

John Cage's Reception of Italian Futurism

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Introduction

To talk about John Cage's reception of Italian Futurism appears to be a rather unnecessary undertaking. There is no need to emphasize the obvious, that the young Cage of the 1930s and 40s was heavily influenced by Luigi Russolo and his approach to integrate noise in the realm of music composition. Most notably, many sections of Cage's seminal text *The Future of Music: Credo*¹ read as if derived from Russolo's *The Art of Noises*. That manifesto, however, did not appear in print in English translation before 1986², and its original publication was too limited in spread to be easily accessible in the United States. Therefore, in this paper I'm going to reconstruct how Cage became acquainted with the Futurists' music aesthetics. The knowledge of the context in which Cage studied Russolo's concepts shall lead to a better understanding of his interpretation – and possibly mis-interpretation – of Futurist music.

I

When he was a Fellow of Wesleyan's Center for Advanced Studies in 1960-61, Cage was asked to compile a list of ten books having the greatest influence on his thought. The third on that list is Russolo's *The Art of Noises*, with the remark: "Put with this *New Musical Resources*, by Henry Cowell, and the early book by Carlos Chavez and you get (circa 1935) a sense of music renaissance, the possibility of invention."³ While 1935 is the year of Cage's first composition for percussion ensemble, the *Quartet* in four movements, written during his studies with Arnold Schönberg in Los Angeles, the book by Mexican composer and conductor Carlos Chavez, *Toward a New Music. Music and Electricity*, was not published before 1937.⁴ Neither that book, that focuses on the implications of sound recording and electronic sound synthesis for music composition and appreciation, nor Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* of 1930⁵ mention Luigi Russolo or the Futurists' approach to noise. But when Cage states in the program notes of a *Percussion Concert* presented by his ensemble in Seattle on December 9, 1938 that "percussion music really is the art of noise and that's what it should be called"⁶, at least the title of Russolo's manifesto must have been familiar to him.

The date of Cage's *Future of Music: Credo* does unfortunately not shed any light on this issue. *Silence*, Cage's collection of writings and lectures of 1961, claims that the text "was

¹ John Cage, "The future of music: Credo" [1940], in Cage, *Silence. Lectures and Writings* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), pp. 3-6.

² Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* [L'arte dei rumori, 1916], trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), p. 1.

³ John Cage, "List No. 2" [1960/61], in *John Cage. An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 138-139: 138.

⁴ Carlos Chavéz, *Toward a New Music. Music and Electricity* [1937], ed. Roland Jackson, trans. Herbert Weinstock (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937).

⁵ Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* [1919] (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶ See Branden W. Joseph, "'A Therapeutic Value for City Dwellers': The Development of John Cage's Early Avant-Garde Aesthetic Position", in *John Cage. Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950*, ed. David W. Patterson (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 135-175: 140.

delivered as a talk at a meeting of a Seattle arts society organized by Bonnie Bird in 1937.”⁷ Leta E. Miller has shown that the lecture could not have been given before 1938, when Cage and dancer Bonnie Bird met and the Seattle arts society was founded.⁸ Miller’s assumption, however, the talk was delivered in 1940, the year noted on a manuscript of the text in Cage’s hand, located at the John Cage Archive at Northwestern University, remains insecure. For my understanding, we need to state that – at least at the moment – we simply don’t know, whether or not *Future of Music* was perceived before or after the premier of Cage’s *Imaginary Landscape No.1* in 1939, the percussion piece incorporating sliding electronic sounds derived from test tone records.

[Music example: John Cage, *Imaginary Landscape No.1* (1939)]

II

“Futurist musicians should substitute for the limited variety of timbres that the orchestra possesses today the infinite variety of timbres in noises, reproduced with appropriate mechanisms.”⁹ This demand made by Luigi Russolo in his first manifesto of 1913 is echoed in John Cage’s *Future of Music: Credo*: “I believe that the use of noise [...] to make music [...] will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments.”¹⁰

Where Russolo states: “Every manifestation of life is accompanied by noise. Noise is thus familiar to our ear and has the power of immediately recalling life itself.”¹¹

Cage explains: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.”¹² Even this early phrasing of Cage’s aesthetics of reception finds a forerunner in Russolo: “Although the characteristic of noise is that of reminding us brutally of life, the *Art of Noises should not limit itself to an imitative reproduction*. It will achieve its greatest emotional power in acoustical enjoyment itself.”¹³

Paul van Emmerik once referred to Cage’s tendency to assimilate other artist’s thoughts without giving proper credit as “creolization”.¹⁴ For the composer, formulating an aesthetic conception arises from artistic considerations, not from the scholarly framework of a theorist. Therefore, reconstructing the influences an artist has been exposed to does not need to rise the question of originality. Each oeuvre and each aesthetic conception is unique in its context and time. To emphasize this, I will later address the differences of Russolo’s and Cage’s approach.

III

The manuscript of *The Future of Music: Credo* I mentioned earlier can be found among the papers John Cage kept while trying to establish a center of experimental music. At the end of

⁷ Cage, “Credo”: 3.

⁸ Leta E. Miller, “Cultural Intersections: John Cage in Seattle (1938-1940)”, in *John Cage. Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950*, ed. David W. Patterson (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 47-82: 54.

⁹ Russolo, *The Art of Noises*: 28.

¹⁰ Cage, “Credo”: 3.

¹¹ Russolo, *The Art of Noises*: 27.

¹² Cage, “Credo”: 3.

¹³ Russolo, *The Art of Noises*: 27-28, original emphasis. For a more detailed comparison of the two texts see David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music, 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990): 189-191.

