

John Cage's Practical Utopias

John Cage in conversation with Steve Sweeney Turner

Cage is a featured composer at Musica Nova in Glasgow this month

John Cage has always been associated with the multiplicity of life – whether in his work as composer, poet, artist or performer, his taste in friends such as Marcel Duchamp, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Pierre Boulez, Yoko Ono or John Lennon, his approach to methodology in using chance, choice, computers, or the *I-Ching*, or in his interest in mushrooms, Zen, gourmet macrobiotics, or world politics, his personal influence on readers, listeners, lookers, or fellow eaters is always deep. One thing, however, lasts as the ever-present trace of his actions, and that is the all-pervading notion of indeterminacy. Whether in his early elegiac melodies, the famous ‘silent’ piece, the uncompromising chaos of the 60s, or the more recent ironies of random opera, Cage has always preached a humble approach to the world, reminding us that desires and intentions too often get in the way of experiencing ‘no matter what eventuality’, and that Joyce’s character ‘Here Comes Everybody’ may, finally, point the way to the new consciousness he hopes for.

It seems to me that one of the problems with indeterminate music may be that we don't really know how to talk about it yet on its own terms; there isn't really a critical discourse to engage with it.

Mmm. Ha ha ha ha. I think it's in the field of anarchy. You can do it there – start there. Read the life of Emma Goldman. Two volumes. *Living my Life*. Ha ha ha . . . The old ideas, the determinist ideas, have to do with the Nineteenth Century, and if you read the book that the Huddersfield Festival put out, it places Boulez, even, in that situation with respect to Beethoven – continuing the main stream. But, uh, there's another way of looking at things, which sees that the main stream has now gone into delta. And beyond that into ocean. And there's a multiplicity of possibilities rather than just one principle one. When I was young there were two ways of going – one was Schoenberg, and the other was Stravinsky. But now you can go in any direction at all, even your own direction.

Yes; in that Huddersfield Festival blurb you were presented as Cage and Boulez: 'Divergent Leaders of The New', which suggests that old situation.

Yeh, it's sort of silly, because it's an idea of Yes or No, and we already agreed that it's more like ocean – many possibilities . . . life is quite, em, complicated.

But when you say ‘critical’, a ‘critical basis’, you're speaking of a decision about values, I suppose; but the values exist not outside of us, but inside of us, and particularly in indeterminate work. Maybe the desire is unnecessary, so that we don't need any basis – we have the basis in us already. It's built – in. Ha ha. You can't prove it to anybody, either. But I don't think we need criticism in the first place. You can get to language by going to the beginning of the words about indeterminacy: I've written a good deal about it, so has Christian

Wolff, but you see, the desire to have a language in order to have a criticism is perhaps not necessary; it's related to laws and theory, and so forth . . . and indeterminacy is precisely not related to those things.

Sure, but to establish indeterminacy you have to step back from the traditional values that music has adopted – that is necessarily a theoretical stance, surely?

You're taking a different point of view, yes? Changing your mind from the determinist position to a non-determinist position. The determinist position has been that each performance is an approach to an ideal. Okay? The indeterminist position is that each performance is necessarily what it is, and you'd better listen while it's going on, otherwise you'll miss it. Mm? And I prefer that point of view; I think it's more appropriate to 20th-century living than the other one. The other one has a kind of an assumption of progress towards a non-existent, or an imaginary, goal, rather than the Now-Moment. The indeterminist position is all connected with seeing how things are at the moment when you're experiencing them.

Yes, and the other fine thing about indeterminacy is that so many views are possible! How do you see your notion of indeterminacy differing from others, particularly those in Europe? For instance, people like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Cornelius Cardew, you know?

How we're different? I haven't studied that. I don't think Karlheinz studies what I do . . . and Cornelius is dead! Ha ha ha. So I really don't know what's happening . . .

However, it's often suggested that Stockhausen was influenced by your work, by your visit to the Darmstadt Composition School in the late fifties?

Right. No, I think people know perfectly well what interests them. And at one time Karlheinz and I would talk and exchange ideas. You know the story about the talk about singing? Well, he was writing a song for Cathy Berberian, who I later also wrote for, and he said, ‘if you were writing for a singer, would you write music, or would you write for the singer?’ And I said, ‘I would write for the singer’, and he said, ‘well that's the difference between us, because I would write music’. So then he wrote this song for Cathy, and he asked her to whistle. And she can't whistle. So that's the difference between us. Hmhmhmhm!

Ha ha ha! So how does your indeterminacy differ from Cardew's?

