Cage Notes 1988

These "Notes" are revisits to my originals for the 1988 Summergarden Concert Series, Museum of Modern Art, New York City. As with the "Satie Notes" the "Cage Notes 1988" should be read in conjunction with the programs (PDF only). My deep gratitude to the fine, dedicated performers.

Paul Zukofsky
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Program Notes

The nine pairs of concerts that are "Summergarden 1988" are devoted, in celebration of his seventy-fifth year, to the music of John Cage (b. 1912), and some composers he cares for. Some of these are, or were, friends. Some he never knew. They are represented not only because of influence -- on Cage or by him. Rather, they are a group of spirits (not always kindred) with whom it is wonderful to dispute, knowing that, at some level, they are united in their concerns about certain aspects of music i.e. newer harmonic usage; how to employ silence; and how to wean musical structures from the milk of classic forms.

As regards harmonic usage, various attempts were made to free music from a sense of key -- that is, the feeling of being in, or away from, or in the process of going to, some other sonic territory.

Silence was elevated to a place of importance equal to non-silence -- that is, silence was no longer just a utilitarian place (for someone to catch a breath, or turn a page) between the really important stuff.

Structure was no longer based on certain standard formal (often symmetrical) relations of musical parts (as in sonata, or minuet, forms). Instead, overall temporal duration might be predetermined, with internal divisions chosen based upon individuated compositional decisions (i.e . just as an open plan office is not rigidly divided, but changes depending upon the requirements of the occupants.)

Of course, even to an initiate, all this is essentially unimportant; and as an example of why, let us briefly discuss Cage's application of chance to musical creation.

Cage began to use certain procedures (based upon the ancient Chinese book of divination "The I Ching") in order to discover arrangements of materials of music (including silence) that he thought his mind too set to see. The procedures originated in the flips of a coin—that is, there was an element of probability, or chance, involved; but the procedures were highly structured, directed and biased i.e. choices were made in the way the procedures were used, and those choices very much influenced the result (i.e. *how* Cage used probability is what truly distinguishes his use of chance in music, as opposed to its much earlier history, going back to at least Athanasius Kircher's "Arca Musarithmica" of 1650, as well as to the "Ars Combinatoria" Minuets etc.). Cage's re-introduction of probability as a tool of music composition and theory can perhaps be thought of as comparable to the introduction of quantum mechanics to the world of physics; and as with all unexpected endeavors, the fact that Cage used what was considered to be a new method was turned against him, and used as proof that he was not a composer. As Einstein said:

God does not throw dice.

And yet, the reality is (at least for music composition) that one number system is as good or bad as any other number system, even if one system is probabilistic, and the other not. The reason why the specific system used to generate the music is unimportant is that, once the sounds have been fixed, we start to perceive order, even where there really may only have been chaos. Music may no longer be written in keys, or have tonal centers; but in attempting to process relationships between pitches, we start to see connection between even chance-derived pitches. It is the same as when we see a Pollock. We recognize the same Pollock each time that we see it. We can even tell if it is not a Pollock (i.e. if a painter other than Pollock used Pollock's techniques). Just so, upon repeated hearings, and upon learning what to hang on to, we distinguish the individual work, and/or composer.

Therefore, the aspect of creation that allows us to distinguish work "A" from work "B", or composer "X" from composer "Y", is not the specific number system used to create the work, but the restrictive choices made by the composer in the way the number system is used. Artistic restrictions are what

provide a profile for a work, and eventually a composer if, over time, the restrictive choices are clever and consistent enough. This, of course, Cage succeeded in doing with a vengeance.

Furthermore, the ultimate question is whether music that one enjoys, and/or wants to hear again, has been produced. Here I must confess a bias basic to my interest in this summer's series. Cage has been, and is, so many things, that one is forced to choose a facet (or two) on which to concentrate. The facet that I have chosen is not Cage the gentle anarchist; or the composer who made the world safe for aleatory; or the mycologist; or macrobioticist; etc., etc.. Rather, it is Cage, the creator of some extraordinarily beautiful music (organized sounds if you must); and this is finally what it is all about--i.e. do you, or do you not, enjoy listening to these sounds in these particular orders, and having heard them once, do you want to hear them again?

What follows are short comments about this summer's programs. Sometimes the comments discuss specific musical aspects; sometimes they only provide a flavor for what was in my mind when ordering the program. My hope is that the comments will not detract from the main objective--namely, finding for yourself those moments of music that you enjoy.

