some aspects of an experimental attitude

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL PARSONS

Michael Parsons is an English composer; born in 1938, read classics at Oxford, following this with a year at the Royal College of Music, studying composition with Peter Racine Fricker (1961-62). During the 1960s he composed atonal and serial music in a "post-Webern" idiom and wrote music criticism for The Listener. But it was only after the formation of the Scratch Orchestra (of which he was one of the three founding members) in 1969 that he became known as a composer - now of experimental music using Cardew as a starting point. Parsons is not associated with the Maoist ideological group which was formed from members of the Scratch about two years ago, but continues to write music with an experimental basis.

On January 5 this year Parsons joined with three other composers who have not followed Cardew into his present political activity - John White, Chris Hobbs (previously interviewed in CONTACT 3) and Howard Skempton - to present a concert of their own recent music in the Purcell Room. The extracts which follow are taken from a long conversation which the composer had with Keith Potter on the Wednesday evening before the concert.

We had been discussing the history of English experimental music up to now, the part played by the Scratch Orchestra, and the present situation in which those former members of the Scratch who have chosen not to follow Cardew now find themselves. We got on to talking about the apparent attempts to get English experimental music out of its "ghetto situation" and, in particular, the Experimental Music Catalogue. (CONTACT continues its review of music from this in the present issue) and the book, Scratch Music, edited by Cardew (1972).

Is anybody buying pieces from EMC at all?

It's selling slowly, but regularly, I think. A few orders a week.

To what kind of people?

There seems to be a great deal of interest in English experimental music in America at the moment. The English publisher of Scratch Music has only sold 1200 copies in this country, but he's also sold 12,000 to America. Which surprised me very much, because, to me, that book is of rather esoteric interest. I can't imagine what it means to anyone who didn't go through the Scratch Orchestra. But again, I'm not really interested whether it sells or not. Once I've finished a piece, it's not that I'm not interested in what happens to it, but it becomes a secondary consideration: I get more interested in what I'm doing next. You can never be quite certain how other people understand your actions. I'm not saying one should be irresponsible and do things without considering the consequences. But this is one difference between politics and music. You have to be aware of the implications of a political act. In music it's more ... wait and see what happens. Experimental music is a meaningful concept, but experimental politics would be extremely irresponsible.

Do you go along with the term "experimental music"?

I prefer to regard it as an attitude rather than a particular type of music. When you make an experiment, the literal meaning is that you're trying to find something out ... You make an experiment in order to get some new information about the situation.

What exactly are you experimenting on? Are you experimenting on your audience, for instance?

Experimenting with sound, with time, with the act of listening ... Not on the audience, but with the audience, certainly. To find out what the reaction of an audience - not just any audience, but a particular one - might be. The same piece can, as you know, produce very different kinds of reactions in different contexts. That again is interesting: a piece is not the same in another context, with another audience. It's a different piece. Just as a Beethoven sonata played on a grand piano in a concert hall is a completely different sound from that which you get from a little upright piano in a small room. This is something you don't find in the notation, for instance, but it's an aspect of performance which is very vital. So to take an experimental attitude would be to take into account all of those things.

Do you think it's part of an experimental attitude to question an audience on how they reacted? As, for instance, Cardew did at the Burdocks concert in London a couple of years ago?

In that particular case he rather interrogated the audience: he seemed to be using the audience for his own ends. No, I would say that was not an experimental act. Because he was doing it to extract information for his own purposes. But for the audience to question each other, and for there to be a general atmosphere of questioning, I think definitely, yes. The concert is itself a question: a performance of a piece of music and the way people react to it are themselves enough. That's a valid form of communication: question and answer. Other questions arise out of it ... people go to the pub and talk about it later. I'm interested more in individual reactions than in any abstract idea of what the audience thinks as a whole. But I wouldn't question people with the intention of finding out what effect my piece had on them. Rather, simply as a way of getting to know them, if you like. I wouldn't just want to know what effect I'd had on them in that particular piece. Because that would again bring it back to the single musical object, which is what we're trying to get away from. That, to me, is what's important about the experimental attitude: this openness, the work is not self-contained and fixed, but something which you put into the world and which people make their own use of.

Nevertheless it is there, it is an object. It's like looking at a thing from different angles. But the work is still in a sense a musical object.

It is necessary to distinguish between the notation, which is constant and objective, and what you hear on a particular occasion, which is variable. One aspect of the experimental attitude is not to regard a piece of music as a fixed object, not to identify what happens with what is written down. Notation is designed to bring something about, but not to describe it precisely. Indeterminate scores (such as Christian Wolff's Burdocks), verbal scores, scores which specify procedures rather than sound-materials, make this distinction clear, but the same is equally true of conventionally notated music. What happens is an event, an activity. An audience's viewpoint depends on the attitudes and presuppositions they come with. A South Bank audience would probably be made up of individuals with different but related attitudes, so there would be something in common in their response to a given piece. A working class audience would respond quite differently, and this would make it a different sort of event entirely.

