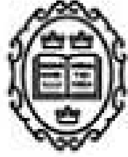

OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

John Cage: Silence and Silencing
Author(s): Douglas Kahn
Source: *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), pp. 556-598
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/742286
Accessed: 13/08/2010 10:04

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John Cage: Silence and Silencing

Douglas Kahn

That a disagreeable noise should be as grateful to the ear as the sweet tones of a lyre is a thing I shall never attain to.

—Meister Eckhart, cited by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

John Cage's ideas on sound, easily the most influential among the post-war arts, were developed with a great deal of dedication, imagination, and good will, within a complex of technical, discursive, institutional, cultural, and political settings, forever changing over the course of a long and productive career. They matured within the sphere of music and, until he began to branch out into other artistic forms, most of the ideas he adopted from elsewhere were brought into the fold of music. He was known for introducing noise and worldly sounds into music, in other words, for stepping outside the confines of Western art music, as well as proposing a mode of being within the world based on listening, through hearing the sounds of the world as music. However, when questioned from the vantage point of sound instead of music, Cage's ideas become less an occasion for uncritical celebration (as is too often the case among commentators on Cage) and his work as a whole becomes open to an entirely different set of representations. What becomes apparent in general is that while venturing to the sounds outside music, his ideas did not adequately make the trip; the world he wanted for music was a select one, where most of the social and ecological noise was muted and where other more proximal noises were suppressed.

Moreover, his ideas did not make the trip at a time when the social conditions of aurality and the nature of *sounds themselves*, in Cage's term, were continuing to undergo major transformations not immediately amenable to music as practiced. By midcentury, two decades after the first large onslaught of auditive mass media in the late 1920s, radio, phonography, and sound film had consolidated in the United States and expanded their overlapping positions. These media introduced on a social scale a newly pervasive, detailed, and atomistic encoding of sounds, gathering up all the visual, literary, environmental, gestural, and

affective elements they brushed up against. Sounds proliferated by incorporating a greater divergence of cultural codes and worldly sources and generated still greater variety through internal means; the sheer number of sounds increased as they became freighted with multiple allusions and meanings. *Sounds themselves* took on multiple personalities and the nature of sound became less natural. Through the redundancies trafficked by means of mass culture, many sounds became naturalized and were capable of being perceived with greater speed. Under the guise of a new aurality, an opening up to the sounds of the world, Cage built a musical bulwark against the auditive culture, one founded on a musical identification with nature itself. During the 1960s when his interests shifted from musical to social issues, there was no corresponding shift to reconceptualize the sociality of sounds. At this point he decided to enter a tradition of mythic spaces by circulating the sociality of sounds through an impossible and implausible acoustics.

In this article, I will examine Cagean sounds at the amplified threshold of their disappearance—silence, small and barely audible sounds—and how the social, political, poetic, and ecological aspects correspondingly disappear. I will not venture into what Yvonne Rainer has called Cage's "goofy naiveté" when it comes to politics,[1] nor explore how Cage dealt with the theatrical, organizational, or institutional practices of Western art music, nor discuss Cage's compositional prowess. I will concentrate primarily on how his concept of sound failed to admit a requisite sociality by which a politics and poetics of sound could be elaborated within artistic practice or daily life. The immediate objection arises that he was just a composer, just making music, nothing else. Let us not confuse him with Elliott Carter. The core of Cage's musical practice and philosophy was concentrated on sounds of the world and the interaction of art and life; there is a musical specificity to be had within Cage's compositions, but it would be insufficient to understand his work as a whole. Indeed, my approach here takes Cage at his word. For instance, I take his slogan to *let sounds be themselves* very literally; I merely refuse to accept how Cage reduces sounds to conform to his idea of selfhood. When he hears individual affect or social situation as a simplification, I hear their complexity. When he hears music everywhere, other phenomena go unheard. When he celebrates noise, he also promulgates noise abatement. When he speaks of silence, he also speaks of silencing.

Silence has served as Cage's emblem. As a key to his developing work, silence (i.e., an absence of sound) was placed nicely between the odd materiality of sound and the organizational concerns of Western art music composition and theory. Organizationally, silence offset musical

sound within duration and thereby established the basis by which rhythm and structure could accept all sounds by being privileged over harmony, pitch, and timbre, which he considered to be outside duration. Materially, silence shared duration with musical sound and would not contradict the extramusical sounds that Cage had already incorporated in his music. In this respect, silence took over where percussion, or rather the auspices of percussion, left off. Indeed, the rhetorical model for the ascendancy of silence in Cage's thought in the late 1940s can be found within his ideas of percussion/noise in the mid-1930s. At midcentury, once within the context of indeterminacy, silence then turned into its opposite: sound. At first, it was non-intentional sound, for instance, the sounds occurring within the concert space when musical sound was not being intentionally made. Just as with the older form of silence, these sounds of silence were heard (intentionally) as music. Eventually codified in the publication of *4′33″*, an ultimate *silent piece* could occur anywhere and anytime, all sounds could be music, and no one needed to make music for music to exist. As one indication of how much this new Cagean silence departed from common usage, loud sounds too could be silence. "Silence is all of the sound we don't intend. There is no such thing as absolute silence. Therefore silence may very well include sounds and more and more in the twentieth century does. The sound of jet planes, of sirens, et cetera."[2] The next step was to interpolate sound (and thereby music) back onto a seemingly intransigent silence of objects. If silence was actually sound, then all matter too must be audible, given the proper technology to detect the soundful activities at the level of subatomic vibrations. Matter is dissolved as technology denies inaudibility and forbids silence.

Before tracking the development of such a powerful nothingness, it is crucial to understand how for Cage sound and silence come back to music. With regard to the line separating sound and musical sound, Cage played a unique role in that he took the avant-garde strategy to its logical conclusion. Luigi Russolo initiated the strategy whereby extramusical sounds and worldliness were incorporated rhetorically or in fact into music in order to reinvigorate it. Cage exhausted this strategy by extending the process of incorporation to a point to every audible, potentially audible and mythically audible sounds, where consequently there existed no more sounds to incorporate music, and he formalized the performance of music to where it could be dependent upon listening alone. He not only *filled music up*, he left no sonorous (or potentially sonorous) place outside music, and left no more means to materially regenerate music.[3] He *opened music up* into an emancipatory endgame.

At the same time, Cage *made music more musical*. He criticized what everyone took as music in the same manner that the inclusion of noise

in music itself had been criticized, that is, sound (musical sound) was not meant to carry extraneous meanings. His best-known campaign, of course, was against self-expression, which he equated most commonly within the German Romantic tradition and the classicism of Beethoven: "Are sounds just sounds or are they Beethoven?"[4] He eventually extended this concept to include a number of elements present inside and outside Western art music. He credits Varèse for having "fathered forth noise" but then berates him for subjecting sounds to his imagination: "Rather than dealing with sounds as sounds, he deals with them as Varèse."[5] When it came to "jazz" Cage saw problems with ego-driven improvisation, along with measured time ("It is useful if I have to catch a train, but I don't think that catching a train is one of the most interesting aspects of my living"), orature, and collectivism ("The form of jazz suggests too frequently that people are talking. . . . If I am going to listen to a speech then I would like to hear some words"), among other attributes.[6] And after a certain point communication, ideas, and intention were also to be expunged so all that was left was a *sound in itself* (what could be termed, in a philosophical mix, "the call of the *ding-a-ling an sich*"). This tendency in Cage was a measure of the degree to which he was lodged within Western art music and how willing he was to carry further its processes of exclusion and reduction with respect to sound in general.[7] It was as though he could legitimately extend the bounds of musical materiality only by proving an unflinching fidelity to musical areferentiality on its own turf.

Cage's battles within music informed the most fundamental features of his thought, including how he heard and conceptualized worldly sounds, how he understood the operations of signification, and how he formulated the role of the artist, in particular, his campaign against ego-investment and his concomitant interest in Asian religious thought and Christian mysticism. These considerations made their first coordinated impact on his thinking during the critical years 1948–52, from the proposal for his first silent composition, *Silent Prayer* (1948), to his most notorious composition, *4′33″* (1952).[8] The link between these two silences, moreover, demonstrated how he developed techniques and rationale, while engaging the sounds and silences of the world, to musically silence the social.

Much to Confess about Nothing

In *4′33″*, commonly known as the silent piece, the performer sits at the piano and marks off the time in three movements, all the while making no sound.[9] An unsuspecting audience (if one still exists) might attempt

to reconcile the silence with its expectations before discovering, perhaps, what the piece might be. The initial absence of music might be taken as an expressive or theatrical device preceding a sound. When that sound is not forthcoming, it might become evident that listening can still go on if one's attention (and this is Cage's desire) is shifted to the surrounding sounds, including the sound of the growing agitation of certain audience members. Ostensibly, even an audience comprised entirely of reverential listeners would have plenty to hear, but in every performance I've attended the silence has been broken by the audience and become ironically noisy.

It should be noted that each performance was held in a concert setting, where any muttering or clearing one's throat, let alone heckling, was a breach of decorum. Thus, there was already in place in these settings, as in other settings for Western art music, a culturally specific mandate to be silent, a mandate regulating the behavior that precedes and accompanies musical performance. As with prayer, which has not always been silent, concertgoers were at one time more boisterous; this association was not lost on Luigi Russolo, who remarked on "the cretinous religious emotion of the Buddha-like listeners, drunk with repeating for the thousandth time their more or less acquired and snobbish ecstasy."[10] *4′33″*, by tacitly instructing the performer to remain quiet in *all* respects, muted the site of centralized and privileged utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken, transposed the performance onto the audience members both in their utterances and in the acts of shifting perception toward other sounds, and legitimated bad behavior that in any number of other settings (including musical ones) would have been perfectly acceptable. *4′33″* achieved this involution through the act of silencing the performer. That is, Cagean silence followed and was dependent on a silencing. Indeed, it can also be understood that he extended the decorum of silencing by extending the silence imposed on the audience to the performer, asking the audience to continue to be obedient listeners and not to engage in the utterances that would distract them from shifting their perception toward other sounds. Extending the musical silencing, then, set into motion the process by which the realm of musical sounds would itself be extended.

Silence derived from the silencing of the instrument itself has its origin in the object status of the accoutrements of music; thus, any sheet music or instrument becomes music *in potentia* or the corpse of a music that has lived its life. In her 10 May 1951 diary entry Judith Malina wrote about a concert in which there was a performance of "*Imaginary Landscape No. 4* . . . scored for 12 radios and 24 players. Silence is an important component." After the concert the instruments are moved

out to the sidewalk and a friend drives up in a hearse to take them away. "John and Remy [Charlip] pile the silent music into the vehicle, which drives off trailing a funereal gloom."[11] A similar objecthood overtakes certain performers in an orchestra when they are instructed by the score to remain silent; they join a tableaux as still and mute as their instruments and sheet music. The only difference between them and the performer of *4′33″* is that the latter is performing solo.

4′33″ was not a gesture for Cage, but something he sincerely took to heart and one of the key moments in the development of his mature philosophy and practice. From this point on he would typically make comments such as, "If you want to know the truth of the matter, the music I prefer, even to my own or anybody else's, is what we are hearing if we are just quiet. And now we come back to my silent piece. I really prefer that to anything else, but I don't think of it as "my piece."[12] What could have moved him to legitimize and compose (or vice versa) such a radical piece? Numerous reasons have been offered by Cage and others, which should come as no surprise considering how it provides a clean slate, silence, absence, a nothingness rife with potentiality, a blank screen on which so much about so little can be projected. The earliest precedent occurred, as Cage recollected (we shall later propose an earlier, deeper constituent), in 1940 while Cage was living in San Francisco.

