

The Music of John Cage: Early Piano Compositions

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Abstract

John Cage (1912-1992), who experimented with sound, is considered to be a composer who brought about a revolution in the sound of music. Many investigations have been conducted on Cage's revolutionary works such as his *4'33"* (1952), while current available resources about his early compositions predating the revolutionary works are minimal. Also, pianists tend to mind trying to play Cage's music because most of his piano works popularly well-known are hard to play. Among Cage's early compositions, as a pianist, I have selected representative piano works that are relatively easy to play while highlighting Cage's early compositional style. This project examines the characteristics of the compositional style of Cage as viewed through the representative selection of his early piano works. In addition, as a pianist, through my performance of these compositions, I explore how Cage's early piano works could be connected to other composers' pieces postdating and predating Cage's early piano compositions. Conclusions are made regarding how we would be able to understand better his early composition in piano music. Therefore, this project provides an improved understanding of the compositional style of Cage's early compositions, as well as their connection to other composers' works.

Keywords: early composition, John Cage, piano music, piano performance

Introduction

There have been countless comments on Cage's accomplishments. Nicholls says, "Cage was without doubt one of the most important and influential figures in twentieth-century culture" (2002, [ix]). Many scholars have looked into his *4'33"* (1952), in which the performer does nothing except being present for the duration of 4 minutes and 33 seconds. In the piano literature, prominent attention has been given to Cage as an inventor of the prepared piano, which is a piano with changed sounds by various objects placed on or between its hammers or strings. However, investigations of Cage's early pieces predating these revolutionary works and his early pieces for piano without the preparations have been significantly fewer. Although Cage's early works have been little known, they would be great resources for observing how the revolutionary works later came to be born. Also, it would be meaningful to investigate the kind of influence that Cage's early pieces have had on other composers' music. As a pianist, my personal interest in Cage's music started when I was studying for my doctoral degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where Cage taught in 1968-1969. Unfortunately, piano performers are apt to mind trying to perform Cage's piano compositions because most of Cage's piano works popularly well-known, such as his *Sonatas and Interludes* (1948), are hard to play. All factors mentioned above have prompted me, a pianist, to try to look into and play Cage's early piano compositions. Among Cage's piano works, I explore four compositions that are relatively easy to play while highlighting Cage's early compositional style: *Two Pieces for Piano* (ca. 1935, revised in 1974), *A Room* (1943), *Dream* (1948), and *In a Landscape* (1948).

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Two Pieces for Piano (ca. 1935, revised 1974)

Two Pieces for Piano by John Cage, composed in circa 1935 and revised in 1974, consists of two pieces: *Slowly* and *Quite fast*. In 1946, Cage wrote another *Two Pieces for Piano*.

Overview

In the *Two Pieces for Piano*, the lack of bar lines might be the most prominent visual aspect. The bar lines are irregularly placed throughout the music. In particular, the bar lines of the left hand and the right hand are rarely put together. The irregular bar lines, very independent movement of both hands, wide intervallic leaps, and relentlessly repeating eighth notes make the piece hard to perform. The second piece of the *Two Pieces for Piano*, *Quite Fast*, which combines these elements with a fast tempo, is especially virtuosic. Both pieces of the *Two Pieces for Piano* have abstract qualities throughout by showing obscure counterpoint, rare scalar motions, and sparse harmonic moments.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Cage studied with Arnold Schoenberg, one of the Second Viennese School members, in California as Schoenberg settled in the United States and was teaching at the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles. In the early twentieth century, Schoenberg pursued radical changes to the traditional tonal system against the Germanic Romantic tradition. Perhaps Cage was under Schoenberg's tutorial when he was writing the *Two Pieces for Piano*. The chromaticism, counterpoint, and polyphonic texture shown throughout the two pieces are connected to the characteristics of Schoenberg's music. In particular, the cohesive use of motivic fragments reminds one of Schoenberg's *Grundgestalt*, which is one of the most important parts of Schoenberg's music. Schoenberg mentioned, "Whatever happens in a piece of music is the endless reshaping of the basic shape. Or, in other words, there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself" (1975, p. 290). The *Grundgestalt* may refer to a fragment of the motivic materials that subsequently has repetition, variation, and development.

