

# On Music as An Invitation to Nobility\*

**This interview is taken from a conversation between Daniel Charles (DC) and Carmen Pardo (CP) in Madrid on 15 February, 2006, in which the two subtly and profoundly analyse the relationship between philosophy and music and John Cage's conception of music as an invitation to nobility, in the Buddhist sense of detaching the emotions, and its relationship to and difference with Nietzsche's thinking on music. They also address other questions, such as the problem of redefining sound in the light of Deleuze's input.**

**CP** In *For the Birds*, a compilation of your conversations with John Cage from the 1970s, Cage refers to music as being an invitation to nobility; where he is referring to "nobility" in the sense used in the Buddhist tradition, as a way of detaching the emotions. Clearly he is not using the term in the same way as Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, for example, but wasn't the way this notion runs through the philosopher's thinking on music in some way premonitory? Whatever about Nietzsche's personal reservations about Buddhism, doesn't the idea of nobility make one think about the development of western music between the end of the nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century?

**DC** That is both an impressive and a subtle question: it operates on so many different planes and requires a very fine comprehension. One could not really answer without properly examining not only Buddhism and Nietzsche, but also Buddhism as John Cage knew and practiced it, and also looking at the possibility that Nietzsche was being "repeated" by Cage himself.

To concentrate first on Nietzsche, it is true that after the *Wagner Case*, his loyalty to Bizet was disconcerting.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to understand how such a passionate admirer of Wagner could claim to have been "converted" to what

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Courtesy of the musician



Daniel Charles

appears to be a kind of aesthetic formalism. Some critics see this *volte-face* as simply marking a return to classicism, arguing that Nietzsche mentions *Carmen* by mistake, without having checked up on it as the result of some regrettable oversight, or even that he got his musicians mixed up and was actually talking about Mozart!

But what *was* this “mistake”? How can anyone really believe that it was an oversight? Not only Nietzsche’s writings, but also annotations he made in the score of *Carmen*, are clear evidence of the admiration he felt for a truly “active” music, an authentic “music of the South”. The fact that he referred to *Carmen* as “the best opera” (in a letter to Köselitz in 1881), and not —whatever Boulez might now try to argue— a Sevillian operetta, requires us to examine carefully the author of *The Gay Science’s* concept of the MUSICAL. Nietzsche was very sensitive to the “absolute logic” he saw in Offenbach and gave great importance to the *montage* and *cut* of a score. If you think about it, perhaps we can already see in Bizet something of that *clarity* John Cage was defending, when he said that he had been born with a “*sunny disposition*”, in reference to his Californian origins.

**CP** Choosing Bizet over Wagner means looking at the question of repetition in music from a different angle. One should

not forget that the twentieth century was the century of repetitive, apparently static musical forms. Nonetheless, unlike those who see it merely as redundant music, in a text from 1976, “*La musique et l’oubli*”, you say that repetition is a function of forgetting and not of memory.<sup>2</sup> How do you think this shift by music towards forgetting operates in Wagner’s work?

**DC** Nietzsche saw in Wagner a “degeneration of rhythmic feeling”, combined with a frequent, and often unintended, interruption of the regular beat of alternating strong and weak tempos. When Wagnerised, the music ran the risk of *disappearing into oblivion/forgetting...* in the Alzheimerian sense of the word! Its specificity, initially submerged from time to time in the rhythmic evanescence, ran the risk of ultimately being drowned.

For Wagner, the important thing was not to safeguard the symmetry and periodicity of the musical flow, but rather to tie the flow to the leaps and bounds of the WORD, which could heighten the *dramatic* reception of the discourse. He saw each of the words introduced by the libretto, as bearers of *part of the meaning*, as being worthy of *monopolising the audience’s entire attention*. The result is that the way the strong tempos were distributed varied from one word to

William Gedney



John Cage 1967

another. And the *meaning* was reduced to the rank of a simple *exponent* of those fluctuations: the music ran the risk of sinking, of being *sent to the bottom*. Hence Nietzsche's objection: Wagner had come to *prioritise an appearance*—or to use an Adornian term, to *fetishize a phantasmagoria*—that of a *flow in perpetual drift*.

The importance of this problem did not escape the critics. As André Boucourechliev recalled, the Wagnerian propensity to change tonality caused, as these modulations progressed, a loss of orientation in the ear, to such an extent that it diluted the diachronic understanding of these melodies, as it was classically established. Was this not the price that had to be paid for tonality to be officially—in other words historically—suspended? Soon there would be a horizon on which the atonal and then the serial adventures could appear.<sup>3</sup> To go back to “*La musique et l'oubli*”, I think the article marked an essential shift *vis-à-vis* Gisèle Brelet's conception of the relations between space and musical time. It was my master Gilles Deleuze who suggested this change to me when I summarised his course on Nietzsche in the Sorbonne for my colleagues in 1958. Taking my inspiration from Deleuzian terminology, instead of reducing forgetting to a simple *lack of memory*, I saw instead the *positive* side to a *radical liberation from the empire of the memory*. I didn't want to pick a fight with Nietzsche... or assimilate Cage into Wagner. For me, the problem consisted of *redefining sound as a differential singularity, unconnected to other singularities*; this absence of a nexus had to allow the nexus itself to be established in any singularity. This is what John Cage called achieving the “*continuity of no-continuity*”.

