

Daryl Runswick

John Cage, Electric Phoenix,
4 Solos for Voice
and the Cage mafia
backlash



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On 30th June 2001 I participated in a Conference on 20th Century Music at Goldsmiths College in London, presenting a short paper on my experience of working with John Cage as a member of the vocal group Electric Phoenix. Strangely to my innocent mind it caused something of a scandal, producing violent and negative reactions and attempted refutations at the Q&A session afterwards; and even more so in the cafeteria at the end of the morning (someone – you might guess who when you’ve read the whole of this – wanted to ‘prevent publication of your paper at all costs, otherwise the Cage performance tradition will be perverted’). The controversy has rumbled on since in a chat room on the web. I present here the original paper and a selection of the cyberexchanges which took place. My email *Dear Virginia*, by the way, never elicited a response.

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1. John Cage, *4 Solos for Voice*: a contradiction.

Daryl Runswick

I met John Cage twice, and was as beguiled by him personally as everyone who met him was. The first time was in Zagreb on 21st April 1985 when he attended a concert by Electric Phoenix, the vocal group of which I was a member; the second in London on 19th June 1988 at a rehearsal of the piece he wrote for us, *4 Solos for Voice*. Both days happen to have been Sundays.

At the concert in Zagreb the news that Cage was in the audience sent a thrill of nerves through Electric Phoenix. We had programmed four pieces, including my own *I Sing The Body Electric*, which I can tell you I have never hoped and prayed would go better than I did on that day. It did go well, but a catastrophe overtook the concert. Our sound man, John Whiting, was in the habit of sometimes wearing a kimono as his concert dress. Reaching across the mixing desk between pieces, the voluminous sleeves of the kimono caught the master volume fader and turned it full on. There was a deafening shriek of feedback – the ultimate shame in an electro-acoustic concert. John Whiting has never worn a kimono again to this day. Afterwards Cage was asked what his favourite piece in our concert was: I wasn't present, but when I was told my heart stopped in case he had said *I Sing The Body Electric*. He said, the feedback. Even at the time I laughed: after all, the feedback was a chance operation.

Despite, or because of, this catastrophe Cage agreed to write us a piece. Due to the usual pressures, he said, he could not contemplate writing a complex work, but if we would be satisfied with a simpler one he would be delighted. Naturally we jumped at the opportunity.¹ Actually Cage was no longer writing complex pieces by this time: he had, the previous year, commenced the series of works which have come to be known as the Numbers Pieces, and I believe he did almost nothing but Numbers Pieces from 1987 until his death in 1992.² Except *4 Solos for Voice*.

4 Solos for Voice present us with a contradiction in our understanding of Cage. Although they have in their notations obvious parallels with the Numbers Pieces, actually they

¹ Cage tried never to turn down any commission in the last years of his life: 'Composing,' he said, 'of course appeals to me, but not that much. The motoring Niagara on 6th Avenue is enough for my daily consumption of sounds. But, on the other hand, I do not think I have the right to disappoint any person who solicits me.' John Cage: *I've never heard any sound that I didn't enjoy: the only trouble with sounds is music*. Temporale (Edizioni Dabbeni, Lugano) N. 29-30, 1993, pp 12-14.

² except for the *Europas* and the completion of the *Freeman Etudes* previously abandoned in the 1970s.

continue the earlier series *Solos for Voice* of which they are Nos 93-96. Cage, after all, titled them *Solos* when he could have called them *Four^{whatever}*: but he called them *Solos*, and did so for a reason. This is connected to the contradiction I'm talking about: going against a lifetime seemingly prejudiced against it, Cage in *4 Solos for Voice* wrote an improvisation piece.

Before going further I do unfortunately need to offer a definition of improvisation,³ because Cage here and there in his writings uses the word in senses I can't accept. For instance he says of the way he wrote *Sonatas and Interludes*, 'The method was that of considered improvisation (mainly at the piano...)'⁴ but by this he only means the way in which most composers (except serialists and himself by the time he wrote these words) compose. To call composing freely at the piano 'improvisation' is misleading: improvisation is real-time creative performance. That's the kernel of my definition: *improvisation is real-time invention applied to a musical performance*. Real-time: if you don't do it *now* it's not improvisation. Invention: if you don't make something that's never been made quite this way before - albeit often from pre-fabricated parts - it's not improvisation. And performance: in my opinion if it doesn't take place during a performance it's not improvisation, it's either a stage in the process of composing or it's noodling: an audience is essential and without one improvisation does not exist.⁵ Real-time creative performance: I must go with this definition of improvisation and regretfully reject Cage's, realising that to accept his would have made it easier for everyone. Apologies.

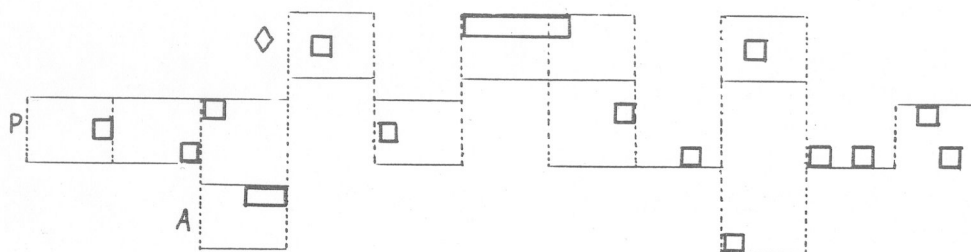
Improvisation is of course a fluid commodity which does not have to be applied to all aspects of a performance: you can improvise some parameters while leaving others fixed. Baroque ornamentation is a form of improvisation (except when it's prepared in advance, when it stinks). Indian classical music fixes rags and tals, within which melodies and rhythms are improvised. Feldman in the *Projections* fixes durations and sound production method but allows pitches to be improvised within general bands:

³ For an exhaustive discussion of improvisation see my paper *The Improvisation Continuum*, Dazzle Music 2004 and on my [website](#).

