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S. Andrew Granade
Ouachita Baptist University

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One for the History Books or the Trash?
Changes in American Piano Literature in the Twentieth Century

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S. Andrew Granade
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Since the eighteenth century, the piano has been one of the dominant instruments for musical expression. In numerical terms, only the symphony orchestra can boast a larger repertoire than the piano. Most of that vast amount of literature was composed during the nineteenth century. At the beginning of that century, technological advances allowed piano makers to add more notes to the instrument’s range and more strings to existing notes to strengthen the sound and timbre they produced. In its basic design, that of small hammers striking three strings each, the piano is a percussive instrument. The advances of the nineteenth century only reinforced that nature. But almost since its inception, musicians steadily ignored the piano’s percussive design and instead regarded the piano as an instrument that primarily produced beautiful melodies.

This predisposition towards emphasizing the piano’s melodic capabilities was strengthened by the dominant modes of musical expression. The combination of piano and voice was perfect for the Romantic ideal of fusing literature and music. The piano provided harmonic accompaniment to the melodic line carried by the voice and often also carried a melodic line equal in beauty and power to that of the voice. As a result of this pairing, the Romantic era witnessed the culmination of a trend begun in the Classical era. Romantic composers, trying to imitate the human voice in their piano writing, turned the piano almost exclusively into a melodic instrument. Its obvious advantage of being able to produce both melody and harmony simultaneously attracted composers anxious to express
themselves fully through one medium. Composers from Beethoven and Brahms, who used the piano's harmonic capabilities, to Mozart and Chopin, who exploited its melodic capabilities, created beautiful masterworks on what was widely considered a melodic instrument.

Soon after the turn of the century, Gertrude Stein challenged artists to “kill the 19th Century dead!” Many early twentieth-century American composers, struggling to make their voices heard in a musical culture then still dominated by Europeans, seem to have taken that remark quite literally. Intervals and sounds once considered not only unacceptable, but also completely wrong, were hardly given a moment's notice when they appeared in modern music. Thus, music as practiced by a majority of American composers in this century was built on the principle of finding and using as many new musical sounds as possible. Musicologist F.E. Kirby has argued that some of these changes have even altered the common conception of what is and is not music.  

Where might have these new sounds originated?

One of the most likely sources for these new sounds and ideas was the piano. Having been a major genre for several centuries, music for the piano had plateaued. The same basic styles and forms that Mozart employed were still being used in the late nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth century, however, American composers began experimenting with new sound resources in every medium and soon focused on the piano. Composers anxious to test their compositional mettle wanted to write for an already-established form in order to gain assurance that the works would eventually be performed.


The use of the piano in this manner had an interesting effect. By hearing these unusual sounds from the piano, composers and audiences alike came to see it not as primarily a harmonic and melodic instrument, but rather a rhythmic and percussive one.

The change in the literature has not taken place only, or even primarily, in art music. The advent of blues and jazz at the turn of the century and rock-and-roll in its middle certainly affected the change to a more percussive piano sound. Yet in the world of university-trained composers, popular music was ignored at best. Most musicians created a distinction between popular music and art music based on the motivation behind composition.

Popular music was understood as music formed with the general public in mind with the sole purpose of producing a product with wide appeal and marketability. It was a commercial art form that took its influence from the fads and tastes of the populace. Art music was seen as more authentic and advanced. Musical study concentrated on works written in the Western European tradition. Composers of this style drew most of their inspiration from that canon. Thus, in terms of art music, these four Americans, building upon each other's experiments yet still working within a more accepted framework, facilitated the shift.

Many composers attempted varying experiments with the piano, but four stood out as primary innovators. Though the sum of their ideas has been the principal means through which a...
The change in piano literature has taken place, these four Americans used differing techniques both on and with the piano. Henry Cowell experimented with tone clusters; John Cage utilized a prepared piano; George Crumb used the performer's own physical resources and manipulated the strings directly; Mario Davidovsky combined the piano with electronically-produced sounds.

Henry Cowell, the first of these four innovative American composers, was born in California in 1897 and died in 1965. He has been called a "founding father of twentieth-century American music" and "the prodigal prophet," because his ideas predated most experimental techniques by several decades. His ideas and methods paved the way for many other composers, including his student John Cage.

Cowell was one of the first composers to experiment with new methods of playing the piano. By the time he was thirteen in 1911, Cowell was writing piano works that used what he later called 'tone clusters'. The very next year he composed *The Tides of Manaunaun*, a piece based on a legend his mother had often told him of the god of motion who sent tides of particles across the universe for later gods to use in creating the world.

*The Tides of Manaunaun* contains the best use of tone clusters from his early years. Cowell wanted to reflect musically the sound of flowing tides, so he invented a method to represent them. In the work, the pianist's left hand and arm play an ostinato pattern of two...
chords, each spanning one and, at the piece’s climax, two octaves. These clusters, A to A and D to D, are played in the keyboard’s lowest register. The result is a soft rumble, resembling the sound of the ocean in a conch shell. The right hand plays a modal melody over the clusters in the left hand and forearm.

Why use the pianist’s arm? Cowell also may have wanted to play these works himself as solos or may have not believed they could find a significant audience if they were for two performers instead of one. More importantly, using the arm seemed obvious enough to him: “Because the fingers alone are incapable of playing the many notes of the cluster harmonies.”

Cowell never intended his tone clusters to become mere banging on the piano with an arm. The scoring reveals his intent that the pianist use this unusual method of depressing the keys as an integral part of the musical expression. At the work’s beginning, he marked the clusters pianissimo. Even at the climax of the piece, when an ear-shattering dynamic of four fortissimos is given, the clusters are marked to be played as slow arpeggios, from the lowest note to the highest or from the elbow to the fingertips, thus eliminating any tendency of the pianist to hammer at the keys with his or her arm.

Cowell continued to use tone clusters in many works, most notably Exultation in 1922 and Tiger in 1928, with the same notation, only to portray different ideas. But even with the notoriety he was gaining through the clusters, and even when Bela Bartok wrote Cowell seeking permission to use the clusters, Cowell could not get much of his music published. He noticed


9 Glenn Watkins, Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century (New York: Schirmer...
other American composers around him experiencing similar problems in publishing their scores.

