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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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John Cage's 4' 33'': Unhappy Theory, Meaningful Gesture

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ABSTRACT. During the premiere of Cage's famous 'silent' piece *4' 33''*, the audience was irritated from not hearing anything. Nevertheless, Cage insisted that the piece was not silent but full of accidental sounds that were music. However, were the first listeners truly mistaken? Can an artwork such as this one determine ways of perception or establish a fact? More generally, how can an artwork such as this one mean anything? To develop these questions, I will first define what *4' 33''* is and examine what makes it appealing. After considering whether *4' 33''* is a musical work, or a conceptual (symbolic) work, I will focus on Cage's aesthetic principles and conclude that there is no determinate way of interpreting the meaning of *4' 33''*, in that its underlying principles are contradictory. I will suggest that in order to explain the attractiveness of *4' 33''* as an artwork, it is helpful to consider how gestures can bear their meaning.

1. Introduction

During the premiere of Cage's famous 'silent' piece *4' 33''*, or *Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds*, consisting of no intentionally composed sounds, the audience sitting in the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York,

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was irritated from not hearing anything, and the discussion that followed revealed that the audience was angry. One of the local artists even stood up and suggested: 'Good people of Woodstock, let's drive these people out of town' (Revill 2014, 156). This is interesting, because most of the audience were partly Cage's fellow artists, professional musicians of the New York Philharmonic on vacation, people close to avant-garde art, and local music lovers, all of them well aware of the context of the presentation of the work. Nevertheless, Cage was misunderstood, and after the event, he repeatedly insisted that the first listeners had

missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. 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. (Cage quoted in Kostelanetz 2003, 65 f.)

The piece was not silent. Silence did not exist, Cage claimed; there were only sounds, and sounds were music.

Despite a discrepancy between what Cage intended to show and what the original audience actually perceived, Cage (and many after him) believed he had established that sounds can be music and that we cannot hear silence. If the first audience did hear silence, they heard it wrong.

However, were the first listeners truly mistaken? Alternatively, can an

artwork such as this one determine ways of perception or establish a fact? Or, more generally, how can an artwork such as this one have meaning? To develop these questions, I will first examine what *4' 33''* is, as different kinds of artworks have their meanings in different ways. Next, I will focus on Cage's aesthetic principles and conclude that they do not help us understand the meaning of the work, in that they are contradictory. I will suggest that in order to explain the attractiveness of *4' 33''* as an artwork, it is helpful to consider how gestures can have meaning.

2. Is It Music?

The work has some *formal* characteristics of music. It has a title, suggesting that it is a deliberately created work, and this indicates the work's fixed duration. It also has a score that can be bought in music shops, giving instructions that qualify certain performances as adequate interpretations of the work. The work is performed by musicians together with other works of music, in venues where music is performed.

The fact that there are three different versions of the score need not trouble us that much, in that they differ slightly only in *how* the instructions are to be performed.² It is important that the performer produce no sounds

² Originally, Cage issued a score in conventional notation consisting of an empty treble and bass stave (there are neither notes nor rests), indicating a work for piano, with the metronome marking of sixty beats per minute indicating that the tempo should not change during the performance. (Interestingly, the metronome marking is graphic; it applies to the

intentionally, according to all three of them: the score presents either an empty stave or an instruction: *tacet*. Literally, the work's score contains silences, not any (intentional or environmental) sounds (this plays an important role in how we interpret the meaning of the work; cf. also Dodd 2018).

More disturbing is the fact that, if music is an organization of sound (which is a rather broad definition initially proposed by Edgar Varèse,

tempo of *reading* the score: 2.5 cm of a bar are equal to one second of physical time. Thereby, Cage emphasizes that the whole piece has a defined duration in physical time.) Although the score is unconventional, it makes clear that the performer performs the piece by following the score and keeping time, by not producing any sound intentionally during the performance. The metronome marking also attaches the piece to the musical tradition, especially to Beethoven, whom Cage sharply criticized in other ways. Beethoven required an exact reading of his scores, and he was thrilled when accurate metronome indicators replaced older verbal indications of tempo. – Later, Cage issued a graphic notation, comprising six horizontal pages on which vertical lines illustrate the duration of the three parts of the work. A performer does not follow the lines but the gap dividing the two lines, defining the duration of a movement. This score also adds that the work is for any instrument or combination of instruments. It is interesting mainly for the fact that, in Irwin Kremen's words (to whom it was dedicated), the score 'marks a transition from one form of musical notation to another' (Gann 2010, 181), thus strengthening its connection to musical tradition again. – Finally, there is a typewritten or hand-written *tacet* version of the score, which simply gives a verbal instruction 'tacet' for all three movements of the work that are numbered in Roman numerals. This version of the score was published without a title, but Cage added an explanatory note stating that 'the work' was premiered at Woodstock under the title *4' 33''*, which indicated its duration. Importantly, he also added that the performance of the work may 'last any length of time' (ibid., 184).

