



# Necrologies

## John Milton Cage, 1912–1992

William W. Austin

*The outpouring of obituaries after John Cage's death at New York City August 12, 1992, gave testimony to the enormous impact of his personality, philosophy and performance skills. September, October, and December issues of The Music Index contained lists of more than twenty periodicals ranging from Österreichische Musik Zeitschrift, 47/9 (September), 552–553, to Rolling Stone, no. 640 (October 1), 21, that treated him as an incomparably influential thinker and doer.*

*What aspect of his career none of the obituaries paid tribute to was his musical scholarship. William W. Austin's assessment strikes out on a path not trod in any other obituary, and therefore serves as IAMR's tribute to the sole Los Angeles-born musician who has thus far won world renown.*

SCHOLARLY MUSICIANS are acquainted with some parts of the work of John Cage, enough to back up their opinions about him as a composer, or as poet or inventor or performer. Might they go so far as to consider him, for a moment, as a fellow scholar?

Cage set aside his own opinions to do a scholarly investigation of the music of Virgil Thomson, which was eventually published as supplement to the biography of Thomson by Kathleen Hoover (New York, 1959). Cage studied all Thomson's music, published and unpublished. He described it disinterestedly. Quietly, he demolished opinions of earlier critics, formed on the basis of more fragmentary knowl-

edge. Cage enabled anyone interested in Thomson to save time in arriving at his own opinion, better founded. Though the old biased opinions continued to circulate, Cage expressed no further concern. Up to 1978, he undertook no other work of music scholarship closely comparable to this. Yet even though he devoted no sustained attention to any such subject again, his work on Thomson is characteristic of the mind that can be recognized in many of Cage's later writings.

Cage's interest in mushrooms is too well known and characteristic to require comment. This interest he sustained through decades spent in the woods and in the kitchen. His book-learning about mushrooms coördinates with his unbookish life. The coördination enabled him to compete with full-time experts in identifying mushrooms on a series of television shows in Italy: Cage won first prize.

His long-standing devotion to Erik Satie, made known through his many performances of Satie's music and his own "cheap imitations," as he called them, resulted also in writings on Satie that although scattered, show a scholarly instinct too little recognized. In fact, Cage anticipated any critic or full-time scholar in efforts to collect the complete works of Satie and understand them as a whole. After finding a few pieces thought to have been lost, he edited them for publication. He was quick and sure in distinguishing between primary sources and dazzling



secondary ones such as Jean Cocteau's writings on Satie. Although his own remarks on Satie may be "dazzling" too, a close look at them shows more caution than Cocteau's. Any close observer should recognize in Cage's considerable work on Satie the marks of excellent scholarly criticism.

Cage's early preference for Schoenberg over Stravinsky remains famous, along with Schoenberg's judgment that Cage, who studied with him briefly (1935-37), was an "interesting thinker but no musician." But when Cage wrote a review of Schoenberg's letters, in 1965 (included in his volume of collected writings, *A Year from Monday*, Middletown, 1967), he not only read and reread the letters but reviewed his memories, reconsidered Schoenberg's music and his teaching, and formulated a mature, sympathetic, understated criticism. Between the lines, a critic with like sympathy for Cage can read that he had been developing his understanding and judgment of Schoenberg's whole work through thirty years and more, always respecting matters of historical fact and using new factual information as it came along to refine his understanding and judgment.

In the historical views of several scholars such as Gilbert Chase, Wiley Hitchcock, Wilfred Mellers, Peter Dickinson, and William Brook, Cage is linked with Charles Ives. But what were Cage's own views of Ives? In 1965 he responded to questions, confessing that he had thus far never studied the music of Ives; he explained why in the 1930's he had not shared his teacher Henry Cowell's great interest in Ives, and why in the 1950's he had at last become interested, although not yet enough to study the music. He referred one questioner to the scholarly work of a younger composer-conductor-theorist, James Tenney. Like Ives, Cage found the works of Thoreau worth reflection and development. But unlike Ives, Cage checked the sources and brought to light neglected drawings in the manuscripts. In all his quotations from Thoreau he demonstrated scholarly care.

Around 1950 Cage studied the music of several younger composers—though he was then devoting more study to dance, to painting, and to religion. He offered brief accounts of the works of Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Pierre Boulez, in each case showing rare precision and modest insight.

His interest in younger men's work continued, not vigorously enough to warrant similar studies, so far as he ever indicated in public, but enough to result in sober factual references scattered through his writings. He avoided expressing the kind of guesses that historians and journalists feel obliged to make. If in private he made such guesses, they may eventually be generally valuable, even when mistaken, as clues to the history of Cage's whole mind, his complex activity, and his wide influence.

Though prudently reserved about individuals, Cage was bold in some of his sweeping statements about historical trends, past and future. Such statements naturally attract more attention than his scholarly restraint, and sometimes such statements are quoted out of context, even by scholars. Among such statements is one that appears to condemn the whole history of European music: "European music made a crucial mistake: the separation of composition, performance, and listening." In context, it is clear that Cage did not claim that every European made this mistake—only that it was rarer in other parts of the world. Many European musicians agree. A scholar can agree, especially perhaps if his focus of interest is European music history. Another provocative statement, which might seem to set Cage in opposition to scholarship, is: "One has to put a stop to studying music." Again, in its context, in *A Year from Monday*, Cage clearly means that anyone who finds study confusing should pause long enough to look ahead for some possibly desirable outcome. He continues, "there is all the time in the world for studying music, but for living there is scarcely any time at all." In another context within the same volume he says, "You must study. When you study, do you study a thing or do you study with someone? Could you do it alone or would you have to have a teacher whose disciple you'd become?"

A loyal and grateful pupil of several teachers, Cage was a disciple of none. He often acknowledged his debts to Schoenberg, Cowell, Suzuki, McLuhan, Fuller, Duchamp, David Tudor, and others. But he did not claim to represent their doctrines or any older ones. He remained always a critical thinker, continually learning.

The tradition of musical scholarship, if it does not eventually disintegrate or atrophy, will do well to coöpt John Cage.