JOHN CAGE’S QUARTET FOR PERCUSSION:
ORIGINALITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE INFLUENCE

RECITAL RESEARCH PAPER

by
Michael Feathers

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Music

June 17, 2014
Introduction

John Cage was one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. His status as a musical pioneer began when he listened to and absorbed the styles of other modern composers during the 1920s and 1930s such as Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg. During this period many young composers gravitated toward the styles of either Arnold Schoenberg or Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. Because of Cage’s iconoclastic nature, he was instinctively drawn to the Schoenberg aesthetic and sought an opportunity to meet with Schoenberg. He was given the chance to study formal compositional techniques and he attempted to tackle Schoenberg’s own twelve-tone system. It was around this time that, after a few efforts writing in the atonal style, Cage ultimately admitted that he had no ear for harmony and began composing for percussion, thus beginning his journey toward originality that forever broadened the definition of musical sound.
The scope of this research will examine John Cage’s first percussion composition, *Quartet for Percussion* (1935), on an historical and analytical basis in order to define his early style and influences. Although Cage tirelessly sought the opportunity to study with Schoenberg in the early 1930s, other composers and artists who had a more direct impact on Cage’s signature sound will also be discussed. It should be noted that some critics dispute the interactions between Cage and Schoenberg at this time, going so far as to negate the claim that Cage met Schoenberg altogether. For the purpose of this examination, we will side with the abundance of evidence that confirms this interaction. Since the first live performance of this piece did not occur until a few years after it was written, a portion of the historical analysis will involve its integration into Cage’s first concert for percussion at the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle in 1938, which was also one of the country’s first percussion concerts.

The piece itself will be dissected and analyzed based on concept, form, notation, technique, and interpretation. Because the choice of instrumentation is left to the performer, my own choices and the reasoning behind them are described later in the analysis. The essence of this work also deserves a look into the field of ontology, a study that focuses on the nature of being, becoming, or existing, as well as the concept of temporality. The aural effect of this piece is profoundly unique and it is mostly due to the genius of Cage’s compositional style – it begs to be examined in terms of time in order to appreciate the piece as a whole.

**Early Beginnings**

Born on September 5, 1912 in Los Angeles, California, John Cage began playing music casually through neighborhood piano teachers and, most notably, his Aunt Phoebe. She assumed the works of Bach and Beethoven would not interest him, herself being an admirer of
nineteenth-century music. When Cage was in the fourth grade he began taking piano lessons from pianist and composer Fannie Charles Dillon and soon realized that he enjoyed sight-reading more than practicing scales restlessly; the typical childhood dream of becoming a virtuoso did not interest him at all.¹ He remarked later in life, “I remember having a kind of sinking feeling inside myself every time Aunt Phoebe or Miss Dillon played the piano for me or at a recital. The music they knew how to play was fantastically difficult, and my sinking feeling was the realization that I would never be able to perform as well as they.”²

Young Cage was first drawn to the works of Edvard Grieg, whose unconventional use of parallel fifths intrigued him. Continuing to study music leisurely throughout high school and into college (he was more interested in religion and literature at the time), Cage felt increasingly disenchanted by his continuing education. The turning point occurred when his history class was given an assignment to read a certain number of pages of a book. He entered the school library to find every student from his class reading from copies of the same book. In classic Cage fashion, he decided to read the first book he found whose author’s name began with the letter Z, studying for his exam using these random materials. He received an A. As Cage recounted later, “That convinced me that the institution was not being run correctly.” He went on to say, “If I could do something so perverse and get away with it, the whole system must be wrong.”³

Cage decided to rebel and dropped out of college to take a parentally financed tour of Europe in the early 1930s. Although most of his time was spent in France, the largest musical contribution of this journey was Cage’s discovery of contemporary works by Paul Hindemith,

---

Alexander Scriabin, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg. After a short stint studying Gothic architecture and piano in Paris, Cage eventually returned to the United States in 1931.⁴

As the economic downfall of America ensued during The Great Depression, John Cage was not immune to its effects. His earliest attempts at composing occurred during this time, which yielded highly mathematical compositions that lacked any sensuous appeal or expressive power. Nothing in his experience had prepared him to make a living, so he eventually had to make ends meet financially by giving weekly lectures on contemporary music, art, and literature to local housewives. Cage would research various topics at the Los Angeles Public Library and present his findings at a cost of $2.50 for a series of ten one-hour lectures. It just so happened that this research led him to Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg and he became increasingly interested in his compositions. One problem, however, was that Cage could not find any recordings of Schoenberg's music, and he surely did not possess the abilities to perform it.⁵

**Advice and Influence: Buhlig, Weiss, and Cowell**

Cage's tenacity eventually led him to Richard Buhlig, an American pianist who had given the American premiere of Schoenberg's *Opus 11* piano pieces and with whom Cage had briefly come in contact some years prior. Cage requested that Buhlig perform for his lecture on Schoenberg, to which he refused. He did, however, agree to look at Cage's compositions and was able to teach him a great deal concerning structure and time. Buhlig conveyed that composition is setting sounds together in such a way that they fit and serve an overall plan, and

---

that time is essential to music and must always be observed carefully.\(^6\) Indeed, the setting of specific sounds, an overall plan, and the significance of time would prove to be crucial components to Cage’s first percussion score. It was Buhlig who then suggested that Cage send some of his compositions to the ultramodernist composer Henry Cowell for possible publication; this would also prove to be one step closer to study with Schoenberg himself.\(^7\)

