

John Cage: 4'33"

I arranged Cage's 4'33" for orchestra and performed it in 2008. It was a great experience (no, really!). The piece is often laughed at, but as Gutmann puts very well below it has, at the least, one very serious point to make: silence doesn't exist on our planet. And if it helps us listen better (which I think it does) then that is a great thing as most of us (me included) are not good listeners.

Two notes. Firstly the piece is called 4'33" because that is the length that the first performance took – Cage says that it can take whatever amount of time you feel is appropriate. Secondly, it is in three movements (no, really!). I interpreted that when I did it with orchestra by raising my hands at the beginning of each movement and lowering them at the end of each movement. People still coughed between movements!

The Sounds of Silence, by Peter Gutmann, 1999.

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As the year, decade, century and millennium all draw to a close, every arts writer invariably will succumb to the temptation to announce The List. To avoid the rush, I'll crawl out on my own critical limb a bit early to proclaim (fanfare and drum-roll, please) the greatest classical piece of the century.

The long history of classical music has evolved too patiently for a single year or even a decade to have much significance. And yet, too much has happened over the millennium for meaningful comparisons: who can say whether some anonymous monk who first dared to sing a fifth within the monody of Gregorian chant was a more daring and influential innovator than Beethoven?

So I'll focus my pretension on our century. In search of its greatest classical work, many would look to Stravinsky, not just for his astounding Rite of Spring but for an amazingly eclectic career that legitimized a melding of disparate influences into a cohesive art. Or perhaps Schoenberg for systematizing the yearning dissonance of the late 19th century into 12-tone expression. Or Stockhausen, for integrating studio electronics into traditional musical timbres and forms. Each was a visionary who pushed music to a new level and irreversibly influenced all that followed.

My candidate may not make many other lists. But its ultimate influence over the music of the future may come to tower over all of the more obvious choices. It's John Cage's 4'33" ("four minutes, thirty-three seconds").

I knew John Cage only briefly when I was an undergrad at Wesleyan University, whose music department lauded him as a guiding genius while others disparaged him as a negligible buffoon. His performances were more "happenings" than concerts, and could range from seemingly random events to a lecture about his beloved wild mushrooms. He was always happy and gentle, alive with awestruck wonder of the world, and especially fascinated by its sounds.

4'33" was Cage's favorite work. Written in 1952, it came at the exact mid-point of his 80-year life of discovery and culminated his exploration of indeterminacy, music in which some elements are carefully scripted with others left to chance. The year before, he had written his Imaginary Landscape # 4 for 24 performers, each of whom adjusted the volume or tuning of one of a dozen radios; although the dial settings were exactly prescribed, the result depended upon the frequencies and formats of local stations. 4'33" was inspired by Cage's visit to Harvard's anechoic chamber, designed to eliminate all sound; but instead of promised silence Cage was amazed and delighted to hear the pulsing of his blood and the whistling of his nerves.

Most music is trivialized by attempts to describe it. ("The melody is announced by the flutes...") That's not a problem with 4'33". Here's how one performance went: A tuxedoed performer came on stage, sat at a grand piano, opened the lid, occasionally turned some music pages but otherwise sat as quietly as possible for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, then rose, bowed and left. And that was it.

Although often described as a silent piece, 4'33" isn't silent at all. While the performer makes as little sound as possible, Cage breaks traditional boundaries by shifting attention from the stage to the audience and even beyond the concert hall. You soon become aware of a huge amount of sound, ranging from the mundane to the profound, from the expected to the surprising, from the intimate to the cosmic –shifting in seats, riffling programs to see what in the world is going on, breathing, the air conditioning, a creaking door, passing traffic, an airplane, ringing in your ears, a recaptured memory. This is a deeply personal music, which each witness creates to his/her own reactions to life. Concerts and records standardize our responses, but no two people will ever hear 4'33" the same way. It's the ultimate sing-along: the audience (and the world) becomes the performer.

Let's tackle a few obvious questions. Is this music? Sure it is - each sound has a distinct tone, duration, rhythm and timbre. Isn't it arbitrary? But so are all artistic conventions. Couldn't a 3-year old have written this piece? Perhaps. But did he? Did you?

If all this still sounds more like noise than real music, don't feel bad - you're in very distinguished company. As chronicled in Nikolas Slonimsky's perversely wonderful *Lexicon of Musical Invective* (Washington University, 1965), even the most comfortable and cherished staples of our current repertoire, including Brahms, Chopin, Debussy and Tchaikovsky, had been condemned by contemporary esthetes in the very same way. Even Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, now the most popular classical work of all, was damned as "odious meowing" - and not music - decades after its premiere.

The "point" of 4'33", and the appeal of most avant-garde stuff, is that unlike most music it presents an open process rather than an attempt to realize a composer's prescribed directives to achieve a specific intended result. It's an invitation, not a command.

And yet, few people genuinely like to listen to modern classical music. (And here I don't mean mainstream derivative stuff, but real cutting-edge avant-garde.) Often the concept turns out to be far more interesting than its execution - once you acknowledge the basic scheme you really don't want to have to sit through it. 4'33" is one of the very few pieces that has the opposite appeal. Its idea sounds simplistic and even stupid, but performances are fascinating, since they involve each listener so fully and intimately. And it's over before you can get bored or uncomfortable.

One more question: is this stuff really classical music? I think so. The huge variety of music of all eras that we call classical (and here I'm certainly including classic pop, folk, blues and jazz) seems to share two key traits. The first is a respect for tradition. Beyond being a wickedly keen variation on the conventions of the formal concert, 4'33" fills a crucial slot in history. Music began as an imitation of natural sounds and human voices but then became increasingly stylized. Cage brilliantly brings the process full circle, bridging the cultural distance that has developed between conventional performance and the sounds of nature where it all began.

The second hallmark is staying power. I've heard Mozart's dozen mature piano concertos dozens of times each over dozens of years, but right now I can recall only a few of their melodies. I heard the Cage piece just once (and three decades ago), but I remember it so vividly.

The ultimate wonder of 4'33" is the profundity of its simplicity. While staying within the concert hall, Cage transcends its rigid confines. He combines anarchy with sly humor. His result is universal, but his means are deeply personal. 4'33" is strikingly original, yet easily imitated. (For example, the graphic for the printed version of this column was an empty border; but upon publication it contained print-through, paper grain and other unplanned "imperfections" and so it really wasn't empty after all.)

But where can music go from here? Perhaps Cage is telling us that we've arrived at a point where everything should be possible, that it is now up to each of us to select and enjoy whatever elements of our world are the most meaningful, that concerts shouldn't erect a barrier between art and the outside world but should rekindle our partnership with nature, and that music shouldn't be an escape from reality but a tribute to the genius of mankind. Like Cage himself, 4'33" is a joyful embrace of our world and all it has to offer. 4'33" empowers us to take charge of ourselves, to trust our own instincts, to make our own judgements, to live our own lives. No other work in the history of music has expressed so much, and yet achieves its meaning with such disarmingly efficient elegance.

Let me end with a prediction and a suggestion. Here's the prediction: in future decades or centuries even Stravinsky will become an historical relic, his sound quaint and old-fashioned, while Cage will remain ever-fresh and vital. And here's the suggestion: take four minutes and thirty-three seconds from your own life and find some way to perform the piece yourself. Genius, like music, comes in so many varieties.