

Composer-to-Composer Festival: John Cage and Conlon Nancarrow in Conversation (August 20, 1989)



Identifier

CTC.1989.08.20.V.c2

Description

Charles Amirkhanian interviews John Cage and Conlon Nancarrow before a live audience, recorded at the Telluride Institute on August 20, 1989 as part of the Composer-to-Composer Festival. The discussion begins with some confusion as to when the two men actually met, but to the best of Nancarrow's memory he saw Cage in the late 1930s or 1940s but did not actually speak to him. Cage recalls becoming aware of Nancarrow's work through a friend at the N. Y. Public Library who played some tapes of Nancarrow's music for Cage, who was very excited to hear them, and even thought of incorporating them into a ballet by Merce Cunningham. Cage eventually visited Nancarrow in Mexico City where he was treated to a meal that contained a mushroom that was new to the noted mycophagist. During this discussion Cage allows no doubts about the depth of respect he has for Nancarrow's work, emphasizing the canonical nature of his music as particularly interesting. This leads to a fascinating conversation about the differences between the music of Mozart and Bach and how it might have changed, or not, if each had had access to contemporary technology. In fact Cage and Nancarrow have quite different tastes in music, with Cage preferring the music of Mozart and Schoenberg, while Nancarrow is more influenced by Bach and Stravinsky. However Cage makes the point that what distinguishes Nancarrow's music is that while it might be based on the tradition of a Bach canon the end result is as modern as anything by Schoenberg or Stravinsky. The two also discuss Nancarrow's more recent works including his third string quartet which was intended to be able to be performed by actual human musicians, and is heard here in a performance by the Arditti Quartet. They also talk about when during the day they do most of their composing, with both admitting that as they have aged their work schedules have changed. However in his youth Nancarrow

often stayed up very late, while Cage preferred to work primarily in the morning. Cage also admits to having some help with copying and the like, while Nancarrow has always copied and hand punched his piano rolls by himself. The two then answer a number of questions from the audience that range from the role of noise and purposefulness in music; the music of Henry Cowell and James Tenney; issues of inequality and social justice; competition vs. cooperation; and the changing conceptions about improvisation. The program then concludes with conference organizers John Lifton and Pamela Zoline presenting awards of appreciation to the two composers.

Musical Selections

String Quartet No. 3 (1987) (13:24) / Conlon Nancarrow

Artists

Composer-to-Composer Festival (features)

Telluride Institute (features)

Arditti Quartet (features)

Amirkhanian, Charles (features)

Cage, John (features)

Nancarrow, Conlon, 1912-1997 (features)

Lifton, John (features)

Zoline, Pamela, 1941- (features)