JOHN CAGE

An Anthology

Edited by Richard Kostelanetz
Satil Controversy  John Cage, with a reply by
Abraham Skulsky

These letters on the French composer Erik Satie first appeared in two separate issues of Musical America (December 15, 1950; April 1, 1951). Cage's later essay on Satie was included in Silence.

To the Editor:

Over and over again in Satie criticism, the complaint is filed that humor was used as a mask behind which to hide an inability to write music. (Equally outrageously, one might imagine that St. Francis sermonized to birds because of an inability to convey his ideas to other animate beings.) Your last issue of Musical America contains an example: The article on Erik Satie by Abraham Skulsky. It seems not to have occurred to Mr. Skulsky, nor to Rollo Myers in his recent book, Erik Satie, that Satie may not have been forced but may, on the contrary, have been free to laugh.

When one takes oneself, one's gains and losses, one's popularity and disfavor seriously, it is quite impossible to laugh (except feebly, or at someone). Satie, however, was disinterested, and was thus able to laugh or weep as he chose. He knew in his loneliness and in his courage where his center was: in himself and in his nature of loving music. There is no great difference between hearing "Consider the lilies of the field, how they toil not, neither do they spin" and a piece by Erik Satie.

Forced, nervous laughter takes place when someone is trying to impress somebody for purposes of getting somewhere. Satie, free of such interest, entitled his first pieces commissioned by a publisher Three Flabby Preludes for a Dog. It being fairly clear who is referred to by the word "dog," giving that title was evidently a social act militant in nature, not nonsensical, as Mr. Skulsky would have it.

Mr. Skulsky records that all of Satie's music is humorous, excepting the Gymnopédies, the Sarabandes, and Socrate. This is simply not true. Think, for instance, of the Nocturnes, the Quatre Mélodies, the Danse Gothique, and other posthumous works, and of Sylvie (which, contrary to Mr. Myers's information, has not disappeared, and contrary to Mr. Skulsky's judgment re the

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Gymnopédies is the first work of the composer to bear the stamp of his originality. In fact, if one tries to think of a funny piece by Satie, it's really tough: Les Corses, perhaps the Embryons Deséchés, and certainly La Belle Éclectrique. When Satie used words (cf. T. S. Eliot's "I go to see words when I talk to you"), his expression was often humorous, always brilliantly imaginative. When he wrote music, he was exceptionally the art's most serious servant. He performed his tasks simply and unpretentiously. He wrote, more often than not, short pieces, as did Scarlatti and Couperin and, as will be shown, even Beethoven. (Cf. Paul Klee, who said something about wanting to ignore Europe and about needing to make things small like seeds.)

It appears we have reached the second complaint filed by critics against Satie. He wrote no big works, with the exception of Socrate. The length of a work, however, is no measure of its quality or beauty, most of post-Renaissance art-propaganda to the contrary. If we glance momentarily at R. H. Blythe's book on Haidaku (the Japanese poetic structure of five, seven, and five syllables), we read (p. 272): "Haidaku thus makes the greatest demand upon our inner poverty. Shakespeare (cf. Beethoven) pours out his universal soul, and we are abused before his omniscience and overflowing power. Haidaku requires of us that our soul should find its own infinity within the limits of some finite thing." My mind runs now to Satie's Vexations, a short piece to be played 840 times in a row. A performance of this piece would be a measure—accurate as a mirror—of one's "poverty of spirit," without which, incidentally, one loses the kingdom of heaven.

More and more it seems to me that relegating Satie to the position of having been very influential but in his own work finally unimportant is refusing to accept the challenge he so bravely gave us.

Reply by Abraham Skolinsky

John Cage's remarks on my article about Satie are typical of the difference of opinion that often prevails between a composer and a critic when both seek to judge the same work or composer. When a composer is related to another composer in character and aesthetic, the judged composer becomes a centrifuge of enthusiasm for the judging composer; the latter tends to regard the works of the former as musically valid in themselves, without reference to surroundings, time, or social significance. The judging composer is quite right in taking this attitude, for his concentration on those aspects of the judged composer's work that affect him, gives him creative impetus toward the achievement of his own ideals.

On the other hand, a critic—especially when he is considering a composer of the past—must take into account various factors of historical development. He must try to find out whether the subject of his judgment was a man of his time, with a normal place in society as it then existed, or whether he was ahead of his time, writing works that were valid only for some later generation.