July 1 and 2

Our first program is about surface -- surface in an almost sculptural sense. In my mind, I equate the pointillism of the Schoenberg (1874 - 1951) with the painting of Seurat; the smoothness of the Scelsi (1905 - 1988) with Noguchi sculpture; the sharded angularity of the Webern (1883 - 1945) with photomicrographs of minerals; and the placidity of the Cage, with its glinting highlights, with -------. The precise comparison, or descriptor, is not what matters.

What does matter is that, were one to compare nineteenth-century symphonists of equally disparate musical positions, one could hardly talk of surface as the crucial difference. Type of melody, harmonization, counterpoint, amount and type of motivic activity, certainly; but not something virtually tactile. As the materials of music expanded, and as the old ways of controlling some of those materials were replaced, the outward form(s), and surfaces, had to change. The directions of these changes frequently paralleled (usually followed) developments in the visual arts, primarily painting.

July 8 and 9

Every work of this piano recital was (at one time) considered harmonically quite revolutionary. The "Sarabandes" and "Nocturnes" of Satie (1866 - 1925) that "bookend" the program are his first and last works for piano. Much of Debussy's harmonic language, especially that of "Pelléas et Mélisande", can be traced to the "Sarabandes."

The developments of Schoenberg and Webern need no introduction; but it should be stated that the second movement ("Langsam") of Schoenberg's "Opus 19" -- with silence elevated to rough equality with its complement -- may be one of the most seminal of all 20th-century works.

Hauer (1883-1959) invented a twelve-tone music almost totally opposed to Schoenberg's classical motivic approach. Nothing could be further from Schoenberg than Hauer's dictum: *not too fast, not too slow, not too loud, not too soft; well tempered, well intoned*.

Cage's inclusion of a radio, a duck call, and a deck of cards in his virtuoso piano piece "Water Music" (the score displayed on a large placard), and his introduction of the prepared piano, are an immense refreshment to the world of piano recitals.

July 15 and 16

The very movement titles of the Scelsi and Wolff string quartets offer a clear clue as to the progress of music in the 20th century. These works are only listed as being in five, or three, "movements". Movements no longer have Italian or English tempo descriptions. These are replaced with neutral, mechanistic metronome marks, that tell little to nothing about "mood" or "feeling". Descriptors and metronome marks did coexist for about a century; but now, standardized rates of speed quite replace "feeling" and "intuition".

Cowell's (1897-1965) inclusion in this program is because of his polyrhythmic concerns.

Scelsi puts a microscope on pitch. What is amazing about his music is that one still achieves a sense of

modulation, i.e. moving from one sonic territory to another, even in so restrictive a harmonic world.

Christian Wolff (b. 1934) is one of Cage's immediate comrades. The "Songs" upon which these "Exercises" are based are:

introduction and first movement -- a Chinese folk song which, in the 1940s, was used for the revolutionary song: "Workers and Peasants Are One Family";

second movement -- Hanns Eisler's "Comintern Song", written in 1929;

third movement -- two Harlan County miners' songs: "Which Side Are You On" and "Freedom Has Changed the Face of the Earth."

July 22 and 23

These instrumentally similar trios demonstrate opposing methods of controlling the total duration of a work.

For both works, individual parts are NOT synchronized, except in the broadest sense of things occurring within certain temporal windows.

For the Cage, a total duration (thirty minutes) is predetermined, and fixed. Thereafter, the material for each part is apportioned freely across various time spans.

For the Feldman (1926-1987), players are in independent, unsynchronized, but highly metered, universes. Total duration (not fixed, but approximately thirty-five minutes) is a function of three almost Joyceian streams ending separately for each instrument. After the piano -- with the longest material -- runs out, the three instruments perform a short, synchronized, ritualistic coda.

July 29 and 30

This program touches upon Cage's vocal music. Lyricalness, and expressivity, are paramount; both for the poem-settings, and the choice of the five phonemes of the responsorial "Litany for the Whale." The "unorthodox" tapping on the outside of the piano is mirrored by Cage's use of unorthodox instruments-- i.e. the pod rattle and cactus plants of "Child of Tree".

Jeney's (b. 1943) music involves the continuous manipulation of small cells of notes. For "Rimbaud in the Desert," the manipulation is to repeat (thirteen times) a line of twenty-five notes. Each time the line is repeated, more and more notes are played "silently". "Kato NK 300" uses only two notes -- B flat, and A. The work was inspired by the sound of a truck backing up, and the order of pitches was generated randomly. The work must last a minimum of (approximately) six and a half minutes. A full performance (which might happen) can continue for twenty-six and a half minutes.

