



Margaret Leng Tan performed John Cage's "4'33" as part of the "Cage Beyond Silence" festival.

JUST LISTEN

Art museum festival honors work of avant-garde composer John Cage

BY SHAUN BRADY
For the Daily News

THERE WAS UNDENIABLY a comic element to Margaret Leng Tan's performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art last month. First, there was Tan's incongruous request for the audience to turn on their cell phones.

Then there was the awkward sight of the virtuoso pianist

perched, motionless, in front of a toy piano, her knees jutting up over the top of the miniature instrument.

This was a performance of John Cage's most famous work, "4'33" — the groundbreaking composer's so-called "silent piece." It is not silent at all, although the performer doesn't

play a note over its nearly five-minute length. There is the sound of the room, of fellow listeners, of the traffic outside.

Despite its potential for humor, the piece provides a very serious opportunity to focus on the sounds of life itself.

Tan's performance marked the opening concert of "Cage Beyond

Silence," a festival marking Cage's centenary year (the composer died in 1992, just shy of his 80th birthday). The festival is being produced by Bowerbird, a local avant-garde music organization, with the Art Museum's landmark exhibition, "Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg and

Duchamp."

As the title suggests, "Cage Beyond Silence" is meant to transcend Cage's reputation as the man who irreverently introduced silence to music and take a deeper look at the broad range of his prodigious compositional output.

"This festival is about John Cage as a maker of music," explained Dustin Hurt, Bowerbird's founder and director. "I continually hear people saying that Cage

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has interesting ideas but his music was not good. I disagree; the pieces in the festival represent not only interesting ideas but are really fantastic pieces to listen to.

"They offer interesting ideas about music and society and philosophy, but apart from that, they're exceptional pieces of music."

Most of the music to be performed during the remainder of the festival (it continues through Jan. 20) is based on various permutations of Cage's use of "chance operations," in which musical sounds are influenced by the *I Ching* and other sources rather than conscious composition by the composer. Chance interposed itself on the festival's first leg, leading to quite a bit more silence

than was originally planned — Hurricane Sandy forced the cancellation of several performances, which Hurt hopes to reschedule.

The common misperception of Cage's use of chance is that the music is intentionally chaotic. Composer Christian Wolff, a student and collaborator of Cage's for many years, will perform several of Cage's Number Pieces in January, works named for the number of musicians involved and guided by directions regarding time and sound elements.

"One of the dangers with Cage's music is because it has these free elements, people get the idea that you can do anything," Wolff said. "In fact, there are a lot of constraints that you have to observe. Cage was very big on self-discipline, and he expects that from

the performers."

While Cage's music can undoubtedly be challenging to audiences accustomed to more conventional classical music, vocalist Joan La Barbara, who worked with Cage for 20 years, said that the ultimate reward is the same.

"Cage loved going to live performances because he always hoped that he could hear something different," La Barbara said. "This is the same reason that we all attend live performances, whether it's of a Beethoven symphony or a contemporary work. Each interpreter of music has their own particular stylistic and intellectual information that they bring to the performance of that work, and what we experience when we hear live music is the fascination of knowing what our fellow human beings will bring to the task of performing music."

La Barbara will perform several of the composer's Song Books. A large collection of solo pieces that range from relatively traditional compositions to graphic scores to theatrical actions, the Song Books are the focus of the second piece of the festival, which begins on Friday and runs through Dec. 9.

They will also be performed by



Vocalist Joan La Barbara (left) worked with John Cage (right) for 20 years.

the BSC, an ensemble founded in 2000 by composer/improviser Bhub Rainey. He described the sound of the Song Books as "like walking into a room that's full of semi-functional record players playing all sorts of different kinds of music."

"Some of the record players work, and you can hear what they're playing, some of them are really broken and make no sound at all, and some of them make a special broken sound, fading in and out."

Hurt said that the opportunity to hear several performances of

the same pieces will allow curious listeners to experience the music's indeterminate nature. "We change the venue, we change the performers, we change the duration of the performances, and we see how vital and different this work is and highlight the role of the interpreter in the performance. You can really delve deep into a particular style of Cage's work and look at it from different perspectives."

Various venues, Nov. 30-Jan. 20, cagebeyondsilence.com.



Joan La Barbara will perform several of Cage's Song Books.

