**The beginning is never the beginning.** Before 1948, there was 1947, and so on. Nevertheless, thought finds it useful to indicate "here" or "there," "now" or "then." The thinking of this book accordingly begins in 1948, in three different places: the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française in Paris; the Muzak Corporation in Fort Mill, South Carolina; and the Macomba Lounge in Chicago. By taking up its task and its story in these three locations, this book starts to construct a claim: that something changed as a result of what happened in these three places, in this one year. What this book proposes is that the events in Paris, Fort Mill, and Chicago were the iconic symptoms of a change in music, a change to music as it had been conceived and practiced, primarily in Europe and North America. But just as the beginning is never the beginning, innovation never occurs in isolation. The changes in music, signaled in 1948 by these events, were echoed by (or were echoes of) similar changes occurring synchronously (or nearly so) in the visual arts and elsewhere in the West.

Because the beginning is never the beginning, we can cast back to something before the beginning, to the prehistory of the history with which this book is concerned. In the second decade of the twentieth century, we can identify the inklings of the changes we will locate in 1948: in 1913, Marcel Duchamp had the "happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn";[1] Luigi Russolo published *The Art of Noise*, calling for a musical parallel to the "increasing proliferation of machinery";[2] and three years later, in 1916, Emmy

1. Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973; repr., 1989), 141.
2. Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, trans. Robert Filliou, Great Bear Pamphlet (1913; repr., New York: Something Else, 1967), 5.

Hennings and Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, staging the initial events of what would come to be known as Dada.

It goes without saying that the beginning is never the ending. (At the same time, every beginning is an ending.) The changes that rattled the cages of art and music in the second decade of the twentieth century—and that returned with renewed vigor (or to a more receptive climate) in 1948—staked a genuine and significant claim to the definition and identity of each medium around 1960. This book will not provide a detailed historical account of the earliest inkling of these changes. We will, however, encounter Duchamp, Russolo, and Dada as they were received by artists, musicians, critics, and theorists, beginning in 1948 and continuing, with ever-increasing force, through the 1960s and to the present day. This movement—if we allow ourselves to see these various activities in the singular—derived its energy, the thrust and direction of its momentum, from a motivated reassessment of the formal, ideological, and ontological foundations of art history and aesthetics. To begin to identify (i.e., understand) these motivations, it is necessary to identify the state of art history and aesthetics, circa 1948. By artificially freezing this moment in time, we will avail ourselves of that all-important "there" and "then" from which we can start to trace a path to "here" and "now."

In the first month of 1948, *Partisan Review* published a piece by the art critic Clement Greenberg entitled "The Situation at the Moment." The diagnosis was not altogether upbeat:

> There is no use in deceiving ourselves with hope. Our most effective course is to confront the situation as it is, and if it is still bad, to acknowledge the badness, trusting in the truth as the premise of any improvement, and feeling a new security because of the very fact that we have met and verified the worst.[3]

3. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 192.



What Greenberg called "the situation" was a public losing interest in abstract painting, resulting in the social isolation of the artist. At the same time, the paintings themselves were growing in scale, demanding larger canvases and exhibition spaces. "Abstract painting, being flat," he wrote, "needs a greater extension of surface on which to develop its ideas than does the old three-dimensional easel painting."[4] Greenberg goes so far as to supply a minimum size for an abstract canvas: "two feet by two"; anything less and the painting becomes "trivial." Pessimism and precision notwithstanding, what fuels abstract painting's physical expansion, for Greenberg, is its commitment to two-dimensionality. In 1948 he was already zeroing in on painting's characteristic flatness, a quality that, by 1960, he had decided was the one quality "unique and exclusive to [pictorial] art."[5] What Greenberg was already fully convinced of in 1948 was that modernist art—in order to "stay alive only by advancing"[6]—had to concern itself with "its own proper experience, . . . that part of experience that has to do with the making of art itself."[7]

Greenberg's convictions about the proper concerns of painting held considerable sway in 1948. His influence was actually so pervasive that it would hardly have been possible at the time to put brush to canvas or paper to typewriter (if the subject were art) without hearing—at least in some remote, quite possibly repressed, corner of one's mind—Greenberg's voice. Such clarity seems inconceivable amid today's polyphony of blogs and wikis. Whether or not we are lucky to find ourselves unable to apply a similarly dominant aesthetic—or even to imagine its possibility—depends on what, ultimately, we want from the arts (among the pairs of opposing candidates: consistency/diversity; authority/equality; answers/questions). What Greenberg wanted, first and foremost, was quality. Not only does he constantly

4. Ibid., 195.
5. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Art," in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, new ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 775.
6. Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, 2:218.
7. Ibid., 218–19.

assert his own assessments of quality and the grounds upon which they are based, he also frequently acknowledges (often begrudgingly) or disparages (often savagely) the tastes of other critics in the midst of discussion or debate. He calls T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, the author of *Mona Lisa's Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art*, "very, very stupid," saying he "cannot tell the quality of one picture or piece of sculpture or school of art from another."[8] What's worse, Robsjohn-Gibbings "attacks modern art not on the score of its quality but only because of the social and ideological tendencies he attributes to it."[9] Despite identifying himself as an "ex- or disabused Marxist,"[10] Greenberg—at this point in his career, both an archformalist and an unrepentant connoisseur—was unwilling to compromise on the subject of aesthetic judgment. He could make no concessions to the anthropologists, the sociologists, the literati, and certainly not to what he called "the 'creative man' or aesthete,"[11] the emerging jacks-of-all-trades for whose benefit the terms "interdisciplinary" and "multimedia" would soon be invented.