Nevertheless, I have the impression that John Cage's viewpoint and mine are not as far apart as they may seem to be. We do not appreciate Satie with the same degree of enthusiasm, but we both appreciate him. Mr. Cage, however, attributes to me certain statements for which I look in vain in my article. Where, for instance, did I assert that Satie's laughter was forced, or that he was unable to write music? The expression "laughter as self-defense," which I used, may perfectly well mean "free laughter," or even "innate and unconscious laughter. As for the charge I am supposed to have made that Satie was unable to compose, what I wrote was that he was unable to attain his ideals—which is quite a different matter. Certainly none of Satie's works reveal compositional shortcomings. But they do suggest the possibility of achievements of bigger scope, which Satie seems to have been unable to undertake. This inability, I think, explains the fact that he went back to study at the age of forty.

I still believe that most of Satie's music is humorous. A piece of music is destined for the audience, which reads the title and creates an association between the title and the music. The audience can hardly be expected to discern serious hidden meanings in such titles as Flabby Preludes for a Dog or Pieces in the Shape of a Pear. It cannot take seriously such indications as those in Le Fil des Étoiles—"Without too much trembling." "Very good," "Fall until weakening," "Ignore your own presence," etc.

As Mr. Cage puts it, Satie was free to laugh, no matter how. This is, I believe, one of the main reasons for the controversy about his music. He loved music and felt himself entirely free. Writing for himself, he became immersed in an ivory tower. He not only ignored conventions, publishers, and critics—which did not matter much—he also ignored any real or imagined audience.

Satie influenced many composers, and for this influence I said that he was important. To Debussy and Ravel, Milhaud and Poulenc, Sauguet, Virgil Thomson, and John Cage, he is a great composer. In my view, however, a composer cannot be called great when only a few composers and specialists hold so exalted a view
of his merits. The composer’s message must reach beyond those who are in the same business.

This Satie’s music has not yet done. He was ahead of his time, and 25 years after his death he is still ahead of his time. He gave us significant examples, great hints of new aesthetics; but others developed them and brought them to life. The chief defect of Satie’s music is not the smallness of each work, but the smallness of his whole output. This output, influential with three generations of composers, still has not reached today’s serious audience through its wall of wit and humor. And until it does reach its audience, I cannot concede that it contains the elements that justify calling its composer great.

More Satie John Cage

To the Editor:

Mr. Skulsky’s letter in reply to mine (re Satie) was not appetizing; I have delayed answering it until I regained stomach. That having happened, on with the second course in this feast! May we continue until Satie-ated.

Mr. Skulsky’s letter resounds with ideas and attitudes that have nothing whatsoever to do with art: e.g. (I quote): “surroundings, time, social significance”; “achievement of his own ideals”; “variables factors of historical development”; “normal place in society”; “audience”; “the composer’s message! (exclamation point mine) must reach beyond those who are in the same business” (nods) “the nuts are mine too”; “head of his time”; “great hints of new aesthetics”; “others developed them and brought them to life” (What? Who? Where?) (monosyllabic questions are mine); “the smallness of his output” (Mr. Skulsky is thinking—that is, of course, the source of his difficulty)—of Satie as some kind of a small unsuccessful business man who had a few bright ideas about manufacturing music, but who never managed to get into “really good” production—actually Satie wrote about twenty-eight hours of music leaving out Petitions, which lasts for twelve hours and ten minutes, he wrote circa fourteen hours of music which is nothing to sneeze at (Weber would not have sneezed; Varèse doesn’t); but Mr. Skulsky, who has a cold when it comes to Satie, “cannot concede that it [Satie’s work] contains the elements that justify calling its composer great.” And so he says, “Writing for himself, he [Satie] became inured in an ivory tower.”

Now, for Mr. Skulsky’s information (and incidentally Musical America’s, too), let it be said that art is not a business; if it is, it is “swinishness” (I quote Antonin Artaud) and nothing more. Art is a way of life. It is for all the world like taking a bus, picking flowers, making love, sweeping the floor, getting bitten by a monkey, reading a book, etc., ad infinitum (business may also provide a way of life, but in that case, it has nothing to do with profit and loss).

The old pond,
A frog jumps in,
Plop!

(Basho)

When life is lived, there is nothing in it but the present, the “now-moment” (I quote Meister Eckhart); it is thus impossible to speak of being ahead of one’s time or of historical development. When life is lived, each one is “the most honored of all creatures” (I quote the Buddha), living in “the best of all possible worlds” (I quote Voltaire), and when this is done there is “no silliness” (I quote my former wife, Xenia Cage). Art when it is art as Satie lived it and made it is not separate from life (nor is dishwashing when it is done in this spirit).

If, however, art is a competitive business as Mr. Skulsky intimates, than on with the ivory, and up with the towers, and the quicker the better!

