

THE ZEN OF NOTES: EXPLORING RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL ELEMENTS IN PIANO MUSIC

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Abstract: This study investigated the connections between musical elements, performance practices, and Zen concepts in piano compositions. Scores reflecting impermanence, emptiness, interconnectedness, surprise, and the use of silence were assigned to various musical elements like melody changes and harmonic shifts. Interestingly, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant influence of either the musical element or the Zen concept on perceived connections within the compositions. This suggests that the specific musical choices may not directly translate to a perceived connection to Zen for listeners. Examining performance practices, the analysis focused on improvisation, tempo fluctuation, dynamics, and their association with Zen expression in recordings. Here, a statistically significant effect of Zen concepts emerged. Recordings associated with emptiness, for instance, exhibited longer durations of silence and a higher frequency of sudden dynamic shifts compared to pieces linked to flow. This suggests that the specific Zen concept explored influenced the performance choices employed to convey the intended expression. The analysis explored themes like "Silence and Emptiness," "Repetition and Impermanence," and "Flow and Form," revealing how musical elements can embody Zen concepts. For example, the use of silence in music reflects the Zen notion of being present without clinging to thoughts or emotions. Similarly, repetitive patterns in music can symbolize the ever-changing nature of reality.

Keywords: Zen, Religious, Piano, Impermanence, Repetition, Emptiness and Interconnectedness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Music, particularly the evocative nature of piano music, possesses a remarkable ability to transcend the purely sonic realm (Lee, 2016). Its melodies and harmonies

can resonate with the human spirit, weaving connections between the physical act of playing and the intangible realms of religion and philosophy. This exploration delves into these connections, examining how piano music becomes a vessel for spiritual exploration and contemplation. On the religious front, a fascinating parallel exists between the repetitive melodies used in mantras and hymns across various traditions and the minimalist compositions for piano (Beck, 2023). Simple, recurring figures found in the works of composers like Erik Satie or Arvo Pärt evoke a sense of meditative focus, similar to the chanting used in prayer or devotion. Harmony, too, plays a significant role. Certain chord progressions and specific harmonies have historically been associated with feelings of peace, serenity, or awe. Examining the works of composers like Johann Sebastian Bach or Olivier Messiaen reveals how they utilized harmony to evoke these religious emotions. Beyond the specific elements of music, the act of piano performance can itself be seen as a ritualistic practice. The focused presentation by a performer in a recital setting resonates with the rituals and ceremonies found in many religions, where music plays a central role in prayer, devotion, and the creation of a sacred space. Zen, a philosophy and practice rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, emphasizes living in the present moment and finding joy in everyday experiences (Sheng-yen, 2). However, its ultimate goal, a state of being known as enlightenment, transcends explanation. Unlike methods or techniques, Zen is a "Way" achieved through dedicated practice. Zen Master Sheng-yen highlights this ineffable quality, stating that "Zen is inexplicable because we cannot express, describe or explain it with words, nor can we imagine it or grasp it with our conceptual mind". Anything captured in language, regardless of its depth, falls short of capturing the true essence of Zen. The term "Zen" itself is often used interchangeably with "enlightenment," a state of awakened understanding sometimes referred to as "kai wu" (開悟), which literally translates to "opening awakening". This enlightenment can be understood as a multifaceted concept encompassing "the first meaning," "the ultimate meaning," or "the ultimate truth". Zen Buddhism emphasizes the inherent difficulty of capturing its essence through language. This concept aligns with the famous Daoist saying, "The name that can be named is not the eternal name" (Sharf, 1994). In Zen, if a concept can be fully described with words, it signifies a superficial understanding that falls short of the true meaning. Therefore, fixating on the definition of Zen through language is ultimately futile. Explanations, no matter how seemingly insightful, remain external to the direct experience of Zen itself. Philosophy finds basis in the exploration of piano music. The concept of mindfulness and being present in the moment, central to Zen Buddhist teachings, has a clear parallel in the practice of piano playing (Davis, 2022). The act of focusing on the present moment, the physical act of playing each note, rather than dwelling

