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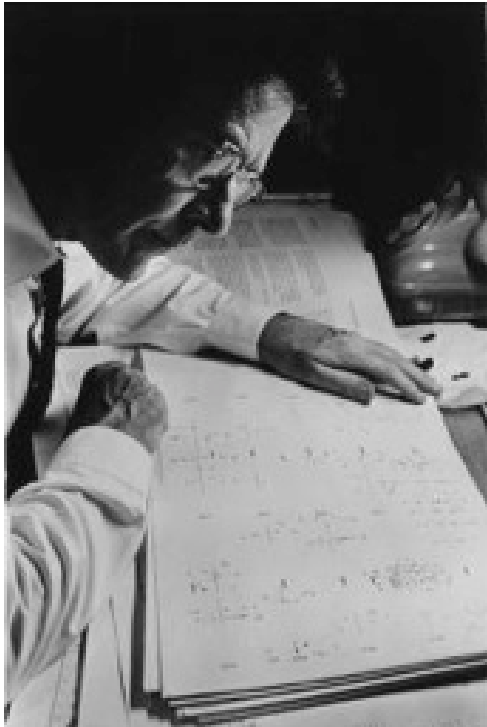
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Reading Cage

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*John Cage, studying the score
of Atlas Eclipticalis (1961)
Photographer: Unknown
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust*

...it was a Saturday; there were six of us having dinner in a restaurant on the Hudson north of Newburgh; we arranged to meet in Mexico...in order to realize this rendezvous, all of us (knowing how to say Yes) will have to learn to say No – No, that is, to anything that may come between us and the realization of our plan.

-John Cage, *A Year From Monday* (1967)

2012 marked the centennial of John Cage's birth, and with it a host of celebrations, from academic symposia to concert series, in honor of one of the twentieth century's most controversial composers and musical thinkers. A year ago, at the beginning of my final year of a dissertation fellowship, I decided to introduce my own honorary project: I started a blog. The name, *A Year from Monday* (www.ayearfrommonday.com), came from the title of Cage's second major publication, and conveniently fit the timeline of the centennial. John Cage was born at Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, just a few miles from my apartment in East Hollywood, on 5 September 1912, and 5 September 2011 just happened to fall on a Monday. I decided thus to allot a small part of my fellowship year to the project each Monday, beginning 5 September 2011, and ending, a year from Monday, on 5 September 2012, the date of the centennial. Each Monday was devoted to reading one or two essays by Cage from his vast collection of writings, and posting 1000-2000 words of my own commentary. The concept itself felt very Cagean: a disciplined action performed according to a predetermined temporal grid with no expectation of the outcome, and above all a devotional commitment to the spirit of his writings and the historical context surrounding their creation.

The music critic Alfred Frankenstein once described John Cage's first publication, *Silence* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961), as "a story of how a change of mind came about." Kyle Gann, writing in the preface of the recently released 50th anniversary edition of the work, reminisced that "*Silence* by John Cage is the book I've reread most often in my life. It's that kind of book. I kept rereading it partly because what it seemed to mean kept changing... The text remains the same; I change."¹ It was this concept, combined with an intellectual impulse to comment on the many misconceptions surrounding the large body of "Cagean lore," that guided my weekly ritual. Much like the experience of reading Cage's vast correspondence collection at Northwestern University, I found myself discovering sides of Cage's personality and mind that were often overlooked, either by me, a junior scholar, or by others who focused exclusively on what I would call "sound byte Cage," where incongruous quotes are taken from a larger text and placed alongside a neighboring argument. The problem with this large body of information, which includes Cage's published writings, interviews, and extensive correspondence, is its heterogeneity. While a book such as *Silence* does seem to encapsulate a period in Cage's life, other volumes increasingly embrace the idea espoused in Cage's many "Diary" entries: a linear collection of thoughts subjected to various degrees of "chance procedures" (more on this later) that spread out like a mosaic into a network of interpenetrating ideas, each paradoxically both relevant and irrelevant, and more often than not, irreverent.

Reading Cage (cont.)

In the process of weekly reading and blogging the project slowly coalesced around several issues of significance to contemporary Cage scholarship. The first was the very concept of “Cage studies.” The vanguard generation of Cage scholars worked tirelessly to defend him within intellectual circles using traditional musicological means. Scholars analyzed and interpreted Cage’s works through manuscript studies to demonstrate the intellectual profundity of his approach to chance and indeterminacy, and coupled these findings with detailed archival documentation and first-person interviews to create a clear historical picture of his life and work. This work tended to avoid the critical parameters of contemporary music scholarship, especially criticism of Cage himself, and as a result Cage has found a comfortable place within academics. However, recent scholarship has gently upset this model by exploring more contemporary modes of inquiry: identity studies, composer hagiography, and particularly critical theory, for which Cage’s writings are ripe for investigation. Naturally, this has sparked tension. Consider the recent remarks by John Adams in *The New York Times*:

‘Cage studies’ is by now a small industry. The flow of new books about him, his music and his aesthetics seems unstoppable, and it is not unthinkable that he will eventually dethrone the likes of Joyce or Proust as the favored subject of college humanities departments. The problem with so much writing about Cage is the difficulty of finding critical balance. He has gone from being unfairly considered a fool and a charlatan to an equally unreasonable status as sacred cow. Criticizing Cage’s aesthetic doctrines is by now a perilous venture because his defenders have become so skilled at turning any questioning around and using it as proof of the critic’s poverty of awareness.²

I’ve witnessed some of this intellectual back-and-forth at recent conferences devoted to Cage, and it mainly centers around biographical details of his life that are to varying degrees, mischaracterizations, false remembrances, and in certain cases, fabrications. The best “Cagean lore” is then repeated in interviews and biographies. A perfect example is the anecdote claiming that Arnold Schoenberg once described Cage as an “Inventor of Genius.” This was in fact a second-hand account from Los Angeles impresario Peter Yates in a letter from 1953.³ Whether this account accurately characterizes the original statement is open to speculation, but perhaps equally important is its perpetuation within the larger cultural construct of “Cage”

in contemporary scholarship. It is because of these various minor discrepancies that those wishing to construct elaborate theoretical ideas based on Cage’s biography are so easily subject to criticism; many details of Cage’s life are still considerably contested, and scholars have used these factual and analytic details as a shield against the influx of critical discourse surrounding Cage. That said, it does seem that a new balance is being struck within Cage studies, where critical and theoretical models emanating from the composer’s aesthetic are augmented by thoughtful and engaged historical research to further cement the grounds of any assertions about Cage.

The second issue of importance to contemporary Cage scholarship is the actual definition of his aesthetic parameters, and, concurrently, the notion of “post-Cage” within various artistic circles from the 1960s to the present day. Many of the fundamental tenants of Cage’s negative aesthetics were first introduced in his early publications. Parsing his often circuitous words, peppered with a seemingly endless series of aphorisms and anecdotes, is an exacting process that many have grappled with to varying degrees of success. Recent works by Benjamin Piekut, You Nakai, Branden Joseph, Julia Robinson, Rebecca Kim and others have approached the “Cage aesthetic” under a number of guises, all of them focusing in particular on the core essays found in *Silence* and *A Year From Monday* that in many ways defined the Cagean stance for several generations.

While some have claimed that Cage clearly defined a specific set of principles in the pages of these early publications, my close readings of individual essays led to a different conclusion. Cage was a prolific writer, and he embraced any opportunity to engage in an eclectic variety of spiritual, philosophical and aesthetic ideas, even if he knew little about them. Overall Cage assembled a unique set of heuristics culled from philosophers, writers, and spiritual gurus ranging from Henri Bergson, Carl Jung, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan to Sri Ramakrishna, Joseph Campbell, Aldous Huxley, and Meister Eckhart. His aphorisms and notable quotes functioned similarly to his many popular anecdotes scattered throughout his first two publications and recorded as “Indeterminacy” with David Tudor in 1959. It is tempting for the reader to extract these truisms from Cage’s own words and take them at face value, thus perpetuating a tradition that defines Cage according to ideas that are not necessarily his own.⁴

Reading Cage (cont.)

Taken as a whole, the writings from Cage's first thirty years (approximately 1938-1968), gradually develop a sophisticated model of listening that redefines the ontology of the musical artwork. These writings define music according to the ontological question of being, or existence, a notion epitomized by Cage's famous experience in an anechoic chamber, where he realized that, even in a situation in which there empirically are no sound waves echoing within the space, the subjective human body still resonates within its own cavity, and thus, "there is no such thing as silence." To be sure, Cage's aesthetic was rife with inconsistencies and contradictions, and it would be unfair to many of the great theorists of the later twentieth century to say that he fully developed a specific set of ideas and maintained them throughout his career. Each essay represents a historical point in Cage's lifelong pursuit of a variety of aesthetic and musical ideals, each turning a new corner, abandoning or reinforcing old ideas, and providing intellectual fodder for others to develop into theory.

Cage situated his musical discourse within the high-minded confines of the Western art music tradition, and to further augment his claims he carefully constructed the layout and organization of his writings to present a false chronology, thus luring the unsuspecting reader into a circuitous yet enticing intellectual trap. Philip Gentry, whose recent research explores the history of Cage's publications at Wesleyan University Press, points to the presentation and layout of *Silence* in particular as one example of this misleading chronological exposition of ideas.⁵ Take for example, the opening seventy-five pages of the work, which are in many ways a confrontational stance against the European postwar avant-garde, a largely aggrandized conflict made famous by Cage's 1958 sojourn to Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music, where he presented the triptych, "Composition as Process" (1958). These essays, combined with the opening triptych of "The Future of Music: Credo" (ca 1940 or later), "Experimental Music" (1957), and "Experimental Music: Doctrine" (1955), and ending with "History of Experimental Music in the United States" (1959), set the dividing lines between American

experimentalism and the European avant-garde. However, to read these essays successively belies the underlying polemic arguments inherent in Cage's major theoretical essays. For starters, *Silence* begins with Cage's most-cited essay, "The Future of Music: Credo." Several scholars, myself included, have noted that the 1937 dating of the essay in *Silence* is incorrect—the only surviving fragment of this essay is dated 1940, and it only includes the capitalized portion of the essay.⁶ In addition, it seems, based on surviving evidence and correspondence, that Cage in all likelihood extensively reworked the original short statement during his residency at Wesleyan University when he prepared the essays that would become *Silence* in 1961, and thus we should consider the essay itself as an amalgam of ideas from Cage's early career rather than as a definitive and prophetic statement. Examples such as this abound within the hallowed pages of one of the twentieth century's most important and revered collection of writings on music.



