No Such Thing as Silence

John Cage's *4′33″*

Kyle Gann

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ONE

4′33″ at First Listening

The Maverick Concert Hall is a lovely open-air theater just south of Woodstock, New York, rustically fashioned to blend with its natural environment. Built like a large barn but with a more gradually pitched roof and striking diagonal windows, the hall opens in the back through four double doors onto additional rows of wooden benches in the open air. There are about as many seats outside as in. Oak, maple, hemlock, and shagbark hickory trees intrude gently on the listening space.[1] The hall, and the concert series founded there in 1916, were the vision of novelist, poet, and entrepreneur Hervey White, who broke away from an earlier arts organization to found it (thus the name *Maverick*). Tucked away in a residential sector of the Catskill mountains, Maverick Concert Hall isn't easy

The Maverick Concert Hall in 2008. Photo: Kyle Gann.

to locate from the main road; even once you've found the right dirt path, you creep your car into the parking lot without getting much reassurance that there's anything there. But for over ninety years the Maverick concerts have remained a prized venue for classical chamber music in a lovely natural setting.

The most famous event in the history of the Maverick series occurred in the late evening of August 29, 1952: the premiere of John Cage's *4′33″*. Pianist David Tudor sat down at the piano on the small raised wooden stage, closed the keyboard lid over the keys, and looked at a stopwatch. Twice in the next four minutes he raised the

The Maverick stage. Photo: Kyle Gann.

lid up and lowered it again, careful to make no audible sound, although at the same time he was turning pages of the music, which were devoid of notes. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds had passed, Tudor rose to receive applause—and thus was premiered one of the most controversial, inspiring, surprising, infamous, perplexing, and influential musical works since Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*.

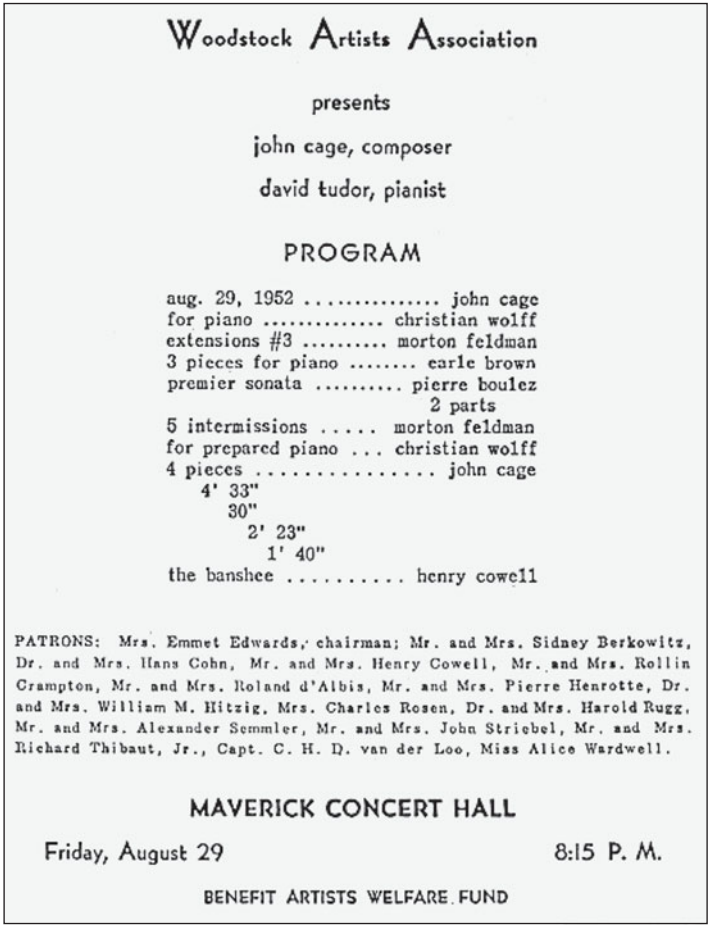
Of course, what the audience heard during the work entitled *4′33″* (*Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds*, or just "four thirty-three" as Cage tended to call it) was not literal silence. Years later, Cage described the sounds heard

during the 1952 performance, which conveniently fell into three movements, paralleling the intended structure: "What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out." In 1985 Cage said to Ellsworth Snyder, "I had friends whose friendship I valued, and whose friendship I lost because of that. They thought that calling something you hadn't done, so to speak, music was a form of pulling the wool over their eyes, I guess." And again: "They didn't laugh—they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry."[2]

