

The logo for Bates music is set against a background of faint, overlapping musical staves and notes. The word "Bates" is written in a bold, red, serif font, while "music" is in a smaller, black, italicized serif font.

Bates *music*

presents

Bridget Convey

Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano

Sunday, November 15, 2020

Olin Concert Hall

7:30pm

Program

John Cage (1912-1992) Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano (1946-1948)

Bridget Convey, prepared piano

Performed without pause.

Sonata I
Sonata II
Sonata III
Sonata IV

Interlude I

Sonata V
Sonata VI
Sonata VII
Sonata VIII

Interlude II
Interlude III

Sonata IX
Sonata X
Sonata XI
Sonata XII

Interlude IV

Sonata XIII
Sonata XIV and XV 'Gemini' -after the work by Richard Lippold
Sonata XVI

Bio

A musician who enjoys performing music of our time, pianist *Bridget Convey* has found much fulfillment in collaborating with living composers. She has been fortunate to work with composers such as Morton Subotnick, Mel Powell, James Tenney, Daniel Sonenberg, Vineet Shende, Elliott Schwartz, John Newell, and many others. As a soloist and ensemble musician, Bridget has been heard at venues such as Lincoln Center (NYC); Dorothy Chandler Pavilion (Los Angeles, CA); Ojai Music Festival (CA); Maybeck Performing Arts Studio (Berkeley, CA); Percussive Arts Society International Convention (Columbus, OH); among many others. She received her Diploma from Mannes College of Music, NYC (Pre-college Division) 1989; BFA from State University of New York at Purchase 1993; and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts 1997. Bridget performs regularly with the VentiCordi Chamber Ensemble; Maine Music Society; and is co-founder/director of the Resinosa Ensemble, with Joëlle Morris (mezzo-soprano) and Eliza Meyer (cello). She can be heard on Navona, Cuneiform, Independent and Nataraja labels. Bridget serves as adjunct piano faculty at Bates College and has a private piano studio in Central Maine.

“...the piano shining like a star, without dictating a thing...

Convey realized the part perfectly.”

– Christopher Hyde, *Maine Classical Beat*

“...words of praise are insufficient to acknowledge what Ms. Convey did on this program.”

– Dr. Morton Gold, *Journal Tribune*

February 1, 2014

Program Notes by Will Hertz

John Cage (1912-1992)

Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano

John Cage was arguably the most influential American-born composer and music theorist of the 20th century. As the leading figure of the musical *avant-garde* following World War II, he pioneered such innovations as indeterminacy in music, electroacoustic music, the non-standard use of musical instruments, and the use of various tools and other household items for percussion.

At this concert we hear the best known of his works for “prepared piano” -- a piano whose sound has been altered in pitch, timbre or texture by the insertion of foreign objects on or between the strings. He produced 30 such works, most of them for dance-related performance but including a few concert pieces for solo piano. Composed in 1946-1948, *Sonatas and Interludes* is the most frequently played, recorded and analyzed of these “prepared piano” works.

As Cage pointed out, there was nothing new about the idea of artificially altering the sound of a keyboard instrument. In the 17th century, harpsichords were designed with two registers, one of which could produce a dryer or more ample sound. With the first pianos introduced in the 18th century, tonal “coloring” could be achieved by varying the pressure on the individual keys. In the second half of the century, a separate register was added above the keyboard to mute the strings. This muting mechanism was then transferred to the pianist’s knees and finally to an additional pedal, the practice today.

The American composer Henry Cowell, Cage’s teacher, went a giant step further in calling for the direct manipulation of the piano’s strings. Thus the pianist might be instructed to pluck the strings, stroke them with a brush, mute them by a foreign object, flick them with a fingernail, or sweep them with the back of the hand. Strings could also be pressed at specific points along their

length with the fingers of one hand while being played by the other hand to produce different harmonic pitches.

Cage first “prepared” a piano in 1938 when he was an accompanist for modern dance classes at the Cornish School of the Arts in Seattle. He was asked by Syvilla Fort, an African-American dance teacher, to write music for “Bacchanale,” a six-minute dance with an African theme. Cage initially planned to compose the work for a percussion ensemble, but the hall where Fort’s dance was to be staged had no pit and only a small stage with a small piano on one side. There was simply no room for a percussion ensemble.

Remembering his studies with Henry Cowell, Cage solved the problem by using foreign metal objects to vary the sounds of the piano strings, in effect producing the equivalent of an entire percussion orchestra. “It dawned on me,” he later recalled, “that screws or bolts would stay in position, and I was delighted with the sounds they produced. With just one musician, you can really do an unlimited number of things inside the piano.”

