

John Cage and the New York School Revolution

August 29, 1952, was a landmark date in American music history, as important here as the premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps* was for Europe in 1913. On that date, at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York, pianist David Tudor sat at a piano in front of an audience for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without playing a single note or even making an intentional sound. During that period, as quietly as possible, he closed the keyboard lid and opened it again three times to indicate the beginnings and endings of three movements. This was the premiere of *4'33"* by the almost-forty-year-old John Cage (1912–1992), who would subsequently become the most influential and controversial, well-loved and widely ridiculed composer of the second half of the twentieth century. As a piece of music, *4'33"* did not consist of silence, nor of the audience's disgruntled reaction, as has sometimes been claimed; it consisted of whatever unintentional and ambient sounds the audience heard during the framed time period. It requested a new attitude toward listening, and toward the concept of music itself.

As a work in which the composer chose to exercise no control whatever (except for the arbitrary, chance-determined length of the four-and-a-half-minute time frame), *4'33"* represents the antithesis of the personality-centered, self-expressive, European concept of art. Cage often acknowledged the influence of Zen Buddhism on his work, and he is cited as an example of the influx of Eastern thought into American art. Yet, presumably no Asian composer had ever before made a musical work entirely of unintended sounds. In reality, *4'33"* was a supremely American gesture. Consider: the nineteenth-century painter, in order to begin a new art movement grown authentically from the American soil without European interference, had to block out the European capitals from his mind and trace the image of the American wilderness, gauge the contours of the American landscape, observe the color of the

American sky—had to take a hard, unbiased look at America itself. What did the composer need to do who wanted to create an American music?

Listen to what America actually sounded like.

If Ives was music's Emerson, dense with meanings drawn from older cultural references, Cage was its Thoreau, a naturalist of sounds who could afford to flout the conventions of human habit and society. For many musicians (though their number is rapidly shrinking), Cage was simply a charlatan, a charming joker who sold the world nonsense packaged as art. Given that Cage was in his fifties before his music began to earn him anything more than the most meager income and that his music was typically vilified in most serious music circles for an even longer time, those detractors are hard put to specify what such charlatanism was meant to achieve.

No matter what opinion one arrives at, however, Cage was one of music history's turning-point figures, like Monteverdi or Haydn or Stravinsky, after whom the course of music shot off at a new angle. He is the sole figure in twentieth-century music whose influence has also been widely felt in visual art, literature, and dance. He was an adored father figure to hundreds of young composers in America, Europe, Asia, and around the world. Controversial as he is, Cage has become the closest thing American music has to a saint, and it will be necessary to go through his life in considerable detail, if only because certain events in it have taken on a mythic status, with deep implications for music's subsequent direction.

Cage's Early Life

Born September 5, 1912, in Los Angeles, John Milton Cage Jr. was the son of an inventor, and all his life pointed to his father's vocation as a precedent for the audacious innovativeness of his own work. In youth Cage was torn between music, writing, art, and architecture. Studies at Pomona College did not inspire him, and he abandoned college to travel in Europe. Studying architecture in Paris, Cage heard his teacher say that in order to become an architect, one must devote one's entire life to it. Unable to make such a commitment, Cage returned to Los Angeles and began studying composition. When he sent a Sonata for Clarinet (1933) to Henry Cowell, the latter took an interest in his music, and advised him to study with Schoenberg, who was then teaching at UCLA.

First, however, to fill some gaps in his musical training, Cage went to New York to study for a year with Schoenberg's first American student, Adolph Weiss. In 1935 Cage returned to Los Angeles and asked Schoenberg to teach him, admitting that he had no money to pay him. Schoenberg asked Cage if he was willing to devote his life to music. Cage now answered an unequivocal "yes." Despite Schoenberg's autocratic



John Cage.

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John Cage. *Photo by Bob Cato.*

and ruthless classroom manner, Cage worshipped him, he later said, "like a god." Schoenberg complained that Cage had no feel for harmony and warned him that without such an affinity he would never be able to write good music; it would be as if he had come to a wall through which he could not pass. In a now-famous reply, Cage answered, "In that case I will devote my life to beating my head against that wall."

Also in 1935 Cage married Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff from Juneau, Alaska. The marriage lasted ten years, ending when Cage became homosexually involved with the innovative American choreographer Merce Cunningham (b. 1919), originally in the company of the famous Martha Graham. The Cage-Cunningham collaboration became one of the century's most dynamic artistic pairings.

Cage's earliest works, written before his studies with Schoenberg, are mathematical in nature, using methods analogous to twelve-tone construction. From reading Cowell's *New Musical Resources* and *Towards a New Music* by the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez, he had become interested in noise and new rhythms.

Starting with a 1935 quartet for unspecified instruments, Cage began to write purely rhythmic works for nonpitched percussion. On a trip to San Francisco in 1938, he was offered a job at the Cornish School in Seattle making music for the dance department, since for dancers, rhythmic structure was sufficient.

For Cage's early percussion works he developed a form in which each phrase had the same proportions as the whole, which he called "micro-macrocosmic" form. For example, his *First Construction (in Metal)* of 1939 was built up of phrases whose sixteen-measure units were divided $4 + 3 + 2 + 3 + 4$. Likewise, the entire work is divided into five sections: there are four such phrases in the first section, three in the second, two in the third, three in the fourth, and four in the fifth. Cage's use of rhythm to define structure had a tremendous impact on the course of American music, influencing many younger composers.

The rise of talking films and radio dramas had brought a wide range of electronic and nonelectronic sound effects into widespread use, and Cage was among the first composers to use them. In 1939, he used variable-speed turntables in his *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (perhaps the first-ever electroacoustic composition). *Credo in Us* (1942) asks for a recording of a symphony by Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, or some other romantic favorite, which is then interrupted collage-style by piano and percussion. In 1938 Cage organized a percussion orchestra at the Cornish School, in whose performances Lou Harrison was a frequent collaborator. Cage embodied his ideas on percussion music in a famous credo:

I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard. . . . Whereas, in the past, the point of disagreement has been between dissonance and consonance, it will be, in the immediate future, between noise and so-called musical sounds.¹

In March of 1940, the dancer Syvilla Fort asked Cage to create an accompaniment for her dance *Bacchanale*. The Cornish School's small stage wouldn't accommodate a percussion orchestra, and Cage had only a piano to work with. In desperation, he began placing newspapers, ashtrays, keys, and pie plates on the piano strings to alter the sound; he liked the results, but the objects bounced off. Finally it occurred to him that bolts and screws could be securely screwed between the strings without falling out, and he also placed weather-stripping between the strings. The "prepared piano," as it was subsequently called, places a virtual per-

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cussion orchestra in the hands of one player, and allows a variety of unpredictably tuned tones with the striking of a single key. In subsequent years he wrote his greatest early works for the invention: *The Perilous Night* (1943–1944), *Root of an Unfocus* (1944), *Three Dances for Two Amplified Prepared Pianos* (1944–1945), and especially the wide-ranging, Eastern-inspired, twenty-movement cycle *Sonatas and Interludes*.

