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John Cage's 'Roaratorio': the Uses of Confusion

Around 1976 John Cage was asked to make a contribution to an issue of the American journal *Tri-Quarterly* focusing on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Inspired by the commission he began seriously to examine this difficult text; the result was a series of mesostics produced from the text itself.¹

The mesostic is a poetic device that has long fascinated Cage. It consists of a poem in which the middle letter of each line, read vertically, forms a word. As in his earlier experiments, Cage interpreted the form rather loosely in his work on *Finnegans Wake*: taking portions of the text he realigned them to form mesostics spelling 'James Joyce' down the page. This process, first of all, provided for Cage a way into and through the book; examined in their own right, for this external purpose, the letters and syllables became stepping-stones across the confusing and shifting semantic content of Joyce's writing. Eventually Cage read the whole book, created his mesostics and published them as *Writing through Finnegans Wake*,² a work that not only makes a characteristic visual impact but which carries even more perplexingly unresolved suggestions of meaning than the original (Example 1).

After *Writing through Finnegans Wake* was finished, Cage received an invitation from Klaus Schöning of Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne, to write a piece of music based on it in some way. So he began work on *Listing through Finnegans Wake*, which was to have been a montage of all the sounds mentioned in the book—presumably assembled sequentially in the order of their appearance. Though this in itself appeared an impossibly large task, the project was extended and enriched still further. The result was *Roaratorio: an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, completed in 1979.³ In its original tape form the work was first broadcast on Westdeutscher Rundfunk on 22 October 1979 as a radio play; it

received the Carl Szuka Prize for the best radio-phonetic work of the year. This radio version is distributed by WDR and has been widely re-broadcast. The work was performed daily for a week at IRCAM in Paris (where the final mixing and realisation of the work took place) from 18 to 24 January 1981, and live by Cage and a group of musicians, with taped sounds, in London on 28 May 1982 as part of the Almeida Theatre Cage Festival. Cage has written a 'score' of the work, or rather of its construction, by means of which a similar piece could be derived from any book.⁴

The work consists of three superimposed layers: readings from *Writing through Finnegans Wake*; a random selection of sounds associated with the original text; and performances of traditional Irish music. I shall examine the three layers in turn, to assess their effect both as pure sound objects and as the means of transmitting the conceptual preoccupations that can be detected in all Cage's work and are strongly in evidence in this late creation of his.

Cage contributes layer one, adopting a chant-like, sing-song delivery of selections from *Writing through Finnegans Wake*. The sound of his voice is constantly being obscured by the other layers, so that to attempt to follow the words is futile; only occasionally, when the sound level of the other two layers momentarily drops, is the listener reminded that the reading continues throughout. The construction of this read text has obvious homologies with Cage's approach to the universe of sound. Perhaps, literature being more amenable to description and analysis than music, Cage's attitude to the text will help to delineate and clarify his musical preoccupations.

Much of Cage's writing has been influenced by two statements, made by Norman O. Brown and Thoreau. Brown wrote that syntax is the arrangement of an army;⁵ Thoreau that when he heard a sentence he heard feet marching. Cage himself has been attracted to Oriental poetry because of its apparently non-syntactical form.⁶ His assault on *Finnegans Wake* is an attempt to demilitarise language. For all its verbal innovativeness and playfulness, *Finnegans Wake* still uses, or demands that the reader recognise, a conventional syntax. If this syntax is 'the arrangement of an army' then Cage's mesostics are a demobilisation of *Finnegans Wake*—the words freed from grammatical regimentation to form their own associations of meaning.

Example 1 First and last mesostics from *Writing through Finnegans Wake*

wroth with twone nathand J oe
 A
 Malt
 jh Em
 S hen
 pft J schute
 Of finnegan
 that the humpt Y hillhead of humself
 is at the kno Ck out
 in th E park
 i'm sure he squirted J uice in his eyes
 to m Ake
 theM flash
 for flight E ning me
 S till and all he was awful fond to me
 J ust a whisk
 Of
 pit Y
 a Cloud
 in p Eace and silence

The complexity of the original text suggests an almost infinite number of readings; Cage's treatment simply gives expression to the conceptual implications inherent in Joyce's radical handling of the form of the novel. Joyce's challenge to the classic realist text, with its acceptance of the convention of an omniscient narrator, is extended by Cage's procedures: all readings are equally acceptable, a random reading no less so than one dominated by Cage's declared enemies, creativity, taste, and memory. The mesostic reading points out that the text, like the world, is capable of an infinite number of meaningful combinations. Aleatoric compositional procedures alert us to the musical potential of all sound.

