



CHRISTIAN WOLFF
two orchestra pieces

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Among the many developments that have transformed the Western classical orchestra over the last 100 years or so, two major tendencies may be identified:

1—the expansion of the orchestra to include a wide range of instruments and sound sources from outside and beyond the 19th-century classical tradition, in particular the greatly extended use of pitched and unpitched percussion.

2—the discovery and invention of new groupings and relationships within the orchestra, through the reordering, realignment, and spatial distribution of its traditional instrumental resources.

The two works of Christian Wolff in these recordings provide examples of both these tendencies. *John, David* introduces in its second part a prominent role for solo percussionist, playing a wide range of pitched and non-pitched instruments, including marimba, glockenspiel, a variety of drums, wood and metal instruments and other sources, the exact choice left to the performer.

Rhapsody, in contrast, uses instruments of the traditional Western orchestra without percussion, divided into 3 separate ensembles and reordered into unusual combinations and relationships, both within and between the groups.

The first part of *John, David* was originally intended as an 80th birthday present for John Cage. As Cage died in 1992 before it was completed, it became a memorial to him. The work was then left unfinished for several years, and was eventually completed as a double memorial/tribute, following the death of David Tudor in 1996. In this completed form it was commissioned by the German radio

station Südwestfunk for Donaueschinger Musiktage 1998, and first performed on October 16, 1998 by the SWF Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jürg Wyttenbach, with Robyn Schulkowsky as solo percussionist.

Wolff had the idea that the second part could have the character of a sort of percussion concerto for Schulkowsky, a longstanding colleague and friend with whom he had already worked closely, and in whose musicality, breadth of interests, experience, and virtuosity he has found great inspiration. He saw the introduction of a solo percussion part as a fitting way of paying tribute to the memory of David Tudor, whose pre-eminent pianistic skill, inventiveness, and creativity had exercised such a crucial influence on the development of many of his earlier compositions.

The first part of *John, David*, as Wolff describes it, was composed by combining and juxtaposing a number of “songs,” each of which is made up of a specified number of sounds: originally between 1 and 80 (with reference to Cage’s then-approaching 80th birthday); in the event only 30 of these were actually written. Wolff uses the word “song” advisedly, but not to describe any particular vocal character in the instrumental material, which is very diverse. Rather the word is used here in a broadly extended sense, perhaps with a nod to Cage’s *Song Books*, a collection of pieces that are similarly diverse and not necessarily vocal. In the orchestral piece, Wolff defines the general character of these “songs” in distinct ways; some for example are loud, others have short durations, some have repeated figures, others are dance-like, others use a snare drum. The arbitrary nature of this division is evident: The chosen characteristics are in no way exclusive of each other, indeed they often overlap and coincide. They may recall a passage in one of the fictions of Borges, referring to “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” in which it is written that animals are divided into categories such as: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens . . . (j) innumerable . . . (n) that from a distance look like flies.

This somewhat bizarre and whimsical classification is quoted by Michel Foucault in the preface to his book *The Order of Things*,¹ with the observation that it calls into question and exposes the limitations of our habitual ways of describing and thinking about the world, which are inadequate to account for “the wild profusion of existing things.”

After deciding upon some of their general characteristics, Wolff determined by a mixture of chance and choice whether each song would be monophonic, heterophonic, or hocketed between different instruments; and whether the songs would appear independently, one at a time, or be superimposed upon each other.

The first song to appear is made up of 60 sounds, which combine to form a chorale-like sequence of 16 chords for strings alone. There is a Webern-like transparency to this opening passage, with repeated pitches in different registers, subtly distinguished in timbral quality by the use of harmonics and *col legno*.

Each song is differently characterised in terms of instrumentation, register, dynamics and articulation; the songs follow each other in a loosely connected sequence of episodes, with generally sparse chamber-like textures, often abruptly contrasted, without transitions between them. The choice of pitch range and register is continually varied, creating sharply profiled lines with varying degrees of tension and elasticity, recalling Xenakis’ observation that to maintain an effective tension, contrast is required between the use of smaller and larger intervals; if there are too many of one or the other, tension is diminished.² Wolff effectively uses such contrasts of intervallic “tension” (although he might not use this word), as well as of rhythmic character, continuity, and instrumental colour, to distinguish the songs from each other.