After several months in Chicago, Cage moved to New York in 1942. A 1943 concert of his percussion music at the Museum of Modern Art was accompanied by a feature story in *Life* magazine, which noted, with an odd mixture of naïveté and philosophical insight, that

percussion music goes back to man's primitive days when untutored savages took aesthetic delight in hitting crude drums or hollow logs. Cage believes that when people today get to understand and like his music, which is produced by banging one object with another, they will find new beauty in everyday modern life, which is full of noises made by objects banging against one another.²

Though welcome, such exposure failed to lead to fame and career stability. Around 1945, concomitant to his breakup with Xenia, he endured something of a nervous breakdown and consulted a Jungian analyst. Put off by the analyst, he instead began studying Indian music and philosophy with a student who had come to him from India, Gita Sarabhai. This marked the beginning of his involvement with Asian ideas. Sarabhai told Cage that, in India, the considered purpose of music was "to quiet the mind and render it susceptible to divine influences." When Harrison showed Cage a similar statement from a seventeenth-century English musician, Cage felt he had reached some kind of musicophilosophical bedrock.

Listening Example: Sonatas and Interludes (1946–1948)

Restful yet primitive-sounding, noisy yet delicately classical as to form, *Sonatas and Interludes* is unlike anything else in Cage's output and is perhaps his most famous work aside from *4'33"*. With its sinuously ornamented melodies, the work is intended to express the nine emotions acknowledged by Indian aesthetics: the heroic, the erotic, the mirthful, the wondrous, fear, anger, sorrow, disgust, and tranquillity, toward which the others ultimately move. Cage never specified, however, which of the piece's twenty movements correspond to which emotions. All that seems clear is the move toward repetitive tranquillity.

The piano's strings are altered by screws inserted at given distances from the dampers, by bolts, nuts, pieces of rubber, and erasers, or some combination of these elements. As a result, some keys emit more than one tone; some thump with no definite pitch; adjacent tones have contrasting sounds (an interesting effect on trills); a chromatic scale played upward may bounce up and down erratically in register.

Most of the sixteen sonatas are in binary form, like the simple sonatas of the early eighteenth century (those of Domenico Scarlatti, for example): divided into two parts, with each part repeated verbatim. Sonatas IX through XI, though, expand this form with a nonrepeated section (resulting in a form such as ABBCC, AABBC, or AABCC instead of AABB). Cage often smooths melodies across the repeat sign so that the listener is usually unaware of the repetition. Each movement is composed according to Cage's micro-macrocosmic form and can be divided into rhythmic units whose structure is duplicated by the form of the movement as a whole.

Sonata II, one of the more rhythmically complex movements, is built in a unit of $7\frac{3}{4}$ measures of $\frac{4}{4}$ (31 beats), divided in proportions of $1\frac{1}{2}$, $1\frac{1}{2}$, $2\frac{3}{8}$, $2\frac{3}{8}$ (example 6.1). Looking at the score, one can find that the movement divides into 31-beat sections, these further divided mostly into phrases of either 6 or $9\frac{1}{2}$ quarter-note beats (6 having the same ratio to $9\frac{1}{2}$ as $1\frac{1}{2}$ does to $2\frac{3}{8}$). With half-beats accounted for by inserted measures of $\frac{3}{8}$, the phrases within each repeated half work out as follows (phrase-lengths given in quarter-note beats):

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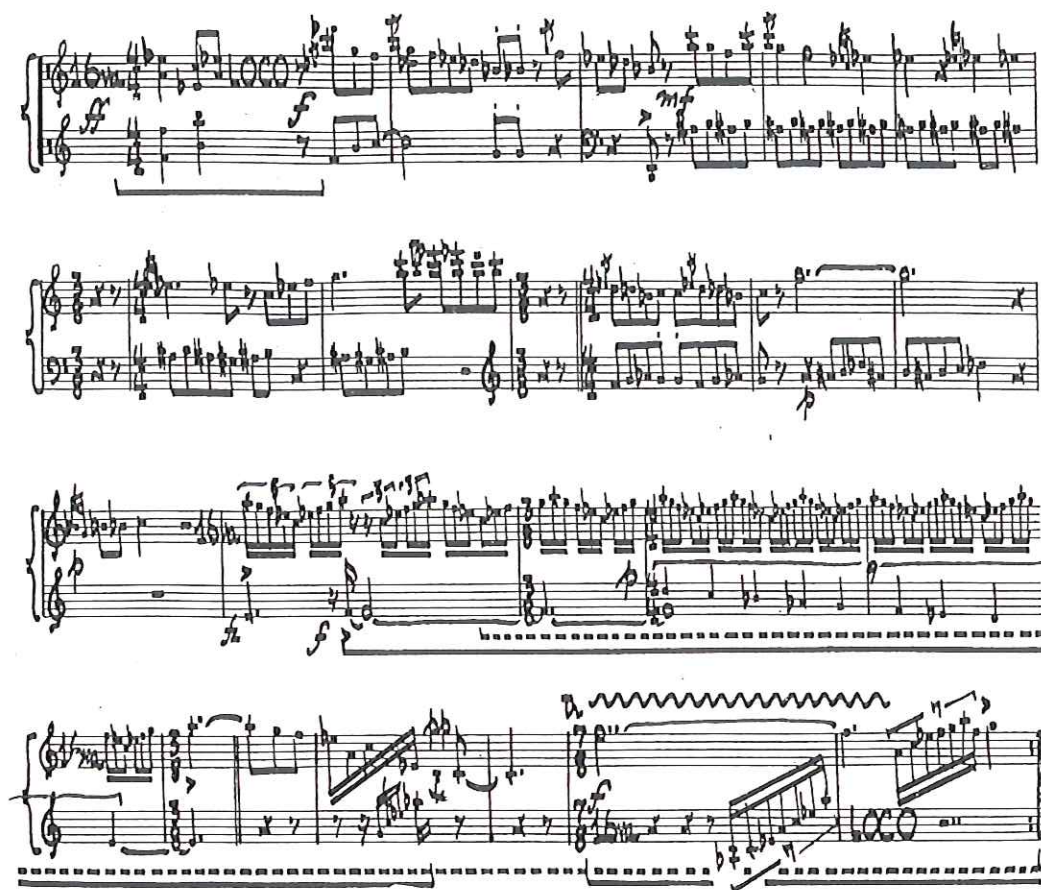
EXAMPLE 6.1 John Cage, *Sonatas and Interludes*, Sonata No. 2.

