

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ANALYSIS: ESSAYS IN MINIATURE

by Lothar Klein

JOHN CAGE. What has happened to music when some composers and audiences credit gargling into a microphone as an expressive experience? However strange the impact of listening to Boulez or Stockhausen may be to the uninitiated, it is certain that an introduction to the world of John Cage will seem like bedlam. Among Cage's work, one may find *Music for Amplified Toy Pianos, 4' 33"* for piano, a piece in three movements during all of which, to quote Cage, "no sounds are intentionally produced"; an *Imaginary Landscape*, requiring tin cans, conch shell, buzzers, and metal waste basket; and *Living Room Music*, a suite of three pieces for furniture, books, papers, windows, walls, and doors. Usual reactions to Cage's performances (he is his own most inimitable interpreter) peg the composer and his activities as clownishly fraudulent; others see him as a musical martyr dedicated to cleansing our ears of clichés and "waking us up to the very life we are living." The composer's rationale has method in its madness, and his artful activity may fit our times; but these times, one suspects, may be out of joint. There is no middle ground in discussing Cage; to condemn him without understanding his compositional attitude is as dangerous to the creative psyche as it is to accept him uncritically. Anyone who does not take Cage seriously does not understand the nature of contemporary existence. Jean-Paul Sartre, in one of his short stories, tells us

that every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance. The initial essay in this series, *Reflections on Music and the Liberal Arts* (*Music Educators Journal*, December 1966), claimed that music as a humanistic study is only valid if it is focused on the questions raised by today's radical empiricist musical developments. In considering the ideas of John Cage, we come full circle and again stress this earlier claim. If the audible aspect of Cage is inconsequential as music, grappling with the internal logic of his thinking is essential if we are to form our own ideas of music and its significance

This article is the eleventh and final in a series of "Essays in Miniature," which has discussed important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series has included analyses of works by Satie, Webern, Schoenberg, Varèse, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Boulez, and Cage. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

as human activity. Cage's ideas, then, are buoys to which we must swim in order to measure our own condition.

California-born in 1912, Cage lists Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg as his compositional gurus. One always perceives Cage as being more interested in ideas behind a particular music than in the music itself, and no one in the history of recent music is as cun-

ning in toying with the ideological boundaries that separate life and art. Does art imitate life? For Western civilization, art, and specifically music, has ever been superior to life—abstracted from it, idealized, and ordered. A Western artist has traditionally been a conscientious god searching for a perfection not to be found in life. For the spiritually enlightened of Eastern cultures, music becomes a moral purgative preparing the mind for divine habitation. This Zen Buddhist concept (in actuality not far removed from extreme European Romanticism) plays a crucial role in Cage's aesthetic, and his thinking is in turn enormously influential on today's intelligentsia, weary of reason and ready for a metaphysical backlash.

To compose serially, we have seen, demands super-reasoning powers. In order for Boulez to compose, a logic-tight system is imperative; choices must be made with the strictest reasoning. Stockhausen explores an electronic sound-world by means of gadgetry, seeking to investigate and extract infinite sounds from any instrument by assaulting it in any manner striking his fancy. A gong may be struck with metal, rubbed with a wineglass, or swept with a broom. The common denominator of these two composers is an attempt to exhaust the sound potential of a particular compositional formula or instrumental body. While Boulez leaves the aesthetic effect of his researches to chance, there is nothing ambiguous

about his method while composing. Stockhausen, too, is seemingly nonplussed about the response his music engenders. For him, the experiment and process is more important than the outcome, and one accepts, as an act of faith, that the outcome will automatically produce what is beautiful. The sound-generating sources a composer admits into his compositional work determines his relationship to music as it is traditionally understood. Boulez insists that music must

emanate from musical instruments; in this requirement he is in direct line to classical Brahmsian thinking. Stockhausen's expanded sound resources also include the sounds of everyday life—hand clapping, tearing paper—sounds that Boulez banishes from his sound-realm. It is necessary to cite the difference between Boulez and Stockhausen in order to grasp the daring of Cage, for in true American spirit, he shows a reckless and enterprising bravado often lacking in his tradi-

tion-bound European competitors. If one chooses to call the work of these three composers nonmusic, then Cage is the elder statesman of international experimental music.

