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Experimental Music around 1950 and Some Consequences and Causes (Social-Political and Musical)

To start with I'm going to rehearse a little history, for the sake of context—but with a warning. This history—the music scene as I experienced it around 1950 and after, in which a new kind of music emerged—is hard to recount without mixing what I remember of the time then and what I later found out. John Cage once reported asking a historian how he did history, to which the historian answered, to Cage's pleased astonishment, that he made it up.

There's a comparable phenomenon in one's hearing of music at longer time intervals. It may well sound different, not necessarily better understood, but really different. When we first heard Pierre Boulez's Second Piano Sonata in New York in 1952, we were overwhelmed—by its force and a complex intricacy we hadn't known could exist (Ives might have come closest but he wasn't so utterly abstract). When I heard the piece again some twenty-five years later, it sounded like another sonata in the great literature of piano sonatas, not so far, I thought, from Brahms.

What could be heard in New York (where I was lucky enough to be growing up) around 1950? The Bartók string quartets, performed entire for the first time in the United States (Bartók had come in exile to New York in 1940 and died in 1945). A program of Berg's *Lyric Suite,* Schoenberg's Fourth String Quartet and Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet* at Tanglewood in the summer of 1948. All this thanks to the Juilliard String Quartet. Stravinsky's music for Balanchine's *Orpheus.* Of course a standard classical concert repertoire dominated completely, going no

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further back than Bach or Handel or beyond Brahms, Wagner, and Richard Strauss (maybe a little Mahler). There was outstanding Dixieland jazz. Unfortunately I had little awareness of the emerging newer developments in jazz, bebop, and Charlie Parker. The popular music which I did catch on the radio—it was the era of the hit parade—seemed mostly awful to me. I did see a few musicals, *Guys and Dolls* and Kurt Weill's *Street Scene.*

In January of 1950 Dmitri Mitropoulos conducted the first U.S. performance of Webern's *Symphonie,* op. 21. John Cage and Morton Feldman attended. Both, overwhelmed, left the concert immediately after, found and introduced one another in the lobby of Carnegie Hall, and became close friends, passing their music and thoughts back and forth, intensively for about the next four or five years. (After that Cage would move out of the city, to Stonypoint, New York, and by the end of the 1960s Feldman was in Buffalo, where he lived and was professor at SUNY until his death in 1987.) A few months later, in 1950, my piano teacher, Grete Sultan, sent me to John Cage. I'd realized my lack of talent for serious piano playing and had started to compose on my own and, she rightly observed, I could use some help. Cage generously took me on immediately. He set me exercises to teach about structure—his rhythmic structure scheme, a practical and elegant way of organizing a whole piece such that all the time spaces, both micro and macro, were in proportional relationships. He had me analyze the first movement of the Webern *Symphonie.* We did—attempted—counterpoint exercises (sixteenth century, Palestrina style). And he had me just get on with my own composition. Which I did, while the formal lessons stopped after about five or six weeks. He said the point of the exercises and counterpoint was to learn how discipline is acquired and works. Then I was on my own. We continued to see one another, sometimes with Feldman, regularly. In 1952 Earle Brown came to New York with his wife, Carolyn, she to dance with Merce Cunningham, he drawn by shared musical interests with Cage and having heard the New York–based pianist David Tudor play Cage, Feldman, Boulez, and my work. The term "New York School," used for the artists, then poets of around this time, got attached to us—Cage, Feldman, Brown, myself—rather later, I think. It should include the crucial figure of David Tudor and the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, already associated with Cage for some time and now embracing, and using for his dances, the music of the rest of us as well. (For myself, I've found in retrospect, that Cunningham's dances, which I've been seeing since 1950, have had a strong effect, both inspirational and supportive or confirming, especially with respect to the dancers' performing—the abstract patterning of movement realized by different, individual bodies (and souls, personalities)—

and with regard to the structural rhythms of the choreography—its irregular, fluid, matter-of-fact and elegant ways of continuity, overlap, and simultaneity.)

As for David Tudor, it is hard to imagine our musical scene without him. He was devoted to new work. He enjoyed especially difficult and intricate tasks. He had uncanny and new skills as a performer (the ability, for example, to differentiate the most extreme dynamic changes, at the highest speeds and across the whole range of the piano keyboard). He also had an exceptionally acute ear. His playing was sharp and precise, electric. He liked getting to the heart of what seemed intractably enigmatic, and he himself liked to be enigmatic, though in a quiet and matter-of-fact way. Much of the music we wrote at that time was, because of him, for piano. When we started making music with indeterminate notations, that is, requiring the performer to make choices and realizations not, in various ways, specified, it was his musicianship and ear and imagination for sound that was our point of reference. By the mid-1960s he had stopped playing the piano and devoted himself to live electronics, with his own invented circuitry, becoming a composer-performer.

