

MUSIC current

THE BEST WAY OF FINDING OUT ABOUT NEW MUSIC IN SCOTLAND
February 1991 No. 25 Issued by the Scottish Music Information Centre ISSN 0954-8122

JOHN CAGE'S GLASWEGIAN CIRCUS

An interview by Steve Sweeney Turner

John Cage was one of the featured composers at last year's Musica Nova in the Cultural Capital. It was his second visit to Scotland to hear the Whistlebinkies perform his *Scottish Circus*, which he wrote for them on his previous trip in 1984. *I asked him how he'd got on with Glasgow's new music festival:*

I'm glad to have been here, and I enjoyed the composition workshops very much. It gave me an opportunity to hear what young people are doing; music which I didn't know. I was also delighted to be able to go to a moor to the north of the city and hunt for mushrooms.

Did you find anything interesting while you were up there?

Oh, I like all mushrooms, and we found some I didn't know, and some I did know. I cooked one of them, which was a boletus. I'm not exactly sure which one, but it was one I knew. It had a tanned cap and a rough stem which had sort of spots on it.

What was your reaction to the music of the other featured composers?

Well, what was so beautifully expressed in Wolfgang Rihm's music is that noise is as welcome as musical sound. A very rich experience comes from getting to know Wolfgang's music as much as I have. I think his music has to do with a love of paying attention to sound very closely. But of the other composers who are here at Musica Nova; I think of James MacMillan's work and Nigel Osborne's work as quite Romantic.

That's interesting, because MacMillan told me that he's quite annoyed at being labelled "Neo-romantic", whereas he saw Rihm's work as bordering on that.

Yes, well, actually these classifications, as you point out, aren't to the liking of the people who're put in them!

Have you ever consciously attempted to be unclassifiable yourself?

No. I don't classify. I don't think I do. I do, I suppose, sometimes; I think of some music as involving something like "speech", and



The Whistlebinkies

that's apt to be Romantic, because it "talks", whereas music which does something is not so apt to be Romantic. By "doing something" I mean being a process which is in action. I think MacMillan has spoken several times about Process Music, so that he probably has a process in mind, and that makes him think of his work as not being Romantic.

It's often said of American music that it's more eclectic than traditional, as is European music. How far would you say that's true of your own work?

I don't think of myself as choosing among a series of possibilities - I'm trying to work just with sound. Eclecticism means to me choosing a number of different things or ways of writing, for expressive purposes, and that your

style is not a single style. But I don't have those purposes. I really want the sounds to be themselves, and to make some kind of discovery. And I think that I'm engaged in that kind of activity. I don't think of it as falling into Eclecticism, or Romantic, or Classicism. Other people would have to think in those terms. For instance, one of the critics, speaking of me in the Glasgow Herald, says that it must be rather odd to be on exhibit while you're still alive. I imagine he means that it must be odd for me, but it's not odd for me - it's odd for him; it's odd for him for me to be on exhibit while I'm still alive! I don't expect to be on exhibit when I'm dead either!

So how did you like the Whistlebinkies' concert?

Well, they're just lovely. They were playing music that they know, but when they were not playing anything, they also did it beautifully! In their performance of *4'33"* I wanted to show that a group is not one thing. I asked them to do it as seven individuals. The directions I gave them were that the silences should be between '33" and 2'40", but should be measured by an "inner clock". "Inner clock" is apt to be slower than a real clock. I mean to say, takes longer.

It's also very similar, then, to what you were doing with them in Scottish Circus - taking them all apart from each other.

Right. That's what you might call my "political" attitude; toward society in general. In *Scottish Circus*, I simply asked them to do what they do. Not to do it together, but in circus, so that each

John Cage's Glaswegian Circus (Cont'd)

musician becomes an individual, rather than part of a fixed group. So that they're playing different pieces, and if they find by chance they're playing the same piece, they should play it in a different tempo. I've done that not only with Scottish music, but also with Irish music, in connection with *Roaratorio*.

Do you actually have any Irish blood in you, way back?

Unfortunately not. I'd like some! Cage itself is an English name. I think I have a bit of Scots blood, though I don't know where I got that idea, but the idea I got growing up in the family was that there was some Scottish blood, some French, and possibly some Swedish, because my grandfather's name was Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage III.

Were you interested in Celtic Folk music before you did "Scottish Circus" and "Roaratorio", or was it an effect of that?

Well, I didn't have the kind of interest I now have since *Roaratorio* - I got to know much more about it because of that. I had very good musicians to do it, and now the Whistlebinkies want to come to the United States, and if I can see a way to bring that about, I'll do it. I think they'd like to do the *Scottish Circus*, but it would be nice for them to do the traditional music, too. There are a number of Irish bars in New York City that I think would be open to Scottish music! I used to listen to Joe Heaney's singing in one on 14th Street. I liked Mick Broderick's and Judith Peacock's [of the Whistlebinkies] singing, too. They don't sing sentimentally, nor did Joe Heaney. They sing straight, and with some kind of dignity.

Is this something you think characterises Scottish and Irish music in general?

Yes, and it's that quality of people doing their work well, which I admire. I like that social tradition of music, it's just that I don't like all the people playing in the same music together. That's why I made a music-circus for them! You know that I'm devoted to the notion of individuals!
