



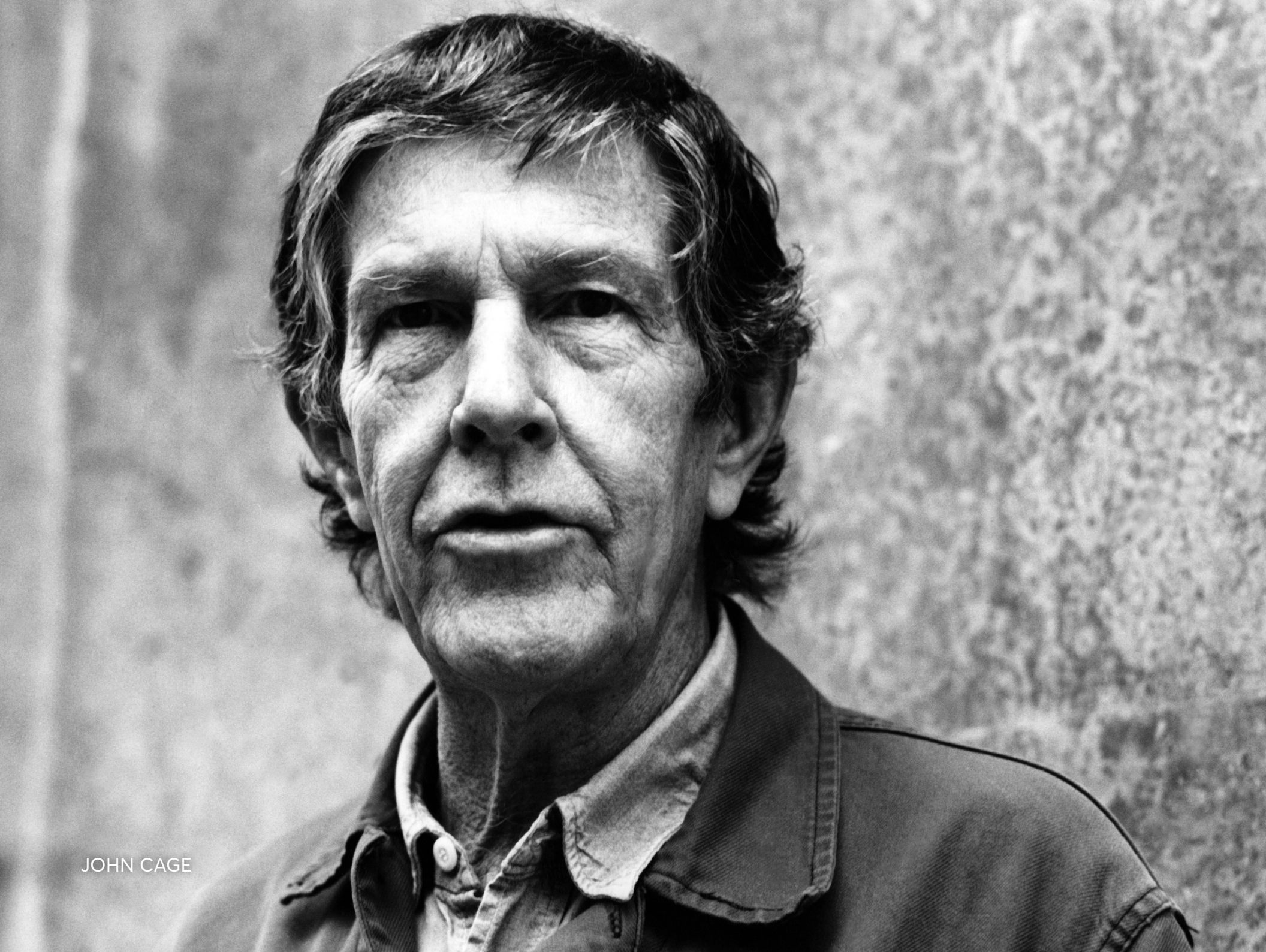
ONDINE

# JOHN CAGE

## Choral Works

Latvian Radio Choir

Sigvards Kļava



JOHN CAGE

**JOHN CAGE (1912–1992)**  
**CHORAL WORKS**

1	<b>Five (1988)</b>	<b>5:07</b>
	<b>Hymns and Variations (1979)</b>	<b>15:41</b>
2	Hymn A (Subtraction from <i>Old North</i> by William Billings)	1:53
3	Hymn B (Subtraction from <i>Heath</i> by William Billings)	2:05
4	Var. I	1:55
5	Var. II	2:06
6	Var. III	2:05
7	Var. IV	1:55
8	Var. V	2:05
9	Var. VI	2:04
10	Var. VII	1:55
11	Var. VIII	1:55
12	Var. IX	1:55
13	Var. X	2:05
14	<b>Four<sup>2</sup> (1990)</b>	<b>7:10</b>
15	<b>Four<sup>6</sup> (1992)</b>	<b>30:02</b>

**LATVIAN RADIO CHOIR**  
**SIGVARDS KĻAVA**, conductor

Choral music and John Cage might seem like an odd pairing. For myself, I think of choral music as a somewhat conservative corner of classical music, and Cage is the dictionary definition of an avant-garde composer. And indeed, strictly speaking, Cage wrote only two compositions for chorus, both of which appear here: *Hymns and Variations* (1979) and *Four*<sup>2</sup> (1990). The other works on this album are written for ensembles that are more or less open-ended and which have been interpreted here for choral forces.

One reason Cage and choruses did not mix well may have been his notorious hostility to harmony in music. He often told stories from his time studying with Arnold Schoenberg in the 1930s, including a memorable teaching about harmony. Schoenberg told Cage that he lacked any feeling for harmony, and that this would be a wall between him and his goal of being a composer, Cage responded, "I will devote my life to beating my head against that wall." When asked in 1960 to provide a short list of books that had influenced him, he included Alfredo Casella's textbook on harmonic cadences—but not for positive reasons. His verdict: "This convinced [me] that Western music had disintegrated." Years of analyzing Bach chorales condition musicians to associate the soprano-alto-tenor-bass of choral music with dry lessons on the theory of tonal harmony, with all of its rules and conventions. Given all this, it is no wonder that Cage and choruses didn't tend to mingle together.

