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BOOK REVIEWS

John Cage. By David Nicholls. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

On U.S. Independence Day weekend in 1981, a young British scholar and composer from Cambridge University arrived in New York City to begin several months of research for his doctoral dissertation on American experimental music. In addition to meeting well-known composers and scholars and visiting major research collections, his stay in the United States included a three-week adventure traveling cross country in a Greyhound bus, stopping as often as possible in both popular and obscure tourist destinations. That young scholar was David Nicholls, and his intensive crash course in U.S. culture served him very well. He soon became a leading expert in American music and has played a pivotal role in establishing research on John Cage, Henry Cowell, and the experimental music tradition in the academic mainstream.[1] His recent book, *John Cage*, issued as part of the American Composers series published by the University of Illinois Press, contributes significantly to the rapidly developing field of Cage studies. Intended for students, general readers, and performers and as a reference and overview for scholars, this series disseminates information about music in the United States to a broad readership. Its goal is to provide accessible, yet current scholarship, free of jargon and overly technical details.

Nicholls's Cage volume offers an alternative to the often negative, misinformed assessment of Cage's work by the general public, and, fortunately, to an increasingly lesser extent, by musicians and scholars. As Nicholls puts it: "Rather than being celebrated as an artistic polymath whose questioning of the fundamental tenets of Western art music led to a revolution in twentieth-century culture, Cage has been characterized as, at best a comedian and, at worst, a charlatan" (2). Offering an "antidote" to mainstream Cage reception, Nicholls places Cage's artistic achievements in their "historical, environmental, philosophical, and aesthetic contexts" (2) and evaluates Cage's influence on his contemporaries and the generations of creative artists who have inherited his legacy. In only 144 pages, his beautifully written, concentrated narrative reveals the impressive range of Cage's multidisciplinary work and the impact of his ideas. This book should sway even the most unsympathetic reader.

Nicholls recounts that Cage was, by his own admission, a poor historian and did not view history as an objective "scientific" discipline. As the scholar R. F. Arragon once said when Cage asked him how history was written, "You have to invent it." Nicholls wisely advises us that the wealth of Cage's statements about his career "need, wherever possible, to be balanced by incontestable facts" (5). He

[1] David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nicholls, *American Experimental Music, 1890–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). Nicholls also edited *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998) and the *Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

correctly adds that even so-called incontestable facts are suspect, and that his book "is therefore as much an invention of history as are Cage's anecdotes" (5). Nicholls's point is well taken; but we should consider all history from this critical perspective. His historical narrative draws from several recent waves of Cage scholarship that have begun to refine our understanding of Cage as both a person and an artist. Cage research has advanced significantly in the past decade, and a broad spectrum of readers can now enjoy learning about Cage's life and work in a recently published biography by the Pulitzer Prize–winning biographer Kenneth Silverman.[2] Today, Cage scholars continue to invent and reinvent history at an increasing pace, just as others have written and rewritten histories of more traditional figures in musical history.

Nicholls wisely chose a geographical locus to organize each chapter: Chapter 1 focuses on his West Coast period (1912–42), Chapter 2 on Cage's initial period in New York City (1942–54), Chapter 3 (1954–70) on his time at Stony Point, and Chapter 4 (1970–92) on Cage's return to New York City. The biographical account in each chapter also functions as an invaluable background for Nicholls's concise overview of Cage's musical evolution. For example, his discussion of Cage's percussion music and works for the prepared piano in the first chapter not only includes a cogent and accessible overview of technical details of this music, such as the "square-root" system and the intricacies of piano preparation, but also covers his studies with Adolph Weiss, Richard Buhlig, and Arnold Schoenberg; his collaborations with dancers at the Cornish School in Seattle; his interactions with Cowell and Lou Harrison and other members of the West Coast percussion school; the group's concerts at Mills College; and Cage's early interest in establishing a Center for Experimental Music that could realize the aesthetic goals outlined in his manifesto "The Future of Music: Credo" (1940).

Chapter 2 covers Cage's major works for the prepared piano, including the *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48), and contains enlightening discussions of *Amores* (1943), *Two Pieces for Piano* (1946), *The Seasons* (1947), and the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50). It examines the evolution of chance operations in Cage's music in the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* (1950–51), *Sixteen Dances* (1950–51), and the *Music of Changes* (1951). In his commentary on the last work, Nicholls aptly draws attention to perhaps the most crucial aesthetic issue surrounding Cage's music from that point forward: that his use of chance operations did not entail an abandonment of compositional control. This chapter also includes an informative discussion of Cage's "notorious" silent piece, *4′33″* (1952), his interactions with New York School composers and painters, his famous proto-happening, the *Black Mountain Piece* (1952), and other theater works, and early experiments with indeterminate notation. The historical context in Chapter 2 includes commentary on Cage's concert of percussion music at the Museum of Modern of Modern Art in 1943, which placed him in the national spotlight with an article on the event in *Life* magazine, the crisis in his personal life, which culminated with the beginning of a lifelong relationship with Merce Cunningham,

[2] Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

his fascinating interactions with Pierre Boulez, and his growing interest in Eastern philosophy and religion.

