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<u>As Composer and Classicist: On Euripides' *Helen* and Christian Wolff's *Changing the System*</u>

"What appeals to me personally is that I find myself…confronted with the as yet not-too-clear possibility of a new civilization."- Frederic Rzewski, on Christian Wolff's music [1]

At this present moment in history, it has become all but impossible to ignore or repudiate the numerous innovations of the New York School and the tremendous influence it has had on Western culture since the 1950s. Representing a radical shift in aesthetic value and offering alternative modes of both expression and non-expression, the New York School developed new concepts and ideas which separated themselves from the European tradition in a manner comparable to Expressionism in the visual arts decades prior. Through his brief period of lessons with John Cage, Christian Wolff (b. 1934) became the youngest member of this loose coalition, and developed lifelong associations with Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and David Tudor. Despite the profound influence Wolff would have on both Cage and Feldman (With Feldman describing Wolff's music as Cage's "North Star"), Wolff did not entirely relate to the almost monastic lifestyle in which Cage and his circle lived. Consequently, Wolff chose to pursue a career in academics, enrolling in Harvard University in 1951 to study Classics. Eventually, he held positions at Harvard (1962-1970) and at Dartmouth (1971-1999), where he also instructed courses in music and comparative literature.

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[1] Frederic Rzewski, *Preface. Cues: Writings and Conversations,* G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 10.

It may seem fairly unusual for a composer associated with such stark originality to pursue a career in a seemingly unrelated discipline. Wolff's parents, who were German book publishers and passionate admirers of art, music, and literature, perhaps had some degree of influence on Wolff's interdisciplinary approach to his career. Even though an immediate connection cannot be made directly between the fields of classical studies and experimental composition, a connection can be suggested between Wolff's approaches to both disciplines. Wolff dedicated his academic career to investigating the dramas of ancient Athenian tragedian Euripides (480-406 B.C.).

To Wolff, Euripides is "less archaic, more modern" than his contemporaries, and in particular, "has a tendency of 'fragmentation' or discontinuity of tone and texture of material (say, between "poetic" and prosaically argumentative), which seems to me closer to how I work."[2] Due to this correlation, Wolff developed a keen sense for these disjunctions and contradictions, publishing several analyses of Euripides' works throughout his career. In particular, his essay on Euripides' *Helen* and the "discontinuities" inherent within the drama reveal a commentary on the moral consequences of war. By comparing his scholarly analysis of *Helen* with the indeterminate processes and political message of his piece *Changing the System,* I hope to clarify the relationship between Wolff's dual career as a composer and a classicist, and ultimately distinguish the differences between them.

Euripides inhabited Athens during the fifth century B.C., often labeled as the "Golden Age" of Athens. It was during much of this era that Greece flourished economically and experienced an intellectual awakening accompanied by sweeping progress in politics, philosophy, architecture, literature, and the arts. In particular, philosophy was most closely

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[2] Email to the author from Christian Wolff. April 16, 2016.

correlated with the issues of contemporary Athenian society, especially concerning the origin and purpose of organized societies, and the proper means to govern such a society. These ideas were at the forefront of the emerging intellectual movement led by the Sophists. Essentially, a Sophist was an instructor specialized in the fields of philosophy and rhetoric who sought to educate predominantly young statesmen and nobility in the art of public debate and persuasion. These skills were considered most valuable for any Athenian desiring a role in political life. Even though democracy was flourishing throughout Athens when the Sophists arrived, their contributions played a key role in the continued expansion of Athenian democracy. The Sophists' education of public deliberation enabled their clients to not only engage with their fellow citizens, but enabled them to do so with a greater tolerance of others' beliefs and values. Naturally, the spread of this liberal attitude throughout Athens ultimately increased the demand for the Sophists' professional expertise and influence.

In addition to their skills in public deliberation and persuasion, the Sophists also made other advances within the realm of philosophical thought, particularly on the nature of reality. Accompanying the emergence of the Sophists was a shift in focus from the relationship between reality and natural phenomena to a more humanistic and phenomenological approach in which "appearances are constantly shifting, from one moment to the next and between one individual and another, and they themselves constitute the only reality."[3] This new perspective is closely associated with Protagoras of Abdera, the earliest and most famous of the Sophists. Protagoras, with whom Euripides was acquainted, boldly cemented this perspective in his celebrated phrase "Man is the measure of all things." Protagoras effectively denies the existence of an absolute truth. Instead, the essence of reality is subjective to each individual's experience, and the

