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„Music – what for? “

John Cage’s Musical Ideas for a Better World

Lecture held

during the Cairo Contemporary Music Days

in collaboration with Department of Arts (AUC)

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at Malak Gabr Arts Theatre

American University New Cairo

“For many years I have noticed,
that music – as an activity separated
from the rest of life – doesn’t enter my mind.
Strictly musical questions are no longer serious questions”

John Cage, 1976¹.

„My ideas certainly started in the field of Music.
And that field, so to speak, is child’s play.

(We may have learned ... in those idyllic days,
things it behoves us now to recall.)

Our proper work now if we love mankind
and the world we live in is revolution”.

John Cage, 1967²

“... art is
a sort of experimental station
in which one tries out living“.

John Cage, 1954³

„Music – what for? “⁴ - Some answers by John Cage

I think, it is a good idea to ask oneself “Why do I do what I am doing? “ -
No matter whether you are an employee, an employer, a soldier, a teacher, or a musician.
And - please, never be satisfied with the answer “for money”,

Most composers don’t ask themselves. They take it for granted what music is made for.

¹ John Cage: Empty Words. Writings `73-`78. Middletown, Conn. 1979 (JCE) p. 177.

² Preface to A Year from Monday, John Cage: A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings. Middletown, Conn. 1967(JCA), p. IX; 16, cf. JCE, p. 182.

³ Lecture on Something, John Cage: Silence. Lectures and Writings by John Cage. Middletown, Conn. 1961. (JCS) S.139.

⁴ „Musik wozu?“ was title of a lecture held by Rainer Riehn on June 7th, 1969 and also title of a compilation of writings edited by him and Heinz-Klaus Metzger (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 1980). My title is homage to both of them.

John Cage did so, until, in the midst of the 1940^s, he ran into personal crisis.

Among other disasters he got divorced from his wife Xenia.

And he was badly in doubt about his music⁵.

„Music – what for? “ – An answer from India and the Far East

In this time he met an Indian musician, Gita Sarabhai. She asked Cage for lessons in counterpoint⁶. Instead of being paid for the lessons, Cage asked her to tell him something about Indian Music.

We should listen to a section from one of Cage's most famous works, Sonatas and Interludes (1946/48) from this time, Sonata V, played 1999 by Christoph Ulrich⁷

It was inspired by Hindu lore of the emotions and their common tendency to tranquillity.

From Gita Sarabhai Cage also learned about the reason, why Indian traditional music is made:

“to sober the mind and thus make it susceptible to divine influences”⁸.

Maybe you spontaneously know what she meant by that. Cage did not. And so he asked himself: “What is a sober mind?” and “what are divine influences”.

He carried this question within, when, as many others of his age at that time he listened to broadcasts of Alan Watts (1915-1973).

The English philosopher had taken training in Zen meditation and had studied at American Academy of Asian Studies at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). And he was a very popular interpreter of Eastern philosophy to a Western Audience.

In his broadcasts and books⁹ he opened Western minds to Eastern philosophy.

Please note the word “philosophy”: It was Watts from whom Cage adapted the attitude that Buddhism would not be a religion, but rather be a therapy for the mind.

Feeling badly in need of therapy Cage enrolled at Columbia University to hear Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.

⁵ Being the son of an inventor, Cage was a person thinking technically. He did not like thoughts like: Music makes the sentiments blossom that are liable to die off in industrial everyday life.

⁶ JCS 127.

⁷ CD „Januskopf. Bach – Cage. LC 07033 (Eigenart) 1999, Track 14, 1'48”.

⁸ JCS 158.

⁹ E.g. East and West (1961).

From Suzuki Cage took over a sight of the world that differs totally from the cosmology of patristic religions, where humans believe to be created to god's own likeness, asked to subject the earth.

In Suzuki's cosmology the world is a very complex self-regulating texture, in which all beings – whether living or not – are of the same value and of the same might to influence each other.

In this sight of the world, all human suffering comes from what Buddhists call "thirst": People are thirsty for something they can't get: Thirsty to a person that is not available; thirsty to reputation; thirsty to love. And the more you suffer, because you don't get it the more your sight narrows to what you can't get. Finally you just see what you don't have, not noticing the nice things around you.

If, as a human, you don't want to suffer, you have to observe how this cosmic texture regulates itself and act in harmony with his laws¹⁰.

Cage learned from that, that watching is more important than creating.

It is from this Buddhist concept that Cage found his translation for the sentence, Gita Sarabhai said to him: "to sober the mind and thus make it susceptible to divine influences": "Divine influences" are our surroundings. We have to watch them very carefully, if we really want to do something for the benefit of all.

A "sober mind" would be one that would not put any filter to them or come across them by its own wishes.

If you want to be happy, Cage found, you just have to train yourself, not to want special things but just happily accept what happens anyway.

He wanted to free himself from the tyranny of likes and dislikes.

He made his music a remedy to change himself.

Cage decided to make his composing an exercise of Zen: he wanted to hear sounds without the "glue" of a technique or a personal intention.

