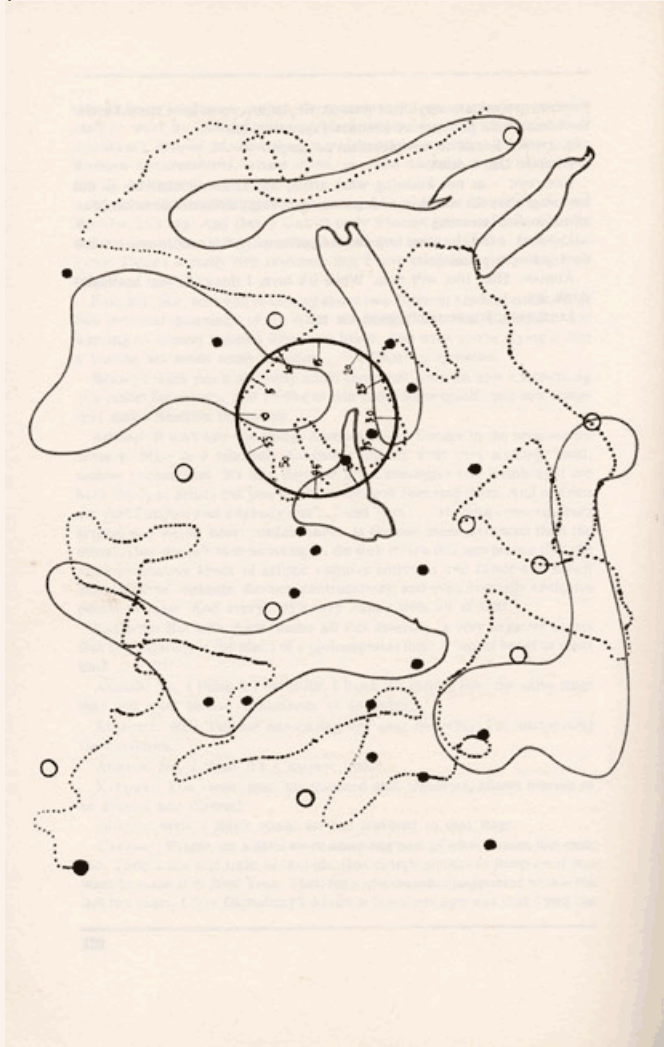


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# Freedom in experimental music: the New York revolution

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Where there is so much talk of liberation there are sure to be very disturbing reverberations within the world of established, acceptable criteria. The liberation of words, objects, sounds, etc., should be seen as different from the confusions surrounding the idea of making them free. They are already free, before anyone ever thinks of using them. The idea of them being liberated is relative to the use that they have been put to (and enslaved by) in the past. They cannot be more free than they are, but they can be liberated from their conceptual inheritance, and we from ours. That is the point at which we can realize that we are already as free as words, objects, and sounds are. Everything is then free to move in all directions to all meanings. [Earle Brown, 1965]<sup>1</sup>

There is little doubt that history will see no greater departure from tradition in the Western arts than that which took place in New York during the fifties and sixties. Manhattan enjoyed the presence of an extraordinary colony of visual artists, writers, and composers who freely supported individual ideas: artists Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns; poets John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara; composers John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff; and countless others. In music, radical disregard for the previous methods of control and construction distinguishes the experimental composers from the European avant-garde and the academic serialists. The philosophical leader of the experimental group was John Cage, though it would be erroneous to place him at the head of a "school" as he was more of a catalyst than an influence. His work gave the others, in all disciplines, encouragement to continue with their own experiments. The results were an exciting flow of works from these maverick composers, each unique in approach but bonded by a common goal: freeing the elements—a music whose materials and ideas were not exclusive, but all inclusive.

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In order to interpret properly how freedom distinguishes the new music from the old, it is necessary to begin with an historical examination of the elements (pitch, timbre, loudness, and duration) as compositional issues in the realm of process, form, time, and space. Western musical tradition has been preoccupied with construction from the medieval modes to the serialists. In the Renaissance, musical form began to shape itself around tonal aspects of line, where both the vertical and horizontal applications of pitch came into play as counterpoint, and polyphony replaced isorhythmic organization. The contrapuntal voices were often adjusted at spots to conform with what were the beginnings of harmony, which in turn gathered momentum toward short-term cadential goals. Shortly thereafter, formal unity became dependent on tonality and key relationships between major juxtapositions of surface material. Similarly in the visual arts, Renaissance painters began to organize space into two dimensions through the use of scientific perspective. Although both tonality and perspective continue to enjoy a deep-rooted tradition, they are by no means universally adopted. Each technique simply supplied a focus for unity in form, and such developments represent a small sector of world art.

