

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 18 June 2022

Apartment House: John Cage Focus Day

CLASSIC *f*M

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11.30am

Miles Lukoszevics newsreader **James Opstad** radio
Simon Limbrick percussion, radio **Anton Lukoszevics** cello, radio
Chris Brannick percussion, radio **Heather Roche** clarinet, radio

John Cage (1912-1992) **Four⁶** (1990-2)
Speech 1955 (1955)

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3.00pm

Nancy Ruffer bass flute

Heather Roche bass clarinet (Seven²)

Barrie Webb bass trombone

Anton Lukoszevieze cello (Seven²)

James Opstad double bass

Simon Limbrick percussion

Chris Brannick percussion

John Cage

Ryoanji (1983-5)

Seven² (1990) *UK première*

7.30pm

Kerry Yong piano

Gordon Mackay violin

Mira Benjamin violin

Bridget Carey viola

Anton Lukoszevieze cello

Simon Limbrick percussion

John Cage

A Room for piano (1943)

Six Melodies for violin and piano (1950)

Child of Tree (1975)

The Seasons for piano (1947)

*I. Prelude I • II. Winter • III. Prelude II • IV. Spring • V. Prelude III •
VI. Summer • VII. Prelude IV • VIII. Fall • IX. Finale (Prelude I)*

Interval

Harmonies from *Apartment House 1776* (1976) *arranged by Irvine Arditti for string quartet*
II • VI • VII • XXX

Waiting for piano (1952)

Branches (1976)

String Quartet in 4 Parts (1949-50)

*I. Quietly flowing along • II. Slowly rocking •
III. Nearly stationary • IV. Quodlibet*

11.30am

John Cage Four⁶
Speech 1955

This day of 3 concerts with music by the American composer **John Cage** (1912-1992) features compositions that straddle five decades of his music, from 1943 to 1992 (his final year). I have specifically focussed on music that is rarely performed and also does not include theatrical works, music for prepared piano or vocal music.

Cage was a prolific composer and what interests me is how each decade of his compositional life was delineated by new ways of composing and new areas of inspiration. For a composer famous for utilising indeterminacy as a method of organising his material for composition from 1950 onwards, there is a surprising aesthetic range and an immense beauty present in his music. In many ways Cage is more talked about today than performed, his influence on today's composers more subliminal than explicit, extending through the emergent European Wandelweiser collective of the 1990s into today's younger generation of experimental composers. His influence seems to have actually increased within the visual arts communities. Cage was himself an exquisite visual artist, something he developed increasingly throughout his life.

The first concert begins with one of Cage's last works, *Four⁶* (1992), 'for any ways of producing sounds (vocalization, singing, playing of an instrument or instruments, electronics, etc.)' The written number four, as in all of his late 'number' pieces, specifies the number of performers and the small superscript number specifies where it is in that particular series of works. One of his very last works, completed and performed with him shortly before his death, *Four⁶* is a culmination of his compositional raison d'être and yet also one of his most fundamental works, harking back to his iconic *4' 33"* (1952). *4' 33"* (not performed today) is undoubtedly Cage's most famous and most (in)famously misunderstood work. It contains 4 minutes 33 seconds of unintentional sounds created by the environmental location of the performance, not silence, which Cage discovered does not exist. 'In 1951, John Cage spent some time in... an anechoic chamber at Harvard. In the dead acoustic environment of the chamber, Cage experienced an epiphany. After a while, against the silence of the room, he became aware of two sounds, one high-pitched and the other low. Later, the technician on duty informed Cage that the sounds he heard were, respectively, his nervous and circulatory systems at work. Cage told the story repeatedly for the rest of his life.' (Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, p. xvi)

Four⁶ bears some similarities to *4' 33"* in that the material in the score is organised by specific chance-determined timings. *4' 33"* is actually in three parts, or movements, each one determined by Cage using chance operations. Cage's early method of using chance basically involved tossing coins to determine different numerical

information in order to organise musical material and durational values. His inspiration for this compositional system was the Chinese Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, which he obtained in 1950. In later life he adopted computer-generated tables of numbers created by Andrew Culver.

