

“Every Something is an Echo of Nothing”: Notes on The John Cage Project in Halberstadt

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Fig 1: John Cage organ project banner at domplatz in halberstadt

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I. Introduction: medieval roots of the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt

The origin of Halberstadt goes back to the Middle Ages, when the bishopric was founded. The town was destroyed and rebuilt twice, rising like a Phoenix from the ashes. At the first time, in the 12th century, it was ruined by the military forces of the Duke of Saxony, Henry the Lion, and later, at the end of World War II, by Allied bombers. After the reunification of Germany, Halberstadt was integrated to the restored state of Saxony-Anhalt, becoming the capital of the district of Harz.

Due to the preservation of its medieval past, Halberstadt cityscape differs from that of contemporary metropolises and megalopolises, where very tall buildings those huge boxes made of concrete and cement stretch up into the sky. The city's skyline is drawn by the lofty towers of several Gothic cathedrals that point upwards with grace, aiming at heaven.

The town is the home of the historical churches and cathedrals that ring their bells in their towers at the interval of fifteen minutes throughout the day, sometimes lasting up to five minutes. Inside, magnificent music for organ is played, either during the service or in concerts.

There is a deep and enduring bond between the city and the organ. Indeed, Halberstadt is the site of the first documented cathedral pipe organ installed in Germany, which was described by the prominent German music theorist and composer Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) in a comprehensive treatise titled *Syntagma Musicum II: De Organographia* (1614-20) (Zea E-Books. Book 24, p. 98):

According to the date that actually appears on it, the large instrument at the Halberstadt Cathedral was first built 250 years ago and was restored just 120 years ago. This is what is actually inscribed on this instrument: Completed on the Vigil of St. Matthew the Apostle in 1361 A.D. by the priest Nicolas Faber. Renovated in 1495 by Gregorius Kleng.

The Halberstadt pipe organ recorded in Praetorius' book was a large organ, twice as big as the earlier types: the small organ, the first one to be invented, and the middle-sized organ, extended by one octave and including semitones. It had three manuals (upper keyboards) to which a pedalboard (a keyboard worked with the feet) was added. The large organ sounded an octave lower than its predecessors. Differently from the previous ones, which were limited to producing one invariable

sound an unchanging full organ sound , the large organ could make different sounds. The high level of achievement of the third generation of organs is stressed by Praetorius (Zea E-Books. Book 24, *Ibia.*):

Just as today, builders had devised and thoroughly explored various clever inventions; their imaginations gave them new and loftier insights, just as one visualizes something in a dream. Thus, they eagerly sought out not only the semitones, but also all varieties of sound. Both of these innovations are already encountered in the organ at Halberstadt.

Reading Praetorius' notes concerning the layout and the use of the keyboards in the very large organs, “in particular in the abovementioned old organ at Halberstadt,” it seems clear that what he intended, while exalting “the possibility of achieving a difference in sound” (Zea E-Books. Book 24, p. 99) by playing the four keyboards, was not to emphasize the timbres themselves, but to point out the polyphonic texture the unique musical instrument made clear, a texture by far more complex than the single unaccompanied melodic line typical of earlier monophony.

Praetorius describes how the two middle keyboards, the second one then called the “Discant,” and the third one could be played respectively with the right hand and the left hand, the left hand playing the bass, thus producing a short two-part composition based on the chant, called “bicinium” at that time. He follows by saying that musicians “continued to make progress until they produced a tricinium, and finally they invented florid counterpoint” (Zea E-Books. Book 24, p. 101).

Polyphonic texture, built on simultaneous distinctive melodic lines, is described as the vertical dimension of musical space. It mirrored, in the Middle Ages, the vertical silhouette of the impressively high cathedrals where the large organs were installed, since their many big pipes required huge buildings to be placed together. Both music and architecture aimed at verticality at that time.

The very high structure of the Gothic cathedrals, supported by the pointed arches, ribbed vaults and flying buttresses, produces a particular acoustic environment when music is played inside. The sound field generated within the rooms shows a high degree of diffusion. The reverberation provides an optimal acoustic environment for the organ, as it mitigates the problem of the very short decay time of the sound waves it generates “100 to 150 ms for 60 dB” (MEYER, Jürgen, 2002). Without that reverberation, the sound decay of the organ would be perceived as an abrupt end, particularly when the loudness is high.

In the reverberating churches, the large organ could develop its full sound, especially when the top (Discant) keyboard and the lowest one, the pedalboard, were played together, as described by Praetorius: “... the top and the bottom [keyboards] were for the powerful full organ, i.e., the mixture (called at that time “Hindersatz”), since it stood behind the Principal (præstanten) sounding together with the præstant² pipes” (Zea E-Books. Book 24, p. 99). The large organ could then sound in its entire splendor.

A multisensory experience was produced inside the hollow chambers of the medieval churches and cathedrals, intertwining the perception of music and of light and color that emanated from the stained glass windows. Music and architecture joined their knowledge and creativity to provide with an experience of the sacred.

The reverberation of sounds inside the churches transcended the material space of the buildings and attained the immaterial. American videoartist Bill Viola portrayed the emotions aroused by the sound of music played in these environments, where sound waves find a way of expression:

For the European mind, the reverberant feature of the interior of the Gothic cathedral is intrinsically linked to a deep sense of the sacred and tends to evoke strong associations with both the internal private space of contemplation and the larger realms of the ineffable (VIOLA, Bill. 1996, p. 44-45).

