



Ethics and/in/as Silence

Marcel Cobussen

abstract

Using John Cage's familiar composition, 4'33'', as the point of departure of this essay, the first part describes how this composition deconstructs the boundaries and (hierarchical) oppositions of noise, silence, and music: music becomes silence, silence becomes noise, noise becomes music. But all this happens within the musical domain. In other words, 'the other' (noise, silence) enters the domain of 'the same' (music). In the second part of the essay, this construct is connected to a Derridaen notion of ethics. Perhaps ethics – regarded by Derrida as hospitality to an unknown stranger – is at work in 4'33'' as the music opens its territory to allow unanticipated sounds in. 4'33'' demands that the listener be open to all sounds, to respect all sounds (to treat them though they were music). This emphasis on the reception of music opens the possibility to discuss in the third part of the essay the ethics of listening. The author presents the idea to consider listening to the random sounds that are allowed to enter 4'33'', listening to all random sounds that form an integral part of this composition, as a receptivity to the advent of an unanticipatable alterity, as an encounter with the accidental, the unmanageable, the unintended. Regarded in this way, music (for example 4'33'') offers the opportunity to experience the world and to relate to the world in another (perhaps ethical?) way.

It is easy enough to play silence, but difficult to get it to sound right. (Derek Bailey, 1993: 89)

There will come a time when music alone will provide a way of slipping through the tight meshes of functions; leaving music as a powerful and uninfluenced reservoir of freedom must be accounted the most important task of intellectual life in the future. Music is the truly living history of humanity, of which otherwise we only have dead parts. One does not need to draw from music for it is always within us; all we have to do is listen simply, otherwise we would learn in vain. (Elias Canetti, 1986: 17)

Woodstock, New York. The Maverick Concert Hall. Friday, August 29, 1952. 8:15 p.m. The Woodstock Artists Association presents works by Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Pierre Boulez, Henry Cowell, and John Cage. Piano pieces. Played by David Tudor. The next-to-last piece starts: 4'33''. Tudor comes to the piano and sits there for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Silent. That is, without playing, without touching the piano keys.

Let's have a look at the program. 4'33'' consists of three parts, 33'', 2'40'', and 1'20''. Three separate parts. Silent parts. Tudor indicates the beginning of each part by closing

the keyboard lid, then end by opening it. 4'33''. For any instrument or combination of instruments, the score says. Signed: John Cage.

4'33''. Not much effort for a piano player, but an enormous leap for the definition of music, for thinking on music. And on silence. For example, that silence doesn't exist. Pure silence is physically impossible. We are always already surrounded by sounds. What is written as a silent passage is actually filled with extraneous sounds, all the incidental sounds in the room regardless of whether or not they are produced by humans.¹ As such, the 'silent' piece, 4'33'', refers to its supposed opposite: it exists because it cannot exist. Silence consists of sounds. All possible sounds. The only reason we say they are silence is because they are unintended, inadvertently produced, not meant to be music, not meant to be part of a musical work. What becomes clear while listening to 4'33'' is that no sound can be excluded from the realm of silence. Silence is not 'the other' of sound, not separate from sound. Silence *is* (a kind of) sound. Silence = sound. After awhile, one notices that nothing is as loud as silence. (There exists something like droning silence.) That is why we need to rethink silence. Silence differs from itself. Silence is deconstructed. We could say that Cage's composition puts the terms 'silence' and 'sound' under erasure, *sous rature*. And it took 4 minutes and 33 seconds.

