

Like Clockwork

John Cage's 'Concert for Piano and Orchestra' – Nadar Summer Academy 2019

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During the ninth annual Nadar Summer Academy (NSA) in 2019 put on by MATRIX [New Music Centre] and Nadar ensemble, we tackled John Cage's (1912-1992) *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957-1958). The piece is fascinating and represents a turning point in performance practice. It is also demanding of all the involved players. There are no conventional rules or restrictions, but in Cage's typical anarchistic style, suddenly everything a performer does on stage is on equal footing and holds just as much artistic significance. Everything, including: entering the stage, opening the piano, changing mutes, removing parts of the instruments, playing toys, (re)moving (tuning) slides, breathing, rests, silences, and of course conventional playing techniques such as striking keys, making crescendos and decrescendos, attacks and articulations, dynamics and note-lengths. All of it is fair game for musical and performative interpretation.

Prior to conducting the piece, I had performed it several times as a solo trombonist. The piece is openly modular, meaning that any of the individual parts may be performed as solo pieces, as duets, or in an ensemble of any orchestration. All players involved in the piece are required to put together their own version of Cage's composition. That is not in itself extraordinary. To one degree or another, all musicians must prepare their own parts for any composed piece of music. However, what is special about this piece is the freedom Cage's indeterminacy offers. A performer may play any or all pages, or none; any or all systems, or none; any or all notes, or none; etc. That said, this piece is not to be viewed as an improvisation. The musicians are required to pre-determine the sections that they will play and fix their performance durations. This must be practiced, and molded until the piece fits exactly within a specified frame. Personally, the afforded freedom weighed heavily. It was an enjoyable challenge, but one that forced me to consider many more aspects of my performance as holding artistic weight.

Concert for Piano and Orchestra was written for and first performed in 1958 in New York's Town Hall by the long time Cage collaborators **David Tudor** on solo piano and **Merce Cunningham** as conductor. It is significant that Cage included a conductor and a soloist in this piece at all, especially because of his "problematic relationship between individual and ensemble. He went to considerable lengths to avoid vesting authority in either conductors or soloists.... In effect, the conductor [in *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*] is transformed from government official to utility technician."¹ Seemingly contradictorily, Cage instructs the conductor to place him- or herself before the musicians in a position "where he may be seen by all the players."² In this way, the conductor is instructed to continue to fulfill a conventional role, serving as a focal point for both the musicians and audience. Furthermore, the clock-like motions made by the conductor, visible for all present, delineate in a very obvious (perhaps basic) fashion, the division and passage of time. The soloist and musicians are compelled to follow the conductor as he/she guides them through the piece, strictly following their prepared indications of passing time.

Reading the score & how we put it together

The first task is to gather all the performance instructions. In a truly democratic fashion, Cage dispersed the instructions for performing this piece throughout the three various roles in the orchestra: conductor, soloist, and musician:

From the Conductor's score:

Using a stop-watch, the conductor changes clock-time to effective time. Standing where he may be seen by all the players, he represents to them the movement of a second-hand, but counter-clockwise (beginning each minute with the left arm high and descending to the left. At effective 30" the right arm continues to the right and up to effective 60". When a change in speed is approaching he indicates this with his free hand; an upward motion announcing a faster speed, a descending one announcing a slower one. Throughout the final minute he keeps the free arm at 0", the end being indicated by the touching of the two palms.³

From the Solo for Piano score:

Each part is one system for a single pianist to be played with or without any or all parts written for orchestral instruments. The whole is to be taken as a body of material presentable at any point between minimum (nothing played) and maximum (everything played) both horizontally and vertically. A program made within determined length

of time (to be altered by a conductor when there is one) may involve any reading, i.e. any sequence or parts or parts thereof.⁴

From a Musician's score:

Each page has 5 systems. The time-length of each system is free. Given a total performance time-length, the player may make a program (including additional silences or not) that will fill it. The action of the conductor (when there is one) will alter the length of minutes (time units). Therefore, in the circumstance of having a conductor, the player's program should be made so that he will be able to play faster or slower than he would with a standard chronometer.⁵

The orchestral and solo piano parts

Cage has written individual parts for "three violins, two violas, violincello, bass, flute, clarinet, bassoon (or baritone saxophone), trumpet, trombone and tuba. Each orchestra solo is [sixteen] pages, with five conventional five-line staves per page."⁶ Despite the fact that the pianist is indicated as a soloist, each player's part can also be seen as a solo part. All parts are equal in number of pages and staves, but they act completely independently from each other. Each musician therefore must devise his/her own path through the piece. For the NSA, this first step required individual guidance from myself and the other coaches. Within the instrumental families, some notational markings, though unique to Cage, are shared. This gave us the ability to begin the instructional sessions in a grouped fashion (strings with strings, winds with winds, etc.) We then proceeded with individual sessions.

