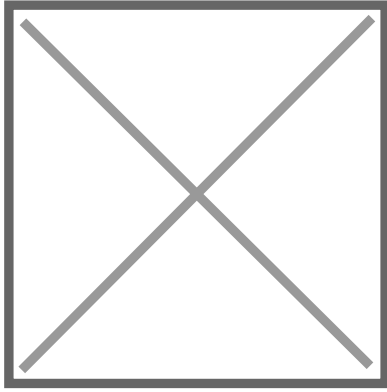




Sometimes It Should Just Be Play: John Cage's MusiCircus

Description

Salt Lake City, UT • On Monday, October 5, as part of Chance Operations, Westminster's multi-day festival of music, dance, theatre, and visual art celebrating John Cage and his circle of collaborators, the Westminster Concert Series filled the stage of Westminster's Vieve Gore Concert Hall with two grand pianos, a drum kit, woodblocks, a laptop, and a heap of leaves, branches, and a gourd. Six performers then spent the evening walking us through five decades of Cage. The program moved from the hushed lyricism of *In a Landscape* to the silence of *4'33"*, from the bolt-and-rubber bells of the prepared-piano *Sonatas and Interludes* to a cactus wired for sound. What emerged was less a concert than a lesson in attention: what counts as music, who decides, and how long we are willing to listen before we decide for ourselves. Even the festival's name is a nod to Cage. •Chance operations• was his term for composing by coin toss and the *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese book of divination, handing decisions to chance so his own taste would get out of the way.

Cage doesn't ask us to like every sound. He asks us to notice it, and the noticing turns out to be the hard part.

An Ear Like No Other

Few composers changed the question of what music *is* the way John Cage did. Most composers ask which sounds belong together. Cage asked why any sound should be left out. Over five decades, he wired phonograph turntables into a percussion ensemble, slid bolts and rubber between piano strings, let the coin tosses of the *I Ching* decide his structures, and wrote a piece in which the performers play nothing at all.

What strikes me most, sitting with this program, is how consistent that restlessness was. The 1939 *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* already treats test-tone records as instruments, and Cage later described the series as a landscape of the future rather than a physical one ([Sothis Medias](#)). By 1975, in *Child of Tree*, the "instruments" are cacti and seed pods, and the score is nothing but a set of instructions ([John Cage Trust](#)). The materials kept changing. The provocation never did: *listen to what is already here*.

That is why the evening's title fits. Cage's own *Musicircus* (1967) was a happening in which many musicians played different things at once, and the audience wandered among them. Westminster's version is more orderly, one piece at a time, but it keeps the spirit: a three-ring circus of sound where the ringmaster is your own attention.

From Silence to Static: The Program

Before a single note, the evening let Cage speak for himself. A clip from Cage's interview in Miroslav Sebestik's documentary *À l'écoute (Listen)* filled the hall. Cage explains that most music feels to him like someone talking about feelings or ideas. Traffic on Sixth Avenue is different: no one is talking, the sound is simply acting, rising and falling, growing longer and shorter. He wants sounds to be only what they are, nothing psychological, nothing symbolic. Then the perfect line: "I don't need sound to talk to me" ([Hearing Voices transcript](#)). He even recalls Kant's notion that two things need not mean anything to give us deep pleasure: music and laughter. It was the ideal overture, dry, funny, and quietly radical, and it gave the audience permission to stop hunting for meaning and simply listen.

Cage remarks that people often mistake his methods to mean that music is "just sounds" and therefore useless. That is not what he means. When he says he doesn't need sound to be psychological, I hear *affective*: he doesn't want sound built to make us feel. And music is very good at making us feel. Film and theatre know that the right score, paired with an image or a few words, can bring someone to tears in seconds, especially when it stirs a memory. Cage asks us to set that machinery aside and let sound simply act. Listening, in that frame, becomes more than hearing. It is embodied, closer to walking around a sculpture than following a story.

To be fair, my own work argues nearly the opposite: that art is political, and that performance is an archive that carries memory and meaning forward. Cage and I are saying very different things. Still, I find real value in his position. Sound and performance do not always have to mean something. Sometimes they should just be play, what Cage, in his 1957 lecture "Experimental Music," called "a purposeless play" and "simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living" (Cage, *Silence*, p. 12).

