4. Benjamin Patterson: *Paper Piece* (1960)

George E. Lewis

Benjamin Patterson's *Paper Piece* (1960) is said to have begun as a letter posted to his family from Germany, where he was beginning to take part in the first pre-Fluxus experiments in performance. Over the years, the piece has become one of the most widely performed Fluxus works.[1]

In *Paper Piece*, performers create a variety of sounds using bags and loose sheets made of various types of paper. At a 2011 seminar at Columbia University, Patterson presented the origin story for the work:

> *Paper Piece* was a reaction to another Stockhausen event (thank you Karlheinz!). As I remember, it was *Kontakte*, the premiere, for piano and two percussionists. David Tudor was the pianist, and he told me afterwards that it had something like 120 hours of rehearsal for this piece to get it all together. And I just couldn't believe that something had to be rehearsed that much and would leave me so . . . *underwhelmed*.[2]

Patterson's 1962 collection, *Methods and Processes*, presents a set of text pieces that have historically been grouped under the heading "event scores," a format said to have been pioneered in the early 1960s by artists including, in particular, La Monte Young, Yoko Ono, and George Brecht.[3] *Paper Piece* is not an event score, however, but a "text score" that functions much like a conventional score, in which notations are provided to guide performers in realizing the composer's intent.

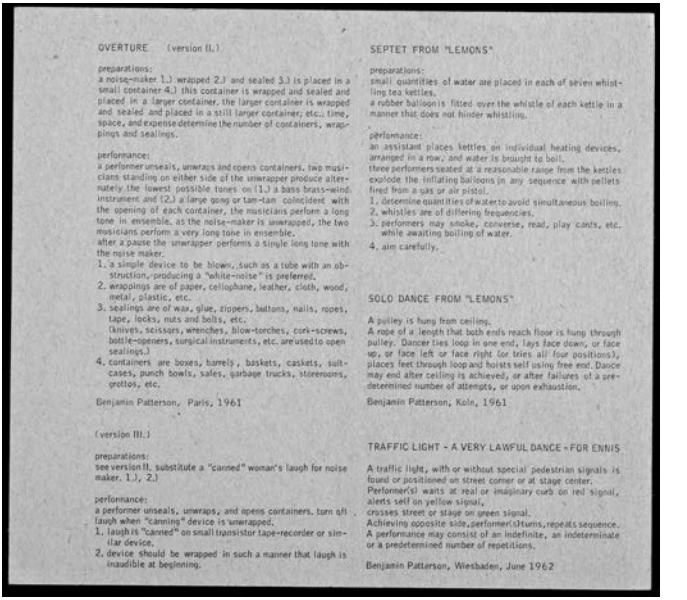
Between 1959 and 1964, Patterson was in a period of rapid growth. *Paper Piece*, conceived at the start of that period, may be classified as an aspect of Patterson's work that focused on new techniques for acoustic instruments, as did his *Variations for Double-Bass* (1961, rev. 1962), which combines performative stances with extended string techniques (figs. 4.1, 4.2) to create a kind of early intermedia *avant la lettre de Fluxus*, and his *Duo for Voice and a String Instrument* (1961), which combines an even more extensive catalog of sounds and string techniques with intricate graphic elements (fig. 4.3).[4]

Paper Piece stands out among these works because, while it specifies sounds and techniques as Patterson's later pieces do, rather than exploring unusual playing techniques for traditional musical instruments, it instrumentalizes a commonly found material—paper—for which no extended techniques had ever been documented. Moreover, the work provides strong suggestions rather than exacting specifications as to instrumentation, duration, and performance process, and it is one of the few Patterson scores from this period that explicitly calls for improvisation: "Dynamics should be improvised within the natural borders of the approximate ppp of the 'Twist' and the fff of the 'Pop!'" (fig. 4.4).[5]

Patterson's earliest pieces, including *Paper Piece*, often comprised three main elements:

(1) a set of materials, physical and/or temporal;
(2) performance instructions and process elaboration; and
(3) limits and ending conditions.