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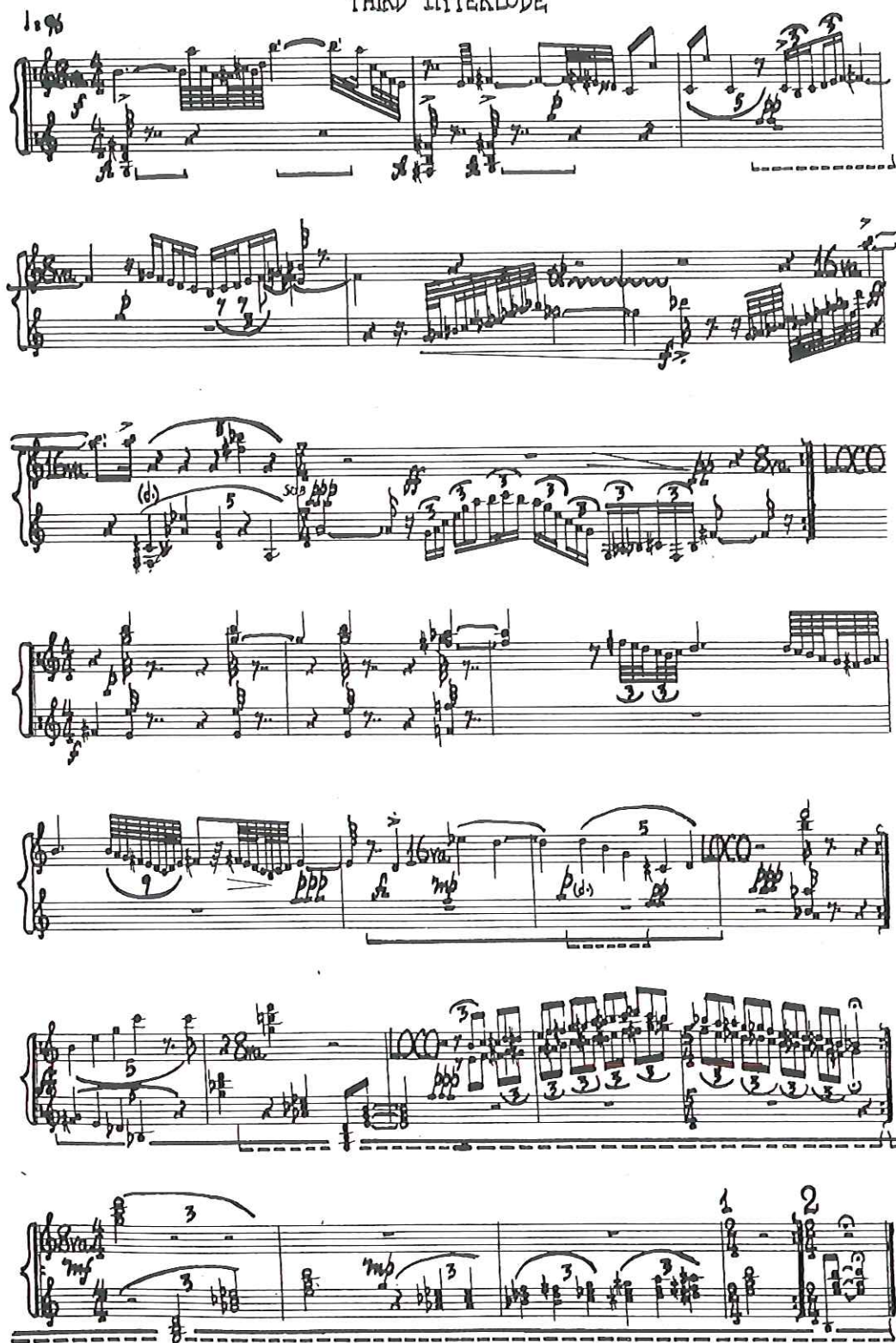


EXAMPLE 6.1 (continued)

The $21\frac{1}{2}$ -beat phrases of the second half are equal to $6 + 6 + 9\frac{1}{2}$. Therefore, the movement's basic 31-beat phrase structure— $6 + 6 + 9\frac{1}{2} + 9\frac{1}{2}$ —occurs one and a half times in the first half of the piece and two and three eighths times in the second half, the final $11\frac{1}{2}$ (23 8th-notes) approximating $\frac{3}{8}$ of the 31-beat unit. Cage sometimes draws contrast from use of the pitches that are not prepared; note for instance the low E and F in measures 28 through 31, marked *fz* and *f*.

The rhythmic proportions of the Third Interlude (example 6.2) are much simpler. The rhythmic proportions of the form are $1\frac{1}{4}$, $1\frac{1}{4}$, 1, 1, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{2}$. Multiplying each number by 28, we have 35 quarter-note beats for each of the repeated first sections, 28 for the second section, 21 for the third section, and 14 for the final section. The opening triad of measure 17 (G–B–flat–D) uses only unprepared notes, giving it a character much different from that of the other triads following it. The overall impression of *Sonatas and Interludes* is a wealth of lively, timbrally unpredictable percussion melodies within a free, tranquil aural space.

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EXAMPLE 6.2 John Cage, *Sonatas and Interludes*, Third Interlude.

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Cage's Late Aesthetic

Had Cage died in 1949 after writing *Sonatas and Interludes*, his music would form a picturesque backwater in the course of American music. Even those affronted by Cage's late writings admit some charm to his prepared-piano works, some of which anticipate the even-surfaced moods of minimalism and New Age music by several decades. Following the composition of *Sonatas and Interludes*, however, he underwent a radical transformation of style and artistic philosophy.

The change in Cage's compositional attitude took place between 1949 and 1952, the year of *4'33"*. His lovely *String Quartet in Four Parts* of 1949–1950 is still in micro-macrocosmic form. The subsequent *Concerto for Prepared Piano* (1951) is similarly meditative but transitional and heterogeneous, with a much wider palette. Conflicted about the role of expressive freedom in music, Cage contrasted the roles of piano and orchestra; the piano part is written in accordance with the usual rhythmic structure, but according to Cage's taste, while the orchestra part is written in a strict and impersonal technique. Sounds for the orchestra were arranged in charts patterned after magic squares. For the third movement, however, Cage filled in the spaces in the rhythmic structure with a new technique: chance procedures.

One day, Cage's precocious seventeen-year-old composition student, Christian Wolff, brought him a new edition of the ancient Chinese book of oracles, the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. The *I Ching* is a book of indeterminable antiquity, one of the foundations of Chinese philosophy. One consults the oracle by throwing sticks—or one can toss six groups of three coins each, the more common method today—to obtain six binary results, together called a hexagram. Because 2 to the 6th power is 64, there are 64 possible hexagrams, each with its own divinatory explanation.

The intended use of the *I Ching* oracle is to be consulted to direct one's actions. The underlying philosophy is that each moment of the universe is a unity, and so the number that comes up on the *I Ching* cannot help but be the appropriate number to that moment of one's life. Cage, though, used the *I Ching* more as a random-number generator to make decisions for pitches, durations, dynamics, and so on in his music. In the third movement of the *Prepared Piano Concerto*, he made charts of sounds for both piano and orchestra and used the *I Ching* numbers to help select which sound aggregates went where.

Music of Changes (1951) is Cage's first work in which the *I Ching*'s influence is pervasive. He first made up charts with composed pitch or harmonic images in one chart, rhythms in another, dynamics in a third. Then he tossed coins to determine where in his rhythmic structure each sonority or figure would occur and what rhythm or dynamics it would

have. *Music of Changes* is one of the most complex, fragmented, and fiercely difficult keyboard works of the entire modern era. Yet it offers rare moments of lucidity, because some of Cage's intuitively written pitch images recur over and over, modified by tempo and dynamic gesture.

