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The Theory of Silence

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Abstract

It is quite possible that no piece of music has ever generated the conversation and debate as 4'33." Written in 1952, this three-movement piece, in which the performer makes no audible sounds, opened up a brand new debate over what elements constitute music. Many musicians, disgusted at the lack of sound, have dismissed Cage's landmark piece as a joke, something Cage himself was fearful of. It is assumed that a piece like 4'33" is a mindless stunt designed to bring attention to a composer while undermining the Western music tradition. Instead of advancing musical ideas, 4'33" has taken away all musical ideas—it has been stripped completely of sound. The question of whether or not 4'33" can be considered music will always be debated. However, that question should not be the focal point of the piece. Instead, the listener should focus on what Cage was trying to do. 4'33" was not an attempt to write a landmark piece on the scale of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. Instead, Cage's aim was to cause his audience to focus—not on the music flowing from the stage, but on the sounds around them.

Keywords

John Cage

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The Theory of Silence

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There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.
-- John Cage (Cage, 8)

It is quite possible that no piece of music has ever generated as much conversation and debate as *4'33"*. Written in 1952, this three-movement piece, in which the performer makes no audible sounds, opened up a brand new debate over what elements constitute music. Many musicians, disgusted at the lack of sound, have dismissed Cage's landmark piece as a joke, something Cage himself was fearful of. It is assumed that a piece like *4'33"* is a mindless stunt designed to bring attention to a composer while undermining the Western music tradition. Instead of advancing musical ideas, *4'33"* has taken away all musical ideas—it has been stripped completely of sound. The question of whether or not *4'33"* can be considered music will always be debated. However, that question should not be the focal point of the piece. Instead, the listener should focus on what Cage was trying to do. *4'33"* was not an attempt to write a landmark piece on the scale of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. Instead, Cage's aim was to cause his audience to focus—not on the music flowing from the stage, but on the sounds around them. Those who observe *4'33"* are not observing music. They are observing life.

Cage held the belief that the best art in life is life itself. As Cage developed his compositional philosophy, he tended to move away from the traditional harmonic and melodic instruments so often used in the Western tradition. Instead, Cage used everyday objects like blenders and radios, or modified instruments such as his prepared piano where he placed nuts and bolts under strings to produce different effects when the string was struck. The more music Cage wrote, the more he focused on silence and *4'33"* was a logical next step in his compositional process. Years of thought went into *4'33"*; thought that included the philosophy of such a piece and the possible outcomes that would follow the premier of a composition devoid of sound.

There were many influences in Cage's life that led him to *4'33"*. Because of the amount of people, theories, and objects that worked their ways into Cage's cognitive processes, the focus here will only be on three fields of influence: architecture, art, and Buddhism (with only a brief glance into Buddhism). First, the most interesting influence in Cage's thought process may be architecture. It wouldn't seem that a world so concrete could affect a world so intangible. While music disappears after the musician stops playing, buildings can be seen and felt even after the architect has finished his project. But for John Cage, architecture is not just about making a visually appealing building. Architecture could serve a very different purpose; a mirror. Architecture could serve as a way of reflecting the nature and beauty around it.

In his lecture entitled "Experimental Music," Cage talks about the glass buildings of Mies van der Rohe. This modern architect's buildings "reflect their environment, presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees, or grass according to the situation" (Cage, 8). They are essentially canvases on which the world around them can paint its picture. Dust, raindrops, the reflections of clouds, or even bird droppings can contribute to this ever changing piece of art. One of the features of buildings best suited for this reflection is a window. Windows are distinctly part of a building, yet have the ability to blend into the surrounding area, or incorporate a reflection as part of a building. Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy wrote, "Fenestrations [arrangements of windows] produced the inward and outward reflections of the windows. It is no longer possible to keep apart the inside and outside. The mass of the wall, at which all the 'outside' previously stopped, is now dissolved and lets the surroundings flow into the building" (Joseph, 87). One example of the surroundings flowing into a building is Cage's house in Stony Point, New York which featured an entire wall that slid open to reveal a view of the forest (Joseph, 85). Cage's house served as the picture frame for the seemingly unordered, yet beautiful wooden landscape. In his own architecture, Cage blurred the line between the inside and outside; the natural and the fabricated.

Although architecture, sculptures, and paintings seemingly have nothing to do with music, for Cage, they had everything to do with it. For Cage, the buildings and sculpture provided a frame to see through. Similarly, Moholy-Nagy wrote:

A white house with great glass windows surrounded by trees becomes almost transparent when the sun shines. The white walls act as projection screens on which shadows multiply the trees, and the glass plates become mirrors in which the trees are repeated. A perfect transparency is the result; the house becomes part of nature. (Joseph, 88).