And so it was not until Cage was 67 years old that he wrote his first work for choral forces: *Hymns and Variations* for 12 voices. In a typically inventive way, he got around his harmony problem by taking two actual pieces of traditional choral music as a starting point and then transformed them, recasting the music into his own voice. The two Hymns are literally that: two four-part pieces by the early American composer William Billings, from his collection *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (1770). Cage took these two pieces ("Old North" and "Heath") and applied a method of subtraction and extension to create both the Hymns and the Variations (five for each hymn).



Cage experimented with a number of different processes to transform the Billings before he found the one that produced the result he was after. His explicit goal was "to do something with early American music that would let it keep its flavor at the same time that it would lose what was so obnoxious to me: its harmonic tonality." By removing some notes and extending others, he arrived at a music with less solidity and more empty space in it. It is a music that "you can recognize . . . as eighteenth century music; but it's suddenly brilliant in a new way. It is because each sound vibrates from itself, not from a theory." Through selective erasure, Cage gave Billings's music a bit of harmonic amnesia.

A decade later, Cage started a series of works known as his "number pieces" because their titles are simply the number of performers involved. These pieces all feature simple materials (mostly single notes) whose timing and duration are unpredictable within broad limits defined by "time brackets." They range from solos (the *One* series) to full orchestra (*Sixty-eight*, *Eighty*, *103*, etc.). They represent a surge of creativity in the last two years of Cage's life; he saw them as a really new direction in his music and was quite excited to work on them. Three of them are heard on this album: *Five* (1990), *Four<sup>2</sup>* (1990), and *Four<sup>6</sup>* (1992) (the superscript numbers distinguish different pieces in the series that have the same number of parts).