¹⁴ Paul van Emmerik, “John Cage and the creolization of serialism” (paper presented at *John Cage Symposium. Quellen, Analyse, Aufführungspraxis*, Berlin 1995).

his *Credo* he explains: "Centers of experimental music must be established. In these centers, the new materials, oscillators, turntables, generators, means of amplifying small sounds, film phonographs, etc., [are] available for use."¹⁵ What Cage was asking for in 1940, is an electronic music studio – about one decade ahead of time. In preparation of a proposal he would send to American Universities and representatives of the movie industry, Cage began to conduct serious research on electronic music instruments and other sound devices and their possible use in music. He would excerpt the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* (July 1936 to July 1940), researched the "U.S. patents in the field of music" issued May through July 1940, and took notes from the magazine *Modern Music*, 1926-30.¹⁶ To the 1928 volume of the latter, Carol Berard contributed a short essay entitled *Recorded Noises – Tomorrow's Instrumentation*,¹⁷ and Cage stated in his notes: "Quotes Russolo." Berard indeed quotes from *The Art of Noises*, in fact from a section I mentioned earlier: "Every act of our life is accompanied by noise."¹⁸ The author also reports on a performance of Russolo's orchestra of noise-makers, which he seemed to have experienced first-hand. At the end of his contribution, Berard suggests the composer should not rely on noises and sound created live, but use recordings instead. "Then the composer of music will have a laboratory and not a study. The future of music lies in the conquest, the subjugation and the organization of noise."¹⁹

While the idea to conquest and subjugate must have sounded alien to Cage, the term "organization" hit. Its use precedes the article *Organized Sound for the Sound Film*, in which Edgard Varèse is considered having coined the term, by twelve years.²⁰ However, Cage gratefully assimilated the phrase, e.g. in his *Future of Music*: "If this word 'music' is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound."²¹

IV

John Cage reported his activities concerning the intended foundation of a center of experimental music to his friend and teacher composer Henry Cowell. In a letter dated August 8, 1940 he writes: "Xenia [his wife] is busy translating Russolo's *Art of Noise* published by the Italian Futurists in Italy in 1916. Their instruments were apparently mechanical, rotating bodies, having sliding ranges of about two octaves. I am at present making a library research of what has been accomplished in the field of electronic music."²² Therefore, in August 1940 Cage must have had a copy or a transcription of *The Art of Noises* in his hands. His wife Xenia, however, soon gave up translating the text and the task was assigned to Renata Garve, a friend and musician, who later participated in Cage's percussion concert at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in February 1943.²³ In a letter dated August 25, 1941, Renata Garve,

¹⁵ Cage, "Credo": 6.

¹⁶ David Tudor Papers, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

¹⁷ Carol Berard, "Recorded Noises - Tomorrow's Instrumentation", *Modern Music*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1928), pp. 26-29.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 27.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 29.

²⁰ Edgard Varèse, "Organized Sound for the Sound Film", *The Commonweal*, Dez 13, 1940, pp. 204-205; Miller, "Cultural Intersections", footnote 40.

²¹ Cage, "Credo": 3.

²² John Cage, letter to Henry Cowell, Aug. 8, 1940. Henry Cowell Papers, New York Public Library.

²³ Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage. An Anthology* (New York: Praeger, 1970), fig. 6.

sent her translation from New York to the Cages who then lived in San Francisco, “one year after I started it.”²⁴

How Cage obtained his copy of *The Art of Noises*, we don’t know. Edgard Varèse knew Russolo personally from Paris; his copy of Russolo’s manifesto was inscribed by the author in 1929.²⁵ Cage met Varèse in May 1938 in Los Angeles²⁶, but what they discussed remains speculation.

What we can assume is, that Cage, contrary to Renata Garve’s concerns, in August 1941 was still interested in her translation. The issue of establishing a center of experimental music was not dropped before 1943, when Cage after having taught a class at Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s School of Design, the former New Bauhaus, settled in New York and focused on composition for prepared piano.

V

In concluding my paper, I would like to address the main difference in Russolo’s and Cage’s approach towards noise. While Cage was interested in the “entire field of sound”²⁷ and saw the importance of percussion music mostly in being a “method[.] free from the concept of a fundamental tone”,²⁸ Russolo insisted on the harmonic aspect of noise: “Every noise has a pitch, some even a chord, which predominates among the whole of its irregular vibrations.”²⁹ After all, Russolo wanted “to give pitches to these diverse noises, regulating them harmonically and rhythmically.”³⁰ Thus, it comes at no surprise, that Russolo later constructed the Russolophon which was controlled by a keyboard, while Cage abandoned the metaphor of the musical instrument and focused on the new media of electronic sound production and music for tape.

²⁴ Renata Garve, letter to John and Xenia Cage, Aug. 25, 1941. David Tudor Papers, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

²⁵ Helga de la Motte-Haber, "Varèse und der Futurismus", in *Der musikalische Futurismus*, ed. Dietrich Kämper (Laaber: Laaber, 1999), pp. 197-202: 197.

²⁶ David Nicholls in a paper delivered at the American Musicological Society national meeting, October 1998, quoted in Miller, "Cultural Intersections": 76 (footnote 40).

²⁷ Cage, "Credo": 4.

²⁸ Ibid.: 5.

²⁹ Russolo, *The Art of Noises*: 27; see also Barclay Brown, "The Noise Instruments of Luigi Russolo", *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 20, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1981/Sum.1982), pp. 31-48: 36.

³⁰ Russolo, *The Art of Noises*: 27.