Performing musical silence: markers, gestures, and embodiments

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Chapter 4. Case Study: Audible Markers for Silences (John Cage's *4'33"*)

In this chapter, I will compare performances of John Cage's *4'33"* found online, ranging from a professional film by Cage specialist David Tudor to quirky experiments by amateurs. I will present alternative ways of marking silence; new attitudes for silence; confluences of time, listening, and silence; and contemporary relationships between performer and audience. My observations have also affected my performance practice, as illustrated by checklists I created several decades ago, and a newly updated list that might encourage the openness Cage championed but also afford new interpretations he would never have imagined.

4'33" is not silent (see Chapter 1); neither does it consist of silence. Cage often said it was about listening but also about what he called "interpenetrability," the way art and real life intertwine (Cage, 1961, p. 102). So, this composition is less about silence than about listening to the sounds that are already there. Yet, it is a compelling example for exploring silence because of the challenge it seems to represent for many younger musicians and the overlaps it affords between the Western Classical tradition and popular modes of performing.

Just as Cage was influenced by diverse and non-musical sources from Zen to Thoreau (Gann, 2011; Silverman, 2010), so did his creation of *4'33"* have effects far beyond the world of classical music. It gained instant status as a seminal artwork of the 20th century, an iconic masterpiece of conceptual art (Adolphs & Berg, 2021; Gann, 2013). But *4'33"* eventually also came to be seen as a work of kitsch, a faulty paradox, and a symbolic failure of the avant-garde (Kahn, 2015, pp. 165–166). Indeed,

Relevant terminology employed in this chapter

Silence is perceived stillness or quietness. There is no true silence, so in this context, silence means relative or sensed silence.

Framing can be created by the (audience) silence surrounding the work; conversely, sounds can frame silences. The edges of the frame may be indicated by markers.

Non-playing refers to the intentional absence of sound production by the performer.

Markers are signals used to *impose* silence, *summon* silence, or *describe* the perception of silence. Markers can also include audience rituals, architectural elements, temporality, and sensory cues that influence our experience of silence.
Markers are not exclusive to silence, they can also signal sounds, traditions, behaviors, actions.

Embodiment is the overall collection of active performer movements, gestures, postures, and facial expressions, as well as performer choices such as hairstyle and costume.

Gesture is the movement and alignment of arms and legs, fingers and toes, torso, head, and facial expression, in relation to the instrument.

Kahn argued that Cage achieved an almost deliberate silencing of the performer and the audience.

Yet in the past decade, the work has gained new life: teenagers, pranksters, heavy-metal bands, architects, and queer activists have embraced it on social media, each finding their group or cultural meaning. And worldwide lockdowns brought a new wave of video interpretations, a rich source in my research. Some aspects of these videos are distinctly classical, employing framing and conventional instruments; other elements are uniquely contemporary. By looking critically at the videos, I discovered a multiplicity of gestures for performative silence. To create the experience of silence on YouTube, performers often embody that silence in novel attitudes.

Some of the videos deliberately engage with the interpenetrability of the artwork and the "real life" happening around the performers. Others focus more on performativity, on the persona of the performer, or on a connection with the unseen viewer. Listening, temporality, gesture, silence, and "real life" are foregrounded in different ways in each example. Some of the performers turn their attention to listening, and others encourage the audience to listen. Some ignore listening and turn their attention instead towards stillness, quiet, duration, time, or the tension between noise and silence, framed and unframed, classical and rock, controlled and uncontrolled.

Even though *4'33"* is often considered a work of absence art, not every example involves absence. Walsh writes: "Generally speaking, absence can be registered only when the expectation of something is thwarted or deferred" (Walsh, 1992, p. 80). I find that the most successful examples I will reflect upon below generate a strong expectation (via markers for tradition, loudness or extremes of some sort) and then an equally strong thwarting or deferment (created by non-doing, non-playing, being-silent, attentiveness, or boredom).

In Chapter 2, I made a clear distinction between the experience of the performer and the listener. In this fourth chapter, three main viewpoints are present: my personal perspective as a performer (e.g. an evolving "checklist"), a listening perspective (e.g. waveform analyses), and my perspective as an observer of the YouTube videos. My analysis will mostly neglect audience reactions, except insofar as they obviously influence the performance (talking, noise, laughter, interruptions).[29]

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[29] For discussions of audience reactions to Cage's work, see my paper "The Audience Grows Restless," as well as work by several colleagues at the Université de Lorraine who discuss audience roles in performances of *4'33"* (Livingston *et al.*, 2025). I have also experimented artistically with online audience reactions by making a video essay that overlays YouTube audience commentary onto a performance of *4'33"*.

4.1 The Checklist

In the 1990s, I performed throughout Europe as a concert pianist. A staple of my programs was *4'33"*. But I found it disturbing that so often it seemed to go "wrong." For example, during a performance in Paris in 1995, I played *Images* of Debussy, and then, in a spirit of contrast, Cage's *4'33"*. Someone in the front row began laughing after a few minutes and started to make loud comments to his neighbors in the audience. As I sat there, grimly tracking the stopwatch, my body frozen in place, I became more and more angry at his interference. But I felt that the duration was sacred, and to end the piece early—or worse, to scold him in front of the audience—was out of the question. So I stayed frozen for those endless last few seconds and finally switched off the stopwatch at 4:33. As I did so, I leapt from the bench and rushed at the man as if I were about to jump off the stage. To my gratification, he looked terrified and was quiet for the remainder of the performance. But I felt terrible; I had done something that went against Cage's non-violent philosophy. I did not want to punish the audience for their behavior.

After much reflection and spurred on by this incident, I came up with a checklist for "authentic" performances of *4'33"*.[30]

A Performance Checklist (1997)

- How to begin the piece:
    1. wait for silence from the audience before starting
    2. make sure the stopwatch makes a sound audible to the audience
- How should I mark the movements? (choose one)
    1. By turning pages?
    2. By changing instruments?
    3. By putting the instrument down?
    4. By breathing, sighing, wiping brow?
    5. By closing or opening the instrument/case?
- Do not react to interruptions (ringing phones, photographers, catcalls, booing, laughter, a seagull in the theatre). No eye contact.
- The performer is invisible:
    1. do not make any sounds during the performance
    2. hold your instrument as if performing
    3. No Actions: DO NOT pretend to play (strumming strings, moving fingers above the keys, conducting…)
    4. do not move
- HOLD the audience's attention! They must not wander off!
- Never smile, no silliness—this is not a joke.

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[30] I have lost the original, but this copy reflects my concerns at the time.

To give a visual and sonic idea of my approach at the time, here is a video by Daniil Trifonov, recorded at the Verbier Festival. His performance represents exactly what I was trying to achieve at the time I wrote this checklist in the late 1990's.

► PERFORMANCE VIDEO: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2917624#tool-2935491

Figure 58: Trifonov performing *4'33"* (Verbier Festival, 2019)

Trifonov's approach is a perfect example of "shin," the expressive Japanese word for an awkward silence that fills a space. In this case, the awkwardness arises between him and the audience. His artistic position seems to be imposition, not attentiveness. The uncomfortable silence that he creates is heavily reinforced by the behavioral constraints of a classical music environment. The audience complies with the ritual and sits in mournful silence throughout the performance.

Trifonov's embodied markers of intense concentration, frozen attitude, and facial tension are all familiar to me and exemplify the problematics of my own approach at the time. Looking back at my checklist, as exemplified by Trifonov's performance, I am struck by how dogmatic it seems and by my clear wish for a "professional" performer to "lead" the audience. This list implies a conducting role for the performer and a subservient role for the receiver. So when I first read Kahn's *History of Voice, Sound, and Aurality in the Arts* many years later, I immediately recognized his claim that Cage was silencing others:

> It should be noted that each performance was held in a concert setting where any muttering or clearing one's throat, let alone heckling, was a breach of decorum. Thus, there was already in place in these settings, as in other settings for Western art music, a culturally specific mandate to be silent, a mandate

> regulating the behavior that precedes, accompanies, and exceeds musical performance. (Kahn, 2015, p. 165)

As a young concert pianist, I considered that mandate of decorum to be the audience's duty; I took it for granted. Audience decorum also meant (though I didn't realize it) audience docility.

