Aleatoric Music

ALSO KNOWN AS CHANCE MUSIC OR INDETERMINACY, ALEATORIC MUSIC IS MUSIC THAT HAS SOME ELEMENT OF UNPREDICTABILITY TO IT.

THE WORD "ALEATORIC" COMES FROM THE GREEK ROOT ALEA, WHICH MEANS DICE!

YOU COULD ARGUE THAT ALMOST ALL LIVE MUSIC HAS A BIT OF UNPREDICTABILITY... **DIFFERENT PERFORMERS** MIGHT INTERPRET THE SAME PIECE A LITTLE BIT **DIFFERENTLY.**



BUT ALEATORIC MUSIC IS DEFINED AS MUSIC WHICH HAS MORE INTENTIONAL UNPREDICTABILTY THAN THAT!

ALEATORIC MUSIC CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS BEING IN TWO DIFFERENT CATEGORIES ... THOUGH A PIECE COULD USE BOTH KINDS!

ALEATORIC COMPOSITION

A COMPOSER MIGHT USE RANDOMNESS TO DECIDE HOW TO WRITE A PIECE ... WHICH NOTES TO PLAY, HOW LONG THEY SHOULD LAST, OR WHICH INSTRUMENTS

THE RESULT IS A TO USE, FOR EXAMPLE. FIXED PIECE: ONE THAT SOUNDS THE SAME EACH TIME IT IS PLAYED!



ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF ALEATORIC COMPOSITION IS GREEK COMPOSER IANNIS XENAKIS, WHO WOULD USE NATURAL PHENOMENA TO COMPOSE MUSIC... USING PATTERNS OF MOLECULAR MOTION TO WRITE HIS 1975 WORK

N'SHIMA FOR BRASS, CELLO AND VOCALISTS. THIS USE OF NATURAL RANDOMNESS IS CALLED STOCHASTIC MUSIC!

ALEATORIC PERFORMANCE

A COMPOSER MIGHT INSTEAD DECIDE TO DESIGN A PIECE TO LEAVE PART OR ALL OF IT TO CHANCE ... MAKING THE PIECE SOUND DIFFERENT EVERY TIME IT IS PERFORMED!

FOR EXAMPLE, A PIECE MIGHT HAVE SECTIONS WHERE PERFORMERS ARE



INSTRUCTED TO REPEAT A CERTAIN PASSAGE AN UNSPECIFIED NUMBER OF TIMES, AT THEIR OWN TEMPO, INDEPENDENT FROM EACH OTHER. THIS IS CALLED SENZA MISURA!

OF COURSE, THERE ARE ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES: PERFORMERS DIRECTED TO PLAY WHATEVER THEY WANT, SPECIFIC PASSAGES PLAYED AT UNSPECIFED TIMES, OR PERFORMANCES WHICH DEPEND ON UNPREDICTABLE ELEMENTS, LIKE COIN FLIPS OR AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION!

> HEADS AGAIN ... YOU'RE UP!

TROMBONES

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS EXAMPLES OF ALEATORIC MUSIC IS JOHN CAGE'S 1952 PIECE 4'33", WHICH INVOLVES ONE OR MORE MUSICIANS ON STAGE, DOING NOTHING, FOR FOUR MINUTES AND THIRTY-THREE SECONDS.

THE PIECE IS SOMETIMES RIDICULED AS AN EXAMPLE OF **NONSENSICAL MODERN** ART RUN AMOK, BUT CAGE SAW IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE EXPECTATIONS OF CONCERT ETIQUETTE TO FORCE THE AUDIENCE TO ACTIVELY LISTEN TOGETHER IN A SILENT ENVIRONMENT!

CAGE POINTED OUT THAT 4'33" WAS NOT INTENDED TO BE A PERFORMANCE OF SILENCE, BUT A CHANCE TO LISTEN TO AMBIENT SOUNDS: NEARBY TRAFFIC, RAIN < FALLING ON THE ROOF, OR EVEN WHISPERED CONVERSATIONS!

I LOVE SOUNDS JUST AS THEY ARE... AND I HAVE NO NEED FOR THEM TO BE ANYTHING MORE THAN WHAT THEY ARE! I DON'T WANT THEM TO BE PSYCHOLOGICAL, I DON'T WANT A SOUND TO PRETEND THAT IT'S A BUCKET, OR THAT IT'S PRESIDENT, OR THAT IT'S IN LOVE WITH ANOTHER SOUND; I JUST WANT IT TO BE A SOUND!

JOHN CAGE, 1991

PIECES LIKE 4'33" REPRESENT THE ULTIMATE ALEATORIC EXPERIENCE; THE PERFORMER HAS NO CONTROL OVER THE PIECE, OTHER THAN CREATING THE FRAMEWORK OF A PERFORMANCE.

AS A RESULT, IT CAUSES US, AS LISTENERS AND AS MUSIC THEORISTS, TO CONSIDER THE VERY *DEFINITION* OF *MUSIC ITSELF!*