

John Cage

“John Milton Cage Jr. (September 5, 1912 - August 12, 1992) was an American composer, philosopher, poet, music theorist, artist, printmaker, and amateur mycologist and mushroom collector.”

In order to begin to understand this genius polymath, one of the most influential figures of 20th century avant-garde, it is perhaps most useful to approach his work not in chronological order, which would only serve to elucidate his penchant for constant reinvention, but instead to delve into it as he did: from all directions simultaneously, and to try to find - or better still, experience - the common aesthetic thread running through all of it. Therefore, in Cagean spirit, the following is a series of aleatoric impressions of the ideas and music of John Cage.

music as furnitur**E**
always att**R**acted cage,
conslder:
the basic **K**inetic nature
of **S**ound; occurrence
unhindered by hum**A**n error or
in**T**erference
free from the wel**g**ht of constant
att**E**ntion

“Even variation is a form of repetition.” - Arnold Schoenberg.

Although never a serialist, Cage was a true heir to the modernist ideals of his one-time teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. Tired of the excessive expressiveness of Romantic music, he recognized the need to break free from the constrictions of European theories of harmony, melody, and arrangement. Like Schoenberg, he sought to use form to liberate composition from personal involvement. Their ideological approaches, however, were diametrically opposed: while Schoenberg proposed building strict artificial structures to force new sonorities into being, Cage attempted to create frameworks in which natural structures could manifest themselves. In this way, he was a precursor to the field of generative music.

John Cage - along with Edgard Varèse - was one of the first in the Classical tradition to write for percussion ensemble. Furthermore, his arrangements included not only canonical instruments but also everyday objects, or demanded string instruments and pianos to be banged on as percussion. This experimentation culminated with his invention of the prepared piano, which called for nails and other objects to be inserted into the strings. It was his firm conviction that very soon, electronic technology would put every possible sound in the hands of the composer. He demanded the reclassification of music from “organized notes” to “organized sound,” a concept that was rejected, curiously, by Varèse but eagerly explored by successors of Cage such as Frank Zappa and made its way into the realm of sound designers, where Gary Rydstrom considers Cage “one of his greatest influences.”

One of Cage’s most important contributions to contemporary classical music was his pioneering use of chance techniques to determine elements of composition. This attempt to turn away from personal taste and expression found a parallel in his study of Zen Buddhism, a discipline based on transcendence of the ego. A lifelong interest in Oriental thought brought him to the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese book of hexagrams which the composer often used as a tool for generating random events. Although highly influential, his aleatoric techniques also generated contempt from former allies and friends in Europe, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Critics claimed that Cage “abrogated his duty as a composer,” and reflected his own reluctance to making decisions. The composer retorted by remarking that Boulez and Stockhausen also used chance-controlled techniques - albeit to a lesser extent - and complained that “it has to be his [Boulez’s] kind of chance.”

“Repetition is a form of change.” - Brian Eno.

“Artists who use disciplines that free their work from their intentions start the flow moving in an outgoing direction.” - John Cage.

A colourful character in New York’s bohemian culture, Cage’s social circle included some of the

most
Fuller and Marshall McLuhan. He notorious Sensitive to the cultural
believed that music could be a force for artists, environment of the 60s, Cage turned
social change as long as the work musicians his mind from pure art towards
embodied, rather than preached, the and politics, and was especially influenced
thinkers of

the 20th century. Kenneth Silverman’s biography suggests a four-way sexual encounter involving Max

Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and Peggy Guggenheim
ideals it sought to communicate. Ever by the communism of Mao before he
the optimist, Cage realised a and the anarchism of Henry divorced his
multimedia piece in the vein of Fluxus, David Thoreau as well as wife and
called *HPSCHD* and incorporating five his friends Buckminster embarked on a
40-year

personal and professional relationship with Merce Cunningham. Other anecdotes include cooking

Mexican dessert for video. The happening lasted an entire neighbours John Lennon and
harpsichords, a computer, day and was attended by thousands of Yoko Ono and mediating the
dozens of pieces of people, in an uncharacteristic moment split between Robert
artwork, costumes, Rauschenberg and Jasper
performance, dance, and Johns. Perhaps most

importantly, he is considered the founder of the New York

School of composers, which included Morton Feldman, Earle

Browne, Christian Wolff, and the recipient of Cage’s unrequited that brought Cage as close to the

love, David Tudor. hippie counterculture as he ever got.

“Percussion music is a contemporary transition from keyboard-influenced music to the all-sound music of the future.” - John Cage

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's there are few." - Shunryu Suzuki.

<-----I n f l u e n c e d----->

by his

strict

musical education,

John

Cage

always put great **emphasis** on the discipline of

notation.

He encouraged

Morton

Feldman

to consider his manuscripts works of **art** in themselves, and together the 2 developed

the idea of

g^s p⁷ h i c s c o s⁵ b⁷

"I try over and over to begin all over again." - John Cage.

John Cage's figure remains omnipresent in the 21st century avant-garde, standing crucially at the passage between the transcendental project of Modernism and the more open-ended and pluralistic tendencies of Postmodernism. Though he remains a marginal character to the average music listener, the philosophical groundwork he laid is decisively felt in mainstream pop music through the attention given to timbre and sonic exploration. Alternative rock icons such as Sonic Youth and David Byrne have variously recorded and performed his work. Always fond of paradoxes, Cage's theory is not without its contradictions: the intention of non-intention, the politics of *sound-in-itself*. His attempts to undermine the influence of the composer in the content are now recognized as a distinct Cagean aesthetic. Until these points of contention are resolved or rendered irrelevant, the full implications of John Cage's work and thought are yet to be fully absorbed.