

## Book Review

### ***Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981): A Reader***

Eddie Prévost, Editor  
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405 pages

#### **Reviewed by Ted Harms**

Cornelius Cardew is a legendary figure in the history of the musical avant-garde and British improvised music. Indeed, he is almost like Forrest Gump in those genres: he was Karlheinz Stockhausen's assistant for two years; he was involved with the pioneering British free improv group AMM for almost ten years; he created and performed numerous ground-breaking notated, indeterminate, and graphic scores; he taught at the Royal Music College in London; and he was a driving force in the creation of the community-based Scratch Orchestra. Then, in the last decade of his life, he rejected it all, turning his political and musical attentions towards Marxist/Leninist communism, with which he remained deeply involved until his early death in 1981 at the age of forty-five.

Eddie Prévost has compiled a wonderful and weighty tome dedicated to the life and work of Cornelius Cardew. As the only consistent member of AMM over its 40-plus year history, Eddie Prévost witnessed Cardew's mid-60's to mid-70's tenure with the group, as well as Cardew's profound impact on free improvisation and the musical avant-garde in Britain generally.

The book has two sections: the first is an exhaustive collection of Cardew's published work (articles, reviews, talks, etc.) and some interviews, while the second is a collection of measured and thoughtful essays by a variety of writers on Cardew's music, philosophy, and legacy.

The introduction, written by Scratch Music co-founder Michael Parsons, sets the stage by providing a brief but thorough overview of Cardew's music and his Wittgenstein-influenced philosophical positions, as well as the ways in which the latter informed the former.

Cardew's own writings provide engaging and insightful first-hand observations of many individuals and events associated with the musical avant-garde. For example, of Morton Feldman he writes, "Only when one has become accustomed to the dimness of the light, can one begin to perceive the richness and variety of colour which is the material of the music" (46). Of John Cage, "Cage's works represents [sic] unquestionably the most important development in musical composition since the war, and will exert more influence on the future evolutions and changes in composition and performance than the work of any European composers" (68). In contrast, Cardew's Marxist era writings focus primarily on the social and class aspects of modern music. For example, in an essay titled "Wiggly Lines and Wobbly Music," Cardew savages the tradition of the graphic score, consigning such works to the dustbin of history as socially irrelevant, save a few which he feels are not "a safe refuge for the musically incompetent" (254).

One of Cardew's most inflammatory essays is his 1974 Marxist polemic, "Stockhausen Serves Imperialism." This infamous piece is included in this collection with the exception of the first chapter, a history of the Scratch Orchestra written by orchestra member Rod Eley that was withheld at Eley's request.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the *Reader* does not include any writings that document the transition between Cardew's pre- and post-Marxist phases. If such writings do exist (perhaps in some of his written correspondence?), they fall outside of the scope of this volume.

The commentaries in the second half of the *Reader* provide a balanced analysis of Cardew's music and legacy. Many of the authors represented herein had personal contact with Cardew: Eddie Prévost provides the program notes from Cardew's Memorial Concert; Scratch Orchestra member and post-Cardew AMM member John Tilbury (who is currently at work on a forthcoming biography of Cardew, also to be published by Copula Press) contributes two articles. Composer and Scratch Orchestra member Brian Dennis discusses Cardew's epic works, *Treatise* and *The Great Learning*, in a pair of essays. *The Great Learning* is also the subject of a review by celebrated British minimalist composer Michael Nyman. There are entries from other noted composers and performers as well, including Christian Wolff, Anton Lukoszevics, Christopher Fox, and Richard Barrett.

There is a certain temptation to view Cardew as a tragic figure in light of his significant pre-Marxist body of work that he ultimately discarded. His Marxist-era writings and music are often viewed as unsophisticated, unimaginative, and boring. This narrative is hard to resist especially to those that are sympathetic to—or were directly involved with—the music that Cardew rejected.

In the introduction, Parsons suggests that Cardew's interest was in the "cruder" vein of Marxist/Leninist thinking, which Parsons sees as an oversight of the links between culture and society that were theorized by Marxist thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin. "His [Cardew's] refusal to take account of theoretical work of this kind," states Parsons, "suggests that he chose to regard Marxism as a fixed and self-justifying doctrine, rather than as a developing tradition of argument and analysis, subject like any other to critical examination and renewal" (xiv).

It could be argued that Cardew's early activities in the avant-garde were equally as "fixed and self-justifying" as his later political interests. In many ways, he simply traded one set of ideologies for another. Reading the articles in this volume, one thing that cannot be doubted is Cardew's profound level of commitment to whatever musical and/or political systems of thought he chose to align himself with at different points in his career. *Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981): A Reader* puts that commitment—and the complex and contradictory personality behind it—on display, blemishes and all, and is therefore a most welcome addition to the growing body of literature on improvised music and the avant-garde.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is, however, available at the following address along with the rest of Cardew's essay:  
[http://www.ubuweb.com/historical/cardew/cardew\\_stockhausen.pdf](http://www.ubuweb.com/historical/cardew/cardew_stockhausen.pdf)