

John Cage – The Compositional Heuristics of the Non-Intentional

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ABSTRACT

Analysing John Cage's personality through the interrogation of his aphorisms, this article attempts to demonstrate that the intention of the creator is constitutive of the work, since it is part of its very definition: without one there is no other. To remove intention from the compositional process is an operation that must be considered logically impossible, in the sense that to affirm the contrary inevitably leads to contradiction. And Cage incurs in it, as the exegesis shows, when he advocates composition as an involuntary action, even though, unquestionably, this conviction is the heuristic engine of his own creation. I mean that Cage, sometimes consciously and often unconsciously, nourishes himself on this contradiction to realise his works. This is what the concept of heuristics in art, already outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* some twenty-three centuries ago, responds to. I assert then that it is not on the existence or non-existence of compositional intention that we must focus our attention when we refer to the Californian composer, but on the fact that he was able to highlight like no one else the existence of two different types of intention in composition. One that translates into an organisational will, establishing the order, relationship and hierarchy of events. The other, which is limited to circumscribing a frame, a space within which involuntary, indeterminate and equiprobable events take place.

With this duality of intention, Cage inaugurates a different era in musical creation. He taught us to use the determination of the compositional gesture as just another parameter, together with pitch, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, and so on.

And it is undoubtedly at the crossroads between voluntarist intention and open intention that the musical composition of our time still stands.

KEY WORDS: Aesthetic – Music – Musicology – Musical Heuristics.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to reveal a particular aspect of Cage's work by observing and interpreting the American composer's aphorisms. I think that a whole generation of practising artists is confronted with questions about will and hazard, about the determinacy and indeterminacy of musical language, about the affirmation and denial of the personality of the composer in their work, and so on. It is true that Cage's personality was so striking to his contemporaries that, until now, few specialists have dared to seriously discuss the validity of the "intellectual bombshells" he dropped on us, with his magnificent, charming and distracted air. Now that he is no longer with us, the time has come perhaps to analyse the extent of his teaching. In my opinion, and after reading so many books and articles on Cage, there is an urgent need for an assessment, albeit provisional, that can serve as a guide for young creators and performers and contribute to their artistic endeavours. Cage's maxims are overwhelmingly about the idiosyncrasy of the maker. His views vary from period to period, and sometimes seem to contradict each other, which can be explained if we consider the different circumstances and situations of the various statements. Also, it must be understood that the ideas of a composer such as him, who has practically never stopped composing, belong necessarily to a particular moment, updated and different for each work. I mean that the characteristic discontinuity of the composer's various compositional processes must be taken into account in order to better determine the value of the aphorisms that emerge at a particular moment. Understanding that Cage's personality is subject to the 'perpetual motion' of creation, one must therefore consider his insights more as samples within a fluctuating dynamic rather than as revelations of absolute value. Perhaps this is why Marvin Minsky says that: "When John Cage points, look at his finger, not at what he sees",¹ thus underlining the importance of the composer's opinion at the very moment of the creative process (Minsky here reverses the terms

¹ Marvin MINSKY, "The self-constructor", in *Anarchic Harmony*, texts collected by Stefan Schädler and Walter Zimmermann, Frankfurt Feste 92/Alte Oper Frankfurt, Ed. Schott, 1992, p. 149.

of the famous Zen saying: “pointing to the moon is necessary, but woe to those who mistake the finger for the moon”, which in turn warns against methods and interpretations that reduce reality or add to it elements alien to its nature. As Mallarmé once said: “All method is fiction” ...

I. INTENTION AN CREATIVE PROCESS

Intention as a source of ambiguity: Let us take a closer look at some of the ambiguities of his aphorisms. Cage’s words slip permanently between music that is absolutely devoid of intention and music that proposes to carry out a determined project. This ambivalence between lack of necessity on the one hand and necessity on the other was noted by Eric de Visscher, who says on the subject: “The search for the unknown, the uncontrolled, the indetermined seems to be a constant feature of Cage’s work, which gives the idea of originality a new meaning.”²

He refers to the following statement by Cage: “Yes, I am very attached to the principle of originality. Not originality in the selfish sense, but originality in the sense of doing something that has to be done.”³ According to the composer, the things have to be done are not those that have already been done, but those that remain to be done. De Visscher continues: “This idea of originality as a necessity is obviously ambiguous, because necessity can be seen as a form of determinacy.”⁴

