

John Cage's treasures are hiding in plain sight

The influential experimental composer's largest archive lives in a library at Northwestern—and it goes a lot deeper than its famous Beatles lyric sheets.

By JUSTIN CURTO

Greg MacAyeal first encountered John Cage while studying music composition in the late 80s as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Arguably America's most influential experimental composer, Cage is famous for his 1952 "silent piece" 4'33", and in the 1950s and '60s he'd pushed the envelope musically by composing works incorporating silence, indeterminacy, and electronics. He'd taught and researched at UIUC two decades before, from 1967 until '69, spending most of his time cocreating a mammoth computer-music piece called *HPSCHD* that premiered in May 1969.

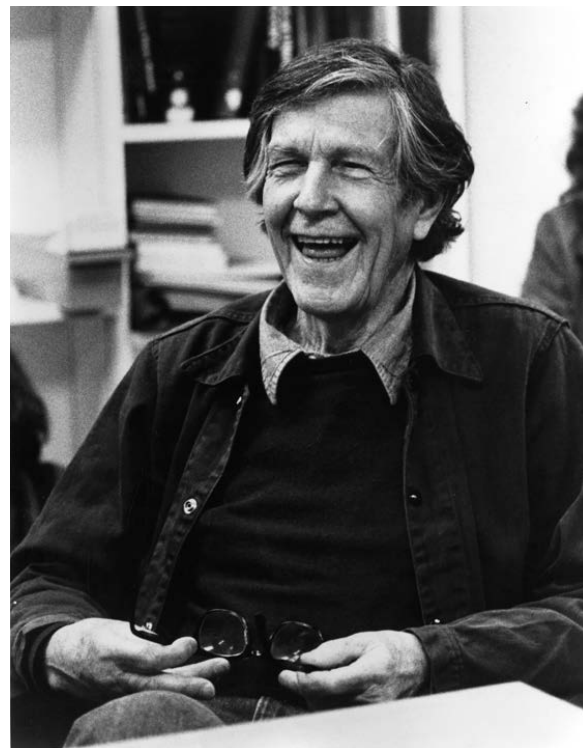
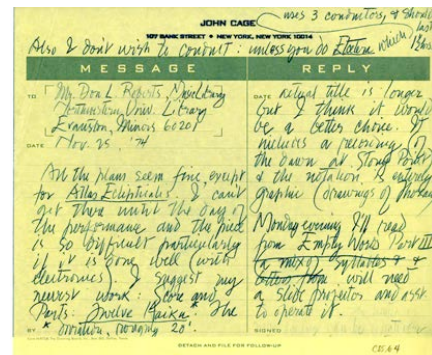
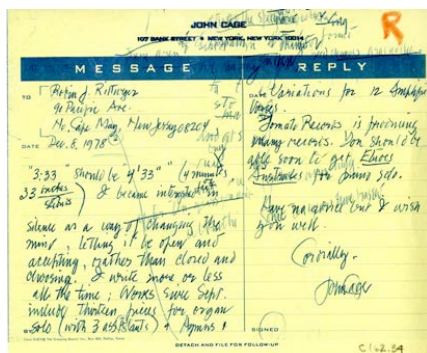
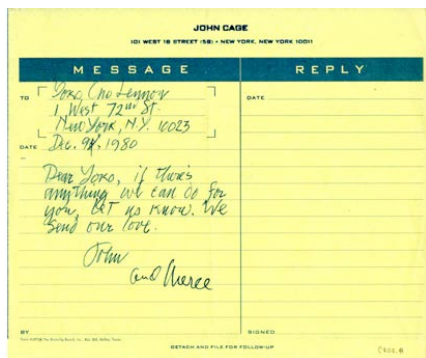
Cage's music didn't leave the university when he did, of course. In 1987, UIUC composition professor William Brooks, who'd participated in the *HPSCHD* premiere, staged a performance of Cage's 1976 piece *Lecture on the Weather*, which incorporates words and drawings by Henry David Thoreau and was inspired in part by haiku form. A composer as playful as he was profound, Cage had stipulated that the piece be performed by 12 "preferably American men who have become Canadian citizens," but Brooks just needed willing musicians. So he got MacAyeal involved to read excerpts from texts such as *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience," chosen through chance operations.

