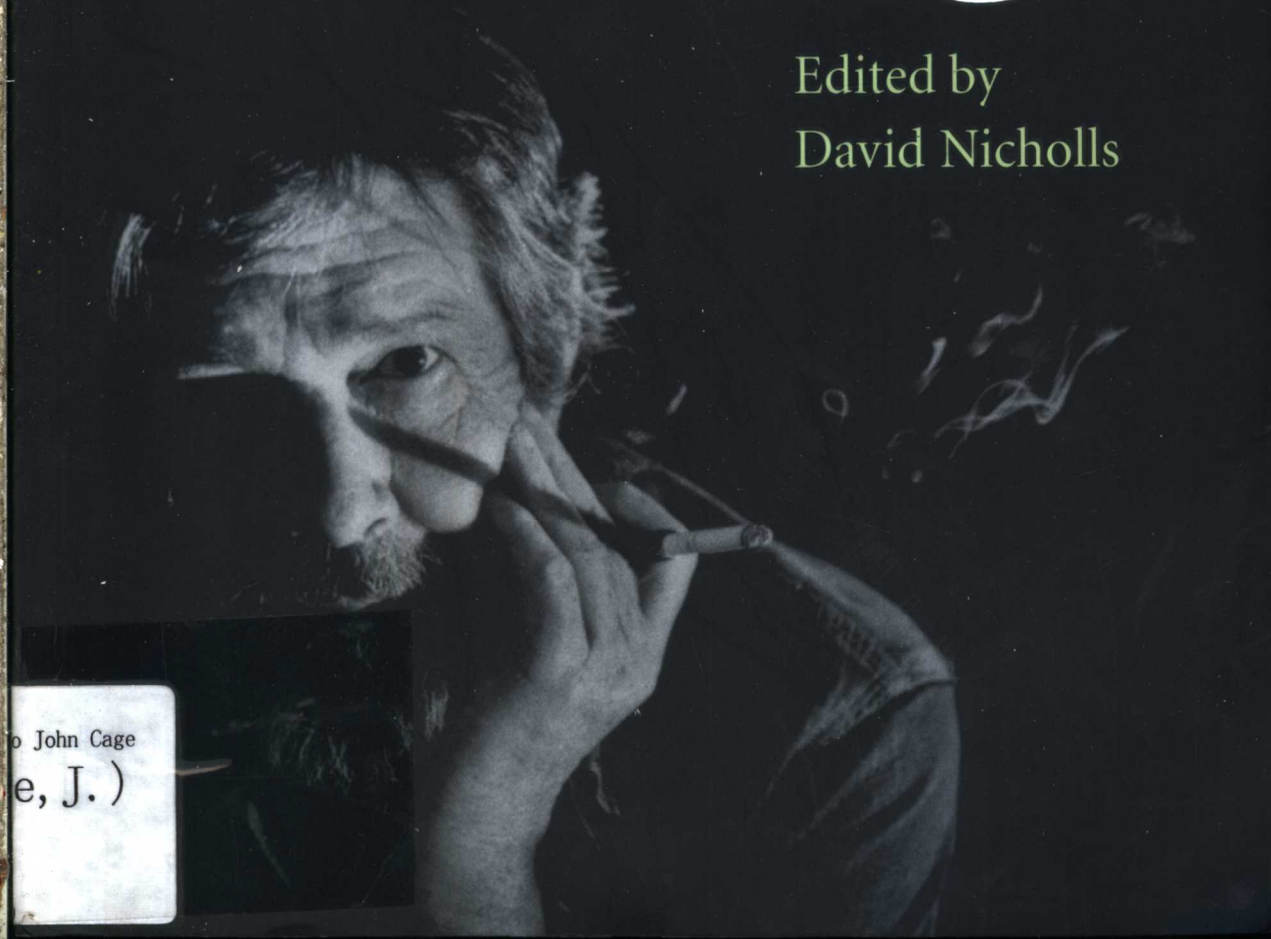
The Cambridge Companion to John Cage

Edited by David Nicholls



The Cambridge Companion to

JOHN CAGE

EDITED BY
David Nicholls

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Minion 10.75/14 pt *System* LaTeX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

The Cambridge companion to John Cage / edited by David Nicholls.
p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to music)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0 521 78348 8 (hb.) – ISBN 0 521 78968 0 (pb.)
1. Cage, John – Criticism and interpretation. I. Nicholls, David, 1955 – II. Series.
ML410.C24 C36 2002
780′.92–dc21
[B] 2001052401

