“Music of Our Time”

When I worked at Columbia Records during the second half of the 1960s, the company was run in an enlightened way by its imaginative president, Goddard Lieberson. Himself a composer and a friend to many writers, artists, and musicians, Lieberson believed that a major record company should devote some of its resources to projects that had cultural value even if they didn’t bring in big profits from the marketplace.

During those years American society was in crisis and the Vietnam War was raging; musical tastes were changing fast. It was clear to executives who ran record companies that new “hits” appealing to young people were liable to break out from unknown sources—but no one knew in advance what they would be or where they would come from.

Columbia, successful and prosperous, was making plenty of money thanks to its Broadway musical and popular music albums. Classical music sold pretty well also. The company could afford to take chances.

In that environment, thanks to Lieberson and Masterworks chief John McClure, I was allowed to produce a few recordings of new works that were off the beaten track. John McClure and I came up with the phrase, “Music of Our Time.” The budgets had to be kept small, but that was not a great obstacle because the artists whom I knew and whose work I wanted to produce were used to operating with little money.

We wanted to produce the best and most strongly innovative new work that we could find out about. Innovation in those days had partly to do with creative uses of electronics, which had recently begun changing music in ways that would have been unimaginable earlier, and partly with a questioning of basic assumptions. Morton Feldman and John Cage, whose early works are reissued on these two disks, were among the artists who had found ways to reinvent music.

When I started out at Columbia in January 1965, the company was housed in an old building on Seventh Avenue, where its offices and studios felt like comfortable old shoes. The atmosphere was familial rather than corporate.

But soon the company moved to its new “Black Rock” building, an imposing black marble skyscraper designed to instill in visitors and its workers an awe of corporate determination and power. The new environment had an effect of heightening the uneasiness that always lurks beneath the surface in relationships between artists and corporations set up to distribute their work.

As the Sixties wound to their end, the financial operations of the company got tightened up and by 1969 the marketing manager for Masterworks developed a bad habit of walking down the Black Rock corridors with his head buried in computer printouts of sales figures. The phrase “dollar return per cubic foot” entered our office vocabulary (it referred to the physical space in record stores).

Columbia Records was heading down the path followed since then by all the large American and multinational publishing companies, of books as well as of music: They lost interest in dealing with any literature or music that wasn’t capable of generating massive sales. They abandoned the old idea that a corporation is a trust, not only for shareholders but for the benefit of the people who use its products. In the words of John Rockwell (in a recent review of a book devoted to the history of Columbia Records): “Columbia spiraled downward in cultural significance even as its profits swelled.”

Looking back now on that fascinating decade of the Sixties from the present, I have a sense that the work we knew best and felt the most enthusiasm for represented a smaller part of worldwide music than my colleagues and I realized. Our horizons have broadened since those years. Nevertheless, that work that we knew and that Columbia Records briefly supported was a precious part of the music of that time. We can thank New World Records for helping us revisit it now.

—David Behrman

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Wasn’t That Beautiful?

In January of 1950 Morton Feldman and John Cage met by chance. They were both separately attending a concert at Carnegie Hall in which Dimitri Mitropoulos conducted Anton Webern’s Symphony. The audience was “so antagonistic and disturbing that I left immediately afterwards. I was more or less catching my breath in the empty lobby when John came out. I recognized him, though we had never met, walked over and, as though I had known him all my life, said, “Wasn’t that beautiful?” (Feldman, *Essays*)

At the time of their first encounter, Feldman (born January 12, 1926, New York City) had composed only a few works (e.g. *Journey to the End of the Night*, 1947) whereas Cage (born September 5, 1912, Los Angeles) for almost two decades had been exploring world-music scales and rhythms, the possibilities of percussion music, and the invention of new sounds (prepared piano, closed piano, multiple radios and phonograph discs, etc.). Cage’s early works range from the serene to the athletic in their musical gestures.

**Two Pieces** (1935)

Cage was twenty-three and studying in Los Angeles with Arnold Schoenberg when these two early works were written. The first piece, marked “Slowly,” is comprised of two angular contrapuntal lines, one characterized by a triplet figure at the onset (in the bass) and the other by an accented offbeat (in the treble). These lines are offset from each other by one beat and employ all twelve tones of the chromatic scale in an original, non-serialist manner: Cage created small rows (for example, of six to seven notes) with distinctive rhythmic motifs that he would repeat and transpose according to a few simple rules. This became his method of composing in subsequent works of this period. The ear can easily distinguish these small motifs as they go through their quasi-narrative, often dance-like changes.