Thus MacAyeal's fascination with Cage began. "It's hard to get away from Cage, as a composer or anybody that's interested in new music since 1945," he says. "Whether you agree with him or not, you can't not respond to him in one way or another."

MacAyeal certainly hasn't gotten away from Cage. Since 2015 he's served as curator of Northwestern University's music library, and as part of the job he manages the university's John Cage Collection, which the composer established with an initial gift in 1976 and added to repeatedly until his death in 1992. "I was going through a poster collection, and I found a poster for the concert I performed in," Mac-

From left to right: three of Cage's letters, written to Yoko Ono (with Cage's partner Merce Cunningham) the day after John Lennon's murder, to a high school student who'd asked him about his famous piece 4'33", and to Northwestern music librarian Don L. Roberts to prepare for a 1974 campus visit.

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John Cage in 1987 © SUSAN SCHWARTZBERG/THE EXPLORATORIUM

Ayeal says. "It was really weird to encounter myself in this archival collection. Like, 'Oh, that's it, that's the concert in October of '87.'"

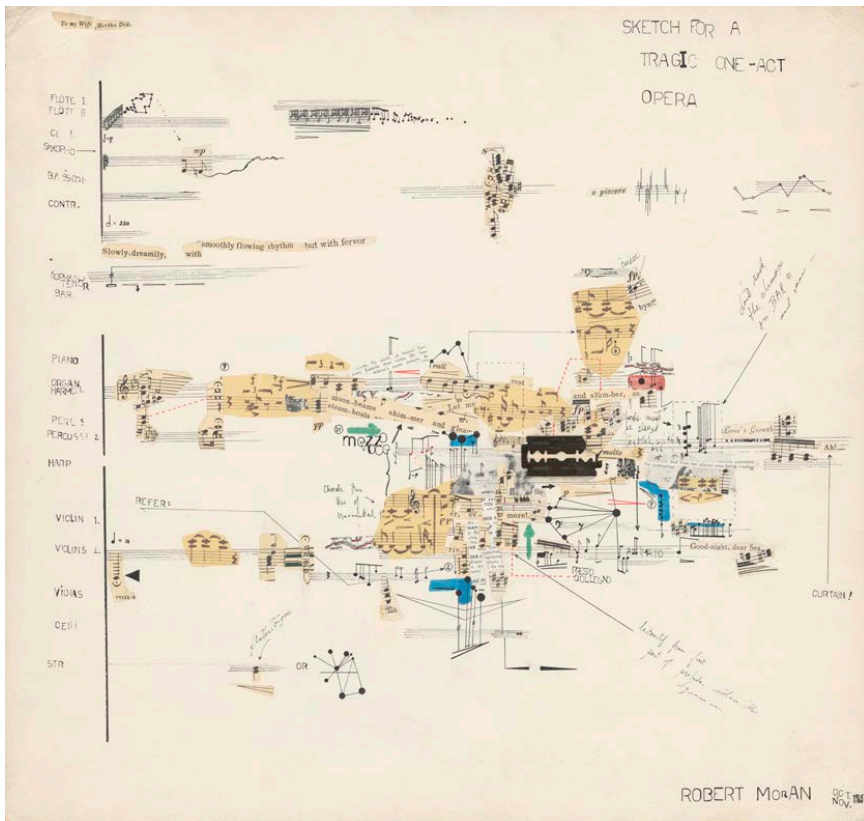
Wesleyan University holds documents related to most of Cage's books, the New York Public Library holds most of Cage's music manuscripts, and the University of California, Santa Cruz, holds Cage's materials related to mycology (the study of fungi). But the collection at Northwestern is the largest single concentration of Cage materials anywhere in the world—it not only surveys modern musical composition during the 1960s but also hu-

manizes a composer who continues to divide scholars with his challenges to the definition of music.

