

The Notation, Aleatory, and Aesthetics of the New York School
and their Impacts on Contemporary Music.

The 1940's and 50's ushered forth a new era in the arts. Avant-garde art culture began to see a shift in philosophy and aesthetic. Coinciding with a plethora of different visual art

movements such as surrealism, dada, and existentialism, young artists from New York began to question art's purpose, significance, and conventions. Music, in particular, began to see a stark shift in character in comparison to the experimental music of the Second Viennese School and their contemporaries. The composer collective called The New York School, is comprised of four principal composers; Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and John Cage. The majority of the group, having studied with, and of, the expressionist composers of the time, did not continue the trend of previous decades by choosing not to embrace the complex hierarchy of pitch that was characteristic of Pre World War Two era music. John Cage, reflecting back on his studies with Arnold Schoenberg, said, "With Schoenberg I have remained apart. Although in each one of the class sessions I have 'gleaned' something extremely valuable, I have felt disturbed fundamentally."¹ Instead, the composers of the New York School began to re-examine music's rudiments, suggesting that music is far broader and more liberal than what it had been defined as in the past. This seemed to be the next step in musical innovation following an artistic movement that had explored the Western twelve-tone pitch collection to its brink. Earle Brown stated in a lecture that, "What is being challenged by recent developments is not music itself but the concept of what is 'art' in music today and this is rightly a constantly recurring problem which indicates that the art is still vital and alive."² In order to articulate these new sonic ideas, the composers of the New York School began to develop and implement new and unique methods of notation. New notational styles were a byproduct of the change in the musical

¹ Hicks, Michael. 1990. "John Cage's Studies with Schoenberg." Essay. In *American Music*, 2nd ed., 8:125–40. University of Illinois Press.

² Brown, Earle. 1986. "The Notation and Performance of New Music." Essay. In *The Musical Quarterly*, 2nd ed., 72:180–201. Oxford University Press.

conscious of the New York School, which ultimately impacted future composers by forcing them to rethink music's identity.

The advent of the New York School coincided with a decline in art culture in Western Europe. During the Second World War, Germany's experimental arts community came to an abrupt standstill. With the rise of the Nazi regime, Germany, which historically has produced the majority of Western music's influential composers, deemed experimental music as crude; opting instead for the largely tonal works of the composers of the 19th century, and before. The avant-garde was referred to as degenerate music, and was publicly mocked and prohibited.

Professor Erik Levi writes:

Thus atonal music, jazz and above all works by Jewish composers were branded as 'degenerate' though in fact during the Third Reich reactionary critics applied the term indiscriminately to a wide variety of styles from the avant garde to popular operetta, particularly if the composer was deemed politically or racially unacceptable to the regime.³

The art world, once dominated by German and other Western European composers, now had an unexpected vacancy that was largely filled by the American composers of the time. Some of whom belonged to the New York School. American composers were looking to find their own aesthetic in a densely occupied European arts movement. This is not to suggest, however, that the New York School looked solely to depart from Western tradition. As was mentioned earlier, American composers, like Cage did seek the tutelage of European masters due to their admiration of the style. In fact, each of the composers of the New York school spent extensive time in Europe after their compositions, which utilized, early if not fully realized graphic notations, garnered the attention of the European avant-garde community.⁴

³ Levi, Erik. 2001. "Entartete Musik." *Grove Music Online*, January.

⁴ Beal, Amy C. . "An Interview with Earle Brown." *Contemporary Music Review* 26, no. 3/4 (July & aug. 2007): 341-56. Accessed February 21, 2018. JSTOR.

