

"OUR PRESENCE TOGETHER IN CHAOS":

JOHN CAGE VS. GLENN BRANCA, REVISITED

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John Cage was famous for constructing his liberating creative ethos around, among other things, the claim that "*there is no noise...only sounds.*" His concurrent suggestion that noise was only "disturbing" when we did not pay attention to it, and "fascinating" when we did, still carries with it an exhilarating air of adventurousness in much of the modern world. His equanimity in the face of potentially frightening, unfamiliar sonic information was clearly an inspiration to thousands of audio progeny; a license to create using the totality of sound and unencumbered by any specific method (although criticisms of Cageian formalism are now abundant enough if you look for them.) All this begs the question: how faithful was Cage, in actuality, to his apparent acceptance of all sounds? Was there not a moment or two in which he broke with form, and found himself fleeing from some sound environment that was too alienating or overwhelming? By his own admission in *Silence*, his heavily referenced 1961 collection of writings, Cage was initially repelled by Beethoven, jazz, and *bel canto* vocalizing. However, he homeopathically cured himself of this dislike by incorporating these styles into his own unorthodox, post-orchestral works. For example, *Williams Mix* - Cage's pioneering octophonic composition for magnetic tape - featured snippets of Beethoven, while jazz found its way into his fifth and final *Imaginary Landscape* "for any 42 recordings." Amusingly, Cage even dared to use the widely despised form of Muzak as part of the proposed soundtrack to Richard Lippold's 1962 sculpture installation in Manhattan's Pan Am building. All told, Cage's track record of embracing subjectively and objectively unlovable sounds tended to validate his beliefs, rather than to contradict them.

However, a funny thing happened in Chicago in 1982, while Cage was in attendance at a Glenn Branca symphony performance at the 'New Music America' festival, which also included Meredith Monk, Charlemagne Palestine and Harold Budd on the bill. Branca was, at the time, airing one of his first symphonies for massed electric guitars - *Indeterminate Activity of Resultant Masses* - which featured instrumental contributions from erstwhile members of Y Pants, Sonic Youth and Elliot Sharp's ensembles. When listened to today, the piece sounds positively benign: a structured series of ringing, hovering crescendos and decrescendos punctuated with well-integrated percussion, and a level of dissonance that would hardly be grating to audiences schooled in the differing degrees of 20th century atonality (Scriabin, Stravinsky, Schoenbergian serialism / 'pan-tonality' etc.) Yet Cage found

himself going weak in the knees before this exhibition, as confessed in a post-concert interview recorded by Wim Mertens for the festival souvenir *Chicago '82: A Dip In The Lake* (this was released by the Belgian Les Disques du Crépuscule the following year, and was somewhat ironically dedicated to Cage, even being released to coincide with his seventieth birthday.) So while this is the centenary year of John Cage, it is also the thirtieth anniversary of this incident. Although most Cage scholars would not rate it as having watershed importance for the composer, and it doesn't even garner a mention in one of the most recent Cage overviews (Kenneth Silverman's 2010 biography *Begin Again*), I do think it stands as a moment when Cage was caught off guard and was unable to offer a decisive rebuttal to an aesthetic and ideological challenge. Here was the man who famously suggested "*let us say 'yes' to our presence together in Chaos,*" now fleeing from a form that many a casual listener would have seen as chaotic.

Given Cage's negative attitude towards much 'experimental' music, especially that which attempted to make novel instrumentation or extended techniques mimic the accepted conventions of European orchestral tradition, his aversion to Branca was not really a surprise. Nor would scholars of Cage be taken aback by his assessment of Branca's work as "an example of sheer determination...of one person to be followed by the others," wherein instrumentalists were "given no freedom whatsoever" and "the only breath of fresh air comes...when the technology collapses (the amplifier broke.)" Cage also disdainfully noted how performance of Branca's music, like that of his contemporary Laurie Anderson, "required" Branca himself to be on hand at performances in order to validate the music, whereas Cage attempted to remove himself from the concert environment as a necessary prerequisite to the appreciation of sounds-in-themselves. So, what *was* surprising about this conversation was the manner in which Cage back-pedaled on some of his most dearly held beliefs when Mertens initiated the following exchange:

Mertens: you also have all this [unintelligible] in mind, the goals- even if you say it's gonna be a "non-goal" for me, it's also a determination that you have thought before you wrote the piece. That you defined your *non-goal* as a goal, also...