At the aforementioned Columbia seminar, Patterson noted the advantages of using paper in his work: "It was a material that was readily available anywhere, everywhere in the world, and it came in all types and shades, dimensions, and had a great variety of acoustic possibilities, from crystal paper, tissue paper, all the way to heavy cardboard, paper



OVERTURE (version II.)

preparations:
a noise-maker 1.) wrapped 2.) and sealed 3.) is placed in a small container 4.) this container is wrapped and sealed and placed in a larger container. the larger container is wrapped and sealed and placed in a still larger container; etc., time, space, and expense determine the number of containers, wrappings and sealings.

performance:
a performer unseals, unwraps and opens containers. two musicians standing on either side of the unwrapper produce alternately the lowest possible tones on (1.) a bass brass-wind instrument and (2.) a large gong or tam-tam coincident with the opening of each container. the musicians perform a long tone in ensemble. as the noise-maker is unwrapped, the two musicians perform a very long tone in ensemble.
after a pause the unwrapper performs a single long tone with the noise maker.
1. a simple device to be blown, such as a tube with an obstruction, producing a "white-noise" is preferred.
2. wrappings are of paper, cellophane, leather, cloth, wood, metal, plastic, etc.
3. sealings are of wax, glue, zippers, buttons, nails, ropes, tape, locks, nuts and bolts, etc.
(knives, scissors, wrenches, blow-torches, cork-screws, bottle-openers, surgical instruments, etc. are used to open sealings.)
4. containers are boxes, barrels, baskets, caskets, suitcases, punch bowls, safes, garbage trucks, storerooms, grottos, etc.

Benjamin Patterson, Paris, 1961

(version III.)

preparations:
see version II. substitute a "canned" woman's laugh for noise maker. 1.), 2.)

performance:
a performer unseals, unwraps, and opens containers. turn off laugh when "canning" device is unwrapped.
1. laugh is "canned" on small transistor tape-recorder or similar device.
2. device should be wrapped in such a manner that laugh is inaudible at beginning.

SEPTET FROM "LEMONS"

preparations:
small quantities of water are placed in each of seven whistling tea kettles.
a rubber balloon is fitted over the whistle of each kettle in a manner that does not hinder whistling.

performance:
an assistant places kettles on individual heating devices, arranged in a row, and water is brought to boil.
three performers seated at a reasonable range from the kettles explode the inflating balloons in any sequence with pellets fired from a gas or air pistol.
1. determine quantities of water to avoid simultaneous boiling.
2. whistles are of differing frequencies.
3. performers may smoke, converse, read, play cards, etc. while awaiting boiling of water.
4. aim carefully.

SOLO DANCE FROM "LEMONS"

A pulley is hung from ceiling.
A rope of a length that both ends reach floor is hung through pulley. Dancer ties loop in one end, lays face down, or face up, or face left or face right (or tries all four positions?), places feet through loop and hoists self using free end. Dance may end after ceiling is achieved, or after failures of a predetermined number of attempts, or upon exhaustion.

Benjamin Patterson, Koln, 1961

TRAFFIC LIGHT - A VERY LAWFUL DANCE - FOR ENNIS

A traffic light, with or without special pedestrian signals is found or positioned on street corner or at stage center.
Performer(s) waits at real or imaginary curb on red signal, alerts self on yellow signal,
crosses street or stage on green signal.
Achieving opposite side, performer(s) turns, repeats sequence.
A performance may consist of an indefinite, an indeterminate or a predetermined number of repetitions.

