
What John Cage Did

Author: Kenneth Maue
E-Mail: 42slbt68@glinx.com

This article was first published in ROLLMAG: Common Sense Newsletter. It is published here with the permission of the author.

When I was a senior at Wesleyan, writing music in a style John Cage had pioneered around the time I was born, Cage came to Wesleyan for a visit. I was a kid aspiring to an arts career, wanting to bask in the light of the master, and so got the idea to dedicate some pieces to Cage and give them to him in person. I asked Dick Winslow, professor of music and friend of Cage, what he thought of the idea. "Well all right," Dick said, "but don't pester him."

Of course that's what I was doing, as Dick and I both knew. The day came, I knocked on the oak door, booklet of pieces in hand, and was greeted by a man busy at work, his desk strewn with scores - but not too busy for a kid he'd never heard of. Our visit was brief, but Cage gave me more than I'd hoped for. His respectful interest washed away any hint of pestering-student-and-celebrity-artist, and made us two fellow composers side-by-side over a day's work.

He asked me if he might publish some of the pieces in a magazine he was guest-editing that year. Oh, uh, yes, that would be fine; thank you. And I was out the door, knowing the man I'd just met was the man I'd found on the pages of his books - different from the hero many of us had put on a pedestal. I had met a man whose deep regard for other people was so affirming, one had to rethink everything.

Cloud of Hoopla

In those days Cage was at a peak of celebrity. It may be hard now to imagine how those two words, John Cage, ran like wildfire through the mind, a lightning bolt igniting all one's ideas with possibility. John Cage meant freedom - to follow every dictate of the soul out to its fullest flowering; indeed, a duty to free oneself, to speak with one's own true voice. The bursting 1960s culture found in this courageous artist a champion of liberation so principled that merely to hold his book in your hand was to declare that you too had joined a revolution of intelligence and joy.

There were always two John Cages: myth and artist. The myth perpetrated hilarious gibberish dressed up as art by earnest purpose, spouted cryptic wisdom, used bizarre musical methods, told witty tales, and trashed sacred norms - ever further beyond the pale, all with a towering integrity even detractors liked. John Cage was our myth of the free artist, his every gesture proof of a faith we craved. We honed our personal "John Cage stories," badges of nearness to the Promethean fire, while some scorned him; the media stoked the myth with his latest antics and pithy remarks. The myth was a cloud of hoopla, half true, half baloney, embarrassing many who loved him; yet for all its excess, a freedom song inviting us all to be true to ourselves.

Pianist and Composer

The artist was a disciplined inventor, a thinker of such lucid intelligence that anything he wrote sounded notable just by the way he said it, a pioneer of so many forms that countless artists acknowledge his mastery of their best ideas long ago in his zestful roving. He was so many things to so many people, it's easy to forget he was a musician: a pianist who played nightly for years in the orchestra pit of the Cunningham dance company, a composer who wrote a river of scores breathtaking in number, range, and beauty. He was a one-man education project bringing the public an idea of how music and life can happen, an idea fanciful or utopian on first glance, then turning out to be the common sense truth we most need if we're to avoid global ruin. His idea wasn't new, but it was new to the West: the paradox that freedom comes by surrendering, not exerting, our will, by accepting life as it is.

Paradox of Surrender

Today we hear this idea more often than in the decade after Cage's 1949 revelation that non-expressive music can bring peace more surely than the titanic emotions of Bach or Brahms. We're used to philosophies of acceptance, self-help calls for life-on-life's-terms. Yet surrendering our will still smells of defeat, the wreck of our dreams. Hasn't our good life come via the will? Maybe. But with bombs and toxins, rape and starvation, we know that will alone leads to hell; thus we grope our way into the paradox of surrender.

Cage built his art on the tough labor of accepting life, curbing desire and demand, distinguishing surrender from defeat, loving what we don't control. It's a strict discipline, takes a lifetime to learn, and may, if we work at it, save us from ourselves. Cage's eccentric practices weren't quaint self-indulgences; they were methods of casting off the yoke of will, of learning to live real freedom's hard paradox.

His ideas are far better known than his music - more palatable: nicer to view freedom than do it. But I find that over time, the music holds me more. I love the books as one loves a womb that birthed one's soul; the music, as much as anything I know, draws me ever deeper into life.

Rooms to Dwell In

Of course the music sounds weird. You don't go away humming it, and even those who listen to it often treat it like vitamins, good for you, not too yummy. Yet the oddness lies not in the sound, but in what the music is. Most music, Bach to pop, is like sculpture to regard: mass to focus on. Cage's music is like rooms to dwell in: places to be, less important for themselves than the life occurring in them.

This isn't esoteric, it's common sense, as I learned one day, years ago, when mourning the loss of a love. Seeking a music tape to touch my grief, I put on the Brahms Requiem. In minutes I was bored. Bored? Then I tried a Cage piece, a really crazy one, all screeches and pops - and wept for an hour. How had that jumble of noise moved my grief when the West's most sublime outcry of love's loss had not? The answer was Cage's truth: freedom to be oneself. The Brahms was like a friend you try to tell your grief to, and the friend tells you about his, blocking yours. The Cage gave me myself, as if it were listening to me.

This, I think, is why we chafe at his music: it doesn't lift us out of our lives, into the artist's feelings; it gives us who we are - an act of vast respect we're unused to. His music stumps us not because it sounds odd but because it sets us free. We say we love

freedom; we talk about it; the reality is a terrible, excruciating joy. Cage gave us that joy.

Thus his great faith: in ourselves. All who met him felt his regard so strongly, it changed who you were. Famous, he ignored fame's make-believe. His writings on people known and unknown lack any glitz: he praised by seeing the unique worth in each of us. John Cage respected people.

Revolution of Faith

After visiting him that day, I sent a thank you note and invited him to a show our New Music Group was giving in a friend's cafe. It was a tiny event: five players, four in the audience, one of them Cage, who instead of talking to noted scholars that night had sought out a bunch of kids. We were thrilled; and he thanked us with disarming humility.

John Cage was, and is, the true revolution of our times: the revolution of believing in ourselves. We are enough, he said; let us but notice, and rejoice. Thus did he love us. If we can labor as he labored, love as he loved, we can keep what he gave us, and prevail.

Copyrighted by Kenneth Maue, 1992

From: Rollmag, Common Sense Newsletter ("It Jiggles Your Thinking")
PO Box 5001
Mill Valley, CA 94942-5001 USA
