



COMPROVISATION

Friday 9th and Saturday 10th December 2005

Persistence Works, Sheffield

Programme: Friday 9th December

Cornelius Cardew	<i>Treatise</i> (pages 6-15, 1963-7)
Chris Burn	<i>from ten, two and three</i> (2005)
Michael Finnissy	<i>Jazz</i> (1976)
Christian Wolff	<i>A Keyboard Miscellany</i> (selection, 1988-2005)
Chris Burn	<i>pressings and screenings</i> (2005) PREMIERE PERFORMANCE
Cornelius Cardew	<i>Treatise</i> (pages 165-173)

interval

John Cage	<i>Variations II</i> (1961)
Paul Obermayer	<i>Coil</i> (2001)
Mick Beck	<i>Not Just a Load of Balls</i> (2005) PREMIERE PERFORMANCE
Simon H Fell	<i>Composition No. 73: Thirteen New Inventions</i> (2005) PREMIERE PERFORMANCE

Programme: Saturday 10th December

A programme of mixed ensemble improvisations, featuring *Martin Archer* (saxophone, bass clarinet, bass recorder), *Mick Beck* (bassoon, saxophone), *Chris Burn* (piano), *Steve Chase* (guitar), *Simon H Fell* (bass), *John Jasnoch* (guitar), and *Philip Thomas* (piano)

My musical experience, my education and training, and my work is founded upon notated music – the score. Associated with this is the world of so-called classical and ‘contemporary classical’ music, with its baggage of musical and professional hierarchies, competitions, the preservation of work, and the deification of the great ‘masters’ (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven through to Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Boulez).

Yet over the last ten years some of my most treasured and significant musical experiences have come about in concerts of what is commonly termed ‘free improvisation’. One day in particular marked a turning point: the one and only occasion in my life when I entered a competitive event as a pianist was nine years ago, in London. I found it a very uncomfortable and disheartening experience and vowed never to enter such an event again, and even contemplated giving up music. After wandering fairly aimlessly around the city I chanced upon a Mondrian exhibition at the Tate and felt deeply moved by the simplicity and originality of his late works in particular. I walked out of the exhibition feeling cleansed of the experience earlier in the day. That evening I attended a concert given by the seminal improvisation group AMM at *The Spitz*, in a dark, smokey upstairs room. An eighty-minute wash of sound, utterly engaging throughout, with each

moment so beautifully articulated led me to conclude that this, in total contrast from that morning's event, was where I belonged as a musician.

Since then I have encountered the exhilarating and affirming musics of Derek Bailey, John Butcher, Evan Parker, Cecil Taylor and many many others. The musicians featured in these two concerts, as composers and/or players, have all been influential to my development as a musician. In particular, the efforts of Martin Archer, Mick Beck and John Jasnoch, amongst others, have been fundamental to the continuation of improvised music concerts in Sheffield and I owe them a great deal.

Some of the characteristics of improvised music which I find so refreshing are: the immediacy of the moment; the risk-taking; impermanence; the involvement of noise and environmental sounds; and the humour. Furthermore, the combination of being true to oneself, allowing others to be true to themselves, and still allowing the possibility of change, of furthering one's own technique, taste and style through the experience of playing with others, are values I hold dear.

However, I know that for myself I remain primarily a notated music man. The score as a visual object fascinates me, and the possibilities for notation as a

prescription for action seem inexhaustible. I relish new scores arriving in the post and the opportunities to engage with different methods, styles, and layouts of notating music. I fundamentally disagree with Eddie Prévost, a founding member of AMM, who, in his book *No Sound Is Innocent*¹, rails against the hierarchical contract between composer and performer and the presumed negation of performer creativity that the striving for a honed and perfected realisation creates. I accept that such a situation can, and probably frequently does, arise, and I consider Prévost's book to be an important one. But for me, every score represents a dialogue – with the composer, with the notation, with my instrument and my technique. The composers whose music I most enjoy playing are those who, whether through indeterminate or fully determinate means, approach notation as a creative dialogue with the performer.

