Off the Beaten Groove

Seventy years of John Cage

John Cage, the man who singlehandedly changed the way we hear and think about music, is now seventy years old but shows no sign of slowing down. In a performance and a pair of lectures sponsored by the MIT Writing Program and the Museum of Fine Arts, Cage the man presented his own thoughts on Cage the composer.

Cage is perhaps best noted for his introduction of chance procedures into the composition of music. As he explains it: "Music should not be the making of music..." But Cage's commentary on the most important aspects of the creative process.

For volkstheology of him as a composer who is "getting rid of the glue." By setting sounds free from the "glue" of the composer's ego or desire to express himself, Cage gives the listener the materials, the opportunity, and the responsibility to create his or her own melodies, phrases, and harmonic rhythms (if such terms remain at all useful). As Emerson said in The Poet, ground for the staccato notes played throughout the etudes. Most interesting about the Etudes, however, were Cage's comments on how the work came to be composed: "I knew of pieces for solo left hand or solo right hand, but as far as I knew, no one had written a piece for solo left and right hands, each independent of the other. I wrote the parts for both hands so that they would each utilize the full range of the piano."

Similar methods were employed to compose the Freeman Etudes for solo violin, but, in comparison to the Etudes Australes, was the result of chance procedures; the interplay between piano and violin seemed to transcend the strictures of the composition. During his lecture at MIT, John Cage read his essay Composition In Retrospect, an evaluation of his entire body of work in which he discusses his methods and attitudes rather than make any direct commentary on his music. The essay consists of a series of mesostics, similar to acrostics but differing in the placement of the emphasis word. For example, the essay begins with a mesostic on the word "methodology." In the course of the question and answer periods that followed the two lectures, it became obvious that after all these years John Cage is not in any danger of being tolerated. When asked what his role in music was, he replied: "I once asked David Tudor that same question. After some thought he told me my role was that of a hit-and-run driver." After being provided with a rare opportunity to become familiar with one of the greatest figures in twentieth century music, it became clear that this hit-and-run driver has certainly made his impact. David Shaw

My memory of what happened is not what happened.

The mesostics used in the essay (methodology, structure, intention, discipline, notation, indeterminacy, interpenetration, imitation, devotion, and circumstances) are according to Cage the most important words in his work. Taken as a whole, then, Composition is not only a retrospection but Cage's commentary on the most important aspects of the creative process.

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