Another principal figure among Cage’s influences was undoubtedly Henry Cowell. By the end of the 1920s, Cowell had become quite popular within the United States not only because of his compositions, but also because of his book *New Music Resources* and the publication *New Music Quarterly*, to which he was the founding editor. He was one of the biggest promoters of new music in America at that time.\(^8\) Cage had the opportunity to send his compositions to Cowell and, upon viewing his work, he suggested that Cage seek lessons with Schoenberg after completing some preliminary instruction with Adolph Weiss, Schoenberg's first American student, in New York. Although very little of his music was ever performed publicly, Weiss was an innovator of the formal and numerical dimensions of serialism.\(^9\)

Henry Cowell was also in New York (ca. 1934) teaching classes at the New School for Social Research, which gave Cage the opportunity to study with him as well.\(^10\) Cage relocated to New York when Cowell offered him one of ten scholarships for his course *Primitive and Folk Origins of Music*. Cage was able to experience Cowell’s ethnomusicological background and his unmatched teachings of world music firsthand.\(^11\) Henry Cowell had grown up among Japanese

---

\(^6\) Cage. “A Composer’s Confession.”
\(^7\) Nicholls, *John Cage*, 14.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Nicholls, *John Cage*, 16.
and Chinese playmates, whose folk songs he had sung in their languages. Later he went abroad and studied Indonesian music in Java and learned African Pygmy music—ethnic music he considered equal to European music.\textsuperscript{12}

It was also around this time that Cowell began composing his own percussion ensemble music after hearing such pieces as William Russell’s \textit{Fugue for Eight Percussion Instruments} and \textit{Three Dance Movements} as well as Edgard Varèse’s \textit{Ionisation}. He wrote \textit{Ostinato Pianissimo} soon afterward with the intended performance at a Pan-American Association concert (which did not happen). Since Cage was studying with Cowell at this time, one can assume that the topic of percussion ensemble music would have surfaced between the two composers.\textsuperscript{13}

There was a professional and artistic connection between Cage and Cowell. Interaction between the two composers has been documented that identifies Cowell’s influence in nearly every area Cage explored during the 1930s including percussion, dance, performance indeterminacy, extended instrumental techniques, and formal structures based on rhythmic organization.\textsuperscript{14} In fact, it was when Cage began studying with Cowell that he first began to realize the importance of percussion instruments and music written strictly for percussion. Cage once said, “That was very important to me, to hear through him [Henry Cowell] music from all the various cultures; and they sounded different. Sound became important to me—and noise is so rich in terms of sound.”\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{itemize}
  \item[12] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Cage and Schoenberg: A Turning Point

After studying extensively with Cowell and Weiss in New York, Cage returned to California sometime between December 1934 and May 1935 to take on Arnold Schoenberg. Considered by many to be the greatest living composer at that time, Schoenberg had become famous for liberating music from the shackles of tonality. In 1933, he arrived in America from Berlin before being dismissed from his position as professor of composition at the Prussian Academy of Arts by the anti-Semitic Nazi government. After a few months on the east coast, Schoenberg began to develop health issues, which led to the decision to move to Hollywood. He gave public lectures while teaching at the University of Southern California and UCLA as well as educating private pupils.\(^\text{16}\) Despite the reputation of being dictatorial and intimidating, Schoenberg was passionate as a teacher—he taught in order to make a living, but gained satisfaction from imparting his knowledge to beginners. He also required total devotion from his students.\(^\text{17}\)

During their first meeting in 1935, Cage admitted that he did not have enough money to pay for composition lessons, to which Schoenberg asked if he was willing to devote his entire life to the study of music – Cage said yes, and that answer allowed him to attend Schoenberg’s composition classes free of charge. For the next eighteen months, Cage attended classes on analysis, counterpoint, harmony, and composition where Schoenberg regularly used musical examples from such master composers as Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms.\(^\text{18}\) Schoenberg focused heavily on his concepts of the “musical idea,” developing

\(^{18}\) Nicholls, *John Cage*, 17.
variation, and the treatment of the motive. In his book, *The Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, he identifies numerous techniques for varying motives, specifying how alterations in rhythm or interval can lead to a sense of development or growth in the music, which is the basis of his concept of developing variation.\(^\text{19}\)

Although he was a diligent student and never ceased to gain Schoenberg’s approval, Cage typically felt disappointed with the music he composed, and believed his compositions would disappoint Schoenberg as well. “I begin to feel that I ‘tamper’ with music, unrightfully,” he wrote to Adolph Weiss.\(^\text{20}\) Later, Cage also admitted, “Several times I tried to explain to Schoenberg that I had no feeling for harmony. He told me that without a feeling for harmony I would always encounter an obstacle, a wall through which I wouldn’t be able to pass. My reply was that in that case I would devote my life to beating my head against that wall.” Later in his life, Cage revealed in retrospect, “…and maybe that is what I’ve been doing ever since.”\(^\text{21}\) This realization became one of the most significant turning points in John Cage’s life, for it shifted his focus from harmony and tonality to that of noise and the relationship between sound and silence.

