

Approaching the Performance of Experimental Music on the Flute

Harriet Richardson

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Abstract

This dissertation serves as a commentary to two recitals: a recital of chamber music which took place in July 2014, and a solo recital in June 2015. The first chapter looks at the definition of experimental music and its characteristics through the exploration of writings by composers and performers, considering the selection of repertoire that abides by these ideas, along with a brief look at performance practice. The second chapter serves as a performance commentary to the chamber works *Why Patterns?* by Morton Feldman and *Flutist and Guitarist* by Christian Wolff. The third chapter serves as a performance commentary to the works *Headlong* by Christopher Fox and *947* by Alvin Lucier. Both the second and third chapter examine the composer's aesthetic concerns, along with recordings and writings around experimental music to inform the performance approach. Finally the conclusion looks at the significance of the experimental performer and how a performer may approach future works.

Preface

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss approaches to performance and the influence of performance practice in experimental music. As a flute player my practice-based research has centred on the performance of works written for or performable by my instrument, both solo and ensemble. As this text will give an informed commentary on the performance of my chosen repertoire it therefore seems appropriate to give an explanation of how I came to decide upon the studied repertoire and why it was selected as part of this research. From herein I will refer to this field of music as 'experimental music' and I will define how I came to classify this.

The existence of a tradition within the performance of experimental music seems an inherent contradiction, with a characteristic of experimentalism being the rejection of convention. An irony lies within a systematic departure from the canon and the subsequent breeding of a new tradition. Indisputably, as explored throughout this text, recurrent interpretative decisions are often made by an experimental performer and can be traced in performances across the genre.

Over the course of the former four years I have sought out performance experiences that deviate from the traditional canon of flute repertoire, initially by my attraction to an alternative way of experiencing music than the concern with virtuosity and the communication of a narrative that is widely found in non-experimental traditions widely performed by flautists. This was triggered by my joining of the edges ensemble and the ensuing exposure to the music of the Wandelweiser Collective, a collective of composers who continue experimentalism in the vein of, and with similar concerns as, the New York School of composers. This music was my first experience of a more holistic performance practice and along with the genial acceptance and mutual curiosity across the members of the edges ensemble I discovered a new approach to sound and its creation.

Chapter 1

1.1: Selecting repertoire

The use of the term 'experimental' to describe a musical tradition is contestable. It has not necessarily been the position of the experimental composer to define their music as such; John Cage initially objected to the use of the term in attachment to his work, although he later adopted the expression;¹ Morton Feldman remarked 'No, I don't think of my music as experimental: I think of Beethoven as experimental, because he was really looking for something'.² Lejaren Hiller was a composer and academic who in 1959 used the term experimental in application to his own work, in his case to work that was experimental in a traditional sense of the word: part of a scientific process with a hypothesis, methodology and conclusion; this literal interpretation of the term being at odds with Cage's application.³ As my interest lay in investigating Cage's brand of experimentalism the way that I decided to respond to problematic classification would be to select a number of defining characteristics, the properties of which had been expressed by Cage and musicians associated with the New York School, and subsequently perform the works that I believed—after consultation with writings on experimental music with roots in the Cageian ideal such as James Saunder's *Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*—to remain relevant to my selected characteristics (along with the consideration of the aesthetic concerns of the composer). The characteristics that I collated are as follows:

- A concern with honesty and now-ness

Honesty in music can be explained by the idea of the relinquishment of tradition that has developed in the west of sculpting art and music in a way so as to provoke a thought or feeling in the mind of the audience, Cage communicated that in experimental music there are no purposes, only sounds.⁴ The aim of the experimental composer is to strip back these traditions and allow the phenomena to speak for itself; Alvin Lucier wrote that, 'We have been so concerned with the language that we have forgotten how sound flows through space and occupies it.'⁵ Cage further explained the reasoning behind this interest in the relinquishment of control in terms of human reactions to the natural world:

¹ Cage, John, *Silence* (London, 1968) p. 7

² Feldman, Morton in Villars, Chris, ed., *Morton Feldman Says* (London, 2006) p. 26

³ Brooks, William, In re: 'Experimental Music' *Contemporary Music Review*, 31:1 (August, 2012), 37 - 62

⁴ Cage, John, *Op. cit.* p. 17

⁵ Lucier, Alvin, *Reflections*, 2nd edn. (Cologne, 2005) p. 416

Hearing sounds which are just sounds immediately sets the theorizing [sic] mind to theorizing, and the emotions of human beings are continually aroused by encounters with nature. Does not a mountain unintentionally evoke in us a sense of wonder? otters along a stream a sense of mirth? night in the woods a sense of fear?⁶

This aesthetic concern with honesty and now-ness in experimental music also seems synonymous with the breeding of the aesthetic of the imperfect, Cage said to ‘let sounds be themselves’.⁷ This genial concern also allows for failure—in *Flutist and Guitarist* Christian Wolff describes one of the flautist’s phrases as ‘impossible’ embracing the idea of the fallibility of the human performer.⁸

A further by-product of the employment of indeterminacy in composition is the creation of unique situations embedded in the now-ness of performance, such as in the way Christian Wolff stimulates interaction between performers in *Duo for Pianists II*:

one simply could not prepare for as many possibilities as one might encounter or rehearse any one of them as many times as one would need to accommodate any contingency. The tension that ensues seems unnerving—or perhaps *nerving* in the sense that each player in the Duo II had to be fully present in the moment of performance. One could not ‘lose oneself’ in the piece but only stay alert for the piece’s constant mutations.⁹

- an interest in unveiling the peculiar

The previous quotes from Cage and Lucier display the experimentalist’s concern with phenomenology and the intrinsic workings of nature and sound. Pauline Oliveros spoke of David Tudor—the pianist and composer who retained a close working relationship with John Cage and other experimentalists:

Tudor was then, and remains, a key figure in encouraging and performing the works of young composers interested in the phenomenology of sound and the revelation of its natural characteristics and processes as music-making.¹⁰

⁶ Cage, John, *Silence* (London, 1968) p. 10

⁷ Cage, John, *Op. cit.* p. 10

⁸ Wolff, Christian, *Flutist and Guitarist* (n.p., 1993)

⁹ Hicks, M. & Asplund, C., *Christian Wolff* (Illinois, 2012) p. 26

¹⁰ Oliveros, Pauline in Lucier, Alvin, *Op. cit.* p. 12

This idea of unveiling the sonic's inherent characteristics as music can be found in the compositions of Alvin Lucier, much of whose work is realised through the interaction of two systems, often a natural / animate being against technology—for example (as discussed later in this dissertation) *947* for flute and pure wave oscillator sees the flautist present notes that deviate in tuning from the sine tones therefore allowing a sonic phenomenon to appear.¹¹

- the subjugation of the composer to the compositional processes or performance decisions

Those involved with the composition of experimental music find ways and means to remove themselves from the activities of the sounds they make.¹²

Works such as *In C* by minimalist composer Terry Riley display this movement towards the dominance of the compositional process. Although the composer lays down certain rules and material, the overall course of the piece is governed by the decisions of the performer. John Cage allowed his autonomy as a composer to be governed by the outcomes of a compositional process in *Music for Piano 21-52*: which came about through the employment of chance operations derived from the Chinese *I-Ching* which he then set within certain parameters; he further used the tossing of coins to determine the clefs.¹³ Christopher Fox's *Headlong* exploits the use of ratios to determine speed and pitch intervals, with the composer describing the ratios as the main theme out of which the rest of the material grows.¹⁴