The building as a part of nature has become the framework for the viewer to see through, something Cage was trying to accomplish with *4'33"*. Even though the building is distinctly man-made, it depicts natural life through the reflecting of the

trees. Anything reflected on the house becomes part of the house, just as any sounds occurring during a performance of *4'33"* become a part of that performance.

Other important developments in Cage's thought came from the realm of art. Richard Lippold's wire sculpture had an effect similar to the effect glass buildings had on Cage. While looking at the sculpture, the viewer will see other people and other scenery through the wire that, to Cage, become part of the sculpture. As a result, this work will look differently to the observer at different times, and probably will even change within seconds of the viewer's first glance. Similarly, Marcel Duchamp created a piece entitled *Large Glass*. This piece lacked a focal point, and as a result the viewer was free to view and interpret from any angle. Cage liked the aspect that he could focus his attention wherever he wished because it blurred the distinction between art and life. "There is nothing in it that requires me to look in one place or another or, in fact, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond" (Joseph, 92). This piece created a visual silence, where the viewer was not forced to look at a single object, but was free from the purposeful attempt to portray anything. It is not too farfetched to assume that Cage, in a similar fashion, was creating a musical framework with *4'33"* in an attempt that the viewers would be able to look into and through it to gain a perception of their surroundings.

Certainly, through the conventional and well-understood acts of placing the title of a composition on a program and arranging the audience in chairs facing a pianist, Cage was *framing* the sounds that the audience heard in an experimental attempt to make people perceive as art sounds that were not usually so perceived. (Gann, 20).

By creating an atmosphere in which the audience is prepared to listen to music, Cage is attempting to change the perceptions of what music is. As listeners take in the ambient sounds around them during *4'33"*, they are forced to either reconsider what music is, or leave disappointed. Cage expects audience members to listen to the sounds around them, and view them as the music filling the space he has created because it is impossible to hear nothing. This was demonstrated when he visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. An anechoic chamber is "insulated with acoustically absorptive material to suppress echoes and outside noises;" it is, theoretically, a silent room (Silverman, 117). When Cage stepped into the room, he heard two sounds, one high and one low. According to the designers of the room, they belonged to his nervous system and his blood circulation, respectively (Cage, 8). The fact that Cage heard sound in a soundproof room led him to affirm his assertion that there will always be sound as long as there is life. Through this experience, Cage found a way to be an architect of sound. *4'33"* created the structure on which walls of sound could be hung.

Another example in art, and probably the most profound influence on Cage, was a painting by Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's paintings, entitled *The White Paintings*, consisted of a series of rectangular canvases simply painted white. This piece was met with confusion and derision, and astounded Cage. It gave Cage the "permission" he needed to go ahead with the development of a silent piece. Rauschenberg, when talking about his white rectangles, explained that he didn't want color to serve him. The white canvases were never empty—they served as landing docks for dust and shadows. They are not simply pictures intended to produce a certain feeling in the viewer. They are, instead, mirrors of their surroundings (Revill, 164). Gann wrote, "Cage saw emptiness in which the shadow of the viewer, or of another viewer, could become part and parcel of the painting, just as unintended sounds would become part of *4'33''*" (Gann, 158). Cage wrote in his essay, "On Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work:"

Having made the empty canvases (*A canvas is never empty*), Rauschenberg became the giver of gifts. Gifts, unexpected and unnecessary, are ways of saying Yes to how it is, a holiday. The gifts he gives are not picked up in distant lands, but are things we already have. (Cage, 103).

According to Cage, Rauschenberg is not giving the viewers a new experience, but rather giving them a reminder of what they already have. The painting is not to give the viewer a new way of thinking. Instead, it brings the viewer's attention to the everyday, the things so often overlooked. Unlike a majority of people, Cage is able to see beauty in the things so often seen as ordinary because people are surrounded by them every day. The paintings are a portal of reflection through which the viewer can experience things in a new light. This was an extreme piece of art; a picture of essentially nothing in an attempt to get the viewer to see something.

When Rauschenberg's paintings were first painted, and Cage saw them in 1949, Cage was in the midst of a struggle. Cage's struggle was whether or not he should compose a silent piece. In the previous two years, he had seriously considered the possibility of a silent piece, but knew that the concept seemed inconceivable to anyone familiar with the Western music tradition. He definitely did not want *4'33''* to be seen as a joke: "I didn't wish it to appear, even to me, as something easy to do or as a joke. I wanted to mean it utterly and be able to live with it" (Revill, 164). The problem did not exist in how to write the piece, but how it would be received by audiences who came into contact with it. There would certainly be those who hate it, but there is no doubt Cage was already aware of this fact; after all, he was a composer. After seeing Rauschenberg's paintings, Cage's mind was made a little more at ease. It gave Cage the confirmation he needed to go ahead with his piece.

