

# II

## *Classical Muddly: Being an Investigation into the Portsmouth Sinfonia*

*Chris Reeves*

“On the more fantastical fringes of his imagination, (Portsmouth Sinfonia manager Martin) Lewis dreams of a nightly reality-television show called Sinfonia! in which the better the contestants are, the quicker they get chucked off. This would, he says, culminate in the winning “musicians” playing at the Albert Hall.” - Dan Cairns, “The Real Godfathers of Punk” in Sunday Times, May 30, 2004.

“Watch him closely and reverently, look into his face and hear the music of the ages. Don’t pay too much attention to the sounds – for if you do, you may miss the music. You won’t get a wild, heroic ride to heaven on pretty little sounds.” – Charles Ives recounting his father’s thoughts on an off key local singing Stonemason in Charles Ives: A Life with Music by Jan Swafford.

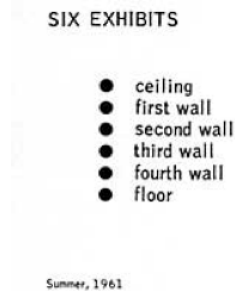
Let’s begin with some legal troubles. Upon the issuance of the Portsmouth Sinfonia’s version of Richard Strauss’ ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra’ (forever tethered to and as the theme of Stanley Kubrick’s film 2001: A Space Odyssey) the orchestra was met with a cease and desist letter by Strauss’ estate on charges of rearranging the original composition. The reality of the situation was that the players simply couldn’t play it very well. Of course the novelty of the de-skilled musician tampering in the canon, popular, classical, or otherwise was not by any means unique with the Sinfonia (consider the singer Mrs. Miller’s “bad” cover of Petula Clark’s ‘Downtown’ that peaked at #82 on the Billboard music charts in 1966). What perhaps is novel, or at least an old spirit reawakened in 1960s thinking, was the element of finding something of reverence within the de-skilled and its resulting “rearrangement.” It’s important to note that the players in the Sinfonia were not all de-skilled proper – by presenting themselves with instruments they had no idea how to play they became, not the score, a chance element. The question to ask is why mostly skilled musicians would choose to de-skill themselves, particularly when approaching a classical piece of music.

### **A Small History Lesson**

Opportunity Knocks was a British television show (beginning its broadcast via radio 1949 and existing on television until the early 1990s) that was a precursor to something like American Idol today. Each week contestants presented their talent and the viewing public would have one week to cast a ballot vote via mail to decide the winner. This would result in an often motley crew of winners, ranging from standard pop singers to Rhodesian dancers to a dog (important digression: improvisational guitar

legend Derek Bailey was in the house band). The composer Gavin Bryars, inspired by this approach to talent (or, for discriminating tastes, “talent”) staged a three-day event at Portsmouth Polytechnic College of Art also called Opportunity Knocks that mirrored the show in its variety of different acts and a competition format. It was during this event that the Portsmouth Sinfonia was formed, conceived as one-off joke that was born out of the experiments put forth by the composer Cornelius Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra.

It was Cardew who sought a variable in the performer, and the Scratch Orchestra, was made up of visual artists and various other “un-trained” performers to achieve this effect. This approach to performance has its roots in the inter/extra-disciplinary compositions of John Cage, and the visual music of Fluxus, particularly in the works of George Brecht. Brecht, a chemist cum artist after studying with Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York City, wrote compositions called Event Scores (the name being a reference to a literal extension of music) that aimed for totality with the score being simple enough that anyone could perform it. Consider Brecht’s score Six Exhibits:



Embedded in Brecht’s event scores is a perpetual readymade and an infinite action, a transmission that strategizes process in a simple form. “The events are total experiences,” Brecht says in an interview with Irmeline Leeber, “...if we perform it right now, for example, we can look at the ceiling, the walls, and the floor and at the same time we’ll hear sounds: our voices, the birds outside, and so forth. All of the belongs to the same whole and that’s the event.”<sup>i</sup> Paradoxically, while the score captures a totalizing experience when realized (sans for those without shelter), its notation requires only literacy to be performed. Thus ultimately the score could be performed by anyone at all times all the time.

