

## H. C. E. (Here Comes Everybody): Morton Feldman in conversation with Peter Gena

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GENA: I think you'd agree, Morty, that the New York music and art scene from the earliest fifties, in which Cage, you and many others were involved, was unique. Certainly unique for America because New York was now the focal point of new art and music and there was a tremendous influx of European talent during and after the war.

FELDMAN: When I first met John in the late 1950s most of the people that I became friendly with in his circle were painters. He did have a musical world that he saw constantly - Lou Harrison was living in New York, as was Virgil Thomson - but both Lou and Virgil had other concerns. Then, of course, there was Henry Cowell. And Henry Cowell was the first older composer who actually wrote one of the initial articles on the new music. And he was very interested in it. Actually everybody was really interested, but to some degree divorced from it. What struck me, coming from just being a student - I was twenty-four or twenty-five when I met John - was the fact that the painters were interested in completely different concerns than I was used to. In music there were Schoenberg and Stravinsky. And people were still talking about Schoenberg and Stravinsky as if all the concerns of composition were bouncing off one or the other.

GENA: Yes, as Schoenberg said, "Either we're right or the French are right. We both can't be."

FELDMAN: But among the painters, cubism was already an old story. You didn't hear anything about it the way you would hear constantly about how one orders the twelve-tones, or whether composers have to write serial music, and things like that. Naturally, among the painters certain artists would be discussed. Matisse, of course, would come up in conversation. Mondrian would come up in conversation; Giacometti - it was the beginning of his big reputation in America. But there wasn't really that much talk about European art in the way composers talked about Schoenberg and Stravinsky. In the art world there wasn't this kind of either/or situation. Just an unbelievable amount of energy, an unbelievable amount of talent and, of course, there were people that, for whatever reason, might have received more public attention than others. De Kooning had a big following around him; Clyfford Still, though living in California, was a personage that loomed over that particular time, especially because of his relationship with Clement Greenberg, the critic; and Barney Newman, Rothko, Jackson Pollock and so forth. So there were [luminists](#),\* but the feeling that I had was that there really weren't issues. It's as if you had fifteen Stravinskys. And that was absolutely extraordinary to me.

GENA: The artists weren't forced to polarize like the musicians. It was serialism or not for the musicians.

FELDMAN: Yes, it wasn't even a crisis of whether or not one should do figure painting or abstract, because everybody was painting so differently.

GENA: So what was it like in terms of sharing ideas? I'm thinking of Larry Rivers depicting Jackson Pollock's style as directed accident. And then Cage talking about purposeful purposelessness and coming up with the silent pieces; or Rauschenberg doing white canvasses. What was the feeling like? Were these ideas just in the air, or was there a direct link? In all periods of music the ideas were in the air. Certainly serialism was in the air and Schoenberg wasn't the only one to do it.

FELDMAN: You have to be a kind of cultural anthropologist to survive today. Kandinsky was doing serial painting fifteen years before Schoenberg. Now here is what I feel the connection was. You have to remember that except for myself, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown, it was not a youth movement. It's very important to remember when I met John he was in his late thirties. De Kooning didn't have a show until after he was forty. They all left periods behind them. John left, what I feel is, a magnificent period behind before he became the John Cage that most people know. Beautiful pieces, a whole cycle of pieces. I will actually name them because I feel they belong together: Six Melodies for Violin and Piano. Sensationally gorgeous pieces. String Quartet, which is now a modern classic. The Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra and Sixteen Dances. And it was after Sixteen Dances, which might have been the last piece before the Music of Changes, which now brings us Cage as we know him. So John already had the prepared piano, the Sonatas and Interludes, and the book of music for two pianos, played by Gold and Fizzdale many years ago. So he had that world behind him. And he had the whole series of percussion constructions and miscellaneous things behind him. The most striking thing about that time is that there seemed to be little concern with influence. Of course there were always followers. But the whole continuity of influence and how we thought about it in terms of picking up some kind of thread was not there. If there was a thread I certainly wasn't tuned into it. But I did catch this attitude and the attitude was absolutely... Well, let me tell you an anecdote that will maybe better explain what I'm talking about. It was in 1951. Jackson Pollock had a stunning show at the Betty Parsons Gallery. A large group of people were sitting around a table. And I remember one man in particular, an artist perhaps in his very early forties who said, "What a terrific show. Am I glad he did it. Now I don't have to." I think that describes the attitude.

GENA: There was no necessity to jump on any bandwagon because there was so much talent around.

FELDMAN: That was not an extraordinary thing to say at the time. I would say that it's the key attitude that got me

into another kind of energy of where my thoughts should be and what kind of questions I should ask. I don't feel that it was by accident that in one of Cage's early lectures he continually talks about H.C.E. from Finnegans Wake - "Here Comes Everybody." He works on that idea over and over in this particular lecture. "Here Comes Everybody, H.C.E." If anybody was to write a book on John Cage, I would suggest that he use this as a title. H.C.E. Because that's exactly what was going on. Everybody. And it was very, very exciting, of course.

GENA: There's the title for this interview... But let's get to the European "everybody."

FELDMAN: Yes, Europe was in America. A lot of Europeans were living in America during the war. Mondrian was brought here. Léger was here. A lot of surrealists were here. And now we get into the surrealists. I feel that's the Cage connection. I think that the surrealists influenced art in America more than they influenced art in Europe. I don't like to time surrealism because there's a really vast spread. For example, Max Ernst once said to Mondrian when he was looking at some work in Mondrian's studio, "You know, Piet, you're the real surrealist." So you've got the range between a Max Ernst (who was a good friend of Cage's) and a Mondrian. Who knows, Jasper Johns might be America's greatest surrealist. So we have a very, very big spread here. You've got from Magritte to Mondrian. In the Schoenberg world what have you got? You've got Krenek to Schoenberg. Surrealism gave vent to the imagination; and I feel temperamentally, if not spiritually, something in that particular era by way of surrealism made it possible for someone like a John Cage to move.

