Controlling Liberation: David Tudor and the "Experimental" Sound Ideal

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Presented at the Getty Research Institute Symposium, "The Art of David Tudor," in 2001.

ABSTRACT

John Cage's music-philosophical goal of breaking down the hierarchical relationship between composer and performer is well understood; the role of the performer generally - and of David Tudor in particular - is less theorized. Cage's Zen-inspired conception of the indeterminate score abandons a conception of the musical work as a determinate configuration of sounds with respect to succession and simultaneity and replaces it with a system of procedures for a performer-based determination. In indeterminate works, the performer makes many of the determinations of musical sound that had been made by the composer, thus breaking down hard distinctions between composer and performer. The blurring of creative and re-creative role boundaries has provoked scant scrutiny in music studies, because these studies typically rest on models of a composer's creative agency. Here I will demonstrate the particular role that David Tudor played in Cage's indeterminate works and I will make three arguments, two specific and one overall: First, Tudor played as significant a role as John Cage in mapping out a sounding aesthetic of musical indeterminacy in the 1950s and early 60s and that this aesthetic is more properly attributable to a group of people, not to a single, creative agent. Second, the aesthetic of musical indeterminacy is more than a set of compositional/performance procedures and instead constitutes an "experimental sound ideal." Overall, I argue that the "experimental sound ideal" had as its banner an aesthetic of liberation and that such liberation was won by control over the musical parameters through procedures of quantification. Different kinds of evidence from the David Tudor Papers at the Getty Research Institute provide a basis for my arguments in this paper.

First, letters to Tudor from Cage, Feldman, Brown, and others indicate that the undefined relation between composer and sounding result in the indeterminate works was nonetheless accompanied by aesthetic criteria that would allow a "correct" performance. Such sounding criteria suggest that a "sound ideal" operated within this group of musicians, including primarily but not exclusively Cage, Tudor, Wolff, Feldman, Brown, Young, and Cardew. The letters also suggest that Tudor played a central role in defining this "experimental sound ideal" through his performances and his performance practice.

Second, the experimental sound ideal entails procedures that enable both performative uniqueness and a kind of sounding objectivity that is premised on the erasure of subjective agency. Here I argue that these procedures allow certain stylistic features to emerge and that these features define the governing sound ideal. Tudor's performance procedures allow him not simply to avoid traditional types of melodic, harmonic, and formal constructions but even further to realize an alternate type of musical design. The papers clearly show that Tudor approached his realizations of the indeterminate works by objectifying the musical parameters with quantifying procedures of measurement and lists. Thus, musical rhythm becomes, metaphorically, events in space, and sound quality becomes a performance action. I demonstrate the aesthetic effects of these quantifying procedures with sound examples of "Cartridge Music," "Fontana Mix," and "Variations II," both from commercially released recordings and from the sound examples of the Tudor Papers.

FULL PAPER

John Cage's music-philosophical goal of breaking down the hierarchical relationship between composer and performer has been the subject of much scholarly discussion and has been understood as a defining component of the practices of the "experimentalists." The indeterminate works have come to epitomize this dissolution since, as Cage theorized, the composer relinquishes control of the sounding outcome of a work We know well what Cage's compositional intent was in this regard. Within the last 10 years or so, there has been increased attention payed to the performance side of the relationship and to performer-intent. Studies of David Tudor, in particular, have illuminated his performance processes in an effort to demonstrate the virtually-compositional role he played in the "sounding" of the indeterminate works. While both types of studies are crucial to understanding the nature of the

musical practices of the "experimentalists," they sustain a kind of thinking about creativity and authorship that was being called into question by the actions of the musicians involved during the 50s and 60s.

