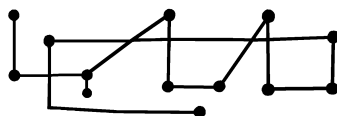


IMPROVISATION, HETEROPHONY, POLITICS, COMPOSITION



PANEL DISCUSSION WITH CHRISTIAN WOLFF, LARRY POLANSKY, KUI DONG, CHRISTIAN ASPLUND, AND MICHAEL HICKS

THE FOLLOWING IS TRANSCRIBED and edited from a panel discussion with Christian Wolff, Larry Polansky, Kui Dong, Christian Asplund, and Michael Hicks, before a group of students and faculty in a library auditorium at Brigham Young University on the evening of March 8, 2006.¹ Wolff, Polansky, and Kui—all of them Dartmouth faculty at the time—had come to BYU for “The Music of Christian Wolff: A Symposium,” a three-day event organized by Asplund (Hicks’s colleague at BYU), at which the three guests performed improvisations as a trio and joined with BYU student and faculty performers in performances of some of Wolff’s *Exercises*.²

Hicks: The National Association of Schools of Music recently reaccredited BYU's School of Music. But one of the things for which they criticized us—they say it every time—is that we don't have enough improvisation in our program. The official, orthodox answer to that is always: "Well, we have a big jazz program. What do you mean?" My less-orthodox answer has been: "Every student in my classes knows all about improvisation: take a look at their test performances." [Laughter] But I frankly don't know what improvisation is anymore—or if there ever was such a thing. What is "improvisation" in music to you?

Polansky: I think Kui should answer that because she's the newest arrival to the idea and her answer may be the most interesting.

Kui Dong: My background is: I came from a conservatory, basically a Russian system where we would write what our teacher taught us to write, like Tchaikovsky. Everything that we would write was very controlled, every single note, every single aspect. Then I went to Stanford University where I got to write computer music. Then, when I joined the Dartmouth faculty, I started complaining about how controlled I was as a composer. There was a period of time where I'd get frustrated and not know what to write. It's too controlled, I thought, it doesn't really have the freedom anymore. And then one day I complained to Christian a lot because—I don't know why—he's always there for me. I said, "I can't compose." He said, "You will do it." "But I can't compose." And one day he just said, "Why don't you play with Larry and me?" I guess he knew that I could play piano.

Wolff: During her interview she played the Liszt Sonata.

Kui Dong: So I said, "Play what?" "Well, just play." And the first session I just refused to join them. "Well, why don't you play?" And I would just sit out. And then Larry said, "If you don't play, we don't play." So I was kind of forced to join them. Although it took a long time, for me it was the discovery of a new dimension. Because I never think of music that way as a composer. When I compose, always, every single note is in my control. But once I started playing with the trio, I realized that improvisation is rather freeing. It might be the same idea as composition, except that you're making each decision as as you're playing. In composition my normal process is that you have an overall structure and then make your decisions. But improvisation is that you play along and, as you do, you make your decisions. That means listen-

ing carefully to other people, sometimes compromising, and sometimes taking the lead. I think it's a very intuitive, almost spiritual thing.

Wolff: There is your “jazz” response, of course, Michael. But there are different notions of improvisation. There's structured improvisation, which is basically what you have in jazz, at one end of the scale. Then at the other end you have completely free improvisation, which is what we do. So the first thing to be clear about is what kind of improvisation you mean. Do you want a definition?

Hicks: Yes.

Wolff: Well, you have to break it down—which I don't particularly want to do. But in our case there is no way to define it except that there are no rules at all. We just start—though one factor to consider is how many people are doing it. If it's one person, then it's one kind of thing. I, for instance, am totally unable to improvise alone. If it's more than one, then you're in the situation that Kui described: not only do you have to start from scratch, so to speak (to the extent that you can start “from scratch”), but you're constantly in a conversation with other people. It's a kind of dialogue. Composing is a two-step (at least) situation where you write something, yes, but you're still a long way from even knowing what you've done, what it is. Because the thing has to be performed. The music isn't there yet. Whereas when you're improvising, that step is gone. You just do it directly. You're composing in real time.

