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Kyle Gann. *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow*. Music in the Twentieth Century Series, ed. Arnold Whittall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xii, 303 pp. ISBN 0-521-46534-6 (hardcover)

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While receiving a traditional undergraduate musical education at the University of British Columbia in the early 1970s, I was fortunate to have an English professor, Helen Sonthoff, who encouraged me to look at broader horizons. Once, during a soiree at her home, she told me about an interesting experience she had had some years before. John Cage had been a house-guest, and had spent a large amount of his time recording her toilet flushing. This venerable piece of plumbing had intrigued him enough to tape it in order to conduct an exploration of its sonic properties. I asked to hear this original instrument which, disappointingly, sounded to me much like older plumbing elsewhere. I do not know whether this material ever made it into one of Cage's compositions, but it brings to mind, at this distance, a central theme in music after World War II.

I am not referring here to the well-known redefinition that occurred as the focus shifted from "music" to "sound." To be sure, Cage was a major (although not the only) figure in the expansion of possibilities resulting from the shift from the self-enclosed art work to the transparent interplay between art and the life-world of experiences and sense-impressions. My concern rather is with what contemporary composers *did* as this redefinition took place. And, to a large extent, what they did was to encode: that is, to take some aspect of sonic reality (the toilet flushing) and record and manipulate it; or to build and add to the sound-world through such encoding procedures as sound synthesis, algorithms, aleatoric methods, and (in Conlon Nancarrow's case) punching of piano rolls. The visionary cultural and literary critic, George Steiner, in *Language and Silence* and other works, has emphasized as fundamental to our understanding of present realities the stupendous transformation of the world by and into symbolic codes.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we can read much of musical history since 1945 as a dialogue between, for, and against encoding procedures and technologies.

Two of the most original thinkers in this immense musical project are the subjects of these very different books. The publisher of Joan Retallack's *Musicage* describes Cage as "the most influential figure in music and the arts in the latter half of the twentieth century" (p. 361). Meanwhile, Kyle Gann names his subject, Conlon Nancarrow, as one of a small list of composers who have "redefined in a technical sense what the act of musical composition can be" (p. xi). The two books are very different in purpose and content: Retallack's is a series of dialogues with Cage, along with accompanying critical commentary, while Gann's is largely concerned with technical analysis, although not

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

neglecting larger issues. The composers make a fascinating juxtaposition in their highly personalized roles as participants/respondents in the whole encoding phenomenon. What is particularly interesting is that both were highly involved in the thought processes of encoding as art (Cage's aleatoric music, Nancarrow's mathematically-formulated ratios in his player-piano works) while the electronic technology of encoding itself was of less interest.

What about that technology? In the early 1950s, the French proponents of *musique concrète* espoused the use of recently invented magnetic tape for recording material from the auditory environment that could be subject to various manipulations. German developers of electronic music, on the other hand, worked initially from synthesized tones and their interactions. What was common to these schools was the centrality of the encoding enterprise. For the first time in history, art music included main lines of development in which the composer was autonomous. The various modes of human interplay inhering in other modes of music-making had been replaced in tape composition by a monistic conception in which the realization of the encoding procedure was complete in itself. Accompanying this shift was the thematization of sound itself. The isolation of sonic parameters was the prerequisite for encoding in which each parameter could be represented symbolically. When teaching introductory music theory as a graduate assistant, for example, I was presented with a curriculum which defined music as "organized sound" consisting of such parameters as loudness, pitch, timbre, and duration.

To a certain degree, Cage dissented from this conception, which had been developed by the practitioners of integral serialism. Rather than organized sound, he turned to sounds as sounds. Encoding now took the form of aleatoric procedures intended to dissolve the creator's egotistical control over sound. The notion of organization of sound was suspect, because under what general principle should a composer really organize anything in the sense of having total control over it? Each composer would have to have a unique system, a sort of musical solipsism. (George Steiner has pointed out an alternative, a conception of music as "time made organic," bringing out the root in "organization," which changes the picture considerably.<sup>2</sup>) Cage's idea of chance applied to sound he later extended to words. The latter works are described as mesostics, in which a given text forms the basic spine from which computer-generated procedures form the basis for Cage's larger elaborations.

Nancarrow's original approach to the encoding issue was, following a suggestion from Henry Cowell, to exploit the potential of the player/piano for diverse and complex cross- and polyrhythms. Although in late works he returned to composition for performers, the bulk of Nancarrow's output lies in compositions where tempo and metric innovations can be precisely calibrated and applied to the acoustic sound of the player-piano. Procedures such as canon, isorhythm, and ostinato abound, all suggesting very strict controls on compositional caprice and intuition. To be sure, as Gann points out, the use of these devices never hardens into an inflexible system, but constantly reshapes

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<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 195.

itself within and between compositions. The presence of the mechanical piano (some performances have used MIDI-controlled pianos employing a system devised by the engineer, Trimpin), gives the sense that an instrument is actually *speaking* in these player-piano works. This sense creates a more embodied impression than that of taped music in which gesture is dissociated from sound, which emerges from loudspeakers in a kind of composer's ventriloquism, as it were.

