

# Aesthetic Contemplations on John Cage's 4'33"

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**Abstract:** John Cage's composition "4'33'", premiered in 1952 in New York, stands as one of the most controversial works of its time. In this piece, the composer instructs the performing orchestra and musicians to maintain a state of stillness during the performance, allowing the audience to listen to the natural sounds of the performance space (ambient sounds in the concert hall). This unconventional approach garnered widespread criticism, with some dismissing Cage's "4'33'" as a mere attention-seeking endeavor, devoid of any aesthetic significance. In response to such viewpoints, this paper adopts a critical stance. Through an examination of John Cage's creative journey, influences, and the inherent characteristics of chance music aesthetics found in his work "4'33'", we aim to dialectically explore the aesthetic thoughts behind Cage's "4'33'", gaining insights into its theoretical foundations and aesthetic value.

**Keywords:** John Cage; chance music; music aesthetics

## 1. Introduction

Music is the art of sound and acoustics. It begins with the composer inscribing the inner music of their mind onto musical notation during the initial creative process. In the subsequent phase, performers interpret the musical score, transforming it into acoustics through live execution. Finally, the audience, through their auditory organs and brains, converts the acoustics into a sensory auditory experience. This process can be summarized as employing organized musical notes to appeal to people's auditory senses, allowing appreciators to undergo a certain inner auditory experience. True music consistently involves the mediation of sound and acoustics throughout the practice of musical art. Hence, it is apt to describe music as the art of acoustics.

However, in the history of human musical development, some peculiarities have emerged in music theory or musical works. In ancient Chinese music aesthetics theory, representatives such as Confucius advocated "music without sound", while Laozi proposed the concept of "great sound seeks silence". The notion of "music without sound" literally emphasizes the idea that music should be devoid of sound. Laozi's musical aesthetic thought, rooted in his core concept of the "Tao," is reflected in his proposal of "great sound seeks silence," where "great" is more aptly described as "Tao." This mirrors Laozi's pursuit of the natural sounds in his musical aesthetic thought. This idea was subsequently developed among Daoist successors, notably in Zhuangzi's concept of "heavenly music".

Nearly two thousand years ago, ancient Chinese philosophers contemplated the idea of silent music and "seeking silence" in music. In the 20th century, within Western contemporary music genres, the advent of the avant-garde movement brought forth representatives like John Cage, a musician associated with the genre of chance music. His work, "4'33'", bears striking similarities to the thoughts of ancient Chinese philosophers Confucius and Laozi. This resemblance can be traced back to Cage's influence from Zen Buddhist culture. Not only did Cage conceptualize the idea of "great sound seeks silence," but he also manifested and realized this concept in a tangible and practical form. In the following sections, we will delve into the musical aesthetic thoughts embedded in Cage's composition.

## 2. Sensory Materials in "4'33'"

Regarding the sensory materials of music, Wang Cizhi and Zhang Qian state in "Foundations of Musical Aesthetics" that "the material basis of art embodies the characteristics of this art" [1]. The materials that constitute art typically satisfy psychological and spiritual needs. Not all sounds can serve as sensory materials; only those incorporated into the realm of art can. Therefore, John Cage's "4'33'" uses this premise as evidence to validate itself. Normally, noises made by the audience, coughing sounds,

or the friction of clothing at a concert would not be considered as sensory materials for creating a musical work. However, John Cage deviates from this convention.

It is acknowledged that sensory materials in music possess symbolic and suggestive qualities. In this "empty vessel," the sensory materials found indeed bear symbolism and suggestion. The noises produced here symbolize the realization, randomization, and naturalization of the concept of chance music. This includes the noises made by musicians and the audience, as well as questioning sounds, all symbolizing the actualization and perceptibility (audibility) of chance music.

Wang Cizhi in "Foundations of Musical Aesthetics" <sup>[1]</sup> argue that "when discussing the beauty of an art or a work of art, we are always referring to the material basis that constitutes this art or work of art." So, when we claim that John Cage's work possesses a sense of chance music aesthetics, how does he embody it? While sensory materials in music are undoubtedly crucial, the introduction of the new concept of chance music is even more significant. In "Foundations of Musical Aesthetics" <sup>[1]</sup>, it is stated, "When we talk about musical beauty, we are primarily referring to the beauty of musical sounds." However, how do we define the beauty of the musical sounds in John Cage's "4'33'"? Here, we must emphasize once again that chance music, as a new branch developed in "postmodernism," possesses a musical aesthetic distinctly different from traditional music. This will be thoroughly discussed in the subsequent sections.

