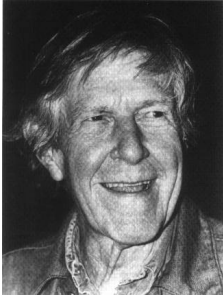


The nature of the contribution to the development of the performance tradition- John Cage



American composer John Cage had a profound influence on avant-garde music and dance. He was born on 5th September 1912 in Los Angeles, California and died in New York City on 12th August 1992.

Cage's work has had a stimulating effect on 20th century music and art. He is recognised as the inventor and leading figure in the field of indeterminate composition by means of chance operations.

John Cage's idea of composing chance music was not by choice; his ideas were inspired by Eastern Philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism. Its influence was so deep on Cage that many say he was more of a philosopher than a composer.

He intended to capture everyday noises as musical instruments. Sound and nature, which were closely related to each other in Cage's context, fascinated him. He expressed his views on music in his manifesto '*The Future of Music*'. This portrayed what Cage believed: that any sound or noise we hear is music and therefore the differences between life and art should be eliminated.

"Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at 50mph. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them, not as sound effects, but as musical instruments."
(Cage on '*The Future of Music*' - from a lecture given in 1937, taken from 'Time for John Cage')

At one of his concerts, musicians played beer bottles, automobile brake drums, flowerpots, "...anything we can lay our hands on". (Cage, from Goldberg, 2001)

This, again, shows his feel for nature in his music by using everyday objects, which represent everyday noises, rather than conventional instruments.

"My favourite piece is the one we hear all the time if we are quiet."
(Cage, from Goldberg, 2001)

In 1942 Cage settled in New York City. Influenced by Zen Buddhism, Cage often used silence as a musical element, with sounds as items hanging in time; he looked to achieve randomness in his music. In 1952 he arrived at his most famous silent work *4'33"*.

4'33" was a "*piece in three movements during which no sounds are intentionally produced*" (Goldberg, 2001:126)

The piece is a composition containing 4 minutes and 33 seconds of 'silence'. The performers sit silently at the instruments and the natural sound of the surrounding environment is the music.

"The point perhaps of "4'33"" is that we can never experience true silence. There is always something to listen to; even in a sound-proof room we hear the activities of our bodies. When "4'33"" isn't, itself, making an audience mad, it offers a way to welcome the ambient sounds that often otherwise hinder the listening to music at a concert."

(The Economist, Volume 364)

David Tudor, *4'33"*'s first interpreter, sat at a piano for a short time silently moving his arms three times. The audience were to understand that everything they heard was 'music'.

"Many people, of course, have given up saying "experimental" about this new music. Instead they either move to a halfway point and say "controversial" or depart to a greater distance and question whether this "music" is music at all."

(Cage, 1960:7)

Cage then goes on to explain (in his lecture on *Experimental Music* to the convention of the Music Teachers National Association in Chicago, 1957) "*There is always something to see, something to hear.*" He defines how humanity and nature are in this world together and any sounds can appear in "*any combination and in any continuity.*"

Another major source of influence for John Cage was *I Ching*. Also known as *The Book of Changes* originated in China around 256 B.C, it was used to predict the future by tossing sticks or throwing coins. It went on to become a book of philosophy instead of a fortune-teller's manual; which would have suited Cage as he, as I mentioned earlier, came across as quite a philosophical person. This brought about Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951), which was based on unpredictable outcomes in his music.

“My recent work (Imaginary Landscape No. IV for twelve radios and the ‘Music of Changes’ for piano) is structurally similar to my earlier work: based on a number of measures having a square root, so that the large lengths have the same relation within the whole that the small lengths have within a unit of it. Formerly, however, these lengths were time-lengths, whereas in the recent work the lengths exist only in space, the speed of travel through this space being unpredictable.”

(Cage, 1960:57)

He started writing for ensembles of percussion instruments; this was a genre which few composers had explored before.

He used a variety of random or chance processes to determine the content and structure of a piece of music. Some of these involved improvisation by the performers.

“The thing about John is that nothing stopped him. He was constantly working on pieces and bringing them to fruition...With the invention of the prepared piano, he could produce the sound of a small orchestra from a single instrument.”

(Cunningham, 2004, The Guardian)

John Cage invented the prepared piano when he required a selection of percussive timbres for a dance but had no room for a percussive ensemble. The sound of the prepared piano is modified by objects attached to the strings. By inserting nuts, bolts, screws and rubbers between the piano strings, he created a new, unique sound world. Cage completely changed the character of the piano in terms of its sound and tonality.

The *Untitled Event* held at Black Mountain College in 1952 saw Cage giving another abstract performance. The rehearsal and preparation for the performance was short and minimal, performers did not get any set musical score to follow; only ‘time brackets’ were given out.

“Spectators took their seats in the square arena forming four triangles created by diagonal aisles each holding the white cup which had been placed on their chair.”

(Goldberg, 2001:126)

There were poetry readers scattered in the audience, Merce Cunningham, a dancer who collaborated with Cage for many years, and other dancers danced through the aisles chased by a dog! Robert Rauschenberg flashed ‘abstract’ slides and film clips of the school cook and setting suns, and Jay Watt, a composer, played exotic instruments. Cage himself read a text on ‘the relation of music to Zen Buddhism’ dressed in a black suit and tie, whilst standing on a step ladder. Cage accredited the evening a success.

“An ‘anarchic’ event; ‘purposeless in that we didn’t know what was going to happen’, it suggested endless possibilities for future collaborations. ”

(Cage, from Goldberg, 2001:127)

From what I have read about the *Untitled Event*, it seemed indeed very bizarre and abstract in its own right. To me, it suggested that even in the twentieth century where we think that nothing could come close to the abstract work of the dadaists or surrealists previously, art was yet again ‘pushing the boundaries’; living art trying to conquer the former manifestos. In support of this, a famous quote from Cage sums up what he was trying to achieve through living art:

“If my work is accepted I must move to the point where it isn’t.”

“We are living in a period in which many people have changed their mind about what the use of music is or could be for them. Something that doesn’t speak or talk like a human being, that doesn’t know its definition in the dictionary or its theory in the schools, that expresses itself simply by the fact of its vibrations. People paying attention to vibratory activity, not in reaction to a fixed ideal performance, but each time attentively to how it happens to be this time, not necessarily two times the same. A music that transports the listener to the moment where he is.”

(‘John Cage- An Autobiographical Statement’)

A modern day comparison is the music and dance of the touring performance ‘STOMP’. STOMP is about rhythm, which is common to all cultures. STOMP is a group of people who perform around the world, with very strong personalities, who use everyday objects combined with their individual improvisations to create original music and dance.

This is a very similar method to Cage’s *Untitled Event*, performers using everyday objects and images, and more importantly their personal improvisations.



(Performers in ‘STOMP’ using dustbin lids as instruments, taken from <http://www.stomp.co.uk>)

Nine years after his death, the memory of John Cage most certainly lives on.

“In 1949 Cage received a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Award from the National Academy of Arts and Letters for having extended the boundaries of music through his work with percussion orchestra and his invention of the prepared piano. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1978, and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1988.”

(‘John Cage’)

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