

JOHN CAGE (1912–1992)

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John Cage was the most controversial composer of his time. Not only did he have devoted followers, but he also wrote pieces that were widely lampooned and scoffed at, such as compositions using environmental sounds and noises instead of normal instrumental or vocal sounds. Furthermore, he went to extreme lengths to eliminate the use of taste and personal expression as factors shaping the music. His mature work—as a composer, writer, and visual artist—suggests that he believed that Western music and art for the past four hundred years, shaped as it had been by personal taste, vision, and expressiveness, had set a bad example.

In his late years, when it was clear that he was not only a composer but also a lover of Buddhist wisdom, a prolific writer, a formidable visual artist, a mushroom expert, a devotee of Henry David Thoreau, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan and a devout anarchist, he was asked, “Do you care less about music now?” He answered that he had always cared less about music—meaning that he’d never considered music as something to be carved out and set aside from the universe of factors that impinge on human life.

On May 15, 1958, virtually the entire New York City avant-garde—painters, sculptors, dancers, and musicians—turned out for a Twenty-Five Year Retrospective Concert of John Cage’s music. The event had been funded by the painters Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg who not only contributed money, but also persuaded art dealers to buy up box seats. Prior to the concert, the Stable Gallery had exhibited Cage’s exquisitely written scores, to critical acclaim. The concert, containing works written between 1934 and 1958, was recorded by George Avakian and is still available on the Wergo label (WER 6247–2).

Audience response to the earlier works was enthusiastic, especially for *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1948), but later works such as *Williams Mix* (1952) and *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1958) received a noisy

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mixture of catcalls and cheers reminding some of the uproar at the first performance of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* in 1913. This split in audience response—cheers for earlier music, catcalls for later—mirrors a sense that the earlier music, for all its newness, had familiar features while the later music did not. The later music was generated from *chance operations*, something that Cage embraced in the 1950s and for the rest of his life. Use of chance meant the abandonment of personal taste, personal expression, and ear-familiar features of construction. It put Cage in the position of “throwing sounds into silence,” as he wrote Pierre Boulez in 1950.

The split in audience reaction at the retrospective concert also paralleled a split between Cage and fellow avant-gardists. Composers such as Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who had welcomed some indeterminate factors in their music, mistrusted Cage’s extreme abandonment of

personal control over his music and his attempt totally to eliminate self from composition. Painters such as Jackson Pollock had also embraced chance factors in their work, intending to eliminate conscious controls, but they trusted the subconscious. Cage strove to bypass even the subconscious.

After 1950, Cage's work reflected the conviction that self-expression as a guiding factor in art had been a mistake.

Cage was a high-spirited man who loved to laugh, enjoyed debate, rarely disliked others, was unusually generous, and tough as nails in matters of conviction. He was born September 5, 1912, in Los Angeles, where, for the most part, he grew up. He was an exceptionally bright child, the son of an inventor, drawn to music by such homely things as the singing of an aunt during church services. He studied piano and thought of pursuing a pianistic career but discovered that his bent was not for virtuosic playing. His academic record in high school was brilliant and in 1929 at the age of seventeen he entered Pomona College—but left after one year in favor of going to Europe to become a writer. In Europe, writing was superseded by, variously, architecture, painting, and music both classical and contemporary (e.g., Stravinsky and Aleksandr Skryabin). After six months in Paris, he wandered in Spain, Germany, Italy, and North Africa and composed some mathematically structured music vaguely suggestive of Johann Sebastian Bach—which he promptly trashed. In 1931, he returned to California where he wrote, painted, and composed songs to words of such writers as Gertrude Stein in a style which mirrored the repetitiveness of the words. After 1932, he studied composition with, among others, Henry Cowell and Adolph Weiss and finally, in 1935, with Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg, who later characterized Cage as “an inventor—of genius,” told him he would never succeed in music because he lacked a sense of harmony. Cage resolved therefore to write music without harmony. He was drawn to Schoenberg's atonal tonerow devices and for a brief period adapted them to his own work. But more importantly, he began focusing on music that existed completely outside the realm of pitches: percussion music.