ISBN 0 521 78348 8 hardback
ISBN 0 521 78968 0 paperback

Contributors

David W. Bernstein is Professor of Music at Mills College and head of the music department. His publications and lectures are on Arnold Schoenberg's tonal theories; the history of music theory; John Cage; and Fluxus. He organized a conference/festival entitled "Here Comes Everybody: The Music, Poetry, and Art of John Cage" which took place at Mills College in November 1995. He coedited (with Christopher Hatch) and contributed to a book of essays stemming from this event entitled *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art.*

William Brooks presently holds faculty positions at the Universities of Illinois and York (England). He has written extensively on various aspects of American music from eighteenth-century music theatre to experimental music of the present. A composer as well as a scholar, he likes to think that each domain informs the other. Future projects include an episodic overview of American music for the University of Illinois Press and an extended work for spatially distributed forces on the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Kathan Brown is the founder and director of Crown Point Press, an etching workshop that will celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 2002. The Press invites artists to travel to San Francisco to produce etchings in its studio. Brown's memoir, *ink, paper, metal, wood: Painters and Sculptors at Crown Point Press,* was published in 1996, and the following year the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco showed the Press's work and published a catalog. Brown lives and works in San Francisco.

Kyle Gann, a composer, has been new-music critic for the *Village Voice* since 1986 and Assistant Professor of Music at Bard College since 1997. His books include *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press), *American Music in the 20th Century,* and *It's Only As Good As It Sounds: Village Voice Articles on American Music after Minimalism.* Gann studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena. His major works include a one-man microtonal opera *Custer and Sitting Bull,* a ten-movement suite *The Planets,* and *Transcendental Sonnets* for chorus and orchestra. CDs of his music are available on the Lovely Music, New Tone, and Monroe Street labels.

John Holzaepfel received his Ph.D. in historical musicology from the City University of New York, where he wrote his dissertation 'David Tudor and the Performance of American Experimental Music, 1950–1959'. He is currently preparing a biography of David Tudor.

Leta E. Miller, Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is coauthor, with Fredric Lieberman, of *Lou Harrison: Composing a World* and editor of *Lou Harrison: Selected Keyboard and Chamber Music, 1937–1994* (MUSA, vol. 8). She has written articles on Harrison, Cage, and Henry Cowell; those on Cage appear in *Perspectives on American Music, 1900–1950, John Cage: Music,*

Philosophy, and Intention, 1933–50, and *Musical Quarterly*. Miller is also an active flutist who has been featured on over a dozen compact disc recordings.

David Nicholls is Professor of Music at the University of Southampton. Author of *American Experimental Music, 1890–1940* (Cambridge University Press) and numerous articles on topics in American music, he has also acted as contributing editor for the reissue of Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* (Cambridge University Press), *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, and *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge University Press). He is editor of the journal *American Music*, and is currently preparing a monograph on Cage for Illinois's *American Composers* series.

David W. Patterson is an Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His 1996 dissertation on John Cage's aesthetic evolution during the 1940s and 1950s received the Sonneck Society Dissertation Prize, and his work since then continues to focus on the work and thought of Cage and the New York School, appearing in *American Music*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *repercussions*, and other journals. Patterson is the contributing editor of *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933–1950*.

Christopher Shultis is Regents Professor of Music at the University of New Mexico. In 1993–94 he was a Fulbright guest professor in American Studies at the Institut für Anglistik, RWTH Aachen and in 1999–2000 at the Anglistisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg. Shultis has written a book on John Cage – *Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition* – as well as several articles. His "Cage in Retrospect: A Review Essay" (*Journal of Musicology*, 1995) won an ASCAP Deems Taylor Award. Shultis is presently an associate editor for *Perspectives of New Music*.

Alastair Williams, Senior Lecturer in Music at Keele University, is author of *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* and *Constructing Musicology*. He has also published articles in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, *Music Analysis*, and *Perspectives of New Music*.

Preface

John Cage (1912–92) was without doubt one of the most important and influential figures in twentieth-century culture; yet he was also one of the least understood. Pupil of, among others, Arnold Schoenberg, Henry Cowell, Marcel Duchamp and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, he spent much of his career in pursuit of an unusual goal: "giving up control so that sounds can be sounds," as he put it on page 72 of *Silence*, his first and best-known collection of writings. Among his many notable accomplishments were the development of the prepared piano and of the percussion orchestra, the adoption of chance and of indeterminacy, the employment of electronic resources and of graphic notation, and the questioning of the most fundamental tenets of western art music. As well as composing around 300 works, he was also active as a performer, writer, poet, and visual artist.

