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MANIFESTO

Much of the new music is concerned with performance under the direction of the composer, who trains and directs his players. Cage, Stockhausen and Cardew have worked in this way, developing a skilled and dedicated group of players, to achieve the kind of performances they want. Cage early became associated with the pianist David Tudor and dancers such as Merce Cunningham; Stockhausen has increasingly worked with his own group; and Cardew is primarily interested in performing groups through his own work in AMM and more recently the Scratch Orchestra. The activities of an English group such as Intermodulation are an important outlet for Roger Smalley and Tim Souster, two composer-performers.

There is much to be learnt from exploratory work, playing from graphic or verbal notations as well as more conventional indeterminate pieces such as Cardew's "Octet 6I". Musicians are more likely to find out about this new performance tradition if they participate themselves rather than merely listen to groups which may not be highly skilled. Skill and musicianship do matter particularly when the composer has specified very few notes. (When is a composer not a composer? All I can say is that the identity of indeterminate pieces makes itself felt for the players even if the indications are so free that the composer would not recognise his piece if he came into the room.) Discipline is not merely a technical matter - ensemble, scales and arpeggios arduously practised. Stockhausen in "Aus den sieben Tagen" points out the spiritual demands made of his players in every kind of musical decision, even though no note is actually named in the score. Responsibility is extended, a sound once produced affects the time which follows. Playing is a means of increasing awareness in all kinds of music - it is not mere improvisation.

The formation of a performing group based on the music department at Birmingham University is to be welcomed. It will aid realistic discussion of the ideas surrounding avant garde music today. And it will do this far more successfully than a visit from outsiders who disappear after the concert before any awkward questions can be asked. The first meetings of the group upset equilibrium at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, but when it was explained that the activity aspired to the condition of music, all was well. I hope the group will act as a forum in the University for the performing traditions of the avant garde, a recent but clearly recognisable and essential to the understanding of music today.

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