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PERCUSSION MUSIC

In the mid 1930s, Cage was already writing for percussion—such things as the 1935 *Quartet* for unspecified percussion instruments, and the 1936 *Trio* for pieces of wood, torn toms, bamboo sticks, and bass drum. By 1939, he had altogether abandoned music organized by pitch in favor of “new sounds.” (He preferred the term “art of noise” to “percussion music” and later wrote that he preferred sounds from the environment to sounds produced by music culture.) This music was structured solely by time-length relationships, an enduring technique. He championed and organized concerts of percussion music by other composers such as Cowell, Edgar Varèse, and Lou Harrison. His identification with such music related quite directly to a lifelong involvement with dance.

DANCE

In 1938, Cage took a job at the Cornish School of Music in Seattle as a composer and instructor in percussion and accompanist to the dance department where he assisted the dancer Bonnie Bird, formerly a member of the Martha Graham Dance Company. He created percussion ensembles whose members were not necessarily percussionists but included, for example, student dancers—one of whom was Merce Cunningham for whose choreography in later years Cage wrote a great deal of significant music. (When in 1953 Cunningham formed his own dance company, Cage became its music director and together the two developed processes whereby the only relationship between a given dance and its music was that they took place at the same time in the same place. An interesting manifestation of this came in 1965 with the piece *Variations V* in which the movement of the dancers themselves triggered, unpredictably, by electronic means, sound/music. From 1970 until the end of Cage's life, he and Cunningham lived together.) A by-product of Cage's work with dance was his invention of the prepared piano.

PREPARED PIANO

In 1940 at the Cornish School, the dancer Sylvia Fort asked Cage to provide music for her solo dance, *Bacchanale*, a work of barbaric intensity. The performance space was too small for a percussion ensemble; it allowed only for a grand piano. However, Cage mistrusted standard piano sounds to partner the work at hand and transformed the instrument into what is now known as a prepared piano. He did this by inserting various objects such as screws, bolts, and pieces of fibrous weather stripping at precise points between the piano's strings, causing the instrument to produce a whole cosmos of thuds and buzzes that proved powerful and engaging. Thereafter, Cage vastly refined such techniques and the prepared piano became central to his work for the next decade, culminating in the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946–1948), a

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work that, along with his percussion music generally, established him as an important American composer. In 1949, following the first performance of *Sonata and Interludes* (by the pianist Maro Ajemianthere) there was considerable critical praise for the composer's mastery of technique and invention. Such public acclaim was replaced by general mistrust and hostility when in 1950 Cage abandoned composing from, so to speak, the heart in favor of music generated by chance operations.

CHANCE OPERATIONS

After 1950, in a quest to eliminate self and personal taste as guiding factors, Cage created virtually no music (or, for that matter, writing or visual art) without using chance operations. Why?

During the 1940s, Cage had felt a growing instinct to make a nonpurposeful, static music. This was encouraged by a flowering of spiritual awareness supported variously by reading sermons of the fourteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart, works of Hindu and Oriental philosophy; and by attending Cowell's classes in non-Western music as well as classes in Zen Buddhism given by Daisetz Suzuki about whom ever after Cage spoke with delight and admiration. Cage never became a practicing Zen Buddhist but its principles rang true and seemed to give him a

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kind of “permission” to rejoice in paradox, to be free of duality, for example, tension release, to believe that every thing in space and time is connected. And a Hindu idea about the purpose of music as existing to tranquilise the mind and thus open it to divine influence attracted him enormously. He began to conceive of composition as “throwing sounds into silence” and allowing them to find their own meanings.

His first full-blown chance composition was the 1951 *Music of Changes* whose creation flowed from Cage’s encountering the book *I Ching*, or *Chinese Book of Changes*, which suggested to him methods for generating chance fabrics.

USE OF THE I CHING

When in 1951 Cage’s friend the composer Christian Wolff gave him a copy of the *I Ching* in a new translation by Cary Baynes, it was put to use immediately and remained important to Cage for the rest of his life. Specifics of its use involved both philosophy and mechanical procedures too complicated to describe here, but suffice it to say that it could help generate a series of random numbers, make choices between alternatives, and suggest procedures. In later years, Cage described the sense of excitement when he had developed a plan for using the I Ching to compose his *Music of Changes*. Apparently this notion was received in high excitement and approval by the composer Morty Feldman. Ever after, Cage was serenely confident about his allowing chance to guide his

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work—even though it put him in the position of challenging received wisdom about Western art.

