

From Sun 禪(zen) to Sun 線(line) to Sun 仙(transcendence):

Interdisciplinary Exploration of Identity through Avant Garde Piano Performance

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor in Music Performance, is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, that it does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and that it has not been taken from the work of others save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
List of Musical Examples	vi
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures	viii
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Literature review.....	3
Chapter 2. John Cage and Zen Buddhism	10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Early life	11
2.3 Indian rasa.....	18
2.4 Zen Buddhism.....	21
2.5 I Ching	22
2.6. Silence	32
2.7 Integral art.....	36
2.8 Conclusion.....	40
Chapter 3. Nam June Paik and video art	42
3.1 Introduction	42
3.2 Early life and influences	43
3.3 Meeting with John Cage	45
3.4 Exploration of multimedia art.....	52
3.5 Linearity.....	56
3.6 Eastern philosophies; Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shamanism...	60
3.6.1 Zen Buddhism.....	61
3.6.2 Confucianism.....	63
3.6.3 Taoism.....	68
3.6.4 Shamanism.....	70
3.7 Globalism.....	72
Chapter 4: Margaret Leng Tan and toy piano	77

4.1 Introduction	77
4.2 Meeting with John Cage	78
4.3 Toy piano	79
4.4 Identity: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Quirkiness, Globalism	84
4.5 Collaborations: <i>Satie Blues</i> by Toby Twining, <i>Carousel</i> by Phyllis Chen, <i>Metamorphoses Book 1</i> by George Crumb.....	86
4.5.1 Toby Twining.....	86
4.5.2 Phyllis Chen.....	89
4.5.3 George Crumb	91
4.6 Theatricality in performance: Memoir (Dragon ladies don't weep).....	101
4.7 Conclusion.....	104
Chapter 5: From Sun 禪(zen) to Sun 線(line) to Sun 仙(transcendent):	
My artistic transformation (autoethnography)	105
5.1 Introduction	105
5.2 Overview	107
5.3 Theoretical frameworks	107
5.4 Purpose of the case studies	123
5.5 Three case studies.....	125
5.5.1 Case Study 1. Journey Through Time: Piano Performance with Storytelling	125
5.5.2 Case study 2. Artist in Residence at St James's Hospital Dublin: Incorporating everyday hospital sounds into music	129
5.5.3 Case study 3. Improvisation (ContemPLAY).....	136
5.6 Conclusion.....	143
Conclusion	144
Bibliography.....	146

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Abstract

This research explores how avant-garde piano performance serves as a medium for re-creation of my artistic identity. This artistic research initially began with self examination of identity shaped by the experience of living in multiple countries and adopting diverse cultures that led to a complex sense of self. This developed into a research question: how can I convey my multicultural identity through piano performance? Thus, this research is grounded in an autoethnographical approach and examines the intersection between the subject of identity and piano performance.

The research is grounded in the works of the avant-garde artists John Cage, Nam June Paik and Margaret Leng Tan. I explore how these artists challenged the traditional boundaries and opened a new path of performance practice that express their own identities. I investigate theoretical frameworks on identity in the context of performance art by these artists. As a result, I experiment with various approaches to determine the most effective way to convey my personal identity exploration through avant garde music by incorporating multimedia strategies and unconventional ways of performing piano.

This research explores reinvention of the role of a professionally-trained pianist, examining the themes of cultural dislocation and personal identity and embracing a process of re-education. The element of destruction in avant garde music leads to a reconstruction of my artistic identity and provides an opportunity to rethink the role of the pianist.

List of Musical Examples

Chapter Four

Example 4.1 Toby Twining <i>Satie Blues</i> , bar 1-5.....	87
Example 4.2 Toby Twining <i>Satie Blues</i> , bar 6-13.....	88
Example 4.3 Erik Satie <i>Gnoissenne no.3</i> (1890), bar1.....	88
Example 4.4 Music box paper strip (30 notes).....	90
Example 4.5 George Crumb <i>Metamorphoses Book I, No.7 Clowns at night</i> (Marc Chagall), bar 5-6.....	93
Example 4.6 George Crumb <i>Metamorphoses Book I, no.7 Clowns at night</i> (Marc Chagall), bar 5-8.....	94
Example 4.7 George Crumb <i>Metamorphoses Book I, no.7 Clowns at night</i> (Marc Chagall), bar 11-15.....	94
Example 4.8 George Crumb <i>Metamorphoses Book I, no.3 Crows over the wheat field</i> (Vincent Van Gogh), bar 1-3.....	95
Example 4.9 George Crumb <i>Metamorphoses Book I, no.8 Contes Barbares</i> (Paul Gauguin), bar 12-15.....	95
Example 4.10 George Crumb <i>Metamorphoses Book I, no.6 Perilous Night</i> (Jasper Johns), bar 1.....	100

Chapter Five

Example 5.1 George Crumb <i>The magic circle of infinity</i> (1972-1979), <i>Makrokosmos Book I</i>	121
Example 5.2 Molton Feldman <i>Projection I</i> (1950) for solo cello.....	137
Example 5.3 Christian Wolff <i>Edges</i> (1968).....	138
Example 5.4 Cornelius Cardew <i>The Tiger's Mind</i> (1967).....	141

List of Tables

Chapter Five

Table 5.1 Programme structure for the performance ‘Journey Through Time’	129
--	-----

List of Figures

Chapter One

Figure 1.1 Multicultural identity by Melissa Hahn	5
---	---

Chapter Two

Figure 2.1 Comparison of prepared piano instruction of Sonatas and Interludes (left) and Bacchanale (right).....	20
Figure 2.2 Illustration of Ying Yang Trigrams Combination Development.....	23
Figure 2.3 Historical formation of <i>I Ching</i>	25
Figure 2.4 Chinese character 易 from Shuowen Jiezi explained in Korean.....	27
Figure 2.5 The evolvement of Chinese Character 易 from shape of lizard.....	27
Figure 2.6 Hexagrams from I Ching.....	29
Figure 2.7 Comparison of John Cage's hexagrams for <i>Music of Changes</i> (1951) and hexagrams of I Ching	31, 32
Figure 2.8 Cover page of <i>4'33</i> by John Cage.....	34
Figure 2.9 <i>White Paintings</i> (1951) by Robert Rauschenberg.....	35
Figure 2.10 <i>Fountain</i> (1917) by Marcel Duchamp.....	38
Figure 2.11 <i>Erratum Musicale</i> (1913) by Marcel Duchamp.....	39

Chapter Three

Figure 3.1 Action music performance by Nam June Paik.....	48
Figure 3.2 During the performance of <i>Etude for Piano</i> (1960) by Nam June Paik.....	49

Figure 3.3 <i>Zen for walking</i> (1961) by Nam June Paik.....	50
Figure 3.4 <i>One for solo violin</i> (1962), Nam June Paik.....	51
Figure 3.5 <i>Zen for TV</i> (1963) by Nam June Paik.....	54
Figure 3.6 Prepared piano by Nam June – Exposition of Music- Electronic Television.....	55
Figure 3.7 <i>Zen for head</i> (1961) by Nam June Paik.....	58
Figure 3.8 <i>TV Buddah</i> (1974) by Nam June Paik.....	63
Figure 3.9 Poster of <i>Opera Sextronique</i> (1967) by Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik by Nam June Paik.....	66
Figure 3.10 Charlotte Moorman performing <i>TV Bra for Living Sculpture</i> (1969).....	68
Figure 3.11 <i>A Pas de Loup</i> (1990) by Nam June Paik.....	72
Figure 3.12 <i>Electronic Superhighway</i> (1995) by Nam June Paik.....	74

Chapter Four

Figure 4.1 One of Margaret Leng Tan’s vintage toy pianos for performance. Schoenhut 37 keys.....	82
Figure 4.2 <i>Perilous night</i> (1982) by Jasper Johns.....	96
Figure 4.3 <i>Isenheim Altarpiece</i> (1512-1516) by Matthias Grünewald.....	97
Figure 4.4 <i>The weeping woman</i> (1937) by Pablo Picasso.....	98

Chapter Five

Figure 5.1 <i>Seo Hwa Dong Che</i> (2016) by Oh Chi Jung.....	111
Figure 5.2 <i>TV Buddha</i> (1974) by Nam June Paik.....	114

Figure 5.3 Margaret Leng Tan’s performance at Greenwood cemetery, South Brooklyn, New York.....	117
Figure 5.4 Mandala circle.....	120
Figure 5.5 A picture from the performance ‘Journey Through Time’ at St.Patrick’s Church, Dalkey Village, Ireland.....	128
Figure 5.6 A picture from the showcase day at St. James’s Hospital.....	135

Chapter 1. Introduction

This research began from personal struggles with a complex sense of self that often reflected the absence of identity in my music performances. My multifaceted identity was shaped by living in multiple countries including Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Bulgaria and Ireland. The initial research question focused on how to convey this multifaceted identity into music performance, and it led to a personal journey of finding my identity both as an artist and a person.

Growing up with rigid piano training, my childhood was shaped by the experience of rigorous piano practice. Instead of the childhood experience of exploring and playing, I experienced the intense pressure from academic success in conservatories, competitions and endless piano lessons. The training also involved physical and emotional challenges which not only contributed to taking away my opportunity for self-discovery in my adolescence but also significantly affected in developing my identity.

In addition to these experiences, living in multiple countries created multiculturalism within me. Growing up without developing a clear sense of identity or established values further contributed to a complex sense of self.

This complex sense of self emerged from the clash between the two experiences. On one hand, the rigid piano training instilled in me a deeply embedded belief that classical music is the ultimate expression of musical skills. On the other, the experience of living in multiple countries allowed me a sense of liberation and diverse ways of thinking that contrasted with the strict discipline inherent in classical music.

In essence, due to the cult of perfectionism in classical music education in Korea, my early training was solely focused on aesthetics and technical precision. Rather than learning how to explore self-expression through music, I was taught to meticulously emulate renowned pianists such as Alfred Brendel and Evgeny Kissin not only in their performance styles but also their body gestures, and even face expressions as their performances were regarded as models of perfection. Arguably, this pedagogical approach is deeply rooted in South Korea's socioeconomic history.¹

The rapid development in the Korean society from the 1960s to the 1990s embraced materialism and capitalism which ultimately affected the purpose of education.²

Children born in the 1980s and 1990s were encouraged to pursue education to succeed in life. Furthermore, the influences from U.S military presence³ led to a pursuit of western education in Korea. As a result, western education such as classical music in the Korean society became a symbolic medium that is a form of cultural and financial capital that served as a social standing instead of its true nature of encompassing the fundamental aspects of human experience.⁴

To untangle my complex sense of self through this research, the process necessitates to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses diverse contexts including history, culture, tradition, multiculturalism, identity, psychology, philosophy, avant-garde and interdisciplinary practice. Thus, this research cultivates music as a cultural practice

¹ Suk-Kyoo Lim, 'The gifted education system behind S. Korea's classical music prodigies like Lim Yun-Chan', *Hankyoreh*, 21 June 2022.

² Timo Fleckenstein, Soohyun Christine Lee, 'The political economy of education and skills in South Korea: Democratization, liberalization and education reform in comparative perspective', *The Pacific Review* 32.2(2019): 2.

³ The United States and South Korea are allies under the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. Under the agreement, U.S military personnel have maintained a continuous presence on the Korean peninsula.

⁴ Liam Birch, "Reflecting on High Educational Expectations in South Korea", *Medium*, 17 May 2018.

rather than sound structures which indicates a character of ethnomusicology and centres music as a cultural response shaped by lived experience.

Literature review

While broad research exist on each of these contexts, few studies integrate all of them into a single framework. Although the foundation of this study lies in my personal history and experience, this interdisciplinary research offers an original exploration contributing to the field of artistic research. It can also provide a model for future musicians navigating their identity especially in an increasingly globalised world today.

Numerous scholars have addressed the issue of education in South Korea and often discuss the impact of perfectionism and how it affects Korean students.

The obsession of perfectionism in Korean education stems from collectivistic cultures in Asia, particularly those with Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), often prioritising the needs of group over individual desires. Narrative practitioner, Eunjoo Lee claims that due to this collectivistic culture in the society of Korea, dominant discourses hold significant influence, and the pressure to conform to social norms can be strong.⁵

These cultural influences shape perfectionism by encouraging individuals to meet a high degree of expectation which becomes central to identity.⁶ However, these studies investigate often the general education system and overlook the creative process from the perspectives of artistic research.

⁵ Eunjoo Lee, 'Conformity pressures: Deconstructing social discourses in the Korean context', *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community work*, 1 (2017), 32.

⁶ Adity Padmanabhan, 'Influence of Cultural Values on Perfectionism and Self-esteem', *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches in Psychology*, 3 (2025), 161.

Scholars specialising in artistic research argue that practice-based research is crucial and takes the process of artistic creation as a valid form of knowledge. This process particularly involves embodiment, sensory engagement and experimental experiences.

The music theorist, Henk Borgdorff in his book ‘The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research’, argues that ‘Art thereby transcends its former limits, aiming through the research to contribute to thinking and understanding; academia, for its part, opens up its boundaries to forms of thinking and understanding that are interwoven with artistic practices.’.⁷

This statement resonates strongly with my research, as it centres art as a powerful means of self-expression. It is crucial for me, as an artist, to shape my self-perception and to explore creative expressions. Thus, this research begins as a journey of my self-discovery and self-acceptance grounded in an artistic research strategy. Through embracing expressive and experimental approaches, I aim to align my artistic practice with my multifaceted self.

Winnie Huang’s dissertation, ‘Sonic Silhouettes Musical Movement’ (2022) emphasises the importance of practice-led knowledge as it produces varied outcomes and innovative dissemination possibilities.⁸

Similarly, Mine Doğan-Dack examines the role of the performer in the art-making process. In my research, I use the piano as a tool for explorations and experimentations.

As Doğan-Dack observes, the piano functions as a tool for exploration and discovery, for

⁷ Henk Borgdorff, ‘The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research’, Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 44.

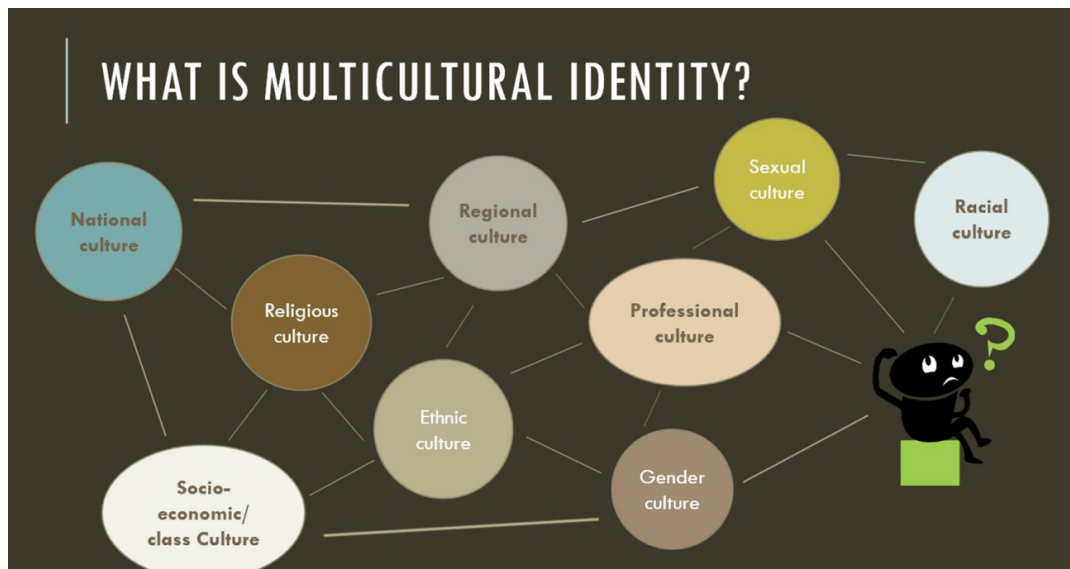
⁸ Winnie Huang, ‘Musical-Gestural Processes: Teaching Artistic Research through embodied experiences’, paper presented at *AEC European Platform for Artistic Research in Music annual conference*, Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), 21-23 March 2024.

affective involvement, expression, thought and creativity, rather than merely as a medium for communicating some meaning that exists prior to or independently of its affordances.⁹

The main object of this artistic research is investigation of the performer's role. In this thesis, my aim is to deconstruct the misconceptions of classical music instilled in me during childhood and to examine the role of the performer as someone capable of transcending limitations through a multicultural identity.

A historian and diversity consultant, Carlos E Cortés, discusses that every individual has multiple layers of identity influenced by various life experiences.¹⁰ In my case, being exposed to various cultural traditions has deeply influenced my multicultural identity, offering me to have a unique perspective and to express my understanding of the world through music.

Figure 1.1. Multicultural identity by Melissa Hahn



⁹ Mine Doğantan-Dack, *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2015), 6.

¹⁰ Dianne Hofner Saphiere, 'Dr. Carlos Cortés on Multicultural Identity', *Cultural Detective*, 17 September 2013

My desire for exploration and experimentation from multicultural identity aligns with the character of the avant-garde movement. The nature of the avant-garde movement embraces an interdisciplinary approach in order to blur boundaries between the disciplines of art. In addition, it often incorporates elements from other disciplines to challenge the traditional norms, reject conventions and push the boundaries.

While researching, I realised that many artists who have multicultural backgrounds tend to practise avant-garde and each artist navigates multiculturalism in their own way. For example, a composer and architect engineer, Iannis Xenakis was a large-minded artist. With his background of Greek heritage, being born in Romania, living in France, he radically liberated music from traditional conventions.¹¹ His composition is not primarily structured by harmony or melody, but with mathematical models such as physics, stochastic laws. These exclude any external meanings or emotional content but solely focus on sounds. This unique approach not only created visual effect but kinaesthetic sense of movement.¹²

Jaha Koo, a theatre-maker, composer and videographer produces artworks that blend multiple art forms. His ambiguous artwork comes from his ongoing inquiry of identity. As a South Korean artist, who is based in Europe, Koo claimed that in Korea, he is seen as an international person with Korean background, though, he is defined as a distinctly Korean in Europe.¹³ This duality is reflected in his performance style, which embraces the complexity of multiculturalism.¹⁴

¹¹ John Rahn, Iannis Xenakis: Regards, Disregard: Liberation (*Perspectives of New Music*, 2001), 213.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 'Who is theatre-maker Jaha Koo?', Southbank Centre Magazine, Feb 2025.

¹⁴ Charlie Smith, 'PuSh Festival: Jaha Koo explores how cultural imperialism shapes national identity in The History of Western Theatre in Korea', *PanCouver*, Jan 2025.

The nature of multiculturalism stems from recognition, tolerance of difference and cultivation of mutual respect. This provides the foundation of compassion by promoting understanding and appreciation of diversity. Although my multicultural identity encouraged me to embrace diverse perspectives and find values in the blending of cultures, I have struggled with accepting my own imperfection and unique journey as an artist. Extensive research demonstrates that childhood trauma involving physical, emotional abuse can affect emotional, cognitive, behavioural and social development.¹⁵ In my case, my early training created a cycle of negative self-perception and self-criticism that resulted in a fear of failure and a reliance on external validation.

It particularly appeared in my ability to reconcile the need for emotional openness with the impersonal nature of classical music training. I came to realise that cultivating self-compassion is essential, especially in the practice of avant-garde music, where exploration and experiments play a key role. Through self-compassion, I learn to quiet the internalised voices of criticism. This emotional transformation enables my attention to be redirected through neuroplasticity¹⁶ which allow us to reshape our thoughts and beliefs. As a result, they align more effectively with our desired outcomes.

Neuroscientist James Doty suggests that cultivating compassion can activate the

¹⁵ Çiğdem Dereboy, Esra Şahin Demirkapı, Mehmet Şakıroğlu, Cennet Şafak Öztürk, 'The relationship Between Childhood Traumas, Identity Development, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation and Psychopathology', *Turkish Journal of Psychiatry* 29, (2018), 147.

¹⁶ Neuroplasticity is the umbrella term for the brain's ability to modify, change and adapt both structure and function throughout life and in response to experience, as well as through repetition and intention, enabling the brain to form new circuits and to prune away old ones that no longer serve us. By redirecting our attention, we can literally change our brains, creating more gray matter in the very areas that help us learn, help us perform, and allow us to manifest. As the brain adapts, it makes alterations that can produce dramatic and positive effects on everything from Parkinson's disease to chronic pain to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). And the same neuroplasticity is how we change our brains using intention and practice to manifest the reality we envision.

parasympathetic nervous system.¹⁷ In other words, this practice changes the brain, body and mindset. In consequence, this process ultimately helps me reconcile the multifaceted aspects of my identity in my music performance. In this sense, the act of performing becomes not only a form of musical expression but a means of embracing my authentic self as an artist.

While the concept of classical music training may not appear to be directly aligned, the psychological and philosophical aspects of this research draw on perspectives from compassion and altruism research, and Jungian psychology which enabled me to understand the process of transforming mindset from scientific and psychological lenses.

Ultimately, this process led me to realise that what happened to my childhood does not limit my future possibilities. Furthermore, it requires me to understand various Korean cultures, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Shamanism and Daosim which shaped my childhood memories alongside my early training.

To apply the various contexts into my music practice, the foundation of this research lies on the frameworks of three avant-garde artists, John Cage, Nam June Paik and Margaret Leng Tan, who exemplify the integration of multiple disciplines and the conveyance of multiculturalism through their respective mediums.

The pioneer of avant-garde, John Cage, viewed the process as a way to embrace chance and randomness, influenced by Zen Buddhism and Eastern philosophies. His approach

¹⁷ Parasympathetic nerves system (PSNS) is a part of the autonomic nervous system that regulates functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, digestion, urination and sweating and many others. Scientific research has shown that practice such as exercise, meditation, deep breathing, nature walks can help stimulate and activate PSNS which supports restoration and energy conservation after stress.

emphasises experiencing the present moment and valuing the process over the result in both music and life. Both Paik and Tan closely worked with Cage, and his philosophical approach had a significant impact in their work.

Paik, multimedia artist, shaped his artistic themes by the experience of Japanese occupation in Korea and the conflict between Eastern and Western influences. He conveyed his feelings of displacement in the context of global perspective in his artwork through the medium of technology.

Tan, toy pianist, embraces her multicultural identity and incorporates it into her unique performance style through the medium of toy piano.

Chapters two, three and four explore each artist's legacy, influences, the investigation of mediums in the context of identity. In Chapter five, I examine how the three artist's work have influenced my own artistic journey and provide an autoethnographic reflection by sharing three case studies.

Chapter 2. John Cage and Zen Buddhism

2.1 Introduction

There have been many composers who were influenced by Asian music in Western classical music. One of the most well-known examples is *Pagodes* from *Estampes* by Claude Debussy. The use of pentatonic scales and the repetitive rhythm patterns in the piece evokes in listeners an image of being in a pagoda somewhere in Asia. Debussy was fascinated by Asian music when he first heard the sounds of Javanese gamelan at the 1889 Paris World Exposition.¹ It is remarkable to think that despite hearing it once Debussy composed *Pagodes* based on his memory and imagination.

The Asian influences on western music became more prominent when travelling become accessible in the early twentieth century. The set of *Sept Haïkai* by Olivier Messiaen was composed after his visit to Japan in 1962. This differs from Debussy's use of Asian influence in that Messiaen systematically integrated the Asian influence into his composition while Debussy used Asian influence from his imagination and tried to express rather atmospherically within the Western aesthetic.

However, there is 60-year difference between when *Pagodes* and *Sept Haïkai* were composed. It is fundamental to consider the time difference that in the 1900s and the 1960s, when Messiaen composed, art scene was facing transformation by the affect from the aftermath of World War I and World War II. In result, many artists attempted to

¹ Richard Mueller, 'Javanese Influence on Debussy's "Fantaisie" and beyond, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1986), 157.

move away from classicism, searching for new methods to express the uncertainty of the time. Especially in the rise of avant garde movement, artists tried to push the boundaries and experimented with new forms, materials and ideas. Avant garde artists attempted to convey the meaning of life through their art, and it was expressed in an abstract way.

John Cage, the ‘father’ of the avant garde movement is well known for incorporating Asian influences into his composition. His engagement with Asian influence was philosophical rather than musical influence. The use of Indian rasa (aesthetic), Zen Buddhism, and the ancient Chinese book *I Ching* (book of Changes) shaped his approach to music. His method of conveying Asian influences is directly related to the way of living life which Cage learned from Asian philosophies. In this chapter, I examine Cage’s legacy on his Asian influences and investigate the theoretical frameworks on how his identity was shaped by it.

2.2 Early life

John Cage is known as a forerunner of the American avant-garde. He is best known for his revolutionary works particularly his engagement with Asian influences. He tried to break the tradition of classicism and developed non-standard musical methods such as prepared piano, using silence and chance operation. His exploration of sound was deeply profound in the Asian influences particularly Zen Buddhism and the I Ching.

Cage was born in 1912 to a father who was an inventor and a mother who was an amateur artist and journalist.² He began piano lessons as a child and showed talent, but he aspired to be a writer. Later Cage pursued writing while studying in Pomona College, but he quickly dropped out, as he believed that he was not challenged enough to be a writer. In the 1930s, he embarked on a transformative journey to Europe where he was exposed to a wide range of art including architecture, poetry and paintings. During the trip he also encountered the music of Johan Sebastian Bach and Igor Stravinsky which inspired Cage to explore composition.³

When Cage returned to the United States, he decided to take composition classes at The New School in New York, where he studied with composer Henry Cowell. They formed a good friendship through their shared ideas. Cowell's use of radical piano techniques such as tone clusters and playing on the strings inside the piano show that he used piano as a percussive instrument. According to Cage, Cowell was 'the open sesame for new music in America'.⁴

His experimental technical ideas are shown in Cage's early compositions such as *Amores* (1943) and *In the name of the Holocaust* (1942) through prepared piano techniques which Cage invented by inserting everyday objects such as bolts, screws and rubbers into the piano to expand Cowell's approach to percussionism with the piano.