One can get an idea from the program what it was that shaped people's expectations. The first work of the evening was a theatrical piece by Cage that was at the time intended to be retitled at each new performance for the current date; the program listed it as *Aug. 29, 1952*, but he later more conveniently gave it the permanent title *Water Music.* This was a theater piece notated with a single page of instructions rather than a musical score, and involving a radio, whistles, a duck call, and a deck of cards, along with other paraphernalia. Lasting six minutes and forty

seconds, the piece directs the performer to perform certain actions at given times determined beforehand by chance methods: blowing the duck call into a container of water, shuffling and dealing the playing cards, playing the radio, sticking objects into a piano's strings to alter the sounds, and blowing a siren whistle. *Water Music* may well have seemed pure comedy, a mini-play reminiscent of the nonsense of the Dadaist movement of the early twentieth century. Yet, as noted on the concert program, the performance was a benefit for the Artists Welfare Fund. The audience was made up partly of sophisticates of the avant-garde, partly of local music lovers, and partly of vacationing members of the New York Philharmonic;[3] for the first group, even the soggy duck call wasn't quite beyond the pale, and perhaps even the others found it entertaining. Moreover, Cage was not an unknown figure in the area. The previous year, a film festival hosted by the Woodstock Artists Association had awarded a certificate for Best Musical Score to his music for the film *Works of Calder.*[4]

Following *Water Music*, the bulk of the program consisted of brief pieces by three younger composers closely associated with Cage: Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and a precocious teenager named Christian Wolff, who was only eighteen at the time of the performance. (Cage, the oldest composer, was a week shy of forty.) All of these



Woodstock Artists Association

presents

john cage, composer

david tudor, pianist

PROGRAM

aug. 29, 1952 ..... john cage
for piano ..... christian wolff
extensions #3 ..... morton feldman
3 pieces for piano ..... earle brown
premier sonata ..... pierre boulez
2 parts
5 intermissions ..... morton feldman
for prepared piano ... christian wolff
4 pieces ..... john cage
4' 33"
30"
2' 23"
1' 40"
the banshee ..... henry cowell

PATRONS: Mrs. Emmet Edwards, chairman; Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Berkowitz, Dr. and Mrs. Hans Cohn, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Cowell, Mr. and Mrs. Rollin Crampton, Mr. and Mrs. Roland d'Albis, Mr. and Mrs. Pierre Henrotte, Dr. and Mrs. William M. Hitzig, Mrs. Charles Rosen, Dr. and Mrs. Harold Rugg, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Semmler, Mr. and Mrs. John Striebel, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Thibaut, Jr., Capt. C. H. D. van der Loo, Miss Alice Wardwell.

MAVERICK CONCERT HALL

Friday, August 29 8:15 P. M.

BENEFIT ARTISTS WELFARE FUND

The program of the premiere concert, August 29, 1952.
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust at Bard College.

were modern, abstractly titled, pointillistic pieces in which notes were disconnected from each other, giving little sense of melody, harmony, or even cohesion. Feldman's *Extensions #3* would have stood out for its steady tempo and seemingly unmotivated pianissimo reiteration of sonorities and brief motives. One of Wolff's pieces, *For Prepared Piano*, involved objects placed in the piano strings to mute the sound, an innovation Cage had developed several years before. In the middle of the program came the huge and difficult First Piano Sonata of Pierre Boulez, a twenty-seven-year-old Frenchman who would become very famous in a few years—would someday conduct the New York Philharmonic, in fact—but who was not yet well known. This violent and more ambitious work, couched in the twelve-tone idiom developed by Arnold Schoenberg before World War II, would have been a stark contrast with the rest of the program.

Cage's more controversial piece came next to last and is listed mistakenly on the program: it was not "4 pieces" but one piece with three movements, the title being *4′33″* and the lengths of the three movements being 30″, 2′23″, and 1′40″, adding up to 4′33″.

The final work was Henry Cowell's *The Banshee*, a classic of the 1920s avant-garde by one of Cage's teachers, made up entirely of eerie noises coaxed and scratched directly from the piano strings, without use of the keyboard.

