Adapting A Contemporary Ensemble Work for Live Solo Harp and Electronic Setup

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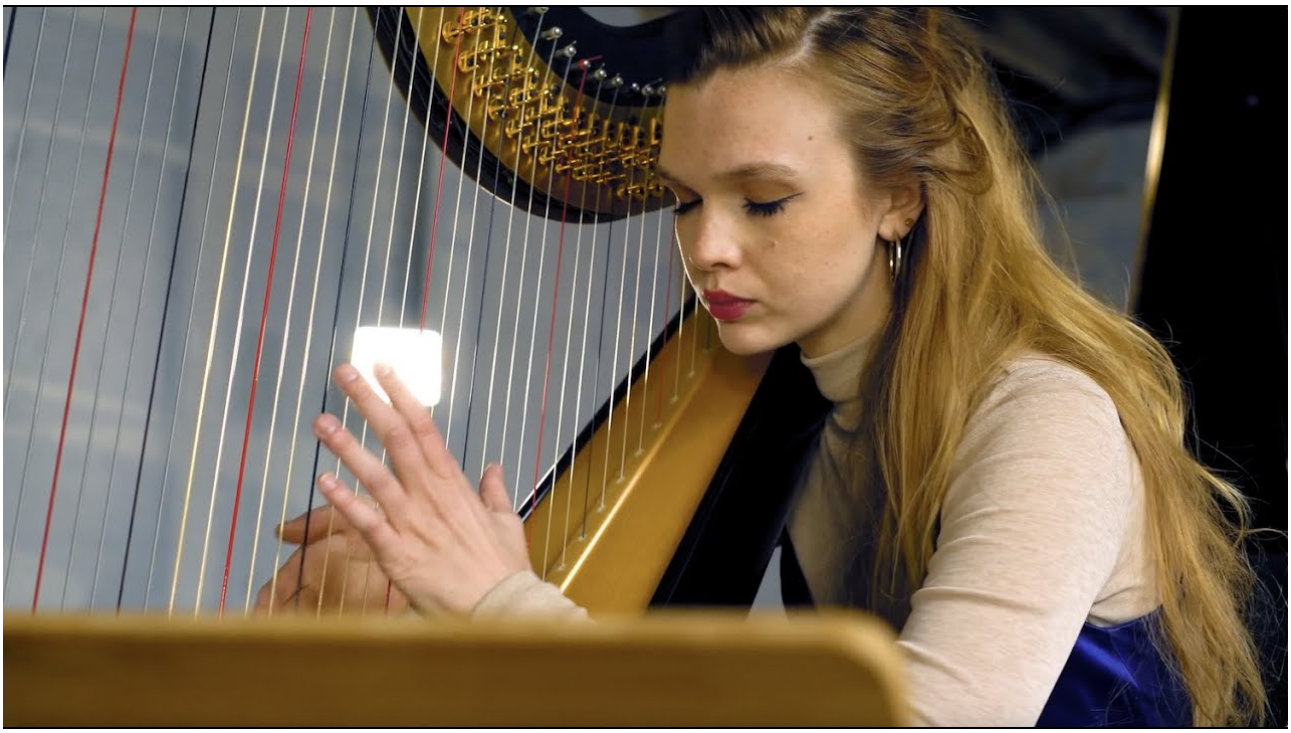


“In my experience, my mentioning [Postcard from Heaven] always brought out sunny smiles on people’s faces[1]”, wrote the harpist Victoria Jordanova in the album notes to her recording of John Cage’s 1982 composition for 1-20 harps. It is a work I have always been intrigued to perform, but the logistical aspect of gathering twenty harpists always appeared rather daunting. When the pandemic hit the world, I had the idea to arrange an ensemble work for solo harp with electronic setup so that I could play group works in a world in which ensemble playing with live musicians is strictly limited. In the final presentation, my harp is centre stage with three ‘boombox’ speakers on either side, each loaded with parts that I recorded during a year of solitary music making.

