

The task of this paper is to compare the indeterminate elements in the music of Brian Ferneyhough to those of Christian Wolff. This perhaps seems like a surreal thesis given that Ferneyhough is widely known as the father of “New Complexity,” a loosely defined cadre of composers that include James Dillon, Chris Dench, Richard Barrett, and depending on what is meant, Iannis Xenakis. The sheer level of tempic and rhythmic specificity in these scores creates the appearance of determinism so dense that there is little room for anything that could be called indeterminate. It is for this reason that a few preliminary remarks are necessary. Specifically, how could one possibly consider Brian Ferneyhough a composer of indeterminate music?

The first indication that there might be indeterminate elements in Ferneyhough’s music came by way of a comment made by the composer in personal correspondence:

JB: Do you feel that the role of extended instrumental techniques contributes more importantly to the sense of “meaningful inexactitude” that you have advocated as the intended interpretive response to your music?

BF: Certainly. These tactics provide the performer with a broad and deep field of practical decision-making in the sphere of realization/interpretation. They encourage fidelity to the work than its literal reproduction.

Ferneyhough’s response is revealing. The term “meaningful inexactitude,” utilized in the question above was actually coined by the composer himself. In the context from which it was drawn¹ it signified a criteria that must be developed in the process of confronting the high demands the score places on the performer. Toop then clarifies Ferneyhough’s intention by asking if “...[the] interpretation consists, to some extent, of different *intelligent failures* to reproduce a central text?” (Italics mine) In the first quote above, this meaningful inexactitude provides the performer with choices. It is also significant that Ferneyhough makes the distinction between the notated score (which is invoked by reference to “literal reproduction”) and the performed experience of the work (that which expresses the “fidelity” to the work – which apparently lies beyond its graphic incarnation as a score). These sentiments go beyond a political niceness directed at failed attempts in performance because each intelligent failure represents the process

¹ (Toop, 268-9)

by which a performers find ways of “plugging it in to his own sensibilities – so that he is not simply trying to give a generally tasteful rendering of some set of noises but that...the performer himself can attempt to take an attitude toward that relationship [of text and musical structure]².”

Ferneyhough clarifies what such a process might entail in the performance notes to his piano work *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* (1982):

An adequate interpretation of this work presupposes three distinct learning processes: (1) an overview of the (deliberately relatively direct gestural patterning without regard to exactitude of detail in respect of rhythm; (2) a “de-learning” in which the global structures are abandoned in favor of a concentration upon the rhythmic and expressive import of each individual note (as if the composition were an example of “punctualistic” music); (3) the progressive reconstruction of the various gestural units established at the outset on the basis of experienced gained during the above two stages of preparation³.

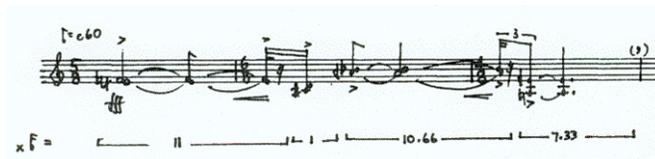
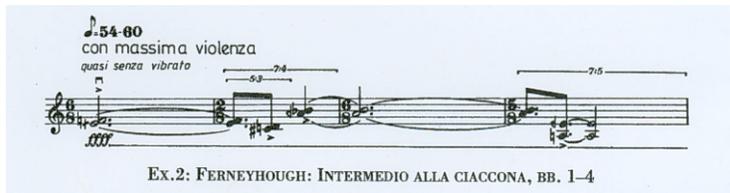
The necessity of quoting this section of the notes is that it demonstrates the composer’s intentions (an adequate interpretation – as close as possible) that result from a personal process of analysis and synthesis, the “psychologising” of interpretive reaction, as he puts it. The apparent problem in framing the indeterminacy of Ferneyhough’s works in terms of interpretive difference between different realizations carried out by different performers is – quite obviously – there aren’t that many widely available recordings of the same work done by ten different players. So in terms of the efficacy of this way of thinking about music, unless things change, our experiential knowledge of the indeterminate effects of interpretation must remain speculative.

