

JOHN CAGE: CONCERT RECLAIMED
50-year retrospective of the 1958 New York Town Hall concert

Philip Thomas (director/piano)
Mathew Adkins (electronics)
Lore Lixenberg (voice)
Apartment House (dir. Anton Lukoszevieve)
Scott McLaughlin & Nick Williams (music boxes)
University of Huddersfield Percussion Ensemble (dir. Chris Bradley)

Fifty years ago, on May 15th 1958, New York's Town Hall was filled with an excitable and distinguished public, including many of the most important artists, dancers and musicians of that time and place. The occasion was a retrospective of the music of John Cage, culminating in the world premiere of his *Concert for piano and orchestra*. Organised by artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, and film director Emile d'Antonio (calling themselves "Impresarios Inc,") the concert presented music stretching back to Cage's earliest compositions in a programme devised by the pianist David Tudor, who also featured as the pianist in the new work.

The concert was presented in three parts, the central part featuring extracts from Cage's classic *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano. Famously, the audience's reaction shifted as the programme progressed chronologically so that the initial polite reception accorded to the works from the 1930s and 40s gradually transforms into one of bemusement, irritation and outrage. Listening to the recording of the concert (Wergo 62472) it is difficult to separate sounds from the *Williams Mix* from the audience's vocal interjections but the violence of the reaction is more clear during the *Concert for piano and orchestra*, which was accompanied by boos, slow clapping, and other interjections (as well as numerous cheers 'fighting back'). Not only did the audience react in a hostile manner but the musicians also behaved irritably. Quotes from Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* may be heard from the woodwind along with other sounds which do not feature in the score. It is reported that one elderly member of the audience was also present in 1913 at the premiere of *Le sacre du printemps* and said that the NY concert attracted the same amount of derision and more applause!

In the intervening 50 years, Cage's music has been revered and reviled, mythologised and misunderstood. It is true to say that even today his music is more discussed than performed, and too often his music receives performances which are misconceived, or worse, treated as a joke. Today's concert relives the 1958 event not as an act of historical preservation but as a celebration of Cage's music, and a 50th birthday performance of a work the premiere of which was more noted for its scandal than its liberating and inclusive music. Instead of including extracts of the often-played *Sonatas and Interludes*, six composers, across a spectrum of styles and generations (including Philip Corner, who attended the 1958 concert), have been asked to compose pieces which might serve as a response to Cage's prepared piano work.

PART 1

John Cage *Six Short Inventions* (1934, rev. 1958)

These are amongst Cage's earliest works (here presented in an arrangement made for the 1958 concert by Cage and Tudor) written shortly before Cage began his studies with Schoenberg. They explore the same 25 pitches presented with minimum repetition and are based upon material taken from a solo which was originally intended to precede the inventions.

7'

John Cage *First Construction (In Metal)* (1939)

This was the first work to explore Cage's technique of rhythmic structures and the divisions (unlike in some of the later works to use this technique) are readily audible through changes in texture, sonority, tempo and gesture.

9'

John Cage *Imaginary Landscape No.1* (1939)

The *Imaginary Landscape No.1* is Cage's earliest experiment with electronics and indeed one of the earliest works for electronics ever composed. The original made use of variable speed turntables and frequency recordings (these had been created as test-tone recordings for experiments in musical perception), together with the muted piano (pre-dating his experiments with the prepared piano) and cymbal.

6'

John Cage *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (1942)

This setting of an extract from Joyce's 'Finnegan's Wake' calls for the singer to use no vibrato and to sing only three pitches, and the pianist to play the piano as a percussion instrument, playing only on the frame of the piano.

2'

John Cage *She Is Asleep* (1943)

In two parts, the first of which is for a percussion quartet, playing twelve tom-toms, and the second of which is for voice and prepared piano.

12'

John Cage *Music for Carillon 1* (1951), *2*, and *3* (1954)

The extent of the aesthetic and technical shift between *She Is Asleep* and *Music for Carillon* would be difficult to overstate. In 1950 Cage began to make use of the *I Ching* to dictate the result of his compositions within the parameters he laid down. In so doing he gave the detail of his musical language over to chance, a decision which, though developed in different ways, often hand in hand with notational methods which were indeterminate, he would never recant. These pieces were composed by punching holes (number 1) or drawing points (numbers 2 and 3) on paper, and the result is to be realised by the performers. The versions presented today (in a regressive step from the performances given on an early two-octave electronic instrument in the 1958 concert) have been made by Scott McLaughlin, James Saunders and Nick Williams for music boxes, also involving a considerable number of holes being punched through paper.

