

SOUND RECORDING REVIEWS

EDITED BY RICK ANDERSON



JOHN CAGE AND RECORDED SOUND: A DISCOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

BY ROB HASKINS

Record collections,—that is not music. . . . A lady in Texas said: I live in Texas. We have no music in Texas. The reason they've no music in Texas is because they have recordings. Remove the records from Texas and someone will learn to sing.¹

John Cage's ambivalent attitude toward recorded sound is well known. Ever skeptical of an aesthetics that privileges objects, he felt that audiences should pay more attention to art, like existence itself, as a continual process of becoming. In conventional music, according to Cage, composers imprisoned sounds within relatively straightforward structural designs that were intended either to impress listeners with intellectual ingenuity or to drown them in sentiment, preventing the sounds from tending toward their natural complexity and ambiguity. As a result, musical recordings brought about the mistaken impression that performance—a naturally evanescent experience—could be reified and that the resultant objects, now possessed by its consumers, held the same ontological status as the music itself.

Cage's emphasis on becoming also included an ethical dimension. He famously spoke of his music and ideas as useful for society—that principles embodied in his music could be used to solve social problems—and also noted that he had no use for recordings. While this statement suggests that Cage doubted the social usefulness of recordings, the implications of the remark are unclear. He possibly meant that the false objectification of music through recorded sound discouraged difference: the ideal state of societies comprising many individuals. A recording foreclosed a multiplicity of performance interpretations, since it was itself a finite object, and it effectively turned the act of audition into an essentially private action. Cage saw performances of music as a metaphor for

1. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 125–26.

social action: the audience who attended to the music as it occurred in acoustic space was just as necessary for the metaphor as the musicians who actually brought the music into existence.

On occasion he expressed himself on the subject of recordings with unusual vehemence. In the course of an interview that appeared in Peter Greenaway's four-part 1983 documentary devoted to as many American composers, for instance, Cage remarked:

[A recording] merely destroys one's need for real music. It substitutes artificial music for real music, and it makes people think that they're engaging in a musical activity when they're actually not. And it has completely distorted and turned upside down the function of music in anyone's experience.²

Certainly, the medium of phonography ill suited Cage's own compositional practice. Articulating his ideal of allowing sounds to be sounds in 1958, he theorized that the best acoustical space in which to hear his music was one in which the instruments were widely separated; that separation allowed each of the sounds to exist, literally, as one of an array of centers intersecting with each other in myriad ways determined by the location of individual auditors.³ Ideal seats in the hall no longer existed: every location offered something different and therefore equally valuable. By definition, even the best recording compresses the sonic space comprising the sounds themselves; one could only replicate the ideal Cage concert situation with as yet unavailable speaker technology that diffuses separate sounds in such a way that a listener senses them issuing from a multitude of locations.

Cage's turn toward the exploration of indeterminacy and its limits in the later 1950s and 1960s further compromised the suitability of his music for phonographic reproduction. Whereas formerly one could, say, regard a recording as a documentary representation of a composition's performance possibilities, the recording of a Cage indeterminate work seemed to have only negligible value as documentation, since such a work could be realized in radically differing ways. In effect, a recording doubly removed the experience of Cage's music from an audience, which often remained unaware of the process required to bring a composition to performance. (Surely this process, somewhat analogous to composing one's own score, is as important to the aesthetic understanding of these works as a performance would be.)

Only after 1969—with such fully notated works as *Cheap Imitation* (1969), the *Freeman Etudes* (1977–80; 1989–90), and *Litany for the Whale*

2. Peter Greenaway, *American [Four American] Composers: John Cage, Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, Robert Ashley* (New York: Mystic Fire Video, 1991).

3. "Composition as Process, II: Indeterminacy," in *Silence*, 39.

(1980)—did the concept of recording technology once more seem relevant to Cage's music. Many of these works were commissioned by musicians anxious to premiere his works in concert and, often, recordings were issued soon after these first performances. Indeed, during this period, the technology of the recording studio enabled Cage to realize some of his most provocative achievements: *Roaratorio* (1979), mixed at IRCAM, was premiered on German radio, while the *Voiceless Essay* (1986: completed as part of *Points in Space*, a collaboration with Merce Cunningham and Jasper Johns) depended even more heavily on the digital manipulation of recorded sound. And in his final works, the Number Piece series (1987–1992), Cage generally specified fixed duration times that lent themselves naturally to the medium: some compositions, such as *Four*⁴ (1991), were even conceived for the duration and near-noiseless sonic surface of compact discs.

Indeed, Cage increasingly recognized the utility of recordings—in particular, as vehicles to memorialize performances that he felt were particularly noteworthy. The head of the American label Mode Records, Brian Brandt, recalls that the company began essentially in order to disseminate the work of Michael Pugliese and Frances-Marie Uitti to prepare and perform *Etudes Boreales* (1978; Mode 1/2, 1985). In the notes of another early Mode release, an 11-performer account of his *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961–62), Cage commented, “I’m glad this record exists, though I myself do not use records.”⁴ Since then, Mode has released over 50 discs of Cage’s music as part of a complete edition; the fact that this essay will include so many references to Mode’s releases attests to the decisive significance of Brandt’s work.

When complete, Mode’s edition will reveal the breadth and scope of Cage’s musical legacy, which remains generally unknown even with the imminent arrival of his centenary in 2012. But, as I will argue, the chronological development of his discography illustrates his troubling reception as a composer: in particular, the canard that his percussion and prepared piano music remains his most important. This attitude only began to change in the 1990s, when the appearance of a larger number of his works made it possible to appreciate the extraordinary diversity of his music.