After changing hands and pitch ranges, the two melodies evolve into a steadily rolling rhythm (an internalized drone) which breaks apart before the end.

The second piece, played “Quite Fast,” delivers splashes of motoric, pointillistic energy. Like its complement described above, this work is also made up of two contrapuntal lines. These are again rhythmically offset from each other, but in this case they coincide at certain moments. The brisk, shining bravura texture, composed mostly of perfect fourths and fifths, exhibits a love of sound for its own sake.

**Metamorphosis** (1938)

Written in five large movements or sections, this piece traces the evolution of simple musical material initially presented as an arc of evenly paced notes, in 2 + 3 and 3 + 2 note phrases. This piece is again built from small pitch rows with easily identifiable rhythms but this compositional procedure is employed with greater freedom than in Cage’s previous works. Cage combined the small rhythmical units into large structures.

After the opening of the first section, the pitch intervals of the even notes begin to stretch way beyond the octave when a second line is added with a defining rhythm of 2 + 3 + 1. The rows are then presented as vertically stacked aggregates (or complex suspended chords), in serenely resonant muted to crystalline textures. The sense of the forward motion of time is temporarily halted. Then the two horizontal (melodic) lines reappear in opposite hands as section I concludes.

Previous material is quoted and transformed in section II. This varied material is interspersed with a quicker and often quieter 3 + 3 + 2 or “paradiddle” rhythm played on two alternating tones. In section III, the rhythm units are more widely dissimilar and asymmetric, and explore larger structures.

Section IV recalls the even notes of the beginning in a kind of flash memory unfolded in furiously racing scalar lines. These rush along toward deeply resonant bell-like octaves in the bass. Section V obsesses over a simple rhythm—dotted quarter, eighth note, half note—in ever greater sonorities.
**Bacchanale (1940)**

Since his studies of world music with Henry Cowell and later with Lou Harrison (including non-Western instruments, cyclic and combinatory rhythm phrases, etc.), Cage had created the *Quartet for Percussion* of 1935, and was deeply occupied with percussion music. He continued on to make works for a modern dance group at UCLA and even for its underwater ballet in 1938. His music was becoming more dance-like and the ingredients more minimalist, that is, he composed patterns which rejected harmonic and melodic modulation in the usual sense.

Cage spent most of 1940 in San Francisco presenting percussion music concerts with Lou Harrison. Written in Seattle in March of that year, *Bacchanale* is scored for prepared piano. The preparations placed between the strings are fairly simple: ten notes are prepared with fibrous weather stripping, one note with a small bolt, and one with a combination of a screw with nuts and a piece of weather stripping. The resulting timbres approximate small log drums, gamelan metallophones, and a tiny rattle. The preparations of course are not intended to imitate other instruments but to create new sounds. Precise measurements of where to place each preparation along the strings are given in a table at the beginning of the piece but some adjustment by ear is always necessary, for example, to match the overtones of preparations made from the same material (the overtone and primary string pitch are easy to hear moving in parallel in this composition), or, in another example, to make certain that a jangling metal washer or nut rings freely without encumbrance. For practical reasons, as will become apparent, precision of placement had to be modified in subsequent prepared piano works.

This piece is in a large A—B—A1 form. It begins with wild spurts of energy and rushing about. Suddenly, the tempo adapts itself to a slow dreamtime atmosphere—perhaps an inebriated stupor or, perhaps better, a shamanistic exploration of altered consciousness. These are images in my mind, of course; Cage leaves such narrative associations open to the listener. There is a brief *accelerando* to the final section which bursts out in athletic abandon characterized by complex, elastic figurations.

This piece can quite aptly be described as a “considered improvisation,” an expression that Cage later used when reflecting upon his works of this period.

**The Perilous Night (1944)**

In this soundpiece, the preparations radically alter the fundamental pitches, and the score becomes a guide to which keys to push rather than a picture of the actual sounds heard. On twelve tones, there are double preparations (for example, weather stripping and a bolt with loose nuts) at different locations along and among the three strings for that individual tone (in the lower ranges there are two strings per note, and the lowest note has its one string covered with cloth and wood).

The “table of preparations” here still indicates precise placement of the objects (for various Steinway models), but because of the wide variety of piano constructions and consequently different resulting sounds from similarly placed preparations, Cage later changed to more general descriptions (“this screw should be positioned . . . so as to produce a resonant sound”) to guide the performer.

