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WHISTLING
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ROBERT MORRIS

The Whistling Blackbird



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The Whistling Blackbird

Essays and Talks on New Music

ROBERT MORRIS



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I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

—Wallace Stevens

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Preface

I began composing when I was eight years old and have always thought of myself as a composer. I studied at the Eastman School (1961–65) and at the University of Michigan, where I received a DMA in composition with a cognate in ethnomusicology in 1969. Although I received good and useful instruction in composition from my teachers, I was almost completely self-taught—by listening to music, studying scores, reading advanced literature on music, and above all, composing almost every day. As my compositional interests evolved from writing contemporary music influenced by Bartók, Stravinsky, and Hindemith to music influenced by Indian classical music—as Cowell, Cage, and Hovhaness had also attempted to compose—to absorbing the techniques and aesthetics of European serial music, and to composing scores that included optionary forms and improvisation, certain compositional problems came to my attention. My solution was to invent compositional techniques to solve them. This took me momentarily away from my scores into a more abstract world of musical thought. By the time I finished my graduate training, I had experimented with various formal compositional techniques I invented or adapted from the music of composers such as Boulez, Stockhausen, Brown, and Cage.

When I went on to teach at Yale University in 1969, I came in contact with the work of the first generation of American professional music theorists, since Allen Forte was on the faculty and had established in the graduate school one of the first PhD programs in music theory. To my surprise, I found that his set theory was more or less isomorphic to the system of classifying and relating sonorities I had come into contact with at Eastman in 1963. Thus, it was possible for me to understand and be influenced by the most up-to-date writings on twentieth-century music. This not only led me to invent and employ similar sophisticated compositional methods, but also resulted in a resurgence of my interest in non-Western music, a preoccupation that had already been stimulated by my studies of Indian and other world musics at Michigan. As a result, I found myself writing technical articles that were eventually published in scholarly journals.¹ My compositional work never flagged during this time; in fact it was nourished by these new researches. I also taught myself electronics and acoustics when I was appointed director of the Yale Electronic Studio in 1972. Wayne Slawson helped guide my understanding of linguistics and psychoacoustics during my Yale years, and I was influenced by my interactions with a young computer programmer

interested in composition, Daniel Starr. Starr and I wrote two articles on twelve-tone theory in 1973–75. By the time these articles had been published, I was reputed to be a music theorist. And in the late 1970s, in order to live up to that designation, I studied the music theory literature of the time, learned how to program a computer, and studied (or sometimes reinvented) the mathematics necessary to do advanced work.²

When I returned to Eastman to teach in 1980, I enjoyed a joint appointment in music composition and theory until 1998, at which time I moved over to the composition department full-time. From the 1980s on, my interests widened in ways I would not have predicted earlier. I began to seriously read Indian and Chinese philosophy and religion; this led to an increasing interest in the music, art, and poetry of the Far East, and a vital appreciation of nature and the outdoors. Hiking became a passion for many years. My early interests in Indian music and graduate school training in ethnomusicology came of age, and I began publishing articles on Indian music in mid-1990s. I have since traveled to India many times, doing research on the Carnatic music of South India. Nevertheless, I have continued to compose while pursuing these new interests and publishing books and articles in music theory.

This book is arranged into three parts preceded by an “overture” that attempts to spell out what American composers like me encounter in today’s postmodern world. The parts include essays on composers, talks on my music, and essays on criticism and aesthetics, respectively. At the beginning of each essay and talk, I have added some background information, including anecdotal and autobiographical remarks.

Most of the essays are reprints of articles that have appeared in various music journals, some revised or rewritten to make them more comprehensible and readable. The talks on my music are based on notes or texts from which I lectured in various compositional seminars and workshops over the past thirty years. There is some overlap among these texts that I have not attempted to diminish so they may remain self-contained, as they were in their original contexts; besides, a little redundancy never hurts comprehension. The various technical discussions found here and there in the essays on composers and the talks on my music are bolstered by four appendices.

In the overture, I try to locate my work within the vast diversity of music available to the listener today. I also suggest that it is useful to consider the different musics of our time and in history as different musical languages. This helps to explain why different musics are not immediately understood and adequately appreciated or criticized.

Part 1, on composers, reprints articles I have written on John Cage, Milton Babbitt, Stefan Wolpe, and Richard Swift.³ The first three composers have profoundly influenced me; I wouldn’t be the composer I am without them. I’ve included the piece on Richard Swift’s orchestral song *Roses Only* partly because it balances the Babbitt piece. I included these four essays because in them—unlike in my more academic, “objective” writing in music criticism and especially

analysis—I have not excluded myself from the discourse. Indeed, my motivation for writing these essays was a desire to reveal what these composers and their music has meant to me as a composer and musical thinker.

Each of the six talks on my music in part 2 discusses a different composition or a set of works. The progression roughly follows the dates of the pieces. However, the first talk is of a recent piece (2006), *Each Time* for piano solo, and it is first because it describes my compositional poetics and working methods in some detail; it therefore introduces the reader to the more invariant features of my musical world. The talk on *Not Lilacs* was given in 1974 at Yale. This composition was a breakthrough piece for me, as I tell in my Babbitt article. The talks on *Cold Mountain Songs* (1993), and *Fourteen Little Piano Pieces* (2002) illustrate some of the contrasting ways I have conceived of my music and its semantics. The last of the talks, on my music meant to be performed outdoors, was written for inclusion in this book, but some of it recasts previously published writings or program notes.

Four essays on critical and aesthetic topics comprise the last of the three parts. The first paper, “Aspects of Confluence between Western Art Music and Ethnomusicology,” appeared in 1995. It documents certain trends in twentieth-century composition that historically and ideologically align with the development of ethnomusicological research in the United States. “Musical Form, Expectation, Attention, and Quality” describes my conception of music experience as dynamic flow, in distinction to the traditional idea that characterizes “form” as a series of musical things arranged to make musical sense. This theme of “process” is found in several places in other parts of this book, but here it is most clearly stated with some of its consequences for listening and appreciating music.⁴ My “Autocommentary: Thoughts on Music Theory at the Millennium” shows how music theory can—and I believe should be—considered part and parcel of music criticism. It attempts to heal the lesion that opened in the 1980s between American musicology and music theory, and to suggest that the fact/value dichotomy is as bankrupt in music discourse as it is in scholarship and science of all kinds. The last essay on aspects of the phenomenology of musical time, written for this book, but based on some previous lectures and writings, is clearly indebted to Buddhist philosophy—distinguished from mysticism—as it has developed over the last two thousand years in India, China, Tibet, and Japan.

The appendixes contain materials that are necessary to completely follow some of the technical passages in this book. The reader may also wish to visit my Web site and download various files, especially the one named “Composition Tutorial.” This text presents what is known as “set theory” from a compositional perspective for those who have not studied the theory of atonal and other post-tonal musics. The reader might want to follow up this tutorial by reading my article “K-, Kh-, and Beyond,”⁵ or my book *Composition with Pitch-Classes: A Theory of Compositional Design*.⁶

Robert Morris
December 2009

Acknowledgments

Since this book encompasses a compositional career of over forty years, it is impossible to thank all the people who have influenced my development. Certainly my teachers and students have had an important role in focusing my awareness on technical and aesthetic issues; I thank them all for their support and criticism, and, in many cases, for important and insightful conversations and email exchanges. I am especially grateful to a number of long-time musical friends: Benjamin Boretz, Martin Brody, George Cacioppo, Dora Hanninen, Ellen Koskoff, Andrew Mead, David Mott, Ciro Scotto, Wayne Slawson, and Richard Swift. So much has been shared with these wonderful people, and, in many senses, this book is dedicated to them.

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Overture

Some Issues Facing the Contemporary American Composer

What does it mean to say, “I am an American composer”? At the time of this writing—eight years into the twenty-first century—this seemingly simple assertion is fraught with ambiguity. Consider the word “American.” First of all, “America” usually stands for the United States, not all of the Western hemisphere.¹ Apart from the fact that I might not have been born in the United States (which is the case) or that I am not a United States citizen (which is not the case), being an American composer could mean many different—even conflicting—things. For what is American music? Is it music in the styles of Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, or Leonard Bernstein? Or is it jazz, “America’s classical music,” according to former President Bill Clinton? Perhaps it means American folk or popular music—country and western, rock, hip-hop, or “alternative music.” Does it include or exclude the music of Central and South America? It might mean, to people living in Africa and Asia, American pop and movie music—one aspect of globalization. Even if we confine American music to that which has its origin in the “classical music” of Europe, American music denotes music meant to be played not only in concert halls but in other venues as well, as in electronic and computer music, installations, and via media such as CDs, DVDs, and video. The term “American” has other ambiguities. If I distinguish American music from European music, I might single out musical innovations founded in America such as eclecticism, chance music, and minimalism, in contrast to some fairly traditional features of European music such as architectonic forms and program music. Moreover, when a nationality is affixed to “music,” the resulting label may mean different things. On one hand, if the nationality is German, French, or Italian, the music is presumed to be art music, distinguished by mild forms of chauvinism. On the other, if it is Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, English, or Spanish music, there is a presumption that it blends aspects of classical music per se with the local “vernacular” music of a particular country or region. In the case of American music, it is not clear which of these two uses applies.

