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Nasher's 'Soundings' offers rare performance of uniquely corrupted composition and instrument

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By Christopher Mosley

American composer John Cage is known as much for what he didn't do as he is for his completed works.

Arguably one of the most important and controversial artists of the last century, Cage's infamous composition, "4' 33"," directs a musician to sit at the piano in complete silence for exactly four minutes



Pianist Boris Berman performs John Cage's "Sonatas and Interludes" as part of the seventh season of "Soundings: New Music at the Nasher." (Oleg Kvashuk, courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center)

and 33 seconds. This has made his name a shorthand dig at the audacity of academic and experimental music, and a beloved figure to cultural radicals ever since.

Music as we know it might be completely unrecognizable, however, were it not for the "prepared piano," another musical concept that Cage helped to innovate.

The prepared piano will be heard at an entry in the Nasher Sculpture Center's "Soundings" series on Saturday, Feb. 18. Moscow-born pianist Boris Berman will perform "Sonatas and Interludes," composed by Cage, who brought the prepared piano to the greater public consciousness in the late 1940s. Berman is a scholar of Prokofiev who has recorded works by the Russian composer as well as Cage.

The concept evolved from techniques employed by musicians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who decided that not even the grand piano was complex enough for their vision and desires. The approach led to more technologically advanced offspring. The prepared piano involves a series of bolts and screws attached to the

strings of the instrument itself, and the drum machines and synthesizers so prevalent in popular music can trace their direct lineage to innovations connected to the practice.

Cage's work of complete silence owes its existence to "Sonatas and Interludes." Besides the obvious, there is a stark contrast between the two compositions, since the latter clocks in at approximately 70 minutes. As such, the piece is rarely performed in its entirety.

That's unfortunate since, as wonderfully intriguing as Cage's aforementioned piece of silence remains on a purely conceptual level, "Sonatas and Interludes" contains entire passages which the world is still pondering. "4'33" " was composed during the height of Cage's experimentation with the prepared technique, and there is ample use of space in "Sonatas," although never quite so extreme.

The details of the way a piano must be prepared for "Sonatas and Interludes" are excruciating in their exactness. "It's absolutely detailed," according to "Soundings" director Seth Knopp. "It takes almost an hour to prepare."

The kit used to prepare the instrument will be shipped, since a box full of metal bolts and screws might raise a flag or two with airport security. "It's an extremely expensive preparation and very specifically marked," Knopp says.

Cage's idea for the prepared piano sprouted from studying under the equally relevant American composer Henry Cowell. While working under Cowell, Cage took note of his teacher's habit of plucking the piano strings by hand and muting them directly with his palm rather than playing the keys. Instead, Cage took control of the foot pedals while his instructor worked under the lid. In Cage's essay, "How the Piano Came to be Prepared," he took note of his teacher's unusual approach to the instrument:



A 1962 file photo from The New York Times of composer Henry Cowell, known as a kindly godfather to the avant-garde. (The New York Times)

"In another piece he used a darning egg, moving it lengthwise along the strings while trilling, as I recall, on the keyboard; this produced a glissando of harmonics."

Cowell himself is a fairly tragic figure. His sexual encounter with a 17-year-old boy resulted in an extended prison sentence in San Quentin, where he was sentenced to a 15 years. He served four and worked extensively on music while serving time. A shocking fate for someone who counted Bartók as an admirer and included everyone from Cage to George Gershwin to Burt Bacharach as students. Cowell's interest in retooling the piano in the 1920s led to his role in the Rhythmicon, which is considered to be the world's first drum machine. It foresaw the rise of syncopated

electronic music by many decades, since it was created in 1931.

Cage was also freakishly prophetic. His writings, including his essay "The Future of Music," predicted much of the cultural and technological advances taken for granted today.

In the 1974 lecture, he envisioned a world in which “shortly, everyone, whether he’s a musician or not, will have a computer in his pocket.” In the very same talk, he also seemed to understand the impact he had made on modern music up to that point.

“Silence isn’t as generally upsetting as it used to be,” he said.

PLAN YOUR LIFE

John Cage’s “Sonatas and Interludes” will be performed in its entirety by pianist Boris Berman at the Nasher Sculpture Center at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 18.



Artist, composer and writer John Cage (Courtesy of The Nasher Sculpture Center)