

# The Violence of Silence and 4'33"

Sally Macarthur

**W**HAT DOES JOHN CAGE'S MUSICAL WORK 4'33" DO WHEN IT GIVES VOICE TO SILENCE? Does silence rise above, even drown out, the noise of ego-driven stardom that has so systematically set about dominating, perhaps even destroying, music? What happened to the 'Cage' that eliminated himself from the work? Did the myriad versions of this musician, artist and philosopher disappear into a silence with no voice? Can silence be read as violence? Or is it only read as violence by those without a voice? If so, did Cage *really* suffer the violence of silence? Or was the multiplicity of this figure resurrected as a superstar? What did silence do to the marginalised in the history of music? Did they suffer the violence of silence? What happens when the 'I' who listens keeps re-turning (deliberately hyphenated) to silence, as Karen Barad would put it, of re-turning as in turning it over, and over again, to gain a 'thicker' understanding of what it is doing (*Meeting*)? How do the past, present, and future enfold through one another, and through me, the 'I' who listens, as I re-turn to the silence of violence? What does sound as a multiplicity do when it emerges out of 'silence'? Or, to put it another way, what happens when the multiplicity, in which I am infinitely entangled, connects with the ongoing-ness of Cage's 'no such thing as silence'?

As 'I' listen to the imagined silence of this work, casting myself as a process-oriented self, as a 'they/we' rather than as an I, in this essay we will conceive of each minute of 4'33" as a period of 15 years to map the ways in which violence and

silence can be read into music's feminist history. The minutes will be plotted as follows: the first from 1952 to 1966; the second from 1967 to 1981; the third from 1982 to 1996; the fourth from 1997 to 2011; and the remaining 33 seconds roughly from 2012 to 2022.

Seventy years ago, Cage offered silence as the material for a musical work. As we re-turn to *4'33"*, listening to the imagined silence of this work—a silence that is much more than silence—aware that we are producing this silence as much as it is producing us, we fleetingly wonder why it has gone down in music history as one of the most controversial (Scharm), but also one of the most famous (Gann), works of the twentieth century. When an imagined frame is wrapped around a duration of silence in a concert hall, and the ensuing random sounds heard in the event of silence produce a musical work, the composer may appear to fail to eliminate himself from the work. He may appear to fail to counter the dominant narrative of the composer as central to the work. The work-ness of the work sustains and nurtures its (and the composer's) everlastingness, which is a point made by Lydia Goehr. For Goehr, the 'work-concept', originating around 1800, carries the imperialising ideals and tendencies that were prevalent in the nineteenth century into the present and future. The work-concept, as she conceives it—which, for others, is better understood as the 'work-ness' of the work to account for its plurality, recognising that there are different kinds of musical works from different periods of history (Steingo 82)—in a quasi-clandestine manner perpetuates those earlier values so that they become normalised in the present and future while floating free of their specific time and place. The material of *4'33"* is random sound, yet it is hailed as a work of pure genius. Those values surrounding 'genius' and 'masterwork' are transported into the present while simultaneously sustaining the idea of the transcendence and timelessness of the work. In this imaginary idea, silence constructs a masterwork and a heroic composer. But, in so doing, does it also construct a violent silence?

We re-turn to the idea of an imaginary silence, this time using *4'33"* as a model to think about the violence of silence—and the silence of violence—in the history of marginalised female composers and feminist musicologists who attended to that history. Does silence, as implied by Macarthur et al., produce the syndrome expressed in the well-known cliché that 'what goes around comes around'? Are women's creative contributions to the history of music constantly emerging from and retreating into silence? Are their contributions going around and around, moving in and out of silence? Is their history governed by silence? In 1952, the year in which *4'33"* was premiered by David Tudor, several composers, as listed in *Wikipedia* ('List of Women Composers by Birth Date'), were born: Kristi Allik (Canada), Judith Bingham (UK), Helen Bowater (NZ), Nicole Carigna (Canada), Mayo Ciobanu (Romania), Tina Davidson (US), Janet Dunbar (US), Margaret Hoenderdos (Netherlands), Grażyna Krzanowska (Poland), Bunita Marcus (US),

