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Silent Music

Andrew Kania

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Abstract

In this essay, I investigate musical silence. I first discuss how to integrate the concept of silence into a general theory or definition of music. I then consider the possibility of an entirely silent musical piece. I begin with John Cage's *4'33"*, since it is the most notorious candidate for a silent piece of music, even though it is not, in fact, silent. I conclude that it is not music either, but I argue that it is a piece of non-musical sound art, rather than simply a piece of theatre, as Stephen Davies has argued. I end with consideration of several other candidates for entirely silent pieces, concluding that two of these are in fact pieces of music consisting entirely of silence.

Silent Music

Andrew Kania

Most discussions of the nature of music begin with the vague notion that it is the art of sound. The next step is usually to argue that though sounds may be necessary for music, they are not sufficient, since there are sonic arts other than music, most notably linguistic performance arts, such as poetry and drama.¹ However, at some point the issue of *silence* inevitably comes up. Most theorists want to allow the possibility of musical silence, that is, silence that is part of a musical work or performance, though this seems to require rejecting the necessity of sounds for music. In this essay, I investigate how best to incorporate the concept of silence into a definition of music, and consider the possibility of musical works consisting entirely of silence.

I. MUSICAL SILENCE

Jerrold Levinson argues for the possibility of musical silence on the grounds that it is a central structural element of much music: “there are very few imaginable musics, and no actual musics, for which silence – the space between sounds – would not be a structural principle.”² But although silence often plays this structural role, it is more integral to the music it partly constitutes than this characterization suggests. No one would suggest, conversely, that musical *notes* articulate the structure of the *silences* they surround, because clearly one is supposed to attend to the notes; they do more than simply structure what they surround. Yet silences, too, must be actively attended to if one is to understand a musical performance.

The primary reason for admitting the existence of musical silence is that silences, in the form of rests, are integral parts of musical items such as melodies and movements. Various kinds of silences occur during musical performances, and on musical recordings. Jennifer Judkins has distinguished between measured and unmeasured silences and, within the latter category, between silences *internal* to a musical unit (such as a symphonic movement) and those that *frame* such units.³ For instance, ordinary rests are measured silences; “grand pauses” are unmeasured internal silences; and the time taken between the end of the last note of a symphony and the audience’s applause is an unmeasured framing silence. Which type of silence a given silence is may be a matter of performative interpretation, rather than a matter of what the work mandates. For instance, the silence between the two statements of the opening motif of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (like the pause on the final note of each statement) may be performed as measured or unmeasured. We might consider a further category of “quasi-measured” silences. Prokofiev’s second violin concerto begins with a phrase played twice by the solo violinist alone. All violinists take a “breath” between the two statements of this phrase, though no rest is notated – it would be unmusical not to. The time taken by the silence is not added to the measures, but taken away from the last note of the first phrase. Thus, the first phrase, including the silence, is precisely five beats long (hence “measured”), yet the silence may not be conceived of by the performer as a particular length, such as an eighth-note or quaver (hence “quasi-”).

A silence of any of these kinds may be an integral part of a larger musical whole.⁴ This can be seen by imagining any example performed *without the silence*. In any of these examples, to skip over the silence, and just play the notes, would have significant (usually bad) results at a number

of levels. For example, to perform in this way would count as an error, just as would playing a wrong note, or playing an additional note in place of the silence. The character of a melody would be dramatically changed without its constituent rests, most notably rhythmically. Furthermore, since emotional expressiveness and other broadly semantic features of music depend in some way on more basic musical features, the expressive character of a melody, or an entire movement in the case of a grand pause, would be dramatically altered were the silences not to be performed.⁵

One question, then, is how to revise the characterization of music as an art of sounds, or a definition of music that requires sounds as a necessary condition. One way to do so would be simply to add silence as an inclusive disjunct, so that music becomes the art of sounds and/or silence. This is the strategy employed by Jerrold Levinson. He says he understands the phrase “organized sound” “to comprise the organization of sound *and silence*, or sounds and silences taken together.”⁶ Thus, when he goes on to consider John Cage’s *4'33"*, for instance, he argues that its framing of the ambient sounds in the performance environment is “a limiting case of the organization of sound-and-silence.”⁷

Though this approach to including silence in a definition of music is extensionally adequate, it is not very informative. One might reasonably ask *why* both silence and sound should be included in the definition of music. A definition that provided such an explanation should be preferred to one that does not, since one central purpose of a philosophical definition is to give us some insight into the nature of the phenomenon being defined. (After all, a circular definition may be

extensionally adequate, but it should be rejected in favor of a non-circular definition on the grounds that circular definitions are uninformative.)

We have just seen the explanation that underlies the inclusion of both sound and silence within the ambit of music: both must be *listened to* in any adequate experience of a piece of music.⁸

Given that this point is relatively uncontroversial, why should *being a sound* continue to appeal as a necessary condition on being music? I surmise that it may be a misplaced attempt to secure the objectivity of music. The alternative might appear to be a subjective definition along the lines that that music is any event listened to (or heard) in such-and-such a way. But this is not the only alternative. We could instead propose a definition according to which music is any event *intended to be listened to (or heard)* in such-and-such a way.⁹

Any definition of music that begins with a necessary condition of this sort would seem to allow for the possibility of a musical work consisting *entirely* of silence. In the remainder of this essay I consider several candidates for the role of an entirely silent piece. If anything comes to mind when the idea of silent music is raised, it is probably John Cage's *4'33"*. This is also the piece most discussed in the academic literature as silent. I thus begin with a consideration of *4'33"*, and then consider other arguably silent pieces of music, several of which pre-date Cage's work.