To return to the wider musical situation: there were for us at first three other important musical presences in New York. The first was Virgil Thomson. He and Cage had become friends and he, a distinctive, idiosyncratic composer and chief music critic for the *Herald Tribune,* had been since Cage's arrival in New York in 1943 supportive, with refreshingly open ears and mind. He and Cage shared admiration for Gertrude Stein's writing and the music of Eric Satie. Cage introduced me to Satie's music, which, along with Webern, was to be one of my basic musical points of reference. It was through Thomson's music and especially Satie's that I first got a sense of how vernacular strains might be compatible with modernism. Then there was Henry Cowell, the energetic and eclectic experimentalist and tireless advocate of American (North and South) experimental composers, once Cage's mentor on the West Coast, in New York and teaching at the New School (where some of our work was first performed in 1950–51). His courses were mostly about non-Western music, a subject almost invisible at the time. With his demonstrations of the variety of musical cultures and ways of making music, and by raising questions of what might actually be thought of as music, Cowell provided a wide context for our own musical work. Then there was Edgar Varèse, greatly admired by all of us as the first, since the 1920s, to think musically and work with pure sonority, with sound simply as sound rather than as a kind of byproduct of the logics of pitch and harmony relationships. I should also mention the composer Stefan Wolpe, with whom both Feldman and Tudor had worked. Like Varèse he was a European émigré (as was I, just a little bit, arriving in New York from France with my German parents in 1941 at age seven).

He had a lively, engaged mind that often and eloquently disagreed with what we were doing, but, unlike most of the music establishment at the time, he didn't simply reject or ignore our work, but listened and argued with us. By the 1950s he was writing densely wrought, serially (twelve-tone) organized music. In the 1930s in Berlin his music included left-wing political songs and incidental music for Berthold Brecht's play *The Exception and the Rule*. Feldman recounted that once when he came to Wolpe for a composition lesson, Wolpe said to him that he should write music with the man-in-the-street in mind. Feldman looked out the window and saw Jackson Pollock walking by.

The art scene in New York from the 1940s on was very much part of our world, too. Cage had been close to artists on the West Coast already in the 1930s—notably Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. In New York it was the abstract expressionists, the sculptor Richard Lippold and, by 1954, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (at that time Cage admired Marcel Duchamp only from a distance). Feldman, through Cage, became especially close to certain painters, above all Philip Guston. Before coming to New York Earle Brown had a particular interest in the work of Calder and Pollock. Though I met some of these artists through Cage and found Rauschenberg and Johns agreeably friendly and was very taken with their work, my direct involvement was intermittent. By 1951 I was off at college in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Before that I was too young to be staying up late drinking at the Cedar Bar on University Place where the artists and musicians regularly gathered. Before meeting Cage I had been particularly enthusiastic about Paul Klee. The close connection to these artists was one of the things that marked us off from the rest of the contemporary music world at the time. The artists and their followers felt like and often were the primary audience for our music. We shared a sense of doing new work and were mutually interested and supportive. The art was in a relation of difference to traditional art that paralleled the relation between our music and the traditions of classical music. So the opposition of abstract to representational in the art had implications for the music as did the art's immediacy of gesture as against the planned formality of traditional art. The latter had close affinity with Feldman's highly intuitive and subjective way of working. Cage, on the other hand, was more concerned with a distancing of the self and self-expression which were characteristic of Rauschenberg and Johns. These two also introduced new uses of ordinary, everyday material, literally in Rauschenberg's case (e.g., the newspaper and magazine scraps, a bed, stuffed goat) and representationally in Johns's (the flags and targets). This had some relation to Cage's and my willingness to welcome ambient sounds—impossible to ignore because our music had a lot of silence in it—as part of a musical event. Cage also made use of "found" sonic material,

recordings of standard music and whatever was being broadcast on the radio. To be sure, the conceptual conundrums of Johns's work had no equivalent in ours, though they engaged and tantalized us. Cage's accounts of his ideas, however conveyed (directly, through stories, in musical structures), were explicit, coherent, and transparent.

We took it for granted that we were part of a community that included visual artists. And dancers, foremost among them Merce Cunningham, but also Jean Erdman (both had started in Martha Graham's company), their students, and company members. We all did music for dance, where new ways of working were also being explored.

