

# DEATH OF A DISSIDENT

*Ten years ago, the English composer Cornelius Cardew was knocked down and killed by a car in east London. A committed Communist, he had given up a brilliant career in the classical avant-garde to compose songs of strict ideological rigour. His friends say he was murdered for his political beliefs.* EDWARD FOX reports

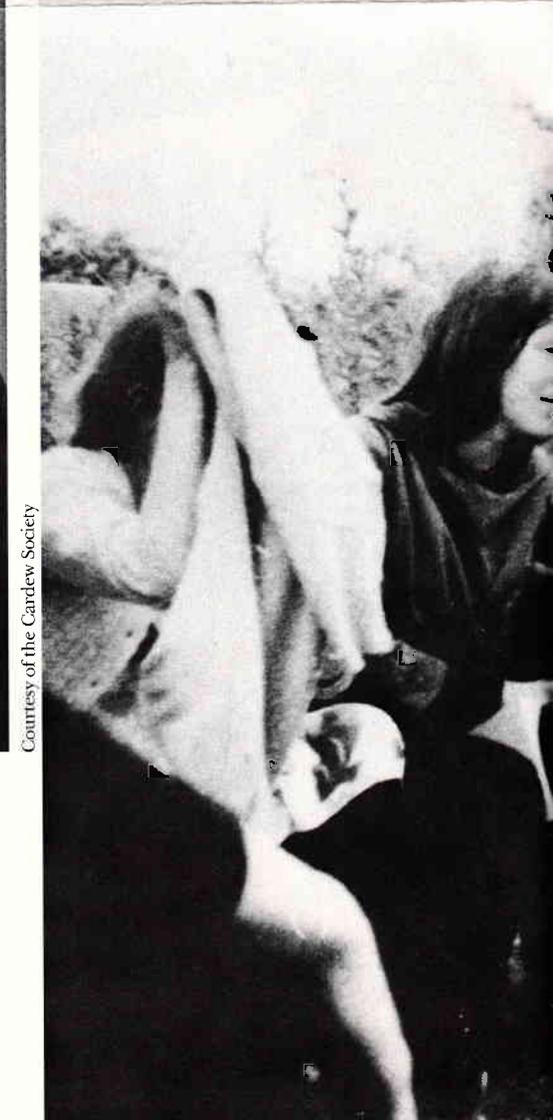
On the icy night of 13 December 1981, the English composer Cornelius Cardew was knocked down and killed by a car while walking home in Leyton, north-east London. His killer was never found.

Cardew had been the central figure of British contemporary music – to England what Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen are to France and Germany. But by the time of his death he had turned his back on the musical avant-garde and become a devout and active Communist, devoting his talent and energy to the service of a tiny hard-left party.

Many of the composers and artists who have assumed places in the firmament of new English music and art – among them the composers Michael Nyman, Howard Skempton and Gavin Bryars, the artist Tom Phillips and the saxophonist Evan Parker – began their creative lives in the vortex of ideas and activity that Cardew engendered



Patrick Eagar/Report



Courtesy of the Cardew Society

*Above: Cornelius Cardew at the age of 30*

*Right: Cardew (third from right) and members of his experimental Scratch Orchestra camping in June 1971 after a concert in Newcastle*

in the Sixties and early Seventies. Cardew promoted the ideas of the European and American avant-garde, of Stockhausen, John Cage and others, and planted them in British soil, giving rise to a new and distinctly English musical sensibility.

Cardew's premature and mysterious death at the age of 45 sealed the enigma of a complex, charismatic man. A kind of personality cult has grown up around him; many of his friends believe he was assassinated. His death "is not less a puzzle to me now than it was ten years ago," says Sheila Kasabova, with whom Cardew lived after splitting up with his first wife. "I find it difficult to believe that he wasn't murdered."

On the night of his death, Cardew had returned from a trip to Europe, where he had been organising a meeting of Communist youth groups. He was a member of

the central committee of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), a small group that was active in the anti-fascist campaigns of the late Seventies and early Eighties.

Cardew had been in prison more than once and had just completed a three-month stint in Pentonville Prison for violating the Public Order Act: he had defied police orders to stop shouting slogans through a megaphone in a demonstration while on a suspended sentence for a similar offence. Only a month before he died, he had been expelled from the House of Commons and then arrested for taking a group of demonstrators into the Strangers' Gallery and disrupting a debate on an immigration Bill by throwing leaflets into the chamber. He was a dissident with a police record.