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[3] W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists.* Introduction. pg. 4.

existence of divine entities cannot be proven by humanity without evidence that suggests otherwise. Protagoras' doctrine of individual relativity was both revolutionary and highly controversial, attracting criticism from Plato, who attacked it for its agnostic and even atheistic implications. The Sophists' practice of charging fees in exchange for their educational services was also condemned by Plato and Socrates, who deemed the practice deceitful. Even Wolff himself describes the Sophists as "a motley crew without a consistent politics between them" and that "hardly any were actually Athenians; they came to Athens because of the (relatively) free speech (and money) there."[4] Though ultimately there is truth to these statements, one cannot deny the lively intellectual atmosphere the Sophists were responsible for generating, nor the influence Protagoras had on Euripides and his tragedies.
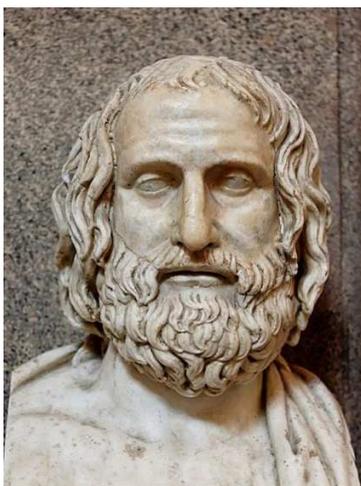

Figure 1 - Euripides

In fact, many crucial elements of Euripides' *Helen* suggest Sophistic influence. This results in myriad discontinuities and dualities which lay the foundation for Euripides' drama to unfold. The plot of the tragedy itself is a revision of the original Helen of Troy tale, thus forming a discontinuity between Euripides' work and historical myth. In the original iteration of the story,

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[4] Email to the author from Christian Wolff. April 16, 2016.

the Trojan prince Paris had been asked to judge the beauty of the goddesses Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. Aphrodite bribes him with Helen as a bride if he judges her the fairest. He does so, and thus receives Helen, leading to the beginning of the Trojan War. However, in the alternate version suggested by Euripides, Athena and Hera, jealous of Aphrodite's selection, extract their revenge on Paris by replacing the actual Helen with an "eidolon," a phantom copy of her. Unbeknownst to Paris, it was this "illusion" that was carried off to Troy while the real Helen was hidden away safely in Egypt by Hermes.

To Wolff, *Helen* is "chameleon-like, persistently shifting in mood, verbal fabric, and the values which it implies."[5] In his 1979 analysis of *Helen* for *Harvard Studies in Classic Philology,* Wolff explores the connections between the discontinuities presented in *Helen*, including an analysis of the three "stasimons" or "choral odes" that occur throughout the play. These three odes generate staggering discontinuity through sudden changes in mood, content, and style. According to Wolff, it is through these abrupt alterations that Euripides offers an opportunity for detachment and reflection upon the prominent aspects of the tragedy's storyline, while also offering insight into the broader and visceral significance of the work.

The first ode of *Helen* offers a change in mood from what previously occurred in the drama. In it, the chorus recollects the primary events of the story, such as the coming of Paris and the senseless carnage caused by the Trojan War. Specifically, the chorus contemplates a harrowing fact: that the deaths of thousands were the culmination of not just a substance-less sexual infatuation, but an infatuation with an illusion, a "phantom" Helen who did not actually exist. The chorus continues its lamentation, describing the gods as "a random force,

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[5] Christian Wolff, *On Euripides' Helen.* pg. 64.

incomprehensible, contradictory, and unpredictable". If Helen, who is the daughter of Zeus and Leda, is ultimately the cause of the Trojan War, then how can the belief in divine providence exist? Wolff believes the chorus itself is conflicted, as they suggest a cycle exists consisting of the "overpowering fact of recurring war" and humanity's abhorrence of war and hopeful struggle to end conflict through human reconciliation. This effort, according to Wolff, is considered by Euripides to be ultimately futile, as the discontinuity inherent between these two ideas suggests an endless cycle of conflict which humanity is incapable of escaping.