Kahn is also concerned about Cage's imposition on the performer:

> *4'33"*, by tacitly instructing the performer to remain quiet in all respects, muted the site of centralized and privileged utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken, transposed the performance onto the audience members both in their utterances and in the acts of shifting perception toward other sounds, and legitimated bad behavior. (Kahn, 2015, p. 166)

In my opinion, however, Kahn has not examined whether silencing a performer ("don't play") is different than asking a performer to activate something ("do embody non-playing"). Going back to my performance approach in the 1990s, I did not see myself as silenced or the audience as silenced, even though it is abundantly clear that my checklist was seeking (quite un-tacitly) to mute both myself and the audience. I was elevating *4'33"* to an iconic status, trying to protect it from the outside world at all costs. I did not yet see a connection between Cage's (mild) destabilization of the normative concert hall performative situation and the audience's frequent transgressions. As I would discover, bad behavior was still legitimized and—here I agree with Kahn—almost encouraged.

Another point my younger self seems to have missed was the question of interruption. And even though I was familiar with this anecdote, I think I missed the point until recently. Cage wrote in his collection *A Year from Monday*:

> One day when the windows were open, Christian Wolff played one of his pieces at the piano. Sounds of traffic, boat horns, were heard not only during the silences in the music, but, being louder, were more easily heard than the piano sounds themselves. Afterward, someone asked Christian Wolff to play the piece again with the windows closed. Christian Wolff said he'd be glad to, but that it wasn't really necessary, since the sounds of the environment were in no sense an interruption of those of the music. (Cage, 2012, p. 133)

If I were to apply this rule to *4'33",* then all kinds of interruptions might happen and be included in the sound of the piece (or *be* the sound of the piece). Wolff and Cage are both making the point that there are no interruptions, that the audibility of "real life" is the point, and that the piece does not need to be "protected" from interruption.

For years, I had strived to protect Cage's legacy from misinterpretation, amateurism, and ridicule, aiming for absolute fidelity to the score and maintaining a stark separation between performer and audience, an adherence to classical norms. Yet I was not uninformed. My checklist was an attempt to preserve the approach I had learned from Cage himself. My desire to respect the composer's intentions at all costs is similar to what aesthetic theorist Lydia Goehr describes in relation to Stravinsky's ideal performer:

> For Stravinsky it was a 'moral responsibility' that the best performance be one that most successfully negates its own presence. The demand here is for performance *transparency*: performances should be like windows through which audiences directly perceive works. (Goehr, 1996, p. 6)

Stravinsky was reacting against the excesses of 19th-century romanticism and the cult of the soloist performer whose artistic freedom superseded the composer's choices. Cage shared this same distaste for performers who tried to make the performance about themselves. He attempted to be personally self-effacing onstage: why should others not eradicate their persona as well? But my attempt to efface my persona via the checklist often failed. I was opening the wrong window onto *4'33"*. Frustrated by what I considered the failure of the composition, I stopped performing it. A new approach was needed, and that would come much later as part of this research project.

4.2 Learning From the Waveforms

In 2020, in collaboration with Szymon Hernik, a student in design at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, I undertook an interdisciplinary project examining performative interpretations of *4'33"*. We aimed to uncover hidden commonalities for embodied silence by visualizing interpretations found on YouTube. Unexpectedly, we found vast discrepancies in both duration and sound levels among the performances. The diversity of interpretations surprised us. We searched for commonalities without at first finding any, until we looked at the audio waveforms. As we compared waveform amplitudes across videos, we discovered significant similarities in their structural patterns despite the diverse interpretations. By picturing the silences, the ritualistic natures of preparation and postlude emerged, bookending the performed silences. Our analysis reinforced the importance of considering *4'33"* performances in terms of their audible markers.

However, there are limitations to this visual representation of each performance by concentrating on waveforms: while viewing these waveforms offers a global perspective, it risks distorting artistic intentions and ignoring the eloquence of silence. The act of viewing waveforms within the confines of audio software and a numbered timeline imposes its own

framing. Reducing complex performances to two-dimensional waveforms could potentially also lead to a false sense of equivalency. We tried to be cautious in our analyses in order to not lose sight of the actual performances.

Figure 59: Preparations and postludes ("bookends") are starkly visible in fourteen randomly chosen YouTube versions of *4'33"* (Livingston & Hernik, 2020).

The majority of YouTube videos featuring performances of *4'33"* exhibit a consistent framing approach, characterized by a (preparatory) prelude and a (concluding) postlude, despite the unnecessary and un-notated nature of these bookends, which were certainly not specified by the composer. This framing has become ingrained in the performance practice of the piece. Our analysis initially had focused solely on *4'33"* itself, but we quickly switched our attention to the significance of the transitional elements before and after the notated "silence."

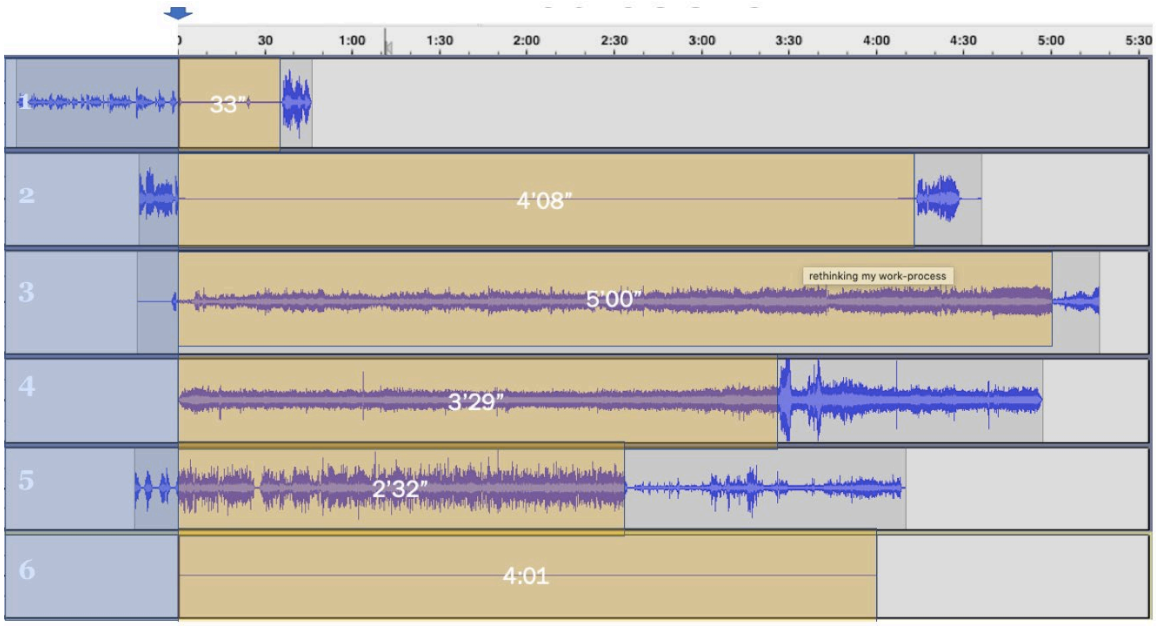


Figure 60: In these six randomly chosen videos of *4'33"*, and despite variations in length, there are similarities in framing and structure. Although it may be unclear when watching exactly when the "music" starts and begins, looking at the waveforms gives clarity. By shading the "music" area, the bookends preceding and following the silence are made clearer.

After examining eighty videos of Cage's composition, I observed that only a few were four minutes and thirty-three seconds long; durations did not seem important. As far as the framing was concerned, some musicians opted to silence the video in post-production—very clearly visible as flat horizontal lines (waveforms 2 and 6 above). Most included all the background noise or created their own noise with shuffling, caressing of instruments, feedback, natural sounds, or fidgeting. In a few cases, the "silence" was louder than the audio before and after the performance (waveform 5, for example). This is not unique to the internet; it could also happen in live performance.