Cardew, leaning heavily on the Event Score concept laid forth by Brecht - that of indeterminate interpretation, authorial dissolution through collectivity, musical extension, and no skill necessary performance - formed

the Scratch Orchestra in 1969, espousing a similar Brechtian rhetoric in his 1969 guideline of sorts, “A Scratch Orchestra: draft constitution”: “The word music and its derivatives are here not understood to refer exclusively to sound and related phenomena (hearing, etc). What they do refer to is flexible and depends entirely on the members of the Scratch Orchestra.”<sup>ii</sup> Section two of the draft constitution is entitled “Popular Classics” and reads:

*Only such works as are familiar to several members are eligible for this category. Particles of the selected works will be gathered in Appendix 1<sup>iii</sup> A particle could be: a page of score, a page or more of the part for one instrument or voice, a page of an arrangement, a thematic analysis, a gramophone record, etc. The technique of performance is as follows: a qualified member plays the given particle, while the remaining players join in as best they can, playing along, contributing whatever they can recall of the work in question, filling the gaps of memory with improvised variational material. As is appropriate to the classics, avoid losing touch with the reading player (who may terminate the piece at his discretion), and strive to act concertedly rather than independently. These works should be programmed under their original titles. <sup>iv</sup>*

In 1970, Cardew organized Beethoven Today, a concert of Beethoven’s works performed by experimental and new music performers. This was one of their earliest public performances following Opportunity Knocks, and at this point, in light of a swath of pedagogical activity concerning new music coming out of Portsmouth Polytechnic, found among their growing ranks ambient pioneer and Roxy Music member Brian Eno (who used his own particular brand of fame to produce and establish the first Sinfonia LP release), composer Michael Nyman, and renowned sculptor Barry Flanagan. The Sinfonia played Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 Op. 67 to a public that “was gripped by the experience of recognizing, or not recognizing, the familiar material being played by instrumentalists who were not (in any old meaning of the word) skilled, and by the obvious seriousness and commitment which marked the appearance of the performers. Never before, perhaps, had Beethoven’s music been greeted with such serious and voluntary laughter; in the pleasure and spontaneity of its response, the audience recognized the simple validity of the Sinfonia interpretation.”<sup>vi</sup>

It is here where the differences between Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra and the Sinfonia’s approach towards their respective acts of de-skilling become more apparent. For the Scratch Orchestra an approach towards a Beethoven work was emblazoned with the tenants of experimental investigation— improvisation, chance, fragmentation etc. In short, the popular classics were a serious reinvestment

through the vernacular of the contemporary expanded arts avant-garde of the time. The idea for the Scratch Orchestra was to decenter the popular classic as strategy. The Sinfonia shared all of these ideals, the crucial difference was that their brand of de-skilled – trained musicians and a few non-musicians playing canonized popular classical music poorly - was intended to be received through immediate recognition, which is to say simply, they presented an amalgamation of avant-garde ideas through a way that could be immediately perceived and processed by a spectator as what Hegel called two incongruous spheres of meaning – that is, humorous.



*“Comedy Album of the Year  
“designation from Rolling  
Stone Magazine,  
Issue 178, Jan 16, 1975*

## Ode to Joy

In 1960, John Cage performed his piece Water Walk on the television show I've Got a Secret. As Cage listed off the instruments he would be using to perform Water Walk (a goose call, a rubber duck, a seltzer siphon, to name a few) the audience burst into laughter. Of particular interest for our purposes are some comments following this moment:

Host: Will you tell us quite seriously whether or not what you consider what we are about to hear music?

Cage: Well-

Host: No tongue in cheek, but serious.

Cage: No, perfectly seriously I consider music the production of sounds, and since in the piece you will hear I produce sounds, I would call it music.

And shortly thereafter:

Host: Inevitably, Mr. Cage, these are nice people but some of them are gonna laugh. Is that all right?

Cage: Of course. I consider laughter preferable to tears.

Audience Laughs.

Throughout Cage's performance of Water Walk the audience roars with laughter, often times obscuring the sounds emitting from Cage's instruments. In this scenario, although Cage encourages the laughter, there is a sense that the radicality of his composition is proposed, through the lens of being broadcast on a popular television show to a live audience, as something mad. This is further exacerbated by the host's line of questioning toward the sincerity of Cage's claim towards what he is presenting being considered music.