In the immediate background there were also a handful of scholars and writers about Asian—Indian, Chinese, and Japanese—religions and thought: Joseph Campbell, not yet the television personality but a disciple of the distinguished Indologist Heinrich Zimmer and just beginning his comparative studies of myth; Daisetz Suzuki, whose classes on Zen Buddhism at Columbia Cage attended; and Alan Watts, promulgator of the lessons of Zen as it related to Western mystical traditions and then, more directly, to contemporary Western life. The ideas and understanding of Eastern thought of all three, as well as of the Boston-based scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy, engaged Cage intensively at this time, a time, I only later learned, of personal and artistic crisis. All I saw then was his changing how he composed, by introducing the use of chance procedures, and how he thought about and explained this, mostly in terms of Eastern thought. I don't think I saw this change as particularly extreme because of the context of his previous music, which was already unlike anything else I knew, with its sound world of percussion and prepared piano and its tendency toward an overall static and nondirectional feeling. The rest of us knew Campbell (whose wife was the dancer Jean Erdman) and Watts, too, who took some interest in the music, though more for its connection to Cage and his involvement with the Eastern ideas. This involvement with non-Western modes of thinking, like Cowell's ethnomusicology, again provided a wider context for our musics' seeming to call into question Western classical music assumptions about what might be understood as music. At the time our work was often accused of not being music at all.

Neither Feldman nor Brown was interested in Eastern thought. Feldman expressed his thinking in a highly, often very funny, polemical way, measuring himself against the contemporary music establishment, or else poetically with wide reference to painting (new and old), stories, aphorisms, and thoughts variously out of Jewish tradition, Kierkegaard, Kafka, and many others, mostly European. Brown had a more technical-scientific background. He had studied engineering and mathematics and had devoted himself to the work of Joseph Schillinger, who devised mathematical procedures for analyzing and writing music (one gathers, with

practical success—his students included George Gershwin and Glenn Miller). Brown was also actively interested in contemporary jazz. For Cage the involvement with Eastern thought was a way of dealing with his personal crises, in which aesthetic and life questions were found to be inseparable.

Two more items of historical context: Around 1950 the contemporary music establishment centered on Aaron Copland and included a generation of composers who had emerged in the 1930s as more or less "native," composers like Roy Harris, Samuel Barber, and David Diamond. Others, like Walter Piston, William Schuman, and Roger Sessions, were academically based. Sessions, along with Milton Babbitt (both at Princeton), tended to a harder-edged, more abstract music, and Babbitt became the most distinguished and influential indigenous proponent of serial music in the United States. Elliott Carter's newly complex music with its intricately elaborated rhythmic and pitch schemes was just emerging, notably with his first string quartet in 1950–51. The great experimental individualists, Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Harry Partch, and Conlon Nancarrow, were all but invisible in the background.

Of more importance for us were the emerging European avant-garde composers. Cage had become close to Pierre Boulez during a stay in Paris in 1949 and was much impressed by the complexity and forcefulness of Boulez's early music and the vigor and edge of his thinking. Boulez was attracted by the new sound of Cage's percussion and prepared piano music and by his liveliness of mind. (In 1951 Cage arranged for me to visit Boulez while I was on a trip to Europe. For a week Boulez generously showed me his work and looked at mine, and we talked about developments in New York and Paris—the latter few, apart from Boulez's own work and recent work, especially on rhythm, of Messiaen, who had been Boulez's teacher.) The closeness of Boulez and Cage did not survive the latter's turn to the use of chance operations in composing and Boulez's absolute conviction that total serialism (the extension of twelve-tone procedures, in their strict form, from pitch to the other parameters of sound—duration, amplitude, timbre and articulation) was the only way of composing.

This totalizing micromanagement of sound would not have been usable for the inherently indeterminate sound complexes of percussion and prepared piano. The most notable effect of Boulez on Cage, as David Tudor who played the music of both observed, could be heard in Cage's piano piece *Music of Changes* in 1951, by far the most complex music he had so far written (this was partly because he knew Tudor would find a way to play it), a music including extremes of density and force, and requiring in its choice of pitch configurations a systematic use of the chromatic twelve tones. Un-Boulezian were the occasional uses of noise (striking the piano body, slamming the piano lid down), the appearance

of extended spaces of silence, and a general feeling of static equilibrium. And of course Cage's use of chance procedures to determine how all the various parameters of the sound and the durations of silences actually came together. On the other hand, this anatomizing of separate sound parameters again followed Boulez's example. That Cage's piece with the most Boulezian elements should have been put together by the chance means that Boulez most strongly rejected is both an irony and an illustration of something later observed: that the extremes of total musical organization and the radical subjection of the musical material to randomness could emerge at something very like the same place.

