

4'33"

Kim Cunio

I START WITH A CONFESSION. FIVE YEARS AGO, DURING THE 65TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR OF John Cage's 4'33" I perpetrated a hoax. I was so affected by my perceptions of monoculturalism in Australian art music that I invented a character. My character was a young Middle Eastern man, a little like my younger self, someone who had a strong interest in western art music without having studied it formally.

In a series of (mock) podcasts my young man looked at what twentieth century art music might mean to himself and other young people in Western Sydney, all recorded while he drove around Western Sydney in his car. As he listened to the art music of the twentieth century his desire to only listen to tonal music lessened, he started to love dissonance. In his words: "This stuff is better than raps and beats".

Let me come to this another way, we have a sugar addiction when it comes to harmony and melody. What do we hear at the supermarket, service station, music for hold, when we ring our least favourite bank? We hear tonal music.

The classical music we hear is also mostly tonal. I would suggest that more than 80 percent of the music broadcast on ABC Classic FM is tonal. As the majority of the canon is written within tonality this should come as no surprise. Apart from concert broadcasts, which will often feature a new work and specialist

programming, care is needed to keep music broadcasts accessible. We might hear the odd *Rite of Spring*, a Bartok string quartet or some late night Xenakis if we are lucky. It is however highly unlikely that we will hear any of Luciano Berio's 14 *Sequenzas* or the music of Brian Ferneyhough. We might hear Max Richter's *Four Seasons*, the Holy Minimalists such as Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki, the newest film and game composition, and the music of our own composers including, but not limited to, Elena Kats-Chernin and Ross Edwards.

Despite this my fictitious young man grew to love dissonance over the course of his podcasts. This is because I have seen this hundreds of times with young composers. If we play 'new' or 'experimental' music often enough it becomes entrained in the brain and becomes normalised—dissonance is tamed by repetition, listening can be muscular. Though my young man may not have heard of James Joyce or read *Ulysses*, he had heard of *4'33"*. This work has a symbolism that cuts into popular culture. It attracts those who love high art, as it does those who look to lambast it. Our fictitious man can listen to *4'33"* with an essential observation, that all of us are the music in a performance—that the proscenium arch of the concert hall can be broken.

There is a paradoxical mirror that has shut out tonality in institutions such as mine for two generations. The composition version of having big muscles is using extended techniques, writing experimental sounds and replicating the sounds of synthesis and nature in scored music, which is often hyper detailed. It can be beguiling: Peter Sculthorpe's *Sun Music III* blew my mind as a composition student and still affects me greatly. The detail in Liza Lim's music is astonishing. If you have not heard *Sun Music* look it up now, and listen to Sculthorpe's string writing—it is our sound.

If we are to speak kindly, we can call the music academy a ghetto of experiment and dissonance. If we are to speak less kindly, we can say that as the academy tries to be radical it exhibits control and conservatism. Fearlessness allows people to make the music they wish to make, even if it is tonal music in the keys of D and A. Though composition as a craft is tied to the aesthetics of its lecturers anything is possible. The academy lost tonality like the wedding ring left behind the couch and it has found it again.

The Global North

A simplistic version of music history tells us that there used to be a wholeness to the craft of composition. When I walk into the Australian National University's Keyboard Institute, our early keyboard collection, I can play pianos from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as an exquisite harpsichord. Most exciting might be the Henryon piano, dated at around 1770. When we move into

the world of these pianos, we see that music was always in flux, that composers were always stretching what instruments could do, pushing boundaries and exploring new technological advances. This is the history of the canon, it is a history of industrialisation through music and a soundtrack to the hegemony of the West.

I am not out to attack the canon, but I need to say that if we are to keep it that we must name it and its privileges. Let me offer a small example. Who can imagine a world without Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*. I certainly enjoy the work. Yet at some point we have to think about the gaze of the music. It is not hard to see that there might be an inbuilt fetishism, a Spanish 'sound' that is not actually Spanish but an imagined otherness of a French composer. The fact that the Spanish wiped out and subsumed some of the world's greatest civilisations does not have any place in the original conception of this opera. Given time, it may. Will we cancel this opera in 100 years?

Thinking about these things means a great deal to me. I have the poisoned chalice of being a (rare) non-European person leading an Australian music school. While I have no desire to destroy the hand that feeds me, my personal interests will never be a part of my music school, nor will the music of my tradition be a part of it. When I look at the pictures of the past directors of the ANU (Canberra) School of Music I do not see myself.

