

Essays

John Cage's 4'33": A Performance Perspective
by Philip Auslander (Published on March 14, 2022)

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John Cage's celebrated (or notorious, depending on your point of view) blank composition, 4'33", originated with Cage's interest in creating a work using structured silence as his compositional material. He evinced this desire as early as 1948, when he announced in a lecture his intention "to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to the Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4 1/2 minutes long—these being the standard lengths of 'canned' music, and its title will be 'Silent Prayer.'" (Quoted in Gann, 2010: 126). (The Muzak Corporation was, for better or worse, a pioneer in the creation and distribution of background music for public spaces and workplaces.) Cage's idea of using silence as the material of music is related to his understanding of duration as a primary compositional element. In his 1949 essay "Forerunners of Modern Music," Cage (2011: 63) argues that the proper structure for music is "one based on lengths of time" rather than harmonic progression. The argument behind this position, which appears in a footnote, is that,

Sound has four characteristics: pitch, timbre, loudness, and duration. The opposite and necessary coexistent of sound is silence. Of the four characteristics of sound, only duration involves both sound and silence. Therefore, a structure based on durations (rhythmic: phrase, time lengths) is correct (corresponds with the nature of the material)...

In suggesting that composition should reflect "the nature of the material," Cage approaches music from a perspective like that of the art critic Clement Greenberg, who theorized modernism in painting around the same time, arguing against perspectival illusionism on the grounds that flatness is the defining characteristic of the picture plane. (Greenberg, 1973: 69).

Over the next few years, Cage came to an understanding of silence different from his initial interpretation of it as sound's necessary opposite. By the time he had finished work on 4'33" in 1952, Cage had embraced the view he articulates in "Experimental Music," an address of 1957: "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot." (Cage, 2011: 8). Nevertheless, Cage over the years consistently referred to 4'33" as "the silent piece" and claimed it was his favorite and the most important of his compositions. Cage also developed a significant interest in aleatory compositional techniques that would serve to distance the work from the composer's ego and conscious intentions. As he said, "I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer." (Kostelanetz, 2003: 65). (It is notable in this context that the length of the hypothetical composition "Silent Prayer" was not determined directly by Cage but by conventions developed for Muzak.)

4'33" is structured as a sonata in three movements. Cage determined the precise length of the piece and of each movement using chance operations involving a deck of cards with durations written on them: "It was done just like a piece of music, except there were no sounds — but there were durations. It was dealing these cards — shuffling them, on which there were durations, and then dealing them... I didn't know I was writing 4'33". I built it up very gradually and it came out to be 4'33"." (Quoted in Fetterman, 2010: 161-2). 4'33" thus brought together three ideas that were essential to Cage: the desirability, yet impossibility, of silence; using duration as his primary structural device; and determining the specifics of the composition through chance.

The important shift in Cage's thinking about silence from his seeing it as the opposing possibility against which sound is defined to his realizing that there can never be true silence means that 4'33" is not the silent piece Cage intended at one time to produce. But if not, then what is it? There is a critical consensus, encouraged by Cage himself, that 4'33" is, as Kyle Gann (2010: 11) puts it, "an act of *framing*, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention in order to open the mind to the fact that all sounds are music." Gann's reference to *music* here is crucial, for there are those who argue that the framing function of 4'33" is not enough for it to be considered a musical work.

Philosopher Julian Dodd advances such an argument. Working from Varese's definition of music as "organized sound," he argues that since the performer of 4'33" merely frames whatever sound is present and does nothing to *organize* it, it cannot count as a musical work, going so far as to say, "Regarded as music, 4'33" seems like a cheap gimmick or a cheat..." He proposes instead that 4'33" be seen as a work of performance art without offering a definition of that form with which to assess it, saying only that "it is altogether more illuminating to place it alongside other performance artworks" than to consider it to be music. (Dodd, 2018).