GENA: Perhaps that was the dichotomy in art, though, at least early on. One headed either in the direction of abstraction, or the direction of surrealism, using realist images in a kind of noncontextual fashion. Just as in music, Satie and even late Debussy, would represent realistic images as tonal structures in a noncontextual fashion, as opposed to the abstraction of Schoenberg.

FELDMAN: John was very friendly with Marianne Moore. He once took me to a poetry reading she gave. He always liked that line of hers, "Real frogs in an imaginary pond." There is a kind of surrealist connection.

GENA: Allowing unrelated juxtapositions, I guess, which is something in John's philosophy that obviously has to come from there and not from the abstractionists.

FELDMAN: But at the same time I still feel that his processes were very much involved with his old teacher. To this day. In other words I feel that Cage's processes are continual variation. I think this came about because of Schoenberg's comment to John, "You have no feeling for harmony. It would be like knocking your head against the wall." And John said, "Well, I'll knock my head against the wall." But like anybody else who had no interest in harmony, he found that which freed music from harmony. He found his Zen for polyphony.

GENA: The rhythmic structure aspect which allows sounds and silences.

FELDMAN: I wrote an article where I actually said, "John, don't be mad if I compare your rhythmic structure, how you use it, to perhaps the way Beethoven used harmony." This is not taking anything away from Cage in his use of continual variation, because he does not use it didactically. Again we must quote him. He uses it in order to imitate nature in its manner of operation. Which brings up another American connection. Because evidently there has to be something here that could produce a John Cage. Recently a friend of mine, a brilliant art historian, Barbara Novak, wrote a book called Nature and Culture. It's about nineteenth-century American painting, which is not too well known. And her contention is that what we had over here was something Europe didn't have - the wilderness. The luminists went out and they painted it as they saw it. And I feel that Cage, too, in a sense explored an aspect of the wilderness in his pursuit of sound, and I feel that also it is not a replica of nature but, as he would put it, an imitation of its mode of operation, so that Cage's music lost the idealized, what appeared to be more focused, artistry of his teacher.

GENA: Wasn't John tremendously influenced, at least we see it later, by Satie and Duchamp? This certainly was not the American wilderness.

FELDMAN: As far as Duchamp goes, I seriously regret the fact that John is continuously being coupled with Duchamp. The crucial difference between them is that Duchamp freed the mind from the eye, while Cage freed one's ears from the mind. Also, all that Duchamp has really left us is the green box. True, it was an unprecedented fusion of linguistic and visual possibilities, and in this regard there is no denying his historical importance - while with Cage there is a long, long, long, long, long, list of very important musical compositions.

GENA: Yes, but also with Cage there is a very long, long, long list of ideas and perhaps with Duchamp there is a long, long, longer list of ideas ... I know when I first started studying Duchamp I was amazed at the similarities in terms of ideas; true, comparing eyes and ears might be like comparing apples and oranges or something. So if Duchamp really did free the mind from the eye, to that extent he moved away from craft and picked on ready-mades.

FELDMAN: Especially if you had two left hands, like Duchamp. I mean he was better with a ruler. Once he took up a ruler, he was fine.

GENA: Yes, he was interested in mechanical drawing. Accordingly, Cage talked about his terrible ear for harmony, and once he took up the ruler, as it were, which was time grids and rhythmic structures, it was wonderful. So Cage freed the sounds because he wanted to put them outside of the harmonic context.

FELDMAN: I didn't bring up Schoenberg's remark about John's lack of interest in harmony to imply what you're trying to say. I said that Duchamp picked up the ruler, not Cage.

GENA: What did Cage pick up?

FELDMAN: He picked up the eraser! He's bluffing. He's a Duchamp in Cagean ears. He's bluffing. He has impeccable ears.

GENA: I didn't mean that. But he himself has said he never had an ear for traditional harmony. Undoubtedly he has impeccable ears for sound, but we were talking initially about conventional harmony.

FELDMAN: Listen, I just reread the harmony book of Schoenberg. And he's a great, great teacher and he's one of the greatest composers of all time. I don't think that he had a feeling for harmony. If Schoenberg was studying with me, I'd say, "Arnold, you are going to be hitting your head against the wall. I don't like your feeling for harmony. Now if you really want to get that interested in Schenker, go ahead, but I don't know, Arnold, you've got problems." So, in a sense you could say that about anybody. Cage opened up the door to a vast world, willy-nilly. He opened Pandora's Music Box. He opened a door for me where I saw a direction which had nothing to do with any model in his world. He articulated for me what I was doing, but I figured it out for myself. It took some time. I went another route. For example, the whole secret to my music, if I could just talk about myself for a minute. Knowing me all these years, you can imagine the great deprivation I feel in not being able to talk about myself completely, but if I could only talk about myself for a moment..

GENA: This is going to be some moment.

FELDMAN: It's that essentially I am the master of nonfunctional harmony. And only a school kid is involved with functional harmony. But what composer heard in terms of functional harmony? Harmony died in the early part of the nineteenth century. Harmony is like serialism. Kids talk about serialism. Serialism lasted six months. It lasted six months. One piece, or so. It was a six-month period. Really, that's all it was.

GENA: Even shorter than fauvism.

FELDMAN: So harmony had six years! It's a fantasy. Is Chopin involved with functional harmony?

GENA: He's involved with functional harmony in the sense of what he could do to muck it up.

FELDMAN: You mean he also was a master of nonfunctional harmony.

GENA: A master at manipulating your perception of functional harmony. I guess that it became a conceptual thing. You felt safe because you knew harmony was under there somewhere.

FELDMAN: Schoenberg's remark, I think, was a little premature and a little too facile. I could say the same thing right now. If Verdi came to work with me and I see these long violin throbs going, very little harmony. I'd say, "What's the matter. You afraid of harmony? Look at the bass line. It's not very strong there. What's the matter, Giuseppe? Unless you get a feeling for harmony, you're going to be knocking your head against La Scala for as long as you live." I mean it's a facile remark.