Cage always had the utmost respect for Schoenberg, even going so far as to proclaim that he “literally worshipped” him.\(^\text{22}\) Cage genuinely believed what he had to say and chose not to argue with his concepts or methods of teaching (as college students tend to do).\(^\text{23}\) Cage showed much devotion to Schoenberg even though he was often a cold and ruthless teacher. Although not his intent, he kept his students in a state of constant failure and would express

\(^{21}\) Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 5.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
the below average results of his American students. Schoenberg refused to look at any of Cage’s compositions, and when he asked about twelve-tone composition, Schoenberg replied, “That’s none of your business.”

Cage later recalled that while studying with Schoenberg, “…there were so many exercises to write, that I found little time to compose. What little that I did write was atonal, and based on twelve-tone rows. At that time I admired the theory of twelve-tone music, but I did not like its sound.” He therefore devised a new way to compose that would employ his own techniques to the twelve-tone system by establishing an order to the twelve pitches and dividing the row into static, non-variable motives with their own individual ictus pattern. This formed an integral relationship between the elements of rhythm and pitch. The Quartet for Percussion, however, replaces pitch with indeterminate sound, which will become the catalyst for his compositional career.

**Post-Schoenberg Influence**

One figure in particular who greatly influenced Cage's post-Schoenberg output, and who solidified the validity of such pieces as the Quartet for Percussion, was German filmmaker Oskar Fischinger. Trained in Germany as an engineer, Fischinger experimented in abstract filmmaking and held an interest in the art of music and graphics. His films consisted of patterns drawn onto paper and photographed onto a film sound track, producing what he called “synthetic sound.” German-American painter Galka Scheyer introduced Cage to Fischinger when she brought him to listen to some of Cage’s work; Fischinger immediately asked Cage to compose music for one

---

of his films. Although the film was never made, Cage still kept in touch with Fischinger and even worked on one of his other films, *An Optical Poem* (1937) (see Fig. 2).²⁶

![Fig. 2. A screenshot of Fischinger's film *An Optical Poem*. Fischinger used shape, color, and movement to demonstrate the spiritual dimensions of his beliefs.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=they7m6YePo)

This is when Fischinger revealed to Cage his belief that **everything in the world has a spirit and that this spirit becomes audible by its being set into vibration**. Cage was so fascinated by this idea that he ventured on a path of exploration to hit, scratch, scrape, and rub anything he could find. “That set me on fire,” Cage recalled. Not only did this statement suggest the freedom of experimentation, but it also uncovered a new dimension of spirituality in music. Cage was immediately drawn to the experimental side, but was less interested in the spiritual aspect: “I was not inclined towards spiritualism...but I began to tap everything I saw.”²⁸

---

Drawing inspiration from Fischinger’s belief, Cage composed his next percussion piece, *Trio* (1936). Unlike the *Quartet for Percussion*, which was written for unspecified instruments, the *Trio* has very specific guidelines for the instrumentation and overall set up of the piece. Cage instructs the performers to adhere to strict parameters such as using three woodblocks of various lengths, three tom-toms played with wire brushes, bamboo sticks, and bass drum.\(^\text{29}\) The specifications of this piece are obviously furthest from that of the quartet written only a year prior (see Fig. 3 and Fig.4).

![Quartet for Percussion](image)

*Fig. 3. Quartet for Percussion* was written with no specific instruments in mind - the performers make the decision.\(^\text{30}\)


Fig. 4. Trio gives the performers direct instructions concerning what instruments should be used.\textsuperscript{31}

The contrasting nature of these two works written within such a short span of time shows the impact of Fischinger’s words. Trio offers a calculated collection of predetermined percussion instruments, whereas the quartet’s instrumentation is left to the discretion of the performers. The polarity of these works also exemplifies what was possibly the most lasting impression of Cage’s studies with Schoenberg.

Aside from Cage’s shortcomings in terms of harmony, the content of Schoenberg’s instruction became decreasingly relevant as Cage’s signature American style began to evolve. By this time there were other composers and artists with whom he could collaborate who had similar ideas. However, it was Schoenberg who told him, “I stand by my work, always, unalteringly.” David Revill explains, “One area...in which Cage and Schoenberg agreed was

clarity and seriousness of endeavor, which transcended differences in the way they chose to pursue their work.”\textsuperscript{32} The barriers that Cage broke during the entire span of his career would not have been possible had he not been absolutely certain about his artistic interpretation and the direction he wanted his music to take. Schoenberg’s assertion meant that Cage had to stand by his decisions unwaveringly in order to sell his compositional approach, or else such pieces as \textit{Quartet for Percussion} and \textit{Trio} would not have made it to the stage.

\textbf{Premiere Performance of \textit{Quartet for Percussion}}

\textit{“I enjoyed it, but where are you going to put it?”}  
-Lucretia, John Cage’s mother, after the premiere performance of “\textit{Quartet for Percussion}”\textsuperscript{33}

Not long after composing the quartet, in the summer of 1937, Cage was employed at the Virginia Hall Johnson School in Beverly Hills where he taught a class in dance composition.\textsuperscript{34} He also taught a course at UCLA called Music Accompaniments for Rhythmic Expression that imparted new ideas in creating sound and music with percussion instruments.\textsuperscript{35} Then, with the help from fellow composer, faculty member, and Cowell pupil, Lou Harrison, he was offered a teaching position at Mills College in Oakland, California. That summer he met Bonnie Bird who was the head of the dance department at Seattle’s Cornish School. After sending a letter to Nellie C. Cornish herself and expressing his interest to work with Ms. Bird, Cage officially became a dance accompanist and composer at Cornish.\textsuperscript{36} This position proved to be a defining moment in Cage’s career and gave him the opportunity to showcase his newly discovered

\textsuperscript{32} Revill, \textit{The Roaring Silence}, 67.  
\textsuperscript{33} Revill, \textit{The Roaring Silence}, 64.  
\textsuperscript{36} Blecha, “\textit{Cage, John (1912-1992)}“
talents as a percussion composer.

