

“I think what we need in the field of music is a very long performance ...”

Lecture at the **International JAMA Symposium '75. Ročník Milana Adamčiaka'** in Žigmund šachta, Baňská Štiavnica (Slovakia), October 23, 2021

(Announcement: Thoughts on John Cage and ORGAN²/ASLSP and 639 years in Halberstadt: As slow as possible? Is it music? Must it be music? What is music? Intentionless sounds charged with meaning? Conceptual listening or sensual experience? Regulated anarchy? Always radical, never consistent? Better just to walk than to talk? These are only some of the many open questions. Cage loved them: „That is a very good question. I should not want to spoil it with an answer.“)

First I tell you a short story about a lost man in another sense. It begins two days ago. 9:30 in the morning I started my trip to JAMA with walk to the station in Halberstadt. One hour later and just a less than 100 km away from Halberstadt the train had to stop because the track was blocked by fallen trees. Stormy weather in Germany. Waiting an hour then very slowly back to the last tiny station. Waiting an hour, then by bus to the next bigger station. Waiting an hour, the whole station was closed, no train in, no train out. No possibility to get to Bratislava at the same day. Seven hours later back in Halberstadt. Next day, yesterday, got up at four o'clock in the morning and walked to the station, changed trains in Halle, then changed trains in Nuremberg, then in Vienna and arrived in Bratislava at 4:23 pm not at 4:33. Then arrived with Marek's small racing truck at seven o'clock in Banská Štiavnica, after 35 hours. ASLSP, as slow as possible. Two things to learn: be patient and try again. Now I'm here.

I am pleased to be a part of an intermedia art /non/ festival in honor and in the spirit of Milan Adamčiak with the presentation of our John Cage Organ Project. In July 1992 John Cage wrote in a letter to the German composer Jakob Ullmann, in which he gave an answer to the question where to find the spirit of new music and art, among other things: “*The spirit is ... in Milan Adamciak in Bratislava.*”¹ Dieter Schnebel, a German composer and theologian; Ray Kass, a painter, who brought Cage back to the visual arts; Laura Kuhn, Cage's last assistant and many other good friends who worked together with the exceptional American artist, find this spirit also in the project in Halberstadt. And I hope a little bit of this spirit I can bring to you.

¹ John Cage to Jakob Ullmann, July 26, 1992, in: *The Selected Letters of JOHN CAGE*, Middletown 2016, p. 590

My task is somewhat paradoxical. I am to reproduce something here in words that you can actually only experience on site in the Burchardi Church in Halberstadt with all your senses as a kind of – what we call in German – “Gesamtkunstwerk”, a total, overall artwork. I feel a little bit like John Cage who says in the beginning of his Lecture on Nothing: “*I am here, / and there is nothing to say. ... What we require / is silence; / but what silence requires / is / that I go on talking.*”² After that, the lecture lasted at least another 45 minutes. I will not talk so long. So please take the following as a marketing presentation to promote a trip to Halberstadt. Eva, Fero and Jozef can tell you, if it's worth it.

I present you three parts: First, a few remarks on John Cage and his understanding of art, from the perspective of the middle of nowhere in the German province. Secondly, his organ piece ORGAN²/ASLSP and how it came to Halberstadt. Thirdly, some paradoxes and open questions in our 639 year realisation of this piece.

I.

For me John Cage is one of the most important artists of the second half of the 20th century, not only as a musician, but also as a philosopher, visual artist and writer.

(Dignity of the individual)

John Cage resists the valuation, the classification, the division into “in” and “out”, the ranking, the saleable and the marketable. For him, all things and relationships in the world are first of all equally valid. Not only people and their artefacts but all living beings and also non-living natural objects have equal value, equal dignity for him.

“*Every mushroom is what it is - its own center. It's useless to pretend to know mushrooms. They escape your erudition. I have studied mushrooms a great deal...*”³ said Cage, who after all was a co-refounder of the New York Mycological Society and won 5 million lire (round about \$ 6000) in an Italian television show in 1959 for knowing the scientific names of all the mushrooms.

