

Musical Silences—Opaque and Capacious

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I will argue that there are (at least) two species of musical silence, which cannot be distinguished by attending to how these silences sound. I term these two kinds of musical silence ‘capacious’ and ‘opaque’. Both capacious and opaque musical silences might occur in the midst of the ongoing production of sound or might exist in the complete absence of sound. Both kinds of silence can, in certain conditions, be sonically identical, but both are always received by the listening ear in importantly different ways. I will discuss our ability to distinguish between these silences, even when they ‘sound’ the same. I will argue that the accounts of musical silence and silent music offered by (among others) Levinson, Kania, and Davies are vitiated by their failure to distinguish between these kinds of musical silence. I distinguish these kinds of silence by the kinds of listening activity associated with them, and the ideal structure of such listening practices.

1. Introduction

I will begin by giving a minimal account of musical silence.¹ Musical silence is a musical event. As a *musical* event, musical silence is only accessible from within the practice of listening to music, broadly understood. Musical silence cannot be identified with the absence of sound, broadly understood. Musical silences will often involve the absence of *music* but the presence of *sounds*.

What we call ‘silence’ in natural language is rarely devoid of sound. So, I will sharpen our terms a little. Our loose, everyday idea of silence, I will term ‘aural silence’. We often find ourselves experiencing a silence that, on deeper inspection, can be persuaded to render up smaller sounds that had previously escaped our attention. This might be the sound of our own breathing, for example, or of our clothes as we make small involuntary movements. Aural silences are contingent on the strength and direction of our attention, and vanish on application of that attention to sounds already available to us. I will

1 In this paper I hope to discuss musical silences and, by extension, silent musical works. This will not be with a view to supporting or contending any broader definition of music more generally, although some consequences for those definitions may follow from this discussion. The reader may desire a definition of music to frame this paper, and I may be wrong in hoping to do so without one. For the purposes of this paper, I would be happy to use Kania’s: ‘music is any event *intended to be listened to (or heard)* in such-and-such a way’ (Kania, 2010, p. 344). How I intend to cash out the ‘in such-and-such a way’ will become clear as we proceed.

define aural silence as *the absence of audible sounds that meet one's present threshold for attention*. A stricter conception of silence (the absence of sound waves within the frequencies that a given person can detect), I will term 'absolute silence'. This covers vanishingly few cases. It also maps onto our conventional understanding and use of the term 'silence' poorly. We will accordingly discard it here, and turn to look at the relationship between musical and aural silence.

Musical silence and aural silence seldom coincide. One important reason for this is that musical silence is only possible when engaged in musical listening proper. Musical listening proper is a specific *kind* of listening, which discloses certain properties that are unavailable in other kinds of listening—including other kinds of listening to music.² Musical silence might contain some audible properties (sounding baleful or tense) that aural silence outside of a specific kind of listening cannot support. (Silences can be baleful or tense outside of listening to music, but here we are still engaged in specific *kinds* of listening—listening to a conversation, for example, or listening for an air raid siren). Musical silence, then, is not accessible from within the general state of aural silence. Aural silence is a general failure of our present level of attention to apprehend sounds; musical silence is brought about by a specific, structured kind of listening. More than this, musical silences can be experienced even if aural silence is completely absent. While aural silences can be 'broken' by sounds, musical silences need not be.

The fact that aural silence is incapable of having the same properties as musical silence is unsurprising. But the fact that musical silence does not necessarily entail aural silence *is* surprising, and significant. Simply put, musical silence often has a sound—perhaps even usually has a sound. While aural silence does not sound like anything, musical silence often does. This has been more or less uniformly noted in literature dealing with musical silence. But partly in order to motivate the reader's acceptance of this broad consensus, and partly to facilitate my later dissenting discussion of *species* of musical silence, I will here give three examples of musical silence possessing a sound.³ This done, we will then turn to engage with the literature in depth. The examples will also later be used to break from the consensus view of musical silence.

