

Musical form and structure



What is the difference between music and noise? In a personal point of view, one important difference is that music makes sense. It has its own structure, basic patterns and it shows how composers made the pieces by their logic as well as their elaborate management. Therefore I would say, a piece without any structure and form can be only called “ noise” instead of “ music”. To research the structures and forms of a piece, we have to know what the structure is as well as what the form is, when I was studying in schools, I thought the structure is the different themes and how they were connected to each other; the form would be sonata form, ternary or something like minuet. After getting deeper into some Twentieth Century composers and their music, I realized it is not as simple as that.

Firstly, the structure in music means the complex composition of musical knowledge or experiments as elements and their combinations. And the form in music means the shape and the figure throughout the whole work. I consider that in music, structure and form are both extremely important – somehow we can analyze “ structure” by a macro view and seek “ form” by a micro view. Children who study in music schools learn some early period formal music structures and forms such as analyzing pieces by Bach and Beethoven — We all knew about many basic forms in music since childhood. But in the modern world, music gets mystic and complicated. For some audiences, it is impossible to realize any structure in contemporary music such as- John Cage’s piece: 4’33”. They think the piece was just composed like a blank paper. Structure and form seems never existed in this music. I have to say, people whom consider contemporary music does not have structure or form just do not understand the music itself at all.

Everything has a reason to be there, such as composers have their own notions of creating music. To prove this view, and to show the forms and structures in John Cage's 4'33", I will analyze this piece below.

1. Introduction

John Cage has made a huge experiment on this composition – 4'33" to the world. Unfortunately the first performance of this piece was like a scandal. It was written in 1952, his so-called "piece in silence". Performers basically go on to the stage and play nothing for exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds. At the premiere some listeners did not even realize they had heard anything at all. Obviously audiences were angry and felt being deceived after the concert. The premiere was performed by the young pianist David Tudor at Woodstock, New York, on August 29, 1952. 1

4'33" was written for any instrument or any instruments combination.

" NOTE: The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N. Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4'33" and the three parts were 33", 2'40", and 1'20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, and the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by (any) instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time. 2

FOR IRWIN KREMEN JOHN CAGE"

1 J. Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (USA, 1961), 102.

2 J. Cage, *A year from Monday: new lectures and writings* (USA, 1985), 77.

From the statement above, we can already see some basic structures in this piece: it is divided in three parts, and the lengths of them were 33", 2'40" and 1'20". (There are two ways of dividing this music, which I have mentioned below)

2. Materials

John Cage has used a few materials, or elements to compose 4'33". Through this piece, " Tacet" (As the image of the score shows) is one of the materials. However, another material which people always ignore is the " division of tacets". " Image of John Cage's writing of this piece"

Base on the score, Cage used " division" twice to make three " tacets" in the whole piece. And these two " divisions" and three " tacets" formed this composition logically, thus: $\frac{1}{4} \wedge I \frac{1}{4} \% \text{Tacet-Division-} \frac{1}{4} \wedge II \frac{1}{4} \% \text{Tacet-Division-} \frac{1}{4} \wedge III \frac{1}{4} \% \text{Tacet}$

3. Analyze

Cage has clearly shown the " tacet" in this piece. But about the " division", we can analyze it in different ways. If we think mathematically, use " tacets" and " divisions" to build a function: If " division" is independent variable x , the musical form is dependent variable " y ", then based on the function mode " $y = f(x)$ ", we can get this:

Form = Tacets (Divisions)

Now we calculate this mode, we get two different results:

1. Tacet-Division-Tacet-Division-Tacet

If we make “ Division” bigger and bigger, then it becomes the part of the piece, (as important as tacets), therefore we can get this musical form: A-B-A-B-A

2. Tacet-(Division)-Tacet-(Division)-Tacet

If we make “ Division” smaller and smaller, until it has but only has the ability of dividing “ Tacets”, then we can get this musical form: A1-A2-A3

Those two forms we all have studied in early schools, so I am not going to talk about them further here.

As we can see from this image statement, John Cage has given some freedom in this piece to the performers – The performance in Woodstock gave the timings 33”, 2’40”, and 1’20”, but the original print program says that the timings were 30”, 2’23”, and 1’40”. Also as I mentioned above, this “ silent piece” could be played by any single instrument or any combination of instruments. It is a freedom piece — But that does not mean this piece has no form — however it divides, we can still find the forms. People may ask, although the piece has a form such as “ A-B-A-B-A” or “ A1-A2-A3”, it still does not have a very convictive structure. How did John Cage make three movements out of this piece and how did he determine the length for each of them? These three parts seem unlikely balanced and managed.

Well, in that case, Cage has pointed to this particular Tarot card formation when shown a number of possible configurations:

This is one of the most complicated configurations and is organized in three parts of concentric “horseshoes”. Each horseshoe has represented one movement, with these cards which bearing a length that could have been plus to the duration of each movement. The point above seems to be able to answer a lot of questions about the structure of this “silent piece”. It illustrates how the movements were built up by those little silent “cards”, also how the composer can know when a movement finishes, why he made this piece into three parts. Somehow these questions seem to have a greater effect on what we hear. However, we can suppose that he used these cards for his composition and it shows the decision of three movements. When people asked about the differences in time lengths of the scores, Cage said that it could be of any length. This does not mean that the formal structure of this piece could be violated at all. He said that “it would still be titled 4’33”, also the durations of the movements must be determined by some type of chance procedure, and it must be in three movements.”³

This piece seems to be very difficult for performers after seen this Tarot Cards formation. Because it becomes so easy to make mistakes and miss the beats. But Cage said that this is not the point. The point is about the feeling it creates, both the performers and audiences are dispensable. What the piece needs is a devoted and interesting listener. However, those methods which Cage used for 4’33” have offered the audiences a huge freedom area. The point, the meaning of this piece has changed. Normally we try the best to do what composer says on the score, now we do what we feel and define our own potentials. The structure that Cage used was mathematical for composer as well as humanized for performers and listeners. Although this

piece has no harmony and melody lines, it still has a strong meaning. The spirit of Cage, like what Alex Ross said about this piece in his book “ The music was the sound of the surrounding space. It was at once a head-spinning philosophical statement and a Zen-like ritual of contemplation” 4

To conclude, structure in music is the sense which composer has given; form in music is the shape and the propriety which composer wants to represent. In the premiere of 4’33”, audiences were angry and negative, but after understood the inner sense and getting deeper into the purpose of Composer, people loved it. When you could not find the structure or the form in any particular piece, it does not mean that they were not existed. As I have said, everything has a reason to be there, such as composers have their own notions of creating music. The real music only appears after researching and understanding.

3 J. Cage, Silence: Lectures and Writings (USA, 1961), 109

4 R. Alex, The Rest is Noise, listening to the Twentieth Century (USA, 2007), 401

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