To take everything that is, first of all as what it is and therefore as equally valid, is not to be confused with indifference. On the contrary, to respect the individual as special is the precondition to see the whole correctly. Cage did not have much to do with Christianity, he was rather close to Zen Buddhism, but he had read his Meister Eckhart, for whom the one who recognizes God rightly recognizes him equally in all things.⁴

And so for Cage there are no good and no bad sounds, he does not make a difference between the beautiful sound and the ‘ugly’ noise. Everything is sound for him, the notes produced on the piano as well as the shrieking of the tram, and thus material for his compositions, his works, his music. In other words: When a child screams and it disturbs, it is classical music.

(Utopia of the absence of domination)

John Cage refuses to accept that everything must immediately have ‘meaning’ and sense, must be useful. What has no function, what literally does not work, is no good, is disregarded. He refuses this submission to the rationality of purpose, he

² John Cage, Lecture on Nothing, in: Silence, Middletown, 1961, p. 109

³ John Cage in: For the Birds. John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles, Boston/London 1981, p. 188

⁴ Cf. Meister Eckhart, Von der Erkenntnis Gottes, in: ders., Mystische Schriften, Berlin ²1920, p. 63

refuses the calculation of utility, the instrumental treatment of people and things, and thus also the search for meaning. His art, his music, is athematic, is non-rhetorical.

Listen to what is written in a very old book: "*On the other hand, music and that which excites laughter are two different kinds of play with aesthetical Ideas, or with representations of the understanding, through which ultimately nothing is thought,*"⁵ 200 years later, John Cage, accompanied by his goofy laughter, refers to this in an interview: "*I'm not so stupid either. There was a German philosopher, who was very well known ... He said there are two things, that don't have to mean anything, one is music and the other laughter. Don't have to mean anything that is, in order to give us very deep pleasure.*"⁶ The name of the very well known philosopher was Immanuel Kant and the quotation is from the Critique of Judgment.

This lack of intention, this lack of meaning as a wilful absence of meaning, this 'that's just the way it is', is what Cage sees realised in art, especially in music. And with this lack of intention, modern art, modern music, with a view into the future, points to a society in which not only forms and colors, sounds and noises but also all people and social relations – in the words of Heinz-Klaus Metzger – are allowed to be themselves "... *not bound into any purposes or heteronomous dispositions, behind which dominance is always hidden.*"⁷ The abolition, the elimination of dominance may not yet have a place today, but then one should follow a request by Bertolt Brecht and reflect on why it is utopian.⁸

(Eloquent silence)

Cage sets the experience of silence, of nothing and nothingness against permanent communication, uninterrupted chatter and talking, media overload and permanent reachability. About – or should we better say around – silence he composed his most famous piece 4'33", and the LECTURE ON NOTHING I already mentioned at the beginning. This silent piece is a paradoxical, an impossible piece that ultimately cancels itself out, and not only because silence does not exist. For what we call silence is full of accidental, unintentional sounds. The very concept (german: Begriff) of nothingness is almost impossible to grasp, and so the desired subjective experience of nothingness, of silence, of emptiness, of openness, of purposelessness, of the indeterminate, is only possible by celebrating, marking, indicating, framing, fencing off nothingness and silence, by writing or speaking about it.

This also applies to the attempts to represent the nothingness, the emptiness in visual art, think for example of Kazimir Malevich's black square of 1914/15 or the pictures from which Cage was directly inspired to his silent piece, the white or black paintings of his friend Robert Rauschenberg. For John Cage, these paintings became "... *airports for the particle of dust and shadows that are in the environment.*"⁹

Despite these paradoxes and despite the lack of intention postulated by Cage – "*Don't have to mean anything*" – I would like to briefly touch on at least three approaches to interpretation, since we come here to a central constellation of current philosophy, and as well as of the critical theory of society. For Ludwig Wittgenstein,

⁵ Kant, Critique of Judgement ²1793, § 54 [translated: James Creed Meredith]

