

Boulez, Cage and Dada

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The three lectures Boulez gave at the Darmstadt Summer School for New Music in 1960, collectively published as *Boulez on Music Today*, represent one pole of post-Second World War musical philosophy. Its opposite is expressed in a collection of writings from the late 1950s by John Cage, published as *Silence*. Boulez and Cage may be seen as the heads of two currents running throughout the twentieth century - identified by Poggioli as abstractionism and expressionism,¹ though perhaps better described as the avant-garde and experimental approaches to composition.² In the second of Boulez's lectures, 'General Considerations', written in 1960, he attacks the musical notions of which Cage stands as a chief representative, even though he refuses to name his adversaries. In particular, Boulez makes the following claim: 'musicians have always been in the rearguard of the revolutions of others; in music, Dadaism still retains the prestige (and naivety) which it has long since lost everywhere else; its flimsy veils hide the sweet sickness of rosy dilettantism'.³ It is the epithet "Dada" which points most directly at Cage.

Boulez, however, is doubly wrong in his impression of the relevance of Dadaism in his day, and the relationship of music to the Dada movement. Firstly, although Dadaism was predominantly a literary and graphic art movement, spanning approximately the years 1916 to 1922, the Dadaists themselves recognized composers such as Satie, Auric, Milhaud, Varese and Stravinsky as sharing Dadaist aims and methods. The Dadaist challenge to traditional ideas of what constitutes art, seen in Duchamp's "ready-mades", and their desire for free reign of the imagination in the pursuit of new forms of artistic expression - as in the free word association poems of Hans Arp - match the provocations of works such as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1911), and the expansion of music to include environmental noise, as in Satie's ballet music *Parade* (1917).

Satie himself shared some of the Dadaist anti-(traditional) art sentiment, showing 'an instinctive disregard for the conventions of continuity or integrated contrasts which serious music had evolved over the centuries'.⁴ Hans Richter, one of the Zurich Dadaists, includes Satie on his list

of 'leading Dadaists', and Tristan Tzara, Oberdada of Zurich and later Paris, listed Stravinsky and Varese as 'Dada Presidents' (of whom there were many) in the sixth issue of the periodical *Dada*.⁵ The music of the above-mentioned composers was frequently played as part of Dada exhibitions, alongside 'Brutistic' music inspired by Luigi Russolo of the Italian Futurist movement, to which Dada was closely allied.⁶ The diaries of Tristan Tzara also frequently refer to a composer of 'tunes and anti-tunes' named Heusser, about whom little seems to be known.⁷

Secondly, not only is Boulez wrong in assigning music to the rearguard of Dadaism, but he also spoke too soon in claiming that Dada had (in 1960) lost its prestige in artistic fields outside music. Andy Warhol, a leading exponent of the Pop Art movement that was taking shape in the late 1950s, says of Dada and Pop Art that 'the names are really synonyms'. Pop Art was to have considerable cultural influence in the 1960s, particularly in the USA, with works such as Warhol's *4 Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) continuing the Dada tradition of ready-mades.⁸ When Boulez speaks of Dadaism, he is largely referring to Cage. Warhol cites Cage as a major influence on Pop Art,⁹ so in fact music may be said to have been in the vanguard of the neo-Dada Pop Art movement.

Cage's connection to Dada is observable in both his literary style and in some of the musical characteristics of his early works. The four-part simultaneous lecture in *Silence* recalls the simultaneous poems of Tzara, and Cage's early compositions show the influence of Satie. Satie's neglect of traditional principles of form, the fact that his music was 'going nowhere',¹⁰ is reflected in Cage's desire for music to exist as a 'now-moment', and not as an unfolding structure or 'argument'.¹¹ Griffiths has drawn attention to Cage's use of continually reiterated chords as a means of achieving stasis in the third movement of the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949-50), shown in Example 1, and Satie's earlier use of the same stylistic characteristic for the same purpose in his *Gymnopedie No 3* (1888), shown in Example 2.¹²

(♩ = 54)

Vn1
Vn2
pp
Vcl
Vla

Example 1: Cage, *String Quartet in Four Parts*, third movement 'Nearly Stationary', bars 1-13.