One goes too far in accepting the implication that because tonality is, more or less, supported by the natural harmonic series in terms of consonance and dissonance, it is the natural musical language. Recent studies show that neurons along the basilar membrane of the cochlea

are lined up to fire according to the series. Although this undoubtedly facilitates the perception of pitch and perhaps influences instrument design, it does not necessarily dictate harmonic or melodic preference, as our most rigid tonal sense was generated from an “adjusted,” equal-tempered tuning system. Indeed, early tonal music indicates that there was a practice of utilizing a wide variety of tunings and interval sizes. Given this, in the presence of world music, we can understand the ear’s adaptability.

In visual art the arrangement of color in a work may suggest a type of tonality, harmony—or dissonance. However, in most art before 1900 representation determined the properties of form, which depended on how realistic images were organized in space. Hence, timbre corresponds to color, whereas tonality functions like perspective. Though the nature of all music is inherently abstract, tonal progression may have approximated the ideal of visual realism. Perhaps, as Morton Feldman suggests, composers have learned to project images in time:

We are taught to think of music as an abstract language—not realizing how functional it is, how related to that other spirit, whether it be literary or a literary metaphor of technique. Can we say that the great choral music of the Renaissance is abstract? Quite the opposite. Josquin, who had a genius for making a gorgeous musical coloration around a devotional word, uses music to convey a religious idea. Boulez uses it to impress and dazzle the intellect by representing what seems to be the mountain peaks of human logic. One

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takes it for granted that Beethoven’s Grand Fugue is composed of abstract components making a magnificently abstract musical whole. It was only recently that I really began to hear it for what it is: a very literary stormy hymn—a march to God. Music can’t be so very abstract when it serves such different and such definite function! <sup>2</sup>

Form in music from the Baroque period through Romanticism imposed perceptual boundaries in conjunction with the structural components of the overall tonal plan. Unity is implicit in tonality, while formal design works within the framework of an inevitable, teleological, basic harmonic and scalar progression. A limited variety of these progressions, as originally suggested by the Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), are indigenous to common practice tonal movement. All other musical parameters support this structural hierarchy, and are generated around this “Ursatz” in time.

Those whom we normally identify as the radical forces in the recent arts (e.g., Schoenberg, Debussy, Ives, Satie, Cage, Manet, Cezanne, Joyce, Stein, Duchamp, Picasso, Pollock, and Rauschenberg) did not necessarily destroy aspects of tradition single-handedly, Beethoven often misaligned tonal and formal drama in his later works—classical form was bulging at its seams. The spread of equal temperament in tuning not only crystallized a complete harmonic language for functional tonality, but it supplied the very impetus for its eventual destruction as well. Common tones separated the diatonic notes; unorthodox modulations and chromatic sequences led to atonality (or pantonality). In the visual arts, as color patches replaced chiaroscuro and Eastern influences broke down perspective, a reappraisal of realism was required for impressionism and cubism. A new awareness of the surface revitalized art as art. At the turn of the century, composers began to reevaluate the “surface” parameters of music (articulation, timbre, rhythm, pitch, and dynamics). Organization of these elements became even more crucial than before, since the focus

of the work was no longer imbedded in the security of tonal progression or perspective. Gauguin often depicted depth in his paintings by careful selection of warm and cool hues. Debussy and Stravinsky often overlaid linear repetition to hold sections together temporally. Edgard Varèse generated movement by stratifying sound.

It is futile, if not impossible, to attempt to define a basic aesthetic or a common human criterion that all music or art must meet in order to be considered palatable, especially in the light of Satie, Duchamp, Cage, and Rauschenberg. The notion that music is a universal language is merely a naive description of common practice music, normally subscribed to and propagated by hard-core romantics and veteran conductors. We can accept basic physiological truths about the ear, brain, and perception—as well as the laws of physics and mathematics—but individual societies interpret the roles of sound determinants through time in vastly different ways. Correlative to rapid changes in twentieth-century Western

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society and worldly cultural access through mass media and technology, the treatment of musical parameters—indeed, the interpretation of what parameters are—has under-gone many radical revisions, the least of which is the dissolution of tonality. However, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical tradition, more than in the other arts, has nurtured aesthetic criteria and thought into a rather logical but resilient mold. Unfortunately, much music criticism still clings to values that, for the most part, served the concept of tonal unification: goal-oriented progressions, phrasing, counterpoint, sectional form, variation, development, etc. The traditional critical assumption seemed to be that music *had to go somewhere*. In contrast, Jung cites Pollock's action paintings to demonstrate unity in abstraction and chaos. He asserts that such works represent the unconscious self, which is at the core of the human psyche: "The deeper layers of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness as they retreat farther and farther into darkness. 'Lower down,' that is to say, as they approach the autonomous functional systems, they become increasingly collective until they are universalized and extinguished in the body's materiality, i.e., in chemical substances. The body's carbon is simply carbon. Hence 'at bottom' the psyche is simply "world.""<sup>3</sup> Clearly Jung comes the closest in identifying a universal structural order.

