

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

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## Citation

Levi, Erik. 1976. 'Review of *Experimental Music Catalogue: Cornelius Cardew: Piano Album 1973*'. *Contact*, 13. pp. 42. ISSN 0308-5066.

EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC CATALOGUE: CORNELIUS CARDEW:  
PIANO ALBUM 1973 (£1.50); THREE BOURGEOIS SONGS  
(£0.90).

ERIK LEVI

I must begin by quoting from Howard Skempton's perceptive review of Cardew's recent book *Stockhausen serves Imperialism* published in *Composer* magazine (Spring 1975):

"The aspect of Cardew's character which emerges most clearly from these pages is his passionate commitment to truth and realism, a towering quality which more than adequately explains his apparently self-destructive repudiation of earlier work. . . This book is highly recommended. We have nothing to lose but our complacency."

Similarly, the composer's own programme notes printed at the back of *Piano Album 1973* give us a lucid explanation for Cardew's drastic change of style. Again I feel compelled to quote, for reasons which I shall try to justify later:

"I have discontinued composing music in an avantgarde idiom for a number of reasons: the exclusiveness of the avantgarde, its fragmentation, its indifference to the real situation in the world today, its individualistic outlook and not least its class character. I have rejected the bourgeois idealistic conception which sees art as the production of unique divinely inspired geniuses and developed a dialectical materialist conception which sees art as the reflection of society and at the same time promoting the ideas of the ruling class in a class society".

One may argue that to quote so many words in an attempt to justify a composer's musical style and personality is in fact contradicting a principle of so-called 'objective' musical criticism, which should concern itself primarily with music pure and simple. But with Cardew the problem is much more complex. I must confess that after studying these pieces I am no nearer to forming a balanced assessment of his present musical idiom. However, on the number of occasions at which I have seen Cardew either speak about or perform his music, I have been shocked by an almost vicious feeling of hostility and prejudice displayed by politically close-minded middle class audiences. It's no wonder that the music can never be given a chance if our political prejudices cloud over appreciation of it. The words "we have nothing to lose but our complacency" still ring in my ears!

Ideally, the editor ought to publish a number of different reviews of these works, and thereby set in motion some healthy discussion. My position must appear untenable to Cardew, as I draw a line between music and party politics, and I make no apologies for reviewing these works as music rather than assessing their political validity. I also realise that a large amount of what I say is bound to be clouded by my bourgeois, elitist musical education, and that it therefore might appear meaningless within the present context. However, in purely historical terms I sincerely believe that Cardew's violent rejection of Cage and Stockhausen is one of the most courageous and important events of the 20th century (pace Hans Keller).

As to the music itself. Well, it's all too easy to sling out the usual clichés such as 'writing down', banality of phrase' and 'oversimplistic musical idiom'. Let me again quote from Cardew:

"Upon what musical sources and traditions should we base our work? In what style should that material be presented bearing in mind that it must be accessible to the broad masses of so-called 'uncultured' people? The pieces I am presenting here are tentative experiments in a number of different directions seeking provisional answers to these questions."

Tentative and provisional are indeed significant words, for Cardew has subsequently moved towards pop music in an attempt to reach a wider audience. One hopes, however, that he won't turn his back on the piano for ever, for in purely pianistic terms his writing is both skilful and imaginative, technically challenging without being virtuosic for its own sake, and more important, covering a surprisingly wide range of expression. Another quality that is immediately apparent is the direct optimism of these pieces: the deliberate simplicity of the musical ideas couched in a straightforward harmonic idiom that somehow avoids both sentimentality and predictability. When Cardew uses folk material (as in the first four pieces in the *Piano Album*, based on Chinese revolutionary melodies), I am irresistibly reminded of a work like Shostakovich's Eleventh Symphony (no doubt a work Cardew would reject as a prop of Soviet imperialism), which similarly builds up impressive structures around revolutionary songs.

With the *Three Bourgeois Songs* I am less happy, partly because I'm not convinced that Cardew has fully solved the problems of setting the English language. All too often the prosody seems awkward, though in fairness Cardew avoids the irritating melismatic

writing of Britten and Tippett.

In summing up, I can't pretend that any of this is great music, nor am I convinced that Cardew's style or message (which I much respect) is sufficiently powerful to reach a wide public. Prokofiev once said that his greatest difficulty was to remain simple without sacrificing his personality and originality. Cardew's repudiation of the individual leads his music dangerously close to anonymity and ultimately to the very complacency which he so despises. Nevertheless, for all my reservations, I can see in Cardew's work a positivism that refreshingly contradicts so much of today's pretentious and depressingly nihilistic art.