

"I have nothing to say / and I am saying it / and that is poetry / as I needed it" --John Cage

"There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. Sounds occur whether intended or not" – Excerpt from *Silence*



- ❖ In 1952, David Tudor sat down in front of a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds and did nothing. The piece 4'33" written by John Cage, is possibly the most famous and important piece in twentieth century avant-garde. 4'33" was a distillation of years of working with found sound, noise, and alternative instruments. In one short piece, Cage broke from the history of classical composition and proposed that the primary act of musical performance was not making music, but listening.
- ❖ Many of Cage's ideas about what music could be were inspired by Marcel Duchamp, who revolutionized twentieth-century art by presenting everyday, unadulterated objects in museum settings as finished works of art, which were called "found art," or ready-mades by later scholars. Like Duchamp, Cage found music around him and did not necessarily rely on expressing something from within.
- ❖ Cage's first experiments involved altering standard instruments, such as putting plates and screws between a piano's strings before playing it. As his alterations of traditional instruments became more drastic, he realized that what he needed were entirely new instruments. Pieces such as "Imaginary Landscape No 4" (1951) used twelve radios played at once and depended entirely on the chance broadcasts at the time of the performance for its actual sound. In "Water Music" (1952), he used shells and water to create another piece that was motivated by the desire to reproduce the operations that form the world of sound we find around us each day
- ❖ In the '70's, with inspirations like Thoreau and Joyce, Cage began to take literary texts and transform them into music. "Roratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake" (1979), was an outline for transforming any work of literature into a work of music. His sense that music was everywhere and could be made from anything brought a dynamic optimism to everything he did. While recognized as one of the

most important composers of the century, John Cage's true legacy extends far beyond the world of contemporary classical music. After him, no one could look at a painting, a book, or a person without wondering how they might sound if you listened closely.

- ❖ His teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, said JOHN CAGE was “not a composer but an inventor of genius.”
  
- ❖ “I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones.” Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz (1988) *Conversing with Cage*
  
- ❖ “They say, ‘you mean it's just sounds?’ thinking that for something to just be a sound is to be useless, whereas I love sounds just as they are, and I have no need for them to be anything more than what they are. I don't want them to be psychological. I don't want a sound to pretend that it's a bucket or that its president or that it's in love with another sound. I just want it to be a sound.”
  
- “If you develop an ear for sounds that are musical, it is like developing an ego. You begin to refuse sounds that are not musical and that way cut yourself off from a good deal of experience.”
  
- “The first question I ask myself when something doesn't seem to be beautiful is why do I think it's not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason.”
  
- ❖ Cage is perhaps best known for his 1952 composition *4'33"*, the three movements of which are performed without a single note being played. The content of the composition is meant to be perceived as the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while it is performed, rather than merely as four minutes and 33 seconds of silence, and the piece became one of the most controversial compositions of the 20th century. Another famous creation of Cage's is the prepared piano (a piano with its sound altered by placing various objects in the strings), for which he wrote numerous dance-related works and a few concert pieces, the best known of which is *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48).