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***John Cage: Two²*. Mark Knoop and Philip Thomas, pianos. Another Timbre at124x2 (2 CDs, 128 minutes)**

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Audio Review

*John Cage: Two*². Mark Knoop and Philip Thomas, pianos. Another Timbre at124x2 (2 CDs, 128 minutes)

Cage's *Two*² (1989) is one of the few in his late Number Piece series that doesn't employ time brackets. (This notational device ensures that the musical content always happens more or less in the same order and that the piece always lasts more or less the same amount of time, but the flexibility built into the system makes it impossible to predict the precise order of the individual events.) Here, instead, the piece explores the implications of a remark from Sofia Gubaidulina in conversation with Cage: "There is an inner clock."

Accordingly, each system of music in this piece (36 in all) is divided into five measures, each of which has various sonorities (either chords or individual tones) in at least one piano part. The pianos' damper pedals are depressed throughout the entire work, which contributes to the work's sonorous character. The two pianists must play the sonorities in their measure in order, but they can freely decide when to begin playing their measure and how long each musical event lasts before playing the next. For instance, given a measure where one pianist has events I'll label 1–4 and the other 1a–3a, the measure could be performed as <1, 2, 1a, 3, 4, 2a, 3a>, <1a, 2a, 1, 2, 3, 3a, 4>, or other possibilities. However, the pianists must wait until both have finished playing a single measure before continuing; as a result, the total duration of this work is indeterminate.¹

Up until now, performances have ranged from about 40 minutes to about 80. Thomas, quoted in the brief liner note, says he had previously found the piece too busy, too full of information. This performance, then, slows things down considerably. It allows the listener to pay very close attention to the quality of the sounds: among other things, their initial attack and decay, their timbral variation, and their position in register. This is very much in keeping with Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes observing phenomena broadly and discourages relying upon habit, which can make us prematurely assign something to a category without really appreciating it as it is.

The two pianists are virtuosos: in this piece, which moves so slowly, the challenge is to produce each sound beautifully, clearly, and consistently. They do this exceedingly well, and are so evenly matched that sometimes it's hard to imagine there are two of them. Although they move slowly through the work, the exact rate of progress is never

1. For more, see my essay "On John Cage's Late Music, Analysis, and the Model of Renga in *Two*²," *American Music* 27, no. 3 (2009): 327–55.

predictable—this, too, is not at all easy to do. The recorded sound is very fine: although the recorded perspective is a little closer than I would like, the sound is never claustrophobic or overly percussive. Still, had the microphones been placed a little further away, I think the piano sound might have bloomed even more effectively.

I will say, too, that I found listening to the piece a moving experience. Whether or not this was their intention, I'm not sure. For Cage was famously uneasy with the idea of basing composition on emotion, and as a listener he frequently commented that he was happy hearing a sound without deriving any specific emotion from it:

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. And I'm not so stupid, either. There was a German philosopher who's very well known; his name was Immanuel Kant, and he said there are two things that don't have to mean anything: one is music and the other is laughter. Don't have to mean anything, that is, in order to give us very deep pleasure.²

Fair enough. But the method by which Cage wrote *Two*² also guarantees that a number of specific sonorities in the piece recur—indeed, 200 of the 327 sonorities in the work recur, some as many as four times.³ For me, at least, hearing these recurring sonorities are like encountering old friends after a long absence: I experience emotions when I see them, some which I understand and some which I don't. And I feel a certain sense of loss when I hear one of these sonorities for the last time. I'd like to think, too, that Mr. Thomas and Mr. Knoop also engaged expressively with the music without necessarily trying to press their listeners into feeling one specific thing or another—which is what I suspect Kant had in mind when he wrote about the pleasure that one feels from the “changing free play of sensations” experienced in music, humor, and games of chance.⁴

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2. See “John Cage about Silence” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcHnL7aS64Y>. This quotation has been transcribed at <http://www.futureacoustic.com/silence/>; I have emended the transcription slightly.

3. Haskins, 341.

4. See John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/>.