



**“John Cage’s *Ten Thousand Things*:**

**“Music is an oversimplification of the situation we are actually in”**

Tao called Tao is not Tao.  
Names can name no lasting name.  
Nameless; the origin of heaven and earth  
Naming: the mother of the ten thousand things.

Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*<sup>1</sup>

The *Tao Te Ching* is a concise treatise on *tao*, a metaphysical first principle underlying the universe. *Tao* is “nameless,” beyond language and “naming.” It is the source for the multiplicity of the phenomenal world, the “Ten Thousand Things.” The *Tao Te Ching*, along with the *Chuang-tzu* established Taoism, an ancient Chinese philosophical and religious tradition that emerged during the third or fourth century B.C. John Cage was familiar with both texts and in 1953 he started a large project consisting of a series of independent pieces based on a rhythmic structure of 100 x 100 measures, a massive work 10,000 measures long called *The Ten Thousand Things*.

Cage’s work on *The Ten Thousand Things* occurred during a crucial period in the evolution of his musical style and aesthetics. Several years earlier he had developed ingenious procedures to harness the randomness of coin tosses using the *I Ching* to compose the *Music of Changes* (1951), a virtuoso work for solo piano. Chance operations made it possible to compose music free from “individual taste and memory (psychology)” and “the literature and ‘traditions’

of art.” Musical continuity no longer consisted of relationships between sounds other than their co-existence in musical space and time. Cage’s radical re-definition of musical form culminated the following year with *4’33”*, a work for piano without sound that simply invites listeners to “listen at any time to what there is to hear.”<sup>2</sup>

*All that is necessary is an empty space of time and letting it act in its magnetic way.*

Cage’s original plan for *The Ten Thousand Things* was to use a rhythmic structure of 100 x 100 measures, organized according to a single proportion to divide each 100 measures into phrases and to group sections of 100 measure units.<sup>3</sup> He later revised his plan, most likely realizing that it would take far too long to complete, by reducing the work’s basic unit to 100 beats rather than 100 measures. As a result, the plan became 100 sections, each 100 beats long, or 25 measures in 4/4 time. Its smaller scale notwithstanding, Cage never completed the 2500 measure work. *The Ten Thousand Things* consists of *Six Short Pieces for a String Player* (1953), the first five pieces of which became part of a larger work, *26’ 1.1499” for a String Player* (1955), *27’ 10.554” for a Percussionist* (1956), *31’ 57.9864” for a Pianist* (1954), *34’ 46.776” for a Pianist* (1954), an unfinished piece for magnetic tape (using sounds from *Williams Mix* [1952]), and an unfinished piece for voice. The titles of the compositions in the series indicate their duration.<sup>4</sup> The pieces may be performed separately, one after the other, or superimposed.

*Time, which is the title of this piece (so many minutes, so many seconds), is what we and sounds happen in. Whether early or late: in it. It is not a question of counting.*

*The Ten Thousand Things* elegantly demonstrates that music, as Cage put it, is “an oversimplification of the situation we are actually in,” its “infinite play of interpenetration,” a metaphor for the *Ten Thousand Things*, the diversity of

the empirical world.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, given its aesthetic goals, that Cage's ambitious project involved complex compositional processes, a rich array of sonic materials and performance practices, and innovative graphic notations. All of the works in the series employ the *I Ching* and what James Pritchett terms Cage's "point-drawing" method, which entails locating a series of points in a score by identifying imperfections in the paper. The position of points in space determined the occurrence of musical events in time, as well as other parameters, including pitch and melodic contour, mode of attack, dynamics, and duration.

*The reason I am presently working with imperfections in paper is this: I am thus able to designate certain aspects of sound as though they were in a field, which of course they are.*

Cage employed coin tosses and the *I Ching* to select the number of points in each phrase (density), the type of sound event, manner of sound production, and specific characteristics of the sound event types. In this way chance operations determined the structure of his musical materials, not the content, which resulted from the "point-drawing" method. Using pre-compositional charts, as he did previously while writing the *Music of Changes*, Cage meticulously composed sounds for each of the cells in his charts, which he selected using the *I Ching*. Thus, although the *Music of Changes* was composed using chance operations, it was also a result of compositional choice. The more open-ended approach to composing he developed for *The Ten Thousand Things* further liberated Cage from the constraints of his own musical intuitions.