- a departure from tradition and willingness towards change

Experimentalism is rooted in the attraction of the unknown and obscure: Christian Wolff's music 'relies on new ways of behaving musically';¹⁵ John Tilbury said of Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise* 'a notation of this kind can take you beyond the instrument, perhaps even beyond the concept of making music.'¹⁶ It is the pushing of boundaries that leads experimental composers to find new ways of composing and transcribing a score. This

¹¹ Lucier, Alvin, *Op. cit.* p. 18

¹² Cage, John, *Op. cit.* p. 10

¹³ Cage, John, *Op. cit.* p. 60-61

¹⁴ Fox, Christopher, *Headlong* (n.p., 2009)

¹⁵ Hicks, M. & Asplund, C. *Op. cit.*, p. 2

¹⁶ Tilbury, J. & Parsons, M., The Contemporary Pianist *The Musical Times*, Vol. 110, No. 1512 (Feb., 1969), p. 150-152

departure from tradition can also be seen in the politics of the composers, such as Christian Wolff, whose scores 'open up the possibility of wider societal change' due to their concern with group dynamics and discussions.¹⁷

- the transcendence of performance and the engagement of the performer as a vessel

In experimental music the performer's role does not sit as it would in music of the traditional canon: the performer acts as a mediator between the listener and the score, whereas in classical music there are matters of embellishment and virtuosity to consider that in many ways encourage performer individuality. It is in the wooing of an audience that the traditional performer's success lies; in experimentalism the performer must adopt a more restrained, less interventional role in terms of stamping their mark on a piece, the experimental performer is forced to think in terms of a more prescriptive role to allow the instructions of a score to speak for themselves: Tilbury believed that the onus of the experimental performer is to show the composer 'some of the implications and consequences of what he has written'.¹⁸ In Cage's 4'33" David Tudor's role was 'merely to indicate the prescribed lengths of silence', it is this simplification of actions—in the vein of the experimental composer's turn to fundamentals of the sonic—that encourages the consideration of the performer's role as facilitator.

In consideration of these five qualities I subsequently programmed two recitals:

Chamber Recital

- Phillip Glass *Piece in the Shape of a Square* (1967) for two Flutes 7' - performed with Alba Bru
- Christian Wolff *Flutist and Guitarist* (1993) for Flute and Guitar 12' - performed with Diego Castro Magaš
- John Cage *Two* (1987) for Flute and Piano 10' - performed with Ben Brezinski
- Morton Feldman *Why Patterns?* (1978) for Flute, Glockenspiel and Piano 30' - performed with Taneli Clarke and Ben Brezinski

¹⁷ Chase, S. & Thomas, P., eds., *Changing the system: the music of Christian Wolff* (Farnham, 2010) p. 214

¹⁸ Tilbury, John in Nyman, Michael, *Experimental Music*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1999) p. 19

Solo Recital

- Pat Allison *John Mudge (Dr Nelson, Dr Siegel)* (2014-15) for solo flute 12'
- Alvin Lucier *947* (1993) for Flute and pure wave oscillator 7'30"
- Cornelius Cardew *Treatise* (1936-81) pages 46-47, instrumentation open c. 10'
- Christopher Fox *Headlong* (2009) for wind instrument and square wave sound file 10'

For the purpose of this thesis the pieces that I will discuss in relation to my own performance approach are *Why Patterns?*, *Flutist and Guitarist*, *Headlong* and *947*. I have selected these particular pieces due to the prominence of their composers and the composer's contrasting aesthetic concerns. Each of these composers Feldman, Wolff, Fox and Lucier, are staple composers of experimentalism and have therefore been, and continue to be, widely discussed across the genre.

1.2: Performance practice

Unlike many pianists who have been active in the performance of experimental music (such as David Tudor, John Tilbury, Philip Thomas) flautists tend to play a much wider and more varied repertoire—perhaps due to the more limited repertoire of the instrument. There is a lot of crossover in the flute world: Ransom Wilson has recorded *Vermont Counterpoint*, and plays everything from Vivaldi to Faure to Penderecki;¹⁹ one of the most prolific flautists of the moment and co-founder of the world renowned International Contemporary Ensemble Claire Chase, has produced some of my favourite recordings of experimental works, such as *Vermont Counterpoint* and Lucier's *Almost New York* yet she also performs works across the new music spectrum;²⁰ the same is true of Carla Rees, who performed Morton Feldman's *For Philip Guston* with John Tilbury and Simon Allen during hcmf// 2012, and whose website describes her as playing a wide range of repertoire, from Baroque to contemporary classical and jazz standards.²¹ This crossover by flautists has meant that it is difficult to track the existence of experimental performance practice on the instrument as there can be a real variety of approaches—some seemingly more aligned with experimentalist concerns than others. As a result of this I have focused on the performance practice of instrumentalists who have experienced working on pieces

¹⁹ Wilson, Ransom, 'Ransom's Repertoire: Flute and Orchestra', *Ransom Wilson*, <http://www.ransomwilson.com/flute-repertoire-with-orchestra.html> (22 March 2015)

²⁰ Chase, Claire, 'about', <http://www.clairechase.net/about/> (22 March 2015)

²¹ Rees, Carla, 'Carla Rees - Alto and Bass Flute: Repertoire', <http://www.carlarees.co.uk/section97599.html> (22 March 2015)

with the composers, such as Eberhard Blum, Christopher Redgate, David Tudor, John Tilbury, and Philip Thomas.

Chapter 2

2.1 Why Patterns?

The 1970s saw Feldman form the group 'Morton Feldman and the soloists', to which Feldman invited like-minded musicians to take part and perform his works, amongst work by other composers. It was through this ensemble that the flautist Eberhard Blum, involved since the piece's conception, came to be a part of *Why Patterns?*, premiering the piece in 1978 in Berlin along with Feldman on piano and Jan Williams on glockenspiel.²²

Why Patterns? had been written as a 'travel piece' for the trio of Feldman, Blum and Williams—they had wanted a piece that required minimal set up and practice time—Feldman didn't write a score, instead he wrote three independent parts that move forwards autonomously but remain closely related throughout. This method of writing was new for Feldman, and later led to the development of works such as *Crippled Symmetry* and *For Philip Guston*.²³ Speaking of these later works Feldman commented,

If my approach seems more didactic now—spending many hours working out strategies that only apply to a few moments of music—it is because the patterns that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult. If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose.²⁴

This issue of *Why Patterns?* rhythmic rigidity and precision (see figure 1) versus the subjugation of the individual parts to each performer, leaves it necessary that the performers reconcile the mathematical exactness of the notation against the autonomy of the three parts which, even with meticulous precision, are vulnerable to inconsistencies of tempo across the ensemble.

