



## Music, Death, and Afterlife

Prof Mieko Kanno

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### Introduction

Music and death are present in every human society. Their universality is unquestioned. Yet the ways in which people respond to music and death differ widely across cultures. These variations not only tell how humans grapple with death, but also reveal how imaginative and resourceful we are in making sense of ourselves and the world through music.

I focus on three interconnected themes:

- How music functions within cultural practices surrounding death
- How Western classical music embraces dead composers
- How we share music on spatial and temporal dimensions, for the 'afterlife' of music

### Funeral music

The most familiar point of contact between music and death is the funeral: those moments when the dead are mourned, honoured, and remembered. But funeral music varies dramatically from one culture to another, and this diversity is striking enough that it prompted ethnomusicologist Philip Tagg (1988) to question the notion of music as a 'universal language'.

#### Funeral music: musical characteristics

In Western classical music, there are established conventions for how particular emotions are conveyed — an idea explored in fields such as music semiotics, topic theory, and musical rhetoric. These theories describe how specific musical parameters become associated with emotions that listeners within a shared cultural context readily recognize, such as anger, joy, or anxiety.

But not all the funeral music around the world shows these characteristics.

#### Funeral music: sociocultural conventions

One of the most often observed causes for difference originates from the cultural conventions surrounding funerals as events. Two issues are particularly relevant:

- Which emotions are ritualised? Funeral music is not solely about mourning the dead; it celebrates the life of the person.
- Whose emotions are ritualised? Funerals can be public occasions that bring together a wide range of attendees, each with different connections to the deceased.

Tagg (1988) concludes emphatically that:

*Death is anything but universal when considered as a cultural phenomenon. We have seen not only how behaviour and attitudes towards death vary radically from one society to another but also how such attitudes vary inside our own cultural sphere. For these very reasons we have also been able to offer evidence suggesting that there is little or no structural correspondence between music associated with death in one culture and that of another. (29)*

## Dead people everywhere

Classical music is a culture that places exceptional value on the legacies of its departed creative figures, especially composers. In this music, we coexist with past generations, bridging temporal distances through sound. We live through their works just as they continue to live through us.

To understand how this situation has emerged, we consider first the education environment in which Western classical music has been passed down through generations. Classical music education places exceptional emphasis on communication through the notated score; composing is routinely described as *writing* music. For performers, crafting an appropriate interpretation of that score is regarded as paramount, because the score is widely understood to embody the essence of the work. As I have argued elsewhere (Kanno 2012), classical music pedagogy promotes an attitude that notation serves as the primary conduit of information.

Classical musicians' training equips them with the skills to master their instrument, read notation fluently, identify relevant stylistic conventions, and determine how best to combine material and style in a convincing performance. Learning to play an instrument in classical music is, for the most part, a solitary endeavour. Aside from the time spent rehearsing with others, the work unfolds mostly within a small triangle, formed by the performer, instrument, and score. This process leaves very little room for the participation of anyone else—perhaps with the exception of a teacher—and certainly not for the composer.

Paradoxically, this hermetic learning process can also foster remarkable creativity. The score opens an expansive space in which musicians can contemplate and shape their own voice by immersing themselves in the lines and dots on the page. They learn to inhabit the space left by the composer. The composer's mortality is not a limitation; it becomes an invitation to explore a realm of imagination that extends beyond the living, much in the way in which literary theory considers the “death of the author” coinciding with the “birth of the reader” (Barthes 1977).

This also points to one of the ways in which classical music cultivates an afterlife for its composers.

The small triangle of performer, instrument, and score promotes an attitude that the performer approaches the matter of creation on their own, without anyone else involved, because the triangle lies at the centre of the musician's personal creativity. The same can be said of audience, who can have their own niche of isolated creativity. There is a particular kind of creativity that becomes available with the death of a composer, that is distinct from other kinds of creativity found in the process of composer–performer or composer–audience communication.

## Sharing music on spatial & temporal dimensions

### Spatial sharing

I use the concept of *sharing* to explore how Western classical music cultivates an afterlife for dead composers. The funeral music practices discussed earlier exemplify *spatial sharing*. Such environment is often collaborative and generative; and provides fertile ground for what is often described (Sayer and DeZutter 2009) as “distributed creativity”, or for creating a “performance-as-event” (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Songwriting, jamming, and improvisation all emerge from this kind of shared, co-present creativity.

But, in classical music, the act of collaborative creativity is typically seen to involve a much smaller degree of spatial sharing. The creative process is conventionally structured in a teleological sequence: the composer writes the piece, the performer learns it, and only then does the listener encounter the music.

