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## 6 Towards infinity: Cage in the 1950s and 1960s

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The 1950s and 1960s were, arguably, the most important decades of Cage's creative life. During that period, he moved in his work from determinacy to indeterminacy, from conventional notation to graphic and texted notation, from standard instrumental resources to technology and "the entire field of sound" (Cage c. 1938–40, p. 4), from music to theatre, and – in terms of performance space – from the concert hall to the world at large. He also started to engage in a serious way with words and images, and – domestically – moved from the noise and bustle of New York City to the peace and tranquility of Stony Point, in New York State. Finally, willingly or otherwise, he exchanged relative anonymity for relative notoriety, and – for the first time in his artistic life – found himself having to respond to commissions. As he put it in 1971, "Roughly I would say 1952, or perhaps 1954, [was] the turning point. Before that time, I had to make the effort to get [my work] performed. Now other people make the effort and I have to respond by travelling" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 101). Unsurprisingly therefore, given the importance of this period, many of Cage's multifarious activities of the 1950s and 1960s are subjected to detailed analysis elsewhere in this volume; consequently, the present chapter attempts not to provide a closely argued critique of particular innovations or developments, but rather to create a contextual overview within which can be placed the various facets of Cage's work discussed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

The multi-faceted broadening of Cage's artistic vision during these two decades may well have been due in part to a contemporaneous widening of his artistic contacts. Until the late 1940s he had been associated with a close-knit but relatively small group of friends and acquaintances, among the most consistent of whom were Lou Harrison, Xenia Cage, Merce Cunningham, and – to a lesser extent – Henry Cowell and Virgil Thomson. Although all were very supportive, none except Harrison and especially Cunningham provided him with sufficient intellectual stimulation to push his work forward with the same vigor that had been evident in the 1930s. Indeed, one might argue that for much of the 1940s Cage appeared contented with the pleasures of the prepared piano and/or scores for dance accompaniment. True, much of this rather focused activity arose from financial necessity (as was noted in Chapter 1) with Cage writing dance scores "at the rate of five dollars per minute of music" (Revill 1992, p. 81) in order to make

ends meet. But there is also a sense of him needing time to refine his musical language (with its structural basis in square-root form, its timbral universe defined principally by the prepared piano, and its aesthetic horizons slowly expanding to include the results of his introduction to Asian philosophy), before he was ready to take the next great leap forward in his artistic development.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, a serendipitous synchronicity of circumstances provided the necessary springboard for such an advance. First, the receipt of grants from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Guggenheim Foundation (both awarded in recognition of his work with, and for, the prepared piano) allowed Cage to spend a prolonged period in Paris. Second, while in Paris Cage became intimately acquainted with the music of two quintessentially different French composers, Erik Satie and (via an introduction from Virgil Thomson) Pierre Boulez. Both influenced his development considerably, the former musically and aesthetically, the latter arguably more concretely by providing an entrée to the emerging European avant-garde scene. Third, as a result of their work together in Paris, Cage and Cunningham decided that the latter should form his own dance company, for which Cage became musical director. And fourth, shortly after returning to New York, Cage met Morton Feldman.

### **The New York School(s)**

On January 17, 1950, only days before meeting Feldman, Cage had conveyed to Boulez some sense of his frustration at the artistic vacuum in which he was trapped: "The great trouble with our life here is the absence of an intellectual life. No one has an idea. And should one by accident get one, no one would have time to consider it" (Nattiez 1993, p. 50). Yet, only a few months afterwards, Cage had through Feldman become reacquainted with David Tudor, and had coincidentally met Christian Wolff. The earlier artistic vacuum was replaced by an invigorating new atmosphere, in which "Things were really popping all the time. Ideas just flew back and forth between us, and in a sense we gave each other permission for the new music we were discovering" (Tomkins 1976, p. 108).

