

Music, Society and Progress

The initial paper given by Michael Chant at The Engine Room Conference, celebrating the legacy of Cornelius Cardew

Morley College, Saturday, December 10, 2011

It could be thought that there is a problem when we come to study and celebrate the life and work of Cornelius Cardew, as we are doing today. Because which Cornelius Cardew are we celebrating?

There may be those who like the days of British experimentalism, and have problems with Cornelius the political person and the music and songs that were produced individually and collectively by Cornelius and his comrades. Equally there may be those who take as their starting point that Cornelius wrote that he rejected the idiom and outlook of the avant-garde, who see him as a political activist first and foremost, and think that the issue is one of how to express political ideas in music.

A conclusion I came to was that one way of overcoming this kind of split is to point out the continuity of the preoccupations of Cornelius at the various stages of his life. In this way one gets to a more fundamental appreciation of what his preoccupations were – his humanity, his leadership qualities, his finding inspiration in the collective, his “watching with affection the way people grow”, to quote from *The Great Learning*, and his encouragement for everyone to look to and sing for the future, if you refer to his final works. I think Hugh [Shrapnel] for instance will be speaking on these kinds of preoccupations. If you take Howard Skempton, who wrote an article in the *Guardian* at the time of the Bath Festival, he encourages everyone to embrace music from all stages from Cornelius' career. There is Stuart [Monro]'s film [“The Content of Our Song”] that also encourages everyone to see Cornelius' role as being in step with the movement of the times, and his quality of capturing and embodying this movement and being at the forefront of it.

Then I thought, another way is to look at the issue of precisely what is “The Content of Our Song”, if you quote the title of the film, the line from “The People United Will Never be Defeated” which says “Freedom is the content of our song”. So in other words, what is the content of our song today? If one can answer or approach this question then one has a deeper insight into what is the identity of Cornelius Cardew and how his identity changed over his life. This content can be characterised as life embracing. It is progressive rather than retrogressive, and beautiful and inclusive rather than ugly and exclusive. One can think of performances the Scratch Orchestra gave which had a freedom at that time, which was one of the characteristics, but the Scratch Orchestra also captured the human consciousness behind the sounds, and I think this is one of the ways the Scratch Orchestra was able to become a turning point. You could say that the Scratch always strove to be genuinely popular before actually stumbling on the class question behind culture and music.

The point to bring out, in my view, is that if Cornelius was standing at the forefront and in the midst of the social and cultural concerns of his day, then to gain a further insight into understanding his significance, not only as a historical figure in his own right but as an abiding influence or as a role model, then one has to address where Cornelius would have been at today. Really the only way to answer it, because he is not here, is to plunge into answering that question oneself, with that perspective, that outlook. To plunge into it as a cultural worker, as a musician, with the social and political concerns of the day. That then allows you to see and participate in things in a way that can put Cornelius' importance and significance in perspective. One can come back like looking into the future, and be celebrating Cornelius 40 years on with a new evaluation, or celebrating the coming 40 years with a new scratch project, perhaps a Morley college renaissance, which is on the cards! So one can think of this conference, this festival, as a the beginning of a new cycle!

A couple of days ago I came across a quotation from Holst, which I thought was significant because of course Holst was an important figure in Morley, and the Holst Room was where the experimental music class was held was, and where the film last night was shown. It's actually a little article by Holst on the memory of Sir Hubert Parry as a lecturer. You wouldn't think of Parry immediately as a progressive figure in today's world, but Holst says he was taught by him at the Royal College of Music. Holst says of Parry: "Some students hadn't the opportunity of realising what lay beneath. An insight into this was recorded in one of the first of his lectures of musical history. He began it in quite an ordinary way. He gave names and dates of events, I settled down to listen to the sort of lecture I had often heard before, only this time far better done. Then he looked up from his notes and said, 'I suppose you all know what was going on in Europe at that time?' He then stood up, and while walking about he gave us, so it seemed to me, a vision rather than a lecture. A vision of people struggling to express themselves in war, in commerce, in art, in life. A vision of the unity that lay under these various forms of human effort. A vision of the unity of a certain century with those that preceded and followed it. A vision that I learned from that moment to call history."

It seems to me that that's the kind of spirit in which we can approach history. It's almost the spirit with which Cornelius' music is imbued, in the sense that he was making history not from the point of view of a composer genius and so on, but from the point of view of moving things forward at every stage. And so it seems to me that to speak of Cornelius is not to speak of one person against the world, but to speak of the movements of which he was part of, embodied and at the forefront of. When one poses the question or has a title "Music and Politics", it almost misses the point that there is this unity. This is one of the reasons for calling the paper "Music, Society and Progress", that this

is more the nub of the matter, and that this is what it means to be political. Music is a reflection of society, but not just a reflection. At its best it embodies advances and contributes to advances in human society, it is not divorced from the motions of society. This has been the case throughout history. In the abstract [of the paper in the conference programme], I promised to deal with historical examples, but I will leave historical examples to another time.

There are themes and emotions that music can embody and express. It is not simply sounds being sounds; it is a reflection of human personality, a part of one's being. Music does this through its essence – its rhythms, its melodies – but also through its associations, its traditions and so on. In short, all of the musical forms. It does this whether it is apparently content-less or whether it has an obvious content. However, the point is to bring out that these forms are actually forms of content.

For example, you can take the question of the expression of love in the various stages in cultural history: One can look from the medieval days; the expression of a love of God in music. Then history advanced, and you can look at the expression of individual love, crashing through this medievalism. Beethoven's love was a love for all men – humanity in the sense of the French revolution. The 19th century gave rise to this concept of a love for the nation, and then you have the development of the concept of romantic love. These are all expressed in the music, and perhaps one of the most developed examples is Mahler, as music which doesn't have a programme but expresses this concept. So today there is a different kind of love one tries to express in the music: there is a social love, to do with the society; there is the love of one's class; there is a love of humanity for humanity, and so on.

So my point is that themes and their forms can contribute to the onward march of society. One can look at what is necessary for cultural workers at this time, as Cornelius addressed, to envisage what is new. Some of the themes which I and others seek to express in our music: there is the whole question of renewal – renewal of society, renewal of the personality from the egocentric capitalist personality and so on; there is respect for Mother Earth and the songs of the earth itself; there's the youth, there is sacrifice for the youth and bringing out the future for the youth; there is celebrating of the heroes of humanity, particularly the 20th century. Cornelius wrote the Thälmann Variations, and we have been writing music to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, and so on. So these are some themes which are appropriate for today, and within these themes one important aspect is how to be effective. Cornelius was an example of that – of how to be effective in music – throughout his life. The *Octet for Jasper Johns* is still performed because it is effective in bringing out the participation of performers, and the later works are effective in expressing what they set out to express; the heroism of Thälmann, looking to the future, the aspirations of the Irish people's national independence in *BooLavogue*, as well as the

British working class. I think Cornelius studied this – how to be effective.

Going back to those Morley experimental music classes, I remember one of the things there was, besides the *Nature Study Notes* and the little compositions, as well as rehearsing for *The Great Learning*. I'm not sure whether it has been lost now, but there was a *Fire-lighting Manual*. In this *Fire-lighting Manual* there were inspiring texts, and we still have one in the score of *The Great Learning* paragraph 5, a fire-lighting component. This brings out the social and philosophical meanings behind these works. People have that aspiration to bring into being what is new, both in culture and society, and it is an important quality, this yearning for what is modern or what is new against what is old and drags things back.

So I think this is a watchword with Cornelius. There is a poem by Hardial Bains of the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist), which embodies this and is simply “Something is calling now, Move on!”