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Apartment House: Wolff, Cage, ‘Performing Indeterminacy’, University of Leeds, 1 July 2017

Oliver Thurley

At the beginning of July, the University of Leeds played host to the ‘Performing Indeterminacy’ conference: a series of talks, panels and concerts that are part of a research project on John Cage’s *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58), led by Philip Thomas and Martin Iddon. In the middle of all this, Apartment House present what many consider the pinnacle of Cage’s indeterminate work alongside a new commission from Christian Wolff, the last surviving member of the New York School composers. *Resistance* (2016–17), Wolff’s new work, titled ‘for 10 or more players and a pianist’, was written in response to Cage’s *Concert*, sharing elements of its instrumentation and schema. In Leeds’ Clothworkers Hall, Apartment House—led by Anton Lukoszevieze—premiered the new piece alongside its progenitor, composed some 59 years apart. At the heart of both pieces in this concert is Philip Thomas at the piano. The conscientiousness and exactitude that Thomas brings to the music of both Cage and Wolff (having worked closely with the latter over the past fifteen years) make him, perhaps, the ideal soloist for this programme. Quite simply, it is a line-up that could not have come about through chance procedure.

Resistance begins frenetically, as though the whole ensemble is starting midway through the piece. After these scant busy moments, individual players drop out to reveal more fragmented and hesitant gestures. Conducting the ensemble, Jack Sheen mediates the player’s roles, intervening intermittently rather than governing or leading them through the piece in a traditional manner. After thirty seconds of conducting Sheen sits down while the ensemble continues, now left to work either autonomously or collaboratively. Without a conductor, subgroups form and shift organically among the ensemble. Thomas’ complex piano lines seem to move skittishly between the fleeting trios and quartets: sometimes inserting the piano into them, sometimes placing it in opposition—sparring with individual soloists that emerge in intricate flourishes, then fading as another emerges. A few minutes later Sheen stands, waiting for various instrumental threads to conclude before, once again, interposing himself into the ensemble and bringing players and erstwhile soloists back together for a short time before sitting back down and leaving the ensemble to continue independently.

Like Cage’s *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, Wolff’s score mixes vastly different notational styles, each page seeming to catalogue a different compositional or notational process drawn from throughout Wolff’s oeuvre. The result is an energetic performance, at times made frantic by a complexity one might not typically associate with Wolff’s music. Beyond the titular note (‘for 10 or more players and a pianist’), the instrumentation is non-specific other than a few minimum requirements (at least one stringed-instrument, one wind, one brass). Without defined parts, performers must divide the roles between themselves. Unlike the Cage piece, whose modularity creates an ensemble of isolated voices, *Resistance* relies on supporting precarious relationships between performers. Temporary sub-groups form and shift around the ensemble, soloists emerge briefly before returning to another group. This, as Sheen noted in Apartment House’s panel discussion the morning after the performance, is a very communal way of making music.

Intimating the underlying political temper of the piece, *Resistance* teases fragments from Cornelius Cardew’s *Revolution is the Main Trend*, which are alluded to in shards before emerging more clearly across the ensemble. Wolff’s programme note draws attention to

another specific moment of quoted material, *Resistance*'s final passage: a short arrangement based on Pete Seeger's 'Hold the Line'. Wolff notes that this song was written, 'on the occasion of a posse of thugs trying to break up a concert by Paul Robeson.' Of course, *Resistance* was written in the lead-up to the recent presidential election in the United States. The title—one of Wolff's most politically charged—alludes to the rise of the Trump administration and the resistance to it that has emerged in response to the rising tide of hate in such a politically divided country. Discussing *Resistance* the next day as part of his keynote talk, Wolff noted the political tone of the work: 'Our music exists in such a small world, that its impact on a larger political scene is practically nil. Basically, you do what you can, and on a scale which is available to you.'

Following the intermission, Apartment House presented Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. The beginning of the performance is restrained, as the conductor's arms—simulating a clock—begin their exhausting revolutions (Sheen will do this, unwavering, for the next fifty minutes). Amidst silence there is a single piano gesture and the ensemble start softly. Given that Cage proffers little direction for the interpretation and construction of the *Concert* (an indeterminate accompaniment to the renowned *Solo for Piano*), any given performance is necessarily a personal and individualised one for each performer. In their panel discussion the next day, members of Apartment House discussed some of the various methods used in preparing their individual parts—from Lukoszevics's Cagean use of the *I Ching*, to Sheen's conductor calisthenics training—but in the moment of the performance, such personal approaches are undisclosed. Thomas plays forcefully with short phrases, small clusters or isolated single notes, but leaves a lot of space between actions so that the orchestra are playing for the majority of the piece's opening. Sheen's composure is unrelenting. As he begins to speed up the conductor's clock, his equanimity belies the performance's building agitation. The piano part becomes more intense and unwieldy fragments are strung together with greater urgency.

As the focus of the piece, Thomas is authoritative, his performance commanding. While there is perhaps an exploratory aspect to any interpretation of the *Solo for Piano* score, there is no sense of meandering in this performance.¹ When framed next to the domineering force of the piano, the anarchic isolated voices of the ensemble somehow fuse together into something very musical. The thaumaturgy of Cage is such that this collective chaos somehow becomes a cohesive unit—delicate, sustained tones passed back and forth across the ensemble—even where individual interpretations run isolated or even contrary to each other.

After the concert, microphones are set up in Clothworkers Hall as its audience leaves, and Apartment House repeat the entire concert once more for a CD recording. In the following days, the players will also take part in a panel discussion and individually record their interpretations as part of Thomas and Iddon's research project. Apartment House's devoted work on Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* is sure to become an authoritative interpretation of the work alongside the original *25-year Retrospective Concert* recording, almost sixty years after the famous Tudor/Cunningham premiere.

¹ Thomas has discussed his approach to realising the *Solo for Piano* elsewhere, see Philip Thomas, 'Understanding Indeterminate Music through Performance: Cage's *Solo for Piano*', *Twentieth-Century Music* 10/1, (2013), pp. 91–113.