

NWCR732

John Cage

Music for Two Pianos



John Cage (1912-1992)

1. *Two²* for two pianos (1989) (32:50)
(Written for Double Edge)
 2. *Experiences* (1945) (2:44)
 - Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos (1944-45)..... (25:41)
 3. Part 1 (6:29)
 4. Part 2 (6:54)
 5. Part 3 (12:17)
- Double Edge: Edmund Niemann & Nurit Tilles, duo-pianists

Total playing time: 61:32

© & © 1997 Composers Recordings, Inc.
© 2007 Anthology of Recorded Music, Inc.

Notes

While John Cage is often thought of only in terms of a single stance—the avantgardist using chance operations to shake up musical traditions—the reality of his life and work is much richer and more complex. Hear without knowing their origins, the three works on this recording might easily be taken for the music of three different composers.

1. Modest and lyrical (*Experiences*)

Experiences was composed in 1945 as an accompaniment to the dance of that name by Merce Cunningham. As with so many of Cage's dance collaborations in this period, the music is modest and understated. At this time, he was living in New York City with practically no money at all: he took up residence in a large, mostly empty loft in a shabby Lower East Side building. Since he had no connections to large performing ensembles, Cage's music of this period was written for small audiences in small spaces using as few resources as possible. That *Experiences* uses two pianos is an extravagance; almost all of the Cage-Cunningham collaborations of the 1940s involve piano solos. Perhaps the hall they booked for this concert had extra space in the pit.

Cage's dance pieces were ephemeral as well, being used for one of two concerts and then put aside. His catalog of works lists only four performances of *Experiences* in the period 1945-1949; Cage performed in all four (twice with Maro Ajemian, for whom he later composed his masterwork *Sonatas and Interludes*). The work was filed away and forgotten after this, although he did write *Experiences 2* in 1949, using the same structure and melody, this time in a composition for solo voice. That piece was performed once.

Cage's style here is simple, open, and lyrical: his indebtedness to Erik Satie is clear. The pacing and structure of the melodies—and of the lengthy pauses—was certainly determined by the phrase structure of the dance (this was

before he and Cunningham developed a way of collaborating while working in complete independence of one another). The effortless spinning of these flat, gently-inflected lines within the predefined time structure of the dance gives the composition that classically Cage/Satie quality of being a music that takes up space.

2. Dynamic and virtuosic (Three Dances)

Although it is hard to imagine, *Three Dances* for two Prepared Pianos was premiered just a little less than two weeks after *Experiences*. They highlight the difference between two styles—the two voices—of Cage's music in the 1940s. The dance works written for the practical purpose of accompaniment are understated, simple, lyrical. *Three Dances*, on the other hand, was written for the concert stage—specifically for the prominent duo piano team of Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale. As a result, it is virtuosic in temperament; bravura, ambitious, physically energetic, intricate. The syncopations and cross-rhythms fly by, leaving one breathless.

The complexities of the piece are compounded by the use not of just a pair of pianos, but a pair of *prepared pianos*. Here, the insertion of objects between the strings (screws, bolts, pieces of plastic and rubber) transform the pitches of the pianos into a kaleidoscope of noises. The tumult of bangs, thuds, buzzes, and gongs can be exhilarating.

And it is not just the performers who show off in this piece; Cage's compositional plan is ambitious as well. Where the structure of *Experiences* follows the phrases of the dance that of *Three Dances* is a carefully and elaborately planned series of durations, engineered so that the larger units are perfectly mirrored at the small scale, even as the tempo changes from section to section. As with all of Cage's concert music, there is something monumental about this piece. The difference

between *Experiences* and *Three Dances* is the difference between speaking to an intimate gathering at a dance recital and to a packed concert hall audience.

But if it is a concert work written in a distinctly concert style, why is it titled *Three Dances*? In 1948, Cage said that the title was the result of a “passing remark” by Virgil Thomson regarding Cage’s long-standing affiliation with dancers and the importance of dance to his work. “The *Three Dances* are written as a gesture of friendliness towards the dance as an art,” he explained. Dance responded a few years later: in 1947, Merce Cunningham choreographed his *Dromenon* to the music of *Three Dances*.

3. Spacious (*Two*²)

That *Two*² presents such a difference in style from the other works on this disc is no cause for surprise: it was written in 1989, nearly a half-century after the two-piano works of the mid-40s. Much had happened in the intervening time, not the last of which was Cage’s adoption of chance procedures in composition. But much is similar. Just as *Three Dances* was written for Gold and Fizdale, *Two*² was written expressly for Double Edge. And again Cage was inspired by a passing remark, this time by the composer Sofia Gubaidulina: “There is an inner clock.”

