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Cage at 100

PHILLIP GEORGE

John Cage -- whose 100th birthday will be celebrated on September 5, 2012 -- continues to influence and inspire composers and listeners around the world.

While his pre-chance works, particularly the prepared piano works of the 1940's such as *Sonatas and Interludes* (1948), earned critical acclaim, his adoption of chance operations in 1951 cost him a number of friendships and led criticisms from fellow composers. Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, both formerly on friendly terms with Cage, dismissed indeterminate music, the former criticizing him for "adoption of a philosophy tinged with Orientalism that masks a basic weakness in compositional technique."

Prominent critics of serialism, including Iannis Xenakis, were similarly hostile: the adoption of chance in music was "an abuse of language and . . . an abrogation of a composer's function."

The cynicism with which this departure seems to have been made is symbolized in Cage's account of a public lecture: "Later, during the question period, I gave one of six previously prepared answers regardless of the question asked. This was a reflection of my engagement in Zen." Such works as *4'33"* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (24 performers on 12 radios) are of enormous importance representing the complete abdication of the artist's power.

While much of Cage's work remains controversial, his influence on countless composers, artists, and writers is notable.

After Cage introduced chance, critics Boulez, Stockhausen, and Xenakis all adopted chance procedures in some of their works, although in a much more restricted manner). Other composers who adopted chance procedures in their works included Mauricio Kagel, Witold Lutosławski, and Krzysztof Penderecki.

Cage's indeterminacy, allied with his rhythmic structural experiments and interest in sound, influenced a number of composers, including close associates Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff, and Fluxus / minimalist composers, such as La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. Many of the English experimental school acknowledge his influence, including Gavin Bryars, who studied under Cage briefly, and Michael Nyman.

Additional influencees include George Crumb, Toru Takemitsu, Mark Alburger, Erling Wold, Frank Zappa, Brian Eno, Sonic Youth (who perform some of the *Number Pieces*), and Aphex Twin, which has utilized prepared piano.

Cage's work as musicologist helped popularize Erik Satie's music, and his friendship with Abstract expressionist artists such as Robert Rauschenberg helped introduce his ideas into visual art.

In this centenary year, Cage celebrations are being held around the world throughout the year. A partial list up to the composer's September 5, 2012 birthday includes:

September 6, 2011

A Year from Monday. 365 Tage Cage. Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Germany. Through September 5, 2012.

January 1, 2012 - December 31, 2012

Daniel Scandurra presents cage 100 saidas)exits(. Brazil.

centocage / Bologna Pays Tribute to John Cage / 1912-1992-2012. Bologna, Italy.

EVERYDAYJOHNCAGE. Rimini, Italy.

John Cage Year Lublin 2012. Centre for Intercultural Creative Initiatives Crossroads, Lublin, Poland.

February 5, 15-16

John Cage's *Songbooks*, 103, *Fifty-Eight*, *Etcetera*, *Dance*, *Fontana Mix*, *Aria*, *WBAI*, *Water Walk*, *Theater Piece*. Roy and Edna Disney Theater, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA.

March 3

2011-2012 Southwest Chamber Music 25th Anniversary Season: Cage 2012. Los Angeles, CA. Through March 24.

March 5

johncage100. Switzerland. Through March 4, 2013.

June 9

San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra's 10th-Anniversary Gala, with music of Igor Stravinsky and John Cage. Old First Church, San Francisco, CA.

Darmstadt 2012: John Cage Centennial Concert. ISSUE Project Room, Brooklyn, NY

July 6, 11, 18

JOHN CAGE 100, on water. Bargemusic, NY, NY.

July 14

souvenir, including John Cage's Souvenir. Havnar Kirkja, Torshavn, Faroe Islands, Denmark.

Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik. Internationale Ensemble Modern Akademie plays John Cage's Sonata for Clarinet, Water Music, and Ten. Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, Germany.

July 15

River to River Festival: Alarm Will Sound presents John Cage's Songbooks. New York, NY.

July 28-29

Park der Klänge: Birthday of the Modern American Composition Legend John Cage, with the Ensemble Megaphon. KulturGut Poggendorf, Germany.

August 7

JOHN CAGE YEAR BYDGOSZCZ 2012: a concert for four double bassists and male voice, inspired by Cage's text, Overpopulation and Art. MOZG, Poland.

August 9

Modern Poets: John Cage Day. Sculpture Garden, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

August 17

Ruhrtriennale 2012: John Cage's Europas 1 and 2. Jahrhunderthalle, Germany.

