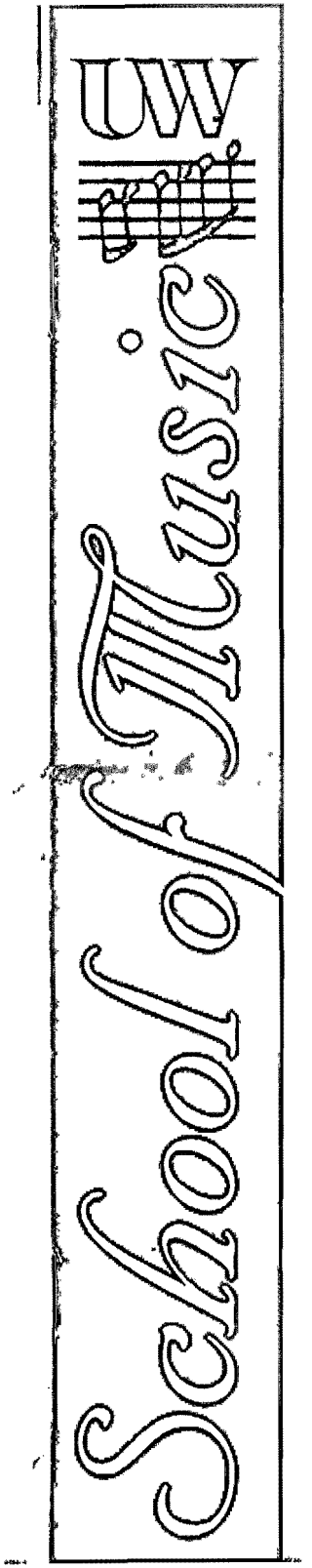




University of Washington
THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC

*presents*

THE CONTEMPORARY GROUP
Joël-François Durand, *director*

# Music by John Cage

◈

*and a tribute to*

# The Portsmouth Sinfonia

7:30 PM
May 27, 2003
MEANY THEATER

DAT #14,412

# PROGRAM

CD #14,413

[1] comments, J-F Durand

## Music by JOHN CAGE

[2] **Nocturne** for Violin and piano (1947)
Neil Holister, *violin*
Jerrod Wendland, *piano* 3:43

[3] **Perilous Night** *for piano* (1943-44) 13:11
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
Harumi Makiyama, *prepared piano*

[4] **4'33"** for piano (1952) 4:33
Joël-François Durand, *piano*

[5] **Construction n.3** for 4 percussions (1941)
Ben Thomas, Andrew Kalinski, Doug Maiwurm,
Andrew Cooke, *percussion* 11:03
Miho Takekawa, *conductor*

CD #14,414 *INTERMISSION*

[1] comments, J-F Durand

[2] **The Contemporary Group pays Tribute to the PORTSMOUTH SINFONIA** 42:00

Robin McCabe, *piano solo*
Jeremy Briggs-Roberts, *conductor*

The main theme of this evening is experimental music. One possible definition of "experimental" art is a process in which one cannot predict the outcome of a given action. **John Cage** was one of the very first artists in the 20th century who deliberately sought to initiate such processes.

An early example of this is found in Cage's prepared piano. Since each piano will produce different sounds with a given preparation, due to its size, its make, etc., a certain degree of undeterminacy is necessary built in the process. Although Cage's indications in the scores are sometimes very specific, it is not really possible to control the timbral results. Cage realized this problem over the years, and this became an important factor in his eventual decision to give up part of the control in the composing itself.

While the works by John Cage that will be heard tonight do not belong to his most experimental period, they are the direct forerunners for it. The main step taken by the composer toward relinquishing control of certain traditional elements of a composition is the famous, but rarely "heard" *4'33"*. After this piece, Cage's attitude to composition became more and more one of creating environments for performances, in which any numbers of things could happen, over which he didn't try to exert control anymore.

