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JOHN CAGE FESTIVAL
BONN, JUNE 6-10, 1979

WILLIAM BROOKS

Most people who attended the John Cage Festival in Bonn seemed to have heard what they expected. Cage's personality and ideas are so well known by now that it's easy to fit the music to the man. Hearing the music as if it were by an unknown composer is difficult. I apparently heard things differently from most. Perhaps this was the result of my own expectations: I've recently been studying Cage's music as I would a stranger's, with as little reference as possible to the personality or the writings. Whatever the reason, it seemed to me that the resident experts (Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Dieter Schnebel, Hans Otte, Jürg Stenzl, Reinhard Oehlschlägel, and others) largely misperceived most works, hearing the philosophy rather than the sound.

In five days there were nine concerts of over 25 pieces, ranging from *Bacchanale* (1940) to the world premiere of *Hymns with Variations*. The full range of Cage's compositional techniques was represented, with the exception of the percussion music and the early chromatic pieces. There were four two-hour discussions, two of them attended by Cage himself. These in a peculiar way took on the qualities of the works presented: thus the session on *Empty Words* was quiet and probing, while that on *Musicircus* was chaotic and often abrasive.

Near the end, Stenzl noted the extreme diversity of Cage's work and wondered what, if anything, these different pieces

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had in common. 'If there is a connection', Cage replied, 'it takes place at the point of silence, in the fact of duration being the basic musical element. If we have emptiness as a basis for music, then other things can enter in.' Quite right, and a response Cage has given often. The importance of this festival for me, however, was its confirmation that the 'other things' that 'enter in' are not merely unexpected sounds. They include relationships between sounds – textures, structures, continuities – which find their way into the music primarily because of Cage's compositional clarity and consistency. Cage turns out to be, in a strange sense of the word, a melodist (as Christian Wolff long ago predicted: 'No matter what we do, it all becomes melody.') The key concept in comprehending his work is not acceptance, but discipline. The structural rigour which controlled sound in the prepared piano pieces has continued, in the later chance works, to control the process of decision-making. For that reason even the most open works, if properly performed, show great sonic unity.

Among the many events, five stood out as particularly interesting: a full-scale rendition of *HPSCHD*; the Ensemble Musique Vivante's performance of the *Sixteen Dances* and their coupling of a superb performance of *Atlas eclipticalis* with a wretched *Cheap Imitation*; the peculiar theatre that unexpectedly accompanied Paul Zukofsky's brilliant playing of the recent *Freeman Etudes*; Cage's own all-night reading of *Empty Words*; and the final evening's rendition of four recent works: *Lecture on the Weather*, *Reriga* with *Apartment House 1776*, and *Hymns and Variations*. Each illuminated in its own way the central issue of coherence, and raised in addition many peripheral questions about interpretation and performance practice.

The week centred on *HPSCHD*, which occupied a central aesthetic position as well, half way between the minimal specificity of *Musircircus* (which is an idea only, not even written down) and the exactness of most early and some recent works. The Bonn performance used the full complement of 52 channels of tape and seven amplified harpsichords. As in previous large versions, the loudspeakers were scattered around the perimeter of the space and the instruments placed on scaffolding at various angles and elevations. The scaffolding supported as well some 38 screens; three others were suspended from the ceiling. On these were projected slides and films, primarily of what were apparently abstract paintings. Tidy, arty, and tastefully arranged, these were washed away by the sound; only a black and white film of the Rhine, shot without editing by a stationary camera, was sufficiently concrete to act as counterpoint.

This was my first chance to see and hear *HPSCHD* as an audience member, although I have participated in two other performances as a player. I found it exhilarating, for very conventional reasons. At the discussion the following day several individuals remarked on the work's density and complexity. On the contrary, it seems to me, it would be difficult to conceive a work for those forces that would be more simple and uniform. The envelopes and spectra for the electronic sounds were derived by rigorously examining the timbre of the harpsichord; thus there is complete consistency of colour throughout. The tapes consist of reiterations of various lengths and shapes of these harpsichord-like sounds; the structure of any particular series of events is therefore extremely simple. One harpsichord part, for an electronic instrument, is simply a transcription of what could have been a tape part. It thus acts as a link between the live and pre-recorded sounds. Another allows its player to perform or practise any Mozart sonata he wishes. The other five are based on Mozart's 'dice-game' music (which may not be by Mozart), in which measures are chosen from columns and then strung together to make a minuet. One of these five is simply 20 minutes' worth of the dice game: in two others, measures from Mozart sonatas gradually 'erase' the dice-game original; in the final two, the dice game is similarly erased, but this time by a selection of music from other composers, arranged chronologically.

