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Bolts, Hammers, and Toys: Primitivism in the Early Piano Works of John Cage

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Primitivism in the Early Piano Works of John Cage

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Bolts, Hammers, and Toys:

Primitivism in the Early Piano Works of John Cage

by

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Master of Arts in Art History

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Professor Miwon Kwon, Chair

This paper examines the primitivist tendencies that operate in two early piano works by the American composer John Cage (1912 – 1992). His material alterations of the traditional piano in *Bacchanale* (1938/40) and *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948) are historically contextualized and intellectually situated in reference to the work of earlier modernist figures such as Igor Stravinsky (1882 – 1971), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900), Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940), and Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939), in order to explore the ways in which these early Cage works are linked to the primitivism of European modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. By focusing on

the composer's output of the 1930s and 1940s and by also adopting an interpretative lens that tracks his fascination with African music and children's play, this paper critiques prevailing Cage scholarship that primarily relies on his better-known later works and philosophy in and after the 1960s.

The thesis of Andrew Hansung Park is approved.

Glenn Wharton

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2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Bolts, Hammers, and Toys:

Primitivism in the Early Piano Works of John Cage

The American composer John Cage (1912 – 1992) achieved a high level of renown and influence among visual artists and musicians by the 1960s, establishing what many now call a Cagean legacy, an aesthetic practice distinguished by the espousal of chance operations, a Zen sensibility, and silence. This Cagean legacy, deepened in the latter half of his career (1960s – 80s) and further solidified since the composer's passing, continues to dominate our understanding of the composer's entire output in both musicology and art history.[1] Described as a "peaceful patron saint of our avant-garde heaven" by art historian Caroline Jones, Cage is credited with implementing a conclusive critique of Abstract Expressionism by the end of the 1950s. Jones interprets this moment as a "finishing school" for a generation of artists that allowed Cage and others to move on from the presumably stifling and outdated high modernism of New York to pursue the new frontiers of postmodernism.[2] For music critic Paul Griffiths, Cage is the "apostle of indeterminacy," the figure most instrumental in the shift from predetermined compositional notation to the dissolution of authorial control in music in the post-World War II era.[3] The shared religious vocabulary that Jones and Griffiths and many other

[1] For an example that tends to collapse all his life's work under this legacy's purview, see Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin, 2012).
[2] Caroline Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 629.
[3] Paul Griffiths, *Cage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 1.

commentators share--Cage as a "patron saint," "apostle," and heavenly "father figure"--reflects the pervasive ways in which the Cagean legacy is understood in almost transcendent terms, as if his career was destined to play out exactly the way that it did, saving music and art from the rigidity of previous modernisms.[4]

While such characterizations of Cage may be appropriate given his wide and profound impact, the legacy has too often overdetermined scholarship of his earlier works from decades prior to the 1960s when his intellectual and artistic reference points were not yet consolidated. For example, the fact of his oft-cited studies of Indian art and Zen Buddhism, which only began in the late 1940s and guided the composer's later mature works, has overshadowed understanding of how Cage sought inspiration from other non-Western cultures in order to galvanize his compositional practice at the beginning of his career. This paper will explore in particular two moments from Cage's less-studied early works from the late 1930s into the 1940s--his novel instrumentation of what is called the "prepared piano" with *Bacchanale* (1938/40) and his utilization of a child's toy piano as a serious musical instrument in *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948)--to situate him in relation to the framework of early twentieth-century European modernism and primitivism.

If composer Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* of 1913 has been accepted as the originary *pièce de résistance* of musical primitivism,

[4] For an essay that surveys a variety of younger composers who looked to Cage for inspiration and also knowingly comments on the Cagean legacy's attractive power, see Kyle Gann, "No Escape from Heaven: John Cage as Father Figure," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242–260.

then its examples of dance, pagan myth, and rhythmic precedence can serve as revealing through lines in Cage's piano alterations that would occur over two decades later.[5] In terms of music theory, primitivism mostly signaled a disavowal of the common-practice harmony and rhythm that had been developing in European art music during the centuries leading up to the 1900s. What replaced this common-practice convention was a highly eclectic array of compositional practices that drew from seemingly simpler popular traditions existing outside of European classical music.[6] A comparison between Stravinsky and Cage will elucidate how the younger composer resorted to these same primitivist techniques despite eyeing an entirely different cultural Other.

Cage, like other visual artists who came of age before him (e.g. Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner), sought ways to evade or overcome the historical weight of European artistic traditions. Accessing the "primitive" by projecting certain desires onto a vaguely defined Other, including the pre-modern arts of Russia or Africa as well as art made by children, these artists aimed to construct what they thought to be a radically different mode of

[5] The most recent comprehensive reassessment of *The Rite of Spring* from many diverse angles can be found in Severine Neff, Maureen Carr, Gretchen Horlacher, and John Reef, eds, *The Rite of Spring at 100* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017).
[6] Even more so than in visual art, musical primitivism as an umbrella term struggles to signify any sort of collective impulse or have any shared stylistic characteristics because of the stark irregularities in how it is used from country to country and from composer to composer. This semantic difficulty, which exists in spite of the casual ubiquity of the term in musicological discourse, helps to explain the lack of definitive scholarship on what exactly musical primitivism is. The following recommended sources analyze the term locally, in relation to a specific region and time period: Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984); Marion Bauer, *Twentieth-Century Music: How It Developed, How to Listen to It* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1933.

expression untainted by the perceived sophistication and excess of modern Western thought.[7] It is well established, for example, that the influx of African masks and other tribal objects into the Trocadéro ethnographic museum in Paris profoundly impacted Picasso's practice, leading to his so-called "African Period" of works featuring mask-like faces and distortions of space previously unseen by European eyes.[8] What is more, as the work of art historian Hal Foster has demonstrated, this type of primitivism--entailing the appropriation and seeming mastery of the white male artist over the colored colonial Other--can be further complicated by a psychoanalytic examination of the fragile ambivalence at the heart of this relationship.[9] In the second half of this paper, the subsequent logical extension of primitivist discourse onto the Freudian theorization of the "primal scene" in child development will serve to connect Cage's primitivism of the "African" with that of the child.

