

Christian Wolff - Preludes, Variations, Studies and Incidental Music

CD 1 (77'08")

En Plus (Satie) Variation (5'03")

Another (Satie) Variation (4'42")

Yet Another (Satie) Variation (1'48")

Variations (Extracts) on the Carmans Whistle Variations of Byrd (7'25")

Eight Days a Week Variation (5'54")

Tilbury 1 (12'24")

Tilbury 2 (3'34")

Tilbury 3 (5'12")

Preludes 1-11 (31'06")

1. 3'32"

2. 2'05"

3. 2'20"

4. 1'25"

5. 4'02"

6. 1'40"

7. 2'02"

8. 4'28"

9. 1'32"

10. 4'34"

11. 3'26"

CD2 (77'47")

Studies (6'55")

1. 1'46"

2. 2'17"

3. 2'52"

Incidental Music (70'52")

In a letter to John Cage written September 1980, Christian Wolff (b.1934) reflected, in somewhat deprecating manner, upon his recent compositional developments and language: 'my music often seems to me just plain eccentric (at best).' Whereas one might detect in his music of the 1950s – which, whilst wholly individual, bears at least the imprint of the pointillistic concerns of the time – and the more indeterminate music of the 1960s, evidence of a unique compositional voice responding to contemporary musical and technical developments, the music Wolff produced from around 1970 appears to come from nowhere. In fact, Cage himself observed of the *Exercises* – ensemble pieces dating from this period – that they sounded like 'the classical music of an unknown civilisation'. The main departure from the music he was composing in the years prior is the more developed notations – as Michael Hicks and Christian Asplund note, *Tilbury 1* marks a return to 'continuous staves across the page with noteheads and rests on a single staff' – with pitches notated in detail, rhythms, melodies and harmony, and an altogether more weighty texture. Yet all these features, familiar to more conventional notated music, are made strange by their alignment with the fragmented, static, discontinuous qualities of so much of Wolff's music since the early 1950s.

These two discs reveal Wolff as a composer fully exploring, in different ways, the continuum between music which is highly fragmented, embracing extended silences (composed or indeterminate), to that which is more progressive and seemingly driven, albeit taking in disarming and unconventional routes. Many of the titles are suggestive of sketches, of working out, of testing ideas, of leading to something, or even as being (perhaps with a shrug) something of little consequence. But all this might equally point to the ways in which Wolff's music – even the most fully notated of the pieces included here – require fleshing out by the performer, whether simply by making decisions as to tempo, articulation and dynamics, or more once-thought important decisions, such as which pitches to play, how long to play them for, and what kinds of sounds will they be. It is worth emphasising, then, that, as with all recordings of Wolff's music, the performances here represent just one person's responses, at one moment in time, to the myriad of interpretative possibilities available. My own approach is somewhere between the kinds of chance-determined methods I adopt when performing Cage's music, and improvisation. In all my performances of Wolff's music I aim for interpretations that both interest and surprise me, allowing the notations to lead me to new ways of playing and thinking about music, whilst at the same time trying to lead the notations toward the unexpected.

En Plus (Satie) Variation; Another (Satie) Variation; Yet Another (Satie) Variation (1995)

Wolff once commented that he thought of his music 'as an odd sort of mix of Ives and Satie'. It is an evocative combination – multiplicity and simplicity, transcendentalism and piety. But both composers shared interests in mixing tonalities, rhythmic procedures, and novel approaches to notation, including the insertion of informal and often humorous texts onto and within the lines of music. These three unpublished variations respond to different elements of Satie's musical language, predominantly repetition, simplicity and bitonality, and are amongst the most beguiling of Wolff's miniatures.

Variations (Extracts) on the Carmans Whistle Variations of Byrd (1972)

Simplicity of a different order is in play in this short unpublished piece, commissioned by John Tilbury (the British pianist who is responsible for allowing the music of Wolff and many of his contemporaries to be heard through his extraordinary and sensitive performances, and for whom the Satie variations were also composed). Here, Wolff, after a first section which is effectively an eight-note chorale, each note with its own sequence of rhythms, presents eight melodic lines, leaving the pianist to select which lines, and which number of lines, to play for each variation. The variations, then, are less the result of elaboration and more a process of revelation, subtraction, and combining, though (characteristically) other possibilities are available.

Eight Days a Week Variation (1990)

A commission from pianist Aki Takahashi, as part of her 'Hyper Beatles' project, led to this set of variations, which are more conventionally conceived than the other variations featured on this recording. As a set it features many of the technical, notational and musical concerns of Wolff's music at this time, each variation the focus for a different technique.

Tilbury; Tilbury 2; Tilbury 3 (1969)

These three pieces, named after John Tilbury, are amongst the pieces on these discs which require, like the *Exercises* which they anticipate by a few years, fleshing out. The notation is minimal, sketchy, requiring the pianist (or other instrumentalists, as these may be played in different arrangements) to make choices as to elaborations (*Tilbury*), clefs (*Tilbury 2* and *3*), tempo and timbre. The first piece may be performed as written or the pianist may, as I have done here, choose to ascribe elaborations and transpositions to the pitches written; either way it is characterised by a strange, inconsequential repetition within a relatively small set of sounds. The third piece of the set consists of a counterpoint of different, and different numbers of, lines and phrases, each of which may be read in different clefs, with the potential for some oddly surprising tonal combinations.