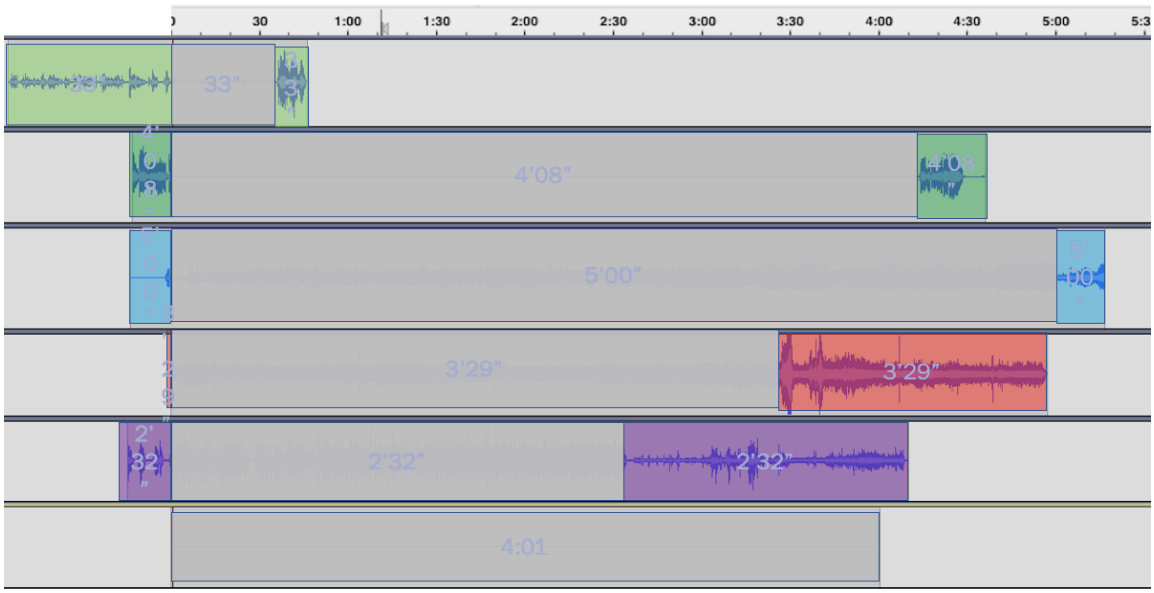


Figure 61: The pre- and post-performance segments resemble book-ends. Mostly they are louder (larger waveforms) than the "music" of *4'33"*. Occasionally they are quieter (example 3) or non-existent (the bottom example contains no bookends).

In most of these videos, *4'33"* is bookended by a prelude and a postlude that is louder or, in a few cases, softer than the performance that follows or precedes: left-frame and right-frame. This is reminiscent of Cone and Littlefield's point that (classical) music is framed by a silence in the beginning and at the end. It also corresponds with Jankélévitch's ideas about the anticipation of *avant-silence* and the remembrance of *après-silence* (Jankélévitch, 1961). Jankélévitch spoke of the *avant-silence* as a silence preceding the start of a piece (think of the expectant pause before a Mozart second movement). *Après-silence* is the silence after an emotional event (e.g., the hush after a mass in church). These two kinds of silence are *exterior* to the notated composition but not to the experience. Most of the YouTubers deliberately include footage before and after *4'33"*. Is this a deliberate search for context or framing? The *pre-* and *post-* filmed elements shape the silence between them.

As Littlefield suggests (see Chapter 2), frames are necessary to mark the transition from the "real world" to the "musical world," and these frames are often silent, that is, consisting of all the "non-musical sounds" that are always already present. However, Littlefield also acknowledges that frames are often porous; it is not always clear which silences belong to the "real world" and which belong to the "musical world." Regarding *4'33",* it seems that this musical world is, in fact, the real world. What is generally excluded (all the already existing environmental sounds) is included in the inside, thus becoming a part of it. Therefore, it is to be expected that it is difficult to determine what belongs to the inside and what to the outside in performances of *4'33"*. However, even if Cage somehow deconstructs the opposition between silence, "non-musical sounds" and music, in most of

the YouTube performances (even the home videos without a live audience), the framing remains clearly visible and audible: the *avant-silence* often comprises gestures and random sounds of the performers setting up their instruments, tuning, etc. And the *après-silence* is mostly louder than the silence of the composition which precedes it. These framings create a context, a setting apart, a hierarchy of music vs. non-music, or performing vs. non-performing. There is even another kind of interior framing since most performers mark the start and end of each of the three movements. This stems from traditional performance practice around the work and entails two pauses of "not": non-playing between the movements. Thus, a nested recursive system of marked noise within silence may be created through the insertion of spacing between movements. YouTube performers of *4'33"* show originality in their search for new markers of silence, but still need to frame their performance.

4.3 Attitudes of Silence in John Cage's *4'33"*

In Chapter 2, I presented three potential types of markers in terms of what they do: imposing, summoning, or describing silence. There seems to be a close connection between the experience of time and these three functions:

- A marker that **imposes** silence can represent discreet **points** in time in the form of signals (turning the glass, overtly shouting "*Ruhe*," or more implicit cultural codes);
- A marker that **summons** silence is often more **continuously** present, as in aspects of ambiance, architecture, nature sounds, or immobility;
- A marker that **describes** silence can arise from markers that are **changing** over time, such as gestures, movements, sounds, or facial expressions that shape the experience of silence.

However, these correspondences are not one-to-one and should not be seen as prescriptive. They can describe many situations. In the performance of silences, multiple markers are usually present and acting at any given time, confusing the temporalities involved. This section concentrates on the audible (and visible) markers for silence within the YouTube setting. I have selected seven examples, aiming to exemplify eloquent silences within performances of *4'33"*. The performers are chosen for the variety of silences they embody: David Tudor, William Marx, John Cage himself, J Kim, Sis Leyin, Lito Levenbach, and the band Dead Territory. These online examples are then followed by two personal experiences from my own practice: one from a national broadcast in Russia and the other from workshops I led at a hospital in Paris.

Example 1: David Tudor (solo piano)

MARKERS: visible markers: page-turns, darkness, concentrated attitude, waiting posture; audible markers: clock ticking, camera clicking

► TUDOR PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936135

Video 1: David Tudor (YouTube, 2015)

I was eager to observe David Tudor performing because he gave the first performance and is closely associated with Cage and the piece. Tudor's style is sober, restrained, and self-effacing. There is no audience sound at all.

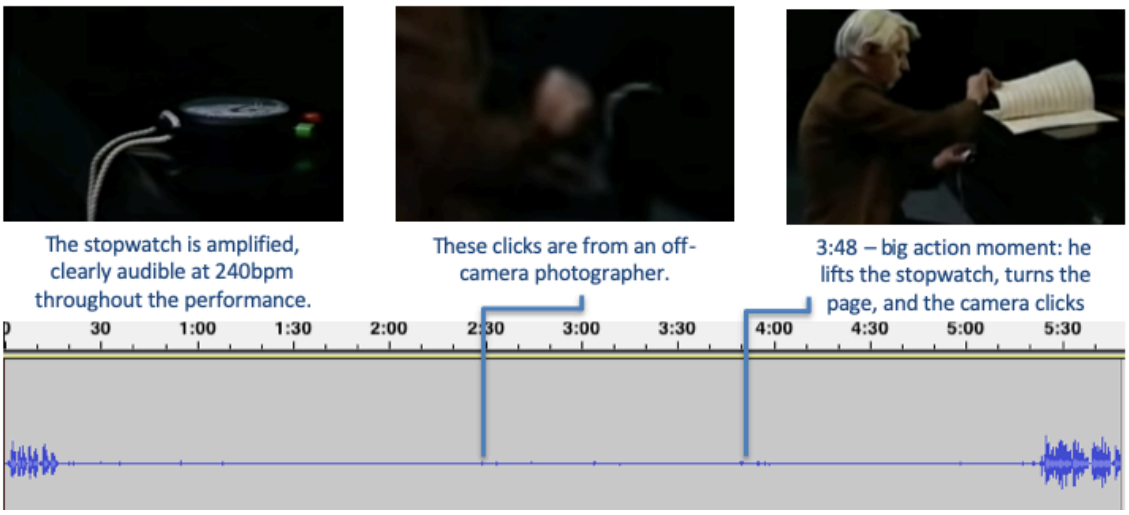
What is remarkable is that there are two very strong and unexpected markers in this performance: a highly audible stopwatch and highly visible page turns. The frantic ticking of the stopwatch is both mesmerizing and distracting—emphasizing duration and creating speed and rhythm where it is not called for. The ticking leaves less room for silence or listening. Maybe this sound was only audible to the performer and the camera and would not have been audible to an audience. Like Dramm's composition *Ruby* for piano and metronome, it raises the issue of what the performer hears in contrast to what the audience hears.[31]

[31] In Dramm's *Ruby*, the ticking metronome marks out silence but also evokes the practice room, the sounds associated with preparation. And that is partly Tudor's case as well, though the effect for me is more one of counting out time.

