

## INTERVIEW

# John Cage

by Miguel Frascóni

There are many points in the histories of the American gamelan movement and the experimental music tradition in America where the two merge into one. Charles Seeger might be said to be the father of both the experimental tradition and American ethnomusicology. He encouraged his early composition students, particularly Henry Cowell, to look to non-Western music as an inspiration for new ideas. Cowell, in turn, went on to teach his students this same interest and respect for the music of other lands.

Two of Cowell's most notable students were Lou Harrison and John Cage. Harrison is well known to the readers of *Balungan* and has been undeniably important in the American gamelan movement. Likewise, any Western musician interested in contemporary music has certainly heard of John Cage.

In the 1930s and 40s, Cage and Harrison developed percussion ensembles in which everyday objects such as pots, pans, and car parts were used for their unique sounds. In 1938, Cage invented the "prepared piano," where screws, coins, and rubber were placed between the strings of a piano to produce more percussive sounds. His first piece for prepared piano, *Bacchanale*, had a decidedly Balinese flavor.

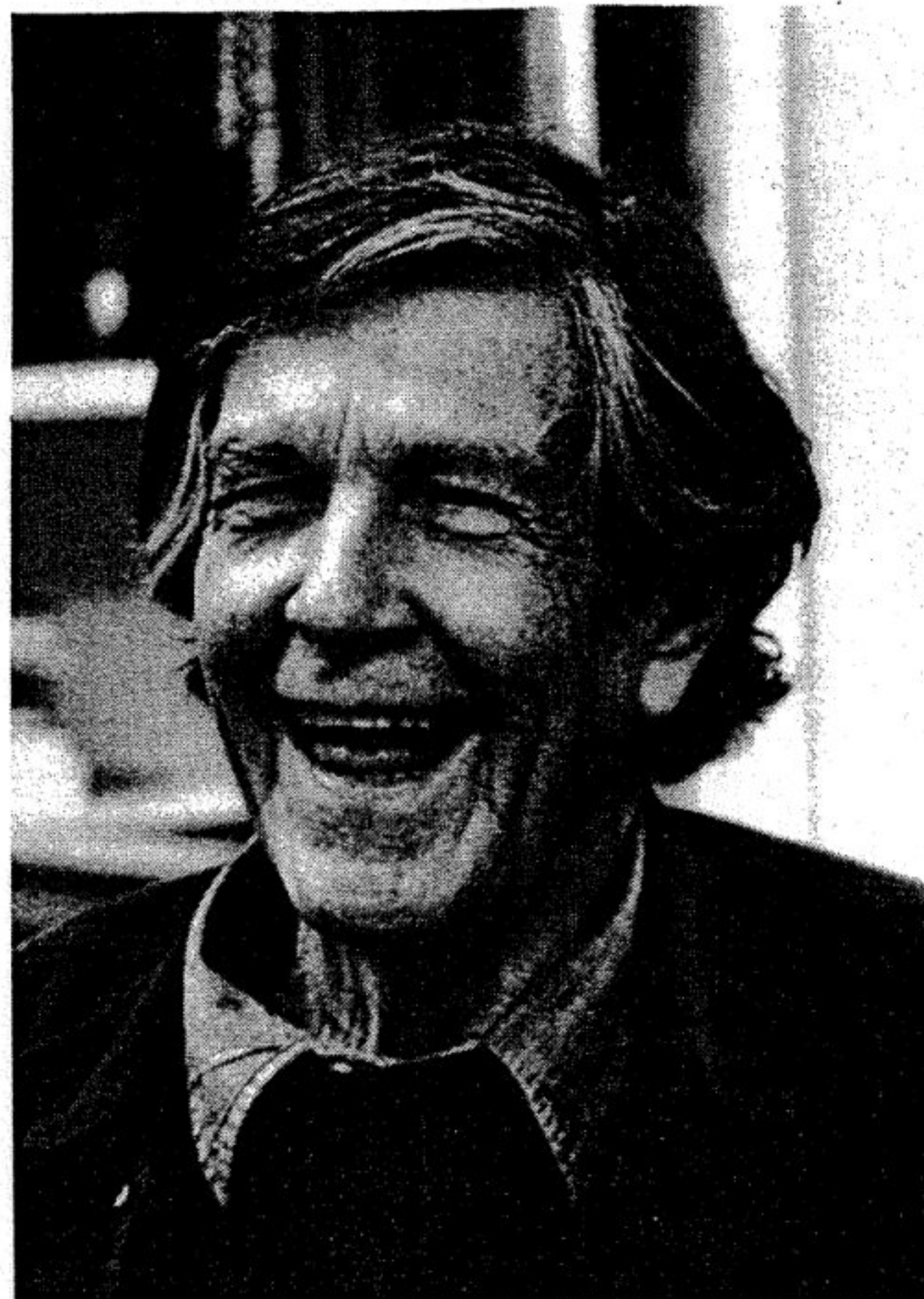
In the 1950s, Cage began using chance operations to help him compose. He would use star charts, imperfections in paper, or the *I Ching* (coin throwing) procedures to make his decisions. The latter technique is one he still uses today. He has said that he employs these techniques to free "his music" from the boundaries of his own taste and ego.

