Curatorial > VARIATIONS

With this section, RWM continues a line of programmes devoted to exploring the complex map of sound art from different points of view organised in curatorial series.

'Variation' is the formal term for a musical composition based on a previous musical work, and many of those traditional methods (changing the key, meter, rhythm, harmonies or tempi of a piece) are used in much the same manner today by sampling musicians. But the practice of sampling is more than a simple modernization or expansion of the number of options available to those who seek their inspiration in the refinement of previous composition. The history of this music traces nearly as far back as the advent of recording, and its emergence and development mirrors the increasingly self-conscious relationship of society to its experience of music. Starting with the precedents achieved by Charles Ives and John Cage, VARIATIONS will present an overview of the major landmarks in Sampling Music, following examples in twentieth century composition, folk art and commercial media through to the meeting of all those threads in the present day.

Curated by Jon Leidecker.

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Jon Leidecker was born in 1970 in Washington D.C. to two physicists. Since 1990 he has performed appropriative collage music under the psuedonym Wobbly, aiming for extended narratives spun from spontaneous yet coherent multi-sample polyphony. Selected recent works are freely available online. http://detritus.net/wobbly/

VARIATIONS #1

Transition

The first episode of this overview of appropriative collage in music covers the years 1909 through 1961, beginning with Charles Ives, who composed in a cut and paste style with sheet music in a way that anticipated what later composers would do with multi-track tapes and mixers. We skip through decades to arrive at 'Twisting The Dials', the Happiness Boys' 1928 tribute to late night radio surfing, before moving to John Cage's proto-sampling pieces for radio and tape, 'Credo In US' and the 'Imaginary Landscapes'. We witness the million-selling cut-in records of Buchanan and Goodman and the resulting lawsuits, Richard Maxfield's tape cut-ups of a sermonizing preacher, and conclude with James Tenney's dedicated dissection of a single recording of Elvis: 'Collage No. 1', the first *remix*.

The concept of an original work of music, attributible to and owned by a single author is a fairly recent development. Music was passed on through generations as an oral culture, communicated through sound itself across generations, even for centuries after the invention of written music. Only by the fourteenth century had it become standard practice for a composer to sign his name to a piece of music, slowly reenforcing the concept of the author as individual creator.

