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No
Sound
Is
Innocent



AMM AND THE
PRACTICE OF SELF-INVENTION

META-MUSICAL NARRATIVES

ESSAYS

Edwin Prévost

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PROLOGUE

Listen!
Follow the sound.
Do not let it escape.
Pursue *it* and not the spidery threads of allusion.
Wait.
Let the sound come.
Embrace its resonances.
Move
The bow across the strings
In time with your heart.
As if playing for the very first time.



where the mechanisms and discussions of real and fake variation are highly developed (if contentious). Advocates of the social-economic mono-culture, which I fear is pervading world thinking, believe it allows sufficient diversity for a continuing and fulfilling social and economic existence. I doubt this.

The *meta-music* has no legitimate lineage or tradition. If it has precursors they perhaps do not know themselves, or else deny their offspring. Out of a miscellany of ideas, influences and aspirations has arisen a new way of making music. Since the mid-1960s (I think it accurate to locate its developing self-consciousness then, though there may have been precedents) it has been moving, in and through action, to self-definition. It is, I suggest, an activity that reveals a new way of looking at the world. In playing the *meta-music* we give life to a proposition. Performing delineates and confirms the meta-music's contours. If there is a moral imperative then it is to defend such a mode of expression. Any conception of a meta-music is inevitably elusive. What follows are views which come as near as I can get to express, through my concerns of the moment, such conceptions. If ever I come to discuss such things again, the emphasis may be placed elsewhere. I hope subsequent writing can also be less opaque — but whatever its shortcomings, if this book is not received in the same questioning, individualistic and combative manner with which I have tried to marry its content and form, I shall be disappointed.

In concluding this introduction I am reminded of a lecture I heard more than 20 years ago, given by a Buddhist monk, the Venerable Sangharakshita. He caused considerable alarm among a certain section of his audience by saying that we should all give up working (by which he meant the jobs by which we earn money). The most indignant among us argued that our civil society would collapse into anarchy. I think I recall the monk raising an eyebrow and venturing half a smile. After the agitation had cooled, he remarked that when he was in Britain he always advised his listeners to give up their jobs. However, when in India he usually urged people to work more. In neither case, he remarked with amused resignation, did he expect his advice to be followed fully. This was why he appeared to make such extreme recommendations. In a more modest way — and not taking any perverse pleasure in annoyance caused — I hope to irritate and provoke readers.

amm and the practice
of self-invention

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AMM AND THE PRACTICE OF SELF-INVENTION

“‘Informal’ sound has a power over our emotional responses that formal ‘music’ does not, in that it acts subliminally rather than on a cultural level. This is a probable definition of the area in which AMM is experimental. We are ‘searching’ for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment.”

Cornelius Cardew ‘Towards an ethic of improvisation’
Treatise Handbook, Hinrichsen, London 1971.

Time, elapsing, smooths the edges of any shock to apperception. Perhaps it also dulls an appreciation of the implications of fortuitous meetings, events and new thinking. Gare was performing in hard bop bands, including a quintet I co-led. Gare and Rowe were also members of the Mike Westbrook Orchestra. Out of these attempts to make small group and orchestral jazz musics there grew an unease with emulation, and a desire to have a more creative relationship with music. In 1965, AMM began a radically different kind of music-making. The prevalent notions of musical theory, practice, hierarchy and structure (thematic reference, jumping-off points — for example the ‘head’ arrangements from which improvisation lifted off — and even the relatively informal criteria of the then ‘free jazz’ movement) were replaced by the creation of, and engagement with, a soundworld in which there was not even a formal beginning and ending. And, from its first raucous explosions, it knew too that it was not only speaking in a new language but that it was talking about things not perceived in any musics the member-musicians had heard elsewhere.

The dynamic of this creative initiative shook the AMMmusicians to their roots. It led them to what, nearly 30 years on, looks as if it may become a life-long quest. It was no ordinary act. By the time Cardew, a composer, joined AMM in 1966, he too had thrown off some of the shackles which bound him to formal music-making, even though much of his work prior to this had sprung from modernist aesthetics. Playing in AMM brought him to another avant-garde approach, an approach in some ways more challenging (and perhaps more rewarding) than the technocratic propositions of Darmstadt. And one that was far more freeing individually than the aesthetic priorities of the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen (for whom Cardew had been for a short and uncomfortable time an assistant).

AMMmusic served no demand and it supplied no market. Neither did it swerve into the slip-stream of any cultural correctness. And although the experience of AMM informed the more jazz-like playing of my duets with both Gare and (later) Rowe, and also my work with other musicians, AMM could not, would not it seems, be made to serve the objectives of any reality other than its own. AMM was, and 'is', both a medium for discovery and a mirror by which it could meditate upon things, but its concern was itself. This activity reflected the needs and aspirations of the musicians. To discover how far the musicians have been changed by this experience, and to hypothesise about its possible meanings, are primary reasons for constructing this essay. In itself this analysis too is of course part of the invention of AMM.

Performances of AMMmusic mediate, qualify and objectify the inner preoccupations of the musicians. Meaning is made through action; a hot fire of alchemy. In early days the group did not seek public presentation: the playing space was more a laboratory than concert platform. However it soon became apparent that the conditions of public performance added a psychological sharpness to the operation. The objective broadened, from finding personal meaning and satisfaction for the players, to making the occasion significant for the listener. Perhaps the musical practice and ethos of AMM helped musicians and audience to invent each other. How far, and in what way, these attitudes shaped the music is hard to say. Certainly some regular AMM listeners developed an almost proprietorial relationship to AMMmusic. It began somehow to exist outside of the persons who actually made the music.

