

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Shimoda, Kimiko. 1982. 'Cage and Zen'. *Contact*, 25. pp. 28-29. ISSN 0308-5066.

Kimiko Shimoda

Cage and Zen

Cage at 70: the Almeida Theatre Cage Festival, St James's Church, Chillingworth Road, London N7, 28-30 May 1982

The presence of John Cage throughout a three-day festival of his music, organised by the Almeida Theatre in honour of his 70th birthday, was a rare and exciting occasion for British audiences, and transformed many of our perceptions of Cage's philosophy and music. Those of us who went with an impression, based on anecdotes concerning such notorious compositions as the silent piece 4'33", of Cage as a composer who likes to outrage knowing critics and enjoys composing deliberately awkward pieces were surprised and charmed to see this gentle anarchist in person.

The festival events were not mounted only for the enjoyment of those who were able to attend them live: they will also feature in the highly ambitious 'Composer' series to be shown on Channel 4 television in 1983. John Cage has visited Britain a few times previously, giving lectures and performances, but a festival of this scale—three days devoted almost entirely to his music—has not been held in this country before, despite the vast influence on contemporary music of Cage's work. Excellent organisation and publicity attracted capacity audiences from all over London to the unfamiliar venue of St James's Church, off the lorry-ridden Holloway Road. Apart from a special performance on 29 May of Cardew's *Treatise* (1963-7) as a tribute to the composer, who was killed in a road accident last December, the entire programme consisted of works by Cage, with an interview by Keith Potter and Stephen Montague (29 May) and an hour-long lecture called 'The Composer Talks' (30 May). The performers were mainly British musicians and composers.

It was clear from the interview that Cage regards his silent composition 4'33" (1952) not as a joke but as his most important piece, and one that marked for him a radical departure from what had preceded it. This interview, his talk, and above all his responses to each of the pieces performed, convinced many of us that Cage has a genuine deep belief in such statements as 'the most important piece is my silent piece' and 'purposelessness is the real purpose of my music'. Cage's preoccupation with concepts such as chance, indeterminacy, and purposelessness is a natural outcome of his lifelong interest in Oriental thought, especially Zen Buddhism, which he first encountered through Daisetz T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia University in the 1940s. His deep commitment to Zen and its significance in his music make it appropriate for me to attempt some exposition of aspects of Japanese culture to which his work is related.

A number of 20th-century composers, Stravinsky for example, have expressed the view that striving for self-expression can harm creativity. Works of art are often explained as the artist's assertion of his individuality, as an extension of his ego crystallised in a painting or a musical composition. The insistence on personal expression at all costs can result in the exploitation of art and its use as a vehicle for the artist's own egotism. Cage has long been outspokenly opposed to the subjugation of an artist to his own ego,

and he goes much further in rejecting harmony, thematic development, the arousal of emotion (likes and dislikes), and the kind of formal structure that characterises the great tradition of Western music.

In Japan an emphasis on the individual artist has never been so dominant. Traditionally works of representational and musical art (though not prose and poetry) are attributed to a group of people, the members of which are not individually mentioned; the work is considered to be the outcome of a collaboration. This tradition is supported by the philosophical and spiritual background: Zen Buddhism has exercised a formative influence, both directly and indirectly, on Japanese culture and has created an entirely different artistic climate from the one developed in the West.

Cage has adopted a concept of music as a dynamic process, whether it is the product of chance operation or design. He says:

One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.¹

The sounds were just sounds, this gave people hearing them the chance to be people, centred within themselves where they actually are, not off artificially at a distance as they are accustomed to be, trying to figure out what is being said by some artist by means of sounds.²

The purpose of this purposeless music would be achieved if people learned to listen, so that when they listened they might discover that they preferred the sounds of everyday life to the ones they would presently hear in the music programme; that was alright as far as I was concerned.

The sounds of everyday life, especially those associated with nature, have long been objects of aesthetic appreciation in Japan, even though they have not been taken out of context and played in an auditorium. The Japanese have been ingeniously inventive in creating 'instruments' that are operated by natural forces, such as wind-bells and -chimes and the 'shishi-odoshi'. This device, which is placed in traditional Japanese gardens close enough to the house to be heard, is a hollow upright bamboo tube with a weighted base, pivoted below its centre, into which water drips from a stream; when it is almost full it suddenly topples over and strikes a rock, giving an echoing 'thwack', and then, the water having run out, it swings upright again and the whole process begins anew. Temple gardens are sometimes so designed as to amplify the sounds of wind and rain to give the listener, sitting quietly inside, the impression of the rushing of a mountain stream. Tuning in to the sounds of nature is so much a part of the Japanese way of life that the boundary between such sounds and 'music' does not seem to exist as it does in the West.

Zen has also profoundly influenced traditional musical training in Japan. At its most basic this consists of contrasting silence and sound, since it is felt that sounds can be truly appreciated only in juxtaposition with silence. The concept of *ma* (literally, 'a gap', but used in musical terminology to mean a span of time where there is no sound—silence) has long been the key element in Japanese music. Indeed, the role of silence in music making is as familiar a concept as the incorporation into traditional garden design of the 'passive' space outside the garden—the distant landscape, the mountains, and the sky. By creating a certain sound one suddenly becomes aware of the silence; by creating a design in a garden one realises that it is part of the entire environment. Similarly the whole of music may

become suddenly apparent from a single musical gesture. The Japanese tendency 'not to state everything' derives from the Zen-inspired tradition of 'not explaining the whole but just leaving things open' so that we become aware of the rest.

