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Suspicious Silence: Walking Out on John Cage

Clark Lunberry

“What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking.”

-John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing”

“Well, shall we / think or listen? Is there a sound addressed / not wholly to the ear?”

-William Carlos Williams, “The Orchestra”

“South, south which is a wind is not rain, does silence choke speech or does it not.”

-Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

Critical Innocence: 2012 marked what would have been the composer and writer John Cage’s 100th birthday, offering a nice round numbered moment to commemorate and reevaluate Cage’s lasting legacy. And it is a rich and still, astonishingly, controversial legacy, bringing forth bold assessments of Cage that range, as they have for decades, from worshipful acclaim, to ridiculing rejection. It seems with Cage, still, that it’s either black or white, love or hate; that he is either a saintly prophet of new sounds, new silences, or a foolish charlatan leading anarchically astray.

Of late, however, one reads more and more critical accounts of Cage that, while acknowledging his wide-ranging influence and importance, suggest nonetheless of him a deafening innocence to his own renowned hearing. A new generation of writers and listeners, one that is perhaps more theoretically inclined and less reverential of the composer’s acclaim, have begun to raise questions about what they perceive as the unexamined dimensions of some of Cage’s claims about silence, the nature of the nothing that was thought to have constituted it. Cage, as a consequence, is now often more mystically presented as somewhat naively espousing a kind of zen-like syncing of a scene with a sound, with its immediate moment. Also, this more recent critique

asserts of Cage a certain silencing of inconvenient sounds, sounds incompatible with, in particular, his own well established story of silence; some have even characterized Cage's silence as, politically and ontologically, an antiseptic one "which exclude[s] the world and its cultural noise" (Brophy). And how simple, or simple-minded, others say, to seek, as Cage so often said he sought, out of the silence, *his* silence, the sound of "sound in itself"; or to listen for the present of such self-present moments of "here and now," when we all now so knowingly know that the various mediations of "there and then," those "continuously compounded" intrusions upon immediate thought by thought's own "memory and expectation," so certainly prohibit our accessing any such punctually present sound, at any such present site, heard as here, heard as now.

But, of Cage's listening innocence, what might we make of these many reasoned, even reasonable, suspicions that are directed toward him, of such aspersions onto the foundational stories of sound and silence that Cage so often told? How are we to reconcile Cage's stated desire for "sound in itself," heard instantaneously "here and now," with what is—in theory—increasingly understood as a more dense and dispersed event of sound that, temporally spreading-out, is always elsewhere and already other than where we look, where we listen? How are we to hear, one wonders, any such present sounds, silent or otherwise, which (if they are to be heard at all) are often now thoughtfully rendered as acoustically thicker in their very thinking, in their having *been* thought? Resounding, re-sounding, such sounds now echo absently elsewhere in their rich range of references that, simultaneously superimposed, constitute them.

My suspicion (from one who has long admired and learned from Cage) is that many of the more recent attributions of a certain critical innocence to Cage, of his being in a kind of deafening denial to his own repressions of sound, have often failed to see, or hear, how cagey Cage could actually be, and how smart his innocence, such that it was, has finally proven to be. And of such self-present hearing of the "here and now," it was Derrida who noted, in his own Husserlian study of the mythically sought "punctuality of the instant," that "the present of self-presence is not *simple*" (61). Nor, I believe, is John Cage's similar seeming to seek of a self-present sound "in itself," "here and now," all that "simple" either, nor all that mythical (or mystical, for that matter), as some have recently seemed to suggest. For Cage, in the vast and rich range of his resounding work, has consistently and deliberately confused most notions of sound and the self, and of the present, of a self that might be self-*presently* present *to* sound—a self that is, positioned as such, neither here, nor there, neither now, nor then; absent. As Cage reportedly said to the painter Philip Guston, "When you start working, everybody is

in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas—all are there. But as you continue, they start leaving one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave” (Mayer 171).

