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Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

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JOHN CAGE'S 4'33". IS IT MUSIC?

Imagine a fugue written for a synthesiser. It is typical of the genre with this exception: its lowest note is at 30,000 Herz, above the range of human hearing. Also, consider a piece of about 300 measures in common time. In most respects the work is ordinary, but the tempo is indicated as "quarter note = five years." The opening sixteen bar theme lasts for more than three centuries; the performance is completed after 60 millennia. In a third case, a work specified for solo piccolo contains a single note: the C at 128 Herz. This tone lies more than two octaves below the instrument's range. Are these pieces musical works?

Rather than priming our intuitions, philosophers' science fiction examples can shred them. For that reason we might be reluctant to pursue such cases. But we cannot dismiss so casually actual works that are no less challenging. One notorious example is John Cage's 4'33".

I

Cage's score for 4'33" reads as follows: "Tacet. For any instrument or instruments." The piece is in three movements: 30", 2'23", and 1'40". The first performer of the work, the pianist David Tudor, closed the keyboard lid at the work's beginning and re-opened it at the performance's end; he marked the

work's three movements with arm gestures.ⁱⁱⁱ The premier was given at Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, New York in August 1952.

There are at least two very different ways to view 4'33" — as consisting of a passage of absolute silence or as comprised of whatever sounds occur during the period. When musical works are played, extraneous noises are likely to intrude. Sirens howl in the distance, planes rumble overhead, people cough, programs rustle. All of these sounds might be heard during a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony but none belong to it. Now, according to the view that Cage's work consists of silence, the same applies. We may never experience absolute silence yet the work might consist of just that. In that case, noises that occur are irrelevant to, and distractions from, the work. According to the second account, the work's content is given by the sounds audible to its (actual or possible) audience. This content will vary from performance to performance. All noises at a performance are to be regarded as belonging to that performance provided they fall within its temporal boundaries. None are to be disregarded.

There is no doubt that Cage intended 4'33" in the second of the ways indicated. 'My piece, 4'33", becomes in performance the sounds of the environment.'^{iv} '[The original audience] missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.'^v Cage's goal is to get the audience to attend to whatever can be heard as the work is performed — the shuffling of feet, the murmur of traffic from outside the auditorium, and so on. The content of the performance consists in whatever sounds occupy the designated period, not

solely of silence as such. Cage supplies a frame so that the audience might focus on the noises it encompasses. 'If true silence did not exist in nature, then the silences in a piece of music, Cage decided, could be defined simply as "sounds not intended," and Cage made up his mind to write a piece composed entirely of just such sounds.'

Cage argues as follows in rejecting the possibility of the first of the characterisations of 4'33" provided above: 'There is no such thing as silence. Get thee to an anechoic chamber and hear there thy nervous system in operation and hear there thy blood in circulation.'^{vi} But the ubiquity of sounds does not count against the possibility of a silent work. For that piece, all the noises heard will be ambient and not part of the performance as such. Cage attempts to counter this point when he claims: 'If the music can accept ambient sounds and not be interrupted thereby, it's a modern piece of music. If, as with a composition by Beethoven, a baby crying, or someone in the audience coughing, interrupts the music, then we know that it isn't modern. I think that the present way of deciding whether something is useful as art is to ask whether it is interrupted by the actions of others, or whether it is fluent with the actions of others.'^{vii} But I doubt that modern music can be distinguished from ancestral forms in this manner. What could be more modern than a work of silence that, because sound is everywhere, is "conceptual" in being unavailable to the senses in its "pure" form? If Cage's is not the silent piece, that is for reasons other than the ones he gives.

In what follows I consider 4'33" as Cage intended it. Viewed this way, the content of an instance of the work is the sounds apparent to the audience within the boundaries of performance. Many of the arguments I will consider would not apply, or not in the same way, to the silent piece.

Why does Cage want us to listen to ordinary sounds? In the first place, he opposes the valorisation of traditional musical works and doubts their continuing interest. The following is typical: 'I agree with the African prince who went to a concert in London and afterward was asked what he thought. He had heard a program of music that began before Bach and went on up to modern times, and he said, "Why did they play the same piece over and over again?"'.^{viii} Underpinning this attitude is an opposition to the manner in which we impose concepts of structure or expressiveness on what we hear, thereby preventing ourselves from hearing the music that is all around us. For instance, in his Juilliard lecture, Cage laments an approach to sounds concerned with pitch-names and the musicologists' terminology of "sharps", "flats", and the like.^{ix} As well, he hopes to banish the personality and intentions of the composer from his work. 'I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like the most, is the silent piece. ... I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. 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.'^x 'Observing the effects of the ego on my earlier works, I tried to remove it, by the use of chance techniques, in my latest works. We discipline the ego because it alone stands between us and experience. I wanted to let the environment — or experience — into my music.'^{xi}

Allowing that we are to interest ourselves in the sounds that occur during a rendition of 4'33", three possibilities are evident:

(1) We might hear them as if they are musical or in relation to the musical (as traditionally conceived). This approach involves regarding the sounds that happen as if they are products of intentions of the kind composers usually

have. It is to hear them as tonal (or atonal), as developing or answering earlier sounds, as (if appropriate) melodies, chords, and the like. Moreover, this mode of listening is to be historically grounded, as all musical listening is. We are to hear these sounds in relation to (as evocations, extensions, developments, rebellions against, repudiations of) the practices and conventions of musical composition and performance followed in historically prior musical eras.

