

## **Christian Wolff *Pianist: Pieces***

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The new millennium has coincided with a blossoming of compositional creativity by Christian Wolff (b.1934). At the time of writing, almost a third of Wolff's total published output, which stretches back to 1950, has been composed within the past 10 years. This increase in the rate of compositional activity has coincided with Wolff's retirement, in 1999, as Professor of Classics and Music at Dartmouth College, Hanover, where he still lives, maintaining, with his wife Holly, a farm as well as a busy compositional and performing schedule. Of the 21 works specifically for solo piano, not including the 30-odd miniatures he has composed over the past twenty years grouped together as *Keyboard Miscellany*, exactly a third have been composed since 2001.

As a body of repertoire, these recent works are remarkable for their freshness of musical thought and energy. Wolff uniquely blends experimental concerns with classical tendencies. John Cage considered Wolff to be the most 'musical' of the experimental composers and in these pieces not only are older composers referenced (Ives, Schumann) but Wolff's love of clarity of line and transparency of texture betrays an empathy with Webern, Haydn and Bach. This aesthetic is, however, combined with a tendency toward discontinuity and fragmentation, isolated sounds and silence, and, perhaps most significantly, indeterminacy of notation. Notational techniques which appear in some or all of the works featured here include: 'tablature' notations which prescribe which fingers to play but not which notes; notes without specified duration; notes which may be played in any clef and octave; the omission of any indications as to tempo, dynamics and articulation; and Wolff's characteristic 'wedge', which means a pause or breath of any length.

Put together, these features will result in widely varying performances. The interpretation of each piece offered here must be heard and understood as one amongst infinite possibilities. What attracts me most to Christian Wolff's music is the meeting point of composer and performer. My sensibilities, as a pianist with a

particular set of interests and experiences, have shaped the music heard on these discs, yet the challenges posed by the scores (the notations, the peculiar continuities, the pitches, rhythms and textures) provoke me to play in ways I would not ordinarily consider. This meeting point thus provides fertile ground for fresh expressions and the creation of a new and strange music.

How much more peculiar must Wolff's early music have felt to listeners in the 1950s, even to those whose ears were gradually being more conditioned to the music of Cage, Feldman, Boulez and Stockhausen. Though the influence of Cage (particularly through the use of preparations and inside piano techniques) and contemporary European developments in pitch organisation might be noted, Wolff's music then as now is distinguished by its transparency, its liveliness and feeling of spontaneity, and its peculiar stops and starts, silences and fragmentary character.

The complexity of many of these works can be largely attributed to the presence of David Tudor, whose innate understanding and commitment to the work of both American and European composers of the time was nothing short of brilliant. Wolff even described him as an *'instrument*. And with that was a kind of matter-of-factness. He was very business-like, with no nonsense; he just *did what had to be done*. He chose to *do* things, of course, that were extraordinary and unusual and not at all *'business-as-usual'*. But having done that, he just went about them without any fuss or bother, very directly.<sup>1</sup> From the earliest work here (*For Prepared Piano*, a work which Cage credited as the first to *'get rid of the glue'*<sup>2</sup>) to the last of the great early works, *For Pianist*, Wolff invites the pianist to engage with the material – not to *'make sense'* of it in any traditional manner (for what sense *can* be made of it?), but to allow the notations, the sounds and silences, the noises, pitch continuities and combinations, to become the focus at each moment (rather than attempting to project a narrative). Wolff's music requires a performer with the imagination to create something surprising, spontaneous and fresh but with the discipline also to leave it alone and do what needs to be done.

### ***For Pianist (1959)***

The culmination of Wolff's compositional relationship with David Tudor is the remarkable *For Pianist*. There is no doubt that it is one of the most extreme instances of indeterminate music to have emerged from the period. It has been described as a *'conundrum'* (David Tudor), a *'labyrinth'* (the composer), *'a self-defeating work'* (David Loberg Code), and, again by David Tudor, as *'terribly frustrating'* (though he adds *'But the music was beautiful'*).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wolff in conversation with John Holzaepfel, in Holzaepfel, J. *David Tudor and the performance of American Experimental Music 1950-1959*, City University of New York, doctoral dissertation (1994) p.76

<sup>2</sup> John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) pp.71-2

<sup>3</sup> *Cues*, p.378 and 490; John Holzaepfel, *David Tudor and the performance of American Experimental Music 1950-1959*, PhD thesis (City University of New York, 1994), pp. 195–6 (see also Holzaepfel, *'Reminiscences of a Twentieth-Century Pianist: An Interview with David Tudor'*, *The Musical Quarterly*, 78/3 (1994): pp. 635–6); David Code, *'Piano as ... text'* *Interface: Journal of New Music Research*, 20/1 (1991): p. 14.