¹ Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon Books 1970, xv.

² Bálint András Varga: *Conversations with Xenakis*. London: Faber & Faber, 1996, p. 146.

The first part of the work concludes with the 80-sound song: It begins with four loud concerted chords (10' 35"), then the pitches in pairs, forming a succession of dyads in a mostly quiet pointillistic texture, widely dispersed, which offsets the prevailing linear character of the preceding sections. This is suddenly interrupted by a loud dissonant flourish for brass, bringing Part 1 to an end.

It is not of course necessary for a listener to be aware of all the compositional procedures in detail; as Wolff remarked earlier, in relation to his piano music of the 1950s, “a piece is not performed to exhibit its composed structure.”³ What the listener hears is the resulting music, not the way its details have been determined. The outcome of these initial choices and procedures is a music of calculated diversity, full of unexpected contrasts and juxtapositions.

This brings us to the mid-point of *John, David*. It is in Part 2 that the solo percussion part really comes into its own. The soloist has made an unobtrusive entry a little earlier (8' 20") playing along with a high melodic line for oboes, adding a timbral “shadow” of drum sounds to the melody; and a little later there is a hocketing passage for percussion with piano and harp, and a single soft marimba note. But her real and decisive entry comes at the beginning of Part 2, which follows without a break. Wolff here introduces another compositional procedure that he has also used extensively in other works: This involves deriving melodic material from pre-existing songs (here actual songs), by altering, adapting, and transforming the original sources.

Part 2 begins (11' 52") with a rhythmically altered version of the medieval English song “Westryn Wind,” used by the 16th-century composer John Taverner as thematic source material in his “Western Wynde” mass setting. With a little familiarity the outline of the original song melody can easily be traced: Although broken up into irregular phrases and overlaid with the independently moving percussion part, its

³ Christian Wolff: *On Form* (1960), *Occasional Pieces*, p. 24

main shape is recognizable: a rising fifth, descending diatonic scales, a repeated two-note motif on F and G, then jumping up an octave and again a descending scale—all this played in unison and octaves by different groups of instruments (all together at 12' 38", strings alone at 13' 02"); mostly quiet, with occasional abrupt loud single notes, then with pitches altered so that the original shape of the melody disappears.

Following a short sequence of string solos and a duet for percussion and piano, a second section of Part 2 begins, based on another melody, the American frontier hymn tune "Sutton" (16' 30" to 19' 20"). This is heard in a broken-up 4-part arrangement for winds and brass, playing sustained chords, along with a duet for percussion and contrabass, with additional percussive sounds from strings (both rhythmically independent of each other and of the hymn melody). A duet for marimba and violas is followed by further duets for trumpet and harp, piano and timpani (the hymn tune and solo percussion continuing independently), then two flutes (19' 20"), leading directly into a third section (20' 03"). This is based on another melody, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," the tune of a hobo song from the early 20th century. It can be recognized by its quirky rhythm and pentatonic character (in spite of pitch alterations) as it is hocketed across the orchestra, fragmented into short phrases, by bassoons, violins, trombones, violas, clarinet, trumpet and piano (its rhythms echoed in the percussion solo).

The fourth and final section of Part 2 (21' 15") reintroduces the hymn tune "Sutton," this time in a densely sonorous 8-part arrangement for full orchestra, entering loud and assertive, dissonant, seeming to reach toward an almost tonal resolution, but then unexpectedly disintegrating. Wolff characteristically avoids any sense of finality, breaking off with a single marimba note, repeated by harp, then an isolated high resonating piano chord.

Rhapsody for 3 chamber orchestras was written for the Ostrava Days New Music Festival (Czech Republic), and first performed there on August 29,

2009 by Ostravská Banda, with conductors Petr Kotík, Peter Rundel, and Roland Kluttig. This was the latest of several pieces for Ostrava, including *Ordinary Matter* (2001/2004) for an orchestra of up to 80 players, which allowed and encouraged a wide range of indeterminacy and freedom of choice for the performers. For the new piece, Wolff decided to write a work for the most part fully scored and conducted, but including sections within which the players have some free choices to make.

