

Silence Expanded (No.2): The Legacy of 4'33" and of 0'00"

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JOHN CAGE'S COMPOSITION 4'33" FROM 1952, ALSO CALLED THE 'SILENT PIECE', REMAINS TO this day the composer's most prominent piece. The status of fame it has acquired often simplifies it to an idea (four and a half minutes of silence), rather than a composition. Asked by an interviewer late in his life if 4'33" was a 'very spontaneous creation', Cage replied: 'No, no, it took several days to write it and it took me several years to come to the decision to make it and I lost friends over it' (Cage, *I-VI* 20-23). The story of the creation of 4'33" and its different versions and notations reveals an astonishing complexity (See Thoben, 'John Cage's Silent Scores'; see also Schmidt). Cage reworked the 'silent piece' for forty years: ten years after 4'33" came 0'00" (4'33" No. 2) in 1962, followed by *Reunion* in 1968, *Solo for Voice 23.0'00" No. 2* and *Solo for Voice 26. 0'00" No. 2B*, both of which were included in the *Song Books* in 1970, *One3 = 4'33" (0'00") + ½* in 1989, and, finally, his only film, *One*¹¹ in 1992. Cage expanded the silence of 4'33" to a whole set of sequels and variations (See Thoben, 'Scores and Documents'). Some of them are quite noisy or technically ambitious compared to the relative simplicity of 4'33".

A second important 'expansion' of 4'33" are the homages, the appropriations and the 'détournements' of Cage's silence by other artists and musicians. An early example is La Monte Young's *Piano Piece for David Tudor No. 2* (1960—Tudor performed the premiere of 4'33" in 1952). Here the pianist is instructed to open and close the 'keyboard cover without making, from the operation, any sound that

is audible'. Young is thus pushing the implications of 4'33" to indicate the boundaries of Cage's concept of silence. The forty years of Cage's reworking and updating his 'silent piece' can also be understood as a response to the younger generation which took it as a point of departure for their own works with silence. Thus, consequences and pretext are caught in a feedback loop. The following text will offer a typology of silence, combining Cage's own development of his 'silent piece' with those developments made by younger artists and musicians. However, it will not offer a chronology of styles and influences. Any straightforward explanation of 'cause and effect' would miss the point.

Before proceeding it is important to note that 4'33" is not a piano piece, but as Cage put it in 1962: 'tacet, any instrument or combination of instruments'.¹ I once saw Cage perform it himself in Cologne 1986 with nothing but an empty glass and a stopwatch.² At the time I did not care about the complexity of 4'33" and barely noticed the three movements, which Cage indicated by turning the glass upside down during two short breaks. The traces left in the back of my mind are more related to seeing than hearing, more a social than a musical event. The intensity of attention is the most important part of my memory. This is why I want to emphasise that in one way or another 4'33" has a lot to do with how our intensity of attention is modulated or sometimes manipulated by media—and it has to do with the so called 'attention economy' generated by media. I would even dare to call 4'33" a piece of 'media art', exactly because it uses no media, no technology and can even be performed without a musical instrument. I want to argue that Cage's silence is a defense of the uniqueness and individuality of aesthetic experience against the ubiquity of reproduction and commercial commodification of music and art in general.

Silence Performed

The 'classic' performance of 4'33" would be the premiere, given by pianist David Tudor in 1952. John Cage's 1986 version of the score gives the following description: 'NOTE: The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4'33" and the three parts were 33", 2'40", and 1'20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid' (Cage, 4'33"). Tudor re-enacted this performance in 1990 for a documentary film (Miller and Perlis). He also commented later on the importance

¹ In the 1953 score, published by C. F. Peters, New York 1993, EP 6777a. See also: Dunn 25; Cage, 4'33" (score in Cage's own calligraphy).

² John Cage's performance of 4'33" at the opening of the exhibition: Die 60er Jahre—Kölns Weg zur Kunstmetropole. Vom Happening zum Kunstmarkt, in Cologne (31 August 1986). Cage also reworked the score for this occasion. The performance was recorded on video by Klaus vom Bruch. See Daniels and Arns.

of reading the score while performing 4'33"—and that he even used different pedals for the three movements (See Schmidt).

