

## Six views of the *Sonatas and interludes*

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### 1. As a masterwork

The *Sonatas and interludes* has the reputation of being a masterwork, and this is well deserved. A word like “masterpiece” creates certain expectations, however: you expect grandeur, big effects that sweep you off your feet; you expect the exposition, development, and exploration of grand themes; you expect an epic, a monumental journey. You think, perhaps, of other keyboard masterworks: Bach's *Goldberg variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli variations*, Ives' *Concord sonata*.

Cage's masterwork is quite different from this: it is a big piece with a quiet voice. The very instrument he writes for, the prepared piano, undermines the grand statement. This is an instrument that operates entirely by muting: by attaching objects to the strings of the piano, Cage has altered their sounds in various ways. The results are different from note to note — some resonant, some dry, some metallic, some wooden — but they are always, always quieter than before. The prepared piano is an instrument that is personal and intimate; the music written for it must by necessity be music for a small space, music between two people. Even when the sound is “loud” it is the sort of loudness that is more a function of intensity than of amplitude.

Cage, as a composer for this instrument of lyrical percussion, faced the problem of how to make a large work in such a modest medium. The instrument would seem to demand smaller structures; indeed, before the mid-1940s most of Cage's music for prepared piano consisted of brief dance movements. In 1944 he wrote *The perilous night*, a fifteen-minute suite of pieces. Shortly afterwards he wrote two virtuoso works for two pianos (*A book of music* and *Three dances*); perhaps he thought that by adding two pianos together he could obtain a sense of grandness. These pieces are full of action, but I have never found them to be particularly convincing (I'm probably in the minority, however). To me, there is a great deal of noise there, but very little intensity or power.

With the *Sonatas and interludes* Cage solved the problem. Instead of working by force, he quietly and patiently built his large piece out of short structures. By constructing the work on the timeless foundation of Hindu aesthetics, he could make each piece perfect and unhurried; the focus could be

on the subtle modulations of his voice. At its premiere some criticized the work for its monotony, but the lack of contrast is its strength. His earlier dramatic works speak loudly to grab our attention; this one instead speaks quietly to draw us in. It is as if we are sitting in Cage's loft, straw mats on the floor, listening to him explore this softly-colored world.

## 2. As a meditation (Peggy Glanville-Hicks, 1948)

Peggy Glanville-Hicks never mentions the *Sonatas and interludes* in the profile of John Cage that she wrote for the September 1948 issue of *Musical America*. But the composer she describes and the music she writes about are clearly the same ones we hear in this recording. She was attuned to Cage's quiet introspection, and opens her article accordingly:

To one who is an artist in the highest sense, meditation is an absolute prerequisite; and in the vital pandemonium that is musical America, few have the strength, the inclination, or the awareness of its importance to embark upon a way of life which ensures time for reflection.

The image of Cage's music that she conveys is one of fragility, delicacy, and sensitivity. She makes a point of describing Richard Lippold's small wire sculptures that floated in Cage's spacious loft on the lower east side of New York. The near-invisibility of these sculptures parallels the near-inaudibility of Cage's music (the fourteenth and fifteenth sonatas are based on a specific Lippold sculpture). "The substance of John Cage's music is elusive," she wrote. "It cannot be taught. It is intangible."

Glanville-Hicks, like almost every other critic of the time, describes Cage as an experimentalist and invokes the names of Varèse and Cowell. But her vision of Cage's experimentalism is unique:

He has become fascinated with the dramatic power of the pause — the intent void as a point of arrival, of climax in a texture of sounds designed to set silence as a jewel. From this need for a one-man laboratory has gradually emerged his prepared piano. . . . In this laboratory John Cage pursues with the utmost introspection, and with a high sensitivity of intuitive intellect, his brilliant investigations into the nature and origin of inspiration.

## 3. As a new musical resource (Peter Yates, 1949)

Peter Yates wrote about the *Sonatas and interludes* in the April 1949 issue of *Arts & Architecture*. He seems to me to be the first critic to begin to understand the technical musical issues involved in composing for prepared piano. His article is full of insights into the workings of the pieces:

The principle of tonal balance is to the effect that more highly pitched sounds tend to unrest and sounds of lower pitch to rest. . . . Cage may repeat the same group of simultaneous sounds, emphasizing first the higher registers as a dominant and then the lower as a tonic, a very reasonable and satisfactory ending process. . . . Other means of structure are found in the balance between movement and non-movement, between sound and silence, between the

hurrying of many tones at one level of sound and the slow fall of single sounds upon another level, the two interpenetrating but never mingling as chords.

Most contemporary critics could only see that Cage was removing pitch — and therefore harmony — from music; by doing this, he was nullifying the structures and procedures that had shaped Western music up to that time. Yates was unique in that he saw the new musical life that the prepared piano opened up.

Yates says that Cage's music reminds him of Arnold Schoenberg's *Six little piano pieces*, Op. 19. Although this connection may seem far-fetched today, many at that time compared the music of the *Sonatas and interludes* to the works of Schoenberg. Yates even claims that in one sonata there is "a definite, extended, imitative reference" to the fifth of the Op. 19 pieces. However, I have never identified which of the *Sonatas and interludes* Yates was referring to.

