

The music

John Cage (1912-1992) *Sonatas & Interludes for prepared piano* (1946-48)

*Sonatas I-IV ~ First Interlude ~ Sonatas V-VIII ~
Second Interlude ~ Third Interlude ~ Sonatas IX-XII ~
Fourth Interlude ~ Sonatas XIII-XVI*

Cage invites us to listen, something we do both day and night yet rarely pay attention to. When we do pay attention, our listening can delight, surprise, trouble, repel or attract us. It's never dull, especially when we let go of preconceptions of how music is supposed to go, or what a piano is supposed to sound like.

If we listen carefully to the *Sonatas & Interludes*, three things are likely to strike us. The first, unmistakably, is the sound world. Cage presents us with a garden of sonic delights, furred silences, aromatic chimes, jewelled trilling, muted thunder, whispered tremolos. He improvised with this instrument, selecting sounds "as one chooses shells while walking along a beach." At one level, then, these pieces are like a child's (or adult's) treasure box, a *Wunderkammer* – or proto-museum – in miniature.

The unmistakable feel of dance, second, is often in the background. Phrases stretch their sinews. Musical figures, lithe in their suppleness, ripple in passages. The pianist's wrists and finger-work bounce gracefully or tap pirouettes in jaunty nonchalance. Yet these dances are not those of the European Baroque, the gigue, sarabandes and minuetts that were refashioned as musical suites and provided early models for the sonata.

And here we are. Alongside all these charms, there is an ever-present sense of form, even if this is not sonata form in the classical sense. Aside from two sonatas – one for clarinet, the other for two voices – written in 1933, aged 21, these are Cage's only works titled *Sonatas*. While he improvised in fishing for sounds, the structure is deliberate – as might be expected of someone who studied with Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles.

Let's take each of these aspects in turn.

What is a "prepared piano"? Cage's invention is a piano with subtle and quite precise modifications. By inserting small bolts, screws, rubber and plastic between the strings in designated places along their length, this pre-eminent instrument of the classical repertoire – an orchestra in miniature (as piano

transcriptions make plain) – is transformed into a percussion ensemble. It becomes a veritable "black box", its secret interior made both more mysterious and seductive. Isn't the piano's mechanism always sublimated, its audible presence usually a problem – a sign of imperfect tuning, faulty dampers, indiscreet pedals announcing their activation? Here we have the contrary. Rather than a mechanism, an object manufactured for instrumental control, we encounter a living thing. Unlike a piano whose "voice" is meticulously refined according to make and model – Steinway D, Yamaha C3X etc – so that all are alike, a piano prepared shows its uniqueness, a product of its materials, age, weight, and history of use. Playing a prepared piano requires skill and virtuosity, but not "mastery" exactly, for this is a duet, a *pas de deux* between equals. The pianist not only prepares the piano; she prepares herself in the process of preparing the piano, which requires acute listening. Does this piece of rubber want to go here or...no, up a bit, ah, yes, now that sounds right!

Cage "invented" the prepared piano from necessity. Asked to compose music by the African-American dancer Syvilla Fort for her piece *Bacchanale* (1940), for which she wanted an African "inflection", he was unable to use a percussion ensemble as he had been doing (along with varispeed turntables), because the stage wings were too cramped. There was, however, a small piano, and he was aware of various ways in which others modified the instrument to achieve innovative results. An early mentor, Henry Cowell, had invented the "string piano" in the early 1920s with pieces such as *The Banshee* (1925) requiring the performer to resonate the strings directly, without using the keys, for uncanny effects. New Orleans "hot jazz" players muted strings by applying paper between or on top of the strings to simulate a banjo or old saloon piano, while Bach Societies pressed thumb tacks into piano hammers to approximate a harpsichord when none was available – an intervention much more dramatic than those Cage introduced! (To try Cage's preparations at home, the simplest way is to download the "CagePiano" app to your phone, where you can play with recordings of the sounds.)