And there are other areas where ambiguity arises: “One can sense that there are, within Cage’s personality, two seemingly contradictory aspects: the ‘idealist’ idea of ‘accepting the circumstances’ and the pragmatic idea of ‘using the circumstances’ [...]. The idealistic view accepts ‘everything that can happen’ and remains open to the unknown. It is found in indeterminacy, devotion, interpenetration. The pragmatic vision is one that takes advantage of circumstances: for example, if you do not have time to finish a work, consider it finished the moment you start it [...]. Circumstances then become a structural factor: the time or money available determines the form or structure of a work.”⁵

This ambiguity is manifested through the apparent opposition of aphorisms, found in various articles:

“I have no objection to the observation that I am engaged in a useless activity.”⁶

“I think about more and more of those circumstances as being variable, unpredictable and finally useful.”⁷

“One does not then make just any experiment but does what must be done.”⁸

“What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen.”⁹

What is at stake here is very important, nothing less than the way the creator positions himself in front of the unknown that carries his work along: either he accepts *a priori* everything that can happen inside the work just because it happens, because unpredictability is the intention, or the unpredictable fits into a project to which it

² « La recherche de l’inconnu, de l’incontrôlé, de l’indéterminé semble bien être un caractère constant du travail de Cage, ce qui donne à l’idée d’originalité un sens nouveau. »

Eric DE VISSCHER, « “I welcome whatever happen next”, la musique récente de J. Cage » (“Recent music of John Cage”) », in *Revue d’Esthétique* No. 13-14-15, Éd. Privat, 1988, p. 182.

³ John CAGE et Roger REYNOLDS, « Entretien » (“Interview”, 1961), translation by Madelaine Chantoiseau, *Revue d’Esthétique*, op. cit., p. 396.

⁴ Eric DE VISSCHER, *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵ « On peut sentir qu’il y a, au sein de la personnalité de Cage, deux aspects apparemment contradictoires : l’idée “idéaliste”, consistant à “accepter les circonstances”, et l’idée pragmatique, où il s’agit “d’utiliser les circonstances” [...]. La vision idéaliste accepte “tout ce qui peut arriver” et reste ouverte à l’inconnu. Elle se retrouve dans l’indétermination, la dévotion, l’interpénétration. La vision pragmatique est celle qui tire partie des circonstances : par exemple, si vous n’avez pas le temps de terminer une œuvre, considérez-la comme finie dès l’instant où vous la commencez [...]. Les circonstances deviennent alors un facteur structurel : le temps ou l’argent disponibles déterminent la forme ou la structure d’un travail. »

Eric DE VISSCHER, *art. cit.*, p. 185.

⁶ John CAGE, letter to *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 May 1956.

⁷ Peter GENA, “After Antiquity, John Cage in conversation with Peter Gena”, online in: <http://www.artic.edu/~pgena/aftant.html>.

⁸ John CAGE, *Silence*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1967, p. 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

will bring some usefulness. This usefulness thus reveals the pre-existence of some purpose, intention and determination, in contradiction of the alleged absence of any intention in the work. In the interpretation of Cage's music, the question of non-intentionality arises with undeniable acuity. Thus, Tom Johnson rightfully asks: "What are the real intentions of a composer of unintentional music? What should unintentional music convey to the listener, and how can the performer get the message across? If a performer plays with great mastery, achieving the desired result perfectly, is this in contradiction with the unintentionality of the music? It must be said, then, that [...] all these contradictions surge on top of each other without end [...] and it is hard to see how to ward off the irony."¹⁰

Cage himself is aware of these ambiguities:

"I often say that I have no purpose and that I am concerned with sound, but obviously this is not the case. And yet I do. I believe that by eliminating the goal, I increase what I call perception. So my goal is to get rid of the goal."¹¹