The mass media have defined (presumably commercially viable) music as a set of over forty market niches including such categories as “show tunes,” “easy listening,” “arena rock,” “dance,” and “smooth jazz”—all of them presumably American. What I do as a composer would have to be included in one or more of three of these niches: “classical masterpieces,” “light classical,” and “opera.” Unlike other niches, which contain repertoires of music spanning at most a few decades, the “classical masterpiece” niche—or simply “classical music”—includes music spanning over a thousand years. Of course, “classical music” generally means concert music composed in the West from about 1600 to today, but recently it has often come to denote music composed only up to the beginning of the twentieth century, leaving out music identified as neoclassic, post-tonal, modern, postmodern, to mention only a few trends. This limitation reflects the tastes not only of conservative music lovers who find twentieth-century music unpleasant and difficult, but also of some professional musicians who avoid performing, practicing, and teaching new music.

Much more could be said about what “American music” is or might be, but let us turn to the term “composer.” Sixty years ago, before the birth of rock ‘n’ roll and the American folk music revival, “composition” was distinct from “songwriting” and “arranging.” At that time, to say someone was a composer was to say he made music in the same way as the nineteenth-century European classical composers: writing it out in music notation, expecting it to be played without improvisation by any combination of specified vocalists or instrumentalists. Songwriters such as Irving Berlin did not have to possess the musical skills associated with music notation; they created popular tunes using their own lyrics or those of others. Arrangers took the songs of songwriters or jazz musicians and wrote them out for various ensembles to play. Arrangers would be responsible for the orchestration, textures, extended harmonies, et cetera, that enhanced and often transformed a simple song into a sophisticated composition. Of course, some songwriters were also arrangers and composers, as was George Gershwin. A similar division of labor is found in composing music for film today. The “film composer” will decide on the musical character and features for a film and compose the basic musical continuity, with “orchestrators” filling in details of texture, harmony, and instrumentation loosely specified by the film composer. However, a film composer usually starts out as an orchestrator, so she is well-versed in all the musical skills that result in the product.² Rock and pop music follow this kind of model as well; what is heard on a CD results from the work of many creative musicians, not just the efforts of the “composer.” As a result, the term “composer” has become associated in the popular mind with the creation of tunes and lyrics, rather than with its broader meaning. Alternatively, it may be assumed that the composer of pop or film music has composed all the lovely particulars found in the arrangements.

I don’t want to imply that the composer of words and tunes who does not use musical notation cannot compose music of great sophistication and nuance.

If we turn to the classical music of South India, where the term *vaggeyakara* denotes a composer of text and music, celebrated *vaggeyakaras* such as Tyagaraja, Muthusvami Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri composed, without the aid of musical notation, highly complex, architectonic compositions often lasting ten minutes or more. In any case, my point is that the term “American composer” has become associated with many different creative activities. So in order to avoid confusion and to bestow credit where credit is due, I shall use the term “composer” in the older sense, distinguishing it from songwriter, arranger, and orchestrator, all of whose activities are within the ken of a competent composer.

But to say that my activities as an American composer are the same as those of composers in Europe in the nineteenth century would be quite misleading. Most composers before around 1800 wrote music in established styles and musical structures, sometimes, but not necessarily, introducing novel variations and local innovations in tonality, orchestration, and form. Most of these composers had scant knowledge of the music of their own past. It wasn’t until the nineteenth century that music scholars began to unearth, study, and publish editions of music from as far back as the tenth century. Until about the middle of the twentieth century, composers were also performers and improvisers of considerable ability; at present, there are well-known composers who do not or cannot publicly perform. However, today’s concert-music composers, whether conservative or radical, are expected to know much about music history, musical structure, and what used to be the infrastructure of music and the music profession. By infrastructure, I mean the acoustics and formal systems underlying musical timbre, form, and process as well as the promotion, publishing, and recording of one’s compositions. Today’s composers are also expected to be imaginative, and establish their own “voice” and perhaps even more: to establish a new musical style or language involving new sounds, modes of progression and social/semantic meanings. Most of the major composers in the twentieth century are celebrated for such innovations, which have resulted in a plethora of contrasting styles and techniques. This lack of musical contextuality has made it difficult for the musical public to keep up with modern music, further complicating what we mean by music, American or otherwise.

However, despite these difficulties, the informed musical public has often accepted all of these innovations to some extent, sometimes reveling in the sheer diversity of musical experiences available in this niche within a niche.³ After all, the worlds of art, architecture, poetry, and drama have also undergone similar transformations and development. What many people don’t realize is that diversity within and among the arts and letters is much greater than supposed. This is often seen as a difficulty for a number of reasons, which I won’t recount here. But our knowledge of what is out there in music is supplemented by access to the Internet and World Wide Web. Using these resources, motivated individuals can locate and learn about the many directions available in serious music today.

The term “composer” contrasts with two other terms—“performer” and “listener.” These three are often interconnected in a communication chain from composer to listener, via performer. In this scheme music comes from the composer, is channeled and elaborated by the performer, and is “consumed” by the listener. The chain can be hierarchized so the composer—the original source of the musical “product”—is on top. Or the listener can be on top, since the listener “pays” the composer and performer for their services; before the rise of public performances for large audiences, the church, the state, or the wealthy nobility patronized performers and composers. Or the performer can be on top, as the locus where the music is brought to life as sound.

Despite the ubiquity of this scheme, it is highly misleading, and greatly oversimplifies musical experience. For instance, the category of listener includes the performer and composer, both in the act of composition and performance as well as when such musicians simply listen to music. (Of course, the terms “audience” or “patron” may be used to identify listeners who are not performers or composers.) But listening is not passive if one is attending to music; each listener is hearing different aspects of the same sound stimulus, determined by the skills, experience, and knowledge she or he brings to the music. And the performer is no mere conduit through which the composer’s specifications are converted into sound. Indeed, the performer not only brings the music to life but also personalizes the music, often through a unique way of hearing and responding to the specifications provided by the composer’s score.⁴ This is an act of creation, and sometimes it surpasses the creativity of the composer, as when the composer’s music is highly derivative, mediocre, or less than interesting in its own right. And the composer does not create music *ex nihilo*, but makes new music based on the experiences he has received in performing, listening, and studying the music of other composers, current and past.

John Cage once asked what composition, performance, and listening have to do with each other. In asking this question, he implied that the three activities could be totally independent of each other. My view is the opposite, that they are actually all aspects of one activity, interpretation—that is, making sense and sensibility out of music. Both Cage and I negate the communication chain.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the division of labor between composing music and playing or singing it. When the composer is the performer, new contingencies arise. Returning to our songwriter, she may be able to perform her music without writing it down. If so, the term “songwriter” is no longer apt, and I will use the term “performer-composer.” There may be no need for an arranger to “set” the music of performer-composers. Moreover, performer-composers can collaborate in ways that composers cannot; some communications between performer-composers are accomplished entirely in rehearsal, without any notation, and nevertheless result in compositions of scope and particularity. Today’s composers of either European or American art music are not necessarily performer-composers, although those who are not may perform their own or

other composers' music.⁵ However, two hundred years ago composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann, Chopin, and most others were also performer-composers who improvised music. This intimate connection of composition and performance meant that scores would not have to specify all musical details in order to be suitably interpreted. Via various informal performance practices that supplemented music notation, performers supplied appropriate dynamics, articulation, ornamentation, and time deviations to the notes and rhythms designated in the score.⁶ This aspect of performance practice continued into the twentieth century, but after World War II, new music called such practices into question in a number of ways I will address in a moment.