So why *Comprovisation*? Put at its simplest, this is a concert of music by musicians whom I admire greatly. I do not intend that the programming will in any way address some kind of debate about the greater merits of either composition or improvisation. Nor do I conceive of this as a 'crossover' event (such occasions generally seem to take out what is best about different musical genres/styles and try to marry what is left as a miserable and flaccid union). The

¹ Edwin Prévost *No Sound Is Innocent* (Copula, 1995)

programme arises from my love of progressive music, be it improvised or composed.

From the outset I wanted to commission musicians who are perhaps more commonly associated with improvised musics to compose a piece for the concert. I was curious to see how they might tackle writing for a solo instrument, in this case the piano. The results are placed alongside works by composers who have been associated with improvisation or whose works allude to that world in some way. The programme is not, of course, an exhaustive examination of such repertoire – there are innumerable other composers whose works I could have included. Some works are fully notated, others are graphic or verbal in nature. Some allow for considerable spontaneity, whilst others demand lengthy rehearsal. Common to all the works is a spirit of adventure and exploration.

It seems right to begin this programme with music by *Cornelius Cardew*. Cardew did more than anyone in recent times to overcome divides between improvised and notated music. Scores such as Autumn '60 and Material invite the performers to create their own scores (either real or virtual) through elaborate systems and notational devices. Treatise is the end-result of this line of enquiry. It is an entirely graphic

193-page score, with no instructions attached. Though a visually stunning work it is not intended as a work to be looked at but to be played. Around the time of writing it, Cardew was a regular member of improvisation group *AMM* and Treatise continues to be a significant reference point for this group of musicians. The guitarist Keith Rowe has likened the physical space in which an improvisation takes place to a 'score', and Treatise can be approached in a similar way, as a focal point for improvisation. Running throughout the work is a horizontal straight line, which in the two realisations this evening is interpreted as a drone.

Chris Burn's from ten, two and three is a transcription for solo piano of improvisations by the legendary guitarist Derek Bailey, taken from his solo recording on the *Incus* label. There are six pieces, drawn from the tracks on the original recording that are listed in the title. The surface simplicity of these pieces may come as a surprise to devotees of Bailey's idiosyncratic playing, but to my ears they reflect the more delicate side of his playing and the influence of Webern. The timbral complexities of the guitar are reflected in a precisely notated use of the pedal.

Jazz by *Michael Finnissy* is the most complex notated piece in this programme, yet the result is at times like that of a wildly ecstatic improvisation. The title refers

not to a type of music ('jazz' as a noun or adjective) but to a way of playing or doing ('jazz' as a verb, i.e. to 'jazz it up'). The music is both reflective of Finnissy's own style of improvisation at the time of its composition (Finnissy was the founder of the Music Department of the London School of Contemporary Dance, for which he would provide regular improvisations) and also a tribute to the world of legendary pianist Jelly Roll Morton. The influence of Cecil Taylor is surely also evident. Though the notation is extreme and demanding, for me its particular value lies in the way it pushes me as a pianist beyond my technique and experience and almost 'beyond myself'. The energy created from the struggle to 'get the notes' is, in my view, impossible to produce in any other way.

Christian Wolff has achieved a balance between notation and improvisation comparable to that of Cardew. His music is often characterised by a game-like structure which relies upon decisions made in the moment of performance. Wolff has played on occasions with AMM and a number of his works (including Edges which will be played during the concert on Saturday) act as catalysts for improvisation. The recent collection of short piano pieces, taken from his Keyboard Miscellany are notated with regard to pitch but only some are precise with regard to duration. Other directions are generally

left to the performer. These pieces, which are mostly very short, can almost be seen as doodles, or little objects which the composer has seen fit to collect and present very simply as they are.

