

# Encounters with John Cage

By Russell Hartenberger

## BREMEN RATSKELLER

My first encounter with John Cage was in 1972 in Bremen, Germany. I had just arrived to begin a two-week tour in Europe with Steve Reich & Musicians. This was the ensemble's first trip to Europe after our three premiere performances of "Drumming" in New York City, and we were all interested to see the reaction to Steve's new work there.

Jet-lagged, but hungry after our flight from New York, we went to the historic Ratskeller in the basement of Bremen City Hall for dinner. I noticed a lively group at a nearby table who looked like they might be musicians in town for the same festival in which we were performing. I had never seen John Cage in person before, but I was certain he was one of the people at that table.

The group was boisterous, with lots of drinking and laughter. They had clearly been in the Ratskeller longer than we had. After some time, they got up to leave, and John Cage approached our table. He was smiling and reeling as he came up to me and said in his unique voice, "Are you an American?"

Everyone at our table broke into laughter. They all recognized Cage and they also knew of his penchant for alcohol and his great sense of humor. Cage did not wait for me to answer his question and laughed along with us. He told us he was here for the music festival, then he rejoined his friends who were leaving the Ratskeller. I spoke with Cage many times since that encounter, and I heard him read from his writings in numerous performances over the years. The sound of his voice is etched in my memory, as I am sure it is for many other people. But the phrase I'll remember most is this first one I heard him speak, even though I'm still not sure if he intended to be funny.

## "FIRST CONSTRUCTION"/TAKEMITSU/JAPAN

Nexus's first tour to Japan was in June of 1976. At the invitation of Toru Takemitsu we performed at his Music Today festival at the Seibu Theatre in Tokyo, with additional concerts in Ohtsu and Osaka. Takemitsu asked that we play John Cage's "First Construction (in Metal)" on our Tokyo concert. Although Cage would not be at the festival, Takemitsu felt it was important for his music to be heard in Japan.

Joining members of Nexus in the performance were three Japanese musicians: Yasunori Yamaguchi, Toshi Ichinyanagi, and Jo Kondo. Yasunori played one of the percussion parts and



Nexus performing Cage's Third Construction. Photo by Donald Dietz.

supplied many of the instruments needed for the piece. Takemitsu had a particular admiration for Yasunori's ability to play with a sense of *ma*. In his essay "One Sound" in *Contemporary Music Review*, Takemitsu describes *ma* as "an unquantifiable metaphysical space (duration) of dynamically tensed absence of sound." Yasunori's sense of *ma* is in his uncanny knack of placing sounds in space in a way that gives them life and the feeling of being surrounded by silence.

Toshi Ichinyanagi played the piano part in "First Construction." He is a prominent composer who is also well known for having been married to Yoko Ono. Ichinyanagi attended John Cage's composition class at the New School in New York in the 1950s. He brought Cage's music to Japanese composers and audiences in 1960, and then arranged to bring Cage to Japan in 1961. Ichinyanagi introduced Takemitsu to John Cage during this visit, resulting in a friendship between the two composers that influenced both their compositional styles. The influence went both ways as Cage became interested in Zen Buddhism while Takemitsu rediscovered his Japanese roots. In his article, "Contemporary Music in Japan," Takemitsu wrote:

I must express my deep and sincere gratitude to John Cage. The reason for this is that in my own life, in my own development, for a long period I struggled to avoid being "Japanese," to avoid "Japanese" qualities. It was largely

through my contact with John Cage that I came to recognize the value of my own tradition. In his own way, John Cage was influenced by Zen through his encounters with the Zen master Daisetsu Suzuki. It doesn't really matter what came first or who was influenced by whom. What is important in the long run is that it is possible for us to understand each other. (Takemitsu, 1989)

Jo Kondo was a young up-and-coming Japanese composer and a protégé of Takemitsu. He was the piano assistant in "First Construction." Takemitsu commissioned Jo Kondo to write a piece for Nexus for the concert series, a work for 25 cowbells called "Under the Umbrella."

