

After antiquity

John Cage in conversation with Peter Gena

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(the following discussion took place on March 31, 1982 in Cage's New York loft)

GENA: John, since the festival itself is in Chicago, why not begin by reminiscing about your first residency there in 1941-42.* You actually came from the west coast, and were on the way to New York.

CAGE: When I was in Seattle at the Cornish School, I went twice to Mills College for summer sessions and at those sessions, there were faculty members from the School of Design in Chicago. A very beautiful percussion concert was staged at Mills by a fellow on the faculty of the School of Design, and it made such a wonderful collaboration to have the stage look beautiful, to have the music sound interesting, and so forth. The mallets were not put in boxes, but were all suspended in order that they became part of what you enjoyed. Afterwards, I spent about a year writing letters all over the country trying to establish a center for experimental music. The only two places that were vaguely interested were the University of Iowa and Mills College, but neither had the funds for it. When I met Moholy-Nagy, who had a connection with the School of Design, I thought at first that that would be a possibility. And Moholy was open to my coming to Chicago. However, when I got there with all of my instruments—I collected by this time some 300 percussion instruments—I found that the School of Design was in a bakery on the north side of town, about where the Museum of Contemporary Art is now, and there were no walls going to the ceiling. It was really an open space with partitions. One day, while I had been making sounds in the room with my students, Moholy opened the door and said, "Please confine your studies to music theory," because the noises we were making disturbed the rest of the school. So, since my work at the School of Design didn't take all of my time nor did it supply a livelihood, I had already made arrangements to accompany the classes in modern dance of Catherine Manning at the University of Chicago. I moved all the instruments from the School of Design to the University, and it was there that I conducted the rehearsals for a concert that was later given at the Arts Club in Chicago.

GENA: What did you perform?

CAGE: I wrote a piece that was broadcast over the radio for the Columbia Workshop—a play with poetry by Kenneth Patchen—and I used an orchestra first, for sound effects. However, when I showed the score that I had written to the engineer in the radio's sound effects department, he said that it was unplayable largely because I was using a great deal of compressed air, and that each blast of air would cost five dollars. At that time that was a good deal of money, and he said that I would have to write something else. So I stayed up nights and quickly wrote another score which is called *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*. Out of that piece, which received a national broadcast over CBS affiliates, I received many letters in Chicago saying how much it was enjoyed by the people to the west. So I assumed that I could leave Chicago and make my fortune in New York. When I got there, though, I discovered that all the letters from listeners in the east were opposed to the music!

GENA: So you had to start all over. What actually did you teach while at the School of Design?

CAGE: My notion was, and I think it was true, that we were at a point in music where the doors were open to new possibilities whether they arose through the actual making of new instruments, or through technology of some kind. That seemed to fit perfectly with the School of Design--the idea of exploration and materials.

GENA: It seems throughout history, and certainly even today, that the actual musical institutions were never open to these ideas but one always finds the interest elsewhere: the galleries, art schools, etc.

CAGE: They asked me recently at the University of Alabama, where I spent two or three days, what to do about the music department because they realized that something was wrong with it. The big thing that's wrong with the music departments in all the universities is that they are concerned with the playing of the literature, but they are only minimally concerned with new music, if at all. So, if they want to change and become involved in greater creativity, all they have to do is follow the example of the art department, or we could say in this case, the School of Design in Chicago.

GENA: This is a question that I've often thought about. Why do you suppose that there seems to be something sacred about the ears? I don't know if it's because the western musical tradition is so strong, but in most good art departments there is an assumed equality in all the periods of study from antiquity through the twentieth century. And the study of new art is felt to be as important as that of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods. In music, interest seems to taper off on each end of the chronology.

CAGE: First of all, the people who control taste and who give funds and buy things in the field of art are individuals. I think institutions in the case of art follow the lead of those individuals and individual collectors. Whereas in music, institutions get in the way in the very beginning and they close the doors to what they would consider to be rabid experimentation.

GENA: Because they don't look to the individual. They look to the performing institutions.

