

JOHN CAGE IN SOVIET RUSSIA

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Abstract: John Cage's music was little known in the Soviet Union until the late 1960s, as official communist cultural policy would not allow his music to be performed or researched. This makes it all the more surprising that the only visit by the composer to Soviet Russia had become possible by 1988. The Soviet officials were planning a large festival of contemporary music in St Petersburg in 1988. With the changing climate Tikhon Khrennikov, the secretary of the All Soviet Union League of Composers, appointed by Stalin in 1948, was keen to be seen as a progressive at the time of Gorbachev's perestroika, and he approved the invitation for Cage to be present at the performances of his works in St Petersburg. This article includes interviews with the composer conducted by the author in 1987–1989, as well as recollections of the meetings with Cage at his home in New York City and in Moscow.

Photo. 1 - B/W online, B/W in print



John Cage

John Cage's music was little known in the Soviet Union until the late 1960s. The official communist cultural policy would not allow his music, or the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg or Hindemith, to be performed or researched. Cage's scores, and his book *Silence*, were first brought to Soviet Russia either by Pierre Boulez or Luigi Nono when they visited in the later years of the Khrushchev Thaw. These materials were left with the composer Edison Denisov, who was a long-standing friend of Boulez and Nono and one of the leaders of the Russian avant-garde music and art scene. Denisov's library was frequently visited by many Russian musicians, as it was the largest depository of scores and recordings by Western avant-garde composers, as well as of music by Schoenberg, Webern and Berg. The Moscow Conservatory library also had many of these scores, which were bought in the 1920s when the music of the Second Viennese School was widely performed in Russia, and some Russian avant-garde scores were published by Universal Edition in Vienna. However, these scores were locked in library storage, and Soviet students were not even allowed to look at them until the early 1960s.

Cage's music was performed, but not widely, and never in major concert halls. The leading figure in performances of Cage's music was the pianist Alexei Lubimov. He presented many compositions by Cage at various 'alternative' venues, such as Dom Uchenykh (The House of Scientists) and FIAN (The Institute of Physics of the Academy of Science), but the philharmonic halls remained closed to Cage's music until the 1980s. This makes it all the more surprising that a visit by the composer to Soviet Russia had become possible by 1988.

I remember my first meeting with John Cage. It was in March 1987, while I was in the US on a research trip, working at the Charles Ives

Archive at Yale University. The meeting with Cage was arranged by the tireless Vivian Perlis, then curator of Oral History Institute at Yale. I was very nervous, visibly shaking as I approached Cage's loft apartment on the corner of West 18th street. But as soon as I exited the elevator and saw Cage, I immediately felt at ease. In fact, I have never felt that easy with anyone of that stature ... I think he was one of very few people with the almost physical presence of an aura, like a saint.

Cage shared the large loft studio with Merce Cunningham. The modest apartment, with no walls, just partitions, was full of plants – you can see some of them in my pictures taken there. Cage was then very much preoccupied with his etching, and indeed his apartment looked more like an artist's studio than a composer's study.

AI: *You have so many plants here ...*

JC: Yes, I love them ... Don't you?

AI: *Yes, but it is rather unusual in Russia to have so many plants at home...*

JC: I think I have about 200 of them ... Not only plants ... These stones I brought from Virginia.



Photo. 2 - B/W online, B/W in print

John Cage's Studio in New York,
1987

AI: *How long have you been living in this studio?*

JC: About ten years now, I am very happy here, and I hope never to move out.

AI: *But it is rather noisy here. (We could hardly talk because of the terrible, almost unbearable traffic noise outside)*

JC: No! I love it; I hear it as music ...

Cage was then completing his *Europera* for the Frankfurt première later that year.

JC: It should be very funny. There is no relevance between the singing and the costumes; so someone singing from *Carmen* might appear in Japanese dress . . . I am doing everything, including the decor and the costumes, and these represent composers and famous singers – Shaliapin, Galli-Curci, Rimsky-Korsakov (laughing).

AI: *The score, as I see it, looks quite traditional in terms of notation?*

JC: It is taken from various operatic fragments. I was researching at the Metropolitan Opera Library and found many operatic fragments – from Gluck to Puccini – from 1 to 16 bars each . . . The title – *Europera* – is Europe and Opera in one word. After the première they might show it in Miami and in Houston, and maybe somewhere else. But if it is too popular, too successful, then it is my fault . . .

