

This is a repository copy of *Experiencing Indeterminacy in Performance*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/189696/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

Laws, Catherine [orcid.org/0000-0002-3888-5989](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3888-5989) (2022) *Experiencing Indeterminacy in Performance*. *Contemporary Music Review*. pp. 130-154. ISSN 1477-2256

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2022.2080452>

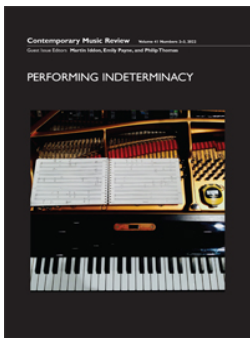
---

**Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



## Experiencing Indeterminacy in Performance

Catherine Laws

To cite this article: Catherine Laws (2022) Experiencing Indeterminacy in Performance, Contemporary Music Review, 41:2-3, 130-154, DOI: [10.1080/07494467.2022.2080452](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2022.2080452)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2022.2080452>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 111



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Experiencing Indeterminacy in Performance

Catherine Laws

*What do we mean by ‘performing indeterminacy’? Performance is, on one level, always an act of substantial determinacy: we ascribe the making of a sound or action to purpose of some kind, on some level. An event is brought into existence and witnessed as such. But performance is always, also, indeterminate: contingent, contextual and unpredictable to different degrees, characterised by the significant uncertainties in the complex interactions of performers, instruments (of any kind), spaces and audiences. Performing music defined as indeterminate can, but does not always, involve indeterminacy in the event of performance. Some players, with some pieces, use the rehearsal process to explore different possibilities before determining the content to be delivered in performance. Here, the extent of that indeterminacy in performance is arguably no different to that inherent in performing any score, no matter how fully determined the content. The difference lies in the process towards performance. In contrast, there are of course many performances of indeterminate music in which players make more or less in-the-moment decisions about exact content, though from a circumscribed range of possibilities. And, equally, there are scores that themselves determine such indeterminacy in performance, with instructions that require in-performance decision making. This summary confirms the richness and complexity of the field, but while indeterminacy has been the subject of ongoing debate and theorisation for some 50 years now, the discourse remains predominantly focused upon composers: on the extent and nature of their intentions and how they are expressed in scores. In this respect, even apparently performance-orientated discussion rarely moves beyond matters of realisation: what a player can and cannot do in response to a particular score. Despite all the claims for the ways in which indeterminate music might afford players a particular creative agency, notwithstanding the insightful commentaries of certain performers, and regardless of the work of those, like George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, who have considered indeterminacy and experimentalism in relation to a wider network of musical practices, much of the discourse remains couched in the same old terms. Starting away from music, with Marjorie Perloff’s consideration of the nature of literary indeterminacy in the early 1980s, this essay explores the parallels*

*with the reflexive quality of indeterminacy manifested in a range of performance work. The main concern is the locus of indeterminacy, focusing on its manifestation in the experience of performing; its immanence in performance. Underlying this is the contention that we don't attend to this enough—that we might consider more carefully what constitutes indeterminacy experienced in and through performance; what we do in manifesting indeterminacy in and through performance, bringing it into the act of performance, embodying it.*

*Keywords: Indeterminacy; Performance; Agency*

## **Introduction**

Musical performance is, on one level, always an act of substantial determinacy: we ascribe the making of a sound or action to purpose of some kind, even if the degree or nature of the intentionality is obscure. An event is brought into existence and witnessed as such. However, performance is always, also, indeterminate: contingent, contextual, and unpredictable to different degrees, characterised by the significant uncertainties in the complex interactions of performers, instruments (of any kind), spaces, and audiences. What, then, do we mean by 'performing indeterminacy'?

Performing music defined as indeterminate can, but does not always, involve indeterminacy in the event of performance. Some players, with some pieces, use the rehearsal process to explore different possible approaches to a score, before making certain decisions as to what (or how) they will play in performance. In such cases, however open the score, the extent of the indeterminacy in performance is arguably no different to that inherent in performing any composed piece from notation, no matter how fully determined the content: the difference lies in the process towards performance. By contrast, there are of course many performances of indeterminate music where players make more or less in-the-moment decisions about exact content, though from a circumscribed range of possibilities. Equally, there are many scores that themselves determine such indeterminacy in performance, with instructions that *require* in-performance decision making.

This summary confirms the richness and complexity of the field. However, while indeterminacy has been the subject of ongoing debate and theorisation for some fifty years, the discourse remains predominantly focused upon composers: on the extent and nature of their intentions and how these are expressed in scores. By contrast, my aim here is to examine aspects of the experience of indeterminacy in musical performance; I explore how that can be produced in working with a selection of somewhat different scores. Experimental music practices, broadly speaking, and indeterminacy in particular, offer performers considerable creative input, not just into matters of interpretation but more substantively, with regard to musical content and interactions. The agency of the experimental music performer is, therefore, significant, and differently so compared either to the conventional interpretative context

of western (and many other) classical music(s), or to the various pop, folk, or improvisational forms that operate primarily without scores and often with varying distributions of creative authority.

My underlying contention is that insufficient attention has been paid to the question of what constitutes indeterminacy experienced in and through performance: I argue that we should consider more carefully how it manifests and also why we might care about this. Peggy Phelan asserts that the life of performance is always in the present—and, perhaps more controversially, that it ‘lessens the promise of its own ontology’ when it enters an economy of reproduction (1993, 146)—all the while acknowledging that the fully present is impossible; that the ‘presentness’ of performance is only discernible in its impossibility, its disappearance. Related to this, I explore the role of indeterminacy and ambiguity in that very attempt—and inevitable failure—to manifest ‘presentness’; to enact the process of determining the moment, through its very contingencies.

### **Perloff’s Reflexive *Poetics of Indeterminacy***

My starting point lies away from music, in a wider consideration of the aesthetics of indeterminacy situated in the world of literature. The characterisation of indeterminacy in this field can, I suggest, help to draw out not just how indeterminacy manifests in musical performance, but also how these processes are significant in wider questions of creative agency and the production of musical meaning. Particularly useful is Marjorie Perloff’s work, which articulates indeterminacy specifically in terms of a liminal space of meaning-making constituted by materials that are often carefully controlled and tightly structured but finally indeterminate in their production of meaning and their effects.

In her 1981 book, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Perloff traces what she regards as an anti-Symbolist mode of modernist writing, rooted in a surface literalness and combined with forms of linguistic free play, producing a certain indeterminacy or undecidedness of meaning. Perloff notes that in writing her book about Frank O’Hara (published in 1977) she had come to recognise the significance of

what we might call ‘the French connection’—the line that goes from Rimbaud to Stein, Pound, and Williams by way of Cubist, Dada, and early Surrealist art, a line that also includes the great French/English verbal compositions of Beckett. (Perloff 1981, vii)

In the writing of these authors, Perloff argues, ‘the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not’ (1981, 18). Perloff was not, of course, the first to consider these writers in these terms, and others have since further explored the relationship.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, her book followed in the wake of a number of literary theories focused upon undecidability of meaning,

whether couched in terms of semiotics, structuralism or post-structuralism, deconstruction, or reader-response theory. However, her trajectory and the links she made between certain European and American authors were quite different to those of other critics.

Given this context, the choice of the word *indeterminacy* is significant: many other words for similar ideas were in circulation in literary theory at that time, with critics making claims for textual openness, writerliness, polysemy, undecidability, multiplicity, *différance*, and so on. It is perhaps no surprise that in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* Perloff discusses some of the writings of John Cage (later returning to write about him more extensively in subsequent publications),<sup>2</sup> thereby situating him in a particular literary context, while using a term less familiar to that context but very much part of Cage's world.