The present volume is neither a biography of Cage nor an analytical study of his music. Rather, it is a multi-faceted celebration of the richness and diversity of a remarkable creative artist and his art. Compiled by a team of experts drawn from the new generation of Cage scholars, it builds on earlier research while providing new facts, insights, and interpretations. Part I – *Aesthetic contexts* – considers and contrasts the three principal sources of Cage's developing cultural background: America, Europe, and Asia. Part II – *Sounds, words, images* – contains the majority of the detailed discussion of his artistic legacy in music, writing, and visual art. However, some of this discussion (notably of key works from the late 1940s through late 1950s) is of necessity also contained in the chapters constituting Part III – *Interaction and influence* – which otherwise examines various aspects of Cage's artistic practice, and attempts to contextualize him in relation to both his peers and his successors. If, in this arrangement, there are overlaps between the fourteen chapters, or differences of opinion among the ten authors, then all the better: for John Cage was both much loved and much maligned, and his work both hugely influential and totally ignored. His aesthetic stance poses multiple questions, and demands multiple answers: indeed, it thrives on plurality – of sources, influences, methodologies, interpretations, and outcomes. And so, hopefully, does this *Cambridge Companion to John Cage.*

A few general thanks are in order: my former colleagues at Keele University and my present colleagues at the University of Southampton have provided academic support and intellectual stimulation in equal measure.

Further afield, I have enjoyed enormously working on this project with

my co-authors (though the number of them sharing my forename has at times proved confusing).

My wife, Tamar, and our children, Ben and Daisy, have (as ever) been tolerant way beyond the call of duty during the gestation period of this volume.

Finally, at Cambridge University Press, Penny Souster has waited very patiently for the delivery of a book that owes its existence entirely to her vision.

David Nicholls
University of Southampton

Acknowledgements

The front cover photograph, of John Cage *c.* 1970, was taken by James Klosty, and is provided courtesy of the John Cage Trust.

An expanded and fully illustrated version of Chapter 7 is published in Kathan Brown, *John Cage Visual Art: To Sober and Quiet the Mind*, San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 2000.

Extracts from the following music examples are © Henmar Press Inc., New York, and are reproduced by permission of Peters Edition Limited, London: examples 2.1; 4.1, 4.2, 4.9, 4.10; 6.1; 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.4; 10.1; 11.1, 11.5.

The music examples in Chapter 14 are reproduced by courtesy of the individual composers, except those by William Duckworth which are used by permission of Monroe Street Music.

The following sketch materials are reproduced by permission of The Getty Research Library, 980039 and the John Cage Trust: Examples 10.2, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7; 11.9.

The following sketch materials are reproduced by permission of the New York Public Library and the John Cage Trust: Examples 11.4, 11.6, 11.7.

The images reproduced in Chapter 7 are reproduced courtesy of Crown Point Press (Figures 7.1, 7.3, 7.5, 7.6); Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (Figure 7.2); Margarete Roeder Gallery, New York City (Figure 7.4).

Chronology

1912 September 5: born in Los Angeles.

1928 Graduates from Los Angeles High School: enters Pomona College.

1930 Drops out of Pomona College. Travels in Europe (to 1931). Begins to compose.

1934 Studies in New York City, with Adolph Weiss and Henry Cowell.

1935 Marries Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff.

1935–36 Studies with Arnold Schoenberg.

1938 Meets Lou Harrison (in San Francisco) and Merce Cunningham (in Seattle).

1938–40 Teaches at the Cornish School of Music in Seattle; *c.* 1940 writes "The Future of Music: Credo."

1939 *First Construction (in Metal)*

1940 Devises prepared piano.

1941–42 Teaches at the Chicago School of Design.

1942 Moves to New York City. Meets Marcel Duchamp.

1944 Begins personal and artistic partnership with Merce Cunningham.

1945 Separates from Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff, whom he subsequently divorces. Commences study of Asian philosophy, later including classes with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.

1946–48 *Sonatas and Interludes*

1948 During summer, teaches at Black Mountain College. Meets R. Buckminster Fuller and Robert Rauschenberg.

1949 Receives awards from Guggenheim Foundation, and American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters. Travels to Paris, where he meets Pierre Boulez. Becomes involved in the Artists' Club in New York.