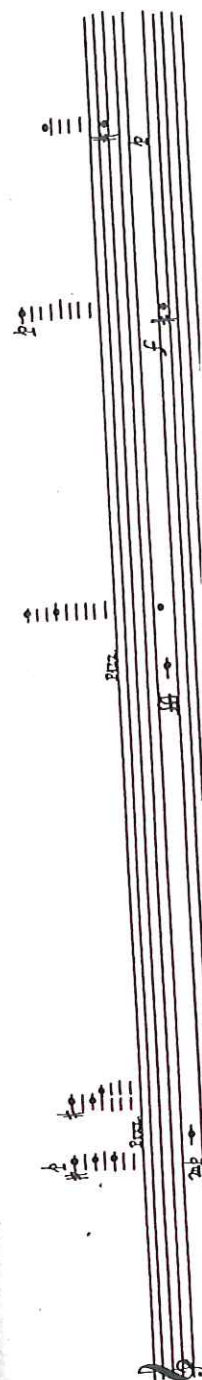
Writing his music according to chance was the hardest fact for Cage's detractors to swallow. It flies in the face of the European conception of art, wherein the supreme mark of the artist is his ability to make artistically meaningful choices. And yet, the philosophy of the *I Ching* is founded on an absolute faith in the rightness of the moment. The very concept of chance can be seen as the negative result of a Western scientific view. In Eastern thought, on the other hand, as in the thought of Carl Jung, there are no accidents and chance does not exist.

In addition, there is no such thing as leaving *everything* to chance. Were Cage's compositions entirely the result of chance, it would be impossible or meaningless to tell them apart, and yet his chance compositions—*Études Australes*, *Atlas Eclipticalis*, *Hymnkus*, *Europeras*—are easily distinguished by texture, instrumentation, range, behavior. The intuitive aspect of a late Cage work is how he set up the parameters within which chance operates. When Cage has been dissatisfied with global results of his chance processes, he has revised them, as he did in the case of his *Hymns and Variations* (1979).

Chance was not an endpoint for Cage's aesthetic, however. Partly spurred on by the music of his protégés Morton Feldman and Earle Brown (of whom more below), he moved in the late fifties toward an even more radical concept he called indeterminacy. In a chance work some randomness goes into the composition of the work; in an indeterminate work, the notation itself is ambiguous, so that different performances could arrive at quite different sonic manifestations. Cage's first major structurally indeterminate work was his Concert for Piano and Orchestra of 1957–1958. In composing this piece, he used the *I Ching* not only to make note choices but to tell him when to develop a new *method* of notation. The result is a Pandora's box of eighty-four different types of notation among the fragments of music scattered across the sixty-three pages of the solo part (example 6.3).

Many people are frustrated by the attempt to listen to a late Cage work, by the absence of linearity or any meaningful continuity, the inability to predict anything. Yet his chance music is not difficult to listen to in the same sense as Babbitt's or Carter's musics, because it does not ask you to listen for deeply buried or complicated musical structures. In fact, it is difficult because it negates musical structures, refusing to lead the ear any place in particular.

In 1960 Cage published *Silence*, a book of essays and experimental writings interspersed with non-sequitur stories; it became the most influential book written by a musician in the late twentieth century. While



The image displays a complex musical score for John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. The score is written on multiple staves, with a large, stylized 'K' and 'A' section prominently featured. The notation includes various musical symbols, such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings, along with a large, abstract graphic element resembling a stylized 'K' or 'A'.

EXAMPLE 6.3 John Cage, *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*.

Cage's statements—humorously paradoxical, surprising in their counterintuitive common sense, gentle even when deliberately provocative—justify his composing means and prepare one to listen sympathetically, they also lead to a whole new set of interpretive problems. Refreshing as Cage's viewpoint is, his writings do not make up a consistent or interlocking system of thought, nor does he avoid self-contradiction. As a result, the artists inspired by Cage have plenty to argue about, and all can support their views by quoting him.

One aspect of Cage's thought that many people have trouble with is that he came to regard value judgments—distinctions between good and bad—as unnecessary and even harmful. His response to something he didn't like was to use it in his work and see if he could come to like it. He hated the sound of the radio, so he wrote his *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for twelve radios to try to learn to appreciate the sound. And yet, even Cage's own words cannot be taken too literally. Although he eschewed judgments of relative value, that does not mean that he had no preferences or couldn't recognize a good piece of music when he heard one. As he once explained, "I am actually an elitist. I always have been. I didn't study music with just anybody; I studied with Schoenberg. I didn't study Zen with just anybody; I studied with Suzuki. I've always gone, insofar as I could, to the president of the company."³ Many composers have used Cage's ideas as an excuse to make bad art, but as Cage reminded an interviewer, "Just because my name comes up doesn't make a failure a success."⁴

Cage felt that art was a victim—as indeed we are all victims—of a business-oriented, commodity-driven society in which something has value only insofar as we can trade it for something else: for example, a great piece of music for fame. A corollary to this is that our rationalism has gone so far in allowing us to understand art in an intellectual sense that we have ceased to derive from art the mystery or direct, sensuous experience which is its prime function. Therefore, Cage often claimed, whenever he understood something, he tried to go beyond it to something that he didn't understand.

Therefore he created situations that frustrated our habitual tendency to "get" something from art. In his lecture-concert *Indeterminacy*, he told one story each minute while pianist-electronic artist David Tudor made electronic noises; occasionally the noises drowned out part of the stories, which Cage considered acceptable. The stories, deadpan and sometimes humorous, often illustrate Cage's worldview:

I went to a concert upstairs in Town Hall. The composer whose works were being performed had provided program notes. One of these notes was to the effect that there is too much pain in the world. After the concert I was walking along with the composer and he was

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telling me how the performances had not been quite up to snuff. So I said, "Well, I enjoyed the music, but I didn't agree with that program note about there being too much pain in the world." He said, "What? Don't you think there's enough?" I said, "I think there's just the right amount."⁵

Invited in the early fifties to visit an anechoic chamber at Harvard—that is, a room in which virtually all sound is absorbed so that one could experience complete silence—he heard two sounds anyway, and asked the engineer what they were. "The high one," the engineer replied, "is your nervous system in operation; the low one is your blood in circulation." Cage was elated at finding that silence doesn't really exist. "We need not fear," he wrote, "about the future of music."

