

John Cage: Professor, Maestro, Percussionist, Composer

BY B. MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Throughout John Cage's early career, his mother kept scrapbooks to document his activities and accomplishments. She preserved photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, and concert programs in simply bound volumes that she aptly titled "John Cage: Professor, Maestro, Percussionist, Composer." These scrapbooks, now housed in the John Cage Archive at Northwestern University, provide a poignant view of Cage's early career in music.

Between 1935 and 1943, Cage composed fifteen works for percussion. Many of these works were written for and performed by percussion ensembles organized by the composer on the West Coast and later in Chicago and New York. The historical significance of Cage's early work in percussion and the four compositional procedures found in his percussion music contain the seeds of development for his later work with chance operations, indeterminacy and electronic media. In addition, insight into Cage's philosophy and discussion of his work in experimental music provide more information about the man and his music.

John Cage was born in Los Angeles, California in 1912. His earliest experience with music came through piano lessons with his Aunt Phoebe James. Cage recalled,

She introduced me to Moskowski and what you might call "Piano Music the Whole World Loves to Play." I started taking piano lessons when I was in the fourth grade at school but I became more interested in sight-reading than in running up and down the scales. Being a virtuoso didn't interest me at all.¹

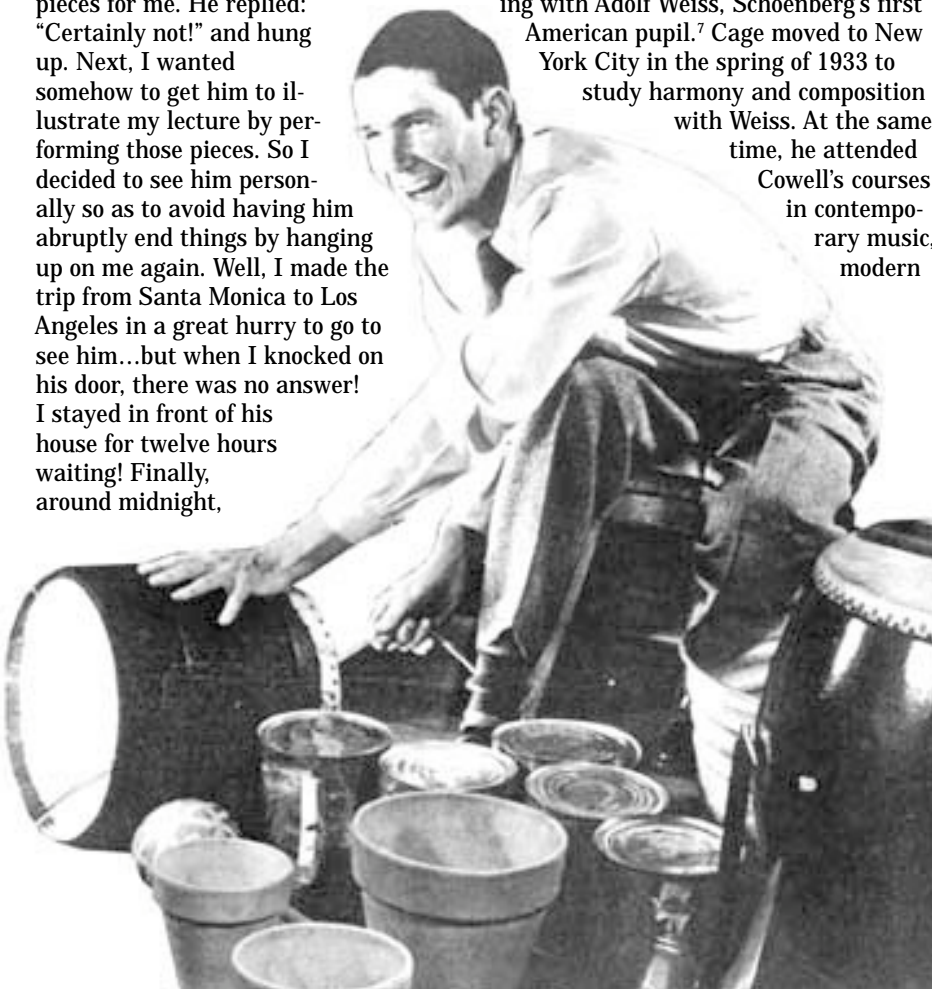
After graduating as class valedictorian from Los Angeles High School in 1928, Cage entered Pomona College in Claremont, California, where he remained for two years.² In 1930, he left for Europe, where he studied architecture,³ wrote poetry, painted, and first composed music.⁴ Cage returned to California in the fall of 1931 and settled in Santa

