



## JOHN CAGE

### Works for Two Keyboards • 1

A Book of Music • Music for Amplified Toy Pianos • Suite for Toy Piano

Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo



## John Cage (1912-1992)

### A Book of Music • Music for Amplified Toy Pianos • Suite for Toy Piano

*A Book of Music* for two prepared pianos was composed in 1944, during a very troubled period in John Cage's personal life. The woman he had been married to for a decade, Xenia Cage (née Kashevaroff), had left him earlier in the year as the result of his increasingly intense romantic relationship with his collaborator, the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. These dramatic developments seem to have caused considerable spiritual turmoil for Cage, and these left their mark on his music, both that of the time and influencing his development towards the poetics of his later years.

In much of the music of the forties, Cage was concerned with emotions, as he was trying to find the best way for his music to relate to them. Thus, the solo prepared piano work, *The Perilous Night* (1943-1944) was written as a direct expression of grief. Famously, however, some critics at the time, perplexed by the novelty of the prepared piano sound, did not hear any emotion in the music but only "a woodpecker in a church belfry". As a reaction, Cage decided to look for a different way of relating music to emotion than the aim of merely communicating and expressing it, and he discovered a new path through studying Indian esthetic philosophies. He now began to feel that the purpose of music was to "sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences", that music should "imitate nature in her manner of operation", and that this included an awareness of nine "permanent emotions" which form a system with the emotion of tranquility as its centre. This new idea of emotion became important in many of the major works of the end of the decade.

The piece for two prepared pianos, however, was composed before this turn, right in the middle of his crisis of personal relationships and sexual identity. Of course, it is not easy to tell to what extent such biographical information is really relevant for the music. It is very well possible to read *A Book of Music* on an entirely technical level as a large-scale constructivist work in two movements using quite abstract patterning as its material. But knowing that this crisis took place at the time makes it possible to understand the piece on two levels, a technical and an emotional one, and both

readings are supported by later statements of Cage's. On the one hand, in his 1948 lecture, *A composer's confessions*, he claims that the piece was "less concerned consciously with [Cage's] personal feelings and more with [his] idea about Mozart"; on the other hand, in a much later interview, he suggested that the two movements represent "the female principle" and "the male principle" respectively, which has obvious significance.

The piece was written for two young pianists, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, who were professionally educated at Juilliard. Making full use of their abilities, Cage wrote a virtuoso tour-de-force work of half an hour – unusually long by the standards of his concert music up to then. Technically, the piece is highly constructed both with regards to its form and to its musical materials. Both pianos are meticulously "prepared", that is, the strings are treated with all sorts of inserted objects to alter their timbre, so that the pianos sound like a grand percussion ensemble.

The piece's intricate form is planned according to the "rhythmical structure" technique that Cage had developed in his earlier percussion works. What this means is that the compositional framework does not rest on some logic of chord progressions, cadences and voice leading as in classical music, but on a time structure, where a sequence of lengths is used to determine durational proportions in the piece both on the higher level of the piece's large-scale structure and on the lower level of the lengths of individual phrases. The rhythmical proportions are 2-7-2-3, 2-7-2-3-3 in the first movement which, in the faster second movement, develop into 5-21-5-7, 5-21-5-7-7. The second movement has the continuous playing by both pianos interrupted a few times by shorter sections of slightly slower solo writing.

What is being played within this structural framework comes from Cage's idea about Mozart. Cage was fascinated by how the enormous richness of Mozart's music could be seen as strictly adhering to only three different kinds of scales: chromatic, diatonic, and 'scales' of broken triads. Similarly, what the pianists play in *A Book of Music* is mostly varying mosaics of different scale patterns, punctured by

more percussive rhythmical attacks. The scale fragments reappear continuously throughout the whole time structure in many different variations. Particularly in the second movement, rhythmical variations explode as Cage introduces anti-metrical triplets and quintuplets everywhere into his textures.

The result is an unusually dense, frenetic sounding work by Cage's standards. It is fascinating and mesmerizing, but also has something unstable about it, something excessive in its relentless patterning of pure lines of motion. The timbral complexity of the treated piano strings further complicates the texture, because many of the preparations confuse the perception of pitch, which can turn what is notated as a linearly ascending scale pattern into a much more complex sonic shape.