Even though composed using broadly similar methods, the number pieces have individual voices and styles. *Four<sup>2</sup>* was written for a high school choir (the text is drawn from the letters in the name of the school's home state: "Oregon"). Written with a chorus in mind, it connects most directly to that tradition. Hearing it we can easily visualize the whole notes on four staves, the perfect picture of a harmony textbook. The other two number pieces here do not specify ensembles, but are suitable for voices. *Five* was one of the very first of the number pieces. The five parts have particular pitch ranges (mostly on the higher side) and any voices or instruments that can play the pitches can play the piece. *Four<sup>6</sup>* goes further still. Here, too, the performing forces of the quartet are not specified, but even within

the individual parts the choice of specific sounds is left to the performer. Each musician is instructed to select twelve sounds that can be extended in time in a static way. The score then references these by number and places them within the time brackets. So when we hear *Four*<sup>6</sup>, we are hearing sounds chosen by the performers that are arranged in the flexible architecture of time composed by Cage.

Because the number of notes tends to be very low and the brackets tend to be fairly long, many of these late pieces feature overlapping long tones. The texture is similar at times to what we hear in *Hymns and Variations*—similar even to the original Billings hymns. Cage viewed this as a turning in his music at long last towards harmony. "I'm surprised at almost all the ideas that come to my head," he said in an interview in 1990, "because they have to do with harmony." In the 1970s he was dismembering harmony through erasure; in the 1990s he was remembering it again. But where *Hymns and Variations* has its roots in the harmonic scaffolding of Billings's eighteenth-century anthems, in the number pieces the vertical structure is transient and illusory. Instead of a composed harmonic scheme there are only the independent notes of the independent parts. The harmony that arises from their overlappings occurs naturally, outside of any theory or rules: "anarchic harmony," Cage called it. After fifty years of beating his head against the wall of harmony, John Cage found a way to simply walk right through it.

— James Pritchett

*"A great musical power."*

– Washington Post

*"This chorus's expertise in music pushes voices to extremes, from ethereal high tones to uncannily sustained bass drones."*

– The New York Times

*"One of the world's greatest choirs."*

– The Advertiser

The **Latvian Radio Choir** is a unique, award-winning ensemble of professional singers that offers its audiences an extraordinary variety of repertoire ranging from early music to the most sophisticated scores of contemporary compositions.

The choir has recorded the Grammy Award-winning album *Adam's Lament* (ECM) composed by Arvo Pärt and conducted by Tõnu Kaljuste. It is a repeat winner of the Great Music Award of Latvia (the highest national award for professional achievement in music) and has received the Latvian Cabinet of Ministers Award. The choir's recording of Sergei Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil* was praised by Gramophone as the best recording of February 2013 and ranked among the 25 best albums of the year by the American radio station NPR.

The Latvian Radio Choir has performed at many of the world's most renowned concert halls: Concertgebouw and Muziekgebouw (the Netherlands), Elbphilharmonie (Germany), Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and Cité de la Musique-Philharmonie de Paris (France), Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Duke University Chapel and the Walt Disney Concert Hall (USA), Konzerthaus Berlin (Germany), the Library of Congress (USA), Queen Elizabeth Hall (UK) and the Dresden Frauenkirche (Germany).



LATVIAN RADIO CHOIR

It is also a regular performer at leading musical events, such as BBC Proms (UK), the Salzburg (Austria) and Lucerne (Switzerland) festivals, the Festival of Radio France Occitanie Montpellier (France), the Baltic Sea Festival (Sweden), Printemps des arts de Monte-Carlo (Monaco), Klangspuren Festival (Austria), the White Light Festival (USA), Klangvokal Dortmund (Germany), Musikfest Erzgebirge (Germany), OzAsia Festival (Australia) and Soundstreams (Canada).

Often serving as a creative lab, the choir encourages composers to write new music that challenges the capabilities of the human voice. During the past 20 years, the ensemble has evolved into an unprecedented form of a choir where every singer has an individual mission and provides their unique contribution to the group's unique, defining blend of timbral qualities.

The choir regularly releases new recordings with Ondine, Hyperion Records, Deutsche Grammophon, ECM, BIS and Naïve, collaborating with outstanding guest conductors like Heinz Holliger, Riccardo Muti, Riccardo Chailly, Gustavo Dudamel, Lars Ulrik Mortensen, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Peter Phillips. It has also partnered with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Ensemble Intercontemporain, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Camerata Salzburg and Concerto Copenhagen.

