

DE ARTE

ET CAELO

A short article on the linkage
between John Cage, a Clarice
Lispector novel and Heaven

Written by Panagiotis Kouremenos

On February 5 2024, in St. Burchardi church in Halberstadt, Germany people flooded the church in order to watch a note change. Not a song, not a chord, not even a mere arpeggio. But a single note.

In 1985, legendary avant-garde composer John Cage wrote an arrangement for piano which could last from 20 to 70 years. In fact, the instructions for the composition were for it to be played “As Slow As Possible”, hence the piece’s title.

It was only two years later that Cage transferred his composition to the pipe organ, for a performance that lasted about 30 minutes.

Cage had an intricate sense of Zen philosophy into his music. He also believed in the non-standard nature of his music and instruments. Having travelled across Europe, after the Second World War, Cage was met with chance encounters, through which he was presented with the Chinese text I Ching (Book of Changes), which changed his -

philosophy upon creating and composing. He was then impacted to create music using chance, rather divination.

The composer would create a plethora of compositions during the course of his life including the widely known prepared piano pieces and also his infamous 4.33 minutes of meaningful silence.

Following his death in 1992, Cage was cremated and had his ashes scattered in the Ramapo mountains near Story Point, New York. It was the same mountains where he had scattered his parents' ashes in 1964 and 1969. He was 79.

I could go on about the discussion of the philosophers and musicians that led to the birth of this project, the first part of which will last for 70 years.

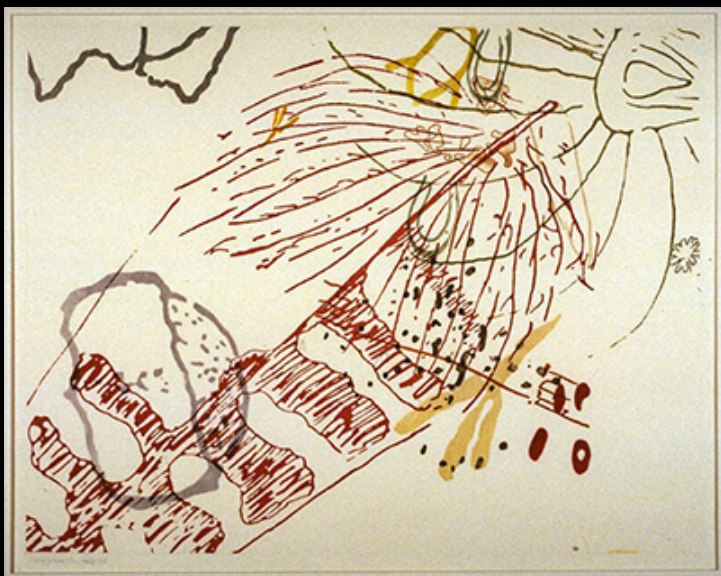
The pipe organ constructed to play the piece began on September 5 2021 and played its official first note (a G#4, B4, G#5 note) on February 5 2003. The last release of the first part, which will also conclude it, will occur on July 5 2071.



John Cage Jr changing the timbre of his piano by placing coins and screws between the strings ('treating') in Gaveau Auditorium, Paris, France 1949

Even though the process surrounding this colossal music piece is fascinating and can make one think of the pure nature of sound itself, of time and its passing or merely the untamed nature of the composition, I found *As Slow As Possible* to behold a greater importance for me.

From a young age, I was invested in stories like this. I have not changed at all, not even for a little change of interest. I am still drawn on to these stories, these pathways that lead out of the standard way to tell stories, to evoke feelings.



It seems everyone needs his own escape from the malignancy of this world and John Cage had his own, unique ways to do so. If my childhood was the seed for these interests to grow and strengthen, then my adolescence was the dark ages (due to the bureaucratic, fascist way that schools are being run today), but then, only a renaissance could ensue, which came along with a freedom of studying at a university at my own pace.

Since, I have found many places I could spend my life of interests and absorb their core ethos into my soul. I moved slowly from the world of music to the literary one because that offered me a higher escape than the other. It is easier to hide behind words. I think many literary specialists felt that way too.

"17 Drawings by Thoreau" by John Cage Photoengraving, 1978



Clarice Lispector, 1940s

Same thing goes for painting. I never related to anything more, than when I read Brazilian writer's Clarice Lispector short novel *Água Viva*, this October. The most incredible thing I felt while reading it was how the seemingly small number of pages make time feel slowed down and frozen. There is depth given to almost every single word. A sentence is like a line in a wonderful painting presented upon the reader in the exact moment it is ready to be given life. It -

is a dense book for sure. Moreso, its abstract thought of process and unconventional style apply hugely to me, given my previous talk about interests.

