

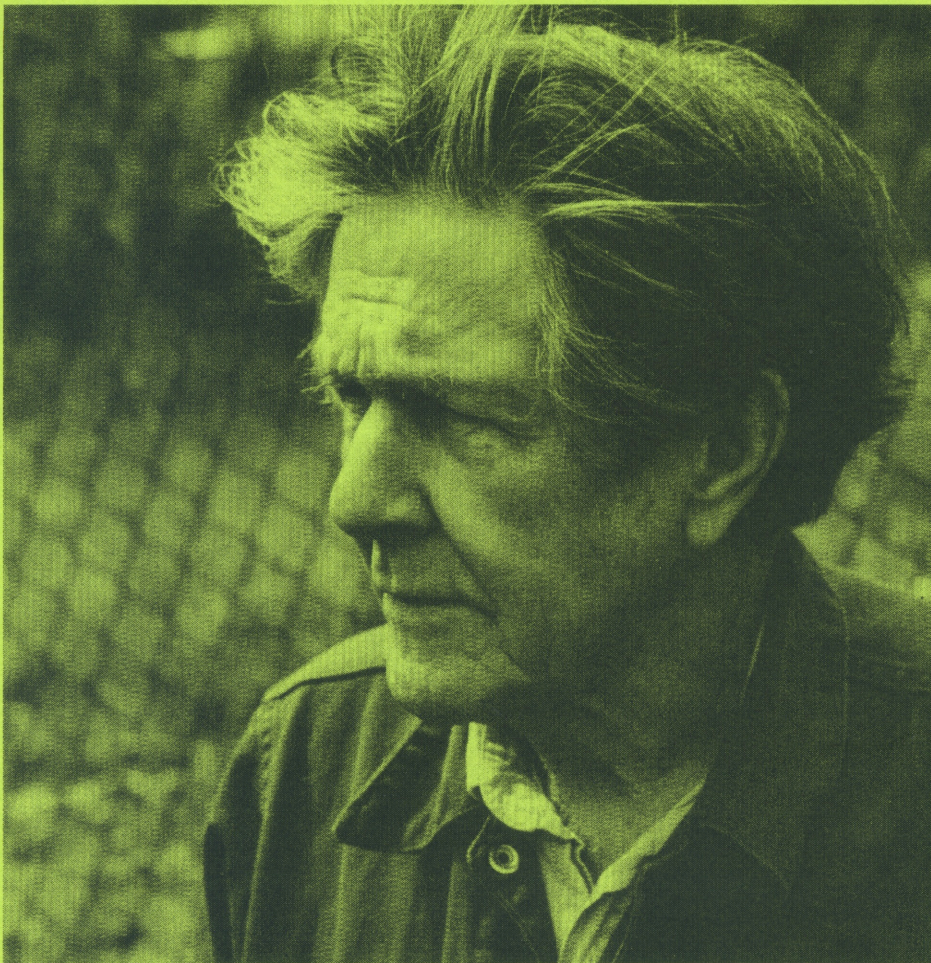
John Cage

Sonatas and Interludes

Aleck Karis, prepared piano

Saturday, May 9, 2009; 4pm

Conrad Prebys Concert Hall



Program:

- Sonata No. 1
- Sonata No. 2
- Sonata No. 3
- Sonata No. 4
- Interlude No. 1
- Sonata No. 5
- Sonata No. 6
- Sonata No. 7
- Sonata No. 8
- Interlude No. 2
- Interlude No. 3
- Sonata No. 9
- Sonata No. 10
- Sonata No. 11
- Sonata No. 12
- Interlude No. 4
- Sonata No. 13
- Sonata No. 14
- Sonata No. 15
- Sonata No. 16

Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano is arguably John Cage's masterpiece. It reflects his immersion in the music of Asia and Africa, his studies with Arnold Schoenberg and Henry Cowell, his fascination with Indian aesthetics, his work with percussion ensemble and complex rhythmic structures, and his ongoing experiments on the sonic possibilities of the prepared piano. Out of all these disparate elements Cage creates a unified work of eloquence and refinement.

The prepared piano was invented in 1940 out of necessity. Cage had been working as an accompanist for modern dance classes at the Cornish School in Seattle, Washington. Syvilla Fort, a dancer at the school, asked him to compose music for a work called *Bacchanal*. He had been writing a great deal of music for percussion ensemble, and *Bacchanal* had an African theme, but the theater had no pit and only a small stage with a piano on one side. Clearly there was no room for percussion instruments; it would have to be a piano piece. Up until that point, Cage's music for piano had been 12-tone, so he set out, unsuccessfully, to find "an African 12-tone row." He decided to change the sound of the piano by adding foreign materials, remembering his studies with Henry Cowell, who was the first to play directly on the piano strings, plucking, strumming, and sweeping his fingers across them. A pie plate bounced out of place, nails between strings slipped; then, as Cage has written, "it dawned on me that screws or bolts would stay in position. They did. And I was delighted with the sounds they produced...I wrote the *Bacchanal* quickly and with the excitement continual discovery provided."

