On and Off the Grid:
Music for and around Judson Dance Theater

[Hand-drawn musical notation with annotations]

Do not repeat in close succession

Same length of time

Low

Middle

High

Same pitch 4 times

Repeat until cut-off slightly coincides with 4 beat

5 or 6 times

Change time proportions

P hit preceding
Judson Dance Theater forged a heterogeneous relationship with music. The diversity of the dance—austere and camp, conceptual and practical—found its match in sound. Judson dancers performed to classical music; conventionally notated new music; newly composed indeterminate works using texts, tasks, or graphics; new electronic music and collages; Fluxus-like musical theater; jazz; speech, song, and vocalizations from the dancers themselves; pop music; and free improvisations. Some of these soundtracks were performed live, while many were played on tape. As far as I can tell, a plurality of the works presented at the sixteen Concerts of Dance (1962–1964) took place with no music at all. But its spirit suffused even the silent dances, given the provenance of Robert Ellis Dunn’s workshops in John Cage’s experimental music courses at the New School in New York and the charismatic iconoclasm of composer La Monte Young (fig. 2), which had wafted into New York with the migrants from Anna Halprin’s California digs.

Composer Philip Corner, who joined the workshop in autumn 1962, observed that the Judson dancers used “the physical equivalent of [Cagean] noise.” Corner would eventually respond to Cage’s formalized chance operations with what he called “nonsystematic chance,” one that would include desire, expression, and the choices of others. (It’s no surprise that Carolee Schneemann would find him a productive collaborator in Glass Environment for Sound and Motion, of 1962.) He had already been on the scene for some years—writing music for choreographers James Waring and Beverly Schmidt Blossom—when the dancers asked him to provide music if needed (he had worked as a class pianist for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in autumn 1962). Corner served as music director, alone or with fellow composers Malcolm Goldstein and John Herbert McDowell, for many of the concerts.

Corner’s Pitt Street loft in New York hosted a number of events during the Judson years, contributing to the city’s welter of experimental activity that also included concerts at the Living Theatre and the Bridge, Charlotte Moorman’s Avant Garde Festivals, the October Revolution in Jazz, historic stands at the Five Spot, Yoko Ono and Young’s Chamber Street concerts, “Vexations” and other events at the Pocket Theatre, the factions of Fluxus, and composer Lucia Dlugoszewski’s work for the Erick Hawkins Dance Company. For a musician like Corner, all this stuff ran together. His own contribution to the mix, with Goldstein and fellow composer James Tenney (the spouse of Schneemann), was Tone Roads, a chamber ensemble that programmed older works by the likes of Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, and Edgard Varèse. Recital concerts of older notated music might have seemed old-fashioned to many downtown denizens, and Corner recalls very few of his Judson colleagues attending Tone Roads shows. In light of this testimony, and of the reaction to his trombone and tape piece “Big Trombone” at Concert of Dance #9 in 1963—somebody yelled, “Get off the stage!”—one wonders how comfortably the music-only numbers by Corner, Goldstein, and Tenney were received by Judson audiences.

In the 1950s, Cage invited Corner to take his New School course. Corner, no longer interested in being a student, declined. Had he accepted, Corner would have participated in early conversations about the task structure that would prove so energizing for artists like George Brecht, Alison Knowles, and Dick Higgins. Their experiments with these bits of behavioral found forms, written up as
text instructions, would eventually influence their teacher: Cage wrote his own task piece, “0’00’’”, in 1962.

The task structure found its way into music as well as dance at Judson Church. Corner’s “Intermission” took place during the entr’acte of Concert of Dance #13 in 1963, when artist Charles Ross’s environmental sculpture was disassembled. Corner contact-miked up the metal structure and piped the sounds of disassembly into the lobby, but the mics didn’t amplify well, and, in Corner’s memory, “it was so ambient nobody paid any attention to it at all.” “Intermission” eventually morphed into Corner’s well-known piece “Everything Max Has. As an ‘Afterward,’” written for the percussionist Max Neuhaus. The piece, which premiered at the ONCE Festival in Ann Arbor in 1965, consisted of Neuhaus packing up his instruments and equipment in front of the audience.