Intentionality/non-intentionality: two principles of a different nature: I think I can explain Cage's apparent contradictions by assuming that intentionality and non-intentionality are two assumptions of a different nature, two principles that are not situated at the same conceptual level. *Intentionality is constitutive of the notion of work:* to deny one is to deny the other. Whereas non-intentionality regulates the composer's activity. It sets into motion a heuristic process that enables him to create works. This is the way Cage would like the creator's work to be carried out, *as if the composition were not dependent on his will*. This is an attempt to conceal the creator's choices and decisions. In short: on the one hand intentionality is tautological and inescapable. On the other hand, non-intentionality is the heuristics that is inherent to the freedom of the Californian creator: it is as it is, but it could be different. Three hundred years B.C., Aristotle had already understood this contingent and heuristic nature of art:

"Every art is concerned with bringing something into being, i.e. with contriving or calculating how to bring into being some one of those things that can either be or not be, *and the cause of whose production lies in the producer, not in the thing itself which is produced*. For art has not to do with that which is or comes into being of necessity, nor with the products of nature; for these have the cause of their production in themselves."¹² Consequently, not everything that the work asserts or denies can be taken at face value, since it refers to the subjective expression of the one who created it. This helps to explain how two idiosyncrasies of composition as different from one another as Boulez's or Cage's manage to coexist in the same world: they do not produce contradiction, neither of them is a truth to be taken literally. They are, on the other hand, *two different heuristics*, two fictions that lead creators to create works.

The modalities of will: There is therefore an intention, a goal, a will that sustains every work. In fact, if by "work" we understand the crystallisation of an activity, a work carried out by someone, *it is impossible (I mean: logically impossible) to accept that this activity is not justified by an intention*. A causal link is maintained between the intention, the creative activity and the work, which leads me to say that the intention is a constituent element of the definition of the latter. *But this intention can either bear with it an organizational will, determining the order, relationship and hierarchy of events, or it can just circumscribe a framework, a conceptual delimitation where equiprobable events may happen*, without establishing their succession. These two ways of organizing the founding intention of a work imply two radically opposed images of the creator. Is he a demiurge or agnostic? The appearance of the image of the omnipresent creator, on the one hand, seems to coincide with the break-up of the univocal style that characterises modernity. On the other hand, following the example of Satie and Duchamp, Cage demystifies the almighty creator, to transform him into a spectator of his own work. As the latter becomes a device where events are distributed randomly, the creator can be naturally surprised by what happens. Thus, his personality is transformed by the act of reception, according to this providence. In order to obtain this transformation, he regulates his creative process as an experience of non-will (which is always will, but in a global syncretic, statistical way), letting chance determine the relationship between the events.

¹⁰ « Quelles sont les intentions réelles d'un compositeur de musique non intentionnelle ? Que doit transmettre la musique non intentionnelle à l'auditeur, et comment l'interprète peut-il faire pour que le message se transmette ? Si un interprète joue avec une grande maîtrise, en parvenant parfaitement au résultat qu'il aura souhaité, cela est-il en contradiction avec les non-intentions de la musique ? Force est donc de constater, que [...] toutes ces contradictions déferlent l'une sur l'autre sans fin [...] et l'on ne voit guère comment conjurer l'ironie. »
Tom JOHNSON, « Intentionnalité et non-intentionnalité dans l'interprétation de la musique de John Cage » ("Intentionality and non-intentionality in the performance of John Cage's music"), translation by Christophe Charles, *Revue d'Esthétique*, op. cit., p. 252.

¹¹ John CAGE et Roger REYNOLDS, *interview cit.*, p. 396.

¹² ARISTOTLE, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, 4, p. 134, the online library of Liberty, Liberty Fund, Inc., online in https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/903/Aristotle_0328_EBk_v6.0.pdf

Intention as legitimization – an example: The constitutive intention of the work is there, and its real importance is shown when it comes to establishing the authenticity of the work, when it is necessary to differentiate it from another project, indistinguishable from the work of reference through simple reception. Let's take an example: during a concert in which 4'33" is being performed, some actors, scattered among the audience, have precise instructions as to how to whisper, murmur, etc., pretending to act spontaneously. How should we view this performance: as a version of 4'33" or as another work? "According to Cage's indications on this piece, all the sounds that occur, except those produced by the performer, constitute this piece, 4'33". And this determinative indication as an intention of the composer, would prove [...] that this piece is a definite work."¹³

