



Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage

By Kenneth Silverman

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A man of extraordinary and seemingly limitless talents—musician, inventor, composer, poet, and even amateur mycologist—John Cage became a central figure of the avant-garde early in his life and remained at that pinnacle until his death in 1992 at the age of eighty. Award-winning biographer Kenneth Silverman gives us the first comprehensive life of this remarkable artist. Silverman begins with Cage's childhood in interwar Los Angeles and his stay in Paris from 1930 to 1931, where immersion in the burgeoning new musical and artistic movements triggered an explosion of his creativity. Cage continued his studies in the United States with the seminal modern composer Arnold Schoenberg, and he soon began the experiments with sound and percussion instruments that would develop into his signature work with prepared piano, radio static, random noise, and silence. Cage's unorthodox methods still influence artists in a wide range of genres and media. Silverman concurrently follows Cage's rich personal life, from his early marriage to his lifelong personal and professional partnership with choreographer Merce Cunningham, as well as his friendships over the years with other composers, artists, philosophers, and writers.

Drawing on interviews with Cage's contemporaries and friends and on the enormous archive of his letters and writings, and including photographs, facsimiles of musical scores, and Web links to illustrative sections of his compositions, Silverman gives us a biography of major significance: a revelatory portrait of one of the most important cultural figures of the twentieth century.

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Editorial Review

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John Cage, whose pieces dazzled and confounded audiences for six decades, hardly seems the easiest of subjects for the biographer, but this is a well-researched, coherent, quite readable account of the composer and his work. What comes across is a man who was ferociously driven to create music and to promote it to those who could most effectively advance it. Cage was an iconoclast, yet he developed relationships—often symbiotic—with some of the iconic artists of the past century, including Arnold Schoenberg, Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, Buckminster Fuller, Pierre Boulez, Robert Rauschenberg, and longtime companion Merce Cunningham. What also comes across is a humanity and openness that served Cage well in his personal life and his work, personified in his advice to young percussion student Cunningham: “You were playing everything absolutely perfectly. Now go a little further and make a few mistakes.” --Alan Moores

Review

“Begin Again is a much more nuanced picture of Cage’s personal life than has currently been available . . . What emerges most powerfully is Cage’s enormous capacity for work, together with his exceptional self-discipline as an artist and his willingness to approach every new challenge with a ‘beginner’s mind.’ For this alone it is a book worthy of being read by anyone, young or old, who is faced with the daunting task of a new creative beginning.” —John Adams, *New York Times Book Review*

“The life of Cage is meticulously told.” —*New Yorker*

“Not just an exemplary biography, but a significant contribution to the cultural history of American music.”—*Kirkus*, starred review

About the Author

Kenneth Silverman is professor of emeritus of English at NYU. He is the author of biographies of Edgar Allan Poe, Houdini, and Samuel F. Morse, and he has received the Pulitzer Prize for Biography and the Bancroft Prize in American History, among other prizes. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Users Review

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