CAGE: And nothing is more conservative than a symphony orchestra.

GENA: Right, and that is the model. Institutions have supported composers, but we see time and time again that the model of composition supported is always the same, and is not the kind of experiment that a "School of Design" is looking for. It seems that the institutions expect originality, but demand precedence. It's rather paradoxical because you're only allowed to be original within the guidelines of how far they think originality can go. If few people have done it before, you've gone too far.

CAGE: During that year, around 1940, when I wrote to places all over the country, I also wrote to Black Mountain College and received no answer. And yet Black Mountain was famous as the place most interested in experimental work. But you see, I was completely unknown. Even though I was involved with percussion and prepared piano, none of that information was exciting enough for them to ask me to be part of their faculty.

GENA: Not until about ten years later.

CAGE: Ten years later, when Merce and I went there, then they were very interested.

GENA: And by that time, when Feldman, Brown and Wolff were just starting out, you already had a substantial career. But even certainly by the fifties, getting accepted by institutions must have been something that was always difficult. At least until the sixties.

CAGE: For me it was. To show you how different things are, just at that time and before I came to Chicago, I was employed by the WPA in San Francisco. I had applied to be in the music section of the WPA, but they refused to admit me because they said that I was not a musician. I said, "Well, what am I? I work with sounds and percussion instruments, and so forth," And they said, "You could be a recreation leader." So I was employed in the recreation department, and that may have been the birth of the silent piece, because my first assignment in the recreation department was to go to a hospital in San Francisco and entertain the children of the visitors. But I was not allowed to make any sound while I was doing it, for fear that it would disturb the patients. So I thought up games involving movement around the rooms and counting, etc., dealing with some kind of rhythm in space.

GENA: Likewise, you were accepted in the University of Chicago dance department, but not in the music department.

CAGE: My work was in association with dancers rather than musicians because musicians, in general, were of the opinion that my music was not music. Whereas, dancers were all grateful for any sounds that I provided. When I was in Seattle I had a kind of friendship with George McKay who taught composition at the University of Washington, but other than that, I had no connection with that music department either; nor at the Cornish School. The musicians were all of the opinion that I was not a musician.

GENA: How did you live with that?

CAGE: Well, I keep telling everybody this, and it's actually kept me in good stead because I was the son of an inventor. The fact that people weren't accepting what I was doing indicated that I was inventing something. In fact, I developed the opinion, which may be right or wrong but I still have it somewhat, that if my work is accepted, I must move on to the point where it isn't.

GENA: So this attitude is what kept you from being bitter through all the years?

CAGE: I think that you can avoid bitterness by observing people who are bitter. And if

you do that, you see that it doesn't produce a good life; or not the kind of life that you would want to lead. My father, in his inventions, became somewhat bitter towards the end of his life. The reason being that people tried to take his ideas and exploit them, never giving him credit or money for them. The result was that he refused to tell people what his ideas were. I advised him, on the other hand, to give everything away, because he was, in a sense, a reservoir from which more new ideas could arise. I've been of the opinion all along that if something is refused, pay no attention to it and keep living, insofar as you can, affirmatively. It's more fun. Just recently, I finished another installment of the diary *How to Improve the World*. And I put in a statement about the avant-garde, and my belief that there always will be one. I think this, because without the avant-garde, which I think is flexibility of the mind and freedom from institutions, theories and laws, you won't have invention and obviously, from a practical point of view, the society the society needs invention. Whether they accept the fact or not, they do need it. And ultimately they will be up against a wall where, if they don't have an inventor around, they will be lost. You see, in the world of practicality—by this I mean airplanes, transportation, utilities and so forth—we must continually invent, as Fuller has said, so as to use less material to produce greater results because of the increase in population. That means that invention is necessary. In the arts, people think that it isn't necessary, but it's equally necessary in order to keep the mind flexible. Otherwise, the mind becomes paralyzed, and the paralysis of mind is honored, established and strengthened by our institutions, both musical and educational. The government also is opposed to anything new. Lately I was in a place where the government and the university were in cahoots, and the result was a yearlong strike, or a yearlong invasion by the government with military means, into the university precinct in Puerto Rico. The teachers, in order to be paid, continued teaching, but there were no students. No one listened to them.

