

What Silence Taught John Cage: The Story of 4'33''

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Originally we had in mind what you might call an imaginary beauty, a process of basic emptiness with just a few things arising in it... And then when we actually set to work, a kind of avalanche came about which corresponded not at all with that beauty which had seemed to appear to us as an objective. Where do we go then?... Well what we do is go straight on; that way lies, no doubt, a revelation. I had no idea this was going to happen. I did have an idea something else would happen. Ideas are one thing and what happens another.

— John Cage, "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?"¹

1. John Cage, "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?", *Silence*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, pp. 220–22.

The Empty Room

When this exhibition was originally conceived, at its center there was to be an empty room: "one completely bare gallery, which visitors will have to negotiate without explanation."² The plans have changed now, and the empty room has disappeared, but this was the feature that caught my attention when I was asked to write an essay for this catalogue. It was an unusual idea for a museum show, since the whole purpose for visiting one is to witness things of beauty or interest. People do not go to a museum to look at blank walls, to walk through empty galleries. Without any context, visitors would have been quite baffled by this, perhaps thinking that they had taken a wrong turn, that someone made a mistake, or (for those who like adventure) that a daring theft had taken place. But these visitors would have known that this is an exhibition about John Cage, and hence the empty room would make sense. "Ah, the silent piece," they might have said to themselves, smiling.

4'33'', the silent piece, is easily John Cage's most famous creation. I would say that anyone who recognizes Cage's name knows that he wrote a piece of music that consists entirely of silence. It is a piece that has become a sort of icon in postwar culture, like Warhol's soup cans: a punch line for jokes and cartoons; the springboard for a thousand analyses and arguments; evidence of the extremity of a destructive avant-garde that appeared in the 1950s and sixties.

2. Julia Robinson, "John Cage: Sound & Silence, From Experimental Composition to Experimental Art," undated document provided to author, June 2008.

It is not surprising that this piece would attract the kind of attention that it has. To begin with, it is a compelling dramatic gesture. At its first performance, virtuoso pianist David Tudor sat at the piano, opened the keyboard lid, and sat silently for thirty seconds. He then closed the lid. He reopened it, and then sat silently again for a full two minutes and twenty-three seconds. He then closed and reopened the lid one more time, sitting silently this time for one minute and forty seconds. He then closed the lid and walked off stage. That was all. With the right kind of performer, such an event can be riveting, and Tudor was absolutely the right kind of performer, possessing an understated mastery of the instrument and a seriousness of purpose that was palpable to everyone in attendance.

Part of what makes the drama so compelling is the utter simplicity of the concept. The composer creates nothing at all. The performer goes on stage and does nothing. The audience witnesses this very basic act, the act of sitting still and being quiet. All this takes place in a Western concert hall setting, lending a historical and artistic gravity to the proceedings that begs us to put this act into some kind of weighty context, fraught with importance.

The piece can be difficult for audiences (just as the empty room in the exhibition might have been). Sitting quietly for any length of time is not something to which people are accustomed in Western culture in general, much less in a concert hall setting. That tensions will arise, with controversy and notoriety following, is only natural. Confronted with the silence, in a setting we cannot control, and where we do not expect this kind of event, we might have any of a number of responses: we might desire for it to be over, or desire for more interesting sounds to listen to, or we might feel frightened, insulted, pensive, cultured, baffled, doubtful, bored, agitated, tickled, sleepy, attentive, philosophical, or, because we “get it,” a bit smug. But do we really think of *4'33"* as a piece of music? What did Cage mean when he made this piece? How are we supposed to take this music? I believe that the story of *4'33"*, of the circumstances in Cage's life from which it arose, can help us to answer these questions.

Noise (1937–42)

For someone traveling through the early parts of this exhibition, or for someone otherwise familiar only with the early works of John Cage, the appearance of the silent piece may be puzzling. For, if we look at Cage's music of the 1930s and early 1940s, we are hard put to find much silence in it at all. And yet silence became central to

Cage's work, the thing with which he was most often connected, the very title of his first and most influential book of essays.