The major difference between *Four⁶* and *4' 33"* is that in the former work performers determine which sounds they make. Cage specifies that they choose 12 different sounds, which harks back in some ways to Cage's studies with Arnold Schoenberg in the 1930s, though interestingly Cage also utilised a 25-tone series then. *Four⁶* also uses flexible time-brackets. Time-brackets basically give a pair of timings for the start of a sound and a second pair of timings for the ending of the sound. A performer may choose to start and end the sound anywhere within each pair of time brackets. This creates a situation whereby no two performances of the same work will be alike. Each performance allows for different combinations of sounds; they will be the same pre-determined 12 sounds in this case, but their juxtaposition will always be subtly different. Early Cage 'number' pieces composed in the 1980s used fixed time-brackets, whereby sounds started and ended at specific points. *Four⁶* points to a composer at the end of his life, content with allowing sounds to be themselves and creating a music that is subtly constructed, harmonically sonorous and mellifluous.

The second work in the first concert is *Speech 1955* for newsreader and 5 radio operators (1955). Cage was fascinated by the radio as an indeterminate receiver of sounds and he used it in other compositions such as *Radio Music* (1956) and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4 (March No. 2)* (1951). He described how he was simply 'opening my ears to what was in the air.' Interestingly he also stated, 'my thinking was that I didn't like the radio and that I would be able to like it if I used it in my work.'

Radios are fascinating devices; they are a real-time portal into a universe of broadcast activity. Witness the use of them in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* to receive messages from the underworld. One can take a radio, turn the tuner dial and shift through a multiplicity of different sounds, languages, music and topical news.

The radio operators in *Speech 1955* do exactly that, according to strict timings written in each part, alongside different graphical indications for volume control. The newsreader reads from two different newspapers or magazines, the execution of which is also determined by different timings. The combination of a live newsreader interspersed with an indeterminate backdrop of radio sounds creates a sonic collage of constant surprise and glorious juxtaposition. Many of our daily activities involve multi-tasking, often accompanied by different sound sources - people, TV, computer or radio. *Speech 1955* in some ways is an invitation to pay attention to these multiplicities, framed in time by the composer.

3.00pm

John Cage Ryoanji
Seven² UK première

The second concert today focuses on two major works, *Ryoanji* (1983-85) and the UK première of *Seven²* (1990). Ryōan-ji is a Zen Buddhist temple located in northwestern Kyoto, Japan. The temple is famous for a rock garden or 'kare-sansui' (dry landscape), a refined type of garden design which features 15 distinctive larger rock formations arranged amidst a sweep of smooth pebbles (small, carefully selected polished river rocks) raked into linear patterns that facilitate meditation.

Cage had a profound relationship with Zen Buddhism starting in the early 1950s when he attended lectures in New York City given by Daisetz Suzuki, the Japanese scholar and philosopher, instrumental in presenting Zen Buddhism to the West. Cage's engagement with Zen was more compositional than spiritual and directly related to how he wrote music from 1950 onwards. At this point, Cage connected his musical world to the Zen concepts of 'unimpededness and interpenetration.' He explained his understanding of these concepts in a lecture given in 1951/52.

This unimpededness is seeing that in all of space each thing and each human being is at the center and furthermore that each one being at the center is the most honored one of all. Interpenetration means that each one of these most honored ones of all is moving out in all directions penetrating and being penetrated by every other one no matter what the time or what the space....In fact each and every thing in all of time and space is related to each and every other thing in all of time and space.

For Cage the thing that interpenetrates was sounds. In the composition *Ryoanji* what one hears are the individual soloists, trombone, flute and double bass, very much in their own sonic universe (unimpeded) but also connecting with each other profoundly (interpenetrating). By the 1980s Cage was very involved with his own visual work, visiting on multiple occasion Crown Point Press in San Francisco, working on various different series of print editions. At different points in his life he had utilised graphical elements in his scores, notably the mammoth piano part of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957-8). As he stated 'The intention was to make a notation that would recognize that sounds did truly exist in a field; that our previous notation has not permitted our recognizing this fact or even acting on this fact; that we needed other notation in order to let sound be at any pitch, rather than at prescribed pitches.'