Over the next eight years, the prepared piano became Cage's primary instrument, often for work with dancers. Fort graduated from studies at the Cornish School, Seattle, with Bonnie Bird, herself a protégée of the celebrated pioneer of Modern Dance, Martha Graham. Cage taught modern music to dancers at the Cornish School and was part of this milieu. It was here that he met, collaborated with, and fell headlong in love with Merce Cunningham. (Cage's letters, published by Laura Kuhn as *Love, Icebox*, give a tender and thrilling sense of their early

relationship, and Cage's dependence on the man seven years his junior.) By February 1944, Cage's infatuation led to his wife, Xenia, taking her leave in an amicable divorce. The composer and choreographer went on to form perhaps the most significant of all artistic partnerships, given their subsequent influence on dance, music and arts worldwide.

The *Sonatas & Interludes* (1946-48) began as a shorter commission – comprising the first four sonatas – from the Armenian-American pianist Maro Ajemian, known at the time for her championing of music by fellow Armenians Aram Khachaturian and Alan Hovhanness. The prototype was, perhaps, *Amores* (1943), Cage's first piece for prepared piano not intended for dance, in which he had attempted "to express in combination the erotic and the tranquil, two of the permanent emotions of the Indian tradition." He had been approached by Gita Sarabhai – daughter of the Gujarati industrialist and supporter of Gandhi, Ambalal Sarabhai – to teach her about the new music, which he did in exchange for lessons on Indian music and philosophy. It was from Sarabhai and Ananda Coomaraswamy – to whose work she introduced him – that Cage learned that the purpose of music is "to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences." The *Sonatas & Interludes*, Cage noted, aimed "to express in music the nine 'permanent emotions' [*rasas*] of Indian tradition: the heroic, the erotic, the wondrous, the mirthful, sorrow, fear, anger, the odious and their common tendency toward tranquility."

These do not map onto specific sonatas but can be heard as guiding qualities of the form of the whole, in particular their "common tendency". Cage distinguished between musical structure – the division of the whole into parts – and form, understood as "content, the continuity." The structure is indicated in the title: *Sonatas* – in four groups of four – are set apart by *Interludes* in a symmetrical relation, inverted at the mid-point: sonatas, interlude, sonatas, interlude, interlude, sonatas, interlude, sonatas. As James Pritchett has shown, the sonatas are mostly in binary form, with both halves repeated, the exceptions being *Sonatas IX-XI*, which are ternary (ABBCC, AABBC, AABCC). The first two *Interludes* are through-composed, rhapsodic, almost extemporaneous, while the last two are in four repeated parts (AABBCDD). The whole is organised so that proportions governing the rhythmic sub-division of phrases are the same as those applied to large sections, like a fractal.

The *formal* reason for this, the principle of continuity and content, was Cage's concern for musical time, which was never "purely musical" but always social – like this concert, in fact. In modern European music, the tonal logic of harmonic motion had

driven musical “progress.” Composers had felt obliged to build on the advances made by the previous generation. For example, the young Arnold Schoenberg understood it as necessary – to avoid historical backsliding – to take a step beyond the harmonic language of Wagner, whose music stretched into hours as the gravity of the tonal centre determining the relation of consonance and dissonance began losing traction. Atonality was not the antithesis of tonal music but an extension of its centrifugal logic to the point at which harmonic motion no longer felt motivated by a tonal centre, even at a distant orbit. Indeed, it did not need to be in “motion” at all. By the 1940s, after studying with Schoenberg (c.1935-37), Cage came to appreciate that the static quality of much new music resulting from this shift gave it an affinity with “the larger part of the music which has been made on this planet, since it includes all oriental music [and] all of the early and middle music of our culture.” The tendency was “towards a fusion of cultures.”