August 24

Locrian Players celebrate the Cage Centennial with new prepared piano works. Riverside Church, NY, NY.

August 28 - September 1

Flussi 2012 -- Out Of Cage. Teatro Gesualdo, Italy.

September 1

John Cage Anniversary Concert. Lappeenranta Music Institute, Finland.

September 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

120 Hours for John Cage, 24 hours every Saturday in September 2012. WGXC, Green County, NY.

September 4

John Cage 100: a 24-hr celebration. Parkteatret, Norway.

John Cage Centennial Festival. Washington, DC. Through September 10.

Happy (Early) Birthday John Cage. University of North Carolina, Pembroke, NC.

September 5

An Opening of Doors: Music of John Cage in Celebration of his 100th Birthday. La Sala Rossa, Canada.

The Age of Cage -- Credo in WI. Caligari Filmbühne, Germany.

John Cage's MusicCircus, a Festival and Conference. Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Moscow, Russia.

John Cage at 100! Symphony Space, New York, NY.

John Cage Variety Show Big Band. The Stone, New York, NY.

Concert Reviews

Not Shy and Retiring Review

ERIK WILSON

April 14th marked a day for musical greatness, as Not Shy and Retiring: Mark Alburger's 55th and Friends was held at the Community Music Center in San Francisco. None can argue that having so many accomplished musicians perform in a single night isn't extraordinary. The first performance of the night was a great one. Sarita Cannon sang Samuel Barber's *Sure on this Shining Night*. This was certainly a wise opening gambit in musical beauty. Next was Ann Calloway's *Vladimir in Butterfly Country*. With the composer at the piano, bass Richard Mix offered great yet equally compelling contrast, and the story behind the song proved surprisingly engaging.

More great soprano singing followed with Annemarie Ballinger in Craig Cornelia's *Flight* and Kurt Weill's *Stay Well*. Then the instrumental ante was upped in Steven Greenman's *In torbe funem vind* (*In the Sack of the Wind*), as Darren Sagawa offered excellence in his violin, along with pianist Alla Gladysheva, and soprano Heather Klein. Oboe-d'amorist-composer Gary Friedman displayed more instrumental variety in his *Three Happy Oboists*, where he was joined by Thea Davidson and Moria Little, the latter on English horn. The otherwise unaccompanied double-reed sounds grew weary to the ear, however, and individual movements were additionally arguably clichéd. Despite all this, the instrumentalists did their best in performing these rhythmically complex pieces.



Pianist Mikako Endo performed Alden Jenks's *Unrestful Sleep* and provided redeemed interest to the recital. The music was expertly realized, despite the fact that this was possibly the most difficult work presented. Next, John McGrew's *Three Haiku Songs* took the stage. While soprano Maria Mikheyenko was definitely in the spotlight, it was still noteworthy and impressive that presenter Mark Alburger was revealed an oboist as well, further proving the expansiveness of his musicianship. Pianist-composer Helena Michelson was next up to demonstrate her musical prowess in *The Game*. After this, Sheli Nan's *Saga: I Want a Man on a Motorcycle* turned out to be the first theatrical presentation of the night (unusually late in the game, considering Goat Hall's reputation as a music-theatre organization). While the story behind the theatrics was interesting, and Nan obviously has a deep artistic mind, it was a little strange to hear such conventional music being mixed with contemporary themes.

The anticipation was put to rest when the man of the hour, Alburger, went on stage for the performances of his most recent compositions. The first "Novel" of *The Decameron* was performed with soprano Cannon, bass Wayne Wong, and Alburger singing tenor. This piece was the most unique of the entire presentation. With interesting words and back story, what instantly grabbed the listeners' interest were the tremendous tempo changes. Breakneck speeds are commonly risky, yet Alburger certainly made them work. *Triple Concerto for Bassoon, Contrabassoon, and Harp* ("Family") topped all as the best performance of the evening. Despite the fact that Alburger is wont to deprecate his piano playing, he is actually quite talented in this arena as well. A most arresting aspect of the work was harpist Samantha Garvey's command of her instrument, in counterpoint to the expert playing of her parents, bassoonist Michael and contrabassoonist Lori. With only the quartet of players, one looks forward to the complete orchestral performance of this piece in June with the San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra. Without a doubt, Mark Alburger's 55th and Friends was an impressive and influential series of performances.

Khalife and Company

MICHAEL MCDONAGH

What can one say about artists as revered in the Arab world -- or as Philip Glass would say "that part of our world" -- as Lebanese composer-oud master-singer Marcel Khalife and the late great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) other than that their work conspires to join our estranged hearts in this relentlessly divided world. These simple truths came home when Khalife and his 12-member Al Mayadine Ensemble played a 2-hour plus concert on April 22 at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Auditorium to a deeply attentive and warmly responsive audience.