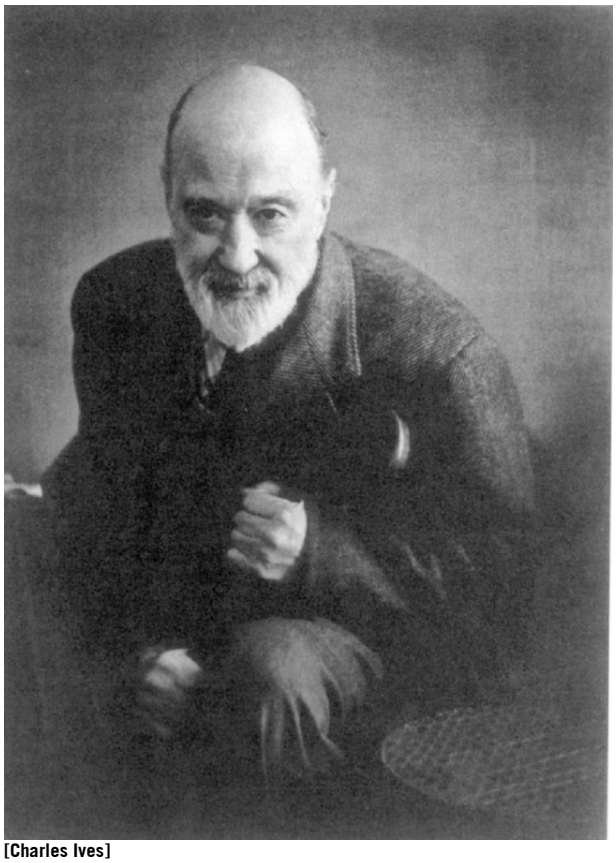
01. Transcript

Hello, my name is Jon Leidecker, and welcome to the first of a eight episode series called VARIATIONS covering the history of appropriative collage in music – new compositions made using recordings of older ones. It's a practice that in the eighties became known as 'Sampling', after the Digital Sampler, a breakthrough instrument which was designed to mimic traditional musical instruments by allowing the player to trigger recordings of them on a keyboard. But it didn't take long for musicians to realize that the true strength of the sampler was the way in which it made it easy to collage and manipulate the best sounds from their favorite records, creating new pieces of music. This practice entered the popular mainstream by the eighties, long after many observers had identified collage as the defining new art form of the twentieth century, the roots of this music go back just as far. Over the course of this series, we'll be looking at those roots as appropriative collage developed across both experimental and mainstream paths.

The idea of a completely original piece of music is a fairly recent one. Music was passed on through sound, through generations, even for centuries after the invention of written music. Only gradually, and centuries after the implementation of written notation, did it become standard practice for a composer to sign his name to a piece of music and claim it entirely as his own, giving rise to the cult of the individual composer. But as recording supplanted sheet music in the twentieth century, the presence of communal influence became unavoidably obvious once again as composers began to use older recordings to make new recordings. We can now hear the process of influence. We can now hear the presence of more than one voice. And there is a reason why people don't say they listen to a record – they say that they play one. From the beginning, recordings have been instruments.

We begin with a composer who could easily kick off almost any overview of experimental music in the United States. Charles Ives wrote exclusively for orchestral instruments, and so might seem an odd figure to begin with for a history of Sampling. But he is the transitional figure between composers who used the previous technology of sheet music, and those who would soon avail themselves of the technology of electronic recording and mixing to forms of music into a single vision. In almost every important way, sampling begins here.

This is the 'Barn Dance' from the Holidays Symphony, written in 1908, with William Strickland conducting the Imperial Tokyo Philharmonic.


[Charles Ives]

Charles Ives, 'Barn Dance' (William Strickland with the Imperial Tokyo Philharmonic), 1908

100 years later, many of those melodies, the hits of the late nineteenth century, are still familiar to us. Ives helped himself to all of them. Quotation in music was nothing new – the Variation, the Quodlibet, the Medley go back for centuries. But Ives does more than quote individual tunes, he conveys to the listener the environment in which they were played. The event itself, right down to the mistakes of musicians having too much fun, and the guy on the floor joining in on mouth harp. Different musicians in the band perform the same tune as a march, as a waltz, as a polka – all at the same time. The night ramps up, then winds down, save for the drunken fiddler. This piece wouldn't have worked if he'd written his own melodies – in order to refer to a communal, shared experience, it requires the actual tunes. But it is less about those tunes, than it is a picture in sound of the way people celebrated over one hundred years ago.

Composer Elliot Carter, who met the older Ives as a young student of music finding his own style:

'As for myself, I have always been fascinated by the polyrhythmic aspect of Ives's music, as well as its multiple layering, but perplexed at times by the disturbing lack of musical and stylistic continuity, caused largely by the constant use of musical quotations in many works. To me, a composer develops his own personal language, suitable to express his field of experience and thought. When he borrows music from another style and thought from his own, he is admitting that he did not really experience what he is presenting but has to borrow from someone else who did. It is, to me, disappointing that Ives too frequently was unable or unwilling to invent musical material that expressed his own vision authentically, instead of relying on the material of others. But what is striking and remarkable in his work, like much of the First and Second Piano Sonatas, is an extraordinary musical achievement.'

