

*This lecture was printed in Incontri Musicali, August 1959. There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the rhythmic structure. There are forty-eight such units, each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five large parts, in the proportion 7, 6, 14, 14, 7. The forty-eight measures of each unit are likewise so divided. The text is printed in four columns to facilitate a rhythmic reading. Each line is to be read across the page from left to right, not down the columns in sequence. This should not be done in an artificial manner (which might result from an attempt to be too strictly faithful to the position of the words on the page), but with the rubato which one uses in everyday speech.*

## LECTURE ON NOTHING

I am here , and there is nothing to say .  
 those who wish to get somewhere , If among you are  
 any moment . What we re-quire is  
 silence ; but what silence requires  
 is that I go on talking .  
 a push : it falls down easily  
 ; but the pusher and the pushed pro-duce that enter-  
 tainment called a dis-cussion .  
 Shall we have one later ?

¶

Or , we could simply de-cide not to have a dis-  
 cussion . What ever you like . But  
 now there are silences and the  
 words make help make the  
 silences .

I have nothing to say

and I am saying it and that is  
 poetry as I need it .

is organized

We need not fear these silences, —

¶

we may love them

This is a composed

talk

for I am making it

just as I make

a piece of music.

of milk

We need the

and we need the

milk

Or again

It is like a glass

glass

it is like an

empty glass

into which

at any

moment

anything

may be poured

As we go along

(who knows?)

an i-dea may occur in this

talk

I have no idea

whether one will

or not.

If one does,

let it.

Re-

gard it as something

seen

momentarily

as

though

from a window

while traveling

If across Kansas

then, of course,

Kansas

Arizona

is more interesting,

almost too interesting

especially for a New-Yorker

who is

being interested

in spite of himself

in everything.

Now he knows he

needs

the Kansas in him

Kansas is like

nothing on earth

and for a New Yorker

very refreshing.

It is like an empty glass,

nothing but wheat

or

is it corn

?

Does it matter which

?

Kansas

has this about it:

at any instant,

one may leave it,

and whenever one wishes one may return to it

Or you may leave it

forever

and never return to it

for we pos-sess nothing

Our poetry now

is the reali-zation

that we possess

nothing

Anything

therefore

is a delight

(since we do not

pos-sess it)

and thus

need not fear its loss

We need not destroy the

past:

it is gone;

at any moment,

it might reappear and

seem to be

and be the present

Would it be a

repetition?

Only if we thought we

owned it,

but since we don't,

it is free

and so are we

and how un-certain it is

Most anybody knows a-bout the future

What I am calling poetry is often called content.  
I myself have called it form . It is the conti-  
nuity of a piece of music. Continuity today,  
when it is necessary , is a demonstration of dis-  
interestedness. That is, it is a proof that our delight  
lies in not pos-essing anything . Each moment  
presents what happens . How different  
this form sense is from that which is bound up with  
memory: themes and secondary themes; their struggle;  
their development; the climax; the recapitulation (which is the belief  
that one may own one's own home) . But actually,  
unlike the snail , we carry our homes within us,  
which enables us to fly or to stay  
, — to enjoy each. But beware of  
that which is breathtakingly beautiful, for at any moment  
the telephone may ring or the airplane  
come down in a vacant lot . A piece of string  
or a sunset , possessing neither ,  
each acts and the continuity happens  
. Nothing more than nothing can be said.  
Hearing or making this in music is not different  
— only simpler — than living this way .  
Simpler, that is , for me, — because it happens  
that I write music .  
¶ ¶  
That music is simple to make comes from one's willingness to ac-  
cept the limitations of structure. Structure is  
simple be-cause it can be thought out, figured out,  
measured . It is a discipline which,  
accepted, in return accepts whatever , even those  
rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses,  
train us to make what we make . How could I

better tell what structure is than simply to  
tell about this, this talk which is  
contained within a space of time approximately  
forty minutes long ?