The Latvian Radio Choir was founded in 1940 by the legendary Latvian conductor Teodors Kalniņš, who led the ensemble until his passing in 1962. Following the artistic direction by Edgars Račevskis (1963–86) and Juris Kļaviņš (1987–92), the choir has had two conductors ever since 1992 - artistic director and principal conductor Sigvards Kļava and conductor Kaspars Putniņš.

[www.radiokoris.lv](http://www.radiokoris.lv)



**Sigvards Kļava** is one of the most outstanding Latvian conductors, also a professor of conducting and producer, music director of the Latvian Radio Choir since 1992. As a result of Sigvards Kļava's steady efforts, the Latvian Radio Choir has become an internationally recognized, vocally distinctive collective, where each singer possesses a creative individuality. Under Sigvards' guidance, the choir has recorded a number of choral works by little known or completely forgotten composers of the past, as well as formed a friendly collaboration with a number of notable Latvian composers. Sigvards Kļava is a professor at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music. Kļava is a multiple winner of the Latvian Grand Music Award. He has performed at the Concertgebouw and Muziekgebouw of Amsterdam, Berliner Konzerthaus and Philharmonie, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Berwaldhallen in Stockholm, Dresdner Frauenkirche as well as in the New York Lincoln Centre.

## PERFORMANCE NOTES ON THE SUNG TEXTS

### Five (1988)

Time brackets are given. Within these the durations of tones are free, as are their beginnings and endings, which should be "brushed" in and out rather than turned on and off.

### Hymns and Variations (1979)

The following symbols for vowels of the International Phonetic Alphabet have been used. They are here given with examples of English words.

æ	b <u>a</u> t	i:	b <u>ee</u>	ɒ	p <u>o</u> t	ʊ	t <u>oo</u> k	ʌ	c <u>u</u> t
e	p <u>a</u> y	ɪ	p <u>i</u> t	o	t <u>o</u> e	u:	b <u>oo</u> t	ə	<u>a</u> bout
a:	f <u>a</u> ther	aɪ	b <u>y</u>	ɔ	f <u>o</u> r	aʊ	<u>o</u> ut		

### Four<sup>2</sup> (1990)

Each section (sopranos, altos, tenors, basses) has its own sounds with time brackets (a period of time during which the sound may begin and a period of time during which the sound may end, the two periods overlapping. This overlap permits variation in sound duration from very short to very long.) Each section may be divided into two or more groups which spell one another so that the sound may last longer than one group or person could hold it. There is to be, however, only one beginning and one ending for each sound. If there is overlapping of voices for a single sound let it be as imperceptible as possible (do not use in the overlaps the initial consonant, g or r, or the initial vowel, e of en). The letters of the vocalise are the letters of the state name, Oregon.

### PRONUNCIATION

e = ce (French) *ce n'est pas*      o = o as in toe  
g = g as in gag but e as in ce      r = re as in repetitive (e as in ce)  
n = en as in sudden

### Four<sup>6</sup> (1992)

Choose twelve different sounds with fixed characteristics (amplitude, overtone structure, etc.). Play within the flexible time brackets given. When the time brackets are connected by a diagonal line they are relatively close together.

Publisher: Edition Peters

Recordings: V/2020 (Five); 2007 & III, 2020 (Four<sup>2</sup>), St. John's Church (Sv. Jāņa baznīca), Riga, Latvia; VII/2020 (Hymns & Variations); VI, 2020 (Four<sup>6</sup>), Sig.Ma Studio, Riga, Latvia

Executive Producers: Dace Bula and Reijo Kiilunen

Recording Engineer: Agnese Streļča

Editing: SIG.MA Studio, Riga, Latvia

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# JOHN CAGE (1912–1992)

## CHORAL WORKS

- |      |                                    |       |
|------|------------------------------------|-------|
| 1    | <b>Five</b> (1988)                 | 5:07  |
| 2–13 | <b>Hymns and Variations</b> (1979) | 23:58 |
| 14   | <b>Four<sup>2</sup></b> (1990)     | 7:09  |
| 15   | <b>Four<sup>6</sup></b> (1992)     | 30:06 |

**LATVIAN RADIO CHOIR**  
**SIGVARDS KĻAVA**, conductor

LATVIAN RADIO CHOIR



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**[66:50] • English notes enclosed**

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