Monica, where he worked as a gardener in an auto court in exchange for his rent and gave lectures on modern painting and music to local housewives.⁵ During this period, Cage began studying composition with pianist Richard Buhlig. According to Cage:

The week came when I was to speak about Schoenberg. I had learned, some time earlier, Richard Buhlig has been the first to play Opus 11—Schoenberg's first three piano pieces—and it suddenly occurred to me that he might be living in Los Angeles...so I ran to the telephone book. His name was listed! I phoned him, and asked him if he would agree to play Schoenberg's pieces for me. He replied: "Certainly not!" and hung up. Next, I wanted somehow to get him to illustrate my lecture by performing those pieces. So I decided to see him personally so as to avoid having him abruptly end things by hanging up on me again. Well, I made the trip from Santa Monica to Los Angeles in a great hurry to go to see him...but when I knocked on his door, there was no answer! I stayed in front of his house for twelve hours waiting! Finally, around midnight,

he returned home, and when I explained to him that I had waited at his door for twelve hours, he agreed to see me. I asked him to play the Schoenberg pieces at the next lecture. He again answered, "Certainly not!" So then I asked him to teach me composition. He replied that he did not teach composition, but piano, but that he would, nevertheless, agree to do his best. After several months of work with him, he told me he couldn't help me anymore, and that I should send my compositions to Henry Cowell.⁶

Cowell suggested that Cage study composition with Schoenberg, but added that he should first prepare himself by studying with Adolf Weiss, Schoenberg's first American pupil.⁷ Cage moved to New York City in the spring of 1933 to study harmony and composition with Weiss. At the same time, he attended Cowell's courses in contemporary music, modern



harmony, and music of the world's peoples at the New School for Social Research.⁸ Cage studied counterpoint, form and analysis with Schoenberg from 1935 to 1937.⁹ It was during this time that Cage's interest in percussion music and the use of noise in musical composition surfaced. Schoenberg had impressed upon his students the importance of the structural function of tonality. Cage recalls a now-famous encounter with the Austrian composer:

After I had been studying music with him for two years, Schoenberg said, "In order to write music, you must have a feeling for harmony." I explained to him that I had no feeling for harmony. He then said that I would always encounter an obstacle, that it would be as though I came to a wall through which I could not pass. I said, "In that case I will devote my life to beating my head

against that wall."¹⁰

In 1936, Cage became acquainted with Oscar Fischinger, an abstract film-maker who engaged the young composer to write new music for his visual projects. The association with Fischinger would profoundly influence Cage's direction in music:

When I was introduced to him, he began to talk with me about the spirit which is inside each of the objects in this world. So, he told me, all we need to do to liberate that spirit is to brush past the object, and to draw forth its sound. That's the idea which led me to percussion.¹¹

Fischinger had given Cage the means whereby the young composer could overcome his lack of feeling for tonality. Cage began composing music for percussion in-

struments and, consequently, began questioning Schoenberg's teachings on the structural character of tonality. He explains:

What struck me all the more was [Schoenberg's] insistence on teaching tonality as structure, as a structural means. When you think about it, composing with twelve tones is only a "method." But I found the obligation to continually submit to that theory to be exaggeratedly constraining...I only truly detached myself from Schoenberg's teachings on the structural character of tonality once I began to work with percussion. Only then did I begin to make structures. But structure then became rhythmic; it was no longer a tonal structure in Schoenberg's sense.¹²

Cage became increasingly interested in the possibility of utilizing noise in musical composition. Peter Yates has suggested that Cage's percussion music represents an extension of Schoenberg's philosophy of the emancipation of dissonance: "Cage said that Schoenberg, when he emancipated the dissonance, should have gone farther and emancipated music from its notes."¹³ Cage clarified his philosophy in the 1937 statement, "The Future of Music: Credo":

