

# Wladimir Vogel as a mediator: John Cage in Donaueschingen, Zurich, and Milan

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American composer John Cage travelled to Europe three times in the post-war period, in 1949, 1954, and 1958. These visits, which included concert tours and extended stays, have received significant scholarly attention due to their importance in the musical interactions between the United States and Europe after the war. Studies have focused on the reception of Cage's music and aspects of cross-fertilisation, with considerable effort put into rebuilding early contacts and their role in these processes.<sup>2</sup> Despite such extensive research, however, the connection between Cage and Russian-German composer Wladimir Vogel has remained overlooked. A letter from Cage to Vogel, dated 17 June 1954 and held at the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich, reveals that Vogel was amongst the earliest contacts that Cage established in Europe in 1949.<sup>3</sup> Building on the information disclosed in this document, this essay aims to shed light on the encounter between the two composers in Milan in 1949 and Vogel's subsequent role as a mediator for Cage's 1954 European tour.

Cage's visit to Europe in 1949 is well-known for his stay in Paris during the summer and his meeting with French composer Pierre Boulez. Before settling in Paris, however, Cage and his professional and life partner, dancer Merce Cunningham, travelled through Italy for three weeks between April and May. Composer and critic Virgil Thompson had arranged for Cage to cover the festival organised in Sicily by the International Society of Contemporary Music (ISCM) as a correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Cage's itinerary also included meeting with friends, composer Merton Brown, and the painter John ('Jack') Heliker, who had moved to Italy after receiving a *Prix de Rome* from the American Academy.<sup>4</sup> Two additional engagements came up during his stay. While in Sicily, Cage was invited to attend the First International Congress of Dodecaphonic Music, organised in Milan by Vogel and Italian composer Riccardo Malipiero.<sup>5</sup> And a concert of his works for prepared piano was arranged for him at the American Academy in Rome with the help of Heliker before he and Cunningham would leave for Paris in mid-May.<sup>6</sup>

Cage's invitation to the congress in Milan was to take part as a delegate, allowing him to attend private sessions in addition to those open to the public and concerts. The question of how Vogel and Malipiero came to invite Cage remains nonetheless unclear. Delegates were expected to be international exponents of the dodecaphonic technique. The list of American candidates, which was decided at a preparatory meeting in Orselina in December 1948, comprised Ernst Krenek, George Perle, Ben Weber, and Adolph Weiss.<sup>7</sup> After the meeting, Vogel tried to obtain their contacts from critic Willi Reich, but

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2 BEAL 2006; DECROUPET 1997; IDDON 2013; NATTIEZ 1994.

3 Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Nachlass Wladimir Vogel, Mus NL 116: Kc 2, letter from Cage to Vogel, 17.6.1954.

4 Archives of American Art, John Heliker Papers, Roll N70/41, frame 0390, letter from Cunningham to Brown, ca. 16.3.1949.

5 J. Cage, letter to parents, ca. 26.4.1949, in KUHN 2016: 93.

6 ROBERTS 1951: 16; VAUGHAN 1997: 50.

7 PICCARDI 1998: 218.

only managed to get Krenek's address in March.<sup>8</sup> Although the congress was scheduled for early May, it took almost a month for Krenek's invitation to be sent out, which did not allow him enough time to accept or find substitutes.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Vogel and Malipiero were still searching for American delegates at the end of April.<sup>10</sup> The scheduling of the congress immediately after the ISCM festival in Sicily proved providential. Cage was within their reach, and this is what most likely warranted his invitation, if only due to his nationality and the fortuitous timing.

Although Cage was not impressed by Vogel's *Thyl Claes* (1943–45) performance, the two men became friends during their time in Milan.<sup>11</sup> It seems clear from later correspondence that Vogel developed an interest in Cunningham's Dance Company.<sup>12</sup> He introduced Cage to his wife, and they exchanged addresses. After returning to the United States in the autumn, Cage received updates about Vogel through their mutual friend Barbara Hermann. Their acquaintance did not go unnoticed by Vogel's friend, Swiss composer Rolf Liebermann, who attended the congress. Four years later, when the director of the Donaueschinger Musiktage, Heinrich Strobel, decided to invite Cage to the festival, Liebermann advised that Vogel may have been in contact with the American. In November 1953, Strobel wrote to Vogel, who lived in Ascona: "Our mutual friend Liebermann tells me that you might have John Cage's address. I would be grateful if you could let me have it in the next few days".<sup>13</sup> Two weeks later, Vogel informed Strobel that Cage was living with Cunningham at 12 East 17th Street in New York City.<sup>14</sup>

In December, Strobel wrote directly to Cage to inform him of his intention to present his work at the Donaueschinger Musiktage the following year.<sup>15</sup> In response, Cage suggested that his musical collaborator and pianist of choice, David Tudor, accompany him.<sup>16</sup> He proposed three concerts that would showcase not only his own music but also works by Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. After negotiating the programme, Strobel agreed to one 60-minute performance for October 17, 1954, featuring piano and tape music by Cage and his New York colleagues. Strobel's condition was that no other engagements should occur before the one at Donaueschingen, which would be Cage and Tudor's première European performance.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, considering their brief meeting in Milan, Vogel's involvement in Cage's tour went significantly further. Once the date in Donaueschingen was fixed and their honorarium covered the travel costs, Cage and Tudor pursued their European contacts to secure more engagements. By June 1954, when Cage wrote the letter to Vogel held at the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich, they had already arranged concerts in Cologne, Paris, and London, as well as radio broadcasts in Brussels, Hilversum, and Zurich. The purpose of contacting Vogel was to seek additional dates. After expressing his gratitude for the assistance with Strobel and fondly recalling their meeting in Milan, Cage informed Vogel of his tour and asked whether he could suggest other performance opportunities in Switzerland.