The search for the new, authentic, or original through the appropriation of Other cultural practices which characterizes primitivism is also fundamental to the avant-garde as a whole. The way Cage approached this search beginning in the late 1930s was through his alterations of the piano--a massive, stationary instrument most

[7] Other notable groups that are tangential to the scope of this paper include Oceania, Japan, Latin America, peasants, and the mentally ill. See the following exhibition catalogue for the foundation of primitivism in contemporary art historical discourse: *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984).
[8] See any of the following: William Rubin's essay in the catalogue referenced in the previous footnote; Patricia Leighten, "The White Peril and *L'Art Nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism and Anticolonialism," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 72, no. 4 (Dec. 1990), 609-30.; Finbarr Barry Flood, "Picasso the Muslim," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67, no. 8 (2017) 42-60.
[9] Hal Foster, ""Primitive" Scenes," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 69-102.

known for its harmonic expression and capability to effectively collapse the voices of an entire orchestra into one object. His invention of the "prepared piano" (a piano with various small household objects carefully inserted into its strings before a performance according to the specifications of the composer) and his use of a toy piano are emblematic of how the composer continually relied on the Other to motivate his neo-avant-garde project, using previously unused objects to alter both the sound production and internal appearance of the traditional grand piano. As we will see, the archetypes of the black dancer and the child at play will be seen as his primary references for *Bacchanale* (1938/40) and *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948), respectively. *Bacchanale* is the first work that prompted Cage to invent the prepared piano and thereby bring his music closer to African dance; the suite stands out in his oeuvre as the first and only work scored exclusively for a children's toy. Although both are musical works, this art historical investigation necessitates close looking at the instrument as an art object tied to material culture, as well as considerations of the visuo-spatiality of performance and, most significantly, the persistence of early twentieth-century primitivism.

I. Prepared Piano

Before Cage's well-documented activities in the downtown New York art scene, where he seemingly connected with and impacted the work of countless other artists, he was exclusively associated with the West

Coast. He was born and grew up in Los Angeles, and when his formal musical training was complete, he moved to Seattle in 1938 at the age of 26 for a new job at the Cornish School of Allied Arts (now operating as the Cornish College of the Arts), where he would stay until 1941. And it is in Seattle where he invented the prepared piano.[10]

The evocation of nature is characteristic of all of Cage's prepared piano output, which includes titles such as *Our Spring Will Come* (1943), *Spontaneous Earth* (1944), and the *Two Pastorales* (1951-2). In addition, the first four prepared piano works, composed between 1938 and 1942, have the following titles: *Bacchanale*, *Totem Ancestor*, *And the Earth Shall Bear Again*, and lastly, *Primitive*. Based on these titles alone, we can already detect his leanings toward a certain primitivist imaginary characterized by ancient time and the natural workings of the Earth.

Although many of the original choreographies have been lost, all of Cage's prepared piano works were also composed as accompaniments for dance. Merce Cunningham, of course, would turn out to be the most frequent collaborator for these works, but *Bacchanale* (Fig. 1) was originally composed for and dedicated to the African-American dancer Syvilla Fort (1917 – 1975), who was only in her early twenties at the time. Fort studied ballet as a child but was denied admission to ballet schools on account of her race, leading her to modern dance. She would go on to become a prominent performer and teacher for the

[10] The word *invented* is appropriate here because *inventor* is a moniker that Cage liked to use to describe his occupation (as opposed to the traditional *composer*).

Katherine Dunham Company (previously called the Negro Dance Group) in Chicago and New York, which was the only self-supported black dance troupe in the mid-century United States. Her inclusion in the traditional history of the prepared piano has always been somewhat superficial for several reasons: she was only a student at the time; the choreography (which may or may not have been designed by her) is no longer extant; lastly, there exists little verifiable information about Fort and Cage's working relationship other than what the composer has recalled about this moment decades after the fact. Regardless, her presence at the Cornish School in Seattle positions the invention of Cage's prepared piano as an encounter between traditional Western and primitivist frames as we do know that around 1938 Fort asked Cage to write music for a recital of hers. The young composer was then employed as an accompanist for Bonnie Bird's modern dance classes at the Cornish School, where Fort was in training.[11]

The title *Bacchanale* was likely Fort's choosing, and its reliance on pagan classical mythology links to the modernist fascination with primitivist qualities of being uncivilized. Frequently used as a title in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for musical works, the term

[11] Dating *Bacchanale* has proven to be a conundrum. While Cage has stated in an interview decades after the fact that the date of its composition/premiere was 1938, many Cage scholars have settled on the year 1940. Complicating the latter date is Fort's matriculation at Cornish School circa 1932 because it is implausible that she would have stayed at the college for 8 years (the *Cornish Magazine* claims she was there for 5 years until 1940). She also moved to Los Angeles after graduating sometime during this period. Furthermore, the popular claim that she was the first black student at Cornish is now doubtful after Cornish researched its own archive and suggested that actress Theodosia Young predated Fort. In any case, early biographical details about Fort have been hard to come by for the author, so a further investigation into the Seattle art scene of the late 1930s would help to deepen this account of the young dancer. See Maximilian Bocek, "Bonnie Bird and Company," *Cornish Magazine*, February 2016, 12-16, https://issuu.com/cornishcollegeofthearts/docs/cornish_magazine_jan2016 for some dating possibilities.

is meant to conjure up ecstatic and orgiastic images of the Roman festivals for Bacchus (Dionysus being his Greek counterpart), the god of wine and fertility. The Bacchanalia were also popular subjects throughout art history because of the opportunity they presented for artists to depict scenes of nude, drunken revelry unrestrained by society's usual codes of propriety. Nietzsche proposed that the Dionysian characterizes a "barbarian world" prior to the rational society of Apollonian Greeks, and it is this quality of coming before societal organization that reflects the very ethos of modernist primitivism.[12] He further delineated a duality between the wild excess of the Dionysian (readily expressed in music, crowded festivals, and sexual promiscuity) and the calming Apollonian side of human nature (exemplified by the visual arts and dreams). Indeed, the rejection of inhibition allows for raucous sound and rhythm to come to the fore in Cage's *Bacchanale*. The Dionysian energy of the opening fortissimo section is immediately gripping. While the quiet, slower middle section provides a lengthy musical contrast to the fast and loud outer sections (according to the classicizing impulse of *Bacchanale*'s ternary form), it is the outer sections that most emphatically demonstrate primitivist "barbarity."