It is plain, though, that Cage would reject this approach. He does not want us to hear the sounds that occur as aspiring to the condition of music (traditionally conceived) but, rather, to appreciate them for their qualities as sounds tout court.^{xii}

Or, (2), we might consider the sounds heard in a performance of 4'33" for their (aesthetic) interest solely as audible events, without regard to music and its performance. We might attend, that is, to the "naked" aesthetic properties they present simply as sounds.

This is an approach Cage might countenance. He would reject an interest in classifying noises in terms of such history-laden concepts as "beautiful" and "ugly" but he does emphasise the aesthetic interest of sounds taken for what they are. For instance, we might enjoy for its unique qualities the sound of countless smoothed stones grinding against each other as a wave retreats from a shingle beach. So long as we refrain from the attempt to reduce what we hear to comfortably confined concepts, Cage would endorse that project.

Finally, (3), we might hear in the sounds occurring during a performance of 4'33" a new kind of music, one transcending and deconstructing the categorical distinction traditionally drawn between the musical and non-musical. In that case, there is conceptual room, so to speak, for regarding the noise of the

everyday as music only because the standard notion of music is undermined and rejected. There is an invitation to conceptual revision.

It is this last proposal that is most clearly advocated by Cage. If Cage doubts, as he seems to, that the world of sound conforms to our projection of it, then the radical revision of our concepts can properly be invited by the suggestion that music is incarnate in all sounds. Michael Nyman captures Cage's project in these terms: 'It is a well-known fact that the silences of 4'33" were not, after all, silences, since silence is a state which it is physically impossible to achieve. ... 4'33" is a demonstration of the non-existence of silence, of the permanent presence of sounds around us, of the fact that they are worthy of attention, and that for Cage "environmental sounds and noises are more useful aesthetically than the sounds produced by the world's musical cultures." 4'33" is not a negation of music but an affirmation of its omnipresence.'^{xiii} Given that he shares a commitment with Cage to (3), Nyman is not patently mistaken in concluding that music is omnipresent, while his premises suggest only that sound is everywhere and unavoidable.

Daniel Herwitz claims that Cage, in his more radical moments, commits himself to (3). Herwitz holds that the deconstruction of the concept of music advocated in this approach is incoherent.^{xiv} He argues, and I agree, that perception is inherently structure-imputing, so that Cage's recommendation that we should perceive impersonally, aconceptually, rejecting appearances of organisation, form, and structure, loses its grip on the notion of perception. Herwitz offers a Wittgensteinian response to Cage's radically sceptical challenge to the standard notion of perception. Such listening has meaning only where we can imagine a form of life in which it is lived out. None is conceivable for humans who perceive in the manner recommended by Cage. For them, there could be no awareness of others or self, for instance. The mode of perception advocated by

Cage would deconstruct, as well as the traditional concept of music, all else besides. In its extreme form, the position advocated under (3) is incomprehensible, for it recommends something that must remain inaccessible and unintelligible to human beings.

Herwitz detects a less radical stance implicit in Cage's commitment to Zen Buddhism. The advocacy of unstructured perception might be viewed, in that context as inviting a form of intellectual discipline (like considering the noise made by one hand clapping). Even if we cannot coherently entertain the thought of Cage's account of perception put into general practice, we can imagine an ascetic form of life in which pervasive, but partial, detachment is achieved to what is presented to the senses. Suppose, then, that Cage is interpreted as endorsing the desirability of this kind of listening. In that case, his view is best represented by (2), by the idea that we should cultivate an interest in the naked aesthetic properties of sound, not by the more radical thesis of (3).

Now, we might dispute with Cage the claim that most sounds, including those of music (traditionally conceived), are aesthetically interesting when approached solely for the sake of their naked qualities. And, even if we allow that some might be interesting when considered in this manner, nevertheless we might question whether they are more aesthetically worthwhile than are musical works heard as such. Rather than challenge the approach recommended in (2) on these grounds, I present a different argument, the conclusion of which is as follows: although we might choose to listen aconceptually on some occasions and in some contexts, it could not be that we listen that way to 4'33" while viewing it as Cage's work of art.

Noël Carroll argues that Cage elevates the sounds he frames to the status of art and, in doing so, invests them with a significance they would not otherwise possess.^{xv} The sounds become referential, partly by exemplification and partly by contextual implicature. This is to say, they have been given a use by which they refer to themselves and to ordinary sounds in general. Moreover, they gain significance from being used to repudiate the concert tradition that is the background for their presentation. They enter, as ordinary sounds do not, into an art-historical conversation with the music composed by Bach and Beethoven and with the performance tradition governing how such pieces are presented. As a result, they acquire artistically significant properties in addition to whatever naked aesthetic properties they possess. This distinguishes them from the ordinary sounds they might be taken to resemble by someone unaware of the artistic context.^{xvi}

The presence of Cage's friend, Marcel Duchamp, lurks in the background.^{xvii} Duchamp took ordinary objects and turned them into ready-made artworks. The creation of Fountain, via the translocation to the realm of art of the urinal that was its material substrate, gave that urinal a new setting and significance. It then was to be compared with marble statues, not with look-alikes found in the gallery's men's room. As a result, its whiteness took on an import that it did not possess previously. Fountain flaunts its vulgar origin and intended function, cocking a snook at the art establishment, as no mere urinal can do. In short, it is an object requiring interpretation. As Arthur Danto (1981) would have it, Fountain makes a "statement" as look-alike urinals from the same production line do not.^{xviii} Fountain has artistically significant properties as a result of which it cannot be understood and appreciated merely as a urinal; indeed, as a result of which it no longer looks just like another urinal to those who are suitably backgrounded.