Yet it is clear that Cage's intention was not to simulate spontaneity, but to capture true spontaneity. Preparing reactions in advance is a decision that alters the creative process and undermines the *raison d'être* of the work. With this fundamental change, it should be questionable whether Cage is still the sole composer or whether there is collaboration. However, despite all the indeterminacy it entails, and all the possible versions, 4'33" does not cast any doubt on the spontaneity of the audience's reactions, nor on the fact that Cage, and only he, is the author. These reasons lead me to consider this example as a project other than 4'33", at best as another piece, though indistinguishable from its reference by the sole comparison of receptions. (In this regard, the following anecdote is significant: Cage's publishers won a case against British composer and producer Mike Batt, who was accused in 2002 of plagiarism of 4'33". He had introduced a silent track in his last rock/classical album, under the name *A Minute of Silence*, signing it "Cage/Batt". An antecedent of this lawsuit was the recording of a version of 4'33" by Frank Zappa, who, like Batt, was obliged to pay the corresponding royalties to Cage's estate).

The universal content of the intention: The constituent intention of the work has universal characteristics that are independent of any isolated consideration of content. Thus, the fact of considering 4'33" as a musical work diverts the expectations of an audience faced with an impassive pianist, in order to make this reality something else and to free it from the purely eventful nature of natural phenomena or anonymous, fluid and non-intentional processes. The intention is therefore, above all, to produce a work, to interpret the object or event in question as belonging to the artistic dimension. "Contemplating a simple object and contemplating an object that interpretation has transformed into a work is not at all the same thing, even when the interpretation in some way renders the object to itself, by saying that the work is an object [...]. Since interpretation is constitutive, the object is not a work before this act. Interpretation is a transformative procedure: it resembles a baptism [...] which brings the baptized into the community of the elect."¹⁴ Producing a work implies making sense: the sense of rendering to the creator, first of all, and to any receiver, secondly, a plausible, realistic and actualised image of himself based on the chosen material conditions. This "making sense" belongs to the field of hermeneutics, in particular the musical hermeneutics of Christian Hauer.¹⁵ Following in the footsteps of Paul Ricœur, among others, he presents creation as the need for the artist and the receiver to understand themselves better when confronted to the work. This gives rise to the concept of "self-refiguring", based on a constructive and re-constructive hypothesis of the self, which is, ultimately, the work. From his experience of time and unfolding as a discontinuous, confused and shapeless perception, the composer makes an explanation of his own image intelligible: with the work as a support, he invents a plot to make himself plausible. In this regard, Cage says, paraphrasing the answer to the question asked to Sri Ramakrishna:

"Why, if everything is possible, do we concern ourselves with history (in other words, with a sense of what is necessary to be done at a particular time)? And I would answer, "In order to thicken the plot".¹⁶ This explains the function of a work in progress for its creator: an imperative need for self-understanding and self-explanation. But if the concept of "self-refiguring" is a valid explanation for composition, it is not enough to give meaning to the act of receiving the work. To complete this notion, Hauer borrows from semiotics the dichotomy of "sender

¹³ « Suivant les indicatives de Cage sur cette pièce, tous les sons qui adviennent, excepté ceux qui produit l'exécutant, constituent cette pièce 4'33". Et cette indication déterminative en tant qu'intention du compositeur, prouverait [...] que cette pièce est une œuvre définie. » Susumo SHONO, « Une Poétique de l'écoute » ("A creative process applied to listening"), *Revue d'Esthétique*, op. cit., p. 449.

¹⁴ « Contempler un simple objet et contempler un objet que l'interprétation a transformé en œuvre n'est pas du tout la même chose, même lorsque l'interprétation rend en quelque sorte l'objet à lui-même, en disant que l'œuvre est objet [...]. Puisque l'interprétation est constituante, l'objet n'est pas une œuvre avant cet acte. L'interprétation est une procédure de transformation : elle ressemble à un baptême [...] qui fait accéder le baptisé à la communauté des élus. »

Arthur DANTO, *La Transfiguration du banal (The transfiguration of the commonplace)*, translated by Claude Hary-Schaeffer, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1989 for the French translation, p. 204.

