

J-CHOES

Silent sensations with Cage, Otte and Satie

World premiere of a ravishing new music-theater piece in Portugal

by Simon Hagel

An unobtrusive, multi-layered new piece of music-theater recently came into the world leaving its audience enchanted and with food for thought following the premiere in Viséu and the sold-out Lisbon performance at the Goethe Institute Auditorium on 11/4/22.

The plot of this one-act play, published by :dacapo: and lasting just under 70 minutes, was penned by the authors Lou Simard (Canada) and Ingo Ahmels (Germany). It is based on an actual incident, captured in the double portrait of Hans Otte (1926-2007) and John Cage (1912-1992) from the fall of 1991 in New York. This photo by Nora Farell is present onstage throughout the play.

One year before his death composer John Cage, the character »JC« in the play, invited his Bremen friend, the composer Hans Otte »HO,« to a banquet à deux in Cage's legendary loft on New York's 6th Avenue. Cage's loft is represented onstage with just a few props: a fan, a Steinway grand piano, three piano benches, a pile of colorful maple leaves, and behind the Japanese paper screen – in the Cage kitchen, with bowls, chopsticks, teapot and teacups, as well as a plant accompanied by a watering can.

Strange things are happening in the *Inner Landscape Kitchen* whose name obviously alludes to Cage's piano composition, *In a landscape*, heard later in the piece. Undoubtedly the two pianists, Joana Gama (Portugal) and Margaret Leng Tan (Singapore/New York), assume with relish the roles of Hans Otte and John Cage respectively. This bold scenic assertion is made plausible by a mere exchange of shirts and mimicking the postures of Cage and Otte while standing in front of the photo.

On a whim the friends initially play beautiful-sounding piano pieces for each other, e.g. miniatures from Schoenberg's op.19 (1911) or Otte's *Book of Hours* (1998). Guest Otte/»HO« is then graciously invited by Cage/»JC« to participate in the preparation of a very special banquet intended for him. The ingredients of this feast consist, as it turns out to the general amazement, of notes to be filleted from famous



scores such as Schubert's *Winterreise*, Schumann's *Mondnacht*, Wagner's *Tristan*, Debussy's *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* or Johann Sebastian Bach's *Kunst der Fuge*.

Initially unobserved by the cooking duo, none other than composer Erik Satie (1866-1925) descends as »ES« in slow motion via Jacob's ladder from his eternal off-stage. He finds himself in Cage's *Inner Landscape Kitchen*, the shadow play area behind the paper wall screen. And this, just at the moment when »HO« presents the score of his *Book of Sounds* (1982) to »JC.« »JC« enthusiastically plays *prima vista*, the wonderful arpeggios of the 9th chapter from this 20th century piano masterpiece.

Initially unnoticed by »HO« and »JC« the temporarily reincarnated *Maître d'Honfleur* takes up these sounds attacca. The audience now witnesses a historical impossibility, where the arrow of time is reversed and cause and effect inverted: Prompted by Otte's sounds »ES« plays *LentO* (2022), Ahmels' homage to Otte and Satie, which develops the last of the famous four *Gnossiennes* (*Lent*, 1897). Cage and Otte would have liked it! While enjoying their tea the friends gradually become aware of the master's tangible presence. They have unwittingly performed a *Satea Ceremony*...

After »JC« has introduced »HO« and »ES« to each other, the host directs Satie into his kitchen where the man who has been dead for 65 years is at first not quite able to orient himself. Reminiscent of the Magritte painting, *Man with Melon*, Satie, with the obligatory bowler hat and umbrella, sits on the bench rather embarrassed. After a while he bewitches with multi-layered shadow play acrobatics to the rapturous accompaniment played by »HO« from chapter 2 of his *Book of Sounds*. »ES« transforms into an imaginary clock with the hand moving in reverse and then into a ticking metronome. Eventually, »ES« simulates a revolving spire on a Gothic cathedral before he turns into a rotating Sufi over whom a blizzard of notes descends. Sheer enchantment created by the simplest of means!

