

The Cambridge Companion to
JOHN CAGE

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EDITED BY
David Nicholls



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1 Cage and America

DAVID NICHOLLS

Prelude

Given that he was born, bred, and educated in the United States, the supposition that John Cage's aesthetic outlook was nurtured and majorly influenced by his home nation might seem obvious to the point of redundancy. However, not every American has achieved the same degree of national and international fame and infamy, as has Cage; nor has any other American artist – with the possible exception of Andy Warhol – had such a huge impact on the global development of culture, whether “high” or “pop.” Thus the fact that Cage was arguably unique among Americans – let alone among American musicians – suggests that his particular relationship with America may have been somewhat out of the ordinary.

Each of us, by the time of our maturity, will have defined what might be termed an individual aesthetic locus. Put simply, this is a set of choices – relating to lifestyle, garb, décor, deportment, belief, culture, and so on – with which we (hopefully) feel comfortable; it is also, de facto, the image of ourselves we project to others. Many complex factors will have engaged and entwined during our formative years, in order that such an aesthetic locus may form: some will be genetic, others environmental; some inevitable, others unpredictable. For artists (in the broadest sense of that word) the process is knottier still, for the aesthetic locus is projected not only materially (through clothing, food, or furniture), but also transcendently (through the artistic objects created by, but existing apart from, the artist).

In March 1943, a percussion ensemble founded and conducted by Cage was the subject of a spread in *Life* magazine. The article had been prompted by a concert, at New York's prestigious Museum of Modern Art a month earlier, in which “an orchestra of earnest, dressed-up musicians sat on the stage and began to hit things with sticks and hands . . . The audience, which was very high-brow, listened intently without seeming to be disturbed at the noisy results.” The concert had been sponsored by the League of Composers, and included works by Lou Harrison (*Counterdance in the Spring* and *Canticle*), Henry Cowell (*Ostinato Pianissimo*), Jose Ardévol (*Preludio a 11*) and Amadeo Roldán (*Ritmicas V & VI*). Pride of place was reserved for Cage himself, who was represented by three works: *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939), *Imaginary Landscape No. 3* (1942), and the recently completed *Amores* (1943). The composer-conductor was described by

Life as “a patient, humorous, 30-year-old Californian . . . the most active percussion musician in the U.S., [who] believes that when people today get to understand and like his music . . . they will find new beauty in everyday modern life . . .” Among the photographs in the spread is one captioned “Pieces of shaped bronze sound like anvils . . . Player is Xenia Cage, the conductor’s wife, who took up percussion after marriage.” Among the other performers was Merce Cunningham.¹

There were, of course, a number of important periods after 1943 when American influences of various kinds affected Cage: witness, for instance, the impact of the Abstract Expressionist painters in the early 1950s, or of the work of Henry David Thoreau, from the early 1970s onwards. Details of such influences will emerge elsewhere in this volume. But by 1943 Cage’s *fundamental* aesthetic locus, which so intrigued *Life*, had largely formed; what followed in the remaining half century of his life, while contributing to his developing persona, was also to a considerable degree a result of choices predicated on the needs of that persona. The principal purpose of the present chapter, then, is to examine via a series of topical headings the complex factors that had engaged and entwined during Cage’s formative years, leading him to the momentous MOMA concert in 1943.²

Family

“Their marriage was a good one between bad people”³

When John Milton Cage Jr. was born in Los Angeles on September 5, 1912, his ancestors had already resided in America for the best part of two centuries. As he noted in 1976, “My family’s roots are completely American. There was a John Cage who helped Washington in the surveying of Virginia” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 1). Many later family members lived mainly west of the Appalachians; and several (on the male side) were active as preachers. Thus Cage’s experience of growing up in the United States was already thrice removed from that of two close contemporaries – Aaron Copland (1900–1990) and George Gershwin (1898–1937) – for he was neither East Coast in location, Jewish in ethnicity and religion, nor first-generation American by birth. Accordingly, he was entirely free from any perceived necessity (whether personal or societal) to assimilate or conform.⁴ In this, he was very much his parents’ (only) child: both John Milton Cage Sr. (1886–1964) and Lucretia (“Crete”) Harvey (1885–1969) were somewhat unconventional, the former an idealistic inventor (for instance of a submarine that gave off bubbles), the latter a sometime journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*. Anecdotes concerning Crete (and to a rather lesser extent John Sr.) adorn the pages of *Silence* and

A Year from Monday, notably in the texts “Indeterminacy” and “How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run” (Cage 1961, pp. 260–273; 1967, pp. 133–140). Some sense of the Cages’ marital equilibrium may be gleaned from an aphoristic aside on page 72 of *A Year from Monday*: “I was arguing with Mother. I turned to Dad. He spoke. ‘Son John, your mother is always right, even when she’s wrong.’”