Another consequence. If we agree that 4'33'' is indeed a piece of music, what does this mean for the definition of music? What are we implying by calling 4'33'' music? When silence (= sound) becomes music? (And indeed, based on what we find in 20th century music theory and music history books, we *should* categorize 4'33'' as a musical piece. It is part of the institution that could be called the music world. No absence of the frame!) It should at least be apparent that there are no longer any intrinsic properties of sound required in order for something to be music. All sounds can be(come) music. 'All' sounds. Of course, this doesn't mean that all sounds *are* at all times music. 4'33'' makes this very clear. For it is only within the context of this composition that silence becomes music. As a piece of music, 4'33'' frames the silence, supplies it with a context, gives silence something to say. Music, 4'33'', gives silence *sens*. (The French term 'sens' is deliberately used here referring to both meaning and direction.) Without music, without 4'33'', silence is perhaps lost, without meaning or direction, and therefore un(re)presentable. 4'33'' allows us to hear the silence, makes us hear the sounds within silence ('sens' also refers to the senses).² One could say that music produces silence. But the reverse is also true.

Is there something else this music can teach us? Are there other effects? Are other relations possible, other affects, or assemblages? Possibly something that was already resonating in 4'33'', in this silent piece that isn't a silent piece, in this music that only consists of random sounds not intended to be(come) music.

'Ethics and Silence' ... Of course, the title says it all ... Or does it? ... No ... No. Of course, the title says nothing at all: after all, it is in the music, in 4'33'' ... But is it? ... It

1 In this sense I agree with Martin Corbett when he writes that "the ear cannot detect stillness" (Corbett, this issue, 273). Pure silence only exists in the dead.

2 I thank Professor Geraldine Finn for taking my thoughts in this direction.

– the ethics in/as silence – is neither in this essay, nor in the music; or it is both in the essay and in the music? Let's say in the space between the music and the reflections presented here, hesitantly, tremulously, cautiously. Up to now, it may have seemed as if I was only writing within what many people would call the 'aesthetic domain'. As if music is reducible to the aesthetic only. As if we can only encounter music through aesthetic concepts. Here, it is my aim to open an ethical space to and for music, a possibility to learn through music, through 4'33'', that is through silence as music about ethics, about ethics in music, about ethics as music.

Let's leave the aesthetic domain for a while and talk ethics. According to Jacques Derrida, ethics can be connected to a recognition of 'the other', of opening, uncloseting, destabilizing foreclusionary structures so as to allow passage towards 'the other'. Especially in his later works, Derrida often speaks of 'the invention of the other', where 'the other' may be regarded as that which remains unthought, that which escapes the grips of our concepts. The other is whatever resists definition whenever definition is put in place. Derrida's philosophy can be thought of as a reading and writing strategy that takes notice of traces of the other, of the unthought, the invisible, the unheard without absorbing, assimilating or reducing it to 'the same', that is, to the cognitive power of the knowing subject or self-consciousness. He wants to preserve the space of the other as other. In philosophy. In writing. In language. But how? How can a philosophical strategy – a reading and writing practice – pay attention to the other, even the other of or in language, precisely in language itself? The paradox is that what cannot be put into language has to be evoked in language nonetheless. According to Derrida, it is this same language that can open the space, the space of the other, which, in fact, never really succeeds in closing it. Thus, the invention of the other implies locating traces of the other within the order of the same. A delicately balanced oscillation between two positions: complete assimilation would deny the other as other, whereas complete affirmation of the difference between the other and the same would render any contact between them impossible. Derrida:

It is in this paradoxical predicament that a deconstruction gets under way. Our current tiredness results from the invention of the same and from the possible, from the invention that is always possible. It is not against it but beyond it that we are trying to reinvent invention itself, another invention, or rather an invention of the other that would come, through the economy of the same, indeed while miming or repeating it, to offer a place for the other.³

And what if in 4'33'' silence would be a trace of 'the other' of music? Within music? Would it be a trace of the other within the order of the same? Why? Several dictionaries describe music as 'the art of combining sounds'. In *Noise*, French thinker Jacques Attali situates music in the following way: "Music is inscribed between noise and silence".⁴ In both definitions music is opposed to and separated from noise (the presence of sounds that are not considered musical) and silence (the absence of sound). Music is neither noise nor silence but it is in some way connected to them: in the space between noise and silence, music finds its place, music takes place. Noise and silence form, as it were,

3 Derrida, J. (1989) 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', in L. Waters and W. Godzich (eds.) *Reading De Man Reading*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 60.

