

Analyzing the New York School through the Music of John Cage

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When one discusses the period of Twentieth Century music, few composers appear to have exerted the level of profound influence as that of American modernist John Cage. Noted as a leading figure of the *New York School*, Cage forged a unique identity within the landscape of twentieth century modernism that often caused those in his presence to not only question the very notion of musical composition, but also the role of the composer as an entity in itself. Some have considered Cage to be a controversial figure with groundbreaking works such as *4'33"*, but his influence and innovative nature have undoubtedly been far-reaching. While Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown and David Tudor were all accomplished figures in their own right, the following discussion will focus upon the *New York School* through the lens of John Cage's body of work to illuminate both the development and influence of the composer within the avant-garde movement.

When one references the "New York School", the term most often refers to the working relationship between John Cage and his colleagues Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, and David Tudor. Though active in the 1950s, the *New York School* as a physical entity was in reality, relatively short-lived as tensions amongst its members ultimately led the group to become fragmented as a cohesive unit.¹ Despite the group's short tenure which lasted approximately from 1950-1954,² it produced a number of important turning points within Cage's artistic and intellectual development such as the development of his friendship with David Tudor who would become lifelong collaborator and performer of his music, and the introduction of the Chinese text *I Ching* which Christian Wolff (a pupil at this time) presented to him in 1951.³

One of the first items worthy of examination when discussing Cage as a composer is that of his musical training. While Cage had early training on piano during his youth from his aunt, he did not believe that he would master the instrument and found his interests lied much more in

the realm of sight-reading.⁴ As a young adult, Cage would initially enroll in Pomona College to study theology, but felt this avenue was not conducive to his intellectual growth and ultimately left to pursue other interests. Leaning towards an interest in composition, Cage would undertake studies with Henry Cowell, a modernist who introduced him to the musics of Asia during the early 1930s. It would be during this period that Cowell's influence persuaded Cage to not only undertake composition in a serious manner (primarily through his work *New Musical Resources*),⁵ but to also develop an interest in the rhythmic structures and complexities of Northern Indian compositions.⁶ Despite Cage's admiration for Cowell's innovation and eclectic approach toward music which he described as emanating a "whole world of ideas in the air",⁷ he ultimately felt that Cowell was more of a writer of music as opposed to a composer. Cage believed that Cowell was ultimately inhibited due to his lack of exploration of concepts upon a deeper, more profound level. With this said, Cowell and Cage never discussed musical philosophy during their time together, and their studies tended to examine these musical forms within the scope of a primarily practical and pragmatic nature.⁸

Nonetheless, Henry Cowell would still be the individual to set the next phase of Cage's training into motion. Though Cage desired to study under Arnold Schoenberg, Cowell believed that the young composer required more training prior to approaching him. Being a dedicated teacher of his student, Cowell referred Cage to Adolf Weiss (Schoenberg's first American pupil) who would further prepare him to approach Schoenberg.⁹ With his studies augmented by Weiss, Cage would excel musically and eventually become a scholarship student at the *New School*; enrolling in all of Cowell's course offerings and becoming well-versed in the current state of modernist composition at the time.¹⁰ When Cage finally had sufficient preparation to approach Schoenberg, he informed him that he would not be able to afford his rates for tutoring

sessions. Despite this potential setback, Schoenberg agreed to tutor Cage free of charge under the condition that the young composer promised to dedicate his life to composition.¹¹ With this generous offer presented to him, Cage agreed to fulfill Schoenberg's request and become one of his highly devoted pupils.

In a much similar manner to his studies with Cowell, Cage once again enrolled in all of Schoenberg's classes at the *University of Southern California* and later the *University of California, Los Angeles* (in addition to their private tutoring sessions). It was during this period that one of the great turning points in the development of Cage as an artist also occurred. When Cage was attending Schoenberg's course on harmony, he felt that this was area in which he "had no gift".¹² Cage attempted to express his indifference toward harmony to Schoenberg, but his teacher informed him that without embracing harmony, his work would encounter a wall of impenetrable fortitude and strength. Rather than accept Schoenberg's claim, Cage stated that he would devote his life to banging his head against this wall.¹³ Clearly, it appeared early on in Cage's career that he did not desire to be a part of the *Second Viennese School*, or to be associated with Schoenberg's more regimented and structured pupils such as Alban Berg or Anton Webern, but rather he desired to forge his own path within the idiom of twentieth century modernism. With this stated, it does not seem surprising that throughout their time, Schoenberg never complimented or praised Cage's work, and at times, even ridiculed him in front of his classmates.¹⁴ Still, despite his misgivings upon Cage's attitude towards formalist composition and harmony, Schoenberg recognized a certain spirit of innovation present within his young pupil as he would ultimately describe him as "not a composer, but an inventor – of genius".¹⁵

