

UDC – 78.09; 786.1

C. Cardew's Treatise – Graphic Score. Improvisation, Interpretation, or Composition?

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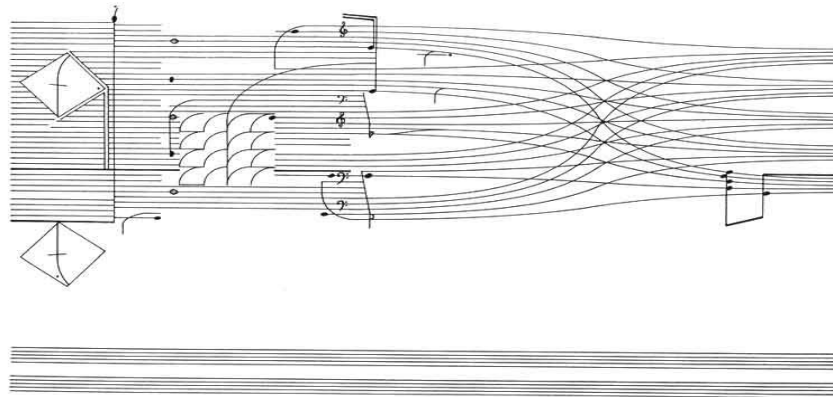
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Summary:

'Treatise', composed by Cornelius Cardew in 1963- 1967, is a music piece comprising 193 pages of a graphic musical score that rejects conventional musical notation. The score consists of various geometric or abstract shapes which, according to Cardew, are "subjected in the score to destruction and distortion". The same could be said about musical symbols - Cardew takes them out of context, depriving them of their initial functions. Interpretation of all those symbols and shapes is left up to performer(s). 'Treatise' could be performed by any instrument/ensemble of instruments, and any number of pages can be interpreted in any order. According to Cardew, he "invented a way of making music and limited it to such an extent that musicians without construction ideas of their own are in a position to adopt the mode of music-making". That's why the composer never gave explicit instructions on how 'Treatise' should be performed. Consequently, the question arises as to whether 'Treatise' performance is improvisation, interpretation, or composition. While the majority of performers is inclined to improvisation, the composers of graphic as well as verbal scores often doubt the expediency of this suggestion. The paper aims is to analyze some of contemporary graphic score performance tendencies and to answer the question posed in the title.

Keywords: *Graphic scores, improvisation, interpretation, composition*

Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*, composed in 1963-1967, is a music piece comprising 193 pages of a graphic musical score that rejects conventional musical notation. The score consists of lines, symbols - some of them musical, numbers and various geometric or abstract shapes. The shapes used in *Treatise* are basic - circles, lines, triangles, squares, ellipses - perfect geometrical forms which, according to Cardew, are "subjected in the score to destruction and distortion" [1, iv]. The same could be said about musical symbols - Cardew takes them out of context, depriving them of their initial functions.



Cornelius Cardew. "Treatise", p.29

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Thus, *Treatise* is a long visual music composition, featuring some familiar musical elements. As for musical parameters, they are not determined by the score. Interpretation of all those symbols and shapes is left up to performer(s). *Treatise* could be performed by any instrument/ensemble of instruments, and any number of pages can be interpreted in any order. The composer himself never gave explicit instructions on how *Treatise* should be performed. In *Treatise Handbook* published later (1971) than *Treatise* itself he just recommended that interpreters devise rules for themselves in advance. "...Since Cardew scrupulously avoids making a set of rules (he has elaborated ideas about, but never instructions for the score), there are no grounds on which totally inconsistent reading could be ruled out", - concludes composer Michael Nymann [2, 118]; and this conclusion is quite persuasive.