⁴ John Cage: *Composition as Process* (1958) reprinted in *Silence* p 19, Wesleyan University Press, 1961.

⁵ Of course you can *practise* improvisation in private, and you should do if you're serious. Also in certain cultures there may be ritual situations when improvisation takes place without a human observer.

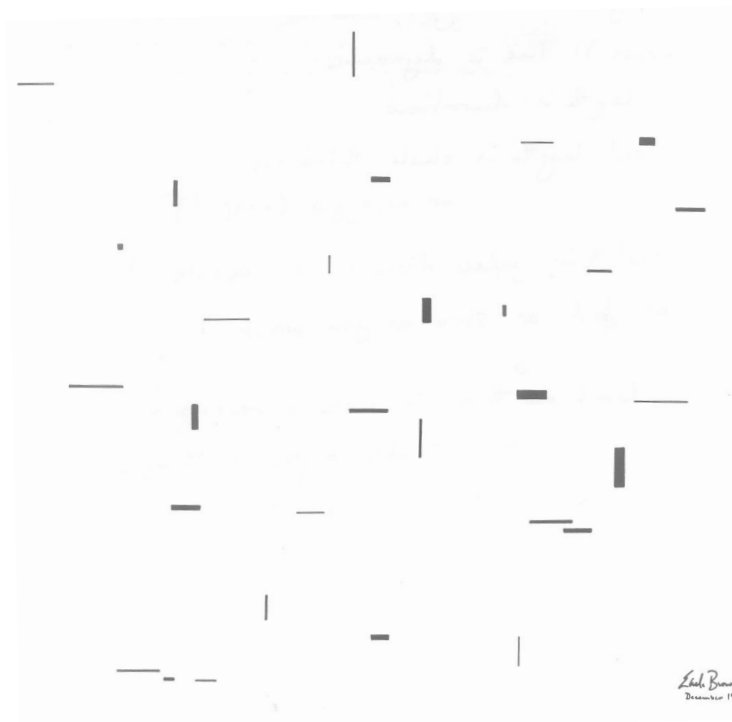
Example 1: Feldman *Projection 1* for solo cello



The horizontal bands represent, top: harmonics; middle: pizzicato; bottom: arco. Vertical dotted lines represent equal time divisions. Bold rectangles represent sounds to be played at the given time and for the given length, high, medium or low in pitch according to their position within the bands. Exact pitches and all other parameters are to be improvised.

Earle Brown in *December 1952* fixes pitch, amplitude and duration in a relatively loose way, the detail being left to the performers:

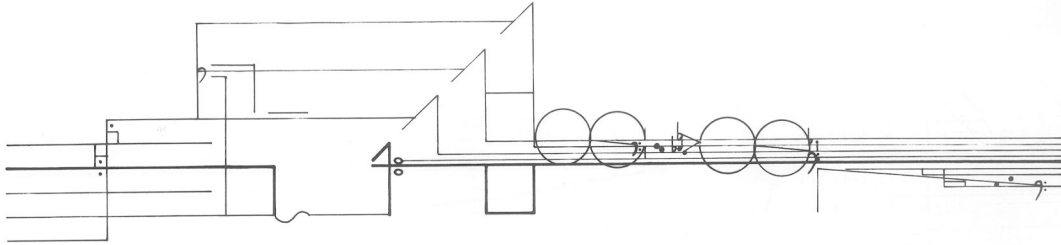
Example 2: Brown *December 1952*



Read any way up; go anywhere at any time; line thickness indicates dynamic; horizontal length is duration; vertical length is cluster thickness or arpeggio height (very rapid). Brown said to me 1) 'The visual thing implies discontinuous events, but you can move as fast or as slow as you want between events.' 2) 'I don't do this to make a version – it's a process thing.' I think this second statement was meant by Brown to discourage indeterminate (ie pre-set) performances and encourage improvised ones.

In *Treatise* Cardew asks the performers to respond in any way they wish to the graphics:

Example 3: Cardew *Treatise* page 69



It can be inferred that the music is to be read left to right, but even that is an assumption: no instructions of any kind are given in the score.

And this is my piece *Moto Interrotto* for piano and backing where I stipulate one of three invented modes and a style:

Example 3: Runswick *Moto Interrotto*

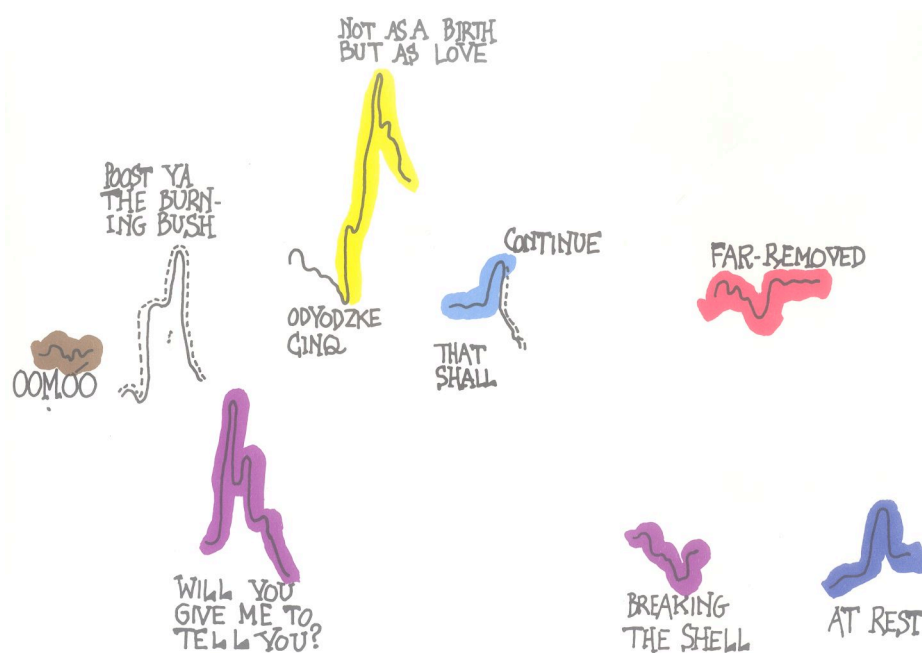
Improvise freely in the given mode (treble clef assumed) at any tessitura (this is what the Φ sign means) obeying the various instructions.