### 3. Expression of Emotion in "4'33'"

In his aesthetics of emotion in musical aesthetics, Hegel, particularly in his seminal work "Aesthetics," repeatedly emphasizes that the content of music is an expression of emotions. "Foundations of Musical Aesthetics" also asserts that "music is an art proficient in expressing individuals' psychological feelings towards real-life, especially emotional attitudes" <sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, when we claim that "4'33'" embodies aesthetic thoughts, are we suggesting that it expresses emotions? To answer this question, we must first define the beauty of music and then examine how "4'33'" aligns with these definitions to determine which emotions it expresses.

Japanese musicologist Nomura Yoshio, in his revised book "Revised Musical Aesthetics," categorizes the domains of musical beauty based on the discourse of German musicologist T. Anschutz, as follows: (1) Joy and Sorrow; (2) Sublime and Ordinary; (3) Profound and Playful; (4) Constrained and Open; (5) Logical and Intuitive; (6) Orderly and Chaotic; (7) Apollonian and Faustian; (8) Optimistic and Pessimistic; (9) Introverted and Extroverted; (10) Active and Passive. Let us discuss points 3, 4, and 6.

"Profound and Playful" - John Cage's work undoubtedly possesses both aspects. Firstly, it is "profound" due to its unprecedented mode of musical expression, composition, notation, and the controversies and reflections it provokes among the audience. We will delve into this in detail later; for now, let us consider the overall profundity of the work. Additionally, the playfulness of this piece is evident. It employs a "humorous" approach to performance, playfully engaging the audience in reflection.

"Constrained and Open" - John Cage unmistakably embodies the beauty of "open" music in this regard, visible to the audience. However, the focus here lies more on the "constrained" aspect. Some may question how an extremely random piece of music can possess the beauty of constrained music. We explain this by drawing on Daoist philosophy - one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to everything. It is precisely because of John Cage's singular work, akin to a singularity, that it endows infinite possibilities to the piece while simultaneously containing all thoughts within it.

"Orderly and Chaotic" - The beauty of music, in this case, is a combination of order and chaos. Firstly, the adherence to the concept of chance music is orderly, both in the realization of this concept and in the organization of notation. Firstly, the unwavering commitment to the concept of chance music permeates the entire composition and reaches extremes during performance. Secondly, the clear division of the three movements in the score and the introduction to each movement demonstrate the composer's experience of creating a work expressing irrational thoughts under the guidance of an ideal philosophy. The chaotic nature is inherent throughout the piece. The psychological chaos of the audience and the mutual confusion of the audience during the performance resonate with the chaotic nature of the piece, thereby eliciting emotional responses in the audience.

In conclusion, "4'33'" expresses profound and playful musical beauty, conveying deep and sublime musical aesthetics. Furthermore, through the aspects of "constrained and open," the work expresses the underlying philosophical thoughts and stimulates endless contemplation. The interplay of "orderly and chaotic" reflects the power of contrast and resonance in evoking emotions in the audience.

#### 4. John Cage's Creative Journey, Influences, and Overview of Aesthetic Philosophy

John Cage's early exposure to expressionism, notably from figures like Schoenberg, and his mid-career influence from noise music pioneers such as Varese, shaped his distinctive musical outlook. Additionally, the impact of Western "postmodernism" on Cage's creative ideas is equally significant. Many scholars analyze "postmodernism" as a form of "counter-culture" aiming to induce cultural revolution by fostering disdain for traditional elements. Postmodernism strongly advocates irrationality and opposes artistic expression reflecting on and proving life, transforming art into a game—a concept that significantly influenced modern music. Under the influence of this trend, John Cage embarked on the path of creating chance music, impacting numerous musicians of his time and beyond while also facing substantial criticism. Among his works, "4'33'" stands out as the most extreme manifestation of artistic chance music.

Simultaneously, this brought forth mixed reviews, with many contending that such music does not qualify as music, lacking aesthetic substance. However, we approach this with a skeptical attitude, considering Cage's lifelong commitment to exploring new creative methods to advance music and continually generating impactful musical events. Furthermore, he is not devoid of an understanding of rational music, as evidenced by the meticulous structural aspects of many piano compositions he created.

Regarding his musical philosophy, Shen Xuan, in "A Brief History of Western Music" states: "The structure of a musical work can be an empty vessel with predetermined length and proportion, into which any sounds can be placed."<sup>[4]</sup> John Cage's musical viewpoint aligns closely with the ideas presented in "Foundations of Musical Aesthetics," where the "empty vessel" is equivalent to what we term as the "artistic scope," and "any sounds" correspond to "all sounds." In any case, it is undeniable that music employs sounds as sensory materials.

