

A Chance Encounter with Christian Wolff

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1. A Conversion to New Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Your music is like no other music, even the music of other composers of the so-called New York School. And you're largely, almost totally self-taught. What made you initially embark on the kind of music you've been making for the last half-century?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: [laughs] How could I? It just sort of happened. You can put together pieces of how it got there. We could go on for a long time doing that. My background originally was very straight, very heavy classical—sort of Bach to Brahms, no exceptions. And nothing after... I mean, I hated modern music when I was a kid. I couldn't stand it. And I had sort of a conversion when I was about 14 years old when I heard, for the first time I heard some Bartók. And actually, the six string quartets got their first New York performance played in a room by the Juilliard String Quartet. And then I got to hear, at Tanglewood of all places, a concert again by the Juilliard Quartet, of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern and that completely turned me on. I thought, yes, OK, now I know what I want to do. Not write music the way they were writing it, but write a music that was as different from traditional music as theirs was. I mean, I would try to do it in my own way.

FRANK J. OTERI: So at the age of fourteen you said you hated modern music, but by the age of sixteen you were hanging out with John Cage!

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah! Well, I said it was a major conversion! [laughs] I should mention the other musical item in that period which I took a long time to percolate through, but I think in the end was really quite important. I didn't listen to pop music at all, I hated it. And if you think about pop music in the late forties I think you'll find, unless you were really seriously into musicals and stuff like that, it was not very attractive. But we used to go hear Dixieland. Kids in school down on the Eastside around 8th Street and just about every Friday and Saturday night and I really liked that a lot. And what I liked about it I think primarily were two things, just the sheer musical energy going, but also two other things: one is the total virtuosity of the performers, which is a totally different kind from that of the classical, it's much freer. And then, this I didn't really understand until much later, but the heterophonic character of the music. That's an idea that somehow registered with me much later, but which I realize was something that I was very interested in myself.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting, that period of the late forties of course was the period of the bebop revolution when jazz went from being popular music to being really heady and intellectual.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: (nods) But you know, I missed that. Somehow—I mean, I knew that something was going on. I think once maybe I went to one of those clubs. Those were more sort of half uptown in the forties and fifties. Somehow I didn't catch on to that; I didn't know enough to go. Dixieland was basically old-fashioned music, so in a sense, I didn't connect to that new movement at all on the jazz side.

FRANK J. OTERI: How did you meet John Cage?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Through my piano teacher, Grete Sultan. I had been doing piano lessons and I had started composing on my own. I had thought that I was going to be a pianist initially but I just didn't have it. So, I practiced less and less and less and wrote more music, and to excuse myself at lessons, I would bring the music I wrote and finally she said, "You know, you need to go see a composer." And I said, "Do you have a suggestion?" I knew one important composer at the time. I knew Varèse who lived around the corner from us on Washington Square. And you know, he was the one composer I could think of that was doing something that seemed to me really interesting in an area where I would like to be working as well, but she said, "No, I think this other person might be very good for you." And that was John Cage.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what was Varèse like in the late forties? That was still the period where he hadn't come out of his silence yet.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Exactly. Yeah. In a word, he was silent. He was a great guy. He was really an interesting person. He was sort of a neighborhood character in the Village and he was a friend of my parents. Once or twice I went to visit him to try to find out about his music. But it was in those days, you know, people didn't have tapes, of course, there wasn't any tape! You have to remember that. And there were no recordings. So you couldn't hear the music and he didn't really want to talk about it. I mean, he talked about these sort of notions he had about electronic music and all of that, but the technology wasn't there yet so he was in limbo. He was sort of waiting for something and then it finally, fortunately, happened and he got back in and wrote those pieces, you know, *Déserts*, and so forth.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, your parents were book publishers?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, I guess that's how they knew Louise [Varèse], because she translated all this poetry.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Exactly, but my memory is of—my memory, it's not my memory at all, but my parents told me, my father: we arrived in 1941 from Europe and moved into this grungy little place on Washington Square and one day there was a knock on the door, and my father goes to open it and there's this guy standing there, you know, this sort of imposing character the way Varèse kind of was, and said, "Bonjour. Je suis Varèse. Welcome to New York." Just like that! You know there's the immigrant community had a way of supporting each other and he may have very well learned from Louise that these people, publishers from Europe, had just come over.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now after you started composing music, did you ever get to interface with Varèse? Did Varèse get to see or hear any of your music?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I don't think so. I mean, Varèse was basically about Varèse. For instance, Cage knew him and admired him a great deal but I don't think the feeling was mutual. I didn't talk to him a whole lot, but I don't recall his ever really talking about other people's music.

FRANK J. OTERI: And the only student I know him ever having was Chou Wen-chung. That's it.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Chou Wen-chung, exactly. So he was really isolated in that sense. I mean, people admired his work, obviously, but he just was there. He was a part of the landscape and didn't really interact with you a whole lot.

2. Meeting Cage & the Genesis of Indeterminacy

FRANK J. OTERI: So, the first meeting with Cage.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, Monroe Street. Which I don't think exists anymore...

FRANK J. OTERI: Now it's the name of a record company!

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Exactly and that's why it is! It was on the Lower East Side. And he said show up at such and such a time, on such and such a day and I went down there, and I'd never been in that part of town before, and it was a little creepy. It was really rundown. It was right at the end, just before you got to the river, just sort of at the Corlears Hook, I guess.

FRANK J. OTERI: Avenue D?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Something like that. Yeah. Now it's a huge housing development, but in those days it was just a bunch of rundown tenement houses. And then next to his house, it once was apparently a bakery that had burned down and they had just abandoned it. And you could still smell this faint baked bread smell. It was really weird and you'd see rats running around. It was really amazing. Anyways, so—I was a kid so I thought, Oh my God! What have I gotten myself into? So I go into this building and there are about six floors and it smells bad and it's really your typical tenement. And I don't know which apartment is his, and of course there are no names anywhere, no indication of who lives where, so I have to go from door to door. I knock. Well, I listen at the door first of all and if there are kids I figure, that's not Cage and I go on. I knock, no answer or and I work my way up the entire building and of course he's on the top floor, right? And I finally knock and there he is, so...

FRANK J. OTERI: Almost a sort of indeterminate quality to that meeting!

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: It was a funny time, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: And had you already written the *Serenade*?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: No, that was later. I had written just a few little things, which I guess were sort of odd. I guess, I was very interested in dissonance and—lots of dissonance—and I would write these sort of canons which were designed to be for maximum dissonance and within a very close range, so they were really like through-composed clusters. But you know, I would write maybe like a page and half's worth and not even that much, you know twenty bars and then I wouldn't know what to do next and Cage really liked what I was doing, but of course he said, "You know, where do we go from here?" But anyway, what he saw he found interesting and he said, "Yes, I'll take you on as a student."

