

Second, and Third, Thoughts Nancarrow's Reworkings of *Study No. 18*

by Helena Bugallo

Conlon Nancarrow's pieces for traditional instruments and his player-piano compositions are frequently interlinked by reworkings and adaptations.¹ Such overlaps in musical content are, however, rare when we restrict ourselves to his work in the mechanical medium. In fact, the composer seemed to have made a conscious effort to maintain his *Studies* – as he laconically entitled the vast majority of his player-piano pieces – as independent, self-contained, clearly differentiated creations. Two exceptions date from his late years. In 1980, he announced in an interview that he was working on a series of alternative versions of the early *Study No. 2a* (ca. 1950),² intending to leave its melodic and harmonic structure intact while slightly modifying its rhythmic proportions. He made rolls of three different versions of the piece and referred to them as “didactic studies.”³ This initiative may well have been related to his newly gained public exposure and the growing need to explain his work to others. Although a fascinating listening exercise, the set constitutes no more than a series of variants too close to the original for each piece to be considered on its own merits. The second instance of a reworking dates from 1988, when Nancarrow revised and expanded another early composition for the celebrations of György Ligeti's sixty-fifth birthday in Hamburg. This time, he took as his basis the original *Study No. 3* (ca. 1950), which he had withdrawn from his catalogue in the 1960s. The main change in the revised version, entitled

1 Nancarrow's numerous adaptations include player-piano realizations of complete instrumental compositions (e.g. *Sonatina, Tango?*) or portions of them (e.g. *Toccata, Suite for Small Orchestra No. 1*) as well as instrumental arrangements of original player-piano works (e.g. *String Quartet No. 3, Study No. 26*). Although less frequent, there are also reworkings of his instrumental music. For a further discussion of this topic, see Felix Meyer, “Auf Spurensuche im Nachlass Conlon Nancarrow: Zur Geschichte der *Study No. 3d*,” *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, 13 (2000), pp. 19–25.

2 Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, “Conlon Nancarrow,” *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, NJ, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1982), pp. 281–303, esp. p. 300.

3 The three “didactic studies” have accompaniments based on the following proportions: *No. 2x* (5:9), *No. 2y* (4:7), and *No. 2z* (5:7).

For Ligeti, was the addition of one section in the middle of the piece. Still unknown is whether this addition was actually composed in 1988 or derived from earlier material. Apart from this section, however, *Study No. 3* and *For Ligeti* are virtually identical.

In this context, the discovery of a truly modified *Study No. 18*, i.e. a new version of the piece clearly rooted in the original yet sufficiently remote from it to possibly deserve its own opus number, is nothing less than intriguing. I first became acquainted with this version some years ago when it was included, along with other previously unpublished material, in a recording project featuring the composer's original player pianos.⁴ Although the roll shows the number "18" pencilled at the beginning, the nature and degree of affiliation with the original *Study* was not immediately apparent. Further examination of the rolls and of several other primary sources – all housed in the Conlon Nancarrow Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation – has made it possible to decode important aspects of the relationship between the two pieces and to establish two different stages in the transformation from one to the other.

Study No. 18 (1950s)

Study No. 18 was originally the sixth item in the multi-movement *Seven Canonic Studies* (presently *Nos. 13 to 19*). Here, for the first time, Nancarrow methodically explored the possibilities of strict temporal canons.⁵ The seven *Studies* are also interconnected by a series of expanding and contracting isorhythms, implemented differently in each piece. *Study No. 18* is playful in character, soft, and entirely *staccato*. Formally, it is a two-part temporal canon in the proportion 3:4 with the convergence point at the end. Unlike the other canons in the set, the two temporal streams are unequal: the slower part consists of an accompanied melody, while the faster part imitates only the melody one octave higher. Six isorhythmic layers, articulated always by single short notes, comprise the accompaniment.⁶ Synchronized in a *tutti* only at the opening chord, the six layers contract and expand independently, each in its own register. In combination, they produce an accompaniment with a maximum of two subsequent attacks of the minimum subdivision at any given time, an infrequent vertical alignment

4 This project was a collaboration between the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (Cologne), the Paul Sacher Foundation (Basel), and the Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel/Hochschule für Musik. The recording sessions took place in Basel in 2005 and 2007. The CD containing the aforementioned piece was published in 2012 as Conlon Nancarrow, *Late und Unknown: Works on Rolls* (Mainz: Wergo, WER 6754 2).

5 The original title of the set was *Rhythmic Study XIII*, and the movements were identified as "parts," each with a given number. This was the case at least until 1962, when the work was presented as such in a public concert in Mexico City.

6 For a detailed discussion of the isorhythmic layers in *Study No. 18* and the other *Canonic Studies*, see Kyle Gann, *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 114–27.

(mostly of dyads), and an unpredictable contour. This accompaniment expands over the entire lower half of the instrument (ranging from *B0*, the lowest note on Nancarrow's pianos, to *E4*), and it defines the piece's pointillist texture and irregular rhythm. The melody duplicates this rhythm throughout, as does its faster canonic imitation.

In addition to the player-piano roll, several sources from the Nancarrow Collection document this piece. There is an early draft containing the accompaniment – clearly spaced over four staves – and a truncated early version of the melody – pencilled tentatively, as if improvising. These suggest that the accompaniment was the point of departure for the composition. At the opposite end, in terms of completion, lies Nancarrow's fair copy of the piece, used for its publication in 1985.⁷ Interestingly, this is the only manuscript to include meter indications. With the exception of the pairs of subsequent eighth notes, which are always grouped together at the beginning of a measure, Nancarrow drew a bar line before each note in the piece. In other words, meter equals rhythm in this *Study*, which makes the metrical indications quite superfluous – more a courtesy for the reader than a significant independent component in the work's temporal fabric. Apparently it was precisely the lack of clear metrical associations that paved the way for the piece's subsequent transformations.

