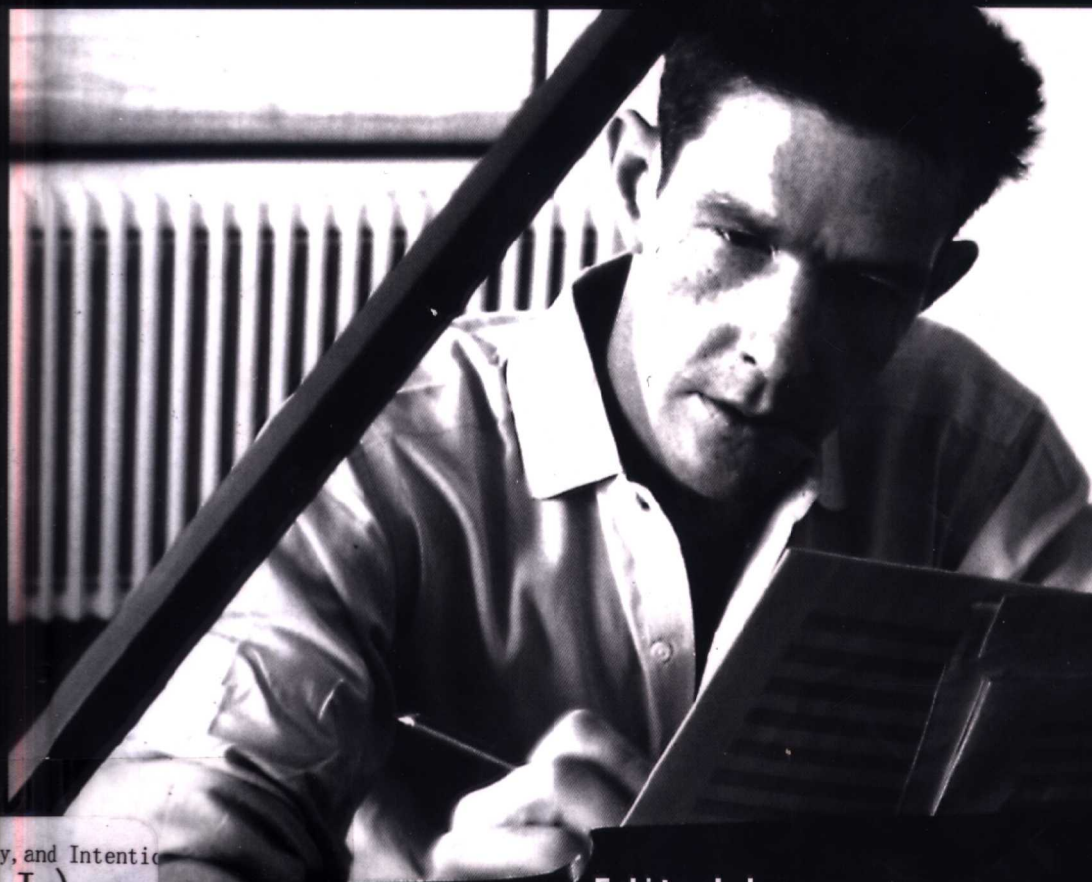


JOHN

MUSIC, PHILOSOPHY, AND INTENTION, 1933–1950

CAGE



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(J.)

Edited by
DAVID W. PATTERSON

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Joseph Auner

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Introduction

Charles Hamm

These essays, written mostly by musicologists, deal with the early life and music of John Cage. What follows is intended to place the present volume in the perspective of previous Cage scholarship, and in doing so, to underline its uniqueness.

Words and music by Cage

Throughout his career, John Cage wrote about his own work from the perspectives of technique and aesthetics. Beginning in 1939, he contributed dozens of articles and essays to such publications as *Dance Observer*, *New Music*, *The Village Voice*, *Art News*, and *Dance Perspectives*. From 1959, when he began attracting international attention, he wrote for similar journals in Germany, Sweden, Italy, Japan, England, and elsewhere. He brought many of these pieces together in a series of book-length volumes published by Wesleyan University Press:

<i>Silence</i> (1961)	writings 1939–61
<i>A Year from Monday</i> (1967)	writings 1963–67
<i>M</i> (1973)	writings 1967–72
<i>Empty Words</i> (1979)	writings 1973–78
<i>X</i> (1983)	writings 1979–82

When one adds *I-VI*, the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures delivered by Cage at Harvard University in 1988–89 and published by Harvard University Press in 1990, one sees that virtually his entire career as composer, poet, and visual artist was counterpointed by his own words.¹

Cage's writings are fundamental to research and writing on his music. Among them are such indispensable items as "The Future of Music: Credo," "To Describe the Process of Composition Used in *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape no. 4*," "Indeterminacy," "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)," "Empty Words," "Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegans Wake*," and various sets of mesostics.

