Happy 100th, John Cage, you old musical anarchist

By Mark Hinson
Democratic senior writer

When pianist David Kalhouw was 16 and studying at the Prague Conservatory, one of his friends handed him an album of music by American avant-garde composer John Cage.

Kalhouw thought “Music of Changes” sounded like an interesting title, so he dropped the phonograph needle down and it landed in a new world of music.

“Cage used the Chinese 1-String to determine the sequence of musical events,” Kalhouw said in an email. “I remember being very intrigued by the music, listening to the record over and over again. But I had no access to the score of the piece, so I didn’t engage with it further then. And I don’t think my teachers would have been thrilled if I told them I was going to play Cage in my final exam.”

Now that Kalhouw is a faculty member at the Florida State College of Music, he is going to give his students, and the public, a chance to get very acquainted with the composer. During this weekend’s John Cage Festival, Cage, who died in 1992, would have turned 100 this year. Kalhouw is overseeing the birthday celebration.

“Cage as an artist was never interested in writing music that appealed to popular taste,” Kalhouw said. “The perpetual crossing of boundaries, amazing inventiveness and deep interest in musical process of discovery is what draws artists, not just musicians, to Cage. I guess it is his ability to create music that often goes against our expectations of what music is, which people still find puzzling.”

One of Cage’s most famous works was “4’33” (1952) in which, well, nothing happens and the musicians don’t play a note. It’s silent. But is it, really? The audience usually coughs and fidgets. The musicians shift in their seats on the stage. It’s all music and it’s being performed tonight with, what else, a choir.

“My PSU colleague Larry Gerber came up with the idea of ‘arranging’ ‘4’33’ for choir and piano,” Kalhouw said. “This piece has been performed with full orchestra but we thought that the presence of silent singers will give this piece a particular urgency.”

When he wasn’t writing hymns to the silence, Cage also led the way when it came to playing on a “prepared piano.” The sound of the prepared piano is altered by inserting bolts, screws and found objects into the instrument’s strings. When the keys are struck, the piano sounds like it belongs in the percussion section.

“Cage is not for everybody, but most people who hear Cage’s music live will never forget it,” Kalhouw said. “They might hate it, but I think that a negative reaction to music is useful. Music that always fulfills our aesthetic expectations can lead audiences to complacency and a certain emotional inertia. Cage constantly provokes us and brings a great deal of freshness into the concert hall, as we hope to show during the FSU Cage Festival.”

The faculty performance tonight costs $9 and $6. The rest of the Cage Festival performances on Saturday are free and open to the public. Here is what is lined up:

SATURDAY:
11 a.m.: A performance of Christian Wolff’s Cage-influenced “Stoocs” at Owen Sellers Amphitheater, behind Opperman Music Hall.
Noon: Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano; works for the gamelan orchestra by Cage in the Lindsay Recital Hall.
3 p.m.: A round-table discussion titled “John Cage’s Legacy” with members of FSU composition and theory faculty as well as visiting artists in Longmire Recital Hall.
4 p.m.: Works by composers Morton Feldman, Peter Kotlik, Louis Moreau Gottschalk and others in the Lindsay Recital Hall.
8 p.m.: Guest artists and the Charleston New Music Collective play works by Cage, Michael Piazzo, Antoine Beuger and others in the Longmire Recital Hall.
Ongoing: “No Such Thing as Silence: An Exhibit of John Cage and His Friends” will be on display in the Warren D. Allen Music Library as part of the John Cage Festival until early November.

The audience-testing composer John Cage studies mushrooms. Cage was an expert on mushrooms and even appeared on a popular quiz show on Italian TV to answer questions about fungi.