

# Introduction to *The music of John Cage*

James Pritchett

---

Copyright 1993 by James Pritchett. All rights reserved.

---

John Cage was a composer; this is the premise from which everything in this book follows. On the face of it, this would not appear to be a statement of much moment. Cage consistently referred to himself as a composer. He studied composition with Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss, and Arnold Schoenberg. He spoke often of having devoted his life to music. He wrote hundreds of compositions that are published by a prominent music publishing house, which have been recorded, and which are performed regularly worldwide. He received commissions from major orchestras, chamber ensembles, soloists, and at least one opera company. He is mentioned in every up-to-date history of music. The only monograph devoted to him was in a series of "studies of composers." Of course John Cage was a composer: everything in his life points to this inescapable fact.

And yet, I must begin this book by defending the obvious. For, even though his credentials are clearly those of a composer, Cage has, as often as not, been treated as something else. It has been stated on various occasions by various authorities that Cage was more a philosopher than a composer, that his ideas were more interesting than his music. Cage, says one history of twentieth-century music, "is not to be considered as a creator in the ordinary sense."(1) Another critic wonders whether Cage, after deciding that "he was not going to be one of the world's great composers," refashioned himself into "one of the leading philosophers and wits in twentieth-century music."(2) The degree to which this has become the standard way of dealing with Cage is revealed in a story told by Kyle Gann: a writer for the *New York Times* was told by his editors that he could not refer to Cage as "the most important and influential composer of our time," but rather had to identify him as a "music-philosopher."(3)

For the *Times* editors, as for so many others, the problem with treating Cage as a composer is clearly a problem with his work after 1951. His compositions for percussion and prepared piano written in the 1940s have never been difficult for critics--his *Sonatas and interludes* of 1948 has even been called a masterwork. In 1951, however, Cage began to use chance operations in the course of his composition, and it is here that things go awry. His adoption of chance techniques is almost always seen as a rejection: a jettisoning of everything traditionally musical. External forces of irrationality (such as Zen Buddhism) are invoked as the cause of this break. Under such influences, it is believed, Cage decided to substitute the throw of dice for his own tastes, so that he could ultimately remove any trace of his personality from the composed work. By 1952, Cage had written *4' 33"*, the silent piece; thus, in the words of one writer, "the authority of the composer [had been] extinguished."(4)

The crux of the problem, then, has been a failure to find some way of dealing with Cage-the-composer, his musical compositions, and his chance operations all at the same time. When faced with music composed using chance, critics have drawn a blank. How can one understand a randomly-made composition? What can one say about such a thing? To criticize it would be to criticize a random act; how does one judge the toss of a coin? The way out of this dilemma has traditionally been to ignore the music and dwell upon "the ideas behind it." For if Cage has left his music to chance, if he has thus extinguished his authority as a composer, then all that remains an idea--the idea of inviting randomness

into his work. The pieces are thus about this idea of chance and are not concerned with anything even remotely musical. These are "conceptual" works in which, as one author writes, "the philosophical underpinnings are clearly more significant than any mere sound." (5) Cage's importance lies in his having originated these ideas, but the results are not music and are not to be evaluated as music. "Here the issues are all philosophical," says a noted composer of Cage's work, "because composing itself has been entirely devalued." (6) Thus Cage has become "a philosopher, not a composer."

The treatment of Cage as a philosopher has had some unfortunate consequences. Foremost among these has been the tendency to see all of his work after 1951--work which presumably shares the same idea about randomness--as an undifferentiated mass of "chance music." The reduction of Cage's music to this one-dimensional approach is made simpler by the nature of chance itself. Critics frequently assume that the compositions are formless and without distinguishing characteristics since they believe them to be, in effect, barely more than random noise. If everything in them is determined by chance, then there can be no stylistic difference between one work and another any more than there can be a difference between one list of random numbers and another. "Instead of a music of definable identity," says one writer, "we have conceptions whose essence is a lack of identity." (7) This failure to see any differences among Cage's chance works has led to their being treated in a superficial fashion; histories of his work tend to pass rapidly over the works composed after 1951, with a few brief descriptions and generalizations. Cage's critics have seemed to take the attitude that if Cage didn't care which sounds became part of his so-called compositions, then why should we bother to listen carefully?