In 1927, he founded New Music, a musical society and a journal which he published until 1958. This journal allowed his music to gain a wider audience than performances alone ever would, and simultaneously exposed him to new trends.

In 1930, Cowell published New Musical Resources, which formalized his complete theory of tone clusters. He began by explaining that clusters existed in the overtone series. Every time even a simple major chord was played in tune, the overtones created clusters that only trained ears could hear and differentiate. After that brief explanation, he defined the term "tone cluster":

chords built from major and minor seconds as heard in the overtone series. Four clusters formed the basis for all others: two major seconds, two minor seconds, a minor second plus a major, and a major second plus a minor (example 1).

Ex. I

The Four Basic Clusters

These basic clusters can be combined in any way to create the pitch variation needed for a particular circumstance. He compared his system with the commonly-used system of triads and the emerging system of quartal and quintal harmonies. Cowell showed that his system, based on the interval of a second, had as much variety as those two well-established and


Cowell elaborated on his theory by suggesting uses of clusters to obtain maximum percussive and harmonic effects. He admitted that clusters could not be used in a traditional melodic situation and thus situations in which to use them had to be created. Alternating clusters and triads was not desirable, he observed, because their dispersion lessened the tense sound generated by clusters and therefore lessened their impact and influence. He continued with many other rules governing cluster placement in a work, but he had already made the most important point.

The effect of clusters interested Cowell even more than their sound. He wanted a rhythmic, percussive, pulsating sound. He wanted to describe audibly the flow of the tides or the pouncing of a tiger. The sound the clusters produced was a novelty, a delightful side effect of his primary goal of creating percussive sounds on the piano.

The most interesting fact about his entire theory of tone clusters as outlined in New Musical Resources is that Cowell’s music did not fully demonstrate his theory. Michael Hicks argues that Cowell’s clusters were not built primarily out of seconds, but instead came from filling in octaves. Also the idea of four basic clusters did not hold true in his music. All small clusters were sections of an octave that he chromatically filled and then used where needed. It is a useless exercise to attempt to analyze Cowell’s music using his own system. As Hicks has pointed out, instead of creating a new harmonic system, as he claimed, Cowell created a
justification for his work and the novel sounds he attempted to produce. Cowell's writings may have failed to rationalize the harmonic system he created, but they did legitimate it. The task of furthering Cowell's experimentation with the piano rested mainly on his students and those composers who followed his path. John Cage, born in California the year that Cowell wrote *The Tides of Manaunaun*, was one of the earliest and most influential of these. Cage studied with Arnold Schoenberg as well as Cowell, and used elements of their contrasting styles in his own early compositions and in his own experimentations. Scholars have charged that Cage is more of a music philosopher than a composer. Some have also alleged that his music is mediocre at best and that his only real importance lies in the ideas he generated. It takes no intellectual leap to accept this argument when one examines the immense catalog of his work and sees the multitude of styles he embraced. But Cage did produce some masterworks. Whether one appreciates his music, accepts his ideas, or sees him as nothing more than a curious oddity, one must admit that modern music would be vastly different without his contribution.

John Cage's primary piano works involve a procedure that he created. In 1940, choreographer Syvilla Fort commissioned Cage to write music to accompany her dance *Bacchanale*. The dance was full of African imagery, so Cage decided to use a percussion ensemble to imitate ritual tribal dancing. When he discovered that the performance hall did not have enough room for such an ensemble and that only a piano would fit, he began to experiment.
with the piano as his teacher Henry Cowell had done. He discovered that by placing foreign objects between the piano strings, he could create an entire percussion ensemble at the control of a single person.

Cage liked the result of his initial experiment so much that he continued his revolutionary ideas and composed numerous works for the altered instrument he referred to as a "prepared piano."

To ensure that the sounds he had achieved would be faithfully reproduced, Cage made notes for preparing a piano, "mutes of various materials are placed between the strings of the keys used, thus effecting transformations of the piano sounds with respect to all of their characteristics."

Each score for a prepared piano work listed exactly how far the objects should be placed from the dampers. Bits of plastic and pieces of rubber occupy the piano's low register, creating a wood block sound. Screws and bolts, some with washers, are to be liberally placed throughout the piano's range, providing a metallic ringing sound as they rattle against the strings. Cage even noted the specific brand of eraser (American Pencil Company # 346) to be used to make just the right amount of resonance in the lowest note prepared.


Richard Kostelanetz, ed., John Cage: An Anthology (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1991), 74. This is a collection of writings by Cage and others about his music. This particular section is taken from an essay Cage wrote about Sonatas and Interludes to accompany the listing of preparations.

Since these objects are often between only two strings, throughout his prepared piano works Cage used the *Una corda* pedal, which shifts the hammers, to slightly alter the timbre. All this alteration in the instrument resulted in "a gamut of sounds moving from lower to higher octaves without the correspondences of pitch characteristic of scales and modes."

Sonatas and Interludes, premiered in 1949, is arguably Cage's finest work for the prepared piano. It is a cycle of sixteen sonatas and four interludes--twenty pieces in all--grouped in sets of four sonatas, each set separated from the others by the interludes. Interludes two and three are placed together, providing a break halfway through the work and causing the cycle to end as it began with four sonatas. It is a large work, taking an hour and ten minutes to perform, but the hard work comes in preparing the piano, a task that could easily take the pianist three or more hours.

Composing for the prepared piano presents an interesting problem. In the Western tradition since the Baroque era, composers have organized music according to harmonic progressions and an overall tonality, so Cage had to look elsewhere to find an organizing principle to unify his composition. Cage, always interested in Eastern philosophy, took the Indian idea of *rasa* and applied it to the Sonatas and Interludes. *Rasa* is the aesthetic quality in Sanskrit poetry that expresses the idea of mankind having eight permanent emotions: the erotic, the heroic, the odious, anger, mirth, fear, sorrow, and the wondrous. These eight emotions, which the Sanskrit poets argued were present in all life and art,
tended towards tranquillity. Each of the sonatas and interludes attempted to portray one of the emotions. Through the repetition of some of the emotions, there was an overarching growth to tranquillity. Cage achieved this feeling by casting all the sonatas in binary form, or some variation thereof, using strict phrase lengths that did not vary within movements. The early sonatas had shorter phrase lengths, usually six measures. By the time Cage reached the last two sonatas, the phrase lengths had grown to ten measures each, creating a feeling of stability and thus tranquillity.

