

Cagean philosophy: a devious version of the classical procedural paradigm

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"The dissipation of music"

The history of modern music in the second half of this century has been drastically and deeply marked by one name: John Cage. Much more than his music, his ideas have been so influential that it would not be exaggerated to think of most present avantgarde / experimental / contemporary music scenes as being Cagean to a bigger or lesser extent. Although this is more clear and intense in the United States and Canada, it also happens in the rest of the Western world.

It is my belief that this influence has been -and indeed still is- heavily pernicious for music and that Cagean philosophy, in its essence, is an exacerbated version of a classical paradigm in traditional Western music. My criticism is not a personal attack to Cage, who, as far as I know, was a very nice person (although this depends on the subjective concept of "nice"). On the contrary, it is a critical analysis of what I understand as the core of his musical thought and of its consequences in modern music and musical thinking. If -as many Cageans often suggest- Cage never was an active upholder of his ideas, then I must be criticizing Cageans. Furthermore, I must stress the fact that these anti-Cagean arguments are part of a larger critique to what I consider as a wider problem in modern music. My goal is not to fight against an already established system of values just for the sake of fighting -I don't believe in the need of change by definition nor in the crusades against the traditional by themselves- but because these values have a profound effect in stating what is important in music and, consequently, in the resulting music.

Cage's musical thought can be foreseen as a very good solution to his personal problems with the question of composition. Without doubt his escape path from the compositional challenges faced as a student of Schönberg was outrageous and brilliant in the sense that he not only found a non-Schönbergian solution but it also led him to explore new fields that were far beyond serialism. The essence of this solution -or, in other words, of Cage's main contribution- can be foreseen as a proposition of non intervention, of decision-free attitude, of dissoluteness of the idea of composer / composition, deeply rooted in (or at least explicitly connected to) Zen philosophy. Randomization of sets of possible decisions regarding the creation of music is thus understood as a form of liberation of the music from the imperatives of human intervention. An explicit and strong sense of beauty is found in the fact that some or all the organizational / structural / constituent features of some music have been generated independently of us (a very common appreciation in the realms of improvised music). Music would thus be freed from taste and memory, specifically from traditions concerning music-making. Indeed, in the Cagean microcosmos any sound is music: "Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we're in or out of concert halls", "Sounds we hear are music", which is generally postulated by Cageans as an historical statement expanding the concept of music to a terrain with virtually no frontiers. And so it is the statement on the non existence of silence: "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot".

It is understandable that all of this sounded (and sound) revolutionary for most traditionalist mentalities, but, is it? why? what's the direction -if any- of that "revolution"?

These thoughts could certainly be considered as astoundingly atypical for that time, but in no way revolutionary with regards to the change of basic concerns and focus of traditional Western music. Every struggle in Cagean philosophy is centered (or arises from) the procedures in music creation, no matter how radical or how anti-creative the proposition made seems to be. The apparently radical confrontation with traditional compositional concerns is a devious way of being trapped once again in the old pitfall of proceduralism and craftsmanship as reference points for the understanding of music. Thus, the classical paradigm on the relevance of compositional techniques is not only kept well present but further elevated to a category of definitive idea in music (something not new but perhaps exaggerated in a peculiar way). In this sense, a strict formalist / structuralist view of music is not essentially different from the Cagean one; both share in a very intimate way the methodical conception of the musical world. While they can be fiercely fighting for a different system of values, this system relates to the same thing.

Cagean proposition of composer / composition dissoluteness is a vain attempt to run away from oneself, a rhetorical game of deciding-not-to-decide that has not consequently been followed by any known Cagean, including Cage. Concepts of indeterminacy and non intervention, rhetorically connected to Zen philosophy, are used as mere adornments of an attitude that, not having the awareness or the courage to be fully consistent with them, still firmly keeps the academic version of the figure of the composer. Instead of being a solid nihilistic achievement that shakes some academic foundations (assuming this to be something desirable), it transform music practitioners to (or induce them to become) mere executors of a randomizer liturgy. Thus, it is decided in which way randomness is going to be applied within the musical action that is being carried out, often obtaining the surprise / charm of naive audiences.