Polansky: It's an interesting question and it's asked more and more nowadays. But I'd like to find a creative way to avoid it in the following sense. Being a musician, in my entire life I've never really made any distinction—or had to make a distinction—between writing notes or writing computer software or playing bluegrass or playing rock or playing jazz. It's just stuff one does. And all of those things involve improvisation in different ways. So when I'm playing in this trio the questions are not, to me, about improvisation. They're about playing with Kui and Christian and what we are trying to do musically as a group. It's not so much an investigation of the notion of improvisation as the investigation of a very specific set of circumstances and musical ideas. I think a lot about how Kui plays and how Christian plays. I think almost none about the general concept of free improvisation versus some other kind. That's just my own temperament. I tend to be situational, not—I had one more thing I was going to say, but I completely forgot.

Hicks: Improvise. [Laughter]

Polansky: Yes, I'll try. One of the interesting things is that there is now a kind of well-defined genre—with, in fact, a great many sub-genres—of “free improvisers.” We three all play with these kinds of musicians in different contexts and situations. Yet none of us comes from that particular ideological and aesthetic perspective. Perhaps because we're of different generations and have quite different backgrounds, we're free to drift in and out of lots of different forms of music without any real dogma or ideology. As Christian said, there are no rules. And that means there are also no stylistic or cultural criteria whatsoever. Our only rule is really to *start*—although we seem to have an unwritten rule to not talk about it too much, which is fine with me. Because otherwise you get into all these unsolvable questions that don't go anywhere.

Hicks: But do you feel you have a performance practice, as a group? It seems to me that in the “free improv” culture you mentioned there are certain habits that evolve in improvisation. But I assume that once something becomes a habit you start to mistrust it. How do you manage that? Or do you? Does it matter?

Polansky: Well, there are people who play music who work very hard to develop habits that they want. You know, if you're a classical violinist, you spend all your life *trying* to develop habits. And hopefully those habits are a route to some kind of evolutionary goal, like being a better violinist, being able to interpret things in whatever you consider a *good* interpretation. So I'm not so trepidatious, thinking, “Okay, we tend to do this or that thing where we're building up and maybe we shouldn't build up”—I don't care much about those kinds of issues because I don't see the harm in them. Having a couple of good social habits, for example, is not such a bad thing as long as they don't become oppressive. In a good group of musicians, when you feel they do become oppressive, they naturally morph into something else, just by the nature of having good, intelligent musicians around you. So I'm always a little distrustful of the criticism that, “If you improvise long enough, you're just playing your licks.” First of all, that may not be so bad. And second of all, if you're a smart enough musician that's just simply a way to something else.

Wolff: I agree with all of that. It's true there is a danger. But with free improvisation—and this may be its greatest advantage—if you want to do it well, you have to really, really pay attention all the time. It's just

like playing a notated piece. It's that kind of attention. And if you're doing that, then even though you may do things you've done before, you're still doing them with complete presence at the time you're doing them. We do feel that we don't have a fixed sound, a fixed set of gestures, and so forth. So far, I think—and maybe I'm kidding myself—we don't. One thing that helps is that we don't play that much. I don't know if that's good or bad, but in a sense it helps because it means we won't have used it up, won't have gotten tired of it.

Audience: What's the role of the audience in improvisation? If you were not playing for an audience, would it be the same sort of dynamics working on your creative spirit as if you were with an audience?

Polansky: I'll just preface by saying that our trio is an odd group in that we mostly don't play for an audience. Our intention in forming was mainly to play for ourselves. We go into a room like this one with two pianos in it once a week and we play for an hour.

Audience: So that answer implies that if an audience is there it affects the performance in some way.

Polansky: It may. We do it very seldom, strangely enough. It's an unusual experience for us to play for an audience. But that's just a preference.

Wolff: What I was thinking was this: We do it in private. And then occasionally we do what we do in private but other people are invited to come and listen to what we're doing. Still, it's hard to deny the fact that the people out there have some kind of subliminal effect. But it doesn't translate into something specific. It isn't that we try to make it more accessible, or less, or whatever. I don't think there's really anything different in the way we play.

Kui Dong: We started out playing as an entertainment group: to entertain ourselves, as Larry was saying. (Like we had nothing else to do!) When we play for ourselves we turn the lights off. Sometimes I play and don't imagine that I can even see Larry or Christian. I just listen to their sounds. At the beginning of public improvisation we're somehow conscious of the people out there. But once we get into it I totally do not even think there are people out there. I do not even think Larry is there—well, occasionally I do. But nowadays it's not that much different if we're in private or with audiences.