So the corollary of my definition of improvisation as real-time creative performance is that it need only exist in a limited number of the parameters of any performance, leaving others fixed.

Here is the full definition: ***improvisation is real-time invention applied to one or more parameters of a musical performance.***

Immediately we see that what Cage calls 'indeterminacy' will often qualify in my definition as improvisation. Not always: the majority of the indeterminate elements in, say, *Winter Music* are impossible to do in real time: and Dr Pritchett tells us that David Tudor often wrote out realisations of Cage's works for performance purposes.⁶ But other pieces contain indeterminate features which could be either improvised or prepared in advance: *Aria* is one such.

Example 6: Cage *Aria* page 6



Read left to right. Vertical height = pitch. Each page should last roughly the same length of time ad lib (say 30 seconds). For each colour use a different singing style.

I've performed this as an improvisation piece myself. You do of course have to prepare the various vocal styles corresponding to the colours of the graphic events, but the melodies themselves, not to mention the non-sung events represented by black squares on certain pages, can easily be improvised: indeed more easily improvised than prepared, which would involve a David Tudor-like realisation in a notation different from Cage's.⁷

So perhaps we should look at the sources to see whether and how much Cage ever sanctioned improvisation. I don't need to re-iterate his antipathy to jazz; though, reading through *Silence* and *A Year from Monday* I noticed three things: 1) he's not *always* rude

⁶ James Pritchett: *The Music of John Cage*, Cambridge University Press 1993. See for example p 155.

⁷ Nevertheless this second method, preparation, may have been what Cage intended or at least preferred. In the performance note to *Aria* he certainly tells us which voices, and which non-sung sounds, Cathy Berberian (the dedicatee) used, and presumably used every time she did the piece.

about jazz – and never as rude about it as he is about European serialism; 2) as an act of will in 1958 he put aside his distaste for jazz, along with Italian *bel canto*, Beethoven and radios, accepting them as simply part of the world of sounds which are undifferentiatedly interesting to the modern composer;⁸ 3) some of his remarks – and I say this as a jazz musician who's well-used to philistine misunderstanding as the *lingua franca* of criticism – some of his remarks about jazz demonstrate a real, astounding and marvellous insight and understanding of it: for instance this in *Four Statements on the Dance*:

With clarity of rhythmic structure, *grace* forms a duality.⁹ Clarity is cold, mathematical, inhuman, but basic and earthy. Grace is warm, incalculable, human, opposed to clarity, and like the air. Grace... is... the play with and against the clarity of the rhythmic structure. The two are always present together in the best works of the time arts... [and this] is what makes hot jazz hot... this, not syncopation, is what pleases the hep-cats.¹⁰

Good, eh? Better than André Hodeir, better than Nat Hentoff, better than Leroi Jones.

But that was a diversion. We know that in general and often in particular, John Cage spoke of improvisation as *not the way to go about it*: 'it' being the creation of music. And this was because for him, from the beginning almost, but more and more as his technique matured, ego-triggered events were less interesting than chance-triggered ones. But this doesn't mean he banned improvisation from his works or his music-making: in my definition, *improvisation is real-time invention applied to one or more parameters of a musical performance*, we see that improvisation – and let's be careful here not to overstate the case – improvisation is often one possible way of performing some aspects of his scores, such as *Aria*. This comes out as a very weak statement: and would also make a very weak argument in favour of improvisation in Cage's music, easily refuted, if it could be demonstrated that, despite the possibility of improvisation, Cage himself didn't want it. Fortunately for me, we can show two things: one, sometimes in Cage's music improvisation is unavoidable; and two, *Cage improvised himself*.

Let's look first at his relationship with the works of his close colleagues. In the *Juilliard Lecture* we read the following:

Feldman writes his music sometimes on music paper and other times on graph. In a series of pieces called *Projections* [Example 1 above] ... he indicates only high, middle and low in reference to pitch. A player is free at the instant of playing to play any note in the register indicated.¹¹

⁸ John Cage: *Composition as Process* (1958) quoted in *Silence*, p 30.

⁹ This was before duality came to be abhorred by Cage.

¹⁰ *ibid* pp 91-2

¹¹ John Cage: *Juilliard Lecture*, reprinted in *A Year from Monday* p 102, Wesleyan University Press, 1967.

Note the words 'at the instant of playing ': this qualifies the performance as improvisation, and Cage goes on to defend this very aspect of Feldman's compositional method.¹² Elsewhere he divulges that he himself took part in improvisatory performances:

We played five pieces three times each... by... Stockhausen, Christian Wolff... Morton Feldman... Earle Brown... and my *Variations*. All of these pieces are composed in various ways that have in common indeterminacy of performance. Each performance is unique, as interesting to the composers and the performers as to the audience.¹³

This statement is crucial to whether Cage himself improvised. The fact that the pieces were played *three times each*, every time differently, almost certainly shows that he did.¹⁴ The fact that he called it 'indeterminacy of performance' does not remove the fact that, by my definition (*improvisation is real-time invention applied to one or more parameters of a musical performance*) he improvised. There also exists a recording of Cage and David Tudor doing two different versions of Christian Wolff's *Duo for Pianists I*.¹⁵

We need look no further than this in deciding whether Cage sanctioned improvisation in certain aspects of his indeterminate pieces: he did, because he improvised them himself.¹⁶ And as I said earlier, there are certain of his pieces (albeit the more theatrical ones such as *0'00"* and *Etcetera*) where you can't avoid improvising.