This trip to Japan, with our performance of "First Construction," marked the beginning of a lifelong musical and personal relationship connecting Nexus, Takemitsu, and Cage. Just as the influences went back and forth between Cage and Takemitsu, so flows the musical symbiosis with Nexus and the two composers.

## "AMORES"

On October 1, 1977, Nexus performed in a concert of the music of John Cage in Walter Hall at the University of Toronto, with Cage in attendance. One of the pieces we played was "Amores" with pianist Marion Ross. "Amores" is a work in four movements: 1. prepared piano solo; 2. percussion trio for drums and pod rattle; 3. percussion trio for woodblocks; 4. prepared piano solo. The Nexus members who

performed the piece with me were Bob Becker and Robin Engelman.

At the concert, Marion played the first movement, and then Bob, Robin, and I played the drum trio movement, each with three Chinese drums. Our performance of the second movement was filled with lots of energy, and at the end of the movement, the audience broke into applause.

Marion, confused by the unexpected applause, thought we had completed both of our percussion movements and began to play the final movement. The three of us, poised to begin playing the *amadinda* bars we were using for woodblocks, froze with our sticks in mid-air. We didn't know what we should do, but we all assumed that since the music was by John Cage, anything goes and we should just wait until Marion finished her movement and then play our woodblock movement to end the piece.

As Marion continued playing, Cage, who was seated near the back of the 500-seat concert hall, stood up and slowly walked down the steps of the raked auditorium to the stage. Marion didn't notice Cage coming to the stage and kept playing. Cage walked across the stage and whispered in her ear, "They're not finished yet." Marion looked embarrassed and stopped playing. Cage walked back to his seat and, when he was seated, we played the woodblock movement. After we finished, Marion began her final movement again and played it to completion.

The performance, unexpectedly, became a theater piece that was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. It also made me realize that, chance operations or not, Cage was very concerned about correct interpretations of his compositions.

### "THIRD CONSTRUCTION"

In the early days of Nexus, our concerts were mostly improvised. However, in the mid-1970s, we began adding other repertoire: the ragtime xylophone pieces of George Hamilton Green that Bob Becker and Bill Cahn brought into the group; West African pieces that Bob and I had learned from Abraham Adzenyah at Wesleyan University; and some composed pieces for percussion. One of the compositions that we began performing around this time was "Third Construction" by John Cage. Bob heard a bootleg recording of the piece played by the Blackearth Percussion Group (founded by Garry Kvistad, now a Nexus member) in 1976, and pushed for us to put it in our repertoire.

When Nexus performed "Third Construction," Bob played the part known as the cowbell part, Robin Engelman played the lion's roar part, Bill Cahn played the conch shell part, and I played the log drum part. (After Robin left the group, Garry Kvistad, who played the conch shell part with Blackearth, learned the lion's roar part.)

Nexus first performed "Third Construction" for Cage in January of 1982 as the first piece on the "Roaratorio" performances in Toronto. Cage hadn't heard the piece for many years, possibly since he played it with his own group of musicians in the 1940s. He only made two comments to us after we played it for him at the dress rehearsal. The first was that it sounded more transparent than he had remembered. This could have been because his original performances were with non-percussionists, so we may have made the parts more clear than his performers did. Cage's other comment was that the *almglocken* that Bob used for cowbells in his part were particularly resonant.

Later that year, Cage was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame at the PASIC in Dallas, Texas. In his acceptance speech, he remarked, "I am delighted for I am, I think, a percussion composer." Cage was the keynote speaker at the PASIC banquet in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1984, and attended the concert when Nexus performed John Wye's "Connexus" with the University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra. Our last performances of "Third Construction" for Cage were at the Los Angeles Festival in 1987.