That forty minutes has been divided into five large parts, and  
each unit is divided likewise. Subdivision in-  
volving a square root is the only possible subdivision which  
permits this micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure ,  
which I find so acceptable and accepting .  
As you see, I can say anything .  
It makes very little difference what I say or even how I say it.  
At this par-ticular moment, we are passing through the fourth  
part of a unit which is the second unit in the second large  
part of this talk . It is a little bit like passing through Kansas  
of that second unit .  
This, now, is the end

Now begins the third unit of the second part .  
second part of that third unit .  
Now its third part .

part (which, by the way, Now its fourth  
length as the third part) is just the same

Now the fifth and last part

You have just ex-perienced the structure of this talk from a  
microcosmic point of view . From a macrocosmic  
point of view we are just passing the halfway point in the second  
large part. The first part was a rather rambling discussion of  
nothing , of form, and continuity

when it is the way we now need it. This second  
part is about structure: how simple it is  
, what it is and why we should be willing to  
accept its limitations. Most speeches are full of  
ideas. This one doesn't have to have any  
. But at any moment an idea may come along  
. Then we may enjoy it .

Structure without life is dead. But Life without  
structure is un-seen . Pure life  
expresses itself within and through structure  
. Each moment is absolute, alive and sig-  
nificant. Blackbirds rise from a field making a  
sound de-licious be-yond com-pare  
. I heard them  
because I ac-cepted the limitations of an arts  
conference in a Virginia girls' finishing school, which limitations  
allowed me quite by accident to hear the blackbirds  
as they flew up and overhead . There was a social  
calendar and hours for breakfast , but one day I saw a

cardinal , and the same day heard a woodpecker.  
I also met America's youngest college president .  
However, she has resigned, and people say she is going into politics  
. Let her. Why shouldn't she? I also had the  
pleasure of hearing an eminent music critic ex-claim  
that he hoped he would live long e-nough to see the end  
of this craze for Bach. A pupil once said to me: I  
understand what you say about Beethoven and I think  
I agree but I have a very serious question to  
ask you: How do you feel about Bach  
? Now we have come to the end of the  
part about structure .

However, it oc-curs to me to say more about structure  
. Specifically this: We are  
now at the be-ginning of the third part and that part

is not the part about material. clear from that as we have seen, ginning to get	devoted But I'm still talking that structure form nowhere	to structure. about structure. has has no point either. .	It's the part It must be no point, Clearly we are be-	and,
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all I have	Unless some to say about structure	other i-dea crops up .	a-bout it that is
Now about It is and it certain.	material: isn't If one is making the one making must he chooses. which is precisely something that was being made; whereas	is it interesting . something love Otherwise , or nothing is anonymous .	? But one thing is which is to be nothing and be patient with he calls attention to the whereas it was he calls attention to .
, the material material, nothing himself, what structure as a	The technique discipline is a means	of handling materials on the rational level of experiencing	is, on the sense level : nothing

I remember loving . . That was because this year of course will go on	sound And so we make our (Last year I was talking I am talking talking	before I ever lives when I talked here about something about nothing for a long time	took a music lesson by what we love I made a short talk. ; .) The other day a using only ."	but and
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pupil said, three tones,	after trying to compose "I	a melody felt limited	
her materials	Had she —	con-cerned herself she would not	with the three tones — have felt limited

, there would not have	and been	since materials any limitation.	are without feeling, It was all in her
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mind , whereas it be-longed in the  
 materials . It became something  
 by not being nothing; it would have been nothing by being  
 something .

materials characteristic of one's time ?  
 Now there's a question that ought to get us somewhere  
 . It is an intel-lectual question  
 . I shall answer it slowly and  
 autobiographically .

I remember as a child loving all the sounds  
 , even the unprepared ones. I liked them  
 especially when there was one at a time .  
 A five-finger exercise for one hand was  
 full of beauty . Later on I  
 gradually liked all the intervals .

I realize that I be-gan liking the octave ; As I look back  
 major and minor thirds. Perhaps, of all the intervals, I accepted the  
 I liked these thirds least . Through the music of  
 Grieg, I became passionately fond of the fifth

Or perhaps you could call it puppy-dog love ,  
 for the fifth did not make me want to write music: it made me want to de-  
 vote my life to playing the works of Grieg .  
 When later I heard modern music,  
 I took, like a duck to water, to all the modern intervals: the sevenths, the  
 seconds, the tritone, and the fourth .  
 I liked Bach too a-bout this time , but I  
 didn't like the sound of the thirds and sixths. What I admired in  
 Bach was the way many things went together  
 . As I keep on re-mem-bering, I see that I never  
 really liked the thirds, and this explains why I never really  
 liked Brahms .