If independence of thought and mind is a particularly (or even peculiarly) American character trait, then there was certainly a good deal of it in the family gene pool for Cage to inherit. As mentioned above, a high percentage of his forebears were ministers, and of these several were notable for a certain doggedness in the pursuit of unpromising quarry. Before the Civil War his great grandfather, Adolphus Cage, preached to both blacks and whites in Tennessee, before moving on to Colorado. Cage’s grandfather, Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage, followed Adolphus into the Methodist Episcopal Church: amongst other exploits, Gustavus traveled to Utah to decry Mormonism, and to Wyoming to work as a missionary. His grandson described him as “a man of extraordinary puritanical righteousness [who] would get very angry with people who didn’t agree with him. As a child my father used to run away from home whenever he got the chance” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 1). John Cage Jr. may not have inherited his grandfather’s temper, but the latter’s religious zeal found early expression: as a child, John Jr. was “very much impressed by the notion of turning the other cheek” (quoted in Revill 1992, p. 31); in his teenage years, he wished – like Gustavus – to become a Methodist Episcopal minister; and slightly later, at age sixteen, he provoked family furor when he announced his intention of joining the Liberal Catholic Church as an acolyte. A striking degree of self-belief also characterizes both Gustavus and (as will become apparent elsewhere in this volume) John Jr. Indeed, this was true of John Cage Sr., too, for he was so convinced of the merits of his gasoline-powered submarine that he set “the world’s record for staying underwater . . . by making an experimental trip on Friday the thirteenth, with a crew of thirteen, staying under water for thirteen hours” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 1).

A further American family trait was a pioneer tendency to seek out pastures new: in the late eighteenth century William Cage moved his family from Virginia to the (then) frontier territory of Tennessee, while the westward relocation of William’s grandson, Adolphus, is discussed above. Later, the financial instability associated with John Sr.’s inventions led to frequent changes of home, state, and even country: before John Jr. was twelve, he had already lived in California (six or more locations in greater Los Angeles), Michigan (Ann Arbor and Detroit), and Ontario, Canada. One can only speculate on the effect so many moves (and the financial necessities underlying them) may have had on the marriage between John

Sr. and Crete, though some of John Jr.'s anecdotes are indicative and Revill (1992, p. 22) reports that "Every so often [Crete] would leave the house, saying she was never coming back, and each time John senior would console his frightened son, assuring him that before long she would return." What is known is that Crete "never enjoyed having a good time" (Cage 1967, p. 69), and had been married twice before her espousal to John Sr., though she could never remember the name of her first husband (Cage 1972, p. 102). John Sr., meanwhile, was once overheard saying to Crete, "Get ready: we're going to New Zealand Saturday." His son got ready, reading "everything I could find in the school library about New Zealand. Saturday came. Nothing happened. The project was not even mentioned . . ." (Cage 1961, p. 6). The effects of such volatility on John Jr. were predictable, and are discussed below.

Three other family members deserve mention: Cage's maternal grandmother, who (like several other of Crete's relatives) lived in the family home during Cage's childhood, also possessed a powerful religious zeal (Hines 1994, pp. 67, 72). As Cage attempted one day to tiptoe across the living room to retrieve a manuscript, she woke from a deep sleep to address him sharply: "John, are you ready for the second coming of the Lord?" (Cage 1967, p. 20). Crete's sister Marge "had a beautiful contralto voice [which] Cage loved to hear . . . at church every Sunday", while another sister, Phoebe, was among John Jr.'s piano teachers: "She was devoted to late nineteenth-century music and expected her charge to feel the same way" (Revill 1992, p. 24). This perhaps in part explains Cage's early obsession with the music of Edvard Grieg: "I . . . imagined devoting my life to the performance of his works alone, for they did not seem to me to be too difficult, and I loved them" (Tomkins 1976, p. 77). While not wishing to over-emphasize the marterteral influences of Marge and Phoebe, it is perhaps significant that Cage's first published vocal work – the Five Songs of 1938 – is for contralto, and that he later became devoted to the music of another *fin-de-siècle* miniaturist, Erik Satie. Music was clearly an important part of Cage's family life, for Crete – at the time of her meeting John Sr. – had been the pianist in Gustavus's church. Indeed, it was apparently Crete who took John Jr., aged five, to his first symphony concert, where "he stood in the aisle utterly absorbed" (Revill 1992, p. 23). However, it was only after great persistence that he was allowed music lessons, and in later life was barely tolerated as a musician: on hearing her son's Quartet for any percussion (1935) Crete stated "I enjoyed it, but where are you going to put it?" Many years on, she could still remark, disparagingly, "I've listened to your record several times. After hearing all those stories about your childhood, I keep asking myself, 'Where was it that I failed?'" (Cage 1961, pp. 264, 273).⁵

Place

“When I was growing up in California there were two things that everyone assumed were good for you . . . sunshine and orange juice.” (Cage 1961, p. 88)