Most of the AMMmusicians have viewed jazz historically as a major artistic and ideological force within the development of a wider-ranging creative improvised music. Its historical impetus suggests it to be an alienation strategy with which AMM can easily identify: jazz struggled to escape the confinement of a white-dominated capitalist culture. But many of its current practitioners have little historical or political sense of this originating impetus. Few seem to appreciate the necessity and essence of the divergence of underlying structure and aspiration in jazz from western 'classical' and commodity musics. It is the inner mobility of the improvisational element in jazz which allows freedom for personal expression. All too often, strong stylistic features arising from innovative ideas and procedures — consider those of bebop — harden into conventions that become as hard to escape as the unfreedoms of classical or popular musics.

Many jazz musicians and commentators seem to think that music and the arts in general are neutral and say nothing specific about the world. Music, for them, is product to be consumed, assuaging the needs of amorphous appetites. It is made accordingly. The doubtful benefit for jazz of vaudeville parentage — giving it licence to revel in naive populism — sits uneasily with its claim to be an art form. Surely art differs in definition from popular expressions through its inherent transcendence. Art informs, inspires and suggests new worlds. Entertainment may indeed be a medium through which meaning is conveyed, but the medium has become the (more valued) message. Art has its responsibilities — if only to be itself! A jazz musician serving the market cannot also make art, since it means diminishing the power of heurism, dialogue and self-invention that must be at the creative heart of jazz if it is to remain and develop as a vital force. (These claims are more deeply argued within the associated narratives of this text.)

Adopting jazz as a cultural inspiration is by no means the same as taking one (or many) of the forms it has developed, and using it as a rigid framework. Jazz is too compliant a form to resist many frivolous, parasitic and ultimately destructive elements; it is too promiscuous, or unconsciously generous, for its own good. The many styles of jazz have arisen out of a network of personal and socio-musical circumstances — as an example, the way many of the instruments which found their way into the musical armoury of New Orleans jazz, colouring its development, were simply military band discards. Such factors do not pertain to a musician of another time and another place: there is no aesthetic necessity in the choice of trumpet or saxophone, just the chance of a long-ago circumstance. Similar but unrelated scenarios in material and intellectual conditions led, subsequently, to the paradigmatic shifts of particular jazz developments during its history.

AMM's history is perhaps a microcosmic example of this process, in the way that non-musical materials came to be examined and transformed into sound-sources. (Often these were industrial cast-offs and debris — such as the sheet metal and the wine-barrel from which AMM made its collective gong and contra-bass drum which I still use, as well the contact microphones and ex-army surplus electronics.) Together with this came a search into the characteristics of existing instruments, in order to extend their range in the making of a meta-music. (The usually inaudible parts of instruments, such as the strings beyond the bridge of the guitar, were made accessible with a contact mike, as were a

myriad other small sounds. The drums could be used as sound-boxes to amplify the bowing of small cymbals, bells and found-objects.) It seems likely that the social, educational and cultural democracy that emerged, however unevenly, from the post World War Two welfare state in Britain, was bearing this kind of fruit by the 1960s, encouraging the spirit of confidence needed to pursue a new and experimental aesthetics. In general however jazz (in Britain and elsewhere) has been content to remain the same and perpetuate itself — all too often in an unthinking emulation of past styles and forms.

The last vestiges of jazz had fallen away from AMM by the time of the first recording, *AMMMUSIC*, in 1966. Thereafter it was a side-issue. AMM strove to embrace a much wider perspective in sound-world and ideas. Having dispensed with working models the AMMmusicians looked for description and an inner manifesto for the work. The cloaked but pregnant acronym 'AMM' was devised and adopted. And the only descriptive appendage has been the word 'music' (which is perhaps ultimately less definable than 'AMM' will ever be). The result of having this 'closed' name has left its meaning 'open.' Perhaps a sort of atavistic English pragmatism inclined us to want the work to speak for itself rather to clothe and circumscribe and thence limit its activities. What AMMmusic meant and where it would turn was not determined by a set of premeditated and pre-ordained objectives — other than the active precept 'to be.' From the very beginning AMM was a vehicle for continuous self-invention.

Victor Schonfield — who organised concerts of avant-garde musics in those days, and was the first critic to write about our work — once called AMM 'John Cage jazz'. The ideas of John Cage allowed any sound-source material into music and encouraged a zen-like sense of 'nowness' that superseded formal appreciation (and its attendant philosophy) of the western music tradition. But Cage always maintained a strong hold on the way 'his' music was to be made. Even if by some sleight of hand method, he maintained and perpetuated the increased authority that has been enjoyed by composers in western music in the last two centuries. The chance methods and the various interpretation techniques which musicians have to use in order to play certain Cage pieces — for example, *Variations I-VI* — are as imbued with Cage's ethos and methodology as the commands of a more formal notation. AMM opted for the freedom to work collaboratively that is absent from the Cage agenda. (Actually, in 1965 not only were Cage's ideas unknown to AMM,

but most of the musicians had only the vaguest idea who he was! In an interview with Miles of *IT* I was asked about Cage's influence, and simply assumed he was a drummer I hadn't heard of. Awareness — and a certain confirmation — arrived with Cardew, though it was to be several years before I discovered that Cage had indeed been a percussionist at one time!