II. *4'33"*

As with many other famous works in the Western classical tradition, there is some dispute about the exact nature and content of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952).¹⁰ Cage had been mulling over the idea

of a silent piece since at least 1948, mentioning it in a lecture delivered in February of that year, and again in an interview for *Time* in 1949.¹¹ Several experiences seem to have galvanized him to actually compose the piece. One was seeing Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951). Another was an experience inside an anechoic chamber (a room designed to admit no sounds nor produce any echoes) in 1951. A third was his time at Black Mountain College during the summer of 1952, when *4'33"* was composed.¹² The work was premièred by the pianist David Tudor just outside Woodstock, New York, on August 29, 1952. The performance consisted of three movements, indicated by Tudor's lowering of the piano lid at the beginning, and raising it at the end, of each movement. Because of the way the score was laid out, Tudor had to turn several pages during the performance.¹³ The total performance lasted around four minutes and thirty-three seconds (plus some time in between movements), Tudor measuring the length of each movement with a stopwatch.¹⁴

The score used at the première is now lost, but Tudor has reconstructed part of it. It consists of a blank piano score, that is, treble- and bass-clef staves that contain no notes or rests. There are bar lines, but the measurement of time is graphic, with two-and-a-half centimeters representing approximately one second. The second, "Kremen" score is more purely graphic, without any traditional musical notation. It consists of blank paper divided by long vertical lines into three movements. Again, horizontal length represents time; in this case, one inch represents eight seconds. Performing from this score also necessitates page turns, both between and within the movements.¹⁵ The third, "tacet" score is the best known. It consists of a single page, with the three movements numbered, each containing the same single instruction: "TACET."¹⁶ At the bottom of the page is a note from the composer:

The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. ...However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.¹⁷

One feature of the piece that usually goes unnoted, then, is that it has a variable title. A performance of it that last five minutes and thirteen seconds (not including time between movements) should apparently be called *5'13"*. Part of the reason for this going unnoticed is the relative conservatism of many performances of the work. It seems to be widely considered a piece for piano, properly lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds, and called *4'33"*, presumably because this is how it is most frequently performed and discussed. The fact that the first score was for piano, as indicated by the distinctive braces of staves, should not be given much weight here. Since it was written for a particular performance occasion, this need not be taken as definitive of the piece. Besides, even if this score was intended as definitive, many works are revised after their initial performance. The first score was never published, while all published versions contain the information that the work may be performed by any combination of instrumentalists. Similarly, the many remarks Cage made about the piece after its composition and publication should be given less weight than the published score, at least by those who believe a work is finished when it is presented in public forum, in a conventional way, as complete.¹⁸

It is unsurprising that Cage and others refer to *4'33"* as his "silent piece." However, there is general agreement among musicologists and other theorists that the content of the piece is not the

silence of the performer, but the ambient sounds in the performance environment.¹⁹ If this is right, it is clear that *4'33"* is not a piece of silent music, though the silence of the performer plays a central role in the work and its performance. Is *4'33"* a piece of music at all? Stephen Davies has argued that it is not. He argues that it is a theatrical work *about* music. The necessary condition that Davies thinks Cage's work fails to fulfill is that music must be *organized sound*. In arguing that *4'33"* does not meet this condition, Davies rejects three arguments that it *does*, and defends one that it does *not*. I will consider these arguments in turn, arguing that Davies has assessed three of them incorrectly, and that the sounds of performances of *4'33"* do qualify as organized.

The first argument Davies considers is that, since silence often structures sounds, we can see the performer's silence during *4'33"* as structuring the sounds of its performance. Davies rightly rejects this argument. The silence of a performer of *4'33"* simply does not bear the same relation to the sounds that occur during the performance as either the silences of a performer who observes the rests while playing a conventional melody or the silences that frame a traditional performance.²⁰ In *4'33"*, the performer's silence highlights the sounds that occur *while* she is silent, rather than articulating the sounds *surrounded by* (or surrounding) her silences. We might similarly observe that the percussionist's silence during a symphonic movement for which his part is marked "tacet" does not structure the sounds of that movement.

The second argument for the musical nature of *4'33"* that Davies considers is one suggested by Levinson. The argument is that the selection of the performance environment is minimally sufficient for the organization required to qualify performances of *4'33"* as music, since one can

anticipate in broad outline the kinds of sounds that will occur in different environments.²¹ Davies does not say what is wrong with this argument: he says merely that it is “trumped” by his argument against the musical nature of 4'33" (which I consider below). The argument is only sketched by Levinson, and one could interpret it in two ways: as resting on the claim that being able to predict to some degree the kinds of sounds that will occur during a performance is *either* necessary *or* sufficient for the organization necessary for being music. Taken as a necessary condition, I believe it would be too strong. Both Levinson and Davies want to allow all kinds of avant-garde sonic appropriations as music. My guess is that both would allow for the possibility of a musical piece that required, for instance, the playing of a CD randomly selected from a library of sound effects. This would fail the condition we are considering on any but the most vacuous reading of “prediction.” Read as a sufficient condition, however, the argument is more promising. Given the possibility of radically aleatoric works, such as the one just imagined, predictability of the sounds of a performance would seem to imply enough control over the sonic nature of a performance to qualify the sounds as organized.