Cage's words are available in another form as well, as interviews and "conversations with." As he achieved notoriety and then fame, a flood of interviews, far too numerous to be listed here, appeared in newspapers and journals all over the world. There were also book-length collections, including *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles*,² *Conversing with Cage*,³ and *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words Art Music*.⁴ It must be kept in mind that in each case the interviewer mediated Cage's words to a greater or lesser extent to fit his or her own agenda, by selection of questions, omissions, translation, insertion of other material, and the like. As Leta Miller puts it in her essay in the present volume, "the oral interview [is] a powerful tool in the reconstruction of recent history, but [it] demands rigorous cross-examination to counteract the necessarily biased subjectivity of memory."

Cage's compositions remained less accessible than his writings for some time, with few of them available in published form before the early 1960s. But a combination of the upswing of interest in his music in the wake of a twenty-fifth anniversary concert given at Town Hall in May of 1958, the release of an LP of that event making a substantial sampling of his music available in recorded form for the first time, and Cage's successful forays into the European avant-garde scene at Darmstadt and elsewhere, persuaded the C. F. Peters Corporation to bring out many of his compositions. "Published" is a somewhat misleading term for what happened; Cage furnished fair copies of his compositions in his own distinctive hand to Peters, which then advertised and sold photocopies of these pieces through a subsidiary, Henmar Press. A catalogue listing and describing 101 of Cage's compositions written before 1961, available through Henmar, was published by Peters in 1962.⁵ As Cage himself says in the foreword to the booklet, many of his compositions were not mentioned for one reason or another, including some that he felt were "inferior in quality." Peters continued to add new compositions by Cage to its catalogue on a selective basis for the remainder of his life.

It was not until 1970 that a comprehensive listing of Cage's compositions was attempted, by Richard Kostelanetz (with the assistance of Cage himself), in *John Cage*.⁶ A decade later I compiled an expanded list to accompany my entry on Cage in *The New Grove Dictionary*

of *Music and Musicians*.⁶ Though both Cage and his editor at Peters cooperated with me on this list, it was still far from complete, since much of Cage's unpublished early music was scattered in various locations, and some was believed to be lost. Many pieces were in the process of being revised or reworked, and it was not always clear whether certain events in which he had been involved in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the *Musicircus*, for instance—should be listed as “compositions.” A more complete list was published in 1982.⁷

During the winter of 1992–93 a number of scholars, including Paul van Emmerik, Martin Erdmann, James Pritchett, and Laura Kuhn, sorted and inventoried the materials in Cage's possession at the time of his death, and in the process they located some compositions believed to be lost and others that had been unknown. The collection was deposited in the New York Public Library, where it was catalogued by Robert Kosovsky.⁸ Van Emmerik included a definitive list of Cage's compositions in his dissertation (1996), mentioned below.

Words by others

Most of the earliest writing on Cage took the form of brief journalistic pieces: reviews of performances of his music and of the audience's reaction to it; interviews with Cage and the performers of his music; descriptions of the unusual percussion instruments and the prepared piano used in his compositions. Though written for the mainstream press, often by persons with no particular knowledge of music, some of these pieces have been useful in chronicling the events of his early career, though they have little to say about the compositional and aesthetic issues with which Cage was wrestling.

