

# 4'33''-Silent Shock

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## ABSTRACT

The American musician John Cage was the most controversial avant-gardists of the 20th century. His piano work 4'33'', which he composed over five years, has become one of his masterpieces. For half a century, this work remains hugely controversial and heatedly debatable. Based on the critical analysis of other scholars in this field, this paper explores the highly innovative and subversive connotations of this work, using the story behind John Cage's composition of 4'33' and its corresponding aesthetic perception.

**Keywords:** 4'33'', John Cage, Controversy, Aesthetics, Meaning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On a rainy night in August 1952, the pianist David Tudor sat at the piano in a concert hall called Maverick near Woodstock, New York. He placed a sheet of music on the music rack, then set the stopwatch, closed the lid, and sat in silence for thirty seconds. Then he opened the lid again, set the stopwatch, closed the lid, and sat still for 2 minutes and 30 seconds again. For the last time, he still repeated the same action, and this time the silence lasted 1 minute and 40 seconds. Finally, he stood up, bowed to the applause of the audience, and walked off the stage. The total length of the performance was 4 minutes and 33 seconds, thus 4'33'' have become the name of the piece randomly.

## 2. CONTROVERSY FROM 4'33''

Since the work of 4'33'' debuted, it has sparked off an intense controversy in the realm of music and has impacted society profoundly. Opponents considered it to be "the emperor's new clothes", deriding it as not being able to be called music at all but merely a deliberately provocative attempt to either insult the audience or provoke their reaction. Since the work did not include any fixed pitch or any basic elements of music, it was believed to violate the basic principles of music[1]. And it was considered that the creative elements could not be found in 4'33'' as it simply gave the audience a visual scene of a concert hall performance, which is not musically logical[2]. Stephen Davies once commented that the necessary condition for composing music is the

organized sound. No matter how free and chaotic the way a musical creation is organized, it must exclude certain types of sound events, such as ambient sounds. During the performance of musical works, these co-existing environmental sounds cannot be described as organized and audible. John cage's 4'33'' contains all the sounds within the scope of its performance, none of which was excluded from the entire movement, the rhythms in it were unorganized thus cannot be called musical work[3].

On the other hand, proponents held the opposite opinion, assuming that 4'33'' acted as an innovative modern work that overturned the traditional manner of expression, thereby representing a fundamental change in the history of music. Ouyang Pingfang analyzed the work from the perspective of postmodernism, commenting that although John cage redefined the music as disordered, dematerialized, uncertain, visualized, behavioralized, and life-oriented, his work was not alienated from the stage and more importantly, he brought the music closer to nature and life [4]. Concerning the form of the work, 4'33'' was divided into three movements and was marked as "Tacet" (Latin language), therefore, it was obvious that 4'33'' has been endowed with the three elements of traditional music including a score text, a sound text, and a meaningful interpretation [5]. The pianist David Tudor sat at the piano and acted affectionately according to the instructions of the score. Although the player did not play a single note with the whole performance being in the so-called silent state, John Cage illustrated in the first section of 4'33'' that there is no such thing as

silence. The audience merely did not capture the true essence of appreciating and interpreting those sounds full of surprises. In the first movement, they could hear the whisper of wind blowing outside; the second movement revealed the sound of raindrops pattering upon the roof; in the third movement, the audience could hear all kinds of interesting sounds from the audience when they talked or walked around, all of which were used as notes for John Cage's masterpiece. In a sense, John cage has endowed the generations of musicians with an aesthetic promotion and spiritual encouragement as these innovative notes transcending the traditional performance demonstrated unlimited possibilities to engage with the sound.

### **3. THE STORY OF 4'33''**

When it comes to the creating story of 4'33'', one has to mention Cage's intimate friend Marcel Duchamp who was a rather well-known American artist and was regarded as the king of Dada. Duchamp once criticized the limitations and superficiality of conventional painting as he often utilized the most ordinary objects to create surprising and bewildering works of art. To illustrate, he created the sculpture 'Fountain' in 1917, the prototype of which was originally a urinal. Duchamp placed it in the exhibition hall, endowing this urinal with a creative and artistic meaning. In the framework of art, Duchamp has changed the original vulgar manifestation of urinal into ingenious aesthetic and cultural values [3]. What Duchamp intended to inspire was that art is always subjective, which has deeply influenced Cage's later philosophical standing and aesthetic choosing, thereby laying the solid foundation for the creation of 4'33''. After that, Cage made another friend who was an Indian female musician called Gita Sarabhai. Sarabhai taught Cage numerous communicative elements in Indian music and the embedded philosophical thoughts, among which the "Zen" philosophy has exerted the most profound influence on Cage. 'Zen' is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word 'Dhyana', a philosophical viewpoint that not only pays attention to the essence of silence but also propagates natural inaction which can achieve a harmonious situation in cosmic originality. In the Zen world, there is no such thing as good or evil, beauty or ugliness. In order to grab its gist, cage attended a Zen lecture by Japanese Buddhist master D. T. Suzuki and has studied the 'I Ching' since then, which rendered Cage a lifelong follower of Zen.

