

drag



for muted amplified violin and prepared piano

(2008)

j bunch

Drag is a cabaret song for muted, amplified violin and prepared piano. My sources for this piece were a cadre of nutty American maverick composers that included John Cage (prepared piano), Henry Cowell (some inside the piano techniques, cf. *Aeolian Harp*), and Conlon Nancarrow (many of the rhythmic techniques can be found in the player-piano studies, here in a slightly less grizzly form). Also I looked at one of the great examples of cabaret music, Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* where I shamelessly cribbed some of the more salient characteristics of the accompaniment style.

I wanted to make a song, so the work is in strophic form (though each strophy is modified for variety's sake). The violin stands in for the traditional singer. In my treatment of the violin writing, I tried to make the violin sound like Lotte Lenya (Weill's fraü and leading lady), by muting and amplifying for an antiquated sound. Also, I've directed the violinist to play with a wobbly vibrato, and to have purposefully bad intonation. The piano is treated as a scratch orchestra of sorts (a one-(wo)man pick-up band) and all of the preparations serve to either provide percussion sounds, or to cause the piano to sound like an out-of-tune bar piano. To further this effect, the harmonies are sullied with "wrong notes" – the swarthy, drunken pianists of the cabaret know just how to make ugly sound great.

The title "DRAG" refers to many of the early cabaret performers who were what we now call "drag queens," men who dressed in women's clothing. The prepared piano is the ultimate musical drag queen – passing herself off as a percussion ensemble. Further connections to the word lie in the notation, which uses note-head size to depict the kind of dragging, artfully inconsistent rhythms of cabaret music. Also, the proportionally conceived allargandi in the middle section seem to drag more slowly as they go on. Hopefully though, you won't think this piece is "a drag."

Performance notes:

- E** Rectangular rubber erasers inserted either diagonally or horizontally between the two strings of each note. Care should be taken to not place them at harmonic nodal points. The required sound is a nearly pitch-less mellow thump. Relative pitch should be heard (A¹ should sound lower than B¹, etc).
- N/C** Nylon or Copper screws inserted between strings 2/3 of a triple-strung note. The resulting sound should change only the timbre of the string and yield an “out-of-tune bar piano” sound. A major chord should be heard as a major chord (in combination with copper-screw preparations and non-prepared notes). The overall pitch should not be affected more than ¼ of a step. Place screws at first partial harmonic nodes, although the placement may be changed to omit major buzz (some small buzz is ok on the copper screws, but not on the nylon screws) or to create a more interesting microtonal shimmer. The pitch accuracy of the Eb7 – which is prepared by a copper screw – should and will be more affected than those in the middle range. A more percussive effect is desired for this preparation.
- W/N (P)** These strings feature a double preparation. between 1 / 2 there should be a small piece of hard wood (like a segment of a thin wooden dowel), and between strings 2 / 3 there should be a strip of nylon or semi-hard plastic. The resulting sound will be similar to that of a woodblock. Care should be taken to preserve the relative pitch definition (low to high) of the three notes. This can be achieved by the relative placement of the preparations. Do not retain the actual pitches indicated (G, A, Bb) however.
- F** Foam strip preparation interlaced between three strings. The resulting sound will be a dry, sharp, percussive snap. Imagine a tiny slapstick. Placement does not matter save to avoid the preparation being struck by the hammer.

grotesque, hearty, uncouth

The alternation of “fat” and “skinny” notes serves to indicate a clumsy rhythmic “drag” or stagger. Some combination of dynamics and slight rhythmic alteration will yield the desired effect. The rhythm should not be transformed into a “swing” rhythm though – stopping just short of it, and accomplishing more through dynamic variation than rhythmic.

“Aeolian strum” – first play the chord with the right hand. While the hand is still depressed, gliss across the strings surrounding the range of the played chord. **After the glissando has activated the held chord strings** then place the pedal down. Depressing the pedal too early will sustain the whole chromatic saturation around the chord (obliterating the harmony). Release the pedal before playing the next chord, so as not to mix harmonies.

Scrape the bow on the winding of the indicated string behind the bridge. The resulting sound has no pitch but should be dry rather than squeaky.

A very high (but not necessarily the highest) pitch on the e-string.

DRAG

with heavy wooden mute
wobbly vibrato
improv bad intonation

for I-Chun Cho

j bunch

$\text{♩} = 66$

Violin

Musical score for Violin and Piano, measures 1-5. The Violin part starts with a whole rest, followed by a half note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G#4, and a quarter note G4. The Piano part features a complex accompaniment with chords and single notes. Dynamics include *mf* and *p*. A vertical line at measure 3 indicates a section change. A box labeled 'SUS.' spans measures 4 and 5.

Vln.

Musical score for Violin and Piano, measures 6-10. The Violin part has a melodic line with a slur over measures 6-7. The Piano part continues with accompaniment. Dynamics include *mf* and *p*. A box labeled 'SUS.' spans measures 8-10. Performance instructions include 'uneven, dry scratch in softshoe rhythm should not sound screechy' and 'molto cantabile'.

Vln.

Musical score for Violin and Piano, measures 11-15. The Violin part has a melodic line with a slur over measures 11-12. The Piano part continues with accompaniment. Dynamics include *mf* and *p*. A box labeled 'SUS.' spans measures 13-15. Performance instructions include 'stupidly sentimental - molto portamento' and 'pizz with plectrum'. A box labeled 'ORD' is present above measure 14.



Vln. 15

simile

sus. sus. sus. pedal ad lib.

ORD

3

Vln. 20

grottesque, hearty, uncouth

precious

first time only!

second time only!

8^{vb} - - -

ff

sfpp *sfpp* *sfpp* *sfpp* etc.

second time: saw out measured 8th-note tremolo
accent the first note of every grouping

Vln. 25

sfpp *sfpp* *sfpp* *sfpp*

Vln. 30

sfpp etc.

subito *p*

Vln. 35

gradual crescendo

f

Vln. 40

second time: stop sawing here

p *f*

molto allargando

pizzicato quasi una ukelele

molto cantabile

mf

Vln. 45

Vln. 50

unbearably schmoltsy - wallow in it
arco

p **f**

ridiculous, clumsy, playful

Vln. 55

spastic, out of control, schizophrenic

hopelessly retromaniacle

mf

pizz

Vln.

60

pizz

arco

+

arco

small, smart-assy

pp

60

p

ff