As has already been noted, Cage spent much of his childhood in transit. He was an only child, and one effect of so many relocations both within and without greater Los Angeles must have been the necessity of self-reliance. During his first decade, Cage would have had little opportunity to develop lasting friendships, and it is noteworthy that of the many anecdotes he related concerning his childhood, few contain mention of any other children.⁶ Rather, we read of an isolated boy – perhaps trying to avoid the tensions of his home – who “sought adventure, exploring the canyons and marshes of [Los Angeles’s] inland countryside, spying one day on a gypsy encampment” (Revill 1992, p. 23). Elsewhere, Cage writes of a period when the family was residing in Ocean Park:

I was *sent out* every morning to the beach where I spent the day building roly-coasters in the sand, complicated downhill tracks with tunnels and inclines upon which I rolled a small hard rubber ball. Every day toward noon I fainted because the sun was too much for me . . . It took me much longer, about thirty-five years in fact, to learn that orange juice was not good for me either. (Cage 1961, p. 88; emphasis mine)

Other children do momentarily flit through the Cagean world – albeit anonymously – in 1924 or 1925, when Cage was twelve and a tenderfoot Boy Scout. He persuaded a Los Angeles radio station, KNX, to broadcast a weekly Scout programme: Cage was “the master of ceremonies” (Kostelanetz & Cage 1989, p. 273) and the content of the hour-long show (which ran for around two years) was provided by “Individual Scouts [who] all gave their services willingly. There were boy sopranos; trumpet, trombone, and piano soloists; and Scouts who spoke on their experiences building fires and tying knots” (Cage 1967, p. 132). There was also a “ten-minute inspirational talk from a member of the clergy” and “When there was no one else to perform I played piano solos . . .” (Kostelanetz & Cage 1989, p. 273).

Cage’s enforced solitude had a downside, of course: whatever elementary school he attended in his childhood, the precociously talented boy achieved “A” grades; unfortunately, he was also often the victim of bullying. “I was what is called a sissy, so that I was continually under attack from other children. They would lie in ambush [outside school] and would laugh at me every time I answered a question in school” (Revill 1992, p. 22). In this general context, one can begin to understand why Cage’s anecdotes concerning childhood cluster around his own (out-of-school) experiences, family

reminiscences, and topics of pleasure or success (such as music lessons or the radio show) rather than the more obvious classroom or “gang” activities. Although the bullying and other such unpleasantnesses had halted by the time Cage was a teenage pupil at Los Angeles High School (1923–28), he appears nowhere to recall, with fondness (or otherwise), any teacher other than those he visited for piano.

Until the summer of 1930, when he dropped out of Pomona College, Cage remained in Los Angeles. The remainder of the period until 1943, though, saw him experience as a young adult a wide range of new, and often very different, environments. Foremost among these was Paris. Having left Pomona, persuaded his parents that “a trip to Europe would be more useful than two more years of college,” hitch-hiked to Galveston, and boarded a trans-Atlantic steamer, he arrived in a city that “enchanted but rather overwhelmed the seventeen-year-old Cage” (Tomkins 1976, p. 78). It is difficult to pinpoint precisely the source of Cage’s tendency towards obsessiveness – though one can speculate that both Gustavus and John Sr. may have set the mold – but by 1930 it was already well developed. Cage’s desire to devote his life to the performance of Grieg’s piano works was noted earlier. In the 1950s and 1960s he amassed an impressive library of mycological texts, later donated to the University of California at Santa Cruz; and from the 1970s onwards, the mushroom books were replaced by plants, of which there were eventually several hundred. Cage’s obsession while in Paris was Gothic architecture, especially “the flamboyant style of the fifteenth century. In this style my interest was attracted by balustrades. These I studied for six weeks in the Bibliothèque Mazarin, getting to the library when the doors were opened and not leaving until they were closed” (Cage 1961, p. 261). While in Paris, Cage also discovered the music of Bach, Stravinsky, and Scriabin; with supreme irony, he probably left the city before the June 6, 1931, concert given there by the Pan American Association of Composers, which included pieces by Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, and two of Cage’s future teachers, Adolph Weiss and Henry Cowell. The further importance of this visit to Europe is discussed in Chapter 2.

