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Cage's Dungeon

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Cage's Dungeon

by Gage Bradley, Brett Hall, and Sam Troncin

Graceland University

This composition was created as a part of Graceland University's MUSC3220: Post Tonal Theory and History course. Throughout the semester, students in this class study the music of contemporary composers who create music by expanding, or even ignoring, the traditional "rules" of Western tonal harmony. At four points during the semester students are asked to demonstrate their knowledge of musical concepts and aesthetics by creating works that mirror those of well-known composers. Cage's Dungeon was written to represent the "Avant Garde" portion of the class, in which students examine pieces that challenge the standard definition of music and musical performance.

Cage's Dungeon specifically refers to the work of the influential composer, performer, writer, and philosopher, John Cage. More precisely, his later compositional style which emphasized the use of chance operations within a musical composition. Cage was highly influenced by eastern philosophy, Zen Buddhism in particular, and he was fascinated by the chance operations found in the ancient I Ching text. As a result, Cage wrote many works that were nothing more than a set of simple guidelines for the performer to follow, with the outcome of the process creating the piece. These indeterminate compositions are not so much about the technical prowess of the performer or composer, or even about making a profound artistic statement. Instead, Cage's chance music creates an opportunity for unique and interesting sounds to interact with one another in a unique way.

The instructions for Cage's Dungeon are rather simple, but the result is a vibrant and interesting piece that showcases the simple beauty of combining various pitches together. Each performer chooses one octave on their instrument to perform in. Within that

octave, each player is responsible for using chance operations to assign a number (one through twelve) to each pitch. Players may use a random number generator, flip coins, roll dice, or even the simple method of dropping small pieces of paper onto the instrument and letting them fall where they may. The individual nature of this method of assigning numbers means that each performer's instrument will have a different numerical sequence to it than their colleagues'.

Prior to the performance the group agrees on the piece's duration (in this video, the piece was four minutes in length), and a timer is used to indicate when the piece has ended. Once the timer is started and the piece begins one player rolls two dice onto a table set up in the middle of all three performers. Both dice are taken from the popular fantasy game Dungeons & Dragons, and each is assigned a specific role. One of the dice indicates which pitch will be sounded (numbers one through twelve), and the other indicates the volume level. Following each roll, the ensemble strikes the appropriate pitch and lets the sound ring without interfering with its natural decay. This process is repeated until the timer indicates that the piece is over.

Each performance of Cage's Dungeon will be a unique experience for both the performers and the audience. Some of the resulting harmonies may be particularly familiar and sonorous, perhaps a major or minor chord is sounded, while others may be very dissonant and unsettling. But, much the same way that other conceptual art focuses on the process by which the piece was created, rather than the aesthetic features of the actual product, Cage's Dungeon provides a framework for exploring sound in a new and creative way.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/oagZpp3HkUs?ecver=1>