Halberstadt is nowadays an organ center in Germany; it is named “the Organ City of Halberstadt” (“Orgelstadt Halberstadt”). The large organ in St. Stephanus and Sixtus Cathedral (“Dom”) is currently played during the services, accompanied by the chiming of the bells, and a new project for it is in course. Efforts are being made to obtain financial support for the rebuilding of the David Beck Organ, which is installed in St. Martini Church, and to create a center of research on organ music from the beginning of the Baroque period. More recently, in 2001, an avant-garde project was launched in the old St. Burchardi Church, the John Cage Organ Project, which is planned to last over a time span of more than six centuries.

2 The word “praestant” (from the Latin “prae + stare”, for “to be in front of”) refers to the pipes placed in front of the console.



Fig. 2: Saint Martini Church

II. The third millennium: the starting point of the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt

The year 2001 was approaching. It would mark not only the turn of the century, but also the beginning of the third millennium in the Gregorian calendar. That year was considered to be a pivotal moment in human history, when an era would end to give rise to a new one. Questions concerning where we were going, or what the future of humankind would be like, came into everyone's minds. A bug warning – the so-called Y2K bug, or Year 2000 bug, or Millennium Bug – was issued to alert that computers were not designed to recognize the naughts (00) as 2000, so they would fail to operate properly. Hope and fear intensified as the year 2001 drew near: on the one side, the dream of a better world; on the other side, the fear of chaos, of facing a doomsday scenario. There was a sense of incertitude in the air.

The fact that the third millennium was perceived as an entrance into the future must be taken into account when we quest for the origins of the John Cage Organ Project set at the old St. Burchardi Church, in Halberstadt. One should not neglect that the millennium year was chosen to launch it, precisely on the fifth of September, the 89th birthday of the American avant-garde composer and artist John Cage. His work *ORGAN²/ASLSP* inspired the idea of the project. By extending the length of Cage's organ piece for many centuries, from the millennium year to exactly 639 years hence, the Organ Project embodied the spirit of the coming era, not only for aiming at the future, but also for making an appeal to the present and future generations to take to themselves the responsibility of keeping the organ running for the next six centuries.

An ethical purpose is on the basis of the overlong musical performance, which has been played since 2001 at St. Burchardi Church. That is why the John Cage Organ Project cannot be approached in a strictly aesthetic perspective, unless we enlarge the notion of aesthetics so that it encompasses ethics, as did Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) by proposing that life should be lived as a work of art. In *Birth of Tragedy*, he states: “Only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* can existence and the world appear to be *justifiable*” (NIETZSCHE, Frederico. 1982, p. 59).

Cage took a different path when he approached the relation between art and life. He intended to free our listening to sounds from aesthetical prejudices, from

personal taste (our “likes and dislikes”). He objected to the barriers created between art and life, as is expressed in *Silence*:

When we separate music from life what we get is art (a compendium of masterpieces). With contemporary music, when it is actually contemporary, we have no time to make that separation (which protects us from living), and so contemporary music is not so much art as it is life (CAGE, John. 1974, p. 44).

Cage’s attitude led him to confer on the activity of listening a prominent role in his poetics:

There are, demonstrably, sounds to be heard and forever, giving ears to hear. Where these ears are in connection with a mind that has nothing to do, that mind is free to enter into the act of listening, hearing each sound as it is; not as a phenomenon more or less approximating a preconception (CAGE, John. *Op. cit.*, p. 23).

At the dawn of the third millennium, we could have made John Cage’s words our own in order to celebrate this very special historical moment: “HAPPY NEW EARS!” (CAGE, John. 1975, p. 30).

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The John Cage Organ Project is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between musicians, musicologists, artists, philosophers and theologians. Its concept grew out of a lively debate following a very slow performance of Cage’s *ORGAN²/ASLSP* in a Symposium that took place in Trossingen, Germany, 1998, concerning the many aspects of the music composed for the organ.

ORGAN²/ASLSP was rearranged for organ from a work originally written for piano by John Cage, named *ASLSP*. In the introductory notes to the score, the composer explains: “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).” Both versions of the piece consist of eight parts. In the piano version, one of the movements must be discarded and replaced with a repetition of any of the remaining sections at any point of the performance. In the version for organ, no movement can be omitted, and any of them may be repeated. Cage refers to the main differences between the form of the two pieces in the notes that introduce *ORGAN²/ASLSP*: “Distinct from *As/sp*, all eight pieces are to be played. However, any of them may be repeated, though not necessarily, and as in *As/sp* the repetition may be placed anywhere in the series” (PETERS. Edition. 2011).

The original work *ASLSP* was commissioned and selected for the International Piano Competition promoted by the University of Maryland, USA, in 1985. The adapted work *ORGAN²/ASLSP* was composed at the request of German organist Gerd Zacher, who premiered it in Metz, France, in 1987. The open form of the two pieces brings us to the many types of indeterminate compositions analyzed by John Cage in his “intentionally pontifical” lecture *Indeterminacy*, delivered at the *Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music* in September 1958. Each type is introduced by the words: “This is a lecture on composition which is indeterminate with respect to its performance” (CAGE, John. 1974, p. 35-39).

