

# The Seriocomedy of Silence

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**A** MILD SPRING DAY, 1988. IN THE WORDS OF ERIK SATIE, IT WAS ‘VERY NINE O’CLOCK IN the morning’. A convoy of trucks pulled up outside the performance space in the centre of Adelaide and a team of removalists began pushing twenty pianos on trolleys. The pianos were placed in locations marked on the floor to form a spiral; the removalists and trucks departed. The explanation for this unusual event, which had the aura of a ritual procession, emerged in the afternoon when twenty pianists sat down to perform 4’33”. The conductor, standing on a podium at the centre of the spiral dressed in white tie and tails, indicated the beginnings and ends of the work’s three movements by moving his arms in a circular fashion like the hands of a clock, using the method described by Cage in the conductor’s part of *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. The assembled pianists obediently closed and opened the lids of the pianos on cue. The audience’s reactions were only detectable by the sounds they made. There was some restless shuffling of feet, a few coughs, occasional chuckles, guffaws and nervous titters; but mostly the audience sat immobile and in silence. There was no way of knowing whether they were wholly absorbed in the experience, or their minds were wandering to thoughts of what they going to have for dinner, or they were intimidated by the etiquette of concert-going that replaces ‘you have the right to remain silent’ with

‘you must remain silent’. No mobile phones rang; they had not yet become the scourge of concert halls. Someone said afterwards: ‘The silence was deafening’.<sup>1</sup>

4’33” has been performed by many ensembles, including symphony orchestras. Is silence greater, if not actually ‘louder’, when performed by a large group? The silence of a crowd—bowing their heads in silence on a solemn occasion or turning their backs and refusing to cheer a politician—can be a very powerful statement. But silence has a very different significance when it is the silence of the oppressed. The composer, poet and *zutiste* Ernest Cabaner (1833-1881) claimed that he would need five military bands to adequately express silence in music. Cabaner’s claim was humorous; the incongruity of scale—the absurdly disproportionate means applied to achieve the outcome—is a familiar trope of humour. In the spirit of the Parisian avant-garde of the era—groups such as the *Zutistes*, *Hydropathes*, and *Incohérents*—Cabaner’s humour was directed at Symbolist poets, for whom silence was a recurrent and serious motif.

The discourse of silence, of which 4’33” is part, has ancient origins and encompasses diverse religions, philosophies and cultures. In the nineteenth century it bifurcates into a serious poetic, often religious, discourse, and a humorous—usually satirical or parodical—discourse of silence.

In Symbolist poetry from Baudelaire onwards silence is a recurring theme. For Mallarmé ‘*la musique du silence*’ had a profound quasi-religious significance. In the poem *Sainte*, the patron saint of music, Saint Cecilia, is called a ‘*musicienne du silence*’ (Mallarmé, *Les Poésies* 73). Mallarmé sought a compromise between the immense power of Wagner’s musicodramatic art, about which he felt ambivalent, and *l’esprit français*: a compromise that could be achieved through the musicalisation of language. The whiteness of the blank page and the empty spaces between words and lines were silences that could also be ‘composed’: ‘The intellectual framework of the poem is concealed and held—takes place—in the space that isolates the stanzas and amid the white of the paper: a significant silence that is no less beautiful to compose than verses’ (Mallarmé, *Œuvres* 2 659). The theme of silence recurs in the Russian Symbolists Soloviev, Blok, Biely, in Rilke, in Pound and in Eliot—wherever Symbolism exerted influence.

We are not obliged to accept a simple binary opposition of the humorous and the serious. Humour can also be a serious business; it may contain as much truth about the seriocomedy of life as drama or tragedy (De Silva). Most discussions about 4’33” insist upon its seriousness and argue that it is not a joke or a hoax. But humour is multidimensional: paradox, absurdity, parody, satire, incongruity,

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<sup>1</sup> The performance was part of the Breakthrough Festival, directed by the author, 15-16 October 1988.

irony, self-mockery, wordplay, nonsense and illogicality are some of its many forms. When John Cage appeared on the television game show *I've Got a Secret* in 1960, he was warned that some viewers might laugh at his performance of *Water Walk*, which involved the use, *inter alia*, of a rubber duck, a bathtub and an electric mixer. He replied calmly 'I consider laughter preferable to tears'. He was echoing the epigraph of Rabelais' second comic novel *Gargantua* (1534): '*mieux est de ris que de larmes écrire*' ('It is better to write about laughter than tears'). This sentiment also served as a motto for many French *fin-de-siècle* humourists, notably those associated with *Le Chat Noir* cabaret. In the birth of modernism humour was one of the driving forces. If a defining feature of modernism was its rejection of the past, then humour was its most powerful weapon.