Carter's comments represent an older notion of the composer perfectly, as someone who innovates entirely through the drive of his own personal expression. But an American voice soaks in everything, and Ives stayed true to the core definition of a composer as someone who puts things together. Ives' later music puts everything together with interwoven references and interdependent depictions of every strand of music known to the American people – jazz, marching bands, church hymnals, Irish & African-american spirituals, ragtime and even classical. Ives is frequently hailed for his early use of atonality, well before other composers found their ways to it, but upon closer listening, it is not atonality but pantonality, the sound of every key playing at once. These dissonances contain the most exciting harmonies yet – the point is not atonality, but rather about a music that contains as much of the world as possible.

Also notable is the way that Ives sampled himself in the materials of his written scores, sometimes cutting and pasting entire fragments from earlier works on top of each other, in almost exactly the same way people later worked with magnetic tape and then computers. He created ever larger and denser pieces for orchestra through editing and revising, slowly crafting a layered world in which all his favorite music co-existed. His works moved beyond simple 'pictures-in-sound' to transcendental portraits of the experience of being alive.

Charles Ives, 'Fourth Symphony, Second Movement' (Michael Tilson Thomas with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra), 1918

Finished in 1916, the fourth symphony was first premiered in 1965. Another half century would be needed before musicians could relate to this level of overload, though the direction was already clear. The specialist market for phonograph records of music from around the world was growing, and disseminating this variety to national audiences was radio.

Our next record comes from 1928. The Happiness Boys were a duo who had taken their vaudeville act to morning radio, adding sound effects & musical cues from records to their routines. When they recorded a tribute to the medium of radio, they realized that much of radio's magic came not just from the programs

[The Happiness Boys]

themselves, but the collisions between them that happened when you got up and changed the channel. Here's the beginning of 'Twisting The Dials' from 1928.

The Happiness Boys, 'Twisting The Dials', 1928 (side A)

Note that beautifully faked shortwave radio noise. Before most people began collecting records, they would simply listen to the radio, and those shortwave noises were entwined at a molecular level with the sounds of the world coming into the listener's room. These noisy artifacts, the integral sounds of the medium turn up in many of the collages you'll hear in this episode – the sound of early audio collage was deeply linked to the sound of shortwave radio.

The Happiness Boys, 'Twisting The Dials', 1928 (side B)

You can't get more self-conscious than that. While some of those musical cues were clearly being played live by musicians in the studio, like the piano, or the fake shortwave tuning noises being played on a pennywhistle, at least six of the pieces on this record came from other records – they're simply throwing as much as they can at you, as quickly as possible. And that's modern. Some of the records are played back by cranking the turntable subtly faster than normal – they are already manipulating their sources to amplify their message. This was considered a novelty single, no aspirations towards high art, but listening to it today gives us the ability to imagine what media overload was beginning to sound like, as early as the roaring twenties.

At this point in the timeline, artists working in other mediums had already begun to explore collages made from pre-existing materials. If Picasso had montaged bits of newspaper text & advertisements into his canvases, the Dadaists would compose collages entirely out of sourced materials, and in 1917 Marcel Duchamp's readymades took pre-existing objects, such as a bicycle wheel, a urinal, or a bottle rack, and presented them unmodified as new works of art. An act which strips the very notion of what it was that an artist does down to the most basic state imaginable, while raising more questions than answers. These acts of collage in other mediums carried a conceptual influence for musicians, but resulted in few finished works.

Recorded music was now everywhere. But only a few were beginning to imagine the potential of composing with recordings, rather than sheet music. Hindemith, Marinetti, Respighi, Ruttman & Vertov are the names of some pioneers who dreamed of this potential: creating music by adding turntablists to the ranks of the orchestra, using optical film as a medium for the precise editing of sound. Many ideas, but few finished pieces – the technology was still too primitive to take these ideas out of the realm of theory and into the realm of appealing listenability.