which Cage appears to accept and further develop), the score of *4' 33''* cannot be a record of a musical work. In the score of *4' 33''*, Cage notated silences to frame environmental sounds to present them to the audience for aesthetic appreciation.³ By doing this, Cage *included* some sounds in the work (all environmental sounds) and *excluded* some other sounds from the work (all 'musical' or intended sounds). All sounds *intentionally* produced by the performer count as ambient: they do not belong to the performance of the work.

However, this is not an organization of sound proper. Although framed environmental sounds are *presented* to the listener (and it is clear which sound does belong to the performance and which does not), the sounds presented are not given any structure. As Stephen Davies has argued, by creating the frame, we do not yet organize what is within the frame; we do not yet create an artwork (Davies 2005, 25). (Cage's other work, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, is a good contrast example to *4' 33''* in that it presents *and* structures presented sounds; cf. Dodd 2018, 637).

We could be more favourable to Cage and consider another option. We know that Cage *composed 4' 33''* using a composition technique called chance operations, through which he wanted to relinquish control over his

³ Levinson accepts the notion of framing as an organizational device and reads 'organization' of sound (a necessary condition of music) in the broad sense of 'designing' or 'arranging' (Levinson 2011, 270). Silence in Cage's score delimits the work's boundaries and thus frames certain environmental sounds as belonging to the work. His suggestion concerning *4' 33''* is that it is a limiting case of music considered as an organization of sound-and-silence. See also Carroll 1994, 95.

work and open it to chance (a technique previously used by Marcel Duchamp, Hans Arp and later Pierre Boulez).⁴ For example, in his other work, *Music of Changes*, Cage determined pitch, dynamics and duration of sounds and silences by applying separate chance charts. Cage compares creating *4' 33''* to composing *Music of Changes*: 'I wrote it [*4' 33''*] note by note, just like the *Music of Changes*. (...) It was done like a piece of music, except there were no sounds – but there were durations' (Cage quoted in Fettermann 1996, 72). In *4' 33''*, Cage determined only durations of silences, arriving at the resulting four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence,⁵ and he divided the work into three unequally long parts, a form which suggests a traditional sonata – as if the work should be considered as belonging to the tradition of western tonal music (cf. Gann 2010, 167).

Chance operations is a compositional system that does not have its perceptual correlate. When we listen to *Music of Changes*, we can hear no trace of its intentional organization, no system or rule; it is merely chance sounds or tones. Nevertheless, we can distinguish the lack of an organization as a composer's intention, because we can hear what is

⁴ Boulez's use of chance operations was quite different from Cage's, in that Boulez wanted to control (rationalize) chance. The term 'aleatoric', often applied to Cage's chance music, comes from Boulez.

⁵ Cage had probably planned to arrive at this length – it would correspond to the length of Cage's *Silent Prayer*, a predecessor of *4' 33''* that Cage conceived in 1948 but never composed. Originally, Cage meant to sell *Silent Prayer* to the Muzak company, probably hoping to interrupt the stream of background music that the company broadcasted into public spaces since the 1940s (see Cage 1992, Kahn 1997); the standard length of a Muzak song was approximately three to four and a half minutes.

presented to us. However, what about the silences of *4' 33''*? What is their intention, and can we distinguish that intention from an unintentional failure to do music, without having any background knowledge of the work? Perhaps we could say, together with Cage, that silence is a structural element of music of equal importance, and that, since duration is the only parameter that sounds have in common with silences, we can define music as the organization of *time*:

It is very simple. If you consider that sound is characterised by its pitch, its loudness, its timbre, and its duration, and that silence, which is the opposite and, therefore, the necessary partner of sound, is characterized only by its duration, you will be drawn to the conclusion that of the four characteristics of the material of music, duration, that is, time length, is the most fundamental. Silence cannot be heard in terms of pitch or harmony: It is heard in terms of time length. (Cage quoted in Gann 2010, 79 f.)