Words and music are sound as sound, and what is sound but a fusion of the public with the private which Khalife and Darwish's work has always celebrated. Words and music have to be necessary like bread or water if they are to have meaning, and the sounds here could have drawn tears from a stone because Khalife treats his listeners as equal partners.

It doesn't hurt that his vocal settings have always been unfussily direct, even childlike simple, unlike some of his American counterparts who clot their settings with accidentals -- a holdover from the New Vienna School and its imitators -- to make them "deep." Khalife and Darwish are aided and abetted by Arabic music's quarter-tone anchored modes with their innately expressive resonance, and by the language's vowel with consonant combinations so different from Hebrew's largely consonantal ones, to say nothing of English with its impossibly unmusical diphthongs, like "spring."



I know because my poem dead serious -- for Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) was recently beautifully translated into Arabic by the gifted young Palestinian artist/filmmaker Ahmed Walweel, who made its shadowed phrases sound a lot more musical. And what beauties in this program.

"Prepare the land for me so I can rest / because I love you until I'm weary ... / Your morning is fruit made for song / and the evening's made of gold /" Darwish says in "The Pigeons Fly" (Yateer el Hamam), which Khalife sang with slowly building insistence as his oud and Mark Elias' double bass drone seemed to come from beneath time. " The voices -- Khalife's, his wife Yolla's, and Oumayama Khalil's -- in Her Eyes (Aynaha). Khalife's ensemble, like Glass's, Paul Drescher's, or Steve Reich's, serves the practical demands of his music and all were superb and deeply accomplished here.

The French accordionist Anthony Millet -- Lebanon was of course a French protectorate -- dovetailed his sounds into Omar Guey's violin. The Romani Ismail Lumnarovski coaxed highly ornamented gipsy, klezmer, duduk, and even western flute-like sounds from his clarinet, and Kenan Adnawi -- oud -- and Feras Charestan -- qanoun -- from tragically embattled Syria, supplied evocative supportive colors. And the percussionists. The Macedonian Aleksandar Petrov on the Balkan parade drum tapan -- you can see it in Darwish's funeral www.youtube.com -- which he, both seated and seated -- hit vigorously with 2 large and small sticks. Michel Baklout -- on Arabic tambourine -- riq -- and Hafez El Ali Kotain -- on the Arabic taba, or dumbek -- brought their sounds center stage.

And there was Khalife's superbly gifted composer-pianist son Rami -- his percussionist brother Bachar was in Paris taking care of his 2 young children -- who discreetly accompanied, and in the rapturous concluding number, Oh Fishermen, Haila, Haila (Al Bahriyyeh), brought the house down with his visceral, hugely imaginative and thoroughly thought out "take" on this tune which included a quote cum variation of Coltrane's "Giant Steps" which sounded massive and completely inevitable here. And if music and words together don't get you where you live, what's the point?

Or as someone once said -- "The avant garde's the oldest thing in the world," which is why Khalife and Darwish's work means and continues to mean much to so many, because it never left the room of the house where our collective hearts have always lived.

John Cage Centenary Percussion

MARK ALBURGER

All life is about arbitrariness and intention, as John Cage's life in music clearly shows. In this year, marking the hundredth anniversary of the composer's birth, Cage celebrations have been arbitrarily popping up around the country and the world, and one at San Francisco's Community Music Center, on April 29, made clear the joys of taking in events -- sonic and otherwise -- as they unfold.

The joint concert, presented by Daniel Kennedy's Sacramento [State University] Percussion Group and Chris Froh's Percussion Group [U.C.] Davis, offered an overview of Cage's percussive output from 1933 through 77, in a series of committed performances that brought humor, profundity, and virtuosity to the fore.

The oldest work, Sonata for Two Voices, refers to a "two-lined" texture, and was here renditioned by the Noyce Duo of Boyce Jeffries and Nick Micheels on marimba and vibraphone. Its three classically-styled movements of Sonata, Fugato, and Rondo leave a double-edge take-home message of clarity and obscurity.

