

Caged

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Next year, 2012, will mark the 100th birthday of John Cage. There are plans for a worldwide celebration of this event, and presentations are already being listed at <johncage.org>. I am wondering what, or whom, precisely, are we supposed to be celebrating?

John Cage's career can, in an admittedly simplistic manner, be divided into two large periods: 1931-1951, and 1951-1992, the year of his death. For the first twenty years of his composing life, Cage experimented with a variety of compositional procedures. Several of the pieces he composed during this period are, in my opinion, quite interesting and enjoyable. Some of his more interesting works are the *Constructions*, *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs*, and *Sonatas and Interludes*, one of his concert pieces utilizing one of his greatest innovations, the prepared piano. There are also several works during this period that, again in my estimation, are historically significant for their experimentation, even if they are musically naïve; *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* would be an example of this.

The second general period of Cage's work is entirely involved with chance procedures, using the *I Ching* to generate data that is then translated into musical dimensional information. Although Cage actually began occasionally experimenting with chance procedures earlier in his career, it was not until 1951 that he adopted indeterminacy as his only compositional method. Why did Cage make this change and why did he do so at this date? To answer these questions, we must look back in time, first to the role of the artist in western history, and then to the post World War II social and philosophic environment.

In considering the role of the artist in the western world, we see a major change occurring with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. While some may argue some vestige of this portion of the Roman Empire continued throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods in the form of the Roman Catholic Church, from about 476 CE, the control of Rome over Western Europe had effectively ended. This was the beginning of the Middle Ages, a period that was to last for almost a thousand years, and one that was dominated by the influence of the universal church as constituted by Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. With the collapse of the former Roman infrastructure, churches developed regional differences, but Pope Gregory, in the late sixth century, did much to unify the Roman Church.

In the world of Europe in the Middle Ages, the artist, especially the composer, was almost always anonymous. The rule for creativity was based on *Ecclesiastes* 1:9: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that

which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." So the idea of creating anything new was, quite simply, impossible. The role of the medieval composer was not to create new music, but rather to connect pre-existing motives with each other, either with no or with a very few added pitches. Many of these pre-existing motives are from ancient sources, collections of motivic modes, some of which can be traced back to ancient Jewish chant. If there were older surviving traditions, I expect that many of these melodic fragments would be seen to be very ancient indeed. Gregorian Chant is, itself, an amalgamation of ten distinct Christian chant traditions existing prior to the sixth century, and each of these drew on much more ancient sources.

Not only could the medieval composer not create any new music, but add to this belief the edict from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 that "all is vanity," and you have the foundation for number four of the seven deadly sins, pride. Taking pride in one's work, heralding one's accomplishments, was seen as an unforgivable imposition of ego. So composers, like other artists, knew their place, which was to serve God by serving the Church and remain anonymous in doing so. You do not need all the fingers of one hand to count the known names of composers in Western Europe before the tenth century.

As the Church was, essentially, the sole conservator of culture and knowledge in the early medieval period, and there was a general collapse of the organization that had existed under ancient Rome, the development of secular culture was very slow. But, eventually, this begins to change, and there is sort of an exponential broadening of society and culture in the late Middle Ages, through the *Ars Nova*, and into the Renaissance. Increasingly, individual artists become known and noted, both inside and outside the Church, and the application of artistic ego became not only accepted, but also expected, even celebrated.

Still, throughout the Renaissance, Baroque, and early Classical periods, most artists, and certainly all composers who were not nobility, needed a patron, religious, secular, or both, in order to survive. It was not until the late eighteenth century that composers were able to make a living by giving public concerts; Haydn began doing this in London in 1791. By this time, of course, many composers were well known, at least to those educated in and experienced with the arts. Eventually, in the nineteenth century, some composers, like poets, painters, and writers, became great romantic figures and assumed great fame. Many were people of outsized egos, such as Wagner, who could, by some measures, be considered megalomaniacal. Ego was no longer a negative in the world of art and music; it was a beneficial and expected commodity.

It is axiomatic that what happens in the arts at any given time is also part of what is going on in the rest of society and culture. To what degree the arts of any given period truly represent the rest of the world they exist in may be debatable, but there is always some connection. If there is turmoil in the arts, it is likely there is a general agitation in society in general, and that was certainly true of

much of the twentieth century, particularly in Europe. Like great artists who imposed their beliefs and aesthetics on not only their work but also the work of others, Europe developed powerful leaders in the 1930s, leaders whose egos literally ruled nations. Of course this is nothing new in human history, but Europe had been relatively settled since Napoleon or, at least, had not experienced leaders afflicted with megalomania until people like Hitler and Mussolini came along. Here were people whose egos were truly outsized, of Alexandrian proportions, and uninhibited by any moral compass except their own self-importance. There was no area of life, including the arts, which they did not control or remake in their own vision. There were no limits to their ambitions of power and control. The result was World War II and the destruction of much of Europe.

