

JOHN CAGE

SONATAS AND INTERLUDES IN A LANDSCAPE

KATE BOYD, PIANO



John Cage, preparing a piano (c.1960)
Photographer: Ross Welser
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust

SONATAS AND INTERLUDES (1946-1948) FOR PREPARED PIANO

For 2012, John Cage's (1912-1992) centenary, I became interested in performing *Sonatas and Interludes*. From the first time I listened to it, I was entranced by the otherworldly sounds Cage evokes from the instrument. I couldn't believe a piano could sound that way – so celebratory, so varied, so jarring – and so I wanted to learn this piece.

Cage invented the concept of “prepared piano” in 1940, when he composed a piece for Syvilla Fort, a dance student at the Cornish School in Seattle WA. He was interested in composing a piece that would utilize a percussion ensemble; however, once he saw the stage he realized it was too small to fit a group of performers. “I decided that what was wrong was not me but the piano,” he later said. “I decided to change it.” (John Cage, Foreword to Richard Bunker's *The Well-Prepared Piano*, 1973)

This piece requires the performer to prepare 45 of the piano's 88 notes. Some of the notes receive two or even three different preparations. On the first page of the score, Cage provides a chart consisting of vertical columns. The first column contains the pitch on the piano keyboard. The columns next to that name the material to be used in the preparation (a screw, a bolt, rubber, etc); the strings between which the material should be placed (strings 1-2 or strings 2-3, as most piano notes have three strings each); and the exact distance, as measured from the dampers, the material should be inserted.

According to Cage's directions, *Sonatas and Interludes* requires the use of twenty-four screws, five medium bolts, one small bolt, three long bolts, six furniture bolts, ten bolts, seven nuts, two pieces of plastic, fifteen pieces of rubber, and one eraser. The sounds that result from inserting objects between the strings of the piano are imitative of a number of different types of percussion noises. Pieces of rubber have the effect of muting the sound and creating a dull thudding noise. Screws and bolts can produce a jangling or “out of tune” kind of noise, and also activate harmonic overtones. The length and diameter of a screw will vary the pitch and final tone of the note.

When Cage composed *Sonatas and Interludes*, he was interested in learning about Eastern philosophy. He started reading the books of Ananda Coomaraswamy, with a particular interest in the eight “permanent emotions,” or rasas, in Indian philosophy. In his first catalog Cage wrote, “The *Sonatas and Interludes* are an attempt to express in music the ‘permanent emotions’ of [East] Indian tradition: the heroic, the erotic, the wondrous, the mirthful, sorrow, fear, anger, the odious, and their common tendency toward tranquillity.”

At around the same time, Cage was exchanging composition lessons with an Indian composer, Gita Sarabhai. She had contacted Cage to learn more about Western classical music, and asked to take lessons with him for a few months. He agreed to work with her for free, provided she would give him lessons in turn.

Cage said that *Sonatas and Interludes* consists of some pieces from the East and some from the West, with some pieces using gong-like sounds, and others using bell-like sounds. Some pieces establish a clear tonal center, while others meander and sound improvised. The final sonata, which is clearly in the key of G Major, is, according to Cage, “the signature of a composer from the West” (Cage, booklet text for Ajemian’s recording of the cycle: *John Cage: Sonatas and Interludes*, Composers Recordings Inc. CRI 700[reissue]).

Most of the sonatas in *Sonatas and Interludes* follow the same form as a Baroque sonata, with two halves that are repeated (AABB). It is interesting to contemplate that the modern piano did not yet exist in the Baroque era; keyboard sonatas were played on the harpsichord. And in 1940, Cage looked beyond the modern piano to his invention of the prepared piano. Therefore, this work bookends the piano as we know it today, grounding itself in a time before its inception and yet looking ahead to the creation of a new instrument and sound aesthetic.

