

John Cage Specimen Questions

1. In what ways do Sonatas 1-3 show Cage's interest in Eastern Thought? Include detailed references to any two sonatas.

In his *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, John Cage aimed to represent the eight permanent emotions of Indian aesthetics: light moods – heroic, comic, wondrous and erotic; and dark moods – fury, fear, disgust and sorrow; and their common tendency towards tranquillity. There are tranquil sections to be found in each Sonata in terms of dynamics, rhythm and density of texture: the start of Sonata III could be described as fairly tranquil, with few notes sounding and sustained notes. Similarly the monophonic beginning of Sonata II sounds quite restrained before the rhythmic energy at Bar 10.

Following the composition of this work Cage's interest turned from India, and Hindu theories, to Japan and the culture of Zen Buddhism. He regarded music as 'sounds thrown into silence' with a purpose 'to quiet and sober the mind'. Examples of this concept may be found in Sonatas I-III. Cage makes good use of rests, creating brief moments of silence into which sounds suddenly intrude. Looking at Sonata I, the first few bars show small units of sound, such as the block chords, interspersed with rests. Silence is also used in Sonata III, with the tolling bell ostinato at the start.

Another aspect of Eastern Thought to influence Cage was the notion that art should imitate nature, whose beauty arises from constant change and an element of chance. He began to incorporate such elements into his music; in 4' 33', for example, it is the environment that provides the music. One of the ways in which the Sonatas show these influences is their fractal structure: the structure at one level mirrors that at another. Each sonata is divided into groups of crotchets in particular mathematical ratios. In Sonata I the ratios are 4,3,1 and 4,2. The groups themselves are also grouped in the same ratios to build each whole sonata. By utilising this fractal structure, Cage is trying to imitate nature – many natural structures, including that of fern leaves and crystals - are fractal.

2. To what extent are Cage's Sonatas, sonatas in the usually accepted sense. What structural devices are used in them?

Each of the three Sonatas in NAM 10 is in binary form, with marked repeats (though it is much more complex at different levels as mentioned in question 1). This suggests that it is not the nineteenth century model of the sonata with its overall ABA+Coda structure that Cage's work is modelled on, but an earlier eighteenth century version favoured by such composers as Scarlatti in his single-movement keyboard sonatas. Sonata Form is not only about physical structure, but also contrasts of tonality and thematic manipulation. The former is not attempted by Cage, the concept of tonality rendered void by the preparation of the piano and the presence of notes of indeterminate pitch. There are many examples, however of thematic manipulation – augmentation, diminution, transposition, inversion, retrograde, and repetition. Sonata III shows good examples of these techniques: the initial right hand motif appears in augmented form in Bar 13, and is inverted in the following bar, followed by a transposition creating a sequence. The Sonatas are unified by the use of motifs, sometimes rhythmic, sometimes melodic, in a similar way to traditional sonatas. In Sonata II, for example the pattern in Bar 5 forms the basis for the scalic passages in bars 28-32. A rhythmic motif, in bar 10 is repeated in bar 15. The classical sonata was characterised by contrast – that between themes, tonalities, and moods. One could point to the contrast between Cage's sonatas (each trying to represent a different mood) and the contrasts within each sonata: dynamics in Sonata II change from forte to pianissimo and back to forte in the first 4 bars, for example. There is also a huge variety of textures – Sonata I has block chords (Bar 1), octaves (Bar 9) and monophony (Bars 15-17).

3. With detailed reference to any one sonata, describe Cage's innovative approach to timbre.

John Cage invented the prepared piano when he required a selection of percussive timbres for a dance but had no room for a percussion ensemble. By inserting nuts, bolts, screws and rubbers

between the piano strings, he created a new, unique sound world. Cage completely changed the character of the piano in terms of its sound and tonality. There are three main timbral qualities that one can hear in the Sonatas: notes which are rich in harmonics, those which are metallic and those which are dull but prominent in harmonics. The composer exploits these to interesting effect in his work. Sonata III begins with a bass ostinato which is reminiscent of a clock chiming. His initial motif, upon which much of this Sonata is based, utilises notes which have a metallic sound. This may help the listener to recognise the motif when it returns. The percussive nature of the sounds reinforces the fact that rhythm is one of the most important features of the Sonatas. The timbres we hear are somewhat similar to those of the Javanese gamelan, which like the prepared piano is a single instrument capable of producing many different sounds, some melodic and some percussive. Although the result sounds barely like a piano, there are certain notes (like the A in bar 21) that allow the original sound to break through the rather mysterious palette of unusual timbres. Cage also uses instructions to use the piano's sustain and una corda pedals to create altogether different sounds.

“In what ways do the Sonatas and Interludes represent a complete break with the past? Illustrate your answer by specific reference to any TWO of the Sonatas in NAM”

While Cage wrote his music using techniques and structural devices that had been around for centuries, there are many reasons for labelling his Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano ‘avant garde’.

Most striking of these is his creation – the prepared piano. Cage invented the instrument in order to provide a percussion ensemble for a dance group, using less space. While earlier composers had come up with new ways of playing particular instruments, the preparation was more than just an extended technique; it was a new instrument, with the ability to create unique, mysterious new sounds.

A result of the preparation was the loss of any sense of tonality or harmony – now notes could be of indeterminate pitch or emphasise certain harmonics. Cage once called harmony a technique used only for commercial reasons- in order to increase audiences for the music. By dispensing with one of the most important aspects of much music that had gone before, Cage succeeded in breaking another tradition.

None of the sonatas have a melody line to speak of. This is not to say that Cage doesn't use techniques of melodic development. In the 3rd sonata, for example, the opening motif in the right-hand is augmented in bars 13-14 and then played in retrograde. Further repeats and development of this motif can be found throughout the movement. Another respect in which Cage remains loyal to tradition, somewhat surprisingly, is his approach to structure (superficially though). Overall, each sonata uses binary form, once characteristic of the Baroque sonata. Sonata II has a repeated A-section from bars 1-15, then a repeated B section from bars 15-end.

Close analysis reveals a more complex approach; one that is new and would never have been considered by earlier composers. Cage's fractal structure – where the structure at one level mirrors that at another- represents an approach which is entirely mathematical and can be explained by the use of groups of crotchet beats which themselves are allegedly grouped in the same ratio.

The sonatas in NAM 10 are compositions that place an emphasis on rhythm, texture and timbre above melody and harmony. While Cage was not the only composer to do this, he can be considered one of the pioneers. Each sonata relies heavily on rhythmic motifs rather than melodic ones. Sonata II has a characteristic element of syncopation – seen in Bar 10 and 15, for example.

It is this shift in emphasis, along with the revolutionary instrumentation that marks Cage out as a pioneer of the avant garde.