



THAT ‘OTHER’ WAY OF WORKING: MICHAEL WOLTERS AT 50

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Abstract: This article does not attempt to paint a complete picture of Michael Wolters (b.1971) as composer, teacher or researcher. Rather, it is a collection of comments and reflections drawn from a number of recent conversations with him. In these conversations we considered the work he has produced across his career, with a particular focus on his ideas about conceptual working, his outsider position and the essential part that accessibility plays in his creative decision-making.

An ‘Other’ Approach

I would like to start with a short note from me, the author of this article, to you, the reader. Self-referential moments like this are uncommon within the realm of academic writing but, as I will explain, communicating an awareness of what one is doing and one’s decision-making in doing it is extremely important to me. For example, I have chosen to eschew the convention of referring to Michael by his last name, as a reminder that this article does not attempt to be balanced or neutral; I am too close to the subject for that. By making space to talk to you in a different voice I am acknowledging my bias yet also acknowledging that I am writing an article.

Introduction

I first met Michael when I was studying classical guitar at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. I always felt somewhat a charlatan at the conservatoire; I was a capable classical guitarist, but otherwise really had no relationship to classical music. Indeed, the first time I saw a symphony orchestra play was during my first year of university. I enjoyed composing and tended to work with compositional systems but I had begun to notice that I was more interested in telling people how I composed than in showing them the results. Around this time I took a class with Michael on contemporary art and music and during the class I had the feeling someone had turned the light on. I was exposed for the first time to the work and ideas of Lucy Harvey, Martin Creed and Sol LeWitt, to name but a few, and this changed everything for me. (I still find it remarkable that such a class can be run within a classical-music institution; it was Michael who established and maintained this module.) I had always had the feeling that I didn’t

quite fit in, at home because of the 'classical music' thing and at the conservatoire again because of the 'classical music' thing but for very different reasons. In conceptual work I discovered, perhaps for the first time, my context. I would go on to complete a master's and Ph.D. in composition, supervised by Michael, and to collaborate with him in our duo, *Difficult Listening*.

Michael Wolters was born in Germany and grew up in Niederkrüchten, a small German village on the Dutch border. Since 2009 he has been Deputy Head of Composition at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, where he runs the Master's in Experimental Performance. He has maintained an outsider position in the world of contemporary music with works that either deconstruct and question the traditional concert situation, or are designed for performance outside the concert hall. He has written music for traditional ensembles like Birmingham Contemporary Music Group but prefers to challenge conventional set-ups and concert rituals. This has resulted in pieces with unusual instrumentations (like his 12-minute-long opera *The Voyage*, for mezzo-soprano, 11 recorders and double bass, produced with the theatre company Stan's Cafe for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad), performances in unusual places (*wahnsinnig wichtig on ice* took place on and around an ice rink) and projects of unusual duration (his *Spring Symphony: The Joy of Life* (see [Example 1](#)) lasts around 17 seconds, while the performance of *Wir sehen uns morgen wieder* lasted for a month). Michael believes that an artwork's idea is the single most important element in its creation, informing its concept and driving every artistic decision. A major influence on his music was the work of American performance artist Laurie Anderson in the 1980s. He especially admires Anderson's

longing for the Golden Girls

tutti arco

fff

you did it

almost giving up

tutti arco

fff

3

life is as good as it can be

feeling Almodovar's melancholy

tutti arco

fff

tutti div. arco

3

full of sexual energy

no more lonely nights

imagining being featured in a post code lottery advert

with a clear head

fff

You think that this is the most important moment.

arco

with the joy of knowing that Masterchef is starting again tonight

Example 1:
Michael Wolters, excerpt from
Spring Symphony (The Joy of Life,
movement IV, bars 3–4).

ability to use multiple artistic genres to create highly effective and moving performance situations in which – in her postmodern way – she tells stories while highlighting the fact that she is telling stories.

That ‘Other’ Way of Working

Concepts

It seems pertinent to reflect on the term ‘conceptual’. Two early important texts on this topic are Sol LeWitt’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’¹ and ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’.² In these texts LeWitt sets out to define ‘the kind of art in which [he is] involved as conceptual art’.³ This passage from *Paragraphs* seems particularly relevant to Michael’s work:

When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless.⁴

The most often remembered part of this sentence is the phrase about the ‘machine that makes the art’, conjuring up the cold, emotionless conceptual artist trying to dehumanise and depersonalise their art. Less often noticed is the observation that ‘This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive’. Intuition is not a word commonly associated with conceptual art but nevertheless it is at the centre of one of the earliest attempts to define the form.