Preludes 1-11 (1980-81)

Of all Wolff's piano music, these eleven preludes are the most virtuosic and, despite their looking more like piano music in the classical and romantic style are, in fact, resistant to familiar gestural patterns. In contrast to much of the music which came before and which he has composed since, these pieces are characterised by forward motion, leading toward something, rarely resting and never resolving. The hesitancy and fragmentary character of, for example, the *Incidental Music*, or the *Tilbury* pieces, is generally avoided in favour of sustained lines, confident flourishes, and improvisatory flair. Improvisation is encouraged, even, in

the first Prelude, which allows the pianist free reign on two occasions. Song is present for most of the set, even if sometimes hidden within the texture, and despite the complexity of much of the writing there is also frequent resource to monody. Wolff's own programme note lists songs used including 'Hallelujah, I'm a Bum' (Prelude 3), 'Rock About' (Prelude 4), 'Abi Yoyo' (Prelude 7), 'Po' Lazarus' (Prelude 9), 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' (Prelude 10), and 'Acres of Clams' (Prelude 11). The pianist is even required to sing - or, rather, whistle or hum - in the fifth Prelude, though almost as if to herself, occasionally emerging from widely spaced chords, Wolff's response to Chopin's set of Preludes, perhaps the famous C minor (Op.28 nr20).

Wolff writes that '[t]he title ... suggests orientation towards some kind of future, open to something that might come next' and several years later, writing about a different set of preludes, his *Bowery Preludes* for small ensemble (1985-86) he continued the theme: "'Preludes': working out within a limited compass more or less one idea; making a beginning; practicing, warming up; opening up: What for? Musically, almost anything - so long as the music's content (wherever it may be) also point us in some way towards our present history and the hope of getting through it, to common liberation and peace." Combined with the technical difficulties of the music, the aspirational sentiments expressed here are somewhat redolent of John Cage's statements regarding his own sets of etudes, composed only a few years earlier to the effect that performing such difficult music might inspire others to 'change the world, to improve it', though Wolff's politics would undoubtedly nuance that toward a more social, collective response.

Studies (1974-76)

These three studies, composed for pianist Jack Behrens (and which may be orchestrated for any instrumentation), are the work of a composer returning to more traditionally notated music after fifteen or so years exploring less conventional - and certainly more idiosyncratic - methods. Recalling his few lessons with John Cage in the early 1950s, Wolff employs rhythmic structures as the primary compositional conceit, though these now appear in the form of isorhythmic techniques. Whilst there is an apparent transparency and simplicity about the music (at least in the first two studies) it remains somehow unfamiliar and obscure, with tonal elements freely mixing with chromatic, and regular rhythmic patterns with irregular. The third study is more fantasia-like and, recalling Wolff's observations about his own music quoted above, perhaps represents a move across the Studies from Satie to Ives.

Incidental Music (2003-04)

There is much to link *Incidental Music* with *Long Piano (Peace March 11)* (recorded on sub rosa SR389), composed in the following year, not least their duration, which in both cases totals one hour or thereabouts. Both are comprised of just less than 100 short, contrasting 'patches', one simply following another without transition; both explore a range of notational and musical techniques; and both leave much to the pianist to respond to, such as dynamics, tempi, articulation, and duration of separation between patches and events within patches. However, where *Long Piano* was composed for someone other than the composer to play (the first performer, and commissioner of the work, was Thomas Schultz), and is conceived as a through-composed piece, *Incidental Music* was composed for Wolff himself to perform and is made up of short pieces bundled together, from which selections may be made.

The impetus for the composition of *Incidental Music* came from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, for whom Wolff performed regularly, most usually as part of an ensemble of musicians. However on one occasion he was asked to perform as a soloist for one of the company's 'Events', assemblages of dances drawn from existing Cunningham choreographies, to which musicians generally improvise. Although having experience as an improviser, Wolff chose not to improvise solo for over an hour and instead began to compose and collate short pieces that would be usable for such an event, that might also offer some degree of improvisatory opportunity, ranging from the indeterminacies mentioned above to more open suggestions for making sounds at or away from the piano. Wolff has recorded the resulting work himself (Mode Records 286/87); whilst the present recording broadly follows the sequence determined by Wolff in both his score and performance, the ways in which the notations are interpreted differ to varying degrees. In contrast to my performance of *Long Piano*, which was broadly conceived as a developed interpretation, in *Incidental Music* I have tried to capture something of the improvisatory context and flavor of the music.

References

Robert Carl 'Christian Wolff: On tunes, politics and mystery', *Contemporary Music Review* 20(4) (2001), 61-69.

Stephen Chase, Philip Thomas *Changing the System: the music of Christian Wolff* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

Michael Hicks, Christian Asplund *Christian Wolff* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

Christian Wolff *Cues: Writings & Conversations / Hinweise: Schriften und Gespräche*, ed. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlägel (Köln: MusikTexte, 1998).

Philip Thomas specialises in performing experimental notated and improvised music as a soloist and with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent solo projects have included premiere performances of works by Michael Finnissy, Howard Skempton and Christian Wolff; programmes of Canadian and British experimental music; a 12-hour performance of Cage's *Electronic Music for Piano*; and a survey of Christian Wolff's piano music. CD releases include portrait discs of Martin Arnold, Michael Finnissy, Christopher Fox, Jürg Frey, Bryn Harrison, Cassandra Miller, Tim Parkinson, Michael Pisaro, James Saunders, Linda Smith, Christian Wolff, and more. After recording music for multiple pianos by Morton Feldman, his recordings of the Feldman's solo piano music is released in 2019. He has also performed recently with pianists Mark Knoop, Catherine Laws, Ian Pace and John Tilbury, with Quatuor Bozzini, and with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. His recent acclaimed recordings of John Cage's *Winter Music*, *Two²*, and *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* have led to a website, set of apps and book about Cage's *Concert* (see cageconcert.org). He is currently Professor of Performance at the University of Huddersfield, co-Director of CeReNeM, and co-editor of *Changing the System: the Music of Christian Wolff* (Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

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Credits

Recorded, edited and mixed by Alex Bonney

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Performed on a Steinway Model D piano