

<b>Institution:</b> University of Huddersfield		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33 Music		
<b>Title of case study:</b> New York Experimentalism Revived: Unlocking Cage, Feldman and Wolff for Audiences, Performers and the Benefit of the Contemporary-Music Ecology		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2008-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name:</b> Philip Thomas	<b>Role:</b> Professor of Performance	<b>Period employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2005-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2013 – December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The music of John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff presents complex challenges to interpretation and performance, which have inhibited the development of a living performance practice and contributed to the marginalisation of a historically significant body of musical repertoire. Since 2008 Professor Philip Thomas has investigated this repertoire specifically from the perspective of performance, advancing new understandings of how it may be brought persuasively to life through scholarly publications, concerts, recordings and innovative online resources, with impact on a range of non-academic beneficiaries. Thomas's research has unlocked the secrets of New York experimentalism for international audiences in concert halls, at home, and in educational settings; it has encouraged amateur performers to engage with this repertoire and helped professional performers deepen their engagement; it has also generated reputational and economic benefit for a range of individuals and organisations within the contemporary-music world.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>During the 1950s and 1960s, the 'New York School' of experimental composers – specifically, John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff – sought radically to reconceive the relationship between composer and performer by composing music in which many decisions were left to the performer. The aim of this indeterminacy was to liberate performers from servitude to the composer. But the unorthodox notations used in such works have deterred many performers, meaning that our understanding of New York experimentalism in performance has been dominated by the idiosyncratic approaches of the composers' original collaborators. As a result, this repertoire has not generated the living performance practice that it merits, with relatively few modern-day performances (especially of Cage and Wolff) and very limited public understanding of these composers' important contributions. Through scholarly research and extensive performance-led enquiry, as well as many concerts, broadcasts and sound recordings, Professor Philip Thomas has brought new life to the performance of repertoire that risked being confined to the textbooks.</p> <p>In 2009, an AHRC Research Leave Grant (£23,599) and a Getty Library Research Grant (\$1,500) enabled Thomas to explore the performance practice of indeterminate piano music by Cage and Wolff. Archival research in New York and Los Angeles, interviews with Wolff, and a series of public concerts of Wolff's piano music, led to Thomas's co-edited book on Wolff's music [3.1] and the recordings of Wolff described in section 4. A further project publication proposed an approach to the realisation of Cage's <i>Solo for Piano</i> (1958) [3.2] that moves beyond the realisations documented in historic recordings. At the Getty Library, Thomas also examined David Tudor's realisations of indeterminate music by Feldman, research that was later to bear fruit in Thomas's 2018/19 recording of Feldman's piano music [3.6]. This five-disc set includes three world premiere recordings, and contains a 50-page booklet by Thomas addressing the challenges of Feldman's notation, and the insights that arise from using Feldman's original manuscripts in performance.</p> <p>Thomas's Cage article [3.2] laid the groundwork for a second AHRC-funded project (£508,000; 2015–2018) examining John Cage's large-scale <i>Concert for Piano and Orchestra</i> (1958). The project was led by Thomas as PI, with Professor Martin Iddon (University of Leeds) as Co-I, and Dr Emily Payne (University of Leeds) and Dr Christopher Melen (University of Huddersfield) as research assistants. The project sought to demystify a work whose extravagant notations are familiar from books on twentieth-century music, but whose realisation in performance has been little explored. As an experienced performer of the <i>Concert</i>, Thomas took a leading role in examining the history of the work in performance [3.4], and developing resources that could assist future performers. Primary amongst the latter is the <i>cageconcert.org</i> website [3.5], which explores</p>		