After the prepared piano display mentioned below »JC« and »HO« let »ES« participate in their final feast of notes. This surreal encounter arrives at its inevitable and indispensable apotheosis: Through the magic of shadow art "ES's" simple gesture of raising the lids of two piano benches deftly transforms them into three pianos on which »JC«, »HO« and »ES« perform their *Grand Finale*, the *Silent Concert* (Ahmels, 2021).

Lou Simard's subtle poetic staging recalls works by Canadian director Robert Lepage or the world of Samuel Beckett. Her deep understanding of the music allows her to consistently pursue visual and sonic counterparts as echoes of each other. Coincidentally J-CHOES (the title of the piece generated from the initials of the three composers) is a play on the word, echoes.

The tightly condensed libretto by Simard and Ahmels contains simple onomatopoeic expressions of amazement, as well as aphorisms from Cage and Otte. Influenced by Japanese Zen these *bons mots* correspond perfectly to Cage and Otte's inner landscapes. Delivered in the best Oxford English, the inimitable Margaret Leng Tan also masters text passages in German, French and Portuguese.

The roles of the three pianists are appropriately cast. Margaret Leng Tan, favorite pianist of her longtime mentor Cage, presents a ravishing »JC« performing sonic gems by Schoenberg, Otte and himself at the piano. Joana Gama, Portugal's rising star in the piano firmament, has devoted herself to the quiet sensations of Otte's piano music which she interprets authentically in her role as »HO«. Finally J-CHOES co-writer Ingo Ahmels is a convincing Erik Satie, even in appearance! He imbues the resurrected »ES« with a smidgen of finely dosed extravagance.

In Simard's production the shadow play creates a lingering poetry. The silhouettes of the three protagonists use this archetypal form of cinema to reveal what is essential, what lies behind the surface. The minimal nature of shadows also leaves room for the viewer's imagination. Slow-motion shadow play complements the finely nuanced sound world of the piano music. It also supports the simultaneous narrative threads of the sounds, images and actions laid out by the authors.

The train compartment of the sound journey through the occidental piano music served up by the guests at the J-CHOES banquet is undoubtedly First Class: Schoenberg's *Miniatures Nos. 2 and 6* from the *Six Little Piano Pieces* op. 19 (1911), Cage's *In a Land-*

scape (1948), and Otte's *Book of Sounds* (1982) celebrate their close relationship to each other and their connection to Satie's presciently minimalist sound poetry.

An entire scene is devoted to Cage's revolutionary reinvention of the piano from the late 1940s. We witness live the preparation and transformation of the Steinway grand piano into a percussion ensemble. This magic is normally hidden from the audience and has now become visible to anyone and everyone. Ahmels' piece *Be Prepared!* (2021) is a duet between the tuning and adjustment sounds produced during the preparation for Cage's *Sonata V* by Leng Tan and Gama and their echoes that Satie discovers in the sound-producing magic plant in Cage's kitchen. Indeed, Ahmels' »ES« uses the *Cage App* developed by the John Cage Trust which makes all the original prepared piano sounds available at your fingertips. Margaret Leng Tan then performs the amazing *Sonata V* from Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano*. Chapeau!

»*The true artist does not work, rather he loves,*« alleges the J-CHOES text at a certain point. In this respect the prolonged, warm applause fittingly rewarded the creative cloverleaf of Leng Tan - Gama - Ahmels - Simard for their loving devotion to the *far-fetched but indispensable music (hi)story* set forth in J-CHOES.

The international organizations such as *Goethe Institut*, :dacapo:, CAAA and the *John Cage Trust* knew well what they were helping to make possible: a jewel in sound, spirit and humour, the likes of which are rare in the fast-moving culture industry. We wish the polyglot* team and their wonderful piece many more performances in front of international audiences.

*J-CHOES, premiered in English/Portuguese, can be adapted to other languages.

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J-CHOES. A far-fetched but indispensable music (hi)story for three acting pianists by Lou Simard and Ingo Ahmels

Margaret Leng Tan – »JC«, piano and prepared piano
Joana Gama – »HO«, piano
Ingo Ahmels – »ES«, piano and Cage-App
Lou Simard – director

Trailer (2'45") www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nOxU2oPzRQ

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