

## Unplayable Music: Nancarrow for 4 Hands

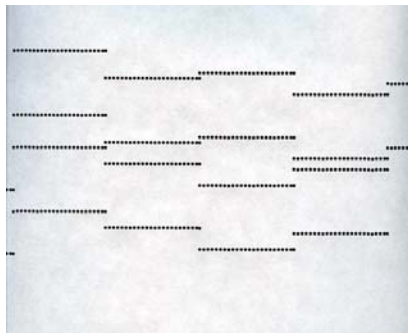
With Jonathan Fisher and Brenna Berman

Slought Foundation, a non-profit organization rethinking contemporary art, presents "Unplayable Music: Nancarrow for 4 Hands." This live concert on Friday June 18th, 2004, from 8:00 pm-10:00 pm, will address the relationship between technology, temporality and performance in the work of composer Conlon Nancarrow.

### **Program** (All works by Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997):

<i>Study For Player Piano No. 3a</i>	Player Piano
<i>Prelude</i>	Jonathan Fisher
<i>Study For Player Piano No. 3b</i>	Player Piano
<i>Study For Player Piano No. 26</i>	Player Piano
<i>Study No. 26 (4-hands transcription)</i>	Jonathan Fisher & Brenna Berman
<i>Study For Player Piano No. 3d</i>	Player Piano
<i>Blues</i>	Brenna Berman
<i>Study For Player Piano No. 20</i>	Player Piano
<i>Study No. 20 (4-hands transcription)</i>	Jonathan Fisher & Brenna Berman

*Concert duration: Approximately 1.2 hours. No intermission.*



**Conlon Nancarrow** (1912 – 1997) was reputedly frustrated by the limitations of human performers, specifically by their inability to handle complex rhythms. "As long as I've been writing music I've been dreaming of getting rid of the performers," he said in an interview. Additionally, the variability of human performance bothered him: "A painting stays the same forever. The same is true of other works of art. But somehow music is supposed to be different all the time." To experiment with the interaction of the music, performer, and audience, we present Nancarrow's music for self-playing player piano alongside arrangements of these pieces for human piano 4-hands performance. In addition, works for solo piano by Nancarrow will be performed.

Recognized worldwide as one of the most innovative composers of the 20th century, Conlon Nancarrow began composing exclusively for the player piano in the late 1940s. He studied composition with Nicolas Slonimsky, Walter Piston, and Roger Sessions. His musical collaborators included Elliot Carter and Aaron Copland. Nancarrow's piano works span several volumes of studies (published by Frog Peak Music and Schott Musik International) and are influenced by blues, jazz, and mathematical proportion studies. The complete Studies have been recorded on the Wergo label. In addition to his player piano works (and concerto for player piano), Nancarrow also composed both solo and ensemble instrumental music for human performance.

## The Transcriptions

Supposedly “un-playable” by humans, the studies for player piano demand both extremely large keyboard span at any one time as well as independently capable hands in order to fully voice the many nested rhythmic structures. While these compositions were originally in piano roll format, some of them have been published as sheet music by Soundings Press. These transcriptions by Fisher are based on these published versions. In transcribing these selected pieces for piano 4-hands, many of the issues can be sufficiently dealt with. There are, however, layers of detail in the player piano compositions that cannot be achieved with perfect accuracy by human performance. For practical performance considerations, some of this detail is inaudible. For instance, in Study No. 20, a study in durations, the transcriptions instruct the pianists to be faithful to the onset of each note, rather than the durations for which they are sustained. In Study No. 26, a canon in seven voices, the enormous span of some of the chords exceed the abilities of even two pianists, thus some of the chords are rolled. While rolling of the chords technically destroys the intended simultaneity of the voices by playing some of the notes out of order, it is also an expressive technique that highlights the extreme range and weight of the particular passages. Though the transcriptions do not “equal” the studies, they provide another view of the studies, emphasizing the lyrical freedom, energy, and humor in these numerically precise works.