For the Sinfonia, the radicality of the procedure was met with the same fits of audience laughter, yet the covertness of the Sinfonia's methodology – again, marred to an egalitarian avant garde ethos inspired by Cardew, Cage, and Fluxus – allowed for the audience to laugh at the absurdity of what was being presented to them in a way that seemed less derisive and more a reaction to the simple absurdity in front of their eyes. Sinfonia conductor John Farley says in Rex Pyke's short documentary film of the Sinfonia's

performance at the Royal Albert Hall, “It seems that the audience reaction to the Sinfonia performance is with joy and encouragement, as if one would have saw a children’s play rather than compared to the Royal Shakespeare Company. The Sinfonia offers the audience no consideration, so different from the conditioned way one reacts to a symphony orchestra or a loud pop group. Of course the ones most conditioned tend to try to and project themselves over the orchestra by heckling...”<sup>vii</sup>



*Audience member reactions to the Portsmouth Sinfonia’s performance at the Royal Albert Hall, 1974*

*(stills from Rex Pyke’s film the Portsmouth Sinfonia “Live at Albert Hall” watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyo-J8omnVo>)*

Sinfonia member Tom Phillips (composer and artist most well known for his classic book *A Humument*) recalls, “The Portsmouth Sinfonia was for fun, but it was really one of Cornelius’ (Cardew) ideas extended...the Scratch Orchestra was much more hairy than the Sinfonia, which really was a kind of joke ensemble – though I’m not certain that Gavin (Bryars) would thank me for saying that.”<sup>viii</sup> Yet, it is Bryars, who claims, with tongue firmly planted i-n cheek, that today the Sinfonia is “still available for weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals, and so on...”<sup>ix</sup>

In 1974, the Sinfonia played the Royal Albert Hall in London, ending the concert by inviting the audience to join the Sinfonia choir in singing Part II of Handel’s *Messiah* (the part with the “hallelujah” chorus). If throughout the concert the audience was prone to bursts of laughter at the Sinfonia’s mangling of the classics, this big finale that invited the audience into the chaos elicited pure glee. In Rex Pyke’s documentary film of this concert, audience shots of performing *Messiah* finds nearly every participant with a large smile on their face (or singing proudly and loudly as possible). Of course, to play *Messiah* at Albert Hall had some historical precedent – The Royal Choral Society, a choir of amateurs, had established an annual Good Friday performance of Handel’s piece since 1878. Thus, while the Sinfonia’s covert musical avant-garde was audience accessible, their sentiments on bourgeois culture seemed wholly apparent.



*Audience members performing Handel’s “Messiah” with the Portsmouth Sinfonia at the Royal Albert Hall, 1974. (still from Rex Pyke’s film)*

It was LaMonte Young who, speaking of his distancing from Fluxus, wrote “I actually had talent, I won prizes, I won degrees, and I actually have a history of capability. Fluxus people are like tenth grade artists. They had no ability. They are hacks that rode on my coattails and then made a name for this movement doing humor. They never understood what I was doing. They ended up doing something on a much simpler level. It’s a level called entertainment.”<sup>x</sup> Of course this statement is a bit generalizing (many members of Fluxus had “talent” proper, opting instead for conceptual endeavors that ignored such demands), but Young’s position does hold weight in regards to the line between avant-garde strategies that aim for an entertained audience vs. changing the terms of capital “A” art. Why Brecht was heralded as a model by Fluxus founder and producer George Maciunas was for the simplicity and humor of which Brecht’s event scores made difficult concepts more easily understood. The Sinfonia, utilizing the humor that arose from their method of restraint with a simple conceit – play familiar works poorly – follow this lead as well.

What then is to be said about the line between approaches to avant garde experimentation that is, or at least aims to be, populist? Or the old adage of “laughing with you vs. laughing at you”? It was Rolling Stone magazine that both awarded their first LP Portsmouth Sinfonia Plays the Popular Classics “Comedy Album of the Year” and a one star review citing the album as “perhaps the worst record ever made; best dismissed as an intellectual joke.”<sup>xi</sup> The intellectual joke implies that a humor specific only to those “in the know,” those that could somehow see the concept of music being played in this way above a simple novelty. To be fair, the Sinfonia’s marketing pushed this line of thinking, flaunting such press as “The World’s Worst Orchestra” and moving from classical music to then contemporary rock and roll such as the Who’s Pinball Wizard.