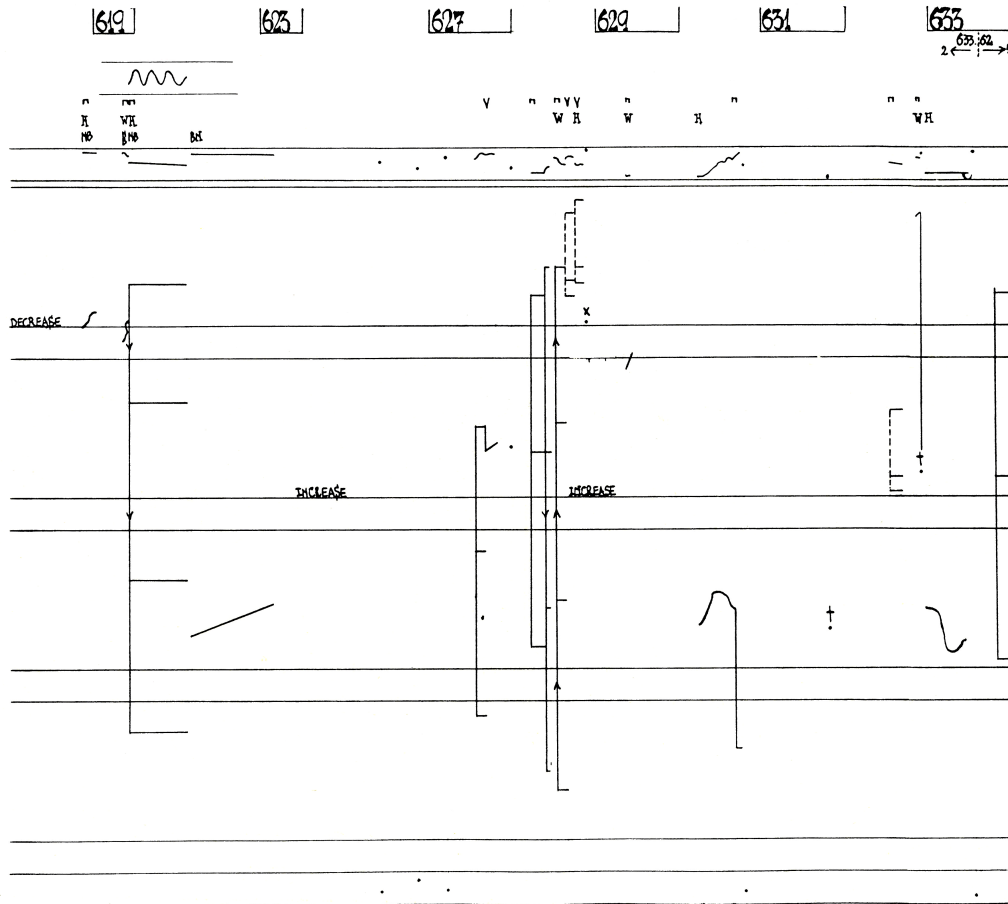
*To see one must go beyond imagination and for that one must stand absolutely still as though in the center of a leap.*

During the 1950s Cage became less satisfied with highly detailed complex musical scores, which imposed severe constraints on the performer. As he explained in his well-known lecture entitled "Indeterminacy" presented at the 1958 Darmstadt summer session: "The *Music of Changes* is an object more

inhuman than human, since chance operations brought it into being. The fact that these things that constitute it, though only sounds, have come together to control a human being, the performer, gives the work the alarming aspect of a Frankenstein monster.”<sup>6</sup> Looking for alternatives to the systematic control and formalism of high modernism, Cage and his younger colleagues, most notably Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown began to explore various forms of indeterminate notation. Indeterminacy opened up a universe of interpretative possibilities for performers.

*Composers are spoken of as having ears for music, which generally means that nothing presented to their ears can be heard by them. Their ears are walled in with sounds of their own imagination.*

Although the graphic notation in *The Ten Thousand Things* looks forward to his later indeterminate scores, its performance is for the most part not indeterminate. Consider, for example, 26’ 1.1499” *for a String Player*. The passage of time occurs spatially on the horizontal axis, measured in seconds at the top of each page. The score contains four wide horizontal bands, each corresponding to one of four strings. The position of a point, line or curve vertically within the bands indicates pitch. A horizontal line extends the duration of a single note; vertical lines correspond to double, triple, and quadruple stops; curves and angles denote the corresponding melodic contour. There are also symbols for four types of pizzicato: a dot is normal; a cross, stopped against the fingerboard, an “x,” played with the fingernail, and a curved arrow, a slide followed by a pluck. When the words “increase” or “decrease” appear within one of the bands, the performer de-tunes the appropriate string. At the top of each page there are two narrow horizontal bands. Wavy lines in the upper band indicate vibrato speed. Symbols for bowing techniques appear between the two narrow bands.