Cage: No, that's a misuse of the language. If you say that a non-goal is a goal, then you're using the language to defeat the mind. If I can't say "non-goal" and *mean* "non-goal," instead of meaning "goal" again, then the language is of no use. I have a different attitude toward life than [Branca] is expressing [laughs]...

Cage's choice of words here - "defeating the mind" - will raise some eyebrows among adherents of Zen, since he seems to be speaking in a pejorative sense about a reverently held state known as *musbin* ["no-mind"] that Zen meditation is intended to bring about. D.T. Suzuki, perhaps Cage's primary influence in the adoption of Zen techniques, recognized it as "the most essential element in the study of Zen."

More interestingly, though, is the considerable history of this technique's being encouraged in environments far from the stereotypical, tranquil meditation space. Brian Daizen Victoria, in his cautionary work *Zen At War*, has expertly pointed out the adoption of *musbin* for use on the battle grounds of Imperial Japan and post-Occupation corporate Japan: "facilitating as it does complete absorption in the present moment, [it] can be applied to any kind of work, from [...] fighting selflessly on the battlefield to manufacturing computer components with flawless precision." Cage must certainly have been familiar with Suzuki's works that dealt with "soldier Zen," or with his Tokugawa-era predecessors' concept of *tokinokoe zazen* ["Zen in the midst of war cries"]- their insistence that "meditation that could not be applied to the battlefield was useless." When considering all this, did Mertens' advanced appreciation for Branca's aural overloads, his refusal to flinch before their cyclonic force, make him more inadvertently "Zen" than Cage set out to be? Continuing with his justification for Branca's music, Mertens suggests as much:

Mertens: It's only about energies. It's an accumulation of energies without content, without dialectics in it- without communication, without feedback. It's very libidinal [...] it's probably useless...

Cage: Then how can you like it if it's useless, or how can you use it if it's useless? I find it then terrifying...

Again, by forwarding an argument that music must be utilitarian to be enjoyable, Cage seems to be refuting much of what he wrote, lectured on, and created within and without the sonic sphere. His decision to make a subject-less / ego-less form of organized sound, arrived at in the early 1950s, would have to preclude a music that had any pre-determined aim or use, or had to assume that uselessness was one possible outcome of indeterminate play. If we take "meaninglessness" to be the *sine qua non* of "uselessness," then Cage was explicit about his encouragement of the former. He even engaged in the kind of paradoxical speech that he chastises Mertens for in this scenario. See, for example, his suggestion in *Silence* that "the grand thing about the human mind is that it can turn the tables, and see meaninglessness as ultimate meaning."

So, his protest to Mertens is 'out of character' enough to bring him nearer to ideological enemies like Cornelius Cardew, a man who delighted in pointing out how Cage's growing popularity within a self-absorbed high society was a natural result of non-committal personal politics (Cardew's bitterness possibly stemmed in part from his role, in the 1970s, as an accompanying musician on the popular French tours of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.) Cardew also accused Cage of using an 'overload' aesthetic as a devious means of hypnotizing and / or muting potential dissenters: of his 1967 performance piece *Musicircus*, Cardew grumbled that "you will find banks of TV tubes, modulators and other 'spaghetti' of all kinds [in the performance space], ensuring that in the event of anyone wishing to say something coherent, they will be totally inaudible to the public." The sentiment, while not perfectly mirroring Cage's disdain for Branca's walls of amplification and reliance on a technological 'umbilical cord', comes strikingly close.

On the *Chicago '82* recording, there is no apparent disrespect or hostility between the two conversational partners (you can hear for yourself [by accessing it here](#)). Mertens is, unlike Cornelius Cardew, not in the business of making Cage out to be some kind of self-contradicting, duplicitous, or irrelevant old fool. Although their argument may have intensified or been further elaborated later, the recorded evidence here shows two opposing views that are more curious to know why the opponent's view works than they are to immediately discredit one another. That said, Cage's confusion of dominating, directed force with an invigorating and un-targeted energy, as evinced on this recorded dialogue, is a disappointing slip-up that has not been given the attention it should have.