Benjamin Patterson, Wiesbaden, June 1962

Fig. 4.1 Benjamin Patterson (American, 1934–2016). *Variations for Double-Bass*, 1961, rev. 1962. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 39, folder 33. © The Estate of Benjamin Patterson.
getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/217/

Fig. 4.2 Benjamin Patterson performing *Variations for Double-Bass*, at *Kleinen Sommerfest: Après John Cage*, Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, West Germany, 9 June 1962. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. © The Estate of Benjamin Patterson. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

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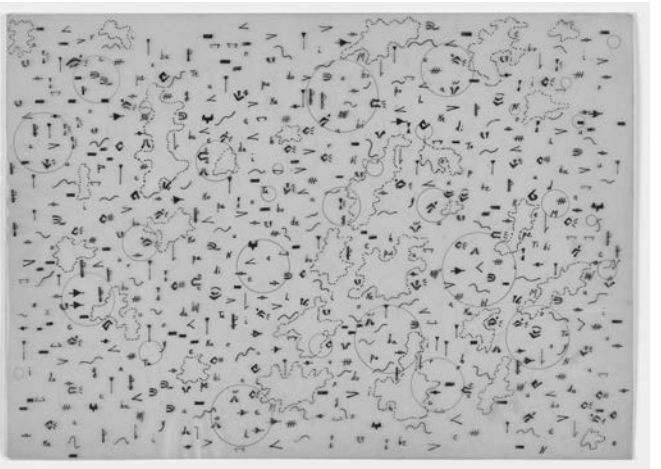

Fig. 4.3 Benjamin Patterson (American, 1934–2016). *Duo for Voice and a String Instrument*, 1961. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 39, folder 32. © The Estate of Benjamin Patterson.

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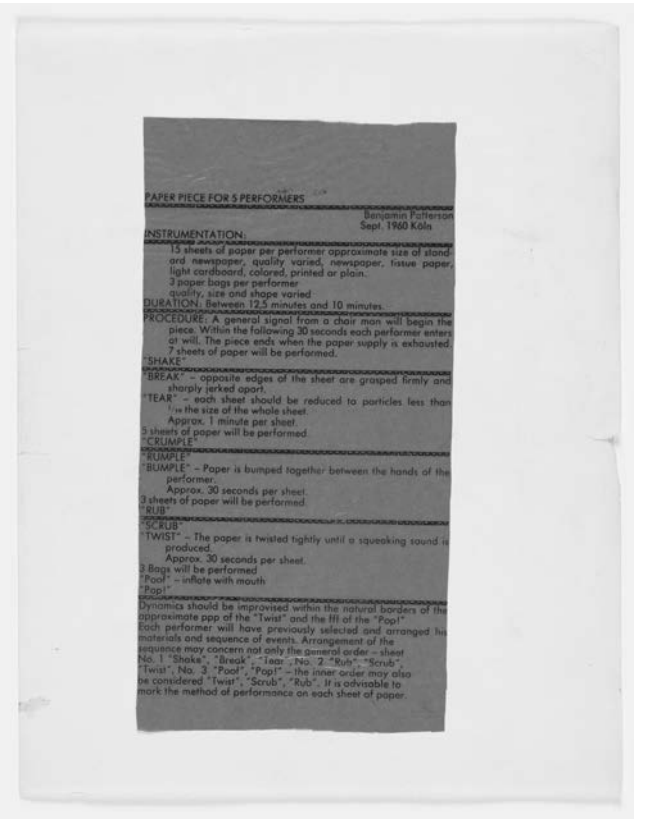

PAPER PIECE FOR 5 PERFORMERS

Benjamin Patterson
Sept. 1960 Köln

INSTRUMENTATION:
15 sheets of paper per performer approximate size of standard newspaper, quality varied, newspaper, tissue paper, light cardboard, colored, printed or plain.
3 paper bags per performer
quality, size and shape varied

DURATION: Between 12,5 minutes and 10 minutes.

PROCEDURE: A general signal from a chair man will begin the piece. Within the following 30 seconds each performer enters at will. The piece ends when the paper supply is exhausted. 7 sheets of paper will be performed.