7'

Larry Austin *Williams [re]Mix[ed]* (1997-2000)

Cage's pioneering tape piece *Williams Mix* (1951) is here given a re-reading in a wonderfully 'cleaned up' version for digital, octophonic playback by Larry Austin, who was given the task of analysing and restoring the original score and tapes. This is followed by six short variations, based upon the six categories of sound Cage specifies in the score for any realisation of the piece, and an 'Nth realisation'. All these were composed using Austin's computer programme, the 'Williams [re]Mix[er]', which simulates the kinds of processes Cage used in the composition and realisation of his original but in a fraction of the time.

20'

PART 2

Alvin Curran *new work*

Philip Corner *Lingering Random Chords (After William Faulkner)* (2006-8)

Corner's work is an arrangement of a piece written in 2006 and which was premiered earlier this year in the context of another Cage tribute. It forms part of a collection entitled 'Music Literature' based upon musical descriptions taken from various authors. It is indebted to the Cage of the *Sonatas and Interludes* through its use of chords of different weights, such as those which the preparations create, and also the Cage whose 'soundworld of single sonic objects floating in space [creates an] acoustic space which does not cover up the underlying silence.'

Hans Koch *new work*

the indian system of emotions, which, however codified, is encrypted into the sonatas & interludes, discerns between 4 "white" emotions (humor, wonder, erotic, and heroic) and 4 "black" (anger, fear, disgust, and sorrow) gravitating towards the ninth: tranquility. transcending the binary black/white, this reminds the state vector of quantum mechanics, which, only upon observation, collapses into one finite state. in other words, tranquility could be seen as an emotional qubit: a superposition of states of the black and white emotions, undecided until measured. "a qubit of emotion" aims to construct an emotional quantum computer, conveying informations between wetware (the instrumentalists), hardware (the instrument - laptop system) and software (score & programs running). the observers (audience) may take individual measurements and thus personally collapse the state vector. (note: since black and white both have several substates, the correct term would be "qudit", indicating a plurality of states rather than binary)

Zbigniew Karkowski *new work*

Claudia Moliter *Paper cut – an homage to Cage (and Beethoven of course)*

In *Paper cut* I've made use of two aspects of Cage's music that interest me greatly. The *Sonatas and Interludes* are, of course, for prepared piano, changing the sounds that one would ordinarily expect from the piano. In *Paper cut* I have also used preparation, not of the instruments though, but of the score, changing what one usually expects from the score, namely to be a silent object, with the occasional page-turning rustle.

I couldn't possibly write an homage to Cage without incorporating a good amount of performer decision-making, and so this piece fluctuates between precisely notated passages and freer elements, with the overall structure, just as with lots of Cage's music, exactly defined.

And finally there is a direct quote from the *Sonatas and Interludes*, but I don't know which one yet, because that decision will be made by the performers of Apartment House. Oh yes, and there is a quote from Beethoven, but I do know exactly what that is. (CM)

Markus Trunk *Parhelion* (1999, world premiere)

Parhelion is the name for an optical illusion caused by ice crystals in the atmosphere, also known as mock suns. The image of disorienting rival light objects in a frozen sky seemed like an apt metaphor for the effect of sounds being destabilised by pitches in close proximity, such as when the celesta sounds notes just above or below the string instruments.

Viola and cello play only open strings and natural harmonics, i.e. *Parhelion* doesn't contain any fingered pitches or vibrato. This does not result in an abundance of open fifths due to the strings of both instruments having been detuned to a pattern of two major sixths and a major third. Linked by their identical tuning, viola and cello are treated as a single virtual instrument, progressing in unison or parallel octaves throughout.

It is probably fair to say that *Parhelion* owes much of its ethereal sound world to that of the prepared piano, and gamelan music for that matter. (MT)

PART 3

John Cage *Concert for piano and orchestra* (1957-8)

A defining work amongst Cage's oeuvre in the 1950s, the *Concert for piano and orchestra* both sums up and looks forward, most notably in its notational features. It marks the culmination of Cage's experiments with indeterminate notation, mainly in the piano part which consists of 84 different types of notation spread over 63 pages, drawing upon previous notational methods and devising new and original ones. At the same time it released a period of creativity stretching into the 1960s, being the origin of the types of notations (or 'tool-kits' as James Pritchett describes them) used for the *Variations* series. Any realisation requires the performer to make numerous decisions, such as the juxtaposition and/or superimposition of material, durations, dynamics, ways of playing, use of silence, etc. The other instrumental parts were composed using a method similar to that for the *Music for carillon*, transcribing points over a staff and assigning meaning to them. Cage made use of an extensive array of extended techniques in the composition of these parts.

As an ensemble piece, each player moves through their parts independently, according to agreed parameters. Cage wrote "My intention in this piece was to hold together extreme

disparities, much as one finds them held together in the natural world, as, for instance, in a forest or on a city street.”