"The right to be myself, as long as I live! As if I were a sound.": Postmodernism and the Music of John Cage

Nancy Perloff

from POSTMODERNISM: THE KEY FIGURES, ed. Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli (2002), Blackwell, © 2002

RELATED RESOURCE:

- John Cage in UbuWeb Sound
- John Cage in UbuWeb Historical
- John Cage in the UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing
- "The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage's "What You Say"" Marjorie Perloff

In 1972, as the term "postmodernism" was beginning to gain wide currency, the American composer John Cage offered the following observations on the new music. His remarks, first made during the recording of the TV film *Birdcage* on April 7, 1972, appeared later in the periodical *Protokolle-Wiener Halbjahresschrift fur Literature, Bildende Kunst und Musik* (1974) and then in the journal *October* (1997):

> "The two kinds of music now that interest me are on the one hand a music which is performed by everyone. And I would like to say that the Chinese people are, from my point of view, now performing a beautiful music which I would actually like to go and hear . . So I like that music by many, many people. And here, more and more in my performances, I try to bring about a situation in which there is no difference between the audience and the performers. And I'm not speaking of audience participation in something designed by the composer, but rather am I speaking of the music which arises through the activity of both performers and so-called audience. . . The other kind of music that interests me is one which has been traditionally interesting and enjoyable down through the ages, and that's music which one makes oneself without constraining others. If you can do it by yourself you're not in a situation of telling someone else what to do." (Cage and Helms, 1997, pp. 82-83)

Cage's writings, his often detailed written instructions for performance, his explanations of compositional procedure, and his musical scores, all

produced during a long and prolific career (b. 1912, d. 1992), provide extraordinarily rich and varied evidence of his role as twentieth-century modernist and as source for postmodern aesthetics. The vast modal differences underlying the writings, scores, and live performances also point to problems inherent in applying a "modernist" or "postmodernist" label to John Cage. In the early 1970s, as we see in the comments quoted above, Cage endorsed collaborative musical performances in which the audience worked together with performers, fusing art with its environment, and in which the composer's will did not constrain participants' activities. This de-centered, collaborative, and heterogeneous principle for musical performance seems very postmodern. Yet the decisive presence of Cage's ego ("I like", "I try to bring about"), as well as the value he attached to historical musical practice, steered a modernist course. He designed and determined the performance situation, no matter how many participants were involved, and relied on his invention of chosen traditions from the past.

Did Cage tend more toward "modernism" or "postmodernism"? How is his radical contribution best understood? Cage moves between the seemingly oppositional contexts of postmodernism in the 1970s and 80s, and European modernism in the early twentieth century, with reference especially to the art of Erik Satie (whom Cage championed), Italian Futurism, and German Dada. Cage's friendship and intellectual exchange with the French composer, Pierre Boulez, during the early 1950s offers a third vantage point. Although the three contexts are quite separate, stylistically and chronologically, each is integral to the evolving Cage oeuvre. Yet none entirely accounts for his radicality. Through a discussion of these comparative settings, Cage emerges as an experimentalist and an avant-garde figure who believed in his responsibility to change the world through new music.

Writers on music have used "postmodernism" less frequently than critics in other fields. Even when comprised of quotation and appropriated soudns, music is an abstract language. In the case of Cage, a particularly complex scenario emerges. Here we have a composer who wrote poetic texts and mesostics, transformed the score into a visual object, and created music to

be performed with dance and theater. Owing perhaps to the revolutionary changes Cage introduced in the meaning of musical composition, critics have skirted the issue of Cage's postmodernism, identifying him instead as a leader of the late twentieth-century avant-garde. By reviewing the postmodernist debate in relation to Cage, what conclusions might be drawn about the usefulness of "postmodernist" or avant-garde in defining his art?

