

No Ear for Music

The Scary Purity of John Cage

David Revill, *The Roaring Silence* (New York: Arcade, 1992; 375 pp.)

Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight, 1988; 300 pp.)

Pierre Boulez and John Cage, *Correspondance et documents*, edited by Jean-Jacques Nattiez (Winterthur: Amadeus, 1990; 234 pp.); trans. Robert Samuels, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; 168 pp.)

John Cage, *The Complete Quartets*; Arditti Quartet (Mode 17 & 27, 2 CDs)

John Cage, *The Perilous Night*; *Four Walls*; Margaret Leng Tan (New Albion 37)

John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing*; *Works for Cello*; Frances-Marie Uitti (Etcetera 2016)

Lenny Bruce had a routine in which he sent audiences into paroxysms by classifying any artifact of contemporary culture to which they referred him as Jewish or goyish. The high point, on the recording that I heard, came when someone shouted, I think, “instant scrambled eggs,” and Bruce went, “ooh . . . scary goyish.” There is no better way of understanding what John Cage has meant to us, why he was so notorious and then so famous, and why his name will long remain an emblem. For half a century he stalked the world of music as its scariest goy.

This had nothing to do with religion, or with the ethnic complexion of modern America. It wasn’t even a question of Us and Them. What made the classification funny was that all the mundane items classified belonged to Us. The classification showed up the contradictions in the shared culture, and in its values. What was “Jewish” confirmed our cherished notions of ourselves; what was “goyish” disconfirmed them. But confirmation and disconfirmation alike begot a shock of recognition, as did Cage. It was always vexingly clear that this disconfirming presence was not only in the music world, but oh, so tellingly and chillingly of it.

People often wrote him off as a jester, with his homemade instruments (“prepared” pianos jangling with inserted household objects, pots-’n’-pans

percussion orchestras), his anarchic happenings and “musicircuses,” his pieces for radios (or for nothing at all), his music-generating games of chance (latterly high-tech, computerized), his New Agey orientalism, his inscrutable droning lectures (“magnificently boring,” his new biographer says). But no, you don’t get mad at jesters, or at mere eccentrics, and everybody got mad at Cage. As the critic Peter Yates once put it, Cage’s name was always “popping up like the Devil in Punch and Judy” in the grimmer music journals, “to be batted down each time by verbal bludgeon or flung brick.” (Lukas Foss invited Cage actually to play the Devil in a performance in 1966 of Stravinsky’s *Histoire du soldat*, and Cage recalled, “Everybody thought I was well cast.”) When Cage masterminded a complete nineteen-hour performance of *Vexations*, a homely little chorale for piano by Erik Satie (Cage’s anti-Beethovenizing hero and another reputed jester) that carried the direction “play 840 times,” many were not amused. “While the avant-garde played on, couldn’t they hear Satie’s chuckling?” one critic wrote. “The old master of *blague* continues to victimize his squarish disciples.”

That critic was even righter than he knew. Though late in life he grinned a lot and (besieged by interviewers) became a fount of self-protecting whimsy, Cage was fabulously humorless and literalistic, every bit as ascetic as his most truculent critics, the elite modernists of academe. He was just as esoteric, just as contemptuous of the crowd, just as determined to have no purpose that could be called good or useful. Norman O. Brown saw right through Cage’s defenses—the studied naïveté, the Holy Foolery—when he called Cage the quintessential Apollonian. Yes, indeed: never was a musician more cerebral or less sensuous, and, for all his lifelong involvement with dancers, never one less attuned to physical impulse. (Nothing, except perhaps lovely harmony, so repelled Cage in any music as a beat.)

No one was ever less a master of *blague*. The slightest sense of irony would have made the fanatical intensity with which he carried out his mission impossible. What for years kept Cage from going through with 4'33" (pronounced “four thirty-three”), his so-called silent piece, was his fear that “it would appear as if I were making a joke.” One might even say that no one ever had less appreciation for Satie’s obvious qualities than his most fervent American disciple; but misunderstanding of this sort, as we know perfectly well without any help from Harold Bloom, is precisely what drives the history of art. Virgil Thomson imitated Satie and was barren. John Cage completely misread him and became charismatically fecund. Thus, on one of the many Cage CDs on the Wergo label one can hear an affecting performance of Satie’s magnum opus, the Platonic “symphonic drama” *Socrate*, followed by *Cheap Imitation*, Cage’s chance determined recomposition of the piece. All the music’s humanity, all its communicative warmth, is systematically, anhedonically squeezed out. On a Hat Hut disc, following Cage’s suggestion that its individual parts may be extracted for performance ad libitum, Eberhard

Blum has overdubbed the three very sparse flute lines from *Atlas Eclipticalis*, the huge orchestral work that became famous when the New York Philharmonic rebelled against it in 1964. It is sixty minutes of virtual sensory deprivation, a discipline that, inflicted on an audience of nonadepts, can seem an act of puritanical aggression. Whoever started the rumor that this composer was Mr. Fun?

It was a defensive myth created and circulated by academic modernists in order to marginalize the one who always managed to seem so effortlessly farther-out-than-thou. That apparent effortlessness was what enraged people and made them vengeful. Where uptowners like Milton Babbitt sweated anxiously over complicated "precompositional" serial schemes, Cage just sat in his loft tossing coins. In a celestially snooty review of Cage's book *Silence*, John Hollander tried to exorcise the baleful presence by proposing that Cage's activity finally lacked "a certain kind of hard work" identified with perfectionism, "that peculiar labor of art itself, the incredible agony of the real artist in his struggles with lethargy and with misplaced zeal, with despair and with the temptations of his recent successes, to get better."