On 16 August 1952, less than two weeks before the first performance of *4'33"*, John Cage organised *Untitled Event*, also known as *Theater Piece No.1*, at Black Mountain College. The performers determined the content of their own contributions and were given a score by Cage indicating when they were to perform or not perform. In Cage's recollection,

There were ladders, which you could climb to read or to recite texts. I climbed up there myself and delivered a lecture. There were also poems by M. C. Richards and Charles Olson, piano by David Tudor, films projected on the ceiling and the walls of the room. Finally there were Rauschenberg's white canvases, while he himself played old records on an antique phonograph and Merce Cunningham improvised amidst and all around that. (Cage 165)

Cage repeatedly acknowledged the impetus that Rauschenberg's white paintings gave to the creation of *4'33"*. But the connection between monochromatic white paintings and silence has a longer history.

What colour is silence? White and black are the main contenders, but white has dominated the discourse. For some it is the silence of a snow-covered landscape, for others the blank page or canvas. White is not emptiness—it contains all frequencies of light and in that sense is positive, a fullness—just as Thoreau and Cage found silence to be.

In 1868 André Gill, founder president of the *Hydropathes*, published his parodies of eighteen paintings and sculptures from the 1868 Salon, including a monochromatic white parody of Ludovic Piette's Salon painting *Effet de neige* (*Effect of Snow*). In the curious history of monochromatic paintings in various colours from the late nineteenth century, one work in particular stands out. Founded in 1882 by Jules Lévy, the *Arts incohérents* held a series of exhibitions in the 1880s. The premise of these parodies of the official Salon was 'drawings by

people who don't know how to draw', although many contributors were accomplished artists who agreed to 'abide by the rules' (Riout). At the 1883 exhibition the humourist Alphonse Allais, a native of Honfleur like his good friend Erik Satie, exhibited a monochromatic white painting, *Première Communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige* (*First Communion of Anaemic Young Girls in a Snowstorm*).<sup>2</sup>

In the following year Allais exhibited several works including the 'score' of a composition entitled *les Grandes Douleurs sont muettes—Marche funèbre incohérente*, (*Great Sufferings are Mute—Incoherent Funeral March*), which consists of eight empty staves, bearing a striking resemblance to David Tudor's reconstruction of the original 1952 manuscript of *4'33"*. As if aware of the prescience of his work, Allais described himself in the exhibition catalogue as a 'student of the masters of the 20th century'. The painting and the score were reproduced some years later in Allais' *Album primo-avrilisque* (*April Fool's Day Album*) with six other bizarrely titled monochromes in various colours. The silent funeral march was renamed *Marche Funèbre pour un grand homme sourd* (*Funeral March for a Great Deaf Man*). The performers are instructed to 'occupy themselves solely with counting the bars' (Allais), although there is no evidence that it was ever performed. As a pioneering work of conceptual art, exhibiting it constituted the 'performance'. From white canvas to empty staves: Allais made the same conceptual leap as John Cage would more than half a century later. The blank white canvas, the blank score, and the empty page are places to be inscribed upon—or not—by shadows, notes, or words.

In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam short story *Le secret de l'ancienne musique* (1878), which is dedicated ironically to Richard Wagner, a new work by 'a certain German composer' opens with a solo for the Chinese hat (*chapeau chinois*), an obscure percussion instrument found only in military bands. The conductor declares that a French orchestra would not dream of giving 'a defective performance of a composer's intentions ... *whatever country he may come from*'. An elderly player with an instrument is found, but at the rehearsal it is discovered that the composer has given the hapless player a part of 'almost insurmountable difficulty'. The part consists entirely of silences, in fact a 'CRESCENDO of silences'. The player takes up the challenge; such is the subtlety and artistry of his playing that 'it sometimes seemed that it could be heard!' The player receives a great ovation, but resigns from the job, declaring 'I don't understand it at all! I can't play it! It's too difficult ... Art is finished! We are falling into the void' (Villiers). Mallarmé's ambiguous feelings about Wagner and his preoccupation with the music of silence become a satirical fantasy in the spirit of E. T. A. Hoffman in Villiers' story.

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<sup>2</sup> For information about the Parisian avant-garde, the author is indebted to the research of Daniel Grojnowski, notably *Comiques: d'Alphonse Allais à Charlot* (Grojnowski).

In Allais' *Marche funèbre*, exhibited in the year after Wagner's death, the deceased might have been the master of Bayreuth himself. In *Hommage (à Wagner)*, which begins with the words '*Le silence déjà funèbre*' ('the already funereal silence') (Mallarmé, *Les Poésies* 117), Mallarmé referred to him ambivalently as 'the god Richard Wagner'. When *Marche funèbre* reappeared in the *Album primo-avrilesque* as a funeral march 'for a great deaf man' the target must surely be Beethoven, who in the nineteenth century became the epitome of the Artist as Hero. Allais' march was the negative space of the funeral march in the *Eroica* Symphony, composed to celebrate 'the memory of a great man', or 'on the death of a hero'. Wagner or Beethoven, god or hero—the real target of the parody was the cult of the great artist.

