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Chapter 18

Ensemble interaction in indeterminate music: A case study of Christian Wolff's *Exercises*

Emily Payne and Philip Thomas

The exploration of social organisation through the use of indeterminate notation has been a recurring concern of the music of experimental composer Christian Wolff (b. 1934) since the late 1950s. In 1973 he embarked upon a series of pieces titled *Exercises* for (mostly) unspecified instrumentation and numbers of players. Since then he has returned to the title to extend the number of works to, currently, 37;[1] they are among his most frequently performed pieces. The notation Wolff employs in these pieces is skeletal and there are no separate parts: every musician reads from the same set of instructions and musical score. Consequently, players negotiate a way of working with the score and with each other, making decisions prior to, and during, the moment of performance. Orchestration, tempo, dynamics, sequence, coordination, and much else are all 'up for grabs', and can differ radically from performance to performance. Consequently, the *Exercises* offer considerable potential for navigating approaches to ensemble interaction, and for exploration of performance possibilities. Exactly how these possibilities are exercised in practice is the focus of this case study.

Exercises performed by Apartment House

[1] A number of additional pieces include the word in their title, such as *Winter Exercise* (2013) and *Apartment House Exercise* (2002). For a more detailed account of Wolff's small ensemble music see Fox (2010).

The case study addressed in this chapter is a recording session that took place in London on 21–24 March 2017 in which the ensemble Apartment House (with whom Philip Thomas plays piano) combined a selection of different *Exercises* from the earliest to some of the most recent.[2] The session was conceived as a professional (rather than research) project, resulting in a CD recording. It was observed and video recorded by Emily Payne, who undertook subsequent interviews and stimulated recall sessions with the musicians.[3] An interview was undertaken with Wolff in the months after the session (see Table 1 for an overview of the empirical material collected during the project).[4]

Table 1. Overview of empirical material collected during the project.

Date	Event	Location	Data	Personnel

[2] Apartment House is an experimental music ensemble founded in 1995 under the leadership of Anton Lukoszevieze. See Lukoszevieze and Fox (2016) for an interview with Lukoszevieze about the group's history and performane ethos.

[3] Stimulated recall is a method whereby participants view or listen to recorded material during interview and are invited to comment on any aspects that seem noteworthy to them (see e.g. Clarke et al., 2016). All interviews were transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to identify emergent themes.

[4] The project received ethical approval from the School of Music, Humanities and Media at the University of Huddersfield. Informed consent was provided by all participants before data collection commenced.

21/03/17–24/03/17	Recording session	Craxton Studios, London	Audio-visual	Apartment House, Simon Reynell (sound recordist), EP
29/06/17	Interview	School of Music, University of Leeds, Leeds	Audio	Christian Wolff, EP, PT
22/08/17	Interview and stimulated recall session	New Cross, London	Audio	Mira Benjamin, EP
28/08/17	Stimulated recall session	Sheffield	Text[5]	PT
22/09/03	Interview and stimulated recall session	Oxford	Audio	Christopher Redgate, EP

Our discussion focuses in particular on *Exercise 4*, of which four takes were recorded by Thomas (PT; piano), Christopher Redgate (CR; oboe), and Mira Benjamin (MB; violin) on 22 March 2017.

[5] For reasons of time, Thomas was not interviewed in person, but watched the video footage and made notes during and immediately after each take. He did not listen to Benjamin's interview before doing this, nor did he read any of Payne's notes on her observations.

<Insert Figure 1 around here.>

The notation for *Exercise 4* (Figure 1) is minimal, with a number of parameters unspecified, for example, clefs, tempo, articulation, dynamics, and timbre. The rhythmic beaming is suggestive of phrasing but Wolff provides no instructions regarding its interpretation. Indeed, aside from the directive 'must' in the final sentence, the accompanying instructions read more like gentle suggestions than a prescribed approach:

> In general the point of reference, where more than one player plays the same material (the normal situation), is unison. But, as rhythm and speed, articulation, amplitude, colour, and modes of playing are all flexible, any player may try to establish what the point of reference for unison is at any point in the course of playing. If, however, a movement by a player, say, in the direction of faster is not generally picked up by the rest, he must return to the prevailing speed. (Wolff, 1974, p. 1)

Wolff's words are indicative of a concern with the social relations of performance, and a reluctance to subscribe to the hierarches that conventionally condition chamber music performance. But what does it mean for performance to say that unison is a 'point of reference', rather than the primary shared intention that is typically assumed to underpin group music-making? Where do the limits lie, and what makes for a 'successful' performance?

The trio did not rehearse before recording, and throughout the recording session, no single performer took a lead; instead there were moments when the musicians operated

as individuals, in pairs, or more collectively. The first take was characterised by confusion and hesitation, and was followed by a brief conversation between the players. However, very little was said after this, rather, the 'discussion' took place in the playing itself. As Thomas commented at the beginning of the session, 'We could try and make some decisions as to who plays what, or we could just play actually, and see what happens'. In the following sections we identify three different forms of interaction in the musicians' playing as they engaged with Wolff's notation: working responsively, independently, and emergently. We conclude by reflecting on what these ways of working might bring to discussions of ensemble performance.

