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BOOK REVIEWS

Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage. By Kenneth Silverman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

Two caveats. First, there's a likely lack of objectivity in this review: having spent the majority of my adult life intimately engaged in the study of John Cage and his polymathic oeuvre, an element of subjectivity (if not downright bias) is, at the very least, somewhat inevitable. Second, and more particularly, having myself written a musical biography of Cage, I might quite reasonably be accused of unconscious ill disposition toward the efforts of others working in the same field.[1]

That said, let me start with some positives: Kenneth Silverman's *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* is by far the best general book on Cage yet to have been published. Although hardly a page-turner, it is engagingly written and, as a consequence, extremely readable; furthermore, it creates an entirely plausible narrative for the events of Cage's life, in some cases making sense for the first time of apparently disparate or contradictory sources. That it manages to do so is testament to Silverman's meticulous reading of Cage's voluminous correspondence, as well as that preserved in complementary collections. Of particular note in this context are the opening chapters, which include a good deal of new information concerning—for instance—Cage's tangled relationships with Don Sample, Pauline Schindler, and especially his wife, Xenia Kashevaroff Cage, all of which reads very convincingly. Furthermore, given its generalist approach, uncluttered by purely musical minutiae, and its handsome production, the volume is likely to appeal to many who would otherwise avoid its subject. It deserves thoroughly to do (and sell) well. However, as folks used to say in the English Potteries (where I lived for quite a few years), "there's a but; and it's a big but," particularly (I suspect) for those of us who have spent our academic lives in pursuit of John Cage: Silverman makes him human.

The great problem in creating personal heroes is that they can never live up to the idolatrous ideals demanded of them by the devotee. So it was—and is—for me in my intended beatification of John Cage. Cage's *Silence* was probably the first book concerning (then) contemporary music that I ever read, and it started me on a journey of discovery that has yet to be completed.[2] Similarly, as I once mentioned to the doyen of Cage studies, Richard Kostelanetz, my copy of his path-breaking 1971 volume *John Cage* has seen so much use that, several decades back, it had already literally fallen apart.[3] By the time that I was first put in touch with Cage—around 1980, through the generosity of Vivian Perlis—he had been raised on the highest plinth in my musical hall of fame; accordingly, when I finally plucked up the courage to speak to him, in 1991, I became—like Cage in the presence of Marshall McLuhan—"tongue-tied, 'unable . . . to do anything but be present'" (214).

[1] David Nicholls, *John Cage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
[2] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).
[3] Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage* (London: Allen Lane, 1971).

Given this "history," it is unsurprising that my view of Cage until relatively recently was one of unblemished admiration. When, in relation to a question concerning his personal relationship with Merce Cunningham (which he almost never discussed in public), Cage answered, "I cook, and Merce does the dishes," I had no need of further detail.[4] Silverman, however, has no such reservations: thus we are told that Cage and Sample "took their baths together" (9); of a "group rush to the bedroom" involving Cage, Xenia, Peggy Guggenheim, Max Ernst, and Marcel Duchamp (53); of Cage and Lou Harrison "having once fellated each other, 69-style" (62); that, soon after meeting him, Cage fell in love with David Tudor (93); of Cage and Cunningham's "active lovemaking" (250); and so on. Were such observations part of a concerted attempt to understand Cage's sexual psyche, their presence might be justified; but there is no such larger context provided, and as such the remarks read like cheap asides.

Another example: Silverman quotes Peter Dickinson remarking to Cage in 1987 that "You have a wonderful serenity," and immediately underscores the point by noting that "Cage similarly impressed many other observers as imperturbable, a man at peace with himself" (347). Elsewhere, though, a rather different picture emerges: we variously find Cage angry (concerning the behavior of orchestral musicians; 202); curt (in a note to his first putative biographer, Roy Close; 365); "very, very depressed" at the prospect of his eightieth birthday celebrations (406); enraged, saying "I shit on you if you take that job!" to the dancer Carolyn Brown (253); and gloomy (during the preparations for the premiere of *Europeras 1 & 2* in 1987; 359). Indeed, even Cage admitted in 1989 that "I'm beginning to be these days more of a pessimist than I ever have been" (395), and elsewhere in the book we encounter an almost Brittenesque procession of fallings-out, some temporary, others permanent. As with his private life, so with his constructed persona: if I had formerly worshipped Cage's spotless character and sunny disposition, I now find my idol distinctly distressed, its previously pristine surface ravaged by the unpleasantries of reality.