More recent attempts to define conceptual music include Jennifer Walshe’s essay ‘New Discipline’,⁵ Johannes Kreidler’s ‘New Conceptualism’⁶ and the debate about conceptual music at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse, ‘New Conceptualism: A Dead End or a Way Out’,⁷ where ‘issues of authorship, content and cultural connection from both conceptual and non-conceptual orientations’ were explored.

Like many artists who work in ways that seem to align with a particular subgenre, Michael is not willing to be labelled. Rather, he sees his work as something more flexible and individual than that. For example, in his *There are more of them than us – a Queer Concerto for 9 Saxophones and Orchestra*⁸ there are instances of strict predetermined structures, systematic composition methods and a focus on what an orchestra looks like, alongside playful experimentations with overextended sequences and an intuitive and sound-focused approach to

¹ Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12–17.

² Sol LeWitt, ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 106–08.

³ LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs’.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jennifer Walshe, ‘The New Discipline’, in *MusikTexte*, 149 (2016), https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/The_New_Discipline.pdf (accessed 24 February 2023).

⁶ Johannes Kreidler, ‘New Conceptualism in Music’, YouTube, 7 August 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-kEs_RliiE (accessed 18 May 2023).

⁷ Harry Lehmann, ‘New Conceptualism: A Dead End or a Way Out?’, YouTube, 30 October 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bhqDjHp2p0&t=1059s (accessed 18 May 2023).

⁸ Michael Wolters, *There are more of them than us – a Queer Concerto for 9 Saxophones and Orchestra*, online video recording, YouTube, 16 October 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEE-WPQY6eM (accessed 18 May 2023).

orchestration. In the course of our conversations⁹ Michael most often used the term 'experimental' and, although this word carries an added weight for him because of the Experimental Performance Master's course that he developed and leads at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, I believe it is a good fit.

Michael's view is that 'The true experimental artist does not try to translate what they have in their head into sound or to realise it in any way. Rather, this is seen as a danger.' LeWitt alludes to this too: 'The artist cannot imagine his art, and cannot perceive it until it is complete.'¹⁰ Michael also believes that 'experimental artists seek curiosity, they ask themselves what would happen if...?', the challenge being 'how to avoid knowing what it will be like in the end'. Ultimately, however, for him it comes down to 'knowing what you are doing', being conscious of the decisions involved in the composition process, challenging them, discussing them and verbalising his intentions in such a way that he makes them accessible to others.

Another useful description of the experimental within an artistic context occurred in a workshop led by Karl Jay-Lewin for the Birmingham Conservatoire Experimental Performance students, in which Jay-Lewin recalled a moment from the tour of his piece *Extremely Pedestrian Chorales*.¹¹ He had been giving a workshop on the piece when a participant asked, 'But what is experimental art?' Jay-Lewin's reply was:

Think back to that moment in science class in school where you have two flasks of clear liquid which, when mixed together, turn green. At this point you don't think, oh I wish it had turned blue, or that would have been better if that was a darker green. You also don't think about the liquids' colour change in terms of good or bad: you just observe what has happened and take a note of it, i.e. putting these two things together makes that. Experimental art is exactly the same: we take ingredients and we mix them together and we see what happens, without judgement.¹²

Closely related to this approach is Michael's belief that musicians on a stage should be seen as people and not just machines realising a composer's dream. As LeWitt states, it is the idea that is the machine. People are always people. Here Michael gives three examples of how this affected specific pieces:

Nine ways of saying hallo.¹³

I learned everything I needed to know about making art in my two years of studying Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen, Germany. That was not due to the curriculum or staff but it was because of the extraordinary environment that was created by all the students there. They weren't professionally trained actors, directors or musicians or dancers. People had different and various interests but one thing in common: to make something from nothing... without pre-existing scripts or scores. It was a truly interdisciplinary, experimental and collaborative environment, but also necessity. People had to rely on what other people brought to a project... because there was nothing else to fall back on. There were a lot of unspoken rules, but ultimately everyone wanted the same: that every single person who worked on a project deeply cared for what they were doing... and people did. Our rehearsal space was

⁹ Interview with Michael Wolters, Birmingham, 2023. Unless otherwise indicated all subsequent quotations for Wolters are taken from this interview.