For Greenberg, the experience of the artwork can be broken down into an encounter with three independent yet interrelated facets: content, subject matter, and form. Both chronologically and in terms of importance, content comes first and last. It is the feeling or impulse that motivates the artist to make the work. Content is also the impact or impression the work makes on the spectator. This content is communicated (in the simple, etymological sense of being shared) via the twin channels of subject matter and form. Subject matter is what the work is ostensibly *about*, what is depicted. In Greenberg's account of modernist art, the only proper subject matter is "the very processes or disciplines by which art [has] already imitated . . . the world of common, extraverted experience."[12] After dispensing with pictorial illusion,

8. Ibid., 200.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 255.
11. Ibid.
12. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 6.



with depicting a three-dimensional world in two dimensions, modernist painting concerns itself solely with the unique conventions, characteristics, and materials of painting. Form, on the other hand, is the means by which subject matter is organized and content conveyed. While subject matter can be accounted for art-historically, form is a matter of aesthetics. Prior to both—and in the final analysis—content is art's raison d'être: "The unspecifiability of its 'content' is what constitutes art as art."[13] Greenberg believes that content cannot be encountered directly; form is the handle allowing content to be grasped. Taste is essential to Greenberg because it is the exercise of the capacity to judge content as it makes itself legible through form.

So where does that leave art in 1948? In a word, abstract expressionism. Okay, that's two words. And truth be told, there were lots of other words for it, including: "postpainterly abstraction," "action painting," and, matter-of-factly, "American-type painting." In 1955, Greenberg wrote:

> The years 1947 and 1948 constituted a turning point for "abstract expressionism." In 1947 there was a great stride forward in general quality. [Hans] Hoffman entered a new phase, and a different kind of phase, when he stopped painting on wood or fiberboard and began using canvas. In 1948 painters like Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin "joined up," to be followed two years later by Franz Kline. [Mark] Rothko abandoned his "Surrealist" manner; [Willem] de Kooning had his first show; and [Arshile] Gorky died.[14]

In addition to those named above, Greenberg vigorously championed the work of painters like Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman. The best modernist painting had

13. Clement Greenberg, "Complaints of an Art Critic," *Artforum* 6, no. 1 (October 1967): 39.
14. Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 219.

successfully jettisoned pictorial illusion and had set its sights on the flatness of the picture plane, on the physical reality of the picture's supports (canvas and stretcher), on the materiality of paint-as-paint. By April 1948, Greenberg's January pessimism had already lifted considerably. In a review of de Kooning's first solo exhibition, he declared: "Decidedly, the past year has been a remarkably good one for American art."[15] Whether presented—as he insisted—as a positivist description of the state of art, or—as he is more often read—as a normative prescription of how art *ought* to be, it was around this time that Greenberg's vision of modernist painting began to be stabilized in theory and realized in practice. For the next dozen years, abstract expressionism enjoyed its de facto status as the face and body of modern art. For much of that time, Greenberg seemed either to sit on modern art's knee, miming its concerns and motives, or conversely, to put words into the mouths of the works, making them obediently speak his mind.

**"For years," said Pierre Schaeffer, "we often did phenomenology without knowing it."**[16] This accidental phenomenology began in 1948, when Schaeffer, an engineer at the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française, began to experiment with phonograph discs in the ORTF radio studios. Phonograph discs allowed certain basic manipulations such as slowing or speeding the playback, but as magnetic tape technology—unknown outside Germany until after World War II—became available, Schaeffer experimented with running the tape backward at consistent speed, cutting it up, and reassembling it. Schaeffer was looking for a new way to construct music, a way that would bypass both traditional tonality and the atonal techniques of serialism and twelve-tone music: products of the so-called Second Viennese School and the dominant compositional aesthetic of the day.

15. Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, 2:228.
16. Pierre Schaeffer, as quoted in Brian Kane, "*L'objet sonore maintenant*: Pierre Schaeffer, Sound Objects and the Phenomenological Reduction," *Organised Sound* 12, no. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 15.



> In the '45 to '48 period, we had driven back the German invasion but we hadn't driven back the invasion of Austrian music, twelve-tone music. We had liberated ourselves politically, but music was still under an occupying foreign power, the music of the Vienna school.[17]

Schaeffer pioneered the approach of musique concrète, a music of concrete sounds in the sense both of sounds of the world and of sounds as concrete, discrete parcels of material. Schaeffer referred to this discrete unit of sound as the "*objet sonore*," the sonic object. Such a sound is not treated as a note with a pitch value, to be combined—in adherence to the edicts of either the tonal or atonal systems—with other notes to create harmonic relations. The *objet sonore* is to be accepted for its sonic, acoustic properties; for its texture, its grain, for all the qualities it carries in excess of, or prior to, its traditional musical values. To accept the *objet sonore* thus, Schaeffer suggests that we should listen "acousmatically," without regard to the source of the sound. We should listen blindly, paying attention only to the characteristics of the sound, ignoring who might have made it, with what materials, for what purpose. Schaeffer borrowed the term *acousmatic* from the practices of Pythagoras, who lectured from behind a curtain in order to encourage his students (*akousmatikoi*) to focus attentively on his words and his words only, without consideration of his appearance, his gestures, his facial expressions. Musique concrète, as imagined by Schaeffer, asks us to listen similarly, from behind a metaphoric curtain, removed from the site and source of what we are hearing.

Such a perceptual prescription takes its cues from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, a philosophical method much in vogue among the French intelligentsia of the 1940s. Later, in 1966, when he claimed to be an accidental phenomenologist, he still considered it

17. Tim Hodgkinson, "Interview with Pierre Schaeffer," *Recommended Records Quarterly Magazine* 2, no. 1 (1987), www.ele-mental.org/ele_ment/said&did/schaeffer_interview.html (accessed February 2, 2009).

