



AMERICAN CLASSICS



JOHN CAGE

Works for Two Keyboards • 3

Winter Music • Two² • Experiences No. 1

Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo



John Cage (1912-1992)

Winter Music • Two² • Experiences I

At the core of John Cage's musical interests lies the structuring of time. This had come to replace harmony for him as the driving issue in composition. His book *Silence* contains a famous anecdote dating back to his days as a student of Arnold Schoenberg, in which the student said he had no feeling for harmony. The elder composer then warned him that if he would not develop it, he would in composing always come up to a wall. Cage responded: "In that case I shall devote my life to beating my head against that wall." Effectively, Cage did so by no longer basing his forms on the harmonic arcs of classical music, but on pre-determined temporal matrices. In particular, it led to his most famous composition, the 'silent' piece 4'33" (1952) which is nothing but a structure of three durations adding up to the length of the title.

In the course of the 1950s Cage increasingly came to collaborate with younger radical musicians. These included composers Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown as well as pianist David Tudor. During this period, more hallmark elements of classical music were to go out the window, such as the idea that the notes you would hear would somehow be a function of the 'taste', 'personality' or 'language' of the composer. Instead, Cage began to embrace chance techniques, in order to help access all sonic possibilities of the instrumentation at hand regardless of personal preference. A further direction, first explored by Feldman and Brown, was to do away with another sacred cow of classical composition: the stability of the piece itself. By techniques of 'indeterminacy,' two performances of the same piece might come out almost unrecognizably different.

Winter Music, written in the winter of 1956/1957 and premiered by Tudor with Cage himself, was Cage's first grand exploration of indeterminacy. This is already true of the instrumentation: the piece is scored for any number of pianos between one and twenty. Twenty pages of notations are given, and each performer will play between one and twenty of them. The pages consist of fields of free-floating musical notations, with dynamics and durations of the attacks left up to the performer(s) to decide. The most

eccentric indeterminate aspect is the pitch: the notation consists of what appear to be big, at times enormous chords with clefs attached. Often the performer has to choose a number of notes to be played in treble clef and some in bass clef, yielding many possible interpretations of the same notation (and making reading it into a challenge of its own!). Even the temporal structure, which had formed the backbone of Cage's composing, has become indeterminate. In regard to the timing of events, the score only stipulates that they be 'freely interpreted as to time.' The main temporal unit here has become the page, with some pages having a great density of events, others containing only two – but precise interpretation of this information is up to the player(s).

Just about the only stable element in *Winter Music* is that it consists of piano chord attacks. Then again, the piece may be combined with any instrumental parts of the orchestra piece *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961-1962) or some solos from *Song Books* (1970). In fact, it is not entirely accurate to speak of 'chords', as that word comes from the theory of harmony, and in this period, Cage tried to distance himself from that idea. Instead, the score talks about 'aggregates' of notes and of 'overlappings' and 'interpenetrations' of the sounds. But when performed with sensitivity and intelligence, *Winter Music* is surprisingly rich in its coloristic variation and its powerful resonances.

As Cage's rhythmic structures were becoming very free in the course of the fifties and sixties, the stopwatch became an important tool for the interpretation of them. David Tudor, the brilliant pianist who premiered many works of this group of composers, first used a stopwatch in his performance of Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951) and 4'33". It remained his preferred tool for interpreting the free-floating rhythms in *Music for Piano* (1952-1956) and *Winter Music*. Likewise, Cage would often use rigorous timing structures even for his most chaotic theatrical performances, as in his 1960 performance of *Water Walk* in the TV show *I've got a secret*, a brilliant piece of television entertainment that has these days become popular again through YouTube. We see

Cage operate all sorts of domestic devices to produce sounds while moving around between them, all the while intently focused on his stopwatch.

However, throughout the eighties, Cage started finding new, more flexible ways of using the stopwatch in performance. This started with *Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras* (1981) and proceeded through the *Music For ___ series* (1984-1987), culminating in his series of *Number Pieces* (1987-1992). The new idea was to use 'flexible time brackets'. Sections would no longer be fixed in length, but their beginning and ending are given a flexible range (see also *Music for Two* on Volume 2 (8.559727)). Performers now had the option of making sounds very long or very short, deciding in the moment itself, within given intervals. Particularly in the *Number Pieces* (so-called because their titles refer to the number of performers) this leads to a flexibility, a sense of breathing, and a spirit of ensemble playing that were new within the works of Cage. The pieces tend to be quiet, slow, and sparse in their events. As a result, there is more space for listening as well as playing, which also results in a much more 'harmonic' atmosphere than before in Cage's work. Indeed, ideas of younger composers had led Cage back into thinking about harmony, as Cage was struck by Pauline Oliveros' idea of 'Deep listening', and by James Tenney's 1983 article *John Cage and the Theory of Harmony*. It was harmony understood in a new way, as noticing sounds as they occur together rather than as a set of rules. Still, by the end of his life, Cage was finally breaking down Schoenberg's wall.