Here as in other recent pieces, his aim is to achieve some kind of balance between the degree of control required to coordinate a large number of performers, and the freedom for individual players and small groups within the orchestra to make spontaneous choices in the context of a performance (a longstanding concern of Wolff's in his chamber music since the 1960s). Here the solution was to work with a smaller number of players (30) and to divide the orchestra into three groups of 10 instruments, each under the direction of its own conductor. Each group consists of eight string players and two other instruments: trombone and harp, flute and horn, bassoon and trumpet respectively. The three groups are sometimes precisely coordinated, at other times they play similar (sometimes identical) material in different tempi; there are three uncoordinated sections in which individual players have free choice of register, timing, and sequence, playing independently of their conductors.

Wolff explains that the title *Rhapsody* is not intended to convey the meanings associated with the emotional rhetoric of 19th- and 20th-century orchestral music. It is used in the original sense of the classical Greek word for oral recitations of Homeric poetry, derived from the verb for "stitching together" (*rhaptein*), meaning literally something like "stitched song." Wolff has often referred to his way of composing as assembling a kind of "patchwork" of disparate materials, which "somehow hang together without losing their

individual identities.”⁴ Divested of its rhetorical associations, the title appropriately refers to the compositional process of joining together sequences of discrete sections of varying length and character, out of which it is hoped that a “precarious continuity” may emerge.

Rhapsody begins with the strings of all three groups playing in various combinations and alternations of soli and tutti; sometimes coordinated, at other times with the same or closely similar material, but in different tempi. Then comes the first entry (3' 53") of all the winds together with harp. This is followed by two short sections, both repeated: for strings with harp (4' 44"), and for winds (5' 06"); then the strings of each orchestra play in succession (5' 17" to 6' 02").

In the first of the three uncoordinated passages (6' 04" to 9' 10"), each of the 30 players chooses individually in what order to play a sequence of short phrases and single notes, variously characterised. The parts look similar in the score, but the resulting music sounds much more complex; a sort of tangled canon emerges, with notes and phrases repeated, shuffled and displaced in unpredictable ways.

Rhapsody continues with ever-changing “patches” of material, making continual and varied use of resemblances and differences of instrumental colour, dynamics, registers, pitch groupings, coordinated and uncoordinated playing, and other forms of juxtaposition and contrast. Discrete “blocks” of material for each orchestra are repeated in different combinations (9' 47" to 12' 00"); a section for all three together in unison is followed by a second uncoordinated passage (14' 27" to 16' 30"), for solo violin with flute, bassoon, trumpet, horn, trombone, and harp.

After another section for all the strings in heterophonic, quasi-diatonic unison (16' 36") there are solos and duets, a trio for brass, and a quiet passage for strings (20' 18") with the other instruments playing independently in pairs. A broken-up

sequence of brief solos, duets, and string patches is followed by an emphatic intervention (24' 38") for all three orchestras, repeated, then a section for six solo cellos (24' 55") based on open-string tuning. This leads to a third uncoordinated passage (26' 29" to 28' 05"), again for all 30 instruments. Disconcertingly after all this varied activity, *Rhapsody* comes to an end with a single exposed high F sharp for flute and muted violas, tremolo, played three times, passed across from one orchestra to another.

The contrast between the “free” passages and the more precisely notated sections in *Rhapsody* may be reminiscent of the inclusion in a formal garden of wild patches, where plants are allowed to flourish without constraint, providing relief from the geometric order and repetition of avenues and flowerbeds: a feature of English garden design introduced in the 18th century, and since widely imitated in public parks and gardens.

