

The John Cage Organ Project Halberstadt & the Climate Change

4 pages

Rainer O. Neugebauer, Interview with Warren Senders for Music 4 Climate Justice (M4CJ) music show (November 12th) at 2021 United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow

WS: Please tell us about how you came to do this realization of Cage's piece. What does it mean to you?

RON: In the beginning, there was a piano piece. In 1985, John Cage was asked by the director of the University of Maryland Piano Festival and Competition (William Kapell International Piano Competition), pianist Tom Moore, if he could write a five to ten minute piece for the semifinals. Cage supplied ASLSP with the following performance note: "*The title is an abbreviation of 'as slow as possible.' It also refers to 'Soft morning city! Lsp!' the first exclamations in the last paragraph of Finnegans Wake (James Joyce). There are eight pieces, any one of which must be omitted and any one of which must be repeated. The repetition may be placed anywhere (even before its appearance in the suite... Neither tempo nor dynamics have been notated. Time proportions are given (just as maps give proportional distances). ...*" So we are dealing with a very contradictory instruction: first 'as slow as ...' and at the same time 'as LSP' – as (short) as the syllable LSP, like a gentle sigh a breath, a soft whispering breeze in the morning. That's typical Cage, he wasn't a fan of competitions. If a participant focused on the 'as slow as possible', he probably needed only a little more than a handful of piano strokes to complete 10 minutes.

In 1987 the German organist Gerd Zacher, to whom Cage had already dedicated 'Some of THE HARMONY OF MAINE (Supply Belcher)' in 1978, asked for a new organ piece. Cage, a bit of a lazy anarchist, then rewrote ASLSP, with the assistance of Gerd Zacher, in ORGAN²/ASLSP. The brief performance note state, "*Distinct from ASLSP, all eight pieces are to be played. However, any one of them may be repeated, though not necessary, and as in ASLSP, the repetition may be placed anywhere in the series.*" The organ version shows two systems notated in treble clef and two in bass clef: right hand, left hand, right foot, left foot. Nothing is fixed except pitch and duration. There are 'chords' to be struck synchronously, organized according to a kind of 'durezza e ligature'. The end of one part and the beginning of another is characterized by the same situation: here all the notes or keys are cancelled. The particular and rare event of a 'pause' (break) always occurs in the transition between two parts, in a few cases also within a part. In the question of how the piece is to be realized tonally, the performer is absolutely free, as well as in the question of whether and how many repetitions there should be.

The question of the tempo at which the composition should be realized is much more difficult to answer because of the paradoxical performance note. Sabine Liebner, for example, recorded the eight parts of ASLSP on the piano in 2009 in just over 64 minutes. The first performance of ORGAN²/ASLSP by Gerd Zacher, to whom Cage dedicated this composition, on 21 November 1987 in Metz France, lasted just over 29 minutes with nine parts (repetition of the fifth part). Interestingly, he played the repetition a little faster. So should one realize the piece rather as short as 'LSP' or rather as slow as possible? This is a question that only the performers can decide for themselves. In Halberstadt, the John Cage Organ Foundation has opted for a radical 'as slow as possible' and ultimately answered the question, what does as slow as possible mean for an organ? – the organ is a wind instrument, an aerophone, which can hold its sound as long as it is supplied with, in contrast to the piano, where the fading strings limit the slowness – independently of the instrument.

In 1998, at the second conference for new organ music in Trossingen (in southern Germany), composers, organists, musicologists, organ builders, theologians and philosophers, some of whom had worked closely together with Cage, such as Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Rainer Riehn and Hans-Ola Ericsson, joined with others who were fascinated by Cage, such as Christoph Bossert, Jakob Ullmann and Karin Gastell, to develop the at that time u-topical idea of a realization of this piece based on the lifespan of an organ: the music is over when the instrument breaks down. Good answer, but it raises many new questions: How long is the lifespan of an organ? There are organs that are hundreds of years old, but of course they are not played permanently. What is the difference between permissible maintenance and non-permissible repair of an organ?

First the location for the performance was found in Halberstadt's Burchardi Church through the mediation of Johann Peter Hinz (artist, co-founder of the civil rights movement 'Neues Forum' und and at that time still president of the city council of Halberstadt). Then it was remembered that Halberstadt had already written organ and music history. In the middle of the fourteenth century, in the Halberstadt Cathedral there was probably the first large organ with a 12-tone keyboard. Michael Praetorius - the most important music theorist of the 17th century and composer of the song "Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen" - still saw the organ, however in an unplayable state. In the second volume of his Syntagma Musicum of 1619, he describes the blockwork organ, whose prospectus (the façade) was about 8 m wide, with pipes made of lead (plumb), these thinly covered with tin and painted, the largest of them 32 feet high, and fitted with two times 10 treadle bellows. The completion of this organ was in 1361. The date of completion of this gothic organ, also called the Faber organ (after the clergyman Nicolaus Faber, who is said to have built it) in 1361, was called by Harry Partch in his standard work 'Genesis of a Music' (1949). the "*Fatal Day in Halberstadt*". Fatal because this established the century-long "tyranny" of 7-White-5-Black.

For us, the year 1361 provided the orientation for the duration of the performance: with the turn of the millennium as the mirror axis (1361-2000/2001-2640), the duration was fixed at 639 years and Christoph Bossert and Rainer O. Neugebauer calculated the sound changes of the first part until 2072. On 5 September 2000, Cage's 88th birthday, the project started in Halberstadt.

A year later, the bellows went into action, for 17 months only the sound of the wind was heard. In 2003, the first pipes sounded on the provisional organ. 2006 was very hectic, there were two chord changes in one year. Since 2012, only the two 16-foot bass pipes c' and des' have been sounding - the latter, by the way, until the year 2071. A sound that oscillates between an engine room and the Hamburg harbor. On October 5, 2013, the whole was added to a five-note sound that has not changed for almost seven years, until Cage's 108th birthday in 2020. Since then, seven tones/pipes have been sounding until 5 February 2022.