1.1 Example 1—Audience Ambience

This is found both in the experience of attending a musical performance and in listening to recordings of performances. The audience that one is surrounded by (or that the recordist is near) makes sounds of varying types. The same is sometimes true of the

2 Absently overhearing a musical recording, or enjoying and dancing to music at a nightclub, does not afford the disclosure of some of the properties that musical listening proper discloses. And vice versa. For a more thorough examination of some of the diverse practices and norms governing different kinds of music-related listening practices, see [Cochrane \(2009\)](#).

3 I will go on to divide musical silence, and associate practices of listening, into two species. However, this will not be to deny that there is important and interesting diversity in the more fine-grained function of silences within those species, found in differing musical works belonging to those species. For an excellent exploration of the diverse functions of silence in compositions that use what I will go on to call 'opaque silence', see [Lissa \(1964\)](#).

performers—a mallet might be dropped, or a chair shifted. Suppose that this takes place in the brief interim between a crescendo and the resumption of the music at a slower pace. The interim has a character of its own—one of tension, or of relief, or of the completion of some thematic goal. In such cases, the absence of aural silence does not interfere with the goal of these musical interregnums. The *sounds* of the audience may well be present to our attention, but fail to interfere with the specific kind of musical listening in which we are engaged and the musical silence it discloses. (There is of course an upper threshold to this—someone leaning over to sneeze in your ear will be very likely to interfere with your attending to a musical silence.)

1.2 Example 2—*Inadvertent Sustain*

The previous example might not convince. Perhaps in reality such audience noise simply falls beneath the threshold of our attention, and so is a kind of aural silence. In which case, I will have misdescribed the phenomenology of being exposed to audience noise while engaged in musical listening proper, whether in person or via a recording.

To try and head off this claim, consider the following example. Suppose that due to a combination of circumstances (perhaps atmospheric conditions affecting the materials involved, or the revenge of a disgruntled conductor), a number of instruments have been imbued with unusual levels of sustain. At the conclusion of musical movements, or at points that employ a caesura in the music, instruments continue to emit their final notes far beyond the common duration one would expect, and with a distracting and tremulous timbre. The extended sustain is thus audibly discernible from an intentionally produced musical sound—the audience are able to clearly see that the performers have ceased to play. Anyone passingly familiar with the piece in question could discern that these sounds do not belong, and the tremulous and unpleasant nature of the sustained notes allows even an inexperienced listener to discern that these sounds do not form part of the performed piece. This extended sustain is noticeable, but not at a volume or pitch so as to obstruct one's attention from the musical piece being performed. What would we say in this case, when the musical piece arrives at a pause either within or between movements?

It would be clear to the audience that a musical silence is taking place. There has been a cessation of musical sound, as demonstrated by the odd sounds now interjecting, knowledge of the piece, and the performers' visible cessation of activity. The extended sustain, then, would not be received as a *musical* event proper,⁴ but rather as extraneous sounds not to be identified with the musical piece.

I said in Example 1 that it can be objected that we do not *really* hear audience ambience. Rather, we screen it out and direct our attention to the musical sounds occurring on the stage. If that objection carried, Example 1 would not be a case where musical silence persists despite a lack of aural silence. The present case—extended sustain—is designed

4 That is, an event ingredient in the composition being performed. It is a 'musical' event only in the trivial sense that an instrument is producing it while attempting to perform music.

to rule this objection out. Unlike in the audience ambience case, these rogue sounds are taking place in *exactly* the place where one's attention is being directed: on stage, produced by the performers. They are also of sufficient volume as to be noticeable but not overpowering.

It is my claim that such a case would be a combination of musical silence and the absence of aural silence.

1.3 Example 3—Overhearing

For completeness, we might consider a third case in which one is listening to a given piece of music or recording and, during a cessation of that piece, one is able to overhear another piece of music (being played in an adjoining room, say). This intruding music would be sufficiently loud enough to be faintly brought to your attention but sufficiently quiet to not overly distract from one's attending to the piece of music being listened to. One can dimly register another snatch of music with a reasonable level of detail while still taking in and experiencing the musical silence that forms part of the primary musical piece one is attending to. In my experience, one is able to attend to and experience a musical silence in composition *x*, while also being subjected to and even recognizing the sound of composition *y*. This split attention is more easily sustained if the primary musical piece is simple, or familiar. This is because proper reception of musical silence requires a continuous sensitivity to the piece's development, including a working retention of the preceding musical events (the fading away of a glissando, say) that lead to that silence. If the piece being intruded upon is simple or familiar, one's attentional resources are less taxed, and so are better able to handle the intrusion.