I first saw and heard *Chris Burn* play in a concert at *Over the Top* (Sheffield's premier venue for radical improvisation involving piano!). I arrived early and the musicians (which I think consisted also of bass and trumpet) were warming up. Chris's piano playing bowled me over, even in just this warm-up, and the tightness and timbral imagination of the group's playing remains vivid in my memory. Discovering that he had composed some piano pieces I was eager to find out more and in 2001 I played two of these pieces at the Mappin Art Gallery.

pressings and screenings is a new work, in four sections, written for tonight's concert. Like the aforementioned piano pieces, the focus of attention is upon the use of the keys rather than the inside of the piano (with the exception of the second section). The resonant capabilities of the piano are explored through use of pedalling and silently depressing notes to allow selected harmonics to be projected. The rhythmic and gestural qualities of the work are improvisatory, jazzy, in feel and exude a brilliance and vivaciousness typical of Chris's own playing.

Q: why do you compose and why do you improvise?

A: during the 1970s/80s i made the transition from being a composer and also a jazz musician to one who was almost exclusively involved in free improvisation. in the mid 90s i examined ways of piano playing that involved much more keyboard playing - as opposed to, and in addition to inside work. it seemed to me that much of this way of playing could be equally well served by composing as it could by improvising. i have stayed with composing ever since in addition to improvising. for me the composing is very much informed BY improvising. it is for me more difficult to articulate how the composing informs the improvising although i suspect it is doing so - more and more as time goes on. i guess for me one of the ways that this influence is felt is in terms of form/structure/architecture of the music and not so much in material. however i can say this because i have mainly composed pieces for piano, brass and percussion - instruments that i have used as improviser. maybe i should challenge myself and compose a piece for flute or cello. would i draw on my experiences of working with improvising flautists and cellists i have worked with?

Chris Burn

John Cage was famously against improvisation, believing it to be a forum for self-expression and to be too easy for musicians to rely upon their technique and experience, thus regressive. Cage in his compositions strove to discover new sounds, new combinations of sounds, and new contexts for sounds. It is possible, given the change of aesthetic within improvisation over the last forty years, informed in part by Cage's music and ideas, that he would look more favourably upon improvisation today if he were alive, though I suspect not.

His Variations II is less a score than a DIY kit. It consists of eleven transparent sheets, six with a single straight line on, and five with a single 'dot'. The performer is instructed to throw the sheets onto a

surface and take the resulting configuration of lines and dots as the score. Measurements are then made by drawing perpendicular lines from the dots to the lines and assigning parameters to each line, such as time, frequency, amplitude, number of events, etc. It can be played by any instrument or any number of instruments. For this version, I have made seven versions of the score and taken a number of readings from each to create a piece which lasts just over 6 minutes, and explores various methods of producing notes and noises on the piano.

Paul Obermayer is a musician known to Sheffield as a member of the band *Bark!*. The spiky, hyper-rhythms of Phil Marks on percussion and Paul Obermayer on laptop computer was a highlight of the 'Other Music' series of concert a few years ago. The dryness and vividness of this music is reflected in the piano piece coil.

'Coil is the short fourth section of REDUCTIONS for piano, a projected series of eight interconnected "studies", each using probabilities to modulate serial determinism, and each using the instrument in the absence of an aspect of standard playing technique (modestly, in the case of coil, the sustaining pedal is only fully "rediscovered" at the end). The basic material is a simple (and awkward) polyphonic process generated using matrices of probabilities to continuously vary the "accuracy" or "intensity"

of a fundamental serial structure. For this section of REDUCTIONS, however, all such continuous development is suddenly cut off, and this "organic" material is "fossilised", fragmented into cells, and reordered. Three parallel sets of these cells are variously eroded and transposed, and "coiled" round each other to form a multiply-connected space that highlights certain self-similarities due to the underlying (serial) unity but obscures many others - remnants of a disintegrated totality, as confusion gives way to frustration... coil is dedicated to Ian Pace.' [PO]

Q: why do you compose and why do you improvise?