> I had applied to be in the music section of the WPA, but they refused to admit me because they said that I was not a musician. I said, "Well, what am I? I work with sounds and percussion instruments and so forth." And they said, "You could be a recreation leader." So I was employed in the recreation department, and that may have been the birth of the silent piece, because my first assignment in the recreation department was to go to a hospital in San Francisco and entertain the children of the visitors. But I was not allowed to make any sound while I was doing it, for fear that it would disturb the patients. So I thought up games involving movement around the rooms and counting, etc., dealing with some kind of rhythm in space.[13]

With its rules regarding silence, the hospital resembles the setting for a music concert. Recreation introduces performance into this space because recreation, unlike a concert, turns everyone into performers. Thus, in keeping kids quiet, Cage is keeping both the audience and performers quiet, ostensibly while a grander therapy ensues all around, and by doing so thus extends the hospital's requisite silence.

Cage's recollection, which came during a conversation with Peter Gena, is interesting because it was raised so rarely (perhaps once?) in reference to the genesis of *4′33″*. Instead, for Cage the most obvious motivation for the piece arose from his interest in oriental thought. When he

first thought of the idea in 1948, he was "just then in the flush of my early contact with oriental philosophy. It was out of that that my interest in silence naturally developed: I mean it's almost transparent."[14] By oriental Cage mainly meant South Asian and East Asian, although early Christian mystical texts and practices were often included and inferred. By 1952 Cage was familiar with several individuals and many texts that could have served as sources bridging orientalism and silence. Since the number of possible sources increased in retrospect over the years as Cage commented upon on *4′33″*, commentators have had difficulty in convincingly pointing out which one may have played a key role and how. Thus, more precise determinations of what Cage called oriental thought are hard to come by and, as will be argued, the restriction to "oriental" itself is not very accurate. The more accurate term at the philosophical locus of his generation of silence would be, if anything, *perennial*.

Cage also said that *4′33″* was provoked by his encounter with the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg. Cage had probably seen them in New York at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Irwin Kremen, to whom Cage dedicated a version of *4′33″*, remembers seeing the white and black paintings of Rauschenberg (December 1951) in Cage's New York apartment, in other words, prior to Cage incorporating the white paintings, along with Rauschenberg himself, into his 1952 Black Mountain event.[15] "Actually what pushed me into it was not guts but the example of Robert Rauschenberg. His white paintings. . . . When I saw those, I said, 'Oh yes, I must; otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging.' "[16] He noticed how, on a canvas of nearly nothing, notably absent of the expressive outpourings characteristic of the time, another plenitude replaced the effusiveness in the complex and changing play of light and shadow and the presence of dust. Correspondingly, environmental sounds rushed in to fill the absence of musical sound in *4′33″* Rauschenberg's paintings may have provoked Cage's silent piece or given him the courage to go ahead with it, but in this case their influence cannot be confused with an earlier development of the piece, since Cage had already had the idea in mind since at least 1948.

If we look back to 1948, to the first glint of the whiteness of what was to become *4′33″*, we find a number of factors which, in their totality, require a general reappraisal of Cage, a reappraisal I will attempt to initiate with this article. The key factor is a document entitled "A Composer's Confessions," the text of a lecture delivered at the National Inter-Collegiate Arts Conference held at Vassar College (28 February 1948). When asked in a 1982 interview about the type of silence involved in *4′33″*, Cage replied, "I'd thought of it already in 1948 and

gave a lecture which is not published, and which won't be, called 'A Composer's Confessions.' "[17] The curious thing about this statement is not that he had already been thinking about doing a silent piece four years prior to the 1952 date of composition of *4′33″*. But why, in 1982, nearly thirty-five years later during a discussion about the thirty-year-old piece, would Cage assert that the lecture *won't be published?* This interjection may have been just an offhand comment underscored by largely inconsequential considerations about the administration of his writings. On the other hand, the text of the lecture is very long and informative and, in retrospect, indispensable for understanding Cage's career and the genesis of his notion of silence. In it he proposed a new composition called *Silent Prayer,* which would consist of 3 to 4-1/2 minutes of sustained silence (the maximum time being just three seconds short of *4′33″*) to be played over the Muzak network. Many if not most texts from the period were published in *Silence* and *A Year from Monday*, several of them much less important and none that would duplicate the material covered in "A Composer's Confessions." Was this a departure from his usual openness? Was he concerned about this text being touched by the light of day? Why would Cage silence the birth of silence over the course of several decades, before it was finally published around his eightieth birthday?[18] One could speculate that Cage chose not to publish the text because it would have unnecessarily complicated the specter of silence as it had developed over the course of the 1950s, that is, the folkloric Cage first presented in *Silence* (1961) would have run counter to the Cage involved in the silencings at the birth of silence.

What are these complications? To begin with, in the supposed transparency of Cage's oriental thought there are several relevant texts, individuals, and activities leading up to 1948, many of which will never be known.[19] David Patterson has summarized many of these and observed Cage's overall predilection for South Asian references, a shift to East Asian ones, with a "rhetorical lurch" occurring between "Forerunners of Modern Music" (1949) and "Lecture on Nothing" (1950).[20] In this respect, the South Asian sources would be of greatest relevance for Cage's Vassar lecture and, thus, the original genesis of Cage's silence would be Indian and not related to East Asian, or more specifically Zen, sources as has often been noted in discussions about *4′33″*. Among the most notable South Asian sources were his friendship with Gita Sarabhai, who assisted Cage in learning about Indian music and aesthetics; Joseph Campbell; texts by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934) and, to a lesser extent, *The Dance of Shiva* (1948); and *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.[21] Yet, as we shall see, there

are at least two more texts that play an important role within "A Composer's Confessions": Carl Jung's *The Integration of the Personality* (1940) and Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946).[22]

What becomes apparent when these texts are examined is that all, with the exception of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, are transparently concerned with cross-cultural perspectives.[23] Coomaraswamy and Huxley both subscribe to Leibniz's *philosophia perennis*, evidencing the same global reach as Jung's collective unconscious. Therefore, although Cage's texts through 1949 cite South Asian and Christian mystics, his operant sources were much broader.[24] For instance, Cage's motto—"Art Is the Imitation of Nature in Her manner of Operation"—was not from Coomaraswamy, as Cage repeatedly states, but from St. Thomas Aquinas, from whom Coomaraswamy had borrowed the idea: *Ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione*.[25] In all of these perennially philosophical sources, tranquillity, quiescence, austerity, blankness, nothingness, emptiness, and any number of other ideas related to silence, including silence itself, were quite common. Jung summed it up when he wrote, "We are always surprised by the fact that something comes out of what we call 'nothing.' "[26] It should come as no surprise, then, that there are so many nothings and that they should be, all of them, so fecund.

The reason for Cage's reading in spirituality has been attributed to changes in his personal life during the 1940s, yet it was also significant that he, as an American, was attracted to timeless, global ideas during and after World War II.[27] The war and its aftermath presented the United States with a cultural problem: how to estrange the character of its enemies while securing sympathies from certain domestic populations? For instance, one of Cage's compositions, *A Book of Music* (1944), was used by the Office of War Information, renamed *Indonesian Supplement No. 1*, and broadcast to the South Pacific "with the hope of convincing the natives that America loves the Orient."[28] This schism became intensified immediately following the war, since the domestic American populace was required to reconcile the decimation of the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with appeals to global commonality. The universalism and world betterment that swept the United States after the war, after the world had become its oyster, especially as it served the ideological front line in the Cold War, provided the cultural environment for popular projects of self-improvement; that most were detached, touristic, imperialistic, and appropriative did not rule out the possibility for more plausible engagements with cultures outside the Eurocentric sphere.

In this respect, the war repeated a problem posed by Jung in *The Integration of the Personality*. The "white man," as the translation went,

was unable to contemplate the metaphysical conundrums by Lao Tze in the *Tao Tê Ching*, let alone answer them, because "he is forced to reject [it] as if it were a foreign body, for his blood refuses to assimilate anything sprung from foreign soil."[29] There are indications that Cage read Jung's text closely, yet he chose to frame the sentiment through reference to Coomaraswamy. "[Coomaraswamy] convinced me of our naiveté with regard to the Orient. At the time—it was at the end of the war, or just afterwards—people still said that the East and the West were absolutely foreign, separate entities. And that a Westerner did not have the right to profess an Eastern philosophy. It was thanks to Coomaraswamy that I began to suspect that this was not true, and that Eastern thought was no less admissible for a Westerner than is European thought."[30] Jung, in the tradition of perennial philosophy, suggested that Westerners assume a disposition toward the wisdom of the East which, although they could not hope to repeat it, would at least lead them to traditions closer to home. "One must be able to *let things happen*. I have learned from the East what it means by the phrase 'Wu wei': namely, not-doing, letting be, which is quite different from doing nothing. Some Occidentals, also, have known what this not-doing means; for instance, Meister Eckhart, who speaks of 'sich lassen,' to let oneself be."[31] For Jung, the *way* of the Tao was to be developed in the West through the development of the personality, and the key to this development was the integration of the different parts of the psyche, primarily conscious mind ("the ego and the various mental contents") and the unconscious.[32] A non-integrated psyche was not merely an obstacle to spiritual development, it impacted on all psychological matters and a range of physiological conditions. "Medical psychology has been profoundly impressed with the number and importance of the unconscious processes that give rise to functional symptoms and even organic disturbances. These facts have undermined the view that the ego expresses the psychic totality. It has become obvious that the 'whole' must include, besides consciousness, the field of unconscious events, and must constitute a sum total embracing both. The ego, once the monarch of this totality, is dethroned. It remains merely the center of consciousness."[33]

Many American artists during the 1940s, under the influence of surrealism, Freud, and Jung were interested in dethroning the monarchy of the ego in order to tap the unconscious. Such a mission provided ample opportunity for individuals to engage in self-expression while imagining an ineluctable communication at a level above or below society and culture (oneiric, instinctual, archetypal), and for a socialization of figures of the unconscious in ideas of a primitivism based in the body. Jung in *The Integration of the Personality* believed in a connection

between the Eastern and Western psychic states which subtended the ego: "The psyche called the superior or the universal mind in Hindu philosophy corresponds to what the West calls the unconsciousness."[34] Yet, he was unwilling to subscribe to the body disciplines by which adepts reach the state of contact with the universal mind: "This is all very well, but scarcely to be recommended anywhere north of the Tropic of Cancer."[35] Cage was not interested in self-expression, whether it was in music or in painting; he was also becoming less sure about communication, and his appropriation of other cultures for musical purposes was centered more on the operations of the mind than the body. Like Jung, Cage was interested in choosing among the ideas of the adepts without taking up any body practices. Over the course of a thousand pages Sri Ramakrishna was forever slipping off into *samadhi*, but Cage's interest remained solely with his wisdom, not in the practices that led to its development. Overall, Cage was less interested in getting the ego out of the way to enable the unconscious to come out into the world, than in removing the ego so more of the world could get *in* unobstructed. He wanted to be open to "divine influences" but not to the extent of fusing them with a world within.

