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Chance Generated Ragas in Solo for Voice *58:* A *Dhrupad* Singer Performs John Cage

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> *I think that if I'm good for anything, that's what I'm good for: finding some way of doing things other than the traditional way.*
>
> —(Cage 1988: 20)[1]

Indian thought has influenced John Cage's music mostly on a conceptual, theoretical level. Thus, his *eighteen microtonal ragas* represent an exceptional, unique example of practical elaboration. They are found in Solo for Voice 58 from Song Books (1970). I first performed the *eighteen microtonal ragas* during the rendition of the Complete Song Books at the Bielefeld Theatre (Germany, May 2001), in collaboration with Christian Kesten and the new music vocal ensemble "Die Maulwerker". This experience led to a decade of intense involvement. I wanted to apply experimental procedures to *dhrupad* vocalism and to elaborate my Indian music background in a New Music context. I was also keen to explore an influential contemporary composer's take on *raga* to be able to step back from my personal involvement with the tradition and observe it from another perspective. After dedicating twenty years of my life to the study and performance of Indian singing, I felt the need to reconnect to my Western origins by having a closer look at the very substance of my musicianship, questioning habits and broadening my vocabulary. In collaboration with the Berliner Festspiele and several other contemporary music venues, my own interpretation of Solo for Voice 58 has been premiered in Berlin (2006) and performed in several European and American festivals. In this paper, I will discuss the salient aspects of my engagement with the Cagean *ragas* and describe the practical *realisation* with its intricate modalities and remarkable challenges.

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[1] quoted in Patterson 2002.

Amelia Cuni

The Composer: An Introduction

John Cage (1912-1992) is one of the most charismatic and controversial figures of American New Music. Undoubtedly, his work and thought has had a profound influence on contemporary artistic sensibility and ideals. His contribution has redefined our understanding of music, role of the composer and the responsibilities of musicianship. Cage's sharp and witty mind, expressed in numerous writings and lectures, has provoked strong reactions from many quarters. His chance-determined compositions, in particular, have aroused indignation and stirred controversy. Cage remains to this day a major source of inspiration for many artists and his work is widely studied, researched and performed.

John Cage has been a powerful reference for me as well. I had been attracted to his personality already as a teenage student of Indian music. I intuitively felt that Cage's departure from the conventional understanding of music and composition pointed to a direction that shared some common ideals with the Indian musical thought and practice. My more recent involvement with his microtonal *raga*s offered me the opportunity to extensively explore these issues, reconsidering my commitment to Indian music from a new perspective. In the process, I have realised that the concepts of *raga* and *tala* are in themselves extremely flexible and can be manifested in an endless variety of ways. Even "experimental" ones may take on a meaningful shape and be effectively performed and evoked. I believe John Cage's genius was wonderfully at work in Solo for Voice 58 and I wish to credit him with the most successful attempt, at least to my knowledge, to experiment with Indian music principles with great care and respect for the tradition, but without any quoting or borrowing from it. By ignoring customary and formal precepts, he has emancipated *raga*s and *tala*s from accumulated cultural and historical bindings, projected them into a truly inter-cultural dimension and evidenced their vast potential as concepts of musical organisation. From this perspective, they can be seen as not exclusively bound to the culture that has conceived them. *Raga*s, as suggested by Richard Widdess, can more broadly be defined as *"cognitive schemes"*. "In South Asia, a combination of orally-transmitted performance practice, with emphasis on memory and rigorous shastric analysis, has brought to consciousness and refined in unique ways aspects of musical communication that perhaps underlie all musics" (Widdess 2006).

In my opinion, John Cage has connected his *18 microtonal ragas* to their original meaning ("that which colours the mind") without relying on traditional canons only, but providing strategies to free their innate generative power. Strategies that would prove effective even in a de-contextualised framework are those that are an eclectic compendium of compositional techniques relating to music and theatre as well, such as the one provided by the Song Books.

Various scholars have analysed John Cage's interaction with South Asian arts and his borrowings from Indian philosophy. Here, I will just report a few instances and include some of my own considerations. According to evidence, John Cage first came into contact with Indian philosophy and aesthetics during the 1940's, mainly through Ramakrishna's and A. Coomaraswami's writings. He learned about Indian music and its philosophy from Gita Sarabhai, who had travelled to the United States in order to understand more about Western music culture. They exchanged practical and theoretical information for several months in 1946.

Cage's mention of these encounters is recorded in his "Autobiographical Statement" (Cage 1990):

> *I could not accept the academic idea that the purpose of music was communication…I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it other than communication. I found this answer from Gita Sarabhai, an Indian singer and tabla player: The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences. I also found in the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy that the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation. I became less disturbed and went back to work.*

Cage could have come into contact with traditional Indian music on several other occasions—between the 30's and the 60's, there would have been many opportunities in California and in New York—such as through his interaction with other composers interested in non-European traditions (*i.e.* Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison). Moreover, his close friendship with the mythologist Joseph Campbell, who actually introduced him to the writings of Coomaraswamy, must have given him ample scope to discuss Indian culture. From Campbell's autobiography, we learn that Cage had wanted to visit India but was never able to realise this trip. However, his music was performed there as accompaniment for Joan Erdmann's dance (Campbell 2004). I believe his strongest link with India has been the Sarabhai family in Ahmedabad.

During this early stage of his artistic development, Cage integrated at least two important principles of Indian music into his own work and openly referred to them in his writings. These were a musical one—*tala* (rhythmic cycle) with its related structures—and an eminently aesthetic one—*rasa* (aesthetic experience). According to scholars, the elaboration of rhythmic structures had been a major theme in Cage's music for at least two decades while he employed the concept of *rasa* in a few instances during the late 40's and early 50's as part of the composition process. Several mentions of this important principle of Indian aesthetics can be found in Cage's rhetoric.

Coomaraswami's writings had a profound influence on Cage. They contributed to some of the main recurring themes in his thought. A good example to support this claim is the emphasis on "*impersonality*" in an artist's production. The wish to eradicate intentionality and personal taste from music-making will eventually result in Cage's adoption of chance operations as compositional tools. We have already come across Coomaraswami's views about the role of the artist, whose ideal should be "*to imitate nature in her manner of operation"*, a statement often quoted by Cage. We could find another important theme in the art historian's affirmation that "*the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist*" (Patterson 2002). Cage had adopted and expressed this idea again and again in statements, such as "*art is a way of life*" (Cage 1952a: 97).[2] One more evident influence was the adoption of the concept of micro-macrocosmic correspondences, which was codified by Cage in the rhythmic structures of his early pieces and often advocated in his writings.