**CP** And that gesture would make it possible to cancel out the *difference* between *difference and repetition*, since against the backdrop of forgetting, difference and repetition come to be the Same.

**DC** That's exactly it. Deleuze had played with this identity of difference and repetition, arguing that only difference is repeated. One might equally say that only repetition is differ-

entiated! The Same, is the forgetting of the *between*, or of the *and*. Here we come back to your allusion to Buddhism, with which you rightly associate Cage's thinking—though he also stressed certain Taoist aspects of his philosophy, and the *I Ching*. Indeed, he continued to celebrate “interpenetration without obstruction” among beings (and especially among sounds), in keeping with Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's teachings from the 1950s.

Although when you say “*difference and repetition come to be the Same*”, this “*Same*” is exactly what Heidegger's seminar in Zähringen in 1973 was to call “*tautological thinking*”<sup>4</sup>, which he saw as “a way leading over there, forward... (*ein Weg der hinführt vor...*), which reveals this forward to which it is led (*und sich zeigen lässt das wovor is geführt wird*).

However, what is announced could be a *non-visual* discipline, the *gathering* of a *listening*.

**CP** And it is precisely the question of listening which occupied John Cage throughout his life. He raised this issue both through his music and through his discussion of music, but particularly in his life itself, because of course he drew no distinction between art and life. This lack of distinction, is what you have invited us to harmonise with an *aesthetic* defined as a way of life and not as the contemplation of beauty. But is it not also an aesthetic that once again needed to concern itself with obtaining concepts? Now that the musical world has been blown apart, do we not need *tools* of thought that will help show and understand what happens in a way that is not authoritarian—tools which, as Cage would say, leave no traces. How did you, or would you, set about achieving such a task?

**DC** If we go back to Nietzsche, speaking of a “will for power”, is he not bringing in a “not-wanting (*non vouloir*)” similar to the one Maître Eckhart referred to? And might the “power” of such a “non-wanting” —presuming that it reveals some Nietzschean premonition— not have caught the attention in the twentieth century of the initiator of the *objet trouvé*, Marcel Duchamp? John Cage devoted himself to sculpting this collage “outside time”, when he said there was a secret connivance between “Marcel Eckhart” and “Meister Duchamp”. A year before his death, he composed an extraordinary poem for Emilie Zum Brunn, interspersing phrases by Eckhart and Duchamp. Revealingly, the poem is entitled “*Meister Duchamp, or Living on Water*”.<sup>5</sup>

It is a *mesostic*, in other words a text arranged typographically so that a ciphered visual message, reading from top down, serves as the spine for a verse or a page. The vertical message is simply the name of the person to whom the piece is dedicated, the subject of the poem. But “subject” does not necessarily mean “subjectivity”. Cage rejected any type of subjectivity. Whenever anyone on the phone asked for his last name, he would ritually respond: “My Name is Cage, like cage for birds”. And he would always add that “the cage was always open”...

Let’s not get away from this apparently formal question of the spelling of concepts, and the reference to Heidegger. When Ernst Jünger told him in a letter of an Englishman’s astonishment about the German rule on capitalising letters, Heidegger told him he should ask the Englishman why the only word in his language to have the honour of being capitalised was “*I*”. Did that mean it would be impossible, in this Anglo-Saxon language mushrooming across the globe, to designate the first person, *regardless of what person*, the *Subjectivity in person*, without giving it this excessive tribute?

**CP** Heidegger’s irony deserves attention. But is his suspicion of an exaggerated “subjectivisation” not related precisely to what you reveal in Cage when you say he rejects “subjection” [*assujettissement*], without calling into question the subjectivity?

**DC** One key work on John Cage will help me answer your question, and it’s a book you know better than anyone, given that you’re the author! The title, *La escucha oblicua* [*The Oblique Listening*], defines what I think is the primary answer to your question—mine too—on the status of *repetition* and the future of *listening* today.

Why this obliqueness? I don’t think I’m getting away from your perspective by looking again at the problem of forgetting as I addressed it when I spoke of an *inversion of nega-*

*tive forgetting*—subordinated to memory—in benefit of a kind of *positive* forgetting, at once de-memorizing and liberating — *a pre-established forgetting, prior to all memory and to the negative forgetting*. What is “oblique”, indeed, is the free look that does not seek to take stock of the future because it is concerned with the present time, with what Nietzsche calls *genealogy*, which reveals the *original* range and title. Nor does it seek to recapitulate what has been lost in the past; that would make it the slave of a history that is limited to computing a chronology of *beginnings*. The *oblique forgetting* only asks one to *open one’s ears, to listen to (about) the instant*. *The fineness of listening* from obliqueness, is a *non-violent aesthetic tool* par excellence!

