

Conversation with Christian Wolff at Miguel Abreu Gallery, April 10th, 2007

The tape recorder goes on in the middle of a conversation between Miguel Abreu and Christian Wolff. Miguel is asking Christian about his background.

Miguel Abreu ... so you started in the "Cageian road" right away? composing music in that manner?

Christian Wolff Well I knew classical music very well. I had grown up on it, and originally I had thought I would become a pianist. And then I suddenly woke up to Modernism and thought, "yah, that's what I wanna do!" So I just tried it. I had a book (laughter) that told me about notation and instrumentation, and stuff like that, but otherwise I just made it up as I went along. And then I brought that to my piano teacher, and she said I should go see a composer, and I said, "Who?" and she said, "Well, I know this guy who might be interested.." and that was Cage. So I went to see him and he took me on as a student.

MA Oh, he had students?

CW He had very few. Formally I was a student for about 6 weeks. At the end of that he said, "Just do your work!" which was very nice.

MA So, how did the classics "kick in", if I might ask?

CW I had to go to college. My parents were publishers, and I had grown up with books, and I thought I would study literature. I started out with English, and there were these classes with hundreds of people and huge lectures... and well, I had had a really good Latin teacher in school, so my latin was very good, so I took a course in Latin, something or other... and I liked it a lot and did very well.

This was at Harvard, and even there Classics Departments are very small, so the teachers were on my case right away ("come to us"-laughter) to be in the department. It was a very good department, with a small amount of people doing it, so you'd get serious attention paid to what your doing, so I thought, "sure why not?"

Then I got interested in teaching, in the idea of teaching. Probably cause a lot of my teachers weren't really very good! I thought, "Pssh, I can do this better!" (laughter). So, I just went through the whole thing, and got my PhD and ended up teaching, and at first just did full time classics. Then I changed jobs to go to Dartmouth (College) and by then there was someone up at Dartmouth who knew about me as a composer, and they said well, you should be in the music department too... I was very lucky, it was a very nice deal.

Alex Waterman But, did you teach much (music) composition at Dartmouth College?

CW Very little... very little. It's a very modest operation and that graduate program didn't exist so the...

AW *And it was more bent on technology (the graduate program)?*

CW Yep... in fact the first time I taught a composition course, a formal composition course, was in my *last* year at Dartmouth teaching, and it was for the graduate program. Yep, that was it, otherwise no. In fact they had no composition. Kids could do it as an independent project or something like that, but there weren't too many takers. But what I did do was a workshop on experimental music, which I opened up to anyone who wanted to take it. They didn't even have to be able to read music to do it. So that was... more appropriate. And I then I taught introductory music courses, on how you notate, up to about basic harmony... which I didn't know. I had to go learn it! (laughter). That was challenging.

AW *When you were studying with Cage, did he ever make you study counterpoint like he had to when he studied with Schoenberg?*

CW Yes! That's exactly what we did. We had three projects. He had just heard the Webern Symphony, and that's where he met Feldman (famously) and so, he wanted to look at the music, but you couldn't buy the music. He had to go to the public library and he copied it out *by hand*, this whole Webern piece. And he just... just started to try to figure out how it worked. And so he gave that to me-that was one of my assignments- to analyze the first movement of the symphony, which had a *huge* effect on me... that was very important. Then he taught me about rhythmic structure that (was) his way of organizing at that time, organizing a piece, which is essential. I mean, you can't compose unless you know how to structure something... Then... ugh... yah... the third project was... counterpoint!

It was species counterpoint. It was uh... what's his name... it was Palestrina! (laughter). Which you know, Schoenberg had made *him* do for *years*! For two years he did that stuff! We lasted about, as I say, 5 or 6 weeks, and um, I wasn't that good at it, and neither of us were really very interested in it, so we both just kind of quit. (laughter). But what he said was, no it was very nice, was you know, the reason they do these things is not that you're gonna necessarily use it, but you need to learn about discipline.

AW *Right, right.*

CW And he said, just go ahead and do your own work. And I was doing that, and then he said, "well, looking at your work you seem to be able to figure out how to do the discipline part, so just go ahead and work, you don't need this other stuff." (laughter) That's the extent of my musical education, my *formal* music education. Not so formal!