And lucky for us, prompted by the present punctuality of Cage’s own 2012 centenary—with Cage, now unliving, and so, himself, neither here, nor there—having left—perhaps we should now, once again, listen more closely to him (though perhaps listening *not* to his often obscuring legacy), listening more closely to all that Cage was always asking us to listen closely to and for . . . a listening, appropriately, that starts anew with silence.

Enchambered Music: Cage famously and repeatedly offered two related scenarios of his own encountering of silence, and of his subsequent awareness of the absence of sound, or the absence of the absence of sound: the first of these arose from his time, in the late 1940’s, inside an anechoic chamber. Such a technological space has been described as “a room designed to absorb any and all sound waves, to diffuse any echoes or reverberation, making it as close to silent (or ‘dead’, in the parlance of audio engineers) as possible” (Kim-Cohen 160). Once inside this chamber, Cage was reportedly startled, not by the anticipated silences encountered therein, but instead by the mysterious and unexpected continuation of two specific sounds—“one high and one low”—contained in this purportedly “dead” space. Cage wrote about what proved to be such a seminal experience for him, in his 1962 book *Silence*, the following: “When I described [these two sounds later] to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death” (8). While still alive inside the anechoic chamber, Cage had clearly realized that, contrary to expectation and intention (i.e., his seeking of silence), there was, in fact, as he later stated “no such thing as silence,” at least as long as the living body is there to listen for it. Heard instead, inescapably and without intention, are the constant, polymorphous variations of life-confirming noises already filling the ear or preceding *even* the ear’s finest receptions; hearing before (and after) the ear has even heard.

However, there are some who have recently claimed that Cage, in the anechoic chamber, must have refused to acknowledge, by silencing himself, a “third internal sound” (in addition to the two physiological ones) in which he surely, internally asked, “Hmmm, wonder what that low-pitched sound is? What’s that high-pitched sound?” (Kahn 190). In other words, the suspicion is that inside the chamber Cage, in the service of a pre-selected narrative, was silencing thought, repressing a “discursive” and interpretive mode of

listening that, it's believed, would have been "antithetical to Cagean listening by being in competition with *sounds in themselves*" (Kahn 190).

And yet I wonder if it's fair or even accurate to suggest that, inside the chamber, Cage did not hear this "third internal sound" of discursive thought, of his own quiet questioning. For, indeed, Cage *did* ask the very questions that are assumed to have been repressed by him, of "Hmmm, wonder what" those sounds are, to the sound engineer once having walked out of the chamber. As Herbert Blau noted, "Cage listened to his nerves and heart, then thought of himself listening" (248). As a result of such thought, such thoughtful listening, instead of these discursive sounds being necessarily "antithetical to Cagean listening" and in "competition with *sounds in themselves*," might such sounds have been heard by Cage as vital, constituting components of "sounds themselves," a music of the discursive mind, even, a poetry of its interpretive processes, and as additional echoing nuances of worded sound moving through or alongside the purring and pulsating of the body's blood and nervous system?

The second and even better known of Cage's scenarios of silence, one that perhaps emerges from and echoes out of the first, is his now legendary noteless composition for piano *4'33"* in which, at its 1952 premier, the virtuoso pianist David Tudor sat silently, never touching the piano's keys; heard in its place, however, was a composition in "three movements" that was, as Cage later described, "full of accidental sounds" (Kostelanetz 70) that were gradually brought to one's attention from both within and outside the performance space by the silencing of the piano. Among the sounds reportedly heard were the anxious noises of those in the audience growing restless, their murmurs and movements, their whisper of words incited by the absence of sound, its awkward non-silence.

