

John Cage and the New Era: An Obituary-Review

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Who first stepped in this puddle anyway?
And how did this mud get to be so luscious?¹

As historians, we know that periodization is the useful product of an art of generalities, and we willingly concede that by necessity, the scholarly idioms we use are often little more than terms of approximation. In social history, for example, when we speak of the “1960s” in America, we do not mean the years 1960-69 in a literal sense, but instead that period which commences with the assassination of John F. Kennedy and ends with Nixon’s resignation from the White House. Similarly, although the “nineteenth century” literally spans the years 1801-1900, we recognize an event technically within the twentieth century—World War I—as the turgid culmination of a long series of nineteenth-century arguments, and we continue to acknowledge the rather resilient echoes of these arguments even into World War II, whereafter new social and political orders would finally be established in some fairly conclusive way.

“Nineteenth century” has always been a term of approximation in music history as well, ostensibly circumscribing the boundaries of that era we traditionally call “Romantic.” But while these terms are often used in conjunction, we have come

1. John Cage, “Lecture on Commitment” (1961), in *A Year From Monday*, (Middletown, Conn., 1967), 116.

to realize that their applications are far from universally transposable, and as our research into this "era" has progressed, so clearly and so often have we uncovered manifestations of its primary tenets within the first few decades of the next century as to render even our long-standing temporal delineations of this period suspect. Curiously, however, we continue to adhere to conventional periodic distinctions in our history books, though by this point, our reliance upon these particular approximations appears more a mere habit of convenience than the consequence of a thoughtful and evolving historical perspective. Regrettably, the ultimate price we have paid for our complacency has been nothing short of a willful distortion when interpreting the relationship of the music of the nineteenth century to music-historical events of the first half of the succeeding century.

In the opening chapter of *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, for example, Carl Dahlhaus postulates that that musical era which began around 1830 ended around either 1890 or 1910, after which a wholesale reevaluation of culture led to fundamental changes in progressive musical thought.² However, when Dahlhaus elaborates on the actual compositional issues and conflicts which unify that era—the notion of the "musical idea," real sequence versus developing variation, musical prose versus endless melody, concepts of "expanded" and "wandering" tonalities, and the "individuation" of harmony—he takes frequent recourse to the example of Schoenberg, a composer supposedly largely outside of the era under discussion, crediting him for developing these ideas to their admittedly extreme and final stages in the next century. More recently, revelations as to Stravinsky's formidable nineteenth-century lineage have been brought to our attention as well.³

The cumulative effect of Dahlhaus's observations only reflects the confounding double-message we have repeatedly is-

2. Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980).

sued to ourselves when delimiting this period in music history: is there or is there not a series of conceptual and technical changes in music at the turn of the century which is fundamental enough to constitute an end to the era? Traditional doctrine suggests there is, but if so, why must we continually reach outside the boundaries of that era to reach the ultimate stages of these essential precepts? So often in our zeal to explain the "new" in early twentieth-century music, we have unintentionally adopted an attitude of disinterest toward its genealogical roots. Yet with few exceptions those originally responsible for this "newness" were fully cognizant of the fundamental traditions they were simultaneously upholding. As Schoenberg would insist as late as 1937, "I have not discontinued composing in the same style and in the same way as at the very beginning. The difference is only that I do it better now than before; it is more concentrated, more mature."⁴ In the above-mentioned monograph, Dahlhaus unflinchingly acknowledges and reaffirms Schoenberg's self-professed status as the descendant of a long-standing Germanic tradition. And why shouldn't he? Don't we all? But if Schoenberg indeed stands as the direct compositional and aesthetic progeny of Wagner and Brahms, if we can identify Rimsky-Korsakov, Liszt, (and even Schubert, though somewhat back down the pike) as the immediate forebears of Stravinsky's musical language, what historic and stylistic insights do we hope to convey by then running a picket fence through the *fin-de-siècle*, distinguishing one side as "nineteenth century" and the other as "twentieth century?"

This is not to assume an historical stance that would classify composers of the first half of this century under what would then become the pejorative term "nineteenth century." Rather,

3. Cf. Richard Taruskin, "Chernomor to Kashchei: Harmonic Sorcery; or, Stravinsky's 'Angle'," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38 (1985): 72-142.

4. Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), 30.

it is meant to suggest that our dependence upon the term "nineteenth century" itself to delineate a periodic totality is inappropriate, for the basic underpinnings of this era did not collapse at the *fin-de-siècle*, but instead appear to have endured a rather dissonant and vibrant spin well into the first half of the next century. The prism containing the elemental foundations of this era was hardly destroyed after 1890 or even 1910, but merely altered in hue, as it absorbed and refracted the new light emanating from modernism, historicism, and the scientific age. And just as we now matter-of-factly acknowledge the use of contemporary weaponry during World War I to battle over issues that had been festering for more than the last century, so, too, may we consider that the majority of composers during the first half of this century were summoning contemporary musical languages to hash out debates founded over organicism, pitch organization, the nature of "genius," the notion of the "masterpiece," distinctions between "high" and "low" art, and the aesthetics of "good" and "bad"—basic themes whose roots, though tangled, could nonetheless be traced unbroken, deep into the nineteenth century.