The few critics who address Cage's links to postmodernism (Henry Sayre, Richard C. Hobbs, David Shapiro) identify his collaboration with Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham, beginning with their Dadaist "Happening" at Black Mountain College in 1952, as a significant impetus for the avant-garde of the 70s. They define Cage's collaborative work on the "Happening" and on experimental dance in New York City as instances of "theatricality", a term applied by Michael Fried in 1982 to contemporary painting and sculpture which "depends for its effects of 'presence' on the staging, the conspicuous manipulation, of its relation to an audience" (Sayre, 1989, p. 9) In the years following Fried's introduction of the term, "theatricality" came to coincide with "postmodernism" and shifted from single media art to a performative art revealed through the collaboration of performers and audience, and of high and vernacular media, sounds, and images. The modernist frame disappeared in postmodernism, replaced by contingency and fragmentation.

The experimental performance or "Happening" which Cage created and staged in the dining hall at Black Mountain College placed the performers in the aisles among the audience and presented a range of simultaneous but unrelated events: John Cage on a ladder reciting either his Meister Eckhart lecture, lines from Meister Eckhart, a lecture on Zen Buddhism, the Bill of Rights, or the Declaration of Independence; Merce Cunningham dancing around the chairs; Rauschenberg standing in front of his paintings or playing scratchy Edith Piaf recordings at double speed; David Tudor playing a prepared piano and a small radio; and M.C. Richards and Charles Olson perched on a different ladder and reading from their poetry. No narrative unfolded. But the events witnessed by the audience were staged and could be enhanced and refined by the performers, in the course of performance. (Harris, 1987, pp. 226; 228) In both respects, Cage's "Happening" was a

new form of theater.

This theatricality and the close link between performance and composition prompted Sayre to identify Cage, Rauschenberg and Cunningham as the originators of postmodernism. Sayre supported his argument with a discussion of important documents such as the "Interview with Roger Reynolds", published in 1962 in the Henmar Press catalogue of Cage's compositions through 1962, the essay "Composition as Process", and particular compositions. In the Roger Reynolds interview, Cage redefined the nature of composition. Composition was not a finished, static object performed before an audience of passive listeners, but, rather, a changing acoustical experience subjective to each individual (performer and auditor) in the performance space. Since the performance action might have no beginning, middle, or end, and no discernible ordering of events, the composition as process opened the possibility for many different receptions and critiques by the audience. The French philosopher Roland Barthes concurred with the argument that Cage introduced a new music. Barthes' analysis of this break linked the new role of performance with the idea of multiple signifiers in Cage's music and the ceaseless production of new signifiers during the act of listening. In Barthes's view, a sharp line had to be drawn between classical music, with its requirements that listeners decipher the construction of the piece from a code, and what he called the "new music as exemplified by Cage", which offered listeners a *"shimmering* of signifiers". This heterogeneity of codes with their shifting meanings and referents affected the listening process, which Barthes compared to the experience of reading a modern text: "Just as the reading of the modern text…does not consist in receiving, in knowing or in feeling this text, but in writing it anew", there is a kind of composition that requires us "to perform" it, "to operate" its music, "to lure it (as it lends itself) into an unknown *praxis.* (Barthes, 1985, pp. 259; 265) Here Barthes implicitly concurred with Sayre's view that the performative requirements of Cage's music define its novelty and hence its postmodernism.

Both the dancer Yvonne Rainer and the critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno discussed Cagian ideas associated with postmodernism, and attack them as apolitical and uncritical. In talking about Cage's impact on her

dance, Rainer praised the precedents he established for a new nonhierarchical, indeterminate organization, but argued that this nonhierarchy still failed to enable us to, as Cage would have it, "wake up to the excellent life we are living". On the contrary, she asserted, the critical insights gained from new methods of indeterminate composition and performance lead us to *question* whether the life we lead is so excellent, so just, so right, and how and why we have been led to believe this (Sayre, 1989, p. 8). Adorno attacked Cage for the practice of indeterminacy, the freedom to let sounds be sounds, the aesthetic of a composition's interpenetration with its surroundings. The philosopher endorses, instead, relative autonomy of the work of art from its social conditions, believing both in the composer's independence and his exertion of some control, so that the work assumed a critical function in relation to society. (Joseph, 1997, pp. 90; 95)