Before World War I, Schoenberg saw atonality as the logical path to pursue in the aftermath of tonality. This departure was less a freeing of melody and harmony from the system than a conscious downplay of the traditional configurations of pitch, and an emphasis of the traditionally dissonant intervals. The intentional avoidance of consonance ultimately led him to systemize his selection of pitch in order to neutralize hierarchy, i.e., the twelve-tone system. In Schoenberg's case, we can perceive such "abstraction" as emanating from expressionism and, to some extent, the abstract artists. Kandinsky and Mondrian avoided concrete objects to create a "pure reality" removed from subjective conditioning; the only element of Schoenberg's music that departed radically from tradition was his treatment of pitch. Aspects of texture, form, rhythm, and duration were, for the most part, subjected to rather conventional application. Anton Webern began to extend serial principles to rhythm and dynamics. More importantly, he dealt with musical space and form as it reflected a new awareness of time, unmolded by tonal

structure—somewhat closer to that inner expression, or mysticism and collective unconsciousness, sought after by the abstract artists. Cage, Feldman, Wolff, and Brown, contrary to Webern's academic followers, saw virtually no importance in the rationale of his serial technique, but were taken with his timbral sound and its integration with silence.

Erik Satie, on the other hand, employed tonal and modal imagery as sonic material with no implied dependency on harmonic organization, progression, antecedent/consequent phrases, development, transition, or variation. The directionless repetition in much of his work

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creates a music stripped of dramatic symbolism—sound for sound's sake in a static time domain, a compilation of unconscious, noncontextual images—ultimately a music that blends casually with life (e.g., *Furniture Music*, 1920; *Vexations*, 1892-93).<sup>4</sup> Satie's music was less related to the abstract artists of his time than to the dadaists and surrealists such as Duchamp, Dali, and Picabia. Here, non-contextual juxtapositions reached the soul of the subconscious in a region beyond the immediate visible reality. Duchamp went the furthest by attempting to demote craft and visual appeal to a status well below that of the idea, allowing the viewer to interpret and complete the aesthetic experience. In the *Large Glass* he allows, as Satie does, life to enter through his art (the "canvas," being glass, is transparent). Dali often strengthened the depiction of reality by mixing it with fantasy.

In the thirties and forties John Cage noticed that although Satie and Webern approached sound in two different ways (Satie through static, nonfunctional tonality/modality, and Webern through a rational method of constructing successive sonorities), they both used duration as the guiding force of their music instead of counterpoint and structural harmony. He concluded that this was the proper approach, as duration is the only determinant of music that is expressed by either sound or silence. Cage championed the integration of silence—allowing the sounds of nature (background noise) to enter into the music. He likened this to the glass houses of Mies Van der Rohe, where the surroundings can be seen through the structure, or to Richard Lippold's wire constructions, which people could see "through."<sup>5</sup> In his early pieces Cage laid out form by dividing time in rhythmic structures, simply as a measurement of quantity, such that the content (or lack of content) of these units had no influence on the outcome of the structure. In his excellent book, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, Michael Nyman pinpoints the ramifications of this concept: "It may seem that by laying out and filling empty spaces of time Cage was cutting music off from its supposed natural, organic roots—its source of growth. But Cage was in effect 'freeing' music—or, as he might have put it, freeing sounds of music. For he was advocating that music should no longer be conceived as rational discourse, concerned with manipulating sounds into musical shapes or artifacts (motives, melodies, twelve-tone rows) as though they were made parts of a discursive language of argument."<sup>6</sup>

The logical end to the process of using durations as a frame to be filled with sounds and/or silences is Cage's notorious *4'33"* (1952), a three-movement piece that contains no specified sounds—the score instructs the performer(s) to make no sounds (tacet) in each



movement. The duration of the silence adds up to the length prescribed in the title. Here, the distinction between “wanted” (music) and “unwanted” (noise) sound breaks down, as the material that fills the durational grids consists of all desirable sounds: the environmental

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sounds of the audience. Therefore, not only freedom, but equality of all sounds is stressed (I use the term “equality” to imply the right of presence, and not necessarily equal volume). In painting, Robert Rauschenberg dealt with the same issue in his *White Paintings* (1952), where the viewing public casts shadows to create images on the all-white canvases. Both works allowed life to enter into art; art and life were no longer to be separated. (As seen above, this ideal had precedence in both Satie and Duchamp.)