On this account, with which I concur, Cage failed with 4'33" if his prime intention was to draw our attention to the naked aesthetic potential of ordinary sounds. He failed because he intended to create an artwork and succeeded in doing so, thereby transforming the qualities of the sounds to which that work directs our attention. In terms of the earlier discussion, in creating an artwork that recalls the performance of musical works, Cage inevitably invited the approach of (1), rather than (2). The sounds to which he draws our attention derive their artistic significance from being brought into relation to music (traditionally conceived) through his invocation of the practice of musical performance via the manner in which 4'33" is presented. The listener who appreciates Cage's piece as an artwork cannot rest with the contemplation of the naked qualities of the sounds comprising the work's performance. Indeed, the receptive listener finds those qualities transfigured, to use Danto's term, so that they are no longer available. The audible events that occur should not sound to the person aware that an artwork is being performed as they would to someone who mistakes what is happening for a break in the concert.

II

I have said that Cage created an artwork in 4'33". Some people would regard that assertion as false.^{ix} To pursue the debate with them, it could be pointed out that Cage's piece seems to have the relevant formal credentials — it is discussed in books on the history of twentieth century music, for instance — and that he was acknowledged as a composer in 1952, having produced works (such as those for prepared piano) whose status as art music is not in doubt. In reply, they might suggest that this shows only that Cage tried to produce an artwork, not that he succeeded. And so the debate could be continued by considering whether or not 4'33" does satisfy any of the acknowledged functions of art, or if it is sufficient for arthood that something be recognised as such within the

informal institutions of the artworld, and so on. I will not pursue this argument. Instead, I accept that 4'33" is an artwork and consider some marks of this, especially ones indicative of what kind of artwork it is.

One sign that Cage's creation is a work of art is that it has a title. Temporal chunks may be described but are not usually titled. "4'33'" might look to be no more than a description of the work's duration but is not.^{xv} Other titles of artworks — Suite in B minor, Third Symphony — are similar in having the appearance of mere descriptions, but all of these are designations that function as titles. As such they are part of the work, affecting its artistically significant properties.^{xvi} In this they are unlike labels, such as those on jam jars, which do not affect that to which they are attached. In characteristically indirect and humorous fashion, Cage indicates his awareness that "4'33'" functions as a title by suggesting that it could be read as "four feet thirty-three inches."

Cage's title, interpreted in the standard way, draws attention to the piece's duration, to its temporal boundaries. This is apt when we recall that Cage's artistic act draws the limits of the work, leaving the content and form to take care of themselves. Unlike the other designatory titles mentioned above, Cage's does not limit the musico-historical context that is the work's reference class. Again, this is appropriate, given the piece's radical character. It stands against any and all traditional types of music.

4'33" is a temporal artwork; it has a fixed duration.^{xvii} Chance procedures were used to determine the lengths of the movements. There is a hint, though, that the overall duration of the piece is significant. In 'A Composer's Confessions' (written in 1948), Cage prefigures the creation of 4'33": 'I have ... several new desires ...: first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to the

Muzak Co. It will be 4 1/2 minutes long — these being the standard lengths of “canned” music, and its title will be “Silent Prayer”.^{xviii}

4'33" is a work for performance, as is evident from Cage's creation of a score, scores being sets of instructions addressed to performers. As such, it is a work that can be multiply instanced; convention allows that the instructions encoded in scores can be executed on more than one occasion. Performances will differ in their contents, obviously, but this also is true, if to a lesser extent, of many multiply instanced artworks, including musical ones. What is necessary for a performance of 4'33" is an appropriate causal chain linking what the performer does to the instructions penned by Cage. If I dust the keys of a piano for four and a half minutes, I do not perform Cage's work. On the other hand, I could perform Cage's work on my home piano if I followed his score.

As just noted, performance does not require the presence of an audience in an auditorium, but, like other pieces for performance, 4'33" takes much of its point as a result of its being intended for that setting. The presence of an audience in a concert hall may be needed if a performance of 4'33" is to achieve the fullest impact, since the piece invokes that context and all it implies about our privileging certain pieces, about the milieu relevant to music appreciation, and about the social values and status of those who play the “classical music game.”^{xviii}

As a work for performance, 4'33" is written for musical instruments, as the score makes clear. I could not perform Cage's work in my home if no musical instruments are found there. The piece is not performed on the instruments for which it is written, however. But this does not mean that patently defective instruments could be substituted for ones that are in working order. A piano used to perform 4'33" should possess the appropriate “insides” — strings,

hammers, and the like. Though sounds are not generated from it, the performance is ineffective unless the instrument can be assumed to be capable of producing musical notes.^{xxx}

This is not the only convention of musical presentation that should be respected in performing 4'33". Were it to be played by a violinist, it would be proper for her to tune up on stage before it begins and to be ready to play as it lasts, violin posed on the knee. It would be no more appropriate in this piece for the instrumentalist to read the newspaper during the performance than it would be for the triangle player to do the same while she was not required to play during the performance of a symphony.