In late 1931, Cage returned to America. He spent the next two or so years in California, where – among other things – he wrote music, painted pictures, gave lectures to housewives in Santa Monica, carried out research assignments for his father, fell in love with Xenia Andreevna Kashevaroff (whom he eventually married in June 1935) and, in Carmel, had his first encounters with mushrooms. As discussed below, in “Education,” Cage also began to receive formal tuition in composition during this period; ultimately, this led him in 1934 to New York, where he stayed for approximately eight months, studying with Weiss.⁷ In her book *Making Music Modern*,

Carol J. Oja describes in vivid detail the city's extraordinary musical life during the 1920s and early 1930s, and the possibilities that existed for young composers: "New York City placed [them] at an auspicious cultural crossroads. There they could stand, with all their belongings in one suitcase, free to roam in whatever direction their imaginations might lead" (Oja 2000, p. 6). Although by 1934 the Depression had cut deeply into most aspects of American life, there were still concerts of contemporary music in New York, as well as Cowell's various activities at the New School for Social Research, and in connection with his New Music Edition. Thus it is rather odd to find Cage failing completely in later years to mention the inevitable impact on him that the city must have had. Indeed, his recollections are almost suspiciously down-beat: in *Silence* (p. 268) he writes about his experiences working at the Brooklyn YWCA; elsewhere, he talks of acting as Cowell's New School assistant, and of "play[ing] bridge every evening with Mr. and Mrs. Weiss and Henry Cowell – or sometimes with the Weisses and Wallingford Riegger" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 7).

It may be that in this, as in other aspects of his autobiography, Cage was less than direct when discussing the most formative influences on his aesthetic locus. The sources for his stunning manifesto, "The Future of Music: Credo" (Cage c. 1938–40) were casually revealed in an obscure list, made in 1960–61, of the ten books that had most influenced his thought (Nicholls 1990, p. 190). And it was only in 1959, in his "History of Experimental Music in the United States" (Cage 1961, pp. 67–75), that Cage first mentioned a number of American composers with whose work he would first have come into contact at this time: these include Edgard Varèse, Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, William Russell, Leo Ornstein, Dane Rudhyar, Henry Brant, Ruth Crawford, and Harry Partch.⁸ The key to unlocking this little puzzle – as with so much else in American music in the earlier twentieth century – is Henry Cowell, whom Cage describes in his article as

for many years the open sesame for new music in America. Most selflessly he published the New Music Edition and encouraged the young to discover new directions. From him, as from an efficient information booth, you could always get not only the address and telephone number of anyone working in a lively way in music, but you could also get an unbiased introduction from him as to what that anyone was doing.

(Cage 1961, p. 71)

Cage had met Cowell in 1933, and it was at Cowell's suggestion that he moved temporarily to New York. As far as can be determined, Cowell was based in Manhattan from September through December 1934 inclusive; also resident in, or visitors to, the city during Cage's sojourn were Varèse, Ives, Ruggles, Russell, Brant, Crawford, and Partch. (Ornstein was by this

time living in Philadelphia, but he had been an important influence on Cowell's use of tone clusters. Rudhyar, meanwhile, had lived since 1920 in California. Cage may have met him there, or Rudhyar may have made an unverifiable visit to New York during this period.) While there is documentary evidence for Cage actually meeting only Partch at this time – “I was with him [in NYC] when he received his first grant” (Cage 1981a) – Cowell's *New Music* activities create further, much stronger, links with the remainder of the group. During 1934–35, *New Music Quarterly* published works by Rudhyar (*Granites*) and Ives (Eighteen [recte Nineteen] Songs), while the associated Orchestra Series issued Varèse's *Ionisation*, Rudhyar's *Sinfonietta*, Ruggles's *Sun-Treader*, and the second movement of Ives's Fourth Symphony. During the same period, the newly founded *New Music Quarterly Recordings* released Weiss's Three Songs, the slow movement of Crawford's String Quartet, Ives's *Barn Dance* (from *Washington's Birthday*), *In the Night*, and *General William Booth Enters Into Heaven*, and Ruggles's *Lilacs* and *Toys*. Given that Cage had been associated with Cowell in California prior to his move to New York, and was Cowell's assistant at the New School for some of the time he spent in Manhattan, it would be very odd indeed if he had not become acquainted with these works during this short but crucial formative period. What is certain is that in Cage's 1959 essay, the works or techniques named or alluded to include Varèse's *Ionisation*, Russell's percussion pieces (the *Fugue for Eight Percussion Instruments* had appeared in *New Music's* Orchestra Series in 1933, and the *Three Dance Movements* would follow in 1936), “the clusters of Leo Ornstein, the resonances of Dane Rudhyar . . . the sliding tones of Ruth Crawford [which could refer to either the String Quartet or the Three Songs, which Cowell had published in 1933] and . . . the microtones and novel instruments of Harry Partch” (Cage 1961, pp. 71–73). What is equally certain is that 1935 saw the emergence of those features that would by 1943 make Cage's music worthy of attention in *Life* (see Chapter 4).

