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Review of John Cage Symposium, Berlin, German, Nov. 23-25

KEYWORDS: Cage, Silence, Schoenberg, Black Mountain College, Boulez, Stockhausen, Whoopee-Cushion

ABSTRACT: The Institute for New Music of the Berlin College of the Arts hosted a three-day conference on John Cage from November 23 to 25. The conference included concerts featuring Cage's "Sonatas and Interludes" and a performance based on the "Song Books." Papers read at the conference covered all aspects of Cage, his music, and his aesthetics.

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[1] The following review of the Cage Symposium held in Berlin made its first appearance as a series of contributions to the Silence mail list. These contributions were written in the lunch and dinner breaks of the conference and posted immediately to the mail list, in an effort to communicate the impressions made in the most timely manner possible. However, it is hoped that the spontaneity of reporting herein will be, in and of itself, of value to *MTO* readers. For this reason, the review is submitted substantially as originally presented, with only minor edits.

[2] Several comments made in the course of the conference generated responses on the Silence mail list, and these are referred to in footnotes. I wish to express my gratitude to all those readers whose remarks have contributed to making this a more accurate and informed review.

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[3] Date: Thu, 23 Nov 1995 15:01 (MET). The most noticeable difference between the recent Mills conference on Cage ("Here comes everyone") and this week's activity is the weather--it's cold and damp; the remains of last Sunday's snowstorm are still everywhere to be seen. There was definitely a feeling that most participants were just picking up where they had left off a week ago in this morning's session.

[4] Not *quite* everybody came straight from Mills. Diether Schnebel had been scheduled to speak, but his cancellation was filled by Elmar Budde, who read from some of Schnebel's writings on Cage. To my mind, this was the most interesting (although already somewhat familiar) contribution, although for the non-allemannophonic participants the content will have been difficult to follow.

[5] Altogether, the linguistic demands on all participants are non-trivial. Papers will be read in

French, German, and English (the last being in the majority). The conference organizer, Martin Erdmann, stated at the beginning that there would *not* be translations of paper abstracts from English into the regional tongue, but after Deborah Campana's paper, requests from the audience came to reverse the decision. We'll see how this goes in the following days.

[6] Campana's paper was an extended repeat of her California performance--that is, she read her Mills paper, followed by a short discussion, coffee, and then a follow-up paper. The Silence e-mail list was mentioned (Campana felt obliged to explain to the local audience what a mail list is--she was probably well advised in this regard, since the Internet is not as integral a part of the German musicologist's life as it is for his or her American colleague), referring to a discussion regarding the propriety of using a Whoopee-Cushion in Cage's music (at which point, the local audience wondered what a Whoopee-Cushion might be, so this also required explanation).

[7] I note that Campana used the word "improvisation" in connection with performing Cage's music. This left me wondering quite what she meant by the term, since following Cage's instructions is something quite different from what is often associated with the verb "to improvise." Otherwise, her talk was peppered with anecdotes about "When I was with John at Urbana . . ." and "Then John said to me . . ." This will presumably come as no surprise to those who witnessed the Mills conference.

[8] After some more coffee Martin Erdmann spoke about Cage's *Chess Pieces*. I must confess that I was unfamiliar with these works. After the talk, I still cannot *quite* imagine what the pieces sound like, but hope to have an opportunity at some stage.

[9] Altogether, the morning struck me as skewed towards the perspective of the musicologist rather than the performer. (This feeling was heightened when the chair, after recognizing all requests to speak by first name, took a question from Eberhard Blum with "the gentleman in the back." Perhaps Blum is not so well known outside of Germany, but the man has been performing Cage extensively for two decades.)

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[10] Date: Fri, 24 Nov 1995 15:23. Yesterday's afternoon session consisted of two presentations from Berliners. I regret having missed Rainer Cadenbach's talk, [{1}](#) but I was at least able to hear Volker Straebel present his research on Cage's early electroacoustic works. The variety of equipment Cage was able to dig up at theaters and radio stations was impressive and informative to those of us who started working with electronic media later. Most of the equipment used for those early works has disappeared from the face of this planet--how many readers have seen a "Thunder Screen?" [{2}](#) (For that matter, it seemed no one in the audience really knew what this object was or how it worked; furthermore, there was little agreement on how to translate the term into German, and only a fraction of the possible translations of the word "screen" were suggested.)

