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by James Manwaring

INTRODUCTION

What is music? What is composition? What is a 'new direction' in music? Who is John Cage?

These are the topics I'll cover in this resource on John Cage's *Three Dances* for two prepared pianos, one of the AoS6 set works from the Edexcel Anthology of Music. I will not only look at the piece itself, but also suggest some wider listening options, as well as ways of bringing the piece to life for your students.

The Edexcel specification and Anthology offers three great examples of music that take the listener in new directions:

- Cage: *Three Dances* for two prepared pianos (No. 1)
- Saariaho: *Petals* for cello and live electronics (see *Music Teacher*, August 2018)
- Stravinsky: *The Rite of Spring* (Introduction, The Augurs of Spring and Ritual of Abduction) (see *Music Teacher*, December 2016)

The specification points out a number of skills that students will be required to demonstrate:

- Formulate critical judgements, achieved through attentive listening (rather than just hearing) and aural perception, and could also be achieved by informed discussion (in writing and/or through speech), analysis, evaluation, contextualisation and reflection.
- Comment on music heard, showing understanding through the genres, styles and traditions studied.
- Comment in detail on music heard, showing critical understanding across the genres, styles and traditions studied.
- Use acute aural perception and discrimination skills.
- Use appropriate technical musical vocabulary to communicate sophisticated judgements.
- Show understanding of the complex interdependencies between musical elements.
- Show understanding of the sophisticated connections between music and its context.

It is crucial that, when beginning their studies of the work, students understand what they are aiming for and why they are studying this piece.

But let's start with that very first question from the top: what is music?

'THAT'S NOT MUSIC'

We've all heard that phrase before: 'That's not music.' It might have been a comment from a student, or even from a colleague who pops their head into your room when you're teaching serialism.

Unfortunately, the conclusion that many people draw when they hear a work such as Cage's *Three Dances* is that it isn't music. Others might consider that it's music, but that it's random, weird or unorganised. What they are saying, perhaps, is that it doesn't sound much like the music they listen to regularly. It isn't easily consumable, like most music we hear, and it isn't as easy to understand.

Cage's *Three Dances* has no melody, no real harmony and a very unusual structure. It is music that takes a very new direction, and the sounds it generates are very different from what many are used to. Students can consider these questions, and think about the other extremes in the Edexcel Anthology – Bach, for example.

Part of our discussion into what makes something 'music' should be to consider what most people think of when they think of music. Is it the 'Classical sound' with clear harmony, melody and sonata form? Or is music about rhythm, structure, dynamics, texture and all the things that Cage very effectively works with in this piece?

It's crucial for A level students to appreciate all styles and genres of music. Appreciating music is different from loving it, however. Appreciating music involves seeing its values, understanding its relevance and listening to it with a keen ear. Students should be guided in this, and teachers should take the time to open their ears to a range of composers that worked in the 20th century. This resource will touch on some examples that will not only help students in this journey, but also provide excellent wider listening examples.

We can, however, easily dispel the opinion that this piece isn't music. We can accept that it is unconventional and not as easy on the ear as other pieces. But it is nevertheless a piece that relies on structure, rhythm, dynamics and timbre. We might conclude that a lack of melody and harmony is what leads people to conclude that something isn't music. Our ears have become trained to associate music with melody, which is probably no bad thing. As we begin considering this piece, however, we must adjust our ears and appreciate that what makes this music into music is everything *other* than melody and harmony.

LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

Appreciating music means looking at what it was, and what it has become. This set work gives us a great opportunity to do this. You could create a timeline with students placing all of the Anthology set works in order by year, then ask them to consider the major changes that have taken place in music over the years.

Here are some questions and ideas to get students looking backwards and forwards:

1. What has changed most in composers' approach to instrumentation?
2. How has the approach to structure changed across the Anthology?
3. What three features of music remain the same across the Anthology?
4. What links Cage and Bach?
5. Finish this sentence – The common theme in all pieces in the Anthology is...
6. What has changed the most since Bach?

There are lots of different ways of helping students, but it's important that they consider how music has changed. This is crucial for their understanding of not only context, but also musical language and elements. As students look back across the Anthology and therefore the history of music, they will see how music has changed and evolved – but also how it has relied on past music in order to move in a new direction.

Of course, the Anthology isn't a full and exhaustive collection of music, which is where wider listening comes in. Ask your students to find another key piece of music that partners up with every piece in the Anthology. It might be a piece that fills in a blank such as a symphony by Tchaikovsky, or an opera aria by Wagner. Take this as another chance to embed wider listening in your teaching and in the minds of your students.