Three months after taking this position, on December 9, 1938, Cage debuted his groundbreaking percussion orchestra at the Cornish Theater – one of the first of its kind. The program consisted of music from other modernist composers such as Ray Green, William Russell, Gerald Strang, as well as two of Cage’s own works including *Quartet for Percussion* (see Fig. 5). Surprisingly, none of the performers in the ensemble were trained percussionists – instead he used Cornish dancers.\(^{37}\) The reason for this could possibly stem from the simple fact that, at this time, few knew of John Cage as a serious contemporary composer. Also, from the point of view of a traditional percussionist during the 1930s, it is possible that they considered Cage’s work a disgrace to their profession and simply refused to participate. After all, some descriptions of the concerts that Cage directed seemed rather outrageous:

While Cage directed the ‘percussion orchestra’ in playing his compositions— including ‘First Construction (In Metal)’—they tapped and beat tones out on an insane variety of ‘instruments’ that, at this show and subsequent ones, might include a piano, a rattle, dinner bells, tortoise shells, a triangle, a slide whistle, dragon’s mouths, lion’s roar, bongos, Chinese gongs, tom-toms, a guiro, cymbals, woodblocks, maracas, a ratchet, quijadas, jawbone gongs, sleigh bells, Japanese temple gongs, claves, marimbula, a xylophone, cowbells, rice bowls, a thundersheet, a washtub, automobile parts, pipe lengths, a saw – and one wine bottle ‘to be broken.’\(^{38}\)

Documented evidence exists of the instrumentation used by Cage and his ensemble as outlined by a list found on the back page of an original part from the *Quartet for Percussion* (see Fig. 6).

---

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Fig. 5. Program from John Cage’s first percussion concert featuring *Quartet for Percussion* (listed as *Quartette*). The left hand side lists the other composers as such, “RAY GREEN, recently a Guggenheim Fellow, has studied with Nadia Boulanger and has written the music for Martha Graham’s ‘American Document.’ WILLIAM RUSSELL’S music has been performed at the New School for Social Research, New York City. GERALD STRANG is at present Arnold Schoenberg’s assistant at U.C.L.A., and is the Director of the New Music Society of America.” Used with permission by the Northwestern University Library Special Collections.
Fig. 6. “Instruments to be taken to Portland.” A list of instruments that John Cage took to a concert in Portland that included Quartet for Percussion. Used with permission by the John Cage Trust.
Though Cage’s initial percussion works were exploratory and adventurous, the rhythmic complexity was not entirely remarkable. His contributions to the development of rhythm would occur a few years later with *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939) and *Third Construction* (1941). The 1930s saw the spotlight shift to the percussionist who, until that time, had been an accompaniment to the orchestra, adding punctuation when needed and counting seemingly endless bars of rest. John Cage was one of the first to write for percussion ensemble and it is remarkable to note that his first concert at Cornish consisted of not one trained musician.\(^{39}\) He read Cowell’s *New Musical Resources* and *The Theory of Rhythm* along with Carlos Chávez’s *Toward a New Music* around this time and thought, “Both works gave me the feeling that everything that was possible in music had already happened. So I thought I could never compose socially important music. Only if I could *invent* something new, then would I be useful to society.”\(^{40}\)

**Formal Analysis of John Cage’s Quartet for Percussion**

The *Quartet for Percussion* was written in 1935 while Cage was studying with Arnold Schoenberg in California. The work consists of four movements that are named after the tempo of each movement, the only exception being the third – *Moderate, Very Slow, Axial Asymmetry, Fast*. Cage instructs that only the first, second or third, and fourth movements are performed.\(^{41}\) The possibility of either the second or third movement being omitted at the discretion of the performers is a connection to Henry Cowell’s work *Mosaic Quartet*, written during the same

\(^{39}\) Revill, *The Roaring Silence*, 75.


\(^{41}\) In the live performance that coincides with this examination of the *Quartet*, the second movement will be omitted.
year.\textsuperscript{42} Cowell instructs that the five movements of his piece may be played in any order. The similarity to the quartet’s instructions in terms of the arrangement of movements suggest that Cowell had an influence on Cage’s structural decisions as well as his ideas on new sounds and instruments.

