

THE NUMBER TWO⁵ BY JOHN CAGE A COMPUTER-ASSISTED INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The performer who approaches the music of John Cage composed by this author after the middle of the 20th century is often disconcerted by the great freedom of execution given, associated with a set of precise instructions. As a result, whenever the musician is asked to determine “a version”, he or she often decides on a choice from among the free elements proposed by the piece. A fixed score is thus created, which can be used several times. The musician interprets “his version” thinking that it is in conformity with the intentions of the composer. But in fact, most of Cage’s works composed after the 1950s should not be preconceived, prepared, “pre-generated” for multiple performances. Each performance should be unique and “undetermined”. It is in this sense that the use of the computer can help the performer: a program will allow the latter to discover without being able to anticipate what and when he will play. The execution of the work thus escapes the intention of the musician to organize the musical text.

Cage’s Number Pieces

The corpus of John Cage’s late compositions (composed between 1987 and 1992) is known today as the *Number Pieces*. Each piece is named

after the number of musicians involved, and the superscript indicates the order of the piece among other compositions with the same number of musicians. The majority of these works use the concept of time brackets, a technique that Cage began using in 1981: the score consists of short fragments, (in the piece *Two*⁵ often a single note, with or without nuance), and indications in minutes and seconds as to when the fragment should begin and end.

Silence and Indetermination

Described as a genius inventor by Arnold Schoenberg, Cage has, in the course of his creative research as a composer, posed essential structural elements. Thus, silence was posed as a structural element to be thought of in a new and positive way; not as an absence of sound, but as a diachronic element, a presence, an acoustic space. This innovative work on silence itself evolved: at first it was conceived as giving the work its cohesion by alternating with sound; then Cage broadened the reflection to a spatial conception: silence is composed of all the ambient sounds which, together, form a musical structure; finally, silence was understood as “non-intentional”, sound and silence being two non-intentional modes of being in nature.

Furthermore, in the need to give existence to music by itself and for itself, Cage attempted to counteract the ego tendencies of the composer and the performers. Using various techniques of chance in

the act of composition and principles of performance, he sought to free the performance from various subjugations and seductions.

The principles of indeterminacy and non-intentionality go in this direction. The principle of indeterminacy leads the musician to work independently of the others, thus introducing an unexpectedness in the musical result of the ensemble. The performer, ignoring the production of his fellow musicians, concentrates on his own part and on the set of instructions. This imposes a great deal of attention, even though the degree of freedom in playing is high².

Time Brackets

In Cage's *Number Pieces*, each individual part contains musical events with *time brackets*. This gives the performer upper and lower time bounds for starting and ending each event. The piece has a defined total duration and the events occur within each of the time brackets. Although there are only individual parts, a partition of the whole is implicitly present involving a solid form³.

The Context of Interpretation

The instructions in *Two*⁵ are very brief. They consist of one sentence about microtonal notation for the trombone and a single paragraph about general performance:

“Any changes of dynamics (pp and thereabouts for both instruments) should be, like changes in breath, as imperceptible

as possible. The piano should sound absent minded, without regularity of presence. If there is at some point a very short sound on the trombone it can be extremely loud, inexplicable.”⁴

The *Number pieces* seem at first sight easy to play, not presenting any particular instrumental difficulties. Concerning the choice of musical material that Cage proposes to “insert into the time brackets” Benoît Weisser underlines the fact that:

“Over time, gradually, Cage filled in the brackets less and less⁵.”

What Weisser calls “the boxes” corresponds to our definition of a “generic musical event”. The piece *Two*⁵ was composed in 1991, close to John Cage’s death; Weisser’s thesis is confirmed by the scarcity of the material used in *Two*⁵. Since there are very few elements in this piece, every detail becomes important: for example, in the piano, the attacks and stops of separate notes, the simultaneity of chords, pedal actions that may bring unwanted noise or any other external sound source. Musicians must find a particular state of mind in which awareness of sound quality and silence is paramount. An almost meditative concentration is necessary.