FRANK J. OTERI: Now do those very early pieces survive?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, I have some of them buried away somewhere.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'd love to see them and hear them sometime.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, I don't know if we really want to get into that!

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, your description of them makes them sound really appealing.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, actually there's a piece for four violins. I wouldn't mind hearing that sometimes. But like I said it's a fragment, it's the very beginning of a piece.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, composition lessons with John Cage, what was that like?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, he had projects, four projects I think. One was, he had just heard the Webern Symphony, which had just gotten its first performance at the Philharmonic, and that's where he met Feldman. A very important occasion, both musically, well, in every way. And, you couldn't buy the score, so he went to the public library and copied out the first movement, so he could analyze it and he had just started to do that when he said, "You do this." So that was one assignment: to finish the analysis of the first movement of the Webern Symphony. I think he wanted me to copy the second movement so we could do that one too, but we never got around to doing that. And then, what was the other one? Then he was going to talk to me about rhythmic structure. The Webern was very important for me. I think I am still working under the spell of that... Webern I generally like a lot, but that particular piece, I owe a great deal to it. And then the other really important thing was the rhythmic structures, which is basically how to put a piece together from a structural point of view and so I did exercises to learn how to do that. And then he thought that we ought to be doing something regular, serious. And he thought counterpoint exercises. Which was totally mad, because I hadn't even had harmony yet! But that's what he had done when he'd studied with Schoenberg. There were two years he'd studied with Schoenberg and all they did was 16th-century counterpoint. So, we started off on one of those things and then the last thing was just to do my own thing and bring that in too. That was it. That was the program.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's so interesting because you never wrote twelve-tone music as far as I know.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Nope. Nope.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you were studying Webern...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah. Well, it was in the air. These things happened simultaneously on this side of the Atlantic and then over in Europe. It was Boulez, Cage had—well that's the other thing—Cage had spent a year in Paris, the previous year, on the Guggenheim and had spent a lot of time with Boulez. They were really good friends at that time. And I think he picked up a lot of that information at least and interest and also the interest in Webern has to come from there. And then Stockhausen is just around the corner and so on and so forth. So serial, maybe not twelve-tone, but serial music in one form or another and then remember what started me on all this was the interest in Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. And when I was first writing, before I met Cage, I basically sort of reinvented the twelve-tone system. I worked out kind of a crude version of it, but it seemed to me to be a useful way to try to put the music together.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you actually did write twelve-tone pieces of a kind...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Sort of. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: But then everything took a shift almost in the extreme opposite direction, if you would. Almost to the point that as I read through these things and listen through these pieces, I would dare say in some ways you influenced Cage perhaps as much as he influenced you. You gave him his first copy of the *I Ching*.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, that's not me, that's the *I Ching*! [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, but you were the one that brought it to him.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, yeah. It's true. It was a pleasant accident. Yeah. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: And the very notion of indeterminate music, this thing that we think of as John Cage, "chance music," is not really exclusively John Cage. It kind of came about through these talks that you in many ways instigated by bringing him that book.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: He was headed in that direction and I think that there were various things happening. Because there was Feldman, and Feldman was doing those graph pieces and in some ways they're not at all indeterminate when you get back far enough because that's the way, he just worked with sonorities, he didn't care about the pitches and, you know, he wanted a high flute, you know, you just make that little square high and that's a high flute. You didn't have to worry if it was an E-flat or an F-sharp. That was secondary. But it was, on the other hand, the notion at the time was very shocking to people. They were like, "What? You're not telling the flute what note to play?" [laughs] And so I think Feldman in that sense was the first person specifically to do something like that. I actually did make a piece, which I dug out for some reason recently, but it was a piece for a vocal trio, where the pitches were not specified: there were simply single lines and the melodic movement was indicated, but not what the pitches would be. I mean, each singer simply picked a central, comfortable pitch and then moved up and down according to the movement along the lines and this was in three parts so that you would definitely get a resultant that was unpredictable.

FRANK J. OTERI: And this pre-dated Cage's indeterminate pieces?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Right, yeah. Yeah. But he was definitely looking for something like that and he already worked with these charts, these magic squares, which caused continuities that would be unpredictable. The materials he used within them were fixed but how they would combine and sometimes overlap that was...He was constantly looking for strategies for making that happen by some force other than his own decision.

FRANK J. OTERI: And certainly, the whole notion of a prepared piano... You can never exactly prepare it the same way and you never know what harmonics are going to resonate and what pitches you're going to get.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yes, that's certainly another issue. Yeah, yeah.

3. Interpreting Indeterminate Music

FRANK J. OTERI: How did the first performers react when they were presented pieces with no pitches determined?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Feldman's pieces, for instance? Actually my vocal piece never got played... That sort of disappeared. It still hasn't been played! [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: But you have it.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, I have it. Yeah, we almost got it done last spring, but it didn't happen. The Feldman pieces and these other pieces, I mean, the Cage pieces that were done by chance, that were indeterminate from the compositional point of view and my music and then, not long after, Earle Brown's music, I guess you'd have to say the reaction generally was very hostile. I mean, I got used to very early on that I was doing something that most people really hated. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: But you kept doing it!

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, I kept at it because there were enough people who seemed to think it was okay. I mean, I was interested in just writing music, but I wanted to do something that hadn't been done before. That seemed to me to be partly maybe a little bit of an adolescent thing, do things a little differently, but also just that seemed to me a reasonable way to proceed, and also the way Western music has always proceeded. I mean, that is, the composers you know are the ones who did it differently.

FRANK J. OTERI: But of course the amazing irony to this whole thing is that this almost sounds ego-driven in this strange kind of way and the thing that makes this music so spectacular, I think, is how selfless it is, how completely crystal clear Cage's post-1951 music is, or any of the music of Feldman, and Earle's music as well as yours. It is all just about sound and nothing gets in the way.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: This is true. In fact, that's probably the single thing that unites all of us, the notion of non-expressionist music. I mean it is not about self-expression; it's about, as you said, sounds. And then the sounds themselves can generate and cause feelings in some mysterious way. And that they could still do that was, obviously perfectly okay and fine and desirable, but it wasn't going to be something where we said, "Okay, now you've got to feel this"—bang! You know, that's it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, clearly in fifty years of writing this music and having performances of it. There have been performers who get it.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Oh yeah. Things have changed. I mean, extraordinarily. There were these concerts last year—the *"When Morty Met John..."* series—they played those pieces that I still remember thinking "Oh my God," this terrible reaction and people just love them now. They just sound so beautiful. You can't believe it! Yeah, time will make a big difference honestly.