Levinson has another argument for the organization of the sounds of 4'33", namely, that the performer organizes the sounds of the performance by *framing* them.²² The framing here is not achieved by the performer's silence, but by her actions. David Tudor lowered the lid of the piano at the beginning, and raised it at the end, of each movement. Davies suggests that were 4'33" “to be played by a violinist, it would be proper for her to tune up on stage before its commencement, and to be ready to play as it lasts, violin posed on the knee.”²³ How could these actions be said to structure the sounds of the performance? By delimiting a certain time period, the sounds of which are thereby determined as the content of the performance. Just as selection of the venue

determines in part the sounds of the performance, the time at which Tudor starts his stopwatch, or the violinist begins being prepared to play, determines that this cough (during a movement), but not that dropping of the program (between movements), counts as part of the content of the performance. Davies is sympathetic to this argument when he considers it as an argument for the status of *4'33"* as art in a broad sense; however, when it comes to considering *4'33"* as organized sound, and hence music, he says that this framing does not count as selection or appropriation of the sounds of a performance of the work.²⁴ It is not clear to me why this framing should not count as selection or appropriation in the relevant sense. And while the above discussion of the necessity or sufficiency of the predictability of organized sounds might be used to lend support to this conclusion, this argument is independent of the previous one. Anyway, in rejecting these arguments, Davies seems to rely primarily on their being trumped by his positive argument for the thesis that the sounds of a performance of *4'33"* are *not* organized. It is to this argument that I now turn.

Davies's argument for the exclusion of performances of *4'33"* from the class of organized sounds is that in order for a collection of sounds to count as organized, there must be the *possibility* at least of some other sounds in the performance environment standing to the organized sounds in the relation of *noise*.²⁵ Davies argues that this possibility is excluded by the nature of Cage's work. "Noise" here means *sounds that are excluded from the content of the performance*. In most musical performances, it is pretty clear what counts as noise, and what does not. Sounds made by the audience count as noise, as do sounds made by the musicians that are not mandated by the work.²⁶ This is a flexible concept. What might count as noise in one performance (e.g. the timpanist dropping a coin on one of his kettle drums) will not count as noise in another (e.g. in a

performance of the *Enigma Variations*, where this is the traditional method of playing certain passages in the thirteenth variation). Sounds that might count as noise in most situations (e.g. those of a wind machine) may be transformed into musical content by appropriation (e.g. in Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica*). Davies's point, however, is that in *4'33"*, Cage, or the performer, implicitly says something like "All sounds that occur during the performance count as part of the performance," thereby excluding the possibility of noise, and hence of organization.

It is not obvious why Davies believes this argument trumps the preceding argument that the sounds of a performance of *4'33"* are organized in virtue of the framing actions of the performer. The organizational function of framing seems more intuitively compelling to me than the principle Davies appeals to that organized sounds require the possibility of noise in the performance environment. Be that as it may, Davies's argument can be resisted without relying on this basic conflict of intuitions, for it can be argued that performances of *4'33"* do admit the possibility of noise. Davies considers mistakes the performer might make as potential candidates for noises in the performance of *4'33"*. First, he considers the possibility of the performer taking longer or shorter than four minutes and thirty-three seconds to perform the piece. In fact, as we have seen, this would not count as a mistake, since the piece can last any length of time, but, anyway, by taking longer to perform the piece, the performer simply includes more ambient sounds in the performance; these sounds do not thereby count as noise in the relevant sense.²⁷

The other possibility Davies considers is the performer sounding a note accidentally. Perhaps in lowering the piano lid, the performer may catch his hand, and accidentally play a C-major chord. *Quelle horreur!* Nonetheless, it seems that this is as ambient a sound as if another performer

were to drop her bow, and thus should be considered part of the contents of the performance. Suppose, however, that the pianist bristles against his contractual obligation to perform 4'33" night after night and, in an act of protest, plays Chopin's "Minute Waltz" a couple of times *during* his performance of 4'33". This strikes me as different from the accidental C-major chord, as does the possibility Davies considers that "the audience might stand as one person and sing their nation's anthem."²⁸ (I assume in the latter case that the singing of the anthem is a protest of some sort, rather than an inexplicable simultaneous outpouring of nationalistic fervor.) These cases seem different from the accidental ones precisely because they are intentional. But Davies also considers someone storming out of the auditorium yelling "This is rubbish!". That is an intentional action, and Davies plausibly concludes that it would count as part of the content of the performance.

Does anything distinguish the disgruntled audience member from the disgruntled performer, or the patriotic audience? The contents of their intentions are different in that the disgruntled performer and the patriots aim to ruin or disrupt the performance, while the disgruntled audience member is merely making a scene. Davies would argue that this distinction is not relevant to the point at hand because Cage intends all ambient sounds in the performance environment to count as contents of the performance. It is this assumption that I would dispute, however. It seems to me that Cage's response to the disgruntled audience member would be one of ironic amusement, while he might be truly annoyed by the renegade pianist or the singing audience members. Why so? Because Cage's point in writing the piece was to draw our attention to the ambient sounds of our environment, particularly the performance environments, partly as a reminder that they are ever-present, despite our usual attitude of ignoring them, and partly as a case for their aesthetic

interest.²⁹ If this is right, then Cage's intention for the contents of the piece was not quite as simple as we have heretofore assumed. The intention was not simply that any and every sound in the performance environment should count as part of the performance, but that *any sound not intended to bilk the audience's ability to attend to sounds that would count as ambient noises in the performance of a traditional musical work* should count as part of the performance. This intention may be irresolvably vague in terms of what it covers, but it seems coherent, plausibly attributed to Cage, and, most importantly for our immediate concerns, to allow for the possibility of some uncontentious noises in a performance of *4'33"*.³⁰ Examples of such noises include the disgruntled performer's Chopin and the nationalistic audience's anthem already mentioned, along with, say, the sounds produced by an audience member who brings his flute to the concert and plays Debussy's *Syrinx* during the performance of *4'33"*.