In his later years, John Cage was influenced by Eastern philosophy, particularly Zen Buddhism, intensifying his radical musical ideology. In 1952, he released the infamous "4'33'" which pushed the wave of chance music to its extreme. The stage setting, the performer's performance (remaining still), the overall atmosphere, and most importantly, the duration of 4 minutes and 33 seconds, all constitute a "predetermined empty vessel with length and proportion."<sup>[3]</sup> During this time, any sound audible through the contemporary recording equipment and the ears of the audience was included in the artistic scope, forming the sensory materials of music. Wang Cizhi and others in "Foundations of Musical Aesthetics" state <sup>[1]</sup>, "Unlike general material substances (such as material used in practical items), it (material constituting art) does not serve as the material basis to satisfy human physiological needs but as a spiritual foundation to fulfill human psychological needs." Can the "musical sensory materials" in "4'33'" satisfy human psychological needs? We believe they can. Firstly, all sounds in this work have been included as sensory materials within the artistic scope, serving as artistic media for the audience to perceive. Secondly, it satisfies the psychological needs of those who understand the aesthetics of chance music and modernist music.

What are the characteristics of chance music aesthetics? How does "4'33'" embody these features? We will elaborate on six points. Jiang Mingyun, a scholar from Northwest Normal University, highlighted some aesthetic characteristics of chance music in his paper "On the Aesthetic Characteristics of Chance Music." Let's use these characteristics as a reference to examine whether "4'33'" interprets the aesthetic features of chance music.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### 5. Interpretation of the Aesthetic Characteristics of Chance Music in "4'33'"

##### 5.1 Conceptually Contrary to Traditional Music

Traditional music is conceptualized as "artistic images formed through organized musical tones, expressing thoughts and emotions, reflecting the social reality" (from "Ci Hai", a Chinese dictionary). In contrast, John Cage's work "4'33'" as an extreme representation of chance music expresses its aesthetic philosophy differently. It does not rely on the organized musical tones associated with traditional music concepts but instead utilizes all sounds within the artistic scope, forming an artistic image within an "empty vessel" to convey the author's emotions, thoughts, and aspects of real-life. Regarding what specific ideas and emotions "4'33'" conveys and how it reflects real-life, the phrase "Life is Music, Music is Life" seems fitting. It aims to convey to the audience that when you pay attention to any moment or sound in your everyday life as you would in a concert, you will marvel at the beauty of the mundane in life, just like in a musical performance. This encapsulates the core idea of life being music and music

being life.

### ***5.2 The Composer is No Longer the Primary Determiner of Musical Ideas***

In the context of John Cage's unique work, at least in this particular piece, Jang Mingyun's statement becomes relevant.<sup>[5]</sup> In "4'33'", John Cage's concept of the "empty vessel" is more crucial than ever, with the audience and all sounds as the sensory materials being variable. The variables are the audience and the location, yet the spirit of "Life is Music, Music is Life" remains unchanged. Therefore, we assert that John Cage remains the primary determiner of the musical ideas in this piece. While the sensory materials of music, relative to John Cage's concept of the "empty vessel," may seem secondary, it's worth mentioning that these sensory materials possess non-correspondence features. How should we interpret this statement? Consider listening to sounds of confusion, amazement, or sighs within John Cage's "empty vessel." In this context, these sounds no longer correspond to the emotions they traditionally convey, at least within the "empty vessel." For instance, a sigh in this space no longer expresses dissatisfaction with the program; instead, within the "empty vessel," it takes on a different meaning, having been incorporated into the artistic scope for people to perceive. Therefore, what people hear in the piece "4'33'" are the chance sounds emanating from the current "empty vessel," and these sounds are considered art.

### ***5.3 Widespread Nature of Sound Materials***

In the work "4'33'," the sound materials are drawn from all the sounds within the "empty vessel," and their widespread nature is self-evident. This includes the sounds of the performers' breathing, the rustling of their clothes, and the flipping of music sheets. The unprecedented musical presentation generates confusion, questioning, sighs, and impatient exclamations among the audience, including the inner auditory experiences of the audience—all these become sensory materials constituting this piece within the "empty vessel." It is essential to recognize the real foundation of musical materials and sensory materials. "In human society, there exist various sounds. Broadly summarized, there are three types: natural sounds, language sounds, and musical sounds" <sup>[5]</sup>. So, within John Cage's "empty vessel," what kind of sensory materials do these sounds belong to? We assert that they encompass both natural sounds and language sounds. <sup>[6]</sup> In this context, all these sounds are transformed into "musical sounds" for people to grasp.

