



John Cage in 1989. A 3-month festival featured his works. AP

Thoughts on months of Cage

By David Patrick Stearns

INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Sometimes you need to submit to an artistic movement: Shelve as many doubts as possible, set aside questions about enjoyability, and just see what happens. Surely the three-month-long Cage: Beyond Silence festival — held in conjunction with the Philadelphia Museum of Art's *Dancing Around the Bride* exhibition — was one such experience, and one that left you forever changed.

Granted, I felt more relieved than enlightened at Sunday's closing concert featuring John Cage's last piece, *Thirteen*; life on the artistic edge is exhausting. But the music/art package revealed

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radical alternative artistic vocabularies in ways that wouldn't happen in less-intensive immersion.

Throughout three visits to the exhibition and a dozen Cage concerts, ancient Incan art came to mind: Europeans didn't think it civilized because it lacked the Greek principles of Western art.

Cage & Co. uncivilized themselves by embracing the underlying randomness of the natural world. This rejection of received knowledge was felt among the three visual artists who are part of the Art Museum show: Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Especially delightful was the way their ideas morphed from artist to artist and piece to piece in perfectly apprehensible ways. The like-minded Merce Cunningham dancers — choreographer Cunningham was also part of the *Dancing Around* crew — in performances at the museum revealed the beauty of everyday movement assembled in singular configurations.

The friction created by visual art, dance and music certainly illuminated Cage, but may not necessarily move him closer to the mainstream, partly because of his compulsive incorrigibility. Even music with great mainstream appeal — such as his *Sonatas and Interludes*, especially as played during the festival by pianist Margaret Leng Tan — requires the piano to be doctored with screws, wedges and other Cage-dictated hardware that can seem daunting.

If Cage (1912-92) started out his centennial year with a public relations



"When You Talk, You Hear From the Other Side," a recording by Bhub Rainey, a participant in the Cage: Beyond Silence festival.

problem — typecast as a lightweight trickster/theorist rather than a composer — he ended with quality-control issues. Because the realization lies so much in the hands of the performers, with some pieces consisting solely of written directions ("In a situation provided with maximum amplification, perform a disciplined action"), concerts could be inert as often as they were entrancing.

Saturday's concert at the Curtis Institute was downright excruciating. The performance of *Two2* by Rob Haskins and Laurel Karlik Sheehan (who have great Cage credentials) was like elongated Toru Takemitsu, with contemplative silences broken only by a narrow range of sound, expression and gesture — and the antiphonal snoring around me.

But was Sunday's finale at the Art Museum far more stimulating because Saturday had felt like such a musical vacuum? Partly. Certainly, one appreciated the membrane-like sound underlying *Thirteen* (as realized by the Prism Saxo-

phone Quartet and the Curtis 20/21 ensemble) because it was something other than silence. Abrupt dabs of more emphatic sounds were relatively thrilling.

Of course, any given listener's personal state must be taken into account: Cage isn't a good choice when you've had a hard day at the office. Yet one weary night in November, I hit the all-night performance of *Orga2* at Christ Church and loved

the chance combination of long-held organ tones and flashing police-car lights coming in through the church's unstained windows.

Often, I was happiest when I didn't know how long the piece was going to be, making the experience like mountain hiking in dense fog: When you have no idea how close you are to the summit, the lack of anticipation grounds you in the moment.

Hearing Cage live is es-

sential. On Sunday, one couple remarked on how easily Cage could be relegated to ambient music if heard at home on a recording. In concerts, music this quiet had a better chance of becoming hypnotic because you had nothing else to do but listen.

The biggest implication for the future is the artists that Bowerbird's Dustin Hurt, who produced Cage: Beyond Silence, beckoned from the woodwork. Experimental composers, an extinct species by the 1980s, were everywhere. Bhub Rainey, for one, creates sound collages with field recordings and instruments played in unconventional ways.