GENA: Well, let's say that it's not even such a matter of functional harmony, but rather the idea of teleological sound structure where the sound had to go somewhere. So not only would Schoenberg criticize Cage's chorale assignments, but he obviously didn't feel that John's music went somewhere. Of course, this is the big break, where finally there were people like yourself and John saying music doesn't have to go anywhere. A sound is not part of a hierarchy.

FELDMAN: But music does go somewhere.

GENA: Where, other than time? It moves in time, but you can't tell me after all these years that when there are two successive sounds in your music, the choice of the second sound was dependent on what the first was. Or that you were drawn from the first sound into the second one. Cage certainly allows for that not to happen. You both deal with nonreferential time.

FELDMAN: It's not so easy. It's not easy. If you were going to analyze, for example, Tolstoy's War and Peace, you can say the man is rambling on and on. A big Balzac novel - is he rambling? Where's the cause and effect? Is he telling the story? Proust is a perfect example. Where's the form? What ties things up? Is it rambling?

GENA: In a novel initially this rambling was often to provide perspective, so to speak, to the characters. But you're writing music without perspective. You're not providing "perspective" to the sounds, so that when I listen I hear some kind of a logical unfolding from sound "a" one by one up to sound "z."

FELDMAN: Being that my music has a bigger point of view, a less censored one. I don't think those are the issues because I think what Cage makes us face is that we then have to define for ourselves how censored we are in terms of our own vested interest. Either our patience, or our professionalism, or whatever.

GENA: But the point is that there was a period in the fifties which you said was so delightful because you each discovered how uncensored you were.

FELDMAN: It depends on a lot of things. For example, people used to leave the house without locking the door. Now I turn a burglar alarm on. You know, it all depends on how one wants to enjoy an uncensored point of view. I once described a difference between John and me: John opened up the door and I just opened the window a crack. The only thing is that Cage created a problem by showing that there was something other than either serialism or Stravinsky or the few jokers in the deck - you know, like Bartók and Hindemith. There are only a few jokers. That's all. You know how dismal the whole state of music is? It's absolutely pretty dismal. I always wondered why John has

been more or less consistent. At least in procedures all these years. Especially when one of his favorite remarks, when I met him, was Satie's: "Show me something new and I'll start all over again." There is no need for Cage to start over again. The musical situation, you know, is still the same. It's 1982 and if I were going into the musical world it would be like 1946 in New York. Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Schoenberg might change. The Schoenberg might be Boulez, and the Stravinsky might be Phil Glass. There is still this kind of polarity, and things are going around these two particular points without too much diversion. And anything that really is a question of diversion is a kind of ... well, it's like when Xenakis was with me during the performance of a piece of mine and afterwards he said, "Well, we're perhaps the only two significant nonmainstream people around." So he meant it jokingly but it's interesting. But you know that if it weren't for Cage we wouldn't even have important nonmainstream people around.

GENA: You hit on it there. It's a funny thing. No matter what's going on today, it can only be seen in the light of a sense of history. I know when students ask me this question, "Is it necessary to study the masters to compose today?" "Yes, you should," I answer. You should study Feldman, Cage, Wolff and Brown. Because there's an area that we can look back on and see that it did the necessary dirty work to free us to have this new pluralism. Even when we hear the new tonality now, it's not a return to traditional tonality; it's a reevaluation of tonality that could only have happened after the experience of the fifties. It's like looking at someone with short hair. We could tell if that person had long hair in the sixties and now has short hair, as opposed to the guy who's always had short hair since the fifties.

FELDMAN: But what are we supposed to learn? I never said this in the classroom, but I said it to a student of mine who studied here and became very upset with the way his work was going. I said, "You know, there's not one thing that I ever learned in the past that I could actually apply to my music. Nobody ever helped me. Any insight I had in the past does not reflect on anything I'm trying to do. I have no models to use. What I have to use is an other tradition: how to notate."

GENA: It's not a musical model. I think it's an esthetic or philosophical one.

FELDMAN: What young composer could use Cage? What could they learn from his music? Look at the long list of Cage's work and you know how prolific he is. Do you notice that some years he didn't do very much? And did you ever look at the pieces where he didn't do very much? They are so vast, so extensive that it's amazing that he could even have done them in a year. Do they know the work that it took? How many people in our time in the past fifty years know the level of work that Cage has done? Do you realize that there are only a few people in our time, Freud perhaps, who knew what it took? Is that any kind of moral for a student?

GENA: I think that's something that is coming out, because part of the problem that critics have had with Cage is that they dismiss his so-called frivolity; when in fact those of us who look deeply into what he says and what he did in his music know that there was a lot of discipline and hard work. And, of course, he's the first one to be saying that now, when he is accused of fluffing things off.

FELDMAN: Are you too young to remember when Khrushchev did the famous U.N. thing? You know the shoe he took off had a hole. So in order to make a parallel with Cage, the hole will be his lack of concern for harmony. Khrushchev said, I'll bury you, remember?, with or without the hole. Well, Cage is going to bury most of the twentieth century just on the level of the work. Forget about any kind of qualitative remark. The level of the psychic force for energy that went to write that body of work is in itself monumental.

GENA: It's something that the young people didn't appreciate right away. I mean in the sixties. Many young composers picked up the banner of Cage and acted like fools, doing absolutely anything and justifying it all by saying that's what Cage is about.

FELDMAN: Why did that come about?

GENA: There was a total misunderstanding of the difference between the kinds of discipline and inner thought that Cage was involved in, as opposed to what on the surface appeared to many as an anything-goes attitude.

FELDMAN: They don't know anything that he's done in the past forty years, thirty years, twenty years; they don't know his recent work?

GENA: I think that is the problem. Many people are just now understanding what the essence of Cage's work, music and ideas is. I think the initial infatuation with Cage's ideas remains very much on the surface, so we had a situation where Cage himself was very unhappy with what his followers were doing under the aegis of his ideas, of chance, so to speak. That's a good point to bring up with you - this whole aspect of indeterminacy. John credits you with being the first one, for instance, to write music which was indeterminate in respect to performance. What misunderstandings and problems did this bring about?

