

## The Cambridge Companion to John Cage

John Cage (1912–1992) was without doubt one of the most important and influential figures in twentieth-century music. Pupil of Schoenberg, Henry Cowell, Marcel Duchamp, and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki among others, he spent much of his career in pursuit of an unusual goal: “giving up control so that sounds can be sounds,” as he put it.

This book celebrates the richness and diversity of Cage’s achievements – the development of the prepared piano and of the percussion orchestra, the adoption of chance and of indeterminacy, the employment of electronic resources and of graphic notation, and the questioning of the most fundamental tenets of western art music. Besides composing around 300 works, he was also a prolific performer, writer, poet, and visual artist. Written by a team of experts, this Companion discusses Cage’s background, his work, and its performance and reception, providing in sum a fully rounded portrait of a fascinating figure.

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The Cambridge Companion to  
**JOHN CAGE**

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**William Brooks** presently holds faculty positions at the Universities of Illinois and York (England). He has written extensively on various aspects of American music from eighteenth-century music theatre to experimental music of the present. A composer as well as a scholar, he likes to think that each domain informs the other. Future projects include an episodic overview of American music for the University of Illinois Press and an extended work for spatially distributed forces on the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

**Kathan Brown** is the founder and director of Crown Point Press, an etching workshop that will celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 2002. The Press invites artists to travel to San Francisco to produce etchings in its studio. Brown's memoir, *ink, paper, metal, wood: Painters and Sculptors at Crown Point Press*, was published in 1996, and the following year the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco showed the Press's work and published a catalog. Brown lives and works in San Francisco.

**Kyle Gann**, a composer, has been new-music critic for the *Village Voice* since 1986 and Assistant Professor of Music at Bard College since 1997. His books include *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press), *American Music in the 20th Century*, and *It's Only As Good As It Sounds: Village Voice Articles on American Music after Minimalism*. Gann studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena. His major works include a one-man microtonal opera *Custer and Sitting Bull*, a ten-movement suite *The Planets*, and *Transcendental Sonnets* for chorus and orchestra. CDs of his music are available on the Lovely Music, New Tone, and Monroe Street labels.

**John Holzaepfel** received his Ph.D. in historical musicology from the City University of New York, where he wrote his dissertation 'David Tudor and the Performance of American Experimental Music, 1950–1959'. He is currently preparing a biography of David Tudor.

**Leta E. Miller**, Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is co-author, with Fredric Lieberman, of *Lou Harrison: Composing a World* and editor of *Lou Harrison: Selected Keyboard and Chamber Music, 1937–1994* (MUSA, vol. 8). She has written articles on Harrison, Cage, and Henry Cowell; those on Cage appear in *Perspectives on American Music, 1900–1950*, *John Cage: Music*,

*Philosophy, and Intention, 1933–50*, and *Musical Quarterly*. Miller is also an active flutist who has been featured on over a dozen compact disc recordings.

**David Nicholls** is Professor of Music at the University of Southampton. Author of *American Experimental Music, 1890–1940* (Cambridge University Press) and numerous articles on topics in American music, he has also acted as contributing editor for the reissue of Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* (Cambridge University Press), *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, and *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge University Press). He is editor of the journal *American Music*, and is currently preparing a monograph on Cage for Illinois's *American Composers* series.

**David W. Patterson** is an Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His 1996 dissertation on John Cage's aesthetic evolution during the 1940s and 1950s received the Sonneck Society Dissertation Prize, and his work since then continues to focus on the work and thought of Cage and the New York School, appearing in *American Music*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *repercussions*, and other journals. Patterson is the contributing editor of *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933–1950*.

**Christopher Shultis** is Regents Professor of Music at the University of New Mexico. In 1993–94 he was a Fulbright guest professor in American Studies at the Institut für Anglistik, RWTH Aachen and in 1999–2000 at the Anglistisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg. Shultis has written a book on John Cage – *Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition* – as well as several articles. His “Cage in Retrospect: A Review Essay” (*Journal of Musicology*, 1995) won an ASCAP Deems Taylor Award. Shultis is presently an associate editor for *Perspectives of New Music*.

**Alastair Williams**, Senior Lecturer in Music at Keele University, is author of *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* and *Constructing Musicology*. He has also published articles in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, *Music Analysis*, and *Perspectives of New Music*.



## Preface

John Cage (1912–92) was without doubt one of the most important and influential figures in twentieth-century culture; yet he was also one of the least understood. Pupil of, among others, Arnold Schoenberg, Henry Cowell, Marcel Duchamp and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, he spent much of his career in pursuit of an unusual goal: “giving up control so that sounds can be sounds,” as he put it on page 72 of *Silence*, his first and best-known collection of writings. Among his many notable accomplishments were the development of the prepared piano and of the percussion orchestra, the adoption of chance and of indeterminacy, the employment of electronic resources and of graphic notation, and the questioning of the most fundamental tenets of western art music. As well as composing around 300 works, he was also active as a performer, writer, poet, and visual artist.