### "ROARATORIO"

Nexus participated in the North American premiere of Cage's "Roaratorio: an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake," on January 29 and 31, 1982 at Convocation Hall in Toronto in two concerts organized by flutist Robert Aitken and New Music Concerts of Toronto. We opened each of the concerts with a performance of "Third Construction." In "Roaratorio," Cage read from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* amidst the music of members of the Chieftains (Joe Heaney, voice; Paddy Glackin, fiddle; Seamus Tansey, flute; Liam óg Ó'Floinn, Uilleann-pipes, Peader Mercier and his son, Mel Mercier, bodhran and bones).

The concert on the first night of the two performances was for a full house of about 1,300 people. The second night there was a huge snowstorm, but even so, about 800 audience members made it to Convocation Hall, including some who arrived on cross-country skis.

Cage and the Irish musicians loved partying, so a big reception was arranged for all of us following the last performance at a location a few blocks away from Convocation Hall. Merce Cunningham was at the performances, and I had the good fortune of giving him a ride in my Volkswagen beetle to the reception. I had taken out the passenger seat in the car in order to have more room to carry percussion equipment and had neglected to put the seat back in the car, so Merce sat in the back seat with his legs stretched out up to the front. He seemed to enjoy the extra legroom.

### STEVE REICH

In the early days of the Steve Reich ensemble, we gave private performances of the compositions we were rehearsing prior to the premieres in New York City. They were usually in loft galleries such as the Paula Cooper Gallery in Soho. It was a great experience for us to play these pieces in front of small audiences and was a part of the thorough preparedness that Steve gave to all his performances. These concerts were also interesting because the invited audiences often included artists and musicians such as Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, Philip Glass, Morton Feldman, and John Cage.

The reaction from the audience was always enthusiastic, and the comments that audience members made to Steve were often entertaining, so I tried to stay within earshot of Steve when these folks gave him their post-concert thoughts. The most memorable comment I heard was made by Cage after one of these loft performances of "Music for 18 Musicians," prior to the premiere in 1976. Cage came up to Steve and said, in his distinctive voice, "It changed!"

I've thought about Cage's comment often over the years. Of course, I don't know what he meant when he said it, but I feel it could have meant many things. Reich's music certainly changed with the writing of "Music for 18 Musicians." The composition itself had many changes of feel in it, with the underlying harmonic and rhythmic shifts creating metrical ambiguity. Or maybe Cage was anticipating the changes created by "Music for 18 Musicians" on all kinds of music that followed.

### "RYOANJI" AND "4'33'"

The plan was for Robert Aitken and me to record Cage's piece "Ryoanji" in the version for flute and percussion, with Cage supervising the recording. The session took place in the home recording studio of Canadian composer Norma Beecroft, in Toronto.

We tried some of the different percussion instruments I brought, and Cage decided I should use a large, wooden, Balinese water buffalo bell combined with a large cowbell that I bought in an antique store many years ago. The cowbell was not the gold colored *almglocken* that are commonly used these days, but a bell with a darker color and a darker sound. We sound checked the instruments and began recording. After some time, a mechanical problem cropped up with the recording equipment. The engineer said it would take a while to repair the problem, so Cage and I went into a room next to the studio to wait.

This equipment malfunction resulted in one of the most memorable evenings I have ever spent. My conversation with John was friendly and the topics were wide-ranging. Cage asked me if I had ever had hand or arm problems from playing percussion. I said I had not,

although a growing number of my students seemed to develop carpal tunnel syndrome or other repetitive stress injuries. I speculated that it might be due to the fact that they constantly play on plastic heads whereas I grew up playing exclusively on calfskin heads.

Cage said that he developed arthritis a few years earlier and it got so severe in his hands that he couldn't write. He said he mentioned this to John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who suggested he go on a macrobiotic diet. Cage was reluctant to do this; he liked eating and drinking (I remembered my first encounter with him at the Bremen Ratskeller) and was even a heavy smoker at one time. He said when he went into restaurants he would always order the most expensive item. He figured it should be the best thing on the menu since it cost the most. However, Cage said he was desperate to be able to write again, so he changed his eating habits completely and adopted a macrobiotic diet. After a short period of time, his arthritis subsided and he was able to resume writing.

