

influence on him—Ashley was deeply engaged with cultural theory and philosophy. However, since books in the American Composers series are designed to be 200 pages or fewer, Gann’s choice to tip the balance in his work toward detailed accounts of Ashley’s musical structures precluded discussion of these other factors. Nonetheless, Gann contributes a much-needed empirical account of Ashley’s compositional processes. Although this reader would have welcomed more discussion of Ashley’s interviews and expository writing, Gann’s formalist analytical approach demonstrates that Ashley’s operas have far more complexity than has been previously acknowledged, balancing the common view of Ashley as primarily a conceptual composer or performance artist.

Gann has not attempted to write a dispassionate account of Ashley. As he plainly admits in his introduction, he has a specific agenda and adopts a revisionist approach in order to shed light on the little-known impact of Ashley’s contribution to American opera. To Gann’s credit, he makes no attempt to hide his biases and successfully mounts a convincing argument in defense of his explicit thesis that Ashley “is the greatest composer of American opera” (11). Through his intricately woven tapestry of biographical and musical details, Gann demonstrates Ashley’s virtuosic reforms to opera on every level, from its large-scale concept down to its finest musical details. Gann’s account of Ashley’s life and compositional activity on the fringes of the establishment deftly traces the emergence of Ashley’s radically new form of opera. Through this insightful and devoted book, we have a more complete picture of who Ashley was: innovator, visionary, and (as Gann reveals) true American maverick.

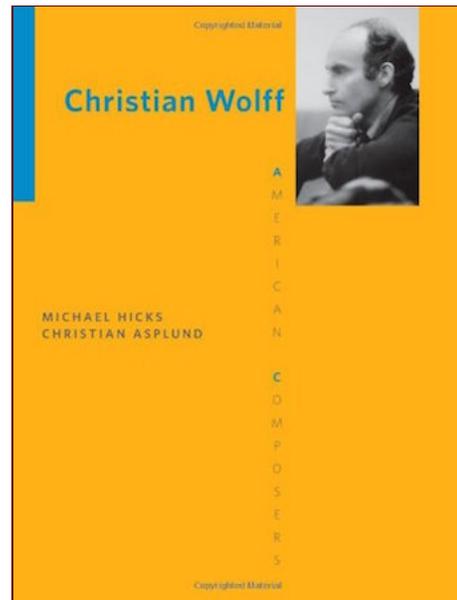
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***Christian Wolff*, Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund, University of Illinois Press, 2012. 118pp. ISBN: 978-0-252-07895-5. Paperback.**

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Christian Wolff, co-authored by Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund of Brigham Young University, is part of University of Illinois Press’s American Composer series. This series presents concise, practical introductions of important, yet underrepresented composers. *Christian Wolff* fits well in it, providing the first biographical study of Wolff’s life and work with clear, succinct analysis that is accessible to a general audience. Wolff is best known as the youngest member of the New York School. Although he was active in John Cage’s circle as a teenager in the 1950s, he diverged from the group by serving in the army, studying classics at Harvard, and later by pursuing an academic career as a professor of classics and music at Dartmouth College. His pieces stem from fundamental questions about what it means for a group of people to make music, and how music-makers coordinate with one another. Thus, much of his career has been dedicated to developing compositional methods and notations that indicate how players are to interact, rather than the specific sounds they make, and gravitate towards heterophony and sparse textures.



While chronologically organized, the strategic inclusion of salient biographical information throughout the text places each work in the immediate context of Wolff’s familial, professional, ideological, political, and musical circumstances. Hicks and Asplund seamlessly interweave discussions of specific pieces with Wolff’s life events. The advantage of this approach is that the authors are able to fluently demonstrate stylistic traits that were present or developed over the course of Wolff’s career. A case in point is the discussion of *Duet I* (1960), in which Wolff explored the use of graphic, neume notation, an elaborate scheme of coded symbols that indicate cues and extended techniques. The authors assert: “Wolff continued to develop style traits he had shown as early as his teenage violin duo [*Duo for Violins* (1951)], where different relationships of starting and ending interact with the compulsive restriction of pitch” (32). Hicks and Asplund are careful to point out how aspects of Wolff’s biography influenced his music. For instance, after his children were born, Wolff adopted a compositional practice akin to “quilting”; it consisted of patching together fragments of previously used procedures, which allowed for frequent, unanticipated interruptions. According to the authors, Wolff’s time as an instructor and administrative assistant in the “team-oriented” army during the early-1960s motivated him to refine his ratio-neume notation to facilitate

greater interaction and cooperation among the players.