Modern music fascinated me with all its modern intervals: the  
 sevenths, the seconds, the tritone, and the fourth and  
 always, every now and then, there was a fifth, and that pleased me  
 . Sometimes there were single tones, not intervals at  
 all, and that was a de-light. There were so many in-  
 tervals in modern music that it fascinated me rather than that I loved it, and being  
 fascinated by it I de-cided to write it. Writing it at  
 first is difficult: that is, putting the mind on it  
 takes the ear off it . However, doing it alone,  
 I was free to hear that a high sound is different from a  
 low sound even when both are called by the same letter. After several years of  
 working alone , I began to feel lonely.

Studying with a teacher, I learned that the intervals have  
 meaning; they are not just sounds but they imply  
 in their progressions a sound not actually present to the ear  
 . Tonality. I never liked tonality .  
 I worked at it . Studied it. But I never had any  
 feeling for it : for instance: there are some pro-  
 gressions called de-ceptive cadences. The idea is this: progress in such a way  
 as to imply the presence of a tone not actually present; then  
 fool everyone by not landing on it — land somewhere else. What is being  
 fooled ? Not the ear but the mind  
 . The whole question is very intellectual .  
 However modern music still fascinated me

with all its modern intervals . But in order to  
 have them , the mind had fixed it so that one had to a-  
 void having pro-gressions that would make one think of sounds that were  
 not actually present to the ear . Avoiding  
 did not ap-peal to me . I began to see  
 that the separation of mind and ear had spoiled the sounds  
 , — that a clean slate was necessary. This made me  
 not only contemporary , but "avant-garde." I used noises  
 . They had not been in-tellectualized; the ear could hear them  
 directly and didn't have to go through any abstraction a-bout them

liked intervals. I found that I liked noises just as much as I had liked noises even more than I liked single sounds

¶

had been dis-criminated against ; and being American,  
having been trained to be sentimental, I fought for noises. I liked being  
on the side of the underdog .  
I got police per-mission to play sirens. The most amazing noise  
I ever found was that produced by means of a coil of wire attached to the  
pickup arm of a phonograph and then amplified. It was shocking,  
really shocking, and thunderous . Half intellectually and  
half sentimentally , when the war came a-long, I decided to use  
only quiet sounds . There seemed to me  
to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society.

¶

But quiet sounds were like loneliness , or  
love or friendship . Permanent, I thought  
, values, independent at least from  
Life, Time and Coca-Cola . I must say  
I still feel this way , but something else is happening  
: I begin to hear the old sounds  
— the ones I had thought worn out, worn out by  
intellectualization— I begin to hear the old sounds as  
though they are not worn out . Obviously, they are  
not worn out . They are just as audible as the  
new sounds. Thinking had worn them out .  
And if one stops thinking about them, suddenly they are

¶

fresh and new. "If you think you are a ghost  
you will become a ghost ." Thinking the sounds  
worn out wore them out . So you see  
: this question brings us back  
where we were: nowhere , or,  
if you like , where we are .  
I have a story: "There was once a man

standing on a high elevation. A company of several men who happened to be walking on the road noticed from the distance the man standing on the high place and talked among themselves about this man. One of them said: He must have lost his favorite animal. Another man said

: No, it must be his friend whom he is looking for. A third one said: He is just enjoying the cool air up there. The three could not a-gree and the dis-

ussion (Shall we have one later?) went on until they reached the high place where the man was . One of the three asked: O, friend standing up there , have you not lost your pet animal ? No, sir, I have not lost any . The second man asked : Have you not lost your friend ? No, sir , I have not lost my friend either . The third man asked: Are you not enjoying the fresh breeze up there? No, sir , I am not . What, then , are you standing up there for , if you say no , to all our questions ? The man on high said :

I just stand .” If there are no questions, there are no answers . If there are questions , then, of course, there are answers , but the final answer makes the questions seem absurd , whereas the questions, up until then, seem more intelligent than the answers . Somebody asked De- bussy how he wrote music. He said: I take all the tones there are, leave out the ones I don't want, and use all the others . Satie said : When I was young, people told me: You'll see when you're fifty years old . Now I'm fifty . I've seen nothing .

Here we are now at the beginning of the fourth large part of this talk. More and more I have the feeling that we are getting nowhere. Slowly , as the talk goes on , we are getting nowhere and that is a pleasure



	which will continue	.	If we are irritated
,	it is not a pleasure	.	Nothing is not a
pleasure	if one is irritated	,	but suddenly
,	it is a pleasure	,	and then more and more
	it is not irritating	,	(and then more and more
	and slowly	).	Originally
	we were nowhere	;	and now, again
,	we are having	the pleasure	
of being	slowly	nowhere.	If anybody
is sleepy	,	let him go to sleep	.
		mp	

Here we are now			at the beginning	of the
fifth unit	of the fourth large part		of this talk.	

