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978-1-107-01432-9 - John Cage and David Tudor: Correspondence on Interpretation and Performance

Martin Iddon

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John Cage and David Tudor

John Cage is best known for his indeterminate music, which leaves a significant level of creative decision-making in the hands of the performer. But how much license did Cage allow? Martin Iddon's book is the first volume to collect the complete extant correspondence between the composer and the pianist David Tudor, one of Cage's most provocative and significant musical collaborators. The book presents their partnership from working together in New York in the early 1950s, through periods on tour in Europe, until the late stages of their work from the 1960s onwards, carried out almost exclusively within the frame of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Tackling the question of how much creative flexibility Tudor was granted, Iddon includes detailed examples of the ways in which Tudor realized Cage's work, especially focusing on *Music of Changes* to *Variations II*, to show how composer and pianist influenced one another's methods and styles.

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Preface

In one of John Cage’s final letters to David Tudor, he discusses the possibility of preparing a volume devoted to Tudor’s work. What Cage proposes is “not a conventional biography but a togetherness of a variety of materials.” In a sense, the current volume follows Cage’s lead, though certainly not in the format that he himself might have envisaged. Through the presentation of the correspondence between Cage and Tudor and a critical examination of Tudor’s working practices in realizing Cage’s scores, using many of the archival sources Tudor left behind in the form of his working materials, the present volume represents a biography, of sorts, of the life of Cage and Tudor’s creative partnership, created by placing these disparate materials together. Inevitably, such a biography is partial: though Tudor was certainly rigorous in his preservation of materials, doubtless not everything has survived; similarly, as noted below, the correspondence itself is certainly incomplete (not to mention being empty of the matter of the many conversations that must have passed between the two); third, Cage and Tudor performed together more often as accompanists for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company than in concert as a piano duo. It may be hoped that a future scholar will find the materials presented here helpful in explicating the additional complex of relationships formed when Cage’s music, especially in Tudor’s hands, encountered Cunningham’s choreography. Finally, what is presented here does not engage with Tudor’s work as a composer, beginning with the one-off performance of *Fluorescent Sound* (1964) in Stockholm on 13 September 1964, and becoming increasingly central to Tudor’s work, especially after the composition of *Rainforest* (1968). Although Cage and Tudor continued to work together within the context of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company throughout their creative lives, after this point Tudor brought nothing new by Cage into his solo repertoire, rarely performed as a solo pianist, and, as noted below, only worked on a small number of new Cage pieces in ensemble, in ways which it is sometimes extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, accurately to trace through archival sources. Nevertheless, John Holzaepfel’s biography of Tudor, which is currently under development, may be expected to provide much new information regarding this aspect of Tudor’s work.

Reading the correspondence between John Cage and David Tudor can be a frustrating experience. This is, not least, because it is clearly tantalizingly incomplete. Tudor was, with the exception of a beautifully personal and intimate sequence of correspondence with his partner, the poet and potter M. C. Richards, not a great correspondent, at least not when compared with the much more prolific Cage. Similarly, the amount of correspondence written to John Cage in his lifetime was vast, but only a comparatively small fraction of that correspondence survives in the papers held at Northwestern University.¹ Not only that, but until August 1954, Cage’s home in the so-called “Bozza Mansion” on East Seventeenth Street – and, between 1953 and 1954, Cunningham’s (Nicholls 2007, 62) – was near enough to Tudor’s home in New York City that face-to-face meetings were more common than correspondence.² Moreover, in August 1954, Cage, along with Tudor and M. C. Richards, departed New York City for rural Stony Point, on the banks of the Hudson River, near to Albany in upstate New York, some 150 miles from New York City itself.³ Again, because they lived in such close proximity to one another, the correspondence in this period is patchy, occurring most often when Tudor or Cage was away from Stony Point on tour. In later years, after Cage’s return to New York City in 1970, having in any case been increasingly away from Stony Point during the 1960s (Nicholls 2007, 86), Cage and Tudor spent a great deal of their time on tour together, most often with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, with the result again that much of their communication was undertaken in person. The experience of reading their correspondence is thus often most akin to finding oneself only hearing snatches of a much larger conversation.

It is, in part, from a belief that, to have a better understanding of what is doubtless one of the most significant, and enduring, musical collaborations of the twentieth century, it is necessary to expand upon the information presented by this correspondence, that the current volume takes its shape. The chapters of the volume are divided between not only the presentation of

¹ Jeanette L. Casey, then Public Service Librarian at Northwestern’s Music Library, now Head of the Music Library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, informed me that much of Cage’s correspondence had been destroyed in a fire. This occurred in 1953, meaning that many materials dating from earlier than this point are missing.

² The Bozza Mansion was named after its landlord (Nicholls 2007, 49). The composer Morton Feldman (b. January 12, 1926, New York City, NY; d. September 3, 1987, Buffalo, NY) also lived in the same block of apartments between 1950 and 1952.

³ The town of Stony Point itself was founded in 1865. The attraction for Cage, however, was the foundation of a new artistic community there by the architect Paul Williams, perhaps inspired by Black Mountain College, at which he had taught, and for which he designed the Science Building and Pottery Shop.

