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**David Tudor and the performance of American experimental  
music, 1950–1959**

**Holzaepfel, John, Ph.D.**

**City University of New York, 1994**

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DAVID TUDOR AND THE PERFORMANCE OF  
AMERICAN EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC, 1950-1959

by

JOHN HOLZAEPFEL

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1994

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Abstract

David Tudor and the Performance of  
American Experimental Music, 1950-59

by

John Holzaepfel

Adviser: Professor H. Wiley Hitchcock

The importance of David Tudor to the music of the postwar avant-garde has been as often acknowledged as it has gone unexamined. Based on direct work with Tudor's collections of manuscripts, papers, correspondence, and programs, this dissertation is the first historical and analytic study of a career unique in twentieth-century musical performance.

The first two chapters discuss Tudor's early training and the radically new musical orientation he underwent at the end of 1950 through a fortuitous encounter with the aesthetics of Antonin Artaud. The remaining four chapters concentrate on Tudor's realizations of selected works by the principal American experimental composers of the 1950s: Morton Feldman's *Intersections 2 and 3*, Earle Brown's *Twenty-five Pages* and *Four Systems*, Christian Wolff's *Duo for Pianists I* and *For Pianist*, and John Cage's "Solo for Piano" from the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. The order of presentation reflects the evolution of Tudor's practice of

preparing his own performance material from a composer's score. A discussion of the context and development of each composer's notational techniques and a description of the works in terms of their notations and the problems these pose for the performer are followed by an analysis of Tudor's realization, which proceeds by a close study of the texts involved: the composer's score, Tudor's work notes, and his own performance material.

The systematic extension of playing techniques was an essential component in Tudor's makeup long before his encounter with experimental music. This remained central to his musical thinking throughout the 1950s and in fact grew as he used the new music as a basis for pianistic innovation. Tudor's role in the composition of American experimental music during this period and his legacy as a pianist are intertwined: his overriding interest in the music lay in the challenges presented by its notational problems, problems Tudor regarded as puzzles. And his solutions were, throughout the 1950s, invariably in terms of what he could do with the piano, either by extending existing techniques or inventing new ones. In this regard, the dissertation is a contribution to the history of piano-playing.

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## Preface

The importance of David Tudor to the distribution, reception, and even the composition of American experimental music -- indeed, to the music of the entire postwar avant-garde -- while parenthetically acknowledged now and then in the literature on the period, has gone unexamined. This is scandalous. I do not use the word lightly. Tudor's role as a performer of new music after 1950 was not merely interpretive but generative: more than one composer has said that without Tudor's insight, imagination, and pianistic virtuosity his music would not have come into being.

But what did this mean? Though the encomiums are plentiful, none of the composers has been specific about what it was that made Tudor unique. In part, this is due to Tudor's reticent and even secretive nature. "He's a great solver of puzzles -- and producer of them," Cage told me. No one, whether writing about Tudor or discussing him with me, could answer what I thought was a simple question: how did Tudor go about his work? Cage's observation was by no means uncommon; by all accounts, Tudor was at once indispensable and remote. I have written the following study as the first step toward answering the question myself.

One thing was known, however. When performing music in which some degree of indeterminacy is a compositional technique, Tudor did not limit himself to improvising from the

composer's score but undertook a rigorous series of preparatory steps, including measurements, calculations, computations, and conversion tables, translating the results into a more conventional notation for use in performance. Not only do all of Tudor's performance scores survive, but so do virtually all of his work materials leading to them: notes, tables, charts, lists, sketches. Explicating Tudor's working methods became the principal goal of this study, which I have organized as follows:

The first two chapters are essentially background in nature. In Chapter 1, I discuss Tudor's early training, especially those factors most influential to his work in the 1950s. In Chapter 2, I examine the radically new musical orientation Tudor underwent at the end of 1950 through a fortuitous encounter with the aesthetics of Antonin Artaud.

In the remaining four chapters, the core of the dissertation, I concentrate on Tudor's realizations of those works by the principal American experimental composers of the 1950s which pose the most difficult notational problems to the performer. The order of presentation reflects the evolution of Tudor's practice of preparing his own performance material from a composer's score: Morton Feldman's *Intersections 2 and 3*, Earle Brown's *Twenty-five Pages and Four Systems*, Christian Wolff's *Duo for Pianists I* and *For Pianist*, and the "Solo for Piano" from John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. After discussing the context and

development of the composer's notational techniques, I describe the works in terms of their notations (not the compositional processes they embody or encode) and the problems these pose for the performer. Then I turn to Tudor's solution.

