

JOHN CAGE: A PERSONAL MEMOIR BY RICHARD BUNGER

Shortly after undertaking my first teaching post – as Assistant Professor of Music at Queens College in Charlotte, North Carolina – I was browsing the extensive file cabinets at Brodt’s Music Store in downtown Charlotte, looking for new repertoire for my piano students. Quite by accident, in the way one stumbles upon a unique flower in a fragrant field or a curious shell on a remote beach, in an otherwise unremarkable drawer I came upon a single score marked “for prepared piano.” I certainly did not realize at that moment how this slender oversized Ozalid™ score would change my musical life forever.

The piece in question was *THE PERILOUS NIGHT*, a suite in six movements “for prepared piano” that John Cage had composed in 1943-44. I had heard of Cage during my undergraduate and graduate studies (Oberlin Conservatory, University of Illinois) but had never personally encountered any of his music. After all, this was only 1967 and John Cage had not yet become a household musical name. As a composer during my undergraduate years my stylistic inspiration came from been Samuel Barber, Arnold Schoenberg (remember, this was the early 1960s in the hallowed halls of Académie), and Charles Ives. When Cage was mentioned, if at all, his name was meant to convey some sort of arcane and unarticulated musical joke that would elicit a knowing nod from the *conservatoire intelligentsia*.

Because I am endlessly inquisitive by nature I purchased the unusual score (which included a detailed list of *hardware* to be employed!!) and took it home. Quite fortuitously, in addition to piano, theory, and history courses, Oberlin had also offered me a year-long course in piano tuning, repair, and maintenance (a practicum that had helped me pay my way through undergraduate and graduate school), so I already knew my way around the inside of a piano – what could be done safely, and what to avoid. And because I had enjoyed working with tools and hardware all my life, I went without hesitation to my home workshop, gathered together the materials described in the preface to the score along with my piano maintenance kit, and proceeded excitedly to a campus classroom with a moderate-sized grand piano. It was a Saturday afternoon and I had the whole building to myself. I still recall vividly how I followed Cage’s preparation instructions carefully – delightedly trying and sampling the sound of each note as I went along and then, when I finished the preparation process, and then sitting down at the piano to play the first piece of the suite. I have often referred to that moment as feeling “as Paul must have felt on the road to Damascus.” I was hooked. Suddenly, here at my fingertips was a veritable one-man *gamelan* orchestra – a spectrum of tone qualities unlike anything I had ever played before, akin to some of the exotic percussion ensembles I had heard and studied in a graduate course on musical instruments of the world.

To put this in its historical perspective, my own “discovery” of the prepared piano occurred months before Bob Moog first demonstrated his early synthesizer at the *Monterey International Pop Festival*, and the timbres of the prepared piano were

infinitely more complex and musically interesting than anything that was practicable electronically at the time or would be for perhaps another decade to come. Moreover, I realized that the prepared piano's "human interface" already had skilled adherents all over the world, albeit that most of these adherents would be baffled if not appalled by the idea of placing screws, bolts, felt and rubber inside a piano!

Soon thereafter I featured *THE PERILOUS NIGHT* on my faculty recital at Queens College (now University), causing a minor sensation on campus and eliciting an article in the *Charlotte Observer* about Queens' "far-out professor." Apparently this event also came to the attention of someone at Winthrop College in nearby Rock Hill, South Carolina because I was invited to perform the suite as part of their upcoming weekend festival of events featuring John Cage with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company! My performance on the evening before John and Merce arrived was very well received. And of course I was in the audience the following evening for the performance by Cage and Cunningham and his Company, eager to get a personal glimpse of John Cage and find out in person what sort of composer could have re-imagined the pianoforte in such a fascinating way.

I was seated on the left aisle in about the sixth or seventh row of the auditorium, watching the dancing and intently listening to Cage simultaneously deliver one of his composed lectures (if I recall correctly, it was his "How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run") from his perch in front of the stage-right proscenium. Great showman that he was, Cage fiddled off and on with a champagne bottle as he spoke – very, very, very gradually loosening the cork of the bottle (what better way to tease and hold an audience's anticipation...?) until at last the cork popped and flew high into the air. I had never met the man, he didn't know who I was, and he certainly had no control over the cork's trajectory – but its arc took it high above the audience...where it seemed to hang...and then...landed directly in my lap. (I still have that champagne cork.)

