

Alan Brett – Reflections on The Scratch Orchestra

I first became aware of Cornelius Cardew and his music in 1968, when I was a first-year cello student at Trinity College of Music, London.

I think it was in autumn 1968, that I attended a piano recital by Cornelius's friend John Tilbury at London's Purcell Room, which included Cardew's Stockhausen-influenced 'February Pieces'. (Earlier that year, Tilbury had been a prizewinner at the Gaudeamus International Competition.)

In early 1969, I attended Cornelius's Experimental Music classes at Morley College; and in May 1969, I went to the all-day presentation of his 'Schooltime Compositions' at the ICA in The Mall, London.

Subsequently, Cornelius sent me a kindly letter to see if I was interested in going to the first meeting of the Scratch Orchestra on July 1st 1969, at a disused warehouse in St Katherine's Dock.

There, I found a remarkably diverse group of people – several musicians (some quite well established as well as amateurs), artists, writers, art students, 'hippies', college lecturers, 'unclassifiable eccentrics', etc. – who sympathized with Cornelius's artistically and socially freewheeling personality and outlook. (As I remember it, I had already seen one or two of those present earlier that year at an electronic music and 'musique concrète' course taught by Hugh Davies – one of Stockhausen's former assistants – at Goldsmiths College, University of London.)

Because I was studying music full-time at Trinity College, I couldn't really get involved that much with the Scratch Orchestra's activities; although I did take part in, or attended several of their concerts/'happenings'.

At one of these – an all-night event held at a small art gallery near Baker Street, London – I remember that Cornelius worked from around 10pm to 7am, making an enormous spider's web out of coloured cotton threads, that spanned the whole front of the gallery.

In winter 1970, I wrote 2 pieces for the Scratch Orchestra – 'Whoopee' and 'Breach of the Peace' – as contributions to 'Nature Study Notes'. As I remember them, 'Whoopee' involved the participants only making sounds while airborne(!) And 'Breach of the Peace' – rather short and sharp – involved the participants making as many different sounds as possible simultaneously on a given signal.

When the 'The Musical Times' reviewed the collection in April 1970, the writer commented: "it is legitimate to single out Alan Brett as a contributor of 'pure music' to the collection". I doubt this was actually the case; but what is or is not music has always been rather narrowly defined by most people, especially by many musicians.

(In 1970, I sent some of my SO text compositions to Stockhausen, who was kind enough to reply. Unfortunately, I didn't keep his note, but he commented that the texts were "just games, without spiritual content".)

The 'Slippery Merchants' was one of the smaller groups that developed within the Scratch Orchestra. It seemed to consist of art students and 'unclassifiable eccentrics'. I took part in one of their manifestations at the old hall of Reading

University. The student audience were sufficiently dismayed by the performance, that during the interval they locked the entrance door to the stage in order to prevent us continuing. In spite of this, I remember us all climbing back in through the window and carrying on as before! (One member, Greg Bright, went on to become an authority on mazes.)

Another group, whose music-making was more traditional, was the 'Promenade Theatre Orchestra' (PTO) – founded by composer/pianist John White, a professor at the Royal College of Music in the 1960s. The ensemble of four players (including Chris Hobbs and Hugh Shrapnel), performed their own systems-based compositions on toy pianos, small organ keyboards, or percussion instruments.

In the two years following the initial meeting, a succession of events took place organized by each member in turn; including concerts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Camden Town Hall, and Cecil Sharp House. My own Scratch Orchestra event took place at dawn on November 11th 1970 – the morning after the Queen Elizabeth Hall concert – on the Royal Festival Hall terrace overlooking the River Thames, and consisted of around a dozen people, including myself, simultaneously reading aloud extracts of their own choosing.

On February 15th 1971, I took part (as one of the drummers), in the Deutsche Grammophon recording of Cardew's 'The Great Learning', Paragraph 2. (It was this work that was bound up with the founding of the Scratch Orchestra.)

Probably, the most significant events to my mind were those that took place in August 1971, at the Scratch Orchestra cottage built inside the Great Hall of Alexandra Palace for the 'Art Spectrum' that celebrated the 20th anniversary of the 1951 Festival of Britain.

It was here that I first encountered the changes in aim, ideology (and mood), that were affecting Cornelius and various other members of the Scratch Orchestra.

I remember clearly the meeting (at a large 19th century house overlooking Primrose Hill), when Cornelius and several others made it clear that the Scratch Orchestra was now a 'Marxist' organization, not a friendly and freewheeling creative, artistic cooperative. Several of the orchestra members were in tears; there were some verbal attacks on individuals, including myself – chiefly, I think, for being an aspiring professional musician with 'better things to do'; and one member bored people silly with his baselessly self-assumed role of 'ideological guide'.

Frustrated, in part, by the rather uncertain artistic results and audience responses (if any), produced by the Scratch Orchestra's apparently clear, but rather vague aesthetics and mode of operation, various members (or a faction of them), adopted the political/social views then current in Mao Zedong's China – at that time, in the midst of the ongoing, country-wide disorder and violence of the Cultural Revolution.

