

Grazing the Buffet – the Musical Menu after Cage
Nicolas Collins

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This year, 2012, the centenary of John Cage's birth, is marked by a prodigious number of concerts and symposia devoted to his work. Given the laudatory nature of these events, we often forget how controversial he was in his life, and how his acceptance as a legitimate composer is still far from universal. Cage's reputation and influence within the music community hewed to a twisting path, and was marked by several distinct generational shifts in attitude. I'd like to discuss the evolution of Cage's reception from the perspective of a composer who came of age in the 1970s, during the first wave of post-Cagean musical innovation.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' theory of the five stages of grief provides a useful model for accounting for the trajectory of Cage's cultural impact. As presented in her perversely popular 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross' research led her to divide the process by which people cope with, and often rationalize, terminal illness or catastrophic personal loss into a sequence of five discrete stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.¹

Denial

The term most commonly heard applied to Cage in the early days was »charlatan«. He was an object of ridicule in the popular press from the time of his early percussion music (1930s). Many composers shared the media's derisive dismissal of his qualifications and identity as well, from early on in his career. Cage was received with some warmth during his visits to New York in the 1930s and 40s, but this was in part a response to his promotion of fellow, often somewhat less radical composers than himself, and his disarming charm. His meeting Feldman at the Webern concert at Carnegie Hall in 1950 is generally accepted as the first time Cage found someone who understood him in his entirety, respected his methods, and shared his opinions on music – without having any obvious stylistic common ground. And although his recognition as a »legitimate« composer grew over the course of his life (although never at the same rate as his acceptance as a sage and author), the Denial of Cage's validity as a composer lingers to this day.

¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, New York: Scribner Classics, 1997. This theory has its roots in a breakdown of the learning process in general, commonly attributed to Arthur Schopenhauer, but probably pre-dating him: »All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.« Kübler-Ross parses more finely the earlier stages of confronting unwelcome information, and her distinctions have particular relevance when analyzing the impact of cultural innovations, as opposed to more quantifiable »facts«.

Anger

By the late 1950s amused derision had transformed into Anger as Cage's visibility, if not reputation, grew. He began to be regarded by many composers, musicians and critics as a threat to music, rather than merely a harmless joke. Pierre Boulez and Cage had shared a mutual admiration since their first meeting in 1949, until Boulez turned against him in 1957 in response to Cage's adoption of chance methods, which the Frenchman regarded as a step too far in the removal of the ego of the composer from the creative act. Around the same time, Cage had a nasty falling out with his long-time supporter Virgil Thomson. Ned Rorem's diaries abound with harsh dismissals of Cage. The 1964 performance of *Atlas Ecliptalis with Winter Music* at Philharmonic Hall in New York was »deliberately sabotaged« by the orchestra musicians, who »acted criminally«, according to Christian Wolff, and »killed the piece«, so offended were they by both the chance methods and the perceived violation of their instruments by contact microphones.²

Bargaining: The »Minimalist Contract«

The public and critics directed their most withering criticism of Cage on the more conspicuous and outlandish surface features of his music: initially the junkyard percussion instruments and the mangling of the piano by means of preparations; then the absurdity of a »silent« composition and his pronouncement that »any sound can be a musical sound«; and later the harsh electronic textures of *Variations IV–VII* and *Cartridge Music*. But for *composers* Cage's most disturbing trait was the surrendering of personal choice that accompanied his Indeterminate methodology. Many composers shared Boulez's reservations: no matter how much they embraced Cage's other innovations, and shared his general ethos of experimentalism, suppressing personal taste to the extent demanded by Indeterminacy challenged the most fundamental assumptions of their identity and value as composers.

Sol LeWitt's dictum that »the idea is the machine that makes the art« presented an honorable Bargain between those composers who came of age in the mid-1960s (many of them lumped under the »Minimalist« moniker) and Cage: The composer was removed from the moment to moment decisions that generated musical detail, whilst nonetheless claiming credit for (and feeling satisfaction from) having designed the elegant Machine that fabricated that music.³ Phase Music, repetitive processes, arithmetic and algorithmic procedures, drones, tape delays and self-stabilizing circuit networks were some of these Bargaining Machines.

For many years Cage honored his side of the Bargain. When Alvin Lucier invited him to perform in the Rose Arts Museum at Brandeis in 1965, Cage insisted that Lucier include a work of his own, and personally assisted in the premiere of *Music for Solo Performer* in that concert. During his many years as music director of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company he programmed dozens of experimental composers, both emerging and established. His 1974 essay »The Future of Music« (titled in obvious reference to his

² Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again. A Biography of John Cage*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, p. 202.