Indeed, Cage in his early days as a composer promoted the antithesis of silence: noise. He spoke of being "for more new sounds." Taking his inspiration from Luigi Russolo and the Futurists of the early twentieth century, Cage enthusiastically embraced the use of percussion instruments as a way of expanding the realm of music to include sounds that more accurately reflected the nature of the industrial culture he observed around him:

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.³

3. John Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo," *Silence*, p. 3.

The above quotation comes from Cage's 1937 essay "The future of music: Credo." This essay strikes many of the themes for which Cage would become famous: that sounds are just sounds, all equally valid; that a composer acts as an experimenter, discovering new sonic possibilities; that it is important to use twentieth-century technologies to create twentieth-century music. What is missing in this early essay, however, is the identification of silence as the underlying rationale for these positions. In the essay, the word "sound" appears twenty-six times, and the words "tone" and "noise" many more. The word "silence" does not appear at all.

What does appear here is a discussion of musical structure based on lengths of time:

The composer... will be faced not only with the entire field of sound but also with the entire field of time. The "frame" or fraction of a second... will probably be the basic unit in the measurement of time.⁴

4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Beginning in the late 1930s, Cage structured all of his compositions in the dimension of time: phrases and sections of particular lengths. In "The Future of Music: Credo," he envisioned the manipulation of time arising from the techniques of film composers, but in reality his reliance on time as a basis for structure arose from his work with dancers. Many of his early compositions were accompaniments for modern dance, in which he was given precise measurements of phrases to which to compose his music. His devotion to percussion music also contributed to his use of duration structures, since structures based on harmony or melody were unavailable to him. Although he was unaware of it at the time, this reliance on time as the basis for musical structure was one of the factors that would prepare Cage for his later encounter with silence.

Quiet (1942–48)

At the turn of the 1940s, Cage was ambitious, with big ideas, big dreams, and a predilection for big sounds. In an essay from 1939, he describes his percussion music in violent terms:

At the present stage of revolution, a healthy lawlessness is warranted. Experiment must necessarily be carried on by hitting anything – tin pans, rice bowls, iron pipes – anything we can lay our hands on. Not only hitting but rubbing, smashing, making sound in every possible way.⁵

5. John Cage, "Goal: New Music, New Dance," *Silence*, p. 87.

He gained some notoriety and fame, first in San Francisco and then Chicago. He made his network radio debut when he was commissioned by CBS to write the music for a radio play by Kenneth Patchen. He was profiled in the *Chicago Daily News*: "People call it noise – but he calls it music."⁶

6. Pence James, "People Call it Noise – But He Calls It Music," *Chicago Daily News*, March 19, 1942.

But as frequently happens in life, the winds change and gain turns to loss, fame to disrepute. In 1942 Cage moved from Chicago to New York City, expecting to have the resources of a media giant like CBS at his disposal. But his luck turned, and he was shunned first by CBS, and then by his patron Peggy Guggenheim. He was unable to move his collection of percussion instruments from Chicago, and so could not form an orchestra in New York. It was a very difficult period in his life, both personally and professionally.

His big dreams unrealized, he started out again more modestly. He returned to the prepared piano (a piano with objects inserted between the strings to alter the sound), an instrument that he had invented some years earlier but had hardly touched during his percussion orchestra period. Musically, Cage was on his own in the city, and the prepared piano provided a way of composing for percussive sounds without the need for many instruments or even another performer. Working with Merce Cunningham, he composed a series of dance works for prepared piano, developing a style of subtlety and quiet power for that instrument. An instrument made from muted strings, it served to quiet his own voice.

7. Coomaraswamy was an Indian art historian, author of *The Dance of Shiva* (1924) and *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934). From the latter Cage took the dictum that art should "imitate nature in her manner of operation" (pp. 10–11). Meister Eckhart was a Christian mystic of the fourteenth century; Cage was quite familiar with his sermons and quoted from them extensively in his writings from 1949 on. For a more detailed discussion of these figures (and others), see the James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 36–38 and 45–47.

In New York, Cage also explored matters of the spirit. He studied the works of authors such as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Meister Eckhart.⁷ He socialized with Joseph Campbell and Alan Watts. Most importantly, he became friends with musician Gita Sarabhai, who, as Cage described it, "came like an angel from India."⁸ She taught Cage about Indian music and aesthetics in exchange for his lessons to her on Western music. "The purpose of music is to quiet and sober the mind, making it susceptible to divine influences," she

8. John Cage, "A Composer's Confessions" (1948), *MusikTexte* Nos. 40/41, August 1991, p. 65.

famously taught Cage. These words moved him deeply and became a touchstone of his work.