John Cage significantly furthered the idea of using the piano as a percussion instrument. He not only showed one way it could be accomplished but he also proved it could be done musically.

Sonatas and Interludes rose above the brutal pounding that characterized much of the percussion literature. It was quiet and refined, musically displaying the permanent emotions and Cage's unique ability to manipulate his innovation.

It is tempting to state that in the music of the next composer, George Crumb, we have the culmination of all the myriad piano techniques used in the twentieth century. It is also tempting to decide that Crumb listened to and absorbed all the avant garde music and used the best techniques. Any such statement would be false. Crumb has said that when he wrote Five Pieces, his first piano work, "I hadn't heard of John Cage or Cowell's pieces using special techniques. I independently explored those resources. Of course later I did become familiar with Cage and Cowell. But of course I developed in a different direction."
George Crumb was born in 1929 in Charleston, West Virginia. Although not primarily a composer for the piano, his impact on the genre has been enormous. His use of various techniques--from strumming the strings to banging on the metal crossbar to dropping metal chains inside the instrument--inspired later composers to go even farther in expanding the piano’s possibilities.

Crumb’s music is intimate, personal, and mystical, and the first volume of the *Makrokosmos* cycle provides a wonderful compendium of his style. *Makrokosmos* drew inspiration from two twentieth-century piano composers--Bela Bartok and Claude Debussy. The work’s two volumes for amplified solo piano mirrored Debussy’s famous two books of *Préludes* by having imaginative and descriptive titles for each of the twenty-four pieces. Crumb’s title, which means ‘great universe’ in Greek, came from his desire to fuse many different elements into a unified whole, as Bartok did in his six books of the *Mikrokosmos*. The use of Bartok and Debussy as models seems logical since Crumb, more than any other American composer, shared their love of tone colors and timbral qualities.

Crumb divided his work into three sections, with four pieces in each section. Each section is performed without a pause between the pieces, emphasizing the sectional unity that is...
The fourth and final piece in each section is graphically notated. Number four, "Crucifixus," is in the shape of a cross; number eight, "The Magic Circle of Infinity," is a circle; and number twelve, "Spiral Galaxy," is a spiral. Crumb further embellished the piece's mysticism by using a different sun sign as the subtitle for each of the twelve movements. Crumb even posed an enigma by placing initials of people he knew or respected next to their birth signs, though he relieved some of the mystery by identifying himself as number five, "The Phantom Gondolier.

Makrokosmos, Vol. 1 furthers the search for new sounds in several ways. Crumb extensively uses the piano strings to add effects or to simply expand what the keyboard can accomplish. He calls for objects to be struck against the strings, placed between the strings, or laid across several octaves. From personal attempts, quite possibly the most demanding and difficult technique in this work is attempting to play on the strings and the keyboard simultaneously. The startling outcome is worth the difficulty.

Crumb's texture is very clear and precise, although it can sound improvisatory. He uses small cells and patterns to develop musical ideas. Larry Lusk, in reviewing the composition for Notes, wrote that the entire set of pieces in Makrokosmos is based on four small elements, all extracted from minor triads, arranged in various permutations and outlined in the first three lines of the first movement. The harmonies as well are not complicated; in fact, his music is quite tonal. He uses little counterpoint and quotes from earlier composers' works, such as Chopin's.
Fantasie Impromptu in C# Minor.

These quotations do not seem out of place and often work well in the harmonic consistency that marks his compositions.

The harmonic devices Crumb employs combine with the plucking and drumming on the strings to create two distinct layers of sound. The effect is a strange, almost haunting melodic and harmonic contour marked by the percussive sounds coming from the strings. The piano’s percussive nature is further heightened by the placement of metal chains on the bass strings which rattle hauntingly when those notes are played. Crumb also requires scraping those strings, which are each wrapped by another string, with a metal plectrum.

Crumb’s uniqueness came from two facts: he broadened existing techniques and combined them with new ones, capable of producing independent, motivically unified, complex, and fully-realized musical structures. He employed a plethora of new sounds and new ways to make them on traditional instruments and caused composers and performers to listen to new sounds and to discover that those sounds are music.

For all of George Crumb’s innovations, he ignored the possibilities of electronics. He left the application of advancing technology to the purview of others. When asked about the aesthetic of electronic music, Crumb replied, “I’ve never felt the need of using synthesized sound, although I can admire someone like Davidovsky who seems to be able to combine live and electronic sounds in imaginative ways.”
The Davidovsky to whom Crumb referred is Mario Davidovsky, the fourth of the major innovators under consideration. He was one of the leading composers in the electronic medium and was the most successful at fusing electronic sounds and the piano's colors.

Born in 1934 in Argentina, Davidovsky decided to adopt the United States as his own country upon arriving here for study in the 1960s. He began working with Milton Babbitt, one of the first composers to use electronics in composing, and soon discovered a love of electronic sounds. He composed a series of pieces that combined live performers on conventional instruments with pre-recorded sounds. This project attempted to create "a coherent musical continuum... while trying to respect the idiosyncrasies of each medium." 30

In 1962, he wrote the first of the series. Eight years later, he published Synchronisms No. 6 for Piano and Electronic Sound, awarded the first Pulitzer Prize ever presented to a piano work. 31