These two enchambered settings, in spite of their radically different contexts (the first, technological; the second, conventionally musical), share within them a discovered awareness of silence's absence and the unintended emergence of indeterminate sound. As Cage noted, "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot" (8). For instance, in the first chamber, the anechoic one, try as we might to locate silence, enter emptiness, there was the deliberate silencing of the world beyond the chamber's thickly insulated walls and the subsequent interior consciousness of *interior* sounds, both physiological and, I believe, discursive, heard within the living body; in the second chamber, the setting for *4'33"*, there was, by stark contrast, a deliberate silencing of all of the interior bodies of those in the audience, as they, according to the conventions of a concert hall, were expected to sit passively while actively listening, not to

their own living bodies, but to the living world noisily resounding around them both between and beyond the room's echoing walls, from windows and doors left open.

Just as silence had proved absent from the anechoic chamber, so was it absent from the concert hall that night, as if Cage's silenced piano, and its passive pianist, had incited (or made room for) the very active, external sounds of its non-silent setting, the component parts of 4'33"'s indeterminate composition. For in the first two movements of that piece there were, as Cage noted, the outside "accidental" sounds of "stirring" wind and then "pattering" raindrops, which became then in the third movement the living bodies of those restless in the room, "interesting" sounds, as Cage humorously, perhaps ironically characterized them, of people "talk[ing] and walk[ing] out."

Walking Out: And so it is, still, from such scenarios as Cage's two enchambered settings that others have continued to walk out on Cage, but now often for quite different reasons. If before, with 4'33", for instance, the departure was caused by what might be snidely construed as a kind of philistine's frustration, or, on the other hand, perhaps a more high-minded sense of aesthetic violation—there being nothing *there* to listen to—more recently, and critically, the departure is more likely caused by the silent suspicion that there is, in Cage's case, not nothing, but *too much* there, or too much claimed, *selectively* claimed, by Cage for the living immediacy of un-represented sensation, the "sound itself" of a particular moment, heard "here and now."

However, both before and now, perhaps too many have "walked out" too soon on Cage, listening too simply, or too suspiciously, to his silences, and to what Cage repeatedly said of these silences. For might it be precisely there, at the punctual point of one's walking out, that Cage's plot has theoretically thickened, and where his own proposed listening most richly begins to extend beyond itself, extending beyond even Cage's own expectations and descriptions of sound and silence, and the absence of each? Might even a kind of acoustic threshold onto absence have been crossed over, *walked over*, while walking out, and where, just when you think you've heard it all, you realize there's far more there than meets the immediate ear? For as Cage noted: ". . . our experiences, gotten as they are all at once, pass beyond our understanding" (194).

In keeping with this image of one's "walking out," let's recall that it was Cage, walking out of the anechoic chamber, who carried with him the discursive questions arising from the physiological noises heard from within, the "Hmmm, wonder what" those sounds are questions, in which language engages sensation and seeks explanation, its words integrating within or upon "sounds themselves," and where, as Cage quite explicitly wrote of

language's inevitable involvements in sound, "the words make / help make / the silences . . ." (109). At such a moment of wonder, though, it's perhaps little wonder that, having entered the chamber seeking silence, even Cage's own premeditated expectations had on that day in some ways "walked out" on him, while he, largely unresisting of the intrusions and the departure of his earlier idea, was finally left alone with his lost thoughts, his initial ideas of silence unlocated and unfulfilled; or as Cage later stated, "No one can have an idea once he really starts listening" (191). Or certainly not a single idea, a fixed idea, enduring and unchanging.

There was, of course, another, earlier description of a different scene of departure, another moment of "walk[ing] out" for Cage, but this one came from Cage's earlier anecdote of the artist in his studio, surrounded by "friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas." In that setting, the departures described were presented as a kind of necessary evacuation or emptying out of—I suppose—ego, cultural noise, a conceptual clearing of one's clutter, the clutter of one's consciousness, and where finally "you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave." It is as if, with this story, Cage is consciously concluding that one must absent oneself, or find oneself absented, getting out of the way of, "walking out" on, that which is otherwise being blocked by one's own habits of thought, habits of listening, even by one's own habits of suspicion toward listening's capacity to keep an open ear.