Although the piece is written for percussion, no instruments are specified. Cage forces the performers to study various sounds and their relationships with other sounds in order to create timbral effects that allow the piece to function as a whole, just as Fischinger revealed to Cage that every object has a sound which is released by its vibrations. Cage explains it as such,

For someone interested in noise, like myself, if you start from the beginning of my work, after I studied with Schoenberg, I began by hitting things in the environment. I wanted to find a way of making music that was free of the theory of harmony, of tonality; and so I had to find a way of composing with noise. And I came to the conclusion that the important aspect, or as we would say in the twelve-tone language, the important parameter of sound, is not frequency but rather duration, because duration is open to noise, as well as to what has been called musical.\textsuperscript{43}

Composers throughout history formed a certain style by manipulating melody, harmony, and rhythm while using the same traditional instruments. Cage went one step further by manipulating the instruments themselves. Additionally, when asked if his Trio had been written for wood sounds, Cage responded,

Nothing was really for anything. They were notes. It was an effort in composition. Then I lived in Santa Monica in a house that was devoted during the day to bookbinding, and in the evening to making music. And some of the people who played in the percussion group had experience as modern dancers. And what we did then was to experiment with pieces of junk and with a few rented instruments. I rented a timpani and some gongs and cymbals and so forth, but a lot of the instruments were things like brake drums and things from

\textsuperscript{43} Kostelanetz, \textit{Conversing with Cage}, 51.
the kitchen, et cetera.\textsuperscript{44}

The piece is also very unique in terms of its notation. There is never a time signature in the published score, however one does exist in the original manuscript of the third movement (see Fig. 7).

![Fig. 7. A facsimile of the original manuscript shows Cage composing the 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement in 7/4. Used with permission by the John Cage Trust.](image)

Cage used dotted vertical lines that divide each individual beat. Small solid black lines also indicate where each player begins a motive; this occurs in every movement except the fourth (see Fig. 8).

![Fig. 8. Example of notation, Mvt. I.](image)

The general tempo is also labeled at the beginning of each movement: Moderate, Very Slow, Slow, and Fast, with very few fluctuations in tempo occurring throughout the work. The note values are discerned using standard Western notation and they range from dotted whole notes

to eighth notes. A whole note, for example, is represented by four spaces between the dotted vertical lines, a quarter note represents one space, an eighth note is one-half of a space, etc.

It is also imperative to realize the beaming of each note—some notes have stems that point upward, some have stems pointing downward. Cage does not indicate whether this means a change in sticking, pitch, or timbre, so it is again left to the performers to decide how to differentiate between the two types of notes. An early copy of the piece shows that Cage decided to use the stem direction (or staff position in this copy) to dictate sticking on tom-toms (see Fig. 9).

![Fig. 9. Position of the notes determines the sticking pattern of the rhythms. Used with permission by the John Cage Trust.](image)

Duration is also an important factor to keep in mind when performing this piece. Longer notes, such as whole notes and half notes, will require the use of instruments with a timbre that resonates longer in order to sustain the entire length of the note. During the live recital performance of this piece, the percussionists utilized between three and five instruments per player, per movement.

Evidence of Schoenberg’s teachings of structural variation and repetition exist throughout the work. However, since Cage abandoned the use of tonality and harmony, it is the rhythmic structure of various motives that grow and develop into complex patterns. For
example in the first movement, primary motive begins on beat 32 with Player 2 (see Fig. 10), which is then repeated by Player 4 on beat 53. The motive is then augmented by Player 3 beginning on beat 59 (see Fig. 11) and does not reoccur until beats 137 and 138 where it is played in canon between Players 2 and 4.

![Fig. 10. Primary motive, Mvt. I.](image1)

![Fig. 11. Augmentation of primary motive, Mvt. I.](image2)

On beat 305, Player 1 plays the motive in augmentation, then in an augmented variation. It continues on as such, each player weaving through periods of sound and silence—in this particular piece, a significant amount of attention needs to be placed on the silence as well as the music. As Cage put it, “...it is the aspect of sound that can be either expressed by sound or by its absence, either positively or negatively, whereas pitch can be expressed only by sound. It can't be expressed by the absence of sound. Nor can the parameters. So I deduced that the parameter of duration was, shall we say, more hospitable, a more reasonable structural means for music, than pitch had been.”

---

45 Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 51-52.
Indeed, it is quite apparent that Cage used duration of sound as a means of composition in this work. Not only does the unspecified instrumentation add a distinctive sound to the performance as a whole, but the combination of multiple sonorities sounding simultaneously creates an even more eclectic collection of sounds. For example, a whole note played by Player 2 will, at times, overlap with a quarter note from Player 1, two eighth notes from Player 3, and a half note from Player 4. Each performer chooses multiple instruments, which should already have unconventional characteristics if the appropriate liberties are taken. Therefore, the overall timbre changes when the texture becomes denser, creating new and surprising sonorities throughout the entire work.

The third movement, the only movement with a title (AXIAL ASYMMETRY), is very motivic and repetitive. It begins, contrary to what the title suggests, in a very symmetrical fashion. Player 2 begins the primary motive (see Fig. 12) which then becomes a tiered effect with every other player joining in after each motive ends until, eventually, every player drops out and Player 2 once again plays the motive alone (see Fig. 13).

![Fig. 12. Primary motive, Mvt. III.](image-url)
Fig. 13. Opening of Mvt. III, tiered effect.

The next section starts on beat 48 with Players 1 and 4 playing two separate motives, and then the motives are traded between the players on beat 71. A similar action occurs between Players 2 and 3, starting on beat 53 and ending on beat 67 (see Fig. 14). The original motive returns among all of the players on beat 124, except it is displaced by six beats in Player 2; he or she
starts the motive on beat 118 (perhaps the meaning behind “ASYMMETRY”). A new motive begins on beat 178 and continues through beat 190 along with the first two motives; this occurs until the end of the movement (see Fig. 15).

Fig. 14. Motivic imitation between players 2 and 3 from beat 53 to 80, Mvt. III.