Once when he traveled to India he asked his hosts if there was a health food store nearby. They told him, "This whole country is a health food store!" Cage told me that Joe Heaney, from The Chieftains, introduced him to Gunpowder Green Tea. He said it fit in well with his macrobiotic diet, so he still drank it. Cage said he still followed a macrobiotic diet, even though he didn't like it. He said to me, "Don't try it unless you have to!" Then he burst into infectious laughter.

Cage told me the inspiration for his "Ryoanji" compositions was the stone garden in the Buddhist Ryoan-ji temple in Kyoto. The garden consists of 15 irregularly shaped stones arranged in a 30-meter long rectangle of raked gravel/sand. The rocks are arranged in five groups comprising five, two, three, two, and three stones. However only 14 of the 15 stones are visible to the viewer at any one time, no matter what your viewing angle might be. It is said that only when you reach spiritual enlightenment as a result of Zen meditation can you see all 15 stones at once. According to Kenneth Silverman in his biography of Cage, *Begin Again*, Cage said the solo parts in his "Ryoanji" pieces represented the stones, and the percussion accompaniment represented the raked garden. Cage further explained that the percussion accompaniment part is in an irregular rhythm because he didn't want the mind to be able to analyze rhythmic patterns.

While writing "Ryoanji," Cage collected stones that he used to make drypoint prints by drawing around them on an engraving plate. He told me he once went through airport security with a picnic basket full of stones he had gathered on the way to the airport. The security agent was astonished that he was carrying a basket of stones, and Cage found the agent's reaction delightful.

Cage told me the well-known story about

his desire to experience complete silence. Some time around 1951, he entered an anechoic chamber at Harvard University thinking he would be able to experience silence in this supposedly completely soundless environment. Instead, he was bothered by two persistent sounds—a high one and a low one. The engineer in charge of the chamber explained the high sound was the working of Cage's nervous system, and the low sound was blood pulsing through his circulatory system. This was when he had the realization that there was no such thing as complete silence.

After relating the story of his experience in the anechoic chamber, Cage asked me if I knew why he had called his composition, "4'33'". I had never really thought about this before, so I said, "No, I don't." He told me it was because four minutes and 33 seconds was the maximum amount of music that could be put on a 78 rpm record.

Kyle Gann, in his book *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33''*, outlines some confusing circumstances surrounding Cage's determination for the length of "4'33'". According to Gann, Cage indicated, at various times, different reasons for the length of the piece, including chance operations using Tarot cards. It may be true that Cage used chance operations to divide "4'33'" into three movements. However, Cage volunteered his answer to his own question to me with such forthrightness, that I believe the 78 rpm time limit is his real reason for the length of the piece.

### MAVERICK CONCERT HALL

In 1991, Garry Kvistad, founder and owner of Woodstock Percussion and creator of Woodstock Chimes, had the wonderful idea to organize an annual concert in Woodstock, New York called the Woodstock Beat. His idea was to produce a concert of percussion music as a benefit for the Woodstock Guild through his Woodstock Chimes Foundation, and also to have a week of fun and music with families and friends. For the first two years of "The Beat" the concerts were held at the barn of the Guild's Byrdcliffe Arts Colony. The percussionists were Garry, his brother Rick Kvistad, Garry's business partner and former Blackearth colleague, Stacey Bowers, and me. We all brought our families to Woodstock and had a week of rehearsals, hikes, wonderful meals, and a great concert.

For the third year of the Woodstock Beat, Garry changed the venue to Maverick Concert Hall in the woods near Woodstock. Maverick is a beautiful, wooden, hand-hewn "music chapel" that was built in 1916, and is the home of America's oldest continuous summer chamber music festival. It is open at the rear with space for audience members to sit out under the stars to hear the concert. The acoustics are excellent and the ambience is enchanting.