After all, in both the anechoic chamber and with 4'33", the indeterminate sounds encountered in each clearly resonated from both within and beyond the sounds of the two sites themselves, signaling much more than simply the singularity of acoustic texture, more than merely the punctually present point of any particular sound. Cage's subsequent listening to the respective absences of silence was thus understood by him to have effectively interrupted and intruded upon any unencumbered or facile immediacies of "here and now." From this new position outside of his own premeditated expectations—where Cage, in a sense, had walked out on Cage—while he may have begun by seeking out silences in the anechoic chamber or 4'33"'s concert hall, he nonetheless inadvertently and indeterminately uncovered in their place moments of mediated separation from such silence, their own time-intersecting echoes, time-delayed traces delineated . . . and the absent sound of that.

Response Ability: In an early essay where Cage first speaks of letting "sound be themselves," he expands upon the mind's interpretive mediations and considerably complicates that which is often construed more simply, more innocently, less theoretically, of his listening. For Cage, in fact, embraces

the ways in which discursive intrusions are not to be separated from sound, repressed from one's listening, but instead heard as richly and inevitably constituting it. He writes: "Hearing sounds which are just sounds immediately sets the theorizing mind to theorizing . . ." Cage goes on to offer personal instances of sounds in nature resounding theoretically elsewhere:

Does not a mountain intentionally evoke a sense of wonder?
night in the woods a sense of fear?... Is not decaying flesh loathsome?
Does not the death of someone we love bring sorrow? . . . What is more
angry than the flash of lightning and the sound of thunder?

Cage concludes this description, indicating:

These responses to nature are mine and will not necessarily correspond with another's. Emotion takes place in the person who has it. And sounds, when allowed to be themselves, do not require that those who hear them do so unfeelingly. (10)

Nor, one might add is one required to hear such sounds unthinkingly either, without the interpretive "theoretical" mediations that, for Cage, finally imply a listener's "response ability" (10), one's ability to respond at all.

However, in what is becoming a kind of contemporary chorus of Cagean criticism, another recently voiced critique of Cage's silence and sound, and what is seen as his suspiciously selective listening, has suggested that, in his discriminations or repressions of inconvenient sounds, Cage "fail[ed] to realize a fundamental thought [that] sound is bigger than hearing" (Kim-Cohen 167), and that there is a "non-cochlear," conceptual component to one's listening. Again, though, I'm not so sure that Cage, so innocently presented, "failed" to realize that, how fundamentally *big* sound could be, and how the ear's spiraling cochlea were indeed—like a jetty spiraling into a great salt lake—mediating channels leading directly to the discursive brain. For Cage always acknowledged the indeterminate density and immensity of sound, and the limits of our ability to actually hear it (as well as our responsibility to the limits of our own listening, to that which cannot be heard by the naked ear); in addition, Cage was well aware of the mind's own interpretive imperative when confronted by sound and the subsequent discursive and theoretical impulse that was, not necessarily disrupted, but linguistically enlivened by sound, and that, as Cage himself noted of silence, "required" him to "go on talking"; indeed, for Cage the materially and conceptually compounded echoes extending beyond any such sought silences—"the nature of these," Cage noted, being "unpredictable and changing . . ." (22)—inescapably moved the listening mind immediately into its own mediation of memory and anticipation, of linguistic/poetic formulation and conceptual contempla-

tion, out of the self-presence of “here and now” and into the non-presence of “there and then,” with these two tenses coalescing toward the formation of any perception at all. “Our poetry now is that we possess nothing . . .,” Cage famously wrote, “We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment *it might reappear and seem to be and be the present*” (Emphasis mine 110). Possessing nothing, the past, the present, both entangled and superimposed, any such sound now seeming to be and *being* the present.

