

Book Review

No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"

Kyle Gann
Yale University Press, 2010
ISBN-10: 0300136994
ISBN-13: 978-0300136999
272 pages

Reviewed by Brian Lefresne

As scholars and critics move further into the twenty-first century and farther away from the twentieth, they are better able to analyze and critique the creation and performance of the seminal works of our time. John Cage's 4'33" is one such work in need of this type of deep-rooted examination, and as Kyle Gann notes in the opening of his book, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"*, a comprehensive study of this work could not have been written in the 20th century (Gann xii). The reputation and the understanding of Cage's composition in the eye of the general public have suffered from a lack of knowledge about the ideas and philosophy of the composer, the roots of the creation of the work, and the context of its premiere. Kyle Gann's text admirably addresses all three of these angles in a compact and very accessible volume.

The opening chapter of Gann's book examines three aspects of 4'33": the premiere of the work, the inherent paradoxes and paradigms of the piece, and the context of the composition within American cultural history. Gann details how the history of the premiere has shaped the history and discourse of Cage's most infamous piece. Everything from the location of the performance to the auspices of the concert and the work's premiere has shaped the reception and understanding of the composition.

The next area that Gann focuses on is the numerous paradoxes and viewpoints of the work. Gann states that Cage's piece is both one of the most misunderstood, but best understood, works of the avant garde. For some, it is seen as a provocation, for others, a logical outgrowth of previous works and ideas put forth by artists contemporaneous to Cage, while still other critics believe that the work presents a new way of listening. Along these same lines, Gann notes that for the inordinate amount of attention this work receives, there are still many unanswered questions about it. A few of these questions are the status and intention of the original manuscript, the notations and performance instructions left by Cage, and the "correct" performance practice of the piece. The other vexing question about the composition that Gann addresses is how one is supposed to understand 4'33". Gann details these various viewpoints, ranging from conceptions of the work as an act of theatre to a representation of Zen.

The final area that Gann investigates is the place of 4'33" within America's cultural history. Gann argues that the piece can be seen as the beginning point for a new direction in American music or as the terminus of preceding events. He compares the work to others in the fields of art and literature such as the paintings of Thomas Cole (*The Oxbow*) and Frederic E. Church (*Sunset*), or the writings of James Fenimore Cooper (*The Last of the Mohicans*) and Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*), arguing that Cage, like the previously mentioned artists, was "[imitating] nature as a way of locating an indigenous American aesthetic" (22-23). Furthermore, Gann peruses other musicians' attempts to interact with nature and to create "American" music. Gann shows that before Cage, many other composers such as Edgar Varèse, Henry Cowell, and Aaron Copland, attempted to integrate facets of America's acoustical environment into compositions, whether they were man-made noises from machines, vernacular rhythms, or melodies from American folk music.

Similar to the composers mentioned above, Cage's primary concern was innovation; Cage did not like utilizing vernacular rhythms and was searching for a new way for Americans to listen to what the American environment sounded like. Cage wanted to capture American nature as music, just as the Hudson River School captured the country's nature as art. Gann posits that, just as many citizens considered America to be the Great Melting Pot, so too did they wish their art to be. Cage's 4'33" can thus be seen as a full synthesis of European and Asian discourses about music.

The second chapter is a brief overview of John Cage's early years and focuses on the individuals and external events that most influenced Cage's philosophy about music and his early life. These people and events included members of his family (grandfather, father, mother), his music teachers (Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and Arnold Schoenberg), and experiences during his sojourns to Paris and New York. For a significant part of this chapter, Gann examines

Cage's early compositions and his extensive experimentation with musical forms, utilization of noise, and use of, including compositions exclusively for, percussion instruments. As with the previous chapter, Gann contextualizes 4'33" as a logical continuation of Cage's oeuvre. Gann notes in particular another paradox in the perception of Cage's work: people who are only familiar with 4'33" are often perplexed by his other music from this period—music often seen as lyrical, meditative, or simple. Gann concludes the chapter with a brief discussion of Cage and the influence of his sexuality on his musical development. To close the chapter, Gann succinctly writes that "Cage had summed up his life's work to date: the percussion music, rhythmic structures, prepared piano, gentle explorations into different emotions—and it was time to move onto something new" (70).

Chapter Three examines the individuals that most influenced John Cage as well as any precedents for writing a silent piece. The people discussed here were cited by Cage when justifying his work, arguing that they were just as radical as he was and that his work could be seen as extension or continuation of theirs. This list contains a diverse array of individuals from the fields of fine arts and philosophy, including Erik Satie, Irwin Kremen, Daisetz Suzuki, and Henry David Thoreau.¹

What Gann so deftly shows in this chapter is that many individuals before and concurrent to John Cage were pursuing the same idea, the idea of creating works, whether literary, visual, or musical, which explore voids or spaces without content, as well as the inclusion of outside events or phenomena within the performance or text. Ultimately, Gann shows that Cage took the ideas and practices from a select group of individuals that best suited, supported, and justified his viewpoint and synthesized them to create his own unique idea about a silent piece.

One final precedent that Gann discusses is the link between 4'33" and musical jokes. Gann looks at more contemporaneous examples of jokes within the musical and visual arts; however, he does not mention or examine the rich tradition of musical jokes and musical joking dating back to as early as the classical period. For example, both Haydn and Mozart included jokes within their compositions. Mention of this tradition would have further strengthened the ties between (and potentially called into question the originality of) 4'33" and the canon of western music.

