



Pianist Margaret Leng Tan, who worked with John Cage in his later years, will be a key participant in the “Beyond Silence” festival, to begin Friday in and around the Art Museum.

BY YVONNE TAN

A centennial tribute to John Cage's creativity

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

The eager group of young musicians seems poised to begin playing. Expectation is in the air. But no sound or motion is coming from anybody. Is it a joke? Mass catatonia? Four minutes later, there's still no sound, and then ...

You can guess the rest. It's the greatest hit by maverick musical folk hero John Cage, whose 1952

piece 4'33" calls for four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. It's typical Cage: maddeningly simple performance directions with open-ended results. Even silence, in his world, has infinite varieties. But such elusiveness hasn't deterred a number of Philadelphia cultural institutions from celebrating his centennial.

The 21-event festival, “Beyond Si-
See **CAGE** on H12

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CAGE from H1

lence: The Music of John Cage," runs from Friday through Jan. 20 in and around the Philadelphia Museum of Art, produced by the new-music organization Bowerbird and in conjunction with the Art Museum's "Dancing Around the Bride" (opening Oct. 30), which uses the art of Marcel Duchamp as a jumping-off point to explore the New York avant-garde.

Visual artists such as Duchamp have something concrete to contemplate. Cage (1912-1992) often refused to impose himself on his own pieces, and similarly urged performers to transcend their own personalities in order to tap into the hum of the universe, in which randomness is embraced, not contained.

"With Cage, guidelines are more open," says pianist Margaret Leng Tan, who worked with Cage in his later years and is a key participant in the "Beyond Silence" festival. "He asks you to be very much a part of the creative process, which, as a classical pianist, you're not trained to be."

Even the jazz community doesn't always sit well with Cage. As liberating as the composer wanted to be, his brand of freedom was anything but complete. With anarchy comes greater personal responsibility.

"The mandate of the performer was not to be free but to produce or express freedom. It's a subtle difference, but it's key," says Philadelphia composer/performer Bhub Rainey, who was in a recent Cage concert at the loft venue fidgetspace.

That doesn't mean any Cage performance, if done in the right spirit, is successful. Tan had many trial-and-error performances under the composer's guidance. In the end, she says, "You have to produce music worth hearing."

Or, as Rainey says, "something you didn't previously know was worth hearing."

Such a process can seem like capturing clouds. In an effort to record what the composer might have heard in his head, Philadelphia new-music champion Anthony Creamer produced a new recording of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* for piano that utilized the composer's original screws and wedges to modify the piano sound. For maximum fidelity, the lavishly packaged set is issued on three 45 rpm vinyl discs. (It sells in museum gift shops for \$140.)

But the greater challenge is



Performing in a John Cage concert at fidgetspace are (from left) Mauri Walton, Chris Mandra, Rob Haskins, and Peter Price. "Cage is very clear," says pianist Margaret Leng Tan, who worked with him. "But you may have to read the instructions several times." **MEGAN BRIDGE**



Pianist Margaret Leng Tan with John Cage. Her 11-year collaboration with Cage, from 1981 until his death, established her as one of his preeminent interpreters.

GEORGE HIROSE

John Cage, Among Friends

Cage: Beyond Silence, presented by Bowerbird in conjunction with the Philadelphia Museum of Art from Friday through Jan. 20, takes place at the Art Museum, the Curtis Institute of Music, and other venues around the city. This John Cage mini-festival unfolds in three parts, beginning with "Move from Zero," Friday to Nov. 4, which provides an introduction to Cage's music, focusing on seminal works from his early career. Tickets and information: cagebeyondsilence.com.

From Oct. 30 to Jan. 21, the Art Museum stages **Dancing Around the Bride**, exploring the interwoven lives, works, and experimental spirit of Marcel Duchamp and four of the most important American postwar artists: Cage, choreographer Merce Cunningham, and visual artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. In addition to the exhibition, which focuses on Duchamp's 1912 painting *The Bride*, "Dancing" will offer Cage concerts, film and video, Cunningham dance performances, lectures, and other events. Information and a complete schedule at www.philamuseum.org.

when Cage had no sound in mind. Many of the pieces from his massive *Song Books* collection, which will be part of Bowerbird's festival, have only directions such as "Perform a disciplined act."

Sometimes, those directions seem contradictory. One song says to take your own

temperature at hourly intervals. Yet the piece's prescribed length is three minutes. Fidgetspace codirector Peter Price decided he would simply take his own temperature after the performance. Would the audience ever know? No. But his commitment to carry out that act is

theoretically felt in the conviction of the performance.

"In classical music ... you give it your personal expressivity," says Price. "Here, it's fidelity to the concept and ethical involvement."

Such discussions inevitably sound like Zen koans. In performing Cage's *Hymns and Variations* last weekend, the Crossing choir's Donald Nally said, "He used incredibly exacting means of determining the manner through which he will qualify the indeterminate." Got that?

"Cage is very clear," says Tan. "But you may have to read the instructions several times. When he first died, I had a sense of sorrow because he wouldn't be around to ask anymore. But he was always more a poser of questions than a provider of answers."

No wonder that, when Cage died of a massive stroke in 1992, the music world seemed weary of his relentless exploration. Pieces consisting of a single page of directions seemed alien to the American work ethic, especially when published and sold for the price of a typical piece of similar length.

At a time when the classical world was turning back toward the more tonal language of Samuel Barber, Cage was still inventing new composing methods: Crumple a piece of paper into a ball and then take your musical inspiration from the creases in the unfolded paper.

Was he serious? You couldn't always tell. He had a trickster streak. He seemed not to mind the ridicule that came when he appeared on prime-time television, often presented as a crackpot, per-

forming pieces he'd written for kitchen appliances.

"He has a PR problem," admits Dustin Hurt, the Bowerbird director who assembled the "Beyond Silence" festival. "I think a lot of people think he was this mad scientist, creating some crazy piece where nothing happens onstage."

"It's a strange case: The guy is incredibly famous, but for me, 90 percent of that fame was about opening up possibilities," said George Crumb, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer who, in the early 1960s, found his creative voice after a Cage seminar. "There are few composers in the world that haven't been touched by John Cage, but not primarily through his music. It was the way he thought."

Whatever American music was doing, the California-born Cage did the opposite, such as turning away from Europe and looking toward Asia for inspiration. When many composers were creating their own highly systematized musical Esperanto, Cage threw his own decision making to the stars, literally, basing his most famous orchestral work, *Atlas Eclipticalis*, on star charts.

Often, the *I Ching* made up his mind for him. His late-period *Europerras* put the history of opera into a blender: Singers wandered about onstage with a spear from one opera, a helmet from another, and singing an aria from yet another, with no narrative thread.

Cage could also be content to stay in the background, and not just when writing music for his longtime partner, choreographer Merce Cunningham. In a concert this fall by the authoritative International Contemporary Ensemble at Columbia University (whose performance of *4'33"* is described above), Cage was juxtaposed with his contemporary Pierre Boulez — and came off as having innocuous, folklike simplicity.

Yet once Cage insinuates himself, he does so deeply. Tan divides her life into B.C. (before Cage) and A.C. Bowerbird's Hurt was a Cage skeptic when he first began organizing the festival. Not now. "Ultimately," he says, "the guy was a genius composer with a subtle ear."

But the world may have to listen extra hard to hear it. Says Hurt, "Cage had a commitment to quiet sounds."

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