In the next decade Cage produced a flood of music for the prepared piano – twenty-three pieces for solo prepared piano, two for two prepared pianos, and five for ensembles including a prepared piano.

Photographs of these pieces showed pianos fitted by Cage with all sorts of foreign objects in addition to screws and bolts -- bits of rubber stuffed between strings, hammers fitted with tacks, even a wooden spoon poking out from the instrument’s entrails at an odd angle. The series culminated in 1951 with a three-movement concerto for prepared piano and chamber orchestra. Cage apparently then lost interest -- he lived another 40 years without writing further for the prepared piano.

Most of Cage’s prepared-piano works were created to accompany dances by various collaborators, most frequently his life partner Merce Cunningham, as a means of varying the music’s tone color with limited instrumental resources. As Cage wrote in the liner notes for *Sonatas and Interludes*, “Composing for the prepared piano is not a criticism of the instrument. I’m only being practical.”

Cage composed *Sonatas and Interludes* not for a dance but for solo performance by a friend, Maro Ajemian, who gave the premiere in January, 1949, in Carnegie Hall. Cage then performed the work several times in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and he received a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation to perform it in Europe. Starting in 1950, the work has been recorded by other pianists 30 times – an astonishing total considering the time and effort required to prepare the piano for each performance.

Sonatas and Interludes is a cycle of 20 short pieces – 16 sonatas and 4 interludes – with a playing time of about 70 minutes. The inspiration and structure of these pieces is highly complex, and this account draws on Cage’s own writings, a book-length study of Cage’s music by James Pritchett, a nine-page article about the work on Wikipedia, and the practical experience of recording pianist Aleck Karis.

Cage started working on the cycle in February, 1946, while he was on an extended visit to New York City. He had just met Gita Sarabhai, an Indian musician who had come to the United States to learn more about Western music. Cage offered her lessons in counterpoint and contemporary music without charge if in return she taught him about Indian music and philosophy.

At around the same time, Cage began studying the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), an Indian art historian and philosopher who was largely responsible for introducing ancient Indian art to the U.S. Coomaraswamy organized Indian *rasa* (aesthetic principles) into eight “permanent emotions” divided into two groups: four white (humor, wonder, erotic, and heroic) and four black (anger, fear, disgust, and sorrow). A ninth emotion, transcending both groups, is tranquility.

“Traditionally, in Indian culture,” Cage subsequently recalled in an interview, “you’re not to express any one, or any combination, of the emotions, without expressing tranquility. The 16 sonatas and four interludes are a bringing together of these eight emotions with their tendency toward tranquility.”

However, Cage did not specify which of the pieces relate to which emotions or whether there even exists such a direct correspondence. This is left to the listener, who may simply enjoy the range and variety of moods. But Cage did divide the pieces into two groups, stating that the “pieces with bell-like sounds suggest Europe and others with a drum-like resonance suggest the East.” He also stated that Sonata XVI, the last piece of the cycle, is “clearly European and the signature of a composer from the West.”

The preparation of the piano is the performer’s responsibility. To assist him or her in that process, Cage inserted in the published score a one-page “Table of Preparations” indicating which notes are to be “prepared,” the foreign material to be used, and where on the string it is to be applied. Additional instructions are given in the music itself, including at what points and how long to apply the damper and soft *una corda* pedals.

Of the keyboard’s 88 notes, 45 are to be prepared, mostly using screws and various types of bolts, but also calling for 15 pieces of rubber, four pieces of plastic, several nuts and one “pink pearl” eraser. For the most part, Cage avoids preparing notes in the lower register of the piano, and as a result much of the melodic line lies in the soprano range.

Some of the 45 notes are altered slightly, some past recognition as piano sounds. With the exception of the bass register, each note on the piano has three unison strings. In some cases, all three strings are altered. In other cases, only the second and third strings are prepared, creating a mixture of the original pitch and the prepared sound.

When the piano’s *una corda* pedal is depressed, the entire action of the piano shifts slightly, so that the hammers strike two instead of three strings. Normally, this results in subtle changes in color, of which most listeners are unaware. With the prepared piano, however, the effect is highly dramatic: the original pitched piano sound disappears, and the entirely new sound may be purely percussive, or, if pitched, may see more than two octaves away.