The task format offered one point of articulation between the two settings that produced Judson dance: the workshops of Halprin in California and of Dunn in New York. As an alum of Cage’s New School course, Dunn would have concentrated, as Cage did, on materials (everyday sounds/movements), method (chance), and structure (alternatives to forms like theme and variation), and he would have described indeterminacy as a way of creating variable, open-ended notations. By all indications, Dunn inherited Cage’s reluctance to develop a discourse of improvisation, which he did not consider to be a suitable approach to his learning exercises. “Improvisation was not on the grid in New York,” Trisha Brown later explained.

If the task was a kind of everyday material for Dunn, Halprin liked it because it provided a means of escape from imitation as well as an opportunity to discover new forms of movement. Stringing a few tasks together diminished the importance of transitions and created a clear, impersonal structure, a kind of easy container for whatever small improvisations might be required to get from A to B. In other words, the fragmentation that was so important to someone like Rainer in these years implied and necessitated a kind of nonexpressive, immanent improvisational awareness. In my view, Rainer, Halprin, Brown, and Simone Forti found possibilities in improvisation that had escaped the attention of Cage and Dunn while also extending the practice of indeterminacy.

The task structure outlined a field of action traversed by both indeterminacy and improvisation; the relationship between them requires investigation. Improvisation is not a consistent or unitary practice, and it usually exceeds whatever single function it is thought to perform. One might highlight its extemporaneity, problem-solving, bricolage, or ephemerality and wildness, preserved by the recording apparatus or the durative structure of choreography (even the spare structure given in the task format—sit, stand, lie down—in a work like Brown’s Trillium of 1962).

To this list of improvisation’s possible qualities, I add two that were significant for the historical milieu that produced Judson dance: interdisciplinarity and shared authorship. Improvisation does not entirely resist concepts, but its home base is found in practice, or thinking in action, which lends it a certain methodological fluidity across the durational arts. Halprin invited Young and composer Terry Riley to improvise music for her summer workshop at just the moment when Young was primed to conceive of his process, as she did hers, across disciplinary borders. Some years later he explained, “An important point was that a person should listen to what [she] ordinarily just looks at, or look at things [she] would ordinarily just hear.”

In the weeklong course on music that Young taught in August 1960, not only did he and Riley “actually
write on the spot” (also known as improvising), but the students investigated sound as it interacted with non-musical modalities like object manipulation, improvised movement, and visual observation. Among the sounds presented by dancers were the chance squeaks of a tree branch held while improvising, the uncrumpling of a compressed plastic bag, and the imagined sounds of stationary trees spotted in the woods. These exercises illustrate art historian Branden W. Joseph’s observation that “continually questioning the notion of medium or disciplinary specificity was ... a primary condition of being ‘advanced’ after Cage.”

Forti was especially enterprising in her cross-disciplinary projects, all of which stemmed from the cultivation of embodied awareness (fig. 4, page 71). The music she recorded in 1962 for Trillium (Concert of Dance #5) testified to the importance of Young’s tape piece “2 sounds,” which she would have heard at Halprin’s workshop in 1960 (and which she set to dance in 1962). Relentlessly abrasive, Young’s tape work addressed the body directly and continuously, without narrative, concept, or representation. The piece pulls the listener inside the sound—you hear it with your body because there’s nothing in it for your mind. Likewise, Forti’s improvisations were firmly rooted in the mechanics of vocal production (fig. 3). The Trillium performance consists of an exploration of the constricted throat above the vocal folds, producing very high squeaks and scrapes of vocal fry that ring out over the ambient sounds of a reverberant loft and occasional traffic noises. These investigations did not lend themselves to notation: the whole point was to discover the unrepeatable, a practical grit that resisted conceptual extension or generalization. Guided by this principle, Forti let her body improvise across disciplinary borders between dance and sound.