FRANK J. OTERI: And in terms of performances, who have been some of the people who've championed your music and really allowed it to shine?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I've been very lucky. I mean, the key figure in a way—the thing about John Cage was that he, in a way, the most important lesson of all was the notion that he said, you know, a piece is not finished until it is performed. It's got to be out there. And he was definitely energetic and always organizing something or trying to get something going, some concert or so forth and so on. I mean, I was a kid and Feldman was not particularly good at this and so forth, so John was the one who really took over this side of things and then we had this extraordinarily piece of good fortune in the name of David Tudor. There were other musicians. There

were always a few musicians who were friends, who wanted to try it or whatever. I mean this is New York after all, even in 1949, '50, or whatever. And so Maro Ajemian, for instance, who devoted herself to the earlier piano music and there was a violinist, Frances Magnus, who played Feldman and then various cellists who were interested in Feldman and so forth, but David Tudor was the key figure because this is all he wanted to do. I mean, he wanted to do the avant-garde music that was happening right now and that meant Cage and ourselves and then also Europeans. He was interested in doing the first performances in New York of the Boulez Second Piano Sonata and the Stockhausen pieces and so on and so forth. So the result was that after that, starting in '51, I think, all I did was write piano music because our resources were seriously limited. There was no money. There were no public funds at all; there was no arts council...

FRANK J. OTERI: No orchestra commissions...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: None! [laughs] And so Tudor was basically it. But he was so phenomenally it. You know, I mean, he was this extraordinary pianist so that he really pushed us because we thought, David wants something new and different and possible to play to do. You know, and so we were trying to provide that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, what's so interesting to me in terms of your story with these people is that you were a kid! You know, Cage at this point was 40 years old.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Almost, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: You were seventeen, like sixteen, seventeen, hanging out with these heady adults.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, Feldman was in his mid-twenties, and Earle, too, was 26 or 27.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you were still the kid.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I was the baby. Yeah, I was the baby.

FRANK J. OTERI: And did they treat you like an equal?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Oh, yeah. I mean, clearly I lived a slightly different kind of life. I went home to my parents at night.

FRANK J. OTERI: You didn't hang out at the Cedar Tavern?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, I might tag along, but when it was supertime I either had to negotiate it at home or, you know, I still had those parameters, and I still had to go to school during the day and stuff like that! So to that extent, clearly we were in a slightly different world. But when it came to music or the concerts and the rest of it, no, we were all on the same wavelength.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now in terms of interacting with the visual artists. Did you also interact with Rauschenberg and Guston and...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, certainly I saw them. I still remember when Cage first took me way down in the Financial District, where Rauschenberg and Johns had an apartment together. Had a space, because they also used it as a studio. I remember being taken along there and seeing, I think it was the *Bed*—he'd just finished it—and seeing those early Jasper Johns targets and flags and stuff. So, yeah, I got to see that stuff early, but there my age did make a little bit of a difference. Because I was still from a different world and I was sort of tagging along with the musicians. So, I was aware of the art and I liked it a lot, but I didn't have that special relationship that say, especially Feldman, and Cage too, had with that work.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, what's so interesting is they influenced the artists and the artists in turn influenced their sense of how to make pieces of music, so you didn't feel that connection?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, yes and no. I mean, maybe a little bit later. I felt very close to Jasper Johns' work for a long time and in very oblique ways and that surely came from that period when I was first made aware of his work at all and then whenever there was a chance to see it, I would immediately go and check it out. And so, I couldn't tell you how it affected my work, but there's just something about it. It was just very classy. It had this very elegant quality which I aspired to—let's put it that way—which I found really interesting and wanted to respond to in some way.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, there definitely is a connection. I was listening the other night to the *Tilbury* pieces which are very painterly. It's just like abstract expressionism. You're throwing these pitches out there the way an abstract painter would throw a splash of a certain color out there and it's very coloristic. And especially that first *Tilbury* piece, which is essentially for the most part a solo piano piece but there are intrusions from a melodica, and they kind of come in as if all of a sudden it was an all black painting and there's a little bit of red in a corner somewhere.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, that's good. Now I should say...

FRANK J. OTERI: Those are much later of course.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, that too, but the notion of using this melodica for instance, in other words, what the music gives the performers, is only notes in the case of this particular piece, so that the particular coloring, and it is clearly a keyboard piece. I mean, you can make other arrangements, but you start from the notion of the keyboard. But the version that you heard, is that version and I could make you one that was quite different. I mean, you could clearly hear that it was the same piece, but it might have a different feeling. For instance, if it were only keyboard, then you wouldn't have this sort of color...it would be much flatter, it would be more like a black and white painting, or something. But I think you're absolutely right, that yes, that the image of the way that the paintings feel and look definitely transferred into the kind of work that I was doing.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, that brings us back into the notion of performers and what performers have brought to this music. Clearly with the series on *Mode*, you have these interpreters that have done such fantastic work with this music, like the members of the Barton Workshop. They get it. And they bring out things in this music that a performer who isn't versed in this music can't possibly bring to it. By writing pieces in a notation system that doesn't give all the instructions, you're putting a lot of faith in the performers. Have you been at performances where the players just don't get it and you're totally dissatisfied?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Oh, yeah. It's not that different from performing any other kind of music. I mean, you can hear Mozart played in a way that's just awful, if somebody doesn't get it. In fact, Mozart is rather hard to play well. That is the basic situation with notated music, that you have to figure something to do with this information, which is not sound, which is just symbols on a piece of paper and I turn that into something that works musically. Now, of course, how it works musically or what constitutes being musical for this music, that's another step, though that is beginning to develop. There's a kind of performance practice of late-20th-century music and on from there. But, yeah, one friend of mine, a player says that my music is very fragile because I've really had some very bad performances and I'm thinking, my God, have I really written this crappy music? Or else people will hate it and I understand! And then it turns out, you know, that either sometimes there's simply a misunderstanding of how the material is to be used. If somebody didn't read the instructions or didn't read them carefully, that's easier to deal with, but other times it's just not having an ear for it and just not knowing what to do with it. It's doubly complicated. It depends a little bit on what kind of pieces we're talking about 'cuz my earlier indeterminate music is really indeterminate and yet at the same time it's much easier to do because you're in such a totally different situation that you don't have to think about "how should I do this?" You just have to do it. You know, you're too busy waiting for these cues, you know, you have five seconds to

wait before you can make this sound and then it has to have three changes in color and, oh my God, you have to be done before the next guy makes his sound. So, you're just very busy and as a result you are very business-like; you just make the sounds. And the question of expression and all that other stuff just doesn't enter into it. And that's fine. And as I said, if I can get somebody to do that in the first place that usually works out okay. Those pieces, in a funny way, are not fragile. The fragile ones come later somewhere around in the '70s, and it in a way, beginning with those *Tilbury* pieces, where I gave up that older, sort of invented notation and the music initially looks much more like regular music, with the notes on staves and the rest of it and a musician looks at that and thinks, "Okay. Now I've got to do this and this and this and that. Now is that what he wants? Is this what you want?" You know, and then I get into real trouble because I can't honestly say yes or no because it has to be what the performer thinks has to be the way to do it. Now it's true, some performers may think of something more interesting, some less, but there's no one image of what the piece exactly should be like and that's the problem because it looks as though there should be.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Whenever you see a piece of music you think, okay, there is a way to do this and then you keep striving for that. In this case, that's a kind of blank or it's a question mark and you're struggling to figure out how to get into this thing and how to do something with it and so forth.

