

# POSTCARD FROM BERLIN



Conductor Carolyn Watson writes from Berlin on her most recent operatic experience.

The entire European opera tradition in 70 minutes? According to John Cage, the answer is a resounding 'yes'. As the composer himself mused, 'For two hundred years the Europeans have been sending us their operas, now I'm sending them back.'

The genesis of John Cage's five *Europeras*, his only works of the genre, is indicated by the title, that is, the combination of 'Euro' and 'opera'.

These compositions all share a common conceptual basis and are structured in a similar vein, although a variety of forces are employed across the five works. Essentially, Cage's *Europeras* are a summary, a pastiche, of some two hundred years of operatic tradition.

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A seemingly grand proposal, Cage achieves his objective via a combination of characteristic innovation, encouraging individual artistic license and by tapping into the performers' own experiences.

To call on six singers, two pianists and an orchestra is not far removed from an ordinary operatic context. However Cage's *Europaera 3* - a work with which I have recently become acquainted - specifies an orchestra of only six players. Even together with two pianists, a chamber ensemble of just eight players sharing musical responsibility for some two hundred years of European operatic tradition is perhaps a feat only a composer such as John Cage can manage. But precisely how?



By possibly the most obvious means available - by using the record player!

All six orchestral members play this same instrument, and indeed two simultaneously. Each musician is seated behind twin turntables in what is perhaps the only orchestra in the world where intonation is not a consideration. Just as well perhaps, because the conductor, defined in Cage's score as a clock on the wall, would no doubt struggle to solve such issues.

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And so was my initiation with Cage's *Europaera 3*, the composition on which I have just been working at the Staatsoper in Berlin. Most musical assistants and conductors are preoccupied with details of the score - listening for balance, textual clarity and ensemble between the stage and the pit. My tasks in this undertaking were more akin to those of a DJ in a nightclub, albeit with a great degree of mathematical precision and intense concentration.

Six singers, six gramophone players and two pianists represent the total forces called for by Cage's *Europaera 3*. The performance instructions for all performers are based on an Ancient Chinese text, the *I Ching* - a text in which a series of 64 hexagram structures correspond to chance elements in the natural world. Cage's fascination with, and use of this text is a well-known and recognisable feature of his chance compositions from the early 1950s onwards.

In the recent Berlin Staatsoper production, these 64 hexagrams were depicted by numbered floor panels on the stage, about which the singers moved according to numerical directives derived from the *I Ching*. We, the orchestra, were placed on this same stage on which the audience also sat, intermingled with performers and performance alike in what was a very 'up close and personal' opera experience.

Each singer was asked to choose six arias, all of which were to be performed *a capella*. Cage stipulated only that the six chosen arias range from Gluck to Puccini, the same parameters to





which the orchestra also adhered. Each had a score with precisely specified timings indicating the points at which they began their chosen arias. At times all six were singing at once in what constituted a very unique kind of operatic sextet - to the left one might hear an aria of *Papageno*, in the distance snippets of *Tosca* and *Otello*, from behind some Rossini and to the right, Wagner competing with Donizetti.

Each night resulted in a different performance as the *I Ching* offered numerous timings and stage placement possibilities. Singers were also able to vary their chosen arias with each performance.

Playing completely independently were the two pianists situated at opposite ends of the stage. Their contribution to the European opera tradition came in the form of transcriptions by Liszt and other composers – indeed, during the nineteenth century such piano transcriptions were one of the most common means via which operatic melodies became popularised. “

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Add to this already eclectic mix a total of 300 selected LPs, fifty for each of the six Gramophone virtuosos. Each record was numbered 1-50, each player given a score specifying exactly when and what to play.

Starting and finishing times were notated in the form of seconds, however duration was determined according to individual discretion. Dynamics were specified in three gradations - *piano*, *mezzo forte* and *forte*, with an orchestral *forte* never to exceed the *forte* of

a *singer*. Our scores were a series of directions such as: ‘24B p 23’–47”. This corresponded to LP number 24, side B, played at a *piano* dynamic starting at any minute and 23 seconds and ending at any minute and 47 seconds. Personal preferences were very much a feature of Cage’s chance elements - when playing ‘28A f 15’–35” which corresponded to Wagner’s *Overture to Die Meistersingers*, I must admit to indulging in a performance which lasted longer than 20 seconds, longer than a minute and twenty seconds, indeed longer than two minutes and twenty seconds.

Supporting the performers on stage was an audio engineer who produced arguably the most startling performance of the evening. Excerpts from one hundred operas were

sampled and superimposed over one another resulting in a deafening crush of sound, sort of like a semi-trailer going down a hill. Way over the speed limit. Without brakes. Startling us all on first hearing, it was quite amusing to watch audience reactions every night when the semi-trailer intervened on eight chance occasions – I think they honestly wondered whether a vehicle was about to crash through the wall and into the performance!

And so the opera proceeded for precisely seventy minutes, all performers keeping a close eye on the ‘conductor.’ At the seventy-minute mark, the conductor stopped, all music abruptly ending and the stage plunging into darkness – a profound ending to a profound opera. - **Carolyn Watson**

Carolyn Watson’s engagement at the Staatsoper Berlin for this project, *Die Musik ist Los, 100 Years of John Cage* - resulted from her winning Opera Foundation Australia’s 2012 Berlin New Music Opera Award. A national prize for the study of post-1945 opera in Germany, the award is open to anyone affiliated with opera at a national level in Australia including conductors, répétiteurs, directors and designers.