Likewise, Stockhausen's improvisations — what he refers to as 'Intuitive Music' — have qualities which either direct the musician (as in his textural pieces e.g. *Right Durations* or *IT* from *Aus den Sieben Tagen*) or gives them the 'freedom' to draw from and transform events from 'his' previous compositions, e.g. *Prozession*. "Do not push sounds around," Morton Feldman has advised. Stockhausen pushes both sounds and musicians around. In addition, he advocated a diminution of 'thinking' ostensibly as an antidote to the overly rationalist elements in so many scores (including some he'd composed himself). In reality this 'non-thinking' mode merely confuses the performer into believing that there is another self to which he must aspire. This imagined sense of 'self' is, of course, Stockhausen's own: his need to dominate confirmed by his habit of controlling the output of his musicians through the mixing desk.

AMM differed from such projects because it denied all external authority and resisted individual attempts to impose their will upon events. There were hot debates about how far Cardew's *Treatise* subsumed individual creativity and impeded dialogue — even though this graphic notational work left far more freedom for individual expression than Stockhausen's works. As with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which influenced Cardew, no elucidation is offered for *Treatise*. How the innovative — or parodying? — symbols in the score are to be interpreted is entirely at the discretion of the performers. It is remarkable, however, the degree to which systems and conventions (some put forward by Cardew) came to be preferred after the initial performances. Perhaps this says as much about the way uncertainty can lead to deviation from original intention as it does about nature's abhorrence of a vacuum. Perhaps it is just difficult to stop being a composer.

AMM differed too from the emergent musical philosophy associated with free-improvising guitarist Derek Bailey, who has gone far beyond Cagean anarchic liberalism. Bailey's aesthetic departs before commonality can congeal into a convention. He enjoys mismatch and confrontation: his mutuality

seems to exist only at the point of agreeing to perform. Such a philosophy inevitably pushes its advocate into a corner, and perhaps generates in consequence some 'unthought of' response. In contrast to Bailey's interest in voicing before common language and understanding develop, AMM implicitly accepted the difficulty in appreciating meaning and sought therefore to develop a diversity in communication. This of course brought its own crop of contradictions, amongst which looms the question whether common understanding can indeed be achieved, and whether it matters.

But perhaps the most significant difference between the Cage/Bailey aesthetic and AMM's concerns is the thorny question of emotional intent, impact and response in music. Advancing or prescribing a specific emotional characteristic for a music probably lessens music's veracity and the likelihood of its happening. Cage explicitly rules this out, including even the right for emotion to be a factor in his music. Bailey does so implicitly. Ironically such an attitude may bring the listener's attention to its absence, and thus its inherent existence in music. AMM do not grant a specific place for nor deny the possible presence of emotion in music. It is, for AMM, a possible dimension for meaning to inhabit. Advancing or prescribing a specific characteristic (emotional or otherwise) would inevitably distort any meaning that might arise out of the moment of performance.

Rowe has suggested that the manner of making AMMmusic is "painterly". He had studied at art school, but this term is not simply a reflection of English art school liberal education in the early 1960s (as much a training in enquiry and an experiment in personal discovery as in 'art' itself; and as such no longer in existence, sadly). Rowe in fact continued to be profoundly interested in, critical of and inspired by the world of graphics and plastic representation. (He is an original graphic designer, as his numerous posters and album artworks attest.)

Rowe and Sheaff were earning a living from commercial art. Gare was still a (mature) student. Despite their art-school backgrounds, none of three were primarily focused on their work as visual artists — Rowe recollects having great difficulties at that time with painting. However, many of the ideas they had about art percolated very naturally into the new music-making of AMM. 'Abstract Expressionism' — especially the work of De Kooning, Pollock and Kline — was influential in respect to the manner of execution. But perhaps

more pertinent to the situation in which we found ourselves then was the idea of 'analytical cubism', in which different objects and different facets of the same objects are shown simultaneously and side-by-side. This non-hierarchical concept became reflected in the manner in which sounds and musicians were placed, perceived and understood. Out went the classical concerto model, and also the bebop model of featured soloist supported by a rhythm section.

Similar issues were simultaneously affecting Cardew's work. Having been educated as a chorister at King's School, Canterbury, and at the Royal Academy of Music, he was one of the few composers who took graphic notation seriously enough to further his study of graphics (at the London School of Printing), enabling him to compose his mammoth graphic work *Treatise* (1963-1967). Significantly, it was Cardew's efforts to find musicians willing and able to interpret *Treatise* that led him towards AMM and his introduction to improvisation. Later, at the end of the 1960s, Cardew, Rowe and myself enrolled at the London Workingmen's College to learn Chinese. Initially, this was intended to further an interest in both graphics and Chinese culture. It led Cardew and Rowe nearer to the politics which later fractured the ensemble.

Other elements of Chinese culture attracted AMM: as well as music and calligraphy, philosophy (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism — especially Zen), Chinese pottery, and the specialised calligraphy of poetry. The calligraphies were a fascinating combination of visual references and language components, in which the origins of words and compound phrases could be traced back to drawings of physical objects. For example, the character for pen 'bi' (in phonetic 'pin yin') was written as 筆. It is based upon the radical for 'wood', of which pens were made. Gradually, through usage and technological development — the change from pointed wood ink applicator to brush — the ideogram became abstracted until perhaps only a scholar could know its original source. Chinese poetry thus depended as much upon brush style as upon literary content, until no real distinction was thought necessary. These kinds of connections — and the thought processes behind them — intrigued and influenced AMM (certainly they had an effect upon how Cardew came to view graphic notation), and was perhaps part of a growing interest in Chinese culture which had originally been stimulated by Ezra Pound. Cardew's magnum opus *The Great Learning* (1968-70) owed much to this field of inquiry.