This statement inspired Cage to compose the work in such a way that time is measured entirely intuitively and cooperatively, with no recourse to an external device such as a stopwatch. Unlike the other “number pieces” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Two*² is not built from a series of “flexible time brackets” that are adhered to with the use of a clock. Instead, the composition consists of thirty-six lines of music, each line containing 5 measures. Within each five-measure line, the following number of events occur: 5-7-5-7-7 (based upon the syllabic structure of Japanese *renga* poetry). Chords and single tones are scattered within the measures. The two pianists are somewhat independent of one another: their chords and tones have no precise time relationships to each other. However, neither may move from one measure to the next until the other has completed their music and is also ready to move on. The result is a situation in which the two players must listen to each other and become aware of the effects of the “inner clock”.

Even though the chords and tones themselves stem to a certain degree from chance operations, *Two*² has a voice—it communicates a sonic vision. As with many of Cage’s later works, it speaks to us of space and the independent-yet-interpenetrating universe of sounds. Each sonority in each pianist’s part arises of itself and resonates from its individual center, moving outward through the space. The effect is reminiscent of the star-map pieces, especially the *Etudes Australes* for solo piano. But in *Two*² the intuitive timing, the carefully-arranged use of repetitions among the chords, and the two-piano medium conspire to create an uncertainty—a blurring—of the sound in space, as if we were seeing stars through a nebula. *Two*² is written in the form of Japanese *renga* poetry, but it reminds me a haiku by Issa:

Summer night—
even the stars
are whispering to each other

—James Prichett

Edmund Niemann and **Nurit Tilles** formed Double Edge in 1978. In 1990, John Rockwell of the *New York Times* wrote, “What makes Double Edge so good is their superb feeling for each other’s playing. They really make two pianos sound like one taut, hugely sonorous instrument.” In 1991, Kyle Gann (*Village Voice*) called Double Edge “one of the century’s best piano duos...Their sonority is big, their ensemble perfect, their repertoire wild.”

Since their 1987 debut at Town Hall in New York, American appearances by Double Edge have included New Sounds Live, Lincoln Center Out-Of-Doors, Merkin Hall, Bang on a Can Festival, Walker Art Center, New Music Across America, New York State New Music Network Tour, and frequent returns to Town Hall. Guest artist appearances include the Richmond Symphony under George Manahan, Concordia Chamber Symphony under Marin Alsop, and the Crosstown Ensemble under Eric Grunin. The duo-pianists were selected for the 1993-1996 Western States Performing Arts Tour Roster.

Following their London debut at Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1990, Double Edge gave a Contemporary Music Network Tour under the auspices of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Their ten-concert tour of Australia in 1993, including Sydney Opera House, Adelaide Town Hall, and Melbourne Concert Hall, was sponsored by Musica Viva Australia. Other tours abroad have taken Double Edge to Holland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Hungary (Budapest Spring Festival), Czech Republic (Prague Spring Festival), Slovak Republic, Bulgaria, Canada, and New Zealand.

The new works written for Double Edge since 1987 include *Two*² for two Pianos by John Cage, *Phantom Waltz*, by Meredith Monk, *Cicada* by Kevin Volans, *The De-Certified Highway of Dreams* by “Blue” Gene Tyranny, *Orpheus Over and Under* by David Lang, and *Double Portrait* by David Borden. They also have given first performances of pieces by Kitty Brazelton, Paul Dresner, Mell Powell, James Tenney, and many other composers.

Double Edge’s other CRI recordings are the widely praised collection *U.S. Choice* (CD 637), and Lang’s *Orpheus Over and Under* on an all-Lang disc (CD 625). Their recording of Messiaen’s *Visions de l’Amen* was released on New Albion. The duo has also recorded for Nonesuch, Lovely Music, and New World. Double Edge has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and The Fund for U.S. artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions.

Edmund Niemann was a founding member of Parnassus and is a longtime member of Steve Reich & Musicians. He has been guest artist with Speculum Musicae, New Music Consort, Group for Contemporary Music, Da Capo Players, New York New Music Ensemble, and The Mother Mallard Band. He is on the faculty of Sarah Lawrence College.

Nurit Tilles has performed with Steve Reich & Musicians since 1975 and was a member of The Mother Mallard Band 1980–1987. She has enjoyed a long association with Meredith Monk, who wrote *St. Petersburg Waltz* (1994) and *Steppe Music* (1997) for her. Her recording of modern piano rags was produced by Rudi Blesh; her own pieces include *Raw Silk* and *The Kitchen Table*.

Production Notes

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton

Editing assistance: Jeanne Velonis and Karl Heriem

Recorded March 22–24, 1995 and December 8–9, 1996, at the Recital Hall, Music Division, SUNY, Purchase, N.Y.

All works published by C.F. Peters (ASCAP).