4'33" gave birth to many misunderstandings about Cage, his philosophy, and the concept of indeterminacy. The type of freedom indicated in this piece may initially suggest chaos, indeed anarchy—an ideology still embraced by Cage—and the naive presupposition that “anything goes.” Unfortunately, many younger composers understood this as giving them license to do anything. In fact, we must honor Cage’s belief that chance processes and the use of the *I Ching* (the English translation was introduced to Cage by Christian Wolff) in composition imposes a greater discipline than control, in that it removes the influence of personal choice; no attempt is made to “improve” on the chance relationships of sound events in the interests of artistic taste as altered from life. Cage allows the music to pass through his process, preferring to accept rather than make sounds:

It can be seen as changing the responsibility of the composer, in making choices to asking questions. And then the questions come by means of one thing or another, that is beyond the control of the person asking the question.... So what I’ve had to do is to decide what questions to ask. Once I’ve decided that, I become, as it were, simply a means by which other things can happen that are outside of me, in which I don’t myself change. . . . I hope in that way I become open to possibilities and events that were not in my mind to begin with.<sup>7</sup>

There is but a short step from this point of view of compositional process to the expanded role of the performer in pieces that are “indeterminant with respect to performance.”\* Here the composer allows the performer to make certain choices pertaining to pitch, duration, texture, or form--many of them during the performance. One can indict a composer who takes this position for shirking from his/her responsibility, while encouraging the performer to become lax in his/her traditional duties (as a skilled technician) of following meticulous detail. On the contrary, the artistic sensibilities of both composer and performer are intensified such that immediate demands on technique are imposed, necessitating an even greater discipline. The creative process and its realization are lifted from the page in near simultaneity. Similarly, Pollock, with his quick, bodily motions in the direct, continuous application of paint, was interested in a real-time transfer of the creative process to the canvas. Pollock’s condition of “directed accident” and Cage’s “purposeful

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\* Cage credits Feldman with being the first to do this in his graph music in 1950.

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purposelessness” unmistakably shared a common philosophical base. The acceptance of disorder appeals to the inner structure of the psyche as identified by Jung. However, the degree of disorder or entropy and the extent of its uniformity through time and space are crucial concerns in the finished work of both Pollock and Cage. A uniform distribution of random elements cannot permit totally unrestricted action unless that action is precipitated without personal or technical bias. In the case of the performer, this is quite an impossibility; so constraints are normally built into the performance instructions, ostensibly to act as a safeguard. It must be remembered that, in 4'33”: the word “tacet” specifies that the player(s) make no sounds. Hence, as Cage has often said: “Anything goes *only* when you have nothing to assume.”

We begin to surmise that much experimental music lacks a perceptible correspondence between the microscopic level of organization, and the macrostructure. Where one may discern homogeneity in the overall form of a piece because the quantity of disorder or entropy appears to be uniform, the events in shorter temporal lengths succeed virtually unrelated to one another. This represents a marked contrast to most Western music, in which construction of the whole was dependent on the relationship of its parts, i.e., form and function cooperating to create order. The other extreme, redundancy, through its high predictability, satisfies the condition for high order but low entropy. Rudolf Arnheim, in his important essay *Entropy and Art*, sees the justification for both indeterminacy and minimalism in the arts: “Surely the popular use of the notion of entropy has changed. If during the last century it served to diagnose, explain, and deplore the degradation of culture, it now provides a positive rationale for ‘minimal’ art and the pleasures of chaos.”<sup>8</sup>

The actual measurement of sound events for their information content or redundancy level is not an issue here (I feel neither a need nor a desire to justify any music through analysis). However, the concept of form takes on a particularly new meaning in relation to time, in recognition of entropy theory. Cage’s preference for the flow of sound events without direct intervention or control, removed the directional succession of time from the boundaries of a piece, or its beginning, middle, and end. Likewise, the somewhat even concentration of energy in action paintings and much of minimal art and music eliminates a directed path during the perception of the work—it would make no sense to frame the large canvases, or place a permanent, total duration on such a composition. Lengths of pieces were often agreed upon by the performers, or decided by how much program time was available. In the music with lengths specified by the composer, the passage of time does not delineate time in the structural sense. Instead, there is often a presence of accumulated sound events in the time domain, often collecting on the surface. The graph-notation works

for Piano, 1953), or even his later, precisely notated pieces (*The Viola in My Life*, 1970; *For Frank O'Hara*, 1973), despite fixed lengths, certainly support this notion. The exact notation carefully directs the listener to the sonorities in nonreferential time.