But beneath there was a deeper level of inquiry, going to the root of meaning. Sounds were not a metaphor: they existed in their own right. Yet, as Cardew has written, they too have a history. In the Chinese ideograms the component parts can be traced back to a very precise representation, and then forward through a specific process of complicated reference and allusion, as the development of language demanded more detail, precision and artistic expression. Music, as represented by the formal western 'classical' tradition, had become too self-referential, too inflexible. Trapped inside this system, it was as cut off from its early history as it was from the initiating needs and aspirations that had led men to make music in the first place. The Chinese studies helped AMM to develop perspectives, strategies and techniques to encourage leaps away from conventional teachings and meanings, and the traps within them.

Perhaps a painterly theme, in practice as well as in metaphor, was inevitable in the development of AMMmusic. Other visual-physical elements have had a role to play. It has never been a surprise that Rowe's set-up and manipulations have invariably fascinated audiences. One loses count of the times when, after concerts, crowds have stood around his table looking with curiosity at the various objects on it, and asking what the disparate and apparently non-musical parts all do. Paige Mitchell's photographs, some used in the booklet of Keith's solo CD *A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality*, serve to illustrate the point. But of course, these artefacts do not merely serve a decorative purpose. Their visual interest is incidental (although by no means negligible) and secondary to Rowe's purpose — although at times a particular item in Keith's battery of effects has certainly been introduced because it had a visual interest. One can be confident, however, that it would soon disappear if a way had not been found to make it serve the music. This investigatory process very well illustrates the making of AMMmusic and is emphasised in an early AMM aphorism: "Given a certain amount of experience, it is not difficult to assimilate any object" (from the sleeve note of first AMM record *AMMMUSIC*). If Marcel Duchamp's ghost haunts AMM, his attitude has been transformed into our collective sound aesthetic: "Every noise has a note" (same source).

These extra-musical ideas and procedures perhaps indicate the inadequacy of the available musical aesthetic — which was not sufficiently broad or mobile enough as a medium for discussion. A sense of the effects of colour

and texture of sound is analogous to a painterly aesthetic and is perhaps necessary in the absence of a systematics of scales and tones to provide a structural basis and an inner coherence for the work. Some sound formulations needed a conceptual approach outside of any 'traditional' musical approach to exist at all. Christian Wolff has observed that most improvisations would be impossible to notate: he thought this especially true of AMM's. Does this also mean that such work is unthinkable in 'traditional' musical terms? As 'unmusical' were the magical, incantational, ritual elements which Cardew and to a lesser extent I myself on occasion introduced. These were a response to the atmosphere developing within performance as well as a contribution to the aura of 'nowness' and 'being' that became an implicit hallmark of AMM's aesthetic, and its audience's experience.

To sum up, such considerations arise from the question of making and/or using sounds not previously associated with music (for example, bowing a plastic yoghurt carton), and how they might work within a sonic aesthetic. Much of AMM's work has been devoted to such activity; the experience of doing anything once helps — even if only conceptually — to draw and judge future effects. Some of the thinking that generated these (and other) aphorisms appear in the article *AMM — Some Memories And Reflections (Recommended Records Quarterly Magazine Vol.2 No.2 Autumn 1987*. The same text appears as the booklet that accompanies the CD *AMMMUSIC — 1966 R&R Megacorp/Matchless*).

Consider now a more specific, more obvious, but very different painterly influence. AMM, especially in Rowe's contribution, is indebted to Jackson Pollock. Even the scene of execution is similar, with Rowe adjusting the basic canvas (in his case laying the guitar flat on its back) to enable certain 'actions' to be carried out, to let dribbles of sound meander, collect in drowning pools of volume or run off the edges into congealed silences. This manner of working — seen/heard in Tilbury's exploitation of the piano stool or in letting bottles slowly oscillate, vibrated by, and in turn vibrating, the piano strings; or in Lawrence Sheaff's use of toys and humming tops; or in my own 'dish gong' and cymbal quasi-Doppler effects, the scratching, scrapings and bowings and the over-speed drumming, designed to fall, through an impossible momentum, into chaotic unknowable sequences — became common practice applied by all AMMmusicians individually. Recall also not just Cardew's remarkably inventive preparations and piano playing, but also the silent rituals he

sometimes performed on our usually darkened stage, adding an eerie presence that affected audiences and the music that ensued, pacing out spaces of magical significance and placing indefinable objects to cohabit with performance. And perhaps most importantly, recall the use of radio, sometimes Cardew's, predominantly Rowe's, switching-in with inspirational touch to add undreamable narratives to the inexhaustible document.

Examples are almost too numerous of Rowe's uncanny touch on the wireless switch. The unpredictability of the radio tests the ensemble's ability to accommodate whatever emerges (sometimes almost to breaking point). A number feature on the recording *AMMUSIC — 1966*. Concurrent with one recorded improvisation there is (amongst other things) a spasmodic 'accidental' running commentary which appears to relate to the proceedings. Judging by the 'cultured' voice, and matching it to memories of the times, it was a BBC Third Programme broadcast on folk music (the Third Programme would later become Radio 3). One can hear, at the end of the track *Ailantus Glandulosa*, the speaker seeming to give up in despair, announcing above the mayhem, "We cannot preserve the normal music. It is only they . . ." At which point his words are obliterated. On the track *In The Realm of Nothing Whatever* AMM is brought to a momentary standstill at the announcement of a "brandy tasting". Thereafter the radio meanders in and out of what seems to be current political commentary. And, if you listen carefully to the section discussing (possibly) Winston Churchill, there comes at a point in the ponderous speech the phrase "around his neck, he has the millstone of Eden": thereafter comes a sharp interjection like a train-whistle. In the background howls of laughter can be heard seeping into the recording from the studio control room. Of course not all radio sequences are humorous or even textual. Rock'n'roll enters AMM via this surreptitious medium, as do all manner of other musics.