The choreographic and rhythmic drive through which this wild energy is expressed recalls the primitivism in the music of Igor Stravinsky (1882 – 1971). Admittedly, Cage's relationship to Stravinsky is complex and curious, given the general lack of

[12] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

intellectual compatibility that is usually attributed to them in musicology. But the Stravinskian holdovers in *Bacchanale* suggest that there is in fact a significant dialogue to be understood between the two composers even if Cage never admitted as much in later interviews.[13] Given that he was a faithful student of Arnold Schoenberg (1874 – 1951) during his time in Los Angeles (he took lessons from the Austrian-born composer at both UCLA and USC from 1935-7), the primary logical explanation for this downplaying of influence could be the Schoenberg-Stravinsky dichotomy that was forced upon many emerging composers in the mid-twentieth century.[14] Expressed most stridently by Theodor Adorno in 1949, the trajectory of modern music could be organized into two antithetical camps: one of progress (Schoenberg) and one of reaction/regression (Stravinsky).[15] This polemic polarized musical opinion of the time, and Cage was not immune: "When I was young, you either had to follow Stravinsky or Schoenberg. There was no alternative. There was nothing else to do."[16]

Despite Cage's public disdain for the Russian-born composer's music, the similarities between *Bacchanale* and *The Rite of Spring* are striking and undeniable. First, the collaborative engagement with dance is instrumental for both composers in realizing their primitivist goals. Like Cage and Fort, Stravinsky worked with the

[13] For instance: "I was *extremely* partisan. I was like a tiger in defense of Schoenberg, and I was less and less interested in Stravinsky's music as time went on." See this interview in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (London: Routledge, 2002), 9.
[14] Severine Neff, "Point/Counterpoint: John Cage Studies with Arnold Schoenberg," *Contemporary Music Review* 33:5-6 (2014): 451-482.
[15] Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
[16] Ibid., 211.

ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, whose original choreography is now lost. Nijinsky's primitivist (and at times disturbing) choreography--characterized by decidedly ungraceful lurching, violent stomping, and other unruly and deliberately awkward gestures--is now understood to be a principal cause for the uproar that the ballet caused at its 1913 premiere at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.[17] The narrative of *The Rite* is comprised of interrelated episodes of pagan ritual dances and primal evocations of nature that predate modern Russian civilization, in which a young girl is sacrificed, in effect, by dancing herself to the point of extinction during the chaotic climax of the ballet.

The second crucial similarity is the cyclical quality of many of the melodic motifs (a short, recognizable collection of notes that forms a thematic unit). *Bacchanale*, like *The Rite of Spring*, utilizes short, pulse-like phrases that are continuously repeated and often shifted in relation to the primary meter in order to communicate rhythmic interest and melodic development. *Bacchanale*'s opening section specifically uses an accented three-note cell in the right hand that is superimposed over a two-note cell in the left, creating a phasing effect that progresses through time. While the myriad destabilizing rhythmic effects of *The Rite* are indeed much more varied and intricate, the mere fact that rhythm forms the basis of musical expression instead of harmony constitutes a serious rejection of Western common practice harmony that primitivism sought to make. In fact, the 3:2 rhythmic ratio that *Bacchanale* relies on is the same

[17] For a problematization of the notorious "riot" at *The Rite*'s premiere, see Tamara Levitz, "Racism at The Rite," in *The Rite of Spring at 100*, ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 146-78.

fundamental ratio that is foundational to much of traditional African drumming.[18] While this similarity may be a coincidence of which Cage was not aware, the effect of its compositional employment remains incontrovertible--that rhythmic prioritization is a major attribute of musical primitivism.

This is perhaps not a surprise since Fort, who by the end of her life became a celebrated symbol of black dance, had asked Cage to compose "African" music that would be suitable for her choreography. Indeed, despite the limited information that is available about their working relationship at this early moment, it is likely that Fort was the one who initiated the primitivist impulse for this work--it was *her* recital, after all. One can only imagine what the choreography might have looked like, but the intimation here is that her dance would be "African" and that she required appropriate music to correspond to her choreography. Detailing his initial reaction to the request that prompted the invention of the prepared piano, Cage recalled the following in 1973:

> The Cornish Theatre in which Syvilla Fort was to perform had no space in the wings. There was also no pit. There was, however, a piano at one side in front of the stage. I couldn't use percussion instruments for Syvilla's dance, though, suggesting Africa, they would have been suitable; they would have left too little room for her to perform. I was obliged to write a piano piece. I spent a day or so conscientiously trying to find an African twelve-tone row. I had no luck.[19]

[18] Rose Brandel, "The African Hemiola Style," *Ethnomusicology* 3, no. 3 (1959): 106-17.
[19] John Cage, Foreword, in *The Well-Prepared Piano* (Colorado Springs: Colorado College Music Press, 1973), vi.

Having prior experience as a successful composer for percussion ensembles, Cage's first instinct to write for percussion to support Fort's dance would have drawn on the wide variety of African drumming music that became more popular among vanguard musicians in later decades. Unfortunately, there was not enough space in the performing area to accommodate the number of drums that would be required. Realizing the limitation to have to compose exclusively for a piano, he found himself confronted with a theoretical impossibility--the African twelve-tone row. It is here that his previous training in European harmony with Schoenberg proved to be completely incongruous with the African musical impulse that he was trying to channel. The incommensurability of these two modes ultimately forced Cage to change the compositional tools and instrumentation he was accustomed to in order to incorporate the non-Western Other into his music. This incommensurability may also help explain Cage's leaning on Stravinsky's work at this time as an artistic model despite the dominant influence of Schoenberg.

To achieve an "African" score for Fort, Cage experimented with inserting household objects between the strings of the available piano, thereby bringing the sound of the prepared piano closer to that of percussion (Fig. 2), which is considered a more primitive form of music insofar as it does not even require a modern instrument. Found objects could have been struck together by pre-historic humans even before the introduction of pitch and other musical parameters. In *Bacchanale*, a bolt, a screw, and many fibrous pieces of weather stripping were carefully placed between the strings within the very

body of the grand piano (this process is called the "preparation"--see Fig. 3). Even though the do-it-yourself visual aesthetic of the prepared strings might suggest that it was randomly or haphazardly done, one glance at the preparation chart reveals that each object was very carefully inserted according to precisely determined distances from the damper. The material of the object (i.e. rubber or metal) would affect the timbre; the distance would affect reverberation (i.e. the length of time that the string is able to vibrate after being struck by the interior hammer, which is set into motion by pressing down on an exterior key). Depending on the work, then, the preparation process can take several hours to do properly in order to ensure the safety of the piano and the intended acoustical results.