Sources

Cage wrote over 300 compositions, which number should probably also include many of the texts that he intended for public performance:

4. Brian Brandt, conversation with author, March 2002; John Rockwell, “The Impact and Influence of John Cage,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1987 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/08/arts/the-impact-and-influence-of-john-cage.html?pagewanted=all>> (accessed 20 April 2010).

Empty Words (1974–75), *Themes & Variations* (1982), *I–VI* (1988–89), and others. It will probably be some time before there are commercial recordings of his entire oeuvre, and for those works that can vary widely in performance, multiple recordings would facilitate some sense of their potential in any case. Still, the total number of recordings is immense; the John Cage Trust at Bard College includes a media library with some 380 commercial recordings (CDs, LPs, DVDs, CD-ROMs, etc.), as well as several hundred archival items—for instance, performances, rehearsals, and Cage’s public readings—in various formats (DATs, cassettes, reel-to-reels), most of which have been transferred to CD.⁵

Cage discographies have listed the abundant commercial recordings as early as 1970, part of an important anthology of primary and secondary sources edited by Richard Kostelanetz; Paul van Emmerik published a discography that includes recordings of Cage’s works composed as late as 1985, and Mark Swed, who is writing a critical biography on the composer, published an important survey in 1992 that documented the burgeoning of available recordings that began to appear in the 1990s.⁶

The Internet, too, has proved an invaluable tool for research. For some time, New Albion Records maintained a Cage discography at its website, but it has been removed since becoming superseded by two others. The exhaustive discography within the John Cage Database, at <http://www.johncage.info/>, is updated regularly and is searchable by record label, work title (alphabetically and chronologically), and performer or ensemble name; it includes information on recordings that are no longer available or in private collections, and it documents information on reissues (either LP or CD). Paul van Emmerik maintains an extensive website of sources at The John Cage Compendium (<http://www.xs4all.nl/~cagecomp/recordings.htm>, which includes a very current discography organized alphabetically by label name); he notes whether the physical form of the item is a phonograph record, cassette, or compact disc, and many entries include references to relevant bibliographical citations collected in the site’s astonishing bibliography.

Neither of these remarkable electronic resources is organized chronologically by the date that the recordings were made or released; however, Chaudon cross-lists recordings and their subsequent reissues and Emmerik includes information on the recording format. Of the nearly

5. Laura Kuhn, e-mail to author, 2 May 2010; she adds that the website (<http://www.johncage.org/>) will eventually offer this information in a fully searchable database.

6. *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970); rev. rpt. (with an updated discography), *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991); Paul van Emmerik, “Diskographie,” in *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband: John Cage II*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 1990), 352–61; Mark Swed, “John Cage Recordings: A Survey,” *Schwann Opus 7*, no. 1 (Winter 1995–1996), 23A–26A, 47A–54A.

770 entries in Emmerik's bibliography, almost 200 describe phonograph records that appeared before 1987; of these, a number are reissues of the same studio recording. Searching by performer name in Chaudon's discography, for example, shows that Maro Ajemian's 1950 recording of what is perhaps Cage's most important early work, the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946–48), was released three times: on Dial Records 19 and 20 (1951), CRI SD 199 (1965), and Harmonia Mundi HMO 34730 and HM 730 (1980?).⁷ And of course many of these older recordings have reappeared on CD at least once or twice.

At present, it is necessary to consult both databases. Citations of label numbers sometimes show slight variation, and occasionally the number of entries for a particular recording differs. For example, Emmerik's site lists two Deutsche Grammophon releases of the LaSalle Quartet's performance of the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949): an LP (Deutsche Grammophon 2530 735) and a CD reissue (Deutsche Grammophon 423 245-2). At Chaudon's site, the two entries are cross-listed and, in addition, he notes two further LP releases (Deutsche Grammophon MG 1048 and Orbis 66 696 6), neither of which appears in Emmerik's listing.⁸ In the discography section of the present article, the citations accord with Emmerik's site with two exceptions: (1) the aforementioned recordings of the String Quartet and (2) any recordings in the author's own collection.

The Earliest Recordings

The first releases of Cage's music were made by the composer himself or by individuals in his circle, including Maro Ajemian, the contralto Arline Carmen, and the astonishingly indefinable David Tudor. The earliest release appeared around 1947 on the Disc Company of America 607 (3058A): a shellac 78-rpm record containing Ajemian's performances of two movements from *Amores* (1943). During the 1950s, the available repertoire widened to include the aforementioned Dial recording of *Sonatas and Interludes*; the masterful *Three Dances* for two prepared pianos (1944–45), performed by Ajemian and William Masselos and released as Disc Company of America 643-648 (three mono 78 rpm shellac phonodiscs) in 1950; and a release by the New Music String Quartet performing his *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50) on Columbia (ML 4495) in 1953.

Best known, of course, is the 25th Anniversary Concert at Town Hall (May 15, 1958), which offered a retrospective of Cage's compositions as

7. André Chaudon, John Cage Database <<http://www.johncage.info/cdlabels/dial1920.html>> (accessed 3 May 2010). CRI reissued the recording on CD as CRI 700 in 1995.

8. Emmerik (accessed 23 June 2010); Chaudon (accessed 12 June 2010). Chaudon notes that the recording has been licensed by Brilliant Classics (9187, 2010).

well as a few premieres. The lion's share of the program was taken up with such early works as selections from the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1945–48), *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942), and the *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939); his chance music was represented by two small works from 1952 (*Music for Carillon No. 1* and *Williams Mix*) and the premiere of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58).

