

[A further loose-leaf chapter for my ongoing polemical memoir — *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man*].

‘the cry of a dove announcing rain’

In his essay ‘Towards an Ethic of Improvisation’ Cornelius Cardew noted:

“Informal sound has a power over our emotional responses that formal ‘music’ does not, in that it acts subliminally rather than on a cultural level.”¹

This observation was part of Cardew’s attempt to locate, and articulate, AMM’s then swiftly evolving musical praxis. More than fifty years on, improvised music has developed diverse nuanced categorical markers. In a sense, *informal music* has reasserted itself within our culture. It has been rescued from the bucolic, largely by a thoughtful, self-confident anti-establishment milieu. In addition, there is a generative power for a self-aware community of ‘improvising’ musicians. Putting the phlegm into punk, and an atonal thunder back into jazz. This sense of the *informal* has become an aesthetic and social template for a creatively conscious cultural mechanism: a power of the commons, which, at times, has also lurked, albeit furtively, in the darker corridors of the conservatory.

Subsequently, there are various socio-cultural effects that owe something to the general practice of improvisation. For example, this musical aesthetic has lent upon, and nourished, a strong social agenda to a sufficient extent for some to reasonably claim it a vehicle, an active agent (and maybe even a rehearsal), for ‘a social virtuosity’. This is an important, culturally empowering claim, one countering the prevailing hegemonic priority of crude individualism which has dominated political, economic, and even cultural discourse for many decades.

As I have argued variously elsewhere, the social element within Cardew's analysis is embedded within the inherently collective register: that it was ‘we’ (i.e. the members of AMM) who embraced, and employed a particular strand of experimental music which appreciated, applied, and endorsed a shift of aesthetic awareness towards a more generalised perception of sound. [In this regard Cardew acknowledged John Cage.] In a more recent application

¹ First published in *Treatise Handbook*, Peters (Hinrichsen Edition Ltd), London, 1971. Now available within *Cornelius Cardew—A Reader*, Copula, 2006. (The above quotation appears on page 125.)

of this approach ('to the search for sounds' — as opposed to applying those most readily available —) I have taken an apt phrase from the anthropologist, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and applied it to a recent improvised music CD release, entitled *The Art of Noticing*.^{2 3}

But what of the power of sublimation within our music, and thence feeding cultural possibility? Cardew prompts us not only to acknowledge the effect of sound upon our perceptive cognition, he also alerts readers to the potential of a more active human engagement with an albeit pervasive (if at times inchoate) universe of sound. In his words:

“[...] it is not the exclusive privilege of music to have a history — sound has a history too. Industry and modern technology have added machine sounds and electronic sounds to the primeval sounds of thunderstorms, volcano eruption, avalanche and tidal wave.”⁴

Cardew could, of course, have added some of the delicately tenuous natural (and human-made) sounds, like that of a breeze in the trees, cicada choruses, nature calls like 'the cry of a dove announcing rain' (an expression drawn from ancient Chinese literature), as well as the pings and whoops of modern electronic devices (although these seem tame compared with the multitudinous voices of buzzes, whines and shrieks nature offers). But

Cardew's point is well made, but, what is implicit in his exploratory narrative — and maybe needs to be teased out — is that 'music' does not *make its own history*. Humanity makes history. Cardew permits himself to alert AMM that they too could create their own story.

I am tempted to make two qualifications in regard to Cardew's call to history. One: whatever may have been in his mind, the term 'music' will mostly be interpreted, in our Euro-centricity, as the Western classical model. With its essential *Sol-fa*-ic employment of even-temperament. Obviously, the history of Western music is short compared to any purview of music derived in human history.

² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushrooms at the End of the World*, Princeton University Press, (paperback version) 2021

³ *The Art of Noticing*, CD featuring John Butcher, Marjolaine Charbin, Ute Kanngiesser and Eddie Prévost. Matchless Recordings MRCD110, 2023

⁴ *Cornelius Cardew — A Reader* Copula 2006 (page 125)

This leads to my second point: 'The history of natural sounds' can also only exist within *human* sensibility. Clearly, the perception of sounds developed from an adaptive awareness into a more generalised cultural configuration. This occurs at the point where necessary survival information arises from spontaneous reaction into consciousness. In this sense, humanity's development of music is truly pre-historic.

Of course, the inherent human ability to sublimate is part of the *Homo sapiens* tool-kit. Deep-seated memorised responses to particular sounds would have been an essential adaptive mechanism: biology's way of creating, and maintaining life-saving and life-enhancing, instinctive impulses. Now, though, instead of the menacing growl of a predator alerting us to a potential threat, we are more likely to have developed a speedy response to the approach of a roaring motorcycle. And, just as we note our atavistic intuitions have developed out of our pre-historic existence, this (brain and muscle memory) capacity also lends itself to the contemporary phase of our evolving world of sound, in which music has become a part.

