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## Interview with John Cage

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ALAN GILLMOR John, I'm aware that you do not believe in linear notions of cultural history; however, it seems evident to me that even the most iconoclastic masters belong to some tradition. Therefore I'd like to talk to you about certain stages in the development of your thought leading up to your present activities. Among your first teachers were Adolph Weiss, Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg. In view of your later proclivities, I find it somewhat curious that you would choose, in Schoenberg, a representative of 'central Europe's immortality machine', as your colleague Virgil Thomson once described musical Germany, especially at a time when the vast majority of young American composers — among them Copland, Harris, Piston and Thomson himself — were seeking an antidote to Germanic solemnity in the fresher and less tradition-bound music of France. Would you comment on this?

JOHN CAGE And particularly Stravinsky, don't you think? . . .

AG Yes.

JC . . . and the teaching of Nadia Boulanger that tended in the direction of Stravinsky, it seems to me, rather than Schoenberg. However, what happened was that during the depression in the early 1930s I found myself in Santa Monica, California, after having spent about a year and a half in Europe — in Paris, actually — where I rather quickly came in contact with a wide variety of both modern painting and modern music. The effect was to give me the feeling that if other people could do things like that I myself could. And I began, without benefit of a teacher, to write music and to paint pictures, so that when I came back from Europe I was in Santa Monica where I had no way to make a living — I was a drop-out from college — and I showed my music to people whose opinion I respected and I showed my paintings to people whose opinion I respected. Among those for painting were Galka Scheyer, who had brought 'The Blue Four'2 from Europe, and Walter Arensberg, who had the great collection that was formed really by Marcel Duchamp. And I showed my music to Richard Buhlig, who was the first person to play Schoenberg's Opus 11. The sum total of all that was that the people who heard my music had better things to say about it than the people who looked at my paintings had to say about my paintings. And so I decided to devote myself to music. Meanwhile I had gone from house to house in Santa Monica selling lectures on modern music and modern painting. I sold ten lectures for \$2.50 and I had an audience of something like 30 or 40 housewives once a week. I assured them that I knew nothing about the subject but that I would find out as much as I could each week and that what I did have was enthusiasm for both modern painting and modern music. In this way I taught myself, so to speak, what was going on those two fields. And I came to prefer the thought and work of Arnold Schoenberg to that of Stravinsky.

AG And yet could not one argue that Schoenberg represented a dying Germanic tradition?

JC It didn't seem that way to me and the reason it didn't was this: we already had such pieces from Stravinsky as the Serenade in A which gave a clearly neo-classic atmosphere. One could also say that some pieces of Schoenberg, the Opus 25 Suite for Piano, for instance, give a neo-classic atmosphere. Neverthless, what was so thrilling about the notion of twelve-tone music was that those twelve tones were all equally important, that one of them was not more important than another. It gave a principle that one could relate over into one's life and accept, whereas the notion of neo-classicism one could not accept and put over into one's life.

AG With hindsight one can see that Charles Ives, Henry Cowell and perhaps Edgard Varèse were the really potent influences on the development of American experimental music in the period between the Wars. I'd like to ask you when you first discovered the music of Ives?

JC Not until much later and not through my own curiosity but through that of Lou Harrison. Two of the inspiring books — inspiring because they gave me the permission to enter the field of music — were New

Musical Resources by Henry Cowell<sup>3</sup> and Toward a New Music by Carlos Chávez, the Mexican composer.<sup>4</sup> And I am, as you know, the son of an inventor and I didn't feel that anything in me prepared me to do something following Beethoven, but I thought that if I could do something it would be in the field of invention, that I had been born, so to speak, to do that.

AG What relation do Ives's ideas and experiments have to some of your own works?

