

The Cambridge Companion to John Cage,
edited by David Nicholls,
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002

Review by Danae Stefanou

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Despite the long-established association of Cage's name with controversy and marginality, Cage has probably been one of the most comprehensively covered composers within the realm of academic monographs and collections of essays in recent years. Since the initial appearance of Richard Kostelanetz's monograph in 1971 and the subsequent publication of *Conversing with Cage* (1988), *John Cage: An Anthology* (1991) and *John Cage: Writer* (1993) edited by the same author, the road was open for a much more rounded appreciation of Cage as musician, philosopher, writer and artist. During the nineties, however, and through to the present decade, critical investigations and reflections on Cage's ethos and work have sprung very much like mushrooms, tracking not only the idiosyncratic aspects of his ideology and creativity, but also attempting to contextualise his artistic output within more general frameworks of influences, affinities and contradictions with established schools of thought. Of these, some have become essential as a kind of source material for scholars and Cage enthusiasts alike – Joan Retallack's conversations with the composer published as *Musicage* (1996) is now a "classic" in its category. Others, most notably James Pritchett's *The Music of John Cage* (1993) have become worthy successors of Kostelanetz's initial attempts, while trying to focus on more technical or more specifically musical aspects, as well as offering biographical information. Then, there is the vast and in some ways uncircumscribed category of works, mostly collections, which deal with specific facets of Cage's characteristically varied and wide output, attempting to present new theoretical insight and original philosophical grounding for some of Cage's most notorious "inventions", theoretical and musical. These have taken an appropriate variety of thematic guises, dealing, for instance, with the nature and implications of Cage's non-musical works alongside his musical output (see Bernstein and Hatch [eds.] *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry and Art*, 2001) or with the character and so-called performance practice issues of his more overtly theatrical

works (see Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances*, 1996).

–2–

This characteristic diversity is in many respects a blessing, for it seems to exemplify Cagean thought at its best: surrounded by a number of heterogeneous stimuli – in this case, the various essays, articles and books on Cage – the reader is free to explore the vast field of Cage-related literature in any way he or she wishes. One may focus on particular aspects of Cage's creativity, choose a certain kind of vantage point from which to comprehend such aspects, or even open one's attention to every source available out there, occasionally having to confront contradictions, paradoxes, and limitations along with the clarity and excitement offered by such new, stimulating approaches. On the other hand, the academic approach which, undoubtedly, most of the available publications aspire to, requires that a certain hierarchy, or at least a mechanism of selection should be imposed on the available sources and, accordingly, on the range of possible vantage points. The reader, as well as, presumably, the researcher, is thus faced with a contradiction: a scholarly publication on Cage should, paradoxically, be selective and somewhat authoritative because of its academic character, and yet, due to the nature of its subject matter, it should always allow for a subjectivity and freedom usually shunned by the academic establishment.

–3–

Nicholls' *Companion* is quite remarkable, primarily because it manages to sustain that freedom – in fact it even calls for it in the preface – while providing a collection so informed and lucid that it can easily be coined the most comprehensive Cage publication to date; this is in every sense a faithful, and much-needed Companion. The originality, and, one could argue, the ingenuity of this publication lies in its achievement of the two diametrically different goals described above without a hint of tension: it is reliable while eschewing claims towards Authority, and it is multifarious and wide-ranged in the perspectives it entails, while managing to maintain a cohesive flow.

–4–

The Companion's coherence owes largely to its carefully arranged three-part structure, but arguably also to the Cagean spirit adopted by its contributing team, who seem to have provided their insight positively and convincingly, but never intrusively – “unimpededness” and “interpenetration”, extensively discussed in several essays, are

made tangible here, as guiding principles of the collection itself. It could be contested that the broadness of the Companion and its marked exploration of social, critical and ideological concerns in Cage scholarship are achieved at the expense of analytical discussion of Cage's music. I personally found that the balancing of analytical detail and more abstract theoretical reflection was finely handled: accepting the substantial body of literature that takes a somewhat conventional turn in discussing the technical aspects of Cage's musical works, the Companion merely adds to, rather than seriously challenges, the findings of previous writers. Most importantly, it thus finds the space to provide a compact but highly revealing critical account of Cage's non-musical activities in one single volume: there is discussion of Cage's writings (D. W. Patterson, "Words and Writings"), his visual art (K. Brown "Visual Art") and, in the slightly different context of "Interaction and Influence", discussion of his collaborations, primarily exemplified through his mixed-media works (L. E. Miller, "Cage's collaborations"). Of these, Kathan Brown's account of the composer's etchings is worth particular attention, as it reveals in great detail an autonomous visually adept side of Cage, which is sometimes overshadowed in discussions of his graphic scores.