in great detail the practicalities involved in realising the work. The 'Performing' section of the website is based upon video interviews with Thomas and the musicians of the ensemble Apartment House – whose new recording of the *Concert* was another project output [3.3] – examining how each instrumentalist interpreted Cage's notations, as well as the conductor's role and how the players combine in performance. Extensive explanatory text (32,000 words) and archival images complement these videos. The website also houses two innovative apps, developed by Melen under the direction of Thomas and Iddon, that offer hands-on engagement with the notational mechanics of the *Concert*. The 'Solo for Piano App' enables users to experiment with the indeterminate notations used in the *Solo for Piano* (the *Concert*'s piano part). It offers an analysis of each notation, considering options for interpretation, and a performance tool, allowing users to generate different realisations. The 'Concert Player App' allows users to explore the flexibility that Cage offers for scoring and duration of the *Concert*. Built around 3,000 individual sound recordings, the app allows users to choose from 16,383 possible instrumental combinations and different orderings of pages, to automatically and instantly generate fresh audio performances of the *Concert*. In combination, the apps afford a vastly greater array of ways of experiencing the *Concert* than is offered by the handful of existing recordings, and they also extend the pleasures and rewards of the performative realisation of indeterminate music to non-specialists.

### 3. References to the research

Evidence of the quality of the research: Outputs [3.1], [3.2] and [3.4] were subject to a rigorous peer review process prior to publication. [3.1] and [3.2] were outcomes of Thomas's £23k AHRC project; [3.3], [3.4] and [3.5] were outcomes of his £508k AHRC project.

[3.1] Chase, S. & Thomas, P., eds (2010), [Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff](#) (Ashgate) [can be supplied on request]

[3.2] Thomas, P. (2013) 'Understanding indeterminate music through performance: Cage's *Solo for piano*', *Twentieth Century Music* 10/1, 91–113 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572212000424>

[3.3] Thomas, P. and Apartment House (2017), *CC: John Cage Concert for Piano and Orchestra and Christian Wolff Resistance*, CD recording (2 discs, HCR16CD) [can be supplied on request]

[3.4] Iddon, M. & Thomas, P. (2020), [John Cage's Concert for Piano and Orchestra](#) (Oxford University Press). (Thomas's contribution: 50%) [can be supplied on request]

[3.5] Iddon, M., Melen, C., Payne, E. & Thomas, P. (2019), <https://cageconcert.org/>

[3.6] Thomas, P. (2019), *Morton Feldman Piano*, CD recording (5 discs, at144x5) <http://www.anothertimbre.com/mortonfeldmanpiano.html> [can be supplied on request]

### 4. Details of the impact

During the assessment period, Thomas has brought his research on New York experimentalism to diverse non-academic audiences through 33 public concerts (in 10 UK cities, plus venues in USA, Canada and the Netherlands), eight CD releases (containing 19 discs on four labels), 11 broadcasts on BBC national radio (including live concert relays, CD airplay and reviews, and a feature on Radio 3's 'Music Matters' on the Cage *Concert* project [audience reach 192,000]), and a series of 63 YouTube videos of Wolff's piano music specially recorded during the 2020 lockdown (2,509 views to date). New audiences have been reached through performances in art galleries (Tate Britain; the Serpentine), airtime on BBC Radio 6, and participatory educational workshops. Together with the digital resources and scholarly publications discussed above, these activities have brought distinct benefits to concert and CD audiences, professional and amateur performers, and individuals and organisations in the contemporary music world, as described below.

#### Unlocking New York experimentalism for audiences

The presenter of BBC Radio 3's 'Music Matters' writes of Thomas's '*rare ability to decode, demystify and make sense of music that still seems forbiddingly remote to many listeners*' [5.1, p.1]. This capacity to unlock the secrets of New York experimentalism is evidenced in the testimony of concert-goers, record buyers and music critics. Typical is an online review of a November 2013 Feldman concert by Thomas: '*It was one of those rare performances where you feel changed afterwards. If I could, I would still be there, listening*' [5.2, pp.1-2]. Specialists and non-specialists alike have remarked upon how Thomas's performances have opened new doors to this repertoire. Writing on Thomas's CD of Cage's *Winter Music* (2017), a critic noted he was '*not the biggest fan of Cage's music ... [often] coming away from his work bored and frustrated*', but that he was '*pleasantly surprised*' by this performance, which he found an '*invigoratingly urgent ... sonic experience – with very fleeting moments of melancholic beauty*' [5.2, p.3]. Thomas's performances

of Feldman have similarly brought new converts: *'Sublime recital of Morton Feldman's piano music from @philip\_thomas\_1 last night, much of it new to me. Time for a deep dive'; 'If, like me, you know little of Feldman's music, I would urge you to have a listen' [5.3; 5.2, p.4].* The extensive liner notes that Thomas provides for his recordings are often singled out for aiding a new appreciation and understanding: *'[the] notes are as illuminating as anything I've read on the challenges of performing, recordings and listening to Feldman'; 'they make enlightening reading, particularly when combined with listening to the music itself'; 'Philip's booklet texts are exemplary' [5.2, p. 6, p.8].*

