

THE HALBERSTADT DIARY(2011)

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Prologue

We're about to go back to Halberstadt at last! We've wanted to return ever since our first visit last year, when Laura Kuhn of the John Cage Trust was responsible for the note-change on the organ. Just prior to that July 2010 visit, we joined Laura and her partner Ralph Benko for a sleepover at the Dornröschenschloss Sababurg – the inspiration for Sleeping Beauty's Castle – which was everything you could want from a fairy tale location. We might have thought this would be the fun part of the trip, since, looking back, we all approached Halberstadt with a bit of trepidation. What kind of strange event would we be attending? Was this to be some kind of wild-eyed geeky wonderment or some ponderous, painfully earnest musicologist's private fantasy?

What we quickly found was as far from both as one could get: the most wonderfully warm, generous, and delightful people, who completely knocked us out with their commitment and hospitality, in a thoroughly charming small town with wonderful places and sights, and a musical project which, in spite of moving at the slowest pace any musical performance has yet achieved, was at once alive, vibrant, historic, active, and curiously emotional.

There was a note-change earlier this year, but we couldn't go. The Edition Peters companies have been for the last 70 years or so just a loose association of sometimes co-operative firms broken up by both the Holocaust and the establishment of the DDR. Last August, after 17 arduous years of directed effort, they merged into one harmonious business. We had thought our lives might be a little quieter after that, but we couldn't have been more wrong. The last note-change fell on Nicholas's birthday, as it happens, but even that didn't give us the freedom to attend.

Thursday, 4th August

After a morning's work, we headed off to Heathrow Airport for the short hop to Berlin, where we'll stay overnight. We're booked into a Suite Novotel, an extraordinary chain of hotels across Germany in which every room in every hotel is exactly the same. All the "services" (bath/shower rooms, closets, loos, and so on) are in a self-contained "pod" built into one part of the room. After you've been to a few of these hotels, you really have to check your itinerary when you wake up each morning to establish which city you're in because the identical nature of every room throughout the chain is extremely disorientating. On the other hand, the rooms are a good size, perfectly comfortable (in a kind of German business hotel way), and incredibly well thought-through, so that everything you might want has already been provided. It's like living the "optimized life"! We have dinner at a marvelous restaurant in what used to be the East German part of the city, recommended to us by the Berlin lawyer who got us through the Edition Peters re-unification legalities. The décor is just as it must have been 25 years ago before

the Wall came down, but the food is magnificent. Astonishingly, an excellent meal, with wine, cost only €50 (\$70).

Friday, 5th August

Woke up in Berlin – a slight fight through the breakfast area, getting two tiny little tasty sausages with scrambled eggs, which neatly kills off the good effect of the muesli and fresh fruit – and now we're on the train to Magdeburg. The landscape around Berlin is beautiful, and a constant reminder of the past. Outside our hotel was the magnificent façade of all that is left of the old Anhalterbahnhof, like a stage set, really, a la Billy Wilder's *Symphonie einer Grossstadt*, and now on the train we have passed Potsdam and the lakes around Berlin. We've also moved from sunshine to rain.

Just a moment ago, while working away at the laptop, we heard a faint sound, which we couldn't quite identify. Was it the computer's fan going wrong? We finally realized that it was the sound from the Halberstadt website, which we had recently opened and which was now quietly playing the music that is sounding in the Burchardi Kloster through the laptop speakers. John Cage, reaching out to us already.

Before we reach each station, one hears a happy little tune over the train speakers encouraging us to put on our walking boots and climb a big mountain and breathe in the healthy air. It's torture after the fifth time. At first we think it doesn't work at all with *ORGAN²/ASLSP* streaming from the laptop, but then we remember Cage's *Musicircus* and think maybe this is just fine after all.