2. Opaque Silence

The preceding examples depend on the attentional resources of the listener and, in some cases, the complexity of the musical silence being attended to. What the examples show, if they are convincing, is that musical silence often takes the form of an *opaque silence*. This musical silence is *opaque* just because it asks us to pattern our attention such that musical silence is indifferent to the audible events that take place while the musical silence intervenes (even if they themselves are from an extraneous musical source). Musical silence does not constitutively require aural silence—rather, it requires comprehension of the dynamics of the musical piece occurring and an ability to exercise a kind of indifference (but not necessarily insensitivity) to audible events outside of those dynamics.

Musical silence, then, is not aural silence. Indeed, musical silence is not best understood as a kind of or absence of sound (or 'sounding like') at all. This is because musical silence is an event that only shows up against the background of a given kind of attention, this attending being directed at musical parts that are almost entirely contained in the experienced past and anticipated future, rather than the present. This kind of attention is compatible with overhearing—but being insensitive to—other sounds occurring during an opaque musical silence.

We have defined opaque musical silence by adverting to the texture of the experience of musical listening, and the way in which it operates in situations where there is not any sound being produced by a piece of music which is nonetheless understood to be ongoing.

In the literature on musical silences we have, philosophers tend to identify musical silences in general with opaque silences in particular. The implicit view is that musical silences are of a single kind, and so can all be identified as members of this single kind. This identification is not noted or argued for. Partially as a result of this identification, writing on musical silence runs into pronounced difficulties when confronted with pieces that do not neatly fit the ‘opaque silence’ model. This is most easily shown by looking at responses to John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952).

3. Silence in Modern Composition

John Cage’s *4’33”* has at least three scores, all of which differ in certain respects. The final score does not require a specific duration for the piece or its constituent movements, nor does it specify any particular instruments or number of performers. The piece comprises three movements, each fully described by the instruction ‘TACET’. The performers are not to play their instruments for the duration of each movement. It is this that has led *4’33”* to become known as a silent piece of music (although philosophers of music have largely come to find that description inexact, as we will see).

Cage’s is not the sole piece of silent music; nor is it the first. Kania (2010, pp. 349–350) notes a number of predecessors, many of which were conceived with something of a humorous intent. Gann (2010), finds a close fore-runner in Dick McCann’s installation of selectable silences in the jukeboxes at the University of Detroit’s Student Union.⁵ One further example I have not found in the literature, which I offer here, is that of a piece that Theodor Adorno and Alban Berg conceived together, likely in the late 1920s. Intended as a parody of Webern’s stark style, the score featured only a ‘single quarter-note rest under a quintuplet bracket and garnished with every conceivable symbol...which, to top it off, was then to fade away’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 27). Also notable is Yves Klein’s *Monotone Silence Symphony*, written in 1947–8, the second half of which is silent.

Discounting the compositions intended primarily as jokes, what is being pursued by silent compositions? Cage understood the function of his silent compositions to be disclosive. Their intent is to force or enable the audience to attend to audible phenomena with something like the deep attention commanded by music. Cage writes:

The piece is not actually silent...it is full of sound, but sounds which I did not think of beforehand, which I hear for the first time the same time others hear. What we hear is determined by our own emptiness, our own receptivity (Cage, in Gann 2010, p. 191).⁶

Due to this disclosive intent, it is largely agreed in the literature that *4’33”* is not a silent piece of music.⁷ This is perplexing. It is claimed that it is not silent because it discloses

5 What’s more, this story from the 16 January 1952 *New York Post* was found in Cage’s own personal papers: Gann (2010, pp. 133–134).