AW *Last time we met up in New Hampshire, I had asked you, or started to ask you, if you had ever made a connection between your work in Classics and your work in music...*

CW Yah.. In one way there was none, that was in a way deliberate, because my other idea about not trying to get into a situation where I would be teaching music, was that I really didn't want to be teaching something that I was also working on and trying to keep my mind *clear* about..

AW *The day job...*

CW Exactly. Yah. And if you're going to do a "day job", then that should be something quite different. Preferably something that you *like* to do, which I was lucky enough to find. I really enjoyed the material

(I love that stuff) and I really liked teaching, so since they ran in parallel, sometimes in conflict because I couldn't find the time to write music cause I had my obligations to teach. Occasionally I'd get asked to do a paper on some classical subject and someone else would ask me for a piece, and it would be a hard choice cause I'd only have time for one or the other. So.. those situations would arise.. but at some other level, there has to be *some* connection. I mean, nothing one does is entirely accidental or arbitrary, but one of things early on, bizarre maybe, especially considering how some of my music developed.. is that I wanted the music to be *durable*. That notion came from classic texts, cause they're nothing if not durable!... (laughter).

They're still with us after all that time! Often in fragmented or broken form, but there's a kind of *life* in them that keeps going. We may just totally misunderstand them but that's the other thing that attracted me about the classics. On the one hand they had this kind of granitic, solid quality about them, that had survived all these years, and on the other hand (we call them "classics" so they are presumably part of our heritage)it's clear, it may be that we really had no idea what they were about; that they're completely mysterious, and that combination interested me a lot. That kind of mystery.

I guess, this is a further extrapolation, but in my own work I like that combination of something that is solidly there and at the same time is completely mysterious, you don't know *where* this is coming from... Cage had put that idea in another form which always stuck with me, which was that he thought that the idea, in say, a piece of music (or probably in any work of art) was to have it, in once sense to be completely transparent and clear but at the same time that what is causing it to be transparent or clear, is *not clear*. It's (chuckling) mysterious. So it's completely persuasive, but you don't know why. The source of that is somehow hidden.

AW *I'm also interested in your use of the word durable, and the longevity of these (classical) texts, and the longevity(?) that that music calls into question... well, we don't know what Greek music sounded like...it's very speculative as a field; but I often wonder, there's something in your early music, there's something in the notation that really looks like ancient script (for 1, 2 or 3 players)... like early gestural language, or pictogrammic even.. do they not have anything to do with one another?*

CW No, no... The only thing I have a recollection of, and it's not classical, is umm.. those early pieces of mine that use very small numbers of notes, like the ones Charles does (Charles Curtis, cellist- the reference is to the piece "Duo for Violins (1950)" by Christian Wolff, which will be performed as part of the exhibition with Charles Curtis and Alex Waterman on two cellos)..I had this recollection of seeing in a book, it must have been a history of music, the notation for (probably it was) Organum, or something like that, very stripped down, very bare... in that sense very classical..

AW *Neumatic? (Neumes- a group of notes to be sung to a single syllable)*

CW Yah, right. And that appealed to me, and I thought, "that's an image I like, and I'd like to work that way." I didn't pay any attention to what the pitches were or anything like that, but it was that very plain image...

AW *Calligraphic?*

CW Well... Notation is an image, it's not words.

AW And we also talked the last time about your interest in Xenakis.

CW Oh yah! and there's a Greek connection there of course. I can't remember if I told you that last time or not, but I had been asked last year, to do a lecture at Oxford about Greek tragedy and experimental music. It was almost a joke, 'cause that's what I do! It was like, "see if you can put these two things together!"

And so I, thought, "OK, if that's what you want!"

It sort of depends a little bit on what you decide experimental music is...and I ended up with the two main figures Harry Partch and Xenakis. Both of whom in their very *different* ways, think of themselves as either reproducing or continuing the tradition of what they *imagined* Greek music to be. And I stress *imagined*, because as you were saying, there are a lot of theoretical works, but they're all relatively late compared to the period that interested me, is obviously the classical period, cause I'm interested in the music in relationship to the texts. For that period we really have no reliable information.

It's funny you should ask, cause next Tuesday I'm supposed to do a class, I agreed to do a class for a course at Dartmouth which is on literature and music, and I said "yes", cause it's actually a course I used to teach. But somehow they had heard that I had once done this lecture, and thought that they could use it, which was called, "Imagining Sappho's Music." On that occasion I'd been asked (the previous time I'd been asked) to put my two worlds together. It was some kind of a conference on archaic Greek literature, and I was asked, "could I do something about that?" and incidentally (it was a colleague of mine at Dartmouth who asked very slyly)

"If you want to use your musical experience, that would be OK too.."

