

MHL 603 – EXPERIMENT-3 – CHANCE AND IMPROVISATION

1. John Cage (1912-1992)

Began like Cowell and Nancarrow with expansion of instrumental techniques, timbres and possibilities

Percussion pieces in late 30's - e.g. Double Music with Lou Harrison - Backyard percussion ensemble made out of brake drums, etc.

Prepared piano – Example is The Perilous Night (1944) - HANDOUT preparation - materials include bolts, tacks, wires, spoons, rubber plugs etc - Turns piano into a very capable, but oddly limited, percussion instrument – Cage said he invented the technique when he was working as a dance-studio accompanist – C. wrote many PP pieces in 40's - In most cases each piece required individual preparation - Technique was C's trademark for about a decade

Structure of Perilous Night – 6 movements – all have same preparation but each works with a different collection of keys on the piano, thus a different collection of sounds – Much repetition of short motifs – Many passages involve hand movements and patterns that are easy and natural at the piano, but which come out sounding unexpected and unusual – Cage once compared his compositional process for a prepared piano piece (Sonatas and Interludes, 1948) to walking along the beach and picking up shells that he found interesting and beautiful

Prepared piano means that sound that comes out of the piano is hard to predict from score – It's a little like an “experimental action,” though Cage must have familiarized himself a lot with each set-up before he composed for it

Like Cowell, this changes what it means to “play the piano”

Does “Perilous Night” express anything? – Cage said it reflected his mood after his divorce and unproductive psychoanalysis (see note) – Note that this piece precedes Cage's study of Buddhism and his ideas of non-intention in music

2.. Cage's philosophy

John Cage (1912-1992)

It was Arnold Schoenberg who inspired Cage to become a composer, and Cage studied briefly with Schoenberg in LA – After giving up on 12-tone music, he composed for percussion ensemble, then prepared piano – Became involved in NY after WWII with abstract impressionist painters, and a group of avant-garde musicians – Also began to study Asian philosophy

C. attributed his ideas about chance and indeterminacy to his study of Zen Buddhism (with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki) – Zen notion of man's (or woman's) role in life as becoming aware of the world, fitting himself into the world, moving with the world instead of trying to shape and change the world

Applying this idea to music, Cage believes that the composer shouldn't try to shape, mold or determine what sounds will occur in music; composer should not impose his own taste on the listener; composer should only create a situation in which performers and listeners can find and experience music themselves

Corollaries of this reasoning:

1. Noises are as valuable and as useful as so-called musical tones – all sounds can potentially be music
2. Silence is crucial to music – Silence isn't the absence of sound but the the absence of intended sound – If we give up intention, then we hear silence – This was the meaning of 4' 33”
3. There is no firm line between "music" and "not music" -- "Everything is music" if we want it to be

3. Indeterminacy and chance music

Burkholder distinguishes between indeterminacy and chance – This is a distinction that wasn't made much at the time (Cage certainly didn't make it), but it's useful

Chance music – composer determines pitches, rhythms, timbres, etc by using chance operations (e.g. flipping a coin), But the composer notates entire piece in all aspects, and the performer plays what the composer has written – Also called aleatoric music

Indeterminacy – Composer notates only some aspects, leaves others up to decisions by performers

In both cases the composer only partially determines what the listener is going to hear – his influence is attenuated, highly mediated – But NB this is the case also the case in Bach (continuo realization) and Rossini (vocal coloratura)

Many Cage pieces are both “chance music” and “indeterminate” – He uses chance procedures to create a score that leaves many things indeterminate

Cage techniques for composing “chance” music:

I Ching - e.g. Music of Changes (1951),

Computer randomization - e.g. HPSCHD (1967-69)

Deriving notes from star map – e.g. Atlas Eclipticalis (1962)

Deriving notes from imperfections in music paper - Music for Piano (1952-56)

Cage techniques for indeterminacy

Indeterminate notation - Concert for Piano and Orchestra (1958)

Interchangeability of parts and segments, overlapping pieces – e.g. Music for X instruments,

Musical vacuum - e.g. "4 minutes, 33 seconds"

Cage's stated goal: "It is thus possible to make a musical composition the continuity of which is free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of the literature and "traditions" of the art." (Silence, p.59) – Is this a worthwhile goal? Does it lead to worthwhile musical compositions?

4. Concert for Piano and orchestra (1958)

Score consists of a “solo for piano” (HANDOUT) plus parts for 3 violins, 2 violas, vc, cb, fl, cl. bn. trpt.trb. tb – Also a conductor who moves his arms like a clock for the players – I’ve never seen the orchestra parts

How was piano part composed? – Part consists of 63 pages with fragments of music distributed around each page - Cage devised a system in which he would have to continually invent new methods of composition, notation and performance – The legend at the beginning is a list of what turned out to be 84 methods – The methods indicate musical parameters graphically, with many decisions left to the performer

As he went to write a fragment, Cage would consult the I Ching to decide whether that fragment would be a formerly used method, a new method or a variation on a former method – The particular configuration of “notes” in each fragment was determined by unspecified random methods – Thus it is “chance” music as well as “indeterminate” music

Instructions at beginning say performer may play everything or nothing and in any order– Most likely he will choose some of the material to play, i.e. some of the pages and a selection of material on the pages – The order of pages seems to be important, because many fragments continue from one page to the next

Example pp. 1-2

Some of these were notations that Cage had used before – Purpose was to create indeterminacy in many different ways simultaneously – probably also to create variety and perhaps also unity (by re-using methods)