No one seems to have left any document of how *The Banshee*'s performance went or, indeed, whether it managed to get played at all; though one supposes it did, because following the concert there was a tumultuous question-and-answer session with the composers, climaxing in one artist's exhortation, "Good people of Woodstock, let's run these people out of town."[5]

However unconventional, this was a piano recital, and the pianist was a twenty-six-year-old named David Tudor who would become a legend in the international world of contemporary music. Born in Philadelphia in 1926, he began as an organist and served in that capacity at Swarthmore College from 1944 to 1948.[6] He also studied composition (as did Morton Feldman) with Stefan Wolpe, an émigré Jewish composer of fiercely atonal yet whimsically intuitive proclivities. In December 1950 Tudor had given Boulez's Second Sonata of 1948 its American premiere. Having trouble internalizing the work's relentless yet fragmented continuity, he learned that Boulez had been inspired by the avant-garde French dramaturge Antonin Artaud, and so Tudor pored through Artaud's book *Le théâtre et son double*, leading to a realization that what Artaud called affective athleticism was the key to playing Boulez.[7] Such devout preparation and total immersion in a composer's aesthetic forecast the level of devotion to his repertoire for which Tudor would later become known.

He was quickly gaining a reputation as a leading pianist for the most avant-garde and difficult new music around—the musical page "could be black as sin [with notes] and I could still play it," he later said, and it was no boast, just fact—and at the moment he was on the faculty of the eccentrically progressive Black Mountain College in North Carolina.[8] (Later, in the 1970s, Tudor would desert the piano to return to composition, becoming a pioneer in the field of electronic performance and sound installations.)

Cage, at the time, was best known as a California composer of percussion music and the inventor of the prepared piano—a piano with bolts, screws, rubber erasers, weather stripping, and other objects inserted between the strings to alter the timbre and pitch. Such preparations turned the piano into a percussion orchestra playable by one person. Though still nearly indigent, Cage had already enjoyed a certain amount of notoriety, notably a well-publicized 1943 concert at New York City's Museum of Modern Art which was written up in *Life* magazine. Cage met Tudor in 1949 through dancer Jean Erdman; Cage sometimes supplied music for Erdman's dances, and Tudor was her accompanist. That same year, Cage also visited Paris and met Boulez, and it was Cage (with Feldman's help) who arranged for the premiere of the Second Sonata. Though Cage was fourteen years older than

Tudor, the two were tremendously simpatico and, following the Boulez premiere, formed a close artistic bond that would last until Cage's death. In 1951 his younger friend's volcanic pianism inspired what was easily the most difficult piano piece Cage had written, a forty-five-minute tour de force of violent and systematic randomness titled *Music of Changes;* Tudor premiered the work on New Year's Day, 1952. When Cage had the wild idea for *4′33″*, an unflinching Tudor encouraged him to finish the piece for his upcoming concert on the Maverick series.[9]

At this point Cage's infamy as a proponent of chance techniques and Zen paradoxes, and the widespread influence of his provocative writings, still lay several years in the future. He had so far been indulged as an amateurish but entertaining proponent of percussion noises. With *4′33″*, the controversy that afterward surrounded his life and work was just about to begin.

John Cage's *4′33″* is one of the most misunderstood pieces of music ever written and yet, at times, one of the avant-garde's best understood as well. Many presume that the piece's purpose was deliberate provocation, an attempt to insult, or get a reaction from, the audience. For others, though, it was a logical turning point to which other musical developments had inevitably led, and from which

new ones would spring. For many, it was a kind of artistic prayer, a bit of Zen performance theater that opened the ears and allowed one to hear the world anew. To Cage it seemed, at least from what he wrote about it, to have been an act of *framing*, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention in order to open the mind to the fact that all sounds are music. It begged for a new approach to listening, perhaps even a new understanding of music itself, a blurring of the conventional boundaries between art and life. But to beg is not always to receive.

What was this piece, this "composition" *4′33″*? For so famous and recent a work, the number of questions that still surround it is extraordinary—from its lost original manuscript, to its multiple notations, to unexplained deviations in the lengths of the movements, to the peculiar process of adding up silences with which it was composed, to the biggest ambiguity of all: How are we supposed to understand it? In what sense is it a composition? Is it a hoax? A joke? A bit of Dada? A piece of theater? A thought experiment? A kind of apotheosis of twentieth-century music? An example of Zen practice? An attempt to change basic human behavior?

