

Megan Bennett

## **John Cage**

John Cage is recognized as an important 20<sup>th</sup> Century American composer, however as I began to do research on him, it became clear that many have considered him also to be an important philosopher. Some have even gone as far to claim that John Cage's philosophy is more interesting than his music. In fact Kyle Ganna who was a writer for the New York Times was told by the editors that he couldn't refer to Cage as "the most important and influential composer of our time" but instead that to refer to him as "music-philosopher"( 4.)

John Cage was born on September 5<sup>th</sup> of 1912 in Los Angeles. Cage's father was an inventor. His family was Episcopalian, and when he was very young Cage wanted to be a minister when he grew up, and later he would consider being a writer. Cage never would attend a music conservatory, as many well known composers have rather his musical education consisted of mainly of piano lessons while he was a child.

Cage did attend Pomona College but dropped out the second year (which is why Richard Barnes calls him a "distinguished dropout" (6.), and left for Europe. He stayed in Europe only eighteen months, and during this time he was an apprentice architect. It was during his stay in Europe that Cage composed his first musical pieces, but he was rather displeased with the results.

Once back in America Cage took composition lessons from several different teachers, including Arnold Schoenberg, and Henry Cowell. After Cage studied with Schoenberg for two years Cage said he had no feeling for harmony, to which Schoenberg

replied that Cage would as consequence always have an obstacle to his being a composer like a wall that he could not pass. As a reaction to Schoenberg's words Cage said that he would devote his life to beating his head against that wall.

Cage's early music can best be described as largely serialism. Serialism is sometimes used as a synonym for twelve-tone music; however twelve-tone is actually just one form of serialism. Serialism is a form of music that uses "sets to describe musical elements, and allows the manipulation of those sets" (9.). Cage also began to experiment with percussion instruments, and rhythm rather than harmony became the dominant force in much of his music.

While John Cage was a composer and accompanist at the Cornish School in Seattle he became a Zen Buddhist. The Zen Buddhist philosophy very much impacted his music. According to John Cage music was "purposeless play" however "this play is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we are living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out the way and lets it act of its own accord" (5.). Such an approach to music was one thing that very strongly set him apart from so many other composers whom instead follow the traditional European way of approaching music. It was the Eastern virtues of "simplicity, disorder, and chance" (2) that Cage built his music upon.

John Cage was a composer of chance music, also called Aleatoric music. With chance music, some aspect of the music is, as the name suggests, left up to chance, or some important aspect of how the music turns out can be left up to the performers. The

randomness of how Cage's music turned out resulted not only from how his pieces were performed, but also in how they were composed. One of Cage's pieces (though not the only one) *Music that Changes* was composed by tossing coins, and this piece was the first of his to use such a randomized method to compose it. The method that John Cage used to compose his *Music that Changes* was derived from the *I Ching*, also known as The Chinese Book of Changes.

Cage's chance music has been considered somewhat problematic by critics; after all to criticize music created by the toss of a coin is to criticize something left up completely to chance. Often it is the concepts behind Cage's chance music that the focus is given to, and considered to be of more importance than the actual piece of music itself, and this also sets Cage apart from most other composers.

Viewing the ideas behind Cage's music as more important than the music itself, however has, according to some had some unfortunate consequences, for example one piece of chance music ends up being viewed as indistinct from another piece. John Cage's goal certainly wasn't to create a mass of music that sounded all the same, he wanted American music to keep its identity, but he also wanted to transcend the limitations of tonality, and expand the possibilities for how things like silence in music could be approached.

Cage's chance music was also an attempt to create music from which the personality of its creator is removed, and that this was the case certainly makes sense; it is another example of how Cage's Zen Buddhist beliefs influenced his music. There is a quote from Cage himself that supports that removing his "ego" from his music was what he intended when he created chance music; "chance operations are not mysterious

sources of "the right answers." They are a means of locating a single one among a multiplicity of answers, and, at the same time, of freeing the ego from its taste and memory, its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego's own experience"(3.).

After reading a bit about Zen Buddhism it became very clear to me how much of an impact it has clearly made on Cage's approach to music. In Zen Buddhism it is the practice of meditation, and experiential wisdom which is very important, rather than the study of religious texts, which is the emphasis in so many religions. Experiential wisdom is wisdom which is gained through the experience of something rather than simply reading about it, or pondering it and experiential wisdom is considered to be closely aligned with experimentation. This sort of experimental spirit clearly shows up in Cage's approach to music. Another quote from Cage that supports Buddhism having a deep influence on his music is this "I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it than communication. I found this answer from Gira Sarabhai, an Indian singer and tabla player: The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences" (10.).