⁶ John Cage about silence, Interview New York 2-4-1991: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcHnL7aS64Y>,

⁷ Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Cage's „Variations VIII“, in: Musik-Konzepte Sonderband John Cage II, München 1990, p. 263 [own translation]

⁸ Cf. Bertolt Brecht, Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat, in: Werke (Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe) Vol. 21, Schriften 1, p. 554

⁹ John Cage in: Richard Kostelanetz, Conversing with Cage, New York and London ²2003, p. 198

the impossibility of thinking the essential and of speaking and writing about it, is at the centre of his work, which for him consists of two parts, everything he wrote and all that he has not written. "*And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.*"¹⁰

In his essay 'Silence and the Poet', the literary critic and philosopher Georg Steiner describes serious poetic and artistic modernism – after the political inhumanities of the 20th century, after war, terror and annihilation – as an attempt to represent the limits of the expressible and the unsayable beyond all meaning, by focusing on speechlessness and silence, where language, art and music were injured in the face of everyday horror. The " ... *reevaluation of silence – in the epistemology of Wittgenstein, in the aesthetics of Webern and Cage, in the poetics of Beckett – is one of the most original, characteristic acts of modern spirit.*"¹¹

When the 'meaning', the 'sense' of the world creates horror, senselessness is a way out. Desolation is the order of the day, not consolation, which is at least ambivalent. Hanns Eisler believed "... *that one of the main crimes of music is that it comforts the despairing. For despair has a 'time limit,' that is, as long as you play something for him [the despairing], he feels a little better, after which he goes back to misery.*"¹² And if you think: Well, 'just a cynical communist agitator', it should be said that Hanns Eisler here only reproduces the thoughts of the Chinese philosopher Mozi, also called Me Ti, who lived 500 years before our era, which is called the Christian one.

John Cage was perhaps one of the few people who was not afraid of nothingness, silence, emptiness, indeterminacy, anarchy, chance. Such an attitude, however, also implies that one not only endures but also accepts meaninglessness and hopelessness.

(Curiosity and empty mind)

"*I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of old ideas.*"¹³ Especially as we know since Hegel that the old ideas, the known at all, because it is known – in the sense of 'familiarily known' –, has not yet been known – in the sense of recognized.¹⁴ Cage was interested in the new, in the unknown,

For John Cage, the task of the artist, of the composer, is to hide beauty. Something is beautiful for us because we already know it, because we remember it, because we know how it continues. This is precisely what Cage is not interested in. He wanted to see what had never been seen, to hear what had never been heard, to experience the indeterminate. He tried to avoid having his likes and dislikes influence his artistic work.

Since the 1950s, therefore, Cage has worked with chance operations as a method of initiating processes whose progress cannot be predicted. "*Most people who believe that I'm interested in chance don't realize that I use chance as a discipline. They think I use it – I don't know – as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask.*"¹⁵ Incidentally, for artistic

¹⁰ Wittgenstein an Ficker (Oktober oder November 1919), in: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Briefe, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 96 [own translation]

¹¹ Georg Steiner, Language and Silence, New Haven and London 1998, p. 48

¹² Hanns Eisler in: Nathan Notowicz, Wir reden hier nicht von Napoleon. Wir reden von Ihnen. Gespräche mit Hanns Eisler und Gerhart Eisler, Berlin 1971, p. 56 [own translation]

¹³ John Cage in: Richard Kostelanetz, Conversing with Cage, New York and London 2003, p. 221

¹⁴ Cf. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes, Vorrede, in: Werke 3, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 35

¹⁵ John Cage in: Richard Kostelanetz, Conversing with Cage, New York and London 2003, p. 17

work with chance, as a kind of notated anarchy, one needs a lot of discipline, something Cage learned from Arnold Schoenberg. The piece ORGAN²/ASLSP, which we realized, was also created with chance operations.

(Accuracy and patience)

Cage wanted to listen to the growth of the mushrooms, the music of the spores. Yes, he was even curious about the sounds produced by the vibrating molecules of an ashtray standing on the table.