Like Forti, Corner experimented with improvisational works that bridged the gaps between disciplines. His 1962 event “Flares” (Concert of Dance #8) unified sound, movement, and light in the simultaneous interpretation of a series of drawings that were danced, sounded, and projected collaboratively in real time, like flares shot into the darkness. An earlier work, “Certain Distilling Processes” (Concert of Dance #4), concentrated more closely on the remediation and transmission of instructions set down in notation (fig. 1, page 68). Corner gave four dancers sequences of numbers on large pieces of paper—laid flat on the floor—that specified measures of a certain number of beats. The dancers articulated these time structures with improvised movement. Meanwhile, the musicians—any number of them, singing or playing instruments, junk, or toys—took the temporal directions of the dancers and rerouted them through musical and graphic notations. Although these notations were open, mixing conventional musical signs with text instructions and spatial gestures, vertical lines throughout the parts were to correspond to the beats articulated by the dancing conductors. The result was a kind of continuous circulation of impulses from notation to movement and sound.

With these examples, I intend to highlight one layer in the tight fusion of the post-Cagean arts after 1959—not only Minimalism, indeterminacy, and daily life, but also improvisation as a cross-disciplinary method that made fluid the passage from sound to movement to light. I wish to turn now to improvisation’s tendency to spread out authorship to a greater extent than “composed” or “choreographed” works customarily do. I suspect that Halprin’s deeply developed improvisation practice included some allegiance to emergent group dynamics over the ideological patterns of single authorship and the work: a restless Brown would ask her every night of the workshops, “When do we get to make dances?” Halprin replied that she didn’t think the group was ready. Did her response reveal a reluctance to move into the space already defined—or closed down—by the great works of the great choreographers?
In their music for Halprin’s workshop, Young and Riley conducted themselves like a band. Through collaborative improvisation and rehearsal, they developed a shared sound in practice. The working familiarity of both in African American musical forms—Young on jazz saxophone, Riley on boogie-woogie piano—might not have manifested sonically in their work, but it certainly did so methodologically. In the black vernaculars, originality and authorship manifest in how an individual or group creates distinctive treatments of shared forms like the blues progression or the Tin Pan Alley standard. Finding a shared sound is one of the foremost goals of any band working in these traditions. I would never suggest that (European) composerly authorship gets eliminated in these contexts—jazz trumpeter Miles Davis expressed his status as an author in numerous ways, and his is the name on the spine of the records. But when saxophonist John Coltrane constructed his solo on Davis’s “All Blues,” some distinct and separate kind of distributed creativity was at work.

Riley and Young, with their experience in these traditions, would have been more comfortable in this relaxed arrangement than, say, Cage and David Tudor, who had no experience with vernacular music making and—no matter how improvisatory, distributed, and equally their collaboration would become—retained the author-performer-work structure that had defined so much of the Western art music tradition. (By the early 1970s, they seem to have sorted it out: Tudor no longer performed music by Cage. They both played their “own” pieces simultaneously.) In the Theatre of Eternal Music, founded in 1962, Young and his colleagues would advance this redefinition of composition into a shared, “real-time physicalized (and directly specified) process,” as artist Tony Conrad put it, although Young would eventually retreat from this radical position into a more traditional assertion of unitary authorship.

I don’t detect much evidence of such shared, real-time, physicalized processes of coauthorship among the dance works presented by Judson Dance Theater. The improvised first half of Concert of Dance #14 in 1964 was an anomaly and consisted of individual solos presented at once, rather than a collectively authored piece. (As dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster perceptively notes, Schneemann’s early 1960s performance works anticipated the shared, interactional format of contact improvisation in practice, but it left the single author apparatus firmly intact.) Paxton (fig. 6) called World Words, performed at Concert of Dance #3, “definitely a collaboration as opposed to later working with Yvonne where she was definitely the leader.” When Liza Béar suggested that Paxton and Rainer had written the score together, his correction emphasized improvisation and practice: “No, we rehearsed it. We worked it out together figured out what the movements would be.” However, World Words was the exception in those early years—the Judson dancers would not consciously foreground the ethics and aesthetics of shared authorship until the early 1970s, with dance collective Grand Union and contact improvisation.