Perloff by no means irons out the considerable differences between her writers of indeterminacy. For example, she notes the similarities between Samuel Beckett's and Gertrude Stein's intricate uses of fragmented repetition and permutation (1981, 208–209). Nevertheless, she argues that Stein 'explodes all syntactic rules, relying on relational metonymic structures to create a particular impression' (209); Perloff's chosen example is 'A Substance in a Cushion'. By contrast, Beckett—and here she is talking about mid-late Beckett, with examples from his *Fizzles* (1973–1975)—does the opposite, exploiting extreme grammatical simplicity, using basic sentence structures perfectly correctly but filling them with words that remain unexplained. In Beckett's short text 'Closed Place' (Beckett 1995), Perloff observes, a sentence like 'The ditch is old' looks

like first grade reader except we don't know what the ditch is. Or what it means. We move from sentence A to sentence B with some measure of self-satisfaction until we realise that the syntactic order is only an illusion. (1981, 209)

In later texts, such as *Worstward Ho*, which was written after Perloff's book, Beckett takes this even further. Devoid of subject, location, or narrative, the piece begins: 'On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on' (Beckett 1983, 7). There is no character as such, no definable 'I', but there is agency: subjectivity implied by the compulsion to move onwards, and to speak that impulse into being, even as it fails. The text is reflexively focused upon its own determined progress through indeterminacy: from the most severely restricted linguistic resources there grows an evocation of the endless searching for some unlocatable origin, spun from the implications of its initial monosyllable ('on') and its negation ('no'). The extreme compression and fragmentation, and the process of additive structuring, produce a gestural process of accumulation and negation that has both coherence and flow without specificity in terms of content or meaning.

In this respect, Perloff sees Beckett's indeterminacy of meaning as characterised by a particular state between control and chaos, and between being and nothingness: in a state of 'neither' (a favourite Beckett word, but also one with a particular experimental music pedigree: it is the title of one of Beckett's short texts, written for composer

Morton Feldman and used as the libretto for his opera of the same name (Laws 2013, 255–257)). Beckett’s writing performs the problematics of saying something and nothing in and through the process of saying something and nothing.

The theories of literary undecidability of meaning, so much in the air around the time in which Perloff was writing, were often concerned to reveal the openness of all literary texts as never simply univocal, always subject to reading and re-reading, and ultimately indeterminate in meaning (though in some branches of reader-response criticism this very undecidability, and hence the possible range of reading, is theorised as textually produced: Wolfgang Iser (1974), for instance, argues that literary texts construct an ‘implied reader’—a position then filled by the actual reader—so as to afford a degree of variation in response but within limits produced—and ultimately controlled—by the text). That some writers exploited openness and indeterminacy more than others was certainly acknowledged in this field: it is discussed, for example, in the work of Umberto Eco (especially *The Open Work* (1989 [1962])) and constitutes Roland Barthes’s distinction between writerly and readerly texts (primarily in *S/Z* (1974)). However, with these theorists authorial determination is usually understood as a rhetorical strategy. As such, more ‘readerly’ or conventionally ‘closed’ texts are subject to deconstruction in a similar manner to more self-consciously open texts. This has led to many wonderfully rich readings ‘against the grain’.<sup>3</sup> Perloff’s approach is slightly different, however: she identifies indeterminacy as the subject as well as an effect of the work with which she is concerned. Thus, she notes that the ‘empty space of indeterminacy’ provides Beckett with a remarkable ‘subject’ (1981, 244).

### **Musical Performativity and Indeterminacy**

In shifting across from writing to music, the situation is of course very different. Complex as the question of literary meaning might be, it is a two-way process, between writer and reader, mediated by the page. In forms of music where the roles of composer and performer are distinct, we have three parties—composer, performer, and listener—and music designated indeterminate often maintains not just these roles but also the idea that they might, at least to an extent, operate distinctly: after all, it was Cage who wrote: ‘Composing’s one thing, performing’s another, listening’s a third. What can they have to do with one another?’ (1961, 13).

Perloff highlights some of the ways in which the literature she considers indeterminate exploits the arbitrariness and ambiguity of linguistic signs—their richness and multivalency, and hence the problematics of interpretation that result. This indeterminacy, she argues, engages the reader actively in the question of meaning. Indeterminacy in music has often been articulated in similar terms, but primarily with respect to the ways in which *compositional* indeterminacy allows for multiplicity at the level of the work. This seems to assume a rather transparent communicative process of signification, from composers to listeners; one that is unlike the conventional western idea of communicating meaning in and through musical narrative,

but that nevertheless often relies on conceptual knowledge beyond the performance: on an awareness that the composition is indeterminate, so as to recognise that its instantiation in performance is one of many possible versions. In some cases, the indeterminate status of the composition might, of course, be made obvious to a listener through the *performance*. In performances of Cage's *4'33"* (1952), for example, the absence of conventional musical tones directs attention to the contingencies and interdependencies of context and the performative significance of any particular occurrence of sound in *this* space, at *this* time, different to any other.

Likewise, performer behaviour sometimes suggests to the audience that substantial, material musical decisions are being taken in the moment of performance. This happens with the more apparent cue-based interactions of ensemble members in some of Christian Wolff's contingent pieces, for example (Saunders 2009, 362–363); pieces such as *For Five or Ten People* (1962), in which performers do not simply decide many of their own pitches, timbres, dynamics, and articulation (all within certain constraints articulated in the score), but the incidence and durations of the sounds are determined by temporal and relational factors: quite how long to wait before making the next sound, or (more often) how to coordinate the distribution of sounds across the ensemble, has to be determined primarily in the moment of performance, each player deciding exactly what, when, and how to play in relation to the actions of others and within the 'rules' of the score. The degree of performer agency here is often apparent to an audience, conveyed by the intensity of performer attention and qualities of musical behaviour demanded by such processes. However, there are many instances where this is not the case: where the extent and nature of the indeterminacy negotiated by a performer is not immediately apparent to the audience. For this reason, performance, as the site of production of musical signs, is of course crucial to the encounter with indeterminacy.

This is perhaps obvious. However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to quite what goes on in this process. I am, here, echoing Philip Thomas, who writes: 'The study of indeterminate music will be at its most stimulating when pursued through the analysis of this middle ground, upon which the practical work of translating sign to sound is done' (2013, 112). The future tense ('will be') is striking: Thomas's article was published relatively recently—in 2013—but he obviously did not, at that point, think that kind of focus was much in evidence. The study of indeterminacy and experimental music is, largely, the study of composers and works. This is surely deeply ironic, given some of the precepts that underly much of this music. The rhetoric, historically and today, is about undermining the hierarchies in the processes of musical production, about creating new roles for composers and performers and listeners, focusing on musical processes and relations rather than objects or products.<sup>4</sup> Many experimental composers are, or have been, performers, not least of their own work.<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin Piekut notes that the fundamental ontological shift of experimentalism is 'from representation to performativity' (2011, 7), and while not all experimental music is indeterminate and not all indeterminate music experimental,<sup>6</sup> the close



relationship between the two—the extensive, if various, use of forms of indeterminacy in experimentalism—is surely significant to this shift. Nevertheless, the discourse remains predominantly focused upon composers. We can read endlessly about a composer’s intentions (or their nonintentions—nonintentions that are, nevertheless, expressed most authoritatively), and about how these are manifested in scores. Practitioners and theorists alike have plenty to say about this: about what the ‘works’—that word persists, even when the identity of the material is deliberately put into question—are ‘doing’, how they configure or reconfigure performer actions or interactions with instruments and contexts, how they transform or reframe the context for listening, and so on.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, performance-oriented discussion rarely moves beyond matters of realisation and particularly what a player can and cannot do in response to a particular score. Ultimately, despite all the claims for the ways in which indeterminacy might emancipate performers from the tyranny of the master-composer, much of the discourse remains couched in relatively conventional terms.