6 Cage in letter to Helen Wolff, quoted in Gann (2010, p. 191).

7 See for example Fielding (2014, p. 160), Kania (2010, p. 345), Davies (1997, p. 449).

sounds surrounding the listener; it thereby has a sound. But this has always been true of conventional, opaque musical silences also. The musical silences in Part 1 of Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* (1798), for example, disclose ambient sounds—and Haydn would, of course, have had foreknowledge of this.⁸ A difference here might be drawn in that Cage's *intent* (and/or the function of the piece) is for the audience to *listen to* these ambient sounds, whereas this is not so for Haydn. In other words, Cage's piece is understood (even by those who deny that it is music proper) to have a specific kind of listening that it demands of the listener. This kind of listening is different from the kind of listening demanded by conventional opaque musical silences, like Haydn's, where any intruding sounds are understood to not be germane to the musical piece, and are to be ignored.

The composition involved in, and kind of listening prompted by, Cage's *4'33"* fails to fit with those found in conventional compositions. As a consequence of this failure of fit, Cage's *4'33"* is held to either barely qualify as music, or to stand outside of music altogether.⁹

Levinson (2011) takes Cage's piece to be a limiting case of his definition of music as the organization of sound and silence. Cage putatively 'organizes' 'the anticipated but unpredictable sounds that will occur at any performance of his piece' (Levinson 2011, p. 270, n. 3).¹⁰ Just as tautologies and contradictions serve as limiting cases of language, so too do silent works (and, by implication, total noise) serve as limiting cases of 'being music'. This parallel between the limits of sense in language and music is also pursued by James Fielding (2014) with reference to Wittgenstein. Stephen Davies denies that *4'33"* is music at all, being rather 'a piece of theatre...a performance piece about music' (1997, p. 460). Dodd (2018) and Ravasio (2019) likewise identify *4'33"* as conceptual art rather than music.

These analyses assume that musical silence is a singular phenomenon that can be captured by a single concept. This single concept is then to either be applied here to render a silent piece as a limiting case of the organization of such silence and sound (with them implicitly understood as opposites, as in Levinson and Fielding), or to be withdrawn as the silence of the piece breaks with musicality altogether (as in Davies and Dodd who either see it as 'sound art', or as a theatrical production that is about music, but is not music itself). Indeed,

8 Haydn did not have foreknowledge of which *specific* sounds might fill those silences—but then, neither did Cage.

9 Andrew Kania is an exception. He sees *4'33"* as a piece of 'non-musical sound art', but this is not due to its being (or being close to) silent. Kania is happy to see silent pieces of music as music (including their own *Composition 2009 #3*). Rather *4'33"* is allotted to sound art (which may or may be a subset of music, in their view) due to the kind of listening they see Cage as demanding—'since Cage intended the sounds audible at its performances not to be listened to under traditional musical concepts'. I am dubious about the provenance and essentiality of these 'musical concepts', but do not have space to discuss that here (Kania, 2010, p. 348).

10 Levinson here relies on a notion of 'organizing' silence that does not obviously map well onto *4'33"*. For a critique of this, see Kania, 2010. Note also that some sleight of hand is happening here in the implied claim that Cage is 'organizing' the sounds he 'anticipates' will occur. Is it essential to Cage's piece that he can guarantee that performances do not take place in anechoic chambers, to audiences wearing mufflers, or under some other conditions that might prevent the occurrence of sounds? Which is to say, would a performance of *4'33"* under such conditions not be a performance at all? The answer is not obvious to me.

it is characteristic that these writers discuss not musical *silences*, but silent *music*. An elision of these two categories depends on an implicit view of musical silence as unvariegated, on the premise that silent music is always and everywhere composed of the same *kind* of silence.

I hold that silent compositions are not extreme cases of opaque musical silence, and nor are they non-musical pieces of theatre or sound art. Rather, such compositions (or elements of composition, in Klein's case) are part of a distinct species of musical silence, which is likewise tied to a distinct practice of musical listening. What they call musical silence, and I have called opaque musical silence, requires a kind of insensitivity to extraneous audible events. While extraneous events may come to a basic level of attention, they are held separate from the specific kind of listening applying to the musical events to which they are extraneous. The kinds of silence we find in totally silent compositions are not grounded in this kind of attentional indifference, but rather attempt to disclose and highlight such sounds. The *disclosive* kind of silence found in works like Cage's requires a distinct kind of listening, and a distinct concept of its own.