Alla Pavolova (Russia), Kaija Saariaho (Finland) and Janet Sinclair Wells (UK). Of these, Saariaho emerges as 'one of the foremost women composers on the planet and one of the leading creative figures of her generation of either gender; a truly original artist with a very distinctive musical style and personal voice' (Rickards). However, as a collective, these composers born in 1952 (and the other women born before and after 1952) are tarred with the 'woman composer' brush. Is this a form of violence? It is an irony that for 'man composers' gender is silent. They are simply composers. Is this a case of silence being used as power (an assumption attached to the dominant term) and noise (the naming of gender) being used as the violence of subjugation? Does the label 'woman composer' misrepresent the identities of those relegated to this category? Since the mid-1980s, feminist work more broadly has been at pains to point out that identity is not simply the difference between male and female. Theorists of intersectionality claim that marginal identities are usually negotiating 'interlocking systems of oppression' (Tiainen et al. 213). These include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, heteronormativity, age, and others *ad infinitum*. Silence. And, as Tiainen et al. would also observe, to continuously spawn more and more categories of oppression that then form into more and more grids with pre-constituted boundaries, is unhelpful, especially because each category creates an identity that is static and unchanging. Violence. The 'woman composer' is more than a woman, more than a composer, more than a static identity category that wants to contain her/it/them. As Tiainen et al. would argue, identity is always fluid and changing, always in a state of process, always in a state of becoming. Liberation.

What does feminist research look like in each 'minute' of the imagined silence of 4'33", a silence that is much more than itself? Is silence contained by violence, and vice versa? As part of the apparatus that produces the silent-violent phenomena of the work, we are drawn to thinking about how it is entangled in the past, present, and future. Recalling Barad, we think about the role of memory and the implications of the unfurling feminist musicological research in the here-now and there-then ('Diffracting Diffraction'). As Barad puts it, 'there is no moving beyond, no leaving the "old" behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new. There is nothing that is not new' ('Diffracting Distraction' 168). As this history passes through our own body, we become enmeshed in the social and material world of which it and we are constituted, producing versions of the present and the past simultaneously. The assemblage of 4'33", into which we are interwoven, produces a 'here-now' and a 'there-then' that oscillates between pure silence and pure violence.

### **The First Minute (1952–1966)**

From pure silence to silence. We are an infant when 4'33" is premiered in 1952. We do not know of its existence. We do not stir yet to register the existence of

music per se. But we are soothed when we listen to our father playing Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and the 'boogie-woogie' on our upright piano as we drift off to sleep each night. We fall in love with music, triggering a becoming-music.

### **The Second Minute (1967–1981)**

Silence. We are a student at the Sydney Conservatorium (1969–1972). No one asks if there are any women who compose music because no one thinks to ask. Their absence assumes their non-existence.

Silence. When activist feminism is on the streets demanding equality with men, we are completing a music degree, majoring in musicology at The University of Adelaide (1974–1976). We notice that women composers are absent from the curriculum. We enquire as to their whereabouts. The institution thinks this is a strange question to ask. Violence.

Emerging from silence. Elizabeth Wood (1980) reveals that much more is going on in the 1970s in the feminist musicological sphere than is widely known. Her landmark essay is published, not in a music journal, where it is unlikely to have been welcomed, but in the feminist-friendly journal *Signs*. Wood explains that in the margins of institutional musicology, scholars are painstakingly rewriting women into the history of music. She indicates that they have been doing this for many years.

### **The Third Minute (1982–1996)**

Emerging from Silence. We are a sessional lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium and Sydney University. On the one hand, we are perpetuating the idea of the masterwork and genius composer, teaching subjects such as harmony and counterpoint, and aural training with their focus on the canon. On the other hand, we inaugurate courses on women in music and gender and music. We try to make sense of a history that is only just emerging from silence. Feminist musicologist Susan McClary issues a warning that 'the voices calling for a feminist criticism are those of well-established men' but that their appeals could be read 'as taunts, as invitations to professional suicide' ('Undoing of Opera' ix).

The Violence of Silence (1991–1996). Professional Suicide. Critical, cultural, feminist, and queer readings of music suddenly flood the market. Silence erupts into violence. Vitriolic, sharply polarised debates ensue. Abuse is hurled at the perpetrators who are proposing that music is not, as customarily assumed, a timeless, neutral entity. Perpetrators argue that even so-called 'abstract' music carries the values of the context in which it is composed and performed. Perpetrators show that attitudes towards women and other marginalised

categories such as sexuality—as if they are homogenous, stable categories—can be read into the music itself: the masculine (strong) cadence versus the feminine (weak) cadence; the violence of Beethoven with its virulent masculinity replete with metaphors of rape versus the ‘eternally feminine’ Schubert (was he a homosexual?); and the subverting of norms by women and queer composers; and many more examples *ad infinitum*. Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings* (1991) is singled out for a savage ‘dressing down’. She withdraws. An impasse is reached. Both sides retreat into a violent silence.