At the end of that exciting evening I went backstage and introduced myself to John. I told him that I had presented *THE PERILOUS NIGHT* in that same auditorium the previous evening, and he very graciously invited me to perform it for him the next morning.

Or as John later and more dramatically described it in his Preface to my book *THE WELL-PREPARED PIANO*: "Many years later while on tour in the southeastern U.S. with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Richard Bunker asked me to listen to his performance of *THE PERILOUS NIGHT*. I tried to get out of what I thought would be an ordeal. I said I was too busy. However, Richard Bunker persevered. When I finally heard him play, I was amazed to discover that he loved and understood the music, and that he prepared the piano beautifully."

When I finished the exhilarating, driving final movement of the suite that morning in Rock Hill, I was breathless, and John was delighted. He told me the piece had not

been performed in concert since the mid 1940s, over twenty years before! So he inscribed the cover of my score “for Richard Bunger, with gratitude for his bringing this piece again to life. John Cage.” That original autograph still hangs on my wall and is reproduced below.

[PHOTOCOPY OF CAGE AUTOGRAPH ON *THE PERILOUS NIGHT* COVER]

A funny story about this wonderful suite, *THE PERILOUS NIGHT*, which I recorded as the title track on my first solo LP in 1973 for Avant Records (a recording happily praised at the time by *Stereo Review/Musical America*), and that I continued to champion in my concerts through the U.S. and Europe for 15 years thereafter. Some time in the late 1970s, a *Los Angeles Times* music critic, reviewing a recital by another pianist who had played *THE PERILOUS NIGHT*, described the suite as “that old warhorse.” From obscurity to “warhorse” in just a decade? Apparently my proselytizing was more effective than I ever suspected.

In that same evangelizing mode, I wrote a booklet titled *THE WELL-PREPARED PIANO* to explain to other pianists how to prepare a piano properly without damaging the instrument in any way. This book was first published by Colorado College Music Press in 1973, and John himself wrote the *Foreword*.

Throughout the 1970s I traveled from coast to coast in the U.S. and Canada as well as in Europe, presenting recitals, lecture recitals, and concerts of music by 20th-Century American composers – the first pianist to concentrate exclusively on that vast and important repertoire. During this time I also invented the “Bungerack®”, a portable music rack that affords pianists easy access to the piano’s interior when they are directed to strum, pluck, knock, drum, and otherwise elicit sounds from the piano’s strings and interior structure – actions generally inhibited by a standard music rack. I manufactured about a dozen of these hardwood-aluminum-and-steel “Bungeracks®” in my home workshop for fellow pianists – including one for John, which is still extant in the John Cage archives – and I published plans for a simpler homemade version that could be assembled by others with materials available at most any hardware store.

[PHOTO OF RICHARD BUNGER PERFORMING FOR BBC, USING HIS BUNGERACK®]

I recorded many of these American works and my own compositions for several U.S. labels as well as for the BBC, ORTF, RIAS, and Oslo Radio. My concerts and lectures usually featured *THE PERILOUS NIGHT* and invariably featured works by John Cage – his *prepared-piano* as well as his solo-piano, toy-piano, and “theatre” pieces – plus works by American composers as diverse as Charles Ives (piano and quarter-tone piano), Henry Cowell (“string piano”), Mort Subotnick (piano/duet with electronic tape), Barney Childs and Hal Budd (early minimalism), Henri Lazarof (virtuosic complexity), Olly Wilson (a concerto I commissioned for grand piano/Fender-Rhodes piano with orchestra that I recorded with the Baltimore Symphony on *Columbia Masterworks*), Jon Appleton (a “concerto” for toy piano with other toy

instruments, accompanied by an abstract slide show that I designed and produced), Charles Lamb (ragtime), E.T.Paull (early-20th-century “descriptive marches” – with subtitles!), several of my own compositions for *prepared piano* and piano-plus-electronics, and works by countless other American composers.