There is however, one way of looking at this phenomenon provided in the unlikely place of Roger Marsh’s article *Heroic Motives*, an article that heavily criticizes Ferneyhough’s complex notation with respect to recorded performances of a number of

² (ibid., 269)

³ (Ferneyhough, I)

works. Marsh undertakes a dictation project to detect – if possible – not the players’ level of accuracy in performance, but questions our abilities to mental parse out what has been performed⁴. Marsh’s central thesis is that no performance of Ferneyhough’s music would be able to convey the preciseness of the composer’s rhythmic notation. He goes about proving his point by undertaking “dictations” of performance interpretations carried out by Irvine Arditti (first as soloist in the *Intermedio alla Ciaccona*, then as leader of the Arditti Quartet in the *Second Quartet*). Although Marsh’s methodology is cleverly put together, it is difficult to ascertain the difference between his central thesis and the statement above that the composer himself makes, referring to a process of deconstruction and synthesis that creates a condition of meaningful inexactitude (or indeed, intelligent failure)⁵. For the present purposes though, Marsh’s dictations are a kind of indication of what that process of choosing how to fail might produce.



According to Marsh’s dictation, the process that Arditti underwent to realize this work lead him to make a number of decisions among which was to shorten the duration of the first note and make the first and third dyads roughly equivalent. Presumably, these changes, along with a very flexible interpretation of tempo, as Marsh points out, were deemed an “adequate interpretation” by the composer as he served as artistic advisor in the recording to which Marsh refers. His point is really that the listener could not possibly

⁴ One cannot help questioning Marsh’s critical detachment when he makes statements like this one: “The extraordinary and dense textures created by James Dillon, for example, which excite and exhilarate me as much as they do Arnold Whittal, are complex, to be sure, but in the same way that the sounds of nature are complex, or the babbling of a baby.” (Marsh, 83)

⁵ It’s for the reason that Marsh – in my mind – is “beating a dead horse.”

have the ability to cognize the level of rhythmic complexity evinced in the scores of the works. To this it must be said that the complexity – which is of course imperceptible if by “perceptible” one means that the audience, even a musically educated one, can verbally list off the rhythmic relationships they have heard – but it does not seem to be the case that Ferneyhough wants the audience to hear complexity as an end in itself. Augenmusik, another commonly endowed description of this music, does not seem to fit either, since the effect of the complexity on the music is an interpretive one, the differences between two performances by two different players would in all likelihood be quite noticeable⁶.

Christian Wolff, on the other hand, needs little examination of this type in order to assert that his music has indeterminate qualities. In *For 1, 2, or 3 People* neither the instruments, nor the specific sounds or pitches or rhythms that they play, nor even the tempo. What then *is* specified? Aside from the quasi-specification of a few pitches here or there, Wolff creates a network of symbols that govern the responses of one player, either to her environment, or to her fellow performers. This socialization of the musical text makes at least two interesting things possible: the invention of a new way of thinking about rhythm as related to the actions of performers (as Gagne points out), and the state of being where a contradiction in the kinds of informational cues one is receiving (or not) from each other performer, or the listening environment.

The work is a different creature depending on the number of persons involved. If there is only one person, then the rhythm and pace, as well as timbre in some places, is not a social phenomenon but becomes one of environmental awareness. In one way this makes *For 1, 2, or 3 People* a similar statement as one of the possible interpretations of John Cage’s infamous 4’ 33”. If there are only two people, then the work can become about a conflict between the aural environment and the presence of another individual. Perhaps one shouldn’t go too far reading into this scenario, but it would suffice to say that the work is not really about “social” interaction yet – at least in the sense that the social context models a small society. When there are three persons, the work takes on an entirely different nature. Now it is possible for there to be contradiction not only between

⁶ The kind of perceptual awareness here is similar to the situation in which one cannot necessarily notice that the florescent lights above their head is making a continuous buzzing sound until someone else turns off the lights.

another person and the aural environment, but between two different persons, and perhaps even the aural environment. It is at this point that the work really takes on a social dimension⁷.

Despite the apparent strangeness of saying so, there are several similarities between the approaches of Ferneyhough and Wolff concerning the indeterminate aspects of their work. Both composers create a situation in which contradictions comprise one of the central aspects of the music, and both composers specify – more or less – a modus for responding to them. In the case of Ferneyhough, the contradiction lies between the realized performance, and the text of the score – it is expressed in the utter impossibility of creating an exact reproduction of that text. In Wolff, the contradictions arise out of the collision of three wills in a complex network of mutual perception (there's that word *complex* again). Furthermore, they both go about getting the results they want by creating a series of symbolic gestures that are restrictive, evincing a discourse of limitations. Wolff states in an interview with Cole Gagne⁸:

CG: Commentators have likened your scores of the '60s to games. Are you comfortable with that comparison?

CW: No. I don't – it's music. Clearly that's a helpful analogy, because there are rules. I used to use it in trying to explain how the music worked: that you had certain fixed rules and that the game had a very distinctive character because of the restrictive moves and the results of those moves, but that each game would be different.

