of each instrument and the lines described as a sound passes from one of the (four) instruments to another. Retuning the four instruments' individual strings—so that sixteen different pitches become available on their open strings—underscores the line of each string. The players are spaced far apart in performance to help show the lines of sound between them.

The score first specifies exactly the connections of these lines (say, from viola to first violin to cello) but their speed of movement (and certain aspects of articulation, dynamics, et cetera) is determined by the players in the course of playing. Thus, for example, viola lets her sound go when she wishes, at which point the violin must pick it up immediately, holds it as
desired, lets it go for the cello to pick up, and so forth. Next the players individually draw their material freely from more distinctly characterized bits of music (which are repeatable, as is all the material in the score). Here coordination is free or circumstantial (for example, hold a sound until the next sound you hear, whoever produces it). The material now also includes provision for retuning the strings to their usual pitches. Finally the score takes the form of prose instructions, requiring continuous sound from the players, to be changed in response to changes, whenever these happen to occur, in the playing of another. The specific character of an individual player’s sound, texture, melodic continuity, et cetera, are now entirely her or his choice. The music as a whole, then, is a collaboration between the composer’s score and the players’ playing, and the latter becomes increasingly directed by the players’ own decisions and feelings—the forming of which may have been assisted by the score to begin with.

Accompaniments (1972)

Accompaniments, for pianist who is also required to sing or chant and play percussion with his feet (drum with pedal and high hat), was written for Frederic Rzewski. This piece 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—and the way the resulting music seemed to affect its audience—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.

Accompaniments began that attempt, including a political text and using musical material of a more direct character. The text is from Jan Myrdal and Gun Keesle’s book China: The Revolution Continued. It is part of an account of a veterinarian and a midwife, in their own words, of their experiences in a village in the area of Yenan during and after the Cultural Revolution. It was chosen both for its concreteness and for its illustration of the principle of applying a revolutionary political orientation to immediate and practical problems, indicating that these can only be understood and dealt with within such a political framework.

The music is in four parts. In the first, one chord or single note drawn out of a chord accompanies each syllable of the text. The text is sung freely (no pitches are specified), and the rhythm is free but tends to be shaped by the movement of the words of the text. The text is musically formalized by allowing optional repetitions of segments of it. The chords come in sequences of sixteen which make a kind of harmonic progression (though a full sequence may not often occur). In the second and third parts, single
line keyboard figures are intended to have a propulsive feeling and accompany freely combined percussion phrases (the drum and cymbals were practical in combination with keyboard and were partly suggested by their appearance in China during mass assemblies and marches). The addition of singing and percussion playing to the pianist’s tasks is to extend one player’s sound resources and to combine his professional competence with non-professional capacities—which we all have—in using one’s voice and making percussive sounds. The fourth part of the piece requires only the use of the piano, and comes as something of a release.

Changing the System (1972–73)

_Changing the System_ is an ensemble piece for eight or more players (usually groups of four players each). There are two larger parts, one with pitched material (but instruments not specified), the other using percussion and voices (but in ways performable by those who are not professional percussionists or singers). The players play as quartets. In each part a quartet has chordal material (four sounds played simultaneously) and melodic material (a single line passed among four performers as in hocketing). In the second part the melodic material uses a text (part of a speech by Tom Hayden given during the 1968–69 student upheavals in the United States about the need for systemic social change) and the chordal material is percussive. A general plan of performance is made for any given occasion, but generally each quartet is autonomous, though, because timings within a quartet are flexible, each quartet can respond during a performance to what another quartet is doing.

Exercises 1–14 (1973–74) and 15–18 (1975)

Exercises 1–14 are for variable, unspecified instrumentation, including in some cases unspecified, non-specifically pitched percussion. The music is notated on a single staff; all players have the same music; notes can be read by any player in either treble or bass clef or both at once (other pairs of readings are also possible, for example treble and transposing 8th); no octave transposition is allowed except in Exercise 14. Some Exercises have only a single line of notation, some have a single line with a percussion part running parallel, some have two percussion parts running parallel, some have two pitch lines (with or without percussion). The maximum number of different simultaneous pitch lines is four, where two are notated and each of these is read in both treble and bass clef (or any other two readings). Pitch lines, when there are two, generally run in parallel (heterophony), but sometimes a pitch of one line may sustain while the pitches of another line continue.

The music is made up entirely of melodic phrases with indefinite pauses between them. It is essentially heterophonic. The notation provides only...