However, we should be cautious before agreeing with Cage that time is a structural element of his music proper. If music is an organization of time, it has to organize some audible events in time. Nevertheless, silences (empty durations) isolated from sounds are not events but absences of events that, on their own, cannot organize audible events. Thus, *4' 33''* does not provide any structure to audible events, even according to that definition.

Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* is a good illustration of the way he worked with time in his music. A conductor does not *coordinate*

(organize or unify) the actions of individual players according to the parameter of time – he functions as a timekeeper. (A performer of 4' 33" has a similar task.) Time does not serve to impute a structure to musical sequences; it is not used as a tool to create a musical form. In Cage's music, time is a unifying element of the work in the sense that is no different from how physical time is a unifying element of perceiving an event. In short, then, we have good reason to balk at the idea that 4' 33" is music.

3. 4' 33" as a Conceptual Work of Performance Art

It appears that the only event that is organized here is the *performance* of 4' 33". During its premiere at the Maverick Concert Hall, David Tudor closed and opened the piano lid to indicate the beginnings and endings of its three parts, measured the lengths of each movement with a stopwatch when following the score, and stood up at the end of the performance to receive applause, thus setting the standard for performing this piece. For this reason and because 4' 33" was originally presented as a work for performance, it has been categorized by Kendal Walton (2008) as a dramatic work resembling the theatre of the absurd, or, by Daniel Herwitz (1988, 1993), Stephen Davies (1997/2005) and, most recently, Julian Dodd (2018), as a work of performance art – an instance of a happening.

According to Julian Dodd, performance art is a medium-specific art *form* belonging to the *genre* of conceptual art. Art forms, such as music, literature, or sculpture, are all medium-specific; they are 'kinds that explain why works are in the media that they are in: that is, why some technologies

and not others are used in the work's production' (Dodd 2016, 256). Art genres, such as satire, comedy, feminist or conceptual art, can be cross-media. Genres 'group together works according to the purpose for which they are produced and appreciated, not according to the media with which they are created' (Dodd 2018, 639). The purpose of works of conceptual art is to afford us an intellectual interest. When Dodd says that *4' 33"* is a work of performance art, he has in mind a specific art form that emerged in the art contexts of the 1960s, suggesting that the *medium* that is specific to these works is *performance* as such (cf. Dodd 2016, 251).

There is a debate surrounding how we appreciate works of conceptual art, but for the sake of brevity, I follow Dodd in accepting that 'performance' is a 'medium' of the work, and not a 'mean', as Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (2010) would have it. There are several reasons why Dodd's suggestion is helpful *in general*. For example, it seems that we do need a medium to appreciate works of conceptual art *as artworks*. Moreover, we do not have to think of the 'conceptuality' of the works in a narrow, propositional sense but consider that the artistic statement of a work can be non-propositional, as Dodd suggests, 'that which the artist presents to us as the focus of our appreciative attention' (Dodd 2016, 253). Importantly, these works can be considered as *continuing* in the artistic tradition, and not as breaking with it (cf. Wilde 2007).

The suggestion that performance is the medium of the work of performance art, and not its idea, is particularly useful as far as Cage's *4' 33"* is concerned. If the execution of a work were inessential to the work, it would be very hard to say what the work is appreciated for being a work of

art. If we wanted to appreciate Cage's work for having as its content a meaning that is propositional in a strict sense, what we would have to appreciate is a set of contradicting ideas as that content. Although it is not impossible to adore theoretical inconsistency, it seems implausible that the work has been successful because of this.

Before we turn to Cage's aesthetics and to the question of the meaning of the work, let me briefly raise an objection. Perhaps performance is not the form, or the medium, specific to *4' 33"*. The work *can* achieve its purpose in an alternative, 'conceptual' way, for example, when we read its score, or when we learn something about the purpose of the work by reading Cage's commentary. Perhaps Cage's work is an example of a new category of conceptual music.

Cage indeed indicates that a performative aspect of the work is *not* essential to it. He speaks as if the work itself were an *idea* or a strategy of how to listen, to be applied in everyday life:

Well, I use it constantly in my life experience. No day goes by without my making use of that piece in my life and in my work. I listen to it every day... I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention toward it. I realize that it's going on continuously. So, more and more, my attention, as now, is on it. (Cage quoted in Fleming & Duckworth 1989, 21 f.)

