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John Cage

Writing for *New York Magazine* in 1972, music critic John Simon stated, "When is any so-called work of art not a work of art but a piece of trickery, a hoax, a nonsensical game, a fraud?" He continued: "We live in an age where... a fey farceur and effete solipsist like John Cage, playing campy games with silences, is proclaimed a serious composer, lectures at universities, and has books of musical theory published, and becomes a major influence on modern music." While Simon is entitled to his subjective opinion on Cage and his works, he seems to misunderstand Cage's purpose, or lack thereof, in composing. In general, Cage's intent was not to compose pieces so beautiful, ugly, or outlandish to evoke an emotional response. John Cage simply appreciated sound and silence for what they were, and his pieces forced audience to listen as intently to non-musical sounds as they would any other composition, permanently altering and broadening our definition of music.

Morton Feldman, one of Cage's contemporaries, and fellow avant-garde composers, said "John Cage was the first composer in the history of music who raised the question by implication that maybe music could be an art form rather than a music form." (Ross) This argument is the centerpiece for the defense of John Cage: his music does not exist to be beautiful, it exists to be experienced. The backlash Cage received from musical and non-musical communities alike mirrors the backlash many avant-garde artists face. Humans reject what is unfamiliar, what is out of our control. Consider the backlash against Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952) which was purchased by Australia's National Gallery for $1.3 million in 1973. One Australian newspaper headline read "$1.3 million for drips and drabs." Cage's compositions were often random, with no real form or traditional time measurements, much like Pollock's drips and drabs.

Cage's compositional style, while random, did not develop by chance. In "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," published in *The Music Quarterly*, Douglas Kahn explains that, partially because of the development of film and other media through and beyond the 1920's, sounds became associated with feelings and experiences. Sounds developed personalities, and the nature

of sound became less natural. Cage fought against this, allowing sounds to simply be, and incorporating all sounds into music. In his most notorious piece, *4'33" (1952)*, four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence on the part of the performer, the sounds of the surrounding environment become the music. Agitated audience members' reactions are part of the composition, outside traffic is part of the composition, wind and rain are part of the composition. Silence on the part of the audience has come to be expected in a concert hall setting; Cage simply extended the "silence imposed on the audience to the performer." (Kahn 560) Understanding the social setting of the performance is crucial to understanding the work, as explained in Gerald L. Brun's book "Poetic Communities." In the book he states "the avant-garde work is accessible only through layers of social mediation, meaning that one has to belong to the social space in which the work appears in order to make sense of it at all." (Brun 91) If one wishes to comprehend or appreciate his compositions, they must also observe the social practices and history surrounding them, rather than attempting to determine if his works fulfill a certain criteria that may be used in traditional western music. The perspective used, or not used, by critics to observe Cage's works may explain much of the critical rejection of said works.

Another defining factor of Cage's music was the use of technology in composition and performance. As technology advanced through the early 20th century, new instruments, ranging from the theremin to new percussive instruments, were created. Despite these advancements, many composers saw artistic traditionalism as formidable an obstacle to progress as outdated instruments. (Patteson 155) George Gershwin even believed that the impact of the "machine age" and its technological advances would only extend to the distribution, not the production of music, stating "Composers must compose in the same way old composers did. No one has found a new method in which to write music." Cage fought against this notion, seeing technological advances as a tool to expand the reaches of experimental music, and the definition of music in and of itself.