Works for performance (music, drama, ballet, opera) usually call for a significant creative input from the performers, who possess the special skills necessary to achieve this. Cage's piece requires no performance skill, apparently. As a non-pianist, I might refrain from playing the piano with as much dexterity as David Tudor displays in doing the same. But, in the concert setting, it may be important that it is customary for performers to be masters of their crafts. In that context, my reading of 4'33" may be less interesting than Tudor's when my lack of pianistic ability is known to the audience. If the work is the more powerful (and ironic) in performance for the fact that a talented and highly trained musician obeys Cage's instructions by declining to exhibit the skills he possesses, my rendition will be lacking by comparison.

If Cage's work is for performance, who are its performers? When a member of the audience yells "This is rubbish" once the performance is under way, she adds to its contents, but is she thereby a performer? Several commentators think so. Paul Thom writes of 4'33" that it 'calls into question the distinction between performers and audience: during a performance of it, the audience

find that the silences afford each one of them the opportunity to become a performer, and unintentional coughs tend to become intentional.^{xxvi} Jill Johnson comments: 'In this piece, Cage makes everybody present (audience) the creator and the performer.'^{xxvii} These observations are astute, yet I disagree that audience members are performers of 4'33" in contributing to the contents of the renditions they attend.

The sounds of street buskers playing an arrangement of Beethoven might filter into the hall during a performance of 4'33", thereby contributing to its contents. It is counter-intuitive to suggest that these musicians are playing Cage's work (as well as a transcription of Beethoven's). The same applies to the noises made by those inside the auditorium who cannot prevent themselves from yawning. But it might be thought that the case is different where the sound is made with the intention that it becomes part of the performance. I deny this, though. I do so because the intentions of these noisy audience members do not stand in the appropriate relation to the instructions issued in Cage's score, which, after all, prescribes that the performers be silent. The performers are the musicians on stage, for it is these who are the target of Cage's instructions and who execute them. Cage's work does, indeed, undermine the distinction between performer and audience in that the latter contributes more to the content of the performance than the former. But it does not make the audience into performers. Although its offerings might be intentional, the audience is not addressed by Cage's instructions and its interventions are not directed or invited by his score.^{xxviii}

III

I claimed that Cage created an artwork and have been considering what kind of artworks that is. I have suggested, unsurprisingly perhaps, that the piece is

titled, temporal, multiple, and for performance (by musical instruments, if not on them). In most of these respects 4'33" is like Western paradigms of musical works, but is it one? Is 4'33" music? The answer to that question depends on how music is properly to be defined. Rather than offering a definition, I make the assumption (controversial enough in its own right) that it is a necessary condition for something's being music that it be organised sound.^{xxx} If Cage's is not a work that organises sound, it is not music.

Jerrold Levinson, who argues for the necessity of the condition I have accepted, believes it is satisfied by 4'33".

'Since I will ultimately retain "organized sound" as a necessary condition of music, a few clarifications are in order regarding my understanding of the phrase. First, I certainly understand it to comprise the organization of sound and silence, or sounds and silences taken together; there are very few imaginable musics, and no actual musics, for which silence — the space between sounds — would not be a structural principle. Thus, to spare a word for Cage's notorious 4'33", we can include it in music if we like, as a limiting case of the organization of sound-and-silence; and this is made easier, of course, if we recognize that Cage has in effect organized for listening, at a very abstract level, the anticipated but unpredictable sounds that will occur at any performance of his piece. Second — and a piece such as Cage's, where organization takes the form of framing, illustrates this as well — the notion of "organizing" should be understood widely as covering what might be more idiomatically put in some cases as "designing" or "arranging".'^{xxx}

Let me make explicit at the outset something I take to be covered by Levinson's account: in the case of works intended for performance and specified by scores, the necessary condition can be satisfied only by the performers as a result of

their following the composer's prescriptions, which they can do only by knowing the performance practices and the notational conventions assumed by the composer. At a performance of 4'33" the audience might stand as one person and sing their nation's anthem, thereby organising sounds that become the content of the given performance. If I had allowed earlier that the audience's members are performers, it would have followed that this instance of 4'33" satisfies the necessary condition of something's being music, even if others do not. But I argued that the audience's members are not the work's performers, even where their contributions are intentional. Many renditions of the work will contain organised sounds among their contents, but neither the composer nor the performer, the one to whom the score's instructions are addressed, is directly responsible for bringing this about. If 4'33" satisfies Levinson's necessary condition, it must do so as a result of the actions of the performer(s).

One can imagine a conservative person who offers the stipulated condition in order to show that many contemporary pieces fail to qualify as music. That is not the reading intended by Levinson, however. He claims that sounds can be organised by being "framed" and that Cage's score, in delimiting the work's boundaries, supplies just such a frame.^{xxx} While I will challenge Levinson's view that Cage's piece meets the specified condition, I share with him the rejection of a conservative interpretation of that condition. Twentieth-century composers have brought into the realm of music sounds that, at earlier times, would not have been thought of as organised. In order to include the efforts of these composers, I accept that "organised sound" requires an historically flexible interpretation. A reiterative approach to its characterisation is called for, not an absolutist, ahistorical, acultural one. Only in that way could it (as it should) encompass as music contemporary works composed through the use of chance procedures, or ones allowing a significant element of improvisation.^{xxxi} In such

cases, the composer selects the procedures that generate the work's sound structure or (indirectly, perhaps) instructs the performers to make the relevant selection, and in either instance we can talk of the organisation achieved, even where it varies from performance to performance. I allow that Cage's Imaginary Landscape No. 4 (1951) — a piece in which pairs of performers at each of twelve radios manipulate the tuning and volume knobs — is organised sound, because the performers, in following the composer's directions, are causally responsible for the appropriations that occur, if not for their contents.

