

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

EDITOR *Calum MacDonald*

VOLUME 60 NO. 238 OCTOBER 2006

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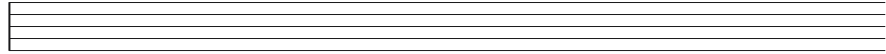


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CORNELIUS CARDEW'S 'AUTUMN '60 FOR ORCHESTRA'

Edward Venn

The not inconsiderable literature on Cardew frequently gives a view of him (merely) as a 'man of ideas', rather than as a composer of *music* whose qualities need no moral support from their conceptual infrastructure, and which may be judged on the same level as any music by composers less concerned than he was with the nature and status of themselves and their work.¹

These words form part of Richard Barrett's 'collection of reactions and reflections' to and of Cornelius Cardew,² published six years after Cardew's death in 1981. Since then, Cardew's stock as a composer of *music* has, if anything, fallen. Comparison between the *New Grove* entries of 1980 and 2001, for instance, evidences an increase in the privileging of Cardew's performance activities and politics over his musical output.³ Similarly, in the last two decades, those pieces of Cardew's that have merited most attention have been discussed from primarily a visual perspective (*Treatise*)⁴ or incorporated into an examination of Cardew's political engagement (*The Great Learning*).⁵ In the year of what would have been Cardew's 70th birthday, one can plausibly argue that we know more about the motivations *behind* his music than how it actually *goes*. With this comes the risk that the music is reduced in significance, becoming no more than a symbol for Cardew's other (more definable) activities.

The challenges to performers and audiences posed by a work such as Cardew's *Autumn '60 for orchestra* are sufficient to sustain an analysis that foregrounds its particular quality of musical thought over any 'conceptual infrastructure'. To engage in such an analysis is not to deny the role played by such an infrastructure, but rather to show that weakening or kicking away conceptual crutches need not cause the music to topple over. What remains standing is a work of considerable charm, beauty and wit.

Cardew suggested that the criterion of any good performance of *Autumn '60* 'is not completeness (*i.e.* perfection), but rather the lucidity of its incompleteness'.⁶ It is in that spirit of revealing the lucidity of *Autumn '60* that these brief and incomplete thoughts, my own reactions and reflections, have been offered.

¹ Barrett, Richard, 'Cornelius Cardew' in *New Music* 87, ed. Michael Finnissy and Roger Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

² *Ibid.*

³ Parsons, Michael, 'Cornelius Cardew' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan 1980) Vol. 3: 773–4; Tilbury, John, 'Cornelius Cardew' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians II* ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan 2001) Vol 5: 119–120.

⁴ Dennis, Brian, 'Cardew's *Treatise*: Mainly the Visual Aspects' in *Tempo* 177 (1991): 10–16.

⁵ Taylor, Timothy D., 'Moving in Decency: The Music and Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew' in *Music and Letters* vol. 79 no. 4 (1998): 555–576; see also Potter, Keith, 'Cornelius Cardew: Some (Postmodern?) Reflections on Experimental Music and Political Music' in *New Music, Aesthetics and Ideology* ed. Mark Delaere (Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel GmbH, 1995): 152–169.

⁶ Introduction to *Four works* [*Autumn '60, Material, Solo with Accompaniment and Memories of You*], UE 14171 (1967)

Autumn '60 was composed in September 1960. Written 'for orchestra', it can, in fact, be performed by any number of instruments. It was premièred in Venice in October 1960, with Heinz-Klaus Metzger and John Cage on piano, Kurt Schwertsik playing horn and Cardew on guitar; Benjamin Patterson conducted. The performers alone are enough to reveal that *Autumn '60* belongs to Cardew's Cage-influenced output. As with any experimental work, one experiences considerable problems if wishing to talk about it in traditional terms as a piece of music rather than an idea. This can be either a source of frustration or liberation, depending on your viewpoint.