There are significant exceptions, of course, particularly in writings by performers such as John Tilbury and Philip Thomas,<sup>8</sup> and studies of significant historical figures such as pianist David Tudor (especially those by Holzaepfel (1994; 2001), Pritchett (2004) and Iddon (2013)), and cellist Charlotte Moorman (Piekut 2011, 140–176; Roberts 2020). Likewise, the shift evident in the work of George E. Lewis (2008), Piekut (2011, 2014), and a few others, both widening the context within which we understand experimentalism, and revealing how networks of musical practices, discourses, and institutions interact to produce what are often considered purely artistic categories, is itself a shift towards performativity: towards looking at how identity and difference are produced and enacted through those networks and interactions, through music-making and all that entails.

I am certainly not alone in pointing out the issues here for performers. In the article quoted above, Philip Thomas argues for the need to understand these works as ‘evolving artefacts and as fresh conduits of musical experience’ (2013, 91) by taking into account the variety in processes of performer realisation. After all, if this music does what we are told, performers have a more substantively creative role to play than in conventional western classical music, but also one that is differentiated from improvisational practices by the ongoing fact of the composer-performer distinction, even if weakened or somewhat blurred, and the ongoing production of scores, even if in a hugely expanded variety of forms. This has implications. If it is true, as Thomas argues, that ‘Performance practice is here marked not by a search for authenticity but inquisitiveness, investigation’ (2009, 98) or that, in the rather different terms of John Tilbury, ‘With this music you learn the prime qualities needed in performing: discipline, devotion and disinterestedness’ (Tilbury and Parsons 1969, 151), then one way or another we might surely see reasons to look more closely at what actually goes on here, not least for its potential for music education and even beyond: for creative, critical forms of interaction between people, ideas, and the creative tools of music-making.

I therefore wish to amplify Thomas's call for more attention to what happens in different performances in this field. In addition, though, we need to consider what we do in manifesting indeterminacy in and through performance; in bringing it *into the act* of performance, embodying it. Of course, performing indeterminate music can mean different things. The performer in this field to whom most attention has been paid is David Tudor, and study of his work has exposed the richness but also some of the contradictory aspects of the performance practices of indeterminacy, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. Martin Iddon's research, building from that of Holzaepfel (1994; 2001) and Pritchett (2004), reveals the nuances within the broad categories of Tudor's responses to Cage's indeterminate scores. In particular, Iddon shows that Tudor often produced his own determinate notations for use in performance (especially with key pieces of 1957–1958), but also that some of his realisations—re-notations that made the score more useable in performance—drew heavily on palettes of sounds or actions taken from the more determined aspects of Cage's earlier compositions. Iddon concludes that, by working on earlier pieces, Tudor 'had *learned how to realise Cage scores*' [my italics], with the result that

[t]hough Cage might have been controlling the sounds he had left undetermined only from a distance, and without necessarily meaning to, the specific route that he and Tudor had taken to reach these realizations meant that Cage's control over the language available to Tudor was still near enough absolute. (2013, 55)

Piekut makes a similar point with respect to Cage's later work, arguing that a successful performance of Cagean indeterminacy in the 1960s 'depended on a performer who had already internalised the expectations of the composer, significantly undermining Cage's well-known goal of accepting the unforeseen' (2011, 143). Moreover, the contrast with the approach taken by Charlotte Moorman in her self-proclaimed 'godawful' performance of *26'1.1499"* (1955), which treated the score 'as a set of rules to be performed, inhabited and experienced in a variety of ways, rather than being merely obeyed or subverted' (Piekut 2011, 143), is striking. This is in no way to undermine the importance of the work of either Cage or Tudor. However, it exposes the extent to which apparently independent and/or indeterminate behaviours are influenced by shared experience and practices, by the wider interactions within a community of practice, and often by tacitly agreed or subtly articulated ideas of appropriateness, reinforced by repeated performance. The question of how indeterminacy manifests in performance—or the ways it does not—is not, then, just about what is in a score. Below, I explore this further, drawing on three contrasting examples from my own performance experience.

### Performing Indeterminacy in Late Feldman

The first case concerns the performance of Morton Feldman's late piano music. My points could apply to any of Feldman's last three piano solos—*Triadic Memories*

(1981), *For Bunita Marcus* (1985) or *Palais de Mari* (1986)<sup>9</sup>—but my specific examples are drawn from the final piece. Superficially, this music is perhaps amongst the most fully determined of Feldman’s output; perhaps surprisingly, given the topic, this is the reason for my choice. By this point in his compositional career, after exploring many different forms of notation, Feldman had returned to the conventional western stave. The late pieces are fully notated in terms of all the main parameters: on the face of it, to perform this piece I just need to play the right notes, at the right speed and in the right durations, at the right dynamic, using the right pedalling.

Feldman’s works of the mid-1970s onwards create complex perceptual effects through the use of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic processes that are highly patterned but constantly evade pure and absolute repetition, presenting fractionally changing materials in ever-different contexts at very low dynamics. *Palais de Mari* comprises small modules of material: sometimes short blocks of one or just a few bars, interrupted by rest bars of different lengths—anything from 3/16 to 2/2: Figure 1 shows the opening of the piece. Importantly, the pedal stays down through the ‘rests’, focusing attention on the decay of the sound. Other sections comprise extended passages of long chords that are then repeated but transposed slightly

The musical score for the opening of Morton Feldman's *Palais de Mari* (1986) is presented in four systems. The tempo is marked  $\text{♩} = 63-66$  and the dynamic is *ppp*. The score is in G major and 3/8 time. The first system (measures 1-6) shows a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with rests of varying lengths. The second system (measures 7-13) features a melodic line with a '6:5' interval marking and a bass line with a '6:5' interval marking. The third system (measures 14-21) shows a melodic line with a 'b.' marking and a bass line with a 'b.' marking. The fourth system (measures 22-28) shows a melodic line with a 'b.' marking and a bass line with a 'b.' marking.

Figure 1. Morton Feldman, *Palais de Mari* (1986), opening. Vienna: Universal Edition.

(by a semitone, for example) and with the length of each chord in the set extended or shortened by a quaver or a crotchet. Feldman described this piece as a 'rondo of everything' (Feldman 2008, 2:594), stating that 'everything comes back'. Unsurprisingly, it is only a rondo in the loosest sense; modules, or fragments of them, return, but almost always in altered form and without any clear sense of consolidated reiteration. Repetition here always reveals difference, the subtle changes undermining the sense of identity. This produces an impression of the relatedness of events, without any clear implication of causality or unity.

Sometimes the relationships between musical events are obvious. Certain chords or modules are echoed by means of techniques of 'almost' repetition; for example, with some pitches reordered rhythmically, or with pitch classes displaced across octaves so that the tone and the decay of the sound are somewhat different, or with exactly the same short chordal sequences simply extended or compressed durationally. Less obvious, but perceptible to varying extents, are other kinds of relationships. Feldman makes use of inversions or transpositions of chords or melodic fragments, but often with the rhythmic relationships retained. Similarly, he sometimes uses only very distantly related chords but employs them within repeated gestures of the same, striking quality (for example by alternating them with single grace notes very high on the piano). Finally, metre is itself subject to comparable forms of variation, with frequent repetition of the same time signatures (especially 5/8, 3/4, and 2/2) but with the content similar but varied and the bars subdivided in several different ways. The result is a general sense of relationships between the musical modules, but at subtly shifting levels and with varying degrees of ambiguity, such that they never quite crystallise into anything graspable.<sup>10</sup>

This both implies and undermines the sense of an ordering consciousness; the music hovers on the borders of being perceptible as ordered. In performing this music, or listening to others play it, I become intensely aware of my own attempts to find relations in the music, tracing the sound-qualities through time (and I would argue that this is likely to be the same, broadly speaking, for most performers or listeners; or perhaps, after an the initial experience, they give up on this attempt, but this, too, is a direct response to the impact of Feldman's almost-patterns). This relates to Feldman's stated aim of 'formalizing a disorientation of memory' (1985, 127). In this way, its own perception becomes the subject of the music; it becomes about the very operation and slipperiness of musical memory.