Although the end results of these new contacts were primarily musical, much of the stimulus towards them actually came from the visual arts, most notably the work of the "New York School" of painters. Cage had already since the late 1940s been a member of the Artists Club, "the primary arbiter of what would be called abstract expressionism" (Jones 1993, p. 638) and spoke to the club on three occasions: two of the resulting talks were the "Lecture on Nothing" (Cage c. 1949–50) and the "Lecture on Something"

(Cage c. 1951–52). Another (similarly disaffected) member of the club was Robert Rauschenberg, whose all-white and all-black canvasses prompted Cage in 1952 to bring to fruition, as 4'33", the "Silent Prayer" he had first envisioned in 1948.<sup>2</sup> Cage and Feldman, meanwhile, found a common interest in visual art: "there was an incredible amount of talk about painting. John and I would drop in at the Cedar Bar at six in the afternoon and talk until it closed" (Zimmermann 1985, p. 37).

As detailed primarily in Chapter 11, by the time of his meeting Feldman, Cage – in works such as the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50), *Sixteen Dances* (1950–51), and *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra* (1950–51) – had already moved a considerable way towards "getting rid of [the] glue . . . so that [the] sounds would be themselves" (Cage 1959, p. 71), by freeing his music from the imposition of personal taste. The gift, from Christian Wolff, of a copy of the *I Ching* – recently published in English translation by Wolff's father – propelled Cage further along that route: "I saw immediately that the [*I Ching's* sixty-four-hexagram] chart was better than the Magic Square [used previously]" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 64); "right then and there I sketched out the whole procedure for my *Music of Changes* . . . I ran over to show the plan to Morty Feldman, who had taken a studio in the same building, and I can still remember him saying, 'You've hit it!'" (Tomkins 1976, p. 109).

Yet it was actually Feldman, rather than Cage, who took the most dramatic and decisive step away from what he considered to be the "photographically still" music and notation of the past (see Zimmermann 1985, p. 38). Some time in late December 1950 – before Cage had even started work on the *Music of Changes* – "Feldman left the room one evening, in the midst of a long conversation, and returned later with a composition on graph paper" (Tomkins 1976, p. 108). The work in question was *Projection 1* for solo cello, in which duration and timbre are specified, but precise pitch is not. Rather, relative pitch (high, medium, and low) is indicated by vertically aligned "fields." Similar graphs – including those for chamber music combinations such as the flute, trumpet, violin, cello, and piano of *Projection 2* (January 5, 1951), and the full orchestra of *Intersection 1* (February 1951) – followed in quick succession. With the arrival of Earle Brown – who, much to Feldman's chagrin, during 1952 joined what later came to be known as the "New York School" of *composers* – these graphic tendencies were pushed to their extreme. The score of Brown's *December 1952* consists of a single sheet of card, approximately A3 in size, on which are drawn a variety of lines and rectangles of different thicknesses and lengths. The sheet may be read from any of its four axes, may be played by one or more instruments and/or sound-producing media, and its performance may continue for any length of time; the score must therefore be "set in motion" by the performer(s),

whose role it is to “bring about a . . . ‘mobility’ of sound-objects in time” (Brown, quoted in Ewen 1983, p. 96).

Cage’s response to such stimuli, though not immediate, was decisive. Initially, he continued to compose using a combination of durational structures and charts of materials: the results are found in works such as *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for twelve radios (1951) and *For MC and DT* for piano (1952); subsequently, he adopted Feldman-like graphs in *Imaginary Landscape No. 5* for any forty-two phonograph records, and *Music for Carillon No. 1* (both 1952). Around this time, though, he seems to have realized the profound implications of employing chance-determined compositional procedures: durational structuring, which had been the keystone of his compositional technique since 1939, was no longer necessary; and conventional notational practices could be completely side-stepped. Thus Cage also created during the *annus mirabilis* of 1952, the “point-drawing system” of the *Music for Piano* series – which consisted solely in “observing and marking minute imperfection in the manuscript paper” (Pritchett 1993, p. 94) – and the huge (55" × 34") quasi-pictorial score of *Water Music* (see Example 6.1). In the former work, pitch and timbre are rendered precisely, but rhythm and velocity are uncontrolled (except by the decisions of the performer, and the sustaining power of the instrument being played); in the latter piece, music and theatre collide as the player – interpreting a score which is suspended in front of the audience – performs not only on a (partly prepared) piano, but also with whistles, playing cards, a radio, and water.