Example 1 gives some indication of the difficulties one faces with *Autumn '60*. Each player performs from the same score, the content of which establishes a rich yet bounded field of musical possibilities. The notational system blends traditional (pitch and dynamic indications) with non-traditional symbols (or interpretations of symbols). The complete list of symbols and their interpretation can be found in Figure 1.

Each bar in the score contains one to four beats, divided by the bar lines in the upper system; bar lines through both staves indicates bar lengths. (The lower staff is provided for the performer to note down what they want to play, should they wish.) Each beat contains between one item of information (e.g. Example 1, the B \flat in the second beat after figure E) and six (Example 1, beat one). The performer is required to accommodate all but *two* of these instructions in whatever musical response they choose to make. If what remains after the two instructions are ignored is mutually exclusive, or if they choose not to perform anything, the performer will be silent.⁷ If there are only two items of information, the performers must either remain silent or do anything *but* those instructions. For instance, at figure D, any performer choosing to play must *not* use a stringed instrument, or diminuendo. Observed to the letter, this would also presumably rule out a sustained percussive sound (which would get softer as it rang on), although one could reiterate this sound in ever-louder attacks throughout the duration of the beat. Where there is only one item of information, the players must observe what is written, or remain silent. Finally, the double bar line is used to indicate a break in the music. Complicating matters further is that within each section delineated by the double bar lines it is possible that performers make their own speed through the material: the resulting overlapping of material would serve to obscure the detail that the performers are trying so hard to observe.

Example 1: *Autumn '60 for orchestra*, bb. 8–10

⁷ Being forced into silence is more common than one might expect. Michael Nyman has cited Roger Smalley's observation that 'so far from being entirely free, as one might suppose at a casual glance, the performer finds himself gradually enmeshed in an ever-narrowing field of possibilities wherein it eventually becomes difficult to do anything at all'. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), 99.

The Indications

A note counts as one indication. If played, it should sound as written; if not, it should be avoided in all registers.

I, II, III, IV—hold through one, two, three or four beats.

• —staccato; attack and cut-off are not heard separately.

∩ —minimal duration where the cut-off is heard separately.

— —medium duration.

△ —long duration, with distinct cut-off.

Λ —maximal duration (hold to extinction, length of a breath, etc.).

↑ —slide upwards, ↓ —downwards, ↕ —either way.

♯ —tremolo, flutter-tonguing, trill, etc.

∞ —vibrato.

○ —harmonics.

⊕ —exaggerated attack (slaptonguing, rebounding pizz, etc.).

f, *p*, <, >, *pizz*, *mute*—all refer as usual.

The name of an instrument or group of instruments counts as one indication.

Figure 1: Indications in *Autumn '60* for orchestra

Faced with the multitude of musical realizations the score enables, in what sense can one talk about the music in generalized terms? Cardew has suggested (in what at first glance appears to be a formalist's paradise) that 'the music itself ... lies in the score; the score is the composition, and as such has its own value apart from any particular interpretation'.⁸ In later years, Cardew was to denounce as a 'disease' the identification of a score (and its notation) with music in this way, giving as examples *Autumn '60* and *Solo with Accompaniment*.⁹ Yet the score does give some indication as to the general *type* of interpretation one is likely to hear. For instance, in the final beat of Example 1, any performer not playing bass will either be silent, or respond with a musical gesture that will interpret two of the three other indications. It is statistically likely that a group of performers will between them come up with material that contains the D₄, a minor ninth above middle C, a crescendo and a long sustained sound with a distinct cut-off. Quite how this is realized in a specific performance is another matter; nevertheless, certain beats of the score suggest (in abstract, at least) more definable musical responses than others.

For beats that impose greater restrictions on the performer, the field of possible interpretations correspondingly shrinks. Most restrictive of all are those beats that require a single response from the performers: those that immediately follow a double bar line (and hence begin with silence) and those that have only one indication (which must be followed, or else the player remains silent). Such beats provide points of relative focus in which a particular type of event is foregrounded, as if an underlying structure had briefly been pushed to the surface; the pattern of composed silences provided by the double bar lines articulates the music into longer and shorter sections (which themselves might be punctuated by silence). Negatively, we might also take note of those beats with only two indications. By requiring the players to ignore these indications, the score ensures that certain events *won't* happen. Here, once again, we encounter a fruitful tension between tradition and notational demands: many players at first find it very difficult to actively do anything *but* what is written in front of them.