Superimpositions: In a conversation between John Cage and his friend and fellow composer Morton Feldman, recorded for radio broadcast in 1966, Feldman anecdotally recounted a recent visit of his to the beach and his annoyance at encountering there “transistor radios . . . blaring out rock n’roll” (254). Feldman lamented that, what he called, these “intrusions on [his] life” had prevented him from the peace and quiet that he had presumably sought at the beach, or, from the sounds, there, that he may have hoped to hear . . . birds, waves, wind . . . silence . . . a space to think his own thoughts . . . who knows? Whichever it was, Feldman felt as if he were being held captive by the annoying noises, obliged to “surrender” to them against his wishes or his will.

Aside from the somewhat distressing mental image of Morton Feldman in swimming trunks, and, even more, the ironic fact that this conversation with Cage was recorded and perhaps heard later by some on “transistor radios” (maybe even heard at the beach!), Feldman’s frustration caused by hearing the unwelcome and interrupting noise of the radio prompted Cage to interrogate further the experience of “intrusion” that his friend had just described. Characteristically, Cage gently counseled Feldman not to “surrender,” but to embrace such radiophonic intrusion, “to listen to it with pleasure,” “attend to” it, he said, “pay attention and become interested” in it. In a typically understated display of his own theoretical orientation and sophistication, Cage then elaborated upon how, by changing one’s way of thinking, one might come to enjoy and appreciate such sounds as those heard at the beach, or elsewhere, insisting: “Well, what it is that you are interested in is *what* superimposes *what*. What happens at the same time together with what happens before and what happens after.”

To Cage’s suggestion that Feldman alter or enlarge his way of hearing, paying attention to the superimpositions of sound—“what happens before and what happens after”—there is the clear assertion that, for Cage, one might be able to listen for more than those sounds immediately present, more than simply “the sounds themselves.” As Cage then explains to Feldman, offering the radio as a device for the reception of such superimposed sound:

... all that radio is, Morty, is making available to your ears what was already in the air and available to your ears but you couldn't hear it. In other words, all it is, is making audible something which you are already in. You are bathed in radio waves—TV, broadcasts, probably telepathic messages, from other minds... And this radio simply makes audible something that you thought was inaudible. (19)

Perhaps somewhat like the poet Jack Spicer's own image of the radio receiving transmissions from outer space, from "Martians" and "the invisible world," Cage presents here a radically new, if entirely earthly, conception of listening, one that encompasses and involves, in addition to a more immediate or positive listening, a kind of negative listening as well, or an anti-hearing, of non-perceptions superimposed upon perceptions; as such, the sounds, as Cage here presents them... redefines them, might then be heard to extend beyond themselves as sounds themselves, into absence, before and after any actual event of sound: in time, out of time, immediate, and immediately mediated; or, as Derrida would later famously describe, in ways not unrelated to sound and the presence of sound:

... the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is continuously compounded with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation (retention and protention). The nonperceptions are neither added to, nor do they occasionally accompany, the actually perceived now; they are essentially and indispensably involved in its possibility... a perceiving in which the perceived is not a present but a past existing as a modification of the present. (64)

For Derrida, these "nonperceptions" are not, for all intents and purposes, *non*-perceptions at all, for, rolled up into one, and inseparable, they make possible, they constitute, perception *as* perception, the two tenses and textures of sound, both their presence and absence, entangled in perception's very formation.

However, to Cage's far-reaching suggestion to Morton Feldman of a more expansive form of superimposed listening, Feldman replied, troubled by the very thought of what Cage was proposing, and in as close to a personal rebuke of Cage as Feldman would ever come, that "At the same time, I mean just simply stated, I can't conceive of some brat turning on a transistor radio in my face and [my] say[ing], 'Ah! The environment'" (19). Feldman went on to even more delicately counter or question Cage (implying perhaps that Cage even shared some characteristics with such a "brat" at the beach) with his suggestion that, even if he were to try and listen for such superimpositions of sound, that "I can't think unless thought is something

of the past,” acknowledging thought’s inevitable and enabling precedence to the very thinking of thought.