Polansky: There's one major difference: before we play in public, Kui always says "What are we going to wear?" [Laughter] She never says that at rehearsals.

Kui Dong: Well, it's a chance to shine.

Audience: When you're doing this free improvisation, do you know what you're going to be playing? Everybody plays piano?

Polansky: I play guitar.

Audience: So do you plan or do you think "this is a G chord" or "this is this" or do you just kind of strum and let it all happen?

Polansky: Well, I can pretty much guarantee you won't hear any G chords. [Laughter]

Audience: Do you know what you're going to do?

Wolff: No, it's better not to know. And it's impossible to rehearse. In some way that's an attraction. You just have to sort of jump in and see what happens. And because it's three people, each of you sets the other off, and you've got a kind of pinball situation. For instance, I'll take one idea. It's gotten very loud and my feeling is that it's too loud, it's too much. So I'm allowed to stop playing entirely, or play very, very quietly, nearly inaudibly, until finally someone can hear what I'm doing. [Laughter] So that kind of decision happens within the context of the situation. But certainly not initially. Just before you start, you might think, "Well, what am I going to do? Maybe I'll start with something in a high register," or some other very rough idea, and that's it. And then we take it from there. Incidentally, sorry, there's no way to teach this. I have a very good friend who's a professor of improvisation at the conservatory in Liège and all of us are constantly thinking, "What's he doing?" [Laughter] Basically he improvises with the other students. That's it. That's the best they can do. Or maybe they can talk about it afterwards and break it down.

Polansky: Sometimes we make initial decisions that are not "What are we going to play" but, rather that Christian will prepare a piano in some way.

Wolff: You think about your sound.

Polansky: I play mandolin or fretted guitar or fretless guitar. Sometimes I throw in some odd electronics, or I'll play some unusual guitar that maybe "doesn't work." Sometimes I'll say, "I feel like playing mandolin for a while tonight." And that will drastically affect what happens. Or if I'm playing the fretless a completely different set of things may happen. I often think about those initial decisions just as ways to get myself into some kind of other space. And Kui will do something like close the piano lid for a while and play with that.

Audience: A jazz player, when they're improvising and thinking about what they're playing, are going to have a real clear concept: "I'm in the key of G, I'm playing these changes." With the choices that you're making, do you know your instrument clearly enough that when you go to press your fingers down you're thinking essentially "C, F#, A," or whatever? Is it that specific? Or is it just "I'm moving my hand in this direction to play something high, I don't care if I hit G \flat or E or whatever"? Would you say it's pitch-specific or more gestural? Or maybe you can't tell.

Kui Dong: Occasionally if they don't start, and someone has to start, then I'll start. And I like F# very much. So occasionally I will start with that. [Laughter] But mostly, I think a lot of gesture. I'm very familiar with the keyboard. Wherever my hands are I know exactly what notes I'm playing. But I don't think exactly that I'm going to play those *itches*. My hands are there, I know they're around a certain place, but gesture is still probably the most important thing.

Polansky: I often play a fretless guitar which I deliberately de-tune in some random way. So in many cases it's not possible to have that kind of control—although it pops out, because there's a lot of conventional music in our collective soul. And it pops out a lot in funny ways and goes in and out of focus a lot, even so.

Audience: I'm interested in what you just said about de-tuning the guitar. Do you do this literally in a random way, so that you have to move purely by instinct and you're surprised by notes that you make?

Polansky: Yes, I often do that, even with the fretted guitar, or the mandolin. I'll re-tune. Mainly because if they're conventionally tuned, I'll play in a certain way. I'll tend to go to certain kinds of guitar stuff. But if I can't do that, I'll do other things. With this particular group, I'm much more interested in the other things. I almost feel that if I'm in a

conventional tuning on a fretted guitar with this group, I'm sort of cheating, as if I shouldn't have that kind of facility. But it might be different with a different group, in a different situation. I've committed to the fretless in this group as my main instrument, just because it's fun for me to play. It's really enjoyable.

Audience: But when you de-tune it, do you find yourself adapting to that new tuning?

Polansky: Sure. I'm listening constantly and trying to listen to the others and pull out sounds from the instrument that are part of what we're doing.

Audience: So there's an evolution throughout.

Polansky: Yes. And I'll be re-tuning all throughout the piece.

Audience: You mentioned you don't try to hear a G chord. So how and in what ways do you listen to each other and try to coordinate? Or do you try to coordinate at all?