Cage's insight about silence resulted in *4'33"*. Cage had mused about writing a work devoid of intended sounds several years earlier and finally made such a move when he saw the totally white canvases of his friend, the painter Robert Rauschenberg. In his lectures as well as his music Cage began incorporating silence, represented on the printed page as empty spaces:

	I have nothing to say	
and I am saying it		and that is
poetry	as I need it . . .	
	Our poetry now	
is the realization	that we possess	nothing
	Anything	therefore
(since we do not possess it)	and thus	is a delight
		need not fear its loss. . . ⁶

There is no denying the stunning creativity of Cage's best late music. His *Hymnkus* (1986) is his answer to minimalism, a quietly rustling continuum of pitches all within a small register. *Variations IV* (1963) is the grandfather of electronic record collages, widely imitated since. *Songbooks* (1970) is a vastly entertaining free-for-all of imaginatively varied theatrical actions. *Four* (1989) is a string quartet of delicately transparent textures, as natural as the wind over Walden Pond. Commissioned by the Frankfurt Opera to write "an opera to end all operas," he responded with *Européras I & 2* (1985–1987). In this work, the singers all sing chance-selected fragments of arias from the operatic repertoire. Several minutes into the work, one singer after another begins to rise and fly across the stage, suspended from invisible wires. A giant wheel rolls across stage with a performer inside. At two points, the orchestra pit rises and lowers again, giving the audience a brief look at the perplexed orchestra. And later, a radio-controlled, helium-filled blimp floats off the stage and around the balcony,

In 1987 Cage's music entered a new phase, that of his so-called "number" pieces, or "time bracket" pieces. These include dozens of quiet, muted compositions in which the instruments play single notes or chords at any point within notated time brackets; for example, the player, watching a stopwatch, can begin a note any time between 3'00" and 3'45" into the piece, and end it any time between 3'33" and 4'15". These pieces, titled by the number of instruments plus an exponent indicating how many works Cage had written so far for that number—such as *Four*⁴, *Seven*², or simply *103*—have something of the sustained quality of Morton Feldman's music; the first such piece, *Two* for flute and piano, appeared in 1987, the year Feldman died.

Perhaps Cage's greatest significance was that, by example, he demonstrated to thousands of young composers that they did not have to take European techniques as their starting point, that they could rely on their own individuality rather than try to tie into a tradition whose centers were on a distant continent. Paradoxically, despite Cage's rejection of self-expression in his music, he opened up a new, freer attitude toward self-expression for composers who came after him. A cheerful lecturer who could deflect anger and incomprehension with humor and calm, Cage became a father figure to younger generations.

Morton Feldman

During the 1950s, Cage was associated with three composers and a pianist who shared his view of music: Morton Feldman (1926–1987), Earle Brown (b. 1926), Christian Wolff (b. 1934), and pianist David Tudor (b. 1926). Feldman relates that for five years in the 1950s he and Cage and sometimes the others met every night at six o'clock at New York's famed Cedar Bar, the same bar where the Abstract Expressionist painters hung out, including Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, and Willem de Kooning. In recent years it has become customary to refer to Cage, Feldman, Brown, and Wolff as "the New York School."

Although Feldman started out as simply one of Cage's "school," his own independent reputation began a rapid rise during the 1970s, until by century's end he has become probably the single most widely imitated composer of the 1990s. Feldman's music sidesteps many of the dichotomies that have bedeviled modernist aesthetics. His music projects an instantly recognizable image, and yet he wrote freely and intuitively with a deep appreciation for sound. His compositions are nearly all pointillistic, with single notes and small flourishes applied with painterly feeling for detail, and—most recognizably of all—usually played "as soft as possible." He repeats melodic figures and chords over and over, but with a rhythmic freedom that prevents the repetition from becoming obvious. In his later years, Feldman became impatient with the standard



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Morton Feldman. *Courtesy New York Public Library.*

twenty-minute length of most modern works, and wrote pieces stretching out to seventy-five minutes, two hours, four, even six hours.

Born in 1926, in Queens, New York, Feldman studied with Wallingford Riegger and Stefan Wolpe. In the winter of 1949–1950 he attended a performance of the Webern Symphony at Carnegie Hall at which the audience responded antagonistically. Recognizing Cage, he introduced himself, and the two became close friends. Soon afterward, Feldman brought Cage a string quartet he had written, and Cage asked,

"How did you make this?" Feldman, accustomed to having to defend and justify his musical structures, replied weakly, "I don't know how I made it." Unlike his other teachers, who still thought in European structural terms, Cage was delighted.

After an early piano piece of Wolpe-esque angularity and dissonance—*Illusions* of 1950—Feldman turned immediately to the quiet, delicately introverted, almost mournful aesthetic he would cultivate the rest of his life. Impatient with the music world's Schoenberg-Stravinsky polarity, which revolved around petty arguments of consonance versus dissonance, he began leaving pitches unspecified, notating sounds as points on graph paper in a series called *Projections* (1950–1953). Typically, these pieces divide the pitch range into general areas of high, medium, and low, leaving the specific notes to the performer. From the beginning, dynamics were kept soft.

Feldman was not satisfied with trusting the performer's taste, however, and his next strategy, in works such as *Last Pieces* for piano (1959), was to notate pitches as note-heads without stems, allowing the performer freedom in the timing of each chord. Especially in works for piano, mallet percussion, and pizzicato strings, this slow-paced rhythmic freedom led to highly original textures that focused on the decay of each note. In his *Piece for Four Pianos* (1957), four pianists read from the same music, each at his or her own rate; the enchanting result is a slow, irregular canon at the unison, in which every note played on the fastest piano is eventually echoed by the other three. (The piece has often been cited as a precursor of minimalist process music.) Such an interest in performance process led to what Feldman called his "race-course" notation, in which each instrumentalist would proceed through his part at his own rate, with no attempt at synchronicity.

To call Feldman a minimalist, as some have, is misleading, for his intuitive attention to each sound is a far cry from minimalism's motor-driven, mass-produced repetitions (described in chapter 8). But it is true that Feldman anticipated many of minimalism's concerns with process, stasis, and repetition. As early as his *Structures* for string quartet (1951) he repeated chords and two-note figures over and over again, often limiting himself to a handful of pitches for long passages. In the sixties the minimalists would turn to similar repetitions, but never with Feldman's delicate feel for balance and timing.

Until his mid-forties, Feldman made a living working in his uncle's dry-cleaning plant each morning; he then composed in the afternoon and hung out at the Cedar Bar at night. In 1972, though, he was appointed to the faculty of the State University of New York at Buffalo. Here, his style expanded in length and depth. In 1969 he had returned to conventional notation, with an orchestral work titled *On Time and the Instrumental Factor*. In a series of pieces called *The Viola in My Life* (1970–1971), and then further in *Rothko Chapel* (1972), he began writing

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chamber orchestra works in which the continuity consisted of recurring sonic images: a bittersweet chord, a viola arpeggio, a vibraphone ostinato, a descending minor seventh in the pizzicato bass. His pieces became longer; his First String Quartet of 1979 was 100 minutes long. During the seventies he hounded the great playwright Samuel Beckett for a libretto so he could write an opera. Finally Beckett gave him a sentence scrawled on a piece of paper. It was enough for Feldman's seventy-minute opera, *Neither* (1977).

Feldman had perhaps the late twentieth century's most impressive ear for tone color. Once, discussing his method of composition at June in Buffalo, he described how he would choose the instruments he wanted to work with. Then he paused. "But Morty," Earle Brown said, "just because you've chosen the instruments doesn't mean the piece is finished." Feldman replied quietly, "For me it is."

As a writer and thinker, Feldman was as impressive and stylish as Cage, and even less systematic. His thoughts about music and painting are almost unparaphraseable.

Of course the history of music has always been involved in controls, rarely with any new sensitivity to sound. Whatever breakthroughs have occurred took place only when new systems were devised. The systems extended music's vocabulary, but in essence they were nothing more than complex ways of saying the same things. Music is still based on just a few technical models. As soon as you leave them you are in an area of music not recognizable as such.⁷

He composed at the piano, saying, "Those 88 keys are my Walden." He resented the fact that in America, innovative composers not influenced by Europe are not taken seriously in professional circles.