It is this attitude and this approach that I reject in the strongest possible way. In the first place, the claim that Cage's chance pieces do not have distinct identities is complete nonsense. To state that one can not tell the difference between *Music of changes*, *Music for piano*, *Winter music*, *Cheap imitation*, and *One-all chance-composed works for piano*--is an act of either profound ignorance or willful misrepresentation. But beyond such an obvious error, the traditional view of Cage fails to answer the question: Why did he do it? If all that Cage was left with after 1951 was the idea of chance, then why did he continue to compose? Cage stated on many occasions that he did not like to repeat himself, that he preferred to make a fresh discovery with each new piece. How do we reconcile this with the textbook image of Cage-the-philosopher, pondering the same tired question for forty years? The portrayal of Cage as only a philosopher fails because it cannot serve as the foundation for a believable account of his work. It demeans the composer by presenting a flat, cartoonish version of his life, totally devoid of and insight.

Cage-as-philosopher is thus an image that will not bear close scrutiny; we thus must seek a new image, new role for Cage. It is in this respect that I am, in this book, returning to the obvious: that Cage was a composer. It is not difficult, in fact, to picture Cage in this role: consider, for example, the story of his composition of *Apartment house 1776*, as told in an interview with David Cope. (8) The work was a commission to commemorate the bicentennial of the American Revolution; Cage thus wanted "to do something with early American music that would let it keep its flavor at the same time that it would lose what was so obnoxious to me: its harmonic tonality." Cage decided to take 44 pieces of four-part choral music by William Billings and other early American composers and then to alter them--turn them into new music. In his first version of the pieces, Cage simply subtracted notes from the originals. For each measure, he used chance to answer the question of how many of the four voices would remain. The results of this process did not suit him: "When I got to a piano and tried them out, they were miserable. No good at all. Not worth the paper they were written on. It was because the question was superficial." Cage then changed his method by adding silence as a possible answer to his question (in the first version, at least one voice always remained). The results were still "not good." Finally he changed the question itself. He counted the number of notes in a given voice of the piece, and then used chance to select from these. Supposing there were fourteen notes in a line, chance operations might select notes one, seven, eleven, and fourteen. In such a case, Cage would take the first note from the original and

extend it until the seventh note (removing all the intervening notes); all the notes from the seventh to the eleventh would be removed, leaving a silence. Then the eleventh note would be extended to the fourteenth, followed by another silence. Each of the four lines thus became a series of extended single tones and silences. This was the version that Cage settled upon:

The cadences and everything disappeared; but the flavor remained. You can recognize it as eighteenth century music; but it's suddenly brilliant in a new way. It is because each sound vibrates from itself, not from a theory. . . . The cadences which were the function of the theory, to make syntax and all, all of that is gone, so that you get the most marvelous overlappings.

This is a description of a composer at work. In composing these 44 pieces for *Apartment house 1776*, Cage had a goal that was clearly defined. His first attempts at making the piece in accordance with his goals were failures. Cage evaluated these intermediate results, making refinements and modifications to his way of working. Through this process, he eventually produced a finished product that he judged beautiful, "brilliant," "marvelous." This is Cage, the composer, exercising his craft. The rejection of the first two versions of the pieces was not based on any random factor at all--it was not a matter of one set of random numbers being more "beautiful" than another. Instead, the focus of Cage's work was on the framework within which chance operated--the questions that he asked. "The principle underlying the results of those chance operations is the questions," Cage told Cope. "The things which should be criticized, if one wants to criticize, are the questions that are asked."

From his description of his experience in composing *Apartment house 1776*, Cage makes it clear that some questions are better than others, produce better music. Why did he reject those first methods of composition? Cage tells us that the first two sets of questions were rejected because the individual tones of the original Billings pieces were still locked up by the vertical structure of the tonal harmony--the harmonic structure was antithetical to his musical goals. In the ultimate arrangement, the tones of the four individual voices are extended beyond their original durations, so that they thus break the bonds of the harmony. Each tone is also surrounded on both sides by a silence. Together, these two factors--the breaking up of harmonies and the floating of individual sounds in silences--create the effect of each tone being exactly itself, separate from all the others: "each sound vibrates from itself."