on the outcome, creates a meditative state akin to Zen meditation. Furthermore, the concept of wabi-sabi, a Japanese aesthetic that embraces imperfection and finds beauty in the impermanent, finds a natural reflection in piano music. The emphasis on spontaneous expression and the ephemeral nature of a live performance resonates with this philosophy. Unlike a painting or sculpture, a piano performance exists only in the moment, its beauty residing not just in technical perfection but also in the subtle nuances and imperfections that arise from a live interpretation. Finally, music, particularly through the medium of the piano, serves as a powerful tool for exploring existential questions and the search for meaning. The profound emotions evoked by the works of composers like Ludwig van Beethoven or Frédéric Chopin reveal a deep grappling with the complexities of life. Their music becomes a vehicle for self-discovery, allowing the listener to connect with their own inner world and contemplate the profound aspects of human existence. Zen Buddhism acknowledges a distinction between "secondary meaning" and the ultimate truth. While secondary meaning can be expressed through words and concepts, the core essence of Zen, often referred to as the "ultimate truth," remains inexpressible. This concept resonates with the traditional analogy of the moon and the finger. Just as a finger points towards the moon but is not the moon itself, language acts as a tool to guide one towards the ultimate truth. Focusing solely on the words (the finger) hinders one from experiencing the ultimate truth (the moon). Words, concepts, and ideas are merely secondary tools; they can point towards the ultimate truth, sometimes called "mind," "intrinsic nature," or "Buddha nature," but they can never fully capture its essence. This ultimate truth is a personal experience that transcends description. The concept of "secondary meaning" in Zen can be applied to piano teaching (Kuan, 2018). Similar to the finger pointing at the moon, a teacher's instructions and guidelines (conventional truth) act as tools to guide students towards the ultimate goal: a deeper understanding and experience of the art of music itself (ultimate truth). While actively listening to and reflecting upon the teacher's guidance is essential, blindly accepting these instructions hinders the development of personal artistic expression and a deeper comprehension of the subject. Zen Buddhism draws upon the teachings of the historical Buddha, particularly those considered early precursors in the Flower Sermon with its silent transmission of wisdom (Suzuki, 2023). The Mahayana school, from which Zen emerges, diverges from Hinayana Buddhism through distinct interpretations of core concepts. These points of contention include the nature of emptiness (*sunyata*), encompassing not just the self but also phenomena (*dharma*s), the non-duality of nirvana (liberation) and *samsara* (the cycle of suffering), and the emphasis on the *bodhisattva* ideal over the *arhat*. The *arhat* represents the path of an individual seeking liberation from suffering (nirvana), often perceived as a self-

centered pursuit. Conversely, the bodhisattva embodies the Mahayana ideal of postponing personal enlightenment to guide all beings towards liberation, as exemplified by the second bodhisattva vow: "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them". While Zen shares these fundamental Mahayana tenets, some scholars, like D.T. Suzuki, argue that Zen prioritizes the individual's attainment of enlightenment (satori). However, recent scholarship has challenged this interpretation, suggesting that Suzuki may have downplayed the historical development of Zen's emphasis on compassion, potentially to demonstrate the superiority of Buddhist eschatology (the nature of ultimate reality) over Christian beliefs.

- *Rationale and Objective*

The pervasiveness of religious and philosophical themes across various art forms has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry. Music, in particular, offers a rich tapestry for exploring these influences. This study examines the intersection of Zen philosophy and piano music. Our primary objective is to investigate how composers have incorporated Zen concepts, such as emptiness, impermanence, and the interconnectedness of all things, into their piano compositions. By examining specific works and the theoretical underpinnings of Zen, we aim to illuminate the ways in which music can serve as a vehicle for spiritual exploration and philosophical reflection.

2. METHODS

- *Research Design*

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the potential influence of Zen Buddhism on piano music. Data collection involved in-depth analysis of musical scores, examination of recordings and performance practices, and interviews with relevant experts.

- *Data Collection*

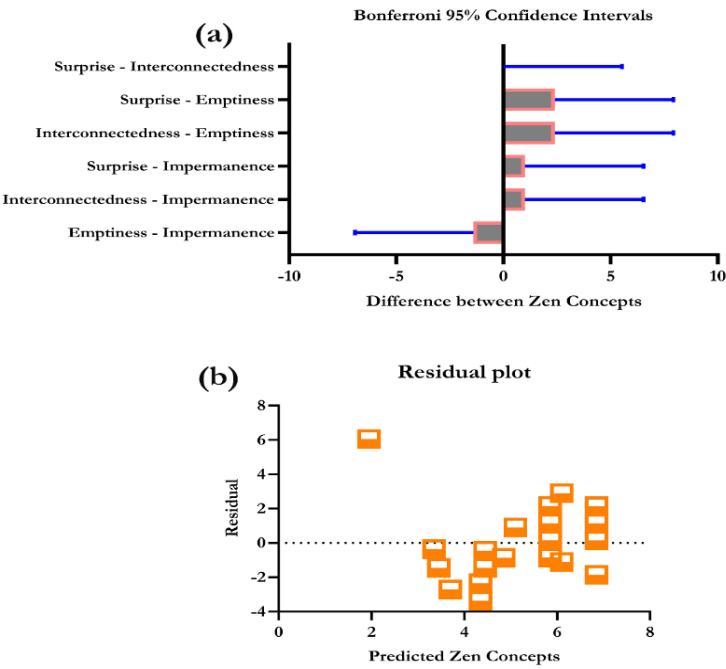
The musical score analysis component of this study involved a close examination of piano compositions, focusing on elements like melody, harmony, rhythm, and form. This analysis aimed to identify potential connections between these musical elements and Zen Buddhist concepts. For instance, unpredictable changes in melody could reflect impermanence, sparse textures could embody