Toward the end of the 1950s, Wolff developed a style of notation which could be described as a form of shorthand, a kind of code which, though at times mystifying, was designed to offer choice, within fixed parameters, to the performers as to sounds and pitches, durations, etc. At the same time he began to develop a music (first explored in the *Duo for pianists II*) which was dependent upon the performers' responses to each other, involving cues of various kinds which determined when or how or what each performer was to play next. (Subsequently, performer interaction became one of the main characteristics of his music through the 1960s and 1970 and has remained an important part of his technique and aesthetic since.)

Naturally, when writing for a solo instrument this aspect of his writing was not possible. However, in *For Pianist*, Wolff explored how the actions a performer makes during the performance itself might determine what material should be played next. Wolff sets up systems whereby a task is set (such as play a sound as softly as possible) which is followed by a choice of tasks dependent upon the result of the previous task (such as if no sound was heard, or the sound was louder than desired, or the sound was indeed as soft as possible). The pianist must instantly react to this sound and move to the appropriate material. There are many such choices the pianist has to make throughout the work. Additionally, pages may be played in any order, repeated or not played at all.

For the two performances included here, I used chance to determine the number and order of pages. I semi-notated some of the coded material whilst others I left more free to respond to the performing moment.

### ***For Piano I (1952)***

Wolff's earliest work for unprepared piano, *For Piano (I)* belongs to a group of pieces composed whilst Wolff was working closely with John Cage which feature a small selection of pitches, at fixed registers, arranged in constantly changing groups. In these works Wolff explored the various ways in which notes could be arranged and overlaid, making use of single notes, pairs and simultaneities, different successions, and so forth, so that whilst the sound world remains static throughout, the inner detail is constantly changing. Rhythms and dynamics are fully (and complexly) notated as are the at times lengthy silences which separate groups. Nine pitches in total are used and these are combined with a range of different durations and dynamics. Other works exploring the same idea use considerably less material, such as the *Serenade* (1950) which contains only three pitches. Even at this early stage, the combination of chance/control (order and superposition of events) and intuition/improvisation (arrangement within a group) which characterises much of Wolff's music is much in evidence.

### ***Suite (I) (1954)***

The rhythmic complexity of the two *For Piano* pieces is exploited to new levels in this work, the result of increasingly abstruse compositional procedures using moves on grids to determine the sequence and combinations of sounds. However, despite the considerable density of events on occasion, the concern is always for transparency and a Weberian clarity of texture. Over the course of the three movements of the *Suite* the illusion is given of the piano being increasingly 'prepared'. The first

movement features entirely un-prepared notes whilst the second and third movements are a mixture of prepared and unprepared notes.

### ***For Prepared Piano (1951)***

This is the earliest work featured on these CDs. It clearly reveals the influence of John Cage, particularly his music from 1948-50, such as *The Seasons* and *String Quartet in Four Parts*, through its use of repeated and fixed sonorities. And of course it is a work for prepared piano, an instrument devised and made famous by Cage. However it also demonstrates a radical tendency toward discontinuity, true of Wolff's music right up to the present day. Each movement was composed onto a grid that differs from the way the music is presented to the performer, consequently subverting the sequence of sounds heard. For example, the first movement was composed vertically – *down* the page - but is read by the pianist in the usual (horizontal) manner; the final movement was composed as four overlapping squares, related to each other in terms of content, but again performed so that the relationships between these squares are thrown into disarray.

### ***For Piano II (1953)***

*For Piano (II)* follows similar methods to *For Piano (I)*, the main difference being that, in response to Pierre Boulez's criticism that he used too few notes, the pitch material consists of all 88 notes of the piano keyboard. One further difference is that far fewer dynamics are notated and there are no tempo indications, leaving much more up to the performer to decide. Although this is the most 'European-sounding' of the early works, the relatively thin and transparent texture and the nuanced rhythmic detail lends this a more buoyant and spontaneous character than other works of the time.

### ***For Piano with Preparations (1957)***

This is the third work in which Wolff continues Cage's legacy of music written for the prepared piano, here inserting screws, nuts, bolts, rubber, wood and a coin between the strings of a piano. Wolff also asks for the pianist to pluck, mute, strike, snap the strings and utilise other means of modifying the timbre. However the process outlined in *Suite (I)* is reversed so that the piano gradually reveals itself, from a first movement which is predominantly noisy to a final movement which is almost entirely unprepared. It is a fully notated work and as such brings to a close the first period of his compositional style, before ushering in the indeterminate works for which he is more known.