Living Room Music (1940) is a personal favorite, the second movement of which has been performed by this writer many times over the years. The score calls for a quartet of unspecified household instruments, in this performance updated to include a plastic 100-CD stack container, as well as a more "period-accurate" old TV set. Sacramento performers Phylcia Morris, Dannie Styles, Isaiah Abdul-Rahman, and the director set up a schtick of ordering pizza on a cellphone and then launched into "To Begin" in an arresting array of exciting rhythms. "Story", a spoken collage in the spirit of Ernst Toch's Geographical Fugue (1930), manifests a very classicist sentiment, despite its hilarious content, in its wealth of variety in contradistinction to its economy of means (everything based on Gertrude Stein's line "Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around"). The third movement, calling for one of the players on a single-line melody instrument, was here realized on grand piano, with the other performers banging away on the lid. The fourth section was a ternary reflection of the first.

Credo in US (1942), as well as Living Room, are both big enough deals to merit their own articles on Wikipedia. And rightly so. Credo is another romp, with amazing syncopations and sonics derived from tin cans, muted gongs, buzzers, tom-toms, a minimally prepared piano (just hands dampening the strings), radio, and

record player -- all wildly delivered here by Kevin's Barr and Sakamoto, Victor Nava, and Lien Do of UC Davis. While records are cued to the other musics in terms of attack-and-release, the content is not specified beyond Cageian suggestions of "Dvorak, Beethoven, Sibelius, or Shostakovich." The only found music that could be made out in this performance was a very funny opening usage of the Prelude to Tristan und Isolde. Wagner was and is spinning...

Amores and She Is Asleep (performed by Andy Davidson, Ian Marci, and others) are both from 1943, and continue to demonstrate that Cage, at least in his early years, knew how to write music and certainly knew what he was doing. The works of the 1950's and beyond have left detractors to believe, not so much so.

But there is much to love. Radio Music (1956), is, along with the more famous Imaginary Landscape No. 4, indeed for radios, but in this case 8 soloists, rather than the 24 duettists sharing 12 machines. For the Community Music Center, the combined group of Sacramento-Davis performers (Serrena Carlucci, Breanna Hale, Ian Marci, Scott McAuliffe, Kaity Roblyer, Danny Zagunis, Morris, and Styles) took on another Cage idea of "sound-sculpture" and walked solemnly around the audience with their boomboxes. The result was one of profound sadness, with most of the stations tuned to various statics (frequencies and durations all pre-determined by the composer), and various random sonic ejecta of popular music floating on the surface.

Possibly least convincing is Child of Tree (1975), for ten plant materials, determined by chance operations, with the exception that one of the instruments should be a pod (rattle) from a Mexican poinciana. Jonathan Raman gave it his all in execution, however, demonstrating that, once again, variety can come from an economy of means. Great tingling sounds from the cactus, for instance.

But Telephones and Birds (1977) is another found masterpiece. Three performers (Hale, Zagunis, and McAuliffe) sit at an electronics-strewn table (a typical Cage conceit) and roll I-Ching sticks, which determine what telephone numbers to call to hear amplified "bird-lover alerts" throughout America (and perhaps the world). Didn't even know there were "rare-bird hotlines", but we heard them in interesting and alarming overlaps.

It was an evening of revelation -- as is so often the case with Cage -- in sound and psychology.

Chronicle

April 2

Cutting Edge Concerts New Music Festival: James Joyce and Tendrils of '30s Swing. Symphony Space, New York, NY. Programs through April 30. "The composer Victoria Bond has never been afraid to experiment with unusual combinations, musical and otherwise, in her Cutting Edge Concerts. The series, now in its 15th season, used to bring together musicians and representatives of other disciplines -- chefs or architects, for example -- in the hope of finding some sort of philosophical common ground. . . . The series, which includes five weekly concerts in the Leonard Nimoy Thalia Theater at Symphony Space, has traditionally focused on contemporary classical music in conventional styles. But this year's prospectus includes flirtations with indie-classical hybrids. At the opening installment on Monday evening, the first half of the program was devoted to unalloyed jazz, with works by Daniel Jamieson and Jim McNeely, performed by Mr. Jamieson's Danjam Orchestra, a modern version of a big band, with a heavy complement of woodwinds and brasses, as well as electric guitar, piano, bass, drums and a vocalist who mostly doubled some of the instrumental lines. The jazz composers were represented by two scores each: A Desperate Act and Phantasm, by Mr. Jamieson, and two pieces inspired by Paul Klee paintings, Der Seiltänzer (The Tightrope Walker) and Tod und Feuer (Death and Fire), by Mr. McNeely. Their styles were not radically different, perhaps because Mr. Jamieson studied with Mr. McNeely. They share an approach to harmony and color, and their music sounds rooted in 1930s swing, with touches of the chromaticism, deliberately loose intonation and melodic angularity of later incarnations of jazz. The second half of the program began with Ms. Bond's Leopold Bloom's Homecoming, an inventive amplification of a passage from James Joyce's Ulysses, for tenor and piano. Joyce's writing -- and Ulysses, particularly -- has yielded reams of music over the last few decades, most notably the lush settings of Stephen Albert. Ms. Bond's score is spare and direct: the questions asked of Bloom, about how he spent his day, are spoken rather than sung, and Bloom's musings are alternately lyrical and introspective, depending on Joyce's wide-ranging imagery. Rufus Müller, the tenor, projected it with clarity, spirit and a warm, enveloping tone, and Jenny Lin gave a graceful account of the vital piano writing. N. Lincoln Hanks's energetic four-movement Monstre Sacré closed the program. The sacred monster of the title, Mr. Hanks explained, describes musicians whose peculiarities and social lapses we tolerate for the sake of their artistry.

