



# AMERICAN CLASSICS



## JOHN CAGE

### Works for Two Keyboards • 2

Music for Two • Three Dances

Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo



## John Cage (1912-1992)

### Music for Two - Three Dances

John Cage, for all his popular reputation of being “more of a philosopher than a composer”, possessed an intensely practical mind, and that formed an important part of his genius at the craft of instrumentation. This craft is something much more profound than a knack for finding nice sound colors. It is the art of knowing your resources and deploying them in the most effective way, given the circumstances within which you work.

The story of the prepared piano bears striking testimony to Cage's practical sense and sensitivity in instrumentation. In 1940, Cage was asked to produce music to accompany a dance piece at the Seattle Cornish School where he was working at the time. Cage was mostly working with percussion ensembles at the time, but he found that the performance space was too small to bring in a full battery of percussion instruments. Only a piano would fit, but he did not manage to make it produce the sound world he needed. As he put it years later, “I decided that what was wrong was the piano, not my efforts.” So Cage went about changing the piano, discovering whole worlds of sound by fastening all sorts of objects between the strings, including screws, pennies, rubber, plastic, weather stripping, and various bolts and nuts. Each object would change the timbre of the notes in novel ways, making the piano sound like a full percussion orchestra. This way, out of necessity and sheer practical considerations, Cage managed to turn the venerable standard instrument of nineteenth-century bourgeois musical culture into a workbench for sonic experimentation, and would write many pieces for it over the decade to follow, culminating in a *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra* in 1951.

Among the most ambitious of these works are the two extended compositions for two prepared pianos from 1944/1945, *A Book of Music* (recorded by Xenia Pestova and Pascal Meyer on the first disc of this series [8.559726]), and *Three Dances*. The pieces were both written for Juilliard-trained pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fitzdale, and constituted the first ever

commissions Cage received from professional musicians. Making full use of their virtuoso abilities, these works are very challenging, often involving quite spectacular pianism and an exciting wildness of texture and color reminiscent of Balinese gamelan. *Three Dances* follows a traditional three-movement setup with a slower second movement and a frenetic final, the incessant high-energy runs of which make for an exceptional type of musical texture within the whole of Cage's musical output, a singular expression of libidinal ecstasy.

The novel sounds of percussion music and of the prepared piano that Cage was so fond of exploring in his early compositional phase also posed novel formal problems. Using completely new and inharmonic sounds meant that Cage could not make use of traditional forms based on developments of harmonic relationships between musical themes. Cage's interest in sound led him naturally into the area of what may be his most important innovations in composition: the idea of basing musical structure entirely on time itself. If the conventional way of thinking about musical structure would proceed from how notes, chords, or melodies would be connected from one to the next, and if larger units (such as phrases or themes) would be constructed from those connections, Cage instead began to work with a more abstract way of structuring time, by first defining temporal matrices and then putting musical fragments into them. Connections between musical elements would not be predetermined; rather, they determine themselves so to speak on the spot, and Cage's musical universe is one of sounds that can appear alongside any other sound in ever changing constellations.

Cage used many different strategies over the course of his life to structure time. His early work was based on the so-called “rhythmic structure” technique, in which everything would be based on fixed time proportions, both on the level of large-scale form and on the level of phrase lengths (in *Three Dances*, the proportions are 2-5-2, 2-6-2, 2-7-2). Later works loosened and varied these temporal

frames in all sorts of ways. Towards the end of his life, Cage began making increasingly inventive use of the stopwatch as a way to determine compositional structure. This phase started with his *Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras* of 1981 and would continue into his final great sequence, the *Number Pieces*. The body of works known as *Music For \_\_\_* falls in the middle of this development. It represents what may be the high point of Cage's mastery of chance techniques in chamber music.

*Music For \_\_\_*, written between 1984 and 1987, took up an idea from the fifties, to create a collection of pieces for various instruments and media that could be performed in any combination. This project (called *The Ten Thousand Things*, according to Cage scholar James Pritchett) was abandoned with only two piano pieces, a percussion piece, a string piece and a piece for speaker having been written, but the idea resurfaced in the *Music For \_\_\_* sequence. This time, the idea was to write one part for every instrument of the orchestra, with the parts combinable into pieces for any chamber grouping, lasting up to thirty minutes. The title would change according to the number of parts performed. Thus, the piano duo version is called *Music For Two*. Seventeen such parts were eventually realized, including two for piano. Piano I was composed in 1984, piano II in 1987. A third piano part was begun but never completed.

Again, the concept shows a highly practical approach to instrumentation: here, Cage was at one and the same time writing a piano duo, a string quartet, a song, a chamber orchestra piece and just about every other chamber music genre. Moreover, by writing each part separately and abstracting from how the piece should sound as a whole, Cage could focus on instrumental details to make sure every part would always make best use of the instrument's possibilities. The formal challenge in such a work is to make sure that however the parts are put together, the whole will be meaningful and expressive, with instruments not getting in the way of one another, and changing between foreground and background presence so as not to dominate the texture. Thus the art of instrumentation becomes a question of time management.

The most important technical innovation of the music of this period is the idea of flexible time brackets. Events are notated in a part along with stopwatch timings about when they are to take place, but there is considerable flexibility in execution. Some sections (called “pieces” by Cage) are indicated to take place any time between two set stopwatch timings, but it is up to the performer when exactly to play them (and whether to make some gesture short and fast or long and slow). By contrast, other brackets (called “interludes”) always have a fixed duration of either five, ten or fifteen seconds.

