

The Great Learning

an artistic research project

Tulkinnanvaraista undertakes a project of artistic research centered around a complete performance of **Cornelius Cardew's** *The Great Learning*. All enthusiasts are invited to participate.

During the next three years or so this important but rarely heard composition will be presented in its entirety. The project aims to encourage an interdisciplinary dialogue on the topic of ethically, ecologically and socially conscious and sustainable practises of performing arts. While examining overlapping areas between artistic expression and non-artistic everyday reality we're searching for healthy alternatives to the hierarchies of mainstream culture.

The endeavour brings together a large number of participants from various artistic fields and circles of life: researchers and students, established professionals and those at the beginnings of their careers, as well as amateurs inspired by music and theatre. In total some 350 people will take part. The project is led by Juho Laitinen as part of his artistic research at University of the Arts Helsinki, supported by Kone Foundation.

Everyone interested is warmly welcome to participate in the discussions, workshops, rehearsals and performances. Current information is available via email (info@tulkinnanvaraista.fi) or on the webpage (in Finnish).

THE WORK

The Great Learning is a music theatre composition written by Cornelius Cardew between 1968–1970. Its seven parts encompass some ten hours of music within a framework that is ritualistic and corporeal, theatrical, choreographic and sculptural as well as philosophical and pedagogical.

TGL calls for large performing forces. Some participants shall have a degree of expertise in playing Western classical instruments such as the organ, drums and low-pitched wind and string instruments. However, the main performing group is a chorus that performs both vocally by singing, speaking and chanting as well as by producing sounds on stones, whistles and various other found or self-made instruments. Preferably the chorus members ought to be musically untrained "innocents", in Cardew's phrasing. Instead of traditional virtuosic control of their instruments, skills "such as inventiveness, ingenuity, practicality and self-discipline" are called for, in the words of composer Michael Parsons. Thus a personal and collective growing is encouraged in the spirit of Confucian teachings, according to Cardew "each learning in his own way".

The text is taken from the eponymous work by Confucius, the Chinese philosopher and politician who lived in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE and whose writings still have a

profound effect on the contemporary way of life in East Asia and elsewhere. Confucius instructs the reader “to clarify the way wherein the intelligence increases through the process of looking straight into one’s own heart and acting on the results” and to observe how “things have root and branch; human affairs have range and origin; to know what comes first and what follows is to be close to the way”, in Ezra Pound’s translation.

The tradition of Confucianism emphasises family unity and social harmony and proposes meritocracy, as opposed to aristocracy, as a principle for government. There is an urging for continuous learning and self-development through sincere introspection. During the progress of his musical life, Cornelius Cardew moved increasingly towards similar values by way of *Treatise*, a vast graphic score written between 1963 and 1967, and *Schooltime Compositions*, a conceptual “opera” from 1968. Arguably TGL is Cardew’s most profound argument in the discussion promoting social and political justice, solidarity and an empowerment of the individual to fulfil his creative needs.

Inclusivity and equality among performers are reflected in Cardew’s notational choices. The writing for the “readers” (i.e. formally trained musicians) is traditionally on staves; for the chorus, the instructions either resemble calligraphic shapes or are written out as text. Focusing on the acts of music-making instead of the outcome, Cardew liberates the performer from a potentially misleading perfectionism: “A successful performance is one that reveals its own imperfections.” A notation anyone can use encourages us to consider the musical act as a meaningful and morally responsible one, as pianist and Cardew’s biographer John Tilbury points out. When hierarchies disintegrate, each participant assumes the roles of performer, listener, critic and composer alike, composer Michael Nyman writes.

PROJECT AIMS

The aims for the whole enterprise are twofold. In addition to the great aesthetic value of TGL, we see its pertinent contemporary relevance in allowing us to explore possibilities for making art in a post-capitalist society. It encourages collective awareness rather than egoistic self-expression and promotes openness and inclusiveness instead of esotericism. We are yet again at a stage where responsibility must be assumed to seek alternatives to the selfish practises of a market- and consumption-driven society that mainstream music has such strong ties to. Aesthetic and ideological values should be promoted together – it is simply not enough to decorate an everyday existence with artistic activities, as Cardew paraphrases Karl Marx. “The world has not been given to us on a plate but as a creative task”, writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch continues elsewhere.

We are confident that the project can present many learning opportunities for the artists, scholars and other participants involved. The hypothesis is that the dialogue between these groups can help build a healthier self-esteem: trained musicians may further their appreciation of their craft as a socially relevant one; untrained participants can learn more about inherent creative powers shared by all. Both will acquire means to

navigate the territory where artistic expression and everyday reality intersect and interpenetrate, thus helping to advance mutual understanding en route to nothing less than a better-working society.

To the public, or rather non-performing participants, the project brings forward a wondrously beautiful musical work with extraordinary communicative powers that many have heard of but have never heard.

STUDY GROUP

At the heart of the research, a study group meets monthly to discuss and workshop parts of TGL and related musical material. Everyone is welcome to join at any time; please note that the working language is Finnish.

REHEARSALS AND PERFORMANCES

Naarmu Ensemble and the Koiton Laulu choir form the main performing body. All enthusiasts are encouraged to join. Prior experience or skills aren't a requirement to participate.

THE TEXT

a rough translation by Juho Laitinen based on various sources

The roots of the great learning are in clarifying a virtuosity.
They are in the compassion with which we watch how people grow.
They are in perfect tranquility.

When you know where to stop you can achieve balance.
When you achieve balance you can be calm.
When you are calm you can quiet down.
When you have quieted down you can deliberate.
When you can deliberate you can accomplish your aims.

Everything has its roots and branches.
People's actions have their origins and sources.
When you understand what comes first and what follows you are close to the way.

Wanting to bring a virtuous clarity to the state, the elders set a good government to their lands.
Wanting to govern well they first created harmony in their communities.
Wanting to create harmony in their communities they first cultivated themselves.

Wanting to cultivate themselves they strived for righteousness in their hearts.
Wanting for righteousness in their hearts they strived for sincerity in their thoughts.
Wanting for sincerity in their thoughts they expanded their understanding to its utmost.
Expanding the understanding to its utmost means studying matters.

When matters had been studied, understanding expanded.
When understanding expanded, thinking became sincere.
When thinking became sincere, the heart became righteous.
When the heart became righteous, people became cultivated.
When people became cultivated, the communities became harmonious.
When communities became harmonious, the a good government was set up in the lands.
When the lands were governed well, peace and happiness prospered in the whole state.

From the emperor to the citizen everyone must understand cultivating of self as the most essential matter.

If the roots are in disorder the branches cannot be in order either
The profound cannot be considered superficial nor the superficial be considered profound.
This is what knowing the roots means. This is what expanding the understanding means.