"A Composer's Confessions" consists primarily of a long autobiographical sketch, the bulk of which pertains to a time before his most recent activities. At the very moment in the text in which Cage moves into the present and recent past he invokes Sarabhai, Coomaraswamy, and Jung. "After eighteen months of studying oriental and medieval Christian philosophy and mysticism I began to read Jung on the integration of the personality."[36] He reiterates Jung's concerns regarding psychological and physiological health and applies them to the topic of people's occupations in contemporary society as a basis from which to focus on the vocation of composition.[37] Composers like everyone else are prone to neuroses; however, "if one makes music, as the Orient would say, *disinterestedly*, that is, without concern for money or fame but simply for the love of making it, it is an integrating activity and one will find moments in his life that are complete and fulfilled."[38]

The term *disinterestedness* thereby becomes a tangible link between Cage's orientalism and his initial formulation of silence. I have not been able to locate where Cage might have derived the specific word—although it has cropped up in several texts,it has not occurred with the emphasis that might explain adoption into his vernacular—but there is no shortage of sources when it comes to the concept. Sentiments similar to "letting things happen" and "not-being" can be found in Coomaraswamy's discussions of self-naughting, dementation, anonymity, and impersonality,[39] and more specifically, both Cage and Coomaraswamy

mention a similar disposition as it pertains to musicians. Coomaraswamy quotes Rabindranath Tagore in describing Indian musicians. "Our master singers never take the least trouble to make their voice and manner attractive. . . . Those of the audience whose senses have to be satisfied as well are held to be beneath the notice of any self-respecting artist [while] those of the audience who are appreciative are content to perfect the song in their own mind by the force of their own feeling."[40] Cage emphasizes disinterestedness in performers and does so with a source from the Orient ("if one makes music, as the Orient would say, *disinterestedly* . . ."). Within "A Composer's Confessions" Cage explained that he found a concert of music by Ives and Webern pleasurable because "when the music was composed the composers were at one with themselves. The performers became disinterested to the point that they became unself-conscious, and a few listeners in those brief moments of listening forgot themselves, enraptured, and so gained themselves."[41] Making and listening to music disinterestedly is the means to integrate the personality "and that is why we love the art."[42]

Disinterestedness is also associated with Aldous Huxley's explanation of self-mortification and non-attachment in *The Perennial Philosophy*, including his own observation that "spiritual authority can be exercised only by those who are perfectly disinterested and whose motives are therefore above suspicion."[43] He also cites St. François de Sales's "holy indifference" and Chuang Tzu's story of Confucius lending advice to a disciple regarding "the fasting of the heart," which links indifference to a model for Cagean listening. "Cultivate unity. . . . You do your hearing, not with your ears, but with your mind; not with your mind, but with your very soul. But let the hearing stop with the ears. Let the working of the mind stop with itself. Then the soul will be a negative existence, passively responsive to externals. . . . Living in a state of complete indifference—you will be near success."[44] Fortified through its opposition to self-expression, *disinterestedness* remains an operative term through "Lecture on Something" (1951–52) and was only abandoned as chance and indeterminacy transformed it from an attitude and disposition into a reproducible and consistent technique.[45] Later, disinterestedness took the most familiar form of a supercession of taste, which itself superseded style and genre, extramusicality and silence; recounting its roots, Cage said in a 1984 interview:

> I wanted to be quiet in a nonquiet situation. So I discovered first through reading the gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, and through the study of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism—and also an important book for me was *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley, which is an anthology of remarks

> of people in different periods of history and from different cultures—that they are all saying the same thing, namely, a quiet mind is a mind that is free of its likes and dislikes. You can become narrow-minded, literally, by only liking certain things, and disliking others. But you can become open-minded, literally, by giving up your likes and dislikes and becoming interested in things.[46]

Canned Silence

Disinterestedness, despite signaling the presence of a cultural other, when used within the context of "A Composer's Confessions" becomes implicated within an array of not-so-foreign values. It also becomes a means to commend the music of certain composers and celebrate the love of art, against the Western art music repertoire with its inflated importance, its claims to genius, posterity and masterpieces, as well as a means to counter academization and commercialization of the arts, self-expression, and art appreciation. In short, disinterestedness is the best response to all matters animated by "sheer materialistic nonsense."[47] The first call for silence in Cage's lecture comes when his disinterestedness shifts from the sheer materialistic nonsense of Western art music and the arts in general to commercial music proper and the mass media in general. He invoked silencing through the power of someone who had already in effect silenced music, James Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). "Since Petrillo's recent ban on recordings took effect on the New Year, I allowed myself to indulge in the fantasy of how normalizing the effect might have been had he had the power, and exerted it, to ban not only recordings, but radio, television, the newspapers, and Hollywood."[48]

Prior to the war, recording had begun to fulfill its promise to make live music obsolete; in response, living musicians demanded proper remuneration from those who profited handsomely from the disembodied repetition of their performances. Petrillo and the AFM first responded in 1942 with a strike to enforce their decree that record companies pay royalties to their musicians on every pressing. The strike lasted for over two years during the middle of the war and cost AFM members millions of dollars in lost wages. Since Petrillo's base of operation was in Chicago, his presence must have been felt by Cage, who was living in Chicago in 1942 and working with professional musicians during the Columbia Workshop (CBS) radio production of *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, his collaboration with Kenneth Patchen. In his lecture (28 February 1948) Cage was referring to Petrillo's second assault on record company practices, when a decree was issued (midnight on 31 December

1947) which extended the labor action to dance halls and radio shows dependent on recorded music. In Cage's fantasy, he wanted to extend Petrillo's silencing further still, to all of radio and other forms of mass media, whether they were audible or not. However, with the experience of the first decree in mind, the record companies put contingency plans in place and, consequently, only working musicians were silenced.[49]

Cage did go on to state what he hoped for from his fantasy. "We might then realize that phonographs and radios are not musical instruments, that what the critics write is not a musical matter but rather a literary matter, that it makes little difference if one of us likes one piece and another; it is rather the age-old process of making and using music and our becoming more integrated as personalities through this making and using that is of real value."[50] Of course, for nearly a decade Cage had used phonographs and radios as musical instruments—phonograph records, turntables, and a radio station in 1939 in *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* and a radio again in 1942 in *Credo in Us*—and was liable to use absolutely anything to make music. He was, in this instance, speaking rhetorically from inside Western art music as a practitioner and purveyor of "live" goods and even more immediately as a listener. Seemingly, by arguing for *liveness*, Cage was siding with the AFM against the record companies, but by 1948 the issue was not between live and recorded; it was a labor issue, one which seemed to be a distraction from the real social project of music. Phonographs and radios, the targets of the AFM decrees, are not important. In the terms of the text itself he was still attending the performance of Ives and Webern as a listener, where disinterestedness in *making* and *using music* had already led to "and that is why we love the art," but then he directed his attention to the performances reproduced on phonographs and radios, which followed a very different program.[51] Instead of acknowledging the obvious differences between the two spheres of music, or contemplating the political realities of working musicians outside Western art music who act in an interested manner regarding their occupations, he returns again to the question of the integration of the personality and attempts to socialize it by implicating all musical activity in self-improvement. From where he sat in the text listening to music, all of music became "music" and the politics of music dissipated among the dispositions of individual personalities.

There is certainly the possibility that Cage's fantasy may have been an offhand remark, a quick way to snub commercialism in favor of the integrity of the individual, etc. However, there is more than just the kernel of truth in this particular jest, since this fantasy of a grand silencing of society had long been within his personal repertoire.

> One of the greatest blessings that the United States could receive in the near future would be to have her industries halted, her business discontinued, her people speechless, a great pause in her world of affairs created, and finally to have everything stopped that runs, until everyone should hear the last wheel go around and the last echo fade away . . . then, in that moment of complete intermission, of undisturbed calm, would be the hour most conducive to the birth of a Pan-American Conscience. Then we should be capable of answering the question, "What ought we to do?" For we should be hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity to learn what other people think.[52]

This was the text of Cage's speech, "Other People Think," for the Southern California Oratorical Contest in 1927, where he represented Los Angeles High School and won first prize. The rhetorical device of imagining a large social silencing was placed in a context very similar to that in "A Composer's Confessions."

Both instances of silencing create conditions for asking questions, which in turn lead to large transformations in consciousness. The social silencing in "Other People Think" provides the opportunity to ask the question "what ought we to do?" and to learn *that*, not *what*, other people think ("It is the produce of the mind of man, and in that it is truly great"),[53] and this in turn promises a Pan-American Conscience. Within "A Composer's Confessions" a smaller quiet provokes the key question about making and using music with which the remaining text is concerned. Cage had moved into a "new apartment on the East River in Lower Manhattan which turns its back to the city and looks to the water and the sky. The quietness of this retreat brought me finally to face the question: to what end does one write music?"[54] And then this question soon leads to a larger social silencing if Petrillo "had the power, and exerted it, to ban not only recordings, but radio, television, the newspapers, and Hollywood,"[55] in recognition of the unimportance of reproduced commercial music, music critics, and musical tastes versus the real value of making and using music, integrating the personality, and cultivating disinterestedness and the wisdom of the Orient.

In "Other People Think" Cage only implied that the social transformation would come about through individual transformation of consciousness, whereas in "A Composer's Confessions" social transformation would come about only through personal acts by legions of solitary individuals: "That island that we have grown to think no longer exists to which we might have retreated to escape from the impact of the world, lies, as it ever did, within each one of our hearts."[56] Both instances do share, however, the type of goofy political naiveté Yvonne Rainer mentioned, the earlier speech in thinking that United States imperialism within Latin America

would be moved by conscience (an opinion that might be expected from a high school student) and the Vassar lecture in conflating an issue of the political economy of music with self-improvement.

The second call for silence in "A Composer's Confessions" narrowed down the scope of the fantasy from silencing all the mass media to silencing just one aspect: Muzak. He planned "to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4-1/2 minutes long—those being the standard lengths of "canned" music—and its title will be *Silent Prayer*. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility."[57] In the late 1940s Muzak was piped over telephone lines into restaurants, workplaces, and other institutions, and was thus primarily a transmissional service like radio. The company was just beginning to make a transition to recorded systems situated in-house. Although it would be difficult to say whether the Muzak Co. would have been amenable to Cage's idea, failure to realize the project would not have been due to a lack of courage on Cage's part to approach the company. The unbridled confidence for which he was known had been boosted by the nationwide reception, in both senses of the word, of *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, and his *Book of Music* was broadcast throughout the South Pacific on military radio. He had always been very enterprising, unafraid to approach anyone who might be able to advance his projects, including a number of companies when he sought support for his Center of Experimental Music. There is no reason to believe that his proposal was a ruse.

There are several possible art connections. It is obvious that *4'33"* is just three seconds over the upper limit for canned music and, although much happened in the four years between the two pieces, if it was indeed chance that finally arrived at this duration, then it was at least a moment of objective chance, unwittingly, in the surrealist sense. The fact that it was canned recalls the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, with whose work Cage was quite familiar. Although Duchamp transposed a mass-produced object into an art venue, whereas Cage wanted to place an art object of canned silence alongside the other cans on the narrowcasted Muzak shelf, *Silent Prayer* could be thought of as a musical version of *Air de Paris*, Duchamp's bottled air. Then there was Ferruccio Busoni's well-known *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music* (available in English translation from c. 1911), in which he stated that consummate players and improvisers "most nearly approach the essential nature of the art" during their employment of holds and rests. If properly isolated, the product of such playing could very well describe one of the bases for Cagean silence: "The tense silence between two movements—*in itself music*, in

this environment—leaves wider scope for divination than the more determinate, but therefore less elastic, sound."[58] I am not saying that Cage was thinking of Duchamp or Busoni at the time, and he certainly was not aware of F. T. Marinetti's radio *sintesi* written in the early 1930s, entitled *I Silenzi Parlano fra di Loro* [*Silences Speak Among Themselves*], the most notable precedent of an artwork in which silence took on its own presence.[59]

The most plausible connection with the past becomes apparent when we ask what would have attracted Cage to Muzak in particular, among all the other forms of mass media? What more so than Erik Satie's *furniture music?* Cage had a long-standing interest in Satie (he arranged the first movement of the *Socrate* for a Merce Cunningham dance, *Idyllic Song*, 1945), and by the time of his Vassar lecture he was deeply engaged with Satie's work. He was no doubt preparing for the Satie Festival lectures and concerts to be held at Black Mountain College that summer. At Black Mountain, concerts took place in the dining hall or pieces would be played by Cage on the piano in his cabin while people roamed about outside, the latter suggesting the ambiance of furniture music.[60] Anyone involved in even modest research would have known about the two primary biographical texts on Satie—if Rollo Myers's *Erik Satie* (1948) was too late, then Pierre-Daniel Templier's *Erik Satie* (1932) was not—as well as the prominence of the "Erik Satie and his Musique d'ameublement" section in Constant Lambert's *Music Ho!* (1934).[61]