¹⁵ See on this subject the article by Christian HAUER « Pour une extension de la signification musicale : une herméneutique de la création et de la réception » ("For an extension of the musical meaning: a hermeneutic of creation and reception"), in *Musical Signification, Between Rhetoric and Pragmatics*, directed by G. Stefani, E. Tarasti et L. Marconi, Proceedings of the 5th International Congress on Musical Signification, Bologna, Italy, 1996 – CLUEB, Bologne, 1998, p. 137 et ss.

¹⁶ John CAGE, *Silence*, op. cit., p. 68.

and receiver”. The composer will be considered as the sender of the work he is shaping and simultaneously as its receiver, because from his work he will form a hypothesis of congruity, which will make his fragmentary experience of temporality coherent. He is both the one who decides on the musical development of the work, and the one who is enlightened by the work *in statu nascendi*. Self-understanding is a process that extends from the creation of the work to its reception. As the creator is at the same time the first receiver of his work, he creates the possibility of the self-refigurations of others along with his own self-refiguration. This is done against the backdrop of an art theory that can frame the interpretations and ultimately determine how the work will fit into the artistic production of its time. “One can only see something as a work of art in the atmosphere of an artistic theory and knowledge about the history of art. Art, in its very existence, always depends on a theory: without a theory of art, a spot of black paint is simply a spot of black paint and nothing more.”¹⁷

Theory will allow for a mediation between creator and receiver, which is necessary for the self-refigurations to remain relevant. A kind of bond is thus created between the composer and his audience, based on what each interprets as their own image based on the same work. This concert of individual processes is ‘reflective’ because there is not and cannot be a single model into which interpretations will fit. Each person is challenged by what they project onto the work. There is *intersubjectivity* here, a subjective universality, a transcendence in the immanence of which we can say with Cassirer: “It is the direct communication of man with man, the mode of communication in which man meets man, without passing through the diversions of an object (or concept) or of the law.”¹⁸

II. NON-INTENTIONALITY AS A HEURISTIC PRINCIPLE

After this overview of the universal content of the founding intention of a work, I would now like to talk about non-intentionality as heuristics, one of several possible particularisations of the creative process. In order to make his work, the creator has a number of dominant ideas, which function as pivots or fixed points around which the piece develops. These ideas are regulatory principles of creation. Their fundamental characteristic is contingency; paraphrasing the above mentioned quotation of Aristotle, *these principles are as they are, but they could be different*. In music, such ideas vary according to the composer, and, within a single composer’s production, according to his maturity and to the problems posed by his creations (several works are likely to share the same regulatory principles). They may directly concern the parametric organisation of a piece, by establishing several parallel levels of musical construction, as was the case for the dodecaphony of Schönberg, Berg and Webern (structure/form), for the integral serialism of Boulez (system/idea) and Stockhausen (structure/form), as well as for the formal music of Xenakis (“out-of-time”/ “in-time”). These examples all admit as a principle, firstly, the traditional division of music into parameters (pitch, rhythm, intensity, etc.) and secondly, their layout, their superposition inside a perceptive unity. To obtain a systematic result, some control mechanisms strongly frame the creative process: for dodecaphony, the pitch series regulates the melodic and harmonic activity of the pieces, determining the order of entry of the pitches through the combinatorics defined by Schönberg. However, the other parameters continue to respond to an intuitive organisation. For integral serialism, the series is transformed into a series of numbers, and can be transposed, with some limitations, to all musical parameters. As for stochastic music, parametric control is based on mathematical operations borrowed from the calculation of probabilities. By the end of the 1950s, most composers were aware that the use of combinatorics, applied to musical parameters, could be effective in organising the articulation of whole sequences of a work. Thus it was believed that the linearity of the musical discourse could be broken while at the same time ensuring strong differences between versions. This new heuristic is at the origin of the open or mobile work — Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück XI* (1956) and Boulez’s *Third Piano Sonata* (1957) are the precursors in Europe — based on mobile reservoirs of which the articulation principles are defined by the composer himself, and that leave it up to the performer to choose one of the many possible versions. Since this choice is made on the basis of a finite, discrete and traceable repertoire of pre-planned possibilities, we speak here of ‘controlled randomness’, over which the composer always maintains overall control. It is against these ideologies of determinism or calculated and controlled chance that Cage insists on putting forward a heuristic that affirms the radical suspension of control mechanisms. Among the consequences, one was meant to alleviate the considerable formal heaviness of works: “Everything happens as if