### ***5.4 Various Methods for Composing and Performing Music***

Regarding this point, we quote Berg's assessment of John Cage, stating that "Cage, as an inventor, outweighs the musician." This description is apt for the unprecedented work "4'33'" and its unparalleled performance style. Throughout John Cage's creative career, he consistently sought to create compositions or modes of expression that would astonish the audience. Noteworthy is his perspective on rhythm structure when composing music for percussion instruments, representing a method of organizing music structures based on time relationships. Utilizing this structure, John Cage composed his percussion sextet, "First Construction (in Metal)," employing a rhythm structure that can be described as unprecedented. His use of the "micro-macrocosmic universe" rhythm structure extended to several of his contemporary musical works.

Additionally, musical forms inherently possess organizational means, and John Cage's composition "4'33'" is no exception. However, the organizational approach in this piece differs from the traditional beauty principles of classical music. Unlike the traditional aesthetics of harmony, contrast, proportion, regularity, symmetry, and unity found in traditional music, this work embodies the beauty of infinite possibilities arising from nature and chance, rather than adhering to established rules and forms.

### ***5.5 Various Notation Methods***

The notation method employed in "4'33'" is unparalleled in history. The piece consists of three movements: the first movement has a duration of 33 seconds, the second movement lasts 2 minutes and 40 seconds, and the third movement lasts 1 minute and 20 seconds. In the broader context of "traditional music," tracing the development of Western music, the earliest form of notation was textual notation, appearing before the medieval period. Textual notation primarily described the pitch and duration of music through simple written descriptions. During this period, textual notation had significant limitations and could not precisely notate music. From this notation method, it is evident that the uncertainty in

notation naturally deepens the uncertainty of the music, to some extent resembling an early form of chance music. In the 13th century, symbolic notation emerged. Originating in the 13th century, symbolic notation further developed from textual notation, gradually replacing words with symbols to notate music. During this period, music's pitch, duration, and intuitiveness significantly improved. Music also moved away from the realm of "chance" music, becoming more accurately recorded. The advent of the staff notation can be traced back to the 16th century. During this period, traditional music could be recorded in a more standardized and precise manner. Music gradually became a determined entity recorded in notation. The subsequent introduction of various novel notation methods is diverse, but for the sake of our discussion, we won't delve into them.

We bring up the development of notation to illustrate that the accuracy of music recorded under human musical development inevitably evolved from uncertainty, progressing to deliberate, rational certainty, and eventually evolving into the uncertainty of music in an artificial, idealized score. John Cage emerges as a representative figure in this development. In "4'33'" and his other chance music pieces, he subconsciously utilized rational thinking, employing vague and uncertain notation to express the beauty of chance music. Despite this form of musical beauty being counter to tradition and counter-cultural, isn't this return to a more primitive form of notation a conscious manifestation of the development of music theory? Human culture evolves through the constant overthrowing of tradition. In summary, John Cage's use of rational thinking in "chance" notation is undoubtedly unprecedented.

### 5.6 Music Evolving into a Comprehensive Art

In "4'33'," during its "performance," all sounds produced by performers and the audience, from the audience's queries and reflections to all the sounds generated by the audience's movements, collectively constitute the artistic material within the "empty vessel," encompassing a comprehensive art form.

## 6. Conclusion

John Cage's "4'33'" embodies the core idea that music is life, and life is music. According to our analysis, it aligns with the characteristics of chance music aesthetics. However, not everyone can comprehend the nuances of chance music aesthetics. As mentioned earlier, the musical sensibilities addressed in this piece cater to those who understand the essence of chance music. This work, as a historical milestone in the history of human music, marks a new stage in the development of Western modernist music and a reflection on new concepts of music. Rather than considering "4'33'" as a musical composition, it is more apt to view it as a "performance of ideas," the realization of the concept of chance. Undeniably, the extensive discussions and impact sparked in the music world by this piece have made significant contributions to the development of modern music, including chance music and other contemporary music genres, as outlined in the previous six points. In conclusion, we quote a statement from Feng Xiaochun, a scholar from the Wuhan Conservatory of Music, to wrap up the entire text: "We should always remember that music, after all, exists as an auditory art. The development of musical art will continue along this nature, and 'silent music' will never become mainstream; it is ultimately just a ripple in the river of music that people cannot hear." This reminds us to maintain an open attitude towards various new musical concepts and aesthetic ideas, as only through absorption can true development occur. Simultaneously, we should not forget that, regardless of theoretical changes, the fact that music is an auditory art remains unchanged.

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