



Forward movements

They do, admittedly, make strange bedfellows, 2012's big two anniversary composers. On the one hand, Claude Debussy (born 150 years ago) is a sensualist, a painter of sumptuous, exquisite sound images, who blurred the edges of music and replaced 19th century formality with organic spontaneity. John Cage (born a century ago), on the other hand, is the music world's most notorious arch-experimenter, for whom no musical values were sacrosanct. He composed the famous 'silent' piece, stuck screws and bolts in piano strings and asked his performers to play from squiggles on sheets of Perspex.

Different times, different concerns, different ambitions; yet there's a clear sense of determined innovation that connects the two men. Both composers set out to free music from the shackles of the past, and of convention, creating freer thinking, more forward looking pieces – music without which little written in the last century would surely exist.

Let's start in Asia – all the rage in the orientalist fashions sweeping the Paris salons Debussy attended at the end of the 19th century, and also the continent whose philosophies held a lifelong fascination for Cage. Debussy famously heard a Javanese gamelan, a percussion orchestra combining gongs, drums and metallophones in a mesmerising web of intertwining sound strands, during the Paris Exposition of 1889, and again in 1900. His reaction? "Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child's play."

It's clear he was enthralled. But more importantly, the gamelan sounds and textures he heard confirmed ideas that he already had: gong and bell like resonances that can be heard throughout his piano music, for example, or



Opposite: Claude Debussy photographed in 1911 on the beach at Houlgate in Normandy

Left: John Cage during a concert at the opening of the National Arts Foundation, Washington DC, on New Year's Day, 1966

a remarkable layering of textures (with fast moving, filigree decoration on top, slower moving melodies in the middle and slow punctuations tolling in the bass). *Pagodes*, the first of the 1903 piano 'Estampes', is often quoted as Debussy's most clearly gamelan influenced piece, with its pentatonic harmonies evoking Javanese modes, and suggestions of bells and gongs throughout. Gamelan influence has also been discerned in the intricate overlapping rhythms depicting the waves in Debussy's turbulent orchestral piece *La mer* (1905). It's open to question whether any of this really holds water – you'd be hard pushed to find any pagodas in Java, for a start. But whatever the case, encountering Asian music opened Debussy's ears to new possibilities for ordering sound.

John Cage actually wrote a piece for gamelan – *Haikai* (1986): our knowledge of Asian music had come a long way in the intervening years. But the Cage work most often associated with the Javanese percussion orchestra is the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1948), an hour long set of 20 movements, whose astonishing, clanging sounds sit somewhere between the elegant Javanese ensemble and the junkyard 'found' percussion instruments for which Cage had been composing over the previous few years. But in fact, the *Sonatas and Interludes'* inspiration wasn't Javanese: instead, the piece was based around Indian aesthetics and its eight 'permanent' emotions (the mirthful, odious, angry, erotic, heroic, fearful, sorrowful and wondrous), which Cage had encountered through lessons with the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai in the mid-1940s.

After his initial Indian explorations, it was the emptiness of Zen Buddhism that had the most profound influence on Cage. "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it," he

2012 marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Claude Debussy. It is also the centenary of John Cage. Two very different composers from different generations perhaps, but as **David Kettle** explains, both played a highly influential role in the music of the 20th century and beyond

Photography: Lebrecht Music & Arts; Getty Images



met the elderly Liszt three times in Rome, where he studied from 1885 to 1887 as prizewinner of the Paris Conservatoire's prestigious Prix de Rome. Some of his piano music owes a debt to Liszt's pictorial techniques: the shimmering water evocations of *Reflets dans l'eau*, the first of Debussy's *Images* (1905), for example, have similarities with a piece like Liszt's *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*. But elsewhere, Debussy was abandoning traditional 19th century virtuosity in favour of entirely new sounds that exploit the full richness of the piano's potential. Resonant open fifths in the piano's bass register set the whole instrument ringing; limpid modal melodies are often left unadorned, to be brought to life by the pianist's caressing touch; and subtle pedalling removes the hard attacks at the beginning of notes, creating a radiant wash of sound – Debussy famously instructed performers that “one must forget that the piano has hammers”.

There is one figure who connects Debussy and Cage, though, and that's the eccentric Erik Satie, composer of the statuesque *Gymnopédies*, cabaret pianist and anarchic Dadaist. Debussy and Satie remained lifelong friends – no mean feat, given that the latter composer fell out with almost everyone he knew – and Debussy made every effort to promote his younger colleague's music, even gaining him a brief admission into Ernest Chausson's influential Paris salon.