Cowell's compositions often reflect his Irish heritage. For example, his pieces *Three Irish Legends* (1922) and *The Banshee* (1925)⁵ express a strong nationalistic character.

² The Art Story, Biography of John Cage, <<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/cage-john/>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Nichols and Joel Sachs, 'Henry Cowell' in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online (Oxford University Press), 16 October 2013 [accessed (25 June 2025)].

⁵ Banshee is a female spirit in Irish folklore who heralds the death of a family member by screaming, wailing, shrieking, or keening.

These pieces include unconventional techniques, such as having a non-performer sit on the piano bench while the pianist stands in the crook of piano and performs directly on the strings of the piano instead of the traditional seated position.

Cowell not only encountered Irish culture but also many different cultures, including elements of Asian influence, which he incorporated them into his compositions.

Cowell recognised Cage's radical ideas and that his desire to push the boundaries of music defined what composition meant to him. He introduced Cage to Arnold Schoenberg who is widely regarded as one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century.⁶ His innovations in music composition particularly atonality and serialism, had a profound impact on the development of modern music. He believed that serialism could become a future formal structure of composition and it could be a way to explore new forms of expression and emotional content in both personal and subjective ways. He saw the structure and organisation of his compositions as a means to achieve these goals. In this sense, Schoenberg encountered both influences of formalism and expressionism as he considered the balance of the formalistic structure of his compositions with the expression of emotions.

Despite Schoenberg's groundbreaking innovation in Western music tradition, this aesthetic approach was criticised by two of the most prominent musicologists; Theodor Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus.

In an essay *Aesthetic Theology*, Dahlhaus claimed Schoenberg's atonal music as a radical departure from the tonal tradition of Western classical music, reflecting a broader cultural and intellectual shift towards modernism and avant-grade. However he

⁶ Charles Rosen, 'Arnold Schoenberg', University of Chicago Press, (1996).1.

was critical of Schoenberg's aesthetic approach that he positioned himself in the role of prophet, changing the course of twentieth century music by proclamation.⁷ In other words, Schoenberg emphasised the spiritual significance of music and it overlooked the fact that music is also a social and cultural practice, shaped by historical context, musical tradition and the relationship between composers and audiences. Dahlhaus was particularly interested in the relationship between music and society and his work often explored how social and cultural practice affect musical developments. He believed that it was important to take these factors into account when analysing the development of music, rather than simply focusing on abstract ideas about spirituality and transcendence.⁸

Adorno praised Schoenberg as a composer and musical innovator and he saw Schoenberg's development of the twelve-tone method as a significant achievement in the history of music. Adorno explains 'Twelve-tone technique is truly the fate of music. It enchains music by liberating it. The subject dominates music through the rationality of the system, only in order to succumb to the rational system itself'.⁹

However, Adorno was also critical towards the aesthetic approach. He believed that while Schoenberg's music, particularly use of the dissonance, reflects the alienation of modern society, yet it becomes inaccessible that it is difficult to listen to and that the complexity and difficulty were not merely justified by its artistic merits.¹⁰

⁷ John Covach, 'The source of Schoenberg's aesthetic theology' (University of California Press 1996), 255.

⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, "Schönbergs ästhetische Theologie," in *Bericht über den 2. Kongress der internationalen Schönberg Gesellschaft 1984* (Vienna, 1984); translated as "Schoenberg's Aesthetic Theology," in *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge, 1987), 81-93.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Philosophy of New Music', trans. A.G. Mitchell and B. Blomster, (Seabury Press, New York: 1973), pp. 67-68. (Quoted in Kivılcım Yıldız Şenürkmez, The Schoenberg phenomenon: Twelve-tone music and its absolute alienation', *Sosyal Bilimler* pp. 76).

¹⁰ Kivılcım Yıldız Şenürkmez, The Schoenberg Phenomenon: Twelve-tone Music and its Absolute Alienation, *MSGÜ Sosyal Bilimler* 14 (2016): 82.

Despite the criticism Schoenberg received, he was still committed to the development of atonal music. He believed that atonality was the only way to break free from the constraints of traditional musical forms and structures and that it creates a new musical language that allows more flexibility and expression than the old forms of music. Along with Schoenberg, other composers of the time, including Alban Berg and Anton Webern, also embraced atonality and used it in their compositions. The three composers later were labelled the Second Viennese School.¹¹

Schoenberg's pivotal approaches influenced Cage and encountering Schoenberg was a significant turning point in Cage's composition development. When Cage approached Schoenberg for studying composition, Schoenberg requested Cage to devote his life to composition. Cage affirmed it and Schoenberg agreed to teach him free of charge.¹²

Although Cage did not fully embrace Schoenberg's twelve-tone serialism, there are significant influences through structural thinking rather than serialism technique itself. Therefore, Cage's move towards freedom in music can be understood not as a development of serialism, but rather a reaction against serialism.

Through the training under Cowell and Schoenberg, Cage's exposures to percussive techniques and serialism became groundwork for his experimental music. Their rejection of rigid structures opened a door for Cage to various experimentations including blending his music with other disciplines of art.

¹¹ Alexander Carpenter, 'Alban Berg and Anton Webern'. Alexander Carpenter (ed.) Schoenberg in context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Composers in Context), p.221.

¹² John Cage: An Autobiographical Statement, *Southwest Review* 76.1 (1991): 59-76.

In the late 1930s, while Cage was working at Cornish School in Seattle, he experienced astonishing experimentations such as inventing prepared piano, applying Indian Rasa, and learning about Zen Buddhism through his colleagues who built a lifelong friendship.¹³

Cage's first prepared piano piece *Bacchanale* (1938/40) was composed through collaboration with a dancer, to evoke African-style music. He initially intended to compose for a percussion ensemble; however, due to the limited space in the performance venue, he invented the prepared piano by inserting objects between the piano strings. He also experimented with the electronic equipment in a radio station at the Cornish School and composed *Imaginary landscapes No.1* (1939), acoustic sounds mixed with amplified small radio sounds.

These various experimental works by Cage were his attempt to shift away from traditional expression of emotion through sounds and treat sounds as an object. However, Cage struggled to understand the academic idea of music that the purpose of music was still focused on communication. Cage expressed this concern in his autobiographical statement: 'I was disturbed both in my private life and in my public life as a composer. I could not accept that the academic idea that the purpose of music was communication, because I noticed that when I conscientiously wrote something sad, people and critics were often apt to laugh. I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it than communication'.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John Cage. [Autobiographical Statement (1990)]; quoted in, [Kay Larson, Where the heart beats, John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists (New York: Penguin press, 2012), 146.]

In addition, in the 1940s, Cage faced challenges in both his personal and professional life. He experienced unsettlement caused by his divorce from his wife Xenia, while simultaneously beginning a romantic relationship with Merce Cunningham. Cage attempted to convey his feelings of sadness and loneliness in to the composition *Perilous night* (1943-1944), yet audiences did not take it as how he aimed to express.¹⁵ Since this experience, Cage decided to move away from the expression of personal feelings in his music.¹⁶ Soon Cage also gave up the notions of communication as he realised that it was impractical in his case.

I had poured a great deal of emotion into this piece, and obviously I wasn't communicating this at all. Or else, I thought, if I were communicating, then all artists must be speaking a different language, and thus speaking only for themselves. The whole musical situation struck me more and more as a Tower of Babel.¹⁷

It is suggested that during this painful experience, Cage found his thirst for spirituality.¹⁸ Cage's close friend Joseph Campbell who had been practising Hinduism introduced Cage to books *The Transformation of Nature in Art* and *The Dance of the Shiva* by Ananda Coomaraswamy.¹⁹ Cage's interest in Asian philosophy significantly arose after this.

¹⁵ Daniel M Callahan, "The Gay Divorce of Music and Dance: Choreomusicality and the Early Works of Cage-Cunningham", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71.2 (2018), 454.

¹⁶ Tzenka Dianova,, *John Cage's Prepared Piano: (The Nuts and Bolts)*, Victoria BC, 2008, 116.

¹⁷ John Cage, [*For the Birds: In Conversation with Daniel Charles* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), 148.]; quoted in [James Pritchett *The music of John Cage*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993) 36.]

¹⁸ Kay Larson, *Where the heart beats, John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin press, 2012), 150.

¹⁹ Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's entanglement with the ideas of Coomaraswamy' (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2011), 90.

2.3 Indian rasa

In 1946, Cage met an Indian singer and tabla player, Gita Sarabhai, who went to America concerned about the influence of Western music on traditional Indian music.²⁰

Cage taught her Western counterpoint and contemporary music. In exchange, she taught him Indian traditional music.

At that time Cage was searching for a different reason to make music as he gave up on the notions of communication through music. Sarabhai suggested to him that the purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences.²¹ Additionally, the quote from one of Coomaraswamy's books 'The responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation' led Cage to explore new ways of composition.²² He composed one of the prepared piano pieces *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-1948) using the ideas drawn from the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*. The aim of this composition was to express the eight emotional themes from Indian *Rasa* tradition that the concept of aesthetic flavour in arts evokes in the listeners. This consists of *rati* (love), *hasya* (mirth), *soka* (sorrow), *krodha* (anger), *utsaha* (energy), *bhaya* (terror), *jugupsa* (disgust) and *vismaya* (astonishment). Later the ninth *rasa santam* (tranquility²³) was added.²⁴

²⁰ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 127.

²¹ Gita Sarabhai, quoted in; [Kay Larson, *Where the heart beats, John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin press, 2012), 141].

²² Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's entanglement with the ideas of Coomaraswamy' (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2011), 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁴ Kay Larson, *Where the heart beats, John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (Penguin press, 2012), 141.

While Cage attempted to use *rasa* in his compositions, the *rasa* was not applied in any conventional manner. It is difficult to find the characteristic concept of *rasa* in the Western society and Cage had no experience of living in India. Therefore, the only way to understand the *rasa* would have been by literatures. Cage mentioned that he learned the Hindu theory of art and attempted to make his work correspond to the theory²⁵, however it is not clear in which part of his compositions *rasa* was expressed. Thus, it suggests that Cage merely used the ideas of *rasa* in a basic, literal way that was influenced by European and American artistic traditions rather than the Indian traditional way.²⁶

Nonetheless, the use of emotions from *rasa* in the *Sonatas and Interludes* was also expressed in Cage's own way as he explained that the use of *rasa* is subjected to individual emotion that what he expressed does not always reflect the same emotion to other people. Philosopher K. C. Bhattacharyya described that *rasa* can be understood as a universal aesthetic theory to both Indian and non-Indian art.²⁷ Thus, the use of *rasa* in Cage's pieces can be understood as a part of the process of his experimentation where he used *rasa* as a tool to express 'universal nature' rather than subjective emotions.²⁸ In comparison with Cage's first prepared piano piece, *Bacchanale*, and later work *The Sonatas and Interludes*, it shows that the preparation became much more complex; 12 notes in *Bacchanale* and 45 notes in *Sonatas and Interludes* were inserted with objects.

²⁵ Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's entanglement with the ideas of Coomaraswamy' (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2011), 189.

²⁶ Ibid., 191.

²⁷ Ibid., 184

²⁸ Ibid.

Figure 2.1 Comparison of prepared piano instruction of *Sonatas and Interludes* (left)²⁹ and *Bacchanale* (right)³⁰

Although we do not have direct insights into Cage's emotional states between 1938 and

SONATAS AND INTERLUDES										PIANO PREPARATION			
TONE	MATERIAL	STRING	STRING	MATERIAL	STRING	STRING	MATERIAL	STRING	TONE	TONE	MATERIAL	STRING	DISTANCE
												(left to right)	FROM DAMPER
15m				SCREW	2-3	1 1/4"			A				
				MED. BOLT	2-3	1 1/4"			G				
				SCREW	2-3	1 1/4"			F				
				SCREW	2-3	1 1/4"			E				
				SCREW	2-3	1 1/4"			D				
				SM. BOLT	2-3	1 1/4"			C				
				SCREW	2-3	1 1/4"			B				
				FURNITURE BOLT	2-3	2 1/4"			A				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			G				
				SCREW	2-3	1 1/4"			F				
				MED. BOLT	2-3	2 1/4"			E				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			D				
				SCREW	2-3	3 1/4"			C				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			B				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			A				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			G				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			F				
				SCREW	2-3	2 1/4"			E				
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				SCREW	2-3								

therefore, could reflect a transition that laid the foundation for his later work with the elements of chance and randomness.³¹

2.4 Zen Buddhism

By the late 1940s, Cage had explored various Asian philosophies and integrated them into his compositions which delved into Zen Buddhism, particularly after attending a series of public lectures on the subject by Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki at Columbia University.³² Encounterer Zen Buddhism is significant in Cage's composition life.

His interest in Zen initially arose from reading a book *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley who described different individuals in different cultures at different times.³³ Huxley argues that there is a common core of value among various religious and spiritual traditions which is the ultimate goal of human life. The idea of a universal religious, philosophical and ideological truth that united all orthodox traditions deeply resonated with Cage.³⁴ As Cage had been searching for the purpose of his composition at this time, the Zen Buddhism provided a framework for his artistic expression.

Buddhism has spread out in Western society for some time, but in the late 1940s it had been popularly characterised as an exotic Asian teaching. D. T. Suzuki, a Japanese

³¹ Jeffrey Perry, 'Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* for Prepared Piano: Performance, Hearing and Analysis', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 27 (2005), 65.

³² Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's entanglement with the ideas of Coomaraswamy' (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2011), 104.

³³ Christopher Shultis, 'Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the Intentionality of Nonintention', *The Musical Quarterly* 79 (1995), 346.

³⁴ Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's entanglement with the ideas of Coomaraswamy' (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2011), 72.

essayist, philosopher and religious scholar, bridged the gap between the Eastern and Western thoughts and helped to popularise Zen Buddhism particularly in America. Although Suzuki taught Zen Buddhism, he did not teach it in a traditional sense. Instead, he focused on finding a way to help people open their own minds. He explained of his teaching Zen: If I am asked, then, what Zen teaches, I would answer, Zen teaches nothing.³⁵

Cage was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Zen, particularly its emphasis on human experiences of humility, compassion and detachment from ego and desire, and he sought to apply these elements into his composition. For him, it was a new way of thinking about composition. The Zen emphasises non-attachment and letting go of control, which Cage integrated into his work through meditation. While there is no evidence that Cage practised meditation in the traditional way of practising Zen such as sitting crossed-leg, it is believed that his compositional process itself became a form of meditation.³⁶

2.5 I Ching

The first time Cage encountered Asian influences was through lectures by his teacher Henry Cowell in the 1930s. At this time, Cage was introduced to the ancient Chinese book *I Ching* (The 'Book of Changes' in English by Lou Harrison).³⁷ However it did not attract Cage's interests.³⁸ In 1951, one of Cage's pupils, Christian Wolff gave a copy of

³⁵ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (London: Rider & Company, 1983), 38.

³⁶ Kay Larson, *Where the heart beats*, John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists (New York: Penguin press, 2012), 344.

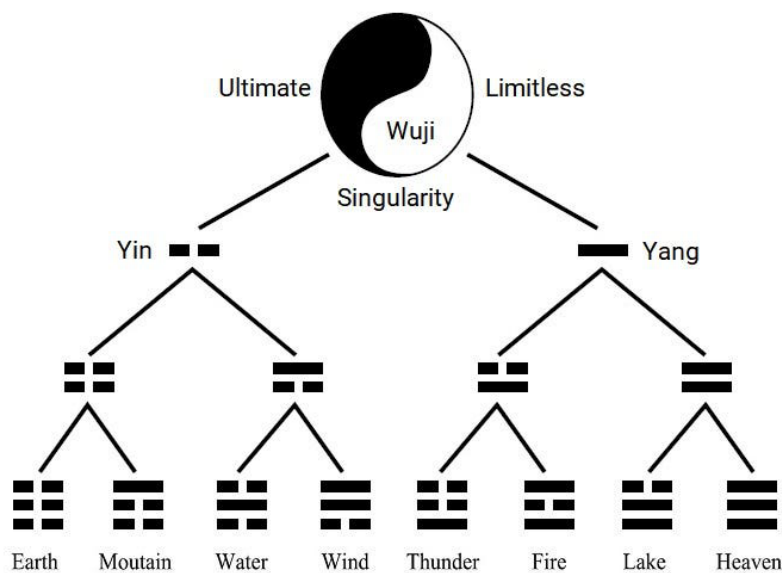
³⁷ David Reville, *The Roaring Silence John Cage: A Life*, (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 130, the 'Book of Changes' was translated into English by Lou Harrison.

³⁸ Peter Dickenson, (ed), *CageTalk: dialogues with and about John Cage*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 40.

his father's new I Ching publication.³⁹ This time Cage was fascinated by its ideas. He wrote 'I saw immediately that the chart was better than the Magic Square. So I began writing the Music of Changes and later the Imaginary Landscapes No.4 for twelve radios. The reason I wrote that was because Henry Cowell had said that I had not freed myself from my tastes in the Music of Changes'.⁴⁰

I Ching is an ancient Chinese divination text that was used for guidance and decision making during the Western Zhou period 1000-750 BC. The book is based on eight symbolic trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams, interpreted in terms of the principles of yin(--) and yang(—).

Figure 2.2 Illustration of Ying Yang Trigrams Combination Development⁴¹



³⁹ Edward James Crooks, 'John Cage's entanglement with the ideas of Coomaraswamy' (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2011), 29.

⁴⁰ Richard Kostelanetz, 'Conversing with Cage', (New York: Routledge, 2003), 63.

⁴¹ Picture from <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-42394-9_4> [accessed 3rd May 2025].

In the western Zhou period, *I Ching* evolved from an oral tradition into a written text with the 64 hexagrams for consultations during periods of upheaval. There were constant significant changes during that time, and the *I Ching* book was used to seek answers to questions in uncertain situations.

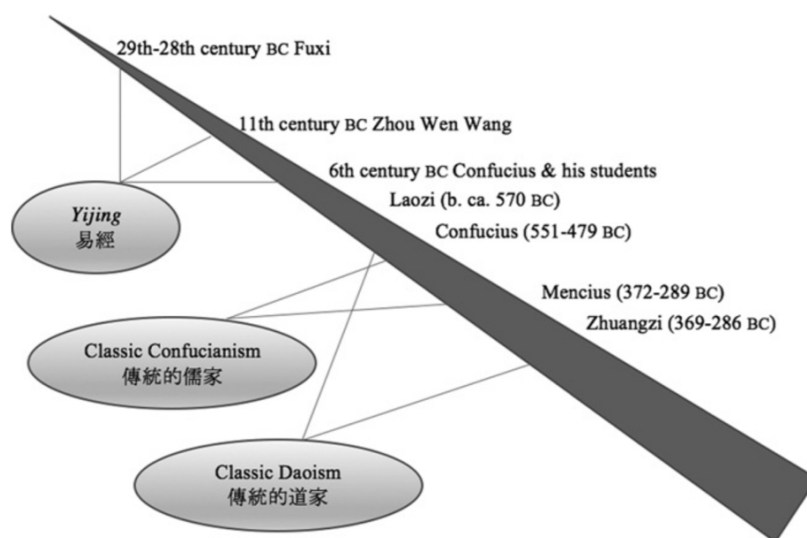
Later in the sixth century BC, Confucius⁴² was deeply concerned with establishing a moral and harmonious society due to political instability and frequent warfare that China was facing. He studied the *I Ching* deeply and explored metaphysical theories relating changes in the universe and the nature of reality. Later, Confucius and other Confucian scholars attributed with writing the Ten Wings⁴³ and transformed *I Ching* from a divination text into a philosophical treatise on metaphysics, ethics and cosmology. In the Ten wings, *I Ching* is described as a microcosm of the universe and as a symbolic description of changes. The *I Ching* is included as one of the Five Classics⁴⁴ of Confucianism. In consequences, this divination text became a foundational work that influenced Asian ethical philosophies such as Confucianism and Taoism (or Daoism).

⁴² Confucius (551-479 B.C.E) was a Chinese philosopher. (in Chinese: Kong Zi).

⁴³ Ten Wings (Shí Yì) is a collection of commentaries on the *I Ching* that expanded its original divination text with philosophical, ethical and cosmological thoughts.

⁴⁴ Five classics includes the book of changes, the book of documents, the book of poetry, the book of rites, the spring and autumn annals.

Figure 2.3 Historical formation of *I Ching*(or *Yijing* in Chinese) ⁴⁵



In the Chinese cosmology, the universe begins with the symbol of *Yin and Yang* which represent fundamental, complementary forces that interact to create the universe and all phenomena within it. The concept of *Yin and Yang* is the idea of two basic aspects of reality within the world of nature and human activity. The meaning of *Yin and Yang* originally referred to the shady side (*Yin*) and the sunny side (*Yang*) of a natural landscape, observing in natural phenomena such as night and day, heaven and earth, and winter and summer. While it is difficult to define the exact meaning in English terms, it is understood that *Yin and Yang* symbolise how opposites are harmonious in nature forces. Such as the fundamental powers beyond human control, for example, there is no day without night.

⁴⁵ C. Victor Fung, *A Way of Music Education Classic Chinese Wisdoms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.

Laozi, the founder of Taoism, was also deeply influenced by the *I Ching*, particularly its concept of *Yin and Yang*. Grounded in the idea that the universe is constantly changing, he encourages harmony in human life through the balance between opposite forces by *Yin and Yang*. This balance is a central teaching of Taoism, and living in harmony with the universe and the ‘Tao’(the way) requires practising self-cultivation like emotions of compassion, frugality and humanity.

In Chinese, the *I Ching* is written 周易, the first word 周 means the period of Zhou dynasty, 易 means changes. Chinese characters often have multiple meanings, the meaning of 易 differs depending on contexts. While it is difficult to find the exact word in English terms, the best interpretation can be ‘change’ in English. Thus, in English the title of *I Ching* is *The book of changes* literally. However, beyond the definition of ‘change’, there are additional interpretations of the word. According to Shuowen Jiezi,⁴⁶ 易 is a word combined with two words, 日(Sun) and 月(Moon), suggesting the word 易 is a symbol of Sun and Moon which reflects a philosophical analysis rather than the literal meaning of *sun and moon*. In this context, the Sun represents Yang, and the moon represents Yin.

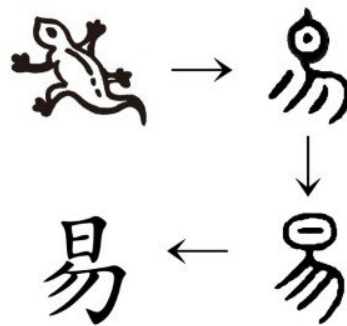
⁴⁶ Shuowen Jiezi is the oldest Chinese character dictionary. It was written during the Later Han period (25-220 CE) by Xu Shen.

Figure 2.4 Chinese character 易 from Shuowen Jiezi explained in Korean⁴⁷



The Shuowen Jiezi also suggests that the word 易 (meaning ‘change’ in Chinese, pronounced as ‘yi’) is taken as referring to the shape of lizard.⁴⁸ 日 (meaning ‘Sun’) as in lizard’s head and 月 (meaning ‘Moon’) as body and legs. According to the dictionary, lizard is an animal who can represent the constantly changing universe as the animal could change its skin colour by environment.

Figure 2.5 The evolvement of Chinese Character 易 from shape of lizard⁴⁹



⁴⁷ 김광현, ‘역(易)은 도마뱀 모양? 해(日)와 달(月)의 결합?...주역은 어떤 책인가[내 팔자가 궁금해]’ [Is the 易 shaped like a lizard? A combination of the sun (日) and the moon (月)? What kind of book is the I Ching? I am curious about my fate], Dong A Press, <<https://www.donga.com/news/Culture/article/all/20240509/124854155/1>> [accessed on 3rd May 2025].

⁴⁸ Chenyang Li, Franklin Perkins, eds. *Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid, [accessed on 3rd May 2025].

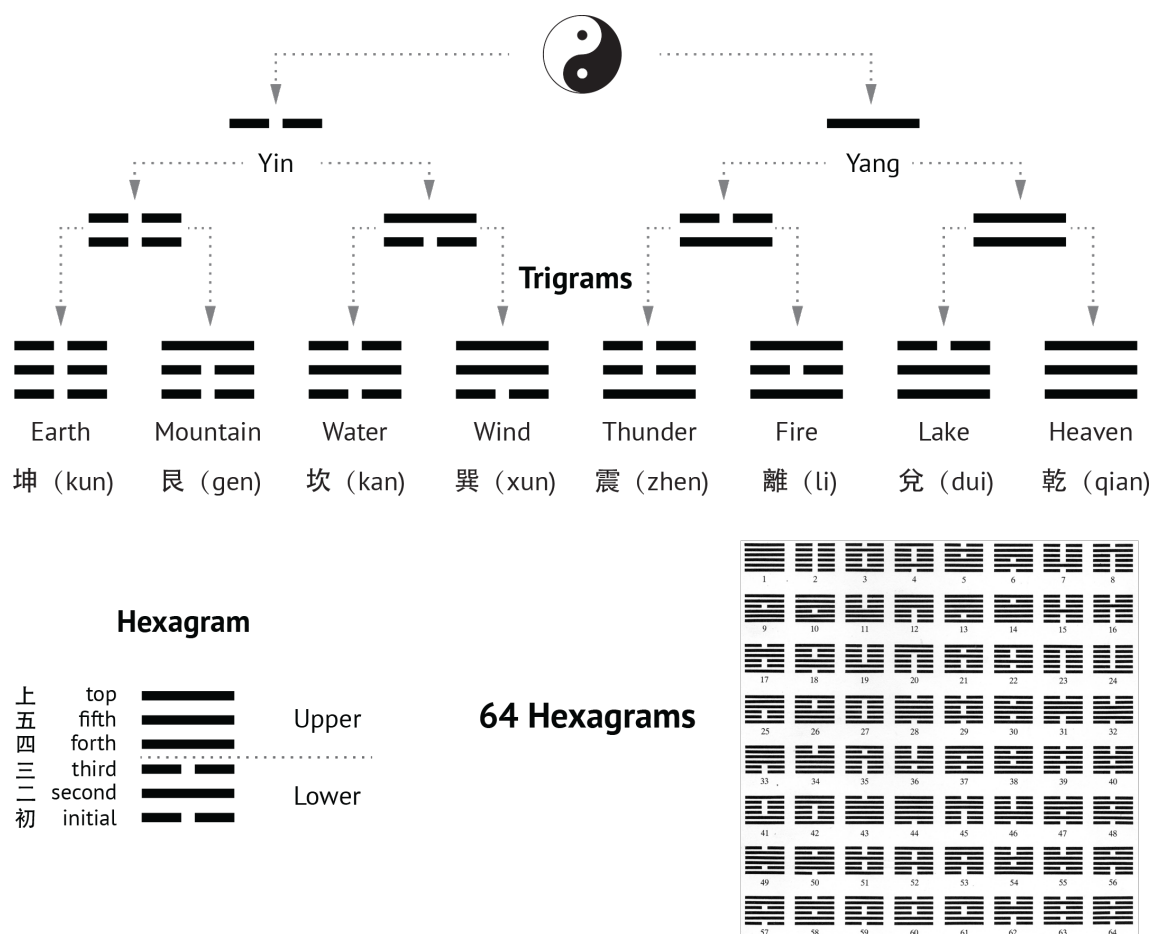
The word 易 can also be interpreted into three concepts in the context of *I Ching*, *bian yi* (變易), *bu yi* (不易), and *yi jian* (易簡). *Bian yi* refers to all types of changes in nature.⁵⁰ It means that the universe is constantly changing including human life, therefore nothing stays the same. *Bu yi* refers to unchanging principles while phenomena change⁵¹ such as Sun, Moon and the fact that heaven is high and earth is low. Lastly, *Yi Jian* represents easiness and simplicity that everyone can understand the universe and its principles and live according to natural principles. In the *I Ching*, it is believed that each individual human being represents a small universe. Therefore, if you understand yourself, you can understand how the universe works. The book explores human life and the way of living in this universe through scientific explanations.