JC Well, now of course I find Ives quite relevant. But I didn't come across Ives's work until the late 1940s, and as I said through Lou Harrison. He had an enthusiasm for Ives. What had put me off Ives was all the Americana business. I didn't like that. You see, in modern painting I was devoted to Mondrian; just as I had chosen Schoenberg in music so I chose Mondrian in painting. And it was not through my own inclinations but through the excitement and work of Robert Rauschenberg that I came to be involved in representational work. If, then, I could accept representation in painting I could of course accept the Americana aspect of Ives. But even still, deep down, when I listen to a piece of Ives, what I like about it is not the quotation of hymns and popular tunes — nor do I particularly like that in Satie, by the way. What I like is the rest of it, the way it works, the process of it, the freedom of it, the 'do this or do that, do whatever you choose' — that I love.

AG In the 1930s and 40s you wrote almost exclusively for percussion instruments, including the now famous Cageian 'prepared piano'.

JC Well, I have, so to speak, no ear for music, and never did have. I loved music but had no ear for it. I haven't any of that thing that some people speak of having — knowing what a pitch is. The whole pitch aspect of music eludes me. Whether a sound is high or low is a matter of little consequence to me.

AG So this in fact was the great attraction that percussion music had for you; it could liberate you from . . .

JC . . . noises delight me; each one of them interests me; and time interests me. And when I saw that time was the proper basis of music, since it included both sounds and silence, and that pitch and harmony and counterpoint and all those things that had been the basis of European Music were improperly so and had made it into the boring thing that for the most part it symphonically became . . . Don't you agree?

AG I hesitate; we'll leave it there.

JC Anyway, that's how I feel. I agree with that African prince who went to a concert in London and afterward was asked what he thought. He had heard a programme of music that began before Bach and went on up to modern times, and he said: 'Why did they play the same piece over and over again?' And you know nowadays we get to hear, probably as a result of communication and transportation and all, a great deal of music from other cultures, and you have to go back very little in time to discover that Europeans listened very little, or took very unseriously whatever they heard from the Orient.

AG In this respect Henry Cowell was a rather important influence.

JC That was very important for me, to hear through him music from all the various cultures; and they sounded different. Sound became important to me — and noise is so rich in terms of sound. Surprisingly, you can even read statements in the early 50s from young composers in Europe, who are otherwise revolutionary and adventurous, to the effect that sound has no importance in music. Do you realise that? They tended to think that the thoughts, the constructions, the ideas that form the relationships of sound were important, but that the sounds themselves were of no importance.

AG John, the late 1940s was a period of fresh discovery for you. I'm thinking of your study of Eastern philosophies, in particular Zen, and your contact with Gita Sarabhai, who revealed to you that the reason for making a piece of music in India was 'to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences'. Is this a view you still hold?

JC Certainly. I might alter it slightly now and not state it so 'churchily'. I would say that the function of music is to change the mind so that it does become open to experience, which inevitably is interesting.

AG Is it not possible that a movement, a slow movement, say, of a Mozart symphony or string quartet could serve the purpose of sobering and quieting the mind?

JC On occasion Mozart can do that. On other occasions he's quite incapable of it, and it's due to the performances. I had the occasion to hear a performance of *Don Giovanni* in New York in the 40s that was

magnificent. I later heard the same piece in southern France at Aix-en-Provence and it was a farce. And I heard so much Mozart in two weeks — they had a Mozart Festival in Aix-en-Provence — that I wished at the end of those two weeks never to hear another note of Mozart in my whole life. It seemed all frivolous, all decorated, all ornate. Impossible! Of course I love Mozart; but there are ways to hate Mozart.

AG Well, I was going to say that you do have some special affection for Mozart's music. In fact it plays a rather significant role in your 1969 work *HPSCHD*, for example. How do you explain your particular preference for this classical composer when you have rejected so many others, in fact almost all of the others?

JC I like Mozart because he moves toward multiplicity, whereas in contrast Bach moves toward unity. When you have six or seven voices or four voices or whatever you have in a Bach composition, they all add up rhythmically to a motor rhythm, which goes ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta consistently and there aren't any pauses of any kind. Also pitch-wise the Bach business is all organised so that nothing is extraordinary, everything moves in the same way, whereas in a Mozart work everything works in a different way and in two or three measures of Mozart you can have many ways rather than one way of doing things.