"much better than talking about phenomenology without practicing it."[18] Just as phenomenology seeks to reduce the field of philosophical inquiry to only that which is available in perception, musique concrète calls for a "reduced listening" practice, concerned only with the immanent features of sound. Schaeffer's Pythagorean curtain is, of course, technology; the "blind" experience of listening to recorded sound, removed in space and time from the circumstances of production, allows for the *concrète* reduction, ultimately an increased attention to the specificity of the sound in question. In ancient times, the apparatus was a curtain; today, it is the radio and the methods of reproduction, along with the whole set of electroacoustic transformations, that place us—modern listeners to an invisible voice—under similar conditions.

Schaeffer was not the first to organize "concrete" sounds into a formal, artistic composition. That distinction may belong to Walter Ruttmann, whose *Wochende* (Weekend) was made in 1930. Preemptively agreeing with Schaeffer's acousmatic intentions, Ruttmann described *Wochende* as a work of "blind cinema." Ruttmann recorded real-world sounds—cars and planes, machines and everyday conversation, church bells and clinking glasses—onto the sound track of optical-sound film stock. Using a photoelectric cell, sound waves were converted into electrical waveforms and then into light waves, which were recorded onto the edge of the film before being converted back into electrical waveforms and sound during projection. Schaeffer's innovation was to work with sound as an independent medium—independent, on the one hand, of conventional musical values and organization and, on the other, of cinema, poetry, and narrative exigencies. The advent of readily available audio technology allowed Schaeffer to begin and end with sound, and in so doing, to invent a replicable technique and aesthetic.

Both technique and aesthetic are bound up in Schaeffer's notion of the sonic object, which might more easily be defined by what it is

18. Schaeffer, as quoted in Kane, "*L'objet sonore maintenant*," 15.



not than by what it is. It is not, for instance, the instrument that produces the sound. Schaeffer wants us to hear sounds with no consideration of their source. Nor is the sonic object a product of its media (phonograph disc, magnetic tape, CD, MP3). He points out that a few centimeters of magnetic tape can contain a number of sonic objects, and therefore the sonic object cannot be a product of the recording medium itself. The sonic object, he writes, is "a perception worthy of being observed for itself."[19]

In a 1986 interview with Tim Hodgkinson, Schaeffer says, "It took me 40 years to conclude that nothing is possible outside of DoReMi. . . . In other words, I wasted my life."[20] Try as he might, Schaeffer felt that he could not organize sound in a sensible way without recourse to tonality. Much of the recorded music of the last forty years testifies, in various ways, to the contrary, proving Schaeffer a less-than-prescient assessor of his own project. Recorded music has come to rely upon and build upon the ideas he theorized and put into practice. The piecemeal way in which recordings have routinely been made since the 1960s borrows from Schaeffer's technique. The overt *concrète* moves of everyone from the Beatles to Marvin Gaye to Pink Floyd to the Minutemen owe their genesis to his founding *concrète études.* One need look no further than the production techniques of Timbaland, the albums of Bjork, the genres of hip-hop, minimal techno, IDM, and the whole idea of sampling as a compositional method, to find active, full-force employment of Schaeffer's technique and aesthetic. Drew Daniel of Matmos (no stranger to appropriative cut-and-splice music making) has gone so far as to claim that *all* contemporary popular music is musique concrète due to the way it is constructed: using isolated bits of sound—sometimes sounds produced by the artists themselves, sometimes by others, sometimes amusical sounds—and digitally rearranging them based on their usefulness within a compositional framework.[21]

19. Pierre Schaeffer, "Acousmatics," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 78.
20. Hodgkinson, "Interview with Pierre Schaeffer."
21. Drew Daniel, e-mail post to Sonic Focus listserv, December 8, 2006.

The argument could be made that such practices are not substantively different from the practices of pre-recording-age composers who maintained in their heads a library of sound clips (i.e., the sounds of the instruments of the orchestra and the gestural uses of those instruments within the tradition of Western composition). In such a tradition, the composer's facility is that of accessing these clips and combining and arranging them into compositions—a practice of virtual sampling, a practice for which Western musical notation is a kind of code or system-language. However—and this is where such an argument would fail—the components of this language are designed to capture only the individual sounds of the instruments of the orchestra and only within the parameters of the possible variations accounted for by the system itself (pitch, tempo, rhythm, dynamics, etc.) It is a mistake to think of Western staff notation as a system intended to express or communicate the possibilities of sound as such. Schaeffer's practice of musique concrète and his *objet sonore* address these limitations of notation by allowing sound compositions to be constructed from sound components without an intervening or translating mediator. Schaeffer's dream for musique concrète is this: the sound signifier signifies only itself; it does not point to some other signified that is meant to be brought forth by the signifying relation. Strictly speaking, Schaeffer's method, his aesthetic, relies on a disarming or suspending of semiotic activity in the listening experience.

Such a suspension again takes its cues from Husserl's phenomenological method, specifically from the bracketing-out of semantic, historical, and semiotic considerations. *Epochē*, a Greek term employed by Husserl, describes a method that advances without consideration of the so-called real world. The Husserlian epochē allows the phenomenologist to make no distinction between fact and fiction, between real and imagined. Perceptual data are accepted as they are received and are analyzed without reference to time, place, intention, or their method of production. For Schaeffer, this means that the sound object precedes any aural experience of it as "signal": "It is the sound object, given in perception which designates the signal to be studied; . . . it should never be a question of reconstructing it on the basis of the signal."[22] The sound object is proposed as the ideal and objective form of the signal; the *essence* of any given heard-thing.