The connections between the two “New York Schools” are worth emphasizing at this point, however briefly. Apart from the many interpersonal relations that existed among the schools’ members – Cage was very close to Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Feldman to Philip Guston, and Brown to Jackson Pollock and Alexander Calder – there are clear parallels between their working practices. Feldman, for instance, “used to work by putting his manuscripts on the wall so that he could step back and look at them the way an artist looks at a picture” (Patterson 1994, p. 72), while Brown actively pursued both “the dynamic and ‘free’ look of the work . . . of Pollock” and Calder’s “idea . . . of making ‘two or more objects find actual relation in space’” (Ewen 1983, p. 96).<sup>3</sup> Cage, meanwhile, made frequent reference to the “New York School” painters in particular, and to other visual artists (and their techniques) in general. For instance, he shared with Pollock an interest in Navaho sand painting, as is evinced by the title of his 1949 Artists Club talk – “Indian Sand Painting or The Picture that is Valid for One Day” – and a contemporaneous article in *the Tiger’s Eye* (Cage 1949); as has already been noted, the final committing to paper of 4’33” was fired by the example of Rauschenberg, concerning whom he later wrote at least two celebratory texts; and he also likened the manner of composition employed in

Example 6.1 John Cage, *Water Music* (1952)

RADIO AT 102.5  
(DYNAMICS CHANGED AT DISCRETION OF PLAYER  
WITHIN RANGE OF 5 AND 6)

2.15  
DUCK WHISTLE IN  
BOWL OF WATER  
(AS LONG AS BREATH LASTS—  
NOT NOT RHYTHM 52.5)

1.00  
1.185

1.20  
1.25  
1.30-1.35  
WATER

2.195  
SLAM KEYBOARD LID SHUT (mf) (PERC.)  
SHUFFLE DECK OF CARDS; DEAL  
INTO PIANO STRINGS: (ALL THIS  
AS RAPIDLY AS POSSIBLE)

2.4825  
2.5475  
3.02  
3.0425  
3.0825  
TUNE RADIO  
TO 88

3.2175  
(RE PERC MUST BE  
FINISHED BY THIS  
TIME)

3.33  
3.43  
3.47  
3.4975  
3.505  
TUNE RADIO  
TO 102 AND  
THEN OFF

4.0075  
4.03  
4.0375

4.4875  
4.5675  
4.5975  
4.5825  
POUR WATER FROM ONE  
RECEPTACLE TO AN-  
OTHER AND BACK  
AGAIN  
GRADUALLY CHANGE  
RADIO TO 125 (FAST; SLOWER)

4.7425; 4.7975  
RADIO  
ON/TX  
5 TO 135  
(DYNAMICS 5-6)

5.4525  
5.5025  
5.5825  
5.5825  
POUR  
WATER FROM  
ONE RECEPTACLE  
TO ANOTHER

6.0275  
6.05  
DUCK WHISTLE  
GRADUALLY INTO  
WATER

6.215  
SIREN WHISTLE

6.3025  
6.40  
TURN  
RADIO  
OFF

the extended *Music for Piano* series (1952–56) to working with water colors (as opposed to the oils of *Williams Mix*) (Cage 1981, p. 44). But there is also a further connection: Cage's scores had always been miracles of calligraphic beauty, but with the exhibiting, in 1958 at the Stable Gallery, of individual

pages from the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58) as works of art in their own right, Cage made a significant step towards the creation of the prints and other visual media discussed in Chapter 7.

## **Stony Point**

The “New York School” of composers – as a physical entity – was in fact short-lived: “the appearance of Earle Brown on the scene infuriated . . . Feldman” to the point where “the closeness that I had had with Morty and David and Christian was disrupted” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 14). Subsequently, a discussion concerning Boulez – who was criticized by Feldman but supported by Brown – led to a major blow-up. During 1952, Feldman left the “Bozza Mansion” on Monroe Street, where both he and Cage lived, for Washington Square; Christian Wolff had already started his studies at Harvard; and in the following year, Cage was evicted from Bozza Mansion prior to its demolition. His eventual destination, along with David Tudor and several other colleagues, was an artistic community founded by ex-Black Mountain College student Paul Williams – dedicatee of *Williams Mix* (1952) – at Stony Point in Rockland County, New York State.