Although the level and nature of the difference created by restrictive moves in Ferneyhough's music is different, it is perhaps enough to render different performances significantly unique. In Ferneyhough, the restrictive force of the hyper-notated scores

⁷ The kinds of contradiction I am referring to can be instantiated in a situation in which the performer receives a start cue, and a stop cue at the same time. They must then decide how they will respond because a number of equally valid and invalid responses are possible. Another example would be the reception of two opposing timbral cues. Clearly, the possibilities for contradiction are greatly diminished if not outright dispensed with in a performance for one person.

⁸ (Gagne, 455)

forms a “Carcieri d’Invenzione⁹” from within which the interpretation must speak. Where with Wolff, the rules of his composition set up a matrix of limitations defined in the actions of the musicians who hem each other as well as release one another to carry out their proscribed actions.

Both composers have an interest in breaking out of the predictability of metric regularity. Where Ferneyhough avoids regularity (really uncritical predictability) by creating impossibly overwrought etched rhythmic figures that avoid simple separation into beats, Wolff relies upon a strategy of “grace notes and fermatas¹⁰.” Wolff’s rhythm departs at the outset from meter as containment (though his sense of interaction is completely defined by containment) and prefers to explore the spaces between beats (so to speak) – his rhythm is defined by the event, not vice versa.

Despite some interesting similarities, major differences (outside of the obvious notational differences) do exist, and it is worth taking a look at them. Firstly, unlike Ferneyhough’s work, Christian Wolff’s music could be performed by musicians of any level of virtuosity. In fact, Wolff doesn’t call the work “For 1, 2, or 3 Musicians,” implying that non-musicians (or amateur musicians) could create a meaningful realization of the work¹¹. The discourse of Wolff’s work does not involve the concept of failure in the sense that it does with Ferneyhough.

“The other phenomenon is that you play and you make a mistake, right? Well, you’ve made it! Unless you’re recording and can take it out, you’ve made it. And therefore it authentically exists; it’s there. The question then is one of attitude. Do you say “Oh, this is a terrible performance because because this mistake was made,” or is the character of the music such that it can accommodate things that were not originally intended¹²?”

While Ferneyhough’s music does accommodate that which was not originally intended (in a manner of speaking), he never seems to allow as much as Wolff does. In

⁹ That is, a “prison of invention.”

¹⁰ (Gagne, 446-7)

¹¹ In fact, neither does Wolff refer to the work as “*Music for 1, 2, or 3 People [Musicians]*.” The significance of this is that it emphasizes alternative ways of imagining the work (as, for instance, a theater piece, or as a social experiment, etc.).

¹² (ibid., 448)

Ferneyhough's thinking, this phenomenon occurs in the murky space between his demand for "fidelity to the work rather than to its literal reproduction," and his insistence upon the importance of "meaningful inexactitude."

Finally the kinds of commitments required by each work are fundamentally different in terms of the performers process of preparation, and the audience perception of how form is instanced in sound. It is impossible to practice the literal surface of the score in Wolff's work – no fixed set of ordered sonic relations exists. If the performers follow Wolff's original intentions as formulated in the performance indications that preface the score, each performance is a collective directed improvisation in terms of sounds. In Ferneyhough, these parameters are made mandate by the score from the beginning. The result is that the identity of the work from an aural perspective (and this is where the listeners come in) is not a fixed feature of the Wolff as it is for the Ferneyhough *Intermedio alla Ciaccona* (for example). Given a score of both works – it will be possible for a musically educated individual to locate the narrative visually in the Ferneyhough score (although it is sometimes admittedly hard to follow). This is not the case in Wolff's *For 1, 2, or 3 People*, where the elements on the page are arranged in a manner that suggests mobile form. Try as one might, it is fiendishly difficult to locate the narrative in Wolff – because the work is modular rather than linear.

The point of drawing correspondences between the work of Brian Ferneyhough and Christian Wolff is to make an attempt to demonstrate not only another possible type of discourse surrounding the music of Ferneyhough (and I suppose of Wolff), but also to suggest that the rigid distinctions that are often drawn between determinate and indeterminate art are arbitrary and necessarily weak. I believe I have shown that there is a significant level of indeterminacy in Ferneyhough, and a significant level of determinism in Wolff. Rather than being a puckish parlor trick, it is hoped that this attempt will stimulate (at least in my own thinking) a more sophisticated and thoughtful network of aesthetic relationships between musics that are not superficially similar but share important discourses, as I believe this music does.

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