If we were to remove our existing stylistic barriers, considering this proposed reperiodization and allowing, therefore, wider berth for the various manifestations which the basic concepts of any era may assume, we may perhaps more meaningfully and more reasonably unite, say, Carl Maria von Weber and Schoenberg within the basic confines of a single musical era, benefiting from the same broad flexibility of function as that which we presently enjoy when invoking the moniker "Baroque" in ascribing stylistic commonalities to composers as disparate as Caccini and Bach. In addition, if we are agreeable to such temporal reapportionment, neither "nineteenth-century" nor "Romantic" would be acceptable terms of approximation for the entirety of this era: it remains for us to find alternative terms better suited to the task.

Of course, any reconsideration of the parameters of this nineteenth-century-based era inherently requires revisions of

our conception of the era which follows. Standard historical practice treats the approximate term "twentieth century" as denoting a single though bipartite era; however, one could well question the profundity of the underlying denominators by which its two phases are allegedly conjoined. Again, what do we mean to imply when stating that Stravinsky and Stockhausen, or Schoenberg and Reich, or Copland and Tenney worked in the same "period?" A chasm separates them, and our purposes in trying to conceptualize this century as a single "era" seem as confused and dysfunctional as our attempts to gerrymander the rudimentary constructs of the nineteenth century from their final incarnations in the first half of the twentieth century.

In actuality, the "twentieth century" is not as we continually suggest in our own histories—a single era folded down the middle—but is instead a century ripped utterly in half by an upheaval which to date has found its nearest and perhaps only analog in the primordial subversions of 1600. We are aware, at least in principle, of this postwar musical movement, though the approximations we use in discussing this era all too often suggest that in selecting our terms, the process has remained remarkably free of any prerequisites as encumbering and time-consuming as a scholarly familiarity with the actual music—a downright pesky chore indeed, especially in this age of unbridled, pluralistic creativity. By no means is this to deny that some highly useful inroads into an interpretation of this era have been made in recent years. Still, despite these efforts, the level of ignorance we not only tolerate but seem almost to promote in ourselves and our profession regarding this period so rich in materials is stupefying, and it is confounding that we should limply cast this era, no less than music history created and parading in front of our very eyes, as an historic lacuna.

In embracing such unprecedented diversity and eschewing "influence" as undesirable, this new era implies a disallowance for the appearance of any individual figures who might be credited with a genuinely wide-ranging impact on the rest of the

musical world. Indeed, this has certainly been the case since the 1960s. Still, the origins of these radical alterations to the very social environment of "composition" can be traced back to the intense activities of a small cluster of figures from the 1940s and 1950s. Somewhat paradoxically, these figures would become the leaders in an era of "no leaders," as successive generations would tether themselves to these early figures for artistic affirmation and validation. Historically, we denote this group as the "avant-garde," whose core membership includes John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Pierre Boulez.

In any study of this new era, our summations of these figures will be crucial to the means by which we choose to approach the remainder of the era. John Cage's passing last August—and the spate of uneven writings which followed—has been the most recent reminder of how ill-equipped we still are in addressing generally the challenges posed by this era, and in assessing specifically Cage's place in music history, his decisive breaks with tradition, and his contributions to the new era.

Issues such as those raised in the preceding pages are not inconsequential when pondering a figure like Cage. For before we even begin to approach the subject of his life and work, we must first confess the flaws within our still largely callow perspective on music since 1945, for our misconceptions about Cage represent some of the most profound and unfortunate consequences of that inexperience. Before we can begin to gauge Cage's impact on his time, we must recognize not only the stylistic independence of the period in which he worked, but also the preeminent role he played in achieving this independence. Finally, before we begin to ascribe any place to Cage in the larger realms of music history, we must at last reconfigure the errant and superficial periodic designations of "nineteenth century" and "twentieth century," comprehending that when Cage lectured on his dislike of Beethoven to the staff and students of Black Mountain College in 1948 and Boulez shortly thereafter proclaimed in print that Schoenberg was dead, both were bidding a forceful farewell to the self-same era.

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After some youthful dabbings in the various fine arts, John Milton Cage, Jr. opted for a career in music in the early 1930s, studying with Adolph Weiss and Henry Cowell in New York and briefly thereafter with Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles. In 1937, Cage worked in Seattle as composer-accompanist for modern dance classes at the Cornish School. Here he met Merce Cunningham, who, following Cage's divorce in 1945, would ultimately become his life partner. Following a brief teaching engagement at the Chicago School of Design, Cage relocated to New York City in 1942, where he began composing a long series of works to be performed with Cunningham's choreography, which was itself drawing critical attention for its bold and impenitent punctures through the traditional parameters of dance.

Cage's definitive rift with the previous stylistic era came long before his adoption of chance techniques in the 1950s, for even as early as the late 1930s his creative world would be uniquely self-designed, seldom depending on preexistent musical establishments or compositional conventions. Following a handful of pieces that demonstrate some preliminary explorations into various organizational schematas, Cage rendered inveterate arguments of pitch organization moot by writing largely for percussion, effectively transferring the burden of structure from pitch to rhythm: formal organization was now expressed as a scheme of proportions that determined durations at both micro- and macrostructural levels. Works from this period include those for percussion ensembles, ensembles with other instruments (e.g., voice, violin, gramophone records, buzzers and other "electric devices"), and solo percussion pieces, the last of these including approximately twenty compositions for Cage's highly touted "prepared piano," an invention born of necessity in 1940 for Syvilla Fort, a choreographer who required from Cage an exotic-sounding accompa-

niment but had only a piano at her disposal. With few exceptions, all of Cage's compositions from 1939-48 are grounded in percussion instruments of both the traditional and "found" varieties.