In view of the fact that the eight parts of both *ASLSP* and *ORGAN²/ASLSP* must be rearranged by the performer, we may consider the two compositions as indeterminate with respect to their form, which Cage defines as “the morphology of continuity”, “the expressive content” of a musical piece. In this aspect, Cage’s sister pieces are similar to the *Klavierstück XI* by Karlheinz Stockhausen, one of the works analyzed in the lecture *Indeterminacy*, as follows:

The division of the wholes into parts, the structure, is determinate. The sequence of these parts, however, is indeterminate, bringing about the possibility of a unique form, which is to say a unique morphology of the continuity, a unique expressive content, for each performance (CAGE, John. *Op. cit.*, p. 35).

Although similar in their form, the two pieces differ radically in the way time is structured by each composer. While Stockhausen makes use of a regularity of beat, one of the aspects identified by Cage as a characteristic trait of European music, Cage abolishes it entirely. He does it due to his increasing interest in processes, rather than objects, which led him to work with the concept of a static musical time, breaking away from European tradition.

The form aspects essentially conventional to European music are, for instance, the presentation of a whole as an object in time having a beginning, a middle, and an ending, progressive rather than static in character, which is to say possessed of a climax or climaxes and in contrast a point or points of rest (CAGE, John. *Op. cit.*, p. 36).

An object in time moves in the direction of a purpose and is viewed dualistically. Cage’s poetics developed in the opposite direction towards the notion of process, which is purposeless, and non dualistic: “The view taken is not that of an activity the purpose of which is to integrate the opposites, but rather of an activity characterized by process and essentially purposeless (CAGE, John. *Op. cit.*, p. 22).

In rejecting the notion of music as an object in time, Cage goes on to treat sounds as events in a field of possibilities, which reminds him, for instance, of the setting of stars in the sky, or activities on earth viewed from the air (CAGE, John. *Op. cit.*, p. 94). As a result, he creates a pointillist texture, filled with sound materials chosen at random, that resembles multiple events happening in time and space. The score of *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961-1962) is an example. Cage superimposed musical staves over an atlas of the stars published in 1958 by Antonín Bečvář (1901-1965), a Czech astronomer, in order to shape the musical texture of the piece.

In *ASLSP* the pointillist texture is built by two independent voices consisting of notes and chords generated out of these notes that are played simultaneously in a very slow tempo. Slowness favors an accurate perception of the behavior of the wave sounds produced by the piano, which reverberate in the ambient room. The perception of overtones is intensified by the use of a staccato chord out of which a single pitch is sustained, after the attack, by keeping the corresponding key pressed, while the other keys are released. Might this atmosphere created by sounds (fundamentals and overtones) played softly in a very slow tempo be referring to the image of a soft morning in the city portrayed by James Joyce in the last paragraph of *Finnegans Wake*, which inspired John Cage?



An analysis of the title *ASLSP* shows that the acronym created by John Cage does not match the expression it stands for, “As slow as possible.” This is due to the fact that Cage inserted in it the onomatopoeic exclamation *Lsp!* taken from the last paragraph of *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce. By doing that, Cage provides a contrasting version to the well-known acronym *ASAP*, which stands for “As soon as

possible", pointing out that his poetics goes in the opposite direction from the fast pace governing life in contemporary societies. What the two expressions *ASLSP* and *ASAP* have in common is that they are undetermined as to time. Indeterminacy, as we have seen, is a recurring theme of John Cage's poetics. It takes the form of ambiguity as Cage associates his music with Joyce's literature for composing *ASLSP*. If we consider that Cage's acronym is formed by the agglutination of two words, "AS" and "LSP," we come to a possible meaning: "as Lsp," i.e., like Lsp, or yet in Joyce's way.

How does John Cage approach Joyce's style in *ASLSP*? A key to answering this question is found in Cage's understanding of Joyce's novel. "*Finnegans Wake* is the river" (BOSSEUR, Jean-Yves. 1993, p.180.), says he. The river is essentially a stream, a flow (of water) continuously moving and changing. Joyce takes the notion of stream as a model to structure the narrative of his novels. The so-called "stream of consciousness" is a literary style that represents the characters' thoughts and feelings as they come to the mind, not in a logical sequence, but as they experience them.

The stream in Cage's poetics is the stream of time. Indeed, his poetics is a poetics of time. Throughout his artistic creative process, Cage envisaged time not as a material to be structured in order to produce an object in time, moving towards a purpose, but rather as a process, which is purposeless. "It is not a music in time, it is a time-music that cannot find its sense but in vanishing" (BOSSEUR, Dominique. 1970, p.17).

By getting rid of the need to control things, Cage frees the mind to "function as a faithful receiver of experience" (CAGE, John. *Op. cit.*, p. 32). His music provides us with a listening experience in which sounds and silences move in a state of non-obstruction and interpenetration, two concepts he was introduced to in his studies on Zen-Buddhism.

For living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing. The wisest thing to do is to open one's ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract or symbolical (CAGE, John. 1975, p. 98).

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In the context of Cage's poetics, *ASLSP* (As slow as possible) and *ORGAN²/ASLSP* are examples of pieces that are indeterminate with respect to the performance, since their form and tempo are left open by the composer. The last

aspect, indeterminacy in respect to tempo, engendered a lively debate among those present at the Organ Symposium in Trossingen, which eventually led to the idea of the John Cage Organ Project. While discussing the playing techniques, and the aesthetic and philosophical aspects involved in *ORGAN²/ASLSP*, the Symposium attendees faced complex questions, such as: "How slow is 'as slow as possible' when the music is played by an organ?", "How the piece should be played?," and "How long should the piece be?"