Perhaps Henri Bergson's observations pertaining to time and motion are apropos. He proposed that since our minds seek fixity, we perceive duration as an unfolding of juxtaposed static events where the contents are displayed the same way regardless of speed: our memory records it "out of time" and our consciousness reconstructs the movement.<sup>9</sup> The nonevolutionary status of the sound does indeed separate content from duration. Brian O'Doherty's thinking must have been influenced by Bergson when he described the effect of Feldman's music on the perception of time:

"Real" time then, its literal passage, is used to denote a convention of time, a fabrication. Time is used to destroy time. The resulting stasis is what opens the way to -the spatial idea. And in turn the spatial idea more or less suggests simultaneity, the possibility of seeing all the piece at once. Here we have telescopic reciprocities occurring between wholes and parts. And this implies a control of remembering and forgetting, or rather a prompting to forget. I get the idea occasionally that time is being reversed and cut up, bits of the future interspersing bits of the past (entirely acceptable if you spatialize time). Therefore, though one knows more or less where the sounds may be coming from, one does not know where one is. This may to some extent explain the feeling one has in Feldman's music of an exact and maddening superimposition of logic and enigma.<sup>10</sup>

What remains is sound as structure, while form is generalized; or, as simply stated by Christian Wolff, "Form in music could be taken as a length of program time."<sup>11</sup>

In the present context, it is easy to understand why sound itself did not come forth as an uncompromisable and structural entity in Western music until this century, most noticeably in the early experimental music of the fifties. Actual sonorities, though often very carefully constructed, were rarely elevated to structural status—to stand alone as sound. I like to believe that, in special areas of Beethoven's late piano sonatas (Op. 111, for example), his brief excursions, as they transcended the formal limits, were more about sound and less about progression. Also, repetition in the late nineteenth century often appeared to be generated out of variety in sonority and a growing awareness of nuance. But the idea content of music was transferable to other combinations of instruments.\*

An expansion of the limits of sonority by extending the resources of sound does not constitute sound as structure. We are not simply looking at new orchestration methods

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\* Actually, Schoenberg was successful in using sound as sound in No. 3 of the Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16 (1909).

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for composition, but new compositional issues fabricated from sound. Varèse called for a reevaluation of sound and noise as an enrichment of sonority; he shared this basic premise with the Italian futurists. He did not orchestrate pitches as much as he built sonorities in the musical space by linear stratification. Both Stravinsky and Feldman were known to compose at the piano. However, Feldman's instrumental works cannot exist musically as piano reductions, though



the *Rite of Spring* and *L'Histoire du Soldat* do. For Feldman, the piano consists of eighty-eight different sonorities (rather than a transposable system of twelve pitch-classes), each of which acts as a reference to range, not to linear goals. As he selected chords, he committed instruments for each sonority; the piano never interprets or interferes. In this way, the actual instrumentation of a work was sometimes not definite until the last sonority was written (e.g., *The Viola in My Life, IV*, 1971, where a piano enters for the first time on the last sonority of the piece).\*

Feldman's approach is totally intuitive. He treats the page like a canvas, filling the flat musical space with sounds of minimum attack and dynamics—blurring their source, never looking back or thinking ahead. Cage generally suppressed self-expression and allowed the inclusion of the environment as well as simultaneous performances of his pieces (e.g., *Cartridge Music*, 1960; *Atlas Eclipticalis*, 1961-62; and *Winter Music*, 1957). Earle Brown leaned more toward conceptualism, assigning a transitory position to the musical elements in the score that constantly move through the time/space continuum. Few constraints on pitch, tempo, instrumentation, direction, time, form, or space are fixed until the performance (e.g., *Folio*, 1952-53; *Four Systems*, 1953). Brown preferred the communicative relationship between performer and composer. The spontaneity that results at both the compositional and performance levels shows a profound influence of Pollock, while the “mobility” of the spatial proportions and subjective time schemes in his later scores reveal Brown's interest in Calder. Christian Wolff, like Brown, explores the sensibilities of performers, but his is a type of social communication among players. He supplies material in the score that may consist of musical fragments, graphic indications, printed instructions, or metaphorical outlines; some being very restrictive, others quite free (*Burdocks*, 1971; *Stones*, 1968). One performer is directed toward a specific situation that is dependent on what he/she hears from another player, or in multiplicity performers become responsive as a group without particularly realizing just how they are affecting one another.

Liberation of the musical elements was accomplished, of course, by new attitudes toward the process of composition. Cage's withdrawal from the decision-making process

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\* Feldman has often advised that when it comes to defining the instruments at your disposal, “think of yourself as a millionaire”

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through the use of chance procedures to answer questions about the material, and his Zen-like affinity for time, sound, and art/life, nonetheless, describe a “method” or “nonmethod.” In the early chance pieces (e.g., *Music of Changes*, 1951) the asking of questions is done at the compositional level; the score is a transcript of that procedure; and the performance, for the most part, is fixed. The process is completed before its realization and not perceived by the listener. This applies to most serial music since Webern as well. In common practice music the process is also transcribed on the score, but presumably the listener can hear it during an intelligent performance. The unified transmission between composer, performer, and listener undoubtedly peaked during the highly developmental and variational styles of the mature classical period. In 1955 Cage took quite the opposite view of this communications link: “Composing's one thing,

performing's another, listening's a third. What can they have to do with one another?"<sup>12</sup>