Following these lines of thought, we arrive at Cage's main preoccupations in composing: by using chance operations, he aimed at "freeing" sounds in music and "*divorcing them from the burden of psychological intentions"* (Cage 1958). By laying emphasis on process rather than end result, the composer is able to allow music to *"happen of its own accord as if thrown up by natural forces"*. (Nyman 1999). This approach comes close to that state of "surrender" (Van der Meer 2007) that Indian musicians look for in a traditional performance. Here, the aim is allowing the *raga* to manifest itself through the skills and knowledge of the performer. In the Indian concept of *rasa*, the listener's participation in the process of aesthetic rapture is indispensible. Simultaneously, John Cage's strategies to avoid control over sounds make the listener (and not just the composer) responsible for the final outcome. In contemporary music, so-called "open" or "indetermined" scores, such as the one included in Solo for Voice 58, represent a device for facilitating processes rather than arranging material (Pritchett 1993: 146). Therefore, the resulting music is not pre-defined and its outcome could not be foreseen. Similarly,

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[2] (Patterson 2002: 47)

ragas' own workings as "cognitive schemes" generate a performance that is very time different, cannot be fixed beforehand and may include novel interpretations. I think that the most appropriate score for a traditional *raga* rendition would indeed be a graphic one, as in the case of "indetermined"music in contemporary Western practice.

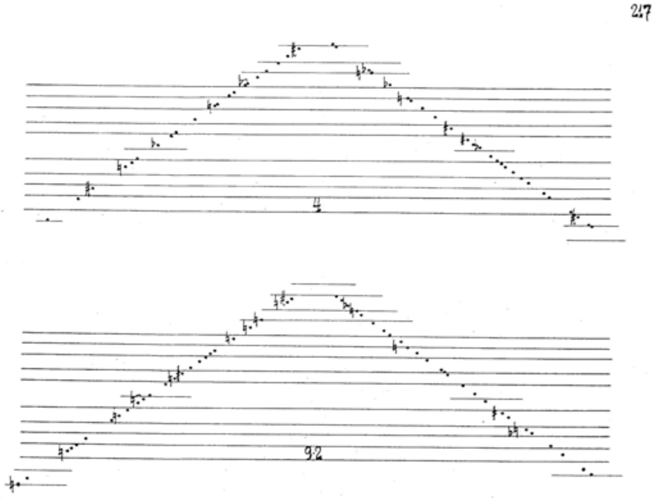
In spite of these affinities, we should keep in mind, as Patterson has pointed out, that John Cage has always been borrowing from other thinkers only the very ideas that could fit into his "modernist agenda", thus turning them into "appropriative subversions" (Patterson 2002). On the whole, it seems obvious that one cannot speak of straightforward Indian music influences in Cage's artistic production. Thus, his *18 microtonal raga*s represent a unique example of his practical involvement with the South Asian tradition. We find John Cage using the term "*raga*" in his directions only in one more work, which is titled Postcard from Heaven (1982), for one to 20 harps and optional vocals.

The Score and the Interpreter

As we have already known, Solo for Voice 58 is one of John Cage's compositions included in the Song Books (1970), a collection of more than 80 soli for voice and theatre with and without electronics, commissioned by Kathy Barbarian and Simone Riest. Solo for Voice 58 is an indeterminate work and it consists of 18 separate and independent parts. In his directions, Cage refers explicitly to traditional Indian music forms:

> *Eighteen full range microtonal "ragas"*
> *They are double; that is, either part may be used for ascending or descending and one can move freely from one side to the other of a single "raga" and one can use as little or as much of it as desired. The associated numbers are "talas" on the basis of which singing and/or drumming may be improvised. Think either of the morning, the afternoon or the evening, giving a description or account of recent pleasures or beauties noticed. Free vocalise also.*
> *For numbers greater than 2 make any desired divisions, freely varying them.*

The scores consist of rows of graphically notated microtones.



While Cage's instructions encourage the performer to evoke the spirit of Indian music through various devices, I have taken his directions literally and have set for myself the task of developing *raga*s and *tala*s in a non-traditional context. As far as we know, mine has been the first instance of a trained *raga* singer taking up this challenge. I believe the overall outcome of the interpretation is recognisable as *raga* music, although it cannot be appreciated exclusively by Indian music standards. In fact, a listener trained solely in Indian music might well find the experience unsettling since it mercilessly challenges established listening habits. Two basic concepts, an improbable pair, have been brought together in this realisation: the meaning of the musical term *raga*, which is to colour the mind, and the use of chance operations, a crucial tool in Cage's methodology. The directions in this composition allow endless possibilities of realisation while at the same time imposing restrictions that stimulate analysis, reflection and deliberate decisions. For me, this process has resulted in an enriching interplay of unconventional, subversive elements with the disciplined and "symbolic thinking" (Rowell 1992) inherited from the tradition. It has involved letting loose established patterns and assumptions by taking nothing for granted. It has allowed chance-determined tunings to open up new landscapes as well as traditional axioms and rules to acquire new meaning and purpose.

Although I was born in Italy, my musical education has mostly taken place in India where I have been studying *dhrupad* singing and *kathak* dance with well-known masters[3] between 1979 and 1996. I returned to Europe with the aim of sharing and passing on this knowledge through teaching, performing and artistic collaborations. I saw myself as a kind of translator, a messenger between cultures. At the same time, my personal inclinations have brought me to interact with other non-Indian music forms and ideals while retaining my identity as a singer of *raga* music. I have been elaborating *raga*-based compositions by integrating diverse influences and aiming at a contemporary and cosmopolitan expression of the *dhrupad* tradition. For the past 15 years, I have been collaborating with renowned composers and performers in various fields, spanning from early music to contemporary chamber, electroacoustic and experimental music. These inclinations and diverse experiences are at the core of my enthusiastic commitment to John Cage's *ragas*.

Confronting the Indian tradition from an experimental standpoint has required a radical approach. I have taken into consideration all sorts of musical ideas and have accepted decisions made by chance procedures, even when they seemed foreign to the *raga* milieu. While exploring this unfamiliar and somehow forbidden territory, I have been keeping in mind the important role played by the "*refused materials*"[4] in Cage's musical thought and learned that what seems unnatural at first may acquire a meaning that gradually emerges through practice and increased familiarity later on.