Although usually solely attributed to Satie, *musique d'ameublement* [furniture music or furnishing music] was a collaboration with Darius Milhaud. It first took place in 1920 at an art gallery to act as an interlude for a play by Max Jacob. The introduction, read by Pierre Bertin, was included in Myers's book. "We present for the first time, under the supervision of MM. Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud and directed by M. Delgrange, 'furnishing music' to be played during the entr'actes. We beg you to take no notice of it and to behave during the entr'actes as if the music did not exist. This music . . . claims to make its contribution to life in the same way as a private conversation, a picture, or the chair on which you may or may not be seated."[62]

To put music in the intermission required an unobtrusive music, otherwise it would be another performance and not an intermission at all, and this not-to-be-listened-to music evokes immediate comparison with Muzak. The association with Muzak would have been particularly noticeable in Templier's book where he cites a note from Satie assigning certain of his compositions their respective *musique d'ameublement* settings: "*The Banquet*—'Musique d'ameublement'—For an assembly-hall . . . *Phèdre*—'Musique d'ameublement'—For a lobby. . . . *Phédon*—

'Musique d'ameublement'—For a shop window."[63] This type of shift in settings from art to non-art and vice versa has been a regular feature of art through the twentieth century, having perhaps its most notable demonstration with the institutional tactics of Duchamp's ready-mades, while eliciting a certain circularity in the relationship of Cage's *Silent Prayer* and Satie's *musique d'ameublement*. Satie's performance was a displacement of one of his café haunts (people talking, ignoring the music) into an artistic space, whereas *Silent prayer* returns to the cafés and other non-art settings to replace Muzak with silence, that is, an unobtrusive music with something even more unobtrusive. Cage was not, like the protagonist in Heinrich Böll's story "Murke's Collected Silences," inside the institution trying to patch together some reprieve, but was instead trying to seek a bit of reprieve, an *entr'acte*, from a daily life where Muzak had become unobtrusively and insultingly pervasive. And there may have been a special consideration for choosing to silence Muzak among other forms of media: if one was to be involved in silencing, there was little danger of being accused of censorship, for in its unobtrusiveness Muzak had already assumed a certain self-censorship, and a hiatus of 4½ minutes would do nothing to disturb the pervasiveness. Silencing would only impose a brief intermission.

In his book Myers also discussed Satie's composition *Cinema* (1924) as another instance of *musique d'ameublement*. Indeed, it was likewise intended to take place within an intermission, yet this time it did not stand alone but accompanied René Clair's film *Entr'acte*, which was to function as the intermission to Francis Picabia's ballet *Relâche* (the name *Relâche*, posted when a performance is canceled, is itself suggestive of the revoked performances of *Silent Prayer* and *4'33"*). *Cinema* was comprised of segments of music, incidental both in itself and to the images in the film, cut in regularly measured lengths with no regard for conventional continuity (the simple structure is perhaps the clearest statement of Satie, the measurer of sounds). Cinema in general affords its own unobtrusiveness and silence with regard to sound in at least two ways. First of all, since film music must as a rule never overwhelm the images, action, or speech, it is relegated to a music heard but not-to-be-listened-to. Silence enters the picture with segments of *Hörspielstreifen*, the delicate atmosphere of recorded silence whose purpose is to imperceptibly confirm the presence of a reproduction under way and not frighten the audience into thinking there has been a technical malfunction (which would require a break in the silence of the audience itself). The silence of cinema audiences is—like that of concertgoers, people praying, and kids being entertained in hospitals—culturally specific, and a true silence, without the presence of the *Hörspielstreifen*, would have the same effect as *4'33"*.

Apart from *musique d'ameublement*, another influence on *Silent Prayer* could have been derived from Cage's understanding of how structure in Satie's music worked to equalize the status of silence with that of sound. In his lecture "Defense of Satie" at Black Mountain College, Cage gave a great deal of importance to structure, specifically as practiced by Satie and Webern and heralded by music from, following his perennial motif, the Orient and middle ages.[64] Both Satie and Webern worked in a short form conducive to canned music, but Cage had more fundamental concerns. He figured that structure was determined by duration, which sound and silence shared, and in turn determined being from non-being: "Music is a continuity of sound. In order that it may be distinguishable from non-being, it must have structure."[65] Pitch, loudness, and timbre, although they could be heard in musical sound, were not intrinsic to the being or non-being of music because they did not require duration, whereas "silence cannot be heard in terms of pitch or harmony: It is heard in terms of time length."[66] This line of reasoning was one of Cage's platforms against harmony (thus Beethoven) and could be found in his earlier arguments for percussion and noise. Indeed, Satie's structure was "extramusical in its implications . . . into Satie's continuity come folk tunes, musical clichés, and absurdities of all kinds."[67] Cage now called Satie's structure into service to privilege yet another element historically downplayed within Western art music: silence. Music was composed most fundamentally of sound and silence, and silence became a way of hearing time within the *being* of musical structure. Nevertheless, he was still thinking of sound and silence as being conventionally distinct from one another, a presence and an absence of sound. By the time of *4′33″*, silence became only the absence of an intentional sound, whereas musical sound had become ever-present and omnipresent, filled with intentional or unintentional sound. Thus, *Silent Prayer* was not underscored by the same sense of silence as *4′33″*, it was not a way to begin hearing and musicalizing the surrounding sound. If anything was meant to be heard it was conventional silence, in this case, the absence of the sound of Muzak, along the measured lengths of canned music.

But why the *prayer* in *Silent Prayer*? I believe the reason can be found in Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, specifically, at the juncture of the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters entitled *Silence* and *Prayer*, respectively. Huxley's book consists of his commentary on perennial philosophy, with substantial quotes from mystics, saints, monks, philosophers, psychologists, etc. Among the people quoted—many passages are nothing but a sequence of quotes—one can find all the individuals and approaches favored by Cage; moreover, one could find them within a relatively secular context. The problem with Coomaraswamy,

Eckhart, and others, after all, was the difficulty of appropriating spiritual ideas without committing oneself overtly to deism. Huxley's chapter on silence is one of the shortest in the book, perhaps because three-quarters of the chapter is devoted to appeals to stop talking. The remaining section consists of one paragraph consisting of Huxley's own appeal for silence over the mass media. It is only one paragraph, but it cannot be taken lightly. Throughout the book Huxley maintains an evenhandedness about timeless, global matters. Here he steps out of character entirely and forthrightly condemns the present-day media.

> The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire—we hold history's record for all of them. And no wonder; for all the resources of our almost miraculous technology have been thrown into the current assault against silence. That most popular and influential of all recent inventions, the radio, is nothing but a conduit through which pre-fabricated din can flow into our homes. And this din goes far deeper, of course, than the ear-drums. It penetrates the mind, filling it with a babel of distractions—new items, mutually irrelevant bits of information, blasts of corybantic or sentimental music, continually repeated doses of drama that bring no catharsis, but merely create a craving for daily or even hourly emotional enemas. And where, as in most countries, the broadcasting stations support themselves by selling time to advertisers, the noise is carried from the ears, through the realms of phantasy, knowledge and feeling to the ego's central core of wish and desire. Spoken or printed, broadcast over the ether or on wood-pulp, all advertising copy has but one purpose—to prevent the will from achieving silence. Desirelessness is the condition of deliverance and illumination. The condition of an expanding and technologically progressive system of mass-production is universal craving. Advertising is the organized effort to extend and intensify craving—to extend and intensify, that is to say, the workings of that force, which (as all the saints and teachers of all the higher religions have always taught) is the principal cause of suffering and wrong-doing and the greatest obstacle between the human soul and its divine Ground.[68]

If one needed spiritual impetus or moral justification to silence any aspect of the mass media, in order to remove the obstacles that would *prevent the will from achieving silence*, no less, here it was in an emphatic end to a chapter entitled "Silence." On the facing page began the chapter "Prayer."

Silencing Techniques

4′33″ silenced music in order to hear the unintended, surrounding sounds, the noises, and ultimately the total environment. *Silent Prayer*

silenced the sound of a music intended as environmental; Muzak was the surrounding sound meant to be as unobtrusive to the task at hand as audience sounds at a concert. Thus, during the twentieth-century Age of Noise, the most noted promulgator of musical noise was involved in the business of noise abatement. *Silent Prayer* was not alone in this respect because Cage, an inventor of techniques from an early age,[69] developed several other techniques for eliminating, diminishing, or displacing the source of the noise, transforming the noise into something else, or canceling the noise by playing back its image, so to speak, in the negative. He did not translate these techniques into technological devices of active noise control, or act politically through popular protest and city ordinances to curb urban noises, but instead elaborated them through compositional, auditive, and physical means associated with music (the exception being his echoing of an anechoic chamber experience). Just as he incorporated noise as extramusical sound into music, so too did he accommodate urban noise through acts of composition and musical listening. Although he had railed against musical tastes, he also attempted through these techniques to transform what he personally found distasteful. These techniques have direct bearing upon how *Silent Prayer* is understood, yet this composition cannot be understood without another composition proposed in "A Composer's Confessions" at the very same time, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, "a composition using as instruments nothing but twelve radios."[70] They need to be taken together, not only because the "two may seem absurd but I am serious about them,"[71] but because they describe a paradigmatic range of noise abatement techniques as applied to commercial music.[72]

An early mention of such techniques occurred during 1943 and arose within the context of personal betterment (as it would five years later in "A Composer's Confessions"), or perhaps personal adaptation, when he was quoted as saying, "People may leave my concerts thinking they have heard 'noise,' but will then hear unsuspected beauty in their everyday life. This music has a therapeutic value for city dwellers."[73] The noise in the city would not be physically diminished, but the city-dwelling concertgoers would accommodate themselves to it by appreciating it differently, removing the aggravation if not the noise, while both noise and aggravation would continue to exist for non-concert-going city dwellers. In further statements, such facility pertained to self-betterment—becoming more open to the world, trying to coexist peacefully with it—and to the negotiation of his own tastes. He was not averse to silencing things, or at least contemplating doing so. Two years after proposing to silence commercial music using *Silent Prayer*, and in the longer shadow of "Other People Think," he finished his "Lecture on Nothing" (1950) with a droll frenzy of destruction and silencing.

> Would you like to join a society called Capitalists Inc. (Just so no one would think we were Communists.)? Anyone joining automatically becomes president. To join you must show you've destroyed at least one hundred records or, in the case of tape, one sound mirror [tape recorder]. To imagine you own any piece of music is to miss the whole point. This is no point or the point is nothing; and even a long-playing record is a thing. A lady from Texas said: I live in Texas. We have no music in Texas. The reason they've no music in Texas is because they have recordings. Remove the records from Texas and someone will learn to sing.[74]

Whereas *Silent Prayer* was a silencing of unobtrusive music such that true unobtrusiveness could exist and its time could be heard, removing recordings in Texas meant silencing the music which silences "live" music, silencing silence for music to be heard. Here again we have Cage the practitioner and purveyor of "live" goods, but instead of calling for Petrillo to extend his silencing beyond the AFM musicians, he fantasizes about destroying the recordings and the means for playback.

Just as silence against silence could produce music, noise against noise could produce silence. Cage was involved in noise abatement at a particular time within which the Age of Noise had reached crescendo proportions, as the noise of wartime shifted over to the immediate postwar period, which consisted of the combined noises of militarism and commercialism. In "Lecture on Nothing," Cage mentioned how the sheer magnitude of the war and of postwar American artifice, as it presumptuously equated itself with *life* and *time* (the magazines), had weighed him down and compelled him to offer something quieter. "Half-intellectually and half sentimentally, when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendship. Permanent, I thought, values, independent at least from Life, Time and Coca-Cola."[75]

Two years closer to the war, in "A Composer's Confessions," he responded more directly with a two-pronged approach for noise abatement: becoming quiet and marshaling loudness against loudness.