Cage's Zen-inspired conception of the indeterminate score abandons idea of the musical work as a determinate configuration of sounds with respect to succession and simultaneity and replaces it with a set of procedures for a performer-based determination of what sounds will be heard in performance. A concept of "work" or "piece" still operates but within a context of freedom from the tradition-based constraints of musical style and expressivity. Within the context of the traditional paradigm of composer-based expression, the performers of Cage's indeterminate pieces were afforded an unprecedented liberty. Recognizing the significance of David Tudor's creative agency, one might well assert that such performative liberty arose in part because of his creative and recreative musical skills. I propose here a tack that does not assume the creative/recreative boundary and builds instead upon a model of community-based music making. Such a model decenters the notion of creativity from the individual and spreads it out to a group of people who collectively define sound characteristics, what I'll call a "sound ideal." This sound ideal is similar in a general way to the notion of style but in some specific ways it is quite distinct.

The "sound ideal" is similar to the notion of style if we understand style as referring to the general characteristics of a group of works. Style is characterized by qualities of sound organization—specific details of timbre, rhythm, pitch, texture, and form—that are heard as similar in some way. Beyond this very general definition, the concepts of sound ideal and style diverge. Musical style is often thought of as an after-the-fact observation of similarity, but what I am suggesting here is more in line with conceptions of "zeitgeist" or Foucauldian "episteme." The sound ideal as I am proposing it here is a "sound image" that is shared by a group of people and serves as an active framework for musical creation. The sound ideal is a communal conception that is in flux but yet provides guiding criteria for choice and for evaluation of value and acceptability.

The concept of sound ideal links Tudor and Cage together as active creators. Rather than thinking of John Cage as the creative agent and David Tudor as the recreative agent, I am proposing that what operated for Cage and Tudor, as well as some others, was a communal understanding and projection of a sound ideal. Such a notion diffuses issues of artistic intention since it does not presume a single causal agent. Furthermore, while I think there was a fundamental tension in how the musicians in this "experimental" group understood themselves with respect to issues of subjective agency and of "the musical work," a concept of sound ideal can better take account of musical practices of indeterminacy and chance, and further, it responds to the inherent implications of the breakdown of the hierarchical relationship between composer and performer.

Jazz musicians and scholars are well-acquainted with issues of the blurring of recreative/creative boundaries and the guiding role of sound ideal for musical performance. My understanding of the sound ideal and the concept of a communal articulation of musical constraints bears some debt to those musical practices. There are, however, some differences: first, the legacy of written notational practices for music of European origin, and second, the vestiges of creative subjectivity linked to compositional intent. The lingering effects of notation and subjective agency operate not only in the practices of musicians but also of critics and scholars. Notions of improvisational framework and intersubjective creative intent provide a more productive framework for understanding the practices of the "experimentalists."

The group of people that may be identified most readily with the articulation of the experimental sound ideal include John Cage, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown. Others whose later contributions were notable include La Monte Young, Pauline Oliveros, and Cornelius Cardew. This group worked together in various ways in the immediate post-war years and through their exchanges and performances shaped this sounding ideal. While Cage and Tudor played significant roles in defining the sound ideal, their contributions were not decisive. The sense of communal sound ideal was made articulate and explicit in the indeterminate scores of Cage and the graphic scores of Brown and Wolff. These scores not only played a role in dissolving the creative/re-creative boundaries but further by their very openness fostered the operation of an implicit sound ideal as functioning framework.

Evidence for the functioning of such a framework takes two forms. First, there are statements made by members of the experimental group which suggest that a "correct" performance of the indeterminate work exists. Second, the

sound characteristics of recorded performances of the indeterminate works project a similarity that I attribute to this sound ideal.

In an interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Cage suggests that "correct" performance is possible.

> Cage: This giving of freedom to the individual performer began to interest me more and more. And given to a musician like David Tudor, of course, it provided results that were extraordinarily beautiful. When this freedom is given to people who are not disciplined and who do not start—as I've said in some many of my writings—from zero (by zero I mean the absence of likes and dislikes), who are not, in other words, changed individuals, but who remain people with particular likes and dislikes, then of course, the giving of freedom is of no interest whatsoever. (*Conversing with Cage*, 1988) p. 67.