That said, not many Chicagoans know this archive exists—and if they do, they've probably heard of it only because of its Beatles lyric sheets, which have been a perennial magnet for local media coverage. The John Cage Collection isn't housed in a tourist destination like a museum, and in fact it's a couple miles outside Chicago. Very little of it is on public view. Primarily a research destination for academics, the collection is kept in hundreds of

folders and dozens of boxes in Deering Library on the Northwestern campus. Researchers can schedule appointments to view specific pieces from the collection in the library's Special Collections Reading Room.

One of the archive's two main sections, the Notations Project Collection, includes scores that Cage collected for his book *Notations*, an ambitious anthology documenting how composers wrote music in the 60s, published 50 years ago by the avant-garde Something Else Press. The other main section, the Correspondence Collection, consists of letters and other



Robert Moran created *Sketch for a Tragic One-Act Opera* specifically for John Cage's *Notations* book project. Its nontraditional score includes a razor blade taped to the page.
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materials from throughout Cage's life (not just those he received but also those he sent, thanks to the carbon-copy Note-o-Grams he wrote on), with the exception of letters related to acquiring the scores for *Notations*. The archive also contains unprocessed ephemera, such as nine scrapbooks documenting Cage's childhood and early tours.

In 1973 Cage wrote to Don L. Roberts, then Northwestern's music librarian, because he was interested in "the problem of where to go to study manuscripts of contemporary music" and he wanted his own materials to be "safer and better kept." At the time, few institutions took "new music" seriously, but Roberts had begun amassing one of the largest academic collections of it (it may even have been the only such collection in 1973). Today, Northwestern's music library is a hub for scholarly research into Cage as well as into experimental performance more broadly. The library's influence reverberates throughout the university's Bienen School of Music, which contains the Institute for New Music and offers courses on experimental and new music.

D.J. Hoek, currently Northwestern's associate university librarian for research and engagement, ran the music library (and thus the John Cage Collection) from 2004 till 2015,

taking over after Roberts retired. During his tenure, students and faculty cited the presence of the Cage Collection in calling for the school to increase its commitment to new music, and in 2012 this led to the establishment of the Institute for New Music. "I don't mean to say that if not for the library none of this stuff would've happened," Hoek says, "but I know that because of the library it sure helped."

In 2013 Northwestern hired Ryan Dohoney, an assistant musicology professor who teaches on Cage, his New York School collaborators, and experimentalism in music at large. (Full disclosure: I'm a junior at NU, and I've taken two of Dohoney's classes. He also advised a grant-funded research project of mine last summer.) One of his courses focuses specifically on Cage, his relationships with collaborators, and performances of his works—it draws from materials in the collection, and according to Dohoney the music library's staff has been integral to making it happen. "They're so open to me having people dig through it—students who don't know anything about a) archival research or b) John Cage," he says. "It's this way to orient them to real research with some of the most rewarding materials of 20th-century music."

The best-known materials in the Cage Collection—framed copies hang in the music library on public view—are lyric sheets from the Beatles. Yoko Ono, a friend of Cage's, wanted to introduce him to the work of the Beatles, who shared his interest in silence, chance, and tape music. For the *Notations* book, she got him "scores" for seven of their songs—the Beatles didn't write notated music, something Ono had to explain to Cage in a letter, so the scores were simply lyrics. John Lennon gave her six manuscripts from *Revolver*, including "Eleanor Rigby" and "Yellow Submarine," and Ono later convinced Paul McCartney to give her the colorful manuscript for "The Word" (from *Rubber Soul*). Cage included a black-and-white scan of "The Word" in *Notations*, the book's only piece of pop music by any standard.

Hoek, who's researched the lyric sheets, presents them to visiting alumni and community organizations to demonstrate the value in keeping manuscripts. "It's trying to get as close as we can to that moment where somebody has an idea and they pick up a pen or a pencil and they take a shot at writing it down," he says.