The division of labour between composer and performer, however, sets the stage for a different type of sharing once the composer dies.

### Temporal sharing

Sharing in the temporal dimension, or diachronic sharing, is a more challenging idea to grasp. The living and the dead cannot share a physical space for communication. Yet, such sharing becomes possible in classical music, because practices of sharing through notation allow exchange between individuals separated by historical time.

### Case study: John Cage (1912–1992)

To illustrate how a composer's death can trigger a shift from spatial sharing to diachronic sharing, I

examine the case of twentieth-century American composer John Cage, comparing musical practices before and after his death in 1992. It is well known that Cage was an avid collaborator, working closely with musicians, dancers, and visual artists. He was a pioneer in exploring forms of distributed creativity. Yet, for all his reputation for embracing values such as chance and non-intention, he retained a hallmark of the traditional Western art-music composer: even while remaining open and collaborative, he held firm and highly articulated aesthetic principles, compositional values, and working methods. In sharp contrast to the apparent surrender of control, Cage maintained a strong sense of intention and authorship.

More than thirty years after his death, a very different set of practices surrounding Cage's work has flourished alongside rigorous scholarship on his own creative output. These represent two distinct approaches: (a) post-1992 re-interpretations of Cage's work outside his original context, and (b) historical appraisal of what Cage himself shared with his contemporaries during his lifetime.

My hypothesis is that a particular compositional trait in Cage's work actively fosters collaborative emergence of creativity on the temporal domain. Magnus Andersson (2009) uses the term *meta-composition* to describe the underlying structuring practice in Cage's work that generates oscillations between intention and non-intention. Andersson identifies three most significant features of Cage's meta-composition as:

1. Cage composes an overarching *structure*.
2. Cage subjects structural decisions to chance.
3. Cage intentionally strives to write non-intentional music.

Recognising meta-composition as a practice distinct from conventional music composition is illuminating, because it opens up a new possibility within diachronically distributed creativity: meta-composition can function as a tool for composing performances.

(If you watch the video you can see a live-performance demonstration on how these concepts may play out in Cage's *Eight Whiskus* for solo violin.)

While Cage was alive, there was no meaningful separation between his composition and his meta-composition; the two operated as a single, integrated practice. Only with the passage of time since his death has this distinction become visible, allowing each element and its creative potential to be considered independently (Figure 1). Meta-composition in the present revitalises the music. In this sense, meta-composition becomes a structuring engine—structuring its own practice in Pierre Bourdieu's terms.

*Figure 1: Representation of the conceptual shift over time*

The score is the crucial artefact that enables the process of meta-composition. It is worth noting that the kind of meta-composition Cage employed exists in the work of many other classical composers too, precisely because notation demands sustained engagement from its users. Through notation, musicians collaborate with past composers by engaging in acts of meta-composition. This is, in effect, how the long afterlife of a composer begins within the Western classical music tradition.

The shift in collaborative creativity is perhaps most perceptible—though not always easily understood—at

the moment of a composer's death. This threshold transforms collaboration from a synchronic exchange into a diachronic one.

Diachronically distributed collaboration is, in fact, the dominant mode within Western classical music. From this perspective, Western classical music offers considerable space for creative engagement, and this may ultimately be one of the most plausible explanations for the culture's remarkable longevity.

## **We remember music, but music also remembers us**

Of course, the dead do not speak or interact with us directly, so the notion of collaboration can only operate on a metaphysical level. But, in this context, metaphysics is hardly abstract, because memory enables diachronic exchange with the past. We often say that we remember music, but in a sense, music also remembers us. Jeremy Eichler describes it:

*... music's ability to trigger flights of memory is a phenomenon many people still experience... Yet it is not just we who remember music. Music also remembers us. Music reflects the individuals and the societies that create it, capturing something essential about the era of its birth. When a composer in 1823 consciously or unconsciously distills worlds of thought, fantasy, and emotion into a series of notes on a page, and then we hear those same notes realized in a performance more than a century later, we are hearing the past literally speaking in the present. In this case, music can fleetingly reorder the past, bring closer that which is distant, and confound the one-way linearity of time. In these very ways, music shares a profound affinity with memory itself. For memory by definition also challenges the pastness of the past and the objective distance of history. (Eichler 2024, 8).*

## **Conclusion**

Let us come back to the starting point of this lecture. Funeral music weaves memory into the moment, and each participant, in their own way, meta-composes the music they hear. There may be no universal music, but I would suggest that there is something universal in the act of shaping musical experience at a moment of loss and beyond. It says something about the power of music and why we have music across the world.

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