As Brian Kane notes, "Through a sleight-of-hand, phenomenology covertly places its ontology prior to experience, and then subsequently 'discloses' the ontological horizon *as if* it were already present—as if *its* ontology made experience possible in the first place."[23] Schaeffer's *concrète* reduction is no less essentialist, no less invested in the reversible flow of ontological-experiential relations. Acousmatic listening involves a naive, blank reception of the auditory. We are asked to let sounds in the door without first asking, "Who's there?" Pursuing the acousmatic epochē, we are then responsible for bracketing out all information that might shade our auditory experience with signification, with historical contingency, with social import. From this reduction, we can identify that which, within the sound, simply *is*. "I no longer try, through its intermediary, to inform myself about some other thing (an interlocutor or his thoughts). It is the *sound itself* that I aim at, that I identify."[24]

Thelonious Monk is purported to have said "simple ain't easy." And it ain't. The construction "in-itself" should always trigger an alarm. We have cause to be skeptical whenever a claim is made on behalf of "the (thing) itself," on behalf of the simple, obvious existence of something. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the "metaphysics of presence" (the Western philosophical tradition predicated on a belief in the existence of some baseline, *it*, underlying experience) began with a critique of the presumptions inherent in Husserl's theory of signs. As Derrida shows, Husserl's conviction that experience has some access to itself in "absolute proximity" is founded on the metaphysical conceit of presence. Presence assumes, at the very least, that we can

22. Schaeffer, as quoted in Kane, "*L'objet sonore maintenant*," 20.
23. Kane, "*L'objet sonore maintenant*, 21, with original emphasis.
24. Schaeffer, as quoted in ibid., 18, with added emphasis.

posit direct, inner experience of ourselves in a way that would render useless any sign, language, or mediation. This claim for the uselessness of signs for inner communication is, for Derrida, "the non-alterity, the nondifference in the identity of presence as self-presence."[25] Such nonalterity and nondifference is (literally) unthinkable for Derrida, for whom meaning of any kind is always a product of differentiation, of a process that distinguishes the thing-in-question (never simply itself) from all that it is not. Such a process always leaves a trace of the differentiating procedure, of all the things the thing-in-question is not. Thus the thing-in-question retains, constitutionally, the mark of otherness, alterity, difference. It is what it is by dint of what it is not. No thing-in-question is ever simply or obviously a thing-in-itself.

Again, this does not lead to the conclusion that for Husserl—or for Schaeffer, in turn—the thing-in-itself maintains a strict materialist existence. "Absolute proximity" is a quality of experience, not of the thing being experienced. The *objet sonore* is real—Schaeffer is unequivocal on this point—but it is real as a function (or perhaps as a product) of attention and, therefore, of *in*tention. Schaeffer's *Solfège de l'objet sonore* (*Music Theory of the Sonic Object*) endeavors, in part, to demonstrate the objective nature of the sound object, which remains identifiable even as its characteristics are electronically modified. "Variation is a technique for revealing *essence.*"[26] Quite apart from the signal, quite apart from any question of fact or fiction, the sound object maintains its own reality as perceived by a listener. The sound object is that which maintains its identity, its essence, even as its particularities change, even as the perspective from which it is beheld changes. Husserl refers to perceptions formed from alterations of perspective relative to an object as "adumbrations." In his phenomenology, these adumbrations testify to the presence of an

25. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 58.

26. Kane, "*L'objet sonore maintenant*," 19, with original emphasis.



unchanging essence of the object, even as the constituent elements of individual perceptions differ. Just as Husserl's epochē confirms the object's singularity, Schaeffer's acousmatic reduction directs the listening activity in such a way as to debar all that might undermine its unity, its self-sameness. Yet without reference to signal, without recourse to determinations of fact, the sound object has no particular obligation to actuality. Brian Kane arrives at the inevitable conclusion: "Once Schaeffer commits to reduced listening, there can be no essential difference between imagined hearing and actual hearing."[27]

It does not seem too much of a stretch to find some common ground between Greenberg and Schaeffer. Just as Greenberg reduced painting to its essential element, jettisoning anything that wasn't fundamental to its constitution, excising anything that was shared with another mediums, so too did Schaeffer reduce music. If we strip away every characteristic of music, we find that, before it ceases to be music, it can afford the loss of every characteristic but one. We can find examples of essentially rhythmless music (Tony Conrad's drones, Alvin Lucier's "Music on a Long Thin Wire"), and we can find examples of music essentially bereft of pitch values constituting either melody or harmony (Merzbow, Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*). "Sound is an irreducible given of music," writes the musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Even in the marginal cases in which it is absent, it is nonetheless present by allusion."[28] The sonic object requires no signal, yet Schaeffer still calls it the *sonic* object. This lack of material obligation allows Schaeffer to pursue the creative organization of sound—"music," if you will—without recourse or reference to the specific parameters or traditions of Music with a capital *M*. If what determines the sound's "value" (for now, let's set aside the term "meaning"—remembering, ultimately, it is the term we most want to engage) is not its singular pitch, or its pitch relative to

27. Ibid, p. 20.

28. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990), 67.

proximate pitches, or its relative placement in time, nor its loudness; if none of these characteristics are how we engage with the sound as a valuable construct, then the sonic object is free to come and go as it pleases. If it is present for appraisal, then its pesky physical properties are likely to mislead our perception. It is better, one would think, if the sound object maintained its distance from the encumbrance of signal. Can such a thing still be music? Reduced to its minimal, inaudible condition, can music survive *as* music? The *absence* of sound (thus silence) in a given context (an *intentional* context) retains the constituting trace of sound, according to the play of difference. The signalless sound object is made of (absent) sound. Music may proceed without the burden of materiality, without resolving the opposition of *physis* and *nomos*.