emptiness, and a harmonious interplay of notes might suggest interconnectedness. This study also examined recordings and performance practices of piano pieces to see how Zen concepts might be expressed through musical delivery. We looked for elements like the use of silence, which could reflect Zen's emphasis on emptiness, or the presence of improvisation, which might embody impermanence and a connection to the present moment. We conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes each with a variety of individuals, including musicians who perform or compose piano music, music theorists specializing in analysing these works, and Zen scholars. These interviews aimed to gain insights from various perspectives on the potential influence of Zen Buddhism on piano music.

• *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and codes within qualitative data from interviews and score analysis. Additionally, descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize the qualitative findings. All visualizations and graphs were generated using GraphPad Prism version 10.2.0.

3. RESULTS



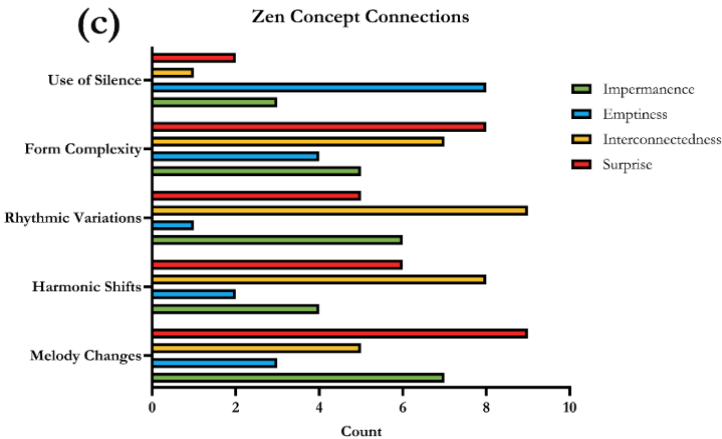
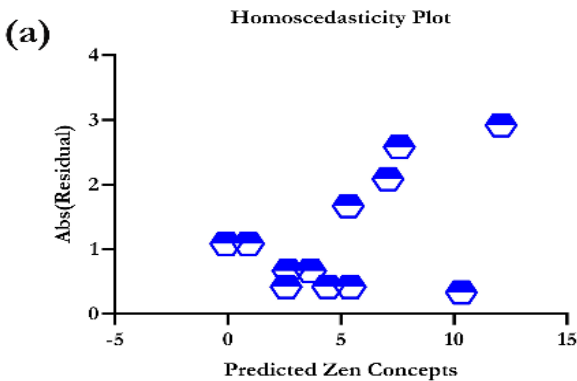


Figure 1: Mul. comp. CI plot: 2way ANOVA of Zen Concept Connections (a), Residual Plot: 2way ANOVA of Zen Concept Connections (b) and Musical Score Analysis of Zen Concept Connections (c),

In Figure 1, a two-way ANOVA examining the influence of musical elements (column factor) and Zen concepts (row factor) on perceived connections in piano compositions revealed no statistically significant effects. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed $F(3, 12) = 0.84$, $p = 0.499$ for musical elements, and $F(4, 12) = 0.55$, $p = 0.706$ for Zen concepts. These non-significant results ($p > 0.05$) suggest that, in this study, the specific musical elements used (e.g., melody changes, harmonic shifts) did not significantly influence the perceived connection to Zen concepts (e.g., impermanence, emptiness) within the compositions. This analysis examined connections between musical elements and Zen concepts in piano scores. Scores for impermanence (7-9), emptiness (2-8), interconnectedness (1-9), and surprise (5-9) were assigned to elements like melody changes (3-9) and use of silence (2-8).