Intermediate version

The first step in the revision process was apparently to slur together certain notes in the melody. This change is documented by pencil annotations in the pen score of the original *Study (Plate 1)*.⁸ The slurs, meaning in this case the lengthening of a note until the next attack, materialized particular melodic and metrical associations in the piece. They also generated a certain detachment between the melodies and the accompaniment, previously more closely integrated through their common articulation. The slurred groups, ranging from two to five notes, seem to have been chosen intuitively and largely on the basis of complementarity between the two melodies, as a sketch including the melodic lines only – with the new groupings written out rhythmically – seems to suggest. The second step was to rewrite the accompaniment, mostly respecting its original rhythm but simplifying its texture to single notes in the lowest register. The new accompaniment left no palpable traces of its generating isorhythmic layers, previously bound to a given register. It did, however, leave space for a duplication of the accompaniment directly above it as part of the faster canonic stratum. This new setup then featured both melodies placed above the accompaniments

7 Conlon Nancarrow, *Collected Studies for Player Piano*, vol. 6 (Santa Fe: Soundings Press, 1985; repr. Mainz: Schott, 1988), pp. 183–95.

8 Pen scores are characteristic of Nancarrow's practice, especially in relation to his earlier *Studies*. They are typically copied less meticulously than his final pencil scores and denote the status of a work-in-progress.



Plate 1: Conlon Nancarrow, pen score of the original *Study No. 18*, opening two systems (Conlon Nancarrow Collection). The score uses the sixteenth note as the minimum value, as opposed to the eighth note of the published score. Pencil annotations include measure numbers, slurs in the melody, and a modified bass up to m. 15.

and the two speeds intertwined (Plate 2). The results might have been somewhat similar to *Study No. 44* (1982), in which the two rather unpredictable accompaniments, although performed on different pianos, tend to integrate into a textural whole while the melodies above them retain their individuality.

Much deliberation, and probably much time as well, went into this new version of *Study No. 18*, and it is likely that Nancarrow tried it out on the player piano. Unfortunately no roll with this version, here labeled “intermediate,” has ever been located. Moreover, the once complete score of this version is partially erased and corrected with additional modifications (Plate 3). A complete reconstruction of the intermediate version is thus unfeasible.

Second version

The additional modifications begin at bar 172 of the original piece and fully reflect the posthumously discovered roll. This last version is therefore considerably shorter than the previous two, roughly by one half. The revisions have to do, once more, with the articulations in the melody, the pitches in the accompaniment, and the registral placement of the two parts. More methodically implemented than in the intermediate version, the slurs bind

3

12 PARTS
No. 2 MONOGRAM EXTRA

The image shows a handwritten musical score for 'Study No. 18, entrance of the faster part'. The score is written on ten staves. The first two staves are for the right hand, and the remaining eight staves are for the left hand. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are several circled numbers (74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92) scattered throughout the score, likely indicating specific measures or techniques. A star symbol is present in the top right corner, and the text '12 PARTS' and 'No. 2 MONOGRAM EXTRA' is written above the staves. A circled number '3' is at the top center.

Plate 2: Score of the intermediate version of *Study No. 18*, entrance of the faster part (Conlon Nancarrow Collection).



Plate 3: Score of the intermediate version of *Study No. 18*, with revisions beginning at m. 172 of the slower part (Conlon Nancarrow Collection). Here the melodic line of the slower part has been marked two octaves down, the slurs in the melody have been crossed out and corrected, the accompaniment pitches have been erased and changed, and the faster part has been crossed out, as its imitative entrance does not occur until m. 207 of the slower part.

smaller groups (two and three notes only) and produce sustained notes never longer than a dotted quarter.⁹ A newly composed bass, also of single notes, accompanies the melody in rhythmic unison and emphasizes its minor and major seconds in the consecutive eighth notes with consistent broken octaves. Shorter melodic groupings and a higher degree of musical consistency distinguish this version from the intermediate one. Yet the largest difference is the change in position of the parts: the entire slower part takes place in the bass register, with the melody two octaves lower than in the previous versions, and its faster full imitation occurs in the treble. In this second version, the focus shifts clearly to the counterpoint of the temporal canon, as opposed to the textural prominence of the original piece. The overall result is heavier, because of the bass melodic line, and less playful and enigmatic, due to the polarization of the canonic streams.

Conclusions

Under the umbrella of *Study No. 18*, Nancarrow produced three related versions of a player-piano piece. The intermediate version, most likely discarded by the composer, was a crucial step towards the consolidation of the definitive second version. The different punching techniques used in the original roll and the roll for the second version indicate that a significant

⁹ More specifically, the slurs apply to all groups of two consecutive eighth notes, all 2/8 measures, and the majority of the 3/8 measures.

amount of time elapsed between the production of each roll.¹⁰ Whether the two later revisions were prompted by dissatisfaction with the original piece is unknown. Another possibility is that *Study No. 18* simply showed a potential that the composer decided to continue exploring, perhaps for himself, at a later date. Whatever the case, this group of related pieces grants us an unusual and privileged look into Nancarrow's thought processes. One modification seems to have led to the next, showing a train of thought that the composer may have followed in other instances. It only remains to search for the evidence.

10 The second roll was realized – at the very earliest – after *Study No. 21*, when Nancarrow modified his punching machine and, accordingly, his way of working on paper rolls.