...whereas, in the past, the point of disagreement has been between dissonance and consonance, it will be, in the immediate future, between noise and so-called musical sounds. The present methods of writing music, principally those which employ harmony and its reference to particular steps in the field of sound, will be inadequate for the composer, who will be faced with the entire field of sound. New methods will be discovered, bearing a definite relation to Schoenberg's twelve-tone system and present methods of writing percussion music and any other methods which are free from the concept of a fundamental tone. The principle of form will be our only connection with the past...¹⁴

During the summer of 1937, while also working as an accompanist at the Demonstration School of the University of California at Los Angeles, Cage held the position of instructor in percussion at the

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Virginia Hall Johnson School of Dance in Beverly Hills.¹⁵ In the academic year 1937 to 1938, he served as accompanist in the Santa Monica public schools. Also, during the spring semester of 1938, Cage and his aunt, Phoebe James, taught an extension course at UCLA entitled, "Musical Accompaniments for Rhythmic Expression."¹⁶

Cage moved to Seattle in late 1938 to join the faculty at the Cornish School. The time he had spent in California in 1935 through 1937 had yielded two compositions for percussion: the "Quartet" (1935) and "Trio" (1936), each based on fixed rhythmic patterns for unspecified instruments. Cage's compositional output for percussion and his continued interest in the medium increased dramatically in the years following his move to Seattle. Cage chose to move to Seattle in part because of a large collection of percussion instruments he found in a closet at the Cornish School.¹⁷ The instruments had been left there by a German dancer who had used them to accompany his choreography.¹⁸ Cage used these instruments as the foundation for his own collection of percussion instruments, which would eventually number over three hundred.¹⁹

With his newly-found collection of instruments, Cage organized a percussion orchestra comprised of faculty members, students and dancers. Cage's wife, Xenia, and dancer Merce Cunningham were among those who played in the ensemble.²⁰ In addition to providing accom-

paniment to the dance, the percussion orchestra presented many of the earliest performances of experimental works for percussion. On December 9, 1938, at the Cornish School in Seattle, Cage presented a concert of percussion music, the first complete concert of its kind in America.²¹

Cage remained in Seattle for two years, during which time his percussion group presented several successful concerts. In addition to Cage's own compositions, the ensemble performed works by William Russell, Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, Johanna Beyer and others. It should be emphasized that the players in Cage's percussion group were not formally trained percussionists; neither was Cage himself. Cage explained: "We could do anything in the way of counting, but we couldn't roll. So, some of the pieces, like those sent to use by Chavez, we were unable to play." Cage also pointed out that while the early percussion performances were well received by the dance community, there was no interest among trained percussionists.²²

During 1939 and 1940, Cage expanded his compositional output for percussion. "Imaginary Landscape No. 1," for phonograph records of constant and variable frequency, large Chinese cymbal, and string piano (a term borrowed from Henry Cowell denoting an instrument played from its interior) is considered to be among the first compositions of electronic music.

In "Imaginary Landscape No. 1," Cage first employed a structure that would accommodate both noise and so-called musical sound. He began with a pre-compositional time frame in which four sections of three-times-five measures appear. Each fifteen-measure section is separated by interludes of one, two and then three measures. The work concludes with a four-measure coda. By constructing first the time frame, then filling it with musical events (both pitched and non-pitched), Cage began to realize the ideas of non-discrimination between noise and tonality he had predicted in his 1937 statement, "The Future of Music: Credo."

Cage extended his rhythmic structure in "First Construction (In Metal)" for percussion sextet. This work consists of sixteen large sections (the macrostructure), each of which comprises sixteen measures based on the durational proportions 4:3:2:3:4 (the microstructure). A similar structural process was followed in "Second Construction," which also employs a rhythmic structure of sixteen times sixteen measures. The technique of fashioning a rhythmic structure to be filled with musical events became known as the "square-root" formula. Cage would rely on the "square-root" formula of rhythmic structuring in his composition over the following twelve years.²³

Cage taught at Mills College during the summer session of 1940. He, along with Lou Harrison, served as instructor in a dance accompaniment course that dealt with percussion, techniques and problems of accompaniment, and composition of dance.²⁴ On July 18, 1940, Cage, Harrison and Russell presented a concert of percussion music, including three premiere performances: "Chicago Sketches" by Russell, "Canticle" by Harrison, and "Suite" by Jose Ardevol.²⁵ Additional performances included "Pulse" by Cowell, "Second Construction" by Cage and "Ritmicas V and VI" by Roldan.²⁶ The performance received a favorable, though light-hearted, review in *Time* magazine:

With ordered gusto they banged, rattled, beat, blew, stomped, and rang their way through Henry Cowell's "Pulse," John Cage's "Second Construction," William Russell's "Chicago Sketches," Lou Harrison's "Canticle," Amadeo Roldan's "Ritmicas V and VI."



