Is it heresy to canonize the compositions of John Cage, or to hope that they might someday attain the status of standard repertoire? Maybe so, if one adheres strictly to the composer’s artistic philosophy. Cage wanted to free music—and ultimately all the arts—from routine, predictability, and hierarchy. This aesthetic was shared by his life partner, the choreographer Merce Cunningham, who died in 2009 and whose dance company (for whom Cage served as music director for nearly half a century) was disbanded soon thereafter, according to Cunningham’s wishes.

Yet the music of John Cage (1912-1992) deserves to be admired and enjoyed by today’s performers and audiences, especially

JOHN CAGE AND THE ENSEMBLE  The composer’s output both embraces and deconstructs the very notion of chamber music togetherness. His centenary offers us an opportunity for an overview.

BY Frank J. Oteri
“Cage composed tons of works for unconventional, one-of-a-kind combinations, ranging from an array of non-Western instruments to rocks and even cacti.”

because few composers have produced a compositional output as varied: there’s music that’s lusciously tonal, bracingly atonal, unfathomably microtonal, minimal, maximal, and everything in between.

Arguably, Cage does not need to be absorbed into standard rep, or officially elevated into a composer pantheon. Homage to his work is implicit in any performance involving chance, electricity, appropriation, cross-cultural pollination, unconventional notation, or in which the sound of an instrument has been altered. While central to the composer’s legacy, these elements perhaps unjustly overshadow another fact about his oeuvre: in conception, if not in performance, it can be considered almost entirely chamber music.

In an anthology published in honor of Cage’s 70th birthday in 1982, Robert Ashley, one of myriad composers Cage influenced, perfectly articulated the Cage chamber music attitude:

> It seems to me that John Cage’s music is essentially chamber music in the way it’s supposed to be. I’m confirmed in that opinion especially when I hear one of his big pieces. [...] I have never seen one of the big pieces, no matter how big, turn into a state occasion. You can only appreciate it as a person. For instance, you never yawn, as at state occasions.

Cage composed many works for solo instruments, but he liked to encourage performance of two or more of them at the same time—creating, not so accidentally, chamber music. And if this is chamber music by the process of addition, his often-flexible approach to orchestral works yields chamber music by subtraction—as when small subsets of the orchestra forces are granted license to perform incomplete segments of his larger works.

Of course, viewing Cage’s entire output as chamber music is a bit whimsical—and impractical. Since I hope to encourage performances by today’s ensembles, let’s abide by Chamber Music America’s definition of its realm—i.e., music for 2 to 10 players, scored one to a part, and generally not requiring a conductor. Even when Cage’s oeuvre is pared down to fit within these boundaries, we are left with 279 works to consider. (I derived this sum from the work list on the john cage.info website maintained by André Chaudron—arguably the most complete Cage resource. This number eliminates compositions that are incomplete, lost, unreconstructable, or otherwise unavailable.) It’s a mind-boggling grand total that outstrips the chamber music output of the three B’s combined.

First of all, Cage’s music is the cornerstone of the repertoire for small percussion ensembles (4 to 6 players). One of the most visible of these on the scene today, So Percussion, marked the composer’s centenary with an all-Cage concert at Carnegie’s Zankel Hall on March 26. Among the works featured was the remarkable 1939 tin-can, gamelan-sounding sextet *First Construction in Metal*; the pranksterish 1942 *Credo In Us* (Cage’s very first score for Merce Cunningham, in which one of the players operates a radio and a turntable); and *Inlets* (1977), which requires the musicians to make sounds with conch shells filled with water. And starting on April 11, the Percussion Group of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, trumped So by initiating a series of free concerts on campus in which they are performing Cage’s complete music for percussion.

As might be imagined, Cage composed tons of works for unconventional, one-of-a-kind, “instrumental” combinations, ranging from an array of non-Western instruments to rocks and even cacti. As musicologist Rob Haskins astutely points out in his liner notes for the OgreOgress recording of *Two*, *Two4*, and *Inlets*, Cage was particularly attracted to writing in such a way that interpreters could not completely control the resultant sound, thus ensuring that every performance would be somewhat different from the others. In one of the more memorable New York City concerts last season, the chamber ensemble Ne(x)tworks performed selections from the composer’s gargantuan *Song Books*. (Parts of that concert were subsequently posted on YouTube.) One of the most open-ended scores in the collection, No. 36 (published in 1970), simply tells the performer to
Cage, age 41, at home in Stony Point, New York
John Cage was famously uninterested in recordings of his own music (or anyone else’s). Yet the two decades after his death have seen more than a hundred commercial releases dedicated exclusively to his works. Here are nine all-Cage releases that are must-listens. (The number 9 was generated randomly out of 100 via http://www.random.org.)