¹⁰ LeWitt, 'Paragraphs'.

¹¹ Karl Jay-Lewin and Matteo Fargion, *Extremely Pedestrian Chorales* (2021), www.karljaylewin.info/projects/extremely-pedestrian-chorales/ (accessed 18 May 2023).

¹² Karl Jay-Lewin, 'Workshop with Karl Jay-Lewin for Experimental Performance Students of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire' (Birmingham: 2019).

¹³ Michael Wolters, *Nine ways of saying hallo*, YouTube, 21 October 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bVOzs4MTMA (accessed 18 May 2023).

stand 3

4th
mf

5
A
| D o o B |
C
4 3 2 1
AUDIENCE

Example 2:
Excerpt from *nine ways of saying hallo*
(1993).

booked 24/7. I remember rehearsing my first project with Kerstin Evert and Christoph Rodatz from 1–4 a.m. (and going for pizza after). There were at least two performances of something a week and everyone was always there because everyone cared. This unique environment created a lot of fantastic art and performance groups like Rimini Protokoll, the Gob Squad and Hofmann & Lindholm, who are all still working together today. This experience taught me to become aware of everything that is available to you when making art and my sax quartet *Nine ways of saying hallo* (1996) (see [Example 2](#)) was the first musical expression of that. I made a piece where four people only play transcriptions of saying hello in different ways in German while walking across the stage and standing in different positions and never looking at each other. It uses the stage and the fact that they are people who can walk. These are small actions but compared to traditional classical-music performance, which is mostly static, they are massive statements.

*Into the Sky.*¹⁴

I remember, when I was in my second year of my undergraduate degree, one afternoon I was sitting in my tiny bedroom in Birkby, Huddersfield, playing with my flute... something I didn't do very often. Growing up, I had never had such a great relationship with my instrument. I had always found the pieces I had to play far too dull, and my flute teacher Gisela never wanted to look at the pieces that I had written (actually, I wrote a piece about that called *Gisela doesn't care*¹⁵). Anyway, I ended up whispering into the flute and noticed that the explosive consonants were creating pitches and I got really excited. It was the moment that I felt closer to my instrument than ever before. I had found out something about it that nobody had told me to do or to practise and I instantly wrote a piece about that special moment between me and my flute. *Into the Sky* is a piece that can't be transferred to another instrument: it is about the collaboration of the flautist and their instrument. That is not so special, really, as it is the case for a lot of pieces, but for me it was a key moment in my compositional process: I understood that both composer and performer needed to invest in the fundamental idea of the piece.

*Queer Concerto.*¹⁶

In the fourth movement, 'Polka with Choreography', of *Queer Concerto*, instrumental players become people on stage. For a few minutes they drop their skilled

¹⁴ Michael Wolters, *Into the Sky*, online video recording, YouTube 28 January 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrXmZLQkqIU (accessed 18 May 2023).

¹⁵ Michael Wolters, *Gisela doesn't care*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=67AdwKvMWUQ (accessed 18 May 2023).

¹⁶ Michael Wolters, *There are more of them than us – a Queer Concerto for 9 Saxophones and Orchestra*, YouTube, 16 October 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEe-WPQy6eM (accessed 18 May 2023).

music-making that we have come to watch in a building that was made for teaching people those skills. Players stand up to give each other signals that trigger sounds that are almost inaudible. The 'orchestra' turns into a 'group of people'. I'm doing something similar in my new orchestral piece for *John Baldessari and/or Gary Lineker*: the orchestra spends most of the time speaking or singing and that simple action of asking someone to do something that they're not expected to do changes how we see them.

Outsider

The press release for *There are more of them than us – a Queer Concerto for Nine Saxophones and Orchestra* observed that the piece 'reflects Wolters' life growing up gay in a small German village and the feelings of being an outsider this engendered throughout his life'. His biography has long included the statement 'Wolters has maintained an outsider position in the world of contemporary music', and reviews of his works also refer to this 'outsider' position. The *Telegraph*, for example, called his *Neighbours for a Night* 'a piece that stood all the norms of "new music" on their head'.¹⁷ The moment during that same performance when 'the audience was invited to sing a deathless melody' left *Guardian* reviewer Andrew Clements baffled,¹⁸ and his unfavourable review of the piece further highlighted how Michael's work purposefully sits uncomfortably within the Western concert tradition.