In the early 1960s, Cage and his music began to be discussed in a more “serious” fashion, often in scholarly journals and books. Much of this writing was the work of composers and performers—Christian Wolff, Ellsworth Snyder, Morton Feldman, William Brooks, William Duckworth, Margaret Leng Tan, Tom Johnson, Roger Reynolds, James Tenney, Paul Zukofsky—and some of it was the work of critics and historians of the avant-garde who were supportive of Cage's music and aesthetics; prominent among them were Richard Kostelanetz and Peter Yates. Most of these authors were closely involved in one way or another with Cage and his music in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, when he was still a highly controversial figure and when aligning oneself with him was not a wise career choice. These writers had a limited grasp of his overall compositional output, however, since little of his music had been published or recorded at that time. Most of what they had to say was concerned with whatever music Cage was currently writing. Likewise, their grasp of his musical and aesthetic thinking was based almost entirely on what Cage himself said or wrote about

these things, since there was virtually no serious critical writing about him. Many of them thought of themselves as having been in the trenches with Cage, battling the Philistines who dominated the concert, academic, and critical worlds of that period. As a result, much of what they wrote was passionately supportive, defending Cage not only against widespread ignorance on the part of so many musicians and non-musicians, but also against what they took to be the misinterpretation of his music and his writings by a handful of authors who criticized or ridiculed him. This body of writing about Cage was recently characterized as "the usual 'insider' treatment (anecdote, personal reminiscence, hagiography, exposition of particular works according to the artist's own prescriptions)."⁹

The first attempt at a chronologically organized overview of Cage's life and works was my article for the *New Groves*, mentioned above. The first complete book on Cage, organized in roughly the same way, was Paul Griffiths' *Cage*.¹⁰ Both drew heavily on Cage's own writings, and their discussions of the music were limited to compositions available through Peters or on recordings. Another decade passed before the next book-length biography appeared, David Revill's *The Roaring Silence: John Cage, A Life*.¹¹

Beginning also in the 1960s, writers from fields other than music began to be drawn to Cage's music and aesthetics. Literary scholar John Hollander reviewed Cage's first book, *Silence*, in *Perspectives of New Music*,¹² and Calvin Tomkins, a noted critic of modern art, devoted a chapter to Cage in his book *The Bride and the Bachelors*, discussing him in the context of the American avant-garde at mid-century and also pointing out his artistic indebtedness to Satie.¹³

The literature on Cage by non-musicians proliferated to such an extent in the 1970s and '80s that it became the dominant stream, helped by the fact that Cage devoted much of his time and energy to writing poetry and creating visual works of art in the last decades of his life. An anthology of writings about Cage in celebration of his 70th birthday, "examines the almost alarming breadth of Cage's interests and accomplishments in music, theatre, literature, the visual arts, mycology, and even macrobiotic cookery,"¹⁴ among the contributors, composers and performers are outnumbered by the likes of Norman O. Brown (humanities), Daniel Charles (philosophy and aesthetics), Anne D'Harnoncourt (art history) and Jill Johnston (dance criticism). A decade later the introduction to a somewhat similar anthology remarks that "none of [the contributors] is a composer or musician;" three of the ten are philosophers, one is a musicologist who "chose to examine . . . a verbal rather than a musical text," one is a poet, one is a cultural and architectural historian, one is a literary theorist, and

the remainder "come to Cage from what is loosely called Comparative Literature."¹⁵

As scholars from the realms outside of music began to dominate the literature on Cage, the focus shifted to an investigation of "how Cage's aesthetic . . . accord[s] with the other philosophical discourses of our time,"¹⁶ for example, the loose constellation of critical approaches to scholarship—literary theory, cultural studies, post-Marxist criticism, postmodern theory, postcolonialism, feminist theory—that came to dominate the academic world in the 1980s and '90s. As a result, issues never raised before, such as Cage's sexuality and its effect (if any) on his work, have been explored by Thomas S. Hines¹⁷ and by Jill Johnston in her recent book on Jasper Johns.¹⁸

Cage and musicology

Though the literature on Cage was dominated more and more throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s by writers with scholarly credentials, few musicologists were among them. A striking exception is Leonard Meyer, whose essay "The End of the Renaissance?"¹⁹ was the first extended piece of critical (as opposed to journalistic, biographical or anecdotal) writing on Cage. In addition, a number of histories of American and/or twentieth-century music written by musicologists devoted space to Cage and his music. Among these were Gilbert Chase's *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), Wilfred Mellers' *Music in a New Found Land* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964), Peter Hansen's *An Introduction to Twentieth Century Music* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1967), William Austin's *Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), H. Wiley Hitchcock's *Music in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), and my *Music in the New World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983).²⁰ Written as trade books and textbooks, their coverage of Cage's music was consequently quite general and not at all musicological.

