

## AS SLOW AS POSSIBLE

We SF people like to think of ourselves as being capable of taking the long view. It is a routine matter for us to contemplate the state of things in the year 3914, or 39,914, or even, for those among us who have the true Stapledonian outlook about futurity, the year 3,914,914,914. (If you wonder what the phrase “Stapledonian outlook” means, check out Olaf Stapledon’s great novels *Last and First Men* and *Starmaker*, which I discussed here a couple of years ago. You have never read anything like them.)

Familiar as we are with the grand stretch of futurity, it should be easy enough for us to become willing participants in a musical concert that’s not expected to end until the year 2640. You will, I have to warn you, reconcile yourself to the fact that you have already missed almost a dozen years of the performance. It began on September 5, 2001. But since it will take 639 years to perform the whole piece, you still have time to catch quite a bit of the show, although I very much doubt that anybody will last long enough to hear the whole thing.

The place is Halberstadt, Germany, a town a couple of hours’ journey southwest of Berlin. The composer is John Cage. The name of the piece is—well, what did you think?—“As Slow As Possible.” It consists of eight movements, of which at least one, according to the composer’s instructions, must be repeated. Cage didn’t specify the tempo of performance, leaving that up to the performer; in this particular performance, each movement is to last seventy-one years. So—eight plus one, times seventy-one—a 639-year concert. Be patient. Be very, very patient.

John Cage, who lived from 1912 to 1992, was an amiable but very radical avant-garde composer whose previously most notorious composition was not nearly as lengthy: “4’33” ” is what it was called, and the score instructs the per-

formers (any number can play) to remain utterly silent for the entire duration of the piece, four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The idea, I believe, is that fortuitous sounds occurring during the performance, a cough in the audience or the rustling of papers or the passing of an airplane overhead, will provide the actual “music,” and we are expected to interpret that pattern of random sounds in any way we wish. Cage, a student of Oriental philosophy and a considerable philosopher in his own right, believed strongly in the role of randomness in the arts, and was fond of leaving many factors to chance in his compositions.

“4’33” ” is, as I said, notorious, and for good reason. But I would not want you to think that Cage was a mere thumb-to-the-nose producer of gimmicky high-concept outrageousness. Much twentieth-century music strikes the uninitiated listener as mere strident noise, scratchy screechy stuff without melodic interest or discernible pattern; but Cage was concerned as much with aural beauty as with abstract principles of composition. Such works as his *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano (1946-1948) are works of great beauty indeed, delicate and lovely to hear, fascinating to the mind. (A “prepared” piano is one that has had various odds and ends, bits of metal and wooden blocks and such, tied to its strings, producing a strange but pleasing twanging sound.) I like to think that Bach and Mozart and Beethoven would have had no difficulty discerning the beauty in these sonatas and interludes, once they had taken a moment to assimilate the idea of a prepared piano and another to comprehend Cage’s theoretical assumptions. “He’s operating by different rules,” they would, most likely, say, “but what glorious sounds these are! Play a little more of it for me.”

He composed “As Slow As Possible” in

1985, and revised it for organ in 1987. The score is just eight pages long. Cage's preferred tempo for the piece is implicit in its title: "As Slow As Possible." And he did request that one of the eight movements be repeated, the choice of movement being left up to the performing artist. Other than that, he placed no limitations on the individual performer. Since it was composed originally to be played during a piano competition, and the judges would have to hear it over and over again, he wanted to spare them the monotony of hearing a sequence of identical performances by guaranteeing that no two performances would be alike. It seems to have been his expectation that a typical performance would last from twenty to seventy minutes, depending on the performer's choice of tempo.

The idea of a 639-year performance arose among a group of Cage's admirers a few years after his death. The choice of duration of the concert may seem to have a Cagian randomness about it, but that is not so. In his great book *Syntagma Musicum* (1614-18), the seventeenth-century composer and music theorist Michael Praetorius asserted that the first organ using the modern twelve-note keyboard was built for the cathedral of Halberstadt in 1361. That organ, had it survived, would have been 639 years old in the year 2000, and so it seemed appropriate to the Cage crowd to celebrate the anniversary of its construction by using Halberstadt as the site of a 639-year-long performance of *As Slow As Possible*.