Tudor's use of page turns at apparently random moments surprises me.[32] Non-playing page-turning might be a *tacet* maneuver. Or the page turns might be markers for time. Or they could be markers to indicate that performing is still going on. But page turns are not indicated in Cage's score. For that matter, most versions of the score are only one page long. The numerical and durational precision of the title–*4'33"*–might well suggest that it is (also) about time. In an interview, Cage said, referencing Erik Satie:

> Of the four characteristics of the material of music, duration, that is time length, is the most fundamental. Silence cannot be heard in terms of pitch or harmony: it is heard in terms of time length. (Kostelanetz & Cage, 2003, p. 81)

Cage's suggestion that silence is heard in terms of duration contrasts with Antheil's idea for the silences of *Ballet mécanique*: "Here I had time moving without touching it" (Antheil, in Whitesitt, 1989, p. 105). Tudor is figuratively and literally touching time (the page-turning is a tangible gesture with his fingers). Confirming Barthes' theory about captions giving silence meaning, Tudor has achieved a depiction of "silence as time" via page-turning.



Tudor's style and demeanor defined the world premiere. He set the tone for an accepted performance practice of *4'33"*, which continues to this day: The pianist is central, and there is no reference here to "real life," which seems entirely excluded from the film. The pianist projects an attitude of authoritative stillness emphasized by the darkness around him. And

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[32] The use of pages is somewhat inexplicable, for there is only one page in the original score, and pages seem irrelevant. It is true that Cage made five different versions of the piece, some as a musical or proportional score, and some as text instructions. The score that Tudor used in 1952 is now lost (Gann, 2013, p. 178).

yet this recording has what could be considered as major audible and visible distractions: a clock ticking and enigmatic page turns. Tudor's interpretation seems neither about silence nor about listening. The ticking clock and the punctual sequentiality of the page turns could summon but also impose silence, yet they are most understandable as markers for chronicling time.

Example 2: William Marx (solo piano)

MARKERS: contextual markers: tradition, positioning at the instrument; visible markers: Steinway & Sons logo, hairstyle, tuxedo, stopwatch (also a marker for time); audible markers: stopwatch click, continuous hum from the recording apparatus, incidental noise from the audience

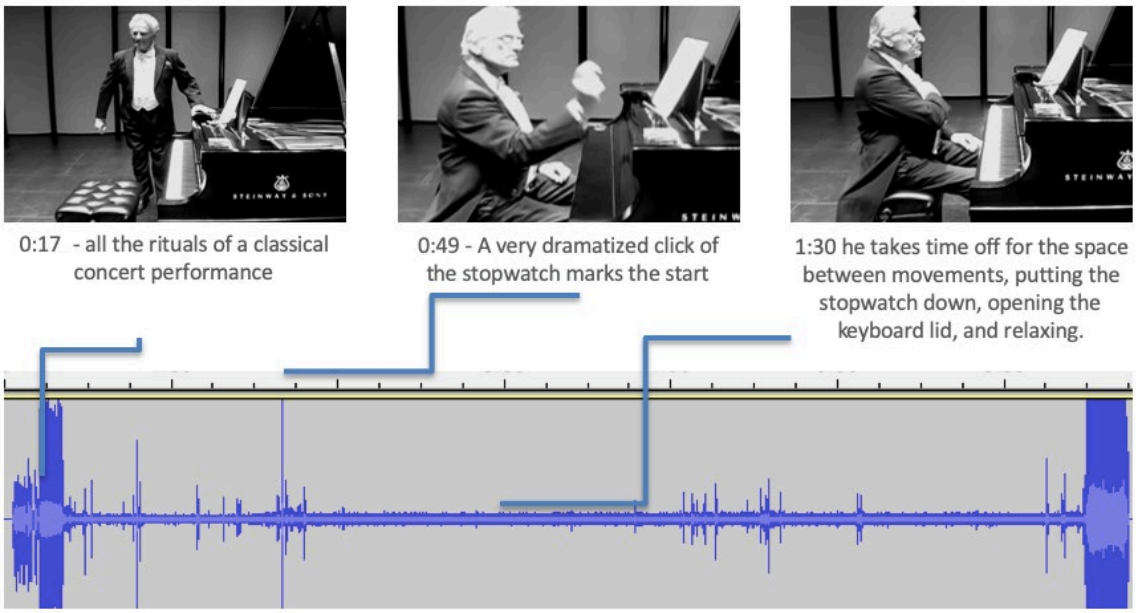
► MARX PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936144

Video 2: William Marx at McCallum Theatre, Palm Desert, CA, USA (YouTube, 2015)

With over 7 million views on YouTube, this video is astoundingly popular. Marx embodies a traditional classical authority with his nimbus of white hair and his impeccable tuxedo, which he wields as markers for silence. Yet the film is also funny. I think the secret of his success lies in a Dadaist absurdity; he takes the piece to its classical extremes (Steinway grand piano, tuxedo, Roman profile, black and white filming). His performing body is held with brio, with majesty. Marx is unquestionably playing to the crowd, enacting "exceptionality" for the audience. His performance is both pedagogical ("this is what the piece is about") and entertaining ("enjoy it").

He holds the stopwatch up in his hand while he performs, sending a strong signal to the audience to pay attention. He shows the watch clearly, in a palpable expression of time's passing and his control over it. But there is a major difference to Tudor's stopwatch: Marx's stopwatch is silent, it is more visible than audible. He is using the object as a marker to *impose* silence. Despite its gentle irony, this type of performance may be exactly that which aggravates Kahn, for silence is imposed by employing all the cultural markers of classical

music. Kahn rebels against the "site of centralized and privileged utterance," which in this case is very clearly marked by a tuxedo-clad, white-haired Aquiline-profiled classical pianist. Marx embodies centralized privilege. His strong embodiments and charismatic gestures are quite the opposite of Cage's self-effacing demeanor (see below). However, Marx exposes the implicit codes of imposing silence so theatrically that they can hardly be taken seriously anymore. The markers lose their summoning power and become descriptions of a silence vocabulary that can even evoke laughter, which is definitely part of the appeal of this performance.



Example 3: John Cage (solo lecture)

MARKERS: visible markers: table, empty glass (also a symbolic marker), motionless posture, piece of paper, stopwatch; audible: slow breathing

► CAGE PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936155

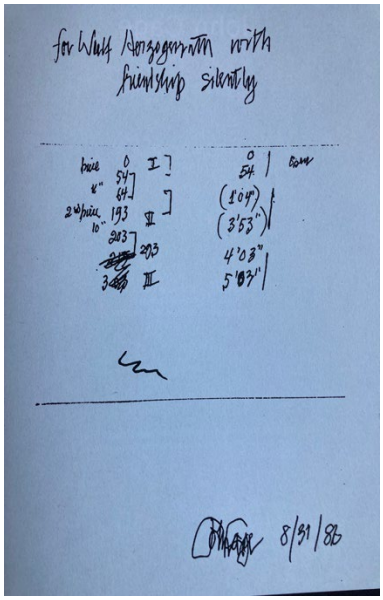
Video 3: John Cage (Kölnischer Kunstverein, August 31, 1986)

This video is one of the rare performances on film of *4'33"* by the composer himself. The performance is not a smooth one. Cage re-starts the piece after someone yells, "*Ruhe*!" and there is a noticeable crescendo of the audience talking. Cage barely conceals his annoyance with the situation, and towards the end, he loses track of the timing. The violence of the text behind him may or may not have escaped his notice, but the audience's inattention must have given him the impression that he was not being taken seriously. Probably, he hopes to *summon* silence, but his markers (embodied stillness and an empty glass) do not succeed. Cage is performing for himself but hopes that the audience will come to a knowledge of listening, silence, or attention. Audience inattention (or possibly "real life"?) seems to have intruded hopelessly into the performance.