The mere determination of whether a performer engages likes and dislikes implies a prior basis for judgment. In other words, in the absence of likes and dislikes, one ought not be able to distinguish if one has likes or dislikes. And further, since Cage himself is able to ascribe "beauty" to David Tudor's performances, then he must possess some criteria of judgment.

This sense of a background of aesthetic criteria is present in the observations of others who participated in or were associated with the experimental group. Statements in some of the letters in the Tudor Papers attest to the possibility of such aesthetic criteria. One such statement occurs in a letter undated but probably from the late 50s or early 60s. In a letter to Cage, the author, "Ann" writes about a concert given by La Monte Young and Terry Riley.

> I too agree about not having criteria and this doesn't make me unhappy but there are bad actions and this I think was one of them.

In another letter to Tudor, Cornelius Cardew remarks about a Cage performance in England: "[I] didn't use a watch. Is this legitimate?" He follows this question with the aphoristic retort "No such thing." The fact that he raises questions of legitimacy is a signal of the underlying and unarticulated sense of a controlling sound ideal. In all of these statements, the implicit references to unarticulated criteria in the context of a stated desire for freedom from the constraint of tradition were symptoms of an underlying tension that animated the experimental group.

Cage's statement quoted previously suggests not only that there are criteria that guide musical indeterminacy but further that David Tudor played a central role in delineating those criteria. Here I would also suggest that not only did Tudor play a central role in articulating the sound ideal but further that his musical creativity as performer helped to give a particular quality to the experimental "sound" itself. There is a telling letter from Cage to Tudor, rather early in their professional relation, in which Cage makes explicit Tudor's bodily-oriented expertise as a performer. Cage writes in a letter from roughly the late 50s:

> Having besides no ear for music, also no kinesthetic sense (which by the way is my present explanation for the chance that you are a pianist and not a composer—you have a strong kinesthetic sense since listening to your conversation is like coming to a theater)…

As Cage suggests, Tudor's particular type of engagement in musical production as a performer gave him a different kind of perspective than those thinking of themselves as composers. When considering some of the specific procedures that may be identified with the experimental sound ideal in Tudor's performances a bit later, I will suggest that Tudor's more bodily-based and performative understanding of musical creation contributed in unique ways to the articulation of the experimental sound ideal.

Let me now turn to a discussion of the sound characteristics of the experimental sound ideal. I will approach this from three perspectives: first, how the sound ideal was conceptualized, second, what procedures were utilized to achieve the sounding features, and third, brief suggestion of the sounding features characteristic of the sound ideal as they appear in some of Tudor's performances.

Concept of the Sound Ideal

In the broadest terms, the experimental sound ideal has as its banner an aesthetic of liberation which is intimately entwined with post-World War II concerns for political and personal freedoms. The liberation of Europe and parts of Asia from the control of an existing and corrupt system of government and of the governmental leaders has a fairly straightforward analog in music studies. Previous 19th and early 20th century musical traditions from Europe provided a convenient target for transcendence in the name of liberation. The older music traditions were associated with notions of subjective genius and of rule-bound musical practices that were understood as unnecessarily fettering musical essences and spontaneity. Playing out within the larger context of global and national politics, the liberatory goals of musical creation within the experimental group were embodied by a concern for uniqueness and objectivity.

Uniqueness

Like the high modernists of musical determinism--Boulez, Babbitt, Stockhausen-- the experimentalists understood the liberation from musical tastes of the past as a quest for uniqueness. In a letter to Tudor, Cage writes:

> The guiding principle for performance should be to act so that each action is itself (that means infinitely different and incomparable, single, never before or ever later to occur, so that each movement makes history).

Perpetual uniqueness, however, is not an absolute quality and, while possible on a micro-level of combination, is not achievable at higher levels of comprehension. In order to project a sense of musical uniqueness musicians relied on distinctions from traditional modes of musical organization as a way of assuring perceived singularity. In other words, goals of uniqueness have a reactionary component that depend on negation.