As I write, arguments are taking place in musicology, particularly in regards to how we survey the history of music. I wonder what John Cage might think of our times, of globalisation and music, of the samples used by Hans Zimmer, of acoustic ecology, of auto-tune? Given that Cage's intercultural lens was significant, given his ability to disrupt the hierarchies and fundamental understandings of music, he would, I feel, have a lot to say. I have to ask, Would he move over for a person of colour? The answer may not be in the score of *Music of Changes*, which utilises the I Ching as a decision-making process in an indeterminate score.

The Asian century is advancing and a trip to the outer suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne shows this clearly. Fewer people from Western Sydney go to the Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, or the Australian Chamber Orchestra. Yet Western Sydney is full of kids learning their own as well as Western music. My son spent years playing the tabla in a group class in Parramatta, there was not one white person in his class.

If we take gross domestic product (GDP) as a representation of cultural power, the world's trajectory is clear. Europe as a percentage of the world's GDP is retreating, and despite the dynamism of the US the GDP of China is staggering—never mind

the rapid industrialisation of India and Indonesia. Our schools teach European languages while the world's power is moving to the Global South.

The Global North is more than a hemisphere, it is (to me), a description of extractive capitalism. Our Global North of Australia, which is situated in the Global South, has its own small Global South ghettos, places where being privileged and Australian can be contestable.¹

I argue that being privileged and Australian is contestable to a woman who works in the rag trade without any union representation, sewing for the fast-fashion industry.

I argue that being privileged and Australian is contestable for any international student who delivers pizza for Uber Eats for Friday Night Footy, a game they probably have no interest in .

I argue that being privileged and Australian is contestable for any musician who wants to study the instrument of their culture, yet finds out that this is not possible when they knock on the door of their chosen university. I ask why is there is no weekly lesson on the bansuri, the oud, the kora, or every other instrument that is not in the western orchestra.

I argue that being privileged and Australian is contestable when we teach the music and the instruments of the western canon, yet fail to see all the other canons and traditions of the world in the same way.

I argue that being privileged and Australian is contestable while there is no tertiary music school that systematically teaches the music of its First Nations? Despite a number of initiatives, including our programs at the ANU, there is no National Academy of Indigenous Music.

When I proposed a Music of the Global South program at the ANU that would allow weekly lessons on non-western instruments, a colleague who had the power to say 'yes' said 'no'. The worst thing is that the justification from my colleague made sense. Canberra is too small to sustain such a program, its population is mostly from the Global North (though the Australian Capital Territory has an underclass from the Global South), the launch of such a program might endanger a music

¹ As my mother was Indian / Burmese and my Iraqi father grew up in China I find this quite exciting, though I lament the languages that they did not pass to me because of something they never defined. I name these languages: Hindustani, Urdu, Burmese, Shanghainese, Judeo Espagnol, Arabic, French. There is an almost unspeakable irony that I need to name; that my generation, the children of migrants and refugees shattered by Word War II, slipped through the cracks even as we thrived and fitted in. Similar things are still playing out. Parents from Asian cultures send their children to learn the western canon on the violin and piano. Though their children are often bi-lingual they are often mono-musical.

school that is only just recovering from a period of turmoil. You get it—it's not the time...

That was the end of the matter, well it should have been the end, except for the fact that I insisted on trialling a system (funded by philanthropy, as the university will not fund the program) that allows a student who learns a western classical instrument to spend a year on an instrument of the Global South.

Schenker

While most music lovers have not heard of Heinrich Schenker and his analysis, Schenker symbolises the growth of music theory as it is taught today, particularly in the US. If I were to name my polar opposite to Cage and 4'33" as a cultural symbol, it is Schenker.

Schenker provides a method to visualise western music as a complex medium. We can visualise and reduce music into a foreground, midground and background, finding a potential fundamental structure. It is possible to reduce a sonata or symphony of the nineteenth century to three notes, called the *Ursatz* (notes 3, 2 and 1 of the scale).

While this all sounds innocent enough, I remember that I questioned its relevance as a music student nearly 30 years ago. My lecturer did not know how to respond, he literally thought I was crazy. I also remember that when I submitted a composition for assessment that year that it was marked down for its use of parallel 5ths, a hallmark of the Vedic chanting I loved, which was seen as harmonically lazy by my assessors. I justified my use of those 5ths, by alluding to their use in Bach Cantatas and Organum.² My culture(s) were not enough. They had no place in that music school and no place in the canon.