I have found that performing this piece multiple times has been a lesson in impermanence, in that from instrument to instrument the prepared notes sound different. Therefore, I cannot attempt to replicate precisely a series of sounds or pitches that I had experienced in a previous performance. This seems fitting for the work of a composer who embraced the practice of meditation and who stressed the value of every sound (and silent) experience. Performing this piece has brought with it some unique rewards. It has been exciting to push the boundaries of the piano, as well as my own expectations as a performer, to the extent Cage requires in *Sonatas and Interludes*.

IN A LANDSCAPE (1948)

In contrast to *Sonatas and Interludes*, *In a Landscape* seeks to limit, rather than augment, the piano’s sounds. In an interview later in life, Cage said that around the time he was composing *Sonatas and Interludes*, he learned from Gita Sarabhai, the Indian composer with whom he was exchanging lessons, that the purpose of music is “to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influence.” (John Cage interviews by Jonathan Cott, 1963)

Cage was interested in and deeply inspired by the works of Erik Satie - in the summer of 1948, the same year he composed *In a Landscape*, he organized a festival at Black Mountain College consisting of twenty-five concerts of Satie’s music. The link between the two composers is evident in this ethereal, timeless work that pre-dates yet anticipates minimalism.

-Kate Boyd



KATE BOYD

Described by *Gramophone Magazine* as a pianist with a “strong lyrical bent and feeling for nuance,” Kate Boyd has performed on many concert series, as a concerto soloist, and as a guest artist with established chamber music ensembles throughout the United States and beyond.

Boyd is a passionate advocate for new music. Her solo album, *MUSIC FOR THE END OF WINTER*, consisting of previously-unrecorded works for solo piano by five living American composers, is available on the Ravello Records label. Her performances have been featured on NPR and CBC radio. She has performed numerous world premieres, including James Woodward’s *Concerto for Piano and Wind Ensemble* with the Butler University Wind Ensemble.

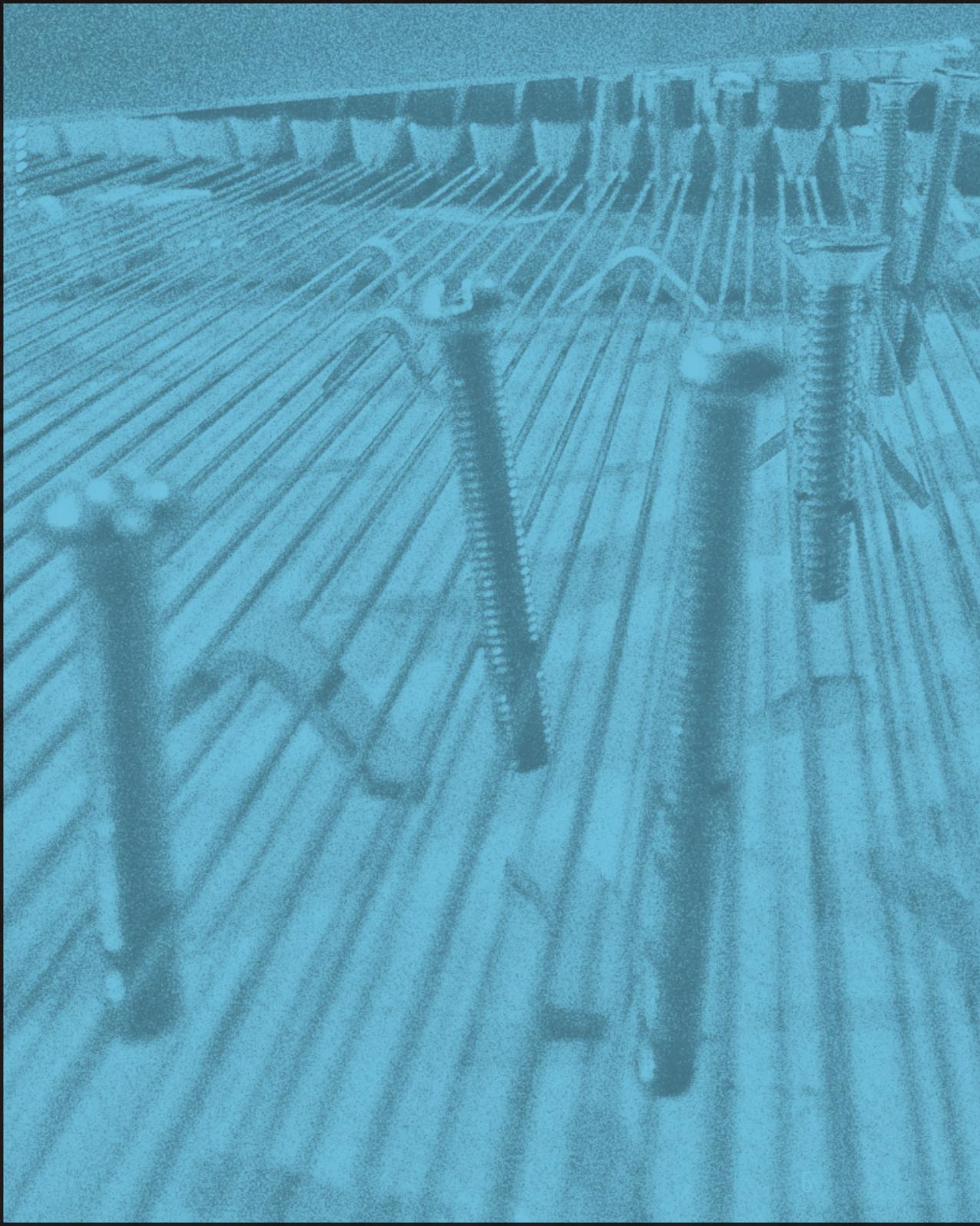
Boyd’s extensive chamber music activities include performances as a founding member of the Oracle Trio, a piano trio based in New York that has traveled to many parts of the United States. She also appears regularly in faculty chamber ensembles and with other musicians in the Indianapolis area.

