

The Third International Webern Festival (1966) and Webern's Contested Legacy

by David H. Miller

"He is doing F# and I do F, you see."¹ With this musical analogy, Henri Pousseur explained the difference between his perspective and that of his colleague, Cornelius Cardew. The two composers were taking part in a symposium on the legacy of Anton Webern, held during the Third International Webern Festival at the State University of New York, Buffalo, in October 1966 (see *Plate 1*). That this conversation should take place at SUNY Buffalo was appropriate; the university was the home of the recently formed Center of the Creative and Performing Arts (CCPA), with which Cardew was affiliated. It is likewise appropriate that an audio recording of the event – the subject of this essay – should be preserved in the Anton Webern Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation, since the six Webern Festivals organized by Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer between 1962 and 1978 led directly to the Moldenhauers' Webern materials landing in Basel in the mid-1980s.²

Cardew and Pousseur were joined onstage by fellow composers Maryanne Amacher and Niccolò Castiglioni, as well as CCPA co-directors Allen Sapp and Lukas Foss, the latter of whom served as moderator.³ Castiglioni, not fluent in English, was essentially silent, while Amacher, Sapp, and Foss all offered insightful reflections on Webern's legacy. But it was Cardew and Pousseur who dominated the conversation. Over the course of 45 minutes, they debated Webern's influence on contemporary composition and performance practice, frequently finding one another on opposite sides of key issues. The details of their debate, and its broader implications for Webern reception history, will be my focus here.

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- 1 "Webern Symposium," tape recording, Anton Webern Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation (PSS); digital copy on AW CD 13, track 5. All subsequent quotations from the Webern symposium cited below are taken from the same source, and were transcribed by the author.
 - 2 For more recordings from the First and Third International Webern Festivals, see the digital copies on AW CD 5–6, and 8–13, Anton Webern Collection, PSS.
 - 3 A photo of the assembled composers is reproduced on p. 54 of Renée Levine Packer's *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), the definitive account of the CCPA.

3rd
International
Webern
Festival

October 28-30, 1966
Buffalo, New York

Sponsored by
The International Webern Society
State University of New York at Buffalo Music Department
The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy
The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Friday, October 28
Albright-Knox Art Gallery Auditorium
8:30 p.m.

CONCERT AND COMPOSERS' SYMPOSIUM

Concert
By Members of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts

Quintet in Memory of Webern (1955) Henri Pousseur
Messrs. von Wrochem, Castiglioni, Martin, Zonn, and Yadzinsky
Richard Dufallo, *Conductor*

Elytres (1964) Lukas Foss
Messrs. Ben Meir, von Wrochem, and Larrison

Eclat (1965) Pierre Boulez
Chamber Ensemble
Lukas Foss, *Conductor*

INTERMISSION

SYMPOSIUM: *WEBERN'S LEGACY*
Lukas Foss, *Moderator*

Panel: Maryanne Amacher, Robert Breuer, Cornelius Cardew, Henri Pousseur, and Allen Sapp.

Webern manuscripts and original documents will be exhibited in the Gallery Auditorium throughout the Festival.

Plate 1: Third International Webern Festival 1966, program, excerpt: title and program for Friday, October 28 (Anton Webern Collection, PSS).

Disagreements between Cardew and Pousseur began early in the symposium, when Cardew stated (in a rather matter-of-fact way) that his music “certainly isn’t influenced by Webern in the slightest.” He went on to clarify, however, that Webern’s music had once been important to him, as it had been for many postwar composers:

I think that Webern is something that happened to a lot of composers, and it happened to them in very much the same way as I think the war happened. I mean, post-Webernian means postwar. And possibly the reason it became so important was that after the war people wanted to go into a kind of ... spiritual convalescence, and this marvelously pure composer was just what they needed.

Though Webern’s music had served as a balm in the wake of the Second World War, Cardew contended, it no longer spoke to the needs of the present:

In Webern these little things stand as symbols. You’re supposed to comprehend a lot more than is actually written all the time, each note is a network of relationships, and I think that now music is concerned with much more material qualities ... when Webern writes a chord containing all the twelve notes, as a product of a very complex kind of manipulation of lines, he just touches it, you know he just touches this chord in the Second Cantata, and it’s a kind of exquisite dissonance. And now I feel that we need things in larger quantities. I think if we’re going to have pain in music, we need it to be really painful and not exquisite.⁴

4 Cardew referred, presumably, to m. 25 of the first movement of the Second Cantata, which features a chord containing all twelve pitches, each sounded exactly once.

Foss and Amacher saw things similarly. Foss noted that Webern's influence had been much more evident in the 1950s, when many new works "sounded like Webern played fast." Amacher, meanwhile, was the only one present to question the need for so much discussion of legacy in the first place. Instead, she suggested, there ought to be more discussion of "[what] is happening right now before us."