In order to deal more adequately with the relations between composition and performance, I will make a distinction between structural and articulative music dimensions. Structural dimensions are those that give the music unity and coherence; articulative dimensions provide music with diversity and character. In short, the "logic" of music depends on the structural dimensions, and its expressive or emotional features depend on the articulative dimensions.⁷ Two hundred years ago, pitch and rhythm largely determined the structural dimensions, while dynamics, enunciation (diction), and tone color were articulative. Since musical scores of that time contained few specifications for performance outside of those for pitch and time, almost all the articulative dimensions were left to the performer or composer/performer.⁸

As music entered the nineteenth century and Romanticism took hold, compositions were taken to be the emotional expression of their composers. As a result, composers began to notate the articulative dimensions in the score, no longer leaving these to the discretion of performers, nor to be determined by older, superannuated performance practices. This change occurred rather smoothly, for, as I've said, composers of that time were also performer-composers. As a result, music became more personal, but also more difficult to play, because so many more details were explicitly notated in the score. Scores became filled with specifications of tone color, accents and other articulation marks, tempo changes, details of rubato, and written-out ornamentation and texture. By the twentieth century, the composer routinely specified both structural and articulative dimensions in her scores, with little room for improvisation or interpretative response. New demands were made on the performer, since the compounding of complex and subtle articulative features was quite difficult to master, and the inclusion of these elements in notation led to an increasing emphasis on technical and expressive virtuosity.

In the period after World War II, the relation between performers and composers began to change in a number of different ways. The demands of serial and aleatoric scores became so daunting that only a very few performers could do them justice.⁹ Chance, statistical composition, and indeterminacy—which both resembled and contrasted with improvisation in jazz and other musics—provided new functions for the performer. New notations were invented to

enable these new roles for performers. Composers also began to make music in which no performer was necessary, as in electronic music.

The division between composer and performer became permeable and sometimes nonexistent; thus, the performer-composer role returned to Western art music with a new vitality in a new realm of expression. Nevertheless, many composers, both conservative and radical, have continued to write music in scores for performers to play. In some of these scores, special notations indicate passages that the performer must complete or interpret. This has resulted in a number of interrelated performance practices for playing and interpreting new music.

In light of these reflections on what a composer is and has been, the meaning of our first sentence, “I am an American composer,” is vast and complex, intertwined in the vagaries and proprieties of cultural and musical history. So when a composer is asked, “What is your music like?” she is confronted by a sea of contingency. It will not do to say, “Well, have you heard Stravinsky [or Takemitsu, or John Adams, or any other twentieth-century composer]?” First of all, the questioner may not know of any composers of twentieth-century music. You might refer to various movie music scores or composers, but the experience of these is not a firsthand experience of twentieth-century composition, because such scores are already imitations of new music, and have a rigid semiotic function.¹⁰ Second, an attempt to give a technical description, no matter how simple, will probably fall on deaf ears. To try to make analogies with popular music will also fail, for all the reasons I’ve enumerated above. But most important, to be asked to characterize one’s own music by referring to other music is to deny its agency and singularity. The question asks you to show how your music “fits into” the “real” or someone else’s world, whereas you may consider your music to create worlds or go beyond any particular orientation, into freedom.

Of course, the way out is simple: provide an example of one’s work. In the past, you would have had to drag your questioner into a concert hall, or sit down at a piano and play. Today, I can take out my iPod, hand the earbuds over and say, “Listen.” Presumably, if the person is open to something new and different, the question will be answered well enough.

Unfortunately, that presumption does not often hold true unless the music is pretty much within the orbit of some well-regarded or established musical tradition. Some typical responses to more challenging music include: “You call that music?”; “It’s interesting, but I don’t know what to think of it—I can’t even remember it”; “It’s strange, but strangely moving”; “I love the way that birdcall [or siren, or wiggly, etc.] section sounded”; “I see you are calling into question everything I know about music”; “I’m sorry, but I’m not smart [or musical or weird] enough to understand this”; “I love the way your music goes against the grain”; and so forth. While some of these responses aren’t negative, they all seem to miss what was composed, in substance and feeling. Of course, you can suggest that the person hear this music and other pieces like it many times. But sheer exposure often proves not to be a very effective route to understanding. The

standard explanation for this lack of connection is that the music is too advanced or “cerebral,” or decadent, or out to destabilize the status quo, or deliberately ugly, or just plain incompetent. It is often assumed that the composer of such music lives in an “ivory tower,” writing music for snobs and upper-class, elite insiders. This criticism has been leveled at all classical music, with the contemporary composer regarded as its most irresponsible perpetrator. Furthermore, music that seems “hard-core” may be contrasted with new music that is accessible, or has a mass audience. It is asserted that to become a “successful” composer one has to write for the audience.¹¹ The more learned among such critics may insist that music not based on tonality cannot be “natural” due to the nature of (musical) cognition, or that music that is not already embedded in culture will always remain recondite and alienating. Answering such criticism can be a full-time occupation, which tends not to result in anything but more contention and controversy. The conversation seems always to degenerate into a competition to determine who is the more intelligent, articulate, refined, or respected. Nevertheless, composers usually find their own music to be authentic, listenable, emotional, interesting, and the like, even in the face of the negative opinions of the musical public and even other composers.¹² Otherwise, why would they take the trouble to make it in the first place?

Are these controversies just a matter of culture, power, and taste? I think something is being overlooked, something crucial that explains the situation. It is that music is not, as the phrase goes, a “universal” language. Certainly, the sheer diversity of musics and their differing audiences seem to deny this.¹³ Indeed, I will argue that music is divided into highly different musical languages just as human speech is partitioned into diverse tongues throughout the world. The reason this is not generally noticed is that the boundaries separating different musical languages don’t overlap with linguistic boundaries. Thus people who speak different languages may understand the same musical language; and conversely, people who speak the same language may not “understand” all the musical languages available to them. In the first case, music can appear to transcend the linguistic and cultural differences between peoples; in the second case, even if two musics are hierarchized, their structural differences are not taken into account, perhaps because music, as an art, is thought to be on a continuum of value rather than on a continuum of comprehensibility.¹⁴

A linguistic account of musical difference provides some simple answers to such questions.¹⁵ For instance, why is it that the older a music is, the more difficult it is to understand? Or, why are some musics—as in the case of the German, French, and Italian musics—considered customary, while those of other nationalities are deemed exceptional? In the first case, we can observe that older forms of English become more difficult to understand since, like all languages, English has changed over time; language is part of culture, and cultures adapt to change. Old English is rather difficult to understand and Elizabethan English moderately difficult. Likewise, as music changes over time, more temporally remote

music becomes more difficult to comprehend. The second question involves the notion of language standards versus language usage. Some musics are regarded as standards to which others are considered dialectal. If so, we might say that Dvořák “spoke” German music with an accent. However, linguistic standards, no matter how ensconced, eventually fail to prevent linguistic change. This happens not only from the outside, but also from the inside, as the most linguistically competent speakers and writers, working at the cutting edge of what a language can say, change its usage and function. These people are the poets and scholars, for whom the demand for expression and knowledge supersedes pedantic conceptions of grammar and usage.

There is already a sizable debate about whether music has languagelike features. While one can take the association of language and music in a metaphorical sense—with a grain of salt—I want to assert that there are some technical reasons to think of musics as partitioned into highly different musical languages.¹⁶ Most linguists divide the description of a language into three interrelated aspects: phonology, syntax, and semantics. Phonology specifies which sounds are used in the language; syntax deals with the ordering of words, parts of words, and collections of words; semantics deals with the use of the language (or what is sometimes called linguistic meaning).¹⁷ A particular body of music has phonology, syntax, and semantics. It will use only certain sounds out of all the sounds that can be made; it will have rules that determine the ordering and grouping of these sounds (what is usually called musical structure); and it will have particular uses, such as to express emotion, to accompany dance, to assist ritual, or to announce and celebrate occasions.

A common objection to a linguistic conception of music is that a verbal language can speak of and refer to itself, whereas musical meaning refers only to what it expresses.¹⁸ But this is not the case: a piece of music can “speak” of other compositions via quotation or parody technique; a piece can even refer to itself, as in a theme and variations, or in the cross-references to musical material in a fugue, sonata, or even the simplest ABA form. Just as poetry is often characterized as conversation between poems from different times and places, music can be similarly conceived—and often is—in musical criticism and scholarship.