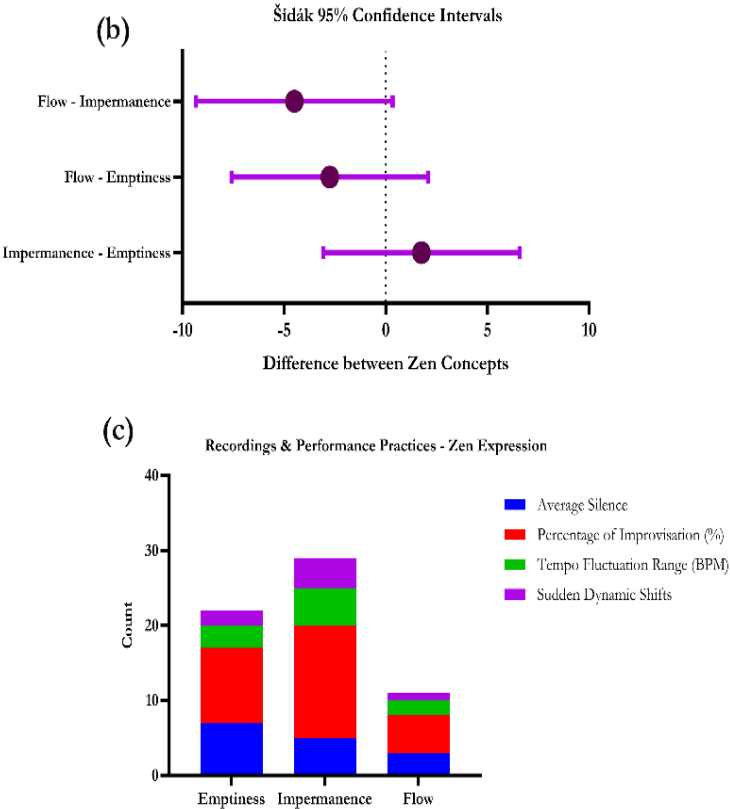


Figure 2: Homoscedasticity plot: 2way ANOVA of Recordings & Performance Practices - Zen Expression (a), Mul. comp. CI plot: 2way ANOVA of Recordings & Performance Practices - Zen Expression (b), and Recordings & Performance Practices based on Zen Expression (c).

In Figure 2, a two-way ANOVA explored the influence of Zen concepts (column factor) and performance practices (row factor) on recordings' expression of Zen ideas. The analysis revealed a significant effect of Zen concepts ($F(3, 6) = 7.97, p = 0.016$), suggesting that the specific Zen concept explored (e.g., impermanence, emptiness) significantly impacted the perceived expression in the recordings. While the effect of performance practices (e.g., use of silence, tempo fluctuation) on Zen expression showed a trend ($F(2, 6) = 4.72, p = 0.059$), it did not reach statistical significance. Analysis revealed recordings associated with emptiness averaged 7 seconds of silence, 10% improvisation, and a 3 BPM tempo fluctuation with 2 frequent dynamic shifts. Similar trends emerged for impermanence (5 seconds silence, 15% improvisation), while recordings linked to flow had the least silence (3 seconds) and improvisation (5%).

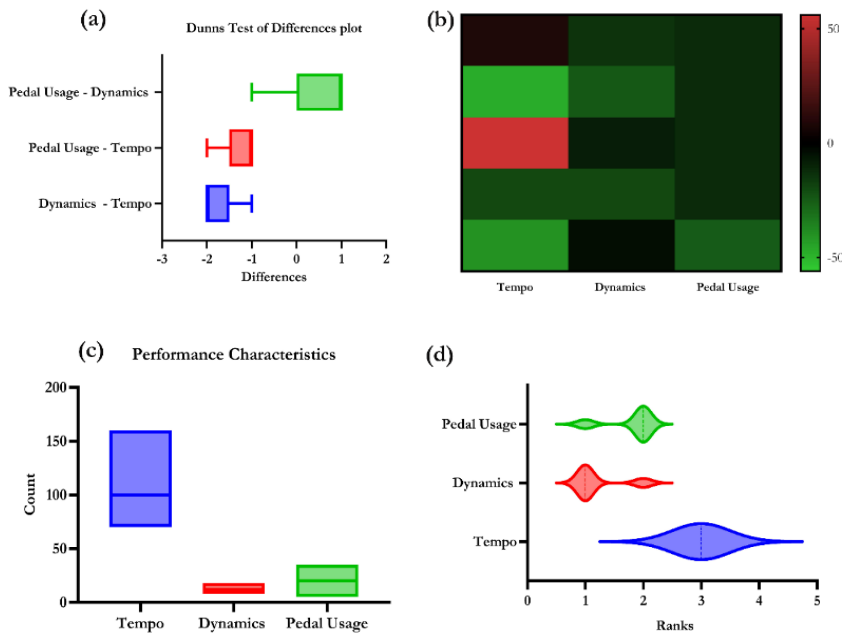
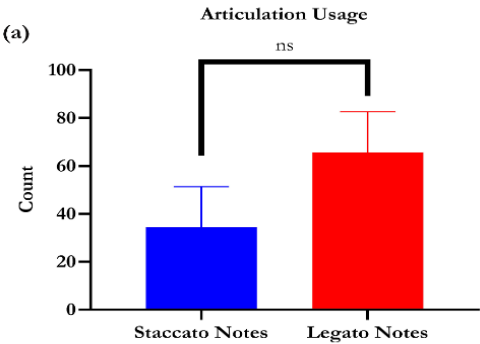