### ***Long Piano (Peace March 11) (2004-5)***

Wolff's longest solo piano work is an extraordinary assemblage of 95 'patches' (the composer's term) plus an opening prelude (track 1). These patches, which range from absence of sound (patch 41, track 42) to the shortest and most pithy of phrases (such as patch 34, track 35) to extended melodies, or chorales, or toccata-like material (perhaps subdivided to include further phrases separated by pauses) follow on from each other in often unexpected ways, despite the work essentially having been composed as a chronology of events. Most of the time, dynamics and tempo are not

prescribed and the separation of events is free, so the pianist has to make sense or otherwise of this continuity. These variables can be appreciated by comparing this interpretation with the marvellous recording by Thomas Schultz, the dedicatee and commissioner of the work (New World Records, 80699-2).

The prelude begins with a long stretch of music which notates the fingers which the pianist is to use for each rhythmically defined sound, but not the pitches. The pianist has to decide, by whatever means, whether to play high or low, loud or soft, with fingers spread out or closely aligned, right hand close to left, above or below, etc. A similar notation reappears in patch 31 (track 32). Other finger trickery can be found at patches 23 (track 24) where the pianist has to sustain selected notes as long as possible, or part of patch 61 (track 62) where all notes have to be sustained as long as possible without use of the pedal.

The often fragmentary sequence of patches is interrupted at patches 57-67 (tracks 58-68) at which point Wolff makes use of a square-root rhythmic structure to determine the length and internal subdivisions of patches, a technique uprooted from his works of the 1950s. This means that the shorter patches severely limit Wolff's compositional choices, whilst others allow for considerable freedom of content. The 'wedges' which separate events through most of the work are absent here, making this section seem more self-contained and continuous than elsewhere in the piece.

Wolff's response to his Western musical heritage is perhaps most evident in this work than in any other of his compositions for piano. References are made to the music of Schumann (the *Kinderszene*, patch 69, track 70) and Ives (the Three-Page Sonata, patch 70, track 71) and to end the work, in possibly the closest he has come to a traditional sense of closure, Wolff composes a setting of the medieval French song 'L'homme armé'.

Listening to *Long Piano* as a single span is an unsettling experience – our ears are not used to such a sustained rate of change. However, awareness of the seemingly disjunct ideas being part of a larger whole affects both memory and the way in which each successive unit is perceived. The sense of progress, of moving forward (Wolff has never been one for recapitulation), is inspiring and the listener is drawn to the ever-changing present.

### ***Pianist: Pieces* (2001)**

Composed for and dedicated to Aki Takahashi, *Pianist: Pieces* was the first major piano work since *Piano Song (I Am A Dangerous Woman)* (1983). In five movements, it is the first work in which the tablature notations mentioned above feature, in movements 3 and 4, though to different effect. The third movement is perhaps the most dense of all Wolff's piano writing, each finger being assigned a note to play most of the time, resulting in a thick 10-part texture. The fourth movement is more lively, the tablature notation continuing the lively rhythms which begin the movement (but which are more fully composed). The first two movements are almost polar opposites: the first being a fragmented succession of ideas, almost sketchy and sounding improvised, whilst the second is an extended melody, joined about halfway through by a second melody running concurrently. The notes are drawn from various

American folk songs, including one particularly beautiful modal stream of notes derived from 'On the rim of the world' by Malvina Reynolds. The final movement is a short invention, with, in the composer's words, 'something of a lament about it (as in 18<sup>th</sup> century keyboard laments, often written 'sadly' in a major key; here the occasional presence of octaves has for me a feeling of dissonance).' Possibly infusing this mood was the death of Iannis Xenakis that year, and to whose memory these pieces were written.

### ***A Piano Piece (2006)***

*A Piano Piece* was commissioned by Stephen Drury for a concert featuring his students at the New England Conservatory. Despite its relative brevity it contains some fiercely difficult piano writing, with contrapuntal lines at odds with one another in the manner of an etude. The extended middle section features notes articulated across a metric grid at a fast tempo which lends them a certain weightlessness and reminds me of Feldman's *Intersection 2*, a graph-based notation for solo piano.

### ***Nocturnes 1-6 (2008); Small Preludes (2010)***

What distinguishes these works from the others in this set is that they were primarily written for the composer to perform himself. Wolff has always been active as a performer, taking piano lessons in the late 1940s with Greta Sultan who introduced him to John Cage. Whilst his early works were clearly indebted to David Tudor, the indeterminate notations from the 1960s onwards allowed him to play a greater role in performances of his music, and he has been involved with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as a performer for many years. Whilst he would describe himself as an amateur pianist, his touch remains lively and sensitive.