Arriving at Halberstadt station we're greeted by Martje Hansen, who kindly ushers us to the breathtaking house in which she and her husband Rainer Neugebauer live on the Domplatz. It used to be the town library, and in a sense it still is. The official library may have been moved to a specially converted space not far away, but there are probably nearly as many books in the collection in place, stretching across the many bays that run along the front of the house, overflowing into side rooms and spaces. It is the most extraordinary living space, and simultaneously a magical and fascinating collection of literature, art, and *objets*.

Rainer, who is one of the main organizers of the John Cage Organ Project, and who acts as Master of Ceremonies on the Note-Change days, has more or less lost his voice. Fortunately, a pharmacist has been called who has gone straight for a maximum chemical assault on the virus – seemingly with good effect, because something of Rainer's voice has returned. He has a great deal of public speaking to do during the rest of the day, so we hope the recovery is sustained!

After lunch, another of the heroes of the Halberstadt Cage Project joins us, Dr. Harriet Watts, originally from Texas, a member of a particularly select group of human beings: Americans Who Live In Europe. It doesn't make a great mnemonic, but its members have a remarkable combination of qualities: all the energetic "can-do" and "pizazz" that can make Americans so exciting and unnerving to Europeans, coupled with thorough

immersion in European culture and style, which seem sometimes to baffle other Americans. In Harriet, it's a particularly powerful mix. Unlike the average English-speaker, she has thoroughly mastered German, and we speak the local language together far more than her native English. She is involved in all manner of important cultural projects around the area as well as with the Cage Project, and evidently accepts no boundaries to what can be done! She lives in nearby Quedlinburg, possibly the prettiest and most delightful town in Germany, so she will also be staying with Martje and Rainer in Halberstadt tonight.

The first thing to happen on the big day is a presentation by the other two note changers, Christoph Bossert and his wife Andrea Dubrausky-Bossert, in the Herrenhaus, the mansion next to the Burchardi-Kloster, the church that houses the performance of *Organ²/ASLSP*. Christoph and Andrea have been researching the way that they believe Bach used a kind of numerology in his compositional structures, and have produced an impressive argument concerning the central role that Psalm 118, verse 22 may have played: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone". With the help of both a projector attached to a laptop and a clavichord, they demonstrate how the numbers work. We might have feared that we would be soon lost in complex calculations and endless finely argued distinctions, and that the warmth of the afternoon would easily lead to what one might politely call a lapse in concentration. But with sensitivity to the realities of the situation that often escapes lecturers, Christoph and Andrea put forward their ideas astonishingly succinctly and directly, and then simply stop! After a few questions from the moderators, the presentation's over. The plausibility of what they have said, and the desire to know more about it, is considerably enhanced by this approach!

There is a short break before the press conference. It's really impressive how interested the press is in these events. As Rainer has pointed out, the major players turn up so far without needing encouragement. Nicholas is being presented as a "surprise guest" alongside Christoph and Andrea (who have been pre-announced as "performers"), so he sits next to Rainer in front of the press. At Rainer's suggestion, he has prepared a little text in German about Cage, Edition Peters, and so on, and after Rainer's husky introduction, he reads it aloud and manages to get a laugh out of the assembled press members, who seem otherwise to be determined to treat this whole thing as something deeply serious (which it is, of course, but one could crack a smile – Cage himself was a great laugher, after all!).

A few questions follow: "Why is the note change happening so late? It's not very convenient for the trains." That's a paraphrase, but one was along those lines (apologies for the pun). Another person asks about the long-term financial stability of the project, and this is no small matter. Of course, it is not easy to guarantee financial stability over the next 629 years for anything, so the question is perhaps not capable of a real answer. The immediate needs for the organization are to deal with the financing of the organ itself – touching on the sensitive questions of taste and style that any new organ project always throws up – and also to do with the renovation of the Herrenhaus. Last Christmas, a pipe froze and burst upstairs and a large part of this wonderful building was flooded. Large chunks of the lime and reed plaster on the walls and ceilings came down. However,

much renovation has already been accomplished, probably more than they first feared in the aftermath. And in the tradition of silver-linings, when they took up the linoleum floor upstairs, they discovered underneath a beautiful wooden floor. But there is now a financial gap that must somehow be filled.