The preparation process may take from two to three hours. First, the preparation materials must be determined, located and tested. With screws and bolts placed between adjacent strings, the results vary enormously depending on the materials chosen. Modern hardware (with a high zinc content) lacks the bell-like beauty and resonance of older hardware (with a higher iron content) like the nuts and bolts Cage might have used in the 40's. Many sizes are needed, since the bolt that fits perfectly between two strings in the top octave is too small to stay in place in the middle octave. A rich stockpile of old screws and bolts is therefore necessary.

In contrast, rubber and plastic are simpler -- strips of canning jar rubber work well when threaded between strings, and plastic paper clips can be cut and bent into a shape that works.

As for the placement of these materials inside the piano, Cage's table of preparations includes measurements from either the dampers or the bridge down to 1/16 of an inch. However, these measurements can never be more than a rough guide since piano design varies greatly, and from one model to another the proportions of the string lengths differ.

Ultimately, therefore, the pianist must make choices. For example, slight adjustments affect tuning. The prepared note may be located exactly on the node of a harmonic, slightly off, or totally off. The amount of percussive sound in the attack, the amount of rattle, in fact every aspect of the timbre of a prepared note can to some degree be controlled by the pianist.

As a result, each performer has his or her own game plan, and no two piano preparations are the same. "If you enjoy playing the *Sonatas and Interludes*," Cage suggests, "then do it with what seems right to you."

In general, the resulting piano sound is immediately engaging and variously serene, haunting, percussive, and surreal. Part of the fascination, moreover, is the interplay between the "Western" piano sounds and the "exotic" prepared sounds. The music can at times sound Asian, African, Western, and sometimes not of this world. To this listener, the sound often suggests the celesta – the keyboard

instrument Tchaikovsky used in the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy in his ballet *The Nutcracker*.

The 16 sonatas and four interludes are arranged symmetrically. There are four groups of four sonatas each separated by interludes as follows:

Sonatas I-IV
Interlude No. 1
Sonatas V-VIII
Interludes Nos. 2 and 3
Sonatas IX-XII
Interlude No. 4
Sonatas XIII-XVI

For the technically minded, Cage organizes the movements in “nested proportions.” Each movement is built on a basic unit of from six to ten beats. The musical discourse is then organized into melodic or rhythmic phrases in varied proportions of that basic unit, ranging from $\frac{3}{4}$ to $3\frac{1}{2}$ of those beats. In Sonata I, for example, the proportions are $1\frac{1}{4}$; $\frac{3}{4}$; $1\frac{1}{4}$; $\frac{3}{4}$; $1\frac{1}{2}$; and $1\frac{1}{2}$. Each succeeding movement has its own sequence of proportions.

Finally, Cage casts most of the sonatas in the simple classical keyboard sonata form used by Scarlatti with repeated sections each repeated – that is, AABB. The exceptions are Sonatas IX-XI, which feature three sections: prelude, interlude and postlude. The interludes, on the other hand, do not have a unifying scheme; the first two are free-form movements like a fantasia, while the latter two have four repeated sections: AABBCDD.

To assist both performer and audience, James Pritchett provides this summary of the work as a whole:

Sonatas and Interludes has the reputation of being a masterwork, and this is well deserved. A word like “masterpiece” creates certain expectations, however, You expect grandeur, big effects that sweep you off your feet; you expect the exposition, development, and exploration of grand themes; you expect an epic, monumental journey. . . .

Cage’s masterwork is quite different from this: it is a big piece with a quiet voice. The very instrument he writes for, the prepared piano, undermines the grand statement. This is an instrument that operates entirely by muting: by attaching objects to the strings of the piano, Cage has altered their sounds in various ways. The results are different from note to note – some resonant, some dry, some metallic, some wooden -- but they are always, always quieter than before.

The prepared piano is an instrument that is personal and intimate; the music written for it must by necessity be music for a small space, music between two people. Even when the sound is “loud”, it is the sort of loudness that is more a function of intensity than of amplitude.

Cage, as a composer for this instrument of lyrical percussion, faced the problem of how to make a large work in such a modest medium. . . Instead of working by force, he quietly and patiently built his large piece out of short structures. By constructing the work on the timeless foundation of Hindu aesthetics, he could make each piece perfect and unhurried; the focus could be on the subtle modulations of his voice.

At its premiere some criticized the work for its monotony, but the lack of contrast is its strength. His earlier dramatic works speak loudly to grab our attention; this one instead speaks quietly to draw us in. It is as if we are sitting in Cage’s loft, straw mats on the floor, listening to him explore this softly-colored world.

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