(Two other interesting examples come to mind in more recent times. At a concert AMM gave in Istanbul to an audience mainly of university students the music was complemented, via the radio, by the pious intonation of a male Turkish voice. AMM, of course, had absolutely no idea what the material was. Later, it was complimented upon the judicious way verses from *The Koran* had been introduced into the performance, and the respectful way they had been treated! Another notable occasion was at a concert in the booming Great Hall at Goldsmiths College. Rowe had picked up on short-wave some

eerily and endlessly insistent number-calling in German — "sieben . . . ein . . . drei . . . funf". A powerful sense of the sinister pervaded the rest of the concert, as Rowe periodically came back to the same frequency with the same cryptic call going on and on. Many in the audience were affected and curious as to the source of this material — as were AMM. Later, it was discovered that these short-wave intonations were probably the East German — then communist — secret services broadcasting to their agents in the West.)

There has also always been a determination to get beyond the artistic, cultural and physical parameters of the musical 'instrument', and to investigate the materials at hand, human as well as physical. New techniques were needed to 'prepare' and extend the potentiality of music-making. AMM was 'deconstructing', in practice, just as the term began to emerge in philosophy, but also 're-constructing' (with, for example, the inspiration of Cage and Tudor's ideas of 'piano preparation'). A hands-on ethos of re-invention was a guiding principle in AMMmusic: "To play as if there had never been any such thing as music before." The strings of the guitar stretched beyond its meagre body to reach out to pillar or beam, clinging and spreading like ivy. Drum sticks are rubbed together — growling like an ecstatic overgrown cicada. Piano strings are stroked until they squeal in delight. (Often the listener has difficulty distinguishing the origin of sounds: "Is that coming from the cello or the drums?" is not a question you'd find in many areas of music.) But these practices are not simply an aural mirror of the techniques of Duchamp, or Pollock or Robert Rauschenberg. There are other running themes that lead here. Taoism has been a recurring source of interest, and its search for a 'harmonic' relationship with all things, all events. The technique of 'allowing the glaze to run', as practised by some imperial Chinese potters, confirmed that the 'controlled accident' was a practice to be mastered. Some configurations may exist beyond rational creative thought: the key seemed to be in letting the music go out of control, in having the courage to fail. Indeed, seeking failure itself was a possible route to success! For AMM these 'controlled accidents' were practised variously: through random radio frequency switching: rolling empty tin-cans across (and often off) the stage: testing the bowing qualities of an unknown metal sheet. There is a dynamic relationship of intention and creativity in Pollock's work that is matched, if not excelled, by the flashing brush strokes of the best imperial Chinese calligraphers.

And the *I Ching* too encouraged a 'letting go' of conscious control to achieve

other and complementary realisations of inner and outer possible worlds. In fact, early on I adopted a very direct percussive version of the casting of the yarrow stalks (though one suspects it might make some of the more sensitive Taoists wince), grasping a handful of drum sticks high above my head and then allowing them to fall onto the snare drum in some aural divinatory equivalence.

In short, it was always clear that becoming master musicians required reference points much more diverse than 'musical'. Perhaps it is this more far-ranging perception of the possible relationships between things that is characterised by Rowe's term 'painterly'. In retrospect it is perhaps difficult to be precise about what led to such a disparate cluster of interests, however obvious the influence on the work. Each of the musicians had particular predilections and personal discoveries that were shared, to a greater or lesser extent, with the others. But one suspects AMM were as much as anything energetically charged by the way which so many things could be incorporated and enrich their musical lives.

The practice of self-invention is, of course, mediated and moderated by external factors. Materiality and social/political features extend or hamper the possibilities of personal development. Freedom is circumscribed by conditions. The rest depends upon the will and personal predilection. AMM's philosophical position — the reflection, in as far as it exists, of the common interests of the individual musicians — arises from a seemingly odd combination of influences, among them Buddhism, Kabbalah, Taoism, Marxism and the thinking of Gurdjieff (though numerous artists, musicians and other thinkers from Gagaku to Robert Rauschenberg come into it). Some may look as if they are mutually exclusive. But ideas have never been incorporated within the narrative of AMM because of their 'absolutism'. Nor, of course, were they adopted without analysis, criticism and, at times, resistance and even division. Cardew, for example, was less inclined to the mystical — especially the ideas derived from Gurdjieff (perhaps in part because his mother was so involved with this system?). He was, however, attracted to Confucianism, whilst Rowe developed a distinct feeling for Buddhism. Sheaff became and remains to this day very involved with Transcendental Meditation, as does Gare. This led to a certain amount of tension about the relative validity of various meditational practices, which was perhaps part of the reason why Sheaff finally left AMM (and, ultimately, all musical practice).