We can however qualify quite drastically the *amount* of improvisation Cage would have approved of, at least in those of his works which employ pitched sounds: the phrase that springs to mind is *the minimum*.¹⁷ And I accept that he would have disliked the very term

¹² *ibid* p 105: 'To accept whatever comes regardless of the consequences is to be unafraid or to be full of that love which comes from a sense of at-oneness with whatever. This goes to explain what Feldman means when he says that he is associated with all of the sounds and so can foresee what will happen, even though he has not written the particular notes down as other composers do.'

¹³ John Cage: *How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run* (1965) reprinted in *A Year from Monday*, p 134.

¹⁴ Of course the performers might have prepared three separate versions in advance: but this possibility is unlikely in view of Cage's statement that each performance is... as interesting to... the performers as to the audience.

¹⁵ Hat Hut Records hat ART CD 6181.

¹⁶ The performance described above included, as Cage says, his own *Variations*. This can only have been what we now know as *Variations I*, because the story was first told in 1958, before the other *Variations* were composed (see *A Year from Monday* p 133)

¹⁷ William Brooks, during the open discussion which took place after I gave my paper, made a very important point which may in some ways supercede the one I'm making in this paragraph. Brooks said that Cage *didn't care* whether (or how much) improvisation went into *4 Solos for Voice* [and by extension any of his pieces which employ improvisation]. This is because by the end of his life only certain specific compositional preoccupations mattered to him. Any other musical techniques which emerged in his music were peripheral and unimportant. So the fact that Electric Phoenix improvised during the realisation of his music was, literally, *immaterial*. At that moment during the discussion I thought this idea so stupid as to be laughable – the whole impact of *4 Solos for Voice* with audiences (and it was truly a massive hit for Electric Phoenix) was due to our improvising skills. I made various disparaging comments, too, in my contributions to the cyberdiscussion reprinted below. Lately, though, I have come to see the possible validity of Bill's argument. After all, why should Cage care more about his music being well-received than about its rationale and its structure: I don't with my music, for heaven's sake. The way Cage made his music, the process, was the important thing to him: what the performer did with it afterward was secondary (though *not unimportant*; Cage showed obvious discrimination about how we performed *4 Solos for Voice* – see below – not to mention great pleasure in the way we sang it).

'improvisation' applied in this way: so you might think I'm being petty, semantic, perverse even, and somehow disloyal to impose this definition on him. Well, I have two compelling reasons for doing so: 1) I'm a deeply committed composer of improvised music and to adopt a definition I considered wrong would be personally to sell out; and 2) this definition I'm insisting on becomes an indispensable analytical tool when we come, finally, to the discussion of *4 Solos for Voice*.

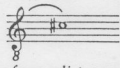
4 Solos for Voice are clearly linked to the Numbers Pieces in date, layout, notation and the specific performance technique of time-bands: performers using stopwatches begin an event at any time during the notated period to the left and finish it at any time during the period to the right.

Example 7: Cage *4 Solos for Voice*, extract from tenor *Solo* (Daryl Runswick's copy marked at Cage's instruction with a cue for the operation of a toy or joke)

SOLO FOR VOICE 95

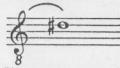
TENOR John Cage

0'00" ↔ 0'45" 0'30" ↔ 1'15"




from a distance

1'00" ↔ 1'45" 1'30" ↔ 2'15"




Sigma par exemple


2'00" ↔ 2'30" 2'15" ↔ 2'45"



the realm of art, the realm of the spirit,
unity, intuition, the visionary,
the idealist, power



2'30" ↔ 3'00" 2'45" ↔ 3'15"



Guggenheim

But ultimately the differences with the Numbers Pieces are perhaps more marked than the similarities. *4 Solos for Voice* has texts (chosen by chance operations) but this is a trivial difference. The non-trivial ones are all to do with the fact that, to an enormously greater extent than anywhere else in his oeuvre, Cage here gives the performers freedom to invent

melodically. And this is crucial: the melodic nature of the invention is quite other from any of the indeterminacies Cage used elsewhere, even to the extent that actually it cannot be accurately described as indeterminacy. *The performers have to make up tunes*. This results in a work, and notations, that are quite different from the Numbers Pieces. Here are the notational and other differences:

First, the notated pitch is only one note in a melody to be improvised by the singer. A slur leading away from the note means this should be the first pitch sung; a slur centred on the note means this pitch should come somewhere in the the phrase; and a slur leading to the note means that it should be the last note sung.

Second, Cage utilises his technique of different note-head sizes to denote differences in either loudness or duration, or both. This notation is first found in the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* and is not used in the Numbers Pieces (as far as I know: I haven't seen them all).

Third, Cage specifies improvised dynamics: a *diminuendo* means that the entire phrase should end softer than it starts; a *crescendo* means it should end louder than it starts; a *diminuendo* and a *crescendo* together allows free dynamics; no indication means constant dynamics.

Fourth, certain events, marked with an asterisk, are directed to be in some way transformed electronically. These effects are to be freely chosen by the sound projectionist (naturally this can be done indeterminately by chance operations or improvised: Electric Phoenix's sound projectionist used indeterminacy¹⁸).

Fifth, the singers are encouraged to give 'virtuoso performances' (Cage's instruction) including a wide variety of styles of singing. The result of this instruction is to generate performances which are louder, fuller (containing fewer silences) and more hilarious than the Numbers Pieces, whose contemplative nature is quite foreign to *4 Solos for Voice*.

Sixth, the four *Solos* are separate pieces which can be performed as solos or in any combination, like the other *Solos for Voice* and unlike the Numbers Pieces.

