

Split the Stick, and There Is Cage

By Kyle Gann

John Cage at Seventy-Five

Edited by Richard Fleming
and William Duckworth
Bucknell University Press, \$18

I-VI

By John Cage
Harvard University Press,
\$34.95

Words and Spaces

Compiled by Stuart Saunders
Smith and Thomas DeLio
University Press of America,
\$35.75, \$16.50 paper

**Sonic Transports: New
Frontiers in Our Music**

By Cole Gagne
De Falco Books, \$15.95

On Innovative Music(ian)s

By Richard Kostelanetz
Limelight Editions, \$12.95

**American Experimental Music
1890-1940**

By David Nicholls
Cambridge University Press,
\$49.50

Leo Tolstoy, one presumes, would not have taken an activist position in the NEA controversy. In 1909 he stated, "It is time for people to understand that governments not only are not necessary, but are harmful and most highly immoral institutions, in which a self-respecting, honest man cannot and must not take part, and the advantages of which he cannot



Cage in Detroit circa 1921, from *John Cage at Seventy-Five*

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divided equally between music made from speech (sound-text compositions) and from specific spaces (sound installations). "Language," says Smith in justifying his enclosed speech-songs, "is invented by us, and if we are not careful it totally invents us without our awareness or consent. Composing in words helps us regain control." The installation descriptions are more technical, though it's intriguing to find (from Alvin Lucier) that the pitch A 440 has a wavelength of 2.75 feet, and the piano's highest C one of 2.5 inches; or to read how Ron Kuivila made his interactive sound sculpture respond to small motions and not violent ones, to get his walk-in audience to behave. Cage gives a funny interview in which Anne Gibson presses him to make a meaningful comment about the music of Bach, and Cage evades her at every step by turning Bach's reputation into metaphors.

The book's gem is Robert Ashley's "And So It Goes, Depending," a report on the philosophy underlying his TV-opera *Perfect Lives/Private Parts*. Ashley talks to your right brain directly, not so much making sense as implying an ontology in which universals such as "speech" and "song" are in the ether for us to tap into. "My taste is to want every sound to be amplified electronically," he says in a clear moment. "I like sounds that formerly were too soft or too short or too quick to be useful. In any tradition those sounds, to the degree that they are recognized, are called *nuance*. They are recognized as attachments to a main form. Now, we are all in a blizzard of nuance, so dense that a main form, supposing it's there at all, is lost." In an acerbic 1986 postscript Ashley recounts his frustrations trying to sell *Perfect Lives* to PBS (the "Petroleum Broadcasting System"), and offers an electrifying prescription for future TV based on a con-

the 1982 Cage/Branca "fascist" controversy. Given his coordinates, Gagne can't help but ask Frith and Tyranny about Cage's dislike of improvisation, due to its reliance on memory and taste. Both see the problem, and Frith answers it best: "Probably more than half of all the improvised performers I hear do nothing for me. . . . People seriously involved in the world of free improvisation have built up a whole series of de-educating procedures that are . . . vital to the music that they're playing. This would actually be quite compatible with Cage's philosophy. The trouble is that a lot of people are also coming from a jazz mentality, which has got a different kind of attitude to virtuosity, one that can bug me just as much as the 'serious music' one. . . . One of the drawbacks [with free improv] has always been that you have to wade through so much shit to get at the gold."

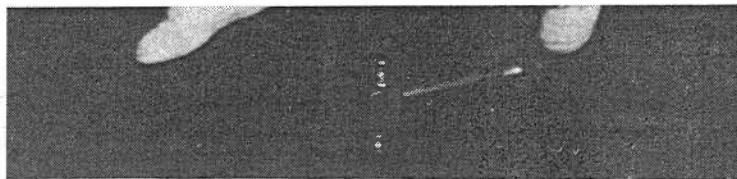
For stylish writing, one turns to Richard Kostelanetz's hundred-and-umpteenth publication, *On Innovative Music(ian)s*. The essays collected here on Cage, Babbitt, Carter, Kagel, B. B. King, Glass, and many others date from 1963 to '89. My favorite article is a jaundiced overview of writings on contemporary music, ranging from *The New Yorker* to George Perle's theoretical treatises, called "Music Criticism and the Literate Layman"; published in 1967 in *Perspectives of New Music*, it reads as though penned yesterday. "Work[ing] from form to content" rather than the other way around, he chides Wilfrid Mellers, is "surely the only intelligent approach to music." The *exact* problem with books by composers? "The practitioner-critic generally lacks that broad, catholic perceptiveness that marks the best of committed critics—a breadth best defined by the willingness to understand and explain works his taste finds abhorrent." Touché.

