

Cage-Interview Nr. 3/ No 3¹
Almeida Contemporary Festival, London, 1990
The Theatre Bar, Almeida Bar², 19/6/90
Steve Sweeney-Turner im Gespräch mit John Cage

[Online-Einrichtung von Clemens Gresser]

SST: Have you ever been in Scotland before?

JC: I haven't been in Glasgow, but I've been in Edinburgh. I haven't been in the northern part – the wild nature of the Hebrides, but it must be very beautiful.

Have you heard any of the music that's come from the Hebrides? The singing, for instance?

I don't know whether I have or not. I've just heard The Whistlebinkies;³ I heard them in Edinburgh.

Right, you did a performance with them.

¹ Im Jahrgang 2001 (TM 2) findet sich eine editorische Einleitung zu den von Steve Sweeney-Turner geführten Cage-Interviews.

² *The Almeida Theatre* ist ein Theater in London, das zeitweise ein Festival für zeitgenössische Musik veranstaltete.

³ The Whistlebinkies formierte sich Ende der 1960er Jahre. Die Gruppe war, laut eigenen Angaben, die erste Formation, welche die drei Instrumente – Fiddle, Dudelsack und clarsach (kleine schottische Harfe) regulär in ihren Aufführungen kombinierte. Die Gruppe vergab an John Cage einen Kommissionsauftrag, den dieser mit der Konzeption des *Scottish Circus* erfüllte. The Whistlebinkies gaben die Weltpremiere dieses Werkes; weitere Informationen unter <http://www.sol.co.uk/w/whistlebinkies/band.htm>.

Yes.

What was the nature of that?

Well, it's called the *Scottish Circus* – it's said to be a first performance for Musica Nova in Glasgow, but we actually put it together in Edinburgh. It's not so much a piece as a circus – of Scottish music, so that instead of the musicians playing together to play a single piece, each one plays his part as a piece from the tradition of Scottish Folk music. And so there's different things going on at once, and that's what it is.

So is it just the Folk music, or are there other elements?

No, just the Folk music, nothing that I've written. It's the fact of taking apart the Scottish Folk music – taking the instruments apart from one another; different pieces. So that you have different pieces going on at the same time.

So it's quite similar to your Europeras,⁴ in that sense.

Exactly; it's the same thing.

⁴ *Europeras 1 & 2* (1987), *Europeras 3 & 4* (1990) und *Europera 5* (1991) sind Cages einzige "Operkompositionen". Die Werke haben allerdings keine Handlung und das musikalischen Material stammt aus europäischen Opera vor 1900. Die Beleuchtung bzw. das Bühnenbild folgt Zufallsgeneratoren, so daß es vorkommt, das agierende InterpretInnen auch im Dunkeln musizieren; Forschungsarbeiten zu einem oder allen dieser Werke: Leah Durner, John Cage: Past & Future in *Europeras 1 & 2* in: *Ear Magazine*, Jg.. 13, 2/1988, S. 10-11, 13; Laura Kuhn, *John Cage's Europeras 1 & 2: The Musical Means of Revolution*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1992; Laura Kuhn, Synergetic Dynamics in John Cage's Europeras 1 & 2 in: *The Musical Quarterly*, 78/1994 (Spring), S. 131-148; Michael Rebhahn, Die Lysis des Zusammenhanges. John Cages Konzeption eines Multidemnsionalen Musiktheaters, Magisterarbeit (Musikwissenschaftliches Institut, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main) 1999; Michael Rebhahn, Die Auflösung des Zusammenhanges. John Cages multidimensionales Musiktheater Europeras 1 & 2 in: *MusikTexte* 90/2001 (August), S. 13-21.

Or Roaratorio without the tape or mesostic.

Exactly.

Eddie McGuire⁵ told me it was a kind of improvisation.

Well, I don't know. I didn't... What kind of improvisation would it be? If it were some kind of improvisation, then I wouldn't be able to say anything about it. But if they're playing Scottish Folk music, then I don't think it is an improvisation, do you? I hope it doesn't involve improvisation, but if it does, then I'll have to tell them what to do.

I know you're against what people normally mean by "improvisation", because of its involvement with the performer's taste, memory, and so on.

Now I've found ways of improvising which keep people from doing that.

So how do you do that?

They are things having to do with time, and pitch. If you give yourself a period of time in which you could make, say, one sound in a certain field of pitch, say, then what's going to happen is something which you don't have in mind, and you just might discover something.

So in a way, it's like providing stumbling blocks for an improviser.

⁵ Flötist und Komponist, der sich hauptsächlich der traditionellen Schottischen Folk-music zuwendet. Er ist seit den 1970er Jahren Mitglied der Gruppe The Whistlebinkies; weitere Informationen unter <http://www.sol.co.uk/w/whistlebinkies/mcguire.htm>.

You could say that, yes; making it impossible to just do what you already know.

I know you used to like malt whisky – will you be tasting any while you're in Glasgow?

Unfortunately not. I no longer smoke or drink alcohol and I don't even drink tea, which may be hard to believe. I don't do it! And the result is my health is better. Some people can be healthy no matter what they do, but I've gotten to the point where I have to act in a rather special way in order to continue being healthy, and I am very healthy, you know? At least that's what my doctor says!

So when you used to drink Whisky?

I used to drink a bit too much! Ha ha ha!

So, a bit too much of which?