The *cageconcert.org* website and apps (launched November 2019) [3.5] use new technologies to offer audiences insights that considerably extend what is possible in the concert hall or on CD. The Vice-President for New Music & Rights at Cage's music publisher Peters US writes: *'Cage's music has frequently been misunderstood and has also often been badly performed. The website and apps created by Philip Thomas and his team will go a long way towards helping on both counts. ... The listener can use the website and app to dig deeper into the work ... in a way that was not possible before this website and app were available' [5.1, p.2].* In its first 13 months the website had 10,980 page views from the UK, USA, Canada, Europe, Japan and Argentina (1,159 to the two apps); 26% of visitors were return users. The apps are a particularly powerful tool for enabling non-specialists to have a hands-on experience of this repertoire, allowing users to create their own realisations without requiring great expertise in music notation. The Senior Curator of music venue Café Oto writes that the apps *'make Cage's work more tactile and engaging for new audiences, and emancipate it in some ways from any academic/hierarchical structures' [5.1, p.3].* For these reasons, the apps offer an enticing entry point into Cage's music; one app user wrote to Thomas: *'I heard you talking about [the Concert Player App] on Radio 3's Music Matters last night ... and have been playing it today ... It's good, really inspiring, and a way in to John Cage's music for someone who hasn't heard much of it until now' [5.4, p.9].* At the public launch for the website, respondents – ranging from amateur and professional musicians, to listeners and those studying and working in the music sector – commented on how the site *'really gets under the skin of the piece' and 'makes [the] music more accessible' [5.4, pp. 1-2].* Two subsequent public online workshops in July 2020 attracted a predominantly non-academic audience (15) from the UK, USA and South America, with feedback attesting to how the website *'has already greatly deepened my understanding of what's entailed in performing the Concert for Piano and Orchestra and Cage's music more generally', and has 'made me think about how this [approach] could be applied to other indeterminate pieces to fully explore their possibilities' [5.4, p.4].* Users have since fed back on how the apps *'bring clarity to what can seem an overwhelming piece', and praise their 'interactivity and the ease to see and hear multiple versions of the piece so readily' [5.4, p.7].* These new resources are also being deployed in educational settings. An Illinois educator has used the *Concert Player App* in classes on experimentalism for the junior students of the Illinois String Academy, and to stimulate new creative ideas within his community composition workshop All Score Urbana. He writes that *'something wonderful' came from 'interactions with the website and app', as a young All Score student experimented with indeterminacy for the first time: the resulting graphic score was realised in different ways by two staff members (now uploaded to YouTube), and 'the student felt empowered by the experience and pleased with the results' [5.1, pp. 5-6].*

### **Supporting performers to engage with experimental music**

A primary motivation for the *Cage Concert* project was to offer new tools for performers interested in playing Cage's music. As the Promotion Manager at Edition Peters notes, *'Cage's instructions on how to translate this score into a performance often puts off any would-be performers from tackling the work, for fear of misinterpreting the musical systems, or because some of the instructions are written confusingly even for people "in-the-know"! What Martin Iddon and Philip Thomas' research does is to lift the veil on the mysteries of this composition' [5.1, p.7].* The website and apps have already been used to support a professional performance of the *Cage Concert* in San Francisco (2020); the pianist wrote to Thomas *'it has been really wonderful - and validating! - to comb through your site and watch your video on preparing the piece. It's like meeting a fellow hiker on a path in the wilderness' [5.4, p.10].* Thomas's Cage research has also benefited organisations working with amateur and young performers. In 2020 Thomas led two CoMA (Contemporary Music for All) workshops in London and Glasgow with over 20 amateur musicians; these examined the *Cage Concert* and ended with performances of part of the work involving all participants.

