

# Aleatoric music of the 20th century music essay



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compositional and instrumental methods utilized by John Cage. The biographical background, educational influences and examples of the musical compositions of Cage will also be illustrated. This paper continues by describing the various methods and processes employed by John Cage in the formation of music written during the minimalist movement. Contrived instruments, ambient audience noise, non-traditional tone structures and electronic music will be identified and defined. Furthermore, this paper will explore the debate over aleatoric music as art form versus noise.

Traditionally, Western music is highly structured and organized- however, music written in aleatory form generally lacks traditional instrumentation, time, and other methods present in Western forms. According to whom one would ask, aleatoric music can be extremely complex, emotional and intellectual. On the other hand, there are those who believe aleatoric music is nothing more than random noise with no structure, rhyme or reason. Over the course of this paper, the reader will be able to discern that aleatoric music is a definitive musical genre.

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Aleatoric Music of the 20th Century:

Compositions of John Cage - An Art Form, Not Noise

Introduction

Aleatoric music refers to musical compositions where some aspect of the music is left to chance. The tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, order of the written music, or various other devices can be manipulated. Simply put,

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aleatoric music is left up to some amount of chance. However, the amount of chance is not immeasurable. In many cases, the composer only allows a portion of the entire composition to chance while the rest conforms to standard Western-influenced counterpoint. The American composer John Cage was one of the foremost composers who utilized aleatory in musical works. He was also the father of the avant-garde in music during the minimalist movement.

#### THESIS:

By studying the devices used in Cage's compositions, the argument will be clearly made that aleatoric music, while sometimes free in form and function, is clearly a structured art form and not random noise.

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#### Aleatoric Music of the 20th Century:

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#### Outline:

##### Aleatoric Music

##### Explicative definition of aleatoric music

##### Overview of aleatoric devices

##### John Cage

##### Early life and education

## B. Utilization of aleatoric devices in compositions

Thesis support

Compare and contrast with opposing viewpoint

Acknowledge and dismiss opposing view utilizing evidenciary support

Conclusion

Summarize main points

Reinforce the argument that aleatoric music is not random

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Aleatoric music refers to musical compositions where some aspect of the music is left to chance. The tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, order of the written music, or various other devices can be manipulated. Simply put, aleatoric music is left up to some amount of chance. However, the amount of chance is not immeasurable. In many cases, the composer only allows a

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portion of the entire composition to chance while the rest conforms to standard Western-influenced counterpoint. The American composer John Cage was one of the foremost composers who utilized aleatory in musical works. He was also the father of the avant-garde in music during the minimalist movement. By studying the devices used in Cage's compositions, the argument will be clearly made that aleatoric music, while sometimes free in form and function, is clearly a structured art form and not random noise.

One of the most prolific composers of music in aleatory, John Cage, was born September 5, 1912 in Los Angeles, California. He was the only child of

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parents Lucretia and John Cage, Sr. (two other sons passed away as infants). His father was an inventor and his mother worked on and off as a writer for the Los Angeles Times. The couple met in Greeley, Colorado. John Cage, Sr.'s father was a Baptist minister who felt music was of the Devil. His mother, Lucretia (her maiden name was Harvey) was considered rebellious because she read books (a practice her family forbade). The young couple fled the restrictive atmosphere of Colorado for the more welcoming state of California. John Cage, Sr. had an avid interest in undersea vessels and, in fact, invented a device that was used in the English Channel to successfully detect German submarines during World War I. The intellect and innovative spirit of his mother and father would serve young Cage well throughout his lifetime. (Rich 142).

As early as age eight, the young Cage began to express an interest for music that was slightly outside of the norm. While taking piano lessons with his

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aunt, the young boy confessed he enjoyed the music of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg (Rich 145). When Cage graduated in 1928, his grades earned him the record of having the best academics in Los Angeles High School's history. From high school, Cage spent two years at Pomona College (Struble 287).

While at Pomona College, he studied ministry and writing. (Rich 145). Cage then went on hiatus to Europe for two years. While there, he composed many short works, some using mathematical formulas. Unfortunately, Cage did

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not save these early works- as he traveled, he would go through his belongings and discard any non-essential items in order to lighten his load (Nicholls 175).

He returned to the United States in 1931 and in 1933, John Cage began to study piano under Richard Buhlig, who introduced the composer to serialism, an aleatoric musical device. Serialism is "music which has been written with a high degree of organization" (Brindle 17). Since Buhlig had premiered serialist composer Arnold Schoenberg's composition Three Piano Pieces, Cage hoped Buhlig would introduce him to Schoenberg. Instead, Cage's first published piece, Sonata for Clarinet (1933), brought him to the attention of Henry Cowell, a professor teaching the "new music" at the New Music Society of California in San Francisco. Though Cage was able to informally study with Schoenberg, Cowell was his primary influence (Lipman 22).

The Sonata for Clarinet also shows how Cage used serialism to reproduce the same pitches in retrograde in the last movement from the first movement of the same composition in a highly organized fashion. Ironically, when the Sonata for Clarinet premiered, Cage found himself performing it on piano because the clarinetist was unable to do so (Nicholls 176).