The second layer of the work consists of a montage of sounds inspired by the book. As well as attempting in *Listing through Finnegans Wake* to build up all the sounds described or alluded to by Joyce, Cage also decided to characterise in sound all the places mentioned in the book. His task was made easier in one respect by the recent publication of Louis Mink's *A Finnegans Wake Gazetteer*,⁷ but the number of places proved to be too large. In the end 626 places were selected randomly from the book. There are 626 pages in *Finnegans Wake*. Sounds from some of the places were procured by Cage on a field trip to Ireland accompanied by John Fulleman, who also assisted in the editing of the montage. Other sounds were solicited from radio stations all round the world, the choice of sounds being left to the recipients of the requests. Finally extensive use was made of the sound archive of WDR.

The use of places as a frame of reference recalls Cage's directions for the realisation of the piece *Variations IV*. In that work the randomly disposed transparent sheets (familiar tools of his aleatoric compositional technique) are superimposed on a map of the performing area, and the instructions for performance deduced from the combinations of point and line that result. This is the principle of notation expanded, where position is taken to represent sound. In the compositional strategy for the construction of the second layer in *Roaratorio*, the world, or at least that of the book, provides the 'score' of the montage; in this world the places mentioned in the text are like the imperfections in the paper which formed the basis of *Music for Piano* in 1952.

The third layer of sound in *Roaratorio* is provided by a handful of Irish musicians. Having sought the advice of Ciaran MacMathuna, in charge of traditional music for Radio Eireann, Cage selected several of the most highly regarded traditional performers to play in the work.⁸ They were recorded and the tape mixed down onto the other layers for the WDR performance, but they also later participated in the live performances. Their contribution is of the highest quality in authenticity of style and skill of execution, but in the context of the work as a whole it raises difficulties of a nature that Cage has discussed in his writings, but which he has been unable fully to resolve in his music.

In his discussion of Ives's music in *A Year from Monday*⁹ Cage makes several comments that have some bearing on *Roaratorio*. The first concerns the anecdotal or folksy elements in Ives's work, of which he writes:

The American aspects of his music strike me, as endearing and touching and sentimental as they are, they strike me as the part of his work that is not basically interesting. If one is going to have referential material like that I would be happier if it was global in extent rather than specific to one country as is the referential material of Ives' music.¹⁰

The traditional music in *Roaratorio* poses the same problems of referentiality and sentimentality that Cage pinpoints in Ives's music. As it is presented in the finished work, the musical material is somewhat fragmentary, but even though the musical details of the sound product are not fully available to the listener, certain extamusical associations ring loud and clear. Cage's predilection for this music has all the marks of a Romantic American view of Ireland; his use of it to impart 'Irishness', a sort of cosmetic atmosphere, is not only uninteresting (to echo his comment on Ives) but offensive to anyone who regards traditional music as a self-sufficient form.

After criticising Ives for his use of referential material Cage praises him for his attitude to the relationship between an individual line and the dense polyphonic texture in which it might be situated. In such a musical situation, he says, there are two possibilities: the line may 'emerge' or we may 'enter in'. By this he means that the arrangement of the sounds may be such that the line will stand out, or we may have to immerse ourselves in a dense texture and find a line to follow. In the first case, everyone hears the same. In the second it may be that what the listener hears he or she hears alone. Cage thus contrasts Ives's referential themes with what he describes (without any pejorative suggestion) as 'the mud of Ives'. Ives's approach to polyphony, according to Cage, invites the possibility of the listener's not knowing what is happening.

The density of texture in *Roaratorio* is intended to obscure all the constituent sounds. Elements of the first and second layers occasionally break through and make themselves recognisable. But the third layer, because of the familiarity and potency of conventional structures, is forever pushing itself out of the 'mud'; even when it is obscured by the second layer, its inexorable rhythm and musical syntax ring on in the listener's mind until the sound becomes audible again and rejoins the mental construct that he has maintained in its absence. The problem for the conceptual balance of the work is that the musical material of the third layer is almost indestructible. In juxtaposing this highly structured music with the somewhat randomly constructed first and second layers, Cage is always in danger of toppling the work. The focusing of the ear caused by the third layer is clearly an example of an 'emerging' line in exactly the sense Cage intended in his discussion of Ives's work.

In practice, however, this third line does provide the work with a reassuring musical continuity that is missing in the other two layers. It sustains the listener's attention in a way that the montage and reading could not. Perhaps this is an example of the triumph of Cage's theatrical sense over his artistic philosophy.