The Silence of Violence. Out of a long period of silence, new information emerges and becomes public. McClary explains that in the 1970s her work, offering ‘different’ (from conventional) interpretations about the mainstream composers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is blocked by the gatekeepers who refuse to publish it (‘Lives in Musicology’). The tenure clock is ticking. She must ‘publish or perish.’ In 1975 she presents her work at the American Musicological Society conference with a paper on the purely formal aspects of a madrigal by Monteverdi. But it provokes a ‘quasi-riot’, quelled temporarily in the session itself, flaring up again in a restaurant where one of McClary’s detractors sexually assaults her. Fearmongering erupts into violence. They are outraged that she has a new (and highly original) approach to understanding the music of that period. She says that her ‘interpretations involved neither feminism (I would not have been caught dead at the time dealing with “mere” women’s issues) nor canon bashing. In retrospect, I recognize that this stormy reception had everything to do with my gender’ (11). In the wake of *Feminine Endings*, she receives death and rape threats, and on one occasion the police remove her from her apartment to safety (11-12). Hatemongering erupts into violence. Pure Violence.

### **The Fourth Minute (1997–2011)**

Violence retreats into silence. Tensions begin to dissipate. The research tapers off. What seems like a future full of hope in the 1990s becomes a ‘shattered dream’ in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Feminist research on women’s classical music all but disappears and simultaneously its performance in the concert hall also begins to dry up (Macarthur et al.). The violence of silence.

Silence. In the background, feminism at large moves on from binary thought, having subjected constructions of male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object *ad infinitum* to rigorous critique, showing their limitations. Feminist philosophy reclaims the ‘missing people’ of humanism while avoiding their resegregation (Braidotti). Feminist musicology claims the ‘missing people’ of music, segregating them as ‘woman composers’. It is only faintly registering that a total focus on women does its own violence to categories that are excluded (sexuality, ethnicity, race, and so on). Violence.

Feminist philosophy is working in the realm of post-humanist thought, which includes Deleuze and new materialism. Feminist musicology continues to grapple with hierarchical identity categories but realises that it has become stranded in a cul-de-sac. It lights on Deleuzian philosophy as a way out. It is attracted to theories of becoming and futurity which give precedence over being, and here and now. Liberation. But as this work progresses, subjectivity and identity categories begin to disappear into silence. Becoming-woman emerges as a liberating force for both male and female composers and composers of every identity-persuasion. Becoming-woman is posited as a movement away from the (male) norm. There is no becoming-man, write Deleuze and Guattari, 'because man is majoritarian par excellence' (291). Accordingly, man, like woman, must pass through a becoming-woman to open up the new, to move away from what is already known. But, in so doing, we wonder whether this gives man the tools to reassert himself as inventor and originator, and to assume his rightful place as the supreme being of music. Are identity-categories still the dominant modes of thought? Is the 'work-concept' and the valorising of the heroic (male) composer still being perpetuated? Is 'becoming-woman' used as a tool of violence? Silence.

Emerging from a thoughtful silence, feminist philosopher Claire Colebrook argues that despite the criticism of 'becoming-woman' appearing to detach itself from the 'real', which is to say from the lived experience of oppression and the struggle to overcome it, its refusal to be oppositional is preferable to an identity politics that 'freezes such divisions and identifications at the level of humanist recognition' (379). Retreating into a deep, thoughtful silence.

### **Roughly 33 Seconds (2012–2022)**

Violence. The neoliberal higher education music institution is populated by a hyper-ego-driven, self-centred individual who prioritises entrepreneurial flair. The dollar and gimmicky catchphrases become the primary value, cancelling out aesthetic value. It produces a heightened star system (Smyth). However, despite claims about widening participation and creating equal social access, the star system is effectively grounded in inequality. Neoliberalism mobilises feminism as a marketing tool. Music mobilises the languages of entrepreneurialism—appropriated from the languages of excellence in aesthetic theory—as a marketing tool, producing violent acts on music. The superstar syndrome emerges as a 'control freak'. It appropriates the languages of entrepreneurialism and chants a bunch of one-liner marketing slogans to claim that 'the new virtuosity' has arrived (Hope and Devenish). It fails to notice that the concept, 'the new virtuosity', was first used in 1963 to consider the aesthetics of 'new' music (Salzman). Rigid categories are maintained under neoliberalism's (violent) watch. Violence.