Another point in distinguishing between opaque musical silence and the kind of silence found in Cage is reconsidering the connection between the kinds of properties a musical silence has and the way it sounds. Our examples of opaque silence (audience ambience; extended sustain; overhearing) could quite conceivably *sound* the same as instances of experimental composition. A performance of Cage or Klein's piece could quite easily contain a passage that happened to be aurally identical to a caesura from a conventional composition. For example, we might similarly be exposed to the sound of the surrounding audience, or overhear music from some extraneous source during the caesurae in Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Clearly, however, while the silences in Barber and Cage might sound the same, they would nonetheless have very different aesthetic properties, and the sounds received would be experienced in very different ways.

This might seem a trivial claim. It is obvious that the silence in Barber's piece has different aesthetic properties to that in Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*, for example. However, for Barber and Haydn, these aesthetic properties are of a common order, and depend upon a common kind of musical listening. In the case of Barber and Cage, however, these are differences in kind. A differing kind of musical listening is in play in each case, and the kind of aesthetic properties afforded are of differing families. But this will be discussed and argued for in more detail below.

4. Capacious Silence

While opaque silence requires a kind of de-prioritizing of non-musical sounds, and seeks to prevent such sounds being experienced as ingredients in the musical experience, the silence employed in silent compositions such as Cage's invites the listener to subordinate *all* of their audition under a kind of musical listening. The silence generated is not an aural silence, but a musical silence which functions as a place, or viewpoint, from which to engage in a very different kind of listening to that which aural silence makes possible.

I will claim that silent compositions of this type make use of a *kind* of musical silence, and that this cannot be opaque silence. I will term this distinct kind of musical silence 'capacious silence'. Opaque musical silence serves to constrain attention to the musical

piece exclusively. Capacious silence, by contrast, serves not to constrain attention but contain it, and to subject all audible events in its duration to that musical attention. It is this which leads me to term it ‘capacious’.

This description of the kind of capacious silence involved in Cagean silent compositions, and the means by which they are experienced and valued, serves to capture its distinctive properties. But it does not thereby give us a firm reason to understand this kind of silence as a *musical* silence, necessarily. Kania, Dodd, and Ravasio, for example, would concede that this is the kind of listening demanded, but deny that it is thereby a kind of *musical* listening, and deny that it is thereby a piece of music. The remainder of the paper will tackle these challenges. At the close of the paper, I will also move to show that other kinds of silent compositions are possible, which use opaque rather than capacious silence.

5. Musicality and Silence-making

Opaque silence confines our attention to a prescribed set of performed sounds, but places no constraint on the conditions under which this attending need take place. One can adequately attend to and experience an opaque musical silence just so long as one’s attentional resources are not exhausted or compromised. I might experience a musical silence by listening to a recording while standing next to a loudly working washing machine just as well as I might under more controlled or conventional conditions. Precisely because musical silence is an attending to the interplay between what was and will be heard *musically*, this task can be performed under variegated conditions.

By contrast, capacious silence refrains from adding any constraint to one’s attention to sounds. Under the conditions of capacious silence, any and all sounds are potentially germane and worthy of being attended to. However, the conditions under which this attending takes place are restrictive. They are restrictive for two reasons—one compositional (to ground our listening to the silence of a *specific* piece of silent music) and the second constitutional (certain silences are not accessible outside of very specific conditions). The compositional reasons will fall out of a discussion of the constitutional reasons, and so it is to those we now turn.

6. Constituting Silences

Here we discuss some constitutive features of silences, both general and musical. There is a rich inventory of silences, together with the variegated aesthetic qualities that they can support, which are only accessible by means of complex enabling conditions. These are not absolute silences, and nor are they aural silences simpliciter. Aural silence is synchronic—which is to say, it is a present state that supervenes on our present threshold of attention, and the failure of any auditory event to break that threshold. Other kinds of silence, by contrast, are diachronic. They are diachronic because they exist by virtue of a diachronic comparison of the present with either a past set of sounds now ceased, or a

future set of sounds presently expected. Here is Vasily Grossman's description of such a silence in *Life and Fate*:

The men in the bunkers and command-posts of the 62nd Army felt very strange indeed; they wanted to touch their faces, feel their clothes, wiggle their toes in their boots. The Germans weren't shooting. It was quiet. The silence made their heads whirl. They felt as though they had grown empty...It felt very odd, even inconceivable...to wake up at night and hear silence. (Grossman, 2011, p. 643–644)

The kind of silence described above cannot be accessed at just any time and place. Rather, certain enabling conditions need to be met. These enabling conditions are a previous set of experienced sounds, either continuous or regular, now ceased—or a future-directed expectation of sound. Neither of these conditions can be simply manufactured at will. I am not able to arbitrarily listen out for an important phone call about a loved one; nor can I arbitrarily listen out to the cessation of gunfire. I am not, thankfully, in a position that affords me either of those enabling conditions. There is an incalculable array of silences closed to us at any given moment, each with their own qualitative colour.

In later life, Cage would claim that *4'33"* was 'going on continuously' and that it could be freely accessed: 'I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention towards it' (Gann, 2010, p. 186). Cage was wrong to imagine *4'33"* as a kind of omnipresent composition accessible from anywhere. The constitutive conditions for the structured kinds of silence we examined above make it evident why attending a 'performance' of a silent composition is essential. Simply; a silent composition cannot be assessed outside of the conditions which make its content possible. And these are: attending a performance of such a silent composition, or possibly listening to a recording of such a performance.¹¹

Something like this has been noted in connection with *4'33"* by Dodd, who claims that Cage's piece organizes sound and silence through the application of 'framing'. Here, the claim is made that the performer's role in the experience of a silent composition is to add certain signifying gestures (sitting and lowering the piano lid, say), which serve to frame both the beginning and end of the silence demanded by the piece as 'notational devices' (Dodd, 2018, p. 631).

This discussion of framing is perfectly accurate, yet misleading. This 'framing' is not specific to silent musical compositions, but is, in fact, essential to a large number of determinate kinds of silence, some of which were discussed in the immediately preceding section above. The silence of the guns can be heard by the soldiers in Grossman's story, but thankfully not by me. The required context and framing is absent in my case. Rather than this 'framing' being a piece of theatre interestingly attached to Cagean silent compositions, it is in fact an irreducible feature of many kinds of silence, both musical and otherwise.¹²

11 This latter possibility introduces some issues of complexity I cannot cover here for reasons of space.

12 Just as silences can require certain kinds of framing that help determine them, silences themselves can serve as framing devices that help determine the sounds they enclose. Judkins (1997, pp. 44–47) gives an excellent account of such silences, occurring before and after compositions, and between their movements.

Once we appreciate the constitutional role that such framings and/or contexts play in the production of varieties of silence, the role of the composer of silent music becomes clearer. If one wishes to listen to a musical silence by Klein as opposed to one by Cage, we need to acquire the necessary diachronic enabling conditions. And chief among these is engaging in the practice of listening to Klein (and not Cage), and this is exercised by attending a performance (or listening to a recording) by Klein, and not Cage.¹³

What the discussion in this section is intended to show, *inter alia*, is that a *prima facie* reason to understand the capacious silences produced by silent compositions as musical events is that their conditions of constitution are themselves embedded in the world of musical production and consumption. But this is not a sufficient reason to agree with my account.

We might hold that such silences are indeed ‘musical’, but only in an attenuated sense. Hearing that my neighbours have finally turned off their radio might be a ‘music-silence’ in the same way that hearing the cessation of gunfire is a ‘war-silence’. But in such cases, the kind of listening we are engaged in (noticing the cessation of a background noise) is dedicated to receiving sounds as information, and not to attending aesthetically to the characteristic components of a musical experience (the interplay of sounds and silence; the temporal progression of sounds, etc.).

In the following section, I will attempt to show that the kind of listening involved in capacious musical silences is importantly and recognizably a musical kind of listening.

