

Sheet Music

A Theater Piece for Prepared Pianist and Two Assistants
(For Donna Coleman) Otto Henry (1981)

- Required:
- 1) One ordinary bed sheet (preferably white)
 - 2) One pair ordinary work gloves, large and floppy.
 - 3) Two Assistants, preferably in formal concert attire.
 - 4) One very determined, optimistic pianist with a good sense of humor.
 - 5) One very familiar piano composition, not too long-
ex.: Chopin, Polanaise , Brahms etc. (no Bach, please).

Procedure:

The Pianist should not practice this piece before the concert.
Assistants have right and left glove respectively concealed in coat pocket.
One has folded bed sheet under arm.

- 1) They walk onstage (very solemnly) and full-stick the piano.
- 2) Moving to either side, they drape the bed sheet over the keyboard.
They have to practice this beforehand and decide how it has to be done, perhaps by raising the music stand and placing top of sheet under it. Drape well and use just enough to hide the keyboard.
- 3) The Pianist enters, carrying selected composition so audience can see the composer's name on the music.
- 4) After the Pianist is seated, the Assistants pull out the gloves and fit them on the pianist's hands.
- 5) The Assistant in front of the piano moves behind it and stands with folded hands. The other Assistant becomes the page turner.
- 6) The Pianist plays the music wearing gloves, with the keyboard covered with the sheet.
- 7) The notes fall where they may! Don't give it up, endure, and receive the applause from the audience for a job well- done!

Composer's Note:



John Cage invented the prepared piano in the 1930s by placing objects on the piano strings that would mute and change the sound. Later on in the 40's he would stage the first "happening" at Black Mountain College, NC. Both innovations strove to expand or overcome traditional definitions of theater and art and became models for a new generation of composers, artists and actors known collectively as the "Avant Garde" who flourished in the 1960's and 70's and who wrote and performed pieces that mixed theater with music and aleatoric or chance elements. Theater pieces require some extra dramatic action from the performers, sometimes silly, sometimes very curious.

Well, why not, it was a lot of fun and composers were trying to do something completely different then. It was my thought that, instead of preparing the piano, I would prepare the pianist with gloves and obscure the keyboard with a sheet. The performer would play some familiar music which would then be altered and transformed in unpredictable ways.

The first performance was in August of 1981 at a concert of contemporary music at East Carolina University. Donna Coleman was the noble pianist who graciously accepted the gloves and played Chopin's Polonaise Op. 40 No. 1 ("Military"). It was really funny, of course, the audience loved it.

I can't think of a lot of advice for the pianist here. except to select a piece that is very familiar and that they know very well, something not too hard, too fast or too long. The Polonaise Op. 40 -1 is perfect but other pieces by Chopin - Etude Op. 10-3 or Nocturne Op. 9-2- would do, or perhaps Mozart, Brahms or Schumann, its up to the performer.