Cage's locations during the remaining years through 1943 were similarly significant. During 1935–38 he was again in Los Angeles, though this time as a married man: at first he studied with Schoenberg; later he met and putatively collaborated with the experimental film maker Oscar Fischinger, before finally taking up a variety of temporary positions at U.C.L.A. Among the long-term benefits of this period was Fischinger's suggestion that there is a “spirit . . . inside each of the objects of this world[;] . . . all we need to do to liberate that spirit is to brush past the object, and to draw forth its sound” (Cage 1981, pp. 72–73); more mundanely, in connection with an aquatic ballet at U.C.L.A., came the invention of the water gong (Revill 1992, p. 55). Both influences were part of the mix that led Cage to form his first percussion orchestra. In 1938, through Lou Harrison, Cage taught first at

Mills College, near San Francisco, and then at the Cornish School in Seattle. The musical importance of his time at the latter institution is discussed in Chapter 9, but while based in the Pacific Northwest Cage also met a number of dancer-choreographers – including Merce Cunningham, later to become his partner in both life and art – as well as the painters Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. The latter, Cage has said, “had a great effect on my way of seeing, which is to say my involvement with painting, or my involvement with life even” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 174). Graves presumably impressed Cage as much by his eccentric and devil-may-care behavior, as by his painting. Among several memorable stories is that in “Indeterminacy,” which describes Graves breaking up a party chez John and Xenia: “about 3:00 A.M. an Irish tenor was singing loudly in our living room. Morris . . . entered . . . without knocking, wearing an old-fashioned nightshirt and carrying an elaborately made wooden birdcage, the bottom of which had been removed. Making straight for the tenor, Graves placed the birdcage over his head, said nothing, and left the room” (Cage 1961, p. 272). After Seattle, the Cages returned in 1940 to San Francisco, before moving to Chicago (1941) where John Jr. was able to experiment further with proto-electronic sounds. Finally, in 1942 and at the invitation of Max Ernst and Peggy Guggenheim, came a second (and more permanent) move to New York, where Cage met a succession of artistic luminaries: among the more important of these, *vis-à-vis* Cage’s later activities, were Marcel Duchamp, and Virgil Thomson (Revill 1992, pp. 78–82).

Time

“Standing in line, Max Jacob said, gives one the opportunity to practice patience.”
(Cage 1961, p. 268)

The first thirty years of Cage’s life were, in historical and social terms, probably the most unpredictable and erratic of the twentieth century. The period is framed by the two world wars: in between came boom, bust, and reconstruction. Unsurprisingly, Cage was to varying degrees affected by all of these events. Although John Jr. was only six years old at the conclusion of World War I, the worldwide militarization that had foreshadowed and accompanied it impacted considerably on the Cage family fortunes. For instance, John Sr.’s bubble-blowing submarine – demonstrated in 1912 and patented in 1915 – was, despite its imaginative design, of no possible use to the U.S. Navy. The resulting bankruptcy prompted the family’s move to Michigan, where John Sr. worked on various related projects with a professor at the University of Michigan (Revill 1992, pp. 20–22).

The general upturn in the economy during the 1920s is reflected in greater domestic stability: based from 1921 onwards in and around Los Angeles, the principal reason underlying successive Cage family moves was an improving financial situation. Indeed, the parallel expansion of both Los Angeles and the U.S. economy during the 1920s is remarkable. In rural areas, there was little of cheer: for most of the decade, “farmers were in distress, and the [Republican] government did little of value to help them out” (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 580). But in urban areas, the picture was quite different: “In the Coolidge years [1923–28] the nation reaped the benefits from the application of electricity to manufacturing and the adoption of the scientific management theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor” (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 583). Between 1914 and 1929, the percentage of factory machinery operated by electricity rose from 30 per cent to 70 per cent; and an electrochemical revolution “dramatically altered factory procedures and improved output in industries like petroleum and steel” (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 583). Worker productivity rose, taxes were lowered, and the real income of those in employment increased by approximately a third. Significantly, a population that in 1890 had been 65 per cent rural was by 1930 56 per cent urban (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 566). In Los Angeles, the changes were even more marked, mainly as a result of the construction of the first Los Angeles aqueduct in 1913 – which ensured a bountiful supply of fresh water – and the opening of the Panama Canal the following year – which led to the dynamic growth of the city’s port. In addition, the climate was benevolent and land was cheap. Between 1910 and 1940, then, the population of Los Angeles County more than quintupled to 2.78 million; as a proportion of the total population of California, this represents a rise from 21 per cent to 40 per cent.

Among the consequences of these large-scale changes in society were dramatic increases in the ownership of goods, and in the availability of mass entertainment. The number of automobiles in America rose from 9 million in 1920 to 26 million a decade later. In the home, “Labor-saving appliances liberated millions of [newly enfranchised] women from the stove and the wash-tub, and knowledge of birth control from the demands of large families” (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 567). While Cage’s singleton status may have been attributable to parental relief at his normalcy (Crete’s two previous pregnancies had resulted in two boys, the first stillborn, and the second so deformed that he died within a fortnight) it could also reflect changing gender dynamics: Revill (1992, p. 22) reports that John Sr., who worked at home, was “kept busy running errands” for the clearly assertive Crete.