With these preparations, harmony (traditionally used by Schoenberg as a major structural tool) becomes subsidiary in *Bacchanale*, whose ternary structure is primarily communicated through changes in tempo, timbre, and dynamics. Keeping in mind the spatial pragmatics of Cage's instrumentation and use of the aforementioned 3:2 rhythmic ratio, the prepared piano becomes a miniaturization of not an orchestra, but an African drum ensemble. As such, the conventional understanding of the prepared piano as a purely formal invention must be rethought in recognition of its origins in *Bacchanale*'s primitivist engagements with Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, African dance, and percussive rhythm over harmony--all combined to answer an assignment to realize an "African" musical accompaniment.[20] The shared ideas of

[20] For a conventional formalist interpretation, see Diane Nelson, "An Introduction to John Cage's Music for the Solo Prepared Piano," *American Music Teacher* 36, no. 3 (1987): 42-49; or Leta Miller, "Henry Cowell and John Cage: Intersections and

returning to life's origins before society and also returning the harmonic classical piano to a simpler world of percussion would continue to operate and flourish in Cage's music as another primitivist trope.

II. Toy Piano

Art historian Jonathan Fineberg has traced the historical and biographical linkages between children's art and modern artists, remarking that at the end of the nineteenth century "childhood represented the prehistory of the adult and thus the child became a kind of domestic noble savage."[21] In 1966, the philosopher George Boas went on to construct a short genealogy of the previously-held belief that children are similar to primitive peoples in terms of thought patterns, a racist idea that conflates human evolution, age, and race.[22] This linkage between children and primitive peoples animated a number of modern artists. Gauguin, for example, once proposed that "in order to produce something new, one must return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind,"[23] and rhapsodized in his journal that "I have gone far back, farther back than the horses of the

Influences, 1933–1941," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 1 (2006): 47-112. The comparison to the older American composer Henry Cowell is appropriate and common in the literature because of Cowell's own piano experiments with extended technique (e.g. strumming the interior strings with one's hands).

[21] Jonathan Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1997), 11. See also his edited volume: *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism, and Modernism* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1998).

[22] George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, vol. 29. (London, 1966), 60-7.

[23] Paul Gauguin, *L'Echo*, August 15, 1895; cited in Daniel Guérin, ed., *Oviri, écrits d'un sauvage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 111.

Parthenon…as far back as the Dada of my babyhood, the good rocking-horse."[24] Various other figures of the European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century exhibited, collected, and published the artworks of children, reflecting a keen interest in "uncivilized" or "untrained" expression. Often positioned next to non-Western objects and the art of psychotic patients, children's drawings were especially favored and shown at various Expressionist, Cubist, and Futurist exhibitions across France, Germany, Italy, Austria, and Russia.[25]

Although some more recent studies, such as Robert Goldwater's landmark 1986 book *Primitivism in Modern Art*, have opined that comparisons between the forms and motifs of non-Western cultural representations and children's art can be reductive and are not viable, the possibility of conceptually comparing these two discursive categories in the work of the original artists remains relevant for art historians of today.[26] It is telling that these same types of superficial formal comparisons that Goldwater criticizes, especially when made between certain types of modern art and non-Western objects, were essential in defining primitivism and its affinities in MoMA's controversial 1984-5 exhibition "*Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*. Clearly, such a major exhibition demonstrates the extent to which morphological similarities between modern art and "primitive" objects held significance in the twentieth-century cultural imaginary, and Cage's early career can surely be interpreted within this framework.

[24] Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Van Wyck Brooks, preface by Emil Gauguin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1936), 41.
[25] Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye*, 12.
[26] Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1986), 199.

What will be most instructive in this study of the *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948, Fig. 4) is not the art of children, however, but rather the pervasive idea of childhood--its discursive, psychoanalytic, and material presence immediately following World War II. The provocative instrumentation of a children's toy has always been the primary focus of scholarly commentary on the suite. While there has been no definitive and detailed account of the suite, its mentions in musicology ultimately hinge on the instrumentation at the expense of all other aspects of its music.[27] Granted, the choice of a toy piano does seem so idiosyncratic and against the grain of traditional values in serious musical composition that this approach does make sense. Indeed, the instrument is not capable of the expressive range of a full-size piano, and its timbre is metallic and therefore percussive. Some toy pianos do not even have black keys. Its volume range is also limited with only rudimentary capacity for dynamics. As a result, the sudden dramatic contrasts between fortissimo and piano notated on the first page of the score (Fig. 4 again, see the beginning of the last system/line of the first page for the most extreme dynamic contrast) can be interpreted as a fanciful exaggeration or an ironic turn on the part of the composer.

With a duration of approximately seven minutes, the music of the *Suite for Toy Piano* can be structurally united by a reliance on motivic repetition within each of the five different movements,

[27] For example, see Xenia Pestova, "Toy Pianos, Poor Tools: Virtuosity and Imagination in a Limited Context," *Tempo* 71, no. 281 (2017), 27-38. The article casts the *Suite for Toy Piano* as a cornerstone of the toy piano repertoire but does so in a way that largely ignores the actual musical material that makes up the composition of the work.

resulting in performances that often sound like children practicing. The first-time listener will be struck by its formal simplicity: sparse voicings and short phrases that are incredibly easy to play (when compared to any of the prepared piano works) even for amateur pianists. The opening phrase is a steady, diatonic (meaning that there are no accidentals/out-of-key pitch modifications) ascension with a sparse texture and G pedal tone in the bass. In addition, the first movement uses exclusively white keys before the next movement introduces the black keys. When performed by an actual child (Fig. 5), the uncomplicated suite also now conveniently serves as a satire of the child prodigies who play virtuosic showpieces and are thrust into the spotlight in today's classical music industry.

