

100 Waltzes for John Cage, a Transient Soundscape on Manhattan's West Side

Tuesday
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07:30pm

DiMenna Center for Classical Music: Mary Flagler Cary Hall, New York City, NY
The [kāj] Ensemble: Homage to John Cage

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James, 100 Waltzes for John Cage

The [kāj] Ensemble

Crossing 9th Avenue to walk even further west, I deplored my lengthy commute from the A train. 'People live this far west?', I said to myself. I didn't realize I said the question out loud until my friend Emily replied, 'Sure, you can make any neighborhood hip in Manhattan.'

While some of us may criticize that hipster edge the arts bring to industrial neighborhoods, in this case it seemed fitting: I was on my way to see Kevin James and the [kāj] ensemble perform their new piece, *100 Waltzes for John Cage*. And once inside the DiMenna Center, the bold colours on the concrete walls erased the dirt and grit from outside. Instantly, I was swept up in its contemporary, fresh feel.

Inspired by Cage's *49 Waltzes for the 5 Boroughs*, Kevin James' *100 Waltzes for John Cage* takes Cage's original work and catapults it into the digital age. Featuring nine iPad-equipped musicians, 100 waltzes, plus recorded audio from 147 New York City locations, James' piece also applies the same elements of controlled spontaneity.

James and the [kāj] ensemble - appropriately pronounced *Cage* - began with 147 specific New York City locations chosen using the classic Chinese text *I-Ching*, also known as the *Book of Changes*. So with two random tosses of three coins, and the combined heads/tails permutations duly applied, precise GPS coordinates for all of the 147 New York City locations were derived.

To match the cacophony of recorded sounds, the musicians in the [kāj] ensemble performed segments of 100 waltzes, blending and overlapping with the very heartbeat of the city. Just like the recordings, the live performance was controlled by a predetermined, randomized process.

Equipped with iPads, bar numbers, stanza numbers and number of bars were all randomly selected (*I-Ching* again!), as was the length of time each musician played each excerpt.

Sitting amongst found objects - vintage lamps and paper chinese lanterns - the musicians moved about the room throughout the performance, sometimes to sit in a different corner, other times to sit on the floor or in a chair amidst the audience. Even audience members engaged with the music by walking around the performance space, reading the programmes (which were scattered on music stands around the room) and sitting in various chairs in the middle of the room. For any outsiders, this performance may have looked more like a participatory art installation than a classical music concert.

Musically, the token triple meter of a waltz mixed with everyday city noises made for a unique, but oddly familiar aural experience. From the pastoral to the pedestrian, recorded noises included traffic and crowd noise, sirens and street music, bird songs, gentle lapping of water, even that incessant buzzing from the emergency door in the subway. But in the same way many New Yorkers grow accustomed to their rough urban soundscape, I found myself forgetting about the recordings, treating their familiar sounds as background noise rather than a central element of the performance.

Anxious to recognize some of the 100 waltzes, I caught myself catching onto segmented rhythms and following them as they traveled across the room. The most obvious example occurred when Daisy Press played a brief melody that sounded just like *Chopsticks* on melodica. This same melody was then repeated by violinist Esther Noh, and then again by Kevin James on trombone on the opposite side of the room. Still caught up in the rhythm, when John Ferrari played a quick down beat on the drums several minutes later, I felt it was a quick flourish ending a brief interlude in the midst of the madness. Perhaps this was my Cage moment!

Producing noises that were more like effects than a traditional timbre and sound, many musical segments sounded less like a waltz and more like an imitation of the recorded music being played from the speakers in the four corners of the room. When a gush of wind forced itself from the speakers, Ellen Macke mimicked it's whirring noises with breathy, quick notes on the clarinet; Daisy Press combined spoken word and her haunting voice, which seemed perfect for Berg's *Lulu* or Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, to imitate shouts on the street and playground; and Tomas Ulrich sounded just like ambulance sirens with high-pitched screeches on the topmost cello strings, plus whirring shrills emitted by his own voice at the same time.

More than an hour in, Herb Robertson's trumpet suddenly sounded like a swarm of bees. Then the room fell silent and all ears tuned into this strange buzzing, until Esther Noh chimed in with a brave Russian waltz. A striking combination, just the two of them played together until, just as suddenly as it began, Noh dropped off and only the buzzing remained until silence consumed even this last sound.

A delightful homage to John cage's 100th birthday and celebration for the [kāj] ensemble's inaugural season, composer Kevin James created a truly 'Cage-ian' experience.

Submitted by **Kay Kempin** on 27th August 2012