How should then *Treatise* be performed? It is expected that performers interpret the graphic score in a quite subjective way. Which musical category could be matched with ellipses, distorted circle, or 'incorrectly' notated treble clef? The answers depend on the imagination of performers. The graphic notation of *Treatise* aims at making an immediate impact on performers, stimulating them to action. That's why Cardew avoids instructions. In his essay "On the Role of the Instructions in Indeterminate Music" Cardew writes that "very often a performer's intuitive response to the notation influences to a large extent his interpretation of the instructions. He influences the piece's identity, in fact, at the moment when he first glances at the notation and jumps to a conclusion about what the piece is, and what is its nature. Then he turns to the instructions, which, on occasion, may explain that certain notations do not, for instance, mean what many people might at first blush expect, and these he proceeds to interpret in relation to his preconceptions, deriving from the notations themselves" [2, 19]. Consequently, Cardew liberates performers from composer's instructions, on one hand, and determinative traditional musical notation, on the other hand.

Interestingly enough, traditional musical notation has been losing its actuality since the 50s of the previous century. Not only indeterminate, but also serial pieces have proved that always existing gap between compositional process and notation turned itself into the abyss. And that can be explained. Until the 20th century, pitch and duration have been regarded as the most important sound qualities, attracting, consequently, a great deal of attention of composers. Intensity and articulation, on the contrary, have been notated with much less accuracy. But since their importance rose, the traditional notation has not been able to meet requirements of new epoch, creating a need for new symbols. Some of those symbols indicate not only the sounding result, but also the actions, necessary to achieve those results¹. Helmut Lachmann's piano etude *Guero* could serve as an

¹ See: Dahlhaus, C. Notenschrift heute. In: Schönberg und andere. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Neuen Musik, Mainz: Schott, 1978, 244-269.

example. Lachenmann scrupulously indicates hand movements resulting into specific sounds. This notation is rather oriented towards the action than the result.

The verbal and graphic scores bring this process further. Verbal scores contain composer's explicit instructions for specific actions. Karlheinz Stockhausen's intuitive music could serve as an example: to interpret his intuitive pieces one has to stop thinking and to react spontaneously to those instructions, expressing feelings evoked by texts. For example, one of the pieces from the cycle *For Times to Come - Elongation* - is notated in the following way: "Play or sing extremely short events until each one seems like an eternity" [3, 8].

Thus, notation system, developed out of need of preciseness and accuracy, transformed itself into notation that liberated performer's imagination to great extent. Intuitive music texts, unlike the score of *Guero*, challenge performers to improvise. Though, Stockhausen himself avoids the term 'improvisation'. "Be careful, the term improvisation is now very broad and is no longer related to any agreements. In Intuitive Music, I try to get away from anything that has established itself as musical style. In improvised music, there is always, as history has shown, some basic element rhythmic, or melodic or harmonic on which the improvisation is based" [4]. That's why, he always recommended performers to avoid any sound materials evoking associations with music of the past stylistic epochs. Moreover, Stockhausen always rejected the resemblance between intuitive music performance and automatic painting of surrealists. "Intuitive Music should if possible have nothing to do with psychology, which means nothing to do with the subconscious and unconscious. Rather, the musicians must be influenced by the supra-conscious (we can tell from the results that they certainly are), by something which enters into them" [4]. Apparently, improvisation in a specific style would hinder communication with supra-conscious. In case of graphic scores, composers, as Cardew states, offer „musicians without construction ideas of their own ... to adopt the mode of music-making"[5].

Cardew's wish, to liberate performers from constraints of notation and to challenge them to 'make music' could be considered as an answer to the idea of so called *tabula rasa*, which dominated music of the second half of the XX century. This idea influenced European avant-garde and American experimental music in different ways. Pierre Boulez stated that there was a need to liberate music from unified and universally recognized code, on which European music has been based for centuries². Serialism – a very strict system developed to meet these demands, constrained not only composers, but also performers of strictly determined scores. "There is no room for the policeman in art", Cage said in one of his polemics against the Europeans [5]. Though Cage's aims were almost the same (to liberate music from the past in different ways), he still opposed to serialism through his indeterminate music. The birth of European aleatoric music, considered by the votaries of experimental music mostly as just an adaptation of principles of indeterminate music, aggravated the debates further.

Cardew is a quite unique case. On one hand, he worked with Stockhausen for a while in Cologne, and felt quite impressed by serialism. On the other hand, he was one of the first Europeans to fully grasp the musical implications of the new American aesthetic, which he later enriched with some European colors. Here is a quote from his diary: "Sounds and potential sounds are around us all the time - they're all over. What you can do is to insert your logical construct into this seething mass - a system that enables some of it to become audible. That's why it's such an orgiastic experience to improvise - instead of composing a system to project into all this chaotic potential, you simply put yourself in there (you too are a system of sorts after all) and see what action that suicidal deed precipitates" [5].