The shouting of "*Ruhe*!" is an instructional audio marker that tries to impose silence (and fails). It is a signal which points in time. It is hard to tell if Cage is more annoyed by the shout, which goes strongly against his ideas about *4'33",* or annoyed by the audience noise, which obviously and audibly marks their inattention. He is trying to connect the movements and the passing time of the artwork via his body, his downcast eyes, and his hands resting flat, in repose, on the table. The work seems a connective *knot* to him and a background *not* to the audience.

Cage uses the turning of the glass to mark the space between movements. His score (see the list of timings below) indicates that the pauses between the movements total 10 seconds each. After the first movement, he does indeed take 10 seconds, including the gestures of turning the glass down and then up. After the second movement, he pauses for

9 seconds, then loses track of the timing. His score suggests that the pauses between the movements are not part of the piece. But that may be a moot point, as they have become part of the work through performance practice and tradition. Except for Sis Leyin, all the performers in this study indicate three movements.



This is the page Cage has in front of him, a hand-written score dedicated to Wulf Herzogenrath, written on August 31, 1986, the day of the performance.)

Timeline on video
0:20 Cage starts stopwatch
0:24 Someone yells out, Cage resets watch
0:38 starts over (glass up) Mvt. I
(exactly 0'54" long)
1:32 pause (glass down)
1:42 Mvt. II (glass up)
(exactly with score@1'04")
3:51 pause (glass down)
4:00 Mvt. III (glass up)
(no longer in sync with score)
5:30 end (glass down)
(he ends 11 seconds too early)
5:34 turns stopwatch off
5:36 smiles to audience

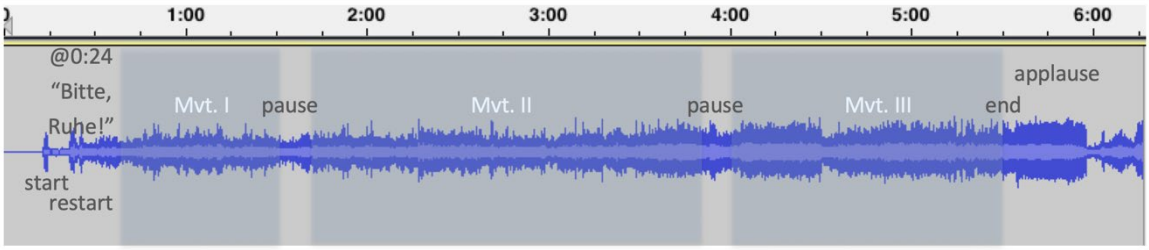
Note that during each pause, the audience quiets down slightly, providing a messy example of "noisy" silences that could be interpreted as inter-movement framing silences.

Marking a pause between movements, he turns the glass over very deliberately.

Just before it begins, someone yells out "RUHE!" (silence) which seems to annoy Cage. He resets the stopwatch and starts over. He indicates the movements by turning over a glass.[33] Interestingly, the waveform suggests a *crescendo*. The audience becomes increasingly restless.

Marker: Glass up is performing; glass down is pausing. The marker here is an object.

The event was filmed by Klaus vom Bruch at the Kölnischer Kunstverein. The painting is Schimpftuch by Sigmar Polke.



The preceding three videos are performances onstage or in public venues filmed from one point of view: an audience member's front-row center seat. The solo performer is centered on a stage, or as if on a stage; statically at a piano or a table. The video experience attempts

[33] His use of a glass is not just a reference to conventional lectures, in which the speaker is provided with a glass of water. Cage often referred to silence as a glass, as for example in his "Lecture on Nothing": "It is like an empty glass into which, at any moment, anything may be poured" (Cage, 2012, p. 110). The glass suggests one role of silence in Cage's world, as a container for "anything," as well as an indicator of passing time.

to duplicate the experience of being there in the actual venue. But in the examples that follow, the performer-stage-audience roles are abandoned in favor of more flexible models.

Example 4: J Kim, *sitting on a bench in the wind* (outdoor/pastorale)

MARKERS: contextual: nature, water, rocks, sky; visible markers: immobility; audible (in-audible) non-speaking while the two people are talking to one another

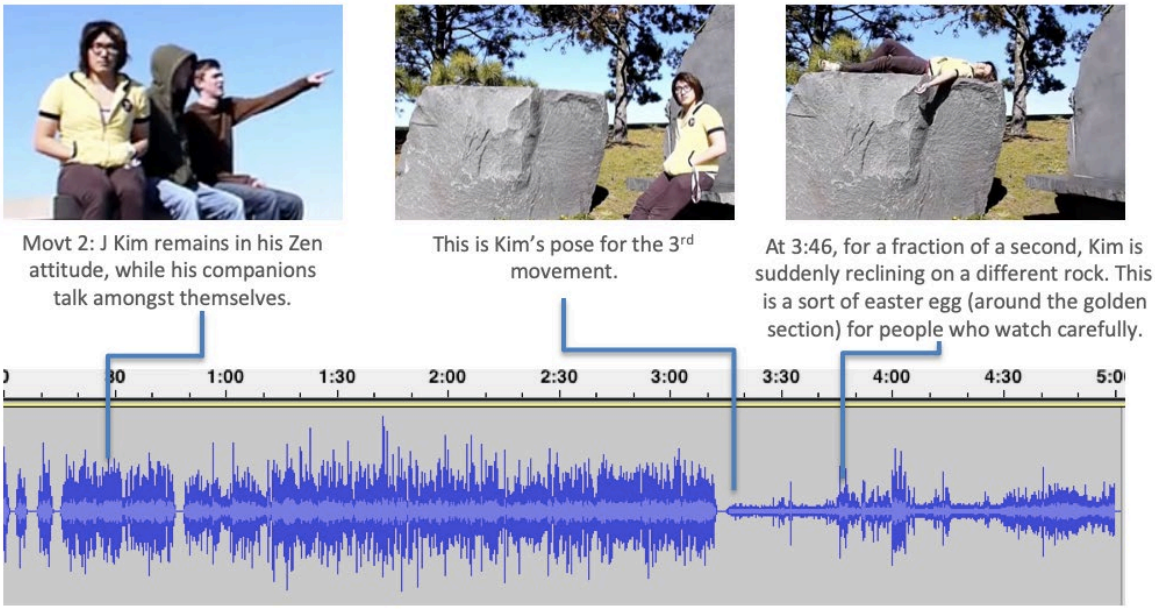
► J KIM PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936179

Video 4: J Kim, *sitting on a bench in the wind* (YouTube, 2020)

The scene is a park by the sea. There is no concert hall, no instrument. The relationship of the performers to each other and the camera is strained and awkward. The three movements are quite different audibly and visibly. The second movement is most intriguing because American performance artist J Kim (the performer in the yellow hoodie) is silent and focused on the performance while two people sit next to him on the same bench, ignoring the camera and having their own conversation. We hear them talking and see them gesturing, but the wind obscures their words. As with the audience in the previous video, these two people are apparently ignoring the performer. This audible/visible marker of noise for silence highlights the contrast between the main performer and the two others, making Kim's actions seem "more silent." The fact that the conversation appears to be ongoing and unrelated to Kim also reinforces a sense of ongoing time, a continuous present. Is Kim sending a message that he is experiencing silence despite the "real life" sounds around him? Or is he looking at us, trying to impose silence upon us in the context of our "real world," not his?

I like the suggestion that silence can reference presence in such strong ways. Kim is staring directly at the audience. Nonetheless, he is firmly anchored in the landscape, on the rocks, focused on his present here-ness. He has an attitude of watching, looking directly at the

viewer, potentially connecting to the YouTube audience, which will watch later after he has uploaded it. But in this Zen here-ness is also a "hear"-ness, an attitude of listening, a connective knot between the performer, his friends, and the viewer.