Cage's Row and Motives

Although Cage studied with Schoenberg who invented twelve-tone technique, Cage tried to develop his own approach to twelve-tone technique. In Cage's *Two Pieces for Piano*, Bernstein (2002) analyzes how Cage constructed motivic segments based on the row's intervallic structure. Figures 1 and 2 show the twelve-tone row and the motives derived from the row that Bernstein analyzes (pp. 66-67). The numbers in Figures 1 and 2 indicate an interval class between two notes. For example, in Figure 1, the interval class between the row's first note B and second note Bb is 1, the interval class between the second note Bb and third note G is 3, and so forth.



Figure 1: John Cage: *Two Pieces for Piano* (ca. 1935, Revised 1974), Twelve-Tone Row

Figure 2 displays seven musical motives (a through g) for piano, each on a single staff. The motives are defined by their pitch and rhythm patterns, with fingerings and accents indicated above the notes.

- Motive a:** A quarter rest, followed by a quarter note (finger 1), an eighth note (finger 5), and a quarter note.
- Motive b:** An eighth note (finger 6), a quarter note (finger 1), an eighth note (finger 1), and a quarter note.
- Motive c:** A quarter rest, followed by a triplet of eighth notes (fingerings 5, 4, 6), a quarter note (finger 1), and a quarter note.
- Motive d:** A quarter note (finger 5), a quarter note (finger 1), a quarter note (finger 5), and a quarter rest.
- Motive e:** A half note (finger 5).
- Motive f:** A quarter note (finger 1), a quarter note (finger 5), a quarter note (finger 2), and a quarter note (finger 5).
- Motive g:** A quarter note (finger 5), an eighth note (finger 1), and a quarter note.

Figure 2: John Cage: Two Pieces for Piano (ca. 1935, Revised 1974), Motives

Each of the motives has its own structure for pitch and rhythm that remains unchanged. Each motive continuously repeats throughout the piece without changing the specific pattern of the pitch and rhythm, but the motive is transposed each time at a different level. For example, motive *a* appears in the right hand of measure 2 and then appears again in the left hand of measures 8, 9, 16, and 34 and in the right hand of measure 24 while keeping the pattern of the pitch and rhythm but transposing each time at a different level. Figure 3 shows how motive *a* appears throughout the first piece of the *Two Pieces for Piano*.

The image displays a musical score for John Cage's 'Two Pieces for Piano' (ca. 1935, Revised 1974), marked 'Slowly'. The score is presented in five systems, each consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef). Red boxes highlight specific musical phrases labeled 'motive a' in both the right and left hands across the systems. The first system shows 'motive a' in the right hand. The second system shows 'motive a' in both hands. The third system shows 'motive a' in the right hand. The fourth system shows 'motive a' in the right hand. The fifth system shows 'motive a' in both hands.

Figure 3: John Cage: Two Pieces for Piano (ca. 1935, Revised 1974) / Slowly, Motive a

In addition, Bernstein analyzes how Cage formed connections between the motives by referring to the final note of each segment and its position within the row (2002, pp. 66-67). For example, in the left hand of measures 2 and 3 where motive *c* follows motive *d*, the first note of motive *c*, Db, follows the last note of motive *d*, Eb. As seen in Figure 1, Eb and Db are linear adjacencies in Cage's row. In the right hand of measures 2 and 3 where motive *d* follows motive *a*, Ab and Gb are connected as Ab and Gb and are linear adjacencies in the row: the first note of motive *d*, Gb, follows the last note of motive *a*, Ab. Ab and Gb are linear adjacencies in his row. The following Figure 4 shows how the row and the motives act throughout the entirety of the first piece.

The image displays a musical score for John Cage's "Two Pieces for Piano" (ca. 1935, revised 1974) in a "Slowly" tempo. The score is presented in six systems, each consisting of a treble and bass staff. The piece is characterized by a continuous sequence of eighth notes with intervals of fourths and fifths. Various musical motifs are highlighted with colored boxes and labeled: motive a (red), motive b (orange), motive c (pink), motive d (green), motive e (blue), motive f (purple), and motive g (magenta). The piece features a continuous sequence of eighth notes with intervals of fourths and fifths.