So I said, "Alright."

So I came up with this notion first of all, which is not new at all, but which dawned on me in a very incisive way, that Sappho was not a poet in *our* sense. That is to say, somebody where you get the book and you read the poems. She was more of a singer/songwriter. Someone more like Bruce Springsteen or someone like that.

We happen to only have the lyrics of her songs. And they happen to be very, *very* good lyrics! So, it raised the whole issue (a very interesting one) of music and texts in songs and how these relate. And that's an endless topic, you could write a book or two, but I thought what can we do with what we have of Sappho? And that didn't get me to do experimental music, but it got me to speculate. The thing about Greek music in that early period, it probably had very little presence of what we would think of as music. For instance, instrumental music is almost unknown.

AW Right. What we often learn about Greek music is that it was there to support ritual, or accompany texts, it was *subsidiary in its function*..

CW Yah... Most literature was *sung*. Homer was chanted, we don't know how that works or what the pitches were, but they are tunes to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre, that's where it gets its name (lyric poetry). So, it seems clear that almost entirely, the setting of the words of the poem would have been syllabic, not melismatic. So, already the music is constrained by the text to that extent. And then it

occurred to me that Greek is a tonal language (ancient Greek, not modern Greek). When you see it, it has accents on it, but the accents are not stresses, they're *pitch markings*.

AW *Wow, I didn't know that.*

CW So, uh... (laughter) It's no where near as elaborate as Chinese, but there is certainly an indication of a rise in pitch and then flat pitches, and then also an "up and down movement" (to a certain extent these things are controversial) but there are actually examples of where you pronounce one word one way and it means one thing and you pronounce it another and it means something else, and they're spelled exactly the same way. So... they had a tonal language.

And then the question comes up, if you have a melody and you have a text, in a language which is tonal, how do you relate the melodic movement of the language as it is, with its tonal shifts, and the movement of melody. Do they coordinate or do they conflict? etc.

The only way to learn anything about that, for me, is you have to go into (for me) very esoteric areas where we have material on tonal languages with examples of music. And that takes you into things like Chinese and Thai and all kinds of stuff. And what I found that is really quite interesting. There are a whole range of possibilities...

One thing that stuck in my mind, the most was that the more sophisticated the poetry was, i.e. highly esoteric court poetry, the more there would be divergence between the melodic movement of the melody and the melodic movement of the language. So that the sign of the poet's virtuosity would be the extent to which he could still maintain the language intelligibly but also twist it with the pitches. Whereas, when you went in the other direction socially, towards folk music... the more the two tended to coincide... which is very interesting.

In the case of Sappho, there is a way, to a certain extent, there's not enough material to be statistically really secure, but, to a certain extent, because Sappho writes in stanzas, the presumption is (and I think it's unassailable) that you would have one set of music for the stanza which would repeat for every stanza after that... (That's rhythmically the case). Incidentally, the rhythms we have, cause we know how to scan these poems, we have the rhythms and all we need now are the pitches, or at least the pitch contours. Then it's a question of what extent the language itself determines those contours and to what extent some music that we don't have, might have. So, you know, we're not that far. And then the other dimension, you know, the language it's written *in* and the sounds it *uses*...

Greek doesn't use rhymes, but it has all kinds of very subtle and sophisticated sound effects, you know play of assonance and...

AW *Onomotopaeia.*

CW yah, all those things...so you know, you have quite a lot of acoustic information about these poems without actually having (pitches)... And they probably didn't use notation at that time because it was all aural tradition. My sense is that it was probably relatively simple (rhythmically not! we know that from the meters) in terms of pitch movement, and somewhat formulaic. What *really* mattered was the words, the text was *primary*. It generated whatever music, what we think of as music, from the words.

The nearest analogy I could find... I mean, to do this, to reconstruct this old music, you have to look for parallels (because we need more material) and the nearest I could come to it was troubadour music... (laughter). Because there you have the same phenomenon that the poets are also the composers, they're also making the tune. Again, it turns out that the evidence is not as transparent as one would like, but it's clear that... for instance, that it was mostly composed aurally because the texts were so different, even of the poems, which come in different versions.