—F. J. O.

**John Cage: The Complete String Quartets, Volume 2 Arditti Quartet (Mode 27)**
With nearly 50 discs devoted to Cage’s music thus far and more to come later this year, Mode Records has done more than any other label to preserve the composer’s legacy on recordings. This early item from the Mode catalog, the fifth in an edition recorded under Cage’s supervision, offers compelling accounts of the String Quartet in Four Parts and the late work *Four* (1989), written for the Arditti Quartet.

**John Cage: Complete Piano Music, Volume 5 (Two Pianos)**
*Josef Christof and Steffen Schleiermacher (Dabringhaus und Grimm DG Scene MDG 613 0789)*
The German pianist/composer Steffen Schleiermacher’s traversal of Cage’s complete piano music, filling some 18 compact discs, is one of the most significant undertakings in the cause of Cage. While most of the set is devoted to solo music, Volume 5 collects the music for two pianos, including *Music for Two (the two piano parts of Music for ___)*, *Two* (1989), and a rare example of Cage virtuosic piano writing, albeit for prepared pianos, in his *A Book of Music* (1944), originally composed for the celebrated American duo Gold and Fizdale. Josef Christof proves a fitting partner for Schleiermacher in these exciting interpretations.

As impressive as Schleiermacher’s complete piano recordings is this collection of Cage’s entire percussion oeuvre on six CDs by the Hungarian percussion group Amadinda. The first volume gathers many of Cage’s now-classic percussion works, including *First Construction in Metal and Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (1939), the latter arguably the earliest American composition to feature electronically generated sound. Also in this volume is the delightful *Double Music* from 1941, co-composed with another great American maverick, Lou Harrison.

**John Cage: Three², Twenty-Three, Six, Twenty-Six (OgreOgress Productions 1999)**
In recent years, Michigan-based percussionist Glenn Freeman’s label, OgreOgress Productions, has devoted many of its releases to first recordings of some of Cage’s most challenging scores—many of the late Number Pieces in particular.
This first Cage issue from 1999 admittedly defies many of the conventions of chamber music performance. The two percussion works, *Three* and *Six*, are performed by Freeman alone, multi-tracking. The two remaining works, *Twenty-Six*, for 26 violins, and *Twenty-Three*, for string orchestra, are not actually chamber pieces; but they are recorded here by smallish ensembles. (*Twenty-Six* is multi-tracked by violinist Christina Fong. On *Twenty-Three*, Fong recorded all the violin and viola parts and is joined for the cello parts by Karen Krummel.) The results, however, are extraordinary, and are the outcome of a DIY aesthetic that is at the heart of chamber music practice.

**John Cage: Complete works for piano & voice / Complete works for piano & violin** (Brilliant Classics 8850)

This three-CD set on the budget label Brilliant Classics offers stellar performances, by violinist David Simonacci and pianist Giancarlo Simonacci, of *Nocturne* and *Six Melodies*, as well as the Number Pieces *Two* and *Two*. Vocalist Lorna Windsor joins Giancarlo for all of Cage’s songs, including *The wonderful widow of eighteen springs*, a fascinating 1942 setting of a passage from *Finnegans Wake* for voice and closed piano. (A wide range of sounds are made by striking various parts of the piano surface.) A bonus: *Four Walls* for voice and piano—a 1944 dance drama, rediscovered after Cage’s death—in which in which the two musicians never perform simultaneously.

**The Barton Workshop Plays John Cage** (Ectetera KTC 3002)

Another three-CD set, featuring performances by the Netherlands-based Barton Workshop, under the direction of American expatriate composer/trombonist James Fulkerson, offers a broad range of Cage’s chamber music repertoire. The collection spans the 1933 *Sonata for Two Voices*, here performed on bass clarinet and flute, to *Seven* (1990) for diverse bass instruments. There are also fabulous accounts of *Hymnkus*, *Music for ____* (in this case for six), plus chamber music renderings of a handful parts from Cage’s *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1958) and *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961), a work that nearly caused a riot among the members of the New York Philharmonic when Leonard Bernstein programmed it.

**John Cage: *Two*, *Five*, *Seven*, *Seven* Ives Ensemble** (hatART 2-6192)

Another Dutch ensemble tackles six of Cage’s late Number Pieces in remarkably clear recordings from a label known for experimental and free-jazz releases. Of particular note is the performance of *Seven*, a work for Pierrot plus percussion configuration and viola. It’s also fascinating to compare the performances herein of *Two* and *Seven* with performances on the other discs listed above.

