



## GUIDE OVERVIEW

### White Label Experiment (For John Cage) NICOLE LIZÉE



For percussion quartet and live electronics (turntables/omnichord).

**Premiere:** March 2, 2012

**Length of Recording:** 14 minutes

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Recommended for Grades 7 to 12.

**Music** – Techniques and Technologies – use a variety of current technologies in various applications related to music, including composing, arranging, performing, and/or recording music.

**Music** – The Critical Analysis Process – listen in a purposeful way to selections from a wide variety of musical styles and genres.

**Music** – The Critical Analysis Process – analyse, and assess the effectiveness of music from a variety of styles and genres.

**Music** – The Critical Analysis Process – Music and Society – analyse the impact that significant individuals or groups from a variety of cultures have had on traditional, commercial, and/or art music.

## MAJOR THEMES

The work of 20th c. composer John Cage;  
Paying homage to an admired artist

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## ABOUT SOUNDMAKERS RESOURCES

The Soundstreams' series of SoundMakers Study Guides have been created for educators to enhance the SoundMakers.ca experience. There is a wealth of *free* streamable and downloadable music available on SoundMakers. These guides give background information, activity ideas, and curriculum connections to help teachers get the most out of the Soundstreams commissions catalogue which is available online.

In-class workshops are also available through Soundstreams. Soundstreams composers and artist-educators can visit your school or organization for in-class workshops or for a staff learning session.

For more information or to provide us with feedback please contact:

[resource@soundmakers.ca](mailto:resource@soundmakers.ca) or call 416-504-1282

[soundstreams.ca](http://soundstreams.ca)

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SoundMakers Resources have been made possible by the generous support of:



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## INSPIRATION

Composed to celebrate what would have been the hundredth birthday of avant-garde pioneer John Cage, this work pays homage to the ideas and philosophies embodied in his music and his words. Cage was famed for integrating non-traditional instruments into his work and for coaxing unconventional sounds from traditional ones. Accordingly, Lizée — herself noted for incorporating turntables and other electronic devices into the concert-music setting — here makes extensive use of various objets trouvés (including typewriters and vinyl records on portable turntables struck with mallets) as percussion instruments, regardless of their original purpose. The idea of “preparing” instruments, one of Cage’s most significant contributions to modern music, is reflected here in alterations made to the surfaces of vinyl records, generating new patterns and melodies by creating new paths for the stylus. Lizée has described this piece as a kind of dance party for Cage: “a re-imagining of a rave.”

## ABOUT THE COMPOSER

### b.1973, CANADA

Born in Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan, Nicole Lizée has written for unorthodox instrument combinations including turntables, the Atari 2600 video game console, Simon and Merlin hand-held games, and karaoke tapes.

Her works have been performed in festivals including the MATA Festival (USA), Winnipeg New Music Festival (Canada), Huddersfield (UK), X Avant (Canada), Open Ears (Canada), Ecstatic (NYC), and C3 (Germany). In 1995 she received a Bachelor of Music degree from Brandon University where she majored in piano and composition. In 2001 she received a Master of Music degree in composition from McGill University in Montreal.

Nicole has received commissions from several artists and ensembles including l’Orchestre Métropolitain du Grand Montréal, Kronos Quartet, CBC, the Kaufman Center/Darcy James Argue’s Secret Society, Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal, Transmission, So Percussion, Arraymusic, Ensemble Kore, Soundstreams, McGill Chamber Orchestra, Standing Wave, Continuum, Bradyworks, Brigitte Poulin, Megumi Masaki, Ben Reimer, Motion Ensemble, Victoria Symphony

Orchestra, Toca Loca, and l’Association des Orchestres de Jeunes du Québec.

She currently resides in Montréal (Canada).

## IN THE MUSIC - PREPARED INSTRUMENTS

Prepared instruments are objects that have an original purpose of making music and are then altered in some way to change their musical output. John Cage made extensive use of the prepared piano, a piano with objects placed on different strings inside the piano. Nicole Lizée embraces this musical ethic. She composes by “coaxing new sounds out of new or unlikely places.” – N.L.

### MORE:

Look up the New England Conservatory’s 5 minute video, “John Cage’s Prepared Piano w/ Stephen Drury” for a detailed look at Cage’s prepared piano, his notes for preparation, and how each preparation changes the sound. The video is available at <http://youtu.be/myXAUEuECqQ>.

## WHITE LABEL

The title of this piece references two influences on 20th century pop culture: Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* from 1951 and the white record labels used in the 1980’s club scene.

