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SOUNDS AND MUSHROOMS

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FOR THE BIRDS By John Cage. In Conversation with Daniel Charles. 239 pp. Boston: Marion Boyars. \$20.

IT'S useless to pretend to know mushrooms," says John Cage in "For The Birds." "They escape your erudition." The more you know them - about telling, for example, a Spathyema Foetida from a Collybia Platyphylla - "the less sure you feel about identifying them."

John Cage should know. Aside from being what was once called an "avant-garde" composer, he is something of a mushroom expert. He won a mushroom quiz contest in 1958 on Italian television. In the 1960's he supplied a New York restaurant with edible fungi. He led mushroom outings at the New School. He knows a Lactarius Piperatus burns the tongue when raw but is delicious when cooked. He has even had his stomach pumped. As Marcel Duchamp wrote, inscribing a chess book for his cagey friend, "Dear John look out: yet another poisonous mushroom."

So the mushroom's role in the avant-garde needs to be accounted for. As Mr. Cage himself has argued, in the "Music Lovers' Field Companion": "I have come to the conclusion that much can be learned about music by devoting oneself to the mushroom." Perhaps sporophores can help explain Mr. Cage's own works. Perhaps they can shed some light on "4'33" - 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence - or on "Imaginary Landscape No. 4" - 12 radios simultaneously played for several hours - or on the many works painstakingly put together according to instructions given by dice and the "I Ching." Mushrooms may even be central to his philosophy - joining Zen, Thoreau, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan and D.T. Suzuki. Perhaps the mixture of mushrooms (fleshy protuberances growing in moist soil and rotting tree stumps) and music (esthetic structures produced for performance in the concert hall) has more than casual interest.

Or perhaps not. Mr. Cage insists: "I am not interested in the relationships between sounds and mushrooms any more than I am in those between sounds and other sounds." Their link is random; the "two words are next to each other in many dictionaries."

At any rate, "For the Birds" - the latest textual addition to the Cage canon - adds significantly to our understanding of mushrooms and Mr. Cage. With its biographical detail, it is a complement to Richard Kostelanetz's "John Cage," showing how the composer himself has grown in the musical wild. He developed when the laws of musical linearity - tonality and counterpoint - were wildly overrun. But he would have been stifled in the arid, harshly lit ground provided by his one-time teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. "During the period of harmony and counterpoint," Mr. Cage says, "there was good and bad, and rules to support the good against the bad. Today we must identify ourselves with noises instead" Somewhere in the overgrowth and chaos Mr. Cage took root; by 1950 he was the free-growing alternative to the cemented determinism of advanced serial composition.

Mr. Cage explains the title of this book, using an aviarian metaphor rather than a toadstoolian one: "I am for the birds, not for the cages in which people sometimes place them." He is "for the birds" - a lunatic, a charlatan, a clown - and he is "for the birds" - an advocate of that region of freedom where even his own name dissolves into air.

In previous books, Mr. Cage has also been concerned with breaking bonds. "Silence," "A Year From Monday," "M" and "Empty Words" relish their own eccentricities; lines and spaces and meanings are disrupted with as much gala zest as in Mr. Cage's music. "For the Birds," though, is least "for the birds." Its margins are justified, binding Mr. Cage in 11 interviews with an energetic French philosopher, Daniel Charles.

The formal restraints were hard come by. The interviews took place in France in 1970; they were translated into French; the English tapes were lost; the French texts were translated back into English. In 1972 and 1980 Mr. Cage interjected footnotes and placed brackets around statements he didn't remember saying. There is a prefatory "Sixty Answers to Thirty-three Questions From Daniel Charles" in which Mr. Cage pastes, in graffiti style, gnomic, random answers to interview questions.

There is also conversation "against the ego," on "the will to disorder," on "the performer's revolt," on "revolution and synergy," on mycology, on subjects random and controlled. What is his objection to linearity, to meaning? Would he agree to conduct Beethoven's nine symphonies? ("I would agree if I could use enough musicians to conduct, in one single concert, all nine symphonies superimposed.") Mr. Cage mushrooms through the interview form, unquashed by Mr. Charles's sometimes irksome presence - "I admire this line of reasoning," says Mr. Charles after Mr. Cage proposes a university with no organization, no requirements and simultaneous lectures in one room.

