

# All Chance Is Not Alike

By Kyle Gann

James Pritchett's *The Music of John Cage*

When John Cage died, I felt that if he was publicly misunderstood at that moment the future public perception of new music would never recover. Gratifyingly, however, aside from a couple of insignificant Uptown daily publications, Cage turned out to be one of history's best understood geniuses. And in case anyone's still in doubt as to what his music's about, the problem can be corrected by the first analytical study to appear since his death: James Pritchett's *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge University Press, \$39.95). "John Cage was a composer," Pritchett opens boldly; "this is the premise from which everything in this book follows." You'd think that was an obvious enough statement, but it's been contested from so many quarters that it's refreshing to see the weight of Cambridge University behind it.

The problem lies with analyzing the works after 1951, the point at which Cage turned to chance procedures. If you assume, Pritchett notes, that a randomly determined work has nothing in it to analyze, how do you account for the audible diversity of such piano pieces as *Music of Changes*, *Cheap Imitation*, and *Etudes Australes*? How do we reconcile Cage's dislike for repeating himself with the "textbook image of Cage-the-phi-

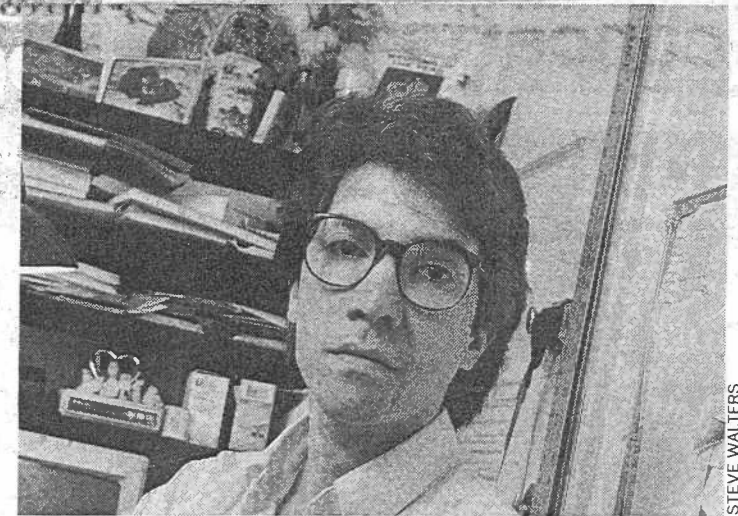
losopher, pondering the same tired question for forty years?" Pritchett answers by going to Cage's sketches and looking at the Promethean diversity of his compositional methods. The 25-tone serial techniques of Cage's earliest works, the numeric rhythmic structures of his percussion pieces, the chance placement of freely composed sonorities in the gamut works, the atomized textures of his point-drawing systems, the free contours of what Cage once called the "Ten Thousand Things" compositions, the rigorous ambiguity of indeterminate notation, the openness of the verbal scores that Pritchett calls "compositional tools," the quietly minimalist focus of the time-bracket pieces; this could have been the output of eight composers rather than one.

The book is best when dealing with the music from *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48) through *Cheap Imitation* (1969), especially where Pritchett outlines the motivations behind Cage's periodic revolutions. The climax, for me, is his graphic analysis of how the 1951 masterpiece *Music of Changes* was composed. I had long wondered why such a thoroughly chance-composed work contains so many repetitions of figures and sonorities, and how such a linear coin-tossing method resulted in textures so fiercely dense. The answer lies in Cage's gamut technique of the early '50s, wherein he freely composed a chart of figures and sounds, then

used chance to distribute them throughout a time bracket. In *Music of Changes*, Cage used the *I Ching* to randomly determine how many layers (up to eight) would be heard at once, and when Pritchett separates out the six layers present in the opening of the work, the process becomes brilliantly transparent.

Pritchett traces the lurchings of Cage's thought to the figures whose influence he fell under successively, from Schoenberg to Meister Eckhart and Ananda Coomaraswamy, to Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller, to Thoreau. Coomaraswamy, curator of Indian art at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, convinced Cage (and later me) that art, rightly considered, is expression, but not self-expression. Likewise, the emptiness of Cage's time structures goes back to quotations from the 14th-century mystic Eckhart: "for by keeping thyself empty and bare, merely tracking and following and giving up thyself to this darkness and ignorance without turning back, thou mayest well win that which is all things." It's questionable whether "4'33" and the pieces following it can be fully understood outside the context of Christian and Buddhist mysticism, a context few listeners have much affinity for.

Having the vicissitudes of Cage's thought laid out cuts him down to human size, as moments of brilliant insight alternate with self-doubt. After all, Cage didn't experiment with indeterminate



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notation until he had already seen Morton Feldman take the plunge with his graph music. Later, more deeply indebted to other minds than we expect a famous artist in his fifties to be, Cage quoted McLuhan and Fuller constantly to justify his artistic decisions. In 1969, after seven years of making works in which musical materials weren't specified, Cage couldn't understand why it felt so good to return to writing down notes in *Cheap Imitation*, and couldn't square the act with the open-ended aesthetics that had made him notorious. All these examples, though, are symptomatic of what made Cage the greatest role model in 20th-century music: his utter lack of dogmatism. He never said "no" to life, never fulminated against what the young composers were doing, never clung to a technique or philosophy and watched it go out of style.

Pritchett's book is less valuable for the music written after *Cheap Imitation*. Most facts in the final

chapter are obtainable elsewhere, which isn't true of the earlier chapters. Oddly, though he separates Cage's life into phases around a series of convincingly drawn turning points (1946, 1951, 1957, 1962, and 1969), he doesn't mark off Cage's late "number pieces," or "time-bracket pieces" as a separate period, despite their remarkable diminution of focus to a small network of techniques. I'd love to know exactly how Cage deployed the star charts in *Etudes Australes*, or found sonorities for the number pieces, and if Pritchett had devoted as much detail to a few late works as he did to *The Seasons*, the String Quartet, and *Music of Changes*, he could have told me. Instead the book declines into a list of works briefly characterized. Before this, though, Pritchett has provided a firm, clean, faithful foundation for future Cage musicology. No one can read him and ever again think that Cage wasn't a real composer, or that all chance music is alike. ■

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