It now seems certain that AMM could only ever remain a homogenous unit whilst it remained open-minded and tolerant (although sceptical) towards new ideas. Whilst it was recognised that the whole was somehow more important than any particular parts (to which there existed varying degrees of personal attachment), then it remained healthy. It was mentioned above that AMM never swerved into the slip-stream of any cultural correctness: the truth of this is perhaps best seen at the moment of greatest peril in this regard, during the shift, in the early 70s, towards Rowe's and Cardew's Maoism. Purely from my own perspective, it now seems that it was the manner of introduction of these ideas rather than their inherent value that was qualitatively different (in its way it had the same kind of inflexible conviction that Sheaff had about TM). Concurrent with this phase of AMM, there was intense ideological struggle going on in the Scratch Orchestra. (Tilbury will surely go into this in detail in his forthcoming biography of Cardew). The effect was that Cardew and Rowe proposed a political analysis and concomitant agenda for AMM. Rowe actually stopped attending rehearsals or sessions, although he continued to play concerts. There were however periodic political 'discussions'. In my opinion Rowe's music became during this time more and more proscribed (others might say closed down) by the rigor of the particular political perspective he was trying to apply to his work. In one key example, random features had to be superseded by the rational: in effect, the radio was usurped by prepared tapes. (Random features, as far as I can recall, could only be entrusted to the outpourings of Radio Peking!) All other actions were rendered null: unless there was some identifiable and 'correct' political meaning or consequence, an action was considered useless bourgeois self-indulgence. Gare and I, angry, and resentful of this treatment, resisted such cultural bullying, only to be identified as "reactionary elements". (It is true that neither of us was particularly knowledgeable of or versed in political theory. Later this changed: the choice of subjects in the degree I chose to take during this interregnum of AMM, an Honours degree in History and Philosophy in which Chinese history figured prominently, was influenced strongly by these debates.) At the time, however, we had little intellectual resistance to the Maoist rhetoric which flowed round our every move and utterance. The one thing that we insisted upon was our right to resist this authoritarian line within AMM, and the resultant attack upon our autonomy (which of course only served to prove our bourgeois individualism!). The experience fractured relationships: discussions degenerated into frustrating incomprehension. (At one point, I recall Gare suggesting that Rowe did not

know whether China existed or not! Whether this remark was obtuse or subtle, it was met with scorn.) However, despite the pain, this was a lesson in maturing which I at least came to value.

More recently Keith Rowe has acknowledged that Cardew's and his political enthusiasm, especially during the early part of this period, owed more to their passion for the broad socio-political programme they found most vigorously pursued in Maoism than to political experience or study. During a tour of Holland in 1973, agreed to before AMM was affected by political struggle, the musicians performed in two duos — Cardew/Rowe and Gare/Prévost. An ironic feature of the resultant musics is that, given the argument made for change by Cardew and Rowe, it is Gare's and my work which appears (to me) most to diverge from the musical form associated with AMM up to that point. The saxophone and drums sound natural, much more direct, tonal and rhythmic in character, owing something to the prevailing sound of Free Jazz, although features of the AMM improvisational relationship (including silence) remain. In contrast the performance by Cardew and by Rowe especially retains more of the sonic characteristics of earlier AMM performances despite the fact they were attempting to distance themselves from AMM's alleged 'subjectivity' and to infuse their music with political content. A further irony (perceived from this distance) is that Free Jazz was surely a much more dynamic cultural mode of response to alienation than anything Cardew and Rowe had then come up with. (All the music on this strange AMM tour was recorded, and parts of the respective duos are likely to feature in the triple CD that Matchless Recordings is preparing, to mark AMM's 30th year.)

In an introduction to a discussion with the audience in Den Haag, Cardew distinguished between two different theories of music. The first saw it as a reflection and an expression of the internal world or of a person's mental state; the second reflected the outside, the 'real' world of perception and social experience. He explained that Keith and he had begun to hold the second theory, and were working from it to find an appropriate music approach to match and promote their politics. Cardew felt it was a musician's duty to reflect the things that were happening in this outside world. The purpose, he explained was to change from the subjective kind of music they had been playing (in AMM), acknowledging that communicating specific ideas through music was a difficult process. They wanted to initiate a consciousness of positive things that were going on in the political struggle. In respect to the

music they were to present that night Cardew explained that the positive example of the People's Republic of China would be introduced into their music via Rowe's technique (established in AMM) of using prefabricated sounds of tapes and radio. He would introduce radio-transmitted sequence from Radio Peking. The uncharacteristically restrained industrial sounds that Keith elicited from the guitar were clearly meant to represent the alienation and contradictions inherent in industrial capitalist society. Cardew's piano music was mostly conventional tonal keyboard material from which pleasant melodic sequences often seeped into the 'noise'. This occupied an indeterminate position perhaps representing the dilemma of the intellectual. These improvisations were contrasted to and played against the 'heroic' and 'culturally correct' material played from tapes to inform and inspire listeners (in particular *The East Is Red*; more generally, music couched in a strange contradictory Eurocentric orchestral/operatic mode that still baffles me).

The implication was, of course, that Gare and I held wholly to and expressed the subjective side to a dichotomy that now seems very simplistic and facile. During the discussion Gare dealt very ably in my view with the issue of the sharpening of perception as a general objective in the process of AMMmusic — as practised hitherto, and indeed subsequently. He advanced the idea of AMM-music-making as an 'irritant' of the kind that promotes and demands responses, such a resolution being a prerequisite to any considered action therefrom. Listening to the tapes of this discussion more than 20 years on, I am surprised by the calm and tone of rationality which prevails. As I recall, my inner self was not in equilibrium with the outside world. I still recoil from what felt to me a disingenuous attempt to persuade or affect. Even after all this time I am still not convinced of Cardew's and Rowe's sincerity in this respect. Their attempts to convince the audience of their humility in an attempt to change their music into something which will reflect and advance a progressive socialist society still rings hollow in my ears. The idea that they needed (and were willing) to go out and learn from the working class is patronising and seems at this distance to be a perverse abnegation of their powers of judgement, sense of social justice and creative responses. It seems now as it did then that there was another agenda — though they have not since admitted it and may not even have known it at the time. The reader should be aware that to revisit these incidents is to float once more into dangerous waters. I have always been — and remain — an admirer of Cardew's and Rowe's creativity, especially Rowe's, so obviously it pains me to continue

to be conscious of my own critical shortcomings and/or lack of understanding and generosity towards my then-adversaries. Tilbury will no doubt offer an opinion on Cardew's various intellectual shifts in the forthcoming biography. For my part I feel that Rowe in particular, given his ever-restless spirit, had perhaps reached a personal and creative impasse. His vigorous adoption of Maoism is totally in keeping with a recurring tendency to take up very strong positions at critical moments in his life.