In *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works,* Lydia Goehr took a different tack on the radical nature of the ego in Cage. She argued that Cage did not succeed in abdicating control of, and hence distance from, the musical performance and attributed this 'failure' to a split between his theory (his ideas and aspirations) and his actual musical practice. Goehr avoided the terms "postmodern" or "modern", but posited that a chance-inspired musical work like the celebrated "4'33", premiered by David Tudor in 1952, still operated within the protocols of the concert hall. The concert setting conveyed a message to the audience about when to applaud and how to behave during the performance. The fixed duration told the audience to follow this behavior during an allotted time period. Cage intended to relinquish control over the performance, so that the sounds of audience and space would produce the contents of the piece. In Goehr's view, however, theory and practice went their separate ways, since specific performance instructions circumscribed the range of random sounds and events. (Goehr, 1992, pp. 261-264) Whereas Rainer and Adorno believed that a stronger ego would articulate a critique of social conditions, Goehr asserted that Cage's performances were the result of a powerful ego, which imposed choices that inadvertently *strengthened,* rather than undermined, the work-concept.

In seizing upon Cage's theatricality and nonhierarchy as a source for postmodernism of the 70s, critics overlooked the emergence of collaborative and mixed media performance in Europe as early as the 1910s. (Sayre, 1989, p. 9) Satie's 'lyric comedy in one act. . . with dance music by the same gentleman', *Le Piège de Méduse* (Medusa's Trap) (1913), was revived as part of a Satie Festival organized by Cage at Black Mountain College in 1948. The production, which marked the American premiere, featured Buckminster Fuller as the Baron Medusa, Merce Cunningham as the mechanical monkey, sets by Elaine de Kooning, dances performed by Cunningham, and piano accompaniment by Cage. While fully notated and scripted (far from a chance piece), *Piège de Méduse* experiments with absurdist word-play, outrageous disjunctions between dialogue and stage action, and mixed media (dance, theater, music). (Whiting, 1999, pp. 449-60) It surely influenced Cage's Black Mountain "Happening" staged four years later with Cunningham. *Méduse* coincided in time with the Italian Futurists' organization of concerts of new sounds and with the Dadaists' creation of a new form of poetic recitation. Luigi Russolo, the pioneer of Futurist music, broke the "limited circle of pure sounds" by composing scores for *intonorumori* (noise-intoners). He designed these instruments to produce noise-sounds divided into six timbral types: "booms, whistles, whispers, screams, percussive sounds and vocal sounds (human and animal". He intended this medley to simulate the sounds of the street and vernacular life. Cage's interest in noise as the primary material of music indicates that he was familiar with Russolo's writings. (Pritchett, 1993, p. 12) For German Dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann, new performance expressed itself in an abstract poetry, in which the formal visual patterns of words and letters served also as scores for poetic recitation.

The modernist theater of Satie, Russolo, and Schwitters are but three examples of performance genres which preceded and inspired Cage. He studied the aesthetics of the past and borrowed from musical and philosophical traditions that intrigued him, in order to invent his own voice (Pasler, 1994, pp. 125; 133) It is important to recognize this practice as we define Cage's position *vis-à-vis* postmodernism. Whereas postmodernist

artists referred to historical practices through techniques of quotation and *bricolage,* Cage used history as an intensive research process involving reinterpretations of tradition from his contemporary vantage and leading to the discovery of a personal style.

Cage's serious study of the past began early in his career, during lessons in counterpoint and analysis with Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles (March, 1935 – Summer, 1937) and during a six-month stay in Europe in 1949. Cage spent the bulk of his time in Paris, where he went regularly to the Bibliothèque Nationale to study the life and work of Satie -- one year after he had arranged the celebrated Satie performance at Black Mountain. During his visit, Cage pursued Virgil Thomson's suggestion to contact Pierre Boulez, the most prominent French composer of the postwar avant-garde. The two developed a close friendship, which continued through correspondence when Cage returned to New York in November, 1949. (Nattiez, 1993, pp. 4-7) Cage was thirty-six, and Boulez twenty-four. A study of their friendship, their shared views on musical composition, and their gradual divergence, presents a new context for evaluating Cage as postmodernist. Is Boulez a postmodern composer? If not, does his position help define where Cage stands?

