

Liberating the signs:

John Cage's Concert for Piano and Orchestra

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– Prelude –

"I don't hear the music I write: John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, written between 1957 and 1958, marks a radical rejection of the metaphysical concept of truth – in his case: musical truth – and a significant change in the relations between the composer, the score and the performer.

"Script has always been treated like a parasite [...]."

John Cage (1991): *An Autobiographical Statement*.

Using an open form and ambiguous graphic representations, Cage's score does not offer an underlying musical truth.

Jaques Derrida (1972): *Signature Event Context*.

In order to understand the reasons, methods and consequences of Cage's shift, we first have to understand what the metaphysical concept implies.

"The *Concert* has no overall score, but all parts are written out in detail. A performance of the *Concert* may include all of the instruments, but any also be performed as a solo, duet, trio or any combination of the given instruments [...]. The notation of all orchestral parts uses a system where space is relative to time. The amount of time is determined by the musician and later, during the performance, altered by the conductor [...]. The part for pianist is an aggregate of 84 different kinds of notations, written on 63 pages and composed using 84 different compositional techniques. The pianist may play the material in hole or in part, choosing any notations, elements or parts and playing them in any order."¹

1 <http://www.johncage.info/workscage/concpiorch.html>

– Metaphysics 1 – Separation between truth and phenomenon

One of the basic ideas of metaphysics, the separation between truth and phenomenon, can be applied to a musical model, considering there are three constitutional components in the act of creating music: intentionality of musical truth, representation and perception. In the metaphysical model, the musical truth is absolute in its abstraction and exists autonomously from its phenomenon. J.S. Bach's *Art of the Fugue* is probably the most famous example for this kind of a perception of a piece of music. In that work, the music (as the musical truth) is considered to be independent from its realization. The idea of it being composed without a specific instrumentation in mind, was a popular theme throughout the centuries of its perception. That means that the music somehow *is* the score itself or better: the abstraction of the score, as an idealized reference to the musical truth that lies *behind* or *under* the representation. In that model the score would be one side of the phenomenon; the other side would be the performance through the interpreter, to which similar concepts can be applied: The musical truth of the work always shines through an interpretation, that should ideally be ignored, and in the best possible realization, the act of interpreting would *hide away* behind the authority of the work, so that it can be perceived without hindrance.

In this metaphysical model, both sides of the phenomenon speak of a musical truth, that lives beyond them in a *context-free* realm of absoluteness, self-identical with its own truth, and independent and untouchable by the surface of the phenomenon – it is *absolute music*.

– Metaphysics 2 – Idealization and abstraction

Three concepts of Jaques Derrida, which he used to describe the role of script in the metaphysical model (expressed in his essays *Signature Event Context*², *Différance*³ and *The pit and the pyramid*⁴) help to understand in a more specific way the relationship between musical truth and

2 Jaques Derrida: "Signature Event Context" in "Margins of philosophy" (The University of Chicago Press, 1982)

3 *Ibid.*, "Différance"

4 *Ibid.*, "The pit and the pyramid"

the score as its representation: "Sign as interim", "Transparency of intention" and "Authority of anchorage".

In the metaphysical concept, a sign – in our case: the score – functions as a "provisional reference"⁵ to a presence, that has been deferred. That means, that the sign provides a reference with which we can trace back the underlying truth through both abstraction and idealization. It also means that the sign is dependent – not-autonomous – on the presence, from which we are deferred (both spatially and temporally) and it is ephemeral by necessity. The medium score is of no value by itself and has no influence on the nature of the musical truth it refers to.

Rather, it is a transparent medium that transports the intentions of the composer without obstruction. Because it is absolutely dependent on the presence it refers to, the medium itself is invisible and nothing but the truth. The only exhibit we have of Bach's *Art of the Fugue* is the score; but not a score we talk about as a medium (– where one could elaborate on how a five-line staff suggests a specific type of music, the omissions it causes, constraints it carries and how all that created the *Art of the Fugue* –), but rather as a score that directly represents or *is* the musical truth. It is such a transparent and clear window that we don't even see the window.