⁸ Introduction to UE 14171.

⁹ Cardew, Cornelius, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer, 1974). Cardew in fact describes two 'diseases'; the first is that 'the composer doesn't conceive of a piece of music so much as a notation system', the second is 'the idea that a musical score can have some kind of aesthetic identity of its own, quite apart from its realization in sound' (p. 80; see also n. 48, p. 121).

Example 2 provides an overview of the entire score. Each beat is represented by a slash; larger slashes represent beats with one or two pieces of information, the latter shown in square brackets for clarity. What the summary demonstrates is that the most clearly prescribed content of *Autumn '60*, both positive and negative, is in itself limited to a restricted range of pitches, colours and performance techniques.

The image displays a musical score for 'Autumn '60 for orchestra', consisting of six staves. The notation is highly abstract, using slashes to represent beats. Various performance techniques and instrumentations are indicated by brackets and letters. The staves are labeled with letters A through P. The instruments and techniques shown include: saxophone (sax.), trombone (tbn.), bass, viola (vla.), saxophone (sax.), and strings (str.). Performance techniques include 'mute', 'p' (piano), and 'f' (forte). The score is written in 2/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and articulations.

Example 2: Overview of *Autumn '60* for orchestra

All of the prescribed pitches of the work (not just those given in Example Two) are drawn from the pentatonic set F G \flat A \flat B \flat D \flat . Although the performers are sometimes required to avoid these pitches, they will more often be drawn towards them.¹⁰ It is possible that a performance of *Autumn '60* would have a distinctive pentatonic feel, but a more likely result is that these pitches act as focal points around which other events cluster, throwing up associations, hierarchies and connexions that differ from one realization to the next. The patterns of inclusion and exclusion also relate to a limited colour palette (sax, trombone, bass, viola and on one occasion all the strings) and articulation (the circle with a line through it); similarly, these events act as interpretative hubs.

To the extent that one can talk about identities for experimental music at all, it seems reasonable to suggest that an identity of *Autumn '60* is most clearly felt to exist at those points in which the instructions give little room for freedom of interpretation. As the number of indications varies from beat to beat, our (abstract) awareness of these focal points waxes and wanes. The environment (or theatre) of *Autumn '60* in which performers and listeners can 'act' is shaped – controlled – by this identity, no matter how loosely-felt; the important thing to note is that this is a *musical* identity.

¹⁰ Cardew: 'in the nature of things these pitches will often predominate' (Introduction to *Autumn '60*).



The musical challenges posed by *Autumn '60* are considerable, requiring performers to participate in the creative process of the work. It offers at first a hostile environment that forces the performers to grapple with the sometimes counterintuitive demands of the notation (Figure 1). Each performer brings to the piece their own habitual responses, conditioned by their prior experience. In interpreting the notation, they must engage in a constant dialogue between their preconceptions of a symbol and what it actually means in *Autumn '60*. Particularly troublesome are those indications that employ traditional symbols but demand different responses. The use of a turn to indicate vibrato is one example, the use of an accented *tenuto* for an event of 'long duration, with distinct cut-off' another. Even when this new meaning has been internalized, it is still possible for some of the traditional associations to influence their realization: vibrato could be performed wider than normal (taking into account the pitches around the central tone in a turn), or the onset of the held note could be accented. The retention of time signatures offers another interpretative quandary: do performers take these as implications of metrically strong and weak beats (and to what extent?), or do they ignore them? Questions such as these are far from trivial: the answers that a particular performing group provide will have a profound effect on any given performance.