Top picks from the Cage fest

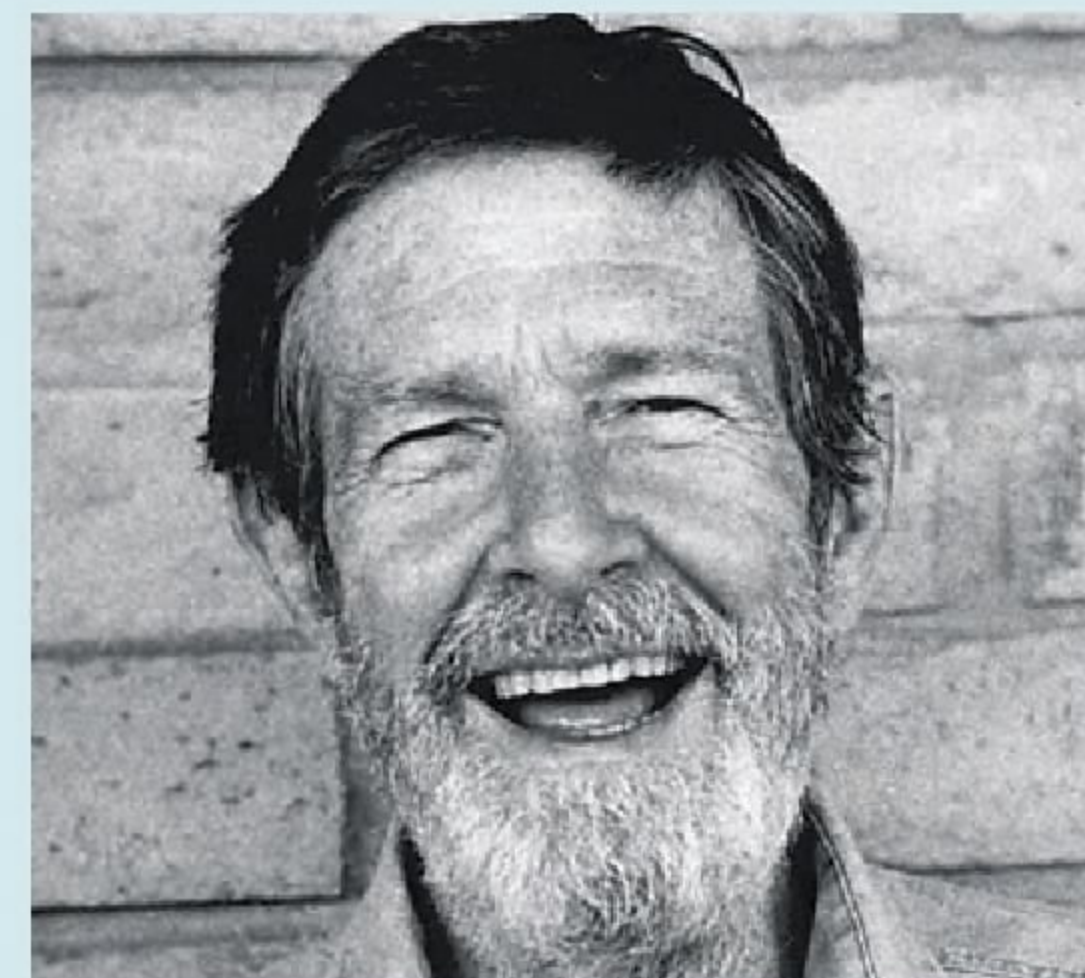
JOHAN CAGE WAS A prolific composer whose career spanned six decades and revolutionized contemporary music and art. As Bowerbird director Dustin Hurt said, "His impact is so vast, you have to talk in terms of music before Cage and music after Cage."

Below is an introduction to some key works being performed during the "Cage Beyond Silence" festival:

► **"4'33" (1952)**

Cage's signature, controversial piece calls for the performer to play nothing for the duration of the title, allowing the sounds of the environment to become music.

► **Sonatas and Interludes**



John Cage: 60-year career.

(1946-48)

Twenty pieces for prepared piano, which requires objects to be placed on the instrument's strings, transforming its sound.

► **Music of Changes (1951)**

The composer's first significant use of chance, in which he composed based on divinations from the *I Ching*.

► **Song Books (1970)**

A large collection of solo vocal pieces meant to be performed alone or simultaneously with other indeterminate compositions.

► **Number Pieces (1987-92)**

A set of late works named for the number of musicians involved and guided by time indications.

► **Organ2/ASLSP (1987)**

A minimal composition for organ meant to be played as slowly as possible. Last month's transcendent festival performance lasted 13 hours, while a church in Germany is in the 11th year of its planned, 639-year rendition.

— Shaun Brady