The discussion led the group to the conclusion that it would be possible to extend indefinitely the performance of *ORGAN²/ASLSP*, due to the fact that the organ is an aerophone, a musical instrument that generates sounds by vibrating a column of air. Differently from the piano, a chordophone that produces sounds by striking stretched vibrating strings, which falls silent after reverberating a certain time in space, the organ, at least theoretically, would be able to sustain the sounds produced by it as long as the keys (of the manuals and/or the pedalboard) would be kept pressed, making the column of air inside the pipes vibrate. Therefore, setting a time frame for playing *ORGAN²/ASLSP* could only find its reason in the lifetime of the instrument and of its player, the organist. The question remained: "How long should the piece be?"

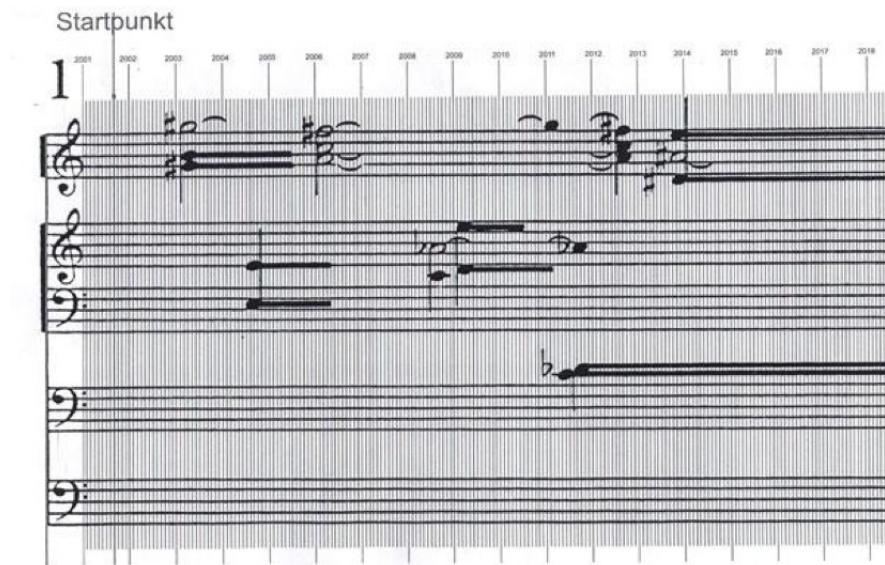
At the threshold of the third millennium, facing the challenges of a new era, composers, organists, musicologists, philosophers and all those who were taking part in the Organ Symposium in Trossingen came up with a new project for *ORGAN²/ASLSP*; they "developed the then still utopian idea of a performance length calibrated to the life-expectancy of an organ" (John-Cage-Orgel-Kunst-Projekt, p. 30). The overlong performance might be considered to be utopian not only for not having at that time a place () to settle the project in, but also for taking on the status of an era, becoming the first "trans-epochal work of art" ever dreamt of. The project might also be considered to be utopian for envisaging an ideal era of peace and creativity in the future, as expressed in its disclosure text: "The question on how to realize the opus leads to the conclusion that 'as slow as possible' can be thought and played indefinitely at least as long as the life of an organ lasts and also as long as peace and creativity in the following generations exist" (Project disclosure leaflet, back cover).

Once the general lines of the project were defined, the next step would consist of finding a venue for the performance. Using a random method, a common practice in Cage's compositional process, the city of Halberstadt was chosen to host it. "The performance site, the Burchardi Church, was found thanks to the artist and future honorary citizen of Halberstadt, Johann Peter Hinz (John-Cage-Orgel-Kunst-Projekt,

Ibid.). The choice brought back the memory of the large organ installed at the Halberstadt Cathedral in the Middle Ages, documented by Michael Praetorius in his treatise *Syntagma Musicum II: De Organographia*. The manuals of the Halberstadt large organ were arranged in twelve semitones in an octave, combining long white keys and shorter black ones, which remains the standard keyboard layout until now. For this reason, the magnificent organ was considered a landmark instrument, and the city of Halberstadt was endowed with historical significance by housing it in its Cathedral: “One might thus say that the cradle of modern music was in Halberstadt” (John-Cage-Orgel-Kunst-Projekt, *Ibid.*).

The year 1361, when the large organ was built, was taken as reference to determine the duration of the overlong performance at Saint Burchardi Church. From this year to 2000 (initially considered to be the millennium year instead of 2001) there is an interval of 639 years. This period between two historic landmarks was defined as the time length of the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt. The performance, launched on John Cage’s 89th birthday, on September 5, 2001, is expected to end on September 4, 2640, on the eve of the composer’s birthday. For the second time in its history, Halberstadt would pioneer an organ project related to a new concept of music.

Once defined the performance venue and the time length of the project, the next step would be establishing its chronology. The project timeline was spread over the nine sections of the structure (“the division of the whole into parts”), the same one observed by Gerd Zacher at the premiere in Metz, France, 1987: eight parts plus one repetition of one of the sections. Dividing 639 years, the entire duration of the piece, by nine we obtain the time length of each section: 71 years, approximately the life expectancy of a human being in our time. In order to obtain the duration of notes and pauses, a squared paper was superimposed over the score, as illustrated below:



We are now listening to five sounds of the first section of *ORGAN²/ASLSP*, made by five different pipes. Two of them impulses c (16) and des (16) were introduced on August 5, 2011; the three others impulses dis , ais and e began to sound on October 5, 2013. So far, thirteen sound changes have been made. The next change will take place on September 5, 2020, John Cage’s birthday, when two different sounds impulses gis and e will join the others now being played.