But one of the things you learn from David Revill's useful if somewhat reverential biography is how hard Cage worked, how doggedly he pursued his clearly envisaged goals. His schemes were just as complicated, just as exacting, just as pitiless, as any serialist's. Chance operations were anything but labor saving. To put together the *Williams Mix*, Cage's first tape piece, he and Earle Brown chained themselves to the splicing table for five months, twelve hours a day. His works went through false starts and rejected drafts as often as any other composer's. His methods guaranteed no tautological success, and he suffered a fair measure of agony.

By Hollander's definition, then, Cage was a "real artist." What he was not was legit. What he lacked, almost totally, were traditional conservatory skills, even baby ear-training. "The whole pitch aspect of music eludes me," he cheerfully told an interviewer. (You might as well say, "The whole lexical aspect of literature eludes me," or "The whole color aspect of painting eludes me.") Any success that such a musician might enjoy would devalue legitimacy. Which is scary, especially to those who traded on ever more exigent and exclusionary standards of legitimation.

Where the activities of conventional modernists had to flaunt their difficulty, Cage's were of another order. They were so mindless at times as to seem *infra dig* not only to clubby professionals, but even to the average onlooker. "There are people who say, 'If music's that easy to write, I could do it,'" Cage wrote. "Of course they could, but they don't." His art required heroic powers of renunciation, and what you had to renounce were the very things ("education and theory," as Cage once put it) that normally gained you prestige. While working on his monumentally serious piano cycle *Music of Changes* (1951), the first opus in which his compositional choices were entirely

determined by operations adapted from the ancient Chinese divination manual known as the "Book of Changes" (*I Ching*), Cage apologized for writing a skimpy letter to Pierre Boulez, then a close friend: "You must realize that I spend a great deal of time tossing coins, and the emptiness of head that that induces begins to penetrate the rest of my time as well."

The very elegance of the phrasing shows how much personality and cultivated intellect Cage had to be willing to renounce. But renunciation is shaming, and scary, and had to be denied; and so the myth of the jester was born. "I like fun," Hollander sneered, but "I shall resist the impulse to have as much fun being a critic as Mr. Cage has being a composer." Mr. Cage was not having fun. His motives did not differ from those of the composers that Hollander admired. His product in those days resembled theirs far more than they could afford to admit. All that differed were the means—and how! That means could matter so much more than motives and ends says a lot about modernism.

Music of Changes was written in emulation of Boulez's Second Piano Sonata, which had left Cage "trembling in the face of great complexity" when the composer played it for him in 1949. The work it most resembles, however, is Boulez's *Structures* for two pianos, written in 1952 under the reciprocal influence of Cage. What both composers accomplished with these works was the replacement of spontaneous compositional choices—choices that, in Cage's oft-incanted phrase, represented "memory, tastes, likes and dislikes"—with transcendent and impersonal procedures. It was a common goal in the early atomic age, when selves seemed frangible and insignificant. The difference between Boulez and Cage was only superficially a conflict between order and anarchy. It was, rather, a conflict between disciplines, both eminently authoritarian, both bent on stamping out the artist's puny person so that something "realer," less vulnerable, might emerge.

Cage's "chance operations," very rigorous and very tedious, were just as effective a path to transcendence as Boulez's or Babbitt's mathematical algorithms. Where Boulez, in the words of the Canadian scholar Roger Savage, "handed the work's structure over to the serial operations which control it," Cage ceremoniously handed the structure of his work over to Dame Fortune. The difference was that serial operations established multifarious arbitrary relationships among the events that took place in the score, while chance operations generated atomistic sequences in which every event was generated independently of every other. Cage's methods explicitly destroyed relationships ("weeded them out," he crowed) because attention to the fashioning of relationships, being egoistic, defeated impersonalism and also, Cage thought, the reality of music.

"Composers," he wrote, "are spoken of as having ears for music which generally means that nothing presented to their ears can be heard by them." Boulez's product, being full of relationships, could be analyzed in traditional

ways: its events could be reduced to principles; it could be conceptualized in "levels." All of which not only made the institutional wheels go round, but gave reassuring evidence of "an ear for music"—a controlling intelligence, a respectable moral accountability. But as Cage implied with his mischievous characterization of the "musical ear," the coherence of the serial structure could only be demonstrated conceptually—that is, on paper—to professionals. As increasing numbers of musicians are now willing to concede, there is no possibility of perceptual corroboration; and musical psychologists are beginning to suspect that the mind's structure may actually preclude the cognitive processing—the "understanding"—of nonhierarchical pitch and rhythmic information. Thus Cage's open renunciation of the discriminating, theory-laden "musical ear" in favor of the literal, physical, uncritically accepting biological ear was especially scary to postwar serialists, because it tainted their ostentatious rationalism with a hint of fraud, producing not just musical dissonance but cognitive dissonance, too.

The fact is, *Structures* and *Music of Changes*, while quite different in texture (Cage's piece is characteristically much sparser), impress the naked ear as equally desultory complexities, and induce an equally passive reception. In a blind test it would be difficult to guess which was the product of "total organization" and which the product of "random selection." The disquiet that this situation produced among the European (and, later, the American) serialists gave rise to casuistic denial and a mania for scholastic analysis that (as Cage deftly implied) all too easily replaced the sounding music as the primary focus of interest.