¹⁷ « On ne peut voir quelque chose comme une œuvre d’art que dans l’atmosphère d’une théorie artistique et d’un savoir concernant l’histoire de l’art. L’art, dans son existence même, dépend toujours d’une théorie : sans une théorie de l’art, une tache de peinture noire est simplement une tache de peinture noire et rien de plus. »

Arthur DANTO, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁸ „Es ist die direkte Kommunikation des Menschen mit dem Menschen, die Art der Kommunikation, in der der Mensch dem Menschen begegnet, ohne die Umwege eines Objekts (oder Konzepts) oder des Gesetzes zu gehen.“

Ernst CASSIRER, *Kants Leben und Lehre Immanuel Kants Werke (Kant's Life and Teachings Immanuel Kant's Works)*, Bruno Cassirer Verlag, Berlin, 1921, Band XI, p. 340.

the concern to preserve the notion of the work at all costs, which one finds among European musicians, prevented them from fully running the adventure of freedom, as if the traditional attachment to the static character of formal or formalised music could not be transgressed, and thus as if it constituted an insurmountable obstacle to the establishment of truly dynamic music.”¹⁹

So, after composing *Music of Changes* for piano, in which he was still very close to serial structuring — as demonstrated by his correspondence with Boulez —,²⁰ Cage addressed the denial of the creator’s self and the consequent emphasis on a natural model originating from Zen philosophy. These philosophical beliefs gave birth to the aphorisms concerning musical indeterminacy, the music of non-will, the absence of purpose, the recovery of the operations of nature within the work, listening as a factor in transforming personality, etc.

III. SCHÖNBERG, BOULEZ, XENAKIS AND CAGE: HISTORICAL ARTICULATION OF THE HEURISTICS

Without referring to a precise chronology, it can be said that the historical turning point to which Cage was to contribute is characterised by diverse conceptions of composition as activity, which preserve the romantic meanings of concepts such as “composer”, “work”, “material”, etc. Nested within each other, these different conceptions of the creative process function as successive redefinitions of the act of creation. Thus:

a) The generalized series makes the dodecaphonic series a special case: “Durations, timbres, dynamics, certainly possessed a logic of use, had a meaning, but their organisation profoundly escaped the system, so rigorous, so narrow, even, with regard to the pitches themselves. What could be done, then, but unify the system and give equal importance to all the components of sound?”²¹

b) Stochastic music in turn makes the generalized series a special case: “In 1954, I denounced linear (polyphonic) thinking by highlighting the contradictions of serial music. In its place I proposed a universe of sound masses, vast ensembles of sound events [...], which required definitions and implementations with the help of the calculus of probabilities. Thus stochastic music was born. In fact, this new conception of large numbers, viewed as masses, was more general than the linear polyphonic, since it could include it as a particular case [...]”²²

But integral serialism and stochastic music propose a unidirectional musical path, since they respond to univocal systems of organisation that establish in advance the relationships between sounds, which will remain forever fixed by the composer. In ‘formal’ music, very strong control mechanisms determine the identity of the piece and serve to reject ‘deviant’ versions that do not conform to them. With Cage, on the other hand, we are dealing with an involuntary path in which chance replaces, to a greater or lesser extent, the deterministic relationship between events. This is why Cage claims to recover the natural model, not only in terms of the material used, but also by imitating the operations of Nature, i.e. by using totally random relationships of simultaneity and succession between independent sound sources. “In other words, Cage, as a composer, aims to determine not the nature of music as essence, but the essence of music as nature.”²³

(c) Indeterminacy as a regulation of the creative process is ultimately a generalization where cases (a) and (b) subsume, because it conceives the work as an infinite continuum, without markers, modules or cuts. Here all events, whether voluntary or involuntary, determined or undetermined, have the same right to exist. Under these

¹⁹ « Tout se passe comme si le souci de préserver à tout prix la notion d’œuvre, que l’on retrouve chez les musiciens européens, les empêchait de courir pleinement l’aventure de la liberté, comme si l’attachement traditionnel au caractère statique des musiques formelles ou formalisées ne pouvait être transgressé et constituait de ce fait un obstacle insurmontable à l’établissement d’une musique véritablement dynamique. » Francis BAYER, *De Schönberg à Cage, Essai sur la notion d’espace dans la musique contemporaine* (From Schönberg to Cage, *Essay on the notion of space in contemporary music*), Paris, Éd. Klincksieck, 1987, p. 178.