Fig. 15. This example shows a new motive on beat 192 (player 1), the initial tiered motive (players 2 and 3), and the second motive that occurs in the movement (player 4), Mvt. III.
The fourth and final movement (Fast) can best be described as a sonic free-for-all. It is difficult to latch onto any consistent elements of structure or specific rhythmic patterns. There is one motive that opens the piece, but it is constantly tossed around the ensemble (see Fig. 16). Fragments of the motive can sometimes be heard as it undergoes extensive variation. When one looks at the entire fourth movement as a whole, the “big picture” reveals an apparent formal structure. It seems to be constructed in an A-B-A’ format, or a quasi- fast-slow-fast. The beginning of the movement utilizes various eighth-note patterns until rehearsal number 240 where the note values increase to quarter notes and become sparse; this can be seen as a transition. The “B” section begins around rehearsal number 500 and is marked by the rhythms slowly transforming into unison half notes and whole notes (see Fig. 17). This continues until beat 720 where there is a return to the fast-paced eighth-note patterns. If one looks at this movement with the said formal structure in mind, it almost seems as if the piece slows dramatically in the middle, when in fact it is the fluctuating note values that give this effect as opposed to the tempo.

Fig. 16. The opening motive of Mvt. IV is altered many times to create variation.
The work also does not employ the use of dynamics until the fourth movement. Possibly because of the evolutionary process of the piece, Cage reinforces the motivic material of the last movement with accents and two extremes of dynamic variance (p and f/ff). Phrases with shorter note values maintain a *forte* or *fortissimo* dynamic throughout the movement while the whole note/half note phrases are a softer *piano* or *pianissimo* dynamic (see Fig. 18). The coda begins on beat 764 in a unique fashion. Player 1 begins playing eighth notes that gradually crescendo for a certain number of beats and then suddenly drops down and repeats the idea continuously until the end of the piece. Each player emulates this idea in a staggered manner,
reaching the peak of his or her respective volumes at different moments. This allows the
collective sonority to be heard while also showcasing each individual timbre (see Fig. 19-20).

Fig. 18. An example of the use of dynamics in Mvt. IV. Any note value that has a duration of two or
more beats is piano or softer, otherwise it is notated as forte or fortissimo.

Fig. 19-20. Player 1 begins the coda on beat 764. Eventually the entire ensemble employs the
staggered crescendos which ends the movement and the work.
Performing John Cage’s *Quartet for Percussion*

The live recital performance that coincides with this analysis of Cage’s *Quartet for Percussion* utilizes a very eclectic amalgamation of objects, as well as some traditional instruments from the percussion family. Each movement represents one unifying element that creates a unique timbre: wood, skin, and metal respectively. Within these parameters specific objects are used based on the distinctive sounds that are made when they are struck, as well as their individual duration of sound. Ultimately the notation alone determines which objects/instruments are played and at what time.

As mentioned above, the first movement is characterized by sounds made from wooden objects; for the most part, they are quite literally pieces of wood that were cut to different lengths in order to create various pitches. Standard wooden percussion instruments such as woodblocks, temple blocks, and claves were purposely avoided in order to achieve a unique timbral effect. Despite this fact, Player 4 uses a log drum for durational reasons. Many exotic hardwoods such as Rosewood, Purpleheart, Ebony Gaboon, Bubinga, among others are represented in this movement. Because of their own unique characteristics, especially in a concert setting, these woods heighten the sonic experience and intrigue the listeners.

The third movement takes a more solemn, contemplative, yet unsettling approach. Conveying a sort of ritualistic character, the decision was made to use drums with a large, deep tone. Each player has one tom-tom of varying diameter, one timpano taken from the standard set of four with the cover still resting on the head, and one gong-like instrument (fire alarm bell, brass bowl, etc). The opening motive is performed on all four timpani, with the performers playing in the center of the muted drumheads (see Fig. 13). This “dead” sound was chosen
because, despite the slow tempo, the music is notated as quarter notes, thus a short duration of sound. The deep, dark, muted tone of the drums resembles a heartbeat. Mixed with the ritualistic nature of the gong motifs, this creates a rather eerie setting.

The mood set by the third movement is then severely interrupted by the fourth. Because this movement is the fastest and contains the highest concentration of short note values, it was decided to adhere to the limits of metallic sounds. The local hardware store was frequented often to gather lengths of stainless and galvanized steel pipe, which would then be cut to specific lengths. Other items such as cooking pots, mixing bowls, dog bowls, button gongs, and elephant bells are utilized. One other interesting item used during this movement is a brake drum—interesting because of how that particular instrument has evolved since Cage’s first performance of this piece. He used a brake drum specifically because it was not a standard percussion instrument. Over time, however, it made its way into standard percussion ensemble literature as the go-to instrument for its raw, gritty metallic sound. It stood the test of time and is now being used again in the Quartet for Percussion, but it plays a much different role in the present day.

**Musical Stasis and the Continuous “Now”**

As one can observe, the most groundbreaking feature of this work is the aural landscape that is developed by each movement: the unwavering restraint of the first, the unnerving patience of the third, and the dynamic ferocity of the fourth. Cage emphasizes the significance of the total sonority by creating a sense of musical stasis throughout the piece. Standard conventions in Western musical composition rely on linearity, or a sense of forward motion to an ultimate climax or goal. This work, however, does not imply goal-directed musical motion.
The sound remains in a state of being—in a continuous “now.” From this ontological perspective, the listeners are not distracted by the momentum of progress, but rather they are immersed in a sea of cacophony that allows complete focus on the sound.