Cage came to Electric Phoenix's rehearsal studio at the October Gallery in London on the morning of Sunday 19th June 1988 from 11-12 in the morning and coached us in advance

¹⁸ See his blog, p 23 below.

of the world première at Merkin Hall in New York on Wednesday 29th June. The rehearsal was recorded on cassette by John Whiting¹⁹ and photographs were taken.

Cage gave the following additional instructions which do not appear in the score of *4 Solos for Voice*:

1. At the beginning of the piece the soprano and tenor should start their stopwatches together. The mezzo and bass should wait to start their watches until they hear the first sung event, be it from the soprano or tenor.

2. Performers should choose when to start and stop each event (within the parameters set by the time-bands) actually during performance, but in advance of each time-band beginning. This instruction (make the choice in real time during performance) qualifies it as improvisation. It may also have implications for the Numbers Pieces and other time-band works.

3. Each performer should obtain a small toy or joke, which they produce and operate once only during performance. Cage came up with this idea during the rehearsal, and later provided four places in each singer's score, one of which they were to choose during performance. The places (which he arrived at using chance operations) are between the printed events at various places, marked in Electric Phoenix's copies in the singers' handwriting with a boxed V (see Example 7 above which shows a V marked in my handwriting in the tenor *Solo*). Electric Phoenix's toys were: Soprano, blowing bubbles; Mezzo, a fan; Tenor, a false nose; Bass, exploding ticker-tape.²⁰

Needless to say this rehearsal was fascinating and instructive. In the course of putting the piece together I asked Cage three questions, the answers to which should be taken as further elucidations and expansions of the printed instructions, and one of which is I think as clear and concise a statement of Cage's attitude to improvisation and indeterminacy as he ever gave; whether he said these same words to others, or improvised them that day to me, I don't know: but I hold them in my heart. My first question was, may we sing a tiny note loudly, ever? (the answer was yes, which I could have gleaned from the instructions anyway). My second question was, may we repeat or desiccate the text while improvising,

¹⁹ A transcript of the spoken parts of the rehearsal is available on my [website](#): *John Cage in rehearsal with Electric Phoenix*. One short passage half-way through is missing, probably because the first side of the tape ran out and it had to be turned over. The missing passage, catastrophically for me, is the very question of mine I refer to below, whose answer 'Something that happens by chance is always more interesting than something a human being thinks might be interesting' is so crucial to my argument concerning Cage's attitude to indeterminacy and improvisation. Because of this omission – because of the chance operation of having to turn over a cassette at that moment – I have no irrefutable evidence Cage ever said it.

²⁰ When we recorded *4 Solos* we substituted audible events for visible ones: soprano, wood block; mezzo, clown's laugh; tenor, camera turning on and taking a shot; bass, crumpling a paper cup.

à la Berio? (the answer was no, and at least one commercially-available recording of *4 Solos for Voice* gets this wrong; though the performers can't be blamed: it doesn't appear in the instructions). My third question was, having chosen a time to begin an event, may one change one's mind in the light of what is actually going on when that moment arrives (for instance if one's event is soft, and if the other singers happen to be screaming, might it be better to postpone one's event in order to have it be audible?) The answer to this question, to my surprise at the time, was no, and Cage gave this as his reason (and now I quote from memory, but I'm pretty sure these were Cage's actual words:) 'Something that happens by chance is always more interesting than something a human being thinks might be interesting'. As I said, this lays out in a very few words everything we need to know about Cage's attitude to improvisation and why he preferred chance operations. Something that happens by chance is always more interesting than something a human being thinks might be interesting.

Which leaves us with the question, why did Cage in 1988 change the habits of a lifetime and write an improvised piece freer in its melodic license to the performer than anything else he ever wrote?²¹ Many of the earlier *Solos for Voice* can be improvised, but not with this few constraints: in the ones I've seen there's always at least a graphic guide to the melodic shape: but not here: why? The only answer I can think of is that, having attended our concert in Zagreb, he thought of Electric Phoenix as an improvising group and wrote a piece he thought would suit us. Which it did, down to the ground: our greatest hit, truly. But of the four pieces we performed to him that day in Zagreb, only one was improvised: mine. So perhaps Cage did like *I Sing The Body Electric* after all.

Finally, an invitation. Discussing the Silent Piece, Dr Pritchett has pointed out that it exists in two different versions which are so dissimilar as to almost constitute separate works. In the first version, composed in 1952 and premiered by David Tudor, Cage writes out a complete score of bars of varying lengths, all rests, at a given tempo. This gives the three movements exact durations to be performed as precisely as possible. But in the published score of 1960 Cage has made a crucial change: there is no printed music, only a performance instruction which details the original durations of the movements as he composed them, but adds that in new performances the movements may last any length of time. This alters things. It turns *4'33"* from a notated piece into *either* an indeterminate one, the lengths of whose movements might be arrived at in advance, perhaps by chance operations (did Cage intend this? – the performance instruction doesn't stipulate it); *or*, and this would alter *everything*, into an improvisation piece where the movement lengths

²¹ - freer because it involves melodic invention at the fantasy of the performers. Some of Cage's pieces from the 1960s (eg *0'00"*) appear to offer totally free improvisation, but the instruction 'Perform a disciplined action' is immediately (actually he thought this up the next day) qualified by 'the action should fulfil an obligation to others... and should not be the performance of a musical composition'. In other words there is none of the same invitation to free melodic fantasy in any of Cage's earlier works that we find in *4 Solos for Voice*.

are arrived at spontaneously during performance. In that case the difference in the way it feels, to both performer and listener, would be startling. On Monday July 9th²² in an evening concert at Trinity College of Music I shall be performing 4'33" twice: first in its 1952 version and then improvised, hoping to demonstrate this difference. It would be lovely if you could all join me.

