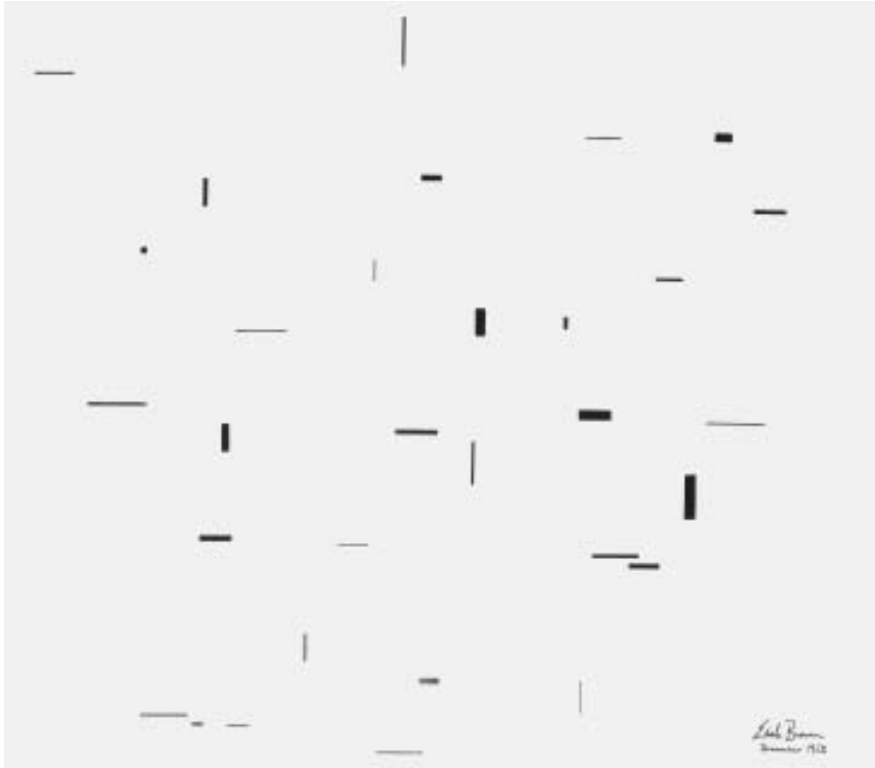


Every Sound You Can Imagine

CHRISTOPH COX



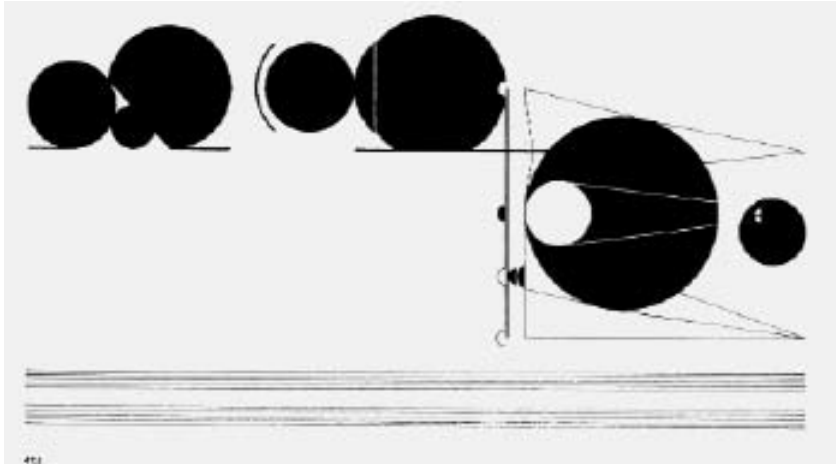
Earle Brown, "December 1952"

A large white sheet of paper is speckled with a few dozen black lines or bars—some horizontal, some vertical, some fat, some thin. In its geometric asymmetry, it might be mistaken for a sketch by Piet Mondrian or Kasimir Malevich. In fact, it's a musical score: Earle Brown's "December 1952." Graphically, Brown's piece bears only a distant resemblance to a traditional musical score, as though all the notes and most of the staves had been erased, leaving only a fragmentary scaffold. As musical notation, it is thoroughly idiosyncratic, eschewing the standards of conventional sheet music in favor of a symbolic language all its own. So how does one perform this piece? A separate page of instructions offers only a slim bit of guidance. "For one or more instruments and/or sound-producing media," it reads. "The composition may be performed in any direction from any point in the defined space for any length of time and may be performed from any of the four rotational positions in any sequence."¹

"December 1952" exemplifies a set of new compositional strategies that emerged in the early 1950s and that continue to thrive today. Intersecting with a range of visual art movements and forms—Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Fluxus, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Performance Art, Video Art, and others—such strategies envision the production of the score as a branch of visual art parallel to and partly independent from musical performance. As such, they challenge the traditional function of the score and propose a new set of relationships between composer, performer, and audience.