In 1937 the young John Cage published a manifesto of sorts entitled 'The Future of Music: Credo', carrying the work of these pioneers forward by asserting that music was not made of notes, but rather, sounds. His 1939 piece 'Imaginary Landscape No. 1' included a piece for ensemble and turntablist, although the score called for a record containing sine wave test tones; interesting but perhaps cautious, given what could have been done. His 1942 piece 'Credo in US' is written for 4 performers: a pianist, two percussionists playing various noisemakers, including a door buzzer, and most importantly: a radio or turntable operator. As the piece was written during wartime, he makes a note: avoid radio news programs during national emergencies. He also goes as far as to recommend the type of record to use: 'classic' music like Dvorak, Beethoven, Sibelius or Shostakovich – i.e. not just any classical, but busy, modern yet tonal music for large orchestra. The score simply tells the operator when to turn the source up or down. Imagine the curtain opening to reveal a stage containing only four people, while the sound of an entire symphony orchestra thunders at you through speakers.

John Cage, 'Credo In US' (Reiner Riehm with Ensemble Musica Negativa, recorded 1971), 1942

[John Cage, preparing a piano (before 1950) Courtesy Cunningham Dance Foundation]

In 1951, he elaborated the idea with a piece for twelve radios called 'Imaginary Landscape No. 4'. The performers know what stations to turn to, and exactly how loud to turn themselves up, but not even Cage would know what sounds would come out of those radios. But by placing this activity on a stage, he created an environment that would focus the audience's attention on sounds they were already learning how to tune out.

So, Cage's point with these pieces was to undermine the traditional notion of the composer as someone who would choose his material, and then impose his will upon it, shaping it to his purposes. With Cage, the audience was simply to discover the sounds that were already there, including the beautiful qualities of the shortwave static itself. That being said – that was not the influence many composers took from these pieces. The random shortwave dialog does not sound random: 'such crowds in the streets'. 'mother? not afraid!' 'feathers... there'. The interesting thing about the results of chance methods is how rarely they sound like accidents. This piece started a thread of influences still felt today in any record that places tapes of found spoken word over new music, and still sounds modern today, six decades later.

John Cage: 'Well, you know how I adjusted to that problem of the radio in the environment. Primitive people adjusted to the animals which frightened them, they drew pictures of them on their caves. And so I simply made a piece using radios. Now, whenever I hear radios, even a single one, not just twelve at a time, I think well, they're just playing my piece.' (Laughter)

Morton Feldman: 'That might help me next weekend.'

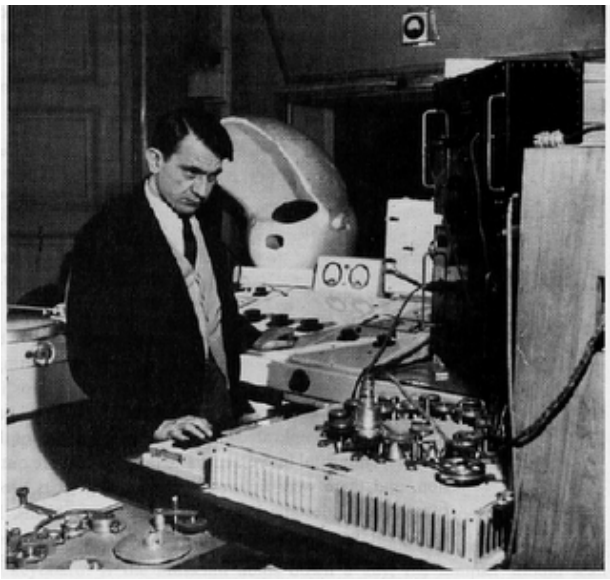
John Cage: 'Yeah, and I listen to it with pleasure. By pleasure, I mean, I notice what happens – I can attend to it, and become interested in the... well, what it actually is that you're interested in, is what superimposed what, what happens at the same time, together with what happens before and what happens after. Formerly, when I would go into any friends' home, out of deference, you know, to my tastes, seeing me coming they simply turned off any radio, or even a disc that was playing. Now they no longer do it, they know that I think that I composed all those things.' (Laughter)

The last piece of Cage's we'll play today is one of the least heard, and the most critical to the development of sampling. 'Imaginary Landscape No. 5' is a score for 42 phonographic records and tape. The performer picks the records, and the score tells you how to splice them together. But that element of choice already makes this different from his pieces for radios. For the original 1952 realization, Cage chose 42 jazz records, in part because he didn't like jazz, or any form of improvisation, and wanted to overcome his aversion. He chose his materials carefully, sampling fragments from the most recognizable figures of the field, creating a three minute genre overview. In this way, it is the very first formal example of sampling collage that we have, where we can hear exactly what sources are being sampled.