Figure 4: John Cage: Two Pieces for Piano (ca. 1935, revised 1974) / Slowly, Motives

Piano Etudes

The *Two Pieces for Piano* that restlessly repeats eighth notes and interval fourths and fifths could remind one of the characteristic of the traditional piano etude, which usually consists of particular technical skills. Since the nineteenth century, the etude for solo piano has confirmed its place in the concert repertoire through some of the main composers of each period, such as Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), Franz Liszt (1811-1886), Claude Debussy (1862-1918), and György Ligeti (1923-2006). The *Two Pieces for Piano* could remind one of interval etudes by Chopin and Debussy in terms of continuously repeating specific intervals such as the fourth and fifth intervals. Chopin wrote a double-thirds etude (Op. 25 No. 6), a double-sixths etude (Op. 25 No. 8), and an octaves etude (Op. 25 No. 10).

Debussy's Etudes Book1 displays interval etudes such as a thirds etude (No. 1), a fourths etude (No. 3), a sixths etude (No. 4), and an octaves etude (No. 5). Also, the *Two Pieces for Piano* reminds one of Ligeti's piano etudes. György Ligeti wrote a total of eighteen etudes in three sets for solo piano between 1985 and 2001. Ligeti's etudes, which postdate Cage's *Two Pieces for Piano* (ca. 1935), have been praised by many scholars as one of the most significant sets of etudes of the second half of the twentieth century in the piano literature. Ligeti altered the tradition of the piano etude in the second half of the twentieth century by continuing the traditional elements of the etude while introducing new compositional processes. Like the visual aspect of Cage's *Two Pieces for Piano*, the lack of the consistent use of bar lines is one of the most prominent characteristics of Ligeti's etudes. Ligeti's etudes that have irregularly placed bar lines, restless rhythms, and perpetual pulses seem to be a postlude to Cage's *Two Pieces for Piano*.

Molto vivace, vigoroso, molto ritmico, $\text{♩} = 63$

Figure 5: György Ligeti: Étude No. 1 Désordre, Measures 1-12

A Room (1943)

Cage's *A Room*, composed in 1943, can be performed with or without the preparations. The piece was originally intended to be the third part of Cage's *She Is Asleep*, composed in 1943. His *She Is Asleep*, an uncompleted work, has two completed movements: Quartet for 12 Tom-Toms and Duet for Voice and Prepared Piano. *A Room* for piano or for prepared piano is the third movement of the unfinished *She Is Asleep*.

Minimalism

Cage's *A Room*, written on a sole staff, has a single visual line. *A Room* reiterates a certain rhythmic pattern: "4, 7, 2, 5, 4, 7, 2, 3, 5" (each of the numbers means the number of measures dedicated to a particular part of the section). The rhythmic pattern could be divided into two groups: "4, 7, 2, 5" and "4, 7, 2, 3, 5." The two rhythmic groups look similar, as only slight change is observed. Figure 6 illustrates about it. The rhythmic pattern "4, 7, 2, 5, 4, 7, 2, 3, 5" repeats twice. *A Room* ceaselessly repeats eighth notes, which produce steady pulses throughout. Only four notes are heard throughout the piece: D, E, Eb, and F. Also, from the beginning to the end, there is no dynamic change as Cage directs to play with *sempre una corda, ppp*. The features observed above are reminiscent of minimal music, which is a style of music originating in the 1960s and in the works of American composers La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936), Philip Glass (b. 1937), and John Adams (b. 1947). Cage's *A Room* (1943) seems to be a foreshadowing of minimal music.

The image shows a musical score for John Cage's 'A Room' (1943), measures 1-39. The score is written on ten staves in a single treble clef. The music consists of eighth notes. Red brackets and numbers (4, 7, 5, 4) are placed above the first four staves, indicating specific measures. Blue brackets and numbers (2, 3, 5) are placed below the last three staves, indicating other specific measures. The first staff begins with the instruction 'sempre una corda, ppp'.

Figure 6: John Cage: *A Room* (1943), Measures 1-39.