> Being involved in the complexities of a nation at war and a city in business-as-usual led me to know that there is a difference between large things and small things, between big organizations and two people alone in a room together. Two of my compositions presented at the Museum [of Modern Art, 7 February 1943] concert suggest this difference. One of them, the *Third Imaginary Landscape*, used complex rhythmic oppositions played on harsh sounding instruments combined with recordings of generator noises, sliding electrical sounds, insistent buzzers, thunderous crashes and roars, and a rhythmic structure whose numerical relationships suggested

> disintegration. The other, four pieces, called *Amores*, was very quiet, and, my friends thought, pleasing to listen to.[76]

Throughout the Vassar lecture Cage pitted personal integration against the forces of social disintegration. Big business, loud war, big orchestras, harmony ("a device to make music impressive, loud and big, in order to enlarge audiences and increase box-office returns")[77] and through music back again to *contemporary* Christian society, Western culture, acquisition of money and fame, etc. He favored small and quiet things related to personal relationships in intimate situations, the Orient, earlier Christian teachings, pleasure and religion, the island of the heart, etc. "My feeling was that beauty yet remains in intimate situations; that it is quite hopeless to think and act impressively in public terms. This attitude is escapist, but I believe that it is wise rather than foolish to escape from a bad situation."[78] Just as he had sought to escape the Age of Noise during the war with the quietness of *Amores* and the raucousness of *Imaginary Landscape No. 3*, so too did he apply the two-pronged approach of noise abatement to commercial music and radio (early Muzak was transmissional) with *Silent Prayer* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, silencing Muzak to side with the quiet and the integrated, and writing radio music to pit disintegration against disintegration, noise against noise. Cage continued to employ such techniques throughout his life against the music that disgusted him, the music he otherwise no longer wished to hear, and the sounds of urban and domestic life. In "Composition as Process" (1958) he explained how *Imaginary Landscape No. IV* had enabled him to override his personal taste about the *sound* of radios, as had *Williams Mix* for Beethoven, *Imaginary Landscape V* for jazz, and *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* for bel canto. "It remains for me to come to terms with the vibraphone."[79] The vibraphone plagued him until at least the late 1970s (it would be interesting to attempt to explain why the *vibraphone?*).[80] In a 1961 interview with Roger Reynolds, Cage still had not come to terms with Muzak. "If I liked Muzak, which I also don't like, the world would be more open to me. I intend to work on it. The simplest thing for me to do in order to come to terms with both those things would be to use them in my work, and this was, I believe, how so-called primitive people dealt with animals which frightened them."[81]

Reynolds revisited the question of persistent dislikes in an interview in 1977, but Cage did not single out Muzak.[82] This turnaround might be explained by a plan Cage had to use Muzak in a composition. In 1962 his friend the sculptor Richard Lippold was commissioned to make a piece for the Pan Am building; however, he objected to his work

sharing the same space with Muzak piped in by the building's proprietors. He asked Cage to provide the sound instead, so Cage proposed a sound work that used Muzak as source material to be manipulated. Perhaps because Cage's part of the Lippold commission was never realized, he became only partially accustomed to it, because in 1973 he had not completely come to terms with it. The Muzak company, he suggested in an interview, should consider including some of Satie's *musique d'ameublement* compositions because Muzak, "in a very weak way, attempts to distract us from what we are doing. . . . Whereas I think Satie's furniture music would like us to pay attention to whatever else it was that we were doing."[83] In essence, therefore, he was proposing another version of *Silent Prayer,* this time supplanting Muzak with *musique d'ameublement* instead of silence. However, this does not result in an easy equation of silence and *musique d'ameublement,* since after *4′33″* silence was non-intentional sound to-be-listened-to, whereas *musique d'ameublement* was intentional and not-to-be-listened to. By replacing Muzak with *musique d'ameublement* because it would better serve the ostensible function of Muzak, Cage was calling for a Muzak not-to-be-listened-to, he was attempting to make Muzak more Muzakal.

It may have been his modern-primitive way of taming a frightening animal, but the animal still had a bad temperament; all those cultural cues and tuneful hooks, no matter how mollified and defanged, still provided a *very weak distraction* whereas *musique d'ameublement* provided *no distraction.* A chapter in Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* concentrates on how to deal with distractions through "spiritual exercises." "Some of the most profitable spiritual exercises actually make use of distractions, in such a way that these impediments to self-abandonment, mental silence and passivity in relation to God are transformed into means of progress."[84] Such exercises were increasingly necessary because the Age of Noise was suffused with "a babel of distractions."[85] However, if Cage had helped Muzak realize itself through use of *musique d'ameublement,* then there would be no distraction. Thus, a very weak distraction remained, at least to 1984 during yet another interview.[86]

When it came to urban noise, at the time of "A Composer's Confessions" he could still write about how his quiet apartment on the East River moved him to ask about the reasons for writing music, but by the 1980s he faced the question of intrusive street noise. "I wouldn't dream of getting double glass because I love all the sounds. The traffic never stops, night and day. Every now and then a horn, siren, screeching brakes, extremely interesting and always unpredictable. At first I thought I couldn't sleep through it. Then I found a way of transposing the sounds into images so that they entered into my dreams without waking me up."[87] A burglar alarm lasting several hours resembled a Brancusi.

Musical noise no longer provided sufficient therapeutic value for city living; it became necessary to adapt to the new environment by combining the processes of musicalizing noise through listening and hypnogagic dreaming. What started out in the social realm of composition (city dwellers leaving a noise music concert to return more appreciatively to urban noise) retreated into techniques practiced by the individual alone. In addition to the inventiveness of this technique, he was still (in 1977) willing to engage in the old-fashioned technique of turning something off. "I think if I listened to [Conlon] Nancarrow for long, that I would have to finally say, please turn it off. The music that I don't have to turn off is precisely the music with us when we don't have any music. . . . and that is the 'Mind' with the capital 'm.' That is what I meant by my silent piece in 1952, and it is *still* that piece which is my favorite music. That's why I have—if I do have—any difficulty with any other music (even if it's my own). It's because of that love that I have that difficulty."[88]

One of the central effects of Cage's battery of silencing techniques was a silencing of the social, a feature which was evident throughout but which was articulated in different ways and different degrees. There was a retreat from the social in the time between *Silent Prayer* and *4'33"*, consisting of removing the silence from the public airwaves and placing it in concert hall, silencing a piano instead of mass culture, arriving at 4 1/2 minutes through organizational methods instead of industry standards, prying three movements into the time slot of canned music, acting directly against the Age of Noise and developing an amenable position within it. In other words, *Silent Prayer* was immersed in the patently social, whether that was the labor activity of the AFM or the business of mollified music, whereas a *4'33"* was removed to the special space of Western art music where associations with the social are more oblique. Cage practiced social silencing rhetorically in "Other People Think" and "A Composer's Confessions," whereas he took explicit action through musical means, including musical listening, where a person's social situation became one of *being within music*. Cagean chance and indeterminacy, developed during this same period, were techniques not only to eliminate himself from his music,[89] but to eliminate the social situations in which he found himself, in particular, the one in which *Silent Prayer* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* were generated.

It should be stressed, however, that Cage's tack within the framework of *perennial philosophy* was not the only possible one, that spiritual techniques for dealing with the distraction of the social need not take recourse to immediate silencing of the social. If we go again to Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, then we can imagine how a technique of listen-

ing could have been developed outside the socially deracinating influence of Western art music, one that could have led to silence without silencing. Among the spiritual exercises Huxley mentions that deal with distractions is one "much employed in India." "[It] consists in dispassionately examining the distractions as they arise and in tracing them back, through the memory of particular thoughts, feelings and actions, to their origins in temperament and character, constitution and acquired habit. This procedure reveals to the soul the true reasons for its separation from the divine Ground of its being."[90]

Applying this technique to aurality, if one begins with a notion that when humans hear and make sense of sound it is necessarily social, then, from the perspective of the individual, one's memory, thoughts, feelings, sensations, experiences, and actions will engender a knowledge of other things besides *the self* or a *sound in itself*, and transform any understanding of being and acting within the world. Only then, as Huxley writes, "having made the resolution to do what it can, in the course of daily living, to rid itself of these impediments to Light, it quietly puts aside the thought of them and, empty, purged and silent, passively exposes itself to whatever it may be that lies beyond and within."[91] Cage merely skipped the first half of the exercise and went immediately to putting aside the thought of them.

Cage and the Impossible Inaudible

Cagean lore admits another key moment of silencing, his visit to an anechoic chamber, chronologically wedged in 1951 between *Silent Prayer* (1948) and *4'33"* (1952). "It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, 'Describe them.' I did. He said, 'The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation.' "[92] The anechoic chamber was the technological emblem for Cage's class of silencing techniques. It was clinical and discursive, exhibiting attributes of both a bona fide anechoic chamber used in acoustical research and the anecdotal chamber diffused through Cagean lore. It absorbed sounds and isolated two of Cage's usually inaudible internal bodily sounds, but in the process there was a third internal sound isolated, the one saying, "Hmmm, wonder what the low-pitched sound is? What's that high-pitched sound?" Such quasi-sounds were, of course, antithetical to

Cagean listening by being in competition with *sounds in themselves*, yet here he was able to listen and at the same time allow discursiveness to intrude in the experience, because such sounds would be absorbed by clinical and scientific discourse, if not by the materials of the chamber itself, which historically had been allowed to intrude on musical listening. Cage once may have appropriated Dayton Clarence Miller's *The Science of Musical Sound*, but here he went to the site where acoustic texts themselves are produced to secure an experiential and scientific legitimization for his musical thought, and to create his own anecdotal text, for the simple reason that he was in the process of extending music far past the assumptions exercised in any of the innumerable acoustics of music texts. At the same time, acoustics was the music for the rest of the world. No longer constrained by musical parameters of sound production, Cage could still isolate an ostensibly asocial body through a clinical hearing cordoned off from worldly influences as a case in point for listening to the whole world musically.

As generator of a new silence, the anechoic chamber visit was a variant of *4′33″* and while both took place in isolated space built for specialized audition, they muted different sounds and shifted attention in different directions, one to surrounding sounds, one to subtending sounds. *4′33″* muted the performer to shift attention to the sounds in the surrounding space, and by implication to environmental sounds in general, while the anechoic chamber muted the sounds of the surrounding space, cordoning off all environmental sounds and dampening sounds inside its waffled walls to shift attention to Cage's internal bodily sounds and by implication to the impossibility of silence and the pervasiveness of music.[93] The anechoic chamber certified for Cage the impossibility of silence by becoming a padded cell for the refractory sound of his own irrepressible vital signs; however, he resisted transposing the conventional figure of silence split between presence and absence of sound, which he was in the process of abandoning forever, into a presence and absence of life and death. The chamber itself was already as dead as possible in order to detect the most minute presence of sound. Sounds are absorbed by the design and materials (composed of sizes smaller than wave forms, their job is to fracture) of the walls and picked up by microphones and other sensing devices which are monitored by researchers who have abandoned the space. The anechoic chamber was a *dead* acoustic and depopulated space in which performativity shifted to the hitherto inaudible internal sounds of Cage, the living, fleshy interloper, as if his own body was constituted of material which too had absorbed sounds. Of course, his death would bring these vital signs to an end, along with the consciousness required to acknowledge them, but it

would not bring silence. Obviously, sounds would still exist in the day-to-day world without him, people would exist who could hear them, but what he had discovered was that there would also be an entire region of sounds which people could not hear, and it was this revelation of a combined impossibility of inaudibility and pervasive musicality which comforted him: "Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music."[94]

Significantly, from this point on, Cage would increasingly employ technology as a discursive means for musical listening, not just practical musical production. The anechoic chamber was joined in this project by another piece of tangible and fictive technology, the microphone, and both pieces of technology had the job of amplifying small sounds; one did it through subtraction, the other through addition. To *hear sounds in themselves* one must first hear them. Small sounds and amplification went hand in hand, although their overall role changed over time. Earlier in his career, the amplification of small sounds served the cause of noise as a practical means to increase the number of "more new sounds" in the constitution of a modernist material fount, or to free them, in Cage's rhetoric of sonic emancipation. With his commitment to the impossibility of silence the world was suddenly overrun with small sounds and, although it would seem there would have been less immediate need for amplification because a plentitude of sounds was assured, amplification was still called on to perform rhetorically, far beyond its actual technological capabilities, to increase the number of possible sounds and to deny inaudibility. Small sounds also moved to inhabit the vicinity hitherto occupied by conventional silence. When silence became a type of sound, actual silence was merely a state of inaudibility, and everything known before as silence became nothing but small sounds contingent on amplification. Thus, the idea of small sounds became for Cage not only a negotiation between old and new silences, but eventually provided the reason for his development of implausible and impossible amplification technologies, which, like other major developments in communications technology, presumed and produced a different, perhaps only a revamped, world outlook.