I go into this detail to indicate how consistent the material is, and how extensively it is dominated by Mozart. Moreover, a large proportion of the Mozart that is heard consists of the dice game. This itself is a set of elaborations of a 16-bar harmonic phrase, repeated ad infinitum. It's in C major; and because *HPSCHD* is overwhelmingly dominated by it, *HPSCHD* is in C major as well. This was perfectly evident in the Bonn performance. If one stood in the middle of the space and listened carefully, the material disposed itself in layers – dice-game music at the centre, Mozart materials in C and

related keys next, then other Mozart materials, then historical material, and finally the tapes.

In fact, it is largely the constant major tonality and the triple lilt of the minuet that give *HPSCHD* its festive quality. Fred Rzewski remarked afterwards that he had tried improvising freely, rather than following the score, but had stopped because it seemed 'dissonant'. It was, of course, just as a major triad would be dissonant in *Ionisation*. If one went to *HPSCHD* expecting a chaotic jumble of sound – randomness sonified – no doubt one could hear this. Clearly many did. But if one emptied one's mind of prejudices and personalities and simply listened thoughtfully (and surely this is what Cage wants), the music became extremely clear and coherent. It is in this sense that it is 'open' – not so much to extraneous sounds (it does not accept improvisation, for example), but to tonal relationships and structures that result from compositional procedures unrelated to tonality.

Atlas eclipticalis raises similar issues. At Bonn it was played simultaneously with an extremely spacious (eight minutes per line) version of *Winter Music* by seven pianists. *Atlas* was played by twelve members of the Parisian Ensemble Musique Vivante, without the optional electronics: the whole was directed by Cage himself. The resulting music was classically beautiful, with carefully etched details and an elegant balance. It was one of the finest Cage performances I've heard, and I found myself moved by it in the same way I have been by brilliant performances of Webern or Satie. In a work composed by superimposing star maps, so classical a result is astonishing: whence comes the lyricism in this impersonal structure?

The parts to *Atlas* provide the players with aggregates of pitches to be played in whole or in part. Within each aggregate the order is free; thus an aggregate is in a sense a collection of possible melodies. The pitches, which are often microtonal, are notated with large or small note-heads to indicate loud or soft sounds. Most sounds are soft. Numbers above the aggregates indicate the proportion of pitches that are to be long or short. More are short than long. A player normally decides in advance which pitches will be taken to be long, though in performance, of course, these may not be played.

Ensemble Musique Vivante has played *Atlas* under Cage several times. Most of its members have much experience with improvisation: many are very close to each other both professionally and personally. Their performance of *Atlas* was very much a collective effort: while each player was extremely attentive to the details of his instrument and his part, each was also very responsive to the choices and inflections made by the others. The performers were, in effect, improvising brilliantly, achieving unity and continuity by collectively realising textures and melodies as any fine improvisation group can. Unlike *HPSCHD*, *Atlas* accepts improvisation: in this performance, the score was less a set of directions than a set of constraints that minimised the likelihood of obvious or uninteresting responses.

But *Atlas* did not set out to be a melodic work. Cage's articulated intention was to create a situation in which each instrumental sound would be centred in itself, and in which the whole would be beyond anyone's control. The fact that *Atlas* can be made into collective melody is a measure of the extent to which the work is open, as I have said, not merely to a variety of sounds, but to sound relationships and continuities. In this extremely focused rendering, it was this larger openness that was emphasised.

