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Composing in the Continuum of Meaning: Music and the Two Truths

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Music

by

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June 2019

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ABSTRACT

Composing in the Continuum of Meaning:

Music and the Two Truths

by

Scott William Perry

People in this global age are very often suffering from a consumerist mentality where instead of generating their own meaningful life-narrative through creative outlet, they are driven to constantly distract themselves with short bursts of entertainment. This paper offers a personalized account of a long-term study and practice of creativity from a Buddhist philosophical perspective. After a brief explanation of Buddhist philosophy, this paper examines the aesthetic position of composer, John Cage, his relevance to our current cultural atmosphere, and offers a new aesthetic perspective based on the author's own exploration of *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* Buddhism in conjunction with the practice of music composition.

Part One: A Sketch of the Three Main Branches of Buddhism- *Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana*

Introduction

After some years of study of some Western philosophies (Plato, Descartes, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Marx, and Žižek to name a few), the author of this paper found that the most satisfying philosophical outlook actually resided in the East, in Buddhism. Of the three main branches of Buddhism, the one that was most appealing to the author was the “Magickal” Buddhism of the *Vajrayana* branch. This, the historically latest branch of Buddhism, offered a very vibrant relationship with the phenomenal world. While the author favors *Vajrayana*, it is important to the scope of this paper that it should include a sketch of all three main branches before discussing musical matters.

Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism

Found most often in South Asian nations, of the two ways of describing this branch of Buddhism, “*Theravada*” serves as the preferred nomenclature of the practitioners of this branch. *Theravada* is a word that means, “the Teaching of the Elders.” *Hinayana*, a Sanskrit word meaning “lesser vehicle,” is mostly used by practitioners of the other two branches (*Mahayana* and *Vajrayana*) and is seen as a kind of a slight by the *Theravadans*. *Theravada* sticks to the oldest known words and practices of Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 600 BCE).

Siddhartha Gautama is the historical name of the man who we more commonly know as the Buddha or “Awakened One.” He was born into the ruling caste of his clan. When his mother was pregnant a prophet told his parents that he would either conquer the world or be a

great sage. His mother died in child birth and his father took every possible measure he could in order to raise him into a conqueror. He is said to have enjoyed every possible pleasure while confined to his palace as a child and young adult. However, curiosity got the better of his father's plan to shelter him and he went out of the palace on his own where he had his first contact with human suffering. Later, after having married and sired a son, he again left the palace in search for an answer to the question, "why do we suffer?" He went into the forest and studied every available philosophical and religious system. He eventually settled into ascetic practices, living constantly just on the verge of death. Seeing that this was not getting him any closer to the answer, he resolved to just meditate until he found the answer. After three days and nights of meditation and a confrontation with the "king of all demons," he found his answer in what is known as, "The Four Noble Truths."

The main focus of the *Theravadan* school of Buddhism is the individual and their search for liberation from suffering. In the nations where you find *Theravada* as a cultural force and tradition, they tend to stress that only those born as mendicants can achieve liberation. However, *Theravada* has made it to the West and developed into something that can be practiced by a layperson thanks to the writings of Stephen Levine, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg. In the East and West alike the key to becoming unleashed from suffering lies in the "Four Noble Truths" and the practice of meditation.

According to *Theravadan* teaching the root of suffering is in the delusion that the individual has a self or soul of any kind. (This may seem a radical proposition to some readers but if one really tries to locate the core of their psyche what might the reader find?) Through meditation and ethical practice one can overcome this delusion and ultimately escape the wheel of birth and death. On the face of it, this may sound quite cold. However,

Theravadans also have a set of practices revolving around the notion of “Loving-Kindness” or “*Metta.*” (“Theravada”).

Mahayana

“*Mahayana*” is a Sanskrit word which means, “Greater Vehicle.” *Mahayana* Buddhism (originating around the first century CE) extends the notion of “no-self” into a universal principle. Nothing anywhere in the universe is tied down to any notion of essence. In point of fact, this may be saying too much about the core truth of *Mahayana*. One of the great sages of *Mahayana*, Nagarjuna, in his *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, defines the core truth of this branch only by negation.