²² Blum, Eberhard, *Choice & Chance: Bilder und Berichte aus meinem Leben als Musiker* ["An Illustrated Account of My Life as a Musician"] (Berlin, 2008) English translation by Peter Söderberg and Chris Villars <http://www.cnvill.net/mfblum.pdf> p. 2

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2

²⁴ Friedman, B.H. ed., *Give My Regards To Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* (Cambridge, 2000) p. 142

Figure 1:



In early rehearsals of the work Ben (piano), Taneli (glockenspiel) and I had made attempts to loosely coordinate across parts with the aim of working out where each of us should be at specific points, therefore enabling us to take cues from one another and to make allowances accordingly. Initially the system showed promise, however as rehearsals progressed we came to the realisation that the allowances that we were making could be counterproductive: the process of listening and adjusting, as well as compromising the exactness of the notation, created a tension between us that would surely translate to an audience in performance. The further issue that the method seemed heavily governed by our comfort in traditional performance practice, with endeavours to remain in time with each other, led simply to the feeling of trying to fit a square peg in a round hole.

As we came to this realisation I discovered Blum's writings of his experience of performing Feldman's work alongside the composer himself. Blum described how the group played the piece:

We had our common tempo (quarter note = 63) and began to play at the same time. Everyone performed his part "on his own" as precisely as possible until the

end of the approximately half-hour long work. We were in a sense free and yet integrated into the strict system of the notation.²⁵

Herein the focus of our practice remained upon concentration on the conveyance of our individual parts during performance. However, this approach was not without its own difficulties; the coda, which is the only section of the piece that all parts are in a common time signature, demands synchronicity across the ensemble. We would begin together and move forwards through our individual parts independently, allowing different permutations of the parts to emerge; each play through of the piece revealing new patterns as inconsistencies in tempo across the trio came into play. As we approached the coda we would loop our parts until eye contact had been established at the conclusion of each part, before moving onto the coda simultaneously.

Figure 2:

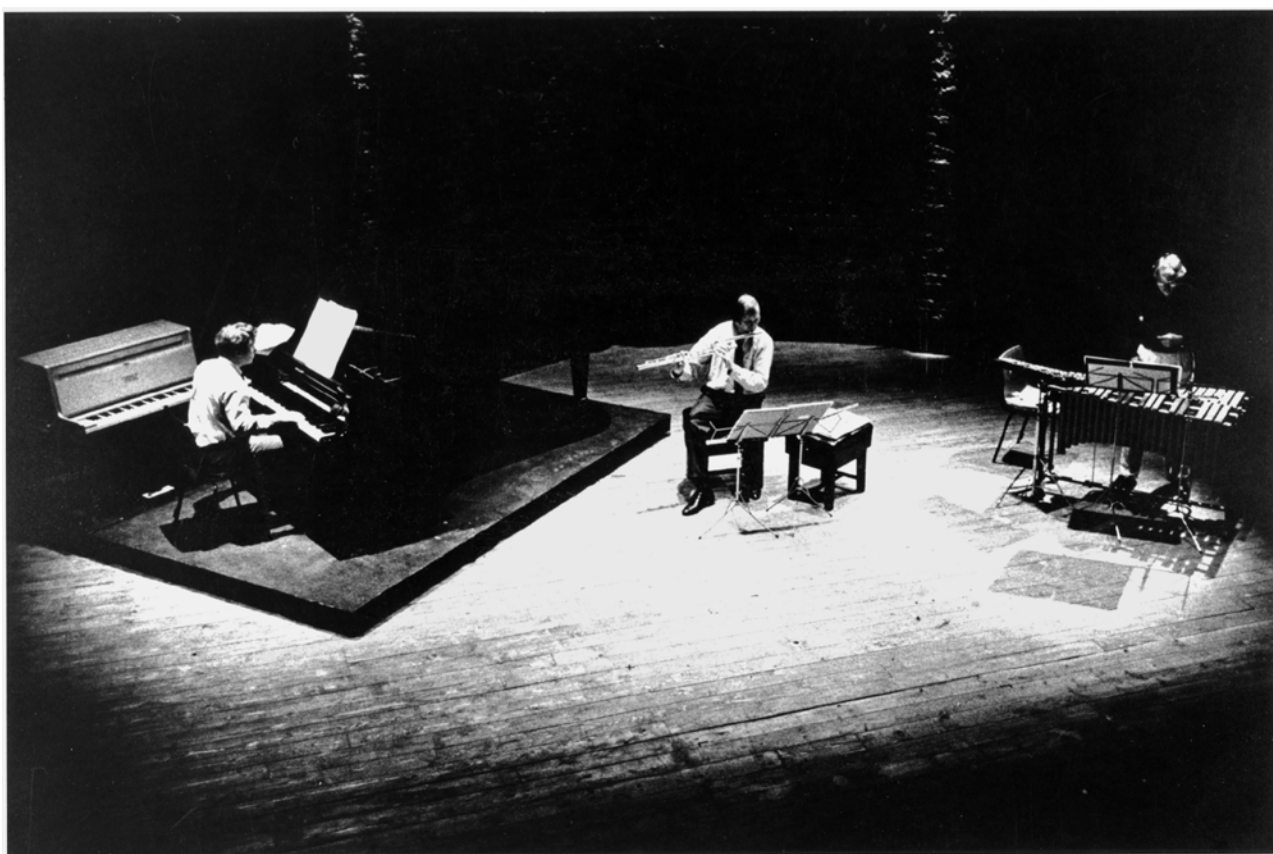


Figure 2 shows the trio in 1985 (now Feldman was replaced at the piano by Nils Vigeland) performing *Crippled Symmetry*, and demonstrates the optimum playing positions of the ensemble: allowing each of the three independent lines of sound its own space to evolve,

²⁵ Blum, Eberhard, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2

but still enabling the connection of the lines in the auditory experience of the listener.²⁶

Our trio mimicked this layout, and found that it allowed us to each concentrate on our own happenings, but still permitted the necessary communication in relation to the coda.

A further parameter to consider when approaching the piece is that of balance. Feldman spoke of the use of patterns and their hierarchy in relation to the piece:

The most interesting aspect for me, composing exclusively with patterns, is that there is not one organizational [sic] procedure more advantageous than another, perhaps because no one pattern ever takes precedence over the others.²⁷

In a quiet piece such as *Why Patterns?* the issue of volume across the ensemble is inextricably linked with an individual performer's concern with tone production, particularly in the case of wind instruments, therefore this aspect of equality in Feldman's music must be reconciled by the ensemble against the practicalities of realising the score without allowing the dominance of one line over the others. In discussion with the German composer Walter Zimmermann, Petr Kotik—Flautist of the S.E.M. Ensemble—communicated his approach to the issue of balance and dynamics in the performance of the later Feldman piece *For Philip Guston*, a piece which shares many of *Why Patterns?* characteristics,

Number one, we are all playing as softly as possible, all of us, all the time. That is one of the preconditions of playing Feldman, especially this particular piece, to go down to the lowest dynamic level. You cannot start arranging to have some instruments play in the foreground in order to balance the sound, that would manipulate the music in a wrong way. Here, the traditional problem of balance really does not exist ... What the dynamic marking means is that all the instruments play all the time soft as possible, without regard for the overall balance. If you play the music this way, you discover, how much dynamics there is.²⁸

Kotik's argument that to manufacture equilibrium across the trio would be tantamount to manipulating the music in a way that would conflict with one of the fundamental ideas of

