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**Special Issue: *Performing Indeterminacy: Experimental Music in Practice. Contemporary Music Review*, 41(2–3)**

**Introduction: Performing Indeterminacy<sup>1</sup>**

**Martin Iddon, Emily Payne, Philip Thomas**

The experience of indeterminate music is, necessarily, intimately bound up with the events of performance. As Cage put it, by and large, indeterminate music may be taken to refer to ‘composition which is *indeterminate* with respect to *its performance*. That composition is necessarily experimental. An experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen’ (Cage 1961 [1958], 39). Yet the question of performance has remained, largely, side-lined in scholarly discussion of indeterminate music, in favour—in rather traditional hue—of the actions (and notations) of composers. Indeed, the one performer who has attracted significant scholarly attention, David Tudor, in the period he was predominantly working on Cage’s scores (and those of other members of the New York School) typically undertook what looks like conventional composerly work, realising the indeterminate score into determinate form, a five-line-staff notation to be performed from on repeated occasions, the outcome, at least from Tudor’s perspective, in many respects wholly foreseen (Holzaepfel 1994; Iddon 2013).

This special double issue of *Contemporary Music Review* seeks to undertake two interrelated aims: first, to introduce the insights of performance studies which have become more strongly embedded into mainstream musicology to writing about indeterminate performance. These insights include raising questions about authorship, agency, and the conventional hierarchies of music-making, by drawing attention to the creative work of musicians. This

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<sup>1</sup> The published version of this article can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2022.2080469>.

work ranges from the long-term collaborative efforts of composers and performers working together, to situations where the boundaries between composer and performer are more porous. Also central to much of the work presented here is a focus on how indeterminacy functions and is experienced in rehearsal and performance. This takes in the role of touch in response to contingency in the moment of performance, and the dynamic and sometimes ambiguous relationships between body and instrument. All of the above contribute to understandings of the nature of freedom, constraint, and discipline in musical decision-making. In this way, this double issue demonstrates that indeterminacy is not simply prescribed through the instructions in a score, but is realised through the complex interactions between people, objects, environments, histories, and traditions.

The second aim is to ensure that the locus of indeterminacy does not rest exclusively with a group of 'usual suspects,' but is expanded both in its history and into the present day. Cage, Feldman, Stockhausen, and Tudor still feature here, but they are joined by figures (not just musicians, but also curators and dancers) including Caroline Shaw, Merce Cunningham, Roger Marsh, Tanya Bruguera, Paul Whitty, Hugh Davies, Pauline Oliveros, Alison Knowles, and Annea Lockwood, as well as contributors discussing their own creative practice. The issue considers the question of what it means to 'perform indeterminacy,' therefore, in a very broad spectrum, taking in extremely practical questions, relating to just what performers might do, through to questions of the politics and ethics of what sorts of performance activities may be asked for (or demanded), by whom, and under what circumstances, as well as retaining contributions from composers discussing how they hope to deploy indeterminacy in performance. It takes in empirical and speculative approaches, as well as ensuring the voices of performers themselves are heard: many of the contributors are, simultaneously, scholars *and* performers of indeterminate music.

Many of the essays presented here have their origins in contributions made to the international conference, 'Performing Indeterminacy,' held at the University of Leeds from June 30 to July 2, 2017, which was a part of the Arts & Humanities Council-funded project, John Cage and the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, led by Philip Thomas, with Martin Iddon, Emily Payne, and Christopher Melen (Project Reference: AH/M008444/1).

Though he was intimately involved with both the conference and with the initial development of what is presented here, what with one thing and another, Philip hasn't been able to play as full a role in the later stages as we'd all anticipated. As such, even though his name is on the cover, it's also dedicated to him, not least since these seem like just the sort of essays he'd want to enthuse about.

## **Bibliography**

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