[11] This morning's session was chaired by Veniero Rizzardi, substituting for Laura Kuhn. This was the session from Babel, with Rosangela Pereira speaking in French, and the subsequent discussion flip-flopping between French, German, and English at a furious pace. Pereira's paper, "Le traversee du serialisme," defined serialism in a more general way than the typical "extending dodecaphonic techniques to other parameters." My understanding of Pereira is that serialism is primarily about trying to structure parameters such as dynamics, density, etc. *at all*. In this sense, Cage, Boulez, and Stockhausen had, in the '50s, perhaps more in common than is generally thought.

[12] One theme that came in both Pereira's and the following talk by Andras Wilhelm was the dichotomy of rigor versus liberty. Both pointed out that a rigorous approach to composition and performance was and is crucial to Cage's work. Wilhelm's talk ("Performing scores: Cage's realizations") was a springboard for a hearty discussion of the problems of authenticity in performing Cage's music. Wilhelm, of course, had numerous anecdotes to tell on Cage revising (intentionally and unintentionally) scores between performances, between publications, and between writing score and extracting parts (or the other way around--Cage, did not always follow the conventional order of writing short score, fair score, and then parts). And some of the discussion revolved around comments from yesterday regarding listening to "authentic" performances, such as Tudor, while preparing one's own performance of a Cage work. Eberhard Blum had an unequivocally

opposed this approach and insisted that the published score could be the only basis for a performance. Wilhelm, in his talk, flatly contradicted this, and referred to numerous comments, suggestions, and modifications Cage authorized while working with performers such as Tudor (and, of course, Wilhelm himself).

[13] What was interesting in all this discussion was, to my mind, the parallels with discussions of Baroque (and other historical) performance practice, and the extent to which an aural tradition can, should, or must influence performance. The problems discussed regarding Cage bear similarities to those concerning Urtext editions of, say, Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. {3}

[14] Finally, Mitchell Arnold reported his experiences in preparing the world premiere of Cage's *108*. The difficulties involved in this work (performers feeling that the lack of convention in notation justifies an "anything goes" attitude) reminded me of the scandals surrounding other Cage orchestral works. (With a student orchestra, the response was not quite enough to justify the word "scandal," and the performers at least played the piece with some effort to do justice to the composer's wishes.) This generated a useful discussion of whether Cage should be performed by students at all, or the extent to which one should even rehearse Cage. [15] One tangent that came up both after Wilhelm's and Arnold's talks was the question of how far one can "arrange" a work by Cage and still have a valid representation of the "original" piece. One participant reported, as an example, performing one of Earl Brown's graphic scores with a rock instrumentation. Is this valid? Not surprisingly, opinions diverged. A gentleman addressed as Mark pointed out that Cage was asked, on many occasions, for his opinion on the appropriateness of a particular instrumentation for various compositions, and that study of the Cage correspondence shows there are no easy generalizations for this question. Cage's replies covered the gamut from "anything is OK in this piece" to a flat "No," and the suspicion remains that in some cases Cage's response might have been different a decade, a year, or even a day later.

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[16] Date: Fri, 24 Nov 1995 19:32. Laura Kuhn's paper, "Cage's algorithmic aesthetics: anticipating CD-ROM," was read in absentia. The title is reminiscent of her Mills presentation. The idea that Cage's thinking would take advantage of new technologies is, in and of itself, hardly surprising: his is among the earliest (if not, indeed, *the* earliest) work in electroacoustic music. However, Cage wasn't always the first to be involved with every technology: it seems that Paik was the video visionary. But the point that bothered me about Kuhn's paper was the thesis that Cage's aesthetics desired a "passive listener" or "passive audience." If this were the case, why did he include those computer printouts in the Nonesuch recording of HPSCHD--the ones where the listener was supposed to adjust volume and balance settings every ten seconds while listening to the piece? Perhaps Kuhn has a definition of "passive" that fits in with this, and other statements Cage made that seem to support a concept of listening as an *active* experience, but it escapes me.