One of the descendants of this branch of experimental music was the **Portsmouth Sinfonia**, founded in the late 1960s in England by Gavin Bryars. Here, as Michael Nyman points out in the book *Experimental Music—Cage and Beyond*, we are confronted with "the idea of experimental music as music with "uncontrollable variables:" the variables are here the players themselves. As with much experimental music one hears a wide discrepancy between intention and effect. The intention is to play the notes, carefully, as written, even though some members can't read music and may not be too good at playing by ear."

It is our intention to offer a faithful rendition of what the real Portsmouth Sinfonia might have sounded like if they had been playing here tonight. Just as the Portsmouth Sinfonia itself would have done in those circumstances, we will try our best to play the music that will be in front of us. What will actually happen, no one knows yet.

John Cage: Nocturne for violin and piano

This short work for violin and piano is typical of Cage's aesthetic interests in the late 1940's. In his article "The East and the West" Cage had expressed admiration for the stasis in the French composer Eric Satie's music, which he attributed to the use of "musical situations (rather than themes) which recur unaltered." In *Nocturne*, Cage evokes the traditional expressive world of intimacy associated with the title, while giving it a new meaning by using musical gestures in a very static manner. Short runs and arpeggios, bits of melody are exchanged between the two instruments and remain essentially static and isolated because they don't follow any development or dramatic progression.

John Cage: Perilous Night for piano

*The Perilous Night* was written for prepared piano, John Cage's now classic invention from the late 1930's, where various objects inserted between the strings of a grand piano act as mutes that completely transform the timbral characteristics of the instrument. *The Perilous Night*, one of Cage's most complex preparations, calls for a piano in which twenty-six notes are prepared, using rubber, weather stripping, screws, nuts, bolts, bamboo, wood, and cloth.

Cage composed the work in New York during the winter of 1943-44. It is one of his most personal and expressive statements, concerned as it is with "the loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy." Following the premiere by Cage of *The Perilous Night* at the Studio Theater in New York on April 5, 1944, a critic remarked that the last movement sounded like "a woodpecker in a church belfry." This upset Cage:

> "I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn't communicating this at all. Or else, I though, if I *were* communicating, then all artists must be speaking a different language, and thus speaking only for themselves. The whole musical situation struck me more and more as a Tower of Babel."

John Cage has mentioned that the idea for the title, *The Perilous Night*, came from Joseph Campbell's recounting of an Irish myth concerning a perilous bed that rested on a floor of polished jasper.

(after Margaret Leng Tan)

John Cage: 4'33"

The title of this work is the total length of minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N.Y, August 29. 1958, the title was 4'33" and the three parts were 35", 2'40", and 1'20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginning of parts by closing/the endings by opening the keyboard lid. After the Woodstock performance, a copy in proportional notation was made for Irwin Kremen. In it the timelengths of the movements were 30", 2'23", and 1'40". However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist(s) and the movements may last any lengths of time.

(John Cage)

John Cage: Construction n.3 for 4 percussions (with conductor)

Many of Cage's pieces throughout the 1940s follow a system of construction in which the lengths of the musical phrases are controlled by series of numbers. This technique allowed the composer the freedom to set up the basic temporal layout before writing the rhythmic patterns, the actual sounds. Once these decisions about structure were made, the composer could concentrate on how to "fill in" the blocks of phrases, on form, without having to think about the temporal structure anymore.

*Construction n.3* consists of 24 units of 24 measures each. Within each unit, each player has sets of phrases of different lengths, according to a basic number series. The first percussionist's phrases, for example, follow the series: 8, 2, 4, 5, 3, 2 measures (per unit). The other players have series with the same numbers, but in a different order. Within individual parts, the phrases are distinguished by dynamics, instrument changes, silences, and the change in rhythmic patterns.

