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On the Debate over Whether “Prepared Piano” was the Creation of John Cage

Liang Deng

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With the growing awareness of 20th Century piano music in the international piano community in recent years, prepared piano has also become a very popular topic. This is because it adds psychedelic, wonderland-like revolutionary sound colors to the traditional piano sound. It is well known that the term “prepared piano” became popular as a result of the famous American modern composer John Cage's works, and many serious music lovers have come to believe that prepared piano is also the original creation of John Cage himself. However, such a conclusion is debatable. So how shall the inquiry begin? We should start by looking at the definition in *Oxford Music Online* for some clues:

A piano in which the pitches, timbres, and dynamic responses of individual notes have been altered by means of bolts, screws, mutes, rubber erasers and/or other objects inserted at particular points between or placed on the strings. The idea originated with Cowell. The prepared piano was devised by Cage for his *Bacchanale* (1940), and used in a number of his subsequent compositions.¹

From this we discover a clue. Perhaps the term was coined by John Cage to define the prepared piano performance technique. However, the original idea behind prepared piano was pioneered by another famous composer, Henry Cowell. This type of phenomenon is commonly seen among modern serious music composer communities such as with the famous Hungarian composer György Ligeti's Piano Etudes, Book I, No.3: *Touchez Bloquées*. The innovative theory behind the performance technique of *Touchez Bloquées* did not originate from Ligeti, but was from contemporary German composer Heining Siedentopf.² Ligeti only put this theory to practice; applying it to the piano. The technical design of this etude is a unique reformation in piano technique. In simple terms, in regard to the method of piano performance, Ligeti requires the pianist's left hand to hold some keys without sounding, while the right hand moves above and beyond the region of the keys being pressed down by the left hand. The notes being held down do not sound and at rapid speed interesting rhythmic effects are created. Therefore, from the citation above and brief description of *Touchez Bloquées*, we can see that the idea of prepared piano was not pioneered by John Cage and should more likely be attributed to Henry Cowell. In fact, Cage was inspired by Cowell's concept of a “string piano” in which a series of sounds could be embellished from the instrument by manipulating the strings directly instead of playing on the keyboard. Cowell's *The Banshee* (1925), for instance, required for the pianist to reach inside the piano and pluck and scrape the strings directly in order to achieve

different effects.³

Does this mean that we can now conclude that Henry Cowell is the originator? Not necessarily! When opening the pages of piano history, we will unexpectedly discover that among classical music composers, there were many predecessors who successfully used prepared piano techniques. Perhaps the problem was that there was no professional terminology to define them at the time. However, the author is uncertain whether both composers (John Cage and Henry Cowell) were clearly aware that prepared piano was used in earlier generations. After a series of literature surveys, the author cannot find any texts that can prove both composers were clearly aware this technique was used before. Cage's official website, stated that the first prepared piano piece *Bacchanale* is a dance by Syvilla Fort in 1938, which was originally designed for a percussion group. However, there was not enough space at the performance venue for the percussion group, and Cage had to write for a piano. While working on the piece, he decided to change the sound of the piano in order to make the music suitable for this dance. The reason why he experimented by placing a metal plate on top of the strings of the piano is because of the inspiration from Cowell's *The Banshee*,⁴ in which he used the "string piano" techniques.

For pushing the boundary more, the author went further back in Cowell's life for deeper surveying. According to Michael Hicks' book *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, the first "serious" composer to write for piano strings was probably Percy Grainger (1882–1961). At the end of his piece *In a Nutshell Suite* (1916), he requires the pianist to play on several bass strings with a yarn-covered mallet.⁵ Nevertheless, the text still fails to give sufficient evidence for proving whether Cowell was clearly aware that this advanced technique was used before, or even dating back to 17th and 18th centuries. Therefore, to arbitrarily define prepared piano as a product of contemporary culture may be premature. For instance, during the 17th and 18th Centuries, the inner components of many keyboard instruments were subject to alterations in order to modify the timbre of the instrument. Such adjustments were used to make the original timbre brighter or broader. According to contemporary terminology, this type of design could be called "prepared keyboard" at that time. The very popular fortepiano at the end of the 18th Century was another example. The damper pedal technology at that time was essentially equivalent to that of the contemporary prepared piano. The difference, however, was that at that time the knees were used to control the damper for the rises and falls of the chords to achieve the goal of modifying the sound. In Beethoven's time, there was a bassoon pedal technique created and used by composers and performers. In my exegesis this was described more concretely:

It is also possible to relate this type of sound effect to some early pianos which incorporated mechanical sound effects, one of the most popular being the so-called "bassoon" sound which was achieved by activating a lever which engaged paper or parchment on the vibrating strings.^{6 7}