[17] Obviously, technology is already available to support the sort of musical production Kuhn was suggesting in her paper: things like real-time mixing of multiple tracks. Kuhn envisioned (among other possibilities) a CD-ROM of, say, the individual parts of *108* recorded to individual tracks, mixed together on the fly in accordance with Cage's score, providing a new "performance" every time it is played back. Nevertheless, one wonders if Cage would not have had other ideas for this sort of technology. There is certainly something special about having a whole orchestra up on stage, and re-mixing a recording is not the same as a new performance. {4}

[18] Paul van Emmerik reiterated an idea Rosangela Pereira spoke on this morning, proposing a broader definition of serialism that gets Cage, Boulez, and Stockhausen into the same boat. His suggestion (reflected in the paper title) that this was a sort of "creolization of serialism" led to some "lively" debate about what the word creolization implies (when two cultures or languages meet in a creolization process, is one in some way superior to the other?). The ideas presented seemed in many ways excessively Eurocentric (as if Cage's first trip to Europe was the only really influential period of his life, and van Emmerik's claim that Cage's 25-tone pieces were influenced by Schoenberg's 12-tone music is not one this author would like to defend). Finally, as Jolyon Brettingham-Smith pointed out during the discussion, Cage's influences came from both East and West of the U.S., which is something of a spanner in the "meeting of two cultures" argument.

[19] Still, van Emmerik's point that the Boulez/Cage correspondence indicates that Cage's "chessboard-like" arrangements of musical materials were a springboard for Boulez's serial matrices is worth knowing, even if it is perhaps not a new insight.

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[20] Date: Sat, 25 Nov 1995 14:52. Paul Rey Klecka's performance of "Sonatas and Interludes" last night can best be described as cozy. The Kammermusiksaal at the College of the Arts was full to the brim, but it was Klecka's easy-going chatting with the audience that gave the concert its atmosphere. Klecka's performance was remarkable for two reasons: he began with playing the first sonata, then interrupted his performance to explain to the audience (most of whom were not present during the symposium proper and who were not necessarily familiar with the composition) what a prepared piano was, the difficulties in the measurements, and the overall structure of the music. He also announced an intermission after the end of the first half of the piece (that is, after the second Interlude). I do not know if this counts as "authorized" performance practice, but dividing the 70-minute performance into two halves alleviates some of the danger of a performance becoming tedious. Klecka also gave us an encore, "Totem Ancestor," another early Cage work for prepared piano, characterized by ostinati and rhythmic repetitions; short and sweet.

[21] This morning's session began with a talk by David Patterson on Cage at Black Mountain College. This contained considerable valuable information on who was there when, and how the various parties interacted (during Cage's first stay the "official" music professor was Erwin Bodky, who was focusing on the Beethoven piano sonatas--this configuration was bound to bring out Cage's most provocative statements on the *grosse Meister*, leading to some hefty confrontations, in some reports culminating in a food fight in the dining hall.)

[22] Speaking of food fights, reports apparently differ considerably as to what exactly did take place, and this lack of definitive history seems characteristic of the entire Black Mountain experience. Patterson extracted from several descriptions of the 1952 happening, often referred to as *Theater Piece no. 1*. While there are a few points of agreement, details from different reports are contradictory (Cage was elevated, but whether on a podium, a ladder, or other platform is under debate; films were shown, but whether only abstract images or pictures of the cafeteria chef were visible depends on who you ask).

[23] Date: Sun, 26 Nov 1995 17:46. Saturday morning's session continued with Doerte Schmidt. Her paper's title, "Die Geburt des Flugzeugs: Cage, I Ging und C.G. Jung" was a reference to a Buckminster Fuller quote Cage was fond of (and one that serves to remind us that Cage was influenced by both European *and* Asian sources). Schmidt made the point that Cage was aware of the I Ching considerably before the beginning of the '50s, having first come across this book as early as the '30s in the San Francisco public library. The point is worth making, since some of Cage's anecdotes leave us with the impression that it was Suzuki who brought him to this book, although Suzuki didn't arrive in the US until 1950 and his teaching at Columbia began the following year.