In *Cartridge Music* we do in fact see a twofold removal of listener from composer. Cage supplied the materials and instructions from which each performer makes his or her own part for the realization of a performance. The sound-producing media, which are amplified through phonograph cartridges and contact microphones, are freely chosen by players who also make changes in intensity and tone on the amplifiers throughout the entire piece. As the performers follow their parts to determine when to produce sounds, they may accidentally reinforce or cancel sounds of others while controlling intensity. Thus, a spontaneous, indeterminant situation among performers arises over and above that initially supplied by the composer—a condition that Cage has continued to seek in recent works (e.g., *49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs*, 1977). It is also interesting to point out that in his collaborations with Merce Cunningham, Cage's music is produced independently from the choreography. The two meet only at the performance.

For Feldman, process at any level is not an issue: "There was a deity in my life, and that was sound. Everything else was after the fact. All 'realization' was after the fact. Process was after the fact."<sup>13</sup> As early as 1950, he used squares in graphic notation to specify approximate ranges of sounds in a time grid: "My desire here was not to 'compose,' but to project sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric that had no place here."<sup>14</sup> Later he abandoned graph music because of the freedom it gave performers—not the freedom to produce sound, but to place phrases in continuity. He needed to remove that continuity from the performers' options in order to uphold his nonconceptual approach to sound. It was less a question of when sounds occurred in time than *where* they appeared in time/space. This led to his use of "free durational" music, where all the pitch material is specified, though unbound by metrics. In *Piece For Four Pianos* (1957), all four players perform from the same part at their own rate creating a beautiful, loose echoing, The

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performers do not consciously interact with each other; the shape of the piece itself comes out of its sonic identity. Free durational notation was also employed by Cage (e.g., *Etudes Australes*, 1974). Feldman's lack of concern for how things were made, a sensibility heightened by his close association with, among others, Guston, Rothko, Kline, and Motherwell continued to dominate his "method" of composition.

Earle Brown moved from the almost content-free pieces of the early fifties (*Folio*, *Four Systems*), where performers made nearly all the decisions, to a structural type of "open form" where the score contains flexible, composed segments. *Available Forms I* (1961) takes on form when the identifiable content of the mobile score is given an overall shape by the conductor and players. *Corroboree* (1964) comes, in essence, with a closed form, i.e., a fixed sequence of interpretable events. Brown articulates the performers' position regarding process:

As to *Form* in particular in my open form works, I have primarily asked that the form be left open until it is necessarily closed and the material formed by responses and actions within the performing process itself—*per-forming* rather than *pre-forming*. I have not, however, prohibited pre-thinking and planning of various

kinds in relation to a performance of the materials. It is obviously not sensible nor desirable to expect no-mind in the process; and, in fact, the endless extensions of combinatorial possibilities, both before and during the performing, are intensely mindful.<sup>15</sup>

Here, an identity emerges that is quite different from Feldman's. Both process and realization are definable in a work, though they may vary in repeated performances.

Christian Wolff, the youngest composer of this group, began his association with Cage and Feldman in late 1950 at the age of sixteen. His fundamental musical activity took shape in the luxury of this free environment. Accordingly, the early music (e.g., *For Piano I*, 1952) dealt with a limited number of pitches, durations, and dynamics (Weberian influence), which were selected by the composer. Their sequencing in time was determined by chance processes. As he moved toward interaction among performers (e.g., *Summer*, for String Quartet, 1961), a collective process became the determining factor in the unfolding of events. The events are made up in varying lengths and are repeatable. Process involves how the players decide to start events, or how they follow by listening for the beginning of a part. Wolff explains this relationship: "People sometimes ask, why don't you specify what you want and be done with it? I do! Actions are indicated more directly and simply. Their results, the sound and rhythm of these pieces (the rhythm, for instance, produced when one no longer knows where one is) could, as far as I know, be brought about in no other way. It's as though you take a walk with a friend or friends, going by whatever ways you like, agreeing on the way, with a direction in mind or getting lost or going nowhere in particular

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and you are absorbed by this: the landscape in which they walk is given."<sup>16</sup>

We know that Zen is a way of life rather than a religion. For Cage, chance is more of a philosophy (life) or aesthetic than a compositional device. His process lies not in answers but in questions. Brown continues to search for identity through creative spontaneity. Wolff's social, collective attitudes in respect to performance have led him recently into pieces whose contents are inspired by political causes. In Feldman's music, self expression translates into each sonority as feeling and is entirely nonsystemic; compositional process would be a burden. It is clear that these four composers fill the time/space continuum with events in ways that promote a free creativity, as opposed to a musical structure. The processes set in motion allow for the occurrence of events as individual elements or groups of elements without directing our perception toward formal boundaries.

