John Cage and Experimental Music

If asked to name one person who has been the most important influence on avant-garde music in the last half of the 20th century, our answer unquestionably would be “John Cage.” Cage’s originality and ideas will resonate throughout our entire course. In this lesson we listen to a few pieces that illustrate various stages in his musical development.

1. Read the Wikipedia article about John Cage. You will need information in this article to help answer many of the questions in this lesson.
   - With what famous composer did Cage study? What vow did Cage make that convinced the composer to give the lessons for free? Why did Cage eventually quit?
   - Why was his stint at the Cornish School of the Arts in Seattle important to him? What did he accomplish there? What musical instrument did he invent?
   - What kind of crisis did Cage experience in the mid-1940s? What did he turn to and how did this influence the Sonatas and Interludes, some of which you will listen to for this assignment.
   - What did Cage discover in the 1950s that had a major influence on his compositional methods? In the early 1950s, what became Cage’s standard tool for composition and how did he use it?
   - Among other things, Cage composed several “Variations” pieces in the late 1950s and 1960s. The Wikipedia article says that these were in fact “happenings,” an art form that Cage and his students had established earlier. What are happenings? Why are they more than merely musical compositions?
   - Cage’s “Experimental Composition” classes in New York inspired the Fluxus movement. What was Fluxus? We will hear more of this group as we move through the course.

2. “The Future of Music: Credo” and “Imaginary Landscape No. 3”
   - Listen to the first piece in this lesson, “Imaginary Landscape No. 3” and watch the YouTube video of a 2008 performance of the piece.
   - “Imaginary Landscape No. 3” was composed in 1942 when Cage was writing music for percussion chamber groups. What does Cage have to say about percussion music in “The Future of Music: Credo”?
   - Compare Cage’s definition of music and noise with that of Varèse?
   - Read only the upper case letters. What does Cage say about his belief in noise? What does he predict will happen as the use of noise to make music increases and continues? Where do you here examples of this in “Imaginary Landscape No. 3”?
   - What criticism does Cage make of how musicians and composers have used the theremin?
   - Cage wrote “The Future of Music: Credo” in 1937, several years before Schaeffer or Stockhausen started work on musique concrète or electronische musik. How did Cage anticipate Schaeffer’s and Stockhausen’s work?
   - Recall the music of Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, or Satie, to which we listened on the first day. Music like “Imaginary Landscape No. 3” is a radical break with the past. Why is this? How is it so different than what others had done before?
3. Read section from *The New Music* about John Cage (pp 121 – 132).

- In the section about Cage, what does Brindle say about the new listening attitude that Cage’s pieces demand?
  - What does he mean by this?
  - How does it apply to some of the later Cage recordings to which we have listened today: *Williams Mix* or *Variations V*, for example?
- How does Brindle compare this new listening attitude with the approach to some of Cage’s writing?
  - Does this apply to “The Future of Music: Credo,” which we have read for today?
- Brindle comments that Cage gradually disengaged himself from musical definition per se.
  - What eventually became his concern?
  - Watch the YouTube video of a performance of *Variations V*. How is Brindle’s observation illustrated by this video?
- What does Brindle say about Cage’s musical influence?

4. *Sonatas and Interludes*

- The *Sonatas and Interludes* were composed for the prepared piano, the next phase in Cage’s music. What is a prepared piano? What kind of continuity is there between Cage’s prepared piano music and his percussion music?
- What are the usual ways that Western music is structured? During his percussion and prepared piano periods, Cage’s music was highly structured, just not in the usual way. His music had a macrocosmic-microcosmic structure, which frequently is very difficult to hear because it involves fractions of measures.
- Listen carefully to “Sonata No. 4,” which is one of the more approachable of the sonatas or interludes because it has a relatively simple 3:3:2:2 structure. The macrocosmic structure is shown below. We also have indicated the microcosmic structure for the first 30 measures, which are divided into a 3:3:2:2 structure yet again
  - 30 measures \(0:00 – 1:13\)
    - 9 measures \(0.00 – 0.21\)
    - 9 measures \(0.22 – 0.42\)
    - 6 measures \(0.43 – 0.57\)
    - 6 measures \(0.58 – 1:13\)
  - Same 30 measures repeated \(1:14 – 2:29\)
  - 20 measures \(2:30 – 3:18\)
  - Same 20 measures repeated \(3:19 – 4:07\)

The microcosmic measures are not repeated, but often are related to each other. For instance, the first 9 measures begin with a slow phrase and end with two phrases of short notes in measures 7 and 9. The second 9 measures begin with a rest and then a slow phrase with one short fast phrase in measure 7.