So, at Vassar College in 1948, it was a quieter and wiser Cage who gave a lecture with the notable title “A composer’s confessions.” In this lecture, the audience heard the story of a composer who had experienced dissatisfaction with his career and then looked inwardly for answers. He described composing:

...in my new apartment on the East River in Lower Manhattan which turns its back to the city and looks to the water and the sky. The quietness of this retreat brought me finally to face the question: to what end does one write music?⁹

9. Ibid.

The answer, of course, had been given to him by Sarabhai: music conditions one’s mind, leading to “moments in [one’s] life that are complete and fulfilled.”¹⁰

10. Ibid., p. 66.

Cage viewed the predominant materialism of Western culture as a hindrance to this purpose. He saw its pernicious influence in his own life and work:

I am frankly embarrassed that most of my musical life has been spent in the search for new materials. The significance of new materials is that they represent, I believe, the incessant desire in our culture to explore the unknown. Before we know the unknown, it inflames our hearts. When we know it, the flame dies down, only to burst forth again at the thought of a new unknown. This desire has found expression in our culture in new materials, because our culture has its faith not in the peaceful center of the spirit but in an ever-hopeful projection onto things of our own desire for completion.¹¹

11. Ibid., p. 67. Of course, Cage continued his “search for the new” throughout his life, embarrassed or not.

It is in this context that Cage then described his own desire (which he worried might be considered absurd) “to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to the Muzak Co.” This was to be called *Silent Prayer*, and Cage was completely serious about creating it.¹² The idea of selling it to Muzak, besides its obvious humor, was to make a statement about the unimportance of music as a material thing. Instead it is, Cage said, “the age-old process of making and using music and our becoming more integrated as personalities through this making and using that is of real value.”¹³

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

Silent Prayer was to be an attempt to break through the din of mid-century American culture, a way of establishing a foothold for silence in the offices, shopping centers, and elevators of America, and to present the beauty that comes out of stillness. I am doubtful that he thought that the piece would be entirely silent. His very poetic description of it suggests opening and closing sounds that would frame the central silence:

14. Ibid.

It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape or fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility.¹⁴

In this way, *Silent Prayer* would have represented a continuation of the path that Cage was traveling, a music that was becoming more and more quiet and still. He never actually created this work, however.

Silence (1948–51)

Cage's description of *Silent Prayer* is notable in that it includes the first use of the word "silence" in his writings. Where he had virtually ignored it prior to 1948, beginning in that year he became more and more concerned with silence, its nature, and how to engage it compositionally. That summer, he delivered a lecture at Black Mountain College in which, for the first time, he stated that sound and silence were coequals in music, and that musical structure should be based on duration because this was the sole characteristic that these two had in common:

...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.¹⁵

15. John Cage, "Defense of Satie," in Richard Kostelanetz, (ed.), *John Cage*. New York: Praeger, 1970, p. 81.

Cage, in other words, had discovered silence through the time structures he had been using for the past ten years. For him, a silence was simply a span of time that was empty. Such a span of time had structural significance for his music – the silent duration still played a role in the overall pattern of phrases and sections – but such a role was quite independent of whether or not any sound actually occurred within it. Music was built out of blocks of time, and these blocks could contain either sound or silence.

This musical emptiness of time is the inspiration for Cage's 1950 "Lecture on Nothing." The very title gives away that Cage's focus is on emptiness, silence, and time. The talk itself is structured in time just like one of Cage's compositions, and he uses this as a way of introducing his imagery of silence:

This space of time is organized. We need not fear these silences, we may love them. This is a composed talk, for I am making it just as I make a piece of music. It is like a glass of milk. We need the glass and we need the milk. Or again it is like an empty glass into which at any moment anything may be poured. As we go along, (who knows?) an idea may occur in this talk. I have no idea whether one will or not. If one does, let it. Regard it as something seen momentarily, as though from a window while traveling. If across Kansas, then, of course, Kansas... Kansas is like nothing on earth, and for a New Yorker very refreshing. It is like an empty glass, nothing but wheat, or is it corn? Does it matter which?¹⁶

16. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence*, pp. 109–10.