Even if we are liberal in applying the criterion that music be "organised sound," so as to accommodate the efforts of recent composers, is Levinson correct to hold that 4'33" satisfies it?

Here is one argument to that conclusion: In music, and in speech for that matter, silence is used between the sounded parts in the articulation of structure. Given this, is it not the case that the performer in 4'33" structures the soundscape by refraining from making sounds? I find this first argument unsatisfactory. If a speaker says nothing then it is not the case that her silence articulates the form of an utterance. And if the musician obeys Cage's instructions by making no sound, she gives effect to Cage's intention to allow what happens to occur, without imposing a structure on it. It does not follow from the fact that silence serves a structuring function in all sounded music that a piece in which no sounds are made by the performer thereby achieves an organised structure.

A different argument, seemingly the one Levinson has in mind, reminds us that the content of performances of 4'33" is supplied by sounds that otherwise would be ambient. Whoever chooses where 4'33" is to be played can anticipate what will be heard. For instance, a performance of Cage's piece during a battle

will have contents that differ predictably from those it will have in a concert hall. It is through the choice of venue that the sounds that make up the performance become organised.

Suggestive though this consideration may be, I believe it to be trumped by a more general one. It seems to me that, if sounds are organised, some sonic possibilities must be excluded. This means that, however free and chaotic is the method of a musical work's organisation, it must rule out the possibility of some kinds of sonic events so that, should they occur during a performance, they are to be classed as ambient.^{xxxiii} Where sound is organised, however loosely, there also must be the possibility of ambient sound, of sound excluded by the manner of organisation. Conversely, where no noises could count as ambient, the soundscape cannot be truly described as organised. Now, as we have seen, Cage's 4'33" encompasses all sounds, anticipated or not, within the ambit of its performances, so none counts as ambient. Since it excludes no sonic events from the content of its performances, the sounds within them are not organised.^{xxxiv}

It is true that the instructions in Cage's score do restrict what the performer is to do and thereby create the possibility for mistakes in performance. These might be of at least two kinds: a note might be sounded accidentally, or the performance could be mismanaged so that it lasts longer or shorter than the specified period. This does not count against the previous argument, though. Mistakes count as part of the performance (unless they are so pervasive as to destroy the performance altogether), not as ambient noise. Cage's instructions create the possibility of mistakes in performance, but they do not thereby provide for a distinction between the sounds of the performance and ambient noise.

Cage was influenced in writing 4'33" by the uniformly white paintings made by his friend Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg organised the painted space, but did so in a way that is likely to lead its viewer to become more aware than otherwise would be the case of visual elements in its neighbourhood, of components that are not part of the artwork's content as such. For instance, shadows cast on the painting's surface are likely to be considered for their aesthetic character. The musical equivalents to Rauschenberg's paintings would be works consisting, say, of quietly constant white noise, or of an unvarying, pure sine tone, or in which the pitch is constant. Works of this kind would lead us to focus on ambient sounds, both because of their uniformity and their lack of intrinsic aural interest. But 4'33" takes what otherwise would be ambient noise into its performances as their content. It enfranchises those sounds as art, rather than excluding them while inviting us to contemplate them.

Cage's 4'33" is better compared to an empty picture-frame that is presented by an artist who specifies that her artwork is whatever can be seen through it. The frame can be viewed from any angle and can be placed anywhere. (To remove the influence of "ego," perhaps it is specified that the frame's porter is to be blindfolded.) It seems to me that there is no virtue in holding that, by creating the frame and the idea of how it is to be used, the artist organises the visual displays seen within its boundaries; neither do I see a reason to class this work as a painting. 4'33" is the picture-frame's sonic equivalent. Neither Cage nor the performer he directs is responsible for organising (selecting, appropriating) the sounds that comprise the contents of any of the work's performances. As a result, there is no distinction between the contents of performances of his work and ambient sounds falling within their temporal parameters.

Given the necessary condition for something's being music outlined earlier, it must be concluded that 4'33" is not a musical work.^{xxxv}

I emphasised previously that 4'33" is to be approached against the background of a knowledge of the tradition of musical works and performance practices. This claim is consistent with the judgment that Cage's is not a work of music. The piece does not have to be music to have as its point a reference to music. In the same way, the empty picture-frame is to be understood and appreciated within a context established by the presentation of paintings, but it invokes this tradition without itself qualifying as a painting. And to return to an earlier example, as an artwork Duchamp's Fountain is not clearly either a sculpture or a fountain. A distinct category has been described to accommodate classification of this kind of art, readymades. Nevertheless, it is the artistic tradition of sculpting in marble that provides the setting against which Fountain is to be viewed if its artistic qualities are to be recognised and appreciated.

Many contemporary works have challenged the accepted boundaries of art and have done so not only by inviting us to question the distinction between art and non-art, but also by evading easy categorisation within particular artforms, genres, or schools. 4'33" belongs to — indeed, contributed to the initiation of — this trend. It is an artistic happening, a conceptual piece that reflects on the world of music without itself being a musical work. I suspect that much of the impetus for arguing that 4'33" is music comes from the desire to acknowledge the legitimacy of its art-status. That impulse should be checked or lessened when it is accepted that one can reject the piece as music without calling into doubt its credentials as art.

