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Lindsay Cooper obituary

Bassoonist and Henry Cow band member who enjoyed success as a film and TV composer

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Lindsay Cooper playing the bassoon and performing with Phil Minton in Amsterdam in 1989. Photograph: Frans Schellekens

The musician Lindsay Cooper, who has died aged 62 of complications from multiple sclerosis, was once concerned that an ensemble specialising in conventional opera would not be able to play one of her technically challenging compositions. Its conductor, a former biologist, advised her to think of the bee: aerodynamically, it should not be able to fly, but oblivious to this theoretical limitation, it does so nonetheless. Similarly, if left unaware that they were not designed for such cutting-edge work, the musicians would probably come up with the desired result anyway.

Much the same principle operated more widely in Cooper's imaginative, spirited,

humorous and courageous approach to life. She simply chose not to notice that a bassoonist, trained classically in the 1960s, was not supposed to play art-rock, free-improv, 1930s cabaret music or Cool School jazz – or for that matter, that the spirit of a multiple sclerosis sufferer might be assumed to wilt under the condition's advance.

Cooper was diagnosed in 1987, but, fearing it would influence people's perception of her work, kept the news quiet for almost a decade. "Hello, I'm very well," was her usual telephone greeting, long after she had faced the end of her remarkable creative career. Between 1971 and 1997, she had taken key roles in the influential avant-rock bands Comus and Henry Cow and in Mike Westbrook's jazz bands; given solo recitals on bassoon and saxophones; and composed for theatre, dance, film, and jazz and contemporary-classical ensembles all over the world.

Born in Hornsey, north London, she studied the piano, and then from her early teens the bassoon. Between 1965 and 1968, she studied at Dartington College of Arts, Devon; at the Royal College and Royal Academy of Music in London; and played in the National Youth Orchestra.

But on moving to New York at the end of the decade, Cooper met musicians with sharply different interests, and when she returned to Britain in 1971 it was to join the creative Canterbury art-rock scene that was nurturing such original such original bands as Soft Machine and Gong. Cooper joined the experimental folk-rock ensemble Comus for a year, transforming her technique and adding oboe and flute to her resources. She contributed to Mike Oldfield's Hergest Ridge, and in late 1973 was invited to join Henry Cow – an uncategorisable band inspired about equally by avant-garde classical music, Frank Zappa and Karl Marx.

Cooper arrived in time for the group's second album, Unrest (1974), and worked with them sporadically. She developed advanced techniques for the bassoon, played the soprano saxophone and piano, and by the band's final album, Western Culture (1978), was composing half the material. "Henry Cow always wanted to push itself," Cooper told the Guardian in 1998. "So sometimes we would write music that we couldn't actually play – I found that very encouraging."

She strengthened as both an ensemble player and an improviser – with the pull of the latter leading her to co-found, with the singer Maggie Nicols, the Feminist Improvising Group. It ran for five years and at various times included the cellist Georgie Born, the film-maker and vocalist Sally Potter, and the Swiss free-jazz piano virtuoso Irène Schweizer.

Cooper's first solo album was the 1980 song-cycle Rags, based on the sweatshops of

Victorian England, and film and TV scores followed, the most acclaimed being for The Gold Diggers (1983), Potter's directorial debut, with Julie Christie in the lead role. The score reflected the meticulous Cooper's close study of silent-film accompaniment, early Russian film composition and the work of Hanns Eisler. Disliking what she called "wallpaper" music for films, Cooper made her score a form of counterpoint to the movie – to be listened to, rather than simply being illustrative or emotive.

Cooper and Potter then collaborated on the song-cycle Oh Moscow – written for the 1987 Zurich Jazz festival, with Potter's lyrics examining a divided Europe during the cold war, and Cooper's accomplished score splicing bebop, art-rock, gypsy music and the freely acknowledged influence of Westbrook.

She worked in Australia in 1990, with the Australian singer, writer and director Robyn Archer – notably on Sahara Dust, a jazz-influenced vocal piece on the Gulf war – and also performing as a solo instrumentalist. In 1991 she released her collections of contemporary dance pieces Schrödinger's Cat and An Angel on the Bridge, and the following year wrote her Concerto for Sopranino Saxophone and Strings for a European Women's Orchestra commission, and Songs for Bassoon and Orchestra for the Bologna Opera House Orchestra.

For San Francisco's Rova Saxophone Quartet, Cooper also composed the pieces Face in the Crowd and Can of Worms – elegant, tightly structured, culturally diverse works that one reviewer described as "Ellington meets Milhaud". She improvised over composer Charles Gray's synthesiser and computer-generated sounds for the album Pia Mater in 1997, and the following year saw the double-album A View from the Bridge, her final release.

As a creative multi-instrumentalist and composer, and a woman energetically active in contemporary music, Cooper became an inspiring figure to young composers and musicians, and her music's appeal also endures for visual artists, film-makers and choreographers. In 2007, her soprano concerto featured in the choreographer Jacky Lansley's View from the Shore at the Royal Opera House, and next month Cooper's work will be used to accompany an exhibition at the Athens Biennale, and in a London installation by the film-maker Sue Clayton.

A creative vision guided all of Cooper's work. As Potter put it: "Her life was threaded through with political commitment and idealism – but her work was never didactic. She believed in the transcendental power of pure sound."

Cooper is survived by her friends, who became her adopted family.

- Lindsay Cooper, bassoonist, saxophonist and composer, born 3 March 1951; died 18 September 2013



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