Cage describes the specific pattern of durations used in the lecture (“Now begins the third unit of the second part...”), noting that within those durations, “I can say anything. It makes very little difference what I say or even how I say it.”¹⁷

17. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

This was a new realization about time structures: because they are built on silence, they can permit anything at all to happen within them. Given a set phrase length, any sound at all could find a home within it; this was just an extension of Cage’s earlier belief in the equality of all sounds. But beyond this, the empty time structure does not require any particular continuity, syntax, ordering, or sense of progress of the sounds within it. A composition structured as lengths of time does not rely upon the sounds themselves to create the structure: it exists with or without them and it is silent about how they should come and go. It is like the ongoing cycle of the moon – new to full to new again – that unfolds in the sky. The activities of people, for the most part, take place independently of it, although still within the grand time structure of this cycle. There is a silence within that lunar cycle within which our lives unfold.

As Cage discovered this kind of silence through his composition with time structures, he became more and more interested in ways of composing in which the sounds, relieved of structural responsibility, appeared more casually, with less effort. This is what he meant when, in 1949, he described his idea for his *String Quartet in Four Parts*: “...without actually using silence, I should like to praise it.”¹⁸ For the quartet, he devised a new system of composing that allowed the use of harmonies without a sense of harmonic progression: a kind of silent harmonic practice. All the different chords that could appear in the quartet were defined at the outset, with no particular relationships to one another. Cage then wrote a simple melodic line and used his collection of chords to harmonize them following a simple procedure: each pitch was always to be supported by a particular chord. This E-natural, for example, would always appear as the top note of a particular chord, while that C-natural would always be at the top of a different chord, and so forth. As the melody unfolded, the chords thus appeared of themselves, without any theory behind them. In traditional harmonic practice, the sense of progression tells a story about the harmonies that we hear: why they succeed one another, where they are going, how they return. In Cage’s *String Quartet*, this story disappears entirely and we hear the harmonies in a fresh way. The clear, gentle, ethereal appearance of harmonies in the *String Quartet* thus “praise silence” because they have nothing to say about harmonic theory.

18. John Cage, letter to his parents, August 20, 1949.

19. Ibid.

20. In 1950, Feldman composed *Projection 1* for solo cello, a work that used graph paper to notate only the number of notes to be played in three ranges of pitch (high, medium, low). That the piece did not specify exact pitches, but rather accepted whatever happened within the broad limits of the high-medium-low notation, was a major stimulus to Cage's own thinking.

While working on the *String Quartet*, Cage described it as being “like the opening of another door; the possibilities implied are unlimited.”¹⁹ Following it, he continued to turn his composing towards ways of letting sounds appear freely within the silence of his time structures. In early 1951, inspired by the more radical experiments of his younger colleague Morton Feldman,²⁰ Cage arrived at a breakthrough in the final movement of his *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra*. Here again he composed all the different individual musical events that could happen in the movement, all completely independent of one another, this time arranging them into a square chart. Cage then moved through the 115 measures of the time structure and tossed coins to consult the Chinese oracle book, the *I Ching*: is there sound here or silence? And if sound, which one of the predefined musical events? He then copied out that sound or silence into his score and moved on to the next point. He followed this simple random process to the end of the movement, and the music appeared as a result. In a way, the piece composed itself out of the silence of the time structure.

Cage was exhilarated with this work: it sounded like nothing else he had ever created or heard. Many events occurred in isolation, surrounded by a sea of silence. Others, arising in proximity to one another, took on different roles, colors, and appearances because of their new neighbors. There were sharp discontinuities, surprising outbursts in the middle of more lyric passages. But there were unexpected continuities as well, discovered by accident as the individual musical events were placed next to one another. *This* was the place to which silence had been pointing: an effortless succession of sounds arising, existing for a time, and then passing away. Cage was composing directly from the silence now, and the music that he found there astonished him. It was an “avalanche... which corresponded not at all with that beauty which had seemed to appear to us as an objective.” It was a fulfillment of what he had said in “Lecture on Nothing” about structure built on silent time: that it is a kind of discipline “which, accepted, in return accepts whatever, even those rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses, train us to make what we make.”²¹

21. Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” p. 111.