Playful echoes of the natural world may well be included in the human-made sonic portrayals of life through 'art'. But now most of us, in the so-called developed world, will more likely feel the hairs at the back of our necks raised by David Tudor's electronically contrived *Rainforest* rather than experiencing the real thing!

Steven Mithen suggests:

'[The] capacity for art is an ability to attribute meaning to inanimate objects or marks displaced from their referents'.⁵

This points to an ability of adaptive consequence for *Homo sapiens*, enabling, for example, early humankind to predict the movement of possible prey and predators through animal tracks, and thus giving them a survival and reproductive advantage. Of course, the history of humanity is a story of the development of language and giving signs to things. Mithen's suggestion could equally apply to the universe of sound. The origins of any sensibility of 'music' surely arises from the catalytic confluence of sublimated responses to sounds, the emergence of self-consciousness, and social awareness.

'The sounds' (from whatever source), and from whatever meanings we attach, derive, or tentatively impute to them, is the cultural medium within which we musicians engage. Echoing Marx, *we can make our own history* — but we cannot make it in circumstances of our own choosing; or even wait

⁵ Steven Mithen, *The Pre-history of the Mind*, (1996) p 183

for the most propitious moment. We must live, and work, within this ever-changing world, even though we (justifiably) may aspire to something more positive than the current socio-economic settlement.

Of the early members of AMM, Cardew was the most musically 'indoctrinated' (I use this term precisely because of its negative connotations.) It is to Royal Academician Cardew's credit that he 'woke up' to this experience. While the rest of the ensemble benefited from this insight, I think his analysis (as expressed through his 1967 essay) creates the impression that the Western tonic *sol-fa* system is a potentially overwhelming neck-lock on musicality. The reality, of course, is that he used even-temperament material within AMM performances. As did Lou Gare (the saxophonist in early AMM) and, as did (perhaps to an even greater degree) John Tilbury (a Royal College of Music graduate), who was also thoroughly imbued (although not uncritically) with Western classical music practices.

Maybe only Keith Rowe and myself are considered to sit apart from the tonic *so-fa* fraternity. We remain, though, as exponents of informal music. Keith, meanwhile, desists from the description of his music as 'improvised', a term rightly to be contested. Its vagueness accepted (perhaps too readily) as a catch-all for an informal music (i.e. a music without prescribed operational parameters, or a strictly identifiable outcome). But, I note that he and I (in our own way) have 'a good ear'. Enough often to convert the most unpromising sonic material into 'meaningful' complexities of sound. We are all (musicians and listeners) also subject to the more 'modern history of sound' which, of course, includes products of the Western music tradition.

What Cardew emphasised (in 1967) was his perception of the cultural weight, and the oppressive nature, of the West European musical hegemony. I recall him complaining of 'having Beethoven on his back'! That musical spinal-lock was loosened by the likes of Cardew himself. Succeeding generations of musicians are now much more relaxed about melding the exploratory with tonic *sol fa*. As can be heard, for example, in Marjolaine Charbin's contribution to the duets she and I made for a CD.⁶ I too, in my own way, accommodate her 'more formal' musical moments. I recognise the positive creative use of a possible universal musical language. But, I also fear that this hybrid musical philosophy could nurture the seeds of authority, and cultural compromise, within our current hyper-commodified society. This encourages a tendency toward conformity, and undermines the creative potential of risk. While such a combination may offer a creative catalytic condition, the informal element of any human contract is the most vulnerable. There is no Academy for Serendipity. (Although, I hope to have contributed towards such an informal foundation.)

⁶ Charbin and Prévost: *The Cry of a Dove Announcing Rain*, 2023, Matchless Recordings, mrcd113

Cardew's own political trajectory took him (in my opinion) away from the implications of his earlier mindset.⁷ Understandably, he saw the then fashionable modern musicological concerns as irrelevant in an age characterised by brutal power and petulant impunity. In fact, I suggest, that the international and environmental situation is currently in a far more parlous condition than it was during Cardew's period of political activity. Are we musicians, then, doing anything other than 'fiddling while Rome burns'? My answer is that it is precisely at such times that we must propose, prepare and engage with our world (as it is—in its constant flux): noticing its positive, and its potential features.

As Cardew subtly implied: *we can make our own history*. It is not the preserve of a rich entitled cliquish elite. There are, of course, the results, and continuing (mostly negative) effects of human activity. Thus, we must each do what we can to understand. But, knowledge of the past is only of any real value if it suggests possible solutions, or alternatives. In this sense, music is no different to any other historically acknowledged phenomenon. If it is necessary for humankind to make a different and, hopefully, a more habitable world, then even musicians must be prepared to make a music accordingly. And, just as no one should take any environmental, social or political recommendations without convincing evidence, then musicians must be prepared not only 'to notice' prevailing conditions of sounds, they must also be prepared to own them. No sound is innocent.

Eddie Prévost, July 2023

⁷ For an comprehensive (and exciting) overview of Cornelius Cardew read: John Tilbury's *Cornelius Cardew - a life unfinished*, Copula, 2008