In 1937, John Cage prophesied that noise would become the proper material for a music of the future. His early efforts in this direction, naturally enough, resulted in percussion music, and he stockpiled the percussive arsenal to include any weapon of metal, stone, or lumber. Nor did electronics escape his curiosity. Recordings of telephone-frequency testing equipment played on variable-speed turntables became an *Imaginary Landscape* to be heard. The use of non-specific pitches within a musical framework was a clever detour around the neo-Classical stalemate that music had achieved in 1939. Cage's reasoning demonstrates a shrewd coupling of Stravinsky's remark, "Music is incapable of expressing anything," and Satie's grafting of visual imagery onto musical shapes, as in *Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear*. The result was a new intermedia amalgam of sound, visual imagining, and even physical movement. Stravinsky's premise (music can only express itself) was compounded into Cage's syllogism that whereas music sounds, any sound can become music. With this sleight of hand, music was set topsy-turvy.

The collapse of Europe and the formal importation of existential philosophy to America in 1945, provided a sober *raison d'être* for playing the piano with a frozen fish. "Our poetry now," Cage said, "is the realization that we possess nothing." What was described as the resurgence of Dada, now evoked the emptiness of twentieth-century existence to justify its art. The basis for this attitude was the realization that artistic humanism was no deterrent to mass slaughter and that an appreciation of art did not prevent atrocities. Human existence, artistic creation, scientific discovery, and world history, one concluded, were the results of happenstance. Even science, the great arbiter, conceded that chance was a more fundamental principle in determining events than the time-honored principle of cause and effect. Formerly artistic creation sought perfection by seeking to

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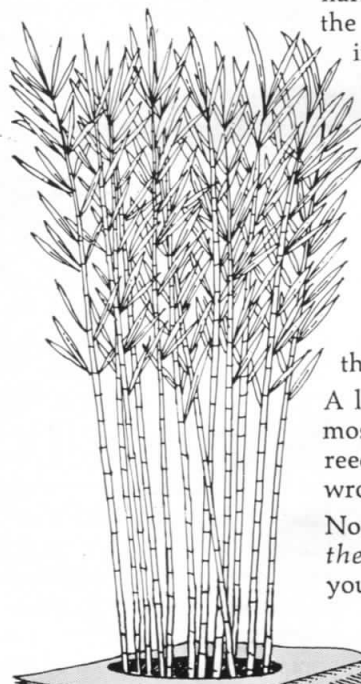
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eliminate chance (the process of compositional revision strives for perfection); turning the tables, Cage wondered, why could not chance be evoked as a creative construction agent. To prove his point, Cage began to employ chance operations—tables of random numbers, the *Chinese Book of Changes*,—as sources for a music derived through chance. Artistic free will, the prime mover of Western art, had been assassinated. With cause and effect out of the way, the universe was seen to operate as a huge roulette wheel. Furthermore, with chance in control, the concepts of right and wrong proved an erroneous expectation. Cage triumphantly reasons, "An error is simply a failure to adjust immediately from a preconception to an actuality . . . error is a fiction, it has no reality in fact."

Given a Beethoven, the appearance of John Cage was inevitable. Since about 1800, our musical history has been dominated by creative figures subjugating the musical art to their own view of the world (Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler, Schoenberg). Earlier ears and more humble composers (all ancient music, *stile galant*, Bach, Mozart, Haydn) saw music as a gentler art, immune to notions of historical progress. As we know, the progressives won out, for individual developments prescribe our studies of styles and periods. We also know that the materials of music have been systematically exhausted until, today, some composers believe the spectrum of music must be widened to include noise. These composers describe themselves clinically as "organizers of sound." Yet a solo violin with obbligato whirling eggbeater strains our sensibilities. However, in summing up, we must recall that for Cage all sounds are potentially musical, and that chance is a more potent force than painstaking creative determinism, and that by banning everyday sounds from our definition of music, a schism arises between life and art. Consequently, Cage can conclude, "Errorless music is written by not giving a thought to cause and effect. Any other kind of music always has mistakes in it. In other words, there is no split between spirit and matter."