Cage himself interpreted these works as "a contemporary transition from keyboard-influenced music to the all-sound music of the future." "Any sound," he would write, "is acceptable to the composer of percussion music; he explores the academically forbidden 'nonmusical' field of sound insofar as is manually possible."⁵ The "newness" of these works would encompass far more than their rhythmic design: the indeterminate properties inherent in these works would run headlong into standard conceptions of and distinctions between "form" and "content," in turn suspending previous definitions of the "work," as well as the criteria by which one traditionally judged and discussed a composition. These percussion works, therefore, would constitute a pivotal new genre in the history of the new era in America, for through them the stylistic and aesthetic monoliths of the previous era would fall like dominoes.⁶

During the latter half of the 1940s and early 1950s, Cage immersed himself in the study of a variety of nonmusical subjects, sources which ultimately would converge to effect his most profound stylistic and aesthetic transformations. Already armed with at least a cursory knowledge of non western musics, he now began his first serious surveys of Indian philosophy and aesthetics, both privately with musician Gita Sarabhai and later through the writings of the Indian aesthetician and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy. East Asian philosophy,

5. John Cage, "The Future of Music" (1937), in *Silence* (Middletown, Conn., 1961), 5.

6. It bears noting that by necessity, Cage's efforts would extend far beyond the singular activity of composition. He advanced his cause by actively encouraging similar works from other composers; having no ensembles to perform these works, he assembled his own percussion orchestras, soliciting donations for the purchase of instruments and the subsidy of various ensemble tours, which he himself designed and promoted.

too—particularly Buddhism and Taoism—seemed to confirm independently the direction in which Cage's musical ideas were now more emphatically compelling him, and Cage familiarized himself with their precepts, though to what degree remains a speculative point at present. On this topic, Cage himself would frequently invoke the memory of classes he attended at Columbia University under Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the Japanese scholar popularly credited with introducing Zen to the West. In 1951, the young composer Christian Wolff would introduce Cage to the *I-Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, the centuries-old Chinese divination system, which Cage would almost immediately adopt as the central mechanism for his increasingly impersonal compositional procedures. Cage was also affiliated with the New York Artists Club during this time, expanding his already considerable ties to the art world through his new and continuing friendships with Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Richard Lippold, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell, and Marcel Duchamp, to name but a few.

In the course of this tremendous intellectual and conceptual influx, Cage was far from a mere passive receptacle, and this period also demonstrates the earliest instances in which ideas can be traced not just *to* Cage, but *through* him, ultimately affecting the artistic attitudes and techniques of others. In the summer of 1948, for example, Cage and Cunningham taught at North Carolina's progressively experimental Black Mountain College, where Cage succeeded in polarizing many among its students and staff (including Buckminster Fuller, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and former Bauhaus artists Joseph and Anni Albers) on either side of a summer-long debate centered around his own evolving compositional attitudes. This particular summer would culminate in an All-Satie Festival, including a faculty cast performance of Satie's *The Ruse of the Medusa*; four years later, Cage would return to Black Mountain and assemble a forty-five-minute multimedia event in collaboration with Cunningham, Rauschenberg, the pianist David Tudor, and the poets Mary Caroline Richards and Charles Olson, an

event now commonly acknowledged as the prototype of the "Happening" of the 1960s. In 1949, accompanied by Cunningham, Cage made his first trip to Europe as a composer, where he initiated a friendship with Boulez, who in turn introduced him to the European musical community. Upon returning to New York, the coalescence of an informal circle of colleagues consisting of Cage, Tudor, Wolff, Morton Feldman, and, somewhat later, Earle Brown, resulted in a series of works which constitute some of the earliest American forays into music for magnetic tape, although the efforts of this group to realize their lofty artistic ideals would prove hopelessly weighted by the genre's unsympathetic demands upon funds and physical man-hours.

Following this period of assimilation, Cage's most noteworthy musical products were a trio of works written between 1951 and 1952 which officially heralded his adoption of indeterminate compositional techniques. The *Music of Changes* for piano, a four-part work deriving its title from the *I Ching*, has become the symbol commonly used to identify the dawn of this new period. *Imaginary Landscape no. 4* for twelve radios was written shortly after *Music of Changes* as a response to criticisms that Cage had still not succeeded completely in emancipating his works from intentionality: this work involves copious chance-rendered instructions regarding dynamics, tempi, durations, and tuning frequencies. Yet despite its novelties, *Imaginary Landscape no. 4* seems only a step away from the earlier pieces for prepared piano, for in all of these works, timbre remains the only undetermined parameter, and even then, the flexible spectrum of possible resultant sounds is not a product of Cage's new compositional techniques, but of the very nature of the instruments themselves.