The fourth chapter examines the years immediately leading up to the premiere of 4'33". Gann opens the chapter by stating that "the genesis [of 4'33"] seems overdetermined," and that in retrospect, any of the individual events he examined in this chapter would have been enough of a catalyst for Cage (or any other composer for that matter) (121). A few of the events that Gann examines are Cage's forays into Indian music; his exposure to early English music; his lecture on music given at Vassar College; his discovery of Robert Rauschenberg's paintings; his discovery of the anechoic chamber at Harvard University; and Cage's incursions into Zen philosophy. As in Chapter Three, Gann connects these diverse influences by showing how each addresses silences or voids within an artwork or in life and how one mentally processes these voids. Gann concludes and that in total this was enough to push Cage to compose his own "silent" piece. What is unique about this chapter is the care and detail that Gann goes through to show how much Zen philosophy and the *I Ching* influenced Cage's thoughts about silence and how much 4'33" is indebted to Asian philosophy. Gann closes the chapter with a brief timeline of Cage's travel and activities during this period and helps the reader gain a better understanding of how quickly 4'33" came to fruition.

The penultimate chapter analyzes extensively the form, the published score, and the performance practice of 4'33". Gann opens the chapter by looking at another paradox: the structure of the piece. He notes that by composing the piece as a three movement work, Cage has engaged in a very direct and deliberate attempt to classicize and connect the piece to western art music. Gann proceeds to investigate the actual composition of 4'33" and shows how the work was composed utilizing the *I Ching* and tarot cards to determine the lengths of time that were to be part of the piece. Gann also notes that as opposed to all his previous oeuvre, which either exclusively highlighted silence or sound, 4'33" is the first work of Cage's to treat silence and sound as equals within a composition. Gann makes the excellent connection between this approach and total serialism, and in so doing further cements his argument that Cage's silent piece must be viewed within the context of post-war music and not as an anomaly occurring in a vacuum.

Another facet of the work that Gann examines in this chapter is its performance practice. Gann reviews how the different versions of the score and potential interpretations of the work, independently and in conjunction with each other, stretch the limits of our understanding of what qualifies as a musical composition. Gann details the numerous issues facing performers of the work and vagueness of the instructions. Along these same lines, to add to the confusion, Gann includes Cage's later viewpoint that 4'33" did not need a performer, that it could merely be the act of listening. This statement by Cage again brings forth another paradox: we have a musical composition that is structured as a conventional work, but that can be performed anywhere by anyone.

The final chapter examines the legacy of *4'33"* since its premiere. Gann surveys the different approaches performers have taken to record the work, detailing how artists either insert "silence" onto the recording, record themselves "performing" the piece in a silent or near-silent environment, or record the work in a non-silent environment such as the out-of-doors. Gann does not offer his own judgment as to which approach is more correct, but does note that each approach highlights one of the various aspects that Cage was attempting to convey with this work. Gann continues the chapter with a discussion of the legacy of Cage's piece, which in his words is difficult to assess because of the numerous genres and movements that can be linked to *4'33"*; that is, potentially any work with unconventional notation or unconventional instruments can be linked to it (194). Gann examines how in the immediate aftermath of the piece its influence inspired an increase in the use of verbal notation for music, as well as served as fodder for the early founders of the Fluxus movement. Gann continues along this path by appraising the three genres of music that are most indebted to *4'33"*: Minimalism, Soundscapes, and Pop Music. Moreover, Gann rightly notes that the work has had an influence on other aspects of music including, but not limited to, notation methods within scores, the interpretation of expressivity in music, and the inclusion of nonmusical phenomena in a composition. Gann befittingly concludes that *4'33"* is one of the few works that has been and continues to be misunderstood by the public and understood by critics; and that as we move deeper into the twenty-first century, critics find more to listen to or are only now realizing how much there is to listen to.

Overall, this is an excellent book that succinctly lays out for the reader the thought and logic of John Cage as well as the structure and the legacy of his most famous work. Additionally, Gann does an excellent job of parsing and explaining the numerous influences that helped shape John Cage's ideas about *4'33"*. More importantly, Gann places Cage and his magnum opus within the narrative and history of the arts in America. Gann links Cage's ideas and *4'33"* to other developments within America's cultural history and shows that while the work is uniquely American, it cannot be viewed as unique unto itself. Also illuminating is the inclusion of a very thorough and current bibliography of texts about and discography regarding *4'33"*. If there is one drawback to this book it is Gann's shortchanging of Black Mountain College. Gann does not offer an extensive enough explanation of what Black Mountain College was or how important and influential this institution was for the visual and musical arts in post-World War II America. Cage was strongly affiliated with this institution, and better understanding this connection would help to cement the argument that *4'33"* must be viewed in the context of the American experimental tradition. Ultimately, this book is a fine addition to the ever-expanding field of Cage studies and should find a place in the library of academics and aficionados of twentieth-century music alike as well as historians and lovers of American cultural history.

Notes

¹ The preceding names are only a selection of the individuals Gann chooses to examine in depth. Gann does provide a more exhaustive list of names that Cage would cite as predecessors and influences on pages 71-72.