In performance terms, the relative uncertainty or stability of these patterns will of course be partly defined by the pianist's decisions about touch, tone, weighting of chords, relative stress of notes, exact tempo, and a sense of what *ppp* really means. These are the kinds of decisions of nuance made, whether consciously or apparently intuitively, by musical performers of conventional classical repertoire and across many other styles and genres, but the particularities of Feldman's musical material elevate their status relative to other aspects of performance.

However, in playing this music, the detail of my understanding of the musical patterns is, in part, dictated by factors only discerned in the moment of performance.

Pianists always, of course, grapple with the fact that they can never take their instruments with them, but here this issue is especially significant. Aside from the substantial influence of the size and acoustics of the space in which one is performing, the nature of piano sound at very low dynamics varies between instruments, as does the decay. Size of piano really matters here, and the particular weight and balance of each keyboard is different, and often there is considerable variation across the range; some of this might only be fully realised in the moment of performance. In *Palais de Mari*, there are sections with continuous sequences of chords, in which the sound builds up slightly—with the pedal held throughout long passages, some harmonics continue to reverberate despite the soft dynamic level. Even as these die, the resonance can sometimes be reactivated by the relationship to overtones of subsequent chords, but the exact nature of this resonance will vary from one piano to another (especially in relation to piano size and model, and how, or how well, the piano is tuned).

Likewise, in *Palais de Mari* (and much of Feldman's other late music), the 'rest' bars, in which the resonances decay (and the pianist apparently does nothing) are not merely spaces between sound events (or in which the performer can prepare the next action) but are materially significant. *How* the resonance decays, and *how* certain overtones fade from prominence and are then reactivated, is of as much interest as the tones activated by the pianist's fingers. We confront the question, what is the musical material: the notes struck by the pianist, or the sympathetic frequencies that rise out of, and fall back into, the bloom of the resonant texture? For the pianist, this question alters the nature of her listening and the relationship between action and perception. In this respect, the nuances of touch, resonance, and decay—of the interaction of a particular pianist with the qualities of a particular piano in a particular space—significantly influence how we hear the almost-patterns of Feldman's music, and these elements are not represented in the score, despite its full notation. Only by playing and/or listening do we experience this.

Above, in introducing this piece, I commented that the notation is such that one simply needs to follow Feldman's instructions. I meant this literally—on one level, this is basically what the pianist gets on with, in contrast to the process of performing more overtly indeterminate scores, where one often cannot simply sit down and start to read through the notes. Of course, things are never quite that simple. Nevertheless, just getting on and playing is an important part of the process; perhaps more so than most critical discussion of matters of performance choices would allow, focused as it is on questions of style and score interpretation. Ian Pace criticises the essentially positivist idea that notation 'tells the performer in essence *what* to do, around which he [*sic*] can elaborate (through use of varying micro-dynamics, rubato, tempo modifications, etc.) depending upon the degree of notational exactitude' (2009, 154). Drawing on structuralist poetics, Pace argues that scores tell us less how to play 'right' than how to play 'not wrong' (2009, 157): a score does not necessarily prescribe what to do, but rather delimits a space of possible approaches. This is crucial, and yet even taking this approach, which recasts the conventional classical, historical

construction of the performer's role, when it comes to focusing on quite how to produce the tones of *Palais de Mari*—how to play this dynamic, how to balance chords, minimise key bite, and so on—it still seems, fundamentally, that I am being urged to make a performance *reading*: to manifest one of those potential approaches apparently contained within the score. Considering the score as such, rather as Roland Barthes approaches Balzac's 'Sarrasine' in *S/Z* (1974), as the textual site of manifold possibilities for realisation of meaning, moves us beyond the idea of execution—of the performer as primarily realising compositional intentions—but still takes attention away from the indeterminacy of the situation of performance and its true contingencies: producing a *reading* of this kind needs performance for its manifestation but does not attend to performance as part of its *constitution*. In this respect, playing and listening—experimental, exploratory playing and listening to what happens this time, and then this, with this touch, or that weighting of the chord, on this piano, or that one—is here the primary space in which possibilities emerge, beyond, even if in relation to, the page.

In most music the subtleties of nuance in touch and resonance are relatively peripheral, subtly inflecting the harmonic resonance but without material implications for form, structure, or overall expression. Here, in contrast, the fragility of the sound-world and the ambiguities of the musical connectivity are in part derived from the very nature of these details of resonance. The repeated playing of *Palais de Mari* gradually accumulates awareness of the ways in which the music not only resists concretisation but is in part 'about' its own undecidability, its own contingency and performativity: 'about' the direct experience of sound in the moment of its perception. The music achieves a peculiar performative quality, as the player experiences the very processes of perception and understanding around which the composition is focused, and potentially affords the listener a parallel active engagement in those processes. The effect is one that parallels the ways in which, following Marjorie Perloff, I characterised the impact of Beckett's work in the first part of this article: in *Palais de Mari*, likewise, the performer (and listener) inhabits the 'space of indeterminacy' that is Feldman's 'subject'.

In this sense, indeterminacy of meaning is here both the subject and effect of the music, constituted in and through performance: it is performative, not purely compositional, and founded in the dynamic interaction between composer—represented by, but not synonymous with, the score—performer, instrument, and context. I would argue that this, more than the notational status of the score in terms of its overtly determinate or indeterminate characteristics, qualitatively changes the experience for the performer (and, I would propose, for the listener, though there is not space here to address that perspective). Likewise, and for that reason, while there are of course significant differences between the experiences of playing Feldman's more obviously indeterminate music, in all its notational variety, and these later pieces, in certain respects I find that the quality of performative indeterminacy remains remarkably similar.

### Indeterminacy and the Body in Musical Performance

My second example, *Touch and Go*, by Roger Marsh, written for me in 2014, is very different. Like *Palais de Mari*, it is a fully determined composition: the notes, rhythms and dynamics are notated, along with certain details of articulation and expression. Moreover, in this case the musical language is not one usually associated with experimentalism. Of course, indeterminacy (and experimentalism more broadly) can and does encompass a wide variety of musical sound worlds—tonal, atonal, and most things in between. Nevertheless, Marsh's post-tonal harmonic vocabulary and the narrative arc of its through-composed structuring, with elements of motivic development, are not often encountered in this field: such musical concerns are quite distant from those of most indeterminacy or experimentalism. In no sense, then, is this an indeterminate composition. However, the experience of performing it is something quite different.

*Touch and Go* is one of five compositions that form part of a large-scale (seventy-five minute) solo performance piece I recently developed, called *Player Piano*, incorporating film, movement and other live performance actions in addition to piano performance. Superficially, the process of making *Touch and Go* was perhaps the least obviously collaborative aspect of an otherwise very collaborative project that involved working closely with composers, a theatre maker, and a film maker.<sup>11</sup> Generally, much of my work with composers takes place in the rehearsal room, workshopping ideas, and improvising and devising materials, often with a score generated only after the first performance, as a consolidation of what happened rather than the starting point for a realisation. With this piece, I initiated the process, providing a 'brief' as to the core concerns of the project, the context in which the piece would be realised, and so on, but Marsh then composed independently, without any further collaboration, subsequently handing over a score.