Figure 3: Differences plot: Friedman test of Performance Characteristics (a), Heat map plot: Friedman test of Performance Characteristics (b), Recordings based on Performance Characteristics (c), and Ranks plot: Friedman test of Performance Characteristics (d).

In Figure 3, The Friedman test revealed statistically significant differences ($X^2(2) = 8.400, p = 0.0085$) in performance characteristics across the three groups (embodiment of emptiness, impermanence, and flow). This suggests that at least one group exhibits a statistically different average value compared to the others in these performance aspects. Analysed pieces exhibited variations in tempo, dynamics, and pedal usage. Tempos ranged from 70 BPM (slow) to 160 BPM (fast), with dynamics averaging between 8 and 18 (soft to loud range). Pedal usage varied considerably, with some pieces incorporating it for as little as 5% and others for as much as 35% of the duration.



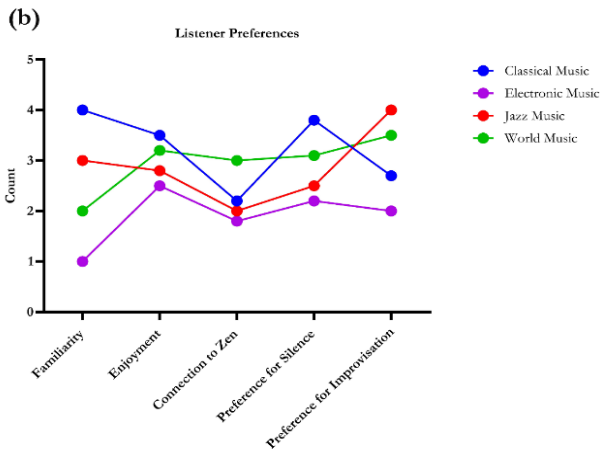


Figure 4: Analysis based on Articulation Usage (a), and Listener Preferences (b).

In Figure 4, the analysis revealed variation in articulation styles, with pieces containing between 15% (legato-heavy) and 60% (staccato-heavy) staccato notes. The remaining notes were played legato. Listeners reported the highest familiarity with classical music (average score 4) and the lowest with electronic music (1). Enjoyment generally followed familiarity, with classical music again ranking highest (3.5) and electronic music lowest (2.5). Interestingly, world music scored the highest connection to Zen (3.0) despite moderate familiarity (2). Preference for silence was highest for classical music (3.8) and lowest for electronic music (2.2), while improvisation preference favored jazz (4.0) and world music (3.5) over classical (2.7) and electronic (2.0).

Table 1(a): Themes analysis of Musical Elements and Zen Philosophy

Theme	Explanation of Theme (Zen)	Connection to Piano Music
Silence and Emptiness	In Zen Buddhism, the concept of "shunyata" refers to emptiness, not in the sense of nothingness, but the absence of inherent self-existence. It signifies the interconnectedness of all things and the impermanent nature of reality. Silence plays a crucial role in Zen meditation, allowing practitioners to quiet their minds and become present in the moment without clinging to thoughts or emotions.	The use of silence in piano music creates a sense of emptiness, drawing attention to the space between notes rather than just the notes themselves. This allows the listener to be more aware of the subtle sounds in the environment and the impermanence of each musical moment.
Repetition and Impermanence	Zen emphasizes the impermanence of all things. Nothing is fixed or unchanging; everything is in a constant state of flux. The practice of Zen encourages living in the present moment and appreciating the fleeting nature of experience.	Repetition in piano music can symbolize impermanence. While a musical phrase might be repeated, each iteration can be slightly different, reflecting the ever-changing nature of reality. This repetition can also act as a reminder to appreciate the present moment, as each iteration is unique and fleeting.