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4

²⁷ Friedman, B.H. ed., *Op. Cit.*, p. 140

²⁸ Petr, K. & Zimmermann, W., 'On Performing Feldman's "For Philip Guston": A Conversation by Petr Kotik and Walter Zimmerman', *Morton Feldman Page*, <http://www.cnvill.net/mfkotik.htm> (1 February 2015)

experimentalism, a notion famously expressed by Feldman to Stockhausen as ‘I don’t push the sounds around’, is one that can be backed up by Feldman’s score (see figure 3). In this example the comparatively longer notes of the alto flute, sitting an octave higher than the piano and glockenspiel (the score shows the sounding pitch of the alto flute) would always sound more prevalently than the other instruments of the trio. Considering that Feldman does not seem to make allowances in his writing to best facilitate homogeneity, the following quote from Alvin Lucier seems highly appropriate when considering the performance of the piece:

Absolute perfection is not paramount in this music. The dichotomy between precision and imprecision goes back to Debussy. You write your music as precisely as you can, but the performance is human.²⁹

Figure 3:



In accordance with the Cageian idea of the relinquishment of control over sound—rather than sound as a means of contrived provocation—the approach I take to tone production in the performance of experimental music is one of minimal intervention, the remaining on

²⁹ Lucier, Alvin, *Music 109: Notes on Experimental Music* (Middletown, 2012) p. 33

a natural, open sound, with the inclusion of vibrato the exception rather than the rule.³⁰ I would also argue that in this particular case the exclusion of vibrato is conducive to the piece's atmosphere of stasis and experimentation with sense of time, the feature of which Feldman felt had been stirred in his work through the influence of the visual artwork of his contemporaries, Mark Rothko and Philip Guston.³¹

In a recording of *Why Patterns?* by Blum, Williams and Feldman the thing that struck me about Blum's approach was how unpolished it was; Blum's tone remained utterly unembellished throughout and markedly non-descript.³² There is a stark lack of vibrato, however at times natural fluctuations can be heard in Blum's breath control. The recording also features notes breaking and inconsistent dynamics.³³ Given Feldman's concern with the creation of beautiful sound, I think it reasonable to assume that the inconsistencies of dynamics in the recording reveals Blum's choices not to compromise his tone quality in favour of volume.

This recording highly contrasts a 1991 recording by California EAR Unit featuring Dorothy Stone (flute), Arthur Jarvinen (glockenspiel) and Gaylord Mowrey (piano). The sound selected by Stone was much more *dolce* than Blum's, with a highly controlled and consistent vibrato. Homogeneity of colour and balance is maintained across the ensemble, with the volume never really rising above *mezzo piano*; overall the California EAR unit recording sounds much more polished and professional.³⁴ In an interview with Jan Williams, Feldman described how his interest in oriental rugs had influenced his ideas around the composition of *Why Patterns?*:

In older oriental rugs the dyes are made in smaller amounts and so what happens is that there is an imperfection throughout the rug of changing colour dyes. Most people feel that they are imperfections. Actually it is the refraction of the light on these small dye batches that makes the rugs wonderful. I interpreted this as going in and out of tune. There is a name for that in rugs – it's called abrash – a change of colours that leads us into pieces like *Instruments 3* [*Instruments 3* later developed into *Why Patterns?*] which was the beginning of my rug idea. I wouldn't say I made a literal juxtaposition between rugs and the

³⁰ Cage, John, *Op. Cit.*, p. 10

³¹ Friedman, B.H. ed., *Op. Cit.*, p. 149

³² Feldman, Morton, 'Why Patterns', *Morton Feldman: The Viola in My Life*, New World Records 80657 (2006)

³³ date unknown, although presumably around 1978—Feldman did not continue to play as part of the trio much later than this

³⁴ I'm also taking into account recording techniques here as the California EAR Unit recording may have been recorded twenty years after the other.

use of instruments in *Instruments 3*, but it made me not worry about it. I like the imperfection and it added to the colour. It enriched the colour, this out-of-tune quality. Just like I like my piano out of tune a little bit. It's warmer. So that was very interesting.³⁵

This idea of imperfection as a part of Feldman's aesthetic is also present in the impracticalities of the piece's score. To therefore produce a polished performance such as that of the California EAR unit seems incongruous with the nature of the piece. This does not mean free reign in terms of incompetence of musicianship, rather, that by its nature a function of *Why patterns?* is a sonic exploration of fluctuation and micro human inconsistencies. I therefore concluded that I would make production of sound my primary concern throughout the piece, as I assume Blum had. I also went on to consider that over-playing and rehearsal could conflict fundamentally with the piece—especially in terms of rehearsal as a trio—when wanting to convey a performance that remained true to Feldman's aesthetic concerns.

2.2 Flutist and Guitarist

Composed in 1992 *Flutist and Guitarist* sits late in Christian Wolff's repertoire, and is a piece by a mature composer who has spent the breadth of his artistic focus on methods of stimulating change and inspiring development. Wolff's means of achieving his quest for the novel and experimental is met through composing with a sequence of ideas in mind: change, teaching, unpredictability, freedom, noise.³⁶ A striking feature of Wolff's output is his recurring tendency to find ways to facilitate the exploration of human nature and interaction through the setting of performance decisions and variables and his relinquishing of compositional control—Wolff is a composer of conscience. John Tilbury noted that Wolff 'tells you not so much what to play as how to play', however, I would go further to say that Wolff does not so much tell you how to play, than suggest how you might wish to play.³⁷

As displayed in figure 4, the performance notes seem to intentionally circumvent the use of dictatorial language:

- reference to tempo markings are preceded by 'ca.'

³⁵ Morton Feldman in Villars, Chris, ed., *Morton Feldman Says* (London, 2006) p. 155

³⁶ Hicks, M. & Asplund, C., *Christian Wolff* (Illinois, 2012) p. 2

³⁷ Tilbury, J. & Parsons, M., *The Contemporary Pianist* *The Musical Times*, Vol. 110, No. 1512 (Feb., 1969), p. 150-152

- for page seven Wolff advises the players to ‘try to end at about the same time’—leaving room for failure and approximations
- in reference to breaks Wolff selects the word suggested rather than instructed
- expressing the flautist should mostly play with minimal vibrato, leaving room for failure and personal choice

Figure 4:

FLUTIST AND GUITARIST

Opening tempo: ♩ = ca. 80. (77) - (95) free, rubato (but not too slow). Wedges (Λ) = breaks of free and variable duration. At measure 96: somewhat slower; at 123: ♩ = ca. 62.

At 142 (page 7) each player plays independently, but try to end at about the same time. Either player may repeat (any number of times) any of the numbered phrases, but flute should not repeat 2, 6 or 7). Flute plays each phrase (between wedges, marked by a legato line) on one breath, the durations of individual notes within a phrase being otherwise free; the last phrase (8) is "impossible": breaks have been suggested ((Λ)). Fermatas indicate a slightly longer duration in context. Once the whole phrase (8) has been played, any parts of it may be repeated, either on one breath or as fast as possible.

Guitar durations (at 142) are determined by how long a note continues to sound played at the indicated dynamic: let the sound die out completely before going on directly to the next one in the indicated line (if a string is still resonating but is required for a sound coming from another line, the resonating sound may be cut off). Note that the alignment of the notes of different lines as notated may not represent the order in which the notes have to be played.

Ways of playing, plucking, use of fingers, picks, etc., when not specified, are free, but flute should mostly play with a minimum of vibrato.

Note that the guitar part at 123 and after sounds as written (except for microtonal lowerings) although the a- and d- strings have altered tunings.

Between (77) and (95) lines through notes (♯) indicate some alteration of sound, change of color, bend, mode of attack, sometimes possibly an ornament (e.g. mordant/inverted mordant, etc.).

