

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Montague, Stephen. 1982. 'Cage Interview'. *Contact*, 25. pp. 30. ISSN 0308-5066.

Stephen Montague

Cage Interview

John Cage is one of the most influential and important creative artists to have emerged this century. On 5 September Cage was 70 years old. The following material is taken from interviews by Stephen Montague with the composer on 18 March 1982 at Cage's loft in Greenwich Village, New York, and during the Almeida Festival, London, 28-30 May 1982.

STEPHEN MONTAGUE: You are 70 years old in September. What are the best and the worst things about being your age? What are some of your reflections?

JOHN CAGE: Well, I have a friend named Doris Dennison who is 74 and whose 96-year-old mother lives alone in Oregon and is still taking care of herself. Doris called her one day and asked how she was. Mrs Dennison said: 'Oh, I'm fine, it's just that I don't have the energy I had when I was in my 70s.'

My attitude toward old age is one of gratitude for each day. Poor Henry David Thoreau died at age 44. You know he had the habit of walking through the streets of Concord in the dead of winter without any clothes on, which must certainly have disturbed the local citizens no end. Later there was a lady who each year would put flowers on Emerson's grave, and mutter as she would pass Thoreau's: 'And none for you, you dirty little atheist!' Anyway, as I get older and begin to be almost twice as old as Thoreau, I am naturally grateful for all this time. It strikes me that since there's obviously a shorter length of time left than I've already had, I'd better hurry up and be interested in whatever I can. There's no fooling around possible. No silliness. So where I used to spend so much of my time hunting mushrooms, I've recently become interested in indoor gardening. I now tend to spread myself thinner and thinner. I'm always looking for new ways of using my energy, but meanwhile continuing the other activities.

About five or six years ago I was invited to make etchings at the Crown Point Press in California. I accepted immediately, even though I didn't know how to make them, because about 20 years before I was invited to trek in the Himalayas and didn't. I later discovered that the walk was going to be on elephants with servants, and I've always regretted that missed opportunity. I thought I was too busy. I am now multiplying my interests because it is my last chance. I don't know what will turn up next. The doctor told me at my age anything can happen. He was right. I got rid of arthritis by following a macrobiotic diet. Work is now taking on the aspect of play, and the older I get, the more things I find myself interested in doing. In my talk during the Almeida Festival I said: 'If you don't have enough time to accomplish something, consider the work finished once it's begun. It then resembles the Venus da Milo which manages quite well without an arm.'

SM: Do you have any regrets, anything you might have done differently as you review your 70 years?

JC: You mean how would I recreate the past? Well, I said long ago that if I were to live my life over again, I would be a botanist rather than an artist. At that time the botanist Alexander Smith asked me why. And I

said: 'To avoid the jealousies that plague the arts. Because people think of art so often as self-expression.' (I don't, but so many people do.) 'And therefore, if their work is not receiving what they consider proper attention, they then feel unhappy about it and get offended.' One of my teachers, Adolf Weiss, got very angry at me simply because I became famous. He was sure I was, in some way, being dishonest, because he had been honest all his life and he'd never become famous; so he was sure I was doing something wrong and evil. But when I said to Alexander Smith that I would like to change my life by being a botanist, he said that showed how little I knew about botany. Then later in the conversation I mentioned some other botanist, and he said: 'Don't mention his name in my house!' So I think that all human activities are characterised in their unhappy forms by selfishness.

SM: Earning a living as a composer in any era has traditionally been difficult. How old were you when you could really say you were earning a living just as a composer?

JC: I began to make money not from actually writing music, but from lecturing, concerts, and all such things—what you might call the paraphernalia of music—not until I was 50. But then I did. Now I could get along without giving any concerts if I chose to live in a poor corner of the world. My income from my past work is sufficient to live on in a very modest situation.

SM: What is your most important work?

JC: Well the most important piece is my silent piece, 4'33". Why? Because you don't need it in order to hear it. You have it all the time. And it can change your mind, making it open to things outside it. It is continually changing. It's never the same twice. In fact, and Thoreau knew this and it's been known traditionally in India, it is the statement that music is continuous. In India they say: 'Music is continuous, it is we who turn away.' So whenever you feel in need of a little music, all you have to do is to pay close attention to the sounds around you. I always think of my silent piece before I write the next piece.

SM: What do you do for leisure?

JC: I don't have any leisure. It's not that I have my nose to the grindstone. I enjoy my work. Nothing entertains me more than to do it. That's why I do it. So I have no need for entertainment. And my work is not really fatiguing so that I don't need to relax.

SM: This is your 70th year. The beginning of a new decade for you. Your life-style and the macrobiotic diet seem to agree with you. You're in good health and seem very fit.

JC: I'm gradually learning how to take care of myself. It has taken a long time. It seems to me that when I die, I'll be in perfect condition.