

The Cage in my Life

by Nicolas Collins

(These informal notes were written for Kyle Gann for excerpting in a book on John Cage that he was preparing at the time. Subsequently Claudio Koremblit asked to translate them into Spanish for inclusion in the catalogue of the Experimenta 2000 festival.)

When I arrived at Wesleyan University in the fall of 1972 I had never heard of Alvin Lucier. I chose the school primarily for its program in "world music" -- I wanted to study tabla. But my astute freshman advisor (pianist Jon Barlow) steered me in Lucier's direction. I enrolled in his "Introduction to Electronic Music" -- with minimal outside work and no exams, it was a notorious "gut" course, and most of the football team was usually in attendance, forming a defensive line in the back row of the auditorium.

I had known of Cage while a high school student in New York City, but I don't believe I had heard a piece of his music or read any of his writing until I took Lucier's class. The first semester was devoted exclusively to the work of Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Christian Wolff (who I discovered, in the course of the term, was a shirt-tail cousin of mine.) I was smitten from the start. After spending my high school years trying to "find my place" within a musical world dominated by European music for which I, quite frankly, did not have an instinctive feeling, this immersion in real American music was liberating. I confess to never really getting Brown, but the others (not to mention Lucier himself) have been extremely influential.

In a sense, Cage ruined my life. By the end of the term I had come so fully under the spell of the credo that "any sound can be a musical sound" that I found it quite impossible to choose one sound over another. Unwilling to embrace indeterminacy as my own method, I spent the next four years making music almost exclusively out of audio feedback -- I got a Zen-like satisfaction out of the image of feedback as the infinite amplification of silence. The quintessential work in this run was *Pea Soup* (1973-75) (which was included in the 'American Century' show at the Whitney this year.) I abandoned the material shortly after Lucier did *his* feedback masterpiece, *Bird and Person Dying*, in an attempt to distance myself somewhat from my teacher. I still return to feedback, both as a material and a structural concept, whenever I am feeling unsure of myself and, more importantly, this aesthetic of minimal interference in process --

born of Cage and ripened in the heady days of minimalism -- has remained core to my music.

With Lucier's encouragement, and under the influence (and sometimes guidance) of David Behrman and David Tudor, I began the arduous process of learning enough electronic technology to be able to design and build my own circuitry for music. Tudor's aesthetic of "composers inside electronics" served as a logical step after feedback: that musical works could be somehow intrinsic to a given piece of circuitry (like the cliché of Michelangelo's David inside the oddly-shaped piece of marble) guided not only my work with circuitry (I joined Tudor's ensemble in 1981,) but later with computers and more traditional instruments as well. The circuitry pieces are unrecorded, but the most typical was *ANDS* (1979), a confluence of Tudorish noises and Wolff-like "co-ordinations" embedded in circuitry. Several of the core ideas of this piece were later adapted to a computer work, *Little Spiders* (1982), available on my first Lovely record (*Going Out With Slow Smoke*.)

I once noted (in a talk at the Technische Universiteit in Berlin) that, after moving back to New York City after graduate school and a year in San Francisco, my music became less "abstract" and more referential -- I suppose one could think of it as moving from a modernist to post-modernist aesthetic. From music "found" in circuitry I shifted to working with "found" sound material. I had no interest in tape composition, and my segue from sound *generation* to sound *processing* was made possible by affordable digital delays and crude samplers that could be adapted for live sampling and signal transformation. *Devil's Music* (1985) is a good example of this phase of my work -- its live sampling and transformation of radio signals owes more to Cage's *Imaginary Landscape #4* than to Stockhausen's *Kurzwellen* or the French tradition of *musique concrète*. I make performance decisions based on personal taste, rather than indeterminacy, but there is nonetheless a roulette-like element of chance in the piece as I scan through the radio dial trying to find the perfect sound snippet. I used to say that the radio was the world's most powerful synthesizer: you could find any sound you wanted; the only problem is can you find the sound you want *when* you want it -- this is the challenge facing the performer of *Devil's Music*.

From found sound material I branched out to "found musicians." *100 of the World's Most Beautiful Melodies* features my "trombone propelled electronics:" a home-made hybrid of digital and acoustic technology that is an "instrument with no voice," designed for live sampling and signal

processing. On stage I am mute until another musician starts to play, at which point I can catch, extend and modify a few seconds of his or her sound into several minutes of variations. This instrument put the brakes on improvised music, which I had hitherto shunned for (among other things) having too many notes.

All my music can probably be generalized by my wife's withering critique of the field of sociology: "an insightful look into the obvious." From my early compositional paralysis under the spell of Cage, I have spent most of my musical career slowing down and revealing the details of fleeting sonic events, in pursuit perhaps of the question of "what exactly makes any sound a musical sound?".