IV

I characterised 4'33" above as a "happening."^{xxxvi} This provides the clue to its proper classification: as an artwork it is a piece of theatre. It is not a work of musical theatre, such as opera, but a performance piece about music.

Cage always has been aware of the theatrical side of musical performance. In response to "Is a concert a theatrical activity?", he says: 'Yes, even a conventional piece played by a conventional symphony orchestra: the horn player, for example, from time to time empties the spit out of his horn. And this — when I was as a child, taken to an orchestra concert — frequently engaged my attention more than the melodies, harmonies, etc'.^{xxxvii} From the late 1960s, Cage arranged what he called "musicircus."^{xxxviii} In fact, he has a long-standing connection to the performance art movement. Some authors cite the event he organised at Black Mountain College in 1952 — a joint performance with Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, M.C. Richards, and Charles Olson — as the first example of a "happening."^{xxxix} 'The theatrical focus of the silent piece may have been unintentional, but nevertheless Cage knew that "theatre is all around us," even in the concert hall. In the same year, 1952, Cage arranged an event which deliberately moved out beyond "pure" music into what was unmistakably theatre. This was the so-called happening at Black Mountain College, the first post-war mixed-media event.'^{xl} 'As he moved towards no-control, Cage also moved towards theatre. ... Cage's theatrical inclinations really took wing that summer when he was invited down to Black Mountain College.'^{xli}

4'33" should be compared with 0'0" (1962), which also was called 4'33" No. 2. 0'0" specifies that, in a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), one has to perform a disciplined action, without any interruptions

and fulfilling in whole or part an obligation to others.^{xiii} Some of Cage's performances of 0'0" consisted in his preparing and slicing vegetables, putting them in an electric blender, and then drinking the juice, with the sounds of these various actions amplified throughout the auditorium.^{xiii} Cage describes the piece as one 'where anything we do is made apparent as music, when through happenings anything we do is made apparent as theater.'^{xiv} Pritchett sums up the work, more accurately in my view, this way: 'Part of the problem of approaching 0'0" is that it does not appear to be "music" in any sense that we might use the term — even in the somewhat expanded sense of Cage's music of the 1950s. Its character instead would seem to place it under the category of theatre, or more properly what has come to be known as "performance art".'^{xv} As an artwork 0'0" is a piece of theatre, an example of performance art, not of music. I claim the same for 4'33", though it more obviously draws a parallel with the performance of "classical" musical works.

One philosopher who grasps that Cage's work is theatrical rather than musical is Kendall L. Walton. He writes of the artworks of Cage (and Duchamp): 'They are easily understood as symbolic or expressive of certain attitudes about life, or society, or the art establishment in very much the way that actions of characters in literature very often are. They are, in fact, strikingly similar to actions of characters in the theater of the absurd. The activities of many avant-garde artists can be, and have been, regarded as a kind of theater.'^{xvi}

Walton goes on to consider how our continuing interest in such pieces is to be explained. '[I]f the act producing the object is symbolic or expressive in one way, the act of buying or displaying it or just observing it may be symbolic or expressive in another. Attending a concert of Cage's indeterminate music may be a way of expressing one's agreement with the point one takes Cage to have been expressing in producing the music; the listener may be symbolically

thumbing his nose at the art establishment, or debunking the “masters,” or affirming a kind of Cagian zest for life.^{sxvii} If the works provide little by way of aesthetic experience as this is standardly described, it is necessary to explain their attraction to an audience. As Walton sees it, an audience aware of what it is likely to encounter in choosing to attend a performance of Cage’s 4’33” shares in and affirms an art-political stance, one that aims to deflate the pomposity of the art establishment and to express solidarity with the radical nature of avant-garde art-making. This account is perceptive. Previously I mentioned the possibility of one’s performing Cage’s work alone in one’s home. I guess that few people with pianos do so, though the piece is easy to play. If Walton is right, this reluctance is not hard to explain. Political affirmations are at their most significant in public settings. On similar grounds, we might predict that recordings of 4’33” (of which several are available) are not sold in large numbers. Neither buying a record nor listening to it at home succeeds as a public expression of one’s attitude as does attendance at a concert including Cage’s music. More than most works, 4’33” relies on a public context of presentation for its effect.

V

4’33” challenges the boundary between noise and music in that it is likely to include more of the former than paradigm musical works. It leads us to think on the distinction between art and ordinary life by incorporating aspects of the latter in its performances. It raises questions about the nature of performance, since the musicians addressed by its score are not called upon to display their musicality and instrumental skills, while members of the audience contribute more to the content of performances than do the musicians who execute the work. It is for musical instruments but is not played on them. Like many conceptual works, its value consists in its leading us to consider such matters.

Its merit lies primarily in its cognitive, artistically conceived properties, not in the aesthetic appeal of its sensuous qualities. Moreover, to the extent that the paradigms it sets out to debunk are ones endorsed by politically powerful, wealthy minorities who take their taste and standards to be superior to all others, its message also is political, not narrowly academic.

We should acknowledge the originality and importance of Cage's contribution to our understanding of music and of the philosophy of the arts. But we need not always accept that his works answer the questions they provoke in the way that he claims. Accordingly, I have argued that 4'33" does not show that "music is all around us," or that audience members are among its performers, or that there is no line to be drawn between music and performance art.^{xlviii}

Stephen Davies,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Auckland,
Private Bag 92019,
Auckland, New Zealand.