Pierre Boulez, a favorite correspondence partner for Cage, sent him the manuscript →



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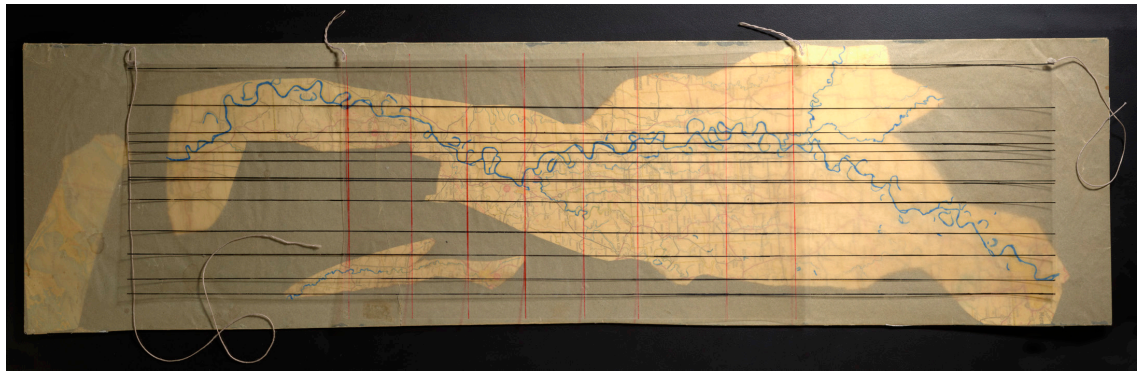
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for the landmark *Second Piano Sonata*, a behemoth solo piece that the French serialist composer wrote in 1947 and '48. The collection contains Boulez's notes for the piece, a draft with whole measures crossed out and notes moved, the "fair copy" (which is sent to the publisher) for the second and third movements covered by instructions in Boulez's tiny handwriting, and the eventual published version.

It's one of MacAyeal's favorites in the Cage Collection. "Within this one folder, you've got this entire genesis of this work—just this hugely important work," he says.

The Notations Project Collection includes scores to many other compositions revered as technical achievements, such as Steve Reich's 1967 *Piano Phase*, his first major piece for live instruments that employs the technique of "phasing"—two pianists play a simple, rapid figure in sync, and then one speeds up slightly, causing them to slip out of alignment and eventually back into a new one. Cage's close contemporary Morton Feldman sent in 1964's *The King of Denmark*, his first graphic score. And Cage's own contribution, the 1951 piano piece *Music of Changes*, was one of the first



Philip Corner's 1954 piece *Mississippi River South of Memphis*, also part of John Cage's *Notations* project, asks performers to "read" a traced map of the titular river as though it were sheet music. Horizontal lines indicate pitch; vertical lines, time. © PRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE COMPOSER

to employ indeterminate methods in its composition—his original copy rests in a book-shaped box, black on the top and bottom and red on the sides, with each page separately laminated.

All these pieces, no matter how experimental, retain some connection to traditional ideas of how notated music looks—even Feldman's abstract graphic score is read like sheet music, in bars from left to right, with some

indications of time and pitch. Yet many other works in *Notations* challenge those conventions, to put it mildly. The "score" for the piece *Danger Musik for Dick Higgins*, by Fluxus artist Nam June Paik, consists entirely of a single handwritten sheet instructing the performer to "Creep into the VAGINA of a living WHALE."

Robert Moran, known for his operas, made the collaged *Sketch for a Tragic One-Act Opera* in 1965 specifically for *Notations*. Its single large square of cardstock is scattered with irregular cutouts from magazine articles and sheet music, the largest group clustered around a taped-down Gillette razor blade. Though it shares the general layout of a conductor's score—the various instruments called for are listed in a loose column down the left side of the page—there are no clear divisions between parts. "Nothing I can say about the work other than it was created just for John's collection," Moran confirms in an e-mail.