Cage appears to be talking about the focus of the work rather than about the work as such. Nevertheless, he comments on what happens when we

actually *execute* the instruction 'tacet' prescribed by the score, implicitly emphasizing that performance is an essential element of the work. Attentively listening, Cage follows his own score. The score can be a vehicle of Cage's idea only via prescribing *gestures* of silencing oneself, be they performed publicly or in private. In this sense, the work *has* an essentially performative aspect. Without executing the instruction, one cannot have the experience with the work. One can have an experience with what one believes the idea of the work to be, and one can think about it, yet this is not the experience with the work itself. Reading a score invites us to perform the work at least privately at home. The medium of the work thus appears to be *performance*.

4. How Does the Work Express Its Idea and What Is It?

There are two opposing suggestions as to how works of conceptual art can have their meaning or 'point' originating from conceptual artists themselves. According to the first, 'purely conceptual', way, indicated by Joseph Kosuth's *Art After Philosophy* (1969, in Alberro & Stimson 1999), works of conceptual art are appreciated for the ideas they convey, through intellection. The natural way to understand the work is to analyse the propositions that underpin the work and expound its idea, either in an accompanying commentary or in an independent text. Sol LeWitt, in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, formulated the alternative: 'Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. (...) Ideas are discovered by intuition' (1967, in

Alberro & Stimson 1999, 13).

Let us begin with the former suggestion. There is no doubt that Cage *wants* to present an idea about music and listening in his work. The standard way of interpreting the work's point follows Cage's explanation: the work is about the aesthetic qualities of environmental sounds. However, this does not follow so clearly when we study Cage's commentaries and other written work concerning his music aesthetics. There are two major claims that he makes in his texts: the first has to do with composing music, the second with listening practices.

1) Cage generally presents environmental sounds or noises not merely as *aesthetically* interesting, but as a new and better *music*. In western tonal music, that is at the centre of Cage's criticism: the aesthetic quality of sounds depends on intentionally composed and perceived relations between tones. However, according to Cage, tonality is normative and artificial (Cage 1961, 152). It is a device of a composer to convey his musical ideas and to prescribe ways of listening and of feeling emotions. For this reason, sounds lose something of their original quality and become a means to a pre-determined end. Sounds 'themselves', as Cage used to call any environmental noises, present no particular taste of the composer. They just occur as they are and are not manipulated and organized by the composer. Therefore, these sounds do not arouse any particular emotion. Cage therefore renounced every form of musical language and proposed a conception of a 'naturalized' or 'ecological' music that does not privilege tone over noise and includes any environmental noises. In Cage's conception, sounds are *not only* to be included in musical works as a

material that would be subject to further creative practice (as is indeed the case for his many works such as *Music of Changes*). Sounds, as Cage's most radical example *4' 33''* illustrates, literally *become* music: there is no perceptible or definitional distinction between music and sounds occurring in the environment. As a consequence, music does not have to be intentionally composed (created or 'mediated'), and it is everywhere: 'When standing on a pavement, we are present at the concert of nature' (Cage 1990, 431).

2) There is a corresponding claim that pertains to a listener of Cage's music. Listeners should attend to any audible events present, without expecting anything and without evaluating what they hear according to their musical preferences, in order not to amend the listening experience of 'pure' sounds: listeners should listen to 'sounds themselves'.

According to Cage, expectations add a content that we *hear in* sounds but that is not actually *in* sounds. For instance, when we listen to Bach's first prelude of the *Well Tempered Clavier*, we do hear the tones as harmonic or 'correct' (or true): we hear that every tone has its determined, fixed position in the whole piece. However, when we switch to Wagner's *Tristan*, there will be tones, which we will be hearing as dissonant or 'incorrect' (or false), as if they should not belong to where Wagner posits them: their correctness is defined by a given position in a musical order. (Or we can imagine how the incorrect tones of a badly performed piece of music that we know well 'feel'.) In short, when we hear a sound as 'correct' or 'incorrect', we hear it as an appropriate or inappropriate response to an expectation raised by a preceding phrase of tones. We thus do ascribe

aesthetic value to sounds as listeners not on the grounds of their audible qualities (not on the grounds of the qualities of a sound as a material) but on the grounds of assigning of the truth-value that we hear *in* sounds (as if sounds *had* it). Therefore, we do not appreciate *what* we hear, but rather *how* we hear.