Example 5: Sis Leyin, *Quarantine A cappella* (solo online x 4)

MARKERS: contextual: silent multiples, , claustrophobia, irony, quarantine; visible markers: facial expressions, intimate setting; audible markers: bird, cat, muffled exterior sounds, air-conditioning

► LEYIN PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936288

Video 5: Sis Leyin, *Quarantine A cappella* (YouTube, 2020)

Sis Leyin's performance is representative of the many quarantine versions of *4'33"*. The tiling deliberately recalls endless Zoom meetings during lockdown. A quote from Leyin: "The world isolates us [...] so I lost my temper and didn't create or play any music." By not creating, she was engaging in a type of self-silencing. And the experience of lockdown was often one of being silenced (by the authorities, by the threat of illness). For Leyin and countless other artists, maintaining a creative voice under these circumstances was painful and isolating.

Her primary emotive quality seems to be an attitude of resignation. The claustrophobic cinematography, consistently framed against the same drapery and under dim, bluish lighting, encapsulates the essence and eternity of lockdown. Meanwhile, her yawns, her drooping sleepy eyelids, the sound of the space (an oppressive room tone sounding like a fan or air-conditioner with maybe some traffic sounds in the distance), and an incongruous bird chirping (does she have a pet bird in the room?) signal for silence. These contrasting visual and audible markers form an apt representation of a not-being, a not-hereness, a "not" that represents the removal of outside stimuli, and also a type of boredom, an imitation of "real life," that parallels Cage's aesthetic of listening closely.

> Staying silenced for a prolonged period of time is difficult, and a certain amount of potential noisy energy seems to build up in the muscles. Think of the fidgety energy and coughs released in the interlude between the movements of a symphony. Think of the anxiety of a prolonged theatrical pause. To remain still in a fidgety world is a tensile performance; an effort. (Mock & Counsell, 2009, p. 215)

Leyin has chosen to enact four different characters, each with their own fidgety world, each visibly (performing) an effort to remain still, each with a different shirt, makeup, hairstyle, and persona. Common to all four is a range of vague facial expressions, distracted smiles, rolling eyes, and biting her lip; these facial embodiments invite a reflectiveness, perhaps summoning silence, in an endless continuous present. Her gaze (even more than in the Kim example) is very present. More than the other performers, she seems to be directly connecting with the YouTube viewer, not so much listening as reaching out to evoke or summon listening and possibly silence.

Example 6: Lito Levenbach (solo online x 12)

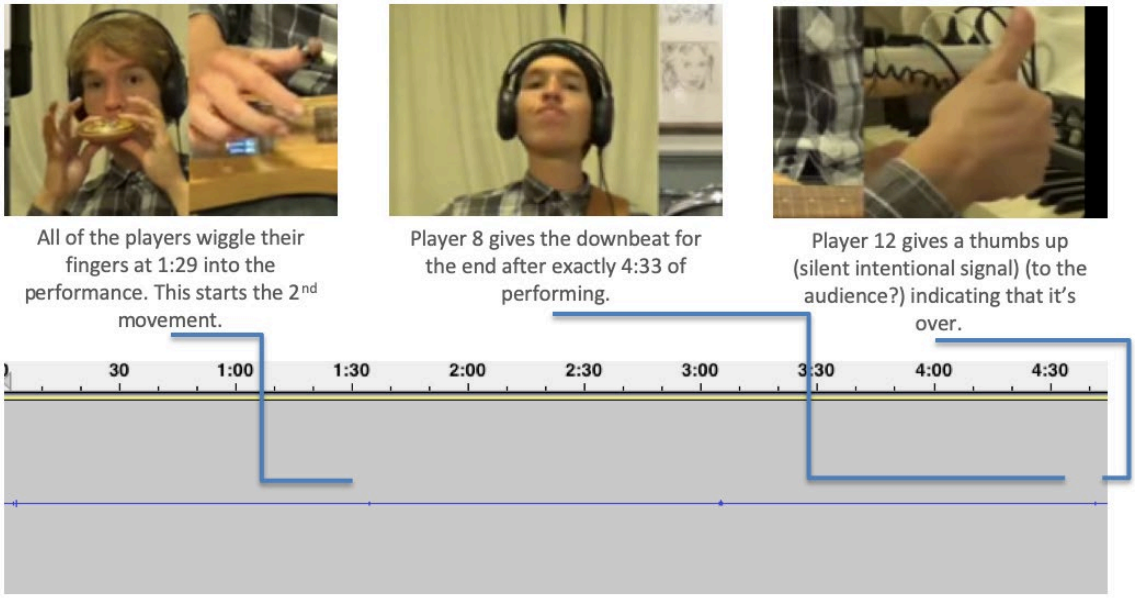
MARKERS: contextual: seriousness; poise; silent multiples; visible markers: tiny and precise gestures; audible markers: very tiny sounds

▶ LEVENBACH PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936236

Video 6: Lito Levenbach, *1 Guy, 15 Instruments* (YouTube, 2015)

Lito Levenbach is the performer in this multi-instrumental montage. The editing and the *mise-en-scène* are very clever. There are three movements, each exactly 91 seconds long and hardly distinguishable except as blips on the waveform. It took me several viewings to realize that his hands perform a two-second strumming motion (in all 12 videos) to mark the changes between movements. He makes creative use of tiny changes in clothing and sunglasses, but his expression is serious, neutral, and respectful, as if he were following a conductor. There is very little sensation of connecting with an audience—he appears to be performing for himself.

He chooses to remain motionless. His intro and outro are minimal and, at first, too subtle to distinguish from the actual performance. But a closer analysis reveals that it visibly and audibly starts at 5 seconds and ends 4 minutes and 33 seconds later. He is rigorous about the overall timing, more so than any other performer I studied, although he does not follow Cage's 1952 timings for the movements. And he plays the piece very quietly. It is entirely without irony, a refreshing change compared to Kim's or Leyin's hyper self-consciousness.



Example 7: Dead Territory (online heavy metal band)

MARKERS: contextual: (thwarted) loudness expectation; visible markers: big amplifiers, hair-tossing; audible markers: (potential) noise, warmup riff, amplifier hum

► DEAD TERRITORY PERFORMANCE: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1712958/2935852#tool-2936204

Video 7: Dead Territory, *4'33" Death Metal Cover* (YouTube, 2015)

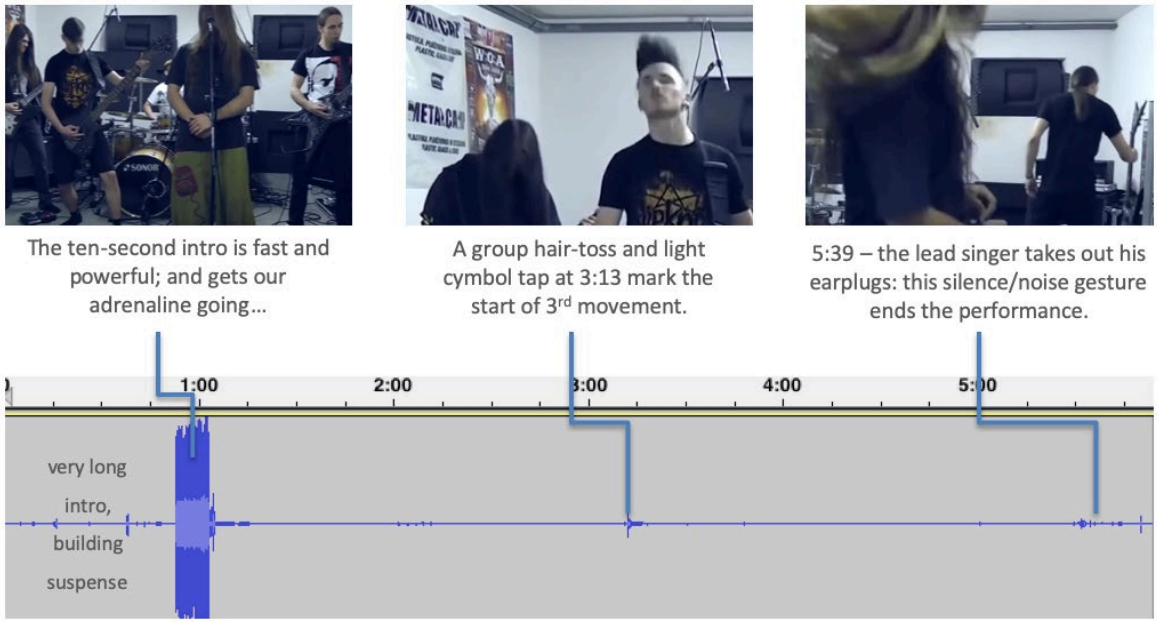
One of my favorite versions of *4'33"* is a video by the band Dead Territory, an Austrian group known for their heavy metal style. As I engaged more and more with covers of *4'33"*, I was struck that metal bands seem to make more powerful, insightful interpretations of *4'33"* than classically-trained pianists. Could being educated in the classical tradition be a handicap in performing Cage?