Synchronisms attempts to alter the piano's natural pattern of attack and decay. A piano normally creates an instantaneous sound, the attack, when the pianist strikes a key. The sound then immediately begins to decay. Davidovsky wondered whether he could reverse the order to begin with the end of the decay and build to an attack. This idea of reversing the natural, normal order of sound appears throughout the work. The piece boldly opens with the pianist playing a G. As the piano begins to fade, an electronically produced G begins to grow until the pianist strikes the note again. Davidovsky incorporated this simple idea throughout the rest of the work, creating a multi-textural...
composition with the electronic line deeply embedded in the piano line. Since the main idea of Synchronisms No. 6 is not a musical line, it is interesting to observe how Davidovsky holds the work together. Textures change quickly, often interrupting or overlapping other textures. The form is obviously serial, but Stephen Gryc showed that any analysis of a single tone row does not hold true for the entire work. The row breaks down in the middle of the piece and is only stated completely five times. On the surface, the composition lacks a continuous flow of musical ideas. Since a traditional evaluation fails to reveal any cohesive factor, discerning listeners need to look elsewhere. The only clear way to examine the piece is to look at the separation of and juxtaposition with the register, dynamics, timbre, and attacks. By doing so, one can observe how the tension created by those disparate qualities is resolved and what unifying factors exist. Although all pitches occur, the unifying tonal factor of the work is the G-D dyad. This relationship is fully exploited not only in the piano part, but also in the beeps and whistles of the electronic part. It gives the pianist something to emphasize in order to project the unity built into the work, a unity hard to find simply by listening. The increase in energy throughout the piece, particularly in the electronic part, also helps provide a sense of forward motion. None of the piece's musical ideas repeat exactly. That lack of repetition—in addition to the lack of a readily-accessible structure and the ever-shifting meter—force the audience to allow


33 Pamela Snow, "Analytic Study of Selected Piano Literature, 1949-1972" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1980), 68.
the sound to completely engulf it. That sound is harsh and percussive. The dynamics are always sudden and extreme, with few crescendos or graduated dynamics. The pianist uses a sharp attack at all times to match the electronic part's clarity. This piece is a work built on extremes. While it is soft and lyric in many places, the majority of the time the piano mirrors the precision and spontaneity of the electronic sounds.

* * *

These four composers took the piano to new levels by focusing on different aspects of the entire instrument. Henry Cowell, through his tone clusters, explored ways to obtain a different sound from the keyboard. Instead of flowing lines, he wanted a percussive block of sound that could paint musical ideas. John Cage moved from the keyboard to the piano's mechanisms. By working inside the box of the piano and creating physical changes, he produced a variety of new, more percussive, sounds. George Crumb made changes inside the piano, but also moved outside the physical instrument. He involved made the pianist in producing the sounds by utilizing his or her voice. Mario Davidovsky, the fourth composer examined, moved totally away from the instrument by composing electronically produced sounds that are then played back on a tape while the pianist performs.

Rhythmic and new compositional devices may have risen in importance, but this is not to say that melody is not evident in experimental music. Even the music of George Crumb and Henry Cowell has a melodic line. The difference is that the works are no longer composed around a given melody or harmony. Thus form has been emancipated from harmonic structure. Rhythms and their interplay, as in Synchronisms No. 6, and extra-musical ideas, as in Sonatas and Interludes, have shaped the form. Instead of following a traditional tonal plan, composers
shape their work through mathematical constructions and literary forms. Although reaction to these changes varied, audiences and reviewers generally received them favorably. At the premiere of Sonatas and Interludes, the audience sat entranced by the dense intertwining of the rhythms and the attractive "noises" coming from the stage. Children responded instantly, delighted to see someone playing the piano with his or her arm. Audience members seemed to enjoy the exposure to new sounds and ideas, though most have rejected a steady diet of twentieth century music. Even much of the music written today for the piano in the Neo-Romantic or Neo-Classical styles has elements of these composers' music. The change in figuration was seen in all musical genres, even melody-driven ones. Harmonic punches and syncopation combined with ostinato to create a percussive feel in almost all modern piano music. Some reviewers have charged that, while interesting at first, upon repeated listening this music tends to grate on the ears and become obvious and boring. But a large majority of reviewers have expressed interest in the new directions and even gone so far as to call the compositions worthwhile and lasting music. The work of these four American composers exemplifies solid music written in the avant-garde style. Even if their compositions do not last as long as Mozart's music, they have accomplished what could be considered as their major goal. They have forced us to listen to new sounds, accept them coming from ordinary instruments, and

35 Doris Hayes, "Noise Poise," Music Journal 35 (February 1977): 43. Hayes is a concert pianist who frequently performs Henry Cowell's music. She readily admits that she was attracted by the percussive aspects of his tone clusters.
36 Gillespie, 30-31. This section in the book is a collection of reviews from all of the works Crumb had written through the mid-1980s.
classify them as music.

What do these changes mean for composers who have composed tonal music firmly in the traditions of the nineteenth century? The result of these attempts at musical experimentation has been a gradual movement away from the nineteenth-century ideal to a more percussive and rhythmic feel to the music. Composers such as John Corigliano and William Bolcom were for much of their careers charged with being anachronistic. Their frequently tonal music was horribly passé and seen as subversive of the advances made by the atonal composers of mid-century. Yet upon closer examination, rhythmic feel, desire for new forms of expression, and even borrowing of experimental techniques characterized the works of these men.

Joseph Strauss has argued that composers of all ages, and especially twentieth-century composers, have an intense need to "grapple with their music heritage." They all in some form invoke the past in order to come to terms with it and move on. The validity of this argument comes from the passing on of traditional tonal forms of composition. Until this century, composers primarily dealt in the forms they inherited from their compositional fathers, expanded upon them, and left them for succeeding generations. However, with the multitude of procedures available to a composer today, the need to struggle with the past is greater than before and is coupled with the need to understand current forms.

Paradoxically, twentieth-century avant-garde composers were possibly the most conservative composers ever to have written. The idea behind their experimental movement...
was constantly to find new things at the expense of the old. Nothing could be worse than for a composer to write in a style or manner that had been used for several hundred years. This wholesale rejection of the past locked composers into a tighter and tighter compositional practice with every year that passed. Soon composers were rejecting not only compositional devices of the common practice period, but also the devices of last year.