"SHAKE"
"BREAK" – opposite edges of the sheet are grasped firmly and sharply jerked apart.
"TEAR" – each sheet should be reduced to particles less than 1/16 the size of the whole sheet.
Approx. 1 minute per sheet.
3 sheets of paper will be performed.

"CRUMPLE"
"RUMPLE"
"BUMPLE" – Paper is bumped together between the hands of the performer.
Approx. 30 seconds per sheet.
3 sheets of paper will be performed.

"RUB"
"SCRUB"
"TWIST" – The paper is twisted tightly until a squeaking sound is produced.
Approx. 30 seconds per sheet.
3 Bags will be performed
"Pool" – inflate with mouth
"Pop!"

Dynamics should be improvised within the natural borders of the approximate ppp of the "Twist" and the fff of the "Pop!"
Each performer will have previously selected and arranged his materials and sequence of events. Arrangement of the sequence may concern not only the general order – sheet No. 1 "Shake", "Break", "Tear", No. 2 "Rub", "Scrub", "Twist", No. 3 "Pool", "Pop!" – the inner order may also be considered "Twist", "Scrub", "Rub". It is advisable to mark the method of performance on each sheet of paper.

Fig. 4.4 Benjamin Patterson (American, 1934–2016). Printed score of *Paper Piece* in English, 1960. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 39, folder 33. © The Estate of Benjamin Patterson.
getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/197/

bags, and so forth." The number and types of materials are precisely given in the score, but some room is left for performer choice and foraging. Thus, a performance of the work could be considered site-specific, as it might depend on the kinds of paper available in a given area.

The score calls for the following materials:

> 15 sheets of paper per performer approximate size of standard newspaper, . . . tissue paper, light cardboard, colored, printed or plain.
> 3 paper bags per performer
> quality, size and shape varied[6]

The score evinces a decided preference for diversity of paper ("quality varied"), which would in turn produce a corresponding diversity of timbres. That said, the actual temporal/structural course of the development of timbre is left to the performer.

As the number of sheets and bags to be used is strictly delineated, so are the particular techniques, for which descriptions and nomenclature are provided, as in this example:

> "BREAK" - opposite edges of the sheet are grasped firmly and sharply jerked apart[7]

The score offers some practical advice, suggesting a process of preparation in which the performance method for each piece of paper is selected in advance and written on the sheet. However, the composer also allows for interpretive liberties, allowing the sequence of sounds to be varied within each performance. The example Patterson gives is a simple retrograde: RUB, SCRUB, TWIST could become TWIST, SCRUB, RUB:

> Each performer will have previously selected and arranged his materials and sequence of events. Arrangement of sequence may concern not only the general order - sheet No. 1 "Shake", "Break", "Tear",

No. 2 "Rub", "Scrub", "Twist", No. 3 "Poof", "Pop!" - the inner order may also be considered "Twist", "Scrub", "Rub".[8]

While the poetics of *Methods and Processes* were still to come, *Paper Piece* was an early example of Patterson taking an onomatopoetic approach to describing the kinds of sounds he was after. One can imagine the descriptions themselves forming a kind of short text-sound work:

SHAKE BREAK TEAR
CRUMPLE RUMPLE BUMPLE
RUB SCRUB TWIST
POOF POP!

Even though some instructions allowed for flexibility, certain sounds were expected by the composer, as with the direction TWIST ("The paper is twisted tightly until a squeaking sound is produced").[9] Since there was no existing tradition of paper-handling in music, these techniques had to be invented by the composer.

"The explosive pops blowing out paper bags are enough to be always quite audible," Patterson told the Columbia students. "Cardboard boxes are very good, and cardboard tubes, very good for 'muscular' performances."[10]

In addition to directions for creating certain sounds, the score also sets forth expectations of visual content:

"TEAR" - each sheet should be reduced to particles less than 1/10 size of the whole sheet[11]

The above instruction also bears implications regarding duration, since it takes some time to tear a piece of paper into very small pieces. The suggested overall duration of the piece is from ten to twelve and a half minutes, but the score also pragmatically proposes that the piece end when the paper supply is exhausted. In practice, however, the piece ends when the performer wants it to end.