–5–

That these three essays are symmetrically interspersed with the three chronological accounts of Cage's musical works (D. Bernstein, "Music I: to the late 1940s"; D. Nicholls, "Towards infinity: Cage in the 1950s and 60s", and W. Brooks, "Music II: from the late 1960s") only serves to highlight the symbiotic relationship established between music and other media – a notion also made evident by the choice to label the corresponding part as "Sounds, words, images". Interestingly enough, Nicholls' essay on the 1950s and 60s distances itself from the fundamentally musical orientation of the other two chronological pieces ("Music I" and "Music II"), by avoiding a title reference to music altogether. This is, of course, topical, given the prevalence of other art forms and the importance of socio-political thought in Cage's activities at the time. Indeed Nicholls' essay functions more as a joining piece between the two essays on pre-1940s and post-1960s music, but interestingly enough, also attempts a synchronic view of the main influences in Cage's course at the time. Nicholls acknowledges four decisive events in Cage's development: the travel to Paris on a Guggenheim grant, the opportunity to explore the music of Erik Satie and Pierre Boulez, the acquaintance with Merce Cunningham and subsequent decision to set up a dance company, and, finally the encounter with Morton Feldman. A causal link between these events is avoided, and the

emphasis is placed mostly on the last event, the only one of the three to have occurred upon Cage's return to New York – this leads very convincingly into a discussion of the New York school, and a crucial distinction between New York composers and artists at the time. It is common for commentators to notice Cage's dissociation from the Abstract Expressionists and his proximity to Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns; here, however, Nicholls combines observations from various writers to trace a more concrete correlation between specific composers and painters, producing an ideal reference tool within the limits of a short essay.

–6–

It is highly useful and rewarding, too, to find that the substantial first part of the *Companion* is dedicated to the sense of place, discussing Cage's relationship to a constellation of continents – America, Europe and Asia. It is interesting, however, to perceive how differently these territories are approached. Nicholls' "Cage and America" is a general introduction to the *Companion*, an examination of America as the combination of "home" (the West Coast and Cage's immediate family environment) and "away" (the East Coast, already a vibrant center of activity since Cage's youth) in Cage's early development. The particular interest of this essay lies in Nicholls' decision to treat these environmental forces as a backdrop for an application of the "Exemplary Creator" model, now a popular term, pioneered in Howard Gardner's 1993 book *Creating Minds*. Gardner's profile of an Exemplary Creator as formed through favourable early experiences is traced in Cage's own formative years. "Cage and America" is thus an investigation of Cage's roots, as it were, and the way these were intertwined with new and more cosmopolitan experiences to form the profile of Cage the creator.

–7–

Christopher Shultis' "Cage and Europe" adopts a rather more traditional approach, sectionalising Cage's first musical experiences into "French" and "German" periods, which can be traced up to the end of the 1950s with the composer's Darmstadt workshops. Although the essay takes an original turn in discussing Cage's relationship with German music, it occasionally seems to dwell too much on the Germanic aspect of Cage's relationship to Europe – proportionately the "German period" is granted twice the size of the "French period", the latter nonetheless encompassing Satie's music and the encounter with Boulez. It is more useful, however, to regard the essay as an episodic presentation of Cage's real-life connection with Europe and some of its prominent

composers and institutions; it is clearly not a general investigation of European elements in Cage's music.

