

TWENTIETH CENTURY MUSIC: EXTENDING THE DEFINITION OF MUSIC (2)

JOHN CAGE: CHANCE MUSIC, 4' 33", THE PREPARED PIANO

* **Note:** when referencing the I Ching, I am only using it to show its importance in John Cage's musical compositions, not as a way of study and practice of divination.

INTRODUCTION

The music of John Cage took on a lot of twists not yet explored in the early 20th Century. He used procedures and compositional methods that had not been used before his time. In this document, I will focus on 2 of these: Chance Music and the Prepared Piano, as well as look at his composition 4'33" (4 Minutes & 33 Seconds).

CHANCE MUSIC

All of Cage's music since 1951 was composed using chance procedures, most commonly using the I Ching (also known as the *Classic of Changes* or *Book of Changes* in English). The I Ching in regard to musical compositions was used for chance procedures when composing and performing some of his musical etudes. These etudes are extremely difficult to perform, thus representing his views on society and politics and represent the complexity of the procedures themselves.

Chance procedures occur when various aspects of a musical work are not planned. These procedures (or events) can occur in any aspect of a work, whether melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, tonal, or others. Graphic scores are used in chance music, but the score is not always fully notated, or a full line. Often, these scores are not fully notated, or can include a small number of measures, including one. The performer is then left to perform the score (and these score parts) as he or she sees fit.

THINKING ABOUT HOW WE APPROACH THE DEFINITION OF MUSIC: 4'33"

Another aspect of Cage's music is that some of his works feature instructions to the performer, rather than fully notated music. One of Cage's most famous works is his 4'33" (4 minutes, 33 seconds), which consists of a single sentence "In a situation provided with maximum amplification, perform a disciplined action." The only content that is heard during a performance of this work is that of the sounds of the environment heard by the audience. The concept and purpose of this work is to challenge not only the definition of music, but also about musicianship and musical experience.

THE PREPARED PIANO

The "Prepared Piano" is another aspect of music Cage is well known for. In the "Prepared Piano", various objects are placed between or on its strings or hammers, thus altering the sound produced when these notes are played. Although theoretically any object could be used to prepare a piano, in practical application preparation objects are usually expected to have certain characteristics:

1. They are applied directly to the piano strings.
2. They must fit in the desired location inside the piano.
3. They (usually) should not move from their location during playing.
4. They must be reversible (that is, when a properly prepared piano has been "unprepared", it should be impossible for anyone to tell that it had ever been prepared; no permanent damage is done to the piano).
5. Additionally, most preparations will change the timbre of the string in such a way that the original pitch of the string will no longer be perceptible, though there are occasional exceptions to this