Cage's scary presence split the avant-garde into anxious "sentimental poets," the kind (as Schiller put it) "whose soul suffers no impression without at once turning to contemplate its own play," and "naïve" ones, with Cage their king, who celebrate "the object itself," not "what the reflective understanding of the poet has made." While his antagonists did their dervish dance of negation, Cage could afford to grin. Self-schooled in "a spirit of acceptance, rather than a spirit of control," he gladly acknowledged the incomprehensibility of his results—and of theirs as well. Catching at the ancient aura of the sublime and so being truer than his opponents to the impulse that brought forth Schoenbergian atonality, Cage maintained "that the division is between understanding and experiencing, and many people think that art has to do with understanding, but it doesn't."

In other ways, too, radically though his means may have differed, Cage's ends meshed with those of his ostensible adversaries. He and Babbitt are often viewed (and surely viewed themselves) as antipodean figures, but they jointly embodied what may be called the "research" model (as opposed to the "communication" model) of composerly behavior, so characteristic of midcentury modernism. Both were wholly fixated on their own activity, on the game of making. Both were obsessed with formulating the rules of the

game, with finding ever more efficient methods of production. And both were wholly unconcerned with reception.

"Who Cares If You Listen?" was the title (given by editors, but not inaccurately) of a famous article by Babbitt, published in 1958. Cage, according to Revill, rejected communication as a goal out of bitter personal experience. *The Perilous Night* (1943–44), a six-movement suite for prepared piano (superbly recorded by Margaret Leng Tan on the New Albion label) that Revill describes as "a lost, sad and rather desperate piece"—and that Cage himself has described in painful autobiographical terms we can now (partly thanks to Revill) link up with his traumatic sexual reorientation and divorce in 1945—was frivolously dismissed by a critic as sounding like "a woodpecker in a church belfry." The wounded composer talked about this experience for the rest of his life. Thenceforth "I could not accept the academic idea that the purpose of music was communication," he once observed. Another time, more strongly, he said that, after the *Perilous Night* fiasco, "I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it than communication." The bruise that Cage received from an insouciant philistine turned him inward, and equipped him with the resentment and the aggression that a modernist giant needs.

What better reasons did he find? The one that he loved to adduce for interviewers was spiritualistic and Eastern, picked up in the forties from an Indian friend, Gita Sarabhai, who said that the purpose of music was to "sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences." (Pressed, he produced a less "churchy" version: "The function of music is to change the mind so that it does become open to experience, which inevitably is interesting.") Ultimate purposes, however, do not produce a program of action. For managing his career from day to day and work to work, Cage enthusiastically embraced the model—inherited, he always said, from his inventor father—of experimental science. Art justified itself in the making. Experiments could succeed or fail, but "sometimes they could tell you what to do next."

What made John Cage such a scary goy, then, was the way he reflected back at the orthodox—more consistently, more nonchalantly, more "honestly"—their own follies of extremism. And they hated him for it. But since the follies of modernism were the follies of the mainstream magnified, mainstream musicians also found in Cage a discomforting reflection.

And then, suddenly, they didn't. By the time the enfant terrible qualified for Medicare, he had been transformed into a grand old man (well, a sweet old guy) at whom no one ever got angry, at whom everyone grinned back, on whom everyone showered praise and thanks. Pockets of resistance lingered among the militant bourgeois, who disapproved of his lifestyle (he was a scary gay, too), and feared the destabilizing implications of his work for the "canon," and kept up a tired game of gotcha with this "liberator" who actually believed in rules (forgetting what was being liberated, and from whom),

and pronounced his latter-day acceptance and prestige (in Edward Rothstein's words) to be "symptoms of our era's poverty." But they were symptoms of something else. Somewhere between the early sixties and the late seventies, Cage and all his squabbling brethren had lost their teeth. He was no longer a threat. And that, if anything, defined the transition from the modern to the postmodern.

It is not that the world caught up to Cage. He was, rather, left behind; or kicked upstairs. (Babbitt, too, went suddenly from pariah to elder statesman, and Boulez became caught up in institutional power politics and has not produced an important work since *Répons* in 1981.) Revill senses this, and his conclusion is shrewd, if a little wistful:

Cage has lived through a time when the "avant-garde" meant what it said. As the twentieth century nears its end, there is no avant-garde of which to speak: the term has come to refer to a midcentury movement, and not to each successive advance on received artistic wisdom. Indeed, arguably times from the eighties have been recuperative rather than revolutionary.

The word *recuperative* carries a bit of stigma; and Revill hints farther down the page at "a certain lack of integrity and engagement among artists." He is understandably nostalgic. A heroic time is past. But what has happened in music since the seventies cannot be dismissed as "retro," though some of it has been that. One may justifiably view the newly serious trend toward softening the boundaries between genres and roles, and toward abolishing the hierarchy of existing categories, as regenerative, whatever one may think of what has so far been brought forth. And though Cage liked to promote himself as the champion of the excluded, he upheld many traditional categories and boundaries as zealously and as rigidly as any midcentury elitist.

As his lifelong vendetta against Beethoven endlessly affirmed, Beethoven never stopped being for Cage the one to beat. Beethoven was the gatekeeper of the tradition that Cage shared with Schoenberg his teacher and with Babbitt his adversary—but perhaps no longer with us. By now Cage's values can look almost academic: anti-jazz, anti-pop (except briefly in the sixties, when rock seemed "revolutionary"), anti-improvisational (until, near the end, he figured out a way of dehumanizing improvisation). "Composing's one thing, performing's another, listening's a third," he wrote in an essay unbendingly (and oxymoronically) titled "Experimental Music: Doctrine." "What can they have to do with one another?" Composing unperformable or unlistenable works was the inevitable outcome of such an attitude, but such an outcome entailed no loss of value. In its way it was the supreme insulator, guaranteeing a sterile authenticity.

