The Prepared Piano Music of John Cage: Towards an Understanding of Sounds and Preparations


PDF - Accepted Version
Available under License Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives.
Download (8MB)

Abstract

The subject for this thesis is the prepared piano music of John Cage with particular attention focussed on the preparations that create the varying sonic pallets in this music. The thesis is divided into six chapters, each chapter fulfilling one of two tasks. Firstly they will provide for pianists an examination of ways in which Cage’s instructions in the scores for preparing the piano can be interpreted, and it will highlight the difficulties that become apparent (and should be considered) when performing Cage’s prepared piano music. The second function to be fulfilled will be to musicologists who wish to trace the development of Cage’s prepared piano music with relation to his later chance determined music.

Chapter one traces the historical and aesthetic influences that were relevant to Cage in the creation of the prepared piano, and places it in an historical context.

Chapter two looks at John Cage’s compositions for prepared piano and provide a thorough inventory of John Cage’s prepared piano pieces. Chapter two also examines the possibilities for making suggestions for the recreation of Cage’s preparations.

Chapter three examines the physical relationships between piano, strings and preparations.

Chapter four analyses the solo prepared piano pieces and highlights the compositional techniques that Cage used in the composition of the prepared piano pieces.

Chapter five looks at the reasoning for performer choice in relation to ambiguity discussed in chapter three

Chapter six explores the six movement work The Perilous Night, and uses it as a case study to identify and explain all of the issues discussed within this thesis.
American avant-garde composer John Cage (1912–1992) started composing pieces for solo prepared piano around 1938–40. The majority of early works for this instrument were created to accompany dances by Cage's various collaborators, most frequently Merce Cunningham. In response to frequent criticisms of prepared piano, Cage cited numerous predecessors (such as Henry Cowell). In the liner notes for the very first recording of his most highly acclaimed work for prepared piano, Sonatas and Interludes, Cage...