Points of interest

* The development of Avant Garde Music
* The move away from tonality.
* Experiments in sonority.
* The development of the prepared piano.
* The concept of aleatoric music.

Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos No.1.

J. Cage 1945.



**Most commonly used time signatures**

**4/4 - 4 crotchet beats in a bar.**

**3/4 - 3 crotchet beats in a bar.**

**2/4 - 2 crotchet beats in a bar.**

**6/8 – 6 quaver beats in a bar.**

New Directions in Music

Set Work 1

**Harmony & Tonality**

* *Three Dances* contains no harmonic elements. The experimental nature of the work and its percussive sonorities render harmony and tonality obsolete.
* Notes are played simultaneously, but these are to create a percussive sound, not to provide any sense of key or harmony.
* Actual piano notes are heard in the piece but they are to provide contrast against the prepared notes, not to emphasise any key pattern.

**Melody**

* Cage has moved away from the traditional concepts of melody.
* The most important melodic feature is the use of ostinato patters but these are designed to create percussive sonorities, rather than to create actual tunes.
* The ostinato patterns are often developed by the use of note addition and subtraction.
* The outer ranges of piano pitch are not explored.
* *Three dances* has a structure entirely based around tempo and rhythm. The music can be divided into nine sections, each comprising of 30 bars.
* These main sections are subdivided into smaller units of bars. The numbers of bars in the subsections is 2-5-2, 2-6-2, 2-7-2. Therefore for each repetition in a subsection the central group is extended by one bar.
* This type of additive structure had its origins in Indian Tala patterns.

**Structure**

* Rhythm is the most important feature of the *Three Dances.*
* Characteristics of the rhythms used in *Three Dances* are as follows:
* Notes beamed over the bar line (blurring the sense of metre).
* The off-beat quaver rhythm of the second piano.
* The unusual placing of accents.
* Rests being used to highlight the end of a section.
* The use of septuplet rhythms.
* Interpolation (extending to create a 5/4 bar).
* The use of metrical shift.

**Social & Historical Context**

**Sonority**

**Texture**

**Rhythm, Metre & Tempo**

* Cage was an experimental composer who was taught by Serialism founder Arnold Schoenberg.
* The piece was written for a ballet that required African percussion sounds.
* The pianos were amplified to enhance the effect.
* From the 1940s many composers developed experimental sounds in music, Stockhausen through electronic effects and Maxwell Davis through extended playing techniques.
* The pianos are prepared by adding objects to the central keys to change

their timbre to something percussive.

* A detailed work sheet is provided on how to prepare each piano, complete with measurements for where each object should be placed on each string.
* Objects to be placed between each string include; screws, bolts, washers, nuts, rubber, plastic, cloth & wood.
* Some pitches are left to function normally.
* Dynamics are of great importance.
* There are occasional chords, but only in the sense of sonorities sounding together.
* Much of the music is in a four part texture and is polyphonic.

There are also examples of:

* Monophonic writing (figure 5)
* Two part textures (figure 6)
* Three part textures (figure 7)
* Silence is used to heighten dramatic effect (64 & 73).
* The polyphonic effect of the piece emulates African Drumming music.

Wider listening: *Gesang Der Junglinge –* Stockhausen, *Eight Songs for A Mad King –* Maxwell Davis*, Catalogue D’Oiseux –* Messiaen.