**John Cage**

David W. Bernstein

A leading figure in the twentieth-century avant-garde, John Cage (1912-1990) was a prolific composer, writer, and artist. Born in Los Angeles, California, Cage was a brilliant student in high school, but quickly dropped out of Pomona College in 1930 to travel to Europe to become a writer. His interests at that time also included music, architecture, and painting. Upon his return to California in 1931, Cage became more and more involved with music and studied composition with Richard Buhlig, Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss, and Arnold Schoenberg. His early works show Schoenberg’s influence in their use of a naive modification of the latter’s twelve-tone system. By the late 1930s, Cage began to pursue his own compositional interests, embarking on a career as a musical innovator who for fifty years would send “shock waves” throughout the music world.

In “The Future of Music Credo,” a manifesto written in 1940, Cage declared that in the future the distinction between “noise” and so-called “musical sounds” would no longer exist. By that time he had composed a series of works for percussion, experimented with electronic media, and invented the “prepared” piano, all of which gave “noise” a new musical vitality. An essential feature of Cage’s evolving aesthetics was his interest in the synthesis of art and life, a position that was the result of his studies of Zen Buddhism and his knowledge of the historical avant-garde (futurism, dadaism, and surrealism). These interests drew him to techniques developed by the dadaist movement such as simultaneity and chance operations, which brought art closer to the chaos and complexities in the real world. At Black Mountain College in 1952, he staged a now famous performance consisting of several unrelated activities including Merce Cunningham’s dancing, David Tudor’s piano playing, poetry recitals by Charles Olsen and M. C. Richards, Robert Rauchenberg playing an old fashioned record player, and Cage’s own reading from a text by the fourteenth-century mystic and philosopher Meister Eckhardt. Cage’s focus upon simultaneity in this work looked back to dadaist performance art and also anticipated the “happenings” that became popular during the 1960s.

Cage’s dedication to the fusion of art and life also led him to adopt chance and indeterminacy as compositional methods. His early experiments with chance operations culminated with the *Music of Changes* (1951), a brilliant virtuoso work for solo piano composed by tossing coins and referring to the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*, the *I Ching*. For the remainder of his career, Cage continued to use different ways of employing chance in his works including computer simulations of *I Ching* coin tosses, arriving at musical notes according to imperfections in sheets of manuscript paper, and “plotting” notes according to a medieval Czechoslovakian star chart. He also created various forms of graphic musical notation, which provided performers with unprecedented freedom to interpret, what he termed his “indeterminate” scores.

Cage’s use of chance methods and indeterminacy are problematic features of his music since the aesthetic evaluation of works employing these techniques is difficult because of the renunciation of compositional control. But even more perplexing is Cage’s composition for piano without sound *4’33”* (1952)—perhaps his most crucial contribution to the mid-century revival of avant-garde aesthetics. The description of *4’33”*—the musical analog for Robert Rauschenberg’s white canvases—as a composition without sound is misleading. *4’33”* was not merely a philosophical statement without any real musical content. According to Cage, an audience experiencing *4’33”* has an opportunity to listen, in an aesthetic way, to what there is to hear at any time and in any place. Thus, the distinction between musical and environmental sound no longer holds; *4’33”* constitutes an ultimate fusion of art and life.

Cage left a legacy of works that had a profound influence on artists from a wide variety of disciplines. His creative activities were not limited to music; he was also an accomplished writer and an artist. His writings include more than eight volumes of essays and poetry as well as numerous articles. Chance operations played an important role in Cage’s poetry. He developed a technique called “writing through” a specific book, poem or series of texts using chance operations to select phrases from his sources, often arranged so that they formed “mesostic strings.” The verses in a mesostic poem, like an acrostic, are formed by an alignment of lines so that words are formed on a vertical axis. Mesostics are differentiated from acrostics in that the words run down the middle of the verses rather than down one side.

Cage was also an extremely productive visual artist and was especially interested in printmaking, drawing, etching, and watercolors. In the late 1970s he had a residency at the Crown Point Press originally located in Oakland, California. Under the tutelage of Crown Point’s director Kathan Brown, he became acquainted with the techniques and materials used in the etching process. Cage subjected these parameters to chance operations and the startling results were highly regarded by both artists and art critics.

Beginning in the 1960s Cage paid increasing attention to the relationships between art and political and social structures. He believed that a work of art may constitute a model of an ideal world. Through chance operations and the resultant subversion of traditional musical forms and organizational principles, he created a musical anarchy, which served as a model for alternative forms of social and political organization. Although Cage did not ascribe to the absolutes and universal truths postulated in so many forms during the enlightenment, romantic, and modernist periods, his views concerning the regenerative capabilities of art place him within this tradition. But Cage’s ties to what Jürgen Habermas has termed the “project of modernity” notwithstanding, his work stands at the crossroads of two principal lines of development in the history of twentieth-century aesthetics. While the radical results of his compositional processes were achieved through modernist precision with its systematic attention to detail and control of the materials used in composition, Cage’s revolutionary commitment to letting “sounds be themselves,” achieved through chance and indeterminacy, resulted in a radically new form of musical continuity devoid of intentional relationships between sounds other than their mutual co-existence in musical space and time. Cage’s creative work thus occupies a unique position within the intellectual history of the second half of the twentieth century, contributing to the evolution of musical modernism and at the same time anticipating developments now associated with the postmodernist era.

**References and further reading:**

*John Cage*, <<http://www.johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Works.cfm>> (June 19, 2013).

This is the official website of the John Cage Trust. It includes a database of Cage’s works.

Emmerik, Paul van (2003-2013) *A John Cage Compendium*, <<http://cagecomp.home.xs4all.nl/>> (June 19, 2013). This website, compiled in collaboration with Herbert Henck and András Wilheim, contains comprehensive information on Cage’s life and work.

Nicholls, David (2007) *John Cage*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press. This beautifully written monograph is a concise overview of Cage’s music.

Nicholls, David, ed. (2002), *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This volume contains a collection of essays on Cage’s music and aesthetics by leading Cage scholars.

Pritchett, James (1996) *The Music of John Cage,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The first published monograph focusing on Cage’s work, this book is an excellent overview to Cage’s compositional methods and aesthetics.

Silverman, Kenneth (2010) *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage*, New York: Random House. Written by a Pulitzer Prize winning author, this biography provides a fascinating account of Cage’s life for a general audience.