American Trailblazers: Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes*

Notes on the Program

In the 1920s a tight-knit group of young composers stood at the vanguard of American art music. Known as the “ultramodernists,” they carefully studied their better-established European counterparts—most visibly, Schoenberg and Stravinsky—while striving to cultivate a uniquely American sound. Organized around the leadership of Henry Cowell, this community of innovators like Carl Ruggles, Leo Ornstein, and Ruth Crawford paved the way for consequent generations to draw freely upon a novel and ambitious toolbox of techniques. The toolbox, which Cowell outlined in his breathless treatise of 1930, *New Musical Resources*, comprised progressive approaches to dissonance in melody, counterpoint, rhythm, and timbre. The ultramodernists’ aesthetic would also encourage investigation and integration of a variety of non-Western musical traditions—Cowell studied comparative musicology (ethnomusicology’s precursor) overseas and taught a course at the New School called “Music of the World’s Peoples.”

John Cage would look back on Henry Cowell’s prolific composing, theorizing, and relationship building as “the open sesame for new music in America.” Though Cowell’s musical output transparently inspired Cage, Ruth Crawford, and Elliott Carter, it was arguably the butterfly effect of his tireless networking that set each of their careers in motion. Without his influence, Ruth Crawford would not have studied with (or later married) Charles Seeger. It may be thanks to Cowell’s early promotion and encouragement of Charles Ives that Ives continued to compose, allowing him to mentor and challenge Elliott Carter. Cowell taught a young John Cage and later introduced him to fellow percussion maven Lou Harrison, which may have induced Cage’s development of the prepared piano. Cowell’s generous advocacy and influence wielded through his periodical, *New Music Quarterly*, aided in vaulting many adventurous composers of the mid-20th century—including Paul Creston and Otto Luening, two of John Corigliano’s teachers—to prominence and professorships, igniting the bright and still-burning flame of new music in America.

**Diaphonic Suite No. 4 for Oboe and Cello**

Ruth Crawford
Born July 3, 1901 in East Liverpool, Ohio.
Died November 18, 1953 in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

Composed in 1931.

Tonight is the first CMS performance of this piece.

Duration: 7 minutes

Following the completion in 1929 of her master’s degree in composition at the American Conservatory in Chicago and an idyllic summer in residence at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, a 28-year-old Ruth P. Crawford moved to New York City. This leap of faith was thanks entirely to the encouragement of established experimentalist Henry Cowell, to whom her professor introduced her at a salon concert shortly before her graduation. Impressed with her initial forays into modernist vocabulary—like the Five Preludes for Piano (1924-28), which built upon the quasi-tonal
language of Scriabin—Cowell connected Crawford with Blanche Walton, a devoted patron of new music who offered up a guest room in her apartment at 1 West 68th Street in support of Crawford’s indoctrination into Manhattan musical life. It was there, where portraits of Bartók, Schoenberg, Varèse, and Carl Ruggles stood enshrined on the mantel, that Cowell engineered Crawford’s first meeting with his own teacher, the composer-musicologist Charles Seeger.

Moments into their first lesson, it was clear to Seeger that Crawford shared his own sensibility toward structural applications of musical dissonance. Seeger’s curriculum centered on his concept of “dissonant counterpoint,” which inverts the traditional principles of harmony and encourages a “sounding apart” as opposed to a “sounding together” of musical voices, promoting “diaphony rather than symphony.” Though fundamentally inspired by the 12-tone works of Schoenberg (which he instructed Crawford to study), Seeger’s system prioritized the off-kilter aesthetic he desired rather than the rigorous serial architecture promoted by the Second Viennese School. Crawford soaked up both approaches during her productive winter of 1929, insulated by Walton’s patronage from the onset of the Depression, and it was in response to Seeger’s assignment to apply various species of dissonant counterpoint that she completed three of the four Diaphonic Suites for solo and duo instruments. The fourth was already in progress when she set out for Berlin on a Guggenheim Fellowship in August of 1930, the first woman to win that award for music composition.

The first movement of the Diaphonic Suite No. 4 is frequently singled out for its original take on the traditional “follow-the-leader” imitative canon form. Crawford spins out a seven-note theme into 12 progressively altered segments. Each instrument runs through this exact same ordered sequence of 84 notes but uses entirely dissimilar rhythmic schemes, which renders the “much-disguised canon,” as Crawford put it, very difficult to follow by ear. Reaching the conclusion of the sequence, the pattern plays once more in reverse. This technique of retrograde symmetry also features prominently in the fourth movement of Crawford’s best-recognized work, the String Quartet of 1931.

The Food of Love for Oboe and Cello

John Corigliano
Born February 16, 1938 in New York City.

Composed in 2018.

Tonight is the world premiere of this piece.

Duration: 6 minutes

Springing out of his 80th birthday celebration last year, John Corigliano shows no signs of creative fatigue: he is hard at work on his second opera and a saxophone concerto to boot. Given these preoccupations, it was only a special event that could have precipitated the interlude from his operatic and orchestral writing that has resulted this delightful miniature.

Corigliano was exposed to a variety of the aesthetic reactions to ultramodernism that permeated musical academia in the 1950s. Paul Creston, his professor at Juilliard, dipped into modernist idioms but generally held total dissonance at bay—an inclination that is particularly evident in his well-known writing for wind band. Much of Corigliano’s oeuvre, from the beloved Oboe Concerto (1975) and Clarinet Concerto (1977) to the Symphony No. 1 (1988) and the String Quartet (1995), explores this push and pull between harmony and discord.
In this charming, programmatic work, Corigliano draws upon an inversion of traditional harmony and explores two distinct key areas, often simultaneously, in order to evoke conflict.