Violence. Colebrook acknowledges that the brutality of the 'real' world is not necessarily solved in a post-humanist thinking system. Yet, Colebrook also counters this idea. Even if the invisible/silent forces of the 'virtual' realm may appear to be dormant, or yet to be actualised, they are nonetheless active. They have 'real' effects when repetitive patterns of thought are transformed. Colebrook makes convincing arguments about using a Deleuzian thought system to rethink the injustices of the 'real' world. Liberation.

Barely noticing these conversations, feminist work in Australian music continues to uphold identity categories. It convenes a conference in 2017. One speaker produces statistics to make the case for change (Hope) but fails to acknowledge how statistics are used to validate what is already known, that they support a narrative of victimhood within the template of stable category-thinking. We might ask, why use statistics if each time they are repeated they remain the same, reinforcing the status quo? The outcome of the conference, in which this statistical 'evidence' is aired, is a book (Kouvaras et al.). Will this change the status quo? Or will 'what goes around keep coming around?' Silence.

In the US, the African American music theorist Philip Ewell is challenging Music Theory to address the 'white frame' through which 'abstract' theoretical knowledge about music is filtered. Music Theory's 'heavyweights' react vehemently in one of its most prized journals, the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* (Symposium), apparently unaware that they are unleashing unfettered violence upon Ewell in the form of a racial assault as they defend their 'white' discipline. Violence.

Silence. Is identity politics in music a never-ending, unsolved question? Are we forever at an impasse? Tiainen et al. invoke the concept of 'the middle', suggesting it can be understood in three ways: phenomena and beings are constantly in *the middle* of emerging into existence; relations are instances of 'mutual affectivity in which the involved terms actualize afresh in a constitutive relation to one another' (212); and the middle is 'a situation-bound region of in-mixing from within which intersectional differences emerge, re-emerge and transform' (212).

What does silence do when it becomes the middle? Does it encourage 'the coming together of opposite qualities within' (Anzaldúa)? Does it move in-between these opposite qualities, avoiding separateness and being apart? Do we agree with Barad that difference 'is not some universal concept for all places and all times, but is itself a multiplicity within/of itself' ('Diffracting Diffraction' 176)? Do we agree with Barad that 'boundaries don't hold', that 'times, beings, places, bleed through one another' (179)? If times, beings, identities, and places are in a constant state of transition and boundaries do not hold, then we might suggest that the 'I' who listens to the violence of silence—and the silence of violence—as

it has been threaded through this paper is also listening to the ongoing patterns of behaviour in which that 'I' is entangled. But as this multiply conceived 'I' keeps listening/observing, so these behaviours entangled in the silence of violence begin to change and reconfigure themselves. As Barad puts it, 'this "I" is of the diffraction pattern ... already multiply dispersed and diffracted through spacetime' (181-2). Silence becomes matter mattering. 'I' keep re-turning to silence.

### **Acknowledgement**

I wish to sincerely thank my colleagues Bronwyn Davies and Paul Watt who read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper.

**SALLY MACARTHUR** is Associate Professor of Musicology (Adjunct) and Director of the Musicology and Ethnomusicology Hub at The University of Adelaide. For many years she was the Director of Academic Program (Music and Music Therapy) at Western Sydney University where she now holds an honorary adjunct position. Her musicological work is internationally recognised for its traversing of disciplinary boundaries, incorporating fields such as poststructuralism, cultural and feminist theories, new materialism and Deleuzian philosophy. She is the author of two monographs, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music* (2002) and *Towards a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Politics of Music* (2010), and co-editor of three books, *Music's Immanent Future: The Deleuzian Turn in Music Studies* (2016), *(Inter)cultural Issues and Musical Contexts* (2006), and *Musics and Feminisms* (1999). Her several essays appear in edited collections with distinguished international publishers, such as the University of Michigan Press, Aboriginal Studies Press, Bloomsbury, Routledge, and Böhlau-Verlag, and she has published numerous articles in highly regarded journals, such as *Musicology Australia*, the *Journal of Music Research Online*, the *British Journal of Music Education*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*, and *Cultural Studies Review*. Her current project is investigating the relationships between gender, marginality, and civility within institutional music settings, specifically looking at the dynamics of work cultures in academic music settings. She is also working with posthuman and new materialist philosophies to rethink the relationship between human beings and music, challenging the human-centred, ego-driven approaches to music-making and the study of music that are attributable to neoliberalism. She is a Member of the Fay Gale Centre for Research on Gender and the J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, both based at The University of Adelaide. Sally serves as a Section Editor for the *Journal of Music Research Online* and is a life member of the Musicological Society of Australia. As a



