

Before I start my presentation I wanted to bring up a few procedural points.

I would like to review the guidelines as to the the length and timing of our presentations. As I remember some time ago, we had agreed that our presentation time should be around half an hour. The last time I was presenting my paper, I was stopped and could not read my last paragraph, the paragraph that was supposed to give meaning and finality to my thoughts. That is why I made sure that this time my presentation would not be long. That way we could spend more time to discuss areas that would be of interest to you.

The other point that I wanted to make is in the form of a suggestion. I thought it would be advantageous to have members suggest topics of interest that could be discussed by those who have the expertise in that specific subject. I will suggest some examples.

1. I would like to know why our society treats criminals who molest and kill children, so gingerly and give them such light punishment.
2. Why are so many of our youth in search of spiritual meaning outside their traditional family religious beliefs and the problem of cults.
3. The religion of the Founding Fathers and the difference between Deism and Pantheism.

## **“But Is this Music?”            9 d**

### **John Cage and the Musical avant-garde**

In recent years there has been a noticeable decrease in the numbers of the concert going public. Audiences are having less exposure to good music, especially at an early age, when musical tastes are developed. As a result, the number of people who appreciate good music is in a decline. In addition, we have witnessed a widening of the gap between the appreciation of new compositions and the taste of the general concert going audiences. It is said that the average age of the concert going public is around 65 years and getting older.

There are several factors which have contributed to this situation and most significant of these has been the attitude of so many of the twentieth century composers, such as those of the Darmstadt school who became influential and achieved prominence in the 1950s and 60s. Some of these composers took special pride in the fact that their music was not accessible and that their music was not easy to understand. Some would rather not have an audience at all. It seemed like composers, such as those of the Darmstadt school, were creating

their own rules for all composers to follow. Serial music was in, tonality was out. Scales and triads constructed with thirds were not acceptable.

Other composers wrote music that was not supposed to be seen or heard by anyone. There were compositions that were to be felt more than heard. One composer experimented with patches of different carpet fragments with diverse textures that were placed on a sheet to be felt by the so called "listener". Shocking audiences was in and these composers thrived on the negative reaction they received. Creating controversy was becoming a primary objective.

In the early 1960s one of my composition teachers told me that unless I composed with the use of total serialization, I might as well forget about composing altogether. Pierre Boulez's "Structures for Two Pianos" had just been released and had become one of the idealized models. Total serialization meant that pitch, dynamics, and rhythm were all to be serialized. Most pitch serialization was to employ the 12 tone technique exemplified in the works of Schoenberg and his students Webern and Berg; all notes in an octave were supposed to be introduced before the recurrence of any of those pitches. Dynamics and length of individual notes were also serialized and ordered numerically.

These concepts and innovations were a welcome addition to the many diverse techniques available to the serious composer. The problem was that they were being forced upon the musical world and composers were supposed to follow them blindly. Composition students were told that these were the only viable ways to produce new music. I personally resented and disapproved this limiting approach to music making. Whenever I was given assignments to write music with the 12 tone technique I chose to use only eleven of the 12 notes. This became my personal secret during my student years. None of my teachers was aware of it, and none of them counted my sets to the 12<sup>th</sup> note to discover the discrepancy. Nowadays, whenever I write very chromatic music I still use a concentration of 11 notes.

Early in my career therefore, I made a conscious decision that if I ever became a composition teacher I would not use those confining and limiting methods, but would challenge the student to find his or her own voice from all possible sound sources. They could touch base with all the diverse techniques, but at no time any one style would be imposed upon them as their primary language. For more than thirty years I have done just that and students have responded in a most positive way.

Creativity is an extremely personal activity and should be treated as such. In order for a potential composer to develop properly, he or she should be given opportunities to grow from within. A student composer should be encouraged to make decisions. It is this unique approach and philosophy that has made the

Composition Program at Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory so remarkably successful. For the last ten years the BW student composers have distinguished themselves among other area university and college student composers whose compositions were performed by the Cleveland Chamber Symphony.

In order to be truly creative, one should learn how to make choices and work toward creating one's own compositional rules and style. Learning to write in the style of a specific composer is only a fraction of what is needed for compositional development. To learn from the vast material written by countless composers should therefore be a lifelong endeavor. In time, by making endless choices, the student composer will approach a sense of self-discovery. Finding one's own voice does not necessarily mean that the student composer should strive for finding a new language or creating sounds never heard before. However, should that happen, let it happen naturally within the process of this self-discovery.