The main purpose of my visit was to touch base with regard to Cage's possible visit to Russia. The Soviet Composers' Union officials were planning a large festival of contemporary music in St Petersburg in 1988, and with the changing climate it became quite possible to discuss the Cage visit with them. This festival was in fact the Soviet response to the festival of Soviet music 'Making Music Together', which was organized in 1988 by the Boston-based conductor Sarah Caldwell, together with Rodion Shchedrin, then the first secretary (i.e., the head) of the Russian Composers' Union. Tikhon Khrennikov, Shchedrin's line manager, and secretary of the All Soviet Union League of Composers, was keen to be seen as a progressive at the time of Gorbachev's perestroika. The Boston festival in 1988 was a great event, with many Soviet musicians invited to the city. Many Soviet officials attended, but so too did leading Russian figures including Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Korndorf. It was Shchedrin, who managed to convince his much more conservative colleagues to give the green light to both the Boston event and to its Soviet 'replica' in Leningrad.

Cage had never been to Russia before, and he was very interested in visiting the country. His former wife, Xenia Andreevna Kashevarova, was a Russian woman from Alaska. She spoke some Russian, and Cage himself pronounced her name perfectly, with no accent whatsoever.

It was agreed in principle at our meeting that Cage would come to Russia, and that the group The Bolshoi Soloists (of which I was director) would play one of his latest works, *Music for . . .*. The work didn't require any conducting (indeed there was no score, only the parts) and the instrumentation was flexible – adapting to the type and number of instruments available.

In a letter to me, dated 28 June 1987, Cage wrote:

A lady called me last night saying you need 'Music for . . .'. Please let me know for which instr[uments]. It exists now for voice, 2 pianos, 4 perc, vn, cl, tbn, flute and cello (12 parts altogether so far). I am writing to see if the address works.

Cordially, John.

Since we had 14 players in the group, it was called *Music for 14* in the festival programme. Cage promised to contact his publishers (Peters) immediately, and ask them to send the parts to us in Moscow.

At the end of our meeting Cage had asked me to take some of his scores to Moscow: he had been asked by the young Moscow musicologist Nina Drozdetskaia to send her his music. These kinds of requests were quite typical in the Soviet era, and understandably so. Stravinsky was also bombarded by requests to send copies of his works to Russia.¹ Cage was happy to do this, and gave me the scores. I left his apartment highly inspired, completely enlightened, as if on wings. I'll never forget that very special feeling.

Next spring, in April 1988, I visited America again, as a performer at the 'Making Music Together' festival in Boston. One morning the telephone rang in my hotel room. 'This is John Cage', said the familiar voice. He was calling to discuss certain details of his planned trip to Leningrad. I told him about the latest arrangements (the most difficult one at the time was arranging the visa).

Finally, in May 1988 Cage arrived in Moscow. Pianist Alexei Lubimov and I had decided to go to Sheremetyevo Airport to meet him. He arrived via the VIP entrance together with Nicholas Slonimsky, carrying a small bag, which he kept with him all the time. When we asked him what was in the bag, he replied: this is food I brought for myself from New York (I think there were some dried mushrooms and a pumpkin in there). It was quite an experience to watch Cage and Slonimsky (who was then 94) talking and making jokes in the car. . .

In Moscow, Cage was surrounded by various officials, and also by representatives of the Schirmer publishing house, including the musicologist Laurel Fay. His wish was to see the real Moscow and how people lived there. So my wife Natasha and I invited him to our apartment, but first we went together to one of the city's most important churches – Voskreseniia Sloveschego na Uspenskom Vrazhke (Church of the Resurrection in the Assumption Ravine). Cage was extremely impressed by the strong religious atmosphere of this small and intimate, yet overcrowded, church, and by the intense mood of the service.

After the church we went to our apartment, near the Iugo-Zapadnaia tube station, in the south-west of Moscow. Just near the entrance to the apartment block, Cage noticed a small lawn with rather dirty grass and dandelions: my neighbours used to walk their dogs there. He suddenly stopped and asked us to wait while he cut some dandelions and enthusiastically put them into his plastic bag with the food he brought. 'I pay a lot of money for these plants at the market in New York City; this is what I eat regularly!'

Having collected the dandelions, Cage happily entered our apartment and immediately asked Natasha to give him a frying pan. He showed us how to clean the plants properly, washed them and put them in the pan. He was really so eager to eat them . . . In the course of the evening, Cage drank a lot of vodka with us, but he ate only the dandelions and some mushrooms he had brought with him.

Present at the party were the composer Vladimir Martynov, the pianist Alexei Lubimov, the musicologist Laurel Fay, the Schirmer representative, my wife (cellist Natalia Pavlutskaia) and myself. Martynov, who admired Cage and saw him as one of the composers who had influenced him greatly, proposed a toast in broken English: 'I love you, Mr Cage!' After quite a lot of vodka we finally tried the

¹ See the Stravinsky correspondence at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, particularly before his trip to the USSR (correspondence:1961–62).