**Study For Player Piano No. 3 [a, b, d]** are early works by Nancarrow that he later grouped together as part of the “Boogie-woogie Suite.” They use typical “I, IV, V” blues structure as the platform for his initial experiments in acceleration, isorhythm, and rhythmic tendencies based on the Fibonacci series (“The Golden Mean”), the mathematical series in which each number is the sum of the previous two: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34...

**Prelude and Blues for Solo Piano:** this set of two pieces written for solo piano contains many of the musical elements found in the early Studies for Player Piano, particularly Study No. 3. Similar to concurrent works by Aaron Copland, these works combine fragments of popular music (ragtime, stride piano, blues) with an array of experimental rhythmic forms. Particular attention is given to rhythmic acceleration and syncopation.

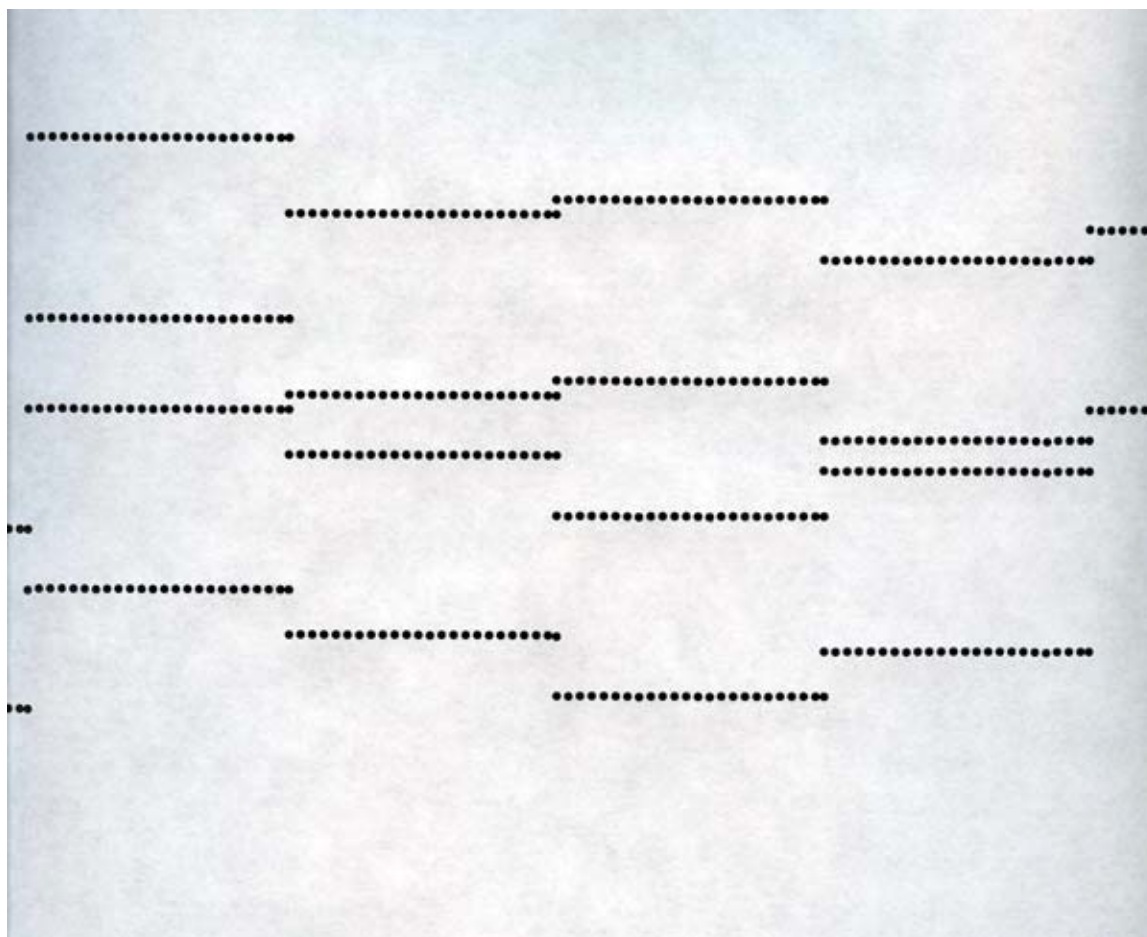
**Study For Player Piano No. 26** is considered an anomaly among Nancarrow’s works. In this 7-voice canon, he abandons complex rhythms for the simplest rhythm possible; all voices are notated in whole notes with a tempo ratio of 1:1 for the duration of the piece. The canon’s subject is composed of a 122-note melody, doubled by octaves in all voices, and divided by rests to create 27 sub-phrases of various lengths. Nancarrow humorously places the rests such that, in the climactic middle of the piece, the rests in all seven voices coincide for a dramatic anti-climax with a measure of silence. The canon’s melody spans an octave and relies heavily on half-step intervals. The minor sixth heard at the opening also play a significant role, as well as the unanticipated ascending fourth at the conclusion. Although harmony was probably not Nancarrow’s main concern here, its unpredictable nature and sporadic exquisite moments contribute to the study’s particular charm.

