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Music

Cage festival closes on some fitting notes

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The [John Cage Centennial Festival](#), which has brought some of the 20th century's most provocative music to Washington over the past week, had its final concert on Sunday night in the Atrium of the National Gallery of Art's East Building.

It was a fittingly cathedral-like place for the event; Cage changed how we think about music in fundamental ways, and the concert brought together some of his most iconic and pathbreaking work, embodying innovations from the use of chance to the invention of the “prepared piano.”

“[Imaginary Landscape No. 4](#)” — a piece as enigmatic as it sounds — opened the evening. It's one of Cage's early forays into indeterminacy, where the structure of the work is precisely determined but the content left to chance. It's a dicey way to make music, but as members of the National Gallery of Art New Music Ensemble tweaked the dials of a dozen different radios, wave after wave of random words, static and snatches of song — the ocean of sound we swim in every day, but barely notice — rose and fell and rose again in a rapturous flow. The piece was played too quietly, alas; the cavernous Atrium eats little radios for lunch, and you almost had to strain to hear.

But Cage's “Cartridge Music,” another iconic work from 1960, kicked things into high gear. Using a computer-generated score realized by the estimable young composer Jaime Oliver, three players manipulated electronics and amplified tiny objects to unleash a colorful, even joyful universe of sound. Plastic toys skittered, Slinkies boinged happily up and down, combs were plucked and pencils scratched; a virtuosically playful performance in every sense.

The rest of the evening stayed at that exhilarating level, though Cage's “Ryoanji,” which closed the program, was a bit of a trial. It's one of the composer's most austere, pared-down works — you need to be a Zen monk to really appreciate it properly — and minds were visibly wandering by the end.

But five pieces by other composers were uniformly stunning, from Roger Reynolds' stark, urgent “OPPORtuniTy” (played and sung-shouted by pianist Margaret Leng Tan), to George Lewis's cheerfully postmodern “Merce and Baby.” **Jenny Lin — surely one of the most interesting pianists in America right now — stormed through Steve Antosca's ritualistic “evocation,” stirring up a nest of spirits who, in a spine-tingling coda, she then drew from the depths of the piano with lengths of string between the wires.**

The high point of the concert, though, may have been Stephen Drury's reading of music Cage wrote for a 1950 film about the sculptor Alexander Calder. It's luminous, unabashedly beautiful stuff (yes, much of Cage is very beautiful) written for a piano “prepared” to evoke the sound of muffled gongs. Drury played with eloquent simplicity, allowing the music to unfold with a kind of weightless grace, rising upward toward the immense Calder mobile that, impassive and inscrutable as the universe, turned slowly above our heads.

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Jenny Lin performs the premier of Steve Antosca's *evocation* in the Atrium of the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC September 9, 2012 during the John Cage Centennial Festival 2012.