It was never commercially released. When searching it out, I learned to my horror that the tape is lost, apart from this punishingly low fidelity room recording of someone playing the piece on a home stereo. We can't play all four minutes, but even just the beginning is enough to hear the idea. While we wait for the original tape to turn up, here is the room recording of 'Imaginary Landscape No. 5' from 1952.

John Cage 'Imaginary Landscape No. 5' (Cage realization w/ David Tudor, Louis & Bebe Barron), 1952

The word 'sample' entered the musical lexicon in the eighties. Forgive me for using the word to talk about music written 30 to 60 years before then, but that's the word the world recognizes when you discuss the pioneers. In the late forties, it was Pierre Schaeffer at GRM studios in Paris who created his five Noise Studies and created the practice of Musique Concrete – a music made from recordings with the intent of isolating and separating sounds from the events that caused them. A recording of a train, of industrial machinery, of struck kitchenware now has nothing to do with its source – it can be listened to, enjoyed, entirely as music in and of itself.


[Pierre Schaeffer]

As such, the purpose of Musique Concrete was not to reference the real world, but to take its sounds and render them abstract. They recorded most of their own sounds for their pieces before manipulating them with turntables and reel to reel tape decks that could be physically played as instruments, including a turntable with an octave keyboard to control the pitch of a locked groove loop. So while this aesthetic is at odds with the referentiality of much later collage music, in hindsight, when you're using turntables as instruments, what's surprising is how little they used sounds from other people's records in their pieces. My bet is there were some great late night record 'listening' parties at GRM. But there are several pieces where Schaeffer takes and abstracts the sounds of other people's records, specifically Schaeffer's 'Etude Pathétique' from 1948.

Pierre Schaeffer, 'Etude Pathétique' (excerpt), 1948

Schaeffer's early pieces were created without the use of tape editing – sounds were recorded to vinyl, and then manipulated, by creating locked groove loops, which were mixed and layered. Far more than Cage, Schaeffer and Henry vastly expanded the use of the turntable as a playable musical instrument.

Here's Schaeffer and Pierre Henry's 'Symphony for a Man Alone', specifically the one short track which makes use of orchestral recordings. Here's 'Valse' from 1950.

Pierre Schaeffer & Pierre Henry, 'Valse' (from 'Symphonie Pour Un Homme Seul'), 1951

The technology of sheet music had a good run of about a thousand years, but by the early twentieth century, they'd basically run out of most of the prettier combinations of the twelve notes. Composers eager to find their own voices felt themselves pulled, or pushed, towards atonality and dissonance. The early decades saw a score of bold manifestos proposing ways forward. Schoenberg's 'Twelve-Tone Composition' provided a new set of rules for writing atonally, for those who were nostalgic for the older outdated rules that mandated tonal writing. And Luigi Russolo's 'The Art of Noises' celebrated the world of industrial noise we lived in, describing it as the only true source for future inspiration. If you'd taken a bet among the few academics who'd read both papers in the mid-fifties, it might have seemed that Schoenberg had won the argument – atonal composition had come to dominate the field. But to the rest of the world's musicians, recording had settled the argument. Suddenly, a musician who had developed a new sound on his instrument didn't have to waste his time figuring out how to transcribe his sound using sheet music. He could simply record it.