Cage's haunting reasoning is

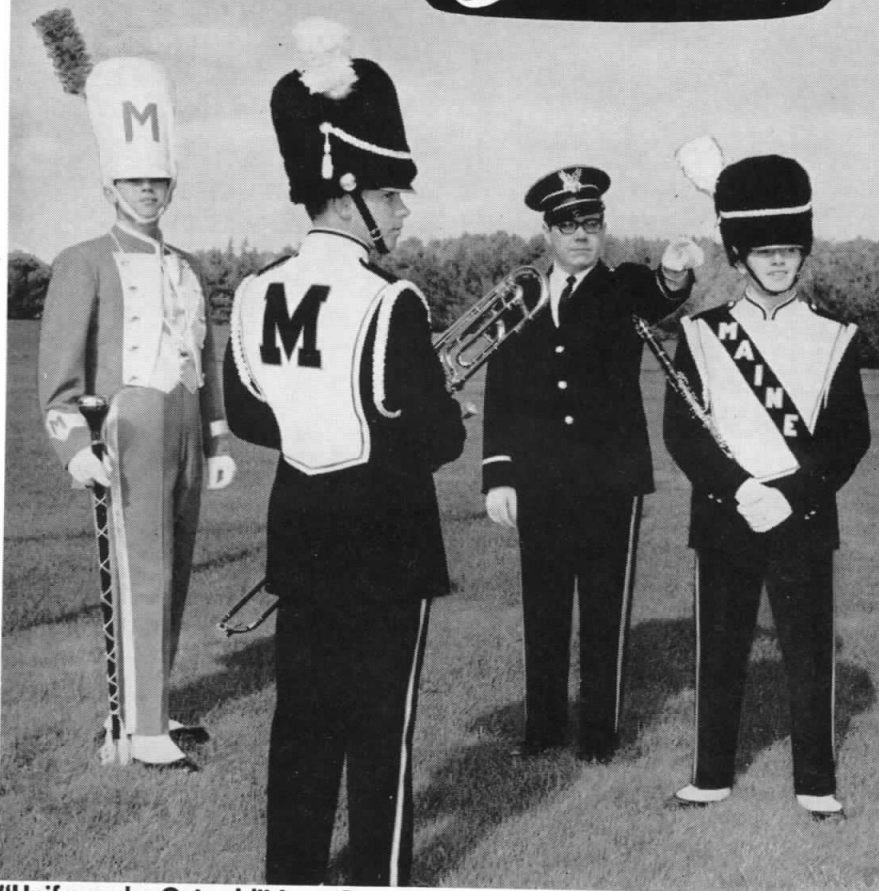
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beautiful. It leads the individual creator straight to nirvana, to a beatific emancipation from external reality. Such dialectics signify the end of music in the Western world. The triad of composer, performer, and listener is torn asunder, leaving each in isolation. The communicative warmth of art is frozen in the individual despair of nothingness. As loneliness and alienation are part of the twentieth-century condition, there is justification for such a philosophy. If Cage is cor-

rect, as many believe him to be, then our present musical curriculums (particularly traditional "theory" as it is usually taught) are as up-to-date and meaningful as maritime studies claiming the world is flat. Can music again be revived and made meaningful?

It is foolish to attempt an answer that can only be found by searching one's heart. The sins of intellect are more grievous than those of the heart. Can we, in "the winter of our discontent" find seeds for an

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eternal spring? An answer can only be found in that no-man's-land between reason and faith. It is this searching responsibility that a musical education today must shoulder in addition to technical matters. It is as pointless to attempt a technical analysis of a Cage piece as it would be to compare the mystical experiences of medieval saints. Music, at this end-game stage, has become a dehumanized art. The nineteenth century debated musical form and content. Cage reduces this argument to absurdity. Radical empiricist music offers only the act of doing, divorced from any intrinsic aesthetic meaning, as the final result of the musical experience. Paradoxically, making music by casting a Coca-Cola bottle into the innards of the piano is not modern but is the ultimate extension of an egotistical Romantic art turned in on itself. Such an act may be a comic effort to go beyond existential nausea, but as an aesthetic act, it is meaningful only to a single individual. Thus, the mere act of organizing sound has become a means to metaphysical salvation. Viewed this way, music, as an art, is destroyed.

Rather than to become impaled by a technical *Zeitalter*, Cage has chosen to revolt against it. A follower of Boulezian serialism becomes little more than a cipher in a historical system, while Stockhausen's electronic foraying embraces the very scientism that crushes personal assertion. Cage does not, like Boulez, seek the perfection of system, nor does he welcome electronics as an "aid to expression," beyond subjugating them to purposes for which they are not intended. Cage is closest to Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, who was maddened by the science and progress that would clearly explain and calculate everything so that there would be no more incidents or adventures in the world.

If we, as music educators, understand the scope of Cage's position, we may be able to restore music to its rightful place of study: the integration of the individual within himself and his environment. If we do not realize the implications of music today, we will be like the ancient mariners who feared to venture too far out to sea lest they sail over the edge of the world. ☐

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