The influences of extra-musical forces are a very telling illustration about Cage's musical philosophy. It seems that Cage views music and life as inseparable. It is no

surprise then, that Cage considers *4'33"* his most important piece—"both in importance and practice." Cage said, "No day goes by without my making use of that piece in my life and work" (Revill, 166). He also said, "If you want to know the truth of the matter, the music that I prefer, even to my own and everything, is what we hear if we are just quiet" (Kostelanetz, 12; Revill, 28). Cage's philosophies of music are not only shaped by the world of music. He sees principles in the worlds of art and architecture that can be applied to his music, and seeks to incorporate them. Music and life are one and the same, and this is the greatest reason to appreciate John Cage. Regardless of what people think about John Cage, there can be no arguing that his art form of music permeated all of his life, and was used as a way of reflecting the seemingly common and mundane.

In 1952 Cage wrote a piece that employed long sections of silence: *Waiting*. This piece for solo piano was 3½ minutes long, beginning with 1½ minutes of silence, and ending with twenty seconds of silence (Silverman, 117). After seeing Rauschenberg's paintings, however, Cage knew he needed to write a completely silent piece, saying, "Oh yes, I must; otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging" (Cage, 118). So Cage set about creating his silent piece. Using Western musical notation, Eastern compositional techniques, and the universal language of silence, Cage began to compose *4'33"*. The Eastern influence of chance, however, took place in the form of the Western tradition of tarot cards. Cage created his own deck of tarot cards, each with durations on them, and drew cards to set the lengths of time in each movement. "It was done just like pieces of music, except there were no sounds," said Cage (Silverman, 118). When he was done shuffling and dealing his cards, Cage had a silent piece of music that consisted of three movements: 33", 2'40", and 1'20".

What Cage had now was a frame through which viewers could see an entirely new picture of music. Like Mies van der Rohe, Duchamp, Moholy-Nagy, Rauschenberg and other artists before him, Cage was introducing a new aspect to music. Perhaps though, Cage's idea was not new, only forgotten. The idea was not for listeners to hear what he had put in front of them. Rather, he wished for them to hear what was already around them. The world premiere of *4'33"*, performed by David Tudor on August 29, 1952, was performed in a concert hall whose back was open to the surrounding forest in Woodstock, New York. There could have been no better place for *4'33"* to premier, because during the silence the audience could experience a myriad of sounds emanating from the surrounding forest. Even those who, unlike Cage, believe there is absolute silence can hear sounds invading what is supposed to be silence.

To understand the point of *4'33"* even better, we need to at least peek into Cage's Buddhist background, specifically his involvement with zazen. When one participates in zazen, he sits with his legs crossed and attempts to free himself of any extraneous thoughts and ideas in his head. Kyle Gann wrote, "The zazen sitter is asked to focus on breathing, slowly in and out, and to register only the sensory impressions that are immediately present—which, if the eyes are closed, means

primarily whatever sounds may occur in the environment” (Gann, 143). Zazen is a purposeful relinquishing of anything unnecessary in order to clear the mind. By writing *4'33"*, Cage has set the stage for an entire audience, whether or not they are aware of it, to experience zazen.

The stage has been set for the audience to experience silence. Yet, when the piece begins, silence is precisely what the audience never hears. Cage said this in his “Lecture on Something”:

no silence exists that is not pregnant
with sound (Cage, 135)

As we saw with Cage’s interpretations of works such as Rauschenberg’s paintings and Duchamp’s sculptures, there is always something to see and hear; we can always experience something but we have to change our expectations in order to successfully appreciate our experience. Anybody listening to *4'33"* with the expectation of hearing a masterfully orchestrated symphony will be sorely disappointed. This is an idea Cage repeated multiple times in his “Lecture on Nothing.” Cage said this: “More and more I have the feeling that we are getting nowhere. Slowly, as the talk goes on, we are getting nowhere and that is a pleasure. It is not irritating to be where one is. It is only irritating to think one would like to be somewhere else” (Cage, 119). Enjoyment can come from *4'33"*, but first the audience has to put away all precedents about what to expect from the performance. They must first accept that the sounds they will be hearing will not be the result of strings being bowed, reeds being blown, or drums being hit. Otherwise they will simply sit in the performance wishing for notes to be played, or the performance to end, instead of experiencing all that is around them.

After the premier, even Cage’s mother thought he was off his rocker (Gann, 191). Another audience member, publisher Helen Wolff, wrote Cage a letter in an attempt to persuade him to retire the piece in the interest of his reputation. His response contained this anecdote, “What we hear is determined by our own emptiness, our own receptivity; we receive to the extent we are empty to do so. If one is full, or in the course of its performance becomes full of an idea, for example, that this piece is [quoting her letter] a trick for shock and bewilderment then it is just that” (Gann, 191). *4'33"* will meet anybody’s expectations. David Tudor, who premiered the piece, said it was “one of the most intense listening experiences you can have. You really listen. You’re hearing everything there is” (Silverman, 118). Tudor knew exactly what to expect during his performance of *4'33"*, and he used that expectation to shape how he viewed the piece. For Cage, *4'33"* is about listening—not simply hearing. It is not enough to know that noise occurs; listeners need to be familiar with the sounds around them in order to appreciate the world around them. In Cage’s view, a note struck on a piano and the cricket’s chirp are equal. “Music is continuous; it is only we who turn away” (Silverman, 119).