As its title suggests, this six-part suite, the first large-scale work for prepared piano, proceeds stealthily through a “night” of the soul in fits and starts, and in cautious, skulking footsteps like the sound of woodblocks in its first three movements. Then there is a steady rush forward, depicted by up-tempo pulses, until the footsteps fade and disperse into the distance. This author is reminded of black-and-white spy and sabotage films of the WWII era. But for Cage the subject of this work was “the loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy.” (What is that old saw about love and war?)

**Tossed as It Is Untroubled (1943)**

This tuneful dance in Lydian mode was written to accompany choreography by Merce Cunningham. The preparations here are pieces of weather stripping and small screws yielding woodblock and metallophone-like timbres. Somewhat reminiscent in feel to *The Perilous Night*, this piece is nevertheless much freer in structure.
A Valentine Out of Season (1944)

Written for his wife, Xenia, to play on a prepared grand piano, this charming three-part work uses finger movement that stays within a small range less than an octave. The first melody with its thoughtful pauses and re-starts is in the same mode as the opening high bassoon theme of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (probably unintentionally, as a full quote is not to be had). The second part moves along in steady motion, and the third part makes subtle contrasts with the use of the sustaining and *una corda* pedals.

Root of an Unfocus (1944)

Creators of any flavor of music almost inevitably arrive at a point where they wish to find, or invent, a rhythm that sounds elusive and unpredictable or “unfocused” relative to a steady dance beat (my interpretation), and yet a rhythm that has an inner coherency just beyond easy assimilation, like hearing an alien code that one can’t quite comprehend. The fine rhythm cycle that Cage created for this piece has all those qualities.

Extremely contrasting dynamics are assigned to each hand throughout the piece. The right hand plays an accented mezzo-forte cluster as a pickup to the first beat, then the left hand begins the primary cycle at pianissimo: $\frac{1}{2} + 2 \frac{1}{2} + 1 \frac{1}{2} + 5 \frac{1}{2} + 5 + 1 \frac{1}{2} + 8 + 2 + 2$. This cycle is notated within seven measures of 4/4 that are further subdivided and truncated as the music progresses.

This minimalist study, brilliant in its elementalism and raw emotion, concludes with a gradually devolving cycle of $6 \frac{1}{2}, 6, 5 \frac{1}{2}, 5$ and, lastly, 4 measures.

Two Pieces for Piano (1946)

Until these two pieces, labeled I (3-5-2) and II (2 1/4 - 3 1/4 - 1 1/4 - 2 1/4), Cage had used small pitch rows, timbre changes, rhythmic modulation, and simple modal gestures as the material for his compositions. He had no interest in, nor admittedly “no talent for” harmonic progressions, which create coherency by their relationship (amount of tension) to a tonal or key center.

To solve this problem (in the positive sense) of harmony, Cage substituted another kind of coherency created by similar sonorities (or aggregates of similar intervals) using different pitches. In this way, degrees of musical tension could be maintained and related to each other over time without reference to a tonal center and with complete freedom of pitch choice by the composer.

There is a feeling of great serenity and calm in both these works. Much silence is introduced which serves to highlight the snatches of melody, the repeated sonorities, and the small grace note calls.

Prelude for Meditation (1944)

By placing two stove bolts of quite different sizes along the same strings, and depressing the sustaining pedal throughout the piece, a wonderful illusion of near and distant prayer bells is created. Two wood screws of equal size are applied to the topmost notes.

Music for Marcel Duchamp (1947)

This score for prepared piano was written to accompany the Duchamp sequence of the Hans Richter film *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. The imagery is that of Duchamp’s rotating discs or rotoreliefs which contain various types of curving lines, smears, and spherical objects. Both sustaining and soft pedals are held down throughout the piece, making resonance (after the simple repeated note patterns cease) an important musical element here (and incidentally making the acoustic afterglow into another kind of harmony). The disinterestedness of the repetitions (for example, 7 repeats of a 4-bar pattern at the end) and the simple mystery and tension of the other musical material can remind one of Duchamp’s own musical experiments with chance procedures in the 1910s.
**Suite for Toy Piano** (1948)

Cage first wrote for the toy piano in his recently discovered score *Dance Music for Elfrid Ide* (1940) for percussion ensemble. The five-part *Suite for Toy Piano* was composed at Black Mountain College in 1948 and later choreographed by Merce Cunningham.

As in the prepared piano works, Cage is again limited in his pitch range. In this case, he has available only nine mid-range notes playable only on the white keys. But he still manages to produce a remarkable variety of music from sweet modest scalar melodies (with slight shocks when the modes change to Mixolydian and Phrygian), to miniature fanfares, to flowing pastoral lines and a joyously declarative coda.

