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## Pianist Boris Berman explores the strange and wonderful sounds of John Cage

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By Scott Cantrell

Legend has it that the composer and critic Virgil Thomson once took his aged mother to a concert of music by John Cage. Asked afterward for her impressions, Mrs. Thomson replied, "Well, I certainly wouldn't have thought of it."

Cage, who lived from 1912 to 1992, is most famous for "composing" a piece of non-music: *4'33"*, for which the performer sits four minutes and 33 seconds in silence, thereby focusing hearers' attentions on the sounds of their own heartbeats, respiration and digestion--and random sounds in the room. Cage's exploration of unorthodox sonorities led to his development of the "prepared" piano, with foreign objects--screws, bolts, bits of rubber, plastic and what have you--inserted between strings to vary the sounds of different notes.



A Steinway grand piano "prepared" for John Cage's *"Sonatas and Interludes,"* at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas, Saturday, February 18, 2017. (Scott Cantrell/Special Contributor)

Cage's 70-minute *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, from 1948, was the sole fare for the Saturday-night Soundings concert at the Nasher Sculpture Center. The performer was Boris Berman, a pianist better known for Prokofiev and the like, but obviously an interpreter deeply committed to these 16 "sonatas," interspersed with four "interludes."

Most of the sections are in AABB form, each half repeated once, and much about the music is mathematically determined. But one soon abandons oneself to the sheer hypnotic weirdness of the experience.

The preparations turn the piano into a one-person percussion ensemble. The music clunks, clangs, tinkles and thuds, the effects variously suggesting

wind chimes, twanging sitar, muted bongos, tollings and peelings of bells. It's not as disconcerting as you



*Boris Berman plays John Cage's "Sonatas and Interludes" during the Soundings concert at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas, Saturday, February 18, 2017. (Allison Slomowitz/ Special Contributor) Special Contributor*

might expect, the overall impression often that of a Balinese gamelan ensemble. One marvels that so rich a range of sound can come out of a "mere" piano.

Berman certainly savored the rhythmic nuances, no less freewheeling than the sonorites. The music alternately jerked, danced and twiddled. Occasionally it extruded hints of a would-be melody.

I once interviewed Cage, back in the late 1980s. For all his reputation as an *enfant terrible* of modern music, he was soft-spoken and gracious, and obviously didn't take himself too seriously. *Sonatas and Interludes* is anything but

scary. In fact, as Berman proved Saturday night, it's strangely beautiful.

*Staff classical music critic of The Dallas Morning News for 16 years, Scott Cantrell continues covering the beat as a freelance.*