In his essay *On Charles Ives* (1990)⁵ Wolff remarks that in the mid-1970s he had a sudden sense of his own work as “an odd sort of mix of Ives and Satie.” He refers to Ives’s “readiness to draw upon whatever sources are useful”; the tendency to include altered versions of popular music and hymn tunes is a feature they have in common. The unlikely conjunction of Ives and Satie may provide a clue to such disparities as are evident in these orchestral pieces: Sections reminiscent of the density and complexity of Ives, of the simplicity and directness of Satie, and of the transparency of Webern, are juxtaposed without any need to mediate or explain how they are connected. The music is continually surprising, exhilarating, and challenging; it resists easy categorisation. Sometimes engagingly direct and transparent, at other times bewilderingly complex and profuse, it invites listeners to be alert to new kinds of musical experience, to suspend judgement based on more familiar models. There is a sense of immediacy that deliberately

⁴ Christian Wolff: Selected Program Notes, *Occasional Pieces*, p. 334 (*Aarau Songs*).

⁵ Christian Wolff: On Charles Ives (1990), *Occasional Pieces*, p. 120.

avoids any suggestion of a general plan or underlying theoretical principle; the controlling idea of a “grand narrative” such as is associated with composers of the European avant-garde (e.g. Stockhausen) is explicitly rejected in favour of a variety of ad hoc procedures. Wolff prefers to work on a local level, as if, in accordance with the words of one of Samuel Beckett’s characters:

“The best is not to decide anything, in this connection, in advance. If a thing turns up, for some reason or another, take it into consideration. The thing to avoid, I don’t know why, is the spirit of system.”

—(*The Unnamable*)⁶

—Michael Parsons

Michael Parsons is an English composer and performer, living in London. He has also written on Wolff’s music in the liner notes to Early Piano Music (Matchless Recordings 51, 2002) and provided the Foreword to Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff.

Christian Wolff (born 1934, Nice, France) is a composer, teacher, and sometime performer. Since 1941 he has lived in the United States. He studied piano with Grete Sultan and composition briefly with John Cage, in whose company, along with Morton Feldman, then David Tudor and Earle Brown, his work found inspiration and encouragement, as it did subsequently from association with Frederic Rzewski and Cornelius Cardew. He also had a long association with Merce Cunningham and his dance company. As an improviser he has played with the English group AMM, Christian Marclay, Takehisa Kosugi, Keith Rowe, Steve Lacy, Larry Polansky, and Kui Dong. Academically trained as a classicist, he has taught at Harvard, then, from 1971 to 1999, in music, comparative literature, and classics, at Dartmouth College.

⁶ Samuel Beckett. *Trilogy*. London: Calder 1994, p. 294.

Percussionist **Robyn Schulkowsky** has been an innovator and collaborator throughout her life. From her studies in Iowa and Germany to her solo tours around the world, Schulkowsky has dedicated herself to revealing the wonders of percussion to people everywhere. An active musician on five continents, Schulkowsky moved to Germany during a heyday of experimental and adventurous classical composition. She has premiered and recorded some of the most important works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, working with such composers as Sofia Gubaidulina, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Iannis Xenakis, presenting their works in tours over most of the planet. Schulkowsky’s virtuosity has been captured on more than twenty recordings, including CDs with violist Kim Kashkashian and trumpeters Reinhold Friedrich and Nils Petter Molvaer, and seminal recordings of compositions by Christian Wolff and Morton Feldman.

The **SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg** was founded in 1946. In its 70 year existence the orchestra was known for its continuous championing of new musical work. It regularly took part in major festivals in Berlin, Lucerne, Vienna and Paris, specializing in 20th and 21st century music. It was also the orchestra in residence at the annual Donaueschingen New Music Days, achieving a special reputation for its performances of new music. It attracted such notable conductors as Hans Rosbaud, Ernest Bour, Michael Gielen, Sylvain Cambreling and François-Xavier Roth, who for decades led and shaped it as an orchestra of exceptional range and mastery. In 2016 it was merged with the Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart.