The twin performances of 4'33" duly took place and a remarkable difference between them was experienced by most of those present (with the exception of Trinity's Vice-Principal, Derek Aviss, now of course Principal, who said – with a twinkle – that he was willing to be subjected to 'that piece' once – but twice!?)

I adopted (or thought I was doing so) David Tudor's practice in adding a visual element to the performance by opening and closing the piano lid to signify the beginnings and ends of the movements. Only years later did I re-read Cage's note in the score and discover to my surprise and delight that I'd adopted the opposite method to that of Tudor: I opened the lid at the beginnings of movements (to show visibly that the keyboard was *available to be played* but that this was not taking place) and closed it at the ends. Tudor *closed* the lid at the beginnings of movements and opened it at the ends. His method perhaps demonstrates a strict obedience to the composer, rendering any (conventional) playing impossible. Mine shows that I am able to play but I *eschew the possibility*. Of these two equally valid methods, mine might be said to be more improvisatory.

In the second, improvised performance, at the end of the third movement I was about to finish the piece (this was obvious to the audience from the fact that my hands went out to the piano lid in order to close it) when a police car, siren screaming, began to pass by in the street outside Hinde Street Church. (The fact that extraneous noise was abundant in this venue, normally a disadvantage, made it of course ideal for 4'33" whose very rationale is to invite us to listen to ambient sounds.) Immediately I aborted the planned ending, waited for the siren to fade to silence, and only then closed the lid. This reaction of mine to a chance event produced audible amusement among the audience and brought the piece to a stunning conclusion. I feel sure Cage – the ultimate showman – would have done exactly the same as I did.

Which does no more than confirm the phenomenon of strong feedback loops which we find generated between performer and audience when improvisation is taking place (more on this in *The Improvisation Continuum...*)

²² This date is long gone – the year was 2001.

2. Correspondence and blogs following Runswick's paper Virginia Anderson, John Whiting, Daryl Runswick, Charles Shere

Where dates are missing I have lost them.

1.

From: John Whiting [<mailto:john@whitings-writings.com>]

Sent: Saturday, June 28, 2003 9:02 AM

To: silence

Subject: Re: The cultural hegemony of the avant-garde

Virginia Anderson wrote:

. . . Darrell Runswick's claim that one of Cage's works is improvisatory, even though Cage himself told Runswick that his indeterminacy was different from improvisation.

Daryl [sic] was pointing out – correctly, I believe – that in working out the details of an indeterminate score, the distinction between indeterminacy and improvisation can ultimately become so vague as to descend into fundamentalist nit-picking. As sound designer, I worked from the beginning on the set of four solos Daryl is referring to, which Cage wrote for Electric Phoenix, and I observed how conscientious adherence to written (and verbal) instruction gradually shaded into individual creative input which can only be described as improvisation. With such an ebullient vocal quartet, Cage knew that this would happen; he prefaced the score with the tongue-in-cheek instruction, "A virtuosic performance is invited." And he certainly got it!

John Whiting

2.

From: Daryl Runswick

To: John Whiting

Dear Boy²³

Naturally as the alleged author of all this I never received Anderson's original article: do you have it? Re all this, it all depends, of course, on how we define improvisation. The definition I gave in my paper is as follows:

– and I quoted to John the three paragraphs starting on page 4 above: 'Before going further...' etc

The Cage crowd really hated this! Pandemonium at the end - I exaggerate. Even Bill Brooks, who was there, attempted at questions afterwards to minimise my implications by saying that the improvisation was a 'completely unimportant parameter in the structure' and that Cage would only have been interested in other structural features and would have tolerated the improvisation as a side issue. Harrumph.

Dear Boy

²³ John Whiting and I habitually address one another as 'Dear Boy': this results in the rather confusing convention of our written communications having 'Dear Boy' as both their appellation and their signature.

3.

From: John Whiting
To: Daryl Runswick

Dear Boy -

Here's the complete posting from the *silence* list in which your name was taken in vain. I can see why your paper caused offense – it's both logical and sensible.

Dear Boy

Subject: The cultural hegemony of the avant-garde
Date: Sat, 28 Jun 2003 08:12:44 +0100
From: Virginia Anderson [mailto:<anderson.lists@ntlworld.com>](mailto:anderson.lists@ntlworld.com)
To: silence@list.mail.virginia.edu

[This was a long posting mainly regarding other topics: but I received the following side-swipe in the course of a – discussion? – of 'experimental music':]

The avant-garde tries to submerge or transform experimental aesthetics and modes of procedures, while being uninformed and not a little patronising: for instance, Richard Barrett's claim that Paragraph 7 of *The Great Learning* becomes diatonic soon after its opening, because of the untrained voices (implying that simple minds make simple music), when every recording and performance shows a complex chromaticism. Or Darrell Runswick's claim that one of Cage's works is improvisatory, even though Cage himself told Runswick that his indeterminacy was different from improvisation.

... Cheers, Virginia

4.

From: John Whiting
To: Daryl Runswick

Dear Boy -

This may amuse you.

DB

Subject: Re: The cultural hegemony of the avant-garde
Date: Wed, 02 Jul 2003 14:00:33 +0100
From: Virginia Anderson <mailto:anderson.lists@ntlworld.com>
To: silence <mailto:silence@list.mail.virginia.edu>

Hi all,

Just this letter, then I'll lurk.

on 28/6/03 9:02 am, John Whiting at john@whitings-writings.com wrote:

Virginia Anderson wrote:

. . . Darrell Runswick's claim that one of Cage's works is improvisatory, even though Cage himself told Runswick that his indeterminacy was different from improvisation.

Daryl [sic] was pointing out – correctly, I believe – that in working out the details of an indeterminate score, the distinction between indeterminacy and improvisation can ultimately become so vague as to descend into fundamentalist nit-picking.