As a watershed work—and indeed it is—*4'33"* represents the springboard from which Cage vaulted from the mere manipulation of rhythm and duration into the very orchestration of time. In this work, which originally consisted of three movements of nonaction by any performer(s) on any instrument(s),

Cage confessed the essence of his new aesthetic in its barest state. Moving beyond Coomaraswamy's statement that "art imitates nature in its manner of operation," Cage eliminated the act of imitation altogether in *4'33"*, contending that art and nature were equal with, and could in fact be identical to, one another. Unlike "silence" in, say, the works of Debussy or even Webern, in which a predominating musical fabric is temporarily interrupted by a vacuity, Cage conceived of "silence" as its own autonomous work in the process of perpetual realization, which through the human activities of composition and performance one could embellish with sounds no longer classified as "musical," but simply "other." In adopting this perspective, Cage himself elevated *4'33"* to a unique position of aesthetic primacy over his other compositions—an act of hierarchization otherwise wholly uncharacteristic of Cage—asserting that *4'33"* was the single work from which all subsequent works proceeded.

"Silence," therefore, became one of Cage's own terms of approximation, yet in invoking this term, Cage was so far from literal in his meaning, that the term became almost encoded—an aesthetic colloquialism denoting something else entirely. "There is no such thing as silence," Cage would even state.⁷ And indeed, during the 1952 premiere of *4'33"* in Woodstock, New York, "silence" was not "silence," but the sounds of an impending storm, culminating in the pattering of raindrops on the rooftop. In one well-worn anecdote, Cage once went so far in seeking literal silence as to place himself in an anechoic chamber, but even then, his attempts to experience "soundlessness" were thwarted by the high-pitched hum of his own nervous system and the low ostinato of his circulatory system. Storm and heartbeat enjoyed equal status with traditionally perceived "musical" phenomena in the Cage aesthetic; in Boethian terms, one could say that in erasing distinctions between *plana*, *humana*, and *instrumentalis*, Cage accepted not "music," but nothing less than the metamaterials of *musica* itself as the

7. John Cage, "Composition as Process" (1958), in *Silence*, 51.

stuff of his art. Literal "silence," then, existed only on the philosophical level, representing to Cage the inconceivable and unattainable precondition of our inescapable universe of aural stimuli.

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As the works from the early 1950s were performed and disseminated, a terminology evolved with which the musical public attempted to discuss them: "chance," "indeterminacy," "anarchy," "Zen." But the meanings of these terms were so amorphous, their popular implications so vague, that their potential as useful approximations quickly eroded to the level of common buzzwords, and ever since, their various interpretations have been used both to praise Cage and to bury him.

The most common criticisms leveled at Cage's chance techniques suggest the old story of a man who approached a great Zen painter, requesting a portrait of a rooster. The artist asked for one year to complete the project and named an exorbitant fee. The man returned to the master's studio a year later to pick up the finished product. "Ah, yes," the master said, whereupon he tore off a blank sheet of paper, and within seconds dashed off the commissioned work with a few lightning strokes of his brush. The customer was beside himself with incredulity, and accused the artist of deliberate fraud.

But this is only the first part of the story, a half-understanding. For upon hearing the customer's complaints, the artist then led the man into his backroom workshop, where he revealed innumerable practice canvases upon which he had painted thousands of roosters over the course of the last year. The final work he had created, while at first glance a seemingly off-the-cuff and reckless creation, now could be understood as the product of an artistic discipline, created by a patient, skilled, and practiced hand.

Indeed, the chance procedures of Cage represent a new freedom, a new spontaneity, a new creativity, and throughout

the years, many would cry fraud at the results which appeared to be produced so effortlessly. Some still do. But more often than not, these detractors, mistaking final product for total process, seldom bother to venture into Cage's backroom, wherein he spent countless hours and years patiently mastering the coldly indifferent discipline of chance techniques, a discipline as potentially unrelenting in its rules and operations as the more short-lived total serial language of Boulez and Stockhausen. *4'33"*, for example, took several days to compose, as Cage painstakingly culled multiple durations of short silences through *I-Ching*-based chance operations, finally assimilating these brief durations into longer units.⁸ When Cage explained that *4'33"* was not one silence, but "many short silences...put together," his statement was neither facetious nor paradoxical: it was a genuine acknowledgement to the discipline through which the final product had been created and ultimately realized.⁹

"Anarchy," too, has been regularly associated with Cage's compositional processes, but in summoning this term, its scholarly application, if not simply careless, has been at least far from accurate, for literal anarchy—"the absence of any cohering principle, as a common standard or purpose"—has remarkably little to do with Cage's technique. Keenly aware of the susceptibility to which an invitation to artistic "freedom" could degenerate into a veiled justification for self-indulgence, Cage purposefully anchored himself to the discipline of chance techniques to preclude such thoughtless irresponsibilities. For all the affinities that scholar and layman have tried to draw between Cage and Zen, the simple purpose of their disciplines, though seldom mentioned, is in reality one of their strongest points of concordance. Like the Zen painter, Cage practiced

8. For the full score of *4'33"*, see *Source: music of the avant garde* 1, no. 2 (1967): 47-54.

9. John Cage, taped recording of Question and Answer period from the Norton Lectures (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

his discipline in order to produce an extemporaneous art; Cage's final products, far from laissez-faire constructions (a tiresome misconception), are instead paeans to the structured mode of creation through which Cage could be assured that his products would be both responsibly spontaneous and spontaneously responsible.