Formed in 2005 as the resident chamber orchestra for the biennial Ostrava Days, **Ostravská banda** consists of musicians from Europe and the United States whose primary interest is the performance of new music. Its principal conductors are Petr

Kotík, Roland Kluttig, Ondřej Vrabec, Johannes Kalitzke, and Rolf Gupta. The repertoire includes Cage, Feldman, Ligeti, Nono, Varèse, and Xenakis, as well as Louis Andriessen, Petr Kotík, Bernhard Lang, Alvin Lucier, Tristan Murail, Phill Niblock, Salvatore Sciarrino, Wolfgang Rihm, and Christian Wolff, among others. Ostravská banda also tours and performs at such venues as the Paris Conservatoire, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center (NY), Akademie der Künste in Berlin, Vredenburg in Utrecht, Prague Spring Festival, musicadhoj in Madrid and at NODO/New Opera Days Ostrava, where it serves as the festival's opera orchestra.

Roland Kluttig was conductor of the Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin and he also served as music director and assistant to Lothar Zagrosek at the Stuttgart State Opera. He was guest conductor at the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Southwest German Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, and the Dresden Philharmonic, as well as in Seoul, The Hague, Bordeaux, Vienna, Zürich, Amsterdam, and Reykjavik. He has worked with directors Jossi Wieler, Christoph Marthaler, and Achim Freyer and the composers Unsuk Chin and Helmut Lachenmann. Since 2010 he has been music director at the Landestheater Coburg.

Petr Kotik studied music in Prague and Vienna and has lived in the U.S. since 1969. Since the beginning of his career, Kotik has divided his time between composing, performing (conducting and playing the flute), and organizing concerts. In 1970 Kotik founded the S.E.M. Ensemble, which expanded in 1992 to The Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble, which made its debut at Carnegie Hall with 86 musicians, premiering the complete *Atlas Eclipticalis* by John Cage. In 2005, he founded in Ostrava, Czech Republic, the international chamber orchestra *Ostravská Banda* as part of the biennial Ostrava Days that he has been directing since 2001.

The depth of his approach to complex scores of every style and epoch, coupled with a great dramaturgical creativity, has made **Peter Rundel** one of the most sought-after partners for leading European orchestras. He is regularly invited to conduct the Bavarian Radio Orchestra, DSO Berlin, NDR Symphony Orchestra as well as the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne and the SWR Symphony Orchestra. Born in Friedrichshafen, Germany, Peter Rundel studied violin with Igor Ozim and Ramy Shevelov in Cologne, Hannover and New York, as well as conducting with Michael Gielen and Peter Eötvös.

Lothar Zagrosek was principal conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Konzerthausorchester Berlin (the former Berlin Symphony Orchestra), and at the Württemberg opera house in Stuttgart. He has also been principal guest conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and has conducted regularly at the Leipzig Opera. Among his commercial recordings are several entries in Decca's *Entartete Musik* series, including Hanns Eisler's *Deutsche Sinfonie*, Berthold Goldschmidt's *Der gewaltige Hahnrei*, Paul Hindemith's *Der Dämon*, Ernst Krenek's Symphony No. 2, *Jonny spielt auf*, and Franz Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* and *Der Geburtstag der Infantin*. He also recorded *Der Ring des Nibelungen* with the Stuttgart State Opera on the Naxos label.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

8 Duos. New World Records 80734-2 (2 CDs).

10 Exercises. New World Records 80658-2.

Bread and Roses: Piano Works 1976–83. Mode Records 43.

Burdocks. Tzadik TZ 7071.

Complete Works for Violin and Piano. Mode Records 126.

For Ruth Crawford. Hat Art 6156.

I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman. Mode Records 69.

Long Piano. New World Records 80699-2.

Percussionist Songs. Matchless Recordings 59.

(Re):Making Music. Mode Records 133 (2 CDs).

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Production credits:

John, David

Artistic Director: Dorothee Schabert

Technical Director: Henri Thaon, Ute Hesse

Recording: March 22, 2012, Philharmonie in Berlin, Germany

Organizer: Berliner Festspiele / MaerzMusik

Production: Südwestrundfunk 2012

Licensed by SWR Media Services GmbH

Rhapsody

Recording: August 29, 2009 in Ostrava, Czech Republic.

Production: Czech Radio Ostrava

Engineer: František Mixa

Licensed by Czech Radio

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Cover art: Nicholas Wolff

Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

John, David and *Rhapsody* are published by C.F. Peters Corp.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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