When there was an attempt to impose a particular perspective upon everything AMM did, the group collapsed. However, it seems that AMM learnt that ideas and theories are of use only in so far as they are fertile. They are all man-made and subject to error and misuse. As well as for 'sounds' AMM were also searching for 'ideas' and the responses attached to them, becoming aware too that philosophical systems all bear the stamp of their time and place. They will always be marked by the language and imagery of their emergence. This is as true of the 19th century sense of 'the scientific' that encompasses Marx's world view as it is of the mystic forces of 'yin' and 'yang' that encapsulate Taoist thinking. A worthwhile observation of both systems would not, for example, simply rule out the archaic eastern mysticism in favour of the more culturally sympathetic 'scientific materialism'. Language imagery apart, both speak about a dialectic motion in natural processes and events, even though they imply different human attitudes. The position today, in 1994, is never to choose one system over another, even at the risk of catching the venom of those of a more 'fundamental' persuasion. For even within the act of music-making there is always the problem of allowing the calculation of the moment to mask the sense of 'being'. Any appraisal of AMMmusical success cannot be reduced to any of the working features and processes suggested above, or anywhere. At best it can be described as consisting of them all, and then of more than can be imagined. The work and the joy in making AMMmusic is in the imagining. But having a sense of (or giving a shape to) what is being imagined, especially within the act of making music, will destroy or negate its effect. Equally, trying to anticipate and pre-arrange some specific themes or motifs will be frustrated by the needs of the moment of playing. This seems to have been true of an imposition of a 'Maoist' line as much as any beatific sense of higher consciousness embodied and propagated by any of the more institutional mystical systems we had connections with, Transcendental Meditation, or whatever. Such external agendas are dangerous precisely because they are orthodoxies; in that they have a fixed view of the world and

ultimately insist upon particular social settings and intellectual conformity. In other words, they, having once invented themselves, become reactionary forces and intolerant to the process of self-invention.

There are, of course, no traditional roles in AMMmusic. There are no soloists or leaders, and no rhythm section. Decision-making and identity comes from the manner in which AMM treats its own history. It is beholden on each player to find a role within AMM. No specifics of performance are ever discussed. There is no formulated logical sense of direction; no particular encouragement to do a particular thing. AMMmusicians prefer not to know if a fellow musician has a strategy for a particular performance. Problems arise mostly when musicians do not know what to do but continue to be active. Another potential area of unease is the concurrent use of the same soundfield — for example when different musicians simultaneously create superficially similar effects. (This problem is exacerbated by the homogenising tendency of the electronic medium.) These negative and often obstructing features usually reflect general disregard or unawareness of the immediate moment of performance. Often the solution to the musical problem is play less or to remain silent: "playing the stringless lute" (a Taoist recommendation which is not the same as not knowing what to do!). In practice the minds and movements of each musician are individually concerned to make sense of the situation they find themselves in during a performance. At times the music may seem to be inextricably chaotic: leaden with ennui; perversely intractable. It may be begging for a single mind to create order. Even though there is the prospect of the musicians tugging in different directions — and often they do — this potential difficulty is the chosen mode of artistic creativity. The key-word is 'potential'. It is working with/in the most complicated and enthralling medium of all — the intuitive responses of strong-minded people.

The conventions and practices that have arisen in AMM are its signatures. They are signs of its identity: perhaps also of traps AMM has failed to avoid. To work within this framework means acknowledging its past and inventing its future. In the process this body of work invents the musician. All debate ensues through the medium of sound, in which all AMMmusicians can ruefully recall dashed expectations. There is a tacit acknowledgement that AMM's strength comes from each member allowing other voices to impinge upon individual aspirations and sensibilities. No one is subdued or subordinated

unless they allow themselves to be. Fundamental to this experience is the maintenance and development of a sense of 'self' that can bear, even enjoy, sublimation — but does not fear annihilation. (One suspects that most musicians are unaware that their individuality is being subordinated when they perform 'works', or else are prepared to ignore the fact. They would find my suggestion incomprehensible: not an issue. However, contractual relationships and moral imperatives continue to lurk!)

If there are continuities worth observing, they are inspirational rather than particular. The solution of one situation is not likely to be appropriate to another. But new initiatives, new instances of freedom-making (liberty-taking if you like!) can and should be undertaken, if our culture is not going to sink into the welter of standardised responses that the capitalist mono-culture seems to demand. I once asked a young drummer to deputise for me at an improvising club in London during the late 1970s. He was surprised to be asked because, as he said, he played nothing at all like me. I returned by saying that that was precisely why he had been asked!