He wanted to free the sounds in order to learn how to free himself.

Sounds should no longer be subjected to the will of a composer; they should not be burdened with the task to express something.

He wanted to learn, how sounds could be mere sounds in order to learn, how people be mere people, without anyone pushing another one around.

The principle of "Unimpededness and Interpenetration" became the leading thought for Cage's thinking from the late 1940s onward¹¹.

¹⁰ A means to obey these laws is the old oracle book I-Ging.

¹¹ Watts later on questioned the influence of Zen on Cage's Oeuvre. In the Foreword of "Silence" (1961)

Unimpededness and Interpenetration

With his „Variations I“ (1958) he created a model for better getting on with himself, with other people and with society in general: by training to accept, whatever chance operations decided to happen in his compositions, he wanted to train his ability to accept what happened to him in the rest of life¹².

“Aria” from 1958 is an example for chance-based composing.

“The notation represents time horizontally, pitch vertically, roughly suggested rather than accurately described. ... The vocal lines are drawn in black, with or without parallel dotted lines, or in one or more of eight colors. These differences represent any ten singing styles established by the singer. ...”¹³

The singer is free to change own styles of singing.

We hear Salome Kammer ¹⁴

Cage found that his music, freed from his own taste, sounded much more interesting than any combination of sounds he could have invented.

He noticed that he became more open and happier.

Later on he suggested this method to politics. But before we come to that we have took for another concept of his: silence.

Silence

One means for creating a state of “Unimpededness and Interpenetration” in his “organized sounds” was chance operation.

Another one was silence.

You all know his Silent piece 4'33" (1952). And you also know that it means: be silent and listen to the surroundings.

Cage thought of this much earlier.

“What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt whether I would have done what I have done. I am told that Alan Watts has questioned the relation between my work and Zen. I mention this in order to free Zen of any responsibility for my actions. “ JCS XI.

¹² Cage’s methods of composing by chance differ from every (series of) composition to another. Composer Antoine Beuger showed me, talking to him, how cunning Cage arranged the questions submitted to chance operations. But to discuss those musical questions would be another focus.

¹³ John Cage [commented catalogue of Edition Peters], edited by Robert Dunn, New York 1962, p. 20.

¹⁴ CD John Cage. Music for Eight. Ensemble Avantgarde. MDG 613 0701-2, P 1996.

At the age of fourteen, in 1928, he won a contest in rhetorics, the Southern California Oratorical Contest with a speech titled "Other People Think," which he delivered at the Hollywood Bowl:

The topic was, how the United States could solve their Latin America Problems.

Cages suggestion was to let all industries stand still and all mouths keep shut. That would create the opportunity to listen to the people in Latin America and to what they had to say.

In his own words:

"One of the greatest blessings that the United States could receive in the near future would be to have her industries halted, her business discontinued, her people speechless, a great pause in her world of affairs created. . . . We should be hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity to learn what other people think."

I love some other implications of silence; among these is the aspect that in Buddhist philosophy "being" is not a state: Everything we consider "to be" is coming to perceptibility from unknown and is disappearing into non-perceptibility again.

So, where we do not percept anything, there can be a lot going on.

A performance of Cages famous 4'33" for me is a brilliant opportunity to become aware of that.

Henry David Thoreau and his ideal of a constructive anarchy

In many thoughts, not only those about society, Cage was inspired by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1802). Thoreau was a unique person that lived in Concord, Massachusetts.

Being the son of a modest pencil maker he studied rhetoric, classics, philosophy, mathematics, and science at Harvard College, but left it without a degree.

He returned to Concord, helped in his father's factory and re-discovered an older method of making good pencils from inferior graphite by using clay as the binder.

He became a close friend to transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson that considered all beings as a part of the divine.

Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience"¹⁵ inspired Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King in their nonviolent civil disobedience.

Some very often quoted sentences are, in the beginning "That government is best which governs least",

another: "Unjust laws exist", and if "it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law".

¹⁵ c.f. <http://www.thoreau-online.org/civil-disobedience.html>.

And finally, optimistically: "If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose".

According to "wikipedia", Thoreau also anticipated ecology and modern-day environmentalism.

Environmental pollution and destruction of the environment came to the notice of intellectuals by the book *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome in 1972, and of course, also impressed John Cage.

Circus Instead of Focus

Cage noticed that many of those problems came into being, because people focussed special things, pulling others out of their minds. For instance they tried to build more and more cars, making them faster and faster, not noticing, that they were causing pollution.

So, in a number of pieces to be played at one time, Cage tried to change concentration into a non-focussed, holistic awareness.

radio music (1956), 1:39 to 3'03¹⁶

"... when you have the intention of one person, you still have that person dressed up in his ideas. But if you have two people dressed up in their ideas, and you hear both at the same time ... the fact that they have ideas modifies the ideas themselves"¹⁷.

If, as we saw in "Aria", the interpreter is free to contribute his very own view to what Cage has written down, both ideas are modified to a more general and more binding view, as if you have a classical score and an interpreter asked to be faithful to that opus.