The Process of Interpretation

During the first several months of my engagement with the *18 microtonal ragas*, I have worked systematically on a process of interpretation that included the following procedures:

- Studying the main themes in John Cage's artistic development
- Maintaining a correspondence with scholars and musicians who have been analysing or performing the Song Books; searching for relevant articles, recordings and many more

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[3] My main teachers have been: R.Fahimuddin Dagar, Bidur Mallik and Dilip Chandra Vedi for singing, Manjushri Chatterje for dance and Raja Chattrapati Singh for drumming.

[4] During an interview, Cage remarked: ' *I've always been on the side of the things one shouldn't do, searching for ways of bringing the refused elements back into play*' (Kirby and Schechner 1965) quoted in Brooks 1982.

- Structuring the working method and discussing specific problems with Ulrich Krieger, the music consultant
- Compiling lists of as many as possible traditional and non-traditional parameters/elements (techniques, musical components or behaviours and any other possible variable including “refused materials”) to be used in making decisions through chance operations
- Selecting *raga* pitches and basic notes (by chance procedure or by ear)
- Delineating each *raga’s* own grammar and developing its main features through the practice of improvisation
- Choosing texts to be sung (my own, by other authors, by chance selection)
- Arranging percussions, drones and other components of the performance
- Developing each *raga* through rehearsals and discussing with other performers
- Selecting and elaborating some soli for theatre from the Song Books to be included or superimposed in the performance

From a listener's perspective, the most prominent divergence between my performance of a John Cage's *raga* and a traditional one lays probably in the atypical selection of the pitches and their microtonal treatment. Intervals, slurs and combinations of pitches that are not usually tuned in Indian *raga*s can be immediately perceived. These anomalies are implied in the score and in Cage's directions. However, in my rendition, one should still be able to recognise the main features of *raga* music. The consistence in the melodic treatment and the ensuing emotional impact should be detectable even in this non-traditional sound environment.

In his score for Solo for Voice 58, John Cage uses a modified version of the staff to be able to visually fit in the microtones (see image 1). At a closer study, we will notice that these microtones are not precisely defined as pitches, their unsystematic appearance within the stave producing occasional ambiguities. Thus, before selecting them, I had to set rules to clarify any existing doubt and come up with an unequivocal interpretation. Before elaborating the behaviour of the chosen microtones as *raga* components, I prepared long lists of various attributes, techniques and other variable elements for every aspect of the performance and used them all along to take decisions by means of chance procedures. This activity alone has provided me with innumerable opportunities to analyse traditional *raga* music in great detail and to become more conscious of my own style of interpretation.

Cage's use of chance operations[5], a well-known feature of his methodology, is sometimes misjudged as some kind of playful approximation that renders everything interchangeable, justifying and allowing practically any interpretation. The more absurd this turns out to be, the better. John Cage's displeased remarks about interpreters taking all sorts of liberties with his music have been recorded in several instances. After engaging myself with this work, I have come to the conclusion that "open" scores are in fact quite demanding. The indeterminate nature of these compositions requires a remarkable amount of discipline and appropriate modalities of realisation: the process of interpretation may well turn out to be very time-consuming. It involves pondering on several aspects of making music and cultivating the ability to constantly respond to novel situations. I believe that while committed "*to let the sounds be themselves*", Cage encourages performers to broaden their horizons and take responsibility for their choices. Creativity and anti-conformism per se do not seem to be sufficient to turn a set of instructions (often intentionally vague) into a convincing work of art nor is the constant use of chance operations enough to give justice to Cage's music. As I have personally experienced, the performer's approach and the method of conducting these operations are in fact more crucial.

Raga Grammar

Understood and experienced as musical "personalities", *ragas* are traditionally subjected to a kind of "grammar", a set of commonly accepted rules and patterns of behaviour that help to shape their individual character. Without this "grammar", it is deemed impossible to achieve the desired effect, the emotional impact of *ragas*. Cage acknowledges this feature by providing in his score ascending and descending parts, a direct translation of the *arohi-avarohi* terminology used in Hindustani music. This is probably the most relevant principle that guides today's melodic development in the traditional *raga* format. However, Cage introduces a more unorthodox, anarchic approach by allowing the interpreter to "*move freely from one side to the other of a single "raga" and one can use as little or as much of it as desired*".

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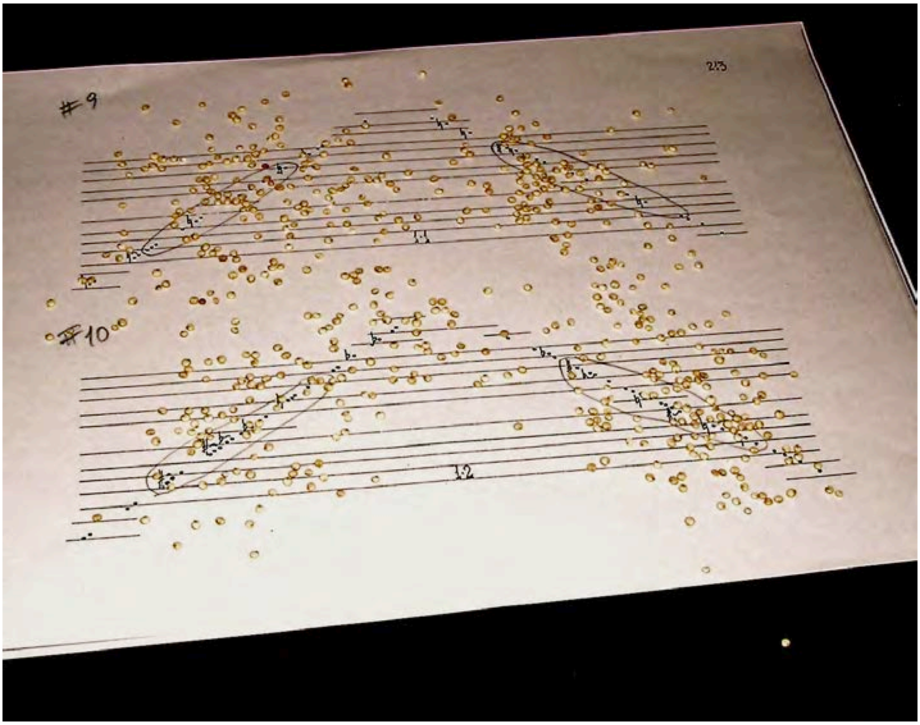
[5] Brooks suggests that the composer had used star charts as in *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961) to arrive at the selection of microtones for SOLO 58. Cfr. Brooks, W. 2007.*The genesis of SOLO 58*, San Francisco: OM 1010-2 (CD booklet).

