
A Chance Meeting : Cage and the Whistlebinkies

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“Hamish Henderson said he’d heard nothing like it since wandering into a pub in the Highlands at one of the early folk festivals in the ’sixties and hearing the mingling of several fiddlers playing different tunes in the hubbub.” So ran one of the Glasgow Herald arts editor John Fowler’s enthusiastic recollections of the fruits of the first collaboration between John Cage and our Scottish traditional music group The Whistlebinkies at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in September, 1984. This is an account of the path that led on to the commissioning of Scottish Circus, its premiere, publication and finally, after a gestation of nearly 24 years, its recording. And, sadly, along the way, writing Cage’s obituary and playing at his New York wake.

Our connection with him through Scottish Circus led Mary Miller to ask me to write his obituary for The Scotsman, entitled ‘Musical ice-breaker of the 20th Century’, paying tribute to a visionary musician who had formed a close link with Scotland. He had been creative to the end – having completed three brand new pieces for an imminent festival in Frankfurt in September 1992 to celebrate his 80th birthday in his presence. His inventions and leaps of imagination had continued in full flow – a revolutionary output had ceased prematurely. Not, however, the reverberations of a long life of provocative thoughts and actions. Talking in 1957 about being in a totally silenced room yet never losing sound completely (the pulse of his heartbeat and the high hum of his nervous system) he said : “Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.”

My own first encounter with the music and ideas of John Cage goes back 40 years to 1967 when becoming organiser of the New Music Group at the Royal Academy of Music involved helping with works like his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and listening to early electronic pieces like Fontana Mix, setting up his Lecture on Nothing and being fascinated by the exotic percussive colours of Construction in Metal. Fellow student composers (Pilkington, Cardale, Shrapnel and Hobbs) read his new books avidly (Silence, A year from Monday, etc) and many an improvisation was inspired by his ideas, letting the music speak for itself.

I’ve always acknowledged Cage as a source of inspiration towards “leaps of imagination”. Rab Wallace, who joined The Whistlebinkies as piper in 1974 (I had joined in 1973 after returning to Glasgow) urged us “to boldly go where no folk group had gone before!” Ten years later the consequences of these outlooks were no doubt part of the reason for the Director of the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, Mark Francis (now at the Gagosian Gallery, London) to ask our group to perform at a special reception for John Cage at the opening of an exhibition of his graphic art. When Cage heard of the nature of the group he was keen to meet us and work out a performance. Mark Francis had titled the evening “music circus for John Cage”. This was also in the midst of the years when Cage developed Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegan’s Wake (1979) into Roaratorio (1986) devised for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. So the party in his honour proceeded; our traditional music, an impromptu performance with poet and songwriter Hamish Henderson and finally the new Cage-devised music, as yet untitled. John Fowler’s description was that “now and again it would sound chaotic, at other times – as when Judith Peacock was suddenly left singing Gaelic alone in a small pool of silence – the effect was hauntingly beautiful.”

Earlier that day – September 2nd, 1984 – we had travelled to Edinburgh to meet Cage for the first time. He requested to explore the various traditional instruments – lowland pipes, clarsach, fiddle, wooden flute, concertina, drum and voice – by talking and listening to us on our own for about half an hour each (the final version of the piece was to have a similar duration!). The group still recall the childlike enthusiasm during that Sunday, spent exploring Scottish traditional music – and between rehearsal and performance fruitlessly seeking a vegan café for his dietary needs. The round about trek ended at a rather ordinary café in South Clerk Street to the surprise of tea-break musicians from The Queen’s Hall. Our concertina player Stuart Eydmann recalls the walk giving Cage the opportunity to admire Scottish architecture relating what he saw to insights from Buckminster Fuller.

My first meeting Cage came on the Friday before – I had arranged with Raymond Ross, editor of *Cencrastus* (an Edinburgh based political, literary periodical) to interview the composer and invited Dr. Stephen Arnold of Glasgow University Music Department to participate.

I was keen to discover how deep rooted his fascination for folk music had become – having heard his collaboration with the Irish musicians in *Roaratorio*. I asked if this interest went 50 years back when he first met his teacher Henry Cowell. He replied : “I hadn’t thought of that but you are certainly right in mentioning it, because through him I was able to hear both folk music from the United States and music from other countries frequently. He had a marvellous collection of records, including those old Edison cylinders. He was teaching what was called “World Music!...”. That was nearly 70 years before the current ‘pop’ usage of the term. Cowell was indeed an important early influence on Cage. In his book *A Roaring Silence: John Cage - A Life*, David Revill recalls that one of Cage’s favourite pieces as a young man was *The Banshee*, an Irish-influenced piano piece by Cowell written when Cage was 13; by the age of 21 he was his composition student. In praising Cowell in his book “*Silence*”, Cage hints at the music – with no score – of *The Whistlebinkies* piece :

“These actions by Cowell are very close to current experimental compositions which have parts but no scores, and which are therefore not objects but processes providing experience not burdened by psychological intentions on the part of the composer.”

Cage had learned the lesson of trying to communicate through composing. In reply to a question during the interview from Stephen Arnold, Cage recounted the experience of *The Perilous Night* earlier in his career : “... I noticed that I had written a piece that from my point of view was sad, even anguished, and that the response on the part of the listeners was to laugh. That’s what led me away from music as communication; to music as, you might say, away of life or a way of changing the mind.”