Cage's use of non-intentional or environmental sounds, a device pioneered by the 'Dada President' Varese,¹³ is one of the characteristics that leads Boulez to label his music Dadaist. Cage's interest in non-intentional sounds, or so-called silences within a composition, stems from the same impulse that leads him to include chance procedures in his compositional method, itself a technique favoured by Tzara for the creation of poems from scraps of newspaper cuttings.¹⁴ Cage's use of the Chinese oracle I-Ching to determine the pitch, duration and intensity of sounds for his *Music of Changes* (1951) was intended to eliminate the influence of the composer's memory and habits - his taste - from the composition. Randomness and non-intentional

sounds stem from Cage's desire to create a new music and a new way of listening: 'not an attempt to understand...just an attention to the activity of sounds'.¹⁵

Sounds were not to be related to one another in a composition, but were to be set free to 'be themselves'. Musical performance was to be related to theatrical action, since 'music, [the] imaginary separation of hearing from the other senses, does not exist'.¹⁶ The performances that resulted from Cage's philosophy would have pleased the original Dadaists no end by their challenge to tradition, culminating in works such as *4'33"* (1952), where the performer's instrument remains silent throughout.

It is against this philosophy that Boulez ar-

Lent et grave (♩ = 66)

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Example 2: Satie, *Gymnopédie No 3*, bars 1-10.

gues in his Darmstadt lectures. For Boulez, 'freedom must be found in discipline'. The composer's mastery of technique is paramount, since technique is 'an exalting mirror which the imagination forges for itself, and in which its discoveries are reflected', whereas lack of technique renders a composer inarticulate. The 'long holidays from thought' found in Cage's musical randomness signify a 'flight from responsibility'. Boulez would have serious composers behave differently: 'one's intellectual equipment should be firmly taken in hand if it is to be controlled and eventually made to create a new logic of sound relationships'. An avoidance of intellect on the part of the composer, as advocated by Cage, can only produce meaningless music: 'an accidental gesture in a random construction cannot be very promising architecturally'. Speculations, or musical experiments, are allowed, but they only become justifiable if they help to 'point the way to general principles, the real target of all speculation', rather than remaining 'in the department of seasonal novelties' (Boulez 1971, pp.25-9).¹⁷

The "errors" of which Boulez accuses Cage are also found in works which have taken the principle of integral serialism too far, and ended in a "debauchery" of numbers. Such works, relying completely on numerical preorganization of material, allow the composer to escape the responsibility of choice and decision: 'enslaved in such a yoke it was difficult not to feel oneself at the mercy of the law of large numbers: in the last resort, any choice had only a relative importance'.¹⁸ Boulez groups irresponsible integral serialists and Cage and his followers together as dilettantes - writers of music that requires no skill or technique for its production.

Cage would no doubt acknowledge that his works contain all the characteristics that Boulez identifies as flaws. Yes, Cage's music is unpromising architecturally; but it is not intended as architecture, only as unrelated groups of interesting sounds. Yes, his music is meaningless; but it is not intended to carry meaning 'for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words'. And yes, it is dilettantish in that its production requires no particularly great compositional skill in the traditional sense; but the thought that all people could compose like Cage would surely delight the composer, who sees his practice of music

from a Zen point of view, as 'a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord'.¹⁹

The work of many post-1945 composers can be evaluated in terms of the dichotomy presented by Cage and Boulez. American composers such as Morton Feldman and Earle Brown allied themselves, at least initially, with Cage's methods, producing semi-indeterminate scores from tables of random numbers.²⁰ Minimalist composers such as Terry Riley and Steve Reich, while not continuing Cage's tradition of chance composition, would seem to lie closer to Cage's aesthetic than to that of Boulez, for their works suggest an 'attention to the activity of sounds' rather than an awareness of a musical architecture as the most appropriate response for listeners. Boulez could certainly accuse their compositional methods of being dilettantish for the same reasons as Cage's. At the other extreme may lie composers such as Xenakis, whose stochastic music utilizes the same 'law of large numbers' that Boulez cites as reducing the importance of decisions made by the composer. Even though Xenakis rejected integral serialism, Boulez may still see his compositions as examples of numerical debauchery due to Xenakis' use of formulas to calculate the 'sound aspects' of a work.²¹

In between Cage and Boulez are a number of composers who exhibit characteristics of both. Electronic or tape compositions by composers such as Stockhausen and Berio, and their use of electronic or environmental sounds in combination with conventional instruments, respond to Cage's acceptance of 'all audible phenomena as material proper to music'.²² Stockhausen's notion of 'moment-form', heard in *Kontakte* (1959), is clearly in sympathy with Cage, even though the former 'now regards Cage as an anarchist'.²³ Works by Stockhausen, Berio and Lutoslawski that allow their different sections a variety of arrangements, or that allow the performers rhythmic freedom within certain limits, lean towards Cage's indeterminacy.