In a sort of opposition is *Cheap Imitation*. Here the melody is explicit – indeed, it is all there is. But because its content is very precisely specified, there is little room for adjustment. It is no longer a question of the individual's responding to another's action, but of fusing with it. To do this, every player must be able to anticipate precisely the actions of all other players, and this requires a sensitivity that no ensemble has yet achieved; both the economics and the psychology of the professional music world make impossible the kind of rehearsals required. *Cheap Imitation* has, by all reports, been a consistent failure in all but the solo versions. It failed again in Bonn.

In discussion later, Cage remarked that Paul Zukofsky, who conducted it, had had only two rehearsals to prepare the performance. Confronted with certain disaster, he had offered to play a solo violin version instead. 'In that case', Cage explained, 'the music would have sounded beautiful but we wouldn't have been able to know what the state of our society is.' When *Atlas* was first played, the performance was a shambles; two decades later, music and the world have changed sufficiently to permit this avowedly non-continuous work to be elegantly disarmed into melody. The society

necessary to play a simple tune like *Cheap Imitation*, however, will be a long time coming.

Ensemble Musique Vivante made one other important contribution to the festival – a solid, though not stunning, rendition of the rarely heard *Sixteen Dances* from 1951. These pieces are at the watershed of Cage's aesthetic. Their material is a rich collection of timbral aggregates, carefully chosen by Cage according to his taste: in this they look back to *The Seasons*, the String Quartet and the prepared-piano works. But these aggregates are often juxtaposed according to a complex system of rules which are essentially arbitrary: in this they anticipate the many indeterminate procedures that followed. Because the notation is so precise, and the dialectic between well-chosen sounds and unchosen sequences so clear, the dances often sound far more disjunct than less rigid works like *Atlas*. They are less open to melody, but more open to the arbitrary or unexpected. We heard them in the recital hall below the Kulturforum exhibit. People came and went, and noises from the lobby and elsewhere were common. The performance, to my ears, suffered not at all.

In recent years, Cage has returned to a notation almost as precise as that of the *Sixteen Dances*, notably in the *Etudes australes* and the *Freeman Etudes*. Four of the latter were the first pieces heard at the festival, played spectacularly by Paul Zukofsky in the same recital hall. These are concentrated, intense works, which make virtuoso demands on both player and listener. I do not know the composing method used, but each of the four had a distinct quality to it, even to the extent of apparent restrictions on pitch content.

One might have expected the *Freeman Etudes* to be at least as open to ambient sound as the *Sixteen Dances*. Quite the opposite was the case. Just before Zukofsky was to begin, a late arrival opened the door to the hall: as it shut, it creaked slowly and rhythmically. Zukofsky waited. Another arrival produced another series of slow creaks. Zukofsky began. Subsequent comings and goings further activated the portal percussion. The situation was striking: nearly everyone in the hall, including Zukofsky, was distracted by the sound. For any other composer's music, the door would either have been shut or propped open; but Cage was there, and no one was willing to assert in his presence that the unexpected sound was a nuisance. The only person who felt unrestricted by Cage's philosophy was Cage himself, and before long he walked to the door and wedged it open with a book.

Several days later he was asked about this incident and explained: 'What you have is an extremely complex situation, like poetry condensed in time. You only have a brief moment to hear a very complex situation which, it is true, is open to noises; but I don't want to hear them because I don't know these pieces very well yet and I don't have very many chances to hear them.' Though this may be true, it seems a bit sophisticated. The *Freeman Etudes*, at least as Zukofsky plays them, are open to melody, but not to noise. The arbitrariness of the compositional procedure is not audible in performance: the individual notes, arrived at independently, become a continuity which can be (and was) interrupted. In the *Sixteen Dances*, on the other hand, the arbitrariness is sufficiently clear to make melodisation difficult: other sounds are therefore admissible.

There was much coming and going that evening, as well, when Cage gave the first complete reading of *Empty Words*, a massive text-piece in four sections, in which excerpts from Thoreau's *Journal* become increasingly fragmented and sparse. In Bonn the parts lasted for two and a half hours each and were separated by half-hour intervals in which juices, wholemeal breads and other Thoreauvian comestibles appeared. Drawings from the *Journal* were projected on the stage of the dark hall, while Maryanne Amacher played tape recordings made at Walden Pond (immediately recognisable to one who has been there by the distinctive combination of church bells and motorway noise). A tardy mayfly hovered around a shaded lamp illuminating Cage as he half sang, half spoke the text. People listened, dozed, came and went, like shadows round a camp-fire, and for the last part, the source texts of which concern dawn, the outside doors were opened. I very foolishly left early, but it was clearly a transcendental evening.