The *I Ching* book consists of sixty-four hexagrams where each hexagram is formed with six stacked horizontal lines, each line representing either *Yin* or *Yang*. A hexagram is formed by the combination of two Trigrams. A Triagram is a combination of three of the horizontal lines that represents either *Yin* (--) or *Yang* (—). Each of three lines represents heaven (top), human (middle) and earth (bottom). The total number of possible triagrams is eight. Each of the 8 triagrams represents various nature forces such as Earth, Mountain, Water, Wind, Thunder, Fire, Lake and Heaven. Each of eight triagrams combines with another triagram and forms the 64 hexagrams ($8 \times 8 = 64$). The upper triagram represents the external environment and the lower triagram represents the internal aspects of a situation.

⁵⁰ C. Victor Fung, *A Way of Music Education Classic Chinese Wisdoms*, (Oxford University Press 2018), 33.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Figure 2.6 The evolvement of Hexagrams in I Ching⁵²



Understanding the *I Ching* is crucial to understanding Cage's works as it deeply influenced his compositions until his death since the moment he encountered it. Although the divination textbook and music do not seem to align, Cage's use of chance and indeterminacy aligns with the concept of the *I Ching* that the universe is inherently unpredictable. The book is scientifically structured, grounded in philosophical thoughts, and metaphysics. In addition, this theory of the book aligns with the concept of Zen Buddhism, particularly the concept of letting go of control in life. For Cage, this philosophical framework became essential as he endeavoured to understand the purpose

⁵² The divination structure of the Zhou Yi (I Ching), <https://math-physics-problems.fandom.com/wiki/Yi_Jing> [accessed on 3 May 2025].

of his compositions. He wrote ‘Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living’.⁵³

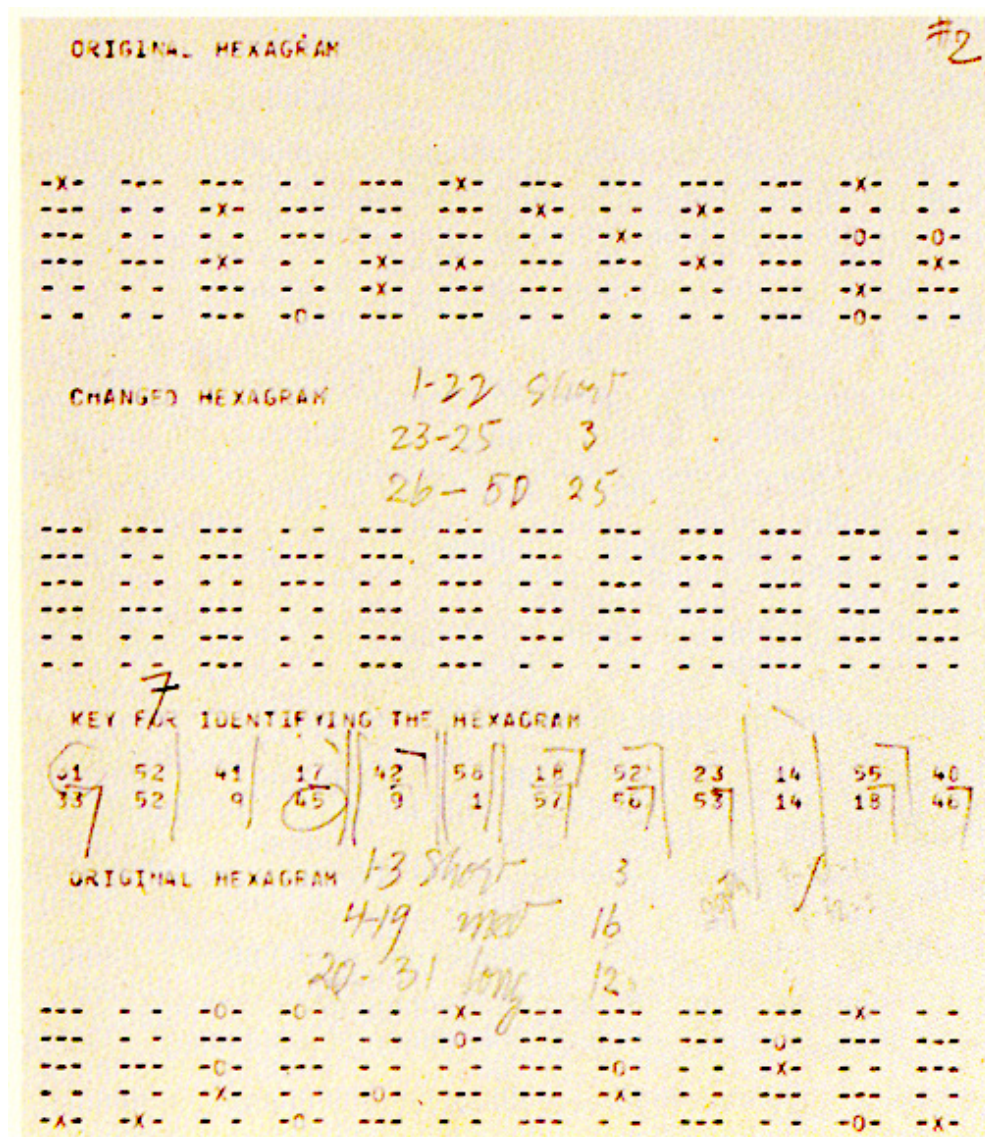
Through this divination book Cage generated the element of chance operation. It is understood that the way how Cage used *I Ching* is in his own ways rather than its traditional way, which is the same as how he applied *rasa* in its literal way rather than how it is perceived in Indian traditional way. Instead of asking for guidance or insight in traditional way of using *I Ching*, Cage used it for selecting musical elements like pitch, tempo and duration. This creative process became a method of composing music without including any of his intention.

Cage composed *Music of Changes* (1951) through chance operation processes by applying the *I Ching*. He created charts of hexagrams for different parameters of the music and used the charts to create the composition. In letters with Pierre Boulez, Cage explained that he feels as if he is learning composition for the first time.⁵⁴ Despite the piece was composed using chance methods, yet it remains fully determinate in performance as the score of the piece is fixed.

⁵³ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 95.

⁵⁴ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 105.

Figure 2.7 Comparison of John Cage's hexagrams for *Music of Changes* (1951)⁵⁵ and hexagrams of I Ching⁵⁶



⁵⁵ John Cage's own I Ching for chance operations, <<https://www.biroco.com/yijing/cage.htm>> [accessed 3 May 2025].

⁵⁶ Benebell, 'List of the most auspicious I Ching Hexagrams', <<https://benebellwen.com/2023/01/20/list-of-the-most-auspicious-i-ching-hexagrams/>> [accessed 10 June 2026].

Upper Trigram ▶									Upper Trigram ◀
Lower Trigram ▼	Qian Heaven	Dui Lake	Li Fire	Zhen Thunder	Xun Wind	Kan Water	Gen Mountain	Kun Earth	Lower Trigram ▼
									
Qian Heaven	1 Qian Creative Power	43 Guai Decisive Action	14 Da You Accolades	34 Da Zhuang Great Power	9 Xiao Chu Cultivate Gently	5 Xu Patience	26 Da Chu Cultivate Supremely	11 Tai Harmony	Qian Heaven
									
Dui Lake	10 Lu Treading	58 Dui Joyous Exchange	38 Kui Opposition	54 Gui Mei Marrying Maiden	61 Zhong Fu Faith Within	60 Jie Boundaries	41 Sun Debilitation	19 Lin Spring is Coming	Dui Lake
									
Li Fire	13 Tong Ren Fellowship	49 Ge Revolution	30 Li The Spark	55 Feng Opulence	37 Jia Ren The Family	63 Ji Ji After the Ending	22 Bi Luminosity	36 Ming Yi Darkening the Light	Li Fire
									
Zhen Thunder	25 Wu Wang Without Folly	17 Sui Inspiring Followers	21 Shih He Bite Through	51 Zhen Jolt	42 Yi Burgeoning	3 Tun Initial Challenge	27 Yi Nourishment	24 Fu Repose	Zhen Thunder
									
Xun Wind	44 Gou Improper Meeting	28 Da Gua Undertake the Great	50 Ding The Cauldron	32 Heng Endurance	57 Xun Use Gentle Force	48 Jing Fountainhead	18 Gu Decay	46 Sheng Hoist	Xun Wind
									
Kan Water	6 Song The Trial	47 Kun Blockade	64 Wei Ji Toward the End	40 Jie Release of Tension	59 Huan Making Waves	29 Kan The Abyss	4 Meng Naivete	7 Shi The Army	Kan Water
									
Gen Mountain	33 Dun Withdraw	31 Xian Mutual Accord	56 Lu The Wanderer	62 Xiao Guo Attention to Detail	53 Jian Steadfast	39 Jian An Impasse	52 Gen Listen to the Wind	15 Qian Modesty	Gen Mountain
									
Kun Earth	12 Fou Stalemate	45 Cui Assembly	35 Jin Advancement	16 Yu Enthusiasm	20 Guan Observation	8 Bi Alliance	23 Bo Partition	2 Kun Supportive Power	Kun Earth

2.6. Silence

In 1952, Cage organised a collaborative theatre event (later it was titled *Theatre Piece No.1*. This is also regarded as Cage's first *Happening*.⁵⁷⁾ when he was serving residency at Black Mountain College. This multimedia performance included piano performance, reading poetry, visual art, narrative, dance and playing records.

The visual art represented in this performance was *White Painting* (1951) by Robert Rauschenberg, who was also serving the residency at Black Mountain College with Cage at the same time. *White painting* is regarded as the most radical painting in the middle of the twentieth century. The canvas was painted entirely with white basic house

⁵⁷ Happenings by John Cage are regarded as the forerunners of performance art and in turn emerged from the theatrical elements of Dada and Surrealism.

paint by a roller. In this artwork, Rauschenberg attempted to switch the role of painting to act as a screen, so viewers can look at the painting depending on the reflection changes by light, shadow and weather. When this painting was exhibited at the Stable gallery, Cage wrote a statement 'To whom: no subject, no image, no taste, no object, no beauty, no message, no talent, no technique, no why, no idea, no intention, no art, no object, no feeling, no black, no white, no and (...)'⁵⁸

This painting conveys the key characteristic of Zen Buddhism. While there is no direct attribute that Rauschenberg was inspired by the ideas of Zen Buddhism, it is believed that Cage's enthusiasm for Zen indirectly informed the concept *White Painting*. The painting reflected Zen principles of 'emptiness' and inspired Cage to create *4'33"* (1952), the most controversial work of avant-garde. Both Rauschenberg and Cage shared an idea that their work of art and life come together.

To Whom It May Concern:

The white paintings came

first; My silent piece

came later⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Emily Genauer, 'Art and Artists: Musings on Miscellany', *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 December 1953.

⁵⁹ A poem by John Cage in his book *Silence* in 1961, recited by Kay Larson, *Where the heart beats*, (The penguin press, 2012), 307.

Figure 2.8 Robert Rauschenberg *White Painting* (1951)⁶⁰

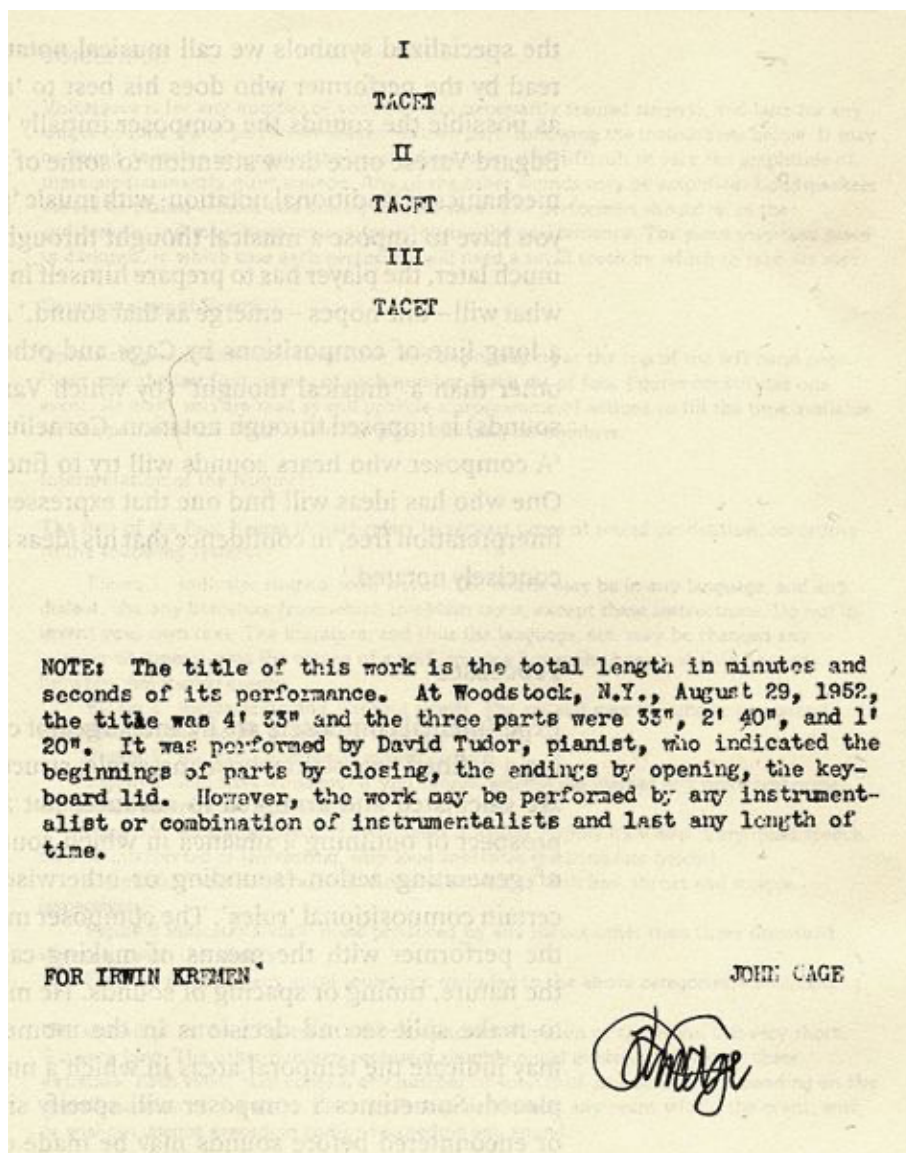


The piece consists of entirely of silence. Cage specified the word ‘Tacet’ which requires performer not performing any instrument. The piece is divided into three movements, each lasts for a specific time, consisting of sounds that occur in the performance space. The aim of this piece is to prove that no absolute silence exists. When Cage visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard University that was built in a way to absorb all possible sounds, he could still hear two sounds, one was his nervous system in operation, and the other was his blood in circulation.

⁶⁰ Photographer is unknown. This *White Painting* (1951) was repainted by Brice Marden in 1968, <<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/40/639>> [accessed on 3 May].

When Cage composed this piece, a vast change occurred in Cage's aesthetic notions particularly in silence. His interest in Eastern Philosophy broadened to Zen Buddhism. The philosophy of Zen, particularly the concept of 'quiet the mind' was conveyed in the context of silence in 4'33". In this composition, Cage attempted to remove the standard role of performer and to emphasise the role of listener (audience) to present music in its most natural way, like what Zen Buddhism teaches living in harmony.

Figure 2.9 John Cage, 4'33", cover page



The way Cage composed 4'33'' was to awaken the audience to listen to sounds. This three-movement piece became not only the most important work of his life, but also became one of the avant garde's best understood. Its premiere was described by Cage 'In 1952, it was performed first at Woodstock, N.Y. and many in the audience were indignant. It was in a hall called the Maverick Hall, which is out in the woods near Woodstock, and one could hear the wind in the trees during the first movement – there are three movements altogether. In the second, you could hear some raindrops – it began to rain – and in the third movement, you heard only people who were indignant, and many of whom were walking out. So it made a three-movement sonata'.⁶¹

David Tudor⁶² who performed 4'33'' at its premiere described the performance as very interesting but extremely intense. Despite he was already familiar with Cage's unconventional method, Tudor experienced a wide range of reactions from the audience. The premier shocked many audiences, resulting some to leave and complain about the performance. Cage's silence piece challenged conventional expectations and it established him as either a genius or a con artist.

2.7 Integral art

Cage's collaborations with artists from other disciplines of art made a significant shift in his approach to integrating chance operation into his composition. By the late 1960s, his use of the *I Ching* blurred the boundaries between art and life. As a result, his composition through chance operation became a central element in his work. The use of

⁶¹ John Cage speaking about the silence piece during the premiere of 4'33

⁶² David Tudor is an American pianist and experimentalist, who collaborated with Cage.

chance created unlimited possibilities of arts not only sounds, but across all forms of art, including painting, etching, printmaking, photography and even writing books. Cage's intention of incorporating chance operation was a way to allow art to exist freely without being controlled by artists.

Cage's attempt to blur the lines between art and life through chance mirrors Marcel Duchamp's⁶³ approach to integral art. Duchamp is one of the most prominent figures in Dadaism. He was known for his multidisciplinary approaches such as readymade and conceptual arts that challenged the traditional notions of art and the role of artist. His famous sculpture, *Fountain* (1917), created by an ordinary urinal, but flipped position, and signed as R. Mutt was submitted for an exhibition in 1917. Duchamp who was a director of the committee of the exhibition, anonymously submitted the urinal to test the society's claims of accepting any art. Although at that time, the artwork was rejected due to its lack of artistic approach, today it is regarded as the most influential modern artwork. The approach of Duchamp's readymade art⁶⁴ is to shift the focus from artistic skills and aesthetic to the conceptual value of art. Duchamp says the creative act 'is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act'.⁶⁵

⁶³ Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was a French painter, sculptor, chess player and writer. His work is associated with Cubism, Dada, Futurism and conceptual art.

⁶⁴ Readymade art is a term for artworks made from mass-produced, everyday objects that are chosen, curated, designed by an artist. This concept shifts the focus from artistic craftsmanship to conceptual meaning.

⁶⁵ Marcel Duchamp spoke about 'the creative act' at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas in 1957.

Figure 2.10 Marcel Duchamp *Fountain* (1917)⁶⁶

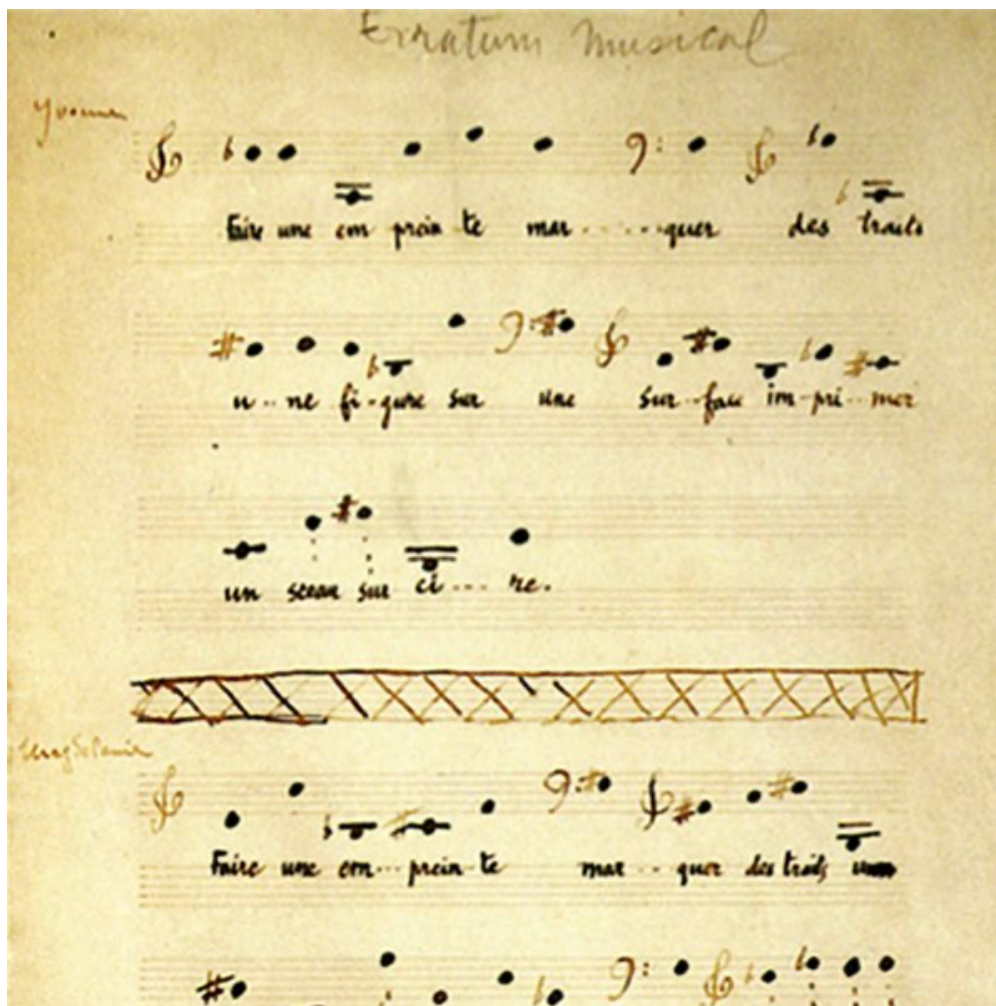


This conceptualism by Duchamp was explored in the intersection of various art forms including music even though he had no musical background. He understood music not as art in time art, but art in space. His innovative approach to sounds is shown in his three musical works, *Erratum Musicale*, *La Mariée mise à nu par sets célibataires même* and *Sculpture Musicale* in the period 1912–1915. These works are considered an event or happening rather than performance as they were composed for exploration of

⁶⁶ Jon Mann, How Duchamp's Urinal Changed Art Forever, 9 May 2017, <<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-duchamps-urinal-changed-art-forever>> [accessed on 3rd May 2025].

relationship between sounds, space and time. Duchamp left some works unfinished without any comments or explanation, leaving many questions unanswered.

Figure 2.11 Marcel Duchamp *Erratum Musicale* (1913)⁶⁷



In 1968, Cage and Duchamp collaborated in a unique experiment by playing a game of musical chess, titled *Reunion* (1968). This is a multimedia performance through chance

⁶⁷ Ya-Ling Chen, 'Erratum Musical, 1913', *The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, <<https://www.toutfait.com/erratum-musical-1913/>> [accessed on 3 May 2025].

operation, consisting of music triggered by the moves that two chess players make on the touch-sensitive square of a specially constructed chessboard by Lowell Cross. This performance unfolded as an indeterminate structure, where each move of the players on the board activates four compositions and distributed them through eight speakers surrounding the audience.⁶⁸

Reunion reflects Cage and Duchamp's shared interest in integrating through diverse art forms and their innovative approach to break the traditional boundaries of art. This exploration contributed to the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century.

2.8 Conclusion

Cage answered, 'I have no feelings for harmony' when Schoenberg told him that in order to write music, he must have a feeling for harmony. Schoenberg responded that Cage would always encounter an obstacle, that it would be as though he came to a wall through which he cannot pass. Cage promised Schoenberg that he will devote his life to beating his head against that wall.⁶⁹

Cage always searched for new methods and new ways in music. Blending Asian influences into his composition is perhaps his way of beating his head against the wall. He explored the meaning of composition through Indian aesthetic theory *rasa*. It is believed that Cage found his answer through *rasa* that the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Victoria Miguel, 'Reunion', < <https://www.johncage.org/reunion/index.html> > [accessed on 3 May 2025].

⁶⁹ Michael Hicks, 'John Cage's studies with Schoenberg', *American music* 8, 1990), 128.

⁷⁰ John Cage, *A Year From Monday* (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 31.