JOHN CAGE

American composer John Cage was born in 1912, and is best described as an experimental or avant-garde composer. 'Avant-garde' is defined as employing 'new and experimental ideas and methods in art, music or literature' – and there's no doubt that Cage fits this definition.

Cage often used unconventional instrumentations and created music that involved elements of chance. He was influenced by a number of different things, but in particular the Asian philosophies of nature and the harmony that exists in nature. Cage very much ushered in a new era in music, and there are a number of key characteristics to his music:

- **Unconventional instrumentation:** the prepared piano is a great example.
- **Use of unconventional elements:** kitchen gadgets, metal sheets and silence, for example.
- **Links to Indian philosophy and Buddhism.**
- **Use of aleatoric principles:** chance elements in the process of creation.
- **Links to dance:** Cage had a huge influence on the development of modern dance.

Some would say that Cage is the most influential of all 20th-century composers, and his music sparked both controversy and intrigue. There are so many examples among his music of pieces that would fit our opening comments about 'what is music'.

Understanding John Cage the composer involves us embracing an entirely new approach to composition. It involves us listening closely, and understanding what he was trying to achieve. Comparing his music to more conventional Western classical music is indeed a challenge, and could conceivably end in some believing that it isn't music at all. But Cage took the whole concept of music and composition in an entirely new direction, and allowed audiences and musicians to see that music is so much more than organised sound. It is the discovery of sounds and silence in an environment where chance, environment and nature play pivotal roles.

The best place to start with John Cage is with one of his most controversial pieces of music.

4'33"

Cage's notorious 4'33" was composed in 1952, and is a three-movement piece of music. The score indicates that it is for any instrument or combination of instruments, and instructs the performer(s) to not play their instrument(s) at any point during the entire performance. It is 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence, where nothing other than the sounds of the environment is heard.

This piece is a conversation starter for sure, and your students will doubtless be keen to have this discussion. As music teachers, however, it's important that we facilitate discussion without giving our own opinions. Guide the students through the pieces we're considering, and try to help them to appreciate what's going on. While 4'33" was the piece that made Cage famous, even notorious, there's so much more to the composer and his music. But what a great place to start on our quest to find out what music truly is.

Performing 4'33"

A class performance of 4'33" will allow students to experience the concept of the sounds of the environment around them.

Here are some questions to consider after your first performance of this piece:

1. Describe your first performance of 4'33" in three words.
2. What sounds did you notice in your environment?
3. Did you have any internal sounds or music going through your head as you performed 4'33"?
4. Do you think it would work in your next school concert?
5. Why do you think this piece made John Cage famous (or infamous)?
6. Are there any other pieces that have a similarly controversial approach to composition?

THREE DANCES FOR TWO PREPARED PIANOS

Composed in 1944, this piece was written for a ballet and uses two prepared pianos. Cage prepared 36 notes on each piano and used a wide range of objects in order to create the sound he wants, including pieces of rubber, furniture bolts, screws and plastic. The full details are provided in the Anthology, and show the sheer level of detail that Cage went into.

These meticulous preparations, however, led to the creation of a whole new sound world where any clear sense of pitch is masked by the preparation.

The ballet was choreographed by Merce Cunningham, Cage's lifelong partner. They collaborated on a number of works, and both contributed to the development of modern dance. In these Three Dances, Cage wanted to compose a piece that had driving rhythms and energy – a piece to make you want to get up and dance. That's something he achieved to great effect.

The Dances feature a number of influences, including Indonesian gamelan, African percussion and Indian tala, shown in the works' percussive qualities and the wide range of sounds that Cage was able to create. Not only does the work explore new sounds, however. It is also clearly a piece of dance music that features a number of exciting rhythmic and timbral qualities. At a time when composers such as Schoenberg (in fact one of Cage's early teachers) were exploring the intricacies of serialism, Cage took music in entirely new rhythmic and timbral directions.

'When I first placed objects between piano strings, it was with the desire to possess sounds (to be able to repeat then). But as the music left my home and went from piano to piano and from pianist to pianist, it became clear that not only are two pianists essentially different from one another, but two pianos are not the same either. Instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion.

'The prepared piano, impressions I had from the work of artist friends, study of Zen Buddhism, ramblings in fields and forests of mushrooms, all led me to the enjoyment of things as they come, as they happen, rather than as they are possessed or kept or forced to be.' John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*

SET WORK ANALYSIS

By now, you've probably created your own ways of studying the set works. All students are different, and therefore learn differently. Personally, I use the score as much as possible. Students are required to annotate it using coloured pens that are linked to each element of music. Using colour not only helps with analysis, but also brings the score to life for a number of students. For example, some colours get used more than others, and it's great for students to see the presence of elements by simply looking at colours.