Throughout his fifty-year career in music, Cage has been at the cutting edge of contemporary Western music. He has devoted his life to helping people perceive all sound as music. He has taken Seeger's teachings of "accepting non-Western music as an inspiration" and expanded it to "accepting all sounds as inspiration."

So now, some fifty years after hearing gamelan for the first time, John Cage has written his first piece for gamelan. *Haikai* is a set of eight pieces written in 1986 at the request of Jon Siddall, director of Canada's Evergreen Club Gamelan Ensemble. The Evergreen Club is an eight-performer

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gamelan *degung* ensemble. All but one of the instruments were shipped from Bandung, Java. Its instrumentation is that of a classical *degung* ensemble with the addition of a Canadian made *gambang*. The instruments are: *suling*, *saron*, *panerus*, *bonang*, *jengglang*, *gambang*, gongs, and *kendhang*.

This interview took place on February 3, 1987 at Cage's New York City apartment.

**Cage:** A year or so ago, Dean Drummond asked me to write some pieces for flute and his Zoomoozaphone. I wrote some pieces with the same title as this piece for Jon Siddall and Evergreen Gamelan Club. And they're similar. Each piece has seventeen events, and the events are either sound or silence. That choice is, of course, the result of chance operations. Since it was just Zoomoozaphone and flute, and I didn't want them to be precisely together, I put

below the two which one would play first and which one would come a little bit later. That idea of not being together, precisely, not being metrically together, came to me from what I understood of Korean music when I was in Henry Cowell's classes at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

I was struck by the fact that instead of being together, as so much Western music is, the Korean music, having nothing but one melody, you see, the instruments weren't together. So the flute and Zoomoozaphone have just one melody. And that's the same idea that I used with the gamelan piece. So that the bonang and the jengglong and the silences make seventeen events. The suling plays also either more or less with, or more or less a little bit before, or a little bit later than the instrument with which it happens to be playing. With the accompaniment of the other instruments—the saron, panerus, gambang and kendhang—the tones are either before or between or a little bit after being in-between.

**Frasconi:** The other day you were saying that some of the pot gongs are turned upside down.

**Cage:** They're all turned upside down. You see, I was in the situation that I'm often in now, of not thinking that I have the time to do something because I'm too busy doing other things. So that it just happened that I received a letter from Jon Siddall at a time that I was about to go near Toronto to give a lecture. So I just took an earlier plane in order to see the gamelan instruments. Seeing all those pots in that conventional situation of the buttons on top made me think of turning them upside down. I like the sound of the side struck by a non-metallic beater. I guess because of the complexity you would say that it's a sound toward the range of what we call noises, don't you think?

**Frasconi:** Yes, a very rich sound.

**Cage:** Rather than being toward the range of "musical" sounds. I've always been partial to noises. [laughs]

**Frasconi:** Do you use the large suspended gongs at all?

**Cage:** Yes, the kempul and gong. I use the center and the edge. That's all there is. Sometimes, as a result of chance operations, the suling or kempul were not used. I think the other thing that characterizes the piece is that it's not metrical. And the dynamics are free. When there are tones, one following the other without silences between, they're as legato as possible. The suling can play with vibrato or not, and make changes in the nature of the vibrato, and can be played quite expressively, actually, if the player wishes. But, I don't want it to sound humanly intentional. I want it to sound like the sounds in nature.

Then the other thing, that I mentioned to you the other day on the street, is that when there's a series of silences they can be distinguished by a gesture of either the palm or the head. Although, as I said in the notes, this performance should be more imperceptible than not. Only one player will make such a gesture, and which player it is will change from piece to piece. All together there are eight pieces.

**Frasconi:** While you were composing this, did you

relate to or think of any traditional Indonesian music?

**Cage:** I was naturally thinking of it in terms of not doing it. I wanted to make some use of the gamelan that, as far as I knew, hadn't been made. I think that if I'm good for anything, that's what I'm good for: finding some way of doing things other than the traditional way. Don't you think?

**Frasconi:** Yes. That seems to be the basis for. . .

**Cage:** . . . most of my work.

**Frasconi:** And experimental music in general. I've been wondering why Western composers' interest in writing for gamelan has increased just in the last fifteen years or so. It seems that, historically, it relates to the work you and other composers were doing in the 1940s.