Furthermore, Cage explored spirituality through his music, particularly from his interest in Zen Buddhism that taught him to combine life and nature, removing his intention and expressing the nature of phenomena that sounds can be sounds in themselves without anybody's likes or dislikes. The answer came with the *I Ching*, where the existence of sound and silence is understood as *Yin and Yang*, the fundamental principle of *I Ching*. While researching Cage's artistic evolution, particularly his encounter of Asian influences and his search for new ideas, I found encouragement to express my own artistic voice through my music. His works inspired me that my personal experiences could become a valuable source of my own artistic expression which creates a unique and authentic music of my own.

Chapter 3. Nam June Paik and video art

3.1 Introduction

Nam June Paik is widely known as a visual artist through his video art and multimedia installations. However, Paik was a musician before he explored multimedia. His background in classical music significantly influenced his later experiments with multimedia. Paik wanted to be a composer since he first discovered the music of Arnold Schoenberg as a teenager.¹

Paik was born in Korea in 1932 during the Japanese colonial period when Koreans were deprived of freedom of assembly, association and speech. In addition, he witnessed the division of the peninsula into North and South Korea, and the Korean war as well.

During this period, due to the political circumstances, most Koreans encountered Western influences through Christian missionaries or through Westernised Japanese music imposed as part of Japan's forced assimilation policies.² As a result, this contributed to an absence of cultural identity among Koreans. Despite the widespread poverty in Korea, Paik was fortunate to receive classical music education and later he encountered avant-garde music such as the works of Schoenberg.

Listening to Schoenberg's music was a rebellious act for young Paik, that challenged the ideological divisions of his era as the composer was the most extreme avant-garde and innovative figure of his time. Recognising the legacy of Paik's journey is crucial, as it

¹현비김, '인생에는 되감기 버튼이 없다, 백남준' [There is no reverse button in life, Nam June Paik], *WITHnews*, 26 March, 2025.

² Jeong Ha Kim, 'Rethinking Colonialism: Korean Primary School Music Education during the Japanese Colonial Rule of Korea, 1910-1945', *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 36 (2014), 42.

deeply influenced his artistic journey, which often conveys themes and messages that resonate with his transformative experience.

3.2 Early life and influences

While most Koreans endured suffering from the war, Paik was born into an affluent family so he was able to receive an elite education. His grandfather, Yun-Su Paik, who was later accused of having been a leftist during the Japanese colonialism period, owned a textile company. Paik's father, Nak Seung Paik, was also a leftist and was driven by a desire for wealth to take care of his family. Later he became a CEO of the textile company and had enormous growth during Japanese imperialism by cooperating with Japanese.³ Paik's family became among the first 'Chaebol'⁴ in Korea. Paik's displacement of his identity began from growing up with his superstitious parents while witnessing the sufferings of majority of Koreans. Paik's mother once said 'money should be spent like water'.⁵ Despite widespread poverty in Korea, Paik family owned a piano at home. Followed by Paik's sister who was trained to be a classical pianist, Paik also learned classical music that enable him to be exposed to Western canon.

Despite his fortunate background, Paik was yet subjected to Japanese colonial rule. The Japanese prohibited Koreans from speaking their native language – Korean. Paik

³ 민족문제연구소, '대통령에게 집과 정치자금 대주고 특혜받은 사업가' [A Businessman who provided a house and political funds to the president and received special favours], *오마이뉴스*, 10 January 2023.

⁴ Chaebol is the Korean word meaning plutocracy, rich business family, or monopoly. Chaebol often have a close relationship with the South Korean government.

⁵ 조상인, '[인간 백남준을 만나다] 시공 초월한 예술혼...35 년전 위성예술로 세계를 잇다' [Meeting the Human Nam June Paik: An Artistic Spirit Transcending Time and Space... Connecting the World with Satellite Art 35 Years Ago], *Seoul Economic Daily*, 5 April 2019.

remembers being forced to count numbers in Japanese in his school. He reflected ‘When you count in foreign language, you have to concentrate so hard, you don’t have time to think about yourself.’⁶ Perhaps influenced by these experiences, his art works often involve themes of communication.

After Korea became independent from Japan’s colonialism in 1945, his family exiled to Hong Kong in 1949 and then moved to Tokyo, Japan where Paik studied aesthetics in University of Tokyo. During this time, he was exposed to various cultural and artistic influences including Japanese traditional and avant-garde art which were present in Tokyo at that time. Paik wrote his thesis on Schoenberg and aimed to become a composer like Schoenberg.⁷

In 1956, Paik moved to Munich, Germany to pursue his interest in avant-garde music and composition. During this period Germany was characterised by the aftermath of war and the challenges of rebuilding, much like Korea. Furthermore, the Berlin Wall was going up to divide the country between communist and democratic which was parallel to what Paik experienced in Korea in his childhood.

At this time, the European art scene was shaped by Eurocentric cultural dominance like a hidden colonialism in art.⁸ It was believed that European art should be performed by European artists. It was a time when travelling across the world was not as accessible as

⁶ David A. Tizzard, ‘The Noise Between Us: Nam June Paik, K-Pop, and the Politics of Performance’, *The Korean Times*, 12 April 2025.

⁷ Byeongwon Ha, ‘Nam June Paik’s Unpublished Korean Article and His Interactive Musique Concrète Projects’, *Leonardo Music Journal* 29 (2019), 93.

⁸ Amanda Kim, dir, *Nam June Paik: The moon is the oldest TV*, (New York: Lone Palm Films, Octopus Originals, Curatorial, 2023).

it is today, Paik found himself as the only Asian person who studied classical music, and Europeans were not familiar with Korea. This kind of social perception led to feelings of inferiority that he was merely an Asian who was from an underdeveloped country and that an artist should be a European. As a result, his aspiration to become a composer like Schoenberg was clouded by uncertainty.

Schoenberg and Paik share a parallel experience in their lives as musicians. Schoenberg appeared as a revolutionary figure in the European art scene in the early 1900s. Along with his Jewish heritage and his development in atonal music that departed from classical music conventions he was labelled as a devil and a degenerate musician by Nazis, leading him to move to the United States to escape persecution. Similarly, Paik faced doubts about his potential as a composer, as being the sole Asian in the Western culture, who pursued the rebellious avant garde music that his family would not accept. Additionally, Paik was facing high expectations from his family, despite his family's ability to afford his education abroad, he was obliged to become successful in return for his family's sacrifices. The clash in between this familial expectation and personal aspirations shaped Paik's journey as a musician.

3.3 Meeting with John Cage

Paik recalls the first time he met John Cage in 1958. 'My life started one evening in 1958; 1957 was B. C. – Before Cage'.⁹ When he attended *Darmstadt international summer course for new music* as a student. He met two Dadaists –American musicians

⁹ Ibid.

John Cage and David Tudor. They presented their new music with an approach of indeterminacy through chance process to show that every sound is equally beautiful. The audience disapproved of their performance people laughed and left during the performance. The European audience judged the two Americans and believed that their music was ridiculous. While no one believed it was music, Paik approached them and expressed his appreciation for their work. Paik's support may have been a relief to the embarrassed Americans who faced challenges from the audience.

According to Paik, the performance was extremely dull and noisy, and at first, it made him question why Cage's music was so uninteresting. Cage and Paik shared a mutual understanding of Zen philosophy. Cage was an artist who was into Zen Buddhism at that time, in an attempt to escape conventions from classical music. Paik had been exposed to the philosophy of Zen through his life in Japan. Reflecting on their shared knowledge, Paik later realised that Cage's music might also be perceived as tedious by Buddha as well.¹⁰

The Westerner with Eastern sensibilities and the Easterner who was fascinated by Western cultures led to an immediate connection between them. Cage was attracted to Asian philosophy, and Paik went to Germany to study Western music. Their bond formed into a strong friendship until Cage died in 1992.

Cage gave me a courage to be free, licence to kill.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hua Hsu, 'How Nam June Paik's past shaped his visions of the future', *The New Yorker*, 29 March 2023.

Through Cage's influences, Paik found a freedom to explore the new approach, *Action music* that integrated with elements of music, visual and theatre in performance. It is suggested that the name *Action music* comes from the new movement happening in America at that time. From the 1940s, *Action painting movement* was popularised, where the approach to this movement emphasised the physical act of painting.¹² Paik's *Action music* also involved physical acts that expressed his relationship and ideas in music. The action music often incorporated everyday sounds and non-musical objects such as bells, scissors and alarm clock. The performance often included provocative performance to shock audience and challenged their traditional expectations of what art should be in conventional manner.

Paik presented *Hommage à John Cage, Music for Tapes and Piano* (1959) a year after Cage presented *Music Walk* (1958) in the same venue in Düsseldorf, Germany.

Dedicated to Cage who inspired Paik, this performance consisted of a mixture of everyday noise such as screaming, breaking glass with excerpts from Western classical music. Paik also employed the chance procedures and spontaneity. There were two pianos presented in the performance; one of them had no keys, another piano's string was tore off with a kitchen knife by Paik. The performance ended with destruction of instruments by overturning the whole piano. Paik's action music performance often involved the destruction of piano and violin instruments, the symbols of the classical music. According to Paik, 'Piano instrument can be performed, but also it can be

¹² Jackson Pollock is considered as the pioneer of action painting. Pollock developed it from his experimental gesture, drip technique.

smashed’.¹³ Destructing instruments meant his departure from the Western classical conventions. This performance was repeated a number of times in Mary Baumeister’s Cologne studio in 1960.¹⁴ In the same year, the studio hosted a joint concert by Paik and Cage.

Figure 3.1 Action music performance by Nam June Paik¹⁵



Paik’s *Action music* performance often appeared aggressive yet simultaneously joyous reflecting his journey from identity crisis to confidence and freedom. In his performance, *Etude for Pianoforte* (1960) (Figure 3.2), Paik suddenly stopped performing *Étude* by Frédéric Chopin, and leaped down to Cage in the audience and cut off Cage’s necktie and washed his hair with shampoo. Such violent act is viewed as a

¹³ Amanda Kim, dir, *Nam June Paik: The moon is the oldest TV*, (New York: Lone Palm Films, Octopus Originals, Curatorial, 2023).

¹⁴ N.A, ‘Nam June Paik, <<Hommage à John Cage>> Music for Tape Recorder and Piano, 1959-1960’, <<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/hommage-a-cage/>> [accessed on 20 May 2025].

¹⁵ Manfred Montwé, Photographer, titled ‘Piano Integral’ from Exposition of Music and Electronic Television 1963 by Nam June Paik.

nihilistic affection, expressing that while Paik pays homages to Cage, it simultaneously reflects Paik's intention to go beyond Cage.¹⁶ For Paik, a mere translation of the indeterminism prefigured by Cage from music to optical art was insufficient.¹⁷

Figure 3.2 During the performance of *Etude for Piano* (1960) by Nam June Paik¹⁸



In *Zen for walking* (1961) (Figure 3.3), Paik tied a string in his violin and dragged the instrument along the ground with a relaxed manner which symbolises Zen Buddhism. He explored the concept of beautiful sounds through act of dragging an instrument

¹⁶ MoMA, 'Nam June Paik, Zen for Film 1965', <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/128108>> [accessed on 3 May 2025].

¹⁷ Media Art Net, 'Nam June Paik: Random Access Music: Exposition of Music – Electronic Television, 1963', <<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/random-access/>>, [accessed on 3 May 2025].

¹⁸ The photographer is unknown. The picture was taken during the performance *Étude for Pianoforte* by Paik while cutting Cage's necktie, <<https://njpart.ggcf.kr/exhibitions/245>> [accessed on 3 May 2025].

instead of performing the instrument. According to Paik it produced beautiful sounds. Paik also used various ways of performing an instrument through his *Action music* such as banging his head on a piano, stretching a string across his back (as in Cello) and being bowed by the cellist.

Figure 3.3 *Zen for walking* (1961) by Nam June Paik¹⁹



In addition, in *One for solo violin* (1962), Paik smashed a violin and it conveyed the idea that the act of destruction symbolised the breaking conventions from the classical music that reflect the same music and expectations that have repeated for centuries. By

¹⁹ Peter Moore, Photographer, *Zen for Walking*, 12th Annual Avant-Garde Festival of New York, Floyd Bennett Field, New York, collection number 226.

destroying the instrument, he claimed, it is no longer usable, symbolising that the Western music is broken and cannot be revived. Paik's intention was to push the idea of inserting chance elements into the artwork beyond the sonic realm.

Figure 3.4 *One for solo violin* (1962), Nam June Paik²⁰



²⁰ Photographer is unknown. The photo was taken during the performance *One for solo violin* by Paik, <<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/one-for-violin-solo/>>[accessed on 5 May 2025].

3.4 Exploration of multimedia art

Throughout his journey, Paik's artwork moved beyond traditional music performance, offering different sensory experiences such as tactile and visual effects. To fulfil the multi-directional characters in his artwork, Paik believed that video art as outputted through TV sets would offer the perfect multi-sensory experience. Paik regarded his multimedia installation works as music. His grand plan of the *Action music* was merely a starting point to extend the boundary of music into an integral art.

His first media exhibition, *Exposition of music, Electronic television* (1963) was held in Germany. The title of this exhibition reflects his artistic shift from music towards image-based art. Paik believed that notion of indeterminism and variability were already explored within the boundary of music but not in optical art. This unique performance required Paik to adopt unusual skills as a musician such as electronical engineering in order to explore his multimedia art.

In the performance, Paik set up the exhibition room with four prepared pianos, mechanical sound objects, several record and tape installations and thirteen modified television sets. In addition, he placed the head of a freshly slaughtered ox above the entrance. Initially, Paik had planned to use a pig's head²¹ following Korean folk tradition, however he was not able to find one in Germany.²²

²¹ Pig's head has a symbolic meaning in Korean folk traditions. It is often used in ritual offerings or traditional ceremonies as well as business openings or house blessings. It is believed that a pig's head would bring wealth, good fortune and prosperity in Korean shamanism.

²² 박기완, '백남준의 예술혼, 창신동에 깃들다' [The artistic spirit of Nam June Paik takes root in Changsin-dong], DanbiNews, <<https://www.danbinews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=7294>>[accessed on 8th May, 2026].

Some of television sets presented distorted channels that were from the only broadcaster in Germany.²³ At this time, Paik was not able to access video equipment yet presented the best possibilities of the exploration of video through the TV sets.

This exhibition also reflects that Paik became associated with the Fluxus movement, particularly his emphasis on audience participation as it is an important part of artistic practice in the Fluxus.²⁴ In *Participation TV* (1963), Paik required audience participation and interaction with the artwork, allowing viewers to become artists rather than passive consumers.

In addition, in *Zen for TV* (1963), the television was placed vertically and displayed a thin line of light that appeared accidentally due to a malfunctioning television. This presents indeterminism through television, reflecting its accidental minimalism to the meditative focus of Zen Buddhism. Therefore, this artwork can be understood as reflecting both Paik's Asian identity and his perspective within Euro-American artistic contexts. Although the result of this exhibition was not successful, it marked the very first video art exhibition that an artist brought televisions to present art historically.²⁵

²³ At this time, Germany had only one TV station and it broadcasts only for few hours per day in evening time. Due to such reason, Paik's performance only took place during the evening hours.

²⁴ Fluxus was an interdisciplinary, experimental art movement that blended media, broke art boundaries, and used performance to bring art to the masses.

²⁵ Lev Manovich, 'Interfaces for a Global Village: Nam June Paik, Marshall McLuhan, m and the Future', *Forthcoming in the catalog of Next 15 Minutes exhibition*, Daejeon Museum of Art, South Korea, (2021), 8.

Figure 3.5 *Zen for TV* (1963) by Nam June Paik



The artwork with televisions became one of Paik's signature practices. Although the TV in his artworks may have looked like merely broken TV sets, his intention to incorporate indeterminism required Paik to assemble TV meticulously. In order to shift his transition from music to image art, Paik learned to understand the intricacies of electronic engineering. In 1969, Paik collaborated with a Japanese engineer Shuya Abe and this collaboration allowed Paik to be able to manipulate and transform electronic image making.

The four prepared pianos presented in the exhibition were a part of Paik's artistic explorations. They were significantly different from Cage's prepared piano. Cage's prepared piano was initially created for practical reasons as he had a limited space to accommodate a percussion ensemble and only had a space for a grand piano. Cage inserted objects in piano strings to recreate percussive sounds. Hence Cage's prepared

piano could be returned to its normal function after the objects were removed. On the other hand, Paik's prepared pianos show the departure from Cage. Paik destroyed the pianos permanently so the pianos could not return to their normal function. While Cage intended to evoke the African style music through the prepared piano, Paik's prepared pianos represented a break from traditional classical music.

Figure 3.6 Prepared piano by Nam June Paik in the Exposition of Music – Electronic Television²⁶



Critics did not understand his artworks but only mentioned about merely broken television sets. Although this exposition received little praise from the audience, both

²⁶ Manfred Montwé, Picture from Parnassian Gallery, Wuppertal.

the audience and critics certainly witnessed the very first media performance. This performance proved Paik's precognition that media could become a part of art.

Although the response of this exhibition was not positive, Paik predicted that television will be the perfect medium that could influence other people in the future. Despite his ideas being ahead of time, he decided to further develop his ideas about media art and decided to move to New York which was the home of the television networks. However, his identity as a Korean became an obstacle in that he needed a visa to move to New York City. Paik asked John Cage and Jonas Mekas, the avant-garde filmmaker to support his visa process.²⁷

3.5 Linearity

John Cage was drawn to Zen Buddhism from his interest in Asian influences and used it as an artistic approach into his composition. While Cage encountered Zen Buddhism by reading books and attending lectures, the Zen Buddhism was embedded in Paik's life as he grew up in Asia. Particularly his experience of living in Kamakura, Japan, a city where Zen Buddhism was developed during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) impacted him profoundly.

²⁷ Danielle Wu, 'Nam June Paik's Lifetime of Alienation' *Asian American Arts Alliance*, 13 February 2023.

Zen Buddhism, originated in India and was formalised in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). It spread to Korea and Japan and both countries integrated its principals of Zen into art, literature and daily life, profoundly shaping their cultures. Although there is no evidence that Paik was religious or into Zen philosophy, his life was formed with cultures across Asia along with many Asian beliefs such as Confucianism, Zen Buddhism and Shamanism.

While each of China, Japan and Korea has their own language, they share some similarities in their languages due to the historical and cultural influences. Some words and its pronunciations are either the same or similar.

The Zen (English), written in Chinese, 禪 or 禅 (they are the same word, first is the traditional Chinese, second is simplified Chinese, the same letter is also used in Japanese), is pronounced *Chan* in Chinese, *Zen* in Japanese. In Korean it is written 선 and pronounced as *Sun*.

In much of Paik's oeuvre, the linearity of a string was often used to convey his philosophical ideas from Zen Buddhism. Its implication comes from two homonyms of Korean words, *Sun*, meaning 'Zen' and another word meaning 'string'. There is an implication in the use of both word 'Sun' in Paik's works, reflecting his identity as a Korean.

Zen for head (1961) (Figure 3.7), a line drawn on a four-metres long piece of paper by Paik's hands, head and necktie dipped in ink as a brush, was an interpretation of La

Monte Young's composition *1960 #10 to Bob Morris* (1960). Young's original score consists of the quote 'Draw a straight line and follow it'.²⁸

Figure 3.7 *Zen for head* (1961) by Nam June Paik²⁹



²⁸ N.A 'Zen for Head' < <https://njpart.ggcf.kr/collections/194> > *Nam June Paik Art Center* [accessed on 20 May 2024].

²⁹ Photographer is unknown. The photo is Paik's performance of *Zen for walking*, <<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/zen-for-head/>> [accessed on the 6 May 2025].

In *Zen for walking* (1961) (Figure 3.3), also named *Violin with string*, Paik walked around a city of Cologne, Germany while dragging a violin tied to a string. His relaxed manner of walking connoted a form of Zen Buddhism. He used a violin which symbolised the Classical music, but also dragged various objects such as spoon, toy car's axle and many others.

In *Zen for TV* (1963) (Figure 3.5), Paik demonstrated how technology can be created as meditative art by using a single line on a television screen which represents the purest form.

The linearity as a metaphor of Sun (線, meaning 'line') through media can also be understood as a movement and transformation. There are many interpretations available on this work such as the use of television as a medium, conveying it as a tool to blend visual art and music. This demonstrates how Paik was remarkably ahead of his time. It can also be understood as the single line in television represents the Cosmic Microwave Background (CMB), the cooled remnant of the first light that could ever travel freely throughout the universe.³⁰

The use of linearity in a lens of Zen Buddhism in Paik's artwork, was perhaps a way of practicing meditation of Zen Buddhism by Paik.

³⁰ N.A., 'Cosmic Microwave Background (CMB) radiation', *The European Space Agency* <[59](https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Space_Science/Cosmic_Microwave_Background_CMB_radiation#:~:text=The%20Cosmic%20Microwave%20Background%20(CMB,shockwave'%20of%20the%20Big%20Bang.> [accessed on 3 March 2025].</p></div><div data-bbox=)

3.6 Eastern philosophies; Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shamanism

In 1964, Paik moved to New York and became involved with the Fluxus movement.

Collaborating with Fluxus artists such as George Maciunas, John Cage, Joseph Beuys and Charlotte Moorman, they created new sounds, images and experiences through music, sculpture, performance and video. This expanded Paik's artistic practice beyond the medium of television.

In 1967, Sony launched *Portapak*, the very first portable video tape recorder. Paik saw this product as an opportunity to create his own channel and believed that it could allow for individuals to communicate with their own information. For Paik, the use of the recorder was the perfect tool for particularly democratic expression. He predicted that the video camera would bring a revolution in the near future. However, the art scenes in 1960s was still focused on installations and paintings, and video art was not yet to be considered fine art. The video was rather regarded as a medium for entertainment purpose. Nonetheless, Paik saw its potential in transforming the video as a canvas for artistic expression that could convey his complex sense of self.

Paik's personal experiences deeply influenced his work through the video. He struggled with the guilt of having had the privilege to learn classical music and study abroad, while witnessing the suffering of Korean people in poverty. He also witnessed that his family became antagonistic towards their own country, Korea, which ultimately led him to develop a rebellious attitude towards his father. Additionally his adaptation to Western cultures and languages, shaped by his experiences of living in multiple countries, along with the challenges of being the sole Asian in Western society was conveyed in his video art.

Paik expressed his personal narrative through philosophical beliefs influenced by Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shamanism. By transforming videos into an artistic medium, his artwork often explored the intersection of technology and philosophical views that allowed Paik to convey his complex ideas.

3.6.1 Zen Buddhism

John Cage's composition *4'33"* (1952) was heavily influenced by Robert Rauschenberg's *White paintings*. Although Rauschenberg did not include any specific intention to create this un-painted painting, Cage interpreted the White Paintings as a representation of the emptiness in Zen Buddhism.

The concept of emptiness is often understood as nothingness, and nihilism is frequently associated with a sense of nothingness. In consequence, this might appear that what Rauschenberg and Cage created can be considered nihilistic.

While both nihilism and the emptiness of Zen Buddhism may appear to share a belief in nothingness, the approach to meaning and purpose in nothingness from Zen Buddhism and nihilism are fundamentally different.

In nihilism, nothingness suggests that life is inherently meaningless, in contrast, the concept of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) does not classify to all negation.³¹ It rather refers to lack of inherent existence, the nothingness in Zen Buddhism simply accepts impermanence of all things. The emptiness of Zen acknowledges that everything is constantly changing and that nothing is permanent.

³¹ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (London: Rider & Company, 1983), 53.

Followed by Rauschenberg and Cage, Paik used the emptiness of the image in *Zen for film* (1962-1964) during his participation in Fluxus while using televisions as his medium. This unexposed film runs through a projector on an endless loop. This film accumulates dust and scratches which symbolise imperfections and changes that we inevitably experience in life. According to Cage, the film devoid of images opens itself up to the nuances of its surrounding environment and what you see is the dust that has collected on the film.³² It explains that Paik interpreted the emptiness in a form of humanising technology.

The connection between *White paintings, 4'33"*, and *Zen for film* is the emptiness. The aim of the Zen is to directly experience and engage with the living reality of the world. Zen is not about meditation or sitting in silence but integrating the awareness and presence in all aspects of daily life, the awareness in every moment.

Many of Paik's work explored the intersection of modern technology and traditional spirituality.

'I use technology in order to hate it properly'.³³ This contradictory quote to a pioneer of video art, recognised the potential of manipulation and control by technology today. The aim of using television and video into his art was to humanise technology instead of accepting it and being manipulated by technology.

In his *TV Buddah* (1974) (Figure 3.8) installation, a statue of Buddha sits in meditation facing a television, while a video camera points at the Buddha and shows its image on the TV screen. This expressed Paik's attempt on blurring the line between technological

³²Nam June Paik 'Zen for Film', < <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/128108> > [accessed on 4 March 2025].

³³ Quote from Nam June Paik featured in the documentary, *Nam June Paik: Moon is the oldest TV* by Amanda Kim dir.(New York: Lone Palm Films, Octopus Originals, Curatorial, 2023).

innovation and Zen Buddhism.³⁴ The Zen Buddhism could have been representing Eastern mysticism in the Western society. In this way the work can also be understood as cross-culture of the East and West.

Figure 3.8 *TV Buddah* (1974) by Nam June Paik³⁵



3.6.2 Confucianism

Paik grew up in Korea where the society is deeply influenced by Confucianism which is an ethical system that has shaped Korean culture, social structures and values in every aspect of Korean society. Confucianism promoted a patriarchal system, particularly the

³⁴ , R. John Williams, 'Technê-Zen and the Spiritual quality of global capitalism'. *Critical Inquiry* 38, (2011), 29.

³⁵ By John HanHardt's Guggenheim museum. 'The Worlds of Nam June Paik.' < <http://www.paikstudios.com> > [accessed on 15 July 2025].

guiding principal of gender relations as ‘male as superior and women as subordinate’.³⁶

Thus it prefers a society where men have ultimate authority within the family unit and community. Paik’s father was not exceptional, he was known as patriarchal, and Paik witnessed that his father treated women in his family very poorly.