In 1988, John Cage was invited to the Soviet Union, which, in the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, was opening up to Western artists. In Leningrad (as St Petersburg was still being called) he met the composer Sofia Gubaidulina. The two composers shared conversations, during which she remarked, about musical timekeeping, that "there is an inner clock." In response to this, Cage later that year composed a *Number Piece* for the Double Edge piano duo called *Two²*. An exception among the *Number Pieces*, it does not make use of a stopwatch, instead relying on the 'inner clock' that Gubaidulina was talking about.

Two² uses a very simple, surprisingly classical timing device: listening together. Formally, it follows the pattern

of the Japanese poetic form, *renga*, which consists of 36 *tankas*. In this piece, a *tanka* is five bars with a fixed number of sounds in them (5-7-5-7-7). The sounds are simply chords on either piano, and either part may freely time them within a bar. The next bar can only start when both pianos have played all the material in the present bar, thus creating an interdependency between the performers. In fact, they rely not only on their own inner clock, but also on that of the other player, two inner clocks combining into one. Between tankas, there are longer rests. Some chords recur within every *tanka*, some even across tankas, sometimes in different octaves, giving the piece a floating sense of harmonic stability and making it mysteriously coherent.

Harmony had given way to time structure, structure to indeterminacy, strict indeterminacy to flexible time brackets, and that to a timing based on the relations between performers, a structure of listening. This interdependence gives *Two²* its intimate atmosphere, and also makes it into one of Cage's most forward-looking works. Today, Cage's work as a whole, but particularly the *Number Pieces*, form an example for some striking work being done today by composers two, three or four generations younger. *Two²* for example can now be seen as a precursor to works by composers associated with the Wandelweiser-group, such as the *Ba-Da Duos* or *Kiarostami Quintets* by Antoine Beuger, *stück 2004(3)* for three instruments by Manfred Werder, or *12x* for three instruments by Dante Boon. All of these pieces explore new ways of being together and playing together based on interdependence and listening, following the avenues opened up by the final works of John Cage, who never in his long life ceased to expand possibilities.

Experiences No. 1 balances the two grand works on this disc with a minor but beautiful early work, an incidental piece from 1945 written for a Merce Cunningham dance. Its sparse white-note figures, simple patterns and chords recall Cage's love for the work of Erik Satie, as they point forward to the welcoming fields of sound of the final years, in which music becomes a place for people to listen and be together.

Samuel Vriezen

Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo

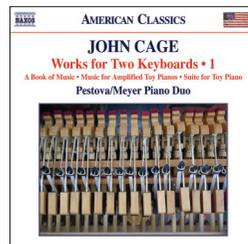
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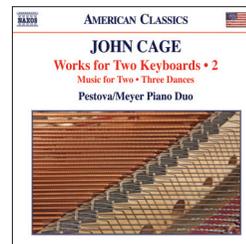
The Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo have performed at the Festival Archipel (Switzerland), Festival Rainy Days (Luxembourg), Royaumont Voix Nouvelles (France), Festival Musikhøst (Denmark), and Festival Musica (France), and in concert in Canada, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Great Britain. Their 2010 recording of Stockhausen's *Mantra* for Naxos (8.572398) (the first to use digital technology for the electronic processing) was hailed as "a highly accomplished presentation of one of the landmark pieces in the second half of the twentieth century" (*The Guardian*). Pascal Meyer (Luxembourg) has performed worldwide as soloist and chamber musician. He has appeared with orchestras such as the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra,

and is a member of the Luxembourg-based contemporary music ensemble Lucilin and the sextet Looptail in Amsterdam. Xenia Pestova (UK) is active as a soloist and chamber musician with a particular interest in contemporary repertoire. She has given premières of numerous new pieces and often works with composers and music technologists on interdisciplinary creation. She is currently Head of Performance at Bangor University. www.xeniapestova.com www.pascalmeyer.com

Also available



8.559726



8.559727

John
CAGE
(1912-1992)

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- 1** Winter Music (1956-57) **12:17**
- 2** Two² (1989) **42:59**
- 3** Experiences No. 1 (1945) **2:47**

Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo
Xenia Pestova • Pascal Meyer



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AMERICAN CLASSICS

John Cage was one of the twentieth century's most radical thinkers who redefined his own contribution to musical history in the light of his ceaseless exploration. One aspect of this was the technique of 'indeterminacy', exemplified by *Winter Music*, a major work on the grandest of scales that can be freely interpreted as to time but which remains coloristic and resonant. *Two²* is one of Cage's 'Number Pieces', and one of his most forward-looking works, a composition that considers the structure of listening itself and one that continues to influence a new generation of composers. This is the final disc in the series (volume 1 is on 8.559726, volume 2 on 8.559727).

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Playing
Time:
58:02