

MUSIC REVIEW

Waltzing a Famous Page Out of John Cage's Book

Kevin James and [kaj] Take John Cage as Inspiration

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Most performers who have been inclined to commemorate [John Cage's](#) centenary this season have done so by performing Cage's music. [Kevin James](#), a trombonist and composer, decided instead to write a work using some of the same principles that animate Cage's music, including randomness, humor and a mingling of music as it is traditionally understood and unalloyed noise. He presented the piece at the DiMenna Center on Tuesday evening, both as a tribute to Cage and as a way to introduce his new group, the [kaj] Ensemble. The name, pronounced "cage," is also a homage to the composer.

Mr. James's piece, "[100 Waltzes for John Cage](#)," is based loosely on Cage's "49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs" (1977). In that score, commissioned by Rolling Stone to celebrate its move from San Francisco to New York, Cage lists 147 New York addresses, arranged in 49 groups of 3 (the order determined by chance procedures) but gives musicians no clue what to do with the information. One solution, adopted by Nonesuch Records in 1980, was to have them play waltz melodies at each of the listed locations. The label recorded the performances, complete with the ambient street sounds.

Mr. James's offering is more carefully organized. Using the [I Ching](#) to help make his choices, he used between 1 and 64 bars of music from 100 existing waltzes, some decidedly Viennese in spirit, others more quirkily modern. The waltz fragments were encoded into an iPad app, which presents them in random order, and for unpredictable lengths of time. Each of the ensemble's nine musicians has an iPad and follows its instructions.

They also wandered freely around Mary Flagler Cary Hall, individually and in recombinant groups. At times the audience, seated in the center of the space (or standing, or moving from place to place; it was pretty free form), was surrounded by clusters of musicians playing (or at times, singing) waltzes. The groups were often, though not always, in sync, as if one group had waited for another's downbeat to begin playing its independent material.

Along with the waltzes Mr. James recorded ambient sounds at 147 locations in New York — not the ones listed in Cage's score, but new ones. (The I Ching helped here too.) The noise, played through speakers in the room's corners, was strangely bland: Mr. James had traffic sounds, a motorcycle and some road drilling. Did he really make 147 recordings on New York's streets and not run into a single siren?

Nevertheless, the music and street noise produced a thoroughly Cagean mix, and the players interacted gamely with one another and the recorded sounds for about 70 minutes. Besides Mr. James they included Herb Robertson, trumpeter; John Ferrari, percussionist; Daisy Press, vocalist; Margaret Lancaster, flutist; Eileen Mack, clarinetist; Esther Noh, violinist; Lev Zhurbin, violist; and Tomas Ulrich, cellist.

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[kaj] Ensemble The new-music group performing Kevin James's "100 Waltzes for John Cage" at the DiMenna Center on Tuesday. From left, Lev Zhurbin, Herb Robertson, Margaret Lancaster and Esther Noh.

Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times