Later, Cage went as far as declaring that Satie was more influential than Beethoven, in a 1948 lecture, and organised an 18 hour, multi-pianist performance of his notorious *Vexations*, which

famously wrote in his *Lecture on Nothing* of 1949. There's a lot of Zen in Cage's infamous 'silent' piece *4'33"* of 1952 (see page 26), and the selflessness of Zen continued in Cage's still controversial, chance-inspired pieces, such as *Fontana Mix* (1958), whose 'score' is a series of transparent sheets to be overlaid as the performers see fit.

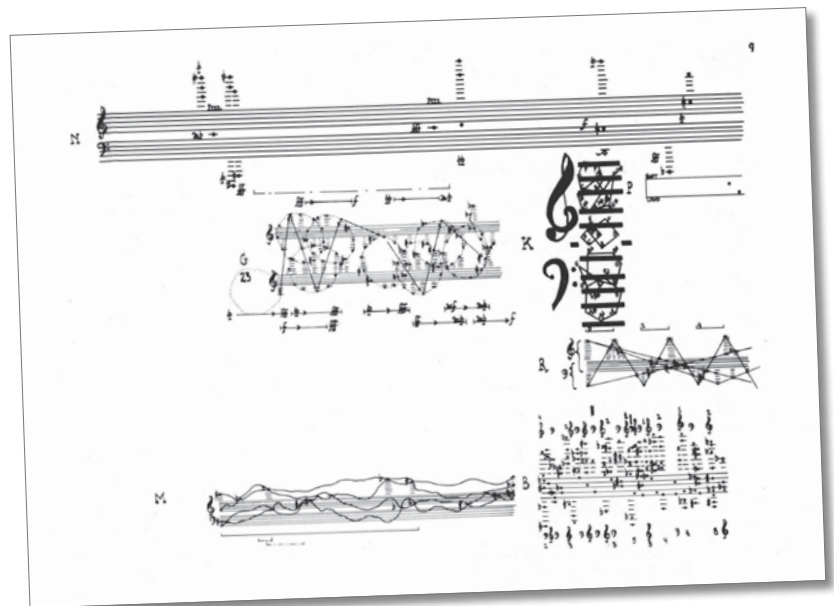
Although these Asian influences highlight interesting parallels between Debussy and Cage, there's more to it than that. More significant is how contact with Asian music and philosophy pushed both men in new directions and encouraged them to explore new ideas. For Debussy, encountering gamelan gave him new sounds to play with and new textures to introduce into his music. For Cage, Zen meant a focus on the moment and a fascination with stillness and silence.

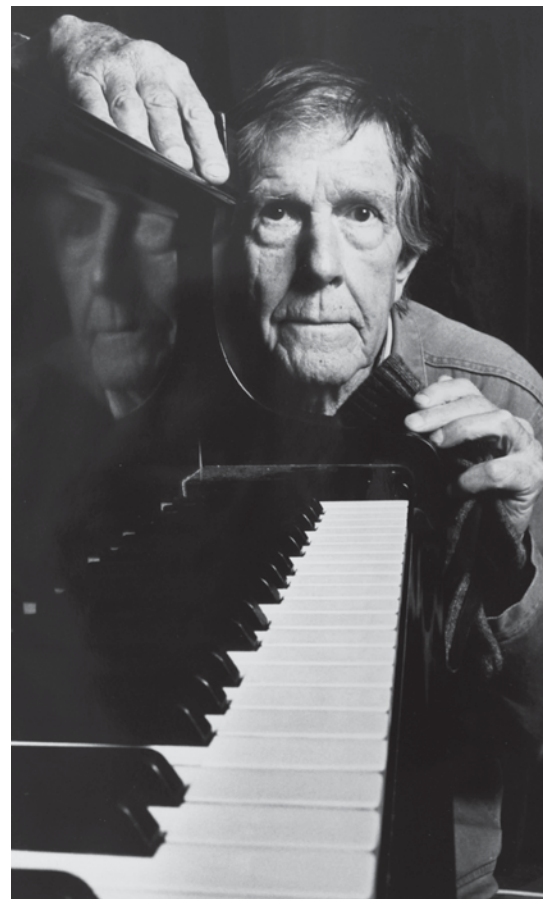
It's no surprise that the piano was central to the two composers: both were pianists by training and they composed some of their most influential works for the instrument. Debussy entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten in 1872 on the strength of his piano playing (he had no formal early schooling), although his later achievements on the instrument were undistinguished. Cage, too, was an early piano student (taught by his aunt Phoebe), although he admitted disliking technical exercises. As a struggling musician in his twenties, though, he found his keyboard skills useful in helping him to forge something of a career performing his own piano compositions.

