

1 The music of chance

It is striking with what regularity seemingly random chains of events, perhaps unlikely, yet inconsequential in and of themselves, come together to acquire a greater significance. Perhaps inadvertently paraphrasing Mark Twain's observation that the reason why truth is stranger than fiction is because truth isn't obliged to stick to the possible, Paul Auster – surely not entirely coincidentally also the author of *The Music of Chance* (1991) – observed that

[c]hance is part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives. And yet there's a widely held notion that novels shouldn't stretch the imagination too far. Anything that appears 'implausible' is necessarily taken to be forced, artificial, 'unrealistic'. I don't know what reality these people have been living in, but it certainly isn't my reality. (Auster 1995 [1989–90], 116–17)

Without just such a sequence of coincidences, contingencies, and chance meetings, potentially John Cage would always have remained 'not yet Cage', in the title of Hines's article on Cage's early years (Hines 1994) – an interesting, if eccentric and erratic, West Coast composer, whose prepared piano was little more than an abstruse cul-de-sac along the routes taken by twentieth-century music – David Tudor might have continued accompanying dance program and playing the occasional solo recital, and Morton Feldman perhaps could have found himself unable to break the compositional impasse he had reached at the end of the 1940s. Put simply, without the succession of events that drew John Cage and David Tudor together, it would probably have been impossible to speak of the 'New York School' of composers – brief though the reality of that union may have been – and the history of post-war music would surely have been radically, almost unimaginably, different.

In any case, the contingencies of Cage and Tudor's meeting in New York are not simple to unravel. Following many years of being, after his return from Europe in 1931, at least comparatively, settled in Los Angeles and Santa Monica, between 1938 and 1942 Cage lived successively in Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and, ultimately, New York. The fast friendship that Henry Cowell had anticipated in encouraging Cage and Lou Harrison to meet led to Harrison assisting Cage in becoming an accompanist at the Cornish School in Seattle. During his two years there, Cage worked with, and

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composed for, the dancer and choreographer Bonnie Bird, formerly of the Martha Graham Company, and, more important, Merce Cunningham, who would soon become Cage's lifelong partner, both personal and professional. After failure in San Francisco – to found his long-desired Center for Experimental Music – and success in Chicago (where he also taught at the Chicago School of Design; Fetterman 1996, xv) with the acclaimed broadcast of *The City Wears a Slouch Hat* (1942), Cage, and his then wife Xenia, moved to the heart of America's musical scene, New York (Nicholls 2007, 21–28).

Cage had an unfortunate start to his time in New York. He rapidly alienated Peggy Guggenheim, with whom he and Xenia were lodging, by organizing a percussion concert at the Museum of Modern Art, which was in direct competition with the one which Guggenheim had arranged for him at her Art of This Century gallery. His personal life seemed to fare little better: by 1945, he and Xenia were separated, soon to be divorced. Yet the reasons for Cage's estrangement from Xenia were also, in some senses, the seeds from which his success in New York would finally grow. Cage's links with dance made it possible for him to find accommodation with another dancer and choreographer, Jean Erdman. Through Erdman, Cage became reacquainted with Cunningham (Nicholls 2007, 29–30).¹ It was precisely this developing personal and professional relationship with Cunningham which led not only, in part, to the break-up of Cage's marriage, but also to a string of commissions for music to accompany dance, including *Credo in Us* (1942), co-choreographed by Cunningham with Erdman, and first performed in Bennington, Vermont, on August 1, 1942, which represented Cunningham's first collaboration with Cage. This collaboration was to become central to Cage's relationship, too, with David Tudor.