As a result of discovering a new aesthetic, the composers of the New York school began to innovate methods of conveying their artistic directive. The commonality between the composers being liberal and interpretive musical ideas, the latter half of the 1940's into the first half of the 1950's was a period of extensive musical experimentation. One of, if not, the largest experiments conducted by the New York School was graphic notation. According to Dr. Cecilia Sun, graphically notated scores are, "documents that no longer represent[ed] specific sounds and musical structures," and ultimately, "attempt to free performers from overly prescriptive instructions."⁵ Music composition took a rapid and radical turn at this point of the 20th century. The score, which had always served as a vessel that conveyed a sonic idea to the performer, has had its historical purpose undermined. The performer, whose role had always been to interpret the music they were playing, was now accountable for creating audible content implied by the score. The graphic notational styles of the New York school varied tremendously however, their aesthetic was unified – musical language has transcended what can conventional notation can instruct.

The New York School were amongst the first to adopt abstract expressionist influence in their compositional design. Abstract expressionist art, often criticized as haphazard and careless, was intended to liberate the viewer from paradigms and biases formed by previous experiences. James Lawrence notes, "Abstract Expressionism sought to concoct visual experiences free of social and historical constraints."⁶ Despite the fact that all art is naturally subjective, the contributing artists of the abstract expressionist movement designed their work to force the

⁵ Sun, Cecilia. "Experimental Music." *Grove Music Online*, July 10, 2012. Accessed February 21, 2018. Oxford Music Online.

⁶ James Lawrence, "Abstract Expressionism. New York," *The Burlington Magazine* 150, no. 1269 (December 2008): , accessed February 28, 2018, JSTOR.

viewer to formulate a unique opinion that mirrors its radical and foreign nature. The composers of the New York School drew heavy inspiration from the artistic philosophy surrounding the abstract expressionist movement in the visual arts. According to musical iconography specialist Cristina Santarelli, “Cage had experienced the painting of Klee, Kandinsky and Mondrian from the time he studied with Arnold Schoenberg.”⁷ Despite studying with Schoenberg nearly twenty years before producing his most iconic graphic pieces, the abstract expressionist aesthetic had established a foothold in Cage’s artistic conscious. In addition to having an admiration for the abstract expressionist art of the time, Cage had spent many of his early years creating visual art. Composing music in such close proximity to the visual arts suggests that graphic notation may have initially been an experiment in fusing the visual and sonic arts.

As mentioned before, abstract expressionist art forces the viewer to have a unique experience free of bias. This phenomenon is accomplished by departing from realistic depiction of subject matter, and instead composing a deconstructed portrayal that focuses solely on artistic fundamentals--line, color, and form. Paul Klee, a painter who Cage, Feldman, and the rest of the New York School were inspired by, illustrates the quintessential expressionist style in his painting *Red Balloon*.⁸ The painting focalizes a red hot air balloon far into the distance. Geometric angles of what can be perceived as architecture line the sides of the canvas, which is adorned with smokey greys and blacks that could perhaps signify fog or haze. The painting’s design is in reference to mundane subject matter; a cityscape with a balloon in the distance. It is how Klee presents the subject matter that creates the experience for the audience. The conscious

⁷ Santarelli, Cristina, "From Vision to Sound: Morton Feldman and Abstract Expressionism," *Music in Art* 38, no. 1-2 (Spring 2013).

⁸ Klee, Paul *Red Balloon*, 1922, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York.

choice to present a work that is defined by the viewer's interpretation was a revolutionary idea. Neglecting to opt for objective detail and expend more artistic effort conveying a sense of suggestion is the philosophy that drew the composers of the New York School towards their unique aesthetic.

Embracing the abstract expressionist aesthetic, the composers of the New York School were now tasked with conveying this interpretive art sonically. Art historian Robert Goldwater is quoted defining abstract expressionist art as, "a deep feeling for nature and a desire to translate not so much its aspect or its analyzed structure, but its mood and impact."⁹ Until this point, the composer's role was to convey a set of precise directions to the performer. The performer, responsible for interpreting and presenting the material, was still under the controlled guise of the composer. The essence of abstract expressionist art, however, challenged the concept of literal or near literal interpretation. The abstract expressionist aesthetic was to present an experience unique to each viewer. In order to achieve this goal, the composers of the New York School had to employ new methods that simulated an experience analogous to what abstract expressionist visual artists were applying to their works. At this point in history, the composers of the New York School begin to implement revolutionary ideas to create unique musical experiences unlike any music prior to this point. The utilization of chance operations and extended notational techniques expanded the musical vocabulary of the New York School and aided the achievement of creating music that mirrored the abstract expressionist art of the time.