With the exception of the *Six Short Inventions* (1934; rev. 1958)—chromatic and somewhat derivative works that surely would be completely ignored today had Cage not gone on to write more provocative music—the programming choices confirm the singular creativity of their creator. The performance, in particular, of the *First Construction* seems revelatory: Cage's keen ear for timbre emerges clearly in the music, not only in his choice of instruments, but also in his understanding of particular properties of various kinds of percussion instruments; for instance, the way he exploits the characteristic attack of a cymbal, which always increases in amplitude immediately after it is struck.

George Avakian, who co-produced the concert along with Cage's artist friends Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, recalls that the audience's greatest expression of displeasure followed the *Williams Mix* performance, but that the *Concert's* premiere was remarkable because some audience members actually became a part of the performance through the noise they made: a clique of malcontents (who had purchased the least expensive seats, Avakian wryly observed) resorted to sustained applause in an attempt to bring the performance to an end. Even the musicians contributed to the debacle, sabotaging the performance by occasionally ignoring Cage's notations and playing whatever they wished—sounds reminiscent of Bach, jazz, and other idioms as well as the ostinato preceding the "Dance of the Adolescents" in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.⁹

David Tudor's importance to Cage's compositional development and general career cannot be overestimated. As late as 1971, Cage admitted that he wrote all of his music with Tudor's abilities and outlook in mind.¹⁰ His virtuosity and rapid changes of style in the *Concert* performance testify to the type of musicianship required by Cage's music. Hearing Tudor unaccompanied is, if anything, even more electrifying: a recording of the solo work *Music of Changes* (1951), made at WDR Köln on November 25, 1956, is probably the greatest performance of the work (the recording was issued on CD as Hat[now]Art 133 in 2001).

9. George Avakian, "About the Concert," in *The 25-Year Retrospective Concert of the Music of John Cage*, Wergo 6247-2 (1994; reissue of recording from 1958), 18; for the *Rite* excerpt, refer to the tuba entry at 3:23 on CD 3.

10. John Cage, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), 120.

In 1959, Folkways released another historic recording: the amusing and inspiring stories of *Indeterminacy*, read by Cage and occurring simultaneously with—definitely not accompanied by—Tudor’s magnificent performance of the *Solo for Piano* from the *Concert* coupled with *Fontana Mix* (1958). No doubt the entertaining quality of the stories accounts for its continuing popularity (the CD re-release, Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40804/5, has remained in print since 1992); however, the idea of attending to Cage and Tudor simultaneously, as music, is probably more confrontational than anything performed on the 25th Anniversary Concert. This release is also important because it documents the younger Cage, a charismatic and extremely authoritative advocate for his particular variety of avant-garde art. (This harder, more insistent Cage disappeared in the ‘70s, replaced by a kinder and gentler elder statesman who wore denim clothes obtained from an Amish mail order catalogue.)

Fame: 1961–1972

Cage’s cultural prestige skyrocketed during the decade of the 1960s. His first collection of writings, *Silence* (published in 1961), inspired and amused a generation of artists from every discipline and walk of life; even though its reception in music periodicals was often far from favorable, no amount of critique could dislodge the thoughts about art and aesthetics that it contained. James Pritchett has argued that the publication of *Silence* was the most important event in Cage’s career;¹¹ it has never gone out of print since it first appeared. Shortly thereafter, C. F. Peters obtained exclusive rights for the publication of his music. The number of his professional engagements increased: his participation in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company’s 1964 international tour, for instance, heightened his reputation worldwide, and an important two-year guest appointment at the University of Illinois resulted in the multimedia extravaganzas *Musicircus* (1968) and *HPSCHD* (1969, made in collaboration with Lejaren Hiller), both of which boasted audiences in the thousands. Not all of his performances garnered such acclaim; the disastrous New York Philharmonic performance of *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961) in 1964 was the first of several debacles involving major orchestras ill-equipped to deal with Cage’s music—the performance was released in 2000 by the Philharmonic (NYP 2003) and is no longer available. Many of the orchestra members played whatever they wished and destroyed the contact microphones that he had purchased for the performance, making it necessary for him to replace them for each subsequent perfor-

11. James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 142.

mance.¹² All in all, however, the overall public awareness of Cage reached its zenith during this period.

Nevertheless, only a handful of Cage recordings were commercially released during this critical decade: around twelve recordings appearing on thirty releases. With the exception of a Time Records release in 1961 (Time Records Series 2000 58000) including Cage as performer in his earlier percussion works, Cage and his circle were mostly involved in recording new works: *Aria* with *Fontana Mix* (1958) on Time Records Series 2000 58003 (1961 or 1962), *Cartridge Music* (1960) on Time Records Series 2000 58009 (1962), *Variations IV* (1963) on Everest SDBR 3132 and SDBR 3230 (1966, 1968). Probably the most fascinating recording from this period is Tudor's astounding performance of *Variations II* for piano and electronic sounds (CBS S 34-61064, 1967; reissued on CD as Sony SICC 78 [2002]): the ingenious transformations of piano sounds reveal Tudor's own considerable gifts as a composer who worked extensively with live electronics, and the engineering of the recording itself is superb.

By contrast, several other noteworthy recordings by soloists and ensembles who were not so closely connected with Cage concentrated on much earlier works: Phillip Rehfeldt released a performance of the *Sonata for Clarinet* (1933) in 1964 (Advance FGR-4), and two different recordings of the *Sonatas and Interludes* appeared: the 1965 re-release of the Ajemian Dial recording and a new one by Yuji Takahashi (Fylkingen FYLP X101-2m, 1966; recorded in 1965). Two releases of the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* (1951) appeared in 1968, the first by Yuji Takahashi and the Buffalo Philharmonic conducted by Lukas Foss (Nonesuch Records H-71202), the second by Tōshi Ichiyonagi and the Japan Philharmonic and an unknown conductor (RCA Victor SJX 1003). From the soloist's dignity to the wealth of detail in the orchestra, Takahashi's recording documents one of the great performances of this important work; a CD reissue is sorely needed.