–8–

On the other hand, D. W. Patterson's "Cage and Asia" follows the latter approach, and clarifies a very significant point from its opening lines: Patterson distinguishes between ideological (philosophical) and technical (musical) influences. This is essential in the question of Asia, which, by virtue of its undoubted exoticism, can easily be presented as a general, all-encompassing influence, thus obscuring the intrinsic differentiation between lifestyle, reflective practices, methodological concerns and musical stimuli. Asia for Cage was India and Japan, Coomaraswamy and Suzuki, permanent emotions and I-Ching charts, but all these facets of Asian culture certainly deserve further, deeper and, most importantly, separate analysis. Patterson's text is gratifyingly sensitive in this respect, without imposing forced distinctions upon Cage's own "melting-pot" ethos: it confirms that Cage's sampling of Asian ideas and practices within an all-accepting sense of fusion was inconsistent and often indefinite; however it presents the constituent elements of this ethos with an acute awareness and understanding of their autonomy.

–9–

Equally place-aware as these three essays, albeit somewhat more implicitly, is Alastair Williams' "Cage and Postmodernism", the penultimate essay in the collection. One of the six essays in the conclusive part of the book, "Interaction and influence", Williams' essay takes the charged and, in some respects, saturated concept of postmodernism into a more fruitful territory, consistently stressing the importance of nature and the urban environment in a number of Cage works, manifested directly (as in *Ryoanji* and the lesser known *Inlets*) or reflected less overtly in the manipulation of space by means of mapping, sound distribution, incorporation of ambient sounds etc. By suggesting the idea of a "museum without walls" as one of Cage's prototypes, Williams pins an idea which can open a vast new territory in Cage research, that of urbanism and naturalism as tangibly manifest sources of inspiration.

–10–

In stark contrast to the abstract reflective character of this essay, D. W. Bernstein's "Cage and high modernism" is perhaps the most analytical chapter in the book, scrupulously unveiling the development stages of such key works as the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* and the *Music of Changes*. Generally, the final part of the Companion certainly offers food for thought in a multitude of areas: John

Holzaepfel's "Cage and Tudor", for instance, deserves considerable attention, not only due to its thoroughness with regard to the adumbration of Tudor's personality and methods, but because it brings to the fore issues that can certainly benefit from more than the traditional paragraph-long mention; a highly revealing piece of information involves the importance of Antonin Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son Double* as a defining influence on Tudor's mature approach to performance. Not only did Tudor's reading of Artaud help him come to terms with the hostile and impenetrable soundworld of Boulez's *Second Piano Sonata*, but it also appears to have been a major interest of Cage during his Black Mountain residence; we even learn here that it was in fact Cage who prompted Tudor's companion, Mary Caroline Richards, to prepare the book's first English translation.

-11-

Kyle Gann's examination of Cage's influence on younger generations, encompassing composers and artists from a variety of backgrounds, ("No escape from heaven: John Cage as father figure") is a similarly stimulating conclusion to the Companion. Crucially, making the same distinction on which "Cage and Asia" is based, Gann separates the ideological sphere of influence from the musical. Similarly anchored on a distinguishing principle is William Brooks' "Music and Society", which takes the expected discussion of social concerns in Cage's work a step further and examines the impact of such concerns in performance. Brooks' proposed distinction comes in the shape of ethics versus aesthetics when dealing with the preparation and performance of Cage's compositions. The oft-posed problem, "what happens if we play something different to what Cage has specified", thus receives a dual answer in Brooks' essay: *morally*, what we are doing is wrong; we, as persons, are not right in going against the composer's will. *Aesthetically*, however, the question itself is irrelevant, as aesthetics involve "the rightness of objects", and the deviation from the score cannot produce a wrong object if the object itself is unintentional. The shift from aesthetic to ethics, supported by Cage's own declaration in *A Year from Monday* "Minimum ethic: do what you said you'd do" (p. 4), becomes a metaphor for his social views too, authentically breaking the barrier between art and life. In effect, anarchy, or simply put, the absence of a central authority, can work on every level of life, at any time, so long as this minimum ethic is at play on an individual level.

In short, the *Cambridge Companion to Cage* goes by that very ethic, and inspires readers to investigate Cage's life, art and ideas in new, different and combinatory ways; most notably, the portrait of Cage sketched in this book is one of a thinker and creator with a remarkable gift for acceptance and conflict avoidance. The Companion thus plants a seed of radically different thought in the reader's head, a seed that can hopefully blossom into a real appreciation of art as life, and life as everything, in the spirit of Cage's own *modus vivendi*.