4 Attali, J. (1985) *Noise: the Political Economy of Music*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 19.

its edges, its boundaries. Perhaps one could say that noise and silence are the *parerga* of music, outside the musical sounds, but not easily detachable from them.⁵ But let's not be too hasty, let's not run ahead of things. Let's continue slowly, meticulously, in a silent way perhaps.

In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Derrida describes ethics as hospitality.

Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the *ethos*, that is, the residence, one's home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner of which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, *ethics is hospitality*; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality.⁶

And what if we consider 4'33'' as a piece of music belonging to music history, belonging to the institution called the music world – what if we consider 4'33'', *because* it is music, as the residence, the familiar place, a home? 4'33'', music, as the host, offering hospitality to 'the other' of music, silence, that is, all sounds that are not intended or not able to be musical. Let's say that this composition allows random, non-musical sounds to (re)enter the domain of music (in the form of silence). It admits silence (and with that, noise) as a trace of the other of music into the musical realm.

Silence as the other of music. How to think through the opening towards this other, the admission of the other of music within music? How to assess this form of hospitality? As previously stated, Derrida wants to acknowledge traces of the other without absorbing, assimilating, or reducing them to the order of the same, the order of the calculable and the familiar. In *L'Intrus* [The Intruder] philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy follows the same line of thought. The stranger should maintain something of an intruder, not to lose her/his strangeness. If s/he is expected, if there is nothing outside anticipation or expectation, if there is nothing that is not receptive or admissible, then the intruder is no longer a stranger. "It's neither logically acceptable, nor ethically permissible to exclude the advent of the stranger from all forms of intrusion ... To receive the stranger, should also mean: to experience intrusion".⁷ In order to respect the other, in order to (re)act ethically, one has to allow the stranger as stranger its otherness, its unfamiliarity, its unusualness. What about silence? Isn't silence always new, unanticipatable, unexpected? Doesn't it change with every performance? Ethics means opening oneself to the advent of the other. The other: always an other. Like silence.

However, is Cage, by integrating silence within music or the musical, reducing the other to the same? We arrive at a paradox. A 'double bind'. Cage can only focus attention on the other of music by admitting the other to the very domain of music. This is the precarious balance between recognition and appropriation of otherness: a full

5 "A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, à bord*]. It is first of all on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [*Il est d'abord l'à-bord*]" ; Derrida, J. (1987) *The Truth in Painting* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 54.

6 Derrida, J. (2001) *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* London: Routledge, 16-17.

7 Nancy, J.-L. (2000) *L'Intrus*. Paris, 9-10. [I used the Dutch version of the text; translations are my own, MC]

assimilation will deny the other while a full affirmation of the differences will preclude every contact with the other. Even if the other resides outside of music in the traditional sense (but it is not at all clear that it does), it cannot dispense with the concept of music if we want to give attention to it. Silence, while escaping the musical, can only be experienced through the musical. This is the reason Derrida does not wish to think of the invention of the other and the invention of the same as binary opposites.

Cage's music gives silence a voice by supplying it with a context. (It cannot exist without a context.) His work turns silence into experience, into something we can come to, surrender to, lose ourselves in; it reshapes our attitude towards silence. It rewrites the cont(r)acts between music and silence so that we can experience the relation between them differently and thus 'think' them otherwise. His work is ethical because it offers hospitality, hospitality to the stranger that does not speak the language of music, to a *hostis* called silence or noise. (In Latin, 'hostis' means both stranger and enemy, but it can refer to 'host' or 'guest' as well.) But this hospitality cannot exist without borders, without a certain sovereignty. *4'33''* can offer hospitality because (this) music has a house of its own, its own domain, although its borders are undecidable, insecure, shifting. ("Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame," writes Derrida).⁸ Frame. Context. Demarcation. No hospitality without exclusion. Perhaps music has become a *phantom name* for Cage. Remnants of the old concept of music live on, but its contours have faded; its meaning has changed. And right there, in that flexible, fluent environment, the other appears. Or rather, the concept of music changes *because* the other appears. *4'33''* invites the other into the house of the same, the realm of music; as a host, it invites the stranger, the intruder, the other to enter its home. This music is once more an 'invention of the other', an openness to the call of the other.⁹ ("To invent would then be to 'know' how to say 'come' and to answer the 'come' of the other," says Derrida.)

