John Milton Cage

John Cage continued the ritual of American composers who have made a great impression on the world through less than traditional musical methods. Cage is of English and Scottish decent and was born in Los Angeles, CA on September 5, 1912. In order to understand the composer I have decided to dissect his entire life from early childhood to his death on August 12, 1992. Along with Cage’s musical accomplishments, he was a talented writer, printmaker and philosopher. John Cage is perhaps most well known for his piece entitled 4’33” in which there is three movements entirely composed of silence. It is this type of avant-garde composing that became known as aleatoric music or by definition, chance music. There are many composers that have experimented with these techniques including Charles Ives, however there are many renditions of even this generalized term. Beginning with the childhood of John Cage, I will discuss the events and personalities that transformed this once music shy child into a well-known American composer.

John Cage was born into a less than musical family and took several years before experimenting with compositions
to devote his life to music. The first important fact is that neither of Cage’s parents went to college. However, Cage’s father was an inventor and according to Cage himself, worked in many different fields. In an autobiographical statement by John Cage, he said about his father, “He was able to find solutions for problems of various kinds, in the fields of electrical engineering, medicine, submarine travel, seeing through fog, and travel in space without the use of fuel.” John Cage said that his father was often very optimistic about life and believed that if someone says something cannot be done, that is showing you the correct way to do it. John’s mother on the other hand was described as never happy and frequently pessimistic. She was described by John as having a “sense of society” and founded the Lincoln Study Club originating in Detroit, Michigan and eventually moving to Los Angeles, California. While in Los Angeles, John’s mother became the Women’s Club editor for the Los Angeles Times newspaper. Growing up with his parents, John constantly felt the strains of his parents sharing different views on life. John’s mother would from time to time walk out on John and his father at home saying she would never be back. John’s father would try to calm and comfort him by telling him that she would actually be back shortly. This kind of
childhood left John with mixed goals and dreams. After the death of John’s father, he suggested his mother come visit family in Los Angeles and the response was, “Now, John, you know perfectly well I've never enjoyed having a good time.” This is the type of opposite personalities John Cage grew up to learn and understand. Originally John wished to become a minister at an early age and later in life an accomplished writer. Cage’s grandfather who considered the violin to be the “instrument of the devil” also enforced lack of support for music. I believe John Cage developed his musical talents and accomplishments largely beginning with his childhood experiences. Cage states in his autobiography, “When I wish as now to tell of critical incidents, persons, and events that have influenced my life and work, the true answer is all of the incidents were critical, all of the people influenced me, everything that happened and that is still happening influences me.” John Cage is a very observational and intellectual individual who thrived off of soaking up every detail the world had to offer.

John Cage graduated from Los Angeles High School and embarked on his journey of life beginning by traveling to Europe. He attended Pomona College in Los Angeles for two years and then decided to drop out when he came to the
realization that the school was not being operated correctly. He told his parents that it would be better to go to Europe and gain new experiences. During his 18 months spent living in Europe, Cage worked as an apprentice to an architect, became interested in modern art and music and eventually wrote his first compositions. These very early compositions were lacking harmony and disliked by Cage, so he decided to leave them behind upon his return to America. Research says that John Cage returned to California in 1931 and gained a renewed enthusiasm for America after reading a novel written by Walt Whitman entitled *Leaves of Grass*. Back in California, Cage was introduced to Richard Buhlig, with whom he began first studying composition. After spending time under the direction of Buhlig, John Cage met Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss and eventually Arnold Schoenberg all of whom with whom he studied.

Arnold Schoenberg is likely the most famous composer that John Cage studied with and “literally worshipped.” Arnold Schoenberg was born in Austria and later in his life moved to Los Angeles, CA where he met John Cage. Schoenberg is likely most well known for his innovations of the twelve-tone technique that involves the use of tone rows of the chromatic scale. After meeting Cage,
Schoenberg offered to teach him for free as long as Cage “devoted his life to music.” This began a lengthy relationship between the two that at times was rather tumultuous. After two years under Schoenberg’s direction, Cage became dissatisfied with Schoenberg and decided to end the student-teacher relationship. Arnold Schoenberg grew frustrated with Cage saying that, “In order to write music, you must have a feeling for harmony.” John Cage realized and readily admitted that he had no feeling for harmony. The two individuals agreed on this fact and Schoenberg concluded that Cage would never be able to make music because he would eventually, “come to a wall and won't be able to get through.” This discouragement upset Cage and he fired back, "Then I'll spend my life knocking my head against that wall." I think it is very important to understand this relationship because I believe it only added more fuel to the fire for Cage to become an independent and extremely experimental composer.