Sound changes always happen on the fifth day of the month, a reference to John Cage’s birth date. In the first two years, only the noise made by the bellows was heard. The first three notes of the score began to sound on February 5, 2003 when pipes were installed in the console table. Sound changes attract many people to the Church, and sensations experienced at these moments are reported in the project booklet:

The year 2006 was quite hectic: two sound changes took place within a single year. In the tenth year, on August 5, 2011, the eleventh sound change was spectacular, as two bass pipes joined in, a half-tone apart, for the next 36 years, the sound oscillating between engine room and Hamburg harbor (John-Cage-Orgel-Kunst-Projekt, *Ibia*).

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The idea of a music which is indeterminate with respect to its duration is not foreign to John Cage’s poetics. When describing the changes that have taken place

in his composition means, Cage refers to the moment he renounced the need to control durations at all, giving as example his piece *Music for Piano* (1952):

Structure no longer being present, that piece took place in any length of time whatsoever, according to the exigencies of an occasion. The duration of single sounds was therefore left indeterminate. The notation took the form of whole notes in space, the space suggesting but not measuring time (CAGE, John. 1974, p. 30).

In agreement with Cage’s remarks, the duration of a musical piece should vary according to the circumstances required by the performance, the same piece lasting either for a long or a short length of time. He makes it clear when he analyzes *Duo II for Pianists*, by Christian Wolff, in his lecture *Indeterminacy*:

If the other pieces on the program take forty-five minutes of time and fifteen minutes more are required to bring the program a proper length, *Duo II for Pianists* may be fifteen minutes long. Where only five minutes are available, it will be five minutes long (CAGE, John. 1974, p. 39).

So, a musical piece that is expected to last 639 years, such as the performance of *ORGAN²/ASLSP* at St. Burchardi Church in Halberstadt, cannot be considered unfamiliar to Cage’s artistic universe, although it might look weird for some people and seem impossible to be accomplished.

It is worth mentioning the special interest drawn by Cage to *Vexations*, a piano piece composed by Erik Satie (1866-1925) in 1893, which consists of a motif to be repeated 840 times in succession at a very slow tempo. In the text *Erik Satie*, an imaginary conversation between the French composer and himself, Cage writes:

True, one could not endure a performance of *Vexations* (lasting [my estimate] twenty-four hours; 840 repetitions of a fifty-two beat piece itself involving a repetitive structure: A,A₁,A,A₂, each A thirteen measures long), but why give it a thought? (CAGE, John. 1974, p. 76).

When Cage discovered *Vexations*, in 1949, he had it printed, and he organized its premier performance at the Pocket Theatre, New York, in 1963, involving twelve pianists, one of them being himself. The whole performance lasted 18 hours and 40 minutes. Cage organized later other performances of the piece, in Berlin (1966) and at the University of California at Davis (1967).

What is so significant in Satie’s piece that led Cage to “give it a thought?” Not only did the work inspire him, but also the instruction given to the pianist in the score: “To play this motif 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, in serious immobilities.” Cage found in the “serious immobilities” proposed by Satie the concept of a static time he intended to

be at the basis of his musical poetics. With regard to the "deepest silence", it expresses a mental state in which the mind, renouncing to control things, as proposed by John Cage, functions as "a faithful receiver of experience", providing a listening activity focused on the perception of time itself, a ceaselessly changing matter where sounds emerge and die away. Cage sees in such a state an experience close to Zen Buddhism: "The textual remarks in connection with the *Vexations* are not humorous; they are in the spirit of Zen Buddhism" (SHLOMOWITZ, Matthew, 1999).

Satie creates with *Vexations* the concept of an "extended duration", which is widely explored in experimental art, whether in installations, happenings or videoart. It is the main characteristic of the performance held at the St. Burchardi Church, in Halberstadt, which is planned to last until 2640. Only an artist who, like John Cage, taking inspiration from Satie's work, made of time the subject matter of his poetics, would be able to create a musical texture provided with so great a plasticity as to be extended over centuries, being assigned the dimension of an era.

We can therefore say that the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt encompasses elements of the poetics of two artists who exerted considerable influence on the thinking and the art of John Cage: James Joyce and Erik Satie. It could not be different, as they are inscribed forever in John Cage's "Alphabet", a vocabulary of artists, whose works have always been next to Cage's creative process, with which he "spelled out" his life. The first influence, Joyce's, is explicit, mentioned in the title of the work *ASLSP*; the second one, Satie's, is inferred from analysis. The subtle presence of Joyce and Satie ensures creativity and boldness to the project.

Soft morning, city! Lsp!
Summon the magic
And bring Erik Satie!

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As previously mentioned, the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt is closely associated with the idea that the third millennium is perceived as an entrance into the future. It started in the millennium year, and is intended to last until the millennium's second half. In spite of its roots in the medieval past, the project essentially aims at the future, envisaged as a utopian era in which peace and

creativity will prevail, drawing inspiration from the concept of hope by the German philosopher Ernst Bloch.

