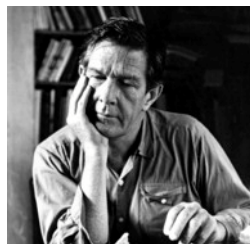


John Cage Thinker-Performer

One-Day Conference
16 April 2005



How is performance to be understood after Cage? What is Cage's legacy for the performer? How wide is the range of repertoires affect by his practice and thought? How should Cage's own performances be understood? What role did Cage's own performers (e.g. David Tudor), colleagues, friends and contemporaries (e.g. Morton Feldman) play in his practice as a thinker-performer? Does Cage make 'demands' on the performer, or ought we to think otherwise about what his music needs? How does technology figure in performance? What issues of cross-media interaction are pertinent to the performance of Cage? Is improvisation a useful term? Performance art or musical performance? Are recordings any use? Can a reliable, strong performance aesthetic for Cage's music be (re-)constructed?



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Programme

- 9.30am **Registration**
- Session 1** chair: Keith Potter (Goldsmiths College)
- 10.00 Stephen Chase (Sheffield University)
 ‘Listening / Not Listening: Improvisation after Cage’
- 10.30 Clemens Gresser (University of Southampton)
 ‘Cage, the Performer and the Idea of Co-Creatorship’
- 11.00 **Coffee**
- Session 2** chair: Martin Dixon (University of Glasgow)
- 11.15 Darla Crispin (Royal College of Music)
 ‘Some Noisy Ruminations on Susan Sontag’s ‘Aesthetics of Silence’’
- 11.45 Nic Melia (University of East Anglia)
 ‘Silence and Subjectivity: Strands of Critical Resistance to Sound-Making’
- Keynote Address** chair: Anthony Gritten (RNCM)
- 12.15pm David Nicholls (University of Southampton)
 ‘Cage \Re Performing’
- 1.15 **Lunch**
- Session 3** chair: Anthony Gritten
- 2.15 Simon Anderson (University of Huddersfield)
 ‘Over-Prepared, Under-Prepared? The Problems of Preparing Pianos for the Music of Cage’
- 2.45 Marco Lombardi (Venice)
 ‘Cage’s Cello Music’
- 3.15 **Tea**
- Session 4** chair: Martin Dixon
- 3.30 Rebecca Kim (Columbia University)
 ‘“Making Music by Reading Aloud”: Cage as Vocalist’
- 4.00 Rob Haskins (University of New Hampshire)
 ‘Playing in the Brothel: Problems of Performance Practice in Cage’s *Song Books*’
- 4.30 **Drinks reception and performance of ‘Lecture on Nothing’ by Jody Killingsworth**
- 5.30 **Performance of *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano by John Tilbury**
- 6.30 **Close**

Abstracts

'Listening / Not Listening: Improvisation after Cage' **Stephen Chase**

Cage's relationship with the practice of improvisation has been a matter of some confusion ever since his first appearances at European music festivals in the mid 1950s. Attacked for his apparent abdication of a composer's responsibilities for his use of chance (interpreted as improvisation by Nono and Boulez amongst others), Cage's stated views on improvisation were mostly negative or strongly ambivalent. Yet despite his insistence that his method of composition and his approach to performance were founded upon the disciplined application of chance procedures rather than his own taste, the anarchic quality of his performances with David Tudor, and the latitude seemingly permitted by many of his scores following the *Variations* series have at times been interpreted by performers as an invitation to improvisation.

In the years since Cage's death, free improvised music has seen the convergence of two ostensibly Cagean tendencies drawing upon the use of noise and found sound derived from a misapplication of technology associated with popular music (samplers, laptop computers, turntables), and a compositional concern with silence, and the extreme reduction of musical materials (e.g. Berlin's Wandelweiser collective). Influential in this regard has been AMM's Keith Rowe who has recently articulated his approach to improvisation as 'non listening'. This describes a level of detachment towards musical materials and ensemble interaction, an attitude that is seemingly antithetical to dialogue and sudden capricious change both of which are more readily associated with improvisation. Such an approach appears to have much in common with Cage and Tudor's performance practice.

In which case, does this force a reconsideration of Cage as a performer? And when it comes to the act of performing Cage's compositions does chance become improvisation? What is chance and what is improvisation? In attempting an answer to these questions I shall examine the practice of some of these improvising performers in connection with the example of Cage's interpretative approach, and pose the further questions: Can 'non listening' improvisation be regarded as a model for the performance of Cage's music? And what is Cage's legacy for so-called free improvisation as it is practiced today?