After studying with Arnold Schoenberg, John Cage became an assistant to filmmaker Oskar Fischinger in order to prepare himself as the leading composer for one of Fischinger’s films. Based on the research I have concluded, Fischinger was yet another strongly influential source of Cage’s constantly developing musical mind. In
his autobiography, Cage mentions a quote he remembered from speaking with Fischinger. Fischinger told Cage that, “Everything in the world has its own spirit which can be released by setting it into vibration.” John Cage by this time had already begun experimenting with percussion instruments and other sound-making devices. He decided that he would rather incorporate a basis of rhythm into his music rather than harmony. So, after speaking with Fischinger, Cage really set sail into a very experimental period in his music making. “I began hitting, rubbing everything, listening, and then writing percussion music, and playing it with friends.” Cage recalls writing without specifying the instruments and using rehearsal time to innovate new sounds with discovered or rented instruments. He believed that music was about any sound created or currently heard. This included simply making noises with various materials or instruments. As Cage continued to become more individual and experimental with his music, he began an ongoing competition with Arnold Schoenberg.

I believe that when John Cage gave up lessons with Arnold Schoenberg, there was a little bad blood created leading to years of banter and competition. During the few years after Cage became an assistant to Oskar Fischinger, he wrote many percussion compositions that were performed
in his house. After several attempts to invite Arnold Schoenberg to his performances, Cage grew frustrated. Schoenberg’s constant answer was that he was busy and when Cage said, “Can you come a week later,” the answer was “No, I am not free at any time.” It is my opinion that this angered Cage a little and even may have caused some resentment. It is as if Schoenberg will not acknowledge John Cage as a legitimate composer because he had no feeling for harmony. Towards the end of the 1930’s, Cage received a job working as the accompanist for the dancers at the Cornish School of the Arts in Seattle, Washington. Able to put his skills to the test, Cage learned a rhythmic structure that he much desired. He found it as his way to offset the emphasis Arnold Schoenberg put on harmony. “This rhythmic structure could be expressed with any sounds, including noises, or it could be expressed not as sound and silence but as stillness and movement in dance. It was my response to Schoenberg's structural harmony.” This was a strong statement by Cage and throughout his time at the Cornish School, he gave birth to some monumental innovations.

John Cage made great leaps toward shaping his musical career and life goals while attending the Cornish School of the Arts. While working as the accompanist, he was asked
to compose and perform a piece of music for a dance by Syvilla Fort entitled Bacchanale. Although Cage wished to compose a percussion piece, there was no pit for a percussion ensemble at the venue where the dance was to be performed. Therefore the dance called for piano. This is when Cage began experimenting by placing objects inside the piano on top of the strings. He enjoyed very much the sound of metal objects clanging against the strings and these experiments eventually led to his invention of the prepared piano. With his prepared piano, he inserted screws, bolts, rubber strips, and metal plates in order to influence and manipulate the sounds and character of the piano. This experimental style of making music is said to have possibly derived from Cage’s teacher Henry Cowell who used to teach his students to pluck the strings of the piano with one’s fingers and use metal slides to manipulate the sounds. After researching Cage’s background up to this point in his life, I have decided to find a copy of Bacchanale and really listen closely to hear the interesting sounds made and dissect their meanings.

The musical work entitled Bacchanale really gives the listener a chance to grasp several concepts of John Cage’s music. First of all, John Cage was determined to create interesting and experimental compositions based on the idea
of rhythm alone. *Bacchanale* is very rhythmic and in fact some might say involves many irrational rhythms. Irrational rhythms simply mean that there is a rhythm in which an unusual number of beats are superimposed on the predominating tempo. There are also a number of tempo changes indicating Cage’s methods. Second, the idea of atonal music is strongly expressed in this piece. John Cage though still very original and individual, did in some ways, emulate the ideas of atonality from composers such as Charles Ives, Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and of course Arnold Schoenberg. Finally, the methods used to create *Bacchanale* effected the pitch and tone to resemble a small percussion ensemble. After listening to this piece several times I have become more and more aware of the concentration on percussion sounds interwoven into many of John Cage’s compositions. *Bacchanale* to me sounds like a train gathering speed, slowing down and then gathering more speed. It definitely reminds me of a small percussion ensemble with both the way the rhythms are played as well as the actual sound accomplished by manipulating of the piano. Towards the middle and then to the end of this song, it feels like the train makes a few stops along the way. There seems to be one big long stop where everything slows way down and gets really quiet. Then all of the
sudden the train starts back up again and departs on its next journey. I thoroughly enjoyed this piece because in my mind it paints a picture and tells a story using non-traditional compositional methods. When a full orchestra or symphony plays a piece, there are so many instruments providing so many different colors, that a story always seems to be told through the music. In Bacchanale, I am able to feel the emotion and purpose based solely on the rhythms and tempo changes from Cage’s prepared piano which to me sounds a lot like a harpsichord. It is new for me to understand music in this form but John Cage creates a very potent atonal style of music that speaks of life, nature and environment.