He was interested in the unremarkable, in the smallest, in minimal deviations, to which he wanted to sensitize us: To see and hear the differences in the seemingly uniform – such as microtonal shifts, intermediate tones and interferences – to discover the movement in the immobile, to experience the change of time in the supposedly uniform duration. Here, too, there are analogies to the visual arts. Think of Yves Klein's blue pictures and sculptures or Mark Rothko's supposedly monochrome paintings, which can make you almost dizzy if you look at them for a while

Such looking and listening requires accuracy and patience. Cage had both. After a nearly 19-hour performance of Erik Satie's 1893 piano piece 'Vexations', a simple short melody repeated 840 times, Cage noted " ... *we heard that it does not [have repetition] – that each time it was played, it was different ... As we heard that piece over and over again our attention became very sharp, very clear; so that every slightest deviation from what it had been became clear. It was like sharpening of the faculty of listening.*"¹⁶

This is by all means not just an aesthetic gimmick; accuracy and patience are necessary modes of cognition. Theodor W. Adorno in his 'Minima Moralia': "*One could almost say that truth itself depends on the pace, patience, and endurance of the individual's dwelling.*"¹⁷ And not only a mode of cognition but also mode of judgment: "*There seemed to me / to be no truth, / no good, / in anything big / ...*"¹⁸

The dignity of the individual, the utopia of the absence of domination, the eloquent silence, curiosity and empty mind, and finally accuracy and patience, are also the most important components of the spirit in John Cage's ORGAN²/ASLSP planned for 639 years in Halberstadt.

This was the end of the fifth unit of the first part.

II.

Now begins the first unit of the second part.

In 1985, John Cage was asked by the director of the University of Maryland Piano Festival and Competition (William Kapell International Piano Competition), pianist Tom Moore, if he could write a five to ten minute piece for the semifinals. Cage supplied ASLSP with the following performance note: "*The title is an abbreviation of 'as slow as possible.' It also refers to 'Soft morning city! Lsp!' the first exclamations in*

¹⁶ John Cage in: Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, New York and London 2003, p. 237

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Farnkfurt am Main 1980, Vol. 4, pp. 84-85 [own translation]

¹⁸ John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing*, in: *Silence*, Middletown, 1961, p. 117

the last paragraph of Finnegans Wake (James Joyce). There are eight pieces, any one of which must be omitted and any one of which must be repeated. The repetition may be placed anywhere (even before its appearance in the suite... Neither tempo nor dynamics have been notated. Time proportions are given (just as maps give proportional distances). ..." So we are dealing with a very contradictory instruction: first 'as slow as ...' and at the same time 'as LSP' – as (short) as the syllable LSP, like a gentle sigh a breath, a soft whispering breeze in the morning. That's typical Cage, he wasn't a fan of competitions. If a participant focused on the 'as slow as possible', he probably needed only a little more than a handful of piano strokes to complete 10 minutes.

In 1987 the German organist Gerd Zacher, to whom Cage had already dedicated 'Some of THE HARMONY OF MAINE (Supply Belcher)' in 1978, asked for a new organ piece. Cage, a bit of a lazy anarchist, then rewrote ASLSP, with the assistance of Gerd Zacher, in ORGAN²/ASLSP. The brief performance note state, "*Distinct from ASLSP, all eight pieces are to be played. However, any one of them may be repeated, though not necessary, and as in ASLSP, the repetition may be placed anywhere in the series.*" The organ version shows two systems notated in treble clef and two in bass clef: right hand, left hand, right foot, left foot. Nothing is fixed except pitch and duration. There are 'chords' to be struck synchronously, organized according to a kind of 'durezza e ligature'. The end of one part and the beginning of another is characterized by the same situation: here all the notes or keys are cancelled. The particular and rare event of a 'pause' (break) always occurs in the transition between two parts, in a few cases also within a part. In the question of how the piece is to be realized tonally, the performer is absolutely free, as well as in the question of whether and how many repetitions there should be.

