

LA FAUTE DE LA MUSIQUE: SONGS OF JOHN CAGE

ARTIST PERSPECTIVES

What kinds of Cages had we gotten ourselves into?

“*Et tout cela m’est advenu par la faute de la musique,*” wrote Erik Satie. (Why did all that stuff happen? Music is the culprit.) In La Faute de la Musique, Cage’s music, in particular, was the culprit. As improvisers, we--like other jazz musicians before us--naturally found his idea of “indeterminacy” (leaving certain compositional features to choices borne of the moment) attractive. Cage himself wasn’t a big jazz fan, but why should we mind? His compositions are flexible enough to accommodate us. To say that Cage’s work permits difference is misleading; it *invites* it. La Faute de la Musique is our response to the invitation.

Cage wrote hundreds of open (indeterminate) forms, using the many and varied compositional tools in his unique kit. Each structure asks something slightly different of the performer; this is what we found so appealing. The pieces we chose (mainly from his Song Books [1970]) give the performer tons of creative freedom, represent lots of different styles and techniques, and allow for adaptations of all sorts. Cage wrote the songs for solo voice, but with “General Directions” stating that everything may be performed “with or without other indeterminate music,” “in any order and any superimposition,” by “one or more singers.” I followed his general (generous) guidelines in arranging the songs for jazz quintet, but decided to include Cameron, Bill, James, and Richard as singers in some instances. (They sing with their instruments, don’t they?) Cage was an inventor of musical notation *par excellence*, and the Song Books are chock-full of these inventions. He developed a huge repertoire of new graphic forms and found some very original ways to reform traditional symbols to suit his own aesthetic purposes. These are all wonderful to look at, and we found them inspiring to play with.

La Faute de la Musique opens with one of his best-known and most beloved works: the “Aria” for solo voice (1958). The composer asks the singer to make up a set of ten “voices” to correspond with his color palette (the score is gorgeous to look at). Each voice/color has an identifiable timbre, a specific melodic idiom, a particular style. On La Faute de la Musique, I used real characters for some of the voices (Mae West, Jerry Lewis, Marilyn Monroe) and made up others. Each phrase is a color and a contour in a blank field (the lines include snippets of text from several languages), with pitch represented vertically and time horizontally. Keep in mind that when Cage says “time” he means *real* time, so stopwatches are *de rigueur* (we had five of them in the studio on January 12, 2000). Oddly, Cage complained about the “tyranny of the beat” in jazz. Who says that the clock is less tyrannical? Cameron and I performed the “Aria” as a duet; I sang while he improvised freely, adding lots of extra-rich “Brown” to the mix. Did I mention that we had fun with this?

Like the “Aria,” “Solo #43” (“la faute de la musique”) asks the performer to work with a variety of styles, but takes her/him one step closer to total freedom. Pitch, contour, and melodic rhythm are left entirely up to the improviser. The text is that single phrase, quoted from Eric Satie: “*Et tout cela m’est advenu par la faute de la musique.*” The score is four pages, each containing a complete statement of this

text, printed using a variety of fonts, sizes, and styles of lettering. The performer creates correspondences between font style and musical style. In recording the piece with the quintet, I asked the instrumentalists to “sing” the words with their instruments, using the sound of the phrase (its intonation and rhythmic patterns, etc.) to suggest melodic content, rhythmic patterns, and phrase structure in their improvisations. (Remember how John Coltrane did this so brilliantly in his "Psalm" in Part IV of A Love Supreme? [Coltrane 1964, see Porter 1998:231-249]).¹ Each instrumentalist came up with his own very personal and specific interpretations. Cameron Brown's reading on the bass, for example, was highly melismatic, while Richard Oppenheim's, on the saxophone, was generally more syllabic. We performed the piece as a canon at 17 seconds, the length of the first page of score. We liked the interesting tangle of textures that this created.

“Apartment House” is one of Cage’s “circuses.” He reveled in unexpected musical coincidences, and this is a prime example. Given a repertoire and a program length, each performer puts together his own set, deciding where each piece fits in the program. The unusual thing is that nobody divulges the contents or timing of his set. In performance, everybody plays together, but without regard to what anybody else is doing. Not so different from what you’d expect to hear wandering the corridors of Manhattan Plaza, the artist’s complex where Richard and I live among hundreds of other musicians. Cage’s composition calls for pieces that might have been heard in an apartment house in 1776. Thinking of the aesthetic resonance with Duke Ellington’s “Harlem Air Shaft,” we chose to focus on the 1940s.