4. Compositional Intent

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, there's always this myth of the composer. Beethoven hearing the Ninth Symphony in his head and not being able to hear it in real life and he conducted the premiere and of course he was still conducting after the musicians stopped because obviously he didn't completely hear in his head the tempo they were actually playing. With this music, with this indeterminate music, in a way, if you're hearing a finished product in your head, you're not hearing it. So what is it you're hearing in your head?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, you are hearing specific things, but you are aware that they are possibilities rather than the only possible result of what you've written. And it's true, especially with the earlier music. I sort of tried to test it. You know, you play something, try it on the piano, you know, does it sound okay or not? You know, and you can't do that when all these indeterminate elements are there, but you can think about, well, what's the worst I could do with these freedoms that I have here? What could I do that would be totally unacceptable to me. And if I can't figure out how to do that, if in fact the conditions are such that that's not going to happen, then it's okay. But if this somehow could be twisted—I mean, in extreme cases it can always be—I mean if somebody really sets out deliberately to sabotage the piece, of course they're going to be able to sabotage it. Feldman had this happen to him a number of times with those graph pieces. People would just play tunes.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: And that means that they're just really not serious. There's no good will at all there. I mean, you have to assume that there's some...that if they're going to do it, will to do it with some interest in doing something decently.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, in terms of setting boundaries, all of the movements in music have been in a way about restricting as well as giving freedoms. I mean, certainly, the serial system is about having a perfectly contained sound world, that's permuted along a certain path and minimalism to even more of an extent, you know, stripping down everything and having cells from which pieces are generated. But in a way, I'm thinking of these earlier pieces of yours extending all the way to the *Tilbury* pieces that we were looking at maybe a 20-year period here from like '49 to '71, let's say. The pieces that have restricted pitches are almost a serial minimalism in a way. You're only using those pitches, so in a sense there's an order, a serial order, but since you're only using a handful of pitches, it's minimalism. A generation before minimalism happened.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, yeah, those are kind of a separate chapter, you might say, entirely. I mean, that's really basically where I started. That's where... I think of my first real pieces, I think of those early pieces with very small numbers of notes.

FRANK J. OTERI: Like the *Serenade*?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, exactly. And indeterminacy is not an issue there. If you're looking from somewhere where they might have come from, the nearest I can think of would be the earlier Cage music, the pre-chance Cage music. Some of those prepared piano pieces, which themselves can be very minimal too. A very small number of pitches...

FRANK J. OTERI: *Four Walls*.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, for instance. Very simple pieces... I didn't know that piece, but there are a couple that I do know. That might have had some effect on how I did those. Though there were technical reasons why I did that which I had cooked up myself, which had to do with...yeah, actually, initially it all came out of one of those exercises that Cage set me, which was to do, I had to learn how to do this rhythmic structure and he said, "Well, look. Do it just monophonically for one instrument and use just five notes. That way you can really focus

because it's so restricted," and so I did that. And I really liked working within this very small area and then I thought, okay, I'm not interested in just monophonic, I wanted more. And I thought, well, okay, let's do two instruments and let's cut it down to three notes. And then I thought about that and thought well, look, it's not three notes. It's a whole bunch of sounds. For instance, any combination of those notes, there's two, so 1 and 2, 1 and 3, 2 and 3, that's already three sounds. And there's 1, 2, 3, in any case by themselves, that's six sounds. Then you have the sound of 1 and 2 together, let go of 1 and that moment when 2 sounds after having been together with 1, that's a new sound. There's no other way to hear that except in those situations. And then you get the permutations and before you're done, as it happens with two instruments, two melody instruments, and three pitches, absolute of course, pitches, you have twelve sounds. And so, that seemed to me a lot to work with. So I made pieces with these twelve sounds and now, I regarded them each as it were as a sound unit and then I thought I was working melodically with these sound units, which might be simple. Just a simple sound or they might be one of these more complex things and that's what that stuff is about.

FRANK J. OTERI: And in terms of rhythm?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: That was sort of intuitive. The rhythmic structure was there, but then it was like making melodic, single-line melodic material.

FRANK J. OTERI: And dynamics were always pretty much...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Similar. I've never really been interested in serializing all these different things. I did do pieces where everything got more complicated, you know where, a lot of variety of dynamics and stuff like that. And, you know, well, maybe, yeah, it's possible that in some of those pieces there is a kind of serial thinking. But it's rather more informal.

5. On Serialism & Complex Modernism

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: The thing about the twelve-tone thing that drove me crazy was that once you start on a sequence of twelve, you had to run through the sequence. You had to go 123456789, and so forth. Which seems really stupid because, one, I've got 1722225134, or something, you know, what is this? And so to that extent, what I did was I set up the equivalent of a row but it was simply a kind of reservoir of pitches. And they might be three, it might be twelve, it might be fifteen, it might be seven. You didn't have to and you could, it could include octaves. And they were not transposable, that's the other thing. The twelve-tone system, at least in its sort of simpler, strict form, is very abstract really, because, it's just a tone row. But there's nothing said about the instrumentation—the registration! A crucial factor. Nothing there at all. So in a way I was stricter because I fixed the registration and the pitches.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: But I never got hung up on this intervallic business, this Milton Babbitt thing about combinatoriality and all this stuff, you know, I just couldn't see that at all.

FRANK J. OTERI: So did you ever interact with Babbitt?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, everybody knew everybody else in the community, the new music community, so I sort of bumped into him and, you know, we knew each other by sight. I knew him more through some of his students. I actually spent quite a lot of time in one year with a guy called Richard Maxfield. You know that name?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: We both got Fulbrights the same year and we hung out together a lot and he was just saturated with this stuff and I was giving him a very hard time about it. And we spent the whole year quarreling about this and then actually the end result, you might say, was that I won because it was after that year that he started doing the tape music and he completely gave up all that other stuff and got to be a really interesting composer.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, I never heard his serial stuff. I only know the whacked out tape stuff.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Exactly, exactly. Now he totally went off...so that was sort of my indirect experience with Babbitt. And Feldman had a sort of chip on his shoulder about Babbitt, as you can imagine. [FJO laughs] No, Babbitt himself is a great guy. He's a fun person and an interesting person and so forth.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, we had a great time with him a couple of months ago.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, I bet. He is a funny man!