We generally take for granted that music is something composers "write" and musicians "read," and that musical "writing" and "reading" are distinct sorts of activities. Yet notation is a relatively recent invention in the history of music, as is the distinction between composition and performance. For most of human history, music was strictly an aural art, learned through hearing and transmitted and altered by way of performance itself. Within such a folk culture, music was in constant flux, without finished works or individual composers.² While oral cultures adhered to traditional forms, improvisation always played a part and, like evolutionary mutation, caused traditional forms to continually drift and change.

Musical notation was introduced in the Middle Ages as a mnemonic aid for accomplished musicians, a crutch that became ever more necessary with the introduction of multiple melodic lines. Yet economic and political pressures made musical literacy a necessity. The transition from feudalism to capitalism meant the collapse of the courtly patronage system that had supported musicians for centuries. Musicians were thrust onto the open market; and the emergent capitalism favored exchangeable objects rather than intangible, ephemeral forms such as music. Musical notation was thus enlisted as a solution to the problem of how to commodify the inherently transitory nature of sound and the fluid matter of music. Copyright regulations eventually assured the legal status of the musical work as the private property of its author, establishing a division between the work and its performance, the composer and the performer. These conditions served to fix music in the form of stable, finished products and led to the waning of real-time improvisation. The score shifted attention from the ear to the eye, as music became



Cornelius Cardew, "Treatise," 1963-1967 (excerpt)

something to see and to read before it was something to hear. What began as a mere supplement to musical performance—the score—became an autonomous entity that governed performances and to which they were held accountable.

Today's system of staff notation first appeared in the 11th century and, over the next three centuries, achieved its familiar form: five parallel lines overlaid with notes and rests, clefs, and time signatures. By the 16th century, staff notation had become the international standard in Western art music; and it continues to function today as the dominant system for notating all kinds of music. Yet in the past half-century, a crisis of musical representation has unsettled not only staff notation but also the whole musical edifice of which it is a part. This crisis was initially precipitated by the invention of the phonograph in the late 19th century and of magnetic tape a few decades later. These technologies challenged the status of written notation as the primary mode of capturing and commodifying music. Written notation could offer a description or set of instructions for musical performance; but electronic recording could preserve musical performances themselves. And while written notation was restricted to discrete pitches and their combinations, electronic recording could capture what John Cage called "the entire field of sound"—not only so-called "musical sounds" but the rush of the wind, the crackling of embers, the wail of sirens, the whirl of machines, the roar of crowds, and the rest of the audible universe.³ These "non-musical sounds" enthralled artists and composers such as Luigi Russolo, Edgard Varèse, Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, and Iannis Xenakis, who began incorporating them into their compositions, either approximating them via traditional musical instruments or directly incorporating them through the use of phonograph records or magnetic tape. New electronic instruments—theremins, vocoders, synthesizers, and, eventually, computers—contributed to the exploration of this vastly expanded musical field, which traditional notation could not adequately represent. Already in 1936, Edgard

Varèse prophesied the need for a "seismographic" notation to capture electronic sounds; and, within a few decades, composers such as Xenakis, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and György Ligeti were producing just such graphic forms to represent the sonic sheets, waves, and pulses characteristic of their electronic compositions.⁴

These developments coincided with the golden age of jazz, which treated the written score as a mere sketch, a springboard for creative improvisation. Jazz enthusiasts such as Earle Brown turned to indeterminate notational strategies as a way of jump-starting the improvisatory impulse. "I couldn't understand why classical musicians couldn't improvise, and why so many looked down on improvisation," noted Brown. "The whole series [of open-form pieces] 'October,' 'November,' and 'December [1952]'" was progressively trying to get them free of having every bit of information before they had confidence enough to play."⁵ From the other side, composers emerging out of the "free jazz" explosion of the 1960s came to see experimental notation as a way of focusing what could otherwise be chaotic improvisatory blowouts. "One of the problems of collective improvisation, as far as I'm concerned," quipped composer and improviser Anthony Braxton, "is that people [. . .] will interpret that to mean 'Now I can kill you'; and I'm saying, wait a minute!"⁶ Hence, Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, Werner Däfeldecker, and others began to use novel notational schemes to create a common point of reference so that improvisation could be genuinely collective rather than individualistic and competitive.