One final objection Davies might make to this line of reasoning is that it ignores another conclusion he argues for, namely, that the audience members are not performers of Cage's work. Davies might try to argue, then, that their intentions are irrelevant to whether the sounds they produce are to be counted as part of the content of a performance of *4'33"*. But this misunderstands the argument. The central issue here is whether a composer or performer has the ability to determine that certain sounds count as part of a given performance, whether or not intentionally produced by them. Davies allows that composers and performers do have this ability – he defends a relatively liberal view of what counts as organization. For instance, he allows that the sounds emitted by the radios used in a performance of Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) are organized by the performers, since they are “causally responsible for the appropriations that occur, if not for their contents.”³¹ If this is the case, then a composer may

decree that sounds of a certain sort within the performance environment, say, count as part of a given work. For instance, a composer may write a work in which all the *mechanical* sounds in the performance environment are contents of any given performance, but not the sounds made by any living being. Similarly, a composer may write a work in which all the *intentionally produced sounds* in the performance environment are contents of any given performance. And she may do so without making the audience members performers, just as Davies argues audiences – even noisy ones – are not performers of *4'33"*. (The musicians responsible for any music that comes out of the radios during a performance of *Landscape No. 4* are not thereby performers of that work.) So the intentions behind the actions of the audience in performances of *4'33"* are relevant, on my view, not because the audience members are performers, but rather because Cage is plausibly understood as excluding certain intentionally produced sounds from the contents of *4'33"*, in particular, sounds intended to prevent the audience from paying attention to sounds that count as noise in traditional musical performances.³²

I have defended performances of *4'33"* as consisting of organized sound, which appears in some guise as a necessary condition in most theories and definitions of music. It is not the silence of the performer that organizes the sounds, but her actions that frame that silence, and thereby the ambient sounds in the performance environment, along with Cage's intentions regarding the contents of the work. The latter, in particular, allow for the possibility of noise during performances of *4'33"*.

I have already pointed out that Cage's work is not a *silent* piece of music, but is it music *at all*? That depends, of course, on what further conditions are taken to be necessary for music. Jerrold

Levinson is one of the few philosophers to have offered a detailed definition of music. He argues that music is

[1] sounds [and silence] [2] temporally organized by a person [3] for the purpose of enriching or intensifying experience through active engagement (e.g., listening, dancing, performing) [4] with the sounds regarded primarily, or in significant measure, as sounds.³³

Taking the conclusions I have already defended for granted, *4'33"* clearly counts as music according to Levinson's definition. The only conditions Levinson posits that we have not considered so far are the broadly aesthetic condition (3), and the "sounds-as-sounds" condition (4). It seems clear that Cage intended audiences at performances of *4'33"* to listen actively to the sounds in the performance space, and that they would thereby have an enriching experience.³⁴ Did he intend audiences to regard the sounds of *4'33"* "as sounds"? At first glance, this condition might seem quite Cagean. Cage often suggests that we should not listen to sounds – musical or otherwise – under traditional musical concepts such as pitch or rhythm, but hear them as the pure sounds they are. Levinson would surely not endorse this proposal, however, at least not in the all-encompassing way Cage intends.³⁵ Rather, Levinson introduces this condition to exclude artistic spoken language from the extension of his definition. Recitations of poetry, for instance, will meet conditions 1-3; Levinson introduces his fourth condition explicitly to "deal with the poetry problem."³⁶ But what does it mean to listen to sounds "primarily as sounds"? The only gloss Levinson provides is that to listen to sounds as sounds is *not* to listen to them "primarily as

symbols of discursive thought” – that is, as language.³⁷ If this is what the condition amounts to, then 4'33" will meet it.

I argue elsewhere, however, that there is more to listening to music *as music* than merely not listening to it as language.³⁸ One alternative to this *via negativa* is that musicians intend the sounds they produce to be listened to under basic musical concepts, such as pitch and rhythm.³⁹ This does not result in as conservative a definition of music as might at first appear, since one can listen to sounds under a particular concept without the sounds' actually falling under that concept.⁴⁰ Thus we can admit as music sounds intended to be listened to for basic musical features that everyone is aware they do not possess. The definition of music that I defend incorporates this idea as follows:

Music is (1) any event intentionally produced or organized (2) to be heard, and (3) *either* (a) to have some basic musical feature, such as pitch or rhythm, *or* (b) to be listened to for such features.⁴¹

This definition allows me to make a distinction unavailable to Levinson. There are artists who characterize themselves, or are characterized by others, as “sound artists.”⁴² These are artists who produce sounds for what we might call artistic or aesthetic appreciation, but who, like Cage, more or less explicitly intend us to listen to these sounds *not* under musical concepts, but more purely as the sounds they are “in themselves.”⁴³ We can imagine a musical pair of Danto-esque “indiscernibles”: two works that use the same “found sound” (say, a field recording of a construction site), one of which is intended to be listened to under basic musical concepts, the

other of which is not. The former, I would argue, is a piece of music; the latter is not – it is non-musical sound art. Similarly, I would argue that *4'33"* is not a piece of music, since Cage intended the sounds audible at its performances *not* to be listened to under traditional musical concepts. But nor is it simply a piece of theatre, as Davies would have it. Rather, *4'33"* is a work of non-musical sound art.