Perhaps I am forgetting—you are entitled to wonder—John Cage's eponymous four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence? But *4' 33"* is, as many since Cage have reiterated, not about the absence of sound, not about silence in the way we commonly understand it. Instead, it is about a new understanding of silence as an unachievable state of noiselessness, as what Douglas Kahn has called "the impossible inaudible."[29] In chapter 6 we will discuss *4' 33"* as an engagement with the very material nature, and the very materials, of listening in more detail. For now, maintaining our focus on 1948, let's shift our locus from Pierre Schaeffer's Paris to Fort Mill, South Carolina—by way of Poughkeepsie, New York.[30]

It was in Poughkeepsie, at Vassar College in February 1948, that John Cage addressed the national intercollegiate arts conference, a gathering intended to explore the issue of "the creative arts in contemporary society." During his speech that day, presented as part of the conference's art and music panel (and later published as "A Composer's Confessions"), Cage unveiled "several new desires":

29. Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound In the Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 158, passim.

30. As an aside, allow me to propose a formula of cultural understanding: focus, plus locus (perspective plus place plus time).



> (two may seem absurd but I am serious about them): first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4½ minutes long—those being the standard lengths of "canned" music—and its title will be *Silent Prayer*. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility.[31]

This is where Fort Mill, South Carolina, the home of the Muzak Corporation, comes in. Although it is not the least bit clear that Cage ever set foot in Fort Mill, there is reason to include it in our constellation of *theres* in the *then* of 1948. If *Silent Prayer* had ever been realized, it would have been broadcast across Muzak's "wired radio" network (Wired Radio being the original name of the Muzak Corporation).[32] Since it was to be silent, there would have been no "performance" per se. It would have happened everywhere and nowhere. The ostensible location of the performance, if we felt the need to identify it, could only be Fort Mill, from whence the silence would have issued (or, one could argue, Poughkeepsie, from whence the *idea* issued).

*Silent Prayer* (or the idea of it) predates *4' 33"* by four years. But just as Schaeffer was not the first composer of recorded sounds, Cage was not the first composer of silence. In 1897, Alphonse Allais composed his *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*, which consisted of nine blank measures. Allais was known primarily as an author, poet, and humorist. This renders his work no less silent, but it probably accounts for its lack of recognition. Since Allais was not invested in the world of music, he had nothing to lose by such an intervention. His *Funeral March* could be seen as a satire of music rather than as a piece of music. This allowed it to be kept outside

31. John Cage, "A Composer's Confessions," in *John Cage: Writer*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Cooper Square, 2000), 43.

32. David Owen, "The Soundtrack of Your Life," *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2006, www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/10/060410fa_fact?currentPage=2 (accessed February 2, 2009).

the music corpus, safely exterior to the tradition. The same, however, does not explain the exclusion of the "In Futurum" movement from Erwin Schulhoff's *Fünf Pittoresken* of 1919. Schulhoff was an accomplished Jewish Czech composer, a student of Debussy, responsible for more than thirty fully realized compositions. After the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, Schulhoff was forced to work under a pseudonym. In 1941 he was captured while trying to flee to the Soviet Union. He was interned at Wülzburg concentration camp, where he died of tuberculosis in 1942. "In Futurum" is scored for solo piano, which is coincidental with the most well-known reading of *4' 33"*. But unlike the score for *4' 33"* (and for that matter, the score for Allais's *Funeral March*), the score for "In Futurum" is hardly a model of blankness.[33]

> There are long and short notated rests, triplet and quintuplet rests, and fast runs of thirty-second-note rests. There are fermatas, exclamation points, question marks, and in the middle and at the end, enigmatic signs that look like a hybrid of a half note and a smiley face. Most challenging of all is the opening direction to play 'tutto il canzone con espressione e sentimento ad libitum, sempre, sin al fine!' [the entire song with as much expression and feeling as you like, always, right to the end!].[34]

Regardless of who got there first, Cage's *4' 33"* is certainly the most famous and infamous, the most influential "silent" piece in the history of music. *Silent Prayer*, for obvious reasons (it was never realized), is not much discussed. But there may be reasons to attend to *Silent Prayer*, to how it may actually be more similar to Schaeffer's acousmatically reduced music than it is to *4' 33"*. Thinking through the

33. The notion of *the* score of *4' 33"* is in itself problematic since there are three vastly different extant scores for the piece.

34. Leo Carey, "Sh-h-h," *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2004, www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/24/040524ta_talk_carey (accessed February 2, 2009).



implications of *Silent Prayer* may help us understand *4' 33"* for what it was and, perhaps more important, for what it might have been.

In 1948 the Muzak network supplied "environmental music," meant to increase productivity and reduce absenteeism, to offices and factories across the United States. Clients included small companies as well as huge ones: Prudential Insurance, Bell Telephone, and McGraw-Hill Publishing. Cage's proposal, to "compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co.," is an uncharacteristic intervention into a commercial channel. Cage was fond of mixing sound sources from different cultural strata, sources with divergent uses and functions. But his approach, almost exclusively, was to bring the nonmusical into the concert hall: to turn radios into members of the orchestra, to employ hardware store ephemera and office supplies as addenda to the mechanics of the grand piano, to play a bathtub. It was far less common for Cage to locate his activities outside the circuits of serious music. The Western compositional tradition was, after all, his target. He sought to overturn the presumptions, habits, and hierarchies that had set music's agenda for three hundred years. But an intervention such as *Silent Prayer*, whatever its overall impact, would have little effect on "classical" music. This reason alone may account for Cage's failure to pursue *Silent Prayer* to realization and for his turning of his attention to the concert hall silence of *4' 33"*.