The reactionary component was expressed in statements about "the cleansing" role of the experimental sound. Such statements occur in the published works and in private communications in the Tudor Papers. For instance, in a letter to Cage, Tudor writes about a concert devoted to "ear-cleaning" in which the audience was "well-stunned." The unique and cleansing sound of a musical performance may only be perceived and understood as such within a context in which the past must be overcome.

Objectivity

Hand in hand with uniqueness is a concept of musical objectivity. For the experimentalists, the musical traditions of the past were infused with the bias of individual taste—that of the composer and the listener especially. Freedom from the bias of subjective taste was achievable in musical sounds which projected a kind of objectivity, and such a sense of objectivity could be achieved through a transcendence of tradition—or in positive terms, through uniqueness.

Procedures used to Obtain Uniqueness and Objectivity

Quantified Action

Liberation from the bias of musical tradition was won by control over the musical parameters through procedures of "quantified action." Quantification both enabled a sense that subjectivity would be transcended and participated in a more broadly based cultural scientism in the post-war years. While Cage and Tudor both employed methods of quantifying pitch, timbre, rhythm texture, and form through a variety of procedures, I'll focus here on Tudor's.

In the remaining preparatory materials for specific pieces in the Tudor Papers, two sorts of quantifying lists may be observed: what I'll call numerical and actional lists.

Numerical lists: These are quite simply lists of numbers which were measurements Tudor made in order to determine the parameters specified in the instructions of the indeterminate pieces.

Actional Lists: These are lists that specify sound in a variety of ways. (Refer to Example I—below) As Example I shows, some indicate the sounding result—single tones, clusters—and suggest indirectly an action. Other directly specify things to do—sweeps, slaps, scrapes—and the tools to be used—plastic, thimbles, mike, cartridge. The specification of action focuses on production but does imply through metaphor the gestural and timbral characteristics of the sounding result. For instance: "Rubbed sweep" differs from "cartridge sweep" or plastic slap differs from a thimble (metallic) slap.

The emphasis on action rather than on resultant sound within the context of a focus on quantification plays a crucial role in what is achieved in actual sound during performance. It is in this actional component that the bodily-based nature of Tudor's musical thinking resides. The actional lists are indicative of how sound conception and design find their genesis in Tudor's "kinesthetic sense," as Cage would put it.

Example I, Transcription of One of Tudor's Lists

10 Types of events

1. Single tones, var. of amp
2. clusters with var. of amp
3. Single tones
4. Multiple sweeps (rub) short (no ped.)
5. Inside slaps, plastic & thimbles
6. Plastic vert. On bridge with hi amp.
7. Plastic scrape on bridge
8. Feeds (mike) long low short h.
9. Cartridge sweeps
10. Cartridge with prep.

The Sounding Features of the Experimental Sound Ideal

Verbal Suggestions of the Sound Ideal:

Consider these passages from letters that are suggestive about the sound ideal

Letter from Tudor to Cage
Reflecting on an experiential difference between Cage's Music of Changes and a piece
by Boulez he was playing at the time: "in Boulez the space seems to be out in front of one, in one's line of aural vision, as it were; and in your piece the space is around one, that is present in a new dimension..."

Letter from Stockhausen to Tudor
"But Cage has 'space,' and we are too dense, and we do–myself before all–too much which is not necessary, which has not the most efficacity."

Each of these comments refer to aspects of rhythm, gestural character, and form in Cage's music from the 1950s and are suggestive for thinking about the "experimental sound ideal" as Tudor articulates it. In the remainder of the paper I will play examples from Tudor's performances most likely from the 1960s that are either in the Tudor Papers, published commercially, or taped from a live performance.
Recordings Considered for

From the Tudor Papers:
R046: Cage, Variations II–"Take 1 (37:40)"
R047: Cage, Variations II–"Takes 2 and 3 (27:42)"
R048: Cage, Variations II–"Take 4 (19:26)
R232: Cage, Variations II–Most likely a tape of the Columbia recording
R233: Wolff, "Takes 1-6" [Wolff, For 1, 2, or 3 People, Tudor, organ]
R234: Wolff, "Takes 7-11 and Room Tone"

