

**Six strings, ten fingers and the heterophonic ideal:  
Some thoughts on Christian Wolff's recent guitar music  
(pre-publication draft)**

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**11/27/14**

**VI**

Christian Wolff has a long, intimate and fascinating musical association with the guitar, especially the electric. He has played guitar, bass, and even a bit of banjo, and collaborated with a number of guitarists (such as Keith Rowe and myself). Christian has a deep sense of what is possible, and what is imaginable for the instrument. The guitar, in its amplified and non-amplified form is essential to American (and other) vernacular musics. Christian knows and frequently alludes to vernacular genres, especially folk music, in his work, in a manner that I would call indiscernible quotation.

In 1966, Morton Feldman famously wrote a piece for Christian, which he played on several occasions. Feldman's "The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar" was long lost, but recently found. In the meantime it has been the fascinating subject of various homages, replacements, and speculation<sup>1</sup>). Christian's own series of pieces, *Electric Spring 1-3*, from the late 60s, are also important early experiments in inviting the instrument into the contemporary repertoire. In *Spring 3* he introduces the electric guitar's various physical and electronic enhancements such as "vibrato" or "tremolo" bar (pitch, not loudness change), amplifier "vibrato" (loudness modulation), and fuzz tones. Christian still plays electric bass, almost always table-top or piano-top.

I have been lucky to be Christian's friend, colleague and collaborator for some 20 years, working together at Dartmouth, and living close to each other in Vermont/New Hampshire. A large part of our musical relationship has been through performance, often informally around Dartmouth, and frequently on the road with our *Trio* (with pianist Kui Dong), and with various ensemble configurations formed to play Christian's music. Based on the latter, and on my

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cnvill.net/mfpossibility.pdf>, and <http://www.cnvill.net/mflarryp.htm>

experiences performing Christian's two solo electric guitar pieces, I offer some thoughts on his recent **compositions** for the instrument.

The recent music discussed in this essay is (reverse chronological order):<sup>2</sup>

*Going West*. Solo electric guitar (2013)

*Quintet*, 2 percussion, electric guitar, piano, contrabass (other arrangements possible) (2009)

*Quartet for Frederic, Larry, Michael, Robyn*. bass clarinet, electric guitar, piano (other instrumental arrangements possible) (2005-2007)

*Another Possibility*. Solo electric guitar (2004)

The earlier pieces for guitar are: *Electric Spring 1-3* (1966, 1966-70, 1967); a solo piece for electric bass; *Rukus* (1990); and *Flutist and Guitarist* (1993). I have not performed any of these, but they contain important ideas, germane to the newer pieces.

Christian's music is rarely (thankfully), "idiomatic" for the guitar. It seldom refers to, depends upon, or even acknowledges guitar techniques, or whatever musical genres a player might have learned or be familiar. In my case, those genres are almost entirely non-classical. In all of his music, Christian is reticent to supply expression markings, articulations, dynamics, and so on. There's not much to go on, regarding how one should "sound." In guitar music this can be especially interesting.

Until recently, it was generally assumed that performers of his music, with some notable exceptions, were classically trained. But many guitarists who play contemporary music (especially those of my generation in the United States) come from diverse musical backgrounds, and are comfortable in a number of vernacular traditions. Classical guitar might be, in fact, the repertoire and technique with which guitarists today are least familiar. When playing Christian's guitar music, one problem, or challenge for guitarists is how and when to refer sonically and technically to their own background (or not). I don't mean "genre" here — one wouldn't lapse into a heavy-metal, bluegrass or jazz version of some indeterminate

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<sup>2</sup> I won't discuss two other recent ensemble works — *Basel* and *Spring Three* — in this essay. They are both fascinating ensemble works, but the techniques I'm considering are either absent from them or, as in the case of heterophonic forms, exemplified by other pieces.

passage. Instead, the music reminds the guitarist of the fundamental concept of two hands with five fingers on strings and wood.

Context is important. I might play in a different way in duet with Robyn Shulkowsky than with Frederic Rzewski. The electric guitar, in ensemble situations, can be a technical polyglot, whereas most other musicians have a clear first sonic language. Lately, more and more players from other traditions are performing Christian's music (an extraordinary example of this is the drummer Joey Baron). This is a good thing, engendering a multi-linguistic interpretation of his elemental musical ideas.

What makes this possible is Christian's avoidance of "style," as well as his avoidance of "rhetoric." The electric guitar's sonic flexibility allows it to fit in with an ensemble in a variety of ways: there is no single "conventional" sound. Generally, though, he wants things simple, abstract, clear, and devoid of gimcrackery: no rock or jazz gewgaws, no folksy relics. I never use electronic pedals except for volume pedal in **his pieces; I try** to let the instrument sound like fingers on wood and frets, rendered audible by transducers and an amplifier.

Christian's compositional methods often end up producing **effects** that can't be played as written on the instrument: chords, notes off the instrument, simultaneous lines for which one would need both an extra right and left hand to play accurately. But as in much of Christian's other music, the guitar pieces have a difficult and fertile tension between what is technically usual and what is technically new, between what is musically imagined and what is impossible to play.

