

Oriental Colors in John Cage's Chance Music

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Keywords: Asian philosophy, Zen, I-Ching, Inaction

Abstract: It is well-established that John Cage was an Avant-garde art composer, the founder of aleatory music. This study aims to determine how Eastern philosophy, especially Zen and I-Ching, influenced John Cage's composition. Through the analysis of the literatures, this paper briefly expounds the influence of oriental colors on the John Cage's chance music. The results showed Cage was influenced by the Zen method and brought Inaction into his musical composition, he started to focus on the sound itself. Chance music grows in the background of Eastern culture entered the Western world when utopian fantasy was completely shattered. By connecting with Asian folks, Asian philosophical thoughts, especially Zen and I-Ching, John Cage created lots of works by unparticular instruments and numbers.

1. Brief Introduction of John Cage

1.1 John Cage and His Music

John Cage (in full John Milton Cage) was born in Los Angeles in 1912, he was an Avant-garde art composer, the founder of aleatory music. Cage had creative compositions in percussion, prepared piano music, aleatoric music, electronic music, etc[1]. His music style led the development trend of modern music in the West after World War II, he was also considered a genius composer and inventor of pioneer music in the 20th century, his unconventional ideas not only significantly influenced music in mid 20th century but also influenced dance, painting, video art, and various areas.

John Cage was a talented inventor and composer. He used to study with Richard Buhlig, Arnold Schoenberg, Adolph Weiss, and Henry Cowell. Schoenberg once described him as a gifted inventor, his talent for invention benefited from his grandfather and father. He had his own unique style of writing music, which was different from modern composition techniques that requested pitch and harmonies, instead, he used unfixed pitch noise to create a new type of sound combination in rhythm. During his early time, due to the study with Schoenberg, he used the 12-tone method to write his pieces. In 1939, he started experimenting with increasingly non-traditional instruments, such as "prepared pianos", meanwhile, he also investigated creating music by tape recorders, radios, and record players[2].

1.2 John Cage and Eastern Philosophy

In the middle and late 20th century, he began to study Eastern philosophy, especially Zen and

I-Ching, and started to add various uncertain factors to music. During the late 40s, Cage was influenced by Suzuki Teitaro Daisetz, who brought the Zen method to America. Suzuki Teitaro Daisetz was a Japanese Zen researcher and thinker, he started focusing on the study of Zen thought after Chinese Zen thought gradually spread to Japan. After that, Cage applied Eastern philosophy, aesthetics, Zen Buddhism, and Chinese “*I-Ching*” in his new pieces. All the Eastern methods brought Cage more inspiration for creating music that was different from traditional music. His masterpiece *4’33’’* was an astonishing work, a blow to the traditional view of music, and it also marked the beginning of a new era in the history of music[3].

2. Chance Music

2.1 Three Aspects of Chance Music’s Development

The backgrounds of the development of chance music can be viewed from three aspects. The first aspect is from social background, the two world wars have left great mental wounds on the people of all countries. Under the violent impact of historical disasters and social changes, utopian fantasy was completely shattered, and Eastern culture entered the vision of the Western world under such circumstances. The second is from the advance in science and technology, chance music was born at the time of the Third Revolution of Science and Technology. The rapid development of science and technology had accelerated the prosperity of culture and art, especially the development and popularization of electro-acoustic technology, providing technical support for accidental music composers to explore new artistic languages and forms. It promoted the birth of new music such as specific music, tape music, and computer music. At the same time, it promoted the use of new musical instruments, especially electric musical instruments in music creation, provided new sound materials for music creation, and impacted the public’s traditional concepts in music appreciation. The third one was the rise of avant-garde art, as a category of avant-garde art, accidental music drew on the artistic concepts and expression methods of other avant-garde art groups.

2.2 Two Origins of Chance Music

Specifically, the born of chance music have two possible origins, and the earliest beginnings of it can be traced back to at least the 15th century. The first was the genre of the catholicon, the other was musical dice games, played by rolling dice and taking different pieces of music from several prearranged small boxes and then piecing them together, which was popular in the late 18th and early 19th century[4]. Between 1913 to 1915, Marcel Duchamp composed two pieces that used chance factors. In 1920, Francis Picabia and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes also used the chance composition method in their music. In the early 20th, Charles Ives was one of the significant composers who used aleatory features in his pieces, his score contained great degrees of freedom and unachievable notations, therefore, he allowed performers to discover their conclusions unconsciously. From the 1930s, Henry Cowell adopted Ives’s ideas, such as in his piece, *Mosaic Quartet*, he allowed the performers to choose from provided fragments and combined them into music. He used special notations to create opportunities and choices in the performance, sometimes occasionally conducted the performers to improvise several sections or play at will.

3. Easten Philosophy and Chance Music

3.1 Zen Method

In the late 30s, John Cage attended the Zen lecture by Nancy Wilson Ross, which was the first

time he got in touch with Eastern philosophy. Then, he worked in Merce Cunningham Company as a musical director, where he got in touch with Asian folk music, pentatonic scale, and percussion[5]. In 1946, Cage got in touch with Gita Sarabhai, who came from a wealthy Indian family, during the time studying with her, Cage began to learn about Indian music and traditional Indian philosophy. Cage and Sarabhai believed that the purpose of music is to make the mind calm and peaceful. As Cowell's student, John Cage organized the Project of Music for Magnetic Tape in 1951, the same time, he started to use chance operations to write his music.

