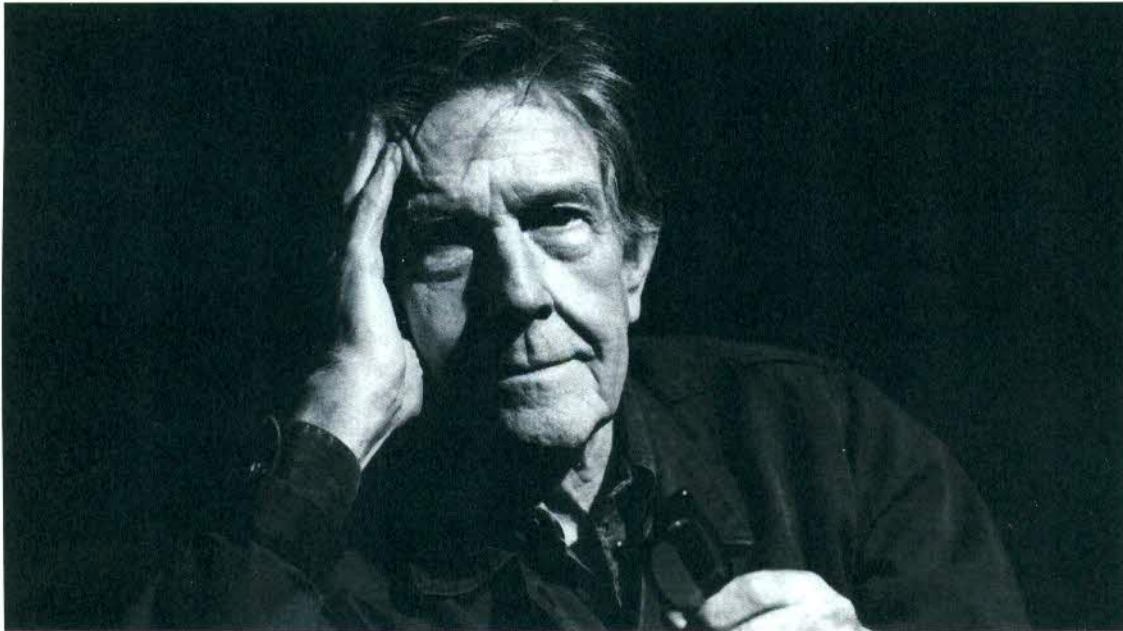


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# Meet John Cage, the Innovative Composer Behind the 639-year-long Concert

BY [MICHELLE KONSTANTINOVSKY](#) OCT 27, 2020



American composer John Cage (1912–1992), a music theorist, artist and philosopher, was one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde and one of the most influential composers of the 20th century. PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

On Sept. 5, 2020, a [small crowd of mask-wearing music lovers](#) gathered in St. Burchardi church in the town of Halberstadt, Germany, to witness an organ chord change. What seems like a minor event was actually a milestone: It marked the first sound change in almost seven years (and only the 14th chord change since the concert began on Sept. 5, 2001) in what is known as the slowest concert in the world. Welcome to John Cage's living legacy, "ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP."

Cage, who died Aug. 12, 1992, nine years before the concert kicked off on what would have been his 89th birthday, left a lasting mark on music composition and is considered one of America's greatest [avant-garde composers](#). Born in 1912, Cage studied music with renowned figures like Arnold Schoenberg and Henry Cowell before he began experimenting with "increasingly unorthodox instruments" like the prepared piano (a piano modified with objects placed between or on its strings) and tools like [tape recorders](#), record players and [radios](#) to create innovative and unconventional sounds and concepts.

"John Cage was an American composer and teacher with a varied career that included many works ranging from modern dance to prepared piano and percussion to tape music to aleatory [music involving the element of chance in performance]," composer [Nicolas Leil Benavides](#), writes via email. "However he is probably best known as the father of indeterminate music in the Western art music canon. In the most basic sense, [indeterminate music](#) is music where the sound is left to chance. This can be a piece for multiple radios, a set of instructions for performers, or famously his '4:33', which is thought to be a piece about silence but in fact is a frame for the sounds of the environment that the listener is occupying. This challenges the definition of music and the notion of what it even means to be a composer, since the composer is no longer the sole producer of musical ideas."