The Music Begins

From there, the music opened gently. Brandon Derfler's *In a Landscape* (1948) is Cage at his most melodic, a slow, pedaled drift that sounds closer to Satie than to the avant-garde. It was the most conventional piece we would hear all night, and still it surprised me: an arpeggiated line full of seconds, built on something other than a familiar scale.

After *Child of Tree* (more on that below), Hilary Koolhoven's *Experiences No. 2* (1948) offered a short unaccompanied song setting E. E. Cummings's dreamy love poem "it is at moments after i have dreamed." Koolhoven sang with very little vibrato; I hardly heard any. There was humming, and I didn't notice a starting pitch from the piano. Still, her voice filled the room with a gorgeous tone, the sound of a clearly trained singer.

Then came *4'33"* (1952), the piece everyone has heard of and few have actually sat through. In a room this small, the "silence" is crowded: shifting seats, a cough, the ventilation, someone's

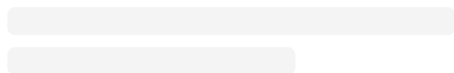
sleeve against a program. That is the point. Cage's most famous work hands the performance over to the audience. The idea was an old one for him: at 15, in a prize-winning 1927 speech at the Hollywood Bowl, Cage proposed a day of national silence so Americans could hear what other people think ([Other People Think](#)).

Amores III (1943), for three players on woodblocks, brought back pulse and play, with Samuel Sellers, Indigo Cook, and Devin Maxwell trading crisp rhythmic cells.



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Kimi Kawashima's selections from *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48) were the evening's still center, and its longest stretch: seven movements, roughly 27 minutes of music. She played Sonata I, the First Interlude, Sonata V, the Second Interlude, Sonata X, the paired Sonatas XIV and XV, and Sonata XII. The paired sonatas are titled "Gemini," after a sculpture by Richard Lippold. Before a note sounds, the piano itself has to be rebuilt. Cage's score prepares 45 notes, mostly with screws

and bolts, plus 15 pieces of rubber, 4 of plastic, 6 nuts, and one eraser, a job that takes two to three hours ([John Cage Trust](#)). The result turns each key into a small gong, drum, or bell.

The prepared piano began as a practical fix. In the late 1930s, Cage was the dance accompanist at the Cornish School in Seattle when the dancer Syvilla Fort asked him, three or four days before her performance, for music for her *Bacchanale*. Percussion suited the dance, but the theatre had no wings and no pit, so there was no room for an ensemble. Cage had only a piano. He laid a pie plate on the strings, and it bounced around; nails slipped between them; screws and bolts stayed put (Cage, [“How the Piano Came to be Prepared”](#), 1972). By the time of the *Sonatas and Interludes*, the method was exact: a table at the front of the score lists which strings to prepare, with what, and how far from the dampers, and the pianist wedges each object in by hand. Even so, no two prepared pianos sound alike, and Cage told performers to prepare the instrument in whatever way felt right to them. The soft pedal doubles the palette, since shifting the hammers onto fewer strings can turn a nearly normal note metallic and pitchless. It is quite an undertaking: hours of setup before a single phrase, and then an instrument that is, in effect, new every time it is played.

On the baby grand, the preparations gave the piano a short, plucked sound, almost like a harpsichord; I’m guessing the rubber had something to do with that. The music is deeply dissonant, yet it unfolds with the patience of a ritual. Under the strange surfaces sits strict architecture. Most of the sonatas follow an AABB form, and Cage set their lengths with nested rhythmic proportions, so every phrase lands on a hidden grid. To my ear, this was the most technical playing of the night, and Kawashima’s training showed in every phrase.

The cycle grew out of Cage’s lessons with the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai, who taught him that the purpose of music is “to sober and quiet the mind” so it is open to divine influences (Cage, *Silence*, p. 158). He drew its moods from the Indian theory of *rasa*, which he found in the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy: eight permanent emotions, four light (humor, wonder, the erotic, the heroic) and four dark (anger, fear, disgust, sorrow), all tending toward a ninth, tranquility ([Sonatas and Interludes](#)). Cage never said which sonata carries which emotion. That is left to the listener to find.