[T]he real tradition of twentieth-century America, a tradition evolving from the empiricism of Ives, Varese, and Cage, has been passed over as "iconoclastic"—another word for unprofessional. In music, when you do something new, something original, you're an amateur. Your imitators—these are the professionals.⁸

All his life [Ives] was branded an amateur. An amateur is someone who doesn't stuff his ideas down your throat.⁹

Feldman was adamant that music was about sound, not about ideas. "Unfortunately for most people who pursue art," he said, "ideas become their opium."¹⁰

Feldman died in 1987 of pancreatic cancer, soon after completing what was perhaps his masterpiece: a forty-five-minute surface of dark, glistening chords dotted with single notes on harp, piano, and vibraphone, titled *For Samuel Beckett*. More than twenty compact discs of his

music appeared in the next few years. And in 1996 Lincoln Center in New York mounted a three-day retrospective of Feldman's music. It was overdue but welcome recognition of the great musical poet of our age.

Listening Example: Why Patterns?

Feldman wrote *Why Patterns?* in 1978, one of three works for flute (doubling with alto flute and/or piccolo), piano (doubling with celesta), and percussion (mostly glockenspiel). The notation of the opening page of *Why Patterns?* (example 6.4) exhibits devices characteristic of both Feldman's early and late attitudes toward notation. No attempt is made visually to synchronize the three parts. If all three performers play at the notated tempo, the percussionist will reach the end of the page first, the pianist last. The rhythms seem arbitrarily complex in places. In a 5/4 measure, for example, the pianist faces a dotted-half rest and a dotted-half-note chord with a "6" bracket over them, each representing half a measure. Within its constantly changing meters, the flutist begins every note just before a bar line, with never a downbeat. Feldman was fascinated by the ability of notation to influence the psychology of performance; the flutist will likely play every note here unaccented, with a slight crescendo onto the next beat. As he once wrote, "The degree to which a music's notation is responsible for much of the composition itself is one of history's best-kept secrets."¹¹

The repetition of sonic images is the basis of Feldman's late music. Each instrument plays with a certain kind of chord, a certain trill figure, an alternation between two notes or chords, but then each instrument will suddenly, without reason, switch to a different kind of figure. One thing that persists throughout Feldman's music, he wrote, is that "I did not develop my ideas, but went from one thing to another. 'Negation' was how Wolpe characterized this."¹²

Feldman adds a coda in which the three players synchronize their final notes all in dotted quarter-notes. The flute rocks slowly back and forth between a high E and F, the piano between a low E-flat and D, and between them the glockenspiel slowly descends a chromatic scale. The

EXAMPLE 6.4 Morton Feldman, *Why Patterns?*, opening measures.

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gently synchronized effect, coming as it does after a half-hour of independent gestures, sums up the chromatically sliding harmonies that characterize the entire piece. Once when German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen pressed Feldman to tell him what his "secret" was, Feldman replied: "I don't push the sounds around."¹³ These pensive tones do not sound pushed around.

Earle Brown

In 1951, Cage and Cunningham toured America, stopping in Denver to give performances and master classes. There Cunningham was impressed by a terrific dance student named Carolyn Brown, whose husband, it turned out, was a composer. Earle Brown (b. 1926) was born in Massachusetts and took an engineering degree at Northeastern University, though he also played jazz trumpet. By 1951, he had become interested in composing, and studied the Schillinger system.

Brown was intently involved in studying contemporary art—the mobiles of Alexander Calder, the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock—in search of analogous methods for music when Cage stepped into his life and changed it. Soon afterward, Brown and Carolyn moved to New York and began working with Cage and Tudor on their electronic music projects. In 1952, Brown gave up the extremely complex, serial style of his piano piece *Perspectives* (1952) in favor of groundbreaking graphic scores, some of which did not even use notes. These scores were collectively called *Folio*, each member of which represented a new step in a search for a freeing notation.

November 1952, subtitled "Synergy" (example 6.5), consisted of fifty parallel lines on which notes were placed, without bar lines but with accidentals and specific durations; the players are expected to supply whatever clefs they wish to interpret the ambiguous notation. *December 1952* goes even further, dropping staff lines and notes both in favor of vertical and horizontal lines and rectangles reminiscent of a painting by Mondrian. The next step was open form, pioneered in a piano work entitled *Twenty-five Pages* (1953) and consisting of that many sheets of clefless, barline-less music that could be played in any order, either right-side-up or upside-down.

Open form is the attribute with which Brown has been most identified. The technique reached its mature state in his first open-form works for orchestra, *Available Forms I* (1961) and *Available Forms II* (1962). A great concern in the early fifties was to catch music up with the exciting developments going on in visual art. Brown was particularly interested in creating a mobile musical form analogous to the large steel mobiles of Alexander Calder: a form in which the content was predetermined but in which the (temporal) relationships between the different



Earle Brown (Nov. 52)

Synergy (from Folio)

To be performed in any direction from any point in the defined space.
 Tempo - as fast as possible to as slow as possible - inclusion.
 Lines and space may be thought of as tracks moving in either direction and at any speeds - clef & signs may be thought of as flexing in the field. This indicates the theoretical possibility of all the attitudes occurring at the same instant, or any other expression of simultaneity. For me in music, or instruments. (Nov. 1952)

EXAMPLE 6.5 Earle Brown, November 1952 ("Synergy").

same instant, or any other expression of simultaneity. For me in more pieces, or instruments. (Nov. 1952)

EXAMPLE 6.5 Earle Brown, November 1952 ("Synergy").

The musical score for "Synergy" by Earle Brown, November 1952, is a minimalist work for a multi-instrument ensemble. The score is written for six staves, each representing a different instrument or section:

- HARP:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains various musical notations, including a large "B4" and instructions like "L.V. // etc. (uneven)" and "L.V. // etc. quasi glass".
- CELESTE:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "L.V. // etc. (uneven)" and "L.V. // etc. quasi glass".
- PIANO:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "L.V. // etc. (uneven)" and "L.V. // etc. quasi glass".
- VIBRAPHONE:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "L.V. // etc. (uneven)" and "L.V. // etc. quasi glass".
- XYLOPHONE:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "L.V. // etc. (uneven)" and "L.V. // etc. quasi glass".
- VLN 1:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "NAT. to TASTO to PONT. to TRATTO PONT." and "NAT. to PONT.".
- VLN 2:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "NAT. to TASTO to PONT. to TRATTO PONT." and "NAT. to PONT.".
- VLN 3:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "NAT. to TASTO to PONT. to TRATTO PONT." and "NAT. to PONT.".
- VLN 4:** The staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains instructions like "NAT. to TASTO to PONT. to TRATTO PONT." and "NAT. to PONT.".

The score is characterized by its minimalist notation, with many instructions and musical symbols that are not standard in traditional musical notation. The instructions often refer to specific techniques or effects, such as "L.V. // etc. (uneven)" and "L.V. // etc. quasi glass". The overall style is highly experimental and reflects the New York School's approach to music.

