

SHORT ANSWERS TO

DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

JOHN CAGE
LUKAS FOSS
IANNIS XENAKIS

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The Buffalo Festival of the Arts Today was the occasion for a panel discussion which included three composers: John Cage, Lukas Foss and Iannis Xenakis. Foss suggested a game: all three composers are on trial; each trying the two others. The questions had to be difficult, the answers short, well under a minute. An unidentified voice asked a final question.

CAGE: Lukas, what is an idea?

FOSS: A connection of parallels suddenly revealed.

CAGE: What is a musical idea?

FOSS: It would be a musical parallel which hadn't occurred to me before; something that makes things fit where before there appeared to be no connection.

CAGE: The French speak of an idée fixe-can we now conceive of an idée non-fixe?

FOSS: Well, an idée fixe is an obsession; an idée non-fixe would then be a free preoccupation, a non obsessed, a non fanatic, a non single-minded one; that's what we work with most of the time.

CAGE: Marcel Duchamp says that a work of art is not art until it becomes such in an observer or listener. What do you think about that?

FOSS: Beauty in the eye of the beholder? An accepted truism. "je ne suis pas contre".

CAGE: Music is a form of government; a composer essentially tells others what to do. Thoreau says the best government would be no government at all; would the best form of music be no music at all?

FOSS: I think there is an error here in the analogy. If we didn't need government we would, indeed, be better off, but if we didn't need music why would we be better off? Put that way the analogy between government and music no longer works.

XENAKIS: Lukas, do you think that the public is necessary?

FOSS: The public as such, no. Other people in the same boat, yes.

XENAKIS: Are you interested in ancient, pre-medieval music?

FOSS: Not yet.

XENAKIS: How do you feel the influence of the future on you? Let me clarify my question. You say that we are influenced by the music of the past; I think that we are influenced by the future. How can you answer this?

FOSS: There is a future and I don't know it. This not knowing something feels like an ominous presence; we can't quite see it but we know it's there-the only thing

we know is that eventually we'll die. I think that if I didn't know that death is my ultimate future my work would be entirely different.

CAGE: Mr. Xenakis, what compositions are you working on currently?

XENAKIS: 'Currently' means 'now'?

CAGE: Yes. What is the nature of your present work in composition?

XENAKIS: For orchestra instruments and for technological means, computer, etc.

CAGE: What do you think is wrong with the United States?

XENAKIS: Too much power.

CAGE: Is your music related to your political views?

XENAKIS: I think my music was related to my political views, now less maybe. It was once like a reconversion of political things into music and there were events in my youth, sound events and form events which have influenced my music.

CAGE: What do you think of the work of Buckminster Fuller?

XENAKIS: I don't think that he can cover the earth.

CAGE: I asked a Spanish lady scientist what she thought about the human mind in a world of computers. She said, "Computers are always right but life isn't about being right". What do you say to that?

XENAKIS: The opposite-life has reason and computers are often wrong.

CAGE: You have been an architect and now you are a musician. Are you going to go on to some other activity?

XENAKIS: I'd like to but it is difficult.

FOSS: Iannis, all the music of yours that I know is built on mathematical premise, mostly probability. Is there any aspect to chance that is not mathematical, that is, not probability theory?

XENAKIS: All my music is not based on mathematics-there are parts of it which use mathematics. As to chance, it is not like dice or tossing a coin, this is ignorance, as if there were impossibility of predicting. What does chance mean to you?

FOSS: Anything I cannot control. You left architecture for music-why?

XENAKIS: Mostly because architecture was a business and music is less business.

FOSS: In order to compose you need time, solitude-what else?

XENAKIS: To live in a big city.

FOSS: If someone imitates you (I know of an instance) does it flatter you or make you angry or both?

XENAKIS: I am angry...angry and depressed.

FOSS: What did you want to be when you were a child?

XENAKIS: An elephant.

FOSS: Has your native Greece shown interest in your music, and if not, why?

XENAKIS: My people have but it is very difficult for them to hear my works because of the tyrannic grip of the actual government; they are practically never played in Greece. John, how do you consider the faculty of thought in respect to the whole full way of life that we have?