One poem had five different melodic versions, all obviously related in some way, but each a little different, which clearly indicates that this was done aurally, and that each person did it a little bit differently. That's what happens with songs. That seems very close to what you have in the Greek situation.

In that case (Greek music) the melodic movement is 75 percent syllabic, maybe even 80, with occasional little melismas, usually at the end of the phrase, to close it off. That may not even be a Greek thing, I mean, it's sort of a natural impulse that you get to the end of a phrase and you do a little something for closure or whatever.

So, well...anyway, that's way off the subject! (laughter)

AW *No! Not at all. It brings me to the next question!*

CW As I say, I have this class that I have to get together and this is all in my head...

AW *When you mentioned the troubadour, that reminded me of Jacques Attali and the way he uses the jongleur – a kind of traveling musician, like a troubadour – in his book, Noise - A Political Economy of Music, as a model or starting point in his "political economy of music". In other words, the musician as a self-sufficient, traveling/nomadic, artist which attracts a public, and yet the(ir) message can be subversive... can be against the state, whilst the musicians themselves remain stateless.*

In this other interview with Frank Oteri, you were both talking about Cardew, and politics in music. This is certainly a major theme for this show (agape) but also for the show in September at The Kitchen where music and social process are the focus. It's also (obviously) a major issue here in America where language is being constantly challenged and its meaning diverted by the media and the ruling party at the moment... the rewriting of constitutional law and so on...

One of the things I wanted to ask you (relates to) Cardew's assumption, in some respect, that text was the thing that could most clearly motivate a political music. In another place he talks about simplifying the music in order to "elevate the masses"; that in other words, first you had to find a level where you could speak to a larger public in order to educate them (which involved simplifying formal elements of the music).

In that interview with Oteri you had mentioned that perhaps it wasn't possible to make a political music without text, and I wonder if that's true or not?

CW OK, well that depends on what you mean by "political music", or how music can be political. I also started with this notion that text was the way to go. This is a very interesting issue-the relation of text and music- that as soon as soon as you put the two together, they both are gonna change.

AW *I heard that last night with the 37 Haiku!*

(Christian Wolff's piece with texts by John Ahsbery from 2005- I had attended a rehearsal performance the night before with SEM Ensemble at their space in Brooklyn Heights)

CW Yah... I experienced it directly, cause my first effort in this direction was a piano piece called "Accompaniments", in which the pianist had to also produce this text, which was a Maoist text, which was not particularly theoretical. It was taken from this book of interviews that this Swedish guy had put together when he went to a village during the cultural revolution and talked to the peasants. They talked about how they had changed the way they worked because of Maoist thought, and I liked it because it was both theoretical and practical at the same time. So I took extracts from that and I was very serious about it and I played it for somebody, and they had a kind of mixed and ambiguous response, and they said,

"What are you doing? Are you making fun of these peasants and their way of talking?"

And I suddenly realized that you could take a text which is politically *right on* and straight, and without even intending to, just by the way you set it, you could completely *undermine it*. Or undermine what it's saying. So, that's of course a whole other thing. Texts have the advantage that they appear to be able to say something clearly or unambiguously, but on the other hand there's at least the caveat that if the music doesn't fit, or if there is any danger of the music causing the text to be misunderstood, you have to really watch yourself.

OK, that's one thing.. With Cardew, he made these songs, some of which are really very beautiful, but some of which are kind of laughable! (laughter)

AW *Yah... pastiche... They're kind of kitsch.*

CW Yah. And that's a little dangerous too! So, it's not an easy issue. So, as far as *not* using text goes, how do you still keep it political? Well, you can bring in texts by the back door i.e. the title (of the piece). That can be, well... *A People United Will Never be Defeated!* That's a strong title! And there's 50 minutes of just piano music.

AW *That's such a great piece!*

CW Yah, it's such a brilliant piece... fantastic piece...

So at the same time when you do that piece, you can-this is kind of modest- but you can talk about the piece, where that song's coming from, why it was written, the other uses of songs in the piece... you can talk about them... etc. You can get (into) a whole political disquisition based on the performance of so-called absolute music – music which has no text at all. So, you're adding the text to the situation.

Now it could be argued that that piece, cause it runs through so many different styles and things... quite a lot of the time the piece has a highly energizing feel to it. It's not *other-worldly*, it's not contemplative, it's very much of *this world, of the people*. It's a kind of "populous music" to the extent that you can do it on a solo piano as opposed to a rock band, which is a whole other issue... but well it's

in the music, it's in the spirit of the music, it's in the energy of the music and the ways in which the music... is attractive to the general listener.

