The music that's all around us

On the eve of a festival celebrating the work of John Cage, king of experimental composers, Michael White remembers the man who claimed that 'Everything we do is music' - even silence

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It was 95 degrees and mid-town Manhattan was stewing. At St Thomas's 5th Avenue, where I'd spent the morning, the Rector had given thanks before God and his congregation for an efficient ventilator system. And in a loft conversion on West 18th Street the benignly grizzled figure of John Cage - an old man with the mischievousness of a six-year-old - was sitting by wide-open windows that exposed him to a sonic blitz of ghetto blasters, car horns and sirens in the street below.

"I know it's hot," I said, "but can we close the windows? It's so noisy."

"You call it noise," said Cage. "I call it music."

Splintering the barriers between noise and music were John Cage's stock-in-trade. When we met in the mid-1980s, he had been doing it for nearly half a century, starting in the 1940s when he first devoted himself "to the principle of originality".

With time he had become the emperor of the American avant-garde: a jokier, less authoritarian figure than his European counterparts, Stockhausen and Boulez, and not always taken seriously. The man I met had something about him of an innocent who had stumbled by accident on profound truths and turned himself into a purveyor of ancient wisdom.

But the wisdom was undeniable, even if it came packaged like entertainment, in one-liners as suspiciously memorable as Oscar Wilde's and absurdisms as outrageous as Marcel Duchamp's. It made him the most popular of gurus, and the most approachable: which was how I came to be in West 18th St on that sweltering day in the 1980s.

For all the frivolity of the end product - which might be a piece where the performer was required to feed vegetables into an electric blender and drink the juice, or his 1952 take on Handel's Water Music that involves a pianist whistling under water ("unlike Handel," said Cage, "it really splashes") - his processes were steeped in ancient Eastern thought. Especially Zen Buddhism.

Fundamental to everything he did was his belief that where art selects and formalises experience, life just is - and wouldn't it be nice if we could merge the two together so that art "just is" as well. In these days of severed cows and soiled beds at the Tate, this may not seem such a big deal, but, in the 1940s and in music (usually 30 years or so behind the other arts), it was a radical proposition. It meant that, as Cage never tired of saying, "Everything we do is music."

Then, as now, his critics argued that this point of view exposed him as inherently unmusical. Indeed, I remember noticing as I looked around his apartment that there was no obvious sign of occupation by a composer: no piano ("I gave it away 20 years ago," he said), no stereo system ("I don't listen to records"), no radio, no clue to his musical interests except what he explained as "the attention that
has been given to each thing as though it had a sound. I have no confusion of objects - everything is very clear, like the attention to detail in music."

I also remember him telling me that he never went to concerts, except of his own work, and that he took no interest in living composers. When I asked if he had come to take less interest in music generally over time, he said, "I've always taken less interest in music," and recounted his now famous story of being told by Arnold Schoenberg that he "had no ear" and wasn't so much a "composer" as an "inventor".

So it's possible that this gift for invention came from his father, a missionary-cum-scientist responsible, according to his son, for building "an airplane so powerful that it flew to pieces before it left the ground, because the alloys that were needed to hold it together hadn't been invented yet".

Born in Los Angeles in 1912, the young John soon picked up on his father's sense of mission, doorstep-selling pamphlets on contemporary music to Santa Monica housewives at $2.50 a time. He seems to have been no less gifted in self-salesmanship, managing without obvious qualification to get himself taken on as a student of the modernist architect Erno Goldfinger in Paris in 1930, and then, back home in 1935, as a composition student of Schoenberg.

Neither of his teachers found him worth their time. The architecture studies terminated swiftly. And when Schoenberg said he had no ear for music, Cage had to admit that it was "physically true, because I don't hear the relationships of tonality and harmony. Schoenberg said, 'As a composer you will always come to a wall and you won't be able to get through.' I said, 'Then I'll beat my head against that wall.' And I quite literally began hitting things and developed a music of percussion that involved noises."

In other words, he made a virtue of his failings. Unable to handle conventional disciplines such as harmony and counterpoint, he explored other, more basic qualities of music such as rhythm and duration. It was an exploration that drew him into the world of contemporary dance where in 1938 he met the man who became his lifelong partner and co-resident at West 18th Street, the choreographer Merce Cunningham. And that in turn led to a sequence of classic dance collaborations that featured Cage's innovation - the "prepared piano", a piano with nails and other objects jammed into the strings to make them sound like something between a gamelan band and a saloon-bar honky-tonk.

Treading this thin line between the exotic and the out-of-tune were Cage's best-regarded and more regularly performed works, the 1946-8 Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano. But in truth the concept of regularity was alien to a composer who, through the 1950s, concentrated on music ruled by chance procedures with elements so randomly determined that no two performances could ever be the same.

In these pieces, the sequence of events is fixed by tossing a coin or by reference to the ancient Chinese I Ching. And they raise a legitimate question of whether they merit the term "composition" at all, given that the creator's responsibility for what you finally hear is reduced to the minimum. "Anarchy" would be a better word. And it was one that Cage himself was pleased to use.

"Every being is the Buddha," he told me, "just as for the anarchist every being is the ruler. My music liberates because I give people the chance to change their minds. I don't want to police them."

The ultimate statement of Cage's non-policing school of composition was the infamous 4’33", a work in three movements for "any instrument or combination of instruments" that is, in fact, four minutes 33 seconds of silence.
At the first performance in 1952 it was played (if that’s the right word) by a pianist who indicated the movements by raising and lowering the piano lid; and it made an arresting point about the nature of silence - as something other than an absence of sound and a way to make the human ear aware of the persistent universe of sonic activity that surrounds us - the universe that Cage called Music.

However, 4'33” demonstrates both the strength and the weakness of Cageian method. It was a great idea that still packs a certain punch as theory - but does it live as a piece? Hardly. Like a comedian’s joke, you can only use it once per audience and that’s it. Done.

A lot of Cage works on that level: having grasped the point upfront, you wonder if you need to hang around to hear the piece. There's a broad consensus these days that the ideas are worth more than the results: that he was a theoretician rather than a real composer with enduring output.

When I asked Cage if his music would survive, his answer was, "I'm afraid it will." But he's been dead 10 years now, and his work has all but disappeared from concert programmes - along with the whole apparatus of the experimental avant-garde, which has effectively become a historical term.

Whether the festival of John Cage at the Barbican this month will change any of that is doubtful. But the airing it gives to some of the more substantial scores will at least give them a chance to make their points anew - and to a new generation of concert-goers who may or may not find them as engaging as their grandfathers did 50 years ago. It will be a weekend of reckoning.

John Cage Uncaged is at the Barbican (0845 120 7500), Jan 16-18