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'Cage, the performer and the idea of co-creatorship' **Clemens Gresser**

That every performer is a creator could be claimed for any kind of music. However, it is important to look at how much or little the performer co-creates, or simply re-creates, music. One can argue that the musician who interprets a determinate notation is translating his/her understanding of a composer's musical idea into sound; therefore, the performer's actions are, on the whole, reproductive rather than unconditionally creative. With compositions which are indeterminate with regard to their performance, though, one is required to address the flexibilities of the score or even its lack of information. At the centre of this paper is the issue of whether one can deal with this challenge creatively, or whether one should imitate the solutions of someone else in order to deal with the specific tasks of a composition. Overall, it is more important to look at the actual possibilities for such creativity than to examine how performers have previously made use of such potential for co-creatorship: an examination of specific realisations by certain performers as a focus for case studies seems to be too selective and insufficiently representative. This would

also indicate a favouring of certain musicians and ensembles over others, which ideologically seems to be against the character of indeterminate works. Instead, this paper will look at the utopian and theoretical potential of various works by Cage, and will discuss the different levels and generic modes of a potential co-creatorship in such pieces. To be truly offering such potential, the work itself has to leave room for the performer to shape the sonic outcome in terms of a soundscape as opposed to a soundworld (a difference which will be explained). I will argue for a specific performance attitude as opposed to a performance practice – a crucial distinction which will be made clear in the course of my presentation.

‘Some Noisy Ruminations on Susan Sontag’s ‘Aesthetics of Silence’

Darla Crispin

Susan Sontag’s writing leads us to fascinating questions about theories of modernism, and about the role of silence in art and in the modernist/post-modernist debate. ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’ was written thirty years ago, in a noisy metropolis, New York City, which was and is paradigmatic of so much that typifies the modern, by a critic whose stance vis-à-vis modernism reflected a gathering doubt that its impact could truly oppose ‘the determining power of history’. (Sayres 1990, 1) Though Sontag’s essay does concentrate on literature, her reference to John Cage make one aware that her questions have promising applications to music and issues of musical modernism. It is possible to apply Sontag’s arguments to consider the issue of silence as it relates to time, and to the process of individual development, as well as to the compositional credos of certain composers and thinkers. In various strands of modernity, such as the avant-garde, the search for the new is preceded by a conscious attempt to obliterate the traditional; this leaves a void, a silence. While many artists strove to immediately fill this space with something novel, others, such as Cage, examined the possibilities of the space itself. In order to trace more clearly how Sontag’s ideas can be seen as relating to musical issues, I would like to create a ‘dialogue between two silences’ in which her essay is read alongside Cage’s *Silence*, in order to expose the accords and resistances that appear. The aim is not only to create a sense of how their ideas relate, but also to reconstruct some aspects of the debate about modernism taking place in America in the late 1960s.

References

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‘Silence and Subjectivity: Strands of Critical Resistance to Sound-Making’

Nic Melia

Silence should no longer be considered as the object of the negation of a sound-producing activity, nor can it be considered to be a kind of conceptual ‘ground’ upon which sound, speech, the operation of the perceptual faculties upon these categories, or indeed, meaning and language are seeded. The paper will attempt (with particular reference to Nietzsche’s analysis of asceticism in *On the Genealogy of Morality*) to sketch the ways in which concepts of silence have been undermined by the assignation of a metaphysical position in relation to an accessible real, by ‘common sense’ (the assumption of a unified knowing subject whose rational thought displays a natural affinity for truth) and by ‘good sense’ (the assumption that truth recognizes the qualitative similarity, the resemblance without difference, between the individuated case and the general concept). I will suggest that while we remain within the grasp of representation, silence will be rendered impotent and misunderstood. Our contemporary condition requires that we consider silence to be deployed in an indeterminate and non-empirical relation to sound. This paper will suggest that silence inheres in the processes of poetic human endeavour, despite its marginalization and vilification by association with notions of absence and negation.

‘Over-prepared, under-prepared? The Problems of Preparing Pianos for the Music of Cage’

Simon Anderson

“I received a telephone call from a pianist who had performed *The Perilous Night* on tour in South America. He asked me to come to his studio and hear him play. I did. His preparation of the piano was so poor that I wished at the time that I had never written the music.” (John Cage, *Empty Words*, 7)

This quote, taken from John Cage’s introduction to Richard Bunger’s manual “*The Well Prepared Piano*”, epitomises the problems with preparing pianos for Cage’s music and performing on them. Cage’s remarks imply the presence of value judgements, either of the process of preparation, or the effect this had produced. The paper explores the difficulties implicit in preparing the piano for performance, and considers the effect both theoretical

and practical, of Cage's specifications, drawing on acoustic theory and computer analysis of a number of recorded performances.