While many tend to think that the point of Buddhism is to awaken to the true nature of reality (in other words, become a Buddha), *Mahayana* Buddhists put an emphasis on becoming a *Bodhisattva*. A *Bodhisattva* is a being who has reached a point of realization where they could become a Buddha but forgoes doing so and entering nirvana, in order to save all sentient beings from suffering (“Mahayana”).

Mahayana Buddhism is the more general category of Zen Buddhism. In terms of the scope of this paper, it is quite important to understanding the author's perspective. Zen Buddhism as described and practiced by D.T. Suzuki was the Zen Buddhism of John Cage.

In the *Mahayana* view (or more likely *non-view*) of reality one can boil down any philosophical outlook into four basic types of philosophy and their combinations and permutations. These four basic types, as negated by *Mahayana* Buddhism, are nihilism, materialism, metaphysics, and eternalism. Nihilism is the view that nothing is real or true. Materialism is the view that only that which is perceived by the senses is real. Metaphysics is

taken as the view that there is something like the Platonic forms governing the existent. Eternalism is the notion that there is something transcending space and time, such as a God, that caused and created reality. To this end, Nagarjuna makes use of a logical device that is known as the *Tetralemma* in order to systematically knock down all four philosophies and leave the reader or practitioner with a clear perception of reality, unfettered by words and concepts. There may be some temptation for the reader to jump to a simple conclusion about *Mahayana* Buddhism being an overly reductive philosophy, but it does make a couple of positive assertions.

There are two Truths, the Absolute Truth and the Relative Truth. Absolute Truth is the ineffable, groundless, indescribable reality empty of self-existence. Relative Truth is the network of relational realities that co-exist in, and co-originate, our momentary lives. One way of putting it is in the form of a question that the author was asked in a *Dokusan* session (formal, private interview where the Zen teacher asks the student questions intended to clear away the clutter of an overly conceptual mind), “What are you doing now?” The nature of this question in the context of *Dokusan* seems pretty clear in retrospect. There are two answers that might make sense in light of the two Truths. First, in terms of the Relative Truth there was an infinite number of things going into the creation of the scenario in which this question was asked. The simplest answer of, “Sitting here, answering your question” might have sufficed but the author was suffering from a heavy neurosis and began to emotionally babble about endless problems. The interviewer continued to kindly repeat the question whenever the author calmed down. Eventually the author had a glimpse of the Absolute Truth while seated there in front of the interviewer. At that moment he was unable to answer the question and just sat there. Just sitting there is an action. The truth of our actions as they

happen and the consequences of these actions are Relative Truths. Absolute Truth seems to be something that is only available in an experiential manner. The two types of truth, together, are not a duality. To the author it seems as though they are in a kind of continuity.

Vajrayana

Vajrayana is another Sanskrit word which is translated as either “Diamond Vehicle” or “Thunderbolt Vehicle.” The origins of this branch of Buddhism date back to the *Mahasiddhas* of the third century CE. *Mahasiddhas* were yogis who practiced a set of less conventional means of awakening to reality such as occult ritual practices or “Sadhanas,” chanel ground meditation, taboo violation, and the pursuit of “magickal” powers. *Vajrayana* is very often connected to the word Sanskrit word, “*Tantra*” which literally means “loom, warp, weave.” *Tantra* can also connote a particular text or ritual practice (“*Vajrayana*”).

In the *Vajrayana* Buddhist branch one eventually steps beyond the fascination with the emptiness of self-existence and begins to relate to energy. Chögyam Trungpa in his *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, describes energy as, “that which abides in heart of all beings, self-existing simplicity, that which sustains all wisdom. This indestructible essence is the energy of great joy; it is all-pervasive, like space. This is the dharma-body of non-dwelling.” He adds, “This energy is the sustainer of the primordial intelligence which perceives the phenomenal world. This energy gives impetus to both the enlightened and the confused states of mind. It is indestructible in the sense of being constantly ongoing. It is the driving force of emotion and thought in the confused state, and of compassion and wisdom in the enlightened state.” Trungpa further describes the state of understanding beyond emptiness as seeing the “luminosity of form, the vivid, precise, colorful aspect of things.” A *Vajrayana*

yogi or yogini (male and female yoga practitioners) has “no veil between him and 'that'.” (Trungpa 218).