Once Cowell had moved inside the piano and had played on the strings, that style was over and composers were forced to move on to placing bits of material between the strings. Over and over composers and philosophers who claimed to be liberating music from the strict procedures of the past confined music to equally strict new ones.

Despite having all of these interesting new devices available for use, very few musicians were actually incorporating them into new compositions. In order for the advances of the avant-garde movement to have a unique impact, they needed to be used, but obviously composers of similar persuasions were not going to take up the flag and champion their use.

It fell to composers outside of the avant-garde, who were composing with tonality, and who were actually getting their pieces performed and recorded, to understand the impact experimental composers had, to acknowledge their legacy, and to incorporate their devices into new compositions. These post avant-garde composers have begun using anything necessary to create music; they eclectically accepted all devices without limiting themselves to one style. 39

What was ironic was the degree to which these composers acknowledged the impact of 1984), 336. 39 Ibid, 337.
the experimental composers on their personal compositions for the piano. Many composers, such as John Corigliano, have denied the avant garde's influence. "I don't write in any specific style," he once said; "I use what I need, and I needed it then." Although he has since recanted and agreed that he did indeed have a recognizable style, he argued that what is more important is "to make these techniques seem inevitable by structure or other means" when new techniques are used. William Bolcom, on the other hand, readily admitted to the use of older techniques and believed that music's future rested in the cohesion of past and present, of old and new styles, and of all sound into one new musical language. Although they differed radically on the degree to which the past should influence a composer, a close examination of two of their piano works reveals the tremendous impact the pioneering work done by Cowell, Cage, Crumb, and Davidovsky has had on their styles.

John Corigliano was born in New York in 1938, two years before John Cage began his experiments with the prepared piano. His father was concertmaster for the New York Philharmonic from 1943 to 1966 and his mother a private piano instructor. Living with two musicians, he was around music constantly and basically learned music through osmosis. His interest in composing came from sitting and listening to recordings like Copland's "Billy the Kid," particularly the gunfight scene, on his mother's hi-fi. To this day Corigliano claims that he...  

40 Allan Kozinn, "John Corigliano," Keynote 1 (December 1977): 33. Corigliano was discussing the use of a quote from Gabrielli and a 12-tone passage in his "Clarinet Concerto.")

41 Alex Ross, "The Ghosts of the Met: John Corigliano's Masterpastiche," The New Republic, 9 March 1992, 30. Ross is one of the number of critics who find the use of quotations and older styles the work of second-rate composers.
learned orchestration listening to that battle and other hi-fi recordings. He went on to study composition, despite his father's advice that orchestras do not want to perform modern music, and worked with Otto Luening at Columbia and Vittorio Giannini at the Manhattan School of Music. At the same time, Corigliano found work at various radio stations and discovered not only recording techniques, but also the current trends in music and what kinds of music were played, both on radio and in live performance. He obviously decided early in his career that the primary purpose of music was to communicate with an audience and that he wished to have his music performed. These early, tonal works, were well received by concert goers, but not by music critics. “Other than wows, one could detect little going on in the music, structurally or expressively,” one critic wrote of his Piano Concerto composed in 1968.

This love of tonality and especially of lyrical melodies was certainly the exception in American music during the 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, Corigliano found little acceptance in the musical world. Not until 1977, with the premiere of his clarinet concerto, did Corigliano achieve critical success. He says that acceptance was strange to him because, “since the beginning of my career, I've felt like a rebel, writing my unfashionably Romantic, tonal music when the musical establishment was run by people who did not see that as a valid..."  

43 Ibid., 57.  
This and other critical successes led the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition to commission a work from him for its seventh competition. The result of that commission was *Fantasia on an Ostinato*. *Fantasia on an Ostinato* was an exercise in minimalism by the composer. In the program notes to the work, Corigliano stated that he found the texture and hypnotic quality of minimalism attractive, but he did not appreciate what he viewed as the lack of emotion and architecture inherent in the style. All of his works were highly organized and structured in some manner as are those of all of these composers. Corigliano clearly favored traditional tonal plans to organize his piano works, most of which are in a standard ternary form or are through composed. Standard ternary form was based on the movement from one tonal center to another and then back again at the end. For *Fantasia on an Ostinato*, Corigliano once again chose this form, but instead of setting the three sections off by contrasting tonal centers, he wrote an opening A section, used a contrasting B section, and then returned with an A’ section that is the opening of the work in retrograde.

Corigliano’s debt to the avant-garde innovators appears in the contrasting B section. In his later works, John Cage developed chance, or aleatoric, procedures whereby the performer made decisions about the length of the work and the ordering of the musical elements. This...
procedure was most likely attractive to a composer like Corigliano as a way to return some control back to the performer and, probably more importantly, give him or her added interest in the performance of modern music because of a symbiotic relationship with the composer. He has used it in several compositions, but never on such a large scale for piano as is found in this work.

A multitude of directions to the performer about the strategy for playing this section appear in the score itself, much as in George Crumb’s and John Cage’s piano works. These directions are extremely specific, down to exact tempos, durations, and tenuto markings indicating which notes in which pattern are to dominate. (example 4) Throughout the section he continues to give added directions as the challenges of performance vary.

Ex. 4 Directions for the repeated patterns in Corigliano’s Fantasia on an Ostinato

The left hand is played with the pedal throughout until

*2

*the pattern with the pedal suspended

of the right hand except the top and bottom notes unless otherwise indicated.

The section begins with a simple two note pattern, played rather slowly, that gradually gains momentum as the performer progresses through more than twenty patterns. Control over the shape of the section comes from the performer’s decision on the number of times a given pattern should be repeated. The effect is beautiful as the various tonal colors shift and differing notes are brought to the fore. Yet a pleasant sound does not mean that this section is completely tonal.
A closer examination of the resulting chords reveals that the only possible classification is that of a cluster. The total effect of the patterns is similar to that of clusters, with any hope of a tonal center being obscured by the nebulous quality of the sound. But simply obscuring the tonal center was not Henry Cowell’s only reason for using clusters. Cowell desired to concoct engaging percussive effects as well, and Corigliano accomplished those same effects through accented notes marked in several patterns. These notes rise above the layer of harmonic sound as percussive hits that propel the music forward into the next pattern. Corigliano achieved Cowell’s effect and used it for his own design, even while eschewing Cowell’s method of producing the effect.