'Cage's cello music' **Marco Lombardi**

The aim of my report is to set cello works and their performance in the background of the whole of Cage's music. One of the most important characteristic of his music is certainly the balancing between determinacy and indeterminacy regarding both the means and the numbers of players engaged in the performance. With reference to that part of his music that can be played by cellist (here, strictly, solo cello) I start from the following tripartite subdivision:

- 1) works to be played by cello: *Etudes boreales I-IV*, *One*⁸, *Solo for cello* drawn from Concerto for piano and orchestra, *108* for cello and orchestra, *Ryoanij* (incomplete) for cello and percussion, *One*¹³. Regarding *Etudes boreales* and *One*⁸, I will show the compositional process and device as taken from the composer's manuscript currently held by The New York Public Library. For all these cello works, moreover, a formal analysis of the music will proceed at the same rate concerning the specific instrumental problem (bow – curved or traditional - and bowing, fingering, sound producing, tuning, and so on) that one must face when playing this music.
- 2) works to be played by any string-player: *59½* and *26' 1.1499*". This last incorporates five earlier works: *57½*" for a string player; *1' 5½*" for a string player; *1' ½*" for a string player; *1' 18*" for a string player; *1' 14*" for a string player.
- 3) works to be played by any number of players and with any way of producing sounds that have been performed (and/or recorded) *also* by cellists: *A dip in the lake*, *Variations I-IV*, *Four*⁴, *4'33*".

It is also very important to connect this style of music to performance(s) and performer(s). Among Cage's own performers the name of the pianist David Tudor certainly stands out. As regards cello work the two principal performers are Dutch cellist Frances-Marie Uitti who created *Etudes boreales* in Amsterdam (she recorded this work twice. One can find the second on a double CD containing not only many of the works for solo cello presented here but also *Lecture on nothing*) and German cellist Michael Bach to whom *One*⁸ is dedicated (he created the work in Stuttgart and also recorded it). As is known, the performance of this last work needs the "curved bow" or Bach-Bogen®, a special kind of bow which allows up to all four strings to be played simultaneously (based on a lever mechanism at the frog that affects the tension and release of the bow hairs). Of course many other performers have played and recorded Cage's cello music: Julius Berger (who recorded *One*⁸ for the Wergo label), Ulrike Brand (in whose repertory we can find a version of *Four*⁶ for solo cello), Anton Lukoszevics (a skilful English cellist who often plays *59½*" for a String Player, *26' 1.1499*" for a String Player, *One 8*, *Variations I, II*, *Radio Music*), Arne Deforce (*Etudes Borealis*), Friedrich Gauwerky (*59½*" for a string player, *Solo*, *Variations I*, *Etudes Boreales I-IV*).

"'Making Music by Reading Aloud": Cage as Vocalist' **Rebecca Kim**

John Cage's activities as a vocalist in the last three decades of his career have provoked wide-ranging responses. In a 1987 article, Tom Johnson proposed that "the interpreter who comes closest to achieving truly nonintentional interpretations is Cage himself.... It is as if the interpreter is no longer playing the music but rather being played by the music. The passive voice." Johnson based his view on recent performances in which Cage recited various "speech-texts." From a somewhat different angle, but also with regard to a speech-text with Cage as speaker, Mureau (1970), Jackson Mac Low remarked on the "curious" way that Cage's voice seems "always to be speaking directly to us." While Cage was a performer of his own works throughout his compositional career, his turn to vocal performance beginning in 1970 has arguably garnered the most critical attention. Writers have given focused commentary on various aspects of Cage's performing voice, from its unique musical qualities to its intimation of authorial presence.

This paper examines the context of Cage's renewed interest in the vocal medium in 1970 and addresses the impact of his vocal presence on the interpretation and performance of his works. First, I situate Cage's rapprochement with the voice against the backdrop of the 1950s and 1960s, during which time his vocal output reached its nadir. I correlate this downturn with his aesthetic shift to nonintention in 1951 after which he avoided "intentionally expressive composition" and claimed, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." By 1972, Cage articulated a changed aesthetic stance and a revived interest in vocal composition and performance: "I show the audience how I am, how I sing. I give them my voice." Equally as resolute as his prior pronouncement, the latter remark seemed to

grant the audience an authorial persona previously withheld. Second, I analyze the relationship between two works written before and after this aesthetic shift to nonintention: *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942) and *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet* (1982). The 1942 song is based on a passage from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and I examine how, if at all, the interpretation of this song is informed by an excerpt from the 1982 *hörspiel* in which Cage recited this same text (the presentation will use a recording from 1990).

