



CHRISTIAN WOLFF

BY GEORGE GRELLA

The program for Christian Wolff's concert at Roulette this month has both premieres and older works. The earliest, *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, dates from 1964, while another, *Keyboard Miscellany*, is both older and newer—a collection of short keyboard pieces Wolff began making in 1997 and has been accumulating since, adding some new parts that he will be playing. That is something of a snapshot of Wolff's work, an ongoing exploration of activity, space, notation and improvisation, built on the idea of mixing them all. (The program, as Wolff detailed in conversation, differs from that on the event page at Roulette's website: *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, *Percussionist 5*—in a duo version for drums and percussion—*Look She Said* for solo bass, solo percussion piece *Exercise 32*, *Keyboard Miscellany* and *Roulette*.)

That has been part of Wolff's work for decades, a balance he approached in different ways. "If it's strictly specified, then I have a pretty good idea of what I'm going to get. But even there, I still leave things a little vague about dynamics and articulation and stuff like that. I think of myself as notating the music the way old music is notated, you know, Baroque, Renaissance, where there's a whole lot of stuff they don't specify and they have a tradition of how it should be done. And so you don't need to write it down."

Wolff, one of the members of the New York School of composers (alongside John Cage, Morton Feldman and Earle Brown, essential to the development of 20th Century avant garde and experimental composition), points out that his own tradition is "a little skimpier," one that in both concept and sound has a close association with free jazz and non-idiomatic improvisation over the same 60 or so years on close parallel paths that still have had musicians crossing from one to the other but still in the process of creating a language that has yet to show that it could have a common vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, unlike Baroque and Renaissance improvisation, or the song-based mainstream jazz traditions. But that's "one end of

the spectrum," for Wolff. "The other one is a completely open one. When we were studying indeterminacy, this way back in the '60s, this idea was new to music. And there were various ways of doing it. Cage decided to go with chance operations, which produce actually quite precise notations, which he then had to play. So the chance element was in the composition, not in the performance. And I got the notion at the time of doing it the other way around, that the composition I would take responsibility for, but the performance would be where an open-ended character would happen."

That is still in the context of a composed piece, a framework that can provide both materials and mood, not least through the fundamental activity of playing music and listening to others in an ensemble. "Partly, the indeterminacy that I give to the performers is meant to produce a certain kind of sound. For instance, if you're waiting to hear somebody and you have to come in immediately after, but you don't know when that's going to happen, that's going to definitely color the way you make your sound. It's going to give the music both a sound and also a rhythm, a feeling, which is not like any other that I know and I don't know of any other way of achieving it then by these indeterminate notations."

If that is not jazz, it is certainly extremely close to modern jazz concepts and the concert will feature a well-known jazz musician in drummer Joey Baron. He has been playing Wolff's music for quite some time now and came to it through his partner, percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky, who herself has been playing Wolff's music even longer.

"Over 20 years," Wolff says about his association with Baron. Of Schulkowsky, he says, "She is one of my favorite all-time musicians. She is just amazing. Joey is pretty great, too. When he joined, I was really very, very happy. What happened is that she would bring him along to concerts of my music or he would just come when she was playing. And he seemed interested in the music. So one day, I finally said, how about joining us. And he thought about it: yeah, why not? And that's how it started. He is an improviser and he doesn't read music. So this is a big step for him...but he seems all in, all together."

Wolff makes it clear this is still composition and he is a composer. "I myself improvise. But when I do that, that's a totally different experience from composing. And I think of the two as having absolutely nothing to do with each other. When I'm composing, I'm sitting

at a table with a piece of paper and a pencil. And I'm maybe writing things that are open and free, but I'm very clear as to what I'm doing. And I'm not improvising, I don't go to the piano. Whereas when I'm improvising, I can just do it. If you've made a mistake, or if you've done something you don't like, well, you know, you have got to move on. Don't try to fix it. Just keep going. And do the best you can. In that way, these two experiences are, for me, very different."