The recurring word is 'outsider' but what does it mean? A simple definition defines an 'outsider' as 'a person who does not belong to a particular organisation or profession'¹⁹ and 'outsider art' is defined as 'any work of art produced by an untrained idiosyncratic artist who is typically unconnected to the conventional art world – not by choice but by circumstance'.²⁰ At first glance neither of these definitions suits Michael's position within classical music as someone who received formal music training from a young age and currently holds a prominent position in a leading music institution. Other meanings of the word 'outsider', however, such as 'visitor, foreigner and individualist', more closely align with certain aspects of his artistic and professional position.

When I asked Michael about his early life he said:

Being 'othered' has been and still is a big part of my life, and only people who have experienced what it feels like to be othered can really understand the impact it has. For example, when I was growing up in Germany we had the annual sports day where you had to compete in various athletic disciplines and you got points for your achievements. If you had enough points you were awarded a 'winner's certificate', which is something that I never achieved. So, not only do the people responsible for your education tell you that you're a loser but the point system provides undeniable proof that you are one – officially – and thus you've been othered, and that's just one of many, many examples. I have been othered as a German immigrant in the UK, as a gay man in a straight society, as a 'weird artist' in gay sports clubs and also in a contemporary music scene that tells you how you must write in order to be 'successful' (i.e. get commissions, get picked up by a publisher, etc). Being repeatedly told that I was too different, had bad taste in music (my mix tapes contained Italo-pop, weird little Orff pieces, ABBA and movements from Khachaturian's *Spartacus* and *Holst* suites), was not worth listening to or that I was just simply

¹⁷ Ivan Hewett, 'Astonishingly Cheesy', *Telegraph*, 14 December 2004.

¹⁸ Andrew Clements, 'Neighbours for a Night', *Guardian*, 14 December 2004.

¹⁹ 'Outsider', *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/outsider?q=outsider (accessed 18 May 2023).

²⁰ Colin Rhodes, 'Outsider Art', *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, www.britannica.com/art/outsider-art (accessed 18 May 2023).

'wrong' has had an effect on me as a person and my art-making. I developed a critical attitude towards others and the institutions that they represent but, crucially, I allowed myself to have fun with that. German conservatoires wouldn't even look at my application to study composition because I couldn't play Haydn piano sonatas fast enough. So I went to Huddersfield, where Chris Fox accepted me with open arms.

I relate strongly to Michael's feelings of outsidership. Even though my discovery of conceptual art and its associated artists was so significant, I soon realised that I was still largely alone and that I thought about music in a very different way from my peers. This feeling was cemented when Mark-Anthony Turnage said to me after hearing my music in a masterclass, 'Yeah... you can't really do that.' Feeling less alone in this environment became less about finding people who thought the same way as I did and more about finding the others who also thought differently. On this basis Andy Ingamells and I developed a new master's course for Royal Birmingham Conservatoire with Michael. The Experimental Performance course offers 'practitioners from a variety of disciplines... to come together with likeminded people [and] doesn't ask you to justify yourself against the background of tradition... People from every discipline are treated equally by focusing on [the] non-discipline-specific aspects of performance.'²¹ We created a space for further artistic study for all those people who felt they didn't fit in anywhere else, a space where we would seek to promote difference. Testimonies from the course's alumni sum this up; Tanna Chamberlain says:

I was stuck in a rut, working in offices for industries I didn't care about, in cultures I didn't like and in roles that bored me. I had done full-time dance training a few years back and I've always been into music but felt unworthy to call myself a 'musician' because I couldn't do things like play guitar chords or read piano music. Mostly, I just wanted to create things. I didn't know exactly what. But I wanted to create things with purpose rather than blindly reproduce things without consideration²².

This is important because maintaining an outsider position is not only a cultural concern but also offers a certain creative potential. Today Michael's position is something that he values and protects, because it allows him to 'observe rather than integrate... when you don't belong to a group you can see something in it that people who are part of it can't see'. This is not a confrontational or negative position but rather one that begins from a point of absolute 'love for one element of a genre – orchestral music, for example'. Michael enthusiastically described first hearing Martinů's *Sinfonietta Giocosa* when he was 19: it 'first seems like any old Baroque piece but as you listen you realise that something is not quite right'. He also recounted the experience, shortly after, of hearing the third part of John Adams' *Harmonielehre* on the radio and being mesmerised:

I have always loved the exuberant bombastic and messy qualities that classical music can have. I have never understood the measured approach. Hearing these pieces for the first time was like somebody showed me that the rules can be different and that was insanely exciting.