One of Maverick Hall's most notable concerts took place on August 29, 1952. David Tudor performed the world premiere of Cage's famous and infamous "4'33'". The atmosphere for the performance must have been perfect with the sounds of nature surrounding Maverick while Tudor sat silently at the piano. For those of us who have known Cage and grown up under his influence, Maverick is a musical shrine. As an homage to Cage, Garry, in our first Woodstock Beat concert at Maverick, printed in the program and announced to the audience that Cage's "4'33'" was being performed continuously throughout the concert.

Garry is still producing Woodstock Beat concerts at Maverick and has sponsored concerts there, including many of Cage's percussion works, every year since 1991. Bob Becker became a regular participant in 1993, and Bill Cahn often joins us for concerts. Garry has brought in many guests over the years, including nearby resident Peter Schickele, who wrote a piece called "Percussion Sonata No. 2: Woodstock" for the concerts. Other guests have included Nexus, African master drummer Abraham Adzenyah, flutist Steve Gorn, percussion performance artist Dave Van Tieghem, New York percussionist Thad Wheeler, frame drummer Layne Redmond, African music specialist Kathy Armstrong, conga drummer Rolando Morales-Matos, steel pan virtuoso Liam Teague, digeridoo player Thomas Workman, the Canadian Brass, SO Percussion and Steve Reich for a performance of "Drumming," the Klezematics, and the Paul Winter Consort.

### LOS ANGELES FESTIVAL

Nexus was invited to perform at the Los Angeles Festival in 1987 for a celebration of Cage's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. We were joined by many other musicians, performers, and readers in a concert of Cage's "Musicircus," with performances happening in various combinations determined by chance operations. Nexus played "Third Construction" twice during the course of the performance.

When Larry Stein, the organizer of the event, asked Cage about the program booklet for the Festival, Cage suggested a collection of remarks from friends and colleagues, laid out like a music score with different typefaces for each person. Cage said to Stein, "That would be nice, don't you think?"

The Nexus contribution to the program booklet, titled *Twenty-One Pages for John Cage*, was a collection of "Yorkers." These are aphorisms that were spoken at various times during a Nexus two-week residency at York University in Toronto in 1973 and compiled by Bill Cahn. The "Yorkers" that appeared in the Los Angeles Festival booklet are as follows:

We need some definitions.

All of these are various ways of saying the same thing.



There's only one pitch.  
 Every rhythm can be felt by the body.  
 You have to think slow to play fast.  
 If you go by ear, you won't be off.  
 You're always doing it the right way.  
 If you can understand it, it's not worth doing.  
 The foremost thing you want to do is smile.  
 If you are considering, you're not doing.  
 The less interested we become in MUSIC  
 the better we'll play.  
 Take this and practice it until you can't play it.  
 What happened to the concert before we get into anything else...forget it.  
 Take whatever you want.  
 It's even better on tape.  
 We can always hear if we listen.  
 Now that we're here...Where are we?  
 When you've institutionalized it, you've lost it.  
 The concept of time is irrelevant when you're playing time.  
 I don't think you have to worry about what we were just talking about.

#### FRANKFURT AIRPORT

In June of 1992, Nexus had just completed a European tour, and we were at the Frankfurt airport changing planes en route to Toronto. As I was walking to my gate I heard the name "John Cage" called over the airport speaker system telling him to report to his gate. I knew this must be our John Cage, so I changed direction and headed toward the announced gate. By the time I got there, Cage had boarded his plane and I didn't get to see him. It was just two months later that I heard of Cage's death in New York City. According to his wishes, Cage was cremated and his ashes were scattered in the Ramapo Mountains, near Stony Point, New York—just down the Hudson River from Maverick Hall where, after four minutes and 33 seconds of silence, music changed.

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**Russell Hartenberger** has been a member of Nexus and Steve Reich & Musicians since 1971. He is Professor and former Dean of the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto. **PN**