One could see the linking idea in a kind of organicism, that is, in the case of the Europeans, the notion that all aspects of the sound material should be integrated through internal relationships. Thus, in a given piece, the twelve-tone pitch organization would allow the pitch of every note to be exactly accounted for; this was extended, analogously—an analogy whose logic was not too closely examined—to durations, dynamics, articulation, and instrumental color. It was thought that a musical composition should be (as Aristotle had said of a tragic drama) like a living being all of whose parts related to one another and had a function in its totality. A few years before Cage had embraced the classical Indian idea that art should imitate nature in its manner of operation. In any case, both the Europeans and Cage were thinking of music as something other than the self-expression of the legacy of romanticism, though one could say that the Europeans were concerned with self-assertion, if in a quite abstract way, while Cage was concerned with self-abnegation. That's what the chance operations were for. They were also, I think, a kind of heuristic device, a way of discovering sounds and combinations of sound one would not otherwise have thought of. The Europeans' idea seemed hermetic, organic only in the self-enclosed world of the piece itself, and it applied only to the composition of the piece. The Americans were more pragmatic. Performance was regarded as an essential component of the music. Cage insisted that a piece was not finished until it had been performed. Its life was bound up with the contingencies of performance and performance situations, including the presence of unpredictable sounds or noises from the environment. The music would be organic in the sense that it was to be a part of the world around it. As for Feldman's and my work, by the end of 1951 Boulez had dismissed them both as too simple and naive.

The other major figure of the European avant-garde to appear next, around 1952–53, was Karlheinz Stockhausen, of whom we heard and saw quite a lot. He had a wider range of musical interests and curiosity than Boulez and a considerable capacity for absorbing and turning to his own use new musical ideas, especially those coming from the United States. It was Stockhausen who first helped arrange for Cage and Tudor to present our music in Europe in 1954.

In an article called "A Life without Bach and Beethoven" (written in 1964) Feldman spoke of the "frontier atmosphere" of the early 1950s art and music scene. This feeling of new territory opening up came shortly after the end of World War II. The older modernists were long established, if not always widely loved. By the 1930s some composers in the United States were, in a counter movement, not only identifying their work more directly as American but taking also a turn toward a more-or-less left-wing populism. Both the experimentalist Henry Cowell, for instance, and the traditionalist Aaron Copland, along with many others, were involved with the Composers Collective of New York, which was devoted to discussions about and the writing of left political songs. (It was at about this time that Jackson Pollock was studying painting with Thomas Hart Benton.) All this went into a holding pattern for the duration of the war; most populism became patriotic support of the war effort. Then, by 1950, the Cold War was well under way. President Truman's aggressive anticommunist "security program" was started in 1947; McCarthyism was firmly settled in. Postwar artistic energies were certainly let loose. We had a feeling in music that the established composers were spinning their wheels, caught in one or the other of the post-Schoenberg or post-Stravinsky camps, in serialism or neoclassicism. It felt like a time in which to make new beginnings. But not politically. We might, in retrospect, be thought to have been involved in a kind of utopian response, a resistant withdrawal from the political world around us, but, as best I can remember, we simply paid no attention to it. Being a-political or keeping politically under cover was the norm at that time.

There was also a near-hopeless situation with regard to money and public performance of the music. Only the dancers, who were already mostly very poor, paid for newly composed music. There was no public arts funding. Cage was tireless in his efforts to raise private money for concerts, and he just managed to organize one or two a year in New York along with a Cunningham recital. All contemporary music was well at the margins of New York concert life, and we were somewhere outside of those margins. (I did hear in 1950 Cage's String Quartet [1949–50] in a concert with a wide variety of twentieth-century music, sponsored by, I think, the League of Composers, at the old Miller Theater at Columbia University, and I took part in another a year later, in a performance of his *Imaginary Landscape* no. 4, for twelve radios. Cage then gave up this kind of association to organize our concerts, in which, because of Tudor, he was also able to include the most recent work from Europe of Boulez, Stockhausen, and others.)

What were some similarities and differences among Cage, Feldman, Brown, and myself? I have already suggested some; now I'll try to be a bit more systematic. As a group we were united by being noticeably different from other music being made at the time. Where each of us came