Before composing 4'33'', Cage deeply considered that the sound could be merely divided into two types: voiced and unvoiced until two things inspired and changed his perception of sound. In 1951, Cage visited a sound laboratory at Harvard University. This room, which was known as one of the quietest spaces in the world at the time, could block out over 99.8% of

external sound waves. However, when Cage walked into this room, he could hear the incredible and clear sound of his nervous system working and blood flowing which made him realize that there is no absolute silence in this world. "Until I die, there will be sounds," Cage wrote, "and they will continue after my death. One does not need to worry about the future of music as any sound may appear in any combination and continuity [6]." In fact, sound exists under the people's awareness and perception so the so-called silent state merely refers to the one that people are unconscious of [7]. The second inspiration happened in the same year when Cage visited Robert Rauschenberg's exhibition 'White Painting'. A huge blank canvas was displayed in the exhibition hall, without any colors or patterns on the canvas but only presenting some light, shadow, and dust. However, it was these elements that made up the 'White Painting' itself, therefore, Cage was deeply encouraged by this work and decided to play the role of 'Silent Performer', which became the prototype of 4'33''.

### **4. AESTHETIC THOUGHT IN 4'33''**

#### ***4.1. The disappearance of boundaries between art and life***

Cage mentioned in an interview: "I find it interesting when one finds something in the environment to look at. If you're in a room where a record is playing, the windows are open and the curtains are blowing with the breeze, that's sufficient and appropriate to produce a theatrical experience [8]." From his perspective, the art and life should be in a coherent and congruous entirety and the audience should concentrate on the instinctive expression in nature instead of the artistic performance. The birth of 4'33'' dismantled and reassembled people's deep-seated aesthetic perception as the seemingly silent performances were indeed filled with the natural and normal sound of rain, wind, human conversations, and even the noises arising from the air-conditioners. The unrestricted and informal forms of aesthetic expression blur the boundaries between art and life, empowering the audiences to practice artistic freedom and the absolute rights to appreciate.

#### ***4.2. The highest state of 'WU (nothing)'***

Cage once clearly stated that his musical and philosophical standing was heavily influenced by Eastern philosophy and he admired the musical aesthetics of Lao Tzu's 'Da Yin Xi Sheng', an ancient Chinese idiom referring to the fact that silence and naturalness are the highest realm of musical statement [9]. This seemingly contradictory meaning reflects profound philosophies, which cannot be interpreted in a literal manner alone. 'Da Yin Xi Sheng' can either represent the sublimed state of people's musical

aesthetics, or it can be described as a way of appreciating the music that breaks through the cognitive limitation. Taking the ancient Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, who knew nothing about music, as an example, he enjoyed the music and played the Guqin, a representative instrument of traditional Chinese musical culture, but it turned out that there were no musical notes or strings on the Guqin. In this sense, Tao Yuanming was not satisfied by the auditory experience but by the joy of being immersed in the spiritual world and nature. In Taoism, Tao is the root for all existence and the same philosophical idea can be applied in music: extraordinary music should be in accordance with the tenets of Tao, that is, an authentic realm of natural simplicity without any traces of man. The work of 4'33'' embodies this ancient oriental aesthetics and perfectly expresses the nothingness in Eastern philosophy.

