

Critic's Pick New CDs for John Cage's 102nd Birthday



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Composer John Cage during his concert held at the opening of the National Arts Foundation in Washington in 1966. (Rowland Scherman / Getty Images)

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Classical music has a habit of burning out on birthdays. Two years ago, John Cage's music was everywhere, what with Los Angeles and the world celebrating the centennial of his birth on Sept. 5 at Good Samaritan Hospital in downtown L.A. The party lingered.

Last September, Gustavo Dudamel opened the Los Angeles Philharmonic season with a performance of Cage's famous so-called silent piece, "4'33".

This year, though, the pickings are slim for Cage's 102nd birthday Friday. But three excellent ongoing Cage CD series have new releases to frost this weekend's Cage birthday cake.

Brilliant Classics, a budget label out of the Netherlands, has been surveying Cage's solo and chamber music with entrancingly colorful performances by Italian musicians in terrific sound at startlingly inexpensive prices. The latest is a dazzler, a two-disc set titled "Music for Piano and Percussion" featuring soloist Giancarlo Simonacci and the Ars Ludi Percussion Ensemble. It includes some of Cage's best known and most attractive early percussion music (the "Third Construction" and "Credo in US"), the seldom-heard percussion trio written in L.A. in 1936, the untypically jazzy and jocular "Fads and Fancies in the Academy" and the radical early masterpiece "Sixteen Dances."

Naxos, another budget label, has been working through Cage's keyboard music, and now has a third disc by Pestova/Meyer Piano Duo. The highlight here is the ethereal late (1989) "Two²," made luminous by the two pianists. Also included is a glittering performance of "Winter Music."

The monumental "Complete John Cage Edition," an ongoing project on Mode for the past quarter of a century, has now reached its 50th release with "The Works for Percussion 3," with solo pieces played by the Canadian percussionist and bass guitarist D'Arcy Philip Gray. The series is one of the great labors of love in the history of recording. While every performance may not be the finest on disc, many are and every single one can be recommended. The sound quality is invariably exquisite. The program notes are authoritative, worthy of collecting in book form. Cage, while alive, gave the series his imprimatur.

Gray's disc lives up to all the above, and as far as sound quality is concerned, exceeds even the usual high standards with three-dimensional you-are-thereness. The main focus is a number of different interpretations of the marvelously onomatopoeically titled "Composed Improvisations," Cage's attempt at the end of his life to deal with his mistrust of improvisation in an imaginatively abstract way.

This is the one CD that may not be a budget release, but the recording also includes such a vivid presentation of pieces for amplified plant materials that simply playing the disc can have the effect of making your house seem to be redecorated. For that reason alone, this may be the biggest bargain of all.