Jeanne Kirstein's noteworthy release of early piano works (CBS Music of Our Time S 34-61169 and S 34-61225, ca. 1970; reissued on CD as New World 80664-2, 2007) included premiere recordings of such pieces as the *Metamorphosis* (1938) and *Two Pieces* (1935), along with a number of other compositions including *The Perilous Night*. Kirstein, who taught piano at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, plays expertly albeit a little coolly, or perhaps too respectfully; but Cage supervised the recordings, which strengthens the release's historical importance.

12. Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982), 74.

Two landmark recordings from 1971 and 1972 present the work of European performers exclusively. Rainer Riehn is a German composer and conductor; he and his partner Klaus Metzger (1932–2009) founded the Ensemble Musica Negativa in 1969 to perform experimental music by Cage and others.¹³ The 1971 release, titled *Music before Revolution* (EMI 28954-28957), includes a somewhat unsteady performance of *Credo in US* (1942) and a simultaneous reading of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* with the first two Solos for Voice (1958 and 1960). The performance of the *Concert* boasted a very special soloist, Hermann Danuser, now better known as one of Germany's foremost musicologists specializing in twentieth-century music, while the vocal solos are marvelously handled by Bell Imhoff and Doris Sandrock; what is more, the dry acoustic allows the individual parts to be heard more clearly than they might be otherwise. EMI reissued the recording on CD in 2008 (*John Cage: Concert for Piano and Orchestra; Credo in Us* [sic]; *Imaginary Landscape No. 1; Rozart Mix; Suite for Toy Piano; Music for Carillon*, EMI 34554), without however including the extensive essay by Metzger and a recorded interview with Cage.¹⁴ Across the channel, the English ensemble Gentle Fire—composed of the conductor Richard Bernas, Hugh Davies, Graham Hearn, Stuart Jones, and Michael Robinson—released a disc of works by Brown, Christian Wolff, and Cage (*Music for Amplified Toy Pianos* [1960] and *Music for Carillon* Nos. 1, 2, and 3 [1952–53]) in 1974 (1C 065-02 469)—the latter performed on a real carillon and recorded outdoors, complete with occasional traffic noises. These Cage works, too, were reissued on the aforementioned EMI CD.

That recordings of Cage's earlier music should appear in such abundance requires some explanation. No doubt the extremes of Cage's indeterminate music, which baffled many audiences and critics, played some role. Writing in 1964 about the release of *Cartridge Music*, Oliver Daniel described the music as "a sort of protracted needle scratch."¹⁵ Indeed, such works challenged almost every expectation of what a musical piece should be: they were often performed in unusual venues; they could last any amount of time (often, performances tended toward lengths that exceeded the durations for concert works or even complete concerts themselves); and they could contain a variety of unusual, even fearsome sounds. Faced with the considerable creative freedoms these scores often invited, many performers no doubt preferred to work with fully notated

13. Metzger had advocated for Cage since 1960, and the two men also helped commission Cage to write *Europeras 1 & 2* for the Frankfurt Opera in 1987.

14. Missing, too, are recordings of works by Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Toshi Ichihyanagi as well as a recorded interview with Feldman and Brown.

15. Oliver Daniel, "The Enlivening *Avant-Garde*," *Saturday Review* 47, no. 13 (March 28, 1964), 61.

scores and spend all of their energy recreating the sounds specified rather than inventing entirely new ones.

But although some critics disliked Cage's newest works, others were enchanted: those works containing a plurality of different kinds of music were particularly popular. This was hardly surprising during the psychedelic 1960s; probably the rampant turn toward freedom and exploration during the decade made Cage as likely a soundtrack as, say, Jefferson Airplane. In a review of the second installment of the Everest *Variations IV*, Eric Salzman reported that he'd just heard a recording of Schumann's *Carnival* immediately before and was startled to hear again the Schumann within the cacophonous texture of Cage's work:

Well, thought I, either Schumann has gotten stuck in the speakers or my mind has finally been blown. It was neither, of course, just part of *Variations IV*. It is such coincidences that make Cage's nuttiest freakouts somehow relevant to a nutty world scrambled by technology we hardly yet understand. Well, dig it, man, dig it! . . . One of the parlor games of the future will be "Catch that Quote in the John Cage *Variations IV*."¹⁶

The hodgepodge of styles was not new: Cathy Berberian, in her superlative recording of *Aria* (regrettably, unavailable on compact disc), adopts an extremely wide variety of singing: operatic diva, little girl, French pop chanteuse, country star. Considering how easy it is to destroy Cage by being too funny or too careless, we can be grateful that Berberian chose to interpret Cage's music. With a lesser artist, these styles might easily provoke the feeling of farce and devolve into the harmless game that Salzman imagines in *Variations IV*. Instead, she presents each style with a persuasive conviction that ultimately invites a Buddhist reaction from the listener: attending to each style, experiencing an emotion (amusement, bewilderment, irritation), and leaving the impression behind.

