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On Substance and Form: A Brief Survey of Christian Wolff and John Dewey

“I like to operate on a number of fronts. I don’t function very theoretically; I respond pragmatically to situations.” - Christian Wolff¹

Born in Nice as the son of two German émigrés, Christian Wolff has always possessed a close affinity with both American and European culture. Unlike John Cage and Morton Feldman, Wolff was exposed to the European tradition at a young age, immersing himself in the works of Bach and Brahms before discovering the string quartets of Schoenberg, Webern, and Bartok. Despite his heavily European background (an aspect of Wolff which no doubt fascinated Cage), Wolff also desired to explore alternative modes of creating music, a desire which eventually led him to Cage and the “New York School”. Many contemporary versions of this period detail a tense rift between American and European composition, a dichotomy perhaps best represented by a conversation presented by John Cage in the *Darmstadter Beitrage zur Neuen Musik* in 1959: “Once in Amsterdam, a Dutch musician said to me, ‘It must be very difficult for you in America to write music, for you are so far away from the centers of tradition.’ I had to say, ‘It must be very difficult for you in Europe to write music, for you are so close to the centers of tradition.’”

¹ Christian Wolff, *Conversation with Cole Gagne. Cues: Writings and Conversations*, ed. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, pg.246.

However, despite Cage's rather amusing remarks, the New York School and the European avant-garde did essentially explore similarly uncharted musical territories. Both Indeterminate and Serialist compositions abandoned traditional concepts of harmony, rhythm, and form in order to establish startlingly new connections between all musical parameters. Even more so, they reappraised the musical relationships between sound and silence, space and time, and performer and audience in a radically abstract manner, the effects of which are still reverberating through music to this present day. These innovations were in response to unprecedented social and cultural change that was sweeping a fragile world, now grasped by a lingering Cold War.

Despite these similarities, one stark contrast between them is the oftentimes fragmented and indeterminate quality which pervades much of the New York School's oeuvre. Extending back to the previous generation of composers such as Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, and Henry Cowell, American Experimentalism has always possessed a sense of individuality by responding pragmatically to unforeseen situations. Such an approach has oftentimes seemed erratic and unresolved due to the clear presence of discontinuity and lack of formal closure. Many of these characteristics are vital to Wolff's compositions, with his unique conception of notation and form playing a key role in the continuous development of his musical vision.

Interestingly enough, Wolff's aesthetic also echoes the writings of another distinctly "American" figure: philosopher and psychologist John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey, a leading proponent of the American philosophical movement known as Pragmatism, published his major volume on aesthetics in 1934 entitled *Art as Experience*. In this work, Dewey discusses the formative impact art has had on humanity as a civilization, and how it shapes individual human experiences. Though much of Dewey's work deeply resonates with Wolff's own artistic

philosophy², what must be presented is the striking connection between Wolff's concept of musical content and form and Dewey's ideas concerning the two vital constructive elements of any communicative medium: "substance" and "form".

As Dewey discusses in *Art as Experience*, because every field of art is expressive in some manner, they are also considered a language. Each artistic discipline is its own unique language or "medium" that communicates an aspect of the human experience, one which cannot simply be expressed through words, despite the absolute emphasis on speech as the most direct idiom of communication within modern society. If speech was the most sufficient form of expression, would the existence of other mediums even be necessary? To Dewey, "all language, whatever its medium, involves *what* is said, and *how* it is said, or substance and form."²

Substance begins simply as the raw material from which a work of art is eventually crafted. This material itself, according to Dewey, is universal and does not uniquely derive from within the artist. However, what does derive from the artist (and is the ultimate objective of a successful "producer of art"), is the *manner* in which this material is assembled. It is through the individualized process that the artist assimilates this material and creatively transforms it into a fresh and distinctive object of self-expression that substance is ultimately achieved. In spite of the utmost importance self-expression has in the formation of authentic substance, the final work of art cannot be regarded as complete if it is isolated and conceived as purely a work of *self*-expression. For Dewey, a work of art is only truly finished when it is allowed to enter the experience of an outside individual, whom he refers to as the "perceiver of art".

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. Pg. 111.

It is the “perceiver of art” who ultimately determines the experience generated by the work of art. Each individual, molded and informed by their previous experiences, carries with them a unique and ever-evolving perception of the surrounding world. Once one interacts with this artistic object, no matter how ancient or contemporary the work may be, something new is born, something never before experienced by any human being. To Dewey, “what was evoked is a substance so formed that it can enter into the experiences of others and enable them to have more intense and more fully rounded out experiences of their own.”³ This leads him to define the true meaning of form:

It marks a way of envisaging, of feeling, and of presenting experienced matter so that it most readily and effectively becomes material for the construction of adequate experience...Hence there can be no distinction drawn, save in reflection, between form and substance. The work itself *is* matter formed into esthetic substance.⁴

With Dewey’s analysis of substance and form in mind, one may begin to identify distinct similarities to the words of Christian Wolff, such as the manner in which he defines a musical score:

A composition (a score) is only material for performance: it must make possible the freedom and dignity of the performers; it should allow at any moment surprise, for all

³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. Pg. 113.

⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. Pg. 113-114.

concerned, players, composers, listeners...No sound, noise, interval, et cetera as such is preferable to any other sound, including those always around us...⁵

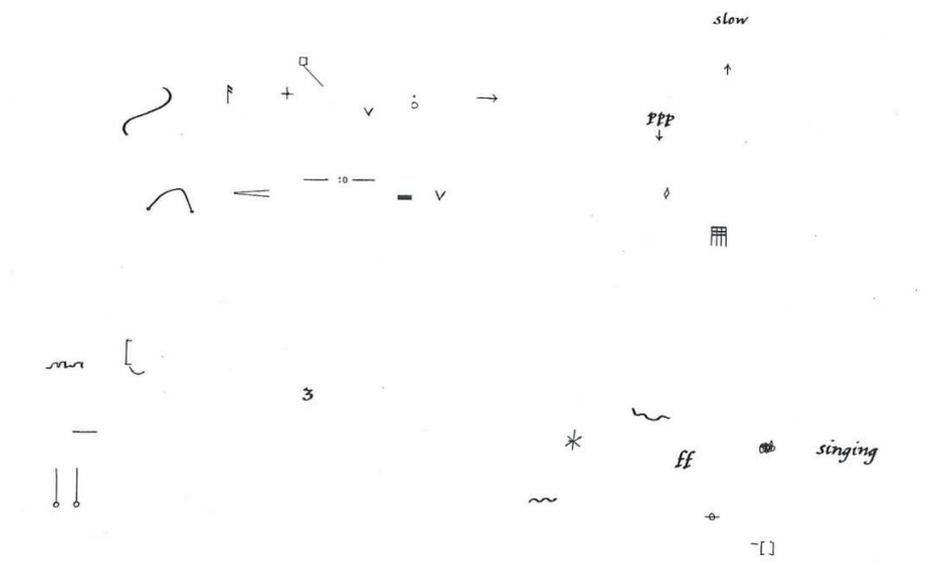


Figure 1- "Edges" (1969)

Such a description may be further explained through a composition such as *Edges*. Perhaps the most extreme of his open-form pieces, *Edges* utilizes both instructional text and a detailed key of notation suggesting the character of sounds and actions to be committed by the performer. Unlike earlier compositions such as *For 1, 2, or 3 People*, the notational system of *Edges* does not indicate specific coordination between performers' actions. As Wolff states in the written instructions, "The signs on the score are not primarily what a player plays. They mark out a space or spaces, indicate points, surfaces, routes or limits. A player should play in relation to,

⁵ Christian Wolff, *...let the listeners be just as free as the players. Cues: Writings and Conversations*. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 86.

in, and around the space thus partly marked out. He can move about in it variously...but does not always have to be moving, nor does he have to go everywhere.”

Although Wolff is not presenting traditionally concrete musical content in *Edges* (as the eventual outcome of the notation is highly indeterminate and therefore inconclusive), he is also not simply just presenting *raw* material. Rather, he has carefully defined and notated the material so as to *suggest* possible musical interaction between performers and the score. Wolff has constructed the parameters of the work to allow the performers’ diversity of experience to mold and inform the work’s ultimate realization. For Wolff, it is at the moment of performance where musical content, or perhaps to recall Dewey’s term “artistic *substance*”, is conceived: “Content has to emerge between a performance, indeed a specific performance in a particular place and historical time, and its particular audience...”⁶ Though Wolff does not speak explicitly in the Deweyan terms of “substance” and “form” when articulating his compositional philosophy, there is a strong correlation to his embrace of notational and formal indeterminacy and the impact on human experience:

Form...is inevitably open, because inevitably contingent, fragile, and subject, as we are, to time and the surrounding world. In turn, the musical work can (for better or worse) give that time and world definition, identity, and meaning it would not otherwise have had.⁷

⁶ Christian Wolff, *On the theory of open form in new music. Cues: Writings and Conversations*. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 180.

⁷ Christian Wolff, *On the theory of open form in new music. Cues: Writings and Conversations*. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 180.

Ultimately, at the heart of both Dewey and Wolff's aesthetic is this notion of indeterminacy, a defining characteristic of both American Pragmatism and American Experimentalism. Both Dewey and Wolff conceive of the world in terms of perpetually evolving temporal processes, oftentimes tumultuous, unpredictable, and inconclusive. The human experience, and the validity of seminal human beliefs such as "truth" and "beauty", are ultimately determined by an individual's previous experiences, surrounding environment, and social orientation. For Dewey, "art does not lead to an experience...it constitutes one."⁸ As does nature, art, when engaged in human interaction, has the ability to transform that interaction into a seminal experience, to forever define an individual's perception and memory of that event. These notions are further echoed in Christian Wolff's belief of art's ultimate role:

Music (art) imitates (represents) not nature, even in its mode of operation, but (inevitably, since we do not exist apart from nature nor nature apart from us) human life in both its material aspect and its history, its movements at once personal, social and political, through time.⁹

⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. Pg. 88.

⁹ Christian Wolff, *On the theory of open form in new music. Cues: Writings and Conversations*. G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 180.

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