In the *Sonatas & Interludes*, the structural repetitions are deliberately blurred to effect a sense of continuity, a sense of purpose not predestined by tonal logic but having a “tendency toward tranquility.” Why “tranquility”? The Western musical world of harmonic structure was in a state of collapse, Cage claimed in 1949: “the problem of a composer in a musical world in this state is to supply another structural means, just as in a bombed-out-city the opportunity to build again exists. This way one finds courage and a sense of necessity.” Like Dresden, perhaps, or Hiroshima or Nagasaki, building new musical means for living well required a different approach, one in which, to echo Dipesh Chakrabarty’s proposition for history-writing beyond a European gaze, harmony was “provincialized.”

Writing in *A Composer’s Confession*, Cage observed:

“Being involved in the complexities of a nation at war and a city in business-as-usual led me to know that there is a difference between large things and small things, between big organisations and two people alone in a room together. [...] My feeling was that beauty yet remains in intimate situations; that it is quite hopeless to think and act impressively in public terms. This attitude is escapist, but I believe that it is wise rather than foolish to escape from a bad situation. I now saw harmony [...] as a device to make music impressive, loud and big, in order to enlarge audiences and increase box-office returns. It had been avoided by the Orient, and our earlier Christian society, since they were interested in music not as an aid in the acquisition of money and fame, but rather as a handmaiden to pleasure and religion.”

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Programme Notes

KATE RYDER

John Cage and the Prepared Piano



8pm, Wednesday October 7th, 2026
Little Missenden Church

66th Little Missenden Festival

Why “tranquility”? Here we are, in St John the Baptist, Little Missenden, a site of meditation and repose away from conflict and violence. In these times, as Cage noted in the same *Confession*,

“Each one of us must now look to himself [*sic*]. That which formerly held us together and gave meaning to our occupations was our belief in God. When we transferred this belief first to heroes, then to things, we began to walk our separate paths. That island that we have grown to think no longer exists to which we might have retreated to escape from the impact of the world, lies, as it ever did, within each one of our hearts. Towards *that final tranquillity which today we so desperately need*, any integrating occupation – and music is one of them, rightly used – can serve as a guide. [Emphasis added.]”

Note by Ed McKeon

The artist

Kate Ryder *prepared piano*

“My journey through this extraordinary piece 'Sonatas & Interludes', has been a very personal one, spanning several decades and crossing many countries and cultures. Since first encountering Cage's magical sound world of the Prepared Piano as a student, this work has come to bear influence on much of my own aesthetic and output, with further exploration of this unique instrument through improvisation and performances in unusual spaces, and by introducing new generations to its wonders. The act of preparing a piano is in itself a highly creative one, as every instrument and every performer will produce a slightly different effect and no two performances will sound alike. To create such a rich palette of sounds - bells, soft mutes and rattles (a process which can take up to two hours) - is to enter the mind and spirit of the composer. To have the opportunity to perform this iconic 20th-century music at the Little Missenden Festival in the beautiful, ancient setting of St John the Baptist Church, is to experience a fascinating juxtaposition of the very old with the very new, bringing a further dimension to the work for performer and audience alike”.

Kate's wide-ranging experience as a pianist encompasses solo work, improvisation and collaborations in dance, electronics and theatre, where she has established herself as a versatile and original performer. She has had many works created for her by composers in the UK and abroad.

She has a particular interest in working with unusual keyboard instruments including toy pianos, and the prepared piano, commissioning new repertoire, performing, recording and giving workshops on these unique instruments. As an improviser she works in a variety of contexts, co-founding several ensembles combining the prepared piano with other instruments – the harpsichord, the violin, the Dan Tranh (Vietnamese zither) and sonic art. She has held several residencies in the UK and abroad and has toured widely, taking her projects and instruments to festivals in America, Australia, Europe, Russia and Scandinavia.

As an experienced educator, Kate teaches chamber music courses at Morley College and is a Lecturer in Performance and Composition at Middlesex University.

kateryder.co.uk

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