The lightening fast development of American Jazz, a form which sheet music was hopelessly inadequate to capture, was enabled largely by recordings. Players would learn the chords from the sheet music, but the feel of the polyrhythms, the accents, and the tricks, spread globally through listening to records – you couldn't learn a piece without hearing it. By the thirties, pop music began to explore arrangements that could only happen in the studio; Bing Crosby's style of whispered crooning over an expanded orchestra could only be achieved by mixing the vocalist's microphone far louder than the 40 people playing behind him. In the late forties, Les Paul recorded huge national hits alone in his garage, overdubbing every instrument himself at various speeds and turning his wife Mary Ford into a chorus. And with the rise of Rhythm and Blues, and Rock and Roll, bands who worked with the distortion and tone of their overdriven amplifiers began to realize that new sounds made for new hits. A song was recognizable within a split-second of its beginning, with the tone of the first guitar chord, slapback echo, drum roll, or shout. Popular musicians were beginning to compose with more than notes.

In 1956, two aspiring songwriters with radio–ready voices named Bill Buchanan and Dick Goodman harvested several years worth of these sounds in a collage called 'The Flying Saucer'. Their independent pressing went on to sell half a million copies in under a month, and the recording explains itself.

Buchanan & Goodman, 'The Flying Saucer (Part 1)', 1956

[Buchanan & Goodman, 'The Flying Saucer (Part 1)', 1956]

There was an immediate legal action from the Music Publishers Protective Association: Copyright infringement without permission. Buchanan and Goodman settled quickly, agreeing to pay 17 cents in publishing from each 89 cent copy, to be split among the 19 sampled artists. But the publishers' headache was just beginning. Dozens of copycat 'break-in' records hit the market, outraging the publishers who sent their lawyers back to demand even higher licensing rates.

But as the lawyers went into action, it was noticed that sales of the songs that had been sampled were skyrocketing, putting the original sampled songs back on the radio. And here's what's meant by 'original': In 1956, most mainstream listeners were only familiar with these songs through the cover versions by white artists – the original black artists were considered off limits for most radio stations, a dangerous influence on teenagers. Buchanan and Goodman's collage used the original recordings, packing 19 samples into 3 minutes, and creating an overview of the real pioneers of the new pop music. Because it was a novelty single, it broke White radio, but it also lifted the curtain. A publishing representative was quoted in Time as saying 'It's the greatest sampler of all. If you're not on 'Saucer', you're nowhere!'.

I'd like to play just the beginning of their followup single 'Buchanan and Goodman on Trial'.

Buchanan & Goodman, 'The Flying Saucer (Part 2)', 1956

By this point they're just showing off – that cut to Fats Domino on the downbeat of the Dragnet theme is advanced composition, proof of editing as a compositional art. Radio station IDs and station promos still use this rapid-fire style today – if the timespan of the music they sampled makes this into a time capsule, it's still the same shape as the ones stations are making today – the sounds have changed, but we use the same structures. The record companies responded by suing to stop distribution & for $130,000 in damages. But this was one lawsuit too many. The judge found that Buchanan and Goodman's collages constituted a satire, a new work. Settlements were made to publishing, but the battle had been won.

Don Charles presents the Singing Dogs, 'Jingle Bells', 1955

The techniques of Musique Concrete also began showing up in popular music in other strange ways, although always in the context of novelty singles. Here's a brief excerpt from another record that sold a million copies. From 1955, Don Charles presents the Singing Dogs. Every one of these barks, recorded at different speeds onto magnetic tape, cut apart into pieces then spliced at the right lengths to form a melody. The lesson here was that noises thought to be non-musical did in fact have a pitch, if one pitched them. If Schaeffer's intent with Musique Concrete was to find a way to compose with sounds, rather than with notes and tunes, it didn't take people long to begin to discover that you could compose tunes from sounds just as easily.

