



Cage and Foucault: musical timekeeping and the security state

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From discipline to security

John Cage (1912–92) was an American composer, performer, writer, and visual artist, whose development of writing and performance processes that allow performance elements to be decided by chance established him as a leading figure of musical and theatrical avant-gardes from the 1950s up to the present day. In this chapter I argue that John Cage's musical practice should be seen in terms of a general aesthetic economy that governs relationships among writer, text, conductor, performers, and audience in a distinct way. Furthermore, this general aesthetic economy is ambivalent in the way that it governs, which we can observe by noting its parallels to two techniques of power that Foucault, in the first three lectures of his 1977–78 series at the Collège de France, *Security, Territory, Population*, suggests should be distinguished from one another – those of security and discipline.¹ Musicologist Benjamin Piekut is virtually alone in drawing connections between Foucault's richly diverse characterisations of liberal power arrangements and Cage's various experimental strategies for governing ostensibly free performers. Piekut has applied multiple moments in Foucault's thought to the analysis of Cage's practice, notably discussing the New York Philharmonic's reluctant 1964 performance of *Atlas Eclipticalis* in terms of disciplinary control and liberalism, and renegade cellist Charlotte Moorman's irreverent performances in the 1960s and 1970s of *26°1.1499" for a String Player* in terms of discipline and the care of the self. While I find his analyses productive, I suggest that his evaluation of Cage is too damning overall, and that we can achieve a richer understanding of Cage's work by attending to Foucault's distinctions between security and disciplinary, as well as juridico-legal, techniques of power.