Kostelanetz is best at evoking

Leo Tolstoy, one presumes, would not have taken an activist position in the NEA controversy. In 1909 he stated, "It is time for people to understand that governments not only are not necessary, but are harmful and most highly immoral institutions, in which a self-respecting, honest man cannot and must not take part, and the advantages of which he cannot and should not enjoy." It's one of the texts John Cage *I-Chinged* to smitherens in "Anarchy," a lecture delivered in 1988 at Wesleyan University's Cage conference. The lecture's reprinted, along with the literary excerpts it pulverizes, in *John Cage at Seventy-Five*, edited by philosopher Richard Fleming and composer William Duckworth.

Today's column isn't about the NEA (so relax), but about recent books that have given new-music discourse a kick after a long nap. Cage's prelude to "Anarchy" glows with Fuller/McLuhan utopianism: "We must give all the people all they need to live in any way they wish. Our present laws protect the rich from the poor. If there are to be laws, we need ones that begin with the acceptance of poverty as a way of life. We must make the earth safe for poverty without dependence on government." And yet, the emphasis of *John Cage at Seventy-Five* (he turned 78 last month) is on not what Cage says, but how he says it. How does music's philosopher make the transition from such a lucid defense of anarchy to the opaque visual and sonic anarchy of the actual lecture?

According to "Silent Performances," by postmodern critic Arthur Sabatini, "the silence surrounding the reader of Cage's works is precarious." The contrast, he argues, between the intentionless texts and the overdetermined, italicized descriptions, explanations, and ex-



Cage in Detroit circa 1921, from *John Cage at Seventy-Five*

hortations that surround them creates a Brechtian distance that Cage uses to subvert the meaning of his own words. If so intent upon freedom, why does Cage insist that *Empty Words* be read, even privately, with a stopwatch? "To collapse the reading/writing process," to undermine the habitual power-balance between writer and reader by focusing on the meaning of reading. Cage wants you to "nonunderstand" him the way he nonunderstood his teachers Schoenberg, Duchamp, and Joyce.

In "About Cage About Thoreau," composer William Brooks approaches Cage's statement in *M*—"Reading Thoreau's *Journal*, I discover any idea I've ever had worth its salt"—with healthy skepticism. *Did* Thoreau say the same things? Finding counterexamples, Brooks warns, "Let's face it: to quote is to misrepresent." Next, however, he draws a line between "abstract" works ("those which establish connections") and "concrete" works (those that "simply present, leaving connections to their users"). Leafing by chance process through Thoreau, he finds that between his early and late journals the proportion of concrete sentences, those that simply state nature facts, almost doubles. Cage's writings show a similar progression. The move is from the 19th century to the 20th: "The nineteenth century... requires change by revolution, by action. The twentieth century (which we've barely entered) permits change by dissolution, inaction."

The Wesleyan audience raved

about Norman O. Brown's "John Cage" lecture; it's printed here, full of footnotes and *Finnegans Wake*isms. Brown asserts, contra Cage, that "something is accomplished by hearing John Cage's music." Tom Johnson examines the intense intentions needed to play Cage's intentionless music well, but adds that "all good musical interpretation must be nonintentional to some degree. Did you ever hear someone *trying* to play Beethoven? If you have to try, you aren't doing it right." *Cage at Seventy-Five* gives the impression that Cage's best disciples feel compelled to disagree with him.

