

# The Vitality and Counter-Pedagogy of Cage in the Conservatoire

Rachel Campbell and James Hazel Maher

**W**HAT PLACE DOES JOHN CAGE HAVE IN TODAY'S MUSIC CONSERVATORIUM? WHERE classical students spend hours every day alone in practice rooms, obsessively perfecting minute gradations of tone, colour, and expression? Where young prodigies strive for agility in their plucking and bowing and teachers assert pedagogical lineages to Liszt and Busoni? And meanwhile, down the hallway, the contemporary music students craft beats and breaks with subtle flavours of sonic production. The very name 'conservatorium' is etymologically related to 'conservative' and an ethos of preservation.

Of course, there are aesthetically adventurous and exploratory musicians working in conservatoria, especially as composers and sound artists. In the 1970s the Sydney composer John Terry would take NSW Conservatorium High School students on Cageian soundwalks through the building and into the neighbouring Royal Botanic Garden. Yet Cage's experimentalism tends to be seen by many classical performance lecturers and popular music practitioners as broadly antithetical or at least irrelevant to what they are teaching. In the early 1990s rumours abounded that George Ellis—then a piano student, now a conductor—had performed *4'33"* in Concert Practice class, and a more daring act could hardly be imagined. At weekly Concert Practice students were assessed on technique, musicality, and stagecraft. The *frisson* of the lecturers' disgusted and censorious reactions kept the story circulating for years after George's performance.

Given that *4'33"* has become such an important work in performance art and conceptual art it may seem misplaced to focus on what it means to musicians. But it was made by a man who had begun as a composer and who, at least initially, saw himself as extending a tradition of classical music (through his interest in Satie, for example). In many ways, *4'33"* was designed for a performance context that had become standard for classical music from around 1800, and which came to the fore in theatre in the later nineteenth century. Classical music and theatre audiences have subsequently tended to sit in quasi-ritualised, motionless silence, their bodies disciplined into sites of audition and vision. Such a social and spatial configuration provides an excellent way to hear *4'33"* even whilst the work disrupts so many aspects of traditional artforms. Perhaps such a context provides a type of 'historically informed performance' platform for Cage's work. Alternatively, hearing the work at a rock concert or a 1960s-style happening creates a very different (but equally valid) experience. Music traditions have something to offer *4'33"*, and we believe *4'33"* affords much in return.

We teach some of Cage's works and thought, including *4'33"*, as part of a survey of twentieth- and twenty-first century classical music at the Sydney Conservatorium. Cage's work tends to appear most often in music history classes at our institution, although it can also be part of the study of musical composition, performance art, and as David Starkey describes, creative writing. Our students read parts of the 'Lecture on Nothing' (1950), 'Lecture on Something' (1951) and 'Experimental Music' (1957). Some class members react fairly calmly or with only mild scepticism and seem to accept *4'33"* as part of the history of experimentalism. Then there are two types of more intense reactions: those who are vehemently opposed to it, and those who find it liberating.

These students' responses imply that for many new listeners *4'33"* remains as provocative in its conceptual force as the original 1952 performance, especially in the conservatorium context. For instance, the range of negative responses we have observed resembles other generally conservative reactions during the twentieth century and will be familiar to anyone engaged with experimental art and performance. At the milder end, some of the current generation of students take a relativist approach by judging the work to be valid conceptual art that opens up and encourages listening to sound and noise. However, a proportion further emphasise that it should be categorised as separate to their own practices as they do not regard it to be music. Whilst affirming its validity, they note that they don't find it enjoyable or profound, and that performing it would not provide creative fulfillment. This recalls Arnold Schoenberg's reported assessment of his composition student Cage as 'not a composer, but an inventor—of genius' (Hicks 133-4).

These students' discussions imply that they believe music is constituted by collections of qualities such as intentionality, impressiveness, expressivity, entertainment, rhythmic entrainment, virtuosity, mimesis, and even beauty. 'Music', here, is ontologically bounded from Cageian non-intentionality, acceptance, and openness to sounds for their own sake. It is easy to see that romantic and modernist aesthetics underlie most traditions of current classical music practice and pedagogy. These aesthetics form a continuity with the conditions of Cage's 1950s environment as well as with earlier conservatory training of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it is also notable that many aspects of romanticism are evident in the priorities and assumptions of what is now referred to, in many institutions, as 'contemporary music' or popular music (Fairchild chapter 7). For example, Cage's work is incongruent with popular culture mainstreams emphasising spectacle, 'the feels', and an endless affect of rebellion.

Certainly, many twentieth-century classical and popular music traditions radically intensify or break with aspects of prior aesthetic projects in their embrace of noise, abrasiveness, pre-compositional organisation, microtones, absurdity, or theatrical gestures (math rock, noise music, serialism, spectralism, Björk, Mauricio Kagel). But most of these assume intentionality and artistry, which means that Cageian open works such as *4'33"* have an ongoing vitality and disruptive potential, despite being 70 years old. *4'33"* transmutes expectations, challenging tacit modes of appreciation whose meaning is underpinned by notions of creative musical shaping as well as, often, conventionally coded or narrative-oriented compositional schemas. It offers a de-anchored, de-territorialised work of 'nothing', bearing similarities to works of Cage's contemporaries such as Pauline Oliveros, which also refuse to provide a 'secure object for reception by the subject' (Miles 20). Compositions of this nature lack a clear communicative frame of reference, fostering an ambiguity expressed by a frustrated subject-position: 'what does this piece actually do'?