Still, these two approaches come together in music that seamlessly mixes the two. And the process of *Keyboard Miscellany*, if not improvised, seems close: "it's a collection that's been going on for years. And I add new stuff to it all the time. It's going to be a mix of older music and stuff that's never been played before. I guess part of it is a world premiere!" The other musician will be bassist Robert Black and the full ensemble will play the world premiere of *Roulette*. In that piece, Wolff says "there's a patch where each of us does independent material, but we're all doing it simultaneously. And the pauses between the phrases are free, so you can kind of adjust a little bit as you're going along. And it comes at a different point for each player." He has played earlier versions of this piece and concept at other concerts and said "I have been amazed in the experience of playing...I can't tell that people are improvising." He adds that the other musicians "don't seem to be able to tell either, because you're surrounded by written music and that obviously affects what you're doing. But it also frees you up for a moment and maybe it goes on for a quarter of a minute, half a minute. That's the other extreme, from very precise, to completely open. All within the same piece. It is quite mysterious, actually, how the music suddenly shapes what is improvised." ❖

For more information, visit eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~wolff. Wolff is at Roulette Jun. 18th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Christian Wolff-*For Piano I / For Pianist / Burdocks* (WERGO, 1971)
- Christian Wolff-*For Ruth Crawford* (hatART, 1993)
- Christian Wolff-*Burdocks* (Tzadik, 2000-1)
- Christian Wolff-*Ten Exercises* (New World, 2005)
- Christian Wolff-*Angelica Music* (I Dischi Di Angelica, 2013)
- Christian Wolff/Eddie Prévost-*Uncertain Outcomes* (Matchless, 2015-16)

LEST WE FORGET



PHIL SCHAAP

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

"Now, as it happens," Phil Schaap was saying on the radio, "Monk's band had lunch between takes two and three of 'Bye-Ya'. That's right, on this particular record date, between takes two and three of 'Bye-Ya' Thelonious Monk's band sat down to lunch and I invite you listeners out there to discern such difference as you can between takes two and three, because Thelonious Monk's great band sent out for sandwiches and had lunch right there in the studio, between takes two and three. Of 'Bye-Ya'. That's right, we're listening to the music of Thelonious Monk today."

Those words were never actually spoken by the WKCR broadcaster of legend, but for any regular listener to his show, it is impossible to read them without hearing Schaap's familiar voice. He was a jazz

obsessive to put jazz obsessives to shame, a fan for whom "encyclopedic knowledge" would be no mere hyperbole. For 50 years, he kept jazz history alive, sometimes exhaustively so, on the Columbia University radio station's airwaves.

That fictitious Monk monologue appeared in Rafi Zabor's wondrous 1997 novel *The Bear Comes Home*, in which the author also incisively imagines scenes with Lester Bowie, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden and other jazz luminaries, as well as the titular talking, saxophone-playing bear. The Monk luncheon discussion carries on with frustration but more so admiration for the famously longwinded radio host.

"Of course I was a fan and basically loved the guy, even including periodic bouts of exasperation, and appreciated the depth and thoroughness of his love for and service to the music that had given him so much and how fully he wanted to pass it along," Zabor said when asked about his recollections of Schaap. "I only met him once, a dozen years [after the book was published] or more, backstage at an Avery Fisher Hall concert of a mutual friend of ours. The friend greeted Phil with a celebratory 'Schaapy!' after which he introduced us to each other. Phil and I shook hands,

wryly and I hope affectionately, and didn't say a thing about the thing."

Schaap lived for many on the FM dial right up until his death on Sep. 7th, 2021, at the age of 70. The son of a jazz scholar and a pianist, Schaap learned at the feet of Count Basie drummer Jo Jones, who often babysat him. As a youth, he introduced himself to the greats of the era, looking them up in the telephone book, walking to their homes and knocking on their doors, thus beginning at an early age a long career as a collector of oral histories.

He began working in radio as a student at Columbia in the '70s while launching a daily swing concert series at the nearby West End Café and taking over management of Basie alumni band The Countsmen, and stuck with the Countsmen and the West End into the '90s. He went on to win six Grammys for producing reissues of jazz sets and lecture at Princeton, Columbia, Manhattan School of Music and Juilliard. In 2021, Schaap was named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts. But he will be best remembered for the dedication he showed in his morning *Bird Flight* and Saturday evening

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a higher purpose. I included him on one recording, Shekhina Big Band, and I'm so happy that I did because it's something that lasts. Thomas played bass flute, alto and baritone saxophones and was ill but had this beauty and joy that he brought to everything he did.

TNYCJR: Last month you premiered "No Pasarán" with drummer Michael Sarin who also played with Chapin.

FL: With José Davila on trombone and Marcus Rojas on tuba. I hope to do a lot more of brass trio plus percussion. I look at the World and ROVA Saxophone Quartets and ask why isn't there a brass group that does that? It came out of a dance performance I scored called *Rube G.*, as in Rube Goldberg, by Jody Oberfelder. This is all my music; it's not in a genre and goes back to my experiences with Lester Bowie. I think it will be my next album.