But Pousseur felt differently. "I will probably bring a certain struggle in the panel," he began, "because I don't agree." He continued: "I think that Webern still is an absolutely privileged figure for the music of today, and I think he can be ... in our future of all, he is still a light who lights in the future for me." For Pousseur, whose *Quintette à la mémoire d'Anton Webern* (1955) was performed at the festival, Webern's music was freighted with an emotional significance that it lacked for the other composers onstage. He argued that Webern was the first composer to create in music the convalescence of which Cardew spoke, and furthermore that "this convalescence is still necessary, because the war is not completely finished, yes?" He felt, furthermore, that Webern's music "can change our life" and that it "is really only then understood when we understand that it can change our life, and when we don't understand [it] only in an academical way" – a sentiment that elicited applause from the many Webern devotees in the crowd.

Cardew and Pousseur also butted heads over the composer's influence on contemporary performance practice. "One consequence of Webernian musical practice," Pousseur noted, was a shift in the "the relation of composer and performer." In a post-Webern world,

the performer has to play absolutely precisely what the composer has written. The performer is really used ... like a very good machine who has to realize what is completely programmed by the composer. He is conceived as a machine who has very special properties, which are special human, musical properties, to be able to interpret and to do music and so forth, naturally, what other machines cannot do, but he has no responsibility for the music itself.

Pousseur saw no issue with this shift, and in fact cited his *Quintette* as following Webern's example in this way. Cardew was less sanguine. He agreed that "the concept of the interpreting musicians as machines" was "a legacy of Webern," and noted further that "there was the idea in the 50s that, you know, if you did exactly what the score told you the music would be alright." But he felt that this idea was "naïve" and "probably Webern's fault." Pousseur responded with mock horror – "Webern's fault? Oh no, why?" – which prompted some hearty guffaws from the audience.⁵

5 Cardew and Pousseur's discussion of the role of the performer parallels broader shifts in postwar performance practice. For more on this topic, see Nicholas Cook, "Inventing Tradition: Webern's Piano Variations in Early Recordings," *Music Analysis* 36, no. 2 (July 2017), pp. 163–215; Miriam Sian Quick, "Performing Modernism: Webern on Record," PhD diss., King's College London, 2011.

The differences of opinion expressed by Cardew and Pousseur over the course of the symposium could be attributed to an aesthetic difference. To put it generally, Pousseur's serial music followed more directly on Webern's work, while Cardew took a more experimental approach that diverged from Webern, as seen in his later work with the Scratch Orchestra. This very divide had been predicted by Ernst Krenek in a 1965 letter to Hans Moldenhauer, discussing plans for the Buffalo festival the following year:

A condition should be, however, that there will be no so-called "avant-garde" Umfang (such as [Foss] has cultivated lately – the John Cage type of sophomoric pranks and "pop" art) but a serious consideration of the works of an intermediate generation (of which, of course, I consider myself to be a member). It seems to me only fair that not only the Gabblings of Webern's (doubtful) grandchildren, but also the relatively mature speech of his sons be perceived.⁶

Despite Krenek's objections, the symposium at the Third International Webern Festival made clear that Webern's legacy would be whatever the new generation of composers decided it would be – whether Webern would have approved or not. As Foss put it at one point during the symposium, "sometimes fathers are horrified by all those who claim to be his children, so maybe that would be a similar case here."

Pousseur and Cardew did, however, agree on one thing: that Webern's place in the canon was secure. Pousseur argued that Webern should be studied as one of the "classic" composers, like Bach or Mozart, while Cardew felt that Webern was "alive in music today in the same way as Brahms is alive in music today ... in the sense that every great composer is." The Webern Festivals, along with the Moldenhauer's other work and the Webern Collection's ultimate placement at the Paul Sacher Foundation, helped prove Pousseur and Cardew right.⁷ A shared affection for Webern's music might explain the friendly tone the two composers maintained despite their disagreements, something that Allen Sapp observed towards the end of the symposium: "There seems to be such heat between my two colleagues here, but it's always resolved on a note of sweetness, which I find a little disturbing, because I think that there's about to be a brouhaha here and suddenly the spirit of Webern unites us" (much laughter from the audience). "He is doing F# and I do F," Pousseur explained. "And," Sapp concluded, "it's a perfectly lovely sound."

6 Ernst Krenek, letter to Hans Moldenhauer, 4 April 1965, The Moldenhauer Archives at Harvard University, box 2, item 91.

7 For more on the First International Webern Festival, which took place four years prior to the events discussed here, see David H. Miller, "Forgotten Pasts and Imagined Futures: The First International Webern Festival and the 1962 Seattle World's Fair," *Twentieth-Century Music* 20 (2023); online: doi.org/10.1017/S1478572223000014.