FELDMAN: Well, in the past twelve or thirteen years, I started moving out of that area. Do you know what Picasso said when asked why he left cubism? "Because," he answered, "I wanted to be a painter. I didn't want to be a cubist." I don't want to imply that I wasn't a composer when I was writing the kind of music I was writing. But as far as I was concerned, I always felt that the minute you set up a grid, or the minute you are notating certain types of acoustical events, whether the time world is in varying degrees of tight or loose, to some degree you know what you are doing; you have a sense of the propriety of it, like the way Jackson Pollock would have a sense of his eye and his scale of things. I can't say that I wasn't writing a kind of deterministic art, but I felt that I was always in some kind of realistic space. And it's realistic to know if the space is going to be long or short, and it determined the many kinds of choices I made. But my argument is not with the concepts. My argument is, though this sounds absolutely ungenerous and I don't really mean it to be, that I was interested in freeing the sound and not the performer.



GENA: John has said many times that, "Morty's notated music is Morty playing his graph music."

FELDMAN: And that was the big problem I had. Did you ever hear of Nick the Greek?

GENA: Jimmy the Greek? The bookie who gives the odds on the sports games?

FELDMAN: Then maybe it's Jimmy the Greek. Good old Jimmy said, "Never bet on anything that breathes." I forgot there was somebody breathing for these notes. It became a realistic social phenomenon, in a way. I have to really hand it to John for never getting discouraged in any way, because I agree with him almost as if a child of mine came to me and said, "Dad, I believe in free love. And I'm going to go and move in with Matilda." And I would say, "Well, it's all right, but for the kind of life that you want to live with Matilda maybe you're better off getting married."

GENA: But John's music at this early time, his chance processes as in the Music of Changes, were before the fact of the realization. They were fixed so his removal from the process was done way before the performance.

FELDMAN: But if what he produced was so irksome to the New York Philharmonic players, the fact that it was now fixed on a page didn't make any difference. I'm not going to live to see the ramifications of the fact that a human being can't present someone's art with the dignity it deserves. I just read an interview John gave. Towards the end he talks about the fact that he doesn't have much experience in being a pessimist. He also talks about the didactic nature of his work. That he thought it would change people.

GENA: Was he often accused of being utopian?

FELDMAN: I don't think he was utopian. Look, if a Jew in Nazi Germany was told by someone, "What are you complaining about? You're acting like an utopian," are you going to say, "All right, I can understand anti-Semitism, I can understand even getting hit on the head on occasion because I'm Jewish, but to put seven million of me in a gas chamber, that I don't understand"? So in that sense, Cage is utopian. The only thing is that as an artist, to a great degree, he is living culturally in Nazi Germany. That's what it amounts to. I just left Nazi Germany and I went to London. That's all.

GENA: Well, I was going to follow up with John's interest in Thoreau, and his mention of anarchy. His hope for an anarchistic society where more people would be laid off to do useful work.

FELDMAN: But don't you know that story he tells about somebody he met who's an anarchist? This guy was very upset because as the kids started to grow up they started to jump on the bed, among other things, and he didn't know what to do with the kids because he was an anarchist. Cage himself tells this story; the dilemma of watching people jumping on his music and doing this and that and yet being an anarchist.

GENA: In recent years, John has been known to get upset when the audience reacts in a hostile way, rather than to delight in the controversy. There were an awful lot of misconceptions about what John was doing, what he was about, in the sixties.

FELDMAN: John opted to go into the world. A very close friend of mine who is now dead, a great painter, was standing on Eighth Street. It was freezing winter, and he was complaining about some reviews, complaining about the reception of his last show, which was a magnificent show. He got hysterical and he's screaming on the corner of Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue. I said, "Look, if you wanted to take your clothes off now in this freezing winter and then complain that it's cold, what do you want? You can't have it both ways." And in a sense I feel that with John. He's less in the world than, for example, Thomas Hardy, who wrote a great novel, got lousy reviews and then decided to keep writing. But the world in Cage's temperament, to some degree, is some kind of measurement, some kind of protagonist in an artistic and ethical way. So he's forced to be a philosopher.

GENA: But there were, are, all these fantasies about what John represents. This is a big problem. Whatever discrepancies there are in your performances are nothing as compared to the crazy kind of fantasy world that people are living in when they think of Cage.

FELDMAN: Listen, being a former entrepreneur of so many concerts here, I found superb performers not even reading directions. You know, on a more vulgar level, it's no different than what happens in Hollywood. There are cycles where the composer is the boss, the bankers are the boss, the producers are the boss, then the writers become the boss, then the directors. Understand? In the fifties, the director was the one who got the money. Then came the writer. I think it's very true in music when the entrepreneurs take over, and the performers take over, and so forth. But it's an important fact. And I think what's happened now is that the performers took over. If they start a modern music group today, it's because they want to shine, where they would play something that would make them shine and have a repertoire where they could get good reviews. So anybody who picks up the Sunday Times and sees all that crap they're playing in New York should know that essentially it's for the performers, and it has nothing to do with playing a new piece by Christian Wolff. Christian is not going to get them a good review. Everybody kisses me and pats me on the back when I walk into a room in New York, but nobody plays me. They are not going to get a good review. So in a sense the whole thing is pretty messy. This relationship between performance and composition is something that is not really discussed in terms of just what it's all about. It's a very, very serious problem.

GENA: Well, how serious is John when he says composing is one thing, performing is another and listening's a third - thus breaking down that relationship, that stream of direction that music has always had. How serious a statement is that in terms of, perhaps, listening to a performance of Etudes Australes or the Freeman Etudes?