I don't know, in those terms. He wrote an article against what I was doing, and I never objected to it . . . or never wrote in opposition to it. Later, he saw me in Berlin, and he said, ‘I may have made a mistake in writing that article about you’. And I said nothing.

Uhuh . . . Although I've read you polemicising against Cardew in Conversation Without Feldman - with Geoffrey Barnard, and it seems that the beginning and the end, to put it that way, is about Cardew, and what you saw as the inconsistencies, or perhaps failures of Cardew's work.

I haven't read that recently . . . We had quite a lot of difficulty toward the end: he was employed, for instance, once, to play a piano part in my piece called *HPSCHD* and he made a point of not doing his work well, and that kind of situation made difficulty for us. It seems to me unprofessional, if you accept payment to do something and then don't do it. I think it actually bound up with my practical side; I found that what Cornelius was doing didn't help the Revolution as much as he would have liked it to help, hm? And it also didn't help music, hm? Because his music became less a discovery and more and more the revival of nineteenth century practises.

But also, in a sense, an analysis of Victorian English music, based on political grounds.

I had liked and followed a great deal of Cornelius's work, and he was a very, uh . . . I really haven't studied my thoughts about that . . . or come to any . . . I don't feel as though I have a point of view, but if I have, I'm afraid it is a little bit against, as you say, in the Geoffrey Barnard.

Uhuh . . . How do you feel about the book Stockhausen Serves Imperialism? You know that, yeh?

That's Cornelius, isn't it? I didn't like it. It was an attack on the part of Cornelius against people who were doing their work. And, instead of doing his own work, he got involved in attacking other people who were working. Hm? So that he didn't do himself any good, or them any good. I think . . . it was negative action - that's what I really object to. I think people should act affirmatively and do what they believe. I think Cornelius failed to do that when he attacked other people, including me. And he even said to me that he thought he may have made a mistake, but he didn't admit that it was a mistake to attack Stockhausen. I didn't pay much attention.

Because it wasn't based in . . .

. . . in affirmative action.



Uhuh. How do you reconcile your Utopian 50s and 60s views on affirmative politics with the experience of the last decade?

I don't try to reconcile it with American politics, if that's what you're saying. I've been all along, very clearly against American government. I'm a Thoreauvian anarchist: I don't vote . . . I look forward to the time when no-one else does, either.

Do you not think that there may be certain directions that you could use your vote in that would eventually generate that?

No, no, I don't.

Does that speak more of American politics, or do you think there are possibilities for it elsewhere?

Government in general . . . I think we have more serious problems that government is not able to solve.

You mean ecological, and so on . . .

All those things. We're almost ruining the whole globe in our interest in government. We have I think it is 158 separate governments in a place where there should be only the solution of problems, otherwise we're all going to 'em, skip the . . . whatever it is.

Yeh, so would you be for some kind of world council in that sense?

Not involving politicians, but involving intelligent people. I'm talking about the problems, and solving the problems. And we generally solve problems by getting people who know something about the materials involved. Governments are concerned with power, and money, and neither one of those things is important. The important thing is to keep the thing working. And the solutions to that have been put forward, as I've pointed out in my books; by McLuhan and Fuller, and there may be better, or improved versions of those now. Full never gave a fixed idea, he gave an indeterminate idea, that could change as the possibilities changed. I have no confidence in government, of any country.

I repeat, then, the life of Emma Goldman; it's the basis of my text called *Anarchy*, which is just now published in the Booknell Review . . .

But would you say that in terms of centres of power or that kind of analysis, do you not think that a dissolution, a disintegration, and an increased number of devolving centres of power on increasingly more specific geographical bases would actually be a step towards the kind of thing that you've always talked about? Instead of America, well . . . instead of Washington and Moscow. For instance, within British politics, it's often suggested that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland become disengaged from Westminster, and so on.

No, it won't do any good. No. The first step will probably be, as it is being, a joining together of differences. Like the joining together of East and West Berlin now. It was in the nineteenth century that all the principalities of Germany formed a nation, and the same thing happened in Italy. We're moving toward a European coming-together, and then what we need is a world coming-together, but not a splitting-apart.

Well, speaking within the Scottish viewpoint, the notion is a holistic fragmentation, basically; independence from England, but within Europe.

I know, the whole thing is so complicated that it doesn't look as though we're going to have the sense to find a solution. But if each person, if each country by separating from one another, they also separated from government . . . but they won't do that. If they would, then I would be all for it. I've already done that as an individual.