Sonatas and Interludes is an exploration of the sonic possibilities of the prepared piano. Forty-five of the piano's eighty-eight notes are altered -- some slightly, some past recognition as piano sounds. Each note on the piano has three unison strings, with the exception of the bass register. In some cases, all three strings are altered. Often, however, only the second and third strings are prepared, creating a mixture of the original pitch and the prepared sound. When the soft or "una corda" pedal is depressed, the entire action of the piano shifts slightly, so that the hammers strike two instead of three strings. The una corda, normally a tool for subtle changes in color, the use of which most listeners are unaware, now creates a rather dramatic effect: the original pitched piano sound disappears, leaving only a prepared sound which may be purely percussive, or, if pitched, may sound more than two octaves away. Part of the fascination of *Sonatas and Interludes* is the interplay between the "Western" piano sounds and the "exotic" prepared sounds, mediated by the partially prepared notes. The music can at times sound Asian, African, Western, and sometimes, perhaps, not of this world.

In *Sonatas and Interludes* Cage was strongly influenced by Indian aesthetics, which he had read about in works by Ananda Coomaraswamy. In an interview, Cage spoke of the eight "permanent emotions" Coomaraswamy described: "The white emotions are the heroic, the erotic, the mirthful, and the wondrous. The black ones are fear, anger, disgust, and sorrow. Sorrow for instance over the loss of something cherished, or the gaining of something undesired. Even that, I think, is very little known in the West. There is the strong flowing through all of these of freedom from likes and dislikes. Which we also find in Duchamp, in his wanting to find an object which he neither likes nor dislikes. And central to the white and black emotions, is the emotion of tranquility. So that traditionally in Indian culture, you're not to express any one or any combination of the emotions, without expressing tranquility. A piece that I wrote when I became aware of these Indian 'rasas,' as they're called, is the *Sonatas and Interludes*. There are sixteen sonatas and four interludes, and they are a bringing together of these eight emotions, with their tendency toward tranquility." The listener may imagine which sonatas embody which emotion, or simply enjoy the range and variety of moods evoked by these miniatures. The composer simply gives a Roman numeral and a metronome marking for each sonata and interlude; only the serene sonatas XIV and XV, which have identical second halves, are paired together under the name "Gemini" -- after the work of [American sculptor] Richard Lipold." Structurally, the sixteen sonatas are grouped in fours, separated by the interludes, with two interludes in the middle. The sonatas are all binary, with repeats at the end of each half, like those of Scarlatti. Numbers IX, X, and XI also have a third section in the beginning, end, and middle respectively, which is not repeated. There is no classical "sonata form" or Western-style development. The first two interludes are through-composed, and the last two are in four parts, each of which is repeated.

The actual preparation of the piano is the performer's responsibility. Effecting this transformation, with screws, nuts, bolts, bits of rubber and plastic, and one "pink Pearl" eraser, is in itself a creative act and an integral part of the interpretation of the work. First, the materials must be located and tested. With screws and bolts placed between adjacent strings on the piano it immediately becomes obvious that the results vary enormously. Modern hardware (with a high zinc content) lacks the bell-like beauty and resonance of older hardware (with a higher iron content) – nuts and bolts like those Cage might have used in the 40's. Many sizes are needed, since the bolt that fits perfectly between two strings in the top octave is too small to even stay in place in the middle octave. A rich stockpile of old screws and bolts is therefore necessary. Rubber and plastic are simpler – strips of canning jar rubber work well when threaded between strings and plastic paper clips can be cut and bent into a shape that works.

As for placement, Cage is very specific in a chart printed in the score, with measurements from either the dampers or the bridge down to 1/16 of an inch. As an aid, he gives the measurements from damper to bridge on one string, advising the preparer to "adjust accordingly." However, these measurements can never be more than a rough guide. Piano design varies greatly and from one model to another the proportions of the string lengths differ. Ultimately, therefore, the pianist must make choices. For example, slight adjustments affect tuning: one chooses unison, near unisons, quarter tones, etc. Preparations may be located exactly on the node of a harmonic, slightly off, or totally off. The amount of percussive sound in the attack, the amount of rattle, in fact every aspect of the timbre of a prepared note can to some degree be controlled.

Once the piano is prepared, the score at hand contains none of the famous Cage indeterminacy. Everything is precisely notated: pitches, rhythm, phrasing, articulation, tempo, dynamics, pedaling. What remains is for a performer to clear the mind, open the ears, and enter Cage's enchanted world.

-Aleck Karis