So commenced Cage's forty-year association with indeterminate procedures in the early 1950s. Shortly thereafter he began producing more didactic works as well, introducing these techniques to a wider audience, effectively going the Zen artist one step further by handing the brush over to his customers and encouraging them to try as well. These instructive works, which include some of the earliest examples of avant-garde "graphic" notation, served as abstract templates from which the disciplined performer was to extract at least one answer from what could be an infinite field of possibilities through both intellectual and intuitive means. In *Fontana Mix* (1958), one in a series of graphic scores involving transparent overlays from which the performer is to mix and interpret according to Cage's criteria, not only the score but the directions themselves are meant as part of the puzzle to be solved. In works of this type, issues of process overshadow those of product, and in some cases the final realization need not even be based upon the manipulation of sound. Cage explains the score of *Fontana Mix*, for example, as an impetus through which the performer is to derive "a program of action," actions which may result in a product which is musical, artistic, theatrical, poetic, etc.¹⁰ Other works in this category include parts of the *Variations* series (1958-67) and *Music for Carillon no. 5* (1967), the latter of which requires the performer to interpret musically the grain patterns on either side of five plywood planks.

Cage's admonitions to other composers and performers regarding indeterminate procedures were always clear: "Permission granted," he wrote in a well-known epigram, "but not to

10. John Cage, *Fontana Mix* (New York, 1960).

do whatever you want.”¹¹ As one of Cage’s most stalwart advocates in performance, David Tudor was to live up to these challenges for over twenty years, in one case even studying advanced mathematics to arrive at a responsible interpretation of one of Cage’s works. But even the best-intentioned pedagogue cannot always guarantee that his words will fall upon ears that hear, and in many instances, a student/performer’s skills at personal restraint would not be equal to that of the teacher: frequently Cage’s directives would be tainted in performance by their misconstrual as license to self-indulgence—a fate, of course, from which no composer has ever escaped entirely unscathed. Even Cage, who so often laid claim to accepting all sounds as equal, found it hard at times to accept the sounds produced in such performances. “I must find a way to let people be free without this becoming foolish,” he once gently bristled.¹²

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In the late 1950s, Cage taught classes at the New School for Social Research, where his students would include Dick Higgins, Jackson MacLow, Allan Kaprow, and George Brecht—all future leaders in the Fluxus and Happenings movements of the next decade, as would be Nam June Paik, whom Cage would meet at Darmstadt. Despite his increasing fame and notoriety in the art and music worlds, financial rewards were still negligible, and Cage sporadically worked at odd jobs to maintain a living.

Fortune began to turn for Cage in the 1960s, when he was popularly adopted as a figurehead to myriad young artists and musicians. His first book, *Silence*, was published in 1961, and Cage—almost fifty years old now—finally found a music pub-

11. John Cage, “Seriously Comma,” in *A Year From Monday*, 28.

12. John Cage, “Indeterminacy: New Aspect [sic] of Form in Instrumental and Electronic Music” (New York: Folkways Record, FT 3704, 1959).

lisher in C. F. Peters. Throughout the 1960s, Cage toured worldwide as musical director of Cunningham's dance company, joined by Tudor as pianist. In 1967, Cage would unveil a new type of composition at the University of Illinois, the "musicircus," a relatively structured, large-scale audio-visual Happening that entailed simultaneous performances of disparate musics. Two years later, another musicircus, *HPSCHD*, composed in collaboration with pioneer computer music composer Lejaren Hiller was premiered at this same site: the performance involved multiple harpsichords, film projectors, eighty slide projectors, and approximately fifty taped excerpts.

From around 1970, the basic premises of Cage's aesthetic were ornamented by a series of fresh subthemes. Having cited Satie, Webern, and Joyce as among his kindred spirits for years, Cage now found a new source of confirmation in Thoreau, whose thought and activities would work their way into many of Cage's compositions. Cage also began to interpret his indeterminate musical structures as models for functional, nonhierarchical, nonmilitaristic social structures during this period, though adamantly and somewhat awkwardly insisting that in drawing this analogy, he was neither contradicting his earlier edicts to "let sounds be themselves" nor ascribing anything as crass as a political agenda to his works. From a purely stylistic standpoint, the 1970s mark the point at which Cage began to incorporate quotations from preexistent works into his own on a fairly regular basis: this, though, did not constitute a basic change in his technique, but was rather an additional device enhancing the battery of classic, nonquotational indeterminate techniques that he continued to exercise in other compositions.

The last years of Cage's life were highlighted by two sizable bodies of works. The first consisted of a series of ensembles of various sizes, which involved the performance of predetermined pitches within flexible time brackets, the performers unified not by a conductor but by synchronized chronometers. The titles of these works were derived quite simply from the

number of instruments for which they were written: the first duet of the series, for example, is called *Two*; the succeeding duet is dubbed *Two*². These ensembles appear to represent a stylistic retrenchment of sorts, for through these pieces we may again speak of the “work” (albeit a delicate application) in a way in which we cannot when addressing many of Cage’s previous chance compositions. That is to say, the very scheme of these pieces, in which strictly determined musical material is manipulated within a pliable time span, permits a fair degree of variance from performance to performance, yet does not necessarily strip the work of its “identity” as an object. These ensembles, then, hardly seem the most advanced and radical phase of Cage’s output; instead, they are more readily interpretable as a new manifestation of the “mobile form,” a concept promoted by Earle Brown and others beginning in the 1950s. The *Européras 1-5* (1987-91) are the culmination of Cage’s later interests in quotation and the musicircus, consisting musically—and solely—of juxtaposed and overlaid quotes from other operas which had been determined by chance procedures. Staging, lighting, costumes, and props were also indeterminately conceived, perhaps logistically qualifying these massive compositions as *Gesamtkunstwerke* in the indeterminate repertoire.