Another objection is that a linguistic conception of music ignores its unique features, exactly those features that distinguish it from any spoken language. However, any verbal language ignores the nonintersecting features of all other verbal languages. In this sense, Russian “ignores” English; a Russian speaker simply is unable to recognize the differences between Russian and English. So having a general idea about what a language is does not mean that any particular language supersedes another (except as a result of cultural contingency). Consider what occurs when one attempts to translate a text or utterance from one language into another. Literal or exact translation of anything more complicated than “pass the salt” is always impossible,¹⁹ and the more complex and nuanced the expression, the more difficult it is to get its sense aptly translated. What

results is something like an explanation rather than a restatement. Nevertheless, texts in Sanskrit, for example, have been translated into Chinese—two languages with highly contrasting phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems. Obviously, this can be accomplished only by experts who know both languages intimately. Yet much will be lost. For example, in the translation of classical Chinese nature poetry into English, the concise and formal arrangements of words meeting the requirements of traditional rhyme and tone patterns in Chinese will have to be sacrificed in order to get the “meaning” of the poem across in English. Actually, the result is really an English poem that (directly) refers to a particular Chinese poem.²⁰

We can understand the possibility of (partial) translation as a matter of finding the ways the two languages use their features to the same end. These ways may be very different in sound and syntax, yet have the same semantics. So in the case of our Chinese poem, translation is possible when one knows how Chinese and English are each used to express an appreciation of the beauties of nature in an elevated, formal, and sensuous way. Nevertheless, analytic philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine has argued that translation between different languages or even different cultures speaking the same language is indeterminate in principle. If this is the case, then it is impossible for a verbal language to substitute for any other language, musical or otherwise. All languages are therefore to some extent self-contained and independent. Only by learning a language can one fully understand it and what it can do.

A final objection to the conception of music as a language might be that even if music and verbal language have many structural affinities, the semantics of each are so different that the correspondences are trivial in the face of the differences. This is true enough, but there are cases in which music aspires to the semantics of verbal language, as in opera and program music. Besides, two verbal languages are not likely to have much semantic intersection if they are from different times and places; consider the worlds of difference between Aramaic and Swedish.

But these arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, positing music as a language explains why all music is not universally understood and appreciated, and why there can be different criteria for excellence in different musics. Moreover, the semantics of a music are various. It is still unfortunately the case that the semantics of some Romantic music are thought to be *the* meaning of (all) music. Accordingly, “successful” or “appropriate” music must adequately express the composer’s (and the composer’s culture’s) ideas and emotions if it is to be taken seriously. However, music—including Romantic music—is also used to certify ritual; tell a story; invoke cultural norms and belief systems; question or rebel against the status quo; teach or exemplify socialization; announce events and actions; commemorate or celebrate special individuals, times, and places; provide interesting sounds and patterns to the listener; and so forth.²¹

So, if music is a universe of different languages, knowing one will probably not help you know another.²² Of course, some verbal languages are related, having evolved from the same parent language or sharing features due to cultural interaction. Knowing German makes learning Dutch easier. Similarly, knowing common-practice tonality makes learning popular-music harmony easier. However there may be snares and delusions afoot. For instance, just because two distinct musical languages use major and minor chords (that is, their phonologies intersect) doesn't mean their musical grammars or semantics are the same. Renaissance music is not the same musical language as common-practice tonality; it has different rules of progression, tonal function, rhythm, and even texture. Similarly, while the dissonant sonorities of common-practice tonality are found in great profusion in atonal music, this fact does not make atonality "dissonant," for the distinction between consonance and dissonance is not a part of the grammar of atonal music. Contrariwise, when atonal music sounds a triad or an octave, this does not mean that the music is tonal or even referring to tonality.

Such a conception of music suggests that the periods of Western art music are not different "styles," but are different, if related, musical languages. In addition, the more abrupt changes from one period to the next can be characterized in terms of changes in vocabulary, musical structure and musical function—phonology, syntax and semantics. Sometimes these changes bifurcate one musical language into two. The change from the Classic to the Romantic period yielded two contrasting musics: the more conservative music of Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms; and the more progressive departures of Berlioz, Wagner, and Liszt. Recent research in music theory suggests that the syntax of these two musics differ; the conservative trend continued to evolve the layered, self-embedded tonal structures of the Classical period (as described in Schenkerian theory), while the more radical music introduced various notions of transformational symmetry into tonal music (neo-Riemannian theory).²³ Similarly the "revolutionary" breakthroughs (or breakdowns) circa 1910 into neoclassical and atonal music involved different phonologies that had the same kind of syntax. In the neoclassic case, the relatively consonant sounds of the tonal language were employed with a syntax based on the intersection and difference of sets of pitches and rhythms; the atonal case involved the dissonant sounds of tonality in a similar syntax of intersection and difference. The syntax of tonality could no longer work in either of these two new musics, since the difference between consonance and dissonance was no longer established. Something was lost, but something was gained.

An even more radical "revolution" swept across Western art music in the late 1940s, culminating in many alternative musical languages as well as nonlanguages.²⁴ In about 1975 new sensibilities arose in reaction to the extremes of the 1950s. This involved the interaction of different musical languages to form new hybrid musics that can be linguistically characterized as dialects, pidgins,

and creoles.²⁵ At about the same time, musics from non-Western cultures were becoming known and appreciated in the West and adding to the mix of musical influences.²⁶

The increasing diversity of musical language has led twentieth-century composers to write about their music, not only in compositional manifestos and treatises, but in efforts to explain and demonstrate their musical orientations and experiences. Thus, composers have entered and recreated the worlds of music theory and criticism in ways that would have been unimaginable in the common-practice period. Writing books and essays is one way a composer can address the question: What is your music like? And as composers invent new ways of thinking about and creating musical structures, writing about music becomes an important tool in advancing their cause. But if one attempts to invent a new musical language, it will take some time before other people comprehend it. Indeed, many of the innovations of the early twentieth century have yet to be completely assimilated by the general musical public. Thus if a composer's muse has compelled her to explore and cultivate new and unclaimed land, she may just have to endure a time lag between composition and appreciation.

But there is no need for despair. The quality of new music performance has continually progressed, and young performers are able to handle difficulties that would have daunted the best performers fifty years ago. In my own case, I have had the privilege of working with musicians for whom my pitch and rhythmic complexities posed no problems, and whose interpretations got right to the heart of my music as I hear it and hope it can be heard by others. The composition and performance of computer music, once produced only in "centers" with equipment costing six figures and up, has become possible for anyone who owns a personal computer. Computers also make it possible for composers to produce engraved scores and CD and DVD recordings of the highest professional standard. Success now depends less on time, place, and money, and more upon knowledge and industry.

Even if new music poses a kind of language barrier to many people, there seem to be just as many who are willing to take up the challenge and learn what is necessary. Indeed, a good deal of the difficulty in learning a new musical language is the unlearning of old musical habits of listening and responding to the music one knows; the same is true in learning to speak a new language.²⁷ Like people with a talent for language, some listeners (not only musicians) find it easy to learn new musical tongues. Many concerts of new music are filled with young—but not only young—people who enthusiastically appreciate the music. They leave the concert hall thrilled and excited. I have seen this happen not only in musical centers like New York and Paris, but anywhere that new music is played well. True, most of this occurs on university campuses; but there is nothing wrong with this since, over the last half century, the university has taken its place as an institution where American culture with a capital *C* thrives and grows.

Part One

Essays on Composers

Chapter One

Cage Contemplating/ Contemplating Cage

This essay appeared in 2000 in the *Open Space Magazine*.¹ Benjamin Boretz, the main editor and founder of the journal, asked that I write something to be published in Volume 2. I had written a piece about the ways in which we might divide “musicking”—into music, talking about music, and talking about talking about music. I showed Ben a draft, and he said he liked it all right, but I could tell he didn’t think it was my best work.² A few days later, a week before I left on a trip to India, I found myself spontaneously writing about John Cage. I had been lecturing in class on Cage since my days at Yale, and over the years had become aware that he and his musical and literary work remained largely misunderstood, despite his eminence. Cage’s take on Zen thought was idiosyncratic and certainly not well-documented by objective scholarship, but was nevertheless received from D. T. Suzuki, one of the first Japanese scholars to popularize Zen in the West. I had always believed that Cage’s perspective had much to offer musical thought and action, even though—and perhaps because—so much glamour and controversy still surrounded Cage’s name.