*

To return to my student days, Lucier's Intro course culminated in a public performance, by the entire class, of *Cartridge Music* -- my debut as an electronic musician. For me the sounds and technology of *Cartridge Music* are the foundation of American electronic music. I can trace them through Tudor (especially *Rainforest*, which I performed for several years) into the home-made electronic circuit scene of the late 1970s, the improvisors of the 1980s, the proliferation of "noise" streams in pop music worldwide, and the waves of "contact mike music" that seem to emerge every 5-10 years. If feedback is the amplification of silence, *Cartridge Music* is the amplification of the almost-silence, the very small -- the first step back into the "real" world of *making* music, rather than just letting it happen.

I've recently taught the piece to Berlin DJs from the Techno and Electronica scene (performed in 1999 in Berlin and at ZKM in Karlsruhe) and my students at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I am astonished by the freshness of the new realizations (completely unexpected objects used as sound sources in the cartridges) and the richness that a modern sound system (6 channels of Myers with subwoofers) offers, compared to the puny speakers available to us in 1972.

In 1972 I was not only trying to become a composer but a performer as well, while "un-becoming" a player of a traditional instrument. *Cartridge Music* was the first piece of performed electronic music I found scored for "non-musicians." Again, a liberating experience. Cage came to Wesleyan the next year to attend a performance by Greta Sultan of a major new work for piano. In a question-and-answer session as part of his residency

I asked why he had returned to conventional instruments and virtuosity after breaking new (and politically correct) ground with pieces like *Cartridge Music*. He answered that, as attracted as he was to the socio-political ramifications of *Cartridge Music*, several musicians had approached him for pieces and he realized that, "if I don't write something for them they'll probably have to play something worse." In his semi-Maoist phase at the time, I think Cage saw himself as providing suitable employment for these anachronistic, but nonetheless highly skilled, musical workers.

Many years later, in a restaurant car on a train from Berlin to Luzern, where we were organizing our second "Whistling Festival," I asked my friend Matthias Osterwold (a pianist and new music curator) what direction he thought I should stress in my music -- at this time I was simultaneously working on solo electronic works, sound installations, improvisational projects, and works for ensembles, usually with electronics. He answered, "Make music that musicians will enjoy playing: I love Bach, but I love to *play* Chopin, the way it feels under my fingers..."

These answers by Cage and Osterwold have been my twin guides in dealing with musicians: most players really want music to play, despite the fact that they may sometimes be a bit snotty when I show them my crude scores; all the more so if the music is somehow pleasurable to play (not just "challenging.") So, curiously, Cage's "ur-elektronik" *Cartridge Music* has significantly influenced my acoustic work as well.

*

I met Cage several times while a student at Wesleyan. I performed in some of his concerts there, and he even mentions me in one of the essays in *M*. At his suggestion I was invited to do a Cunningham event at Westbeth in 1978 or 79. I saw him often at public events in New York in the 1980s. Then at some point in the early 1980s Tudor suggested I do another Cunningham event but mentioned, rather sheepishly, that Cage (as musical director) now insisted on hearing "representative music" by composers under consideration. I sent over my recent *Lovely* record (*Let The State Make The Selection*) and received a telephone call from Cage asking if I could come by for a chat. After some small talk he informed me my music was "irritating" -- which took me completely by surprise. I thought of my work as so mild, so tentative, so middle-of-the-road -- especially compared to his. A bit of prodding on my part revealed the culprit: the electric guitar. The disc included two compositions featuring my "backwards electric guitars," the rebus-like cover painting

incorporated a red guitar, and there was a photo of the musicians on the back cover, guitars in hand. Curiously, on listening the instruments are almost unrecognizable as guitars, but I wonder if Cage ever got that far: red or not, I got the impression that electric guitars were a flag for Cage -- especially since his confrontation with Branca at New Music America in Chicago.

It was a feet of clay kind of moment. After a lifetime of trying to eradicate personal taste, not only in his composition but in his boosterism of the experimental community at large, the cracks were beginning to show. He had his preferences. He knew what he liked and what he disliked. He wasn't a god. He was human. An old human.

We remained on good terms socially nonetheless. I have a bittersweet memory of our last conversation. He asked my opinion of Ken Montgomery's "Generator" project -- I had played at his East Village and West side locations a few times, and done an installation for him. I praised Montgomery's industriousness, coming at a time of growing apathy and dwindling resources in downtown New York. A few months later Cage's foundation gave Generator a much needed, completely unexpected grant that let Montgomery greatly expand his activities. I moved to Amsterdam shortly thereafter and never saw Cage again before he died.

Chicago
July 13, 2000