The suspicion and caution with which most musicologists regarded Cage was reflected by the almost total absence of doctoral dissertations undertaken on his music during this period. Ellsworth Snyder's "John Cage and Music since World War II: A Study in Applied Aesthetics," written in 1970 at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, was a lonely first of its kind; next were John Francis's "Structure in the Solo Piano Music of John Cage" (Florida State University, 1976) and Monika Fürst-Heidtmann's "Das präparierte Klavier des John Cage" (Cologne, 1978).²¹ It would be almost a decade before the next. But strangely enough, it was within the very discipline of musicology that a new phase of Cage scholarship emerged in

the last decade and a half, beginning with a succession of dissertations, among them:

Deborah Campana. "Form and Structure in the Music of John Cage." Northwestern University, 1985.

James Pritchett. "The Development of Chance Techniques in the Music of John Cage." New York University, 1988.

Laura Kuhn. "John Cage's 'Europas 1 & 2': The Musical Means of Revolution." University of California at Los Angeles, 1992.

Christopher Shultis. "Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the Experimental Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Poetry and Music." University of New Mexico, 1993.

Martin Erdmann. "Untersuchung zum Gesamtwerk von John Cage." Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, 1993.

Johann Rivest. "Le 'Concert for Piano and Orchestra' de John Cage, ou les limites de l'indétermination." Université de Montréal, 1996.

David Patterson. "Appraising the Catchwords, c. 1942-1959: John Cage's Asian-Derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College." Columbia University, 1996.

Paul van Emmerik. "Thema's en Variaties: Systematische Tendensen in de Compositietechnieken van John Cage." University of Amsterdam, 1996.

Musicologists, especially in the United States, have traditionally relied on historical/positivist methodology.²² They have been concerned with finding, cataloguing, evaluating, writing about, editing, and otherwise interpreting primary musical sources (holograph scores, sketches, copies, published editions of compositions, period phonograph recordings if available) and also with locating and utilizing written documents composed of letters to, from, and about composers, performers, and others involved with the music in question. Also included are performance reviews and other contemporary journalistic writings, official documents yielding information on births, deaths, education, employment, and other vital matters. In addition, musicologists are expected to be able to deal with "the music itself" through structural, tonal, harmonic, and melodic analysis.²³

A "musicological" approach to Cage would involve the recovery and interpretation of primary documents pertaining to the events of his life and of his music (as in the dissertations by Patterson, Shultis, and Erdmann), detailed formal, structural, and rhythmic analyses of

his music (Campana, Kuhn, and Pritchett), or a combination of these two (Rivest and van Emmerik).

The vast majority of this new musicological literature has focused on Cage's early music and the events of his early career. There are several reasons for this. As noted above, many of his earliest compositions, including some believed to be lost, are now published or otherwise available for study. Since these pieces are more or less conventionally notated, they are susceptible to systematic musical analysis, more so than many of Cage's later compositions. And since most of the events of Cage's early career were known only from his own recollections (and his memory was not always accurate, as he admitted himself), this period was in particular need of a thorough investigation based on documentary and primary evidence.

The work of James Pritchett and David Patterson demonstrates these two musicological approaches. In his dissertation, and even more strikingly in his book *The Music of John Cage*,²⁴ Pritchett demolishes the notion that Cage wasn't a composer but rather an inventor and manipulator whose music could not and should not be subjected to analysis.²⁵ Examining the full chronological range of Cage's music, Pritchett constructs a chronology of the compositional techniques used at various stages of his career, offering close analyses of key works to establish his points.²⁶ Patterson's dissertation, a chapter of which is included in the present volume, is based on an exhaustive examination and interpretation of primary documents bearing on two critical phases of Cage's early career: his involvement with Asian philosophy and aesthetics, and his activities during two summers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Patterson augments and enriches the conventional wisdom that Cage was influenced by Zen Buddhism and the *I Ching* by assembling a dazzling array of evidence clarifying when, where, and through whom Cage came into contact with Eastern thought, as well as which texts he read and how he paraphrased some of this material in his own writings. One of Patterson's most important findings is that writings by Indians, particularly Ananda Coomaraswamy, played as persuasive a role in Cage's evolving aesthetic thought as did his contact with Japanese and Chinese material. The second section of the dissertation likewise assembles a mass of documentary evidence bearing on a hitherto obscure but highly critical episode in Cage's career, which yielded, among other things, the first "happening."