An attempt to evaluate the profound influences of this experimental group on subsequent generations of composers would require another essay. However, a number of relevant observations are possible. Cage's belief that performers should be physically freed in space (i.e., be allowed to spread out on the stage or performing area, even disseminate among the audience) shares an affinity with theater in that his indeterminate performances eliminate the purpose of a regimented ensemble. His concern with mixed media (theater, film, dance, electronics, etc.) stems from works in the thirties. In 1952 at Black Mountain College he produced the first modern-day happening with David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg,

among others. Since then, visual aspects have continued to enter into his works (e.g., *HPSCHD*, 1969). Intermedia works were quite the rage of the sixties, most noticeably in groups such as the *Sonic Arts Union* (Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma), and *Musica Elettronica Viva* (*MEV*: Alvin Curran, Frederic Rzewski, Richard Teitelbaum), and movements like FLUXUS (George Brecht, Dick Higgins, George Maciunas, La Monte Young). Indeterminacy, in one form or another, became a popular prerequisite, as did conceptualism (with roots in Duchamp, Cage, Brown, and Wolff) and minimalism (inherent in Feldman's aesthetic, though not necessarily explicit in his music, and the stasis of Webern's controlled variation).

Cage's conviction that theater is not to be separated from music ("listeners also have eyes") has perhaps been carried to its greatest extreme by the FLUXUS composers. George Brecht, formerly a painter and a student of Cage at the New School for Social Research in 1958, brings performance to the fringes of dada and conceptualism, as the following exercise demonstrates.

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#### TWO EXERCISES

Consider an object. Call what is not the object "other."

Exercise: Add to the object, from the "other," another object, to form a new object and a new "other." Repeat until there is no more "other."

EXERCISE: Take a part from the object and add it to the "other," to form a new object and a new "other." Repeat until there is no more object.<sup>17</sup>

Pauline Oliveros uses meditation to link a conceptual performance directly to an inner consciousness—a midway point in that inner psyche described by Jung.

*Pauline Oliveros, Sonic Meditations*

V:

*Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.\**

Her instructions, which describe a mood of sensitivity instead of an idea for realization, extend beyond the performable context that Wolff prescribes in selections from *Burdocks*:

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*At least fifteen players in an orchestra. Each player chooses one to three sounds, fairly quiet. Using one of these each time, play as simultaneously as possible with the next sound of the player nearest you; then with the next sound of the next nearest player; then with the next nearest after him, and so forth until you have played with all the other players (in your orchestra, or if so determined beforehand, with all players present), ending with the player farthest away from you.*

X

*Flying, and possibly crawling or sitting still.†*

Of the above pieces, the Oliveros work and *Burdocks X* can be interpreted as a type of prose music that communicates immediately with the reader (listener). Realization of the concept is complete, with or without musical execution. La Monte Young goes even further by solely indicating real literary images:

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*Piano Piece for David Tudor #3* (November 14, 1960)

most of them  
were very old grasshoppers\*

Prose music and actual text-sound composition have been explored vigorously by Cage (e.g., *45' for a speaker*, 1954-55; *Sixty-Two Mesostics re Merce Cunningham*, for amplified voice, 1971; *Empty Words*, 1974-75; etc.) and by Wolff (*You Blew it*, 1971).† *Empty Words* for solo speaker consists of four 2 1/2-hour sections—a total of ten hours—and is perhaps the most extreme example of using elements of language as sound (outside the context of linguistic meaning). Cage subjected the entire *Journal of Thoreau* to a series of chance operations. Letters, syllables, words, phrases, sentences, silences, punctuation, and every aspect of selection and placement, were chosen by consulting the *I Ching* through a list of questions. Successive sections systematically eliminate these elements from the choice process, until the fourth section simply contains letters and silences as sound material. *Empty Words* reminds us that the multiplicity implied in Cage's processes of composition also allows singularity in objects, which is in line with the all-inclusive premise.

The minimalists of the sixties rejected the multiplicity of indeterminacy for the “oneness” of drones and simple repetition (Eastern influences), tuning themselves to the most subtle nuances of sound. La Monte Young's long performances would often consist only of singing or playing with a single interval, usually generated electronically (e.g., *Drift Study*). This heightened sensitivity surely was evident in Cage's openness to sound and Feldman's impeccably beautiful sonority. The variety of perceptible nuances increases in minimal music; the listener has the time to focus on the single sound source, its actual production, and its interaction with interference patterns, audience ambience, atmosphere, and room acoustics (an excellent example is Alvin Lucier's *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, 1977). Repeated performances of some minimal pieces may result in a variety of outcomes, given these conditions. Therefore, minimalism identifies with music that is indeterminate with respect to its performance.