Another way of approaching the arrival of the third millennium is conceiving it as a period when a paradigm shift is in course. In John Cage's thought it is represented by a change from linear to complex thinking, from determinism to indeterminacy, from dualism to non-dualism, by producing processes instead of making objects (among which the so-called work of art).

When one says that there is no cause and effect, what is meant is that there are an incalculable infinity of causes and effects, that in fact each and every thing in all of time and space is related to each and every other thing in all of time and space. This being so there is no need to cautiously proceed in dualistic terms of success and failure or the beautiful and the ugly or good and evil but rather simply to walk on "not wondering," to quote Meister Eckhart, "Am I right or doing something wrong" (CAGE, John. 1974, p. 47).

III. The new organ and the old church

St. Burchardi Church is one of the oldest churches in Halberstadt. It was built around 1050 by Burchard of Nahburg. In the John Cage Organ Project disclosure leaflet we get some information about its history. The church served as a Cistercian convent for more than 600 years. During the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the building was partially destroyed, being rebuilt in 1711. Later, in 1810, St. Burchardi Church was secularized by Jérôme, the brother of Napoleon, serving to different purposes: as a barn, a hovel, a distillery and a pigpen. It is now the venue of the John Cage Organ Project, which attracts visitors from different parts of the world.

Inside the ruined church was installed an organ, specially built for the project. Donor plaques are attached to the inner walls, forming a belt around the musical instrument. They are arranged in chronological order, each one referring to a specific year of the project timeline. There are names and messages (texts, quotes, drawings) engraved on the surfaces of the plaques, inscribing the mark of their donors in the history of the project.

In the outer area surrounding the building, a group of modern metal sculptures titled *Fractures of History* ("Brüche der Geschichte"), created in 2000 by the artist and metal sculptor Johann-Peter Hinz (1941-2007), contrast with the architecture of the ancient church. They remind us of Cage's collaboration with American avant-garde

artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, particularly with the sculptor Richard Lippold, who inspired Cage to compose the 14th and 15th of his *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946-48), subtitled *Gemini*, after the sculptor's work. Cage recreated in music the concept of the diptych while composing his twin sonatas. Similarly, he conceived *ORGAN²/ASLSP* as a different approach to *ASLSP*, taking into account the particular characteristics of the organ while addressing the same subject.

The simultaneity of the modern and the old, represented respectively by the sculptures and the church, reinforces the non-dualistic view of Cage's thought, and the importance attributed by him to the concept of interpenetration. While visiting a new center for the arts, in Ohio, Cage felt very impressed by the project of the architect, who superimposed the architectural plans of an old and a modern building upon one another, producing a new architectural plan of unexpected drawings. "And are you interested in this approach?," he was asked. "Yes, very much," answered he. "It is not the new, but the new married to the past" (BOSSEUR, Jean-Yves. 1993, p.179).

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At the kickoff phase of the John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt, the circumstances were similar to those observed at the time Michael Praetorius wrote about the construction of the large organ at the city Cathedral: a new project for an organ and a new concept of music were being gestated simultaneously. Therefore, it would be required from the contemporary organ manufacturers, who were working on the design of a new organ for The John Cage Project, the same skills of devising and thoroughly exploring various clever inventions, the same creative imagination capable of new and loftier insights, exalted by Praetorius in the organ builders of the past.

Different designs for the new organ were explored, as reported³ by Prof. Dr. Rainer O. Neugebauer, chairman of The John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt. The initial idea consisted of building a big organ symbolizing a gigantic mushroom and placing it in the middle of the church, in reference to John Cage's great interest in this type of fungus and its haphazard growth. The second idea was to recreate the Faber organ documented by Michael Praetorius in a smaller size, and to build

³ Reported in an exclusive interview given to the author on August 23, 2019, in Halberstadt.

duplicates of the pipes to replace those that might fail to work along the 639 years of performance. The very high cost of this project made it unfeasible. The third conception can be considered to be the first version of the current pipe organ design. It consisted of a set formed by a wooden console table with six holes to insert the organ pipes, a pair of attached bellows made of wood, and pipes of different sizes corresponding to the different pitch of the musical score. The air for the organ pipes is sucked in by a compressor. As there is no organist playing the instrument, the keyboards are kept pressed by bags of sand. When the first three notes (gis , h , gis) of the score began to sound on February 5, 2003, the three pipes related to the pitch of the notes were doubled, so as to fill all the holes on the console table. When the next change of sounds took place on July 5, 2004, two different pipes were introduced, each one corresponding to one of the notes (e, e) of the musical score, resulting in five different simultaneous sounds. As no pipe was doubled, one hole was left open. Then, another design was created so that there are only as many organ pipes as there are sounds. When a new sound is required, the pipe corresponding to its pitch is introduced in the console table; when a sound ends, the corresponding pipe is removed. Prof. Dr. Rainer O. Neugebauer considers that the organ design represents a kind of graphic or visual notation, as it is possible to see how many notes are sounding and infer their pitch by *looking* at the size of the pipes inserted in the console table without hearing to them: the longer the pipe, the lower the sound; the smaller pipe, the higher sound. The organ is now a symbol of The John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt, its identity sign.



