



Image: Aodh O Coigligh

"Experience is a form of paralysis." - Erik Satie

"Satie bases everything on structure... The basis of his music that no one bothered to imitate was its structure by means of related lengths of time. Think of Satie as interchangeable with Webern (you'll be somewhere near the truth)." - John Cage

"What could be more Avant-garde than the Romantic? What could be more Romantic than the Avant-garde?" - Lukas Foss

The great works of the Romantic period sought to reach heights of color, form and timbre that had not yet been travelled. A few decades later, Modernist and Avant-garde composers sought to do the same thing, only this time, their task was to respond to a world on the brink of destruction...

Such are the broad strokes of most music students' introduction to 20th Century Music. The earliest portion of the 20th century is seen as a continuation of the Romantic era, and like the death of Bach marks the end of the Baroque period, the final works of Strauss in the 1940s can also be seen as the end of the Romantic period. "Music After 1945" is another specialized course offered in many music schools, which covers music composed in the aftermath of World War II, ignoring the Modernist music in the 1910s through the 1930s which was composed leading up to, and then in the aftermath of World War I. Pivotal works of the early 20th century that do not fall within the framework of being reactionary to the World Wars or their sociopolitical

consequences do not get a lot of class time. Leo Ornstein had a robust performing career in the 1910s playing repertoire likely to shock audiences even now, and in the 1920s Henry Cowell's success would move past that of Ornstein. Their music and the music of the Second Viennese School of this period is defined by an orientation away from traditional harmonic devices, but less formalized and rigorous than the hyper-serialists and mathematician-composers of the 1950s and 1960s.

Somewhere in this timeline, discussion of the humanity behind all of these composers and compositions falls to the wayside. Their actual technical or personal motivations become swallowed by the idea of the World Wars disrupting all artistic values, precipitating a necessity to reform the rules of art and music out of the ashes. While it would be foolish to say that art and artists are unaffected by war, the turbulence of the early 20th century is used as an excuse to justify the unfamiliar nature of the music of that era, as if to make the student not think about whether a composer might actually *like* sounds of this nature; that the early Modernists did not just write this way because their world was dark or without joy. In the World War framework, the Modernist and Avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century is perceived as having all the drama of Romanticism but none of the joy. But, examining the subject matter of the texts for *Pierrot Lunaire* by Schoenberg, or Webern's Hildegard Jone lieder, or even Milton Babbitt's *Philomel* reveal that these composers believed that nuanced and varied emotional depth. Explorations of

love, hope, happiness, justice, resilience, are all possible through an altered harmonic medium.

Instead of viewing the World Wars as reset buttons for a collective musical philosophy, what if we treated Schoenberg's insistence that his developments were the inevitability of (German) Romantic musical development as true? Like Lukas Foss suggested with his pair of questions, the Romantic and the Avant-garde have much more in common than not. The transition out of the Romantic era into the 20th century established, then, a *tradition of defying tradition*. Now, 110 years on from *Sacre du Printemps* and *Pierrot Lunaire*, and almost 140 years on from Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies*, today's composer is hard pressed to feel like a radical doing anything they can set their minds upon. Although we may be tempted to feel it more true now than ever before that "nothing is new under the sun," it helps to remember that quote is often attributed to Aristotle. Even so, if nothing really is new under the sun, then breaking away from or reforming or redefining an artistic tradition is not new either. There were plenty of scathing contemporaneous criticisms of the music of Schubert and Schumann, just like we can find regarding Cage and Cowell.

Erik Satie straddled the ideological similarities and differences of the Romantic and the Avant-garde deftly. Some of his music looks deceptively simple. Some of it looks intentionally complicated. He was beloved by members of both Romantic and Avant-garde composers, and while he is remembered academically for his works which perplex and stupefy, the

Gymnopédies are not spoken of as if they belong in the oeuvre of this absurdist, reclusive composer whose nearly every word was certain to cause serious head scratching. Instead, the much-beloved *Gymnopédie No. 1* is played as if it's *the Blue Danube* or Scott Joplin's *Bethena*. *Nobody* appears to follow Satie's persistent pianissimo, his very sparse surprise fortes or his expression marking of *Lent et Doreux- slow and painful*. I found that the slower I played the *Gymnopédie*, the more it fit with the idea and concept of Satie's music communicated by himself and by Cage.