A: I improvise because it is the only way I know to produce certain interesting musical phenomena. And I compose for the same reason. But composers cannot be separated from the performers of their music. And the idea that improvisers pluck it all completely spontaneously from nothing is as unhelpful to me as the notion that performers of notated music are simply attempting to "reproduce" composers' scores. In other words, I certainly don't regard the two methodologies as being quite as distinct as these questions imply. There will be plenty of "digging back" in improvisation, as there must be real spontaneity playing notated compositions.

Even so, compositional structuring is arrived at through reflection, planning, and more or less precise temporal coordination; while improvisation structures music primarily through this (apparently) "intuitive", spontaneous activity. But I think it is important to recognise that there is likely to be at least as much "deep structure" in the latter as the former - or, otherwise, that an arbitrary "compositional system" is likely to be at least as incoherent as any intuitive outburst... More generally, these questions might in any case be more precisely phrased in terms of music which is fundamentally structured either before or during performance. The kind of music I want to make requires me to consciously engage with both approaches - and in FURT [electronics-based improvising duo with Richard Barrett] in particular with the ways in which they "interfere" with one another.

Mick Beck has been a driving force for improvisation in Sheffield for many years. The first occasion I witnessed his playing was at ‘The Grapes’ about ten years ago, before his recent discovery of the bassoon. Then he was playing saxophone and accompanying objects. The humour, craziness and virtuosity of his playing was and still is an inspiration. Not Just a Load of Balls captures those very qualities in a singular manner.

Simon H Fell is no stranger to Sheffield, familiar to many through his trio with Mick Beck and Paul Hession. His approach to composition, like other composers in this programme, reflects an interest in notated composition and improvisation. A characteristic of a number of his works is a drawing upon the music of the past (recent and not-so-recent) which, combined with other material, forms part of the debris from which we make music.

Composition No. 73: Thirteen New Inventions

‘When Philip Thomas commissioned *Composition No. 73* (as it was to become), it presented a rare and interesting opportunity for me. I have composed solo music only infrequently, as much of my interest in musical performance derives from the communal nature of creative improvisation, and the fluid

interaction of the jazz performance tradition; moreover, the piano itself is an instrument which seems to epitomise the pitch clarity and intonational inflexibility which (at first glance) appears diametrically opposed to fields often explored in my music. But Philip's openness to whatever I wanted to try made the project irresistible.

Whilst there is indeed a considerable literature (even tradition) of extended-technique piano music - where the piano sounds like anything *but* a piano - I decided that I wanted to (attempt to) deal head-on with some of the weighty implications of the Western European solo keyboard literature; for some time I had wanted to write a piece that reflected my love of J. S. Bach's clarity, incisiveness and mathematical architecture, and this began to seem like an ideal opportunity.

Thus, whilst I was aware of Philip's keen interest in improvisation, *Thirteen New Inventions* is full of **written notes**.

But it is also full of improvisation – some of it will be Philip's, most of it is mine. Indeed, *Composition No. 73* is subtitled *Improvisations after J. S. Bach*, and over a period of 13 days I immersed myself in Bach's two-part keyboard inventions, each day improvising a different approach to realising a new version of this music. Sometimes these improvisations were conceptual, such as turning the Bach upside down and trying to play it that way (eventually leading to *Invention 1*), or superimposing 2 inventions

simultaneously (*Invention 13*). Sometimes the improvisations were more literal, as I improvised responses to Bach, notating them as I went (*Inventions 4, 9 & 12*); sometimes this extended to setting parameters within which Philip would improvise (*Invention 7*). Some of the pieces involved my forcing errors (improvisations?) in music-scanning software, or using other technological corruptions to ‘degrade’ or ‘pervert’ the original (*Inventions 3, 5 & 11*). Sometimes I just let Bach be Bach – almost...

Along the way I’ve managed to tip my hat to many of my favourite composers-for-piano, including Milhaud, Gerald Barry, Ives, Webern, Stockhausen, Messiaen and Nancarrow.... and given the starting point for this composition, it proved impossible to exclude a fleeting appearance from Jacques Loussier, plus concert-pianist’s-dismembered-hand-on-the-rampage B(ach)-movie classic *The Beast With Five Fingers*. But hopefully the common thread running between these thirteen meditations/reflections on Bach is a sense of spontaneous, free, loving and sometimes wilful personal extemporisation... happening before your very ears.’ SHF

Q: why do you compose and why do you improvise?