The year 1992 was to be one of celebration for Cage. He would have turned eighty that September, and festivals in his honor had been planned throughout the world. However, on 11 August, Cunningham came home to find Cage unconscious in their 18th Street loft, the victim of an apparent stroke. Cage died the next day at 2:40 p.m. at St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York.

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Stylistically, Cage was not immaculately conceived: he, too, had his precursors, but for various reasons, these figures are interpreted historically more as invocational muses than protag-

onists in the postwar turn-of-eras proper. In the case of Charles Ives, for example, while we can only speculate on any influence his works and thought might have potentially wielded over the next generation of composers, his self-imposed isolation cloistered him from significant interactions with the larger musical world. Ives, who could have been of quasi-Wagnerian influence to the new music in America, was instead fated to bear closer resemblance to a Vincentino: his uniquely creative musical tree did indeed fall in the woods, but by his own inexplicable design, relatively few composers of the next generation would be there to hear the sound.¹³

The impact of Henry Cowell on the new music in America constitutes a still unwritten chapter in music history, and it is only recently that primary materials have been consigned to musicologist Joel Sachs for his exclusive study in preparation for Cowell's first full-length biography. For now, history depicts Cowell's youthful compositions and writings as brilliant and pioneering: the drafting of his *New Musical Resources*—a volume which Cage extolled as essential to his own early works—was begun when Cowell was all of nineteen.¹⁴ Throughout his later years, his efforts behind the scenes as editor and promoter were extraordinary, increasing the already substantial debt owed him by his own and later generations. Still, the spotlight upon Cowell as a creative force quickly waned as he was upstaged by the developments from Cage's generation, whose works would explode the seeds of sedition sown by Cowell (and also Varèse) into bona fide revolution.

13. This is not a universal truism for Ives. Earle Brown, for example, is one composer who feels the course of his work directly affected by Ives; Carter quickly comes to mind as well. By and large, though, Ives would be an interesting after-discovery to composers like Cage, Christian Wolff, and other American composers of the 1960s. Cage could ultimately claim legitimate followers who were consciously stimulated into their own musical explorations through his techniques and aesthetic; Ives, however, in the broadest sense, would not gain followers so much as fans.

14. Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York, 1969).

While Cowell may have presaged the mass exodus from existing musical settlements of the day into the unknown frontier, it was Cage who assumed the historical role of barker and tour guide, and those who inhabited the various musical camps of the day were often compelled by this man who so simply and profoundly reminded them that their existing settlements all dotted the larger realm of Sound. Cage's call to exploration was taken up in earnest by his immediate colleagues in the 1950s, and his cheerful perseverance communicated to a surge of artists in the 1960s that this untamed wilderness was indeed inhabitable. A plethora of composers and artists would take up the call: "Here Comes Everybody," Cage would quip.

While debates over Cagean aesthetics, analysis, and biography will probably be long-standing, no one could deny his impact in changing the face of the musical terrain. The very perspective that Cage and his colleagues had encouraged so enthusiastically, in which "music" became a self-defined, ultra-individualistic, and exploratory activity, quickly became *the* central tenet of the new era. In fact, it became so commonplace, that the artistic agenda today faces a new dilemma, for though creative artists still find this call to "individuality" compelling, it has simply become more and more difficult to find a spot where another hasn't stepped before. The widespread dissemination of the pluralistic aesthetic proved counteractive to its own existence by its manic insistence on "novelty," and although this mania has begun to wane, resolutions to this predicament are not yet evident. Cage himself remained unconcerned about the future of music, confident that meaningful answers would come when we learned to ask the right questions, and believing that just as one comprehends the lesson of 4'33" with a sudden "a-ha!", so, too, would the path out of this ideological and aesthetic quandary some day leap out at those who ponder it.

Scholarly issues which a figure like Cage raises are no less urgent in their insistence for our critical attention. Currently *all* facets of Cage scholarship pose unresolved, elemental problems, and commonplace idle speculations over the relative weight of Cage's compositions in comparison to his ideas wrongly imply that we have even begun to develop a vocabulary and perspective with which to assess either competently. Theoretical issues are especially thorny: even in Cage's early works, analysis must either adapt or discard its pitch-centric rudiments before effectively addressing the almost twenty years' worth of percussion music preceding Cage's indeterminate period. Of the indeterminate works, those most liberal in their realizations are also those most resistant to verbal illumination. Certainly, the performer or scholar of chance works may still detail a progression from primary concept to realization, from score to performance, as one may do with any other composition; however, the nature of indeterminacy often acts prohibitively as a one-way mirror, inherently disallowing the reverse possibility of perceiving and identifying the original compositional matrix of a work through the study of its realizations—a technique fundamental to traditional analysis.¹⁵ Further, in expanding the realm of acceptable interpretations of any given matrix, this new philosophy of "chance" not only proceeds in utter contradistinction to the conventional rules by which one previously might assess a musical "object," but renders historic and aesthetic concepts of the "masterpiece" nonoperative as well. Recent disserta-

