



## Cage, John (1912-1992)

by Jeffery Byrd

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One of the most influential and controversial American composers of the twentieth century, John Cage is best known for his work utilizing chance as a factor in writing music.

Born in Los Angeles on September 5, 1912, the son of an inventor father and a writer mother, Cage developed musical interests early. After spending two years at Pomona College in Claremont, California, he spent two years in Europe, where he tried to compose music for the first time. After returning to the United States, he studied with Arnold Schoenberg and Henry Cowell.

In the mid-1930s, he began composing for percussion instruments and began developing some of his ideas about sound and noise. He also married. Although Cage had had sexual affairs with young men, including aspiring artist Don Sample, with whom he traveled in Europe, in 1935 he wed Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff, the daughter of a Russian Orthodox priest.

Late in 1938, Cage and his wife moved to Seattle, where he gave percussion concerts and wrote his first piece that utilized electronic technology in composition, the *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*. Also in Seattle, he met a young student at the Cornish School for Performing and Visual Arts, the dancer Merce Cunningham, who was later to become his life partner and artistic collaborator.

In 1942, Cage and his wife moved to New York, where Cunningham was a member of the Martha Graham dance company. The composer and the dancer began developing dance programs. By 1945 Cage had divorced Xenia and acknowledged Cunningham as his personal as well as his professional partner.

The relationship with Cunningham would endure for the rest of Cage's life, which ended in New York City on August 12, 1992.

Cage and Cunningham produced pieces in which the music and dance were created independently but presented simultaneously. The two elements, neither related or unrelated, simply occurred in the same space and time. Their first great success was their ballet "The Seasons" (1947), which was commissioned by the Ballet Society of New York (later known as the New York City Ballet). After 1953, their preferred venue for their work was the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, which is still in existence.

Cage and Cunningham became part of a largely gay circle of New York avant garde artists that included Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly, who might be said to have anticipated post-modernism in their theories and practices.

Cage is best known for his theories that de-emphasized the role of personal expression in producing art. Inspired by Zen Buddhism, Cage sought to suppress his personal tastes and desires in favor of emulating nature's creative process through the use of chance operations and indeterminacy.

In 1951, Cage discovered the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*, and used it to write music. He

would assign musical value (pitch and duration) to all possible combinations of the three coins and write the music much as if he were taking dictation. The resulting compositions may in fact have emotional content but it is derived from process and is not the result of the composer's intention (as is traditional in Western art).

These chance-derived pieces, once notated, were intended to be performed as written and, barring the usual interpretive discrepancies, performances tended to be similar.

Cage later extended this thinking by writing music in which most or all pertinent decisions related to pitch and tempo were left to the performer, thus yielding radically different performances of the same piece.

*Aria* (1958), for example, uses a series of colored squiggles rather than conventional bar notation. The performer is instructed to assign a different vocal style to each color and follow the up-and-down direction of the line by singing higher or lower pitches.

*Variations IV* (1963) takes this approach to its logical conclusion by allowing the performers to employ any sound-making device or action for any length of time.

Another famous work is the *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1952), which uses twelve radios with two performers each, one controlling the tuning dial, the other the volume knob: depending on what is being broadcast at any particular time, the performance will vary.

Cage's practice of de-centralizing the process of composition shifts the responsibility of creating meaning from the producer to the audience. Art is no longer solely in the hands of the artist but becomes an act of attentive observation and organization on the part of the viewer/receiver. In this way, Cage's work follows the model of meditation.

Undoubtedly the most famous (or notorious) example of Cage's shifting the burden of creating meaning to the audience is his *4'33"* (1952), in which a pianist sits silently at a piano for precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting*, Cage's work asks the listener to create a world of sound out of silence.

Cage introduced his ideas to an entire generation of artists through his teaching. In addition to numerous visiting appointments throughout the United States, he taught for extended periods at the School for Social Research in New York and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. He encouraged students to look outside themselves for inspiration and to think of art not as self-expression but as self-alteration.

The abstract character of Cage's works does not present many opportunities to read them as "gay" works. Only a few pieces seem to have what might be considered autobiographical content, but his process does provide what might be considered a democratic attitude toward sound in which all sounds (including those generally considered noise) are valued equally. Silence itself is valued as much as any notes actually performed.

Art historian Jonathan Katz has suggested that Cage's ironic emphasis on the importance of silence in music reflects a political position related to the imposed silence of the closet prevalent in 1950s America.

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**Jeffery Byrd**, Professor of Art at the University of Northern Iowa, is a performance artist and photographer whose work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and journals. He has performed at New York City's Lincoln Center and Alternative Museum, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago's N.A.M.E. Gallery, and Cleveland's Performance Festival.