A: I don't really perceive these two as different things with a clear distinction between them. To me improvisation and composition are labels used by some people (myself included) to signify differing points on a spectrum of creative musical activity involving the summoning, marshalling and/or restraining of sound. Definitions are by no means

clear, and these labels have at least two aspects - the 'objective' one of how much of the performance was predetermined in advance of the start of the performance, and by whom (and indeed to what extent were any instructions observed) - and the 'subjective' one of whether the music sounded improvised or composed, i.e. possessed those qualities which one associates with the archetypes of these states (although improvised music often sounds composed, and composed music sometimes sounds improvised). Having said which it's worth reiterating that these states are different shadings of the same activity - performance in real time; my work delights in sliding through the overtones of this spectrum in a free way unconstrained by categorisation. Remember, scores are not performances (or music - yet), whilst recordings are outside the real time continuum, although either form may suggest or document music from any point along the spectrum.

Simon H Fell

Philip Thomas (b.1972, North Devon) specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. His concerts are noted for being both accessible and provocative. He places much emphasis on each concert being a unique event, often addressing an underlying theme or issue. Philip's most recent solo projects have included premiere performances of major new works by Richard Emsley and Christopher Fox; a highly successful three-concert festival of the music of Morton Feldman, alongside three specially commissioned new works by British composers (this took place in October 2002 at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, and subsequently toured venues across the country); performances of solo music by Lachenmann, Zimmermann and others in Spring

2002; and a John Cage and contemporary British composers festival in February 2001, including a number of world and British premieres.

Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent performances with them have included a 70th birthday celebration of Christian Wolff's music with the composer at Kettles Yard, Cambridge; a concert at the 2004 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.; a BBC invitation concert featuring the music of Christopher Fox and others; a Brian Ferneyhough workshop at the Huddersfield 2003 Festival; a 'Fluxus-Defluxus' event in Berlin as part of the 'Maerz-musik' festival; a performance in Ghent, Belgium, as part of Ghent's contemporary music series; 2 concerts at the 2002 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, including a major portrait of the music of Christian Wolff, featuring the composer himself in a rare visit to England; a Luc Ferrari/Sylvano Bussotti presentation at the 2002 Hoxton New Music Days; a world premiere by Christopher Fox, broadcast on the German radio network WDR and subsequently released on CD, in April 2002, at the Witten Neue Musik Tage, Germany; and a portrait concert of Clarence Barlow at the Hoxton New Music Festival in June 2001, which included two solo works and was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

In 2005 Philip joined the renowned pianist Ian Pace in a programme of experimental music for two pianos. Other recent collaborations have been with David Toop and others at the Anolfini Gallery, Bristol in *Playing John Cage*; improvisers Martin Archer and John Jasnoch; electronics improvising duo Transient v Resident; and Manchester-based Ensemble 11.

Philip has premiered solo works by Richard Ayres, Chris Burn, Stephen Chase, Laurence Crane, Richard Emsley, Christopher Fox, Bryn Harrison, Michael Parsons and James Saunders. His repertoire also includes works by *Clarence Barlow, Gerald Barry, Luciano Berio, John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, Aldo Clementi, John Croft, George Crumb, Morton Feldman, Michael Finnissy, Graham Fitkin, Charles Ives, György Kurtag, Helmut Lachenmann, Alvin Lucier, Olivier Messiaen, James Macmillan, Per Nørgård, Katherine Norman, Arvo Pärt, Wolfgang Rihm, Robert Saxton, Howard Skempton, Rodney Sharman, Linda C. Smith, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mark R. Taylor, Michael Tippett, John White, Christian Wolff, and Walter Zimmermann.*

Philip was appointed a lecturer in performance at the University of Huddersfield in September 2005.

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