

MHL 603 – INTRO TO EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC

1. Definitions

Not everybody agrees that it's a useful category - Maybe just a name for a clique of composers around Cowell and Cage

HANDOUT definitions – Nicholls, Cage, Cameron

Can we distinguish “experimental” vs. “avant-garde”? – Nicholls: Avant-garde is “extreme position within the tradition”; Experimental “lies outside the tradition” – But what does “outside the tradition” have to do with “experiment”? – That's just deviant! (outsider)

Cameron's definition – Can we broaden this to include non-American composers?

Cage's definition – Does this amount to saying: “experimental” is music like I compose?

Can definition be expanded to encompass music where the composer couldn't foresee outcome at beginning of the process, even though he may have gained “control” over the sounds in the course of composition?

Nicholls and Cameron's definitions are based on external, social criteria (who are experimental composers and their audiences?); Cage's definition is based on internal, musical criteria (what is common to all experimental music?)

2. Brief historical overview

“Experimentalism” as a historical movement with a beginning, middle, end – But has it reached an end, or is it near an end? – Not nearly as obviously as 12-tone music

I will divide lectures according to themes:

overview

technology

improvisation

3. PLAY Charles Ives: 3 quarter-tone pieces (1925?) - #1 Largo

Composed in 1925 for pianist friend Robert Schmitz who ran the “Franco-American Musical Society” – Ives had been playing around with $\frac{1}{4}$ tones for years, and 2 of the pieces were based on earlier material – Ives claimed that his father had built microtonal instruments out of violin strings, musical glasses, etc.

Technique was to use 2 pianos tuned $\frac{1}{4}$ tone apart –

Ives wrote an essay trying to explain what he was up to – He explains quarter tones as upper partials of harmonic series and thus harmony (which begins with simplest ratios) can be extended to encompass them – Essay tries to work out a theory of stable and unstable chords with quarter tones

In what sense “experimental”?

Nicholls: “outside the tradition” – pretty much!

Cameron – This piece not “distinctively American,” but other pieces by Ives certainly are
Cage – Outcome not foreseen – or at least not at the beginning of the compositional process

3. Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997)

American but lived in Mexico

Almost all his compositions are for player piano

Interested in rhythmic possibilities beyond those conventionally notated and performed -- Had composed some rhythmically very complicated music before exile

Realized possibilities of player piano - Acquired top-of-the-line model and learned to cut his own rolls -- Laborious process of composition

Has composed something like 45-50 pieces all for player piano - Most or all can't be played by pianist because there are too many parts and rhythms are too difficult - Nevertheless N. transcribed many into conventional notation (Why did he bother? – to demonstrate his compositional process?)

"Discovered" by John Cage in 1960 - Very recent appreciation - Prophet of computer music similar to Varese as prophet of electronic music

Study #5 (1950s)

Investigates opportunities for virtuosity in experimental music – Difficult figures are added in layers on top of one another, so the end of the piece is spectacularly unplayable – But elements and layering process are very clear to the listener
Does the orchestrated version sound clearer to you? How does the

8. Luciano Berio – Sequenza V for trombone (1966)

Luciano Berio's Sequenza cycle are a series of pieces, each for a different solo instrument, and one for voice. He has composed 14 so far, beginning with Sequenza I for flute (1958). Sequenza V for trombone was composed in 1965 for the American trombonist Stuart Dempster. Sequenza V requires many "extended" techniques. The trombonist must sing and play at the same time, produce sounds while inhaling, and to rattle a mute against the bell of the instrument. The score specifies how the performer should act as well as what he should play. For example he should begin the piece by taking aim at the notes and "shooting" them with his trombone. All this clowning around has a purpose. Berio composed Sequenza V as a tribute to the famous German clown Grock (1880-1959), who had lived in the same town as Berio when the composer was a child. A good performance ought to be funny, but it should also be sad. Halfway through the first page, the performer turns to the audience and asks "WHY?"

You can read about Sequenza V and see some wonderful video clips of Grock in action at Abby Conant's website: <http://www.osborne-conant.org/Grock.htm>.

Example of "extended technique" on an instrument – No good definitions – Most say something like "outside technical norms for instrument"

What are some techniques in Sequenza V?

multiphonics

quick swells

use of mute for color, as percussion

Do "extended" techniques eventually get absorbed into "normal" techniques? – e.g. shifting on violin, vibrato, harmonics, thumb on keyboard – Do some techniques never get absorbed?

Notation

No legend so far as I know – how intuitive are these?

Ambiguous? How much leeway for performers to interpret?

Performance practice traditions

9. Henry Cowell (1897-1965)

First American to achieve notoriety as avant-gardist – Bohemian child prodigy – Training with Charles Seeger at UC Berkeley - Began composing expanded-technique piano works from 1912 - noted in particular for "clusters" played with fists and forearm -- toured as A-G piano virtuoso in 1920's delighting in scandals (see cartoon in W & T, p.484) -- book *New Musical Resources* (1919) - arguments for systematic redefinitions: e.g. exchanging consonance for dissonance, equation of pitch with rhythm, micro-intervals, etc.

Leading public figure of American Avant-garde, performed, wrote, lectured, organized - e.g. biography of Ives, "New Musical Quarterly" - Locked up on a morals charge in 50s (soliciting teenage boys) – Soured relationship with Ives – Pardoned by Governor of CA after public campaign - Did Cowell become "conservative" after release from jail?

Also interested in folk and popular materials, both American and international, and from early 30's on, these tend to take over in his music - i.e. in his compositions he more or less drops out of the A-G, especially after his incarceration

Advertisement (1917) – example of "tone clusters" – chords formed physically by the fists or forearms – PLAY – Why is this piece so easy to understand? Because gestures are similar to other virtuoso piano pieces -

The Banshee (1925) - A new and very influential Cowell technique: working inside the piano -- PLAY -- How does this challenge definitions? (changes definition of what you do when you "play the piano") – This piece is a bit of a "one-off" – Cowell composed other pieces inside the piano, but not stroking the strings like this – Perhaps it leads to prepared piano and to bowed piano