AG What about the question of form? This seems to me a significant fact . . .

JC ... form is a very different word ...

AG Mozart is a closed form and Bach is an open form.

JC I find it just the reverse.

AG How do you explain then the regularity . . . ?

JC ... Don Giovanni bursts into flames; how could it be more open than it is?

AG I'm thinking, of course, more of symphonic music, the sonata-allegro principle as opposed to the open-endedness of fugal procedures.

JC When I think of Mozart I really think of Don Giovanni.

AG I see the period 1950-52 as being a very important stage in your development. You yourself have said as much. In 1950, for example, you moved into chance operations with the aid of the I Ching, and in 1952, in collaboration with David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and others, you performed a mixed media work at North Carolina's Black Mountain College which became in effect the progenitor of the 'happening'. Also, in that year, in August I believe, your 'silent' piece 4'33" was first performed at Woodstock, New York, and this, I think, has remained one of your most controversial works. I wanted to ask you: is it only coincidental that Rauschenberg's equally controversial 'white' paintings appeared also at that time, in 1952?

JC No. As a headnote to my article on Rauschenberg which appears in Silence, I say, to whom it may concern, that the white paintings came first; my silent piece came later. I had thought of the silent piece since 1948. I gave a lecture at Vassar College — I think it was in 48 — called 'A Composer's Confessions' and I related the history of my musical thought and announced that I wanted to write a silent piece which I'd not yet written. But it took me four years to decide actually to write it because I didn't wish it to appear, even to me, as something easy to do or as a joke. I wanted to mean it utterly and to be able to live with it. And it was Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings that gave me the permission to do that. One way or another we get permission. Of course, sometimes we give it to ourselves, but other times we gratefully receive it from friends.

AG Would you agree with Rauschenberg that the artistic activity itself is more important than the resulting art work?<sup>7</sup>

JC This carries me to Duchamp, who said that he didn't like art, that what he liked were artists. He liked to be with artists; something about the way they conducted their lives led them to be people that he enjoyed being with, whereas their works didn't so much interest him. Robert Rauschenberg said something with which I wholly concur: he said that a work of art can be deemed good when it changes you. If it doesn't change you, you're either not looking at it very clearly or it isn't a very good work of art. Just the other day I received a request from a lady in Oregon asking me to say what enabled me to know how to recognise a work of art. She didn't use the word 'good', fortunately. I wrote back to this effect, and I'm not sure that my answer is good, but it's in the direction that I think: I said, first you change your mind, then wherever you

look — implying that wherever you look you can look aesthetically — you can see life as art, if your mind is changed. Then I made a postscript to it after a few days. I said: or you just start looking; in other words you start going out of yourself and looking at the world around you, and then your mind changes.

AG It seems to me that if one follows Rauschenberg's statement to its conclusion the art work becomes in effect disposable; it becomes merely the by-product of the artistic activity.

JC But look, history proves that art is disposable! How otherwise can we accept Venus with her arms chopped off?

AG So in effect, then, museums, art galleries and concert halls become nothing more than what we might call cultural dung heaps.

JC Our attitude toward Greek art, for example, is that if we have any of it left, just a scrap, we love it. We even get fond of utensils from the past. Any damn thing from the past strikes us as art strikes us. In other words we pay attention to it. Can't we then see it as reasonable to pay attention to the world around us?

AG In an interesting reversal of 4'33", La Monte Young's Composition 1960 No. 6 directs the performers to stare at the audience as if the audience were the performers. Now it seems to me that your own 4'33" is a serious statement with far-reaching philosophical implications. On the other hand, I cannot help but view Young's work as a return to a kind of 1920s Dadaism, with very strongly antagonistic and nihilistic overtones.

JC But we have to realise with La Monte Young that he is still alive and that he's done many things. One of the marvellous things about him is that he continues to change. He's now deeply involved with Indian music. He has an Indian teacher and he's practically performing Indian music now. And I am sure that, though it may be fairly classical at the moment, out of it will come a great benefit both to Indian music and to Western music. I'm convinced that La Monte Young is a great musician.