Because of my traditional training, I found it helpful to establish features for the behaviour of each one of Cage's *ragas,* working out a *challan* (melodic outline) and defining one or more *pakad* (key-phrases). These patterns and restrictions in my interpretation may not replicate those of traditional Indian *raga* grammar but they have been established through an analogous process, involving both analytical and empirical procedures. My aim was to achieve an emotional impact (colouring of the mind) by developing a defined, independent "personality" for each Cagean *raga*, despite the "random"character of the tone material. To my surprise, even the most daring combinations became gradually acceptable while my ears learnt how to deal with them. After some months of practice and adjustments, *raga-bhavas* (expressions, affects) started to emerge from Cage's microtonal assemblages. This is probably the most exciting and engaging aspect of my work on Solo 58 to this day; a continuous search for an emancipated perception of sound, melody and rhythm that can be expanded and perfected with each performance.

Intervals and Microtones

In traditional Indian *ragas*, pitches are organised modally and ordered in an ascending and descending progression. The *raga* pitches, called *svaras* (that which shines of itself), are always perceived as intervals in relation to the chosen basic tone. The set of intervals in a *raga* recurs in each octave and very often contains an inner symmetry that links higher and lower parts of the octave by means of consonant relationships. Cage's *ragas* are instead made of intervals that may be chosen freely from his given sets of pitches covering a broad range; therefore, the resulting scales are wider than an octave. In my experience, intervals are more meaningful than pitches to the trained Indian ear. In Cage's *ragas*, I had to reverse this order and let the pitches of the score, which do not fit any traditional intonation patterns, find their way to become meaningful intervals in a *raga* context.

I chose a basic pitch for each of the 18 parts. In some cases, its selection was determined through chance operations, but I opted for the usual basic tone fitting my own vocal range (A-flat / G-sharp) whenever it appeared in the score. The additional *raga* pitches were selected by means of chance operations or simply by ear.



Cage's notation does not precisely define microtones but rather allows flexibility in their intonation (*i.e.* higher, lower, very high, very low, in relation to their neighbouring pitches). Their exact tuning has therefore been developed by ear while working on a single *raga* as a whole. Their actual pitch and function within each *raga* personality has been gradually consolidated through practice and improvisation, consciously freeing them from habitual intonation patterns.

Since Indian music does not use equal temperament, any traditional *raga* may be considered microtonal. The intonation is dictated by a cultivated pitch perception, which can be extremely precise, inherited from the oral tradition and supported by an ancient theoretical background. However, praxis and theory of intonation have undergone numerous transformations along the centuries, producing debates and controversies to this day. I believe that the tuning of microtones in Indian *ragas* can be fully appreciated only in performance, since intonation is indissolubly connected to the melodic phrasing and its ornamentation. The profuse usage of slurs, shakes, and oscillations should be considered an integral part of the music. In fact, the cultivated ability to tune all these inflections to the mode of the *raga* is one of the greatest achievements of the Indian tradition. In this modal organisation, the constant drone of the *tanpura* and the leading role of the melodic line confer an intense emotional impact to the single intervals, which can be skilfully exploited by experienced artists. Thus, tunings and pitch inflections can be discussed and evaluated also from a psychological and aesthetic point of view. Keeping all this into account, I would say that the present concept of intonation in Indian music is an organic, comprehensive one and therefore, quite complex. It relates eminently to the praxis (even when ancient and modern treatises propound elaborate tuning theories), where pitches are perceived in a richer and broader sense and can be hardly reduced to precisely measurable values fitting snugly into intonation systems. Moreover, hearing and tuning habits (together with the perception of tempo and rhythm) continuously change, adjusting to new social, environmental and cultural stimuli. I would like to suggest that the unpredictable, unclassifiable intonation of these *18 microtonal ragas* might be considered part of this process of change.

Improvisation

Interestingly, Solo for Voice 58 represents one of the rare instances of John Cage prescribing improvisation. In the classical tradition of North India, this is a vital ingredient. It is considered to be the only way possible to bring *ragas* to life. Such improvisations are disciplined by a customary development fitting the modal structure of the music and including brief so-called "compositions" (*bandish*) followed by lengthy improvised/flexibly-memorised variations. In the teaching of Hindustani music, special emphasis is laid on the training of improvisational abilities by means of specific techniques and exercises. This is because the music, belonging to an aural tradition, depends upon each performer to re-construct the personality of the *raga* each time anew, relying only on memory, creativity and inspiration. Thus, improvising in the *raga* context could be considered a kind of composing on-the-spot since it requires a cultivated ability to arrange larger forms impromptu as well as to elaborate on finer details while remaining aware of the overall impact of the performance (Van der Meer 2007). This approach is the result of a vision, which perceives music and life as intimately connected, flowing and resounding together, celebrating sound as the agent of creation (*nadabrahma*).

The exceptional, atypical emphasis of Cage on improvisation in Solo for Voice 58 provided me with yet another stimulus for re-assessing my musicianship as a performer of *raga* music, making me more conscious of the unique role that improvisation plays in it. John Cage did not approve of this procedure because of the stress on personal taste and the idiosyncratic habits that it tends to reinforce. However, in the case of the *18 microtonal ragas*, he acknowledged the importance of improvisation in the elaboration of *raga* music. Here, too, I have tried to apply his own ideals of discipline and restraint, searching for a radical Cagean approach that would allow for unpredictability and unplanned outcomes. Thus, I worked with various kinds of superimpositions, time brackets (chance-determined durations, a procedure often used by Cage) and other devices. Selected examples will be described in due course.

Drones

Considering that Cage points to fine-tunings by using the expression "*microtonal raga"* in his instructions, I opted to use audible drones to allow maximum possible accuracy of intonation during the performance. I mostly realised them (in collaboration with Werner Durand) using pre-recorded sounds from various sources belonging either to the traditional *raga* milieu or to the larger sound environment of the Song Books. At times, I would get my basic pitch from some tuned percussion accompaniment or pre-recorded vocal patterns (superimpositions of the same *raga*). The samples had been electronically treated using digital delays and other effects and some were non-continuous as opposed to the uninterrupted drone of the Indian *tanpura*. In any case, these drones did not have an autonomous musical function. In Indian music, they are always considered an integral part of the *raga*. The rich sound of the *tanpura* is used for the practical purpose of tuning intervals accurately as well as to help the musician to "get into the right mood". Similarly, our drones lent an atmosphere to the pieces and became a conscious source of inspiration, contributing to the emergence of a *raga-bhava*.

