

Christian Wolff – OUT-TAKE **(blog post for OUT-TAKE ensemble concert, 6/3/17)**

I first encountered Christian Wolff's music through my interest in performing contemporary 'classical' repertoire for the electric guitar. Wolff has made several important contributions to developing this instrument's role in concert music, having composed some of the earliest works to feature the instrument (his *Electric Spring* series of the 1960s) and several further notable pieces. He has even performed as an electric guitarist, premiering Morton Feldman's semi-mythical 'lost' work *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* in 1966. I was excited to discover that such a respected composer-considered a member of the 'New York school' along with Feldman, John Cage and Earle Brown-had done so much to popularise my instrument as a tool for modern composition.

The first Christian Wolff piece that I played was *Another Possibility* (2004), a solo electric guitar piece written in response to the aforementioned Feldman work (which has, incidentally, recently been reconstructed by the guitarist Seth Josel). This piece was a challenging initiation into the strangely beautiful world of Wolff's music. It showcases many of the typical features of his work-most notably his esoteric use of musical notation, which seems designed to throw musicians off balance by encouraging them to find their own approach to interpreting Wolff's often rather ambiguous performance directions. The composer deliberately writes passages that seem impossible according to conventional notions of guitar technique, forcing the player to come up with novel solutions to get their fingers around the chords and melody lines. These devices help to create an atmosphere of whimsicality, and an almost childlike naivety and playfulness in exploring the potential of the instrument.

OUT-TAKE (2005), the Wolff piece that we will perform in our first concert and from which our ensemble takes its name, also uses notation in a unique way, but in a larger group context. The piece is composed for tuba and a group of any number of other instruments, of any kind (although it can also be performed as a tuba solo, a tuba duet, or a tuba duet with ensemble!). Each player, however, reads their music from the tuba part, which consists of 15 short modules of melodic material. The tuba player (in our case ensemble founder Alexander Glyde-Bates) plays through these modules in any order that he or she chooses, while the other instrumentalists are free to select any material to play in response to the tuba and each other, initiating a spontaneous commentary on the soloist's performance. This creates another layer of ambiguity in addition to Wolff's already vague performance instructions, as the players are required to transpose the material from the low tuba pitches into different registers to ensure that it is playable on their own instruments. This can be quite a challenging task for those players not accustomed to reading music notated in the bass clef and in such a low range!

The ensemble performance procedure for this piece adds a different dimension to Wolff's music that I didn't experience when playing *Another Possibility*. Playing *OUT-TAKE* is a truly social experience, in which listening to the other musicians, respecting their contributions, and doing your best to complement them are all essential to an engaging performance. *OUT-TAKE* opens up more 'democratic' approaches to making music than those to which many classical musicians are accustomed. Of course (as many of us may have experienced recently) democracy does not always produce the results that we might have hoped for, but in the case of *OUT-TAKE* this seems to me to be part of the fun! As with improvised music, the possibility of a less satisfactory performance (although to talk about 'right and wrong' in Wolff's work seems somewhat redundant) is part of what makes the moments where things truly 'click' all the more enjoyable. I am sure there will be many of these moments on the 6th March at the Talking Heads!