So let's hear no more about Cage the first postmodernist, or (pace the *New York Times's* egregious obituary) about Cage the first minimalist. He was anything but. All that Cage had to say of the work of Riley, Reich, or Glass

(ungratefully enough, for they worshiped him) was, "I can't use it." To him, they were backsliders. Like Schoenberg, Cage was a self-appointed Hegelian protagonist on whom History made demands. He referred to his work as "what I was obliged to do." Hence, "I'm practically Germanic in my insistence on doing what is necessary." And what is necessary? "Now, obviously, the things that it is necessary to do are not the things that have been done, but the ones that have not yet been done," which was another way of saying that he was as "devoted" as any modernist "to the principle of originality." That is maximalism, not minimalism. "Anything goes," Cage did write, sure enough, just as his enemies accused him of doing. "However, not everything is attempted. . . . There is endless work to be done."

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The superstitious category "genius" was made for the likes of Cage. Like Schoenberg (or perhaps despite Schoenberg), Cage was a primitive. And as Schoenberg said, "Talent learns from others; genius learns from itself." The mark of the genius, on the late, late romantic terms of high modernism, was the faculty of self-validation, which gave one the magical capacity to validate others. "He has immense authority," the art dealer Leo Castelli said of Cage. "He is, after all, a guru; and just the fact that he was there with his fantastic assurance was important to us all." The painter Robert Rauschenberg said that it was Cage's example that "gave me license to do anything." Morton Feldman claimed that Cage gave not just him but everybody "permission." "Permission granted," Cage liked to say in that enigmatically clarifying way of his, "but not to do whatever you want."

But who gave Cage permission? Not Schoenberg, that's for sure. Schoenberg was uniformly sarcastic and dismissive toward his American pupils, and Cage (legends to the contrary notwithstanding) was no exception. Schoenberg had given himself permission to remake the world by first putting himself through the traditional mill to the point where he had become the miller in chief. Cage built his own mill and never asked permission. The mill produced flour. Scary.

His really extraordinary endowment was for turning crippling limitations into special aptitudes. As Revill writes gracefully, "His ideas and practices have gradually been made adequate to, and have clarified, his inclinations." Not that he didn't have his own gurus. He fairly trumpeted them, in fact: "I didn't study music with just anybody: I studied with Schoenberg. I didn't study Zen with just anybody: I studied with Suzuki. I've always gone, insofar as I could, to the president of the company." But they did not create him. On the contrary, he created them *ex post facto*, from his own cloth, in the authentic tradition of modernist mythmaking.

Michael Hicks, a composer and scholar at Brigham Young University who

has done the kind of skeptical research on Cage that the more devoted Revill has not attempted, has effectively demolished the legend of a special relationship between Schoenberg and Cage, or any special transmission from the one to the other. Cage never took private lessons from this master; he just audited some courses at USC and UCLA. He had one very discouraging interview with Schoenberg, which he romanticized in memoirs and interviews into a kind of initiation, Schoenberg agreeing to teach him gratis in return for an oath of lifelong dedication to music. Hicks has shown that free instruction from Schoenberg was more the rule than the exception (for those actually studying with him, as Cage was not), and quotes a letter from a very dissatisfied Cage that contradicts his later professions of filial adoration. Repudiating the very idea of calling himself “a Schoenberg pupil,” Cage complained, “That designation is so cheap now that I am not interested in it; it is being bandied about by all those whose ears are vacant passageways for his words.”

Schoenberg emerges from Cage’s accounts as a kind of Zen master. (“If I followed the rules too strictly he would say, ‘Why don’t you take a little more liberty?’ and then when I would break the rules, he’d say, ‘Why do you break the rules?’”) But the teacher who did the most for Cage, though no guru, was Henry Cowell. It was Cowell, not Schoenberg, who provided Cage with pertinent precedents: an interest in Asian music, an untraditional approach to the piano, a penchant for percussion. (Cowell was also Cage’s first impresario, first publisher, and first publicist.) The British scholar David Nicholls has tried, in characteristic mother-country fashion, to fix Cage in the context of Cowell’s essentially regionalist tradition, but the effort is finally unconvincing. As Cage well recognized, Cowell’s experimentation was an aspect of an overriding eclecticism that was wholly foreign to Cage. His was a vision of purity. No amount of source study or documentation can account for the astonishing lecture, “The Future of Music: Credo,” that Cage delivered in Seattle in 1937. What astonishes is not so much the twenty-five-year-old nobody’s singleness of vision or his prescience but what Castelli called his “fantastic assurance.”

Cage did his best to link his work retrospectively to Schoenberg’s—giving himself, as it were, Schoenberg’s permission. If Schoenberg had “emancipated the dissonance” (that is, erased the distinction between consonance and dissonance in his own work, and legislated the erasure for the work of everyone else), then Cage would complete the job and emancipate noise. This, he claimed, was the foundation of his interest in percussion music, which saw him through his first important creative period (1939–43). What he really accomplished, though, was not merely the replacement of one type of sound with another on the surface of the music, but something much more fundamental. Cage’s earliest percussion music (like most of the music he would write forever after, even *4'33"*) is already based on abstract durational

schemes—"empty containers," as he called them, to be filled with sounds—that replaced the abstract harmonic schemes of the classical tradition.