FRANK J. OTERI: We talked about beer and Broadway musicals and...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Right, right.

FRANK J. OTERI: How about Carter, who actually to this day still lives around here?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Does he still live on 12th Street?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Oh my God. Alright. Yeah, Elliott Carter. Again I would meet him periodically here and there and we had one friend in common and that's Frederic Rzewski. A surprising friend in common actually... And they got along very well and he did good things for Frederic. He got him good gigs and things like that. I had problems with Carter's music. A few pieces I like a lot, but mostly it seems, it's a little bit beyond that sort of early, really uptight European serial music, but not too far.

FRANK J. OTERI: But it's not serial.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, that's the other thing. It's not strictly serial but it's still very organized. I mean, a lot of it is in the rhythmic stuff, but it seems so kind of hyper-constricted. Maybe I just don't have an ear for it or something, but it just doesn't... I mean, my wife put it once, it's funny, she said, "It doesn't swing." [laughs] And I had to confess I knew what she meant...

FRANK J. OTERI: It can be very busy. But it's interesting because the music he's written in the last decade is much lighter...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, which I don't know. I've sort of lost track of it. What I gather, he's sort of loosened up a lot and it must be quite different.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's fantastic. And of course, you know, he's in his nineties, and he's writing this stuff.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, it's amazing, the work he's doing. No, I still need to catch up with that.

6. On Neo-romanticism & Politics

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, to talk about how your style evolved over these years and I don't know what you'll think of my saying this, but works like the *Piano Trio*, which is one of my favorite works of yours, and *Hay Una Mujer Desaparecida* are almost neo-romantic in a way. And they're almost harkening back to the past. What's that about?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, well. I think two things. One is sort of personal and that has more to do with what I told you earlier, that I was saturated with all this classical music, which I didn't give up, you know, I mean, I still get a kick out of Brahms occasionally [laughs]. And so some of that may be in the background. But otherwise, the main thing that happened to me was in the late '60s, the early '70s is this turn to politics, you know, this interest in politics, like a whole lot of other people, obviously. But through the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, it got us pretty stirred up and interested and then a number of us asked, "Well, this music we get. Where's that in this larger picture of the world." And the feeling was, and mine too in the way, I mean, I didn't have this problem that say Cornelius Cardew had where he decided to reject all of his earlier work and to denounce it and so on and so forth. I certainly didn't. I thought, it was done in good faith. I certainly didn't want to keep doing it and that also for personal reasons. I thought, I'd already done everything I wanted to do with that way of working. I wanted to do something different. And in a way the first break from that, it's a couple of things: it's, there's a larger piece called *Burdocks* was one thing and then something like the *Tilbury* pieces were another. And those were really, in some ways they're still minimal and have all these other qualities, but they're also quite different, or at least they seemed to me at the time to what I'd been doing before. Well, it's simpler, there are a lot more notes! You know, I guess the early music was very sparse, very like Webern in that way. But I was looking for something else to do. That was another factor. And then as far as the politics go, the feeling was that what I'd been doing was so kind of specialized and esoteric and self-enclosed, and I wanted to try something that was a little bit more, you know, going in the other direction, and that's basically, those were some of the results. The other thing was, again on a more technical level, that one way of doing that, which again occurred to a number of us, was to use traditional material--folk songs, or political songs, or politically connected music--and work that into our pieces. And so that's a sub-stratum of that. For instance in the Trio, each movement is based on a political song and once you're into those political songs, I can't use them abstractly. I mean, they're full of all kinds of very powerful feelings and ideas and stuff like that, and that becomes sort of part of what's in my head as I write that music and therefore it then becomes fairly direct, expressive music that the early music had not been.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, in terms of the politics... These pieces are mostly instrumental pieces.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: So the message that's coming across is not coming across verbally.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: No, no.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you still think that an overt political message can come across in instrumental music?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Overt? No, no, no. I did do that too, I wrote some songs. I wrote sort of a cantata on the IWW, the Wobblies: Wobble Music... The only way to be directly political—I mean, not the only way, this is a large subject—but for starters, the only way to be political is to have a text... Music is notoriously elusive. I mean, that's the whole point. What is expressed can only be done through music. You can't do it with words. If you have a text, that's a whole other scene. And even there, text plus music can come out to something that is not just the text. In fact, it can be something completely different than the text. And so, there are all those issues there. But when it's straight instrumental music, the best you can hope for is that there's something—it could be in the title of the piece, it could be in the notes accompanying the piece, you explain, or you mention that this

song was used and then you say a little bit about the song and where it belongs—and so that you kind of position the music to a kind of political culture. Ideally, the thing is to write really great agitational songs...

FRANK J. OTERI: Which is what Cardew wanted to do...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Exactly, exactly. And it's not easy to do. It's really hard. And also it's both from the point of view of composition, but also from the point of view of circumstance, you need to have, you need to be in the middle of a strike to write a piece, you know to write a song that's going to work in a strike. So, and that kind of experience, occasionally, there were moments in the Trio, for instance, which are dedicated to these three women's camps, anti-nuclear camps, which happened to be Seneca, NY, down in Sicily, and then in Greenham. Well, I was at Greenham and my wife was both at Seneca and Greenham, so that these things connected with real things that were going on in the world that had a political significance.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, one thing though in this music since it allows the performer so much room is that the music in and of itself is a statement against autocracy...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: That's another way to look at it. But something like the Trio doesn't leave the performance that much room...

FRANK J. OTERI: That's the irony!

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: [laughs] Yeah, exactly. I mean, I had this experience once, and the piece (not that piece) but a piece from that period was performed somewhere in England, I think in London, and when it was over these kids said, "Why are you doing this? This is terrible! And it's politically bad." And I was really quite shocked because I thought I was doing the right thing and they said, "No, it's your earlier music that's really political." The stuff that I had rejected as too esoteric... And then of course these ideas came up which you might say because it's a kind of model or a symbolic enactment of certain ways of relating among people, and therefore about politics, that in some deeper sense was more political than the stuff that I later did with using songs and things like that. It's another version of it. No, I have to also admit, I had no idea, I had no notion of being political in those pieces. [laughs] That was a bonus in retrospect! But it is true, that the notion of de-hierarchizing, you could say, has always been important to me.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting that Luigi Nono, who was an avid left-wing political thinker, wrote really hardcore serial music...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, he's one of my favorite examples when you raise issues connected... I mean, you go the whole—between Cornelius Cardew or somebody like Hanns Eisler, wrote hardcore political music and had been themselves avant-garde folks and then you get someone like Nono who is hardcore political and writes this really hard music. Yeah, yeah. [laughs] No, there are many possibilities out there!