Still, it is difficult to square Cage's abandonment of *Silent Prayer* with his well-documented interest in subjects including indeterminacy, the relocation of music making from the site of composition to the site of audition, an agnostic listening practice, and the composer Erik Satie. Cage was a collector of the scores of Satie (1866–1925). As early as 1945, Cage had worked with and from a Satie score, arranging the first movement of Satie's *Socrate* for a Merce Cunningham dance, *Idyllic Song*. Cage was no doubt aware of Satie's *musique d'ameublement* (usually translated as "furniture music"), a collaboration with Darius Milhaud. First presented in 1920, *musique d'ameublement* was performed during intermission of a play by Max

Jacob. The spoken introduction to the music instructed patrons to "take no notice of it and to behave during the entr'actes as if the music did not exist. This music . . . claims to make its contribution to life in the same way as a private conversation, a picture, or the chair on which you may or may not be seated."[35] Compare this to the term "functional music," employed in a Muzak corporation description of its product's utility, "not as mere background music, but as a psychologically active, sonic accompaniment, carefully designed to remain below the threshold of common attention."[36]

One can easily imagine Satie making the same claim for his *musique d'ameublement* that Donald O'Neill, a former Muzak vice president, made for Muzak, calling it a "non-entertainment, . . . to hear, not listen to."[37]

What's more, Cage's long-standing interest in—indeed, championing of—indeterminacy as a compositional and performance strategy would certainly have found ready application and realization in *Silent Prayer*. Cage's compositional proposal includes the idea that "It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility."[38]

Notwithstanding this "attempt," everything from the duration to the sonic content would be determined, not by Cage as composer, but by external forces: duration, by the standard length of a piece of "canned" music; sonic content, by the particular, unpredictable sounds of each individual environment in which *Silent Prayer* intervened in the flow of Muzak programming. One might read Cage's proclamation from the Vassar lecture less as a declaration of compositional intentions and more as a prediction of how such a period of

35. Quoted in Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 179.
36. Quoted in Ronald M. Radano, "Interpreting Muzak: Speculations on Musical Experience in Everyday Life," *American Music* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 449–50.
37. Quoted in Ibid., 450.
38. Cage, "A Composer's Confessions," 43.



silence might impose itself on the sensibilities of its audience: blossoming at first from within Muzak's static continuity but eventually receding into the quotidian and imperceptible regularity of the sounds of commerce or manufacturing.

This is not to suggest that by 1948 Cage had already developed his "mature" thoughts regarding silence: that what we think of as silence always includes unintended sounds. It *is* to suggest, however, that Cage may already have been attracted to nonintentional sounds and to recasting attention to the activity of listening quite apart from the activity of composing. If we agree that the downplaying of compositional intentionality and the privileging of the listener's role rank among Cage's major contributions to twentieth-century music, then we might conceivably see Cagean tendencies in Muzak itself. Ronald M. Radano states it plainly:

> Muzak topples art from its pedestal into the life of the everyday. It accomplishes what John Cage, the father of American postwar vanguardism, hoped to achieve with a highly radical musical language: to remove the composer's imprint from the score and disrupt traditional listening expectations, directing attention away from the artist toward the role and experience of the listener.[39]

Douglas Kahn has suggested that *4' 33"* approaches silence quite differently from *Silent Prayer*, which "was not a way to begin hearing and musicalizing the surrounding sound. If anything was meant to be heard, it was conventional silence—in this case, the absence of the sound of Muzak."[40] Still, it seems clear that the result of *Silent Prayer* would have been an increased awareness of one's sonic environment. Just as one becomes aware of the hum of the air-conditioning only when it turns off, the intrusion of *Silent Prayer* into the

39. Radano, "Interpreting Muzak," 458.
40. Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 182.

aural environment of Muzak would surely have drawn attention to the change in atmosphere: to the new presence of quiet (if not actual silence), to the absence of the sound of Muzak (as Kahn suggests), and to the Muzak itself. This newly encouraged consciousness of the Muzak content would function in two temporal directions. One would retrospectively "hear" the Muzak that had been playing, suddenly attentive to what had previously existed as unheard ambience. One would also be activated as a listener, prospectively, to when the Muzak returned, undoubtedly listening more sensitively—if only temporarily—to the content of the programming after the end of *Silent Prayer.*

> The broad appeal of Muzak suggests that, unless we reject it entirely, we need another approach, one that comments on its effect, its function, and the kinds of responses it elicits. When interpreting Muzak, we must focus on the listener rather than the object, observing the ways in which programmed arrangements shape sonic environments and, in turn, public perceptions of everyday life. Indeed, I would argue that Muzak is important chiefly because it places the responsibility of making a meaningful experience in the hands of the listener.[41]

In what may be nothing more than a bit of inspired apocrypha, it is said that in 1989 the rock guitarist Ted Nugent (also known as the "Motor City Madman") made a ten-million-dollar bid for the Muzak Corporation, hoping to purchase the company so that he might erase all their tapes. One is tempted (probably unadvisedly) to see this as *Silent Prayer* writ large, as a permanent insertion of silence into the Muzak circuit. In the end, though, sound always prevails over silence: in response to Nugent's failed buyout, the Muzak Corporation created a treacly version of his 1977 hit, "Cat Scratch Fever."