GENA: It sounds painfully conceptual. One thing that one has to respect, whether or not they like what you do, is that you are very serious about what you do. A composer's music and philosophy can constantly be bombarded with criticism and ridicule, but if that person shows a real seriousness about what he or she does...

CAGE: and perseverance...

GENA: it survives. On the other hand, there have been many misunderstandings in the past thirty years concerning what John Cage has meant to a lot of composers. This month I read John Rockwell's promotional article for the *Wall to Wall Cage* program in the *New York Times*, where even he said, "John Cage told composers that they could do whatever they want."

CAGE: Which is not true.

GENA: Of course. You were constantly saying things like, "permission granted, but not to do as you please." I lived as a student through the sixties, and Buffalo was a hot spot for experimental music. Many composers, performers and artists took what you did to mean that they could do anything. They could impose their egos on any situation, and such license was often credited to you. This is something that must have bothered you for a long time.

CAGE: But I really don't act on the fact that it bothers me. In other words, if I were to act on the fact that it bothers me, I would have to become a policeman, and I refuse to do that. I think that it's difficult for people to understand the permissiveness that I seem to have given, but it remains something that could be understood, so my attitude is that some people will understand and some won't. I think this is true in any situation—even in something so simple as a recipe for cooking a particular dish. Some people will do it well and others will do it poorly. Some may even think that the ingredients listed are not important, and that others can be substituted. And you know that they'll do it when they look on their shelf and discover that they don't have the ingredients. On occasion, cooking with other ingredients than those given will result in a discovery, but on other occasions it will simply result in a misunderstanding, or a misrealization.

GENA: So you could give someone a recipe and they would make a totally different dish, but they will say, "I got this recipe from John Cage." Everyone involved with the arts should know that there were all these misconceptions. I hear performers playing their improvisations, in situations where they don't have the proper discipline to be free. They don't have decent technique and control, so you hear squeaks, squawks and grunts; and of course the rationale is "it's all part of the music." They use "it's all part of the music" in a way different than you do.

CAGE: I think that people give insufficient time to the study of these matters. I had an interesting experience recently. Those who give the least amount of time, generally speaking, to new music are orchestral musicians. They do it because they follow not musical desiderata, but the music unions-prescriptions of how many hours they're to work. Knowing this when I was commissioned by the orchestra in Metz to write a piece last year, I had written into the contract the stipulation that there would be ten full

rehearsals for the work. That meant thirty hours of rehearsal! Up until the last minute I received no rehearsal schedule, so I sent a telegram saying that I was not coming to the festival until I received one. Finally it came, and I did get ten three-hour rehearsals. In the course of that time, all the musicians became interested in the piece, because they were spending time with it. I think the squeaks and gurgles that you just mentioned result from not spending enough time.

GENA: With even their own music and ideas. Is that something unique with that particular orchestra? Do you think that if the New York Philharmonic gave you ten rehearsals they would become interested?

CAGE: Yes, I think they would.

GENA: That problem exists in education too. When a course is taught on twentieth century music, music after World War II gets squeezed, if we're lucky, into the last two weeks of the survey.

CAGE: Well I think that education should take place continuously rather than being limited by an amount of time the way a union rehearsal is. Or, if it is going to be limited, then that time limitation should be extended. The New York Philharmonic, in rehearsing *Atlas Eclipticalis*, rehearsed for seven and a half minutes. That was it. The *Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras* was rehearsed for thirty hours! Now that kind of difference should take place also in education. Another thing that is wrong with education is the emphasis on examinations and on squeezing everything into a particular period of time. Also, I don't see why all the members of the class should be studying the same subject. You could divide music into a number of departments, one of which would be new music, one could be Schoenberg and Stravinsky, etc.; and then the students would elect which parts of those to study. If they all studied something different and then shared it together, they would all learn everything.