Before considering Cage's amplified small sounds further, we need to ask about the practice of considering sounds according to *size*. In the realm of music, ideas about the sizes of sounds appeared at the turn of the century, when it had become apparent that existing means of musical notation were inadequate to the task of denoting smaller and smaller intervals and of representing many of the salient characteristics of sounds in general. These ideas were accompanied by appeals to the vernacular experience of hearing and to acoustics, their commonality occurring as acoustics continued, as it had since antiquity, to seek observational

means for understanding sonic phenomena. While an individual might speak about the size of a sound, throughout the nineteenth century acoustics had busied itself with measuring and producing sounds through the development of visible sound (while at the same time mathematical modeling took acoustics further away from prosaic experiences of observation). Moreover, visualization meant that smaller and smaller increments and attributes of a sound became evident and, in turn, became the pride of acousticians who could publicly display them outside the laboratory. The avant-garde made quite a bit of mileage from affectionate parodies of the culture of science and technology and no one more so than the French (Jarry, Roussel, Apollinaire, Duchamp). It was left to Erik Satie to take on the ideas of size implicit in acoustical measurement by claiming that he was in fact a phonometrographer, a measurer of sound, not a musician.

> The first time I used a phonoscope, I examined a B flat of medium size. I can assure you that I have never seen anything so revolting. I called in my man to show it to him.
>
> On my phono-scales a common or garden F sharp registered 93 kilos. It came out of a fat tenor whom I also weighed.[95]

Meanwhile, developments of microphony and amplification in telephony, phonography, and radiophony concentrated on lowering the threshold to the transmission of smaller sounds. Western art music met these developments head on during the late 1920s in the technologically saturated space of the radio studio. Once the orchestra was transformed into a *radio* orchestra, the old amplitude hierarchies were warped and small sounds could have their day: "a harp, for example, even when played pianissimo, [could] be audible through no matter what orchestration."[96] By the 1950s, the combined approaches to the sizes of musical sound had become so well established that an advertisement in the *Village Voice* for the 1958 New York premiere of Varèse's *Poème électronique* promised "big sounds, not fat sounds."[97]

Cage demonstrated an interest in small sounds and amplification early in his career. In "The Future of Music" (1937) he called for centers for experimental music equipped with "means for amplifying small sounds."[98] The magnetic audiotape piece *Williams Mix* (1952) listed as one of the six categories of sonic raw material "small sounds requiring amplification to be heard with the others" (as was the task with radio orchestra amplification). The instruction appears to have worked, if we believe the report from Robert Dumm of *Newsweek*, who wrote in 1954 that he heard in *Williams Mix* a little sound "like a fly walking on paper,

magnified."[99] *Cartridge Music* (1960) also used "microphones and cartridges . . . connected to amplifiers that go to loud-speakers, the majority of the sounds produced being small and requiring amplification in order to be heard."[100] Then, starting in 1962 with *0′00″*, Cage began using amplification to render audible a range of small and inaudible sounds belonging to states and actions of the body, to other types of action, and to the signals of transmissions and radiation. Most importantly, he amplified amplification, extending audibility (thus musicality) to increasingly smaller sounds and to all sounds all the time. *0′00″* itself was an electronic extension of music into everyday life and all fields of action. As Cage wrote, *0′00″* is "nothing but the continuation of one's daily work, whatever it is, providing it's not selfish, but is the fulfillment of an obligation to other people, done with contact microphones, without any notion of concert or theater or the public, but simply continuing one's daily work, now coming out through loudspeakers."[101] Cage claimed that "the piece tries to say . . . that everything we do is music, or can become music through the use of microphones. . . . By means of electronics, it has been made apparent that everything is musical."[102]

From this point on Cage was thorough in how he introduced technology, audition, and music absolutely everywhere. The air was saturated with activity and could give up its sounds when signals were thought to be sounds and radios and other receivers were thought to be amplifiers.

> The air, you see, is filled with sounds that are inaudible, but that become audible if we have receiving sets. . . .
>
> There were [in *Variations VII* (1966)] ordinary radios, there were Geiger counters to collect cosmic things, there were radios to pick up what the police were saying, there were telephone lines open to different parts of the city. There were as many different ways of receiving vibrations and making them audible as we could grasp with the techniques at hand.[103]

The received all-sound here was carried globally on the wave of a McLuhanesque prosthetic nervous system, even though Cage denied the synaptical signals of his own thought, let alone the political, military, and industrial barrage of what imperially and empirically pervades Lee de Forest's "Empires of the Air."[104] And, according to Cage, the activities of the plant and insect worlds too awaited amplification.

> That we have no ears to hear the music the spores shot off from basidia make obliges us to busy ourselves microphonically.[105]
>
> I thought of sounds we cannot hear because they're too small, but through new techniques we can enlarge them, sounds like ants walking in the grass.[106]

The "music of the spores" imagines sounds having nothing to do with humans as music and puts Cage in a contradictory position with respect to his professed anti-anthropomorphism. At the minimum, it belongs to a nagging categorical imperialism in Cage's thought that should be taken into consideration in representations of his anarchism or ecology. Indeed, should there be some question about the nature of the influence of this aspect of Cage's thought on others, it is helpful to refer to R. Murray Schafer's statement in his book *The Tuning of the World*. In this book, which has shaped *acoustic ecology* and underpinned much electroacoustic music, Schafer explicitly states his indebtedness to Cage and consequently goes on to say that "today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying *within the comprehensive dominion of music*."[107] When was the last time you heard the word *dominion* used in a sentence?

Cage completed the ubiquitous figure of musical sound when he extended amplification to the silence of objects and matter, which he would do wherever he happened to be at the time, "this table, for instance, around which we're sitting, is made experiential as sound, without striking it. It is, we know, in a state of vibration. It is therefore making a sound, but we don't yet know what that sound is."[108] Technology would not only let us know what the sound is, it would also render music "a revelation of sound even where we don't expect that it exists."[109] Thus, while he did not want to make his music into an object—this was his argument after a certain point against recording—he did want to make objects into music. In another circumstance, "If here, for musical pleasure, I could make audible to you what this book sounds like, and then what the table sounds like, and then what that wall sounds like, I think we would all be quite delighted."[110] Or again, returning full circle to the anechoic chamber, he says, "Look at this ashtray."

> It's in a state of vibration. We're sure of that, and the physicist can prove it to us. But we can't hear those vibrations. When I went into the anechoic chamber, I could hear myself. Well, now, instead of listening to myself, I want to listen to this ashtray. But I won't strike it as I would a percussion instrument. I'm going to listen to its inner life thanks to a suitable technology.
>
> While in the case of the ashtray, we are dealing with an object. It would be extremely interesting to place it in a little anechoic chamber and listen to it through a suitable sound system. Object would become process; we would discover, thanks to a procedure borrowed from science, the meaning of nature through the music of objects.[111]

Cage's passion for striking tables and ashtrays (marking the philosophical status of the reality of this chair, that table) goes back to his meeting

with the filmmaker Oskar Fischinger. In 1932 Fischinger began investigating the graphic synthesis of specific sounds on film; by the time he met Cage around 1936 the correspondences between sign and sound had been enveloped by spiritism, and when he heard a sound it was the *inner life* of an object speaking. "When I was introduced to him, he began to talk with me about the spirit which is inside each of the objects of this world. So, he told me, all we need to do to liberate that spirit is to brush past the object, and to draw forth its sound. That's the idea which led me to percussion. In all the many years which followed up to the war, I never stopped touching things, making them sound and resound, to discover what sounds they could produce. Wherever I went, I always listened to objects."[112]

Percussion was replaced by amplification as the means to listen to objects. Whereas percussion required striking objects or otherwise involving them in an action to hear their sound,[113] amplification (and the muting of the anechoic chamber) required no such action on the part of objects because the sound-producing action took place continuously at the atomic level. Therefore, all matter sounded all the time and only the lack of proper technology prevented it from being music. Cage was not alone within modernist ranks, in which there was a long-standing notion that the soul, spirit, or essence of objects and matter was to be found within and communicated through vibrations. It is most familiar in terms of Kandinsky's *inner sound*, but took on a more scientific cast when Richard Huelsenbeck said in passing, "Bruitism is a kind of return to nature. It is the music produced by circuits of atoms,"[114] or when the Italian Futurists F. T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata wrote in their manifesto "La Radia" (1933): "The reception amplification and transfiguration of vibrations emitted by matter. Just as today we listen to the song of the forest and the sea so tomorrow shall we be seduced by the vibrations of a diamond or a flower."[115] Musically, it had been suggested by Varèse's *Ionization* and later in the work of Iannis Xenakis,[116] but it was Cage who situated it technically in a coherent theory of music.

Cage's dominion of *all sound* and of the corresponding capacity for *panaurality* is reminiscent of the totalizing reach of the Romantic utterance, resonating in voice or music throughout eternity and entirety, or of the nineteenth-century synaesthetes who also used their utterances to insinuate themselves throughout the cosmos. It is true that Cage explicitly sought to subvert tactics based in human centeredness, yet all he did was shift the center from one of utterance to one of audition. He simply became quiet in order to attract everything toward a pair of musical ears. He achieved through centripetal means the same centrality utterance achieved through centrifugal means. Indeed, Cage's musical renovation

was built on a larger cultural association in which listening was thought to be intrinsically more passive, peaceful, respectful, democratic, and spiritual than speaking, as it intersected with Western art music which, on the one hand, had produced itself through the sonicity of utterance and, on the other, promoted a proscription against speaking, signification, and mimesis. Cage's shift, in other words, entailed a production of music through the sonicity of audition while retaining all other features of Western art music. Again, although Cage introduced this feature systematically into music, perhaps the reason it resembles earlier forms of totalization carried out in a register of utterance is because there were also earlier forms based on audition. For instance, if we were to replace God's panaural ear with Cagean amplification, this passage from George Sand's *The Seven Strings of the Lyre* (1839) could be moved forward 125 years. "Hear the voice of the grain of sand which rolls on the mountain slope, the voice which the insect makes, unfolding its mottled wing, the voice of the flower which dries and bursts as it drops its seed, the voice of the moss as it flowers, the voice of the leaf which swells as it drinks the dewdrop and the Eternal hears all the voices of the Universal Lyre. He hears your voice, O daughter of men, as well as those of the constellations; for nothing is too small for him for whom nothing is too great, and nothing is despicable to him who created all!"[117]

The force of Cage's centripetal pull was likewise registered on the voice of technology. While describing the means to hear the inner life of the ashtray, he says that "at the same time, I'll be enhancing that technology since I'll be recognizing its full freedom to express itself, to develop its possibilities."[118] Seemingly, he ironically encouraged from technology what he discouraged among musicians, that is, expression, yet by "full freedom to express itself" he meant within the function of hearing a submolecular sound itself, where the technology becomes realized by becoming transparent. In fact, he masked the technology's "signature," or rather the signatures of a specific piece of technology, the social exigencies built in to any technology and the meanings accumulated through use within different cultural settings, just as he omitted the mediational attributes of listening itself. Indeed, he was more attentive to the mediations of Jesus: "considering the lilies, which is a kind of silence; but now we know, through science, that the lilies are extremely busy. We could say that Jesus was not thinking microscopically, or electronically; but then we could agree with him, because the work of the lilies is not to do something other than themselves."[119]

Technologies are especially amenable to mediation when they happen to be communications technologies, the tools of the trade for Cage. By the 1950s, nearly three decades of full-scale auditive mass media (phonography, radio, and sound film) were followed by the dissemina-

tion of television. As the mass media introduced more and more sounds, individuals became generationally capable of apprehending sounds in their social complexity, and at an accelerated pace. It was a period of media expansion that began to forcibly usher in the lightning-quick delivery of the din today. It was no coincidence that Cage's progressive expansion into all sound occurred at the same time, or that his emblematic *silence* was founded on a silencing of communications technologies, or that he diminished and eradicated the sociality of the sounds of the auditive mass media throughout the 1950s and 1960s—all their wayward empirical, semiotic, poetic, affective, cultural, and political *noises*—or that a shift toward listening occurred as listening became more of a consumerist imperative. In this way, Cage unwittingly aped the expansionist economies generating the media saturation in the postwar years and presented a figure of a din undifferentiated by power.