But it's important also to focus on the effect that each element has. Simply naming elements in a piece and saying where they can be found isn't enough for an A level essay or analysis. Students should state the impact or the effect of particular musical decisions that a composer takes. Let's look at some examples.

- **Prepared piano:** the preparation of the piano not only pushes music in a new direction, but also creates new sounds and a unique set of timbres. The effect is that the listener is given a combination of pitch and percussion, all created on a single instrument. Different preparations create different timbres and effects, making the piece sound exciting and unique.
- **Structure:** Cage adopts an interesting approach to structure, one entirely based on tempo and rhythm. The effect is that every section is different, apart from one repetition in the ninth section. This links not only to Indian tala, but also to the principles of gamelan. The effect is a piece that challenges the listener to think outside of Western classical structures.
- **Polyrhythm:** Cage uses polyrhythm throughout the work, and this simultaneous sounding of different rhythms has a really interesting effect. It gives the piece forward motion as well as a strong sense of rhythm and punctuation of that rhythm. In the context of music for dance, the polyrhythms actually make you want

to dance. At times, Cage emphasises different beats on the different pianos to create even more rhythmic energy in the piece.

These are a few examples of picking out a feature and explaining its effect. Students also need to embed wider listening in their work by mentioning other pieces that have similar features. This is a challenge, and wider listening is a crucial component of the A level course. It's therefore crucial that wider listening is embedded and linked to specific points, rather than just being mentioned as an aside.

Here are some questions and ideas to help students analyse and understand this set work:

1. How does John Cage explore and use rhythm in this first dance?
2. What links John Cage to Bach when considering his use of texture?
3. Why does it matter what materials and objects are used to prepare the piano?
4. Explain the concept of polyrhythm, and how Cage uses it in this set work.
5. How does Cage use texture in bars 50 to 51?
6. Where do we see the use of ostinato?
7. Why does Cage use a wide variety of dynamics?
8. What does 'una corda' mean, and what impact does it have on the piece?

A LEVEL ESSAY QUESTIONS

If an essay question on John Cage comes up in the exam, it's a great opportunity. Not only is there some strong wider listening that we'll look at shortly, but there are also some very strong lines of argument.

First, look again at the marking criteria for the top band essay, so that essays cover all of its key points:

- **Sophisticated links between the music and the historical, social and cultural context in which it was created and developed.**
- **Presents a critical evaluative argument with sustained musical examples. Excellent use of musical vocabulary.**
- **Relevant works are used to justify salient points.**

When studying a set work with a class, it can help to begin with the line of argument and the introduction. The line of argument is the thread that will run through the essay, helping to keep it evaluative and linked to context. Students need something to pin their salient points to, and a line of argument strongly helps – and avoids simply stating musical features without placing them in context.

There are various different lines of argument for Cage's Three Dances:

- **What makes it a great example of avant-garde music?**
- **How does Cage break away from the normal conventions of music?**
- **How does this piece push the boundaries of conventional music?**
- **How does Cage move music in a new direction?**
- **What makes this piece suitable for dance?**

All these different angles on the piece make it a great option for students should it come up in the exam. They should always keep in mind what the piece is about, what it's exploring, and what the composer intended. This line of argument will help them to thread their essay together, and keep it evaluative and context-driven.

The essay's introduction is also important, and students can write suitable introductions to every set work in advance. These introductions can work for any essay title, and students can simply slot in the elements that the exam board choose in the question. They can go into the exam with these introductions committed to memory, meaning that they begin their essays well. Make sure the introductions are not too long, but if they include a few key details then they are immediately ticking the 'context' box.

Example introduction:

In his *Three Dances for two prepared pianos (1944)*, John Cage provides an excellent example of experimental, avant-garde music. Having been influenced by oriental music and the sound world of gamelan, Cage naturally focused on the percussive qualities of the piano. Composed for a ballet, these Dances provide an almost African soundtrack. While a piano was available to Cage, he felt that a standard piano wouldn't provide the percussion that the ballet needed. Cage therefore experimented by inserting everyday items into the strings. In this essay I am going to consider how Cage used (INSERT ELEMENTS) to create an avant-garde and experimental piece of dance music that explored new sound worlds. In this essay I will also be considering the music of Stockhausen and Peter Maxwell Davies.