The *HPSCHD* release on Nonesuch (H-71224, [1969]) enjoyed spirited reviews both pro and con. Famously, the disc contains a distillation of the multichannel tapes and seven harpsichords into two channels, an audio texture of near-impenetrable density. Based as it is on Mozart's Musical Dice Game (KV Anh. 294d), a joyous triple meter replete with dance-like rhythms is clearly audible above the din, while the computer-generated sounds blurt and bleep in an almost carnivalesque fashion. It is a good-natured din, oddly familiar sounding and remote at the same time. Kostelanetz, who described the performance in loving detail, described the phonographic account as "the best (and most) Cagean record ever made"; Alan Rich pronounced it "a 22-minute block of

16. "[Review of *Variations IV*]", in *John Cage*, ed. Kostelanetz, 150.

inchoate sound that sounds like a saturnalia in a harpsichord factory, with no beginning or end or intervening shape."¹⁷

Renewed Possibilities: 1973–1986

After the phenomenal success of *HPSCHD*, Cage widened his aesthetic purview to re-embrace the music of the past. The exploration began with his *Cheap Imitation*, a piano work that took as source material the exact rhythms from the principal melodic line of Erik Satie's *Socrate* (1915); Cage used chance operations to select pitches other than the ones in the original composition. Thereafter, a number of Cage compositions relied on at least some elements of traditional notation, and their performers learned the music in a traditional manner. Indeed, sometimes Cage composed according to his own taste, as for instance in some solos from the monumental *Song Books* (1970). At the same time, soloists and orchestras became more interested in his music and in commissioning new works. The pianist Grete Sultan met Cage in 1945 (thanks to another pianist well known in Cage biography, Richard Buhlig, a member of Schoenberg's circle who commented on Cage's earliest music). For her, he made the *Etudes Australes* (1974–75); for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, *Score (40 Drawings by Thoreau) and 23 Parts* (1974); and for the Boston Symphony and other orchestras, *Renga and Apartment House 1976* (1976). A particularly fruitful collaboration with the American violinist Paul Zukofsky resulted in an arrangement of *Cheap Imitation*, the *Freeman Etudes* (1977–80; 1989–90), and *Chorals* (1978). Zukofsky recalls that he was particularly keen to perform new Cage works because the composer had re-embraced conventional notation, which offered more possibilities for interpretation than his graphic scores.¹⁸

The piano and violin works appeared very shortly after their composition on two small labels: Tomato released Sultan's account of *Etudes Australes* on four LPs (TOM 2-1101 and TOM 300 841, 1979; reissued on CD as Wergo 6152-2 in 1987), while Zukofsky's own Musical Observations label released the *Chorals*, *Cheap Imitation*, and the first eight Freeman Etudes in 1981 and 1983 (CP²⁷, CP²¹²; reissued on CD as CP²¹⁰³ in 1991). Both recordings are historically important as performances supervised by Cage, and the Sultan recordings have endured as benchmarks for other performances.

At the same time, however, Cage continued to create more experimental works, such as *Empty Words*, an evening-length text piece drawn from

17. "Environmental Abundance," in *John Cage*, ed. Kostelanetz, 176; Alan Rich, "Up the Wall with John Cage," *New York* 2, no. 40 (October 6, 1969): 54.

18. Paul Zukofsky, "John Cage's Recent Violin Music," in *A John Cage Reader: In Celebration of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Peter Gena, Jonathan Brent, and Don Gillespie (New York: C. F. Peters, 1982), 101.

Thoreau's *Journal; Child of Tree* (1975), which requires the performer to use instruments made from plant materials; and *Roaratorio* (1979), a composition originally for radio broadcast (and assembled at IRCAM) that included a vast tapestry of sounds mentioned in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* along with Cage's reading of a text created from the same source.

Two of his own recorded performances from this period deserve special comment. In 1977, Cramps issued a concert performance of *Cheap Imitation* recorded March 7, 1976 at Mills College (CRS LP 6117, 1977; reissued as CRS CD 117 in 1989). Of course, the piano figures prominently in the reminiscences Cage was fond of making in interviews and writings: as a child, he loved to play the piano music of Grieg; he discovered the music of Bach from a few lessons with Lazare Levy in Paris; and he had to perform his *Sonata for Clarinet* on piano when he realized the clarinetist who was to have premiered it didn't bother to learn the music. The Mills performance shows Cage as a musician with an incredible gift for tonal control; the interpretation itself is minimally inflected but is by no means mechanical or perfunctory.

In December 1977, Cage appeared in a notorious concert in Milan where he performed the third part of *Empty Words*. The audience began to get restless around 10 minutes into an event that lasted well over 2 hours without a break; like the Town Hall dissenters of 1958, they attempted to bring the concert to an end with applause and, when this failed to work, resorted to something that sounds more like a riot worthy of 1968. The performance was recorded but not released until 1990 (as Cramps CRS CD 037-038; it is currently available as *Ampersand Ampere6*, 2004).

In the main, other new recordings from this period continued the trend of releasing performances of older works, especially duplicate performances of the works for percussion or prepared piano. Nevertheless, these releases generally maintain a uniformly high level compared to the majority of earlier recordings. One of the greatest, a stunning account of the *Three Dances*, was recorded by the brilliant pianist/conductor Michael Tilson Thomas along with Ralph Grierson; it appeared on LP in 1973 as Angel S-36059 and was reissued on CD in 2002 as Angel 67691. Herbert Henck's 1982 recording of *Music of Changes* (Wergo 60099, 1982; reissued on CD as 60099-50 in 1986) was described as the first complete recording of the work and is still one of the most important available performances. Joshua Pierce began issuing a recording of all the prepared piano works in the late 1970s; recordings of the same works appeared on various labels (including Tomato TOM-2-1001, 1977); Wergo reissued the early recordings in the early 1990s as part of a series of CDs devoted to all of Cage's earlier piano music. Two other notable releases offered other early pieces. Zukofsky led a recording of the *Sixteen Dances*

(1950) for *Musical Observations* (CP²15, 1984; reissued on CD as CP²115 in 2002), and the Brooklyn Philharmonic recorded (in an arrangement by Robert Hughes) the rare *Party Pieces* (1945)—a composition made collaboratively with Lou Harrison, Virgil Thomson, and Henry Cowell. The recording was published in 1983 (Gramavision GR 7006); so far as I can determine, this is the only recording of this work and is no longer available.