Let's try the hoax hypothesis. Here are some definitions for *hoax:*

1. An act intended to deceive or trick;
2. Something that has been established or accepted by fraudulent means;
3. Deliberate trickery intended to gain an advantage (synonym: *fraud*);
4. A deception for mockery or mischief.

In what was Cage trying to deceive the audience? Attempting to make them think they had heard something when they hadn't? The audience was fully aware that Tudor was sitting onstage and neither touching the keyboard nor making any audible sounds. If Cage was trying to fool the audience into thinking he had written a piece when he really hadn't, who was deceived? One could argue that Cage was mocking the audience, but he wasn't doing so by *deceiving* them. There was no attempt to cover up what *4′33″* was: a man sitting at a piano for four and a half minutes without playing. There was no moment following the performance at which listeners learned that what they'd heard was not what they thought.

Perhaps it was trickery intended to gain an advantage? Ah yes, the advantage! And what was that advantage? Why, money, of course! Every time I have ever played or explained *4′33″* to a class, one student has always exclaimed indignantly, "You mean he got *paid* for that?" According to the common understanding of how musicians

lead their careers, the musician makes some music, it gets played, and the musician is given some money through some means or another. But Cage wasn't paid for writing *4′33″;* the piece wasn't commissioned. The concert was a benefit for a good cause. The money people paid to hear David Tudor play did not go to Cage, or even to Tudor.

And in fact, while songwriters usually get paid for their performances and receive royalties for the use of their songs, classical composers like Cage sometimes compose for commissions, but also often write pieces with no commission at all. Often they compose simply because they have an idea, or they're building up a portfolio for future performances, or they're trying to advance their careers by doing something impressive, or—quite often—they compose for the sheer love of composing, which can be an enjoyable and fulfilling activity. At that time, Cage was, as he said, "poor as a church mouse," and he had been so for many years. He had spent the year 1951 composing his piano piece *Music of Changes* on the sidewalk and on the subway, and asking friends and strangers to support him by buying shares in his music in case it ever did actually make some money. The year following the *4′33″* premiere, the old Lower West Side apartment house Cage was living in was scheduled for demolition, and he was forced to relocate. Not affluent enough to find another place in the city (even with cheap 1950s rents), he eventually moved

with friends to an artists' collective upstate at the community of Stony Point, where he could enjoy two small rooms for $24.15 a month (about $194 in 2008 dollars).[10] Not until the 1960s would Cage gain any measure of financial security. The idea that he might have made any money off an avant-garde gesture like *4′33″* is a raw caricature of a composer's life. (In the 1960s, however, when he was much more famous, Cage did sell the manuscript of *4′33″* for a large sum of money, much as one might sell any document that had come to have historical significance.)

Or perhaps Cage was just lazy, "writing" a piece that took no work at all and hoping to make some money off it later. Any such impression is belied by the sheer volume of Cage's lifelong output, the detailed complexity of many of his scores, and the loving care he put into copying his manuscripts. He would later say that *4′33″* took longer for him to write than any other piece, because he worked on it, as a concept, for four years. And in 1951 he had written the tremendously virtuosic and complex *Music of Changes*, more difficult to conceive and compose than anything a lazy person would have ever contemplated.

In 2004 the BBC broadcast an orchestral version of *4′33″*—which meant that the BBC Symphony Orchestra sat onstage for four and a half minutes without making sounds, and people listened to their silence in the hall and

over the radio. Some of the comments the BBC received over the Internet played into the "hoax" theme:

> I'm sorry, but this is absolutely ridiculous. The rock 'n' rollers and the punks were wrongly bashed in their day, but this genuinely deserves a big thumbs down.
>
> This is clearly a gimmick, when he 'wrote' this piece he was testing who was stupid enough to fall for it. I think you'll find he wrote it on 01 April 1952.
>
> I find it quite patronising and disturbing that self proclaimed intellectuals are trying to convince us that this is art—just another nail in the coffin for the world of art!
>
> Is this how our licence fee money is being used? I've never heard of such a stupid thing in my life! God rest his soul, but this 'composition' by Cage smacks of arrogance and self importance . . .
>
> Emperor's new clothes anyone?[11]

Yet for the rest of his life, Cage talked about *4′33″* as his most important work, the one he returned to again and again as the basis for his other new works. He knew what it consisted of and was well aware of the range of receptions it generated.