Of course, Levinson might draw this same distinction between two kinds of sonic art, yet insist that it is a distinction *within* the category of music, rather than between music and another type of art. I will not attempt to settle this dispute here. I will just point out that my definition, though not very conservative, is more conservative than Levinson's, in the sense that it excludes more from the extension of music. Thus, if silent music is possible according to my definition, it will be possible according to Levinson's too.

III. CANDIDATES FOR SILENT MUSIC

There is general agreement, among philosophers at least, that *4'33"* is not a silent piece of music, though there is disagreement with respect to what it is, and the arguments that establish its correct categorization. It turns out, though, that there are several other candidates for the status of silent music, reaching back more than one hundred years. In this section I consider whether any of these candidates is in fact a silent piece of music.

In 1897, Alphonse Allais published his "Marche Funèbre." With a score consisting entirely of twenty-four blank bars, the piece looks quite similar to the first score of Cage's *4'33"*.⁴⁴ (The

main difference is that there is only a single staff with no clefs, as opposed to the piano-specific nature of Cage's score.) Supposedly composed "for the funeral of a great deaf man," the score includes a preface by Allais:

The author of this funeral march was inspired in its composition by the principle, accepted by everyone, that great sorrows are silent. Since great sorrows are silent, the performers should concentrate solely on counting bars, rather than making that obscene racket which deprives the best funerals of their solemnity.⁴⁵

Though on the surface a promising candidate for the first silent piece of music, Allais's funeral march is not a piece of music at all. It is a joke. The tempo marking for the piece is "Lento rigolando" (slowly, laughing), and it was published in Allais's *April-First Album*, a multi-media work including some visual artworks that would be ground-breaking were they intended seriously.⁴⁶ (These are a series of monochrome images with titles such as, for the white image, "First communion of anemic young girls in a snowstorm." This is not the most offensive one of the set.⁴⁷) Consequently, I suggest that the work is a hybrid literary-visual joke – an artwork perhaps, but not a piece of music, because not seriously intended as instructions to musical performers.⁴⁸

Erwin Schulhoff's *Fünf Pittoresken* were published in 1919. Four of the pieces take popular genres as their basis (foxtrot, ragtime, etc.), but use them to parody what Schulhoff perceived as the elitist music of his milieu. The middle movement, "In futurum," however, consists entirely of rests. Many elements of the piece point to a facetious intent: Though consisting entirely of rests,

each bar on each staff is subdivided in different, and quite complex ways; the clefs of the piano staves are switched, with the treble clef below the bass clef; the time signatures are nonsensical and incommensurable ($3/5$ and $7/10$), though the rests in every bar add up to a whole note (semibreve); the score contains not only rests, fermatas, breath marks, and a grand pause, but also upside-down fermatas, exclamation and question marks, and “notes” whose heads are smiley- and frowny-faces; and, finally, the tempo and stylistic indications are: “Timeless tempo; the whole piece freely with expression and feeling throughout, to the very end!”⁴⁹

Much of this suggests that “In futurum” is a joke, and a largely visual one at that. On the other hand, the piece is embedded within a suite that is clearly music for traditional performance. Moreover, the categories of “joke” and “music” are not mutually exclusive. I argued that Allais’s funeral march was not a piece of music on the basis that it was not seriously intended for performance, not on the basis that it was a joke. There are several famous examples of musical jokes, including Mozart’s *Musikalisches Spaß* (K522). The other pieces in Schulhoff’s suite have a partly comedic character, but that does not militate against their being music.⁵⁰ Ironically, the bizarre features of the score described above do not make for difficulties in performing the piece, precisely *because* it consists entirely of rests. (Looking at this idea from another angle, we might observe that many widely acknowledged musical works from the latter half of the twentieth century have scores that are much more difficult to interpret in performance than this one.) The visual aspects of the piece are no cause for concern, either. This piece may well be a hybrid visual-musical work, but that simply adds to the complexity of the work; it does not take away from its musical nature.

Someone might argue that “In futurum” is only a silent *part* of a work that includes musical sounds, since it is part of a larger work – the suite of five pieces. However, pieces in suites such as this are regularly played on their own. (“In futurum” might be played as an encore at a performance of Cage’s piano music, for instance.) Whatever use we reserve the term “work” for in a strict sense, we must allow for musical pieces that are parts of larger works but may also stand alone.

In sum, I suggest that Schulhoff’s “In futurum” is arguably the first completely silent piece of music. My only reservation is due to the intentional character of music. That is, if it turns out that Schulhoff did in fact intend this piece *merely* as a joke, and not to be performed, I would retract my claim that it is a piece of music.

