



# HISTORICAL ROW

## CAGE'S FIRST WESLEYAN CONCERT, 1955

The offer came in a neatly typed letter from John Cage in December 1954.

"Mr. Tudor and I would welcome the opportunity to perform at Wesleyan University," he wrote. "My work for two pianists, which uses two prepared pianos and many accessory sounds, is my most recent." Richard K. Winslow, now John Spencer Camp Professor of Music Emeritus, saw an opportunity. In a departmental note, he wrote, "This guy Cage is an attraction in the sense that whatever he does stirs up lots of discussion. If the word got around as to what a 'prepared piano' is I'd predict you'd have students hanging from the rafters."

Little did he know (or maybe he did).

Winslow, recalling the fee Cage and pianist David Tudor received for their Memorial Chapel performance on March 23, 1955, as well as the audience's reaction to it, would later refer to the event as the "\$100 Riot."

Active from the 1930s through the 1980s, Cage was, in the words of John Spencer Camp Professor of Music Neely Bruce, "the most influential composer of the 20th century. In the whole history of music, only Wagner and Beethoven would have had greater impact." By the mid-1950s, Cage had become a leading innovator in avant-garde music, pushing the definition of music and performance. Perhaps his best-known, and most provocative, piece was his 1952 composition 4'3", consisting of three movements, each completely silent.

A release about Cage and Tudor's 1955 Wesleyan concert written by Winslow and published in the *Argus* promised a prepared piano with "spoons, nails, pencils, and anything else which the musician feels necessary on the strings. This technique produces music with clunks, clanks, plinks, and plonks." As Winslow said later, it didn't help that someone in the public relations office advertised "John Cage and David Tudor: Skrewball Pianists."

The concert's first offering, a composition by Karlheinz Stockhausen, called for slamming down the piano lid, plucking the strings by hand, banging the underside with a hammer, and playing an antique automobile



Photo of a prepared piano Cage sent to Wesleyan in 1955.

car horn. Some members of the audience were apparently not quite ready for what they heard. "The place started to go mad," Winslow recalled. "I saw people, red-faced with anger, punching one another. And I sensed that the audience was polarizing ... —those who felt they were in the presence of Art and those whose sensibilities had become unhelped."

At intermission, Cage announced that he and Tudor were going to prepare the pianos for the second piece—Cage's composition 34' 46.776"—and audience members could come up and watch. As Winslow remembered, "WHOOSH! The hall exploded. The stage filled up instantly." The music that followed was like none anyone there had ever heard. "[I]t came in enormous varieties of sounds," Winslow recalled, "in unimaginable relationships, and in rhythms so unperiodic as to seem to need a new term. It touched emotions that were hard to deal with."

As a response to the campus furor, Winslow wrote a letter to the *Argus* editor in a partial Q. and A. format, with such questions as these:

"Q. Was it a hoax? A. No.

"Q. Is Cage a serious artist? A. Yes.

"Q. How can you listen to such stuff? A. The great problem is to listen to it with the

expectation of hearing something 'normal.' Until you can listen with a vacant mind, you'll be hearing Cage's music not for itself but as an unwanted distortion of something else.

"Q. Why bother to listen? A. Why give up the codpiece?"

The 1955 concert marked the beginning of Cage's 37-year relationship with Wesleyan. He came to campus as a performer and visiting artist, was a resident fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies, attended performances of his compositions, and in 1988 was the honored guest at an international celebration of his life and his works, "Cage at 75," organized by Bruce. In addition to being a groundbreaking composer and performer, Cage was an influential writer. The Wesleyan University Press recognized Cage's unique vision and published five of his works, including *Silence* in 1961, described by Winslow as "surely the most important work on music by a 20th-century composer." In honor of his enduring relationship with Wesleyan, Cage donated the papers related to his large body of writing to the university, and they are freely available for research in Special Collections & Archives.

"What Wesleyan did was to identify accurately the most important living American composer before he was recognized and then nurture him," as Bruce explained it, "thereby making it possible for him to blossom into the John Cage who had such incredible impact." He added, "Cage is a reminder that Wesleyan can shape American culture in hugely significant ways."

In early December, Wesleyan will offer "John Cage & Public Life," a collection of events celebrating the centenary of John Cage by focusing on his understanding of music as a social process, as part of "Music & Public Life," a yearlong campus and communitywide exploration. **UPFRONT**

—LEITH JOHNSON, *University Archivist*

*The Wesleyan University Archives welcomes alumni, faculty, students, and visiting scholars researching John Cage, music and public life, or any aspect of Wesleyan's history.*