The ideal society in Confucianism is where women are expected to be ‘thrifty and diligent’,³⁷ and young women are expected to remain chaste and pure virgin until marriage. Sexuality is considered as taboo and discussion about sex is encouraged to be forbidden. Thus the purpose of sex was solely procreative, and to produce sons who are more valued than daughters, as having sons ensures the continuity of family line.

In Confucianism society advocates that the role of men is to work and the role of wife to stay home to be a caregiver of family.

To Paik, challenging the conventional idea was not just within Classical music boundaries but also every aspect of his life. To break the conventional ideas and to accept new things, he tried to break the ideas of Confucianism by merging the title of Sexualism and music. It may seem that the classical music and Confucianism are not related, however sexualism was taken as forbidden both in the Classical art world and Korean society. Paik collaborated with the cellist and collaborator, Charlotte Moorman to challenge this context.

³⁶ ErSheng Gao GE, XiaYun Zuo ZX, Li Wang WL, ChaoHua Lou LC, Yan Cheng CY, Zabin LS. ‘How does traditional Confucian culture influence adolescents sexual behavior in three Asian cities?’, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 50, (2012), 2.

³⁷ ErSheng Gao GE, XiaYun Zuo ZX, Li Wang WL, ChaoHua Lou LC, Yan Cheng CY, Zabin LS. ‘How does traditional Confucian culture influence adolescents sexual behavior in three Asian cities?’, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 50, (2012), 3.

In the performance of *Opera Sextronique* (1967) in New York, Charlotte Moorman performed a four-movement cello pieces composed by Paik. In the first movement she performed wearing a bikini, and in the second movement she performed topless.³⁸ During the performance, Moorman was arrested by police officers. The remaining movements were unperformed. Moorman's arrest became a symbol of the artistic and social boundaries of the time. Paik criticised the purge of sex under the excuse of being 'serious', arguing that the seriousness exactly undermines the so-called 'seriousness' of music as a classical art. He believed that music should be on an equal footing with literature and painting.

'Music history needs its D. H Lawrence and its Sigmund Freud, the novelist and neurologist'³⁹ who recognised the importance of sex in human experience and relations. This unconventional performance almost took away Paik's US visa which would have required him to return back to Korea. Paik also believed that he might be arrested upon his return to Korea.

In the context of Confucianism, Paik was seen as a failure to fulfil his role as a man. Despite gaining fame through his media art, he could not become the primary breadwinner. In addition, using multimedia at that time was expensive and Paik struggled financially. When this performance was published in a Korean newspaper, this drew attention to imposing influence from West, which was considered as a dangerous act in Korea at the time. The result of this was that Paik's father no longer regarded Paik

³⁸ Louis Armand, 'Concerto for the Universal Algorithm Paik I Moorman I Youngblood I Flusser', *Musicologica Brunensia*, 52 (2017), 140.

³⁹ This text is written on the poster/announcement of performance '*Opera Sextronique*' (1967) by Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman.

as a son as Paik's family saw his actions as bringing shame into his family. They believed that Paik did not possess the capability to work and he was a failure. As a result, they stopped supporting him financially at this time.

Figure 3.9 Poster of *Opera Sextronique* (1967) by Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik



Paik's engagement with counterculture is reflected in *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969) (Figure 3.10). This work demonstrates his desire to humanise technology and his exploration of the body's relationship to technology. Particularly use of women's breasts regarded as a body part leading to the context of sex in Confucianism due to its potentiality for sexual arousal.⁴⁰ This performance was exhibited at 'TV as a creative medium' at the Howard Wise Gallery, New York. Two small televisions attached to a set of vinyl straps were placed on each breast of Moorman.⁴¹ Each television played various broadcasts including live and pre-recorded footages. The TV screen also altered by the sounds of cello. Installing the two TV screens on Moorman's bare breasts was Paik's aim to disrupt the traditional boundaries between high art, technology and the Confucianism belief.

⁴⁰ Aihua Zhang, 'Womens Breasts and Beyond—A Gendered Analysis of the Appeals for Breast-Unbinding: 1910s-1920s', *Postscript: A Journal of Graduate Criticism and Theory*, 8, (2011), 7.

⁴¹ N.A 'TV Bra for Living Sculpture, TV as a Creative Medium, Howard Wise Gallery, New York' Nam June Paik Art Center < <https://njpart.ggcf.kr/collections/79> > [accessed on 5 May 2024].

Figure 3.10 Charlotte Moorman performing *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969)⁴²



3.6.3 Taoism

Paik's exploration of video art deeply reflects the relationship between technology and human life, particularly the use of technology as a tool for connection and a means of opening up the world. This approach aligns with the philosophy of Taoism, that

⁴² Vin Gabrill, photographer, Charlotte Moorman performs *TV Bra for Living sculpture* on the roof of her loft, 62 Pearl Street, New York on the 30 July 1982, Courtesy of Grey Art Gallery, New York University.

emphasises finding balance (*Tao*) in life by cultivating a sense of harmony between opposing forces.

The founder of Taoism, Laozi's philosophy emphasised the importance of 'weakness' over 'strength'. In this context, the weakness does not mean literally weak, rather being in line with the natural flow of balance (*Tao*), the universal principle of harmony and order. The ideas of an opposite – weak and strong – does not exist in Taoism. As its theory is established in Chapter 2 (page 26), Taoism recommends to revolve around the concept of *wu wei*, meaning effectiveness,⁴³ a state of being where actions are in harmony with the *Tao* and flow naturally. Paik tried to combine humanity and technology in the reflection of the opposite forces of weakness and strength.

Robot K-456, named after Mozart's piano concerto No.18 in B flat, with the Kochel Catalogue number 456, was Paik's first work that invoked a robot, designed to perform human-like actions including walking down the street, even urinating and passing stools. The robot also played a recording of President John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech through its speaker. Paik intentionally designed this robot to experience a car accident, in a themes of human-machine interaction, the fragility of technology, and the robot's experience of life and death, just like a human being. It reveals the falsehood of mechanical rationality and proposes the humanised machine that possesses human anxiety, emotion and experiences of life and death. The creation of this robot also reflects Paik's Korean identity. Due to his childhood experience of being suppressed of

⁴³ Huston Smith. 'Taoism', in Harry Oldmeadow (ed.), *Light from the East: Eastern Wisdom for the Modern West* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007), 99.

any individual expression under Japanese colonial rule in Korea, Paik came to realise the value of freedom of speech. For him, the ability to communicate freely was crucial which was conveyed in this work through John F. Kennedy's speech. Paik used the robot as a medium to expose the role of communication in society.

3.6.4 Shamanism

Paik's effort to integrate technology and humanity continued as a theme of blending traditional and modern elements in his arts. Paik often used Shamanistic elements to represent tradition and technological elements to represent modernism.

In his first major exhibition, *Exposition of Music–Electronic Television* (1963), Paik combined electronic media with an unexpected element: the head of a freshly slaughtered ox above the entrance of the venue. The head of ox created a surreal environment challenged traditional art conventions served as a powerful symbol of the themes of East and West, as well as the concept of combination of traditional and modern. In shamanism, the ox head serves as a sacrificial offering, symbolising wealth and success that give high praise to spirits in rituals.

A German sculptor, Joseph Beuys and Paik were significant figures in the Fluxus movement and pioneers of the avant-garde. Beuys was also a long term collaborator and lifelong friend of Paik. They particularly shared an interest in Shamanistic traditions. Paik recalled his childhood in Korea, where his mother invited a shaman into their home regularly. Growing up surrounded by these shamanistic rituals, Paik became familiar with the practice and often incorporated shamanistic culture into his art. Shamanism has

deeply influenced Korean culture, where a shaman (무당, pronounced as *moodang*) is believed to be a mediator between the spirit and the human. In Korean Shamanistic belief, the spirit of deceased ancestors can either bring good fortune or misfortune to a family. In order to keep a good life or to address difficult situations, Korean families often invite a shaman to their house to perform rituals (굿, pronounced as *gut*), in an attempt to communicate with the spirits.

Similarly, Beuys's interest in shamanism grew from his war experiences of serving in the German military during the World War II, and his experience of being rescued by native Tartarians after an air crash in Crimea. This experience deeply influenced Beuys's artistic practice in the concept of healing both physical and spiritual. Particularly, materials such as fat and felt that the Tartarians used to help Beuys recover, symbolise power of healing. Beuys often crafted an identity for himself as a shaman figure and integrated the healing aspects of shamanism into his art works.⁴⁴

Paik and Beuys promised to have a grand ritual performance in Korea, however, it only happened four years after Beuys died. Paik performed *A Pas de Loup* (With the Steps of the Wolf) in 1990, exploring a theme of shamanism to commemorate Beuys' death in Seoul, Korea. In this performance, Paik became the shaman, and a broken piano and slit-cut fedora represented Beuys.

⁴⁴ Barbara Gronau. 'I did take the role of the Shaman... The artistic rituals of Joseph Beuys' *Documenta* 28, (2010), 52.

Figure 3.11 Nam June Paik *A Pas de Loup* (1990)⁴⁵



3.7 Globalism

The use of linearity by Paik in his early work evolved from the literal interpretation of line to the universal human connection. His experience of living in multiple countries

⁴⁵ Photographer is unknown. The photo is Nam June Paik performing *A Pas de Loup* in South Korea, <<https://www.galleryhyundai.com/story/view/20000000142>> [accessed on 8 May 2025].

influenced him to explore the themes of globalisation and communication. Through the medium of technology, Paik tried to bridge the gap between people across the world. *Global groove* (1973) was created during Paik's service as an Artist-in-Residence at Experimental Centre in WNET Channel 13 in New York. The twenty-eight minutes long video collage was broadcast in 1974. It explored the concept of a global communication network, reflecting Marshall McLuhan's 'Global village' theory.⁴⁶ This video begins with the opening words 'This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will enable to switch to any TV station on the earth and TV guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book.'⁴⁷

The work features clips of diverse artists and their collaborations as well as commercial footage with Paik's own recordings. It also includes a footage of cross-cultural images such as traditional Korean and Nigerian elements, chants and popular songs while showcasing performances by various artists, dancers and musicians from different backgrounds.

This work can be seen as an early exploration of the inter-connectedness of the world through media, and Paik's vision of what we are experiencing today through the television. Symbolising as a democratic medium, Paik's message was to celebrate other cultures and the power of global communication.

⁴⁶ Dieter Daniels, 'Touching Television: Participation Media with Marshall McLuhan, John Cage and Nam June Paik', *TV Commune, de-inter-trans* (2011), 178.

⁴⁷ Nam June Paik, 'Global Groove, 1973' <
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UXwhIQsYXY&list=RD7UXwhIQsYXY&start_radio=1>
[accessed on 3 May 2023].

Paik's emphasis on the importance of communication across nations through technology and art expanded in the electronic installation *Electronic Superhighway* (1995). It is a large scale video installation shaped like a map of the United States. Each state is outlined in neon lighting and displays images that associated with each region. A total three hundred and thirty-six televisions and fifty-one video channels are used. Paik's aim in this work was to allow people to communicate and understand each other across traditional boundaries through satellites, cables and fibre optics. Ultimately this idea suggested the rise of internet that we are experiencing today.

Figure 3.12 Nam June Paik *Electronic Superhighway* (1995)⁴⁸



⁴⁸ Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 2002.23, © Nam June Paik Estate

3.8 Conclusion

Paik had such unique global experience, considering the time period he lived that opportunities for such experience were limited. His experience of living in multiple countries deeply shaped his sense of global awareness. While having global experience might be seen as a fortunate background, Paik faced significant challenges particularly in terms of cultural assimilation. As a result, his artwork often conveys themes of connection and communication between diverse cultures particularly East and West. Paik saw the potential of video as an artistic medium for global connection which led him become the father of video art for pioneering its use as an artistic tool to bridge cultural gaps.

In Paik's artwork, the theme of globalisation is deeply interwoven with his Korean identity which served a significant role in shaping his artistic vision. His Korean identity represented not only the East, but also represented his experience of being challenged from cultural difference while living in Western society as a sole Asian. Although Paik witnessed conflict from the Korean War during his childhood, he sought ways for people of different backgrounds to understand each other and foster mutual understanding through the use of technology in his art.

Paik's use of Zen Buddhism is well known, especially due to heavy influence by Cage who used Asian elements in his works. However, his incorporation of other Eastern mysticisms, such as Confucianism, Taoism and Shamanism, is less acknowledged compared to the use of Zen Buddhism. Understanding these influences is significant to

understanding Paik's work. Despite Paik's global experience, his Korean identity remained a deep foundation throughout his artistic journey.

Researching Paik's works was especially meaningful to me as I share a similar cultural background. Although Paik and I belong to different generations, I was able to relate to many of Paik's perspectives of Korea, particularly growing up within the Confucianism, Shamanism traditions. I was also drawn to his global experiences. The more I moved to different places and adopted to new cultures, the further I became distanced from my own roots.

Engaging with Paik's works helped me navigate the social and cultural complexities while developing a multicultural identities. His ability to transform his personal challenges, and a sense of displacement into his own artwork was profoundly inspiring. His work showed me that my own experiences can become a valuable artistic resource for developing an authentic artistic voice.

Chapter 4: Margaret Leng Tan and toy piano

4.1 Introduction

Margaret Leng Tan, the queen of toy piano¹, was born in Singapore in 1946. She moved to New York after she won a scholarship to study at The Julliard School where she became the first woman to graduate with a doctorate degree. After Tan met the composer John Cage in 1981, she began her unique journey as a classical musician.

Tan encountered the toy piano in 1993, while preparing a memorial tribute for Cage. Toy piano was considered a toy rather than an instrument at that time. However, she found the potential of the toy piano and believed that the instrument could expand her artistic approaches. Evolving from the tiny instrument, today her performance includes not only piano and toy piano, but also her voice, acting ability and any other objects that make sounds. Tan's searching for new sounds led to her performance incorporating theatrical aspects that blend well with her unconventional choice of instruments. Through the influences from Cage, she gained courage to be free and became a multimedia artist who transcends boundaries.

¹ Margaret Leng Tan is described as 'Queen of the toy piano', 'Toy piano virtuoso' 'The doyenne of toy piano' as she is the world's first professional toy piano virtuoso.

4.2 Meeting with John Cage

In Tan's early career, she aspired to be a classical pianist like many classical musicians. However she experienced anxiety about pursuing a traditional career in the highly competitive classical music environment. Traditionally, classical musicians often perform a limited repertoire that challenges performers to feel obligated to convey unique interpretation when the pieces have been performed by numerous performers. Research shows that this causes music performance anxiety (MPA) and it is a common cause of classical musicians discontinuing professional performance careers.² This anxiety resulted in Tan considering moving on to another aspiration – dog trainer. She joined an organisation to get trained to be a service dog trainer for blind or disabled people, yet she continued to perform regularly at concerts.

In preparation for a tour of the Far East, Tan planned to perform works that incorporated Asian influences by Western composers. Her search for repertoires led Tan discover John Cage's prepared piano works which instantly resonated with her Asian identity with its gamelan-like sounds. The new discovery brought back the lost interest in piano performance.

Tan described how she met up with Cage was through 'fate' and 'destiny'.³ She contacted Cage to see her performance after Tan and her dancer friend choreographed one of Cage's pieces. After getting rejected by Cage several times, her persistence

² Emces Hruska, 'Exploring performance anxiety in classically trained musicians in relation to perfectionism, self-concept and interpersonal influences' (PhD dissertation, University of Roehampton, 2019), 3.

³ Coffeepaste, 'Margaret Leng Tan – Entrevista/ Interview' <<https://youtu.be/9vcUx2IQLSc?si=PMk0iDqVmXnTPt0>> [accessed on 10 May 2025].

eventually let her showcase her own interpretation of his prepared piano pieces. This encounter marked the beginning of their fruitful collaboration for eleven years until Cage died in 1992.

Collaborating with Cage gave Tan a new vision for both her approach to music and life. Cage's use of indeterminacy and chance operation through the Chinese divination text, *I Ching*, and Zen principles aligned with embracing everyday life. His various explorations and experiments significantly grounded in between art and everyday life influenced Tan's own artistic philosophy.

I was fortunate to interview Tan in May 2024 after her performance at Southbank Centre in London, England. During this interview, she stated that she sees herself on trajectory link from Marcel Duchamp, Cage and herself. She noted that Duchamp was one of the most important figures in avant garde and was a fundamental source for Cage's work. The influences from the two artists profoundly shaped Tan's approach to music and her performance. For a discussion of the relationship between Cage and Duchamp is described in pages 35-39.

4.3 Toy piano

In 1993, in preparation for Cage's memorial tribute at Lincoln Centre New York, Tan searched for repertoire that incorporates all of Cage's varieties through his piano works. The programme included his compositions for piano, prepared piano, string piano, bowed piano and toy piano. Although Tan had never heard of Cage's toy piano piece

after working with him for eleven years, she found the piece *Suite for Toy piano* (1948).

Tan describes when she found the toy piano, I was so pushing the envelope of the piano, taking it to its ultimate boundaries, its ultimate frontiers, that I fell off the edge and landed on the toy piano.⁴

Performing this piece significantly shifted Tan's career. The piece was composed with nine consecutive white notes on toy piano. The use of limited numbers of notes did not mean limited creativity in the music. Its simple melodies yet complexities in its performance, required Tan to practise as much as she would practise any other classical pieces on a regular piano. She recalls practising the piece and saw the potential of the toy piano instrument to become a real instrument.

Its unique Gamelan-like sounds align with her childhood in Singapore. The sounds of the toy piano are quite raw with its simple mechanics compared to 'adult' piano.⁵ It is rather a percussion instrument with its metal rods despite the name of this instrument is piano. The toy piano is rather closer to glockenspiel than piano.

The size of toy piano keyboards, key ranges and its sounds are varied. So Tan collects all different types of toy pianos. She has eighteen toy pianos of difference sizes, shape, brands and number of keys, some acquired from garbage bins to flea markets. Someone even left a toy piano on her doorstep. She calls herself a founding hospital for orphan pianos.

⁴ Margaret Leng Tan; quoted in [Stephen Brookes, 'Margaret Leng Tan reigns over a toy piano renaissance'], *The Washington Post*, 3 October 2014.

⁵ Margaret Leng Tan calls standard piano 'adult piano'.

When she tours for performance, she uses two of her vintage toy pianos – one grand piano and another upright, both 37 keys, Schoenhut brand. She calls the Schoenhut brand the Steinway of toy pianos. Schoenhut company was founded in 1872 in Philadelphia by Albert Schoenhut who was a German immigrant. Despite their small size, these toy pianos were performed by Tan internationally including in Carnegie Hall and Beethoven's house in Bonn, Germany.⁶

⁶ Sian Cain, Toy piano virtuoso Margaret Leng Tan: 'I played Beethoven in Beethoven's house – eat that, Schroeder', *The Guardian*, 28 Oct 2022.

Figure 4.1 One of Margaret Leng Tan's vintage toy pianos for performance. Schoenhut 37 keys⁷



Tan recalls that when she walks out on stage carrying the toy piano, audiences often laugh, and it is the whole point of using the toy piano for her performance. Its funny character allows her toy piano performance to automatically connect a theme of 'playfulness'. According to Tan, in toy piano performance, the performer can be an

⁷ Grace Sun Park, photograph, taken after Margaret Leng Tan's performance at SouthBank, London 25 May 2024.

entertainer, or the real-life character of Peanuts,⁸ she prefers her performance to be a sit-down comedy rather than serious recital.

Despite its funny character, the preparation for toy piano repertoire is not different from regular piano performance. Tan mentioned that practising with toy piano requires tremendous amount of control and refined sounds. When she practises toy piano and then plays ‘adult’ piano, she feels that her touch is much better.

Dadaist visual artist, Marcel Duchamp’s concept of ready-made art challenged the traditional notion that art does not depend on skill, craftsmanship and aesthetic beauty. He stated that using poor tools requires more skills from the artist. This statement inspired Tan and became the central to understanding her artistic philosophy as a toy pianist.

From this statement, it is naturally assumed that the poor tools refer to the toy piano, however, when the realisation of difficulties come due to the limitations of toy piano instrument, it could mean that the poor tools are referred to Tan herself. This statement aligns with Tan’s artistic choice of medium, toy piano. The creative act of her artistic expression comes from the medium of toys which turn into instruments. Tan said, Cage believed that one can make music on any object capable of producing sound, and Tan has been performing beyond his expectations.⁹

⁸ *Peanuts* is a brief title of American comic strip *Good ol’ Charlie Brown* written and illustrated by Charles M. Schulz.

⁹ Stephanie Eslake, ‘Margaret Leng Tan: “Concerts are much too serious affairs”’, *CutCommon The New Generation of Classical Music*, 26 August 2018.

Along with the toy piano, she also uses other toys as unconventional instruments including music box, toy drums, bicycle bell, bicycle horn, train whistle, soy sauce dishes, cat-food cans and many others.

4.4 Identity: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Quirkiness, Globalism

Tan's identity is deeply incorporated in her performance and it plays a crucial role in her artistic expression. Born and raised in Singapore gave Tan an Asian background and personality yet simultaneously she adopted many aspects of Western cultures. British colonialism (1819-1959) greatly impacted on Singapore's development through the exposure to Western education and governance systems. English became the official language along with Malay, Tamil and Mandarin, and the influence of British culture and values remained even after Singapore became an independent country in 1965. Yet Singapore highly maintains a strong Eastern identity where Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian communities create a multicultural society. As a result, Singapore became a city that balances modernism and tradition, a place that embraces its quirkiness that reflects its unique cultural identities.

Through her multicultural background, it is understood that Tan's transitioning from conventional Western classical music to the unorthodox avant-garde would have been at ease. She redefined what it means to be a musician and an artist in a globalised world and conveys her multiculturalism with her ability to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern musical elements.

The uniqueness of Tan's artwork can lighten the unconventional styles of her music due to her authentic self-expression conveyed in her performances. Her unique perspective attracts audiences through not only her embracement of her multicultural background but also her lifelong struggle to manage her obsessive-compulsive disorder.

When I was a child it manifested itself in a spectrum of behavioural quirks ranging from an adamant insistence that the bow in my hair be perfectly straight to a perpetual need for reassurance to allay my many fears, largely imagined but painfully real to me.¹⁰

Tan does not take her obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as her weakness. Instead of hiding it, she rather accepts that how her weakness gives her strength. For example, the obsession of counting which is one of the common symptoms of OCD, affects her even today yet she transited the obsession of counting to rhythmic counting in music. This perfectionism, caused by OCD, also made her become critical of herself until she met Cage who had a significant impact on her.

The important questions are answered by not liking only but disliking and accepting equally what one likes and dislikes.¹¹

¹⁰ Margaret Leng Tan, 'ANXIETY; Music of the Unquiet Mind', *The New York Times*, 1 Sep 2012.

¹¹ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 133.

4.5 Collaborations: *Satie Blues* by Toby Twining, *Carousel* by Phyllis Chen, *Metamorphoses Book 1* by George Crumb

Tan's choice to adopt the new instrument, toy piano, as her iconic instrument was a transcendent movement that allowed her to move beyond traditional boundaries.

Through the influence by composer John Cage, Tan paved the way of new world of musical possibilities by using the toy piano and turned it into a serious instrument. Her pioneering work also inspired various composers to write new pieces for the instrument today. These new possibilities of freedom and discovery of the new world led Tan to collaborate with other artists who shared her passion for going beyond the extent of musical boundaries.

4.5.1 Toby Twining

In Tan's first toy piano album *Arts of the Toy Piano* (1997), she performed not only toy piano but also combined both standard and toy piano together. The pieces vary from well-known existing classical pieces such as *Moonlight Sonata* by Ludwig Van Beethoven to newly-composed works. The existing pieces were transcribed for toy piano due to its limited keyboard range.

Toby Twining, one of the composers who collaborated with Tan for the album, re-arranged his existing piece, *Satie Blues* (originally composed for solo standard piano) for both toy piano and a standard piano. According to Tan, performing two different sized instruments together not only developed skills on toy piano but also made her a better pianist on the standard piano.

Twining is an American composer who spent his life in many regions of the United States. These experiences played a significant role in shaping his identity as a musician. For example, his childhood in Texas exposed him to gospel and blues, while living in New York influenced him classical music and jazz. Throughout his adult life, Twining had explored a wide variety of musical traditions and learned instruments from around the world in his search for artistic authenticity. This shaped his sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere at once.¹²

The piece *Satie Blues* immerses with diverse influences that Twining was exposed. For example, the 7th chords (Example 4.2) from bass line evokes colour of gospel and jazz while the melody line produces an impression of *Gnoissenne* No.3 (1890) by Erik Satie (Example 4.3).

Example 4.1 Toby Twining *Satie Blues*, bar 1-5

Warm and Weighted Toby Twining
♩ = ca. 44

The musical score for 'Satie Blues' by Toby Twining, bars 1-5, is presented for Toy Piano and Piano. The Toy Piano part consists of five whole rests. The Piano part begins with a piano (p) dynamic and features a series of chords and eighth notes. A yellow arrow points to the first chord in the Piano part. The piece concludes with a 'sim.' (sine) marking.

¹² This statement is written by the composer Toby Twining in the exchanged emails with me and Twining.

Example 4.2 Toby Twining *Satie Blues*, bars 6-13

6 *mf*

10 *furtivo*

Example 4.3 Erik Satie *Gnossienne No.3* (1890), bar 1

2

GNOSSIENNE
(1890)

ERIK SATIE

Nº 3

Lent

PIANO

4.5.2 Phyllis Chen

Phyllis Chen, an American composer and the organiser of UnCaged Toy Piano Festival,¹³ expands the boundaries of piano music through her work with miniature instruments such as toy piano and music box. Her search for extended piano techniques particularly incorporates miniature instruments and objects. Through this practice, many of her works immerse interdisciplinary characters that combine music with theatrical elements such as storytelling to create immersive experience.

Chen composed *Carousel* (2009), for a toy piano, a hand-cranked music box and video. The process of performing music box begins from punching holes on a paper strip as the piece comes on a classical notation. This miniature instrument challenges a performer to understand the mechanism of music box with little available information. As a result, a performer's experimentation to learn how the music box functions required.