## V

One doesn't have to search beyond the opening of *Another Possibility* for a good example of the latter. The first thing a guitarist encounters makes for what I'd call a "What the hell...?" moment. The score states: "Chords that are 'impossible' to play: consider one or more of the notes as grace notes preceding the rest of the notes." Even so, it's a bit of a surprise to encounter this in the first chord. How to do it? The challenge defines the player as an impulse function defines a resonance. Some guitarists roll it as a lovely arpeggio. My approach is to embrace the impossibility, calling in the first responders. I usually play it as a ringing three part chord (F#-D-E)

and grab the C# with the right hand (RH), plucking and stopping it. This postulates other possibilities for playing what comes later. I say "usually," because I always do these pieces differently. The object is to exploit, in performance, the ambiguities of the score. These ambiguities are an exhortation to explore new sounds, fingerings, and gestures.



**Example 1: Another Possibility, first line**

The next two chords of *Another Possibility* are idiomatic and seductively easy. Performers seem to "dig in" to the third, 16<sup>th</sup> note figure, perhaps channeling their inner surf-guitarist. The 4<sup>th</sup> event (G-B-A-Bb-E) allows for a choreographic return: for the notes to sustain together the RH must be liberated from its usual over-the-pickups exile. *Another Possibility* and *Going West* (and all the pieces) are full of similar examples. Christian writes the chords he wants, playable or not. The performer is not just encouraged but forced to become a more creative musician.

The tension between the quotidian and the unexpected is fundamental to Christian's aesthetic. The remainder of *Another Possibility's* first line is just as much fun. The next task is to hold down the white notes in the lower beamed figure while the intervening black notes are played. It's wonderfully doable, in various ways, and each approach will sound different and elucidate the guitarist's personality. I like to get the high C-natural with my right hand, as well as the last Ab, referring physically and sonically to the opening. Again, this is anti-idiomatic, and thus (maybe) progressive. In working out these alternatives after considering a number of them, you feel more like a collaborator and less like an interpreter.

These technical questions all appear in the *first line* of a 12-minute piece. They are typical of the kinds of choices offered. The more I play Christian's music, and the more I play with him, the more I think of the guitar music (and, by extension all of his music), as a Rorschach test of a musician's intelligence, creativity, integrity, and chops. The pieces are an ecology that rewards mutations and speciation.

#### IV

A pervasive idea in Christian's music is the continuum between monophony and heterophony. This idea manifests itself in an unusual way in the guitar music. In all of his pieces there are passages that sound either distinctly homophonic, monophonic, polyphonic, or heterophonic. He likes to explore these textures, and to find interesting ways of getting from one to the other. Many of his pieces show a clear formal movement among levels of heterophony, and between monophony and heterophony (and everything in between). Performers play in various groupings and hierarchies of rhythmic synchrony and independence, and combinations of the two. They must interpret neutral clefs, speed up and slow down in various non-coordinated ways, come together for lovely little rounds and chorales, play 2-, 3- and n-part counterpoints that sound like Fux translated into Martian and back, and play things together that are in no way played together (there must be a word for this, but I can't think of one). His music joyously reflects the history of polyphonic styles through a mirror that's been broken into a million pieces and hand-glued back together. In the guitar pieces these ideas radically transform **the way in which we think of the guitar.**

Christian often notates simultaneous independent lines to achieve various forms of "-phony" in the guitar pieces. In the two solo pieces there are short but challenging passages of this (more on these below). In *Quartet...* there are more extended examples, which are less challenging from a technical perspective, and not as exposed. But they are also much longer, and because the guitar is part of the ensemble, rhythmic execution is critical. *Quintet* contains only a brief passage of 2-part writing, written in two staves (Section V, n. 13–18<sup>3</sup>). This is intended as a contribution to the gentle multi-voice polyphonic texture (and could have been written in one staff).

Guitarists often play multiple-lined polyphonic (but not usually heterophonic) parts, in various musical styles. This has even become a new form of virtuosity in the last 20–30 years with tapping, various right hand techniques and the integration of moving bass lines under chordal and melodic playing as in jazz (making 7- and 8-

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<sup>3</sup> In Christian's pieces "measure number" isn't always a precisely meaningful term. He often refers "rehearsal numbers." For simplicity, I use the abbreviation "n." here.

string guitars more common). It also occurs in a lot of contemporary composed music for guitar.

We often practice music in more than one staff, reading through piano music or even string quartets (why not, in fact, orchestral pieces?) in some guitar-centric reduction ad absurdum to improve reading and fingerboard chops. We play things in various clefs for the same reason, and in lots of different tunings (not to mention instruments like mandolin, banjo, et al). But aside from the other instruments and tunings, we're seldom asked to do much of this in contemporary "art music" pieces (aside from reading bass clef, à la Schoenberg's writing in the *Serenade*, in which the guitar transposition is made transparent).

