

AMERICAN EXPERIMENTALISTS

"IF A MAN DOES NOT KEEP PACE WITH HIS COMPANIONS, PERHAPS IT IS BECAUSE HE HEARS A DIFFERENT DRUMMER. LET HIM STEP TO THE MUSIC WHICH HE HEARS, HOWEVER MEASURED OR FAR AWAY."

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *WALDEN*

EDGARD VARÈSE (1883-1965)

- Trained in mathematics and engineering
- 1915 expressed need for enriched musical alphabet and new instruments
- Personal Musical Goal: Liberation of Sound



VARÈSE: BEFORE WWII

- Desire to broaden timbral palette: encouraged invention of new instruments
- Pitch no longer most important element—rhythm, timbre, dynamics, texture equally important
- Experimented with percussion
- Relatively static pieces—no tonal / harmonic "pull"

HYPERPRISM (1922-23)

- Sound masses juxtaposed to give the sense of space—spatial distance and motion through sound
- Unusual battery of percussion instruments: siren, lion's roar, sleigh bells, Chinese blocks etc.
- Layers, blocks of sounds like Stravinsky
- Chromatic saturation like Schoenberg

INDETERMINACY

A MUSICAL RESPONSE TO SERIALISM?

HENRY COWELL (1897-1965)

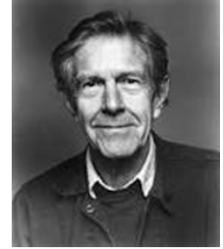
- Experimented with extended performance techniques (playing instrument in unconventional ways)
- Success and fame in Europe 1923-33: concert tours brought attention to new ways of playing piano
- *Aeolian Harp* (1923), *Banshee* (1925)

COWELL: *NEW MUSICAL RESOURCES* (1919, PUB. 1930)

- Pitch ratios could generate rhythmic ratios
- Pitch clusters
- Indeterminacy: elements of the piece determined *not* by the composer but by the performer

JOHN CAGE (1912-1992)

- Inspired by Cowell, studied with Schoenberg in California
- 1930s and 40s began studies of Zen Buddhism
- Accompanied and worked often with dancers and their studios esp. Merce Cunningham



FIRST CONSTRUCTION IN METAL (1939)

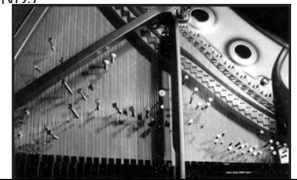
- For percussion sextet playing variety of traditional and non-traditional instruments including: 8 anvils, 4 brake drums, water gong, thunder sheets, etc.
- Fixed rhythmic structures: 16 sections each 16 measures; at every level may be subdivided 4-3-2-3-4

CAGE IN THE 1940S:

PROBLEM: ASKED TO COMPOSE FOR DANCE EVENT THAT WOULD BE HELD IN HALL TOO SMALL FOR HIS USUAL PERCUSSION ENSEMBLES

SOLUTION: INSERT OBJECTS INTO STRINGS OF PIANO TO CREATE PERCUSSIVE SOUNDS

RESULT: **PREPARED PIANO**



SONATAS AND INTERLUDES (1946-48)

- Concert work for prepared piano: 16 Sonatas and 4 Interludes
- Each piece explores limited number of timbres
- Like *First Construction in Metal*, uses proportions at the small and large scale to organize the work
- Despite highly detailed preparation and score, every performance is different

ARTISTIC BREAKTHROUGH: LATE 1940S

Visited the "anechoic" chamber at Harvard University: isolated from every possible sound in the hopes of experiencing "silence"

Discovered that there is no such thing as "silence"—silence is a mindset

4'33" is a response to this discovery (1952)

Why did he regard this as his most important work?

OUR INTENTION IS TO AFFIRM THIS LIFE, NOT TO BRING
ORDER OUT OF CHAOS OR TO SUGGEST
IMPROVEMENTS IN CREATION, BUT SIMPLY TO WAKE
UP TO THE VERY LIFE WE'RE LIVING, WHICH IS SO
EXCELLENT ONCE ONE GETS ONE'S MIND AND ONE'S
DESIRES OUT OF THE WAY AND LETS IT ACT OF ITS
OWN ACCORD

JOHN CAGE

Woodstock Artists Association

presents
john cage, composer
david tudor, pianist

PROGRAM

aug. 25, 1952 john cage
for piano christian wallf
extremities 25 merion foldman
3 pieces for piano carle brown
proust music pierre buchta
2 parts
5 intermissions merion foldman
for prepared piano ... christian wallf
4 pieces john cage
25"
3' 23"
2' 40"
the hammer henry cowell