Here are some practical examples: in one instance, we turned a recording of an electric drill into a drone by pitching it through a pipe. This drone was inspired by Cage's use of other pre-recorded machine sounds in the Song Books. More orthodox ones were created using two *shruti*-boxes or recordings of *tanpura* strings, which were processed electronically or played with unconventional techniques. The sound of a waterfall was pitched with the support of a saxophone. I challenged my ability to identify a basic note by creating drones using clusters that appeared in the score and were reproduced using sine waves. In a specific case, Werner created a drone, which was atypically fragmented, from *tanpura* sounds. Here, I let the drone influence the character of my vocal rendition by avoiding any slur (*mind*). One more drone used the resonance of a *pakhawaj* (drum) stroke made continuous by digital delays. In another example, the vocal drone shifted at some point, while the *raga* intervals remained unaltered. All the pitches used to compose the drones were taken from John Cage's score. However, for the sake of clarity, I selected only the ones that do not present microtonal alterations.

Tala

In contemporary Indian music practice, singers restrict the use of *talas* to a specific section of the *raga* performance called *bandish* or "composition." This consists of a few verses set to music according to a customary structure depending on the kind of singing genre being performed. It is followed by numerous improvisations of increasing complexity and speed. Whenever a *tala* is introduced, the singer will use the accompaniment of percussion. The given *tala* pattern will be strictly adhered to, often with the support of clapping (cheironomy). The singer will be interacting with the percussion by improvising within the given *tala*. The singer is always considered a soloist, even when accompanied by one or more percussionists. In addition, the complexity of *ragas* and *talas* in Indian classical music does not actually allow the soloist to sing and drum at the same time. All these considerations induced me to collaborate with percussionists for accomplishing a detailed and elaborated rendition of *talas* in Solo for Voice 58. I experimented together with two experienced percussionists: Federico Sanesi from Italy, mainly trained in the classical Indian tradition, and Raymond Kaczynski, an American living in Germany with a Western music background and a good knowledge of South Indian drumming.

Cage's *talas* mostly employ atypical divisions. Indian music theoretically recognises a boundless variety of *tala* and their subdivisions, although nowadays only comparatively few are commonly performed. In Solo for Voice 58, we explored a variety of options besides the ones consolidated by the tradition. For instance, singing within a *tala* framework without percussion accompaniment; singing without following a *tala* but with the percussion playing one; using *tala* in singing and percussion both without conforming to the customary *bandish* requirements and form but setting new rules and developing atypical structures and arrangements.

Some examples: *raga* 8 was set to an eleven-beats *tala* (divided 4.2.1.4.), which, in our interpretation, lasted only a couple of minutes. Here, Sanesi played a single slow cycle while Kaczynski stressed the *tala* subdivisions of this one-only cycle. In *raga* 12, the singer and the percussionist performed within a six-beat *tala* structure while we heared two independent *tala* clappings following different *layas* (tempi). In *raga* 16, I focused my interpretation on the link among percussion, recitation and singing, stressing a very important aspect of the Indian use of metric rhythm and showing its connection to speech. The percussionist played the *tabla* patterns often over-layered with recitation. He rendered verses written by his father, the poet Roberto Sanesi, and *tabla bols* (imitative, onomatopoeic words) mixing them freely, alternating and interchanging percussion and recitation in a seamless flow of metric rhythms. My vocal improvisations interacted in a similar vein, exploiting the interplay between words, rhythm and melody typical of *dhrupad* music, where improvisation included the percussive uttering of the syllables in fast melodic sequences. I sang fragments of a traditional text describing springtime. The theme was mirrored in the sound of the drone, which mixed *tanpura* with the buzzing of a beehive.

In the treatment of *laya* (tempo), which is an important aspect of *tala*, we departed from the tradition by playing with fragmentation, gradual speed variations and layering of various tempi. Here, we looked for support and inspiration in the instructions of the Song Books and in some of its graphic scores as well as in John Cage's own working methods, such as the use of time brackets and other chance procedures. As a result, our treatment of *tala* in Solo for Voice 58 did not conform to the standard *laya* structures of intensification and acceleration typical of Indian music. Our interpretation did not induce any sense of progression and it often created the impression that *ragas* and *talas* were executed in parallel but independently, so that several perceptions of time may coexist in a given piece. In this respect, the *tala* improvisations on the percussion instruments should be considered an integral part of the Solo for Voice 58 performance, providing at times a rhythmic canvas for the singer and elsewhere an independent, parallel interpretation of the given *tala*. As a result, our improvisations often overlapped fully or in part (for instance, through the use of time brackets), creating unplanned synchronic interpretations and superimpositions.

Texts

The texts on which I improvised the *raga*s in Solo for Voice 58 came from a variety of sources. Following Cage's instructions, some had been written by me in different languages. They included vocalising, a widely used technique in Indian singing. In other instances, I used some of Cage's own procedures, such as creating texts by selecting words, syllable and phonemes from my own repertoire (or from other Song Books' soli) by means of chance procedures. In some *raga*s, I chose the self-referential approach and quoted from Alain Daniélou's works about Indian music in various languages. Complying with the improvised nature of the work, I chose to sing one of the *ragas* (*raga* 2) using a new text in every performance, which had been written by me in the language that could best be understood by the audience.