Chapter 3 begins with the idyllic setting of Cage's new residence at Stony Point in upstate New York, founded by Paul Williams, a former student and architecture instructor at Black Mountain College, who commissioned Cage's *Williams Mix*. The rural environment and artistic community at Stony Point stimulated Cage's artistic output and thinking. During this period he continued work on a series of works called "The Ten Thousand Things," a project of epic proportions originally conceived as a single work with a rhythmic structure of 100 by 100 or 10,000 measures (a number with special significance in Taoist and in Buddhist philosophy). This chapter also covers the further development of Cage's indeterminate works, from the visually breathtaking graphic scores such as *Winter Music* (1957) and the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1958) to the so-called music tools such as *Cartridge Music* (1961) and *Variations II* (1961), which employed sets of transparencies marked with various shapes, dots, and lines. Nicholls discusses Cage's growing interest in the writings of the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who inspired *Variations V* (1965) and *HPSCHD* (1967–69), a complex multimedia work, which eclipses even the most elaborate of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerke*. The author also makes note of Cage's growing fame, as indicated by the retrospective concert of his music presented at Town Hall in 1958, his appearance at Darmstadt that same year, his influential classes at the New School for Social Research, and the publication of *Silence* by Wesleyan University Press in 1961, as well as new scandals such as the New York Philharmonic's sabotage of *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961) in 1964.

Cage moved back to Manhattan in 1970, and so begins the final chapter of Nicholls's book. As he aptly points out, by 1970 Cage's musical universe had "infinitely expanded," fully embracing theater as well as music, new technologies and multiple media, and musical sources from both the present and the past. He significantly increased his creative output in visual media and continued to develop new forms of prose and poetry and extended the range of his intellectual appropriations. Cage's political views evolved during this period as he became more and more interested in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and anarchism. Nicholls shows us that Cage promulgated his utopianism musically, in works with overt political messages such as *Apartment House 1776* (1976) and *Lecture on the Weather* (1976) and by composing a series of etudes—*Etudes Australes* (1974–75), the *Freeman Etudes* (1977–80; 1989–90), and *Etudes Borealis* (1978)—expressing his aspirational philosophy by pushing the limits of performer virtuosity. Nicholls also demonstrates how Cage's production of multimedia extravaganzas reached new heights with his *Europeras* (1987–91), as he extended his musical pluralism yet another notch by embracing (and transforming) a genre that he had rejected in the past, creating works that would not have been possible without new developments in technology and the computer wizardry of his assistant Andrew Culver. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Cage's "number pieces," a series of compositions for diverse ensembles written between 1987 and 1992 labeled by a convention indicating the size of the ensemble and the number of a given work within a group of pieces composed for ensembles of the same size. (*Four*^{6}, for example, is the sixth piece Cage composed for four players.) All of the number pieces employed the

"time bracket" system, Cage's preferred approach to organizing temporal structure during this period. Nicholls observes that Cage's number pieces share uniformity of both compositional method and, to a certain extent, style. But he also acknowledges the extraordinary range of musical results Cage created with his narrowly focused method. Most importantly, he again draws the reader's attention to Cage's skill as a composer, demonstrating how Cage's apparently "automated" compositional process did not prevent him from subtly shaping the individual musical characteristics of his late works.

This book will certainly inspire readers to learn more about John Cage. One regrets only that the volume did not include a CD of selected works (two of the five volumes published in the series include CDs).[3] Nicholls's wonderful book would serve its purpose even more if it provided an opportunity for uninitiated readers to experience the actual sound of Cage's music.

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Selected Piano Solos, 1928–1941. By Earl "Fatha" Hines; ed. Jeffrey Taylor. Recent Researches in American Music, vol. 56; Music of the United States of America, vol. 15. Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2006.

In the last twenty years or so, published transcriptions of jazz performances have proliferated at a gratifying rate. Thanks to the diligent labors of devoted and talented musical archaeologists, we now have access to a wealth of notated improvisations by almost every major soloist as well as transcriptions and reconstructions of composed pieces by the likes of Duke Ellington, Gil Evans, Fletcher Henderson, Eddie Sauter, and many other important figures. Most of these documents are "performance scores" to be recreated by students or passionate aficionados, and as such they fill a pressing need. As yet, however, few are directed primarily at the serious scholar concerned with historical and musical analysis. A welcome exception is the present volume, a critical edition of transcribed piano solos by Earl "Fatha" Hines, scrupulously edited by Jeffrey Taylor. This book has already been recognized, having won the 2007 Claude V. Palisca Award from the American Musicological Society for best edition or translation. One hopes it will serve as a model for many similar projects in the future.

Taylor is not the first to make such an erudite offering in the name of source studies relating to jazz. His book appears as volume 15 in Music of the United States of America (MUSA), an excellent series of critical editions on American topics ranging

[3] Leta E. Miller and Frederic Lieberman, *Lou Harrison* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); N. Lee Orr, *Dudley Buck* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).