

## Topic Page: [Cage, John, 1912-1992](#)

Definition: **Cage, John** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

US avant-garde composer. He experimented with new sound sources, believing that all sounds, including noise and silence, are valid compositional materials. He worked with percussion orchestras and invented the 'prepared piano', modified by fixing objects to the strings. He used chance in his compositions: *Imaginary Landscape* (1951) is written for 12 randomly tuned radios; *Reunion* (1968) consists of electronic sounds created by chess moves on an electric board; *4'33"* (1952) has no sound, except for the environment in which it is performed.



Image from: [Portrait of John Cage, 1995.](#)  
[Susan... in Encyclopedia of American Studies](#)

### Summary Article: **Cage, John**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1912–92, American composer, b. Los Angeles. A leading figure in the musical avant-garde from the late 1930s, he attended Pomona College and later studied with Arnold Schoenberg, Adolph Weiss, and Henry Cowell. In 1943 he moved to New York City, where his concerts featuring percussion instruments attracted attention. For these performances he invented the “prepared piano,” in which objects made of metal, wood, and rubber were attached to a piano's strings, thus altering pitch and tone and producing sounds resembling those of a minuscule percussion group. Cage's *Bacchanale* (1938) and *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48) were composed for prepared piano. Cage sought to break down the barrier between “art” and “nonart,” maintaining that all sounds are of interest. Many of his works seek to liberate “nonmusical sounds.” For example, *4'33"* (1952), probably his most famous piece, consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence, providing a frame to be filled by random environmental sounds.

Cage also conceived the idea of a “composition indeterminate of its performance,” in which the composer gives the performer instructions that do not directly condition the resultant sounds. For example, his famous *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) is scored for 12 radios tuned at random. In addition, he adopted procedures whereby the composer does not directly condition the sounds of the resultant composition, using such methods as the roll of dice or a consultation of the *I Ching* (see aleatory music). Cage, who for many years was associated with choreographer Merce Cunningham, also wrote music for the dance, to be played independently of the choreography. A kind of musical provocateur, Cage is noted for his inventiveness, his humor, and his strong influence on minimalist composers such as Philip Glass and on the development of performance art. His influence also extended to such media as poetry, video art, painting, and printmaking. Cage wrote several books, among them *Silence* (1961) and *A Year from Monday* (1967).

See Kuhn, L. , ed., *The Selected Letters of John Cage* (2016);

Charles, D. , *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation* (1981);

Brown, C. , *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (2007);

biographies by D. Revill (1992), D. Nicholls (2007), and K. Silverman (2010);

studies by P. Griffiths (1981), J. Pritchett (1993), W. Fetterman (1996), R. Kostelanetz (1970,

1991, 1993, and 1997), C. Shultis (1998), D. W. Patterson (2001), D. W. Bernstein and C. Hatch

(2001), P. Dickinson, ed. (2006), K. Gann (2011), J. Robinson, ed. (2011), and K. Larson (2012);  
Nicholls, D. , ed., *Cambridge Companion to John Cage* (2002);  
Caplan, E. , *Cage/Cunningham* (documentary, 1991).

**APA**

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

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Cage, John. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cage\\_john\\_1912](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cage_john_1912)

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## APA

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## Chicago

"Cage, John." In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University. 8th ed. Columbia University Press, 2018. [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cage\\_john\\_1912](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cage_john_1912)

## Harvard

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## MLA

"Cage, John." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 8th edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cage\\_john\\_1912](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cage_john_1912). Accessed 22 Nov. 2019.