Falling somewhere between the contributions from Boulez, Paik, and Moran is *Mississippi River South of Memphis*, a 1954 ensemble piece by Fluxus artist and composer Philip Corner. The piece's score consists of a traced map of the southern portion of the Mississippi River, which the performers orient horizontally and overlay with two transparent sheets, one marked with horizontal lines and the other with vertical; two of the lines should intersect at a particular place on the map, such as the performance site. The horizontal lines indicate pitch; the vertical, time. Performers play along the river from left to right, "moving over even flow," according to Corner's instructions. He encourages individual performers to "go on to tributaries, to follow parallel currents or a jump to an ox-bow lake."

"It's probably the most remarkable example of graphic notation," Hoek says. "Maybe my favorite ever."

In contrast to the *Notations* side of the collection, which brims with the sort of puckish musical unorthodoxy that Cage found fascinating, the Correspondence Collection more fully expresses the composer's ordinary, relatable humanity. As MacAyeal says, he was "a man who had likes and dislikes and friendships and felt pain and felt joy and had setbacks and successes."

The letter Cage and his partner, choreographer Merce Cunningham, sent to Yoko Ono after John Lennon's murder conveys deep emotion in just two sentences: "Dear Yoko, if there's anything we can do for you, let us know. We send our love." It struck Hoek from the first time he saw it. "When we were processing that collection, I came across that and I'm like, whoa," he says. "It's a really powerful, emblematic example of how these letters, they capture a moment."

Cage wrote to many well-known figures, including Ono, Boulez, architect Buckminster Fuller, and philosopher Marshall McLuhan. But he also kept the letters he sent to everyday people, such as the student who wrote to ask about "3:33." Cage's reply doesn't stop with correcting her about the name of the piece ("4 minutes or feet, 33 inches or seconds") but goes on to distill his intentions in composing it. "I became interested in silence as a way of changing the mind, letting it be more open and accepting, rather than closed and choosing," he writes.

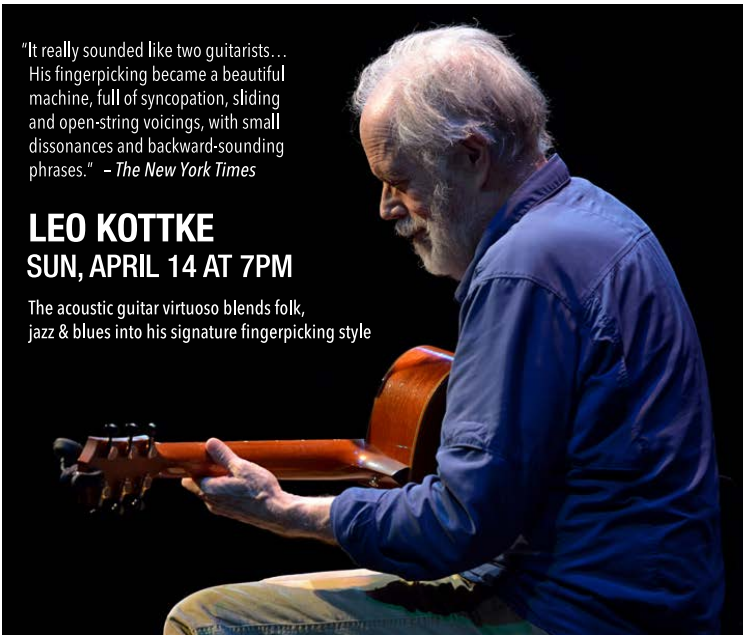
To MacAyeal, this simple, lucid explanation enriches our understanding of an enigmatic piece. "For all the things that people have said and all the weird things that he's said about 4'33", that one letter is the most brilliant, explanatory thing I've read about it," he says. "And he just wrote it as a reply to this high school kid in the mid-70s who probably didn't even know who he was."