GENA: Unfortunately, most educators are overly concerned with syllabus. And it's true; one is preoccupied, before teaching, with whether or not the material could be tested. If it cannot be tested, it's often thought of as invalid material. In other words, what good is it if you can't test the students to see if they learned it! I guess we're hitting on what the crucial problems are in respect to...

CAGE: Why the music schools are not involved with creativity.

GENA: And with the proliferation of recent music.

CAGE: The first thing that is so important about the most recent music is that it leads to the next music; and if the students don't know what the most recent music is they won't know how to begin to write the music after that.

GENA: The idea of a new music festival interests me as having educational potential. This year in particular, you are involved in a number of festivals. Most are honoring you.

CAGE: Actually, honoring me in a festival is a fairly recent idea, although it's rather general this year because of my seventieth birthday. There's one in Witten, Germany; the Tenth Festival of New Music in Tokyo is dedicated to me; and New Music America '82 in Chicago.

GENA: Our festival may differ from the others in that, in addition to honoring you, we are inviting some fifty composers to perform and stay for the week. The communal atmosphere among musicians that we seek seems appropriate to a festival having you as guest of honor. Your role as a catalyst for creativity throughout the history of experimental music is still great at seventy, and a week is only too brief to represent the wealth of new American music.

CAGE: One thing that I think would be desirable is to have some situation which would be a forum for all the things that are not accepted by the organization of the festival, Remember that movement, not in music but in visual arts, of the *Salon des Refusés* and *Independents*? I think that you might include something like that in this. So, instead of saying to people that they couldn't be a part of it, you could say, "Oh yes, you could be part of this." In other words, wherever you can escape from making judgment, do so.

GENA: Since we only have a finite amount of programming time, we are encouraging local groups, which set up any concerts or installations in the city during the week, to notify us and we will publicize them and offer them as part of the festival. We've already had some requests about that. We doubt that many people from outside of the Chicago area are going to spend their own money to get here to do that, but if they do, they are welcome. It's rather interesting that even the field of experimental music could become institutionalized. The Kitchen was the place to go in New York to escape from institutional programming, but now the Kitchen is almost an institution.

CAGE: And Symphony Space is becoming one.

GENA: Now, there are these new “alternatives” to the alternative spaces.

CAGE: One good thing is that there are a lot more places than there used to be.

GENA: Do you think that it would be healthier if institutions would regularly self-destruct?

CAGE: Well, I often think about what Satie said, “Experience is a form of paralysis.” When institutions get paralyzed then other institutions naturally come into existence that are not paralyzed, at least in the beginning. They have to wait. This is actually each person’s problem too; it’s my problem. The fact that I had certain ideas automatically makes me think that those ideas are continuing with me. And the fact that they continue with me makes it difficult for me in my mind to have other ideas than the ones I already have. How to become free of one’s own experience is both an individual problem and an institutional one.

GENA: When something you do is a success, though, you must feel good about it. Certainly you might like to do more with an idea.

CAGE: I think that it’s automatic when we are composing and making one work, that in the course of that work a kind of conversation takes place between the work and yourself, between different aspects of your own mind that suggest the next work. If you work in several directions, as I tend to do, there’s a kind of cross-fertilization. And now that takes place for me between my graphic work—the etchings—and the musical work. Morty [Morton Feldman] does the same thing, doesn’t he?

GENA: Sure, most recently with antique rugs. Actually Morty told me that in the beginning you were actually quite a painter. Was there outside encouragement for you to go into painting? He gave me the impression that you had thought, for a while, of going into payment.

CAGE: But actually I received more encouragement from people whose judgment I admired in the field of music, than in painting. You see, I knew Walter Arensberg and he encouraged me less than Richard Buhlig did. That’s why I’m a musician.

GENA: I have found, just from an academic point of view, that in order for me to understand anything about new music it was indispensable to have spent a good deal of time learning about developments in the visual arts over the past thirty years. Autonomous musical analysis since the fifties is virtually impossible.

CAGE: I think it’s because of the advent of magnetic tape, and the clear correspondence between time and space leading to graphic notation. Graphic notation has invaded the whole of musical notation.