An aleatoric section must be anchored for a work to ever reach a climax or some sort of resolution where it can end, and Corigliano provided an interesting anchoring device. The work’s A section is built around the ostinato from the second movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92, hence the name Fantasia on an Ostinato. Corigliano broke this ostinato down into both a rhythmic and a harmonic pattern and then dealt primarily with the rhythmic one. The entire A section is built from that rhythmic pattern, often expressed in only one note with accents establishing the rhythmic pattern and forming at the same time, as Corigliano called it in the score, a "bebung" effect. The result is that of a percussion instrument hammering out the meter and time.

The intensity of the ostinato rises as the tempo increases and new ideas are added through the B section until it finally bursts forth from that section into a pounding climax and then dies away, with an actual quotation of the original Beethoven ostinato appearing before the work is finished.
Organizing a work solely on an ostinato is not a new concept; Beethoven obviously did so. But the strictly percussive aspect of this ostinato recalls the organizational principle Cage used in his Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano.

When traditional tonality cannot be used, composers must look elsewhere for an organizational principle. Corigliano looked, as did Cage, towards rhythm to organize his composition.

Besides these idiomatic and percussive effects, one other thing seems to characterize Corigliano's compositions for piano. All of his earlier works and especially Fantasia on an Ostinato require a great deal of virtuosity from the performer.

The quiet lyricism and subtle melodies are still present, but they are coupled with bursts of extremely difficult passage work. The aleatoric section is difficult not only in the close and quick finger work it requires but also in the endurance the pianist must have in order not to rush through the section just to be finished with it. Corigliano wrote well for the piano, and the passage work fits well under the hand; he obviously understood the piano. But a successful performer of Corigliano's work must have a secure technique.

David Burge, in reviewing Fantasia on an Ostinato, remarked that the listener's predispositions concerning quotations in music and minimalism as a style would invariably color the way he or she heard the work. Yet the reaction to the work overall was extremely favorable. Corigliano achieved an interesting distinction: he was unique in his ability to synthesize twentieth-century ideas and harmonics in a fairly traditional framework and thus make
Throughout his career, Corigliano refused to acknowledge the influence of earlier composers on his work. He steadfastly maintained that only the demands of that particular piece and, in the case of commissions, the guidelines set out by those expecting and awaiting the finished composition influenced each work that he created. William Bolcom was the polar opposite of this view. In his wake-up call of an article, "Trouble in the Music World," Bolcom challenged musicians, professional and amateur alike, to fuse the old with the new into a radically different musical culture:

What clearly is lacking is an economic, pedagogical, and spiritual bridge, a marrying, between the old, aristocratic and the new, popular, demotic musical cultures. Together, they can nourish each other; separately, both suffer... How, then, can we work toward a synthesis of our musical culture?

Some artists already have brought about a marriage of the various strains of our still-expanding and open culture. One doesn't have to be a so-called eclectic to bring about this synthesis: all that is necessary is artistic excellence on whatever front. 50

The music world is in flux, he argued, and a new era is upon composers. Unless they accept this new synthesis and use the musical heritage they have, musicians will be left behind.

Bolcom's inspiration for his new attitude toward musical composition came from an unusual source, but one that goes far in explaining why he embraced and used all musical styles. Early in his career, Bolcom immersed himself in the academic musical culture of the 1960s and wrote 12-tone music, which was in vogue at the time. He soon wearied of writing works that he felt would never communicate with an audience. During this time he also worked on a radio program. The similarities between his life and that of Corigliano end here.
The guest on the program was John Cage. During this serendipitous interview Bolcom confessed to Cage his turmoil over his compositional career. Cage responded:

"Some people divide the world into things that are good and things that are bad. Other people take it all in and let their own organism decide."

Bolcom cites that response as the turning point in his career. He moved away from abstraction in composition and slowly adopted pieces of Cage's Zen philosophy of music that all sound is music that composers can and should use in practicing their craft.

In addition to coming to terms with their musical heritage, twentieth century composers have had to clear a space for their works amidst the pantheon of the great masters and the musical establishment of the present day.

Balcom accomplished this task initially by delving into ragtime along with his colleague at the University of Michigan, William Albright. He eschewed classical composition for many years, publishing several collections of rags. When he finally returned to more formal composing, he brought popular styles and improvisation into these new compositions.

This focus on mixing popular and classical styles very clearly set William Bolcom apart from John Corigliano. Both used the techniques of a generation past, but Corigliano used them idiomatically inside an essentially Romantic framework. They serve as a spice in his musical concoctions but not as the basis for composition. Balcom used those same techniques inside popular styles to provoke his audience and take them out of what they found comfortable.


Strauss, 184-185.
Instead of allowing his audience to languish in a musical aura of conventional tonality, he communicated with them through the combination of what they found familiar and what they found shocking. He crossed musical boundaries to speak to audiences in an innovative manner.

Twelve New Etudes for Piano is an example of how Bolcom accomplished this duality. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for 1988, it is only the second piano composition to ever win this award, the other being Mario Davidovsky's Synchronisms No. 6/or Piano and Electronic Sounds. Yet this work almost remained unfinished. Bolcom was writing the pieces for pianist Paul Jacobs, a champion of twentieth-century American piano works, when Jacobs became extremely ill. By the time Jacobs died in 1983, Bolcom had completed only nine of the twelve etudes, and he ceased work on them. Then, in 1986, John Musto performed three of the completed etudes. Pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin was in the audience, heard the set, and contacted Bolcom wishing to perform all nine on a recital. Bolcom acquiesced, later attended Hamelin's recital, and was inspired by the performance to return to the pieces. He immediately composed the remaining three etudes in quick succession and gave them to Hamelin, who added them to his permanent repertoire.

Speaking to Mark Wait, Bolcom said that these etudes were very different from his first set in that:

The first ones were really very much in the Boulez tradition, which I was very
much involved with then. But various things here and there have taken more prominence in my life then, and now there's even a kind of mad Rag in the second set. The new etudes are much more tonal. I think the first group were much more difficult technically.  