Yves Klein, much better known as a visual and performance artist, was also the composer of the *Monotone-Silence Symphony*. The final version of the work, scored for a small orchestra and choir, consists of a D-major chord, to be held for five to seven minutes, followed by forty-four minutes of silence. The history of the piece is rather obscure, particularly with respect to whether it was composed before or after Cage’s *4'33"*. Klein claimed to have first had the idea in 1947, and worked out its final form in 1949, but there is little documentary evidence of this. It was orchestrated by Pierre Henry in 1957, and was certainly premiered in 1960 at Klein’s show “Anthropometries of the Blue Period.”⁵¹ It was also played at Klein’s wedding in 1962.⁵²

Here, it seems, we do have a single work that is only partially silent – the chord and the silence are not distinct movements that might reasonably be performed separately. It is thus not a perfect

example of a piece of silent music. It is, though, arguably as difficult a case as a completely silent piece for those who would defend the possibility of silent music. For it would be implausible to argue that the silence here plays the traditional role of musical silence, namely, structuring the musical sounds. Thus the classification of Klein's piece as a piece of music stands or falls, I would suggest, with the possibility of completely silent pieces of music.⁵³

There are many silent pieces after 1952 (the date of *4'33"*), but most seem to be heavily derivative on Cage's piece. This makes it difficult to tell whether their contents are, like Cage's piece, the ambient sounds of the performance environment, or the silence of the performers (or recording, in some cases).⁵⁴ I will discuss just two post-*4'33"* pieces. The first is György Ligeti's *Three Bagatelles* (1961). Dedicated to David Tudor, who premiered *4'33"*, the piece seems to be a gentle parody of Cage's work. The first bagatelle consists of a single note: a whole-note (semibreve) C# two octaves below middle-C, with a tempo indication of ♩ = 40-48, the marking *dolcissimo* (very sweetly), and a fermata over the concluding double bar-line. The next two movements each consist of a whole-note rest: one at the same tempo, marked *molto espr.* (very expressively), with the concluding fermata in parentheses, the other "Più lento" (more slowly), its fermata marked *lunga!* (hold for a long time!). Each bagatelle, though only a single bar long, is printed on a separate page.

The way in which Ligeti notates the two silent bagatelles suggests that their content is indeed the silence of the performer, rather than the ambient sounds in the environment. However, unlike the case of Schulhoff's *Fünf Pittoresken*, it seems that Ligeti's bagatelles must all be played together. A note on the first page of the score reads: "These 'Bagatelles' should not be played by

heart. The end of each Bagatelle is to be indicated by turning the page. The end of the whole composition is to be indicated by standing up and bowing to the audience.”⁵⁵ This suggests that, though consisting of distinct movements, Ligeti’s piece is, for our purposes, most like Klein’s *Monotone-Silence Symphony*: though the silences do not structure the sounds of the piece, they are intended to be heard in counterpoint to those sounds.⁵⁶ As a result, this is not the perfect silent piece of music, either (though an equally good test-case for theories of musical silence).

The second post-Cage silent piece I will discuss is my own *Composition 2009 #3*. Frustrated by the lack of an ideal example to illustrate clearly the possibility of silent music in a lecture-recital, I turned my hand to composition. In most fields of philosophy, one must be content with hypothetical examples, but philosophers of the arts have the distinct advantage of being able to produce *actual* examples to illustrate their theories (or refute others’). As is noted in discussions of the institutional theory of art, a single person can play many distinct institutional roles, and though I may not be a very skilled composer, I think it is uncontroversial that I know enough about music to compose musical works, whatever their quality. Hence I set out to compose a truly silent piece. The score reads as follows: “Indicate a length of silence, using the usual cues with which you would signal the beginning & end of a single movement, song, etc. (The content of this work is the silence you frame, not any ambient noise.)”⁵⁷ I believe, for the same reasons I defend my own definition of music, that this work is a piece of music. It seems that Levinson would also be committed to considering it a piece of music.

IV. CONCLUSION

Those who would resist the admission of my *Composition 2009 #3* to the ranks of musical works face the challenge of accounting for how silence can be part of traditional musical works while rejecting a piece that consists entirely of silence. Though one might do so simply stipulatively, I think it will be difficult to resist the possibility of purely silent pieces on principled grounds if one wants to allow the possibility of much experimental music, particularly that consisting of found sounds, or sounds produced aleatorically. For what must qualify those pieces as music, in the absence of any traditional musical features, is an intention that those sounds be listened to (or the experience of hearing them) *as music*, whether we cash that out in terms of a kinds of aesthetic experience, as in Levinson's definition, or in terms of basic musical features, as in my own. And there seems no principled reason why this kind of "derivative" or "second order" condition could not be met by pure silence.⁵⁸

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Jerrold Levinson, “The Concept of Music,” in his *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 267-78; Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 16-18; Andrew Kania, “Philosophy of Music,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2008 edition <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/music/>>; and Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), pp. 40-65.

² Levinson, “The Concept of Music,” p. 270, n. 3.

³ Jennifer Judkins, “The Aesthetics of Silence in Live Musical Performance,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31 (1997): 39-53.

⁴ For an introduction to the range of purposes to which internal silences can be put, see Jan Swafford, “Silence is Golden,” *Slate.com*, August 31, 2009 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2226630/>>.

⁵ How exactly these higher-level features of music depend on lower-level features is a matter of some controversy, of course.

⁶ Levinson, “The Concept of Music,” p. 270, n. 3, original emphasis.

⁷ *Ibid.* See below for a fuller consideration of 4'33".

