

- BOOKS & ARTS
- MASTERPIECE

The Sounds of Silence

John Cage's '4' 33''' was no compositional prank, but a deep exploration of the very nature of music and the beautiful chaos of life



ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTOPHER SERRA

Stuart Isacoff
Nov. 5, 2021 4:07 pm ET

On Aug. 29, 1952, in an open-air converted barn in Woodstock, N.Y., pianist David Tudor, known for his interpretations of contemporary music, gave the premiere of a work by John Cage (1912-1992) remarkably different from anything else in the classical repertoire. Tudor had been familiar with the full range of the avant-garde, from the spacious pointillism of Morton Feldman's "Extensions 3" to the thorny complexity of Pierre Boulez's First Piano Sonata, both of which were also on the program.

For the Cage piece, however, the pianist curiously sat motionless at the keyboard, holding a stopwatch. The composer had indicated three separate movements with specific timings. Keeping an eye on the timepiece, Tudor announced the beginning of

each section by closing the keyboard lid, then paused for the required duration before signaling its end by opening the lid again. All the rest was stillness; throughout the performance he didn't make a sound.

But Cage's "4'33'" is actually not about silence at all. Though most members of the audience were focused on the absence of music, there were also ambient vibrations they ignored: wind stirring outside, raindrops pattering on the tin roof—and, toward the end of the performance, the listeners themselves making "all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out. Music is continuous," the composer explained. "It is only we who turn away."

It was a dramatic departure from concert norms, and not everyone understood. Composer Christian Wolff's mother was so embarrassed at having invited friends to the performance, she complained to Cage that it was merely "a schoolboy's prank, and can give pleasure only to an immature portion of yourself." She reported that she had consulted the "I Ching" about the piece—the Chinese "Book of Changes," traditionally employed with chance operations for the purpose of divination, which had become for Cage a compositional tool—and said that it gave her the hexagram for "Youthful Folly." To many in the audience, it must have seemed a put-on—a reaction in keeping with similarly skeptical judgments toward mavericks like Stravinsky, Picasso and Matisse. For Cage, the effort was not a joke, but an important step along his aesthetic evolution.

Traditionally, music derives its potency from a sense of tonal stability and cogent organization. Even under the most ideal conditions, though, chaos threatens at every moment: Human touch wavers, rhythms falter, vibrating strings behave inconsistently through material impurities; sometimes they even snap. What is noise, except discontinuity (what Cage fondly celebrated as indeterminacy), reflecting life's pervasive disorderliness?

Yet in some quarters the messy, chaotic sounds of everyday life are regularly reshaped into artful experience. As writer Kofi Agawu has noted, in Africa whole

symphonies emerge from commonplace sounds—of chopping, grinding and pounding food, for example, or the fetching of water.

Cage expanded this sensibility to include an array of disparate sounds. He was spurred in this pursuit by multiple inspirations—Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo’s “The Art of Noises,” for example, which he set about to translate, and Eastern spiritual practices, especially Zen, which aimed at transcending the entanglements of the human ego. Thus, his interest in the “I Ching,” a way to eliminate personal choice in the compositional process.

He also explored the absence of sound. As a WPA recreation leader during the New Deal, entertaining the children of visitors at a San Francisco hospital, Cage’s job was to prevent them from making any noise, in order to avoid disturbing patients. The experience, he believed, led to some of his most radical conceptions.

Silence took on even greater dimensions for Cage in 1950, when he visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard University, a room specially insulated to suppress any external noise. Despite the audible blockades, he still heard two sounds, a high one caused by his nervous system and a low one resulting from his blood in circulation. So, Cage concluded, there really is no absolute silence. Nevertheless, upon seeing the all-white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg he felt an instant compatibility: These paintings expressed, he said, “the plastic fullness of nothing.”

Cage’s music drifted as far as possible from the ideals of his onetime teacher, Austrian-American Arnold Schoenberg. Although he had idolized Schoenberg, the composer informed Cage that he simply had no feeling for harmony. So Cage ultimately embarked on a course of composition for which the rules of harmony were simply irrelevant—and thereby created a surprisingly rich and lasting legacy.

—*Mr. Isacoff’s book “Musical Revolutions” will be published by Knopf in June 2022.*

Appeared in the November 6, 2021, print edition as ‘The Sounds Of Silence.’