In a consideration of the toy piano as a play object in and of itself, the reviews of Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) help to describe a relevant theory of children's play. "Any novel theory of play," he writes in a book review from 1928, must confront the "great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play: the law of repetition."[28] After all, one can easily imagine an infant pressing down on a piano key and enjoying the sound so much that they do it again and again ("*noch einmal*" as Benjamin suggests). Repetition, for Benjamin, is a source of pleasure. He also portrays play actions as instinctual, primal urges that motivate specific types of play. For instance, "a child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse."[29] Following this logic, one could speculate that the

[28] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Marcus Bullock et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003) vol. 2, 120.
[29] Ibid., 119.

instinctual human desire to strike two objects together to create sound causes a child to become a percussionist and musician, and Cage's alterations of the standard piano reflect this percussive desire. This locates the primal source of creative activity in children and not in another adult entity that is being imitated.[30]

Going further, Benjamin asserts that toys are not innocent objects that can be played with apart from the social world. On the contrary, they have a material history and are determined by adults, who have the power to purchase, create, invent, and circulate them. The purposeful circulation of educational toys by the companies Holgate Brothers Company; Playskool, Inc.; and Creative Playthings, Inc. has been detailed by art historian Amy Ogata. With the baby boom starting in 1946 as American soldiers came home from war to start families, there was an increased demand for childcare products that exemplified "a growing faith in creativity as an authentic value that could redeem society after the destruction of war and encourage competitive drive."[31] This competitive drive in particular was encouraged by the American government, which sought to parlay educational advances into technological ones in order to compete with the Soviet Union during the ensuing Cold War. Using educational toys for capitalist expansion and as an implicit weapon against communism, the American people (especially the upper middle class) projected their utopian desires for restarting society from a pure source onto

[30] Michael Powers, "The Smallest Remainder: Benjamin and Freud on Play," *MLN* 133, no. 3 (2018): 730.
[31] Amy Ogata, "Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture," *Winterthur Portfolio* 39, no. 2/3 (2004): 129.

their newly-born children, and so the baby-boom child symbolically became "the idealized citizen of a new world of peace, freedom, and democracy."[32] These desires were often expressed in parenting magazines and other print media, which made the idea of childhood both redemptive and consumable.

The establishment of nursery schools further cemented the essential role that toys play in childcare and childhood development. Designed by middle-class reformers in the 1920s, nursery schools in America were modeled on their European counterparts and were primarily private institutions associated with privilege. A central part of their pedagogy relied on educational toys, such as hammering toys (Figures 6 and 7) that are meant to improve basic motor skills and hand-eye coordination. This "creative pounding," or striking action, is the fundamental basis for percussive sound and also mimics the very same action that causes piano strings to sound. In musical pedagogy, the very first thing a student learns is often rhythm, in essence the metrical spacing of sounds, before an instrument even enters into the learning process. The concomitant growth of child study centers at major universities in the postwar period did well to bring child psychology into the mainstream and to provide scientific evidence for toy companies. As a result, there was a societal "shift in attitude toward to the toy as an everyday object rather than just a holiday or birthday gift."[33]

[32] Ibid., 130.
[33] Ibid., 136.

The discursive and material preoccupation with children and their toys in the U.S. starting in the 1950s is foreshadowed by the *Suite for Toy Piano* (1948) to a certain degree (Fig. 8).[34] In order to fully account for the musical material that Cage notates in his composition, this paper must return to the abstract concept of repetition and how it serves as one of the most important compositional factors in the suite. Repetition functions as the crucial connection between play theory, the idea of childhood, the composition itself, and Freudian psychoanalysis. The first movement's swift quintuplet motive is repeated six times across the movement, and four of these iterations occur in quick succession at its end. The most overt act of repetition, however, occurs at the close of the second movement, when the C key is sounded over and over again in the right-hand (notably not the subsidiary left-hand like most accompanimental figures) to the point of absurdity, ninety-eight times (Fig. 10). A true *ostinato* in the Italian sense of the word (meaning "obstinate"), the passage is marked piano and staccato. Given that the tempo is relatively fast and that most toy pianos are not carefully constructed for precise

[34] Jasper Johns was first introduced to Cage soon after the former's move to New York in 1953. Johns' *Construction with Toy Piano* (1954, Fig. 9) echoes Cage's concerns with children's play and innocence, but it is only an echo. Plastered on top with bits of paper that have been strongly shaded with graphite, the toy looks worn down and burdened with the adult weight of newspapers, receipts, and letters. A muted nostalgia is expressed through its wooden frame. During a decade when plastics were seen to be the materials of the future, the sturdy wooden construction matches that of most educational toys, which were marketed as plain, reliable products that hearkened back to simpler times. Even Roland Barthes was not immune to the poetic nostalgia of wooden toys, once musing: "A sign which fills one with consternation is the gradual disappearance of wood, in spite of its being an ideal material because of its firmness and its softness, and the natural warmth of its touch. Wood removes, from all forms which it supports, the wounding quality of angles which are too sharp, the chemical coldness of metal…. It is a familiar and poetic substance…[that] does not shatter, it wears out, it can last a long time, live with the child, alter little by little the relations between the object and the hand." Roland Barthes, "Toys," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 54–55.

execution, performances of this passage often reveal the mechanical limitations of the instrument--either by way of the performer making a mistake or by calling attention to the messy, incidental sound of the key being pressed and rising back up to its original position.

The compulsion to repeat, which seems to drive *Suite for Toy Piano*, is much more than just a neutral compositional technique if we consider its operation as a post-traumatic coping strategy, as pointed out by Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) in his analysis of the "*fort*/*da* game" in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). In this case study, Freud observed his own 18-month-old grandson figuratively rehearse the trauma of his mother's leaving him by throwing away a toy cotton reel so that it disappears (*fort* meaning "gone"), only to retrieve it again (*da* meaning "there"). The constant cycle of disappearance and retrieval helps Freud to begin theorizing the death drive, wherein the compulsion to repeat past traumas of loss signifies an unconscious desire to return to an original state.[35] That is to say that the human subject, once born, desires to die again, according to Freud. His examinations of traumatized soldiers coming back from World War I (1914 – 1918) forms the historical context of this theory.