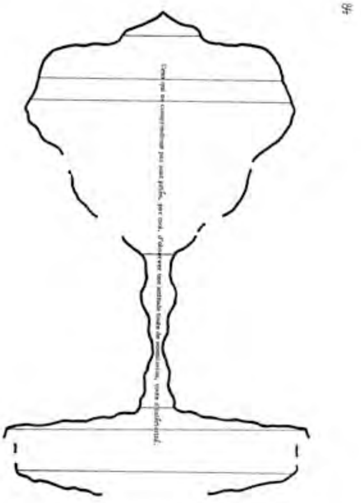
Superimpositions

During the early stages of my work on Solo for Voice 58, I discussed with our music consultant, Ulrich Krieger, the various difficulties encountered in leaving the comfortable, self-contained environment of traditional *raga* music and in experimenting in a consistent Cagean mode. Ulrich, a composer and saxophonist who had worked on Cage's music extensively, suggested that some of the Song Books' graphic scores might be used as a tool to expand my musical thinking beyond the habitual patterns and well-established strategies. His advice proved very useful. It brought forth unexpected developments in my interpretation. In practice, I selected some graphic scores from the Song Books and interpreted them using the pitches of some of the *ragas* in Solo for Voice 58, allowing the visual experience to inspire and guide the musical outcome. In this way, we realised the superimpositions of two or more soli, a procedure allowed by John Cage in his general directions to the Song Books. I have used this procedure for some of the vocal pieces and theatrical soli as well (see further). In one instance (*raga* 10), I opted for a superimposition of the very same *raga*, using time brackets for the singing, for the percussion parts and for the pre-recorded segments of the same vocal rendition. Likewise, in the last section of my *ragamala* (a combination of four different *raga*s from Solo for Voice 58), I used pre-recorded vocal fragments, which were played according to random order and timings, resulting in ever-new superimpositions with my live improvisations. This procedure calls for a different kind of attention from the performer and the listener alike and introduces pauses and silences, which are unusual features in contemporary *raga*/*tala* renditions. In my own view, the resulting breaks in the flow as well as the moments of overlap and superimposition actually concern only the surface of the musical event. At another level, the individual *ragas* and *talas* flow uninterrupted, maintaining their own peculiarities and distinct character.

I will describe here in detail one of the superimpositions with a graphic score: Solo for Voice 21 (song with electronics) superimposed on *raga* 18.

Cage's directions for Solo for Voice 21 are:

Let the upper and lower extremes of the symmetrical shape relate to the upper and lower extremes of the voice register. Let horisontal space relate to time. Total duration: 40 seconds. Take either the upper or lower line, changing to the other if desired at any structural point (these are given by vertical lines). Make one very gradual electronic change (a dial "glissando") from the beginning to the end. Make any use of the text given (by Erik Satie), repeating words and phrases freely.



In my interpretation of this superimposition, I first made a chance-determined selection of pitches for *raga* 18. In the performance, I had to negotiate the various restrictions imposed by the score of Solo for Voice 21 itself. Although free to change from upper to lower ranges and vice versa, I had to follow a melodic line (in its literal meaning!) that was pre-defined. In this case, the *raga* pitches could not be perfectly tuned, mainly because of the short duration (fixed at 40 seconds in total) and the continuous glissando, which included abrupt changes of range at some structural points. Here, I had to sacrifice the precise definition of the microtones for the sake of coordination. Working with this very short and set duration would be unthinkable in a traditional context. Indian music performances tend to be lengthy and to unfold at a leisurely pace. The musician needs time to establish the atmosphere of the chosen *raga* as his/her ability to achieve its unique emotional impact will determine the success of the performance. One may argue that this process of evoking and manifesting a pre-existing musical entity cannot be bound to precise timings nor can it be realised within extremely brief durations. Thus, in the experimental context of Cage's Song Books, I juxtaposed the consolidated practise of "being absorbed in an on-going state of *raga*-ness, one that tends towards *timelessness*" (Clayton 2000: 26) with atypically short and pre-defined durations, another deviation from tradition, conferring an episodic and fragmented character to parts of the performance. Solo for Voice 21's graphic score gave me an unprecedented experience of music turning into "gesture" in the sense of a compact and coherent expression within a very concise time span. At the same time, it made evident the visual aspect of glissandi, the intimate link between the graphic and the vocal line. After having performed this superimposition for some time, I decided to add another dimension to it by setting against the condensed 40-second version a brief prelude that introduced the individual *raga* pitches. In this first section, I was able to dwell longer on the intervals and establish them in a more consistent manner. Exceptionally, the sequence of the pitches and the way they were joined were not improvised but had been determined through chance operations and through the selection of vowels and phonemes, which were derived from Satie's text. Just for once, I wanted to have the experience of singing a brief *alap* (kind of prelude) that had been worked out exclusively through chance operations and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I found the unexpected combinations and melodic twists beautiful and inspiring. However, I did not fix the correspondence between the vocal lines and the *tala* (9.2, played with a bell tuned to my basic tone), thus allowing the flow to be different every time.

Other superimpositions with graphic scores led me to search for suitable vocal expressions and techniques outside of the *raga* milieu, such as the "pointillist" use of the voice required in Solo for Voice 72. Superimpositions with the soli for theatre require a separate treatment and will be dealt with further on.

Rasa

In his directions to Solo for Voice 58, Cage states: "think either of the morning, the afternoon or the evening, giving a description or account of the recent pleasures or beauties noticed". This is an obvious reference to well-known Indian aesthetic principles that are typically taken into account while rendering ragas: the aesthetic theory of rasa and the so-called time-theory, associating ragas with a specific time of the daily cycle or with a season.

However, these are both controversial theories in modern India and Cage gives his contribution to the discussion by characteristically abandoning any traditional model and leaving the interpreter free to find his own associations. Moreover, he clearly diverges from the classical Indian approach to "static emotions" (rasas) by directing the singer to focus on the memory of personal experiences. The resulting friction between the individualistic western attitude to "describe pleasures and beauties noticed" and the more impersonal treatment of rasa embedded in the raga tradition encourages further speculations. By narrowing the "description or account" to the more rewarding kind of experiences, such as "pleasures or beauties noticed", Cage echoes the prescribed avoidance in Indian music of unpleasant and destructive emotions. For example, the rasas of disgust, fury and fear are only used in theatre and dance, never in a purely musical performance. On the other hand, the experimental and anarchistic treatment of ragas in the Song Books leads to a loosening up of the connections between rasas and specific intervals or modes. As intervals that are deeply dissonant to the Indian ear, such as a flat octave or a very high fourth, come into play, rasas become much less classifiable and standardised, allowing Cage's ragas to acquire new colourings and hues. In essence, Cage's approach allows the performer to draw on his own experiences, and combine them with the discipline of performance to foster the growth of new and unpredictable rasas.