There are different approaches from each performer. From left to right, performer one mostly freezes. Performer two marks the beat. Performer three (the lead vocalist) embodies listening most effectively: his stance, his attitude, his hair gestures, and his crossed hands all communicate embodiments of attentiveness or attention. Performer four looks a little lost, unsure of his role, but mostly imitates performer two, nodding his head to an internal or imaginary beat (the fact that their beats are not in sync is only somewhat noticeable).

There is a controlled wildness to the buildup: The hair tossing, the guitar tuning, the intro riff, the insertion of earplugs—all these are done with absolute integrity and seriousness. And these performative rock-n-roll gestures abruptly cut off at the moment that the performance begins. There is something leftover of the classical setting of Cage's piece, yet re-interpreted in a stylized language of noisy rebellion. The musicians treat silence as the absence of sounds, but they also allow the non-musical or non-intended sounds of real life to enter the frame. We hear the humming of the amplifier, small shuffling of clothes and hair and feet, and extraneous or accidental guitar sounds, all superimposed on a very quiet room tone.

During the performance, the musicians keep an intense bodily pose with their instruments and a rapt but relaxed focus on their faces, ending at precisely 4:33. They nod to some kind of internalized beat. Is this open listening, as Cage desired? Or is their embodiment of an internal beat creating a confused image of continued musical intentionality? They seem to be listening to their own music, which is not exactly Cage's idea of listening to the world around them.

One intriguing ambiguity about the performance comes from the framing. It is not so much the absence of sounds that frames the music here; it is "non-musical" music that frames the "musical" silence. There is a frame of quiet (getting ready to perform) followed by a typically loud rock-style prelude (shouting "1,2,3,4!" and playing a drum roll), both of which precede the actual performance and put the "real life" component into the framing elements rather than the artwork itself.



A typical reaction from the commentary: "The best part is that it comes from a metal band. It adds more tension. We know you're all wound up inside. We know you're itching to pound out sound." And that, for me, is the genius of this performance: it is all about control; it is about holding a ticking bomb that does not explode. The thwarted threat of violent catastrophe respects the score but also updates Cage's artwork for our time, for summoning silence can also arise from suppressing sound.

Two Counterexamples

Own Practice Experience: A Live Broadcast (All-Union Radio, Moscow)

MARKERS: contextual: radio performance, political environment, fall of Soviet Union, radio silence; audible (inaudible): performed silence, audience silence, breathing

In June of 1993, I was invited to perform *4'33"* live on All-Union Radio in Moscow. As we were ushered into the studio, our translator whispered that today's audience was *only* one million people. The Soviet Union was collapsing, and listeners had new choices. But it was not over yet at the national radio. As eager as the general public was to hear Western pop music, they also wanted to discover the Western avant-garde. Hence, my performance of Cage's silence piece live on the air.

The broadcast, for an immense audience under chaotic conditions, was a confrontation of silencing and eloquent silence, absence and presence, agency and aleatory. The radio show was in such a turbulent time, that we were never sure it had been actually broadcast. Although it was "live" on-air for the entire former Soviet Union, the deteriorating infrastructure meant that signals may never have left Moscow and may never have been transmitted beyond the roof of the radio building. I never found out what the audience

thought of the performance. Did that million dutifully listen to the silence? Did the potential listeners *even know* that there had *been* a performance? Could they tell the difference between musical silence and technical silence? Did they tune out or switch stations? Were they entranced, inspired, bored, or confused? With all the chaos and the power cuts, did they just assume that the station had gone off-air? Was the silence politicized? How much explanation was given before the performance began? Was it treated as a pedagogical opportunity or a spontaneous happening? These questions were never answered for me as a performer.

Salomé Voegelin has theorized a mode of listening that might reduce the dominance of the visible in favor of other senses (Voegelin, 2010, pp. xi–xiii). Her approach offers intriguing possibilities for analyzing my radio performance since all visual elements and clues were removed. One of the many paradoxes raised by this broadcast was that *I* felt silenced, unable to communicate with the audience since I couldn't see them. And the opposite is also true—they couldn't see me either. Did the piece thus lose value? Or did it gain in value because the visual was eliminated in favor of the (in)audible?

As the performer, I was only concerned with one thing: time. It was going too slow; it was taking too long. I began to fear I had set the stopwatch wrong. As the silent audience of my fears, I suffered an eternity in those four and a half minutes. No one was visible in the control room. The only audible markers for silence were the small sounds of our bodies. There was no audience feedback. In this agonizing performance, it was as if time stood still, thus the opposite of Tudor's performance, in which time could be heard distinctly ticking.

I found it nerve-wracking standing in front of the microphone and comprehending how many people were listening. But I also knew they were not listening to "me" because the microphone transmitted none of the sounds I was hearing (my breathing, the beating of my heart). What the microphone transmitted were low-level noises, the hum from the electrical equipment, and the background sounds in the studio. The resultant quiet noise emitting from the user's radio would then resonate with other "real life" hums and vibrations at home or in the car of the listener, creating small sounds on varied timescales. Listeners would have heard the background sounds of their own world, of their own personal soundscape: maybe the whoosh of their car's tires, the creak of the radiators in their kitchen, or birds chirping outside.

In addition to the noises of their personal soundscape, they heard the vibrations of their radio as it broadcast the audio artifacts of the Moscow recording studio. Whatever those quiet hums might have been, they were probably quieter than the localized noise of their

kitchen, car, or office. I can imagine that many experienced frustration rather than silence: "What's wrong with my radio?" (the personal); "What's wrong with the station?" (the administrative); or "What's wrong with Moscow?" (the political). All these would have been interpretations of the silence as extreme *not*. Many might have switched stations, choosing to silence Cage; others might have heard it as music or found it soothing.

The resulting situation was an interesting experiment in shared listening in that the broadcast became a space for active contemplation and imagination for the listener. Moreover, the performance tied in nicely with Cage's idea that this piece is going on all the time around us. Whether or not *4'33"* was actually broadcast, whether or not the intended audience heard it or not, listening to "real life" was achieved that day on an impressive scale.

Own Practice Experience: *4'33"* in Healthcare (Workshops at Hôpital Goüin)

MARKERS: ritual: group markers of shared ritual; visible markers: others, self; audible markers: breathing

Is there a way to bring performances of *4'33"* closer to the listening experiences that Cage described? I explored this question in workshops I led for many years for hospitalized patients in long-term care.[34] One of our favorite exercises was to sit in a circle, with no particular expectations, and close our eyes and listen. This ring of people contained no designated performer; we were all performers and listeners at the same time. We might listen for a minute or five minutes. We would stop when concentration seemed to be flagging. The result was a bit like Cage's personal silence meditations in the forest and less like the YouTube performances above. By removing the designated performer, the audience had become the performers themselves. As a group, we became a flexible and continuous marker for summoning silence, a state that recalls Cage's idea of tuning into a silence that is already there. This led to a phenomenon Margulis describes as meta-listening:

> Experiences during silent periods also point to the active, participatory nature of musical listening. […] the listening itself often becomes an object of listening. In these episodes of 'meta-listening,' the music seems to purposefully place listening habits or beliefs on self-conscious display to the listener, weaving this into the fabric of the aesthetic object. (Margulis, 2007, p. 274)

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[34] This project took place from 2010 through 2020 primarily at Hôpital Goüin in Clichy, France, under my own artistic direction, and with the guidance of social worker Gaëlle Quéven and the psychology staff of the Fondation Goüin. The collaboration with Association Le Piano Ouvert was supported by the Fondation de France.