The first step for all the student-musicians was to first decipher Cage's score. Here is a list of some things to which we paid special attention:

- **Special, defined techniques:** The interpretation for some markings/notation can be found in the Cage's legends to the parts.
- **Special, undefined techniques:** Each part contains markings that are not defined in the legend and are also not part of the standard notational practice. One must define the meaning of these symbols for oneself. It is also important that the individual interpretations remain consistent (to the individual player, not the group as a whole) throughout a performance.
- **No tempo markings:** The tempo for every passage, line, page, etc. must be individually decided.
- **No rests - spatialized notation:** There are no rests. However, everything is relatively spaced throughout the piece. We encouraged our students to remain consistent in their interpretation of the spatialization.
- **Choosing motions:** A number of motions (removing mutes, mouthpieces, pipes, pages, toys, etc.) are required during a performance of this piece. The students were encouraged to interpret every motion as a holding musical value.
- **Choosing dynamics:** Often a range of dynamics is presented. The students, in their preparation chose which dynamics they wanted to apply each such time a range was presented.

Once all that deciphering and musical decision making was completed, the student-musicians then had to create their own individual *parcours* through the piece. This is time consuming. However, it is vital to the piece. Once chosen, the musicians must then time a practice-performance using a stopwatch and then notate their timing in their score (for example: 30sec, 1min, 1:30, 2 min, etc.). We then proceeded to rehearse the *parcours* to an acceptable degree of repeatability. Students were allowed to make adjustments during their own practice sessions. But it was important that this all was fixed prior to rehearsing with the other players. During the group-rehearsals, they could of course listen to their fellow musicians, but to achieve Cage's indeterminacy, they were encouraged to try not to adapt their score to "fit" with the other musicians. This proved at times to be very difficult for some of the students (and for some coaches, as well.)

The conductor's part

The conductor has his/her own part separate from the musicians. He/she is instructed to show time to the musicians (and audience), but not in any conventional fashion. His/her hands, fully extended, move like second hands on a clock, resembling one large clock face. The musicians, having determined beforehand (together with the conductor) the length of the performance, rely on the conductor's clock-like movements to progress through their own parts in a time-unit-appropriate fashion. The conductor's 'score' is a sequential table of checkpoints for both the shown (effective) and clock (stopwatch) time. By following Cage's table, the conductor speeds-up or slows-down clock time, converting it to effective time.

The conductor's role has been completely choreographed by the composer. Although he/she may choose the starting and ending point (based on the desired length of the performance), the sequence of movements is precisely detailed and thus represents a rigid restriction. Though this piece has many layers of composer-intended indeterminacy, Cage wields an incredibly direct influence on any performance of this piece when a conductor has been enlisted. Through the conductor's part, he directly influences effective (operative) time that, depending on the sequence, can vary greatly from actual time. The conductor is a tool for Cage, who thus retains control over one important aspect of the performance: the speed at which the performers must play the, by their own hand, pre-determined parts.

Group-Rehearsals

Cage indicates that there should be as few group-rehearsals as possible. If one can limit the time spent as an ensemble to one rehearsal per performance, that would be ideal. However, with the students of the NSA, we felt we needed to hold at least three group sessions. To ensure indeterminacy of the parts and the conductor's influence on the timing of those parts, I devised a simple, yet effective exercise:

1. Choose 1 minute of your *parcours* – no conductor influence

The students could begin anywhere in their *parcours* and play collectively for a timed (stopwatch) minute.

2. Choose another 1 minute of your *parcours* – no conductor influence

The students could again begin anywhere in their *parcours*. With two exceptions: 1) Not at the beginning and 2) not the same point as step 1. They again played collectively for a timed (stopwatch) minute.

3. Choose another starting point and play 2 minutes – no conductor influence

Again, they could start anywhere in their *parcours*. With three exceptions: 1) Not at the beginning and 2 & 3) not the same point as step 1 and 2. They again played collectively for a timed (stopwatch) minute.

4. Choose another starting point and play 5 minutes – with conductor's influence

And finally, they had to pick a fourth new point in their *parcours* and play for 5 conductor-influenced minutes. The conductor may speed-up or slow-down time at will.

Test concerts

As a conductor, I prepared several versions of the conductor-*parcours* based on the collectively decided upon time range. (In our case that was 12 minutes.) In this way, I was able to rehearse 'concerts' and yet still make sure that each live performance represented a new version of the piece. We have performed *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* on three separate occasions now and although the musicians consistently employed the same *parcours*, I utilized a new conductor-*parcours* for each concert. I am of the opinion that the conductor should always use new *parcours*, thus increasing the Cage-ian indeterminacy. It's also a lot more fun!

References

¹ Nicholls, David (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 220.

² Cage, John, *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, Conductor, Edition Peters, 1957-58.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fetterman, William "Merce Cunningham and John Cage: Choreographic cross-currents", in: *Contemporary Music Review*, 18:1, p. 121-142, 1999.