FELDMAN: John asks the most crucial questions only because of the John Cage phenomenon. It's a Cagean phenomenon. That leads us to ask only one question. The question is not whether or not what Cage is doing is art. I'm

convinced that it will be art without even hearing the piece, only because he does it. The question is, and it is because of John we must ask this question: Is music an art form to begin with? Was it always show biz? And by show biz I mean Monteverdi. And by show biz I mean Josquin's music, which in a sense is a high-class "Song of Bernadette." I mean it is a serious question. The question is, again, and say it to yourself when you wake up in the morning, say it to yourself when you go to bed, and say it five more times in this interview: Is music an art form? Because that's what Cage is really forcing us to decide. It's no question of art for art's sake. But is it an art form? Or has it always been show biz based on a kind of small attention span? Did you ever hear those Chopin preludes? The thing is going on and it can go on forever and it's got this fake cadence at the end. Every piece has a fake cadence, one after the other. The piece could go on for hours. What I mean by show biz is fantastic show biz. That a new piece of Boulez, perhaps, presented in a classy hall in Paris is like Sarah Bernhardt doing a monolog. Without the histrionics, of course. That's what I mean. By holding the moment. By capturing the moment in every sense of the word. Where people then go to the party and have a conversation about it.

GENA: Is this something that Cage himself sees or, in his optimism, refuses to see?

FELDMAN: I think in a sense he's not idealistic about performers; he was not idealistic about society. The man, evidently for some particular reason, thought that he was involved with an art form. Just like Jews are not allowed to win a war. Israel is not allowed to win a war. A writer could make art. A painter could make art. Maybe a composer is not allowed to make art, and maybe a composer never made art.

GENA: So, maybe, Cage is the first composer who freed music to become pure art, with the same kind of intention Pound had for poetry or Kandinsky for painting. But why do you suppose the issue of Cage's music as art is so often skirted? I mean let's talk about education.

FELDMAN: Everybody thought they're listening to anti-art when they're listening to Cage. They don't know that the reason they're annoyed is that it's art. I'm serious now. I'm not trying to be clever.

GENA: So music is an art form when John does it.

FELDMAN: If you give vent to the imagination and travel the path that he has taken, it becomes an art form. It's not anti-art. Yes, the problem with Cage is that it's too much art for music. But I think about this. I see John very infrequently these days. He's always on my mind. And he's on a lot of people's minds, who are close to him and don't see him, only because he does raise very, very interesting problems. Not because people don't want to change, or performers to a great degree get annoyed, but because he presents a lot of problems.

GENA: This brings up the question of accessibility. Certainly when one reads John's writings or listens to him, one often gets the impression that there's a huge effort to reach out to the public, finally, after all these years of being tainted by allusions to what music was in Beethoven, Schoenberg, etc. Cage particularly hated Beethoven. One might even say that Cage also opened doors for a new accessibility, and if he has, it's an accessibility that appears only recently in other composers.

FELDMAN: Everybody's talking about accessibility, yet if you look at the repertoire, they play the same old things; or they don't play the music that was accessible in the forties. I gave a seminar on accessible music. I won't mention names, but I played hit pieces from the forties that are no longer played. Critic awards, Pulitzer Prizes, they are forgotten. We all felt that they were so poorly put together. They were so inept in every sense of the word. Now this whole business of accessibility is a lot of baloney, because what's going to happen with John is going to happen with every other great composer. I mean what do they play of Stravinsky's repertoire? What do they even play of Schoenberg's? Five pieces for orchestra. I mean, they're short enough, they're attractive enough, like five little photographs of particular scenes. One would be the Black Forest, another the Alps, etc. But no music has gotten into the repertoire. Beethoven is not even in the repertoire. For example, how many symphonies do they play? The third, the fifth, and for the pension fund they play the ninth. I heard Beethoven's Fourth Symphony the other night. That piece should be played at least once every three years or so. What I'm really trying to say is that nobody is in the repertoire. Nobody has made it.

GENA: Nobody is accessible?

FELDMAN: Nobody is accessible. Unless you go to church, where will you hear Renaissance music? If I want to hear Renaissance music, I have to convert! Where are you going to hear it? How much Bach do they do? Again, I have to convert. I have to go Easter week. Nobody is in the repertoire. Mozart is not in the repertoire. If you get some clarinetists, then they play the Clarinet quintet. You have new generations playing these pieces - new fiddle players wanting to compete with Mendelssohn. If there wasn't that competition for the violinist, you wouldn't even hear Mendelssohn. So nobody made the repertoire. A few selective pieces. It's all hokum, you know. There's no repertoire. They're going to do Pelléas and Mélisande at the Met. They'll fall asleep, for crying out loud. Monteverdi's Orfeo - They'll doze off. When's the last time you heard Machaut in Chicago? Did you ever sit through a Machaut mass? You could commit suicide. The repertoire is in books and, I imagine, in records.

GENA: But they will fall asleep during Pelléas, but come running next week for La Bohème.

FELDMAN: You go back to Chicago and put on a Machaut mass, but instead of Machaut put John Cage's name on the mass and they will be throwing bottles at the chorus.

GENA: What you said about attractive pieces, that's interesting. If I asked you to put together a retrospective concert of John's music, how would you start?

FELDMAN: If anything, Cage belongs in the repertoire more than Beethoven because I can't make that much

distinction between one piece and another as having more importance than another. He's just like any other composer. He's no different. As far as I'm concerned, one of Boulez's most important pieces was one of his first. His flute Sonatina is still a terrific piece. In other words, if you get into a hot idea, you take it in places that have a kind of fresh insight, adventurous feeling. I'll do it. I'll put on a Cage concert just like I would put on a Beethoven concert.

GENA: I want to continue on the point of accessibility, but in the sense of judgment. One thing that John has always discouraged is value judgment. There's no point in expressing likes or dislikes. These tell you nothing about anything except yourself. Again, this is an idealistic approach. But obviously, even John must have his likes and dislikes in pieces.

FELDMAN: Yes, doesn't he dislike the vibraphone and the dominant seventh chord?

GENA: Well, yes, those are elements, but in terms of a performance of a piece, probably the most difficult thing in John's music, especially the music after Music of Changes or since Variations IV, or Cartridge Music, is the concept of a value judgment. And of course, John says that a value judgment is neither necessary nor useful. Whether or not he applies that to everything he hears, I'm dubious. I question this. How do you deal with the question of evaluation?