John Cage, Alexander Ivashkin,
Alexei Lubimov in Moscow, 1988

fried grass, as Cage was encouraging us to eat it. It had a bitter and unpleasant taste. 'Let's drink more', said Lubimov, 'otherwise it is impossible to even touch this terrible stuff ...'

Inevitably, we asked Cage many questions. One of them was about his piece 4'33". He said: 'I'm very happy this piece helped so many people to understand music better'.

'Which church do you belong to?' we asked Cage. He replied:

JC: Formally Presbyterian ... However, I am collecting the opinions of people from different countries in order to free my mind from my own likes and dislikes. It is opened rather than locked. In India in the 19th century there was a preacher, Sri Ramakrishna. He was the first ever religious leader who had a visionary experience of everything that we call 'religion', including Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. And he said that God is like a lake, and believers enter the lake to get water, calling this water by different names. Therefore, I have decided that the question is really which flavour to choose. I had chosen the flavour of Zen Buddhism. And as soon as I made this choice,

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Photo. 4 - B/W online, B/W in print



Collecting dandelions, Moscow 1988

Suzuki arrived from Japan and started to teach at Columbia University, and I took his course for two years. He helped me enormously, and brought me away from the border of self-destructing intentions. [At this point Cage drew the picture below.]

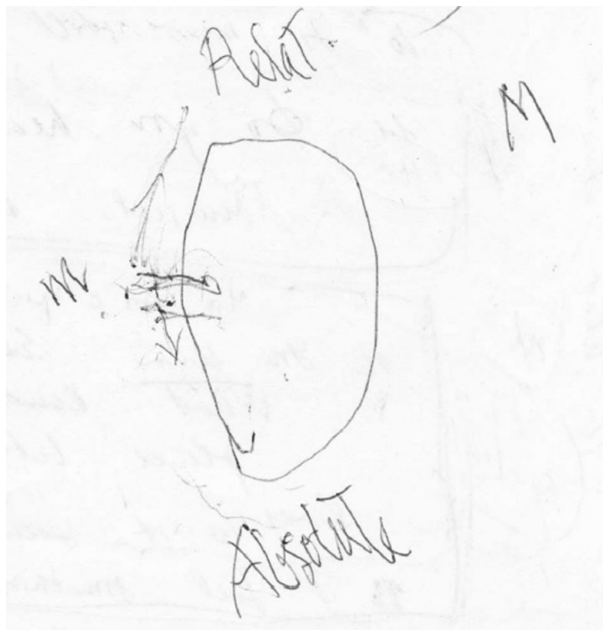


Photo. 5 - B/W online, B/W in print

Relative and Absolute (Cage's autograph)

Here is our mind structure: parallel lines represent the 'ego'. Big 'M' means the Mind, small 'm' – the mind of our 'ego'. And here, to the left – the world of relativity. But here, on the right, is the ground, the foundation of the Absolute, which is sometimes called

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God. 'Ego' understands the relative world through our senses [moving anticlockwise]. And the Absolute is understood by the dreams [in the opposite direction]. So this gives us a circle. If you are entering an unconscious dream, it frees you from your likes and dislikes. This is why I use chance, to free myself and my music from my likes and dislikes. I use chance to be strong enough. Do you understand? This is what I am doing. Therefore, the most important principle I follow is indeterminacy. It is quite hard to understand because there are so many incorrect things in the present, and there were so many of them in all times. But we have to keep ourselves strong in order to be able to make changes for the better. However, we can't force people to make these changes. I can write books and make music, and I would like to believe that people think like me. But I can't force them to think like me. I hope people will use my music in the way I understand it. I am not interested in politics, but I am interested in individuals and in society. I would like to be together with people, and I believe we can achieve much if we are united.

AI: *Do you compose electronic music at present?*

JC: No, because David Tudor does it so much better . . . Previously, I was making what we call now 'live electronics'. Pure electronic music only happens in a studio, but we have moved to concert halls! One piece I made relatively recently, and I think it is an interesting work, was created with a computer, starting out from Henry David Thoreau's essay 'Civil Disobedience'. I made a montage of the text combining it with the titles of Erik Satie's *Messe des pauvres*, as Satie – just like Thoreau – was convinced that a human being is most creative when poor. Therefore, there is a connexion between Thoreau and Satie. This work, called *Essay*, was premièred at the Warsaw Autumn in 1986. I have written 'mesostics' throughout the *Essay*, 18 of them in total. They constitute what I call 'The First Meeting of the Satie Society'. Now they have been published, and are accessible to everyone, it is possible to upload them to a computer and develop them in various ways. I read these 18 texts, from the longest to the shortest. The computer analysed them all and made the short ones longer, and the long ones shorter, while also eliminating any pitch variations; it also analysed the voice in terms of consonances and warmth of the tone timbre, and changed and deformed these.

