Performing musical silence: markers, gestures, and embodiments

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Summary

In this research project, I have experimented with the performance of silences. When a performer discerns the role that silence plays (*how it acts* and *what it does*), new ideas may emerge for performing silence. What are the contexts that potentially affect musical silences? What are the silences in which performers or audiences willingly or unwillingly participate? And how can performers engage with the multiple dimensions of silence in composed music? Through these research questions, rooted in the act of performance, I have explored the relationship between notated rests and "audible" silences, focusing on the role of visible, audible, and notational markers. I propose the term markers to describe cues or signals that communicate information about silence and sound. Markers may impose, summon, or shape the perception of silence. Markers can include sounds, gestures, and embodiments. Some markers—architectural, ritual, or iconic—exist outside the notated music as meta-silences, emerging from the performance context and, as such, influencing the audience's experience.

Chapter 1 introduces the varied terminologies and manifestations of silence, a concept that holds multiple meanings across disciplines. Silence can be societal, religious, meditative, political, or punitive. In music, it functions as a performed element, even if it is not purely silent in an acoustic sense. Moments in which silence is intentionally depicted by the composer or performer are thus "performed silences." In my research, I experiment with how performers engage with silence, emphasizing that the visual aspect often outweighs the auditory, as gestures and embodiment communicate silence to the audience.

Silence is difficult to qualify and quantify. Silence can be connective or disconnective in musical experience, a duality I describe as not/knot. Indeed silence is often perceived as tangible by musicians. The artistic research process calls for some techniques of comparison and some fair methods of cognitively, creatively, and affectively approaching performed silences. My methods for studying silences include video analysis of performances (my own and others), reflective imitation, re-enactment videos, and waveform analysis of digital audio. These techniques are overlapping and complementary and offer multiple perspectives on each examined silence.

Chapter 2 offers a theoretical framework, including discussions of framing, notation, and gesture, and an examination of the multidimensionality of silence. This research draws from a range of interdisciplinary sources, including musicology, performance studies, phenomenology, and cognitive science. Key theoretical perspectives include Roland Barthes's notions of the neutral and the gesture, Richard Schechner's performance studies concepts, Richard C. Littlefield's work on silence as a frame, Barbara Lüneburg's

methodologies of re-enactment, and Elizabeth Margulis's theory of the multidimensionalities of silence.

The system of notating rests is unequivocal, but the means of expressing silence in performance are diverse, complex, conflicting, and overlapping. These means are commonly understood amongst musicians but remain tacit insofar as they have not been studied and documented systematically. Traditional notational symbols overlook the multidimensional contingencies and potentialities of performing silence. Moreover, this knowledge is tacit in the sense that most performed techniques of expressing silence are encoded through physical embodiments that are not themselves notated.

Notated rests within the printed score communicate duration and sometimes pulse, but little else. Thus, multiple options for interpretation arise from these rests: Often more so than the notes, the rests in a score give the performer the liberty to reveal or create—an affordance to communicate via gestures and embodiments.

Chapter 3 is an archive that proposes thirty examples of silence from the piano repertoire. These examples are presented via performance and personal reflection and illustrated with explanatory videos. They demonstrate the use and kinds of visible and audible markers, the potential multidimensionality of performed silences, and the role of silence as both connector and separator. The archive testifies to the incredible heterogeny of performed silences and their resistance to taxonomies, for the silences offer no easy synthesis. This archive is, therefore, a "noisy" archive in the sense of being unpredictable and irregular, like a staticky television signal or an intermittent radio transmission from outer space. By creating an archive that examines and illustrates different silences in performances of composed music, I have illustrated and tried to open up new options for understanding and engaging with silence. The silences in this archive are primarily drawn from the 20th and 21st-century piano repertoire, as that is the performing tradition I am most familiar with. I have drawn connections outside the European repertoire where possible, hoping that this research can serve as a stepping stone for myself and others to explore beyond these limitations.

My exploration of silences has been furthered through the analysis and re-performance of three canonical works: *4'33"* by John Cage, opus 111 by Ludwig van Beethoven, and *Ballet mécanique* by George Antheil. I studied other performances and my own and used reflective imitation and re-creative videos as methods for investigating the means of performing silences.

In Chapter 4, I 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. These examples present alternative ways of marking silence; new embodied attitudes for performing silence; confluences of time, listening, and silence; and contemporary

relationships between performer and audience. My observations have affected my own performance practice, as I use fewer guidelines now than I did before, and thus, a more open view of what *4'33"* can present. This expanded view might encourage the openness Cage championed but also affords new interpretations he might not have imagined.

In Chapter 5, I have selected six well-known pianists and analyzed their performances of Beethoven's last piano sonata as a way of understanding embodied silence in classical music. This chapter focuses on visual embodiments of silence in the concert hall. Silences separate the fanfares that open the sonata, and the notes of the fanfares mark the silences but are equally marked by the silences. A heterogeneous performance tradition has developed around these fanfares. Key agents are teaching traditions, the score, associated texts, concert hall acoustics, the rituals and socio-cultural context of the concert, and factors such as piano, stage, and costumes. Looking-at and listening-to the silences of virtuoso pianists gave me a chance to pull apart the gestures and to experiment with them. They are an unwritten vocabulary for communicating silence's multidimensionality to the audience. This method of analyzing through reflective imitation may also be helpful for other performers to make more thoughtful decisions about silences. While traditions around Beethoven's music impose structured interpretations of silence, they paradoxically allow for unexpected creative gestural freedom.

Chapter 6 investigates silences in *Ballet mécanique*. Antheil's use of brutal, measured silence encouraged me to question how musical silence is notated and made visible for a performer, how it is marked by time, and what its dimensions might be. I was particularly fascinated by Antheil's assertion about the silences that he was "moving time without touching it." The markers for these silences—whether visual, as in the inert mechanical instruments on stage, or notational, as in the meticulous scoring of the rests—serve as a key focus of this chapter. These markers do more than denote absence: they actively configure the audience's anticipation and reception of the audible, effectively making silence a palpable, agitated presence that is as communicative as any musical note. Using a choreographed performance with ballet and electronics as an example, I have investigated the role of these silences within Antheil's work, examining how they function, not as gaps, but as integral, forceful, material components of the composition. The notated rests are emphatic and not connective; they may be described as "nots" in the performance and yet as tangible communications of frenetic pulse and speed.

Chapter 7 suggests some conclusions about markers, the importance of the visual, and the (dis)connectivity of silence. There are many markers (especially audible and visible) that a performer can use, which lead the audience to expect silence. They are signals that the performer employs to embody silence or make it eloquent. Frequently, silences are multidimensional, communicating information about temporality, function, and emotion.

The use of markers by the performer shapes the audience's experience of these dimensions. Composers might perhaps use these vocabularies to enrich their scoring. By examining performed silences, musicians can better understand the functions of silence. The value of picturing embodiments is that performers might use multiple gestural vocabularies to augment their interpretations of silence.

This artistic research project highlights the complexity of silence in performance. My research into performed silence has deepened my understanding of its visual and gestural dimensions, leading me to approach each silence with greater awareness of its connective or disconnective potential, with care for its tangibility, and with attention to its dimensions. But it will certainly also be of particular interest to other pianists and potentially appeal to a wider audience interested in absence, tangibility, visualization, gesture, and embodiment.