When he first met Boulez, Cage was searching for matrices with which to organize his works, particularly their rhythmic structure. A letter he received from Boulez in August 1951 suggests the nature of their Paris conversations. Using technical terms, Boulez described how the notion of the twelve-tone series could be generalized to apply not only to frequency but to intensities (volume), attacks, rhythm, and even timbre. (Nattiez, 1993, pp. 99ff) Boulez spoke of the "serial structure" of each musical parameter and introduced corresponding tables which mapped out the serial organization. This letter so impressed Cage that he translated much of it and published it in 1952 in the journal Transformations, with commentary by Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Cage. By bringing together the French serialist Boulez with American composers of chance and indeterminacy, Cage made a statement about the new music. He affirmed the common goal of composers of new music to isolate and compose for individual musical parameters, so that the parameters could then be

integrated in different combinations.

Boulez's admiration for Cage hinged on their common interest in doing away with Western European harmony and defining sound instead as an aggregate of timbre, frequency, attack, and duration. In a lecture Boulez delivered on Cage on June 17, 1949 (while Cage was in Paris), Boulez praised his colleague for "making use of sound complexes", instead of "pure sounds". In the published version of this lecture which appeared in 1952 in *La Revue Musicale* ("Possibly"), Boulez expanded this point:

> We also owe to John Cage the idea of sound complexes; for he has written works in which, instead of using pure sounds, he employs chords which have no harmonic function, being essentially a sort of amalgam of sounds linked to timbres, durations, and intensities. (Nattiez, 1993, p. 9)

Boulez was most likely thinking of the sounds of Cage's prepared piano, a magical tranformation of the piano into a percussion instrument capable of producing different timbres when materials (string, rubber band, metal coils…) were inserted between the strings. During the 1940s Cage had composed many pieces for prepared piano with which Boulez was clearly familiar.

The basis for friendship between the two young composers was solid: an interest in structure and in structural relations between musical parameters, in mathematical tables which charted out the different parameters, in sonic aggregates, in the idea of the series. They parted ways, however, as Cage became increasingly interested in chance and in a new performance situation. Boulez had always been critical of Morton Feldman's "imprecision" and "simplicity", but as early as December 1951 Boulez lashed out at Cage's precise use of chance in *Music of Changes* (1951):

> "The only thing, forgive me, which I am not happy with, is the method of absolute chance *(by tossing the coins).* On the contrary, I believe that chance must be extremely controlled: by using tables in general, or series of tables, I believe that it would be possible to direct the phenomenon of the automatism of chance, whether written down or not. . . there is already quite

enough of the unknown." (Nattiez, 1993, p. 17)

In *Music of Changes*, Cage used the *I Ching*, or Chinese *Book of Changes,* to create charts corresponding to three musical parameters: sound, duration, dynamics. To compose his piece, he tossed the dice (Boulez's coins), obtained numbers referring to different cells in his charts, devised a sound aggregate with the resultant frequency, duration, and dynamics cells, then threw the dice to construct the next sound. In Boulez's view, Cage left too much to chance. Boulez's use of mathematical tables, which Cage initially found appealing, utterly controlled both the compositional process and the outcome. The idea of selecting compositional materials according to chance methods was unacceptable to the French composer.

In his rejection of Western harmony and his application of the idea of the tone row of Schoenberg and Webern to all aspects of musical structure, Boulez stood as a leading avant-garde figure. He was not, however, a postmodernist or even a source for postmodernism, for reasons that are clear from his response to *Music of Changes*. Neither Boulez's theory nor his practice expressed an intent to remove the ego, make the auditor central, and fuse art with life. Seen in relation to Boulez, Cage was the American experimentalist who used the discipline practiced by Boulez to redefine both musical composition and performance, and to introduce randomness. Unlike those of Boulez, Cage's experiments involved collaboration with any number of artists in other media (Cunningham in dance, Rauschenberg and Johns in painting and set design, filmmakers, video artists). Recasting the modernism of Satie, Italian Futurism, Dada, and other early modernist movements, Cage infused the vernacular into his composition by giving audiences the freedom to move and participate and, during the 60s, by conceiving of the work as a disciplined *action* by the performer with or without sounds. (Pritchett, 1993, p. 146)