Ryoanji, the composition, has a very elegant use of graphic notation. In 1983 he made a series of drawings entitled *R = Ryoanji*, which consisted of him creating drawings using 15 stones as templates, and around this time he was asked for a new work, also

to be titled *Ryoanji*. For the solo parts Cage again took 15 stones and drew around them to create linear curves within a prescribed pitch range. Each instrument plays the curves as slow *glissandi* (sliding tones, or as Americans say, sweeping tones). These curved lines are interspersed with gaps, which equal silence. Each instrumental part, trombone, flute and double bass, has a separate, uncoordinated part, signifying the rock formations in the Zen garden. The other layer in the work is a percussion accompaniment, signifying the raked sweep of tiny, smooth pebbles. The two percussionists are asked to select two slightly dull sounds, one wooden and one metallic. They provide a constant slow pulse, interspersed with gaps, in unison, but ever so slightly out of synch with each other. Something Cage interestingly described as a 'Korean' unison, as found in traditional Korean music. *Ryoanji* is a sonic painting of a location, but also an austere meditation on the interpenetration of sounds, which one can truly experience with sliding tones, as they emerge, merge, gel and dissolve in unharmonic fields of individuality, unimpeded. There are shadows of gagaku music and ritualistic elements, redolent of some secret theatre.

The second work in this afternoon's concert is the UK première of an extended composition from the 'number' series of pieces that Cage wrote from 1987 until 1992, *Seven²*. Scored for bass flute, bass clarinet, bass trombone, cello, double bass and two percussionists, *Seven²* is a monumental work that could be described as an extended sonic landscape, but also as an exploration of what Cage described as anarchic harmony.

As I stated earlier, Cage's compositional life can (roughly) be described as each decade being a new beginning. One new beginning, which started in the 1970s, was what could be described as a renewed interest in, or rediscovery even, of harmony. Cage's anarchic harmony I would describe as dysfunctional harmony. In classical music harmony has a function; it shows how things begin, change or end, such as the use of a cadence. Cage's interest in less functional harmony seems to my ears to be located in his work of the 1940s, such as the String Quartet in 4 Parts (1949) which will be performed this evening. The string quartet uses a gamut, basically a series of pitches as the material for each movement. Each pitch functions as itself and also in conjunction with the other pitches, creating its own universe but also hanging out with the others. In *Seven²* we have a timbral world of bass instruments and low sounds. Cage writes in the score preface of melodies being passed from instrument to instrument, the sharing of long tones and their resultant harmonies heard in 'an anarchic society of sounds'. For the many unspecified percussion instruments in the score he asks that they be very resonant, such as bells, gongs, cymbals and thunder sheets, often bowed or tremoloed. Each of the 'number' pieces (there are over 40 in total) is characterised by its instrumentation and the natural timbral qualities of those instruments, combined with different explorations of microtonal tunings and pitches. *Seven²* is a dark-hued, rumbling and sonorous

work. It is like a Mark Rothko deep burgundy coloured chamber of deep listening, down in the depths of experience.

7.30pm

John Cage A Room for piano
Six Melodies
Child of Tree
The Seasons
Interval
Harmonies from *Apartment House 1776*
arranged by Irvine Arditti
Waiting
Branches
String Quartet in 4 Parts

The final concert today focuses on chamber music by John Cage composed in the 1940s, 1950s and 1970s. My aim for this concert was to create a programme that featured more melodic and harmonic music, made a nod towards Cage's music for dance and what I will call Zen-folk music. The first piece *A Room* (1943) is the earliest work in today's concerts. A short, hypnotic and minimal work, *A Room* is for prepared and also unprepared piano. There are echoes of Erik Satie, a composer central to Cage's aesthetic outlook, and a big influence on his compositional approach. Satie's shadow looms quite large here, with the continuous ostinato figure like some fragment of his music cut out and examined intensely. Cage's music of the 1940s often feels deeply emotional and the titles of works are much more evocative than later ones, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, *Dream*, *Mysterious Adventure*, *The Perilous Night*, to name a few. Even such a prosaic title as *A Room* has the foreboding and prescience of some unknown psychological situation.

