

Cage-Interview Nr. 2/ No 2¹
Almeida Contemporary Festival, London, 1990
Various afternoon and evening moments, Almeida Bar², 17/6/90
Steve Sweeney-Turner im Gespräch mit John Cage

[Online-Einrichtung von Clemens Gresser]

SST: Where would you say that Roaratorio³ "speaks" from, geographically – do you see it as more Irish or American, or is it something else altogether; Joycean, even?

JC: It's more Joycean. I think of Joyce's work as basically Irish; *Finnegans Wake* lists all the places in Ireland, and half of them are in Dublin. But *Finnegans Wake* is actually a concentration – it includes the whole world, really, but concentrating on Ireland and centred on Dublin – the river Liffey is very important.

So how long did you spend in Dublin when you were recording sounds for the tape collage?

A whole week, which was a long period of time out of the month, because we spent three weeks going around the rest of Ireland – and southern England and London.

¹ Im Jahrgang 2001 (TM 2) findet sich eine editorische Einleitung zu den von Steve Sweeney-Turner geführten Cage-Interviews.

² *The Almeida Theatre* ist ein Theater in London, das zeitweise ein Festival für zeitgenössische Musik veranstaltete.

³ *Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, wurde für Tonband realisiert. Es beruht auf dem Werk _____, _____ circus on _____ (Edition Peters 66816, 1979), welches aus Anweisungen zum Übersetzen eines Buches in eine Aufführung ohne Schauspieler besteht. Die Aufführung kann literarisch und musikalisch, oder nur eines der beiden sein. Die Striche des Titels stehen für Leerplätze, die in der Partitur mit folgenden generischen Platzhalter untertitelt sind: *title of composition, article adjective C I R C U S O N title of book* (siehe erste Seite der Partitur; unnummeriert).

Was there much work to do in Paris, given that Joyce wrote some of the Wake there?

Well, I didn't do that work – I just did the work in Ireland and England. I mean to say that we went to the places mentioned in *Finnegans Wake* that came up through chance operations. We went to those places. And then I wrote letters or telephoned the people in other places and they sent recordings from sound libraries for those places.

Did you have an interest in Irish Folk music before you did Roaratorio or was it an effect of that?

Well, I didn't have the kind of interest that I have since I did *Roaratorio* – I got to know much more about it because of *Roaratorio*. I had very good musicians to do it.

How did you go about choosing the musicians?

I went to the radio station in Dublin.

R.T.E.⁴?

⁴ R.T.E. steht für *Radio Telefís Éireann* und ist die Nationale Irische Öffentliche Sendeanstalt. (*Irish National Public Service Broadcasting Organisation*).

Yes, and the man in charge of the programmes dealing with Folk music gave me a list of the finest musicians in Ireland, then he gave me the other list of the second best, and he said if the best ones don't agree to do it, then I could ask the others, but all the first ones agreed. I had Seamus⁵ on the Uilleann pipes – he's dead now, he drank too much Guinness! He could hardly record for me – he had to go to the toilet all the time!

There's a lot of caramel in Guinness. It destroys your system.

Yes – he was the first to die, of the original people I worked with on *Roaratorio*. Then Joe Heaney⁶ died, too. And he was not drinking any longer. But he had done – he had brought himself close to the grave! I met Joe Heaney in England, in a pub in... I forget the name of the town. He'd been playing in a pub, and he agreed to do the whole thing then, and it was he who sent me to the radio station in Dublin with an introduction. So he was my break in – my first connection with them. He was a great man; did you ever hear him?

Yes. So how easy do you think it was for the Irish musicians to assimilate the idea of Roaratorio to their own conventions?

Once they got the idea, it didn't disturb them, but I had to explain to them what was happening. The piece reminds me, actually, of being in a pub full of Folk music – all the things happening on top of each other. When we did the Scottish version in Edinburgh, all our Folk musicians had to play in a pub afterwards, so everyone followed them down, and it was just as if the piece was continuing. It went on and followed us around all through the night!

⁵ Es handelt sich hier um Seamus Ennis (1919-1982).

⁶ Joe Heaney, 1919-1984.

Right, that's right.

Also, we decided that since the piece explores sound, space and sight (we had videos, too), we'd include taste and smell, too. So we found some malt whiskies relevant to the text we used (about 17th century East Lothian witchcraft) and set up a bar as part of the piece. The audience loved it!

Would you say that was a legitimate thing to do within your instructions? How do you feel about that?

Yes, I feel fine about that. My favourite single malt whisky is Talisker!