AG Knowing something of your views on the matter, I was not going to urge you to pass a value judgement on a colleague's work.

JC The reason I value La Monte Young so much is that he has changed my mind; he's one of the ones who has.

AG What I did want to ask you coming out of this was for you to comment on your relationship, if any, to the aesthetic ideals of the Dada movement of the early 20s.

JC I forget what year it was, but I remember that I'd given a concert in New York at the Museum of Modern Art — of the Amores, I think it was — and Paul Bowles, the composer and critic, related my work to Dada. I was insulted at the time. The reason I was insulted was that the word 'dada' then struck me as not being serious. I have since realised that Dada is the most serious of the 'isms'. If we say that Zen Buddhism is serious then Dada is very serious. Surrealism, for instance, relates to therapy, whereas Dada relates to religion. I'd like to point out something amusing here. Most people take the word amusing as having no serious import. But Duchamp based his life, virtually, on amusement. And this is close to comedy, which is actually a higher art than tragedy, in the last analysis. What was I saying that was amusing? I've forgotten now; that's even more amusing: to forget.

AG I've always found the Dada movement . . .

JC Oh yes, that's what it was. I didn't realise when they connected me with Dada that it could be serious. I thought it was simply frivolous, and I wanted people to know, even though I appeared to be cheerful and all, that I was perfectly serious — which I was. Humour, in fact, is perfectly serious. And now I know that Dada is more serious than Surrealism. Oh, I know what I want to tell you that's amusing. In Paris in the 20s we had Dada first, and it was followed by Surrealism. In Dada is a certain self-abnegation; in Surrealism is a certain self-pronouncement. Now, neo-Dada, which is what we have in New York in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, is followed by what's called Pop Art, which is, in another sense, Surrealism. But it is not Surrealism as related to the individual, but Surrealism as related to the society, so that Andy Warhol's work is like André Breton's, and we can equate Breton's interest in sex with Warhol's interest in supermarkets.

AG Do you agree with Marcel Duchamp's statement that repetition has been the great enemy of art in general?

JC Marcel said that?

AG Yes he did. In fact, it's quoted at the head of Kostelanetz's book.8

JC That's what he disliked about music, isn't it? I think he said that the reason he found music so boring was that it was constantly repeating the same tune. Duchamp's statement is quite relevant and, I think, very perceptive. There's so much repetition in music: repeated measures, the same rhythm, and the same tunes and all that, which is really unsupportable.

AG You don't think he was referring to the past — the musical or artistic past?

JC Yes I do think he was. Duchamp also didn't like violins; he said that it was inconceivable to him that anyone would take cat-gut and scrape on it.

AG Bertram Jessup has suggested in a recent article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* that it doesn't follow that 'because it is meaningless to imitate works of the past, it is therefore meaningless to value them'.9

JC I don't know that this statement arouses in me much comment. What we want is to get to a point where we value first the simplest things in life; we should value water. I'm now becoming a gardener, and I now know that we must value earth. I've been reading about China. The Chinese say that water is more precious than air, earth more precious than pearls. And I know that from seeing the way the plants are growing in the garden. I know that we must — if we're going to speak in terms of value — first of all get the earth productive and the water clear. This is more important than valuing a work of art. I would prefer to hear a bird sing, as Thoreau did, than go hear Boulez conduct.

AG Christian Wolff has said that 'form in music could be taken as a length of programme time'. 10 Does this fit in with your concept of form in music?

JC Yes.

AG Could you explain the difference between chance operation and indeterminacy?

JC Chance operations can be used to make something that is fixed. That is how I made the *Music of Changes*. I used the *I Ching* in order to write down something that enforced a performer to go through a particular series of actions. Then later, when I began my series of *Variations*, I was intent on making a kind of composition which was indeterminate of its own performance, a composition which didn't itself prescribe what would be done. In other words, I was intent on making something that didn't tell people what to do. At this point I attack, if I may say so, what seems to me to be a questionable aspect of music. Music is, after all, not like painting; music is a social art, social in the sense that it has consisted, formerly, of people telling other people what to do, and those people doing something that other people listen to. What I would like to arrive at, though I may never, what I think would be ideal, would be a situation in which no one told anyone what to do and it all turned out perfectly well anyway.