The author of this paper practices in a *Vajrayana* Tibetan Buddhist lineage. However the stages of this path are quite occult in as much as there are practices which are kept from the practitioner until the teacher or guru deems that it is appropriate to begin them. At the time of authoring this paper, the author has only taken refuge vows and Bodhisattva vows. However, he has been given some energetic practices and has also stumbled into the practice of lucid dreaming. It is for the author, both enough for now, and enough to eventually seek to explore fully.

Buddhism, stemming from whichever branch you like, is a lifetime pursuit if not a multi-lifetime pursuit. It is unjust to boil it down so much as the author has done. The reader is encouraged to learn more by reading the works cited. However, in order to make his point, this summary was necessary to underpin the aesthetic and philosophical perspective of the author.

Part Two: John Cage as a Model of Existing Buddhist Aesthetics in Art Music

The Question of Cage

John Cage (1912-1992) stands now as a monumental figure of twentieth-century art music. His work and life are well known enough for the author to forgo much introduction. While he probably would not like it much, it is fair to say that he is widely seen in a polarized manner. What tends to come up while discussing Cage with composers and other musicians is a kind of questioning of his precise place in the canon of avant-garde composers. Was he a charlatan, an iconoclast, an equalizer or democratizer, or a genius? Are

these things even relevant?

Cage was fascinated with a number of Eastern and Western spiritual and philosophical traditions. The chance operations from the *I-Ching* owe their origin to Taoism, his early works for prepared piano owe their aesthetics to non-Buddhist Indian Philosophy, and Meister Eckhart is referenced a number of times in *Silence*. However, Zen Buddhism and D. T. Suzuki's writings are likely the most profound influence on the sum of his life's work and outlook. To the questions of the previous paragraph the author tends to lean towards a more Zen answer, Cage was all of the above and none of the above. In other words, there is a lot going on with Cage and his work. It is worthwhile to look closely and listen closely to his work, as it not only still reflects on the universe today, and while he sought to avoid the egotism of the canonical composer, nonetheless his work stands as a marker of his place in time.

Indeterminacy and Zen

In *Silence*, in his lecture *Indeterminacy*, Cage describes several types of indeterminacy in music. In point of fact most Western music has indeterminate elements to it. In almost all cases, with the exception of a work for fixed electronic medium, there are elements of the musical performance that are left to the circumstances of the performance and the performers. Cage cites Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, as an example of this kind of proto-indeterminacy. The lecture moves from Bach, Stockhausen, Feldman, Brown, and Wolff, describing their indeterminate procedures to ultimately proposing some new ideas about indeterminacy where "... A non-obstruction of sounds is of the essence." (Cage 39). Cage goes on to offer that in order to appreciate non-obstructed sounds there are practical matters

of separating the instruments of a performance in time and space.

The postlude of the lecture then, very tellingly, relates an anecdote about a dinner with D.T. Suzuki (40).

Here it is apparent that the point of Cage's last form of indeterminacy is to create a situation in which the sounds themselves can be apprehended in a state of *emptiness*.

Emptiness is a convenient way of translating the Sanskrit word, “*Shunyata*.” What this means is rather complicated in words and other descriptions but simple in the experience of it.

Emptiness is prevalent throughout the English translations of the *Mahayana* sutras (a sutra is a Buddhist or Jainist collection of aphorisms). One of the most famous *Mahayana* texts is *The Heart Sutra*. It is famous because it, in just a couple pages of text, describes the nature of all reality as empty of self-existence. Again, there is some temptation to fall into nihilism but this is compensated for in the sutra by a kind of reversal. One line of the sutra states that “form is emptiness” in other words, there is no metaphysical ground or essence. However, the next line at once balances this and proposes a conundrum, “emptiness is form” (Pine 2). While there is no thing in itself, there is a thing. Just that thing. So, Cage's proposition for non-obstructed sounds relies heavily on Zen-Buddhist philosophy and practice. Cage's art, at this point, is one where he seeks to understand sounds as just sounds. For Cage, it seems as though one could and ought to find the Absolute Truth by relating to sounds as simply as is possible. Sounds, devoid of emotional implications and empty in context, free from the weight of traditional musical meaning, can be seen to have offered Cage and his listeners a means of liberation from suffering.