The composer writes: “The Food of Love was written to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of my dear friends Michèle and Larry Corash. This amazing couple celebrate their birthdays and anniversaries by commissioning new works of music from contemporary American composers. I met the Corashes through the distinguished composer (and former student of mine) Mason Bates. They have funded several works by Mason and have thus enriched our orchestral repertoire.

The ‘food of love’ is, of course, music, and this little tribute is written for oboe and cello—two of Michèle’s favorite instruments. I have taken the liberty of assigning the oboe to portray Michèle, and the deeper cello to represent Larry.

Since a long, constantly loving duo might thwart the homage I intended, I wrote a work that begins and ends with a consonant and beautiful melody, but is often interrupted by either partner resulting in discord which finally resolves into peaceful harmony. In truth, I have never seen the slightest disagreement between the living Michèle and Larry, but as a composer, I needed the drama, and therefore invented it. I hope they forgive me.”

**Selected Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano**

John Cage
Born September 5, 1912 in Los Angeles.
Died August 12, 1992 in New York City.

Composed in 1946-48.

Tonight is the first CMS performance of this piece.

Duration: 17 minutes

Before his radical activities of the early 1950s—among them, his application of silence in 4’33” (1952) and his pioneering use of chance procedures in *Music of Changes* (1951)—Cage’s first significant musical innovation was born of pragmatic necessity (and controversial only to piano technicians). Faced in 1940 with the need to infuse a score for a new dance piece with a dose of groove, the composer’s first impulse, to write for percussion ensemble—which he had recently used in two of the brash *Constructions* (1939-40)—was stymied by the tiny proscenium stage at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. Spatially constrained to an ensemble of one and uninspired by the uniform timbre of the piano, Cage thought of Henry Cowell’s *Aeolian Harp* (1923) and *The Banshee* (1925), both works that direct the performer to reach into the piano and manipulate the strings by hand. Cage realized that he could approximate the percussive textures he sought by modifying the vibrations of piano strings with household objects. He stuck pieces of weather strip and screws between the strings of 12 notes and completed *Bacchanale*, his first piece for prepared piano, in a matter of hours.

By the time he began work on *Sonatas and Interludes* in 1946, Cage had broadened the range of objects used as preparations and fine-tuned the acoustic effects of their placement, thus expanding the instrument’s emotional range. Cage always intended the work to be of significant magnitude, employing 45 prepared notes as well as an intricate series of nested proportions, whereby a series of natural numbers or fractions determines both the rhythmic content of each measure and the overall length of each phrase. His writing was also informed by a burgeoning interest in Hindu philosophy and in the Carnatic musical tradition of southern India. *Sonatas and Interludes* displays hybridity by designating tonal, bell-like
timbres to represent the European tradition, in contrast to more percussive sounds—such as those emphasized in Sonata V—that he meant to symbolize, broadly, the East.

Though the interludes vary in structure, each sonata movement takes a binary form, containing two sections that are each played through twice. Sonatas XIV and XV are paired and jointly titled “Gemini” — After the work by Richard Lippold,” a sculptor whose signature medium was intricate geometric constructions of wire. Cage wrote that the final movement (Sonata XVI), with its cloudily Baroque ornamentation and detectable harmonic motion, is a blatant nod to the European tradition to which the piano—no matter how many clothespins are attached—remains inextricably linked.

**Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord**

Elliott Carter  
*Born December 11, 1908 in New York City.*  
*Died there on November 5, 2012.*

Composed in 1952.


Duration: 16 minutes

...out of what one sees and hears and out  
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
As if the air, the midday air, was swarming  
With the metaphysical changes that occur  
Merely in living as and where we live.

Armed with 17 years of perspective on the work, Elliott Carter prefaced his liner notes to the 1969 Nonesuch recording of the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord with this excerpt of Wallace Stevens’s “Esthétique du Mal,” published in 1950. The composer draws explicit connections between Stevens’s “many selves” and “sensuous worlds” and his own rich palette of musical characters that came into maturity with the turn of the 1950s. Carter describes his preoccupation during this fertile creative period with the “very limited routine” of rhythmic devices in “most contemporary and older Western music.” Seeking to effect “metaphysical changes” in that realm, the composer embarked upon a broad survey of rhythms found in non-Western art music—citing the Carnatic, Arabic, Balinese, and Watusi traditions—while redoubling his studies of American composers whose rhythmic ideas he respected, such as Ruth Crawford Seeger and Charles Ives (Carter’s close friend and mentor from childhood). The rhythm chapter of Henry Cowell’s *New Musical Resources* would prove particularly influential as Carter conceived the metrical kaleidoscope that he first employed in the Cello Sonata (1948) and that would make his String Quartet No. 1 of 1951 a breakout success.

Though the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord employs a scaled-back collection of the radical principles of rhythmic organization found in the First Quartet, it forges ahead in its use of timbre as an organizing principle. In what Carter calls the “splashing dramatic gesture” that provides the motor for the first movement, the ensemble creates a slow-motion sustained effect by emphasizing the higher overtones of the harpsichord, augmenting the short decay of sound that is the instrument’s
hallmark. He notes that subtle shifts of timbre inform “all the details of shape, phrasing, rhythm, [and] texture, as well as the large form” of the second movement, which juxtaposes a segmented stream in the ensemble against sudden register changes in the harpsichord, before the whole quartet bursts into a bout of fast music. The last movement references the lively furlana, a Northeastern Italian folk dance, before decomposing into a collage of overlapping, dance-like gestures that Carter has “cross-cut like a movie.”

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