Satie, however, never lived in an ivory tower, nor does any artist of his quality ever need to: for there is nothing in life from which he separates himself. Satie was as at home in a night club as in a church. An ivory tower is “heaven” (I quote X. C. again), but an artist if sides are taken is necessarily on the side of hell (I quote William Blake).

An artist as artist has as his “highest responsibility” (I quote W. H. Blythe) “the hiding of beauty” (compare Skulsky’s “great hints of new aesthetics”) and as man the “knowing of himself” (I quote Socrates) which brings us back “past riverrun” (I quote James Joyce) to Satie’s Socrate and the shocking fact that we haven’t heard it yet in NYC 1951. The publishers, “the dogs” (I quote Satie), have not even made its score available for ourocular pleasure. I hope publishers and performers hurry, for I myself am bored with Satie. The music I love now (besides what I myself am currently writing) is that being written by Pierre Boulez, by Morton Feldman, and by Christian Wolff, and these

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attachments (passionate) are not, as Abraham Skalsky would have it, related to the “achievement of my ideals,” for I have none. There is not a moment in life as far as any one of us is concerned that is not “ideal” and in a state of successful and utter “achievement.” To think otherwise would be to be in hell rather than in league with it, which latter state turns the tables bringing about “The (eternal) Marriage.” Dear Skalsky, rejoice! for at any moment, you may see the light. You will then love Satie wholeheartedly.

P. S. I read the above to a friend over the phone. She said, it’s all right until you come to that part about Boulez, Feldman, and Wolff. I said, what’s wrong then? She said, it invalidates everything you’ve said because it’s like a brick. I said, I’ll think it over. I did and ever since the letter is full of bricks. Bricks have the function of hitting blocks, but, glory be! they sometimes knock down.

Among the truths that Satie expressed in words was “Show me off.” Since Feldman, Boulez, and Wolff are doing precisely that (presenting new ideas), Satie would be the first to agree that an article about him in 1951 would of necessity broadcast the names Feldman, Wolff, and Boulez.

Current Chronicle  Henry Cowell

Cage remained closest to Cowell of all his teachers; and the elder composer wrote the first extended essay on his wayward pupil’s work. Still the most incisive and detailed study of Cage’s early music, this originally appeared in The Musical Quarterly (January, 1952).

When I first met John Cage about 1932, he was writing strange little piano pieces with an unusual sense of the sound interest created by odd tonal combinations. Then, as now, the music showed little desire to move about actively; it rather depended on very slight and subtle changes for its elaboration. Influences to which he subjected himself in the mid-1930’s enlarged and enriched, without changing, this orientation. He studied dissonant counterpoint and composition with me for a season in California, and, when he went to New York to prepare with Adolph Weiss for lessons with Schoenberg, he continued intensive explorations of his own into rhythmic form and percussion music, and the musical systems of other peoples, particularly in the Orient. In my classes at the New School, later, he studied with Schoenberg, who felt that Cage was more interested in his philosophy than in acquiring his techniques. Since then, Cage has written a great deal for the dance, and he has organized percussion orchestras to play music especially composed by himself and other people. Some of his more recent music uses conventional instrumentation for string quartet and for small orchestra. Concerts of his music are a regular feature of the season in New York and, for the past several years, in Paris also, where his music has been extravagantly admired.

To John Cage, a brief series of sounds, or even a single combination of them, has come to seem complete in itself, and to constitute an audible “event.” But he does not use the conventional organization of music, in which such events are related through planned rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic succession to produce what we are accustomed to consider an organic musical development. Instead, since Cage conceives each musical “event” to be an entity in itself that does not require completion, he simply places them one after another and sees them as being related through their coexistence in space, where they are set in a planned order of time. Each “event” is an aggregate of materials of sound that cohere, making a tiny world of their own, much as physical elements find themselves joined together in a meteorite. A work of Cage’s, therefore, might well be likened to a shower of meteoric sound.

Cage’s pieces for what he calls the “prepared piano” offer an array of tightly organized little sounds of many colors. They are played on an ordinary grand piano whose strings have been muted at various specified points with bits of wood, rubber, metal, or glass. These mutes produce a variety of timbres, whose pitch and tone quality are entirely altered from those of the unmuted strings. Each piece may have its own recipe for the arrangement of the altered sounds, a kind of tone-row of timbres. They suggest the sound of the gamelan or the jaipongan, with some delicate buzzes, clacks, hums, and sometimes an unaltered tone as well. The player is guided by a piano score that is read and played entirely conventionally but produces, of course, sounds entirely different from those suggested to the eye, in accordance with the mechanical preparation for the particular piece.

In spite of his idea of the separateness of musical “events,” Cage has always had an intense interest in rhythmic structure, in absolute time values, and in the dynamics of sound and silence. His