William Fetterman points out that 'most performers do a David Tudor imitation rather than finding their own approach' (Fetterman 82). The first one to find radical new ways of performing 4'33" was indeed Cage himself. For Nam June Paik's experimental TV feature *A Tribute to John Cage*, filmed on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in 1972, he did two different versions of 4'33". The first one is a 'classic' interpretation at the piano, but rather than a concert hall, the venue is Harvard Square, a busy crossing in Cambridge, Massachusetts (which the voice-over terms 'the Times Square of the American brain') **[Figure 1]**. The second performance is set in Manhattan: 'The entire island is, so to speak, a concert hall', as Cage points out in the film. This time it has four instead of the original three movements. With the help of the *I Ching*, Cage has designated four spots on a map of New York for each of the four movements of 4'33". The first is situated in Harlem, the second between 203rd and 204th Street on the Hudson River, the third at Times Square and the fourth on Mitchell Place at Beekman. Each of these places is recorded on video for the duration of the corresponding movement, and it isn't until the four sequences have been assembled and broadcast that the full 'silent piece' is achieved **[Figure 2]**. Cage departs here from the 'traditional' live performance with a musical instrument by creating a new, medium-specific version of his 'silent piece', which is visible and audible only for the TV audience. The two versions of 4'33" have been shortened in Paik's 1973 edit and therefore actually fail to reach four minutes and thirty-three seconds. It also contains a series of entertaining interludes, such as Nam June Paik taking away Cage's microphone on a busy street in Harlem and questioning passers-by on music and ambient noise, with Cage visibly struggling to maintain his composure (this sequence is absent from the 1976 re-edit, which was cut down from sixty to twenty-nine minutes).



Figure 1. John Cage performs 4'33", piano version, Harvard square, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1972. Excerpt from *A Tribute to John Cage* by Nam June Paik (video still), 1973-1976.



Figure 2. John Cage performs 4'33", spatial distributed version, in NYC, 1972. Excerpt from *A Tribute to John Cage* by Nam June Paik (video still), 1973-1976.

On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the premiere of 4'33" in 2012, Inke Arns and I curated the exhibition *Sounds like Silence* at the HMKV Dortmund. The exhibition focused on homages and appropriations of Cage's silent piece by contemporary artists. The most difficult question was how to represent 4'33" in

the show, without falling in the trap of the ‘David Tudor imitation’ referred to above. If Cage throughout his life always updated the notations and his own performances of the ‘silent piece’—how to follow his approach without becoming an epigone? We worked with the dramaturg Jens Heitjohann, who developed a performance in public space: *In Begleitung [In the Company of]—4’33”* in twelve versions for one visitor each. Jens Heitjohann’s starting point was:

the question of how I could use Cage’s composition 4’33” to initiate a moment of disruption and irritation in a familiar public environment, which would become a moment of discovery and coming together of strangers. [...] A performance of 4’33” provides the framework for an encounter between performers and audience, whose interdependence it puts into focus, and an opportunity for listeners to embark on an encounter with themselves and with the constituents of the situation in which they experience the performance of the piece. I invited twelve inhabitants of Dortmund to create with me a version of 4’33” in the public space. The choice of venues is determined by their experiences, memories, and everyday life in an environment unknown to me. As companions, they invite members of the audience to follow them and attend a version of 4’33” performed at a venue they have chosen. (Jens Heitjohann in Daniel and Arns 261)

A different way to perform 4’33”, but also focusing on the uniqueness of aesthetic experience of each participant, is the online game *4 Minutes and 33 Seconds of Uniqueness* (2009) by the Finnish computer scientist and game designer Petri Söderström-Kelley. He explains: ‘You’ll win the game if you’re the only one playing the game at the moment in the world. The game checks over the internet if there are other people playing it at the moment and it’ll kill the game if someone else is playing it. You have to play the game for 4 minutes and 33 seconds’ (Purho, Kelley and Söderström). In a manner contrary to that of popular multiplayer online games, the experience is not collective. A kind of forced individuality is imposed on the gamer. Technically Petri Söderström-Kelley asks what the minimum requirements are for creating a computer game from source code and thus relates his programming to the musical minimalism of 4’33”.

Silence Recorded

Cage’s concept of silence is intricately related to the questions of presence and liveness. In general he did not like recordings, and preferred live performances.³ Any recording of 4’33” is really a paradox, as performing it ‘live’ is much easier

³ For example: ‘The reason they’ve no music in Texas is because they have recordings in Texas. Remove the recordings from Texas and somebody will learn to sing’ (‘Lecture on Nothing’ (1949), in Cage, *Silence* 126).

than recording it. Listening to the presence of sounds here and now is what Cage wants us to do. But with a recording of 4'33" we get quite a different experience: we listen to the faint sounds of a different time and space (on the record), paradoxically overlapping and interfering with the sounds of our present environment.

