

**Silence in Music:
Listening with Intention**

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How does one define music? This question has been the center of much debate, leading to a wide range of definitions shaped by individual philosophies. Music, fundamentally, is a deeply personal experience, subject to individual interpretation. While many define music as “organized sound,” this definition falls short, overlooking genres like chance music, and opens itself to including other contested areas of organized sound, like poetry or speech. Then, you might ask, is music simply just sound? Certainly, music is an auditory experience. Yet, the definition of “organized sound” could benefit from a shift in focus from the intentionality of the sound itself to the listener’s engagement with it. Music is an active experience. Ultimately, what constitutes music is up to the listener, as it is their intentional listening, experience, and interpretation that creates the label of music for themselves. Music, then, could be defined as the subjective interpretation of aural experiences, where what constitutes music relies on individual perception and auditory engagement. This is how we will understand the term “music” moving forward.

The fun of defining music is in capturing its subjectivity. As John Cage wrote in his collection of lectures and writings, *A Year From Monday*, “there are no aesthetic emergencies,”¹ meaning there is no important need for an objective definition of music, because of its individuality and also because it simply does not matter; defining music has no real-life consequences. Music is ever-changing, from classical and romantic music to musique concrète and synthesized songs; every day brings new social understandings of what music is. Highlighting the fickleness of notions of music, Cage says, “Now contemporary music is changing, but since everything’s changing we could simply decide to drink a glass of water.”²

As we have discussed the definition of music, so too should we explore what silence is. The last century has seen several composers utilizing silence in their compositions for a number

¹ John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 28.

² John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 110.

of reasons. Each composer's approach to using silence in composition reflects their unique philosophies and views on music. As composers delve into the realm of silence, they aim not only to create auditory experiences but also to shape the listener's perception of sound itself.

“Composing silence is to build an infinite frame around the experience of these sounds.

However, this frame is the contingent act of listening rather than a particular instruction to hear.”³

It takes two to tango. While the composer can shape and frame the intention of the silence, the individual audience must actively engage with this listening and experience. The composer constructs the conditions, both physically in space and mentally in framing the purpose of the silence. John Cage's 4'33" being the most well-known example of a silent composition, is focused on the sounds in silence, which is drastically different from Ligeti's focus on silence as a lack of sound, Arvo Pärt's extended gaps and held notes in *Tabula Rasa*, or Christof Migone's silence and near silence to build anticipation in his piece, *Quieting*.

Before jumping into the spiritual successors of John Cage, a look must be taken at John Cage himself. The infamous 4'33" is a piece of silence. Made up of three *tacet* movements of varying lengths, adding up to 4 minutes and 33 seconds, Cage's piece aims to encourage the audience to listen to the world around them. As the performer(s) sit in silence, indicating the end of movements with subtle readjustments or touches of their instrument, the small sounds of the audience and their environment become amplified to the ears of everyone around. Not having a piano concerto or an orchestral symphony to fill their ears, the sounds of people shuffling around in their seats, coughing, sneezing, and whispering are far more apparent. Beyond the human sounds, the sounds of the room or environment become clearer as well; things like the blowing of the air conditioning, the beeping of machines, and the creaking of doors also feel louder and

³ Salomé Voegelin, “Silence,” chapter, in *Listening to Noise and Silence : Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 77–120, 89.

more present to the listeners. In this way, the composition is entirely subjective, inseparable from the ambient noise of the performance venue. The listener becomes centred in their present reality, discerning the composition from amongst the ambient noise, only to find they are one and the same.

Beyond Cage, composers like Arvo Pärt, who are perhaps a little less silent, use silence or near-silence to communicate their own ideas as well. Andreas Peer Kähler compares this passage from *The Little Prince* to Pärt's *Tabula Rasa*: "I have always loved the desert. You can sit on a dune. You see nothing. You hear nothing. Yet something is still radiating in the silence."⁴ Pärt's beautiful string lines and piano accompaniment are complemented by the silence of long held notes and extended pauses. This juxtaposition of sound and silence enhances the listener's experience, giving them time to process, reflect, and most importantly, accept the music. Approaching *Tabula Rasa* from a Zen Buddhist approach, as Cage often did in life, the importance of the music shifts "from making to accepting, and the possibilities afforded by openness to environmental and unintended sounds."⁵

Another great example of a silent work is Christof Migone's *Quieting*. This work is a collection of 36 tracks, half of which are entirely silent, and the other half, almost silent. Influenced by the documentary, "First Contact" (1982), Migone "became interested in the moments of trauma which might be incredibly loud in and of themselves but also impose a silence (silencing/*Quieting*) in their aftermath."⁶ In the original hopes of sharing the town tradition of a daily noon-hour cannon explosion in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Migone had recorded the event and placed it in the middle of over 40 minutes of silence. This brought forward the

⁴ Andreas Peer Kähler, "Radiating from Silence. The Works of Arvo Pärt Seen through a Musician's Eyes," Arvo Pärt Centre, 2003.

