

## John Cage (1912–1992)

At the heart of John Cage's career lies a paradox. By 1951 he believed music should become 'purposeless': without direction or meaning, free of human intervention. Echoing Stravinsky's statement that 'music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all', Cage argued that the composer must 'give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments'.

Yet Cage's own 'theories' – Eastern philosophy, aleatoric (chance) processes, the emancipation of noise – combined with the sheer magnetism of his personality, left an indelible imprint on 20th-century music of all genres. Try as he might to remove personality from music, Cage's own character became bound up with his work. Luciano Berio argued that Cage's avant-garde sounds 'conserve a semblance of meaning for me only if I can relate them to their author's musical concerns and personal music history... in John Cage's 'concerts': if he's not on stage I get horribly bored.'

Cage's experimental approach invited more severe criticism than Berio's. In 1961 he was parodied in a BBC Third Programme broadcast by Hans Keller and Susan Bradshaw. Pretending to be Polish composer 'Piotr Zak', whose music bore 'The strong influence of Kagel, Stockhausen and John Cage', the pair 'performed' *Mobile for tape and percussion* by running around the studio, hitting things at random. Donald Mitchell, unaware of the prank, criticised the 'succession of whistles, rattles and punctured sighs that proclaimed, all too shamelessly, their non-musical origins'. Cage's approach provoked ridicule, anger – and mirth. He had performed *Water Walk* on the game-show *I've Got A Secret* in 1960; the audience laughed openly. Cage's view: 'I consider laughter preferable to tears'.

Cage's notoriety, as well as his inventiveness, has assured his role as a colossus of 20th-century art. Indeed, the 'Cage Against the Machine' campaign of 2010 saw the adoption of '4'33"' as an unlikely protest song against commercialised pop, demonstrating that Cage has crossed from the avant-garde into the mainstream. Cage's music, and his visual art, currently on show at the Hayward Gallery, are so distinctive that both critics and admirers may agree with one of his teachers, Schoenberg, who said of Cage: 'He's not a composer, he's an inventor – of genius.'

## **4'33" (1952)**

**30" – 2'23" – 1'40"**

Perhaps the most notorious piece of music ever conceived, *4'33"* is not a thoughtless gimmick, but a coalescing of Cage's ideas, and wider trends. Zen philosophy, with its emphasis on 'being', on silent contemplation, was becoming highly influential. In his *Nine Stories* of 1953, J.D. Salinger, himself fascinated by Zen, quoted an idea of precisely the kind that interested Cage:

We know the sound of two hands clapping.  
But what is the sound of one hand clapping?

Such questions of content versus absence were pervading artistic thought. Most influential in Cage's case were the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg – which shocked critics in the way *4'33"* would. Cage acknowledged that Rauschenberg's paintings effectively laid down a creative gauntlet; art without 'content' demanded music without content, and to ignore this challenge would have been to ignore the direction of artistic progress:

'Actually what pushed me into [writing *4'33"*] was not guts but the example of Robert Rauschenberg. His white paintings... When I saw those, I said, "Oh yes, I must; otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging."'

The point made by critics that anybody could have written such a piece was invariably met with Cage's response that nobody else did. It took someone with an extraordinary approach to sound to believe in the validity of this concept. In 1949 Cage had argued that: 'Any attempt to exclude the "irrational" is irrational. Any composing strategy which is wholly "rational" is irrational in the extreme.' This dismissal of 'rational' preconceptions enabled Cage to embrace the idea of taking a snapshot of time, and listening to it to hear what it would yield. Cage's point is that 'there's no such thing as silence', and that all sounds, however faint, constitute music. In *Silence* (1961), Cage asked: 'Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?'

The non-existence of silence was vividly demonstrated to Cage in 1951-52, when he visited an acoustic anechoic chamber at Harvard, a room built to absorb and block all sound. This was a defining moment:

'... in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds... He said "The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation."'