Meanwhile, Cage's six noninformative Harvard lectures are now published under the title *I-VI*. Cage wrote the texts as mesostics (acrostics spelling key words down the middle) on 15 words naming ideas he retrospectively found important in his work. The choice of words may surprise fans; *freedom* is not among them, but *method*, *structure*, *discipline*, and *devotion* are. Transcriptions of the postlecture question-and-answer sessions run across the bottoms of the pages. The questions are often naïve, but Cage explains that "in '43' I built up each movement by means of short silences put together. It seems idiotic. But that's what I did." The book is accompanied by a cassette of the sessions, which is bound to turn up on a thousand sampler pieces.

The text-surrounded-by-explanation format that Sabatini deconstructs becomes the paradigm for *Words and Spaces*. Compiled by Stuart Saunders Smith and Thomas DeLio, the collection is

recognized, are called *nuance*. They are recognized as attachments to a main form. Now, we are all in a blizzard of nuance, so dense that a main form, supposing it's there at all, is lost." In an acerbic 1986 postscript Ashley recounts his frustrations trying to sell *Perfect Lives* to PBS (the "Petroleum Broadcasting System"), and offers an electrifying prescription for future TV based on a conviction that "real-time is the greatness of TV."

Cole Gagne, in *Sonic Transports: New Frontiers in Our Music*, sets Cage as his freedom coordinate, Harry Partch as his technical coordinate, and Ives, Rudhyar, and Ashley as landmarks. Having outlined his universe, he then locates his favorite new musicians within it: Glenn Branca, Fred Frith, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and the Residents. Lack of editing is the book's weakness, for Gagne vacillates between incisive aural analysis and fanzine platitudes. When he says of the pauses in Branca's *Ascension*, "Unlike the opening of the *Spectacular Commodity*, nothing hangs in the air," I whip out the record and hear differences I'd never heard before. His insistence that *Commodity* is "really bitchen," however, just signals fans to nod their heads. If not a smooth writer, Gagne's an astute critic, and his bang-by-bang descriptions of his favorite music show it to you from the inside in layman's terms and in now-local, now-cosmic context. Fans' misunderstanding of a Residents Beatles parody becomes a lesson: "However hard you work at what you do, people hear what they want to hear, not whatever it is you're playing. Which is actually a relief..." (Same goes for people reading criticism.)

The book's best parts are Tyranny's articulate interview on puritanism in America and Gagne's objective gloss on the Branca symphonies, including background for

around, ne chides Wilfrid Mellers, is "surely the only intelligent approach to music." The *exact* problem with books by composers? "The practitioner-critic generally lacks that broad, catholic perceptiveness that marks the best of committed critics—a breadth best defined by the willingness to understand and explain works his taste finds abhorrent." Touché.

Kostelanetz is best at evoking personal glimpses of shadowy figures: Alan Hovhaness, Glenn Gould, P. D. Q. Bach's sad alter ego. Didn't you want to know that Peter Schickele's ear-training class was Phil Glass's favorite course at Juilliard? Kostelanetz always seizes to a judgment, and in concentrated doses, his glinting flakes of bravado snowball into presumptuousness. But his opinions are surgically precise, so uncontaminated by generality that the offending ones are easy to pick out. What remains is priceless.

David Nicholls's *American Experimental Music 1890-1940* is a hard grind for the lay reader. But musicians will enjoy seeing a British composer/scholar trace an American experimental movement with an objectivity that only a transatlantic outsider could muster. The book restores Charles Seeger (1886-1979)—Pete's father, whose music was mostly lost in a 1923 fire—to central prominence for his dissonant counterpoint systems, which inspired Ruth Crawford (his wife), Ruggles, Cowell, Lou Harrison, and others. Nicholls details the innovations Cowell invented in his *New Musical Resources* but never used, and, in a virtuoso finale, shows how indebted Cage was in his 1937 article "The Future of Music: Credo" to Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noise* and Carlos Chavez's *Toward a New Music*. No matter whether you go back to Ives or merely back to the Residents, John Cage turns out to be at the center. ■