Those friends who believe he was murdered still turn over the possibilities of who

might have done it: if he was not killed by shadowy forces of the state – alarmed by the activities of a troublesome intellectual with an international reputation, who could perform at the Festival Hall then attend a demonstration the following day – he might have been killed by someone representing one of the far-right groups against whom the far left have fought pitched battles in east London since the Thirties.

The scant available facts about Cardew's death suggest he was the victim not of murder but of drunken driving. He was hit while making his way along Leyton High Road after midnight on a Saturday night, from Stratford station to his home in Leyton Park Road. Joseph Sadiq, a mini-cab driver, testified at the inquest eight days later that he had been chatting with his boss in his firm's tiny office next to Leyton Underground station, about a mile from Stratford station, when he heard what



sounded like two vehicles colliding. It was about 1am.

"I went to the door," said Sadiq in a statement. "I saw a man lying in the road. As I was going to the man I saw a car, a Renault – I think it had its lights on – brake and skid into the bus layby. Its back end was by the pavement and its front was facing the road.

"I saw the driver look back to where the man was lying. I was just about to take the car's number when the lights went out. Then the car started off and turned down the first right."

When he was hit, Cardew was on the far side of a humpback bridge that passes over the railway lines serving Leyton station. Because the pavements were covered with ice and snow he was walking in the middle of the road, so a driver would not have seen him from the other side of the hill until it was too late. The car skidded and lost a wing mirror. Some fragments of glass and paint were left at the scene. The Waltham Forest coroner returned a verdict of accidental death.

But to some, the record of the inquest is remarkable for the coroner's lack of curiosity. Why, it is asked, did Sadiq's boss not give a statement? What is the significance of a second statement Sadiq gave

three days after the first in which he described the presence of another car? Why did the police make no immediate search of the area? Why was there no questioning of the pathologist about the cause of death?

Why were the results of the tests on the flakes of paint not given, which might have helped identify the car? Why was no attempt made to clear up uncertainty over its colour and make? In one place in the police inspector's statement it is described as brown, in another as blue.

Why is there no mention of Cardew's police record? Police would have known of this within minutes of establishing his identity. The only record of the inquest is a dozen pages of notes. No tape or stenographic recording was made. The coroner's office has said this was normal procedure and that it was not customary to tape-record inquests unless the subject was a "prominent person".

Michael Mansfield QC, a barrister who defended the Birmingham Six, knew and liked Cardew. "He was a very political animal, and that's rare among musicians," he says. He believes that the case of Cardew's death was dropped like a hot potato by both coroner and police because Cardew was a known dissident.

As for who did it, "I would not be surprised", says Mansfield, "if agents of the state decided his time had come."

Cornelius Cardew was born in 1936, the son of the potter Michael Cardew. He and his two brothers grew up in a converted inn in Cornwall. It was a bourgeois-bohemian environment, "barefoot but reading Dante", according to his first wife, Stella Cardew. Michael was away teaching pottery in Nigeria and Ghana for much of Cornelius's childhood.

Financially, life was always precarious, but all the family played music and Cornelius had a good English musical education: Canterbury Cathedral School (which evacuated to Cornwall during the Second World War), where he was a chorister, followed by the Royal Academy of Music. He was prodigiously talented.

By the time he was 30 Cardew was established as a formidable figure in contemporary music, particularly through the composition of *Treatise*, a ground-breaking work that pioneered graphic notation. Its score used conventional musical signs combined with often beautiful abstract shapes and symbols to provide a pattern of suggestions for free improvisation by performers. Stockhausen and Cage had explored similar ideas, but no one had taken graphic notation this far.

The grumble that the innovator finds no support in his own day often emerges in discussions of Cardew but, although this plays a part in the aura of martyrdom that has come to surround him, it is not entirely true. His reputation was established early on in Europe and America, though praise in Britain was slower in coming.

In the late Sixties and early Seventies he was written about or writing in nearly every issue of the *Musical Times*, the musical establishment's journal of record. In November 1967, for example, the composer and critic Roger Smalley reviewed Cardew's piece *The Tiger's Mind* in the magazine: "Continually probing and developing the very nature of music, Cardew is one of the precious few really intelligent and imaginative composers in England today."

Cardew won a publishing contract almost at the outset of his career, a mark of establishment acceptance that the better-known composer (and one-time Cardew collaborator) Michael Nyman, for example, has complained about being denied until only recently. Cardew was gifted with a facile musicality that was as natural as breathing. "He could sit at a piano and play two notes, and it would be music," recalls



The Progressive Cultural Association

Cornelius Cardew at a demonstration in London protesting against American policy on Iran in 1980, the year of the hostage crisis

Howard Skempton, a friend and fellow composer. "If you mentioned it to him, he would say, 'Well, I'm a musician.'"