15. The term "matrix" is used here not in the Fortean sense, but as Leo Treitler uses it when discussing those elements which identify a work and therefore must be realized (either in score or performance) for its successful transmission. From this perspective, the "work" becomes "a matrix of abstract forms and schemata and concrete models," which is influenced by "local and individual principles guiding the reconstruction" of the work. See Treitler, untitled paper for the symposium *Peripherie und Zentrum in der Musik des Mittelalters*, in *Deutsche Musikforschende Gesellschaft, Internationaler Kongress, Berlin, 1974, Bericht* (Kassel, 1980), 59.

tions by Deborah Campana and James Pritchett have been welcome beginnings to the analytic efforts that still lie ahead.¹⁶ By and large, though, a paucity of analytic writing on Cage's works exists, the inevitable consequence of a still unsolved methodological impasse, namely, the inability of present methods of analysis, grounded firmly in the language of *logos*, to address Cage's works, which have garnered their historical significance as heralds of the new age of musical *mythos*.

At first glance, Cage historians would seem to be far more fortunate than their theorist counterparts, for indeed an abundance of material exists, and one can read page upon page of Cage's aesthetics, his fondness for Eastern philosophies, his appreciation of Indian and Indonesian musics, his interaction with other musicians, artists, poets, and dancers, etc. But a deeper investigation into the sources behind this information reveals a challenge to historical scholarship no less profound than that faced by analysis, for the extant Cage literature is not a collection of in-depth scholarly articles based on the thorough investigation of documents, archival materials, or other primary sources, but is instead little more than a set of variations upon Cage's own self-commentaries—commentaries which with few exceptions have been accepted at face value and are now almost the sole foundation of our historical perceptions of Cage.

These self-commentaries assume two guises. The most common is the interview transcription: Cage recollects, offering his memories to the interviewer, who then dutifully transmits this information on to the reader as historical fact. Fortunately—and unfortunately—for Cage scholarship, Cage was well known for his willingness to be interviewed, and while this generosity was an invaluable kindness, it is also a curse to the

16. Deborah Campana, *Form and Structure in the Music of John Cage* (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1985); James Pritchett, *The Development of Chance Techniques in the Music of John Cage, 1950-1956* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988).

historian who finds himself bogged down in a morass of interview materials in which the composer gives the same answer to a question repeated in countless interviews. It is even more unnerving, though, to discover instances in which the composer offers identical answers to noticeably different questions.¹⁷ Almost invariably, these interviews are devoid of any explicit critical commentary or independent verification of information by the interviewer.¹⁸ The second brand of self-commentary is anecdotal and appears throughout Cage's own prose writings. Eliminating the mediating role of an interviewer, though effectively achieving the same end as the interview-history, these vignettes can be easily cross-referenced to the information found in Cage's interviews in many instances, and in some cases, Cage's answer to an interview question may well be a direct restatement of an excerpt from these prose snippets.

These observations are not meant to suggest that Cage actively and intentionally created his own history to his own specifications and for his own purposes at the expense of some truth. He is not a Stravinsky; nor (if we are to yield to Maynard

17. These instances should not be confused with those pedagogical "interviews" in which Cage demonstrated indeterminate techniques by preparing a series of answers (usually through chance operations) which he then used as responses to given questions, regardless of the context of the questions themselves.

18. The most notorious of these interview-histories is perhaps *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York, 1987), which is not itself a single independent interview, but rather a compilation of excerpts from previous interviews conducted largely by others during various periods in Cage's life. Kostelanetz has compiled at least one other interview in a similar fashion, referring to it as an "Ur-Conversation" ("His Own Music: Ur-Conversation with John Cage," *Perspectives of New Music* 25 [1987]: 88-106). Of course, there is little about these interviews which is "Ur-." Stripped completely of context, both in terms of the periods in which these interviews took place and the questions surrounding the quoted excerpts in the original interviews, these writings are, for historical purposes, wholly synthetic and therefore unusable as source material. If nothing else, this kind of *ersatz* scholarship demonstrates how lamentably untouched Cage research is by any kind of scholarly methodological standards.

Solomon's eloquent seductions) is he an Ives. One does get the strong impression, though, that after scores of interviews over the years, Cage may have settled, be it consciously or unconsciously, on a basic "routine," i.e., a series of stories and responses which became a stock part of any standard question-and-answer session. Consequently, from an historical perspective, Cage scholarship is seriously ruttled in a largely chatty, anecdotal quagmire of untested data; so far, it has been only in very rare instances that scholars have managed to free themselves even partially from this "hearsay" brand of history.¹⁹

Since Cage's death, one final stumbling block has emerged which may threaten to impede any steady advancement of Cage scholarship in the United States. The Cage estate includes manuscripts, written works, drafts and other work materials: they now need a home. But American institutions, of course, are hard-pressed for money, and we still have not established any large-scale independent research facility or archive for contemporary music, as has been done in Europe. Offers to house the Cage materials are likely to come from other parts of the world, and may well succeed, barring comparable bids from American sources. In relating this predicament to a colleague who is originally from mainland China, he exclaimed, "My God! Doesn't the U.S. have laws to prohibit the exportation of its national treasures?" Sadly, no. But the Cage estate is hardly at fault in considering such foreign options. We in the American sector must come up with other reasonable and competitive offers for the estate to consider, or else resign ourselves to