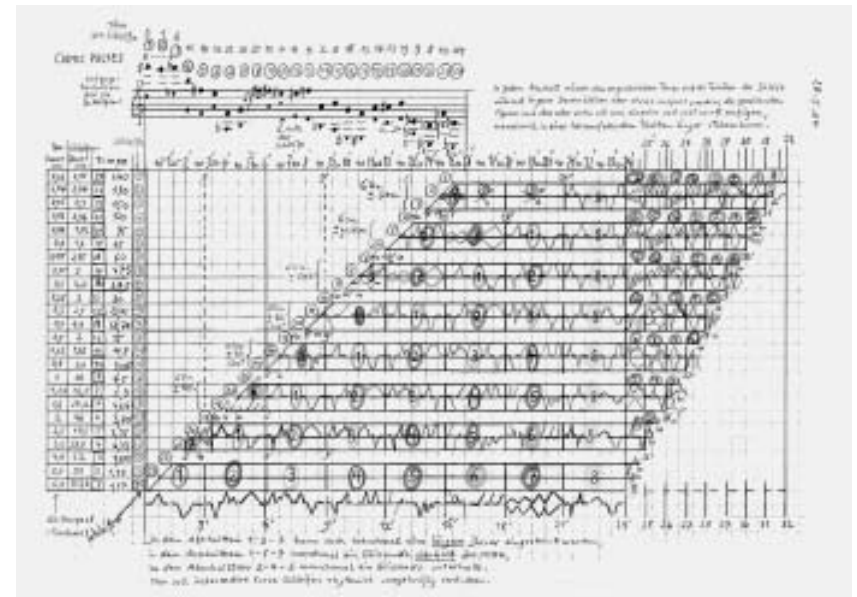


Jennifer Walshe, Turf Boon's "The Sacred Geometries," 2007

Whether used to encourage or to rein in improvisation, the turn toward experimental notational schemes often had political underpinnings. Brown's invitation to performers to become co-creators of his pieces sprang in part from a rejection of the hierarchy in classical music that made performers subservient to the composer and the score, a hierarchy that many experimental composers felt to be unsavory. "[W]hen you get right down to it," remarked John Cage, "a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do. I find this an unattractive way of getting things done. I'd like our activities to be more social—and anarchistically so."⁷ Deeply political composers such as Cornelius Cardew shared Cage's aim and construed musical composition and performance as utopian activities that could foster experiments in radical democracy. Cardew thus envisioned his classic "graphic score" "Treatise," 1963–1967, as a prompt or occasion for a group of musicians (or even non-musicians) to arrive at a consensus about how to perform the piece and then to follow the rules they had set themselves.

The experimental scores of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, then, were responses to the technological, cultural, and political transformations of the times. After a period of relative dormancy, the 1990s saw a reanimation of notational experiments that coincided with the emergence of new digital art-making technologies and a multi-media aesthetic sensibility. Inexpensive, portable, and ubiquitous computer technology fostered a popularization of electronic music production; and the internet made possible a global exchange of music and musical knowledge that opened a new generation to the history of experimental music. The vitality of video and performance art, and the ready translatability of digital data encouraged artists to ignore the boundaries between media and disciplines. It was no longer unusual for visual artists to incorporate sound into their practices or for audio artists to work with images. The paintings, sound works, and installations of Steve Roden, for example, draw as much inspiration from the canvases of Arthur Dove and Alfred Jensen as they do from the music of Morton Feldman and Brian Eno. Marina Rosenfeld performs improvised music on turntables and produces spellbinding photographs and videos. And Stephen Vitiello collaborates as readily with experimental music pioneer Pauline Oliveros as with painter Julie Mehretu. Not surprisingly, many of these artists have come to substitute the dominant visual formats—video monitors and computer screens—for the ink on paper characteristic of musical scores since the Middle Ages. Michael J. Schumacher's "Grid," 2007, for example, is an algorithmic visual program displayed on a computer monitor, while Rosenfeld's *White Lines*, 2005, and Christian Marclay's *Screen Play*, 2005, unfold in real time on video screens.

For all these artists, the experimental score serves as a nexus that links music with the other arts and acts as a kind of portable program for the endless production of new sounds, actions, forms, and communities. Rather than exemplifying the much-hyped notion of *synaesthesia*—the merging of sensory modalities or artistic media—these scores affirm the aesthetic value of *metaphor* in its original sense—the joy in unpredictable leaps and translations, in this case between sight and sound. As such, the works in this exhibition draw attention to musical notation as a species of graphic art and affirm a future that is conditioned by the past and present but that nevertheless remains fundamentally open.



Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Form Scheme from *Cosmic Pulses*," 2006–2007

Notes

1. Earle Brown, "Folio" (1952–1953) and "4 Systems" (1954), (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1961).
2. For a concise presentation of this history, see Chris Cutler, "Necessity and Choice in Musical Forms," *File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* (New York: Autonomedia, 1985), pp. 20–38. See also Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
3. John Cage, "Future of Music: Credo," Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 4. This text is reprinted in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*,

- ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004).
4. See Edgard Varèse, "The Liberation of Sound," *Audio Culture*, p. 18. Also see the texts by Russolo and Schaeffer in this volume.
5. Earle Brown, liner notes to *Earle Brown: Music for Piano(s) 1951–1995*, David Arden, pianist, New Albion NA082.
6. Anthony Braxton, quoted in Graham Lock, *Forces in Motion: Anthony Braxton and the Meta-Reality of Creative Music* (London: Quartet, 1988), p. 240.
7. John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. ix–x.