Once the performer has determined which instructions to, and how, if possible, to accommodate and interpret the remaining instructions, the question arises of how to progress from one beat to the next. In his sleeve notes to a recording, David Ryan asks 'What was the world intended by Cardew for *Autumn '60*? Generally, the generated sound world has a fragmented, pontillistic atmosphere'.¹¹ This is certainly in accordance with the Cageian influence on the work. However, certain indications suggest that continuity, at least sometimes, is as desirable as discontinuity. For instance, Roman numerals require performers to sustain an event for one, two, three or four beats (e.g. Example 1, beats one, two and four). By doing so it is highly likely that they will obscure some of the focal events described above; however, the distribution of Roman numerals is such that no sustained event overlaps a break required by a double bar lines (again, see Example 1). This suggests that the silences that separate sections are absolute; those in the course of a section are optional.

The decision to produce a predominantly fragmented sound world is nevertheless one brought to the score; it is not inherent in it. It is a decision based on prior experience, and one that emerges in the constant dialogue with the notation. In his introduction to the score, Cardew gives a sample realization of seven beats, for the idiosyncratic ensemble of five cellos. Whilst some of the individual cello lines suggest an atomistic performance, others hint at a smoother musical surface in which events flow into one another: both approaches are presented as equally valid. And indeed, in the second bar after figure J (see Example 2), Cardew specifically instructs the performers *not* to hold the event through one beat: one acceptable realization is to hold the event for *longer* than a single beat, blending with the instruction of the following bar (to hold for maximal duration).

¹¹ Sleeve notes to *Cornelius Cardew: Chamber Music 1955–64*, Apartment House, Matchless Recordings MRCD45 (2001). Ryan performed in both versions of *Autumn '60* that are included in the CD.

A conductor of *Autumn '60*, no less than the musicians, is required to engage in a dialogue between his or her musical background and the specific demands of the score. In some respects, the conductor fulfils a traditional function, keeping time and suggesting the character of interpretation; the ways in which he or she chooses to do this can vary from one beat to the next. Thus in any given section, the conductor can give distinct beats, vague beats, or even no beat at all. This results in the ensemble either moving through the section with the conductor and each other; or if the gestures are vague they may stumble through uncertainly, blurring boundaries between beats; or they may progress at their own pace, coming together again only with the next double bar line. In this way the conductor can have a guiding hand, though by all means not the only say, in the way events link or overlap with one another. The conductor is also at liberty to change the duration of beats from one to the next; further, it is the conductor's decision as to where the piece begins and ends. The conductor may also suggest that certain directions are observed more than others (an example Cardew gives is that 'in a particular section [the performers] should all play the written notes wherever possible'); this may be used as a means of clarifying (or obscuring) the identity of the work.

But the conductor may elect to participate with the group on a more equal footing. It is perfectly feasible that performers 'merely' progress through the work on their own, heeding only whether the conductor's beat is clear, minimal or non-existent in order to guide their way through the score, paying no attention to the sounds around them. However, performers who are sufficiently versed with the notational demands may choose to improvise within the limits established by the notation and respond to those around them: they might enter into musical dialogues, reacting to others as they become more or less pronounced in the texture. Certain performers might take on the role of a soloist for one or more beats; the others could assume accompanimental roles.¹² Similarly, in addition to the clarity of his or her beats, the conductor may choose to 'interpret' the music in traditional ways, or 'merely' mark time; players are at liberty to respond as they see fit to these gestures.



The musical challenges posed by *Autumn '60* bring with them considerable musical rewards. *Autumn '60* does not ask of its performers that they shed themselves of their history (a charge Cardew levels at Cage), but that they examine it fruitfully and creatively. This process is not easy, but when approached with sincerity and commitment, the experience is positive and affirming, and the musical results significant. One need not know Cardew's convictions to apprehend the humanist impulse behind this music: it is palpable in every bar, and it is this that convinces me of its considerable and enduring merits.

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¹² There are similarities here with some of the improvisational rites of the Scratch Orchestra; see, for instance, *Nature Study Notes*.