This experience, the white paintings, and Cage's philosophy, led to *4'33"*. Describing Rauschenberg's work, Cage put it this way:

'The white paintings were airports for the lights, shadows, and particles... Before such emptiness, you just wait to see what you will see...'

In the emptiness of 4'33", we just wait to hear what we will hear.

## ***Radio Music for eight (1956)***

Cage believed that music is 'organized sound', and that all sound, even that conventionally categorized as 'noise', is music. As he explained in 1937:

'Wherever we are, what we hear mostly is noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles an hour. Static between the stations. Rain.'

*Radio Music* was a product of this philosophy, exploring the limitless shades of 'static between the stations', the colours of radio noise and interference. Written for one to eight performers, each using one radio, these sounds unfold using chance operations. The parts employ different ranges of frequencies, between 55 and 156 kHz, notated using numbers without conventional staves. Lines denote silences, which are 'expressed by maximum amplitude'. Every part is in four sections, with or without silences between them, to be programmed by the players.

## ***Concert for Piano and Orchestra (1957–8) / Fontana Mix (1958)***

There is no overall score for this work, only a series of 'solos', musically independent but coinciding in time, just as sounds heard in the world may overlap without relationships existing between them. Of this work, Cage stated: 'My intention in this piece was to hold together extreme disparities, much as one finds them held together in the natural world, as, for instance, in a forest, or on a city street.'

The piano part's elements may be played in any order desired, and the orchestra may consist of any number or combination of 13 instruments – including none – playing parts of which any number of pages may be used – including none. This allows for the possibility of multi-directional structures. Each part was written by Cage using purely graphic indications, and distortions of conventional notation, including three sizes of notes, denoting duration, amplitude or both. The piano score uses a plethora of notational styles and techniques, including chance factors such as imperfections on the paper.

The piano is 'prepared' with rubber, bamboo, bolts, and soft beaters used to strike the strings. Cage pioneered this technique in 1938: 'In a flash, I saw what was wrong; it wasn't me but my piano. I began therefore to experiment with the interior. I inserted magazines, newspapers, ashtrays, baking pans. Every object seemed to change the

sound as I hoped'. The prepared piano remains a contentious issue. Berio stated: 'I always thought that to "prepare" a piano was a bit like drawing on the Mona Lisa... It makes no difference, the piano remains the same, and it has certainly survived being violated by kind and smiling Americans.'

Yet the two composers respected one another, and it was to Berio and his then wife, Cathy Berberian, that Cage dedicated his *Fontana Mix*, one of the works which he allowed to be performed alongside the *Concert*, and derived from one of its notations. For tracks of magnetic tape and any instruments, the score comprises ten sheets of paper and twelve transparencies. On the paper are drawings of six curved lines; on ten of the transparencies are randomly distributed points. Another transparency has a grid, and another a straight line. By superimposing the transparencies over the paper, the performer/s may determine the work's structure. Originally entitled *Performance Mix*, Cage renamed the piece after his Milanese landlady, Signora Fontana.

## ***Child of Tree* for percussion solo (1975)**

*Child of Tree* epitomises several aspects of Cage's philosophy at this time: the use of chance to determine musical order, Eastern tradition, and a fascination with ecology. Cage was an expert mycologist – collector of mushrooms. So when, in 1975, Cage was brought a dried cactus by the dancer Charles Moulton – who placed it near Cage's ear and plucked the spines – it was, perhaps, inevitable that the sounds produced would inspire Cage to use plant materials in *Branches* and *Child of Tree*. The process was, quite literally, organic.

The soloist may use ten instruments, all of which are plants or made from plant materials, including a rattling pod from the Mexican Poinciana tree. Cage reminds us that all instruments stem from raw materials; so why not use plants? The order in which these instruments are played is determined through chance, using the ancient Chinese system of I Ching, a device Cage employed in several compositions. Then, 'Using a stopwatch, the soloist improvises, clarifying the time structure by means of the instruments. This improvisation is the performance'.