Beyond these highly subjective cavils, there are a few other—hopefully more objective—complaints, albeit of a rather scholarly nature. First, and perhaps inevitably given Silverman's generalist approach, his oft-times breezy prose style occasionally grates in its use of incomplete or ungrammatical sentences: "Focusing on the arts, the press had begun publishing only the year before Cage came to Wesleyan. And auspiciously" (175). Second, the text is unburdened by foot- or endnotes, references instead being provided via recourse to the increasingly common (and irritating) system by which "The documentation uses the first few words of each paragraph in the text, printed in boldface, to group citations for that paragraph. Individual citations are keyed to a prominent word in the relevant sentence of the paragraph" (424). Third, the illustrations seem at times to have been chosen solely for their decorative qualities, rather than for their strict relevance to the pages on which they appear. Thus on page 31, in the context of a description of Cage's "discovery" of the prepared piano, we are shown not a page from the work

[4] Quoted in Jonathan D. Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," in *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art,* ed. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41.

in question—*Bacchanale* (1940)—but rather an otherwise unidentified "Table of piano preparations" that appears to belong to either *A Book of Music* (1944) or *Three Dances* (1945). Elsewhere, although on page 309 we are notified that Cage at the start of 1979 "permanently shaved off the graying mustache and beard he had sported for the last half-dozen years," we still find it in evidence on pages 315, 332, 367, and 369, it having previously disappeared on pages 304 and 292. Fourth, there are some curious omissions or near omissions. One might, for instance, have expected to find more concerning Jackson Pollock, and at least *something* about Peggy Glanville-Hicks.

Finally, one might have assumed in such a thorough biographical study as Silverman's that there would be a sizeable amount of discussion and dissection, to balance the detailed description that otherwise maintains throughout. Sadly, all too often such analysis is avoided, whether in relation to Cage's upbringing (the first twenty-six years of his life are routinely dispensed with in twenty-five pages), his musical aspirations and achievements, his rather embarrassing sometime espousal of Maoist views, or any number of other potentially pregnant topics. To cite but one example, on pages 245–46 Silverman describes Cage's lifestyle changes ca. 1970: "Cage changed much more than his diet. He had always dressed conservatively, appearing in public clean-shaven, wearing a suit and tie. . . . Now he dressed in faded blue jeans and denim workshirt, sometimes topped by a denim workjacket. Uncombed dark hair covered his ears and fell to his shoulders. His lipline barely showed through his full gray mustache and breastbone-length gray beard." The obvious question here is "Why?" Was Cage having a mid-life crisis, albeit at sixty? Had he felt the need to update his image to fit with the times, perhaps better to relate to those who saw *Silence* as "a bible for the young in heart"?[5] Or with the passing of his parents (father John Sr. had died in 1964, mother Crete in 1969) did he no longer feel the need to dress in a manner of which they would have approved? Yet Silverman's explanation of the change of "uniform" simply (and limply) cites Cage's pragmatic remark that "I can stop my car on my way to or from a concert or lecture engagement and hunt for mushrooms in the woods" (246). Readers both casual and professional could surely be forgiven for expecting more.

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Sound Diplomacy: Music and Emotions in Transatlantic Relations, 1850–1920. By Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

With *Sound Diplomacy*, Jessica Gienow-Hecht, professor of International History at the University of Cologne, Germany, and author of *Transmission Impossible:*

[5] The reference here is to Wilfrid Mellers's remark on the jacket of the first British imprint of *Silence* (London: Boyars, 1961).