Yet to place Boulez with the avant-garde and Cage with postmodernism is far too simple. The two composers had much in common. Both believed in building upon tradition, in this case the serialism of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. Both believed that in applying serial structure to all musical components, they were extending and reinterpreting the work initiated by

this Second Viennese School to replace functional harmony with a disciplined counterpoint in which one sound did not imply the next. Neither Boulez nor Cage engaged in social and political satire or attack. They tended not to appropriate and combine fragments of social and cultural history, philosophy, or composition to create multiple voices and *simulacra.* Cage, in particular, sought to discover a "suitable past" from which to invent a tradition of which he was the logical heir, the next voice. (Pasler, 1994, pp. 125; 133) He was concerned to carve his place in history, his original voice. Absorbed by the past, Cage joined the "mainstream of musical modernism" and set himself apart from the "fading sense of history" and the life in a "perpetual present" of postmodernist culture. (Pasler, 1994, 140; Connor, 1989, p. 91)

In assessing whether the postmodernist label aptly defines Cagian composition and aesthetics, I have argued that his interest in theater and mixed media may have prefigured postmodernism; I have situated Cage in the context of European modernism of the 1910s and 20s; and I have discussed his work in relation to that of the French avant-garde composer Pierre Boulez. The missing link is the contribution of Cage to our understanding of the present world, independently of movements he may have anticipated, echoed, or refuted. With every decade, Cage's work changed dramatically. In the 1950s, he explored procedures of chance and indeterminacy, devising unique graphic notations which performers could realize in a myriad of ways and raising perplexing questions about critical evaluation based on the written score or on the performance (which always changed). Cage sought to create a world of interpenetrating sounds, without hierarchy among these sounds. (Pritchett, 1993, pp. 139; 146) In the 60s, Cage's aesthetic changed. Rather than treating the composition as a concrete object made up of sounds, he approached it as an action, a process in which the composer set up electronic components, and the performer realized a score that offered broad outlines, but no specifics. For instance, the score for Cage's *0'00 (4'33" no. 2)* of 1962 contains the following sentence: "In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action." By the 1970s, according to James Pritchett, Cage's aesthetic had changed again, preoccupied more with an

eclectic mixture of styles than with a single music of the future. (Pritchett, 1993, pp. 146; 158; 173)

Cage's production was diverse, yet motivated throughout by goals which cannot be contained within the postmodernist rubric. The utopian vision of modernism and American experimentalism led Cage to transform the traditional roles of composer, performer, and audience, and to introduce a vision of "freedom given to disciplined people" to change society and to show the "practicality of anarchy". (Cage, 1997, p. 81) Cage used chance procedures in order to shift the authorial voice from the composer, to the performer and to the individual members of the audience. His move away from self-expression resonates with the multiple voices of postmodernism, although indeterminacy operated within his chosen parameters. In addition, the "postmodernist" rubric does not adequately explain Cage's challenge to musical composition, the revolution he sparked in the 1950s by establishing *difference* between writing (the musical score) and sound (the performance). Cage paved the way for the production of works that were not fully notated or fixed. In the 1960s and 70s, Fluxus musicians went on to explore this idea of the "open work", which anticipated conceptual art. (Pepper, 1997, pp. 37-38) The Cagian tension between the written score and the variable performance, the resulting paradox that the score is autonomous, without fixed referent, the treatment of composition as process, the expansion of the possibility for multiple signifiers and critical receptions – such ideas propelled the avant-garde to new terrain. Explored in their own right, they distinguish Cage as a startlingly provocative voice whose originality made room for a new freedom for the contemporary audience.

Nancy Perloff

Curator of Modern and New Media Collections

Getty Research Institute

top