In Léon Bloy's *Le musicien de silence*, the protagonist is an impoverished, misunderstood genius who has spent twenty-five years composing his masterpiece, 'a gigantic work, a kind of symphonic Ramayana ... which could not be recovered after his death'. The extraordinary title of this work was *Le Silence*. For music to be perfect or divine, 'it must be SILENT, shut in, cloistered in the most profound Silence'. Beethoven 'aspired to Silence and for that reason was granted the grace of deafness in order to better hear his genius sing' (Bloy). Is silence the music of the future? In *futurum*, the third piece in Erwin Schulhoff's *Fünf Pittoresken* for piano, dedicated to the Dadaist Georg Gross, consists entirely of rests of various lengths, to be played 'with expression and feeling'. In the novel *Hebdomeros* (1929) by the Surrealist artist Giorgio de Chirico, we read of a silent musical performance in a building that 'resembled a German consulate in Melbourne'. In the middle of a vast room inside the building is 'an enormous grand piano with its top up; without standing on tip-toe you could see its complicated entrails and clear-cut internal structure ... A strange inexplicable silence lay over the whole scene: that pianist sitting at his instrument and playing *without making a sound...*' (De Chirico, *Hebdomeros*).

If silence can be performed, can it also be recorded? 4'33" has been recorded multiple times: there is even a phone app to record it yourself. In Heinrich Böll's short story *Dr. Murkes Gesammeltes Schweigen* (*Dr. Murke's Collected Silences*, 1958) a radio station employee edits tapes for broadcast, removing unwanted silences. 'I collect silences ... When I have to cut tapes, in places where the speakers sometimes pause for a moment—or sigh, or take a breath, or there is absolute silence, I don't throw that away, I collect it ... I splice it together and play back the tape when I'm at home in the evening. There's not much yet, I only have three minutes so far—but then people aren't silent very often' (Böll 294). In another one and a half minutes Murke would have had the first recording of 4'33".

In Erik Satie's *Danses gothiques* (1893) there are sections of empty staves that suggest silences of unspecified duration. Satie is composing with silence; the empty staves resemble the blank spaces in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, which did not appear until 1897. On the manuscript of *Vexations* (1893)—a piece closely associated with John Cage, who organised the first public performance of *Vexations* in 1963—Satie wrote instructions for a performer: 'To play this motif to oneself 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities'. The idea of silence as a prelude to performance is significant. This may be the first acknowledgement by a composer that all music emerges out of silence—as, ultimately, it must return to it. Silence as prelude is the theme of De Chirico's 'On Silence': 'Before man appeared on earth the god Silence reigned everywhere, invisible and present' (De Chirico, 'On Silence').

Silence and immobility were closely related to whiteness in Satie's mind—the opening of *Le fils des étoiles* (1891) is marked *En blanc et immobile*—'in white and immobile'; *Socrate* is to be played 'pure and white like Antiquity'. His own obsession—and that of certain poets—with whiteness was sent up by Satie in an article (1913) in which he claimed 'I only eat white foods' (Satie 23). Satie gives silence a provocative comic twist in *Parade* (1917), when the orchestra is silent during the dance of the horse, a number which prompted outrage from some sections of the audience at the premiere; also during the *Danse sans musique* in *Relâche* (1925). In a ballet, the music is expected to continue; to stop the music is contrary to the conventions of the genre: this is the comedy of defeated expectations. Satie understood that sound and silence are inseparable. The dance of sound and silence could be a definition of music itself.

*4'33"* is a rule-breaking work. At a piano recital, the pianist is expected to play the piano. When expectations and conventions are defied reactions can be expected to vary. Much has been written about the importance and seriousness of *4'33"*, but too little about its inherent humour. There is incongruity—one musician, or twenty pianists, or an entire orchestra on stage not playing their instruments is, on the face of it, absurd. There is parody; the division of *4'33"* into three movements following a classical sonata pattern, without the content that defines the form, is an irreverent tilt at convention. By parodying the hallowed classical tradition Cage was indirectly parodying its greatest representative, Beethoven, about whom he made his feelings clear: 'Beethoven was in error, and his influence, which has been as influential as it is lamentable, has been deadening on the art of music' (Kostelanetz 81). As parody, *4'33"* is not far removed from the spirit of Allais' *Marche funèbre*. To see humour in *4'33"* does not deny that it also has a serious purpose; the seriocomedy of *4'33"* is the seriocomedy of life itself.

A warm evening in late summer, 1976. The theatre was packed for the only solo appearance by John Cage at the Adelaide Festival. The first half included, inevitably, *4'33"*. The reactions of the audience, as far as one could judge by the sounds they made (without realising they were part of the performance) indicated the usual mixture of puzzlement, restlessness, irritation and bemusement. Most of the audience returned for the second half. Cage read for an hour from *Empty Words*, in a flat monotone, with long silences between words. After a while a few members of the audience began heading for the exits; before long the exits were crowded with people desperate to get out. Many people, it seems, were more annoyed by the silences than by the sounds of Cage's performance. In one of the greatest mass exoduses in musical history, most of the more than 2000 people in the audience walked out. A few hundred remained to applaud or cheer. One man endured it right to the end for the sole purpose of booing. You had to admire his stubborn insistence on his right not to remain silent. More than that, you had to laugh.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 22 February 1976. The author was present at this performance and stayed to the end. He did not boo.

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