A Friendly Critique of Cage as a Model of Buddhist Aesthetics

Cage, in the author's view, was an excellent composer. His compositions, writings, lectures and other artistic activities introduced a whole new set of options for those who wish to engage in sonic creativity. After Cage, it was no longer reasonable to assume that it was necessary to have a conservatory or academic pedigree in order to become a composer. In this sense, his work was one of an individualistic iconoclast. While he did hold academic positions to make a living and had traditional training, his aesthetics placed art and the artist in the twentieth century into a position where, as the Fluxus saying goes, "Everything is art and anyone can do it." Likewise, in the Zen-Buddhist way, anyone can practice and awaken to the Truth. However, the author would like to offer some minor contentions with Cage as a possible model of Buddhist aesthetics.

The first contention is about the two types of truth. It has been the author's experience that listening to Cage's Zen-Buddhist influenced compositions, that there is an emphasis on the Absolute Truth. Cage, as previously stated, sought liberation in sounds and the liberation of the sounds themselves. A good performance of a John Cage Zen piece, such as *0'0"*, can give the same apprehension of Absolute Truth one gets from having practiced *Zazen* (seated meditation) for hours and then receiving a good, precise whack on a pressure point on the back from the *kyosaku*. With both, there is a clear but usually, only momentary realization. For that moment there is the dropping away of mind and body. What is left in its place is the ineffable. This is quite valuable and if it is a fresh experience it is a good start on a lifelong path. Here is the contention, while a piece like *0'0"* can give you a glimpse of Absolute Truth, Absolute Truth is not the whole picture in Buddhist philosophy. What happened to the infinite number of causes and conditions that went towards the creation of that moment? It

seems as though Cage has abandoned them. While it would not be fair to say that Cage had no appreciation of Relative Truth (he, at various points in his lectures points towards the meaningfulness of every situation), it is fair to say, that his works in the Zen vein seem to favor these glimpses of the Absolute Truth.

Another possible point of contention is the way in which his work seems to renounce tradition and ego to an extent that sacrifices emotional communication. From any Buddhist perspective and especially in the *Vajrayana* tradition, emotions and ego are as much enemies as they are realities or energies that are a part of the path. While Cage, situated as he was in the post-war avant-garde, needed to relate to his world in a plain manner, the musical world at large today is now charged with a staggering level of ego and emotion. For a twenty-first century *Vajrayana* composer, this is extraordinarily fertile material for creating sonic art that might lead to liberation.

Part Three: Composing in the Continuum of Meaning

Reclaiming the Relative Truth

The hyper-intellectual nature of the post-World-War-Two avant-garde and experimental music scene, for good but timely reasons, revolved around a need to move away from the personal, emotional, and potentially irrational subjectivity of Romanticism and towards the material, structural, and absolute in Modernism. John Cage, in particular, renounced everything that might be construed as romantic or self-involved. This was for both personal and aesthetic reasons. While he sought to renounce ego-expression, there is still a clear imprint of the composer on his work. A piece of music by John Cage is still something that bears identifying characteristics. We know Cage despite the lack of ego-expression.

This is not to say that there is any failure in his work, just an emphasis in it on the apprehension of the Absolute Truth. Here, it will be necessary to make a fine point. The two types of Truth in Buddhism are not an opposition or duality and Cage seems to have known this quite well. The Relative Truth is present in many places in his work but because of his position in the course of music history it became necessary for him to renounce expressiveness.