⁹ Harrison, Helen A., "Arthur G. Dove and the Origins of Abstract Expressionism," *American Art* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1998): , accessed February 26, 2018, University of Chicago Press.

The early half of the 1950's served as a period of transition in the development of graphic notation. The composers of the New York School, as early as the mid to late 1940's, began to demonstrate proto-graphical technique in their compositions. When analyzing the early works of Earle Brown, one can see the graphic scoring style of the time mature into a more liberal representation of musical philosophy. In one of Brown's earliest works, *Three Pieces* for piano, Brown highlights musical ideas and processes that have not yet left the confines of a traditionally notated space.¹⁰ Rebecca Y Kim explains that the piece, "foregrounded some of the problems that were to occupy Brown."¹¹ The composition utilizes serialized twelve tone pitch material. The concept of serialism predates this piece by several decades, and is not an innovative contributing factor. However, this piece does display a revolutionary modular design that was unique to Earle Brown's methods. In examining the piece's rhythmic organization, each measure lasts a unique length of time that is dictated by the length of the phrase. The absence of meter removes any expectation of traditional organization where a phrase is expected to end after a determined number of beats. This piece, as a result, is conveyed to the listener purely at the phrase level, where barlines serve the sole purpose of justifying the length of the phrase, not indicating any sense of uniformity implied by meter. Brown's diagrammatic and extended notational techniques foreshadowed the inevitable and necessary departure from traditional notation. Brown's contemporaries, too, were experimenting with alternate notation styles. Cage's *Music of Changes*¹² and Feldman's series of *Projections*¹³ indicate their abstract

¹⁰ Brown, Earle. *THREE PIECES for Piano*. 1951.

¹¹ Kim, Rebecca Y., *Beyond notation the music of Earle Brown*(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

¹² Cage, John. *Music of Changes*. 1951

expressionist aesthetic. Hints and subtle diversions from compositional convention amongst all of the composers of the New York School suggest their imminent escape from the norms of notational practice.

Where techniques that predate fully graphically notated scores are evident in the early works of the Earle Brown, a nearly complete departure from traditional notation does not occur until 1953. In Brown's composition, *Twenty-five Pages*¹⁴ for between one and twenty five pianos, Brown displays his most radical departure from conventional notation to this point. In a lecture, Brown details the compositional process for *Twenty-five Pages* as, "the delicate balances one had to deal with between subjective-objective contact with the work; between freedom and control; explicit-implicit notations; and between compositional necessity and performance reality."¹⁵The canvas being familiar staff paper, Brown's rhythmic and spatial organization suggest a radical new method of approaching music, both for the composer and the performer. Before attempting to formulate an opinion about the piece from the score, one can infer quite a bit from the title. As the title of the piece suggests, this piece can be played by a range of performers. The concept of indeterminacy serving a formal role in music composition was pioneered by Cage. Marc G. Jensen summarizes, "Cage sought a balance between the rational and the irrational by allowing random events to function within the context of a controlled system."¹⁶ In order to convey and accommodate the idea of one or any number of performers

¹³ Feldman, Morton. *Projection I for solo cello*. 1950

¹⁴ Brown, Earle. *Twenty-five Pages for one to twenty-five pianos*. 1953

¹⁵ Brown, Earle. 1986. "The Notation and Performance of New Music." Essay. In *The Musical Quarterly*, 2nd ed., 72:180–201. Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Jensen, Marc G., "John Cage, Chance Operations, and the Chaos Game: Cage and the "I Ching," *The Musical Times* 150 (Summer 2009): , accessed February 24, 2018.