Would that be the 8 year-old?

However it comes!

So where else did you have to go to make the recordings?

We went all over. We had a very detailed map, those quadrangular maps – you know – where you can see every path? And you can go to very... almost unknown places. It's a very good way to visit a country you don't know; to do it by chance operations! You get to all the places where tourists wouldn't – different corners than they go.

Do you actually have any Irish blood in you, way back?

Unfortunately not. I'd like some! But I'm actually English, and I think a little bit of Scots is in me.

Satie was partly Scottish, of course!

Yes, and I think I have some French, and possibly some Swedish. But Cage itself is an English name.

Did doing Roaratorio bring you closer to Folk in general? I mean how do you stand in relation to the American styles? Cajun, for instance!

Well, I've got friends who are devoted to Folk music, you know? Like Cindy Cowell, the widow of Henry Cowell⁷ – she's a great authority on Folk music. But I don't spend a great deal of time with it. I like it, but I have to do so much work with music that I don't get too close to it. One of the dangers about music is you can get caught up in a particular kind of thing, like Jazz, for instance, or Folk music, and you forget what everything else is.

Yes, but it strikes me that there's a kind of similarity between Folk and what you do in the sense of Folk's involvement with the social circumstances of performance, but also its emphasis on the practicalities of the moment, like with instrumentation, and so on.

Yes, and I was struck by the fact that the fiddle playing in *Roaratorio* was very attractive to Paul Zukovsky who's a great violinist, and he doesn't generally like the way people play the violin, but he liked our fiddle player in *Roaratorio* – he was a marvellous player, Paul thought.

⁷ Henry Cowell (1897-1965), amerikanischer Komponist. Cowell komponierte nicht nur etwa 1000 Werke, sondern spielte auch für die Verbreitung amerikanischer, zeitgenössischer Musik eine wichtige Rolle. Für diesen Zweck gründete er eine Konzertgesellschaft, einen Verlag und ein Schallplattenlabel. Der 1933 erscheinende Symposiumsbericht *American Composers on American Music* ging als Meilenstein in die Geschichtsschreibung über amerikanische Kunstmusik des 20. Jahrhunderts ein. Cowell war für eine kurze Zeitspanne Lehrer von John Cage (hierzu siehe Daniel Charles und John Cage, *For the Birds*, Boston/London (Marion Boyars) 1981, S. 70-71, 72, 74 und S. 75).

Have you ever thought of doing another, different version of "____, ____ ____ circus on ____", other than Roaratorio – or are you planning one now, perhaps?

Well, that's my trouble – I have so many different ideas that I don't have time to go back to the old ones. I'm glad that other people are doing them! That way, I don't feel that I'm to blame that I don't do it!

It seems to come from almost a tradition within your own work using the large scale with imported musics which are brought into new multiplicitious contexts – from HPSCHD (1969) through the Europeras now. What would you say Roaratorio adds to that tradition?

It adds the idea of literature, don't you think?

Would you say it remains just literature, though?

No, it's a translation of literature into music. And the mesostics are a nice thing to do – you probably enjoyed what you did. And Robert Worby – he did it, too, another one in Huddersfield. And he did very well. There are all sorts of things one can do now. I could myself enjoy doing it, but I don't have time. Everything takes a great deal of time, even if you work with computer now, you have to do a lot of work.

They seem to take more time to me.

Yes – different kind of work, but same amount of time.

Was Roaratorio the only piece where you used mesostics within a generally musical context?

Uhu. Now I've done another one called *The First Meeting of the Satie Society*.⁸

Is that an invented society?

Yes.

How many members does it have? One?

Well, Satie is the principle member! It's a birthday party for him... Everyone brings him a present, and the presents they bring are mesostics!

Does he like them?

Well, he replies. You know – the things he said? I have a list of the different things he said, and after each present he says one of these things, like "When I was young, people told me: You'll see when you're fifty. I'm fifty. I've seen nothing."

Would you say that Satie had any influence on how you composed Roaratorio?

I hope so.

What kind of influence would that be?

I don't know! Ha ha ha ha ha! Because his music was so simple and that is so complex, so I don't know, but I hope there's some influence.

⁸ *The First Meeting of the Satie Society* (1984-85) für zwei Sprecher, einen Vokalisten, Musiker und ein oder mehrere Kassetten.

I've heard you say things against the idea of Game Theory. Why does it...