19. Only in recent months, Arcade Publishing (New York) has released Cage's first full-scale biography, *The Roaring Silence, John Cage: A Life*, by English composer-percussionist David Revill. Intended for a general audience, the bulk of this book is a chronological ordering of Cage's anecdotes; the author's self-confessed intentions to make the book "as light as possible, building from contiguities and not connections, providing information but few instructions," suggest immediately the deeper dimensions of research which professional historians might offer to enhance the information contained in Revill's work.

the potentially prohibitive realities of the thousands of miles of travel that Cage research may someday entail.

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We can trace a single long-standing European (and largely German-designed) system of beliefs which directed the course of both music's academic and creative circles for decades. This system was monotheistic, deifying the late eighteenth-century in its three manifestations—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—Father, Son and, ultimately, the Holy Ghost whose specter would loom over music and music history for the next 130 years. In academia, of course, this faith was institutionalized as "*Musikwissenschaft*," and expressed itself through the busy activities of data acquisition, which would lead to the formulation of canons and the identification of "great" works determined by a series of aesthetic principles themselves based upon late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century models.

Generations of composers as well would bear witness to this faith, turning to these models as the ultimate justification of their own work. Even into the first half of the twentieth century, these beliefs were the locus of musical contemplation and activity. However, the schism between serialists and neoclassicists illustrates that, by the 1920s, the very relevance and purpose of these prototypes had become the central issues of debate. Serialists like Schoenberg, of course, interpreted their work as evolutionary, one more step in a German-dominated historic continuum. Neoclassicists like Stravinsky acted as skeptical counterparts, and the advent of neoclassicism suggests a stylistic retrenchment obliged out of conceptual poverty and exhaustion to favor reminiscence over any questionable serialist claims of "advancement." In hindsight, these musical developments between the World Wars betray the limitations of the musical order of which they are a part: as serialism brought these models to their most abstracted states, neoclassicism actually returned to these models, closing the final years of the era

with a cyclic twist. In any event, these twin phenomena can well be considered the final collective exhortation of faith in the specific system of beliefs which defined the larger era.

It has been only very recently that we in scholarly circles have begun to rethink this same "faith" in historical terms until, at present, we are more suspicious and dismissive of our scholarly forebears than at any other time, and the phenomenon of a near universally accepted and dogmatic music history is being replaced gradually by an ever-growing number of idiosyncratic creeds. However, in challenging the academic catechisms of our past, it seems that we have yet to acknowledge that it was this very same system of beliefs which Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen, and a handful of others would challenge some fifty years ago. The general demeanor of their reactions, like ours, was typified by an aggressive disinterest toward preexistent codes, most often replacing them with highly personalized and sometimes jargon-clad constructs.

Cage himself learned through his work with chance operations that if one doesn't get useful answers, one probably isn't asking the right kind of question. We, too, acknowledge that round pegs and square holes will never really fit together: we don't speak of the Baroque in terms of the Renaissance, nor do we define the Classical era in terms of the Baroque. Yet many of our own best efforts in approaching Cage and postwar music in general have been crippled by a habitual reliance on historically loaded terminology ("What is the *form* of this work?"), inappropriate expectations ("How is it *unified*?"), and obsolete priorities ("But is it a *masterpiece*?"), framing compositions and artists within a system of beliefs which they themselves utterly disavowed. In the past, we have feigned surprise when we addressed Cage in terms other than those of his own era and came up empty-handed. Yet instead of designing methods useful to discussions of the man and his era, we more often have excused ourselves from this task simply dubbing Cage "mysterious," or worse, ignoring him.

But “Cage as enigma” is now cliché (if it hasn’t already been for years), and our historical, aesthetic, and analytic outlooks upon his art and thought are ripe for and needful of extensive reconfiguration. While his music has been the focus of this review, one would have to turn to all his contributions excised from this essay—in poetry, art, theatre, film, dance—to gain a sense of the true scope of his output, a mammoth prodigiousness that defies pithy summary. Underlying all of his artistic activities, though, was a common series of ideas culled from a diversity of musical and philosophical sources, which Cage treated as intellectual “found” objects, synthesizing them into a basic aesthetic which he then elegantly multitasked across the arts.

It bears noting that many of the phrases turned in this essay are in their own way mere terms of approximation. For Cage is not a Zen painter. Ives is not Vincentino. The “nineteenth century” is not the Baroque. And all composers of the first half of this century did not retire *en masse* after the war in deference to those involved in creating a new era. However, these terms are justified if they can collectively communicate the immediate need for a deeper, scholarly investigation of John Cage, a figure so essential to our understanding of the music of our own era. Despite his active compositional presence of some sixty years, we as historians still lack suitable terms by which to discuss his technique and works. Our efforts will have to be both patient and flexible, and if in the course of Cage research we are challenged to new modes of analysis and interpretation, perhaps in our own way we, too, will join the ranks of those already indebted to him.