

Every artist hits a point at which he (or she) has basically said what he has to say, at which he has nothing left to do but polish up fine points and is no longer likely to shock anyone.

Except John Cage.

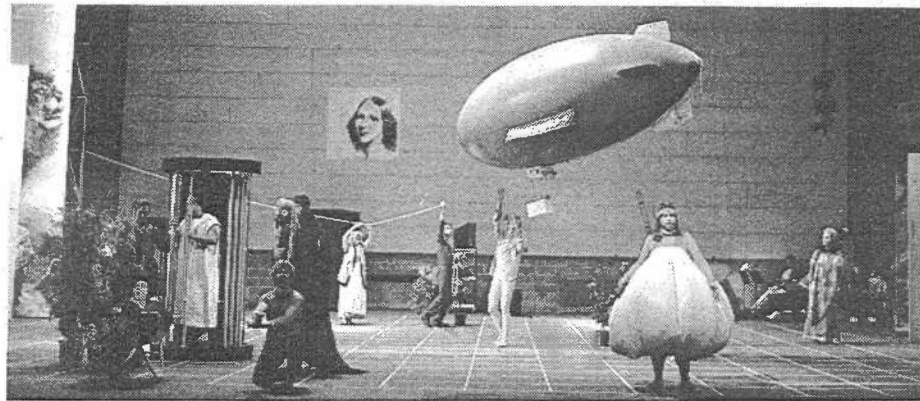
Fifteen times in as many years I've gone to Cage performances out of a sense of avant-gardist duty, thinking I already knew what Cage is all about. Fifteen times I've said afterward, "Whoa, that's not what I expected!" Who would have thought that, at age 74, the guru of obsessive nonrepetition would write a response to minimalism, *Hymnkus*, in which all players simply repeat a few lines of a few pitches each? Who would have believed that at 75 he would answer New Romanticism's collage technique with *Europeras I & II*? By middle age most composers have ceased paying attention to other people's music, and those who still chase trends we call opportunists. Yet Cage continues to devour the avant-garde at each turn, and everything he eats turns into John Cage. By now he's supposed to be new music's elder statesman, but this geezer declines the nomination.

I shouldn't be so surprised that I failed to anticipate *Europeras I & II*, which received its American premiere with the Frankfurt Opera July 14 as part of SUNY at Purchase's remarkable Summerfare series. Marxist pedants Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn invited Cage to compose the work with the intention of "closing the European opera tradition," but he must have surprised even them by assembling an opera in the highest comic tradition. The instrumental music was a collage of one- to 16-measure fragments from 70 operas ranging from Gluck (why no earlier?) to Puccini, and the 19 singers sang arias of their own choosing, overlapping an array of incongruous passions. With the tuba playing *Walküre* and the violin a snatch of *Car-men*, "Name That Tune" was one ap-

John Cage

A Flight at the Opera

BY KYLE GANN



Cage's agenda was to close the European opera tradition.

BEATRIZ SCHILLER

proach to the opera. The greater pleasure, however, was that the music's continuity, as fluid as that of recent Cage works like *Music for . . .*, was rampantly polytonal, and sounded like unsynchronized Milhaud.

Music, though, except in the brief prologues to each act, took a backseat to theater. The subjection of costumes, props, and stage directions to chance operations resulted in a liveliness next to which the most murderous *verismo* opera looked tired: dancers drew singers across stage on ropes, rocks and giant fish danced, a soprano went fishing in the orchestra pit, huge portraits of Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, and others dropped from the ceiling at random, and a string-operated pheasant fluttered constantly overhead. Opera buffs were treated to parodic vignettes: when two singers emerged to sing a duet from *Zauberflöte*, she was dressed for *Madame Butterfly*, he for *Il Turco in Italia*. Every now and then, confused chorus-and-orchestra climaxes

blared from loudspeakers, as if all this hectic energy threatened to burst the bounds of the proscenium.

Such diverting theatrics gave the lie to at least one premise of Cage's aesthetics,

MUSIC

the claim that he's never inspired. An inspiration, after all, is only a desire bounced off the wall of discipline. The props were chosen by putting a dictionary of nouns through random processes, but no dictionary told Cage to have a Lohengrin-like character use his staff to fill the stage with soap bubbles until the opera looked as though it were taking place underwater; to suspend an upright soprano over the stage and let her float back and forth during a long aria; or to send a radio-controlled Zeppelin sailing over the audience and into the balconies in a thrilling Act II climax. To a degree, all this activity merely extended another

Cage theater work, *Songbooks*, but in that 1975 work the performers were independent, and each needed his or her own space. Here there were so many events occupying the same area that coordination (achieved by dividing the stage into 64 parts, with the help of a computer program by Andrew Culver) became paramount, resulting in a theatrical polyphony that the composer of *Don Giovanni* would have envied. (In fact, Mozart's own profusion of ideas makes him Cage's favorite premodern composer.)

Metzger and Riehn should have known better; far from ending opera, Cage has offered it a second wind. From its inception, opera has been premised on illusion, and Cage forbade illusions. There were no backdrops; stage hands were often visible, mechanisms were exposed, and dancers walked casually across stage to enter from the other side. Twice the floor of the orchestra pit arose, bringing the orchestra (who looked bored, as orchestras do) into view in front of the actors. Anything distinguishing art from life was scrupulously avoided, so that instead of the disappointment I almost always feel when comparing actual stage effects to the operas of my imagination, every stunt was an unexpected pleasure.

And in another way, *Europera* seemed to achieve what opera has really desired all along, because there were a million things to look at and nothing you had to pretend you understood. The result, which no one would have expected, was one of the most entertaining operas ever written, a stagework as riotously funny as *Finnegans Wake*. Afterwards and during intermission, people bubbled; those who had never liked opera before raved about this one, and some impressive veterans of the avant-garde called it the most significant premiere they had ever attended. The ultimate realist, Cage has turned out to be the quintessential opera reformer. He's also the most incredible composer who ever lived. He makes me glad I live in the 20th century. ■

MATT UMANOV

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