from, on the other hand, was quite different. Our musical educations were irregular (none of us went to conservatory). Cage had some private lessons, with Henry Cowell and Adolph Weiss, and he attended classes and some group private lessons with Schoenberg in Los Angeles for two years. Feldman, after piano lessons, studied composition with Wallingford Riegger and Stefan Wolpe in New York. Brown studied with Roslyn Brogue Henning and at the Schillinger school in Boston. I studied piano with Grete Sultan and, as said, some composition, counterpoint, and analysis with Cage for a bit over a month in New York. For a few years we could be said to have studied with each other. Cage, for instance, showed Feldman how to copy his music properly. (From some of Feldman's early pieces and from mine from the later 1950s Cage, starting in the 1980s, would take over and adapt the time-bracket structures that he used in all his pieces from that time on.) An early piano teacher of Cage's, an aunt, I think, didn't care for Bach or Mozart but liked Grieg, to whose piano music Cage became attached because he found it not too hard to play and he especially liked its many open fifths and fourths (they pervade, for instance, the String Quartet of 1949–50). It is a sound common to many folk musics. Cage had a longstanding aversion to functional harmony, Western classical music's anchoring structural mode, with its inherent tendency to drama in linear, narrative shape, working through conflicts to resolution. Early interest in architecture and painting also accompanied and may have informed his early involvement with music which, at Schoenberg's insistence, then became his exclusive creative work (until the 1980s when he took up artwork, especially in the form of printmaking, seriously). He also wrote a great deal, such as manifestos, essays, and lectures, which, starting in the 1950s, increasingly took on the form of musical compositions and became a kind of poetry. He told of coming to Paris in his late teens and seeing for the first time modern art and thinking that, as was certainly not the case with the old masters, he could somehow do that, too. His early reading was concentrated on modernists: Gertrude Stein, e.e. cummings, Joyce (involvement with *Finnegans Wake* would last for the rest of his life).

I can't do justice to Feldman's wonderful autobiographical reminiscences printed as an interview in the *Buffalo Evening News*, April 21, 1973 (you can find it in the collection of his writings, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*). He sketches out his musical beginnings: lessons with a Russian piano teacher who had known Scriabin and had studied with Busoni. When Feldman was seventeen he met Varèse who told him about meeting Debussy and Charles Ives. It never crossed his mind to go to college. Then there were the artists. He always read voraciously. I should say that Cage seems to me probably the most truly intelligent person I have ever met. But Feldman, whom a friend once described as "more than intelligent," was capable of seeing sharply to the heart of a matter and

expressing what he saw with a kind of poetic wit. He somewhere refers to himself as a "tough, Jewish intellectual," except that he happened also to be a musician. At the end of that interview he speaks about his personal attachment to history—through his piano teacher to Scriabin and so Chopin, to Busoni and so Liszt, through Varèse to Debussy and Ives, and how in Paris once he had a vision of Heine walking toward him down the street: "I had this intense feeling for him, you know, the Jewish exile. . . . What I feel most is . . . that I cannot betray this continuity . . . the burden of history."

Cage, in the early 1960s, was attacked by the communist avant-garde Italian composer Luigi Nono for his indifference to history. Of all the musicians I've met, Cage struck me as the most detached from the traditions of Western classical music. I had the impression that, if he never heard another note of it, it wouldn't have made any difference to him. This is not at all to say that he was unaware of that music. One of his first composition teachers, the pianist Richard Buhlig in Los Angeles, was devoted to Bach's *Art of the Fugue* and Cage had paid attention to that. If he happened to hear some classical work on a concert, he often had something perceptive to say about it. The one older composer to whom he remained devoted all his life was the outsider (who in some quarters is still not taken seriously) Erik Satie. Cage's musical interests were entirely in the present, for other experimentalists. And, starting in the mid-1960s, he began to express a strong sense of the social and political life around him, particularly in a series of writings called "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)" (1965–82).

I've already mentioned Earle Brown's background in engineering and mathematics. One reason for his coming to New York had been to take part in the magnetic tape project organized by Cage in 1952. He was then to work for Capitol Records and Time-Mainstream, producing an important series of new music recordings, both U.S. and European. Except for his interest in jazz, I have no recollection that he had musical interests other than the current new music. I do not feel as well informed as I would like, but I assume that Brown's year of private composition study introduced him to twelve-tone procedures; this was to be, with just a few exceptions, his constant way of working with pitch material.

As for myself, I grew up in an environment saturated with standard classical music, and because of my father (who had played cello and whose father had been a professor of music in Germany and a composer, in the circle around Brahms) I was often in the company of distinguished musicians devoted exclusively to that music. It was only on hearing, more or less by accident, Bartók, Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, and seeing the music of Varèse, Ives, and other composers, including Cage before I had met him, in the New Music Editions put out by Henry Cow-

ell, that I thought, yes, I could and wanted to do that, too—not to imitate but to mark for myself a distinctive change from existing earlier music, classical and modern. My devotion to earlier music, though, continued, too, and was to extend back to late medieval and Renaissance music as well. Unlike Cage, Feldman, and Brown, I decided early on not to try to support myself through music. Strong interest in literature, especially poetry, starting with modernist poetry, somehow led me to study classics—Greek and Latin—and then to teach it. Musical activity would be continued as best I could. I was the only one of us who would go on to have a family, something I shared with two other younger composers, whom I met, one in 1956, the other in 1960, and with both of whom I became closely connected—Frederic Rzewski and Cornelius Cardew. (Rzewski and I have noticed how, once we had small children about, we developed structural schemes for our composing made up of collections of small units, such as could be concentrated on whenever, say, a quarter or half an hour might unexpectedly be free as a child suddenly fell asleep.)