The music draws on the tunes "Parting Friends" and "Rock About My Saro Jane."

For Suzanne Huber

Christian Wolff

This suggests, to a degree, the notion of Wolff handing over a level of autonomy to the performers and portrays a measure of trust and generosity from the composer. The language encourages the performers to take ownership of the piece and stimulates the individuality of each iteration of the score. Philip Thomas writes ‘the desire to release

performers, to allow them both to be free as well as to further themselves and to be alert to the freshness of the situation lies at the heart of Wolff's approach'.³⁸

Upon opening *Flutist and Guitarist* the performer is presented with an apparently very traditional score: a typical notation with clefs, time signatures, articulations, rehearsal marks etc. Diego (guitar) and I approached the opening of the piece as if we had been performing classical chamber music, shaping and exploring melodic phrases and balancing dynamics. From the outset—in spite of the page's traditional features—Wolff sets a precedent for the lively and dynamic writing that continues throughout the piece, deftly drawing upon contrasting melodic material:

Bars 1 - 14:

- texturally rich in harmonies
- the guitar plays two homophonic pitch lines
- flute sits towards the bottom of its range
- dignified and steady motion of material
- lines maintain steady pitch range
- balance across both parts

Bars 15 - 24:

- shorter livelier soloistic flute lines
- climb in flute range
- quicker flute rhythms
- single accompaniment-like line on guitar

Bars 25 - 38:

- solo flute line (although guitarist has option to whistle along quietly and intermittently with the flute)
- two octave drop in range, longer and more fluid lines

These three sections, all occurring within roughly a minute of the piece's origin, feature contrasting content that trigger opposing use of colour and character from the performer.

³⁸ Chase, S. & Thomas, P., eds., *Op. cit.*, p. 212

The piece continues in this vein of constant flux, sections evolving from one to another with seemingly unrelated material.

Figure 5:



Bar 77 (see figure 5) marks a transition from the piece's earlier more traditional sections, to one of experimental indeterminacy. There is a twofold relinquishment of parameters to the performers: firstly, the choice of how one might deviate and alter sound (the notes with line through mark the notes which sound can be altered); and secondly, the removal of bar lines and time signatures along with the instruction 'free, rubato (but not too slow)' transfers a measure of choice to the performers with regard to the rate at which the material is proceeded through. The preceding material to bar 77 accustoms the performers to change, encouraging the performers to take Wolff's lead and surprise the listener and each other with the subsequent material over which they have a degree of autonomy.

When preparing the section Diego and I began to consider how we might embrace the section's indeterminacy: the unconventionality of indeterminacy lies in its embracement of the unknown and spontaneous, in the knowledge that the same thing will never be repeated twice. With each exploration of the section we therefore resolved to focus on the immediacy of the performance and move through the section with no predetermined ideas of what actions we might make. This immediacy breeds an essence of now-ness that brings the music a sense of life and stimulates action from basic instinct, creating a very specific engaging tension which cannot be created without dynamic interplay. Switching from the earlier material to the more free bar 77 created for me a marked absorption in the present and an amplification of the senses that allowed me to retain a focus not on performing, but on the execution of a series of actions in response to the action of another. John Tilbury related to Michael Parsons,

Playing Christian Wolff's music is very complicated. You are so involved with actually making the sound that you have no chance of emotional indulgence; you have a job to do and it takes all your concentration to do it efficiently—ie musically. With this music you learn the prime qualities needed in performing: discipline, devotion, and disinterestedness.³⁹

The penultimate section, bars 123 - 142 (see figure 3), sees the duo launch into jagged semiquavers at an approximate speed of quaver = 62 bpm. As has been Wolff's habit in *Flutist and Guitarist*, the performers are left to make interpretative decisions around dynamic content and style, cues on which comes solely from the pitch and rhythmic material presented in front of them. As so much of Wolff's aesthetic is tied up with the will to surprise and wrong-foot both performer and listener, we took the decision to throw ourselves into section with force and rigour, juxtaposing against the prior more free guitar solo. The pitches selected by Wolff for the section jump rapidly across the full range of both instruments with disregard for idiomatic writing, it therefore seemed evident that the section might be rooted in the manifestation of awkwardness. We decided to take this theme of awkwardness into our treatment of the fermatas in the section and we chose which of us would give the cue to continue on from each fermata, with no prior decision taken around their length. From the framework set by Wolff, this naturally developed into an inherent playfulness as we began to try to catch each other off guard with our entries—furthering the character of awkwardness through our interplay.

³⁹ Tilbury & Parsons, *Op. cit.*, p. 151

Figure 6:

The image displays a handwritten musical score for Figure 6, consisting of five systems of staves. The notation is highly complex and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is organized into five systems, each with two staves. The first system is marked with circled numbers 116 and 130. The second system is marked with circled number 120. The third system is marked with circled numbers 124 and 128. The fourth system features a circled number 128 and a circled number 132. The fifth system is marked with circled numbers 136 and 140. The notation includes many slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'p'. The overall style is that of a working draft or a composer's sketch.

Bar 142 marks the beginning of the final section (see figure 6). This section is, in the theme of its preceding material, radically different from the rest. Wolff uses harmonics in

the flute line (length indeterminate), the disposition of which sit in opposition to the leaping rigid semiquavers of the prior section. Wolff frees the flute and guitar line from each other, allowing each line to be played independently, however an awareness of each other must be maintained in order to try to conclude the piece at about the same time—as expressed by Wolff in the performance notes. In performance an interesting conundrum is facilitated as the player is allowed the freedom to self-determine, but with a simultaneous dependence maintained on the choices of a co-performer; a faux-freedom is created as the performers try to deal with two conflicting interests which can only be resolved through the heightened awareness, perpetuated by Wolff's note that 'the alignment of the notes of different lines as notated may not represent the order in which the notes have to be played'.

By Wolff's own admission the flute line of the final section contains an 'impossible' phrase: the phrase stretches across three lines through which the flautist should play on one breath. Accepting the impossibility of the task, Wolff suggests places at which breaths could be taken—however, it is interesting to note that despite this, Wolff still leaves the player the option to attempt the impossible or that he at least leaves the performer the inevitable option of breaking one of his own rules. This embodies a perversity that is present throughout *Flutist and Guitarist*, which might therefore lead to the conclusion that the composer's main point of interest must not be in the piece as a product which is presented to a listener, but in the presentation of a series of obstacles to the performer in which they are forced to make a series of decisions—and the subsequent consciousness bred from this. I would argue that this music is not a music meant primarily to be an auditory experience, but music that at its root lies the experience of engaging and responding to the puzzles laid down by the composer—meaning that the fabric of *Flutist and Guitarist* leads it to be a work best experienced via performance.