Imagine yourself an artist, a composer, coming out of the ashes of the disaster and destruction of war in 1945, experiencing the wreckage of civilization caused by the imposition of great ego. The idea that art was an expression of the ideas, will, and ego of the individual artist might have seemed a difficult proposition to accept. Indeed, ego and its insertion into the artistic process as the result of making decisions based on subjective personal choice could easily be seen as unacceptable, even evil. A new paradigm for the generation of art had to be asserted, and nothing looked better at the moment than an abstraction of the scientific method, the best procedure yet devised by humans to insure a high degree of objectivity. The foundation for this in music had already been laid. Schoenberg's dodecaphonic method had existed since 1921, and had been expanded by Webern. Although almost exclusively used to control the ordering of pitch elements, it was seen by Herbert Eimert (a major influence on Stockhausen) to be able to be applied to other dimensions of musical data, such as duration, dynamics, and spectra. Thus was born the idea of European Serialism, the notion of creating data based on some supposed "rational" basis and then translating this data into musical dimensional information. Two of the greatest attempts at achieving this idea are Stockhausen's electronic works *Studie I* (1953) and *Studie II* (1954). The first is based on the number "6" and the second on the number "5." Stockhausen attempts in these works to realize Eimert's dream of a totally serialized music created by electronic means, music which avoids (insofar as possible) any personal choices made by the composer, and is based on logical, autonomous procedures.

I have written and spoken many times on the differences between what I call "relational" compositional procedures and "translational" ones. In relational composition procedure, the meaning of the music (teleology) is created by the relationships formed among the various pieces of dimensional information combined together in a way that expresses musical ideas and meanings that have evolved through the millennia. While I do not believe in music as a universal language, and I think that all experience exists within a defined context, the extrapolation of what is meaningful in experience is the only way to create effective communication in music. The teleology of a work is the intentionally

imparted ideas and meanings placed there by the composer, and this, in a final sense, is what a particular work of relational music is about. In translational works, on the other hand, data created in a way that has no relation to evolved musical processes is simply translated into sound. Translational music cannot relate any teleology since the compositional procedure is foreign to human perception. (One can, of course, imitate or recreate a particular work through translational means.) But this is what the serialists wanted: a music that was impersonal, safe, the product of a supposed logical procedure, and, in the final analysis, could not impart any aspect of the personality of the composer and therefore be open to (negative) criticism of any kind. This was an art above reproach, even if it was also an art without meaning. Indeed, it must be without meaning in order to be safe and unassailable. American serialism, chiefly invented and developed by Milton Babbitt, was a different and later development, but it, too, was based on translational procedures.

Around the same time as Eimert began dreaming of serial music, John Cage began experimenting with chance procedures in a serious way. In the *Concerto for Prepared Piano* (1950-51) and *Music of Changes* (1951) Cage began to apply chance to his works, the latter work using the *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, a geomantic system for divination dating from the fourth century BCE. One of Cage's most ambitious early chance pieces is *Williams Mix* (1951-53), a concrete work for eight tapes, which requires almost humanly impossible feats of tape splicing to complete. Cage, of course, did not personally experience the destruction of his European counterparts, and I cannot say to what, if any, degree he was affected by this. But, for the same or different reasons, Cage also arrived at the decision that ego and personal choice were things that needed to be systematically eliminated from the creative process. "If you develop an ear for sounds that are musical it is like developing an ego." he said, which shows his supposed disdain for self-importance during this period of his life. In a recorded conversation released in 1972 on the Odeon label (*Music Before Revolution*), Cage stated "I wished, when I first used chance operations, to make a music in which I would not express my feelings, or my ideas, but in which the sounds themselves would change me. I would discover, through the use of chance operations, done faithfully and conscientiously, that the things that I thought I did not like, I actually liked. So that rather than becoming a more refined musician, I would become more and more open to the various possibilities of sound. This has actually happened, so that my preferences as an individual, in terms of musical aesthetic experience, is not any of my music, and not any of the music of any other composer, but rather the sounds and noises of everyday life."