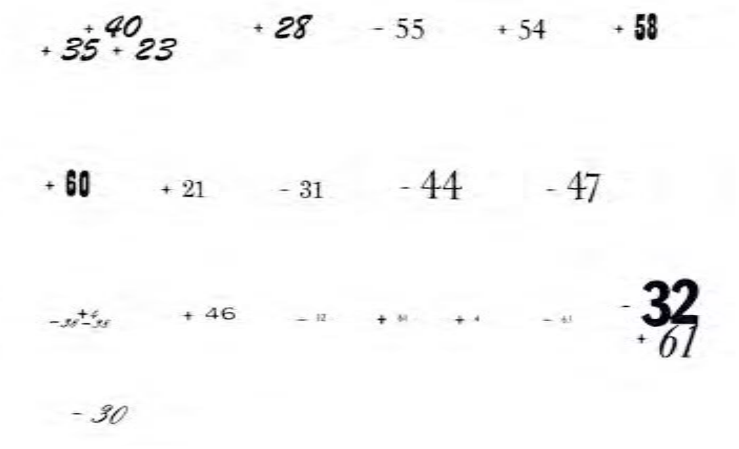
Theatrical Elements

The theory of *rasa* originated in the realm of drama. Ancient Sanskrit theatre has nurtured it and its underlying principles are still interwoven in Indian music praxis, as we have seen earlier. In fact, all classical performing arts in India have these common roots and the interdisciplinary aspects are evident and supposedly cultivated. However, the fast pace of contemporary life, social adjustments affecting music in innumerable ways and the consequent leaning towards specialisation all gradually changed the attitude and the taste of musicians and audiences alike. Consequently, most of the genres and techniques requiring an interdisciplinary approach seem to be falling out of fashion while dance and music become more and more distinct, self-contained art forms. In my interpretation of Solo for Voice 58, I have taken the opportunity to work with the interdisciplinary aspects of the classical tradition, which I especially value and have been integrating in my own training from the very beginning.

Cage's Song Books are conceived as a multidisciplinary work, connecting various art forms and allowing simultaneity. Accordingly, I decided to introduce in my performance of Solo for Voice 58 some soli for theatre included in the Song Books, with the aim to explore this particular aspect of the Indian tradition from an experimental standpoint. In addition, in this case, I found the process extremely rewarding and revealing. I learnt to use my attention and concentration in various ways and have developed the ability to make synchronicity happen within myself to a degree that I did not believe would be possible. According to my experience, the superimposing of a song with unrelated actions produces bewildering combinations and unpredictable synergies that contribute in their own way to the intensification of the aesthetic rapture. They magnify the here-and-now and point to a kind of awareness that is encompassing and detached. Whenever I have to perform an action while singing, I must negotiate with its speed, intensity, duration, expression and many more, considering it an autonomous and independent event, overlapping with the melodic movement of the voice by a fortuitous coincidence. By practicing, one can actually learn to experience these activities separately, as if completed by different parts of oneself. This is not perceived as a sterile exercise. Rather, it seems a useful technique to focus while keeping the influence of one's ego in check. I have observed that having my attention fully occupied with this artful split of personality causes a shift of perspective that leads to a psychological re-arrangement, a change in the perception, a re-alignment of the various faculties involved in the creative process. Paradoxically, one also learns to flow more within the performance and give up some of the self-conscious and controlling attitude to let things happen according their own accord.

During the selection of the soli for theatre, I gave priority to the ones that prescribe everyday actions (such as preparing food, eating, drinking, sleeping, taking off /putting on shoes, writing a card, fulfilling an obligation, and so on) and the ones prescribing lists of unspecified actions, where I introduced movements, steps and *mudras* (symbolic gestures) belonging to the choreographic vocabulary of the *kathak* dance. In the case of the first group of soli, I aimed at making the borders between art and life less obvious and more blurred. I searched for a wider, comprehensive experience that might integrate common actions, usually those taken for granted, with an artistic process of creation. In my own understanding, this could result in a new awareness of our daily life, informed by the direct experience of art as an *imitation of Nature in her manners of operation*. I especially enjoyed exercising the rendition of the soli for theatre everyday actions (rather than theatrical ones), which I happened to perform on stage. I believe this subtle shift of purpose makes a great difference in my handling of the performance and in its overall impact.

For the second kind of soli for theatre—the ones using lists of actions—I took into consideration the elements that belong to the milieu of the *kathak* dance, a discipline that I have been practising simultaneously with *dhrupad* singing for many years. First of all, I had to select the steps/movements to make up the lists, numbering each action. Subsequently, I had to interpret them according to the typeface, size and other visual aspects of the numbers appearing in the score.



As for the *18 microtonal ragas*, I had to make my own scores and find adequate graphic representations. Luckily, Indian dance uses mnemonic syllables (related to the *bols* of the tabla language) and being able to write them down made the task easier. The work on these soli gave me the opportunity to explore in depth some aspects of the traditional vocabulary by taking into consideration singularities and by setting new rules for their realisation. Thus, the single events became fragmented and de-contextualised, producing new semantic interpretations and often unlikely combinations that were unrelated to the traditional "dance grammar". This whole process of de-construction and re-assemblage afforded many valuable insights into the workings of the ancient vocabulary. At the same time, superimposing actions and singing have challenged my coordination to the highest degree. Remembering the sequences that have no logic development requires long periods of rehearsals for every performance. During the years, I have interpreted these soli in a variety of ways. The performance turns out different every time not only because the music is improvised, but also because the selection of the soli for theatre varies. In fact, I have been careful not to define and fix the interpretation of the *18 microtonal ragas* in detail, so that I may keep on experimenting with them. Simultaneously, I elaborated a new combination of the soli for every performance in order to bring forth unknown situations and to avoid stagnation. Sometimes, I did not include any actions at all. Cage's Song Books gives the interpreter the freedom to arrange the performance differently every time. Whenever the opportunity

arises, I would also like to make completely new realisations in collaboration with other singers, musicians or actors.

Lighting

Colours and other visual elements are connected with music in India in various ways. The most well-known examples are the series of *ragamala* paintings, miniatures that depict *raga*s. Associations with different kinds of light may also be derived from ancient practice, which originated from the Hindu temples, relating *ragas* to the different times of the day and night cycle. In my interpretation of Solo for Voice 58, when the situation allowed, we used a light design especially developed by Andreas Harder. In this case, we tried out different options. More recently, we agreed upon defining the light changes and their cues according to a solo for theatre (with numbers) as suggested by Christina Tappe, the theatrical consultant. This resulted in a contradiction since the lighting of the performers on stage did not relate to the atmospheres and changes in the music. The light technician programmed his mixer according to a cue-sheet derived from the interpretation of the score of the solo for theatre, which had been worked out beforehand by the light designer and myself. Since the lighting equipment varied from venue to venue, the character and effect of the design would be different every time as well. Moreover, the music and actions did not reoccur with exact timings during each performance and my positions on stage were not fixed. Therefore, the relationship between the performer and the light was never a conventional one, but resulted in yet another kind of superimposition. The light design became emancipated from its designer and it participated in the show as if of its own accord. In order to explore this Cagean, anarchistic approach, I had to give up the wish to make the performance more beautiful and suggestive by means of an "appropriate" use of lighting, relying mainly on coordination and emphasising hierarchies. It felt definitely strange for a soloist to be singing standing in a pool of darkness while her empty seat was in full light! It did take some audacity on my part to lay down to take a nap (Solo for Theatre 57) while the performance seemed to come to a halt or to come back in haste from backstage (Solo for Theatre 32) as if I had missed my cue. On the other hand, it took even more audacity to sing a purposely flat octave or different kinds of sharp fourth in a row. Those unconventional activities obviously provided me with gratifying rewards. They made up for the doubts and low confidence that have generated within myself and in the audience by offering the exhilarating experience of exploring a yet unknown territory, stepping over logic and personal taste.