CHALLENGE TO TRADITION

Cage’s chance operations, motivated by spiritual convictions, had the effect of challenging Western classical music and art at its root. As Calvin Tomkins beautifully put it in 1965, “what he [Cage] is proposing is, essentially, the complete, revolutionary overthrow of the most basic assumptions of Western art since the Renaissance...[such as] the power of art to communicate ideas and emotions, to organize life into meaningful patterns, and to realize universal truths through the self-expressed individuality of the artist” (1965). Although Cage had occasionally attacked, verbally, cherished notions (e.g., in his 1948 essay “In Defense of Satie”) it was Cage’s chance-controlled music itself, not polemics, that challenged tradition. Such works as *Music of Changes*, *Williams Mix*, and *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* were vigorously deprecated by critics. Descriptions of the music as “aggressively unattractive,” “insistently repellent,” and “utterly hideous” were not uncommon and the musical establishment in Europe and the United States became hostile to him. Nevertheless, his work not only sustained itself but also had a strong impact on other artists. The composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and Witold, Lutosławski, for instance, have mentioned the liberating effect of Cage’s writing and music.

Some Cage compositions seemed to challenge traditions with especial flagrancy, none more so than the 1952 *4’33”* or *Silent Sonata* for piano, which requires a pianist to sit in front of an instrument without playing it, allowing listeners to hear only ambient sounds. The piece,

influenced by Rauschenberg's all-white paintings, is structured as three movements whose lengths were established by chance means—30", 2'23", and 1'40", which, added together, make the 4'33" of the title. Just as Cage conceived of sounds as existing within a rhythmic structure, so, he reasoned, would silence exist within a rhythmic structure. It is not difficult to associate this with spiritual beliefs, thinking of Eckhart's seeking to empty himself in order to hear "the hidden word." Cage considered 4'33" to be his most important work. He said, "I always think of it before I write the next piece." (Astonishingly, 4'33" has been recorded four times, once by Frank Zappa.)

Other pieces that helped confirm Cage's reputation as an extreme avant-gardist might include *Imaginary Landscape #4* (1951), for twelve radios; *Williams Mix* (1952), a pioneer magnetic tape composition; *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961), in which eighty-six instrumental parts can be played in any combination whatsoever from chamber group to full symphony orchestra, for any duration; and *HPSCHD* (1967–1969), a kind of huge music "circus." After 1970, the issue seemed less and less "avant-garde"; the revolution, it seemed, was over; new works were heard objectively with either pleasure or distaste.

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AFTER 1970

A list of significant compositions of the 1970s and 1980s might include: *Cheap Imitation* (1972), for orchestra; the enormously difficult *Etudes Australes* (1974–1975), for piano; *Freeman Etudes* (1977), for solo violin, also extremely difficult; *Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras* (1981); *Europoras I/II* (1987), an opera for nineteen soloists and orchestra; and, finally, a long series of "number pieces" titled after the number of required performers, for example, *One* for solo piano and *Two* for flute and piano. Ultimately, there were forty-three such pieces written for many numbers from solo to large orchestra

WRITINGS

Throughout his career, Cage wrote constantly—diaries, essays, and lectures—all of which probed ideas about art, music composition, and life. He also wrote endless mesostics (anagram-like poetic structures), sometimes as tributes to individuals, sometimes exploring works such as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, sometimes creating lectures. His writings were collected into books, beginning in 1961 with *Silence* followed by *A Year from Monday*, *Empty Words*, *M*, and *X*—all published by Wesleyan University Press. The most influential of these may be *Silence*, which brings together many essays fundamental to his outlook. Overall, the writing style frequently mirrored his composing style (e.g., rhythmic structures and acceptance of very long silences), and a progressively more experimental manner emerged such that, replacing conventional sense, there might be a flow of words could be undertood without necessarily comprehending the meaning. Such would characterize his mesostics-based Charles Eliot Norton lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1988, titled *I–VI*.

There were, as of 1997, a dozen publications by Cage in print.