As Cage completed his studies with Schoenberg in the late-1930s, he began to gravitate even more towards Eastern philosophy throughout the following decade; notably that of Zen

Buddhism and Indian philosophy. This shift away from Western thought was clearly evident in his 1949 essay titled *Forerunners*, which opened with a description of music and art entailing the conciliation of dualities. With a rejection of scientific systems in favor of more spirituality-based concepts, there appeared to be considerable influence upon Cage during this period from South Asian philosophers such as Sri Ramakrishna and Coomaraswamy, especially when he stated “Music is edifying for from time to time it sets the soul in operation. The soul is the gatherer-together of the disparate elements (Meister Eckhart), and its work fill one with peace and love.”¹⁶ Cage was also heavily influenced by East Asian philosophy; notably by the incorporation of the Chinese *I Ching* text introduced to him by fellow *New York School* colleague Christian Wolff mentioned previously. While information pertaining to the early East Asian influences are somewhat elusive (partly due to Cage selling his library during difficult financial times throughout the 1950s),¹⁷ there are definite instances of the composer quite explicitly citing Buddhist and Taoist works such as Huang Po’s *Doctrine of the Universal Mind*, along with numerous writings of Kwang-tse such as in his 1955 essay titled *Experimental Music: Doctrine*. Cage was also versed with much of the translated publications by Reginald Blyth such as those of *Haiku* and *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*.¹⁸ Notable references to *Zen* occurred in the discussions of Cage, notably when he claimed “No matter how rigorously controlled or conventional the structure, method, and materials of a composition are, that composition will come to life if the form is not controlled but free and original. One may cite examples of the Sonnets of Shakespeare and the haikus of Basho”.¹⁹ In addition to these examples, Cage also may have had first-hand contact with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki through his lectures at Columbia University (though exact evidential records and details of Cage’s attendance during this period remain somewhat elusive, and at times, even contradictory).²⁰

Perhaps the greatest (and most safely identifiable) influence of D.T. Suzuki upon Cage is that of his pedagogical teachings of *Zen*, in which he referred to as “in opposition to the Western rational way of thinking, an irrational, non-rational way of thinking”.²¹

Clearly, the Eastern influence played a prominent role in the intellectual development of Cage as an artist. As mentioned earlier in the discussion, Cage had a definite rejection of rational systems through what some such as Charles Lemert referred to as “complimentarity”, which applied the rejection of the classical form entailing rational relationships based upon ordered tones.²² In Lemert’s view, Cage envisioned music in the juxtaposition of noise (or sound) and silence. This juxtaposition of hitherto irreconcilable elements ultimately then resulted in what could be said to be the undermining of the very heart of traditional “logical” epistemology (with the subject-object dichotomy in a manner similar to the complimentarity of Niels Bohr, or Eugène Ionesco’s anti-logic).²³

Perhaps the best illustration of Cage’s rejection of systematic meaning was his controversial 1949 *Lecture on Nothing*, which he began by stating explicitly that his lecture would not only be entirely void of meaning, but would also lack any formulated sense of progression. He began this lecture by stating "I am here and there is nothing to say. If among you are those who wish to get somewhere, let them leave at any moment".²⁴ Despite the rather unusual nature of this session, Cage still encouraged the audience to enjoy each and every “pointless” moment of their lecture together. This lecture has often been said to have illuminated Cage’s views upon Western thought, which he largely believed to have coerced the general population to only attain value in things that appeared to have deep meaning or embedded paths to eventual goals or aims. Cage further elaborated upon on this claim when he stated "Our poetry now is the realization that we possess nothing. Anything therefore is a delight (we do not

possess it) and thus need not fear its loss"²⁵ Thus, Cage also held the belief that individuals create their own likes and dislikes that are not inherent upon any particular object or situation: "It is not irritating to be where one is. It is only irritating to think one would like to be somewhere else".²⁶ Statements such as these reflected Cage's viewpoint that the notion of preference was detrimental towards human experience, and expressed his belief that personal taste should not interfere with one's judgment upon a given situation at hand.