In 1977, ten years after I had first unearthed *THE PERILOUS NIGHT*, and because he admired THE WELL-PREPARED PIANO, John invited me to his apartment in Greenwich Village to browse his file cabinets to look at his manuscripts of piano pieces not yet published. John asked me to select and edit some of these assorted manuscripts for release by his publisher C. F. Peters. He humorously gave me one of his nicotine-encrusted black-and-silver cigarette holders as a little souvenir of our time together! (I had given up smoking in the late 1960s – but, as I recall, John was still inhaling.) I remember the experience vividly because I visited John and Merce’s apartment during a particularly cold October of that year – along with my wife and our three-month-old first-born daughter bundled in an infant carrier.

[PHOTO OF JOHN CAGE AND RICHARD BUNGER TOGETHER]

I subsequently used my photocopies of John’s manuscripts to perform these pieces on my concerts and to record many of the pieces on these CDs. While some of the annotations I subsequently prepared for Peters are now housed in the Performing Arts Library at NYC’s Lincoln Center, the “translations” that Peters made of my notes and that they subsequently published unfortunately contain numerous errors to this day! (For example, there is an entire page of music missing in the published version of the first movement of *What So Proudly We Hail* a.k.a. *Four Dances* that is recorded for the first time in these recordings.) However, these definitive recordings represent Cage’s intentions as he and I had deciphered, discussed, and decided.

In return for having brought them out of obscurity and preparing them for publication, John Cage and C.F. Peters authorized me to make the “first recordings” of these pieces. I was contacted in this regard by Heiner Stadler, a producer for Tomato Records, a company that had already issued Cage’s *SONATAS AND INTERLUDES* and that wanted to release more of John’s music. Because I was living in Los Angeles at the time, Stadler arranged for the recordings to be made in 1978 in the main studio at the famed Capitol Records in Hollywood. For these sessions, Stadler brought in not only two marvelous grand pianos but also several of his favorite musicians to play on my realizations of Cage’s *Variations I* and on the pieces requiring percussion and vocalist. I invited my friend Delores Stevens, with whom I had performed on LA’s Monday Evening Concerts, to join me for the 2-piano numbers. But Stadler and I were unable to find the right singer for the second movement of *WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL* (later titled *FOUR DANCES*) at the time, so this recording includes only a piano-and-percussion excerpt that we recorded as a “place-holder” with plans to record the remainder of that movement later. During that same year, THE WELL-PREPARED PIANO was published in Tokyo (translated into Japanese) by Zen-On Music Co. Ltd,

Unfortunately, Tomato Records never issued the complete recordings (although they did issue *FOUR WALLS* without my permission and without a contract) and eventually went bankrupt. So other artists and recording companies soon began recording the pieces. Nonetheless these formerly “lost” but now-finally-released-recordings are (1) actually the first recordings ever made of these pieces, (2) the ones made from the original manuscript scores, and (3) still the recordings first authorized by John Cage – even though they are just now being released 35 years later, during the centenary of John’s birth!! Thus I have chosen the title THE LOST RECORDINGS for this release of 3 CDs with over 3 total hours of John Cage’s music.

In 1980 the Musical Heritage Society released a recording of mine titled *PREPARED PIANO: The First Four Decades* that included Cage’s initial foray with the prepared piano – *Bacchanale* – as well as my own *Mirrors for Pianist and Tape Recordist*. And in 1981 a much-expanded edition of my book *THE WELL-PREPARED PIANO* was published in Los Angeles by Litoral Arts Press, again with John’s *Foreword*. I still receive requests for copies of this book from pianists and libraries around the world!

Illness and surgery kept me occupied much of 1981 and 1982, and I gave my final professional public concert performance – Cage’s monumental *FOUR WALLS* – during a festival dedicated to John’s music in Minneapolis-St.Paul to celebrate John’s 70th birthday, with John as the honored guest. This was the first public performance of *FOUR WALLS* since its single-performance premiere in 1944 in a production with actors (including a young Julie Harris) and other dancers! By that time it had been 15 years since my momentous day in Brodt’s Music Store. And now it was time for me to hand the baton to others.

– Richard Bunger (Evans)
November 2011

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