Excerpt from 26' 1.1149" for a string player,  
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In addition to the conventional down- and up-bow, Cage provided symbols for the hair of the bow, *col legno*, and several degrees of *sul ponticello* (depending on the proximity to the bridge) and *sul tasto* (differentiated by how high on the finger board the bow is drawn). Symbols within the lower narrow band indicate bow pressure (or dynamics), with high to low within the band corresponding less to more pressure. A narrow band at the bottom of the page indicates noise produced on the instrument without using the strings or from other sources such as percussion instruments, whistles, radios, etc. The pitches and durations in this band are indicated in a similar fashion as within the string "bands." The noise part provides an indeterminate element by allowing the performer to chose the sounds and specifies only whether they are high or low. The

remainder of the score is extremely precise, so precise that it is most likely impossible to realize exactly. But as this recording elegantly demonstrates, *The Ten Thousand Things* is not impossible to perform well by virtuoso musicians who understand Cage's commitment to precision and discipline.<sup>7</sup>

Cage and David Tudor performed *31' 57.9864" for a Pianist* and *34' 46.776" for a Pianist* as duet entitled *12' 55.6058"* for Heinrich Strobel's Donaueschinger Musiktage in 1954. Strobel requested the shortened version in anticipation of a negative reaction by the relatively conservative general audience and critics in Donaueschingen (which turned out to be the case).<sup>8</sup> Although the pitch notation in the two scores is mostly traditional, there are also indications at specific points in the score to add "string piano" techniques, such as "finger muted, pizz., muted and pizz., struck with a mallet, beater, fingers, etc., strike, or otherwise activate a preparation, if any, etc.," freely chosen by the performer. Three bands at the top of the score define the force, distance, and speed of attack in a manner resembling the notation for bow pressure in *26' 1.1499" for a String Player*. *34' 46.776" for a Pianist* is more difficult to play, since it contains four layers of activity rather than two, as does *31' 57.9864" for a Pianist*. For this reason David Tudor performed the former work, Cage the latter. *31' 57.9864" for a Pianist* and *34' 46.776" for a Pianist* are the last major pieces Cage wrote for the prepared piano. But unlike Cage's previous works for that instrument, the preparations in both scores are indeterminate. Cage did not specify either the exact preparations or their locations. Instead, he provided a table with instructions for the performers to select objects from six categories—wood (W), metal (M), rubber (C), plastic glass, or bone (P), and "free" (X)—and to place them between specified strings at locations of their own choosing. Moreover, the preparations do not remain fixed during a given performance. At points within the score there are instructions for the performer to add and subtract preparations, add to and subtract from a

preparation, and to move a preparation to another location along a string.

Changing the preparations during the course of a given performance of *31' 57.9864" for a Pianist* and *34' 46.776" for a Pianist* adds a theatrical element, which did not go unnoticed by several critics at the Donaueschingen premiere who compared it to a scene from Charlie Chaplin's film *Limelight* (1952) featuring a musical performance by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton dressed in tuxedos.<sup>9</sup> Cage's intent was not to create a comic situation. The theatrical component of *31' 57.9864" for a Pianist* and *34' 46.776" for a Pianist* looked forward to future developments in his aesthetics. During the 1950s and 1960s Cage increasingly incorporated theatrical elements into his work. With the composition of *4'33"* he demonstrated that all sounds could be appreciated in an aesthetic way. It was a natural and a logical step to extend this inclusiveness to all phenomena: "Just as I came to see that there was no such thing as silence, and so wrote the *Silent Piece*, I was now coming to the realization that there was no such thing as non-activity."<sup>10</sup> By the early 1960s, theater, for Cage, was simply defined as that which "engages both the eye and the ear."<sup>11</sup>

*Music is simply trying things out in school fashion to see what happens.  
Etudes. Making it easier but not real. Theater is the only thing that  
comes near what is.*

Cage wrote *45' for a Speaker* for a lecture he presented at the Composers' Concourse in London in October 1954, after his appearance in Donaueschingen. The text uses the same rhythmic structure as his piano duo. Cage found that he was unable to perform "45' for a Speaker" at its original duration of 39' 16.96". As a result, he decided on 45', which was essentially two seconds per line. The London performance occurred simultaneously with *34' 46.776" for a Pianist*, performed by David Tudor. The text combines passages from previously written lectures with new material. Cage used chance operations to select noises and theatrical gestures, to determine whether there is speech or silence and for how long, whether the material is old or new, and, if the material is new on which

of 32 subjects related to his compositional methods and aesthetics.” The result is a wonderful amalgam of Cage’s ideas as they had developed through the early 1950s, with an emphasis on his recent work and particularly on *The Ten Thousand Things*. Cage wrote that “poetry is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words,” a goal which is accomplished in “45’ for a Speaker” by allowing disparate ideas, noises, and silences to brush against one another.” “45’ for a Speaker” can be performed with any or all of the pieces in the *Ten Thousand Things*. The version presented here features a recently discovered recording of Cage performing the text, most likely at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1962.