**Cage:** Well, I think that one of the things that characterizes, say, the mid-century and after is the awareness or the approachability of the Orient and the Occident. Really, 1950 might be more or less the time when that friendliness toward the Orient on the part of Westerners began. Actually, it began with some people much earlier. It began with Thoreau [laughs] 100 years ago at least, maybe 125. But, in the 1950s it began to be more generalized. Before that, people used to repeat the notion that the two would never come together. The general interest now is part of that large interpenetration.

**Frasconi:** Why haven't you written for gamelan before?

**Cage:** If I would have done it, I would have done it when I was working with percussion groups. I didn't do it then because I didn't have the instruments. I had a kind of . . . I guess you'd call it a "pick up" group of instruments. Lou Harrison went in that direction, both in his percussion music and in his instrumental music. He went in the direction of musical sounds, that is to say pitched sounds. He was concerned with a particular intonation rather than another whereas I never had that concern. I was interested, as anyone nowadays in his right mind is, I was interested in microtonality, but I wasn't interested in specifying pitches. I was struck by the fact that, oh, if you write for a drum in one percussion group and hear the same piece played by another percussion group, that the pitch is very different. I went toward acceptance of those differences. I was always biased in favor of noise rather than musical sounds. So that's why, I think, I didn't go toward gamelan.

**Frasconi:** You might have had the opportunity when you were at Wesleyan University in Connecticut in the 1960s.

**Cage:** Yes, but at Wesleyan I was already working on *Atlas Eclipticalis*, for orchestra. My music was just beginning to be published so I was busy as a bird copying manuscripts. By the way, this gamelan piece is in my own hand. I took the liberty of drawing the staves without the use of a ruler. [laughs] I did that because of the impression I received from looking at the instruments, and thinking of the people as a "club," playing. I don't know if I'm right in saying that there's something unprofessional about the American use of gamelan. It's more friendly than professional, don't you think? I imagine the rehearsals go on to all hours. [laughs] ▀

ON POTS TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

EACH OF THE EIGHT BONANG-JENGGLONG-SILENCE HAIKAI HAS SEVENTEEN EVENTS. EACH EVENT HAS ITS OWN LENGTH (THE PIECES ARE NOT METRICAL). TONES ARE PRODUCED WITH Mallet, VEH (VERY HARD), H, MHL (MEDIUM HARD), M, MS (MEDIUM SOFT) OR P; OR WITH TWO MALLETS NEAR THE EDGE (MS OR S) TREMOLO (≡); OR WITH BOW (B) FOR A RELATIVE LENGTH OF TIME VS (VERY SHORT) S, M (MEDIUM), L (LONG), OR VL. THE SILING TONES ARE BEGUN OR ENDED BEFORE ← OR AFTER → OR WITH (NO ARROW) THE BONANG-JENGGLONG TONE. THE SARON, PANERUS, GAMBANG AND KENDANG ARE IN 'KOREAN UNISON' (ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE TOGETHER): BEFORE · WITH ↓, OR AFTER ↓. THE BONANG-JENGGLONG TONE, OR APPROXIMATELY HALFWAY BETWEEN TWO SUCH TONES OR TONE AND SILENCE, FOR THE KEMPUL AND GONG USE LARGE SOFT OR MEDIUM SOFT BEATERS (NOT METAL IC OR WOOD). IF THE ↓ LOW E'S AND F'S ARE NOT AVAILABLE ON THE PANERUS, THEY ARE TO BE OMITTED.

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DYNAMICS ARE FREE. LEGATO BETWEEN BONANG, JENGGLONG AND BONANG-JENGGLONG TONES. DURATION OF TREMOLOS FREE. MUTE KEYS OF SARON AND PANERUS WITH CLOTH FOR DAMPED SOUND. THIS MUSIC SHOULD HAVE A PEACEFUL QUALITY, BUT THE SHORT SOUNDS MIGHT BE QUITE LOUD AT TIMES WITHOUT BECOMING UNPEACEFUL. THE SILING MAY PLAY WITH OR WITHOUT VIBRATO AND CHANGES OF VIBRATO (CHANGES IN DEGREE QUALITY, PRESENCE OR ABSENCE); HE CAN ALSO MAKE CRESCENDI AND DECRESCENDI, ALTER TIMBRE/TUNING AND SUCH THINGS, BUT THE EFFECT SHOULD NEVER BE EXPRESSIVELY INTENTIONAL, BUT RATHER LIKE SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED IN NATURE. WHEN THERE ARE TWO OR MORE SILENCES IN SUCCESSION THEY CAN BE 'PERFORMED' BY ONE PLAYER'S TURNING A PALM OR HIS HEAD (WHICH PLAYER DOES THIS SHOULD CHANGE); THIS PERFORMANCE SHOULD BE MORE IMPERCEPTIBLE THAN NOT. THE OTHERS ARE STILL THERE, SHOULD BE ENOUGH SILENCE BETWEEN TWO HAIKAI SO THAT EACH HAIKU HAS ITS OWN SPACE OF TIME.

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