Most of the essays in the present volume expand and refine this two-pronged musicological approach—analytical and documentary—to Cage and his music. Several deal with the seminal years at the Cornish School in Seattle (1938–1940), where he was first involved intimately with dance, where he wrote his first pieces for prepared

piano, and where he met his long-time companion and artistic collaborator, Merce Cunningham. Leta Miller constructs a detailed chronology of events of this period from primary documents, weighs this information against Cage's often faulty recollections, then interprets these events in the context of the music he wrote in Seattle. Among other things, she discovers that the intellectual and political climate at the Cornish School, and in Seattle, was more liberal and radical than had been thought, and that Cage's seminal essay, "The Future of Music: Credo," doesn't date from 1937, as Cage remembered, but from 1940, when it was given as a lecture before the Seattle Artists League. According to Miller it is thus "a culmination, rather than a precursor, of this formative period, its ideas honed from Cage's interactions with the Seattle artistic community, and reflecting influences both within and outside of music." Also, Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 2* was written for a dance recital in Seattle, but it was withdrawn after a first performance, and the title was subsequently used for an altogether different composition written in Chicago.

Susan Key discusses Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, written for performance at the Cornish School's then state-of-the-art radio studio, in the context of the early history of radio. Examining the composition itself and then a mass of contemporary writing on the implications of radio for "serious" music, she concludes that Cage was one of "a few isolated individuals [who] looked beyond these parameters, investigating the means by which radio's decontextualized sounds raised both new aesthetic issues and creative possibilities," and that Cage "transforms the radio studio itself into an instrument" in this composition, which together with Varèse's *Espace* represents "the most original musical response to radio in Depression-era America."

In his wide-ranging essay bridging Cage's stay in Seattle with his subsequent years in Chicago, New York, and Black Mountain College, Branden Joseph traces the development of Cage's advocacy of "a utopian social totality initially modeled in a universal aesthetic form, but which protected within its philosophy individual difference," a phase that culminated with the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* (1951), the "first work in which [Cage] made use of chance procedures." According to Joseph, this prolonged aesthetic odyssey began with Cage's contact with the painter Mark Tobey in Seattle. This interaction sensitized the young composer to the "energy and dynamism" of the urban landscape, and then continued as Cage came to know, in person or through their writings, such figures of the avant-garde as Russolo, Moholy-Nagy, William Carlos Williams, Eugene Jolas, George Antheil, and Carl Jung. Like Patterson, Joseph has read what Cage read, and he measures Cage's words against those by oth-

ers which attracted him. Particular attention is paid to the avant-garde literary journal *transition* and the theory of Verticalism put forward therein by Jolas, its chief ideologue, which called for "disruptive assaults upon outworn linguistic and artistic rules." As Joseph sums it up, "*transition's* emphasis on the dialectical sublation of fragmentation—on both the aesthetic and social level—strongly resonates with Cage's own understanding of the interdependence of the therapeutic and aesthetic functions of music." In the course of this decade-long intellectual journey, Cage came to understand that the "idealization of individual expressive genius," so rampant in Romantic and Modern music had been a factor in the "social fragmentation" of contemporary society, and as a result (among other things), he completely reversed his attitude toward Arnold Schoenberg.

Paul van Emmerik, as are most of the authors represented in this volume, is interested in Cage's concept of "rhythmic structure," wherein "a musical form [is created] based on numerical relationships between the durations of sections and of groups of measures of a composition in such a way that the durations of both levels were governed by a single series of proportions." Unlike other writers who have assumed that such structures are rigidly imposed on the sonic materials of a piece, van Emmerik stresses Cage's flexibility in their application, finding that "in actual compositional practice Cage frequently compromised with himself over a precompositionally defined rhythmic structure, or he reached agreements with others about a structure mandated by the choreography, stage play, radio play, or film." He calls attention to numerous pieces in which Cage deviates from the precise application of the rhythmic structure governing a given piece, suggesting pragmatic and aesthetic reasons for these departures, and he also argues that contrary to what others have suggested, Cage's rhythmic structures "did affect the audible musical continuity."