**Study For Player Piano No. 20** is markedly different from earlier works of Nancarrow. Similar in style to later works by Ligeti and Xenakis, it is a beautiful canon of rhythmic durations; thus the length each note is sustained is paramount to the melodic structure. The piece is divided into five sections, each of which is based on six adjacent notes. Unlike many of the other Studies, the notes in No. 20 have a minimum duration increment of 1/3 cm measured on a piano roll, and each duration is a multiple of this time value. This makes transcription of the durations into note values possible using a metric ruler. While much of this detailed musical structure is not audible, musical gesture and rhythmic drive become the most salient features to the ear. In the final section, the rhythmic and melodic canons are combined such that the voices seem to arrive at, but then fall out of, “synch” resulting in a “chasing” effect across the full range of the keyboard.

**Jonathan Fisher** received his bachelors and masters degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. He has played in masterclasses with Edna Golandsky, Dorothy Taubman, Ian Hobson, Father Sean Duggan, Temuri Akhobadze, and Blanca Uribe, among others. In addition to his work on the music of Conlon Nancarrow, he has played in concerts throughout the USA and in Italy, and has given solo performances in Philadelphia. He currently studies with Robert Durso in Philadelphia.

**Brenna Berman** earned her Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance at Oberlin Conservatory and her Master of Arts in Piano Performance at Hunter College in New York. She has given solo performances in New Mexico, Colorado, Ohio, and New York. She has taught privately for six years as well as at Drexel University. She currently studies with Robert Durso in Philadelphia.

*This program is made possible in part through the generous sponsorship or support of Wolfgang Heisig, Rex Lawson, Kyle Gann, Richard Groman, and John Califra*



***Study No. 26 for Player Piano by Conlon Nancarrow***  
(Courtesy Wolfgang Heisig, Germany)

A handwritten musical score for Study No. 20 for Player Piano, featuring eight staves. The score is annotated with various markings for transcription. At the top, three measures are labeled with handwritten numbers: '33.', 'm151', 'm152', and 'm153'. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'p' (piano) and 'f' (forte). Blue arrows indicate fingerings or articulation, while red circles highlight specific notes or groups of notes. Vertical green lines connect corresponding notes across the staves, likely indicating a specific voicing or harmonic structure. The bottom of the page is marked with '(20)'.

**Transcription process for Study No. 20 for Player Piano, by Conlon Nancarrow**  
(Arrangement by Jonathan Fisher)

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Study No. 20 for Player Piano" by Conlon Nancarrow, transcribed for piano 4-hands. The score is arranged for two pianos (Pno) and consists of two systems. The first system starts at measure 130 and ends at measure 17. The second system starts at measure 134 and ends at measure 17. The notation includes treble and bass staves for each piano, with various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals. The score is marked with (S) and 17.

**Study No. 20 for Player Piano, by Conlon Nancarrow, and transcribed for piano 4-hands**  
(Music by Nancarrow, Arrangement by Fisher)