While Cage was beginning his work at the Cornish School, David Tudor, fourteen years Cage's junior, was still studying the organ, alongside theory, harmony, and composition, with H. William Hawke at St. Mark's Church in his home town of Philadelphia (Holzaepfel 1994, 2). By 1943, Tudor had become organist at Trinity Church in the Philadelphia suburb of Swarthmore; it was in Swarthmore that he made the acquaintance of Irma Wolpe, then teaching at Swarthmore College, whose performance of her husband Stefan's *Toccata* (1941) impressed Tudor and led to his beginning piano studies with her (Holzaepfel 1994, 4–5). Stefan Wolpe, too, was teaching in Philadelphia, at the Settlement School, and, alongside his piano studies with Irma, Tudor

¹ Both Erdman and Cunningham were part of the Martha Graham Company at this time. Erdman left to found her own company in 1944, Cunningham left to work as a freelance dancer and choreographer in 1945.

worked on composition and analysis with Stefan; later, Tudor recalled finding analysis a significantly more fruitful field than composition (Clarkson 2004, 7). It was with the Wolpes' support that Tudor made his way to New York, staying in the Wolpes' apartment there during his regular forays to the metropolis from the mid 1940s, ultimately moving there in 1947 (Clarkson 2004, 7; Holzaepfel 1994, 7). Although he did give performances in his own right and, more prominently, as the saxophonist Sigurd Rascher's accompanist, Tudor, like Cage, found it necessary to supplement his income through accompanying dance, working particularly with Jean Erdman, to whom he was probably given an introduction by another dancer, Doris Halpern, and in whose apartment, as mentioned above, Cage had been a regular lodger (Holzaepfel 1994, 9).² Though solo recitals proper were hard to come by for Tudor at this early stage in his New York career, he performed regularly at the Wolpes' apartment, playing, alongside other students of Irma's, the music of Stefan's composition students (Clarkson 2004, 7). Not least of these students was Morton Feldman, who had begun studies with Stefan Wolpe in New York at roughly the same time that Tudor had begun to work with Irma Wolpe (Holzaepfel 1994, 9). Given the number of acquaintances that Cage and Tudor had in common by this stage, their meeting was becoming increasingly inevitable.

By the end of 1949, though, Cage and Feldman had not yet met. Indeed, Cage had spent much of 1949 in Paris (certainly returning after October 15, the date of his last European letter home to his parents), after receiving a thousand-dollar grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters; during his stay, amongst others, Cage had come to know Pierre Boulez. Cage and Feldman's famous encounter outside Carnegie Hall, both having departed immediately following the performance of Webern's *Symphony, Op. 21*, took place on January 26, 1950. Cage himself suggested that, although his initial plan was to arrange for William Masselos to give the premiere of Boulez's *Second Sonata*, after he discovered from Masselos that he was failing to make any headway with the piece, Feldman suggested that Tudor might be able to take over Masselos's duties – especially since Tudor had already been working independently on the second copy of the score, which, Cage having lent to Feldman, Feldman had lent to Tudor (Holzaepfel 1994, 28).³ According to Cage, then, it was “that ‘premiere’ of the *Second Sonata* that was the initial

² Halpern would later, in 1950, take part with Cage and Cunningham in a recording of Lou Harrison's *Tributes to Charon: Counterdance in the Spring* (1939), choreographed by Erdman as *Creature on a Journey* (1942) (Kisselgoff 1985).

³ In the event, Tudor's performance of the *Second Piano Sonata* at the Carnegie Recital Hall on December 17, 1950 was not the premiere, but only the US premiere.

link” between him and Tudor (Cage and Charles 1981, 124). The lateness of this association with Feldman, though, draws into question, as Holzaepfel observes, the idea that it was through Feldman that Cage and Tudor became part of the same sphere (Holzaepfel 1994, 22–23).

In fact, none of the tales of a ‘first encounter’ between Cage and Tudor is without its ambiguities. Certainly, Tudor had performed Cage’s music before the end of 1949. In a program of student dance recitals on October 22, 1949, at the Central High School of Needle Trades in Gramercy, Louisiana, Tudor played Cage’s *Ophelia* (1946) for the Jean Erdman Dance Group,⁴ but there is no indication either that Tudor had sought Cage out to ask for any further information regarding his performance of Cage’s music, or that he regarded *Ophelia* any differently from the other pieces that he was called upon to play in his role as accompanist.⁵ It is reasonably sure, too, that Cage had heard Tudor perform, since he briefly describes Tudor’s performance (with the violinist Frances Magnes) of Wolpe’s Sonata for Violin and Piano (1949), alongside music by Ben Weber, at Carnegie Hall on November 16, 1949 to Boulez in his letter of January 17, 1950 (Nattiez 1993, 48; Holzaepfel 1994, 22–23). Yet Tudor is not mentioned by name; there is nothing to indicate that Cage had taken any particular interest in the performers themselves.⁶