Each of the prerecorded parts represent a sonic snapshot of different stages of my lockdown experience. In keeping with a Cageian aesthetic I made the decision to embrace the environmental sounds that came with recording in my home or in practice

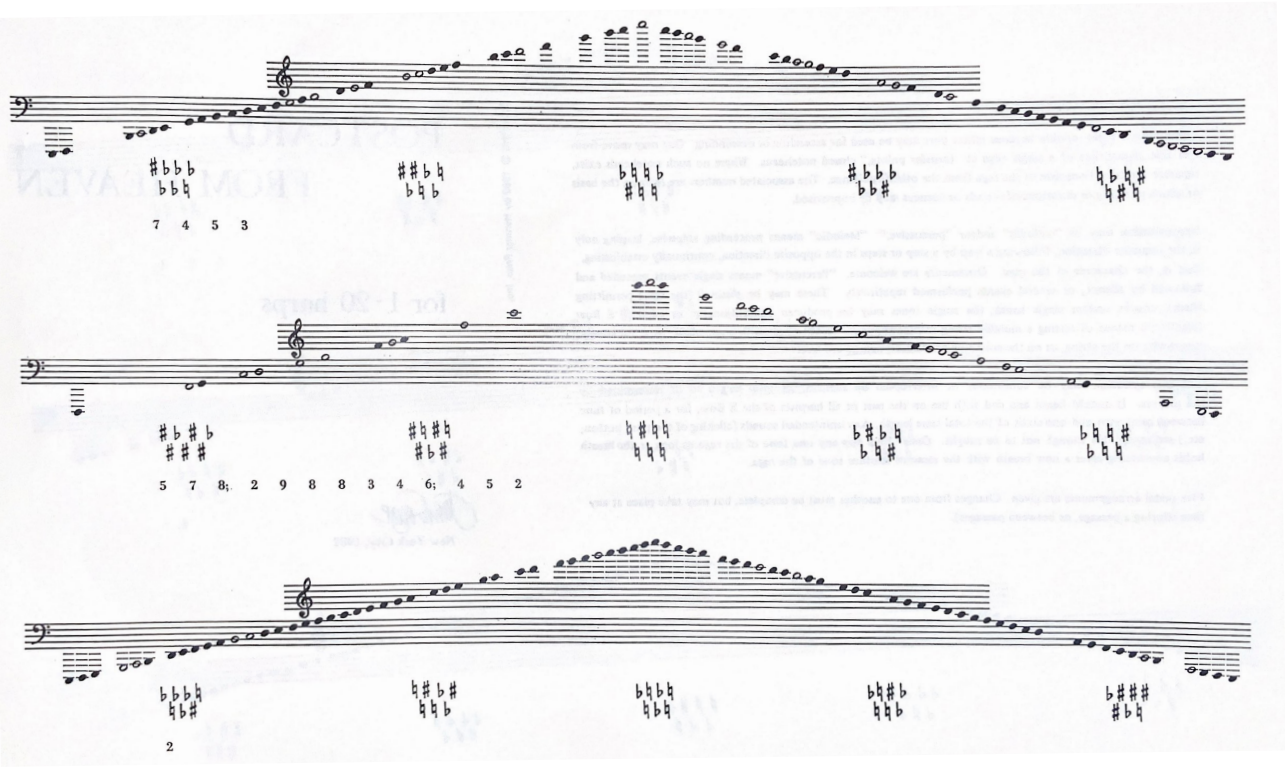
[1] Victoria Jordanova, ‘Postcard From Heaven’ in ArpaViva <http://arpaviva.org/postcard-from-heaven/> (Accessed 1 May 2021)

rooms. Over the past year, we have all been confined to our four walls yet ambient sound is ever-present. As each of the parts come together the underlying environmental murmur of each snapshot in time presents itself and a picture of this strange time is sonically represented.