**Dream** (1948)

This touching and lyrical piece is a study in resonance. The long melodic line is to be played rubato “always with resonance: no silence; tones can be freely sustained manually or with pedal beyond notated durations.” The entire piece is played three times, and this affords the pianist plenty of opportunity to explore fingered sustains, and subtle degrees of pedaling, especially in the second half, which is approached by a gently cascading scale.

Because resonance is a kind of memory or extension in time, Cage seems to be “dreaming” of how feeling and memory modulate each other.

In a recent E-mail to this author, Christian Wolff (who together with Cage, Feldman, and Earle Brown became known as the New York School) wrote: “I remember Cage saying that Jeanne Kirstein’s playing caught the spirit in which the pieces were written at the time he wrote them—a kind of simple excitement and enthusiasm (also, surely, out of the discovery of the preparing of the piano and the great new sounds).

“I remember, after a performance of John’s *Sonatas and Interludes* in his apartment on Monroe Street, Morty saying to me that, though very beautiful, that music didn’t really interest him—he was only interested in John’s immediately recent work . . . involving chance operations. It’s true that after that *Sonatas and Interludes* performance John didn’t look back. And Morty didn’t really have anything to look back to yet in his work.

“I don’t recall stories around the music so much, more hearing the music itself and loving it, for its utter distinctiveness and starkness, with (especially in Morty’s case) this having mostly an extreme stripped-down character with just occasionally these totally beautiful moments—usually just a loop, repeated figure, or something like in one of the piano pieces, about a page or more of just the same repeated two notes two octaves apart.”

**Piece for Four Pianos** (1957)

This composition is remarkable for both its originality of conception and beauty of sound. All four pianists play from the same page of music which is notated in stemless noteheads on staves, with a few grace notes (played not quickly) and a few numbers indicating silent beats. There are no bar lines, no time or key signatures. The pianists begin more or less at the same time but then each proceeds, quietly and calmly, at his or her own internal tempo.

The resulting uncoordinated drifting has been compared by David Behrman to a bunch of balloons released to slowly float away from each other into the sky. Visual analogies such as that one are appropriate in reference to Feldman’s music because he often used them himself—he compared Mahler’s music to the “stylized mood-drenched landscape of a Munch painting” and Cage’s music to the refraction of sunlight into the “non-delineated world” of Monet’s later paintings (“More Light” in *Essays*).
There are several places in the piece where Feldman briefly repeats material three, four, and up to five times. The pianists seem to call to each other from a distance, and briefly attempt to re-align themselves in a shared tonality. Such repeating sequences or loops happen frequently in Feldman’s work. Here the widely spaced intervals suggest stripped-down romantic tonalities, like chords topped with major sevenths and major and minor ninths. The gently repeating insistence on each new tonality functions to erase or wipe out the previous resonances.

The listener can appreciate the care with which each note was chosen. Feldman is said to have spent many hours trying out, for example, two or three sounds at the piano before making his choices.

**Intersection 3 for Piano** (1953)

Separating music into its components, or parameters, such as pitch, event occurrence, density, dynamics or amplitude, duration, and so forth became a highly detailed activity in many countries in the forties and fifties, leading some composers (serialists) toward greater control and others to create greater freedom for performer, composer, and listener.

This piece, in graphic notation, written literally on vertically and horizontally lined graph paper, indicates in each box the number of keys to be depressed in relatively high, middle, and low registers but leaves the specific pitches to the performer. Each box is a pulse or ictus at MM = 176 and the notes may be played in any rhythm within that time. Dynamics are also left up to the pianist. So, other than maintaining a rather fast tempo, the majority of parameters are left to be realized by the performer. The listener can appreciate the brilliance of the legendary David Tudor’s realization heard here. Tudor, to whom the piece is dedicated and who later became a well-known composer of electronic music, creates a wide gamut of dynamics, gestures, and touch.

**Extensions 4 for Three Pianos** (1953)

This work is fully notated (fixed) and is thus interesting to compare to the graph works in its aural effect. There is a good deal of interplay between the players, including shared pitches quickly skipping across the performing space, as well as gestures distributed in a kind of hocketing amongst the trio. The majority of the piece has extreme changes of dynamics in a pointillistic style but gradually more silence is introduced until the piece concludes in a touching and gentler atmosphere.