Although no further correspondence between them has apparently survived, there is substantial evidence of Vogel's efforts to help Cage. A letter to Italian composer Gino Negri, dated 11 October 1954, shows that Vogel travelled to Donaueschingen with the intent to arrange two concerts for Cage in

8 Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Nachlass Wladimir Vogel, Mus NL 116: Kr 199, letter from Vogel to Reich, 15.3.1949; Mus NL 116: Kr 305, letter from Reich to Vogel, 17.3.1949.

9 University of Bologna, Fondo René Leibowitz, M LEIB L 21, *I Pionieri della Dodecafonìa* (unpublished conference proceedings), Locarno, 23 February 1989, document no. 21, letter from Krenek to Malipiero, 21.4.1949.

10 University of Bologna, Fondo René Leibowitz, M LEIB L 21, *I Pionieri della Dodecafonìa* (unpublished conference proceedings), Locarno, 23 February 1989, document no. 20, letter from Koellreutter to Malipiero, 18.4.1949.

11 CAGE 1949: 32.

12 Although Cunningham was not with Cage in Milan, this can be inferred from a letter that Vogel wrote to Strobel in November 1953 and also from the one written by Cage to Vogel in June 1954.

13 H. Strobel, letter to Vogel, 12.11.1953, in NAUCK 2004: 187.

14 W. Vogel, letter to Strobel, 24.11.1953, in NAUCK 2004: 187.

15 H. Strobel, letter to Cage, 1.12.1953, in BEAL 2006: 65.

16 J. Cage, letter to Strobel, undated but probably December 1953, in BEAL 2006: 65–66.

17 IDDON 2013: 158.

Zurich and Milan.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Zurich, Vogel was plausibly acting on behalf of the local Kunstgewerbemuseum. On October 22, the week after the Donaueschinger Musiktage, the museum's curator, Willy Rotzler, invited Cage and Tudor to perform in their lecture hall.<sup>19</sup> The invitation was sent by letter, and three days later, Cage accepted via telegram from Paris.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the concert in Italy, it is unclear where the idea originated. It is worth noting that, apart from Negri, who handled the arrangements for the host institution, the concert also involved the collaboration of Malipiero, who had worked with Vogel in 1949 to organise the congress in Milan. This suggests that Vogel may have proposed the concert himself, possibly after hearing from Cage in June. Whatever the case, Vogel's intermediary role is evident in a letter from Negri to Cage dated 26 October, in which Negri states that he agrees with Vogel's conditions and provides details for Cage and Tudor's accommodation in Milan.<sup>21</sup>

On November 3, Cage and Tudor performed at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich, with an introductory speech by conductor and theatre director Hans Curjel. Their programme included Feldman's *Intersection 3* (1953) and *Extension 3* (1952), Brown's *Four Systems* (1954), Wolff's *For Piano* (1952), and Cage's *Water Music* (1952) and *34'46.776"* (1954) for two pianists. The following day, Tudor recorded Wolff's *For Piano II* (1953), Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951), and Boulez's *Second Piano Sonata* (1947–48) for Radio Zürich. Then, on November 5, Cage and Tudor played at Milan's Centro Culturale Pirelli, introduced by Malipiero.

Like most dates on their 1954 tour, these concerts proved crucial for Cage and Tudor to expand their European network. The contact details of Rotzler, Curjel, and the museum's director, Hans Fischli, were added to Tudor's address book under the heading 'Switzerland'.<sup>22</sup> In June 1956, while planning their next overseas tour, Cage and Tudor reconnected with Rotzler, who enthusiastically offered to arrange two performances in Zurich.<sup>23</sup> Although Cage himself ended up not coming to Europe in 1956, a concert by Tudor was held at the Kunstgewerbemuseum on 12 December, introduced by Curjel. In the summer of 1958, further contacts were made to arrange another date in the autumn of that year.<sup>24</sup> While there seems to be no substantial evidence confirming whether this concert eventually occurred, it is clear that, following Vogel's mediation in 1954, Cage and Tudor found an audience in Zurich that particularly valued their music, contrasting with the controversies that frequently surrounded their European concerts.

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18 Apice, Archivio Gino Negri, letter from Vogel to Negri, 11.10.1954.

19 Northwestern University, John Cage Collection, Box 3: folder 1, letter from Curjel and Rotzler to Cage, 22.10.1954.

20 Zurich University of the Arts, Archive ZHdK, VAV-1954-F01-001, telegram from Cage to Rotzler, 25.10.1954.

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22 Getty Research Institute, David Tudor Papers, Box 107: folder 6.

23 Zurich University of the Arts, Archive ZHdK, VAV-1956-F01-001.

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