AG If absolute or total indeterminacy is not possible, is it then futile to attempt merely to approach it?

JC It's not futile to do what we do. We wake up with energy and we do something. And we make, of course, failures and we make mistakes, but we sometimes get glimpses of what we might do next.

AG You often have spoken of 'curiosity' and 'awareness'. In fact these two terms are, I think, central to your thought.

JC Right.

AG And I believe you have said that the specific function of music is to help us to attain a more intense awareness of life, and that in order to do this all art should 'imitate nature in her manner of operation'.11

JC I was not the first one to say that.

AG I think you found that in Ananda Coomaraswamy.

JC Yes. And it's to be found in traditions of India and of Europe.

AG How does indeterminacy relate to nature's manner of operation? I find this statement a little cryptic.

JC Perhaps I could answer your question if I knew more about modern physics. But I have a layman's attitude toward modern physics and I do think that we know just vaguely that nature operates indeterminately.

AG I don't know.

JC But you surely don't believe that God is sitting in heaven and organising everything properly!

AG No. But — again from a layman's point of view — I can't imagine that nature works in a totally facetious way.

JC But just look around you! Look around where we are now and you see that everything is going wrong!

AG What?

JC Just look at it! It's either going right or wrong, but it's certainly not going according to plan.

AG Milton Babbitt, in an article called 'Who Cares if You Listen?' suggests, and I quote, the 'complete elimination of the public and social aspects...'12

JC Look at those leaves over there! No one conceivably — not even God — could have decided that.

AG All right, John; I'll accept that.

JC So, indeterminacy.

AG I would like to get back to this statement of Babbitt's: he suggests the complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. In other words, he advocates the removal of the audience.

JC That's surely in response to my thinking, because I've insisted that those must remain.

AG It seems to me that the reductio ad absurdum of indeterminacy is the complete elimination, on the other hand, of the composer.

JC That's perfectly all right. The sooner I get on unemployment compensation the better off I am.

AG In 1970 you said that 'more important today than the accomplishment of an individual is social change'. How do you react to the Soviet view of music, in particular the oft-stated view that music must be comprehensible to the people for whom it is in effect being created?

JC I've never been friendly to such views. I feel like Ives did that we should have a music that will pull us up by our bootstraps. He wanted a music that would make us stronger than we had been; he was sure that music could do that. And I think so too. I know in my own experience that music has changed me. I have hoped that it will change other people. I even have hoped that it could change society, which corresponds to an old Chinese view that music has an effect on society. I would like to improve society, but now I sometimes feel pessimistic that that might not happen, that we might just all go to the dogs.

AG I've always sensed, since I first discovered your work, that there is a great tradition of humanism here. But there is no doubt that you outrage traditionalists, although I sincerely believe that you want to reach all kinds of people.

JC I'm afraid I'm more traditional than those traditionalists.

AG Yet you do maintain a rather uncompromising approach to art and life that has made you something of an artistic elitist. Isn't this a bit paradoxical?

JC Yes.

AG Marvellous answer; no other possible.

JC I think we should all be elitist. I agree with Ives that music should improve us. We should improve ourselves constantly. The things that make us depressed about society and about the world generally are the views that enter our minds from time to time that the situation is hopeless, that people are just

ineradicably stupid, and that they won't improve. But they just might. We have currently the example of China. I don't know how they're getting along now, but it's perfectly clear to everyone that one quarter of the world, through Mao Tse-tung, has actually improved.

AG Since the first appearance of your book *Silence* you've turned more and more to the written word for the expression of your ideas. Is this trend significant in any way?