Chapter 3

3.1 Headlong

Headlong by Christopher Fox, one of the more contemporary pieces in my repertoire, was composed between 2007 and 2009 for solo woodwind instrument and square wave sound file. Having recently moved on from playing Wolff's *Flutist and Guitarist* some parallels between Wolff's work and *Headlong* seemed apparent to me, with both composers exploiting the performer in similar ways. Like Wolff, Fox challenges the versatility of the performer's responsiveness, however in this case rather than set against the decisions of another responsive being (a co-performer), Fox tests the performer in reaction to the rigidity of an unrelenting machine. Further *Headlong* requires the performer to transition instantaneously to sections of new material and slot in with the incessant sound file. In the piece's programme note Fox explains:

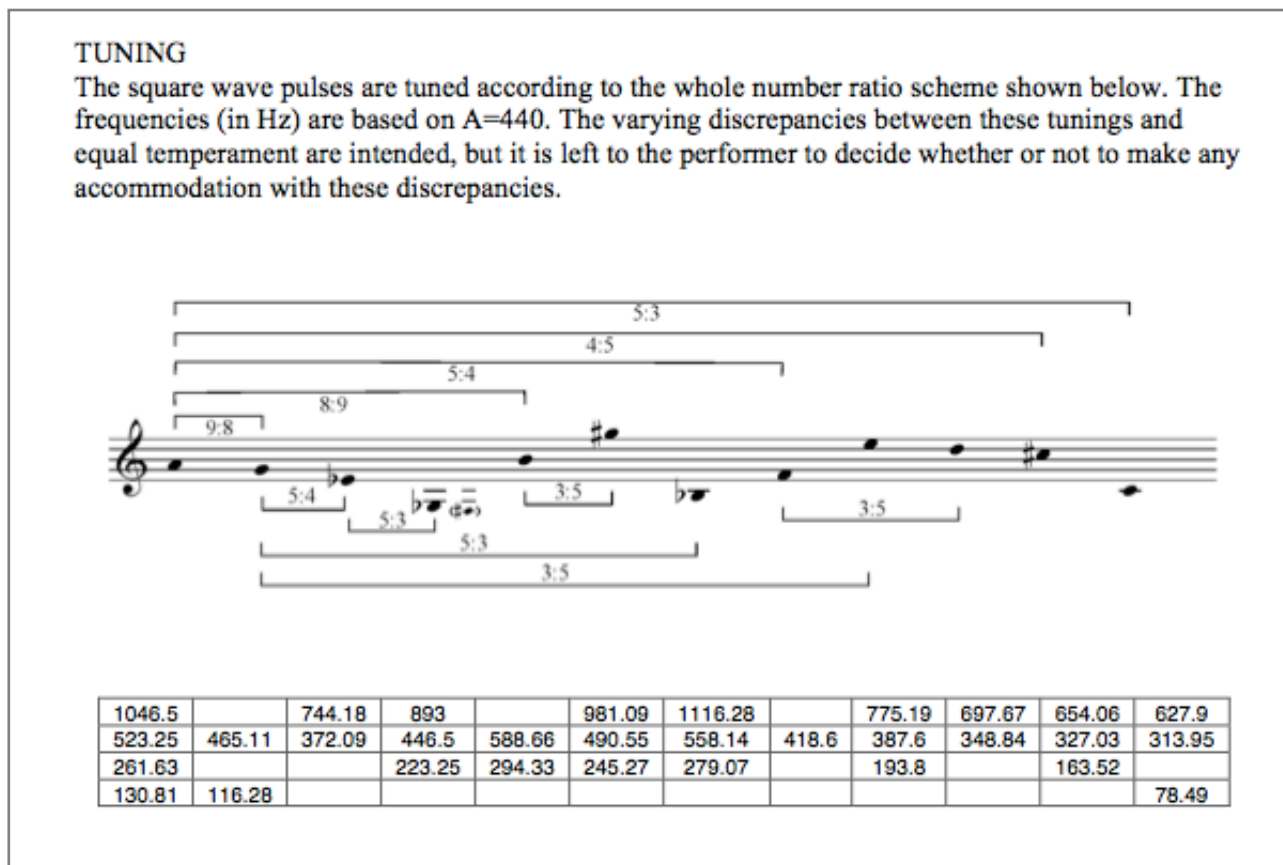
Music has two measures of frequency, the pitch of individual notes and the speed at which they follow one another, and in *Headlong* they are connected by a set of simple ratios. There are four different speeds which, going from the fastest to the slowest, are related by the ratios 5:4, 9:8 and 5:3, and these three ratios are also heard throughout the piece as pitch intervals, the major third, the major second and the major sixth. This set of ratios is the 'head' motive out of which all the music grows. The electronic sounds which accompany the live instrument are deliberately simple, suggesting some sort of scientific measurement (or computer games from the early 1980s?), and impose a grid on the music through which the musette's music grows, like weeds around paving stones perhaps.⁴⁰

These ratios (see figure 7) employed by Fox fulfil Cage's argument that an experimental composer utilises methods of composition that allow them to detach from the sonic realities that they produce.⁴¹ This idea of removal is something that I try to keep in consideration in my approach to performing the piece. My function is to deliver a sonic representation of the score.

⁴⁰ Fox, Christopher, *Op. cit.*

⁴¹ Cage, John, *Op. cit.* p. 10

Figure 7:



The initial sound heard as the piece commences is that of the square wave sound file, an intentionally unsophisticated, abrasive sound which I find to be a rather aggressive attention demanding sound. This sound acts for me as a cue of how to approach my own initial entrance, as well as shaping the idea of the sound that should be created by the player throughout the piece: one of arduous and unrelenting power with (to an extent) a disregard of sound quality—force being the primary focal point. The crude panning of the electronics places further emphasis on this as the sound files are singularly heard either hard left or hard right. All of these factors contribute to an aesthetic, which I would describe as anti-aesthetic. This is additionally compounded by *Headlong's* programme note in which Fox compares the solo instrument line to the growth of weeds around paving stones, a seeming intentional subversion of arts historical concern with beauty.⁴²

A defining feature of the piece is its form, it is made up of 21 sections the shortest lasting 22 seconds, the longest 1 minute 3 seconds, each with a differing tempo (there is, however, an audible *accelerando* which is maintained from one section to another as the

⁴² Fox, Christopher, *Op. cit.*

piece progresses). This creates a problem for the performer as the piece shifts instantly to each change in tempo. The biggest challenge of *Headlong* is to learn these tempo changes, and be able to switch from one to another instantly; complicated further by various cross-rhythms (the piece can move between 14 against 15 in one section to 7 against 10 in another). The robotic quality of the composition pushes the performer relentlessly on and on by seemingly erratic tempo changes, causing a struggle with the player to interlock poly-rhythmically. The machine is brutal and indifferent, whereas the performer is responsive and adaptive. Overall, the intelligence of the performer is highlighted over the indifference of the machine. The act of conflict between the two entities inherently creates a sense of urgency and stress, much in the way that new complexity composers such as Ferneyhough intentionally complicate their writing in order to create a circumstance of performance for the player.

It is the focus on this desperate quality in the performance of *Headlong* that led me to decide that the discrepancies between the pitch of the tuning ratios used by Fox and that of equal temperament (see figure 7) is not a primary aspect of the piece for me, it seems to be that the presentation of the information is given more for context around the piece than something that must be explored—or the composer would have inevitably expressed so. I therefore took the decision that I would not be making allowances for the alteration of pitches for three reasons: firstly, I felt that the composer's construction of *Headlong* would already force a satisfactory representation of the piece; secondly, that the incremental changes of pitch would be barely perceptible given the rapid movement, therefore it could be in the attempt to achieve the alterations that the interest would lie—yet this is already explored throughout the piece via a different parameter; thirdly, that without perfect pitch (or exceptional relative pitch) given the rapidity of the pitch changes later on in the piece, it would not be achievable for me to accommodate the alteration in tunings throughout the piece (as I would argue the accommodation must be all or nothing).