I had two unforgettable encounters with Cage’s work when I was a composition student at Eastman, or I should say at the University of Rochester—since Cage’s music was too radical to be taken seriously by the composition faculty at Eastman in the early 1960s, he was obliged to visit Rochester on the University campus, where he was invited by the dance and art departments to present lectures and performances.³ The first of my experiences with Cage involved his public reading of his “Lecture on Nothing,” a talk that is also a musical composition. It is composed exactly like one of Cage’s pieces, consisting of a series of sections whose durations are determined by a set of proportions such that lengths of the subsections are in the same relation to the sections as the sections are to the whole. In the lecture, Cage refers to this method of temporal division, which is often misleadingly referred to as his “square-root form.”⁴ Hearing Cage’s delivery, with its long stretches of mantralike repetitions and lengthy silences in addition to text, made a deep impression on me, even though I had already read the text in Cage’s first book, *Silence*.⁵

The second experience occurred during a joint performance by Cage and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. I agreed to review the concert for the University's student newspaper, *Campus Times*. The evening was so gripping and engrossing that I was completely overwhelmed and unable to write a single word; in fact, I was convinced it would be impossible to describe what I had experienced. I wrote a brief note to this effect to my editor, who published it in lieu of a review.

My essay is structured so that it begins with Cage's views in the left column and others' views on the right. However, the relation between the left and right should not literally be considered a "conversation" or some other form of cause-and-effect rhetoric, but rather a form of resonance with singularities. In any case, as the text goes on, these two points of views begin to connect and even fuse. The ways the column margins are structured follows a compositional principle I often use in my own work.

1.

I.

John Cage began writing manifestos and ended asking questions. If his questions often come in the form of declarative sentences, they are designed to problematize issues and inhibit glib reaction. In his essay "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)," Cage quotes Thoreau: "We Yankees are not so far from right . . . who answer one question by answering another. Yes and No are lies. A true answer will not aim to establish anything, but rather to set all well afloat." To which Cage adds: "Mentioning opposites, he called them correlatives. Fuller calls them complements" (*M*, 3).

To appreciate Cage, therefore, one need not accept his direct assertions and opinions at face value; rather they are offered as helpful suggestions, as part of an unending dialogue, shaped by time and place. Seeing Cage's music in the same light, as musical probes, helps readjust our thinking away from assessing its meaning and qualities as "pure" sound, on one hand, and musical therapy, on the other—toward

Why start out with Cage's discourse? If Cage's statements are exploratory, then they remain useful even if they contradict each other. Zen koans: *koan* means "public record."

Excluding the Law of the Excluded Middle we have: $\sim(\sim A) \neq A$. I wonder what Cage thought (or would have thought) of L. E. J. Brouwer's rejection of mathematical proofs by contradiction, or of fuzzy logic? He might have known of the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna who deconstructed doctrine by denying any statement *A* according to the following: not *A*, not not *A*, not both *A* and not *A*, not neither *A* nor not *A*.

Self-referential sentence: The negation of the Law of the Excluded Middle is not uninteresting.

"Dr. Suzuki smiled and said, 'That's why I love philosophy: no one wins'" (*Silence*, 40).

appreciating its synergy with human activity, purposeful or not. And not only Cage's music, but any music whatsoever.

2.

Although older than Western composers who came to maturity immediately after World War II, Cage also sought to reconfigure the whole enterprise of music-making from the ground up. An intense mistrust of nationalism and even tradition itself led young composers like Stockhausen and Boulez to reduce music to what they defined its essential "primitives": pitch, duration, loudness, and timbre. One would then build back up to "music" by using serial techniques and principles read into the music of Webern and Debussy. Other European composers, such as Xenakis, less interested in a project of applying logical atomism to music, conceived of a music based on gesture and shape, using techniques and concepts borrowed from probability theory, statistics, and combinatorial analysis. Once again, the emphasis was on objectivity and technical means but with a Platonic twist: since the mathematics used in constructing his music were the same as those used in modeling the real world of physical phenomena, Xenakis believed he could hardwire the beauty of nature into the structure of music.

In the United States things were different. Milton Babbitt's development of serialism, while radical in import, extended structural principles found in the music of Arnold Schoenberg, a composer many European composers dismissed as "traditional," if not reactionary, despite Schoenberg's invention of the twelve-tone system. Cage, who studied music with Schoenberg in the 1930s, followed a similar path; starting with traditional values from Western and Indian music,

II.

The interest among European composers to reduce music to its "parameters" dried up about the same time W. V. O. Quine published his famous paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." His work, coming after Gödel's incompleteness theorem of 1931 and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), put to rest any hope that knowledge of the world can be reduced to sense data and logic alone.

(There is a joke among philosophers:
What is a pragmatist?—A logical
positivist with a broken heart.)

Cage's use of chance differs from Xenakis's in many well-understood ways, but the musical model is somewhat similar. A piece is a series of sections, the number and durations of which are determined by chance; the character of each section is derived by choosing at random from a predetermined list of properties; the values of the properties are determined by chance procedures.

I am known as a serial composer, a designation I would never use to describe myself. Many people assume that I would therefore be hostile toward Cage and chance composition. In the same breath I have heard such people say that the "sound" of a serial piece and a chance piece is about the same, since it is impossible to hear any structure in either. More recently, chance and serialism have been lumped together as the *loci classici* of high modernism. Actually, I find Cage's music and ideas interesting

he eventually developed a revolutionary approach to music composition that not only ignored the entire aesthetic canon of Western musical traditions, but rejected the institutions of tradition itself.

Cage's goal was not only to change music (and art) and our thinking about it, but to change the nature of thinking itself. In this he drew on traditional sources, those of Zen Buddhism and Taoism, as taught to him and others by D. T. Suzuki in New York in the late 1940s.

3.

Zen, like all forms of Buddhism, accepts the Four Noble Truths set forth by the Buddha: (1) Life is marked by pain and suffering; (2) The cause of pain and suffering is desire; (3) Pain and suffering can be eliminated by abandoning desire itself; (4) To eliminate desire, one follows the Eightfold Path: right beliefs, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right vocation, right effort, right meditation, and right concentration.

Cage identifies the problems of desire in traditional Western music in many places in his writings, but the issues are perhaps most saliently addressed in his Lectures on Nothing and Something.

"I learned that the intervals have meaning; they are not just sounds but they imply in their progressions a sound not actually present to the ear. Tonality . . . But I had never any feeling for it: for instance: there are some progressions called deceptive cadences. The idea is this: progress in such a way as to imply the presence of a tone not actually present; then fool everybody by not landing on it.

and provocative, especially the ones that engage ancient Indian and Chinese philosophy. Does this make me a paleomodernist?

Thinking must change if people are to appreciate what our present music is good for. Classical music lovers are still hopelessly enmeshed in a nineteenth-century European conception of music and its social meaning despite all the revolutions and changes of the entire twentieth century.

III.

The different schools and churches of Buddhism differ on how one implements the Eightfold Path. When the Buddha died (of mushroom poisoning) he said, "Work out your own salvation." While this statement might be taken to mean everyone is on his or her own, the Four Noble Truths are understood to be in the context of the Buddha's compassion for all sentient beings.

Desire is the root cause of other pathologies such as clinging and willful ignorance. Buddhism's analysis of our existential predicament can seem harsh and unfeeling, but that is a reflection of one's resistance and fear.

Cage's insight about tonality is that it is not natural, but cognitively constructed.

This observation need not be used to reject tonality but to better understand it. Some features of certain musics are akin to language. One can identify phonological, syntactic, and semantic features of tonality and of other musical systems—for instance, the ragas of India or the gamelan music of Indonesia. (This, of course, says nothing about the use of music or its aesthetic features.)

Thinking about different musics as

What is being fooled? Not the ear, but the mind. The whole question is intellectual” (“Lecture on Nothing,” *Silence*, 116).

The implication is that our (tonal) cognition of Western music is based on expectation and that traditional music usually satisfies the desire for our expectations to be met. While there are Western theories of music that assert that emotion is (only) aroused when our expectations are not met, such theories place strict limits on what kinds of deviations produce acceptable emotions and that, in order for a piece to be “satisfying,” all the deviations are to be resolved over the course of the piece. Pieces that do not satisfy expectation may have their place: they express pain and suffering, and serve to motivate the audience to social action or to accept a pessimistic outlook on life.

But Cage’s use of Buddhist ideas serves not only to justify the emancipation of the dissonance. In the “Lecture on Something,” we read:

“When a composer feels a responsibility to make, rather than accept, he eliminates from the area of possibility all those events which do not suggest the at that point in time vogue of profundity. For he takes himself seriously, wishes to be taken seriously, wishes to be considered great, and he therefore diminishes his love and increases his fear and concern about what people will think. There are many serious problems confronting such an individual. He must do it better, more impressively, etc. than anyone else. And what, precisely, does this beautiful profound object, this masterpiece, have to do with

different languages suggests that we don’t immediately “understand” all musics, just because we understand one.