1950 Meets Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and David Tudor, later known collectively as the "New York School" of composers. Earle Brown joins the group in 1952. Starts to employ chance operations based on the *I Ching*.

1951 *Music of Changes*

1952 During summer, teaches again at Black Mountain College: *Black Mountain Piece. 4′33″*

1954 Meets Jasper Johns.
Moves to Stony Point, Rockland County, New York State.
With Tudor, tours Europe; meets Karlheinz Stockhausen.

1956–60 Teaches regular classes at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

1958 May 15: Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective Concert at Town Hall, New York City. Scores exhibited at the Stable Gallery.
With Tudor, tours Europe; meets Luciano Berio. Wins Italian quiz show *Lacia o Raddoppia*, answering questions on mushrooms.

1960–61 Fellow at Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University.

1961 *Silence* published; signs exclusive contract with Henmar Press, Inc.

1962 Co-founds New York Mycological Society.
With Tudor, tours Japan.

1963 *Variations IV*

1964 With Cunningham Dance Company, undertakes world tour.

1967 Composer-in-residence at University of Cincinnati.
Introduced to the work of Henry David Thoreau.

1967–69 *HPSCHD*

1968 Elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

1968–69 Associate at the Center for Advanced Study at the University of Illinois.

1969 Artist-in-residence, University of California at Davis.
First work in visual art.

1970 Fellow at Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University.

1972 Moves back to New York City.

1978 First printmaking sessions at Crown Point Press in San Francisco.
Elected to Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1980 Regents Lecturer at the University of California at San Diego.
For the remainder of his life, is increasingly affected by health problems.

1982 70th birthday celebrations include Wall-to-Wall Cage and Friends in New York City, plus events throughout Europe and America.

1986 Awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of All the Arts by California Institute of the Arts.

1987–91 *Europeras 1–5*

1988 Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University.

1992 August 12: dies in New York City.

Contents

Illustrations

PART I

Aesthetic contexts

1 Cage and America

DAVID NICHOLLS

Prelude

Given that he was born, bred, and educated in the United States, the supposition that John Cage's aesthetic outlook was nurtured and majorly influenced by his home nation might seem obvious to the point of redundancy. However, not every American has achieved the same degree of national and international fame and infamy, as has Cage; nor has any other American artist – with the possible exception of Andy Warhol – had such a huge impact on the global development of culture, whether "high" or "pop." Thus the fact that Cage was arguably unique among Americans – let alone among American musicians – suggests that his particular relationship with America may have been somewhat out of the ordinary.

Each of us, by the time of our maturity, will have defined what might be termed an individual aesthetic locus. Put simply, this is a set of choices – relating to lifestyle, garb, décor, deportment, belief, culture, and so on – with which we (hopefully) feel comfortable; it is also, de facto, the image of ourselves we project to others. Many complex factors will have engaged and entwined during our formative years, in order that such an aesthetic locus may form: some will be genetic, others environmental; some inevitable, others unpredictable. For artists (in the broadest sense of that word) the process is knottier still, for the aesthetic locus is projected not only materially (through clothing, food, or furniture), but also transcendentally (through the artistic objects created by, but existing apart from, the artist).

In March 1943, a percussion ensemble founded and conducted by Cage was the subject of a spread in *Life* magazine. The article had been prompted by a concert, at New York's prestigious Museum of Modern Art a month earlier, in which "an orchestra of earnest, dressed-up musicians sat on the stage and began to hit things with sticks and hands . . . The audience, which was very high-brow, listened intently without seeming to be disturbed at the noisy results." The concert had been sponsored by the League of Composers, and included works by Lou Harrison (*Counterdance in the Spring* and *Canticle*), Henry Cowell (*Ostinato Pianissimo*), Jose Ardévol (*Preludio a 11*) and Amadeo Roldán (*Ritmicas V & VI*). Pride of place was reserved for Cage himself, who was represented by three works: *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939), *Imaginary Landscape No. 3* (1942), and the recently
[3] completed *Amores* (1943). The composer-conductor was described by

Life as "a patient, humorous, 30-year-old Californian . . . the most active percussion musician in the U.S., [who] believes that when people today get to understand and like his music . . . they will find new beauty in everyday modern life . . . " Among the photographs in the spread is one captioned "Pieces of shaped bronze sound like anvils . . . Player is Xenia Cage, the conductor's wife, who took up percussion after marriage." Among the other performers was Merce Cunningham.[1]