Starting from Cage's idiosyncratic use of the terms "structure" and "form," Chadwick Jenkins offers an exhaustive analysis of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, concluding that the composer's experiments with micro-macrocosmic form attained their highest peak of creative manipulation in these twenty pieces. Like van Emmerik he is alert to the many deviations from precompositionally-determined rhythmic structures, demonstrating through his analyses that:

In *Sonatas and Interludes*, [Cage] manipulated the micro-macrocosmic Structure in such a wide variety of ways that . . . [they] are a virtual textbook on his techniques in the manipulation of Structure.

Challenging Cage's assertion, "I don't have an ear for music," Christopher Shultis examines a number of Cage's early compositions for percussion, finding that Cage's sensitivity to the timbre of non-pitched instruments increases over time, reaching a peak with the *Third Construction* (1941). Suggesting that these pieces should be performed "in relation to their historical past," that is, played by the instruments the composer intended rather than whatever instruments are readily available, Shultis painstakingly sifts through documentary evidence, including photographs of Cage's performing ensembles, to identify the precise types of rattles, tom-toms, gongs, and so on, used in early performances under Cage's direction. When these pieces are performed with "proper" instruments, Shultis finds that they are "not only more historically accurate, but actually sound better," and that the resulting timbres help articulate Cage's formal structures. Shultis concludes that Cage not only had an ear for timbre, but he also "had an exceptional ear for music, regardless of what he himself had to say;" this should not surprise anyone who has heard Cage performing his own music, Shultis adds.

David Bernstein discusses Cage's relationship with Arnold Schoenberg, a subject explored earlier by musicologists Robert Stevenson²⁷ and Michael Hicks.²⁸ After examining some of Cage's early compositions, he argues that his "emphasis on motivic integration as well as other forms of pitch relationships . . . betray Schoenberg's continuing influence," and that even after Cage lost interest in the manipulation of pitch relationships, "the underlying aesthetic assumptions behind [his] chance music correspond to Schoenberg's notion of a musical idea [i.e., the emancipation of the dissonance]."

• • •

The present volume is the first extensive collection of writings from the third, "musicological" stage of Cage scholarship, a phase that has yielded close musical analyses of pieces written in the first decades of his career and a reevaluation of these years based on previously unused documentary sources.

Many—but certainly not all—of the writers represented here knew Cage and benefited from his friendship and advice. But rather than the "not-yet Cage" of the 1940s and 1950s lurking on the fringes of the musical and intellectual worlds, the Cage they knew was generally acknowledged to be a genius in all but the most reactionary circles, and his work was celebrated all over the world in performances, recordings, commissions for new compositions, conferences, and other honors. There was no longer a need for writers to defend his words and music against the hostile and the ignorant, and there was no fear that critical investigation—in the sense of close examina-

tion—might diminish his work, even if it uncovered flaws. His own words are still used as a prime source of information, but they are now examined critically as opposed to being taken at face value. Inconsistencies in the application of his compositional techniques can be revealed without fear of invalidating his work. His frequent and critical paraphrasing of the words of other authors can be ferreted out, acknowledged, and placed in the context of his own unique intellectual development without tarring him as a plagiarist.

As is the case with so much musicological work, striking revelations and dramatic reevaluations are not necessarily the goal of the essays offered here, but instead a careful, thorough investigation, analysis, and evaluation of materials pertaining to his work. As they put the details of Cage's music and life in better order, musicologists are constructing a larger, more accurate picture.

Notes

1. To supplement Cage's own collections of his writings, Richard Kostelanetz has published many pieces not included in these, in his *John Cage* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) revised and expanded as *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo, 1991), and *John Cage: Writer* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993).
2. John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (Salem, NH: M. Boyars, 1981). First published in French as *Pour les Oiseaux* (Paris: Editions Pierre Belfond, 1976).
3. Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988).
4. John Cage and Joan Retallack, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words Art Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).
5. Robert Dunn, ed., *John Cage* (New York: Henmar Press, 1962).
6. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), s.v. "Cage, John," by Charles Hamm. Reprinted and revised for *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*.
7. n.a., "Chronological Listing of Musical Works Through the Summer of 1982" in Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent, eds., *A John Cage Reader: In Celebration of His 70th Birthday* (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982), 195–207.
8. A detailed descriptive catalogue is available on the internet at <http://catnyp.nypl.org>.
9. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds., *John Cage: Composed In America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.
10. Paul Griffiths, *Cage* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Richard Kostelanetz's *John Cage* contained a selection of Cage's own