Once they have an introduction and ideas for their wider listening and line of argument, students should then consider their salient points. It's important that they're aware of the most noticeable and important features of the piece:

- Exploration of timbre and sound through the preparation of the piano.
- Alongside the use of rhythm and timbre, dynamics are hugely important in this piece, and Cage explores a wide range of contrasting dynamics.
- Structure based on rhythm and tempo rather than a conventional section-based structure such as sonata form.
- The use of polyrhythm to drive the piece forwards.
- The use of a four-part texture with some use of monophony, two-part and three-part textures.
- There is no sense of melody at all in this piece – a complete break from the classical concepts of melody.
- Ostinato is the only melodic feature in this piece, and Cage uses short motifs that are repeated throughout.
- Pitch versus percussion: some of the preparations result in there only being some sense of pitch, while others take away all sense of pitch entirely.
- While the structure is less conventional, it is very clear and very specific. There are nine sections that each have 30 bars.

Once they have their salient points, wider listening, line of argument and introduction, students are ready to embark on the essay. They should remember, however, that the essay is about explaining how the elements are used and what effect they have. And it should be rounded off with an evaluative conclusion – for example:

In conclusion it is clear that Cage has composed a piece of avant-garde dance music that explores new sounds and ideas, and moves music in a new direction. His *Three Dances* are a wonderful example of the power of rhythm and timbre.

WIDER LISTENING

There are many wonderful wider listening examples that students can listen to when studying Cage's *Three Dances*. Below you'll find some ideas in a list that can be shared with students, or even made into a playlist. Students can also be encouraged to find their own examples alongside the ones they are given: suggest that they find a piece by the same composer, a piece from the same year as the set work, and another piece in the same genre:

Pieces by the same composer

- Sonata V from *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano
- Suite for Toy Piano
- Quartet for Four Percussionists

Pieces written in the same year as the set work (1944)

- Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra
- Schoenberg: Piano Concerto
- Stravinsky: Sonata for Two Pianos

Use of prepared piano

- Cor Fuhler: 'Draaimolen'
- Kelly Moran: 'Ultraviolet'
- Denman Maroney: 'Exophilia'

Exam Board wider listening suggestions

- Stockhausen: *Gesang der Jünglinge*
- Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King*

COMPOSITION IDEAS

In a previous resource on computer game music (see *Music Teacher*, January 2019), I introduced an idea I refer to as a 'one-note composition'. The basic principle is that students compose a piece of music using only one note. This forces them to think about rhythm, dynamics, time, tempo and so on, rather than melody, harmony and tonality. The piece must have a clear beginning, middle and end, and it may contain a motif.

This set work relies almost entirely on the power and complexity of rhythm. In order for students to understand this concept fully, they should engage with rhythm in their own compositions. The 'one-note composition' will help them to focus on rhythm, but it's also worth pushing them even further with rhythm and metre in particular, in a 'no-note composition'.

For this composition, they will explore rhythm in all its facets and complexities, for example considering different time signatures as well as creating complex and exciting rhythms.

The Cage set work features a number of rhythmic devices and features that students should explore in their own composition:

- Polyrhythm: the simultaneous use of different types of rhythm
- Off-beat quaver rhythms
- Accents
- Septuplets
- Metrical shift

Students could also explore hemiola, syncopation and unusual time signatures. Let's not forget, too, that some of these rhythmic devices were used by composers including Bach in the Baroque period – so there are links to other periods in musical history, too.

A final composition idea might lie outside the capabilities of most music departments. But why not try out some piano preparations? Nobody wants students wrecking the school's only piano, but if you have one that you don't mind them preparing, then encourage them to give it a go. They might like to try out some of the specific preparations that Cage uses, or come up with new ones of their own.

WIDER READING

As music teachers, it's important that we're always keeping up to date with our own knowledge and learning. Here are two books that you and potentially your students will find useful when studying Cage's *Three Dances*:

The Rest is Noise by Alex Ross

New Yorker critic Alex Ross provides a wonderful overview of 20th-century music, one that provides valuable context for this set work and the others in the New Directions Area of Study.

This well-known book is hugely useful to music teachers and students. In our pursuit of understanding what makes music music, a book like this is very valuable.

CONCLUSION

Whether your students love or hate it, Cage's Three Dances for two prepared pianos is a piece they will simply have to embrace. It's a piece that challenges students to think outside the box, and gives them permission to consider what music is, what makes music what it is, and how we can appreciate music in a whole new way.

It might not be something that they listen to outside of their studies, but hopefully it will open their eyes to the richness of the exciting and varied world of music. Inspiring students to create their own music and explore new territories in their compositions is crucial.