There were, of course, a number of important periods after 1943 when American influences of various kinds affected Cage: witness, for instance, the impact of the Abstract Expressionist painters in the early 1950s, or of the work of Henry David Thoreau, from the early 1970s onwards. Details of such influences will emerge elsewhere in this volume. But by 1943 Cage's *fundamental* aesthetic locus, which so intrigued *Life*, had largely formed; what followed in the remaining half century of his life, while contributing to his developing persona, was also to a considerable degree a result of choices predicated on the needs of that persona. The principal purpose of the present chapter, then, is to examine via a series of topical headings the complex factors that had engaged and entwined during Cage's formative years, leading him to the momentous MOMA concert in 1943.[2]

Family

"Their marriage was a good one between bad people"[3]

When John Milton Cage Jr. was born in Los Angeles on September 5, 1912, his ancestors had already resided in America for the best part of two centuries. As he noted in 1976, "My family's roots are completely American. There was a John Cage who helped Washington in the surveying of Virginia" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 1). Many later family members lived mainly west of the Appalachians; and several (on the male side) were active as preachers. Thus Cage's experience of growing up in the United States was already thrice removed from that of two close contemporaries – Aaron Copland (1900–1990) and George Gershwin (1898–1937) – for he was neither East Coast in location, Jewish in ethnicity and religion, nor first-generation American by birth. Accordingly, he was entirely free from any perceived necessity (whether personal or societal) to assimilate or conform.[4] In this, he was very much his parents' (only) child: both John Milton Cage Sr. (1886–1964) and Lucretia ("Crete") Harvey (1885–1969) were somewhat unconventional, the former an idealistic inventor (for instance of a submarine that gave off bubbles), the latter a sometime journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*. Anecdotes concerning Crete (and to a rather lesser extent John Sr.) adorn the pages of *Silence* and

A Year from Monday, notably in the texts "Indeterminacy" and "How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run" (Cage 1961, pp. 260–273; 1967, pp. 133–140). Some sense of the Cages' marital equilibrium may be gleaned from an aphoristic aside on page 72 of *A Year from Monday*: "I was arguing with Mother. I turned to Dad. He spoke. 'Son John, your mother is always right, even when she's wrong.' "

If independence of thought and mind is a particularly (or even peculiarly) American character trait, then there was certainly a good deal of it in the family gene pool for Cage to inherit. As mentioned above, a high percentage of his forebears were ministers, and of these several were notable for a certain doggedness in the pursuit of unpromising quarry. Before the Civil War his great grandfather, Adolphus Cage, preached to both blacks and whites in Tennessee, before moving on to Colorado. Cage's grandfather, Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage, followed Adolphus into the Methodist Episcopalian Church: amongst other exploits, Gustavus traveled to Utah to decry Mormonism, and to Wyoming to work as a missionary. His grandson described him as "a man of extraordinary puritanical righteousness [who] would get very angry with people who didn't agree with him. As a child my father used to run away from home whenever he got the chance" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 1). John Cage Jr. may not have inherited his grandfather's temper, but the latter's religious zeal found early expression: as a child, John Jr. was "very much impressed by the notion of turning the other cheek" (quoted in Revill 1992, p. 31); in his teenage years, he wished – like Gustavus – to become a Methodist Episcopalian minister; and slightly later, at age sixteen, he provoked family furor when he announced his intention of joining the Liberal Catholic Church as an acolyte. A striking degree of self-belief also characterizes both Gustavus and (as will become apparent elsewhere in this volume) John Jr. Indeed, this was true of John Cage Sr., too, for he was so convinced of the merits of his gasoline-powered submarine that he set "the world's record for staying underwater . . . by making an experimental trip on Friday the thirteenth, with a crew of thirteen, staying under water for thirteen hours" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 1).

A further American family trait was a pioneer tendency to seek out pastures new: in the late eighteenth century William Cage moved his family from Virginia to the (then) frontier territory of Tennessee, while the westward relocation of William's grandson, Adolphus, is discussed above. Later, the financial instability associated with John Sr.'s inventions led to frequent changes of home, state, and even country: before John Jr. was twelve, he had already lived in California (six or more locations in greater Los Angeles), Michigan (Ann Arbor and Detroit), and Ontario, Canada. One can only speculate on the effect so many moves (and the financial necessities underlying them) may have had on the marriage between John