When Christian uses multiple staves (and clefs) and/or multiple lines in the same staff (or sometimes 4 lines in 2 clefs), it's because he's intrigued by the idea of turning a conventionally monophonic or homophonic instrument into a heterophonic one. He writes two or three independent lines (in *Going West*, five lines) and multiple staves (in *Going West*, three staves) in order to more clearly notate a complex musical passage that, when played by an instrument that doesn't comfortably do this, becomes something entirely different. The guitar is pressed into service as a noisy filter composed of fingers, strings and frets. It is played against its grain. By explicitly ignoring the guitar's predilections in these passages, Christian achieves something both significant and beautiful.

It's not the same thing as a composer who notates three staves for piano in order to clarify the counterpoint, or make the part easier to read. And neither are Christian's multi-stave / multi-line passages reductions. The guitarist's *job* is to do the reduction. Christian is *thinking* heterophonically, writing multiple parts and letting the chips fall where they may. It's a musical idea unfettered by the meager resources of our fingers, hands, strings and tunings.

### III

The *Quartet...* and *Quintet...* are explicitly written for a highly selected group of musicians, including himself. Accordingly, these pieces are technically demanding. But most of the multiple stave work in these pieces is in the ensemble.

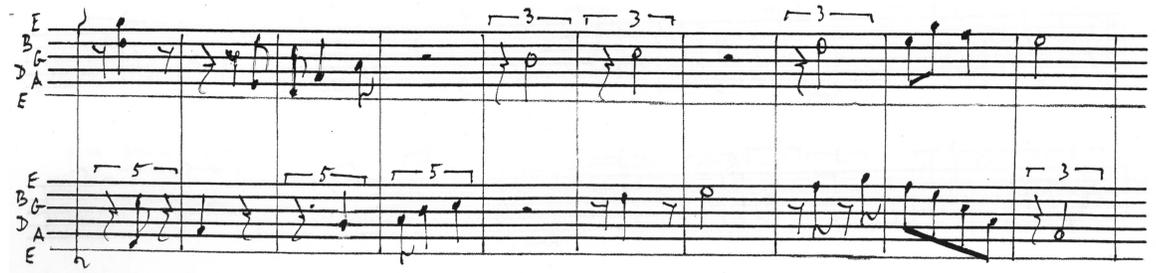
Consequently, the material is less "soloistic" than in *Another Possibility* or *Going West*, but is no less challenging and interesting.

In Section III of the *Quartet...* each instrument plays "independently allowing any and various degrees of overlap between each other." This section is a good example of his formal use of the apposition of monophony and heterophony, and the movement from one to another, in what could be called (in one direction) *cumulative heterophony*: new melodic lines are added to a texture over time.

The guitar part, two pages long, begins with a solo melodic line, the first page (half) of which has a kind of ABA structure distinguished by contour complexity, which in this case might be called *implied heterophony* (analogous to the term *implied polyphony*, commonly used to describe an aspect of Bach's solo string writing). The first and third sections (of this page) are characterized by melodies with large chromatic leaps alternating with repeated note phrases, and a simple passage in semi-determinate tablature (which might result in any number of textures; more on this below). The second "half" of the solo is all in tablature notation and adds a staff (and a second musical line), becoming 2-part, rhythmically independent (albeit sparse), heterophony. One could argue that the juxtaposition of repeated notes with the thornier melodies and tablature passages is Christian's way of having different polyphonic ideas in the context of a single instrument, which is itself embedded in a heterophonic quartet of instruments all doing similar kinds of things on their own. In a sense, this section is a complete heterophonic piece with individual parts that contain varying levels of that same heterophony, all made unpredictable by the independence and freedom within each part.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for guitar, consisting of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with various rhythmic values and chromatic leaps. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains a mix of melodic lines and tablature notation, with some notes marked with fret numbers (e.g., 8, 7, 10, 12, 15, 18, 20, 22, 24, 27, 30, 32, 34, 37, 40, 42, 45, 48, 50, 52, 54, 57, 60, 62, 64, 67, 70, 72, 74, 77, 80, 82, 84, 87, 90, 92, 94, 97, 100, 102, 104, 107, 110, 112, 114, 117, 120, 122, 124, 127, 130, 132, 134, 137, 140, 142, 144, 147, 150, 152, 154, 157, 160, 162, 164, 167, 170, 172, 174, 177, 180, 182, 184, 187, 190, 192, 194, 197, 200, 202, 204, 207, 210, 212, 214, 217, 220, 222, 224, 227, 230, 232, 234, 237, 240, 242, 244, 247, 250, 252, 254, 257, 260, 262, 264, 267, 270, 272, 274, 277, 280, 282, 284, 287, 290, 292, 294, 297, 300, 302, 304, 307, 310, 312, 314, 317, 320, 322, 324, 327, 330, 332, 334, 337, 340, 342, 344, 347, 350, 352, 354, 357, 360, 362, 364, 367, 370, 372, 374, 377, 380, 382, 384, 387, 390, 392, 394, 397, 400, 402, 404, 407, 410, 412, 414, 417, 420, 422, 424, 427, 430, 432, 434, 437, 440, 442, 444, 447, 450, 452, 454, 457, 460, 462, 464, 467, 470, 472, 474, 477, 480, 482, 484, 487, 490, 492, 494, 497, 500, 502, 504, 507, 510, 512, 514, 517, 520, 522, 524, 527, 530, 532, 534, 537, 540, 542, 544, 547, 550, 552, 554, 557, 560, 562, 564, 567, 570, 572, 574, 577, 580, 582, 584, 587, 590, 592, 594, 597, 600, 602, 604, 607, 610, 612, 614, 617, 620, 622, 624, 627, 630, 632, 634, 637, 640, 642, 644, 647, 650, 652, 654, 657, 660, 662, 664, 667, 670, 672, 674, 677, 680, 682, 684, 687, 690, 692, 694, 697, 700, 702, 704, 707, 710, 712, 714, 717, 720, 722, 724, 727, 730, 732, 734, 737, 740, 742, 744, 747, 750, 752, 754, 757, 760, 762, 764, 767, 770, 772, 774, 777, 780, 782, 784, 787, 790, 792, 794, 797, 800, 802, 804, 807, 810, 812, 814, 817, 820, 822, 824, 827, 830, 832, 834, 837, 840, 842, 844, 847, 850, 852, 854, 857, 860, 862, 864, 867, 870, 872, 874, 877, 880, 882, 884, 887, 890, 892, 894, 897, 900, 902, 904, 907, 910, 912, 914, 917, 920, 922, 924, 927, 930, 932, 934, 937, 940, 942, 944, 947, 950, 952, 954, 957, 960, 962, 964, 967, 970, 972, 974, 977, 980, 982, 984, 987, 990, 992, 994, 997, 1000). The notation is dense and complex, with many accidentals and dynamic markings.