Wolff: By ear. That's the short answer. I don't know about Larry and Kui, but sometimes I decide "there's too much of that." It's getting too harmonious. So I just decide to play and pay no attention to what they're doing at all for a stretch. Nothing's really fixed. It's a very fluid situation. Sometimes you're quite focused, other times you're gestural, other times you're thinking about pitch patterns or whatever, all those possibilities that you have in mind.

Polansky: I'm determined to play a G chord Friday. [Laughter] The problem is I'm going to have to learn how to do one. By Friday I think I'll have it.

Asplund: Now, you all recorded the [Wolff] *Exercises* recently.³ Was it a bigger group? Who was in it?

Wolff: It was a big group, maximum nine people. But of those who are here, it was only Larry and myself who played in that group.

Asplund: Would you mind telling us a little bit about the *Exercises*, then describing the differences between playing those and the free improvisation that you do?

Wolff: That's an interesting question from several points of view. Because the *Exercises* are actually a long way from our improvisations. They are pieces where pitches are given mostly on single staves—in fact they're *only* on single staves in the first fourteen—and look like a series of melodic fragments. They can be read in at least two clefs, most simply treble and bass. Instrumentation—number or what kind—is not specified, and the general instruction is that everybody plays from the same music, playing in a kind of improvised heterophony where unison is your point of reference (though you need never play in unison). You start together and play more or less together, and come to a kind of consensus—though one of the challenges of playing the *Exercises* is to be sure that it doesn't sound like a lot of people trying to play together and not succeeding! It has to make sense. So that's the basic setup. The pitches are given, so in that sense it's not at all improvised. But the actual heterophonic quality is completely improvised. One more thing to note is that you are never required to play. We may start all playing together, for example, but three people could drop out for a phrase, or a part of a phrase, or could play just two notes of a phrase, first or last note or whatever. So that's also open as to how you play these pieces. The instrumentation is free, but also how you play the instruments. If you have a string instrument, whether you're playing *col legno*, or *pizzicato*, or normal, whatever—all of that's open. And there is no tempo given. Somebody sets a tempo by starting and others join. But if somebody within a group of four decides "I'd like to go a little bit faster," that person might start speeding it up. They then still have to listen to see if the others join them or not. And if they don't, then the rule is that that person should either stop, drop out, or else slow down so the others can catch up and get back into a more or less unison situation. The same goes for dynamics and phrasing. So you might say the details of the performance are constantly being negotiated in real time.

Asplund: And these pieces are hard. They're notey.

Wolff: There are lots of notes. And it's hard to make musical sense out of it all, let me say. That's probably the most difficult thing about the *Exercises*, even though they do have a clear melodic character to them. Let me describe how I wrote them. With each one I set down material basically consisting of pitch collections or made-up scales. Because each piece was fairly simple—just one line—and I was writing most of the time, I tried to write as though I were improvising. In other words, I wasn't composing so much as I was improvising with the material that I had set up for myself. So that idea of improvising was already at work in

the actual compositional process, to the extent that one can do that. There wasn't a lot of erasing, going back, fixing stuff. I just sort of plunged in and did it. Occasionally something would turn out to be no good and I'd throw the whole thing out. But I wouldn't try to fix it along the way.

Polansky: I think the nature of your question is that the *Exercises* are perceived as some kind of a bridge between improvisation and not. And that may be true in some sense but I think of them in a different way. I think of them as a kind of super-virtuosic chamber music. And the virtuosity is, to me, more interesting than the conventional conception of virtuosity. To play them well, you have to exercise every iota of musical care and experience you have, some of which is quite conventional. You've got to play the notes and you've got to play them beautifully. But on top of that, you've got to use every technical skill you have, and then every compositional skill you have, because you can go with any clef at any time, and all of the sounds are yours, including the inflections and articulations. And it's all about listening and super-listening and super-playing at the same time. So it became less and less to me about improvisation and more and more about "I've got to really focus here. These are really great players and we could really do something extraordinary here, if we can bump it up to that next level." It had almost nothing to do with improvisation at a certain point, but more with what I think Christian really intended: taking that sort of chamber music ensemble experience to another, very different sort of level than any other music would take it. I think they're unique in that.

Hicks: All of you as composers and players are very interested in heterophony. What draws you to heterophony? What from a spiritual or aesthetic or technical point of view, draws you in that direction, even though all your music is quite different?

