The Boulez–Cage Correspondence

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The Boulez-Cage Correspondence

The number of sounds used is large. I begin with 1024 cards to make the 16 charts. A totally variable sound will have a frequency of 32 out of 1024 whereas CCc (e.g.) will have a frequency of 2.\(^7\) The cards are dealt after being carefully shuffled (in one of the classical Tarot ways) into the charts. Each chart has a fund of cards available to it as the “mobility” principle (from the Changes) operates. These are refreshed as necessary. This whole thing is cumbersome in the extreme and I now realize that as I go on I must involve computation rather than the cards with their character of uniqueness. I discovered this attacks and decays, where, because there are 2 factors infinite unpredictability comes about through their interaction. However we are working, the work is very slow. I go this week to North Carolina to teach for 3 weeks and I think I shall simply put the students to work composing and cutting the tape. The piece as planned is 20 minutes, but 4 minutes alone (the first “movement”) will be 192 pages! And by the time that is finished I will surely have new ideas.

As you see I have increased rather than decreased the element of chance in this work. Another thing characterizing it is the fact of many people working on it in all of its aspects. So that it is not “my” work. David Tudor has been composing superpositions 7–11. A student from Illinois worked etc.

I am anxious to have a copy of Schaeffer’s book on Music Concrete.\(^8\) Would you ask him to send me one?

I am also anxious to know your plans; it is very exciting to be looking forward to seeing you again soon and here. Naturally I can hardly wait. News of your work always pleases me and more and more one hears of it here (in the newspapers, etc.)

Merce choreographed part of the Symphonie pour un Homme Seul\(^9\) (a terrible piece) for a Festival at Brandeis University. There I met again Bernard Blin whom you probably know (was connected with Schaeffer).

This last Spring I organized concerts and also gave lectures and that kept me busy too. I lectured at the University of Illinois and they were so interested that I might conceivably go there to continue the work with magnetic tape. All my interest is now in this field and I doubt whether I will be writing any more “concert” music. On the other hand the public here is just beginning to be aware of the “prepared piano”, so that I shall hear a performance in October of my concerto for prepared piano and orchestra, paid for by the Musician’s Union! David Broeckman, the conductor would also like to play a work by you. Can a score be sent? We are hoping to hear your Polyphonic.

David is going to play your first Sonata on programs this summer and in the Fall.\(^10\)

7 Cage refers here to the frequency of occurrence of the sound, not its acoustic frequency.
9 Symphonie pour un homme seul, by Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaeffer, first performed at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris on 18 March 1950.
10 The work was in fact played by David Tudor on 12 August 1952 at Black Mountain College and on 29 August at the Maverick Concert Hall. Eventually Tudor incorporated it into the programme of several recitals: on 28 April 1954 at the Fisher Concert Hall, New York, and on 28 November 1955 at Portland State College (according to programmes kept in the David Tudor archive and communicated by John Holzapfel).

Letters and documents

Please keep us informed about when you will be here so that we can arrange a concert while you are here. Lectures etc.

I have the sad news that the building in which I live will be torn down in a year; but you will be here before that happens. It is a delight and now, as I write, many birds are outside on the fire-escape where I put food for them. They will put up a new 20 story building to house more people. New York is beginning to look like a prison.

Whenever you want an article for a magazine on electronic music, let me know; and if anything is written besides Schaeffer’s book I am anxious to see it.

I am full of admiration for the way in which you are working and especially for the way in which you have generalized the concept of the series, and in your Etude for a single sound\(^11\) made the correspondence between frequency and duration. I am fascinated by the correspondences between rows of different numbers.

I am afraid this is a very sketchy letter and scarcely worth sending you. However, you must realize that I spend a great deal of time tossing coins and the emptiness of head that induces begins to penetrate the rest of my time as well. The best, I keep thinking, is that we shall meet again soon.

Please greet all the friends for me. I miss you all.

Always yours,

John

Letter from Pierre Boulez to John Cage

1 October 1952

My dear John,

Lots of things to tell you. And then you know how letters get put off from one day to the next. Now we are about to leave – in 3 weeks. And it still has to be done.

Firstly – Thank you for the Music of Changes. Which I liked a lot, and which I was so pleased to get. I was absolutely charmed by this development in your style. And I am with you all the way. It is certainly my favourite amongst everything you have done. And I have lent it here to all my young composer friends. Now comes the problem: of playing it here, either by Y. Loriod or by Y. Grimaud. We are going to arrange it with P. Souvatch-

11 For the discussion of this process see pp. 33.
Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez

August 1, 1966

To: Pierre Boulez

Subject: My work is about theImpossible.

Dear Pierre,

I hope this letter finds you well. It has been a while since we last spoke, and I am eager to hear about your recent projects and how you are doing.

I wanted to update you on the status of my work titled "My work is about the Impossible.

As you know, this piece is centered around the exploration of the unknown and the unattainable. I have been working on this for several months now, and I am excited to share with you some of my progress.

The piece is divided into several sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the impossible. I have been experimenting with various techniques and sounds to create a unique and immersive experience for the listener.

I have also been working on integrating elements of chance and randomness into the composition, which I believe will add a layer of unpredictability and mystery to the piece.

I would love to hear your thoughts on this work so far. What do you think of the direction I am taking? Is there anything you would like me to consider or incorporate into the piece?

Looking forward to hearing from you,

John Cage

P.S. I am planning to perform this piece at the upcoming festival in September. Would you be interested in attending and providing some feedback?

Best regards,

John Cage

PS: I have enclosed a copy of the score for your review.
Dear John,

After returning from New York, I am deeply aware of never really appreciating its beauty, charm, and significance. It is a place that has captured my heart, and I will always cherish my memories from there.

I am currently in Paris, and as I look out the window of the cafe where I am writing this, I can see the Eiffel Tower in the distance. It is a scene that I have come to associate with Paris, and I find it quite fitting.

I hope you are doing well and enjoying your time in the United States. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours truly,

Peter

P.S. The weather here is quite pleasant, and I hope you are enjoying the same.

Letter from Pierre Bouse to John Cate

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