Participants evidently learnt a great deal and had their enthusiasm stoked for more: *'I gained a whole new understanding – the score is now exciting and not terrifying!'; 'It was lovely to have this first experience of the piece as a performer rather than just studying!'; 'I'll take away new knowledge, and an interest in performing more Cage'* [5.5, p.1]. CoMA's Glasgow coordinator observed how Thomas's guidance *'unlocked the potential and confidence of "soloists", especially among the people who are normally very shy to perform on their own'*, meaning that *'the excerpt we worked on could easily become one of our CoMA Glasgow repertoire pieces'* [5.5, p.4]. In 2020 Thomas was also lead advisor for a Cage project planned for the London Sinfonietta's Junior Academy course. The project was cancelled due to the pandemic, but Thomas's input changed the Sinfonietta's thinking about how to bring Cage's music to the Academy's young participants. The Sinfonietta's Participation and Learning Officer writes of how Thomas's participation *'provided us with the opportunity to fully understand the piece and [how to] introduce young people to contemporary music in a way they would not have considered previously. ... Philip's help with understanding the piece and Cage's intentions meant we were able to plan a thorough project to engage young musicians in contemporary music and take ownership of a piece'* [5.1, p.8].

For the performers of ensemble Apartment House, participation in the Cage Concert project brought new insights for their professional practice. The extended timescale of the project was *'a luxury for a professional musician used to working within a tight timeframe'*, making it possible *'to explore in much greater depth ... [Cage's] ideas and the ways in which I might deal with them on a practical level as a performing musician'* [5.7]. One musician wrote of how *'coming away from this kind of music-making I had a new, freer and more flexible perspective on the other music I play'*. Being interviewed for the project website was *'a further extension beyond my normal experience ... [which] introduced me to the growing importance of digital resources to connect to emerging audiences for our work'* [5.7]. The Cage project built on Thomas's long-standing involvement with Apartment House, of which the ensemble's founder says: *'Many of the works that we perform demand an intellectual acumen and almost visionary approach, and Philip has always been an outstanding musician to have on board with regards to unravelling such compositional intricacies. In ensemble matters his calm and generous approach to music making has always inspired others and created a progressive and positive atmosphere'* [5.1, p.9]. Apartment House also benefited from the funding (£14,700) attached to the Cage project, which enabled both employment for the musicians and the commissioning of a new work for the ensemble by Christian Wolff (see below).

### **Generating benefit for individuals and organisations in the contemporary music world**

By generating new public and performer interest in this repertoire, Thomas's research has brought significant reputational and economic benefits for other individuals and organisations. Foremost amongst these is the sole surviving member of the New York School, Christian Wolff (b. 1934). Wolff writes that *'over the last ten or so years [Thomas] has been one of the most important people in the furthering of my music. He has arranged two important commissions, with generous money, one for a longer solo piano piece, Sailing By (2014), the other for a large (40 minute) piano and chamber orchestra piece, Resistance (2017) [3.3]. ... Thomas was the driving force behind the [first-ever] collection of essays about my music (Changing the System [3.1]), to which he also contributed an excellent essay on my piano music. This is the best overall account of my work. Finally, and not least, Thomas has been recording my complete piano music, of which 5 CDs are already out. ... Thomas's contribution to furthering the cause and presence of a major portion of contemporary piano music ... has been of first-class quality and extraordinarily productive'* [5.1, p.10].

The critical and public success of Thomas's recordings of New York experimentalism have brought significant benefit to the record labels with whom he has worked. In the case of the Yorkshire-based record label Another Timbre, this impact has been transformational. Another Timbre's Director writes: *'Philip Thomas's impact on Another Timbre has been extraordinary. He has played on over 20 of the label's 150 releases to date (March 2020), including many of the most successful in terms of both critical responses and sales. The Morton Feldman Piano 5-CD box set [3.6] ... has been phenomenally successful critically and financially ... [bringing] an extraordinary amount of income into Another Timbre. ... Normally the label's income from CD sales is around £15,000–20,000 per year. ... The total income from the [Feldman] box set alone is approximately £49,000 in the past 6 months' (1,400 copies sold, September 2019 to February 2020) [5.1, pp.11-12]. This*