Aside from that movement's being the most publicized (but least understood), manifestation of 'socialism in action' at the time, I think it is significant that Cornelius – when I first met him in 1969, before the SO – was personally devoted to Chinese culture and philosophy, especially Confucianism; and his composition 'The Great Learning' reflects this. (For example, Cornelius told me that, in the original score, the music for the swanee whistles' swooping up and down was constructed from the actual pen strokes made when writing the Chinese characters of the text.)

Naturally, no one adopting 'Maoist' affiliations back then had any idea of the extent, violence, mindless cruelty, or destructive abusiveness of the Red Guards: robotically chanting the facile rhetoric of 'The Little Red Book' (Quotations from Chairman Mao). It's structure, by the way, bears a striking resemblance to Confucius's 'Analects'.

While I too 'jumped on the bandwagon' temporarily, and even wrote one or two articles myself – one of these was quoted by Cardew on a BBC radio programme, and in the magazine 'The Listener' – I was too busy trying to make a living as a professional musician and teacher to become more actively interested.

One encounter I had at a political meeting at Birkbeck College in late 1971, effectively buried any passing interest I may have had in 'Chinese-style socialism'. At the end of some talk, followed by a question and answer session (during which I had made some criticism or other), one dull ideologue came up to me and asked me rather aggressively if I thought that the speakers' "thoughts had been correct".

I think to myself: who was this asshole who, without knowing who I was, felt he could confront a complete stranger and seek to control their thinking? From that time, I lost all interest in participating in a fragmenting Scratch Orchestra which, in any case, ceased functioning around 1974. I did, however, meet and work with Cornelius on a few more occasions.

Around New Year 1972, at Cornelius's request I went to Munich to speak to the organizer of the cultural events that were being planned for the 1972 Summer Olympics, in order to set up the Scratch Orchestra's participation in the 'Spielstrasse' (play street). This was a winding pedestrian street within Munich's Olympiapark with various exhibition and performance spaces for art, music and theatre.

In the event, because I was working as music director/composer for a summer drama course, I couldn't actually go to Munich. In any case, the Games were disrupted on September 5th 1972, by the terrorist attack of Palestinian group Black September. Although the Games were resumed after a day or so, the Spielstrasse was permanently closed down.

As the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen stated (after Cardew had worked with him on Carré for 4 orchestras and choirs in 1958), Cornelius was an outstanding musician as both pianist and composer. I worked with him as a cellist on two occasions in the early 1970s: at an event featuring new German composers held at the ICA in London; and in a concert/talk when we played movements from Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time' at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. We then largely lost contact.

After Cornelius was killed in north London by an unknown hit-and-run driver on December 13th 1981, I played some Bach solo cello music at his funeral.

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From 1974 to 1989, I worked as a professional freelance cellist and teacher in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Holland and Spain. (For a few years, I also conducted a student string orchestra at a music centre in Hertfordshire.)

In 1977, I had 4 or 5 scores published by Universal Edition – the original publishers of the works of Boulez, Stockhausen, Luciano Berio and Mauricio Kagel – in their educational series 'Music for Young Players'. The scores, which I still have copies of,

were titled: 'Dashing Away', 'Large Resources – Limited Means', 'Relays', and 'Changes' (UE 16110 to 16113).

My own involvement with contemporary music continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Altogether, I worked with more than 70 composers from 16 different countries; gave more than fifty first performances and national premieres (Dutch, German, UK, and U.S.); and performed at almost 50 music festivals and concert series in the UK and abroad. One of the British composers I worked with, who composed two pieces for me, was Howard Skempton – a co-founder of the SO. At the 1984 Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse I was awarded the Kranichsteiner Prize for interpretation. (At the 1992 Darmstadt course, I conducted my own 'Aurore' for 6 Flutes, 1991.)

From 1989 to 2000, I lived and worked abroad; firstly in what was then West Berlin (I gave some lecture/recitals at the Technische Universität); and then in California, where I was a lecturer at California State University, Fresno teaching cello and music composition.

My work as a professional freelance musician included playing in symphony orchestras, opera, classical ballet and theatre; a contemporary chamber orchestra, various contemporary music ensembles, contemporary dance and opera; string quartet, piano trio and piano quartet; recordings for T.V., film, radio and pop music; playing cello/piano recitals on classical music cruises down the River Danube; coaching students in orchestra and chamber music playing; and private cello and composition teaching.

After returning to England, I found that all the music ensembles, theatre and dance companies, and music centres where I had worked previously had disappeared because of government funding cuts. However, between 2005 and 2015, I gave a large number of classical music cello recitals and some concerto performances.

A Scratch Orchestra 'flashback' occurred when, in October 2006 (unknown to me at the time), 'Whoopie!' and 'Breach of the Peace' were performed at the Landesmuseum, Münster, Germany as part of a concert put on by some German and Dutch composers celebrating the Fluxus movement. Other performances were given at Verkadefabriek, 's-Hertogenbosch, Holland in November 2007, and the Kolumba art museum in Cologne in June 2015.

Between 2013 and 2019, I wrote a 500-page book on psychology, philosophy and other subjects titled: 'Experience, Psychotherapy and the Influence of Cultural Myth'.