Pritchett says the concert was written specifically for David Tudor, who had played many of these methods before and was very scrupulous about realizing the notation

Instrument parts are said to be less complex and less diverse

Cage composed many other works were written using these and similar methods – They can be played simultaneously with the concert if desired – also individual parts from the concert can be played as solos – Thus it forms part of a “family” of pieces

PLAY

5. Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988)

His music embodies many of the ideas in Rzewski’s essay – Rzewski and MEV knew Scelsi well, admired him, and promoted his music

Biography – murky, self-mythologized

Italian count, involved in avant-garde circles in 20s – studied and briefly advocated 12-tone music – also wrote poetry (in French)

Nervous breakdown after WWII – Renounced his previous works – discovered various sorts of mysticism – Says he worked toward new composing style in asylum
Believed that music was a way of discovering and communicating secret knowledge about the universe – Composer is only a conduit for these truths – Filmmakers tried to convey this in Casa Scelsi

Compositional process

Improvised at piano or ondiola – captured improvisations on tape recorder – Late at night -
Said to have been in trance-like state

Hired assistants to transcribe the improvisations – adapt to instruments or voices as he imagined the piece

Edited the transcriptions with performers (e.g. F-M Uitti, Michiko Harayama)

Published

Suite #9 for piano (“Ttai”) (1953)

Improvisation doesn’t move away from piano

No one seems to know what “Ttai” means, but it seems to have something to do with Eastern mysticism

Composed in 1953 (relatively early), premier by Rzewski in 1976

PLAY mvt 7 (#18)

Listen for signs of origins in improv

Does this “make us aware, if only vaguely, of the possibility of other universes right under our noses . . .”?

Vieru Tossata’s claims

Does participation of several people detract from composition? from composer?

Does it detract from myth? or enhance myth?

Performance issues – Sharon Kranach

Sharon is Scelsi’s editor at Salabert

Claims that transcribers “overnotated” – she’d like to go back and simplify many pieces, leave more leeway to performers

What is “original” of a Scelsi composition – the tape of the original improvisation? - the first transcript? – the edited transcript? – the first performance (with Scelsi’s coaching)?

JOHN CORIGLIANO: SYMPHONY NO. 1 **Mason Bates**

I. Introduction to Corigliano and the work

A. Corigliano’s evolution through the contemporary American music world

1. American symphonic tradition : its rebirth in 1991
2. development of unique, “architectural” approach to composition
 - a. clarity of form
 - b. eclecticism

B. The work as a major expansion of the American symphonic tradition

1. combination of aleatoric and controlled elements
2. weaving of various improvisational gestures into a cohesive orchestral tapestry
3. use of theatrical effects to make the work three-dimensional
4. free use of tonal, atonal, microtonal, and polytonal harmonies

C. Extramusical elements of the symphony

1. AIDS crisis and the media
2. formal problems of imposing a “program” on a symphony
3. instrumentation : huge forces used to expand palette (vs. ...)

II. Brief formal overview

A. Superimposition of A-B-A and sonata form ...

B. ... along with the integration of a disparity of materials

III. First theme group

A. Attack : A-G#, A-Eb

1. cue beats
2. economical use of one note
 - a. effective for musical and dramatic reasons
 - b. the percussive punctuation
 - c. "theme" stretched out as to be almost unrecognizable

B. Decay

1. repeated figure: like the opening A, the note gradually changes
2. free, "lonely" woodwinds, landing on adjacent notes to color the E
3. end of the page: low strings pulsate on cluster chords
4. m. 14-17: tonality emerges from a cluster : introducing material in the background (that will later emerge)

C. Attack

1. m. 20: the strings fixate on the E again, growing like a swarm of bees 2. low cluster repetitions pulsate underneath
3. m. 27: addition of "chattering" brass to texture : demented fanfares
4. m. 28: theme returns more compressed, and with alleatoric piccolos
5. mm. 32-34: the two chords that frame the brass explosions
 - a. introducing material in the background that will later move to the foreground)
 - b. choice of harmonies
6. pg. 10 – 11: separate accel.'s with brass fanfares juxtaposed on top
7. pg. 12-17: accel's of the two chords juxtaposed
 - a. how they are juxtaposed: two rates of accel.
 - b. what happens around this to make it more effective
 1. at first, the lonely winds...
 3. ...but most importantly: brass chords (polytonal)

IV. Second theme

- A. Wandering tonality
- B. Albeniz
 1. choice of the Albeniz : musical relations to themes
2. further development of alleatoric element : tempo
 3. an effective dramatic touch : Guardian quote
- C. Tonalization of theme
- D. Remembrance turns to rage
 1. p.26: first haunting of repeated notes (p.29: Albeniz rep.)
2. strings climb

V. Juxtaposition ("recap")

- A. p.30: juxtaposition of both themes and repeated chords underneath
- B. p.34: as if the accelerando repeated chords are an extension of the A's growing oscillations
- C. Accelerando / decelerando
 1. chattering brass, repetitions, held chords, multiple accelerandi
 2. p.41: machine comes to a halt
- D. Metamorphosis of themes
 1. horn lyricizes first theme
 2. second theme, via microtonal glissandi, becomes rage
 3. final return of the Albeniz (with emphasis on the repetitions in orch)
 4. resigned dying away on a high harmonic

VI. Conclusion

- A. Architectural approach to form
- B. Combination of alleatoric and controlled elements in the orchestra