It's time to talk about the notion of experiment. Its causes are hard to pinpoint. The easiest to grasp may be to do with historical context. Culturally, again, around 1950, a feeling of musical vacuum as far as vitally new work was concerned; politically and socially, a reaction of detachment from the massive tensions starting to be generated by re-emerging global conflict that was hard-line ideological and backed on both sides by the possibilities of nuclear destruction. This might seem unusual. Avant-garde art movements and their experiments are ordinarily associated with political involvement: the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century in tandem with the Bolshevik revolution; the communist connections of Dada and the surrealists in the 1920s; and, at the other end of the political spectrum, the fascist associations of some of the Italian futurists. And there were more immediate contingencies: of place (New York) and for the musicians the visual art scene there; the encounters of individuals around the magnetic figure of John Cage, and Cage's organizational energy; the life histories of individuals—Cage's time of crisis, the youth of the rest of us, Feldman and Brown just at the start of their careers (David Tudor, too), myself in late adolescence, a time to be making one's own way, wanting to try new things.

As for the consequences of experiments in music around 1950, I'd like to consider the notion of experimental itself. Robert Ashley, one of the great experimentalists appearing in the later 1950s, along with Gordon Mumma, David Behrman, and Alvin Lucier, also Toshi Ichiyanagi and La Monte Young (coming to New York from Japan and Berkeley, California) and Pauline Oliveros (who stayed in California)—Robert Ashley once remarked that the term "experimental music" gave him the creeps. (I have the impression too that Feldman and Brown avoided the term

as well.) I think I know what he means: it got overused, it's a too-easy pigeon-hole, and it easily becomes dismissive. But I'll stick to it. Cage used it and reappropriated it in a 1955 article called "Experimental Music: Doctrine," where "doctrine" referred to a section of the article that was in dialogue form in the manner of the Chinese Buddhist (Zen) classic "Huang Po Doctrine of Universal Mind," a favorite text of his.

For a long time I've thought of myself as a composer of experimental music, though my music has undergone a number of changes. Throughout, the main thing has been a feeling that whatever I did should have a distinctive identity. This was not a preset program, but a way of working. For instance, here is an instrumentation, say, a given ensemble wanted a piece, a given resource of possible sounds, and a possible space of time—the scale or dimensions of what might happen. Then there are, initially, a particular group of individual performers and performing situation. What can I do that will allow the possibility of things happening that are at once clear, have an unencumbered presence, and still have some mystery and surprise in them? And what can I do to engage and perhaps surprise the performers? How do I make situations in which their attention is engaged in such a way that their musicality is best activated, that their self-assertiveness disappears into the music and their intelligence and alertness are at work together with self-forgetfulness?

"Experimental" has earlier senses worth remembering, for example, indicating what belongs to one's experience, what one has encountered first-hand. It belongs also to the vocabulary of science, where its sense is usually rejected by musicians: if it is experimental, it should stay in the lab, in the sketchbook, and not be part of what is brought to the public. But it is worth recalling the first associations of the term with such Renaissance thinkers as Galileo, Da Vinci, or Francis Bacon, for whom it was antimetaphysical, indicating a purely human way of proceeding, discovering, and producing. In music, rather than indicating preliminary work preparatory to making a final object, it can express an attitude in the making and performing of the work. It points to the work's continual condition of being in progress, of being in a life-process.

The notion of experimental will also be dependent on context. Once, as part of the accompanying music for a dance of Merce Cunningham and his company, I included along with usual music the informal and quite raucous singing of Woody Guthrie's "Union Maid." The audience, most of whom had routinely encountered Cunningham's dances and more or less tolerated the most advanced kinds of music (notably Cage's and Tudor's), audibly gasped in shock. An unexceptionable tune and text with old and familiar, if assertive, labor movement sentiment had in the context of a modernist (and very beautiful) dance become experimental. We had had no deliberate intention of producing a shock. Experimental I don't think has to do with shock, though it doesn't exclude the possibility

of it. We did know we were taking a risk singing that song. Experiments are full of risks (one of which is that what at one time had the vitality and edge of an experiment at a later time under other circumstances may lose these qualities). In connection with Cunningham I should recall that he allows the music to go its own way independently of the dance. Usually the two do not come together until an actual public performance. That is one aspect of his experimentalism.