Example 2a, *Quartet...*, Section III, guitar solo, final two lines first page (score page nine)



**Example 2b: *Quartet...*, Section III, middle line (two staves, tablature notation) of second page (score page ten)**

Section IV is a quartet in notated rhythm (except for the piano, and free coda). The guitar begins in two staves, in three simple and sparse heterophonic lines. It thins out to two lines, and then to one, ending in a lovely passage (n. 28–70, moving to one line at n. 48) which is not only surprisingly playable and idiomatic for the guitar, but seems **to lie** within a gamut of G-mixolydian (absent a tonal center) for the whole ensemble. Section V, two independent duets: (guitar/piano, bass clarinet/percussion), opens with a strictly notated 2-line/2-stave passage for guitar and piano, in highly coordinated counterpoint, both within the two parts and between them. This is complicated in performance by a simultaneous but independent duet in the bass clarinet and percussion. This highly ordered polyphony (guitar and piano) is followed by: a pair of solos, one for each instrument; a beautiful tremolo-ed homophonic section (n. 44); a 2-stave independently-proceeded-through passage; and, finally, another strictly written duet for piano and guitar, antiphonal in nature, with the bottom stave composed entirely of 16<sup>th</sup> notes on varying beats (occasionally in rhythmic unison but most often not), with the top staves of both guitar and piano consisting of half-notes in the 2/4 meter. The coda is a 1-line melody, once again alternating between wide leaps and repeated notes, with the indication "Both play, start together, then free. Read any clef; gt. At concert pitch".<sup>4</sup> Section VI opens with a rich, chromatic,

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<sup>4</sup> The way that Christian's guitar music, in ensemble context, deals with guitar transposition is an interesting topic, and often a challenge for the guitarist (especially, in my experience, in the *Exercises*, the performance of which merits another essay entirely). When to transpose, when not to? The music is generally forgiving, open to various sonic solutions, and he usually doesn't specify. But when he does indicate "concert pitch" it must be assumed that he really wants it. It is all the more peculiar then that the passage in question (end of Section V) has a "25<sup>th</sup> fret" F natural in it, which must be played, on any guitar I have, as an artificial harmonic, by retuning (up) the E

homophonic 24-measure chorale for the four players, strictly notated. "Each player chooses independently which line or changing lines to play. Guitar and piano can play any number of lines simultaneously as they decide (percussion too)." I've always liked it that Christian thought of the guitar as being on equal polyphonic footing with the piano in that sentence. As the chorale progresses, it becomes more heterophonic, often returning to the repeated note idea, until at n. 25 it changes to free rhythm, any clef (still 4-part). This is followed by a sparse coda, beginning at n. 26, with two lines, two staves (again, any player any clef).