This effect brings to mind the idea of "sounds being themselves," a common theme in Cage's work. What is made crystal clear in the story of his composition of *Apartment house 1776* is that this idea is *musical* and not merely philosophical. That Cage chose one set of questions over another was purely a matter of taste and style. The frameworks for Cage's chance systems were crafted with an ear towards what sorts of results they would produce, so that the questions he asked form the basis of his own distinctive musical style. If either of the first two chance systems that Cage derived for this work had been used, the resulting 44 pieces would still be valid chance compositions--they would still adhere to Cage's supposed "philosophy." But it is only the third and final set of questions that could produce music that was Cage's, that had his style. John Cage evaluated his compositional questions on a strictly musical basis, and so should we.

To understand the music of John Cage, then, one not only needs to know something of the mechanics of his work, but one also needs an image of John Cage the composer--his sensibility, his musical style. As with any composer, this style changed over the years, and not just in 1951, either (in this book, I suggest 1957, 1962, and 1969 as major years of change in Cage's career, but there are others, and mine are not meant to imply a hard division of his work into periods). But constant throughout, from the earliest works to the last, was Cage's joy in composing: his exercising of his musical imagination, whether through the expressive "considered improvisation" of works such as the *Sonatas and interludes*, or through the design of elaborate chance-driven systems as in *Music of changes*, or through the simpler methods of his last works, the "number" pieces. In listening to these compositions, we are witness to the

work of a man with a unique and very beautiful sense of musical style.

This book aims to present a coherent picture of this John Cage, the composing Cage. I have asked myself these questions: who was John Cage? What was his identity as a composer? Who was the man for whom this work was necessary? I do not present this as a biography, nor as a study of his compositions in themselves. Instead, the focus of this book is on John Cage's life as a composer, with what it was that he did and why he did it. In this way, one may say that I have written about something in between Cage and his works: the act of composing rather than the composer or the compositions.

This study is by no means comprehensive. Some of the compositions I mention only briefly, and others I do not mention at all. Similarly, there are some ideas and trends in Cage's work that I do not pursue at any great length. This is in part due to necessity--Cage wrote an enormous amount of music and his work touches on an astonishing range of other subjects. However, this book is also very much my own personal view of Cage's work, shaped by my own attempt to put the pieces of his life together into a coherent picture. In each chapter, I have tried to bring the various disparate materials together into some believable portrait of a composer's life, dispensing with everything but those ideas, techniques, experiences, compositions, and writings that I feel contribute to a satisfying and enlightening account of how and why Cage did what he did.

Cage once indicated that he wished critics would be "introducers": people who could take music and, by writing about it, turn it "into something you can deal with." This has been the model I have tried to follow in this book. By keeping uppermost in my mind the image of Cage composing, I have tried to write about his music in such a way that, in some sense, it will remain unexplained, but which will still make it into something that can be dealt with by each listener in his own way. In the end, there is no substitute for the direct experience of Cage's music itself: this book should be seen as opening a door into that work rather than presenting the final word on it. If you feel it necessary to listen to one or more of the pieces I discuss in the course of this study, then I will consider myself a success. Certainly nothing pleased Cage more than for others to enter along with him into his musical world.

## Notes

- (1) Eric Salzman, *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 160.
- (2) Donal Henahan, "The Riddle of John Cage", *The New York Times*, 23 August 1981, p. D-17.
- (3) Kyle Gann, "Philosopher No More", *The Village Voice*, 25 August 1992, p. 77.
- (4) Paul Griffiths, *Cage*, Oxford Studies of Composers No. 18 (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 28.
- (5) John Rockwell, *All-American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 52.
- (6) Charles Wuorinen, "The Outlook for Young Composers", *Perspectives of New Music* 1/2 (Spring 1963), p. 60.
- (7) Salzman, *Twentieth-Century Music*, p. 163.
- (8) Cope's interview with Cage appeared in *The Composer*, Volume 10/11, pp. 6-22. The description of

*Apartment house 1776* occurs on p. 8.

[James Pritchett home](#)