How about the "joke" theory? Well, Cage was certainly

afraid it would be taken as a joke, which is why it took him four and a half years (nice coincidence) from conceiving the piece to actually presenting it publicly. ("I have a horror of appearing an idiot," he once told a critic.)[12] In a 1973 interview he admitted, "I was afraid that my making a piece that had no sounds in it would appear as if I were making a joke. In fact, I probably worked longer on my 'silent' piece than I worked on any other."[13] Cage explained the "joke": "I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like the most, is the silent piece. It has three movements, and in all of the movements there are no sounds. I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall."[14] For a joke, this is an awfully earnest philosophical program.

How about Dada? Dada was an art movement, or perhaps anti-art movement, associated with the period during and after World War I. Disillusioned by the great world of European culture being plunged into war, artists like Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, Hans Arp, Sophie Täuber, Erik Satie, and others dove into a world of nonsensical art that eschewed reason and logic in favor of chaos, random-

ness, and paradox. In the foreword to his seminal early book *Silence*, Cage acknowledges a debt to Dada, and Satie was one of his favorite composers. Cage also notes that "what was Dada in Duchamp's day is now just art," but on Cage's own authority the possibility that *4′33″* was a Dada-inspired gesture, even if also more than that, cannot be entirely dismissed.

How about theater? One of the crucial aspects of *4′33″*, at least in the first performances, is that there was a pianist onstage, whose presence, and whose behavior in the previous pieces on the program, clearly led the audience to expect that his hands would at some point engage the keyboard, and that they would hear deliberately made sounds coming from the stage. That this did not happen, that the listeners' expectations were deliberately flouted, cannot be entirely divorced from the sonic identity of the piece, even though the way Cage talked about *4′33″* later in life—claiming, for instance, that he often "performed" the piece while alone—seems to suggest that it can. As *New York Times* critic Edward Rothstein suggested in a rather unsympathetic obituary of Cage, had Cage simply wanted his audience to listen, he could always have instructed them to do so.[15] In fact, following *4′33″*, Cage's music, by his own enthusiastic admission, began tending more and more toward theater, and during the 1960s in particular he became very interested in the physical and

cognitive relationship between performers and audience members.

The description of *4′33″*'s theatrical recontextualization can hardly be phrased more delicately and thoroughly, I think, than Douglas Kahn has done:

> Ostensibly, even an audience comprised of reverential listeners would have plenty to hear, but in every performance I've attended the silence has been broken by the audience and become ironically noisy.
>
> It should be noted that each performance was held in a concert setting, where any muttering or clearing one's throat, let alone heckling, was a breach of decorum. Thus, there was already in place in these settings, as in other settings for Western art music, a culturally specific mandate to be silent, a mandate regulating the behavior that precedes and accompanies musical performance. As with prayer, which has not always been silent, concertgoers were at one time more boisterous; this association was not lost on Luigi Russolo, who remarked on "the cretinous religious emotion of the Buddha-like listeners, drunk with repeating for the thousandth time their more or less acquired and snobbish ecstasy." *4′33″*, by tacitly instructing the performer to remain quiet in *all* respects, muted the site of centralized and privileged

> utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken, transposed the performance onto the audience members both in their utterances and in the acts of shifting perception toward other sounds, and legitimated bad behavior that in any number of other settings (including musical ones) would have been perfectly acceptable. *4′33″* achieved this involution through the act of silencing the performer. That is, Cagean silence followed and was dependent on a silencing. Indeed, it can also be understood that he extended the decorum of silencing by extending the silence imposed on the audience to the performer, asking the audience to continue to be obedient listeners and not to engage in the utterances that would distract them from shifting their perception toward other sounds. Extending the musical silencing, then, set into motion the process by which the realm of musical sounds would itself be extended.[16]

Kahn is right: *4′33″* cannot be bracketed as a purely sonic phenomenon. It called upon the audience members to remain obediently silent under unusual conditions. The pianist's refusal to play calls a whole network of social connections into question and is likely to be reflected in equally unconventional responses on the part of the audience.