The motion-picture industry, with which Los Angeles became inextricably linked during Cage's formative years, grew enormously in the period between the wars: "Stars of the silent screen supplanted luminaries of the 'legitimate' stage . . . Sound, introduced in 1927, greatly expanded film potentialities . . . [and] by 1937 the motion-picture business was eleventh in assets among the industries of the nation[:] . . . some 75 million persons visited the movies each week" (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 567). Even more popular than film was radio. "The first broadcasting station opened at Pittsburgh in 1920; within a decade there were almost 13 million radios in American homes, and by 1940 there were close to 900 broadcasting stations and 52 million receiving sets" (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 566). For Cage – whether as tenderfoot Scout broadcaster, potential collaborator with Oscar Fischinger, or borrower of electrical equipment from the CBS studios in Chicago and New York – such developments were clearly crucial to the shaping of his aesthetic locus. And, notwithstanding his rural retreat to Stony Point in the 1950s and 1960s, Cage was fundamentally a child of the city and of technology.

Equally influential on Cage's character was the dramatic downturn in the economy after the Wall Street crash of October 1929: in less than a month "stocks suffered an average decline of 40 per cent" (Morison, Commager, & Leuchtenburg 1977, p. 594) and the effects of the resulting Great Depression only truly receded in 1941, with the onset of America's involvement in World War II. Although Cage was to some extent immured from the early effects of the recession – he was at college in California, then traveling in Europe – by the time of his return home in 1931 things had clearly changed. His parents, as a result of new financial difficulties, moved to a Los Angeles apartment; Cage himself took a job as gardener at a Santa Monica auto court, "working in return for an apartment and a large room over the garage" (Revill 1992, p. 39). Showing remarkable initiative and self-motivation, he raised funds by organizing a series of lectures on modern art and music, which were delivered to Santa Monica housewives. A little later – "I had no job. No one could get work" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 7) – he carried out library research for (among others) his father; he also helped in his mother's nonprofit arts and crafts shop – through which he met Xenia – and as a dishwasher at the Blue Bird Tea Room in Carmel.

In New York, Cage would have been exposed to the full horrors of the Great Depression, and it is perhaps this that explains the tone of one of the few stories concerning his first visit there:

I had very little money. To eat and pay my rent and so forth, I was washing walls at a Brooklyn YWCA . . . [Every day] I would get on the subway, at the last possible moment, to go to Brooklyn . . . The way I knew it was the last

possible moment was because I saw the same people every morning, in the same car. Because *they* all went there at the last possible moment; they didn't like their jobs any more than I liked mine. (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 7)

On his return to the West Coast, the situation was no better. After marrying Xenia, the couple lived for a while with Cage's parents, before moving in with bookbinder Hazel Dreis and her apprentices. Cage learnt some design skills, continued with library research projects (this time for lawyers), and organized the household residents as a percussion orchestra. But "Everyone was as poor as a church mouse" (Revill 1992, p. 52), and as a consequence Schoenberg taught Cage without charge (Hicks 1990, p. 128), while the orchestra's battery included kitchen utensils, bookbinding equipment, and objects salvaged from scrap yards. In this context, the instrumentation of such works as the *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939) and *Living Room Music* (1940) becomes attributable as much to poverty as to sonic imaginativeness.

Although, following his meeting with Lou Harrison in 1938, Cage was for a while in fairly regular employment, by the time the MOMA concert approached his circumstances were again dire: "there was no possible employment. We were penniless, absolutely penniless . . . we had a place to live, but no money for food, I mean literally" (Kostelanetz 1988, pp. 11–12). Cage never *per se* mentions "standing in line" – in a soup queue, or to receive welfare handouts – but the 1930s clearly taught him considerable patience, as well as self-reliance. Unafraid of taking on menial tasks – such as washing walls or dishes, or working in hospitals and community centers for the WPA – it is impossible to conceive of Cage becoming a hobo, as did Harry Partch. More importantly, he "used to have a feeling . . . that I had, so to speak, a guardian angel" (Revill 1992, p. 31): thus, at the worst point of his fortunes, in 1942, rather than succumbing to depression he displayed "a characteristic buoyancy in the face of an insuperable problem" (Revill 1992, p. 81). Indeed, he felt "relieved because I found that I had not even a cent – nothing" (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 12) and, with complete pragmatism, "simply took the attitude that people should give me money" (Revill 1992, p. 81). As a result of having written to friends, approximately fifty dollars was received; shortly thereafter, he was again able to undertake research for his father (which, by virtue of its military nature, excused Cage from being drafted), and also accumulated a number of dance commissions, "at the rate of five dollars per minute of music" (Revill 1992, p. 81). And there was one further, immensely pragmatic, lesson learnt during the 1930s, albeit unintentionally, from Adolph Weiss: "he had written a large amount of music and almost none of it was played. He was somewhat embittered because of this . . . I determined then and there . . . that I won't

write something unless it is going to be performed” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 101).