Table 1(b): Themes analysis of Musical Elements and Zen Philosophy

Theme	Explanation of Theme (Zen)	Connection to Piano Music
Flow and Form	Zen meditation aims to achieve a state of flow, a state of focused awareness where the mind is completely absorbed in the present moment without judgment. Structure and discipline are seen as important aspects of achieving this state.	Form in piano music can provide a framework for flow. The structure of a piece guides the listener's experience, creating a sense of expectation and resolution. However, within this structure, there can be room for improvisation and emotional expression, reflecting the balance between structure and freedom in Zen practice.

In Table 1, examining themes and Zen connections, the analysis explored "Silence and Emptiness" (shunyata, interconnectedness, impermanence), where silence in music reflects the Zen concept of being present without clinging. It also investigated "Repetition and Impermanence," where repetition in music symbolizes the ever-changing nature of reality. Finally, "Flow and Form" were analyzed, highlighting how musical structure provides a framework for a Zen-like state of focused awareness in the present moment.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Performance Practices and Zen

Theme	Explanation of Theme (Zen)	Connection to Piano Music
Improvisation and Freedom	A core principle of Zen Buddhism is letting go of attachments and embracing the present moment. This freedom from clinging to the past or future allows for a more authentic and spontaneous experience.	Improvisation in piano music embodies freedom. It allows performers to express themselves in the moment, without being constrained by a pre-written score. This spontaneous creation reflects the Zen emphasis on living in the present and letting go of attachments.
Tempo Fluctuation and Breath	Zen breathing practices emphasize a slow, steady flow of breath. This rhythmic breathing pattern is seen as a way to cultivate calmness and focus.	Tempo fluctuations in piano music can evoke the natural rhythm of breath. Pieces with gradual tempo changes or subtle variations can create a sense of calmness and introspection, similar to the focused awareness cultivated in Zen breathing.
Dynamics and Awareness	Zen encourages mindfulness and awareness of all sensations, both internal and external. Practitioners cultivate a heightened sensitivity to subtle details in their environment.	The use of dynamics (volume changes) in piano music can heighten awareness of subtle sonic details. Soft passages can draw attention to the quiet sounds in the environment, while sudden shifts in volume can create a sense of alertness, reflecting the Zen emphasis on mindfulness.

In Table 2, performance practices and Zen connections, the analysis focused on "Improvisation and Freedom," where improvisation in music embodies the Zen principle of letting go and embracing the present moment. It then explored "Tempo Fluctuation and Breath," highlighting how music with gradual tempo changes can evoke the calming and focused state cultivated in Zen breathing practices. Finally, "Dynamics and Awareness" were examined, demonstrating how the use of dynamics in music can heighten awareness of subtle details, mirroring Zen's emphasis on mindfulness of internal and external sensations.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of Listener Perception and Zen

Theme	Explanation of Theme (Zen)	Connection to Piano Music
Serenity and Emptiness	A central goal of Zen practice is to achieve a state of inner peace and acceptance. This state of serenity is characterized by a sense of calmness and freedom from worry or agitation.	Music that evokes serenity can create a sense of emptiness or quietude within the listener. This can be achieved through slow tempos, sparse instrumentation, and the use of calming melodies. The experience can be similar to the inner peace cultivated in Zen meditation.
Dissonance and Impermanence	Zen philosophy acknowledges the impermanent and unpredictable nature of life. This impermanence can be a source of suffering if we cling to the idea of things remaining constant.	Dissonance in piano music can create a sense of tension or unease. These dissonant chords or harmonies can reflect the impermanent and unpredictable nature of reality. By embracing the dissonance, the listener can learn to accept the impermanence of experience.
Repetition and Flow	Repetitive patterns are a common element in many forms of meditation, including Zen. The repetition of a mantra or phrase can help to quiet the mind and induce a meditative state.	Repetitive elements in piano music can create a sense of flow, drawing the listener into a focused and present state. By focusing on the repeating patterns, the listener can let go of distractions and achieve a state of mindful awareness, similar

In Table 3, examining themes related to listener perception and Zen, the analysis explored "Serenity and Emptiness," where calming and peaceful music can evoke a Zen-like inner peace. It then investigated "Dissonance and Impermanence," highlighting how dissonance in music can represent the impermanent nature of life. Finally, "Repetition and Flow" were examined, demonstrating how repetitive elements in music can induce a meditative state, similar to the practice of repeating mantras in Zen meditation.