However, I have worked with Marsh for over twenty-five years. I have played many of his pieces, including, for a long period in the late 1990s and 2000s, in the music theatre ensemble that he founded, Black Hair. As a result, in learning *Touch and Go* my hands recognised many of the shapes and patterns from playing other pieces of his over this extended span of time; the audible characteristics of his music are, for me, embodied. More than this, the more I have *handled* this music over so many years, the more my hands have become shaped and formed by its demands. Not just this music, of course—I could equally have commented on such matters with respect to performing Feldman's piano music. However, in that case I knew the music in other ways prior to playing, having listened to many performances and recordings of Feldman's music by other pianists. By contrast, with *Touch and Go*, the feeling of embodied recognition in encountering an entirely new piece—one that nobody has played before—was still *tangible*. I am a pianist who plays all kind of music but who has, for over twenty years, played more new music, of many different kinds, than anything else. As such, the ways in which Marsh's music carries both

similarities to and differences from other late twentieth-century and twenty-first century compositions is, for me, manifested in my body as much as in sound.

This presumably works both ways. Marsh may have written the piece independently, but he did so with substantial experience of who I am at the piano, and with years of direct experience of what it might mean to give me something to do. He produced a conventional score—with notes and rhythms for execution—but prefaced it with a brief note that suggests a process of discovery through the instrument: ‘Magic ... sense of wonder ... bringing the piano to life’ (the ellipses are Marsh’s). Moreover, the title hints at the precariousness of performance: when we consider that something might possibly work but might not, when we might succeed but might fail, we say the situation is ‘touch and go’. Much of Marsh’s work is in the field of music theatre, but not all, and on the face of it this might be a purely musical composition: Marsh gives physical instructions for the first two musical gestures of the piece, instructing the hands to ‘float’ between the two loud chords, high then low, which open the piece, and then, after a long pause, a sustained, quiet, trill should be played ‘intently, face close to fingers, watching the sound’ (see Figure 2). After this, though, he specifies no further gestural or theatrical action throughout the twelve-minute piece until the final chord is played, when the pianist should ‘keep hands in place (on the keyboard) and stare ahead as light fades’. Nevertheless, while at the time of writing Marsh had no idea of the final entity in which this piece might form a part—*Player Piano*—he assumed, on the basis of our past association and my current interests, that I would do more than simply play the notes: much later, he commented, ‘I had expectations that you would do *something* for it ... I

## Touch and Go

3

♩ = 72      Magic...sense of wonder...bringing the piano to life

8<sup>va</sup>-----|      let the hands float from 1st to 2nd chord

Intently, face close to fingers, watching the sound

3      *tr*      *pp*      lunga

Figure 2. Roger Marsh, *Touch and Go* (2014), opening. London: Decipherer Arts Press.



knew you would bring a theatricality to it, and that I could rely on that'.<sup>12</sup> None of that is specified in the score, though: it operates at a different, more tacit level of interaction, rather like some of what Iddon observes in dissecting the Cage-Tudor relationship, noticing the ways in which apparently independent performer choices were actually, quite often, strongly conditioned by engrained practices and long-term interaction.

In considering Aden Evens' comments on the resistances that instruments present to performers, guitarist Stefan Östersjö proposes a reconfiguration of instrumental mastery into a focus on the meaningful negotiation of instrumental resistance: 'the way in which a performer responds to the instrument is not simply a development of strategies to overcome this resistance, but rather a continual learning of how to "play" the dynamics of its resistances' (2013, 203). With *Touch and Go*, there is a strange combination of recognition, in the familiarity of many of the shapes and patterns with respect to some of Marsh's other music, and estrangement, in moments when the piece seems to actively disengage from those patterns in order to produce a contrived awkwardness, extravagantly difficult—impossible, even—for the hands. Thematically, this seems intended to produce a drama that contrasts moments in which the piano seems a strange, unfamiliar object that requires a distorting and contorting of the body, with others when the body and instrument seem reconciled and united: moments when the notes 'flow'.

The experience of performing this piece in this sense relates to Östersjö's characterisation of resistance; the process of practice became a continual learning not just to play but also to play *with* the resistances of body and instrument, negotiating their interaction. More significantly, this process became generative; the more I focused on it, both reflectively, thinking about my realisation of the score, but also reflexively, considering in and through playing why and how I was practising it quite as I was, what I was doing with my body in relation to the instrument, with my pianistic technique, with my understanding of this piece, and how that derived from bigger questions outside this piece—of bodies, pianos, the authority of composers, and agency of performers—the more the process afforded a different response. I started to focus on my playing gestures, to interrupt and freeze them, then to exaggerate and extend them, generating an additional, semi-choreographed, semi-improvised layer of gestural enaction which foregrounded the kinds of bodily engagement already in process (see [Figure 3](#)).

For example, a lot of the fast descending or ascending runs in the piece break out abruptly from sustained tremolo chords, racing up or down the piano in a brief flourish that ends with a staccato note. The tremolos have the effect of building a moment of tension, with the subsequent fast run acting as a sudden release, like the action of a coiled spring. Practising these phrases, I realised I was manifesting this physically, feeling as if the hands were somehow locked in position with growing tension while playing the tremolo, until they exploded out, escaping away up or down the keyboard, with an exaggerated physical sweep of the hands facilitated by an accompanying lateral upper body movement. Suddenly freezing my position at the end of



**Figure 3.** Stills from live performance (Scenic Stage Theatre, York, 5 May 2016) and film, Roger Marsh, *Touch and Go* (with gestural choreography by Catherine Laws): this piece formed part of the large-scale performance *Player Piano*. Images 1, 2, 4, and 5 from film (see footnote, below); 2 and 6 from live performance.

each of these, I would find my hands in extreme positions: high in the air above the keys or flung low off the bass end of the piano. This produced a series of ‘how did my hands get there?’ moments, with the freezing process revealing fragments of gestures that would ordinarily have passed me by in the continuity of playing. Noting these positions then allowed for their extension and exaggeration, drawing attention to this aspect of the performance. In addition, I incorporated into the performance the occasional possibility of freezing a gesture, as in my practice process. Sometimes this might be accompanied by a sudden staring at the hands, perhaps holding them in place while moving the head to view them from different angles, as if they had become an object of scrutiny, outside of or strange to myself. Finally, when I later decided to make a film of the piece, the film-maker Minyung Im suggested adding somewhat self-conscious editing techniques to further emphasise these moments: occasional freeze-frames, slow motion, or blurring of images.<sup>13</sup>

As such, the process of performance became one of staging the explicit interaction of body-instrument-sound, and perhaps also the performer’s embodied interception and interrogation of the composer’s meaning-making. Playing the resistances in the context of this generative process towards the performance of *Touch and Go* meant not just learning how to play the music, but also how to play with the sound-gesture relationships and, perhaps, to playfully work in and through the precariousness of performance hinted at in the title, thereby opening up a space in which performer agency emerges.

To summarise, here the musical content of the performance is determined by the composer but in a situation that was always going to be overtly focused on the visual and embodied aspects of instrumental performance. The process of working with movement in practice clarified a method and certain possibilities for performance, but did not fully determine exactly what happens in any one realisation. My intention is that this self-consciously, reflexively, opens up a space of meaning for the audience,

where the knowledge that this is somehow a composed event, somewhat determined by another, exists simultaneously alongside, and perhaps in tension with, the experience of performer agency in the moment: the experience of a particular body in the process of interacting within the designations of composer and score and the resistances of the instrument.<sup>14</sup> I do not, by this, mean that the audience knows (or should care) quite what is or is not composed. Rather, a productive space is generated by the tension between the fact of composition—the knowledge that there exists some other form of intentionality, beyond my own, and certain forms of designated action—and the immediacy and specificity of this particular embodied response; the specificity of the way *I* play the piano, not choreographed by the composer, and not simply the way one needs to or ‘should’ play these notes, but how this body negotiates sound production and embodies the creation of musical meaning. That space is, in a very different way to performing Feldman’s music, one of interaction: it is about the ‘touch and go’ of the moment of doing something, seeing something, responding to something; about relations between people, instruments or tools, and contexts.