This account will detail some of the challenges I faced when adapting this work. I will at first touch on understanding Cage's direction in the score, and the language used in it. I will discuss the difficulty of capturing the essence of indeterminacy in an improvised work when most of the parts are prerecorded and therefore planned to some extent. Subsequently, I will present some of my inspiration and influences in works by other composers that helped me incorporate new elements in this adaptation, such as embracing incidental sound in the recording process.

Understanding the score and making it work for this adaptation

The first challenge I faced was deciphering the score. It is written in such a way that is not at once easy to understand in the practical sense, nor in the composer's intentions. The score consists of twenty pages (for each harpist), each containing three staves, a number sequence and fifteen pedal charts on one side, and text on the other.



In the text, Cage provides directions as to how to play the material overleaf, which he refers to in the terms *rāgas* and *talas.* In Indian musical theory, a *rāga* provides melodic material for improvisation and a *tala* is the marking of metre[2]. Therefore, the wording here is extremely fitting for this music due to its free, improvisatory nature. Because 'r*āgas* are normally attributed to divine rather than human origin[3]', one may speculate that the specific choice of words could also be in reference to the other-worldly nature of the work's subject: heaven. The idea is taken to its furthest extreme with the instrumentation of so many harps, arguably the most stereotypically heavenly or angelic of the instruments, so it makes sense to use *rāgas* which are considered to exist in the form of deities or spirits. Cage was heavily influenced by eastern religion and philosophies from around the 1940s so this could be another reason for his use of language here. He learned from an Indian musician, Gita Sarahbhai, that the traditional reason for making a piece of music in India was 'to quiet the mind thus making it susceptible to divine influences[4]'. This led Cage to explore notions of chance and indeterminacy in music as a means of spiritual practise, but I will discuss this later.

Cage provides a rather convoluted direction for improvisation stating:

> Improvisation may be "melodic" and/or "percussive." "Melodic" means proceeding stepwise, leaping only in the opposite direction, following a leap by a step or steps in the opposite direction, continually establishing, that is, the character of the raga. Ornaments are welcome[5].

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[2] Richard Widdess, *Tala* in Grove Music Online. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000048151?rskey=OSz9Lj> (Accessed 9 May 2021)

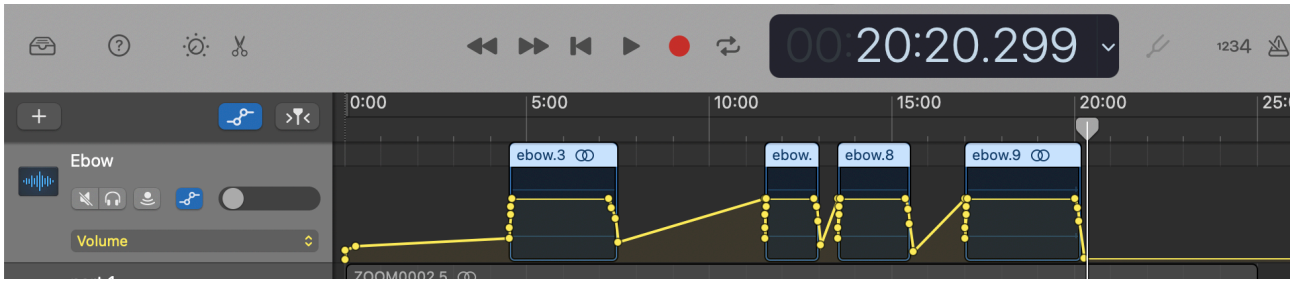
[3] Richard Widdess, *Rāga* in Grove Music Online. *Oxford Music Online* <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000048150?rskey=VYiuV7> (Accessed 9 May 2021)

[4] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing With Cage* (Psychology Press, 2003), 45.

[5] John Cage, Postcard from Heaven *Edition Peters,* 1982

Upon initially reading his direction, I was left confused on how to tackle the improvisations, and thought it necessary to map them out. However, when I went into initial experimentation sessions with the score, I came to realise that what Cage is describing here is actually a musician's natural instinct when it comes to improvisation and voice leading.