I have several objections to Dodd's position, the first of which is that it is ahistorical. I argue further that treating *4'33"* as a framing device without accounting for the ways the piece itself is framed is insufficient, and that Dodd does not provide an adequate account of the role of the performer. As Roselee Goldberg (2011: 7) points out in her standard history of performance art, "performance became acceptable as a medium of artistic expression in its own right in the 1970s." The Happenings and Fluxus events of the late 1950s and early 1960s were the immediate antecedents of this development. Cage played a significant role in this history: *Untitled Event*, a performance he and choreographer Merce Cunningham presented at Black Mountain College in 1952, the same year he finished *4'33"*, is sometimes called the first Happening and is considered by Goldberg to have "created a precedent for innumerable events that were to follow in the late fifties and sixties." (Goldberg, 2011: 126). Cage had a direct impact on many of the artists who created these events through a course he taught at the New School in New York in 1956.

Despite Cage's importance and that of *Untitled Event* to the development of the nascent art form of performance art, *4'33"* is not considered to be a canonical work in its history as it is in some histories of music. Whereas Goldberg mentions it only briefly as the culmination of Cage's early musical experiments and devotes far more space to *Untitled Event*, Michael Nyman (1999: 2-4), by contrast, treats it as a foundational work in the genre he calls "experimental music" (also the title of two essays by Cage from the mid-1950s) and does not mention *Untitled Event* at all. It is clear from this that *4'33"* does not have the same significance to the historical development of performance art as it does to that of experimental music. Neither Dodd's attempt to wish away the anachronism of calling *4'33"* a work of performance art by saying it was "at least ten years ahead of its time" nor his inattention to its lack of recognition within the critical and historical discourses of performance art makes for a compelling argument. (Dodd, 2018).

My second objection to Dodd's dismissal of *4'33"* as a musical work is that his account of the piece's relationship to framing is incomplete. It is fair to say that *4'33"* is a framing device intended to focus the listener's attention on ambient sound. However, any performance of *4'33"* is not just the implementation of this frame but also an event that is itself framed. Erving Goffman (1974: 10-11), in his monumental work *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, defines frames as "principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them." These frames allow us to make "sense out of events." In my book *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, I discuss the application of frame analysis to music in the following terms:

Once we understand that a particular event has been framed as a performance of music, we know the terms in which we are to perceive, think about, and interpret the situation, and we know that those terms are different from the ones that would enable us to understand and interpret another kind of situation, such as the performance of a play. (Auslander, 2021: 5).

Dodd's claim that *4'33"* is a work of performance art is based solely on its ostensible intrinsic functions as a composition—that it *frames* sound rather than *organizing* it—and ignores the social and institutional dimensions of its performance. My approach focuses instead on how music acquires its identity through the ways it is framed by performance situations. For example, Icelandic performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson's *An Die Musik* (2012) is a piece in which eight pairs of singers and pianists spread out in the performance space perform Schubert's song of that title simultaneously and repeatedly. When shown at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich in 2012, it was framed as a work of performance art, and the audience was asked to understand and evaluate it as such. When it appeared on the program of the London Contemporary Music Festival in 2017, it was framed as music for an audience prepared to consider it as such. Although the intrinsic properties of the piece do not change with each framing, its assimilation to the category of a particular art form—whether performance art or music—does, and this in turn changes what we understand it to be and "our subjective involvement" with it.

The premier of *4'33"* took place in Woodstock, New York, in 1952 at the Maverick Concert Hall, then as now a rustic venue primarily for chamber music. The pianist David Tudor, who was gaining a reputation at the time as an interpreter of challenging contemporary music, performed it on a program that included another piece by Cage (an early version of *Water Walk*) alongside works by Morton Feldman, Pierre Boulez, Christian Wolff, and others. As Gann notes, "the audience was made up partly of sophisticates of the avant-garde, partly of local music lovers, and partly of vacationing members of the New York Philharmonic..." (Gann, 2010: 5). It was a music audience, in short.

Gann (2010: 8) also observes, "however unconventional, this was a piano recital..." This definition of the event was further enforced by Tudor's approach to the piece, which he insisted should be performed in the same manner as any other scored work:

when I performed it I was looking at sheets of music paper scored for piano—two staves—with measures of four beats and the structural delineations given by the constant tempo. [Tudor has indicated that the score listed the time signature as 4/4 and the tempo as 60.] So I was looking at the first movement and I was turning pages because I was reading the score in time. (Dickinson, 2006: 86).