The question of the tempo at which the composition should be realized is much more difficult to answer because of the paradoxical performance note. Sabine Liebner, for example, recorded the eight parts of ASLSP on the piano in 2009 in just over 64 minutes. The first performance of ORGAN²/ASLSP by Gerd Zacher, to whom Cage dedicated this composition, on 21 November 1987 in Metz France, lasted just over 29 minutes with nine parts (repetition of the fifth part). Interestingly, he played the repetition a little faster. So should one realize the piece rather as short as 'LSP' or rather as slow as possible? This is a question that only the performers can decide for themselves. In Halberstadt, the John Cage Organ Foundation has opted for a radical 'as slow as possible' and ultimately answered the question, what does as slow as possible mean for an organ? – the organ is a wind instrument, an aerophone, which can hold its sound as long as it is supplied with, in contrast to the piano, where the fading strings limit the slowness – independently of the instrument.

In 1998, at the second conference for new organ music in Trossingen (in southern Germany), composers, organists, musicologists, organ builders, theologians and philosophers, some of whom had worked closely together with Cage, such as Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Rainer Riehn and Hans-Ola Ericsson, joined with others who were fascinated by Cage, such as Christoph Bossert and Jakob Ullmann, to develop the at that time u-topical idea of a realization of this piece based on the lifespan of an organ: the music is over when the instrument breaks down. Good answer, but it raises many new questions: How long is the lifespan of an organ? There are organs that are hundreds of years old, but of course they are not played permanently. What is the difference between permissible maintenance and non-permissible repair of an organ?

First the location for the performance was found in Halberstadt's Burchardi Church through the mediation of Johann-Peter Hinz (artist, co-founder of the civil rights movement 'Neues Forum' und and at that time president of the city council of Halberstadt). Then it was remembered that Halberstadt had already written organ and music history. In the middle of the fourteenth century, in the Halberstadt Cathedral there was probably the first large organ with a 12-tone keyboard. Michael Praetorius – one of the most important music theorists of the 17th century and composer of the song "Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen" – still saw the organ, however in an unplayable state. In the second volume of his *Syntagma Musicum* of 1619, he describes the blockwork organ, whose prospectus (the façade) was about 8 m wide, with pipes made of lead (plumb), these thinly covered with tin and painted, the largest of them 32 feet high, and fitted with two times 10 treadle bellows. The date of completion of this gothic organ, also called the Faber organ (after the clergyman Nicolaus Faber, who is said to have built it) in 1361, was called by Harry Partch in his standard work 'Genesis of a Music' (1949). the "*Fatal Day in Halberstadt*".¹⁹ Fatal because this established the century-long 'tyranny' of 7-White-5-Black.

For us, the year 1361 gives the orientation for the duration of the performance: with the turn of the millennium as a mirror axis (1361-2000/2001-2640), the duration was fixed at 639 years and Christoph Bossert and me calculated the sound changes of the first part until 2072. On 5th of September 2000, Cage's 88th birthday, the project started in Halberstadt.

The Cage organ, a planning for eternity: Originally there were the following basic determinations: An organ only for the realization of ORGAN²/ASLSP, technically as simple as possible (following the Faber organ of 1361) according to the idea of a blockwork, designation of a Cage Organ builder for lifetime. A first concept by Gerald Woehl was discarded for design reasons, an instrument as a large tower-like sculpture in the middle of the crossing of the church would have visually beaten, overwhelmed the visitors. It would also not have been cagy if the organ builder had acted out his subjectivity in such a way. Try again. A second concept of a complete Cage Organ based on the Faber organ (reduced in size by half), designed by the Seifert Company in Kevelar and Andreas Saage, could not yet be realized for financial reasons.

On 5 September 2001 the Halberstadt realization of the piece began. The wind installation with two times three wedge bellows and electric motors, built by the Hürfken Company in Halberstadt, was put into operation in the northern transept. As a third concept, intended only for the first pipe sound from February 5, 2003 to July 5, 2004: another reduced organ after Faber was realized as a journeywoman's piece also by the Seifert Company under the intonateur Andreas Saage with two times three pipes. At that time we still doubled the pipes, because nobody can tell us how long an organ pipe will last if it is played continuously for years and decades. This organ in the southern transept became the fourth organ concept. The small organ after Faber will be used from 5 July 2004 as an exchange base only for the pipes needed for each chord and only single pipe staffing. So much about planning for eternity.

