

KATHARINE CARTWRIGHT/RICHARD OPPENHEIM

A MUMBAI OF THE MIND: FERLINGHETTI IMPROVISATIONS & LA FAUTE DE LA MUSIQUE: SONGS OF JOHN CAGE

“It was like a really great ongoing improvisation,” says Richard Oppenheim of the voyage that transported the jazz saxophonist and his musical partner, singer-ethnomusicologist Katharine Cartwright, through the Alice-in-Wonderland world of John Cage, into the rain-soaked suburbs of Bombay (Mumbai), then back to New York, where Lawrence Ferlinghetti caught up with them in the dog days of summer just before 9/11. Two albums, travelogues in a manner of speaking, resulted: La Faute de la Musique: Songs of John Cage, and A Mumbai of the Mind: Ferlinghetti Improvisations. To Oppenheim, the trip seemed “part of one very condensed experience, despite taking place over different stretches of real time and real estate.” But who would plan such an odd itinerary? The answer is quite simple: the agent was music. This is as true for Cartwright and Oppenheim as it was for Cage and Satie: “*Et tout cela m’est advenu par la faute de la musique.*” (You name it: if it happened to me, music is to blame.)

As any navigator knows, it helps if you can steer by the stars. The ensembles on both recordings are stellar. The New York-based quintet on La Faute de la Musique: Songs of John Cage features acclaimed artists Cameron Brown, bass; Bill Goodwin, drums and producer; and James Weidman, piano (all longtime associates of Cartwright and Oppenheim). The wonderful Bombay-based percussionists on A Mumbai of the Mind: Ferlinghetti Improvisations are Bhooshan Munj, *tabla*; Rajesh Sreenivasan, *mridangam* and *kanjeera*; and R. Venkatesh, *morsing* and *ghatam*. “We were incredibly fortunate to be able to work with these musicians,” Cartwright attests. “Each one of them is absolutely amazing.”

From Cage’s door, Cartwright and Oppenheim followed their muses on a trail that led first to Bombay then back to New York (or was it San Francisco in 1958?). Cartwright saw the trip as “an unfolding.” “One of the joys of improvisation is that one never knows what’s going to happen next. Anticipation is part of the fun, and so is the thrill of risk.” As Ferlinghetti tells us, the poet (like the improvising musician) is a “super realist” who “climbs on rhyme to a high wire of his own making...” (“Poet Like An Acrobat,” A Mumbai of the Mind: Ferlinghetti Improvisations; poetry by Lawrence Ferlinghetti from “A Coney Island of the Mind,” 1958).

Entering John Cage territory, the first thing to do is “suspend your disbelief,” says Cartwright. “Cage defies the normal *modus operandi* of the jazz musician. He banishes pulse, which he finds ‘tyrannical,’ substituting something both completely strange and utterly familiar: clock time, real time. He takes away our lead sheets and puts these beautiful little drawings in front of us; this is his notation. All of this makes us think differently, play differently, and hear all sorts of new things....” Cage grants the performer plenty of room to roam, but not without direction. In Richard Oppenheim’s view, “Cage’s stuff is a combination of these very stringent controls coupled with a lot of interpretive freedom. He’s demanding recomposition while-u-wait. It’s a joyride with complete unawareness of the ultimate destination.”

For Cartwright and Oppenheim, the next destination was India. She had been there before, gigging and studying, and had an interest in Indian classical music dating from her days as a doctoral student

in the 1990s. But Cage had opened a new door. “We entered Cage’s very personal world, a musical culture unto itself really, and found that our experiences there prepared us for the Mumbai encounter in ways we hadn’t anticipated,” Cartwright explains. “Cage’s world is both self-contained and highly dependent. He’s constantly causing the world *outside* to insert itself in the music, often quite suddenly, bringing all its heavy silences, thickets of sound, babbling tongues, and funny coincidences.” This is a provocative stance, as Oppenheim points out, a process of “deliberately setting up an action to provoke a fresh reaction, then asking the performer to think about what just happened and go on from there.” On they went to Mumbai. Cartwright talks about the round trip below (“Artist Perspectives”).

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