²¹ 'Experimental Performance MMUS/PGCERT/PGDIP', *Royal Birmingham Conservatoire*, www.bcu.ac.uk/courses/experimental-performance-mmus-pgdip-2023-24 (accessed 18 May 2023).

²² 'What Is an Experimental Performance Degree?', *Royal Birmingham Conservatoire*, www.bcu.ac.uk/conservatoire/about-us/news/blog/what-is-an-experimental-performance-degree#:~:text=You%20might%20be%20wondering%20what,in%20a%20fully%20supportive%20environment (accessed 18 May 2023).

For me a classic example of this approach is Michael's *BRAHMS*.²³ He described the composition process and the work's controversial first performance:

BRAHMS happened really quickly. I was commissioned by Birmingham University Music Society to write a piece for a concert that also featured Brahms' *Violin Concerto* and Brahms' *German Requiem*. So I made a piece using the structure of the *Requiem* and the musical material of the *Violin Concerto*. The piece did a lot of different things and also had one movement where a big choir stood up and then later sat down (they never sang a note) or a second conductor appeared to conduct one movement and then disappeared. It all ended with a singer singing 'This song that I'm singing is the last tune you'll hear in this piece. It's also the first one that you will hear in the next piece', followed by a trashy dance mix version of that tune in the orchestra. So, when the violin concerto started afterwards people still had my 'bastardised' version of the opening tune in their heads – it was a transgressive moment. I had not only presented my own piece but also infiltrated the rest of the concert. I had overstepped the 'appropriate behaviour barrier' massively with this piece and a lot of people were very angry. My slightly mischievous glee was quickly replaced by the unnerving realisation of how powerfully and aggressively people were protecting historic pieces and concert rituals. I understood that I would never be welcome in that history but that my job would be to occasionally open things up, reveal things, point at things and ask questions.

Michael is now taking steps to develop this outsider position through his drag alter ego 'Aria Cuntata' (see [Figure 1](#)).²⁴ 'Aria Cuntata and the World of Music: Major and Minor Keys (*Dur und Moll*)'²⁵ sees 'Aria' present an alternative genesis for major and minor keys, although the work's irony was remarkably lost on many listeners. 'Aria's latest work, 'Aria Cuntata and the Low Miracles',²⁶ was created in celebration of Michael's 50th birthday:

The Low Miracles was the closest that I have come to creating a show like Laurie Anderson did in the 80s: stories and music and films and technology, vocoders, animation, collaboration. . . a real interdisciplinary show that was about nothing and really important issues at the same time. What is exciting and new and at the same time unnerving for me is to have something very clear to say, which would have been almost impossible to do in postmodern 1990s Giessen. At the same time I don't have the feeling that I'm leaving my postmodernist attitude behind. It's more like I'm using it to say things. This way I can make pieces about the homophobic sports world (in *Amaechi*²⁷ together with Seán Clancy) or comment on climate change and the hypocrisy of morality that I experienced when growing up in *The Low Miracles*. I'm currently working on pieces about the slaughtering of gay men in the holocaust and homophobia in tennis.

Accessibility

Giving audiences access to a composer's thinking is, for me, crucial. Imagine, for example, how different John Cage's impact on music would have been if he had never spoken about how and why he

²³ Michael Wolters, *BRAHMS*, SoundCloud, 2002, <https://soundcloud.com/michaelwolters/sets/brahms> (accessed 18 May 2023).

²⁴ 'Aria first appears in Michael Wolters and Paul Norman (Difficult Listening), 'Aria Cuntata and the Black Holes', YouTube, 19 June 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SV3ZIIdVPY (accessed 18 May 2023).

²⁵ Michael Wolters, 'Aria Cuntata and the World of Music: Major and Minor Keys (*Dur und Moll*)', YouTube, 1 February 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6eb9LN-dSg (accessed 18 May 2023).

²⁶ Michael Wolters, 'Aria Cuntata and the Low Miracles', YouTube, 22 July 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlrNYd_XbqU&t=6s (accessed 18 May 2023).

²⁷ Michael Wolters and Seán Clancy, *Amaechi*, YouTube, 28 September 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQDidn7ZTW4 (accessed 18 May 2023).