Sound (1951–52)

Cage's encounter with silence triggered an explosion of creativity. In the years immediately following the concerto he produced more music than at any other point in his life (only to be rivaled by his last years in the 1990s). Silence, channeled through chance, was capable of producing endless content of amazing variety, full of both the

unexpected and the common, the shocking and the entrancing, the engaging and the dull. There appeared to be no bottom to this well from which Cage was now able to draw his music.

Cage's excitement at the discovery of the music that came from silence is readily apparent in his 1951 "Lecture on Something." The subject of the lecture was the music of Morton Feldman, and it was written virtually at the moment when Feldman's work inspired Cage's plunge into chance. But beyond Feldman's music, the lecture is about the upsurging creativity that Cage was experiencing, the freedom and fearlessness that resulted from his embrace of silence. Cage describes Feldman as having "changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting," allowing him "to be unafraid or to be full of that love which comes from a sense of at-oneness with whatever."²² This love, being unconditional and silently aware of everything, was the fruit of his study of silence and was the source of Cage's newfound creative power:

When nothing [*i.e.*, silence] is securely possessed one is free to accept any of the somethings. How many are there? They roll up at your feet... There is no end to the number of somethings and all of them (without exception) are acceptable.²³

After the concerto, Cage launched upon the ambitious *Music of Changes* for piano: forty-five minutes of difficult piano music that would be his first major work to come completely from this place of silence. It was composed using chance throughout, from start to finish, and in every dimension of the music: sounds, silences, rhythms, dynamics, densities, tempi. Drawing upon the virtuosity of pianist David Tudor, Cage allowed his compositional process to create a wide variety of musical events, piled up at times in thick layers. The piece, while based on a structure of silent time, is bursting with sound: effusive, bubbling over with energy, at times quiet and delicate, at others ferocious, thundering, and sharp. Once again, the silence revealed musical continuities that Cage could never have foreseen. These come into being as spontaneously as they subsequently disappear, a fleeting show of pianism flickering in front of our ears.

4'33" (1952)

This brings Cage's story up to 1952 and the appearance of 4'33". How do we in the audience deal with the silent piece? I believe that if we engage it at all, we do so in one of two ways. The first of these is to pay attention to the acoustic quality of the ambient sound we hear during the piece. "Oh," we may say to ourselves, "there are all kinds of sounds going on in this space that I never noticed before."

22. Cage, "Lecture on Something," *Silence*, pp. 129–30.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

We become interested in these noises and what we can detect for those four and a half minutes. This is treating the piece as an aesthetic object, like any other piece of music, only one built out of very unusual materials. Experienced in this way, *4'33"* is just the delayed manifestation of Cage's original 1948 idea for *Silent Prayer*.

The other common way of dealing with the piece is to think about what it might mean: to think about the concept of silence, whether silence even really exists, the philosophical significance of a composer making a work that contains no willful sound, the composer's silence as a metaphor for any of a number of things, the political implications of putting the concert audience in this position. There is any number of avenues that our thought about *4'33"* can take, but all have in common the treatment of the piece as a statement: about silence, about music, about composers, performers, audiences, etc.

I find both approaches problematic, especially in light of the work's history and John Cage's encounter with silence. Touching silence in 1951 was an event of enormous importance to Cage and permanently changed his approach to music. To treat *4'33"* as an aesthetic object trivializes the silence that was at the heart of Cage's life and work from 1951 on. The composition itself as a thing, as a work of music, was really quite irrelevant to Cage's experience of silence. On the other hand, for us to treat the piece as a subject for aesthetic thinking takes the work even further from the truth of silence as Cage discovered it. Looking for the meaning behind the piece takes us away from direct experience and into the world of ideas and stories.

As a result, I myself am left somewhat unsatisfied by *4'33"*, even as I find Cage's engagement with silence both compelling and inspiring. I believe that the problem of the piece stems from the following reality: Cage's experience of silence was as a *composer*, not just as a *listener*. It was composing within the confines of time structures that led him to the discovery that all sounds could occur within them, and in any combination. It was this discovery that showed him the path "from making to accepting." We in the audience can hear the results of this discovery, which can produce a special kind of beauty unavailable via other compositional means, but we are not actually reliving Cage's experience: the experience of silence itself. Without that context, the silence of *4'33"* has no real power. We are left with the surface phenomena of silence, ideas about silence, and we fumble around for ways to make the piece "work" for us.