These issues come to the fore in the attitudes of outright hostility evident in some responses to *4'33"*. This is remarkable given that most students in recent years otherwise show a strong commitment to artistic relativism. We have heard some class members describe *4'33"* as pretentious, supercilious, shocking, weird, and pointless. Others insist that it is too simple and extremely boring because nothing is happening. The intensity of these responses suggests that something about the work is contrary to students' convictions about their own musical practices. They seem to believe Cage's work to be invalid in comparison to their commitment. These students are striving so hard to attain high levels of musical artistry, whether in performance, composition, song writing, production, or improvisation, and for most it is an undertaking over many years. To be presented with a platform through which everyone is invited to let go of intention, shaping, and expressivity

in music-making and 'let sounds be themselves' (Cage 10) can be experienced as an affront. An insistence on values of skill and craftsmanship and the fear that one is being tricked are old responses to avant-gardes but these music students are striving in specific ways. They seem to feel offended that something so contrary to their values is hailed as a significant work within what is, despite our critical efforts, still essentially a canonic historical survey.

We have other students who experience Cage's work and thought as a type of liberation, or at least as part of an important lineage of sound-making. For some there are implications for creation, whereas in other cases students are most interested in the possibilities for listening, and there are also philosophical engagements.

Cage's rejection of the intentionality and intense control that are features of so much classical music practice is experienced highly positively by some students. They are taken with an approach that foregrounds curiosity about sound. They appreciate the move beyond possession and attachment towards acceptance of all the results of sound-making. Some find it a relief that Cage's work moves so far away from the idea of singular communicated meaning and into a radical openness of reception. Other students flirt with new materialism and object-orientation in arguments that composers may abandon their own agency in favour of the agencies of sounds, beyond anthropocentric conceptions of artistic determinism.

*4'33"* offers a particular discipline of listening, a bracketing of life into Cage's famous durational division that simultaneously promotes listening to anything, at any time. It is an approach equally evident in the composer's career-long advocacy for situationally-oriented reception formats. Students in music schools often encounter ideas of holistic listening that encourage them to listen closely in supposedly non-musical contexts, but this tends to give way fairly quickly in the classroom to a focus on specific pitches, harmonies, and rhythms. Cage invites us to expand our aperture of appreciation beyond a priori musical habits and listen to life, to everything, without focusing on meaning or treating sounds as communications. Students have commented that *4'33"* makes them see that music is all around us. Some appreciate that the piece blurs the boundary between art and life. For some who are committed to older ideas of music, there is a realisation that music is not a singular entity, rather, it is always situated in the contexts to which Cage draws attention.

An encounter with Cage's work can also prompt historical and philosophical ruminations. Many students recognise that Cage's relinquishing of control enabled subsequent experimental work and facilitated new forms of artistic creation. Some reflect upon the silence which is not silence and conclude that it is a moment in the history of soundscape composition, a type of found soundscape. They argue

that it leads them to contemplate the richness and volume of space. Others observe that the piece mirrors our larger perceptual relationship with the world, a relationship involving inevitable acceptance of phenomena. Many simply enjoy the provocation to consider music's ontology.

Cage's work lives, it continues to receive new performances, it is not a relic of the history classroom. It has been recorded so many times that Kyle Gann includes a discography in his book on the work. It is now performed in many different contexts, including by a Big Band on zoom in 2020. But we argue that in addition to this, it has a great deal to offer music teaching, as well as university pedagogy more broadly.

The richness and variety of responses we have seen from music students indicate that 4'33" remains profoundly conceptually charged and vital. Although it is a classic work within performance art, new music, and American experimental music, perhaps when it is presented to audiences outside those milieus it has even more significance. It has the potential to counter-institutionally vitalise Conservatorium environments, reconfiguring students' conceptions of the musical object towards a type of open format. This resists the regulative and objectified tendency of the university system to pronounce music in unidimensional terms confined to the work-concept, the recording, or the musical score. Cage's work and thought function as situationist action: exposing limitations, contradictions, and traditional constraints, and demanding that we question our inherited and received methods of teaching and knowledge production. University governance and administrative processes increasingly mandate legibility, visibility and transparency. 4'33" fosters a critical vitality through listening that reaches beyond the manifold structured expectations of rationalist and data-driven models of pedagogy. In the context of concretised goals and stultifying rubrics, it establishes a counter-pedagogy. Even today, this work can provoke new ways of thinking for models of learning stuck in the hauntological loops of the neoliberal university.

**RACHEL CAMPBELL** is a lecturer in Musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney. She is currently working on a book about musical primitivisms and the music and ballets of John Antill's Corroboree.

**JAMES HAZEL MAHER** is a researcher, composer, and sound artist whose work investigates the cultural production of experimental working-class musical and sonic practices. James' research has been published in *Resonate*; *Limelight Magazine*; Liquid Architecture's *Disclaimer* journal; *Carriageworks Journal*; and

*ACT: Journal for Music & Performance*. James is the co-director of interdisciplinary arts publication *ADSR Zine*.

### Works Cited

- Cage, John. 'Experimental Music.' *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
- Fairchild, Charles. *Musician in the Museum: Display and Power in Neoliberal Popular Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Gann, Kyle. *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2010.
- Hicks, Michael. 'John Cage's Studies with Schoenberg.' *American Music* 8.2 (1990): 125-40.
- KCL Jazz Society. 'Collaboration Performance of John Cage's 4'33": King's Big Band.' <<https://www.kingsbigband.com/post/collaboration-performance-of-john-cage-s-4-33>>.
- Miles, Stephen. 'Objectivity and Intersubjectivity in Pauline Oliveros's "Sonic Meditations."' *Perspectives of New Music* 46.1 (2008): 4-38.
- Starkey, David. 'Performing John Cage's 4'33" in the Freshman Composition Classroom.' *Writing on the Edge* 4.2 (1993): 41-5.
- Tinkle, Adam. 'Sound Pedagogy: Teaching Listening Since Cage.' *Organised Sound* 20.2 (2015): 222-30.