The 20 measure section \(2:30 – 3:18\) also has a microcosmic structure \(6:6:4:4\).
- What similarity do you hear between the first 6 measures \(2:30 – 2:42\) and the second 6 measures \(2:43 – 2:55\)?
- What about the first 4 measures \(2:55 – 3:06\) and second 4 measures \(3:07 – 3:18\)?

If you look at the score for this sonata, the microcosmic structure appears to go down another level, which we will not explore here. The important point is that Cage’s music in this period is highly structured – just not in the way other composers had used before him.
5. Experimental Music

- Read “Indeterminancy, Chance, and Aleatory Music” and “Improvisation – Graphic Scores – Text Scores” in *The New Music*.
  - What is “indeterminancy” as the term relates to music composition? How is indeterminancy a major break with total (or integral) serialism?
  - Did indeterminancy begin first in America or Europe? What American composer was most responsible for the rise and spread of indeterminancy in composing?
- Read “Experimental Musics” and “Towards (a Definition of) Experimental Music” in *Audio Culture*.
  - In “Experimental Musics,” the authors quote John Cage’s definition of experimental music. What did Cage say? How do the authors describe how an experimental “composer” designs his or her pieces?
  - How do indeterminate works fit with Cage’s definition?
  - The authors of “Experimental Musics” describe the aesthetics involved in indeterminancy and 1960s experimental music. How are the two aesthetics different?
- In “Towards (a Definition of) Experimental Music,” Nyman begins with a famous piece “written” by John Cage as a practical instance of experimental music.
  - What is the name of this piece?
  - What does the performer do during the performance of this piece?
  - Why is this piece so famous or, as some would say, infamous?
  - Why does Nyman say he has selected this piece to begin his article?
- Nyman describes the processes used by experimental composers. What are these processes. What new demands does experimental music place on performers that traditional music does not?
- Two recordings of traditional music, Beethoven’s 9th Symphony for example, will sound basically the same. Will this be true for two recordings of a piece of experimental music? Why or why not?
- How do the scores illustrated in Chapter 9 of *The New Music* play a part in experimental music?

6. “Williams Mix”

- Listen to *Williams Mix*.
- Read the “Cut Time” blog entry about the construction of *Williams Mix*. What kind of sounds are used in this tape piece? How did Cage put it together in 1952? How long did it take?
- How is *Williams Mix* a piece of musique concrète? Identify some of these sounds you hear.
- What is the *I Ching*? What is so revolutionary about the way Cage composed *Williams Mix*?
- In “Experimental Musics,” the authors of *Audio Culture* define “experimental music” as the aesthetic was used to describe vanguard music in the 1960s. Is *William’s Mix* “experimental music” according to this definition? Why or why not?
- Before he became famous, Cage lived “hand to mouth,” by the way. He was seriously concerned about dying from starvation during the long time it took to put *Williams Mix* together. Being in the avant garde generally is not a pathway to great wealth!
7. Variations IV and V
- Listen to the announcer introducing Variations IV and the selection from Variations IV.
- Watch the YouTube video of a performance of Variations V.
- How was Variations IV composed and performed?
- What sounds do you hear in the excerpt? How is Variations IV a piece of musique concrète?
- Is Variations IV “experimental music” according to the aesthetic discussed above? Why or why not?
- In the Variations V video the two men sitting in front of the bank of tape recorders are Cage (foreground) and David Tudor. Who was David Tudor and what was his relationship with Cage?
- This video is an example of an important aspect of Cage’s work, his contributions to modern dance. The main dancer featured in the video is Merce Cunningham, the world-renowned dancer and choreographer who died last July. What was Cunningham’s relationship with Cage?

8. Compare Cage and Stockhausen
- Both composers began with 12-tone music (Cage studied with Schoenberg, for example) but moved beyond simple serialism. How did their paths differ as their compositional methods developed?
- What did they feel about sounds and noises?
- Compare their concepts of music and approaches to composition.
- Compare their music. How are their compositions different and how are they the same?
- Which one was more “experimental” according to the definition discussed in question 9.

9. Compare Cage and Partch. It may help to review the earlier reading on “The Maverick Core.”
- How were their backgrounds similar?
- Both were considered radicals at the time, but one was more in line with the artistic trends of their time? Which one? How so?
- Compare their concepts of music and approaches to composition.
- Compare the influences of Eastern and Western music on the two composers.
- Which one was more theoretical and which one more pragmatic?

10. Read the section on John Cage in pp 26 – 35 of Avant Rock
- Why does Martin write that he has included a discussion of John Cage in a book on rock music? What influence has Cage had on rock musicians?

11. In this course we will follow five general trends that characterize most, if not all, of the ways that the avant-garde music has influenced popular music. Which of these trends do we begin to hear in this lesson?
- Simplicity
- Decomposition of Musical Structure
- Electronic Music
- Noise as Music
- Pastiche