4'33'' does not merely introduce new sounds or noises into the realm of music. This work (is it a work in the traditional sense?) demands attention to sounds that are always already present in music, that reside and resonate in the margins of the music, but that have been disavowed or suppressed. It points us to the other *of* music *within* music. *4'33''* draws explicit attention to unintentional sounds that music can never exclude, and that are always already part of every composition. The other does not reside outside the same, but is as an outsider an inextricable part of it. A *parergon*. The *hostis* was always already inside the house of the host, the uncanny already part of the familiar. Music: impossible to close off because the outside is always already on the inside. Silence (= sound) as an inextricable part of music. The invention of the other. The other *of* music. The other *in* music. Music as other. An other music. Cage's work renders music a fissured concept that is unable to tell its inside from its outside. The house of music is open; it gives entry to the stranger, to silence, to all sounds. *4'33''* brings us to

8 *The Truth in Painting*, 73.

9 In Deleuzian terms one could say that we are caught here in an endless play of de- and reterritorializations, a play in which Cage's music acts as a constantly deterritorialized refrain because 'the other' is no longer 'The Other' but an active force within the domain of the same. Much more about the refrain and its territorializations can be found in Bent Meier Sørensen's essay (this issue).

accept the other of music, the other that is usually repudiated, that really should not exist. Hospitality. Ethics. In music. Through music.

Actually, writing about 4'33'' means writing about a triple silence. Composer, music, and audience are all silent. Both the composer and the audience become listeners, listeners to silence; that is, listeners to unpredictable sounds: low, high, loud, soft, dense, scanty, with or without pitch, produced by humans or not, outside or inside the concert hall, at a distance or nearby.

Of course, in a way, the composer, John Cage, is 'saying' something. But where Gemma Corradi Fiumara concludes in *The Other Side of Language* that "the mechanism of 'saying without listening' has multiplied and spread, to finally constitute itself as a generalized form of domination and control," this mechanism seems to be absent in 4'33''.¹⁰ Cage is speaking and listening simultaneously. Or better, he is speaking by/through/in listening. His listening speaks; it has something to say. It says something without saying it.¹¹ According to Derrida, the 'invention of the other' cannot be compared to a traditional notion of 'capacity to invent'. Contrary to the capacity to invent, the invention of the other withdraws from every plan or conceptualization. Any conceptual meaning should be abandoned as much as possible, or at least delayed. An encounter with the otherness of the other can only occur in a state of passivity or susceptibility. Cage recognizes and admires this susceptibility in the work of Morton Feldman, composer of many pieces that are extremely long and contain hushed volumes and slow tempos and that seem to arise hesitantly from a silent ground. "He has changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting. To accept whatever comes, regardless of the consequences".¹² From making to accepting: besides Feldman's, it is Cage's statement through/in 4'33''. No planning. Susceptibility. But does this mean no activity? Derrida says it is necessary to prepare for the coming of the other, which indicates a conscious and deliberate effort to arrive at this passivity. Inert passivity does not promote a relationship with the other. It leads instead to indifference. An active will to engage with whatever escapes any anticipating apperception is required to move into this susceptibility, a responsiveness and alertness to the possibilities that we randomly encounter, a combined play of improvisation and strategy. "Letting the other come is not inertia open to anything whatever ... I still call it invention because one gets ready for it, one makes this step to let the other come, come in".¹³