Music was not the only thing that Cage wrote using his coin toss method he also wrote twenty poems called *Anarchy*. These poems first were delivered as a lecture in 1988 in New York City. Later *Anarchy* would be published as a book. *Anarchy* drew inspiration from many anarchists; among them one of the most famous: Emma Goldman. To write the poetry of *Anarchy* Cage used a computer program to simulate the *I Ching's* coin toss method. The poetry of *Anarchy* is mesostic, meaning that a vertical phrase intersects the horizontal text.

When Cage first began writing mesostic poetry he would simply write a word vertically, and then fill in the horizontal around that word with words, so that the original vertical word becomes a spine running through the other words. A similar form of poetry is called acrostics, and initially that is what Cage called his poetry, but in acrostic poetry the vertical word goes down the edges of the horizontal words, rather than in the middle. Cage came up with the word mesostic, which is derived from the word acrostic.

John Cage was indeed an anarchist, specifically he believed in individual anarchy, with small communities and decentralization. An interesting quote of Cage's was also that "as long as one human being is hungry, the entire human race is hungry." This was Cage quoting Fuller, and in Cage's view the quote has "illuminated the whole situation of twentieth-century living". From this I gather Cage supports the idea of small communities with a lot of individual freedom, but is very much against being isolationist, since what happens to one person affects all.

Cage's concern for the well-being of humanity showed up in his works; Cage published a diary in 1967 which he called "*Diary: How to Improve the World*". In his diary he expressed his concern over the war in Viet Nam as well as such world wide problems as hunger, and lack of shelter. The political views which Cage held were in large part influenced to what he thought was the result of modern technological progress; he believed, that like Buckminster Fuller (an American inventor and visionary) that technology could some day provide enough food and other goods for all. To Cage that humanity became ecologically responsible was of the utmost importance. It was in a world where everyone's basic needs could be met that Cage thought anarchy would be ideal, for in such a setting people would be able to most fully pursue their personal goals

Another place where Cage's concern for humanity shows up is in his writing *Other People Think*, which was the first of his extended writings which was presented first in 1927 at the Hollywood Bowl, Cage was representing the Los Angeles High School and he won the California Oratorical Contest. In his *Other People Think* Cage wrote about the relations between the US and Central as well as South American countries. He addresses that there are a great number of US citizens that have a sense of superiority to those from countries to the south, and vice versa. However the relationship of the US to those countries is essential, as we rely on them for various products from sugar, to wheat, to coffee, etc... Cage thought that the foreign policy of the US in general had the promoting of the welfare of countries to the south in mind, and has done much to benefit those countries. However, he says that there are two sides to every question (in this case the question is why is there such a misunderstanding between the Latins and Anglo-Saxons of the American continents). Cage points towards the capitalists whom he says according to him have invested money in the southern countries to a zealous extent, and exploited them, and these capitalists he says have the desire for their own material gain rather than the welfare of the people at heart.

Cage was also famous for his experimentation with percussion music, in which as mentioned earlier, rhythm rather than harmony or melody was the dominant force in the music. At one point in the Museum of Modern Art some of his pieces were performed using objects not traditionally used as instruments, including; flower pots, brake bands, etc... Of percussion music Cage said that "Any sound is acceptable to the composer of percussion music; he explores the academically forbidden "nonmusical" field of sound insofar as is manually possible"(6.).

Cage's percussive pieces are described as being "slightly reminiscent, on first hearing, of Indonesian gamelan" (6.). However the structure of the music is not Oriental, but rather Modern Western. Cage created a percussion orchestra, and wrote his *First Construction (In Metal)* for that orchestra in 1939. As its name suggests *First Construction (In Metal)* uses metal percussion instruments.

Another thing which Cage explored which has always been an important part of rhythm is the role of silence in music. According to Cage there is in fact not really any such thing as silence. Cage noted that in even in an anechoic chamber, which is a room made as silent as possible, there is not true silence, since Cage in his experience of being in such a room could still hear two sounds, a low one and a high one, the explanation for which he gives is that the high sound is his nervous system, and the low his circulatory system. There is some debate over whether Cage's explanations for the two sounds he heard (which he was originally given by the engineer in charge of the anechoic chamber) are actually accurate, but whatever the correct explanation for the sounds, Cage heard sounds where one might expect to not hear anything.