At Columbia, Patterson noted that in performance, the score usually served as a point of departure for what was to follow: "Most of the performances started out more or less like that, but then they quickly took on their own character, which is just fine with me, which is what should happen."[12] Indeed, through improvisation, performers of *Paper Piece* explore the *sound* of sociality, intention, and consensus. Following the curator-theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, one can view this as a form of "relational art"—a type of work that proposes "moments of sociability."[13] In Bourriaud's terms, *Paper Piece* operates "like a relational device containing a certain degree of randomness, or a machine provoking and managing individual and group encounters."[14] Thus, the overarching effect of *Paper Piece* is of an emergent sound sculpture composed of physicality, relationality, conviviality, and the creation of community, like that of an arts and crafts workshop. Agency and control are shared among the experiencers, the work, and the artists themselves. Writing in 1964, Patterson declared, "I demanded of an experiencer (not a passive viewer or listener) to act in the position of performer, interpreter and even as creator in the event."[15]

It is also significant that *Paper Piece* welcomes nonspecialist performers; in fact, no "specialists" in paper performance existed when it was conceived, and thus the work could not imply a need for conventional displays of virtuosity. That it could be performed by "anyone" is an aspect of Patterson's work that later carried over into the pieces in *Methods and Processes*. In the Columbia seminar, Patterson recalled that his determined goal for *Paper Piece* was to create complex new music that anyone could perform: "There must be some other way to create a work that could have a certain amount of acoustic complexity, but could be performed by practically anyone with a sensitive ear at least, and without thirty years of study of the piano, violin, or whatever."[16]

A similar intent marked the methods of the pianist and composer Cecil Taylor's use of letter notation.[17] In rehearsals, Taylor dictated note names and melodic direction to the performers, for example, "start on B-flat, up to D, down to G-flat." Taylor's notational strategy allowed complex structures to be realized by a mixed cohort of players, from the highly classically trained to autodidact players with almost no relationship to Western notation.[18]

Paper Piece pushes the envelope even further. As Patterson has noted, "My pieces, as they appear on paper, have neither material nor abstract value . . . they can only achieve value in performance, and then only the personal value that the participant himself perceives about his own behavior and/or that of the society during and/or after the experience. In fact, any piece is just this: a person, who, consciously, does this or that. Everybody can do it."[19]

The level of precision of the notation in *Paper Piece* contrasts markedly with the indeterminacy of the result, which itself is telling in that many listeners could not discern the difference between precisely notated contemporary music scores of the 1950s and works for similar instrumentation composed according to chance operations, or even improvised. In this sense, does *Paper Piece*—whose score dutifully specifies the sizes, colors, types, qualities, and quantities of paper to be used, and the procedures for producing the sounds—present a humorous sendup of *Kontakte* and other works like it? As the musicologist Robert P. Morgan remarked on what was already happening in the mid-1950s:

> Stockhausen, Boulez, and their serialist colleagues had come to realize that the more precisely musical events were predetermined, the more random and haphazard they tended to sound. Since the nature of European serialism was to treat all musical elements as equal, the result often appeared to be a collection of disparate events with no perceptible effect upon,

> or connection with, one another. Any single event tended to sound "arbitrary" and could thus just as well be replaced by another.[20]

On the first evening of the Festum Fluxorum Fluxus at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1962, in response to the Kunstakademie faculty member and festival organizer Joseph Beuys, who had requested that some kind of manifesto regarding Fluxus be presented at the festival, the sounds of crumpling and tearing, apparently emanating from behind an onstage paper screen, announced the commencement of a performance of *Paper Piece*.[21] At some point, sheets of paper containing a text were dumped onto the heads of the audience. The authorship of this text was later attributed to Fluxus cofounder George Maciunas that became known as "The Fluxus Manifesto," which read in part:

> Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual," professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art,—PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM!" [. . .] PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART, Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be ~~fully~~ grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals. [. . .] FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.[22]

In Owen's account of the Düsseldorf event, the performance ended "as the paper screen was gradually torn to shreds, leaving a paper-strewn stage."[23] One could easily imagine copies of the manifesto being crumpled, rumpled, and bumpled in an implicitly satiric distancing from the very idea of "manifesto." At the Columbia seminar, Patterson observed that something like this "happened at the very first

performance, without even trying to do it. At every performance after that, paper drifted off into the audience off the stage by accident and everybody joined in. So it's now the big audience piece in which everybody participates, even though it may start on the stage."[24]

One account of the origin of *Paper Piece* dates it to 1959: "Benjamin Patterson, then visiting Germany to explore developments in experimental music, writes a letter to his family and offers a score, *Paper Piece*, as a Christmas gift and activity."[25] This account is not sourced, unfortunately, and it is at variance with Patterson's account of the origins of the work, which he says was in response to the 1960 premiere of Stockhausen's *Kontakte*.[26]

Regardless of why or for whom the piece was originally created, it has proved attractive to all types of audiences. Sheila O'Shea, an innovative music teacher at the School at Columbia University, a private elementary and middle school in New York affiliated with the university, discovered that even her youngest students responded to the piece. In 2018, O'Shea introduced her elementary-age students to the performance of instructional art and had them create their own text scores in the spirit of Fluxus. She said the students found performing *Paper Piece* "really refreshing and a release. . . . The words 'fun' and 'freeing' and 'release' came up many times."[27]

Reading O'Shea's account, it seems that this performance by her students, like most presentations of the piece, quickly developed into sheer joy and laughter. In comparing the student performance with the 1962 Düsseldorf event, it is interesting to remember that while a number of activities in *Paper Piece* are precisely specified, nothing in the score mentions the possibility of tossing about the bits of the torn paper, and yet that is what happened in both of these cases. This now traditional part of the performance seems to have come about as an inevitable outgrowth of simply tearing up paper, an act similar in intent

to the practice children have of building towers and then knocking them down.

As O'Shea observed,

> There is a sense of transgression. . . . People are allowed to tear up things and they don't have to put them back together again. It is almost like having permission to be bold, but not in a bad way—in a humorous and engaging way that hurts no one. There is an innocence and fun to it that the kids relate to, and they all felt a profound sense of respect for the project. They felt different inside and they all wanted the chance to do it again. Their eyes were bright and they looked enlivened. They thanked me for introducing them to art forms that they would never usually encounter and said that the experience changed how they look at art and what they view as art.[28]

The Düsseldorf performance rendered literally palpable the differences between *Paper Piece* and its negative image, *Kontakte*. The latter, as well as any other work that might require something like the fabled 120 hours of rehearsal, was clearly not intended to be consigned to the dustbin of history, given how much practice it took to perform it. Stockhausen, composer of *Kontakte*, and so many other composers of works from this era drew on the traditions of *Werktreue* in the hope that their creations would one day enter the museum of musical works, which, in this moment, before the philosophy of Lydia Goehr, had not yet become imaginary.[29] In the sharpest contrast to this aesthetic, as Patterson told his Columbia audience in 2011, "there is no definitive version" of *Paper Piece*.[30]

Thus, as the saxophonist and composer Eric Dolphy remarked in the concluding sonic epigraph of his celebrated 1964 album *Last Date*: "When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air. You can never capture it again."[31] Dolphy's pithy but potent comment makes common cause

with the deepest intent of *Paper Piece* and, indeed, Fluxus itself. As Patterson said on a 2002 recording of "Fluxus stories":