FELDMAN: There is a value judgment, but it gets tied up with performance. In other words, if he goes someplace with Paul Zukofsky, evidently, he's just not picking any violinist off the street.

GENA: So value judgments are made in terms of performance.

FELDMAN: Well, it has to do with a person's character, proficiency; and if they have a fantastic character, John will lessen his standards in terms of proficiency. I think he's no different than anybody else. You want to work with good people, that's all. And he's always, as far as I'm concerned, with the people that were personally close to him, and they were people who were nice people, just nice people to work with.

GENA: Okay, let's get back to the beginning. So he had David Tudor. Surely, it was a luxury to have a person like that. Correct me if I'm wrong. There was a small circle of composers in the fifties that had certain luxuries. You knew if you wrote a piano piece you'd get a topnotch realization, a serious performance.

FELDMAN: But it's no different even from the past. Brahms had his Joachim. Beethoven had Czerny. Everybody wrote for very key people. Berlioz had Paganini, but Paganini didn't want Berlioz. That's a perfect example: Paganini pays for Harold in Italy, but he wouldn't play it because it didn't have the pizzazz. He probably liked it too. I have this experience all the time. It's show biz. I'll never forget when my nephew, now an adult, was about six or seven years old and his folks took him to Tanglewood. They went backstage after a Leinsdorf concert. Jay is standing back there with his program and he wants Leinsdorf to autograph it. So Leinsdorf asked him, "What's your name?" And he said, "Jay Feldman," and Leinsdorf, whom I never met, said, "There's a composer by the name of Morton Feldman, any relation?" "Yes, he's my uncle." And Leinsdorf patted him on the back and said, "Congratulations." I never heard from Leinsdorf. Did I ever tell you the story about Munch and Tanglewood? Lukas Foss conducted a piece of mine in Tanglewood. The piece was received badly by the other performers and the composers. I remember one famous composer hid as I walked up the gangplank in the chamber shed. I recognized Munch in a white suit with two elegant Boston dowagers on each arm, and he started to walk towards me. When he got to me, he grabbed me by the shoulder, hugged me and said, "Ooh-lala. Fantastic poet." Did I ever hear from Munch? Did Munch ever play me? I have this all the time. "Congratulations": Leinsdorf; "You're a poet": Munch. I never heard from them. So I think with Cage, too, there are a lot of people who have a sense of Cage's importance. As FDR said, "The American people talk one way and vote another." Unfortunately, performers talk one way, but when they perform, they vote another. I don't think there is lack of appreciation for John Cage among serious colleagues. I think he's felt to be a very important composer. And that's because he raises the question that maybe music could be an art form. Cage needs no defense, no apologist or explanation. With young composers, though, I don't think it's too late for Cage. I think it's too late for the young composers. I don't think the young composer can get anything out of anything for the simple reason that Cage took away their security blanket before they were really ready for it.

GENA: By doing what? Doing it all?

FELDMAN: What he did was constantly to bring up the possibility of music being an art form. To me the whole moral of the fifties with John's work, with my work, is that it's like what our friend said at the bar after Pollock's show: "I'm glad he did it. Now I can go on and do something else." While in painting there seem to be many places where you can go to do something else, this really isn't the case in music. There's something impregnable about music that opposes this diversity. You know, it's marvelous that John recently said that he felt that if he did anything, he made it possible for other streams to exist, other than the mainstream. And I don't think there would have been other streams without him. I think he dramatized in big capital letters THE MAINSTREAM STOPPED HERE. But there is something in the nature of music that resists this. After working all my life in music, I can't put my finger on it. I don't know what the hell it is.

GENA: Could it be because the western musical tradition is so strong?

FELDMAN: No, the western tradition was strong only because its resources were so weak. You start pushing around those twelve tones and you know what I mean. Now, no matter how ingenious we are, we really don't have any resources, and the only kind of resources we want to use are very obvious.

GENA: If John's the one that says perhaps music is an art form, there's a huge amount of responsibility on his shoulders. But did he ever feel it? I was recently reminded of a funny story about Schoenberg when he was in the army. Someone came up to him and asked, "Are you Schoenberg?" He said, "Yes I am. Somebody has to be." He felt

this incredible sense of responsibility. Certainly on a personal level, from speaking to John, I don't think that he ever felt a terrible weight on his shoulders to bring everybody out - to lead. That's why I couldn't imagine John accepting a John Cage School idea or John-as-influence. In the fifties, John was more of a catalyst.

FELDMAN: It was only because it was an American style. But it was not different than Schoenberg, Webern and Berg, for example. John was not so much of a teacher. You know, Christian Wolff had one lesson with him. It was just a question of how to line up a neat page. And I never went to John as a student, but he gave me advice which made it possible for me to have the career that I've had. He gave me one piece of advice, and I followed it just this morning. On the second day I knew him, he suggested that I copy out my score nicely, and as I'm doing it I'll get ideas for what's going to happen. It saved my life. I remember a humorous situation. Some years ago, when I joined with Universal Editions, I was staying with my publisher (I stay with him when I'm in London), and he came home and saw me working, copying or something. My eyes are bad, as you know. He said, "Don't waste your eyes like that. Just give us a copy that we can read and we'll do it here." So I started to do that. And my music deteriorated because I wasn't given the opportunity for extra thought while copying. I was working too quickly. So that was the advice John gave to me. I once showed a five-year-old kid how to use a catsup bottle. I told him how to twist the cap so that the catsup goes back in the bottle. About twenty years later, this nice looking man stopped me on Madison Avenue. "I know you, but you don't know me," he said. "No," I said, "I don't know you." He said, "Catsup, the bottle of catsup, remember?" And I remembered him. He told me that every time he picks up a bottle of catsup for a hamburger, he thinks about me. That's the way I think about John Cage, though I think it's a little more important.

GENA: It's interesting that you point out his need for thinking while copying, because in your music I see a tremendous value in that, but I would never have realized that in John's.