7. Christian Wolff—Rock Star?

FRANK J. OTERI: In the last couple of years, you worked with Sonic Youth on their album *Goodbye 20th Century*. What was that like?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: That was fun. [laughs] You know, and it was very brief. I mean, to say I worked with them, it was one session. They just had this very nice notion of making that record...

FRANK J. OTERI: I love that record.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: You know, they tried out all of these avant-garde things and it's an accident that I worked with them because Lee Ranaldo just called up one day. I mean, I'd never, I vaguely had heard the name Sonic Youth, my kids know about all this stuff, there like into this, all of this. [laughs] Well, I learned. So he calls me up and says, "So we're going to do these pieces of yours, is that okay?" And I said, "Sure, it's fine. It's great. When are you going to do it?" And he mentioned the date. "Oh," I said. "I'll be in New York." And he said, "Well, why don't you join us?" And so I showed up at the studio and we had this really great session. And that was it. But it was very enjoyable, I must say. It's funny because the recordings, recordings are usually... I hate them. They're just torture. You know, they go on for hours and they do this phrase ten times and the next one ten times and so on and so forth and then you have to edit it all and it's awful. But here basically we sat around... I arrived and they were sitting around and there was some music laying around and they said, well, what are we going to do? And I saw a piece called *Edges*, which is basically an improvisation piece, so I said, "Well, why don't we try that?" So then we explained the score, the notation and so forth and then we go in the studio, we start playing. We play for about twenty minutes, okay, step out, let's listen to it. Ah, it's pretty good, now what are we going to do? [laughs] It was great. I mean, it was just absolutely super. And then we did one of the pages from *Burdocks*.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, so do you feel that their interpretations of your music are your music?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, yes and no. I mean, this is also a larger question that we've touched on in a way before. No, my first impression when I hear it is yeah, that's Sonic Youth. [laughs] Right. However, it is also true that it isn't quite Sonic Youth, because in fact, it's an expanded band. I mean, Kosugi's playing on it, Christian Marclay's playing on it...

FRANK J. OTERI: William Winant.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: William Winant is playing on it. I'm playing on it. So we're getting something a little bit different in that sense. The ground tone is, as it were, is certainly, partly because of the conditions under which we did it—it's electric, so on and so forth, and they do have a very strong presence, so it's a Sonic Youth kind of thing and yet they probably would not have done it, anything like that if they hadn't started with my material, right? It's sort of...in that sense, it's a kind of symbiotic relationship.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, what's interesting is hearing the stuff they've done since then. And, certainly, before they did this particular record, had done three albums of these avant-garde improvisatory things that are fascinating. And all of this experimental work has really affected the actual songwriting they've been doing on their official rock albums that have come out since then.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Oh, really? Isn't that interesting...

FRANK J. OTERI: It's fantastic and the thing that excited me about it probably more than anything, because I've been a Sonic Youth fan for years, but now there was this extra bonus. There was an item about *Goodbye 20th Century* on one of the video stations. And they featured Pauline Oliveros because of this! All of a sudden the entire alt-rock crowd was aware of Pauline Oliveros because of this album. And that is a great thing.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: That was very nice. That was great. Yeah, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: And what's interesting to me is that that audience, the audience for alternative rock music is more open to the music of Wolff and Cage and Feldman and Pauline...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: That's been one of the nicest things about the last three or four years, is all the younger people who come to these concerts. I mean I'm astounded, you know, because we're old fogies here. We've been around for years and all of sudden, all these kids turn up! You know, and they seem to like it or at least are interested; they're willing to check it out which is very nice. It's really nice!

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, what's interesting is that they're more open to it then the so-called classical music audience, which is still dismissive of this.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, yeah.

8. The Orchestra

FRANK J. OTERI: I recently heard this piece you wrote for orchestra and it was your first orchestra piece, if I'm not mistaken.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Not quite. There are two or three others preceding it and a couple of little ones. Very little orchestra music because I can't get the commissions for it and I'm not going to put in the work, and I mean, it's an enormous amount of work to do an orchestra piece. So unless I have at least a notion that this is going to get played, I'm not going to do it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, writing for an orchestra is almost the opposite phenomenon of working with a rock band. The orchestra is this standard ensemble that largely plays repertoire that they've been playing for a hundred years; it's codified and the audience for the orchestra is much different from the audience for Sonic Youth, let's say. What was your experience working with orchestral musicians and working with the audience?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: It's been mixed. Setting aside a couple of the earlier pieces, which I just did to try it out and then the first, I can't even remember what the first one is, but a relatively recent one, a bigger piece which was a commission from Donaueschingen, the festival in Germany, where they're into that kind of music, preferably for orchestra, and there's a lot of it and this is just one more in the—so there is a kind of new music culture, if you will, that does a lot of orchestra music—you're not going to hear Beethoven on those programs, it's just going to be Lachenmann and Rihm and if I'm really lucky, there'll be some Wolff on it! Right? So, to that extent, from the audience point of view, that was no problem. On the other hand, from the orchestra point of view, there were major problems, which I kind of suspected. I mean, I was there when the New York Philharmonic did Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, which was a shocking, really, really awful event. I mean, just dreadful. They deliberately sabotaged; they killed the piece. Literally, I mean, before your very eyes on the stage. Half the musicians just sat there. They wouldn't even play their parts. I mean, you wouldn't even believe how unprofessional that group of people were. It was stunning. So I knew that orchestras could be a problem. And then, you know, you hear stuff and you can understand it in a way. I complained a lot to Cardew and Cardew said, "Well, look, wait a minute! The ultimate image of alienated work has got to be orchestral musicians. You know, those poor guys. They have no say in what they're going to play. They have to do exactly what this guy tells them to..." and all the rest of it. You know, it's a completely hierarchical situation and that creates certain kinds of feelings and situations and then this kind of tension between orchestras and their conductor. Now, for this particular piece for instance, it's the Sudwestrundfunk Orchestra, which is an okay orchestra that specializes, no it doesn't specialize, but once a year every year, they take off a month and a half and do nothing but new pieces. But they're regular conductor had just left and they were using temporary conductors. And I'd come for the first rehearsal and we hadn't gone but one minute into the rehearsal, when the concertmaster's already telling the conductor what to do. And you know there's trouble, I mean that there's going to be... So the whole thing is a battle to sort of establish turf and establish territory and who's going to tell who... You can't really look bad so ultimately they will pull something together, right? But as far as actually thinking how the music goes, it was really a bad, bad situation. So that's sort of the negative side, and it wasn't entirely negative because I had a great soloist, a percussionist, Robyn Schulkowsky, who was terrific and a few members of the orchestra did get the idea and actually came to me and said, you know, "I think this is okay. It's kind of nice." And so forth. But generally speaking it was a very tense and unpleasant situation. So that's that experience. Good experience: Petr Kotik. Heroic efforts to do something interesting with orchestra musicians, right? And this is New York, so he gets to put together groups that are really first class.