The *Nocturnes 1-6* was written as part of a collaborative event – a Cage tribute – at Bard College with musicians David Berhman, John King, Takehisa Kosugi and Wolff. Each musician prepared solos and also contributed to a collaborative piece (Wolff's contribution *For John (Material)* is published with the *Nocturnes*). The freedom given to the pianist with respect to structure is thus a reflection of the context for which they were written: 'The order of playing of parts (phrases, parts of phrases) may be shifted within a page or between pages. Any such parts may be repeated, though not usually in immediate succession.'

Of all the works included here, these offer the greatest variability in interpretation. Not only is the order of events free but durations, dynamics and durations are often free and the most startling innovation is that the performer is permitted to read any note in any clef in any octave and with any doubling of these. Thus a single note could theoretically result in an eight or even ten-note chord. The recording here then is almost an improvisation upon sketch material. In the context of a group performance doubtless choices would be very different – here I have tried to allow the character of each Nocturne to be perceptible (i.e. I have chosen not to blur the line *between* pieces) whilst also allowing for an improvisatory response which is mine own.

The *Small Preludes* were not written for commission but instead were the composer's personal response to the repertoire of small preludes such as those modelled by Bach. Each is indeterminate with regard to dynamics, tempi, pauses and clefs (which can be read as either treble or bass) and each its own distinct character though they are mostly rhythmically defined. The music is as fresh as any Wolff has composed, and his tendency for clarity of line and texture is brought into even greater focus, partly through each prelude being a self-contained piece. The *Small Preludes* are dedicated to English composer Chris Newman.

### ***Touch* (2002)**

*Touch* brings together a number of the techniques revealed in Wolff's music over the past 55 years. It is both a virtuosic work and yet entirely transparent in its texture (and consequently more virtuosic!). In many ways, as the title (which derives from 'toccata') suggests, it is about the act of playing, both in the playful nature of much of the music and in the complexity of events which pose great challenges to the pianist. It is fragmentary at times, discontinuous, quirky, but also lyrical, tender, and often extremely beautiful.

Indeterminacy is a feature throughout – in the absence of dynamics, tempi (much of the time), and articulation, but also in extended passages for which the pianist needs to make a realisation (choice of clefs, pitches, etc.) and more of the tablature notation. These take their cue from, as the composer writes, 'an idea I found long ago in Frescobaldi's [1583-1684] preface to some keyboard works, including "toccatas". These works are referred to as "in open score".'

*Touch* was commissioned by and composed for Thomas Schultz and was composed in memoriam Earle Brown, who died at the time of its composition.

Philip Thomas

### **References and Further Reading**

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Pianist Pieces 2001 04:04. In recent years he has been particularly associated with the music of Christian Wolff, giving the world premiere of his Small Preludes in 2009, the UK premiere of Long Piano (Peace March 11), having co-edited and contributed to the first major study of Wolff's music, Changing the System: the Music of Christian Wolff, published by Ashgate Publications in 2010. Philip Thomas's survey of the piano music of Christian Wolff may not be entirely comprehensive, but it spans almost the whole of the American experimentalist's career as a composer, from his Cageian pieces of the 1950s to the explosion of creativity in the last decade. The earliest work here is For Prepared Piano of 1951, full of obsessive repetitions and irregular silences; the most recent, the set of 20 Tiny Preludes composed in 2010, in which many of the musical parameters – tempi, dynamics, even the choice of clef – are left to the performer's discretion. The first disc is framed by Thomas's two utterly different realisations of Wolff's For Pianist, of 1959, which he calls "one of the most extreme instances of indeterminate music to have emerged from that period." Christian Wolff at his prepared piano performance, 2007. Christian G. Wolff (born March 8, 1934) is an American composer of experimental classical music. Contents. Wolff is mentioned in piece numbers 4, 8, 9 and 14, as well as numbers 91 and 155, which were published after Folkways' original release. ^ "Christian Wolff :: Foundation for Contemporary Arts". [www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org](http://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org). Retrieved 2018-04-05. ISBN 978-3-7957-0800-9 (Detailed account of the life of pianist Grete Sultan, Christian Wolff's piano teacher who eventually acquainted him with Cage. Contains many references to the New York Avant-garde). (2017) Wolff, Christian, Occasional Pieces – Writings and Interviews, 1952–2013, New York: Oxford University Press.