Sound is obviously a very important part of music. As we established earlier in this analysis, John Cage stressed the importance of silence and its identity as an equal part in the creation of what is called “music.” When listening to a work that is linear and goal-directed, the existence of silence can be somewhat overlooked. The temporality of such a work creates a “horizontal” timeline that suggests anticipation from each individual note or chord to the next. In fact, there is no question that goal-directed music could not exist without dissonance that is resolved by consonance; a question accompanied by an answer; an inhale inevitably followed by a satisfying exhale. The silence in between the sound is often skipped over, thus belittling its importance to the listener—the music keeps moving from left to right, and all that is desired is the next sound. David Revill explains this phenomenon as such,

Since Cage’s structural means were based on time rather than on harmony, they could be articulated by any sounds, whether pitch or noise, which thus had equal status within the system. Not only did all sounds have a potential structural function, but the structure could also be articulated by silence. This was possible too when structure was actualized in time, because silence is the thinnest element of music; sounds last a certain time, have a spatial location, a certain dynamic, tone color, and a register if not a definable pitch, whereas silence can be specified only as a duration.\textsuperscript{46}

Cage’s \textit{Quartet for Percussion}, on the other hand, is designed to showcase the cerebral relationship between this musical yin and yang (in this case, sound and silence). Because of its static nature, the work does not anticipate future events, but rather focuses on the present—this can be referred to as “vertical” time. In this sense, all of the audible material is experienced

\textsuperscript{46} Revill, \textit{The Roaring Silence}, 78.
equally because it is entering consciousness as it is happening. During the live recital performance of the third movement, for example, the static timbral effect of muted timpani with bells, gongs, and metal bowls and the periods of silence in between those sounds created an experience that transcended standard musical linearity. An awareness of “vertical” time during this slow movement would prepare the listeners to hear the initial execution of tone, the resonance of the drums and gongs mixed with the ambience of the hall, and even sounds from the environment. It began to rain during this particular performance, adding a subtle drone that could be heard inside the concert hall – as if the spirit of John Cage wanted to contribute to the piece in his own signature fashion.

Further contributing to this notion of “vertical” time is the fact that no time signature exists throughout the work. Nothing alludes to a unifying downbeat. There is no beat “1” that naturally progresses to beat “2 – 3 – 4” and so on. Time, in the musical sense, refers to forward progress or motion that is divided by movements, sections, measures, and beats. A time signature creates an organizational grid that can assist performers in easily identifying these smaller units of time, and each of these small units have a beginning and an end (in common time, beat 1 and beat 4 respectively). As Cage explained, “There’s none of this boom, boom, boom, business in my music...a measure is taken as a strict measure of time – not a one two three four – which I fill with various sounds.” He went on to say, “It’s not the rhythmic structure that I was concerned with, it was the phraseology and the relation of the parts.”

Cage’s Quartet for Percussion flows continuously from start to finish – he marks where motives occur with solid black lines, but that is not an indication of time since they occur at

---

different moments among the four parts. Rehearsal numbers are marked at an increment of ten beats throughout the entire work, which also reflects this lack of goal direction. Rehearsal markings typically signify the end of one phrase or section and the beginning of another, but Cage’s work holds steadfast throughout, never deviating from the structure of the continuous “now.” His rehearsal numbers will sometimes land needlessly in the middle of a motive or, as in the first movement, two beats before the end of the movement. This suggests that the entire work is ongoing; it is not progressing toward a goal, but is simply “happening.”

Philosophically speaking, this work and its reflection of time, space, and duration hold a certain ontological distinction that warrants a further look into the temporal features of musical perception. All of the arts maintain a common thread with time, but music is arguably considered to be the “art of time.” It is composed in time, it has a history, its presentation requires time, and it exists, albeit momentarily, within a certain frame of time. One can assume a more literal sense of the phrase by assigning it to the composer who exploits time as a formal element. The composer whose goal is to create a temporal ordering of tones for musical perception controls certain features such as time signatures, tempo, and duration.

The musical perception of Quartet for Percussion is rooted in the duration of tone. Philip Alperson, an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Louisville, discusses how tone or sound is presented to perception by asserting that, “…in the case of musical tones, it is the normal state of affairs that, as with many sounds, we are privy to a tone’s existence from inception to cessation.” This microcosmic view of perceiving tone only grants a fleeting

---

49 Philip Alperson, “‘Musical Time’ and Music as an ‘Art of Time’,” 408.
appreciation of music, especially when listening to Cage’s *Quartet for Percussion* where the periphery is just as important as the focal point. Alperson expands on this idea by stating that, “...despite the facts that tones are presented to perception progressively in time and that their duration is relatively short, we are nevertheless able to assimilate a series of discrete tones and perceive larger musical units as unities.”\(^{50}\)

The assimilation of tones to create a musical whole is much like the individual pigments that make up a painting. Every color must be realized in order to understand – and gain an appreciation for – the entire work. However, the visual form of a painting is a stable physical substrate that exists *in* time. Tones, on the other hand, are sonorous and durational phenomena that can be said to exist *through* time, or within the physical substrate. Yet Cage’s *Quartet for Percussion* resides in a very unique position that defies both senses of time.

