

# Music & Musical Performance

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***John Cage: Music for Piano 4–84 Overlapped*,. Pascale Berthelot, piano. Collection Cuicatl YAN.006—64 minutes**

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## Audio Review

*John Cage: Music for Piano 4–84 Overlapped.* Pascale Berthelot, piano. Collection Cuicatl YAN.006—64 minutes

Cage's *Music for Piano* (1952–53, 1955–56, 1962) comprises 85 pieces, each one page. The pitch material for these pieces derive from Cage's so-called point drawing system, by which Cage intensified imperfections he observed in the paper he wrote on and added staves to turn the points into notes, using various sorts of chance operations to determine other aspects such as cleffing, accidentals, and mode of performance (plucked vs. played conventionally).

Nos. 4–84 can be performed singly or in any combination. For this performance, Ms. Berthelot used chance procedures to facilitate the particular superimpositions of the pieces; these are not precisely specified, and I don't know the pieces well enough to figure them out through listening alone. With such a number of individual pieces, I am surprised at how spacious it sounds and presume that different subsets of the whole were superimposed over the course of the CD's duration.

In many ways, this work is the purest demonstration of Cage's interest in Zen Buddhism, which he had begun exploring in the late '40s and which occupied a great deal of his attention in the 1950s. An image common in Buddhism that applies especially well to the sound world of these pieces is Indra's Net, a vast celestial network of jewels arrayed such that one may view the entire network through a single jewel: thus, each jewel is its own center—the most important of all—but each also forms part of the whole. Likewise, single pitches appear sporadically throughout Cage's *Music for Piano* series, and Berthelot's spacious method of presentation ensures that listeners will hear, more or less, single pitches that are temporally separated from each other to various degrees. (Very occasionally two sounds occur simultaneously.)

The superimposition—perhaps fortuitously, perhaps as a consequence of the compositional method—further reveals a number of sonic possibilities that gently refuse any overarching system. I hear single pitches over several octaves, simple dyads (thirds, fifths, and so on), the suggestion of triads and pitch centricity (if not outright tonality), and more rarely larger and more dissonant sonorities. Sometimes the pianist is instructed to strike the body of the piano or sweep a group of strings; sometimes a plucked string is slightly stopped by another finger to produce a lovely rainbow of harmonic partials—such less orthodox sounds even further confound any unified principle of organization. Taken as a whole, the collection of sounds in *Music for Piano* resembles a world teeming with phenomena best apprehended for their individual qualities and only incidentally for the way in which they interact with each other. The observation of connections among these sounds, while inevitable, suggests many directions for description. Indeed, the work really captures very well Cage's own character during this period, where his

almost fanatical devotion to chance and indeterminacy is leavened by a gentle wit and an engaging curiosity about the discovery of new sonic possibilities.

All these qualities are very well captured by Ms. Berthelot, who brings to her performance an enviable control over every kind of articulation, considerable tonal beauty, and virtuosic panache. The sound is absolutely exquisite. This recording is a nice complement to Sabine Liebner's collection for Neos, which presents each of the pieces in turn; it also makes a better case for a superimposed performance than the only other I know, by Steffen Schleiermacher for MD&G, which I think sounds too mercilessly chaotic.

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