Commercially Distributed Version of Cage, Variations II: David Tudor, piano and electronics
Columbia MS 7051 (1967)

Live Tape: 1964–'Tudorfest'
Co-sponsored by radio station KPFA, Berkeley, and the San Francisco Tape Music Center" from the collection of Professor Peter Winkler, Department of Music, SUNY Stony Brook.
Two performances of Cage, Variations II, David Tudor, piano and electronics: 1 and 8 April, 1964

Rhythmic characteristics
I begin with Tudor's sense of an enveloping as opposed to an "out front" sense of temporal space. This differing temporal sense is linked to a "non-gridded" articulation of time. Traditional music notation produces an implicit temporal grid that contextualizes the temporal progress of musical sound. Without such an implicit grid, events in musical time occupy a relational temporal space into which listeners may place themselves. The resulting overall sense is one in which events "float" and articulate spans of time.

(Sound Example 1: R047 Variations II (Take 2), 1:55-3:00)

Gestural Characters

For the recordings of indeterminate works considered here, I have analyzed gestural characters that contribute to the realization of the experimental sound ideal. Two kinds of issues arise with respect to these gestural characters. These characters embody both an aesthetic engagement of the non-aesthetic sound world and the actional basis of their creation. In other words, the musical significance of the gestural characters is essentially linked on one hand, to the aestheticizing of sounds one might encounter in "real" or non-aesthetic contexts, and on the other hand, to the presence of the bodily gestures required to produce the sounds as musically significant. I can only suggest some of these features with a couple of examples.

Sound Example 2: R234 Wolff [for 1, 2, or 3 Players], 0:10-1:00
Exemplifies "Scrapes" and "electric buzz"

Sound Example 3: 047 Variations II (Take 3), 18:30-19:30
Exemplifies "Feedback"

Sound Example 4: "Tudorfest" Tape: Beginning of Performance A, 1:00-2:00
Exemplifies: "Feedback" to "Pulses" to "Whacks"

Form

Finally, form in the recordings considered here is generated by processes of development, combination, and succession.

Sound Example 5: R048 Variations II (Take 4), 0:31-1:10
Exemplifies Development of "rustling/scratchies"

Sound Example 6: R046 Variations II (Take 1), 13:26-14:15
Exemplifies Combination of "Scrapes," "Feedback," and "Rumbles"

Formal Succession

Example II below summarizes the succession of the Gestural Characters in R048 Variations II (Take 4)

0:31 ARustling/scratchies@
2:07 AWhack/Reverb@ Gesture; Rustle@
2:20 Silence
3:34 ASoft Rustling@
5:27 ALow Hum + Rustling@

6:27 Silence
7:21 AWhack/Reverb@ Gesture
7:23 Silence
8:11 AHigh scrape@, sparse
8:55 ARustling@
9:40 AWhistle plus scrapes@: increasing activity
11:27 Silence
11:50 AScratch to loud scrapes (in waves)@: gradually increasing activity
13:30 Transforms into and adds Ahelicopter@Bgradually slowing
13:56 Silence
14:10 Sparse Arustles@ into Silence
15:12 AWhack/Reberb@ and Arustles@ into Silence
16:19 Sparse AWhack/pluck@
16:55 ALow Hum@
17:55 APulsing Tape Hiss@ into Silence

Concluding Remarks

While the aesthetic of indeterminacy finds an origin in the transience of experience, recording technology has afforded 20th and 21st century music scholars the possibility of repeated hearing and study of the performative aspects of musical sound. This recording technology proves particularly valuable in the case of the indeterminate works that were conceptually insistent on the ephemeral. As scholars begin to study and compare the sounds that were produced in performance, we will be able to gain a better understanding of the musical goals of the experimental group and how they articulated a recognizable sound ideal. My study is certainly not the end of this process–more likely only a beginning.