EXAMPLE 6.6 Earle Brown, Available Forms II.

parts would be different at each performance, and even within one performance. His solution was to write different passages of music (often using graphic notation, rhythmless noteheads, or even squiggles) in large rectangles, with a number by each one. *Available Forms II* (part of a page is given in example 6.6) contains thirty-eight such musical units to be cued by two conductors, whose sound-sculptures overlap in ways unpredictable prior to the performance. The role of the conductor, then, becomes crucial in shaping the raw materials and prechosen colors into an emotionally meaningful shape.

From 1953 on, the basic strategies of Brown's music change little. Unlike the other three figures of the New York School, he never underwent a style change in his mature years. His music remains more dependent on intelligent performer interpretation, and thus comes closer to improvisation, than the music of his colleagues—not a surprising fact, given his jazz experience. If his reputation has not kept pace with those of the other composers here, it may be largely because his music's brilliance is so tied to his own performing skills. He is a superb conductor and shaper of his own works, with an eloquent language of hand gestures and an elegant way of sculpting sound on the spur of the moment into tactile forms. While his performances can be exciting, his pieces do not take on as well-defined a personality as do those of Cage or Feldman.

In 1995 Brown wrote a piano piece, *Summer Suite '95*, by improvisatorily realizing a predetermined scheme of ranges and densities at a computer-connected piano, allowing notation software to notate the results. This partially solved the problem of transferring his own performing sensibility to another musician.

Christian Wolff

The youngest member of the New York School by eight years (b. 1934), Christian Wolff was the one who brought Cage his first copy of the *I Ching*. Cage later said of the precocious teenager, "He was quite remarkable, and I believe I learned more from him than he did from me."¹⁴ Born in Nice, France, to American parents, Wolff moved to the U.S.A. in 1941 and studied classics at Harvard. Aside from a few informal lessons with Cage, he remained self-taught in music. He taught at Harvard for eight years and then at Dartmouth from 1971 on, where he teaches not only music but also classics and comparative literature. His specialty in classics is Greek tragedy, and he has published papers on the plays of Euripides.

Wolff's earliest music, influenced by Webern, was pointillistic but static in the extreme, stripped down to a few pitches in a way that would have later been called minimalist. His *Trio for Flute, Trumpet, and Cello* of 1951 uses only three pitches, E, B, and F sharp, two perfect fifths

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apart; no two measures are alike, and the music runs through what seems like all possible permutations of rhythm, timbre, and pitch combinations. Between 1957 and 1964, he changed to an unconventionally notated style of music based on performers cueing each other according to sometimes elaborate rules. The score for *Duet I* for pianos (1957) contains a few indications for allowable pitches and then a series of hollow and filled dots connected by lines, occasionally accompanied by numbers and dynamic markings (example 6.7). Two dots connected by a vertical line, for example, direct the pianists to

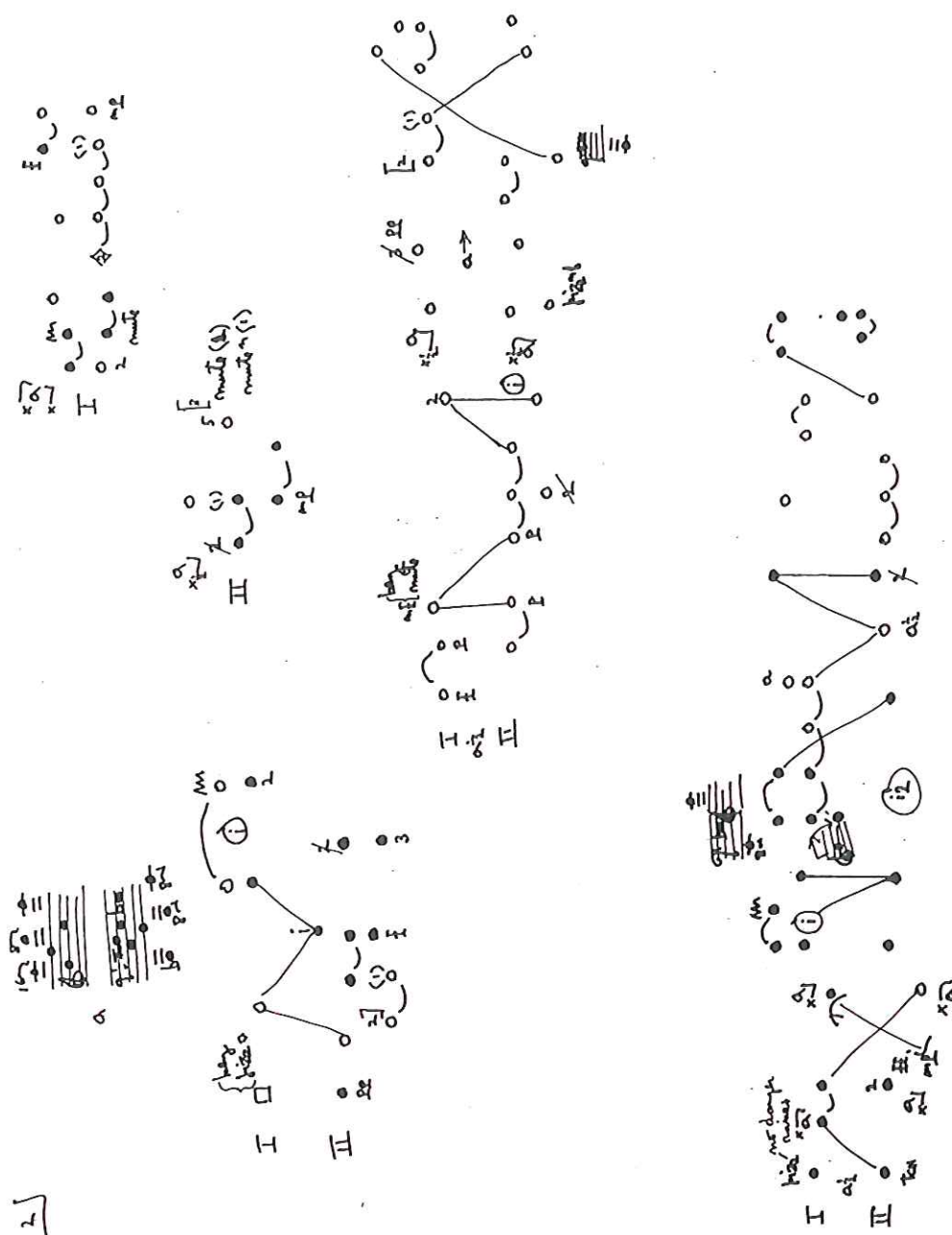
Coordinate as closely as possible both attack and release without however any intentional signals. I.e. somebody has to make the first move and somebody the last and the other react as quickly as possible. Needless to say, the one who attacked first need not be the initiator of the release.

If one of the dots is preceded by another dot with a tie (slur mark), then the appropriate pianist begins a sound and holds it until the other enters; and so on. This aspect of Wolff's music, which makes the performance into a kind of game among the players, became influential in improvisatory music of the 1980s, with younger performers such as John Zorn and Nic Collins crediting Wolff for ideas they had borrowed from him.