It was, in fact, Ben Weber’s music that occasioned the next potential meeting of Cage and Tudor, and this time they certainly did meet. Weber’s *Ballet*, Op. 26, had been completed and delivered to Cunningham for choreography.⁷ However, its demands went beyond the limits of Cage’s piano technique and Cunningham was in need of a rehearsal recording of

⁴ The costumes for *Ophelia* were designed by Xenia Cage. The cellist Seymour Barab, who would also perform a number of Cage’s pieces in the early 1950s, was involved in the same performance. Cage and Tudor would not appear on the same program until November 26, 1950, at the Theresa L. Kaufmann Auditorium of the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association in New York City, when Cage accompanied the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (under its earlier name of Merce Cunningham and Company), and Tudor accompanied Katherine Litz and the Jean Erdman Dance Group, performing on this occasion both Cage’s *Ophelia* and *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (1945).

⁵ In the October 22 performance, these included pieces by Scarlatti (which Scarlatti is unclear; no pieces by either Scarlatti appear in the David Tudor Papers held at the Getty Research Institute), Debussy, Bernardo Ségall, Louis Horst, and Lou Harrison.

⁶ Nor, for that matter, does Cage appear to have been especially impressed with the program, suggesting that both Wolpe and Weber tended “toward Berg rather than Webern,” in distinction to Boulez’s Webernian interests which led Cage to advise him that “[i]n truth, it is only you who interests me.” Nevertheless, it is equally clear that Cage regarded Wolpe’s and Weber’s compositional work as being rather better than that of the majority of the composers whose music he had encountered in New York (Nattiez 1993, 48).

⁷ The dance Cunningham set to *Ballet* would take as its title the subtitle of Weber’s piece: *The Pool of Darkness*.

the piece in order to complete his choreography.⁸ Enquiring of Jean Erdman whether she might know anyone appropriate, Cage was introduced to her regular accompanist, David Tudor. Tudor's recollection was that Cage "knocked on [his] apartment door" (quoted in Holzaepfel 1994, 25) in order to ask him to make the recording. Despite having little interest in the Weber piece itself, Tudor provided a copy of the piece for Cunningham; it would fall to Maro Ajemian to perform the piece in its premiere on January 15, 1950 (Holzaepfel 1994, 25–26). This is evidence enough to lead Holzaepfel to be sure that Cage and Tudor's professional association had already begun long before Feldman recommended Tudor as a potential performer for Boulez's Second Piano Sonata, and makes it possible to square Tudor's recollection that he had invited Cage to one of the Wolpes' weekly musical evenings in late 1949 (Clarkson 2004, 7). The correspondence between Cage and Tudor is unhelpful in establishing the course of events any more precisely. The note which might be expected to signal Cage's initial approach to Tudor, which reads

Composer, 39 yrs. of age, on point of completing 2nd mvt. of an extensive work (also recipient of letters from Boulez + Wolff) wishes to correspond with pianist by name of David Tudor. Please Reply 326 Monroe St. N.Y.2.

was almost certainly, in fact, written in jest by Cage much later in an attempt to elicit a response from Tudor in respect of Cage's several letters to him, especially given that the extensive work to which Cage refers is doubtless *Music of Changes*, only begun in 1951.⁹ Ultimately, it seems best to mirror Nicholls's opinion that, although Cage and Tudor may well have worked together in some regard in 1949, it was Feldman's reintroduction in 1950 that signaled the real beginning of their friendship (Nicholls 2007, 49). Nevertheless, it would not be until 1951, when Cage's work on *Music of Changes* began in earnest, that their artistic collaboration began to take shape.