We continued this discussion about audiences for some while. Parsons didn't seem too sure of what kind of audience to expect at the concert, since there hadn't been an experimental music concert on the South Bank since the Gavin Bryars evening in December 1972. (In fact there was a very good turnout - which included many familiar faces.) Later we returned to the music in the concert.

All the music is fully controlled and notated - with the reservation that, having been through this experimental period, all of us having developed what I've tried to define as this experimental attitude to music, we recognise that control doesn't mean complete control over everything that's going to happen. It means that you establish certain controls, but that you're also interested in what departs from the controls, you're interested in the irrational elements as well. As soon as you establish a rational control of some kind, what it in fact does is to make you aware of things which are outside that control. And this is, I think, the essential thing about experimental music: the recognition of the limits of control. This still applies to what we're doing ... The more you control, the more you become aware of elements which you're not controlling - that's one way of putting it. For instance, Rhythmic Study No. 4, which I'm going to play in the concert: it's a very long piece, and although it's completely controlled in terms of the note-to-note sequence of events - in fact it's so completely predetermined that if the piece was lost, but you had the first few bars and knew what the procedure was, you could reconstruct it note for note - yet I've got no idea what effect it's going to have in the concert, played complete under those conditions. Because the controls don't cover all the aspects of it. They didn't, for instance, cover the length of it: the length is a result of the decisions made in writing it, but the actual length it came to is much greater than I'd expected. And the length is an essential part of it ... To take another, simpler, example: say you took the trouble to write out a whole page of single notes, all notated exactly the same. The notation would draw attention to the similarity of those notes. But performances would draw attention to the differences: all those single notes would sound different, each one would be slightly louder or softer, slightly longer or shorter - not to mention what else might be going on coincidentally. They'd all be unique, single moments. And you wouldn't maybe notice the uniqueness of each note if they were all different in other respects. But to make them the same in one respect - pitch, for instance - would emphasise their differences in other respects. To go back again to Cardew, who is in so many ways the source in this country of this attitude which I've defined as experimental - equal in importance to Cage, I think: the essay he wrote in the Treatise Handbook about LaMonte Young's X for Henry Flynt deals with exactly

this question ... The more you try to make successive sounds uniform, the more you realise this is impossible and the more you realise what you're in fact doing is revealing the differences between successive sounds. The aim is to produce a uniform succession of sounds, but the result is to produce a succession of different sounds.

The composer then played me Rhythmic Study No. 4, a 20-minute piece based on a ragtime pattern which is put through a series of rhythmic systems, thereby subtly changing its character. The new percussion pieces of John White and Chris Hobbs are also continuums and systems-based. We spoke about the relationship of these pieces to the music of Terry Riley and Steve Reich.

I was very excited when I first heard Terry Riley's music and took part in early performances of In C and so on. But at the same time I wanted to find some way of going on from the repetitive continuum situation; that is, to take that as a starting point and introduce some element of structure into it. Terry Riley sets up a great wash of sound, which is like a sort of raw material ...

You want more intellectual content?

Well, my piano piece has a type of structure which Terry Riley's music doesn't have.

But is it very perceptible, do you think, in that piece?

I think it's perceptible to varying degrees, obviously depending on how familiar you are with the piece. Most people will be hearing it for the first time, so it will depend on how familiar they are with that kind of music in general and also just how hard they listen. I'd like to believe that what's going on is fairly clearly perceptible: the notes get more spaced out, the sections get longer and the chord changes get further and further apart.

You want people to hear the process involved?

I want them to hear the general outlines of it, not how every detail is determined - I want people to hear the melodies, really. What interests me is the way in which the procedure which I used to write the piece reveals all sorts of melodic implications in the ragtime figure which one would never have suspected from hearing it initially. And playing it is like getting to know your own piece. Whereas most composers think they know a piece when they've written it, I wrote this piece and then afterwards realised that was only the beginning. But the melodies are not "composed" melodies, as

Mozart or Schubert would have written; they're "found" melodies - involuntary, if you see what I mean. They are by-products of the rhythmic procedure.

That goes back to another tradition of experimental music - the "found object".

Yes, it does. By transforming the figure according to a certain rhythmic procedure I knew roughly the kind of thing that was going to come up, but I didn't know exactly. And so what actually did come up is constantly surprising ...

What about the other piece of yours in the concert - Highland Variations?

This is for string quartet and is based on piobaireachd, the classical music of the Scots highland bagpipe.

That was another thing which seems to have come up with the Scratch Orchestra - a fascination with Scottish things.

We were interested in all kinds of music, and particularly in music from outside the European classical tradition, at that time. This is true, again, of a lot of Americans - Terry Riley and LaMonte Young have both become performers of Indian music.

And Steve Reich has studied Ghanaian drumming ...

Yes. And all these things are on record now. You could never have heard so many different kinds of music at any previous time. Scottish music, piobaireachd, is particularly interesting to me, because it has certain things in common with experimental music. It has a certain sort of inevitability, a certain uniformity and very restricted type of sound which it concentrates on to the exclusion of everything else - which is another characteristic of experimental music, I think. A sort of extreme concentration on one thing. Neither uses contrasting elements in the way that is normally considered necessary for compositions.