However, the seemingly trivial act of recording 4'33" is far more complex than expected. As the musician Ulrich Krieger put it: 'In the case of 4'33" and especially of a recording, a performer has to face the following question: What do I want to represent?'⁴ Is it a recording in a silent situation (microphone silence) or a technical silence (no signal)? Is it recorded with or without musicians—and in case there are musicians, which instruments do they have and what are they supposed to do: indicate the three movements, if so, by what actions?

Nonetheless, since 1974 there have been more than 54 recordings of 4'33" on vinyl, CD, or other formats.⁵ If you listen carefully, *they all sound quite different*. This relation of 4'33" to recording technology is traced by Liz Kotz back to the time of its conception: 'It is no coincidence that these permutations in modern music happened around mid-century. The composition of 4'33" is overdetermined by its relation to then-new technologies of sound recording and sound production' (Kotz 14). What Kotz calls "time brackets" that could be filled with any material, or none' is also true for recording media, which are developed to be 'neutral' containers, which are so to speak 'non intentional' to whatever happens during the time of recording.

These paradoxes of recording 4'33" are taken up by contemporary artists in time-space-media pieces with recording technology. Cage already loved to joke that 4'33" can be read as time duration and as well in terms of linear measurement: 4' (minutes or feet) and 33" (seconds or inches) add up to 81 inches (Kostelanetz 70).⁶ Carl Michael von Hausswolff's work 4'33" (81") transposed this double sense onto a 7-inch vinyl single. The resulting disc is engraved with an 81-inch-long spiraling groove that encapsulates nothing but silence. From a humorous appropriation of Cage's work, Hausswolff's unplayable record thus becomes a reflection on the impossibility of recording 4'33". Ryoji Ikeda's 4'33" (2010) creates a time-space 'image' of silence on sound film with 16mm blank film with Aaton timecode in a picture frame. It is a techno-poetical tableau close to Liz Kotz's ideas quoted above. Ikeda's 4'33" might also be related to the 'classical' visual

⁴ Ulrich Krieger in the booklet of: John Cage, *The Works for Saxophone*, vol. 3/4, mode records, 2010. Ulrich Krieger has recorded two versions of 4'33" for saxophone trio ('open window' version and studio version) and for each of the three movements of each version there is a separate track on the CD.

⁵ See the Discography in Daniels and Arns.

⁶ Another frequent apocryphal allusion is that 4 minutes 33 seconds translates to 273 seconds, while -273° Celsius equals 0° Kelvin.

analogies of silence, Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*.

Manon De Boer's video installation *Two Times 4'33"* (2007) invites the visitor to sit through the video recording of two performances of Cage's piece, performed by the Brussels-based pianist Jean-Luc Fafchamps in front of a small audience. In the first part the video, image is married to its synchronously recorded ambient sound, which is played in Dolby surround when the work is projected. In the second part, De Boer cut all sound. The camera travels in a long pan that begins where the first section does, at the piano, but then moves steadily along every member of the audience and finally travels outside the studio door to show a parochial landscape at the edge of the city centre cut through by telephone wires and animated by wind-blown bushes. None of this is heard. Viewed in a cinema setting, the second performance, and the second part of the projected film rely on the ambient silence of the live audience present in the exhibition space. What happens to the visitor, is an attention shift—in the first version you are listening to a film (-sound), in the second you are listening to where you are and who is present together with you.

Silence On the Air

Silence is a taboo in mass media today—technical and economical. If the signal is too low, an alarm function switches on an emergency program to fill the gap. Mass media are based on the so called 'attention economy'—income is generated by advertisement and the cost-per-minute is calculated by the rating statistics (audience measurements). Any moment of silence could be the occasion to switch channels—music tracks and announcements follow each other without respite, even radio news programs have background music to give the listeners a feeling of continuity.

Artists have used the interruption by silence in a complementary way to increase awareness of the medium. As early as 1931, the futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti had the idea to broadcast silences on the radio, as intermissions of a sound collage. His concept for the *sintesi radiofoniche* includes *I silenzi parlano fra di loro*:

15 sec di silenzio puro—do, re, mi, di flauto—8 sec di silenzio puro—
do, re, mi, di flauto—29 sec di silenzio puro—sol di pianoforte—do di
tromba—40 sec di silenzio puro—do di tromba—ve ve ve di pupo—11

sec di silenzio puro—1 minuto di rrrr di motore—11 sec di silenzio puro—oooo! stupito di bambina undicenne.⁷