It is interesting to note that as a leading figure of the *New York School*, John Cage appeared to be very much the antitheses of many of his contemporaries associated with the *Second Viennese School* at the time. Despite receiving much of his formal training from its leading figure, Schoenberg, Cage's desire for "music performed by everyone" illuminated a stark contrast to serialism, with its followers such as Milton Babbitt, whose 1958 essay titled *Who Cares if You Listen?* portrayed the technical nature of modernist serialism as beyond the grasp of the general population; requiring more insulation within academic institutions.²⁷ This modernist movement of serialism during the time of Cage was progressing undoubtedly at levels of new unparalleled complexity that Stockhausen so aptly described:

... all elements had equal rights in the forming process and constantly renewed all their characteristics from one sound to the next. ... If from one sound to the next, pitch, duration, timbre, and intensity change, then the music finally becomes static: it changes extremely quickly, one is constantly traversing the entire realm of experience in a very short time and thus one finds oneself in a state of suspended animation, the music "stands still." If one wanted to articulate larger time-phases, the only way of doing this was to let one sound-characteristic predominate over all others for some time. However, under the circumstances then prevalent, this would have radically contradicted the sound-

characteristics. And a solution was found to distribute in space, among different groups of loudspeakers, or instruments, variously long time- phases of this kind of homogeneous sound-structure.²⁸

Without a doubt, the artistic goals of Cage and the *New York School* were very much in stark contrast with the twelve-tone dodecaphonic practice and its subscribers. In fact, Cage would lead his prolific career without ever embracing his mentor Schoenberg's highly controlled, mathematical methods of harmonic practice. While serialist proponents such as Milton Babbitt and Schoenberg with his pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg attained notoriety pioneering a new benchmark of compositional control through rhythmic and harmonic complexity, Cage preferred a role as composer that expressed a much more physical, and performative "new simplicity". Through the concepts he attained from the *I Ching* text, he executed applications of chance and indeterminism, which composer Michael Nyman once referred to as embracing the radical concept of unfixing relationships.²⁹ According to Nyman, all post-Renaissance music to Cage's period had previously been concerned upon fixing with increasing exactitude the relationships amongst sounds.

Through the incorporation of the *I Ching*, Cage executed chance processes to generate music which essentially combated the self as an expressive agent. He greatly desired to minimalize or absolve entirely the role of the composer from the act of musical composition. The fixed notion of self-expressive art set in places for centuries would be disposed of with the removal of preferences dictated by the imagination, tastes and desires of the artist in favor of a new compositional system governed by chance and indeterminacy³⁰ that would commonly be referred to as aleatory music. In Cage's words, writing music (or any artistic endeavor for that matter) was "purposeless play", but at the same time, an affirmation of life. He also viewed the

act of composition as not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, or improvement upon creation, but rather to “wake up to the very life we’re living”.³¹

Cage essentially desired to dissolve the ego or will of the composer from the process to the greatest extent possible. While improvisation practices as far back as J.S. Bach released some grip from the composer’s artistic exertion and control, Cage’s aleatoric methods were much different from improvisation, or practically any solidified musical formula previously known to this period in history. With this said, immense effort was carried out to remove the artist from the compositional process, encouraging artistic discovery in one’s daily life as opposed to the previous role of the composer to generate masterpiece works. For Cage, the chance protocols of *I Ching* were basically an avenue to imitate nature and further his ideological pursuits of composition.³² It should be noted that other contemporaries such as Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen would also carry out chance operations within a more limited scope, but they were quite hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace indeterminism with the same enthusiasm and boldness as Cage or Feldman (who not only embraced indeterminism, but also considered the discovery of Cage’s works as a mark of his beginning of a composer).³³ Those more closely aligned with Schoenberg’s school of practice would distance themselves from Cage as an artistic colleague in this regard,³⁴ with those such as Boulez accusing him of exuding feeble compositional technique through his chance operations.³⁵ The composer Iannis Xenakis even went further to express his disdain for chance operations; referring to Cage’s aleatoric methods of indeterminism as an “abrogation” of the composer’s function.³⁶ Clearly, Cage’s innovations in relation to indeterminism set him in clear contrast with many of his modernist contemporaries who refused to embrace this radical stylistic evolution.