There would seem to be no debate that this work is static in nature, therefore creating an impression of stability – an unwavering period of aesthetic contemplation. The perception of this piece is much like that of a painting until the subject of transience comes into play. As suggested earlier, music is an art of time, and the durational character of tone will always allude to the temporality of musical perception. This piece, therefore, can be understood as a stable substrate existing *in* time aesthetically while also progressing *through* time ephemerally; similar to the idea if one were to imagine a blank canvas that gradually transformed into a beautiful landscape, then reverted back to its original form.

Further contributing to this topic are the concepts of memory and anticipation. Since musical perception is a successive process, one must possess the capacity to perceive the

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
present state of sound and remember what has passed. Herein lies the conceptual basis of musical appreciation. Some would argue that the progression of tones as they are presented in time not only involves perception and memory, but also anticipation.51

Alperson quotes nineteenth century music critic Eduard Hanslick as such, “The most important factor in the mental process which accompanies the act of listening to music, and which converts it into a source of pleasure, is frequently overlooked. We here refer to the intellectual satisfaction which the listener derives from continually following and anticipating the composer’s intentions...”52 Adam Smith, the “father of modern economics” and moral philosopher, shared a similar sentiment:

...the enjoyment of Music arises partly from memory and partly from foresight. When the measure, after having been continued so long as to satisfy us, changes to another, that variety, which thus disappoints, becomes more agreeable to us than the uniformity which would have gratified our expectation: but without this order and method we could remember very little of what had gone before, and we could foresee still less of what was to come after; and the whole enjoyment of Music would be equal to little more than the effect of the particular sounds which rung in our ears at every particular instant.53

Indeed, it is the effect of particular sounds that we hear at every instant that Cage insisted on calling music. The sounds that we hear in our everyday lives can be most closely related to percussion, further validating the use of regular household items as instruments for such a piece as Quartet for Percussion. Cage would defend unpitched percussion against other modern composers who were using Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system by saying that “atonal music was excellent in theory, but there were no atonal instruments to play it.” Cage also

---

52 Ibid.
disputed, as Peter Yates observed, “...he could see no reason why Schoenberg, having freed music from tonality, should not have gone the entire way and freed music from its 12 notes. If every tone is equal to every other, then any controllable sound is equal to any other or to any tone.”\footnote{Michael Hicks, “John Cage’s Studies With Schoenberg,” American Music 8, no. 2 (Summer, 1990): 131, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051946} As Cage became more and more preoccupied with percussion and the structural means of noise and silence, he was at last outside the realm of Schoenberg. One might disavow the connection between these two masters because, as Brenda Ravenscroft noted, “Schoenberg felt compelled to liberate himself painstakingly from the shackles of Old World tradition, while Cage experimented freely in an unfettered spirit characteristic of the New World.”\footnote{Ravenscroft, “Re-Construction: Cage and Schoenberg,” 3.} Schoenberg’s contribution to Cage’s legacy carried on, though, through the demonstration of ambition and seriousness of endeavor.

At first Cage worshipped Schoenberg, but it is certainly fair for oneself to ask why. One can only speculate that Cage was inherently drawn to his unique compositional style, his position as an innovator, his contribution to the progression of modern music, and his steadfastness. Cage’s relationship with Schoenberg would not have been possible without the advice given by Henry Cowell. Although he spent just over a year in New York with Cowell and Adolph Weiss, Cage absorbed a great deal of information about contemporary and world music, advanced rhythm and harmony, and the possibilities that percussion can offer compositionally.

Although Cage met Oskar Fischinger after Quartet for Percussion was composed, his spiritual outlook on all tangible things undoubtedly encouraged Cage to stand behind this piece and keep it in his list of repertory. He could have quite easily considered it a failed attempt at
experimental writing with no place in the future of composition, but obviously this was not the case. He took the completed composition to Seattle where he programmed it on his first percussion orchestra concert just one year after his encounter with Fischinger. Years later Cage included the work in his complete oeuvre when he sought a publisher to distribute his music, which ultimately became the C. F. Peters Corporation. Fischinger’s endorsement was essential to the exposure of this work and its importance in Cage’s career.

Possibly the most intriguing aspect of Cage’s *Quartet for Percussion* is that it does not suggest obvious stylistic influence despite all of the influential figures in his life at the time it was composed. He was able to gain as much knowledge as he could from various corners of the musical and artistic world, yet still managed to create a truly original work. Other compositions for percussion before his quartet called for traditional percussion instruments that were widely recognized around the globe, but Cage strived for a new *sound*. By the end of the 1930s Cage felt that people were protective of the word “music” as if it had to occur at a specific place, at a specific time, with specific instruments. He wanted to break the unnecessary confines that were forced upon music and give it a new designation. He preferred something a bit more open to interpretation such as “art of noise” or “organization of sound” – a proper place for his *Quartet for Percussion*.

The fact that Cage wrote *Quartet for Percussion* for unspecified instruments shows that he began to experiment with different sounds that would bridge the gap between music and noise early in his career. One can also distinguish various facets of this piece that can be directly related to Cage’s interactions between such influential figures as Arnold Schoenberg, Henry Cowell, Oskar Fischinger, and many others. He challenged the perception of the listeners as well
as the creativity of the performers by notating rhythms and leaving it up to the performers to
decide what the piece will ultimately sound like. This is a sincere and innovative work that
creates an entirely new way to interpret musical composition and raises some interesting
questions concerning the limits (or lack thereof) of composers. These concepts are what made
John Cage one of the leading figures of twentieth century composition.
Bibliography