If the way in which Nietzsche distanced himself from Wagner by praising Bizet seemed to me to be exemplary, it was because it provided a “tool” —a contrasting framework in which the aspects, initially ambiguous, could come into connection, redistribute and not be hindered, so that they could open on an *intensive time*— dependent on a *listening through*. A listening, perhaps without pretensions and only an *oblique* one, but which according to Nietzsche submerges one in the “chaos one needs in one’s soul to give birth to a dancing star.”

**CP** And isn’t it true that Nietzsche, considering himself as a composer, try to “put his own ideas into music”? Didn’t he operate *musically* in this aspect?

**DC** Yes and as one might imagine, he did so provocatively. I will mention only the piano piece he composed in 1871 —a year before the *The Birth of Tragedy*— with the revealing title of “*Fragment an sich*”, in which he examines the idea of the eternal return for the first time. It is a single page containing a sequence in choral form, with the conventional harmonies, in which the sequence is repeated over and over again in a loop. There is nothing particularly noteworthy about it; in any case, at first sight no *musical* impregnation of a philosophical theme emerges. If you want to perceive it, you have to play the work, in other words to perform a kind of “*da capo con malinconia*” which the author has written at the end of the score, which puts absolutely no limit on the number of times it is to be repeated.

**CP** One might perhaps call Nietzsche the unknown precursor of the repetitive musicians who appeared in America and Europe in the last third of the twentieth century. And one might claim that if Cage had known of the existence of the *Fragment an sich*, he would have paid it the same attention as he gave Satie's famous *Vexations*. Without wanting to compare the two works, do you not think that the *Vexations* acted as the *revelation* the *Fragment an sich* would have been if it had been performed around the same time?

**CD** I asked John Cage, not exactly the same question, because at that time the *Fragment* was only known by a few odd scholars, of whom I was not one, but a question which I mistakenly thought was equivalent: might it not be true that the development of repetitive music was stimulated by that fateful year of 1963, which saw, in New York at Cage's initiative, the creation of *Vexations*, whose *princeps* page and 840 *da capos* were interpreted over 18 hours 40 minutes by an army of ten pianists (plus two substitutes)? Does the revelation of an *unending music*, creating an almost *ad libitum* extension of the duration, not make a new arrangement of time inevitable? John's answer was very simple: "the "use" of time could not be the same in Satie and in the repetitive composers, since Satie never stressed the search for the domination of the other by the self". My question made no sense... The listening is inseparable from the ethic. Let's not forget that John Cage, who had taken the exploration of sound art to its extremes, silences included, suddenly realised that the word *mushroom* came immediately before *music* in all the dictionaries, and straight away he helped found the New York Mycological Society? And having become a recognised expert in rhizomes, after his first trip to Japan he took a continued interest in the mosses which stubbornly manage to creep into the tiniest join (the Japanese call them *ma* or *aida*) between the sand and the fifteen stones in the famous "dry garden" of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto?<sup>6</sup> And the pleasure he took in telling the story of how Buddha died of "natural causes" after dining on mushrooms —because their mission, as everyone knows, is to "free the world of old waste"? This might help us to understand Cage's irony when he called himself a "Sunday Buddhist"— his rejection of all proselytising in this controversial area, as well as a bit of modesty, a large pinch of non-violence... In short, a certain nobility.☛

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 For more on Nietzsche's position on Bizet and, in general, the Nietzschean conception of music, see Eric Dufour, *L'Esthétique musicale de Nietzsche*, Villeneuve d'Ascq : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005, from whom the following basic points were taken.
- 2 CHARLES, D. "La musique et l'oubli", *Traverses*, No. 4, Paris, C.C.I. (Centre Pompidou), May 1976, p. 14-23. *Sahara, l'esthétique de Gilles Deleuze*, by Mireille Buydens (Paris : Vrin, 1990, pp. 155-165), contains an exhaustive analysis of "La musique et l'oubli", and the interpretation Deleuze offered in *Mille Plateaux* (Paris : Minuit, 1980, p. 325 sq.).
- 3 BOUCOURECHLIEV, A. *Dire la musique*, Paris : Minerve, 1995, pp. 138-139.
- 4 HEIDEGGER, M. *Le Séminaire de Zähringen* (trans. rev. by Cl. Roles and J. Beaufret of the seminar of 8 September, 1973), in *Questions*, IV, pp. 338-339.
- 5 The poem *Meister Duchamp, or Living on Water*, dated 14 April 1991, which John Cage did me the honour of composing for the Emilie Zum Brunn compilation *Voici Maître Eckhart* (Grenoble, Jérôme Miles, 1994), reproduced in Daniel Charles, *Gloses sur John Cage, suivies d'une Glose sur Meister Duchamp*, Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2002, pp. 326-327.
- 6 Cfr. "Gloses sur le Ryoan-ji" in D. Charles, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-323 and the commentary on the film by Takahiko Imura *Ma: Space/Time in the Garden of Ryoan-ji*, in "Le Ryoan-ji porté à l'écran", *Revue d'Esthétique*, No. 39, 2001, pp. 27-31.