Cage emphasizes that, since there is no truth-value in sounds, listeners should *actively* free themselves from their listening habits by not expecting any relations between sounds and by not evaluating a sound as correct or incorrect. In this way, listeners will be able to listen in a non-evaluative way, which is an aesthetically proper and correct way of listening. (Although Cage's observations concerning the fact that the tones we hear are 'interpretations' based on previous expectations, as was evidenced by David Huron (2008), Cage does not appear to be right in supposing that it is possible to hear without structuring or evaluating sounds that we hear *at all*, even if tones or sounds are released from tonal relations.)

There are two contradictions involved in these principles:

- 1) If there is no difference between works of art and works of nature, one can intentionally produce works of art that are *not* intentional.

- 2) One can listen in a non-evaluative way to the audible events present in the environment and at the same time evaluate such listening as more valuable in comparison to listening, during which one *does* evaluate the aesthetic qualities of sounds. Moreover, one would have to be active in order to listen in a non-active way to avoid expectations

that naturally arise in listening.

In short, both Cage's principles are based on the notion of immediacy, but in the indicated sense, immediacy cannot be consistently claimed to be a principle of artistic creation⁶ and reception.

The medium that an artist chooses to work in is neutral as far as its artistic value is concerned. Sounds have no intrinsic *artistic* value, and the way they are present in the environment raises no demand concerning how sounds should or should not be treated artistically, or how they should be listened to. Once immediacy is evaluated (as 'artistically interesting'), it ceases to be immediacy. What is immediate simply is, and a positive or negative evaluation is imparted to it additionally. Once environmental sounds are presented as worthy of being preferred, they are not presented as immediate. To accept an aesthetics of immediacy is to accept a theory based on contradiction.

The problem of Cage's aesthetics is similar to the paradox of spontaneity.⁷ The command 'Be spontaneous!' is self-refuting, in that it is not possible to act spontaneously in obeying a command. Similarly, it is not possible to execute Cage's instruction to listen to environmental sounds as

⁶ According to Cage, sounds do not have to be manipulated or 'mediated' in order to be music. In this sense, music is 'immediate'. The above-mentioned claim does not concern the practice of artistic improvisation (such as in cases of jazz or dance improvisations), in the creation of which an artist is essentially involved, and the artist's intention to create is also preserved.

⁷ I would like to thank Vojtěch Kolman for bringing this to my attention.

music. We either perceive sounds during 4' 33'' as music, but then, they are not perceived as environmental sounds (their qualities are transformed, or 'transfigured', to use Danto's term from his 1981 book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*), or we perceive the aesthetic qualities of sounds themselves, but then, we no longer perceive a work of art (cf. Davies 2005, 17 f.). In short, if Cage presented only his 'ideas', he would probably not receive so much attention and success.

Let us now consider the alternative suggestion of Sol LeWitt. If the suggestion of uncovering the ideas in a conceptual artwork by intuition is to be meaningful, the 'discovery' cannot be a matter of blind guessing. Rather, and more symbolically, a work must 'lead' us towards the idea that an artist wants to convey via something implicit, by viewing a not necessarily realized or rationalized procedure. We do not have to *interpret* the point of the work; rather, we apprehend it directly when we encounter the work.

Relating this to 4' 33'', Noel Carroll's suggestion that 4' 33'' is an 'exercise in exemplification' (Carroll 1994, 95) comes to mind. Carroll draws on Nelson Goodman's (1969) notion of exemplification, one of the two fundamental forms of reference together with denotation.

Insofar as the work is presented within a context of musical practice, Carroll suggests, it exemplifies (highlights, or symbolizes) aesthetic qualities of ambient sounds or noise. By using silence that frames ubiquitous sounds, Cage conveys his idea to the listener to attend to the aesthetic qualities of sounds.

According to Goodman, a sample exemplifies if it highlights *a selection of some* particular, constitutive qualities of what it is a sample of,

and he gives the example of a tailor's swatch. A tailor's swatch exemplifies only some of the qualities of a fabric, such as the structure of the weave, the colour, and patterns, but not others, such as size or shape.

However, in Cage's 4' 33" there are no particular sound qualities that are highlighted as constitutive or, in our case, aesthetic. All kinds of noises are included in the performance of the work, and no sound-quality is excluded. Noises, therefore, do not seem to have a symbolic function if there is no particular sound quality, which they would symbolize as aesthetic (see Dokic 1998, 110). Hence, such an 'intuitive' understanding of the work does not appear to operate when we encounter Cage's 4' 33". This would also explain its first audience's rejection. The question of 'how' 4' 33" can have a meaning remains open.