Even if these etudes are less difficult, an opinion that could easily be contested, they offer plenty of new ideas and old devices for the pianist to work into his or her technique. Perhaps realizing this, Bolcom provided a Glossary at the beginning of the score that details many unfamiliar notations that he used and promises that all other notations are explained in the score itself.

By definition, an etude is a composition that focuses on one particular technical difficulty and then, through repetition, helps the pianist overcome that problem. These etudes fit the definition precisely. At the beginning of each work, a short sentence describes the difficulty addressed by that etude. Lois Svard, in a favorable review of the set, remarked that the works were "concerned with such musical matters as color, legato, timbre, and mood."  

As with most of the composers considered in this study, Bolcom provided elaborate directions as to how the pianist should play almost every line of the etudes. Phrases such as "spiky," "glass-smooth," "wild!," "passionate," and "like brass" abound as mood, tempo, and dynamic markings. Precise pedalings and slurs are notated and an arrow shows exactly how long to accelerando or ritard certain passages. Bolcom obviously admired the strict control the experimentalists held on the performances of their compositions and imitated it here. He knew how each work should sound and informed the pianist how to achieve the desired sonority.

The strict control Balcom exercised over his work was only the beginning of the techniques he used from his avant-garde forerunners. In the first etude, entitled "Fast, Furious," Cowell's clusters appear exactly as Cowell intended them. On the final page of this etude are two notes with a large box between them and forearm written beside it. (example 5) The addition of a decrescendo, indicating a lessening of sound as the cluster travels up the keyboard, shows that Balcom did not wish the pianist merely to bang his arm on the keys. Instead, in an extremely difficult musical passage, the pianist must begin fortissimo at the beginning of the cluster and decrescendo while still maintaining the percussive feel the etude has had to this point. This notation also appears in the eighth etude, "Rag Infernal." Along with the familiar box is the direction "as in Etude I, p.6" Balcom did not want the performer to forget how to play these clusters musically, and thus he referred the pianist to the previous occurrence of forearm clusters. As did Cowell, Balcom intended this method of depressing the keys to be integral to the musical expression of the work.

Ex. 5 Bolcom's forearm cluster marking

Every composer of this century has dealt with the piano not only at the keyboard but also in the strings. Balcom continued this tradition with many instances of the player plucking a string while still playing at the keyboard, much as George Crumb did. In the second etude, "Recitatif,"notated in a free meter, the pianist must hold a chord while reaching into the strings,
plucking a note, and then playing the same note again, this time on the keyboard. It is an interesting effect that provides a challenge to the performer. Fortunately Bolcom only required plucking the strings in the set's slower etudes!

The difficulty in plucking is not the only manner in which Twelve New Etudes for Piano resembles Crumb's compositions. Individual titles are very descriptive, ranging from a that of a mood or action, such as "Hi-jinks" to a more concrete portrait such as "Butterflies, hummingbirds." Every effort is made and every possible technique used to musically portray the assigned title. The organization of the set is also familiar. In Makrokosmos, Crumb divided the twelve works into three books of four each. Bolcom divided his set into four books of three each. The problem of organization when tonality cannot provide a set structure is a complex one in the twentieth century. Both Bolcom and Crumb took their cue from John Cage and others to organize through extra-musical ideas and did so in these two sets of works.

Bolcom also managed to achieve structure through his references. He obviously borrowed many techniques from this century's experimental composers, but he avoided direct quotation or a simple collage of previously written music. Instead, he invoked the idea of the musical styles of past masters, of this century and others, but filtered them through his own compositional lens. In the middle of the second etude, "Recitatif," a shy waltz appears, and Bolcom underscored this section with a quotation attributed to Satie. The music is not a quotation from Satie, but the sound is definitely in his style. At the end of "Butterflies, hummingbirds," the fifth etude, Bolcom instructed the pianist to slowly retake all the notes of a

57 McAlexander, 72.
sustained chord until one note is left. This technique was devised by Robert Schumann and used in situations exactly like the one encountered in this etude. The eighth etude, “Rag Infernal,” is an homage to Scott Joplin and other ragtime composers, but it has been distorted. It exudes a schizophrenic nature, rocking back between tonal centers and rhythmic grooves. Bolcom’s heritage in ragtime and other jazz-inspired popular compositions is shown throughout the set, not only in the eighth etude. The final etude, “Hymne à l’amour,” is marked to be played with “Orchestral” sonorities. It contains two separate ideas, and the second one, a series of chords, is a clear blues progression. It is interesting that the etude that is most clearly associated with symphonic writing, a genre that traditionally has been staid in its harmonic usage, contains jazz harmonies. Bolcom wanted these harmonies full and obvious. Many of the other etudes contain small movements of jazz progressions, but the majority of the other occurrences of jazz-inspired writing are found in the syncopated rhythms of the etudes in a faster tempo. David Burge remarked that Bolcom’s gifts as a jazz improviser are reflected everywhere in the set. Despite the ease with which it seems a pianist improvises a piece or plays this work, both are extremely difficult tasks that are ultimately rewarding.

John Corigliano and William Bolcom have faced the task of interpreting the ideas of innovative composers from earlier in this century in differing ways. Corigliano used many techniques pioneered by the four composers considered in this paper, but in a much more Romantic framework. His primary concern was communicating with his audience. Knowing that the musical tastes of people who attended concerts had a decidedly Romantic bent, 

Corigliano chose to write in that style. The result was almost immediate acceptance by the general public. It loved his music, and conductors eager to program recent music that will still attract a crowd were willing to perform it. It appears that Corigliano succeeded in connecting with his audience. Yet behind the facade of an unabashed Romantic was a composer who was aware of the techniques of previous generations. Corigliano made the experiments of this century palatable to a culture that was largely musically illiterate. He may have scared an audience with esoteric procedures, but he always provided a resolution to tonality. The use of these procedures thus seemed inevitable and an intrinsic part of the structure of his piano compositions.