Education

“I didn’t study music with just anybody; I studied with Schoenberg. I didn’t study Zen with just anybody; I studied with Suzuki. I’ve always gone, insofar as I could, to the president of the company.” (Duckworth 1989, p. 27)

It could be argued that much of what has been discussed previously contributed significantly to Cage’s general education. But it is important to distinguish between the time he spent in relatively formal tuition, and that spent in autodidactic activities: both were equally important in shaping his aesthetic locus. Cage’s unfortunate years at elementary school were discussed earlier; at Los Angeles High School he appears to have been a model student, eventually graduating with the highest scholastic average in the school’s history. He had been contributing editor of a student-run French-language monthly, had won prizes for oratory (Cage’s speech “Other People Think” is reproduced in Kostelanetz 1971, pp. 45–49, and makes fascinating reading given his later political views), and was class valedictorian. This success continued, initially, at exclusive Pomona College, but he rebelled against the rigid textbook-based system, revising for exams by reading materials chosen randomly, and answering assignments in a prose style akin to that of Gertrude Stein (whose work he had recently discovered, and whose non-syntactic texts he set in the *Three Songs* of 1933, and the second movement of *Living Room Music*). Pomona did, however, contribute to Cage’s education after he had dropped out. One of his former professors there, José Pijoan, met him in Paris and, on hearing of his activities at the Bibliothèque Mazarin, gave him “a swift kick in the pants” (Cage 1961, p. 261) and arranged for him to work with the architect Ernö Goldfinger.

A new phase in Cage’s education began on his return to California. Perhaps as a result of his solitary childhood, he was a gifted researcher: consequently, his teaching of Santa Monica housewives was predicated in the notion that “I will learn each week something about the subject that I will then lecture on” (Cage 1961, p. 273). When the time came to talk on Arnold Schoenberg, in whose work Cage had become increasingly interested, he attempted to engage Richard Buhlig, a Los Angeles resident who had given the American première of Schoenberg’s opus 11 piano pieces. Buhlig refused, but offered to look at Cage’s compositions; subsequently, he recommended

that Cage contact Henry Cowell. What, in specific terms, Cage learnt from Cowell is difficult to ascertain: Cowell maintained that Cage “studied dissonant counterpoint and composition with me for a season in California” (see Chapter 4) and in New York “continued intensive explorations of his own into rhythmic form and percussion music, and the musical systems of other peoples, particularly in the Orient, in my classes at the New School” (quoted in Kostelanetz 1971, pp. 94–95). Cage has only concurred that he “studied with Henry Cowell at the New School and became his assistant for a while” (Kostelanetz 1988, p. 7).

Cowell recommended that Cage should study with Schoenberg, and it was to this end that he moved first to New York, to undertake preparatory studies with Weiss (Hicks 1990, p. 126). In later years Cage strongly emphasized the importance of his Schoenbergian tutelage (as, for instance, in the statement quoted above) and often related stories emanating from his lessons with him. For instance, five of the anecdotes in “Indeterminacy” (Cage 1961, pp. 260–273) are concerned with Schoenberg, most famously that in which Cage determines to devote his life to beating his head against the “wall” of harmonic incomprehension (Cage 1961, p. 261). On other occasions, Cage proudly repeated Schoenberg’s supposed opinion that he was “Not a composer, but an inventor. Of genius.”⁹ Yet in reality, Cage’s aesthetic locus was probably influenced to a far greater extent by Cowell than by Schoenberg. From the latter, ultimately, he learnt compositional discipline, and of the fundamental necessity of structure (in whatever form). But from Cowell – author of the seminal text *New Musical Resources*, and (in Cage’s earlier-quoted words) “the open sesame for new music in America” – he inherited a spirit of musical adventurousness, as well as important practical examples of how such adventurousness might manifest itself. In the context of the 1943 MOMA concert – and beyond – these include the use of newly invented or adapted instruments (percussion; prepared piano), the use of durational structures (such as “square-root form”), and more generally the iconoclastic idea, expressed in “The Future of Music: Credo,” that “Any sound is acceptable to the composer of percussion music; he explores the academically forbidden ‘non-musical’ field of sound insofar as is manually possible” (Cage 1961, p. 5).

Postlude

Towards the end of his 1993 book *Creating Minds*, Howard Gardner – having earlier examined the lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi – paints “A Portrait of the Exemplary Creator,”

this being a generalized description of the common themes that emerge in the lives of many (if not most) outstanding creators. Gardner is

well aware of the limitations of this hypothetical portrait . . . [for] when it comes to offering generalizations about creativity, one must assess how essential each generalization is. In all probability, no single one of the factors . . . highlighted is critical for a creative life; but it may be that one needs at least a certain proportion of them, if the chances for a creative breakthrough are to be heightened. (Gardner 1993, pp. 362–363)

The Exemplary Creator is nicknamed “E.C.” and is made female; however, it is interesting (and instructive) in the following précis of Gardner’s idealized portrait to substitute “J.C.” for “E.C.” and “he” for “she.”