The other short piano work is *Waiting* (1952), composed in the same year as *4' 33"*. *Waiting* was premièred in February of that year and *4' 33"* in August. Already in *Waiting*, with hindsight, one can see how Cage would arrive at his so-called silent piece. *Waiting* begins with 16 bars of silence, about a minute and half, and then continues with short phrases of ostinati, followed by more silence. To create such an extraordinarily compressed work, which contains so much feeling of anticipation and enigma is no mean feat. The concentration on time and literally waiting for things to happen was an unusual way to compose music, even for Cage, and the influence of his studies of Zen philosophy was clearly having a major effect on his compositional approach.

The longest solo piano work in this concert is the piano version of Cage's orchestral ballet work *The Seasons* from 1947. In the 1940s, before Cage's engagement with Zen philosophy, he studied certain aspects of Indian philosophy, in particular the writings of Ananda K Coomaraswamy and his writings *The Transformation of Nature in Art* and *The Dance of Shiva*. Cage was particularly interested in the connection of art and spirituality. *The Seasons* is the first Cage

work to use the gamut technique, whereby a pre-selected range of musical materials or pitches constitutes the compositional body of the work. Commissioned by The Ballet Society in New York City, with choreography by Merce Cunningham and costumes by Isamu Noguchi, *The Seasons* 'is an attempt to express the traditional Indian view of the seasons as quiescence (winter), creation (spring), preservation (summer) and destruction (autumn)'. Each seasonal movement is preceded by a prelude and the finale is a recapitulation of the first prelude. The harmonic feeling of the work has a certain restrained character, partly a result of the gamut technique and partly perhaps from the ghost of Erik Satie, still very much an influence on Cage's aesthetic in the 1940s. Cage's exploration of the gamut technique extended into the composition of the *String Quartet in 4 Parts* (1949-50) and *Six Melodies for violin and piano* (1950).

In the string quartet Cage again used the model of the seasons, but this time not explicitly. Each of the movements is titled 'Quietly flowing along', 'Slowly rocking', 'Nearly stationary', and 'Quodlibet'. The tempo is consistent throughout the piece but Cage doubles the basic rhythmic unit in the 2nd and 3rd movements, effectively slowing the music down. In the last movement (the Spring movement) the basic pulse is the eighth note (quaver) so that a sudden increase in tempo is created.

The gamut Cage uses in the quartet uses harmony in a non-progressive way. So that the harmony does not have a structural responsibility but becomes a formal element, 'serving expression.' It is interesting how Cage uses harmony as a melodic line or principle in the quartet, a similar technique to Ornette Coleman and his harmolodic compositional method. The *String Quartet in 4 Parts* and the *Six Melodies for violin and piano* both have a sound world like some kind of Zen folk music, not something naïve, but a purity of restrained emotion and melodic, rhythmic repetition that has a feeling of some American folk music.

In the *Six Melodies for violin and piano* (1950) again Cage used the gamut technique and described the work in a letter to Pierre Boulez as a 'postscript' to the *String Quartet in 4 Parts*. The violin and piano share and pass the melodic material between each other, creating a rhythmic and hocketing interplay of sounds.

In 1976 Cage was commissioned to compose a work to celebrate the bicentenary of American Independence. He chose to create a work entitled *Apartment House 1776*, a work that my group takes its name from, obliquely. *Apartment House 1776* consisted of several constituent parts and one notable one was a collection of 44 Harmonies derived from 18th-century American hymn tunes. Much later in 2005 the violinist Irvine Arditti arranged them for string quartet, as some of them will be heard this evening. Using chance operations Cage erased different notes from the original harmonies and created new harmonies, which still have the flavour of the original hymn tunes. As he noted 'the cadences and everything disappear, but the flavour remained. You can recognise it as 18th-century music, but it's suddenly brilliant in a new way.'

Music using percussion instruments was always of particular interest to Cage. In 1986 he stated, 'Well, I have become convinced that everything has a spirit and that everything sounds. I became so curious about the World in which I lived from a sonic point of view, that I began hitting and rubbing everything I came near – whether it was in the kitchen or outdoors.'

A major theme that runs through Cage's work is a preoccupation with nature. Nature imagery began to appear in his writing and

music in the mid 1950s, in particular when he moved from New York City to the countryside in Stony Point. He noted that he was 'starved for nature.' *Child of Tree* (1975) and *Branches* (1976) are both for amplified plant materials. *Branches* is essentially a set of variations on the structure of *Child of Tree*. Both works utilise improvisation within strict time periods.

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