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And Mr. Cage has lots to say about mushrooms. In a jacket photograph he beams with pleasure in wooded surroundings, swinging a basket that must be laden with fungi. He could be thinking of that stroll as he cries, in one of the interviews, "That's my 'Concert for Piano'! A walk in the forest" That work randomly glances about; each player chooses his part from possibilities of 84 different compositions.

For Mr. Cage, then, mushrooms do not inspire random interest. Rather, they represent a disordered freedom from determination and meaning - they escape his erudition. "Mushrooms allowed me to understand Suzuki," he says; they grow haphazardly, defying the classifying intellect. He hunts them, as he composes, without reflection, with great relish.

The mushroom is his icon; its whimsical freedom is everywhere. "Accepting chance," says the mycologist Mr. Cage, "makes prejudices, pre-conceived ideas, and previous ideas of order and organization disappear!" Art should "preserve us" from "logical manipulations." Taking the mushroom as his model, he is "imitating Nature in her manner of operation" - random and free. Mr. Cage, an avid reader of Fuller and McLuhan, is also a utopian "anarchist"; government, like order in composition, is to be avoided. Mr. Cage says of his method: "It neither wounds nor wrongs anyone in the end." It is a harmless exercise in boundlessness, as fanciful as hunting mushrooms.

But there is something about mushrooms that defies Mr. Cage's flights of Zen fancy. He admits of "chance" operations: "It's only if I act like that with mushrooms that it can kill me." He would not, then, use the "I Ching" to pick mushrooms; there are bounds on his activity, limits to his freedom.

Categories and laws, in fact, fill Mr. Cage's airy regions of freedom like the scientific Latin names for mushrooms he must learn. His musical dice throws involve as many complex operations as harmony and counterpoint; "HPSCHD" required computer calculations to set up the necessary bounds. Mr. Cage even submits himself to chance in daily life - "for everything," he says. "I have always accepted everything the 'I Ching' has revealed to me."

His political anarchy also has its rigidly ordered shadow. "The Maoist model," he writes in a 1972 footnote, "managed to free a quarter of humanity; that gives cause for thought. Today, without hesitation, I would say that, for the moment, Maoism is our greatest reason for optimism." This may not only be for the birds, but for the cages people are put within.

So Mr. Cage sets up cages while he destroys them. The music is not even as freely meaningless as he claims. Aside from such early works as the translucently beautiful sonatas for prepared piano, his works avidly take on literal meanings; the music is heard not as koan, but as rebellious gesture. The music is meant to uncage, to free from the grid of the past. But the result is the opposite. Its meaning is caged in that very gesture.

There is something exhilarating in the radical scope of Mr. Cage's play with freedom and law; his pronouncements -musical and literary - are wrought with captivating swagger, bluster and charm. But given the state of our musical world, such attitudes are also a bit discouraging. For even now, as celebrations of Mr. Cage's 70th birthday begin, he remains less important as a composer than as a symptom, embodying fundamental gestures of this century's cultural beliefs: Natural law is devalued, social tradition is minimized, while rebellious gestures are given sense by the tradition they deny. The result is a classic modern trap, not avoided by Zen transcendence.

Mr. Cage's career, in fact, seems to provide a marker for the end of musical modernism, which now lies in as much disarray as the carcass of the musical tradition it once fed upon. So Mr. Cage's mushrooms, in obedience to natural law, may be serving a function. Consider this, a Cagean koan:

A woman once asked Mr. Cage, "Have you an explanation of the symbolism involved in the death of the Buddha by eating a mushroom?" Mr. Cage thought: "Mushrooms grow most vigorously in the fall, the period of destruction, and the function of many of them is to bring about the final decay of rotting material. In fact, as I read somewhere, the world would be an impassible heap of old rubbish were it not for mushrooms and their capacity to get rid of it. So I wrote to the lady in Philadelphia. I said, 'The function of mushrooms is to rid the world of old rubbish. The Buddha died a natural death.'"

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