

Response to “The Future of Music: Credo” by John Cage

One of the most fascinating and inherent qualities of music is its ability to serve as a documentation of the thoughts and experiences occurring during the time of its composition. In his 1937 lecture on the future of music, American composer John Cage predicts a dramatic change in field of music in the 20th century that reflects the advancements made in our time; through the aid of electrical instruments, the distinction between “noise and so-called musical sound” will be blurred and new methods of composition will free our ears from the traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

As a novice composer, I viewed Cage’s lecture not only as a gauge for future compositions but also as a challenge to contribute to the music of the future to the best of my abilities. Taking guidance from his lecture, I strived to create an example of music that would fit the following criteria:

1. To explore the boundary between noise sounds and musical sounds
2. To produce music through the aid of electrical instruments
3. To demonstrate the principle of form

Addressing the first two criteria, I experimented with the distinction between noise and musical sounds and found that the most effective way of blurring this boundary is to remove the ‘musical’ quality from a musical sound with the help of electronically synthesized tones. To achieve this, a recording of a single ring of my alarm bell was reduced in speed (in Audacity) to bring out a more static and pure tone. Two separate generations of a series of sine tones at semi-random frequencies (produced in Max/MSP) were flanked around the bell sound to attract attention away from the natural fluctuations in the bell sound. By minimizing the changes in pitch, timbre, and volume in the bell recording, the bell was able to mimic a synthesized tone. On the other hand, by presenting the sine tones as a melodic line with changes in rhythm, volume, and timbre-mimicry (a second track with a slight lag and echo effect were added to give an impression of a fuller sound), the sine tones were able to take on the role of a ‘musical’ sound. As a result, the distinction between musical sound and electrical sound is obscured.

To demonstrate the principle of form – as Cage says, the only constant connection to the past – a recognizable A B A’ form was adopted for the piece. Because the strike of the bell became a natural focus of the B section, the theme of the A sections was highlighted by starting and ending the piece with the sine tones alone. In addition, a third generation of sine tones at a much faster tempo was incorporated into the A’ section to take on the role of a *cadenza* with flair and extravagance. However, this *cadenza* did not feature timbre-mimicry in the beginning in order to emphasize the synthetic quality of the tones.

As a response to Cage’s challenge to produce music of the future, I strived to blur the distinction between electrical sound and musical sound with the aid of synthesized tones (Max/MSP) and sound modification (Audacity) while maintaining form. As the organizer of sound for this piece, I hope this composition will contribute toward Cage’s call to expose ourselves to new sound experiences.

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