Uhuh, but surely, the greater number of centres of power, the less megalomaniac each centre, and the greater the possibility of moving towards that?

Well, Fuller says the opposite of that, and I think I concur with him.

So in a sense you have a centralist viewpoint.

I have a technological point of view, and we need it, because we have now nearly four times as many people as ever lived on the planet in all of history living on it, at one moment, rather than in thousands of years, and we need to feed those people, and to give them water to drink . . . and they don't have good water now. Water and air are two of the serious problems. And we don't even pay any attention to them, and as long as we divide the people up continually, it won't solve that. Fuller's plan is to bring it all together, and to bring some intelligence to the solution of water for everyone.

Within the ecology of food, I mean the experience of mycology – of looking for a mushroom and not necessarily finding what you set out to . . . how's that developed in relation to your awareness of the prevalence of indeterminacy in life in general? Has it been an influence in your music?

It's like the United States government – it's a balancing operation to keep things reasonable, because if you use indeterminacy in connection with the gathering and eating of mushrooms, you might kill yourself. Um . . . the question in mushroom hunting, if you're also going to be eating the mushrooms, is a question of success or failure, whereas the music's not involved with that. When I first came in touch with mushrooms, I was looking for strawberries. Ha ha ha. But there weren't any strawberries – wild strawberries; there were mushrooms, though.



So is that how you got into mycology?

No, that's a longer story . . . I became interested in wild foods largely because I was poor. And last night, a young man came up to me and said that he wanted me to look at his music, so I looked at it and I said it didn't interest me. And, uh, after we talked briefly, he explained that he wanted to make a living, and I said you have to decide whether you want to make a living or whether you want to make music. And he said he really wants to make music, and I then said he could eat wild food, which was free, and he wouldn't have to worry about money. And that's the attitude I actually took, in my life.

Did you find that a practical attitude at that point?

Oh yes, and at that point, I read about an English lady who managed to walk around the entire world without any money, just eating wild food, and she sustained herself. It's quite possible.

But surely, within the macrobiotic diet as subscribed to by yourself, you have to be involved with . . .

It's rather elegant when it's urban. Ha ha ha!

Yes, ha ha! You can't pick it yourself!

Right. It's like an art.

Yes, like the actual fruitarian diet, in a way, where you can only eat what you find in your immediate area . . . in fact, you once wrote about the timbral aspects of the prepared piano in almost macrobiotic terms, or at least in terms of Duchamp's found objects – do you think that the parameter of timbre aids music implicitly in the sense of allowing further 'dietary' indeterminacies, so to speak?

Yes, and particularly in the percussion section of the orchestra, if we're talking purely about music, because it's involved with all the things that haven't been organised like the violins and the brass and the woodwinds have. The percussion is dealing with, uh, noises . . . and one drum is quite different from another drum, and instead of wanting the best drum, you have to take the drum which you have.

So you have less control, and you have to accept what you get. It seems to me that in that sense there's a very practical aspect to your attitudes based in indeterminacy, which relate, almost to fruitarianism.

Right. I think that the determinist position is very much related to a lot of occidental thinking which moves toward a goal which is non-existent; one goes toward a centre, towards an idea. In the Zen point of view, every sound is at the centre so you have a multiplicity of centres. That's all that Zen is; there's nothing peculiar about it.

I know you're very influenced by oriental philosophy, but I've also heard you mention an interest in Wittgenstein, for instance . . . How do you stand in general to occidental philosophy?

Well I like Wittgenstein mainly because of the language, which I think is very beautiful. And his strong relation to Buddhism . . . which isn't expressed in those words; one can become empty and I think that a lot of Wittgenstein, for instance, moves in that direction. He asks such questions that the mind is back to zero.

Is that surely not more a spiritual viewpoint than a practical viewpoint?

Well, if you think so, yes. Ha ha ha!

Ha ha! How about the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean François Lyotard, all these people? It strikes me there's a kind of connection there with your work, for instance, with a text like Barthes's The Death of The Author?

I think there is, but I'm not a student of it.

Did you ever feel like proclaiming your own 'death' as a composer?

Uh, well, it's a little late for me . . . ha, ha. I don't have to worry; I'll be dispensed with before that! Ha ha ha! I wouldn't want to dispense with it because in the dictionary, it says that I'm a composer; and it doesn't say anything else – it says 'American composer'. I don't see anything wrong with the word 'composer' – in a sense it means 'putting things together', and I put them together in such a way that they're not fixed in a fixed way but flexibly work together.