The press conference is over, and now comes the concert: works by Bach (clavichord) and Cage (prepared piano), played by Armin Fuchs and Bossert. A journalist from *Bloomberg News* asks to interview Nicholas briefly, and we are ushered quietly outside. Afterwards we are not allowed back into the building for fear of disturbing the listeners. In the meantime, the concert has begun to float out of the windows above our heads, and we listen from benches outside in the garden. We probably heard this in more comfort than some who were inside, since there was at least double the number of people at the concert as places for them. People were sitting on the stairs, standing on the landing outside the concert room, and practically hanging from the old DDR-era light fittings on the ceiling (now under landmark/listed building protection as ideal examples of their period and style).

After the concert, the Project staff rush around trying to prevent people from falling immediately upon the food and drink that has been put out in the rooms downstairs for enjoyment after the note change – but with only some success. It is approaching 8pm, so some people seem too hungry to wait.

We are now approaching the moment for the Note Change and the atmosphere has become appreciably more excited. A substantial crowd has gathered in front of the entrance to the Burchardi-Kloster Church, perhaps 500 or so, some new to the event. (The church was closed at 7:30pm in preparation for the event, so the building is empty at the moment.) Rainer leads Christoph, Andrea, and Nicholas to the church door, where a microphone is waiting to spare his enfeebled voice. Patrick is appointed bodyguard to a young woman in a wheelchair who will be brought into the church first.

Rainer introduces the event, keeping it light and interesting, and manages to raise smiles and a bit of laughter with his observations. He explains that the three changes to be made will happen with 10-second intervals between them so that everyone will be able to clearly hear the distinctions. (A spread of 20 seconds in 629 years is, after all, a smaller difference in “attack” than you probably get when putting down a chord on the piano in more usual performance conditions.) He introduces the “performers”, and makes note of the availability of the special Halberstadt-only edition of *Organ²/ASLSP* that Edition Peters has produced to support the Project. And then it is time to open the door of the church again, and out seeps the distant sound of the organ.

Rainer leads us into the building, and it seems suddenly as though we are in the middle of some important ritual. Everyone seems to move with a little more deliberation, perhaps a little formality, as each walks to his or her appointed position. The high stone walls, the austere Romanesque architecture, the now slightly fading light seeping in through the spaced windows, and the formality of the layout, all have been used by church architects through the ages to create a sense of the immanent and the transcendent as preparation

and context for an encounter with the Almighty. All of this now conspires to create a context for our drama of the human spirit spread out over 639 years.

The performers take their positions by the organ, where the two new bass pipes are already in place, kept from sounding by triangles of black paper that act as mutes. Andrea puts her hand on the pipe that she is to remove but waits for the first signal. Rainer has Cage's score on a music stand and takes out his antique stopwatch.

The crowd takes an age to find its way into the church, but eventually everyone settles into place. People are standing on low walls, on the massive bellows system in the opposite transept, and at floor level, while press photographers are crowded around the front, as near as possible to the performers so as to get good shots. "You will think of us, won't you?" one of them shouts to Nicholas, fearful that Nicholas will accidentally block the view of the pipe when removing the mute.

Rainer, whose unamplified voice seems now too quiet to carry, manages to still the crowd by asking for a moment's silence so that everyone can appreciate for the last time the present sound of the organ. Rather surprisingly, everyone seems to get the point, and the building becomes noticeably still. The sound of the organ rings out over us with the notes that have been sounding since February 5, 2011. Rainer's eyes are fixed on the stopwatch, and then he counts in the first change: "eins... zwei... drei..." Andrea pulls out the A-flat pipe, which has been sounding since July 5, 2008, and there is an immediate and very noticeable change in the sound. Seven seconds later, Rainer counts again: "eins... zwei... drei..." and now Christoph whips out the mute from the D-flat bass pipe. The timbre of the chord drops into a new, deeper sonority. So far, everything sounds smooth, but seven seconds later: "eins... zwei... drei..." Nicholas releases the sound of the C pipe, a semitone away from Christoph's pipe. In his introduction, Rainer spoke of the addition of these two adjacent sounds as being like the sound of a ship's engine room, and indeed, the colliding tonal waves produce now a constant thrumming in the room.