How about a "thought experiment," a kind of "meta-music" that makes a statement about music itself? For many people, including me, *4′33″* is certainly that, if not only that. One story about Cage recounts his sitting in a restaurant with the painter Willem de Kooning, who, for the sake of argument, placed his fingers in such a way as to frame some bread crumbs on the table and said, "If I put a frame around these bread crumbs, that isn't art." Cage argued that it indeed *was* art, which tells us something about *4′33″*.[17] Certainly, through the conventional and well-understood acts of placing the title of a composition on a program and arranging the audience in chairs facing a pianist, Cage was *framing* the sounds that the audience heard in an experimental attempt to make people perceive as art sounds that were not usually so perceived. One of the most common effects of *4′33″*—possibly the most important and widespread effect—was to seduce people into considering as art phenomena that were normally not associated with art. Perhaps even more, its effect was to drive home the point that the difference between "art" and "non-art" is merely one of perception, and that we can control how we organize our perceptions. A person who took away nothing from *4′33″* but this realization would, in my view, already be taking home something revolutionary.

From a broader perspective, how about *4′33″* as the

apotheosis of twentieth-century music? There is something intriguing about the piece's position as a kind of midpoint of the century. The years just following World War II had seen a resurgence of the twelve-tone music invented by Arnold Schoenberg. Composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and Milton Babbitt were expanding the twelve-tone idea from the realm of pitch to include rhythm, dynamics, and timbre, and in the process creating music of unprecedented complexity. Such hyperstructured music began to verge on the realm of incomprehensibility, a kind of perceptual chaos arising paradoxically from rational processes. It's true that most of this development appeared in the years just following *4′33″*, but in the 1960s it became common to talk about how little different the super-controlled music of Stockhausen and Babbitt sounded from the totally chance-controlled music Cage was writing. And indirectly *4′33″* led to the developments from which grew the simpler and more accessible new style of minimalism. As a locus of historical hermeneutics, *4′33″* can be seen as a result of the exhaustion of the overgrown classical tradition that preceded it, a clearing of the ground that allowed a new musical era to start from scratch.

And how about *4′33″* as an example of Zen practice? This, I think, may be the most directly fertile suggestion, but it is too early in the book to develop it as it deserves.

Cage first spoke of the possibility of a silent piece in 1948, and several steps in his thinking led him, over the next four years, to the inevitability of presenting such a work in public. These steps will be covered, one by one, in Chapter 4. First, in Chapter 2, we need to consider who John Cage was and how he became such a remarkable, and remarkably influential, person. Chapter 3 will give the history of people and ideas that formed the ladder of precedents that Cage climbed, and in Chapter 5 we will finally examine the work itself. For now, suffice it to say that there are many levels on which *4′33″* can be understood, and many simultaneous meanings to be grasped within it—which, after all, is one of the signs by which any great work of art can be recognized as such.[18]

But first, a few more thoughts about where *4′33″* fits in American cultural history. Whatever else one can say about *4′33″*, the piece can be understood as a beginning point, or perhaps the final beginning point from a series, of a particularly American process: the imitation of nature as a way of locating an indigenous American aesthetic. The development of American music was little different from that of painting or of the novel in this respect, but less accelerated. The first generation of American painters to aim for an indigenous American style, the so-called Hudson River School—Thomas Cole (1801–1848),

Frederic E. Church (1826–1900), Jasper Cropsey (1823–1900), Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904), and others—achieved originality by painting a native landscape that did not look like Europe and that few Europeans had ever seen. Cropsey, for instance, painted autumn maple forests so red that European audiences believed he was falsifying the color, until he began exhibiting red maple leaves next to his paintings to prove that he was coloring from life. American novelists could step away from Europe by choosing American subjects like the American Indians (James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*), the whaling industry (Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*), or the early Puritan settlers (Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*).

For American composers, the path to national authenticity was not so obvious. Formal models were inherited from Europe, and there was no clear American auditory model to learn from. The Boston tanner and composer William Billings (1746–1800) imitated what he knew of Continental musical style so ineptly, yet with such vigorous musicality, that he fell into what now seems an almost original choral idiom, which would spread throughout the eastern United States as shape-note singing. In his dissonance-filled choral piece "Jargon," he even flirted with radical experimentation—although "Jargon," a response to critics, was more evidently a joke than *4′33″*.