The values of discipline, experimentation, and an egalitarian relationship among sounds, silence, and noise, undergird all of Wolff's music. However, his work remains elusive of classification; as Hicks and Asplund stress: "If Wolff has a method of composing it is to overturn methods from piece to piece" (1). The difficulty of characterizing Wolff's work also stems from his refusal to reject aspects of musical styles that were shunned by other New York School composers—such as improvisation and melody—as well as methods taken up by contemporaries such as Cardew, who embraced those musical qualities but spurned the compositional rigor and sterile procedural indeterminacy of the avant-garde as elitist. Thus, Wolff lies outside the established stylistic categories of mid-century experimental music. Hicks and Asplund deftly place Wolff's work into rough stylistic periods based on his preferred compositional methods while at the same time maintaining the awareness that their framework is subjective, imposed to provide Wolff's music with a sense of direction and order.

Although Wolff's work resists sweeping generalizations, Hicks and Asplund emphasize a characteristic that is present in almost all of his compositions: the music is relational. Wolff considers his scores tools for making up a community through the act of making sound. He explains that his music is "not so much an expression of the player (or composer) as a way of connecting, making a community...sometimes involving internally fluid and precise, and transparent, lines of projections of connection" (2). For example, the indeterminate score for the previously mentioned *Duet I* consists of "coordination neumes" and written instructions that indicate not only how to select the pitch material but more importantly, how the players are to interact (32). As Wolff suggests: in this work, "strategies of listening and reacting trump pitch and rhythm as the fundamental structuring principles of the work" (32). This quotation also indicates that Wolff, like other members of the New York School, values music that encourages heightened listening and awareness. However, Wolff's approach is distinctive in that his "pieces [are] about music making, not 'music.'" His works shed light on how the practices of composing, performing, and listening relate to sound and human interaction (25).

Throughout the book Hicks and Asplund also highlight important personal relationships that served as formative influences on his life and work. Wolff's friendship with John Cage plays a prominent role, as does his connection to other members of the New York School, including Cornelius Cardew, Frederic Rzewski, and Larry Polansky. The downside to this approach is that, Wolff tends to be overshadowed by his colorful friends and influences, which to some extent undermines the authors' attempts to distinguish Wolff from the New York School. However, the attention paid to Wolff's colleagues, mentors, and friends points to his place in a community of composers as well as humility—he is more apt to cite the work and influence of others than to tout his own originality or creative prowess.

One aspect of Wolff's work that distinguishes him from his New York School peers is that in the late 1960s and 1970s his political convictions—primarily regarding the civil rights, anti-war movements, and communist sympathies—led him to become proactive. He began writing music that communicated political ideals and modeled an alternative structuring of society. This extra-musical influence prompted Wolff to employ melody and incorporate folk tunes (often altered) such as "Bread and Roses" and "There Once was a Union Maid" into his pieces. He also wrote many vocal works with text settings of folk songs or other political poetry such as *I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman* (1984). Wolff's turn to heterophonic textures during this period was also influenced by his desire to let his music serve as a metaphor for self-reliant individuals working together towards a common goal.

In a discussion of Wolff's political leanings, Hicks and Asplund highlight a tension between the aesthetic values of virtuosity and rigor on the one hand, and accessibility, simplicity, and flexibility on the other. This tension is apparent in *Burdocks* (1970–71), a multi-movement work for "orchestra" (five or more players). The score of this work consists of elaborate schemes of sonic material and instructions indicating how performers are to interact. The authors explain that "an elective political process undergirded the piece: players were to 'gather and decide' or 'choose one or more representatives to decide' which sections to play and in what order" (46). Although *Burdocks* has a flexible structure, which is determined by a democratic process, Wolff employed a different compositional and notational method for each of the ten sections; most are difficult to play because they require intense focus and interpretive discipline.