For a short period, Cardew was fascinated by logical constructs and serialism, but later he felt the necessity to reject serialism. That happened when he got interested in American experimental music. A gifted pianist and improvisator himself, Cardew was impressed by Cage's liberation of the

² See: Boulez, P. *Sprache, Material, Struktur*. In: *Leitlinien. Gedankengänge eines Komponisten*, übers. von Häusler, J. Kassel, Stuttgart: Bärenreiter/Metzler, 2000, 60-88.

performer from the constraints of oppressive notational complexities. Still, “Cage's notational systems presuppose a denial of the influence of musical background (that is, history), whether Cage's own or the performers', and moreover generally allow for no spontaneous expression during performance”, - concludes a prominent British pianist John Tilbury, [5]). As for Cardew, he developed in the opposite direction - towards spontaneous music-making, extending indeterminacy and creative freedom to the performer.

But still, performers are required to read the score of *Treatise* – to match symbols with particular musical categories. Cardew himself gives us some examples: “Take the enclosed spaces and divide them into categories – triangles, circles, circle derivatives (not very many), squares, square derivatives (horizontal and vertical rectangle), irregular enclosures. Musical categories can then be matched up with these: triads, trills, irregular tremolos, periodicities, deviating periodicities, cluster that disintegrate in the direction of whatever shape is closest” [1, vi]. Such reading requires quite a serious preparation (especially in case of ensemble performance) resembling, to some extent, compositional process. Then should we use the term ‘improvisation’ when it comes to *Treatise* performance? The term associated with a spontaneous and more or less unprepared performance?

Interestingly enough, Cardew required this kind of reading rather from conventionally trained professional musicians – as his friend and one of the best interpreters of his music John Tilbury claims. As for “musical innocents” without academic education³, Tilbury suggests, that “a non-reading musician might take a much freer, more spontaneous approach [5]. In the end, as Cardew himself states, “...each musician will give of his own music - he will give it as his response to my music, which is the score itself” [1, x].

In 1969 Cardew founded the Scratch Orchestra, which along with professional musicians welcomed artists and music-lovers, amateurs. They mostly performed graphic scores and improvised. But the ideal performers of *Treatise* for Cardew were the members of British free improvisation group AMM. The members of AMM, who came from a jazz background, met regularly for sessions and improvised. They never rehearsed or prepared performances, never developed in advance any kind of performance plans. There was only one requirement: to avoid any kind of conventional melodies, rhythms and harmonies (actually, this evokes some associations with Stockhausen and his attitude towards intuitive music performance). Cardew joined AMM when he was working on *Treatise*. 1970 he stated: “I now regard *Treatise* as a transition between my earlier preoccupation with problems of musical notation and my present concerns - improvisation and a musical life. Joining AMM was the turning point, both in the composition of *Treatise* and in everything I had thought about music up to then” [5].

As we see, unlike Stockhausen, Cardew uses the terms improvisation and music-making (composition?) in a quite free way when related to his graphic scores. Maybe, the reason is that Cardew welcomes different interpretations of the concept of *Treatise* by professional and amateur musicians? That's why, all those terms transform into each other and it is quite difficult to set borderlines between them. The process of making (composing) or interpreting *Treatise* (either fully improvised, or with some elements of improvisation) resembles to some extent historical performance of Middle Ages and early Renaissance music; music which was recorded, rather outlined in a quite relative way. The final sounding result, style and content of this music were strongly determined by interpreters. Graphic scores gave interpreters this function, lost through centuries, back!

Consequently, there is no need to set strict borderlines between interpretation, improvisation and composition relating to *Treatise* and other graphic scores. It is all about ‘music-making’ - this task has always been uniting composers and performers on the historical way of transformations of their interesting and complex relationships.

³ Cardew welcomed amateurs performing *Treatise*.

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Article received: 2017-12-12