GENA: Yes, and although more and more composers now are using conventional notation, it’s a type of music that could never have happened without the graphic movement. The reexploration of tonality can only exist because of what happened in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Perhaps people are saying the avant-garde is over because somehow they view what is going on now as a conservative swing, which I think you’d agree is not necessarily the case, and maybe that’s why the *Times* said that your music at Symphony Space was passé.

GENA: Now that you're getting so much attention, how do you avoid a situation where external factors and success spoil your work?

CAGE: About that, I must pay no attention. Since everyone else is, I must pay none.

GENA: How do you pay no attention?

CAGE: There’s a beautiful story about this. You know how interested I am in Thoreau. Once he received a letter from his publisher saying that his book had not sold. It was the only book published while he was alive. The only copies that had been distributed were those that were given away. The publisher asked, “What shall I do with the ones that remain?” There were something like 700 or 800 books from an edition of 900. And Thoreau said, “Well, send them back to me.” And he built a coffin himself, and he put the books in the coffin up in the attic. That day he entered into his diary, “It makes me feel so good that no one is interested in my work, because it leaves me free to go in any direction that is necessary.” Now, I have to translate that into its opposite with the same sense. I need to say, “It makes me feel so good that so many people are interested in my work, because I must know that they will not object to my carrying my work in the

direction that it must go.” I don’t want to make big generalizations but I’ve always tried to keep my music free of other concerns, such as making ends meet in terms of a livelihood, or pleasing someone. One of the things that has helped me all along is the fact that I don’t really have an ear for music. I don’t hear things when I read notation, nor do I hear things in my head and then make a notation. I only hear things like that siren [police car going up Sixth Avenue]; I can hear it perfectly well. I can hear anything that’s actually vibrating, but anything in India ink I don’t hear. I do know, I think the record shows, that I can write in such a way as to hear something that hasn’t been heard before. I think the thing that I’m most deeply concerned with is the actual experience of listening and I’m more interested in setting out in a direction which I’m unfamiliar with, than in one which I approve. Because if I approve, it’s only out of some experience which I am remembering.

GENA: This is something that the painters were saying also. I remember Guston saying that will builds distortion, and desire is incomplete and arbitrary. That, of course, is consistent with why you would get involved with the kind of compositional processes that you use, as well as the musical circus idea. As for collaborations, in *For the Birds*, in reference to Hiller and *HPSCHD*, you said that when many composers work together it blurs their intentions and eliminates the problems of ego. However, what often happens in joint performances with musicians, audience, etc. is that you find the participants competing with each other to see who could do the most interesting thing. And the egos aren’t diffused, but the performance gets turned into a show place.

CAGE: I had a workshop, at Northwestern actually, years ago. It was in the dead of winter, and it was in a room where there were many percussion instruments and other instruments too. I had the lights turned out and windows open. I advised everybody to put on their overcoats and listen for half an hour to the sounds that came in through the window, and then to add to them—in the spirit of the sounds that are already there, rather than in their individual spirits. That’s actually how I compose. I try to act in accord with the absence of my music.

GENA: This is very similar to what Robert Rauschenberg has said, “I work with materials not ideas.”

CAGE: Also, there’s a remark of Bob’s in a recent book of his photographs. It has a beautiful introduction in which he describes himself not as a painter or artist, but as a photographer. Even when he’s a painter, he thinks of himself as a photographer. Which means to say that he’s not thinking of his world of ideas, but he’s thinking of the world around him.

GENA: So that when he takes an object and puts it on the canvas it’s from the outside rather than the inside. Then there’s no point in an art critic trying to interpret what the objects mean.

CAGE: This discomfiture of critics and institutions, with a great deal of new music, comes because they see that something radical has happened, and they can’t accept it. They could only accept it by altering their notion of what the inside is, and that they would have to do through an acceptance, I think, of either some profound form of psychoanalysis, which I think is what happens with Morty, or some form of oriental philosophy, which is what happens with me. Or some other such thing.