Cage moved to Stony Point in August 1954 and remained there until the late 1960s; the effects on both his lifestyle and his work were large scale and unexpected. As noted in Chapter 1, Cage was fundamentally a child of the city – whether Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York – which heretofore had provided him with both a multiplicity of artistic stimuli and a surprising degree of privacy and quietude. Suddenly, however, “I found myself living in small quarters with four other people, and I was not used to such a lack of privacy, so I took to walking in the woods . . . in Stony Point, I discovered that I was starved for nature” (Kostelanetz 1988, pp. 15–16). To paraphrase the fourth-century poet Lu Yun, Cage’s cottage became a universe,<sup>4</sup> as the “accidental sounds” highlighted two years earlier by *4'33"* became the *musique d’ameublement* of his new home: Ninette Lyon wrote of “the only melodies in [the] sparsely furnished two-room cabin [being] the creaking of a big white hammock, [and] the muffled sound of bare feet on cocoa matting” (quoted in Kostelanetz 1971, p. 153), while Cage himself noted in 1974 that “the sounds of the environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall” (quoted in Kostelanetz 1988, p. 65). Less (or perhaps more) serious was his view twenty years previously, not long after the move to Stony Point:

I have spent many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece, transcriptions, that is, for an audience of myself, since they were much longer than the popular length which I have had

published. At one performance, I passed the first movement by attempting the identification of a mushroom . . . The second movement was extremely dramatic, beginning with the sounds of a buck and a doe leaping up to within ten feet of my rocky podium.<sup>5</sup>

No wonder, then, that in 1967 Cage should have become so drawn to the work of Henry David Thoreau (see Chapter 8), nor that it became a cornerstone of his aesthetic once he returned to the city.

Among the original attractions of moving to Stony Point was Paul Williams's intention that it would serve as a base for Cage's long-wished-for center for experimental music. In the event, nothing came of this; but one significant facet of Cage's work over the next decade was its increasing interaction with electronic media. Thus, following on from *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and *Water Music*, he wrote a series of works involving radios: these include *Speech* 1955, *Radio Music* (1956), and *Music Walk* (1958). Complementing these are two television pieces – *Water Walk* and *Sounds of Venice* (both 1959) – several tape works, such as *Fontana Mix* (1958), *Music for "The Marrying Maiden"* (1960), and *Rozart Mix* (1965), and a sequence of compositions involving amplification and/or assorted audio-visual devices, most notably *Cartridge Music* (1960), *0'00"* (1962), various of the *Variations* series, *Reunion* (1968), and *HPSCHD* (1967–69). Many of these projects were brought to fruition in locations other than Stony Point – *Fontana Mix*, for instance, was created (at the invitation of Luciano Berio) at the Studio di Fonologia in Milan, and *HPSCHD* at the University of Illinois – but there is a sense in which the particular ambience of Cage's country home may have encouraged him in "reaching out" from Stony Point, both literally and metaphorically, in this case via electricity.

Indeed, there are parallels to this "reaching out" in other contemporaneous areas of Cage's activity. The bustle of New York City had provided him with relatively few opportunities to work elsewhere; yet removed to the isolation of Stony Point, invitations began to flood in, whether to festivals in Europe (see Chapter 2) or residencies in American universities and colleges. Similarly, 1961 saw both the publication of Cage's first (and most influential) collection of writings, *Silence* (Cage 1961), and his signing of an exclusive publishing contract with the Henmar Press, part of the C. F. Peters Corporation. Finally, Cage's work began to influence younger composers, including the Fluxus group, and Nam June Paik.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the electronic pieces mentioned above, two further series of works were largely conceived and executed during this period. The first was the never-completed group collectively titled "The Ten Thousand Things" (see Pritchett 1993, pp. 95–109). Each is for a solo instrument, and has a title defining a precise duration – examples include *26' 1.1499" for a string player* (1953–55), the pair of works for prepared piano discussed in Chapter 2, and



27' 10.554" for a percussionist (1956). Cage's overall plan was to "compose many independent pieces for various media, each of which could be played as a self-contained work in its own right, or performed together with any number of the others" (Pritchett 1993, p. 96). The notation for these works is often complex, and points towards the virtuosity of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*.

