

Program Notes



From the outset it is important to know that David Porter loves puns. The title of his program is, in fact, a pun on the title of one of Johann Sebastian Bach's most famous works, "The Well-Tempered Clavier," a series of 48 keyboard exercises published in two volumes in 1722 and 1742. The *clavier* referred to in the title denotes a keyboard instrument. The phrase *well-tempered*, or "well-tuned," has to do with a tuning system developed in the early eighteenth century that allowed for a harmonious relationship between notes played in both major and minor keys.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a revolution in the arts, as many artists challenged or rejected traditional, established ideas: painters explored new ways of seeing, and writers explored new ways of dealing with time and point of view, and thus "truth." Composers also experimented with new melodies and harmonies and new instrumentations, encouraging those interested in music to listen to and appreciate non-traditional musical creations. Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, and John Cage were three of the major figures in this modernist movement in music.



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*The Alfred M. Zeien Lecture Series
Presents:*

Dr. David Porter

**The Well-Tampered Clavier:
Play—Musical and Otherwise**



*A program of twentieth-century
piano music*

by Charles Ives, Henry Cowell,
and John Cage

October 28, 2015
7:30 PM



About David Porter



David Porter received a B.A. degree from Swarthmore College and a Ph.D. in Classics from Princeton University. He retired in 2013 after 51 years of teaching classics, English, and music at Carleton, Princeton, Williams, Indiana, and Skidmore, often in named chairs. During his academic career he also served as president of both Carleton College and Skidmore. In 2011 Carleton College conferred on him the honorary degree Doctor of Humane Letters.

He has been doing strange things with and to pianos for decades, and while he was president of Skidmore (1987-99) he inflicted programs such as tonight's on each new first-year class. He has given piano recitals throughout the U.S. and in the U.K. and is the author of eleven books on Horace, Greek tragedy, pianist Edward Steuermann, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, and, with Helen Porter, on Lucy Scribner, Skidmore's founder (2011). His edition of *Lucy Gayheart* for the Cather Scholarly Edition was published in August 2015.

THE WELL-TAMPERED CLAVIER: PLAY—MUSICAL AND OTHERWISE



David Porter, pianist (both prepared and unprepared)

The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object. Suddenly—miraculously—it will look like something we have never seen before.

—Cesare Pavese (1908-50), *Dialogues With Leucò*

Excerpts from First and Second Piano Sonatas (1903-13?) —Charles Ives (1874-1954)

It will probably be centuries, at least generations, before man will discover all or even most of the value in a quarter-tone extension. And when he does, nature has plenty of other things up her sleeve. And it may be longer than we think before the ear will freely translate what it hears and instinctively arouse and amplify the spiritual consciousness. But that needn't keep anyone from trying to find out how to use a few more of the myriads of sound waves nature has put around in the air (immune from the radio) for man to catch if he can and "perchance make himself a part of nature".... — Charles Ives

The Tides of Manaunaun (1912)

—Henry Cowell (1897-1965)

Aeolian Harp (1923)

The Banshee (1925)

Of course no one life will ever be long enough for all that there is to be done. But who among us would care to believe that music must decline after us, or come to such perfection in our lifetimes that no composer would need ever to write anything again? I like to think that Charles Ives was right when he declared: "There is always something more to be said." For myself, I have more ideas for music than I can ever use. This is a happy state, and I wish the same to all of you. —Henry Cowell

Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano (1946-48) —John Cage (1912-1992)

What is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord. —John Cage