⁸ Later, Cunningham would choreograph entirely independently of musical accompaniment, obviating such difficulties.

⁹ Nevertheless, even this note is not without its ambiguities. Given the information in this brief note (that Cage was on the point of completing the second movement of *Music of Changes*, which was completed on August 2, 1951; that Cage had received letters from Christian Wolff and Boulez, suggesting a date after Wolff had left for Europe after graduating from high school in spring 1951), it is necessary to date this letter in between Wolff's departure and the completion of *Music of Change's* second movement. Yet Cage was certainly only 38 at the time.

2 Correspondence, 1951–1953

In reading Cage's recollections of his compositional life, one might often receive the impression that he knew more or less everybody who was anybody in the worlds of contemporary music, art, and culture in the second half of the twentieth century. His correspondence with David Tudor does little to take away from that view, indeed if anything it bolsters it. As well as the sense of the relationship between Cage and Tudor, the correspondence is also profoundly revealing regarding the extent of Cage's network of contacts, and also sheds some light on the range and impact of influences from such people. The correspondence specifically shows what one might conceive of as Cage's American network, a network which, whether it meant to or not, supported his output and his life in numerous ways. It is not for nothing that the first three names, other than Cage's and Tudor's own, in the run of correspondence here are Morton Feldman, Merce Cunningham, and Christian Wolff. The importance of each is well documented in the scholarship surrounding Cage. The correspondence also shows, however, just how tightly interwoven Cage already was by the beginning of the 1950s with the art worlds of New York City: as well as a string of composers – some of whom have retained their status as major figures and others who have been more or less forgotten – Cage's close relationships with a wide range of the performers of his music in his early years in New York are evident, such as Seymour Barab, and Maro and Anahid Ajemian. Even though Cage obviously knew a very wide range of people within New York, the correspondence here also gently suggests that his circle of acquaintances widened very greatly between 1951 and 1953; by the close of this part of the correspondence, far more names begin to appear and form a wider range of different interests. By contrast, particularly in recommending people Tudor might visit in California, it is clear that Cage's knowledge of the various art scenes in and around Los Angeles remained significantly greater or, at any rate, more diverse.

Probably more immediately important, the correspondence is profoundly revealing regarding Cage and Tudor's relationship, both professionally and privately. It is difficult to avoid the sense that Cage's feelings for Tudor, both as a pianist and a human being, were more profound than Tudor's for Cage, especially in the early days of their acquaintance. Yet such an appearance may be, at least in part, misleading. What is revealed here is also something

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about the characters of the two, with Cage demonstrating his enthusiasm and excitement about a very wide range of topics, interests, and people as well as his very specific passion for Tudor's contribution to his life and music. Tudor's correspondence, at least in these early years of their professional life, seems more distant and more obviously 'professional.' Yet the sole letter Tudor wrote to Cage in this period which survives – remember too that other letters may have been destroyed in the fire at the Bozza Mansion – quietly implies the vital importance Tudor accorded to Cage's work. Tudor, it is clear from this text alone, regarded Cage's work as of vital importance, such that he was entirely unwilling to allow chance operations to determine the items in a program, specifically because that left the possibility that Cage's music would not turn up. The methodical attitude of both composer and performer, too, is evident in this stretch of composition, particularly in the letters related to the *Music of Changes*. It is worth noting that, in their later career, Cage and Tudor wrote to one another little about what they actually did in the process of composing or realizing a piece. Indeed, as I will suggest below, only at points does one necessarily even think that it is likely they discussed their respective strategies for realization, even in pieces which they played together as a piano duo. Yet even here Tudor's instinct to fix and determine a wholly accurate version of the 'text' of a piece is already in evidence. Some of the future nature of Cage's music can be seen too, as in his statement in his letter of August 5, 1951, regarding the *Music of Changes*, that “[i]t also includes a half-minute of silence (about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way through) which brings me to the idea that the approximate time-length of each part should be included on a program (instead of *allegro con brio* or in C),” an idea which would be realized, of course, in 4'33" not least.