FRANK J. OTERI: The Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble is a handpicked group.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: It's a fantastic group and it's people who know what they're getting into and are not going to be shocked if they have to do something a little differently, or whatever it is that they're required to do, and might even find it kind of interesting and get into it. So I knew that I was in a much better situation. Now that particular piece was originally written for, or at least, the piece exists as a kind of modular collection of

material, which can be used in a number of different ways. So that's harkening back if you will. But it was originally made for this orchestra in the Czech Republic, which is a sort of provincial orchestra, not very good, not until Peter got hold of them (don't ask me how), had only done classical repertoire and he started them off...I mean, their sort of initiation to new music, to any 20th-century music, was with Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis* [laughs]. So they had been a little bit broken in and the concerts had been successful, so that they did feel as though they were doing something that people were interested in hearing. And in fact, were more interested in hearing than Beethoven, which was played better by the orchestra in Prague. You know, so that was nice. And so, to that extent, they were willing and they were relaxed about it. And so I knew I would have a fairly positive kind of general atmosphere. And then it was just more of a question of what to do with this hierarchical situation--having three orchestras is really a good start, because that means that no one person is in charge. And then different, all kinds of different strategies... The way they began that performance in the Czech Republic I like a lot. There are solo parts for every single member of the orchestra. There are 80 parts. Everyone gets their own solo. It's not very long but there it is. It's completely... and when you do that part of the piece, you simply block off some time and then whenever you think you want to do it, you do it. And so what happens is that the quieter instruments have to kind of look for some space. Because flutes in a low register have to wait until the trombone's done his thing over here or else forget it! And so forth. But anyway, so the piece started and I didn't know quite how this piece was going to work out. That's dangerous. You know, 80 people all doing something more or less simultaneously. The parts of it can be arranged in different sequences, and they decided to start with that and so the conductors come out, all three of them, and take, you know, the whole routine, take their bows and so forth. Look at their orchestras. And then just sort of nod their heads and put their arms down and the music starts. And there's music for three minutes and nobody's doing any conducting whatsoever! [laughs] And it sounds absolutely beautiful!

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, that's great. We've got to get a recording of this.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I was interested in doing the piece in doing not just that, but sort of trying all of the different possible ranges of control, non-control, you know, and so forth. So there are parts of the piece where—I never did use a unison for everybody—but there are parts where there, say, if only just writing two lines and the entire, all three orchestras are playing at the same time, but the two lines are, as I was saying, we're cutting across that space, so it's very precise and the conductors are the only ones, I mean, they just make sure everyone plays on time, but otherwise it's completely determinate, because it's you know... And yet, on the other hand, it's highly indeterminate because of the spatial situation and where you're sitting and the way the sound is hitting you. And also because it's impossible to coordinate at those distances that the musicians are from each other, perfectly. You're not going to get, I mean, you can do it on the computer or with a computer or with a synthesizer, but with an orchestra there's no way you're going to get—or also just the way you hear the sound—so you in fact you get this very rich, complicated sounding thing even though all I have notated on the score are these two lines of notes and relatively simple rhythms. [laughs] So that's the other extreme.

FRANK J. OTERI: So that's the heterophony issue, going back to the very beginning of our conversation.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Exactly. Right, right. Yeah.

9. Listening

FRANK J. OTERI: Now we talk about the ideal performer to some extent. What about the ideal listener?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I don't have a lot to say about that. Let's start with that. I think it may be partly because of that initial experience that I had which was that people hated the music... I mean, in concerts, there would be a very small group I knew would be interested and the rest—either they would hate it or if they were my family or friends, they'd say, "My God, what are you doing?" They just couldn't relate to it in anyway. And so I got kind of hardened early to the notion that, look, this is what I'm doing and... There's plenty of music out there that people like to listen to and if they like to listen to it, they should go listen to it. I'm going to do my thing and if they like it fine and if they don't, too bad.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, to a listener that's coming to your music, what advice would you give? How should somebody listen to your music?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Besides just listening to it? Well, just relax. I don't know, I just don't know. I mean, I don't want any special favors or anything. You should just listen to it the way you would listen to anything else! It's true, though I mean, the problem with it, of course, is that it doesn't sound like anything else. Or you might say the problem, or even the greater problem, is that it might occasionally sounds like something else and then suddenly it doesn't. And then it leaves, you think, "Ah, now I've got something I can get, you know, relate to" and then I leave them hanging dry, you know and that... So, yeah, I don't know what to say. I used to talk a certain amount about art actually. I mean, people don't have problems with abstract pictures. Alright, so you can't see, here's a picture of a mountain and here's a picture of just blobs and you don't have any problems looking at one and then the other, you know. And the music is like that too. I mean, I haven't totally talked that way for a long time but that seemed to me perfectly, and maybe that's, maybe I should raise that again. Just listen to it as another kind of, what could you say, work with sound. I mean, maybe that's an issue that came up earlier. Don't worry about music, now especially nowadays that shouldn't be such an issue because every kind of music is out there. And as you said the kids are used to music from, you know, Borneo and Sonic Youth, and Bach and it's all part of this great thing and people are much less troubled now by making peculiar sounds or whatever it is. It's just part of the world's music and maybe that's what I would say. Just listen to it just as though you listen to anything else that is out there.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, this question...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: My main problem with audiences is that they're totally unpredictable. Because you never know who it is that's out there, and why they're there, and what they think they're doing there and so on and so forth. And there's no way you can control that. I can control what I write on a piece of paper. To a certain extent if I'm there when they're preparing the piece or I'm playing in it, I have something to do there, but beyond that, it's totally out of my hands. I mean, I can choose my venue, okay, but who knows who's going to come to a concert? Or with what presuppositions and maybe all they do is listen to classical music. Well, of course, they're going to have trouble with this to a certain extent, yeah. On the other hand, if they listen to Sonic Youth as well then maybe they can connect a little better.

FRANK J. OTERI: But indeed, isn't that the most wonderfully indeterminate quality of music? That you don't know the audience...

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Sure, exactly, yeah. Well, that is the ultimate indeterminacy.