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When they had finished, the audience gave percussive approval.²⁷

Rather than return to Seattle in the fall of 1940, Cage elected to remain at Mills College in order to establish a research laboratory of percussion and electrical instruments.²⁸ Cage's work at Mills was favorably received by columnist Peter Yates, who, in March, 1941, wrote:

So today in the midst of us in California is being written a new technological and meaningful chapter in the history of the creative organization of sound, out of which comes music.²⁹

While at Mills, in the spring and summer of 1941, Cage continued to concentrate on music for the dance. He and Lou Harrison accompanied the Marian Van Tuyl Dance Company in a concert for percussion and dance presented at Mills on July 26, 1941. Although Cage's music at this time was enthusiastically received by the dance community, music critics continued to take it lightly. A program of percussion music by Cage and Lou Harrison, presented May 14, 1941, was announced by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the following manner: "...the orchestra will be composed of drums, gongs, bell, brake drums, and sheet metal and all selections will be original compositions of Cage and Harrison... You'd think they could at least play 'Old Man River,' ho ho."³⁰

Further evidence of Cage's struggle for recognition as a bona fide composer and musician appeared in the summer of 1941, when he applied for a position with the Works Progress Administration. Ac-

ording to Cage: "When I applied to the W.P.A., they put me not in the music department, but in the recreation department. They didn't consider my work as music."³¹ In the fall of 1941, Cage moved to Chicago to join the faculty of the School of Design. At this institution of related arts, Cage taught a class in improvisation and "sound experiments."³² He also established a percussion ensemble that performed several concerts worthy of note.

Cage's first percussion concert in Chicago was presented March 1, 1942, under the auspices of the Arts Club of Chicago. The program received much advance publicity, as evidenced by the unusual number of newspaper articles and columns heralding the event. The program included William Russell's "March Suite" and "Three Dance Movements," Lou Harrison's "Counterdance in the Spring" and "Canticle," and Cage's "Construction in Metal" and "Imaginary Landscape No. 3." The concert received much public attention, both in Chicago and elsewhere. An unidentified New York critic began his article in the following manner: "For the first time in the history of the Arts Club of Chicago, a beer bottle was broken in its auditorium last night and called music."³³ The critic was referring to the last of William Russell's "Three Dance Movements," which requires the player to break a glass bottle into a metal wash-tub. Cecil Smith, of the *Chicago Tribune*, gave this summary:

Of the final artistic result, I can only say that we went thru [sic] all this once before in the 1920s, when George

Antheil and Edgar Varèse were at work, and I suppose we can go through it again.³⁴

On March 18, 1942, Cage's percussion ensemble performed for the first time on a mixed program shared with the University of Chicago Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Frederick Stock and Charles Buckley. The program featured the music of Holst, Beethoven, Bach, Saint-Saëns and Dvorák. Within the program were interspersed two selections of Cage's ensemble: Lou Harrison's "Canticle" and Will Russell's "Three Dance Movements."

Again, Cage's performance received a number of public reactions. Most critics reported on the novelty of a percussion orchestra that used such unconventional "instruments" as flowerpots, automobile brake drums, thundersheets and beer bottles. Cage explained that, although there was some amount of attention given the ensemble's work in Chicago, it never ventured beyond the aspect of novelty. He said: "No one really took my music seriously. I think they much preferred the Dvorák."³⁵

By December of 1942, Cage had moved to New York, where he continued to work with the dance and with music for percussion ensemble. One of his most notable performances was presented at the Museum of Modern Art on February 7, 1943, under the auspices of the League of Composers.³⁶ The program included Cage's "Construction in Metal," "Amores," and "Imaginary Landscape No. 3," as well as works by Lou Harrison, Henry Cowell, Jose Ardevol and Amadeo Roldan. The Museum of Modern Art performance received immediate notoriety among critics and established Cage as a leading exponent of experimental music. Although initially criticized as unmusical by a number of music journalists, many of the works presented by Cage's ensemble in 1943 remain staples of the percussion repertory today.