Headlong was written for Christopher Redgate, whose performances of the piece have taken place on the musette. 2014 saw Redgate release *Electrifying Oboe*, featuring a recording of the piece. Upon listening to Redgate's recording I discovered discrepancies between mine and the oboist's use of vibrato. Redgate employs vibrato, though to varying degrees, throughout his realisation of *Headlong*; meanwhile I refrain from employing it without necessity. I however do not assume that there is a correct or incorrect conclusion

on the application of vibrato and I therefore do not choose to amend my approach. Further, the decision with regard to the inclusion of vibrato could very much depend on the nature of the instrument: the musette does not possess a naturally weighty sound, something that can be enhanced by vibrato, however a forceful breadth of sound can be much more naturally produced by the flute due to less resistance of the instrument in comparison to that of a double reed instrument. Nevertheless, Redgate's recording did encourage me to consider the use of vibrato where I might not have previously. In section 5 of *Headlong*, the performance direction reads *quasi pastorale*; here I decided that the direction could best be manifested through a more traditional mode of playing which may concede to the use of vibrato as a means of enlivening the colour of the sound.

When learning *Headlong* I found the piece to be the one, out of both my chamber and solo recital, in which my attempt to circumvent the inherited traditional performance practice in my own playing was most forcibly challenged. Take for example sections seven (figure 8) and eight (figure 9):

Figure 8:

The image displays a musical score for Figure 8, consisting of three systems of music. Each system is written for a flute (treble clef) and a bassoon (bass clef). The first system begins with a box containing the number '7' and a tempo marking of '♩ = 225'. Above the flute staff, the instruction 'always accented' is written with a series of accents (>) over the notes. Below the flute staff, the dynamic marking 'ff' is present. The second system features a key signature change to one flat (B-flat) indicated by a '(b)' in a circle above the flute staff. The third system continues the piece with various rhythmic patterns and accents. The score is enclosed in a rectangular border.

Figure 9:

The image displays a musical score for Figure 9, consisting of three systems of staves. The top system begins with a box containing the number '8' and a tempo marking of '♩ = 180'. The score is written in treble and bass clefs. The top staff of each system contains a melodic line with numerous accents (>) and slurs. Above the top staff, there are numerous '3:2' markings with brackets, indicating a 3:2 ratio between notes. The bottom staff of each system contains a bass line with a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The overall piece is characterized by its complex rhythmic structure and the challenge of interpreting the accents in a non-pulsed context.

Both of these sections require the performer to respond to seemingly random *marcato* markings. The actual execution of the accents remains uncomplex; it is in fact the execution of the accents with consideration to the overall beaming and time signature that the challenge lays. In other versions of the score Fox excludes the use of bar lines, I would figure his reason for this is in encouraging the performer to refrain from being influenced by the pulse of the time signature which in other music would signal movement towards the accentuation of certain beats of the bar, a hierarchy which is irrelevant to Fox's piece—I assume the reason for the inclusion of the dotted bar lines is rooted in the usability of the score. This break from such learned behaviour presents a challenge in the avoidance of pulse whilst accenting apparently arbitrary notes. In the case of figure 8, the evasion of a natural pulse could further lead to the disorientation of the performer in a long line of identical pitches.

Headlong is a piece which disorientates the performer throughout, the physical jumping of the tape from left to right incessantly around the player (the performer is situated between the two speakers) further perpetuates this. I would liken the sensation of performing

Headlong to that of treading water; the majority of the piece for the performer is spent in battling against the encompassing current that is the square wave sound file. As in Wolff's *Flutist and Guitarist*, though explored via different parameters, the piece demands all of the performer's focus and awareness, enabling and challenging the performer's resilience and maturation.

3.2 947

Lucier composed *947* in 2001, for flute and pure wave oscillators. The piece requires a pair of speakers situated equidistantly either side of the flautist at head level. Lucier does not dictate a specific volume for the sine tones, and instead expresses that the volume levels should be determined by the point at which optimum beating is achieved against the flute tones—to be judged at the discretion of the performer (and their technician)⁴³.

Alvin Lucier is a composer who is concerned with sound and its fundamental properties; 'I'm always cutting things down to their simplest form so that the phenomena is exposed' the composer expressed to James Tenney.⁴⁴ *947* sees Lucier—as in many of his other works, such as *Vespers* and *Music for Solo Performer*— employ two roles in the realisation of a piece: a live performer against the use of electronics/technology. This juxtaposition of two autonomous roles allows the convergence of separate systems causing phenomena to be unveiled. These connections and their subsequent outcomes were beautifully described by Lucier in nature's terms:

You know, it's like the log in the stream. When I am fishing I watch those obstacles, logs and twigs, and the water flowing around them. The log and flowing water make the pattern.⁴⁵

In *947* the sine tones feature as the constant, in the manner of the flowing water, while the flute pitches intrude on this constant therefore facilitating the formation of the beating.

Lucier places emphasis on the use of process and systems in his work, and a belief in the process rather than a desired outcome.⁴⁶ This movement away from a product, much in

⁴³ Lucier, Alvin, *947* (Frankfurt, 2001)

⁴⁴ Lucier, Alvin, *Reflections*, 2nd edn. (Cologne, 2005) p. 232

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232

the vein of the music of Wolff and Fox, intimates a further aesthetic concern of Lucier—one of experiential learning. This again seems to point to the significance of experiencing experimental music at the primary point (that of an engaged performer), rather than the secondary point (that of a listener detached from the execution of a piece).

The composer once described his perfect player: one that doesn't add anything, doesn't crescendo, doesn't try to bend notes or force expressivity, one that just does it.⁴⁷ This idea of simply carrying out an action is of vital importance in the performance of Lucier's work. The performer acts as an object in *947*, one that is either on or off; either actively allowing the revelation of the phenomenon, or not. Philip Thomas described the role of the performer in Lucier's music as 'both catalyst and medium', further expressing that 'Lucier's music tends not to exploit the situation but rather to present it clearly and honestly with only the minimum of performer intervention.'⁴⁸

This non-interventionist approach is manifested in my performance via the use of open (therefore allowing more partials to speak), supported notes of a *mezzo-forte* dynamic (the dynamic which allows maximum beating) and a focus on auditory interaction as immersion, whilst attempting to communicate the connotations of the score. In practice I engaged with the piece through the measuring of pitch with a tuner, this allowed me to hear beating and learn ways of immediately producing the desired pitches. However, the use of a tuner would not translate to the piece's performance as it may negate the experiential focus of the piece and prevent engrossment in the piece and the production of its phenomenon. Lucier acknowledges the impossibility of the precision of the tunings relayed to the flautist (see figure 10) and therefore specifies that approximations are expected and welcomed—but that the flautist must not resort to bending the pitch to attempt to achieve the beating.⁴⁹ Any kind of intervention on the part of the flautist to manipulate a result would in a sense be dishonest, and would further conflict with the weight that Lucier places in the trust of his devised system—'You don't expect a river all of a sudden to change its speed, to make itself more interesting.'⁵⁰

As the fundamentals of Lucier's work explore the very basic characteristics of the sonic, *947* is a piece best executed with regard applied to the importance of architectural area.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 214