performer, Sally is a pianist, keyboard improviser and organist. Email: [sally.macarthur@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:sally.macarthur@adelaide.edu.au).

## Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Barad, Karen. 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together Apart.' *Parallax* 20.3 (2014): 168-87. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927623>>.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 36.6 (2019): 31-61. <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0263276418771486>>. 23 Aug. 2022.
- Colebrook, Claire. 'Humanist Posthumanism, Becoming Woman and the Powers of the "Faux."' *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 16.3 (2022): 379-401. <<https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/epdf/10.3366/dlgs.2022.0483>>. 23 Aug. 2022.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Ewell, Philip A. 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame.' *Music Theory Online* 26.2 (2020): 1-29. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4020545>>. 23 Aug 2022.
- Gann, Kyle. 'From No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33".' *New Music USA* (1 April 2010). <<https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/from-no-such-thing-as-silence-john-cages-433/>>. 23 Aug. 2022.
- Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Hope, Cat. 'Working Towards Gender Equality and Empowerment in Australian Music Culture.' *A Century of Composition by Women: Against the Odds*. Ed. Linda Kouvaras, Maria Grenfell and Natalie Williams. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 307-23.
- , and Louise Devenish. 'The New Virtuosity: A Manifesto for Contemporary Sonic Practice.' *Twitter*. 5 November 2020. <<https://twitter.com/catahope/status/1324217379929272320?lang=en>>. 30 June 2021.
- Kouvaras, Linda, Maria Grenfell, and Natalie Williams (eds). *A Century of Composition by Women: Against the Odds*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
- 'List of Women Composers by Birth Date.' *Wikipedia*. Undated. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_women\\_composers\\_by\\_birth\\_date](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women_composers_by_birth_date)>. 23 Aug. 2022.

- Macarthur, Sally, D. Bennett, T. Goh, S. Hennekam and C. Hope. 'The Rise and Fall, and the Rise (Again) of Feminist Research in Music: "What Goes Around Comes Around."' *Musicology Australia* 39.2 (2017): 73-95. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08145857.2017.1392740>>.
- McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1991.
- . 'Lives in Musicology: A Life in Musicology—Stradella and Me.' *Acta Musicologica* 91.1 (2019): 5-20. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/727281>>.
- . 'The Undoing of Opera: Toward a Feminist Criticism of Music' in Catherine Clément. *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. London: Virago Press, 1989, xi-xviii.
- Rickards, Guy. 'Contemporary Composer: Kaija Saariaho.' *Gramophone* 7 March 2019. <<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/contemporary-composer-kaija-saariaho>>. 17 Aug. 2022.
- Salzman, Eric. 'Report from New York: The New Virtuosity.' *Perspectives of New Music* 1.2 (1963): 174-78. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/832116>>.
- Scharm, Betsy. '4'33": Work by Cage.' *Britannica*. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/433-by-Cage>>. 23 Aug 2022.
- Smyth, John. *The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars, and Neoliberal Ideology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Steingo, Gavin. 'The Musical Work Reconsidered, In Hindsight.' *Current Musicology* 97 (2014): 81-112. <<https://doi.org/10.7916/D8K078VG>>.
- Symposium on Philip Ewell's SMT 2019 Plenary Paper, 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame.' *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* 12 (2019): 125-214.
- Tiainen, Milla, T. Lepänen, K. Kontturi and T. Mehrabi. 'Making Middles Matter: Intersecting Intersectionality with New Materialisms.' *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 28.3 (2020): 211-23. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2020.1725118>>.
- Wood, Elizabeth. 'Review Essay: Women in Music.' *Signs* 6 (1980): 283-97. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173927>>.