While renouncing personal expressiveness is quite Zen and in the case of Cage, also modernist, it is not nearly as emphatically important in *Vajrayana*. *Tantra* can be understood as weaving or continuity. For the *Vajrayana* practitioner, everything that is self-involved is an opportunity to have insight into the nature of reality. For example, a bad case of anger is an excellent and very potent energy to transmute into directed action. So long as one can drop the story line that caused the anger, one can use the energy of it to become very clear minded and take whatever action is needed to become wiser and more compassionate. If you look closely at anger you might discover that it is rooted in fear. If you look closely at fear you might see that there is a fundamental sadness beneath it. If you look at this sadness, you might find that it is caused by our mere existence. From there it is a short step to emptiness because there is no ground of permanence, the fundamental sadness is caused by our suffering in impermanence. From the perspective of impermanence, it is then possible to experience Absolute Truth. So, therein lies the continuity of Relative and Absolute Truth, from anger to profound understanding.

So, with this in mind, the author would like to offer the opinion that emotionally charged music can be quite a good thing if it is taken with a view towards the two Truths, and he would like to offer that our world has become a place of intertwining social realities that

depend heavily on the Relative Truth. The author takes this as an opportunity to work with himself and others in music in an effort to alleviate suffering.

The Bodhisattva Ideal in Music

“May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the root of happiness,
May they be free from suffering and the root of suffering,
May they not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering,
May they dwell in the great equanimity, free from passion, aggression, and prejudice.”

The Four Immeasurables, a Bodhisattva's prayer or aspiration.

As stated earlier, in *Mahayana* and also in *Vajrayana* Buddhism a *Bodhisattva* is a being who forgoes becoming a Buddha and entering into nirvana in order that all sentient beings might be saved from suffering. In practical terms this means that a *Bodhisattva* is someone who has worked enough of the path to possibly become completely liberated from suffering but then manages to see the usefulness of it in relating to others. This is not to say that they would ever inflict suffering, but rather, that suffering is the touchstone for relating to themselves and others. For many, the call of the artist is the call of the *Bodhisattva*.

What would a *Bodhisattva's* musical activities be like? It seems to the author that the music of a *Bodhisattva* would be free from conveying or spreading neurosis and it would instead spread the values of *The Four Immeasurables*. While this does not necessarily mean promoting Buddhism, there are a couple of powerful examples of Buddhist twentieth century art music.

Lou Harrison's *La Koro Sutro* is a setting of the aforementioned *Heart Sutra*, a classic text of *Mahayana* Buddhism in translated into Esperanto. The piece is for chorus, percussion, harp, organ & American Gamelan. With its light, floating melodic lines and simplicity in texture the music is almost entirely at the service of the text. Composed in 1970, it is a bit revolutionary in as much as there is a lot of emotional qualities to the work at a time when abstraction reigned the avant-garde. For the author of this paper, hearing this work in concert served as the tipping point at which Buddhism moved in his life from an intellectual curiosity to a living practice.

Another example of a *Bodhisattva* aesthetic can be found in the music of Eliane Radigue. The eighty-seven-year-old Radigue is a practitioner in the *Kagyü* lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Her work is the work of liminally noticeable transitions. Using the ARP 2500 to create works that last as long as three hours, listening to her music one may find a pathway into the life of Buddhist meditation.

Buddhist-themed works and works which utilize Buddhist texts are one way of representing the *Bodhisattva* ideal in music. However, the *Bodhisattva* ideal is also one of universality. If Buddhist terminology and philosophical perspective stand in the way of liberation, they must be discarded. Ultimately, any *Bodhisattva* activity is one of appropriate spontaneous action. Improvisation in music may spring to the reader's mind but that is only just one option. The world is vastly at our fingertips now, how should a musical *Bodhisattva* respond?

Eclecticism and/or Non-Dogmatic Aesthetics

Cage's democratization of music combined with a technological situation where information and performances of music from all over the world have made for an excellent situation in which one can be educated in music. For the Western art composer this means that not only are we unbound from a potentially stifling perception of the canon in the image of the “Great Composer” we are also able to relate to the world at large in an instantaneous manner. While in the past one needed to align with a philosophical perspective or create one’s own maverick aesthetic in order to have any impact, the author would like to suggest that this is probably no longer necessary or healthy.