I found this to be an excellent way of experiencing silence as a group. Without the framing components of Cage's reputation and instructions, we achieved a constructive and positive type of silent listening that was often more interesting than what I achieved onstage. Acheson hears symphonic silences here: "That is one of the beauties of silence—that, when multiple people perform it at once, their silent voices are raised in unison, creating not cacophony, but symphony" (Acheson, 2008, p. 549). One could argue that this unison silence has little to do with performing, that listening or feeling is not performing.[35] Perhaps it is a listening exercise in the manner of *Deep Listening* (Oliveros, 2005). As with Oliveros's exercises, the communal ritual becomes a supporting framework for the silence. But I think that what we did was both listening and performing, knotted together. Moreover there was an ingredient of play, with its elements of exploration, learning, and risk. Sitting in a circle, we watched each other performing listening as we watched ourselves listening and as we performed silent listening for others.

Figure 62: a listening workshop (Hôpital Goüin, Clichy, France, 2014)

4.4 Updating the Checklist

Cage's composition nicely torpedoes classical preconceptions, even as it holds classical elements: three movements, a score, a pre-determined length, a formally-dressed performer, an expensive 19th-century instrument. Without being able to "see" the performance, the audience needs to find another way to "see" silence. Interpreting Cage's

[35] There was an interesting nuance: asking the group to listen was far less effective than asking them to *perform* a piece about listening. The act of listening seemed to be passive, whereas the act of performing suggested a goal to be accomplished, even a competitive edge to be seized, as in playing a game. Thus, emphasizing the performative was a means of getting more smoothly to the intentionalities of active listening. The listeners became performers, and vice-versa.

work as a non-classical piece—with the possibility of variations, covers, re-interpretations, and improvisations—seems now more fruitful to me. This research, including the analyses of the YouTube videos, has created multiple viewpoints from which I theorize the validity of many embodiments and styles. Reflecting on my research, I re-wrote my checklist:

A New Performance Checklist (2020)

- How/when does it start?
- How/when does it stop?
- How silent will/should/could it be?
- Can I create a favorable environment for the audience to listen, and to listen to themselves listening?
    1. What are the situated elements: architecture, seating, spatial layout; and how do they contribute to summoning silence?
    2. Does "real life" intervene?
- Is confrontation a goal? A side-effect? An accident?
- Is there a performer? And if so, why?
    1. Does a performer impose, summon, or describe silence?
    2. Is non-playing or not-playing appropriate?
- Cage removed the three movements in later versions of the composition. A choice should be made in advance about durations/ use of movements.
    1. Is time marked?
    2. Are the movements marked?
- Is the piece poetic, ironic, self-destructive, narrative, static, or…?
- How is it framed or bookmarked? (what happens before and after must be planned, for these bookends raise expectations, create tension and anticipation, recollect and recall events afterwards)
    1. Should the piece be described and situated for the audience via program notes or spoken word?
    2. Are expectations set up and thwarted, and how?

My performance goals have changed substantially. This checklist reflects a new interest in the audience experience, the imbalance between the performer's and receiver's experiences, and questions of confrontation, juxtaposition, and "real life" vs. performance. Further, Hernik and I discovered at the outset of my research that the start and stop of the piece held key values and that the manner of framing the piece often defined and created it.

Contemplating the potential applications of this revised checklist raises questions regarding future performance direction, especially when incorporating a piano. Can

innovative approaches, inspired by the YouTube videos, provide alternative performance "solutions"?

Possibilities include:

- utilization of deliberately anti-establishment or destructive materials (garbage, spray paint, breaking something/destroying value);
- integration of usually noisy items for exaggerating "thwarted" silence (for example, Dead Territory's use of amplifiers and electric guitars);
- incorporation of social media comments as a means of un-silencing the audience (for example, a re-mix of Dead Territory's video with their YouTube comment feed);
- confronting the audience by, for example, using extreme noise (heavy machinery or airhorns) combined with some method of silencing (earplugs, noise-canceling headphones);
- marking the movements in unexpected ways, such as changing the décor as Kim does;
- emphasizing the elements of classical music in Cage's work: exaggerating traditional markers, like wearing a tuxedo, overdoing the lighting, or turning it into a Liberace-type experience, in which traditional classical markers are ironically overemphasized;
- creating a "pastorale" by shifting the audience setting from the hall to the natural environment. This could be accomplished by performing the artwork outdoors, as in Kim's example, which could even reference the première, which took place in the forest setting of the partly open Maverick Hall.

Figure 63: Maverick Hall provided a pastoral setting for the première in 1952 (photo: Dion Ogust, 1996)

Using this new checklist, I performed *4'33"* at a music festival in Burgundy in July 2021. My instruments for the three movements were a massive and heavy power drill, a tiny Chinese bell, and a large broom. These were deliberately chosen for their visual impact and their *potential* for noise-making. There was some laughter at my choice of instrumentation, but otherwise, the audience was relatively silent and patiently waiting for me to begin. I used a silent and hidden stopwatch to avoid visually reminding the audience of the elapsed or remaining time; although the work may be about time, I wanted to remove overt references to time from the stage. The drill was in standby mode,

producing a low electronic buzz; this blended in with the whir of the theater's air-conditioning. I turned off the drill after the first movement, creating an unexpected experience of comparative silence.

The performance was successful in that it encouraged lively audience discussion and re-evaluation of what, for many, has become a cliché artwork, a relic of the previous century. Experiencing that the work could be refreshed by simple means was gratifying. The biggest lesson was that by partially removing the overt imposition of authority, shifting focus away from the performer, using elements of thwarting and real life, and heightening the audible, I created a more successful work, granting more freedom for audience listening.

(Re)considering My Own Practice

Central to my original checklist was how I could summon and impose silence. Now, my focus is more diffuse. Is the artwork about listening (e.g., Hôpital Goüin), about non-playing (e.g., Marx), about attention (e.g., Leyin), about "real life" (Moscow), or about time (e.g., Tudor)? Each performance brings a different approach. Some (Kahn) may still consider Cage's artwork a failure because it cannot answer questions about what it is or what it is about. However, my conclusion goes in the opposite direction: the case studies demonstrate that by opening so many options, *4'33"* is still very much valid as we move further into the 21st century. It forces us to re-think the answers and reformulate the questions continually. There will be no absolute answer to what the composition is about nor how it should be performed. Choices will be necessary, and each performer must make those choices. The next performance by the same performer could result in entirely different choices. Like any great piece of performance art, and perhaps even more so than most, *4'33"* defies a final prescription and analysis.

All of the YouTube performers deal with conventions and traditions, (implicitly) playing with the western ways of perceiving music as well as the frames to mark the edges of the performance. Through the different ways in which I have approached *4'33"*–analyzing other performers, comparing waveforms, reading reflections on this piece by other scholars, and presenting the piece in different contexts–I have been able to question traditional performance paradigms, advocating a broader, more inclusive approach to understanding and experiencing Cage's work. The updated checklist for performing *4'33"* emphasizes the artwork's fluidity and the performer's release of control, reflecting a journey from classical adherence to interpretations that challenge and expand the conceptual and literal borders of silence and art.

In classical performances like Chopin's ninth nocturne discussed in the previous chapter, or in the Beethoven sonata that will be discussed in the next chapter, there is a direct narrative relationship between describing and summoning through the embodiment of

silence. But to what extent are descriptive markers in Cage successful in this respect? My own experience of performing it demonstrates that descriptive markers are easier to implement than summoning ones. Cage himself tried (and failed) to summon silence in the Köln performance. Trifonov imposed silence, but it is uneasy and fraught with awkwardness. Trying to impose silence or summon it performatively does not always evoke audience engagement and can even lead to a distancing between listener and performer.

In all their richness, the YouTube performances show the pointlessness of restricting or codifying *4'33"*. Cage's piece has come full circle: from an avant-garde marginal work to a mainstream meme, to an annoyingly trite standard, and back again to the hip margins of the mainstream. My original checklist focused on preserving the performer's hegemony and the composer's authority. From my research, I conclude that this piece is infinitely resilient and can function on many levels. Even if it has lost the power to shock, my research illustrates the potential richness of this composition and its surprisingly future-proof endurance. Undoubtedly, my checklist will continue to evolve along with the artwork.