In celebration of John Cage’s centenary, Boyd dedicated much of 2012 to exploring his seminal work for prepared piano *Sonatas and Interludes*, performing the piece throughout the United States and in England, and presenting at international conferences in Germany and Malaysia.

Boyd is a 2013 recipient of an Indiana Arts Commission Grant and a 2009 recipient of the Arts Council of Indianapolis’ Creative Arts Renewal Fellowship, an award funded by the Lilly Foundation for creative artists of all disciplines. Her other awards and prizes include a Fulbright scholarship to Cologne, Germany; and fellowships at the Tanglewood Center, Blossom Music Center, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and Prussia Cove.

Boyd holds performance degrees from Stony Brook University, the Oberlin Conservatory, and the Hannover (Germany) Academy of Music. Her major teachers were Gilbert Kalish, Arie Vardi, and Arbo Valdma. A sought-after pedagogue, she has worked with students ages 7-70 in workshops and masterclasses. In the summers she is on the faculty of the internationally renowned Interlochen Arts Camp in Northern Michigan. Boyd currently serves as Associate Professor of Piano and Piano Area Coordinator at Butler University in Indianapolis IN.

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SONATAS AND INTERLUDES

1	SONATA 1.....	3:19
2	SONATA 2.....	2:17
3	SONATA 3.....	2:39
4	SONATA 4.....	2:33
5	FIRST INTERLUDE.....	3:46
6	SONATA 5.....	1:46
7	SONATA 6.....	2:10
8	SONATA 7.....	2:26
9	SONATA 8.....	2:57
10	SECOND INTERLUDE.....	4:25
11	THIRD INTERLUDE.....	3:14
12	SONATA 9.....	4:28
13	SONATA 10.....	3:37
14	SONATA 11.....	3:39
15	SONATA 12.....	3:32
16	FOURTH INTERLUDE.....	3:05
17	SONATA 13.....	4:05
18	SONATA 14.....	3:12
19	SONATA 15.....	3:16
20	SONATA 16.....	5:14
21	IN A LANDSCAPE (LIVE RECORDING)	9:19

All tracks composed by John Cage
Kate Boyd, piano