Here Cage reveals what he claims is his true purpose for using chance procedures. He wants to avoid ego. He wants to avoid personal choice. The procedures must be applied "faithfully and conscientiously" in order to assure this. Whatever results from the application of the procedures is acceptable, no matter what the outcome may be. Many people misunderstand Cage's philosophy during his chance period. They think Cage's point is that you can do

anything you feel like doing. Nothing could be further from the truth. This would be creating out of ego from personal choice, which, by 1951, was anathema to Cage. There is a story about a rehearsal of *Atlas Eclipticalis* in London where Cage became angry with the musicians in the orchestra because they were just playing what they felt like instead of following the stated procedures.

Cage's influences come from beyond the world of music, and, after he moved to New York in 1942, he met many painters and other visual artists, including those involved in the abstract expressionist movement. While this group had many artists with varying styles, some of them, such as Jackson Pollock, eventually began creating visual art out of translational procedures themselves. The thinking of artists such as Marcel Duchamp ("Art is either plagiarism or revolution." "Destruction is also creation.") undoubtedly had an important influence in Cage and the development of his ideas; Duchamp himself had largely abandoned the making of art for playing chess in 1923.

So, from 1951 on, Cage did not really "compose" musical works, but rather created instructions based on chance procedures for generating sound by whatever means he chose. It is easy to see that, while Cage's practice is irrational as compared to the serialists, both practices are simply opposite sides of the same coin. They are translational procedures imposed to insure that ego and personal choice are dealt out of the creative process. In both cases, whatever results from the translational procedures is acceptable. Curiously, however, the serialists, particularly Boulez and Stockhausen, disapproved of Cage's procedures and their results. Xenakis, disliked both serialism and chance, but seemed particularly opposed to chance, stating that it was "...an abuse of language and ... an abrogation of a composer's function."

Lest you think that I am insinuating that relational and translational compositional procedures are mutually exclusive, allow me to state categorically that this is not the case. I view most everything as continua, and so most things, for me, exist on a sliding scale. While I consider myself a composer dedicated to relational procedures, I have, at times, incorporated translational procedures in minor ways to deal with elements in a particular dimension of music that, at a given point of a piece, is not of major concern to me. In these cases, I am after a more general, less specific degree of control. But, usually, I am making compositional decisions based on achieving a particular goal (teleology) that I want to accomplish. But even for those composers who wish, as Cage seemed to do, to create at one extreme of a continuum, it is impossible to do so. The serialists would like to believe that they could control every facet of their creation, but, if their work is played by any instruments that they, themselves, did not make, these composers have, at least partially, abandoned the control of timbre. And who can completely control the sonic environment in which a work of music is heard? Similarly, Cage could not create a situation in which everything was left to chance. At some point, he had to make decisions about the forces creating

the sound, the amount of time something would last, and the environment housing the performance, to name a few things.

But what I find particularly strange about Cage's chance period is the prodigiousness of his output. From 1951 through 1992 Cage created over one hundred chance "works," mostly sets of instructions. Given that any chance piece (set of instructions for generating sound) could have infinite realizations, each one creating a different result, why would Cage create more than one chance composition? The only reasonable answer is ego. Cage's ideas of creating and using chance procedures took off like none of his previous work did. His success grew, along with commissions, concerts, recordings, books, personal appearances, and other things that put and kept him in the public view, things that were also profitable. The disillusionment that he had experienced in the 1940s, a period where he seriously questioned the value of his work and music in general, faded away into a newfound celebrity and success. In order to maintain this, he had to keep creating new chance pieces. Now this not only seems reasonable but also sensible until you consider the basis for Cage's entire chance period. It is simply impossible for someone to logically be simultaneously in opposition to himself. Cage could not base his entire aesthetic on the elimination of ego and then proceed to generate more work in order to aggrandize his ego and position. This, it seems to me, is extremely self-contradictory and, basically, puts the lie to Cage's entire philosophy during the last forty years of his life.

None of the translational-based composers of the past or present have really left ego behind in the manner of the medieval composer. These avant-garde advocates may expound a system of abstract rationality or egoless irrationality, but they all want to be noticed. Usually, when you read their writing or hear them talk, they pontificate on the details of their procedures and means of production, but seldom do they actually discuss the music the listener will experience as anything beyond the results of their procedural elegance. To these composers, the music, itself, seems to have little importance. Perhaps that is because it is meaningless; only process really matters.

While I did not know John Cage, I have known several composers who worked with him, and they have all told me that Cage was very careful about things like publicity and presentation. One composer (who shall remain nameless) told me that, while a graduate student, he assisted Cage in a performance. This was during the summer and the building the concert took place in did not have air conditioning, so the windows were open. During the concert, a dog began barking outside. Cage, obviously annoyed by this indeterminate sound material, stopped the performance and waited until the dog stopped barking before continuing. If he truly believed in what he preached, it seems to me that Cage would have gladly accepted this chance encounter with his favorite sort of material, "...the sounds and noises of everyday life."