This cyclical pattern is further emphasized in the second ode, presenting a tale concerning the Mother Goddess Demeter and the abduction of her daughter Persephone to the underworld by Hades. The grief and anger Demeter feels causes her, the goddess of harvest, to bring famine, drought, and death upon the world. Hades agrees to release Persephone from his realm, but because she ate pomegranate seeds in the underworld, Hades binds her to his realm during certain months of each year. These periods result in natural phenomenon such as summer droughts and harsh winters. Thus, Demeter's anguish and distress represent the seasonal cycle that occurs each year. This myth concerning abduction and the destruction that ensues not only parallels the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War, but also recalls humanity's fragile cycle between endless war and its prevention illustrated during the first ode. To Wolff, the discontinuity between life and destruction in Euripides' play "balance and complement one another," and this "cyclical pattern thus imposed on human events may seem to defy the final value of sustained human effort," with Euripides offering yet another discontinuity between "human striving and success."[6]

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[6] Christian Wolff, *On Euripides' Helen.* pg. 73.

The content presented in these odes, while working together to illustrate Euripides' contemplation of war, also bears the influence of the Sophists. The drama generated from individuals' perceptions of reality as well as the questioning of divine presence are all clearly informed by Protagoras' philosophy. Wolff also notices that Euripides' representation of Helen, a symbol of both love and destruction, suggests "Sophistic affinities":

Making a play and not a speech, he gives us not contrary arguments but a doubling or blending of poetic accounts, not *dissoi logoi*, contentious and divisive…but a *dissos muthos* which indicates connections and makes out of divergences a kind of harmony.[7]

Through the perception of these discontinuities, Euripides is not only able to construct a sophisticated commentary on war, but through the discord and contradictions of differing individual perspectives he creates several layers of drama, and ultimately presents a more realistic depiction of human nature. Both the meticulous observations and the language Wolff employs to describe the discontinuities present in *Helen* possess similarities to his words concerning his own compositions. To Wolff, both the end results of his scholarly endeavors and his compositional ones are not completely unrelated:

I suppose I could say that I've found the interpretation of the Greek tragedies as an "indeterminate" process, partly insofar as all interpretation is indeterminate, that is, inconclusive, but particularly so with the Greek plays (partly due to their remoteness in time and cultural context, but also due to their intrinsic nature.)[8]

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[7] Christian Wolff, *On Euripides' Helen*. pg. 77.
[8] Email to the author from Christian Wolff. April 16, 2016.

Indeterminacy is a defining characteristic of Wolff's compositions, as well as the

discontinuities that are the direct result of indeterminacy. However, the notion of discontinuity

inhabited Wolff's work even before he embraced indeterminacy, and can be traced back in his

output as early as his 1951 piece *For Prepared Piano*. Even this early in his compositional

career, Wolff possessed a sensitivity which informed his seemingly allusive and fragmented

ideas. He displayed an innate understanding of the possible relationships between sounds (either

pitched or non-pitched), and the delicate relationship these terse gestures have with surrounding

silences. The extensive use of silence simultaneously contributes to the mysterious atmosphere

generated by the brief musical gestures, and allows the listener to center their focus on the

gestures themselves, allowing one to possibly describe his work as "little patchworks of musical

haiku."[9] It was at this point that Wolff began to equate discontinuity with "unexpected"

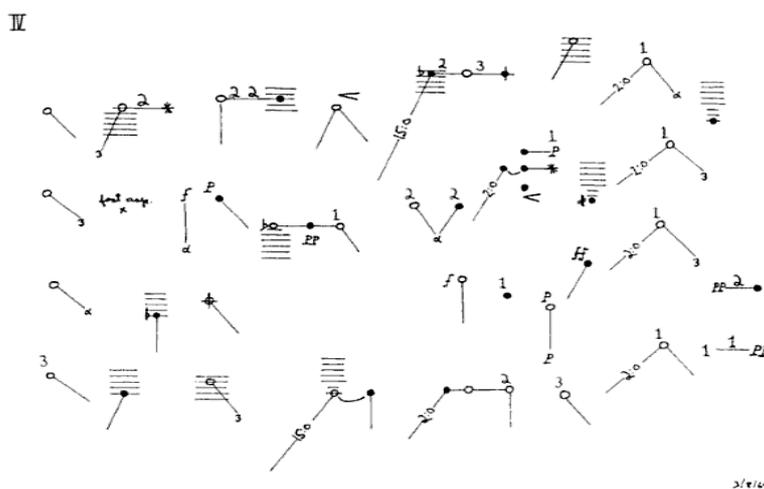continuity, offering new possibilities in combinations of sound and dramatic impact.