Another technical challenge was creating the sustained body of sound at the beginning and end of the piece, in which Cage directs each player to use an eBow. An eBow ('energy bow') creates a sustained pitch by electromagnetically activating a string causing it to vibrate[6]. EBows are usually used on guitars and, disappointingly, the spacing of the strings on the harp is quite different. Therefore, it is almost impossible to find a clear sound without the device scraping the strings and producing undesirable noise. I made the decision to instead use a violin bow on the lower strings of the harp at these sections for seven of the parts. To keep within the spirit of the sound world Cage imagined, I did create one track using an eBow. I managed to get a clear eBow recording of about a few minutes, and used this throughout the piece by simply copying it throughout the duration of the piece.



[6] Hugh Davis, *Instrument modifications and extended techniques* in Grove Music Online <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-90000329463?rskey=YowUS2> (Accessed 12 May 2021)

Indeterminacy - staying true to the composer's intentions

As mentioned prior, Cage had found in oriental music models for new ways of notation, and the philosophy on which they were based led Cage to insist on the notions of chance and indeterminacy[7]. He believed the new term for music be 'organisation of sound[8]'. To keep the spirit of chance in my adaption of *Postcard from Heaven*, while also allowing for a sense of organised sound that would usually be possible in traditional group improvisation, I had to come up with a new solution.

In the early stages, I was doing short samples of improvisations based on Cage's directions and layering them on a music software. I was disappointed to discover that when I played back all the parts I had recorded together, the effect was too random and the finished product was not at all what I wanted to hear in the piece (or what I think Cage did either). I quickly realised that the ability to react to other members of the ensemble are completely lost when playing ensemble music on one's own using pre-recorded soundtracks, as one cannot react in the moment and be sensitive to the other parts.

One approach I explored, was recording a part and then improvising the next one while hearing the previous through earphones. I found this was not a successful outcome as it was too difficult to hear myself and also be aware of the space around me. In much of Cage's music, he allows chance to play out within a pre-decided system, so to keep within this style, I decided to create a a loose time score to follow when I was recording each of the parts. After listening to my early experiments, I took out moments that I did enjoy and analysed the various singular/combinations of gestures or extended techniques that I liked and wrote them all down. I wanted to stay as true to score as possible, not plan too much of a structure and keep some essence of indeterminacy. As a solution, I

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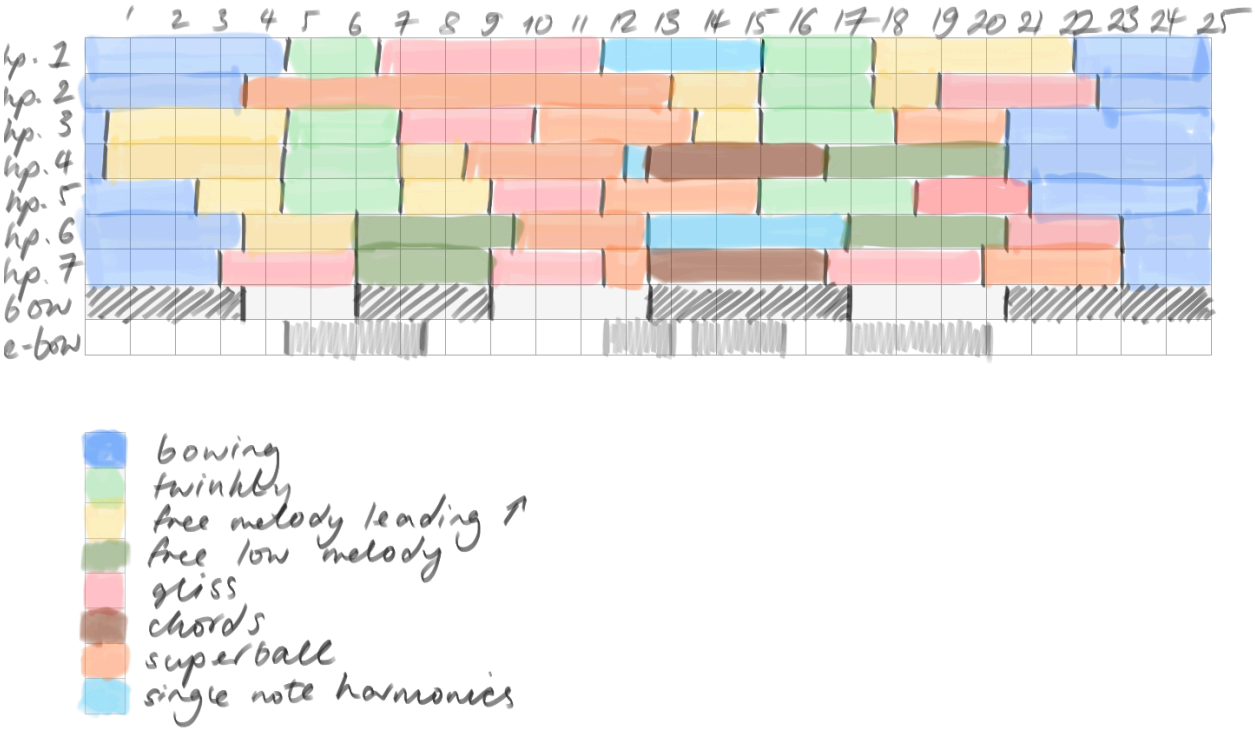
[7] Roselee Goldberg, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present (Thames and Hudson Ltd; Third Edition, 2011), 124.