Ordinary tonal music theory often invokes musical expectation by the use of teleological dualisms to describe musical progression such as tension and release, dissonance and resolution, instability and repose. Music that has only the latter term of each pair is static, uninteresting, and boring. Music that has only the first is chaotic and unpleasant. Nevertheless, the content of the theory is independent of these dualisms. “V goes to I” and all the other rules of harmony and voice leading can be taken as rules of progression, no more, no less. The dualisms smuggle purpose into tonality, that there is a reason for following the rules.

The assertion of an endless alternation of tension and release in tonality suggests the unending alternation of desire and satisfaction = dissatisfaction in the Buddhist wheel of life, *Samsara*.

Cage’s observations about the unsatisfactory condition of those who wish to become great (or consider themselves to be great) should not be taken as motivated by any feeling of envy on Cage’s part. We have all encountered famous and successful people for whom the term “genius” is warranted but who are nevertheless unsatisfied with and resentful of their lot in life. Of course, there is always some

Life? It has this to do with Life: that it is separate from it. Now we see it and now we don't. When we see it we feel better, and when we are away from it, we don't feel so good. Life feels shabby and chaotic, disordered, ugly in contrast" (*Silence*, 130).

While this statement doesn't imply that one should give up writing music or do away with music or art, it does indicate that one's thinking and feeling about music will produce pain and suffering as long as one desires to produce "great" music, considers certain musics as better than others, or thinks of art as an improvement on ordinary life. For Cage, this meant the functions of music and art had to be radically altered. Music would have to have features that would inhibit the arousal of desire on the part of the audience and these new forms of music, in their musical and social structures, or lack thereof, would serve as models for how life might be better lived.

The structural solutions to musical problems were the same as those of life itself.

4. IV.

Cage's earliest music was based on mathematical formulae which soon he rejected as "unmusical." He followed this with music based on 25-tone rows of pitch-classes dispersed over the range of two octaves, obviously influenced by Schoenberg's twelve-tone system. Through his interest in percussion music, Cage became a champion of the "use of noise" as set forth in his essay of 1937: "The Future of Music: Credo." "We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments" (*Silence*, 3). Cage learned of non-Western music through his association with Henry Cowell and later Gita Sarabhai who, in exchange for

higher end or recognition to achieve, but why the corrosive cynicism?

Spending time with composers who cannot but compulsively judge and rate others, set standards, and decide on certification is unpleasant and pointless. To note that some people are not as good as others at writing music according to some specified criterion is trivial. When I'm in the presence of music I don't like, I try to find something to hear that will hold my attention and engage my interest.

Rather than compose a music that is designed to inhibit desire, I think we need to work within ourselves until we can listen to what is there to hear, not what (we imagine) the music attempts to make us hear.

I, too, was introduced to Indian music early in my musical training. Perhaps that is why I enjoyed Cage's early music so much. The use of modes, percussion sounds (prepared piano), and rhythmic structures made immediate sense to me but did not suggest an exotic, non-Western atmosphere. As a freshman at the Eastman School of Music, I was fortunate to know of this earlier music since the Sibley Music Library housed Cage's collected works. Most other people who had heard of Cage then had no or little knowledge of Cage's pre-chance compositions.

lessons in Western contemporary music and counterpoint, taught Cage the essentials of Indian music. Indian music helped Cage focus his compositional interests on timbre and time, as well as supply a different model of the function of music and the relation of the composer to the audience.

By “structure” was meant the division of a whole into parts; by “method,” the note-to-note procedure. “Both structure and method (and also ‘material’—the sounds and silences of a composition) were, it seemed to me then, the proper concern of the mind (as opposed to the heart) (one’s ideas of order as opposed to one’s spontaneous actions); whereas . . . method and material, together with form (the morphology of a continuity) were equally the proper concern of the heart” (“Composition as Process,” *Silence*, 18).

Cage saw that his definition of structure was quite independent of material and continuity and noted that of the four attributes of sound, the articulation of the first three (pitch, loudness, timbre) was dependent on the last (duration). Thus, as in the tala of Indian music, structure was articulated by a series of timespans. Cage went one step further and arranged the time spans in a hierarchy so that the temporal proportion of the parts of a time span at a given level would be the same as the proportion of time spans themselves. Yet nothing about the structure was determined by the materials which were to occur within it, so that it could be as well expressed by the absence of these materials as by their presence. Noises, sounds, words, could all be structured as music.

Cage’s idea of thinking of music as spans of time was particularly important for my compositional development. It suggested that the concept of harmonic rhythm could be generalized to x -rhythm, where x is anything that is heard. But rather than considering this idea as only compositional—poietic as opposed to neutral or esthetic—the spans of time would have to be articulated by musical events so that they could be felt by the performer and heard by the listener. Finding new ways to satisfy the interplay between conception and realization of musical time has continued to inspire my music to this day.

Such a view of structure is top-down. It is hierarchical since (1) duration is considered phenomenologically prior to pitch, loudness, and timbre; and (2) the length of the whole work and its component parts have to be decided before the material is placed within it. Cage thought of the twelve-tone system as a method to guarantee local continuity. He, like almost everyone else, did not sense that Schoenberg’s music was based on a tone hierarchy, twelve-tone aggregates and row regions. Thus he could not appreciate the invention of the twelve-tone system as a direct analogy to Schoenberg’s concept of tonal music. Schoenberg’s music was traditional rather because it was rhetorically similar to Brahms’s music.

In the mid-1940s, drawing on writings by Ananda Coomaraswamy on Indian art,

Cage put together a principled compositional aesthetic. He began to dismiss personal expression as a reason for writing music—advocating not that music should be inexpressive, but that it be impersonal. The composer’s job was no longer to bring attention to himself, but to express transpersonal states of feeling, such as the Indian *rasas* or affects, which Cage referred to as the “nine permanent emotions.” His *String Quartet* of 1950 has four movements, each identified by the four Hindu stages of being associated with the seasons: Spring (creation), Summer (preservation), Fall (decay), and Winter (quiescence). Art was to imitate nature in its manner of operation.

The renunciation of personal voice that marked Indian aesthetics led Cage to appreciate Buddhist psychology. He realized that it was one’s own personal preferences (likes and dislikes) that inhibited one from connecting art and life, since preferences partition the mind. Furthermore, desires and attachments are not easy to root out; they are habitually ingrained in the mind and body, even at the subconscious level. Thus, Cage needed a methodology to make sure his choices would be not based on personal want or need. In Eastern religions, the primary methodology is yoga or various forms of mediation that are used to quiet the mind and “make it susceptible to divine influences.” (In Zen, the practice is meditation and chanting, with or without other means such as studying sutras or confronting koans.)

Rather than take up meditation, around 1950 Cage chose to submit his will to asking questions of the *I Ching*, one of the Chinese classic books. Cage’s *I Ching* practice was traditional; one throws coins

The nine *rasas* are: *sringara* (romance), *hasya* (mirth), *karuna* (compassion), *raudra* (anger), *vira* (heroism), *bhayanaka* (fear), *vibhatsa* (disgust), *abhuta* (wonder), and *shanta* (peace). The *rasas* include “unpleasant” feelings and therefore encompass a wider spectrum of states than Western “doctrines of affection.”

Trimurti: *Brahma* (creation), *Vishnu* (preservation and balance), *Shiva* (destruction). In some Shaivite sects of Hinduism, Shiva represents all the functions of the Trimurti but potentially (in quiescence), while his consort, *Parvati*, the goddess, embodies the active principle, *Shakti*.

While a graduate student, somewhat influenced by what I knew then about Cage, I wrote some experimental piano pieces involving chance operations and played them for one of my composition teachers. He said that they sounded a lot like my other music, and added, “You know, you can’t extinguish your personality.” I think he took my experiments as an attempt to repress a dissatisfaction with my musical self. For him, this was completely wrong-headed, since a composer was obliged to find his individual “voice.” Only then would one’s music rise above the generic and be worth listening to.

Why the *I Ching* for generating numbers? Any number in the range of 0 to n where n is a power of two can be represented by a series of n coin flips or lines. Let us take the series of coin tosses

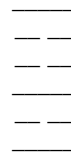
or sticks and interprets the result so as to produce a number from 1 to 64. One then consults the corresponding chapter in the book for guidance. The throwing of coins (traditionally, yarrow stalks) is performed according to a ritual that, among other things, makes sure the throw is at random. Cage used the *I Ching* as a kind of random number generator. He would assign values of various musical dimensions to the sixty-four numbers and perform the coin or stick toss to determine which of the values to choose.

