

reviews

James Pritchett. *The Music of John Cage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 223pp.

James Pritchett makes evident his devotion to the music and thought of John Cage in this important contribution not only to Cage scholarship but also to the history of mid- and late- twentieth century music. Pritchett focuses on Cage's compositional activities rather than on the biographical details of his life or on analytical explanations of representative compositions. This focus appears to be motivated by two factors. One is Pritchett's fascination with Cage and his music. The second is his wish to overcome negative attitudes toward Cage as a composer—attitudes that result in descriptions of him as a philosopher or philosopher-composer at best.

The strategy Pritchett employs to overcome negative attitudes is to provide information about technical aspects that underlay the production of Cage's music. And indeed, the book's strength lies in Pritchett's accounts of the various techniques Cage used over the years and of the various concerns that led to specific technical innovations. The strategy appears to be based on the following kind of logic: since activities that lead to the production of something that can be called a "piece" are necessarily compositional, then Cage is a composer because he paid meticulous attention to the technical details of producing "pieces." This logic is adequate for Cage's devotees, but given the nature of certain techniques, I can not imagine that it addresses the concerns of those who would regard him as more philosopher than composer.

Let me be clear here that I *do* consider Cage a composer. In the case of the chance and indeterminate pieces, however, the idea of "composition" needs definition and qualification with respect to more traditional understandings of the term. For the chance and indeterminate pieces, the issue of compositional choice needs careful explanation both in general and in particular instances. Pritchett does provide such explanation of a particular piece in the book's introduction. In comments directed precisely at those who would maintain that Cage is more philosopher than composer, Pritchett shows how Cage's compositional voice is present in *Apartment House 1776*, a piece in which Cage subtracted notes using chance procedures from some "four-part choral music by William Billings and other early American composers" (p. 4). Pritchett tells us that Cage rejected a first version of the piece on aesthetic grounds, and that, after reformulating specific features of the chance procedures, he generated another acceptable version. Since Cage made an aesthetic judgment about musical

value, Pritchett considers this an instance of “a composer at work” and of Cage’s “taste and style” (p. 4). Pritchett’s example does in fact speak to Cage’s aesthetic choice for this piece, but as the book so clearly documents, Cage employed a great variety of different chance-derived techniques. For some of these techniques, it is not readily apparent how compositional choice may be exercised. For others, it is not clear that such individual “taste” should be present since Cage disavows it. In fact, the argument that individual choice is apparent in some of Cage’s music could be construed as a negative commentary on those indeterminate works in which Cage’s stated intention was to relinquish a compositional voice.¹

In providing detailed information on the technical aspects of Cage’s music, Pritchett has made a substantial scholarly contribution. His book will do little, however, to depolarize attitudes toward Cage because Pritchett does not directly address the source of negative attitudes toward the music. Arguments against those who would understand Cage as more philosopher than composer must base an understanding of Cage’s compositional activities and the music that is their result on a critique of “composition” itself and its relation to notation. For instance, one could argue for the idea of Cage as composer by showing that what we take to be “compositional choice” is always qualified by the formal and expressive conventions of a listening community and that compositional choice is not always a defining feature of composers.

Readers willing to engage Pritchett’s strategy will find a wealth of information regarding Cage’s compositional output. Laying out his topic in a mostly chronologic sequence, Pritchett documents Cage’s successive stylistic periods. Pritchett identifies the major changes as occurring in 1946, 1951, 1957, 1962, and 1969 but does not consider them “hard divisions” (p. 4–5). Pritchett’s topography of Cage’s compositional career is convincing except in one instance. His fourth chapter, “Indeterminacy (1957–61),” documents those pieces whose scores do not direct performers to create particular sounds. As Pritchett indicates, *Variations II* (1961), most extremely of the indeterminate works, removes compositional “shaping influences” and “reduce[s] Cage’s compositional voice to a near silence”

¹ I have argued in “Performance Practice in the Indeterminate Works of John Cage,” *Performance Practice Review* 7, no. 2 (1994): 233–241 that aesthetic criteria may be detected in the indeterminate works through the mechanism of a “listening community.” So, while Cage wishes to “relinquish” control, such abdication is theoretically impossible. I do not, however, understand the mismatch between Cage’s intention and the sounding result as a compositional failing.

(p. 137).² In the following fifth chapter, Pritchett argues that the 1962 piece *0'00" (4'33" No. 2)* "stands apart from all that Cage composed before it" since "it does not appear to be 'music' in any sense that we might use the term" (p. 139). The score of the piece consists of prose directions to perform a "disciplined action" with "maximum amplification" and includes four other qualifications. Pritchett differentiates *0'00"* from Cage's previous work because of its implicit theatrical component, linking it with performance art, and because of the nature of its score. He writes:

There is no score to speak of here at all, and there is no sense of an objective sound world to be apprehended. Instead, there exists a totally subjective situation, in which the performer acts in a deliberate and personal fashion (p. 140).