1987 and After

In 1987, Cage celebrated his 75th birthday; although he had already become a kind of elder statesman of the avant-garde, this year in particular was important because it signaled an increasing scrutiny of his work by scholars, critics, and performers. The notable symposium, *John Cage at Wesleyan*, took place at Wesleyan University from February 22 to 27, 1988; a volume that published some papers from that symposium included an essay by James Pritchett that introduced his important analytical insights into Cage's music.¹⁹ The Wesleyan symposium also included a number of performances of Cage works by distinguished performers including the Arditti Quartet. (Documentary recordings, some of which have been released by Mode, are archived at Wesleyan.) Cage fulfilled a number of commissions for all sorts of performers, chamber groups, opera companies, and orchestras, and the number of performances and publications devoted to his work skyrocketed during this period.

This activity likely increased as a result of Cage's unexpected death just a few weeks before his 80th birthday in September 1992. Koch's touching tribute, *A Chance Operation: The John Cage Tribute* (3-7238-2 Y6x2, 1993), included new memorial compositions as well as Meredith Monk's performance of *Aria* and Frank Zappa's performance of the iconic "4'33" (1952). But it was probably also motivated by the astonishing variety of Cage's music itself, which was beginning to be widely discovered, as well as the distinguished performances of his work that appeared during this period.

Cage's late work was dominated by a number of instrumental pieces made using more or less conventional pitch material that performers realized in flexible measures called time brackets, which generally gave a range of possible start- and end-times. One group of pieces called *Music for _____* (1984–1986) comprised a number of separate instrumental parts and a single voice part that could be combined in many possible configurations. A complete recording of all seventeen parts was pub-

19. James Pritchett, "Understanding John Cage's Chance Music: An Analytical Approach," in *John Cage at Seventy-Five*, ed. Richard Fleming and William Duckworth (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 249–61.

lished in 1993, performed by Joan La Barbara and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players conducted by Stephen L. Mosko (Newport Classic Premier NPD 85547). The larger series of Number Pieces—so called because all the titles referred to the number of performers involved—explored sparser textures and longer durations. Very few of them exceeded the total durations of ordinary concert music and the series was thus well suited for the numerous commissions that Cage received in his final years. Cage also produced three substantial music theater works—*Européras 1 & 2* (1987), *Européras 3 & 4* (1989), and *Européras 5* (1991)—alternately chaotic and elegiac in tone.

Since the piano had occupied so much of Cage's attention over his career, many of the new and best recordings that were released during this period were produced by pianists. Margaret Leng Tan, who began performing Cage's music in the 1980s, exploited a certain kind of dynamic pianism in her performances, one which included a distinctly choreographic element. She revived Cage's early work *Four Walls* (1944), which is one of his most proto-minimal and moving works. It was written at the height of the difficulties associated with his estrangement and eventual divorce from his wife, Xenia, and at the time of his total commitment to his long partnership with Merce Cunningham that continued until the end of his life. The pathos of this piece emerges very clearly in Tan's intense and passionate performance for New Albion (NA037, 1991); this release was the first authorized recording of the piece. She has concentrated, in the main, on Cage's early works: for Mode, she has recorded such early pieces as *Jazz Study*, *Totem Ancestor* (both 1942), and *Triple-Paced* (1943—Mode 106, 2002) as well as first recording of the little-known *Chess Pieces* and the *Sonatas and Interludes* (Mode 158, 2006); a number of other prepared piano works including *Bacchanale* (ca. 1938), *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (1945), and *In the Name of the Holocaust* (1942—New Albion NA070CD, 1994); and a magnificent reading of the Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra (ECM New Series 1696, 2000). But Tan also premiered and recorded the complex *One²* (1989), which was scored for between one and three pianos played by a single performer and which also required the player to use a number of other objects, such as a Japanese cup gong, as musical instruments (also on Mode 106).

Indeed, Mode has issued some of the greatest piano recordings of his music available. Compact discs with Philipp Vandré include both the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* as well as all of the shorter prepared piano pieces (Mode 50, 1996; Mode 180/81, 2007). His recordings are, I think, distinctive because he always uses a smaller grand piano which, when prepared, has an extremely detailed and resonant character.

Stephen Drury has made a number of recordings, several of which were supervised by Cage before his death. Among the greatest is his performance of the late bowed piano concerto *Fourteen* (Mode 57, 1997), which also includes a brilliantly nuanced reading of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* with David Tudor and Ensemble Modern, conducted by Ingo Metzmacher; *The Seasons* (1947; Mode 63, 1998); and the first recording of the difficult piano parts from *Music for _____* (Mode 47, 1995). Like *Fourteen*, the parts both include some passages for bowed strings, and the haunting sound perfectly evokes the quietude that often characterized Cage's late music.

Steffen Schleiermacher is the first pianist to have finished a complete recording of all Cage's piano music, which he made for the MD&G label. He is an artist of uncompromising virtuosity and energy who is at his best in such virtuosic works as the *Music of Changes* and *Etudes Australes* (MDG 613 0786-2, 1998; MDG 613 0795-2, 2002). Occasionally, however, Schleiermacher's creativity gets the better of him; for instance, he resorts to technology in his recordings of the *Music for Piano* series (MDG 613 0784-2, 1998), superimposing multiple performances of himself to create the illusion of piano ensemble music; although the choice was no doubt economically prudent, it also foreclosed the musical opportunities afforded to many pianists performing together in real time.