Figure 2 - For 1, 2, or 3 People, Page IV

As the 1950s progressed, Wolff began experimenting with the possibilities of

indeterminacy in terms of musical form and notation. He gradually crafted a system of symbols

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[9] Michael Hicks, *Christian Wolff*. pg. 13.

which notated "as clearly as possible the process of coordination between players, including different kinds of specification and indeterminacy."[10] These symbols have been referred to by musicologist Michael Hicks as "coordination neumes."[11] First employed in 1964's *For 1, 2, or 3 People,* the construction of a new notational system such as this indicates a key difference between Wolff's evolving conception of indeterminacy and that of Cage's:

> Cage used chance in the composing process, but not at the point of performance. I thought, first, not of using chance but rather of having a variety of open possibilities, and this should include the point at which the music is actually realized, that is, performance… I wasn't, by the way, interested in the sociology of this (performer behavior)… Of course, the social implications of the situation are certainly there.[12]

It is this unique conception of indeterminacy which ultimately separates Wolff from Cage. Both the "open" form and notational system of *For 1, 2, or 3 People* and the pieces that followed illustrate Wolff's belief that "A composition (a score) is only material for performance; it must make possible the freedom and dignity of the performers."[13] By focusing on the point of total realization of music (i.e. performance), Wolff grants performers extraordinary influence over the form and substance of a work, thus subverting the traditional belief that "The composer is master…the performer is servant however skillful."[14] For Wolff, composition and performance are intertwined, and should not be conceived as two isolated components which bring a musical

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[10] Email to the author from Christian Wolff. December 18, 2015.
[11] Michael Hicks, *Christian Wolff.* pg. 32.
[12] Email to the author from Christian Wolff. December 18, 2015.
[13] Christian Wolff, *…let the listeners be just as free as the players. Cues: Writings and Conversations.* G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 86.
[14] Christian Wolff, *…let the listeners be just as free as the players. Cues: Writings and Conversations.* G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 80.

work into fruition: "If composition is the condition of all sounds, all those around us, dormant in things or awake in the air, playing can be their investigation: listen, converse with, accompany, pursue, abandon, alter, liberate."[15]

Changing the System, composed during December 1972 and January 1973, is both an exploration of the social implications represented by performance indeterminacy and a transitional piece as well, bridging the gap between his abstract ensemble pieces of the 1960s and his more directly political works of the 1970s. Composed for a minimum of eight people grouped into two quartets (but also suggesting the possibility of large ensemble performance), *Changing the System* utilizes a text from an interview with student activist Tom Hayden, published in *Rolling Stone* in 1972:

> Well don't make the same mistake that we made, of thinking that the Peace Corps or the New Frontier was the simple answer, that you could find a place for yourself in there and use new, modern imagination to solve the problems of the poor people of the world, because that would be a misreading of the possibilities of working within the system. It's the system itself that sets the priorities that we have, that distorts the facts, that twists our brains and therefore the system would have to be changed in order to change priorities and to make it possible for us to really see what's happening. That's the danger.[16]

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[15] Christian Wolff, *…let the listeners be just as free as the players. Cues: Writings and Conversations.* G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 80.
[16] Interview with Tom Hayden in Rolling Stone. November 9, 1972. pg. 32.
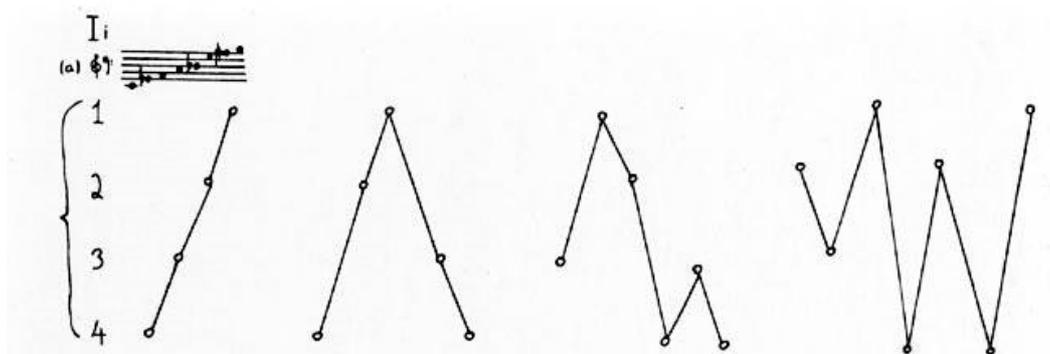
Figure 3 – Changing the System, Page Ii

Rather than just consisting of a series of written instructions and notation key like *For 1, 2, or 3 People*, *Changing the System* is comprised of several components: two pages of melodic material, two pages of four-part harmonies, six pages of percussion coordination, four pages of vocal material with Tom Hayden's quote as text, and three pages of instructions. The piece itself is structured into Parts I and II. Part I consists of two pages of melodic hockets (Ii, IIii), and chords, identified as IA and IB. Part II consists of percussion (IIa) and the vocal score (IIb). One of each component is distributed to each quartet for the performance. (ex. Quartet I = Ii, IA, IIa, Quartet II = IIii, IB, IIb). The organization of Part I is ultimately open to the performers, though Wolff suggests alternating phrases of Ii and IIii with chords of IA and IB as one possibility.