TNYCJR: You also curate a series at Flushing Town Hall.

FL: Under the direction of Ellen Kodadek, Flushing Town Hall had Global Mashups for years with two bands from different world traditions. My Klezmer brass band did one with a Latin boogaloo band, Spanglish Fly. There were dance instructors and Klezmer and Salsa dancing were taught. Each band does a short set and then figures out something to do together. It hearkened back to the days of Salsa meets jazz nights at the Village Gate. About a year and a half into the pandemic, to try to reopen safely, I suggested a mini version with two solo artists who represent different traditions and Ellen said, why don't you curate it? They've now extended it to the end of 2022 and I'll have programmed like 18 different concerts.

TNYCJR: How do you answer people who accuse you of cultural appropriation?

FL: No one has ever accused me of cultural appropriation, at least not to my face. Maybe it is because they know that if they did, they would be critically challenged for their assumptions? It is very good to think about and discuss this issue and it is all in the details. For instance, I had absolutely no experience of Yiddish culture directly in my youth; coming from the economically dominant popular music culture—American rock 'n' roll, soul music, etc.—not from the oppressed, denigrated Yiddish language and music, nearly wiped out by the one-two punch of the Holocaust and post-war Israeli pro-Hebrew policies. So, interestingly, if there is a culture that I am guilty of appropriating it could be Jewish and Yiddish culture. But, I would counter that everything that I know about Jewish and Yiddish culture and music came through my rigorous studies as an adult, which is equally true of my knowledge of all other musics that I have worked in for 45 years. Furthermore, just because I am an Ashkenazic Jew doesn't mean that I cannot engage in cultural appropriation of Yiddish culture. That betrays an essentialist thinking shockingly similar to Nazi-esque ideology; like 'Jews can't play Beethoven, everything a Jew does is Jewish'. This type of thinking can be used to justify eliminating, for example, African-Americans and anyone who is not white, Christian, European and perhaps male from performing in orchestras. So, yes, after study and respectful interaction, the dominant me—white, male, English-speaking—took "Yiddish music and culture" from an oppressed minority culture—Jewish, Yiddish speaking, non-white in the time and place of its creation—something that was not 'mine' except by strict literal essentialist thinking, for my own profit and benefit. There is much more to say about this and with limited space, perhaps it should become the basis of a larger discussion.

TNYCJR: *Ghetto Songs* is another recent project.

FL: It was commissioned by the Jewish community of Venice, in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the opening of the Venice ghetto, where the term was first applied to the Jewish sector. I put together an incredible group of musicians, including guitarist/vocalist Brandon Ross, the amazing Karim Sulayman, who won the Grammy for best classical vocal performance, cantors Svetlana Kundish and Yaakov Lemmer, percussionist Kenny Wollesen, cellist Marika Hughes, bassist Gregg August and multi-instrumentalist Ilya Shneyveys. We explore music from ghettos, including everything from medieval Italian music to the band War's "The World is a Ghetto". I look at *Ghetto Songs* as a vocal recital of great vocal music from around the world. Why do we only think of the Western European classical tradition as vocal recital music?

TNYCJR: You just premiered a multimedia piece, "Prayer for Ukraine", at Barbès. Can you speak to that?

FL: During the pandemic I learned how to do home recording and very elementary video. On "Prayer for Ukraine" I was thinking about the Ukrainian flag and the two colors and it led my mind to Mark Rothko. It is a medley of Mark Rothko paintings with the Ukrainian flag, because of the simple color blocks. Conceptually, it's about abstract art and abstract music versus representational art and the same thing with music. It's a meditation on strength and energy, which is what the people there need right now to survive, along with military assistance.

TNYCJR: Another pandemic release is Adeena Karasick's long poem *Salome: Woman of Valor*.

FL: I've known Adeena for about 10 years and we said let's do this project together. I love poetry, music jazz and improvisation, like Mingus' *Scenes in the City*. In a lot of my explorations of Jewish music, I'm particular about using the traditional modes. Other people just throw together a bunch of notes, because they sort of sound exotic and say, 'listen, it's like Jewish music' and I hate that. But to liberate myself for *Salome* I use these syncretic modal scales that have elements of Jewish, Ethiopian, Indian and Arabic modes.

TNYCJR: In closing, what's in the works?