Just as Cage found his music turning into theater, Wolff became more interested, after 1971, in the political significance of the performer situations he was setting up than in the sounds produced. A democratic socialist, he became involved with a transcontinental group of composers whose music was motivated by political concerns: among them, Frederic Rzewski (for whom see chapter 9), John Tilbury of the British AMM trio, Frank Abbinanti of Chicago (b. 1951), and Cornelius Cardew, the founder of the British Marxist-Leninist Party. Wolff began writing works less as experiences for the audiences than as models for social interaction. One of the most ambitious of these works is *Changing the System* (1972–1973), in which the performers must collaborate on group decisions about when and what to play. One premise of Wolff's middle-period music, like that of many of the political composers, is that it is performable by nonmusicians as well as by professionals. This often means that the instruments are not specified and that conventional instruments may not even be involved.

With *Accompaniments* (1972), Wolff turned to text as a way of making his political commitment more concrete. Playing a note or chord on the piano simultaneously with each syllable, and also hitting percussion as well, the pianist is to read a text written by a midwife during the Chinese cultural revolution:

Formerly many women were always pregnant. Most now understand that this is bad. But we must go on spreading information. . . .



EXAMPLE 6.7 Christian Wolff, *Duet I*.

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Hygiene is a political question. The old bad habits are deep-rooted, but we're fighting them all the time. . . . This work we do during study meetings. To study and apply Mao Tse-Tung Thought is a good method.¹⁵

The performance technique is striking and quite original; later, however, Wolff decided that the ideas behind the Cultural Revolution had been discredited, and that the politics of *Accompaniments* were no longer valid.¹⁶ Subsequent pieces such as *Hay Una Mujer Desaparecida (after Holly Near)* (1979) and *Bread and Roses* (1976, one version for piano, another for violin) used political folk songs as musical material for variations, in a thorny, but basically tonal style. While he often starts with a politically significant song as a nucleus, Wolff has lowered his expectations of raising political awareness through music:

. . . [O]ne way to try to convey something political is with a text. That's the guaranteed way, theoretically; actually, it's not at all guaranteed. . . . But at least it's a start, because people will say, what do you mean? or what does this title mean? or where is that text from? You create an occasion in which political questions can be raised, or a little bit of modest education can take place.¹⁷

Like Cage, Wolff has always been a chief apostle of freedom in his music, including a freedom that will free the performer from his or her habitual reflexes; unlike Cage, however, he has often mixed composed materials with chance (or at least unpredictable) procedures. For example, his *Snowdrop* of 1970 for harpsichord and any number of other keyboards randomly superimposes insouciant melodies over one another in cheerfully disorderly counterpoint. Some of his instruction pieces, such as *Stones* (from *Prose Collection*, 1968–1971), indicate methods of producing sound but not what sounds are to be made. In solo pieces like *Bread and Roses*, the performer is occasionally required to make extraneous noises, such as whistling or striking the piano. More recent ensemble works, such as *Bowery Preludes* (1985–1986), *For Si* (1990–1991, based on songs by the activist-songwriter Si Kahn), and *Spring* (1996, written for an orchestra of seven trios), mix conventional notation with verbal instructions designed to elicit unpredictable textures. Wolff's music never fails to convey an aura of joyous surprise.

David Tudor

The New York School contained four composers and a performer. Were it not for the obsessively precise and relentlessly disciplined pianism of David Tudor, much of the music by the composers in this chapter would never have come into existence. A disproportionate amount of music in

the 1950s—not only by Cage, Feldman, Wolff, and Brown, but also by Boulez, Stockhausen, Bussotti, and several other Europeans—is for solo piano, and Tudor had as much to do with that fact than the ubiquity of the piano did.

Born in Philadelphia, Tudor (1926–1996) fell in love with the keyboard music of Messiaen at the age of eleven and began his career as an organist. He studied composition with Stefan Wolpe and piano with Wolpe's daughter, Irma Wolpe Rademacher. Feldman, also a Wolpe student, introduced Tudor to Cage, who had just received the score to his friend Pierre Boulez's *Deuxième Sonate*. Tudor made a splash by giving the highly demanding work its U.S. premiere in New York in 1950.

Stories of Tudor's perfectionism strain the imagination. He did much of his preparation away from the piano, practicing mentally. Avant-garde music of the 1950s indulged an unprecedented ambiguity, and Tudor's relentless persistence made the music possible to play. In Cage's and Brown's aleatoric scores he would measure every note-duration with a millimeter ruler; the composers might leave much to chance, but not the performer. To play the violent tone clusters in the *5 Piano Pieces for David Tudor* by Italian avant-gardist Sylvano Bussotti, he donned leather gloves. Cage tells, in *Silence*, a story of himself and Tudor receiving in the mail two boxes of spices in which the caps had come off, so that the spices were all mixed up. Tudor spent the better part of three days separating out his spices grain by grain and offered to help Cage with his. Argentine composer Mauricio Kagel's comment about Tudor is typical: "He could play the raisins in a slice of fruitcake."¹⁸

In the early fifties, however, Tudor had begun making his own electronic music; the noises that accompany and sometimes interrupt Cage in his recording of the lecture *Indeterminacy* are Tudor's. By 1970 Tudor had given up playing the piano, allowing his pianistic legend to live only on records. Thereafter he devoted himself to composition, becoming a pioneer in the newly growing field of live electronics. Tudor's magnum opus was a series of works begun in 1968 under the collective title *Rainforest*. In these works, assemblages of suspended cast-off objects—lawn sprinklers, car windshields, bicycle rims—were made to vibrate with transducers, bringing the detritus of civilization to acoustic life. Tudor's solo electronic works, like *Hedgehog* and his *Neural Synthesis* series, chirped and whistled with the warmth of a swarm of insects or distant flock of birds and were presented with a sense of mystery that made him shy away from technical explanation. His circuits themselves were the scores, and he would set them up in such a way that he himself couldn't predict how the resulting sound would behave.

Tudor's unrelenting purity made him a difficult figure for audiences to understand and approach. But he became a father figure to several younger electronic composers, especially those who worked with him on *Rainforest*, such as Linda Fisher and John Driscoll.

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Notes

1. Cage, *Silence*, pp. 3–4.
2. *Life* magazine, March 15, 1943.
3. Quoted in William Duckworth, *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
5. *Silence*, p. 93.
6. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," in *Silence*, pp. 109–110.
7. Morton Feldman, "The Anxiety of Art," in *Essays*, Beginner Press (Cologne, 1985), p. 91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
9. Morton Feldman, "Conversations without Strawinsky," in *Essays*, Beginner Press (Cologne, 1985), p. 61.
10. Quoted in Robert Ashley, *Morton Feldman Says*, a 1964 interview turned into a performance theater piece.
11. Morton Feldman, "Crippled Symmetry," in *Essays*, Beginner Press (Cologne, 1985), p. 132.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
14. Quoted in David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage: A Life*, Arcade Publishing (New York: 1992) p. 129.
15. Quoted in the liner notes to *Music by Christian Wolff*, CRI SD 357.
16. Cole Gagne, *Soundpieces 2: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993), p. 461.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 464.
18. Quoted in David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage: A Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), p. 102.