What we're starting to talk about here and what you get in Cardew, what you were talking about earlier, is this *educative* function. That is to say, whatever else will happen on the occasion of performing this piece, people will now know that there *is* such a piece and what it's about and what caused it. And that educational process is a small modest step, but that too is important.

The other thing is, and this happens a lot in my music, and I've heard you talk about this too, is this issue of involvement of the people doing it. So that the music is put together in what you could call a democratic spirit. The whole hierarchical thing of authority which is kind of "top-down," is not used... and instead you have a lateral movement. Ideally you put all these pieces together with a group of people and you get together and discuss and argue and come up with something, and this becomes a kind of *model of social behavior*. It's sort of pedagogical, *certainly* for those playing.

That's in Brecht!... in his so-called *Lehrstücke* where he argues that those pieces are not really for the audience, those pieces are for the people who are actually putting the play on. It's not to *exclude* the audience, but primarily the first step is those people doing it- when they finish doing it, they've learned something, and they've had material to think about and work out and it's in a political character.

AW *I hate to interrupt you, but this brings me to an aspect of your music in particular, which is that it often seems to be so much about the performance itself. I believe you talked about this elsewhere in an article, that the class on composition that you taught (at Dartmouth College) was more about performance than composition... I think that Alain Badiou talks about this... the relationship between performance and politics.*

I think that involvement or participation like you are talking about, is related to something which I truly believe- reading is itself already a political act---that we can get together and read and construct a vision of a social act together and perform it... that's a political act.

Where is the audience however, in that transaction between you the composer and the language that you've created (for the performer)?... because it is a created (fabricated) language, sometimes only for that one piece, sometimes referencing another piece's linguistic characteristics... or an already known language (such as traditional notation)...

Can the audience observe that transaction? More importantly, how is the audience able to see this process of reading or composing?

CW That's a very good question. (pause).

I'm trying to think how to go about it. One response would be (I don't whether I've run this by you before) but one of the nicest compliments I've ever received about my music was on the occasion of a performance of these pieces called *Exercises*. Which... I think you can sort of... (maybe you can hear it, maybe you can't) but everybody (playing) has the same material, but they're negotiating a kind of *heterophony*. They're doing it in real time by ear. It is this collaborative situation which is *part* of the performance...

They're very tricky pieces to do, cause sometimes the danger is that it will sound like a lot of people

trying to play together and not being able to do it! (laughter). Or that they haven't rehearsed, or that they're just not playing well... (laughter).

But that's the worst case, and that rarely happens... The first time we did a complete set, we did it in Berlin, and by some last minute accident I had a slightly different band than what I'd started out with, and what I discovered to make the pieces work, was that you have to have at least one more kind of professional player than the amateurs. If the balance was the other way then you got into trouble. And (this night) the balance was the other way... Pauline (Oliveros) was there, and she said,

"You guys, you need some lessons in Solfege!" (laughter).

So that's the story.. so anyway, oddly enough on that occasion (this compliment, that I regard as a compliment)...there was an English music critic there that we sort of knew and we talked to and so on, and afterwards, I think he actually reported it in his review.. He was sitting with this woman who normally didn't go to new music concerts, it was all kind of new to her, and she said afterwards that she didn't really get into the music much, but she said *it made her want to be a musician*, watching this thing happen... so I thought that was really cool! That was really nice.

So that's one possibility, a rather unusual audience reaction 'cause our model (of performance) is this thing of "Do it to me! Astound me! Knock my socks off!" You know, that has its place too, but it's not really mostly what I'm involved in. To hear this music you have to get *involved* with it, which is not *performing* necessarily, but it's a step in that direction.

AW *It seems to be a problem in experimental music, that it needs so much time to put it together and to work on it...*

CW It's labor intensive...

AW *...Not only to understand the score, but to rehearse with other musicians until you feel like your speaking a common language... Whereas virtuosity (in the classical sense) has a completely other aspect to it... It's applicable to a lot of musical situations. The kind of skills you need to interpret experimental music are non-applicable in other situations (they are specific to the score at hand) except perhaps "listening" and... negotiating and discussing the...*

CW They're arguably *very* applicable! In fact *more* applicable! Cause most of us aren't virtuosos! (laughter). I don't have anything against virtuosity, I mean, if you have somebody who can really play, give'em something to *really play!* Why not? If I'm going to write a piece for Frederic (Rzewski) I'm going to give him something interesting to do, right? I don't want him to play with one finger!