"He is one of the most important artists of the second half of the 20th century and he revolutionized modern music," says [Rainer O. Neugebauer](#), chairman of the board of trustees of the [John Cage Organ Foundation](#), in an email interview. "For him, all sounds, tones, and noises are equal, they all have the same dignity. He was especially interested in the new, not yet heard, surprising sounds."



Rainer O. Neugebauer, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the John Cage Organ Foundation Halberstadt, speaks to the guests in the Burchardi Church before the Sept. 5, 2020, sound change on "ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP," which has been playing without interruption since 2001 and will last 639 years, until the year 2640.

MATTHIAS BEIN/PICTURE ALLIANCE/GETTY IMAGES

When it comes to Cage's signature sound, Neugebauer uses an interesting term to sum up the experience: "His handling of sound material can be described as 'decomposition,'" he says. "The composer's subjectivity, his likes and dislikes, should be taken back, therefore he worked a lot with chance operations. He was interested in exhausting all possibilities of formal and structural relationships, in the dazzling diversity of the unstructured. He was interested in the initiation of processes whose progress is unpredictable. He stood up for the utopia of a non-intentional, non-instrumental life, of a simple so-and-so existence, for freedom and openness."

As Cage himself told [The New York Times](#) in 1981 about his book, "[For the Birds](#)," "I am for the birds, not for the cages in which people sometimes place them." According to Neugebauer, Cage was referring to "what we call silence, which for Cage means only the absence of intended sounds."

## Why a 639-year-long Concert?

The concept of creating a 639-year-long composition wasn't actually Cage's idea. "In 1985, Cage composed the piece, '[ASLSP](#),' for a piano competition," Neugebauer says. "In 1987, he gave it the ambiguous title, 'As SLOW as Possible,' but also the reference to 'Soft morning, city! Lsp!' from the last paragraph of James Joyce's 'Finnegans Wake'." Adapted for the organ at the request of [German organist Gerd Zacher](#), the piece became known as "ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP" (As Slow as Possible), and was dedicated to Zacher.

"The first performance in the same year in Metz was just over 29 minutes," Neugebauer says. "After Cage's death in 1998, the question was asked at an organ symposium: 'What does as slow as possible mean by an organ?' A piano string fades away. The organ is a wind instrument, an aerophone that can hold the sound as long as it is supplied with wind."

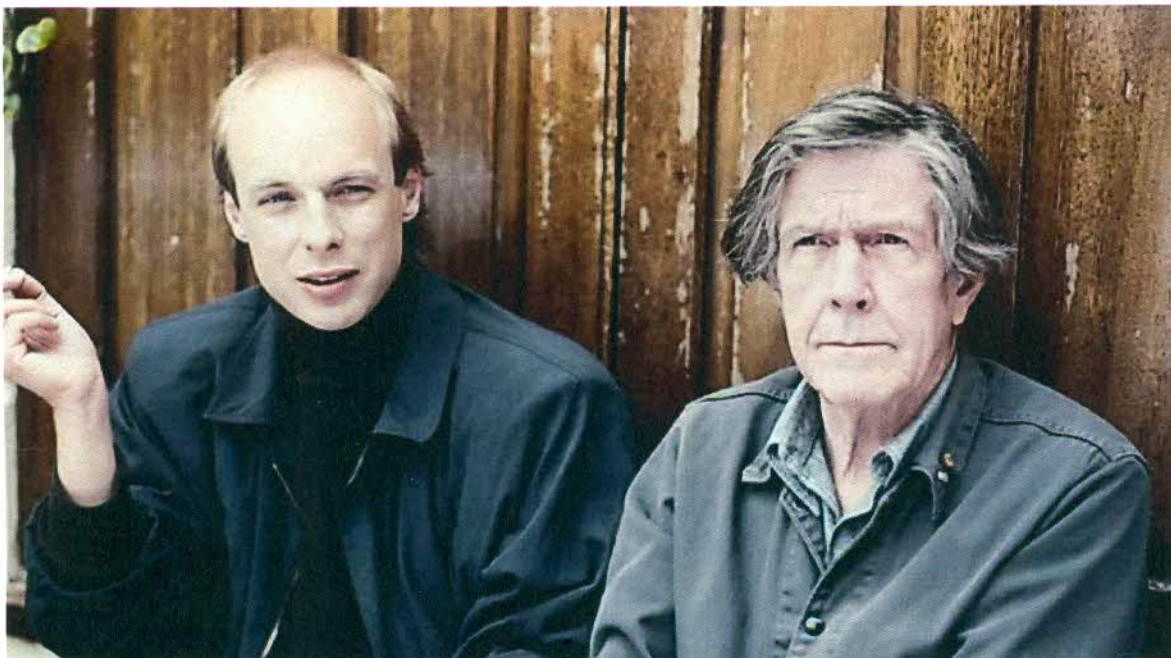
At an [organ symposium](#) in Trossingen, Germany, six years after Cage's death, music theorists, philosophers and organ builders discussed and debated what ASLSP really meant. The answer? 639 years.



