



JOHN CAGE (1912-1992)

Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano (1946-48)

American composer John Cage is known for turning familiar sounds into strange ones.

You may have heard his most popular work, *4'33"*, in which musicians sit on stage in silence for this length of time. There, he draws us to the unintended sounds that we make while listening. These may be normal sounds we hear every day, but in a new context; our attention to them makes them special.

In 1948, a few years before *4'33"*, Cage completed *Sonatas and Interludes*. The piece lasts over 70 minutes, and is comprised of 20 short movements. The sound of the prepared piano still appears as surprising and bizarre as it must have in the 1940s. "Composing for prepared piano is not a criticism of the instrument," Cage wrote, "I'm only being practical." The alterations transform the familiar piano with relative ease, showcasing a nearly limitless collection of strange clangs, buzzes, and bell-like tones. For this piece, the "preparation" involves placing a number of mutes made of various materials — screws, pieces of rubber and plastic, furniture bolts, erasers — directly between the strings of the piano. The exact placement is important for accessing particular harmonic partials. Cage instructs the performer as to the exact spot — up to one-sixteenth of an inch — for each mute. This process takes upwards of three hours (there's also a smartphone app that simulates the sounds).

Around the time he wrote *Sonatas and Interludes*, Cage was disturbed by his inability to communicate with audiences through his music. Eventually, an encounter with Zen Buddhism and Indian philosophy helped him to redefine his purpose beyond communication. Everything changed when Cage learned from singer Gira Sarabhai that Indian music served "to quiet the mind and thus make it susceptible to divine influences." In *Sonatas and Interludes*, Cage's sound of the "East" doesn't specifically refer to Indian music, but the philosophical idea of a progression towards tranquility grounded him. As he read Ananda Coomaraswamy's writings on *rasa*, the Indian theory of aesthetics, Cage adopted the idea that the fullest exploration of each of the nine human emotions inevitably leads to the "whitest" color, the non-emotion underlying all of them: peace.

Sonata V, which is fast and rhythmic, features a wonderfully syncopated effect. While the pianist plays a string of notes of equal duration, the magic comes from the inside of the keyboard, where one string is muted much more heavily than the others. That note is hardly audible until it rings, finally, on its own.

Sonata VI is slow and lyrical, propelled by a recurring run of fast notes. There's a hint of Debussy in these flourishes, but it is as if they have long since melted into the rustling of distant, broken wind-chimes.

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