

Silence in john cage's 4:33 essay

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Cage was heavily influenced by his mentor and teacher Arnold Schoenberg, an Austrian composer who eventually immigrated to the United States. My own knowledge of Schoenberg came about through a literature class that required the class to read a novel, *Doctor Faustus*, by the German author Thomas Mann. In the novel, which uses the traditional Faust myth of a man who sells his soul in order to obtain knowledge, the Faust character is a musical composer who sells his soul to be able to compose unusual music that will bring him critical acclaim. The professor explained that this character is generally regarded to be based on Schoenberg, based on the descriptions in the novel of the music that he created. As part of the class, the professor discussed Schoenberg's music and we listened to some of it. On an objective level, Schoenberg deserves credit for his innovative approach to composing music; he wanted to escape the fairly rigid structures that went into composing classical music, in which, for example, a symphony would begin with an overture that introduced the major musical themes and motifs, followed by various movements of the symphony in which those themes would be developed and expanded. Schoenberg was trained in this classical method of composing, but ultimately rejected it. He developed his own method of composing, called dodecaphony. This method is based on using twelve notes for any given musical composition, with the limitation being that no one note or series of notes is supposed to be dominant. In practical terms, what that means is that if one particular note is used X number of times in the piece, then the other notes must be used the same number of times, or at least very close to the same number of times. The result is that when listening to Schoenberg's music, sometimes it is possible

to hear the beginning of a melodic line, but then there will be a note that is discordant. Knowing how he composed, it is easy to determine that the discordant note is not there as part of an organic creative process; it's there because Schoenberg needed to plug in that note to meet the requirements of using the note the required number of times. The result is that on a subjective level, listening to Schoenberg's music is at best less like listening to music and more like listening to someone solve a math problem, and at worst is like listening to someone herding cats across various musical instruments.

Cage integrated Schoenberg's rejection of traditional music composition into his own works, but Cage took the nontraditional methodology one step further. I have heard performances of a few of Cage's other pieces, in which he deliberately chose to use nontraditional sources of sound to create the musical piece. For example, in some of his works there are street sounds, such as cars blowing their horns. One piece uses the sounds of people typing on old-fashioned typewriters (this was done before computer keyboards existed); the sounds are very mechanical and somewhat tedious, and are apparently meant to emphasize the tiresome background noises that people have at work, but which can become musical when using imagination and creativity.

With this background knowledge, when listening to 4:33, my initial response is that at least it's not Schoenberg, car horns blowing, or typewriters. More than anything, though, when I listen to 4:33 I think about Roland Barthes' book *Writing Degree Zero*, in which he maintained, among other things, that what a writer chooses to not say, what the writer chooses to omit from his or

her narrative, is just as important as what the writer chooses to include. Very simply, why did Cage use silence and to what effect?

One obvious response is that using silence disrupts the normal listening process that the audience expects. They expect the composer to have already selected notes for a piece, arranged those notes, decided which instruments should be used to play those notes, and so forth. Their normal role as an audience is somewhat passive; they listen. Silence demands that the audience itself think about the creative process. They would ask themselves why the composer chose silence. In listening to the piece, they will not hear the piano or other traditional musical instruments be played. They will hear, instead, their own breathing, or the noises the performers might inadvertently make as they shuffle their feet or move in their chairs. They will hear their neighbors whispering comments about this music, or lack thereof. These little noises become the musical composition; they create a silence in which any member of the audience can imagine in their own head either a new song or can replay in their head a song they already know. The silence allows the audience to become the composer, for once, to take control of the creative process. The ongoing silence emphasizes the use of silence in more traditional pieces of music, in which there might be silence for a second or two just after a particularly powerful note or passage; the silence creates a contrast with those notes and forces the audience to focus on them more. This is the musical equivalent of an author asking the readers to make up part of the story. Given Cage's other works and his ideas about wanting to inject randomness into his musical compositions, I do not believe 4:33 was a prank on the audience. In today's music setting, 4:33 and its

silence are a welcome counterpoint to the musical acts that focus more on theatrics when performing. Very simply, when a “ musical” performance features a dozen backup dancers, intense choreography, and a bejeweled microphone, it is easy to determine that those elements are there to distract the audience from noticing that the lyrics are egregiously insipid, the so-called melody is the musical equivalent of a paint-by-numbers landscape, and the lead vocalist has a musical range of three notes, two of which are flat. Cage’s 4: 33 requires the audience to focus not on theatrics but on the silence in their own head; if they hear music, it is because they can perceive the absence of noise as music.