FL: I'm preparing a huge piece for the end of 2022 as part of the New York Town Hall's 100th anniversary, a new musical theater piece called *Desperately Seeking Nellie*. It is an homage to the Town Hall of the early '80s, when 42nd Street was at its most wild and crazy. They were doing Yiddish theater revivals at Town Hall every year. In this original story, a Hasidic girl runs away from home and ends up in Times Square in 1980, with all the associations of that, to audition for Nellie Casman's Yiddish theater piece *The Show Girl*, which actually played at Town Hall in 1982. She runs into her old Hasidic best friend neighbor, who's now come out as a drag performer in Times Square. I'm writing this with Michael Wex and Eleanor Reissa. ❖

For more information, visit franklondon.com. *London is at Drom Jun. 15th. See Calendar.*

Recommended Listening:

- Klezmer Conservatory Band—*Yiddische Renaissance* (Kleztone-Vanguard, 1981)
- Les Misérables Brass Band—*Manic Traditions* (Northeastern, 1988)
- The Klezmatics—*Rhythm and Jews* (Piranha, 1990)
- Hasidic New Wave—*The Complete Recordings* (Knitting Factory-Tzadik, 1993-2001)
- Frank London—*Invocations* (Tzadik, 2000)
- Frank London—*Ghetto Songs* (Felmay, 2020)

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Traditions in Swing programs. (Like all WKCR programmers—including, for the sake of disclosure, this author—Schaap worked at the station without pay.)

The Queens native and lifelong resident will be remembered this month in a concert by the Queens Jazz Orchestra led by saxophonist Antonio Hart, Professor of Jazz Studies in the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College City University of New York. He acknowledged that he only met Schaap a few times, but was an avid listener to *Bird Flight*. "It was nice to wake up to hearing Charlie Parker every morning and having some anecdotes," he said, adding that Schaap was "quite brilliant, he was like a computer in terms of his retention...He was important to the music. He kept Charlie Parker's music alive to generations that probably wouldn't have heard it."

One person who did know Schaap both on and off the air was his fellow WKCR jazz programmer Sid Gribetz, who recalled fondly his friend's devotion to the cause. "He presented the jazz musicians, great and small, as living treasures with something to say, worth reverence and a place in our ongoing heritage and not as relics of nostalgia," Gribetz said. "He also practiced a rigor of scholarship to properly research and present the music in an intelligent manner, with a concern for accuracy in the presentation. Despite the wide breadth of his knowledge, Phil had a gleeful sense of joy and wonder in his awe upon the discovery of new material"

Gribetz and Schaap were classmates when WKCR's jazz department was brought into being and was there when Schaap launched the first Charlie Parker festival on the air and extended the practice into a station tradition of birthday broadcast marathons for the greats of American music. He acknowledged that the obsessive spirit that led to programming one artist for 24 hours could also lead to some pontification on the subject, part of Schaap's uniqueness as a broadcaster. "While I wouldn't deny that he was lengthy and verbose in his commentary, the speeches were always intelligent and interesting," Gribetz said. "Those who criticized him are the ones to hold at fault. They lacked the patience to hear a whole story and the imagination and intellectual curiosity to find joy in the interesting things said. As I heard Phil put it several times. 'If you don't find it interesting that Coleman Hawkins' grandmother ran a hotel in Missouri that gave shelter to Jesse James, then the problem's with you.'" ❖

For more information, visit philschaapjazz.com. *A tribute to Schaap by the Queens Jazz Orchestra led by Antonio Hart is at Flushing Town Hall Jun. 17th. See Calendar.*

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the making of which, Pennisi recalls, required a round of cappuccinos after each tune, for a total of 18! Moreover, there is a wealth of tapes that have been in the vault for almost 40 years waiting to be issued, such as Baker's precious 1987 live recording *Intimacy*. The covers remain very stylish, confirming once again Pennisi's taste and craftsmanship. Red is distributed in the U.S. through Stateside and can also be found on most streaming platforms, although there is no substitute for the vinyl sound. ❖

For more information, visit redrecords.it. Artists performing this month include Kenny Barron at Blue Note Jun. 21st-26th; Jerry Bergonzi at Bar Bayeux Jun. 9th and Nublu 151 Jun. 30th; Fred Hersch at Village Vanguard Jun. 21st-26th; Dave Liebman at Birdland through Jun. 4th, The Jazz Gallery Jun. 9th and Nublu 151 Jun. 30th; Steve Nelson at Smalls Jun. 29th; Dick Oatts at Village Vanguard Mondays with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; and Saul Rubin at Cellar Dog Jun. 1st, Bar Lunático Jun. 3rd and The Django Jun. 4th. See Calendar.