“Solo #17” is a bird of another feather. The text is drawn from entries in Henry David Thoreau's journals: randomly combined excerpts from his comments about the "telegraph harp." This piece is completely different from the "Aria" and “Solo #43” (among others), which ask the performer to create and juxtapose several different styles. “Telegraph harp” demands the opposite: that one work with a single sound ideal in mind, a sonority that "resembles singing wires, not strident, but whirring (Aeolian harp, musical saw)." The piece exists in a very specific soundscape, a little world unto itself. Our ensemble found this notion immensely intriguing. But who has actually heard a telegraph harp? We all found our own ways of expressing it. It’s something like a unicorn: one can imagine it very well, but who has seen one?

“Solo #67,” “Solo #90,” and “Solo #72” (“Mensa, Osaka”; “coloratura” songs, as Cage called them) are yet another breed. The composer represented melodies as note-heads in a tube-like two-line staff; staff lines indicate upper and lower extremes of the performer's range. The top line is a kind of ceiling; the bottom, a floor. Only register extremes are used in the piece, the melodies appearing as note-heads that cling to and cluster around top and bottom lines. Cage asks for pitches in the upper register to be performed in an exaggerated staccato manner, the lower register to sound like slurred "grunts." The melodies make frequent quick leaps from one domain to the other. In La Faute de la Musique, we did the “coloratura” pieces as a collage, with three songs performed simultaneously. To me, the result is like a field of strange wildflowers, little organisms with roots sharing the same grunting soil, their tiny heads sprouting up in different colors.

¹ Coltrane, John. A Love Supreme. Impulse 77, rec. 12/9/64; Porter, Lewis. John Coltrane: His Life and Music. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

The notation for “Solo #12” (“mud luscious”) is a tad more conventional: a series of note-heads of various sizes are arranged on five-line staves, along a horizontal time-axis. The performer is free to choose an appropriate clef; none is indicated. Some pitches are not centered on a given line or space (some large notes take up both a line and its adjoining space). In these cases, the performer is asked to make microtonal alterations. The pitches are accompanied by swatches of text: sounds and phrases in English, French, German, and Sanskrit. Above each note is a marking that looks like a conventional slur or tie, but is used in a unique way. The markings are drawn either slightly to the left of, directly above, or slightly to the right of the note, indicating that the given pitches are to behave as target notes in freely-improvised phrases that use them as either the starting point, central tone, or ending pitch of the phrase. This approach to melodic invention resonates with the idea of “guide tones” in jazz pedagogy: the improviser locates structural pitches in a given progression and develops improvisations that move around and through them in various ways. To create an ebb and flow of energy within the piece, Cage includes dynamic markings (*espressivo*, *crescendo*, *diminuendo*) below the note-heads.

My adaptation for jazz quintet presents the piece in a modified homophonic texture. As with “Solo #43” and other pieces, I saw that instrumentalists could use the text snippets as prosodic and rhythmic guides, as well as frames for timbral and emotional coloration. For a singer who doesn’t have perfect pitch (I don’t), the pitch demands of this piece were somewhat daunting at first, particularly in a group context where vocal lines are surrounded by swirling atonal or polytonal melodies. The solution I found was to arrange for the voice to key off of a melodic drone (as one would do in India). In jazz, it’s often the bass (sometimes piano) that is asked to perform drone duties, where required. As an alternative (the bass holds up the world most of the time), I asked Bill Goodwin to improvise a continuous free-rhythmic accompaniment on a tiny pentatonic “bell harp” (see Thomas Mann’s cover art for [La Faute de la Musique](#)). This bitty harp functioned a little like a *tanpura* in Indian classical music, providing a constant pitch reference. Bill Goodwin likened his role in our arrangement of “mud luscious” to a character in Charles Schultz’s comic strip, “Peanuts,” calling it “a Schroeder state of mind.”

[La Faute de la Musique](#) closes with “Solo #27” (“lusty growth”). In this final piece, we experience Cage’s beloved silence. In each phrase, a conventionally notated melody is surrounded by a prescribed number of beats of silence. Richard Oppenheim and I performed it as a duet: he improvised on imagined chord changes as I sang the tune. We each breathed in the silent interludes. This created a density around the melody (a “lusty growth,” if you will) that made the intervening silences all the more piquant. The pregnant silences bring an air of expectancy, and we decided to close with it.

Contact: Linda Whitman, 212-563-2271/email: linda@katchie.com
HARRITON CARVED WAX, 400 West 43 St #43M, New York, NY 10036-6318