That most of the so-called music avant-garde of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s fell into one of the two main translational camps has led to a curious situation with whatever is left of contemporary art music. (Actually, I think art music, like all high art culture is dead. All that is left are museums, no matter what names the buildings or organizations might have.) Because so many people have, for so long a time, become accustomed to the results of translational procedures, any conglomeration of sounds has become acceptable as music. While few composers today may utilize chance or serial procedures, many do use algorithmic procedures that are also translational. And young composers, to whom the music of the 1950s and 1960s is new and novel, may be increasingly falling back on these procedural warhorses that Xenakis termed "...an abrogation of a composer's function." Not long ago, a young composition student informed me of his delight in being able to use serial procedures. He assured me that this enabled him to compose a lot of music very quickly without having to think much about it. I have heard essentially the same thing said by composers who use algorithmic procedures.

In the academic world, the composers of the 1950s and 1960s have become iconic. They are presented as not only past masters of musical composition, but also as the pinnacle of what seems to be an eternal avant-garde. Writing about film in the July 2011 issue of *Harper's*, David Thomson notes "Academics will always thrive on elevating bad movies into an art form, with its own hall of fame." The same can certainly be said about music. In academia, the works presented as great and important "contemporary" music in many college classes are the same ones that were dished out to me in the 1960s. But, then, most of these works were new and could at least be regarded as "experimental." Most college composer/professors seem to teach what they have been taught, and we are now on the fourth or fifth generation of composers who are repeating the same mantras. Why? For exactly the same reasons as these translational works were initially created: safety, security, and lack of assailability. As a result, the definition and meaning of "music" has been reduced to nothing; it is a meaningless term. In most academic circles, the definition of "music" is merely sound in time. Some academics will refuse to accept "time" as part of the equation, and a few will even argue against "sound." Music is, therefore, whatever you want it to be. And this is exactly what Cage wanted, because his position, during his chance period, was to not only invalidate the ego of the composer, but also deny all responsibility for whatever the sounding result of his "works" were. From Cage's point of view, it is up to each listener to accept, reject, and make sense or not out of the results of any of his chance pieces. Cage takes no responsibility for his work or its results.

"The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all." Cage stated. "I have nothing to say, I am saying it, and that is poetry, as I need it." So, at last, we come to the essence of Cage's chance period: nihilism. But it is nihilism in the service of ego and celebrity. Cage found a horse that people seemed to like and he never dismounted.

Cage also said, " Get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in." He does not seem to have followed his own advice. Cage caged himself in a self-contradictory and logically indefensible position. But we are used to this in politics, and so, if it is successful, even though it is dangerous, we buy into it.

So I am back to my original question posed at the beginning of this article: Exactly what or whom are we supposed to be celebrating during the Cage Centennial? If it is the John Cage of the first twenty years of his career, I think that makes sense. There are many interesting works and innovations in Cage's music of this period. But if it is the person and work of the last forty years of Cage's life that is being feted, I have a problem. It is sort of like believing that the Wizard of Oz was, after all, a great wizard, long after his out-of-control balloon has been blown away to who-knows-where. To deny the importance of ego by commemorating it seems very strange to me. To applaud the abandonment of meaning in any defined current context because the universe, itself, may be meaningless, is to open oneself to solipsism or suicide.

In *The Grand Design*, Stephen Hawking declares, "...philosophy is dead." He is probably correct. And with the passing of philosophy in general also goes the field of axiology, of which aesthetics and ethics are branches. If there is no value to be found in anything, then Cage's uses of chance procedures are as good as anything else, as would be true of any other translational compositional procedure. But try applying these ideas to other areas of life. Would you like to eat food created by chance or other translational procedures? How about suffering medical practices based on these ideas? Would you like your government to operate this way? The point of civilization has been to create a degree of security, certainty, and meaning in a scary universe.

Art has, traditionally, been about communicating aspects of the artist, either in terms of a general culture and/or of a more personal nature, which, yes, does involve ego. And while personal aesthetics are always somewhat subjective, most of us have no problem applying them. As intelligent creatures, we constantly battle against the ever-present storm of uncertainty, and part of this has been to create society and culture that, in one way or another, celebrate the human spirit and its imagination. We may fail more often than we succeed, and, perhaps, that makes what positive accomplishments we have as individuals and as a race even more valuable. Still, the world operates mainly on two principals: fear and indoctrination. To assume and accept a position merely because you have been told to do so and you fear intimidation if you do not, is to put yourself in a cage of your own making. I find it difficult to believe that John Cage would approve of this.

"It is 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." - John Cage