PART I

Aesthetic contexts

1 Cage and America

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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 transcendentally (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 Episcopalian 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 Episcopalian 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 rolly-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.
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> (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).