Alberto Savinio (1891-1952) was the brother of the painter Giorgio de Chirico. Savinio's music is based upon a concept of "DISHARMONY," which rapidly verges towards polytonality, and which attempts to apply to music some of the same ideas that de Chirico worked with visually. Coming as they do, in the middle of the middle concerts of the entire summer series, the lyrics of the singer ("Mamma Mia", repeated seven times) could be considered a subtitle to, and comment upon, the entire endeavor.

August 5 and 6

A prepared piano is created by inserting screws, bolts, nuts, pieces of rubber, etc. between the strings of the desired pitches (for this program forty-five strings are so prepared). The piano is then played in the normal way (on the keys), but the resultant sound is completely different, as the strings can no longer vibrate in their normal mode, and as the preparations provide additional rattles and other sounds. Cage invented the prepared piano in order to provide an inexpensive and efficient substitute for a percussion ensemble. Originally primarily used for dance accompaniment, the prepared piano rapidly took on a life of its own.

The "Sonatas and Interludes" represent the culmination of Cage's writing for the medium. The music expresses the nine permanent emotions of Indian aesthetics (see the notes for the August 19 and 20 program). The difference between a "Sonata" and an "Interlude" is in their formal structure, and in the

number and type of repeats allowed in each piece.

August 12 and 13

By 1941 Cage had amassed a collection of some three hundred percussion instruments. Looking for a place to establish a center for experimental music (and to store his instruments?), he obtained (with the help of László Moholy-Nagy) a residency at the Chicago School of Design, which at that time was housed in a bakery without internal walls going to the ceiling. *It was really an open space with partitions* Cage has recalled. *One day, while I had been making sounds in the room with my students, Moholy opened the door and said 'Please confine your studies to music theory' because the noises we were making disturbed the rest of the school.* Fortunately, John did no such thing.

Among the more unexpected instruments used in this program are: radio or phonograph ("Credo In Us"); tuned sleigh bells, wind glass, and thunder sheet ("Second Construction"); twelve conch shells, with a pre-recorded tape of burning pine cones ("Inlets"); and tin cans, coil, electric buzzer, lion's roar, metal waste basket, and water gong ("Imaginary Landscape No. 2"). Four of the works are conventionally notated. "Quartet" is conventionally notated, but the choice of instrument(s) is left to the player(s). "Inlets" specifies the instruments, but the remainder of the work is given by written instructions. Despite these nominally salient differences, the fact that all of these works are composed by Cage, remains evident.

August 19 and 20

Scelsi's "Three Pieces" for bass trumpet are (for this presentation) performed on a flügelhorn. Scelsi applies to a single instrument the techniques we have already heard (in the first and third weekends).

Jo Kondo (b. 1947) is one of the younger generation of wonderful composers from Japan. His music is based on his concept "linear music." The music consists of a single "line" (of pitches, or groups of pitches -- chosen from a collection, or "gamut", of predetermined sounds) which permutes and unfolds. In the case of "Standing," the "line" is distributed among three instruments. The concept of basing a work upon a "gamut" is central (although used quite differently -- i.e. harmonically, not linearly) to Cage's "Sixteen Dances" (as well as his "String Quartet", and many other Cage works).

"Sixteen Dances" was intended to fill an evening of dance choreographed by Merce Cunningham, who wrote of the project: *The choreography was concerned with expressive behavior, in this case the nine permanent emotions of Indian classical aesthetics, four light and four dark, with tranquility the ninth and pervading one*.

"Sixteen Dances" marks the beginning of Cage's exploration and use of chance techniques. Shortly after their completion Cage explained privately that: *By making moves on the chart used to compose the work I freed myself from what I had thought to be freedom, but which was only the accretion of habits and taste*.

August 26 and 27

The "Quartets I-VIII" are "subtractions" from New England hymns dating from around the time of the American Revolution. The compositional process approximately consists of starting with the complete (harmonized) hymn, and for each note, determining whether or not it should be present. The result is very much akin to the wear one finds on old gravestones -- i.e. some of the lettering remains; some is gone; the whole seemingly random. Although the "Quartets" were originally designed as a group, I could not resist the idea of interspersing (with Cage's permission) the Satie between every two Quartets, thereby creating a seven-layer-cake-waltz from the church yard, to the dance hall, and back again.

"Relache"-- a surrealist "ballet instantaneiste", in two acts with a cinematic interlude, was Satie's last work. It was written in collaboration with Francis Picabia, who created the scenario and the decor. The cinematographer was Rene Clair. Satie, Picabia, and Duchamp appear in the film.

As part of the design for the cover of the score, Picabia wrote

When will one lose the habit of explaining everything...

Paul Zukofsky