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John Cage to David Tudor, handwritten
[c. January 1951]

Dear David:

Your note came this morning and I am quite lost.¹ It may be the utter gap between us which has for me (and you have told me) (for you also) drawn us together. Loving you from this side with you so close and so far is what loses me.

¹ This note is not extant. A fire in Cage's apartment in 1953 destroyed many of his early papers.

The note you wrote represents precisely the face and life accepting spirit which I feel and love and would like to hold, – but which cannot be held, and so makes me miserable. That you write ‘do not want to see you’ and the next day do is like it will not rain, then does. You are for me really like a brightness but my feeling makes me blind and tremble, not understanding but only loving. Now I am frightened. I recognize your freedom as the only freeing way of being and which I cannot go on loving but must be [^]independently + in my own life living. It is as though there were an absolute amount of wanting which since it did not flow into you filled me up to overflowing and it is this inequality [^]of desire which is so shaking me. This is actually a Christian feeling and so I send you my love which you understand and support but neither need nor ask. I do not demand anything since you give me all this that I’m now living²

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John Cage to David Tudor, handwritten
[between January 21 and 27, 1951]

Dear David

Morty just left and you can see from this paper something of what we were doing this evening.³ It was a question of finding a way of writing the graph music on transparent paper so that it can be reproduced cheaply, and what you see here was a transitional stage; the final outcome is stunning and perfectly clear but only the utterly essential lines remain. Vertical lines (indicating the measures) are dotted (which makes the solid thick lines of the sounds clear). The horizontal lines are thin but only present when needed. The result is a space design very beautiful to look at and easy to read. You will see it later of course when you come back.

Merce’s concert was sensational and very controversial.⁴ People either loved or hated it. I myself had a fine time. And all those directly concerned did too.

² The extant portion of this letter ends here.

³ Morton Feldman was a member, along with Cage, Tudor, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff, of the so-called New York School of composers. The third page of Cage’s letter was written over the top of an incomplete example of Feldman’s ‘graph’ notation, which he used for, for instance, his *Intersection* and *Projection* series.

⁴ Merce Cunningham (b. April 16, 1919, Centralia, WA; d. June 26, 2009, New York City, NY). Dancer, choreographer, and Cage’s partner, both professionally and personally. This seems likely to refer to the second performance of Cage’s *Sixteen Dances* (1951) at the Hunter Playhouse in New York City on January 21, 1951, which also included the premieres of Feldman’s *Projection #2* and Wolff’s *Trio*. The performers were: Martin Ornstein, flute; Carmine Fonaratto, trumpet; George Barber, Carroll C. Bratman, Arthur Press, Ronald Gould, percussion; Maro Ajemian, piano; Anahid Ajemian, violin; Seymour Barab, cello.

John Cage to David Tudor between January 21 and 27, 1951

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Morty's and Christian's pieces were both hissed and bravoed.⁵ Some people left in the middle of the evening. I was delighted with all the music including my own. Now of course it is difficult for me to write about it because I have begun work on the Concerto again, and my feeling is displaced from the ballet.⁶ But the sounds were such that I have no fears (if I had them before) about the work I am doing. And Morty and Xian liked it too, so what is necessary more? I failed in making a recording (for lack of microphone and wire at last minute and rehearsal exigencies). Morty Seymour Barab and Maro helped me finish the copying,⁷ And Maro worked very hard on the piano part which she said was difficult and which she never played acceptably until the performance + even then left out or muddled up whole sections. However it went as a whole fairly well and we managed to stay with the dancers. There was a party here afterwards and we all drank toasts to you and to Boulez.⁸

Virgil tells me that he's not convinced about Morty,⁹ that he is too much the "anointed one" (oil dripping off his shoulders). However, I'm more or less generally broadcasting my faith in his work and to the point of fanaticism. I spent a troublesome hr. + ½ arguing with Arthur Berger re Morty and Xian's Music because Arthur has to review the concert next Sunday.¹⁰ And then another hr with Minna Lederman who began to take the music more seriously when I explained Suzuki's identification of subject and object vs. the usual cause and effect thought.¹¹ She even invited me to dinner to talk further. And then we will hear Varese's Ionisation up at Julliard with Dallapiccola, Krenek and Stravinsky.