The paper roll music box comes in 3 different sizes and tones, 15, 20, and 30. The 15 and 20 tones can only create a tone difference notes and not able to create semitones therefore, using the 30 tones music box gives a wide range of possible melodies.¹⁴ In the paper strips, there are vertical and horizontal lines. The vertical corresponds to tones and the horizontal corresponds to rhythm.

¹³ Steve Smith, 'Invention and Whimsy, Inspired by a Toy', The New York Times, 13 December 2013.

¹⁴ Haneke Debie, Music Box Guide for paper roll music boxes

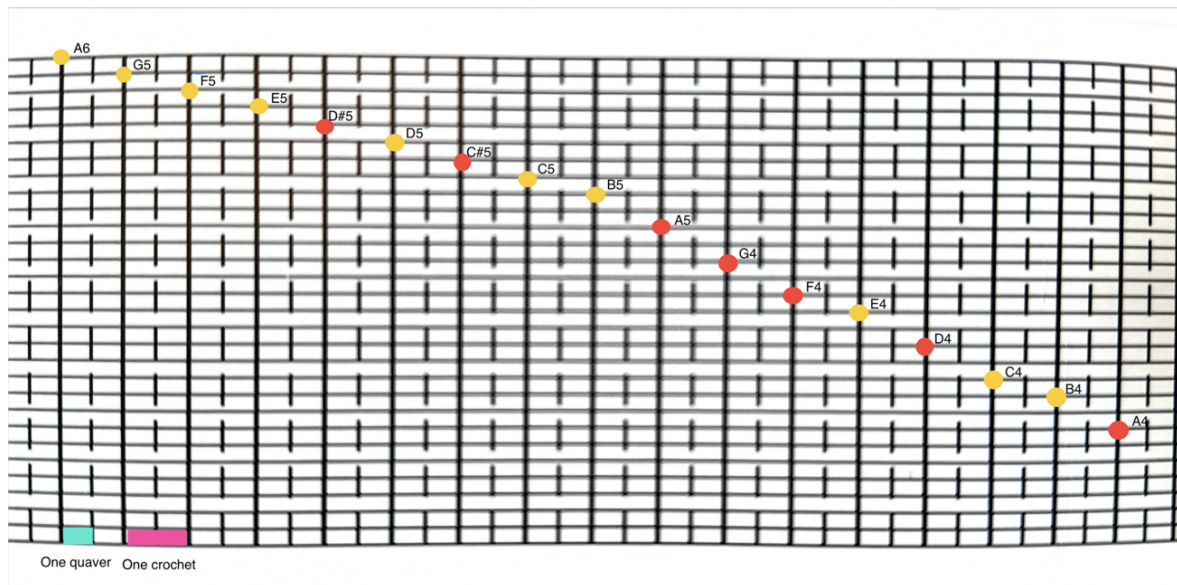
<https://musicboxmaniacs.com/news/music_box_guide> [accessed on the 7 Jul 2025].

Most of each vertical line creates a tone difference (Example 4.5 yellow dots) however, some lines require two lines to create a tone difference (Example 4.5 red dots).

One full horizontal square creates a crochet rhythm, and half square creates a quaver rhythm. The mechanism operates with time therefore the tempo of the piece depends on how fast a performer turns the crank of the music box.

Each line is measured approximately 0.15 mm wide vertically and 0.75 mm wide horizontally, therefore, the process of punching holes in the strips demands meticulous and precise measurements.

Example 4.4 Music box paper strip (30 notes)



According to Tan, the process of creating a score for music box becomes a part of making art itself. Due to the small size of script, each note has to be punched meticulously otherwise the pitch and rhythm would be altered. Because this process requires manually by hand, even if it is meticulously done, it cannot be perfect. In fact,

this reflects a core concept of Zen Buddhism that encourages embracing the imperfection, incomplete aspects of life.

Tan's perfectionism by her obsessive compulsive disorder, was softened by Cage's influence of Zen Buddhism. While her obsession with the toy piano led to attractive and successful performances, she learned from Cage to value the process over the achieving a perfect result.

Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of it's own accord.¹⁵

4.5.3 George Crumb

Tan's shift to becoming an avant garde performer using the extended techniques evolved her exploration of making music with everyday objects. This led to collaborating with like-minded composers including George Crumb, an American composer who is well-known for his use of extended piano techniques and non-traditional sounds.

¹⁵ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 95.

Crumb composed a series of four volumes of *Makrokosmos* from 1972 to 1979 that are subtitled *Twelve Fantasy-Pieces after the Zodiac*. This series is known for its innovative and unconventional piano techniques.

Tan performed Crumb's *Makrokosmos I* on the 70th birthday tribute for Crumb at Merkin Concert Hall in New York in 1999. Five years later, she also performed both *Makrokosmos I* and *II* at Carnegie's Zankel Hall.¹⁶

For me, George Crumb, along with John Cage and Henry Cowell, form the triumvirate of 'the three Cs,' the three intrepid American pioneers of 20th-century avant-garde pianism¹⁷

Her performance of Crumb's pieces marked the beginning of their fruitful friendship. In 2012 (John Cage's centenary year), during Tan and Crumb's conversation, she mentioned that Cage's *Sonatas and Interudes* and Crumb's *Makrokosmos* series were the pinnacles of the twentieth century avant garde piano compositions. Crumb responded that he might compose new series soon. Three years later, Crumb told Tan that he was ready to compose a new piano cycle for Tan, naming *Metamorphoses* and showed her various works by visual artists to interpret his new compositions. Soon the new series became ten fantasy-pieces after celebrated paintings by Klee, Van Gogh, Chagall, Whistler, Johns, Gauguin, Dali and Kandinsky. This work is thought to be updated *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Modest Mussorgsky.¹⁸

¹⁶ Margaret Leng Tan, 'George Crumb; A Remembrance – Reflections on an Idyllic Friendship', *I CARE IF YOU LISTEN*, 6 Feb, 2023.

¹⁷ Margaret Leng Tan quoted in Ben Mattison, 'Margaret Leng Tan Pays Tribute to George Crumb at 75', *Playbill*, 20th November, 2004.

¹⁸ Maureen Buja, *Art into Sound I: George Crumb's Metamorphoses, Book I, Interlude*, 3 Dec 2022.

According to Tan, it took eighteen months for her to work with Crumb to tailor the work to Tan's idiosyncrasies. Crumb included her iconic instrument – toy piano (Example 4.5), as well as small percussions (Example 4.6, 4.7, 4.9), and Tan's own voice in unusual ways (Example 4.8, 4.9).¹⁹ She recalls when she worked the *No. 3 Crows over the Wheatfield*, she practised how to make crow sounds, *Caw* (Example 4.8) while observing crows in Crumb's backyard.

Example 4.5 George Crumb *Metamorphoses Book I, No.7 Clowns at night* (Marc Chagall), bars 5-6

26

Toy Piano

pp legatissimo

(Piano)

pp (Ped. I sempre →)

*vocally produced moaning sound

¹⁹ Margaret Leng Tan, 'George Crumb; A Remembrance – Reflections on an Idyllic Friendship', *I CARE IF YOU LISTEN*, 6 Feb, 2023.

Ton
orio

Handwritten musical notation for the piece 'Ton orio'. The notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a half note A4, and then a quarter rest. The next measure contains a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note D5. The following measure is a half note E5. The next measure contains a quarter note F#5, a quarter note G5, and a quarter note A5. The final measure is a half note B5. The piece ends with a double bar line. There are some handwritten markings below the staff, including a 'p' (piano) and a 'y'.

Example 4.8 George Crumb *Metamorphoses Book I*, No.3 *Crows over the wheat field*
(*Vincent Van Gogh*), bar 1-3

3. CROWS OVER THE WHEAT FIELD (Vincent van Gogh)

13

Lento elegiaco [♩ = ca. 70] (uncanny, forbidding)
(half-sung) - plaintively
mp can, (iv. sempre) (sim.)
p can, cant, can
poco pressando
half-sung (come sopra)
Ped. I - *
Ped. II sempre
gliss. over str. (wire brush)
strike crossbeam (yarn stick)
gliss. over strings (ft.)
pp
pp (iv. sempre)
senza Ped. I

Example 4.9 George Crumb *Metamorphoses Book I*, No.8 *Contes Barbares* (Paul
Gauguin), bars 12-14

(vocally produced)
shout!
To-pa-pau!
Pod rattle
mp sub.
strike piano crossbeams with a yarn stick
gliss. over str. (ft.)
Ped. I sempre
8
5
1
1.

Crumb composed the piece, No.6 *Perilous night in Metamorphoses Book 1*, after Tan introduced him to the painting *Perilous night* (1982) (Figure 4.2) by Jasper Johns. This diptych painting referenced various sources including a music piece, *Perilous night* (1943-1944) by John Cage, two paintings, *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1516) (Figure 4.3) by Matthias Grunewald and *The weeping woman* (1937) (Figure 4.4) by Pablo Picasso.

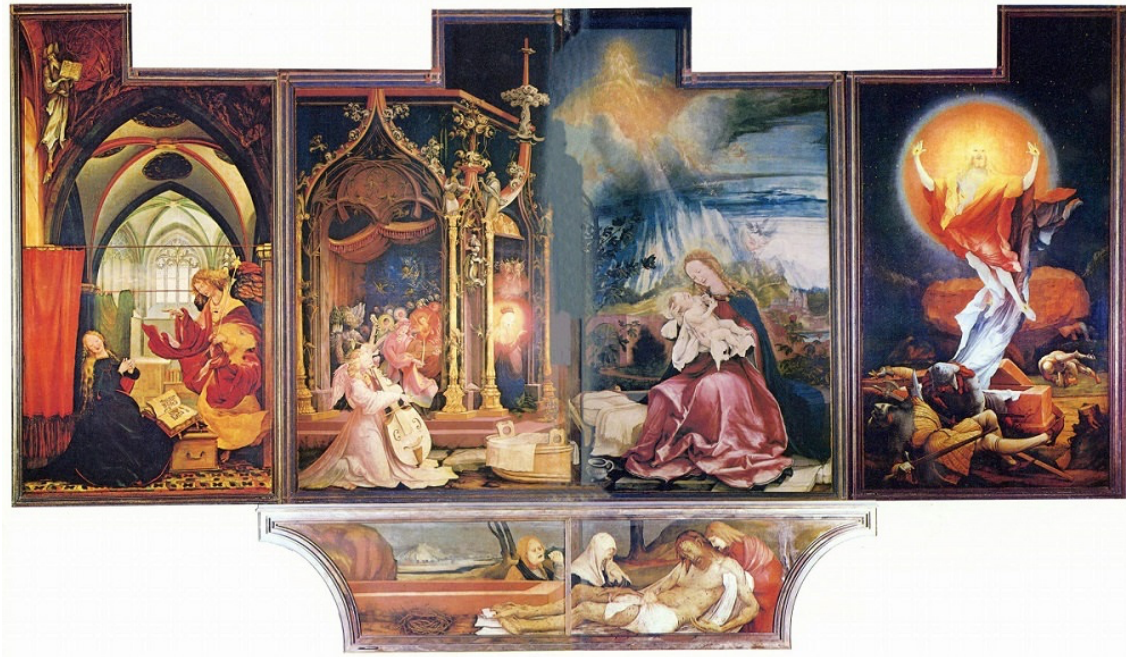
Figure 4.2 Jasper Johns *Perilous night* (1982)²⁰



The gray background with white and amethyst purple on the left part of the painting (Figure 4.2), is according to Johns, derived from Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Figure 4.3).

²⁰ National Gallery of Art, Robert and Jane Meyerhof Collection, accession number 1995.79.1.

Figure 4.3 Matthias Grunewald *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1516)²¹



The image of the handkerchief on the floor (Figure 4.2) was adapted from *The weeping woman* (Figure 4.4) by Pablo Picasso who created this work after being deeply influenced by the Spanish Civil War. It is suggested that *The weeping woman* reflects an emotional response of sorrow and pain from the artist. Therefore, the use of Picasso's motif in Johns's painting derived similar emotions.

²¹ Photographer is unknown. This picture is sourced from Musée Unter Linden, < <https://www.musee-unterlinden.com/en/oeuvres/isenheim-altarpiece-outer-wings-opened/> >.

Figure 4.4 Pablo Picasso *The weeping woman* (1937)²²



The image of three arms hanging from hooks on the right side of *Perilous Night* (Figure 4.2) has many connotations. Most importantly, underneath the right-most arm with blue colour patch, there is a sheet of music printed with the letters ‘JOHN’ and ‘THE PERILO’.²³ This suggests that Johns chose to reference the composer John Cage and his piece *Perilous night* (1943-1944) which evokes the emotional states of the dangers of erotic love, the misery of people separating, the loneliness and terror. Cage composed

²² Photographer is unknown, This picture is sourced from Tate Modern Collection, London.

²³ Jane Ursula Harris, ‘The Role of the Copy’, *The Believer*, 15 Apr 2016.

this piece during the period of his suffering from separation from his ex-wife Xenia, simultaneously the beginning of the romantic relationship with Merce Cunningham who later became Cage's life partner. However, the audience did not perceive Cage's intended emotional content which led him to question the relationship between expressing emotion and intention in his compositions. According to Johns, his intentions are irrelevant because meaning emerges between the painting and the individual looking at it. While Johns did not confirm these representations literally, it is believed that Johns was also questioning the same as Cage.

Margaret Leng Tan became the significant connection to carry forward the influence of the avant-garde tradition. Crumb responded with a piece also titled *Perilous Night* in the *Metamorphoses Book I*. Tan stated that, the response from Crumb to *The Perilous night* work was both immediate and visceral, yet it is very different.

Example 4.10 George Crumb *Metamorphoses Book I, no.6 Perilous Night* (Jasper Johns), bar 1

22

6. PERILOUS NIGHT (Jasper Johns)

Molto vivace (fearfully, with dark energy) [♩ = 184-192]

on keys
scrape over string windings - (loco) a single rapid stroke (4 finger nails)
glissando over strings (fingertip)
Ped. I sempre →

scrape str. windings (4 fingernails)
gliss. over str. (fing.)
(Ped. I sempre →)

gliss. over strings (thumb nail)
(Ped. I sempre →)

The textures of these pieces are constantly captivating from amplified piano sounds and extended techniques. Crumb is not an electronic music composer but composed many of his works for amplified piano to create an effect that does not exist in acoustic instruments. Particularly the use of extended techniques such as pianist's fingers on the strings, use of sticks, mallets and yarn sticks or glissandos on lower strings which create various sounds that often appear spooky, creating haunting ambience or dreamlike sounds. This suggests that Crumb's use of sonic explorations in piano creates a sense of timeless, universal experience which links to his fascination on mythification.

My music is not programmatic in the nineteenth century sense of this word [the use of myths] is not literal, [but it is] a part of my thinking,²⁴

Crumb often drew inspiration from mythic sources into his composition, and the extended piano techniques became a tool to produce sonic experience.

While Tan is specialised in avant-garde experimentation, her search for new sounds that convey the universal themes are shared across past and future. She recalls when performing *Four walls* (1944) by Cage, which conveyed his disturbed mind, that nobody would know the details of what disturbed mind Cage experienced personally. She drew on her own experience of the disturbed mind and interpreted it in the piece. Thus, Tan and Crumb's collaboration may have opened the door to new sonic possibilities and innovative artistic expression, combining Crumb's imagination and Tan's experimental approach. The two artists created a powerful emotional complexity in the music. Their collaboration paved the way for future generations of contemporary musicians.

4.6 Theatricality in performance: Memoir (Dragon ladies don't weep)

Tan's performance evolved from a classical style of performance to an unconventional piano performance that is rather closer to theatre than music performance. She calls her

²⁴ George Crumb during the interview with Victoria Adamenko 'Neo-Mythologism in Twentieth-Century Music' (PhD dissertation: Rutgers University 2000); quoted in Victoria Adamenko. 'George Crumb's channels of mythification' *American Music* 16, (2005), 328.

performance ‘show’ rather than ‘recital’ because her performance not only includes piano performance but also preparations, vocalising, multimedia, even acting, which the whole production is done by herself.

I’ve always had aspirations to be a sit-down comic – not a stand-up one!²⁵

Tan is renowned as the high priestess of the toy piano, and she is also well-versed in the dark arts of expanding the piano’s range of colours and sounds by placing objects on or between the piano strings per composer’s instructions. She was not content with simply playing a composed piece on the piano, she wanted to create art with her music and to be free to interpret music beyond the score sheets. Since she performed *Suite for toy piano* (1948) by Cage, she had become an artistic performer who also creates her own pieces. She has been actively collaborating with contemporary composers and creating multitasking pieces.

Through the eleven years of working with Cage, Tan expanded the boundaries of what is possible in contemporary music. Her approach to his music embodies the experimental and exploratory spirit of avant garde music, and she has been pushing the boundaries of the traditional conventions in her own compositions and performances.

I thought it’d be easier to make a sonic memoir than a written one.²⁶

²⁵ Margaret Leng Tan, quoted in [Sian Cain, Toy piano virtuoso Margaret Leng Tan: ‘I played Beethoven in Beethoven’s house – eat that, Schroeder’], *The Guardian*, 28 Oct 2022.

²⁶ Ibid.

Tan created biographical theatrical show/piano performance *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* with a theme of her experience of significant moments, including a theme of lifelong struggle of her obsessive-compulsive disorder. The programme includes all the different kinds of pianos that Cage wrote for such as regular piano, prepared piano, toy piano, toys, piano strings and percussions to present how Cage's creativity on piano influenced her life as an artist.

This performance not only incorporates the creativities on piano, but also how Cage influenced Tan as a person, through sharing her stories of how she had accepted who she is even with her OCD manifestation on counting. The perfectionism in her, now appreciate the process rather than the goal.

Simply a failure to adjust immediately from a preconception to an actuality²⁷

Her creation of such unconventional performance is to embrace not only her artistic approach but also her struggles. This is dedicated to her mother and Cage, particularly influenced by his works of *4'33"*, *Lecture on nothing*, *Silence* by Cage.

The important questions are answered by not liking only but disliking and accepting equally what one likes and dislikes²⁸

²⁷ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 171.

²⁸ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 133.

4.7 Conclusion

Tan's legacy is an artist who transformed the toy piano into a real instrument and made herself a toy pianist. It was not an easy journey for her as the first woman to graduate with a doctorate from the The Julliard School. During the interview with me, she shared that one of her teachers cut off all contact when she started performing avant-garde music.

As a John Cage interpreter, she divides her life into BC and AC, before Cage and after Cage.²⁹

I can't even imagine what I would be doing if I never met Cage³⁰

In the same way that Cage affirmed to Schoenberg that he will devote his life to music, Tan agreed with Cage that music can be made with anything whether it is a tin can or a bucket.³¹ Cage's expansion of music boundaries inspired Tan to transcend her musical ability to create works that move beyond music. In her theatrical show *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep*, she explored her obsessive compulsive disorder as a theme and wove it into the musical performance. She not only fulfilled John Cage's definition of sounds, but also fulfilled his belief that art equals life. During the personal interview with Tan, she advised me to simply be who I am and keep trying new things.

²⁹ Margaret Leng Tan, quoted in [Gena Raps, 'Margaret Leng Tan: Toi, Toi, Toy, interview with Margaret Leng Tan']

<<https://persimmontree.org/fall-2018/toi-toi-toy/>> [accessed on 1 June 2025].

³⁰ Margaret Leng Tan, quoted in [Sian Cain, Toy piano virtuoso Margaret Leng Tan: 'I played Beethoven in Beethoven's house- eat that, Schroeder'], *The Guardian*, 28 Oct 2022.

³¹ Ibid.

Chapter 5: From Sun 禪(zen) to Sun 線(line) to Sun 仙(transcendent):

My artistic transformation (autoethnography)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the evolution of my artistic identity shaped by the influence of John Cage, Nam June Paik and Margaret Leng Tan.

The title of this chapter includes three Chinese characters that share the homonym *Sun* (선) in Korean. Each of the *Sun* has a different meaning, representing the artistic identity of each of the three artists and, ultimately my own.

The first Sun, 禪, means Zen Buddhism, this letter represents John Cage, whose work was deeply influenced by Zen philosophy; the second Sun, 線, means line, this letter represents Nam June Paik as he engaged with linearity in his work. Particularly he chose the theme of linearity because the words for line (string) and Zen Buddhism are both pronounced *Sun* in Korean. His use of Zen Buddhism in his artwork is deeply related to Cage's influence on Paik. The last Sun, 仙, means transcendence, representing Margaret Leng Tan as her performances transcended from conventional to unconventional which came from her deep connection to working with Cage.

The last letter Sun, 仙, also reflects my own transformation as an artist. The character is my middle name, Sun, connecting to the transcendent qualities of my artistic identity from the three artists.

While this research initially began as a personal search for identity, it has had a profound effect on my artistic transformation. The influence of Cage, Paik and Tan significantly changed my personal understanding of boundaries of music. Underlying each artist projected their work differently yet there are shared theories underneath among the artists. Firstly, they are all linked to Cage, particularly Paik and Tan's works have a deep connection to Cage. As discussed in Chapter 4, during the interview with Tan, she confirmed that she never met Paik in person, however, his involvement with Fluxus influenced her own approaches to performance. Secondly, their artworks are involved with the avant-garde movement, experimenting with various mediums that reflect their unique artistic identities. Each of the artists chose different mediums to reflect their artistic identity. I examined these mediums and explored their theoretical frameworks, applying them to my experimentations. Lastly, they share the ideas of inter, multi, cross, transdisciplinary practices that may seem confusing and ambiguous, yet this reflects their complex backgrounds particularly the amalgamation of East and West in their work. These approaches have deeply encouraged me to embrace ambiguity from cultural fusion that resonate with my own artistic journey.

This chapter documents my artistic research journey through creative practices influenced by Cage, Paik and Tan. Through the conceptual links between these artists and my own artistic transformation, I explore how their ideas challenged traditional boundaries and redefined music. The three case studies presented will also examine how their work has influenced my own interdisciplinary approach in search of my artistic identity that led me to rethink my piano performance. Ultimately, through my transformation influenced by the artists, I have come to embrace my unique authenticity, from both my Korean heritage, and multicultural background.

5.2 Overview

This chapter breaks down the process of how my artistic identity has been reshaped through the influences of John Cage, Nam June Paik and Margaret Leng Tan.

Firstly, each of the artist's choice of medium introduced me to new ways of thinking about music. Cage's use of Zen Buddhism, embracing chance process and indeterminacy, taught me to explore the unpredictabilities and to view the process of music as more important than the result. Paik's integration of technology encouraged me to expand the possibilities of multimedia performance. Lastly Tan's ability to transform toy piano into a real instrument and avant-garde experimentation particularly exploring from classical to unconventional ideas inspired me to rethink the role of pianist.

This chapter is based on the examinations on how their ideas and artistic practices have influenced my approach to redefine my own artistic voice. I will use three case studies from my previous performances that demonstrate how their work has helped me navigate my own artistic transformation.

5.3 Theoretical frameworks

Before encountering John Cage, by nature of my heritage I was drawn to works with Asian influences by Western composers like, *Estampes* by Claude Debussy. My longing to define my complex identity was a quest of somehow finding a right place in the

middle of the East and the West. I sought answers from the works that blended both influences.

The first encounter with Cage was the silence piece, 4'33". This infamous piece is often misunderstood as a joke due to the fact that the performer does not play any instrument physically. From my perspective as a traditionally-trained classical performer, the act of physical playing an instrument is an essential element of music. A piece without the struggles of rigorous practice cannot simply be considered as music. Yet, all of this idea is under the premise of expectation that sounds must be produced by performer and instrument.

Until I die there will be sounds and they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.¹

Cage's theory behind the piece 4'33" is understood to be contrast to the disciplines in classical music. Often a good performance in classical music is when a performer has full control over his or her playing, and everything is intentional. On the other hand, Cage's silent piece is rather focused on uncontrollable sounds that not only come from the performer but also sounds occurring from the audience. This challenges the traditional definition of music and the expectation of both performer and audience that performer produces sounds.

¹ John Cage, *Silence Lectures and writings by John Cage* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1961), 8.

They missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.²

The irony is that Cage's silence piece actually does not include the element of silence. Conventional thoughts in music define music by certain rules particularly the expression of emotion into a piece, which serves as a communication between performer and audience. According to Cage, when the music adheres to this concept of communication: It becomes very difficult to listen to, because of what's been done to it in organising it. And when expression sweeps sound into its production then you also get into a situation where you are not allowed to just listen.³

Cage's 4'33 certainly challenged the traditional notion of music. To him, sounds do not have to mean anything in order to give us pleasure in our ear. This profoundly influenced me, and I realised that I have been focusing on the act of performing and the expression in music. This perspective was also shaped by my experience of rigid piano training in Korea, where its culture emphasises a results-driven mindset that prioritises results over artistic process. By embracing Cage's philosophy that music does not need to include any intention and treat them as they are, I opened the door to explore new approaches in my practice.

² Richard Kostelanetz, 'Conversing with Cage' (New York: *Routledge*, 2003), 70.

³ Gerald, Lerner 'John Cage interview: 'I gave up the notion of communication as impractical in my case', *The Guardian*, 16 November 1989.