If that seems oddly specific, there's a reason for that. One of the symposium participants knew of an old abandoned Burchardi church that stood empty in Halberstadt. "And then came the memory," Neugebauer says. "Halberstadt had written music history once before: The 17th-century composer [Michael Prätorius](#) wrote that an organ with the first modern keyboard design had been built in Halberstadt's cathedral in 1361. This organ was the first of its kind with a manual organized in patterns of 12 notes, the manual still used on our keyboard instruments today. One might thus say that the cradle of modern music was in Halberstadt."

The innovation was major, according to Neugebauer, and American composer [Harry Partch even described](#) it as "'that fatal day in Halberstadt.'" With the new millennium approaching, the symposium thought leaders decided to pay homage to the fateful occasion. "We then extended the 639 years from 1361 to the year 2000, with the millennium change as a mirror axis 639 years into the future," Neugebauer says. "Our performance of John Cage's *ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP* ends on schedule in the year 2640."

"This piece is a great example of John Cage's contributions as a music philosopher and the extremes his thought experiments bring us to," Benavides says. "The tempo marking of this work is 'as slow as possible,' but what does that mean for an instrument that has no decay? The work is no longer on a human timescale and cannot be played by a single person, but is the any different from an orchestra or modern electronic music? Does that make it any less of a work of art? There's something beautiful about watching only a portion of it in a single lifetime, much like how building cathedrals and great monuments took hundreds of years and many lifetimes."



John Cage worked with some of the most progressive musicians, dancers and artists of the 20th century, including Brian Eno (pictured at left here with Cage in 1985), and his romantic partner of many years, choreographer/dancer Merce Cunningham.  
MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

In addition to this iconic, continuing work, and his other musical masterpieces, Cage also published several books over the course of life, including "[Silence: Lectures and Writings](#)." He also studied Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies and "[concluded that](#) all the activities that make up music must be seen as part of a single natural process." But his enduring live concert continues to be one of his most awe-inspiring works.



The meaning or message of ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP is something Neugebauer feels the composer would have been coy about. "John Cage would have answered, 'That is a very good question. I should not want to spoil it with an answer,'" he says. "And, 'there was a German philosopher who is very well known, [Immanuel Kant](#), and he said there are two things that don't have to mean anything: one is music and the other is laughter.'" So, according to Neugebauer, Cage's answer would have been, well, cagey, alluding to the notion that certain pleasures merely exist for the sake of pleasure.

"My own cautious answer: maybe it is a kind of sonic message in a bottle released into the world," Neugebauer says. "The 639 years of Cage's ORGAN<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP in Halberstadt are a simultaneously radical, irritating, open, and extremely gentle art project '[... past the wit of man ... The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen](#) (Shakespeare)....' A dream so strangely set motion; a former monastery church as a sonic dreamspace that allows more than 639 years of the past to become visible, and that is filled with the force of [Ernst-Blochian](#) hope for more than 639 years into the future."

## NOW THAT'S INTERESTING

Cage may be credited with pioneering the industry of indeterminate music, but it's important to know that the composing technique is distinct from another form of interpretive sound. "John Cage is credited with being the father of American [aleatory](#)," Benavides says, "but it's worth noting that he actually disliked improvisation where a performer makes intentional choices. Aleatoric or indeterminate music was created in opposition to improvised American music like jazz, and though those traditions intersect in many ways, it is important to recognize the contributions of American improvisors in jazz who were creating complicated music without fully notated scores."

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