7. Listening to Musical Silences

Why should we understand ‘capacious musical silences’ as *musical*, or *music*? What does the idea of ‘capacious musical silence’ add to our ability to understand such compositions as music? Given that it is so different to opaque musical silence, and its associated kind of listening, why think of it as musical at all? There is good reason to see the silence operative in Cage, Klein, and others as best understood as a musical silence. This will chiefly be because capacious silences exhibit a development of *content*, while non-musical silences develop only in *magnitude*.

Suppose that you are walking in a field of long grass, and you hear the background hum of crickets stridulating. This accompanies you for some time, and eventually passes beneath your attention. You then come to a stop, feeling alert without knowing why. You realize that the crickets have stopped stridulating completely, and you decide to wait until they resume. Other sounds might brush against your attention while you wait. As you wait, the *silence of the crickets* extends in time. This extension in magnitude might itself

13 Can we listen to a silent piece by composer *a* when we think it is in fact by composer *b*? Where silent performances have some external conditions (given props on stage, say, as in Cage’s case) then I believe the answer is no, just as the diachronic conditions are specifiable and serve to distinguish the pieces sufficiently as to disallow this kind of misidentification. Where the diachronic conditions are purely internal, if the two performances have no differing conditions other than my knowing it is by composer *a*, or knowing it is by composer *b*, I am less clear.

generate some interesting non-aesthetic features. (You might assume they have quieted because of a passing predator but, as time goes on, wonder ‘what *is* bothering them?’). But the silence itself does not develop. It is simply the absence of the sound of crickets, and it does not reward continued attention by divulging further qualities *qua* silence. This is partly a product of the kind of listening you are engaged in; you are listening *for* crickets—not listening *to* crickets, and not listening *to the absence of* crickets.

Neither opaque nor capacious musical silences function in this way. Taking opaque silences first, consider again Barber’s *Adagio* and the plangent silence at its midpoint. The persistence of the silence is not merely a matter of listening for the next sound. Rather, the silence itself deepens in tension and emotional colour. There is a kind of contingency attached to the length of the silence of crickets, which is absent here. It is important to the musical silence in *Adagio for Strings* that it be the length specified by the score—doubling it or halving it would have important aesthetic repercussions.

Capacious musical silences likewise have this feature. Performances of 4’33” can be of any length, but that length is *not* immaterial to the kind of aesthetic experience the performance will produce. The duration of that performance outlines a listening practice in which each sound is juxtaposed with and informed by those which precede, co-occur, and follow it. Silent musical compositions of this type acquire their complexity and structure in the course of being executed. While the silence of crickets (when listening *for* crickets) is static, the listening to 4’33” and similar compositions has its own internal ordering of sounds that is inextricable from the experience of so listening to that piece. While performances of 4’33” are unrepeatable, this is only due to practical constraints. A re-performance of a given instance of 4’33” (its first performance in 29 August 1952, say)—in which *per impossible* the same inadvertent and spontaneous sounds re-occur with the same inadvertence and spontaneity—would be as valid as a re-performance of the *Goldberg Variations*, and as distinct from another instance of 4’33” (the premiere in New York on 14 April 1954 for example) which had a different internal ordering of sounds.¹⁴ What I am saying is that capacious musical silences are as eligible for notation and transcription as opaque musical silences. This is precisely because they are musical silences.

8. Further Implications

I have been trying to show that the idea of capacious silence offers good descriptive resources, and I have hoped it will resonate with the intuitions and experiences of the reader. But in this closing section, I would like to touch on two further benefits that come downstream of my account, and that can hopefully also be turned to its advantage.

14 I am not clear on whether such a re-performance is impossible in principle, or beyond our abilities. This will depend to an extent on how strictly we understand the notion of the ‘same’ sounds. Even if such a re-performance is unperformable in principle, this does not entail that such a re-performance is not a genuine piece of music with philosophical significance. For more on the relationship between unperformability and musical ontology, see Cray (2016).