Suggestions to American Politics: "Lecture on the Weather" (1976)

When, in 1976 he was commissioned by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation to write a piece to celebrate the American Bicentennial, he wrote this piece, called "Lecture on the Weather"¹⁸ by chance operations in the proportions of his Silent piece 4'33" (1952).

By this he referred to his ideas of silence, from the days when he was a young guy.

According to Cage, chance operations in politics would assure that nobody was exploited or damnified by purpose and so could help a little bit against social injustice and inequalities.

¹⁶ Dream. John Cage. Stefano Scodanibbio. LC 00846, WER6713 2.

¹⁷ Zimmermann, 1981, p. 286.

¹⁸ I did not find a hint, why Cage chose this title. Obviously he wanted his listeners to use their own phantasy for explanation.

Cage considered this to be a constructive critic to the politics of the USA (If you happen to see Donald Trump, you should tell him):

“The desire for the best and the most effective in connection with the highest profits and the greatest power led to the fall of nations before us: Rome, Britain, Hitler’s Germany. Those were not chance operations. We would do well to give up the notion that we alone can keep the world in line, that only we can solve its problems”¹⁹.

Cage closes his text with the sentence:

“I dedicate this work to the U.S.A. that it may become just another part of the world, no more, no less”²⁰.

Social utopia

Cage’s essay „The Future of Music“ (1974/79)²¹ formulates very clear parallels between music and utopic society.

In difference to political composers like Frederic Rzewski or Cornelius Cardew, Cage did not want to set a theoretical concept ahead, but wants his music to be a direct model of society²².

“We can say that this blurring of the distinctions between composers, performers, and listeners is evidence of an ongoing change in society, not only in the structure of society, but in the feelings that people have for one another. Fear, guilt, and greed associated with hierarchical societies are giving way to mutual confidence, a sense of common well-being, and a desire to share with another whatever one person happens to have or to do.”²³.

Cage had noticed that some musicians, being used to play such music, felt more responsible for the rest of the world.

So music can educate people to get mature for a life without institutions and governments.

“A necessary aspect of the immediate future, not just in the field of environmental recovery, is work, hard work, and no end of it.”²⁴, he wrote.

“Our institutions, not only the musical ones, are incapable of hard work. Time is counted to the second and limited. The goal of an individual within an institution has nothing to do with the work to be done or with the state of his mind. It has to do with the payment to be received”²⁵.

To give a musical example for that Cage’s music from this time is extremely difficult to play.

¹⁹ JCE 5.

²⁰ JCE 5.

²¹ In: JCE, p. 177-187.

²² JCG 200; 145.

²³ JCE 182.

²⁴ JCE 184.

²⁵ JCE 184.

If you are a contrabassist, you will be able to estimate, what hard work Stefano Scodanibbio is mastering in his own transcription from Cage's Freeman Etudes for double bass²⁶.

„Music – what for? “

Music can be a remedy to improve the world
by freeing oneself from the tyranny of one's likes and dislikes;
by not subjecting anyone or anything to someone's might.

By establishing a holistic, roundabout attendance
that can be warranted rather when all people are having the equal right and the might to say
what they see and act how they think it would be useful.

By watching more than doing.

That does not mean that humans just humbly have to accept whatever is going to happen.
Humans differ from other beings by being able to love, to show sympathy and compassion
and participate in the joy of others.²⁷

They can take responsibility for the common good.

Institutions bear the problem, that a wrong decision gets enlarged,
Besides they keep people in a state of not really feeling responsible for what they are doing.

While, if all people would equally feel responsible to tidy up our common home
then, among all the different opinions on what should be done
there would be an ecologic equilibration.

Thank you for listening!

²⁶ Dream. John Cage. Stefano Scodanibbio. LC 00846, WER6713 2.

²⁷ Buddhists speak of “virya” as the moral energy, “the unshakable tenacity, the active responsibility, the courage of one's own ideas, and the perseverance to struggle for the common good.” Giuseppe Tucci, Art. Buddhism, in: The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (Makropaedia), Chicago etc., 15. Edition 1973, Vol. 3, p. 374-403; p. 390f.

Abbreviations and Literature:

Main sources for this lecture:

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Abbreviations:

DUNN: John Cage [commented catalogue of Edition Peters], edited by Robert Dunn, New York 1962.

JCS: John Cage: Silence. Lectures and Writings by John Cage. Middletown, Conn. 1961.

JCA: John Cage: A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings. Middletown, Conn. 1967.

JCE: John Cage: Empty Words. Writings `73-`78. Middletown, Conn. 1979.

JCM: John Cage: M. Writings `67-`72. Middletown, Conn. 1973.

JCX: John Cage: X. Writings `79-`82. Middletown, Conn. 1983.

JCG: „John Cage im Gespräch. Zu Musik, Kunst und geistigen Fragen unserer Zeit“. Hg. Von Richard Kostelanetz, Köln 1989.

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