St. Burchardi Church (External View)







If we analyze the three main projects conceived for the organ of The John Cage Organ Project in Halberstadt, from the first one to the current design, we observe that they represent three different aspects, respectively, the symbolic, the historical and the functional. Although the functional design has prevailed, the other

aspects, the symbolical and the historical, are not absent from the project, but expressed in another way. The symbolic aspect is expressed, for instance, by the contrast between the light emanating from the glass windows and the shadows projected in the internal area of the building. Light is usually associated with life and the sacred. Many cosmologies narrate the creation of the universe as the emergence of light out of a primeval darkness. Shadows were associated to sounds by American composer Morton Feldman, as referred by Cage in *Julliard Lecture*: “I remember now that Feldman spoke of shadows. He said that the sounds were not sounds, but shadows. They are obviously sounds; that’s why they are shadows; every something is an echo of nothing” (CAGE, John. 1975, p. 98).

As for the historical aspect, it is represented by the ruins, which are apparent and mark the passage of time, its effects on things built by people along the history of humankind, as well as of memories, feelings, and thoughts associated to them. They are engraved on donors’ plaques fixed on the walls of the old Saint Burchardi Church. History is also made present in the sculptures of the German artist Johann-Peter Hinz, portrayed as a development of disruptions – the fractures carved into the metal –, which express the unstable equilibrium of different forces in human life.

The trans-epochal trait of The John Cage Organ Project makes it an expression of different dimensions of time: the cosmological, the social, the historical, the personal, and their relation with the concept of musical time. It is difficult to find, among the traditional categories within the arts, one that perfectly fits the unique work of art that has been performed at St. Burchardi Church since 2001. Is the John Cage Organ Project a concert? Is it a performance? Should it be called a sound installation? A site specific? All the usual categories employed to define a work of art, even the ones that refer to contemporary art, seem not to fit the dimension of the project. That said, we might conclude that The John Cage Organ Project poses questions to the visitors who go there to listen to and to see the unique organ, in the hope that they contribute to change their way of thinking. The project aims at the future, and leaves to us the responsibility of turning it into an era of peace and creativity.

And what I think we need in Joyce, or need in our lives, is to return, in so far as we have the courage to return to poetry and chaos, rather than to stay always on the safe side with the policeman” (CAGE, John & SCHÖNING, Klaus. 1979, p. 38).



“In the first two years, only the noise made by the bellows was heard.”



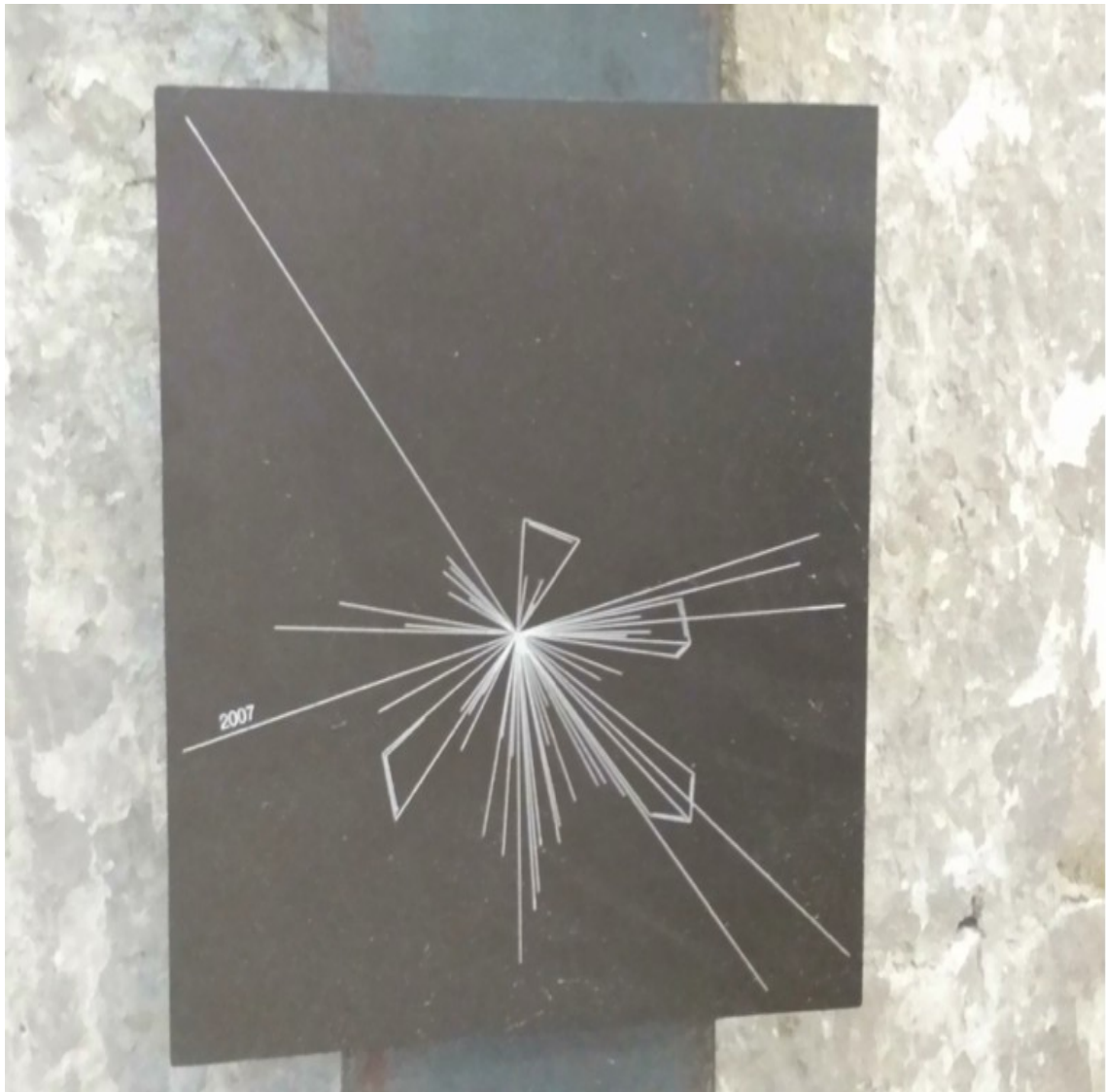
St. Burchardi Church (Internal Space)