The most important recordings of the percussion works are those by the Amadinda Percussion Group (Hungaroton HCD 31844, 1999; HCD 31845, 2000; HCD 31846, 2000; HCD 31847, 2006; HCD 31848, 2008). This ensemble was the dedicatee for the late *Four^A* (1991), and all the recordings are produced by the eminent Cage scholar András Wilhelm. Quatuor Hélios has also produced some fine recordings for Wergo, one of which (Wergo 6651-2, 2001) includes a performance of a 1985 work that surely holds the record for the longest title in Western classical music: *But what about the noise of crumpling paper which he used to do in order to paint the series of "Papiers froissés" or tearing up paper to make "Papiers déchirés?" Arp was stimulated by water (sea, lake and flowing waters like rivers), forests.*

The violinist Irvine Arditti, who has recorded all of the violin music for Mode, holds a special place in the history of Cage performance for his role in the completion of the *Freeman Etudes*. Cage had abandoned work on them in 1980 while he was in the process of composing the eighteenth etude; the chance operations that he used to create the piece resulted in a passage of such density that he believed it was unplayable. Therefore, rather than turning to an electronic realization of the music or overhauling the compositional process for the work, he elected to abandon it altogether. In 1989, however, Cage heard Arditti play the

etudes with such skill that he was inspired to complete the project. Arditti had interpreted Cage's note to play the etudes "as fast as his virtuosity permits" to mean "as fast as possible." As a result, Cage realized a way to continue with the etudes by writing a performance note asking that, in cases where a passage had many notes, the performer should play as many notes as his virtuosity permits.²⁰ His most significant recordings for Mode include the Etudes (Mode 32, 1993 and Mode 37, 1994); *Chorals* coupled with *One*⁶, a 1992 work containing only harmonics (Mode 118, 2003); and *Cheap Imitation* (Mode 144/45, 2005).

Cage's solo and ensemble vocal music is underrepresented on recordings. Joan La Barbara (for whom Cage made the vocal part of *Music for _____*) had already recorded Solo 45 from *Song Books* along with her own composition *Tapesongs* (Chiaroscuro Records CR-196, 1977); although that disc has not been reissued, a later release (New Albion Records NA 035, 1990) of solo works includes three other solos from *Song Books*, *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942), and *Sonnekus*² (1985)—a work interleaving solo vocal pieces by Cage with various songs of Erik Satie. La Barbara brings a razor-sharp intonation and—perhaps most important—a composer's sensibility to all her work; she is probably the most important interpreter of Cage's vocal music since Berberian.

Mode's principal offering for the vocal music is a collection of various pieces performed by Vocal Group Ars Nova (Mode 71, 1998). In addition to the late choral work *Four*² (1990), composed for a high school madrigal choir, the disc includes the major work *Hymns and Variations* (1979). This composition is one of a number of pieces Cage made using eighteenth-century hymns by William Billings and other composers: his method involved subjecting the pitch material to chance, removing some tones and extending others past their original durations, thereby creating a severely denatured neoclassicism of surprising appeal. The release also includes a kind of late postscript to *Song Books*—four solos composed in 1988 for Electric Phoenix, an English group that released the original recording of *Hymns and Variations* in 1986 (EMI EL 2704521).

It is a commonplace that Cage's music expresses no ideas or evokes any expression whatever. I hold the view that performers and auditors are free to have an emotional response to the music so long as that particular response is not imposed upon others. Certainly, the possibility for emotional responses emerges quite readily in late works such as the *Européras*, which unite in collage pre-existing material from the operatic repertory. The end of *Européras 3 & 4*, as performed by the Long Beach

20. James Pritchett, "The Completion of John Cage's Freeman Etudes," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (summer 1994): 264–65.

Opera (Mode 38/39, 1995), is particularly striking in this regard. Here, almost all sound disappears except for a chance-determined collage of recordings played by one performer and the fragments of Liszt opera paraphrases chosen by the pianist. While the phonographic excerpts will change from performance to performance, the sequence of piano fragments does not. Thus, the work always concludes with a note of poignancy when the transcription of Wagner's "Oh du mein holder Abendstern" from *Tannhäuser* appears in its entirety.²¹

Naturally, Cage continued to perform, always attempting to achieve something that had not been done previously. On July 23, 1992, he gave his last concert in New York's Central Park. On that occasion, he was joined by La Barbara, William Winant, and Leonard Stein for the premiere of *Four*⁶ (1992), a work dedicated to Pauline Oliveros that gave the musicians the freedom to choose the sounds that were heard over its thirty-minute duration. (Cage supplied each performer with a series of time brackets, each of which contained a number from 1 to 12 which the performers would relate to their particular choices.) Cage himself described his contribution to the performance as "shocking sounds." The concert was released in 1995 (Music & Arts CD-875).

Looking toward 2012

September 5, 2012 will mark Cage's centenary. If the recordings of his music that have appeared in the last few years offer any indication, his music still has many surprises to offer: the quality of performances continues to increase; the premiere recordings of certain compositions continue to appear; and artists devoted to his works still manage to find imaginative solutions to the problems he posed in his music in a manner that reasserts his continuing cultural relevance.

The composer/performer Glenn Freeman has been producing a series of recordings devoted to the Number Pieces and other late works. His label, OgreOgress, has issued important premiere recordings of *Two*³ (1991) for shō and conch shells (OgreOgress 634479370557, 2004) and two orchestral works from 1992: *Twenty-Six with Twenty-Eight* and *Twenty-Nine and Eighty* (OgreOgress 634479962141, 2009). Both of these releases appeared in DVD Audio format, which allows extremely long works like *Two*³ (which lasts two hours) to be heard without pauses. For the orchestral works, Freeman uses extensive overdubbing with a small group of performers; as noted above, this approach may not facilitate an

21. See John Cage, *Europeras 3 & 4*, Long Beach Opera (Mode 38/39, 1995). The Wagner transcription begins on Disc 2 at 19:41. In an e-mail to the author of July 3, 2003, James Pritchett vaguely recalls a story that the choice of the Wagner as the closing fragment became codified because it worked so well in the first performance.

ideal performance, but it makes it possible to hear the works. In spite of a handful of orchestral recordings that have appeared over the last decade, Cage's orchestral music remains underrepresented on disc.