### **4.3. Frame Aesthetics**

Cage once discussed art with an abstract painter Willem de Kooning in a restaurant. William de Kooning made a rectangle using his fingers to frame the breadcrumbs on the table and told Cage that this was not art. Cage retorted that the frame meant everything. Cage performed the rebellious and bewildering work of 4'33'' in a standard concert hall for appreciation and only under this specific circumstance can the work be endowed with an innovative aesthetic connotation. Regarding the aforementioned Duchamp's sculpture 'Fountain', if the 'fountain' taking the form of a urinal was not displayed in the exhibition hall but in the toilet, no one would regard it as a work of art. To give another example, a beautifully dressed lady would not draw the attention of the crowd if she walked down the street; but the same dress and appearance could create the sensation if this lady was walking on the catwalk. This explains the paramount importance of the frame as it is only when the aesthetic value is given to the work within a specific frame that the work can reveal its unique artistic connotation.

### **4.4. Unique aesthetic value**

The sound contained in the 4'33'' was full of uncertainty and randomness. Cage expected that when the audience at the premiere heard this work, they would react in different ways and express various verbal affections including the sound of doubting, cursing, or praising, none of which was certain, predictable, or impromptu. Based on this feature, there only existed a unique 4'33'' at the Maverick Concert Hall on August 29, 1952, in the world. If future players intend to repeat the work, they can only imitate the performing form as the sound contents and emotional revelation cannot be replicated, even if it is in the same place and with the

same audience. Therefore, 4'33'' has demonstrated its own unique aesthetic value.

## **5. THE MEANING OF 4'33''**

The work of 4'33'' can be analyzed at two different angles. One is that this was an absolutely silent performance where not a single note of the piano sound that the audience expected was performed. And the other stance is that the entire performance was composed of the rich diversity of sounds inside and outside the exhibition hall [3], which was consistent with the standpoint of Cage who has framed the work within the standard performance in the concert hall. During 4 and a half minutes, Cage expected that the audience could focus on all audible sounds inside and outside the concert hall that are often overlooked because he firmly believed that music is not about the composer, but about the common sound. Throughout the history of Western music, whether it be the Baroque, Classical, or Romantic periods, although the music in the abovementioned different periods has been stepping out of the existing stereotypes, it still has maintained its inherent structure and organization. Meanwhile, these types of music contain so much of the composer's personal emotion that the audience can only act as the passive recipients of the artistic information. "I want my work to exclude my joys and sorrows as the music should not have the distinct personality and intentions of a composer. I am eager to guide other people to be aware of the fact that the ambient sounds constituting a piece of music is more engaging and captivating than the ordinary music heard in a concert hall [3]." In a classical concert, the so-called "noise" would be the chief culprit of the declined quality of audience's appreciation; however, in Cage's opinion, this is unfair to the environmental sounds as there should be no boundaries between noise and music. People's different cognition and mentality determines their accordingly different treatment of sound. For example, some people think that it is pleasant to listen to the tick of raindrops and they can fall asleep peacefully with the sound of pattering, while some people think that the sound is harsh, disturbing, and confusing. Henry David Thoreau once commented that "The most common and the most meaningless sounds, such as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect in fresh and healthy ears as the rarest music. It all depends on the audience's appetite for sounds [10]." Noise and music co-exist in a harmonious way rather than oppose each other. After watching the video of 4'33'' performance, the most impressive scene was the initiating one displaying the title 'Everything we do is music' said by John Cage. His intention is obvious, which is to assist people to find those neglected sounds, equip them with the artistic appreciation to pay attention to all the random and normal sounds in our living environment and perceive

these beautiful notes that are constantly changing. This is exactly what 4'33'' is trying to convey.

## 6. THE IMPACT OF 4'33''

In fact, 4'33'' had a huge impact on a lot of music afterwards, even if it was typically quiet. Later, with the popularity of portable recorders, musicians were allowed to record and process various environmental sounds, and these sounds began to be valued by artists. For example, the composer Alvin Lucier created a sound artwork called "I'm Sitting In A Room", explored pure resonance harmony and room tone; Musician Brian Eno created the work of "ambient music", which is a kind of quiet and soothing music. He hopes that people will discover the beauty of sound in life, rather than struggle with it. Until today, hip-hop producers use street noise in their music structure; pop music introduces voice narration; DJs use the noise on the surface of vinyl records to convey the value and authenticity of the sound.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Half a century since 4'33'' came out, opinions still differ as to whether or not this work is a musical work. However it is certain and undoubted that what John Cage wants to convey was the positive and avant-garde side of the work. The aesthetic and philosophical thoughts of 4'33'' still influence the world and stimulate the human imagination. Perhaps when we take a moment to listen to the silence in the same way we appreciate music, we will be rewarded with many surprises and inspiring experiences.

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