JC Actually, if the record of what I've done since 1961 is examined in detail, you'll see that I've written more music than I've written words. But people have come to think that they can disregard my music because they can read my words much more easily. Eventually they may be able to listen to the music, but whether or not they do, I'm not sure that it makes much difference.

AG Do you consider your writings simply an extension of your other artistic activities or do they have in fact a different function?

JC No. I enjoy doing all these various things. I like to do other things too. I like to play chess; I like to hunt mushrooms, etc. I don't mean to say that I'm intent on pleasing myself from minute to minute, but I do remain active.

AG What pieces are you working on now?

JC I have to do a new piece of music for Merce Cunningham's ballet to be done in Paris in November. It's not concluded yet what the nature of that piece will be. I will hope it will be an example of a piece in which I've written none of the notes, but all of the notes have been written by Erik Satie. But I'm running into problems with the copyright holders. I would like to base the music on the musique d'ameublement, which would be I Ching-determined; then other pieces of Satie's would be superimposed on that, and still other pieces of his superimposed on that, so that it would be musique d'immeublement, or apartment-house music.

AG Marcel Duchamp, Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller and Norman O. Brown are a few of the creative minds you've admired. Have you recently made any new discoveries in these areas? You mentioned Thoreau to me earlier today.

JC I'm getting more and more interested in Ezra Pound. He's a great man. We have the possibility of liveliness when we have such people with us.

AG One of the most fascinating bits of theatre unfolding in the United States today is the Watergate affair. How have you reacted to this drama?

JC Well, I sit glued, as everybody else does, to the television. We are, if I may say so, a corrupt society. I'm very impressed by an article I read recently in *The New York Review of Books* by Mary McCarthy. Ashe has been a critic of Viet Nam and is still a critic of Viet Nam because Viet Nam continues even though President Nixon tells us that it has stopped. McCarthy sees Watergate as a continuation of Viet Nam; she sees it as a silly and pathetic attempt on our part to atone for our true crime, which is Viet Nam. But Viet Nam is not, I would say, our only crime. We have also ruined our environment. We've done everything in order to be selfish. We should listen now to Mao Tse-tung, who points out that the earth in which capitalism grows is just pure selfishness. What was Nixon's excuse for continuing in Viet Nam and now Cambodia? It was to come out of that whole thing as he says with some kind of face or self-respect. It all turns back on the self, and here I would like, if you permit me, to criticise the entire tradition of Christianity. I think the Golden Rule, which is often thought of as the centre, really, of Christianity, is a mistake: 'Do unto others as *you* would be done by.' I think that is a mistaken thought. We should do unto others as *they* would be done by.

## NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Virgil Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 118.
- <sup>2</sup> I.e., Lyonel Feininger, Alexej Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.
- <sup>3</sup> Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930; 2nd revised edition, ed. Joscelyn L. Godwin, New York: Something Else Press, 1969).
- <sup>4</sup> Carlos Chávez, trans. H. Weinstock, *Toward a New Music: Music and Electricity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937).

- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 99. This book later appeared in Britain under the title *Ahead of the Game: Four Versions of Avant-Garde* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968).
- <sup>6</sup> John Cage, Silence (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961; Cambridge, Mass. and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 98.
- <sup>7</sup> See Richard Kostelanetz, 'A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg', *Partisan Review*, Vol.XXXV, No.1 (Winter 1968), p. 94.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970; London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1971), p. xvii.
- <sup>9</sup> Bertram Jessup, 'Crisis in the Fine Arts Today', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol.XXIX, No.1 (Fall 1970), p. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> Christian Wolff, 'On Form', Die Reihe, No.7 (English edition, 1965, of the German original, 1960), p. 26.
- 11 See Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, p. 100; and Kostelanetz, ed., John Cage, p. 50.
- <sup>12</sup> Milton Babbitt, 'Who Cares if You Listen?' in Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs, eds., Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 249.
- 13 Quoted in Kostelanetz, ed., John Cage, p. 191.
- <sup>14</sup> Mary McCarthy, 'Watergate Notes', *The New York Review of Books*, Vol.XX, No. 12 (July 19, 1973), pp. 5-8.

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