Cage completed the dominion of all sounds during the 1960s at a time when he eventually became more interested in social and political issues. While his ideas of sound and sociality were becoming more global, sometimes literally so, he maintained a strict division between the two, "a being together of sounds and people (where sounds are sounds and people are people)."[120] He did not incorporate the social, or the ecological for that matter, into the immediate materiality of sounds, but only simulated their compass and complexity through undifferentiated totalization. That his music of objects, matter, and air happened to be both everywhere and inaudible, its sounds heard only through a faith in technology, placed it squarely in a mythic heritage in the West established at the time of Pythagoras. Most importantly, Cage's own deafness amid all this inaudible sound, that is, his inability to hear the significance of sound, meant a depleted complexity of what could be heard in any *sound in itself*. Consequently, his elaboration of panaurality and sonic pervasiveness was compensatory: a space fulfilled by a dispersion of the density of the social and ecological. If he could not hear the world through a sound, then he would hear a world of sound.

Notes

Epigraph from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934; New York: Dover, 1956), 67.

1. Yvonne Rainer, "Looking Myself in the Mouth," *October*, no. 17 (Summer 1981): 65–76.

2. Michael Zwerin, "A Lethal Measurement," in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), 166.

3. Only a limited number of compositions may have overtly incorporated sounds in this way, but all of his music after the mid-1930s was discursively and philosophically dependent

on this strategy. This general strategy within avant-garde music presents difficulties for musicology, for it requires new notions and analyses of musical materiality, including the establishment of a vantage point outside music, the source of the new materiality, in order to gain some type of critical distance. This would require an interdisciplinary approach, with corresponding transformation of the object of study, and would ideally then contribute toward a transformation of artistic practice.

4. John Cage, "Composition as Process" (1958), *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 41. It is helpful to hear Cage read excerpts from this text in Dick Fontaine's 1967 film *Sound??* (New York: Rhapsody Films, 1988), videocassette, to detect the degree of castigation in his questions and realize that the affable Cage of later years had not yet fully emerged.

5. John Cage, "Edgard Varèse" (1958), *Silence*, 83–84. The way imagination impaired hearing was not restricted to Varèse: "Composers are spoken of as having ears for music which generally means that nothing presented to their ears can be heard by them. Their ears are walled in with sounds of their own imagination." Cage, "45′ for a Speaker" (1954), ibid., 155. Cage's criticism of Beethoven, Varèse, and composers in general has implications for the question of structure and continuity in music. For his comments on Beethoven in this respect, see "Defense of Satie." Regarding Varèse, he suggested a corrective measure that "discontinuity has the effect of divorcing sounds from the burden of psychological intentions" ("Edgard Varèse," 84).

6. Michael Zwerin, "A Lethal Measurement," 161–67.

7. In this respect, he has not effected the historical rupture credited to him but instead exudes a loyalty to the mission of absolute music in the nineteenth century, with its roots in the Neo-Pythagoreanism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See John Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 45ff. and Epilogue.

8. The year 1952 was a good one for nothing to happen. Following Rauschenberg's white and black paintings of the year before, there was Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), with its not-so-pregnant pauses scattered throughout a larger non-event. If Godot was a play "where nothing happens twice," then 4′33″, with its three movements, was a composition where nothing happens thrice. In 1952 also appeared the final version of Guy Debord's film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, which consisted of black and white *imageless* screens with a pared-down sound track of people speaking. Debord used another form of withholding in his 1961 address to the Group for Research on Everyday Life by not participating in the everyday life of the conference and, instead, delivering his speech using a tape recorder. "These words are being communicated by way of a tape recorder, not, of course, in order to illustrate the integration of technology into this everyday life on the margin of the technological world, but in order to seize the simplest opportunity to break with the appearance of pseudocollaboration, of artificial dialogue, established between the lecturer 'in person' and his spectators." Guy Debord, "Perspective for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 68–75. For an account of reductionism within the arts of this period, see Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

9. The piece was initially made up of three fixed lengths of silence (30″, 2′23″, 1′40″) arrived at by using chance operations and then underwent modification when it was published in 1960.

10. For the historical nature of silence among audiences, see James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

11. Remy Charlip was one of Merce Cunningham's dancers and the lover of Lou Harrison, who also had music performed the same evening. See Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina, 1947–1957* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 163.

12. *John Cage*, ed. Kostelanetz, 12. On the question of whether it was or was not "his piece," he could go either way; e.g., "I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like the most, is the silent piece." John Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), 65.

13. John Cage in conversation with Peter Gena, "After Antiquity," *A John Cage Reader*, ed. Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent (New York: C. F. Peters Corporation, 1982), 169–70.

14. Stephen Montague, "John Cage at Seventy: An Interview," *American Music* (Summer 1985): 213.

15. Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," *Tulane Drama Review*, 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 53, reprinted in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (London: Routledge, 1995), 53. Irwin Kremen, e-mail message to Larry Solomon (17 June 1997), as posted to the *Silence List*. One of the other interesting, if fanciful, reasons that have been entertained is based on the observation that 273, the number of seconds in four minutes and thirty-three seconds, is the positive value of absolute zero (−273° C.).

16. John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: A Conversation," *Contact*, no. 25 (Autumn 1982): 22.

17. Stephen Montague, "John Cage at Seventy," 213. James Pritchett cites the lecture in connection with *4′33″* but then steers clear of the social implications within the text itself and states instead, "Thus the silent piece's origins lie not in Cage's works of the 1950s and 60s, but rather in the aesthetic milieu we are considering here: the late 1940s, the *String Quartet in Four Parts*, and the 'Lecture on Nothing.' " James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 59.

18. *Musik Texte* nos. 40–41 (Cologne: August 1991) and *Musicworks* no. 52 (Toronto, Spring 1992). Subsequent citations to "A Composer's Confessions" will be to the *Musicworks* publication. Calvin Tomkins apparently had access to this text, perhaps from a publication of which I am unaware, when he wrote his portrait of Cage for *The New Yorker*, but he did not mention information relevant to the genesis of 4′33″. See Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 69–144.

19. Cage did not make matters easier by selling off portions of his library, including many of his Asian books, during some financially difficult times.

20. David Wayne Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords, C. 1942–1959: John Cage's Asian-derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1996), 129. The inclusion of Meister Eckhart and other Christian mystics within the period of South Asian influence is explained by the chapter on Eckhart appearing in Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art*.

21. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934) and *The Dance of Shiva* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1948); Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942).

22. Carl Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, trans. Stanley M. Dell (London: Kegan Paul, Trency, Trubner, 1940); Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946).

23. Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* contains much Chinese, medieval Christian material, most significantly Meister Eckhart, and some Zen sources; *The Dance of Shiva*, more consistently Indian, contains chapters on "Intellectual Fraternity" and Nietzsche; while the Huxley and Jung texts are based entirely on cross-cultural comparisons and contain explicit references to East Asian sources. Jung also wrote about Meister Eckhart in *Psychological Types* (1923).

24. See Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords," 72–73. In the same respect, his reliance on Jung should temper his familiar rejection of psychoanalysis as well as place him closer to the abstract expressionists to whom he was supposedly diametrically opposed.

25. Patterson, 95–99.

26. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, 11.

27. This is the point around which could pivot a fruitful comparison of avant-garde and modernist musics with that other postwar impulse of lounge, easy-listening, novelty, and exotica musics, what Ken Sitz has called Deep-50s music.

28. Cage, "A Composer's Confessions," 13. Henry Cowell advised the OWI "on serious works, American pieces, and music especially selected to go out to particular districts. . . . We used art music, old and new from all countries, and found that pieces by modern Americans whose style is not too complex were well received." Henry Cowell, "Shaping Music for Total War," *Modern Music* 22, no. 4 (May–June, 1945): 223–26.

29. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, 30–31.

30. John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), 105.

31. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, 31–32.

32. The last paragraph of this book states it explicitly: "When all is said and done, the hero, the leader, and saviour is also the one who discovers a new way to greater certainty. Everything could be left as it was if this new way did not absolutely demand to be discovered, and did not visit humanity with all the plagues of Egypt until it is found. The undiscovered way in us is like something of the psyche that is alive. The classic Chinese philosophy calls it 'Tao,' and compares it to a watercourse that resistlessly moves towards its goal. To be in Tao means fulfillment, wholeness, a vocation performed, beginning and end and complete realization of the meaning of existence innate in things. Personality is Tao." Jung, 304–5.

33. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, 4.

34. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, 15.

35. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality*, 26.

36. "A Composer's Confessions," 13.

37. The question of how spiritual matters relate to the workaday world of occupations runs throughout all the readings and move closer to one another in discussions of "vocations," i.e., callings, while Coomaraswamy expands the field of what Westerners might think as artists by listing more than eighteen professional arts, the sixty-four avocational arts in India, embracing "every kind of skilled activity, from music, painting, and weaving to horsemanship, cookery, and the practice of magic, without distinction of rank, all being equally of angelic origin." *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, 9. See also Patterson, 73–75.

38. "A Composer's Confessions," 13–14. In "Defense of Satie," a lecture given at Black Mountain College the summer after the Vassar lecture, Cage repeated the link between Jung and music: "Music then is a problem parallel to that of the integration of the personality: which in terms of modern psychology is the co-being of the conscious and the unconscious mind, Law and Freedom, in a random world situation. Good music can act as a guide to good living." *John Cage*, ed. Kostelanetz, 84.

39. Patterson, 86–92.

40. *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, 28.

41. "A Composer's Confessions," 14.

42. "A Composer's Confessions," 14.

43. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 143.

44. Huxley, 115 and 134.

45. In "Lecture on Nothing" (1950), Cage extended his idea of disinterestedness by associating it with a lack of interest in possessing things ("a piece of string or a sunset," "one's own home") or in possessing moments in time ("We need not destroy the past: it is gone"), and specified it by setting it against the conventional forms of continuity within Western art music ("themes and secondary themes; their struggle, their development; the climax; the recapitulation"). *Silence*, 110–11.

46. *Conversing with Cage*, 231.

47. "A Composer's Confessions," 15.

48. "A Composer's Confessions," 15.

49. Among them were the members of Spike Jones's band, who chose to satirize Petrillo openly, following his every command as though from military top brass. Cage had no apparent interest in Spike Jones, although the band would be celebrated in the post-Cagean ranks of Fluxus. See Jordan R. Young, *Spike Jones and His City Slickers* (Berkeley: Disharmony Books, 1984), 36 and 77. See also Russel Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3:229–30, 286. The big companies also had a new technology on their side: the same month as Cage's talk, ABC Radio Network announced it was going "all-tape" for nighttime programming, using the latest improvements on the German Magnetophone that had been discovered by American troops.