Debussy's piano idols were Liszt and Chopin. He dedicated his *Études* (1916) to Chopin and even

Above: a gamelan orchestra performing at the Chanzy Theater in Angers, France

Below: part of the score for Cage's Concert Piano and Orchestra (1957-58)





calls for a strange, directionless 34 chord chorale to be repeated 840 times.

For both Debussy and Cage, Satie served as an inspirational model; a true original who forged his own path and defied the conventions of his time (dying a pauper as a result, it has to be said), and who was unafraid to return music to simplicity, at once spare, cold and profoundly witty. It's not hard to see Satie's influence in some of Debussy's poignant, jazz tinged harmonies, and his radical questioning of music's function encouraged Cage's more elaborate experiments. The earlier composer's *Musique d'ameublement* (furniture music), pieces to be played as an unobtrusive background to everyday life, may well have been in Cage's mind during the long gestation of his own environmental *4'33"*.

Debussy's impact on later French music has been huge, from the neo-impressionism of

Above: Debussy (left) with the eccentric Erik Satie in 1910, at Debussy's home in Paris

Above right: Cage photographed in 1989 at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival

Messiaen's early piano works to the glittering textures of Boulez's complex orchestrations. The French so-called spectralist composers – for example Gérard Grisey or Tristan Murail – owe their rigorous analysis of sound to their great compatriot's earlier explorations. And although the high priests of the European avant-garde – Stockhausen, Boulez, Berio – were initially unimpressed by Cage's music, even they later embraced some of his experimental philosophies. Without Cage's reduction of music to its basics, there would be no minimalism, probably the most influential (and popular) musical style of recent decades.

There are connections, perhaps unexpected, between Debussy and Cage, some biographical, some philosophical. But what really binds the two composers is a desire to push music in new directions, to expose its qualities as pure sound. For Debussy this meant a fresh focus on colour and timbre, and a radical rethinking of musical form. For Cage it meant questioning every rule, and asking what we are happy to call music. His view? "Everything we do is music," as he never tired of saying. ■

2012 Debussy and Cage anniversary events

Debussy in San Francisco

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Debussy's *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien*.

12th-14th Jan 2012, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco

www.sfsymphony.org

Manchester's Reflections on Debussy

Japanese pianist Noriko Ogawa programmes a concert series contrasting Debussy with music from her homeland.

20th Jan-9th Jun 2012, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester

www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk

Debussy in Scotland

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Stéphane Denève plays Debussy's *Nocturnes*. 27th Jan, Usher Hall, Edinburgh; 28th Jan, Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow

www.rsno.org.uk

Debussy in London

Michael Tilson Thomas takes on the *Danse sacrée et danse profane* and *La mer* with the London Symphony Orchestra 2nd Feb, Barbican Hall, London

www.barbican.org.uk

Debussy at the Salle Pleyel, Paris

The Orchestre de Paris under Riccardo Chailly performs Ravel's arrangements of two Debussy piano works (22nd-23rd Feb); Myung-Whun Chung conducts the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *La mer* (16th Mar); and Pierre Boulez and the London Symphony Orchestra perform the *Nocturnes* (1st May).

22nd Feb-1st May, Salle Pleyel, Paris

www.sallepleyel.fr

Pelléas et Mélisande at the Paris Opera

Philippe Jordan conducts a visually arresting production of Debussy's enigmatic opera by American director Robert Wilson.

28th Feb-16th Mar, Opéra Bastille, Paris

www.operadeparis.fr



Left: Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in January

Below: Joel Sachs producer and director of Juilliard's FOCUS! Festival, taking place in February

Debussy's Images

Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes plays Set 1 of Debussy's *Images*.

29th Mar, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

www.southbankcentre.co.uk

Juilliard Celebrates Cage

Week long festival devoted to Cage's solo, vocal and orchestral works.

27th Jan-3rd Feb, Juilliard School, New York

www.juilliard.edu

Cage in Oregon

Fear No Music, Portland's new-music ensemble, presents an all-Cage programme featuring the *Lecture on Nothing* and *4'33"*.

17th Feb, 800 SE 10th Avenue, Portland, Oregon

www.fearnomusic.org



John Cage Centennial Festival, Washington, DC

A week of music, readings and exhibitions, and a whole day devoted to percussion.

4th-10th Sep, various venues, Washington, DC

www.johncage2012.com

Cage in Los Angeles

Four concerts from Southwest Chamber Music featuring Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, *0'00"* and *Lecture on the Weather*.

3rd, 4th, 10th, 11th & 24th Mar, Los Angeles and Pasadena, California

www.swmusic.org

Cage's Song Books

CalArts presents the complete *Song Books*, alongside an ambitious online project about the work.