Working responsively

Take two of *Exercise 4* began in a fairly coordinated manner, with the trio breathing together before synchronous entries from Redgate and Benjamin, followed shortly by Thomas. A steady tempo was maintained throughout the performance, with few sudden shifts in speed, apart from some occasional accelerations from Thomas. Benjamin and Redgate sometimes matched each other's articulation with *pizzicato* or *staccato*, respectively, and occasionally slowed down together on particular phrases. Benjamin and Redgate finished synchronously with a brief smile at one another, with Thomas finishing soon after. Thomas felt that take two was more cohesive than their previous playing, commenting on watching the footage that it 'shows more signs of listening to each other, and greater confidence. There's more playfulness with the interaction of lines, and at the same time less trying to muck around with the sound.' A specific example of Benjamin responding to Redgate by matching her sound to his playing occurred about halfway through the second take where, having been playing in a legato manner, Redgate began line 5 with *staccato* articulation and at a soft dynamic, and

Benjamin echoed him with gentle *pizzicato*. Similarly, Redgate reflected that at the beginning of this take he was seeking a sound that would not be too strong in character, and would blend with Benjamin's. Watching the footage, he commented:

> [A]n obvious modification I could have done was to flutter tongue here. The problem with flutter, especially down there, it tends to be very loud and dominating, so I rejected it. Because I wanted to get into her sound world, but I realised that I couldn't do it with the flutter. It would just be too overpowering […].

Benjamin characterised this take as 'chamber music', and Redgate's reflections certainly suggest a concern with cohesion and the ensemble's collective sound.

Working independently

In contrast to the cooperative strategies described above, there were instances of the musicians making decisions to modify the material in unexpected ways, apparently independently from, rather than in response to, one another. In take one, Redgate introduced some trills, afterwards asking the others for their feedback:

> Talking about modifying things: what do you think about, because on the line you [Benjamin] have got lovely *pizzicato*, you've got the harmonics, and all the different bow things. Do you think trills and trems are allowed? Once or twice I was picking bits and tremming two notes.

Thomas and Benjamin agreed to Redgate's suggestion, and in take two, Redgate employed this technique more frequently, particularly around repeated dyads, for example, at the beginning of line 3. He repeated this approach in all subsequent takes.

For Benjamin, too, opportunities for independent decision-making lay in timbre, but she took quite a different approach to Redgate, playing *pizzicato* throughout take four. Her decision to employ this technique was conceived of and applied separately from any consideration of the others. As she commented in interview: 'I love being surprised by what's coming up. So "OK, I'm just going to do *pizz.* for the entire thing"'. Thomas later reflected on the effect that Benjamin's decision had on how he experienced the piece, and on the performance as a whole:

> Mira's decision to play entirely *pizz.* was canny – it made everything slow down a little (although the full performance was not slower) and highlighted the canonic potential in the piece. It also I think made both Chris and myself listen more carefully, aware that Mira's playing changed the character (pace, volume, articulation) of the piece.

Working emergently

The moments of interaction discussed so far have been focused on decisions made by the musicians, but there was an episode in take one of *Exercise 4* that unfolded somewhat less predictably. About halfway through the take, Redgate and Benjamin (reading the score in treble clef) played the repeated D4 figure halfway through line 4 quite freely; then Thomas

entered assertively with the same phrase but read in the bass clef as F2; by that point Redgate and Benjamin had reached the beginning of line 6 and played the first two phrases in unison, and because they played an F4 it sounded like an echo of Thomas. Watching back over the footage, Benjamin reflected on the serendipity of this interaction:

> [Sometimes] you notice that something has happened and then you decide to try and keep that going a little bit. […] You realise, 'Hey that was really cute what just happened', or 'That was a wonderful sound, I'm going to try and make it last'. And then as soon as you try to make it last it starts to deflate and then it leaves, but it's these little experiences of liking what you hear. […] So right there we landed on this F really loudly, together, totally by accident at the same time. That was quite fun, and I think what follows is that little moment.

'Collaborative emergence' describes a phenomenon in ensemble performance whereby unpredictable outcomes are determined by the group as a whole rather than any single individual; to use a well-worn phrase that tends to be most often used in relation to improvised ensemble interaction, 'the whole is the greater than the sum of the parts' (Sawyer, 2003, p. 11; see also Chapter 1). In these indeterminate circumstances, despite the presence of music notation, the unexpected outcome is one of momentary coordination, rather than innovation, where Redgate and Benjamin seemed to pair up and respond to Thomas spontaneously. This moment of interaction was not repeated in any of the subsequent takes.

Conclusion

The above brief episodes—some of which only lasted for a few seconds—only scratch the surface of the kinds of interactions going on in the session, but they demonstrate how the players responded to the situation and to Wolff's notation in radically different ways across takes. The distribution of creative authority was neither uniform nor static within the ensemble, with the performers moving between different kinds of interaction: sometimes working responsively or independently, sometimes in pairs or emergently as a collective. The notation acts like something of a puzzle to be solved in the moment, or rather, given there are infinite solutions, a provocation to act, to create (as also discussed in Chapter 2). Like the Apartment House musicians, some performers might opt not to talk about anything but just to dive straight in and play, and then play again; others might engage in prolonged conversation about possibilities and what might and might not 'work'. Wolff (1984/2017, p. 85) has written that the notation is one element in a conversation 'before the fact': it provides a text for musicians to work with, setting out limits, possibilities, rules, and choices. The score is upheld as facilitating work to be done, discussions to be had, solutions to be proposed, discarded, subverted, and enacted. As Wolff reflected during interview, 'exercise'—understood as both noun and verb—is particularly apposite as a title: 'to try out […] not necessarily an end in themselves'. Processes of interaction and exchange are granted an importance equal to, and quite possibly greater than, the end result. People get lost playing, or there might be points at which no-one plays — confusion and disruption can be a feature of this music. Wolff's *Exercises* thus prompt a rethinking of what it means to play together: cooperation is necessary, but the resultant ensemble interaction might be characterised by uncertainty, surprise, or even complete breakdown.

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