According to Michael Nyman, additional contrast between the *New York* and *Second Viennese* schools may be witnessed through the rather arrogant attitude of composers such as Stockhausen toward the *New York School* who said of Cage's colleague Morton Feldman, "[I] once told Feldman that one of his pieces could be a moment in my music, but never the other way around".³⁷ Interestingly, According to Nyman, commentary such as Stockhausen's reflected an attitude essentially incapable of ever comprehending true complexity in music. With this said, it could be argued that serialists such as Stockhausen may only recognize a simple movement when it is combined against another, more complicated moment, and must therefore, fulfill a complex role in the underlying structure of composition. The opposite, however, tends to be evident in the "new simplicity" of those from the *New York school* such as Feldman and Cage. For example, a simple work may be a complete field in which movements of greater or lesser simplicity (if present), entail no intended relational significance in the same traditional sense of the serialist followers of the *Second Viennese School*.³⁸

The final area of focus in this discussion resides around Cage's innovative use of environmental sounds. According to Tim Woods, Cage was arguably the greatest proponent of this medium which Woods refers to in works such as 1952's *4'33"*. With this said, one might describe Cage as a naturalist due to his co-founding of the *New York Mycological Society*,³⁹ and the apparent influence of figures such as the famed naturalist Henry David Thoreau upon his ideology.⁴⁰ Cage once stated "I am not interested in the names of movements, but rather in seeing and making things not seen before";⁴¹ Clearly, Cage expressed a desire to reject highly notational and text-centered composition in favor of the ambient music of a given environment. His controversial work of *4'33"* (performed by David Tudor) also not only challenged the traditional role of the composer and the act of composition, but also drew a number of rather

unsettling questions for many pertaining to the definition of music and the absence of silence. Inspired by an experience inside an anechoic chamber at Harvard University during 1951, Cage concluded that the concept of silence was a nonexistent entity: “There is no such thing as empty space or empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot... Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.”⁴² His 1969 work *33 1/3*, expressed similar aesthetic practices, which consisted of a score merely stating that the performance include a gallery filled with about twelve record players, and two-to-three-hundred vinyl records. The gallery visitors were encouraged to act as composer, performer and audience by simply playing the records in any manner that they preferred. Like *4’33”*, *33 1/3* established a sense of equality amongst composer, performer, and audience; neglecting any sense of overarching priority amongst the usually partitioned groups. Art designed for viewing in museums for Cage was akin to “refrigeration”; ensuring preservation, yet slowing the vital sense of livelihood within art itself. Cage did not believe in this segregated nature of apparent “museum culture”, which he believed was an attempt to separate art and life.⁴³ Instead, he advocated for both to have a type of intertwined, fused-together relationship. When interviewed by Hans G. Helms about his views on musical performance, Cage stated:

The two kinds of music now that interest me are on the one hand a music which is performed by everyone... And here, more and more in my performances, I try to bring about a situation in which there is no difference between the audience and the performers. And I’m not speaking of audience participation in something designed by the composer, but rather am I speaking of the music which arises through the activity of both performers and so-called audience. . . The other kind of music that interests me is one which has been

traditionally interesting and enjoyable down through the ages, and that's music which one makes oneself without constraining others. If you can do it by yourself you're not in a situation of telling someone else what to do.⁴⁴

This attitude expressed by Cage in compositions such as *4'33"* and *33 1/3* illustrated what scholars such as Nancy Perloff describe in his work as a fusion of art with its environment without constraint, encouraging a de-centered, collaborative, and heterogeneous principal for music performance.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, both of these works broke new ground for composition upon numerous levels.

In context, John Cage was not only the most influential figure to emerge from the *New York School*, but also one of the most important figures of twentieth century music. Through his innovative and groundbreaking philosophies and compositional practices, Cage managed to imprint a musical legacy that few composers of his period managed to rival. Though controversial at times, the contributions of John Cage have been vast, far-reaching, and as his mentor Schoenberg stated so aptly, simply "of genius".⁴⁶

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