The performance protocols Tudor employed were those of a musician playing a work of music from score. In terms of how the event of which it was a part was framed, the identity of *4'33"* as a musical work was overdetermined. The setting, audience, and repertoire, the presence of the score, the performer and his manner of performing all worked to frame the event as a concert of contemporary piano music.

There is a tendency now to discuss *4'33"* in isolation as an autonomous work, but at its premiere it was on the program between Christian Wolff's *For Prepared Piano* (1951) and *The Banshee* (1925) by Henry Cowell. The former is a piece in which single notes or note clusters emerge against moments of silence, and some keys of the piano are deadened to sound almost like drums. Cowell's piece, which is played directly on the piano's strings, is sonically dense and dramatic. Placed in the context of these works, *4'33"* is framed as a work of similar compositional and instrumental innovation. The three pieces together represent a spectrum of new music, from the sparseness of the isolated events in *For Prepared Piano*, to the meditative emptiness of *4'33"*, to the intensity of *The Banshee*. They also present a range of uses of the instrument, from the piano as percussion instrument, to the piano as a means of marking silence, to the piano as a stringed instrument. The meaning of *4'33"*, like that of any other

piece of music, is partly a function of its relationships to other compositions.

The relationship of 4'33" to sound production is more complex than the idea that the performer is silent. This silence inevitably invokes, possibly even evokes, the sound the musician is not making. There are several reference points for the unheard sound. The first is instrumentation. Whereas the original score for 4'33", which was lost but reconstructed by Tudor, is specifically for piano, the last—and best known—score for the piece is a set of verbal instructions that the work “may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.” (Cage, 1961).^[1] While the piece is still most frequently performed by pianists, the work also has been performed by instrumentalists ranging from soloists on guitar, harp, and non-western instruments such as the Chinese guzheng, to ensembles of all kinds from symphony orchestras to wind ensembles and at least one death metal band. There are vocal versions, as well. Clearly, instrumentation is closely related to musical style and genre, raising intriguing questions concerning the differences between the silence (or non-playing) of a pianist and that of a harpist, or between the silence of a symphony orchestra and that of a rock band. If the performer of 4'33" were truly there only to serve as a framing device, any warm body would do, yet Cage specifies that the performer must be an instrumentalist. I hypothesize that it must be apparent that the person performing is not making musical sound by choice rather than because of the inability to do so. Musical sound is not simply absent from 4'33": it is present as an intentionally unrealized potential.

Dodd describes the way the work directs its audience's attention:

While listeners new to the piece might, for a very short while, try to pay close attention to the performance's content, they will soon discern that, since this content consists in silence, there is nothing there that rewards such attention. And it is just this realization that will prompt them to direct their focus onto things outwith the performance's content: the sounds occurring around them. (Dodd, 2018)

Tudor's description of his own actions while performing belies Dodd's claim. In fact, Tudor clearly was doing many things that would have rewarded the audience's attention. The sight of a musician assiduously reading a blank score is fascinating in itself. The issue here is that for Dodd, as for many commentators, the only content that counts in musical performance is sound, and anything the performer does that is not directly involved in sound production is irrelevant, a position against which I have argued extensively (Auslander 2021). In Dodd's account of how 4'33" works, since the performer is not producing sound, the audience will redirect its attention to whatever sound is available. This reductive view of musical performance as limited to the production of sound is particularly egregious when talking about Cage, who famously stated, “we have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we're alive to use them.” (Cage, 2011: 12).

Martin Iddon (2013: 44) proposes that 4'33" “highlighted extravagantly” Tudor's performance style, which he describes as always characterized by physical understatement. William Fetterman (2010: 169) describes his performance similarly:

The understated quality of gesture has, perhaps, become even more refined in Tudor's recent videotaped performance [of 4'33"] in 1990. Here, one can see very graceful, rounded gestures in such details such as starting the watch, closing the keyboard cover, as well as Tudor's close attention between reading the score and checking the reading by looking at the stop-watch. Except for turning the pages, Tudor had his hands folded in his lap during the three movements, his back erect, his expression very serious and concentrated.

Both Iddon and Fetterman suggest that in the absence of sound, the audience turns its attention not to ambient sound but to the details and nuances of Tudor's physical performance and its relationship to his characteristic style of performing. In short, Iddon and Fetterman imply that Tudor's performance of 4'33" was a performance of what I call his musical persona.