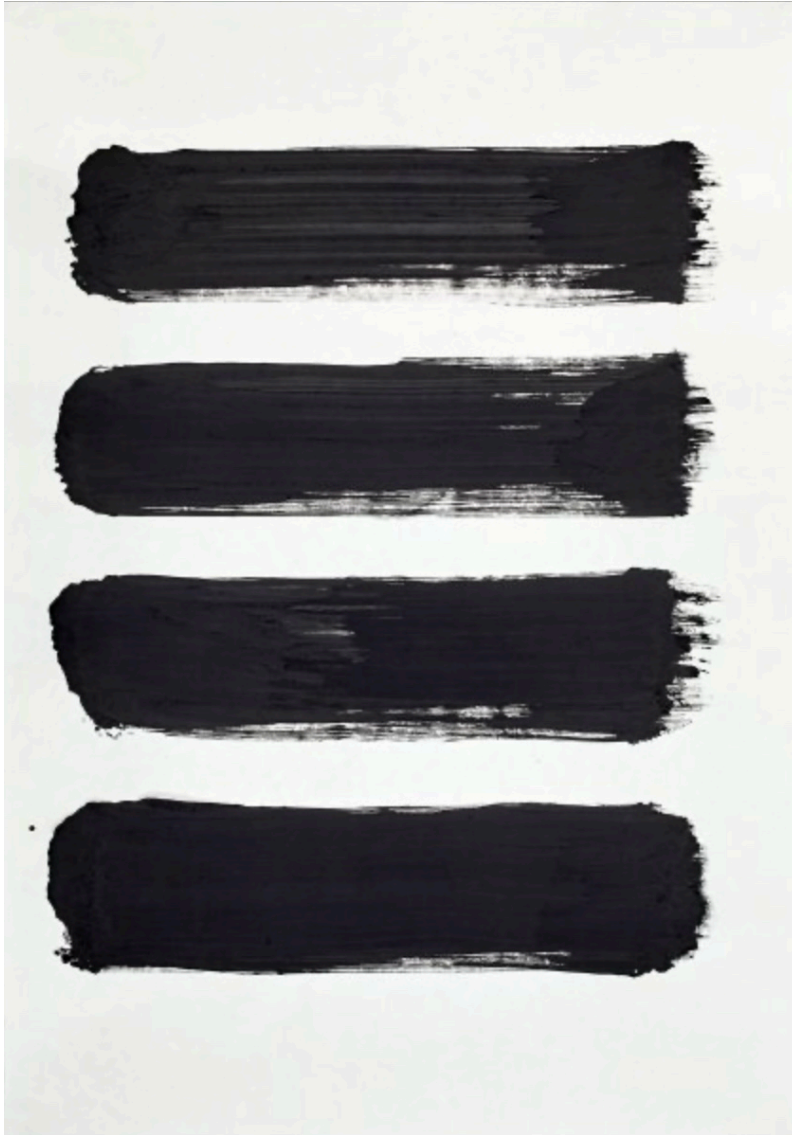
They say, ‘you mean it’s just sounds?’ Thinking that for something to just be a sound is to be useless, whereas I love sounds just as they are, and I have no need for them to be anything more than what they are. I don’t want them to be psychological. I don’t want a sound to pretend that it’s a bucket or that it’s president or that it’s in love with another sound. I just want it to be a sound.⁴

In addition, through Cage’s *4’33’’* and its philosophical link to Zen Buddhism, I was also able to re-connect with my heritage and integrate the traditions and cultures into my present life.

Zen Buddhism is part of the lifestyle in Asian societies. It is not merely a religion or philosophy but a way of life in many Asian cultures, particularly in Korea, China and Japan. While I have not particularly encountered Zen Buddhism through textbooks or lectures like Cage, it is deeply connected to my heritage as a Korean through Buddhist traditions. Nam June Paik’s use of Zen Buddhism as a medium for his artistic identity can be seen as a way of embracing his heritage. As mentioned in the Chapter 3, the reasons for Paik using a medium of string or line to convey Zen Buddhism is twofold: firstly, the words for both string/line and Zen Buddhism are homonym in Korean. Secondly, the concept of the word ‘string’ can symbolise the Asian lifestyle. For example, in brush calligraphy, drawing a line is not merely an art form but also a practice of meditation, as shown in one of Paik’s artworks, *Zen for head* (1961) (Figure 3.7). Although this work was a performance of La Monte Young’s composition *1960 #10*, Paik incorporated the elements of brush calligraphy and interspersed it with East Asian cultures.

⁴ John Cage interview in documentary, ‘Listen’(1992), https://youtu.be/2aYT1Pwp30M?si=yE0QEY_sLZ-eK5xg [accessed on 15 May 2025].

Figure 5.1 Oh Chi Jung *Seo Hwa Dong Che* (2016)



In Korea, *Seo ye* (written in Korean, 서예),⁵ or brush calligraphy in English, originated in China and was transmitted to Korea during the Three Kingdoms Period.⁶ It developed in countries that use Chinese characters, including China, Japan and Korea.⁷

⁵ *Seo ye* is not exactly calligraphy, yet there is no definite word in English term. Therefore, I am using an English term ‘Brush calligraphy’ in this context.

⁶ Three Kingdoms Period, also named Three Kingdoms of Korea (c. 57 BCE to 668 CE) was when Korea was divided into Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje.

⁷ At this period, Chinese characters were used in Korea as Korean alphabet was created much later by the king Sejong in 1443.

Seo ye is regarded as an art of line due to the logographic nature of Chinese characters. Each line in Chinese characters is treated as a form of non-figurative art. Therefore, each line in Seo ye conveys context and aesthetic. The simplicity of brush calligraphy through its minimal elements of dot, line and stroke in the simple colours of black and white, reflect a deep connection to life. Learning calligraphy begins with the meditative practice of grinding ink. The brush calligraphy embodies the life, culture and history of East Asia.

Paik's incorporation of string into his artworks to convey Zen Buddhism is understood as poetic expression. His attempts to blur the 'lines' between traditional and unconventional aimed to shift the interaction between technology and humanity from a passive viewer experience to active participation through media art. He envisioned technology's potential to connect globally as a means to connect with people between countries. Simultaneously, he predicted its potential to corrode as well.

In fact, Paik had a complex relationship with Buddhism from his childhood experience. He was born into a Buddhist family, but what he witnessed from his own parents developed a conflicted belief on Buddhism that his father aligned with leftist ideologies during the Japanese colonisation of Korea in order to make more money, and his mother was superstitious. However, encountering John Cage led Paik to incorporate the Zen Buddhism as a new way of expressing his identity of Asian heritage and it became the key element in his artwork.

Zen has been dead for the last 300 years. Only salesman was alive,

Two Americans (have) revived it. The first was Cage...

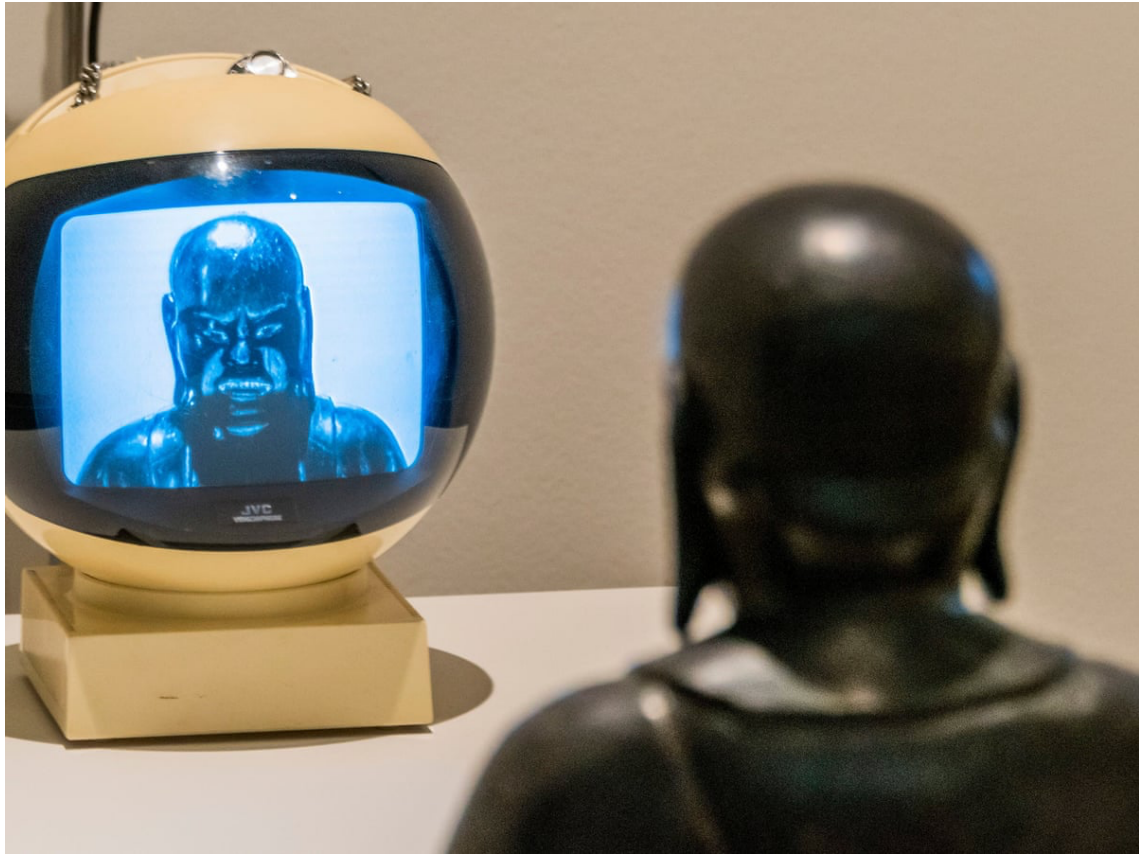
Nobody has time to meditate 30 years in the mountains⁸

Paik's childhood in Korea, particularly his experience during the Japanese colonial period, such as the experience of not being allowed to use the Korean language by Japanese rules, and witnessing how Japanese Zen monks played a leading role in war propaganda shaped his complex relationship with his identity. However, Western society where Zen Buddhism is often romanticised, did not view these experiences as Zen. Thus, it is understood that the use of Zen by Paik could be seen as an attempt to embrace Buddha without its reverence.

One of his iconic works, *TV Buddha* (1974), a statue of the Buddha, a symbol of wisdom in Asian cultures, is presented as if it is observing itself on a television screen through a video camera pointed at the statue. This conveys a narcissistic reflection, simultaneously self-reflection. The use of Buddha image in Paik's works reflects what many emigrants experiences, reconnecting with his heritage in a personal and subjective way. For Paik, it was crucial for him to reconnect with his Korean heritage in order to explore his multi-faced identity which Paik deeply desired to understand.

⁸ Nam June Paik; quoted in [Ryan Lee Wong, 'The Buddha on TV: Nam June Paik's fraught relationship to Buddhism'], *American Masters*, 10 May 2023.

Figure 5.2 Nam June Paik *TV Buddha* (1974)⁹



Paik's search for his identity aligned with his sense of displacement. He developed a multicultural identity from living in diverse places, yet simultaneously questioned where he belongs. His search for his identity, particularly his life in between East and West, was expressed in many different forms. Eventually Paik redefined his identity as an artist who embraces multiple influences but also transcended traditional boundaries in the process.

Margaret Leng Tan, also draws from her multicultural background to express her identity, yet instead of feeling displaced like Paik, she embraces her unique heritage.

⁹ Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock, Photographer, 'Restful and Kitsch', Tate Modern.

Although she is of Chinese descent, growing up in Singapore deeply influenced her multicultural identity and artistic perspective. Due to Singapore's vibrant society where diverse cultures coexist, she developed a strong Western influence. In addition, her ethnic music sensibility from her background plays a significant role in her artistic expression. According to Tan, it is how she was able to connect to Cage's music.

Cage's whole philosophy is so entrenched in Asian aesthetics, whether it's his own brand of Zen Buddhism or I Ching or Indian philosophy... You cannot understand his music without understanding his aesthetics. You cannot separate them out. So for me, that was a way to bring me back to my own Asian roots.¹⁰

Tan was fascinated by the Asian elements from encountering Cage's music. This led her not only to become an interpreter of Cage, but also to explore the music of other Western composers who incorporated Asian aesthetics. She also explored how Asian composers put their own heritage into Western music. Ultimately, she became a prominent interpreter of new music, particularly the compositions that blends aesthetics of both the East and the West.

Not because I am Asian, but I'm who I am. I have a foot in either door, because of my whole Western background and my Asian roots. In a way I feel very privileged to be in both worlds. My name kind of sums it up, right? Margaret Leng Tan.¹¹

¹⁰ Margaret Leng Tan; quoted in [Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from different shore: Asians and Asian Americans in classical music*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 169.].

¹¹ Margaret Leng Tan; quoted in [Ibid., 170.].

It is suggested that Tan's blended cultural background played the key role in exploring the intersection between Western classical music and Eastern sensibilities, and toy piano was the medium of her artistic expression. The toy piano acts as an artistic tool for her to push the boundaries of music, explore new sounds and challenge the conventional ideas.

Due to the toy piano's minimal size compared to standard pianos, toy piano performance can take place almost anywhere, while regular piano recitals are typically held in halls where a piano can be moved or fit. This naturally introduces an element of theatricality into the toy piano performance as the stage preparation becomes part of the experience. Therefore, Tan's performance developed into a blend of music concert and theatre. Her performance often features a specific theme, and it requires various props along with toy pianos. For these reasons, she prefers to call her performance a show instead of performance or recital.

There's zillions of little finicky details and you have to be sure that everything is in place. You also have to take care of the lighting and the amplification. It's like a theatre production in every performance.¹²

¹² Margaret Leng Tan; quoted in [Gena Raps, 'Margaret Leng Tan: Toi, Toi, Toy, Interview with Margaret Leng Tan'] <<https://persimmontree.org/fall-2018/toi-toi-toy/>> [accessed on 1 June 2025].

Figure 5.3 Margaret Leng Tan's performance at Greenwood cemetery, South Brooklyn, New York



Her integration of theatricality and her symbolic icon, toy piano aligns closely with George Crumb's approach to music. Crumb's music often incorporates both visual and aural elements to create an immersive experience. Crumb also used toy piano in his composition like Cage, but not only exploring new sounds, it also functions as a symbolic element. For example, in his piece *Ancient voices of children* (1970), the toy

piano in the context of childhood and innocence, serves not only its unique sound that evokes emotional atmosphere of childhood, but also as a symbol of childhood itself as the instrument is traditionally associated with children. This is closely related to Crumb's fascination with mythology. There are several channels of mythification features in his compositions including numerology, syncretism, symbolisation, archaism, ritualism and universalisation. Each of these channels is interconnected and embodies a complex mixture of many influences from various sources such as philosophy, aesthetics, the choice of poetic text, musical language, form, and notation which all are universalised in his music.¹³ Crumb's approach of universalising different elements can be understood as a form of neo-mythologism according to Claude Lévy-Strauss's analysis of myth.¹⁴ Additionally, Lévi-Strauss argues that repetitiveness and symmetry are fundamental structures, particularly both in myths and music. In music, in general, repetition and symmetry are often used to structure compositions such as, musical forms of variation. This explains that Crumb's use of circular notation can be seen as closely related to his interest in mythification. The circle represents wholeness, unity, and eternity which resonate deeply with Crumb's music. The circle is also a powerful symbol in mystical traditions. Crumb's circular notation often involves repetition, which evoke the ideas of endless continuity.

The circle is often associated with the cosmos and the universe. Particularly, in Buddhism, circular shape of mandala is a symbolic representation of the universe, deities, or sacred spaces. Psychotherapist Carl Jung (1875-1961) used mandalas to

¹³ Victoria Adamenko, 'George Crumb's Channels of Mythification', *American Music*, 16, (2005), 325.

¹⁴ Ibid.

represent the wholeness and integration of personality, and it influenced the emergence of neo-mythologism.

Jungian psychoanalysis, with its universalising and metaphorical interpretation of the unconscious play of the imagination, presented a certain trampoline for a huge leap from the psychology of an alienated or oppressed modern individual to the pre-reflexive psychology of archaic society.¹⁵

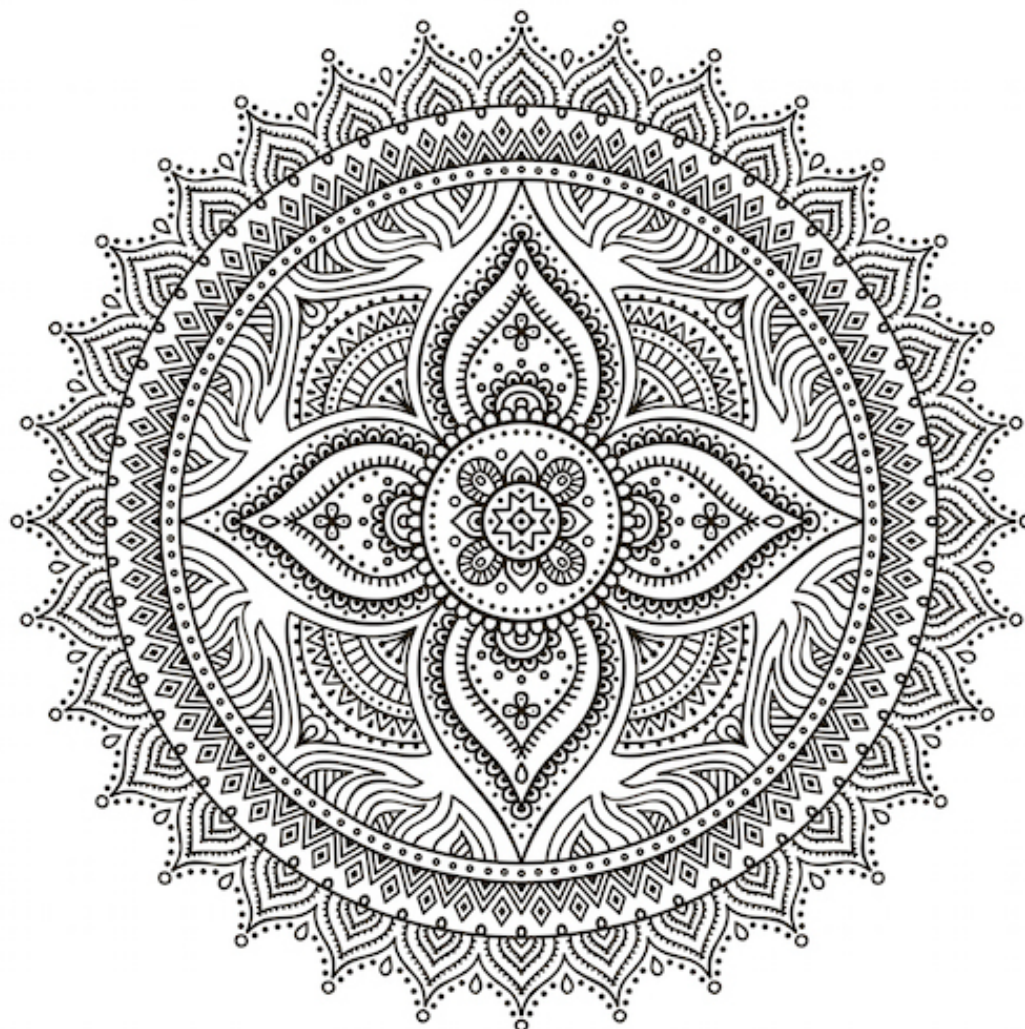
There is much evidence that Crumb's mythification and the idea of circular notation, are interpreted through Jungian terms for achieving his personal wholeness through mandala symbolism.¹⁶ Crumb has mentioned that he read 'Jung's books, and they are one of the sources of his poetics, Lorca's poetry is closely related to the concept of the mandala and Jungian archetypes.'¹⁷

¹⁵ Poetika mifa, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Vostochnaja literature, 2000) 297 cited in Victoria Adamenko, 'George Crumb's Channels of Mythification', *American Music* 16, (2005), 327.

¹⁶ Victoria Adamenko, 'George Crumb's Channels of Mythification', *American Music*, 16, (2005), 329.

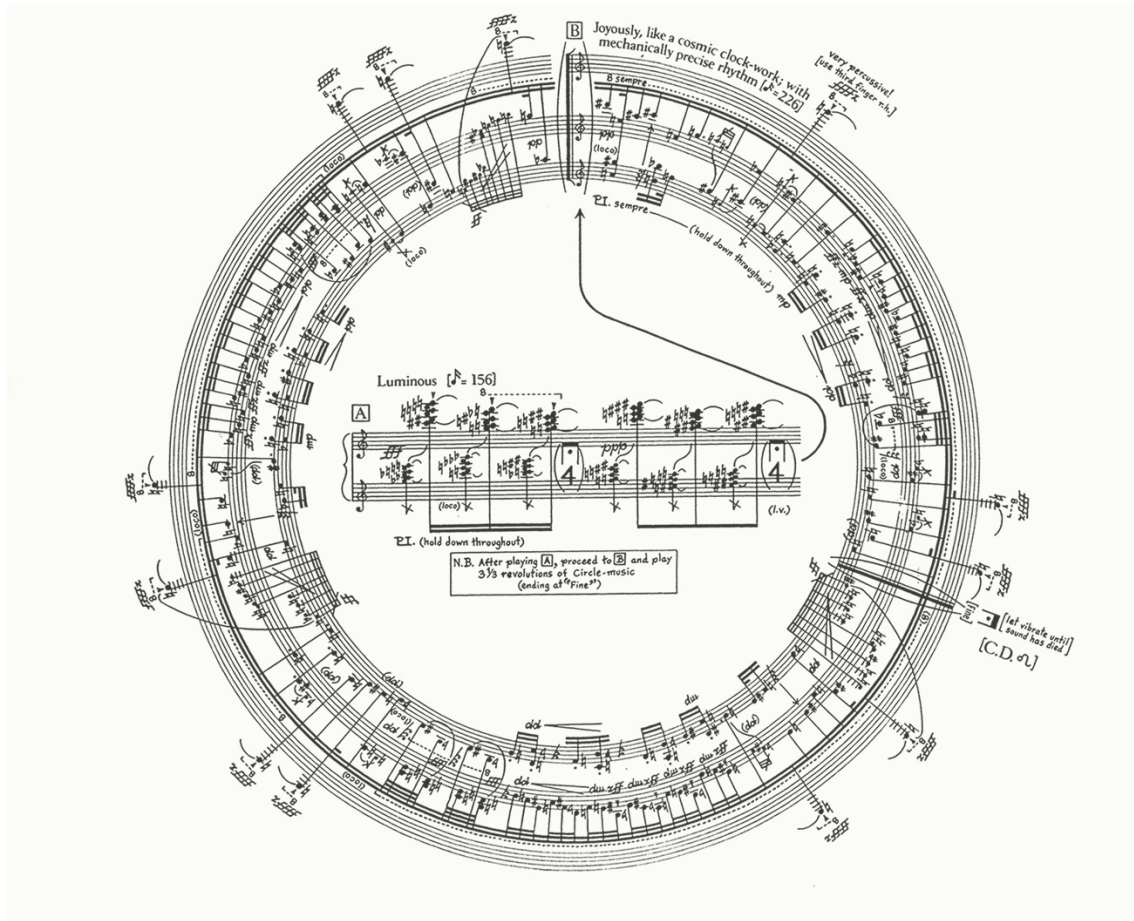
¹⁷ Victoria Adamenko, 'George Crumb's Channels of Mythification', *American Music*, 16, (2005), 328.

Figure 5.4 Mandala circle¹⁸



¹⁸ Image from <<https://www.mandalasforthesoul.com/circle-mandala/>> [accessed on 18 May 2025].

Example 5.1 George Crumb *The magic circle of infinity* (1972-1979), *Makrokosmos*
Book I



The circle shape and its link to mythology convey a reiteration motif which becomes a bridge for Tan's attempt to blend East and West. She often engages with circular concept directly into her artworks by incorporating visual and sonic elements. In her interdisciplinary performance, *Resonates With*, she collaborated with a visual artist, Kim Lim¹⁹ who used repeated shapes in her artworks. Tan paired Lim's artworks with Crumb's piece, *The Magic Circle of Infinity* (1972-1979) (Example 5.1) to convey a

¹⁹ Kim Lim (1936-1997) is a Singaporean-British sculptor and printmaker. She focuses on themes of minimalism, nature by using raw, natural materials such as stone and wood.

connection between art and life through the Eastern sensibility, exploring themes of eternity, infinity, cosmic and Zen.

The word ‘cosmic’ comes to mind and makes me think of the American avant-garde composer, George Crumb.²⁰

Crumb’s *Makrokosmos* series include the twelve fantasy pieces after the zodiac, features a hand-written image score that blends sonic and visual elements. The minimalistic reiteration of a motif whether it forms visually or sonically creates a seamless fusion of Eastern and Western aesthetics.

Tan’s exploration of circular concepts such as Mandala, Jungian archetypes, and Crumb’s circular notation deeply resonates in her through reflecting her own journey of self-discovery and artistic transformation. In particular, Tan’s use of her lifelong struggle with obsessive compulsive disorder serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life. She has described her struggle with OCD as being trapped in a ‘merry-go-round cage’.²¹ Her interpretation of Cage’s work can be seen as symbolically expressing this sense of cyclonical repetition.

Tan opened new pathways for performers to connect with sound beyond the traditional boundaries through Cage’s influences. Her collaborations with Crumb, whose music

²⁰ Margaret Leng Tan; quoted in [CultureLink, ‘Margaret Leng Tan: Art + Live| *Resonates with Margaret Leng Tan*’]

<<https://youtu.be/wlcGSLEHc3E>> [accessed on 7 July 2025].

²¹ Margaret Leng Tan, ‘ANXIETY; Music of the Unquiet Mind’, *The New York Times*, 1 September 2012.

evoke symbols, dreams, and ritual that resonate with the archetype by Jung. Jung's ideas also influenced Joseph Campbell,²² who had a strong impact on Cage's thinking.

In this way, the lineage from Cage to Tan, to Crumb to Jung, and to Campbell, ultimately returns to Cage, is interconnected in a transcendent cycle.

When you come out from a strictly classical background ... it does create a certain mindset. I mean it is inevitable, you gonna survive in that kind of environment ... you also develop a competitive streak ... With Cage, all that became really rather irrelevant. For him, life wasn't about goals or achieving great concrete intentions. For him it was more the process and that is something which is very Zen ... John Cage defined error as merely our inability to adjust immediately from a preconception to an actuality.²³

5.4 Purpose of the case studies

This research with interdisciplinary strategies aims to convey my unique multicultural background through pianism. The three case studies include the process of challenging the ideas that were instilled in me from the experience of rigid piano training in my childhood. In order to break free from the traditional boundaries that are associated with classical music, I incorporated non musical materials such as visual, sonic or theatrical elements. Christopher Small argues that it is not true that performance takes place to

²² Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) is an American writer and mythologist. Campbell and John Cage were close friends. They shared interests in Eastern philosophy and the importance of myth. It is suggested that Campbell might have had a direct influence on Cage's work.