However, in Cage’s affirmation of sound’s superimpositions, he wasn’t here asking Feldman simply, or merely, to *think*, to *think* about the sounds of the radio heard at the beach; for Cage was suggesting instead that it was perhaps *thinking*, or certain kind of “deep” thinking that they had just discussed—the image of it, the *self*-image of it—that was part of the problem, and that this kind of thought itself was largely creating the staticky interference to a more temporally dispersed form of hearing, a listening that is corporally as well as cerebrally engaged, a thinking *in time*, through the body, that *includes* a discursive awareness of what’s to be heard without allowing that discursiveness to deafen the sounds around, to entirely dominate the scene. Cage later states to Feldman the following of such a superimposed listening in motion:

I guess in my case that it goes out of thought into experience . . . [and] that we can be, not just with our minds, but with our whole being, responsive to sound, and that sound doesn’t have to be the communication of some deep thought. They can be just sound. Now that sound could go in one ear and out the other, or it could go in one ear, permeate the being, transform the being, and then perhaps go out, letting the next one in (both laugh). And then whether an idea developed . . . you know, the hardest thing in the world, of course, is to have a head without any ideas in it. (27)

To this affirmation of absence, and to what is, as Cage characterizes it, the “hardest thing in the world,” Feldman appears to concede the point of the value of the empty head, responding, “But that’s always the best work, you know? Always was” (27).

Feldman elsewhere wrote, in a manner directly related to the absence of sound, and of mediated listening, that “We do not hear what we hear . . . , only what we remember.” To which Cage, concurring, would likely counter, yes, but we might nonetheless hear that, remembrance, as if, once-removed, the remembered sounds, even the anticipated sounds, decayed and soon decaying, dead and soon to die, might somehow be made nonetheless to emerge and return (in some ghostly, radiophonic manner), to sound, perhaps inaudibly, in their own resounding absence.

Sound Conclusions: Such compacted densities of superimposed sound—Cage’s interest in “*what* superimposes *what*. What happens at the same time together with what happens before and what happens after”—listened to closely in all its phenomenological “thickness,” disperse into a range of radiating references that Cage fully understood could not be traced or tracked down, located in any one site, and certainly not onto any single site

or source of sound. While the one listening, also dispersed and divided by the densities and indeterminacies of the acoustic event, might—as if “present at [one’s] own absence” (Beckett 27)—walk away from the scene, as if walking out on oneself, vanishing through the very efforts to hear anything at all, and where, like the artist and the studio, “if you are lucky, even you leave,” becoming in the process, if only for a moment, that which both Feldman and Cage had agreed was the “hardest thing in the world”: “a head without any ideas in it.” For silence itself had been vividly demonstrated *to* Cage and *by* Cage as being complexly intersected by the rich and noisy range of these intrusions and interruptions that are involved in simply being alive, by the multiplicities of their continuously compounded sounds.

And it is in large part thanks to Cage that the windows of the concert hall, the windows onto the world—to a life intently and responsively lived—*these* windows are now more widely open. As a result, there’s no telling what might finally be heard from them. As Cage noted: “. . . the composer resembles the maker of a camera who allows someone else to take the picture” (11). While as such a composer, perhaps Cage’s most important compositional act, as well as the most enduring and valuable part of his legacy, are his expansive and liberating lessons in listening and the fact that he certainly never told us what we were and were not to listen to—internally, externally, physiologically, discursively—as all sounds are now equally available, those heard and perhaps even more delicately those that remain unheard, absent.

Morton Feldman, in a follow-up radio conversation with Cage, movingly stated that “I know that when I write a piece [of music], sometimes I’m telling people, ‘We’re not gonna be here very long’” (143). Of Feldman’s poignant and elegiac claim for his music, one might imagine Cage nonetheless affirmatively responding that such a life, however long, if lived attentively, would be long enough . . . offering each of us just the right amount of time to hear, superimposed, what’s there to be heard, and not heard, see what’s there to be seen, and not seen, and in the process to be awakened, as Cage described elsewhere, “to the very life that we’re living” (12).

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