Figure 1:
Still from 'Aria Cuntata and the Black
Holes' (Difficult Listening: 2020):
Photo © Oliver Clark, 2020.

composed the way he does. On the other hand, I have often been frustrated by music, particularly of a conceptual nature, that only allows access to its concepts and processes through ancillary information such as programme notes.

When Michael and I discussed this, our thoughts immediately turned to Schoenberg and to his compositional methods, about which we had both been taught in our musical education. We discussed how the attempts to take human decision-making 'out of the equation' of Schoenberg and his followers had become part of musical folklore and Schoenberg's belief that listeners would be able to recognise tone rows and their transformations. Michael commented that 'the way I work really has nothing to do with Schoenberg or Boulez, apart from the fact that they also knew what they were doing in such a way as they could describe it. It was also clear that they knew why they were doing it. . . I think I would have done the same.'

Michael is not shy of working with systems, and systems are a relatively common feature of his composition process. But he says that 'it's problematic for me when I feel like a compositional system is inaccessible, because there is no possibility of connection. For me music is about communicating something and developing that connection with other people.' He composes the way he does because 'this is the only way I know how'. He is aware that he, like many of us, is in a niche within a niche, on the experimental edge of contemporary music within the relatively small world that is classical music. His work is not an attempt to entrench an aesthetic position, however, or to bring down classical music from the inside; it simply attempts to be honest and accessible. Yet its accessibility is, very much like the work itself, different in every piece. Sometimes the music language is accessible, reiterating pop music or short sequences, for example, or sometimes Michael will recognise that a purely sonic music is not able to communicate his idea and instead create access by using text and other media within the composition and performance. Significantly, Michael makes as much of his music as possible freely available on YouTube.

First and foremost, communicating the idea is what is important, and when Michael and I collaborate this is the basis for our creative decisions. Our goal is always to create access to each other's thinking, explaining why we are interested in the ideas we pursue until we understand one another. It also means not compromising. Sometimes in life compromise is a positive thing, but in collaborative art-making this is

not the case. For Michael, truly collaborative work involves 'discussing and continuing to work until solutions are found that make sense and that are better than either person could have found alone. Compromising in art is accepting that it could have been better.'

As a final example, I asked Michael about his work *The Lady Plays Rachmaninov*.²⁸

My friend Alex likes playing the piano. She usually plays show tunes and pop songs, but once she asked me to pick a piece for her that she could really get her teeth into and that would also be musically rewarding. I chose Rachmaninov's Prelude in C-sharp minor, op. 3, no. 2 (from *Fantasy Pieces*, 1893) as Rachmaninov's piano music has exactly those qualities (even if I don't think they're equally weighted). She spent a year, on and off, rehearsing. Just before Christmas she told me that she could play it all now and she asked me to record her playing the piece so she could give her mum a recording for Christmas. We worked out quickly that she was too nervous with me in the room, so I went home and left her to record herself. I asked her to number every new take by simply saying the take number before playing. Two hours later a frustrated Alex turned up and said that there wasn't one whole successful play-through but it was all in bits that I would have to edit together. As I edited all successful passages together I noticed what fantastic material these recordings were, documenting Alex's gripping struggle with performing the Russian composer's work. I made a 15-minute edit of the recording that told the story and re-notated what she played, including her mistakes, and arranged it for the mixed ensemble Decibel, who played along to the tape. The performance gives everyone access to the idea. There is no other way of hearing it. It's been performed three times by different ensembles and some players enjoy being part of this story and some really don't. I had a particularly frosty experience with a quartet who played it at the Bechstein centre in Düsseldorf. The extraordinarily expensive Bechstein piano that was being played was tuned slightly lower than Alex' piano in the recording and when the pianist played in unison with the tape it sounded like the cheapest honky-tonk piano, which I enjoyed very, very much.

An Ending

Michael Wolters is a true conceptualist and serious experimentalist, a maverick, a communicator and the outsider that one always wants to welcome to the party. He has had a significant impact on my own work and it has been enjoyable to share a small portion of that impact here in the hope that aspects of his thinking may impact others and continue to do so for generations to come. But, as Michael says, 'Why does it all go out the window as soon as you press record?'

²⁸ Michael Wolters, *The Lady Plays Rachmaninov*, online recording, SoundCloud, 2012, <https://soundcloud.com/michaelwolters/the-lady-plays-rachmaninov> (accessed 18 May 2023).