The point of this blow-by-blow is that it describes how different polyphonic textures, and the movement between them, is a formal fundamental in Christian's music. Heterophony — multiple ideas happening freely at the same time guided by common principles — is an ideal in his work, one that he explores tirelessly and thoughtfully. He is well known for his pioneering work in the ways musicians relate to each other. Similarly, the various polyphonic genera describe how "sounds" may relate to each other. Compositional genera may or may not be correlated to performance ones. Heterophonic sounds may occur as a result of what one might call, by analogy, homophonic or even monophonic behavior, and vice versa. The performance behaviors in a piece such as *for 1, 2, or 3 People* could be said to be antiphonal ("you play after I do"), or heterophonic ("we play the same thing at the same time but independently"), *independent* of the musical resultant. Polyphony is not even restricted to the number of voices, monophonic textures (in time) like the return to repeated notes in the *Quartet*, assure sonic coherence — homophony or controlled polyphony— that arises even when players' behaviors are independent (heterophonic). The score, sound, and performer action can form larger heterophonic organisms.

## II

The solo pieces contain extreme instances of heterophonic guitar writing. In *Another Possibility*, there are two multiple-line passages, both written in a single staff. The first is at n. 56, and the second at n. 92 (with a 1-measure 2-staff detour). The first passage begins simply in a glorious 2-part chorale-like texture, with clear bass and melodic line. The bottom line, for the first four measures, consists of alternating Ds

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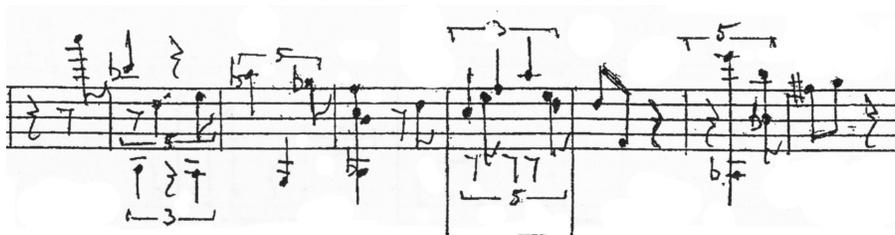
string, or by "just bending the high E" (thanks to Nick Didkovsky for pointing this out). Or perhaps this passage reveals Christian's secret love for heavy-metal guitar...

and Gs, suggesting open strings, and a resonant, modal, strangely archaic sound (except for the m9<sup>b</sup> in the second measure). This passage fits beautifully on the guitar, almost, one might say, idiomatically (I don't know if this is intended). It's so much fun to play that I feel a little guilty, and remind myself not to overdo it.



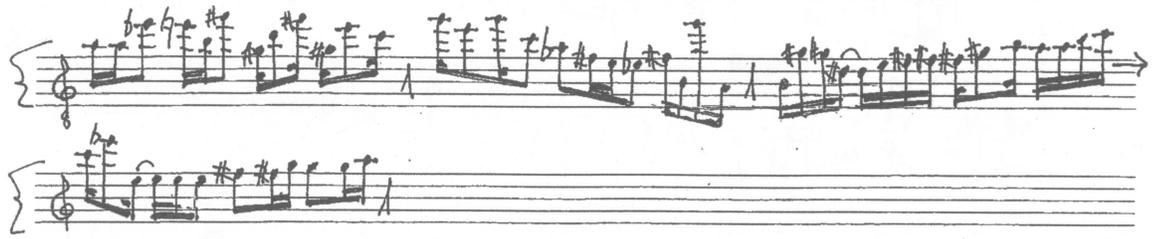
**Example 3: *Another Possibility*, first seven measures of first heterophonic passage (n. 57 – 63)**

No such temptation occurs in the second 2- (and occasionally 3-) voice passage. The leaps and stretches in the first two measures remind you that you're back on whatever terra firma Christian stands on. This passage includes various embedded polyrhythms and its share of impossibilities (such as the dyad consisting of the lowest Ab on the instrument (VI string) and the highest G (I string), in n. 110). In my experience, and in talking to other players who've performed *Another Possibility*, these passages require a disproportionate amount of practice. On the other hand, they're also a lot of fun. The multiple lines, unlike the first of the two passages, don't "fit" together. This is, of course, the idea.



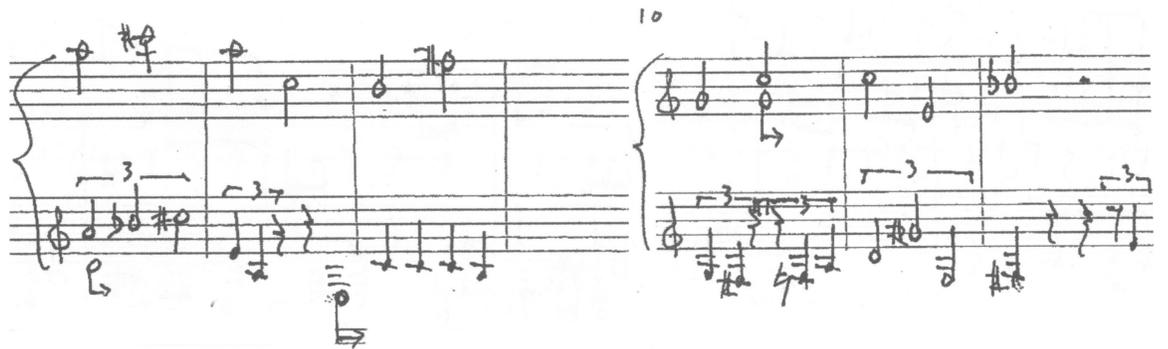
**Example 4: *Another Possibility*, n. 104 – 111**

*Going West*, the most recent guitar piece (as far as I know) and the second of the two solo pieces, is the clearest example of cumulative heterophony. The entire piece moves steadily from one to five lines over the course of the short work. It ends, characteristically, with a short single line coda. It begins with a short high register, leaping chromatic line (as usual, alternating with repeated and "almost" repeated notes).