John Cage, compiling materials for *Silence* (1961), Wesleyan University, ca. 1960-1
Photographer: Unknown
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust

As a musician it is tempting to indulge in an untrammelled analytic investigation of Cage's later "chance" texts, which fall into their own indeterminate category of poetry. Surprisingly there is little scholarship on the method behind Cage's poetry and prose. The project would not be difficult, given that Cage left us with nearly all of his working notes for these essays, held at Wesleyan University Special Collections. A few scholars, such as Marjorie Perloff and Christopher Shultis, have embarked on detailed readings of the chance procedures involved in some of these later works, and the results of their findings, not surprisingly, once again assert the analytic profundity of Cage's eclectic methods. Even short essays, such as the statement on Korean video artist Nam June Paik in *A Year From Monday*, were the result of meticulous sketches and calculations.⁷ In the same way that David Bernstein has noted that many of Cage's chance-derived compositions such as *Music of Changes* (1951) contained editorial "choices" in their final assemblage, so too are many of the "chance procedures" in his essays usurped by subjective editorial changes. Chance was a means, not an end.⁸

There are many other aspects of Cage's writings that I covered during my year of reading, and many more that

Reading Cage (cont.)

were beyond the project. Cage's "mesostics," a unique approach to the acrostic, his many statements on other artists, his performative texts such as "Lecture on Nothing," and his highly developed approach to mosaic arrangements of preexisting texts, are perhaps best reserved for one thoroughly versed in twentieth century poetry or art history rather than a music scholar. However, the inherent interdisciplinarity of Cage studies forms part of his attraction as a research subject. As Adams has observed, there is ample opportunity for future research on the many eclectic collision points within Cage's oeuvre between medium-specific, and in turn, discipline-specific topics.

It is tempting to posit that all of this focus on Cage's writings justifies the perennial argument that he was a great thinker rather than a great composer. I find this problem to be simply a matter of distinction. Cage's earlier writings in particular informed and were directly driven by his compositional impulses and efforts to redefine the ontology of the musical artwork, and they are in every way intertwined with their concurrent musical works, both from an aesthetic and compositional standpoint. In this sense he inaugurated a new framework for musical production that closely mirrors the contemporary art world: a highly developed mode of discourse surrounds each aesthetic and intellectual turn that plays directly into the reception and consumption of a new piece of music. Musical production is thus intertwined with discourse and philosophy, making it not merely an object for aesthetic contemplation, but equally a philosophical and political statement. This intellectual framework best encapsulates the spirit of "reading Cage."

Finally, there has been much discussion lately of the notion of "public musicology," and the blogging framework provides one outlet for the dissemination of intellectual material in an open format. I can now say from experience that it is a difficult arena for any scholar to embark upon. Self-imposed exacting standards of timely and articulate output is an excellent way to develop skills expected of music reporters and cultural critics, and it is a skill that can only be learned in practice. The stakes are low, the rewards are few, but the experience is priceless.

Notes:

¹ Kyle Gann, foreword to *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), ix. The quote from Alfred Frankenstein comes from Cage himself, in his preface to *X: Writings '79–82'* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), ix, and as the reader may surmise, this too is an example of falling prey to the enticing world of "Cagean lore" by reprinting Cage's quotation verbatim.

² John Adams, "The Zen of Silence," *The New York Times*, 19 November 2010.

³ Letter from Peter Yates to John Cage, 8 August 1953, Series IV, Correspondence, box 2, folder 7, item 24, John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library, Evanston, IL.

⁴ For the definitive academic study of Cage's various appropriations see David Patterson, *Appraising the Catchwords, c1942-1959: John Cage's Asian-Derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996).

⁵ Phillip Max Gentry, "Writing *Silence*," paper presented to the National Meeting of the American Musicological Society, San Francisco, CA, November 2011.

⁶ Richard H. Brown, "The Spirit inside Each Object: John Cage, Oskar Fischinger and 'The Future of Music,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6/1 (February 2012): 83-113.

⁷ Christopher Shultis, "Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the Intentionality of Nonintention," *The Musical Quarterly* 79/2 (Summer 1995): 312-350. One recent example of Marjorie Perloff's excellent research is "Cage, The Conceptual Poet," paper presented at "Cage at UCLA: A Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of John Cage's Birth," University of California, Los Angeles, 2 December 2012.

⁸ See for example, David W. Bernstein, "The Future of Cage Research: Taking a Chance," paper presented to the Plenary Session, "Contemplating Cage At 100," of the Society for Music Theory, 3 November 2012, New Orleans.