[8] Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music. (*New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 26.

came up with the idea of using the *Talas* (number sequences) as a guide for the timings in my new score.



Indeterminate music allows for flexibility and fluency, and despite having made a score with fixed parts prerecorded there is a certain level of chance in each take, keeping with the idea that in indeterminate music 'two performances will be different[9]'. For example, the live part will always be new as it is improvised on the spot. And, despite having added time onto the start of each track to allow five seconds for me to walk to each boombox and switch it on, this can never be exactly predetermined as I count the seconds without a stopwatch allowing for human 'error' and variation in performance.

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9 Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present (*Thames and Hudson Ltd; Third edition, 2011), 124.

Limitations of Covid and the recording process

The limitations of conceiving this kind of project in a world taken over by a pandemic caused a few problems along the way. I had originally hoped to record the parts in a recording studio, but the second lockdown hit at the time I had allocated for the recordings. Initially, this was a great worry for me as my previous home recording efforts had been 'unsuccessful' to my ears at the time, with lots of incidental sound that was unavoidable. I found it difficult to record the harp and get the right level of gain so that the instrument sounded its best, but that environmental sound was not picked up.

I was returning to other recordings of *Postcard* and on one particular album, I saw that a harpist had 'played' Cage's infamous *4'33"*. I found it perplexing to have a recorded version of a piece that invites the listener to be very present and aware of live sounds in the room or environment. However, when reading about the harpist, Floraleda Sacchi's, intentions, she communicates that she sees a recording of *4'33"* as being like a sonic snapshot of the time and place of the recording[10]. This discovery made me reassess how I felt about my home-recording efforts, and could hear them as a time capsule for these strange times we are living in.

It reminded me of another piece for a solo instrument with prerecorded versions of the same instrument: Luigi Nono's '*La Lontanza nostalgica utopica futura'.* The work was written at a tumultuous time, just as Communism was collapsing in Eastern Europe, and the work was rushed to be finished. In the tape track it is possible to hear incidental sounds such as the tuning of the violin, chatter, scraping of furniture, and it is in these sounds one really gets a sense of the precarious conception of the piece. I found it fascinating that these environmental sounds are preserved in the Nono piece, each tape a relic of the unpredictable world in which the work was created.