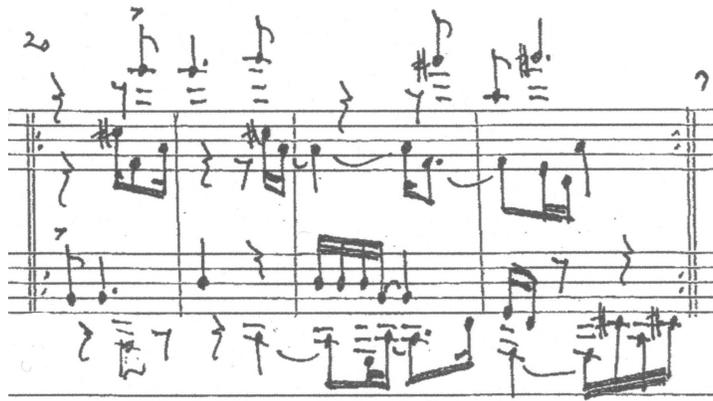
**Example 5: *Going West*, first section (three phrases)**

This *Going West* melody is followed by a monophonic — uncharacteristically guitaristic — gradually ascending passage. Beginning in the lowest register, mostly on the VI string, it uses all but one (i.e., I) of the open strings as sustained accompaniment. Next, this becomes what one might call “two independent melodies with accompaniment,” again using open strings (two staves).



**Example 6: *Going West*, second section (two staves), first six measures (n. 7 – 12)**

By this point, Christian has built a 3-voice heterophonic texture. At n. 20, the piece enters a 4-voice heterophonic guitar **section**. The degree of difficulty changes precipitously at the double bar: this passage is more complex than any I know of in his guitar music.



**Example 7: *Going West*, second page, first four measures (repeated, n. 20 – 25)**

Finally, at n. 28, after the 8-measure four-voice passage (of which Example 7 is the first half), another heterophonic voice is added on a single line between staves: 5-voice heterophony. This new line may consist of any sounds.<sup>5</sup>

The image shows two examples of handwritten musical notation. Example 7 (top) consists of two systems of staves. The first system has two staves with complex rhythmic patterns and accidentals, starting at measure 30 and ending at measure 35. The second system has two staves with similar notation. Example 8 (bottom) consists of two staves with complex rhythmic patterns and accidentals, starting at measure 30 and ending at measure 36.

**Example 8: *Going West* (n. 30 – 36)**

This next section is complex and daunting, but after a while it becomes a kind of guitar drug. Some compromises need to be made, many of the notes can not be sustained to full value, but the polyrhythms, multiple lines and leaps stretch the brain and hands. I tried renotating this passage in order to limit the cognitive load to one stave, to see if it might become easier to read and learn. That wasn't the case.

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<sup>5</sup> In the premiere, I used a small sound palate of toys and percussion instruments taped to a plastic cutting board at my feet. I could also have used my voice, or even some other sounds on the guitar (though the fingers are already pretty busy). One of the instruments I intended to use was a Vietnamese *song loan* —a foot operated struck slit wood-block. These are hard to find, and mine broke (after heavy practice usage) the day of the performance (it sounded great in rehearsal!). I previewed *Going West* for a small class of graduate students, who said that in the section with foot percussion, I moved around so much and so fast that they were afraid I was going to fall. I decided to sit down in performance.

Christian's notation is efficient and well-considered. There's too much information for one staff, and three staves clarify both the performance and the musical idea.

*Going West* moves methodically from one to five voices, its cumulative heterophonic form explicit and transparent. Christian seems to be using this idea more and more in recent pieces which, like *Going West*, explore its extreme possibilities. And, as in some of the other works discussed, *Going West* ends in a short monophonic passage, idiomatic and bluesy, a kind of "welcome to your new home" after a short but difficult journey.

## I

Another musical/notational idea in the guitar music is the use of a kind of tablature. In three pieces (*Flutist and Guitarist*, *Another Possibility*, and *Quartet...*). Christian notates the strings independently in six lines, a system that allows for rhythmic precision and semi-indeterminate pitch. I believe he does this for the first time in *Flutist and Guitarist*. The most challenging example is in the extraordinary ending of *Another Possibility*.

In these passages Christian treats the guitar as a physical, acoustic and geographical tabula rasa, not as a repository of repertory and specific technique. For Christian, Cage, and others of later generations this is a powerful and urgent forward orchestrational step. Naturally and inexorably, maybe even happily, it has opened up possibilities that avoid conventional instruments entirely. The beauty of this kind of "experimental tablature" is that sounds are notated directly as the result of physical actions, unmediated by conventional notation.