In the 1950s and 60s we also witnessed all manners of experimental presentations. Many of them were intended to shock and confuse the listener. It seemed as if these composers were elated to see negative response from audiences. Accessible music was considered inferior and was to be avoided. Some wrote danger music and seemingly wanted to compete with the experimentation that was taking place in the visual arts. There was quite a bit happening in the visual arts that could be imitated. In David Cope's *New Directions in Music* we read:

"The decay of any movement or social direction begins when the thrust of its reason for existence is silenced. This *raison d'être* of the *avant-garde* movement centers on supposed shock value and "newness" of purpose and effect. Certainly the movement begins its death throws when an event in any of its art forms becomes so new, so shocking, as to virtually negate anything surpassing it. "

According to Robert Hughes of *Time*: "Rudolph Schwarzkogler, a Viennese artist born in 1940, a prime mover of the *avant-garde* of his time, had decided that his art, at least, depended not on the application of paint, but on the removal of his own flesh: So he proceeded, inch by inch to amputate his own penis, while a photographer recorded the act as an art event. In 1972, the resulting prints were reverently exhibited in that biennial motor show of Western art, Documenta 5 at Kassel. Successive acts of self-amputation finally did Schwarzkogler in . . . No doubt it could be argued by the proponents of body art . . . that Schwarzkogler's self-editing was not indulgent but brave, taking the audience's castration fears and reducing them to their most threatening quiddity. That the man was clearly as mad as a hatter, sick beyond rebuke, is not thought important; wasn't Van Gogh crazy too? But Schwarzkogler's gesture has a certain emblematic value. Having nothing to say, and nowhere to go but further out, he lopped himself and

called it art. As the article states Schwarzkogler is indeed dead, a victim of his own art.”

One composer, who stood out in the avant garde period, a fascinating man who could not be pinpointed, explained or categorized, was John Cage. His most significant work is his composition 4'33" in which a performer sits in front of the instrument without making any sound for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Since every moment of our lives we are surrounded by sound, it is up to us whether we discover the sound for ourselves as music or not.

A man of endless imagination and interests, he was more of a philosopher in search of an identity than he was a musician. At times he did not even seem to care to have an identity. He did not believe that a composer's personality should in any way influence the music the composer wrote. But, John Cage was also full of contradictions. "Sound should exist for its own sake regardless of the composer's input," he claimed. Yet during rehearsals of his own music he became exceedingly agitated and meticulous in demanding details that he had not provided in his general performance notes. At times he identified with the Dada philosophy, a nihilistic movement in the arts that flourished chiefly in France, Switzerland, and Germany from about 1916 to about 1920. Dada was based upon the principles of deliberate irrationality, anarchy, and cynicism and the rejection of laws of beauty and social organization. Cage also created music using the chance method and dabbled with I Ching. According to James Legge, *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, is the most widely read of the five [Chinese Classics](#). According to tradition the book was written by the legendary Chinese Emperor Fu Hsi (2953-2838 B.C.)

John Cage traveled extensively. In Europe he studied Gothic architecture and became interested in modern music and modern painting. Later he studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg for two years. Schoenberg informed him that he did not have an ear for harmony. Cage started experimentation with percussion instruments and the prepared piano. He wrote music for Merce Cunningham's modern dance company. Cage formulated the idea that the raw material of music should not be restricted to the so called musical tones but should comprise the complete range of audible sounds including noises.

In his book *Silence* John Cage states: "Try as you may to make a silence, we cannot. For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. "

John Cage seemed to thrive and be elated if he could shock the listener and he seemed to enjoy negative reaction from his listeners. He was very interested in Zen and was fascinated by the intangible. One of the central points of Zen is intuitive understanding. As a result, words and sentences have no fixed meaning, and logic is often irrelevant. Words have meaning only in relation to who is using them, whom they are talking to, and in what situation they are used.