[24] It is probably fair enough to credit Suzuki with being an important factor in Cage's development towards the I Ching and chance. Perhaps even the decisive factor. The '36 encounter was probably seminal, and the seed took many years to sprout. As important as Suzuki's influence may have been, some of Cage's work that shows increased interest in indeterminacy predates the time of the Suzuki lectures.

[25] Schmidt's lecture also dealt with any influence C.G. Jung and Jungian analysis may have had on Cage. No one seemed able to definitively say whether or not Cage underwent analysis. Cage, of course, says in *Silence* "I never underwent analysis," but in another anecdote tells of speaking with a psychiatrist. Cage's statement that Zen replaced psychoanalysis seems to imply some contact with a psychiatrist's couch. The period just after the war, coinciding with Cage's divorce and, apparently, other personal and professional difficulties, seems to be a chapter where Cage (and other sources) leave us a little in the dark as to what really went on.

[26] The discussion did not fail to talk about Cage's use of I Ching as a very particular form of chance that has a foundation beyond simply "choosing random numbers." The dichotomy of causality versus synchronicity (according to Schmidt, introduced by Jung) also reared its head in the discussion.

[27] The morning ended with a paper presented by Sabine Sanio, a doctoral candidate at the FU Berlin writing a dissertation on Cage. The hall was packed and overflowing by now, with the distribution of native to non-native listeners changing dramatically in favor of German-speakers. A few hardy anglophones did stay to listen to a paper entitled "Die Paradoxie der Unbestimmtheit" with a subtitle that can be translated as "Some thoughts on Cage's terminology."

[28] The most obvious paradox Sanio refers to is the difference between Cage's musical work of the '50s and his texts of the same period (Lecture on Nothing, Lecture on Something, and other "text compositions" [Sanio's term]). Indeterminacy functions in the music as a means of dissolving (or negating) conventional sorts of musical meaning or "semantics"; the texts, although highly unconventional in their use of semantics, have an unmistakable semantic intent. The terms Sanio used include "Sinnzusammenhang" and "Kommunikation." (However, one wonders if we should perhaps be distinguishing between semantics and pragmatics in this discussion--Sanio is certainly aware of this distinction in linguistic usage, but it did not come out in her talk.)

[29] In the afternoon, Veniero Rizzardi spoke on "Some specific episodes of Cage's European reception." He threatened to get quite specific in deed, first limiting Europe to Italy, then limiting the time frame to the years 1958-60. Rizzardi did, in the end, go a bit beyond this focus (he mentioned Nono, Berio, Evangelisti, Eco, and Donatoni, but also Cardew, Adorno, Metzger, and several German towns well known to the musical avant garde). The point of using the above focus was to highlight the time when Cage's influence in Italy was at its most positive. Cage had, of course, been in Italy prior to that. It was at the end of the '50s that Cage's ideas about indeterminacy found significant resonance among the Italian (and much of the rest of the European) avant garde. Cage's relation to Nono seems to have been most enlightening, with the two having considerable contact, up to Cage's (infamous) lectures in Darmstadt. After this, there was a falling out between the two composers (although less charged than the break between Cage and Boulez), coinciding with Nono's own contribution to the same issue of the *Darmstaedter Bei traege zur neuen Musik*.

[30] In the following discussion, the question of the authorship of Nono's paper came up (Lachenmann, who was studying with Nono at the time, has lodged a claim to authorship; Lachenmann is not likely to have made this claim lightly and is a generally reliable source, but there seems to be no other evidence than his word) as well as the question of who Nono's true target was, Cage or Stockhausen. There is also a question of whether Stockhausen had a hand in editing the published text.