2431

Rainer O. Neugebauer

For JOHN CAGE

impossible? oNly a joke? utopian?
crazy? senseless? monOtony? too open? too long?
too meager? too iNaccurate? too noisy? silence?
too impatient? mUch slower? time?
hecticNess? boredom? eternity?
mushrooms? mistakes? too raDical?
not consistEent? tolerance? art? music?
chords? tones? melody? haRmony?
rhythm? structure? SounD? john cage?
composiTion? by chance? an organ?
musicians? a performANce? a concert?
uninterrupted? coNceptual listening?
sensually moveD? humility? a church? zen?
blrds? avant-garde? anarchy?
a dream? strangely set iN motion?
past? expect somethinG? hope?
calmness? a future? nothing ...



APPENDIX: John Cage ORGAN²/ASLSP, 639 Years, Part 1, Sound Changes
K= Klang Anfang (Sound Start), P=Pause / Klang Ende (Sound End)

Impulse	1	P:			05.09.2001
Impulse	2	K:	gis , h , gis		05.02.2003
Impulse	3	K:	e, e		05.07.2004
Impulse	4	P:		gis , h	05.07.2005
Impulse	5	K:	a , c , fis		05.01.2006
Impulse	6	P:		e, e	05.05.2006
Impulse	7	K:	c , as		05.07.2008
Impulse	8	P:		c	05.11.2008
Impulse	9	K:	d , e		05.02.2009
Impulse	10	P:		e	05.07.2010
Impulse	11	P:		d , gis	05.02.2011
Impulse	12	K:/P:	c (16),des (16)	as	05.08.2011
Impulse	13	P:		a , c , fis	05.07.2012
Impulse	14	K:	dis , ais , e		05.10.2013
Impulse	15	K:	gis, e		05.09.2020
Impulse	16	P:		gis	05.02.2022
Impulse	17	K:	d		05.02.2024
Impulse	18	K:	a		05.08.2026
Impulse	19	P:		e	05.10.2027
Impulse	20	K:	g		05.04.2028
Impulse	21	P:		d	05.08.2028
Impulse	22	P:		a	05.03.2030
Impulse	23	P:		dis , e	05.09.2030
Impulse	24	P:		g	05.05.2033
Impulse	25	K:	h		05.12.2033
Impulse	26	K:	f, d		05.08.2034
Impulse	27	P:		f, d	05.09.2034
Impulse	28	P:		h	05.10.2034
Impulse	29	K:	des		05.06.2035
Impulse	30	K:/P:	A (16)	des	05.09.2037
Impulse	31	K:	as , as		05.03.2038
Impulse	32	P:		as	05.07.2038
Impulse	33	P:		as	05.05.2039
Impulse	34	K:	d , as		05.12.2039
Impulse	35	P:		d , as	05.04.2040
Impulse	36	K:	des, b		05.01.2041
Impulse	37	P:		des, b	05.03.2042
Impulse	38	P:		A (16)	05.11.2043
Impulse	39	K:	a, d		05.07.2044
Impulse	40	K:/P:	e	ais	05.03.2045
Impulse	41	K:	h , c , ais		05/03/46

Impulse	42	P:		c (16), h , c , ais	05.10.2047
Impulse	43	K:	c (16)		05.02.2049
Impulse	44	K:	dis , a		05.04.2050
Impulse	45	P:		a, d , e	05.02.2051
Impulse	46	P:		dis , a	05.11.2051
Impulse	47	K:	es, h		05.05.2053
Impulse	48	P:		c (16)	05.11.2054
Impulse	49	P:		es, h	05.07.2056
Impulse	50	K:	b		05.08.2057
Impulse	51	K:	A (16)		05.05.2058
Impulse	52	P:		A (16)	05.11.2059
Impulse	53	K	ges , c , des		04/05/60
Impulse	54	P:		ges , c , des	05.06.2060
Impulse	55	K:/P:	e	b	05.11.2060
Impulse	56	K:	h , c , es ,	c	05.02.2061
Impulse	57	P:		c , es , c	05.04.2061
Impulse	58	K:/P:	d	e	05.09.2061
Impulse	59	K:	ais, dis , fis		05.08.2062
Impulse	60	P:		ais, fis	05.02.2064
Impulse	61	K:/P:	a, a	dis	05.01.2067
Impulse	62	P:		d	05.06.2067
Impulse	63	P:		a, a	05.07.2068
Impulse	64	P:		des (16)	05.03.2071
Impulse	65	P:		h	05.07.2071

End of the first part		04.09.2072
Beginning of the second part		05.09.2072

K= Klang Anfang (Sound Start), P=Pause / Klang Ende (Sound End)

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VERA TERRA
"Every Something is an Echo of Nothing": Notes on The John Cage Project in Halberstadt

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