

Experimental music
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Experimental music is a term introduced by composer John Cage in 1955. Cage defined "an experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen" (Cage 1961, 39), and he was specifically interested in completed works that performed an unpredictable action (Mauceri 1997, 197) In a broader sense, it has come to mean any music that challenges the commonly accepted notions of what music is. Avant-garde music is another term for it. David Cope describes experimental music as that, "which represents a refusal to accept the status quo" (Cope, 1997, 222).

Michael Nyman (1974) uses the term "experimental" to describe the work of American composers^[1] (John Cage, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Meredith Monk, Malcolm Goldstein, Morton Feldman, Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Philip Glass, John Cale, Steve Reich, etc.) as opposed to the European avant-garde at the time (Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis). The word "experimental" in the former cases "is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success or failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown" (Cage 1961, 13).

According to David Nicholls, "...very generally, avant-garde music can be viewed as occupying an extreme position within the tradition, while experimental music lies outside it" (Nicholls 1998, 318). That tradition is the inheritance of common-practice Western art music, with its concern for increased technical complexity, historical inheritance, composer intention and other features. In general, and at least originally, experimental music took its inspiration from non-Western sources and from varying times. It may take its inspiration (directly in terms of generating systems) from other media; practitioners may or may not be professionals in the traditional sense of the word, although they may still be trained in their work and adept at it.

Leonard B. Meyer, on the other hand, includes under "experimental music" composers such as Berio, Boulez, and Stockhausen, as well as the techniques of "total serialism" (Meyer 1994, 106 107 and 266), holding that "there is no single, or even pre-eminent, experimental music, but rather a plethora of different methods and kinds" (Meyer 1994, 237).

As with other edge forms that push the limits of a particular form of expression, there is little agreement as to the boundaries of experimental music, even amongst its practitioners. On the one hand, some experimental music is an extension of traditional music, adding unconventional instruments, modifications to instruments, noises, and other novelties to compositions. At the other extreme, there are performances that most listeners would not characterize as music at all.

While much discussion of experimental music centers on definitional issues and its validity as a musical form, the most frequently performed experimental music is entertaining and, at its best, can lead the listener to question core assumptions about the nature of music.

The term "experimental music" was used contemporaneously for electronic music, particularly in the early musique concrète work of Schaeffer and Henry in France (Vignal 2003, 298) and in the Experimental Studios at the University of Illinois, run by Lejaren Hiller.^[citation needed] "Experimental" electronic composition may be "experimental" in the sense used in Nyman (for instance, Cage, Cartridge Music or the early work of Alvin Lucier); it may also lie more comfortably with the avant garde.^[citation needed]

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[edit] Keywords

Aleatoric music - A term coined by Werner Meyer-Eppler and used by Boulez and other composers of the avant garde (in Europe) to refer to a strictly limited form of indeterminacy, also called "controlled chance". As this distinction was misunderstood, the term is often (and somewhat inaccurately) used interchangeably with, or in place of, "indeterminacy".

Graphic notation - Music which is written in the form of diagrams or drawings rather than using conventional notation (with staves, clefs, notes, etc).

Indeterminate music - Related to 'chance music' (one of Cage's terms). Music in which the composer introduces the elements of chance or unpredictability with regard to either the composition or its performance. This term is used by experimental composers, performers and scholars working in experimental music in the United States, Britain, and in other countries influenced by Cagean aesthetics.

Literalism - Music that rejects the aesthetic as motivating force for the creation and pursuit of sound, using either the basic building blocks of orchestral composition (strict literalism) or sounds present at the site of performance (direct literalism) instead.

Microtones - A pitch interval that is smaller than a semitone. This includes quarter tones and intervals even smaller. Composers have, for example, divided the octave into 22, 31, 43, 53, 72, etc. microtones, either equally or unequally, and then used this scale as a basis for composition.

[edit] Techniques

Some of the more common techniques include:

Extended techniques: Any of a number of methods of performing on a musical instrument that are unique, innovative, and sometimes regarded as improper. "Prepared" instruments ordinary instruments modified in their tuning or sound-producing characteristics. For example, guitar strings can have a weight attached at a certain point, changing their harmonic characteristics (Keith Rowe is one musician to have experimented with such prepared guitar techniques). Cage's prepared piano was one of the first such instruments. A different form is not hanging objects on the strings, but divide the string in two with a third bridge and play the inverse side, causing resonating bell-like harmonic tones at the pick-up side.

Unconventional playing techniques for example, strings on a piano can be manipulated directly instead of being played the orthodox, keyboard-based way (an innovation of Henry Cowell's known as "string piano"), a dozen or more piano keys may be depressed simultaneously with the forearm to produce a tone cluster (another technique popularized by Cowell), or the tuning pegs on a guitar can be rotated while a note sounds (called a "tuner glissando").

Incorporation of instruments, tunings, rhythms or scales from non-Western musical traditions.

Use of sound sources other than conventional musical instruments such as trash cans, telephone ringers, and doors slamming.

Playing with deliberate disregard for the ordinary musical controls (pitch, duration, volume).

Use of graphic notation, non-conventional written/graphic 'instructions' actively interpreted by the performer(s). John Cage is credited with the original development of the radical score,[citation needed] and this influence continued through other composers/artists such as La Monte Young, George Brecht, George Crumb, Annea Lockwood, Yoko Ono, Krzysztof Penderecki and beyond.

Creating experimental musical instruments for enhancing the timbre of compositions and exploring new techniques or possibilities.

[edit] See also

List of experimental musicians

20th century classical music

Acousmatic art

Biomusic

Circuit Bending

Computer music

Contemporary music

Danger music

Electroacoustic music

Electronic art music

Electronic music

European free jazz

Musique concrète

Free improvisation

Free jazz

Glitch

[edit] Articles

MUSIC; Electronic Music, Always Current By KYLE GANN, New York Times, July 9, 2000

It's Sound, It's Art, and Some Call It Music By KYLE GANN, New York Times, January 9, 2000

[edit] Further reading

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Vignal, Marc(Éd.), 2003, "Expérimentale (musique)" in *Dictionnaire de la Musique*, Larousse, Paris, (ISBN 2035113547)

[edit] External links

Experimental Music Catalogue - Experimental Music Catalogue has been publishing American and British experimental music scores and recordings since 1969. This site sponsors the *Journal of Experimental Music Studies (JEMS)*, a peer-reviewed online journal devoted to experimental music.

The Sound Projector - The Sound Projector music magazine and radio show
<http://www.addlimb.org> ADDLIMB Organization

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