2006 was very hectic, there were really two chord changes in one year. Since 2012, only the two 16-foot bass pipes c' and d' flat have been sounding – the latter, by the way, until the year 2071. The semitone difference creates strong interferences:

¹⁹ Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, New York (1947) ²1974, p. 373

a sound that oscillates between an engine room and Hamburg harbour. On 5 October 2013, the whole was added to a five-note sound that has not changed for almost seven years, until Cage's 108th birthday in 2020. Since then, seven tones/pipes have been sounding until 5 February 2022.

This was the end of the forth unit of the second part.

III.

Now begins the first unit of the last part.

The John Cage Organ Project is a crazy project. The German word for crazy is 'verrückt', 'Verrückt' has a double meaning, not only crazy, but also moved away from its usual, normal place: ver-rückt. In this sense, our project is 'ver-rückt' in that it does not fulfill the usual, normal expectations of music and its performance, it lacks melody and rhythm and no one can hear it all. But it is also an 'impossible' project, and not only because mistakes have been made here too, but also because of immanent paradoxes and antagonisms that cannot be resolved, that have to be endured and accepted so that it can continue.

The worst mistake so far is the result of artistically induced mathematical weakness and impatience. Originally, the Halberstadt performance of ORGAN²/ASLSP, which lasts 639 years, was to begin on John Cage's 88th birthday, 5 September 2000. A preliminary calculation was made by music students, they fixed the chord changes until the year 2012. Since the piece begins with a 'pause', the timeline recorded the second impulse, the beginning of the first pipe sound, for February 2003 and the third impulse, the second chord change, on July 2004. This was measured out true to Cage's instruction to ASLSP, which we have already heard: "*Time proportions are given (just as maps give proportional distances).*" The John Cage Organ Foundation is a master in measurements.

Because the financial means were not yet sufficient to build the bellows, without which even the 'pause' at the beginning of an organ piece should not be played, the start of the performance was postponed for a year to 5 September 2001. The will to start the 'impossible' project against all doubters, critics and opposition, coupled with the impatience to hear the first organ pipes, made us overlook the fact that then also the timeline, on which, however, the start date was not recorded, had to be postponed by a year. So the initial 'pause' was ended too soon. John Cage had guessed: "*Now what is the most difficult thing about in this piece to perform? It literally is those periods when you have nothing to do.*"²⁰ Not remembering this, everyone, including the interested public, enjoyed the first sound of the organ pipes from February 2003, even though we were too fast at the 'slowest' piece of music in the world. And so this mistake would probably not have been noticed at all if a typing error had not crept into the provisional calculation of the next chord change, he was also noted a year early. Our press release for the next Chord change was therefore cheeky: Hectic with the slowest piece of music in the world, two chord changes in one year.

A journalist noticed this error in time, prompting the John Cage Organ Foundation to review the calculation of the chord changes. Try again. In this final (?)

²⁰ John Cage [Improptu address to an Orchestra], in: Studio International, London September/October 1976

calculation, it became clear once again that, with the smallest unit of calculation set at 1 month, the results were already within certain margins of discretion due to objective problems with the accuracy of measurement. Thus, the prematurity of the first sound of the organ pipes was reduced to 11 months, and the same was true for the chord change that was too early in time. Now it was a question of reconciling the performance, which was 'too fast' by a total of 11 months, with the duration of a performance period of 71 years for each of the nine parts. John Cage was faced with a similar problem in 1954. He wanted to give a lecture parallel with the performance of his piece 34'46.776" for two pianists. The part of a pianist was just under 32 minutes. *"However, when the text was completed, I found that I was unable to perform it within that I time-length. I needed more time. I made experiments, reading long lines as rapidly as I could. The result was two seconds per line, 45' [minutes] for the entire piece. Not all the text can be read comfortably even at this speed, but you can still try."*²¹ For adjustment at the Halberstadt performance of ORGAN²/ASLSP, the John Cage Organ Foundation has arranged that the longest consistent chord between impulse 14 (October 2013) and impulse 15, be played slightly less rapidly and extended by 11 months, until John Cage's 108th birthday on 5 September 2020.