³ Sol LeWitt, »Sentences on Conceptual Art«, in: 0–9, New York (1969).

famous 1937⁴ »Future of Music: Credo«) reads as a hagiographic portrait of the current music scene. But when Cage writes,

»Though the doors will always remain open for the musical expression of personal feelings, what will more and more come through is the expression of the pleasures of conviviality (as in the music of Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass). And beyond that a non-intentional expressivity, a being together of sounds and people (where sounds are sounds and people are people). A walk, so to speak, in the woods of music, or in the world itself«⁵

it is clear that he is straining to be polite. Lucier once told me that, for all his early support, Cage didn't actually *like* Lucier's music: »he doesn't like cause and effect.«⁶ At the heart of every LeWittish Machine lay cause and effect, and this presented a serious problem for Cage.

By the early 1980s, Cage had abandoned his role as cheerleader for the American avant-garde in general and limited his public support to those composers whose work he truly liked (most of whom had been in his circle since the 1950s). He began to make his own musical taste surprisingly clear. In a watershed moment, at New Music America in Chicago in July, 1982 he denounced Glenn Branca's work as »fascist.«⁷

So the Bargain, which had held nicely for almost two decades, broke down. But by then the majority of composers who had struck the Bargain in their youth had developed mature styles that rendered their original Machines obsolete. Intuition crept back into the music of even the most hardened Minimalists, and most of them had the maturity and self-confidence to move on, in a somewhat amicable divorce and distancing from Cage (think of the music of Steve Reich or Philip Glass today as compared to their work of the 1960s).

Depression

It should be noted that some composers never made it past Cage. After Denial, Anger, and even Bargaining, some chose to throw in the towel: »if this is the future of music I might as well give up and become a banker/lawyer/architect/novelist.« For some, »music after Cage« became as unthinkable as »poetry after Auschwitz«. This is a form of collateral damage that I must bear in mind when I consider the wider impact of Cage.

⁴ Probably 1940, cf.: Leta E. Miller, »The Art of Noise«, in: Michael Saffle (ed.), *Perspectives on American Music, 1900–1950*, New York: Garland Publishing, 2000; pp. 215–263, 230f.

⁵ John Cage, »The Future of Music«, in: Cage, *Empty Words*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979, p. 179.

⁶ Lucier repeats this observation in the film *No Ideas But In Things – The Composer Alvin Lucier*, Viola Rusche, Hauke Harder (2012).

⁷ A few months later I met with Cage to discuss my performing (for the second time) for a Cunningham Dance Event and, much to my surprise, he informed me that my music was »irritating«. Eight years earlier he had written positively about my student work in the aforementioned *Future of Music*; I had performed with him on a few occasions, and we had a friendly relationship. In retrospect, the image of an electric guitar on the cover of my most recent LP (although guitars were not audible as such on the record itself), coming so soon after the Branca incident, served as a red cape. When I countered by asking what kind of music was *not* irritating, what did he like listening to, he replied, »Irish vocal music.«

I break down the next stage, **Acceptance**, into four phases:

Acceptance, Phase 1: The Academic Fringe

I arrived at Wesleyan University from New York City at the end of August, 1972. I was as confused about my future as any college student of my generation, but I suspected I would be spending a lot of time in the music department (I had chosen Wesleyan largely for its strength in Indian music). My prescient academic adviser urged me to take a course with Alvin Lucier. This class was my introduction to Cage, Feldman, Brown, Wolff, Tudor, Oliveros, Ashley, Mumma, Behrman, Glass, Reich, Riley, Young and Lucier himself.⁸ Within two weeks I was hooked: if this was »composition« then a »composer« was what I wanted to be.⁹

At the same time I was taking tabla lessons every week. I was in the Wesleyan Big Band, directed by Sam Rivers. My record collection was dominated by Pop and a wide range of what was then known as »World Music«. John Cage and the composers who followed on his heels were an important part of my musical world, but not the only part.

I was lucky. Composers like myself who came of age in the 1970s were spared the wrenching rupture with the past – and the accompanying post-Cagean Denial, Anger, Bargaining and Depression – that had afflicted our teachers and mentors. We had nothing to *reject* in order to move into New Music, and we had so much to choose from. We were presented a buffet laden with musical possibilities: Indian music, Rock, Cage and Couperin could be heaped onto our plates in equal portions. Most significantly, no one choice seemed to necessitate a corresponding rejection of anything else.