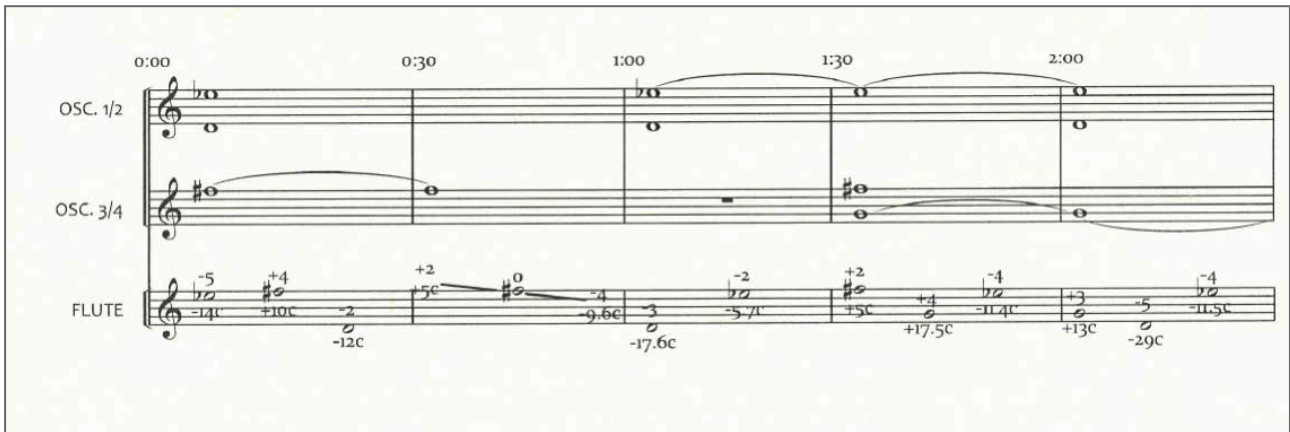
⁴⁸ Thomas, Philip, in Saunders, James, ed., *Op. cit.* p. 91

⁴⁹ Lucier, Alvin, *947* (Frankfurt, 2001)

⁵⁰ Lucier, Alvin, *Ibid.* p. 234

Acoustics are a parameter that can induce alterations in the perception of sound, and for this reason much of my work on the piece has taken place in the performance space and the monitoring of the piece's situation within that space.

Figure 10:



947 challenges my technique similarly to Feldman's work and in a very different way to the obstacles laid out by Wolff and Fox. The piece's dependence on consistency of tone can lead to problems in performance such as the natural fluctuations of breath and the issue of a shaky lip—both issues being of a nature that the increase in pressure during performance does not serve particularly well! As I found in the performance of *Why Patterns?*, the optimum communication of works of this character rely on stamina and concentration, a performance of a work of this nature can easily turn into an endurance exercise on the part of the performer.

Conclusion

The exploration of experimental music through practice, performance and writing has left me contemplating the function of experimental music and the role of the performer. The characteristics for experimental flute practice that I have collated are as follows:

- the submission of the performer to the realisation of a piece's notation, whilst endeavouring to remove oneself and one's fingerprint from the realisation
- in ensemble playing, the consideration of the individual part and individual actions, rather than on the part's implication. A deviation from the traditional focus on blending and production of homogeneity across an ensemble
- the ability to strip back one's own performance practice to basics. For example, in sound production the focus remaining on the most natural sound a flautist can make including the removal of vibrato unless included due to the prescriptiveness of the score
- the willingness to sacrifice one's own perfection and yield to imperfection in the form of honesty. The willingness to be vulnerable to surprise in performance
- the willingness to succumb to the rigidity of the system, and allowing the system to compromise one's practice
- the acceptance of an outcome
- the openness to learn from a score

Moving forwards, bearing these ideas in mind, in the realisation of Cardew's *Treatise*, with its novel graphic notation and the sounds that such a notation might allow, the focus must remain on the score and its conveyance rather than the whims of indulgence. The willingness to fail and respond to said failures as a means of exploration, along with the acceptance of themes that these failures may bring, would be a truly experimental approach to the piece.

The following statement by Michael Nyman seems highly appropriate in relation to all four pieces which have been discussed as part of this commentary:

Apparently routine tasks may have an alarming tendency to breed random variables which call for a heroic (unsung, unnoticed) virtuosity on the part of the performer.⁵¹

⁵¹ Nyman, Michael, *Op. cit.* p.15

The pieces have generally been free of versatility in the traditional sense of flute technique, fast passages demanding streams of notes, use of vibrato, specification of articulation, demands of expressivity etc.; although some of these elements do present in *Flutist and Guitarist* and *Headlong* due to the nature of the pieces rather than as virtuosity for the sake of itself. The lack of interest in idiomatic writing, despite the works being written for the flute (and wind instrument in the case of *Headlong*)—I would suspect indicates that the outcome of the pieces lies in the adaptability and resourcefulness of the performer, which is unspecific to instrument and highlights that, unlike more traditional music, there is a real focus on the performer as more of a mediator rather than a virtuosic instrumentalist engaged in the communication of an idea. Fox described this experimental music specific approach, relating back to the Cageian legacy of experimentalism, in his essay *Why Experimental? Why me?*:

Cage became a 'listener' because the chance operations produced events within the music that he had not expected. For me, however, it also describes an approach to composing in which the composer attempts to create music to which s/he has an unprecedented relationship, each new work an attempt not just at rearranging previously tested musical formulae but at making something different. Not all composers need (or need be expected) to do this, but today, just as when Cage wrote his essay, this approach is still quite properly described as 'experimental', and it is what I do.⁵²

This gives prominence to the idea of the transcendence of performance in experimentalism, and highlights how one might approach such a piece of experimental music retaining the focus on honest, factual communication of an instruction rather than on how one might interpret a score artistically with the aim of expressing compassionate, sympathetic sentiments and subsequent affection of a listener's perception of consciousness. Perhaps a departure from the term 'performance', with all of its historic connotations for virtuosity and drama, is appropriate in experimentalism, to be replaced with the term 'realisation'.

Cage related that the experimental composer may:

⁵² Fox, Christopher, in Saunders, James, ed., *Op. cit.* p. 26

give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.⁵³

For me, this is the primary rule to be applied to the performer of experimental music. It is the relinquishment of control and the willingness to give in to a composers perversity and constructed systems that is crucial in the exploration of a piece; without it the system is compromised irreparably and the performer's efforts in the communication of a piece are rendered redundant by a deliberate deviation from a principal foundation of experimentalism, that of honesty. In the manner that experimental composers have gravitated towards natural characteristics of the sonic, the experimental performer must too reassess their role:

Through their desire to be inquisitive about material - sound and silence - experimental performers willingly adopt a performance approach which is non interventionist. With alert ears and responsive bodies, experimental performers attend themselves to the task at hand.⁵⁴

The principal of honesty is something which should also be examined in relation to the recording of experimental music. A performer often walks a fine line in performance between the implementation of a score's facts along with a consideration of unwritten aesthetic concerns of the composer, against the technical realms of an instrument and the imperfection of a human realiser. In live performance the act of constructing a sonic realisation of a work can (but not inevitably) lead to the compromising of the performers control over their instrument, leading to the perception of natural imperfections in performance. Conversely, recording enables performers to iron out these imperfections and produce a polished work which, while understandable in a capitalist system concerned with product, can lead to the disappearance of an audible engagement that walking this fine line can create.

⁵³ Cage, John, *Op. cit.* p. 10

⁵⁴ Thomas, Philip, in Saunders, James, ed., *Op. cit.* p. 92

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