⁸ For a thorough consideration of what it is to hear silence, see Roy Sorensen, “Hearing Silence: The Perception and Introspection of Absences,” in *Sounds and Perception: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Matthew Nudds and Casey O’Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 126-45.

⁹ Of course, some will be happy with a more subjective conception of music. I have no hypothesis for why they have not rejected the necessity of sound in their accounts of music.

¹⁰ A recent book-length consideration of the history, nature, and influence of *4'33"* is Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹¹ William Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), pp. 69-70.

¹² Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, p. 71.

¹³ A performance along the lines of the première is viewable on YouTube:
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HypmW4Yd7SY>>.

¹⁴ Though there is no dispute that the lengths of the movements were intended to add up to four minutes and thirty-three seconds, there is some dispute as to the particular lengths of the individual movements at this performance. See Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, p. 79.

¹⁵ This score is reprinted in full in the journal *Source: Music of the Avant Garde*, 1/2 (1967): 46-54.

¹⁶ The word "tacet" is most commonly found in musical parts for ensemble works. It indicates that the instrument in question does not play anything in the entire movement. There are actually two versions of this third score, but they differ only in that one is calligraphic, while the other is typed. For more on the scores for *4'33"*, including reproductions of parts of each, see Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, pp. 72-9.

¹⁷ John Cage, *4'33"* (Glendale, NY: Edition Peters, 1960).

¹⁸ For instance, in 1986 Cage said that whatever the length of a particular performance "it would still be called *4'33"*" (Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, pp. 79-80). He also implied that it does not have to be performed in a public setting, or with any of the conventional trappings of musical performance. See Stephen Davies, "John Cage's *4'33"*: Is It Music?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997): 448-62, at pp. 450-1, n. 12, for the relevant quotation and a

different interpretation of these remarks. On when a work of art is finished, see Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 53-61.

¹⁹ This conclusion depends on some kind of intentionalism regarding the content of musical works, but would be defensible according to a wide range of intentionalist theories (including, for example, hypothetical intentionalism).

²⁰ In fact, the movements of performances of *4'33"* are typically framed by silences in the traditional way. See, for example, the performance by the BBC Symphony Orchestra available on YouTube < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHEZk6dSReI>>.

²¹ I ignore the complications of discussing intentions when both a composer and performer are involved. No adequate theory of the work–performance relation will cause problems for what I say about *4'33"* here.

²² Levinson, “The Concept of Music,” p. 270 n. 3. Davies considers a similar argument made by Noël Carroll when discussing whether or not *4'33"* is art of any kind (Davies, “John Cage’s *4'33"*,” pp. 452-3).

²³ Davies, “John Cage’s *4'33"*,” p. 455.

²⁴ Davies, “John Cage’s *4'33"*,” pp. 452-3, 459-60.

²⁵ Davies uses the term “ambient sounds.” I prefer “noise” since the sounds of a performance of *4'33"* are often (usefully) described as ambient, as opposed to intentionally created. It is not clear to me why Davies believes organization requires the possibility of noises *in the performance environment*. He claims that when you listen to a recording of *4'33"* the ambient sounds of your living room should not count as noise, though they are not part of the performance you are listening to. But he does not provide an argument for this claim. While I think the claim is questionable, I accept it here for the sake of argument.

²⁶ It is difficult to draw this line with absolute precision. For instance, are the clackings of the bassoon keys part of the musical performance or unwanted noise? This is more than an abstract philosophical issue if you're a sound engineer. For some discussion of this issue, see Jennifer Judkins, "Silence, Sound, Noise, and Music" in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, ed. Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

²⁷ Perhaps there can still be mistakes of this sort. It might be argued that the performer must decide in advance that her performance will take a certain length of time, and could thus err in her judgment of the time elapsed, employ a faulty stopwatch, or whatever.

²⁸ Davies, "John Cage's 4'33"," p. 457. It might be argued that the performer who plays Chopin is so egregiously ignoring the instructions in the score of 4'33" that he fails to perform the work at all. If so, the other examples I consider should be sufficient for the points I want to make.

²⁹ At least, this was the point of the Cage who composed 4'33" in 1952. As Davies points out, Cage's attitude towards his own piece changed rather dramatically over the course of his life ("John Cage's 4'33"," p. 449, n. 5). For evidence of Cage's intentions in writing 4'33", see Davies, "John Cage's 4'33"," pp. 448-53 and Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*.

³⁰ I do not think it is hopelessly speculative to ask what Cage's attitude towards these different scenarios would be. Anyway, anyone who has come this far in the debate is committed to the relevance of Cage's intentions to the issues at hand.

³¹ Davies, "John Cage's 4'33"," p. 458.

³² Gann suggests that a more accurate epithet for Cage's work than "Silent Sonata" would be "Unintended Noise Sonata" (*No Such Thing as Silence*, p. 163).

³³ Levinson "The Concept of Music," p. 273. The numbering of the conditions is mine; one could divide up the necessary conditions in other ways. Clearly, we could replace Levinson's first

condition (sounds-and-silence) with something along the lines I have argued for above (events intended to be listened to). I am not sure if Levinson would consider this a friendly amendment, however.

³⁴ For instance, Cage said, “I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall” (quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, second edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), p. 70), and “environmental sounds and noises are more useful aesthetically than the sounds produced by the world’s musical cultures” quoted in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 26.

³⁵ Levinson, “The Concept of Music,” p. 275.