Schenker's analysis works best on music of the nineteenth century, music that we often describe as vertical music, built on the scale degrees 1, 3 and 5 of a chord and a series of chord progressions. The fact that Schenkerian analysis did not work on music without chords or chord progressions did not matter.

In recent years Schenker and his legacy have inspired fierce debate. Tensions are razor sharp in music theory. One side argues that that little is gained in cancelling Schenker, his methodology serves Western music well. The argument continues that Schenker's critics are often part of the 'Twittersphere', and that free speech is endangered by the cancel culture that it represents.

² Organum is the earliest Western harmony, emerging from the Cathedral at Notre Dame, made famous by the composers Léonin and Pérotin.

On the other side it is argued that, regardless of how the analysis was originally intended, the music theory Schenker was a part of is institutionally white. Because of its inbuilt aesthetic limitations, it can be seen as racist. Before I ask you to make up your mind I want to muddy the waters. Schenker was Jewish and had to witness the rise of Hitler. He was vilified during his life and now he is vilified again.

Are Music and Sound the Same?

Can a 20-year-old musician know John Cage? Should a 20-year-old musician be 'forced' to undertake a series of encounters, contrived in institutions like mine, to think about these grand notions. I ask this differently. Should we expect our musicians to have opinions or do we just expect them to entertain us?

Earlier I wrote about my fictional musicologist of Middle Eastern appearance. His final podcast involved a live performance of *4'33"* in a hotted-up Holden car in the 'hoon lanes of Sydney'. He wanted to recolonise white music, and Cage was the place to start, a halfway space between the structures of power and its dissenting voices. As the inventor of the young man, I wanted to think about my own notions of music and how I might reimagine *4'33"* in our time and place. I wonder whether a work that has been so exalted can still be an object of disruption. My young man spoke...

I drive towards the city, it's 11pm on a Friday night, the hour where the guys come out in them hoon cars. It's burn-out time, when young cats in low seats meet at the traffic lights and race through the smell of rubber. The whole world—it's music, can you hear it Bro?

Even though I was in character, I realised that *4'33"* offered a me chance to engage in acoustic ecology and eco-musicology, to imagine Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* without using a recorder. I could be that picture of Miles Davis with his hands on his lips, thinking about what space is in music, wondering whether music and sound are the same.

As I drove I heard the sounds of subculture. Cars were driving with their radios blaring, overtaking each other and checking out other drivers and passengers. This was a radical repurposing of *4'33"* because it questioned the need for a piano or a hall. This piece can be performed in a car to an audience of 1–5, just as a Bach prelude can be performed on a violin, viola or cello. Instead of performing *4'33"* on a piano, I reclaimed this work (at east in my own mind), for the billions of people who will never get the chance to learn/play/see a piano. I imagined a new Cage, a Cage who cut his teeth fishing illegally in Australian waters, a Cage from a refugee camp who had sown his mouth shut in protest.

Before I finish it is worth acknowledging that Cage was aware of the piano and its limitations. While *4'33"* may have garnered the admiration of popular culture, Cage did much more with that instrument. Originally written for the dancer Martha Graham, his music for prepared piano bends the instrument in every direction. A prepared piano has a myriad of tonal colours, for preparation involves inserting substances between the hammers and the strings. Preparing substances range from screws and pieces of metal to rubber, paper, ping pong balls, phones, keys, maybe even pieces of other pianos. Suddenly an instrument that defines regularity, that plays in equal temperament can play microtones. An instrument that is built to play evenly throughout its range is suddenly gangly, strangely unbalanced. I feel we should have a cautionary statement: Warning. Prepared pianos can be strangely addictive.

Suddenly it is over. The thing about *4'33"* is that it takes less than five minutes to complete. This work is an act of transience. This an ad-break without the ads, a mute button, where we are muted instead of the television, where we can imagine for a moment the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha, but only if we can summon the compassion.

You might ask whether I have released this version of *4'33"*. The answer is no. I shared it with a number of friends, and they advised me that if I intended to continue my career that I should leave things be, so I did. We are our own censors.

The car is still driving, but the recording is over, another young man hoons by unaware that his driving has been preserved into my version of *4'33"*. I might be experimenting, though the time for thinking is also ending. Maybe I need to move to *Radio Music* (1956), a piece I have always find profound as it logs the time, place and state of analogue radio with each performance? *Radio Music*, like *4'33"*, will never be the same. Will we?

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42 *Kim Cunio / 4'33"*

'Sunconscious', sets the 'sounds' of the sun (<https://soundsofspaceproject.bandcamp.com/album/sunconscious>).