> An important part of Fluxus—early Fluxus, let's say—was that the manifestation of the art should be immaterial. That's why it became music or performance or events, or—"happenings" were a bit suspicious, but events were clear there. So it was something that you experience, and that was it. You couldn't take it away.[32]

Notes

1. Valerie Cassel Oliver, ed., *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013), 121.
2. Benjamin Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia University," video recording, 20 March 2011, private collection of George E. Lewis. For a similar account from Patterson about the origins of *Paper Piece*, see Kathy Goncharov and Benjamin Patterson, "Oral History Interview with Benjamin Patterson, 2009 May 22," Smithsonian Archives of American Art, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-benjamin-patterson-15685, accessed 21 May 2024.
3. Benjamin Patterson, *Methods and Processes* (Paris: self-published, 1962). For a historical and analytical account of the emergence and poetics of event scores, see Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," *October* 95 (Winter 2001): 55–89.
4. Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia" (1966), in *Dé-coll/age* 6, ed. Wolf Vostell (Frankfurt: Typos Verlag; New York: Something Else Press, 1967), available online at https://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/Higgins/intermedia2.html. In 1964 Dick Higgins remembered that even before meeting Patterson, he suspected that he was Black: "Actually Patterson's way of using periodic repeats and the blues feeling that this produced being so ingrained and natural struck me so much that when he first sent me a copy of methods and processes I wrote to him and guessed he was a negro." Quoted in Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village, 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 206. Along related lines, Patterson's emphasis on diversity of timbres and techniques recalls the composer Olly Wilson's 1992 theorization of the "heterogeneous sound ideal" in Black music: "The desirable musical sound texture is one that contains a combination

of diverse timbres [and a] fundamental bias for contrast of color—heterogeneity of sound rather than similarity of color or homogeneity." Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in Afrodiasporic Music," in *Signifying, Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagel Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 160.

5. Benjamin Patterson, *Paper Piece* (Cologne: self-published, 1959–60). The dynamic directions *ppp* and *fff* are abbreviations for *pianississimo* and *fortississimo*, which mean "very, very soft" and "very, very loud," respectively. Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 39, folder 33, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
6. Patterson, *Paper Piece*.
7. Patterson, *Paper Piece*.
8. Patterson, *Paper Piece*.
9. Patterson, *Paper Piece.*
10. Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia."
11. Patterson, *Paper Piece.*
12. Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia."
13. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002), 33.
14. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 30.
15. Benjamin Patterson, "Bekenntnis," in *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965), 241. Translation by the author.
16. Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia."
17. See Matthew Goodheart, "Freedom and Individuality in the Music of Cecil Taylor" (MA thesis, Mills College, 1996), 38.
18. Goodheart, "Freedom and Individuality," 38–39.
19. Patterson, "Bekenntnis," 245. Translation from the German by the author.
20. Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 371.
21. See Owen Smith, "Developing a Fluxable Forum: Early Performance and Publishing," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester, West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), 3–21.
22. Quoted in Smith, "Developing a Fluxable Forum," 3–4. An image of "The Fluxus Manifesto" (1963) is available on the Museum of Modern Art's website: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/127947.
23. Smith, "Developing a Fluxable Forum," 4.
24. Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia."
25. Oliver, *Radical Presence*, 121.
26. Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia University." Most accounts of the premiere of the work date it to 1960 in Cologne. See "Karlheinz

Stockhausen: Biography" (Stockhausen-Verlag, 2013), http://www.karlheinzstockhausen.org/karlheinz_stockhausen_short_biography_english.htm.

27. Sheila O'Shea, personal communication with the author, 15 March 2018.
28. O'Shea, personal communication.
29. The reference is to the discussion of *Werktreue*, or fealty to the original intent of notated compositions, in Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
30. Patterson, "Lecture at Columbia."
31. Eric Dolphy, final track on the album *Last Date*, [1965] 2008.
32. Ben Patterson, *Ben Patterson Tells Fluxus Stories (from 1962 to 2002)*, ? Records 7, 2002, compact disc.