²⁰ For more on this issue see letter No. 39 from Pierre Boulez to John Cage, in *Pierre Boulez/John Cage : Correspondance*. Documents collected, presented and annotated by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Éditions Christian Bourgois, 1991, p. 211.

²¹ « Durées, timbres, dynamiques, possédaient certainement une logique d’emploi, avaient une signification, mais leur organisation échappait profondément au système, si rigoureux, si étroit même en ce qui concerne les hauteurs proprement dites. Que faire alors, sinon unifier le système et donner une égale importance à toutes les composantes du son ? »

Pierre BOULEZ, « Le Système et l’Idée », *Jalons pour une décennie (Milestones for a decade)*. Texts collected and presented by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Éditions Christian Bourgois, 1989, p. 360.

²² « En 1954, je dénonçai la pensée linéaire (polyphonique) en mettant en relief les contradictions de la musique sérielle. Je proposai à sa place un univers de masses sonores, de vastes ensembles d’événements sonores [...], qui nécessitaient des définitions et des mises en œuvres à l’aide du calcul des probabilités. Ainsi naissait la musique stochastique. En fait, cette nouvelle conception des grands nombres, massive, était plus générale que la linéaire polyphonique, puisqu’elle pouvait la comprendre comme un cas particulier [...]. »

Iannis XENAKIS, *Musique, architecture*, Paris, Éd. Casterman/Poche, 1971, p. 41.

²³ « En d’autres termes, Cage en tant que compositeur vise à déterminer non plus la nature de la musique comme essence, mais l’essence de la musique comme nature. »

Daniel CHARLES, *Gloses sur John Cage*, Paris, Éditions 10/18, 1978, p. 17.

conditions, the unfolding of the work can only be ultimately unpredictable. This is the condition by which the piece becomes “experimental”. “Such an attitude is essentially different from those of musicians who designate their approach as experimental according to the technical means they use. For Cage, music is experimental if the composer does not know what it will become at the time he makes it.”²⁴ Thus a voluntary and determined act, such as the sudden appearance of a melody, is considered equiprobable with an unforeseen coincidence due to pure chance. Here, control mechanisms are structurally deficient since they do not allow a spontaneous overall realisation.

IV. TOWARDS A CRITICAL MODEL FOR RESOLVING APORIAS

When taken to their logical conclusion, contradictions between determination and indetermination, wanting and not wanting, etc., would be sufficiently powerful to shatter the concepts of work and composer, which logically presuppose even a minimal determination and willingness to organise the event framework that will become the work. Anyone who firmly believes in the Zen principle of systematic self-denial in order to achieve a transformation of the personality, accomplished from within, should have no reason to make works that involve self-assertion. Can it not be said that *happenings* first, and then *events*, are invitations to go beyond the work by seeking a fluid and non-reproducible spontaneity? Why not stay there, in the territory of fluid, free, natural, anonymous processes, with no possibility of reproduction or royalties, where nothing of the creator’s egotistical impulse can stand in the way of the spontaneous capacity for organisation? Look at Cage’s catalogue of works: is it not the best argument against the whole rhetoric of indeterminacy? Why list so many works and versions, if in the end what matters is self-transformation, which ultimately can be triggered by the perception of anything and everything? These questions reaffirm the two-level operation of the outlined principles. At the constitutive level, the non-observance of the principles of identity and contradiction leads to incoherence. At the regulative level, as heuristics, the contradiction of points of view does not eliminate one at the expense of another, but creates a concert, a dialogic of diverse aesthetic possibilities. In fact, Cage continues to believe in concepts that he could have permanently eliminated from his creative universe. And this is because, despite the ambiguities identified above that would lead one to believe the opposite, his objective is not to destroy, but to push back the conceptual boundaries of the work and the composer — and, consequently, those of the performer and the listener — with a firmness that is unprecedented in the entire history of Western music.

