

As Chance Has It

By Kyle Gann

John Cage

Chance is our devil. Western society swears by statistics; chance screws up statistics. Take a bag of rocks: science can tell you the rocks' average weight, but look in the bag for one that weight, you may be disappointed, for the weight of a *particular* rock is governed by chance. Ruling by the Law of Great Numbers, science can predict events only when each experiment is repeated enough to eliminate "accidents." Because science disregards individual instances as chance-contaminated, the scientific worldview has to avert its gaze from the actual world.

That's the thesis of *On Divination and Synchronicity: The Psychology of Meaningful Chance* (Inner City Books, 1980) by Marie-Louise von Franz, a psychoanalyst who worked closely with Jung. She's written wonderful books on the significance of fairy tales, alchemy, creation myths, spiritual aspects of number, and other realities. In these lectures given in 1969 at the Jung Institute in Zurich, she seizes on chance as an alternative to scientific abstraction, and describes the psychological impulse behind divination oracles from many cultures: the *I Ching*, reading of cracked turtle shells, geomancy, crystals, astrology. Faith in chance, she shows, is necessary to a balanced psyche, and, if repressed, resurfaces in a



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primitive form as superstition.

Because divination oracles are based on chaotic patterns, they release intuitions from the unconscious; "the complete disorder in the pattern confuses one's conscious mind." They are not devoid of meaning, as rationalists claim, but provide a type of information relevant only to the moment. Science scoffs at oracles because, by definition, they aren't repeatable. In fact, the very notion of randomness is science's negative projection onto concrete reality. Chance doesn't exist. In non- or prescientific cultures, von Franz says, "there is no meaningless, accidental chance, every chance is the act of a divinity." The insurance business preserves

a spark of ancient wisdom when it classifies random occurrences as "acts of God." If rationality builds an ideal world, a phenomenology of chance can restore contact with the real world we do, after all, have to live in.

Here is the psychological apologetic for the late music of John Cage.

From 1951 on, Cage used numbers generated by the *I Ching* for detail-level decisions in his music. Each nonrepeatable note became the act of a divinity. The rhythm of the *I Ching's* numbers, says von Franz, "sketch, with the help of acausal orderedness, the quality of a time moment." (Some types of order have no cause, such as the pattern of primes in the number

series.) If a sonata portrays the conscious experience of a psychological process, then Cage's chance music depicts psychic time from a perspective that is compensatory, irrational, but no less real. We have to learn to *read* Cage's flow, just as uninitiated listeners have to learn to read Haydn's linear narratives. And to do that, we have to see how our rationalist assumptions lead us, subconsciously, to avert our ears from actual sounds.

Musicians analyze works (and listeners learn to listen) for motives, themes, chords, pitch cells—in short, for whatever is repeated. Like scientists, they shove aside as undesirable anything that occurs only once. Cage gave us a repertoire of pieces in which everything happens once. Naturally, there's no foothold for such music in the slick rationalism with which our discourse is sealed. How can anyone trained to listen only for unifying threads even *hear* Cage's music? But the day will come when theorists will recognize, as some psychologists and philosophers have, that the scientific model presents only one possible picture. Then, Cage's chance pieces will be studied in detail along lines for which current science-based thinking is inadequate.

The inability of critics and academics to explain, accept, or deny the importance of Cage's music points not to a deficiency in Cage, but to a crippling one-sidedness in our collective understanding. Had Cage died in 1951—after writing the String Quartet in Four Parts, Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano, Three Dances', *The Seasons*, Six Melodies—no controversy would surround his reputation. Many composers are fond-

ly remembered for fewer successes. Cage, however, receives special treatment. He's belittled, not because he never demonstrated that he could compose masterfully, but because he elevated to a virtue something that threatens our idol, science.

The parroting of clichés with which the importance of his music was downplayed in one obituary after another reeked of bad faith. Why would *The New Yorker* have bothered to write an obit for a composer whose music it claimed was forgettable, if not to explain away a devil? The critic who calls Cage a poor composer is saying nothing more than that rationalism is the only truth, that chance is psychologically unfruitful, or else that he hasn't learned how to listen to music that lacks internal repetition. Unless he can cite some *good* chance music for contrast (and I've heard plenty of bad), he's not saying anything about Cage.

Cage was a star in Europe and a saint in Japan, where chance is philosophically respectable, but he hit a raw spot in the American psyche. As von Franz notes, no other nation is so in thrall to the god of rationalism as the U.S. But the god's reign is over. Cage was music's Jung, its Wittgenstein, Gödel, and Heisenberg, the first composer to discard rationality as an overplayed hand. His music is rejected, not because it fails, but because it embodies values our culture can't face without painful self-questioning. As the inevitable reassessment begins, Cage will be understood in terms of his participation in a worldwide turn toward a more balanced viewpoint. Von Franz's little book, a must for every Cage fan, is a place to start. ■

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