It was a way of circumventing "the whole pitch aspect." Duration, Cage would argue, was the fundamental musical element, since all sounds—and silence, too—had it in common. And therefore, he could aver, he was the only composer who was dealing with music on its most fundamental level. (It was a claim that Elliott Carter, ignoring the scary goy, would revive in the late forties; Cage dismissed Carter as merely "adding a new wing to the academy.") Cage contrived more imaginary precedents for his activity in the work of Webern and, of course, Satie. They, too, became totemic ancestors, two more self-created gurus through which he could give himself permission. In Webern's sparseness of texture (which he did emulate for a while), Cage heard a rejection "of sound as discourse in favor of sound as sound itself." (Webern, a fastidious serialist, would have scoffed.) "In Satie," Cage further asserted, "the structures have to do with time, not pitch." In Paris he thought he found evidence: some notebooks in which Satie had written lists of numbers similar in appearance to the proportional matrices that Cage worked out for his percussion pieces. He never could get anyone else to agree with him about those numbers (Milhaud told him they were shopping lists), but they gave him the green light.

Only in *Cheap Imitation*, which dates from 1969, does Satie finally sound the way Cage heard him. *Cheap Imitation*, like at least half of Cage's output, was meant to accompany the dance. His four-decade career as Merce Cunningham's music director was his primary creative outlet. And it was a Seattle dancer named Syvilla Fort, who performed in a space too small to accommodate an ensemble, who mothered the invention in 1940 of the one-man percussion orchestra, a.k.a. the prepared piano, and gave Cage the medium that saw him through his second creative phase (1942–48).

The body of work that he created for this instrument is the one most likely to be recognized as a permanent contribution to the literature of music. Cage can be ranked alongside Ravel and Prokofieff as a major twentieth-century keyboard composer—though, again, anything but legit. Many of his keyboard compositions can be mastered by amateurs, and most of them are disarmingly "communicative." The magnum opus of the period, the cycle of *Sonatas and Interludes* of 1946–48, aspires beyond communication to the monumental representation of the nine "permanent emotions" of Hindu philosophy, but it remains Cage's most accessible large-scale composition. It is his one conspicuous concession to then-fashionable neoclassicism, otherwise his great *bête noire*.

The sonatas are cast, like Scarlatti's, in regular two-part forms with repeats, and proceed through infectious dance rhythms and ostinatos. The last sonata, the one toward which the whole cycle inclines, is a gorgeously static delineation of tranquillity, the emotion that balances the rest, and presages

Cage's involvement with the quietism of Zen. Revill is at his best (though, as ever, vague where Cage was vague) in reporting this phase, about whose importance he is commendably skeptical. He shows that the extreme philosophical realism of Zen, its ideology of indiscriminate passive acceptance, and its rejection of subjectivity were already present in Cage's thinking by the time he, the ageless auditor, began dropping in on Daisetz Suzuki's classes at Columbia sometime in the late forties.

And all of this was contradicted in some way, even where Cage meant consciously to embody it. Accepting he may have been of nature's offerings, but he remained bitterly and bombastically rejecting of the (musical) works of (most) men. He may, as instructed, have denigrated conceptual thinking in favor of taking things as he found them, but practically to the end he remained faithful to his predetermined, idealistically rationalized durational "containers." In sum, Revill suggests, for Cage, as for many casual enthusiasts, Zen was more a personal therapy than a philosophy. It brought relief to his perilous night—his period of anguished sexual readjustment—and it enabled him to embark with renewed self-confidence on his long-presaged art of noncommunication. It provided him with a handy rhetoric for advertising his new manner. But it did not give him permission.

The fifties and early sixties were Cage's heroic age—the era of the *Music of Changes*, the *Williams Mix*, the *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (in which the percussion ensembles of yore were replaced by radios playing whatever happened to be on), the *Cartridge Music* (in which a teeming universe of "microaudial" sound was electronically explored as if in inverse answer to the exploration of space), the *Atlas Eclipticalis* (another space age extravaganza, arcanelly derived from sidereal maps), and, of course, *4'33"*. It was the age of his notoriety and his guruhood.

It culminated in the grandiose *HPSCHD* (computerese for "harpsichord"), a flamboyant mixed-media performance created in collaboration with the computer engineer and composer Lejaren Hiller. Its first performance, at the University of Illinois on May 16, 1969, lasted four and a half hours, and enlisted seven keyboard players, fifty-two tape recorders, fifty-two film projectors, and sixty-four slide projectors. ("The following Sunday," Revill adds, pleasingly, "Apollo Ten was launched.") From the chary composer of *Nothing*, Cage had become the voracious composer of *Everything*.

HPSCHD was a response not only to baroque science but also to sixties carnivalism, which caught Cage in its tide and, it seems, washed him out to sea. In the seventies and into the eighties he turned Dionysiac. He became a gourmandizing collagist (as in the famous Cage-supervised Deutsche Grammophon LP that piled *Atlas Eclipticalis* on top of *Cartridge Music* on top of the *Winter Music* for piano). He became a perpetrator of happenings, a sentimental Maoist, a nostalgic futurist, a scribbler of gibberish poetry. Worst of all, he became derivative for the first and only time, "writing

through" texts by Joyce and Thoreau by turning their work mechanically into arcane acrostics and performing them amid a welter of sonic "readymades" (as Marcel Duchamp, Cage's last guru, would have called them) in three- or four-ring "musicircuses," which culminated in a series of parasitic assemblages of cultural debris whose portmanteau title, *Europera*, tells all. It is the single arguably "postmodern" facet of Cage's career, but it is glaringly the weakest, postmodern only in the most banal sense of the term.

In his last decades Cage mellowed interestingly. He turned back to fully determined (though still chance-composed) compositions in a fairly conventional notation, including some impressive virtuoso studies for instrumentalist friends (*Études Australes* for the pianist Grete Sultan, *Freeman Etudes* for the violinist Paul Zukofsky) and a long series of abstract solos and ensembles, the titles of which are derived from the number of performers, from one to 103. His last finished composition, which was first performed in July 1992, a month before his death at seventy-nine, was *Four*⁶ (the sixth work for four), for two vocalists (one of them at the première the remarkably youthful Cage himself), a pianist, and a percussionist. At the première the pianist was Leonard Stein, an old Schoenberg hand from California, whose participation brought things touchingly full circle.