Following Freud's insights, one could argue that the *Suite for Toy Piano* (composed three years after the end of World War II), which utilizes a child's toy to engage in a compulsively repetitive behavior, can be understood as a defensive regression back to a young age in response to the horrors of war. The desire to return to an

[35] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74).

original state is also manifested in the suite, as it begins and ends on the same note (G). Linking the idea of childhood to the unconscious is the fundamental premise of Freudian psychoanalysis, and the discipline's popularization in the mid-twentieth century provides an instructive backdrop to Cage's compositional activity of the time. Perhaps repetition in the suite is not a source of pleasure as Benjamin would have it--this darker interpretation of the child at play looms large behind the heavenly façade of the Cagean legacy and its postmodern games.[36] This affective distinction between Benjamin's and Freud's theories can be found in a quantitative measurement of the repetition in question. Pressing the C key, the most basic and foundational pitch in all of Western classical music, several times in a row can certainly be done for enjoyment. But ninety-eight times? The compulsion to repeat here has gone beyond innocuous play for pleasure, now hinting at the existence of an unconscious trauma, which the *Suite for Toy Piano* may be understood to both avow and disavow at once.

Conclusion

By pairing the *Suite for Toy Piano* with *Bacchanale*, both works and their reliance on the rhythmic and percussive can be included in a longer modernist narrative about the afterlife of European primitivism

[36] In the 1940s, well before his triumphs of the 1960s, Cage also faced a crisis in his artistic and personal identities, as he struggled to find an original compositional voice of his own and endured unemployment, poverty, discrimination based on sexual orientation, and divorce. While these biographical anecdotes are outside of the scope of this paper, it remains possible to see these personal struggles as potential sources for trauma.

in art history and how it recast itself throughout Cage's music as his art developed. What becomes clear after this account of two formative moments in Cage's early career is that, while the subject matters of his non-Western encounters eventually diverged from the well-trodden paths of modernist primitivism, his recurring tactic of seeking out the Other (the non-Western and non-adult) would become a habitual tendency for the rest of his life.[37] As a result, the prospect of studying Cage from a forward-looking (i.e. from the 1930s onward), interdisciplinary perspective that more readily includes music theory and foregrounds his early work as an interpretive lens equal to his late work proves promising. This is because of the crucial crossroads that he occupied at the time--a crossroads caught between piano and percussion; instrument and found object; Stravinsky and Schoenberg; repetition and chance; Africa, Japan, and India; modernism and postmodernism.

[37] As Stravinskian rhythmic propulsion was adapted by Cage into percussive repetition, the composer's voice began to mature and definitively change by the beginning of the 1950s. As a postscript, his newly diversifying references points can be briefly sketched out, when his attention turned to Asia, where traditional instruments like the gamelan (an Indonesian pitched percussion orchestra) represented a different encounter with the Other. He initially moved to New York in the spring of 1942, bringing with him a budding interest in Zen Buddhism that would be later cultivated by his attendance at lectures given by the Japanese Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki (1870 – 1966) at Columbia University during the 1950s. From that encounter he would develop his own artistic philosophy based on nothingness and silence. In the same year that he wrote the *Suite for Toy Piano*, Cage first visited Black Mountain College and, more importantly, started studying with the Indian-born musician Gita Sarabhai. This mutually beneficial arrangement in which Cage taught her about Western music and she taught him about Indian music and philosophy helped Cage to write the *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-8), a 16-piece cycle for the prepared piano that far eclipses the compositional achievement of *Bacchanale* in terms of scale, complexity, and ambition. This flagship work in the prepared piano literature was based on his reading of the art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877 – 1947).