### White Paintings

*“In the summer of 1951 Robert Rauschenberg created his revolutionary White Paintings ... At a time when Abstract Expressionism was ascendant in New York, Rauschenberg’s uninflected all-white surfaces eliminated gesture and denied all possibility of narrative or external reference ... While generally misunderstood at the time, the works were highly influential for Rauschenberg’s frequent collaborator, the composer John Cage. Under the sway of the Buddhist aesthetics of Zen, Cage interpreted the blank surfaces as “landing strips” or receptors for light and shadow, and was inspired to pursue the corresponding notion of silence and ambient sound in music. His response, 4’33” (1952), consisted of the pianist sitting quietly at the piano without touching the keys for four minutes and thirty-three seconds so that incidental sounds in the surrounding environment — such as the wind in the trees outside or the whispering of audience members — determined the content of the piece.”*

– From Guggenheim.org

## White Labels

Turntablism is the art of manipulating sounds and creating music using phonograph turntables and a DJ mixer. DJs carefully select their source music and can be rather proprietary about their collection of vinyl records. As Nicole Lizée describes, “[white] Labels began to appear in the late 1980s and existed for a few reasons — mainly so that the DJs would not give away their discoveries, who they were playing. [They wanted] to keep those treasures, for themselves and for the public’s consumption.” The desire to keep trade secrets coupled with a desire to avoid licencing hassles led to plain white labels which DJs affixed to the records they were playing.

### John Cage: Game Changer

- What is it about the work of John Cage that made him famous?
- Was it his work? His personality? His connections to famous musicians and artists? His varied experiences? Was there a need for something new that he happened to fill? Right place, right time?
- Take a moment to discuss his most renowned work, 4’33”. What made a duration of ‘not playing music’ so compelling and so enduring?

### DID YOU KNOW?

The composer herself is a performer on this recording. The turntables here are played by Lizée. What might the composer bring to a performance of her own work that another artist might not? Why might a composer stay so close to her composition?

### KEEP IT GOING

There is a Prepared Piano App available (for iPad, iPhone, and Android for \$1 or less) via [JohnCage.org](http://JohnCage.org). Using the app, you could create your own prepared piano piece. You could even mix your prepared piano creation with samples of White Label Experiment (SoundMakers.ca) and upload the new tribute work to the SoundMakers community!

## ACTIVITY - CREATE YOUR OWN PREPARED INSTRUMENT

Nicole Lizée created prepared instruments for *White Label Experiment*. She prepared records for use on the turntable. Records make sounds when a stylus runs over grooves etched in the record’s surface. Traditionally these grooves are circular and a song plays as the record spins. Lizée prepared her records by creating new pathways for the stylus using tape on the surface of each record. These “locked grooves” were prepared specifically for this composition and change the way the record plays.

**Piano** – Open up your piano and take a look at the mechanisms of sound. The key moves the hammer which hits a string. Each string vibrates at its own frequency, producing a unique sound. How do the pedals of the piano affect the sound? Brainstorm some ideas of ways the sound of the piano could be changed by altering the physical state of the instrument.

**Recorder, Drum, Trumpet, Violin** – For each of these instruments, think of the way sound is produced, when it is traditionally played. List ideas for preparing each of these instruments. How do you think your preparations would affect the sounds produced?

**Design Lab** – Choose an existing instrument and design a blueprint to turn your chosen instrument into a prepared instrument. Bonus: Compose a brief musical composition using your new creation.

**Try it!** – If appropriate, put your plans, ideas, and brainstorms into action. Alter instruments to create a prepared band or musical ensemble. Even without alterations, explore the instrument as Nicole Lizée might. As she did with the Omnichord, try to find “the wrong way” to play the instrument and hear what new sounds emerge.

## Tribute

White Label Experiment is a tribute to John Cage. His work, his ingenuity, and his tenacity, all inspired Lizée and other artists to be daring and push their own work to new boundaries. He inspired a generation of artists. Who inspires you?

Choose an artist or personality who inspires you. What is it about them or their work that you admire? How could you show their influence in your own work? Is there a project or art piece you could create which would pay tribute to your inspiration?

The class should be divided into groups, and each group should choose one person to whom it will pay tribute. Make a proposal for your tribute piece and present your proposal to the class.

The presentation should include:

- three words that describe the person of inspiration
- a description of the new work
- an explanation of how your work pays tribute to your role model

## GLOSSARY

**Objets Trouvés** Found object originates from the French objet trouvé, describing art created from undisguised, but often modified, objects or products that are not normally considered art, often because they already have a non-art function.[1]

**Omnichord** The Omnichord is an electronic musical instrument, introduced in 1981 and manufactured by the Suzuki Musical Instrument Corporation. It typically features a touch plate, and buttons for major, minor, and diminished chords. The most basic method of playing the instrument is to press the chord buttons and swipe the touch plate with a finger or guitar pick in imitation of strumming a stringed instrument. Originally designed as an electronic substitute for an autoharp, the Omnichord has become popular as an individual instrument in its own right, due to its unique, chiming timbre and its value as a kitsch object.[2]

[1] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objets\\_trouvés](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objets_trouvés)

[2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omnichord>