The second half of Cage's career was no match for the first, and Revill does not flinch from saying so (attributing the decline not to imaginative fatigue but to the distractions of fame). Still, there were some late gems. Two were for string quartet: *Music for Four* (1987) and *Four* (1989), both of them restrained, elegiac studies in sustained tones reminiscent of, and perhaps a tribute to, Cage's old friend Morton Feldman. When performed as plainly and devotedly as the Arditti Quartet performs them they are sublime lullabies, gloriously realizing not only the quietism of Zen as Cage professed it, but the qualities of "naïve poetry" as described by Schiller: "tranquillity, purity and joy."

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It seems right to end this survey of Cage's output on a German romantic note. There is ultimately nothing exotic about him. His ties to the traditional esthetic of the West that he claimed and strove to break were never broken. He is well, if latently, understood. Far more than he (or we) ever acknowledged in his lifetime, far more than he (or we) may even have known, Cage not only subscribed to the fundamental values—no, I'll be brave, to the singular bedrock tenet—of Western art, he brought it to its purest, scariest peak. In an address that he gave in 1954, called "45' for a Speaker," Cage tried to encapsulate in two sentences his somewhat adulterated understanding of Zen (adulterated, that is, with a phrase borrowed from the Indian scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy): "The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all. This puts one in accord with nature in her manner of operation."

These were the catch phrases that he would intone and inscribe, in hundreds of permutations, for the rest of his life. Revill does an excellent job relating the notion of “purposeful purposelessness” to Cage’s work, which depended equally on knowing with certainty what to do and on having no expectation of the result.

But the phrase is just a variation (or, to put it musically, an inversion) of the “purposeless purposefulness” (*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*) by which Kant defined the brand-new concept of “the esthetic” more than two centuries ago. The esthetic, in the classical Kantian definition, was a quality of beauty wholly transcending utility. Esthetic objects existed—that is, were made—entirely for their own sake, requiring both disinterestedness and zealous application on the part of the maker, and a corresponding act of disinterested, self-abnegating contemplation on the part of the apprehender. Autonomous works of art occupied a special hallowed sphere, for which special places were set aside (museums and concert halls, “temples of art”), and where special modes of reverent behavior were observed, or, when necessary, imposed.

Music, inherently abstract to a degree owing to its lack of an obvious natural model, quickly became the romantic art of choice, the most sacred of the autonomous arts. Not only for that reason, but because it was a performing art in which a middleman stood between maker and apprehender, music developed the most ritualized and the most hierarchical social practice, one that Cage was far from alone in crying down: “The composer was the genius, the conductor ordered everyone around and the performers were slaves.” (And the listener? An innocent bystander.)

The composer’s status was enhanced and the performer’s demeaned precisely because the new concept of the autonomous artwork sharply differentiated their roles for the first time, and assigned them vastly unequal value. The composer created the perdurable esthetic object. The performer was just an ephemeral mediator. Musical works that were too closely allied with egoistical performance values, or that too obviously catered to the needs or the whims of an audience, or even that too grossly represented the personality of the composer, were regarded as sullied because they had a *Zweck*, a purpose that compromised their autonomy. The only truly artistic purpose was that of transcending purpose.

The art that most fully met this prescription was “absolute music.” And how does that differ from what Cage called “Zen”? Only in its degree of rigor. The work of the midcentury avant-garde vastly magnified and purified the romantic notion of esthetic autonomy, and among the midcentury avant-garde it was Cage, in his compositions of the early fifties, who reached the most astounding, self-subverting purism of all. In that way he reexposed in maximal terms the problematic and the contradictory aspects of the idea of absolute music. How does an art form that is inherently temporal achieve transcendent objectification? What is the ontological status of the autonomous musical

work? How does the work relate to its performances? To its written score? (The question was posed most teasingly by the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden when he asked, "Where is Chopin's B-minor Sonata?") We have seen that the essential structure, the essential "workhood," of a formalistic opus such as, say, Boulez's *Structures* can have rather little to do with its aural experience. Cage's highly determinate containers were even more arcane, because they had even less to do with the often wholly indeterminate sounds that filled them. Cage's awareness of these problems and his sometimes playful, sometimes deadly, engagement with them are memorably set out in his seductively Gertrude-Steinish "Lecture on Nothing" of 1959, one of the essential Cage experiences, whose subject is largely the filling in of its own preplanned durational matrix ("Here we are now at the beginning of the thirteenth unit of the fourth large part of this talk . . ."). It is an easy introduction to Cage's maximized romanticism, since the sounds that fill the container are familiar words in grammatical sentences.

In the *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for twenty-four players on twelve radios plus conductor, the concept of "the work" is more abstract and difficult. The piece has an elaborate score in fairly conventional musical notation, but there is no way of "reading" it, since the score has no determinate relationship to the sounds that will occur in performance. The intricately contrapuntal "structure" can only be realized haphazardly in performance, because what is prescribed is not a set of sounds but a set of actions. (This in itself is far from unprecedented; ancient "tablatures" for keyboard and lute did likewise.) The players are directed to turn the knobs on the radios to specified frequencies (where there may or may not be a broadcast) and amplitudes (often just this side, or even that side, of the threshold of perception). The conductor executes all kinds of tempo changes that relate only to the "work," not to the aural experience; his elaborately choreographed actions, eliciting no discernible result, pointedly signal the abstractness and the autonomy of the work-concept. Any whiff of spoof—there is always nervous laughter at performances—is definitely an illusion. (When Virgil Thomson told Cage he didn't think a piece like that ought to be performed before a paying audience, Revill tells us, Cage took extreme umbrage, and it caused a permanent rift in their relationship.) Needless to say, there is no recording.