**Cartwright/Oppenheim: La Faute de la Musique — Songs of John Cage** (Harriton Carved Wax HCW 031)

John Cage notoriously disdained jazz, rock, and most forms of popular music. But in this bizarre collection, primarily culled from *Song Books*, jazz vocalist Katharine (a.k.a. Katchie) Cartwright is backed by a stellar jazz quartet—featuring Richard Oppenheim on saxophone, James Weidman on piano, Cameron Brown on bass, and Bill Goodwin on drums—for performances that will forever change the way you hear this music. Since the *Song Books* are very open-ended, these interpretations are totally legitimate. Too bad Cage isn’t around the hear them!

**John Cage: Solo for Voice 58 — 18 Microtonal Ragas**

*Amelia Cuni* (Other Minds OM 1010)

A *Song Books* collection that completely redefines Cage performance practice: *dhru pedal* singer Amelia Cuni takes the Solo for Voice 58, which is based on Indian classical music traditions, and returns it to its source. The result is a world music album like no other.

In a CBS-TV studio, 1967
other ways of perceiving the world and for the rest of his life would transform them to his own artistic ends. In 1944, he transcribed the opening section of Erik Satie's Socrate, for piano duo, to accompany a dance by Merce Cunningham. His immersion in Satie's direct, almost effortless melodies, with their spare tonal harmonies and their quality of seeming to come out of nowhere and to be headed in no particular direction, inevitably inspired Cage to construct works along similar lines. Among these are treasures of his chamber music output: the gorgeous Nocturne (1947) and Six Melodies (1950), both scored for violin and piano, and one of his “masterpieces” (if I dare use such a word to describe music by a composer who attempted to neutralize the concept)—the String Quartet in Four Parts (also 1950). Hearing this music now, one can only imagine how listeners would have reacted to its radical simplicity sixty years ago.

But Cage soon abandoned fixed compositional decisions altogether, first by using chance procedures to determine notated scores and thereafter by presenting performers with scores that could not be realized the same way twice. These included such works as Imaginary Landscape No. 4, which has precise notations for turning dials on radios, and the more widely known 4′33″ (1952), in which a performer (a solo pianist at the work’s premiere) is instructed to play nothing for three short movements totaling four minutes and thirty-three seconds. (Cage’s point, of course, was that the music inheres in the ambient sounds that arise within the silence, wherever the work is presented.) Ultimately, Cage went on to create works with abstruse scores whose elucidations always yield a different result, as well as many works, such as Musicircus, for which there is no score per se. In the even stranger Variations VII (1966), a handful of players attempt to convey an entire world of sound by using amplified open phone lines to ten locations, which in the original performance included The New York Times press room and the aviary at the Bronx Zoo.

In 1968, Cage attempted to complete his transcription of Socrate for a lengthier dance by Cunningham, but Satie’s publisher managed to block this re-imagined version because the work was not yet in the public domain. Cage’s ingenious solution was to create a new work to fit Cunningham’s already-completed choreography; it was precisely as long as the Satie, and had the identical metrical structure—but Cage changed every note to one of his own. That score, Cheap Imitation, led to a series of similarly constructed compositions for a variety of ensembles. Later that year Cage enlisted computer-composition pioneer Lejaren Hiller to collaborate with him on HPSCHD, a work in which various fragments of melodies attributed to Mozart are played on seven harpsichords, while a mainframe computer distorts them into a variety of incompatible tunings that are played back during the live performance. Cage continued to explore processes of re- and de-composition throughout the 1970s, with early American hymns and a variety of other works.

In the mid-1980s, sustained tones and repeated material appear in Cage’s work with greater and greater regularity, almost suggesting a bona fide tonality, albeit without linear narrative or predictability. Important during this period is Music for ____, a 30-minute composition from 1984 with a total of 17 distinct parts, no score, and playable by any possible number of instruments (hence the open-ended title; if six people are performing the work, it is called Music for Six). Hymnkus (1986), another 30-minute scoreless work for a sextet of alto flute, clarinet, bassoon, trombone and two pianos, has been described by composer and new-music authority Kyle Gann as Cage’s response to minimalism; all instruments play the same eight pitches within an extremely narrow range of a perfect fifth.

The music Cage composed in the last six years of his life appears to have been a response to something else entirely—the quiet, ecstatically static, and decidedly nontonal music of Morton Feldman, a composer whom Cage had influenced nearly forty years earlier and with whom he maintained an association throughout his life. The first of these pieces, Two (1987), for flute and piano, is a ten-minute work in one movement. Again there is no score, just the two independent parts that are written for the most part in standard musical notation. The flute part consists of a series of quietly sustained single tones, and the piano part is a series of block chords for each hand that do not necessarily line up
with each other. For both flute and piano, Cage specifies, instead of precise timings, a range of possible times (measured to the second) in which each notated sound is to begin and end.

