



Pearson

John Cage: Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos: No. 1 (for component 3: Appraising)

Background

John Cage was one of the leading American experimental composers of the twentieth century. Many composers of the first half of the century were exploring new ways of organising musical material after what they saw as the death of traditional tonality and harmony. Whereas Schoenberg and his followers went in the direction of serial technique based on a 12-note chromatic *row* of notes, Cage sought to base his structures on new rhythmic directions. Cage also explored new sound worlds in terms of the possible timbres of the piano and other instruments.

Like Debussy before him, Cage was influenced by the sounds of **oriental music**. There is a clear relation to the sound world of the Javanese/Balinese **gamelan**, where all the main instruments are **percussive**. Indian rhythmic structures, particularly the **tala** were also an important influence.

A number of Cage's pieces were specifically written for **ballet** performances in New York. This work was composed in 1944 and premiered in early 1945. It was written for a dance piece called 'Dromenon' by the choreographer Merce Cunningham. The dance had an **African** emphasis. A piano was available but Cage felt a standard piano wouldn't be suitable to produce the ethnic quality required.

Timbre

Cage began composing for the prepared piano in 1938. His first pieces resulted from the need for a **percussion ensemble** where there wasn't room, and only a piano available. Cage experimented with inserting various everyday items between the strings of the notes. Most notes on a piano have three strings each. Only the bass strings have either two or one, so it's easy to wedge items between the strings to affect the sound quality.

In most cases the 'preparing' results in either changing the timbre but **retaining some sense of pitch**, or making the sound **entirely percussive**, removing all sense of pitch.

Cage specified items such as **screws, rubbers, coins, bolts, pieces of plastic** and a '**weather strip**' (plastic items that help seal doors and windows from drafts). He decided on these items having first experimented with using implements such as plates on top of the strings. These moved around and didn't provide the fixed sound he wanted.

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He also specified which of the three strings would be affected and **how near the bridge or dampers** the items would be placed. Using the *una corda* ('soft') pedal, he could also change the sound because the hammer could strike just one of the strings affected by the preparation. On a grand piano, when the soft pedal is pressed, all the hammers move to the left, so that only one of the three strings is hit. Without the soft pedal, depending on the preparation, one of the three strings could be unaffected by the implement.

Each piano has its own separate set of preparations. The pianos are amplified in performance, using microphones.

Structure

This dance is the first of a set of three that form the ballet. The second dance is slower and more thoughtful in character. The last one is fast and frenetic.

The structure is based on **tempo** and **rhythm**. The tempo is **88 minim beats per minute**. This determines the lengths of the sections. Each main section lasts for exactly 30 bars. There are eight sections, with the last being repeated, making **nine sections of 30 bars** in total.

The end of each section is shown by a **double bar line**. The sections are broken up into smaller units of bars. Each of these units is shown by a figure in a **box** above the score. The number of bars in each section is **2–5–2; 2–6–2; 2–7–2**. So each time the groups of three units are repeated, the central group is extended by one bar – from 5 to 6 to 7.

Each section has exactly the same groupings. So the second section, beginning at **figure 10** again starts with groups of 2, 5 and 2 bars. Each small group has its own type of rhythm. So the first piano in the very first two-bar grouping has continuous quavers in groups of three in the right hand. This changes to a more varied rhythmic scheme at figure 2. Some rhythmic aspects are nevertheless continued from one small group to the next, like the first piano left-hand quavers in threes lasting for the first 11 bars.

This kind of structure idea is related to the **Indian tala** idea, though the Indian version groups beats rather than bars. The Joomra Tal for instance has beats grouped in 3+4+3+4 beats.

The contents of each section are always different – apart from the ninth section, which is a repeat of the eighth. Even so, some ideas return from time to time. At figure 13 for instance, the second piano briefly has the same music it had at the beginning. The note G above the staff as a crotchet is an important recurring note, e.g. figures 2, 5, 14, etc.

Rhythm and metre

Rhythm is the most important feature of the music (closely followed by timbre). The music uses **polyrhythm** (simultaneous different types of rhythm) where for instance the **first piano has groups of three quavers going across the bar line**, while the second piano has a straightforward crotchet and **off-beat** quaver rhythm in **2/2 metre** (two minims to a bar – **simple duple** time). Cage emphasises the first beats with **accents** in the second piano part here (bars 1 and 2). Elsewhere he uses accents to emphasise **off-beats**, e.g. the end of bar 5.

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Note values consist almost entirely of just **crotchets and quavers**. **Longer notes or rests are often used to mark the end of a section or group**, e.g. before figures 5 and 10.

There are occasional ornamental groups of notes, such as the **septuplets** at figure 20. The often continuous quaver movement as at the end and elsewhere gives the feeling of **moto perpetuo** (continuous motion). There is certainly a sense of continuous musical drive.

Sometimes phrases are repeated at different positions in the bar, giving a **metrical shift** effect. So the phrase beginning with the pair of G crotchets at figure 14, shifts from the first beat of the bar, to the second and then fourth before returning to the first beat.

Texture

There are occasional 'chords' in the sense of having a group of different sounds sounding together, as at figure 17, though the 'chords' do not of course have any harmonic function.

Much of the music has a **four-part** texture, as at figure 5. Cage varies the texture constantly. Some examples are:

- **Monophonic** texture bar 14 (first piano only).
- **Two-part** texture at figure 6.
- **Three-part** texture at figure 7.
- Occasional **silences**, e.g. bar 11 or bar 210. These give extra power to the music immediately following. (the minim in bar 210 does not sound as a sustained note)

Melody

Cage was attempting to move away from traditional Western concepts of melody and harmony. The piano preparations mean that any sense of either of these elements is almost entirely missing.

Ostinato is the most important melodic feature. Short repeated figures are important as in the three-note figure in the right hand of the first piano at the beginning. Sometimes there is more of a sense of pitch. In the last section (figure 64/73), the first five notes of the right hand sound clearly as a melodic ostinato figure, repeated after every two bars, while all the other notes are quieter and percussive. The ostinato continues for 16 bars before a new quaver ostinato figure begins at figure 69/78. This time the figure lasts for one and a half bars, so, when it is repeated for the first time it starts in the middle of the bar, instead of at the beginning. This new idea continues until the end of the section.

Sometimes Cage uses a system of **note addition** and **note subtraction**. At figure 55 we have a **seven-note motif** in the first piano right hand. An extra upbeat is added at figure 56 to make the motif **eight notes** long. The position of the motif is also shifted later by one beat. In the third bar of figure 56 we are left with just the last **five notes** of the motif. These are repeated and then followed by just **four** of the notes.

The range used is not extensive for either piano. Some relatively high notes are used but the lower ranges are not explored.

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Dynamics

Dynamics are important in the piece, though the preparations often mean that the sounds are much quieter than they would normally be. There is a **forzando** accent at the beginning, and numerous accent marks. There are a number of **crescendos**, e.g. figure 9. Cage uses dynamic surprise, as at figure 38 where we suddenly have **ff** fortissimo markings after a **piano** passage. A more powerful effect is achieved by using **pianissimo** followed by **rests** then a sudden **fortissimo**, as just before the final sections at 64/73.

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