The C will sound against its D-flat neighbor for the next 36 years, so it is difficult not to do the math in one's head: we will both have to reach the age of 90 if we are to personally witness the cessation of that tone. Of course, that is by no means impossible these days, although to make it to the time when the D-flat is removed, in 2071, which will be just before the end of the first part of *Organ²/ASLSP*, will take far more determination. When Nicholas mentions to someone that when he was removing the mute he found himself wondering whether he would live to experience the end of his C, the other responds by saying "unless the project is forced to stop before that." Nicholas realizes that this possibility had not occurred to him. Even if this project is only 10 years old, the idea that anything might now prevent it from fulfilling its 639-year musical destiny seems absurd, unthinkable, crass, and almost bad manners.

After a few reverential moments, applause breaks out. The performers are induced to briefly bow, and the crowd gradually breaks into small groups of excited conversation. The life of this building began in the 11th century, some 300 years before the Faber organ

in the Halberstadt Dom was erected and nearly 1,000 years before this moment. Over the past 800 years it has been a pig sty, a brewery, and an agricultural storehouse, but now is once again a place for people to be part of something larger than themselves, a place to be confronted once again with the question of four-score years and ten, or whatever length modern medicine is able to provide, and a place for the human spirit to be challenged to optimism or pessimism about its future, its culture, its imagination. If that sounds “high-fallutin’,” the only thing to do is to go to Halberstadt and witness one of these events yourself and let it work its own subtle magic. It ought to be mad, weird, or pompous, but it is not – in large part because of the people who make it happen, especially Rainer & Martje, Harriet, Christof Hellegger, and Hans-Jörg Bauer, all of whom walk on water regularly, as far as we’re concerned.

Afterwards, people drift back to the Herrenhaus, where wonderful sausages and other delicacies are served along with plenty to drink. We sit outside, falling into amiable conversation with old and new friends alike. Brigitte Wiegmann and her husband are with us. She is a German artist who has produced many pictures in response to works by various composers, including John Cage. Eventually, they come with us on foot with Harriet and Hans-Jörg back to Rainer and Martje’s house, where a little party is already in full swing. Some time after midnight, everyone else goes home, and the note-change day is over. It has seemed both to last an age, and yet has gone by in a flash, time seemingly playing tricks with our minds, which seems somehow right for this event.

Saturday, 6th August

Today is the first birthday of the unified Edition Peters Group! The contracts were signed on August 2, 2010, became valid on August 4, 2010, when various conditions were fulfilled, and the companies were reorganized into a unified structure on August 6, 2010.

We are going for an outing to the utterly bewitching town of Quedlinburg with Rainer and Martje. After breakfast in the garden, Harriet leaves for the next of her many projects, and we drive off for the short journey. It is actually rather useless to try to explain Quedlinburg, because words cannot possibly do it justice. There are ample photographs online, but the experience of being among these beautiful, charming buildings is nearly impossible to capture. Of course, before the war, there were many places like this across Germany. There are far fewer now. One cannot help but consider the horrible futility and destructiveness that human beings can wreak on one another and regret the hideous losses of human life. Quedlinburg gives us a glimpse of what we have collectively managed to throw away.

But one also thinks about humanity’s life and experience, frozen in this beautiful architecture and this artistic endeavor.

In the middle of the afternoon, exhausted from much walking, climbing hills and steps, and the humid heat, we return to Halberstadt for a much-needed rest. Then dinner nearby, and finally *digestifs* in Reiner and Martje’s magical garden.