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Two 2 for two pianos. *The Complete John Cage Edition*, Vol.
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Louis Goldstein

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RECORDING REVIEWS

*Two*² for two pianos. *The Complete John Cage Edition, Vol. 39*. Rob Haskins, piano 1; Laurel Karlik Sheehan, piano 2. Liner notes by Rob Haskins. 2008. Mode 193.

Between 1987 and his death in 1992, John Cage completed forty-eight compositions that have come to be known as the Number Pieces. The term derives from the fact that the titles of these compositions consist of the number of players required, written out as a word. When the same number of players was required for a subsequent composition, an Arabic numeral was added as a superscript. Thus the composition under consideration here, *Two*², properly read as “two for the second time,” is the second piece in the series requiring two performers. It was composed in 1989.

The availability of recordings of this repertoire has become relatively abundant in comparison to other contemporary repertory. For the last few years the Mode and OgreOgress labels have been moving forward with noble efforts toward completeness. The disc at hand is Mode’s fifth Number Pieces CD and volume 39 of their Complete John Cage Edition.

The Number Pieces are often extremely economical in their sounds; sometimes a player might have a full minute in which to position a sound. The stillness, indeed, the extended silences, of much of Cage’s late composition can evoke a wide array of emotions, notably a sense of tranquility and serenity. In ensembles, a vast range of possibilities exist for the resultant rhythmic proximities. Contrasting with this, the score of *Two*², quite thick with sounds to begin with, has a check on the performers’ coordination every five or seven sounds. Here the unpredictability often associated with chance composition and indeterminate performance is kept within a comparatively strict control.

Cage based *Two*² on *renga*, a Japanese poetic design that he referred to in many different situations. *Renga* has at least thirty-six five-line stanzas, with the lines containing five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables respectively. *Two*² imitates this form by containing thirty-six lines of music, each divided into five measures that contain, alternately, five, seven, five, seven, and seven musical

events. These events are sounds ranging from a single pitch to dense chords, and their distribution is usually shared between the two pianists. The pianists do not coordinate their parts with each other, but each pianist must finish the current measure before proceeding to the next, hence the control of ensemble coordination already mentioned. The cover of the CD booklet has a light image, uncredited, of the first page of the score, consisting of the first three renga. Even though the last measure of each line is cut off, this image helps to clarify the written description of the music's structure.

Rob Haskins is a young musicologist with a solid and still growing reputation as a Cage scholar. He has provided booklet notes for other recordings of Cage's Number Pieces, and for this CD he supplies an excellent 3,100-word essay complete with footnotes and suggestions for further reading. The essay reviews Cage's relationship with the concept of harmony, the connection that relationship bears with the Eastern idea of "interpenetration," and his late-career return to harmonic thought. Haskins's discussion of *Two*² in particular is rich with personal metaphorical description of some of the possible meanings held within the music. He successfully places the work as an important composition, not merely within the Number Pieces, and not limited to Cage's output, but generally within the musical canon, as a work worthy of intellectual and artistic contemplation.

As Haskins observes, the immense mixture of harmonies in *Two*², from simple triads to severe, multinode dissonances, and the manner in which they are ordered, creates an inherent lack of pattern. The ambiguity of their sequence allows the possibility for each sound to create an illusion of either development, or cadence, or stasis—an illusion, of course, since the next sound is as likely to disrupt the continuity or the resolution as it is to sustain it. The listener has no choice but to remain in a state of constant present tense with the performers, listening for the next sound, whether a single pitch or a dense chord, perhaps as one would observe a diversity of flora during a walk through a forest.

Cage's performance note in the score of *Two*² states that the events of the music should be played "quietly but equally." The performance at hand includes chords in the first few renga that at first I found intrusive, loud and aggressive beyond the expected range. Considered in the totality of the complete performance, they perhaps open a wider vista for the listener, who is essentially a tourist in this forest of sounds. On subsequent hearings I continued to be bothered by the heaviness of some of the low chords and the sharpness of some of the high ones, although I also began to see that the greater volume of the music's first moments provided additional contrast which guaranteed that the gradual softening occurring by the sixth renga had a more obvious impact. If the listener is a wanderer in *terra incognita*, this contrast near the beginning provides a directional signpost many will appreciate.

I am equivocal about this personal criticism. With the music so much a series of lovely discoveries, each listener will likely find his or her individual preferences along the way. When I reduced the volume of my player to ameliorate my reaction to the loud chords, I discovered a shift in the analogy of my musical thinking. Now the music brought to mind a rocky landscape along a shore. There were rocks of many sizes and shapes, and the louder, lower sounds of *Two*² described the larger rocks. Some were enormous boulders. The performance does

succeed in conveying an image of endless discovery, just as when walking with a companion in a new environment one person will point out one thing, and the other something else. Whatever the individual preferences, the constantly shifting harmony is a joy to experience, both with careful listening and also as sounds quietly articulating a background ambience.

In another observation that is similarly personal, I note that Cage does not provide any advice concerning tempo or duration. While a recorded performance of this work could scarcely be any longer than this one and still fit on a single CD, it would be possible to perform with more variety in the pacing. I found myself occasionally wishing a particular passage was lingered over to a greater extent. In order to keep the total time in check, other moments could push forward with a bit more urgency. In other words, the quirks of my own sensibilities would modify the occasional forceful chord and substitute that impulse with greater flexibility in pacing.

Haskins combines his intellectual prowess with his considerable skill as a pianist, and together with Laurel Karlik Sheehan, who gave the Canadian premiere of *Two*² with Jack Behrens in 1990, they bring an undeniable authority to the performance. Recorded in one complete take with no editing, their performance is strong and secure while at the same time providing graceful shapings along the way. As I continued to listen I thought more in terms such as “magical” and “miraculous.” I kept finding more to like. There is a richness to the performance that gradually reveals itself and the music to be unfathomable. By the time I finished this review, I was reluctant to remove the disc from my CD player.

Complementing the beautiful performance, the recorded sound is excellent, capturing the perfectly matched pianos resonating wonderfully in Kilbourn Recital Hall of the Eastman School of Music. In another wise choice, even though *Two*² is one, through-composed work without movements, track numbers are provided for each renga, and they are identified by the accumulating timing of the whole. Altogether an admirable product.

Louis Goldstein
Wake Forest University

Grand Larsen-y: Vocal Music of Libby Larsen. Terry Rhodes, soprano; Ellen Williams, mezzo-soprano; Benton Hess, piano; Steven Reis, cello. Liner notes by Terry Rhodes, Ellen Williams, and Libby Larsen. Song texts and biographies of all artists included. 2004. Albany Records: TROY 634.

Recordings of Libby Larsen’s songs have heretofore been few and far between. This is the first to be devoted in its entirety to her vocal compositions. Two of Larsen’s more familiar and more frequently performed song cycles, *Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to Her Daughter Janey, 1880–1902* and *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers*, are included in the program, as well as the newer and lesser-known cycle, *Chanting to Paradise*, which in time might well prove to be an audience favorite. Delightful excerpts from her operas *Eric Hermannson’s Soul*, *Dreaming Blue*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* whet the listener’s aural appetite. Certainly the most unusual piece included on this recording is *Hell’s Belles*, for mezzo-soprano and five-octave bell choir, which is rarely performed due to the difficulty of the piece and the forces required to present it.