His newest self-produced album is a 45 r.p.m. 12-inch disc titled *When You Talk, You Hear From the Other Side*, based on homemade wire recordings Rainey found in an antiques store with an early-1950s family playing around with what was then a new invention. Rainey is doing with sound what Bill Morrison of the Ridge Theater (known for the film *Decasia*) does with the visual manipulation of antique film. A former Bostonian, Rainey

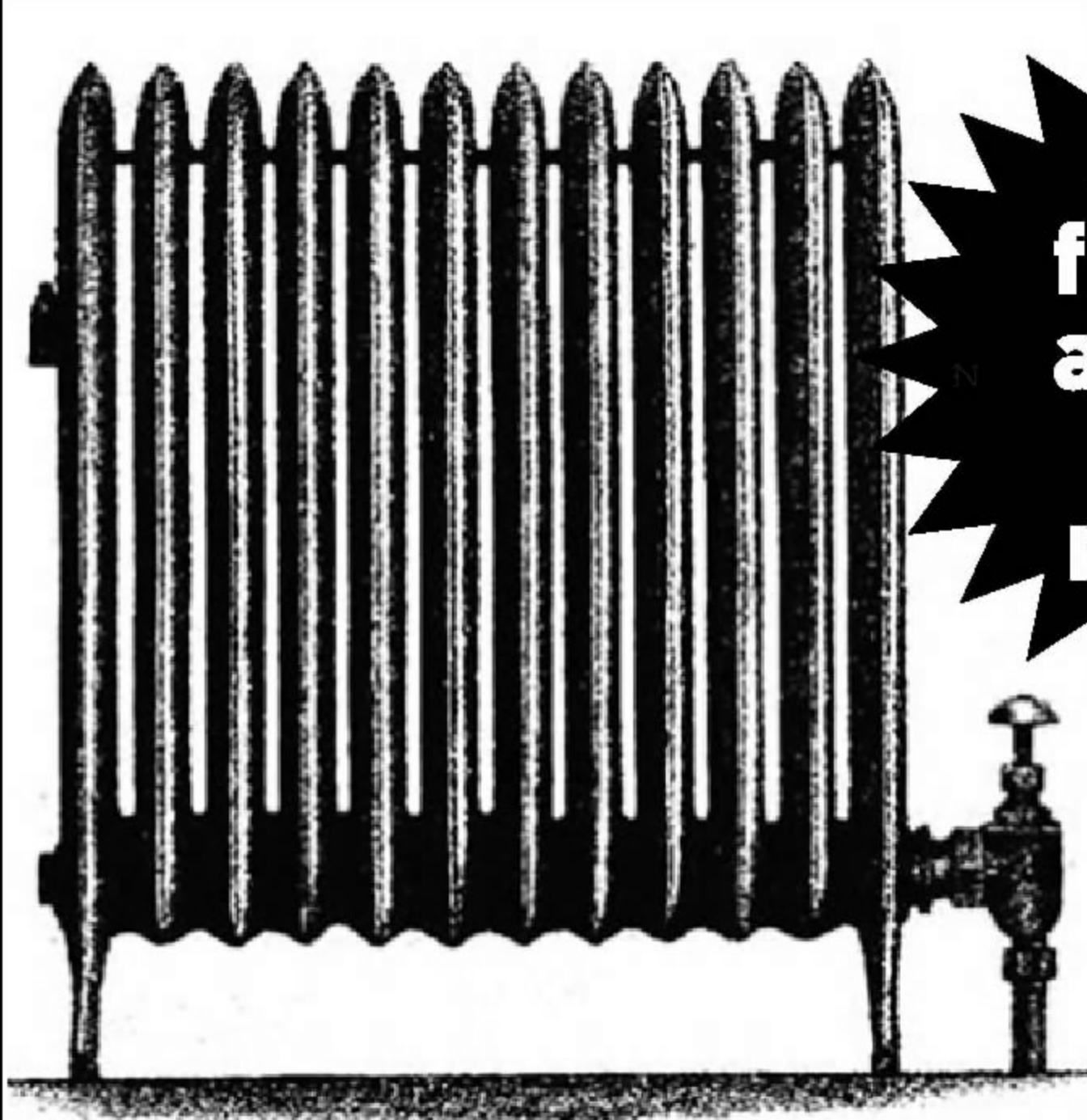
now lives here. Do welcome him.

Another discovery is Michael Pisaro, an electric-guitar based composer who appeared in last weekend's concerts, and had for sale a CD of his 50-minute electronic tone poem *the punishment of the tribe by its elders* — a piece that simmers at length before erupting into something that could make your most tolerant neighbors hate you.

Without Cage, such artists might not exist, not just at that edge, but at the opposite musical extreme — by relieving music of the burden of being art. One night before popping into a Cage concert at Christ Church, I paid \$1 at AKA Music for a used album by Cage's ultimate lightweight pop-music contemporary Ray Conniff. Would this mellifluous easy-listening Muzak sound ridiculous after Cage? No. It sounded just fine. Even though Cage doesn't ask that his own music be enjoyed, he allows everybody else's an honored (if small) place in our musical lives.

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