Dream (1948)

Dream, written in 1948, was composed for the choreography of the dance of Merce Cunningham (1919-2009). Cunningham, an American dancer and choreographer, had an important role as an avant-gardist. Cunningham's collaborations with other fields' experts, such as musicians, artists, designers, and architects, were notable, and the works from the collaborations had a deep impact on avant-garde. John Cage was one of Cunningham's collaborators.

Collaborations

Fetterman (1996) says that the first mature period of Cage's works dates from about 1936 to 1951. During this period, Cage became involved with modern dance. Cage found that modern dancers showed greater interest in his compositions than did classically trained musicians (Miller, 2002). At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), he composed music for choreographies and accompanied a concert dance group. Also, Cage taught a class called "Musical Accompaniment for Rhythmic Expression" at the UCLA. In 1938, Cage moved to Seattle, Washington as a faculty member of the Cornish College of the Arts. His first full-time job was working as a composer and accompanist for Bonnie Bird's dance company at the Cornish School. At the school, Cage first met the dancer Merce Cunningham, who became an important collaborator with Cage. For example, Cage's *Dream*, written in 1948, was composed as a piano accompaniment to a dance of Cunningham. In addition, Cunningham became a life partner of Cage. After marrying Xenia Andreyevna Kashevaroff in 1935, Cage divorced her in 1945. It was Cunningham who became Cage's life partner for the rest of Cage's life.

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

Like *A Room*, Cage's *Dream* also seems to be a foreshadowing of minimal music. *Dream* is also written on a single staff. Except the last six measures that consist of half notes, *Dream* mainly consists of eighth notes. Also, from the beginning to the end, there is no dynamic change as Cage directs to play with *sempre una corda, pp*.

Unlike in Cage's *A Room*, there are a time signature, 2/2, and a tempo marking, $\text{♩} = 88$. Another significant aspect of *Dream* is that Cage tries to experiment with sound. In *Dream*, he directs that "Always with resonance; no silence; tones may be freely sustained, manually or with pedal, beyond notated duration." Here, Cage seems to try to suspend time by sustaining tones throughout. In addition, he directs to have *Rubato* all the time, although he presents a tempo marking, $\text{♩} = 88$. The *Rubato* helps the performer to have the tones sustained. Soft, lyrical, and meditative sounds are heard throughout the piece. The features observed above remind one of the music of Erik Satie (1866-1925), who was also an avant-gardist. In the early twentieth century, Satie pursued neoclassicism against the Germanic Romantic tradition. Satie wrote music that became a precursor to minimalist music. Also, the French composer and pianist Satie is considered as one of the French impressionists with Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Cage's *A Room* is reminiscent of Satie's impressionist music.

$\text{♩} = 88$ Rubato
Always with resonance; no silence; tones may be freely sustained,
manually or with pedal, beyond notated durations

sempre una corda, pp

Figure 7: John Cage: *Dream* (1948), Measures 1-25

In a Landscape (1948)

Cage's *In a Landscape*, written in 1948, can be played on the piano or harp as written in the music. The arpeggiation figures throughout the piece might be for playing harp. His *In a Landscape*, a modal composition, shows symmetry in its structure: "15 * 15 (5, 7, 3)." This means that the work consists of 15 parts, each of which has 15 measures, and each of which has 3 phrases divided into 5, 7, and 3 measures. Figure 8 illustrates the first part. Like his *Dream*, *In a Landscape*, composed for the choreography of the dancer Louise Lippold, is also a result of Cage's collaboration with a modern dancer. Also, like in his *Dream*, Cage tries to experiment with sound in *In a Landscape*. He directs to use both the damper and soft pedals together throughout the entire piece. Here, by sustaining both pedals throughout, Cage seems to try to suspend time as seen in his *Dream*. At the very last measure of the piece, as seen in Figure 9, Cage directs to "Play without sounding, release pedals (thus obtaining harmonics)." *In a Landscape*, which has soft, lyrical, and meditative sounds like his *Dream*, makes listeners think of a calm and peaceful landscape. In this manner, Cage's *In a Landscape*, which shares many similarities with his *Dream*, is another example that clearly reminds one of Erik Satie's music.