Interludes in the piano parts consist of sequences of chords, which sometimes recur within the bracket itself and which remain mostly the same over the duration of the entire piece. This way, the interludes form something of a refrain within every part. The pieces consist of two kinds of writing: either more melodic gestures in a free rhythm, or single notes, which may be repeated like a signal. In the piano parts, these are produced in an unconventional way once again: by bowing the strings rather than playing them on the keys. Finally, since the time brackets of any part in *Music For \_\_\_* do not cover the full duration of the work, a fourth and very important element in any part consists of the silences (which can be quite long).

It is in the careful balance of these elements that Cage's mastery of form and instrumentation shows itself in *Music For \_\_\_*. Each of the four elements (silence, interludes, tones, gestures) gives an instrument a different role within the whole. Sometimes, a part is more in the foreground (with the melodic gestures), sometimes one could hear it as having more of an accompaniment function, as parts freely shift roles. The flexibility of the time bracket structure makes it possible for performers to use their sensitivity of timing, to let their gestures breathe and fit the circumstances. Thus performances of *Music For \_\_\_* create shifting tapestries of subtle instrumental expressions, motions and relations, making for some of the most exquisite and moving chamber music of the late twentieth century.

Samuel Vriezen

## Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo

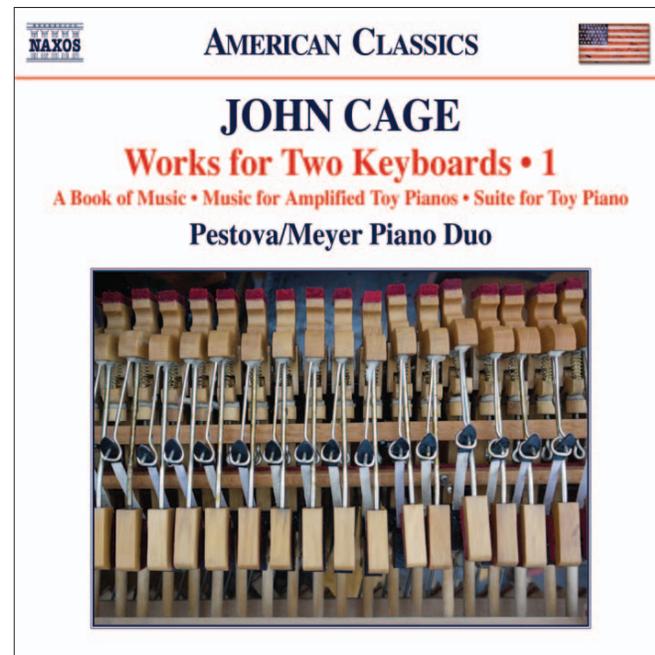
Photo: Sanja Harris Photography



The Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo have performed at the Festival Archipel (Switzerland), Festival Rainy Days (Luxembourg), Royaumont Voix Nouvelles (France), Festival Musikhost (Denmark), and Festival Musica (France), and in concert in Canada, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Great Britain. Their 2010 recording of Stockhausen's *Mantra* for Naxos (8.572398) (the first to use digital technology for the electronic processing) was hailed as "a highly accomplished presentation of one of the landmark pieces in the second half of the twentieth century" (*The Guardian*). Pascal Meyer (Luxembourg) has performed worldwide as soloist and chamber musician. He has appeared with orchestras such as the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra,

and is a member of the Luxembourg-based contemporary music ensemble Lucilin and the sextet Looptail in Amsterdam. Xenia Pestova (UK) is active as a soloist and chamber musician with a particular interest in contemporary repertoire. She has given premières of numerous new pieces and often works with composers and music technologists on interdisciplinary creation. She is currently Head of Performance at Bangor University. [www.xeniapestova.com](http://www.xeniapestova.com) [www.pascalmeyer.com](http://www.pascalmeyer.com)

## Also available



8.559726

John  
**CAGE**  
(1912-1992)

**Works for Two Keyboards • 2**

- |   |  |              |
|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | <b>Music for Two (1984/87)</b>                     | <b>29:25</b> |
|   | <b>Three Dances (1945)<br/>for prepared pianos</b> | <b>23:02</b> |
| 2 | <b>I.</b>  | <b>6:18</b>  |
| 3 | <b>II.</b>   | <b>6:34</b>  |
| 4 | <b>III.</b>  | <b>10:10</b> |

**Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo**  
**Xenia Pestova • Pascal Meyer**



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**AMERICAN CLASSICS**

John Cage's practicality transformed the piano into a full percussion orchestra and a workbench for sonic experiment. *Three Dances* is one of his most ambitious works for prepared piano, often involving spectacular virtuosity and exciting wildness of texture and color reminiscent of Balinese gamelan. Striking the balance which shows Cage's mastery of form and sensitivity in instrumentation, *Music for Two* includes bowed piano techniques to create shifting tapestries of subtle expression, making for some of the most exquisite and moving chamber music of the late 20th century. This is the second of a three volume series, Volume 1 of which can be found on Naxos 8.559726.

**[www.naxos.com](http://www.naxos.com)**

Playing  
Time:  
**52:27**