More and more		I have the feeling	that we are getting
nowhere.	Slowly	,	as the talk goes on
,	we are getting	nowhere	and that is a pleasure
.	It is not irritating	to be where one is	. It is
only irritating	to think one would like	to be somewhere else.	Here we are now
,	a little bit after the	beginning	of the fifth unit
fourth large part		of this talk	of the

	More and more	we have the feeling	
	that I am getting	nowhere	.
	Slowly	,	as the talk goes on
		mp	

,	slowly	,	we have the feeling
	we are getting	nowhere.	That is a pleasure

	which will continue	.	If we are irritated
,	it is not a pleasure	.	Nothing is not a
pleasure	if one is irritated	,	but suddenly
,	it is a pleasure	,	and then more and more
	it is not irritating	,	(and then more and more
	and slowly	).	Originally
	we were nowhere	;	and now, again
,	we are having	the pleasure	
of being	slowly	nowhere.	If anybody
is sleepy	,	let him go to sleep	.
		mp	

Here we are now

of the fourth large part

More and more  
nowhere.

Slowly

we are getting

only irritating

It is not irritating  
to think one would like  
a little bit after the

fourth large part

More and more  
that I am getting  
Slowly

slowly

we are getting

which will continue

pleasure

it is not a pleasure

if one is irritated

it is a pleasure

it is not irritating

and slowly

we were nowhere

we are having

slowly

of being  
is sleepy

,

Here we are now  
ninth unit

of the fourth large part

More and more  
nowhere.

Slowly

we are getting

only irritating

It is not irritating  
to think one would like  
a little bit after the

fourth large part

More and more

at the middle

of this talk.

I have the feeling

,

nowhere

to be where one is

to be somewhere else.

middle

of this talk

we have the feeling

nowhere

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⌘

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nowhere.

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;

the pleasure

nowhere.

let him go to sleep

⌘

that we are getting

as the talk goes on

and that is a pleasure

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It is

Here we are now

of the

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as the talk goes on

we have the feeling

That is a pleasure

If we are irritated

Nothing is not

a

but suddenly

and then more and more

(and then more and more

Originally

and now, again

If anybody

.

at the beginning

of the

of this talk.

I have the feeling

,

nowhere

to be where one is

to be somewhere else.

beginning

of this talk

we have the feeling

that we are getting

as the talk goes on

and that is a pleasure

.

It is

Here we are now

of the ninth unit

of the

.

	that I am getting	nowhere	
	Slowly	,	as the talk goes on
		mp	
,	slowly	,	we have the feeling
	we are getting	nowhere.	That is a pleasure
	which will continue	.	If we are irritated
,	it is not a pleasure	.	Nothing is not a
pleasure	if one is irritated	,	but suddenly
,	it is a pleasure	,	and then more and more
	it is not irritating	.	(and then more and more
	and slowly	).	Originally
	we were nowhere	;	and now, again
,	we are having	the pleasure	
of being	slowly	nowhere.	If anybody
is sleepy	,	let him go to sleep	.
		mp	

Here we are now			at the beginning	of the
eleventh unit	of the fourth large part		of this talk.	
More and more		I have the feeling	that we are getting	
nowhere.	Slowly	,	as the talk goes on	
,	we are getting	nowhere	and that is a pleasure	
.	It is not irritating	to be where one is	.	It is
only irritating	to think one would like	to be somewhere else.	Here we are now	
,	a little bit after the	beginning	of the eleventh unit	of the
fourth large part		of this talk	.	
	More and more	we have the feeling		
	that I am getting	nowhere	.	
	Slowly	,	as the talk goes on	
		mp		
,	slowly	,	we have the feeling	
	we are getting	nowhere.	That is a pleasure	
	which will continue	.	If we are irritated	
,	it is not a pleasure	.	Nothing is not a	
pleasure	if one is irritated	,	but suddenly	
,	it is a pleasure	,	and then more and more	
	it is not irritating	.	(and then more and more	