Another premiere recording from 2007 documents a typically Cagean concept: *Postcard from Heaven* (1982), scored for an ensemble of twenty harps and an optional voice part (ArpaViva Foundation Inc. CD 001, 2007). The harpist on the recording, Victoria Jordanova, observes in her accompanying liner notes that the work is rarely performed. Once more, Jordanova resorts to overdubbing techniques to achieve the ravishing effect of twenty harps playing together, and the inventive composer Pamela Z, who performs the voice obbligato, brings a sensual element to the sound while focusing the complex, shifting textures of the harps.

Perhaps the most important addition to the Cage discography in the last ten years is Amelia Cuni's ravishing performance of Solo 58 from *Song Books* (Other Minds 1010, 2008). The Solo consists of a number of graphic scores that allow the performer to create 18 microtonal ragas; as is often the case in Cage's music, the performer has considerable (but not total) freedom in what she performs and for how long. But the fact that Cage's score describes both ragas and talas without much explanation makes this particular solo one of the most difficult to approach and perform in a responsible manner. Cuni succeeds because of her amazing background: she has studied dhrupad singing and kathak dance for many years and also works as a composer/performer in Berlin.

The most recent item in this discography is a 2009 release (Wergo 6713) that includes early and late works. Contrabassist Stefano Scodanibbio offers brilliant and rather frightening transcriptions of the first five Freeman Etudes: particularly apt since Cage said that the difficulty of the works offered the performer a metaphor for the individual's political action in spite of overwhelming social problems. The release also includes Scodanibbio's masterly performance of *Ryoanji* (1984)—a gloriously microtonal composition whose score consists of elegantly curving lines that frequently intersect, which must be realized by a solo musician performing one line in concert with the others pre-recorded. Cage had heard one of Scodanibbio's performances and praised it. Scodanibbio also leads a spirited performance of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, this time without piano; the performance seems to privilege no one instrument, and its sonic variety makes it one of the most successful performances on record.

Conclusion

Cage's continuing attention from scholars, in particular, acts as a double-edged sword: while it helps to demystify his methods and clarify

his importance to twentieth-century and contemporary music, it also runs the risk of vitiating the subversive thrust perpetuated by his best work and greatest performances. Likewise, the proliferation of Cage recordings raises some concern that a growing familiarity with his immense oeuvre will dull the impact of his music or discourage the most imaginative and provocative performances possible. Future performers and audiences of Cage's music will need to reconcile the varied and sometimes contradictory messages gleaned from the composer's comments on successful and unsuccessful performances, the phonographic evidence of artists who knew and worked with him, and the new possibilities proposed by younger generations of musicians who may not necessarily have direct contact with Cage or his circle or who, more critically, endeavor to make his music speak for audiences participating in a cultural environment increasingly divergent from the one Cage knew.

More broadly, however, the great variety of available Cage recordings demonstrates to many professional musicians an unimagined wealth of works for practically every conceivable medium and intended for many levels of technical and musical ability. Even performers who specialize in the music of our time will probably not know this repertory in its entirety; indeed, for each of the well-known, frequently recorded works—such as the *First Construction* or *Sonatas and Interludes*—one can point to an important work that has been recorded only once or not yet in its entirety. *Song Books* may be Cage's most important composition and is woefully underrepresented in the catalog: no complete recorded performance has appeared as yet. Similarly, the demanding works in the so-called Ten Thousand Things series—which includes such compositions as 26' 1.1499" for a String Player (1955) and 27' 10.554" for a Percussionist (1956)—are in desperate need of new recordings, and such text works as *Empty Words*, *Themes & Variations*, and *Anarchy* (1987) have scarcely established a performance history, let alone a sustained presence on disc.

For the most part, the major labels have long ceased any commitment to Cage's work, new or old, and some of the most significant releases—for instance, Cuni's *Solo for Voice 58*—appear on small labels with precious little budget for advertising or distribution. In the aftermath of America's recent economic crisis, Mode Records presented a benefit concert to help shore up its resources; this label remains the best and brightest hope for all of Cage's music, and its demise would deliver a grievous blow to the ongoing reception of his work. Nevertheless, the small-label recordings enjoy a relatively greater visibility to consumers thanks to internet sellers such as Amazon and Barnes and Noble, which can store and list a much more varied inventory than localized stores.

Indeed, technological advances have enabled individuals to produce an ever-increasing quantity of high quality recordings, and the Internet allows consumers to locate these releases more easily. It may well be that the future of the ongoing discography critically depends on such recordings. In any case, Cage's commitment to invention and innovation resonates with the greatest advocates of his work, and likely guarantees that the years to come will offer surprise, unpredictability, and probably more than a little consternation.

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BRIEFLY NOTED

BY RICK ANDERSON

Hildegard von Bingen. Komponisten & Mystikerin. Ensemble für Frühe Musik Augsburg. Christophorus CHR 77314, 2009 [1990].

Over the nearly three decades since her rediscovery by a music world recently intoxicated by all varieties of early music, the twelfth-century abbess, mystic, poet, and

composer Hildegard of Bingen has retained her grip on the listening public's imagination. Enough is known about her life and career that her image can be fashioned to fit any number of musical and political agendas, but it is the richness of her melodic language and the passionate, devotional intensity of both her lyrics and her music that bring listeners (and record