Marinetti's unrealized concept has astonishing parallels to John Cage's first idea for a 'silent piece', dating from 1948, four years before the premiere of *4'33"*:

I have, for instance, several new desires (two may seem absurd, but I am serious about them): first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4 ½ minutes long—those being the standard lengths of 'canned' music—and its title will be *Silent Prayer*. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibly. And, second, to compose and have performed a composition using as instruments nothing but twelve radios. (Cage, 'A Composer's Confession')⁸

For sure, the Muzak Company did not 'buy' Cage's silence, and *Silent Prayer* like Marinetti's concept was not realised. The company, still active today, explains Muzak on its website: 'Founders of piped music and the science of how music affects the behavior of customers.'⁹ Muzak is a non-listening music, you may find it in elevators, airports, shopping malls and factories—but most of the time you will be not aware that it is there. Cage admittedly hated Muzak. He also disliked the radio as well as recorded music in general. So his *Silent Prayer* is meant to be a subtle subversion of the non-listening Muzak, because only in the moment it stops, you will become aware, that in fact it was there. Cage's concept was based on a shift of attention—from non-listening to listening—initiated by the silence interrupting the unheard sound.

The above quote also links *Silent Prayer* to what will become *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) for 12 radios and 24 performers. Astonishing details are already fixed here several years in advance of the actual compositions: the number of twelve radios and the duration of 4 ½ minutes for the 'silent piece'—which seems to be determined here by 'standard lengths' of 'canned music'—although, according to Cage, in 1952 the length of *4'33"* derived from chance operations! *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, predating the 'silent piece' by one year, is linked to silence in several ways. The first and also second performance of *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* was haunted by silence. The premiere because it was late at night, and in 1951

⁷ The sintesi radiofoniche were never broadcasted by Marinetti. A 1978 recording by composer Daniele Lombardi is included in the CD *Musica Futurista: The Art of Noises 1909-1935*, LTM Recordings (2006). For information on other performances of the sintesi radiofoniche see Fisher 245.

⁸ This lecture from 1948 had to wait until 1991 for its first publication.

⁹ <https://www.muzak.com>.

radio stations still went off the air at night (Cage and several others have told the story)—and for different reasons the second performance in 1959, at U.C. Berkeley’s Hertz Hall: ‘Unfortunately, no one had checked out the reception. In the event, the steel and concrete structure proved to be an impenetrable barrier to radio waves’ (Whiting).

But more important than this accidental silence is the structural logic of both compositions, which is closely related to them: *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for 12 radios and *4’33”* both have a double layer of contingency: first in the composition (chance operations), second in the unpredictable ‘live’ sounds of the radio waves (indeterminacy) or of the environment. Both compositions offer a sensitisation for auditory reception, but *4’33”* is so to say radically ‘unplugged’, doing away with the radio receivers and based on what Cage calls our ‘Happy New Ears’ only. With no intentionality and without the sound of musical instruments *4’33”* is a double negation that turns positive. For Cage, silence was an equivalent to life—not to death (as in Christian-Western culture) (See Daniels, ‘Your Silence’).

Silence Remediated

Ten years after *4’33”* Cage brought media technology back into the sequels of his ‘silent piece’. The score of his composition *0’00”*, (also *4’33” No. 2*) from 1962 reads: ‘In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action’ (Cage, ‘0’00”). Cage uses electronic amplification to turn even the slightest sound of a non-musical action into an intensive listening experience. I would dare to call *0’00”* the ‘re-plugged version’ of the original ‘unplugged’ silence of *4’33”* where the radios of *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* had been left out. Cage’s interest in media technology matched with his friendship to Marshall McLuhan. In a way, *0’00”* transforms McLuhan’s famous phrase ‘the medium is the message’ into a musical and physical experience. In fact, at the performance of *Reunion* (also called *0’00” No. 2*) in Toronto 1968 where John Cage and Marcel Duchamp played an amplified game of chess on stage, Marshall McLuhan attended the performance—but left early (as was his habit). *Reunion* could be called a ‘re-mixing’ of the Duchampian ready-made with McLuhan’s ‘medium-as-message’.

The re-mediation theory developed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their 1999 book takes up ideas by McLuhan from the 1960s. As McLuhan put it in one of his notorious TV appearances: ‘Movies tend to be the content of TV, and books and novels used to be the content of movies. So every time a new medium arrives, the old medium is the content. And it is highly observable—the real “massaging” done by the new medium—it is ignored’ (See Daniels, ‘Touching Television’).