How all these formal aspects map exactly to male and female principles is up to every listener's imagination, as is the precise emotional meaning of a piece like this. What is important, however, is the friction itself between the two levels of construction and that of randomness and excess. Order and chaos, if you like. This fundamental theme of art in general finds an unusually sharp articulation in the work of Cage; indeed, it is one of his most central concerns. In *A Book of Music*, a very rigid construction leads to sonically excessive results, frenetic, expressive, not fully stable. In his later work Cage decided to focus much more on the emotion of tranquility and values such as "egolessness" and discipline. But the theme of the relation between construction and randomness remains.

*Music for Amplified Toy Pianos*, written for a variable number of toy pianos and variable duration, dates from 1960, long after Cage's personal crisis, in a period in which Cage had turned to the work that he has become most famous for: works in which an important role was given to chance and indeterminacy. It is part of a series of works (including the *Variations* and *Fontana Mix*) that no longer provide the performers with a ready-to-play score, but rather with a set of tools by which a score can be generated. For each performance, the score will be different. The tools here consist of a set of transparent sheets with markings on them: a line, some circles, some dots, a grid. These are to be superimposed in some random way so that a diagram

emerges, a different one each time the piece is done. This diagram can then be interpreted as a score: dots indicate notes, and their pitch and the instrument on which they are to be played depends on the position they have on the grid. Likewise, there are symbols that indicate noises, and an instruction for randomly determining the level of amplification for certain sections of the piece.

In striking contrast with the *Book of Music*, this is an extremely flexible score that makes randomness part of the structure itself, though otherwise remains as rigorous as before, if not more so. But this time the music comes out sounding very controlled, if unpredictable. We may have no way of knowing what note will be played or what sound will be made when; still, there is a controlled atmosphere of concentration in the piece, which develops entirely by its own logic. This is possible because of the kind of discipline that the process requires of the performers. They are required merely to be as precise as possible in executing the sounds as they come in their own time, determined by a rigorous chance process. As can be heard on this disc, it is in fact makes for a strange, rich and beautiful kind of lyricism, of spaciousness and occasional hints of melodic figures that emerge from the performance process.

The *Suite for Toy Piano* was composed in 1948 – the first ever work of serious concert music for the instrument. It is in five movements and uses no more than nine white keys in the central movement, seven in the second and fourth movement, and only five in the outer movements. Cage wrote it as an early attempt to go back to composing for "normal", pitched instruments, rather than only the noise instruments (percussion and prepared piano) he had become so familiar with in the decade before. Trying to rediscover normal pitches as things that could be as just as surprising as noises, he decided first to try them with an unusual instrument with natural restrictions. What he ended up with, using similar techniques and materials as in *A Book of Music*, is in fact a minor masterpiece, remarkably inventive given its restrictions, full of charming melodic lines, a modest miracle of subdued, yet extremely precise expression.

Samuel Vriezen

## Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo

Photo: Sanja Harris Photography



The Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo have performed at the Festival Archipel (Switzerland), Festival Rainy Days (Luxembourg), Royaumont Voix Nouvelles (France), Festival Musikhost (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](http://www.xeniapestova.com) [www.pascalmeyer.com](http://www.pascalmeyer.com)

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**CAGE**  
(1912-1992)

**Works for Two Keyboards • 1**

**A Book of Music (1944)<sup>1</sup>  
for two Prepared Pianos 34:25**

- 1 **Part One** 13:04
- 2 **Part Two** 21:21

**Suite for Toy Piano (1948)<sup>2</sup> 7:13**

- 3 **I.** 1:35
- 4 **II.** 1:31
- 5 **III.** 1:24
- 6 **IV.** 1:45
- 7 **V.** 0:58

8 **Music for Amplified  
Toy Pianos (1960)<sup>3</sup> 12:42**

**Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo**

**Xenia Pestova<sup>1-3</sup> • Pascal Meyer<sup>1,3</sup>**



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AMERICAN CLASSICS

John Cage's remarkable magnum opus *A Book of Music* for two prepared pianos is brought together here with his complete works for toy piano. Intricately structured according to Cage's ideas about Mozart, *A Book of Music* is an eloquent and virtuoso mosaic of driving and sometimes frenetic rhythms, the exotic sounds of the 'prepared' piano strings transporting the listener into worlds of the strangest imagining. The *Suite for Toy Piano* is a modest miracle of precise expression and the first ever serious concert music written for this instrument, while *Music for Amplified Toy Pianos* is composed using chance elements, generating a spacious field of sound filled with surprise.

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Playing  
Time:  
**54:19**