⁵ Andreas Kähler, "Radiating from Silence."

⁶ Christof Migone, "*Quieting*."

trauma Migone hoped to capture, and framed the silence in an intentional listening, not knowing when there would be faint sounds or the single loud cannon blast. Listening to this piece requires the active listening of music, and because of its framing by the composer and consumption by listeners, it feels like music too.

Space is a storytelling device, both visually and auditorily. Space can show the distance and emptiness between things, or can highlight what is in between. Silence is a type of space. Silence, like music, is an auditory experience, and can therefore be used in conjunction with music, or even as music. Because space and silence can be defined in many ways - as something or a lack of things - their framing and intention are what make them special. By framing the listening that takes place in silence, different stories, ideas, and philosophies can be conveyed. So what is silence, really? What is meant when someone talks about silence? It could be argued that nothing is ever silent... Whether it be the background sounds of traffic, the birds chirping outside the window, the howls of wind, or your stomach grumbling, there is sound all around us all the time. If “no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound,”⁷ then is our understanding of silence found in the lack of intentionality in the sounds around us? Perhaps one might think of silence only in relation to the music; the sounds around you are separate from the silence of no music playing. For John Cage, his perception of silence can best be described in his description of the *White Paintings* by Robert Rauschenberg as “airports for lights, shadows and particles.”⁸ “Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening,”⁹ a blank canvas which the world shapes around us, as we interpret and create it ourselves.

It explores silence as a sonic condition that engages (your) listening in sound rather than in music, and that implicates (you) in (your) hearing through its quiet demand to be

⁷ John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 98.

⁸ Classical Music, “What Is the Point of John Cage’s 4’33”?,” September 28, 2021,

⁹ Salomé Voegelin, “Silence,” 83.

heard. Such silence shifts the responsibility of production from the conventions of the composition/the artwork onto the individual audience member, who becomes audible to (themselves) in the contingent context of (their) listening practice.¹⁰

Then, with this dual responsibility, the listener's interpretation of a (silent) auditory experience as music, the arguments made previously are all confirmed. All it takes is one person to hear something as music for it to be so, and if you hear the sounds of a "silent" room as music, then so it must be.

Legendary jazz musician and educator, Charlie Banacos, sent an email to his students while on his deathbed from cancer, saying the following:

Another great way to practice when you can't move around too much is figure out the chord or chords that you hear in the hospital and use that to practice different sonorities. I'll give you an example of what's happening right now: most of the electronic sounds of this hospital at this moment are B's, D#'s, F#'s and A-naturals. Now there are other sounds, but those are the pre-dominant sounds coming from the electronic equipment (and people yelling "Code Red!!!") Just kidding...) So you could say right at this moment I'm swimming around in a pool of Bdom7. If you use that as a basis, the next time you hear somebody yell "code" you can practice and name its function against the B7 chord as quickly as possible and it makes a type of symphony.

For example, let's say someone says "saline" and you notice that they said it on E and G, you would say to yourself "sa" is 4 and "line" is flat-6. Let's say you hear a nurse say "stat" and it just happens to be an F, you might say "Oh, that was #4 (or flat-5)". This way you can do this all day long and have a mini symphony going on. I hope you never have

¹⁰ Salomé Voegelin, "Silence," 82. Edited for verb tense and inclusive pronoun use.

to use this kind of exercise in this type of situation, but it works everywhere - in diners, supermarkets, etc. So try it and you might have fun playing that game.¹¹

Banacos' words resonate with Cage's philosophies of intentional listening and silence as music. Similarly, Fluxus composers like George Brecht and La Monte Young use this same kind of intentional framing of average things in their works to make them art. Young had a collection of works numbered under the title *Composition 1960*. Breaking the meta of typical performance, Young's *Composition 1960 #6* had the performers sitting on the stage watching the audience as though their roles were reversed.¹² Also breaking the norms, Young's *Composition 1960 #2* has the performer building and lighting a fire on stage, letting it burn out naturally.¹³ It is the framing of these as musical works with specific conditions to interpret them that makes them unique. The absurd nature of these performances also "invokes a thinly sublimated form of violence or danger" that brings feeling and intent to the piece.

George Brecht, while not utilizing silence, captures a natural sound that one might hear in the intentional listening as a part of Cage's 4'33" and makes it the focus of its own piece. *Drip Music* is actually just the sound of dripping water, but the compositional work is in the arrangement of conditions for the piece and the focus on the directed listening to the water drips.¹⁴ As these kinds of sounds can be found almost everywhere in life, their existence in other contexts can be considered part of the silence that we listen for. These artistic encapsulations of pre-made experiences extend to items in the visual arts.