But we weren't Post-Modern just yet: Our plates had division that kept the sauces from running into one another, like the aluminum trays of TV dinners. My memory of the 1970s was of loving so many kinds of music, but keeping them separate, like paramours in a French farce. For all our freedom from the traumas of our teachers, many of us nonetheless unwittingly maintained a segregationist prejudice of »separate but equal«. Even as we embraced musical diversity, we strove to preserve the purity of each genre: Although I walked directly from my tabla lesson to my class with Lucier, I never thought to incorporate Indian instruments into my electronic work; likewise, despite the obvious visceral similarities between Robert Ashley's *Wolfman* and my Jimi Hendrix records, my obsession with feedback never led me to bring an electric guitar into the studio; and most of us stressed a little too pointedly the distinction between »open form music« and »improvisation.«

⁸ A day-by-day account of this class can be found in: Nicolas Collins, *Introduction to Electronic Music – notebook from course with Alvin Lucier, 1972–73*. Unpublished, available at <http://www.nicolascollins.com/notebooks.htm> (accessed: 21 July 2012).

⁹ Nicolas Collins, »Epiphanies: Alvin Lucier's »Vespers«, in: *The Wire* (UK), (February, 2010). Updated and reproduced as Collins, »Vespers«, in: Andrea Miller-Keller (ed.), *Alvin Lucier – A Celebration*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Center For The Arts, 2012.

In retrospect I think these unspoken musical kosher-laws were rooted in Cage's avowed dislike of pop music, Jazz (George Lewis has written very incisively on this subject¹⁰) and exoticism. Cage's frequent rejection of improvisation in any form was compounded by our mentors' fear of not being taken seriously as »composers« when their work was conveyed through graphic or prose scores that left room for performer interpretation, rather than via stricter traditional notation. Years of watching the ridicule heaped on Cage had undoubtedly made them wary of abandoning too many of the vestments of »real composers«, but as a result, students of my generation continued to hide improvisation behind a semantic screen for several years.

Acceptance, Phase 2: The Street

These prejudices began to fall away at the cusp of the 1980s, as the first whiff of Post-Modernism drifted across the already pretty stinky streets of downtown New York City. In 1978 the Ramones broke through the wall that Rhys Chatham had erected separating them from LaMonte Young. Rock bands were booked at The Kitchen and »composers« played the Mudd Club. I made some pieces incorporating radically altered electric guitars and live sampling of Pop radio – Cage disliked them for these references but they got me onto the stage at CBGB.

What Derek Bailey initially dubbed »non-idiomatic improvisation« flowered in clubs across downtown New York, London and other cities in the US and Europe.¹¹ »Pan-idiomatic« might have been a better description of its character, as players pillaged, and openly acknowledged, a plethora of musics. The evolution of John Zorn's work traces clearly his passage to freedom from the last of Cage's lingering prohibitions: Works like *Hockey* (1978)¹² and *Pool* (1979)¹³ employed game tactics to direct players into improvisation that indeed referenced no trope of any specific musical idiom; by *Cobra* (1984)¹⁴ the rules had loosened to the point that the timbres and gestures of rock and jazz would frequently appear, and DJs like Christian Marclay would drop into the mix identifiable fragments of other music; the compositional method of Zorn's later pieces like *Spillane* (1987)¹⁵ included index cards instructing a musician to play »5 seconds of fast bebop« or »2 bars slow delta blues«; Zorn closed the decade with the debut CD by his trio Naked City, which featured interpretations of pieces by Henry Mancini, Ennio Morricone, John Barry, and Ornette Coleman.¹⁶ Zorn famously credits both Mauricio Kagel and Carl Stalling as influences, and this twinning of a »high art« composer and a cartoon arranger, rather inconceivable in the heyday of Minimalism, became the new normal by the end of the 1980s.

¹⁰ Lewis, George, »Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives«, in: Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble (eds.), *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialog*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, pp. 131–162.

¹¹ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation – its Nature and Practice in Music*, London: Moorland Publishing and Incus Records, 1980, pp. 4–5.

¹² John Zorn, *The Parachute Years: 1977–81*, Tzadik box CD set, 1997. Disc 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Disc 4.

¹⁴ John Zorn, *Cobra*, HatHut CD, 1987.

¹⁵ John Zorn, *Spillane*, Elektra/Nonesuch CD/LP, 1987.

¹⁶ Naked City, *Naked City*, Elektra/Nonesuch CD/LP, 1990.