But we were bound to fall into another trap, without any escape: we are not as slow as possible. 640 years would already be slower ... But it is much harder. Since our realization of ORGAN²/ASLSP begins with a 'pause' of many months, any ending of this 'pause', i.e. the celebration of the first chord change with the first pipe tones, was a definite failure. If we were really to play the piece as slowly as possible, we would never be allowed to break off the initial 'pause', we would have to present an infinite 4'33", a never ending silent piece. We take refuge in a quote by Walter Benjamin that also fits Cage well: *"Always radically, never consistently."*²² After all, we staged a kind of 17 months long performance of 4'33" with solo organ.

Although John Cage, died almost 40 years ago, and thus he belongs to the last millennium, he is still today one of the most 'alive' and radical artists. His aesthetic ideas – of which I have only sketched a few in the first part – continue to inspire and surprise the happy few, challenging us. Many of his questions are still unanswered. Even today, he is avant-garde in the literal sense. To the artless majority as well as to the mainstream of the culture industry, but also to many serious art and music lovers, Cage still has a disturbing to provocative effect: 'But that's not music.' There is a quip among organists: 'If you've never emptied a church, you don't know what modern music is.'

And Cage in Halberstadt? A monumental, formerly sacred room, a sound that is often listened to awestruck, respectfully, that puts not a few in a meditative mood. Chord changes that attract thousands of visitors, indeed fans, including some Cageians from all over the world. The whole thing is organized and presented in such a way that associations with religious rituals involuntarily arise: The place of worship is first closed, one can only listen to the ancient sound from the outside. The crowd receives wise attunements, the sanctuary is opened, they go to the Grail, they listen devoutly once more and then, on instruction, silver equipment, the organ pipes, are handled and the new sound appears. Devout silence, then applause, even if only one

²¹ John Cage, 45' for a Speaker, in: Silence, Middletown, 1961, p. 146

²² Benjamin an Gershom Scholem, 29.5.1926, in: Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Briefe, Frankfurt am Main 1997, Vol. III, p. 159 [own translation]

pipe is pulled out. Thank God, of course there is a word by John Cage go with it: "*If you celebrate it, it's art*". And thank Cage it is not so very often: the 'quite other' of the chord change.

ORGAN²/ASLSP in Halberstadt is a simultaneously radical, irritating, open and extremely gentle art project, "... *past the wit of man ... The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen....*"²³ A dream so strangely set in motion; a former monastery church as a sonic dreamspace that allows more than 639 years of the past to become visible and that fills with the force of Ernst Bloch'ian hope for more than 639 years into the future. Or some headlines of the international press: 'A musical little apple tree'; 'That actually only makes sense for the really big listener up there'; 'Sound for eternity'; 'The hum of God'. A certain theological dominance in the interpretation cannot be overlooked. A project with an organ piece in St. Burchardi, which overwhelms by its church room, gladly supported by organists who mostly work as church musicians, often interpreted by pastors and theologians, hardly escapes a metaphysical, partly religious sense.

But aren't they just sounds, nothing but sounds, unique sounds, accidentally sounding, without meaning, without purpose and without name, from which nothing follows, which tell us nothing, which don't need any other sounds, which neither have to stop nor to sound eternally? Sounds that are simply there, that can be heard without the need for an explanation, an interpretation, a lecture, a theory, a philosophical framing? Hard to endure. It is not necessary to say it, nevertheless I say it, John Cage: "*And / needless to say, / each sound is unique (has accidentally occurred while it was being played) / and is not informed / about European history an theory: / Keeping one's mind / on the emptiness, / on the space / one can see anything can be in it, is, as / a matter of fact, in it.*"²⁴

These were just a few examples of the paradoxes, contradictions and antagonisms that accompany our performance as kind of intellectual dissonances. Fortunately, the project, the work of art that we perform, is strong enough to live with, endure and accept these paradoxes, contradictions and antagonisms. We trust the artwork. This also helps us to deal with a huge number of questions, most of which are completely open. Some we have to answer, some we are answered, in case of doubt: Always radically, never consistently.