He impressed everyone he met with his quietly charismatic manner and immense power of concentration. He had unkempt hair, wise, heavy-lidded eyes, an ample chin and a slight lisp. "It was like having the vicar around for tea," says the composer Gavin Bryars.

As a teacher at the Royal Academy in the late Sixties, he used unconventional methods to challenge his students. Once, he walked out of a class and locked the students inside, so they had to shout for help from the window. Another time, he held a "silent lesson".

"We just understood that we were meant to be silent," says Hugh Shrapnel. "He didn't teach us conventional music and techniques, but to defy convention, to think, not to take things for granted."

In this role of *enfant terrible* Cardew formed the experimental Scratch Orchestra, a collection of musicians and non-musicians regulated by the Scratch Constitution, a recipe for controlled anarchy written by Cardew and published in the *Musical Times* in June 1969. Its aim was to bring music out of the ivory tower and to involve large numbers of untrained people in making music.

The Scratch Orchestra explored group improvisation, but, "when you have 70 or 80 people improvising, the results can often be pretty worthless", says Skempton.

Scratch was a forum for enthusiastic experimentation in an art-school atmosphere: it was chaotic, hippyish, innocent and idealistic. On tour, Scratch members lived in tents.

The orchestra was the vehicle for Cardew's magnum opus, a seven-hour piece for organ, choir and percussion called *The Great Learning* and based on texts by Confucius. Technically easy to perform, it embodies the Scratch Orchestra's ideal of involving untrained people. It was often performed in churches and has the character of a kind of Confucian mass.

Then came what Cardew called "the big switch".

His conversion to radicalism began in 1971 when the Scratch Orchestra collapsed. A Marxist faction had arisen within it, which argued that the orchestra had failed because its methods were hopelessly bourgeois and that it had lost its way in meaningless self-indulgence.

Never one for half-measures, Cardew accepted this thinking with vehement

thoroughness. His friend and musical collaborator Keith Rowe introduced him to the Communist Party of England (Marxist-Leninist), which later became the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain.

He submitted to party discipline with a convert's zeal. The party governed his life and vetted his compositions for political correctness. It was part of a natural transition, Keith Rowe says, from an interest in Chinese writing which the two of them shared, to the Chinese philosophy of Confucius, to the Chinese politics of Mao Tsetung.

In 1971 Cardew wrote *Soon*, subtitled "How are we to interpret the word 'soon' in Chairman Mao's phrase, 'There will soon be a high tide of revolution in our country?'", and *Long Live Chairman Mao!* He denounced all his previous works. He called *The Great Learning* "a piece of inflated rubbish", because the Confucian texts on which it was based were then being discredited by Mao's Cultural Revolution. Cardew would only allow performances of the piece if accompanied by his essay denouncing it.

Cardew's fierce, unforgiving integrity was now being applied to radical politics. In 1973 he published *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, his account of his conversion. In it, he denounced his interest in Cage and Stockhausen. "This was a bad thing and I will not offer excuses for it," he wrote. The account is written in a grim Stalinist boilerplate prose style, crude in logic, heavy with breathless explanatory sub-clauses. It is probably the first time anyone has suggested a link between Stockhausen's *Refrain* and the British Army in Northern Ireland.

All this was dismaying to his friends from his avant-garde days. "I found him increasingly ideological and very difficult to talk to after that," says Skempton.

The late Seventies and early Eighties saw Rock Against Racism, inner-city riots, the Anti-Fascist League, the People's March for Jobs, Bobby Sands and the H-Block hunger-strikers. Cardew and the party were active in the many demonstrations connected with these causes, particularly in the visceral struggle against the National Front, which, at its peak, fielded hundreds of candidates in the 1979 general election.

As one aspect of Cardew's revolutionary activity, he and other party members formed the rock band People's Liberation Music. It performed from the back of lorries at political meetings and demonstrations, playing songs such as "Revolution is the Main Trend" and "Join in the Fight". The band frowned on improvisation because it represented bourgeois individualism.

By this time, Cardew had separated from Stella. His two sons, Horace and Walter,

sometimes played with the band, cutting their musical teeth when barely teenagers. They are now professional musicians. "The songs were like pamphlets set to music," Walter says. "You couldn't just say 'Party', you had to say 'Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist)'."

Playing in the band was exciting and dangerous and difficult. "You've got to keep playing when the driver is braking, when it's raining, when the electrics are a problem. And you could get arrested in the middle of it," Sheila Kasabova recalls. Sometimes the police would just pull the plug. Meanwhile, the party members believed they were all under surveillance and their phones were being tapped.