ENDNOTES

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- i Or 33", 2'40", 1'20" in the manuscript presented to Irwin Kremen — see David Revill, The Roaring Silence. John Cage: A Life (London: Bloomsbury, 1992) p. 166.
- ii See Calvin Tomkins, Ahead of the Game (London: Penguin, 1968) (first published in 1962 in the U.S.A. under the title The Bride and the Bachelors) p. 115, and Richard Kostelanetz (ed), John Cage (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) (hereafter referred to as JC) p. 195.
- iii Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, Conversing with Cage (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988) (hereafter referred to as CC) p. 188.
- iv CC, p. 65.
- v Tomkins, op. cit., pp. 114-115.

Note, though, that Cage's attitude to the work changed over time. James Pritchett writes: 'This notion [of Cage's in the 1960s] that simply living could be art created a new interpretation of 4'33". Where before the piece had represented a demonstration of empty time structure or a showcase for unintentional sounds, Cage now considered it as a musical work that went on constantly, an intimation of the ultimate unity of music and life. ... Cage felt that his work could show all listeners how to find that "daily beauty" that was not obtained through the offices of any composer, but "which fits us each moment (no matter where we live) to do our music ourselves. (I am speaking of nothing special, just an open ear and an open mind and the enjoyment of daily noises.)"' — The Music of John Cage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 145); also see JC, pp. 12,

20, 195-196. Moreover, Cage's conception of silence was subject to revision — Eric De Visscher, "'There's no such thing as silence...': John Cage's Poetics of Silence (1991)", in Richard Kostelanetz (ed), Writings about John Cage (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993) (hereafter WJC) pp. 117-133.

- vi Silence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1966) p. 51. This work was first published in 1961 by Wesleyan University Press.
- vii Quoted in CC, p. 210.
- viii Quoted in CC, p. 60.
- ix A year from Monday: new lectures and writing (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) pp. 95-111; see Part 1.
- x Quoted in CC, p. 188.
- xi Quoted in 'Rhythmic or Not, the Art is in the Activity,' The National Observer, June 26 (1967) p. 20.
- xii Note, however, the last sentence of the following quotation in which Cage acknowledges the relevance of an interest not in naked sonic properties but in art-historically informed ones.
- 'I have spent many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece, transcriptions, that is, for an audience of myself, since they were much longer than the popular length which I have had published. At one performance, I passed the

first movement by attempting the identification of a mushroom which remained successfully unidentified. The second movement was extremely dramatic, beginning with the sounds of a buck and doe leaping up within ten feet of my rocky podium. ... The third movement was a return to the theme of the first, but with all those profound, so-well-known alterations of world feeling associated by German tradition with the A-B-A.' (Silence, p. 276)

De Visscher (op. cit., p. 127) cites this passage in suggesting that 4'33" is not a closed work but is an experience that can occur at any place and time. This interpretation ignores Cage's claim that the woodland version is a transcription, which implies it is not the original as such.

xiii Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974) p. 22.

xiv 'The Security of the Obvious: On John Cage's Musical Radicalism', Critical Inquiry 14 (1988) pp. 784-804, and Making Theory, Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993) ch. 5.

xv 'Cage and Philosophy', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 52 (1994) pp. 93-98.

xvi William Duckworth says this: 'But it seems to me that when you focus on that piece it becomes art silence rather than real silence. And that the understanding of real silence is what the piece is about' — 'Anything I Say Will Be Misunderstood: An Interview with John Cage', in Richard

Fleming and William Duckworth (eds), John Cage at Seventy-Five (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989) pp. 15-33; the quote is from p. 22. Cage does not disagree.

- xvii Cage's relationship with and affection for Duchamp is well-known. He wrote Music for Marcel Duchamp (1947) for prepared piano, authored a concrete poem (with Calvin Sumsion), Not Wanting to Say Anything about Marcel (1969), and an essay '26 Statements re Duchamp' (in A year from Monday, pp. 70-72). Reunion (1968) was a concert built around a game of chess played between Cage and Duchamp (see Nyman, op. cit., pp. 83-84, and Pritchett, op. cit., p. 153). For a discussion of Duchamp's influence on Cage, see Marjorie Perloff, "'A duchamp unto myself': 'Writing through' Marcel", in Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (eds), John Cage: Composed in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) pp. 100-124.
- xviii The Transfiguration of the Commonplace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- xix For just one example, see Francis Sparshott, 'What Works of Art Are: Notes Towards a Homespun Ontology', Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 61 (1980) pp. 346-367.
- xx Observe that it is the work, not any accurate performance, that has a duration of 4'33". As Revill (op. cit., p. 165) points out: 'With gaps between the movements, 4'33" from start to finish will always last longer than its title'.

^{xxi} See Jerrold Levinson, 'Titles', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 44 (1985) pp. 29-39, and S. J. Wilshire, 'The Role of Titles in Identifying Literary Works', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 45 (1987) pp. 403-408.

^{xxii} Cage might have indicated that the length of performances be chosen by the performers, of course. Even then, instances of the work would have a clockable duration fixed by (the execution of) Cage's instructions.

Eric Salzman writes: 'One man's silence is, after Cage, much like another's. (In fact, all silence, no matter how noisy, is now by Cage)' ('Imaginary Landscaper (1982)', in WJC, pp. 1-7; the quotation is from p. 6. He is right to imply that another composer's attempt to copy 4'33" would be boring and derivative but the parenthetical remark is exaggerated. Performances of Cage's work have temporal limits.

