

Music Notes: in memory of a retrograde revolutionary

A year ago last December, at the age of 45, British composer Cornelius Cardew was killed in front of his home by a hit-and-run driver. According to friends, Cardew was a meticulous man, aware of his surroundings, not the type to step into the street unthinkingly. Since the accident, rumors have circulated that his death was no accident at all, that he may have been killed by fascists who wanted to put an end to his activities.

Composers are rarely credited with enough social importance to warrant rumors of political assassination. That such speculation is still voiced points to the unusual nature of Cornelius Cardew and his unique role in contemporary music.

Cardew's early career was typical for his generation. First he embraced the absurdly complex style of serialism then in vogue on the continent; then he left it for the freedom of a new aesthetic. His twin idols became John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and his activities in the new music culminated in the formation of the famous Scratch Orchestra, an unprecedented group of musicians and nonmusicians whose conceptually far-flung performances included such works as LaMonte Young's **Draw a Straight Line and Follow It**.

Then Cardew made a not at all typical move - he turned against the avant-garde. In his program notes he began to announce, "I have discontinued composing music in an avant-garde idiom for a number of reasons: the exclusiveness of the avant-garde, its fragmentation, its indifference to the real situation of the world today, its individualistic outlook, and not least its class character..." In the early violence of his apostasy, he wrote a book entitled **Stockhausen Serves Imperialism**, in which Stockhausen was condemned for his fetishistic materialism and Cage was presented as a capitalist flunky. Cardew later regretted the book's excesses, but it served as a starting point for what was then a unique, truly revolutionary stance for a professional composer.

Cardew began to write for the working class, composing music that reflected "the vital struggles of the oppressed classes and peoples in their upsurge to seize political power." Convinced that art was sterile without political action, he played a pivotal role in the



Cornelius Cardew

formation of an English Marxist-Leninist party, and went to prison in 1980 for demonstrating against a march by the right-wing National Front in Camberwell. In a flirtation with Maoism, Cardew made piano arrangements of Chinese working-class songs, and set Mao's words to music in such songs as "Soon (There Will Be a High Tide of Revolution in Our Country)." This new music was in an accessible style based on the still commercially current language of 19th-century Romanticism, a language he felt the working classes could identify with. It was one of his proudest achievements and a measure of his success that his "Bethanlian Song," written during a campaign for better health facilities for the working class in Berlin, became part of the community's local folk music.

Today Cardew is considered the most extreme example of an international group of composers whose goals have less to do with aesthetic niceties than with incitement to political action. Included in this group are Christian Wolff in America, Frederic Rzewski in Italy, Yuji Takahashi in Japan, David Smith in England, and relevantly, Frank Abbinanti in Chicago. Memorial concerts have been given for Cardew in London, New York, and Tokyo. Chicago will be the site of the fourth such

concert, instigated and sponsored by Abbinanti, under the artistic directorship of local composer Peter Gena. Abbinanti has long been the major link between Cardew and Chicago, corresponding with him since 1969, and giving the first performances of his music here in 1971.

Chicago's Cardew Memorial Concert will include three works by the late master. One paragraph will be performed from **The Great Learning**, a nine-hour conceptual work based on the **Analects** of Confucius. This earlier score, a transition to Cardew's more political work, deals with relationships between leader and chorus, which reflect such relationships in society. "We Sing for the Future" and **Booleavogue** will receive area premieres; the latter is based on a 1798 song by Irish freedom fighter P. J. McCall and named for the town in which an uprising occurred in that year. Also included will be works by Rzewski (**Attica**) and Wolff, and Abbinanti's **Liberation Music**, a tribute to Cardew.

Reactions to Cardew's apostasy have been predictably varied. Christian Wolff states that he was "the most important composer in England, because of the quality of his music, because of his organizing, because of his thinking, speaking, and writing." Critic John Rockwell, however, thinks that because "artistic quality as such was of no importance to him," his political music is "nearly all prosaic and derivative." German composer Dieter Schnebel wrote that "Cardew's originality lies in the abandonment of originality," while Rzewski felt that Cardew's work continued on a genuinely experimental path, and that he would have achieved a major musical breakthrough had his life not been cut so tragically short. For Frank Abbinanti, Cardew's importance lies in his attempt to write music "that goes beyond the ends of the page."

Whether Cornelius Cardew's death was a freak accident or a political plot is likely to remain a mystery. Whether he succeeded in his attempt to create a politically relevant music is yours to decide May 5 at 5:30 PM in the Preston Bradley Hall of the Public Library Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington. Members of the American New Music Ensemble will perform. Admission is free. 346-3278.

- Kyle Gann