"Cornelius was fully aware of the dangers," Horace says. "The party drummed into us exactly what we were up against. He fully expected there to be a crunch."

Cardew could never grasp rock music, but he saw that it was popular and a way to reach people. Keith Rowe recalls that the great composer couldn't tap his feet. "I remember trying to teach him to play 'Yellow Submarine' in a pub, but he just couldn't get it, although he wanted to do it so badly," says Rowe.

Although much of his political music was hackneyed and ephemeral, Cardew wrote some of his best music during this period. Writing music "which a lot of people could understand", as he put it, meant returning to tonality, to melody. His piano music of this period, such as *Thälman Variations* and *Booleavogue*, has the lightness and poignancy of Satie. Much of it is based on emotionally powerful Irish folk tunes, because he had become involved in the Irish republican cause.

At the direction of the party, Cardew and Sheila moved to a house in Leyton, to be near Ford's Dagenham car plant. The party wanted to organise the Ford workforce. The area was also the battleground for a campaign against the National Front. By this time the party had rejected Mao Tsetung and China as models and had turned to Albania, which it perceived as, in the words of a hymn Cardew wrote in praise of it, an "impregnable fortress of revolution and socialism". Maoism had been "a fog", a mistake.

Cardew joined the party's central committee in 1979, with responsibility for forging links with other left-wing groups and for leading the party's cultural organisation. He was pulling hard under the yoke of party discipline and was its most visible spokesman. At the time of his death, the party believed itself to be having real success in leading left-wing groups that

were then active in demonstrations. It had also decided to allow Cardew more time for composing.

Perhaps his friends' talk of murder is just a way of coming to terms with his premature death, a way of expressing grief and shock at the loss of a person who gave meaning to so many people's lives. He died at the point when he seemed to have been on the verge of resolving the questions of music and politics that had driven him this far. His best work seemed ahead of him.

When a charismatic figure dies prematurely, his followers argue over the hypothetical direction his life would have taken had he survived. While some say he would have remained a Communist, others argue that in the last months of his life he seemed to have mellowed in his politics, to have become less dogmatic. "It's hard to accept that someone like Cornelius is dead," Kasabova says. "He was so engaged with life."

Five months after his death, in May 1982, a memorial concert was held at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, sponsored by the Greater London Council when it was spending itself out of existence under the Thatcher government's death sentence. Party members in the new Cornelius Cardew Foundation,

dedicated to promoting Cardew's music and ideas, insisted that only the later, political music would be played, as Cardew himself had renounced everything else. The other half of the foundation said his whole *oeuvre* should be represented.

A compromise was reached and the concert's highlights were released on a double LP, one disc containing the avant-garde music, the other the political. The cover bears Cardew's handsome, thoughtful, guru-ish portrait in a black border on a red background with just his name and dates, like a tombstone.

Last December, ten years after Cardew's death, another concert of his music was held at the QEH, this time paid for entirely by the foundation. It was like the religious service of an austere sect, pure of faith, flinty in attitude, dedicated to keeping the Cardew flame alight in a time of darkness. The past decade has not been good for Cardew's kind of music. "Cardew was a musical dissident. He had a hard time then. Dissidents have an even harder time now," says the pianist John Tilbury, an old friend of Cardew and a member of the foundation's committee. "We live in a designer culture."

His legacy as a composer is tricky to evaluate. "It's a very uneven *oeuvre*," says the composer and pianist Michael Finnissy,

a rare champion of Cardew's music who did not know him personally. "Some pieces are excellent, equal to anything written anywhere. But it's not easy music and that will guarantee its future."

The violinist Alexander Balanescu, whose quartet performed at the tenth anniversary concert, believes the foundation does Cardew's work a disservice by preserving it like a "church", built around the personality of the man. "He is certainly the most interesting composer in England from the Sixties and Seventies," he says. "The problem is how to get his music out of the clutches of this little circle. Programming it with other composers is the solution. I never heard a piece of his that wasn't interesting."

The Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) still exists, operating out of a dusty bookshop in south London. It carries a sparse stock of the works of Enver Hoxha and Ramiz Alia, and the compact disc of Cardew's late piano music is displayed in the window like a relic. Chris Coleman, its general secretary and a freelance science writer, won't reveal the party's exact membership figure (out of elementary Leninist strategy) but admits it is "in the hundreds". Its present posture, at the "end of history", is one of "regrouping". Cardew would find the Nineties rather tame. ●