

Music is full of incident.

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Mostly, it's treated as an element to be framed-out of the experience: someone coughs during a concert and we tend to ignore it, or else manage the interruption, either with our ears or with our glares; if a baby has a crying fit or a phone rings and rings, we may have occasion to hear the movement again from the top. When I heard of the latter happening during a Mahler symphony lately, I was somewhat struck that incident-suppression prevailed, despite what I would consider Mahler's deep embrace of irreconcilables, inside and out—albeit in a decidedly more teleological, less...incidental way.

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What am I doing, mind in the concert hall like that? Maybe it's better to state things more generally: something happens, which will have had, quite inadvertently, any number of complex, variable, and unforeseen interactions with everything else, down to the molecular level. This immanent vitality is quite incidental, belying the notion that one ever does more or less than simply take part in it. Music situates parts—gathering up bundles of messy connectivity, listening in; putting an ear to all that vast, tangled darkness, we draw close to the beating heart. The question of what we do in music is therefore revitalized by the exploration of incident.

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Christian Wolff has consistently found some very effective and singular ways of taking the essential incidentality of music to heart. Above all, for me, is his use of the vertical wedge ( Λ ) in his scores, to denote some sort of indeterminate pause. One could never presume to govern incident—this would only reassert some version of the suppressive posture I described at the outset. Yet Wolff's *indication* of pauses with the wedge in my experience somehow succeeds in completely slackening their tension—immediate cut-away to some neutral register—in a way that traditionally notated caesurae never do. Perhaps this is because such a pause is neither counted, nor “felt” (as in a fermata), nor even required to happen at all, but merely *observed*. Whatever it is, we come across it, simply there.

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And the wedge keeps cropping up, medium of the surrounding change suffusing all of the fitful, obsessive activity that playing Wolff often seems to entail—the shared ecology and atmosphere attending all those weird, squirrely shards of notated material, whether they conspire at any given moment to build-up coincidental coherence or drive it apart. For amid all the scrappy bits and pieces—somehow or other taken down, strung together and spun out by Wolff in endless parts—the wedges proliferate like so many teepees dotting the landscape: *there are others here*.

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Other musicians, quite likely, since Wolff's music is profusely, chaotically social (though even in the solo music, one often feels oneself divided, split between multiple concurrent parts). And others still: other people, other parts, other worlds... How do we make peace with all of these? Like being startled by our own reflection in a mirror—glimpse of that strange, separate life passing silently within us—everything remains, yet remade from the middle.

When Mahler's artificial thunder subsides, leaving only the barest smattering of sounds to echo among distant instruments, the music seems to evaporate. Yet as it does, we are carried off into the depths of some vast forest, dimly lit by various small fires—whose are these?—while perhaps some wayward swans from Tuonela float past. Literally *everything* goes on in those spacious, opened moments (including us). And Wolff's music seems to spring forth from this grandeur, arising amid twigs and stones, feeling its way through the underbrush and going native as it spreads deeper into the uncharted interior. Sure, you might hear some chords, as likely as a phrase or three from an old worker song, some orphaned rhythmic figure looping along, or even lots of different things playing out at the same time in apparent cacophony—*wtf?!* Any number of these possibilities (and others) is typically at hand, with everything frequently turning on a dime, often due to some inadvertent circumstance of how the parts happen to coexist: real coincidence drives and shapes the experience. This stuff all came from somewhere, but it's here now and like so much nature unfolding, it could be *anything*. Harmony, in the most expansive sense, is free to be its big unwieldy self, creating opportunities that can only crop up, be seized, or pass in the moment, and Wolff constantly places you in the thick of it. The wedge is harmony, too; when it happens to line up in everyone's part it's a reminder that all is shared, and there's always more outside.

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Wolff's wedges are like opening a window (regardless of what has been happening in the course of playing the music; regardless, too, of whatever is happening outside—perhaps, in both cases, most strikingly when *nothing* is going on). Literally, as in the way you have to stop everything else in order to do it. But I'm also fond of that old story, related by John Cage, where he was listening to Wolff play a piano piece near an open window, and the sounds outside were at least as strong as whatever he was playing. When he asked Wolff if he'd play the piece again with the window closed, Wolff said he'd be glad to, but that it wasn't necessary. The wedge also happens to resemble a loft window swung open from a top-mounted hinge. Indeed, this hinge-y quality is another component of the wedge: it doesn't simply break-open the situation, it binds it—the vertical wedge is also the sign for a mathematical conjunction.

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*AND Istanbul - 11 Conjunctions for Christian Wolff* is a postcard folio from Hagia Sophia. It sat with me for some 6 years as I wondered what on earth I was ever going to do with it, until it finally dawned on me that nothing was to be done: it materializes and integrates the functions of the vertical wedge in uncanny and elegant ways, with its eleven accordion folds conjoining, along a series of wedges, one scene after another of the great basilica-turned-mosque-turned-museum, itself an historical conjunction of Christian and Muslim design. The subtle exquisite corpse comprised by the imagery—both in terms of abutting image pairings and the syncretic visual culture of Hagia Sophia itself—plays across the geometry of wedges and extends in dual fashion to the surrounding world, with the glossy image faces acting as almost-mirrors while the matte white reverse sides leave the usual space for correspondence, address, postage, carriage markings, etc. Finally, the folio seems to repeat a small, silent mantra to and of itself in the form of the publisher's acronym, imprinted on the back of each card: AND

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