playing the piece already begins to stir a sense of wonder in the listener's mind. Granted, the first documented performance of *Twenty-five pages* was premiered by solo pianist David Tudor, composing a piece while leaving room for inconclusivity was a salute to the artistic gestures of the abstract expressionist movement. Brown's composition displays a virtually complete departure from the rigidity of ordinary notation. Brown used a pair of five-lined staves in order to accomplish a fundamental sense of pitch organization, however the intentional neglect to incorporate clefs could potentially perplex the performer. Whether they were to infer that the staves were a standard treble-bass configuration or another two clef combination, the purposeful ambiguity Brown creates is a clear abstract gesture that mirrors the art of the time. Despite not being his first composition using an indeterminate time-notation, Brown utilizes an alternate method for rhythmic organization that suggests the durations of note values in relation to one another. This manifests itself in the score as stemless black stripes that extend for a length on the page. Familiar musical symbols do occur in the score in the form of accidentals, accent marks, and ties, however the obscure and foreign first impression that the piece makes when first observed is akin to the phenomenon of ambivalence that occurs when one attempts to make sense of abstract expressionist art. This style of composition is unprecedented in nature. Music and the philosophy surrounding it was becoming as liberal as it ever had been. A significant part of music's broadened definition can be attributed to the use of extended notational techniques which grows to its most untamed state in the years to come.

As graphic notation continued to evolve, the role of the performer began to change as well. While the compositional style of the New York School, at the time, reflected a divergence from tradition in order to accommodate new ideas of indeterminacy, performers were now posed

with the task of having to interpret this music. Until this point in history, the performer had a relatively clear conception of what was to be performed because of notational practices. What existed on the page was intended to be played by the performer. Of course, each performer interprets music differently, however composers predating the New York School all communicated their musical ideas precisely on the page. This did not leave the performer with as much artistic liberty as the music of the first half of the 20th century. When referring to performance of Morton Feldman's works, author Alistair Noble states, "One of the fundamental problems is that the musical 'work' itself is notoriously elusive."¹⁷ The music of the New York School was composed from a unfamiliar realm. The western tradition had, up until this point, placed the performer in a near definite constraint. Responsible for performing what was on the page, the performer now had the responsibility of supplementing the notation with their own ideas. The first, and most noteworthy, interpreter of this new style of music is David Tudor. A personal friend of Feldman, Cage, and Brown, Tudor premiered the majority of the works of the New York School. Author John Holzaepfel documents, "Tudor found in indeterminate music a means with which he could expand what he called his 'sound imagination' by creating an equilibrium between responsibility and freedom."¹⁸ Having an intimate relationship with the pioneering composers of the time, Tudor, who also composed experimental music, shared a similar aesthetic to his contemporaries. With an understanding of the direction the New York School took music, Tudor was prepared to embrace the freedoms given to him. This

¹⁷ Noble, Alistair. 2013. *Composing Ambiguity: The Early Music of Morton Feldman*. Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group. Accessed March 10, 2018.

¹⁸ Beal, Amy C., John Holzaepfel, Douglas Kahn, Liz Kotz, Tamara Levitz, Judy Lochhead, Tyrus H. Miller, and Kristine Stiles. "Abstracts: The Art of David Tudor: Indeterminacy and Performance in Postwar Culture." *Leonardo Music Journal* 14 (2004): 59-63.

performance method would become a necessity for performers of experimental music for years to come.