Again, however, the intention is easily misread. *Empty Words*, in such a performance, is aesthetically an extremely classical piece – an elegant and detailed setting of a major philosophical text. In the portion which I attended, my associations were with Tibetan chant, with Satie's *Socrate*, even with *Parsifal*. Cage's music perfectly expresses the content of Thoreau's words, helping the listener to understand them in a new way. It matters not at all that they become, in the process, unintelligible.

Indeed, a very great deal of Cage's music in recent years has been explicitly programmatic, expressive, or didactic. *Lecture on the Weather* (which was performed on the final evening) uses the elements of *Empty Words* in a blatantly descriptive way: Thoreau's text is drowned out by tapes of a thunderstorm, while his drawings are projected in flashes, like lightning. A preliminary essay discussing society's unwillingness to consider Thoreau's advice makes the parable unambiguous.

In a similar way, *Apartment House 1776* is a commentary on American culture, with four individuals from four subcultures presented in relief against a competitive background of quartets that are partly-erased performances of early American music. These erasures illustrate another facet of Cage's recent work: not only does it comment on other music, but in some cases other music is actually its referent. Thus *Cheap Imitation* is not only a statement about the difficulties of social action, but also a kind of 'setting' of Satie, and it can become a kind of meta-music if one knows the original well enough to hear its ghost behind the alterations. The *Hymns with Variations*, given their first performance in Bonn, use the erasure techniques of *Apartment House 1776* to the same effect while posing performance problems similar to those of *Cheap Imitation*. Thus they are both a critique of choral singing and an elegant 'setting' of an earlier music: they illuminate early American hymnody in the same way that *Cheap Imitation* illuminates Satie, or *Empty Words* illuminates Thoreau.

Of the final evening's music, only *Renga*, which was performed with *Apartment House 1776*, is an abstract work like, say, *Atlas eclipticalis*. Like *Atlas*, it can, I think, be sparse and elegant, though one wouldn't know that from the Bonn performance: *Renga* and the *Hymns with Variations* both received miserable treatment at the hands of the WDR orchestra and choir. The playing of *Renga*, in particular, was reminiscent of the infamous *Atlas* premiere by the New York Philharmonic: Dennis Russell Davies now, like Bernstein then, seemed unwilling or unable to stem the tide.

I am sorry the festival ended in that way. It was an ambitious and adventuresome undertaking all around, and much of it had obviously been carefully considered and rehearsed. In sum, the good performances far outweighed the bad, and the diversity and density offered an unprecedented opportunity to grasp Cage's work as a whole. The intersection between the pieces, it seems to me, is broader than Cage suggested. It is true that they meet 'at the point of silence' and that, because of this, other things, not originally planned, can enter in. But these other things, I am convinced, include most, if not all, of the characteristics of less radical music. Cage's work is becoming melodic and coherent, despite itself; and increasingly there is room in it for description, emotion, even a sermon or two. But these often appear not because Cage put them there but because he made room for them; thus, although the result may resemble the music that came before, there is an important difference.

Cage noted this difference years ago, in the *Lecture on Something*: 'there is not one of the somethings that is not acceptable. When this is meant one is in accord with life, and paradoxically free to pick and choose again . . . New picking and choosing is just like the old picking and choosing except that one takes as just another one of the somethings any consequence of having picked and chosen.'¹ The same difference is even more crucial to one of his favourite stories: 'Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen, things become confused. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. After telling this, Dr Suzuki was asked, "What is the difference between before and after?" He said, "No difference, only the feet are a little bit off the ground."²

John Cage started in music as a composer of beautiful and useful things. Then, for a while, things were a bit confused: he was an aesthete, a social critic, a poet, a philosopher. It's now clear that he is a composer of beautiful and useful things again – and, furthermore, that that's what he was all along. The feet may be off the ground, but the shoes still fit.

NOTES:

¹ *Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966), pp. 132-133.

² *Ibid.*, p. 88.