Balcom embraced the innovations of these four composers and used their ideas to the fullest extent. He believed, and has stated, that traditional music "should be a certain part of our musical world, but a much smaller one than it has been made to be." 59 Composers, then, should write in a contemporary style and performers should actively work to present contemporary works. But that contemporary style must include all that has come before it in addition to presenting new ideas. Balcom attempted just that dichotomy. Each of his piano works contained not just one new technique, but several. Perhaps his career as a pianist made Balcom more willing to stretch the technique for the piano, place more demands on the player and integrate strange methods of playing in such a way as to seem natural. Whatever the reason, his music for that instrument was pioneering without seeming reactionary. It dealt with old ideas in new ways and even presented

59 Wait, 34.
vague hints of music in past styles. His music was still tonal and readily accepted by modern audiences because of his ability to draw them into the structure and, like Corigliano, communicate with them.

This notion of conveying an idea or feeling to an audience was what set these two composers apart from the four examined earlier. Instead of simply experimenting for experiment's sake, they only used avant-garde techniques when it served the overall intent of the work. Instead of being fascinated by new sounds, these two were fascinated by the who and why of music. Instead of striving to be original at all costs, these two feared no sound, whether old or new, and used any sound freely in compositions and challenged audiences to accept Beethoven next to John Cage. Audiences responded, and that response was positive.

We have seen that changes in American piano literature, as facilitated by Cowell, Cage, Crumb, and Davidovsky, spread to non-experimental music in three areas—figuration, form, and notation. Figuration was no longer an Alberti bass figure supporting a melodic line. Ostinato, the use of a repeated rhythmic or melodic pattern, and rhythmic cells became two of the dominant compositional devices. Composers focused on the interplay of repetitive patterns and often used them as the basis of a work. The pianist’s attack also became more percussive and harsh in order to create the quick changes in dynamics that new music usually required.

This more percussive attack also facilitated the punches that were seeping in from jazz influences. The piano was one of the primary rhythm instruments in jazz. While it provided a harmonic accompaniment, it did so in a percussive manner. The pianist punched out chords in short, syncopated bursts. As more art music began to use jazz as a basis for composition, this...
practice became acceptable technique. Form was no longer defined by tonal progression. Long past were the days when composers began writing a work for piano knowing the general structure and which keys were allowed. Today, composers must find extra-musical ideas as the basis for compositions. Whether descriptive titles or rhythmic patterns, ancient Indian poetry or a snippet of Beethoven, these ideas are needed to add coherence and structure for understanding. Without these concrete ideas to latch onto, musicians and audiences alike would have been unable to follow new harmonic progressions and disjunct melodic lines.

Notation created by the experiments of the avant-garde were finally becoming standardized due to the work of mainstream composers like Corigliano and Bolcom. With this new notation came a better means of expressing the composer's desires to the performer. Used in addition to standard notation, the long explanations of novel procedures characteristic of all the works examined have opened a new path of correspondence between artists.

Where the first four composers forced us to accept the strange sounds they produced as music, the final two composers studied forced us to accept that music as a viable means of composition. They took away the limitations of experiments and moved them from the edge of compositional practices solidly into our musical language. The addition of those experimental techniques not only broadened our definition of music by making it more inclusive, it also created a more expressive and malleable music. As newer techniques were brought into mainstream composition, facilitated by composers like Bolcom and Corigliano, music only grew more eloquent and compelling.
Will the music of these four experimental composers last very far into the next musical age? Perhaps, perhaps not, but that is not the important question. What is important is whether or not these composers have altered perceptions of the piano. The answer to that question is a resounding yes. Whether or not artists are performing their music, or audiences are even listening to it in the future, their influence will still be felt. The changes made to the repertoire of the piano, facilitated by their compositions, have altered the way audiences listen to the piano and the way composers write for it. When young musicians are no longer discussing their ideas, these same young musicians will be using their techniques. If imitation is truly the highest form of flattery, then modern music has come to respect their concepts, something none of them ever imagined or particularly craved. Yet that respect, the result of their years of experimentation, has produced a revolution in composition that will still be studied for years.
GLOSSARY

Accelerando. Gradually becoming faster.

Alberti Bass. An accompaniment figure, usually found in the left hand, in which the pitches of three note chords are played successively in the order lowest, highest, middle, and highest. It was most common in 18th-century keyboard music.

Arpeggio. A chord whose pitches are sounded successively, usually from lowest to highest, rather than simultaneously.

Dyad. Two pitches, whether sounded simultaneously or successively. The term is used principally with reference to nontonal music.

Fortissimo. Very loud.

Legato. Smooth and connected, with no separation between notes.

Modal Melody. A melody characterized by the use of a mode or modes distinct from tonality, especially the church modes of the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The system of modes was used in the classification of Gregorian Chant.

Motive. A short rhythmic and/or melodic idea that is sufficiently well defined to retain its identity when elaborated or transformed and combined with other material and that thus lends itself to serving as the basic element from which a complex texture or whole composition is created.

Ostinato. A short pattern that is repeated persistently throughout a performance or composition or section of one.

Overtone. The term given to harmonics above the fundamental pitch that sound when a given pitch is sounded on a single frequency.

Pianissimo. Very soft.

Plectrum. A piece of some material, often plastic, ivory, or a quill, used to pluck a stringed instrument. Also referred to as a pick in banjo and guitar playing.

Quartal Harmony. Harmony based on combinations of the interval of a fourth, as distinct from tertian harmony, which is based on combinations of the third.

Ritardando. Gradually becoming slower.

Sonata. A work for one or more instruments, usually in several movements, that has been common since the 17th century. Often used to describe both the genre and the typical formal structure of the first movement of the works.

Syncopation. Displacing the normal recurrence of a strong beat by placing a long duration after a short one so that the long note seems to be accented.
Ternary. A formal structure consisting of three parts, the first and third identical or at least closely related, and the second contrasting in some manner, whether in character or in tonality.

Timbre. The character and quality of a sound separate from its pitch.

Triad. A chord consisting of three pitches, the adjacent pitches being separated by a third.
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