Marcel Duchamp, a controversial artist, not dissimilar to most of the other composers and artists discussed in this paper, is a visual artist known for his ready-made art. His installation

¹¹ WarrenS, "The Harmonics of Intensive Care: Charlie Banacos, R.I.P.," Daily Kos, December 9, 2009.

¹² Eric Drott, "Ligeti in Fluxus," *Journal of Musicology* 21, no. 2 (2004): 201–40, 205.

¹³ Eric Drott, "Ligeti in Fluxus," 205.

¹⁴ Eric Drott, "Ligeti in Fluxus," 205.

titled *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal with “R. Mutt” written on it.¹⁵ Duchamp did not make the urinal; he only signed it and declared it art. This presentation of a pre-existing object with the added inscription of the letters and year, 1917, gave the piece the context and framing it needed to be art. While obviously still controversial, it is this idea that composers of silence utilize as well; taking a pre-existing state of the world, silence, and framing it in such a way that gives it meaning and purpose, turning it into a work of art that can be appreciated, criticized, and evoke feelings and opinions.

On the other end of John Cage and his use of silence is György Ligeti’s Fluxus works, *Trois Bagatelles for David Tudor* and *Die Zukunft der Musik*. Ligeti’s anti-Cagean views opposed the idea of art and life being the same, instead believing that “art is something absolutely artificial.”¹⁶ *Bagatelles* is the first example of a piece that Ligeti uses silence in; starting only with one soft, low C#, followed by two movements of rests.¹⁷ Capturing the humorous, lightheartedness of this silent composition, Ligeti frames the silence as a lack of sound to appreciate and hear, as opposed to Cage’s tendency to use silence and the sound within silence as the subject. Ligeti does this by beginning the first *Bagatelle* or movement with “the presence of the lone C# [acting] as a reminder to the listener of what is missing.” Interestingly, literature on the subject identifies how Ligeti’s use of notation in the piece gives it more musical legitimacy as it draws on “some element of music education, which in turn belies the suggestion of compositional and performative egalitarianism.”¹⁸

It was his second silent piece, *Die Zukunft der Musik*, which immediately became Ligeti’s most controversial piece. The piece is more of a retelling of the audience’s reaction to his silence

¹⁵ Salomé Voegelin, “Silence,” 80–81.

¹⁶ Eric Drott, “Ligeti in Fluxus,” 222.

¹⁷ Eric Drott, “Ligeti in Fluxus,” 215, 218.

¹⁸ Eric Drott, “Ligeti in Fluxus,” 219.

as he stood in front of an audience of academics without speaking a word for 10 minutes. Again, following his divergent approach of silence as the lack of sound or substance, his silence angered the crowd, only provoking them further by his humorous writing on a blackboard. The experience is notated untraditionally with written descriptions, though on a traditional music staff marked with 20-second intervals. Framing the experience with music's notations, defining, by means of its transcription, as music. Labelling sections with stylistic and tempo markings and recollections of what the audience was doing at the time, Ligeti retroactively mocks them further. While at first listen, Ligeti's *Zukunft der Musik* could sound like Cage's 4'33" twice over, the framing of the silence created an entirely opposite experience, ending in university professors storming out and Ligeti getting dragged off the stage two minutes before his 10-minute time slot was over.¹⁹

The exploration of silence in music reveals the connection between the auditory and visual art mediums, challenging traditional notions of artistic values. Alongside the minimalist art from artists like Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg, composers like John Cage, György Ligeti, Arvo Pärt, and Christof Migone utilize silence to tell stories, encourage deeper thinking and listening, and evoke feelings among audiences. By framing familiar experiences in new and unique contexts, these composers and artists are able to transform the mundane into something special that evokes feelings, thoughts, and opinions.

The concept of silence transcends the absence of sound, becoming its own auditory sensation to be heard, appreciated, and experienced. Like space in visual art, silence in music serves as a canvas where meaning is constructed and interpreted.²⁰ As Marcel Duchamp famously demonstrated with his ready-made art, the act of framing instills ordinary objects and

¹⁹ Eric Drott, "Ligeti in Fluxus," 219–220.

²⁰ David Briers, "Sounds of Silence: David Briers on John Cage and Morton Feldman," 6.

experiences with significance. In this sense, silence becomes not only a sonic condition but also a narrative device, inviting audiences to participate in the co-creation of meaning.

Ultimately, the subjective nature of art guarantees that interpretations of silence will vary widely among individuals, shaped by directed intention and personal experience. As a medium of art and expression, the controversial nature of silence in the field of music fosters dialogue, both in conflict and appreciation. As we continue to explore the boundaries of creativity and expression, silence will remain a powerful tool, inviting us to listen more closely, think and reflect more deeply, and discover new dimensions of beauty and meaning in the world around us.

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