Therein lies the interesting tension between an avant garde production and novelty. It was Maciunas who billed Fluxus works, much to the chagrin of many members of the group, as “art amusement.” Maciunas’ idea was to make a mockery of bourgeois art tendencies in the hope that through pointing out art’s elitist tendencies (by breaking art down into immateriality or into cheap largely valueless commodities) a grander sociability would arise that made art for everyone, not just a select few. This is an affinity shared by the Sinfonia, at least on their surface presentation. To make the exalted grounds of classical music accessible to everyone it was demanded that it be known that anyone can play them, just perhaps not well. This two-fold operation is perhaps not a take-down of the enterprise of elitist culture, as Maciunas was wont to do, but a strategy to open up the conversation of who this kind of music is for and what its potential is

when a parameter is removed. The price is ultimately to be dismissed as a novelty act, as can be the critical case with Fluxus and is certainly the case with the Sinfonia. Their legacy exists as a footnote to the careers of many famous English composers (Bryars, Nyman, and almost always Eno), and a second life as a popular internet meme “orchestra fail.” Their records remain out of print and their internet presence outside of a failure meme is a modest website run by their longtime manager that is essentially a petition to get their records re-released.

Yet, despite their position as a foggy early 1960s – 70s avant-garde memory, the Sinfonia’s story is one that provides an interesting insight into the utopic wants of the 20th Century and an example of the tension between promoting a highfaluting concept in a populist way. Is it that humor in the avant-garde remains taboo because it seems to not provoke a serious consideration? Is it because the inevitable fate of the very serious utopic art conceit presented through humor is to be deemed novelty? Or is it just that the big idea of deconstruction is presented in a simple way that so aligns the Sinfonia to a comedy act? If this last question were to be the case, would it not be of value to consider the merits of the simple explanation or the idiosyncrasies of comedic expression? It was Tom Philips who said, “I think being a member of the Portsmouth Sinfonia is probably the best musical education you could ever have”<sup>xii</sup> While it is likely that Philips is being facetious in his comments, I would argue that he is correct. The tenants of mid-Twentieth Century avant-garde operate completely within the simple gesture of the Sinfonia, making a case for a reconsideration of our highbrow pedagogical endeavors and the means of which we approach them.

- i. Martin, Henry. *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*. Italy: Multipla Edizioni, 1978. 84.
  - ii. Cardew, Cornelius. "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution." *The Musical Times*, Vol. 110, No. 1516, 125th Anniversary Issue (Jun. 1969): 618.
  - iii. Ibid.
- Popular Classics*
- Particles from: Beethoven, *Pastoral Symphony*  
 Mozart, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*  
 Rachmaninov, *Second Piano Concert*  
 J.S. Bach, *Sheep may safely graze*  
 Cage, *Piano Concert*  
 Brahms, *Requiem*  
 Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*  
 Etc.
- iv. Ibid. 618.
  - v. Information regarding this pedagogical influence on the Sinfonia and Portsmouth Fine Art students can be found in an essay by Sinfonia member and Portsmouth professor Jeffrey Steele and in an interview with Sinfonia member David Saunders in this book.
  - vi. a.d.r. "Portsmouth Sinfonia" in *Source: Music of the Avant Garde, 1966-1973*. Eds. Larry Austin, Douglas Kahn, and Nilendra Gurusinghe. Berkely: University of California Press, 2011. 338.
  - vii. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyo-J8omnVo>
  - viii. Sheppard, David. *On Some faraway Beach: The Life and Times of Brian Eno*. London: Orion Books, 2009. 67.
  - ix. Ibid. 156.
  - x. An interview with La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela by Gabrielle Zuckerman, American Public Media, July 2002.
  - xi. Frank Rose, 1979 Rolling Stone Record Guide.
  - xii. Bracewall, Michael. *Re-make/Re-model*. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. 240.

R: John Farley conducting the Sinfonia at Royal Albert Hall (as seen on the cover of the Sinfonia album *Hallelujah*). Farley was said to begin the overture of a piece in a 3/4 time signature with a count of "1,2,3,4."