Cage continued to compose similarly designed works for a broad range of instruments, almost to the complete exclusion of all other compositional approaches, up until the end of his own life on August 12, 1992, just weeks shy of his 80th birthday. This final collection, some fifty compositions, has come to be known as the Number Pieces, since each is titled with two numbers: the first denoting the number of musicians involved and the second, a superscript, functioning like the once-standard numbering of piano sonatas or string quartets, e.g., Four$^5$ (1991) for saxophone quartet is the fifth “number piece” Cage composed for four instruments. Thirteen of the Number Pieces are solo compositions, and 13 are for large ensembles, although none in the latter group is meant to be conducted. The largest, 108 (1991), as per its title, requires some 108 musicians. The remaining 24 works can be said to represent Cage’s final flowering of chamber music, in the sense that each is approached as chamber music. This group of can be further broken down into solo, chamber, and orchestral categories, although the task is fraught with problems. For example, Two$^1$, a massive duo in ten sections lasting nearly two hours for shō (a Japanese mouth organ) and five conch shells, is predominantly a shō solo with very occasional conch intrusions. The solo part is actually identical to Cage’s composition One$^9$ for solo shō. To add to the taxonomic confusion, the aforementioned orchestral work 108 can be played simultaneously with three of the ten sections from One$^9$—resulting in something akin to a shō concerto—or with One$^6$, a work for solo cello resulting in a concerto that is, at least nominally, more conventional. Curiously, as yet 108 has not been recorded on its own, and the only complete recording of One$^9$ played independently is an accordion transcription. Luckily, OgreOgress Productions has issued a complete Two$^1$ for shō and conches on an audio DVD.

The Number Pieces are structurally homogenous overall, but the pieces sound very different. With its quietly flowing sustained notes that almost hint at triads at times, Five (1988) for five unspecified players (at its premiere it was Cage at the piano with the Kronos Quartet) sounds heavenly. (See an excerpt from Five, opposite page.) On the other hand, Seven$^2$ (1990), a nearly hour-long work scored exclusively for low-range instruments—bass flute, bass clarinet, bass trombone, cello, contrabass, and two percussionists on unspecified instruments—is positively eerie. Its predecessor, Seven (1988)—a 20-minute work for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, piano, and percussion—would fit comfortably on most new-music programs today; whereas the more unruly Eight (1991), an hour-long work for wind quintet plus trumpet, tenor trombone, and tuba has an unsettling sonic ambiance. (The players are instructed not to

“The music Cage composed in the last six years of his life appears to have been a response to the quiet, ecstatically static, and decidedly nontonal music of Morton Feldman.”
tune up with one another before the performance, exacerbating the natural clash of sonorities in such a combination.) Several Number Pieces, such as the intense *Five* for trombone and string quartet, utilize a scale with 84 tones to the octave (resulting in six pitches between each semitone). Such fine gradations are playable only on fretless string instruments or the slide trombone. In his final duo, the remarkable *Two*, for violin and piano, the piano’s fixed 12-tone, equal-tempered scale clashes with the violin’s extended 84-pitch gamut, and the individual parts consist of chains of melodies rather than sustained tones.

After *Two*, Cage completed only one more work, the mysterious *Thirteen*, a piece slightly too large to be considered chamber music and definitely too small to be orchestral music.

The John Cage centenary is generating fewer performances than one might expect for a composer of his importance. Still, the year got off to an impressive start. In January, *Focus!*—The Juilliard School’s annual festival of contemporary music—was devoted to Cage (albeit mostly to his less overtly iconoclastic works). Among the highlights were performances of *Music for Wind Instruments; Third Construction* (for percussion ensemble); *Six Melodies*, for violin and piano; and the String Quartet in Four Parts. Such an official embrace of Cage by a leading American conservatory may help pave the way for a Cage entry into classical music’s canon.

The canon needs John Cage’s music, if for no other reason than to shake things up a bit. Two centuries ago, Ludwig van Beethoven shook up music by completely reinventing every music genre; nowadays his revolutionary musical ideas are taken for granted. In an era like ours, when nothing seems new or surprising, Cage’s open-ended music is one of very few things that withstands homogenization and commodification.

ASCAP Award-winning composer and music journalist Frank J. Oteri is the Composer Advocate for New Music USA (a new organization formed from the merger of the American Music Center and Meet The Composer) and senior editor of its web magazine, NewMusicBox (www.newmusicbox.org).

All of John Cage’s music is published by Henmar Press/ C.F. Peters.