Before going any further, it should be noted that I do not see the Cage / Mertens encounter as proof of some unbridgeable chasm dividing the generations of sonic explorers. Enough evidence exists to show that Branca was not unanimously adored by his contemporaries, let alone by the 'grand old men' of experimentalism like Cage. For example, a 1984 editorial from one-time collaborator Z'ev acidly referred to Branca as a composer who "...believed the hype about himself...people said he was the greatest living composer, he thought he was the greatest living composer." More damningly, he insists that Europe was right to ignore Branca's aspirations as a serious symphonic composer, advertising his concerts from that era as being performances of the "Glenn Branca Band" rather than his preferred "Glenn Branca and Symphony." If all that is not enough, Z'ev names his participation in Branca's *Symphony #2* - he is audible on the Atavistic CD release of this work - as "one of the biggest professional mistakes in my life." He alleges that the composer falsely claimed to have given Z'ev directions on the performance of the piece (Z'ev claims otherwise, i.e. that he wrote his own parts and designed his own percussion instruments.) With this last criticism, at least, Z'ev seems to lend credence to Cage's fear of the modern composer re-emerging as a dictatorial figure, to which Cage stood opposed as the champion of non-purposive sounds.

The Mertens / Cage disagreement, despite its 'footnote' status in the annals of art music, still maintains relevance today. This is not due so much to the fame of its participants, but to the irresolvable nature of the larger conflict: there is still no solid consensus over the role that high intensity plays in the various art forms. There is still also plenty of justifiable concern over the way in which high volume and an uninterrupted flux of data can muzzle an audience and disable its ability to point out, a la 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' a fundamental lack of ideas. One could even draw an analogy to that particularly brash variety of tourist who, upon realizing their hosts can't understand English, merely repeat their English-language inquiries at maximum volume instead of seeking out translation help, trying to communicate via miming, etc. As much as some would like to think otherwise, though, all the arts dealing in extremes of sensory information, be it Branca's noise or Cage's silence, remain highly malleable and applicable to a very diverse number of ends (or non-ends, as the case may be.) Reactions can be expected to be equally diverse, a point underscored by Jacques Attali's denunciation of Cage's performed silences for their "giving back the right to *speak to people who do not want it.*" When he likens this to Yves Klein's "selling

the air in a gallery for a blank check" in its inability to inspire truly new forms, Attali's cynicism may be harsh, but he nonetheless outlines the challenges that still face present-day purveyors of "silence-as-statement" (Radu Malfatti, Taku Sugimoto, etc.) and implies the difficulty involved in making an audience go beyond the threshold that "extreme" art brings them to the brink of.

In the final estimation, Cage's reaction to the 'fascistic' energy of Branca's work is tragic: it represents a missed opportunity for more constructive dialogue between two individuals who, each in his own way, had attempted to transform their respective environments using means outside of instrumental rationality (Branca's fascination with mathematics and 'rigorous composition', though more decidedly rational than Cage's approach, did not make him hostile to, say, more esoteric reflection on the nature of mathematics and music.) A more mutually respectful conversation between the two composers might have helped to calm anxieties about the type of chaotic or nihilistic society that would result if their works were accepted as the norm. Instead, as time wore on, both composers would endure greater criticism over how their methods supposedly camouflaged or deflected attention from personal flaws. Branca would be prone to the usual vulgar insinuations that audacious "bigness" was compensation for some personal feeling of insignificance, while Cage sustained similar attacks on his aleatory method's implications: the Communist condemnation from Cornelius Cardew and John Tilbury mocked Cage's method as being an easy way to opt out of socio-political activism, while the composer Gerald Pape simply pointed to the random "letting sound be itself" ethos as being motivated by frustration rather than inspiration ("when [Cage] tried to compose sad music, he said that people laughed...people were unable to understand what he was expressing in his music, therefore Cage decided to eliminate all subjective expression from his music.")

Regrettably, the chance for a significant Cage / Branca summit is long gone, but maybe the authority of these individuals is not needed to approve further research into the relation of intentionality to musical quality, or of sound energy to power and social control. All music - not only that of the avant-garde that both Cage and Branca worked in - has a strange way of escaping the intentions of its originators and occasionally becoming antithetical to them, a mystery that I don't feel was ever solved in Cage's lifetime. It is up to us to either find out why that may be, or to merely take comfort in music's continuing resistance to complete domestication.



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