So just what did Cage think he was doing when he composed *4'33"* in 1952? Why did it appear then and not in 1948, when he first thought of a silent piece? Cage never directly explained the motivation behind *4'33"*, but its appearance so soon after the emergence of chance composition leads me to believe that it was a result of the transforming encounter with silence that brought chance composition about. One motivation for the piece may have been that he felt it necessary to make the source of his music – the silence – more readily apparent to the audience. *4'33"* directly presents the silent time structure to the audience in a way that a work such as *Music of Changes* could not. One way of looking at it is that *4'33"* represents Cage's profession of his faith in silence.

The problem, however, is that Cage's understanding of silence could never be communicated directly through a piece of music of any kind, either with sounds or without them. He may have written *4'33"* to put the silent time structure on display, to make the origin of his music clear, but the best it can be is a pointer to this place, easily mistaken as the silence itself. I believe that Cage recognized this problem himself, as he downplayed the importance of *4'33"* as a work of music after its creation. It did not appear on the programs that he and Tudor put on in the 1950s, and while his first collection of essays and lectures may have been titled *Silence*, *4'33"* is not mentioned by name anywhere in its 276 pages.²⁴ In interviews, even while affirming his devotion to silence, he gives little weight to *4'33"* itself. For example, he told Richard Kostelanetz that "I wrote that piece [*4'33"*] in 1952. This is now 1966. I don't need that piece today."²⁵

While Cage may have deemphasized *4'33"* as a work in itself, what he constantly wrote and spoke about was the importance of the silence to which he had been introduced through time structures. When asked by William Duckworth if *4'33"* was taken "too seriously" today, Cage counters that it is not possible to take it too seriously:

JC: Well, I use it constantly in my life experience. No day goes by without my making use of that piece in my life and in my work. I listen to it every day. Yes I do.

WD: Can you give me an example?

JC: I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention toward it. I realize that it's going on continuously. So, more and more, my attention, as now, is on it. More than anything else, it's the source of my enjoyment of life.²⁶

This may seem to contradict his dismissal of the piece in 1966. However, reading this exchange, it is clear that when Cage refers to "that piece," he is talking about something much larger and more

24. The only reference is a self-deprecating announcement in the introduction to his essay on Robert Rauschenberg: "The white paintings came first; my silent piece came later." Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," *Silence*, p. 98.

25. Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with John Cage," *John Cage*, p. 12.

26. William Duckworth, "Anything I say will be misunderstood: An interview with John Cage," in Richard Fleming and William Duckworth, (eds.), *John Cage at Seventy-Five*, Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1989, pp. 21–22.

important than the specific silent piece he wrote in 1952. Silence, and the transformation that encountering it produced in 1951, was always at the core of Cage's life and work. *4'33"* functioned mainly as a kind of totem that provided a convenient material way to reference this experience.

So what are we to do with *4'33"*? The piece, I think, can most usefully be seen as a tribute to the experience of silence, a reminder of its existence and its importance for all of us. But the piece is flawed, however, in that it may suggest that silence is something that can be presented to us by someone else. Ultimately, the experience of silence is not something that can be communicated from one person to another. It cannot be forced into existence externally, and we cannot willfully make it happen. "We are made perfect by what happens to us rather than by what we do," as Cage quoted Meister Eckhart. Attending a performance of *4'33"* is not an activity that by itself is likely to trigger such an encounter, even if we strongly desire it to do so.

Instead, we have to do the work of facing silence ourselves, just as Cage did in the 1940s and 1950s, or at the very least to simply notice it when it appears. The most helpful role for *4'33"* is to inspire silence. It can remind us that it is up to us to turn our minds towards the silence, to recognize it as we encounter it, even if only for a moment. The silence that Cage spoke of is something that is accessible to each and every person at any time. We cannot help it from happening: moments of that deep silence appear for us spontaneously (if briefly, perhaps) for various reasons. You can see this yourself if you reflect over your experience and look for such moments. For myself, it was the silence that happened when I stepped out and heard the wind in the trees, forceful, calling me into the woods. It was the silence that happened when I held in my arms a loved one who was suffering. It was the silence that happened when, opening the door and expecting to see the morning stars, I saw the falling snow instead. When we touch the silence in moments such as these, we experience that same moment in which silence taught John Cage how to compose.²⁷