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Cage Match – In the Soundings: New Music at the Nasher series, Boris Berman breathlessly performs the entirety of John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*

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by Wayne Lee Gay



Boris Berman Photo: Oleg Kvashuk

Dallas — In post-concert comments Saturday night in the **Soundings: New Music at the Nasher** series, at the Nasher Sculpture Center, pianist **Boris Berman** referred to his just-completed performance as “a world completely different.”

And with good reason. Berman, a pianist trained in the stringent school of Russian romantic virtuosity, a tradition in which thunderous technique and passionate expression are valued, had just performed the complete *Sonatas and Interludes* of John Cage, an American experimental work that’s universes distant from the storms and yearning of Prokofiev and Scriabin.

Cage completed the *Sonatas and Interludes* in 1948 as an extension of a project for a modern dance company. In the tradition of great composers, Cage seized the limitations of the project—in that case, an inferior piano—and turned the limitations into a source of inspiration. In order to create a variety of sounds and color, Cage meticulously introduced foreign objects,

including bolts, screws, and pieces of rubber, into exact locations among the piano strings. The result was a new range of timbres and qualities for the piano, and a new way of making music that continues to influence composers, performers, and audiences seventy years later.

Performed in its entirety—as was the case Saturday—*Sonatas and Interludes* includes 16 sonatas, interspersed at key moments with four interludes. Cage would eventually remove himself from the historical chronology of music, claiming to have no musical past or influence from the tradition of classical music; the *Sonatas and Interludes*, however, absolutely beg comparison in mood, structure, and effect to the short sonatas of two geniuses of 18th-century keyboard music: Domenico Scarlatti and Antonio Soler.

For his part, pianist Berman applied the same sense of drama and precision to this performance as to his performances of more standard repertoire. Seventy minutes is a long stretch of time to listen, without break, to any one continuous work of instrumental music (the length of *Sonatas and Interludes* is comparable to the symphonies of Bruckner and Mahler); Cage here created a constant variety of effects and noises that pull the listener almost hypnotically into that “world completely different.”

Although we tend to associate Cage with the concept of music liberated from the restraints of drama, momentum, or extra-musical association, it’s impossible not to hear chimes, machines, and gongs, or to feel a level of emotion and personal reaction. Ultimately, however, the music insists on its own value, offering no more “meaning” per se than a geranium or a squirrel or a pasture.

Textures are generally lean, throughout, but with some amazingly lavish moments along the way. And Cage, whatever disavowal of momentum he may have eventually made, clearly had a valedictory effect in mind in the sixteenth, and final, Sonata, in which Berman skillfully communicated a sense of completion and fading away.

Besides the intense immediate experience, the concert represented yet another addition to the amazing series of musical experiences brought to Dallas audiences on the Soundings series, ranging from definitive presentations in recent years of classics of modern music such as Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, Ives’ “Concord” Sonata, and Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, to name but a few. Soundings at the Nasher, which also offers unique new musical experiences in addition to these “classics,” continues to be one of the most valuable facets of our region’s classical music scene.