

## Revision Notes:

### NAM 10 – Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano; Sonatas I-III, John Cage

Cage – “An inventor of genius”

#### The composer

Cage studied composition with Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss and Arnold Schoenberg. In the 1930s he began working as a rehearsal pianist with dance companies, probably sparking his interest in rhythm above melody and harmony. He subsequently started writing for ensembles of percussion instruments, a genre which few composers had explored before.

In the late 1940s, Cage became interested in the Zen Buddhist philosophy of adapting to the world rather than trying to shape it – he tried to reduce the importance of the compose, seeking to find music in life and the environment – hence his use of silence and an element of randomness, inspired by the Chinese ‘Book of Changes’ or I-Ching. His most famous piece 4’33’ requires the performers to sit silently; the sound of the environment is the music.

#### The instrument

Invented out of necessity: there was no space for a percussion ensemble on stage to accompany a dance performance. Cage therefore set about trying to invent a percussion ensemble controllable by one player. The result is similar to the sound of the Javanese gamelan.

The piano has bolts, screws and rubber inserted between the keys, producing 3 distinct types of sound:

- ? Rich in harmonics (bolts)
- ? Resonant in a metallic way (nuts and bolts)
- ? Dull but prominent in harmonics (rubber)

#### The Sonatas

Each sonata is meant to represent one of the eight permanent emotions of Indian aesthetics – the erotic, the heroic, the odious, anger, mirth, fear, sorrow, and the wondrous – and their common tendency towards tranquillity.

Structure – each Sonata uses fractal structure: i.e each part of the piece at one level mirrors the structure at another (like a fern leaf). The overall form is binary; therefore not the nineteenth century model of sonata form (ABA+Coda) that Cage is thinking of, but an earlier eighteenth century version favoured by Scarlatti in his single-movement keyboard sonatas.

28 crotchets										7 crotchets			21 crotchets			28 crotchets				14 crotchets	
4 X 7 grouped as below										1 X 7			3 X 7			4 X 7				2 X 7	
4	1	3	4	1	3	4	2	4	2												

Motifs – Cage uses a number of techniques of motivic development, including:

- ♣ Augmentation
- ♣ Diminution
- ♣ Inversion
- ♣ Retrograde
- ♣ Transposition

Texture – There is a wide variety of devices used

- ♣ Block chords
- ♣ Octaves
- ♣ Two-part
- ♣ Monophony
- ♣ Homophony

## Analysis of the elements of music in the 3 Sonatas

Sonata I	
Form/structure	AA BB with indicated repeats
Harmony	Elements of bitonality on paper, but atonal in performance
Melody	Some recognisable motifs, but no melody
Rhythm	Triplets and syncopation are distinctive
Texture	Lots of block chords. Lines are not very independent
Timbre	Fairly metallic – first chords are like a clock chiming. Some rhythmic clicking
Sonata II	
Form/structure	AA BB with indicated repeats. Short A section, B is longer
Harmony	A ‘bluesy’ feel to the opening scale. Grace notes are like blue notes.
Melody	Lots of scales. Some repeated melodic motifs (Bars 7-8)
Rhythm	Very recognisable motifs – syncopated. Acciacaturas, passages of fast movement
Texture	Varied – sections where left hand accompanies, others where hands are equal.
Timbre	Harmonics noticeable in first bar. Mainly metallic sounds, some percussive
Sonata III	
Form/structure	AA BB with indicated repeats. Short A section, B is longer
Harmony	Some very close dissonances
Melody	Initial motif repeated several times and seen again later in augmented form (crotchets).
Rhythm	Some syncopation
Texture	Left hand takes mainly accompanying role
Timbre	Real piano sound breaks through at times. Fairly mellow sounds.

Things to think about:

- ♣ The relative importance of the elements of music in Cage’s work – emphasis on rhythm and timbre above melody and harmony
- ♣ Influence of Eastern philosophy
- ♣ The sound world created by the prepared piano