#### 4. As *rasavant* music

The content of the *Sonatas and Interludes* draws upon to the Hindu aesthetic theory of *rasa*. This can be translated as "emotional character." In the classical theory, there are eight moods or emotions that are the flavors of *rasa*: four light moods (the Erotic, Heroic, Wondrous, and Comic) and four dark moods (the Odious, Furious, Terrible, and Pathetic). A ninth possibility exists: Tranquillity, the common tendency of the other eight. These are the "permanent emotions" that Cage referred to on many occasions. What Cage knew about *rasa* he learned from reading the works of Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Indian art historian and critic. Coomaraswamy's book *The dance of Shiva* (1924) contains an extended essay on *rasa* and the Hindu view of art and beauty.

How this classification of emotions applies to the *Sonatas and interludes* has never been clear. Coomaraswamy stresses the importance of unity of mood in art; if Cage followed this rule, he would have devoted each piece to a single emotion. That there are sixteen sonatas suggests that there are two sonatas per emotion, with tranquillity emerging throughout, perhaps. The interludes would then be outside the scheme. But Cage never published an outline of the content of the pieces, and there is nothing in the score to suggest that such an overall plan ever existed. This is in contrast to *Sixteen dances* (1950), a composition on the same subject that clearly states its plan of interlacing "emotional" dances and interludes.

The only statement I have ever found from Cage on the matter is in a review of the 1949 Carnegie Hall performance; Cage is reported there as having said that the emphasis on ten-bar phrases in the last four sonatas represents tranquility. That statement makes sense to me; the emotional ups and downs of the work do seem to flatten out as it nears the end. Perhaps there was a different plan underlying the work: one involving a progression, like that of a

rushing stream to the sea, from individual emotional content to the overall tendency of tranquillity.

But then again, rereading what Coomaraswamy has to say on the subject reminds me that the question is probably of little real importance:

The 'nine rasas' are no more than the various colourings of one experience, and are arbitrary terms of rhetoric used only for convenience in classification: just as we speak of poetry categorically as lyric, epic, dramatic, etc., without implying that poetry is anything but poetry. *Rasa* is tasted — beauty is felt— only by empathy . . . that is to say by entering into, feeling, the permanent motif; but it is not the same as the permanent motif itself, for, from this point of view, it matters not with which of the permanent motifs we have to do.

## 5. As a transforming experience: a journey

Like other Cage works, this one was a "work in progress" for an extended period (almost two years). In this regard it has much in common with other big pieces such as the *Concert for piano and orchestra* (1957-1958) or the *Song books* (1970). When Cage set out to write these big works he did not attempt to write great unified masterpieces. Instead he designed a plan for writing a number of little pieces. In the *Concert* or the *Song books* the plan was a chance-derived set of tasks: "compose a bit of music using a variant of this particular compositional technique," it might tell him. In the *Sonatas and interludes* the plan was that of the permanent emotions expressed in the sixteen sonatas and four interludes. Perhaps there was a plan for the rhythmic structures used as well; no evidence of such a plan survives and we may never know.

Cage was fond of telling a story from Irish legend, in which a prince and a magical horse follow the path of a magic ball that rolls in front of them. The rolling ball takes them from one adventure to another, ultimately taking them to the object of their quest. These large ongoing pieces of Cage's have this same quality: start here and follow the rolling ball. While composing them, he knows exactly what he's doing — he's following his system — but he has no idea where he's going.

Writing a large piece that is a journey creates the effect of an epic without being ponderous or monolithic. The *Sonatas and interludes* are lacking that feeling of the self-consciously monumental statement that accompanies so many grand works. Instead its epic nature affects you gradually over time as you follow the continuity of events, from point to point in the journey, until you emerge from the other side — transformed.

And it is not just the listener who is transformed. By the time he had finished writing these twenty short pieces, John Cage was not the same composer; he had changed. As he emerged from the other side of this adventure, his technical stance (a tendency towards quietness, the individual sound and silence, the subtle modulations of phrase) and his spiritual stance (a tendency towards quietness, silence, poverty) were permanently altered. The

*Sonatas and interludes* is not just a string of pieces, it is a passage in Cage's life.

## 6. As a work in progress (John Cage, 1948)

In February of 1948, John Cage gave a lecture at Vassar College as part of the National Inter-Collegiate Arts Conference. The lecture had the title "A composer's confessions," but has also been called "the Vassar lecture." Perhaps because of its autobiographical nature, or perhaps because he did not feel that it was a good piece of writing, Cage did not care to have it published. It appeared in print in 1991 not at his own instigation but as a result of the efforts of others who found it interesting and important. I personally think it is one of Cage's finer writings.

He had not completed the *Sonatas and interludes* at the time he gave the lecture; he mentions them only briefly. First he describes their origin: "Another passing remark, this time by Edwin Denby, to the effect that short pieces can have in them just as much as long pieces can, led me two years ago to start writing twenty short *Sonatas and interludes* which I have not yet finished." He then starts a new paragraph and hints at their future: "They have all been written in my new apartment on the East River in Lower Manhattan which turns its back to the city and looks to the water and the sky."

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