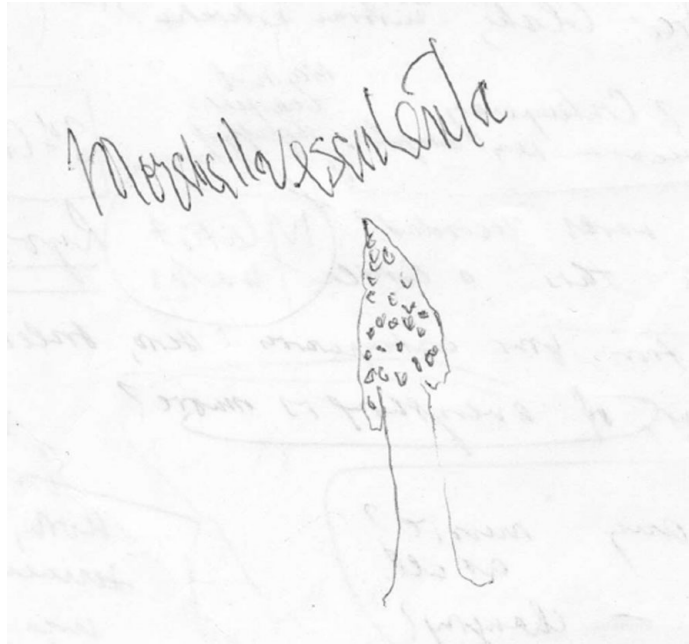
AI: *Thoreau was one of the thinkers who had a very strong influence on Charles Ives. And you, as far as I know, used Thoreau's own drawings, made in his 'Journal', in your own music?*

JC: Yes, I have shown you some of my own etchings in my New York flat, where I used many elements of Thoreau's drawings from his 'Journal'. And I also used Thoreau's drawings in my musical compositions. Thoreau's lines and contours are so easy to follow as music.

AI: *What do you think of Charles Ives and his music today – the same as in the 'Statements on Ives' published in your book A Year from Monday?*

JC: I like his works so much and I feel it is necessary to perform them more often. This is very strange: his music is performed rarely nowadays. His orchestral works are not often performed. Sometimes one can hear his songs, very original ones. Do you know them?

- AI: *We have heard them mostly on the recordings.* 400
- JC: I do not listen to recordings. I prefer live performances. This is why I don't know much of Ives's music. But when it happens that I hear it, I am so happy about the meeting. I love Ives's music for its density, and for the intensity of the writing. It creates the effect of just listening in, rather than attempting to find meaning. It is like one big sound. And it is impossible to impose any limits on it. 401
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- AI: *What about contemporary American music? Do you know many recent American compositions?* 409
- JC: One of the most interesting composers for me is Christian Wolff. I think there is often a theatrical element in my music. By contrast, his music is much more musical. By 'musical' I mean immersed in repetition and variation. I think that, from Schoenberg's point of view, repetition and variations constitute the very essence of any music, and I strongly believe these qualities are present in Christian Wolff's music. His music always targets a distant goal – again, from the Schoenbergian perspective. And the feeling of anticipation in Wolff's music creates a sense of confidence, and not just of careful evaluation. This partly relates to political features. He was very close to the late Cornelius Cardew. I don't exactly know the nature of his political views. But I like the way he deals with them, much more than the way Frederic Rzewski does ... Listening to Christian Wolff's music, I hear the music of a society that we do not yet know ... But it is utterly musical, and is not reminiscent of anything you might know. It is like a music that our society has not yet invented. ... 410
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- AI: *We asked Cage about his life in New York City.* 429
- JC: You know, I am often afraid to come back home at night alone. Once, a man came at me with two knives. He could have killed me ... At the underground station people are often pushed on to the rail tracks ... And it is all because there is such a huge gap between the rich and the poor in our country. Our president [Ronald Reagan – A.I.] is a fool, he doesn't have any brains. ... 430
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- AI: *But he is an actor. . .* 437
- JC: Yes, but a bad actor. It is terrible. It would have been better to elect Greta Garbo as President if we needed an actor ... The bitter problems of the world lie in the confrontation of individuals, and in their isolation from each other. 438
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- AI: *... And what about mushrooms?* 443
- JC: I love them as ever. And you too, I am sure?! Do you play chess? 444
- AI: *Yes, a little ... You know in Russia many people like to pick mushrooms ... where do you get mushrooms in New York City?* 445
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- JC: Oh, almost everywhere! (*laughing*) Sometimes – in the corner of my studio ... But I have to get up very early. I know one place in Ohio, where mushrooms called morel (*Morchella*) grow. Do you know these mushrooms [makes another drawing] – with a sharp cap? 447
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Mushroom (Cage's autograph)

AI: *Is it red?*

JC: No, different: black, white and grey. Very tasty! Don't you have such mushrooms here?