RELATION TO THE VISUAL ARTS

In 1980, Cage listed, off the top of his head, fifteen people who had meant much to him. Although he commented that many more could be added to the list, it is of interest that five were visual artists and only three musicians. The musicians were his long-time associate David Tudor, Erik Satie, and Schoenberg. The visual artists, all personal friends, were Marcel Duchamp, Morris Graves, Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, and Mark Tobey. The remainder were Norman O. Brown, Fuller, McLuhan, Thoreau, Joyce, Cunningham, and Daisetz Suzuki. (Cage would be the first to agree that other musicians had been extremely important to him as well, particularly Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Wolff, and, at one time, Boulez.)

Cage's interest in the visual arts was reciprocated by artists who, generally, were quicker to sense the strengths of his music than was the music community. His use of chance materials was echoed by New York abstract expressionists

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dripping paint onto canvasses to achieve random results—and by surrealists randomly juxtaposing unrelated images. Earlier, his use of environmental sounds in compositions had been stimulated by the painter Mark Tobey's spontaneous reactions to the world around him, resulting in instant works of art. In his youth, he had considered becoming a painter. In later years, he produced a significant number of admired etchings, dry points, water colors, and prints. His beautifully wrought scores, some using traditional five-line staves, some being graphs, some looking for all the world like a sketch by Paul Klee, and some with words in a wide variety of type faces, were seen to be works of art and were frequently exhibited in galleries.

ANARCHISM

There is an implicit anarchism in Cage's use of chance procedures, in his "throwing sounds into silence" and allowing them to seek their own meanings. In reality, he *was* an anarchist who believed that the best situations for people as for sounds were those in which they were free to be themselves, "unimpeded and interpenetrating" as he said. He didn't believe in the use of government to control people any more than he believed in the use of personal taste to control music. Both Pritchett (1993) and David Revill (1992) discuss anarchism as it relates to his music and his views on the human condition.

MUSHROOMS

Cage was a naturalist in his devotion to the idea that art should imitate nature in its manner of operation, not merely its appearance, and in his mastery of mycology, particularly the study of mushrooms. A devotion to mushroom hunting that started in the mid-1950s led to his becoming a distinguished amateur mycologist who owned perhaps the largest private mycological library ever assembled. Cage the naturalist affected Cage the composer in many ways. Some were obvious as when recordings of natural sounds became part of a composition, for example, *Lecture on the Weather* (1975), and some were implicit as when his observation of nature's "wastefulness" (e.g., the huge number of spores produced by a mushroom in relation to the

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number that reproduce) encouraged music of superabundant materials, for example, in the music “circus” *HPSCHD*.

RECORDINGS

As of 1997, one could easily own one hundred Cage recordings on some thirty different labels, including such major ones as Deutsche Grammophon, London, Philips, BMG, and Victor Red Seal. Some forty of these recordings are in current issue. An annotated discography is available over the Internet on the New Albion home page (<http://Newalbion.com>). In the face of such profusion, it is ironic that Cage thought recordings were bad for music and never owned a record player.

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Among the most popular recordings have been *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, played by Maro Ajemian, and *Indeterminacy*, with Cage himself reading, at the rate of one a minute, ninety anecdotes tinged with wit and wisdom accompanied by chance-selected excerpts from the piano solo of *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* and from *Fontana Mix*. A list of other notable releases might include *Atlas Eclipticalis*, with James Levine conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; *Freeman Etudes* for solo violin, recorded by Irvine Arditti; *Sixteen Dances*, recorded by Ingo Metzmacher and the Ensemble Modern; and *The 25 Year Retrospective Concert of the Music of John Cage*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

As of 1997, there were fourteen books about Cage in print—interviews, collections of essays, a catalog of his music, and so forth. The titles of three central works follow:

Pritchett, James. 1993. *The Music of John Cage*. New York: Cambridge University Press. [A first-class discussion/analysis of the music in the context of the composer’s life and personal development.]

Revill, David. 1992. *The Roaring Silence*. New York: Arcade. [A full-fledged biography offering an extraordinary amount of information including an extensive bibliography and complete chronology of compositions and works in the visual arts.]

Tomkins, Calvin. 1965. *The Bride and the Bachelor: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* New York: Penguin. [The five are John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jean Tinguely. The section on Cage remains the best of all short studies.]