



THREE DANCES FOR TWO PREPARED PIANOS: NO. 1

John Cage (1944)



POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Minimalist techniques
- Prepared piano and sonority
- Rhythmic structures
- Percussive quality of piano
- Ethnic influences
- 20th century directions followed by other composers.

STRUCTURE:

- The first of a set of three that form the ballet.
- Structure is based on tempo and rhythm.
- 8 sections, with the last being repeated, making 9 sections of 30 bars in total.
- 30 bar sections are broken up into smaller units of bars. with pattern: 2-5-2; 2-6-2; 2-7-2.
- Each small group has its own type of rhythm.
- Structure idea is related to the Indian tala, though the Indian version groups beats rather than bars.

CONTEXT:

- Cage was one of the leading experimentalist composers in the twentieth century. Went down the route of basing structures on new rhythmic directions as well as exploring new piano sonorities.
- Was influenced by oriental music. (like Debussy before him), particularly Javanese/Balinese gamelan which consist of mainly percussive instruments.
- Also influenced by Indian rhythmic structures, the tala.
- This work was premiered in early 1945 and written for a dance piece called 'Dromenon' by the choreographer Merce Cunningham. The dance had an African emphasis. A piano was available but Cage felt a standard piano wouldn't be suitable to produce the ethnic quality required.

SONORITY:

- Prepared piano came from needing a percussion ensemble not available.
- Prepared piano by inserting everyday objects between strings. eg. rubber, screws, bolts...
- Effects of prepared piano include retaining some sense of pitch or making sound entirely percussive.
- Specified which of the three strings would be affected and how near the bridge or dampers the items to be placed. Una corda also affected sound because one string would be hit.
- Each piano prepared differently.
- Pianos amplified in performance using microphones.

TEXTURE:

- Mostly in 4 parts
- Constantly varying texture
- Monophony
- 2 part texture
- 3 part texture
- Silence, giving more emphasis to music following.

RHYTHM, METRE AND TEMPO:

- Most important feature of the music (closely followed by sonority).
- Polyrhythm
- Accents emphasise first beats and offbeats.
- Almost entirely made up of crotchets and quavers. Longer notes or rests are often used to mark the end of a section or group.
- Ornamental groups: septuplets
- Moto perpetuo
- Metrical shift

MELODY:

- Moves away from traditional concepts of melody and harmony.
- Ostinato is the most important melodic feature.
- Note addition and note subtraction
- Fairly limited piano range covered, with lower end not explored in either piano.

DYNAMICS:

- Preparations mean the dynamics are generally quieter, although still important.
- Forzando and accents
- Dynamic surprise, eg. p to ff., pp rests and then ff.