There has been a lot of research on the life of John Cage and how it affected his musical compositions. Many researchers recognize *4'33"* as his most important and influential piece. In his 1996 book, *John Cage (ex)plain(ed)*, Richard Kostelanetz explores the life of John Cage. During Cage's career, he was one of the leading defenders of Cage's work. This book chronicles the professional career of Cage and traces how his music developed. Kostelanetz works to shed light on the techniques and philosophies that led Cage to write his music, including *4'33"*. The implications of Cage's work extend to the entire music world, and ultimately the rest of the fine arts.

Another work focusing on Cagean ideas of sound was written by Douglas Kahn and published in *Music Quarterly* in 1997. This article, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," delves into Cage's view of sound and music. Kahn argues that Cage's ideas regarding sound make him the most influential composer of the post-World War II era. The ideas Cage developed regarding sound manifested themselves in his compositions, most famously *4'33"*.

Another article from 1997, "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence," also deals with the subject of John Cage's view of silence. This article not only looks at Cagean aesthetics, but looks at how they transfer to other artistic areas, such as architecture. Cage relates his understanding of silence to the properties found in glass. He equates his music to the glass houses of Mies van der Rohe because they reflect what is around them. The author, Brandon Joseph, says that Cage's definition of silence is not the absence of sound, but rather silence is defined by ambient and unintentional noises. There is no such thing as an empty space.

In 2002, Cambridge University Press published *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*. In it, a variety of authors present their findings on John Cage, from his aesthetic views, to his words of sounds, words and images, to his influence and interaction with other composers. The authors in this book have worked together, not to present a complete biography, but to celebrate the work of Cage and seek to better understand his musical ideals. Compiled in three parts, the first part covers the influence of American, European and Asian music on Cage's compositional theories and processes. The second group of articles explores Cage's use of sounds, words and images. Some of them also explore his music's connection to visual arts. The last section is a compilation of essays that deal with Cage's professional interactions and influences.

Yet another source regarding *4'33"* and silent music was written by Andrew Kania in the *Journal of Aesthetic & Art Criticism* in 2010. "Silence" considers musical works that consist entirely of silence, with Cage's composition being the foremost example. In addition, Kania discusses the importance of silence in other compositional works, specifically the opening motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Cage's background and philosophies are important to discovering the meaning of a composition such as *4'33"*, so the most helpful source in discovering the meaning of a piece of music in which not a single note is played is Kyle Gann's book *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"*. Published in 2010, this book explores what is Cage's most well-known, important and misunderstood works. Through an analysis of Cage's life, Gann works to show that *4'33"* is not simply a mindless creation by Cage, but that it is a piece of art necessary to the history of music. In order to understand *4'33"*, what first needs to be understood is Cage's background and what led him to the composition of this piece. Gann notes Cage's use of silence in all of his compositions. Silence is as important in Cage's music as the actual notes are. While most are quick to dismiss *4'33"* as a joke, Gann shows that the piece is actually an artistic expression, and carefully planned by Cage.

Regardless of the researcher, it seems that anyone who has insight into Cage's life can help listeners to better make sense of *4'33"*. Despite the apparent lack of thought it contains, *4'33"* still stands as a musical milestone—it was not merely a chance piece of music. There was a significant amount of thought put into the piece, and through it Cage speaks volumes. Years of Cage's musical wanderings led to the moment when a performer would sit on stage silently and motionless. But, what you are hearing is not the absence of sound. Instead you hear more than you ever thought you would. It is not enough to simply debate the musical aspects of it, and whether or not it actually should be labeled as music—that is an endless debate. What musicians and audiences need to understand is the purpose for writing this kind of piece. *4'33"* is not an exercise in musical virtuosity. Instead, it serves as an exercise in life. The influences for this piece came from experiences very common to Cage. His experiences in mediums such as art, coupled with his Buddhist background paved the way for him to write *4'33"*. He saw man-made frames such as paintings, glass buildings, and sculptures reflecting and magnifying the natural physical world around them. Based on these experiences, he knew that his composition could reflect the natural world as well. It wasn't a thoughtless publicity stunt; Cage put an immense amount of thought and effort into this piece. It should not be dismissed for what can be considered musical shortcomings. Instead, *4'33"* should be embraced as an opportunity to experience the everyday in a way that is extraordinary.

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