With the looming social concerns of our time, it is becoming more and more essential that our species learns to be non-violent. One of the most appealing aspects of Buddhist philosophy is its non-violence. The case for non-violence should be self-evident to any sensitive person without recourse to a philosophical perspective but it is not always so. Briefly stated, a Buddhist does not harm another sentient being because we are all in this together at a deep ontological level. Every sentient being in the universe is uniquely co-creating our reality. Unless there is no other recourse in addressing the harm that an individual is causing, harming another is wrong because you are damaging reality itself. Simple enough to understand but the world is still replete with violence. Why is this so? The root of this problem can be found in dogmatic or absolutist thinking. The solution is to see things creatively and from a plurality of perspectives.

In terms of music, this seems to translate into a kind of imperative to embrace eclecticism. There seems to the author to be two types of eclecticism, each reflecting the two types of truth.

Relative eclecticism is the drawing on of many sources which relate to each other as the composer experiences them. Stylistic and genera distinctions and practical understanding of them are important to relative eclecticism. One can grow up listening to and playing whatever is inspiring while appreciating its distinctness and contrasts. The music of Frank Zappa is an excellent example of relative eclecticism.

Absolute eclecticism is a bit harder to envision. It would have to be a kind of music that was informed by a multiplicity of sources but also a music that never pointed at one source in particular. The music composed by Iannis Xenakis, with its theoretical understanding of many types of music from around the world combined with mathematical abstraction comes to mind as an example of absolute eclecticism.

Another type of eclecticism might emerge from the traversal of the first two. One could compose in such a way that there was some reference to specific genera and style at one point and then move by some technical or algorithmic means to a more absolute and abstracted eclecticism. The music of Alfred Schnittke does this quite well.

In any case there is some danger to the embracing of the world at large in the name of eclecticism. One could become a promoter of consumerist capitalism, rampantly taking partially informed musical knowledge and turning it into a means to become absurdly wealthy. In essence this would be the kind of composer who just follows the public whim in order to make a buck. While there is nothing wrong with earning a good living, it seems rather important that our aesthetic aims be just that, aesthetic. One way of putting it might be, a *Bodhisattva* composer does not steal.

Inspiration as a Practical Matter

Frogs croak in chorus, birds sing their songs, and humans all make music. Cage's work did much to open this pathway. It can be quite overwhelming, both the experience of all sound as having musical potential and the amount of thinking involved in informed music composition. One need not follow the noticeably neurotic white rabbit. Wonderland is a nice and even inspiring place to visit, but it is not a very practical place.

On the other hand, with an open heart and mind there is the potential to improve our world. All the thought and training that goes into making an informed composer is pretty vast. With that kind of experience, what would you have us do? It is a sincere question. What needs to be done musically to improve and edify the lives of people on this planet?

The answers seem quite multiple. On a personal level a composer can improve the situation by simply communicating their own musicality. The uniqueness of each person is very important. The author favors the eclecticism outlined above but someone else might just want to make an expression of their own utopia.

On a social level, there are as many musical traditions as there are ethnicities. A living composer might not ever want to venture away from a given tradition. Their allegiance might be towards the elevation of a given culture. So long as the culture does not elevate itself at the expense of another culture, who could see any problem with this?

On a global level, there is the potential to elevate our species. With the exception of violence and theft as means, it would seem that anything anywhere should be employed to this end. In this sense the conventional notion of inspiration is quite dead. A conscientious composer cannot wait to be struck by grand ideas of pure innovation (all the best to those who do have this happen). Work needs to be done in order for all sentient beings to be

liberated from suffering.

Frogs and birds are keen on making life sonically interesting and beautiful. However, the author has yet to see one of these creatures write a paper about it. Eventually, the author of this paper wishes to reach the same point as the frogs and birds but with the additional benefit of the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of humanity.

In all three of the Buddhist branches, it is a subtle point that the *ism* of Buddhism should drop away in time. One goes through all the rigors of meditation and insight in order to just live peacefully in this life. Similarly, the author envisions the potential of an informed composer to just peacefully write good music. No positing, aesthetic positioning, or mathematical scaffolding, just good music, awake to the situation in which it occurred.

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