	and slowly	).	Originally
	we were nowhere	;	and now, again
, of being is sleepy	we are having slowly	the pleasure nowhere.	If anybody
	,	let him go to sleep	.
		⌘	
Here we are now teenth unit	of the fourth large part		at the beginning of the thir- of this talk.
More and more nowhere.	Slowly we are getting	I have the feeling ,	that we are getting as the talk goes on and that is a pleasure
,	It is not irritating	to be where one is	. It is
. only irritating	to think one would like	to be somewhere else.	Here we are now
,	a little bit after the	beginning of the	thir-teenth unit of the
fourth large part		of this talk	.
	More and more that I am getting	we have the feeling nowhere	.
	Slowly	,	as the talk goes on
		⌘	
,	slowly we are getting	,	we have the feeling
	which will continue	nowhere.	That is a pleasure
,	it is not a pleasure	.	If we are irritated
pleasure	if one is irritated	.	Nothing is not a
,	it is a pleasure	,	but suddenly
,	it is not irritating	,	and then more and more
	and slowly	).	(and then more and more
	we were nowhere	).	Originally
,	we are having	;	and now, again
of being is sleepy	slowly	the pleasure nowhere.	If anybody
	,	let him go to sleep	.
		⌘ ⌘	

MP

MP

That is finished	now.	It was a pleasure	.
	And now	,	this is a pleasure.
“Read me that part	a-gain	where I disin-herit everybody	.”
	The twelve-tone	row	is a method; a
method is a control		of each	single
note.	There is too much	there there	.
There is not enough	of nothing in it	.	A structure is
like	a bridge from nowhere	to	nowhere and
anyone may	go on it	:	noises or tones
,	corn or wheat	.	Does it matter which
?	I thought there were eighty-eight tones	.	
	You can quarter them too	.	

MP

If it were feet	,	would it be a two-tone row
?	Or can we fly from here	to where

?	I have nothing	against the	twelve-tone row;
but it is a	method,	not a structure	.
We really do need a	structure	,	so we can see
we are nowhere	.	Much of the music I	love
uses the twelve-tone	row	,	but that is not why I
love it.	I love it	for no reason	.
.	I love it	for suddenly	I am nowhere
.	(My own music does that	quickly for me	.)
to Japanese	And it seems to me	I could	listen forever
	shakuhachi music		or the Navajo

¶

Yeibitchai	.		Or I could sit or
stand		near Richard Lippold's	<i>Full Moon</i>
	any length of time	.	
	Chinese bronzes	, —	how I love them

.	which others	have made,	But those beauties
.	the need to possess		tend to stir up
I possess	nothing	.	and I know
	Record collections	, —	
	that is not music	.	

¶

The phonograph	is a thing, —	not a musical	instrument
.	A thing leads to other things,	whereas a	musical instrument
leads to nothing	.		

?	Would you like to join	a society called	Capitalists Inc.
Anyone joining	(Just so no one would	think we were	Communists.)
To join	automatically	becomes president	.
records	you must show	you've destroyed	at least one hundred
.	or, in the case of	tape,	one sound mirror
any piece of music		To imagine you	own
.		is to miss	the whole point
and even	There is no point	or the point	is nothing;
	a long-playing	record	is a thing.

¶

A lady	from Texas	said:	I live in Texas	.
music in Texas	We have no music	in Texas.	The reason they've no	
in Texas.		is because	they have recordings	
	Remove the records from Texas			
	and someone	will learn to sing		
	Everybody	has a song		
	which is	no	song at all :	
	it is a process	of singing	,	
	and when you sing	,		
	you are	where you are	.	

All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know nothing.

∩ ∩

#### Afernote to LECTURE ON NOTHING

*In keeping with the thought expressed above that a discussion is nothing more than an entertainment, I prepared six answers for the first six questions asked, regardless of what they were. In 1949 or '50, when the lecture was first delivered (at the Artists' Club as described in the Foreword), there were six questions. In 1960, however, when the speech was delivered for the second time, the audience got the point after two questions and, not wishing to be entertained, refrained from asking anything more.*

*The answers are:*

1. *That is a very good question. I should not want to spoil it with an answer.*
2. *My head wants to ache.*
3. *Had you heard Marya Freund last April in Palermo singing Arnold Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire, I doubt whether you would ask that question.*
4. *According to the Farmers' Almanac this is False Spring.*
5. *Please repeat the question . . .  
And again . . .  
And again . . .*
6. *I have no more answers.*