41. Radano, "Interpreting Muzak," 449.



**In 1948, all roads led to 3905 South Cottage Grove Avenue.** How else would one explain the convergence—at the Macomba Lounge, a neighborhood bar on Chicago's South Side—of the brothers Phil and Leonard Chess, Polish Jews who had immigrated to the United States in 1928, and McKinley Morganfield (aka Muddy Waters), who arrived in Chicago in May of 1943 from the Stovall plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi? Yet it was hardly just these three men that came together, after hours, at the Macomba. They also carried on their proverbial backs the traditions of their respective diasporas. The Chess brothers embodied Ashkenazi Jewish flight from the metastasizing anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe to the merciful anonymity of big American cities. Muddy Waters exemplified the journey of African-Americans from their recent ancestors' enslavement in the American South to the "liberation" of institutionalized racism, segregation, and torturous low-paid labor on Southern plantations and then to the eventual migration to New York, Detroit, and Chicago, the latter a city whose African-American population increased 77 percent during the 1940s.[42]

The Chess brothers and Muddy Waters carried with them other threads of their cultures and of the shared culture of newly arrived inhabitants of big-city, postwar America. The Macomba may not have been the crossroads of the Robert Johnson myth, where he swapped his soul for blues prowess. It may have been a more pedestrian crossroads, where the traditions and aspirations of a few people—and a few peoples—collided and colluded, in the process inventing not just a new form of popular music, but also a new form of the American myth of the iconoclast, the cowboy, the rebel. Then again, perhaps something like souls had been exchanged for material reward. As African-Americans found their music being captured and sold by white entrepreneurs, they lost control of their cultural capital. What's worse, it could be argued that this Faustian bargain

42. Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 19.

resulted, unwittingly, in the loosening and eventual severing of the social tether the music provided to the blues singers' own communities and traditions.

In 1947 Leonard Chess invested in the fledgling Aristocrat label, hoping to grab a piece of the emerging market for so-called "race records." (It wasn't until 1949 that *Billboard* changed the name of its "race music" chart to "rhythm and blues".)[43] The music Chess heard Waters play at the Macomba was, in itself, a product of the journey from rural South to urban North. Aristocrat released Waters's 1948 single, "I Can't Be Satisfied," backed with "I Feel Like Going Home," a version of a song that had made the rounds back in Coahoma County, Mississippi, and traveled north with Waters. When Son House recorded it in 1930, he called it "My Black Mama." When Robert Johnson cut it in 1936, it was known as "Walkin' Blues." Waters himself recorded two versions for Alan Lomax in 1941, and at that time called the song "Country Blues." "I Feel Like Going Home" repeats the chord progression and most of the lyrics of these earlier renditions. Waters even retains the repetitive bent-single-note opening of the Johnson and House versions. Most of what makes the 1948 version different, most of what allows it to blaze a new trail in the expansion of American music, follows from a simple technical fact: electricity. The string bass accompaniment—provided by Ernest "Big" Crawford—is still acoustic. But electricity forces the performance to adapt. Not only does Waters swap his acoustic guitar—the iconic instrument of the Delta blues—for an electric guitar, but also—unlike the previous recordings, captured (sometimes literally) in the field—"I Feel Like Going Home" is a modern studio recording.

An individual microphone is dedicated to each of the instruments: one each for Waters's voice, Crawford's bass, and Waters's guitar (or, more accurately, for the guitar amplifier). The result is a new embodiment of sonic space. In the song's previous recordings, all apparently

43. Ibid., 106.



made with a single microphone, a natural hierarchy of proximity is established. All volumes being equal, those sound sources that are closest to the microphone are loudest. The performer is aware of this and alters his volume accordingly. In "Walkin' Blues," Robert Johnson's voice can be heard tracing a dynamic-acoustic shape just as clearly (maybe even more clearly) as tracing a melodic line. The volume of his voice rises and falls according to compositional and emotional exigencies. There are times when the voice must take precedence, must ostentatiously draw the listener's attention. Other times the voice better achieves its goals by retreating into the folds of the guitar's chords, camouflaged within its voicelike bottleneck glissandos. Recorded by one microphone, Johnson's dynamics indicate a perceived acoustic space: the distance of the voice from the microphone, that distance relative to the distance of the guitar from the microphone, and as a result, a sense of the size and perhaps even the shape and materials of the room. Needless to say, this is merely a *perceived* acoustic space, bearing no verifiable indexicality to the actual space of performance.

The range of the signification that contributes to such perception is significantly expanded by Waters's amplifier and additional microphones. The amplifier conveys the buzz of the strings with the same fidelity as the major chord. The quietest and the loudest all register. The microphone is both sensitive and agnostic. Aimed at the speaker cone or the vibrating string or the larynx, it makes no distinction between the phlegm in the throat and the words of the song. The agnosticism of the microphone enables the singer to indulge in the details of the voice: sibilance, distortions, sighs, whispers, the click and crunch of particular consonants, the hollow allowances of vowels. Waters's distinctive singing style emanates from the back of the throat, making audible use of all the fleshy components of the mouth, tongue, cheeks, uvula, and lips. His vocal personality relies on an intimacy possible only in close, quiet quarters, or under the microphone's conspicuous magnification. We are in no position to

say whether he leaned as hard on these qualities when performing in acoustic settings. But the singing on his recorded work—the majority of which features a band and electric instruments—dwells in the phlegmy folds of the vocal apparatus. He targets the syllables that milk the effect of these sounds, hanging longer than seems necessary (longer than would seem advisable for other singers) on *m*'s and *n*'s, on swallowed vowels. Already on "I Feel Like Going Home," his first recording on electric guitar, he dwells on the *ing* in "morning," dragging out the nasal consonant buried between the *n* and the *g*.