André Hodeir, 'Jazz Et Jazz', 1951

As a side note, in 1956, composer and inventor Hugh Le Caine responded to the Singing Dogs by seeing if he could make a tune out of an even more annoying sound: a direct sample of the climax of Alban Berg's opera Lulu: the shriek of the lead character being stabbled to death by Jack the Ripper. One thing I love in particular about this piece is the way Le Caine splices together the chord changes and bassline for 'Happy Birthday' entirely out of samples of the orchestral waltz, and a subtle craft like that shouldn't be mistaken for novelty. It also goes down in history as one of the earliest pieces made exclusively out of sounds resourced and recycled from other recordings. Here is Le Caine's 'Arcane Presents Lulu'.

Hugh Le Caine, 'Arcane Presents Lulu', 1956

Before becoming renowned for his work with television and multimedia in the sixties, Nam June Paik had studied extensively in music composition in Korea, then Japan, and then Germany, where he met and fell under the influence of John Cage. Several tape collages were designed to accompany his performances, where he would play piano, sob uncontrollably, and alternately assault his friends


[James Tenney]

in the audience with a pair of scissors, or merely shampoo them. The tapes were designed to underline these shocks and they hold up on their own. Here are excerpts from two pieces from the late fifties, 'Hommage a John Cage' and 'Etude for Pianoforte'.

Nam June Paik, 'Homage A John Cage / Etude for Pianoforte', 1958-1960

In 1960, electronic composer Richard Maxfield found himself reworking his sounds from an earlier unfinished opera, making tape loops out of various sounds. He then added the chopped up sounds of revivalist preacher James G. Brodie to create his piece 'Amazing Grace'. Though any semblence of language has been carved away, you can still nearly tell what the source is entirely through cadence. Within a few decades, sampling american preachers and setting them to music would become one of the most overused hallmarks of sampling music. Here's Maxfield's 'Amazing Grace'.

Richard Maxfield, 'Amazing Grace', 1960

In 1959, James Tenney chose to attend the University of Illnois as it was one of the only American universities with an electronic music studio. His early attempts to compose with electronics failed to produce a piece – the 'synthetic character' of the sounds resisted all his attempts to turn them into music. After two years of frustration, he suddenly realized – why use synthetics, why not start with the most exciting sounds available – what was there to stop him? Assembled in one feverish week of editing, here is James Tenney's 'Collage No. 1 (Blue Suede)', from 1961.

James Tenney, 'Collage No. 1 ('Blue Suede')', 1961

There were tape collages in the air by 1961, but if there is a work which can claim to be the first remix of a song, it's probably this one. All sounds are directly manipulated and transformed from one original recording by Elvis Presley. The result would never be mistaken for another pop song; the lyrics, the rhythmic tempo, and the melody have been atomized – all that is left are the familiar sounds, in a shape that allows us to actually hear the sounds for what they are, now that the song itself has been cut away by Tenney's razors. Free jazz rhythms almost sound like a more appropriate structure to house these sounds than anything as traditional as verses and choruses.

Tenney went on to write his graduate thesis, later published as 'Meta Hodos', which proposed new ways to analyze modern music, the most progressive and interesting aspects of which lay not in its notes and melodies, but in the complexity of its sounds. The vocabulary of Musique Concrete gave the composer the ability to layer, transpose, and manipulate any recorded sound. And with the rise of rock and roll, swimming in unique sounds for each song, the new variation was obviously going to be one which would directly avail itself of the sounds of the original piece. People don't want a rip off of the thing. A composer who wanted to work with a sound, a specific sound – was now free to simply take it.

This brings us to the ending of this first episode of VARIATIONS, which covered 1909 to 1961, just over a half-century of music. For the second episode, we'll go through the collages composed in the sixties, the decade when the first generation of post-war children grew up and started talking back to their parents in the language they'd been taught, raised on radio, records and television. Until then, this is Jon Leidecker, and thanks for listening.

02. Acknowledgments

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[Nam June Paik]

03. Copyright note