This concept of re-mediation is also present in John Cage's continuous updating of his 'silent piece' which leads up to his one-and-only film, realised, in the last year of his life, with Henning Lohner, *One*¹¹ (1992). Here, the emptiness of the studio is a visual analogy to the acoustic silence of 4'33" forty years before.

0'00" Remediated

At the premiere of 0'00" in Tokyo 1962 the act of writing the score coincides or interferes with the performance of the piece. On stage Cage wrote the sentence which is the score, and this act of writing was itself subject to the maximum amplification mentioned in the score. A perfect autopoietic self referentiality emerges in this situation. Or in other words: the performative writing of 0'00" generates the acoustic experience *and* the score itself.

This procedure of remediating (James Pritchett calls it 'rebooting') of 4'33" could be compared to contemporary software-based generative art which has no fixed or final outcome (Pritchett). Such artworks, generated by a digital script, are updating the algorithmic aspects the Cage's indeterminacy which also present in the script of 0'00" as well as in the four more instructions added after its first performance to the score, one of which reads: 'No two performances to be of the same action...'.¹²

It comes as no surprise that such generative methods serve as further remediations of the Cagean silence. Christopher Jefferson and Ian Miguel launched a digital online version of *Reunion (0'00" No. 2)* at the University of St Andrews' School of Computer Science. As Victoria Miguel explains, this project tries to be as faithful as possible to the original indeterminate structure: 'They created two versions, one for use over the Internet through a web browser, the other for live performance; both use recorded, rather than live, music; the biggest deviation from the original version of *Reunion*... Digital Reunion now has a permanent home at johncage.org, where the online chess game will allow anyone who chooses to participate to play a game of chess, create the structure for the composition, and listen to *Reunion*' (Miguel). In their essay *Digital Reunion* Jefferson and Miguel go into more detail about the generative software: 'Rather than produce a single mapping, we generate a new unique mapping for each use, providing a unique experience for every user. With over a googol (1 followed by 100 zeroes) possible configurations, this means every user gets his/her own unique interpretation' (Jefferson and Miguel).

Matthieu Saladin continues on this track and takes up Cage's own remediation of silence with 0'00" as (4'33" No. 2). In his audio piece 4'33"/0'00" (2008) Saladin subjects the first release of a recording of 4'33" (by Gianni-Emilio Simonetti, Cramps label, 1974) to a similar procedure as Cage does for a 'disciplined action'

in *0'00"*: he amplifies the sounds as much as possible. Saladin thus creates a contemporary digital tribute which transforms *4'33"* itself into *0'00"* [Figure 3]. The cover of the artist's mini-CD reprises the design of the Edition Peters title page of Cage's scores for *4'33"* and *0'00"*. The minimalist readymade concept was also applied to the pricing, with the disc retailing at € 4.33.