Strangely enough, 4'33" has been recorded several times, icon that it has become—but an icon of what? Even Cage, who loved it best of all his children and, according to Revill, treated it "reverentially," called it his "silent piece." That is a misnomer. It is, rather, a piece for a silent performer, who enters a performing space, signals the beginnings and the ends of three movements whose timings and internal "structural" subdivisions have been predetermined by chance operations, but makes no intentional sound. (Usually the signal is given by most carefully and noiselessly closing and raising

the keyboard lid on a piano.) The piece consists of whatever sounds occur within a listener's earshot during these articulated spans.

This would seem to be the very antithesis of an autonomous work of art, since the sounds are wholly contingent, outside the composer's control. (Cage often maintained that his aim in composing it was to erase the boundary between art and life.) But sounds are not the only thing that a composer controls, and sounds are not the only thing that constitutes a musical work. Under the social regimen of esthetic autonomy, the composer controls not just sounds but people, and a work is defined not just by its contents but also by the behavior that it actuates. As the philosopher Lydia Goehr, Cage's shrewdest exegete, has observed:

It is because of [Cage's] specifications that people gather together, usually in a concert hall, to listen to the sounds of the hall for the allotted time period. In ironic gesture, it is Cage who specifies that a pianist should sit at a piano to go through the motions of performance. The performer is applauded and the composer granted recognition for the "work." Whatever changes have come about in our material understanding of musical sound, the formal constraints of the work-concept have ironically been maintained.

And she comments tactfully, in the form of a question, "Did Cage come to the compositional decisions that he did out of recognition that people will only listen to the sounds around them if they are forced to do so under traditional, formal constraints?"

It is a profound political point. A work that is touted as a liberation from esthetics in fact brings an alert philosopher to a fuller awareness of all the constraints that the category of "the esthetic" imposes. Sounds that were noise on one side of an arbitrary framing gesture are suddenly music, a "work of art," on the other side; the esthetic comes into being by sheer fiat, at the drop of a piano lid. The audience is invited—no, commanded—to listen to ambient or natural sounds with the same attitude of reverent contemplation they would assume if they were listening to Beethoven's Ninth.

This is an attitude that is born not of nature but of Beethoven. By the act of triggering it, art is not brought down to earth; "life" is brought up for the duration into the empyrean. *4'33"* is thus the ultimate esthetic aggrandizement, an act of transcendental empyrialism. There is nothing ironic about it, and nothing, so far as I can see, of Zen. (And *4'33"* has a published, copyrighted score. The space on its pages, measured from left to right, corresponds to the elapsing time. Most of the pages have vertical lines drawn on them, denoting the chance-calculated time articulations on which the duration of the piece depends. One of the pages, bypassed by these markers, remains blank. If copy-righting a blank page is not modernist chutzpah, I don't know what is.)

So Cage's radical conceptions were as much intensifications of traditional

practices, including traditional power relations, as departures from them. His dealings with performers were especially symptomatic; here is where, if you're looking, you can find a contradiction worthy of rebuke. More than once Cage went beyond mere audience hostility and got into confrontational situations with players. Orchestral musicians in particular have taken his works as affronts. Cage and his supporters have made much of the philistinism of the players' resistance, not without some justification in the case of the members of the New York Philharmonic who stamped on the contact microphones they were asked to attach to their instruments for performances of *Atlas Eclipticalis*. (The penurious composer was forced to replace them out of pocket.)

But Cage himself has acknowledged that the social practices that have grown up around the sacralized work object have tended to dehumanize performers, especially those who play under conductors. The only way that such musicians are able to retain a sense of personal dignity is by believing devoutly in the esthetic of "communication" or "self-expression" (expanded to encompass a notion of collective self-expression), and this is the notion the midcentury avant-garde has worked most militantly to discredit.

Works based on a principle of nonintention present musicians with a set of especially arbitrary, hence especially demeaning, commands. They are intolerably deprived of their usual illusions of creative collaboration. The contact mikes, feeding each player's sound into a mixer that, operating on the usual chance principles, added an extra dimension of unpredictability to the proceedings, were a special outrage. As Earle Brown explained to Revill, "Even if you were making your choices with diligence, you might be turned off. Maybe you were heard, maybe you weren't." The composer, though ostensibly aiming at ego effacement (and ostensibly opposed, as Cage put it, to "the conventional musical situation of a composer telling others what to do"), became more than ever the peremptory genius, the players more than ever the slaves.

Even soloists devoted to Cage have recognized the paradoxical reinforcement that his work has given to the old hierarchical dispensation. By the use of chance operations, Cage says, he is able to shift his "responsibility from making choices to asking questions." When the work is finished he can have the pleasure of discovering it along with the audience. The only one who cannot share the pleasure is the performer, to whom the buck is passed, who cannot evade the choices, who must supply laborious answers to the composer's diverting questions. The pianist Margaret Leng Tan, perhaps the leading exponent of Cage's music today, complained to Revill of being cut out of the fun. Her freedom in performing "chance music" is not enhanced but diminished: "By the time you've worked out all this material, can you really give a spontaneous performance? It's a discovery for him [Cage] if he's hearing it for the first time, but it's not a discovery for me." Once again the composer's authority over the performer (and over the listener, who is re-

duced to a passive auditor) is paradoxically magnified. The grandiosity of genius is affirmed.