Silence

4' 33" (1952) is perhaps Cage's best known composition. It was in Cage's lecture "A Composer's Confessions" at Vassar College in 1948, when Cage first mentioned the idea of using silence for his composition (Fetterman, 1996). Such an idea of using silence seems to be anticipated in his early compositions. As seen in his *A Room* that directs *sempre una corda, ppp* throughout and in *Dream* that instructs *sempre una corda, pp* throughout, Cage's *In a Landscape* also keeps an atmosphere of quietness by holding *una corda* all the time.

— = Pedal
- - - = una corda

Figure 8: John Cage: *In a Landscape* (1948), Measures 1-15

— = Pedal
- - - = una corda

† = play without sounding, release pedals (thus obtaining harmonics).

Figure 9: John Cage: *In a Landscape* (1948), Measures 221-226

Conclusion

The selected early piano compositions by John Cage have been explored: *Two Pieces for Piano* (ca. 1935, revised in 1974), *A Room* (1943), *Dream* (1948), and *In a Landscape* (1948). This part makes a conclusion based mainly on what was explored. First, as Cage studied with Arnold Schoenberg, Schoenberg's influences are found in Cage's early compositions. For example, in Cage's *Two Pieces for Piano* (ca. 1935), Cage was interested in utilizing musical materials in abstract ways with chromaticism, counterpoint, and polyphonic texture. The cohesive use of motivic fragments reminds one of Schoenberg's *Grundgestalt*. On the other hand, Cage, as a student of the twelve-tone technique inventor Schoenberg, developed his own twelve-tone technique. The *Two Pieces for Piano* is the first work in which Cage used the technique. Based on the row's intervallic structure, Cage split the twelve-tone row into short motives, each of which has its own structure for pitch and rhythm. Each motive repeats while keeping the specific pattern but transposing each time at a different level. Second, Cage's *Two Pieces for Piano* (ca. 1935), reminiscent of the genre of the piano etude, recalls piano etudes by Chopin and Debussy predating the composition, as well as György Ligeti's etudes postdating the composition. Especially *Two Pieces for Piano*, which has irregular bar lines, relentless rhythms, and a perpetual pulse, seems to be a prelude to Ligeti's piano etudes (1985-2001). Third, in Cage's early piano compositions, there are several works that seem to be a foreshadowing of minimalism. Examples include *A Room*, *Dream*, and *In a Landscape*. In particular, minimalist music is prominently recalled by *A Room*, which is written on a single staff, reiterates a certain rhythmic pattern with eighth notes ceaselessly repeating, plays only four notes throughout, and directs no dynamic change but keeps *ppp* all the time. Fourth, Erik Satie (1866-1925), who was also an avant-gardist and became a precursor to minimalist music, is recalled by Cage's early piano compositions. For instance, Cage's *Dream* and *In a Landscape*, which play soft, lyrical, and meditative sounds throughout, are strongly reminiscent of Satie's music. Fifth, in Cage's early piano compositions, collaborations with modern dancers are found.

Dream was composed for a piano accompaniment to the dance of Merce Cunningham. *In a Landscape*, written for the choreography of the dancer Louise Lippold, is also in collaboration with a modern dancer. Sixth, in Cage's early piano compositions, there are works in which Cage tries to experiment with sound. By his experimental techniques, Cage seems to try to suspend time. For example, in his *Dream*, he directs that "Always with resonance; no silence; tones may be freely sustained, manually or with pedal, beyond notated duration." In addition, he directs to have *Rubato* all the time, although he presents a tempo marking. Here, Cage seems to try to suspend time by sustaining tones throughout. In his *In a Landscape*, at the very last measure, Cage directs to "Play without sounding, release pedals (thus obtaining harmonics)." Also, he directs to use both the damper and soft pedals together throughout the entire *In a Landscape*. By sustaining both pedals all the time, he could be intending to try to suspend time. Seventh, in Cage's early piano compositions, certain works seem to foresee Cage's idea of silence presented in his later work *4'33"*. Examples include *A Room* that directs *sempre una corda, ppp* throughout, *Dream* that instructs *sempre una corda, pp* throughout, and *In a Landscape* that keeps an atmosphere of quietness by holding *una corda* all the time.

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