Both Cage and Nancarrow, in different ways, challenged us to reconsider the basic process and act of composing. In Retallack's formulation, "To compose is simply 'to put together'" (p. xxvi). Cage himself referred to the composer-performer relationship as a "division of labour" (p. 93). Is this not an overly reductionist formulation? Cage also noted that he did not hear music in his head, trusting in creative processes to produce a kind of "anarchic harmony" (p. xxv). Nancarrow's view of composition was mechanistic; he said that he no more required performers for variety of interpretations of his music than does a painter require performers for variations in the finished artwork. To me, such explanations open up an existential divide between monistic, reductionistic viewpoints, and more pluralistic formulations of human relationships in music which incorporate such categories as translation/interpretation, response and answerability, re-creation and counter-creation which, following numerous leads from George Steiner, I have elaborated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, the focus on sound (organized or not) characterizing the latter half of the twentieth century in music is itself beginning to characterize an historical epoch, rather than offer the only path to the future.

*Musicage* is a series of dialogues recorded with Cage between September 1990 and the composer's death in August 1992. These are fascinating pieces, as the dialogue format reveals Cage, the master of debate and paradox, in a more informal way than do his prepared texts. Joan Retallack brings a philosophically and literarily informed mind to these lively conversations. There are sections on Words, Visual Art, and Music along with substantial excerpts from texts and scores of Cage. The author is particularly good in describing the text pieces from his later years; on the other hand discussion of his dance work is almost non-existent.

In her introduction and throughout the book, Retallack refers to connections between Cage's work and various philosophers. Among these philosophical tendencies is the currently fashionable one of applying the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his language philosophy to Cage's work. Apparently, Cage himself became quite interested in Wittgenstein, partly at the interviewer's instigation. However, I would take issue with some of the implications of linking Wittgenstein, a notoriously difficult and elusive philosopher, with Cage. The problem is not simply that Wittgenstein's own cultural background was so thoroughly European and steeped in nineteenth-century musical tradition. Rather, it is that his work on language is so specifically centred on the limits of language and the contextualization of language in daily life. Trying

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<sup>3</sup>Roger Knox, "George Steiner on Music: A Composer's Viewpoint," *Studies in Music from the University of Western Ontario* 17 (1998): 173-86.

to enlist it into the comprehension of the so-called anarchic harmony of Cage's music is unconvincing; in any case, Wittgenstein would have been sceptical about verbal discourse on music, which he described as having its own non-verbal rules.<sup>4</sup> And what composer in this century has been more verbal about his work and about everything else than Cage? Further, while much of Cage's work involves a letting-go of musical syntax and grammar, Wittgenstein, even in his later period, was proposing a philosophical work that would be *based on* explications of grammatical types such as prepositions or adverbs.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Retallack is right in engaging with Cage at a philosophical level, and she brings to bear considerable understanding of several major figures with whom Cage was conversant: Kierkegaard, Dewey, D. T. Suzuki, and others.

While *Musicage* becomes an important primary source, Kyle Gann's *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow*, which appeared shortly before the composer's death in August 1997, is a distinguished contribution to the secondary literature. It includes analysis and criticism of every work written by Nancarrow up to its publication. Not only did the author meticulously study Nancarrow's scores, but also he returned to the punched piano rolls for issues of interpretation and clarification. He carries to a new level the available commentary on Nancarrow, which already includes contributions from such figures as James Tenney and Roger Reynolds. The increased availability of scores and recordings makes analysis of the music with this book feasible for the first time. Gann's explanation of Nancarrow's use of ostinato, canon, tempo variation, isorhythm, and other devices even makes one wish to experiment with similar procedures. Although the complexities are necessarily forbidding, given the nature of Nancarrow's music, the author never loses perspective in both the well-written technical explanations and the related discussions which include frequent references to other music. Like Retallack's *Musicage*, the book promises to be an essential reference in the literature on one of the most original musical minds of this or any other century.

In the end, we are left with pictures of two composers who retreated from the existing musical order, developed encoding procedures and means that produced results which could not have previously been imagined, and left bodies of work whose trajectories and implications continue to fascinate. The artistically compelling aspect is not any actual encoding system, but the sense of transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary. What is magical is that in Cage's mesostics, words "sing" and become music; that through Nancarrow's punched rolls the piano "speaks" and comes to life on its own. These exemplary metamorphoses engage us, not because of technical procedures, but through opening up a vision of the limitless possibilities in the never-ending dance of art and life, in the making-ever-new of contemporary musical creation.

Roger Knox

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<sup>4</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 15–16. This reference was brought to my attention by Lynette Reid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 3.