GENA: In recent history, your music is obviously much more vulnerable, than that of others, to certain criticism—certain insensitivities of people. I think you’ve become more sensitive recently to unfavorable audience reaction than in the past. In the past people may have thought that if you got an unfavorable response, you were delighted to be controversial. When did you first realize that maybe you were seriously misunderstood?

CAGE: Mostly I’m told about it. I’m sure that some people misunderstand. I guess I’m not so involved because I’m not actually teaching daily in a school. When I do appear at schools, I go so briefly that I don’t see the results of my actions. I asked David Tudor once how I should act. He said, “Think of your self as a hit and run driver.” I really don’t observe the bad effects. I can see it in newspaper reviews. And it’s perfectly clear that things are not understood. What can I do about it? Recently I’m aware that people don’t any longer read the books that I have written. I think they’re thought of as having slipped into the past. When someone writes me a letter with many questions, I often write back, “Have you read my books? Because if you had, you’d have the answers to your questions.” At the end of the Symphony Space program, having been there all day, a girl came up and said, “I’m very impressed; however, I’m very skeptical. Could I see you sometime and ask you some questions?” And I said, “Yes, have you read any of my books?” And she said, “No, what are they?” I replied, “Well, there’s *Silence* to begin with. Why don’t you read it?” So it seems that in many cases the situation is hopeless, and yet we proceed with our work. Or like the environment. Everything is going we could say, to hell—getting worse and worse. What in heaven’s name is going to happen? I think most of us now would have to confess that nothing is going to happen until it hurts. At the point that it really hurts, and hurts enough people, something might happen.

GENA: Has such a point ever existed in history?

CAGE: It's occurred on the individual level and it's happened on the social level too. The American Revolution took place because it hurt. The next time that it hurts, it's apt to be global. And I think there will be survivors. There will either be a great change which prevents a Holocaust, or there will be a Holocaust. But I think in any case there will be survivors. And they will be impelled to use intelligence rather than selfishness.

GENA: After World War I, weren't the dadaists essentially saying that?

CAGE: They were prophesying what I am saying again.

GENA: They took the responsibility to do those things. This brings up the question of using music or art for political ends. There are people who think the arts can change the world. I think a majority now believe that the arts only reflect the world and can't necessarily change it. Rauschenberg said, "I don't want to change the world; I only want to live in it." You've been asked this question, and have discussed it in your books, but in terms of having an effect on political or social change, do you agree that art always seems to reflect a situation without necessarily instigating one?

CAGE: No, but it can give an instance of changed society as it operates. I was very impressed as you know, years and years ago, by the reason for making art given by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in his book, *Transformation of Nature in Art*, in which he said that the business of the artist's responsibility is to imitate nature in her manner of operation. So we can give an instance of society in its manner of operation. And music is good for that, better than painting for instance, because it involves a number of people often in a group performance situation. And if those people are behaving and interacting in a way which does not yet exist in society but which might, then we have an illustration of the future. I have thought about that a great deal. I have not noticed, on the other hand, that it has an effect on society. It has had a strong effect on music. Now we can go back to what was said and believed in China. That is, that there is a direct correspondence between music and the state of society. You know that if the tones go wrong, then the society goes wrong. I think that Lou Harrison would probably criticize all of my work on the basis that it isn't sufficiently organized in terms that would make society good. His attitude is more Confucian, where mine is more Daoist, or more related to individuals. I think he's more concerned with a well-run society, and I'm more concerned with the difference between individuals.

GENA: Obviously you have an optimistic viewpoint that is refreshing to everyone who listens to you.

CAGE: In this diary that I mentioned earlier, I've also written a brief statement about optimism, because it's frequently complained that my optimism makes no sense in this day and age when the news is all so bad. But I think that optimism exists always and automatically, because when we go to sleep, we wake up with energy, and energy goes arm in arm with optimism. Otherwise, we don't get through the day. I think what changes is not optimism itself, but the space around it. When the situation gets very bad, the space in which optimism operates gets, so to speak, only skin deep. Or optimism can't go beyond my skin, but then it's still in me. At times optimism would seem to be foolish, but it isn't. In better circumstances when society is not so pressing, optimism has more room in which to breathe. We must be able to be optimistic in all situations. Because I don't think that life is pessimistic. It can't be.