### ***under and under: Determined Indeterminacy and Indeterminate Determinacy***

My third example is, on the face of it, very different again. *under and under*, for piano, mp3 players, battery powered loudspeakers, and turntable, was written for me by Paul Whitty in 2014. This piece is much more obviously indeterminate in character than my first two case studies, comprising an instruction score that brings together a range of different kinds of materials: field recordings, plus other recordings of piano music, selected by the performer and played back through the piano, via small speakers and transducers placed inside the instrument or elsewhere in the space (including an LP on a portable turntable); live, semi-improvised playing in relation to those recordings; and live performance of operations on scores chosen from the performer’s personal collection (see Figure 4 for excerpts from the score). This way of working is on the one hand what I think of as classically ‘experimental’,<sup>15</sup> in its interest in process (as much, if not more, than in the performance as a ‘product’) and in that it seems to forsake a composerly role for a facilitative one that leaves many decisions about content to the performer. The composer instructs the performer to undertake certain processes prior to the performance; but within that, the performer is the one who chooses the material, selecting scores and recordings to be played and also thinking about the tools that might be used for playing inside the instrument. Quite what then transpires in performance is also very much up to the performer, in the moment. Structurally, when the performer chooses to do things is completely up to her, and the piece has no fixed duration.

In this respect, the score leaves things very open. Nevertheless, as with many verbal scores, the instructions are strongly characterised: the tone of the writing has a particular kind of neutrality and objectivity, but this is meticulously constructed. A particular voice emerges in the very concrete—dry, even—instructions, and in the attention to certain details and the complete but purposeful disregard of other

**Preparation**

1.

This piece can be performed using either an upright or grand piano. You will require:

Mp3 players (4)

Battery powered speakers (4)

Turntable(s)

FM Radios

Headphones

Any number of object with which to interact with the piano both inside and outside including e-bows, rulers, paper, magnets, cellophone, tea-cups, hand-held cappuccino frothers etc...

2.

Gather any number of piano scores you have previously performed. These should have performance annotations on them made by the performer. Using tracing paper isolate these annotations from the piano score. Print or photocopy these sheets of annotations onto acetate so that they can be placed over other piano scores - you will need a selection of these.

3.

Make four field recordings. These could be recordings of the ambient situations in which you have previously played piano, or they could be recordings made in rural or urban environments. They can be of any length. Transfer these recordings to the four mp3 players - one recording per player.

4.

Look in your attic, on your bookshelves, in skips and charity shops for records of piano music to be played on the turntable. Procure as many of these as you can.

[...]

**Performance Activities**

The performance consists of any combination of the following activities. The activities can be carried out one at a time or can overlap in any viable combination:

1.

Place one or more of the acetates over one or more of the piano scores. Use the annotations as a filter to select which materials you perform from the piano score. Treat each series of activities instigated by the annotations as a separate event.

[...]

2.

a. Put the headphones on and plug them into the headphone socket of one of the mp3 players. The four players should be playing throughout the piece whether or not they are connected to a speaker or headphones.

b. Listen to the field recording.

c. Use the field recording as an audio score using the piano as a means of filtering the audio data in the recording. This can be done using a strategy of your choice.

[...]

3.

a. Attach a number of the mp3 players to the battery-powered loudspeakers. Experiment with the volume of the recordings. Experiment with the positioning of the loudspeakers.

[...]

b. When you have positioned the loudspeakers use the strategies outlined in 2 to interact with the piano.

[...]

4.

a. Place the turntable in a suitable location. This could be inside the piano, on a table, or somewhere else in the performance space. It is important that you can hear the sound it is making.

b. If you have FM radios you may then wish to place these in different locations around the space or in a pile inside the piano or elsewhere. Tune them to the output frequency of the turntable or tune them to any other frequency.

c. Listen to the recording of piano music. Identify an event and try to re-create it using the piano. You can stop the recording if you choose to and repeat the event several times or alternate the recorded event with your re-creation of the event or you can leave the recording running and when you are happy with your re-creation of the selected event you can select another one and continue the process.

**Figure 4.** Excerpts from Paul Whitty's score *under and under* (2014) for piano, mp3 players, battery powered loudspeakers, and turntable.

aspects of the creative decisions. Even if I didn't know the composer well, the deliberate tone, and the care with which he has constructed an instructional voice, would, I think, still be apparent: the subtle negotiation of suggestion, obligation, and necessity is an aspect of verbal scores that is carefully considered by John Lely in his study of the grammar they employ (2012, 3–74). Moreover, the idea of performing certain kinds of operations on found materials, from scores and recordings, such that they are at one and the same time vaguely recognisable but made strange, filtered, and distant, is something that has, through a sequence of compositions, become an aspect of Whitty's composerly identity. With regard to another of his pieces, *stop me if you think that you've heard this one before*, which also asks players to perform operations on scores they choose from their instrumental repertoires, Jennie Gottschalk comments: 'Musical tradition and indeterminacy overlap at every turn in this piece' (2016, 261). That is the case here, too.

In Whitty's scores, then, a continuity of composerly identity is mapped across processes in which performers make substantive material choices: in *under and under* this manifests both in the ways in which the score frames the context and the range of possible actions, but also in the textual expression. Additionally, though, the process towards the piece was quite a personal one. This piece, like *Touch and Go*, was requested for the same overarching project, *Player Piano*; again, it can be performed separately, but the initial context was performer-led: an invitation to respond to my specific interests as a performer. With Whitty, the process in part involved excavating the ways in which my piano playing self, or selves, have developed. There were initial discussions about how I came to play the piano, what I have played, the piano music and performers I have listened to and where and how, memories of particular pianos I have practised on, memories of specific performances, of notes that did not work properly, and of different performance contexts and acoustics. All very personal.<sup>16</sup> The instruction score that emerged is at once abstracted from that mining process but specifically requires the inclusion of sonic materials related to a personal history; this will be the case whoever is performing. In particular, the player is asked to trace (onto transparent acetate sheets) markings she has in the past written into scores she has played, and to place these over pages of other scores, also from her playing history. The superimposition is random, such that the personal is significant but defamiliarised. The process disrupts embodied habits of playing, making it somewhat awkward to perform otherwise familiar music. Certain characteristics of the sound are retained, while others change; there is a 'making strange' of something held as familiar in both the cognitive and embodied memory. The process seems to ask the player: what (or who) determines what you want to play, and how?

In contrast to *Palais de Mari* or *Touch and Go*, designating this piece indeterminate is unproblematic: indeterminacy operates very obviously at the levels of both composition and performance. However, the question of quite what should be and how things are determined—the question of meaning making—is also present and active in the performance itself, which both uses and makes strange the traditions

and conventions of practice. The processes draw upon and resituate the materiality of scores and recordings<sup>17</sup> in and through the ways in which they are brought into play, producing a situation in which the constraints and possibilities of performance, agency, and identity, are very obviously at work in and through the event. The classical pianistic tradition becomes part of the experimental context, its conventions reframed.

However, the very conventions of experimentalism—its historical attempts at detachment from the expressive traditions of western music, its nonrelation and objectivity<sup>18</sup>—are also put into play: its assumptions and practices, its inclusions and exclusions, are self-consciously invoked. After all, the apparently somewhat objective experimental process is one that I as a performer, along with the composers and audiences for this community of practice, now know well, and are at home with: indeterminacy as a process can become all too familiar. Whitty's piece self-consciously works with and through these processes, understanding them as always, already grounded in personal and collective history: memory, relations, resistances become both subject and process, performatively.