What would John Cage have said about the Halberstadt project? We can at best speculate. In response to the accusation that his pieces were too long, Cage said that even for his silent piece 4' 33" (4 minutes 33 seconds), he thought "*a very long performance*" was necessary. In his last years, by the way, he often walked in the nature and in the forest to listen to several hours long 4'33" pieces. But: aren't hundreds of years a bit too long even for ASLSP? Is it even, according to Gerd Zacher, just a century spook reduced to a gag?

These and other questions are being argued about with great pleasure by the after- and the professional world. Isn't the artistic approach a little poor?²⁵ How precisely are the times of the chord changes calculated? Shouldn't the chord changes themselves be stretched just as much as the sounds? Could we simply end the "pause" with which the piece begins? Is it even possible to begin a performance

²³ Shakespeare, *A Midsommer nights Dreame*, IV. i., Bottome speaks, London 1623 First Folio, p. 158

²⁴ John Cage, *45' for a Speaker*, in: *Silence*, Middletown, 1961, pp. 175-76

²⁵ With this remark Adorno had mocked the performance of a Cage piece in Darmstadt, Dieter Schnebel once told me.

first without an organ and then with an incomplete, provisional instrument? Is a performance of the piece, a serious realization or just an arbitrary sound installation as muzak for department stores or elevators? Who are actually the performers? What if they could not stand it because of impatience and played too fast? Is it allowed to compensate for this later by playing slower? What does slower than "as slow as possible" mean? Is it even an organ or just a sound sculpture with a kind of graphic notation? What if the concert is interrupted because the bellows fail? Is it even a concert if there are often no listeners present? Is it an indoor cemetery with music? Every evening, when the last visitors have left, it is then: the church door closed and all questions open! Cage would have been pleased, he loved open questions: "*That is a very good question. I should not want to spoil it with an answer.*"²⁶

"A SOUND IS HIGH OR LOW, SOFT OR LOUD, OF A CERTAIN TIMBRE, LAST A CERTAIN LENGTH OF TIME, AND HAS AN ENVELOPE.

Is it high? / Is it low? / Is it in the middle? / Is it soft? / Is it loud? / Are there two? / Are there more than two? / Is it a piano? / Why isn't it? / Was it an airplane? / Is it a noise? / Is it music? / Is it softer than before? / Is it supersonic? / When will it stop? / What's coming? / Is it time? / Is it very short? / Very long? / Just medium? / If I had something to see, would it be theatre? / Is sound enough? / What more do I need? / Don't I get it whether I need it or not? / Is it a sound? / Then, again, is it music? / Is it music – the word, I mean – is that a sound? / If it is, is music music? / Is the word 'music' music? / Does it communicate anything? / Must it? / If it's high, does it? / If it's low, does it? / If it's in the middle, does it? / If it's soft, does it? / If it's loud, does it? / If it's an interval, does it? / Is a chord an aggregate? / Is an aggregate a constellation? / What's a constellation? / How many sounds are there altogether? / One million? / Ten thousand? / Eighty-eight? / Do I have to ask ten more? / Do I? / Why? / Why do I? / Did I decide to ask so many? / Wasn't I taking a risk? / Was I? / Why was I? / Will it never stop? / Why won't it? / THERE IS NO SUCH THING LIKE SILENCE. ... I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY AND I AM SAYING IT."²⁷

Thanks for listening!

²⁶ John Cage, Lecture on Nothing, in: Silence, Middletown, 1961, p. 126

²⁷ John Cage, Composition as a Progress, in: SILENCE, Middletown, 1961, pp. 49-51



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