10 Fiumara, G.C. (1990) *The Other Side of Language. A Philosophy of Listening*. London: Routledge, 2.

11 Perhaps Cage's attitude is somewhat similar to Lacan's psycho-analytic approaches as described in the contribution of Carmen Kuhling, Kieran Keohane, and Donncha Kavanagh (this issue). The point is not to (re)create a (hierarchical) opposition between silence and sound/speech/discourse (silence has no voice in the dialectic play as Martin Fuglsang and Steffen Böhm state in their contribution to this issue), but to reveal how silence as 'the other' is always already present in and through sound/speech/discourse. This way we can interpret Derrida's words – "whether to step out of the Master's house or reside within it" – as an insight that 'the other' should not be opposed to the order of 'the same' but is always already at work within it; it even needs this 'sameness' to present 'itself' at all. It is up to us to recognize this.

12 Cage, J. (1973) *Silence*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 129.

13 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', 55-6.

4'33''. Its call does not challenge mine, nor does it silence it; it is directed to me imploring to be noticed. The fundamental shape of its discourse is responsive rather than active and responsible instead of effectual. Passive activity. Active passivity. Aren't we talking about listening here?

What is Cage saying? Asking. In/through/by silence. Or better, what is 4'33'' demanding? The answer can be summarized in one word: 'listen!!' Listen to the sounds that surround you. Try to open yourself to the auditive stimuli around you. But how does one relate to those sounds? Cage formulates a clear proposition: if we try to ignore them, they disturb us; if we listen to them, if we accept them, they fascinate us.

Let's turn then to the listener. Let's turn to the hospitality of the listener, to the ethics of listening, to the ethics of listening to silence, to the call of 4'33''. Let's listen to what silence in music can teach us about ethics, that is, about opening oneself for the advent of the other.

In *The Other Side of Language*, Fiumara attacks Western logocentrism and with that, its rationality, logic, and knowledge, its capacity for ordering, systematization, and explaining. All these achievements are based on a culture in which the power of discourse is deployed and the strength of listening ignored; we know how to speak, but not how to listen.¹⁴ Through speech we build ourselves a world of rational, coherent, and logical systems, a ruling set of meanings that appear to control and shape all of our rational pursuits; at the same time we reduce the un-speaking, non-expressive other to a void, a negation. Fiumara speaks of an increasingly arrogant logos "ready even to ignore anything that does not properly fit in with a logocentric system of knowledge".¹⁵ It exercises a supreme legislative power that establishes proper ways of thinking. The territory of a logos that speaks, orders, molds; a logos deafened by its own speech. Western intellectual tradition has a strong need to keep all interactive forms closely bound within a network of those cognitive categories that are 'normal' and practicable. "Current rationality surreptitiously absorbs all knowledge claims with the ultimate result of silencing any 'illogical' voice that might be heard in the case of the debate and which might create links that we regard as unnecessary".¹⁶

The Other Side of Language hinges on the possibility of "freeing our thinking from its constitutive compulsion to submit to analyse, scrutinize, delve into, explore, exhaust,

14 The silencing of the other through speech is extensively thematized in Anthony O'Shea's contribution to this volume. (See especially 'scene 1' in his essay.) Perhaps it is useful to notice a certain difference between the position of Corbett on the one side and O'Shea and myself on the other. Where Corbett – correctly I would say – argues that, at least in our Western world, an auditive culture has been subordinated to a visual culture, his plea for more attention to 'sounds' – sounds considered as 'the other' of visual data – seems to ignore the possibility that these sounds are as able to silence otherness as visual culture is. It is therefore that I demand attention to an attentive listening, the necessary condition for every speech. By referring to Attali and his ideas as to how sounds (music) are in fact silencing people, Corbett seems to be aware of this problem but is not thinking it through.

15 *The Other Side of Language*, 6.