## Conclusion

In selecting these three examples, I have tried to consider the ways in which scores with very different forms and degrees of notational determinacy, and which might superficially seem differently related to (or distanced from) the fields of practice we call indeterminacy and experimentalism, all provoke a certain indeterminacy in *performance*. In each case, realising the pieces for performance requires a negotiation of instrumental, composerly and cultural affordances and resistances: an explicit embodied exploration of the tensions between the roles of performer and composer, between performer and instrument, and between the decidedly powerful uncertainties and contingencies of the moment of performance and the provisionally intentional determinacies of scores, traditions, discourses, and instruments. In each of the processes towards performance, here, there is something excavatory: the pieces provoke a self-consciously experimental and probing approach; one that I would align with what Brad Haseman considers as constitutive of practice research, in that it 'inaugurates movement and transformation through iterability' (2007). But this is also close to what Perloff articulates in defining particular examples of literary modernism as indeterminate: through quite different approaches to textual structure and syntax, different levels of control and apparent freedom, the writers she discusses produce particular, often tightly-formed instances of textual undecidability that self-consciously draw the reader into their own questions of meaning, status, authority, and agency. The reflexive performative act does something, has an effect on our perceptions, and makes us look again. It creates what Judith Butler calls a 'de-constituting possibility' (1993, 10): a space of new understanding that derives from the simultaneous use and disruption of the conventional, habitual and reiterative.

Returning to Phelan's assertion that the life of performance is always in the present—even while that 'presentness' is only ever evident in its impossibility, as it disappears—the above examples reveal a corollary: the more we scrutinise the subject produced in and through performance—the performing self—the more it, too, disappears, reveals its instability and multiplicity, its distributed and relational contingency, its 'not I'-ness, to again invoke Beckett. This happens, I think, in performing each of the pieces I have discussed in this chapter: a space of performative agency is articulated where what I do matters, but at the same time the more self-consciously evident my performing self seems to be, the more its contingency is exposed. I *almost* disappear into what everything that constitutes 'me' in this context: the interactions and resistances between people, traditions, practices, discourses, instruments, contexts. The performative quality of subjectivity is exposed. Likewise, the more directly we seem to encounter the performing body, the more we lose a grip on it: as Phelan says, in performance bodies are never just bodies, but become 'metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of "presence"' (1993, 150): 'in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else—dance, movement, sound, character, "art"' (1993, 150). The condition of performance is one of indeterminacy in its very determinacy; but this is often hidden under the surface of presence and the desire to communicate, the need to determine: we are not always called to attend to it, and anyway we are very good at looking elsewhere, at apparently more concrete objects, to more graspable concepts, listening to apparently more reliable authorities and to those who are most insistent that they have something to say.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on Contributor

**Catherine Laws** is Professor of Music at the University of York and a Senior Artistic Research Fellow at the Orpheus Institute, Ghent. As a pianist, Catherine specializes in new music, working collaboratively with composers but also theatre- and film-makers. Recent performances include her solo multimedia piece, *Player Piano*, plus a series of 'piano films' developed with film-maker Minyung Im and composers Juliana Hodkinson, Edward Jessen, Annea Lockwood, Roger Marsh and Paul Whitty. Her recent research is focused on processes of embodiment, subjectivity and collaboration in contemporary practices: publications include *Voices, Bodies, Practices: Performing Musical Subjectivities* (Leuven, 2019) and the edited volume *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation* (Leuven, 2020).

### Notes

- [1] For example, in situating experimental music in relation to American pragmatist philosophy, William Brooks (2012, 37–62) explores the relationship to several writers, especially Gertrude Stein.

- [2] Perloff co-edited the (1994) volume *John Cage: Composed in America* with Charles Junkerman. Also particularly notable is her essay ‘The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage’s “What You Say”’ in her volume *Poetry On and Off the Page* (Perloff 1998).
- [3] This much used phrase derives from Walter Benjamin’s determination, in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, that the critical, materialist historian must ‘brush history against the grain’ (1968, 257). The phrase is transferred across into literary theory and occurs again and again in criticism of this period, whether from a deconstructionist, post-structuralist or Marxist theoretical perspective. British literary theorist Terry Eagleton used the expression as the title of one of his books (1986).
- [4] Michael Nyman, for example, stresses both the process orientation and the reconfiguring of roles: ‘Experimental composers are by and large not concerned with prescribing a defined *time-object* whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance, but are more excited by the prospect of outlining a *situation* in which sounds may occur, process of generating action (sounding or otherwise), a field delineated by certain compositional ‘rules’; ‘experimental music emphasizes an unprecedented fluidity of composer/performer/listener roles’ (1999, 4; 22–23).
- [5] With regard to the American context, for example, Amy C. Beal comments that many ‘experimental composers, by necessity or choice, remained or became performers’ (2006, 3). Nyman makes the same point, discussing British as well as American experimentalism (1999, 22).
- [6] Jennie Gottschalk, in *Experimental Music Since 1970*, identifies indeterminacy as one of the defining features of experimental music (2016, 8–9).
- [7] This composerly orientation is the norm, even in more critical-theoretic writing on experimentalism, but Jennie Gottschalk is at least rather more open about this than most, acknowledging the biased perspective of her overview study: ‘My training is in composition, and this book is written from a maker’s perspective. The most frequently quoted people are composers writing about their own work, or sometimes about other people’s work’ (2016, 8).
- [8] John Tilbury’s writings on performance are hugely insightful but primarily take the form of CD liner notes. Many of his notes on performing Feldman’s music can be found at <https://www.cnvill.net/mftexts.htm>. Tilbury and Parsons’s (1969) interview with Michael Parsons is still relevant, and his chapter ‘The Aesthetics of Imperfection’ (Hamilton and Pearson 2020) discusses his experiences of both improvising and performing indeterminate music. Philip Thomas has written in more depth than anyone else about the performance practices of experimental music. In addition to the articles quoted directly in this chapter, key texts include Thomas’s (2016a) article on performing the piano music of Christian Wolff (‘Fingers, Fragility and Freedom’), which is particularly striking for its focus on the physicality of performance (with video examples), and his study of performing the music of Laurence Crane, couched in terms of a ‘post-experimental’ practice (Thomas 2016b). Of course, there are other significant texts on experimental music performance, but overall this body of work is far outweighed by that on composition, and much of it looks back at historical instances, from an external, musicological perspective. Beyond Tilbury and Thomas, another important text is Virginia Anderson’s critical account of performer choice in Cardew’s *Treatise* (2006). This is important work, but an understanding *in and through* performance is still lacking.
- [9] The broader points made in this section would almost certainly apply not just to these three pieces, but also to Feldman’s other long, late piano piece, *Piano* (1977). However, this is the only one of these compositions that I have not performed. Given my insistence that more attention needs to be paid to performance perspectives in this context, along with the focus on playing in the subsequent discussion, it seems inappropriate to extrapolate beyond my direct experience.