After the paper he gave at the 2001 20th C conference at Goldsmith's, I asked Runswick if he felt that improvisation and the interpretation of indeterminate elements were the same, he answered that he thought that they were.

I certainly use different modes of thinking in Western art-music improvisation than I do in working out the indeterminate elements of a composer's score. What's more, people who I respect who improvise as a major part of their professional activity say they do, too. The members of AMM distinguish AMM music from the occasional compositions they perform (in the past, pieces like Cardew's *The Tiger's Mind*, Eddie Prévost's *Spirals* and these days *Treatise*). Cardew, who was no great slouch at interpreting other peoples' indeterminate music, wrote that before AMM, '...improvisation had always terrified me; I thought it must

be something like composing, but accelerated a million times'. With experience, he found that improvisation 'is vital and direct, rather than a translation or interpretation of intellect, attitude, notation, inspiration or what have you' [*Treatise Handbook*, p. ix]. Cardew specifically noted that the Improvisation Rites as defined in the Draft Constitution of the Scratch Orchestra were not musical compositions, rather that they were rituals to facilitate improvisation. Most of these Rites (some 127 of the 151 in the first collection, called 'Nature Study Notes') have no direct limitation as to sounds, sound sources or other elements of a musical score of any kind. This attitude continues to this day in the improvisers with whom I have worked, both here in Britain and in the United States, over the past quarter century.

It could be that, from Runswick's conclusions and his bio mentioning that he had been a jazz musician, he was, like Richard Rodney Bennett, involved in chart-based jazz. Playing practiced riffs over changes (whether tonal, modal, or 'other') in someone else's piece is, perhaps, exactly like realising an indeterminate piece, but this is not 'improvisation' as we use it in the discussion of modern art music. If he meant chart-based jazz improvisation, he should have specified it.

... Cheers, Virginia

5.

From: Daryl Runswick

To: Virginia Anderson

Dear Virginia

John Whiting has forwarded to me some contributions of yours to *silence* with my name in them. I think you say some very interesting things and I thought I'd engage with you on a couple that interest me.

1. *Cage himself told Runswick that his indeterminacy was different from improvisation.* He did indeed, though until you wrote this I didn't see it in that light, so thank you. Nevertheless Cage listened to Electric Phoenix's rehearsal – which was improvised – and approved it. I feel he must therefore have sanctioned our improvising. Of course there are other possible interpretations of his behaviour. At worst, he may have been so dismayed at what we did that he thought nothing he said could effect an improvement and so it was best to say nothing; though he did in fact say a lot of encouraging things and made suggestions, leaving at the end seemingly well-pleased; nor did he take any steps thereafter to withdraw permission from us for performances. Another (less humiliating!) possibility is that, as Bill Brooks claimed in the discussion after my paper, the structural aspects of *4 Solos for Voice* that Cage really cared about were other ones, and it was immaterial to him whether we improvised or not. I find this hard to believe, since the improvisation takes such a central place in the listener's experience of the piece: but it could be true. If it was true however, then Cage at least *didn't mind* improvisation in this case. Perhaps therefore I should retreat from the claim that *4 Solos for Voice* is an improvisation piece, to the rather weaker one that Cage accepted improvised performances of it. But I don't retreat quite yet!²⁴

2. *After the paper he gave at the 2001 20th C conference at Goldsmith's, I asked Runswick if he felt that improvisation and the interpretation of indeterminate elements were the same, he answered that he thought that they were.* I do not deny saying this to you, but I was wrong to say it – it did not represent my view. I was caught on the hop and said something I didn't believe even at the time: it was at odds with what I had just said in the paper about the nature of composition and how it differs from improvisation. I said in the paper:

I do unfortunately need to offer a definition of improvisation, because Cage here and there in his writings uses the word in senses I can't accept. For instance he says of the way he wrote

²⁴ (March 2005) I don't retreat at all.

Sonatas and Interludes, 'The method was that of considered improvisation (mainly at the piano...)' but by this he only means the way in which most composers (except serialists and himself by the time he wrote these words) compose. To call composing freely at the piano 'improvisation' is misleading: improvisation is real-time creative performance. That's the kernel of my definition: improvisation is real-time invention applied to a musical performance. Real-time: if you don't do it now it's not improvisation. Invention: if you don't make something that's never been made quite this way before - albeit often from pre-fabricated parts - it's not improvisation. And performance: in my opinion if it doesn't take place during a performance it's not improvisation, it's either a stage in the process of composing or it's noodling: an audience is essential and without one improvisation does not exist. Real-time creative performance: I must go with this definition of improvisation and regretfully reject Cage's, realising that to accept his would have made it easier for everyone. Apologies.

Of course, the above says nothing about the realisation of indeterminate elements, which was not my main theme (and 20 minutes is short enough to try to say anything) but whether or not you accept my definition of improvisation, it obviously cannot encompass the prior working-out of complex indeterminacy rules such as Cage often employs. The 2nd paragraph of your posting of 2 July 03 (*I certainly use different modes of thinking in Western art-music improvisation...*) is very pertinent in this respect and I would not disagree with any of it.

3. *It could be that, from Runswick's conclusions and his bio mentioning that he had been a jazz musician, he was, like Richard Rodney Bennett, involved in chart-based jazz.* Indeed I was, though I also moved in free-jazz circles and contributed, I hope not without quality, there. One of my performances was recorded: Ray Russell's concert at the ICA in 1971, which has been re-issued on CD, if you're interested. Ray's band was not totally free – he wrote 'head' melodies, following which the music took its course often with solos backed by the guitar, bass and drums, though the 'time' was mostly unstructured. The ethos was rather like Coltrane's later work. By the way I refuse to be insulted in being bracketed with Richard Rodney Bennett, who does what he does very well, I think. But my jazz style was much more advanced than his.