FELDMAN: When John was staying with me a few years ago, and he does a million things at one time, he was doing some proofreading of an article. And there were mistakes that weren't very serious. The imperfections were miniscule, but he spent hours fixing them. I myself wouldn't have fixed it.

GENA: I see a comparison here. John has talked about the difference between Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. He said if a work is damaged in transit, it would be fine with Rauschenberg, but with Johns it would open up a whole new aesthetic realm.

FELDMAN: People are very, very peculiar. He might have a terrific largess, but as soon as John has made a choice, he could be as stubborn as anybody else.

GENA: That is exactly what one would understand. That once he removes himself from the decision-making process, and once the decision is made from outside of his control, it's a means for discovering new things and it's to be left as it stands, which is similar to Rauschenberg's attitude.

FELDMAN: It all depends. If he decides on something that just didn't work out or appears to be irrational, he'll still put it in. For example, one of the most wonderful things, to me, that demonstrates this is in the Music of Changes. I don't think anybody ever noticed it unless you played it, that there's a kind of pedaling gambit on another chart that he generated by throwing coins, and the pedals went in certain sections. There was a part that was completely silent in which the pedal has different moves. In other words, the pedals do not accompany sound. The pedals are used during silence. Yet he kept them in.

GENA: Was that the beginning of conceptual music?

FELDMAN: No, I love the idea because I just think it's the innocence of the part. Remember, he's one of the group of cultured people that didn't sound like graduate students. He's such an artist and yet he's so stubborn that he left it in. I think that's part of the didactic element that he talks about.

GENA: Whereas you're more liberal with the eraser, perhaps.

FELDMAN: You know, there hasn't been anybody of his stature that developed such close friendships with so many wonderful and different kinds of artists. If you read about people like Schoenberg, Gertrude Stein, even Freud or Joyce, especially - they're constantly dickering over the supremacy of ideas, father figures, authoritarianism. I once spent an afternoon with Beckett. Beckett would not talk about Joyce at all, or his relationship with Joyce as a younger man. The fact that Cage could proliferate among so many generations, and so many magnificent artists, is absolutely extraordinary.

GENA: I guess the whole package works. You can't think of him in any other way. You can't think of his music or ideas as anything other than what they are.

FELDMAN: I think he is idealistic. I think, in a way, he is part of the American ideal of what D.H. Lawrence called the Rejuvenation, the whole idea of what we share about the frontier. European railroads might have gotten us out to the Rockies, but from there on in, we took a canoe. And I think Cage had this idea about America, the wilderness.

GENA: So John got in a canoe, whereas others stopped at the Rockies.

FELDMAN: You know, maybe he's in the wrong field. I remember when his father was still alive and we were writing. John was winning all kinds of awards before he became John Cage. He was very famous, but his father kept talking about him going into another field. So, when I said that, I really wasn't serious. I was kind of drifting off. But you know he wanted to be a painter, and when he went to Europe he painted - in fact, I saw an early painting of his that was somewhat like Georgia O'Keeffe. He was very gifted as a painter. He was always close to painters. He grew up with painters, wonderful painters. He might have been happy because then it would have been an art form, and



everybody would have been happy with his work.

GENA: It's interesting because now he is doing etchings. But we haven't talked about eastern philosophy and Zen. This is something that's synonymous with John and yet on the other hand, I can't think of anyone's music that's more Zen-like than yours.

FELDMAN: But I think John's Zenness is not so intense. I think, again, just like the way surrealism in a sense opened up the mind, John said one should keep one's mind open for divine influences. I think John's Zen really comes from the fact that he grew up on the West Coast, which faces the Orient. New York faces Germany; that's why the tradition in New York was essentially Germanic.

GENA: But you have no profound interest in Zen. I know your famous statement about the only thing you owe to the Orientals is gratitude for Chinese food. Your music, though, seems to be able to set the mood for what at least most people think of as Zen. Certainly, more than John's does. And John's initial affiliation with surrealism and closeness to painters shows up perhaps less in his music, although we do see similar ideas, whereas I could show my class a Rothko and play your Chorus and Instruments and everything is understood. No explanation is necessary.

FELDMAN: Well, maybe I was Zen insofar as I never had a philosophy. I really don't have a philosophy.

GENA: It might be as Daniel Charles points out in *For the Birds*, that this idea of no philosophy is still a philosophy.

FELDMAN: Yes, but no philosophy in conversation sounds very Zen-like. But I really don't have one, nor do I have one about John. John's interest in Zen is no different than that of a close friend in London whom I stayed with at one time when she said, "I'll be right back. I have to go to Mass."

GENA: Did she come back?

FELDMAN: Yes, she was a Catholic and she went to Mass. Once I asked her about rosary beads; I wanted to know about beads and everything. I asked her about the iconology of a lot of things, just as I would ask John about Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. I was interested in information, but I would never ask him if he really believed in Zen. There are a lot of people who are very religious but who don't believe in God. Can you imagine after all these years if you asked John Cage, "Do you really believe in Zen?" and you get the answer, "No."

GENA: He's also the first to admit that perhaps he doesn't know a great deal about Zen. There's that discourse with Alan Watts where John capitulated and said that he didn't pretend to be an expert. Whatever relationship his musical ideas have to Zen is usually something applied by someone else other than him.

FELDMAN: Yes, it's not that I never took whatever interest he had in Zen seriously, but it's like a belief in anything. I would fear that I would be prying to ask about it. My reassurance came essentially from his vast musical gifts and inventiveness.

GENA: Right in the beginning of the Daniel Charles book, Charles quotes Schoenberg, who said that Cage is an inventor of genius. Charles then asked Cage, "What do you invent?" He said, "I invent music, not composition." From what I can see, that's probably the most important element that the rest of you were able to grasp. There was an effect that his presence had that wasn't necessarily influential - it just caused you to feel secure about what you were doing. Like you said so many times, John's presence in what he was doing gave you permission to go ahead and do what you wanted.

FELDMAN: I think his presence depended upon many aspects of how one needs somebody like John. He could be somebody's cream on the table and he could be somebody's meat on the potatoes. Sometimes he could be...