E.C. is raised “somewhat removed from the actual centers of power and influence in her society” in a family “neither wealthy nor in dire financial straits.” The home atmosphere “is more correct than it is warm” and “moral, if not . . . religious . . . E.C. develops a strict conscience [and] often passes through a period of religiosity . . .” The family “is not highly educated, but [values] learning and achievement.” When, relatively early on, E.C.’s “area of strength emerged . . . the family encouraged these interests” though with some ambivalence concerning “a career that falls outside of the established professions.” By the time of adolescence, E.C. has “outgrown her home environment” and before long “ventures toward the city that is seen as a center of vital activities for her domain.” There, she finds “a set of peers who share the same interests”; the results include “organizing institutions, issuing manifestos, and stimulating one another to new heights.” (Gardner 1993, pp. 360–362)

And so on: the similarities continue through the remainder of the portrait.

It is highly unlikely that J.C. was in Gardner’s mind when he described E.C. (though J.C. is mentioned, in another context, on p. 402); and there are some small but significant differences between them. Yet the degree to which Gardner’s “hypothetical portrait” maps onto the early (and, indeed, later) life of John Cage is both remarkable and striking. Of particular note is the issue of location, for Cage’s home state was at *two* levels “somewhat removed from the actual centers of power and influence” of early twentieth-century society (Gardner 1993, p. 360). California was the best part of 3,000 miles from America’s East Coast, where could be found the country’s capitals both political and – more importantly – cultural. Thus, in the period under review, Cage was twice drawn, in 1934 and 1942, to New York City, which he saw as “a center of vital activities for [his] domain” (Gardner 1993, p. 361). Indeed, he ultimately made Manhattan his home. However, America itself was *also* “somewhat removed” from that traditional “[center] of power and influence,” Europe; and thus Cage – like such contemporaries as Aaron

Copland, Roy Harris, and Virgil Thomson, together with the Pan American Association of Composers – was inevitably drawn to Paris, an even more vital center of “activities for [his] domain.” In this context, the importance of America to the development of Cage’s aesthetic locus takes on a different, more subtly shaded, meaning.

Creating Minds also suggests a final connection between Cage’s American upbringing and his artistic achievements. Gardner argues very convincingly for there being “significant links between the world of the young school child and the world of the accomplished master” (Gardner 1993, p. 401), with these links “abound[ing] in the artistic realm.” Like four of Gardner’s seven subjects, Cage was – as a child – “already fascinated with the domains of [his] artistry”: witness him playing on a newly purchased baby grand “while the movers were carrying it into the house” (Tomkins 1976, pp. 76–77). As adults, Gardner’s subjects continued “to examine the productions of young children and of populations that seemed . . . primitive and childlike, and . . . often sought to capture such aspects in their own work.” Although this does not resonate particularly strongly with Cage, he was at various times fascinated by – for instance – Native American sand painting, the music of Erik Satie, and the toy piano (for which he wrote a suite in 1948). But “perhaps most fundamentally, the modern masters centered their own work around the elements that are salient for the young child” (Gardner 1993, p. 401). For Cage, in 1943 and beyond, this manifested itself in multifarious ways, most of which center on a childlike need to question basic syntax. These include:

- A fascination with raw sound, as is revealed in the opening paragraph of “The Future of Music: Credo”: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain.” (Cage 1961, p. 3)
- A predilection for adapted or newly created instruments, such as the junk percussion of the 1930s, the natural instruments – conch shells and amplified plant materials – of the 1970s, and (most famously) the prepared piano.
- The use of simple durations (rather than complex harmonies) as the basis for his “square-root form” compositional method before circa 1950, and thereafter of chance-derived methods including the *I Ching*, a variety of templates, and the identification and highlighting of imperfections in the manuscript paper.

As is discussed elsewhere in this volume, similar observations might be made regarding Cage’s writings and his visual art; it is also noteworthy that he was attracted at an early stage to the writings of Gertrude Stein, e. e. cummings, and James Joyce, and the visual art of Mark Tobey, Marcel Duchamp, and – to a lesser extent – Morris Graves, all of whom in their work similarly question basic syntax.

Gardner concludes the penultimate section of *Creating Minds* by noting that, “it may well be part of the birthright of the most creative individuals that they retain a privileged access to sensations and points of their earlier development, including the years of early childhood. As Baudelaire once remarked, genius is the ability to recapture one’s childhood at will” (Gardner 1993, p. 402). For John Milton Cage Jr., certainly, the experience of growing up in America in the first third of the twentieth century had a profound and permanent impact on the development of his aesthetic locus, and of the remarkable work that subsequently emanated from it.