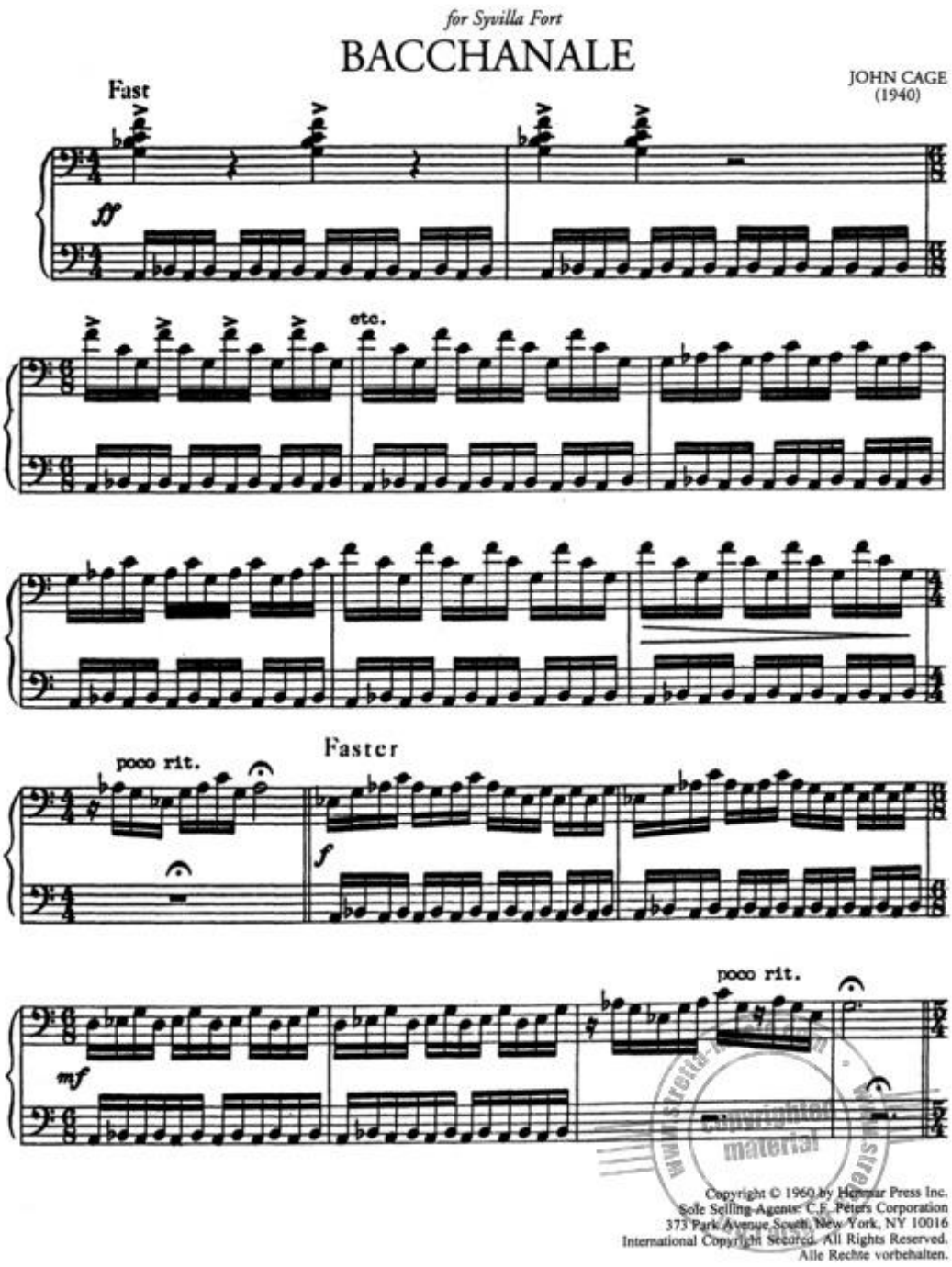

Figure 1. John Cage (1912 – 1992), first page of *Bacchanale* (Peters Edition), 1938/40.
https://youtu.be/ue6uEpuy3Gc

Figure 2. Cage "preparing" a piano by placing various screws, coins, and dampening strips between a grand piano's strings.

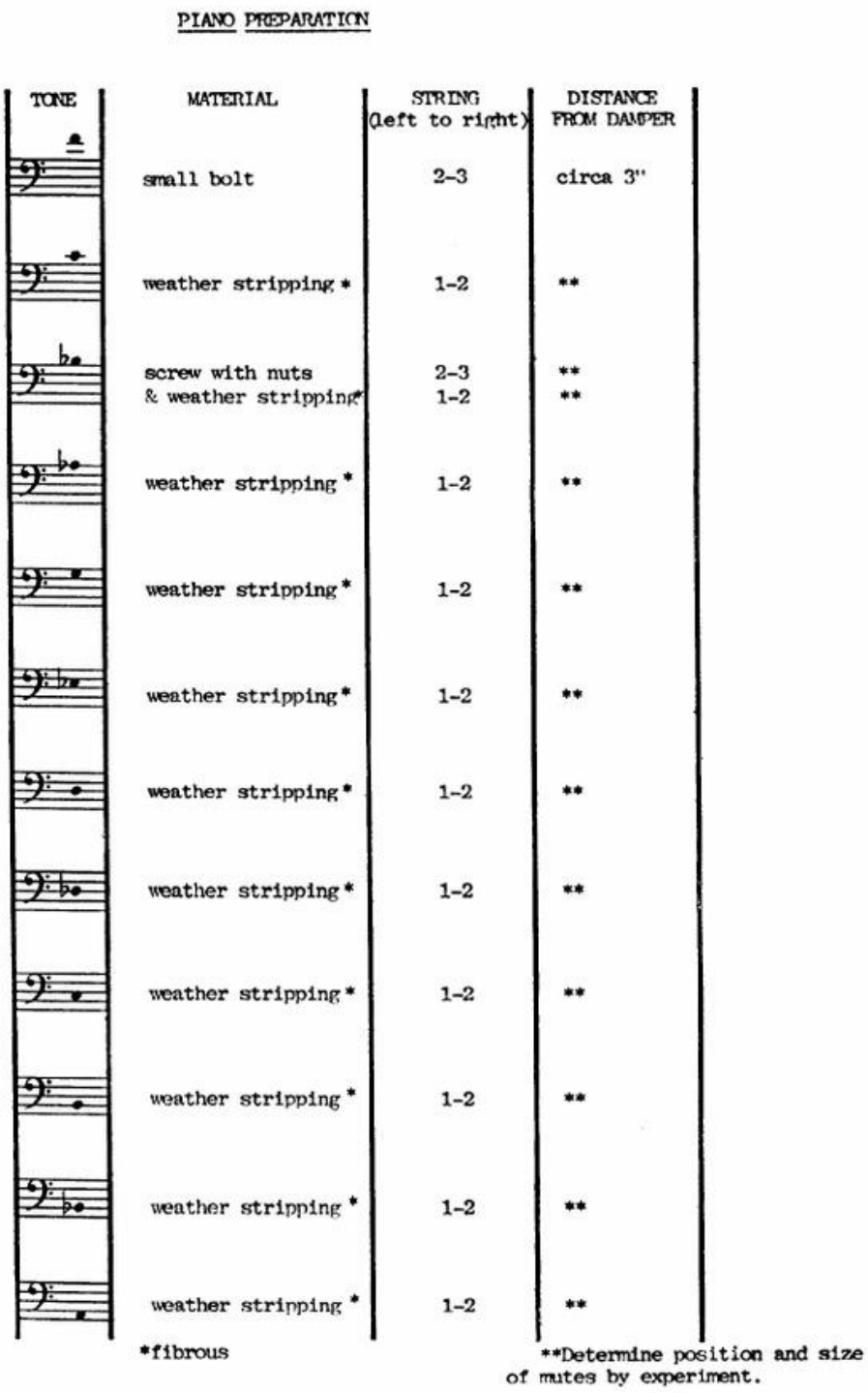

Figure 3. Preparation chart for *Bacchanale* (Henmar Press, Inc.).