Soon after the concert at the Museum of Modern Art, Cage began to move away from percussion in order to focus on his works for prepared piano. Because of logistical problems with instruments and rehearsal space in New York City, Cage eventually disbanded his percussion ensemble and donated his extensive collection of instruments to Paul Price, then percussion instructor at the University of

Illinois.³⁷

Between 1940 and 1943, Cage continued to employ the compositional techniques he had developed in his "First Construction (In Metal)" and "Imaginary Landscape No. 1," both composed in 1939. The "Construction" series eventually numbered three, and was based exclusively on the "square-root" formula. The "Imaginary Landscape" series, which eventually included five works, continued to use elements of rhythmic structuring, but began to move toward indeterminacy after the third work in the series. Each of the works entitled "Imaginary Landscape" employed some type of electronic devices in addition to percussion instruments.

Other works from this time period include "Living Room Music" (1940) for unspecified instruments; "Double Music" (1941) for percussion quartet, written in collaboration with Lou Harrison; "Credo In US" (1942) for percussion quartet with electric devices, written for dancers Merce Cunningham and Jean Erdman; "Forever and Sunsmell" (1942) for voice

and percussion duo; "The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs" (1942) for voice and closed piano; "She is Asleep" (1943) for voice, prepared piano, and quartet of twelve tom-toms; and "Amores" (1943) for prepared piano and percussion trio. Cage did not write another work for percussion alone until 1956, when he composed a solo work entitled "27' 10.554" for a Percussionist."

Cage utilized four different compositional procedures in the fifteen works for percussion composed between 1935 and 1943. The earliest percussion pieces ("Quartet," "Trio" and movement III of "Amores") consist of fixed rhythmic patterns that are continually recycled, appearing in various locations within a given measure (or unit of time) throughout the work. The patterns, or motives, remain static and do not undergo any developmental manipulation other than placement within a given unit of time.

The "square-root" formula provided a structural framework, based on duration, within which motives or silences could occur. Each work employing this procedure

is based on a given number of measures having a square root, so that the large structural divisions (the macrostructure) have the same relationship with the whole that the small structural divisions (the microstructure) have within a unit of it. The majority of Cage's percussion works employ this procedure in some form.

In two works composed in 1943 ("She is Asleep" and movement II of "Amores"), Cage utilized a compositional procedure known as "icti-controls," in which he predetermined the number of attacks (or "icti") per player within a given phrase-length. This procedure was applied within a structure of phrase lengths similar to that employed in the "square-root" formula.

Three works involving either dance or voice ("Credo In US," "Forever and Sunsmell" and "The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs," all composed in 1942) employ a more freely-structured compositional style based on the framework of the dance or vocal line. These works utilize the contraposition of periodic and

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aperiodic rhythms.

Cage has said that his goal in composition is to allow sounds to be themselves, unhampered by the stringent laws of harmony and tonality. Although his early percussion music is often highly structured and organized (as in those compositions using "icti-controls"), it is open to any sound that might be placed within such a structure. Hence, Cage was able to explore a myriad of percussive sounds in his music. Often, a work explores a particular type of sound such as that produced by metal instruments ("First Construction" and "Double Music," for example), or electronics (in "Credo In US" and the "Imaginary Landscapes"). In "Living Room Music," he allowed the performer to choose the instruments to be played from among items found in an ordinary living room. In "Quartet," he made no specification at all as to the sound sources (the title reads: "For percussion: no instruments specified"), leaving the performers absolute freedom of choice.

Cage collaborated with Lou Harrison, Henry Cowell and others in his search for new percussive sounds. Many of his instruments are of non-Western origin, reflecting the influence of both Harrison and Cowell, who also experimented with such instruments. In addition to sharing ideas on sound materials, the composers also influenced one another in their compositional procedures. Cowell's "Ostinato Pianissimo" (1934) uses fixed rhythmic patterns in a manner similar to that employed by Cage in his "Quartet" (1935) and "Trio" (1936). In "Pulse" (1939), Cowell employed a structure consisting of twenty-five segments of five measures each, a procedure similar to Cage's

"square-root" formula. Cage has said that he derived his use of "icti-controls" from Lou Harrison, who employed the procedure in several works prior to 1943.