It is no accident that Cage has been profoundly affected by such a tradition. For someone who has intuitive sensitivity to all forms of sound, as well as silence, it must have been a very significant experience to encounter not only such a culture but, more important, a body of spiritual knowledge that encompasses 'silence' at the same level as sound.

But Cage did not unquestioningly adopt Zen attitudes to art and daily life, and he maintains an individual approach particularly in the way he uses time. He has been deeply preoccupied with the structuring of time—that is, absolute (physical) rather than relative (musical) time—as the essential form-building element in music. Traditional musical training in Japan takes no account of mechanical time; the Western practice of writing down music and specifying the duration of each note, which has found a place in some areas of Japanese music making, would be considered useless by traditionalists, who believe that such matters can be decided only intuitively and that intuition must be fostered within the relationship between master and apprentice. It is quite clear that Cage is not trying to compose music according to the criteria that a master teaches to his apprentice, nor according to the Zen concept that the revelation of a part implies the whole.

Zen teaching has many complex aspects and, depending on one's degree of commitment, it may exercise influence on many levels. For the average Japanese, Zen is understood first and foremost within the context of daily life, where it characteristically governs the way in which he deals with time and space. There are others who are more seriously involved, and some who devote their lives solely to the spiritual path. Zen teaches that the goal of the dedicated follower should be to grasp the whole truth by direct realisation, without any intermediaries; it is pure and simple. It seems to me that this is what Cage attempts to achieve through sound: he is not trying to make Zen-inspired music but to live Zen; the sounds he employs are the vehicle for direct realisation.

I shall now return to the Almeida Festival and try to trace some parallels between Cage's preoccupation with Zen and the works performed there.

The recent piece *Roaratorio* (1979), loosely based on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, received its UK première on the first day of the festival. It was perhaps the most complex work performed, both musically and conceptually, for it combines several ideas—chance, indeterminacy, purposelessness—that are found individually in earlier works. Irish musicians, including members of the Chieftains folk group, sang and played flute, fiddle, *bodhrán* (frame drum), and pipes, while an impressive 16-channel playback system produced a tapestry of the everyday sounds mentioned in *Finnegans Wake*. Cage read one of his own chance-derived texts from the book, and the musicians contributed when and as they pleased, the only restriction being that each had to perform for a total of 20 minutes. At the first hearing I was rather taken by surprise: the various familiar sounds on the tape, overlaid with Irish folk-tunes, gave an authentically ethnic impression which was not at all what I had previously associated with Cage's music. But by the third performance (the work was repeated at evening concerts on the second and third days), after hours of austere electronic sounds, the breath of

the Irish countryside was thoroughly relaxing and soothing; every array of sound became progressively more interesting and the work came to seem almost joyous.

Inlets (1977) was the only other piece performed on the first day of the festival. This is a piece for three large and three small conch shells; the shells contain water and are tilted at random so that when amplified they produce gentle gurgling sounds. The work shows with particular clarity the special meaning of 'randomness' for Cage, in many ways a concept closely akin to the Zen idea of non-involvement of the self or ego. In his talk Cage described *Inlets* as a form of 'improvisation based on chance'. Improvisation in the usual sense is something that Cage does not allow when his works are being played, since it reflects the 'likes and dislikes' or the emotions of the performers, which he wishes to exclude as far as possible. He seems, however, quite content with improvisation on the conch shells, for the sounds they produce are so unpredictable that they cannot be determined by the performers' intentions; improvisation thus comes to play the same role as chance.

Among the many works performed, those in the concert entitled 'Tape Music' on the final day seemed to contain some of the fundamental concepts in a relatively pure form. It goes without saying that *Fontana Mix* (1958-9) and *Cartridge Music* (1960) had an enormous influence on subsequent developments in experimental music. The score of the first consists of a set of ten transparent sheets containing drawings, each having six differentiated curved lines on a graph which presents a time unit. When one is superimposed on another they offer numerous ways of producing patterns of possibilities for any one or a number of performers to realise on tape. At the time it was composed *Fontana Mix* was the first tape work ever made whose outcome could not be foreseen. Such music allows chance to operate in every conceivable way, so that each realisation is different. The version I had heard previously used human voices; in the Almeida version electronic feedback and howling noises often exceeded the limits of the bearable. However, this seems to be the perfect realisation of Cage's desire to create 'indeterminate music' through discontinuous works in which random events unfold within a fixed time-span and a true sense of purposelessness is achieved.

The last work in this programme, *Cartridge Music*, was given a highly amplified live-electronic performance, in which four 'players' generated scraping and screeching sounds by manipulating chairs and tables to which contact microphones had been attached. The level of amplification seemed to change randomly. To tell the truth I found the serious expression of the performers far more interesting than the sounds they were creating, and perhaps this is not, after all, an attitude to which Cage would object. In each of his pieces he offers both audience and performers an opportunity to become aware, to acquiesce in a particular realisation that reaches beyond the sounds themselves to encompass everything both within and outside the performance; this extends to a point at which it ceases to be interesting to ask whether the music is interesting or not.

¹ Quoted from Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (London: J.M. Dent, 2/1980), p.502.

² This and other quotations not otherwise accounted for are taken from the interview and talk given by Cage during the festival.