In her book, Lispector grasps the stigmata that each word can leave behind, much more the words that stab like knives, but do not cut through skin, they rather pierce the soul. Eternity not only withers the soul, but it also sets it free, and it flees away. Eternity can also be regarded as some kind of heaven. As says the author:

"Eternity: For everything that is never began. My small ever so limited head bursts when thinking about something that doesn't begin and doesn't end-for that is the eternal. [...] But I know what I want now; I want the inconclusive."
(Lispector, *Água Viva*, 1973)

With *Agua Viva*, Lispector manages to capture that thin line that dichotomizes storytelling and thought. It opens the pomegranate of thought and drinks the sweet juice. It is the kind of novel that never truly ends, as it is abundant in itself.

The city of Halberstadt in German means literally “Organ City”. That is a splendid coincidence/touch to me because it also signifies chance. The ASL-SP Project is not by any chance cheap, though, as it demands about 60,000 euros a year to maintain the organ itself.

I don’t know if the project will be unfunded in the future, or be dismantled, or even forgotten. What I fear most is to someday stop entirely and be forgotten in time. At least I can rest assured that the project resides at safe harbors for now. I think the reason *As Slow As Possible* applied to me is not its enormous length - although 639 years are easy to underestimate - no it is the sound of the composition itself. I am a lover of the organ. I love its throbbing sound, which trembles going up and down, up and down. Almost breathing. Almost being alive.



HV2, No. 17n by John Cage - Aquatint, 1992

This summer, I visited a friend at her home in Andros, a fairly large Greek island in the Cyclades. I had no phone with me. One evening, I decided to lie down on the small couch at her home's entrance. No one bothered me. No one talked, no one dared to interrupt that precious moment. When the air blew upon my body, and I was half-asleep and half-awake, I opened my eyes. My vision was blurry, still not having recovered from my deep sleep. What unfolded in front of me was the hills and small, shy mountaintops, all black because a few days prior they had been the victims of a wildfire.



A Busy Street in Summer by Adrianus Eversen

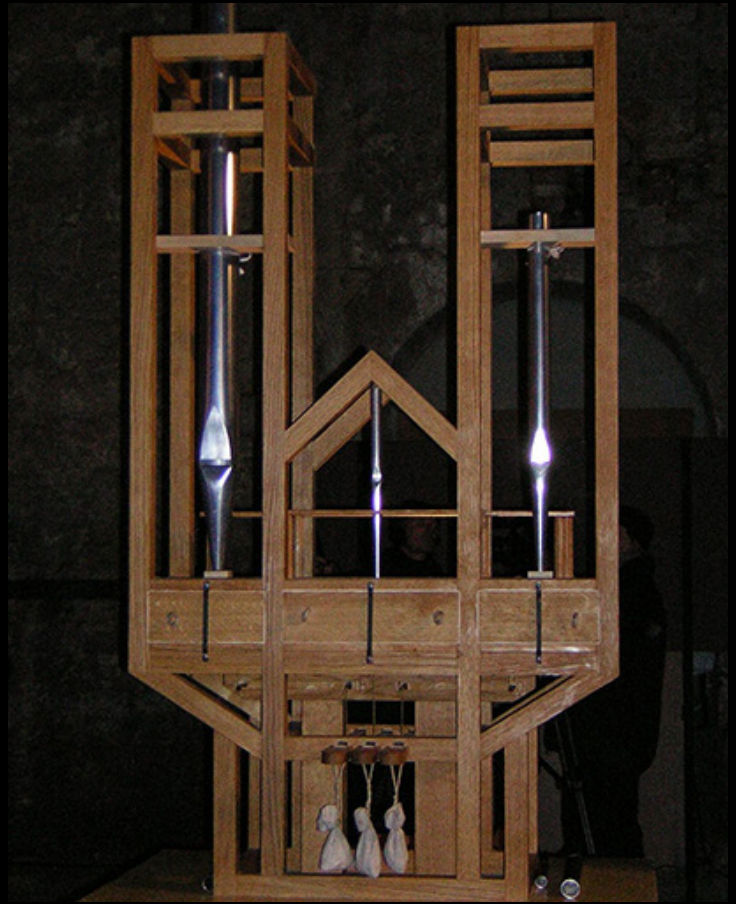
I usually frown in front of the spectacle of burnt countryside, as matter of fact I mourn, but not this time, because I felt it actually growing again. That this was not the end. This, to me, was something unending, those mountains would never be weathered down, not even in the next 1000 years. I think a small, shy speck of heaven presented itself unto me that day.

The sound of the pipe organ from *As Slow As Possible* fits the landscape perfectly, it might as well be its own soundtrack. If I am lucky enough to go to heaven, to ascend, then I hope it is something like this.

