

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Villars, Chris. 1973. 'Cage and Music'. *Contact*, 6. pp. 6-8. ISSN 0308-5066.

characteristics given in textbooks on physics or acoustics. If, secondly, we remember that physics is a branch of abstract thought and begins by objectifying its subject matter, we may be led to suspect that music, which relies essentially on the subjective perception of sound, makes use of other, non-physical, characteristics of sound. And, indeed, this is so.

For the purposes of musical composition the essential characteristic of sound is the immediate impression it makes upon a listener. We might call this the "affective-tone" of the sound. The physical magnitudes of pitch, duration, timbre and dynamic all influence the affective-tone of the sound heard. In fact it is only by virtue of this secondary relation to the immediate impression that these characteristics have any relevance to musical composition at all, and indeed, one can be a composer and know nothing whatsoever of them! To be a composer it is only necessary to have an impression in one's mind of a sound, whether from memory or by actually hearing it, and to put this sound together with other sounds.

Other factors than these physical characteristics influence the affective-tone of a sound. One factor which is very important as far as music is concerned is the context of other sounds in which the sound is heard. A sound with the same physical characteristics will in fact sound quite different in different contexts. Furthermore, whereas in accordance with the laws of physical acoustics the physical characteristics of a mixture of sounds will be the predictable sum of their individual physical characteristics, it is evident that the subjective impression of a mixture of sounds is something quite unique and no mere sum of the individual impressions involved. This fact is the basis of harmony in music, both vertical and horizontal. Indeed it seems to me probable that harmony - understood as the unique effect of sounds "sounding together" with other sounds, whether simultaneously or in succession - is the essential characteristic of sound without which music would be impossible.

Thus we see the poverty of Cage's conception of sound. For him a sound is completely specified when we state its pitch, timbre, duration and dynamic. That he is quite wrong in this is clear from the above, for a sound is strongly dependent on the context in which it is heard and especially on what immediately precedes it and what other sounds are heard simultaneously.

We can also see now why there is really no contradiction between Cage's claim that music is the organisation of sound and his use of chance to effect that "organisation". For Cage sound is the sum of its four physical characteristics and these, being measurable, are susceptible to being ordered in any mathematical way. From this point of view,

chance, as a mathematical technique, has as good a claim to be used as any other. It is only when we consider the fuller nature of sound, its immediate impression, that a contradiction between organisation and chance arises. It is a matter of fact that randomly to arrange the physical characteristics of sound generally creates an impression of no organisation whatsoever. The ancient laws of harmony, which can also be used to structure mathematically the physical characteristics of sound, are better than chance in this respect in that they do create an impression of organisation in the perceived sound; though, without variation, it is a stereotyped impression and most composers today find that the strict use of these laws does not create the effects they wish to achieve.

Music is the organisation of sound, but the sound organised is not the abstract physical sound but the living subjective impression, and the organisation is no mere mathematical ordering of measurable, physical characteristics but the creative combination of sound impressions to achieve expressive effects.

CHRIS VILLARS.