Cage and Tudor’s correspondence but also text which examines Tudor’s working practices in realizing Cage’s scores (most especially, but not exclusively, his indeterminate scores), building on seminal work by, amongst others, John Holzaepfel, James Pritchett, and William Fetterman. While developing the techniques used by these scholars to explain the relationships between score and performance in Tudor’s realizations, these portions of the volume suggest that the realizations themselves can be viewed as representing three different and distinct types: first, the more-or-less determinate realizations of more-or-less determinate scores; second, the more-or-less determinate realizations of more-or-less indeterminate scores; and, third, the more-or-less indeterminate realization of more-or-less indeterminate scores. These categories also have a broad temporal dimension, although there is a degree to which such periodization results in cases of overlap. The first category includes Cage’s scores from 1951 until 1956, most particularly *Music of Changes* (1951) and the *Music for Piano* series (1952–56). The second category includes those pieces where, although the score’s relationship to the sounding image overtly avoids the impression of one-to-one correspondence (which is to say those scores where a musically trained reader would be incapable of imagining an approximation of the final result), Tudor’s realizations reimagine the pieces’ indeterminate notations on five-line staves, even if using additional sound-producing resources not present within the piano (including piano preparation, squeakers, radio receivers, rulers, and so on). This period is brief, though hugely significant, given the pieces it encompasses: three pieces which are central to Cage’s output fall into this category, *Winter Music* (1957), the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58), and *Variations I* (1958). The *Haiku* of 1958 are also a part of this grouping, as is *Fontana Mix* (1958). Since the former is, in many respects, simply a variant of *Variations I* and not, in and of itself, a development of Cage’s ideas beyond this point, it is not considered within this grouping, but I return to it in the examination of Tudor’s ‘late’ realizations, since it was probably only in 1987 that Tudor first performed it. Similarly, *Fontana Mix* is ignored, not because it is insignificant from a Cageian perspective, but because its realization has little relevance to Tudor. Finally, from the end of 1958 onwards, Tudor developed ways of realizing scores where his realization would include increasingly large degrees of indeterminacy. This last category may also be conveniently subdivided. First, *Music Walk* (1958), *Cartridge Music* (1960), and *Theatre Piece* (1960) all translate Cage’s notation into text. Arguably, this really represents a liminal stage between determinate and indeterminate realization; the texts continue to provide relatively accurate instructions for the activities to be carried out. However, I will suggest that these realizations are indeterminate

in numerous respects, most especially in terms of pitch content. Second, Tudor’s realization of *Variations II* (1961) represents the culmination, in many respects, of his work on Cage’s materials. Here, it is perfectly possible to perform directly from a realization which is itself indeterminate, where it would be impossible in using Cage’s materials (or at least impossible without a healthy, or unhealthy, dose of improvisation). Although parametric characteristics are largely determined, actual events – the results of these characteristics – remain indeterminate.

As should be clear from the above, this periodization is not unproblematic. Though the three categories are helpful in terms of delineating certain aspects of Tudor’s practice and demonstrate the way in which this changes over time, they disguise certain aspects of continuity, which I hope will become clear in what follows. Not least amongst these continuities is the fastidiousness with which Tudor approached Cage’s scores, and the manner in which meticulous measuring of the dimensions of properties suggested within the score informs Tudor’s readings from *Music of Changes* onward. Moreover, the way in which the trajectory proposed appears to reach its apotheosis in Tudor’s realization of *Variations II* suggests that it is here that Tudor’s work with Cage ends. There is some truth in this. As noted above, Tudor added nothing further by Cage to his solo repertoire after this point and, when he returned to performance in the 1980s, after he was firmly established as a composer of electronic music, it was pieces such as *Solo for Piano* (1957–58) from the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* and *Variations II* that were the mainstay of his performances. Nevertheless, those new pieces which Tudor performed as a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company after *Variations II* utilized techniques that Tudor had already applied elsewhere: *Telephones and Birds* (1977) is extremely closely related in its realization to the material of *Theatre Piece*, *Cartridge Music*, and *Music Walk*, though it contains a lower degree of specificity than those pieces; *Five Stone Wind* (1988), too, although it is more greatly focused on Tudor’s electronic processing of recordings of earth-vibrations, uses a similar time-bracketed set of textual instructions to those pieces. Moreover, Tudor also performed Cage’s *Four*³ (1991) to Cunningham’s *Beach Birds*, but no materials in the David Tudor Papers indicate what methods Tudor may have used in realizing his part. Finally, what follows seeks to offer at least provisional answers to questions posed by Holzaepfel by engaging with the complex questions of authorship and ontology in pieces which are, as a result of realizations simultaneously determinate and indeterminate, at one and the same time the output of both composer and performer, through a consideration of whether Cage’s and Tudor’s activities can be considered two distinct types of artistic activity, here termed *praxis* and

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poiesis, following a model proposed by Agamben (Holzaepfel 1994, 65–66). Interleaved with this text, I present the complete extant correspondence between Cage and Tudor, the various parts of which are preserved in the Music Library of Northwestern University Library in Evanston, Illinois, and in the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California. All letters are reproduced verbatim. In letters that are largely typewritten, square brackets are used to distinguish handwritten portions.

Naturally, this volume relies on the help, support, and advice of many others. I would particularly like to thank Jeanette Casey, Mark Zelesky, and D. J. Hoek, who made my research visit to Northwestern University in July 2007 extremely profitable; similarly, Nancy Perloff and the staff of the Special Collections department at the Getty Research Institute could not have been more helpful during visits there in March 2007 and January–February 2009. I am grateful also to the British Academy and to Lancaster University for grants which enabled me to carry out the archival work which lies at the heart of this volume.

Many conversations have also informed the work. It would not have been completed without the input of, amongst others, Trevor Bača, Jason Cady, Fabrice Fitch, Mary Harris, Robin Maconie, David Nicholls, Michael Pisaro, Ian Power, Antti Sakari Saario, John Schneider, and Mic Spencer. Particularly, I would like to thank John Holzaepfel, without whose advice the correspondence would have been both less accurate in its dating, and less rich in the commentary which runs alongside it. Nevertheless, any mistakes which remain are entirely my own.