³⁶ Levinson, “The Concept of Music,” p. 272.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Andrew Kania, “Definition,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, ed. Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

³⁹ These terms are used in their musical, rather than physical, senses. For instance, a “pitched” sound is, roughly, one intended to have a location within an octave. For more on these concepts, see Davies, *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 47-60, Scruton *The Aesthetics of Music*, pp. 19-71, and Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music*, pp. 119-52.

⁴⁰ By way of analogy: You might look for the three-dimensional image in what you take to be a “magic eye” picture, only to discover that it is a hoax. But you might just as easily engage in the same activity if you know there is no three-dimensional image there.

⁴¹ Kania, “Definition.”

⁴² For an introduction to this field of aesthetic production, see Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006). Andy Hamilton discusses the distinction between music and non-musical sound-art in more depth in his *Aesthetics and Music*, pp. 40-65.

⁴³ Stephen Davies has argued that we cannot listen artistically and purely at the same time. But he would allow, I think, that we can listen to sounds in an artistic or aesthetic fashion without hearing them under specifically *musical* concepts (“John Cage’s *4'33*,” pp. 450-3).

⁴⁴ Alphonse Allais, *Œuvres Posthumes*, ed. François Caradec and Pascal Pia (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1966) vol. 2, pp. 380-1.

⁴⁵ Allais, *Œuvres Posthumes*, p. 380. The original French reads: “L’auteur de cette Marche funèbre s’est inspiré, dans sa composition, de ce principe, accepté par tout le monde, que les grandes douleurs sont muettes. Ces grandes douleurs étant muettes, les exécutants devront uniquement s’occuper à compter des mesures, au lieu de se livrer à ce tapage indécent qui retire tout caractère auguste aux meilleures obsèques.”

⁴⁶ In fact, “*rigolando*” is neither a French nor Italian word. It seems to be Allais’s transformation of the French “*rigoler*” (to laugh) into an Italianate form suitable for a musical tempo or expression indication.

⁴⁷ The parallels between these visual artworks and Yves Klein’s monochrome paintings are intriguing, given Klein’s composition of a semi-silent piece, discussed below. The first reproductions of Klein’s works, in a pamphlet titled *Yves Peintures*, were preceded by a preface consisting of pages of blank lines, reminiscent of Allais’s funeral march. (See Pierre Restany,

Yves Klein, trans. John Shepley (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1982), pp. 20-35.) However, I know of no independent evidence connecting the two publications.

⁴⁸ Nonetheless, a group has “performed” Allais’s march (under the direction of Ismaël Robert at the Festival *Manké* in Nice in 2000). I use the scare quotes since I do not believe such a performance is possible, given that the work is not one for performance. In contrast, consider John Russell’s description of the march as a “little picture” (John Russell, “The Stylish Small Change of a Paris Rich in Talent,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 21, 1996. Accessed online: < <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/21/arts/art-view-the-stylish-small-change-of-a-paris-rich-in-talent.html>>.)

⁴⁹ “Zeitmaß-zeitlos... tutto il canzone con espressione sentimento ad libitum, sempre, sin al fine!”

⁵⁰ For a joke bearing some similarity to Schulhoff’s piece, see Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, p. 119.

⁵¹ The piece seems never to have been published as an autonomous work, but facsimiles of two versions of the score are printed in Restany, *Yves Klein*, p. 111, and Institute for the Arts, Rice University (ed.), *Yves Klein 1928-1962: A Retrospective* (New York, NY: The Arts Publisher, 1982), p. 196. My brief history of the piece derives largely from these two sources. See, in particular, Restany, *Yves Klein*, pp. 110, 244-6.

⁵² Restany, *Yves Klein*, p. 232.

⁵³ A more conventional example of this kind is the opening measure of Britten’s *Phantasy Quartet* for oboe and strings, op. 2, which consists of a whole-note rest for all four musicians.

⁵⁴ For a consideration of many of these, see Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, ch. 6.

⁵⁵ To enable the page turns, the first two bagatelles are printed on the rectos of two pages, with the verso between the two left blank. Ironically, the publisher has added the following boilerplate to the verso: “This page is left blank to save an unnecessary page turn!” *Au contraire*.

⁵⁶ Ligeti provides an optional fourth bagatelle as a possible encore. It consists merely of a sixteenth-note (semiquaver) rest, at the tempo of the first bagatelle. Presumably this could be played alone, particularly as an encore, as I suggested with respect to “In futurum,” above.

⁵⁷ The concluding parenthetical sentence is an explanatory note, rather than an instruction to the performer. The title is in homage to La Monte Young’s series of *Compositions 1960*. The first two pieces in my series were created as counterexamples to Jerrold Levinson’s assertion that temporal organization is a necessary condition on being music. The first instructs the performer to “Play or sing a single note as briefly and quietly as possible, consistent with the result being audible to the audience.” The second instructs the performer to “Play an exquisite chord” in the same way. The first two pieces were premièred on Tuesday, September 15, 2009 at a lecture-recital on the nature of music, given at Trinity University, San Antonio. The third has had no public performance yet.

⁵⁸ Thanks to Julie Post, Nanette LeCoat, Michael Ward, Thomas Sebastian, and Judith Norman for help with translation; to an anonymous reviewer for the journal for some helpful suggestions; and to my commentator, Lee Brown, and the audience at a session where I presented part of this paper at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics (Asilomar, CA, April 2010).