financial windfall has been used by Another Timbre to support less profitable projects involving younger composers: *'the success of the Feldman box set has enabled us to plan two batches of releases ... focusing exclusively on little-known composers who don't (yet) have a reputation or following. ... We have [also] been able to commission both the Canadian composer Martin Arnold (£4,000) and the Huddersfield-based composer Ryoko Akama (£2,000) to write new series of solo piano works, as well as commissioning younger composers Eleanor Cully and Georgia Denham to write new ensemble works for Apartment House ... [and] to record existing ensemble works by the Belgian composer Maya Verlaak for a CD release'* [5.1, p.11]. The Feldman set, listed by *The Guardian* as a 'standout release of the year' (19 December 2019), has also brought new audiences to the label: *'it has reached a lot of people who have not bought anything from the label before, and in some cases had never heard of Another Timbre ... Our email list ... suggests that nearly 700 people who bought copies of the box set are new to Another Timbre. ... [S]everal of these ... have since come back and ordered other CDs'* [5.1, pp.11-12]. Thomas has also brought commercial success to other contemporary music labels: two Christian Wolff releases (2014; 2019) have earned £7,552 for Sub Rosa; and the CD set of Cage's *Concert* and Wolff's *Resistance* (2018) has earned £1,309 for Huddersfield Contemporary Records (its second-highest selling album) [5.6].

Concerts accompanying the 2019 release of the Feldman discs have brought unexpected benefits for concert promoters. The inclusion in [3.6] of a premiere recording of Feldman's unpublished music for a 1954 film on the sculptor Seymour Lipton led to a first-time collaboration between Yorkshire's principal chamber music organisation Music in the Round and Sheffield's annual digital festival Sensoria. The event combined Thomas's live performances, projections of this and other films scored by Feldman, and introductions to the artists featured in the films by painter David Ainley. The Programme Manager at Music in the Round writes on how the event *'offered our core audience members the chance to hear music that is outside their usual expectations. ... The feedback from the audience was overwhelmingly positive, with a desire for more performances that widen their experiences of live music through exploring experimental and alternative repertoire. ... The audience size exceeded our expectations and was, in turn, what we would consider to be a financial success. The success of the event and working with Philip, in particular, has undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for us, and it has brought about a number of new and surprising ideas at MitR that we aim to explore in the coming seasons'* [5.1, p.13]. A similar event at the Music We'd Like To Hear series at St Mary-at-Hill Church in the city of London attracted a higher than usual audience, with consequent benefit for the series' future: the Lead Curator of the series writes: *'Healthy ticket sales and funding enabled us able to pay everyone very well and secure a deposit to book our next series, which is something we don't usually have spare funds to do'* [5.1, p.14].

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] Testimonial letters and emails: Presenter, BBC Radio 3; Vice-President for New Music & Rights, Edition Peters New York; Senior Curator, Café Oto; Music Teacher, Illinois String Academy; New Music Promotion Manager, Edition Peters London; Participation and Learning Officer, London Sinfonietta; Director, Apartment House; Christian Wolff; Director, Another Timbre; Programme Manager, Music in the Round; Lead Curator, Music We'd Like to Hear

[5.2] Published Reviews of CD recordings & performances: Homer, P. *Spectacular Feldman with Apartment House at The Rest is Noise*, Bach Track (2013); Batty, R. *John Cage: Winter Music*, Musique Machine (2018); Perkins, M. *Sensoria 2019 Review*, Exposed Magazine (2019); McGregor, A. *Record Review*, BBC Radio 3 (2019); Eyles, J. *Philip Thomas: Morton Feldman Piano*, All About Jazz (2019), Clements, A. *Classical CDs of the Year*, The Guardian (2019)

[5.3] CD & Performance listener feedback: Twitter comments

[5.4] User feedback on *cageconcert.org* website and apps collected by University of Huddersfield: Compiled responses from launch event November 2019; Compiled responses from online demonstration events July 2020; Compiled responses from *cageconcert.org* follow-up survey, November 2020; Email correspondence with website users

[5.5] Collated feedback questionnaire responses from CoMA Glasgow outreach workshop, collected by University of Huddersfield, 2020; Email statement, Coordinator, CoMA Glasgow.

[5.6] CD sales figures from Another Timbre, Sub Rosa and Huddersfield Contemporary Records.

[5.7] Email statements from Apartment House musicians.