



tone |tōn|

noun

- 1 *Music*: A sound of distinct pitch, timbre, strength, and duration; a note.
- 2 *Mood*: The general character, attitude or atmosphere of a place, piece of writing, situation, etc.
- 3 *Phonetics*: The pitch of a word or phrase used to distinguish differences in meaning.
- 4 *Color*: The effect of brightness, deepness, hue and intensity on a particular tint or shade.
- 5 *Physiology*: The normal level of firmness in a muscle, tissue or organ of the body.

12 tones

A dozen bodies collide with a dozen pieces of music over the course of a calendar year.

Every month a different composer writes a short score for a group of vocalists. The vocalists then turn that score into movement.

Meanwhile each composer converts their composition into an instrumental work.

After a year of monthly compositions, each yielding two performed arrangements, we arrive at 12 compositions, each with a distinct sound, mood and color—12 Tones.





When twelve-tone composer Karlheinz Stockhausen gave concerts in New York in 1964, there were protests. A few years earlier the German composer had said that jazz music was “primitive” and “barbaric” and “garbage” during a lecture at Harvard. Demonstrators called him a “patrician theorist of white supremacy” and showed up en masse “to expose and fight the domination of white, European-U.S. ruling class art.” The combined roster of Stockhausen’s performers inside the concert hall and the noted protesters outside read like a who’s-who of New York’s avant-garde, and without checking, it’s hard to guess who would have been on which side of the picket line: Ay-O, George Brecht, Robert Delford Brown, Robert Breer, Tony Conrad, Henry Flynt, Allen Ginsberg, Dick Higgins, Allen Kaprow, Michael Kirby, George Maciunas, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Takako Saito—Which side were you on? And where the hell was LeRoi Jones?

That same year West Coast composer Steve Reich dissented against Stockhausenism by another means. In college Reich rebelled against his twelve-tone composition assignments, framing its Euro-whiteness in a similar light as the critics in New York did, but from a different angle. In an ITV interview Reich said, “This is not Europe, this is America. John Coltrane is playing at the jazz workshop, hamburgers are being sold, there is Motown on the radio. How can you pretend, in a world like that, that you’re living in the dark brown angst of Vienna at the turn of the century?” Reich’s early pieces took inspiration from Black voices: a sermon by a Pentecostal preacher named Brother Walter, the testimony of police brutality survivor Daniel Hamm, and John Coltrane’s *Africa/Brass*, of which he’d say, “The piece that made the biggest impression on me is a half an hour on E. And you would say, ‘Well, it’s impossible. It’s going to be boring, You can’t sustain that...’ But he did.”

"You can play a shoestring if you're sincere."
—John Coltrane

I share Coltrane's and Reich's view on drawing forth new music out of the environment and emotion in which it's created. I also share their aesthetic for choosing a narrower palette of sonic color to create aural morays of rhythm and phase. In our 2013 play *Meet the Mediums*, music director Dorie Byrne and I had adapted Reich's technique for converting the lilt of speech into instrumental music, as heard on his 1988 recording of *Different Trains* and in the more recent voice-to-piano syntheses of Peter Ablinger. In expanding this experiment, as Reich had 50 years hence, I wanted to subvert the notion that "twelve

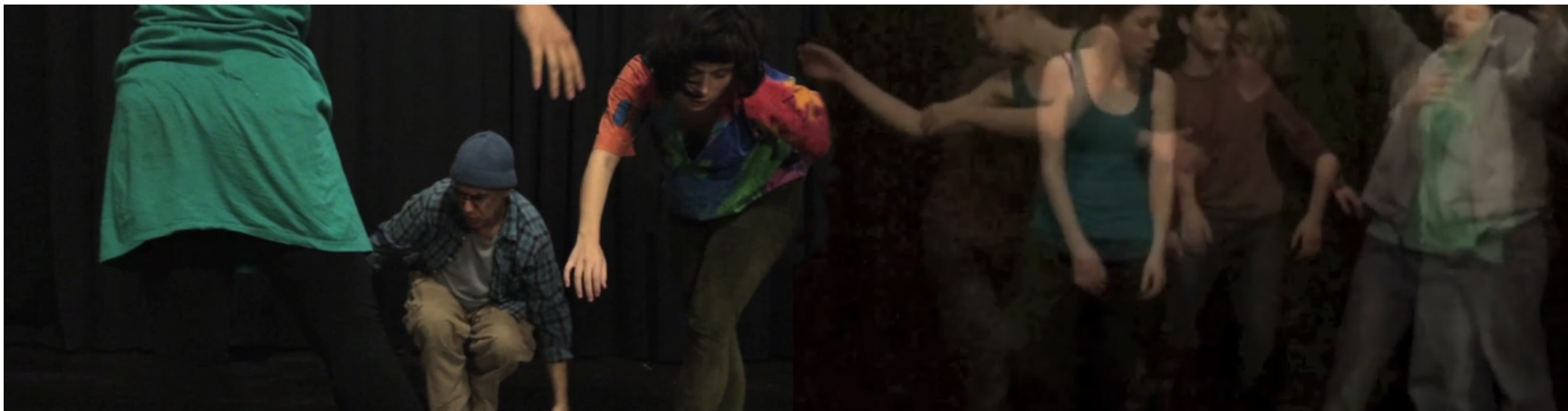
tone music" bore a stern and sometimes alienating experimental performance aesthetic. That subversion would be in expanding twelve tones beyond the western musical scale, embellishing many other meanings of "tone": visible colors, discernable moods, phonetics of speech, and the feel of muscle tissue. Dorie and I had already transfigured movement of vocal chords and mouths into movement of hands upon an instrument. Now we'd work with groups of people to expand the vibration of voice into choreographies of many bodies to build a dozen different pieces of dance theatre: 12 Tones.



"I must find a way to let people be free without their becoming foolish. So that their freedom will make them noble."
—John Cage

A lot has happened pedagogically since John Cage first expressed frustration with creating and staging chance composition in workshop settings during the 1950s. Several decades later Philadelphia finds itself rife with artists influenced by Cagean ways of working, not just in chance music, but also in improv dance and devised theatre. I invited people with any combo of these in their background to three workshops where we played with some ideas for this project called 12 Tones. In the first session I led two trios through vocal and movement work based on the seven *chakras*, aligning certain vowel sounds with

ranges of pitch and motion. Then each trio added consonants and turned two-word phrases into small movement pieces. In the second session, Dorie Byrne led some voice exercises, which I built off of by threading them into a structure for three quartets of sound-to-movement composition. The project ran aground in our third session when I invited a composer friend to screen a video score that didn't mesh with what the people in the room could do. So in the spring of 2015 I shelved 12 Tones to focus on other projects, but some powerful seeds had been planted. The following videos document this work.



Videos

Videos 1 from November 4, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1N5ufn4Wsd4>



Videos 2 from November 11, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTxiTPwg1-E>



12 Tones

Workshop #2