Cage was influenced by the Zen method and used it in his musical composition. Cage's idea was considered indeterminate that the performance of his music was not pre-conceived, and there was no psychological motivation or consequence. He was attracted by any possible sounds, whether they were pitched or unpitched. His composition method had a wide range and was usually related to the purity of abstract expressionism and non-expressionism art. Specifically, he decided on using instrumentation such as prepared piano, or radio sounds ahead of time. Some of his works were created for unparticular instruments and numbers, afterwards, he used unselected numbers to represent the choices of any decisions that must be made about the sound features.

Zen believed that in order to achieve a state of freedom and wonderful life, one must let nature take its course, and lived with a normal heart and life as it was. This thought of Zen coincided with the "Inaction" advocated in Lao Zhuang's philosophy. Cage brought *Inaction* into his musical composition, he started to focus on the sound itself, applying the unprocessed sound in daily life to music composing, erasing the artificial traces and obtaining the most primitive beauty of the sound. Another important method he followed from Zen was that the state of life advocated by Zen was random and unconscious, and its outcome was uncertain and accidental, which further developed chance music.

3.2 I-Ching

Later, Cage came into contact with *I-Ching* through his student, Christian Wolff. *I-Ching* is one of the oldest and most profound dialectical philosophy books in China, which understands and grasps the world from a holistic perspective and regards man and nature as an organic whole that interacts with each other, that is, the unity of man and nature. Meanwhile, *I-Ching* had also been used as divination to predict the future development of events for a long time, and Cage was interested in the ancient Chinese divination method of sixty-four hexagrams. Therefore, he drew inspiration from the operation mode of accidental factors and used the method of seeking hexagrams in *I-Ching* to create chance music. The works he created by using *I-Ching* were *Imaginary Landscape No.4*, *Imaginary Landscape No.5*, and *Music of Changes*.

3.3 John Cage's Pieces

Imaginary Landscape No.5 was composed of the magnetic tape recording of any 42 phonograph records. It was completed by Cage and the Barrons with the help of David Tudor in 1952. This was their first tape project; he chose most of the jazz records as his source material[6].

In Cage's book *Silence* he mentioned the creation method of *Music of Changes*, he began by presetting several tables filled with specific music elements, which were sound, amplitude, duration, and velocity. Except for velocity only had one preset form, the other three elements preset eight tables for each, and each table had divided into sixty-four parts. Besides, he also had an overlay form, which was used to combine all the elements from the other four types of tables. The elements in each type of table made full use of the "Yin and Yang" method in *I-Ching*, that is, the elements that makeup music are divided into two corresponding aspects for consideration. Such as, in the table of sound, each one had 32 voiceless and 32 voiced, and in the voiced one, 12 sounds were

pitched, and the rest were noise. In the table of amplitude, only 16 elements were the intensity of the movement, that was, the crescendo and fading of different amplitudes, while the others were fixed intensity levels. This piece used proportional notation, that was, the length of 2.5 cm on the staff was equal to the duration value of a quarter note, therefore, in the duration table, the length of duration was divided into various forms of fraction combinations. In these three types of element tables, some elements were called “solidified” by Cage, that was, they could be selected again after being selected, and some were “fluid”, that was, they could not be used again after being chosen. At last, the table of velocity had only 32 elements and contained some empty spaces, which meant once the empty one been selected, the music maintained the previous speed.

After the presets, Cage used the method of counting hexagrams in *I-Ching* to record the score. More specific, he took the value side of the coin as Yang, and the side of the person’s head as Yin, threw three coins to get one Yao (the basic symbol of the hexagram, represents the overall effect of the interweaving of Yin and Yang), threw three times to get a Bagua (a set of metaphysical philosophical symbols composed of three groups of Yin and Yang), and threw six times to get sixty-four hexagrams.

In Cage’s piece *4’33’’* he used a lot of thoughts in Zen. Before he performed *4’33’’*, he explained that silence was a kind of sound, he hoped every audience could find themselves in silence. There are three movements in this piece, the first movement is 33 seconds long, the second is 2 minutes and 40 seconds, and the third is 1 minute and 20 seconds, the player will open and close the piano cover and wipe sweat between the movements. Cage’s performance just like the meditation (za-zen) in Zen, during this time, the performer needs to clear their minds. Meanwhile, the audience is an unknown factor in this piece, all the sounds they make are parts of the music in the piece.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, John Cage as one of the most important Avant-garde composers during the 20th century, incorporated Asian philosophical thoughts, especially Chinese philosophical thoughts into his works and expressed the thoughts of Zen with his own understanding. The appearance of chance music is not accidental, it is generated based on the development of certain societies and previous music. With the development of music in different periods, composers eagerly hope to express their individuality in music and strive to be independent and free in both spirit and musical compositions.

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