I agree that the piece does have a strong theatrical component, but it only accentuates this inherent feature of any musical performance. I disagree that its score stands in a different relation to the composer and sound. Traditional notation directs performers to do something the result of which is sound. The score of *0'00"* works similarly: execute a disciplined action and amplify its sound. In his account of the piece, Pritchett falls into the objective/subjective dualism that Cage himself sought to dismantle in his music and writings. As a result of such dualistic thinking, Pritchett observes a "piece difficult to understand" (p. 139). While it is reasonable to locate some sort of stylistic change occurring with *0'00"*, the change is incremental and certainly not the profound break Pritchett identifies. In my view, the more significant and differentiating change is Cage's use of amplification. Pritchett does discuss this aspect of the piece later in the chapter, understanding it in terms of how it makes the unintentional actions of a performer the sounding focus. A more thorough consideration of Cage's use of amplification in *0'00"*, especially in light of Cage's interest in the ideas of McLuhan, would have been welcome.

One further aspect of Pritchett's periodization requires comment. The last chapter of the book covers the years 1969–92, the last 23 years of Cage's life, while other chapters cover 15, 5, 5, 4 and 7 years. This concluding chapter reads much differently than earlier chapters, and includes such diverse subheadings as: "Work in other media," "Writing," "Visual art," "Program music," "Political themes," "Nature imagery," "Music using

² Pritchett's statements here seem to contradict his position in the Introductory chapter about the presence of Cage's "taste and style" in the chance works: compositional voice is synonymous with "taste and style."

other music," "Etudes," and "The 'number' pieces." The last years were very rich for Cage, in music as well as other artistic activities. And it is this great variety of enterprises that challenges Pritchett's descriptive approach to Cage's composition. Coming at the end of a book packed full of information on numerous pieces, the last chapter, with its even greater density of details, makes for hard reading. The chapter does not paint a coherent picture of Cage as musician and composer during these years, even if that picture is of a complex, perhaps eclectic artist working in varied media. Pritchett's discussion of this period in Cage's life would have benefited from a clearer focus on Cage's musical and non-musical motivations and how these relate to earlier motivations.

The conclusion of this review considers the book's values and shortcomings. The disproportionate discussion of the latter does not mean that shortcomings outweigh values. It is simply a sign of my own wish to present clearly the issues that are the source of my criticism.

Pritchett's book will serve as a reference tool for students and scholars wanting to know the details of most of Cage's music. Its periodization of Cage's life provides intellectual shape to a very complex, almost unwieldy collection of events and music. And the book, as far as is realistically possible given its focus, presents the philosophical ideas that provided the conceptual backdrop for Cage's musical output.

The book's shortcomings demonstrate that by focussing on compositional techniques, Pritchett excludes other topics crucial to a comprehensive understanding of Cage and his music. I center my commentary on two topics: critical assessment, and consideration of the sound of Cage's music.

First, while critical understanding of composers's musical outputs necessarily builds on a knowledge of the technical details of their pieces, such understanding also goes beyond those details. Pritchett should be applauded for providing "facts" about Cage's career, but there is little in his book that counts as critique. He comments occasionally on the effects of pieces or about the problems with certain techniques, but such commentary is minimal. A critical assessment of Cage could include the following issues: a thoroughgoing assessment of the relation between Cage's technical aims and the sounding effect of the music; consideration of the role of the listener in the musical conception and its realization in sound; Cage's relation to his immediate compositional circle and to other contemporary composers, and a reception history. Pritchett should not have and could not have addressed all these issues, but perhaps in future writings he will contribute to a comprehensive critique of Cage as composer and musician.

Second, Pritchett's focus on technique results in description of what the composer did rather than what the music sounds like. For many of Cage's pieces, however, writing about musical sound is no simple task. To

consider, for instance, what *0'00"* sounds like, critics must devise a methodology for "capturing" the sound of such indeterminate pieces. A more simply achieved task would be a consideration of timbre in the works for prepared piano. While Pritchett does mention timbre as an important aspect of these pieces, he does not write about its musical role or give any sense of how the "prepared" timbres sound.

Two final comments: First, the very feature that makes Pritchett's book valuable also makes it difficult to read. Someone not well-versed in Cage's musical output may find it difficult to absorb all the information. Pritchett could have helped readers by providing more clues along the way as to which ideas and pieces are most important to his discussion. Second, given today's musical climate, I find it unconscionable for both author and publisher to allow the sexist use of the pronoun "he." Even if authors or publishers dislike such solutions as "s/he" or "she or he," sexist usages can be avoided easily. For instance, in the sentence ". . . Cage points out that the performer may not necessarily make *his* decisions randomly or even arbitrarily" (p. 108, emphasis mine) one can easily use the plural "performers" and its matching pronoun "their" with no awkwardness and no loss of meaning. Cage certainly challenged his listeners to be more inclusive in what they consider music. One would hope that those who write and publish books about him would adopt similarly inclusive attitudes.

—*Judy Lochhead*