Over the course of the next two years (1933-34), John Cage invented a new technique called 25-pitch non-repetitive serialism. In this technique, each voice is limited to a twenty-five note pitch area and no pitch can be repeated

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until all twenty-five have been played. He also used this technique in three additional pieces he wrote during this period: the Sonata for Two Voices (Nov. 1933), Composition for Three Voices (1934) and Solo... and Six Short Inventions (1933-34). The use of this technique was generally not harmonically sound with the exception of a few phrases (Nicholls 177).

John Cage composed two pieces in 1935 (Three Pieces for Flute Duet and Two Pieces for Piano) that also used the serialism technique. The harmony was paired with a highly chromatic melodic line that made the pieces overwhelmingly contrapuntal. However, these pieces tended to possess a higher percentage of harmonically pleasing subject matter (Nicholls 184). These works also coincided with his introduction to Merce Cunningham, an author, choreographer and Cage's lifelong love interest. As a result, Cage began to be interested in how music correlated with dance. John Cage and Merce Cunningham collaborated to organize performances using Cage's

music and Cunningham's choreography over the course of their lifetimes (Thomson 77).

Another interesting device John Cage used in his composition was ambient noise. In his piece 4' 33" (1952), a piano or any ensemble is to conduct themselves as if they were preparing to play. However, the instrument(s) or performer(s) never utter a singular sound- for the entire four minutes and

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thirty-three seconds. The idea is to attune one's self with the ambient noise of the room, the noise entering the room from outside and the natural noises of the people within (Lipman 30). The piece has also been said to be an example of freedom in general (Brindle 122). This work had its premiere by pianist David Tudor in Woodstock, New York, on August 29, 1952, in the Maverick Concert Hall (located near where the 1969 Woodstock Festival was held). Cage (interviewed in the late 1980s by William Duckworth) stated that he listened to the piece every day and that in Indian culture, it is we that turn away from the music. However, the music is always there (Bonds 588-589).

An original device employed by John Cage was an invention all his own- the prepared piano. A prepared piano is a grand piano where the inside strings are manipulated by foreign objects to produce a twelve-tone scale. Such was the case with Cage's composition Bacchanale (1940)- a percussive piece he was commissioned to write to be performed with a dance group. The work was originally intended for percussion instruments, but was relegated to the prepared piano when it was deemed the concert hall was too small for all of

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the required instrumentation. Cage required that “ bolts and weatherstripping be attached to the strings connected to the 12 different notes” (Bonds 590).

John Cage’s influence in the realm of electronic music began as early as 1937. His composition *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (1939) was one of the first

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written in the electronic genre. It consisted of recording “ oscillatory frequencies on two 78rpm gramophone records” (Brindle 99). He also wrote a piece comprised of fifty-one tapes (each twenty minutes long) produced on the computer system of Illinois University (Illiac) that could be played in any order along with seven live harpsichords and a light show of sorts. This piece was written in 1967 and titled *HPSCHD* (Brindle 125).

John Cage began to write pieces titled by the number of performers later in his life. For example, the work titled *One* (1987) was for one pianist. Another work, titled *Five* (1988) was for string quintet. These pieces are dubbed “ number pieces” (Moser 31). Even these odd little pieces have a structure- the structure being the amount of time the performer has to perform each measure and the number of musicians required for performance.

As illustrated with the devices John Cage used in his compositions, his works are very structured and organized. Cage was one of the “ total serialists, who felt that music composition could be planned and analyzed with the precision of scientific experiments” (Lipman 56). In his own words during a lecture in Darmstadt in 1958:

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“ The function of the performer... is comparable to that of someone filling in color where outlines are given; ... is that of giving form, providing, that is to say, the morphology of the continuity, the

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expressive content; ... is that of a photographer who on obtaining a camera uses it to take a picture; ... is comparable to that of a traveler who must constantly be catching trains the departures of which have not been announced but which are in the process of being announced” (Moser 8).

It is clear by reading these words that Cage finds his music to have form, which is a staple of Western music. In addition, his music is generally left up to the interpretation of the performer- definitively not an aspect of Western music. Even still, form is readily detectable within his works regardless of how the stated form is interpreted by the performers.

Another argument concerning music in aleatory is that there are no determinate ways to discern the number of possible arrangements. This simply is not true: “... the exact number of realizations of an indeterminate score can often be determined...” (Moser 11).

In conclusion, John Cage lived during an exciting time in American history. Just after his birth in 1912, the United States found itself fully engaged in World War I. The United States truly became a world power during this time.

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The enlightenment through his well-rounded and educated parents as well as the

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excitement and innovations of the new century served John Cage well, as he was able to thrive and grow as an intellectual and musician in this environment. Although his music is sounds extremely dissonant and non-harmonic, it exhibits a high amount of structure. Cage's earlier works illustrate a mathematical approach to the music- meaning that the music makes sense based on mathematical principles, but not necessarily traditional ideals surrounding musical composition. The influence of John Cage's music can certainly be felt today in late 20th century jazz and numerous other works that allow the performers greater freedoms. Take, for instance, the piece recently performed on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Dr. Joanna Hersey premiered a work for her Low Brass Ensemble at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke titled Sails, Whales and Whalers (2008) by Gary Buttery. This work included recorded whale song interspersed with the live music produced by the Low Brass Ensemble (Hersey & Krosschell). Perhaps Gary Buttery's composition was influenced in some way by the works of John Cage. There is no doubt that many musicians past, present, and future have been and will continue to be influenced by Cage's maverick attitude toward music.

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