*For instance, now, my focus involves very little: a lecture on music. But it is not a lecture, nor is it music; it is, of necessity, theatre: What else? If I chose as I do, music, I get theatre, that, that is, I get that too. Not just this, the two.*

Although 27’ 10.554” *for a Percussionist* (1956) is arguably the first piece written for solo percussion, composed three years earlier than Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Zyklus* (1959), it is the least well-known work in *The Ten Thousand Things*. Its premiere, which took place in Munich on February 2, 1962, featured percussionist Siegfried Rockstroh, performing a shortened version called 7’ 7.614” *for a Percussionist*, which included a magnetic tape prepared by Mauricio Kagel. The legendary percussionist and sound artist Max Neuhaus gave the first complete performance of 27’ 10.554” *for a Percussionist* on June 2, 1964 in Carnegie Recital Hall.

The last work in *The Ten Thousand Things*, 27’ 10.554” *for a Percussionist* is the most open-ended. The performer may choose his or her instruments from four categories: wood (W), metal (M), skin (S), and “all others” (A), which includes various “electronic devices, radios, mechanical arrangements, whistles, etc.” According to Cage, the piece may be performed as a recording or with the aid of recording. The performance here features percussionist William Winant,



who first played the work at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1977. Cage mentions in the score that a virtuoso performance should include, as does Winant in his interpretation, “a wide variety of instruments, beaters, sliding tones, and an exhaustive, rather than conventional use of the instruments employed.” The “A” part features pre-recorded samples created by Jon Leidecker (aka Wobbly) inspired by *Williams Mix*. The two musicians made several versions in which Winant cued Leidecker in and out according to the entrances in the score using a stopwatch. The score for *27’ 10.554” for a Percussionist* includes four lines, one for each of the instrument groups. There are three sound event types: point (single attack), line (a sound with extended duration), and a combination of the two. Each page includes a minute of music (including silences) with numbers above the staves indicating seconds facilitating a correspondence between time and the position of notes in horizontal space. The vertical dimension indicates amplitude rather than pitch. Notes on a line are *mezzo forte*, notes above a line louder, and notes below a line softer. These specifications notwithstanding, *27’ 10.554” for a Percussionist* is largely indeterminate in its performance. In addition to choosing the instruments, a performer interpreting the score may freely select the instruments or successions of instruments in each instrumental group.

*Giving up counterpoint one gets superimposition and, of course, a little counterpoint comes in of its own accord.*

In the 1950s and 1960s Cage explored textural density in his music by superimposing layers of musical material (as in the *Music of Changes* and *Williams Mix*) and later through simultaneous performances of separate compositions such as the pieces in his *Music for Piano* series, combinations of *Aria* (1959) and *Fontana Mix* (1958), and simultaneous performances of *Winter Music* (1957) and *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961). These works, along with *The Ten Thousand Things*, anticipated Cage’s more radical explorations of simultaneity

and sensorial saturation in *HPSCHD* (1969), *Roaratorio* (1979) and the *Européras* (1985-87; 1990; 1991). Cage understood that “the relationship of things happening at the same time is spontaneous and irrepressible.”<sup>14</sup> This extraordinary performance of *The Ten Thousand Things* is a masterful demonstration that this is so. Listeners who have a copy of the special *iChing Edition* of the *Ten Thousand Things* can experience the work’s multiplicity from virtually unlimited perspectives. This version of the performance not only can permute the order and placement of the temporal units of the four instrumental pieces heard in tandem with “45’ for a Speaker”, but also can generate performances of the works in the series in the 32 possible combinations of solo’s, duets, trios, quartets, and a quintet. Cage would certainly have been very pleased with this masterful and innovative presentation of his music.

*Unloose your mind and set your spirit free. Be still as if you had no soul.*

[Kwang-tse]

David W. Bernstein




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<sup>1</sup>Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans., Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 1. This elegant translation includes a brief, yet informative, description of the text by Burton Watson.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, *I-VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 26.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the genesis of *The Ten Thousand Things*, see James W. Pritchett, “The Development of Chance Techniques in the Music of John Cage, 1950-1956,” Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988, 237-310.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 279. Following a practice initiated by David Tudor for his performance of the *Music of Changes* Cage, converted metric time (i.e., time according to beats) with changing tempi to clock time.

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<sup>5</sup> Idem, “45’ for a Speaker,” 149.

<sup>6</sup> Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> For a controversial reading of Cage’s reactions to cellist Charlotte Moorman’s famous (infamous) interpretations of 26’ 1.1499” *for a String Player* see Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 40-176.

<sup>8</sup> Amy C. Beal, *New Music, New Allies: Experimental Music in West Germany from Zero Hour to Unification* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 69-71.  
According to Beal, the two musicians performed a complete version of 31’ 57.9864” *for a Pianist* and 34’ 46.776” *for a Pianist* after the formal concert concluded.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, “An Interview with John Cage,” in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed., Mariellen Sanford (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>12</sup> For the complete list see Cage “45’ for a Speaker,” in *Silence*, 146-48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,