The Halberstadt cathedral itself was unavailable for the performance, for the practical reason that continuous organ sounds spanning the next seven centuries would probably distract the worshippers from the regular services. The site chosen instead was St. Burchardi Church, which was one of the oldest in the city. It had been built about 1050 as a Cistercian convent, was partly destroyed in war six hundred years later, rebuilt in 1711, and eventually deconsecrated and used as a barn and a distillery before being rediscovered and re-

stored. For the Cage performance a new organ, built along the lines of the 1361 original, was constructed. And the performance itself began on September 5, 2001, which would have been John Cage's eighty-ninth birthday.

The organ was still under construction that day, but that was no drawback to starting the performance, because Cage's score specifies that *As Slow As Possible* is to open with a lengthy period of silence. At the tempo chosen for the Halberstadt performance, that opening "rest" had a duration of seventeen months. So, though September 5, 2001 marked the official start of the playing of the piece, the first audible music wasn't heard until February 5, 2003: a chord consisting of two G-sharps with a B between them.

That chord needed to be sustained until July 5, 2004. (All changes of sound take place on the 5th of the month, because Cage was born on that day of September 1912.) Of course, no organist can be expected to hold a chord non-stop from February of one year to July of the next, so little bags of sand were affixed to weigh the organ pedals down and keep the chord playing continuously. The church's neighbors weren't so happy about having a single sustained organ chord coming from the building for month after month, either, and after some complaints were registered the organ was enclosed in a plexiglass case to cut the sound emerging from the church down to a faint whine.

And so the performance has gone ever since: a change of note on January 5, 2006, another one a mere four months later on May 5, 2006, the next one on July 5, 2008, and so on and on and on (November 5, 2008, February 5, 2009, July 5, 2010 . . .) until the performance reaches its triumphant conclusion on September 5, 2640. The work of building the organ went on during the early years, pipes being added as required by the score; the instrument was not completed until 2009.

Devotees of Cage's music make pilgrimages to St. Burchardi to follow the progress of the event. The biggest crowds show up for each chord change, of course.

I imagine that to be a memorable thing, sudden tonal alteration after months or even years of unvarying sound—but the church is open six days a week and anyone can visit at any time during the performance. (Much as I admire Cage's music myself, I doubt that I'm going to get there. The performance has 629 years to run as I write this, but I don't.)

Music-lovers who are too impatient to sit through the entire Halberstadt production do get opportunities to experience *As Slow As Possible* at a faster pace. The organist Joe Drew played it in a mere twenty-four hours during an arts festival in 2008; he has also performed it at paces of nine and twelve hours, and—an iron man, Drew is!—is currently planning a forty-eight-hour version. And on February 5, 2009, Diane Luchese performed it at Towson University in Baltimore in a single swoop that began at 8:45 in the morning and lasted until 11:41 at night—fourteen hours and fifty-six minutes. For those in a *real* hurry, there's a CD of the piece available that whizzes through it in a brisk seventy-five minutes. That's in keeping with Cage's original concept, but I suspect

that true Halberstadt acolytes regard such haste as deplorable.

Meanwhile, the Halberstadt performance zooms merrily along, extending its reach farther into the future with every passing month. I'm sure Olaf Stapledon would have been fascinated by the vast scope of the concept.

How many organists it will use up as it proceeds no one can estimate; the organ itself, if properly maintained, should easily last it out. Those who are curious about this most enduring of all musical concerts can, with a little Googling, tune in on it on their computers. Various sites offer the opportunity to hear the current notes, and YouTube has a video of the pretty little organ, besides.

The next change of chord is due on July 5, 2012. I hope to be listening myself when it happens. And if I'm not able to be near my computer that day, there'll be another chance only fifteen months later, October 5, 2013. That's one of the many good things about this concert: there'll always be lots of time to catch at least some of it. ○

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