In 1967 Cage explained his ecological interests and his musical sincerity – with characteristically wry humour: 'I don't wish to be thought to be as foolish as I sound. And I frequently, very consciously, put into my life experiences where conclusions that I've reached in the field of music cannot possibly be held, for instance my interest in mycology and my gathering and eating of wild mushrooms. Now if I were as free and easy with the mushrooms as I am with sound, I might not be here this afternoon to talk with you. Indeed not.'

## **String Quartet in Four Parts (1949–50)**

### *Quietly Flowing Along – Slowly Rocking – Nearly Stationary – Quodlibet*

This slowly-unfolding work, much influenced by Cage's hero Erik Satie, exhibits what Alex Ross calls the 'California spirit', alluding to Cage's West-Coast origins; and meaning, perhaps, that its almost static pace exudes a quality more laid-back, less highly-strung than much other mid-20th-century music. The work's slow shifts at once foreshadow minimalism, and take it to its logical conclusion, by stretching musical time almost to breaking point. Unusually, the movements are not purely abstract, but relate to the seasons: the first to Summer in France, the second to Autumn/Fall in America; the third to Winter, and the *quodlibet* to Spring.

Cage's beautifully pure sonorities justify the decision to linger over each; his wish was to praise silence without using it. This is one of Cage's 'gamut' works, drawing together regions of sound and then moving between them, sometimes rocking back and forth between two. This enabled Cage to deal with harmony in an unconventional way: sonorities are specifically delineated, but their order is not, reducing the sense in which they are defined by mutual harmonic relationships.

Each movement is composed from these preset sonorities. When the viola plays the F sharp above middle C, the second violin plays B-flat and B. When the first violin plays the C an octave above middle C, it also plays a pizzicato D, and the cello plays a pizzicato A. There is also a recurrent group of notes which first appears in bar 8: C, D-flat, A-sharp and F-sharp. Each sonority is to be selected with detachment, following a sense of 'natural' impulse; to borrow Cage's explanation of his *Sonatas and Interludes*, they are '... chosen as one chooses shells while walking along a beach'.

## **Music for Eight (1984–1987)**

The title for this work is determined by the number of musicians involved in any given performance. Cage wrote a total of 17 parts; as with the *Concert for Piano*, there is no overall score. The percussionists may choose from 50 instruments each, and the piano is played using a fishing line or horse hair to bow its strings; tonight, horse hair is used.

Each part includes 'pieces' and 'interludes', notated using flexible time-brackets and including microtonal pitches. The 'pieces' incorporate held tones, surrounded by silences, repeated at will, as well as sequences of tones which may not be repeated. The 'interludes' may be played at will, lasting 5, 10 or 15 seconds and using undistorted timbres. The players choose which 'pieces' and 'interludes' are to be used, resulting in a work which may last up to 30 minutes.

## ***0'00" (4'33" No.2, 1962)***

Cage returned to the principles of *4'33"* a decade after its conception, to produce another work that expands our notions of what constitutes music. Bordering on performance art, *0'00"* originally consisted of just one instruction: 'In a situation provided with maximum amplification, perform a disciplined action.' For the work's premiere, Cage himself simply wrote that sentence.

He later added more specific instructions: 'the performer should allow any interruptions of the action, the action should fulfill an obligation to others, the same action should not be used in more than one performance, and should not be the performance of a musical composition.' This last specification is particularly interesting: Cage was at pains to distance himself from conventional music, to the extent that he demands that no 'musical composition' be involved.

Cage argued that: 'in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not.' He diverted the skill of musicianship from the physical realm to the cerebral, emphasising not instrumental technique, but the 'technique' of experiencing sound democratically. Skill shifted from the fingers to the ears, the brain. Cage bridged the gaps between music, art and philosophy, and, in so doing, made musicians of us all, empowering us, the audience, to control the music ourselves, to become skilled musicians simply by opening our ears to new possibilities. Stravinsky had differentiated between hearing and listening, pointing out that any creature may hear – 'a duck hears also'. Cage took the principle of attentive listening to new extremes: the challenge to audiences is to embrace innovation in sound. As Cage himself put it: 'new music, new listening'.

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