

John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*

By Kyle Gann

Of all the many controversial aspects and events of John Cage's tumultuous career, the least controversial is his *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48). Even critics who disdain the "noodling" of Cage's proto-minimalist piano pieces of the 1940s, who were outraged by the audacity of his "silent" piece 4'33", and who can't be bothered to take his late chance pieces seriously have admitted that *Sonatas and Interludes* is a grand, expressive, and well-balanced musical structure.

The period of the piece's composition was an unstable one for Cage. In 1946 his divorce from his wife Xenia was finalized, he was coming to terms with his homosexuality, and for awhile he considered psychotherapy to calm his neuroses. Instead, under the tutelage of a young Indian musician named Gita Sarabhai, he discovered Buddhist, Hindu, and Zen philosophy, particularly in the books of Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Curator of Fine Arts at the Boston Museum, a scholar with many connections to New York's avant-garde art scene. In Coomaraswamy's book *The Dance of Shiva* Cage read about the nine Indian emotions, or *rasas* (aesthetic qualities): the erotic, the heroic, the odious, anger, mirth, fear, sorrow, and the wondrous, these eight tending toward a more balanced ninth emotion, tranquility.

Many of Cage's works of the late 1940s were an explicit attempt to embody these emotions (which are considered permanent emotional states, as opposed to the transient emotions we feel momentarily). In the case of *Sonatas and Interludes*, Cage left no outline as to which movements corresponded to which emotion, so the listener has the option of drawing his or her own conclusions. The last four sonatas, though, seem calmer than their predecessors, leading Cage scholar James Pritchett to speculate that this last group represent tranquility. There are 16 sonatas in groups of four, with one interlude each between numbers IV and V and between XII and XIII, and two interludes between numbers VIII and IX. This makes for twenty movements, but Sonatas XIV and XV, under the joint title "Gemini" – the twins – are run together without pause. Cage had no commission for the work, but remembered having been inspired by a remark by poet and critic Edwin Denby that "short pieces can have in them just as much as long pieces can."

The piece's medium is the "prepared piano," an invention of Cage's. In 1940 dancer Syvilla Fort had commissioned Cage for a dance accompaniment on short notice. The hall, at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, was too small for a percussion orchestra, which had been Cage's usual performance outlet through the 1930s. Now he had only a piano at his disposal. And Fort, an African-American dancer, had specified an African-themed dance, for which the usual prickly atonal style of Cage's previous piano music seemed inappropriate. Cage worked away at the piano without inspiration, and finally decided that the instrument needed alteration. He tried putting screws, bolts, erasers, and weather stripping between the piano strings, and found that he had a percussion ensemble under his fingertips. Every prepared note gave a different klang, the resulting pitches delightfully unpredictable. (Cage estimated that preparing the piece for this piece takes three hours.)

Upon his move to New York City in 1942, the prepared piano became Cage's primary medium for a decade's worth of music, allowing him to avoid paying Manhattan's exorbitant prices for rehearsal studios. For *Sonatas and Interludes*, his magnum opus for the medium, Cage used 75 objects altering 45 pitches, most of them in the upper half of the piano scale. (Some pitches played, mainly in the bass, are unaltered.) The piece was premiered by, and dedicated to, Maro Ajemian—a young pianist who was becoming well-known for her advocacy of new music—on April 6, 1948, at Black Mountain College where Cage was teaching at the time. A New York premiere the following January inspired the *New York Times* critic to call Cage "one of this country's finest composers."

Eleven of the sonatas are written in binary form, in which a first half is repeated, and then a second half, also repeated. The form comes from the late-Baroque sonata of the early 18th century, and while it might seem strange for Cage to have reverted to so historical a genre, his friend Lou Harrison (a devotee of Handel) had used the same form a few years earlier for his *Six Sonatas for Cembalo or Pianoforte*. The form is rarely very obvious to the listener, however, for Cage took pains to “make the progress from the end of a section to its [repeated] beginning seem inevitable,” and the segue to the recapitulation is often so smooth that the listener doesn’t notice it.

Those who have an image of Cage as a kind of wild-man composer for whom “anything goes” are often surprised by the Zen-like calm of most of his prepared piano music. *Sonatas and Interludes* is generally restful and meditative, though it can admittedly be an odd piece to listen to and watch. Some single notes sound like chords; some chords sound like a unified thump. High notes can sound lower than low notes. A trill often buzzes between two very distinct timbres. Damped by screws and erasers, many of the notes die away quickly, but the sustain pedal is often held down to create a halo of resonance through the whole piano.

Some passages sound proto-minimalist (Sonata V, Interlude 2, and especially the combined Sonatas XIV and XV are notable in this regard), even anticipating the style of Philip Glass, though variations in speed make the rhythm more fluid. Ostinatos (repeated melodies) arise here and there, often broken by brief silences. Phrases repeat within sections that also repeat, but what constitutes a phrase is so complicated by the diversity of timbre (somewhat like Schoenberg’s “tone-color-melodies”) that it makes unusual demands on one’s listening memory. There are bursts of virtuosity (as in Sonata VI), but more often a gentle rocking motion (for which Sonata XII is notable). The result is an odd combination of simplicity and ambiguity, gentle and charming yet everywhere resisting definition. No wonder that those who hold a grudge against Cage have rarely been able to find fault with *Sonatas and Interludes*.

Kyle Gann is the author of seven books on American music, including No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33”.