AI: *We don't think so... Do you have time to pick mushrooms?*

JC: Of course, everybody will find time for something he likes.

It was a very pleasant and relaxed evening, with Cage keeping the conversation so easy and at such a low profile. We all felt very comfortable with him, as if with an old friend or a close relative. After a while he said, 'I should stop drinking now, I've already passed all possible limits tonight!'

Cage left quite early, together with the American colleagues. Vladimir Martynov and Alexei Lubimov, in contrast, stayed all night, drinking and chatting. In the morning Martynov left very early for a church service, as he did so scattering many things chaotically in different places around the apartment, perhaps intending to create a physical manifestation of Cagean indeterminacy ... Lubimov, similarly, left with the cake he had brought (nobody had eaten it) and at the last moment threw it through the closing elevator doors just before going down.

Our next meeting with Cage was at the rehearsal for the concert in the Maly Zal [Small Hall] of the St Petersburg Philharmonia on 21 May 1988. Cage's work *Music for ...* was played in the concert by The Bolshoi Soloists (conductor Alexander Lazarev) together with pieces by Mauricio Kagel (*Ten Marches to Miss the Victory*, for woodwinds, brass and percussion), Valentin Silvestrov (*Ode to Nightingale* for soprano and ensemble), George Crumb (*Lux aeterna* for masked players) and Sergei Slonimsky (*Novgorod Dance* for clarinet, trombone, cello, piano, percussion and tape).

Cage's main concern at the rehearsal was to avoid any certainty as to the exact moments that the piece would begin and end. It was to be

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played with no conductor, and each of the performers (sitting in the audience, between the listeners) had a stop watch. As Cage said, 'the piece ends when the time comes ...' We tried several options, one being just turning the lights off and then on to mark the beginning, but this was far too obvious for Cage. Finally we found a solution: silently turning the ventilation off as the sign for the beginning – it worked well.

In the middle of the performance (which lasted for about 30 minutes), the composer Boris Tishchenko (the favourite pupil of Shostakovich) who was sitting next to our viola player, Igor Boguslavsky, started to applaud in an attempt to stop this 'boring and senseless' (in his view) performance. However, Boguslavsky found a quick solution and forcefully hit Tishchenko's head with his bow. Tishchenko stopped applauding.

In Leningrad, Cage stayed in a terrible, Soviet-style 'Leningrad' hotel overlooking the River Neva, next to the legendary cruiser *Aurora*, which had allegedly 'started' the October Revolution in 1917.² But he seemed to enjoy this rather paradoxical location. In Leningrad Cage spent much time with many Russian musicians, including Sofia Gubaidulina; he liked her music and felt that some of Gubaidulina's ideas were very similar to his own.

After the festival, I received a letter from Cage, again on his favourite 'bureaucratic' tricolour paper, which he used for all his messages to me (with blue, pink and white copies, and with the printed instructions: 'recipient keep this copy, return white copy to sender'). It looked funny at the time, although today I think it was only partly humorous, and partly a very practical way of keeping copies of his correspondence. So many archives of correspondence nowadays are lacking the sender's copies. The letter was sent on 6 August 1988:

Thank you for your letter. Very good to hear from you. Greetings to your wife, your friends and yourself. C.F. Peters (Germany) promised to send all my works to the Conservatories in Moscow and Leningrad. In that way we hope that everyone who wishes can have access to my music in Russia. Otherwise too many requests are difficult to supply. I am very grateful to you for bringing me to Russia. With best wishes, John.

The last time I saw Cage was in July 1989. My wife and I played and taught at a summer festival in Maryland, and afterwards we went to New York City to visit Cage, at his invitation. He himself prepared a very special, unforgettable dinner for us – cooked pumpkin with more than a generous dose of scotch, a typically Cagean combination of the opposites.

Photographs and illustrations courtesy of Alexander Ivashkin

² By firing on the Winter Palace on the opposite bank of the Neva: cf the third movement of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 12. The *Aurora* is maintained to the present day as a museum. – (Ed.)