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Music review: Southwest Chamber Music begins John Cage 2012

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John Cage was born Sept. 5, 1912, at Good Samaritan Hospital on Wilshire Boulevard. Today the neighborhood is booming. The Wilshire Grand project, a couple of blocks away at Figueroa Street, proposes flashy skyscrapers with Asian-style neon advertising. But so far there isn't even a Cage plaque to mark the spot where one of the 20th century's most influential and innovative artists began the revolution.

Maybe next year. What the [Cage centennial](#) will bring is yet to be revealed. But [Southwest Chamber Music](#) has gotten the jump. It kicked off a two-year festival, Cage 2012, Saturday night at the Colburn School, a mile north of Good Samaritan. In a pre-concert talk the ensemble's conductor and artistic director Jeff von der Schmidt noted that were L.A. a European music capital, Grand Avenue -- the address of Colburn, the Music Center and MOCA -- would be Cage Street, just as the swank Mahlerstrasse leads to the Vienna State Opera.

Southwest Chamber Music's demanding first concert (three more programs the second weekend in April at the Pasadena Armory Center for the Arts conclude the first season of the festival) pulled no punches. It began with Cage's *Sixteen Dances*, a seldom performed but seminal 50-minute score in which Cage first began to seriously experiment with chance elements in composition.

After intermission, four percussionists gave a rare performance of the austere "Four⁴," which lasts exactly 72 minutes and in which very little happens. The program ended with "4'33","

Cage's famous silent piece in which nothing at all happens. The progress of the long, impressive evening was from something to nothing.

The Sixteen Dances was written at the end of 1951 for the new dance company Merce Cunningham had formed. The subject matter is the nine permanent emotions in Hinduism: anger, humor, sorrow, the heroic, the odious, the wondrous, fear, the erotic, tranquillity.

Cunningham danced the emotions as solos. He was a wild warrior in "the odious." Cage, however, approached emotions warily. Having been ridiculed when he intended to express his feelings in music, he had come to believe that art was best off when it reminds us of nothing. Music that doesn't possess our emotions, he contended, opens us up to the possibility of free enjoyment.

Sixteen Dances was made by organizing a gambit of 64 sounds, devised for an ensemble of flute, trumpet, violin, cello, piano and a huge percussion array requiring four players. There can be heard a playfulness in "humor," a fulsomeness in "the heroic." Or not. The music is abstract and discontinuous. But when Cunningham wanted something bluesy for a post-"odious" interlude, Cage somehow extracted the blues out of his gambit.

The emotions and interludes between them are played without pause. Since the dance revealed structure and content, the score alone can be a challenge for an unprepared listener. But it does seem to find a direction at the end, with a tremulous interlude, a quirky if irregularly sinuous "the erotic" and then glowing gongs in "tranquillity." If you want to read that as Cage very much in love with Cunningham, there is nothing in the music that disallows it.

Von Der Schmidt did not bring out, or leave out, emotion. Ensemble coordination in tricky music came first. The musicians were very good, and the percussionists stellar. Instrumentalists were often moving, such as the touching cello and piano interplay in "sorrow."

"Four⁴" (pronounced four-four) was written in 1991, 10 months before Cage's death, for CD (hence the typical 72-minute CD duration). No instruments are specified. Very few sounds are asked for (73 from the first percussionist; a mere 16 from the fourth). A sound enters from the silence and then leaves, like an actor in a variety show.

To perform this music live, each sound needs to be a moment of wonder, and [Lynn Vartan](#), the first percussionist, brought to hers a lightness of spirit and a smile. The others (Dave Gerhart, Ken McGrath and David Johnson) were more severe and less inviting. But nothing is harder on stage than doing nothing. And little is more remarkable in a concert hall than the stillness this performance achieved.

Afterward, "4'33"," played (or not played) by percussionists holding mallets, continued the peace and quiet enjoyably if almost to the point of possessiveness.

-- Mark Swed

Southwest Chamber Music Cage 2012: Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena; 8 p.m. Apr. 8 and 9, 5:30 p.m. Apr. 10; \$10-\$38; (800) 726-7147 or www.swmusic.org.

Photo: Lynn Vartan, from left, Dave Gerhart, Ken McGrath and David Johnson perform at Zipper Concert Hall Saturday night. Credit: Gary Friedman/Los Angeles Times