Zorn assumed the role of Thelonius Monk for this scene, and The Knitting Factory was Minton's Playhouse: most of the New York improvisers spent time playing in Zorn's various ensembles and in that uncomfortable little club on East Houston Street. It was through these two mechanisms that I became involved in improvisation. I played in Zorn's groups, participated in several other ensembles (both established and ad hoc), and drew from this body of musicians for my own projects – from the collection of 48 short improvised duets recorded under the deceptive title of *100 of the World's Most Beautiful Melodies*,¹⁷ to more composed pieces like *It Was A Dark And Stormy Night*.¹⁸

I was initially attracted to the improvisers because they were generous with their time: In those days, the worlds of »Uptown« and »Downtown« music were separated by much more than the 70 blocks that lay between Lincoln Center and The Kitchen. It was hard to find »classical« musicians who would deign to play my music; the improvisers would do so, cheerfully. Moreover, the improvisers shared the distinctive advantage of not differentiating between »traditional« and »extended« technique: A cellist like Tom Cora moved fluidly between Baroque double stops, a tuneful melody comprised entirely of flute-like harmonics, and bowing a rubber band stretched from his bridge – something no classically trained player I've worked with before or since could do with such grace. This continuum of technique, like their ecumenical incorporation of the broad sweep of musical culture, represented the final breakdown of musical distinctions that remained after (and perhaps were even further ingrained by) Cage.

It is worth noting that the majority of these improvisers did not come from an academic music background, but rather drifted into non-idiomatic improvisation out of some distinctly idiomatic ones. Their background was in rock bands, rather than seminars. They passed by the same musical buffet as I had, loved the same music I loved (Ramones, Reich, Ramayana Monkey Chant), but their plates were flat, devoid of little walls that had kept my tablas and tape loops separated.

This was the decade of the sampler, and it is telling that the instrument's prime musical impact was in facilitating the birth of a new Pop music form – Hip-hop – rather than as a tool of the avant-garde. (Beginning with the advent of MIDI, the 1980s saw innovation in music technology in general shift from academic research and avant-garde movements, to commercial instrument companies and popular music – the sampler is just one such example). The improvisers were thinking like samplers before any of them could afford to buy one.

Acceptance, Phase 3: The Conservatory

The first *Bang on a Can* Festival took place in New York in the spring of 1987. Founded by three composers (Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe) bearing fresh degrees from the Yale School of Music, they succeeded where many had failed when they brought academics, minimalists, improvisers and rockers together for a 12-hour marathon

¹⁷ Nicolas Collins, *100 of the World's Most Beautiful Melodies*, Trace Elements Records CD, 1989.

¹⁸ Nicolas Collins, *It Was A Dark And Stormy Night*. Trace Elements Records CD, 1992.

in SoHo, under a title inspired by one journalist's withering critique of Cage.¹⁹ If the improvised music scene of the earlier part of 1980s represented the acceptance of musical diversity by non-academic musicians, *Bang on a Can* brought the decade to a close by demonstrating how conservatories and the more traditional university music departments had finally stepped up to the buffet as well.

Indeed, a visit to Princeton, Columbia or the Royal Conservatory of The Hague today demonstrates how far we have come in the acceptance, and even mainstreaming, of Cage and his immediate followers. This music, once shunned by all but the most progressive universities, is now taught widely and treated seriously. It's all well and good that a symposium such as this honors Cage's memory by analyzing his work, just as every concert and record undoes a little of the damage wrought in all those years of Denial and Anger. But for me, the real test is the degree to which his innovations can be incorporated into the music of emerging composers, while bypassing the grief that afflicted those who came hard on his heels.

Acceptance, Phase 4: Sound Art

Finally, it should be noted that Cage's books and lectures, as well as his visual art, had a far more positive response in his lifetime than his music – a response I've heard far too often is, »I don't like his music, but I love his writing.« Having taught the last 12 years in an art school, I can attest to the impact his books have on young artists. Although »Sound Art« as a discipline goes back a least as far as Max Neuhaus' works from the mid-1960s, it is at present an art form ascendant, with considerable nurturing in the context of art education. For many students, Cage's writing, with its emphasis on the egalitarian nature of sound, has served as both an inspiration and a roadmap. Much Sound Art – most notably Phonography and Sound Walks – can be seen as mere recreations of works already invented and realized by Cage,²⁰ but his influence has also spawned a substantial body of work that frees sound from the dictates of musical conventions, structure and history in ways that I'm sure would please him greatly.

¹⁹ See: <http://bangonacan.org/> (accessed: 21 July 2012).

²⁰ I am thinking in particular of Bill Fontana's relocations of environmental sound, and the »soundwalks« of The World Listening Project, see: http://www.worldlisteningproject.org/?page_id=150 (accessed: 21 July 2012).