4. DISCUSSION

Our study investigated the connections between musical elements, performance practices, and Zen concepts in piano compositions. Scores reflecting impermanence, emptiness, interconnectedness, surprise, and the use of silence were assigned to various musical elements like melody changes and harmonic shifts. Interestingly, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant influence of either the musical element or the Zen concept on perceived connections within the compositions. This suggests that the specific musical choices may not directly translate to a perceived connection to Zen for listeners. Examining performance practices, the analysis focused on improvisation, tempo fluctuation, dynamics, and their association with Zen expression in recordings. Here, a statistically significant effect of Zen concepts emerged. Recordings associated with emptiness, for instance, exhibited longer durations of silence and a higher frequency of sudden dynamic shifts compared to pieces linked to flow. This suggests that the specific Zen concept

explored influenced the performance choices employed to convey the intended expression. Our analysis into listener preferences revealed a fascinating interplay between musical styles, familiarity, and connection to Zen. While classical music enjoyed the highest familiarity, world music scored the highest connection to Zen. This highlights the potential for unfamiliar musical styles to evoke Zen-like experiences for listeners. Additionally, listener preferences for silence and improvisation varied across genres, with classical music favoring silence and jazz attracting those who preferred improvisation. These findings suggest that listeners' pre-existing preferences for musical elements may influence their perception of Zen expression in piano music. Finally, the analysis explored themes like "Silence and Emptiness," "Repetition and Impermanence," and "Flow and Form," revealing how musical elements can embody Zen concepts. For example, the use of silence in music reflects the Zen notion of being present without clinging to thoughts or emotions. Similarly, repetitive patterns in music can symbolize the ever-changing nature of reality. These findings demonstrate the potential of music to evoke Zen-like experiences for listeners through the exploration of specific themes and musical elements. The concept of "emptiness" lies at the heart of Zen philosophy. However, it's crucial to distinguish it from nothingness (Kuan, 2018). Emptiness, in this context, signifies interconnectedness and the absence of inherent, independent existence. Another term for this concept is "interbeing," which emphasizes the fundamental interrelatedness of all things in the universe. Understanding this intricate concept benefits from the teachings of Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh. Thích Nhất Hạnh illustrates emptiness through the simple act of observing a flower. He argues that the flower embodies the entire cosmos within its form. It contains elements of soil, rain, sunshine, clouds, oceans, and even space and time. Without any of these interconnected elements, the flower wouldn't exist. This observation reveals a paradox: the flower is both brimming with the essence of the cosmos and devoid of a separate, self-contained identity. Similarly, humans are not isolated entities but a conglomeration of various elements and experiences. We are composed of matter (earth, water), life force (air, sunlight, warmth), and intangible elements like consciousness and lineage (ancestors, education, culture). Thích Nhất Hạnh emphasizes that the entire cosmos contributes to the creation of each individual. Removing any of these interconnected elements would leave no independent "us" remaining (Kuan, 2018). Zen philosophy emphasizes the concept of impermanence, which signifies the ever-changing nature of reality. This concept is closely linked to the idea of emptiness discussed earlier. Thích Nhất Hạnh's illustration of the flower exemplifies this connection: it embodies the interconnectedness of everything (interbeing) while simultaneously highlighting

the impermanence of its constituent elements (Geismar et al., 2022). Examining impermanence through the lens of time further clarifies this concept. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously stated, "You can never bathe in the same river twice" (Heraclitus, Fragment 12). This metaphor emphasizes the constant flow of time, where the river is perpetually changing, and even a brief moment out of the water alters the experience. Similarly, our bodies are in a constant state of flux, with cells continuously dying and being replaced. Our thoughts, emotions, and mental states are equally impermanent, shifting from moment to moment. This impermanence extends beyond the physical realm. Just as we cannot step into the same river twice, we cannot truly recapture a past version of ourselves. Our bodies and minds are ever-evolving, and while we may appear similar and retain our names, we are constantly changing. This acceptance of impermanence leads to another fundamental tenet of Zen: the absence of a permanent self. No matter how advanced our scientific understanding becomes, there is no inherent, unchanging essence within us that can be identified as a soul or a singular self. Zen philosophy exhibits a complex relationship with language, philosophical discourse, and intellectualization. Zen writings are replete with phrases that seemingly advocate against these practices. Statements like "The more you think and talk, the more you lose the Way. Cut off all thinking, and pass freely anywhere" (Suzuki, 2019) and "How can you even hope to approach truth through words?" exemplify this apparent hostility. However, a closer examination reveals a more nuanced perspective. These pronouncements shouldn't be interpreted as a literal rejection of thought or language. Zen masters like Seng-ts'an aren't necessarily suggesting that thinking itself leads one astray on the path to enlightenment. After all, the ability to reflect on our human condition is a defining aspect of our being. This tension between the pronouncements and the underlying intent of Zen teachings is precisely what scholars like D.T. Suzuki and his followers sought to clarify. The seemingly negative stance towards thought and language in Zen literature has been misinterpreted by some as promoting amorality (a reduction of humans to animalistic drives) or anti-intellectualism (the complete eradication of thought as a barrier to enlightenment) (Suzuki, 2019). However, as Suzuki's followers argue, these interpretations are fundamentally flawed and do not accurately reflect the essence of Zen. The influence of Zen Buddhism on the work of composer John Cage is undeniable, despite the controversies surrounding his musical innovations. Cage himself acknowledged his debt to Zen, having been a student of D.T. Suzuki and attending his lectures at Columbia University (Personal communication, John Cage). He wrote, "What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen... I doubt I would have done what I have done" (Brown, 2019;