John Cage continued to create, innovate and form new relationships with artists and various musicians throughout his stay at the Cornish School of the Arts. After virtually inventing the prepared piano, Cage founded a percussion orchestra that quickly gained followers. Perhaps one of Cage’s most well known works are the Sonatas and Interludes of 1946-48. Cage quickly met and began collaborating with a strong admirer of these works, Pierre Boulez. After lengthy discussions and collaboration, Cage and Boulez came to disagreement over the use of chance in Cage’s music. Pierre Boulez believed that by allowing the
artist to submit to chance, the composer will loose control of his art. In Cage’s mind and made apparent by later works, his use of chance actually was vital to his artistic evolution. The Perilous Night was written in 1943 and is described as quite possibly Cage’s greatest work with the prepared piano. Biographer David Revill said that John Cage often referred to this as his “autobiographical piece” and associated with the composer’s sexual reorientation. Cage’s personal issues caused the divorce from his wife in 1945 and subsequent involvement in a monogamous homosexual relationship with dancer and choreographer, Merce Cunningham. Revill said about The Perilous Night that it was a piece written for Cage’s new lifelong partner in an, “attempt to express, and thereby relieve, the anxieties he was experiencing in his private life.” Each of these events has sculpted John Cage and provided many influences on his life, music and writings.

The Cornish School of the Arts proved to be a backbone of John Cage’s development as a composer, writer and personality throughout his lifetime. Not only did Cage learn, experiment and innovate different elements into his musical compositions, he also shaped his life by learning and following Hindu beliefs, most specifically Zen Buddhism. Cage learned from an Indian musician named Gita
Sarabhai, a saying from the seventeenth century music commentator named Thomas Mace. Mace stated, “The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences.” Cage stated in his autobiography that he “had the good fortune to attend Daisetz Suzuki's classes in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism at Columbia University in the late forties.” It is during this time now that Cage makes another shift in his concentration of different experimental methods of composing.

Silence was to be John Cage’s next area of focus and by the late 1940’s and early 1950’s; he had devoted his music to it. Cage’s idea was that silence still had sound and that even in silence, the environment would make noises, thus creating sound. He learned this from experimenting in an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. According to my research, an anechoic chamber is designed so that the walls, ceiling, and floor will absorb sounds in the room instead of bouncing them off the walls creating an echo effect. Here in this chamber Cage was testing the actual prospect of silence. He soon realized that silence is not acoustic. He determined that silence paves way for the listening of nonmusical and environmental sounds. While experimenting in the anechoic chamber, Cage heard two
sounds from the silence. He later described what he was hearing to a sound engineer. The engineer proceeded to explain that the high-pitched tone was his nervous system and the blood circulating through his body was providing a low-pitched tone. This intrigued Cage greatly and is said to have directly influenced his most famous piece, 4'33".

The piece entitled 4'33" is what Jon Cage is most famous for. Cage would later in his career write a novel called Silence taking the idea into great depths of experimentation. This piece was composed of three movements in which not a single musical note is played. This creates an atmosphere for the audience that requires intense listening and concentration to hear and understand how sounds from the environment can make music. The title was derived from the actual length of the combined three movements. There has to this day been debate over whether Cage’s 4’33” is a challenge to the very definition of music. I believe it allowed him to leave his mark on American music in a very original interesting way.

After the conclusion of all my research, I have indeed come to not only respect John Cage as a composer but enjoy him as well. I am a very open minded musician who believes experimentation is only cause for growth and improvement. Though many would consider atonal music too strange for
their own ears, I consider the innovative side of the methods. Music really can in my opinion be about random sporadic sounds and noises because listening is the key to what makes music possible. One can listen to anything in nature to find music and it will come. I enjoyed learning about John Cage and have gained a much better understanding of where his music fits into the wide range of American composers. I once heard a song where music became the cycle of life. I believe it ties into Cage’s compositions by stating ad agreeing that music can be silence and there doesn’t always have to be numerous strict guidelines to create a musical masterpiece. “Music is life. Life is death. Death is silence. Silence is sound. Sound is Music!” Music is the cycle of life!

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