The advent of microphonic singing is generally seen as ushering in the era of "intimate" vocal technique. This term is not usually used to suggest what I'm describing here in Waters's singing, but rather to refer to the whispering, confidential styles of singers like Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra. Counterintuitively, microphony's expanded dynamic field closes down the sense of perceived space. As each instrument occupies its own dimension, the sense of a collective space of performance is lost. This reads as intimacy, a space big enough for only two: singer and listener. On "I Feel Like Going Home," the interactions of the three independent sound spaces—those of the voice, guitar, and bass—relocate the song to the compressed nonspace we call speakers (or headphones). The resulting intimacy is made not of proximity, but of distinct-yet-connected spaces and situational identities. Ian Penman observes:

> The "intimacy" of microphonic singing is also the distanced "take" of recording and, thereby, transmission and reception at a distance. Intimacy is also the first step toward the promiscuous impersonality of a record buying public; of both the homogeneous "they" of popular reception and the Song's pivotal and ambiguous "you."[44]

44. Ian Penman, "On the Mic," in *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, ed. Rob Young (London: Continuum, 2002), 29.



Understood this way, electric, microphonic, amplified recordings are early instances of virtual experience. Without connection to a perceivable space, microphonic recordings of amplified instruments begin to detach themselves from the specifics of time. Even if Muddy Waters's recording was not a multitrack production—in which musicians played their parts at different sessions, synching with previously recorded performances—it sounds to the contemporary ear as if it might have been. There is an indication of synchrony: a single time when these three sound sources occupied the same space and engaged in a collaborative activity. But we, as educated twenty-first-century listeners, are skeptical of such indications. Not only is the listener's experience virtual, but the listener's perception of the production process also establishes a virtual relation between the musicians. More than a few observers have written about how the microphone and amplification changed the way music was performed and produced. But few have noticed how modern recording has changed the way music is perceived by listeners. Regardless of the actual circumstances of production, a recording is received and made sense of as a pieced-together construction, which creates "a new economy of absence-presence in its neoteric circuitry."[45]

"I Can't Be Satisfied" b/w "I Feel Like Going Home" was distributed throughout Chicago on a Friday in June 1948. By Saturday evening not a copy was to be had. One record seller at the Maxwell Street Market had hiked the price from seventy-nine cents to a dollar ten and limited sales to one per customer. Apparently even Waters, identifying himself as the singer, was denied a second copy.[46] The record's success convinced Leonard Chess that there was a market for "race music" in general, and for Muddy Waters in particular. By 1950 Leonard Chess had bought out his partners at Aristocrat, moved his brother, Phil, from the Macomba to the label, and renamed the business Chess Records. With Muddy Waters at the top of the roster,

45. Ibid., 30.
46. Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 19.

Chess cornered the market on the electric blues as it evolved into rock and roll. Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88," considered by many to be the first wholehearted rock-and-roll song, was Chess catalog number 1458, released in May 1951.[47] Bo Diddley released his first single, the eponymous "Bo Diddley" b/w "I'm a Man," in April 1955 on Checker Records, a Chess offshoot, home also to the Moonglows and Little Walter.[48] Chess released Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" in July 1955.[49] Muddy Waters's electrified country blues opened the door, and Chess Records ushered rock and roll out onto Cottage Grove Avenue, then to Chicago, America, and the world.

"I Feel Like Going Home" amplifies a familiar country blues, altering its production, aesthetics, and reception. But one common denominator underpins all the ways electricity intervenes in the evolution from country blues to electric blues to rock and roll. The employment of electricity is always a matter of maximizing distribution. Muddy Waters preferred the stripped-down mode of the Delta blues, accompanying himself, solo, on the acoustic guitar. The reason Waters turned to the electric guitar inevitably had to do with wanting to be heard, and to be heard by as many people as possible: "in order to be heard in the noisy clubs and taverns of Chicago [it was necessary] to take up an amplified instrument."[50] Yet the electric guitar distributes the music only as far as the back of the club. To move the music down the street, out of the neighborhood, beyond the city, coast to coast, and worldwide requires the interdependent electric media of recordings and radio. Leonard Chess amplified the change that Muddy Waters initiated, distributing on record and via radio the sounds of a new electrified form of a music that had, until then, been race specific and strictly regional.

47. Ibid., 59.
48. Ibid., 105.
49. Ibid., 117.
50. Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues & Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 72.



Forty-one hundred forty-seven miles away in Paris, Pierre Schaeffer was realizing that electronic media are innately acousmatic, blind to their sources. This is not to suggest that anyone was mistaking Waters's recordings for the work of a white man, but there is a big difference between dropping by the Macomba on a Saturday night and dropping the needle into the grooves of Aristocrat 1305 in the privacy of your living room. An encounter with a recording allows the virtual curtain to remain intact between performer and listener. It would not be long before white audiences peeked behind the curtain and then tore it down. By the mid-1960s Waters's audiences had become so predominantly white that he complained to Peter Guralnick, "I don't hardly play for a black audience anymore."[51] Waters's situation was not unusual. Rock and roll's shift from black to white can be pinpointed with great specificity to the moment when Elvis Presley's contract was sold by Sam Phillips's fledgling Sun Records to MCA in November 1955 for the then-unheard-of price of $35,000. RCA booked Presley on *Stage Show*, the Dorsey Brothers' television show, and took out full-page ads in *Billboard*. Over the course of the following year, Presley had eight separate million-selling records. He topped the *Billboard* sales charts, not with just one song but with four, leaving previously popular artists to fight it out for fifth place.[52] Again, this cultural crossroads is the site of dual and dueling mechanisms: it is the location of a wanton transaction in which African-Americans lost possession of a part of their cultural heritage and, in the process, were swindled out of one payday after another (Chuck Berry was coerced into sharing composer credit for "Maybellene" with the DJ Alan Freed). It is also the source of the inexorable energy by which an underdog music asserted the unique capacities of its form in the struggle for cultural, aesthetic, and economic purchase.

51. Ibid., 87.
52. Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, 145–46.