Experiment in the context of the unexamined norms and routines and contradictions of a prevailing culture may be oppositional. It can mean trying to find and put into play new sources of energy. It can mean clarification or calling into question and looking anew at what is taken for granted (both Cage and I have noticed pedagogical aspects of our music). The process need not be aggressive, but can be forceful, perhaps even explosive. An example would be Cage's silent piece, *4'33"* (from 1952), which from the point of view of sound is perfectly unassertive, but worked quite otherwise in the context of normal concert performance. I never had a problem with it because it reminded me of the long silences of the Quaker meetings that took place every week at my school. One might think that silence is a sign of death, but for Cage it was rather a window open for sound; in a musical context silence is an artifact that allows us to hear sounds as such, the sounds of the life around us. Structures come to light when things are dismantled. New energy can work like a clearing storm or with sharp focus have a cutting edge.

Experiment, one could say, is the dynamic within music working on its social-cultural setting. Experiment should sustain a hope of renewal that is both aesthetic and political-social. The philosopher Richard Rorty refers to John Dewey's "experimentalism" that "asks us to see knowledge-claims as proposals about what actions to try out next." He then quotes Dewey:

> The elaborate systems of science [we could, modestly, put in parallel the systems of musical language] are born not of reason but of impulses at first slight and flickering; impulses to handle, to move about, to hunt, to uncover, to mix things separated and divide things combined, to talk and to listen. Method is their [the impulses'] effectual organization into continuous dispositions of inquiry, development and testing.

Rorty continues: "Dewey, because his vocabulary allows room for unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity" allows us best to function freely, that is, free of metaphysical or rationally totalized systems, with the "haphazard and perilous experiments" that we are continually required to perform.[1]

For one's own working, experiment entails certain dispositions, for example, unwaveringly close attention to everything: no dimension of the material to be neglected or taken for granted, not necessarily that all of it be used but that it be there as a possibility. A readiness for invention. Cornelius Cardew, writing about the experimental improvisation group AMM, of which he was a member, spoke of "the virtues that a musician can develop," namely: simplicity—but "you have to remember how you got there." Integrity—a total relation of what we have in mind and what we do. Selflessness—"to do something constructive you have to look beyond yourself"; self-expression is not an aim. Forbearance—starting with the relations among fellow musicians and the music they make; we might now call it openness. Identification with nature—using "the interplay of natural forces and currents to steer a course." An identification of "the musical and the real worlds." Finally, acceptance of death. This was with particular reference to the intensely ephemeral nature of improvised music. I think it applies to all live performance of music which at its vital core involves a high-wire act of improvisation. A number of these qualities or "virtues" are clearly akin to Cage's ideas, and one could add two more that he especially liked to evoke in later years: the exercise of intelligence and of conscience.

Cage evoked, in connection with his music, principles of spiritual discipline. He cited the idea, apparently from classical Indian thought, that the purpose of music was "to sober and quiet the mind thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences." This he later modified to be more simply human: "to change the mind so that it [becomes] open to experience, which is inevitably interesting." The raising of ethical issues is a new feature, I think, in the history of experimental music. In spite of this music having a very low profile on the larger cultural horizon, it insists on an intrinsic relation to social life. This in turn is linked to an explicit sense of the music's being made through performance, that is, at the point where music realizes its public presence. The notion that cultural and moral issues are closely related is, of course, very old—in the classical Indian, Chinese and Greek worlds, for instance, though it is a relation usually evoked to counter cultural innovation, in the cause of conservatism.

The articulation of such ideas around 1950 was Cage's. I was also interested in Eastern thought, Feldman and Brown were not. What we did all share was the impulse to explore new ways of making music, which led us to devise a variety of new technical procedures. Cage worked out numerous different ways of using chance procedures, to distance a subjective self from the process of composition. Feldman introduced the idea of having performers' choices of pitch open, not as a way of self-abnegation through indeterminacy, but as a notational procedure that

shifted focus to sound entities, "weights," as he called them. What mattered was less the specific pitch content of a sound than its register, which he specified as high, middle, or low, and density (single sound, cluster, and so on), also specified. And, as always in Feldman, instrumental color was carefully chosen. I occasionally used chance procedures and, more often, ways of writing discontinuously, in order to narrow and so focus more sharply composing choices, and in order to avoid the rhetoric of willful choice. By 1957 I turned to locating indeterminacy at the point of performance. Chance was not used in the process of composing, but the performers were given choices to make from variously specified ranges of material (pitch, color, dynamics, location in a time space), and when there was more than one performer, they were required to play with specific reference to each other's sounds, which were arranged to appear in ways that were not predictable. This resulted in a music that was always variable with each performance. Brown was the first to make notational images that were entirely open to the performers' interpretation—what was later to be called graphic music. He was looking for an immediacy of music-making comparable to jazz improvisation.