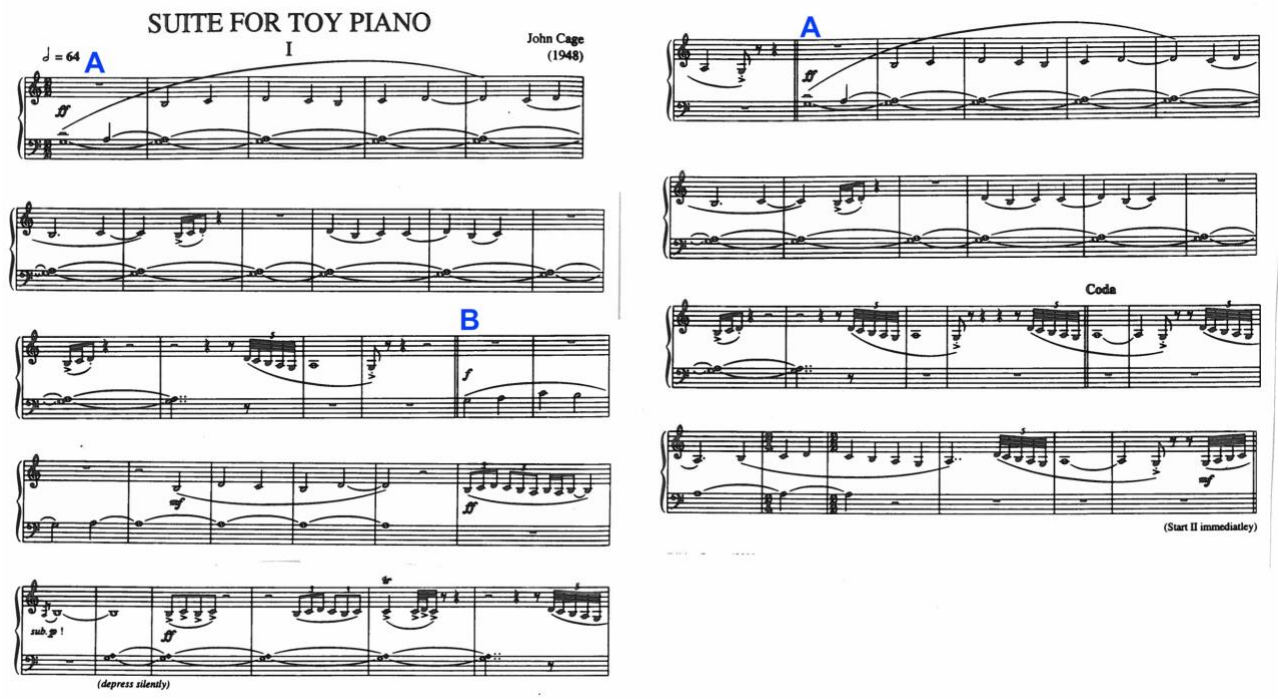

Figure 4. First movement of *Suite for Toy Piano*, 1948. In *Works for Prepared Piano and Toy Piano, Vol. 4, 1933-52 (Margaret Leng Tan)*.

Figure 5. Zihon Wang performing *Suite for Toy Piano* on Jan. 3, 2016. Gould Rehearsal Hall, Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia. https://youtu.be/WC78T-i6pow

Figure 6. "Creative Pounding" Playskool advertisement in *Parents' Magazine* 24, no. 10 (October 1949): 152. (PLAYSKOOL ® & © 2005 Hasbro, Inc.)

Figure 7. Vintage Playskool, Inc. hammering toy, presumably from the 1950s.

Figure 8. The first appearance of Schroeder's toy piano in a strip from Sept. 25, 1951.
Charles Schulz, *Peanuts*.

Figure 9. Jasper Johns (b. 1930), *Construction with Toy Piano*, 1954. Graphite and collage with toy piano, 29.4 x 23.2 x 5.6 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.

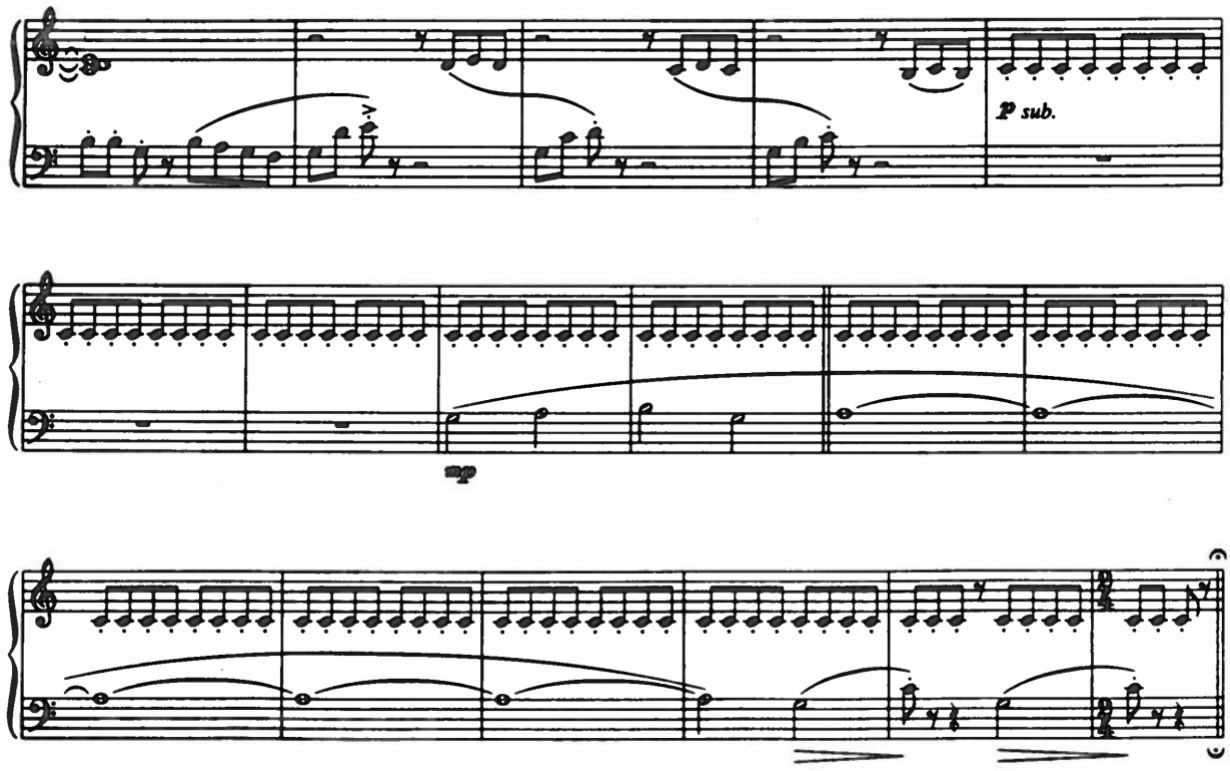

Figure 10. Last three systems of the second movement, *Suite for Toy Piano*.

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