The late *One4* (1990) put Devin Maxwell alone at a drum set, working within the open time brackets of Cage’s final years. The piece is built from rolls: snare rolls, then rolls across drum after drum. The evening closed with *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (1939), with Derfler at the piano, Sellers on cymbal, and Maxwell on electronics standing in for Cage’s original variable-speed turntables. Hearing the earliest piece last was a smart choice: it ended the night where Cage’s experiments began. Derfler played inside the piano with a large mallet against a separate cymbal part from Sellers, and the result sounded like the score to a futuristic alien film, unsettling in ways that kept shifting what I felt. Across the evening, I noticed that even when these pieces were not what a typical listener would call beautiful, playing them with this much control takes real skill.

Child of Tree: Listening Up Close

For me, *Child of Tree* (1975) was the evening’s boldest experiment. Cage’s score asks one percussionist to gather ten instruments made of plant matter, including an amplified cactus and a seed-pod rattle. The performer uses the *I Ching* to divide eight minutes into sections, then improvises with a stopwatch ([John Cage Trust](#)). Cage reportedly got the idea when a Cunningham dancer held a dried cactus to his ear and plucked its spines.

Indigo Cook drew sounds I had never heard before, dropping pebbles into a wooden bowl and shaking a dried pod that looked like it had fallen from a tree. A child watching might have said someone was making a mess on stage. As the piece unfolded, Cook moved through gourd, leaves, and branches, each one magnified until its texture filled the hall. It was an intensely physical, close-up kind of listening, and for me it was a lot to take in.

That intensity is part of the design. By Cage's rules, anything that grows can become an instrument. The idea goes back to 1937, when the filmmaker Oskar Fischinger told Cage that, in Cage's later words, "each inanimate object has a spirit that can take the form of sound by being set into vibration" (LACMA; Brown 2012). Cage also wanted the instruments to be unfamiliar, so the improviser couldn't fall back on habit or taste. What challenged me is exactly what he invited: sounds stripped of the categories we use to filter them, including "beautiful" and "gross." Cook committed to that fully, and I respect the conviction it took.

Watching Cook, I kept thinking of *Āina*. In Hawaiian, *Āina* is the land, and the word holds *Āi*, to eat or to feed: the land is what feeds us, in body and in knowledge. Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls this land as pedagogy, the idea that land itself is the teacher and that we learn by entering into a relationship with it (Simpson 2014). Cage gets partway there. In *Child of Tree* both the plants and the musician set the terms, and the performer responds in a sort of limited conversation. But Cage wanted art to imitate nature's way of working, and imitation has limits. A cactus amplified in a concert hall is still a cactus taken from its place. Nature does nature best, and it teaches best on its own ground.

Still, there is something to be said for the stage. A concert hall is a safe room: cushioned seats, a program in hand, permission to be curious without feeling lost. If Cage's frame lets more people meet these ideas there, and leave listening to the world a little differently, that counts for something. But I would love to see the next step: take the stage outside, and let the *Āina* do the teaching.

Cage's genius is that he makes you ask where music ends. His challenge is that he won't answer for you.

Performer Highlights

Kimi Kawashima, who also directs the Westminster Concert Series and welcomed the audience, gave the *Sonatas and Interludes* the patience they demand. Prepared piano can sound like a gimmick in less careful hands; here, every muted thud and bell-like ping felt placed.

Indigo Cook committed fully to *Child of Tree*. The piece is far harder than it looks: the performer has to tune unfamiliar plant instruments, track chance-determined sections on a stopwatch, and improvise without leaning on habit. Cook's skill in pulling that off was admirable.

Devin Maxwell, who also teaches percussion at Westminster, anchored three of the evening's works: the *Amores III* trio, a solo turn in *One4*, and the electronics in *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*.

Samuel Sellers brought precision to the woodblock trio and the cymbal part of *Imaginary Landscape*.

Brandon Derfler framed the night, opening with *In a Landscape* and returning at the piano for the closer.

Hilary Koolhoven carried *Experiences No. 2* alone, with nothing but her voice and a very quiet room.

Conclusion: The Discipline of Listening

I left *MusiCircus* admiring Cage more and enjoying him unevenly, and I think he would have been fine with that. His music is less a set of pieces to love than a set of questions to live with. What is silence? Can a plant be an instrument? Who gets to decide what is beautiful? Not every answer is comfortable, and that is part of the gift.