I propose that Cage approached the vocal medium in his later years as a space in which to explore and enact a polyphony of voices, including his own. However, as late as 1989, in the essay "An Autobiographical Statement," Cage maintained a view of music as "Something that doesn't speak or talk like a human being" but rather "expresses itself simply by fact of its vibrations." How are Cage's vocal performances, many of them preserved for posterity, to be reconciled with this view? Does the reception history of Cage's performing voice work in tandem or in tension with Cage's own view? This paper will address this interface between aesthetic experience and aesthetic intention.

'Playing in the Brothel: Problems of Performance Practice in John Cage's *Song Books*'

Rob Haskins

In conversation with Daniel Charles, John Cage expressed some bewilderment over his *Song Books* (1970): "But at the present time to consider the *Song Books* as a work of art is nearly impossible. Who would dare? It resembles a brothel, doesn't it?" (Cage & Charles 1981, 59) Nevertheless, the work's ninety solos demonstrated every compositional technique Cage had employed up to that point and introduced new ones that would become increasingly important: in this respect it resembles a summa similar to the one he produced in the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1958). *Song Books* is central, too, as a significant example of his ongoing interest in theater music, one which continued in such works as *Roartorio* (1979) and the *Europas* cycle (1987–1991). Unlike the later works, however, *Song Books* makes extraordinary demands on performers who would bring it to the stage: each participant selects and orders the specific solos he/she will perform (to last for an agreed-upon total duration); an ideal blocking of all theatrical actions generally creates the sensation of equal importance among all performers and does not impose a single dramatic trajectory upon the whole; and only minimal information is provided to allow for the design of such other elements as décor or lighting.

These demands have invited a diverse number of responses from performers over the years. The composer/performer Julius Eastman performed one solo, in which Cage calls for the enactment of a disciplined action that fulfils an obligation to others, by undressing his partner on stage. The next day, Cage expressed his disapproval in the strongest possible way: by pounding his fist on a desk and shouting, "I'm tired of people who think that they could do whatever they want with my music!" (Gena 1997) Other performances by the American Music/Theatre Group, the Alliance for American Song, and Ossia all end the work with Solo 89, in which a performer makes a gift of an apple or cranberries to an audience member chosen by a chance operation—the simplicity and poignancy of the gesture make the choice an effective one for theater, but raise questions concerning the validity of *Song Books*'s dramaturgical indeterminacy.

This paper addresses performance practice problems in *Song Books* by briefly documenting fundamental dramaturgical choices in several presentations from the last three decades and by offering close readings of particularly problematic instructions and notation for some of the solos. My conclusions suggest that the ambiguity of *Song Books* led the ever-practical Cage to devise new ways to create in advance an unambiguous but indeterminate dramaturgy for his later theatrical works and clearer performance instructions for the benefit of performers who were less familiar with his work. Nevertheless, he maintained a strong confidence in performers who were close to him, and for such performers he continued to provide significantly more open-ended performance instructions and notation. An optimal performance practice for *Song Books* probably should take account of both traditions while this is still possible, but the assessment of new interpretative possibilities remains a problematic issue.

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Future events

SMA TAGS Day for Music Postgraduates
University of East Anglia
23 April 2005
Email: v.hawes@uea.ac.uk

Dublin International Conference on Music Analysis
University College Dublin
23-25 June 2005
Email: julian.horton@ucd.ie or heneghaa@tcd.ie

Fourth Biennial International Conference on Twentieth-Century Music
University of Sussex
25-28 August 2005
Email: c20conference@sussex.ac.uk

Future RNCM events

RMA Study Day: 21st Century Music: Aesthetics and Reception
14 May 2005
Email: anthony.gritten@rncm.ac.uk

Symposium: Sculptors in Sound: The Piano Music of Beethoven and Tippett
6-7 May 2005
Including performances of all Beethoven Sonatas, Bagatelles and Variations, and all four Tippett Sonatas
Including performances and talks by Charles Rosen, Stephen Osborne, and Barry Cooper
Email: anthony.gritten@rncm.ac.uk