The present volume is neither a biography of Cage nor an analytical study of his music. Rather, it is a multi-faceted celebration of the richness and diversity of a remarkable creative artist and his art. Compiled by a team of experts drawn from the new generation of Cage scholars, it builds on earlier research while providing new facts, insights, and interpretations. Part I – *Aesthetic contexts* – considers and contrasts the three principal sources of Cage’s developing cultural background: America, Europe, and Asia. Part II – *Sounds, words, images* – contains the majority of the detailed discussion of his artistic legacy in music, writing, and visual art. However, some of this discussion (notably of key works from the late 1940s through late 1950s) is of necessity also contained in the chapters constituting Part III – *Interaction and influence* – which otherwise examines various aspects of Cage’s artistic practice, and attempts to contextualize him in relation to both his peers and his successors. If, in this arrangement, there are overlaps between the fourteen chapters, or differences of opinion among the ten authors, then all the better: for John Cage was both much loved and much maligned, and his work both hugely influential and totally ignored. His aesthetic stance poses multiple questions, and demands multiple answers: indeed, it thrives on plurality – of sources, influences, methodologies, interpretations, and outcomes. And so, hopefully, does this *Cambridge Companion to John Cage*.

A few general thanks are in order: my former colleagues at Keele University and my present colleagues at the University of Southampton have provided academic support and intellectual stimulation in equal measure. Further afield, I have enjoyed enormously working on this project with

my co-authors (though the number of them sharing my forename has at times proved confusing).

My wife, Tamar, and our children, Ben and Daisy, have (as ever) been tolerant way beyond the call of duty during the gestation period of this volume.

Finally, at Cambridge University Press, Penny Souster has waited very patiently for the delivery of a book that owes its existence entirely to her vision.

David Nicholls  
University of Southampton

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## Chronology

- 1912 September 5: born in Los Angeles.
- 1928 Graduates from Los Angeles High School: enters Pomona College.
- 1930 Drops out of Pomona College. Travels in Europe (to 1931). Begins to compose.
- 1934 Studies in New York City, with Adolph Weiss and Henry Cowell.
- 1935 Marries Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff.
- 1935–36 Studies with Arnold Schoenberg.
- 1938 Meets Lou Harrison (in San Francisco) and Merce Cunningham (in Seattle).
- 1938–40 Teaches at the Cornish School of Music in Seattle; c. 1940 writes “The Future of Music: Credo.”
- 1939 *First Construction (in Metal)*
- 1940 Devises prepared piano.
- 1941–42 Teaches at the Chicago School of Design.
- 1942 Moves to New York City. Meets Marcel Duchamp.
- 1944 Begins personal and artistic partnership with Merce Cunningham.
- 1945 Separates from Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff, whom he subsequently divorces.  
Commences study of Asian philosophy, later including classes with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.
- 1946–48 *Sonatas and Interludes*
- 1948 During summer, teaches at Black Mountain College. Meets R. Buckminster Fuller and Robert Rauschenberg.
- 1949 Receives awards from Guggenheim Foundation, and American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters. Travels to Paris, where he meets Pierre Boulez.  
Becomes involved in the Artists’ Club in New York.
- 1950 Meets Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and David Tudor, later known collectively as the “New York School” of composers. Earle Brown joins the group in 1952.  
Starts to employ chance operations based on the *I Ching*.
- 1951 *Music of Changes*
- 1952 During summer, teaches again at Black Mountain College: *Black Mountain Piece*.  
*4’ 33’’*
- 1954 Meets Jasper Johns.  
Moves to Stony Point, Rockland County, New York State.  
With Tudor, tours Europe; meets Karlheinz Stockhausen.

- 1956–60 Teaches regular classes at the New School for Social Research in New York City.
- 1958 May 15: Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective Concert at Town Hall, New York City. Scores exhibited at the Stable Gallery.  
With Tudor, tours Europe; meets Luciano Berio. Wins Italian quiz show *Lacia o Raddoppia*, answering questions on mushrooms.
- 1960–61 Fellow at Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University.
- 1961 *Silence* published; signs exclusive contract with Henmar Press, Inc.
- 1962 Co-founds New York Mycological Society.  
With Tudor, tours Japan.
- 1963 *Variations IV*
- 1964 With Cunningham Dance Company, undertakes world tour.
- 1967 Composer-in-residence at University of Cincinnati.  
Introduced to the work of Henry David Thoreau.
- 1967–69 *HPSCHD*
- 1968 Elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1968–69 Associate at the Center for Advanced Study at the University of Illinois.
- 1969 Artist-in-residence, University of California at Davis.  
First work in visual art.
- 1970 Fellow at Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University.
- 1972 Moves back to New York City.
- 1978 First printmaking sessions at Crown Point Press in San Francisco.  
Elected to Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- 1980 Regents Lecturer at the University of California at San Diego.  
For the remainder of his life, is increasingly affected by health problems.
- 1982 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations include Wall-to-Wall Cage and Friends in New York City, plus events throughout Europe and America.
- 1986 Awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of All the Arts by California Institute of the Arts.
- 1987–91 *Europeras 1–5*
- 1988 Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University.
- 1992 August 12: dies in New York City.