GENA: Somebody's vinegar?

FELDMAN: Yes, I was thinking about an incident, and I don't think that Richard Lippold will be annoyed if I mention it because, actually, it was quite funny at the time. When I first met John, I moved into Bozza's mansion. It was a house down on the East River. The joke was that it was called Bozza's mansion after the landlord who treated it as if it was a mansion. All he had to do was look at his tenement house, keep it clean, and see that nice people moved into it. Anyway, during one of the first weeks that I was there, I was walking up to see if John was home. I was on the second floor and he was on the top floor and I met Richard Lippold, the sculptor, who was living next door to John. He just looked at me and said, "I'm moving. I have to get out of here. John is just too persuasive." So there's a perfect example. I'm going upstairs to hear what he had to say, not thinking of it as persuasion. Richard Lippold is running down the stairs, too persuaded. And I think that's exactly what John's relationship is - not only with society, but with his personal friends as well. I once watched Jasper Johns during a conversation at dinner with John. John had too much wine, and was saying one off-the-wall thing after another, and people didn't know how to take it. They were listening and they were confronted with some very provocative, interesting remarks. Jasper was just sitting there with that little Cheshire-cat grin on his face, enjoying this trip. He didn't feel intimidated. So it's just a question of who's walking up and who's walking down the stairs.

GENA: One took what one needed from John and there was a lot there.

FELDMAN: Maybe John Cage has to be looked at in the way T.S. Eliot said, "One takes from history what one needs." Maybe one has to learn to take from John Cage what one needs, because I think it would have been a devastating century without him. Absolutely devastating. It's shoddy enough.

GENA: One could easily understand if there was no Beethoven, there would have been someone else to take music where it had to go. It seems that you don't believe that if there wasn't a Cage that there would have been someone else to do what he did.

FELDMAN: It all depends. I think that in order to discuss Cage, every minute issue has to be brought up and we must toss our own three coins into our mind and come up with whatever oracle appears appropriate. Because it's a question of care. If one would say that John doesn't give enough care to notes, I would reply: just look at all the care he gives in creating a situation that needs the notes that he doesn't seem to care for. I mean, there is a great degree of caring. He gives more care to that particular detail than most people who feel that they care about things, but who don't really care enough. So it's a question of what you mean by what one should be concerned about. Does a lack of interest in one area show a lack of concern in another? It becomes a very complicated situation. And that's only because we're using a completely different yard stick in trying to relate his actions to actions that we are already familiar with, or that we think are a normal response to a certain type of situation. The century would have been dismal without him and I think that future music would absolutely be dismal without him.

GENA: And the future of music is still going to benefit from him.

FELDMAN: I think that it's beginning to. I think that historians will view music before John similarly to the way we look at Pythagoras. What was it like?

GENA: Right. Five hundred years from now it will be the Greeks up to Cage and then Cage and beyond.

FELDMAN: It was a kind of Grecian heritage of idealization before Cage. There's no question about it.

GENA: It's starting to happen. I think that academia is embracing a lot of what happened in yours and Cage's early careers, and maybe, in essence, it's a Renaissance of those ideas. Perhaps history is starting there and maybe I am correct in what I tell composition students that they must study the great masters - Cage, Feldman, Wolff and Brown.

FELDMAN: To bring it into context, I think my most important point is that he asked that dangerous question, "Is music an art form?" If he asked that question, then I feel he's really at the beginning of something. Now this beginning might have to sacrifice certain things. And what it really might have to sacrifice is what we would feel. The same kind of status quo between audience and performer, between musician and composer. In other words, does he keep the status quo going? Maybe he doesn't. I feel that in my life I'm trying out another option. It's not philosophy. It's the option of writing very long pieces that are very difficult to play, very difficult to hear, and have to do with the life of the piece, whatever that means and not the life of the performer, or what happens to an audience when they go hear it. I'm trying to see what happens when the work does not depend on those other very important, very rigid factors. Recently I received a call from Paul Zukofsky about writing a piece for a concert in New York dedicated to John. Shortly afterwards, a young man from New York called to announce the marathon concert in honor of John's birthday. And he asked me to participate by having a piece done. And I think I mentioned to him that I was writing a piece for Paul and Aki Takahashi as a tribute to John - a piano and violin piece. The first thing the young man asked me was how long the piece was. Now you would think that in a tribute to John Cage one wouldn't ask how long the pieces are. Right away we have the impresario. So right away I was bullied. I called up Paul and I said, "I didn't even think about it. I don't know the appropriate length. If I write a twenty-minute piece for John it will be an insult." So I decided that I couldn't really participate in this thing. I decided that I would just write the piece and see what's going to happen. I'm into about fifty minutes already and it's just getting going. Now it seems to me that an hour and a half in the whole of someone's lifetime, on such a momentous occasion as a tribute to John Cage, is not too much. But there's a very interesting problem. Am I out of bounds? It has nothing to do with me. This is a tribute to Cage. I can't help it if the piece might be an hour and twenty-five minutes. I don't mean anything egotistical about it. It's a little piece for piano and violin, but it doesn't quit. So it's very interesting, this question: "What would I write given the opportunity?" What would my music be if I didn't have to think about the performer? There are good performers - friends of mine. I don't have to think about an audience, and yet there are good audiences. In California recently I got practically a standing ovation for a very grueling hour-and-a-half string quartet. So the world is full of surprises. There are two ways of understanding the world. A Greek philosopher said that you develop a perspective either by getting closer to a thing or moving further away. I would say that in John's life he got closer to the sun and he's getting a little sunburned. And in my life, little by little with every decade, I'm leaving it, leaving it.

GENA: And it's getting colder.

FELDMAN: It's pretty chilly.

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\* Morty was referring to the "Luminists" (19th century American landscape painters who influenced abstract Expressionists such as Still and Rothko), but the word had been transcribed erroneously from the audio tape as "luminaries." It was subsequently published incorrectly in both the *TriQuarterly* and C.F. Peters editions. ([Return](#))