CAGE: I think that if the activity of the mind, that is to say thinking, could flow from that point to any other point and could go out in the sense of sense perceptions, or could go in in the sense of dreams, then there is no real distinction or disconnection between those things.

XENAKIS: What is your relationship to your own past and, in general, to the past of the rest of humanity?

CAGE: My feeling about the past changes according to what I do; what I do is to bring to my attention things which I had not noticed in the past.

XENAKIS: Do you think that a new era of mysticism is going to come for humanity? Christianity was a kind of era of mysticism which came at a period which was so much like ours now today (Alexandrian times). When science and all ways of life were so rich Christianity came like a sponge.

CAGE: Comics, no?

XENAKIS: Razor, no? As a sponge to erase fantastic ways of rich life and bring to humanity a certain degree of thought which was very, very different.

CAGE: I believe that we are living in a period of change from competition; we're moving to a situation of overlap, interplay, where things which have seemed opposite and contradictory become part of a general cooperation; and I think that in that situation an attitude of mysticism could be entertained by individuals but that it would not be required-a period, in other words, of multiplicity of ways, all of which will manage to interpenetrate and not obstruct one another.

XENAKIS: What sense do you make out of working with computers - what does it mean to you?

CAGE: Well, I'm in the process of doing it and discovering what it does mean. It brings about the possibility of realization of projects so complex that I could not have approached the projects without the aid of the computer. I am heartened and delighted with the fact that there are no secrets in this field; that programs that are already available are shared; that what seems to be resulting is not music made by one person but rather music made by men, or many people.

FOSS: John, what do you do with a composition of yours which you don't like-withdraw it?

CAGE: No, I keep it.

FOSS: Could you conceivably dislike a piece by someone else written totally in accordance with your own orientation, your own parti-pris? What would have to be wrong with it for you to dislike such a piece?

CAGE: Some defect of it that would indicate that it was not done from belief.

FOSS: Could you conceivably like a new piece of music totally opposite to your own music? If so, name one. And what would have to be right with it?

CAGE: I think the work of La Monte Young is virtually opposite to mine, and I like it very much for the reason that it changes the way I hear.

FOSS: Some years ago Stravinsky visited Pope John and the Pope said, 'My son, is anything bothering you?', and Stravinsky said, 'Yes, I cannot take criticism.' The

Pope said, 'Neither can I.' John, can you take criticism?
CAGE: I pay very little attention to it.

FOSS: My last question: Is it possible to ask a colleague a non-general, that is, a non-technical question which is not idiotic?

CAGE: Yes.

TAPE (Unidentified voice): As precisely as memory permits, retrace the history of music from 1900 to 1990; just the highlights, please.

XENAKIS: I think that during the next ten years we will have a crazy mixture of music in everyday life. Then a kind of feedback will come in about 15 to 20 years. It will probably be a decay if another world war does not happen.

FOSS: Erickson says that there will be two kinds of people - those who know what they're doing (the technologists) and those who mean what they say. I suppose I belong to the latter group because I mean what I say and I don't know what I'm doing...I certainly don't know the music of the future. If I knew it I would write it.

CAGE: I think we can expect in the future finer performances of classical music than we have now since societies will gather together to preserve things which we have the feeling might disappear if they didn't...just as we now have pro musica 'Orchestra'. I think we have yet to be surprised by further technological possibilities. At the same time there will be a greater and larger influence of cultures which have formerly been separated. I think that music will not swing back to something with which we are familiar - that it will include, not exclude, the past.

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REVIEW cont.

may seem absurdly self-evident, but it is amazing how infrequently this view of things, due to the nature of the musical facts of life, can be seen to apply to the generality of music criticism.

It has been Yate's paradoxical good fortune to be able to call himself a musical amateur through much of his life (a few years ago he gave up outside employment in order to devote himself to music full time). His remark-

able achievements on behalf of performance and composition, beginning with his founding of the Evenings on the Roof chamber series in Los Angeles in 1939, seem to belie his amateur status, and in many ways it could be said that he is the dynamic kind of critic-leader for whom the 19th century furnishes the prototype. There has been a dynamism of sorts in present-day criticism: over the past few years a number of excellent books by music critics have appeared in fields relating to professional performance