The early repetitive works of the mid-sixties belonged to the minimal concept of stasis created by patterns. Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) contains fifty-three motives, varying in length from very short to very long, which oscillate around C. The players have the flexibility to decide where, when, and how to enter with motives and how many times to repeat them, but at the same time they must be sensitive to the progress of the rest of the ensemble.

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\* © 1963 by La Monte Young.

† Text pieces, of course, have roots in the experimental literary works of writers such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, and the early sound poems of dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters and Tristan Tzara. Text-sound continues to flourish in the works of recent composers, most noticeably by Robert Ashley and Charles Amirkhanian.



Riley thus implants a type of formal control along with the completely determinate source material. Philip Glass projects process directly on the surface by extending the initial motives with a systematic, additive rhythmic technique (e.g., *Music in Fifths*, 1969). In *Music with Changing Parts* (1971) he frees the unfolding of the process slightly by allowing his performers to change parts (if they so desire) at specific points throughout the seventy-five-minute piece. Recently, Glass has coordinated clear cadences with the rhythmic grids in a totally controlled process (e.g., *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976). He feels that a very direct tonal progression is necessary, so as not to remove the listener's focus from the logical spinning-out of the form. This idea of using time lengths as the basis of musical construction is naturally reminiscent of Cage, though in Glass's case the cadential progression is of prime importance.

Both Glass and Steve Reich have discouraged outside performances of their works. They insist that the high degree of control in their compositional procedures demands a strictly trained, quality ensemble that must rehearse regularly. Reich also views his pieces as processes; processes that are heard, not compositional processes that simply supply the musical material. Reich initially set up basic motives or ideas that would be repeated by multiple players for long periods of time. The motive first appears in unison and then gradually separates as each individual line proceeds to get faster than the original; this was done electronically (as in *Come Out*, 1966) or mechanically by performers (as in *Phase Patterns*, 1970). The "out of phase" effect creates a myriad of resultant patterns and cross rhythms that the listener perceives as "metamusic," a phenomenon created by the brain's perception of unique patterns from groups of pitches in close-range proximity, all of which emanate from quick, repeated melodies. This contrapuntal interaction from a single line was certainly understood by earlier composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach, who often employed this technique in his solo violin partitas and sonatas to generate harmonic function. In 1971 Reich began to add instruments for the purpose of reinforcing the metapatterns heard in *Drumming*. These resultant patterns are also evident in Glass's fast, undulating melodic material without the use of Reich's phasing process. Reich has since abandoned "phase music," but continues to use patterns in rich sonic textures. Like Glass, he too has recently consolidated harmony and form in his works (e.g., *Music for 18 Musicians*, 1976). Riley continues to improvise patterns around drones with added tape (now digital) delay (e.g., *Shri Camel* for just-intoned electronic organ, 1977).

Indeterminacy still plays a role in the performance of even the most controlled process music of Reich and Glass, as the metamusic may vary with articulation of the melodic patterns from performance to performance. The use of tonality, witnessed in much recent

music, shows a new concern for an accessibility to the listener, though the present interest in art rock and new wave music undoubtedly can be credited as an influence on young composers. This must not be misconstrued, however, as a return to tonality. The

new direct, transparent harmonic explorations could not have appeared without the experiments and aesthetics of the fifties and sixties. Perhaps it represents a modern realism and expressionism that seems to have gained currency in the literary and visual arts as well. Robert Ashley, whose new video opera *Perfect Lives*, 1981 (Private Parts), deals with contemporary social realism, provides us with some insight: “The *imaging* of aural—as distinct from ‘tonal’—comprehension (to derive specific *images*, as in dream, from aural patterns) is the condition of *déjà-vu*, or time confusion. The effect gets watered down, but can be prolonged better, as the aural patterns are more specifically tonal.”<sup>18</sup>

Today, owing to the progressive attitudes and contributions of four New York composers, music can enjoy a pluralism that is unprecedented in the history of the Western world. John Cage, quoting Charles Ives, accepts this vitality with pleasure:

“What music is and is to be may be somewhere in the belief of an unknown philosopher of a half a century ago who said, ‘How can there be any bad music? All music is from heaven. If there is anything bad in it, I put it there—by my implications and limitations. Nature builds the mountains and meadows and man puts in the fences and labels.’ The fences have come down and the labels are being removed. An up-to-date aquarium has all the fish swimming together in one huge tank.”<sup>19</sup>

We must all feel free to share in this optimism. Life demands it from our art.

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  4. Satie’s own description of *Furniture Music* is quoted in Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 168-9.
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EDITION X RECORDINGS.

*23 VIII 64 2:50:45-3:11 AM the volga delta.*

La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, bowed gong.

EDITION X RECORDINGS.

*13 I 73 5:35-6:14.03 PM NYC from Map of 49's Dream The Two*

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