The Music of John Cage

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One might suppose that twelve radios playing at once would produce an extremely raucous effect—a blaring futurist gesture. But Cage was no Luigi Russolo in his intent, and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* has exactly the opposite effect. The use of silences, the clarity of distinction among the various sound events, the predominantly thin texture—all hallmarks of the new chart music—combined with the relatively low dynamic level make this a sparsely-populated and hushed landscape. This was considered a flaw by the audience at its premiere, and the thinness of sound was blamed on the late hour at which it was performed (when many local radio stations were no longer broadcasting), and on Cage’s miscalculation of the dynamic range of the instruments. However, the example of *Music of Changes* should make it clear that bombast was not Cage’s goal. As he describes *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, “it certainly was not . . . a rabble-rouser.”

The other major work from this period is *Williams Mix* for magnetic tape (1952). The title refers to Paul Williams, an architect who funded the composition of *Williams Mix* (along with other works by Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff) as part of a project known as “Project: Sound” or “Project for Music for Magnetic Tape.” *Williams Mix* is a piece of musique concrète, made up of recorded “real” sounds. For the purposes of organizing the materials, Cage divided the sounds into six categories:

A) city sounds
B) country sounds
C) electronic sounds
D) manually-produced sounds (including music)
E) wind-produced sounds (including songs)
F) “small” sounds requiring amplification

The sounds were further categorized by the predictability or unpredictability of their frequency, timbre, and amplitude. Each of these aspects of a sound could be “controlled” and predictable or “variable” and unpredictable. Thus the designation of a sound consisted of a capital letter representing the sound type, followed by three lower-case letters (“c” or “v”, for controlled or variable) representing the predictability or unpredictability of the three aspects of the sound (e.g., Dvvc).

Sounds could be mixed electronically to produce “double sources,” or looped to create regular rhythmic patterns. A rather complex system was used to fill the sound charts with such generic descriptions, and Cage, together with Louis and Bebe Barron and David Tudor, collected sounds to fit these descriptions.

Since amplitude was already given in these sound descriptions, Cage dispensed with charts of dynamics in *Williams Mix*, and instead used charts for attacks and decays. He described them to Boulez as follows:

The attacks and decays are specific cuts of the tape . . . [and] also “cross-grain” use of the tape (which affects the overtone structure as well). I have organized single and double cuts . . . and then use a “+” to indicate more complicated cuts or curves which are invented at the moment of cutting.
"Throwing sound into silence" (1951–1956)

Cage goes on to explain that the system of determining the splicing patterns could have some odd results: "It often happens . . . [that] a sound 'ends' before it 'begins' or even that the sound that 'follows' it happens first."

The process of composing Williams Mix produced a full-size drawing of the tape fragments, which served as a "score" for the splicing. The excerpt of this score shown in Example 3–5 gives a sense of the variety of splicing patterns found in the piece, and includes a specific example of a sound whose "end" precedes its "beginning" (the sound AcccBccc in track 3, middle of system 1). The arrows crossing some of the sounds represent the direction of cross-grain tape splicing. Examples of Cage's notation for "more complicated" splicing are found in tracks 4, 6, and 7 (the last sounds on the first system). Once the score was finished, the tape was cut from this, just like "a dress-maker's pattern."14

Example 3–6  Williams Mix, excerpt from score