[31] After 1960, Cage retained influence as a point of reference for Italian composers, including discussion about the idea of open form, but Cage's presence was primarily as a negative influence ("don't do what Cage did"). We had some entertaining quotes, notably from Umberto Eco, which caused some strain on the chair in attempting to maintain his composure. The audience had no compunction about giggling through this.

[32] Saturday put musicologists back squarely as the focus of this conference, and this was most noticeable in the closing discussion, by which time attendance had thinned out considerably. A portion of the discussion circled around an hypothesis proposed by Rainer Cadenbach, that Cage research in Europe seemed more interested in questions of aesthetics, whereas American research was more concerned with Cage's personality. There was agreement that this is not an absolute dichotomy, but that there were some tendencies that supported this notion.

[33] In this context there was also a question about Cage research and reception in Asia. Cage's presence has been felt in Asia (particularly Japan), and there is work being done there. While Berlin is about as far from Japan as one can get geographically, it was reported that Asian research was equally underrepresented at Mills. One can only hope that the next Cage conference, wherever it



may be, can address this imbalance.

[34] There was also some discussion of various Cage anecdotes and their historical accuracy. Cage had claimed never to have seen Schoenberg again after his studies, whereas a member of Schoenberg's family recalls, apparently with great clarity, Cage demonstrating piano preparation for his former teacher. Additionally, the remark attributed to Schoenberg, that Cage was not a composer but "an inventor of genius," now seems to be of dubious origin<sup>[5]</sup> (although Cage may well have been dealing in good faith when he quoted this).

[35] The closing concert was a performance by the Berlin ensemble, Die Maulwerker, of a "Concert for Voices, Piano and Five Instruments (1958/70)." This was a simultaneous performance of extracts from *Song Books* and the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. Die Maulwerker are an ensemble with a 17-year history, originally founded by Diether Schnebel. Their first performance was, not surprisingly, Schnebel's *Maulwerk*, but since then they have collectively developed considerable experience in performing works by Cage.

[36] Saturday night's excellent performance was scored for piano, flute, clarinet, violin, and two 'celli, and voice (all instrumentalists except the pianist doubled with vocal performance). Reporting is difficult, but those who have experienced other performances may recognize some of the "songs." Among these was that old favorite, "The best form of government is no government at all" (with an excitedly waved black flag), the folding of towels, two recipes, and "Nitchy, nitchy, collaconitchy!" shouted at us, first 62, then another 63 times. Of course, various other grumbles, moans, and humming as well as some simple tunes (the final three-note melody, ending with the word persimmon, had a surprising feeling of reprise for this listener), accompanied throughout by a quiet, 50 Hz hum on the lines to the loudspeakers (after due consideration I realized this was a deliberate contribution from diffusion engineer, Martin Supper).

[37] The venue was packed and overflowing for the entire 70 minutes of the performance. A memorable experience.

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## References

1. Prof. Cadenbach was kind enough to provide me with the text of his paper on the *String Quartet in Four Movements*. It summarizes the piece's relation to contemporaneous works in Cage's oeuvre, pointing out similarities and contrasts. In the paper's second half, Cadenbach makes several analytical observations regarding the composition, highlighting Cage's methods of temporal structure and use of a limited vocabulary of pitch structures, taking prior work by Erdmann and Campana as a starting point for his examinations.

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2. The device referred to was definitely not the traditional Thunder Sheet, typically used in

theater and opera to simulate the sound of thunder. Straebel later clarified, in a message to the Silence list, that it is not clear whether or not Cage actually had opportunity to hear this device; however, Straebel considers it probable that Cage would have at least seen it.

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3. The similarity in problems of determining historical performance practice in Cage and Bach was also touched on in the closing session.

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4. The original report to the Silence list also questioned if consumer technology, as opposed to specialized products such as Pro Tools and AudioMedia, was likely to *ever* provide the sort of mixing facilities Kuhn was suggesting. Stephen Smoliar pointed out, quite rightly, that this sort of thing is already available on some multimedia CD-ROM productions.

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5. The source of this statement is Peter Yates; there is no independent confirmation that Schoenberg ever said anything like this.

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