The application of a random procedure for the arisal / creation / construction of a piece is a perfectly defined, intentional and clearly designated decision; even although the randomization procedure is serious (i.e., according to a formal probabilistic theory) and "total" (i.e., with equal probability for any possible event). The belief that one is doing random music when proceeding in such a way is formally equivalent to the statement / affirmation that music *is* the set of parameters and the set of events to which the probabilistic procedure is going to be applied to. If music is not just that (as I believe), then a *decision* has been made, selecting some of the possible parameters to be subjected to the procedure. According to this, it's impossible to conceive a total random music, freed of taste and memory. And, indeed, randomization has become another tradition of music regarding procedures in music-making. It is actually an extreme form of formalism. As such formalism (but pragmatically justified) is understood and applied in science (e.g., methodical application of randomization procedures to obtain adequate samples in empirical studies).

Nevertheless, even more relevant than the discussion on their consistency and feasibility, is the question of what is the conception of music behind these propositions. A hypothetical total cessation of decision could be fully consistent with the idea of non intervention, but will also be the destruction of music, for music is human, while sound existence is not. When Cage equals music to sounds, it either destroys the entity of music in an unconscious reductionism to pure physics or denies the possibility of non-musical existence of sound, which, in the end, are equivalent. Facing classical discrimination of some sounds as non-musical according to untenable criteria of tonality or "pleasantness" -but with the same futile attempt of universality- Cagean though assigns a reactionary indiscriminate *per se* value to all sounds. And, because of this, Cageans use to quote Cage as the expander of music with the consideration of all sounds. As most of them probably know, this merit belongs to Luigi Russolo, who, unlike Cage, did not dissolved the entities but proposed the incorporation of sounds into music. I strongly believe that any sound *can be* music, but not that *is* music. The essential difference, what converts a sound into music, is a human, subjective, intentional, non-universal, not necessarily permanent, aesthetic, *decision*. And this does not mean composition, nor academic definition, but a way of perceiving certain sounds in a certain time by a certain person. The problem -and common ground- of both the traditional and the Cagean definitions of music is that they rely on sound itself; they both state *which* sounds are music (whether only some or all). In my current world, music is an aesthetic perception / understanding / conception of sound. This is a very precise definition providing a totally non-absolute assignment of sounds to music. But I don't think we need, nor we should pursue, such an absolute

assignment.

Cage's statement on the non-existence of silence is also deeply related to his conception of music, and it has been elevated to the category of philosophical dictum by many Cageans. It is, however, a puerile and misleading assertion, especially if we take into consideration that he needed to experience an anechoic chamber to realize what he realized: that physical absolute silence does not exist. This is as puerile and misleading as the assertion that a circle does not exist in reality; geometry would be impossible in the Cagean world. If music is sounds and we are always surrounded by sounds, silence obviously does not exist. This statement is nothing but a different version of the same definition of music. Within the context of this discussion, my simple but forceful reply would be: silence indeed does exist; in music. If I were a sound physicist I would say: when the sound level is below a certain limit that I have fixed beforehand with a certain purpose, then there is silence.

So, why am I concerned with this anti-Cagean criticism? Why do I think that this critique is important? Because no matter the background philosophy, no matter the concept addressed, no matter the context, the main point is always -and in a very essential sense- about the way music is made, about the *procedure*. And this is a misleading distraction for music. It distracts the attention of music practitioners (creators, perceivers or whatever) from the actual music to the way it has been made. The procedure becomes a value in itself, for its own sake. The effects of this distraction are very patent and widespread: in addition to the classical additives of, say, virtuosism and elegant spectacle, now we have additives of new procedural worship (evidently, not only as a consequence of Cagean though), and both are not essentially different in their effect on music. Cagean anti-compositional, anti-traditionalist propositions convert the procedure in the goal of music as much as traditional solfa, and distract the attention from essential qualities of music as much as traditional schools of music. I believe that Cage "revolution", instead of "freeing music from taste and traditions", re-restricted it again to the fences of the same old Western paradigm of formalism and proceduralism. It's no use to fight the traditions just running away from them within their land and staying in a hideout offered by them and, therefore, illusory as such hideout. This is puerile and futile. Let's cope with the traditions face to face instead of exaggerating what we want to change from them in a convulsory movement of negation. I don't think it's possible for music to be freed from taste and memory (and Cageans themselves are a proof of this) but, what is more important and relevant, I don't think it should; even in the more extreme position of anti-traditionalism.

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