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When the job description "artist" stops requiring chutzpah, postmodernism begins. At that point far-outness stops being impressive and becomes quaint. The disinterestedness of the artist and the transcendence of the artifact, maximalized under modernism, have long since metamorphosed into indifference and irrelevance. Cage's esthetic, now that all is said and done, promoted not the integration of art and life but rather a hypertrophied estheticism that transgressed the normal boundaries of art and invaded life. Carrying his esthetic credo, acceptance of all things, beyond those boundaries, Cage often said that there was not too much pain in the world, that there was just the right amount. That was estheticized politics at its most unappetizing. It was the residue of yet another outmoded romantic stereotype, the artist as public oracle, that began, as usual, with Beethoven, reached an unsavory peak in Wagner (or, from the critical perspective, in Adorno), ran to seed with Stockhausen, and now, let us hope, has run its course.

The honors that John Cage reaped in his final decades, and the celebrity status that he achieved, betokened the eclipse of his relevance as an artist. His work and his persona now have a musty period flavor. It is a critical commonplace to laud his influence over other composers (and not only composers), since that is the primary measure of modernist achievement. The *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* claims flatly that Cage "has had a greater impact on world music than any other American composer of the twentieth century." Yet as one looks around at today's music world, it is hard to find evidence of that.

True, a great many composers around the world (Lutosławski perhaps most successfully) have dabbled with "indeterminate" notation, but only as an effect, an occasional blur. Particularly in Eastern Europe, where everything was a symbol, Cage was a symbol for a while. (I knew that perestroika had got out of hand when I saw his face grinning at me from the pages of *Sovetskaya muzika*, the organ of the now-defunct Union of Soviet Composers.) There are some excellent Hungarian recordings of his work (including a 4'33" with Zoltán Kocsis dropping the lid). In Germany, where everything musical is taken much too seriously, Cage remains a cult figure. They know *E-Musik* (*ernste Musik*, "serious music") when they hear it. Few composers have ever carried less taint of the opposite category, mere *Unterhaltung* (entertainment), than Cage. In 1992 the grandest birthday-cum-memorial festival of his music took place in Frankfurt.

Predictably, some critics have berated the American musical establishment for allowing itself to be out-Caged by Europe, but I find that pleasing. "Once in Amsterdam," Cage recalled, "a Dutch musician said to me, 'It must

be very difficult for you in America to write music, for you are so far away from the centers of tradition.' I had to say, 'It must be very difficult for you in Europe to write music, for you are so close to the centers of tradition.'" He is now viewed by Europeans, and properly, as central to their tradition. America is moving on. We are giving up the totalizing dream and are becoming engaged in a newer, truer integration of art and life. Cage, as Boulez once said of Schoenberg, is dead.

Some of his work may live on. My hunch is that we will shed the lofty metaphysical Cage and incorporate the earlier dynamic and fleshly Cage—the Cage of the percussion pieces and the prepared piano—into the fringes of the repertory, insofar as their unusual media will allow. There has been a surge of interest in this music in recent years, partly, no doubt, because of the way it seems to forecast recent trends like “minimalism” and “fusion.”

In any case, that music has all been documented in excellent recordings (most extensively by the Germans, naturally) and deserves its place in our cultural museum. My very favorite Cage piece, the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1950), a thing of wondrous hockets and ecstatic stillness, composed right before chance took over, is in the Arditti set on Mode, which, together with Tan's piano recordings, is the best Cage to be had on records. (The hockets were even more beguiling, though, and the stillness yet more rapt, on the old New Music Quartet recording, issued by Columbia when the music was new.) Two historical items should be mentioned. The Smithsonian Institution has reissued the thirty-year-old Folkways album called *Indeterminacy*, with Cage inimitably droning through a series of marvelous one-minute anecdotes while his faithful accomplice David Tudor strums away at the random *Fontana Mix* in the background. And George Avakian is mooting the reissue of his recording of the landmark “Twenty-five-Year Retrospective Concert,” held in New York's Town Hall on 15 May 1958 before an audience overwhelmingly composed of painters and gallery owners. Musicians then were not paying attention.

David Revill's biography is the first of its kind, and obviously it fills a need, even if it contributes little new information and concentrates (perhaps taking its likely audience of artists and dancers and philosophers—the traditional Cage audience—into account) on Cage's career and *mentalité*, steering pretty well clear of the music. Much of what it does contain can be gleaned from the horse's mouth in Richard Kostelanetz's indispensable mélange of interviews, *Conversing with Cage*. Revill arranges all this raw material in chronological order, and furnishes an almost complete list of works (about two hundred). His book is becomingly written, at times piquantly perceptive, and not entirely uncritical. (He does not hesitate to call Cage's late social philosophizing “fatuous.”) An embarrassing number of names are misspelled, however, and the book is culpably unreliable on factual background, characterizing Satie's *Socrate*, for example, as a “programmatic orchestral piece” and calling Cowell's *Banshee* “the first known composition to use the sounds

of the piano strings directly strummed and plucked" (it had at least two predecessors among Cowell's works).

Revill's book will be quickly superseded as fundamental research on Cage gains steam. Spadework by Michael Hicks and by Robert Stevenson gives a foretaste. The first scholarly book on the composer, by James Pritchett, has been accepted for publication by Cambridge University Press. [It was issued, as *The Music of John Cage*, later in 1993.] And more biographies are in the works, by Europeans and American alike, as well as a catalogue raisonné of sources and other impedimenta. Yes, our scary goy will get the full treatment. And why not? He was a master. Of the old school.