GENA: In life, your optimism about anarchy is often misinterpreted by artists and intellectuals. Morty recently brought up the story that you tell about an anarchist whose children kept jumping up and down on the bed. So he said, "No jumping on the bed." But he did not know how to handle it because he was an anarchist.

CAGE: The whole thing is very confusing, and what we have to do is determine our action, to make very clear to ourselves what it is that we are willing to live with. I'm not willing to live with my becoming a policeman, and neither was the anarchist. He didn't want to say no jumping on the bed, but he did. And he said that it made him very sad. I want to find a way of continuing without doing that, and it's not easy. However, one way that succeeded was my getting ten rehearsals written into that orchestra contract. I did not expect them to accept my demands, but they did. Now you frequently get yourself into a situation in which you have no control over the circumstances and they go wrong. What are you going to do then? Say they go so wrong that they misrepresent your intentions. How do you proceed? It's like the optimism getting squeezed in. At that point, the thing that I have frequently had recourse to has been my own equanimity of mind. This may sound very selfish, but I do it as an example, and I make it as public as I can. This attitude is expressed in the first words in my diary, *How to Improve the World*. It says, "Continue; I'll discover where you sweat (Kierkegaard)." Do you remember that remark? What it refers to is the fact that Kierkegaard was listening to an incessant talker who was very boring. Kierkegaard noticed that perspiration was running down the nose

of this boring person, and he became interested. So do whatever you like; I will find in what you do, the circumstance that is liberating. Even if I'm the only one who notices it.

GENA: But if you get a performance that you are not pleased with, it seems to me that it could do an awful lot of damage, at least for the public to undo.

CAGE: I think that damage is inherent in the social situation. It's part of what we live with. Don't you think, for instance, that Beethoven has submitted to damage? I think that the schools have administered damage, generally. I am reminded of that experience I had with Roshi who did the rose petal service. You know, that story I've written, where the host and hostess played a miserable selection from an Italian opera with a cracked voice and an out-of-tune piano; and I was embarrassed. But I looked at him, and he was enjoying it! We can't tell what transmutation will occur.

GENA: So there will be people who will benefit from a bad performance. Therefore, your advice to composers would be to get their works performed, no matter how badly, because there is always something good in the experience.

CAGE: Performance is essential, no matter how bad. That will lead to other compositions. Someone recently showed me a work for orchestra, and I asked, "Have you any chance of getting this performed?" There was no chance at all. And my advice is not to write things that don't have a performance in view.

GENA: Composers like you teach a valuable thing just by being prolific. Too many composers don't write enough. Again, we ought to learn from the painters' example.

CAGE: That was the choice that I made when I became so closely connected with the modern dance—an insistence on performance.

GENA: And you learn a good deal more by writing six pieces in a year, than by laboring over one. Ruggles had this problem. He just didn't write enough music. We can sit here and praise how beautiful what he did is, but so what?

CAGE: It already sounds like it's involved with clichés. Actually, Varèse had a similar problem in that he actually destroyed his early work. I would love to hear it.

GENA: What does it do but hurt the artist? It only hurt Varèse to destroy his early work. Many composers are preoccupied with a rather academic notion of musical integrity. Look what's happening to your music in certain circles. I see a clear distinction between what we've come to know as experimental music and what we might call the experimental tradition. Now twenty years after *Silence* was published, many academic composers are integrating some of your ideas into their music. They now allow controlled aleatory, free situations contained in boxes, etc., in their music. It's as though a safe way were found to incorporate your ideas in music, while still maintaining "musical integrity." This brings the concept of ideas into question again. There is a difference between receiving an idea, and evolving through one. The attitude in, "That's a good idea; I think I'll write a piece with that," is usually less productive and rarely experimental. The best examples of this are often connected with technology. A technician introduces a new "chip" and can do forty voices at once, and costs only five dollars; so ten of those can produce 400 voices. Then because of the new chip, a composer who rarely writes music gets an idea for a piece, outside of any active aesthetic continuum. What strikes me about your music and ideas is that the ideas come at a point when you need them, as opposed to this other approach.