In his autobiographical statement Cage writes: "I once asked Arragon, the historian, how history was written. He said, 'You have to invent it.' And later, "In Sevilla on a street corner I noticed the multiplicity of simultaneous visual and audible events all going together in one's experience and producing enjoyment. It was the beginning for me of theater and circus." So John Cage became very interested in theatrics and for many years he was presenting the so called "Happenings" with a prevailing spirit of "anything goes".

This brings me to the story of my first meeting with John Cage more than 43 years ago during my student days. It was at the 1962 Louisiana State University Contemporary Music Festival that I first encountered John Cage. I did not know much about him. He was that year's visiting composer. Many of his improvisatory compositions were performed and the last work on the program was presented by multiple radios placed around the auditorium which were "performed", each radio for a selected number of seconds creating a cacophony of musical and spoken excerpts and antiphonal bursts of sound. As a beginner student, I was totally puzzled and confused and later during the question and answer period, I ventured to ask what his definition of music was. His answer was as shocking and theatrical as his musical presentations. He first stared at me sternly, then he started making funny faces, he pulled his hair up in the air wiggled his head and started scratching the table in front him and then he froze, wide eyed and stared away. I was stunned, I did not know how to react and the words I was thinking of I could not say aloud. It would have been very improper. Other students were just as confused and insulted.

Almost exactly 30 years later in 1992, I was invited to attend a concert at New York's Carnegie Hall on the occasion of Armenian American composer Alan Hovanes' 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. That is when I met John Cage for the second time. Of course he did not recognize me but after all these years I was very much aware of who he was and I was very familiar with both his compositions and his philosophical writings. After the concert we were both guests at the reception presented by the Armenian Church. There was a large and rich table with all types of pastries and cooked food. We happened to stand together and many were coming to Mr. Cage asking him about his latest compositions and musical activities. As expected, he spoke in riddles and looked bored, giving confusing answers. He was still at the top of his game. Deliberately avoiding any discussion on music, I instead asked him how he liked the specific food he was eating. His answer was a classic John Cage. He looked very serious. He told me that he liked the food, that it was dates, and that it only grew on trees in

Armenia. "Try it," he said. I picked one of the small cooked meat rolls we were discussing and feigned disbelief, acting seemingly incredulous that this bit that tasted like meat would actually grow on a tree. "I am amazed," I told him and asked, "This actually grows on a tree?" He stared at me in disbelief. I must have looked very convincing. He was wondering whether I could be that naïve or there might be something wrong with me. He had no idea I was giving him back his medicine. He kept very close to me the rest of the evening. I could tell he was watching me and he often asked me questions. I had finally turned the tables. I was the one who was having fun.

I would like to end my presentation with a final thought. Although it is true that there are compositions that are not worthy of our attention, there is a danger that we pass judgment too soon about compositions that we do not understand. Some of the most prominent beloved composers were criticized harshly during their lifetime. Nowadays it is fashionable to criticize Arnold Schoenberg; we should be reminded however, that Arnold Schoenberg was the composer of "Verklaerte Nacht" and "Jacob's Ladder."

Nicolas Slonimsky's Lexicon of Musical Invective, Non – Acceptance of the unfamiliar, contains numerous examples of how masterful works of historic composers were severely criticized at the time of their inception. Debussy was criticized for writing music as ugly as his own face. Chopin could not write a decent melody and Beethoven's music was full of cacophony. To some un-oriented Orientals all Western music is unintelligible. One Jihei Hashigushi spoke his mind on the subject after attending the New York premiere of "Madama Butterfly" in February 1907. He wrote to a New York daily; "I can say nothing for the music of Madama Butterfly. Western music is too complicated for a Japanese. Even Caruso's celebrated singing does not appeal very much more than the barking of a dog in faraway woods."

To develop good taste in the appreciation of music, it helps to have early exposure to good music. Appreciation of good music is similar to developing a propensity to master languages. Preteen exposure to good music helps establish healthy amateurs. Unfortunately, most youngsters these days do not have that type of positive exposure and more and more of our youth are completely taken by the cheap uninspired music that is enticing and appealing because it is peppered with carnal connotations.

Nowadays, whenever young students admit that they cannot appreciate a certain historically recognized masterpiece; I advise them to wait until they have more exposure and to give themselves a chance, and not to come to hasty conclusions. The positive opinions about a composition from so many could not all be wrong. And then I tell them, "Someday maybe you will appreciate Mozart."

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