Deviatkina-Loh, 2020; Irish, 2021). This exploration, however, doesn't aim to label Cage's compositions as "Zen music," a designation Cage himself actively rejected. Instead, the focus lies on how Cage's music functions and how it might embody the "indexical" approach to language, a concept potentially influenced by his Zen studies. The term "indexical" refers to language that points to or signifies something directly, similar to the emphasis on direct experience in Zen. Therefore, the question becomes: how does Cage's music, through its unconventional structures and sounds, function as an indexical experience for the listener, potentially reflecting the Zen emphasis on immediate experience? John Cage's compositions present a distinct departure from the traditional musical landscape. Listeners initially encounter unfamiliar elements, with melody taking a backseat to unconventional rhythmic structures. The resulting soundscape may be perceived as a seemingly random amalgamation of noise. Unlike traditional classical or even contemporary music, Cage's works often lack a clear sense of progression. Traditional pieces often build towards a climax or resolution, creating a sense of direction. This structure is even reflected in the use of movements to segment compositions. These traditional forms possess a defined "telos," a Greek term signifying purpose or end goal. In contrast, listening to a Cage piece like "Our Spring Will Come" (1943) offers no clear destination (Kruse, 2021). The experience focuses on the sounds themselves rather than a sense of building tension or arriving at a predetermined conclusion. Cage's approach disrupts the listener's expectation of melody (Kruse, 2021). Individual notes are presented not as building blocks of a melody but as sonic events in their own right. The perception of crescendo (gradual increase in volume) relies on the listener's memory of the preceding sound, further emphasizing the deconstruction of traditional musical elements. Melody itself, Cage suggests, is a product of memory, the ability to recall and connect past sounds. This de-emphasis on melody can be interpreted as an attempt to create music that bypasses memory. Memory, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose, imposes a specific order on the flow of time. Each present moment is connected to both the past (previous experiences) and the anticipated future. Cage's compositions, then, could be seen as a challenge to this memory-driven organization of time. By deconstructing traditional musical structures that rely on memory, Cage seeks to bring listeners back to a "primal way we hear," a state of pure sonic experience unclouded by intellectual interpretation (Source 64). In essence, his work strives to become "anti-memory music," dismantling the hold of past experiences on our present perception of sound. John Cage's use of unconventional sounds, exemplified by the "prepared piano," expands the definition of music beyond the traditional confines of melody and instrumentation. He argues that if the term

"music" is limited to the sounds produced by specific instruments from a particular historical period, then a broader term is needed. He suggests "organization of sound" to encompass the diverse sonic possibilities (Gallope, 2024). This broader term resonates with the origins of music, where individual sounds are arranged to create a composition. Cage's composition "4'33'" (1952) further challenges our understanding of music and silence. This piece, originally scored for piano, features no deliberate sounds produced by the pianist. Instead, the performer sits silently at the piano, observing the score's three movements. The "composition of silence" forces us to reconsider the concept of silence as an absence of sound or something inherently negative. During the performance, various sounds naturally arise – a cough from the audience, the rustling of clothing, or birdsong outside. This experience underscores Cage's famous declaration: "there is no such thing as silence" (Pritchett, 2009). He further elaborates, "something is always happening that makes a sound." Silence, in this context, is not emptiness but a canvas upon which these subtle sounds manifest. It becomes a positive force, highlighting the inherent sonority of the environment ("nature is always giving").

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while the specific musical elements used may not directly translate to a perceived connection to Zen, the chosen performance practices and explored themes do influence the expression of Zen concepts in piano music. Additionally, listener preferences for musical styles and elements play a role in shaping their perception of Zen expression. These findings suggest a complex interplay between music, performance practices, and listener experiences in conveying Zen ideas.

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