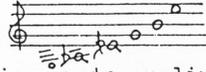
In Christian's case there is also a nice pun at work. Many guitarists, especially younger guitarists, can't even read conventional notation. Several generations have grown up learning tablature, mainly heavy-metal, rock, jazz and folk transcriptions. Oddly, and somewhat ironically, this gives them something in common with "guitar" players from hundreds of years ago. The trend to tablature postdates my own development. In an odd generational divide, I don't read conventional guitar tablature very well.

Christian's tablature is simple in terms of pitch: only a few categories are used (open string, stopped string, or harmonic). But these passages can be extremely difficult from a rhythmic standpoint: unlike conventional tablature they represent six independent musical lines, not a melody or series of chords distributed among the strings. I imagine Christian saying to himself: "They've got six strings after all, why do they need to play together?"

In *Flutist and Guitarist*, there's a fourteen-measure solo passage 6-string/line tablature notation near the end (with an optional, quiet, non-notated flute part). The guitarist retunes two of the strings (approximately, to neighboring quarter-tones), and plays open strings (notated on the line), stopped strings (notated above the line), and harmonics (diamond-shaped notes). Simple rhythms and a free, moderate tempo (quarter  $\approx$  80) render it easily played, almost sight-readable. And unless one plays an open string that was supposed to be stopped there are no wrong notes.

page 6

guitar re-tune ( $e^b$  and  $a^b$  about  $\frac{1}{4}$  tone or less lower):



Each line = string; note on line = play that (open) string; note above line = play any higher note on that (stopped) string; diamond-shaped notes = produce harmonic

(Optional: flute may quietly, intermittently, as best she can, "track" one (any, changing) of the guitar voices.)

(109)

(115)

(120)

continue directly  
 on bottom of page 5;  
 guitar stays tuned  
 as is, pitches to  
 sound as written  
 except for micro-  
 tonal lowering

**Example 9: Flutist and Guitarist tablature**

The ending of *Another Possibility* is another matter entirely. There are two repeated sections: eleven measures of 4/4 at (tempo) mm. 62, and twelve measures of 2/4 at

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mm. 76. Open strings are on the line now, stopped strings above (harmonics not mentioned). In *Flutist and Guitarist* the texture is more or less homophonic, like a chorale. In *Another Possibility* it's heterophonic—a complex, 6-voice string-string combat. There are beat filling hockets, polyrhythms, and a dance-like independence in the right hand. It's like a 6-part score for indeterminate percussion instruments, and a gas to play.

The first section is slower but more difficult than the second. The latter always feels like a reward, a little fiddle tune to end the piece. I always feel a sense of relief and wonder when I'm done. I know it's possible, and I've played it often, but I'm a little astonished that I did it.

The image shows three systems of handwritten guitar tablature. Each system consists of six horizontal lines representing the strings, labeled II through V on both sides. The notation includes notes on the lines and above them, with stems and flags. Rhythmic values are indicated by numbers below the lines (e.g., 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 2, 3, 4). Fingering is indicated by numbers 1-4. Some notes have arrows above them, possibly indicating slides or bends. The first system is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 64. The second system starts at measure 130. The third system starts at measure 135 with a tempo of quarter note = 76 and ends at measure 140.

Play at strings indicated. Notes on line = that open string. Notes above line = any higher, fingered, note on that string (always variable). Repetitions are optional. If taken, may, of course, use different fingered notes.

Example 10: *Another Possibility*, first page of tablature section (my marked-up score), (n. 125 – 140)

This passage has interested me in another way since I began playing it. Should one learn it in a specific, note-determined way, or more generally? More to the point, should it be improvised in performance?

Improvisation is essential in Christian's music. His notations are often precise and demanding in certain respects while leaving a great deal to the musician in others. He is intentional, explicit and imaginative about getting musicians to think and play in new ways, not just "interpret" however thoughtfully, even insightfully or inventively. As he points out in his interview with Walter Zimmermann in *Desert Plants*:

"... my music is often just material. But not raw material exactly. It's set up in such a way as to require anyone who wants to seriously deal with it to exert themselves in a particular way. Not just technically, to learn how to play it, but also imaginatively ... how to fill out what's to be filled out, how to use the material. And so that's just the individual in relation to the score."<sup>6</sup>

Improvisation is not only comfortable for me (and musicians who grew up playing vernacular musics rather than notated classical music), it's my natural mode. It was clear to me that I should *not* work this passage out ahead of time, or renotate it determinately. Some performers do the latter, and there's ample historical precedent for this approach.