As Daniel Charles explains:

> "The Cage of 1939 had substituted (to the traditional vocabulary of pitches and harmonic syntax) a system of cells apparent in the tala of Indian music; he enclosed these cells one inside another following a law of similarity or in proportions which enabled the different strata of the composition to be homogenized vertically, from the overall shape to the basic micrological level. The significance of such geology was that it guaranteed the correlation between the microcosm and the macrocosm, and therefore the unity of the whole. But in doing this, the musician opted for prefabricated or preset planning, which freed him from having to question the occurrence of isolated events on every occasion. Once the kit was installed, all that remained to be done was to fill it, either with sounds or with silence: the creator freed himself, in short, from all non-contemplative work, in order to concentrate to the full on listening, and the sensuality of sound. This reveals the foreshadowing of Cage's conversion to chance, or at least to the de-subjectivization of composing."

**The Portsmouth Sinfonia**

"The uncontrollable factor (in the Portsmouth Sinfonia) arises out of the variable abilities of the members. Some are untrained and others less musically innocent may not be especially expert on their instruments. As with much experimental music one hears a wide discrepancy between intention and effect. The intention is to play the notes, carefully, as written, even though some members can't read music and may not be too good at playing by ear. What results through the players' incompetence is somewhat at variance with the letter of the music, and uncontrollably hilarious. What one hears at a Sinfonia concert is familiar music, seriously dislocated (to a greater or lesser extent). The originals may be recognized only by their rhythmic content or there may occasionally be more than a whiff of familiarity about a tune. Rhythm in the Sinfonia is something not to be relied upon; most players get lost, are not sufficiently in control of their instruments to keep up the pace, may suddenly telescope half a dozen bars into one, or lose their place. Pitch too is a very volatile element; as some players will most probably, if unintentionally, be playing wrong notes, the vertical combination will be unpredictable (one person may get the tune absolutely right for a few bars); rather, pitch shape and melodic contour may be preserved."

(Michael Nyman: Experimental Music; Cage and Beyond)

"The Portsmouth Sinfonia was founded by an English composer named Gavin Bryars. He started it at Portsmouth College of Art, hence its name. The philosophy of the orchestra was that anybody could join. There was no basis of skill required for joining. The only condition was that if you joined you should attend rehearsals and take it seriously. It wasn't intended as a joke - though it was sometimes extremely funny. The orchestra only played the popular classics, and it played only the most popular parts of these popular classics, the bits that everyone knows: Da-da-da dum, da-da-da dum. At its biggest it was about 78 people strong and it had a complete complement of orchestral instruments. Most people when they talk about the Sinfonia talk about it as though everybody in the orchestra was incompetent. This wasn't true, exactly. There was a range of competence, from extremely competent - we had some bona fide virtuosi in there - to completely incompetent. What was interesting about it was this mix. It wouldn't have been more interesting if it had been all incompetent or all competent. It was this particular mix so that in any piece what you heard was a number of approximations of how the piece should be played. You'd hear the melody of whatever it was, hidden somewhere among all those approximations of the melody. It was like a very blurry version, a soft-focus version, of classical music, and it produced some beautiful music. I really liked some of those results. There were some exquisite moments - the mixture of chance and choice, you know?"

(Interview with Brian Eno; Keyboard, July 1981)

Members of the orchestra tonight will probably include, among others and in no particular order:

Ashley Nelson, Amy Chen, Helen Lee, Harumi Makiyama, Linda Bailey, Autumn Yoke, John Gibbs, Ben Thomas, Emily Asher, David Kappy, Wha-Yeon Lee, Gaby Holmquist, Cynthia Walsh-Lemke, Andrew Kaminski, Joël Durand, Neil Hollister, Richard Karpen, Patricia Michaelian, Marchette Dubois, Amy Chen, Don Craig, Matthew Nelson, Siu-Yin Mak, Diana Yahya, Conney Lin, Mary Theodore, Ewa Trebacz, Marilyn Pedersen, Colin Todd, Brianna Atwell, Don Immel, Craig Hogan, Josh Parmenter, Chris Sigman, Constantin Parvulescu, Vern Sielert, Linda Peragine, Wyatt Fletcher, Bret Battey, Rob Schultz, Andrew Seifert, Josiah Boothby, Michael Tisocco