And although the signifier and the signified are provisionally separated, they have an unambiguous relation. The sign receives its authority from its anchorage to the musical truth and the clarity of their relationship makes the sign disappear. The meaning of a sign in the *Art of the Fugue* is strictly related to the equivalence of a presence (that is absent by necessity) and requires obedience . In order for us to understand the process, we have to understand the language and know the correspondences. It is a one-to-one relationship.

– Cage's shift –

This is the point where Cage significantly modifies the frame. His score for the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* doesn't offer a sonic truth behind its representation. He denies the absolute and independent existence of content outside of a context.

From a micro-formal perspective he removes the anchorage of his signs to a single musical truth

5 *Ibid.*, "The pit and the pyramid"

by keeping the field of possible meanings unoccupied. They offer several interpretations without a certain hierarchy: some very free (*Group AR*) and others almost traditionally strict (*Group C, AS*). He also does not decide upon a definite macro-form of the piece. The player is free to choose where to start and stop playing, he may decide upon omission or repetition and in which order objects are to be played. Finally, the instrumentation is also left open: It can be played as a solo, with any combination of other solos, that accompany the piano solo as part of the whole *Concert* and it may even be combined with other pieces, that are not part of the *Concert*, like *Variations, Song Books, Aria, Fontana Mix* "and other related indeterminate pieces"⁶.

– Consequences –

Depiction gains autonomy. Signs in Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* are no longer a "provisional reference" point to a deferred presence – but they gain significance of their own. As he is blurring the window of the media, we start to see that there is a window. By making the relation between the signifier and the signified ambiguous, he liberates the sign from the authority of musical truth. He goes even further: There is no underlying truth *behind* the score, as "the absence of presence is the feature of script"⁷, and depiction becomes content by itself. His shift marks a turn away from *absolute music* to *absolute depiction*.

All that may have been initiated by his thought, that "structure isn't necessary anymore"⁸, which drove him toward a new system of musical description where structural issues are simply omitted. The result is a shift of working effort from traditional musical content (structure, timing, etc.) to the phenomenon. All his effort goes to finding new ways of *describing*, bearing in mind that the representation *is* the thing, which only exists within the possibilities to communicate through its sole condition of existence: the description.

This model fundamentally changes the relationship between composer, score and interpreter.

The composer abandons authority and authorship to a certain degree and the role changes from

6 <http://www.johncage.info/workscage/concpiorch.html>

7 Jacques Derrida: "Signature Event Context" in "Margins of philosophy" (The University of Chicago Press, 1982)

8 John Cage: *Composition as process* (Darmstadt, 1958)

being the sole source of anchorage to being the initiator, driven by her/his intentions.

The score is not a transparent medium and the exhibit of authority. It becomes a tool that builds a working environment for the interpreter, through which the composer confronts the performer with her/his intentions, providing both provocation and framing.

Finally, the interpretation is no longer the neutral extension of the score, where it ideally would hide behind the work. In the case of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, the interpretation *becomes* the work. Musical truth does not exist without it being brought into existence by the idiosyncratic interpretation of a specific performer. As Cage removes the authority of anchorage by not offering a truth *behind* the score, only the act of interpreting has the power to bring the work into life.

– Berceuse –

With this piece, John Cage moves away from a strict and unidirectional concept of a musical truth mapping onto a transparent representation, to a loose and complex concept of an intention that finds its expression in – or *is* – the depiction. This makes him somewhat dependent on the capability and willingness of the performer to assume responsibilities.

Although he loosens this relationship, his scores still transport a feeling of strictness and austerity. And despite their inherent freedoms, one cannot find an example where Cage completely abandons all responsibilities; strict execution of all rules in his scores demands intense concentration, commitment and honesty.