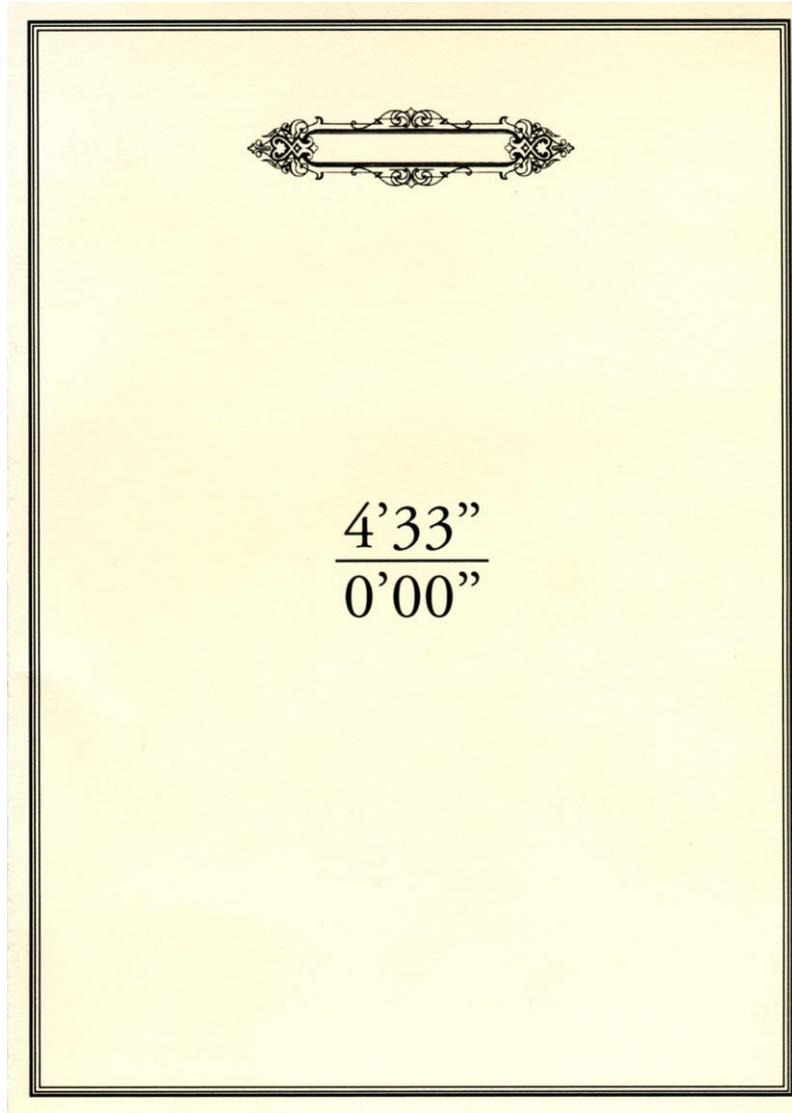


Figure 3. Matthieu Saladin *4'33"/0'00"* (2008). Cover of the Mini CD.
© Editions Provisoires. Courtesy the artist.

The Opening Performance Orchestra's (OPO) most recent project adds another layer to this ongoing remediation by contemporary artists. OPO explains the new release via e-mail:

The release will be in a usual form, so digipack with booklet inside. But there will be no CD available. There won't be any music. There will be only a flash memory with a 4.33kB data file (*0'00"* of silence). The shortest piece that can be released on a CD has 2 seconds and therefore

the CD medium is not usable as it cannot express zero time. Therefore, in the digipack will be a sticker with a file in WAV format of 4.33 kB. This piece actually lasts 0'00" and the file is 4.33 kB. So we publish 0'00", the second of Cage's silent pieces, with a direct reference to the first silent piece 4'33".¹⁰

This release shifts attention from the music to the theoretical context of 0'00" with a booklet including contributions by Richard Kostelanetz, Petr Kotík, Kim Cascone, Dove Bradshaw, Sean Bronzell and Dieter Daniels. For Opening Performance Orchestra the conceptual side of 0'00" exceeds its performative value.

These two digital versions of 0'00" develop different strategies of re-mediation: Saladin works with what Jan Thoben calls the 'unintended medium specific noise' of analog recordings of silence and transfers it into an immersive digital soundscape dominated by the rising, storm-like noise of the vinyl disc.¹¹ The release of the Opening Performance Orchestra copes with the question of digital silence per se. How silent the flash memory will be depends on what in audio technology is called the noise floor. 'Internally generated noise is caused by the physical properties of electronic devices, and it's this type of noise that usually determines the noise floor of a system or a device... Electronic circuit noise is largely unavoidable and is present in all electronic circuitry (not only audio interfaces)' ('What is the Noise Floor'). Again, we are facing the issue that there is no such thing as silence. As a proof of concept it might be worthwhile to remediate the release of the Opening Performance Orchestra with the same procedure proposed by Matthieu Saladin according to the maximum amplification mentioned in the original score of 0'00" and listen to the result.

Résumé¹²

In drawing attention to various instances of the 'expansion' of Cage's 'silent piece' I have not meant to present a 'theory' of his work and its reception. Together these reperformances and remediations of Cage's work pay homage to the specificity of any aesthetic reception. This individual specificity is also at the core of Cage's silence, which abides as a nucleus of inspiration that is reanimated by the references, revisions, re-workings, follow-ups, creative misunderstandings and refreshing re-enactments of 4'33". Cage anticipated this typology of reception in

¹⁰ Opening Performance Orchestra in emails to the author, 6 July and 6 August 2022.

¹¹ For an overview of sound pieces related to the 'medium specific noise' of vinyl discs see Thoben, 'Media Parasites'. See also Zeitz.

¹² This text is a remediated version of the earlier 'Silence Expanded: The Legacy of 4'33"', published in Schröder and Straebel, 213-23. A typological approach similar to that in this text, with different types of silence compared, can be heard on the audio CD *Sounds Like Silence* (Arns and Daniels).

one of his first written statements on his 'silent piece' in 1954: 'it moves in all directions and will be received in unpredictable ways'.¹³

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¹³ Letter from John Cage to Helen Wolff (1954). Cited in Daniels and Arns.

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