QUESTIONING MUSIC: JOHN CAGE’S 4’33”

HEATHER FROM

A conductor walks to the front of a stage and takes his place before a grand orchestra. Musicians sit relaxed until a flick of the conductor's baton spurs them into position.

Movement one. The players are poised. The conductor holds his baton mid-air. The audience waits for the first note to be played, but it never comes; or so they think. Silence radiates throughout the room. Many of the orchestra players lift their eyes and look around. Some stare at their music, others look to the conductor trying to remain motionless and not crack a smile. But the music has already begun.

Coughs break through the silence and act as a beat. Crinkling programs add rhythm to the mix, and the heavy breathing and sighs of the listeners fill the pockets of silence. Jewellery jingles between the beats as a form of instrumentation. Feet shuffle even more than before, creating a bridge of sound on top of the resonances of coughs. Doors outside the auditorium clang open and closed. Chairs squeak. After what seems like a long span of time, the conductor lowers his baton. Listeners release their anxieties, and the concert hall erupts with coughing and the sound of people shuffling in their seats. The players rest for a few moments and the conductor wipes his brow, jokingly indicating his stress. The auditorium fills with laughter, but then the crowd grows silent.

The conductor raises his baton. Musicians sit. Audience members listen. Movement two begins and ends like the one before it, with only the noise of the audience filling the hall. For the final time, the conductor raises his hand. Before the first cough has the chance to break through the “silence” to decide the meter of the music, the conductor lowers his hand and the orchestra relaxes. Musicians stand and bow, and the conductor raises his arms in triumph. He has just performed a striking rendition of John Cage’s 4’33’.”¹

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While a student at Peninsula Shores District School in Wiarton, Ontario, I was exposed to John Cage’s 4’33.” Maurice Azzano, a high school music teacher, showed us John Cage’s work to begin a debate about what is considered to be music. For many of us, this was the first time we had heard Cage’s 4’33.” Although interesting, I did not expect that we would have to try to answer the question, “what is music?”

After I heard Cage’s work I began to consider the identity of music by looking for the compositions of sound in my own life. During a trip to New York I tried to look at the city as Cage looked at noise. The hiss of the steam rising from construction holes, the blaring car horns, the slamming of taxi cab doors, and the clinking of water glasses on patio fronts, began to define the city for me. Just as Cage’s work was formed by the sounds that we hear every day, New York street life became my personal melody of the metropolis. No wonder New York, one of the centres for artistic production and musical composition, fit neatly into John Cage’s conceptual movement of questioning everyday sounds as a form of music.

John Cage, artist and music composer, worked in the music world before 4’33” was released to the public. While in Seville, Spain, he discovered sounds and images that for him, “produced enjoyment,” and became interested in theatre as a result. 4’33” took on the qualities of a theatrical performance, in which the audience observes not only the actors but itself. Cage’s work is thus most effective when you sit in a crowded auditorium and hear a person breathing heavily, a woman coughing in the balcony and your own feet shuffling on the hard ground of the theatre as you scratch at the red velvet seats.

It is also not surprising that John Cage struggled with producing a harmony for his musical compositions. His mentor, Arnold Schoenberg, believed that, “harmony was not just coloristic: it was structural.” John Cage set aside this typical structure of music through this work, as harnessing the sounds of the crowd for four minutes and thirty three seconds of rests helped begin to question the function of unstructured noise in society.

Noise is a given aspect of life as we are never surrounded by pure silence. We may watch a silent movie, but the audience’s reactions become the soundscape as they laugh, cry or gasp in excitement or fear. Noise is separate from society, as it can exist without the media, the music industry and fame. It is, however, a reflection of society at the same time, as people and objects move throughout space, creating sounds that can later be claimed as music. There becomes a beautiful simplicity in walking outside of one’s
house and hearing the noises of the country or of the city, as a song. It also answers the annoying question of, “What do you want to listen to?”

Cage’s work questions the structures of modern and classical music and moves it into a postmodern era. Genres that reflect a certain group of people, or a style of melody, beats and lyrics, as can be seen in the chill sounds of Indie, the fast pace of Pop, and the spiritual experiences of Soul, no longer become applicable. John Cage’s work opens up the possibility for new genres to emerge that reflect public and private life in a way that no other genre can. His use of sounds found throughout our everyday lives, such as sneezing, coughing and the squeaking of chairs, can create a new genre of music that could be called the Everyday.

The definition of music has grown since Cage’s first performance of the work. In 1952 audience members fully expected to hear a musical score from a famous artist and composer, but were instead met with the music of their own reactions in the concert hall. Now John Cages’ 4’33” has been played for audiences all over the world, changing each time that it is performed, dependent upon the audience and how they react to the piece. Experiencing 4’33” is no longer about seeing the orchestra sit silently, it is about being in a room of thousands of people exposed to a “music” that we hear every day, but do not define as such.

When my grade twelve music class first experienced John Cage’s 4’33” and was asked if it was music or not, the responses were on both sides of the fence. Several students believed that music was comprised of beats that create a melody, and nothing else. For many students in my high school, music was a way to express themselves. Stairwells and music rooms were always filled with guitar players, band practices and the occasional flute or trumpet player who did not want to sit in the cafeteria and make small talk. Music allowed people to leave the world in which they lived. So, if noise is music, then where would they go? I, however, did not want to be transported to another place during class or while sitting with friends. I chose to define music as abstractly as Cage did, allowing the sounds of the everyday to enter into the realm of music. It would explain why the class was so divided and how I could sit in a coffee shop and enjoy the chatter and clattering of dishes, while many people grasped Ipods tightly in their hands.

Now, several years later, and a student at the University of Toronto, I sit in lectures featuring discussions about John Cage’s work from experts in the field of music and art. The question still exists: can noise be considered music? The arguments of fellow colleagues are strangely similar to those.
expressed in high school. Some students passionately argue that music is a structured art that cannot be comprised of noise, and some disagree, claiming that they have always thought of noise as music. I like to think that John Cage was expecting some uncertainty about the topic from his audiences when he created this work. Some people believe that it is music, and some people do not; but no matter the answer, people are engaging in a discussion of sound itself as the origin – and definition – of music.

When I first heard 4’33” in 2010, music was still being questioned. Today in 2014, we are beginning to formulate an answer. John Cage is one of many answers to that question as he supplies his audience with a way to connect to unconventional sounds as a form of musical production. It thus makes sense that when Arnold Schoenberg asked, “Will you devote your life to music...?” that “[John Cage] said, ‘Yes.’”\(^5\) I am sure, however, that John Cage’s idea of “music,” consisting of the sounds that make up our everyday experiences and considered to be noise, was most likely not what Schoenberg or the rest of society had in mind.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7rSh5K04G0

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1 “Lawrence Foster on Silence and 4’33’,” YouTube video, posted by Samuel Stefan, August 14, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7rSh5K04G0.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.