Conclusions

John Cage was not interested in crafting systems to structure sounds according to European tonality. He had strong opinions about the Western tradition, which he considered dysfunctional and deteriorating. He saw counterpoint and harmony as *"out of step not only with its own but with all other traditions*". He affirmed this belief in his "Lecture on Something" from 1951 to 1952 (Patterson 2002: 48). Cage was truly inventive and single-minded in his dedication to music. Although he admired and respected non-European traditions, he went on his own in a radical way. In my case, the experience of working intensively in a rather uncomfortable spot, where I could not rely upon familiar and recognisable forms, has been at times unsettling. All the carefully learned structures, aural and emotional correspondences as well as the effective tools and strategies for improvisation that are an integral part of the Indian oral tradition could only be partly exploited in support of Cage's *ragas*. In the tradition, the practical function of these conventions is to let the music maker and listener dive deeper and deeper into that non-verbal state of communion and achieve a rich and fulfilling aesthetic experience. By performing *ragas* only according to its customary development, there is no emphasis laid on musical forms (as in the Western classical "compositions"). Thus, the conventional structures are not understood as a contribution of individual genius. They are rather used as devices, refined by generations of artists for the sake of allowing *ragas* to be effectively manifested.

After several years of engagement with John Cage's *18 microtonal ragas*, I have been able to assess their efficacy in innumerable ways. Every time I pick them up, I find new inspiration and endless potential for their development. The decision to retain a definite selection of intervals and a basic *raga* grammar for each one of them has proved advantageous because only time and practice will allow their personality to unfold. Solo for Voice 58 has indeed generated a transformative process, which can be shared with the audience. Cage's methodology has been working wonders, propelling an endless chain of reactions that have transformed and enriched my understanding of music. I am aware that many people's mental flexibility and aural tolerance may be challenged by Cage's provocative approach. This work "*has to do with perception and the arousing of it*" (Cage, quoted in Nyman 1999: 23) and forces us to leave behind preconceptions and listening habits by pointing at what is here now rather than at a new interpretation of already formed musical structures. John Cage's experimental take on *raga* music is possibly the most radical of its kind. His truly anarchist perspective has shaken the very foundations of the theory of harmony in the West[6] while the "*single goal throughout his career has been the disciplined acceptance, in musical contexts, of that which has been previously rejected out-of-hand*" (Brooks 1982: 161).

If we proceed to apply Cage's radical ideals to the tradition of Hindustani music, as I have attempted in my interpretation of his *18 microtonal ragas*, we may find that his transgressive approach is likely to cause disbelief or even rejection in the Indian music circles as well. I have not been able to perform Solo for Voice 58 in India so far; therefore, I cannot elaborate on this topic. On the other hand, I am not sure that Cage would have been fully aware of this "other" perspective nor would he have even realised how far this work could be taken by a trained *raga* singer, since he probably never came across one who was interested and willing to put everything at stake. I regret he is no more with us to share his opinion on this. In any case, I believe that whoever wishes to open up to this music has to leave something behind and proceed with a lighter burden. Only the willingness to be surprised and prodded at every turn of this unpredictable path can be of use. Finally, I wish Cage's *ragas* might be appreciated as musical beings in their own right.

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[6] see James Tenny's essay: John Cage and the Theory of harmony, in SOUNDINGS 13. *The Music of James Tenny*, soundings press, Santa Fè 1984

Eccentric perhaps, but nevertheless grown out of seeds of discipline, joy and bewilderment.[7]

I would like to conclude with my sincerest thanks to Charles Amirkhanian (Other Minds), Matthias Osterwold (Berliner Festspiele) and to all the participants in the project. Without their support, encouragement and active involvement, I would not have been able to develop the performance through the years.

In this paper, I have integrated some parts of my sleeve-notes for the CD publication: Creating 18 microtonal *raga*s, edited by Adam Fong and included in the booklet of the CD, *JOHN CAGE, Solo for Voice 58: 18 microtonal ragas by Amelia Cuni, dhrupad vocals*. Other Minds, San Francisco, 2007 (OM 1010-2 CD).

Detailed information about the performance history are available on my homepage: www.ameliacuni.de

GLOSSARY

1. Alap: lit. "discourse", introduction and elaboration of the raga's melodic character
2. Arohi-Avarohi: ascending / decending progression of a raga
3. Bhava : in Sanskrit means expression, affect.
4. Dhrupad : the oldest genre in North India, on which Hindustani music is based
5. Mudra: lit. "seal": symbolic gesture or posture of the hands, used in Indian dance and Hindu rituals
6. Kathak: a dance genre, which has developed in North India in close contact with dhrupad music
7. Pakhawaj: double-headed barrel drum, played in dhrupad music and kathak dance

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[7] Pritchett reports (ibidem, p. 175): *The situation he* (Cage) *foresees - and in which he obviously takes great pleasure - is one in which the various arts and styles* "intermingle in a climate very rich with joy and - I am purposely using an expression frequent in Japanese texts - bewilderment" (Cage, *For the Birds*, 1981)

8. Raga: from Sanskrit, "ranj" : "to colour, tinge". Ragas are melodic modules used in traditional Indian music
9. Ragamala: a garland of various ragas, a traditional form
10. Rasa: from Sanskrit "sap, taste, essence": sentiment, aesthetic experience/ enjoyment
11. Shruti-box: small drone instrument, made of wood, with reeds and bellows. Used as drone mainly in South Indian music
12. Svara: from Sanskrit, "that which shines of itself", the raga pitches/ intervals
13. Tanpura: plucked lute with long neck, used as drone in Indian music

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Photos:

1. 4, 5, 7 and 9: Giovanni Pancino, Venice Biennale 2007
2. 8: Kai Bienert