By contrast, most prominent nineteenth-century American composers modeled themselves as closely as possible after the "modern Romantic" European school—Robert Schumann, Frédéric Chopin, Felix Mendelssohn. A few, however, tried to discover an inherently American sensibility in their music, and those composers turned for inspiration to nature.

For instance, born in Bohemia but tramping through Pennsylvania and Kentucky from 1810 on, Anthony Philip Heinrich (1781–1861) wrote programmatic works on subjects of American nature: *The Ornithological Combat of Kings* (1836), *Trip to the "Catskill Mountain House"* (1851), *The Mocking Bird to the Nightingale* (1834), and, more socially, the *Barbecue Divertimento* and *The Treaty of William Penn with the Indians* (1834). William Henry Fry (1813–1864), best known today for the *Santa Claus Symphony*, wrote in 1854 a heavily onomatopoetic *Niagara Symphony* (not performed until the beginning of the twenty-first century). Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869), a New Orleans native, was the first to turn for American authenticity to rhythms of the various non-Caucasian races that settled on this continent, in his symphony *Night in the Tropics* (1861) and piano pieces such as *The Banjo* (1855). The *Arcadian Symphony* (1872) of George Frederick Bristow (1825–1898) begins strikingly with a long violin solo suggesting the loneliness of the American wilderness.

Between 1892 and 1895, the famous Czech composer Antonin Dvořák lived in America, as director of New York's National Conservatory of Music. In 1893, just as he was finishing his own *New World* symphony, supposedly based on Negro themes learned from one of his students, Dvořák made a statement to the press, quoted in the *New York Herald:* "I am now satisfied . . . that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called negro melodies. . . . There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source."[19] Some American composers, resenting this didactic intrusion from a foreigner, responded with other strategies: Arthur Farwell (1872–1952) set American Indian melodies for the piano, and Amy Beach (1867–1944) wrote a Gaelic Symphony based on the Irish tunes of her family background.

The generation of Americans who came of age after World War I took more sophisticated approaches. For the seminal genius Henry Cowell (1897–1965), nature in music meant numbers and especially the harmonic series. Between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one, Cowell wrote a groundbreaking book titled *New Musical Resources*, which argued for treating rhythm, tempo, and meter with the same freedom that composers traditionally applied to pitch and harmonies. The book wasn't published until 1930 and stayed in print only a few years, but it had an

impact on Cowell's student Cage, who helped transmit its ideas to the European musical world of the 1950s. Unbeknownst to Cowell, the great American recluse Charles Ives (1874–1954) had already written in a thoroughly experimental idiom full of unprecedented rhythmic complexities and massive dissonances in an astonishing body of music, often programmatically depicting characteristically American events such as a Fourth of July celebration seen through a child's eyes. Many of Ives's most important works, however, would not be heard publicly until the 1940s, or even the 1960s.

Other American modernists such as Edgard Varèse (1883–1965, born in France) and George Antheil (1900–1959) achieved nationalism by drawing inspiration from the fast-paced traffic and impersonally energetic machinery of American industrial cities like New York. Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940), habitually rather conservative, stepped out of character to write a dissonant tone poem, *Flivver Ten Million* (1927), to celebrate the Ford company's ten-millionth car. John Alden Carpenter (1876–1951) wrote *Skyscrapers* (1924) from a similar impulse and *Krazy Kat* (1921) in honor of an American comic strip. Truly, the creation of an American classical music differentiated from European tradition was a self-conscious enterprise to which a host of diverse strategies was applied.

The Great Depression brought a temporary halt to the modernist agenda and inspired Americanist composers like Aaron Copland (1900–1990) to quote folk songs in a simpler musical idiom that evoked rural America. But it was the Cowell-Varèse-Antheil generation that had already set its mark upon Cage, who remained more in sympathy with experimentalist tendencies than with nationalism per se. The son of an inventor and self-consciously an inventor himself, Cage would rarely stress Americanness, but he put considerable emphasis on innovation. ("I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas," he liked to say. "I'm frightened of the old ones.")[20] Specifically North American musical sources such as ragtime and Latin American rhythms held no particular interest for him, though he did arguably follow Cowell in shifting the interest of his early music to rhythm.