I asked myself "how slow is painfully slow?" How slow is so slow, that it's painful for me to actually play it at that speed consistently? The answer turned out to be 42bpm. Only one pianist I could find on recording - the inimitable Reinbert De Leeuw - played it anywhere near that slow. At this glacial pace, a new meaning of Satie's *musique d'ameublement* "furnishing music" unifies with the goals of ambient and textural musicians today. This ceases to be music not meant to be listened to- it becomes music that listens to you. Listening back to my performance, although my tempo is with all available steadiness, I could not maintain any focus as a listener to the beat. My parasympathetic nervous system became active- I was very much *physically relaxed* in the way that one must be in order to go to sleep or meditate. We readily understand in these times the concept of music that is purely environmental or textural. Ambient music, noise music, and ASMR all engage directly with our senses, but they do not necessarily always induce our most active listening state. This is the meaning that history has uncovered and

borne out of Satie's furnishing music idea. John Cage's devotion to Satie would lead to a body of work all his own that also explores this space in our listening sensory experience.

Satie and Cage are embodiments of the same duality. In Satie's work, Cage found the ample place left for silence and disembodied listening, and in that place first cradled his infamous phrase "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." Satie was certainly one of Cage's favorite composers. Cage's written and dictated ruminations on Satie leave much to read on what elements of Satie's music and thinking precipitated his own. In 1969, Cage not-so-famously based a new piece off of Satie's *Socrate* (into which Barbara Hannigan and Reinbert De Leeuw also breathe much-needed life on recording). Cage maintained the rhythmic structure of *Socrate* but used his random-yet-particular system of framing ways of adding to and changing the music as questions to the *I Ching*, and mapping the set of 64 possibilities of throwing the *I Ching* as answers to these questions. If that sounds confusing to you, that's because it is. Even Cage himself when writing on exactly *how the I Ching was used in his music* is shockingly vague. Biographical sketches on Cage will note he wished to use the *I Ching* and chance decisions in general to remove his self or his ego from the music. Fans, students, and collaborators of Cage will almost unanimously tell you he failed at that goal- Cage's music is so unmistakably his that it cannot be said his self was removed in any capacity.

The disconnect stems from a confusion about what the *I Ching* and divining answers for questions in life does for oneself. After hearing from Chinary Ung about his mentor Chou Wen-Chung's criticisms of Cage's conception of the *I Ching*, I endeavored to study it on my own, using it to aid my own journaling and mindfulness practices, and tried to reach a better understanding of the text so apparently integral to the history of the Avant-garde. After some years spent doing so, I believe that chance shows us a window to the self. It shows us when our decisions matter and when our decisions would be just as good as choosing at random. Attempting to decide things upon chances can show us how we really feel or what we really want. We are better conditioned to think through a given choice without the feeling of committing to one- you can choose to take a given oracle's advice or not.

Using chance restores and reifies our agency. It does not diminish it.

The work accompanying this essay does not replace Satie's notes in *Gymnopédie No. 1* with new notes. I only rolled dice to remove notes or change their octave. I constructed each movement of *Ceci N'est Pas* as an iteration of the *Gymnopédie* with different results of randomized note removal. The resulting work transcends the passive complacency of most Ambient music and becomes a sensory experience which unfolds in the body and around it. This is a work that I hope calls your whole body to listen rather than just your ears, and I would be doubly satisfied if this work made you fall asleep or forget about your most immediate, mundane, or intrusive thoughts. These

reactions are like the quantum state of a listening experience. When we listen to binaural tones, white noise apps, or other sounds when we go to sleep or meditate, the sound fills the whole mind, but we are not listening to it with a lot of active attention. Otherwise we would not fall asleep! Attention is simultaneously paid and not paid to the music and sound itself.

I did not physically play any of *Ceci N'est Pas*. I physically performed *Gymnopédie No. 1* in full, and then duplicated the MIDI roll multiple times to remove notes as determined by a set of D&D dice (d4, d8, d10). The notes in a given measure of the *Gymnopédie* are always at least 4 and at most 9. This makes it very easy to produce one's own movement of *Ceci N'est Pas* in a matter of about an hour. Just take any score of *Gymnopédie No. 1* and for each measure, count the number of notes lowest to highest. Roll the appropriate dice to account for the amount of notes, and if you wish, roll an additional die or use numbers on your die higher than the number of notes in the measure to determine if you should move a particular note up an octave, or two, or three, if you keep rolling the highest numbers. Anyone can do this, yes. That is part of the goal. I *want* anyone to be able to do this. A work like this could be made as long or as short as a listener-composer wants. The power of lies ultimately with the listener.