The graphic notation and musical aesthetic of the New York School has served as a major inspiration for composers of the second half of the 20th century-- as well as the 21st century. Since the 1950's, many composers have partaken in composing in a graphical style. Because the music of the avant-garde continued to express a need for a diagrammatic language in order to convey elements of indeterminacy, extended technique, or other non traditionally conceptual musical ideas the use of graphic notation. One of the composers that began to embrace graphic notation and elements of indeterminacy is Cornelius Cardew, and English experimental composer active during the mid 1950's through 1980. In his most widely acclaimed graphic piece *Treatise*, a 193 page graphic score, Cardew evidently displays techniques first pioneered by the New York School. Cardew says, "in my piece there is no intention separate from the notation; the intention is that the player should respond to the notation."¹⁹ Cardew shares the same philosophy with the New York School surrounding notation. While not completely abandoning a need for notational organization on the page, the need for interpretation is thoroughly prevalent in Cardew's work which is reflected in his abstract and widely variable notation methods. One can also see elements of the abstract expressionist aesthetic in the music of György Ligeti. In one of his early works *Poème Symphonique* for 100 metronomes, Ligeti expresses his compositional desire and how elements of indeterminacy are weaved into the piece's structure. Ligeti says, The piece should last about 18 to 20 minutes. Ideally, there should be 100 metronomes, but at least thirty are needed," and " Not too many should be set fast,

¹⁹ Smalley, Roger. "A Beautiful Score." *The Musical Times* 109, no. 1503 (1968): 462.

but there should be at least 16 to 20 slow ones in the first row. Perhaps, 20 to 30 should be slow.”

²⁰ Ligeti using words that connote suggestions to the ensemble, such as the words “about” and “perhaps” are clearly aligned with the musical goals of the New York School. Comparable to the Brown pieces that was examined earlier elements of indeterminacy that require interpretation by the performer exist both in the piece’s notation and the philosophy surrounding the artistic goals of the music itself. The necessity of alternative notational styles has continued into contemporary experimental music. Composers, with constantly evolving musical principles and ideas will always beckon for surrogate notation to aid in their sonic communication.

Despite continuing to compose music utilizing standard notation well into their careers, the composers of the New York School of the 1950’s, Cage, Feldman, Brown, and Wolff, revolutionized music with their abstract expressionist aesthetic. Rising to ultimate significance in the years following World War II, the New York School were amongst the first American composers to receive international acclaim for their revolutionary ideas. Christian Wolff details the night during which Cage and Feldman first met. Wolff writes:

In January of 1950 Dmitri Mitropoulos conducted the first U.S. performance of Webern's *Symphonie*, op. 21. John Cage and Morton Feldman attended. Both, overwhelmed, left the concert immediately after, found and introduced one another in the lobby of Carnegie Hall, and became close friends, passing their music and thoughts back and forth, intensively for about the next four or five years.²¹

Perhaps their unified flight from the performance is not only significant because of their meeting, but also symbolic of a new musical aesthetic forming as a literal departure from twelve-tone expressionism. Because the serial methods of Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese

²⁰ Clendinning, Jane Piper. "The Pattern-Meccanico Compositions of György Ligeti." *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (1993): 192-234.

²¹ Wolff, Christian. "Experimental Music around 1950 and Some Consequences and Causes (Social-Political and Musical)." *American Music* 27, no. 4 (2009): 424-40.

School had, in theory, explored pitch relations of the chromatic scale to its furthest possible extent, experimental composers were bound to write music that did not centralize pitch relation as a compositional goal. The music of the New York School utilized non precise elements of indeterminacy that call upon the performer to interpret their music far more liberally than any other music that had been written up until that time. Because of these new musical ideas, the compositional conventions of the time were pulled into question. Traditional staff could no longer serve as a vessel for conveying their musical ideas. In the compositions of the New York School, one can clearly see that there has not been a complete departure from the notational practices of traditional western music. Even in the late scores of Feldman, Brown, and Cage, the utilization of a five-lined staff, accidentals, and in some cases, dynamic markings demonstrate that only ideas that couldn't be conveyed through traditional would be notated alternatively. However, the compositions of the New York School served as an important development in experimental music, as well as a significant source of inspiration for avant-garde composers who have succeed them. The compositional developments made in the 1950's by the New York School serve as an important artistic departure from the Western tradition. Not only did music begin to deviate from staff notation which had been the convention for more than 350 years, but also music began to stray from pitch organization which continues to serve as the most significant feature that separates the musical eras. New music, from this point onward, continued to answer a question that the New York School obsessed over—what can be considered music?

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