- [10] Frank Sani reaches a similar conclusion after a thorough analysis of all the possible relationships perceivable from the score; he identifies a complex web of interconnections, some immediately apparent to the ear and others not, but concludes that there is no core group class providing underlying cohesion: ‘*Palais de Mari* shows a catalogue of playful workmanship, making through-composing into a highly skilled flow of invention, where groups of pitches are inverted, transposed, re-shaped, and where the introduction of new pitches from time to time is instinctively alternated with echoes of previous harmonies’ (Sani 2004).
- [11] The project involved collaboratively developing new pieces (in one case a new version of an extant piece) with four different composers—Edward Jessen, Annea Lockwood, Roger Marsh, and Paul Whitty—all in response to a brief that I provided (the same brief for each composer). Subsequently, I developed a scenography to encompass the compositions within an overarching performance, along with other performance activities devised in relation to the key concerns of the research. In this way, and with the subsequent help of theatre-maker Teresa Brayshaw and later the film-maker Wendy Kirkup, I treated the compositions not as products—the final artistic work to be realised in performance—but as building blocks in devising the large-scale performance piece, *Player Piano*. For a substantial discussion of this project, in terms of performer agency, subjectivity and embodiment, see Laws (2019, 83–167).
- [12] Interview with Catherine Laws, March 15, 2019, York.
- [13] The film version of *Touch and Go*, by Minyung Im, with sound by Lynette Quek, is available at <https://vimeo.com/273496616>.
- [14] It is perhaps relevant to note, here, that this underlying intention led to my memorising the score; a practice still unusual in new music performance. Partly, from my own perspective, memorisation has facilitated a more intense and absolute focus on the physicality of performing the piece. However, from an audience perspective the absence of the score perhaps leads to greater uncertainty as to whether the piece is fully composed or incorporates elements of indeterminacy or improvisation; an ambiguity that is, to my mind, productive, opening up the questions articulated in the main text. This hypothesis has been borne out in practice: I have now been approached many times by audience members seeking clarification on this, and expressing a sense that the complexity and structures of the music signal its compositional basis, while the absence of score and the approach to body and gesture suggest something less fixed, with a higher degree of performer agency. Again, the hope here is that this is not simply confusing, but rather that the ‘between-ness’ invites the audience into the space of meaning-making; into the questions of how, when, and by whom musical meaning is produced.
- [15] As set out in Nyman (1999, 1–30).
- [16] Later, in making a film version of the piece, we decided to relocate everything to my domestic environment, and to include in the film some of the processes of finding the objects and materials for use in playing the piece. The film, by Minyung Im, with sound by Lynette Quek, is available at <https://vimeo.com/343209978>.
- [17] To give a more specific sense of how this piece draws on and recontextualises extant music: in recent performances I have used scores by western classical composers whose music has long been part of my repertoire, including C.P.E. Bach, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Satie, Ravel, Webern, Feldman, Annea Lockwood, Juliana Hodkinson, Howard Skempton, and Donnacha Dennehy. As noted above, snippets of scores from one’s personal playing history are performed (alongside a range of other performative actions), but with adaptations determined by the process of tracing personal practice markings (sometimes years old) from one score to another. For the recording to be played back on a portable turntable I often use a recording of Schubert’s Sonata in Bb Major (D960), played by Artur Schnabel. While the personal experience underlying the choices of materials here will never be apparent—or important—to an audience, the process of mining a history that is both

personal and cultural becomes a significant aspect of the performance: on one level it is clearly ‘about’ what it means to be a performer and how and why we play what we do.

- [18] Experimental music has often been characterised in terms of objectivity—Gottschalk prefers ‘non-subjectivity’ (2016, 3)—and as rejecting the idea that the prime function of music is self-expression. For example, David Dunn describes the experimental tradition as diverging ‘from the predominantly European nineteenth-century belief that music must express “self” and “emotion”’ (2008).

## References

- Anderson, Virginia. 2006. “Well, it’s a Vertebrate . . . : Performer Choice in Cardew’s *Treatise*.” *Journal of Musicological Research* 25 (3–4): 291–317.
- Barthes, Roland. 1974. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Beal, Amy C. 2006. *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1983. *Worstward Ho*. London: Calder.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1995. “Fizzle 5: Closed Place.” In *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, edited by S. E. Gontarski, 236–237. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Harry Zohn, 253–265. New York, NY: Schocken.
- Brooks, William. 2012. “In Re: ‘Experimental Music’.” *Contemporary Music Review* 31 (1): 37–62.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. London: Routledge.
- Cage, John. 1961. “Experimental Music: Doctrine.” In *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 13–17. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Dunn, David. 2008. “Acoustic Ecology and the Experimental Music Tradition.” <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/acoustic-ecology-and-the-experimental-music-tradition/>
- Eagleton, Terry. 1986. *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985*. London: Verso.
- Eco, Umberto. 1989 [1962]. *The Open Work*. Translated by Anna Cancogni. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Feldman, Morton. 1985. *Essays*, edited by Walter Zimmerman. Kerpen: Beginner.
- Feldman, Morton. 1986. *Palais de Mari*. Vienna: Universal Edition.
- Feldman, Morton. 2008. *Morton Feldman in Middelburg: Words on Music—Lectures and Conversations*. Edited by Raoul Mörchen. 2 Vols. Cologne: MusikTexte.
- Gottschalk, Jennie. 2016. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. London, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Haseman, Brad. 2007. “Tightrope Writing: Creative Writing Programs in the RQF Environment.” *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Programs* 11, no. 1. <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april07/haseman.htm>
- Holzaepfel, John. 1994. “David Tudor and the Performance of American Experimental Music 1950–1959.” PhD diss., City University of New York.
- Holzaepfel, John. 2001. “David Tudor and the *Solo for Piano*.” In *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, and Art*, edited by David W. Bernstein, and Christopher Hatch, 137–156. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Iddon, Martin. 2013. *John Cage and David Tudor: Correspondences on Interpretation and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 1974. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Laws, Catherine. 2013. “Headaches Among the Overtones”: *Music in Beckett/Beckett in Music*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Laws, Catherine. 2019. “Being a Player: Agency and Subjectivity in *Player Piano*.” In *Voices, Bodies, Practices: Performing Musical Subjectivities*, edited by Catherine Laws, William Brooks, David

- Gorton, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy, Stefan Östersjö, and Jeremy J. Wells, 83–167. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Lely, John. 2012. “On the Use of Grammar in Verbal Notation.” In *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation*, edited by John Lely, and James Saunders, 3–74. London: Continuum.
- Lewis, George E. 2008. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Marsh, Roger. 2014. *Touch and Go, for Solo Piano*. Greenwich: Decipherer Arts Press.
- Nyman, Michael. 1999. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Östersjö, Stefan. 2013. “The Resistance of the Turkish Makam and the Habitus of a Performer: Reflections on a Collaborative CD-Project with Erdem Helvacıoğlu.” *Contemporary Music Review* 32 (2–3): 201–213.
- Pace, Ian. 2009. “Notation, Time and the Performer’s Relationship to the Score in Contemporary Music.” In *Unfolding Time: Studies in Temporality in Twentieth-Century Music*, edited by Darla Crispin, 151–192. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 1981. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 1998. “The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage’s ‘What You Say’.” In *Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions*, edited by Marjorie Perloff, 290–307. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Perloff, Marjorie, and Charles Junkerman, eds. 1994. *John Cage: Composed in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Piekut, Benjamin. 2011. *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Piekut, Benjamin. 2014. *Tomorrow is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Pritchett, James. 2004. “David Tudor as Composer/Pianist in Cage’s *Variations II*.” *Leonardo Music Journal* 14: 11–16.
- Roberts, Eleanor. 2020. “Charlotte Moorman and *Avant-Garde Music* A Feminist History of Performance Experimentation.” In *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, edited by Catherine Laws, 149–168. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Sani, Frank. 2004. “Morton Feldman’s *Palais de Mari*: A Pitch Analysis.” <http://www.cnvill.net/mfsani3/mfsani3.htm>
- Saunders, James. 2009. “Christian Wolff.” In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, edited by James Saunders, 359–368. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Thomas, Philip. 2009. “A Prescription for Action.” In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, edited by James Saunders, 77–98. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Thomas, Philip. 2013. “Understanding Indeterminate Music Through Performance: Cage’s *Solo for Piano*.” *Twentieth-Century Music* 10 (1): 91–113.
- Thomas, Philip. 2016a. “Fingers, Fragility and Freedom—Christian Wolff’s *Pianist: Pieces*.” <http://divergencepress.net/2016/10/24/2016-10-27-fingers-fragility-and-freedom-christian-wolffs-pianist-pieces/>
- Thomas, Philip. 2016b. “The Music of Laurence Crane and a Post-Experimental Performance Practice.” *Tempo* 70 (275): 5–21.
- Tilbury, John. 2020. “The Aesthetics of Imperfection.” In *The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Music and the Arts: Spontaneity, Flaws and the Unfinished*, edited by Andy Hamilton, and Lara Pearson, 28–35. London: Bloomsbury.
- Tilbury, John, and Michael Parsons. 1969. “The Contemporary Pianist.” *The Musical Times* 110 (1512): 150–152.