I define musical persona by saying:

To be a musician is to perform an identity in a social realm that is defined in relation to that realm. [. . .] When we hear a musician play, the source of the sound is a version of that person constructed for the specific purpose of playing music under particular circumstances. [. . .] Both the musical work and its performance serve the musician's performance of a persona. What musicians perform, first and foremost, is not music but their own identities as musicians, their musical personae. (Auslander, 2021: 88).

One of the main factors that influences the construction of a musical persona is genre, which I see as a frame: “genre as a structure of expectation. . . is always a vital frame of reference in the performance of music” and musicians' self-presentations as musicians have to be legible within the conventions of a genre. (Auslander, 2021: 10).

Fetterman well describes the characteristics of Tudor's persona: the understatement, grace, concentration, and seriousness that he brought to bear on the music he performed. In the 1990 video, his dress is casual, his posture at the piano is informal but reserved; he holds his arms close to his sides. The score is spread out on top of the piano close to him so that when he turns the pages, he does not have to reach far, and the gesture is deliberate yet modest. (Tudor, 1990).

By contrast, pianist William Marx uses 4'33" as a vehicle for the performance of a much more theatrical persona. When he performs, he dresses formally in tuxedo or tails and sits bolt upright at the piano in a way that recalls Artur Rubinstein's magisterial presence. When playing conventional music, he lifts his hands high above the keyboard to emphasize certain notes. He brings the same gestural vocabulary to 4'33", lifting the stopwatch to his eye level rather than looking down at it, as does Tudor, and emphasizing the moments when he starts and stops it with a large and dramatic movement of his arm. He has the score on a music stand on the piano, making it necessary for him to reach over the keyboard to turn the pages, again a much larger gesture than Tudor's. (Marx, 2010).

Tudor's and Marx's respective personae are quite different from one another, yet both clearly make sense within the broad genre context of western art music, whether classical or contemporary. Both bring the same persona to the performance of 4'33" as they do to all the music they perform. There is no mistaking them for performance artists—the personae they present are self-evidently those of *musicians*. These personae, along with the other contextual factors I have mentioned contribute to the framing and, thus, to the identification of 4'33" as a musical work.

Conclusion

From one point of view, 4'33" has proven historically to be a success story. Whereas Cage lamented that the piece was initially misunderstood and that he lost friends over it, there is now a well-established understanding of Cage's intention: that he "hoped," in his own words, "to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music." (Quoted in Gann, 2010: 65). Ironic, for a piece that was supposed not to reflect any intention! Of course, there is still much debate swirling around "the silent piece" particularly as to whether it can or should be considered a musical work, as I have discussed here, but there is no dispute as to whether it is historically significant and a worthy object of inquiry. Lost in the ongoing discourse are some of the more interesting ideas that underpin the work, such as Cage's notion that duration, which encompasses both sound and silence, is the essential property of music and, therefore, that composition should focus on the arrangement of durations. Cage thus suggests that music is "organized *time*" rather than "organized sound," a proposition with implications that far exceed his modest composition of 1952 in which the overall duration is organized by being divided into three movements. Among these implications are questions about the function of tempo and rhythm in the articulation of silence. What does it mean that 4'33" is in 4/4 with a tempo of 60? How would it be different in a different meter or at another tempo?

From the perspective I have outlined here, if 4'33" depends for its effect on the idea that the performer is only a self-effacing framing device, it is a noble failure. The audience's attention does not simply default to whatever sound is present in the absence of any produced by the performer, as Dodd suggests. Rather, the performance frame encourages the audience to attend to whatever the performer *is* doing and, as I have suggested here, what the performer is *not* doing, and the *way* in which the performer is or is not doing it. Far from disappearing from audience consciousness, the performer is at the center of its awareness. Since the performer inevitably is working within conventions of instrumentation and presentation associated with a specific musical genre, that of new music or experimental music in 1952 and a proliferation of others since, any performance of 4'33" is primarily a performance of the performer's genre-specific musical persona.

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[1] This version of *4'33''*, called the “Tacet Version,” is the third and last score Cage prepared for the piece. The first was the lost version Tudor worked from in 1952, and the second of 1953 is in “proportional notation.” See Gann (2010: 178-86) for a discussion of all three scores.