The only one he identified in his comments was the pianist Glenn Gould, which explains the passing references to Bach's English and French suites, but not those to Gershwin, Prokofiev and other composers who flit through the piece). The success of Mr. Hanks's work was that it offered you enough purely musical twists that you stopped wondering which monsters he had in mind" [Allan Kozinn, The New York Times, 4/3/12].

April 8

Anna Caterina Antonacci. Alice Tully Hall, New York, NY. "Antonacci alternated . . . Fauré works with song sets by Reynaldo Hahn, the Venezuelan-born French composer, including selections from Venezia, settings of poems in Venetian dialect. In Hahn's song La Barcheta (The Little Boat), a man with love on his mind ushers the becoming Nineta onto a boat in the moonlight. Each verse ends with a yearning 'Ah!' As sung by Ms. Antonacci, these expressions were not milked for effect but seemed to be the subdued sounds of internalized desire seeping out. . . . [She] end[ed with] a solemnly beautiful performance of Licinio Refice's 1935 song Ombra di Nube" [Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 4/9/12].

April 10

Michael Brown performs his Constellations and Toccata and George Perle's Classic Suite. Weill Recital Hall, New York, NY. "George Perle's Classic Suite (1938), is actually an old work that Mr. Brown and Shirley Perle, the composer's widow, recently discovered in a box of unpublished manuscripts. Cast in the rhythms of Baroque dances (an Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gavotte and Gigue) but couched in a mildly dissonant harmonic language, the suite is a lively dialogue between eras, with a touch of the lyricism that would distinguish Perle's later music. Mr. Brown played it with energy and clarity, qualities he also applied to his own rugged Constellations and Toccata (2012), a work with a spare, atmospheric opening movement that gives way to a sizzling perpetual-motion finale. He read both works from an iPad, and he is repeating his own piece at his next recital" [Allan Kozinn, The New York Times, 4/11/12].

April 14

Fresh Voices XII: Not Shy and Retiring -- Mark Alburger's 55th and Friends, a benefit for Goat Hall Productions and San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra. Mark Alburger's The Decameron, Triple Concerto, and Psalm 92, Samuel Barber's Sure on This Shining Night, Ann Callaway's Vladimir in the Country, Chris Corniela's Flight, Gary Friedman's Three Happy Oboists, John McGrew's Three Haiku, Sheli Nan's Saga, and music of Lisa Scola Prosek and Kurt Weill. Community Music Center, San Francisco, CA.

Tod Machover's Remembering H.M. Cambridge, MA. Through May 13.

April 29

John Cage Centenary Percussion. Community Music Center, San Francisco, CA.



Recordings

Zack Browning. Secret Pulse. Innova.

Jennifer Higdon, Andrea Clearfield, James Primosch. Metamorphosis. Innova.

Edge Study. Bruce Friedman, Trumpet; Motoko Hondo, Keyboard Synthesizer. Analog Arts.

Ethel. Heavy. Innova.

Forward Energy. The Awakening. Jazz on the Line.

Jeremy Haladyna. Music from the Mayan Cycle. Innova.

Steve Heitzig, Lori Laitman. Wild Songs. Polly Butler Cornelius, Soprano. Innova.

Erdem Helvacicolu. Eleven Short Stories. Innova.

Howl. James Roman, Saxophone; Nicholas Roth, Piano; Mark Engebretson, Computer. Innova.

Ilkilk. Grampus. pfMentum.

Kevin Kastning, Carl Clements. Dreaming As I Knew. Greydisc.

David Keberli. Caught in Time. Innova.

Dylan Mattingly. Stream of Stars. Contemporaneous. Innova.

Nick Vasallo. Monuments Emerge. Innova.

Volti. House of Voices. Innova.