16 *The Other Side of Language*, 45.

probe the famous ‘object of knowledge’ of our research tradition”.¹⁷ How? By giving back to Western thought the other half of language, namely, the rich openness of listening. ‘Listen’. Fiumara calls upon Hans-Georg Gadamer who, in his most well-known book, *Truth and Method*, states that “anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another”.¹⁸ Having explored these ideas in much the same way, Martin Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, “Being with others develops in listening to one another”.¹⁹ Both Gadamer and Heidegger are referring to an openness that is more fundamental than questioning because the way in which a question is posed, limits and conditions the quality and the level of any answer that can possibly be worked out. Listening is different from the sort of cognitive endeavors that result in further production of the very knowledge that warrants them; it is ‘the de-stitution of the defining’.²⁰ “Listening is not to be envisaged as yet another position so much as a path of a co-existential nature aimed at such an understanding of the message (theory, system, or other) that will allow it to live on and develop in the direction of further conjunctions and cross-fertilization,” Fiumara states.²¹ It thus moves us towards creative thinking: “if we cannot listen properly, it seems that we can no longer share in ‘creative thinking’, and that we must confine ourselves more and more to circulating within a given repertory, or arsenal, of terms and standard articulations, which can be summoned up each time in mnemonic fashion”.²²

Listen and the world will open itself. In another way. Another world. Listening as hospitality. Listening is hospitality. Establishing a relationship between our world and a different world, between our attitude and a different attitude.

Listening. Paying careful attention to simple things. To silence, for example? To 4’33’’? What does it mean to listen to 4’33’’? What does it mean to listen to silence, to a composition that has, in fact, nothing to say? 4’33’’ disrupts our habits of listening. Could we think of listening to the random sounds that are allowed to enter 4’33’’, that form an integral part of this composition, as a receptivity to the advent of an unanticipatable alterity? As an encounter with the accidental, the unmanageable, the unintended, with what is and what remains to be intangible?

Let’s see what Cage has to say about the role of the listener with regard to 4’33’’. “The performance ought to make clear to the listener that the hearing of the piece is his own action – that the music, so to speak, is his rather than the composer’s”.²³ With this comment, Cage gives more freedom to the listener, but also more responsibility. In its

17 *The Other Side of Language*, 16.

18 Gadamer, H-G. (1979) *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed and Ward, 324.

19 Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. London: SCM Press, 206.

20 *The Other Side of Language*, 21. See also the essay by Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera in this issue. Where they start by saying that silence can interrupt conversation, I would argue that silence makes conversation only possible.

21 *The Other Side of Language*, 77.

22 *The Other Side of Language*, 167.

23 Gena, P. and J. Brent (eds.) (1982) *A John Cage Reader. In Celebration of His 70th Birthday*. New York: Peters, 22.

non-articulatedness, 4'33'' provides the listener with the freedom to add value and meaning (or none at all!) to the piece. It is the responsibility (response-ability) of the listener to assign meaning and *sens* to this music. Even though it no longer has the same provocative effect it had back in 1952, 4'33'' still demands a willingness by the listener, and prompts her/him to think and reflect. Additionally, it also has the virtue of installing a way of listening that does not allow for jumping to conclusions, but that demands a quiet and simple listening to sounds. This way of listening could be described as a susceptibility to the other, passive in its dedication to the sounds that present themselves, and active in its alertness to and preparedness for a diversity of (acoustic) events.

... .. listen

but I cannot hear anything

... .. listen ...

but ... but ... bu

... ..

the author

Marcel Cobussen studied jazz piano at the Conservatory of Rotterdam and Art and Cultural Studies at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He teaches music philosophy and cultural theory at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and Leiden University, the Netherlands. Cobussen is co-author of the book, *Dionysos danst weer. Essays over hedendaagse muziekbeleving* (1996) [Dionysos Dances Again. Essays on Contemporary Music Experiences]. His Ph.D. dissertation was presented as an online website located at [www.deconstructioninmusic.com]. He is currently co-authoring a book on music and spirituality. E-mail: MA.Cobussen@Kunsten.LeidenUniv.nl