As I go on with Concerto, I think only of you playing it and hope [^]your circumstances will permit that. I miss you very deeply, – and will be very happy when you come back.

⁵ Christian Wolff (b. March 8, 1934, Nice, France), New York School composer, and Cage's best-known composition student. Wolff's name is often abbreviated "Xian" in Cage's correspondence.

⁶ The concerto mentioned here is the Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra (1951). Cage's reference to the ballet is likely to refer specifically to his piece *Sixteen Dances*, on which he was working at the same time as *Music of Changes*, rather than to Merce Cunningham's dance company more generally.

⁷ Seymour Barab (b. January 9, 1921, Chicago, IL), cellist and composer; Maro Ajemian (b. July 9, 1921, Lausanne, Switzerland; d. September 18, 1978, Houston, TX), pianist.

⁸ Pierre Boulez (b. March 26, 1925, Montbrison, France).

⁹ Virgil Thomson (b. November 25, 1896, Kansas City, MO; d. September 30, 1989, New York City, NY).

¹⁰ Arthur Berger (b. May 15, 1912, New York City, NY; d. October 7, 2003, Boston, MA), composer.

¹¹ Minna Daniel, née Lederman (b. March 17, 1896, New York City, NY; d. October 29, 1995, New York City, NY), founding editor of the magazine *Modern Music*, 1924–46. Wife of the painter Mell Daniel.

I am going to apply for a renewal of the Guggenheim; I phoned them and still have time. I wrote a funny article for *Musical America* which I am enclosing for your amusement.¹² I envy the travelling through the country you are enjoying because I know what a pleasure it is to see how nature operates, – and then to imitate that “manner of operation” in one’s work and life. Magical clues by trees, and the flat continuous land.

It is late and quiet here and I trust you pardon my rambling on like this as though I had nothing to say.

Life continues to be incredibly beautiful, each moment, and now I hear your voice over the phone and see the shape of your hands.

How marvelous of you to have given me fire! Every time it works infallibly. It is like knowing a secret.

My pleasure in returning to the concerto is the pleasure of not being responsible to another imagination. And so I work directly and am silly enough to think the quality of work ‘better’. I am at least in a more direct (because private) situation.

Berger thought the ending piece of the ballet would have made a ‘lovely accompaniment for a melodic tune.’ Shows you what we’re up against. Virgil however says ‘I think you’ve got something there!’ Isaac came to rehearsals and performance and was very interested.¹³ Hirsch told Morty and me he’s one of us.¹⁴ My mother said the concert made her think of how Marie Antoinette must have felt after the French Revolution! It is curious how anxious people are to tell what they thought. Lou said he thought my music was ‘lovely’;¹⁵ since he said this before the concert, I was somewhat disturbed, so I tossed some coins and got the hexagram “The Power of the Great” the Creative and the Arousing, and the advice not to be stubborn, proud or belligerent.

¹² This article is not extant with the David Tudor Papers, but presumably refers to the first of two letters from Cage to *Musical America* in defense of Satie, responding to an article by Abraham Skulsky. This letter was published as “Satie Controversy,” *Musical America*, 70 (December 15, 1950), 12; reprinted in Kostelanetz (1970, 89).

¹³ Isaac Nemiroff (b. February 16, 1912, Cincinnati, OH; d. 1977). Tudor’s brother-in-law. His Sonata No. 1 for violin and piano was performed by Tudor and Broadus Erle in 1948, under the auspices of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Taught at the Contemporary Music School in New York, 1948–52. Founder of the State University of New York at Stony Brook’s music department.

¹⁴ It has proved impossible to identify Hirsch.

¹⁵ Lou Harrison (b. May 14, 1917, Portland, OR; d. February 2, 2003, Lafayette, IN).