In Part I, Ii and IIii display a listing of numbers one through four, designating each member of the quartet. The white circles represent the performance of a pitch, and the black lines connecting each circle indicate the sequential performance order of each pitch (Performer 4, followed by Performer 3, followed by Performer 2, etc). The pitches listed may be read in either treble or bass clef, accommodating for both instrumentation and expansion of pitches available, and may be played freely in regards to timbre, dynamic, and duration.

In Part II, one quartet is assigned the IIa score, which encourages each performer to have four simple percussion instruments or common objects capable of producing sounds of four gradated resonances. For percussion instruments, Wolff states in the instructions to utilize four types of sonic material: wood, metal, stone, and friction (He suggests a guiro.) Accompanying each indicated instrument or timbre is a dynamic marking. Like in Ii and IIii, each member of the quartet will coordinate the occurrence of sound events among themselves following the suggestions notated in the score. There are also the presence of circled notes, which designate sounds that can be sustained through the following "four or eighteen seconds," or the next cued sound. IIb, the vocal score, fragments Tom Hayden's text through a system of intricate hocketing as "speakers/singers pass short phrases, words or syllables from one to the other" in a similar vein as the hocketing in Ii and IIii of Part I. The instructions state that the delivery of the text, either spoken or sung, should not be delivered too ornately. Pitch, intensity, and color may be changed on a given syllable, but again, nothing overly elaborate.

Regarding the performance, or point of total realization of this piece, *Changing the System* is an indeterminate work. However, the more elaborate structuring of the piece in combination with both the pre-determined and suggested melodic and harmonic relationships grant it a level of coherence perhaps not always present in Wolff's more fully indeterminate pieces of the 1960s. The hocketing treatment of the text in Part II allows it to seamlessly co-exist with the other musical material, rather there ever being an occurrence of subversion between the text and the percussion. The use of such a politically-charged text gives this work a more specific political intent, as opposed to the abstractly utopian or freely democratic conclusions one may infer when analyzing *For 1, 2, or 3 People* or his *Prose Collection*. The definition of "political" music, and the implications of political art, has been a topic Wolff has tackled over the past few

decades, stating that "all music is demagogic…It will persuade people, it will move people, it will stir them up…"[17] To Wolff, Tom Hayden's text articulated the "need for fundamental change of our dysfunctional social system" and that *Changing the System* ultimately represents "a focusing of concerted, persuasive but not coercive energy…a kind of revolutionary noise."[18]

When discussing the possible connections between Christian Wolff's dual career as experimental composer and classicist, English composer Michael Parsons determined that both fields are "speculative forms of enquiry which go back to origins and lead to a radical reappraisal of acquired cultural habits and values."[19] By placing his analysis of Euripides' *Helen* alongside an indeterminate work such as *Changing the System*, one can identify a connection between them in terms of approach, of the use and recognition of dramatic discontinuities, or rather "unexpected" continuities that arise out of human nature and human interaction. Though Wolff deeply relates to the works of Euripides and has been enriched by the knowledge of a previous civilization, he is ultimately a composer of the modern world, one whose present-day views continue to influence his music and personal philosophy. With a work such as *Changing the System*, the musical ensemble represents a microcosmic version of a perhaps ideal society, one in which each member cooperates together in order to create something of lasting value. In stark opposition to Euripides' conclusion in *Helen* that humanity is forever trapped within an endless cycle of conflict, Wolff believes otherwise, choosing to demand an "impossible possibility."[20]

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[17] Christian Wolff in Amy C. Beal's *Christian Wolff in Darmstadt, 1972 and 1974. Changing The System: The Music of Christian Wolff.* pg. 43.
[18] Christian Wolff, *Floating Rhythm and Experimental Percussion. Cues: Writings and Conversations.* G. Gronemeyer and R. Oehlschlagel, eds. pg. 206.
[19] Michael Parsons, Preface in *Changing The System: The Music of Christian Wolff.* pg. xvii
[20] Email to the author from Christian Wolff. April 16, 2016.

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