Wolff: I have a specific two-part answer to that in connection with the *Exercises*. One part is positive, the other negative. When I was in high school my early music experience was almost exclusively classical. I was completely saturated with that music. And I didn't like contemporary music a bit. But, we used to go, my friends and I, to hear Dixieland (this was in New York City in the forties). It was fantastic. I was very taken with that music. One of the things that struck me about it—though I didn't realize or conceptualize it at the time—was the heterophonic playing. I really loved it. I didn't really think about that when I wrote the *Exercises*. But looking back, I think that's where they came from.

And then negatively—or differently anyway—the *Exercises* were written shortly after the emergence of the first minimalists—Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich—whose music I enjoyed very much at the time, thought it was really terrific. The *Exercises* were sort of my attempt to make a response to that music. I had the image of their music in my mind. But my response was a kind of “variation/distortion,” if you will, a displacement of the minimalist idea.

Polansky: I’ve been interested in heterophony all my musical life, because I like the notion that people follow generally interesting rules in their lives and do them without governance of the micro-structure and without governance of the particular moment-to-moment coordination. That seems like a very nice way to run the world. If I have to live somewhere, that’s how I’d like it to be: you trust that the person next to you is doing something really cool, but you’re not kibitzing them too much about how they’re doing it. And occasionally you go in and out with that person. That seems like ideal life to me. So all my music has been involved in that notion of simultaneous rule systems. I often joke that I can’t stand counterpoint and have no feeling for it. I just can’t understand why you would want to write a two-part invention. I learned how to do it, but it seems so unnecessarily restrictive in every way—socially, spiritually, politically. It wasn’t until much later in my life that I discovered many of my most interesting musical influences also felt the same way. One of those influences, of course, is Christian, whom I didn’t meet until I was much older. Another is Ruth Crawford Seeger, who wrote very explicitly about heterophony not only in the theoretical work with Charles Seeger,⁴ but also in a very beautiful way about American folk music, including prison songs. She talks about the song “Go Down, Old Hannah” in her book *The Music of American Folk Song* and gives a beautiful description of heterophony. You realize that what it meant to her was people singing together, but not feeling obligated to sing exactly together. They were free to be themselves in a group experience—and that seems what it’s all about. I urge anybody who’s interested in the word heterophony to find that paragraph in the book that is the most beautiful exposition I’ve ever encountered.⁵ And if you hear the song she’s talking about, “Go Down, Old Hannah,” a prison song, almost no more needs to be said.

Kui Dong: My starting point was a personal experience. I witnessed a funeral in a remote village in China. A group of old women was singing and I was moved by the way they sang. Just one woman started singing a particular melody and then the group started to join in. Each one fol-

lowed the same tune, but with a kind of improvisational shift. It was a very, very personal experience, because it was raining and it was late and, I don't know, something got to me. I think that that sound as a whole is *almost* oneness, because you combine differences within oneness. So I said, "Okay, this is something that is really interesting. I'd like to do it in my composition." Later on it got very technical; I figured that you can't do it too much. And I'm not quite sure how to use microtonal systems yet. I don't know if I can feel them, because I'm pretty much classically trained, which involves always thinking about harmony. I'm teaching harmony too. But when I teach it, I think of harmony as more of a linear coordination than a chord progression. So when I think about voice leading, it's almost like thinking thinner rather than thicker. And then I realize that this may be a technical point for me, that I can avoid actually building harmony. You write for thinner lines and it lines up itself. So I don't really care, when it lines up, what kind of harmony, what chord—not chord, but sound—you're going to get. It lines up in a kind of way that it writes itself. I think I'm more into writing music this way.

Polansky: I think that that's a beautiful phrase: "Oneness with difference." I'll steal that! Christian used Dixieland as a personal example, and that's one of my models too. But I grew up in and around a lot of orthodox Jewry. And I don't know if anyone here has ever been to a small orthodox Jewish service in Brooklyn (or somewhere like that), but it's completely cacophonous. It's everybody going through the liturgy in their own time, in their own corner, in their own key. It's a wonderful example of heterophony. And that sound is very much in my head. I can't even deal sonically with the antiphonal and unison conventions of a reformed Jewish service. Not for any religious reasons—I'm not religious at all—but because I don't like the sound of it. I don't like people speaking at the same time. I don't like responsive reading; honestly, it creeps me out a bit. And what more than creeps me out, what *scares* me, is crowds yelling the same thing in unison. I feel that if that many people are saying the same thing together, and the thing is simple enough to be said together, it can't be good. But I love that sound of people off in corners praying in some weird tone of voice, and everybody at their own rate, yet all doing more or less the same thing. I think that's a kind of a wired-in childhood experience that has influenced my musical growth.