5. 4' 33" as a Gesture

Nevertheless, the idea that the work is symbolic is not irrelevant. Perhaps Cage's idea is not *referred to* (via exemplification, as Carroll suggests) or 'said', but rather, as Dokic suggests, employing Wittgenstein's notion, is 'shown'. 4' 33" can have its symbolic meaning via introducing into the art context gestures that accompany its performance: negative gestures of not performing music.

We often talk about works of conceptual art as gestures, yet the suggestion – in regard to questions about meaning of works of conceptual art – is often overlooked. Gestures are symbolic in that they do not directly

designate or articulate propositionally their meaning. They show their meaning, which depends on the way the gesture is produced, in the context of presentation *and* in the reception of the gesture. Gestures are not universal (with the exception of some facial expressions), so we must learn their meaning, and they can also have more than one meaning depending on the culture in which they are used. Gestures can take on new meanings in different contexts (like the 'time out' gesture used during a football match or shown by a teacher in a classroom).

The way gestures are made (their physical appearance) is crucial to understanding what they communicate. (In our case, the fact that there are silences contained in the score of 4' 33'' matters for interpreting the meaning of the work as much as does the context of its presentation.) Some gestures do have a conventionally established meaning in a given culture (such as pointing with an index finger or with a chin) or in a community (in case of gestures employed within sign languages).

On the other hand, gestures of conceptual artworks are interesting for their unresolved nature for the fact that their meaning *has to* be specified. In the moment of their first presentation, a reference framework for interpreting the artwork (its socio-historical and cultural background) is only being established. Therefore, it is understandable that their meaning is not easily deciphered immediately, or that the work can remain meaningless if the original reference framework is not known. (A performance of Cage's 4' 33'' by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 2004 broadcasted over the radio illustrates this well. The recorded reactions were conspicuously similar to those of the original audience, cf. Gann 2010, 14 f.) Whereas the meaning of

a manual gesture can be well established, the complex gestures of conceptual art are not 'complete' or 'resolved' once and for all, and they will urge us to respond to them. In this sense, a work of conceptual art such as *4' 33''* has no single meaning or point: works of art, as with some other gestures (such as in sign poetry), have a creative potential. The meaning of an artistic gesture depends on the *relation* between someone who makes a gesture and someone who receives it.

So, was the first audience mistaken about the point of *4' 33''*? Although Tudor's original interpretation was not successful in transmitting Cage's intention to the audience, and although the audience did not know anything about *4' 33''* (as we do now), the work guided the first listeners to one of its points. They claimed to hear nothing – silence, or perhaps the silencing of music – which they conceivably perceived as the political revolt of a composer renouncing to take part in the music establishment. If music rather than politics was expected during the Maverick Concert Hall recital, it is easy to understand that the audience began to leave, rejecting the act of power that the composer was willing to exercise over his listeners, who had no wish to become involved in a composer's rebellion.

Some later orchestral interpretations of the work in which orchestra members emphasize the act of not playing their instrument suggest a different reading of the work.⁸ In facilitating the shift of the listener's attention to the very act of not playing an instrument, as an intentional act of

⁸ For an orchestral interpretation by the EBU Euroradio Orchestra directed by Emil Tabakov, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OovYr0w7BMA>

producing an artistic content, a shared act of attention emerges, one whose intention is not necessarily sounds, but the shared, intentional silence itself. Although the four-and-a-half-minute silence, as a standard for interpreting the piece has it, may not be objectively audible (we begin to hear environmental noises after a while), the content of the work enables us to experience the expressive power of communal silence, an experience that can be unexpectedly interesting and enriching.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I suggested that Cage's 4' 33'' succeeded precisely because Cage presented his idea in the form of an artistic gesture. 4' 33'' is a work of performance art that does not, and does not have to, present a single meaning or a statement that could be exhaustively grasped either via an analysis of its propositional content or via exemplification, as conventional interpretations would have it. It is conceptual in the broad sense of the term: it invites us to ask questions important to us, such as what music is, and even ontological questions, such as whether there is such a thing as objective silence, or epistemological questions, such as whether we can hear silence. However, as an artwork, it is not obliged to answer those questions. Cage's 4' 33'' can have a meaning and can be appreciated thanks to the introduction of gestures of silencing accompanying a public performance. The work thus invites us not only to think about music but also to

experience a shared intentional silence.⁹

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