In a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Wilfrid Mellers commented on a live performance of *Roaratorio* in such a way as to show that he misses many of the most important points of the work. But through his very errors of judgment he demonstrates some of the inconsistencies in Cage's approach discussed above. Of the third layer he says:

[The] folk musicians intermittently create their 'musics of necessity', which spring from the lives they've led in the contexts of tradition but which, *going on*, become at once historical and eternally present. What they make is not the artefacts of Western 'works' of art but a *continuum*, existing within the flux we're surrounded by. That they endure makes our awareness of chaos peculiarly poignant.¹¹

According to Mellers's interpretation, the players are not so much playing music as expressing some natural, archaic, historical and social collective

consciousness. This is no more than sentimentality, which patronises the musicians. They are producing "works" of art' in quite the same way as a 'Western' performer, and it may be that Mellers does not recognise this because their music is treated in *Roaratorio* merely as an ornament to the larger composition. Further, that Mellers can construe the rest of the work as chaos by comparison with the third layer only points up Cage's misjudgment of the aural pull that each layer is capable of exerting. If Cage had followed his own principles of polyphony, as expressed in his comments on Ives's music, the musical marriage of the diverse sounds might have been more satisfactorily achieved.

I regard the montage as the most significant layer in the piece. The sounds are not clearly distinguishable: as Cage stated in a radio interview with Klaus Schöning, 'A large amount of what we experience is destroyed.'¹² *Roaratorio* exposes for what it is the illusion that what we hear is privileged over what is obscured. The self-effacing montage renders what is before our eyes as inaccessible as what is behind our backs: the sounds that present themselves to us are whipped away and replaced almost as we focus on them. We may accept the randomness with resignation, sinking ourselves quiescently in it, or we can attempt to control it formally, seeking the relationships of sequence, contrast, and similarity that may be found in any group of sounds. Paradoxically both possibilities are offered to us simultaneously.

Do the chance procedures of Cage result in a work that is truly random, a mere lucky dip into the universe of sound? One's aural experience of his music suggests that they do not. The grip of the tyranny of taste and memory may have been weakened by Cage's compositional techniques, but in spite of his protestations, personality impresses itself upon the sound object, to the extent that it is recognisably the work of Cage. Whether because he has restricted himself to a certain range of choices, or because he consistently balances contrast and similarity in certain degrees, or because of some other recurring characteristic, a conformity of style can be perceived, not only in the composition considered as a conceptual art object, but even in the physical sound product.

Cage's aleatoric procedures in both music and literature are marked by common paradoxes. Out of a deeply held conviction he aims to dismantle the central position of the composer as the individual who structures the experiences of others; instead the randomness of the universe is harnessed to act as designer of his musical events. But in the context of Western musical thought, this means nothing less than that the products of chance, and actions beyond his knowledge or control become Cage's aesthetic property. Far from extinguishing his aesthetic role, Cage has elevated it. Thus *4'33"* has not turned everyman into the composer of his own symphony on his front porch, as Ives and Cage himself would have hoped, though it reveals both silence and ambient sound as musically significant; rather it has appropriated part of the experience of not music, has taken 'silence' and tacked onto it 'John Cage ©1952'.

This is not to accuse Cage of deceit in his aesthetic manifestos. Indeed, the strength of his music comes from the complexity of its conceptual basis and the contradictory nature of its principles. If his ideas were simply clear, logical, and sequential, then they would be better expressed in language. In music Cage can present himself simultaneously as composer and not composer. This or that performance is both a unique musical event and a collection of sounds as unpremeditated and unstructured as any

we might hear around us. It is within the power of music to express these complexities and confusions, and perhaps no-one has opened the way to their expression as faithfully as Cage. Rather than see *Roaratorio* as a musical failure because of the uncomfortable inconsistencies of its construction, we might look at it as the expression of a central contradiction: that of the relationship between randomly constructed *musique concrète* and highly structured conventional musical forms.

¹ John Cage, '7 out of 23', *Tri-Quarterly*, no.30 (Winter 1977), pp.174-8. This is a collection of seven mesostics taken from *Finnegans Wake* without altering the sense of the original.

² John Cage, *Writing through Finnegans Wake*, University of Tulsa Monograph no.16 (Tulsa, Oklahoma: University of Tulsa Press, 1978); also published as a special supplement to *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol.15 (1978).

³ The script of the piece, with additional explanatory material, is published as *Roaratorio: an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 1980).

⁴ Details of Cage's compositional practice in the piece are given in his article 'On having received the Carl Sczuka Prize for *Roaratorio*, Donaueschingen 10/20/79', *The Composer* (1980), and in Cage's radio interview with Klaus Schöning, made in connection with the original tape version of the piece.

⁵ See John Cage, *M* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), p.[ii].

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Louis O. Mink, *A Finnegans Wake Gazetteer* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978).

⁸ The following musicians were heard in the original tape version of *Roaratorio*: Séamus Ennis (pipes), Paddy Glackin (fiddle), Matt Malloy (flute), Peadar and Mell Mercier (*bodhrán*), and Joe Heaney (voice).

⁹ *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), pp.37-42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.41.

¹¹ Wilfrid Mellers, 'John Cage at Seventy', *Times Literary Supplement* (11 June 1982), p.637.

¹² See note 4 above.