Cornelius Cardew: passionately engaged

Cornelius Cardew: A Life Unfinished
By John Tilbury
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Twenty years in the writing, John Tilbury's biography of British experimental composer Cornelius Cardew is set in an era when composers really did think the world needed changing and that, quite possibly, better art might make for better politics might make for better art.

The sad anticipation of Cardew's murky, unexplained death in 1981 at the age of 45 in an East London hit-and-run car accident hovers over everything that comes before, and partly explains Tilbury's title. His narrative tells of a composer who was passionately engaged with the world, and couldn't but go on out a limp to express the injustices and hidebound attitudes he perceived as destructive and wasteful. This is a timely and oddly moving reminder that composition can be idealistic at a time when a generation of composers, poisoned by attitudes hatched under "her" in the 1980s and nurtured by New Labour, are threatening to run new music into the ground: to borrow a phrase from the current political lexicon, Cardew's music proclaimed "Yes We Can".

Tilbury's book, too, is an affirmation of a profound musical thinker and a composer who left an indelible mark — even if implicit in this admiration is acceptance that his politics sometimes lead to frustratingly sloganiand thin music. It's in the true spirit of Cardew that any mainstream publisher would have balked at issuing Tilbury's book in this form. At 1000 pages of thickly written text and with lavishly detailed musical examples, the mainstream instinct would have been to prune content and smooth off awkward corners. But Cardew's personal, political and musical life was packed with contradiction, and Tilbury's scrapbook-like negotiation between note-picking musical analysis, long extracts from Cardew's journals and hardcore political theory feels wholly authentic and fitting.

The most problematic contradiction that emerges is between Cardew's relentless search for musical liberation and his increasing attraction to dogmatism, controlling politics. Musically, Cardew's journey took him from rigorous twelve-note composition during his studies at the Royal Academy of Music, and while working as Stockhausen's assistant in Cologne in the early 1960s, towards the freer impulses of New York School composers such as Cage, Feldman and Earle Brown.

His next step embraced musical performance as an allegory for society more directly and this manifested numerous directions — Cardew played piano and cello in the free improvisation collective AMM (of which Tilbury is a member), founded the notorious Scratch Orchestra and eventually composed revolutionary works designed for "the masses". Paradoxically, as Cardew's music became spiritually freer, his politics became increasingly doctrinaire. After a long period espousing Maoist communism, Cardew would cite the authoritarian Albanian leader Enver Hoxha as his political guru. But the masses didn't flock to hear his songs of liberation: Cardew had become an elite political figure and his works, with their bargain-basement chord sequences and square rhythms, were hopelessly banal and boring.

Cardew's life was also unfinished in the sense that fate intervened before he could reassess and move on. Tilbury's sadness at Cardew's lot is palpable but there's much to be celebrated: his graphic score Treaties is rightly weighed up as a misunderstood masterwork, and Tilbury's insider unpickings of the inscrutable inner workings of AMM is a revelation. This book is a labour of love, born from extraordinary devotion. Philip Clark

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All you have to do is listen
Music from the inside out
By Rob Kapilow
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I shouldn't be keeping this book. I shall be passing it on to a young friend of mine who, largely because of this country's abysmal lack of classical music education, has not had the benefit of being introduced to the great works of music with which so many of us have been familiar since schooldays. At 17, he's decided to join a choir and is teaching himself to read music. He is keen, intrigued and self-motivated but at the moment is listening to music in a vacuum. I can't imagine a better pair of hands than Rob Kapilow's to guide him into what is still, for him and many others of his generation, a mysterious and daunting world.

At first glance he may balk at the sight of nearly 100 music extracts that are germane to the book's narrative, some in full score. Help is at hand. Simply go to a website, click on the numbered example you are reading about and play it on your computer while following the music (a moving vertical line tells you where you are); or you can upload the files to an MP4-compatible device. The examples range from Handel and Gershwin to Haydn and Janáček. Though there are surely others, this book is the first I have come across that interacts with the internet in this way.

Kapilow, a composer, conductor and pianist as well as music commentator, has been helping audiences hear more in great music for almost 20 years through his US radio show "What Makes It Great?" and concert appearances. Clearly he wants to switch people on to classical music, to encourage the same people who "get" the music of a Broadway show similarly to "get" Vivaldi and Beethoven. His method is not to burden the reader with biographical and historical information about the music but to show people how to listen to it from the inside out. Music has a plot, it has conversations; it is constructed with paragraphs and sentences, punctuated with commas, colons and full-stops. By the time we are halfway through, it seems quite natural to be talking about "sonata form" (Kapilow reminds us that the term was not used until about 1840, long after Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven were dead) until, at the end, ritornellos and double expositions seem like old friends.

My one reservation about the book is that it fails to pull out each style of music in context. In the uninitiated, Beethoven might have pre-dated Purcell. From the way it is laid out, there is no way of seeing how the language of music progressed, of hearing how and why Puccini sounds different from Schubert. That, with any luck, will be the subject of Kapilow's next volume.

Jeremy Nicholas