But few artists of the last century trained our ears as thoroughly as Cage, and almost no one did it with such humor and stubborn curiosity. Westminster’s performers honored that legacy by refusing to soften it. In an age built to capture and sell our attention, an evening that simply asks us to *listen*, even when listening hurts, feels quietly radical. Cage built his music on chance operations so that he would not be the one deciding what mattered. Westminster’s festival extends the same invitation to its audience: let go of the need to control what you hear, and see what you notice.

Show Info

MusiCircus: The Music of John Cage
Presented by the **Florence J. Gillmor School of Music** and the Westminster Concert Series, as part of the Chance Operations festival

Venue: Vieve Gore Concert Hall, Westminster Performing Arts Center
When: Monday, October 5, 2026, 7:30 p.m.
Address: Westminster University, 1840 S 1300 E, Salt Lake City, UT 84105

Chance Operations Festival

All events at the Jewett Center for the Performing Arts and Emma Eccles Jones Conservatory. Westminster, University of Utah, and K students with a valid ID get in free.

Event	Dates	Venue
<i>John Cage 101</i> (Available Light Theatre)	Oct 2, 7:30 p.m.	Dumke Black Box Theater
<i>MusiCircus</i>	Oct 5, 7:30 p.m.	Vieve Gore Concert Hall
Cunningham Dance Workshop	Oct 6, 6	 p.m.	Sorenson-Fenton Performance Studio
<i>Watch. Listen. Remember.</i>	Oct 8
, 7:30 p.m.	Sorenson-Fenton Dance Studio

Source: [Westminster Performing Arts on Instagram](#)

Performers

- Indigo Cook, percussion
- Brandon Derfler, piano
- Kimi Kawashima, piano
- Hilary Koolhoven, soprano
- Devin Maxwell, percussion
- Samuel Sellers, percussion

Program

Work	Year	Performers
<i>In a Landscape</i>	1948	Brandon Derfler, piano
<i>Child of Tree</i>	1975	Indigo Cook, percussion and amplified cactus
<i>Experiences No. 2</i>	1948	Hilary Koolhoven, soprano
<i>4â??33â?• (I, II, III)</i>	1952	Samuel Sellers, Indigo Cook, Devin Maxwell, woodblocks
<i>Amores III</i>	1943	Samuel Sellers, Indigo Cook, Devin Maxwell, woodblocks
from <i>Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano</i> : Sonata I, First Interlude, Sonata V, Second Interlude, Sonata X, Sonatas XIV and XV â??Gemini,â?• Sonata XII	1946â??48	Kimi Kawashima, prepared piano
<i>One4</i>	1990	Devin Maxwell, drum set
<i>Imaginary Landscape No. 1</i>	1939	Brandon Derfler, piano; Samuel Sellers, cymbal; Devin Maxwell, electronics

About John Cage and the Works

John Cage (1912â??1992) was born in Los Angeles and studied with Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg. His deepest influences, though, came from Zen Buddhism, Indian philosophy, and the *I Ching*, which became his main compositional tool from 1951 on. His decades-long partnership with choreographer Merce Cunningham, in life and in art, reshaped modern dance as much as music.

- ***Imaginary Landscape No. 1 (1939)*** premiered at the Cornish School in Seattle. It is scored for two variable-speed turntables playing test-tone records, muted piano, and cymbal, making it one of the earliest electroacoustic works ([Wikipedia](#)).
- ***Amores (1943)*** pairs prepared piano solos with percussion trios; the third movement is for woodblocks.

- **Sonatas and Interludes (1946–1948)** is Cage's prepared-piano masterpiece: 16 sonatas and four interludes, shaped by the Indian aesthetic theory of the permanent emotions.
- **In a Landscape** and **Experiences No. 2 (1948)** both come from Cage's lyrical, pre-chance period, and both were connected to dance.
- **4#33# (1952)**, in three movements, was premiered by pianist David Tudor in Woodstock, New York.
- **Child of Tree (1975)** is an eight-minute improvisation for amplified plant materials, built through / Ching chance operations. It later grew into the longer *Branches* (1976) ([John Cage Trust](#)).
- **One4 (1990)** is one of Cage's late "Number Pieces," which use flexible time brackets instead of fixed rhythms.

Sources

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- [Branches, John Cage Trust](#)
- [Sonatas and Interludes, John Cage Trust](#)
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- Concert program, *MusiCircus*, Westminster University, October 5, 2026

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keola06