Hicks: All of you refer, one might say, to vernacular origins that are all spiritual in some way. I mean, you're talking about a religious service,

you're talking about a funeral procession, and you're talking about Dixieland, which really grows out of a gospel tradition as well. Do you sense that heterophony—or improvisation, for that matter—is a spiritual practice, or meditative practice? Unlike most people here, I spent my teenage years in Pentecostal churches where we were singing in tongues at the end of hymns. And there was a feeling of being united yet independent at the same time. It seems like you all in some way are reaching for that feeling. Is that true?

Polansky: Yes.

Hicks: But you're composing as well as improvising that way. Does that take away from it at all, for the players? Would it be better, rather than writing it all out, to say, as you were suggesting, "Just generally play this, or interpret in your own way, simultaneously"?

Polansky: Well, I think Christian's music is a model of how to resolve that question.

Asplund: I want to follow up on a question I asked Christian about ten years ago. I was very curious at the time about political music and very interested in Frederic Rzewski's music in particular. (I was going through a somewhat politically radical phase myself.) Rzewski had visited Seattle a few months before, and I asked him about it: "Are you still engaged politically in your music?" And he was not happy about my question. Then I asked you, Christian, and you said, "Yes, I think it's important to be engaged." But we didn't get a chance to talk about it much. I do have this sense that the New York School, or at least Cage, was not as enthusiastic as you in the '70s and '80s about political music. So I'm curious: are you still thinking the same as when you first began to engage political matters or ideas in your music, or have you revised your thinking about political music?

Wolff: Well, there was a stretch where I felt everything that I did had to have some political element or aspect to it. Just for a little context, we're talking about late '60s, early '70s, which is before most of your times, I presume. This was the period of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement (connected to the Vietnam War), and student upheavals. A very turbulent time. It was impossible not to respond to it in some way. Of course, those conditions have changed by now. But that whole era came after a time that was so remarkably *apolitical*, a period when people took no particular interest in political issues. The level of awareness

in politics was very low in general. So when it hit, it hit very hard. And I found myself involved with that new awareness along with a number of other musicians. Frederic Rzewski was one; the other main one was the English composer Cornelius Cardew. I was very close to both of them. We all went through a major political conversion, if you like. We took a serious interest in these issues, and in the questions that they raised for what we were doing as musicians. That situation has changed and has passed. So I don't try to do the kinds of things that I tried to do then. However my political orientation has not changed at all. It's still there. I don't feel the need—and I haven't felt it in some time—to have every piece be some kind of political statement. On the other hand, if I find a text or if I find an occasion to introduce my political views into the music, I'll still do it.

Asplund: I know that many people are very opposed to the idea of a political art, feeling that that somehow diminishes art's value. Has your opinion of the possibility of a political art changed?

Wolff: I guess it has, yes. I probably started out partly thoughtlessly, partly idealistically. And I've become I won't say more cynical, but more realistic in some sense—or what I imagine to be more realistic. Let me put it this way: I've seen much more clearly that if you want to do politics, you should do politics. If you want to do music, that may or may not have something to do with politics. Cage came up with much the same belief. But his situation is interesting because it was not that simple. Starting in the same period, actually, the late '60s, when he started to read the newspapers and he started a series of writings—"How to improve the world (you will only make matters worse)," for example⁶—he clearly became engaged. He stopped reading his Zen texts and all that stuff and started getting himself up on current events. Being a very intelligent man, he could see that the world was in terrible shape. And also having this other side to him, an almost evangelical side, he felt that in some sense he should do something about it. Eventually he came to the notion of anarchism exclusively. For Cage, anarchism in a sense supplanted the Zen, or the attitude that comes out of Zen. It's when he discovered Thoreau, one of our great political writers and thinkers. And in fact, for a short while he was very enthusiastic about Mao. He took it all the way. That didn't last too long—which again was very smart of him, it turned out. But he did go through that kind of a phase and arguably, from then on, wrote a kind of political music insofar as it represented a model or metaphor, if you will, for anarchism in some form. I think what Cage objected to above all, though, was the idea of