PATRONS: Mrs. Ernest Edwards, chairman; Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Berkowitz,
Dr. and Mrs. Isaac Cohen, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Cavelli, Mr. and Mrs. Billie
Crumpton, Mr. and Mrs. Roland d'Almeida, Mr. and Mrs. Pierre Desroches, Dr.
and Mrs. William M. Ellis, Mrs. Charles Boney, Dr. and Mrs. David Bogg,
Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Brumber, Mr. and Mrs. John Strickel, Mr. and Mrs.
Richard Thibault, Jr., Capt. C. H. D. van der Lee, Mrs. Alice Woodwell.

MAVERICK CONCERT HALL

1952 Friday, August 29 8:15 P. M.
BENEFIT ARTISTS WELFARE FUND

- 1950-60s Cage aiming for greater aesthetic "objectivity": anti-romantic sentiment
- Chance procedures as a way of denying personal taste and will
- Influenced by Schoenberg: "Emancipation of the Dissonance" becomes "Emancipation of Sound"

ALEATORY MUSIC

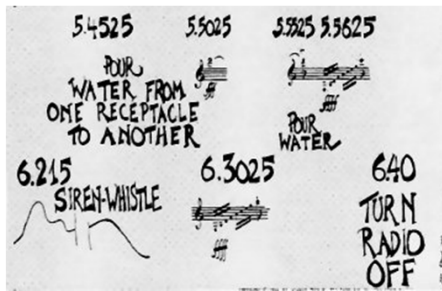
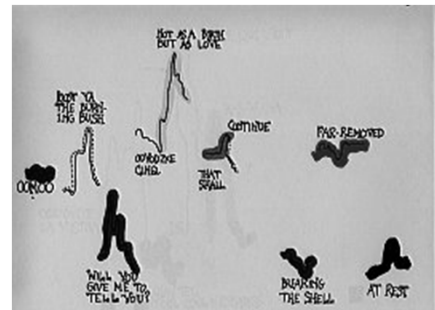
- *Aléa*: related to games of chance with dice
- Refers to music composed with elements of chance or indeterminacy at some level of the piece

MUSIC OF CHANGES (1951)

- 1950s CAGE INTERESTED IN ZEN BUDDHISM
- USES *I CHING* (TOSSEING COINS) TO GENERATE MUSICAL MATERIAL: COMPLEX MATRIXES MUCH LIKE SERIAL MUSIC
- HIGHLY SOPHISTICATED CHARTS AND PROPORTIONS ALL GENERATED FROM RANDOM COIN TOSSES
- INDETERMINACY ALSO AT THE LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE: PERFORMER DECIDES WHERE IN THE MEASURE TO PLAY NOTES

NEW NOTATION

- Cage's scores often works of visual art: high level of penmanship, colourful, full of gesture
- After 1950s less precise notation allows greater indeterminacy at level of performance

Cage, *Water Music* (1952)Cage, *Aria* (1958)

IN WHAT WAYS MAY A PIECE OF MUSIC BE "INDETERMINATE"?

- COMPOSITIONALLY:
 - randomly generate elements of music (length, form, pitch, duration etc.)
- AT POINT OF PERFORMANCE:
 - Indeterminate or graphic notation—shows general movement but not specific pitch/rhythm/attack
 - Specific notation but leave order up to performer . . .

POSTMODERNISM

- *Very* problematic term; but helpful in recognizing similarities and shared aesthetics among diverse composers
- Questions modernist assumptions:
 - Faith in progress
 - Absolute Truth
 - Emphasis on form and genre
- Sees the world as the product of multiple perspectives all of which have some truth
- Led to breakdown of "elite" and "popular" cultural boundaries

MODERNISM

- Values rational systems and form
- Closed works, set apart from history
- Hegemony at many levels
- Performer realizes what is on the page

POSTMODERNISM

- Intensifies rationality (electronic music) *also* counters it by embracing nature and communities
- Consciously part of history
- Deny hegemony: embrace pluralism
- Performer "collaborates"—interprets, makes decisions

POSTMODERNISM: SOME GENERALIZATIONS

Favours:

- Discontinuity over continuity
- Difference over similarity
- Indeterminacy over rational logic
- Accessibility over extreme intellectualism
- Discourse over absolutes