Well, I like very much Laphroaig, and I prefer it even to Talisker, and in my opinion, which may not be worth much, but in my opinion, the Talisker was like Laphroaig, but in the air, instead of on the ground.

That's because it's made in the North!

It is. But it was Laphroaig, actually, that changed my notion of what single malts were all about. I loved the idea. And I used to have great times with my friend, Robert Aitken,⁶ who plays the flute in Toronto, and he had a great

⁶ Robert Aitken, geboren am 28. August 1939 in Kentville, Nova Scotia, Kanada. Kanadischer Komponist, Dirigent und Flötist, der sich auf Neue Musik spezialisierte.

collection of single malts – I think he must have about thirty or forty different kinds, and he's always replenishing them. You can drink, as it were, a melody, from one bottle to another!

Yes, a Klangfarbenmelodie – on the taste buds!

Yes, yes! A beautiful experience.

Was whisky your main preference?

No, at the very end, I stopped drinking because I was drinking too much Vodka! And it was the one called Absolut, from Sweden. I had made a trip to Leningrad, and in Leningrad, there was very little to eat, so we drank Vodka! And they pointed out the superiority of Siberian Vodka – have you ever heard of that?

I'm afraid not, I've only had Polish or Russian.

Well, the Siberian Vodka is high, it's just marvelous, and I think the Absolut Vodka is in that direction. Of course, not geographically, but vodkaistically!

So what else will you be doing in Glasgow other than the performance with the Whistlebinkies?

Well, I have seen the program – it includes all sorts of my music, and several different conductors and the festival will include my *Etcetera 1* and *Etcetera 2*.⁷ They're both pieces that deal with the difference between improvisation

⁷ Cage meint hier *Etcetera* (1975), für Orchester und Tonband (bezeichnet als *Etcetera 1*) bzw. *Etcetera for 2/4 orchestras* (1985) (hier *Etcetera 2*).

and non-improvisation. In *Etcetera 1*, the musicians begin by improvising, more-or-less, and they leave the situation of improvising and go to one of the conductors, and then they play fixed musics in those situations. And then they go away, and go back to improvising. In *Etcetera 2*, they begin by playing with conductors and they leave the conductors to go and improvise. So the pieces do the same thing, but in opposite ways. And one of them, the first one, has a tape going which gives the sounds of the country – birds, airplanes, such things. And the sound tape in *Etcetera 2* is of street traffic.

I've heard you've become partial to the sounds of traffic in your flat.

Yes, I always have been, and especially now. I think that the sound of the environment is getting more and more filled with sounds of traffic. Perhaps one day we'll use up all the gasoline and then there'll be a general quiet. What do you think?

I think it's quite likely, but it depends on what else they manage to invent or dig up.

Yes, yes. Then the sound will change.

So are you going to be doing Roaratorio,⁸ given that it's a Celtic country?

In Glasgow? I don't think so. Are they? I don't know.

I was just wondering, because there's a lot of Irish people in Glasgow, historically, you see.

⁸ *Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, wurde für Tonband realisiert. Es beruht auf dem Werk _____, _____ circus on _____ (Edition Peters 66816, 1979); für weitere Informationen siehe Interview Nr. 2, Fußnote Nr. 3.

Yes, well, I don't think they're doing that.

That's a shame.

They're doing quite a number of things. I look forward to being there. I've never been in Glasgow, as I told you.

Am I right in thinking you're doing some workshops as well?

I don't know.

I think you are!

I am? What kind of workshops?

I think the idea is that people send in scores, and then you and a couple of other composers look at them.

Oh, I see – I know there will be some such panel discussion. And will we hear the music, too?

I think so, some of it, anyway.

Oh, that's good, that's good.

So you're going to be asked to judge pieces – it seems to me that one of the things you don't like doing is making judgements.

No, I don't.

How do you react to these situations where you're expected to? How do you subvert it?

Well, we'll see!

How have you done it in the past?

I try to avoid it. I don't know what I'll do, but if there's several of us doing it, then maybe I won't have to do anything! Ha ha ha ha! Are we going to give [a] prize?

I think that's the idea.

Oh, really? That's very difficult.

Perhaps you could do it by chance operations!

Well, people don't expect chance operations then; they expect you to make a judgement. I'll try to do what they want me to do – it'll be difficult, but I'll try.

Would you prefer that you weren't asked to do such things?

I prefer not to do that. You see, the work of each person has it's own value, and there's no reason, when there are, say, four such works, to say which one is the best, because it simply ignores the qualities of the three who lose. Each piece will be unique – it'll have its own qualities, so to say that one thing is better than others is to misinterpret at least most of them.

So you're very much for inclusion rather than exclusion.

Right.

You'd prefer to give everyone prizes.

We could take the prize and cut it up! Ha ha ha!

Depends what it is, I suppose.

Well, if it's money, then it loses it's value! Unless you get change at the bank!

One thing I was thinking – given your interest in the macrobiotic diet – was that behind your preference for whisky and vodka, given that they're "macrobiotic" to the extent that they're made from grains?

Actually, I thought in those terms, yes! And I also thought that when I drank Guinness in Ireland!

So how is Guinness macrobiotic?

Well, isn't it said to be "Good For You"? I think that's part of their advertising campaign. But actually, I'm afraid it isn't, really, good for me any longer, so I don't drink it. But I loved Guinness. I like bitter things – now I take Chinese herbs, first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and it's very nice and it has a bitter taste – it's just that it isn't alcohol! Ha ha ha ha!