If one conditions an audience to be put off by a piece of music, they will be put off by it. If a concert programmer plies an audience by seeming to make apologies for its unusual character or even mischaracterize a piece as

unsettling, when the composer had some other unrelated idea in mind, then the audience's perception of the music is tainted before the music ever had a chance. Too much music in the last 50 years has been presented with this air of apology and reluctance, as if to say "what you are about to hear was made by *a unique mind*, and only *specialty prepared or anointed minds* can appreciate this." There is no reason to allow academic isolation and the cold grip of erudition make an audience forget that all of this music, no matter how simple or strange or pleasant or unsettling, was put there by a human being for a human reason. As a living composer, I am tired of seeing the work of my peers treated more like alien specimens than feats of human expression. Even if they used random chance operations or AI to generate their work, *it sounds like that because the composer likes it that way.*

If nothing else, I would ask any listener to approach an unfamiliar work with this premise. There is always something human to be found in every piece of music, because making music is the most natural and human thing we can do. *Gymnopédie No. 1* is not at all a piece that suffers the aforementioned fate, but it is an important junction in the Grand Human Listening Experience which links the hearts of the traditionalist and the maverick, the Classicalist and the Dadaist, the Avant-garde and the Romantic. And what could be a more romantic notion?

Nick Fagnilli

We are accustomed to reading John Cage's use of the *I Ching* as a *morte d'auteur* of the type demanded by Roland Barthes: if the Postmoderns have a desire to examine an artistic work without letting the author's intent drive the discussion, then it seems fitting that we would see music which is not in fact written by its composer, *non?* – yet, as my dear colleague has identified, if Cage meant to remove his personal signature from his “chance” music, he certainly did a poor job of it, as a work like *Socrate* (or even *Music of Changes*) bears a palpably personal aural signature. I would propose that we have been Barthes-ing up the wrong tree: that there is a difference between effacing the artistic subject and effacing oneself (though the English language makes the difference between the two rather difficult to articulate). What Cage accomplishes is not to remove himself from the compositional process but rather to allow unconscious aesthetic formations to well up through chance procedures and override conscious decision-making.

Around the same time as Cage was experimenting with the *I Ching*, Carl Jung was investigating the same as a “method of exploring the unconscious,” whose uncannily topical divinations emerge through “synchronicity...the coincidence of events in space and time...meaning something more than mere chance.”¹ Because the *I Ching's* responses directly engage the reader's specific questions, unconscious intuitions are invoked through their interpretation, much like consulting Tarot cards. Jung, inspired by recent discoveries in quantum physics

¹ Carl Jung, “Foreword to the *I Ching*”, 1949.

and contemporaneous ESP experiments, posited that the results of chance procedures are in fact directly connected to the unconscious mind in their initial emergence, though accepting such an explanation is not necessary to appreciate the means in which divinations offer access to the unconscious: here is the “window to the self” which Nick has described.

In the case of *Ceci N'est Pas*, Nick has unearthed a powerful self-replicating procedure from within *Gymnopedie No. 1* which has produced from it an expansive work, achieving even a feeling of transcendence. When we compose, all of the music we write down ultimately succeeds or fails based on its success in speaking for itself, according to the spooky animate phenomena that placing notes together unlocks, and likewise, the impression in *Ceci N'est Pas* is that it functions not at all by accident, nor that it is an inevitable product of the system Nick devised: it seems, indubitably, that *something is speaking*. I will not pretend to know what it is or how it operates, but it doesn't matter: it speaks, and continues to speak, and could continue to speak for much longer if it wanted to.

Amelia Brey

A Note on Tunings

Using tunings other than Equal Temperament for *Ceci N'est Pas* allows me to add another dimension of color and brightness changes to each altered iteration of the *Gymnopédie*. Using non-equal tunings emphasizes the sensory aspect of the listening experience. Our ears affect our sense of place, depth, balance, and other minute sensory qualia. It also fits with Cage's concept of "musical sculpture," an expansion upon the ideas of Marcel Duchamp (and later Edgard Varèse and Iannis Xenakis).

The performance of *Gymnopédie No. 1* is in Equal Temperament, and the movements of *Ceci N'est Pas* use Equal Temperament, Pythagorean, Meantone Half, and Wendy Carlos's "Super Just" tunings. Doing so creates an exploration of three-dimensional sonic space and gives form and surface area to the overall composition.