In the wider intellectual culture an undercurrent is detectable, wherein new ideas and developments are considered somehow inevitable. Of course, material conditions do determine, or allow, specific features (for example, without electricity the only amplification would be the sound boxes on stringed instruments). But the ideas and the new form of musical expression that became AMM depended upon the creative and psychological disposition of the musicians involved. There was no platonic ideal to be discovered. Nor did the musicians stumble, like absent-minded explorers, into a fertile clearing from a jungle of sub-conscious responses. AMM took a long hard look at the forms of music it had grown up with and found most of them wanting. They did not satisfy AMM's needs — the desire to be creative and autonomous people. AMMmusic is the way it is because AMM made it this way. (There is of course a problematic corollary for those who emulate AMM's playing ideas and techniques — for example, Rowe's approach to the guitar. Deconstruction and reconstruction can also become no more than an exercise: no better or worse than following a manual. For such imitation to be justified it must transcend the originating impulse, hopefully on an upward spiral of originality. In other words, a musician worthy of using Rowe's concepts and techniques should be able to make their inventor gasp at the use and ends to which the ideas have been extended.)

It is not a question of exclusivity nor of moral copyright. Those who follow AMM have to ask themselves what they are doing, because the externals are deceptive and could become self-deceptive. It will, of course, seem paradoxical to be arguing against the development of what could be seen as an 'AMM school'. There is work to be developed in the field AMM have begun to map out. Outwardly the forms and structures, the guiding practices (that's to say 'heurism' and 'dialogue' injected with the appearance of 'experimentalism') may give the impression of original work. But unless there is a powerful evidence of self-invention — a sharp distinguishing mark of identity — then it will be no more than an empty charade. The message of self-invention, the philosophical gains of AMM which argue against AMMmusic ever becoming an orthodoxy, will have been negated.

The effect of an audience's presence upon AMMmusic gives this situation a sharp focus. The musicians are aware of a further refinement in their perception of the materials and situation in which they must work. It feels a bit like a player playing with someone looking over his shoulder and enquiring of his every move. Yet ultimately he knows that he must get beyond this very personal response if he is to do justice to the work in hand. What AMM have come (perhaps dangerously) to hope for is a recognition of the values which inform the work and a sharing of the particular experience of the moment: the tensions, inventions, the surprises, and the physical and emotional relaxation of resolutions. But amidst all these important generalities it is clear that individual musicians and audiences find specific features to interest and nurture them. Often a figure from the audience will express a sentiment or a feeling that arose for them, in a performance, with an emotional strength that serves only to humble the AMMmusician who has been struggling for an hour-and-a-half with three thumbs and indigestion! It is then that a player is at least glad that he had enough technique in playing this music to have got out of the way and not to have disturbed this 'other' inner experience. Although there was (and still is) some indefinable unanimity about whether a session was successful or not (the sheer joy, perhaps, of travelling without expectations about arrival), there are also very personal inner pleasures derived from making AMMmusic, which may not necessarily have any correspondence with the experience of others in the ensemble or of the audience. For me, the personal transcendence of the body over mind figures as a satisfying feature in playing: doing for doing's sake. But perhaps AMM all share in an appreciation of the deep refreshing tranquility, after the loud cataclysmic

sequences, of the long quiet and often silent passages. The audience too seems to engage and participate on all these levels.

“Within the timespan of a performance the nearness of sound beauty becomes laughingly obvious, the players merely indicators of that is there already.” Very early on AMM knew something of the ‘game’ it was trying to play, even though the meaning of this aphorism might now perhaps be moderated or qualified, prepared as it was for the sleeve of *AMMMUSIC — 1966*. It seems now that recognition and experience of ‘sound-beauty’ — maybe of any perception of ‘beauty’ — is a sense of satisfaction; intellectually, emotionally, physically. (How archaic it feels to be discussing aesthetics in such terms — but why not?) ‘Beauty’ is a successful development of ideas; a realisation and/or assuaging of a deepfelt need, and in music an aural bathing that leaves the whole being refreshed and calm. The initial experiences of such ‘satisfactions’ within performances seemed to come so easily (or much more easily or unexpected than could possibly have been anticipated) that it felt as if it must have been there all along. Of course, what was there all along was the ‘need’ for certain kinds of experience, resolution of which came only rarely to AMM and some of its listeners from other musical forms. The reasons for this, one suspects, are very complex. But one might perhaps lean towards this one: that so often the conditions of the musical experience are strained and even hostile (fighting to get through a traffic jam to get to a concert; having to pay an unreasonably large sum of money to gain admission; living up to the social and intellectual expectations that the ethos and *mores* of the music demands; striving to understand and enjoy something because it has been recommended by ‘informed’ opinion).

In a satisfactory AMM performance such demands are absent. During the early days people only found out about ‘sessions’ by word of mouth or accident. There was no admission charge and AMM very often performed in the dark with no formal seating. One regular listener used to bring a blanket in which he cocooned himself on the floor. And, as there was no formal ‘aesthetic’ (AMMmusicians and the audience were ‘searching’ for it) people invested in and took from the experience. They invented a music for themselves and in the process they acted to confirm that the ‘search’ which the AMMmusicians were undertaking was not some delusory madness. It was, of course, another form of potential ‘madness’ — the invention of self.

“And so I live in leisure and nourish my vital power. I drain the wine-cup, play the lute, lay down the picture of scenery, face it in silence, and, while seated, travel beyond the four borders of the land, never leaving the realm where nature exerts her influence, and alone responding to the call of wilderness. Here the cliffs and peaks seem to rise to soaring heights, and groves in the midst of clouds are dense and extend to the vanishing point. Sages and virtuous men of far antiquity come back to live in my imagination and all interesting things come together in my spirit and in my thoughts. What else need I do? I gratify my spirit, that is all. What is there that is more important than gratifying the spirit?”

From an essay entitled *An Introduction to Landscape Painting*
Tsung Ping (A.D. 375-443)