But I like improvising. It's central to my performance of *Another Possibility* and the other music of Christian's that I play. In *Another Possibility* phrasing, fingerings, sounds, tempi, and articulations are most often left to the player. Each of my performances is different from every other. And my own are quite different, for example, from those of my friend and frequent collaborator Giacomo Fiore (whose performances and recording I admire). For one thing, I alternate between a pick and my fingers (but not nails), and Giacomo, trained in classical guitar, uses only his fingers (with nails). But there are many other more substantial differences as well. When to use open strings and let them ring (as in n. 7, 6, 51, and 56)? What string to use and how to articulate the low register phrases (as in n. 55, with its beautiful microtonal ideas, 76, and most interestingly, 123)? There are many intriguing

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<sup>6</sup> *Desert Plants: Conversations With 23 American Musicians (1976)*. Thanks to Giacomo Fiore for reminding me of this almost 45 year old remark.

choices throughout. Given the degree of performer freedom, it's hard to imagine ever falling into a rut with this piece.

I am inclined, as a general rule, to welcome freedom when offered, not turn it down. The tablature passages suggest *more* improvisation, not less. Playing the section spontaneously is exciting, at least for me, and maybe a little for the audience — working without a net. But it also makes learning the material hard: what exactly to practice?

The answer is simple, and generalizes to much of Christian's music: practice what you play. This is no different than jazz, or bluegrass, or any other form in which there are certain givens and certain non-givens. *You just play*, which is one way I've heard Christian describe how his own improvisation. In playing, you learn the things that remain constant: rhythms, stringing, what kind of note to play on each string. Conversely, you try not to "learn" anything that isn't given, focusing on how to create new ideas as you play, as in jazz. When practicing, you search for new possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes, for example, I intentionally use as much of the neck as possible in this section, until I find myself settling into clear patterns. I might reverse the intention

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<sup>7</sup> Still, as an experiment, and for pedagogical purposes, I made a determinate notation of this section:

### Another Possibility

one possibility: last 14 measures

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 2/4 time. The first staff contains measures 1 through 5, and the second staff contains measures 6 through 14. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals. Fingerings are indicated by Roman numerals (I, II, III, IV, V, VI) above or below notes. Some notes are marked with diamond-shaped noteheads, representing open strings. There are also triplets and a quintuplet indicated by brackets and the number '3' or '5' above the notes.

example "transcription," last 14 measures  
diamond noteheads: open strings

#### Example 11: *Another Possibility*, realization of second tablature section (n. 136 – 149)

This is unwieldy, and I never seriously considered learning it, but it was an interesting experiment.

— use as little of the neck as possible. Sometimes I use a wide variety of vibrato, bends, and slides. Sometimes almost none. In performance, I approach it with fresh, with no idea of how to realize it. That idea arises in performance context and from my study of the piece on the guitar, not away from it.

### **Appendix: Notes on the Recent Pieces for Guitar**

*Another Possibility*, 2004 was commissioned by the Dutch guitarist Wiek Hijmans, who premiered it. *Another Possibility* has since been played by a number of guitarists including myself (the American premiere, I believe, on a concert of Christian's music at Roulette, with *Quintet 2*). Giacomo Fiore has recently recorded it on his LP *iv: american electric guitars*, GFLP001, 2014. A video of a performance of mine is at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0eiS0IDITg>.

*Quartet for Frederic, Larry, Michael, Robyn* (2005–7) was written for a series of performances by Frederic Rzewski (piano), myself, Michael Reissler (bass clarinet), and Robyn Schulkowsky (percussion) in Madrid, Spain (February, 2008). To the best of my knowledge, *Quartet...* has only been performed twice, during one week in Madrid, by the eponymous ensemble.

*Basel*, 2008 was written originally for an ensemble in Switzerland. The American premiere was given at Roulette, (April, 2008), on a concert of Christian's music (with him on piano) organized by Craig Shepard (who played trombone). The two guitarists were Marco Cappelli and myself, and the clarinetist was Jürg Frey, whose music for the same ensemble was also on the concert, along with Christian's *Microexercises*.

*Quintet*, 2009, 2 percussion, electric guitar, piano, contrabass (other arrangements possible) was written for a concert at Roulette (December, 2009), with Joey Baron (drums), Robyn Schulkowsky (percussion), Robert Black (bass), myself, and Christian playing piano. Close to an hour long, it was the second half of a concert. The first half consisted of two solo pieces (*Look, She Said*, played by Black, and *Another Possibility*, played by me). It was recorded for Roulette TV, and available at: <http://vimeo.com/10954656>. To the best of my knowledge, *Quintet* has not been played since.

*Spring Three* was written in 2011 for a concert at The Stone, New York City (June, 2011), shared by Christian and I, curated by New World Records. Christian and I decided to use the same ensemble/instrumentation, and each write pieces for that group, which consisted of Doug Perkins (percussion), Robert Black (bass),

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myself (guitar), Christian (piano). My piece was called *9 events (quartet for christian, doug, robert and me)*

*Going West* (2013) was written for me as a going-away present when I moved to California from my long time home in Hanover, New Hampshire. I premiered it in May 2014, on a solo recital in the Tangents Guitar Series in San Francisco, directed by Giacomo Fiore (I also played *Another Possibility* on that concert).