²³ Margaret Leng Tan; quoted in [SinoVision, Margaret Leng Tan 'Stepping out of the Ivory Tower' on YouTube]

<https://youtu.be/a-Px_Z8KQC4> (currently deleted) [accessed on 3 March 2024].

present only a musical work, but musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.²⁴ Small defines ‘music’ not only ‘musical performance’ but to perform, listen and to provide materials for performance.

The term ‘recital’ in the context of a music concert has emerged since the mid-nineteenth century to today’s definition of that one-person performance for the entire event.²⁵ A piano recital, according to Small, indicates the nature of a ritual, ‘An event taking place within our society, at a particular time and in a particular place, involving a particular group of people’.²⁶ These conventions often become an obstacle in classical music and keep it confined to traditional structures.

To express my multiculturalism, it is essential to embrace artistic liberation, which requires experimentation and exploration in new forms of expression that is beyond the traditional boundaries.

Thus, the focus of these case studies is integration of various elements, rather than a solo piano performance. In each case study, I applied different elements and investigated its outcomes. My ultimate aim is to search for my personal identity through exploration of sound, crossing boundaries and reconciliation between Eastern and Western sensibilities.

²⁴ Christopher Small, ‘Why Doesn’t the Whole World Love Chamber Music?’, *American Music* 19, (2001), 343.

²⁵ William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), n.d, quoted in Késia Decoté Rodrigues, ‘For a ‘Dramaturgy of the Piano Recital’ – an investigation of interdisciplinary strategies for live classical piano performances’, (PhD dissertation, Oxford Brookes University 2017), 1.

²⁶ Christopher Small, ‘Performance as Ritual: Sketch for an Enquiry into the True Nature of a Symphony Concert.’ In *Lost in Music* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 8. quoted in Késia Decoté Rodrigues, ‘For a ‘Dramaturgy of the Piano Recital’, (PhD Dissertation, Oxford Brookes University, 2017), 1.

5.5 Three case studies

5.5.1 Case Study 1. Journey Through Time: Piano Performance with Storytelling

Context and Background

This performance ‘Journey Through Time’ was designed to create a piano concert that integrates both music and storytelling. This performance was organised as a Christmas concert in aid of a local community school and I was invited to perform as a local member of the community. The audience members were mainly local residents, who have a broad appreciation of various disciplines of art, as Dalkey village is known for its rich artistic heritage.

When I discussed with the organiser, I realised that this performance would not need to be formal but open to any style as long as it creates a friendly atmosphere, thus the programme should feature pieces that have familiar melodies rather than long and technically difficult pieces.

Taking this opportunity as a part of my research, the project’s research questions addressed the identity of the performer’s role by incorporating non-musical element – storytelling, into classical music performance. In addition, the role also required reshaping a standard musician’s identity into one that creates a more immersive experience for the audience, providing an effect that goes beyond aural.

I created a programme that included various periods from Baroque era to contemporary. The idea was to incorporate narrative between each period, sharing anecdotes and historical events related to the composers and their works.

Unlike a traditional piano recital, where there is no narrative part but solely focused on performance, I aimed to create a more friendly and inviting atmosphere for local audience who were not regular classical music listeners.

Methodology and Artistic elements

As the performance was held during the Christmas season, the theme of performance naturally included festive atmosphere which contributed to the theatrical element in the performance. Another local member helped decorating around the piano to enhance the festive mood. Small suggests, sounds are not sole element to define a performance, but the setting where the performance is taking place also create meanings as well.²⁷ The storytelling aspect played the significant role in the performance to serve as theatrical element in this performance.

This performance created a true community effort behind the scenes. The performance was held in a historical church in the local village, which was provided by the local pastor. Local authorities also generously provided the grand piano. The piano moving and tuning were also done by another local member.

I researched and created historical anecdotes that link each of the pieces to specific events including histories in Ireland. For example, I shared historical accounts of George Frideric Handel's visit to Dublin, and explained how his experiences in Dublin

²⁷ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*, (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 344.

influenced his compositions and performed one of Handel's pieces.²⁸ This approach was particularly effective when performing contemporary music as the audience were not particularly classical music listeners, they were not aware of most of the contemporary pieces or the composers. I provided the context of what contemporary composers aim to compose compared to the past. For example, I performed one of Phillip Glass's pieces²⁹ and explained that his music aimed to provoke a meditative feeling, minimalistic by using the repetition. Minimal music is one of the modern styles of classical music, and Glass's piece served as an example to indicate this aesthetic.

The narrative of the historical anecdotes played the key roles to lead more accessible and engaging for audience to understand classical music pieces.

²⁸ Passacaglia Suite No.7 in G minor HWV. 432 by George Frideric Handel.

²⁹ Etude No. 6 by Philip Glass.

Figure 5.5 A picture from the performance ‘Journey Through Time’ at St Patrick’s Church, Dalkey Village, Ireland



Outcome and Reflection

The feedback from the audience was immensely positive. Many of them shared that they expected a standard piano recital, and many were worried that they would not feel like they understood. However, they shared that the storytelling aspect helped them understand the different music periods, and the style of each composer that they have not encountered before.

The storytelling element not only allowed the audience to connect more deeply with the piano performance, but it also created a meaningful connection between me as a

performer and the audience. Although a performance that combines music and narrative is not exactly considered as a new form of music performance, I have not experienced it before, and it offered an insightful introduction to experimenting and constructing the unconventional approaches.

Table 5.1 Programme structure for the performance ‘Journey Through Time’

Structure	Repertoires/Narratives		
Baroque era	J. P Rameau	J. S Bach	G. F Handel
Storytelling	Historical anecdotes of eighteenth century in Europe and what composers aimed this time of period.		
Classical era	W. A Mozart	F. Schubert	
Storytelling	How romantic composers shifted the focus from strict, formative characters from Classical era to conveying expression and emotion in their melodies.		
Romantic era	F. Chopin	J. Sibelius	
Storytelling	How composers at this time explored new ideas in music such as incorporating minimalism, and use of pentatonic scales to give unique ideas into compositions.		
Impressionism era	C. Debussy	E. Satie	
Storytelling	How modern composers explored unconventional ways and blurred the boundaries of traditional classical music.		
Contemporary era	P. Glass	C. Boiling	

5.5.2 Case study 2. Artist in Residence at St James’s Hospital Dublin: Incorporating everyday hospital sounds into music

Context and Background

This case study is a *Music in Hospital series* project by Mercer’s Institute for Successful Ageing (MISA) at St James’s Hospital collaborating with The Royal Irish Academy of Music. I was one of three musicians and the only pianist for this project.³⁰

³⁰ The three Musicians-in-Artists for Music in Hospital series were two sopranos and a pianist (myself).

According to the report by World Health Organisation(WHO) 2019, there has been an increasing amount of research in recent years on the effect of arts on health and well-being.³¹ As a result, the positive impact of the arts on human's bodies has led many organisations to integrate arts into their programmes. The MISA, a state-of-the-art-facility for integrated clinical service and a hub for world-leading research in ageing provides the musicians with the opportunity to explore and access new spaces for learning, engagement and reflection through new innovative music-in-hospital experiences.

I designed this project to challenge the traditional boundaries of classical music. My curiosity about working with non-musicians in non-musical environments offered valuable insights and allowed me to be able to interpret music through a different lens.

This project required an outcome of an original piece which gave me an opportunity to compose music. Although I studied composition as part of conservatoire education, I never considered myself to compose music, making this another approach of experimentation. Throughout this project, my research questions also arose 'What insights can musicians gain from working with non-musicians particularly hospital staff' and 'How can I, as a musician contribute to the hospital through my music'.

³¹ Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn, 'What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being?'; *A scoping review, Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67*, (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019), 30.

Methodology and Artistic elements

As I was the very first pianist Artist-in-Residence to serve in an Irish hospital, this role was a pioneering endeavour for both the hospital and myself, which naturally led to various experimental approaches.

The process of the residency began with contextual learning for several weeks, which included engaging with various departments of the hospital such as visiting library, laboratories, wards, classrooms for training nurses and doctors, and attending conferences, ceremonies and events in the hospital. At each location, the musicians-in-residence met with specialists of each department and had conversations about their work, its history and how music can positively affect the human body.

I decided to incorporate everyday sounds of the hospital inspired by how Cage redefined sound that blurred boundaries of ‘musical sounds’ and ‘noise’. Using this everyday sound in my composition, would bring the hospital staff to perceive their working environment in a new and meaningful way. Occasionally, I spent time in various locations in the hospital just to absorb sounds. I realised that each place had its unique atmosphere that evokes different emotions. I chose four locations in the hospital and recorded ambient sounds including Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) lab, main hallway, Intensive Care Unit (ICU), and staff restaurant, and blend the recorded sounds into my compositions.

Particularly, visiting the MRI lab and ICU gave me a unique experience as I was able to hear several sounds from the medical machines not as a patient but as a musician. I realised that the hospital staff would hear these sounds everyday and their perception of

this sound would be different from mine. Visiting ICU was an especially profound experience. While I was honoured to be able to visit the unit as a musician not as a patient, it was challenging from the beginning as it required additional documents and preparation to enter the ICU to protect both patients and myself. The atmosphere was so intense that I could not hold back my tears. It was a place where there is a fine line between life and death. A music therapist was working by playing the harp. I captured the sounds of beautiful melodies by harp alongside sounds from various life support machines simultaneously.

Along with the everyday sounds from MRI and ICU, I chose the main hallway and staff restaurant to represent everyday life in the hospital. Particularly, these locations evoked a sense of equality and community within the hospital. For example, the staff restaurant evoked an atmosphere that there is no boundaries between positions of hospital staff whether they are doctor, nurse, chef, porter or any position, and I witnessed that all staff enjoyed their meals together while setting aside challenges of their job. It was a place that provides the basic human needs.

The four locations were chosen to blend the hospital ambient sounds into my composition as an artistic approach of integrated music and creativity into hospital settings.

The highlight of the residency was to engage with hospital staff from various departments throughout four workshops. The four groups were Human Resources, Nurses, Doctors and Catering staff. Each workshop includes activities that discuss the relationship between their work and music. During the workshop, the discussion involved key questions:

- What is your relationship with music?
- What is your relationship with healthcare/your job?
- How does your work at SJH impact you personally?
- Can you pick a story to share from your life that brought you to this place?
- Can you describe an average day for you? What would be your good day and bad day?
- What does that look like for you?

Any staff at the hospital naturally requires compassion towards patients as part of their job. During the workshop sessions, I collected emotions that were evoked from the discussion about their job at the hospital. I created four original compositions inspired by the words that I noted down reflecting on their stories.

This interdisciplinary work deepened my understanding on avant-garde movement and which became the foundation for shaping my new artistic identity with a unique background and perspective.

Outcome and Reflection

This project was completed with a showcase where musicians presented compositions and performances. The four original pieces by me that incorporated with four specific locations within the hospital were well-received by hospital staff. The performance was rather meaningful experience for hospital staff, influencing that this project can create a connection between hospital staff and musicians through music.

There were several challenges working with non-musicians in a non-musical environment such as scheduling with busy hospital staff. The unpredictable nature of the hospital made it difficult to coordinate scheduling workshops.

Another challenge was the technical aspect of the project. The residency involved a pioneering and experimental project, as it was my first experience in incorporating hospital ambient sounds into my music. This required me to be familiarised with technical tools such as using laptop, audio interface and sound software to integrate the recorded sounds with live music for showcase performance. As a classically trained pianist, I had no prior experience performing with recorded sounds or using technical equipment in my performance. Learning these new skills was challenging but rewarding, pushed the boundaries of my artistic journey and embraced the possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration. The experience of incorporating multimedia into live music was particularly related to expressing the sense of displacement that I encountered through the work of Nam June Paik. The incorporation of sounds from four different locations created a sense of hybridity that conventional and unconventional elements co-existed. This challenged the traditional musical boundaries simultaneously provided me an opportunity to redefine what music can become.

This collaborative process offered both musicians and hospital staff a way to see their work from a new perspective. The project also established a unique connection between musicians and healthcare staff which demonstrated how music and storytelling can foster empathy and connection. This experience has inspired future interdisciplinary collaborations within healthcare. As the first generation of musician Artist-in-Residence at St James's Hospital, the project created a new path of creative projects in the intersection of Arts and Health.

Figure 5.6 A picture from the showcase day at St James’s Hospital



5.5.3 Case study 3. Improvisation (ContemPLAY)

Context and Background

ContemPLAY is a music festival-workshop for contemporary and improvised music organised by the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in Vilnius, Lithuania. I participated in this festival where I was assigned to the improvisational ensemble. The festival provided lectures and lessons to all participants that focused on experimentation, improvisation and creativity that required each participant to perform as part of an improvised ensemble on the final day of the festival.

As a classically-trained musician, learning improvisation gave me new insights into the boundaries of my musical practice. Most of the participants came from backgrounds in jazz, rock, folk and non-classical music, with many being guitarists, drummers and singers. I was one of the few pianists and the only musician with a classical background and no prior experience of improvisation which gave me challenges.

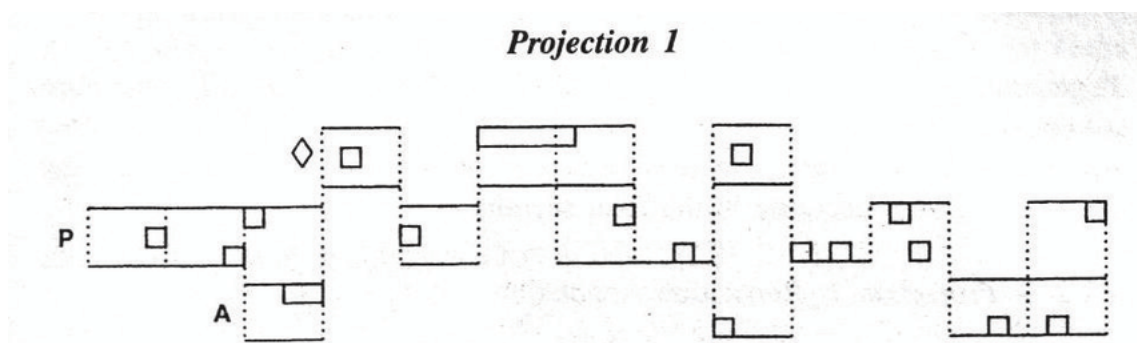
Methodology and Artistic elements

It was challenging to collaborate with experienced improvisational musicians, as I had no prior knowledge of performing without having traditional music scores. Additionally, learning to interpret unconventional music scores, such as graphic scores or text scores, provided me with new insights on interpretation skills. Unlike conventional performance methods, improvisation emphasised listening to other performers and communicating through non-intentional movement.

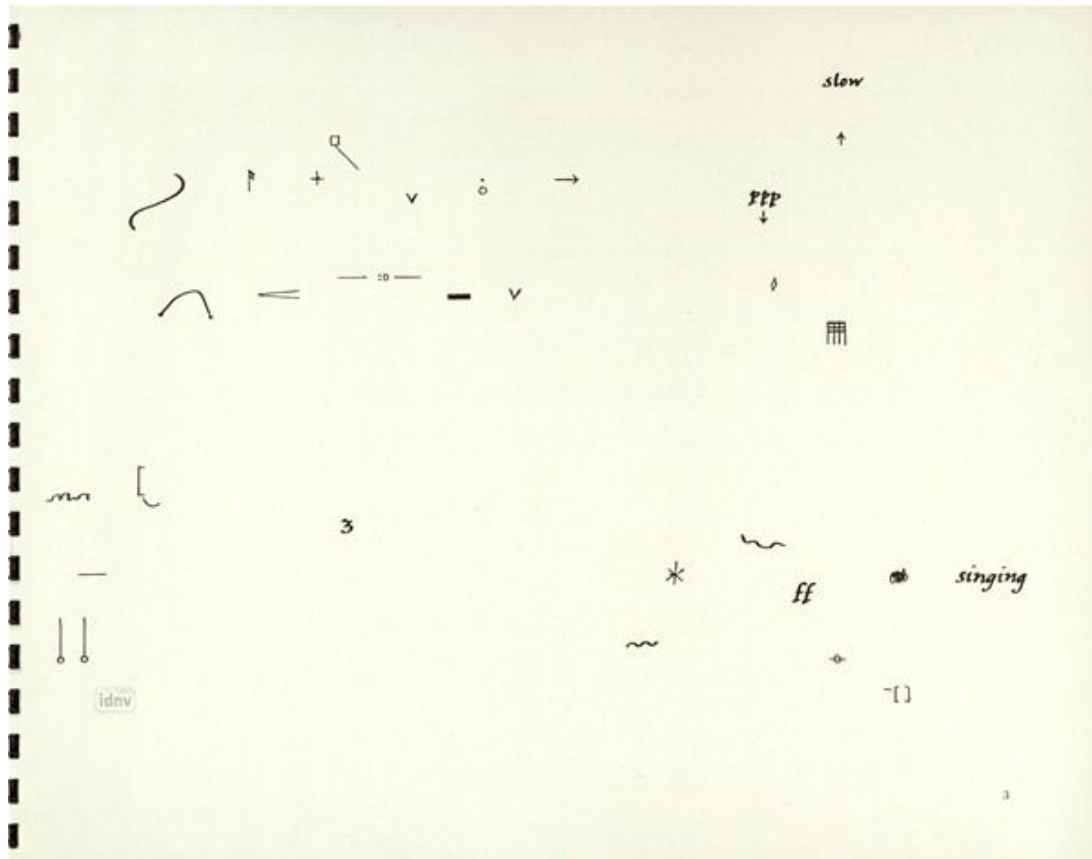
Unlike the previous two case studies, this case study only involved the musical element, yet it pushed beyond the conventional boundaries in music. While this study remained within the musical realm, as the nature of avant-garde, it intersected with various art forms, such as literature and visual arts. For instance, *Tiger's mind* (1967) by Cornelius Cardew (Example 5.4), and the graphic scores by Molton Feldman (Example 5.2).

Before starting with improvised music, participants studied graphic scores, that offer performers a visually-driven music score instead of traditional musical notation (Example 5.2, 5.3, 5.4). This naturally allows performers to exercise their improvisation and interpretation skills. While classical music requires similar skillset, it provides detailed instructions written in music scores. In contrast, graphic scores offer little to no specific instructions on how to perform or even which instruments to play. This openness encourages performers for multiple explorations and interpretations by emphasising the abstract character of the improvised music.

Example 5.2 Molton Feldman *Projection 1* (1950) for solo cello



Example 5.3 Christian Wolff *Edges* (1968)



Moreover, improvised music does not provide performers with any music scores or any set rules to follow. There is less distinction between composer and performer. Instead, the focus shifts to the immediate connection and collaboration between each performer and creates spontaneous creation in present moment.

In Jazz music, improvisation is a key element that offers the freedom, unlike classical music that focuses on its intended sounds. Traditionally improvisation also exists in classical music such as basso continuo, ornamentation and cadenza, yet it tends to have limited application compared to purely improvised music.

However, improvisation is not formless music making, it is rather a form-making music. I have learned that in improvisation I need to create sequences and build upon a foundational harmonic structure. Most importantly, it requires a collaborative process where musicians influence each other's performance. This was particularly challenging for me as, by nature of being a pianist, I am accustomed to performing solo. According to musician, Ann Farber, in improvisation 'Our aim is to play together with the greatest possible freedom – which, far from meaning without constraint, actually means to play together with sufficient skill and communication to be able to select proper constraints in the course of the piece, rather than being dependent on precisely chosen ones'.³²

Performing improvised music was particularly challenging for me in terms of expressing 'freedom' in musical performance. This freedom does not remain in the realm of sounds, but also in the performance methods. I observed many performers, regardless of their instruments, that they often used non-musical materials such as using toothbrush, whisk, coins, wood sticks and mallets which reminded me of prepared piano by Henry Cowell or John Cage. Although I had experience of performing prepared piano pieces by Cage and Cowell, embracing these unconventional approaches within the context of musical practice was another challenge I had to accept. Unlike following the composers' written instructions for preparing the piano, this experience offered me complete freedom of choice. I incorporated everyday objects (or non-musical materials) into the piano to create unconventional sounds.

³² Daniel Belgrad, 'The culture of spontaneity: Improvisation and the arts in postwar America', (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2. quoted in David Borgo, 'Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music', *Black Music Research Journal*, 22, (2002), 167.

This process particularly resonated with my experience of multiculturalism. While my roots remain in Korean identity, I have continually adopted new cultures and languages in new places. In a similar way, my musical background remains within traditional musical boundaries, while I adopt non-musical materials to create new sounds.

Although this experience was offered in a realm of complete freedom, the new sounds I created were encouraged to harmonise with other musicians rather than being isolated.

In this sense, this experience mirrored the key character of multiculturalism that requires negotiating one's identity while finding ways to co-exist in a diverse environment.

Sextet—The Tiger's Mind

by Cornelius Cardew

Daypiece

The tiger fights the mind that loves the circle that traps the tiger. The circle is perfect and outside time. The wind blows dust in tigers' eyes. Amy reflects, relaxes with her mind, which puts out buds (emulates the tree). Amy jumps through the circle and comforts the tiger. The tiger sleeps in the tree. High wind. Amy climbs the tree, which groans in the wind and succumbs. The tiger burns.

Nightpiece

The tiger burns and sniffs the wind for news. He storms at the circle; if inside to get out, if outside to get in. Amy sleeps while the tiger hunts. She dreams of the wind, which then comes and wakes her. The tree trips Amy in the dark and in her fall she recognizes her mind. The mind, rocked by the wind tittering in the leaves of the tree, and strangled by the circle, goes on the nod. The circle is trying to teach its secrets to the tree. The tree laughs at the mind and at the tiger fighting it.

Outcome and Reflection

The final performance led our improvised ensemble to evoke the sounds of nature particularly sounds of birds. It was initiated by the saxophonist and gradually unfolded as each instrumentalist create their own sounds like a rich nature soundscape. The performance ended with a chorus of birdlike sounds by all instrumentalists. As the nature of improvised music, this was neither planned nor discussed beforehand.

This experience particularly reflected the way I navigate my multicultural identity in everyday life. As the ensemble produced diverse sounds that they gradually came together to evoke nature sounds, I contributed my own part without a clear destination or goal, instead listening and responding to be part of the ensemble. This experience demonstrated how I integrate multiple cultural backgrounds within my own sense of self.

Through these unconventional musical practices, I realised that, as a performer, it is essential to embrace the ambiguity of artistic disciplines, particularly within contemporary art. The freedom that new music offers often enhances the uncertainty of variable outcomes and the collaborative process of art making. My interdisciplinary practice has taught me the importance of merging different art forms which create completely unique results.

Thus, the participation of this festival demonstrated the expanded role of a pianist by exploring improvisation and collaboration in music-making.

5.6 Conclusion

I was able to explore my multicultural identity through experiencing and experimenting with various forms of avant-garde performances inspired by three avant-garde artists, John Cage, Nam June Paik and Margaret Leng Tan. The challenges I encountered throughout these projects led me become more aware of my values and allowed me to embrace my unique background, most importantly my heritage, Korea. This finding values ultimately opened the new possibilities for creative practices by performing piano in unconventional ways and experimenting with diverse sounds. I discovered that my unique background can become a powerful artistic tool that allows to create my own sounds.

Conclusion

This dissertation is grounded in my personal journey as a pianist. At the beginning of this research, I aimed to discover how avant-garde piano performance can serve as a medium for exploring identity. My intention was to deconstruct the effects of the strict classical training of my childhood and reconstruct a new performance practice that aligns with my authentic self. While I recognise the value of traditional training methods for classical music, the process of this research particularly necessitated revisiting painful memories of my own early training which brought emotional challenges along the way. Yet as a classical pianist, this process has been a unique experience and essential to understand the foundations of my complex sense of self. Ultimately, confronting with my shadow self³³ led me to accept and embrace my past experiences which allow me to integrate it into my authentic self.

The three avant-garde artists, John Cage, Nam June Paik and Margaret Leng Tan provided the frameworks of this research. Their contributions to avant-garde practice are significant and their work is deeply influential in my own discovery and practice particularly, in navigating between East and West. My ongoing inquiry had been finding my coherent identity within multifaceted identity and how to convey it in my music performance. Through the frameworks of these artists, I found new pathways for conveying the feeling of displacement that often shadowed my piano performance.

³³ The term 'shadow self' was coined by psychoanalyst Carl Jung. This term refers to the hidden, dark side of the human psyche that lies in the unconscious and stores the unwanted, unprocessed qualities of the self, including the life experiences we ignore in order to survive.

Cage's use of Eastern philosophies particularly adopting Zen Buddhism and *I Ching* opened a new pathway for me. Despite his western background, he created compositions that convey the contexts of impermanence, silence and non-attachment. Contrasting with my early training, this offered me a new perspective in music. Paik's use of technology and global perspective offered me an insight to convey my feelings of dislocation and the absence of identity in my performance. Particularly, his integration of Korean and Western identity led me to be able to merge my multicultural identity with my own heritage. Lastly, Tan's pioneering use of the toy piano exemplified how multicultural identity can shape a unique performance and be authentically conveyed in the performance. All the three artists not only bridged the gap between East and West through their own medium but also offered me models of possibility through their use of Asian philosophies. Most importantly, their work taught me to integrate my music performance into my own unique life rather than separating the two. This perspective profoundly shaped my understanding of how I can cultivate and express my authentic self through music performance.

In chapter 5, I applied the lessons drawn from the three artists to my own practice. The process of exploration and experimentations involved engagement with different repertoires, instruments, and methods on my practice. This experience embodied the expression of my multicultural background through my piano performance reflecting how I navigate multifaceted identity in everyday life.

The questions about identity through artistic practice remain open and offer room for further exploration and continued research.

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