In this way he would determine the characteristics, dimensions, and details of a musical composition. For instance, Cage might ask how long a piece of music would be, how many parts it would have, what kinds of sounds each part would have, and so forth, until he would be asking about each event of the composition—questions such as what clef, accidental, loudness, and so forth should this note on a staff (previously determined by the *I Ching*) have? (Cage provides a list of these kind of questions in his “Composition as Process,” *Silence*, 49–50.)

In addition to consulting the *I Ching*, Cage used other methods for chance composition. Writing notes over imperfections on empty manuscript paper is perhaps the best known.

Since the resulting composition would be unpredictable before its creation, the tastes of its composer could have little to do with its character. Of course, the basic decisions that led to assigning values to the sixty-four numbers would still reflect the composer’s desires and preferences, but these choices would only be of

HTTHTH or the corresponding series of unbroken and broken lines, top to bottom:



Let the first flip or line indicate the presence or absence of $1 = 2^0$; the second the presence or absence of $2 = 2^1$; the third the presence or absence of $4 = 2^2$; the n th the presence or absence of 2^n ; then sum the numbers. So the example codes the number $41 = 1 + 0 + 0 + 8 + 0 + 32$. The lines above represent a hexagram; each chapter of the *I Ching* is headed by a different hexagram, 64 in all. Such a scheme codes numbers as a series of binary digits; for example 41 is 101001 (rereading right to left). Moreover, each hexagram of n lines denotes a unique subset of a set of 2^n elements. So given the set {ABCDEF}, our hexagram indicates the subset {ADF}. Thus we have a method of matching numbers to subsets. This is useful in atonal music theory for enumerating all the possible chords ($n = 12$) and classes of chords.

But even with chance procedures the composition process was still top-down. One had to know what one was doing, i.e., writing a piece, beforehand. Many more traditional composers work bottom-up; they start with ideas that may or may not end up in pieces.

Hierarchies can always be manufactured in networks of relations by focusing one’s attention. One can concentrate on the loudest, or lowest, or strangest, or vaguest sounds in a piece. In graph theory, a system of nodes connected by lines can be traversed by spanning trees, paths on a graph that omit lines that

structural significance and not determine the details of continuity, material, or form. So, like Cage's method of using embedded durations to structure his earlier music, his chance composition methodology was still hierarchic in principle.

Cage's first compositions using chance procedures went a long way to suppress his tastes and preferences, but soon Cage came to realize that unpredictability as a compositional method did not preclude one from predicting an event while listening to an existing aleatoric composition simply by memorizing the composition. He says:

"We've now played the *Winter Music* quite a number of times. I haven't kept count. When we first played it, the silences seemed very long and the sounds seemed really separated in space, not obstructing one another. In Stockholm, however, . . . I noticed that it had become melodic" (*A Year from Monday*, 135).

Cage's observation makes two points. First, that the processes of composing, performing and listening are certainly not equivalent. A musical score composed by chance is certainly neither performed by chance nor must it be listened to by chance, whatever that would mean. Second, that if one wants to completely

complete cyclic paths or are loops. Choose one of the nodes on the spanning tree as the first, and you have a hierarchy. Each node now has an unambiguous distance function to the first node: how many nodes must be traversed on the spanning tree to get to the first node; the higher the distance function, the further down the hierarchy.

Who am I to repress myself?

Some music theorists who subscribe to an expectation model of music cognition say they have a reason for revolutionary style change in the history of music. Eventually all the deviations from a set of musical norms will become well known and cease to surprise the listener. These deviations become the norms and even greater deviations are necessary for arousal. This continues until the system completely breaks down, ushering in a new musical period with new norms.

What's the difference between this model and addiction?

The eradication of memory can only go so far. Does one want to inhibit musical memory to the extent that each event is new and unrelated to previous events or so that previous events are not remembered at all? In other words, do we erase only relations between events, or the events themselves? Or perhaps we seek to erase what psychologists call psychological set—that is, what we expect to happen based on past

renounce preference by making prediction impossible, one must find ways of thwarting memory itself or reprogramming its functions. Cage initially chose the first of these options.

experience. But what if we simply did not expect things to happen just because they have happened the same way before? Since hypotheses are incapable of being proven true, only falsified, this might be a very practical thing to do (especially when confronting new and unfamiliar situations).

Indeterminacy was Cage's final technical solution to the problem of memory and desire. Compositions were designed so they could never be performed the same way twice. Cage implemented this idea in many ways by making scores that allowed the performers to interpret the notation in different ways from one performance to another. This might be as simple as asking the performer to place notes in time as they appeared to be placed in space on the score, or asking performers to play the pages or systems of their parts in any order, independently of any other performer in the piece. More complex methods involved providing materials to be used to determine a performance of a work. For instance in *Cartridge Music*, Cage provides many transparent sheets of velum containing circles, lines, rulers, and the like to be overlaid and interpreted by rules that are deliberately worded to promote ambiguity. In fact, Cage's fecundity in thinking up new notations and performance situations was unsurpassed by composers whose reputations were based on such innovations. Prime examples include the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1958), which includes one hundred different notations for the soloist alone, and the three volumes of the *Song Books* (1970), which include a perpetual variety of notation, indications for singing styles and vocal production, and instructions for vocal, theatrical, and electronic performance.

With indeterminacy, Cage reversed his compositional thinking from top-down to bottom-up. Even the duration of a performance was not or could not be specified, being contingent on the performance situation.

It's curious that Cage never asked players to improvise in his music. If "improvise" means satisfying a compositional grammar in real time, as in playing the blues or Indian music, then improvisation would certainly not count as indeterminacy on Cage's view. If it means playing outside of any particular or ordinary musical conventions or grammars, then it might satisfy Cage since Cage himself wrote: "When you get right down to it, a composer is just someone who tells other people what to do. . . . I'd like our activities to be more social and anarchically so" (*A Year from Monday*, ix). Then why not free improvisation? Was Cage unable to give up the idea of composer and composition despite his ideals? Or did he think that "disciplined action" precluded improvisation? Certainly, his experiences with most professional ensembles (up to that time) did not suggest that they could be trusted to improvise with either skill or integrity.

Cage had made a transition from making music to accepting any sounds as music.

Breaking all traditional associations between composer, performer, and listener had opened music to any possible configuration of participants. The resulting emptiness, while deep and transfiguring, was of no help in answering the question: now that everything is possible, what does one do? Cage was acutely aware of this problem.

He quotes a passage from the *I Ching* in “Lecture on Something” that illuminates the question and suggests an answer:

“When desire is silenced and will comes to rest, the world as idea becomes manifest. In this aspect, the world is beautiful and removed from the struggle from existence. This is the world of Art. However, contemplation alone will not put the will to rest absolutely. It will awaken again and then all the beauty of form will appear to have been a brief moment of exaltation.

Hence this is still not the true way of redemption. The fire whose light illuminates the mountain and makes it pleasing does not shine far. In the same way beautiful form suffices to brighten and throw light upon matters of lesser moment. But important questions cannot be decided in this way. They require greater earnestness”
(*Silence*, 130–31).

This problem is identified in Zen as an attachment to emptiness. It happens when a meditator begins to delight in the bliss of meditation at the expense of making any further progress toward enlightenment. But Cage could hardly find bliss in the reaction of his performers and audience to his indeterminate music.

In any case, indeterminacy is one way to “play outside,” where sounds are sounds and free of semiotic function. Playing, listening, and composing outside requires only openness of mind. Music that has semantic and syntactic functions demands specialized knowledge, and that knowledge separates people into insiders and outsiders.

“How could there be a Buddhist music?” was the answer I received from a famous Sinhalese anthropologist.

In the texts of early Buddhism, music and dance are more or less prohibited as inappropriate behavior for the clergy. Later, in Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism, music can be used for meditative and transformational purposes.

I recently bought a CD at a department store: *Buddhist Chants: Harmony of the Soul*. The liner notes entreat, “Let the gentle serenity of the ancient Buddhist Chants show you the way to deeper relaxation, more reflective meditation, and profound self-examination.” The first chant, “The Universe,” starts out with swept white noise, and cheesy synthesized strings playing slow pentatonic melodies over a drone. A heavily reverberated recording of Zen chanting makes an appearance in the middle of the six-minute piece.