In Cage's "The Future of Music - Credo," he considers the future of electric instruments and how they would relate to composition, calling for "centers for experimental music." He points out the fact that, at that point, many inventors were trying to replicate instruments that already existed, and explores the possibilities of electrical instruments to redefine what sounds are considered musical, stating that later electric instruments will "make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard." (Cage) Where his early pieces relied on

percussion, he began to explore amplification as the means to listen to objects. "He did not want to make his music into an object… he did want to make objects into music." (Kahn 586)

In "Chance and Certainty: John Cage's Politics of Nature," published in *Cultural Critique*, author Benjamin Piekut explains how, through exploring Christian and South Asian philosophy, Cage adopted his two guiding principles: "the purpose of art is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences; and art is the imitation of nature in its manner of operation." Cage often spoke of a musical scenario where the only human influence was the "amplification they could provide to allow nature to speak for itself." (Piekut 135) Cage wanted his art to imitate nature, not only through the use of nontraditional sounds, but also through the use of spontaneous, impersonal choices in his composition, such as in *Music of Changes* which uses the Chinese divination technique of *I Ching*. One should also consider his use of radios, such as in *Imaginary Landscapes* as using chance as a compositional tool.

John Cage first worked with radio when he began accompanying Bonnie Bird's dance classes at the Cornish School in Seattle. Attracted first by the school's large collection of percussion instruments, he later discovered the radio station connected with the school. (Kostelanetz 217) It was in that station that Cage began experimenting with turntables, using the records as instruments. In the interview, "A Conversation About Radio," between Cage and his friend, Richard Kostelanetz, Cage discusses his rejection of organizing the individual tracks in pieces such as *HPSCHD* (1969). Cage states "I haven't wanted to fix the relationship of individual parts… there are all these parts that can get together in a variety of unpredictable ways." (Kostelanetz 225)

This rejection of control and organization is further demonstrated in *Variations III* (1962). Where earlier pieces like *4'33"* provided a time frame, *Variations III* is void of much direction other than that it was to be performed. The instructions direct the performer to drop 42 small circular pieces of paper onto another sheet of paper, and to make actions based on the number of interpenetrating circles." In "Silencing the Sounded Self," author Christopher Shultis suggests that "a performance of *Variations III*, once begun, need never end." (Shultis 322) Over dinner with Kostelanetz, Cage once said "we could be performing it right now, if we decided to do so…" (Shultis 322)

Just as Cage believed that silence didn't exist, he believed that non activity couldn't exist. He strove for intention and non intention to equally coexist, allowing intentional actions, like

dropping an allotted amount of circles on a page, to produce an unintentional, indeterminate piece. He strove to erase the separations between art and life. In Silencing and the Sounded self, Shultis explains that Cage "was looking for justification outside of any musical tradition," (Shultis 313) for a connection between music and the natural world. It had less to do with the conception of music, less to do with the Self, and more to do with the perception of music and sound as a whole. Much of this stemmed from Cage's explorations into Eastern philosophies that viewed music as a means to quiet the mind and the ego, and to allow that quiet space to speak.

Much of Cage's use of chance in composition stemmed from his desire to remove the self from the music, which stemmed from the culture of the time Cage lived in. Cage strove for his music to be impersonal, "it was a common goal in the early atomic age, when selves seemed frangible and insignificant." (Taruskin 264) In "No Ear for Music: The Scary Purity of John Cage" Richard Taruskin explains that, in essence, the only difference between Cage and most composers was the means by which he composed. Cage's motives, erasing the boundaries between art and life, were not so different from any other composer. Cage's use of chance and randomness was also a useful tool for evolving beyond the mathematic, systematic approach taken by many other composers. Cage fought against classical theory, time signatures, and even the notion of pitch, once stating "the whole pitch aspect of music eludes me." This rejection of traditional harmony and theory can be seen in his early percussive works, all the way to *4'33"*, which can only be "heard" in terms of duration.

Cage once said "quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love, or friendship." He wanted his listeners to appreciate noise, and to coexist with the world, especially considering the magnitude of World War 2 and post-war America. (Kahn 577) Cage wanted his listeners to hear sounds, and let sounds exist for what they were. He wanted his listeners to observe the world around them, to truly *listen* to the world. When one regards Cage in terms of his philosophy and his purpose, though he claimed his music had none, a deeper appreciation for the music can be established. It may not be traditionally beautiful, but Cage's work pushes us to listen as intently to nonmusical sounds as we do musical ones, and, hopefully, reminds us to observe and listen to the world around us.

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