Recapitulation and interpretation : I would now like to return to the central hypothesis of my paper: on the one hand, intention is a constitutive principle of the concept of the work; it gives the work its universality, thanks to the “making sense” attached to the hermeneutic process of self-refiguration. On the other hand, non-intention is a regulating principle of the compositional process, a conviction rooted in human freedom, which can be replaced by another conviction. Purpose and purposelessness, as viewed by Cage, seem to be separated by an ontological crack, the one that separates the world of causality from the world of human freedom. Between the apodictic and the ideological there can be no contradiction, since they belong to two different levels of thought. Cage’s already quoted statement — “I often say that I have no goal and that I am concerned with sound, but obviously this is not the case” — is indicative of the co-existence of these two principles and their parallel functioning. The obviousness of purpose reveals the necessity of intention in the work; despite this, Cage acts *as if* he can get rid of it. The use of *as if* allows the analyst to relativise the value of the regulatory principles. The composer acts: *as if* his music were an experiment in not wanting; *as if* he had nothing to decide, nothing to say, no intention, no goal; *as if* his piece had no meaning, no reason to exist; *as if* nature could be imitated in its processes and integrated into the work. But this distancing is not possible for the creator himself, who would see his creative process seriously weakened; here, the reasons of the philosopher or the musicologist are not the same as those of the artist. Indeed, the creator’s reasons have a pragmatic value that is independent from whether they are true or not. They function as a support and framework for his creative process. This process is dedicated to the increasing determination of a form, starting with a first “*bildliche Darstellung*” — as Hegel would say — and ending with the finished work. Objective truth is not the essential criterion for making sense of this path. Nor is the search for, or the finding of, coherence. What is important is, in a totally pragmatic way, the adaptation and plasticity shown by the composer’s reasons in relation to how he makes his work real. Here, defined at a stroke, is musical heuristics.

²⁴ « Une telle attitude se distingue essentiellement de celles des musiciens qui désignent leur démarche comme expérimentale en fonction des moyens techniques qu’ils exploitent. Pour Cage, est expérimentale une musique dont le compositeur ne sait pas ce qu’elle va devenir au moment où il la réalise. »

Jean-Yves BOSSEUR, *John Cage*, Paris, Minerve, 1993, p. 66.

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Cage's great novelty was to lead us to consider the creator's will as a new parameter in the creation of a work. This is the consequence of a close relationship between will and non-will. Thus, as has already been said, non-will is always a minimal will, that defines the dimensions of a device, of a framework within which events of all kinds, both predictable and unforeseeable, can take place. At the same time, however, so-called "determined" works cannot evacuate from their being a certain degree of unpredictability in relation to their interpretation, which will play an essential part in the reception of the work. From this point of view, a unison, an octave, a "square" rhythm, a particular tempo, a character, etc., depend on a threshold of tolerance for the recognition of their identity, without which, for example, symphonic music would be unthinkable. This means that, in turn, and despite all the details contained in the score, will is always a minimal non-will, at least in terms of realisation. We can see therefore that a strong dialectics is established between these two categories: it is impossible to appeal to one without also referring to the other. In the light of this observation, Cage's aesthetic, traditionally presented as an aesthetic of rupture, irreconcilable with that of European formal music, in fact constitutes its extension, from the musical to the sonic. From Cage onwards, and for the following generations of creators, will has acquired the status of a parameter in its own right in the composition, in the same way as pitch or rhythm. Cage taught us that the contour of our will can vary within a compositional project. If this contour is clear, the musical development is voluntaristic. If it is blurred, chance moves forward and takes its place within the work. Thus the creator's will is 'spread out' between two boundaries — 'strong will' and 'vague will', called respectively 'determinism' and 'musical indeterminacy' — between which it is possible to identify the various degrees of a differential scale. It is because of this work on will that musical notation has had to evolve and adapt to each project according to its degree of determination.

In conclusion, it can be said that Cage's aesthetics establishes total parity between the voluntary (deterministic) and involuntary (weakly voluntary) acts of the composer. It thus invites an introspective act of renewal based on listening, where the work is no more than a particular moment within a process of continuous enrichment. In this sense, understanding Cage has become an inescapable necessity in order to prepare for the advent of an art that is less polarised on technical achievements and more open to the human, the source of all wonder.

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