

PROGRAM NOTES by Aaron Grad

Long before there was a New York School, **John Cage** (1912–1992) honed his revolutionary approach to sound on the West Coast. He was born in Los Angeles, and later he studied there with Arnold Schoenberg. Cage soon abandoned the twelve-tone system and California, and it was in Seattle that he made his first significant leaps into indeterminate music, writing for all-percussion ensembles and doctored pianos that took the focus away from strictly notated pitches.

It was during this period that Cage composed ***Living Room Music*** (1940) for four percussionists. He specified that “any household objects or architectural elements may be used as instruments,” suggesting a general ordering from high pitch to low pitch for the four parts: “magazines, newspaper or cardboard” for the first player; “table or other wooden furniture” for the second; “largish books” for the third; and “floor, wall, door or wooden frame of window” for the fourth. The second movement is a departure in that the percussionists generate all the sounds vocally, repeating fragments of a Gertrude Stein line, “Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around.” The optional third movement contains the work’s only pitched melody, to be played “on any suitable instrument.” The final movement returns to the found percussion objects of the opening.

© 2016 Aaron Grad