Cage's work in percussion certainly has precedents in the music of earlier composers, such as Varèse, and in artistic movements such as Dadaism and Futurism, but direct influences are difficult to discern. In an article he wrote in 1959 entitled "The History of Experimental Music in the United States," Cage addressed the notion of influences by quoting painter Willem de Kooning: "The past does not influence me; I influence it."³⁸ Cage once asked a question of Varèse concerning the latter composer's views on the future of music. "His answer," Cage said, "was that neither the past nor the future interested him; that his concern was with the present."³⁹ Cage is equally enigmatic concerning influences on his own music.

It is a prevalent assumption that Cage's early percussion music was greatly influenced by non-Western music. The sounds of his prepared piano have been compared to those of the Balinese gamelan, and indeed, they are strikingly similar. Cage has accumulated, and employed in his music, instruments from many different world cultures. It has been suggested that his rhythmic structures are akin to the tala found in Indian music.⁴⁰

It has already been established that Cage had been exposed to non-Western music through his association with Henry Cowell, yet Cage himself denied any direct influences on his work. "As I mentioned, I attended some of Henry Cowell's classes in New York where I heard some music of that type," he said. "If there were any influences, I was not conscious of them; anyway, at that time I had not seriously studied the theories of Indian or Indonesian music."⁴¹

Cage was interested in sounds themselves. Through his association with colleagues such as Cowell and Harrison, who were quite familiar with music of non-Western cultures, Cage became acquainted with the sounds associated with such cultures, and he freely employed those sounds in his music. In "First Construction (In Metal)," for example, he used muted gongs, oxen bells and Japanese temple gongs, but he also employed such "found" instruments as automobile brake drums and thundersheets, in addi-

tion to ordinary orchestra bells and Cowell's "string piano"—"sounds themselves," Cage has said, "pure and simple."

Immediately following the early works for percussion, Cage concentrated on compositions for prepared piano and later experimented with chance operations, indeterminacy, and both live and recorded electronic music. The early compositions for percussion, while seemingly far-removed from Cage's later musical directions, contain the seeds of development for many of his most controversial processes of composition. The prepared piano was invented as an extension of Cage's work with percussion instruments. Not only did the instrument itself reproduce the sounds of a percussion ensemble, but the compositions for prepared piano contained the same type of rhythmic structures found in the works for percussion.

Cage's work with chance operations seems a natural outgrowth of the pre-compositional procedures utilized in the early works for percussion. William Brooks has suggested that, for Cage, the use of chance was simply another way of extending his determination to accept refused elements, much in the same way that the rhythmic structures in his early works provided a means of acceptance for noise.⁴² Cage himself has said that variations in the sounds of percussion instruments and the effects of preparations on pianos prepared him for the renunciation of intention.⁴³

Cage's work with indeterminacy can likewise be traced, in part, to his early work in percussion. The use of unspecified percussion instruments in "Quartet," his first effort in that medium, is among the earliest examples of indeterminacy in Cage's work. The employment of a radio in "Credo In US" opened the composition to indeterminate sounds, as they were to intended sounds. "4'33," a totally indeterminate composition, could be viewed quite simply as an "empty" rhythmic structure.

Cage's later work in electronic music had its origins in the "Imaginary Landscapes" for percussion and electronic devices. The frequency recordings used in these works were precursors to Cage's work with magnetic tape in the 1950s and 1960s. The amplified coil of wire and the electric buzzer employed in the "Landscapes" prefigured the amplified sounds used in later works such as "Car-



tridge Music" and "Child of Tree."

The initial idea that prompted John Cage to write music for percussion instruments was, quite simply, to make available to music any sound that could be heard, whether or not that sound was considered "musical." It was this idea that eventually led Cage beyond percussion and into the realm of new musical resources: the prepared piano, chance operations, indeterminacy, electronic music and "music of contingency." In the process of his own musical evolution, Cage influenced the worlds of percussion, music and art. Indeed, he revolutionized twentieth century aesthetics, opening new doors of artistic thought to those who followed him.

For Cage, the revolution began with the acceptance of noise as material for music. It was through his efforts to create music that would open to noises that Cage became interested in percussion, organized his percussion ensemble, composed music for the group, and encouraged other composers to do the same. The results were seminal to the development of percussion literature and became a vital catalyst in the ongoing evolution of one of the most imaginative minds of the twentieth century.

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⁴³Stuart Smith, "Interview with John Cage," *Percussive Notes*, 21 (March, 1983), 3.

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