The Halberstadt Cathedral (where the pipe organ plays the piece for 23 years now), is undoubtedly a work of beauty. Cathedrals, monasteries and churches in general I admire with my entire heart, because of their inherent linking to the divine. From the omphalos of the body to a chapel's crucifix and the higher plains of ether and sky.

In the cathedral, the pipe organ is supported by bellows which are placed in the left transept of the church, while on the right transept the organ is displayed and protected by acrylic glass, which also reduces the volume. The bellows are the secret to the piece's eternity, because they blow the air which allows the note to be played for such a long duration of time.

Air and heaven go hand in hand. I can imagine heaven as a garden for all the angels of God, His believers and also His Son. If I were to feel at least one second of heaven's gust,



The organ used for the performance in the Burchardi Church in Halberstadt, Germany

I am sure I would feel a throbbing eternity of that sweet, unreachable life of pleasure. Of certain eternity.

6 16 years remain until the last note is released, and the piece is completed. Who knows what will occur in the meantime? Why care? Did John Cage care about this gap? I cannot know this, but I am certain he was aware he was dying. He had suffered several injuries and gone through various illnesses in his later years. I think he needed something to keep his soul going, to remain alive for a little more, not in the physical and mortal way but in the spiritual.

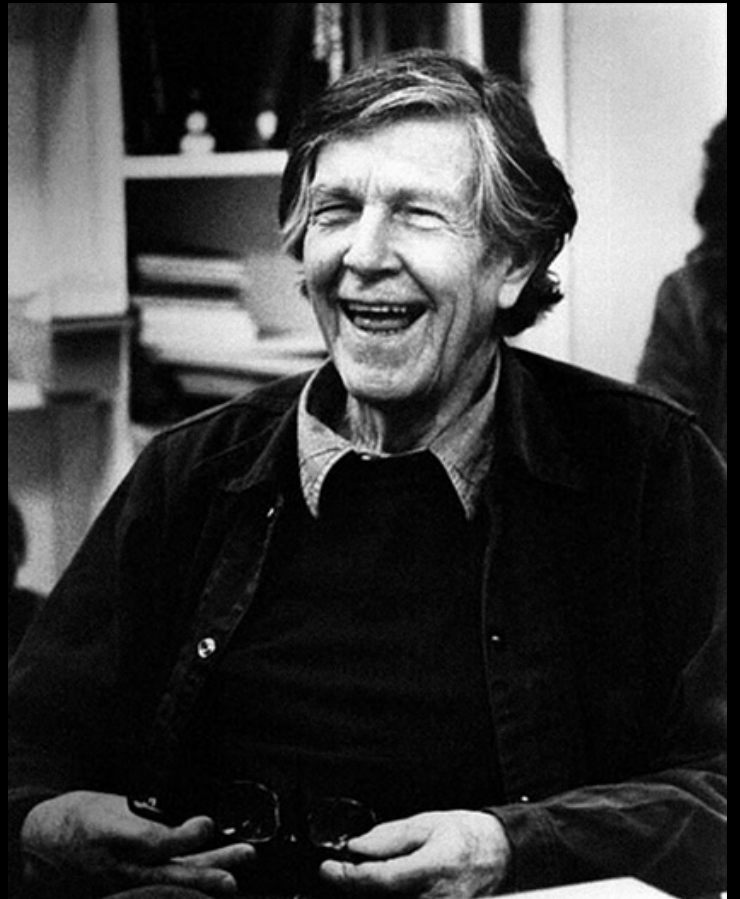
The sound the organ makes is an upward sound. As if it ascends to the heavens. There is something divine to Cage's piece. Perhaps he saw that, caught it with a firm grasp, and decided to make it his testament. A testament to something larger than all of us. I won't be part of history when the piece ends, and so I can choose to be indifferent. But I would not be truthful to myself, if I believed that. I wish I could be there, when the last note of the last part of the -



05 February 2024 in Halberstadt, as the chord of the piece is changed for the 16th time.

piece will play, only to release. Freeing me from what is unending, I get to finally see the stars go out. Night falls on the landscape, night falls upon me.

Agua Viva does not have a start. It does not have an end either. I think this is why I loved reading and skipping through its pages. I saw it as a companion that understands me perfectly-and has the same- difficulties with trying to explain the beautiful things unveiled before it. I won't live to see As Long As Possible play its final note. I don't know if a heaven exists, though I really hope it does. I think if heaven was real would be what is implied between Lispector's novel, Cage's piece and the wonderful home of my friend, along with its garden. That continuity. That sense of stillness. That freedom.



John Cage in 1987