CAGE: I think the idea, to be really good or something that we can live with, has to be not just outside of us; it has to somehow be inside of us. That's not easy to understand. I don't mean the expression of a feeling, but it's the expression of an awareness of some kind.

GENA: I've become interested in doing carpentry around the house, so I purchased the *Reader's Digest* comprehensive book on home repairs. In the chapter on tools, it suggests that tools be bought only as they are needed. If you buy tools as the need arises, in terms of your own experience, you're much happier with what you do. And that's true for music.

CAGE: I had a marvelous need recently to divide any distance into 64 parts. So I asked Max Mathews if a ruler existed that could change its length while maintaining equal subdivisions; and he said, "Yes, it was invented twenty years ago." Now I use it both in my music and my etchings.

GENA: In music history we have antiquity before the medieval period. It seems to me that if we look into the future, perhaps 500 years from now, antiquity might encompass the history of music up to World War II, then there will be Cage and beyond. There will

be new historical parting starting with you.

CAGE: I think from the distance of 500 years, particularly, it might not be clear that it was me. It might just as well have been Satie, for instance. I think that's shown in Donal Henahan's recent *Times* article on music that "doesn't go anywhere." He spoke not only of Reich, Glass and myself, but also of Satie. Just recently, I received a prepublication copy of a new book by Dane Rudhyar, in which he speaks of the avant-garde as bringing music back to a proper relation to, what I think he calls, "the magic of tone." In other words, there was so much in so-called classical music that was bound up not with sound but with theory. And that is what made classical music so successful in schools. What we need, and I think that the avant-garde more and more is providing it, is a kind of music that simply can't be taught.

GENA: One of the reasons why it can't be taught is that academia often refuses to make the vital shift from music theory into music experience, because it's not as tangible as craft. Students have to make that shift in order to deal with aesthetics and ideas, and that aspect of their minds in music education has always been suppressed. One of the things that you can take credit for, along with Satie and other American experimentalists as well, is increasing this awareness of sound experience. In a sense, it's music that cannot be taught as music. One can no longer be a specialist. One has to be more liberal in his or her studies.

CAGE: They must actually get their ears into it. Most articles on music, even by young and advanced composers up until 1950, actually pretend that sound is the lower aspect of music.

GENA: So we can agree that, in more ways than one, the fifties represent a milestone in music history. Recently, there is what you might call nostalgia for the fifties where many institutional composers are starting to embrace your ideas in their own safe way. Furthermore, I've noticed that in a respected music journal there seems to be a fashionable trend toward printing certain kinds of cute aphorisms, similar to some of the things that were published in *Silence*. Now, when students ask me if it is necessary to study the great masters to be a great composer, I reply, "Yes, you should study the masters; and they are Cage, Feldman, Wolff, and Brown, as well as Rauschenberg, Johns, McLuhan, Fuller, etc." What advice could you give composers now, and what would you hope that they could get out of the experience of knowing your work?

CAGE: To give advice is a very difficult thing to do. I think the most that we can do, and we can't be certain of the results, is to carry on with our work, and to think of it in relation to other people, as what we have to say to them. In other words, I don't think we do our work or conduct our lives just for ourselves, but willy nilly it interpenetrates with other people's. So rather than advice, I would give an instance or example. I like that attitude, because it goes through the whole process of life instead of coming to one conclusion. I notice, for instance, that some people are struck by some of the pieces I wrote between 1940 and 1950; they won't have anything to do with the rest of my work. Now other people, just because they see that happening, are beginning to be interested only in the music from 1950 to 1980, I made a text last August at the University of Surrey, which is called *Composition in Retrospect*, the last set of mesostics is on the word circumstances. I think about more and more of those circumstances as being variable, unpredictable and finally useful. I don't think we ought to worry about advice. You just have to do your work, and expect other people to do theirs.

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