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100 WALTZES FOR JOHN CAGE, JOHN CAGE, KEVIN JAMES, THE [KAJ] ENSEMBLE
the [kāj] ensemble's 100 Waltzes for John Cage
 the [kāj] ensemble
 DiMenna Center for Classical Music at Mary Flagler Cary Hall, NYC
 Thursday, August 23, 2012

Written by *Jeremy Shatan*

The last time I was at the Dimenna Center, *Talea Ensemble* was performing some of the most intense, radical modern music I've heard. Yet the chairs were all in rows, just like any concert. For the [kāj] ensemble's *100 Waltzes For John Cage*, however, the seats were set up in irregular little pods around the center of the room, making it immediately apparent that something unusual would be taking place. Because I didn't think Cage would want me to, I tried not to spend too much time thinking about where to sit.



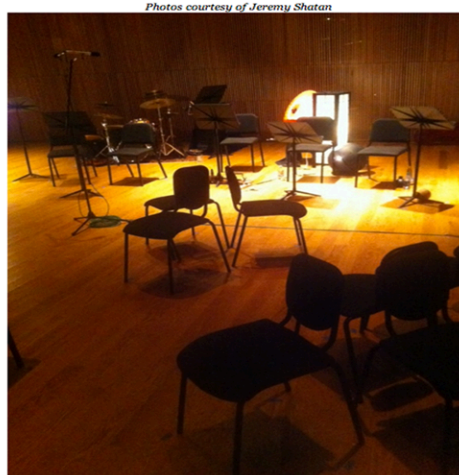
Around the periphery of the sparsely elegant space were the musicians' areas, decorated with an eclectic array of lamps and improvised lighting. Eventually the musicians assembled in one area, and composer and trombonist **Kevin James** made a brief introduction, explaining that the musicians would be working off of iPads, with any one of 100 waltzes randomly appearing before them for random amounts of time. He also let us know that the players would be moving around the room and we were free to do so as well. We were instructed to shut our phones all the way off as the data packet bursts could affect the recording. I suppose there is only so much "indeterminacy" one work can bear. Finally, we were warned that the field recordings, playing out of

speakers in each corner of the room, could get loud (helicopters, trucks, etc.) and that they would not be insulted if we stuck our fingers in our ears.

Field recordings? Let me wind it back a minute. *100 Waltzes* has enough conceptual underpinning to make John Cage himself blush. It's based on a work Rolling Stone commissioned from Cage in 1977 called *49 Waltzes for the 5 Boroughs*. That piece consisted of a map of NYC with 49 triangles outlining 147 randomly selected locations. There was later an accompanying "score" that instructed musicians to use familiar waltzes, recordings if necessary, and to play them at the locations on the map.

Instead of asking the performers to travel around the city, James himself made 147 field recordings around the city, using the I-Ching (the ancient Chinese "Book of Changes") to pick the spots. Selections from the 45 hours of sounds he saved would be played in an indeterminate order during the performance, with each speaker playing different sounds alongside the little bits of waltzes played by the musicians. The ensemble, in addition to James, included: Caroline Chin (violin), John Ferrari (percussion), Margaret Lancaster (flute), Eileen Mack (clarinet), Daisy Press (voice), Herb Robertson (trumpet), Tomas Ulrich (cello), and Lev "Ljova" Zhurbin (viola).

No matter how fascinating it is to contemplate the planning, forethought, risk and challenge put into any work, however, it all comes down to how will it sound? What will my experience be? In short, does it work? Before there was time for any further thinking, Ferrari began a beguiling wozy shuffle on the drums. Other players started up and then: a moment of tightening, as a geometric riff on James's trombone locked in with the drum kit. Quickly, an ensemble of cello trumpet and drums coalesced and



just as quickly, atomized. I instantly realized that there would be no describing the whole piece, but that I might be able to focus on a series of snapshots of what went on.

- Robertson circling the room, trumpet and iPad in hand, ringing bells.
- Press, the soprano, sitting next to me on the floor, singing. Listening. Singing. I stood up and moved away. She lay down – exhausted? Exasperated? Or just extemporizing?
- Tomas the cellist handing his iPad to an audience member, who held it for him, face turned away, as he played.
- A momentary lull, just field recordings – street sounds, mainly – and Lev tapping the back of his viola.
- The cellist, whistling, joins forces with a recording of a police siren – crescendo!
- Press begins reading Margaret Lancaster's bio and the flutist says, in waltz rhythm, "I don't need my bio read!" "I hope I didn't annoy you," the soprano says, also in rhythm. "It was just embarrassing."
- The trumpeter, with a deadpan worthy of Buster Keaton, almost destroying a squeaky toy – and a music stand – as the singer dissolves in laughter (me, too).
- The drummer playing the wooden slats of the wall with his mallets.
- A furious conjunction of violin, cello and viola – a trio!
- Pizzicato cello, vibes and violin creating a lovely moment before being overtaken by a truck's deep rumble.

And so it went for almost two captivating hours. The waltz rhythms had my toes tapping fairly often (sometimes almost involuntarily) and the combination of sounds and textures was stimulating, occasionally startling (those helicopters), and almost always delightful. Standing up, looking over a musician's shoulder, and walking here and there had me feeling almost a part of the performance, which added to the fun. The performers, all of whom have bios worth singing about ("My friend says you're a god," I overheard someone say to Herb Robertson), were uniformly excellent, throwing themselves into the work with vigor, creativity and joy. Knowing that what

I had a few moments to speak with James after the show. I understood that the musicians had notes in front of them but I wondered what determined how they would play them and when they would either lay out or play something other than their instrument. He explained that some of the snippets simply wouldn't work for a particular player and they could choose not to play or pick up something else at hand – a slide whistle, a squeaky toy – and make noise with that. Other than that, it was up to them to find a way to execute the music. I also confirmed that he designed the work with other ensembles in mind. A few tweaks to the software are necessary but he hopes that it will be taken up by others and have a life beyond the [kāj] ensemble.

While I am no expert on the music of John Cage, I did have a personal encounter with him. It was back in the 80's when I had the opportunity to DJ the end of season party for the Merce Cunningham dance company. Then as now, my style was eclectic, playing KC and the Sunshine Band, Led Zeppelin, Bowie, Yma Sumac, Run D.M.C, Lee Perry, Perez Prado, etc., etc., creating segues and juxtapositions that kept the dancers going. About halfway through the night Cage walked up to my setup, looked me in the eye and said: "I like what you're doing." I have no doubt that he would say the same to Kevin James and his colleagues. Not only does *100 Waltzes for John Cage* work, it's a triumph, and a fitting tribute to the man on his centenary.