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John Cage at 70

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Cage Celebrations, New York

Wall-to-Wall John Cage and Friends: a Seventieth Birthday Tribute, Symphony Space, New York City, 13 March 1982

I must say I find an anniversary concert a slightly bizarre idea. One day you are not worth a celebration, the next you are. Often these jamborees seem to be an excuse for someone to take advantage of someone else. There are certainly plenty of them about these days and the 'coming of age' seems to get younger all the time; on the other hand I am sometimes unsure whether I am at a memorial or an anniversary concert. There was no doubt, however, that John Cage was (and is) still very much with us at Symphony Space on Saturday 13 March. Symphony Space, a converted ice-rink-cinema at 95th and Broadway—now a lively community arts centre which occasionally spreads its wings to embrace celebrities and events that are far from local—leapt in to host the first of the many world-wide celebrations of Cage's 70th year (his actual birthday is 5 September).

The event was organised by Allan Miller, one of Symphony Space's two artistic directors, and Vivian Perlis, a writer and long-time champion of new American music. Mr Miller was evidently eager to avoid the connotations of a memorial for Cage. 'This is really a celebration not a tribute or a retrospective', he said. 'It's just a big party, that's all.' It started at 11 a.m. and was scheduled to finish at midnight, but by 6 p.m. it was about two hours behind. The guest list for the party included composers, both dead and alive, connected in some way with Cage—as teacher, colleague, disciple, or, in some cases, very vague associate. Included on it were Brown, Cardew, Cowell, Curran, Drummond, Feldman, Harrison, Johnson, Kosugi, Lucier, Partch, Satie, Schoenberg, Tudor, and Wolff; the poets Clark Coolidge and Jackson Mac Low were also invited, and the performers ranged from Cunningham to present-day students. All participants were evidently chosen from a list supplied by Cage.

There were 26 of Cage's works, the earliest being the Clarinet Sonata of 1933, played by Virgil Blackwell, and the most recent *49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs*, played by Yvar Mikhashoff, and *Inlets*, music for conch shells (both 1977). 20 of the works were written before 1961, the other six were from the seventies. No large-scale collage works or orchestral pieces were included, as, it was claimed, the length and cost were out of the question for the Symphony Space schedule and budget. Considering that Morton Feldman's violin piece *For John Cage*, premièred here, was almost an hour long, and all artists gave their services, I am a little sceptical about those reasons. However, there was a fair cross-section of Cage's output, and what I heard—about five hours' worth—was well performed.

There were what could be called 'uptown' as well as

'downtown' performers. Ursula Oppens, for instance, pretty much the former, played Christian Wolff's piano piece *Hay una mujer desaparecida* (1979), a most moving piece superbly performed called *For Cornelius* (1982) by the now Rome-based American Alvin Curran, and three of Cardew's piano works of the seventies—*Revolution is the Main Trend in the World Today* (1974), *Father Murphy* (1973), and *Bethanien Song* (1974). (Many people seemed to be unaware of Cardew's death, and John Rockwell's preview in the *New York Times* announced his participation in the day's events.) Oppens (on cello this time) joined others in a performance of Wolff's *Burdocks* (1970-71), directed by the composer; her desire in this piece to crawl round the floor on all fours mystified many. Later she teamed up with another establishment pianist, Paul Jacobs, in Satie's *Trois morceaux en forme de poire*, the earliest pieces presented. Jacobs also played Schoenberg's *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke op.19* and Cage's *Credo in US* (1942). Some of Cage's early rhythmic studies—*Living Room Music* (1940), *Double Music* (1941) in collaboration with Lou Harrison, and *Third Construction* (1941)—along with Cowell's *Pulse* (1939), were given excellent performances, mostly by the New Music Consort, a group of present or recent students, whose commitment and skill could not be doubted but whose self-conscious rhythmic jiggling was most annoying and distracting (to me) yet succeeded in bringing the house down. Dean Drummond brought along his own invention, the zoomozophone, a microtonally tuned kind of vibraphone, to play Partch's *Two Studies on Ancient Greek Scales*, with flute (1946), and his own *Copégoro* (1978).

Other items included three of Tom Johnson's inconsequential theatre pieces; Alvin Lucier's *Sferics* (1971) for large-loop antennae, tape, and audio playback system; Cunningham's dancers in *Changing Steps* (1973), danced to *Cartridge Music* (1960); Cunningham himself in *Solo* (1973) to *Child of Tree* (1975); *4'33"* (1952) performed by David Tudor; *Six Melodies* for violin and piano (1950); *Water Music* (1952); *Speech* (1955); and part of the mammoth *Études australes* (1974-5), sadly not played by the dedicatee Grete Sultan who has worked so devotedly on the whole collection with Cage, but by Joseph Kubera (evidently a pupil persuaded Sultan that this kind of affair was not for her).

And so it went on . . . I popped out for a 'rest', some food and to make a couple of phone calls (as one must at least every two hours in New York) to find on my return about 800 people queuing round the block; I never managed to get back in. The organisers in fact had been pleading throughout the day with people inside to leave so as to allow others the opportunity to hear something. I even met someone who had camped out all night. There was certainly plenty of interest shown by the public, and the organisation of the occasion was first class. Furthermore WNYC broadcast a large proportion of the day's events (BBC please note—where were you at Britain's only Cage celebrations?).