I do have room for that. I don't want to exclude that by any means. On the other hand, there are lots of people out there that would like to be involved and *could* be involved if you could just create situations in which it was possible and create material which they could use.

Miguel Abreu *The common perception, I don't know whether this is true, is that... the cliché in the art world of experimental music is that nobody practices. You just show up and do it on the spot. The opposite of what you just said! People think: "It's all chance anyway..."*

AW *Well that's an economic factor that creates that situation...*

MA *So it's the opposite of the symphony orchestra that has to work on a Brahms Symphony and put in a lot of hours of work on it, whereas experimental musicians are all alone, so they just kind of get together and throw it together... does this come about after Cage?*

CW Well, it comes after Cage, yah... But, I mean of course that's a *serious* misunderstanding. In fact, I could turn the Brahms example around. The reason they do the Brahms is that they've already done it a hundred times and they can throw it together in 15 minutes. They don't need to take all that time! Whereas if they do a new piece by Charles Wuorinen – God help us – that'll take a week before they even play the notes.

AW *This is what the piece by Robert Ashley (Trios WHITE ON WHITE, 1963) that we're going to do here (at Miguel Abreu Gallery) is about. He makes a piece that is "disappearing"... The idea is that you have to get closer and closer to the surface (of the page). It's about not sight reading. It addresses one of the central problems in experimental music... and this was 1963 (!)... Now we still have the exact same issues- these socioeconomic issues. There's no money to rehearse, so how do you put this music together?*

CW The other thing is, that in the early years, one thing that strikes me as opposed to now, is that generally speaking we just didn't worry about the money. It was clear that there was not going to be any money in this situation. So we just thought, well we wanna do this, so we'll just do it! Cage was great because obviously he still had to get the money to run the space, you know, and we were also very serious about trying to play performances, but a lot that, we did the performing, so that was free! Composers never expected to be paid for *anything*. The economics was *ridiculous*! So absurd! People lived on the edge or got other jobs, or whatever..." day jobs."

AW *Like Cage when you first went to study with him, right? He was living in a tenement building on the East River...*

CW Yah, I mean, it was one of the reasons I decided I couldn't do this professionally, to try to earn my living doing this, cause I didn't want to end up like that!

MA *What was Cage doing to earn a living in the beginning?*

CW Well first of all, you *could* live. I mean New York was much more manageable, you could find really cheap living. Basically his parents would contribute, they were not well-to-do, *not at all*, but they would give him a few hundred bucks every now and again so he could get by. And he would take the odd job, would get... well *once* he got a Guggenheim...

I don't know how he did it! But he was very good at living on very little, and doing it very elegantly incidentally. You would go to thrift shops for your clothes and you lived in the cheapest apartment, but fixed it up so it looked really good... There was no public arts funding in those years. None! You had to go to individuals, private funding, or you had to go to museums. Museum of Modern Art sponsored a Cage concert in 1949, or something like that, and he happened to know Peggy Guggenheim, so she came through occasionally. That's how you had to do it. It was literally hand-to-mouth. So that was the economics. That's changed a lot. I don't run across that a whole lot anymore.

AW *Really?*

CW People who recklessly make music no matter what it takes, they just wanna get the music played. Most younger people are already worried about their careers and um their whatever-you-call-it... their Curriculum Vitae and all the rest of it (laughter).

MA *"Whatever you call it! that's good!"*

CW.... resume! That's the word I wanted! (laughter).

MA *CV sounds better coming from a classicist!* (laughter).

CW I don't know how we got off on all this stuff!

AW *It's great. I think the issue of economics though is still a huge issue..*

CW Yah! I didn't mean to...

AW *...the closing down of Tonic...*

CW ...sure yah.

AW *...the manifesto that just came out about that this last week, expresses a worry for the loss of a downtown scene. And what's interesting is, cities being what they are, a lot of culture is moving out to Brooklyn--music culture has moved to Brooklyn, and that's sort of created a problem.. One of the first lines of the manifesto says something like, "We don't wanna lose our culture to Brooklyn.." And, um... the mallification of Manhattan is...*

MA *and Diapason (sound art gallery in midtown run by Michael Schumacher) is closing down (or having to move out). He emailed me by the way, but I told him that downstairs and across the street just weren't gonna work for him...*

AW *too much (expensive) for him?*

MA *Compared to the other place, I mean, there's just no competition..this is a lot more, it's 2800 dollars a month...*

So, you would find places for one or two nights? Is that how you would do it at the beginning?