5th Feb, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California

adagio.calarts.edu/virtualcage/

American Mavericks

Two concerts featuring Cage percussion music and his *Song Books* as part of Carnegie Hall's US season.

26th-27th Mar, Carnegie Hall, New York

www.carnegiehall.org

The sounds of silence

For all its outraged detractors, John Cage's 'silent piece' continues to provide a thought-provoking challenge to our conception of what music really is. And, writes **David Kettle**, without such challenges, music would be the poorer

The thing about John Cage's infamous 'silent' piece *4'33"*, of course, is that it's not really silent at all. In a performance, you hear all kinds of sounds: creaks from the concert hall, maybe, or the breathing of fellow listeners, or even sirens passing outside. There's plenty to listen to – just not sounds that the composer has actually specified.

Cage himself was clear about this. He wrote, "The piece is full of sound, but sounds which I did not think of beforehand. What we hear is determined by our own emptiness, our own



Left: Cage (left) at work with fellow composer David Tudor in the recording studio in 1965

Above: the woodland Maverick Concert Hall, New York, where *4'33"* made its infamous debut

Top right: the 'manuscript' of *4'33"*, published by Edition Peters



receptivity." This was, admittedly, in a letter to the mother of composer Christian Wolff, a close friend of Cage's, who was worried that he would jeopardise his reputation with what she called a "prank" such as this.

She was right to be concerned. Throughout its history, *4'33"* has provoked disbelief, dismay, even anger, with listeners somehow feeling like they're being taken for a ride. Even at the work's premiere, by pianist David Tudor in the semi-open-air Maverick Concert Hall near Woodstock, New York, on 29th August 1952, a heated question and answer session after the performance culminated in one audience member exhorting, "Good people of Woodstock, let's run these people out of town!" Cage himself admitted that the piece upset some people, saying, "I had friends whose friendship I valued, and whose friendship I lost because of that. They thought that calling something you hadn't done, so to speak, music was a form of pulling the wool over their eyes, I guess." Yet it's hard not to imagine the composer smiling at the conundrum he'd posed to his listeners.

Cage worked on the piece for over four years. He announced back in 1948, "I have several new desires: first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted

silence and sell it to the Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4.5 minutes long – these being the standard lengths of 'canned' music, and its title will be *Silent Prayer*." At that time, Muzak, the company set up by inventor George Owen Squier to pump music into workplaces with the aim of increasing productivity, didn't have the appalling reputation it enjoys today, but it seems that Cage still thought workers deserved a break.

There were several other influences during the piece's long gestation. Cage had visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951 to experience pure silence, but had discovered that he could still hear the sounds of his own body. And there's the undeniable impact of Zen, which the composer was surely referring to when he mentioned emptiness and receptivity. He wrote the piece shortly after his immersion in the Buddhist philosophy, and he seems to be trying to persuade us that there's no difference between the sound of a piano and the ambient noises of the concert hall. Indeed, at the work's woodland premiere, the audience got quite a Romantic sound portrait of the American natural world, as Cage remembered. "You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out."



Above: American composer Steve Reich, whose 1973 New York performance of *Four Organs* was met with cries for mercy

Below: a scathing review of Stravinsky's ballet *Rite of Spring*, which caused a riot at its premiere in Paris in 1913

The piece has had a huge impact, though, from the advent of early minimalism to more mainstream tributes: it's testament to its place in the popular consciousness that a 'cover version' by a collective calling itself *Cage Against the Machine* almost made it to the UK's Christmas no.1 slot in 2010.

And it's in good company. Most famously, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* caused a riot at its 1913 Paris premiere, yet is now considered to be probably the 20th century's most influential piece of music. Back in the 19th century, the audience at the 1838 premiere of Berlioz's opera *Benvenuto Cellini* was bewildered enough by its subject matter and eccentric music to force the composer to radically rethink his score.

There's the unavoidable feeling, though, that other composers positively courted scandal. Satie's ballet *Parade* (1917), a collaboration with Picasso and Cocteau, outraged audiences with its cardboard costumes and typewriter and shotgun sound effects, but Cocteau may well have been trying to emulate the succès de scandale of *The Rite of Spring* four years earlier. Even a now revered composer like Steve Reich has caused uproar: a 1973 New York performance of his *Four Organs* caused pleading cries for the music to end, with one audience member reportedly striding down the aisle of Carnegie Hall and banging her head on the stage, wailing, "Stop, stop, I confess!"

Not every work that has raised eyebrows at its premiere has gone on to prove groundbreaking. But if no composer questioned the conventions of music, we'd be all the poorer for it. And as Cage ably demonstrated with his *4'33"*, music can be a place for meditation, mindfulness and mischief. ■



Photography: Getty Images, Lebrecht Music & Arts; Dion Oguist