In doing so, I have adapted Collingwood's maxim and reconstructed the questions Tudor asked, not of the composers but of their texts. These texts were what he received, and these -- not the polemics, arguments, aesthetic questions which surrounded them -- were what he addressed. Tudor's concern with new music was as a performer of it, and his approaches to it were at all times practical in the root sense; that is, with the aim of making the composer's notations practicable. I proceed by a close study of the texts involved: the composer's score, Tudor's work notes, and his own performance material.

In the early chapters, I show that the systematic and deliberate extension of playing techniques was an essential component in Tudor's makeup long before his encounter with experimental music. And I show, in my analyses of his realizations, that this remained central to his musical thinking throughout the 1950s, that in fact it grew as he used the new music as a basis for pianistic innovation.

Of the four appendices to this study, three contain material relating to Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* or to Tudor's realizations of that work. The fourth, an

index of first performances given by Tudor through the year 1960, shows Tudor's role in the distribution of new music during this phase of his career.

David Tudor has now spent more than half of his professional life almost entirely away from the piano. But the first phase of his work as a pianist came to a close at the end of the 1950s. Tudor's role in the composition of American experimental music during this period and his legacy as a pianist are intertwined: his overriding interest in the music lay in the challenges presented by its notational problems, problems Tudor regarded as puzzles. And his solutions were, throughout the 1950s, invariably in terms of what he could do with the piano, either by extending existing techniques or inventing new ones. To the extent that I focus on this aspect of Tudor's achievement, then, the dissertation is a contribution to the history of piano-playing.

---

#### Acknowledgements

Above all to David Tudor himself, who was far more than cooperative: his generosity in allowing me unlimited access to his collection of manuscripts, correspondence, and programs provided the very foundation for this entire project and made of my task a scholar's dream.

To H. Wiley Hitchcock, whose editorial acumen was perhaps not among his many accomplishments recently feted on the occasion of his retirement but which should be apparent in the following pages. Where it is not, the reader may assume that I remained obstinate.

To Austin Clarkson, whose expertise in the music of Stefan Wolpe was helpful in establishing the accuracy, sometimes even the identities, of the entries for that composer in Appendix D.

To my wife, Joan Callan, whose forms of support and understanding and perpetual willingness to act as a responsive audience -- to listen, criticize, and clarify ideas, passages, sections, and finally entire chapters -- can neither be enumerated nor adequately acknowledged. She also lent her hand (far steadier than mine) and patience (far greater than mine) to the task of mounting the illustrations.

The analytic charts in Chapter 5 reflect the calligraphic skills of Arlo McKinnon, Jr.

Two Summer Research Fellowships from the CUNY Graduate School enabled me to see, in the crucial early stages of research, that doing justice to my subject was going to require a full-length study.

In the course of researching, writing, and rewriting this dissertation I spoke with numerous composers, artists, and performers, more than those whose names appear in its

pages. Without exception, the response to my request for information or an interview was typified by that of Richard Lippold, whose first words, when told that a study of David Tudor was under way, were "It's about time."

One of these people deserves special acknowledgement. John Cage's capacity to give whatever was asked of him by anyone is one of the qualities most missed by those who knew him. His support for this project was unstinting, and his generosity extended not only to his time, whenever I asked for it, but to giving me a sketchbook in which I found his realization of Wolff's *Duo for Pianists I*, without which a good deal of Chapter 5 would not have been written in its present form. He also provided me with addresses, telephone numbers, and introductions to many of Tudor's colleagues, urging, "You must speak with everyone who ever knew or worked with him." That has not been possible, of course, in studying even one part of a career that for more than forty years has been at the nexus of new music. But "demonstrating the practicality of the impossible," though fortunately not the task of the scholar and historian, was standard practice for both Cage and Tudor, as I have tried in the following pages to show.

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Portions of this dissertation previously appeared, in different form, in "The Tudor Factor," in *John Cage Anarchic Harmony*, ed. Stefan Schädler and Walter Zimmermann (Mainz: Schott, 1992), 43-53, and will appear in "The Roles of David

Tudor in the Early Repertory of The Cunningham Dance Company," in *Choreography and Dance*, Special Issue Devoted to Merce Cunningham, ed. David Vaughan (forthcoming).

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