

TIDBITS 01/11/2008:

John Cage: 4'33" [*pick up score*]

On first hearing that 4'33" is a piece without any notes most people are incredulous, to put it mildly. I remember being stunned to find a bound score in my university library saying I tacet – 2 tacet – 3 tacet. In other words 3 sections or movements where you play nothing at all. I therefore, like many people, thought that Cage must have written this piece with at best his tongue firmly in his cheek. This is confirmed on YouTube where you can see a performance of this piece with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The conductor, Laurence Foster, after one of the movements takes out a handkerchief and mops his brow. "Ah!" say the audience (who laugh), "it's just a comedy piece after all." However John Cage was being perfectly serious.

In his book called *Silence*, Cage wrote, "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot ... sounds occur whether intended or not." So what Cage is doing is as much philosophical as musical. He is trying to get us to listen to the ever-changing, never-ceasing 'music' of the environment. Visit an anechoic chamber and you will see what he means.

Let me suggest 3 things you may (or may not!) like to think of over the next few minutes (the piece, but the way, is often thought to need to be exactly 4'33", and some therefore, like Laurence Foster, time their performances ... Cage however said that the piece could be any length you like, the 4'33" was just the length the first performance happened to be). Anyway, 3 suggestions:

1. In 'standard' music the gaps between notes are every bit as important as the notes themselves. Perhaps 4'33" is like all the gaps between all the notes in a standard piece squashed together.
2. Although we may agree with Cage that silence is not an absolute on this planet, I certainly believe that there is too much noise around. And perhaps an enforced 'silence' is not at all a bad thing. And in this sense I see a connection between 4'33" and the Gorecki Symphony you will hear after the interval. Both demand that you 'listen' in a very different way to music such as Beethoven or Mozart.
3. Enjoy listening to all the little sounds that occur. Vehicles going past outside (Cage was particularly fond of traffic noise), a squeaking chair, a cough, the beating of your heart ...

John Cage, 4'33", in 3 movements.