Given jazz’s ideological prominence in postwar discourses of spontaneity, Sally Banes’s speculation that black artists “may not have had a taste for the kind of iconoclastic activity” at Judson appears all the more puzzling. (Compare Banes with LeRoi Jones: “Negro music is always radical in the context of formal American culture.”) This strange speculation has elicited strenuous critiques about the wider context of downtown New York in the 1960s, critiques with which I largely agree. Other commentary lingers on the animations of African American aesthetics that operated in a register removed from epidermal presence. As historian Brenda Dixon Gottschald wrote of her own experience of the downtown scene at the time, “Everything in my immediate world looked/felt basically white, until the winds of African-American studies, cultural studies, and race studies blew me off center and helped me see the black at the center of it all.” She was referring to relaxed carriage, heterogeneous movement vocabularies, and citation and double entendre, all stylistic features of Africanist dance aesthetics. I’ve also suggested that the authorial politics of improvisation itself might be there at the center of it all (fig. 5).
The black aesthetic was certainly not missing entirely from the *musical* side of Judson. It was there in pianist Cecil Taylor’s collaboration with dancer Fred Herko at Concert of Dance #1. It was there in Tenney’s tape piece “Collage #1 (‘Blue Suede’),” which he built in 1961 at Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey, with source material from Elvis Presley, and which was played at Concert of Dance #10 in 1963. It was there in Corner’s riff on free jazz, “Big Trombone,” and, delightfully, in the music for William Davis’s *Crayon* (1963), which consisted of three doo-wop songs by the Volumes, Dee Clark, and the Shells.27 If Goldstein’s “Ludlow Blues” gave away hints of his training at Columbia—it was a scored work for three winds and bleep-bloop tape music—then at least the title projected a wider frame of cultural reference.

By 1964, Goldstein had begun his journey away from those uptown aesthetics and toward free improvisation. (He might have been tugged downtown, aesthetically, by his wife, Arlene Rothlein, who performed in Judson dances.) He began rehearsing with saxophonist Archie Shepp, and the two appeared in concert at Corner’s loft on April 4, 1964, and again with Corner on piano later that year.28 Shepp would also appear with his quartet in a benefit for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Council of Federated Organizations that Corner (fig. 7) organized in November 1964.29 (Corner had spent the summer of 1964 registering voters in Mississippi.) Corner asked other black jazz musicians to perform, but he expected to get paid, an expectation that was unusual among the white experimentalists who regularly undertook free and underpaid work during these years. The reluctance of these jazz musicians to accept unremunerated gigs echoes John Perpener’s explanation for the dearth of African American artists in the experimental dance of the 1960s: having worked hard to participate in a modern dance idiom so persistently defined against black concert dance, they were in no rush to dismantle that mid-century edifice.30 Likewise, black avant-garde musicians had far fewer social connections to the fine-art establishment or graduate degrees from places like Columbia University—what we now often call white privilege. “We saw it as giving all that stuff up, and you’re right that we probably didn’t,” Corner remarks. “I mean, look at what eventually happened to me. I gave it all up, and I got it all back, without lifting a finger to do it.”31
NOTES

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5. Corner, interview with the author.
13. Forti was an early but short-lived member of Young’s Theatre of Eternal Music. Her Trillium tape strongly indicates that she was also in dialogue with avant-garde musician Henry Flynt in these years—hear Flynt’s “Central Park Transverse Vocals” (1963).
31. Corner, interview with the author.