

# Unstrung Hero. . - Music - Nam June Paik, Works 1958.1979 - sound recording review

ArtForum, Dec, 2001 by Damon Krukowski

## DAMON KRUKOWSKI ON NAM JUNE PAIK

Nam June Paik, Works 1958.1979. Sub Rosa (SR 178).

NAM JUNE PAIK IS OFTEN PICTURED with an instrument: banging his head on a piano; dragging a violin along the ground; stretching a string across his back, to be bowed by cellist Charlotte Moorman. What these images share with many of Paik's multimedia works is the sense of a dreamed art--they represent a music that isn't heard, necessarily, but whose effect might be even greater than music that is. With television, the distance between Nam June Paik's dreams and reality seems starker: Works such as Zen for T.V., 1963, Moon is the Oldest T.V., 1965, T.V. Buddha, 1974, and Candle T.V., 1975, introduce possibilities that the medium not only has never possessed, but probably can't. Paik's musical ideas are no less striking, but they are closer to the reality we know: Instruments are built along the lines of the body; musicians do attack them with violence and caress them with love; musical performance does include physical sounds unconnected to the notes played. In fact, the traditional symphony orchestra could easily be an elaborate Fluxus joke.

Fluxus was, in many ways, a musical avant-garde, and John Cage was its exemplar. Central to so many Fluxus works is the concept of a "score," a device borrowed from music and forever changed by Fluxus. Without Fluxus, Cage's 4'33" might have remained the end-of-the-line gesture that it must have seemed at its premiere in 1952. Instead, 4'33" launched an entire corpus of new scores, including many of Cage's own. As Douglas Kahn pointed out in his excellent essay "The Latest: Fluxus and Music," which appeared in the Walker Art Center's 1993 catalogue in the Spirit of Fluxus, Cage's follow-up piece, 0'00" (1962), seems like a direct response to Fluxus. Would it have been written without the amplifying effect of Cage's influence over his Fluxus followers?

Many Fluxus artists came to music through Cage, but Nam June Paik came to Cage through music. Paik began his career as a composer, writing his Tokyo University thesis on Schoenberg, then emigrating to Germany to continue musical studies and eventually finding a place at Karlheinz Stockhausen's WDR studio for electronic music. It was at the Darmstadt music conference of 1958 that Paik, together with the bulk of the European musical avant-garde, first encountered Cage. "My past 14 years [are] nothing but an extension of one memorable evening at Darmstadt '58," Paik would write in 1972.

As decisive as this encounter was, Paik shared with many composers of his generation a second, equally powerful influence in Stockhausen. The pull of these two thinkers,

sometimes in tandem but often in conflict, shaped postwar avant-garde composition much as Paik's electromagnets would warp the cathode ray of a television set. Fluxus, with its deadpan but joyful humor, was much more Cage than Stockhausen. But Paik, whose early career was indebted to the support of Stockhausen's then wife, Mary Bauermeister, as well as to the composer himself, remained so loyal that when George Maciunas and Henry Flynt staged a picket against Stockhausen in 1964, calling him a "ruling-class artist," Paik left the Fluxus group in protest. (He later rejoined.) Even today, writing about himself in the third person, Paik is careful to note that "Weltangst-filled expressionism is common to Stockhausen and Paik. This fact does not discount Cage's influence on Paik, which liberated Paik from Sound and paved the way to Mixed Media and eventually to Video." In other words, as a composer, Paik remains as indebted to Stockhausen as to Cage.

Works 1958.1979 bears this out. The CD collects five of the eight "Audio Works" listed in the catalogue to Paik's retrospective at the Guggenheim last year and features three tape pieces from 1958-61 that were rediscovered and restored in connection with that exhibition. These early works ("Homage a John Cage," "Simple," and "Etude for Pianoforte," all of which were also used as sound tracks to Paik performances) are characteristic of tape experiments from the period, although Paik relies on found sound (musique concrete) rather than the electronically generated sounds then in vogue at the WDR. Paik's irreverence leads him to include in these collages bits of Beethoven and Stravinsky alongside shrieks, test tones, and other, unidentifiable noises--but his WDR training shows up in the disciplined and taut structures of these pieces, which, despite their heavy reliance on surprise and seemingly random juxtaposition, never resort to chaos.

Paik's musical indebtedness to Cage is most clearly heard on this CD in the 1977 piece "Prepared Piano for Merce Cunningham," originally recorded to accompany a Cunningham dance performance. Here Paik plays a de-tuned piano in a manner strongly reminiscent of Cage's piano preparations in tone, though less percussive in attack. Dramatic dynamics and a kind of mock-virtuoso, almost Lisztian touch at the keyboard also distinguish this from Cage's drier and more restrained use of the instrument.