50. "A Composer's Confessions," 15. What critics wrote was also a *literary* matter, in accord with other instances of Cage's use of the term, because they were interested almost entirely in the playing of the literature, i.e., the repertoire, and not new music.

51. Two years later in "Lecture on Nothing" (1950) he stated, "Record collections, that is not music. The phonograph is a thing, not a musical instrument. A thing leads to other things, whereas a musical instrument leads to nothing." *Silence*, 125. The idea of an instrument literally leading to nothing which is music is, of course, the foundation of *4′33″*.

52. John Cage, "Other People Think" (1927), *John Cage*, 48.

53. "Other People Think," 48.

54. "A Composer's Confessions," 13.

55. "A Composer's Confessions," 15.

56. "A Composer's Confessions," 15.

57. "A Composer's Confessions," 15. The last two sentences are less enigmatic when taken as rhetorical devices. In this capacity, there is no synaesthetic shift away from in/audibility; the *idea* is to be made seductive as a means (short of interrupting his lecture with several minutes of standing quietly at the podium) to induce his Vassar audience into imagining what it might be like to actually *listen* to "silence" for such a length of time and not immediately understand it as a withholding of labor. And in lieu of the type of markers of time or development which might provide an anticipation of an end, the end approaches imperceptibly and, thereby, approaches imperceptibility. He had, after all, associated disinterestedness with his own brand of continuity in music two years later in his "Lecture on Nothing," and it would be understandable that, within the realm of all the ends of disinterestedness, imperceptibility would lie near the end of the trajectory from quietness to silence.

58. Busoni, *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music,* included in *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 89. Emphasis in the original.

59. Translated by Victoria Kirby in Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 293.

60. See Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords," 204 and 232. Patterson interviewed W. P. Jennerjahn, who places the invention of "happenings" not with Cage's *Black Mountain Piece* (1952) but with these cabin performances in 1948: "The music of Satie, played on two pianos inside the open window of one of the cottages on campus while the audience sat on the ground outside, or strolled about."

61. Rollo H. Myers, *Erik Satie* (1948; New York: Dover Publications, 1968); Pierre-Daniel Templier, *Erik Satie* (Paris: Les Éditions Rieder, 1932); and Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934). Cage was fluent in French by the time of his study of Satie.

62. Myers, *Erik Satie,* 60.

63. Templier, *Erik Satie,* 46, and cited in Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 232.

64. "It took a Satie and a Webern to rediscover this musical truth, which, by means of musicology, we learn was evident to some musicians in our Middle Ages, and to all musicians at all times (except those whom we are currently in the process of spoiling) in the Orient." Also: "There can be no right making of music that does not structure itself from the very roots of sound and silence—lengths of time. In India, rhythmic structure is called Tala. With us, unfortunately, it is called a new idea." "Defense of Satie," *John Cage,* 81.

65. "Defense of Satie," 78–79.

66. "Defense of Satie," 81.

67. "Defense of Satie," 83.

68. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy,* 249–50. Jung's *The Integration of the Personality,* 10, contains a similar passage: "The enormous increase of technical facilities only serves to occupy the mind with all sorts of sensations and impressions that lure the attention and interest from the inner world. The relentless flood of newspapers, radio programs, and movies may widen or fill the external mind, while at the same time, and in the same measure, consciousness of the inner world becomes darkened and may eventually disappear altogether. But 'forgetting' is not identical with 'getting rid of.' "

69. While a student at Pomona College: "One day the history lecturer gave us an assignment, which was to go to the library and read a certain number of pages in a book. The idea of everybody reading the exact same information just revolted me. I make an experiment. I went to the library and read other things that had nothing to do with the assignment, and approached the exam with that sort of preparation. I got an A." Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 78.

70. "A Composer's Confessions," 15.

71. "A Composer's Confessions," 15.

72. In the interviews with Daniel Charles circa 1968, Cage defined Muzak to include the daily bill of fare for radio: "Music for factory workers, or for chickens to force them to lay eggs. The miscellaneous music played throughout the day by most radio stations." John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds*, 137.

73. Quoted in "Percussionist," *Time* (22 February 1943): 70; cited in Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords," 108–9.

74. "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence*, 125–26.

75. "Lecture on Nothing," 117.

76. "A Composer's Confessions," 13. *Credo in Us* (1942), a percussion quartet piece with piano which included among its instruments a radio or phonograph, was composed and first performed during wartime. Instructions for the piece include the statement: "If radio is used, avoid news programs during national or international emergencies." In a 1965 interview, Cage recalled that "when the Second World War came along, I talked to myself, what do I think of the Second World War? Well, I think it's lousy. So I wrote a piece, *Imaginary Landscape No. 3*, which is perfectly hideous." *Conversing with Cage*, 59.

77. "A Composer's Confessions," 13.

78. "A Composer's Confessions," 13.

79. "Composition as Process (1958)," *Silence*, 30–31.

80. John Cage and Roger Reynolds, "A Conversation," *Musical Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (October 1979): 578.

81. John Cage, interview with Roger Reynolds," *John Cage* (New York: Henmar Press, Inc., 1962), 46.

82. Reynolds: "When [in 1961] I asked you about sounds that had been distasteful to you, such as Beethoven and the vibraphone, you mentioned Muzak. I especially admire the impulse to seek resistant materials, and wonder in this connection if there are any sounds you have recently come to find distasteful."

Cage: "The only problem that I am aware of in terms of sounds themselves . . . it's still the vibraphone for me." John Cage and Roger Reynolds, "A Conversation," 578.

83. John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: A Conversation," 22.

84. Huxley, 325.

85. Huxley, 249–50.

86. "The thing that makes Muzak tolerable is its very narrow dynamic range. It has such a narrow dynamic range that you can hear many other things at the same time as you hear Muzak. And if you pay attention carefully enough, I think you can put up with the Muzak—if you pay attention, I mean, to the things that are not Muzak." *Conversing with Cage*, 231.

87. Stephen Montague, "John Cage at Seventy," 205. In another interview Cage elaborated on the technique: "I translate the sounds into images, and so my dreams aren't disturbed. It just fuses. There was a burglar alarm one night and I was amazed because the pitch went on for two hours, was quite loud. It seemed to me to be going slightly up and slightly down. So what it became in my dreams was a Brancusi-like shape, you know, a subtle curve. And I wasn't annoyed at all." David Sears (1981), *Conversing with Cage*, 26.

88. John Cage and Roger Reynolds, "A Conversation" (1977), 577.

89. During the question period of his Norton lectures he said, "When I wrote *4′33″* I was in the process of writing the *Music of Changes*. That was done in an elaborate way. There are many tables for pitches, for durations, for amplitudes, all the work was done with chance operations. In the case of *4′33″*, I actually used the same method of working and I built up the silence of each movement, and the three movements add up to *4′33″*. I built up each movement by means of short silences put together." John Cage, *I–VI* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 20–21.

90. Huxley, 327.

91. Huxley, 327.

92. John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 134.

93. The impossibility of silence and the pervasiveness of music were closely related to the development of indeterminacy, which also occurred in the years between *Silent Prayer* and *4′33″*. When a piece of music is purposefully purposelessly made, Cage asks, "What happens, for instance, to silence? That is, how does the mind's perception of it change?" ("Composition as Process," *Silence*, 22–23). It no longer serves as a means of emphasis for taste or expressivity, or as an element marking a predetermined or developing structure. Because there are no goals, means become meaningless, because nothing is meant to be happening, whatever happens happens. If there is no determination that the absence of musical sounds (silence in the conventional sense) means the abeyance of a musical listening to any sounds, then what can be heard in the silence, as hitherto perceived, are the surrounding sounds. "Where none of these or other goals is present, silence becomes something else—not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds. The nature of these is unpredictable and changing. These sounds (which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical intention) may be depended upon to exist. The world teems with them, and is, in fact, at no point free of them" ("Composition as Process," 23). Consequently, silence itself disappears and transforms into its traditional opposite—sounds—and for Cage where there are sounds, especially a "world teeming in sounds," there will be music. It should be made clear, in this respect, that the freeing of musical intention in Cage is specifically geared to the intention to make music. The idea that intention, let alone a formidable culturally laden discursive framework, is present within the act of hearing sounds as music, does not receive equal attention.

94. John Cage, "Experimental Music," (1957), *Silence*, 8.

95. Erik Satie, "Memoirs of an Amnesiac," *The Writings of Erik Satie*, ed. and trans. Nigel Wilkins (London: Eulenburg Books, 1980), 58.

96. R. Raven-Hart, "Composing for Radio," *Musical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1930): 138.

97. An advertisement in the *Village Voice* for the U.S. premiere (9 November 1958) of Varèse's *Poème électronique* in New York, reproduced in George Brecht, *Notebook* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1991), 2:86.

98. "Future of Music Credo," *Silence*, 6.

99. Robert Dumm, "Sound Stuff," *Newsweek* (11 January 1954): 76.

100. *John Cage*, 144.

101. *Conversing with Cage*, 69–70.

102. From a 1965 interview with Cage by Lars Gunnar Bodin and Bengt Emil Johnson, *Conversing with Cage*, 70.

103. From a 1970 interview with Nax Nyffeler, *Conserving with Cage*, 74. For a discussion of *Variations VII*, see Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage*, 153.

104. In a 1966 interview, Cage remarked, "We are living in a period when our nervous systems are being exteriorized by electronics, so that the whole glow [sic] is happening at once." Michael Zwerin, "A Lethal Measurement," 163. On the inaudibilities and disappearances in transmission and reception of "media that have reached their levels of saturation," see Friedrich Kittler, "Observations on Public Reception," *Radio Rethink*, ed. Diana Augaitis and Dan Lander (Banff, Canada: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), 75–85.

105. Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 34.

106. "An Interview with John Cage," *Tulane Drama Review*, 54.

107. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 5. Emphasis in original.

108. *Conversing with Cage*, 106.

109. *Conversing with Cage*, 106.

110. *Conversing with Cage*, 70.

111. John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds*, 220–21. He states the same thing in "The Future of Music" (1974), *Empty Words* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 179. "Within each object, of course, a lively molecular process is in operation. But if we are to hear it, we must isolate the object in a special chamber."

112. Cage and Charles, *For the Birds*, 73–74. Also: "[Oskar Fischinger] spoke to me about what he called the spirit inherent in materials and he claimed that a sound made from wood had a different spirit than one made from glass. The next day I began writing music which was to be played on percussion instruments" ("A Composer's Confessions," 9).

113. In 1948 Cage described a wider notion of percussion: "It is used in a loose sense to refer to sound inclusive of noise as opposed to musical or accepted tones." "A Composer's Confessions," 9.

114. Richard Huelsenbeck, "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism" (1920), in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. Robert Motherwell (1951; New York: G. K. Hall, 1981), 26.

115. F. T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata, "La Radia" (1933), trans. Stephen Sartarelli, in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1992), 265–68.

116. Dane Rudhyar wrote the following on Varèse's music: "Every tone . . . is a molecule of music, and as such can be dissociated into component sonal atoms and electrons, which ultimately may be shown to be waves of the all-pervading *sonal energy* irradiating throughout the universe, like the recently discovered cosmic rays which Dr. Millikan calls interestingly

enough 'the *birth-cries* of the simple elements: helium, oxygen, silicon, iron.' " Cited in Henry Miller, "With Edgar Varèse in the Gobi Desert," *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York: New Directions, 1945), 170–71.

117. George Sand, *Les Sept cordes de la lyre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), 111; cited in Joscelyn Godwin, *Music, Mysticism, and Magic* (New York: Arkana, 1987), 229.

118. Cage and Charles, *For the Birds*, 221.

119. *Conversing with Cage*, 230.

120. John Cage, "The Future of Music" (1974), *Empty Words*, 179.