...bother me? Because of the dualistic aspect of games. That is to say, the black-and-white, yes-and-no, wrong-and-right; I don't like that. Buckminster Fuller said you can't get anywhere if you begin with the idea of 2, which that is. Games are always involved with the number 2. And we should get to a situation of the number 5, at least.

But could you not conceive of a game which operated on those principles?

No.

A changing game...

No!

...which constantly...

NO!

...reformulates itself?

NO!!! Ha ha ha ha ha!

I'll believe you!

I like games, you know, I like to play them and then win or lose; I really don't care whether I win or lose. Duchamp got very cross with me with my chess-playing. He said, "Don't you ever want to win?" But I don't care whether I win or lose.

Sure, it's more just the process. But in something like Music of Changes, you set up rules, limits, and then operated within them as if it were gaming.

No, I don't think I really do that. I don't think it's like a game. It's more like asking questions and getting answers, and inscribing the answers.

But you have made pieces which have rules for what you can ask, or rules that in some way limit the kind of answers.

No, I don't think so.

Well, what about the case of Music of Changes here?

I know, I think it's a process, but I don't think it's a game. I don't think there's any place for that. It has to start or stop...

So something like Music of Changes is, in a sense, unfinished?

I think so. I hope so.

So it was an arbitrary decision to stop working on it?

Actually, it was in a rhythmic structure, so that when the rhythmic structure was completed, then I stopped. But the trouble was that the rhythmic structure had accelerandos and ritards, so that it didn't make sense, really, as time. It didn't really make sense. I've described that problem in *Silence* in the talk I gave at Darmstadt, about the *Music of Changes*, which I finally likened to a Frankenstein Monster.⁹

Do you think you've managed to deconstruct that monster?

Oh, I'm not even dealing with that now. I use time brackets which are very flexible and they're also very large so that there's so much freedom of space, you know. What happens, happens at a very unspecific time. And it works just beautifully in relation to the other time brackets. I'm very pleased with it. And I think my music has changed.

You seem these days to use, more and more, the flotsam and jetsam of history as materials, things already extant – only presented in a new context, in juxtaposition with others. Like the Folk music in Roaratorio, or the arias, etc. in the Europeras.

Well, that's one thing I do, do now, this Circus idea, but the time brackets I talked of, they're another – they're more just sounds.

Has your interest in Artaud influenced your perspective in the theatrical aspects of these Circuses?

⁹ Siehe John Cage, *Composition as Process. II. Indeterminacy*, in: *Silence*, London (Marion Boyars) 1968, S. 36.

I haven't thought about that – I would have to think about it. I like Artaud's work very much.¹⁰ I like that idea of theatre as a kind of disease. Don't you? And people get sick, going to the theatre! Ha ha ha! Isn't that marvellous?

Were you ever interested in Nietzsche, through Artaud? It strikes me there's a connection in terms of a physiological aesthetics.

I imagine. But I was told by Norman O. Brown¹¹ that I needn't bother!

Ha ha ha ha! So you didn't!

No! But I think he thought that I could've bothered, but then he said, "I don't think you need to bother." Maybe I should...

[Question asked in public discussion in Almeida:]

Given your predilection for non-intentionality and so forth, I was wondering if you have any preferences about how you would like to die?

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Cage hat Artauds *Das Theater und sein Double* von 1938 gelesen und war von dessen Ideen nachhaltig beeinflusst (siehe Daniel Charles und John Cage, *For the Birds*, Boston/ London (Marion Boyars) 1981, S. 52, 123, 165, 166). Siehe auch Barbara Zuber, The outcome is not foreseen — Le hasard sera notre dieu. Über John Cage und Antonin Artaud, in: *MYTHos Cage*, hrsg. von Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Hofheim (Wolke Verlag) 1999, S. 223-264 (besonders S. 223-232); hierzu vergleiche den entsprechenden Absatz der Rezension dieses Bandes in FZMw, 2002, S. 57, Absatz 3.

¹¹ Norman O. Brown (1913-2002), amerikanischer Philosoph. *Love's Body - Wider die Trennung von Geist und Körper, Wort und Tat, Reden und Schweigen* (dt. 1979) und *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (1959) sind nur zwei seiner zahlreichen Publikationen. Mit Marshall McLuhan und Buckminster Fuller zählt Brown zu den zeitgenössischen Philosophen, die Cages Denken nachhaltige Impulse gaben.

Well, I don't really see how I can, because it's not a decision that I will be taking. It'll happen regardless of my desires and intentions. I'll just have to accept it however it happens... [long, tense pause] ... I wonder if I will....