Putting on hold the traditional musical procedures, with their primary reference points in melodic line or thematic unit, metrical pulse, melody supported by harmonic aggregates and continuities, and the counterpointing of melodic lines, we devised other grammars and syntaxes. Unlike the serialist composers emerging at this time, we had a primary interest in a kind of found rather than constructed sound, and in sonority as such, the actual, present noise that any piece of music makes. We did not want to subordinate that to a closed compositional system or to use a compositional system that could not entirely vanish into the final sound. We were also open, following Cage's use of percussion, to the use of almost any kind of sound or use of an instrument, not just those already certified as "musical." We shared a feeling of space in the music, of sound projected on to a space, which often involved extensive use of silence and a feeling of suspended time. The music had no directional impulse and no narrative logic or continuity, and certainly no dramatic trajectories with buildups and climaxes; the latter might appear, but they were unmotivated. The music, one could say, operated in a field, or made up a sonic landscape (Cage had used the title "Imaginary Landscape" for some of his early percussion pieces, after the titles of sculptures by David Smith).

It might appear that this music did away with subjectivity; Cage seemed to insist on that. But one could also say that what we were rejecting was the rhetoric of subjectivity that has come down from nineteenth-century romanticism (a rejection we shared, for instance, with Satie and Stravinsky). In his "Lecture on Nothing" (ca. 1949–50) Cage said "I have nothing to say / and I am saying it / and that is / poetry / as I need it." That

surely indicates an individual expression of self, too. For all the associations among us, we were all four, of course, inevitably, quite different, and enjoyed and freely exercised our differences; we were hardly a "school."

In the following decades our music, variously, changed. Feldman's and Brown's rather less so, Cage's and mine more, especially by the end of the 1960s, under the impact of, like many others then, our waking up to the social and political events around us: the civil rights movement, the re-emergence of the left, the Vietnam War. But that's another story.

It was suggested to me that this talk about the music of the 1950s might also look to the present. Well, what I've been saying inevitably comes from the present as I experience it. The experimental music of the 1950s seems to be hanging on, though still at the margins—where there are other musics too, say, folk music, most jazz, early music (Western). Even mainstream classical music is being increasingly marginalized by the overwhelming force of commercial pop music. (Perhaps more positively one could say that the overall state of music is one of the widest possible heterogeneity, driven by ubiquitous recording technologies.) The earlier music of Cage and the later music of Feldman have become classics of a kind, though, depending somewhat on how and in what circumstances they are performed, there is still an experimental aura around them. Feldman's pieces of extreme length—up to six uninterrupted hours, for all the beautiful music in them, constitute a severe challenge to any normal concert situation and to usual listening habits. Cage's music of the 1960s, if properly performed, still has real grit in it and remains tough to assimilate, as does his late work. Though beautiful in its quiet sparseness, in its ascetic repose it runs strongly against current mainstreams. Earle Brown's open form pieces, elaborated by the 1960s, though their idiom became standard by the 1980s, still have a lightness and freshness, partly because he initiated the idiom, and because the forms can really be audibly and variably open.

A feature of the 1950s (and 1960s) music that I have not mentioned so far is the considerable body of pieces that were accessible for performers who were not virtuosos (so, apart from the virtuosic music written for David Tudor). Cage and Feldman played the piano, as do I, all of us with very modest technique, and quite a lot of the music reflected our performing abilities as well as our wish to be able to play our own music. When we devised new notations, in addition, and performing requirements, these would be new for all performers, trained and untrained musicians alike. This aspect of the music has continued to be useful, in alternative performing situations and in teaching contexts, because of its openness and flexibility, its mix of requiring discipline and free inventiveness and resourcefulness, and its focus on listening, in detail, to sounds, both one's own and others'.

Much (though by no means all) of the music currently being made—

certainly what gets most supported economically and promotionally—seems to me to be a music of accommodation and recuperation. It is sometimes made with great skill and flair, especially in the treatment of instrumental color. But one can hardly hear it as experimental. Experimental, nevertheless, is where I have thrown in my lot, believing it to be always necessary, if only as a reminder, however oblique, that the world around us might be different, might be better.

NOTE

1. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 208. The Dewey quotation is on page 205 and is from John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Modern Library, 1930), 196.