CW There would be very few concerts. You couldn't afford to do them, so in the early years we'd be doing well to be doing one or two concerts a year. And the other thing was that Cage was concerned with Merce Cunningham, and then by '53 I guess the Cunningham Company had formed, so a lot of energy went into doing that. They'd do about one concert a year, and then try to get gigs outside of town... academic colleges... that would be for very modest money, but at least it would be something.

Tudor of course was a big boost. He was a spectacular performer.

AW *Amazing!*

MA *Who was this?*

CW David Tudor, the pianist. He played both European and American music, so people would go to him and hire him, just to hear him play *anything*! He was only interested in, you know, playing the latest stuff. So that helped a lot. Without Tudor things would not have moved that much. Before Tudor, Cage had an enormous amount of energy and the rest of it to put together these one or two concerts a year. It was very modest. Then when he started writing, seriously, which he did brilliantly, then he'd be hired to do talks. And that's really (A) how he became really well known, not through the music, but through his presence. He was just irresistible and funny and interesting and provocative, the works. The whole package. Then when they would include a concert, that was almost just like an after thought (laughter). Which is not ideal either obviously! But that helped keep things going till finally by the late Sixties he began to get reasonable fees and things started to come together, and the dance company got more successful. This very nice book just came out, Caroline Brown wrote, it's sort of memoirs on Cage and Cunningham.

AW Oh yes, I saw that. It's got an early picture of them on the cover. I've been meaning to pick that up!

CW I just got it, I haven't looked at it yet, but it looks like it's very nice because she's quite intelligent. It's basically a memoir, I mean you won't find a lot of theory in it, but it's a historical document.

AW Hmm. But David Tudor was really central to holding together the scene, no?

CW Oh, absolutely.

AW Most of the music was written for piano..

CW It was basically written for *him*. And before that, Cage had either hired musicians or he had a kind of-that was out west and he, to a certain extent reconstructed it here but not so successfully- he had a percussion band which is what he did out west. Then, the first major concert was this thing he did in New York, which was at the Museum of Modern Art. It was a percussion concert...so he must have found enough people. Merce played, I think he might have still been married (Cage)... so *his* wife played.. Again, it was rather like... it was completely non professional musicians who had been taught and trained and practiced very hard, cause you didn't have to pay them by the hour...

Apart from that he had to hire people. I remember the *Sixteen Dances* ('51 or '52) a big piece for Merce (very beautiful). That required a band, except for the piano (David Tudor), they had to go out and hire these musicians. The deal was: 2 rehearsals and a concert for 100 bucks. Which was real money in those days!

I remember when he came back from the first rehearsal, that was one of the first times I saw him depressed. He was normally a very "up" guy. It was going badly and he had none more rehearsal to get it together and the musicians had no idea how to do this.. It didn't look good. New York being what it is, even back in 1950, you could get good musicians, always good musicians, so in the end they did a good job.

It was only a forty minute program, so he decided to fill out the program. That was my first performance in New York, with a piece of mine and a piece of (Morton) Feldman's. Earle (Brown)

hadn't even come to New York yet... We could use the instruments that were there, so I made this little piece, like the one for 2 violins, it had four notes... and it was for three instruments: flute, trumpet and cello.

The trumpeter I noticed about 15 years later became the first trumpeter of the Boston Symphony, and the cellist was Claus Adam who was the cellist of...

AW *Was it the Juilliard Quartet? What was he in?*

CW no, I think it was something like the "New Music Quartet" or something else that I don't remember. But anyway... a serious, *serious* performer!

And the other guy that used to do a lot of new music gigs was the guy who ended up being the cellist of the Guarneri (Quartet).

AW *David...*

CW ...Soyer! David Soyer, yah. So, these guys were kind of just gigging! And on the other hand they might not actually relate to the music, but that's how we had to do it. And failing that, we would make pieces for David (Tudor) or I would make pieces, or John too, or Feldman, which we could do ourselves, or our friends or whatever...

I think I need to roll... is that OK?

End of interview. Christian leaves to do a sound check at the Greenwich School for a performance with Pauline Oliveros.