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[10] Floraleda Sacchi, *Happy Birthday, John!* (CD, Amadeus Arte, AAP12001, 2012)

When I had completed the recordings and mixing and loaded them to the boomboxes, I was delighted to discover that the environmental sounds (which were mostly cars driving past my window) actually echoed and reinforced certain effects in the piece, such as the use of a superball brushed vertically along the bass strings.

The realisation that environmental sound can be celebrated and embraced also coincided with a discovery of the *Sonic Meditations*[11] by Pauline Oliveros. I participated in a week-long course of her text scores earlier this year and was mostly moved by her *Environmental Dialogue*[12]. The 'player' is invited to sit outside or in their room, and become aware of the present moment and the sounds all around. If they feel inclined to do so, they can reinforce sound with their voice or instrument. I performed the piece with voice in the park, and was very touched to be hearing new sound that I had once ignored. A strict lockdown permits one walk outside per day, and it is easy to take for granted what we see and hear on a daily basis. I felt that my ears had opened up again and I could celebrate the sound of my environment. When I got back to recording more parts, I embraced this idea that it was a dialogue with my environment on that day and in that space. Some of the parts that I had considered tedious before, such as intermittently bowing one string for 25 minutes, were at once more interesting. In this instance for example, I could suddenly hear the variation of different pressure and speed of the bow creating detailed sound, and use this to create a dialogue with the sound that was coming in from the streets below me. Cage stated that 'the music [he] preferred… is what we are hearing if we are just quiet'[13], so in this sense I feel that this approach is fitting with Cage's intentions.

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[11] Pauline Oliveros *Sonic Meditations.* Smith Publications, 1971

[12] Pauline Oliveros *Sonic Meditations (-VIII- Environmental Dialogue).* Smith Publications, 1971

[13] Paul Griffiths, *A Concise History of Modern Music* (Thames & Hudson Ltd 1978), 177

Transferring to boomboxes - live player versus inanimate technology

The idea for loading the prerecording parts onto boomboxes was initially to keep costs low. I presumed it would be the easiest and cheapest way to have various parts spaced around me, but I was concerned the sound quality would not do justice to the parts I had recorded and mixed. I had questioned whether a solution to this problem would be to elevate the sound of the live harp by putting a microphone inside the sound board on recording day.

When researching pieces that use prerecorded tracks of the same instrument, I revisited Feldman's *Three Voices*[14] for female voice and prerecorded voice. The piece is usually performed with one live singer, with the other parts relayed through a pair of large loud speakers which represent two of the composer's friends who had passed away. In a review of Juliet Fraser's rendition, a critic writes,

> 'the pre-recorded material symbolises past lives into which the performer breeds life is woven into Barbara's version as the nasal, filtered quality of the tape gets warmed in the moment.[15]'

After having considered my prerecorded parts to represent past versions of myself during the lockdown experience, I was pleased to discover my boombox and harp combination gave a similar effect. The lo-fi sound quality of the boomboxes contrasted with the resonance of the live harp provided a sound quality that blends the various components of my arrangement. At some points it is difficult to discern from the boomboxes whether one is hearing incidental or intentional sound. From around minute 2 and 7 in the live part, I play slow melodies in the low register of the harp. The muddy sound quality to this register blends with the metallic sound quality of the boomboxes in these first few minutes. Then, from the seventh minute the live part, and boombox parts 1, 3 and 4 ascend into fast gestures in the top register of the harp. This is where the

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[14] Morton Feldman, *Three Voices.* London : Universal Edition, 1982

[15] Phillip Clarke, '*Feldman: Three Voices'* in Gramophone <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/feldman-three-voices> (Accessed 7 February 2021)

contrast between sound qualities is really noticeable, and there is a real sense of the juxtaposition of a live player with inanimate technology. I decided it was important to keep all the parts equal and on recording day I asked the sound engineer to put just one microphone on each side of the harp to pick up each boombox (of which there were three on each side) and the live instrument equally. To aid the idea that they are all equal in a visual sense too, I got plinths for each of the boomboxes so we were roughly on the same eye level when I was sitting.

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