This type of prepared piano technique was also used by contemporary American composer George Crumb on his famous piano work *Makrokosmos II -- Morning Music*. The piece employs a new sound effect that, of paper "buzzing" on the vibrating strings. In a sense, therefore, Crumb is reinventing an earlier piano technique which is not achieved by the action of the pianist on the keys or the strings. Rather, it is made mechanically by the interaction of paper and vibrating strings. However, the aesthetic reasons that lay behind the special sound effects of early pianos may demonstrate a different motivation when compared to the musical ideas of Crumb. Perhaps, in the piano music of Cowell, Cage, or Crumb, the reasons behind such effects seem to be more aligned with the mystery and meaning of the music itself. In other words, the sound of the piano played merely through the keys did not provide a wide enough sound spectrum to illustrate the spiritual ideas of the composer. Through the addition of such external hardware they are able to transform the piano into an instrument capable of evoking a wider spectrum of emotions including new "otherworldly" and unusual sounds which is an effective way of conveying mystery.

In the case of some early pianos, most sound effects were intended to imitate orchestral sounds or the sounds that were in vogue at the time, such as Turkish (Janissary) instruments. For this reason, some piano manufacturers began making some prepared piano equipment to allow the piano to imitate the martial music sound of the Janissary as much as possible. For instance, they would design pedal bells so that when the pedals were pressed the bells would chime. They also designed pedal mallets so that when the foot trays were stamped, the mallets would beat directly on the piano soundboard to produce the sound effect of the military drums.

Among such music, one famous example is Mozart's *Alla Turca*. At that time, many performers used prepared piano techniques to perform this piece. Composer Heitor Villa-Lobos requires the pianist to insert pieces of paper between the strings and the hammers to attain a certain sonority in his *Choros No. 8*.⁸ Maurice Delage's Indian style piece *Ragamalika* calls for a piece of cardboard to be placed under the Bb in the second line of the bass clef to dampen the sound, imitating the sound of the Indian drums.⁹ Likewise, in 1913 and 1914, the French composer Erik Satie's piano music *Le piège de Méduse* required performers to place a piece of paper flat on the piano strings to imitate the sound made when operating a mechanical monkey. From this it can be seen that in contemporary piano, Erik Satie's technique predates that of John Cage and Henry Cowell by a little, and even a year earlier than Percy Grainger's

piece. Thus it can be seen that a few compositions of these predecessors already began the use of prepared piano techniques prior to John Cage's.

In summary, to attribute the creation and invention of prepared piano solely to John Cage is not appropriate. This is because before his time, even dating back to the 17th Century, prepared piano performance techniques were used, if not by that name. Perhaps this was simply due to the fact that there was no unified academic terminology for prepared piano at that time and so a blank space was left with respect to this term's academic definition, thus leading the people of modern times into mistaking prepared piano as being pioneered by John Cage. Instead of seeing the modern composers John Cage or Henry Cowell as the inventors of prepared piano, we should recognize them as "innovators." The author trusts that such a definition would be more appropriate, so that most music lovers will not be ambiguous about this new modern improvement.

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Notes

¹Edwin M. Ripin and Hugh Davies. "Prepared piano." *Grove Music Online*. [Oxford Music Online](#). Oxford University Press, accessed January 17, 2013

²Heining Siedentopf, *Neue Wege der Klaviertechnik*, Melos, Mainz, XL/3, 1973, pp. 143-146.

³John Cage, *How the Piano Came to be Prepared*, [Johncage.org](#), accessed February 9, 2015

⁴Ibid. footnote 3.

⁵Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002, pp 110.

⁶Deng Liang, *Performance Techniques in Modern Piano Music*, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, Ann Arbor, MI, American, 2011, pp.100.

⁷Kenneth Mobbs, *Stops and Other Special Effects on the Early Piano, The Early Piano I, Early Music* Volume 12, No. 4, Oxford University Press, Nov 1984, pp.471-476.

⁸Anna Stella Schic, *Villa-Lobos, Souvenirs de l'Indien Blanc*, Actes Sud, 1987, pp.82.

⁹Jann Pasler, "Orientalism Race, and Distinction in the Wake of the 'Yellow Peril'", *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000, pp.107.

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Liang Deng



Deng was born in ChengDu, China, and started studying piano at the age of seven. During 1995-2001, he attended the middle school attached to the SiChuan Music Conservatoire, and studied with Associate-Professor Gu Xin and guest Professor William Race from The University of Texas at Austin. From 2001 to 2005, Deng has continued his studies at Auckland University, and completed his B.Mus, B.Mus(Hons) and M.Mus under Associate-Professor Tamas Vesmas. From 2006-11 Deng pursued his DMA programme under the supervision of David Guerin and Professor Robert Constable, focussing on Performance Techniques in Modern Piano Playing. During his study at Auckland University, he was awarded scholarships such as the Reardon Postgraduate Scholarship in Music, the University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship, and a University of Auckland Partnership Appeal Award. Now, Deng is working in Art Faculty, Southwest University for Nationalities, China.