propaganda—in other words, that music is used for something else and is not just *music*. He had this very clear sense that things should be what they are and that they shouldn't, as it were, interfere with each other. So music was one thing, politics was another. On the other hand, he explicitly said somewhere in the early '70s that one thing you could do in music was to model alternative ways of social conduct—and therefore political conduct, ways of organizing how people work together—of respecting one another, of going against hierarchies. All these various things you could actually model in the ways music was organized and arranged and presented. So the music—even though it doesn't have some text that says “Go out and do this” or “Go out and do that”—shows you, through the way that it's made and through the way it's performed and presented, what an alternative kind of social life might look like.

Hicks: Kui is unique up here: she's a woman, she's the youngest, and she has a whole different cultural history. How does this work in your mind, Kui, politics and music? Do you feel this connection between political statement and music? Or are they really separate worlds for you?

Kui Dong: I think I always try to separate them. I think music should be music, not politics. I guess it's because my teachers at the conservatory all learned in the 1950s and 1960s that they had to write something according to the slogan of “Arts for People” that the Communist party had set up. For them music or art and politics were basically together. You couldn't even express your individuality. So they would not try to. But I grew up later than them. I was born after the Cultural Revolution and I could start writing in a period of time when individualism was flourishing, especially in the period of '84 to '86. I think that's the most culturally and intellectually interesting period for China. Not now, though. Now it's not that. In the '80s, Chinese culture got the best filmmakers, the best authors, the best of everything. It was a diversity. It went from the old oneness to suddenly going all different directions. But since '86 I think the government thinks that intellectuals might think too much. So now it's all commercial.

Hicks: So is music a refuge from the world?

Kui Dong: I haven't suffered that much. But if I'm very upset, then I listen to music a lot and it makes me feel better. So I think music is a kind of self-enjoyment. If I write music I like to bring that joy to myself and then, if people happen to like my music—and I'm not sure if they'll

like it or not—then I think I did my job. I bring joy to myself and to others.

Audience: Is there any advice, or any encouragement that you could give to young composers to stick with it? Is it worth it?

Polansky: Yes to the first part, no clue about the second.

Wolff: I think it has to be something that you have to do. If you can't live without doing it, then do it. If the impulse is not that strong, then maybe not.

Polansky: Well, I used to agree with Christian on that, but now I've modified my opinion slightly: even if you're not sure, what could be wrong with it? That is, there could be no better way to spend your life than doing music, even if you're not completely clear that you have no choice. So why not do the most interesting and incredible thing you could do, no matter what it exactly means? And stamina is everything. My definition of a composer is someone who is still composing. That's it.

Wolff: Yes, that's basically it.

Polansky: I used to say, "Ask yourself if you have no choice." But sometimes people are not exactly sure. So I've modified my answer a little now. I say: Give it a try. And if you're still doing it in thirty years, it's not so bad. Better than working for a living.

NOTES

1. The recording of the panel discussion was transcribed by Dan Barrett and edited by Michael Hicks in consultation with the participants.
2. For photos and recordings of the trio see <http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/trio/trio.index.html> (accessed 28 August 2007).
3. Recordings from these sessions were released in September 2006 on Christian Wolff, *Ten Exercises* (New World 80658). The players were Natacha Diels, Garrett List, Larry Polansky, Michael Riessler, Frederic Rzewski, Robyn Schulkowsky, Chiyoko Szlavnic, and Christian Wolff.
4. See Mark D. Nelson, "In Pursuit of Charles Seeger's Heterophonic Ideal: Three Palindromic Works by Ruth Crawford Seeger," *Musical Quarterly* 72 (1986): 458–75.
5. In the paragraph to which Polansky refers, Seeger describes the heterophony in "Go Down, Old Hannah" as "striking," repeated hearings of which "will reveal the fact that the blue notes do not stand apart from their fellows [but represent] an imperceptibly graduated scale of departure from fine-art standards ranging from the obviously 'distorted' single intonations to such subtle nuances in the whole melodic line that only the laboratory instrument could distinguish them from orthodox fine-art practice"—Ruth Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music*, ed. Larry Polansky and Judith Tick (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 69.
6. Published in John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan, 1969), 3–20. Also available online at <http://www.ubu.com/aspn/aspn4/diary.html> (accessed 28 August 2007).