But while "The Ten Thousand Things" are essentially traditional (albeit very demanding) concert works, the remaining series includes pieces that "do not describe events in either a determinate or indeterminate way, but which instead present a procedure by which to *create* any number of such descriptions or scores" (Pritchett 1993, p. 126); many are implicitly (if not explicitly) theatrical. Thus in *Variations I* (1958), the materials consist of several transparent squares notated with either points or lines, which are superimposed in order to produce "readings" of notational data. *Theatre Piece* (1960), meanwhile, requires that each of its performers make a collection of verbs and nouns, these serving as the raw data that are placed within individual time-bracketed scores. Given the potential dangers of up to eight individuals carrying out asynchronous actions within a confined space, Cage – ever the pragmatist – wisely instructs that "a rehearsal will have the purpose of removing physically dangerous obstacles [including, one might add from experience, other performers] that may arise due to the unpredictability involved."

Perhaps the most radical of these works – and the one that relates most closely to the idea of the cottage becoming a universe – is *Variations IV* (1963). The work is designated as being "for any number of players, any sounds or combinations of sounds produced by any means, with or without other activities" and can be performed anywhere – concert hall, theatre, apartment, open space, cave. Thus, where 4'33" had in 1952 liberated ambient sound, and 0'00" had a decade later achieved the same for everyday gesture, *Variations IV* goes the whole hog in liberating *everything*. The materials provided by Cage do not enable the performers to specify substance (i.e., sonic material), but rather the means by which the spatial sources of such substance may be determined. Thirty years previously, Charles Seeger (himself the teacher of Henry Cowell) had coined the term complete heterophony to describe "a polyphony in which there is no relation between the parts except mere proximity in time-space, beginning and ending, within hearing of each other, at more or less the same time," further noting that "Heterophony may be accidental, as, for instance, a radio-reception of Beethoven's 'Eroica' intruded upon by a phonograph record of a Javanese gamelan" (Seeger 1933, p. 111). In Cage's own recorded performance of the work's première – and it is important to acknowledge that Cage's performance practice is a vital element in helping us to understand

the intention in many of his pieces – there is extensive use not only of amplified ambient sounds (of street, audience, and radio), but also of discs of a wide variety of extant musics. We never hear “Beethoven . . . intruded upon by . . . Javanese gamelan” as such; but Schubert intruded upon by Japanese shamisen music comes convincingly close.<sup>7</sup>

\*

To a considerable degree, *Variations IV* is not just the “kitchen-sink sonata, the everything piece, the minestrone masterpiece of modern music” jocularly described by Eric Salzman (quoted in Kostelanetz 1971, p. 150). Rather, it is in addition both a McLuhanesque example of what Salzman called “instant communication with the entire experiential world, [in which] our nervous systems are extended [and receive] messages from every corner of the global village” (quoted in Kostelanetz 1971, p. 151) and – less optimistically – the end of conventional music history, in that it can both contain everything that has existed previously, and predict everything that is yet to come. In this context, it is therefore unsurprising that so much else of Cage’s music from the later 1960s (the remaining *Variations* pieces, *Musicircus*, and *HPSCHD*) might seem like partial regurgitations of *Variations IV*; nor that Cage himself, in the “Foreword” to *A Year from Monday*, confided that “I am less and less interested in music” (Cage 1967, p. ix). At times, like Earle Brown following the composition of *December 1952*, he must have wondered what else, musically, there was that he could achieve. As Brown had put it, “The extremely high degree of . . . freedom . . . seemed to be as far as I could go in that direction” (Brown 1974). Indeed, as is discussed in Chapter 8, it was only in 1969 that Cage found a new way of navigating through the infinite space he had opened out six years earlier; and again, there is a direct parallel to Brown’s experience, in that the breakthrough came through a kind of compromise, for “the notational and performance process discoveries were applied to [later] works in a far more normal compositional way . . .” (Brown 1974). In both cases, though, the ability to move forward creatively and with new vigor from an apparent impasse is major testament to the composers’ inventiveness and imagination.