

Marcel Duchamp's Aleatory Compositions

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[This is a transcript from a recent edition of *The Frequency Mutineers*, show date indicated in brackets.]

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In our preparations regarding an important lecture (History of Turntablism) for our upcoming course (Advanced DJ Training), we encountered an interesting story about Marcel Duchamp. Most people know that Duchamp is a pioneer of dada art, however few know that he also composed dada music (1). We will be hearing an example of that music next, but I'd first like to explain Duchamp's underlying philosophy and his composition style.

Duchamp believed that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act". And he extended this idea with his music. In compositions of notes played randomly, the emphasis was on "the noise that lies in the intervals between the notes or the gaps left empty between the sounds". Duchamp believed that it was the gaps not the notes which revealed the true "music".

The piece we will be hearing was composed in 1913, however there is no known recording of it until 1976 (2). To make that recording, The S.E.M. Ensemble had to "realize" or re-create Duchamp's aleatory composition style. Although the term "aleatory" was coined later, its definition perfectly suits the musical work of Duchamp. As defined by Werner Meyer-Eppeler in the 1950s, aleatoric processes "have been fixed in their outline but the details of which are left to chance". And as I describe the way Duchamp "composed" this piece you will see the importance of this element of chance.

In the written notes S.E.M. Ensemble used, there a description of a compositional system called "An Apparatus Automatically Recording Fragmented Musical Periods". This apparatus consists of three parts: a funnel, about hundred model train cargo cars, and a set of numbered balls. Each number on a ball represents a musical note, and there were eighty five balls representing the keys of a standard piano of that time. Along with the apparatus, there is an implied protocol: (1) start the train running down a straight track and vary the speed at random, (2) load the balls into the funnel and let them gradually release into the cars, and (3) when the balls run out, stop the train and assess the "composition". Obviously, the execution of this protocol leaves some cars empty and these are the noted "gaps" in the piece which Duchamp felt revealed the music.

Thus using a scaled-down version of a technique similar to that invented by Marcel Duchamp in 1913, here is a version of his work with a translated title of "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even. Erratum Musical" as done by the S.E.M. Ensemble in 1976.

[Notes]

- (1) Adcock, C. (1992). Marcel Duchamp's gap music: Operations in the space between art and noise. In: *Wireless imagination: Sound, radio, and the avant-garde* [D. Kahn & G. Whitehead (Editors)]. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT.
- (2) S.E.M. Ensemble (Performer). (2006). *La Mariée Mise à Nu Par Ses Célibataires, Même. Erratum Musical* [Track 3] [M. Kalve & P. Kotik (Realization)]. On: *The entire musical work of Marcel Duchamp* [P. Kotik (Editor)]. Chicago: Ampersand. [Reissue of a 1976 release on Multhipla.]