

John Cage Collection, ca. 1988-1992



Percussive Arts Society
110 West Washington Street, Suite A
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

Summary

Title: John Cage Collection

Dates: ca. 1988-1992

Extent: 2 manuscript folders

Language: The materials in the collection are in English.

Repository: Percussive Arts Society, 110 West Washington Street, Suite A, Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

Administrative Information

Accession(s): 2011.14

Donor(s) and date(s) of acquisition: Barry Michael Williams (2011)

Processed by: Alysha Zemanek, July 2020

Access and Restrictions: This collection is open to the public without restriction.

Rights statements: The reproduction and publication of copyrighted materials is regulated by the copyright laws of the United States (U.S. Code, Title 17).

Preferred Citation: John Cage Collection, ca. 1988-1992. Percussive Arts Society Archive, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Notes/other:

Biographical Sketch:

Influential 20th century American composer John Milton Cage, Jr. was born in Los Angeles, California on September 5, 1912. His early exposure to music came in the form of piano lessons from his aunt. Cage graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1928 as class valedictorian. He then attended Pomona College for two years before leaving to travel Europe.

In 1931, Cage returned to the U.S. and began to study with pianist Richard Buhlig. Eventually, Buhlig suggested Cage send his early compositions to Henry Cowell. Cowell directed Cage to study with Arnold Schoenberg's first American student, Adolf Weiss, before attempting to study composition with Schoenberg himself. So in 1933, Cage moved to New York City in order to study with Weiss. He also attended Cowell's classes at the New School for Social Research. From 1935 to 1937, Cage studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg did not charge Cage for his time, instead extracting a promise that Cage would devote his life to music.

Cage moved to Seattle in 1938 to become a part of the faculty at the Cornish School. Using a collection of instruments left at the school by a German dancer, Cage formed a percussion ensemble of faculty members, students, and dancers. These early performances were received well by the dance community but drew little interest from trained percussionists. Among the performers was dancer and choreographer

Percussive Arts Society: John Cage Collection Finding Aid, rev. 2020.

Merce Cunningham. Cage would later continue a close association with Cunningham, reflected in their common interest in using chance in their compositions.

Cage's early compositions were written in the 12-tone method Schoenberg used. However, by 1939 he began experimenting with unorthodox instruments, including tape recorders, record players, radios, and the prepared piano, his own invention. In the late 1930s, Cage also began exploring a method he called "micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure," where units of time were grouped together similarly on both the small and large scale. From 1930 to 1950, Cage composed over 16 percussion scores and invented procedures and theories for composing percussion music. Cage's interest was in noise, which made percussion a central component in his works. Biographer David Revill wrote that Cage "saw percussion music as a way to liberate noise from its subordination to pitched sound."

Cage began teaching at Mills College in 1940, where he began concentrating on music for dance. In the fall of 1941, he moved to Chicago to teach at the School of Design. While in Chicago, Cage's work gained publicity but was not taken very seriously. A year later, Cage moved to New York where he continued his work in dance and percussion. In the mid 1940s, Cage became upset at the unreliability of communication through music. Listeners would often mistake the emotions Cage wanted to convey in his compositions. Instead of trying to improve his expression, Cage decided to cut out the aspect of communication from his music.

In the 1950s, Cage developed new methods of composing using elements of chance and ways to remove the composer's personal taste from the compositional process. He also began to reject the idea of improvisation. The central method of chance he used was the I-Ching, the traditional Chinese book of wisdom. He would use this technique to determine the sequence of most of his pieces for the rest of his life. Other methods included not specifying the instruments or number of performers, giving no set duration for sounds or entire pieces, and using inexact notation. Cage's later works extended these concepts to other media, such as light shows, slide projections, and costumed performers. Beginning in the 1970s, Cage also developed his own version of improvisation.

In addition to his influence on music composition, Cage was also known for his writings and lectures. He published several books including "Silence: Lectures and Writings" and "M: Writings '67-'72." John Cage died on August 12, 1992 in New York City.

Bibliography:

Encyclopedia Britannica. "John Cage." Accessed June 23, 2020.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Cage>

Percussive Arts Society. "Hall of Fame: John Cage." Accessed June 23, 2020.

<https://www.pas.org/about/hall-of-fame/john-cage>

Williams, B. Michael. "John Cage: Professor, Maestro, Percussionist, Composer." *Percussive Notes* 36, no. 4 (August 1998): 55-61.

Scope and Content:

Percussive Arts Society: John Cage Collection Finding Aid, rev. 2020.

This collection consists of correspondence from John Cage to Barry Michael Williams from February 22, 1988 to December 10, 1990. Other correspondence to Williams includes invitations from the Cunningham Dance Foundation to attend a John Cage celebration event and a memorial event. The collection also contains a few unidentified 35 mm negatives.

Container Listing:

BOX	FOLDER
1	Correspondence to Barry Michael Williams, February 1988-October 1992
1	Negatives, undated