Cage came to view the moments of silence in music as being as filled with sound as the sound created by performers playing their instruments. Cage explored the idea of silence in his piece 4'33", which was a three movement piece. In 4'33" not a single note was played, rather the piece consisted of about four and a half minutes of silence. Cage said that he chose 4'33" because that is the standard length for so called "canned music". Cage was not in fact the first composer to write a composition of complete silence, Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff wrote a composition in which the notation comprised only rests. *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man* written in 1897 by Alphonse

Allais (whom was a French writer and humorist), was the earliest known silent piece, and it comprised of nine measures of silence.

Cage discovered what he called a micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure; in this rhythmic structure the larger parts and the smaller single-unit phrases have the same proportions. Cage found that this rhythmic structure could be expressed with anything, ranging from sound, to just silence, or in dance it could be expressed through movement or stillness.

Cage's pieces also explored using a variety of different materials used to alter a piano, for example he would have bits of metal, wood and other materials placed between the strings of a piano. A piano altered in such a way is called a prepared piano, and John Cage was the one whom coined this term, and also the first to use prepared piano really extensively. According to Cage it was Henry Cowell and Erik Satie whom were the real contributors to the idea.

Cage was inspired by Cowell's experimentation with plucking or scrapping piano strings, techniques which are referred to as string piano. Cage commonly used pieces of rubber, nuts and bolts in his prepared piano. When Cage was commissioned to write music for a dance by Syvilla Fort called *Bacchanale* he used prepared piano. In fact it is claimed that this is the first use of prepared piano by Cage, and for *Bacchanale* the only instrument available was a piano. Cage's goal was to be able to play an entire percussion orchestra on just one piano. Preparing a piano does indeed allow for a great variety of sounds, ranging from some of which sound something like gamelan instruments, and others which don't really sound like anything else.

I listened to *Bacchanale*, and a lot of the sounds still sound like an ordinary piano, but some of the sounds do sound like some sort of drum, in fact so much so that I'm wondering whether the recording I heard actually was using prepared piano, or piano along with actual drums. Another piece which Cage composed for prepared piano was *Sonatas and Interludes*.

Cage collaborated with Merce Cunningham, whom was an American dancer and choreographer, and in fact Cunningham is considered to be one of the most influential people in modern dance, and is notorious for requiring exceptional athleticism on the part of his dancers. Cage and Cunningham met at the Cornish school, and apparently they became lovers, as well as collaborators.

Cage was the piano accompanist for dance classes, and he and Cunningham had their first recital together in 1944. Cage was commissioned by The Ballet Society of New York to do the score for *The Seasons*, and Cunningham did the choreography. In 1951 Cage completed *Sixteen Dances* for Cunningham, and for these dances Cage created charts in order to determine the procedure for the music note by note.

Another thing which Cage experimented with was music technology, in fact he is credited with being a part of the first group of musicians and engineers to put music on magnetic tape; this happened in 1951. Among Cage's other experimentations with music technology, were his experimentations with recordings of sine waves. While Cage was at the Cornish school he was involved with a radio station, and it was there that he created compositions which combined the recordings of sine waves with acoustic sounds, and "amplified small sounds". His *Imaginary Landscapes* were a series born of this

experiment. His *Imaginary Landscapes* include the use of turntables, radios, and many other things to be used as instruments.

Cage sometimes used the term “organization of sound” rather than music, for he was interested in organizing sounds which wouldn’t ordinarily be considered music. This was part of why Cage found film interesting, because film studios have a library of sounds, and any of them can be given “rhythms within or beyond the reach of anyone’s imagination” and their amplitudes and frequencies can be controlled, and a quartet for “explosive motor, wind heart beat, and landslide”(6.) can be composed.

Cage also noted that most electrical instruments imitate past instruments rather than being truly something new. Furthermore he noted that those whom play new electric instruments such as the Theremin often tried to make the instrument sound like some other older instrument rather than to explore the truly new possibilities which the Theremin had the potential for. To Cage one of the very interesting things about electric instruments is that they had the potential to allow for complete control of the overtone series.

John Cage died on August 12 of 1992 shortly before the celebration of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday was planned to occur. Cage’s birthday celebration which was planned by Walter Zimmermann, and Stefan Schaedler went on despite his death, and during the celebration his *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* was performed. Cage was truly one of the musical pioneers of America; he sought new ways to approach music. Cage can be credited with opening many doors for further experimentation within music.

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