^{xxiii} Reprinted in Musicworks No. 52 (Spring, 1992) pp. 6-15; also see CC, p. 66.

Note, again, that Cage indicates the relevance of music, not the properties of naked sound, as inspiring the work's genesis.

^{xxiv} Herbert Lindenberger writes: 'Both 4'33" and Cage's Frankfurt "opera," for neither of which he "composed" a single note or chord, attempt to comment on the social context of art — not in a theoretical statement, as many a contemporary academic critic has sought to do, but within the very context upon which he is commenting' — 'Regulated Anarchy: The Europa and the Aesthetics of Opera', in Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (eds), op. cit., pp. 144-166; the quotation is from p. 150.

^{xxv} It does not seem to have been Cage's intention to provoke questions about where to draw the line between musical instruments and other things.

^{xxvi} For an Audience: A Philosophy of the Performing Arts (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) p. 207.

^{xxvii} In JC, p. 148.

^{xxviii} In 1987, Cage identified as one of his interests "music that is performed by everyone." In the work of a year earlier in which he pursued this goal he issued instructions to the audience via the score, thereby making performers of those who were willing to comply. 'And then, through I Ching chance operations we subjected a map of the [campus of the University of Wisconsin] to those operations and made an itinerary for the entire audience which would take about forty-five minutes to an hour. And then all of us, as quietly as possible, and listening as attentively as possible, moved through the university community. It was a social experience' (quoted in CC, p. 111).

^{xxix} John Blacking, an ethnomusicologist, insists that the sounds must be humanly organised — see How Musical Is Man? (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973) pp. 10-19. I pass by such niceties.

By the way, Cage seems to endorse this account of music: 'If this word, music, is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound' (quoted in JC, p. 55).

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- xxx 'The Concept of Music', in Music, Art, and Metaphysics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) pp. 267-278; the quotation is from p. 270, fn. 3
- xxxi Levinson is not alone in characterising Cage's creative act as one of framing — also see Carroll op. cit.; Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967) p. 165; and Nyman, op. cit., p. 29. Cage himself argues that framing generates art. He does so, however, not because he sees the frame as a method for organising the work's contents but, instead, as part of his attempt to deconstruct the established notion. 'I was with de Kooning once in a restaurant and he said, "If I put a frame around these bread crumbs, that isn't art." And what I'm saying is that it is. He was saying that it isn't because he connects art with his activity — he connects with himself as an artist whereas I would want art to slip out of us into the world in which we live' (quoted in CC, pp. 211-212).
- xxxii For a relevant discussion, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Towards an Ontology of Art Work', Noûs 9 (1975) pp. 115-142. He suggests that 4'33" might be a musical work, despite its lack of a definite sound-structure, because it is performable. For obvious reasons, performability could not be a sufficient condition for something's being music, as Wolterstorff plainly realises.
- xxxiii I accept that a person who listens to a broadcast or recording of 4'33" is likely to hear sounds, ones issuing from the listening environment, that are not part of the sonic contents of the given performance, but I do not see this concession as undermining the argument given. For works intended

for live performance, ambient noises are those that occur in the performance situation without counting as part of the sonic content of the performance as such. (It is not always easy to determine the spatio-temporal boundaries of musical performances, of course, but this does not seem to be what 4'33" is designed to show.

xxxiv Had Cage written the truly silent work described at the beginning of this paper, the previous argument would not apply. Whether the silent work organises sound and, if it does, whether this is sufficient (and not merely necessary) for its being music are not issues I pursue.

xxxv In 'John Cage's 4'33": Using Aesthetic Theory to Understand a Musical Notion', Journal of Aesthetic Education 26 (Spring 1992) pp. 83-91, Mark Robin Campbell arrives at the same conclusion — that, as an artwork, the piece is not music — by a different route.

xxxvi Herwitz (in 1988, p. 792) describes 4'33" as 'a founding example of a happening'. Robert Charles Clark — in 'Total Control and Chance in Musics: A Philosophical Analysis', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 28 (1970) pp. 355-360 — regards traditional, total control, and chance music (with 4'33" mentioned as an example of the latter) as instanced variously by performance, production, and happening.

xxxvii Quoted in CC, p. 101.

xxxviii See John Cage, I-VI (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 433.

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- xxxix See Pritchett, op. cit., p. 139 and CC, pp. 103-105, 210-211, 248-250.
- xi Nyman, op. cit., p. 60.
- xli Tomkins, op. cit., p. 113.
- xlii For comment on the piece, see Nyman, op. cit., p. 77; Pritchett op. cit., pp. 138-140 and 146-149; and CC, pp. 69-70.
- xliii See Charles Hamm, 'John Cage', in Stanley Sadie (ed), New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (London: Macmillan, 1980), Vol. 3, pp. 597-603. Other performances involved Cage in writing and in drinking water — see Revill, op. cit., pp. 203-204.
- xliv Quoted in CC, p. 193.
- xlvi Op. cit., p. 139.
- xlvi 'Style and the Products of the Processes of Art', in Berel Lang (ed) The Concept of Style (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, revised and expanded edition, 1987) pp. 72-103; the quotation is from pp. 76-77.
- xlvi Ibid.
- xlvi I have benefited from reading drafts of this paper at a number of universities. I am also grateful for comments received from Philip Brownlee, Noël Carroll, Kendall L. Walton, and Tom Wartenberg.