**Two Pieces for Two Pianos** (1954)

Feldman indicates that these two delicate works are to be played “as soft as possible,” a dynamic marking to be found in many of his compositions. He asks for this touch in order that the timbral quality of the harmonics and other small events available only at that dynamic level on the instruments used can be clearly heard. (Some performers, assuming that the composer only desired to make quiet music, have mistakenly recorded his pieces with this instruction at “normal” levels—back in the days of analog recording to improve the engineer’s signal-to-noise ratio—and then asked the listener to turn down the playback volume.)

The small events in these pieces include shared or “common” tones between the two pianos surrounded by more complex intervals, quick gestures begun and completed between the pianists, and barely perceivable sustained tones hanging over as resonances from very quickly articulated staccato notes. A hushed conversation of some import seems to be taking place.

**Projection 4 for Violin and Piano** (1951)

The graphic notation for this piece is similar to that for Intersection 3 with the addition of “timbre symbols” for the violin (harmonic, pizzicato, arco) and, in the manner of Arnold Schoenberg, there are diamond shapes that indicate keys that are to be depressed silently in order to produce harmonics when other keys are sounded and released. Each box can potentially last for 4 icti or pulses, and each box moves at a tempo of MM = 72.
Structures for String Quartet (1951)

To produce the finely wrought timbres of these fully notated structures, Feldman again employs the direction “as soft as possible” and additionally has the strings play with their mutes on throughout the work. They perform a variety of delicate harmonics, pizzicati, ponticello, col legno and normal bowed events. There are several rhythmic loops including a mesmerizing 54-measure mobile near the center of the piece with the lower string rhythms gradually offset forward and backward by half and full beats.

Extensions 1 for Violin and Piano (1951)

This completely notated composition is a study in extreme dynamics with certain motifs or gestures recurring but extended in pitch and varied in rhythm.

Three Pieces for String Quartet (1956)

Surprising and exquisite sonorities are treated in different ways in each of these three works. The first piece presents simultaneous events held for different durations: for example, in 3/16 time, the first violin has an eighth-note harmonic, the second violin has a sixteenth-note pizzicato, the viola and violoncello have bowed eighth notes, the viola a sustained grace note pickup. The second piece settles into a long series of chords each played on the first beat, which puts the emphasis onto the changing pitches. More silences are introduced in the third piece, and repeated notes on the same instrument become a subtle motif. The piece concludes with a wide-ranging cello solo.

Isn’t that beautiful?

— “Blue” Gene Tyranny

“Blue” Gene Tyranny is a composer-pianist who has created more than fifty works for acoustic and electronic instruments and voices. His recordings are available on the Unseen Worlds, CRI, IDEA, New World, and Lovely Music labels.

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John Cage


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**John Cage**


**Morton Feldman**


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New World Records, 75 Broad Street, Suite 2400, New York, NY 10004-2415
Tel (212) 290-1680 Fax (212) 290-1685
E-mail: info@newworldrecords.org

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JOHN CAGE: MUSIC FOR KEYBOARD 1935–1948
MORTON FELDMAN: THE EARLY YEARS
80664-2 [2CDs]

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John Cage (1912–1992)

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2. Quite fast 1:21

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4. Bacchanale (1940) 9:24
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6. Tossed As It Is Untroubled (1943) 2:36
7. A Valentine out of Season (1944) 4:01
8. Root of an Unfocus (1944) 4:22

Two Pieces for Piano (1946)
9. I. 4:43
10. II. 7:44

Jeanne Kirstein, prepared piano, piano, and toy piano

Total Time: 66:12

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John Cage

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Suite for Toy Piano (1948) 7:46
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9. Piece for Four Pianos (1957) 7:13
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10. Intersection 3 for Piano (1953) 2:42
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Two Pieces for Two Pianos (1954)
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David Tudor, Edwin Hymovitz
Matthew Raimondi, violin; David Tudor, piano

15. *Structures for String Quartet* (1951)  5:17
Matthew Raimondi, Joseph Rabushka, violins; Walter Trampler, viola; Seymour Barab, cello

Matthew Raimondi, violin; David Tudor, piano

*Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1956)
17. I.  4:30
18. II.  6:12
19. III.  3:48
Matthew Raimondi, Joseph Rabushka, violins; Walter Trampler, viola; Seymour Barab, cello

Total Time: 75:29

New World Records, 75 Broad Street, Suite 2400, New York, NY 10004-2415
Tel (212) 290-1680  Fax (212) 290-1685
info@newworldrecords.org
www.newworldrecords.org

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