I stopped playing jazz professionally in 1983, since when I've taken part in 'art music' improvisations (I don't like the term 'art music' but what else is there? – 'concert music' hardly applies to such an under-represented genre!) and attended a few performances by Rhodri Davies, AMM, Nikos Veliotis and others. Actually I find myself in a rather strange position, both vis-à-vis the improvisers and the 'concert music' executants, because as an 'art music' composer these days, I put improvisation into my scores. Both sides look at me askance, the improvisers because they don't, as a rule, think a composer should tell them what to do, and the executants because they're terrified. Actually I have over recent years attracted a growing number of performers happy to improvise 'my' works, most of them from Trinity College of Music, where until recently I was Head of the Composition

Faculty, including Nikos Veliotis, but also others including CoMA²⁵ people. Eddie Prévost took part in a performance of my *Chinese Whispers* some time ago, and at the same concert I performed pages from *Treatise* with him and others (as members of the Continuum Ensemble). A couple of years ago I took part in some workshop performances with Earle Brown, who was inspiring, and was I suppose a precursor in the kind of thing I'm trying to do. In 2000 I made a CD of an improvisation score of mine, *Set of 5*, with Keith Tippett on two pianos. His input was rather more jazz-influenced than mine, but the result was a good juxtaposition.

4. *Playing practiced riffs over changes (whether tonal, modal, or 'other') in someone else's piece is, perhaps, exactly like realising an indeterminate piece.* I think you're wrong here, though I see the connection. The practised **licks** (riffs are something else, most often written down by the arranger) are summoned up during performance, in the heat of the moment, and strung together into sentences and paragraphs of greater or lesser elegance: they thus qualify (in my definition) as improvisation. A realised indeterminate piece will be played from prepared music (or memory) but will be fixed before the performance begins.

There is a common misconception (I can't accuse you of this since I don't know what you think) that free improvisation is somehow totally new every time: in other words, that free improvisers never repeat themselves. Now I'm not familiar with every improvising tradition in the world but I do know jazz (structured and free) Indian and contemporary 'art music' improvisation well, and I've never heard any performer like that. I don't believe it's possible, or desirable. I only say this because I don't accept that the various improvising traditions are different in this respect, not even completely free improvising.

All the best, and thank you for making me think hard today, Daryl.

²⁵ Contemporary Music Making for Amateurs, of which I was at this time Chair.

6.

From: John Whiting

To: Daryl Runswick

Charles Shere wrote:

And there you have it, the conundrum that faces us all when we participate in a social context, participate simultaneously as individuals and co-participants. To me the great thing about music, all real music, and perhaps supremely in Cage, is that it provides the challenge and opportunity of that conundrum in an interesting and esthetic context, harmless to participants and bystanders alike.

Improvisational performance of Cage continues to be ambiguous and contentious. Even when answers to questions are arrived at by means of the I Ching, the questions themselves can be regarded as improvisational; i.e. the result of ad hoc conscious choice. In a Cage festival in which I took part, one of the concerts was 'directed' by Cage himself, arriving at chance decisions determining many aspects of its detail. Other concerts in the festival had been similarly structured, but Cage's own was by far the most interesting, often humorous, because Cage had asked structural questions to which almost any answers would have been stimulating.

When Cage wrote his four solos for Electric Phoenix, he was aware of the group's skill and versatility. The one verbal instruction he attached to it, his tongue at least lightly implanted in his cheek, was 'A virtuosic performance is invited'. When he heard the piece in rehearsal, the one strict instruction he gave was that the singers not listen to each other; i.e. the improvisation must not be interactive.

Daryl Runswick, the EP tenor and a substantial composer in his own right, wrote about this rehearsal in a previous Silence discussion. It's worth quoting a part of it here:

Cage listened to Electric Phoenix's rehearsal [of 4 Solos for Voice] – which was improvised – and approved it. I feel he must therefore have sanctioned our improvising. Of course there are other possible interpretations of his behaviour. At worst, he may have been so dismayed at what we did that he thought nothing he said could effect an improvement and so it was best to say nothing; though he did in fact say a lot of encouraging things and made suggestions, leaving at the end seemingly well-pleased; nor did he take any steps thereafter to withdraw permission from us for performances. Another (less humiliating!) possibility is that, as Bill Brooks claimed in the discussion after my paper, the structural aspects of 4 Solos for Voice that Cage really cared about were other ones, and it was immaterial to him whether we improvised or not. I find this hard to believe, since the improvisation takes such a central place in the listener's experience of the piece: but it could be true. If it was true however, then Cage at least didn't mind improvisation in this case. Perhaps therefore I should retreat from the claim that 4

Solos for Voice is an improvisation piece, to the rather weaker one that Cage accepted improvised performances of it. But I don't retreat quite yet!

I can only add that EP's performances were indeed both improvisational and virtuosic. As a part of them, I added improvised electroacoustic treatment to certain passages, as instructed in the score. These were left to me to decide on, and consisted of selections from a pre-programmed series of treatments in a Lexicon LXP, which treatments I had modified for this piece. Before each performance I decided which selections would be used and where – not through any elaborate chance procedure but simply by writing out a pseudo-random series of numbers from 1 through 12 (the total number of treatments I had programmed in advance). The singers never made any effort to alter their performance so as to take advantage of the effects produced – as indeed they should not have.

The end result of all this was a series of very amusing performances, which always got a lot of laughs. Cage didn't seem to be bothered by this; he had in fact heard virtuoso performances of EP on record, such as the 4th Madrigal of William Brooks, which is a hilarious send-up of barbershop harmonization, so he knew what to expect. One criticism of Cage which is never made is that he lacked a sense of humor. But he did demand, I believe, that a performer's humor not be cheaply egotistical, but rather arise from a sort of po-faced abstracted incongruity – a violation of expectation, not unlike much of Haydn.