These composers, however, have no desire to follow Cage by entirely eliminating themselves from their compositions, and still retain a degree of control over their works that is more in accord with Boulez than Cage. Lutoslawski says of his *Jeux venitiens* (1961) that despite considerable

metrical indeterminacy, 'in composing my piece I had to foresee all possibilities which would arise within the limits set beforehand [so that] even the least desirable possibility of execution, in a given fragment, should nevertheless be acceptable'.²⁴ Similarly, works such as Berio's *Circles* (1960) achieve much of their effect through the contrast between fixed and free sections, the overall form remaining under the strict control of the composer.²⁵ Such compositional methods can hardly be called dilettantish, nor seen as 'holidays from thought' or responsibility.

Criticisms that can be directed against Cage and Boulez indicate why the middle ground between them may be more attractive to most post-1945 composers than the extremes of either pole. Cage's compositional practices are so far removed from tradition, denying the necessity of any compositional craft in the traditional sense, that his followers may not be able to define themselves as musicians or composers in the way these words are normally understood. Furthermore, one may wonder whether Cage's chance procedures actually succeed in eliminating the composer's personality from the work as intended, since the parameters from which the random selections are made are initially determined by the composer. Even Cage's choice of the I-Ching as a random number generator demonstrates his personal taste at work, since there are methods for generating random numbers available that are far less laborious than the Chinese oracle. Clearly, Cage chose his method for more than its ability to generate random numbers.

Boulez has been accused of proposing a 'stultifying new academicism...little living, breathing music is likely to be spawned from the lucubrations of Boulez the theorist'.²⁶ This view may be a trifle reactionary, but it has been a characteristic of many composers since 1945 to seek a degree of indeterminacy in their works beyond what Boulez may condone. This is so particularly in the realm of so-called non-musical or environmental sounds of which Boulez disapproves: 'any sound which has too evident an affinity with the noises of everyday life...with its anecdotal connotations, becomes completely isolated from its context; it could never be integrated'.²⁷

It is not yet possible to say whether composers like Berio, part way between Cage and Boulez, represent a compromise between the extremes, or a resolution of them. As Boulez's mistake about the post-1945 relevance of Dada shows, his opposite pole is just as alive as his own. The criticisms of one pole made by the other are not heeded as criticisms, since there are two separate philosophies in action. Poggioli defines these philosophies as the difference between the classical view of the will as a 'conscious rational and autonomous faculty' - Boulez -, and Schopenhauer's view of the will as a 'vital energy and cosmic force; not a restraint or inhibition, but an impulse or instinct...an unconscious, irrational and automatic will' - Dada and Cage.²⁸ These two views yield different ideas of what art can and should be. They may be seen as the thesis and antithesis of the yet to be resolved dialectic process of twentieth century music.

¹ R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde* (London: Belknap Press, 1968), p.185.

² Arnold Whittall, *Music since the First World War* (London: Dent, 1977), p.195.

³ *Boulez on Music Today* (London: Faber, 1971), p.14.

⁴ Whittall, p.196.

⁵ Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), pp.236 & 201.

⁶ J.C.G. Waterhouse, 'Futurism', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, VII, 41.

⁷ Richter, p.225.

⁸ J. Russell & S. Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), pp.26-7.

⁹ Russell & Gablik, p.118.

¹⁰ John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1970), pp.10-14.

¹¹ Paul Griffiths, *Cage* (London: OUP, 1981), p.22.

¹² Griffiths, p.21.

¹³ Cage, pp.83-4.

¹⁴ Richter, p.54.

¹⁵ Reginald Smith Brindle, *The New Music: the Avant-garde since 1845*, 2nd ed. (London: OUP, 1987), p.122.

¹⁶ Cage, p.10.

¹⁷ Boulez, pp.25-9.

¹⁸ Boulez, pp.25-6.

¹⁹ Cage, pp.10-12.

²⁰ Brindle, p.127.

²¹ Whittall, pp.240-242.

²² Cage, p.84.

²³ Whittall, p.263.

²⁴ Whittall, p.237.

²⁵ Whittall, p.247.

²⁶ G. Green, 'Boulez on Music Today', *Notes*, vol.29 (1972), 245-6.

²⁷ Boulez, p.22.

²⁸ Poggioli, p.189.