The authors tactfully convey the ways in which Wolff's musical-political agenda placed him in a precarious position in the conflict between Cage and Cardew that escalated after Cardew published "John Cage: Ghost or Monster" in the early 1970s.¹ Cardew's article mocked Cage's work and lambasted him as an imperialist for

writing music without content that ignored “the people’s” struggles (49). Cardew sent a copy to Wolff. The authors subtly capture Wolff’s diplomacy and grace in handling the situation: Wolff crafted a carefully worded letter to Cardew affirming that he disliked Cage’s separation of his pacifist politics from his life and works, but he also gently chastised Cardew’s harshness and his over-simplified analysis of Cage. Wolff emphasized that above all, he desired “‘freedom’—including individual freedom—as an ideal that music could portray without text or vernacular affectations” (49).

The biographical information and details regarding Wolff’s compositions rely heavily on emails and unpublished interviews conducted by Hicks and Asplund with Wolff and his colleagues. The authors also cite Wolff’s personal correspondence with John Cage, Frederic Rzewski, Cornelius Cardew, John Tilbury, and others taken from Wolff’s home archive and the John Cage Collection. For example, the authors include quotations from Wolff’s correspondence with Rzewski that include letters dated as early as 1959 to emails sent in 2007; referring to this decades-long thread of communication lends a consistency of narrative to the work and also acts as a testament to the importance of Wolff’s long-lasting friendships.

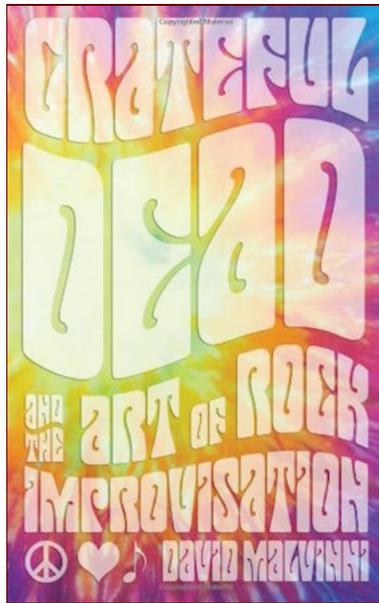
In this slim, well-crafted introduction to Wolff’s life and music, Hicks and Asplund provide definition to Wolff’s body of work. They offer analytical tools that may aid scholars and performers by clarifying Wolff’s notational practices and instructions.

Ultimately the reader is left with a sense of how much Wolff valued freedom, individuality, discipline, and relationships, and how these values play out in his music and his roles as a father, friend, classicist, and composer. Hicks and Asplund sum up Wolff’s steadfast character and dedication to his career and community by referring to his 1963 PhD dissertation in classics, in which he studied the notion of survival in Euripides’s plays: “Private survival conflicts with efforts to save a community....’ But, Euripides suggests, life is still ‘a form of exile which is resolved only among friends, in a private world’” (87).

Notes

¹ Cornelius Cardew, “John Cage: Ghost or Monster?” *Listener*, BBC Publications, May 4, 1972.

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***Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation*, David Malvinni, Scarecrow Press, 2013. 296pp. ISBN: 978-0-81088-255-3. Hardback.**

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Rock promoter Bill Graham once noted that the Grateful Dead are “not the best at what they do, they’re the only ones that do what they do” (5). David Malvinni’s book, *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* analyzes this uniqueness and explores two ways the Grateful Dead can be distinguished from other rock bands of their era: first, the band’s approach to jam-based performances through group improvisation, and second, their unique relationship to audiences, which enhanced and propelled those innovative improvisational techniques (5). In the book’s seven chapters, Malvinni investigates the Dead’s hybrid musical style and instrumental improvisation development from the early years (1965–1975) to the death of Jerry Garcia (1995).

Malvinni teases out the intricate layers that weave through a topic steeped in bohemianism, the counterculture movement of the 1960s, and American vernacular musics. However, members of the Grateful Dead did not want to be identified as counterculture leaders nor did they (or the mainstream media) consider themselves “popular.” Thus the label “popular music” is in essence problematic although the band did achieve mainstream notoriety with a Top 10 album *In the Dark* and the single “Touch of Grey,” both from 1987. Instead of being weighed down by methodology and very aware of the knotty territory a musical analysis and study of the Grateful Dead would entail, Malvinni attempts to navigate the reader through the historical, musical, and social context of the band

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