What does it mean to me?

A difficult question. Cage would answer: "*Don't have to mean anything.*"

For him, tones and sounds have no meaning, they have no names, they are not called Mozart or Beethoven, they are sounds, only sounds, nothing but sounds. They are simply there and they give us a very deep pleasure. Cage was referring to Immanuel Kant, a very well known German philosopher and his Critique of Judgment: "*I'm not so stupid either. There was a German philosopher, who was very well known ... He said there are two things, that don't have to mean anything, one is music and the other laughter.*"

I myself am not a musician and not a musicologist. For me, Cage was first a Fluxus and happening artist and late Dadaist. I saw him in 1979 at the Bonn John Cage Festival reading his Empty Words and was very deeply impressed. So it was clear that I would participate in the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt from the beginning and I became a something like a semi Cage expert. For me John Cage is one of the most important artists of the second

half of the 20th century, not only as a musician, but also as a philosopher, visual artist and writer.

And our 639 years of ORGAN²/ASLSP in Halberstadt? First of all it is a performance of the piece, a serious realization and not just an arbitrary sound installation as muzak for department stores or elevators. It is also a crazy project. The German word for crazy is 'verrückt', 'Verrückt' has a double meaning, not only crazy, but also moved away from its usual, normal place: ver-rückt. In this sense, our project is 'ver-rückt' in that it does not fulfill the usual, normal expectations of music and its performance, it lacks melody and rhythm and no one can hear it all. And it teaches you patience and you need a large portion of skeptical optimism.

Two little things more: I learned to hear in a new way through the project, listen to all sounds, even the inconspicuous, the quiet and the accidental. And because of Cage, no assholes come to Halberstadt; most of them are highly interesting people.

Q: Music is a way for human beings to communicate across large spans of time and space. What can this very slow music teach us about time and timescale? How does being part of such a long-term project change the way you think about the future?

A: Most of the visitors to our project, besides being able to listen to sounds for a longer period of time, are interested in our dealings with time. In a time in which we all have no time, because we are rushed by appointments, because new messages await us on our smartphones, something almost timeless is being created here. We will no longer be there at some point, but the piece and the sounds will still be there.

But what is time? I'm an atheist, but Augustinus - St. Augustine's - dictum still holds true, I think: "If no one asks me about it, I know; if I want to explain it to someone asking, I don't know". Sounds fade away in time. And thus one of the most important ways of experiencing time is music, sound art - experienced present between past and future. In the former monastery church, one has the feeling of experiencing a piece of eternity; time stands still. Thus the Cage project may teach us that instead of going faster, higher and stronger, the future lies rather in deceleration, in slowingness. And maybe it will teach us patience, endurance and empathy.

And I think the Cage sounds, which are not subject to hierarchy, violence, exploitation and domination, give a preview of a society without hierarchy, violence, exploitation and domination. A society in which fear is also abolished.

So if I have to give an interpretation or a meaning, then it is for me: a simultaneously radical, irritating, open and extremely gentle art project, "... past the wit of man ... The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen..." A dream so strangely set in motion; a former monastery church as a sonic dreamspace that allows more than 639 years of the past to become visible and that fills with the force of Blochian hope for more than 639 years into the future.

Here I am a little bit optimistic: If the project continues as long as we have planned, then at least the church building will have experienced a time of peace, as never before in its 800 year history. But this hope is not confidence, it can be disappointed.

Q: Does this music have relevance to our discussion of global climate change? In a time of urgent planetary emergency, what is the contribution of such an artistic project?

A: First, climate change has existential relevance to our musical performance. If it cannot be stopped and reversed, perhaps the Burchardi Church and the organ will be under water, or

due to extreme dryness, Europe will be literally devastated and everything here will be covered under sand.

Stopping and reversing climate change requires a system change. It takes economic change. There is no climate justice without social and economic justice. We need to learn again to live in harmony with nature instead of exploiting it. This requires a global society without permanent faster and faster, without profit maximization, without exploitation and without violence and wars. Such a society may not yet have a place today, but then one should follow a request by Bertolt Brecht and reflect on why it is utopian.

I am here rather pessimistic. Since the 1970 years we know everything about the coming climate catastrophe, but the political actors and unfortunately also large parts of the population does not want to admit it, they have other interests. Carbon dioxide emissions, which are responsible for extreme weather, have just reached a new high again worldwide.

And since it seems a bit silly to call for the UN Climate Conference to make the world revolution, we demand as a first pragmatic-realistic step the massively empowering and expanding of public transport. Individual cars, even electric cars are not a solution. Achieving this will be hard enough.

Art is not directly political, but the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt, like all genuine great art, remembers us of a better future that is possible and provides the patience, endurance, empathy but also discipline needed to reach them.



Rainer O. Neugebauer obtained his doctorate from the University of Bonn under Annette Kuhn, worked as a postman, scientific assistant, educator in a kindergarten, in youth media protection, and as a lecturer for political education at a school for conscientious objectors. From 1992 to 1997, he was professor of political science at the Federal University of Applied Administrative Sciences in Cologne and Bruhl. Since 1997 he has taught as a professor of social sciences at the Harz University of Applied Studies in Halberstadt and was the founding dean of the Department of Public Management there, since 2019 as professor emeritus. He is engaged in politics and culture. Among other things, Neugebauer is chairman of the board of trustees of the John Cage Organ Foundation Halberstadt, which realizes the piece ORGAN2/ASLSP by John Cage over 639 years, and artistic director there. Favorite occupation: bookworming.