“You won’t get a wild, heroic ride to heaven on pretty little sounds.” —
George Ives

“When I was setting out to write the orchestral parts to my Concert for Piano and Orchestra [of 1958], . . . I visited each player, found out what he could do with his instrument, discovered with him other possibilities, and then subjected all of these findings to chance operations. After a general rehearsal, during which the musicians heard the result of their several actions, some of them—not all—introduced into the actual performance sounds of a nature not found in my notations, characterized for the most part by their intentions which had become foolish and unprofessional” (*Silence*, 135–36).

5.

But Cage had had social problems from the beginning. Few American composers in the Depression saw the need for the emancipation of dissonance, not to mention noise. Schoenberg told Cage he didn’t have a feeling for harmony. Hence the need for manifestos. Furthermore, writing about music only made the division between one’s musical ideals and the harsh realities of musical life more public. Cage found out that this split between the useless and the pragmatic, theory and practice, fantasy and reality, life and art was nowhere more highly charged than in the musical establishment. Both the professional and the amateur honor the idea that art should be useful and real (representative) while life should be lived with taste and élan, but art and life should never become mixed up.

You don’t have to be John Cage to have extremely unfortunate encounters with professionals. The orchestra is perhaps the worst case; as an institution it became reified in the first decade of the last century. All attempts to reconfigure or expand it since have been pyrrhic. Orchestral music by (late) Stravinsky, Feldman, Stockhausen, Babbitt, and others, despite their new and vital conceptions, has been ignored, especially in America. Only music that continues to project a romantic or impressionistic sensibility is taken seriously, and yet even those pieces that do have not entered into the standard repertory. As a result, most progressive composers have turned away from the orchestra to chamber, solo, or electronic music. It’s interesting to consider that most non-Western musical cultures do not have music for large concerted groups of musicians—Indonesian music being the exception.

V.

As a member of an academic community, I often feel a pressure to explain, even justify, my music both to colleagues and audiences. (Cage did not have this problem.) Most of the time my comments backfire, and the music is stigmatized as requiring explanation. Since I don’t—can’t—design my pieces to be immediately understandable, even to me (who does this deliberately, anyway?), I have found it best not to say anything at all, or to talk about something else, except under certain circumstances: workshops and composition lessons. Ironically, were I writing music in a well-established musical tradition, I could remain silent and not be misunderstood.

Only recently have I followed Cage’s cue and found a way to write about music and make it at the same time.

The criticism Cage received in the 1960s insinuated he was not truly serious (read “professional”): either he hadn’t paid his dues, or he had no ear or compositional craft, or he was a charlatan, or at best an entertainer, or “only” a philosopher.

Audience member: “Anyone could compose your music.”
Cage: “But no one does.”

(During a question period after a reading of “Lecture on Nothing” at the University of Rochester, 1963.)

6.

Perhaps the moment of supreme insight about the interpenetration of opposites came to Cage when he discovered that absolute silence is impossible. At

Harvard University, Cage entered an anechoic chamber and was surprised to hear two sounds, one high and one low. He asked the technician in charge why he had heard anything at all if the room was so silent. “The high one is your nervous system in operation, and the low one is your blood in circulation” (*A Year From Monday*, 134). So silence was none other than sound, but unintended or unattended sound. It is what we don’t hear when we are listening to one sound (the signal) at the expense of others (the background) in the aural field. It is “noise” when we find it difficult or impossible to pick out the signal.

Cage’s famous silent piece, *4’33”* (1952), is a demonstration of this point. Whether Cage intended sounds to be in this piece, but due to the roll of the die, no sounds came up, or he intentionally chose to

“Mr. Cage’s career as a composer lacks a certain kind of hard work. . . . It is that peculiar labor of art itself, the incredible agony of the real artist in his struggles with lethargy and with misplaced zeal, with despair and with the temptations of recent successes, to get better” John Hollander, *Perspectives of New Music*, 1963).

Kliban cartoon: Man changing a light bulb. Dog, sitting nearby, looking on. Dog’s thought-balloon: “I could do that!”

VI.

Did Cage have *kensho* (an enlightenment experience)? “Three lectures I remember in particular. While [D. T. Suzuki] was giving them I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what he was saying. It was a week or so later, while I was walking in the woods looking for mushrooms, that it all dawned on me” (*Silence*, 262).

Did Cage consider himself to be a Buddhist? “I called Mother to tell her the good news. I said, ‘I’m to be a Fellow in the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University.’ . . . Mother said . . . , ‘Do they know you’re a Zen Buddhist?’” (*A Year from Monday*, 69).

How you hear is what you hear. Can we be sure musical experience is intersubjective? Even within the same musical language and culture?

write a piece without sounds is not the issue. In either case, the piece suggests that any sounds, including sounds of the environment, can be considered as music, and even as conventional music, in a concert hall with performers and audience situated in their standard and traditional roles. It points out that music is how you listen and not what you listen to.

Although Cage never directly makes the connection, his understanding of silence and use of the word “nothing” directly parallels the meaning of the Buddhist term *shunyata* or emptiness. But *shunyata* does not only mean nothing, it also implies presence. (Cage’s choices of the titles of his most formative talks, “Lecture on Nothing” and “Lecture on Something” suggest that he was quite aware of the meaning of *shunyata*.) Buddhism teaches that everything in the world is empty of self-nature and yet all things are interconnected. When we take a strand from a spider’s web, it all but disappears, but within the web it allows all the other strands to connect. Similarly, when we isolate anything from its context, it will eventually become stagnant and die. But if it is allowed to remain in its (natural) environment, it will live but also change. It therefore follows that no individual thing has a permanent self, including “ourselves,” since the self either changes or ceases to exist. It is the attempt to cling to one’s present self, to insulate oneself from change, or to desire to become some other self that causes the pain and suffering mentioned in the First Noble Truth.

7.

Cage’s immersion in Zen and Taoist thought obliged him to no longer draw lines between art and life. One of the consequences was the eradication of a

I’ve followed a different path from Cage. I try to compose music designed so there are many different ways to hear it. I often think of my music as a garden with many intertwining paths, none of which must be taken or enjoyed in any particular order or way. Like Cage’s music, this puts the responsibility on the listener to discover his own path.

“I think that ‘Everything is empty’ may be more adequately rendered in this way: ‘Everything is just as it is.’ A pine tree is a pine tree, a bamboo is a bamboo, a dog is a dog, a cat is a cat, you are you, I am I, she is she. Everything is different from everything else. And yet, so long as one and everything retain their uniqueness and particularity, they are free from conflict among themselves” (Abe Masao, “Emptiness is Suchness” 209).

VII.

Almost everyone notices that most important composers in the twentieth century have written extensively about music. Besides compositional theory and

difference between writing about music and making it. Cage's essays from "Lecture on Nothing" onward were structured exactly the same way he structured his music. "Lecture on Nothing" makes this point by filling in the lecture's time structure of silent durations with sentences such as: "At this particular moment we are passing through the fourth part of a unit which is the second unit of the second large part of this talk" (*Silence*, 112). Of course, texts need not be reflexive, for anything that could go in a piece could go in a lecture—vocal sounds, silences, prerecorded tapes, performances of music.

In writings composed after Cage embraced indeterminacy, the number of words to occupy a structural unit would be specified by chance, or in the case of the indeterminacy stories (scattered throughout *Silence* and *A Year from Monday* as well as grouped into the articles, "Indeterminacy" and "How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run" in *Silence* and *Empty Words*), each passage is to be read in the same number of seconds. (Short texts are heard as isolated words and long ones are word salads.) Different strands of text began to be placed in polyphony (sometimes read by more than one reader) or alternated without respect for semantic—or later, syntactic or phonemic—boundaries. Although Cage published his texts in a number of fonts and typefaces selected by chance operations, he considered all of his writings to be best read out loud, especially the latter ones in which sentences are granulated and mixed into streams of phonemes further differentiated by their visual position and appearance.

musical analysis, the range of writing encompasses research (Bartók), pedagogy (Hindemith), aesthetics (Stravinsky), outreach (Copland), and criticism (Sessions).

Does this literature help people better appreciate new music? Yes and no. The composer has better control over the reception of new music, and the interested musical citizen has direct access to the composer's way of thinking.

But composers are not always the best judge of what a listener needs to know for optimal communication to take place (if

that is what is desired). Furthermore, much of this writing has backfired since the listener may only be intimidated or alienated by the stance and style of a composer's prose. In the relatively rare case when a composer's writings have inspired and enlightened the reader, a wedge may be nevertheless driven between the composer's musical output and his or her writing. For "music" is intrinsically different from "writing about music" and from "music-ing about writing."

But music and writing might considerably overlap, and Cage's practice of writing words and music using the same formal, compositional procedures is one way to breathe music into writing about music.