Once we are equipped with a distinction between opaque and capacious silence, we are able to reconsider the relationship between capacious musical silence and the history of Western composition. The wholesale or partial use of silence in musical compositions can be seen as prefigured by trends stretching back a significant distance. The use of silence has been, of course, linked to an interest in and extension of certain elements of Zen philosophy, among other non-Western sources (not least due to Cage's insistence on this connection, even if his grasp of these resources was not always strong)¹⁵. This must be true in many cases, and I do not wish to dismiss it. But capacious silence is also premised on a desire to incorporate extra-musical sounds into the sphere of aesthetic appreciation. Seen in this light, silent music can be seen as also prefigured by, and drawing on trends already found in, mainstream Western composition. Beethoven's imitation of natural sounds in Symphony No. 6 (1808), Debussy's *La Mer* (1905) and, of course, the more brazen efforts of pieces like *Peter and the Dragon* all hint towards a similar ambition, namely, to press the listener to incorporate sounds with an extra-musical origin into the structure of musical listening proper. In such cases, this was most often accomplished by a transformation of an actual sound into a musical facsimile—but not always. (Think here of the cannons in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (1880), or Wagner's use of anvils in *Das Rheingold* (1869)). Understanding silent compositions not as limiting cases, theatrical events, nor as performance art allows us to better identify how it draws on a pre-existing project in music and attempts to consummate it in a certain kind of musical listening. This also sets up resonances and continuity between such works and other forms of composition within and without 'absolute' music (see, for example, Charles Mingus' 'A Foggy Day' (1956), the acousmatic approach to composition, collage in early cubism, and early surrealist writings such as Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926)), which similarly strive to get the appreciator to approach the mundane world from within the aesthetic stance.¹⁶

A second benefit of our account, which is perhaps of greater immediate application, is that it makes it possible to more finely distinguish between *kinds* of silent composition. We have focused on silent compositions which make use of capacious silence. Such compositions are identifiable by the framing and context in which the musical silence is being produced. (If you attend 4'33" as a reasonably informed person, you will have been primed for just this sort of listening.). But this is not the only kind of silent composition conceivable.

What would a composition that focused on *opaque* silence be like?

Consider the two-minute silence observed by many countries on 11 November at 11 a.m., to commemorate the end of World War One. Such a silence is not associated with a kind of listening at all. The intention of the silence is to pay respect to the dead and, in being silent together, collectively commemorate them. The silence is attended to, but in the same sense that one attends to a burden being jointly carried with others. One is careful that one does not upend it, and is hopeful that others do not upend it, either.

We can imagine a case in which a commemorating silence is produced that does invite a specific kind of listening, and a listening that has the developmental nature of diachronic

15 For more on this, see Gann (2010, pp. 147–148).

16 For this reason, I disagree with Neufeld's claim that Cage's work is a 'revolutionary violation of norms' (2015, pp. 118–119).

musical attention. Further, it could receive the framing and articulation such as to make this an act of musical appreciation. Here is an attempt to do so:

A concert is organized to aid those affected by a terrorist attack. After a number of other performed pieces of music, the audience are informed that the orchestra will now commemorate each of the 600 victims by playing a new composition. They are informed that the piece will proceed at 60 bpm, with each beat (which equals a second's duration) representing each victim, and each beat being played silently. The piece takes a total of 10 minutes, during which the orchestra remain silent. (If you like, the conductor can continue to move their arms to mark the beats).

As the composition proceeds and the number of beats played mounts, so too is the depth of the loss conveyed. In such cases, the listener is tasked with attending to the opaque silence, not to attending to the other ambient sounds. They must focus on the opaque silence, because its spreading and extending is conveying the spread and extension of the loss and death commemorated by the piece. In this case, then, the silence attended to is developmental and diachronic, is couched in the context of a musical performance, and these contexts are meaningfully linked with each other. The opaque silence does not appear, to me, to be a limiting case, a piece of sound art, conceptual art, nor a piece of theatre. It is a piece of music, whose form and content convey and deepen our appreciation of the composer's musical idea.

By disentangling our theory of opaque musical silences from the obligation of also covering cases like *4'33"*, we might be able to produce an account of opaque musical silences that better fit the imaginary silent piece just outlined. Space is too scarce to fully pursue this here. But I hope the brief discussion of it supports the idea that silent compositions come in distinct kinds, and my distinction between opaque and capacious silence improves our ability to handle both of those kinds. It disentangles the project of explaining musical silences from the obligation to produce a theory of silent music that can unify all real and possible cases under a single covering definition.¹⁷

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