10. Music & A Career

FRANK J. OTERI: For years, you've had this other life. You teach Classics which is a whole other world than cutting edge, new music. [CW laughs] Thousands of years separate them! [laughs] Is there any connection at all?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Right, right, right. My day job. Well, there's got to be some connection, right? I never worried about it. I just kind of stumbled into that very early on. I decided, I thought, when it was time to think about college and stuff like that, I thought first of all, I should really go to music school, you know, a conservatory. I'm a musician, right? But then people kind of talked me out of that. They said, you know, "You should get a proper education. So broaden yourself, go to a liberal arts school." And so forth. And by then, I'd encountered Cage and anything after that was going to be too late. So I got to college. To major in music and study with Walter Piston? After having studied in 1950 with Cage?! Come on! I thought much later, maybe it wouldn't have done me any harm, say, to do a harmony course, or whatever. Counterpoint, maybe.

FRANK J. OTERI: His string quartets are nice.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, right. Yeah. Sure. No, Piston's fine. He was a great guy; he was extraordinarily tolerant. You know, he never gave us a hard time, you know, and we caused trouble there and stuff. But he didn't mind. He was, it was good. And he was a very accomplished composer and I could probably have learned all sorts of stuff, but anyway, I just kind of decided no. And the other thing was that I thought, well, I can't play, I write this music that is really problematic as far as the audience goes and it seems to be what I do. How the hell am I going to make a living? You know, what am I going to do if I want a family or any of those things. And I looked at John Cage in his late thirties, destitute. Living on hand-outs from here and there. I mean, really having it hard. I mean, it's hard to imagine because eventually things worked out but he was halfway through his life and he was just in desperate straits and I thought, can I do that? You know, I didn't, this wasn't necessarily conscious but was my picture of what it was to be a composer like that.

FRANK J. OTERI: And Feldman at the dry cleaners!

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: And Feldman doing dry cleaning and so forth. And I thought, I don't know if I want to do that. So I thought, let's go to college and see what happens and I... You know, I did have this literary thing in the background. My parents were publishers and so forth, and somehow I'd stumbled into Classics. I had a very good Latin teacher in high school, and so I was well prepared. And I took a Latin class and I enjoyed it immensely. And classics students are hard to come by at these institutions, so as soon as they see that you're even there and that you have a little capability for doing this stuff, they're on you immediately. "Come join us!" And here I was at Harvard, with a very distinguished department and they wanted me! Anyway, that's how I got to be a Classics major, and then the idea of teaching appealed to me. Especially when I saw, again, a very distinguished institution, and these people teaching this great stuff, and really not being very great teachers. Some of them... You know, there were both good and bad, but the indifferent ones and the bad ones at this great institution, I thought, wait a minute! I can do this better, maybe this is what I should be doing. And that sort of got me and then I could see and I was, sort of, at the time... Now, the idea of going into Classics to make a living is totally bizarre. But in those days, some way, maybe I was naïve but I thought okay, let's try that and then that's what I did.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's another one of those weird ironies: teaching Classics is more lucrative than being a composer.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Yeah, yeah, I mean, yeah, there certainly are the...two other things, or one certainly. There was the interest in teaching and somebody once said, that my music, there was a strongly pedagogic element in it, especially the earlier music. It's not just about playing the music, but it's about learning about what

music is and how it works and how you do it. And maybe that's the connection. I mean, it's this impulse to teach. And so that's again, it's a little bit abstract, but I think that could be a connection.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, interestingly enough, I mean, ironically in the earlier part of your life, you were an academic and a composer, but you were not an academic composer! [laughs]

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Not in any stricter sense, no.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, now, in terms of the music departments that you interacted with, you eventually started teaching music.

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I did, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: How did that happen?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: I've actually only had two academic jobs in my whole life. One was at Harvard. I got my degree, I got all my degrees there, and I ended up teaching there for actually eight years and I had no interaction with the music department at all, except once. I once got asked to come in and teach a class about Cage. And that was by the guy who was their Renaissance specialist. [laughs] So it gives you an idea. And then the Harvard thing, the Harvard gig sort of came to an end and I was looking for work and there was a job open at Dartmouth in Classics and I went up there. And when I went up, I met this guy Jon Appleton and he knew about me as a composer and he said, "You know, if you come to Dartmouth, you really should be part of the music department too. It would be great to have you here." And somehow that worked out. That we had a dean who thought it was going to be interdisciplinary, which it really wasn't, but anyway... And so I got this joint appointment and that was how I ended up teaching some music, finally.

FRANK J. OTERI: You are largely a self-taught and an intuitive composer. So what sort of things have you tried to bring out in the music of your students?

CHRISTIAN WOLFF: Well, the first thing to say is that in the entire time that I've taught at Dartmouth, which was well over 25 years, I only taught a composition course once, and that was in my last year! [laughs] And in that case, so I can tell you what happened there. What I did, no, I did do something else. It was a workshop; it was called Workshop in Experimental Music where I took anybody who wanted to come in, whether or not they had any background, and basically we spent the term figuring out what we could do and what kind of repertory we could make use of and we gave a concert. And that was great, that was, basically, so, in other words, and you didn't, you could, there was no, nothing about composing, it was about performing. But it was a kind of performing, it was mostly those like my early pieces, some Cage, but there's a huge, there's a large body of work, which is just prose instructions. A lot of Pauline Oliveros's work is like this, so that is the kind of stuff we did with this. If we had a couple of instrumentalists who really had some chops then we would do things around them to a certain extent, but it was mostly about teaching them how to perform the music. And to perform the music which required them to be something like a composer, the activities really cross there. As they should in fact all the time. And so that's one thing I did and if in the course of the term they got interested in doing their own things, that was great. Then we would in fact get student compositions but they were spontaneously generated out of this performing situation. And then the composition course, that was a rather specialized case because Dartmouth has a small program, a graduate program in music and technology, and so you tend to get people there who are highly computer sophisticated and spent all their time in the studio and never played an instrument. And this course was billed as, you know, Composition in Electronic Media, or something like that and I told them immediately, you know, I don't know the first thing about electronic media, so we're just going to do music here. And basically, I mean, I did have them make pieces, but I had insisted they made only pieces that could only be performed in class. So, in other words I made them get out of the studio and either they had to do it themselves or find somebody or whatever, but it was performance oriented. So my teaching basically has to do with performance. Composition is a kind of poetry. You can't really teach, I mean, obviously you can

technical things. You can help people; you can see their work and say okay, this doesn't seem to work well and stuff like that. But as far as just teaching composition, it's like teaching how to write poetry. I mean, somebody has to want to do it and has to have some impulse for doing it and then you can help them and then there are technical things you can learn, but otherwise, no. So in a way, I was glad that I didn't have the opportunity to teach composition as such, you know, and I got to do it in these more indirect ways which seemed more interesting.