Still, in midcareer it would be Cage who made the most radical turn toward nature of any composer: nature as associated with chance and environmental sounds (the latter found not only in *4′33″* but also in works with taped ambient sounds, like *Etcetera* and *Score [40 Drawings by Thoreau] and 23 parts: Twelve Haiku followed by a Recording of the Dawn at Stony Point, New York, August 6, 1974*). In *4′33″*—at least in terms of its outdoor premiere—he took the controversial step of simply listening to what the American environment sounded like. For all that the

rhetoric surrounding *4′33″* urges us to listen to our environment no matter where we are, it is difficult to resist the idea that the place of the work's premiere seems particularly Romantically chosen: an open-air space in the woods, half of its seats outside under the sky, in which rural nature—rather than the traffic and machinery of an urban area—was pretty much guaranteed to assert itself. In setting *4′33″* for the first time in the sylvan deciduous forest of the Catskill mountains, Cage asked his audience to listen to the murmur of American nature as music, much as Frederic Church, Jasper Cropsey, and others had created a newly luminous aesthetic by capturing that same landscape in paint. The coincidence that Cage and the Hudson River School had started with the same landscape is a delicious one.

Significantly, however, Cage would not be able to arrive at the bold apostasy of *4′33″* until he had turned away from Europe and European music toward the thought and aesthetics of Asia. Cage was part of a generation of composers who grew up or lived on the West Coast—along with Cowell, Lou Harrison (1917–2003), Harry Partch (1901–1974), and Alan Hovhaness (1911–2000)—and whose orientation was less dominated by European thought than was that of the far more numerous and conventional composers along the Atlantic seaboard. Cowell grew up hearing the music of Chinese immigrants; Partch, the son of

former missionaries to China, was lulled to sleep by Chinese lullabies and, growing up in Arizona, heard songs of the nearby Yaqui Indians; Harrison would become, along with the Canadian Colin McPhee, the composer mostly closely associated with the percussion orchestra of the Indonesian gamelan. For many composers nurtured along the Pacific Rim, European music held no special prestige.

Cage moved to New York a decade before finally committing himself to the boldness of *4′33″*, but during that decade he revitalized his ideas on music, rebuilding his aesthetic from the ground up, based on ideas garnered from Zen and Buddhist and Hindu mysticism. Additionally, as World War II ended, the defeat of Japan by the United States drew the two countries into a closer relationship than they had had before, and a new consciousness of Japanese thought and philosophy flowed into American intellectual circles just as Cage was searching for new ideas. In assimilating the writings of R. H. Blyth on haiku (which poetic form swept the New World in the 1940s and 1950s), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's writings on Indian art, and Aldous Huxley's comparisons of Zen and medieval mysticism, Cage synthesized an aesthetic that could only have arisen in America, drawn from both Eastern and Western sources and yet explainable in neither European nor Asian terms. For all its seeming indivisible

A cartoon like the one pictured here, however "alternative" its intended audience might be, shows how far the piece has sunk into cultural consciousness. *Rhymes with Orange*, June 25, 2008. © Hilary B. Price. King Features Syndicate.

simplicity, *4′33″* was a thoroughly American product of the clash of Asia and Europe in the New World.

And, fittingly, *4′33″* cleared the deck for a new American music, freer from European influence than the nationalist streams of music of the 1920s and 1930s. From *4′33″* younger composers imbibed a freer attitude toward sound, adding their own processes into Cage's emptiness (in ways that will be documented in Chapter 6) and leapfrogging over his logical constructs to create the conceptualist and sound art movements of the 1960s, the minimalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the postminimalist and totalist movements of the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of experimental American music in the late twentieth century can be traced to the lineage of composers who took *4′33″* very seriously indeed. Nor were they the only ones. Yoko Ono and John Lennon paid homage to *4′33″*, as have

a number of pop musicians and rock bands. Despite all those who still call it the "emperor's new clothes," it has become a cultural icon, a beginning point, a permission to dart off in any new imaginative direction.

4′33″ was born, on one hand, of European classical concert conventions and formal structure and, on the other, of Asian philosophy, brought together in a specifically American mix. One of the paradoxes of Cage's life, though, is that he absorbed the European influences in his youth in California and discovered Asia later in New York, as I shall now relate.