Cage’s voice on the interview cassette was so softly spoken that a correspondence ensued to clarify faint phrases and name spellings. Finally, his approval arrived in a note dated May 28th 1985 which also contained support of the idea I had put to him of writing a piece for our group: “Your interview is very good. I am enclosing pages with errata. I will consider writing a piece for you but I can’t promise you right now when I will be able to do it. With friendliest greeting to the other Whistlebinkies, John”

In 1990 an opportunity did indeed arise to enable him to create a piece for us - the *Musica Nova Festival* in Glasgow had invited him to be a featured composer. His reply dated 1st March 1990 gave a positive response, for the first time proposing the title *Scottish Circus*. This had now grown into the unlikely scenario of a folk ensemble commissioning a world-renowned composer! So it was with some trepidation that I approached our meeting with him at the White House (yes, a small Glasgow hotel the BBC always seemed to use) at 9am on September 19th 1990: the crunch moment defused instantly. When I asked how much he wished to be paid for the new composition he said “Nothing”.

This recalled the almost legendary account of nearly 50 years before when he had asked Schoenberg to teach him. The reply was : “You may not be able to pay my price.” Cage said : Don’t mention it because I don’t have any money.” Schoenberg then asked: “Well, would you devote your life to music?” Cage

affirmed and Schoenberg concluded: “Then I’ll teach you free of charge.” He related this story in 1984 at the first interview.

The music devised in 1984 had finally evolved into Scottish Circus and the Whistlebinkies premiered it on September 20th 1990 at Glasgow University’s Concert Hall in the composer’s presence. We had the additional task of performing his newly devised version of his 1952 piece 4’33” (it lasted 10 minutes!). This, in turn, had attracted BBC TV news, adding to the heightened atmosphere. Interviewing for Music Current, Steve Sweeney Turner asked for his reaction:

“Well, they’re just lovely. They were playing music that they know, but when they are not playing anything they also did it beautifully! In their performance of 4’33”, I wanted to show that a group is not one thing. I asked them to do it as seven individuals. The directions I gave them were that the silences should be between 33” and 2’40”, but should be measured by an ‘inner clock’: this is apt to be slower than a real clock ...”

Turner asked about similarities to Scottish Circus and his separating out the strands of the group : “Right. That’s what you might call my ‘political’ attitude; toward society in general. In Scottish Circus, I simply asked them to do what they do. Not to do it together, but in circus, so that each musician becomes an individual, rather than part of a fixed group.”

Writing in The Times Educational Supplement, Bill Alexander said : “for me, the freshest listening experience in the Cage catalogue was The Whistlebinkies’ imaginative and relaxed version of the devised Scottish Circus – a fusion of the improvised avant-garde freedom with traditional folk music ...”

Comparing it to Roaratorio, David Revill writes : “without the additional thick texture of tape and voice which is needed in the Joyce piece, the effect of the performance is spacious; tonalities are superimposed non-intentionally as players weave in and out” but that it is “not unlike a Duchamp readymade.”

In November 1992, we performed it at the Van Gogh Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Scotsman critic Mary Miller wrote “And wide eyed, ears straining, we remained, as more haunting phrases crept from all around – from the upper galleries, from distant rooms and hidden corners. John Cage’s Scottish Circus, he devised for The Whistlebinkies, an improvisation of incredible beauty and delicacy.”

That Amsterdam performance had the added poignancy that it followed soon after his death in August of that year. On top of that I had only sent the final version of Scottish Circus – as John had left it with us at Musica Nova – off to his publisher Peters Edition in New York on July 17th. When I heard that he had died on August 12th, I thought there was a strong possibility that he had not seen and approved it. Don Gillespie of Peters Corporation was soon to confirm, however, that the composer had made the final version and approved its publication during the two weeks before he died.

The request for the Scotsman obituary followed; all this resulting in an invitation to what used to be called a ‘wake’ – in New York. On the card, Merce Cunningham wrote : “We are giving John a party. It seemed more suitable to his spirit than a memorial.”

The Chinese composer Tan Dun (fresh from being BBC composer in residence in Glasgow – and a writer on Cage’s ideas in Chinese) helped find accommodation in his artists’ colony in the heart of the (then) very dangerous lands of East Broadway.

The memorial party at The Merce Cunningham Dance Studios in Bethune St. fell on October 31st and was an ideal commemoration, dignified, with no recording or photography. The Irish singer Níonín Ní Riain weaved her plaintive laments through the hundreds of guests, others played and when they tired during the six-hour event I took my role as a wandering flautist. Another six-hour event in tribute – Cagemusicircus – was held the following day with over 50 of his works performed, often over-lapping.

Yoko Ono opened with 0'00" – dedicated to her in 1962, from whence the 'happenings' of the 1960's flowed. Numerous performers contributed, from Laurie Anderson, to Pauline Oliveros and Christian Wolff to our own violin virtuoso Irvine Arditti.

Such enthusiasm is still resounding across the Atlantic and again Cage's graphic art will provide a platform for his music – back in Edinburgh together echoing the events of 1984.

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