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up broader research possibilities than the scores and manuscripts from *Notations*, which tend to encourage relatively straightforward analysis of a piece's composition or development. Hoek and MacAyeal have worked with many scholars from disciplines outside music, studying a wide range of interconnected subjects: Cage's friendships with artists, dance performances of his works, his relationship with technology.

John Green, a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of Rochester, knows something about the possibilities the collection contains. His dissertation research focuses on four of Cage's broadcast pieces, three of which—his music for Kenneth Patchen's 1942 American radio play *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, the 1979 West German radio performance *Roaratorio*, and his performance in Nam June Paik's 1984 international satellite-TV simulcast *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*—figure extensively in the Correspondence Collection. Green won Northwestern's \$3,000 John Cage Research Grant in 2017, which funded a visit to the collection. He found letters from listeners responding to *Slouch Hat*, Cage's letters requesting sound recordings for *Roaratorio*, and letters between Cage and Paik planning for *Mr. Orwell*.

"They're really correspondence-based because broadcast, that my dissertation focuses on, is a collaborative kind of effort," Green says. "It's usually something that you can trace in the documents in the archives there." When he couldn't find correspondence in the collection on the fourth subject of his research, Cage's 1959 performance of *Water Walk* on Italian TV, he had to adopt a more subjective approach. "That's my interpretation, whereas these other chapters, I'm almost like an ethnographer—I'm almost like following the lead of the evidence," he explains.

Dohoney has also used the collection for his own research, specifically on Morton Feldman's 1971 composition for the Rothko Chapel in Houston. In his forthcoming book, *Saving Abstraction*, a 1966 letter from Feldman to Cage illuminates Feldman's dismal financial condition before arts patrons John and Dominique de Menil commissioned him to write a piece for the chapel they'd founded. No copy of the letter exists in Feldman's own archive at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Switzerland.

Dohoney sees this approach—using Cage's archive to research someone else entirely—as potentially representing a turning point in "Cage studies."

"We kind of know everything we need to know about Cage, more or less," he says of his

fellow researchers. "I like to think of them as people using archives against themselves—that we're using these archives not to lionize the person whose collection it is, but to use it to recover other traces."

The library at Northwestern has helped that happen by acquiring separate archives by performers and artists adjacent to Cage, in hopes that they can work in conversation. A collection from musician, performance artist, and avant-garde festival organizer Charlotte Moorman (who became notorious as "the topless cellist" after a midperformance arrest for indecent exposure in 1967) served as the basis for the 2016 exhibition "A Feast of Astonishments" at Northwestern's Block Museum of Art. Other collections include correspondence from Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, founder of Something Else Press, and from Something Else editor Jan Herman; the library also has unprocessed archives from several experimental composers, which have yet to be catalogued and thus aren't publicly accessible.

Scott Krafft, who manages much of this material as curator of Northwestern's special collections, says building such a network of archives aids researchers who might be able to draw from many at one time. "I think it just makes sense," he says. "It gives our library a bit of individuality and cachet to have these strong, what you'd call 'destination collections.'"

When Northwestern was beginning to develop its archive of 20th-century avant-garde music, Cage engaged with the university in more ways than donating his materials. He visited the university twice during Roberts's tenure as music librarian: once in 1975 for a talk and performance and once in 1992, shortly before his death, for a scholarly celebration of his 80th birthday. Northwestern held a similar celebration in 2012 for Cage's centennial. MacAyeal worked on the accompanying exhibition, "Sound & Silence," and interviewed Brooks, the professor who'd introduced him to Cage 25 years earlier. During their conversation, MacAyeal asked a long-standing question: "What makes Cage relevant today?"

Brooks replied that Cage asks questions about control—having it, lacking it, responding to it—that remain consequential.

"That's a very abstracted way of thinking about some aspects of Cage, but I think he's right in the point he's making that that question is never going to be irrelevant to anybody," MacAyeal says. "He'll always remain important, he'll always remain relevant, and we've got this gigantic collection of stuff that people need to use." **■**