The Presence of Absence: Silence, Sonority and In-Between

Abstract

“Silence is more than a void.”


Music is not only about how to occupy the space with sonority. Silent moments in music can be as expressive as sonorous moments. To prove this, I will explore the history of the use of silent expressions by looking at John Cage as the pivotal artist. As the outcome of this project, I will have three things: a presentation of my research, a paper about my comprehension of silent expressions, and compositions to demonstrate of how I perform silence in music based on what I state in the paper.

Overview of the Project

In the context of Western music, silence is most likely to be perceived as a rest, a pause of notes. I don’t like it. I don’t like this perception of silence in music. Silence is a musical element that is equivalent to notes. It is more than a pause of notes. To address this claim, I will begin this project by looking at John Cage’s approach to music and also his early works namely, Dream and In a Landscape. I will then expand my focus over other artists and concepts that influenced him and that were influenced by his works.

The final products of this project will be threes things: a presentation, a paper/statement, and compositions. The presentation will entail my research on the use of silent expressions in music and other related venues such as painting and will present. The main focus of this presentation is to exhibit the concept of silence discussed by scholars and artists and to present how artists have applied silent expressions to their works. The paper will be a 10 to 15 page long which includes a statement of my intentions that I try to achieve by compositions. I will also contain in the paper descriptions of how I understand the concept of silence as a musical element and how I use it in my compositions. The demonstration of the compositions will be a way to exhibit my comprehension of the knowledge that I will gain through the research.

This project is also a process for me to find a suitable term for what I appreciate in music by saying “silence”. This word essentially evokes the absence of notes in a musical context. However, there are also sonorous expressions which “dissolve into the texture” (Pearsall 2006) and become almost inaudible or hard to recognize unless the listener pay attention to the particular phrase. Such expressions use redundant motives. A good example of this is the triplets in the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven. Although there are intervallic changes in the triplets and the listener would, therefore, notice the
presence of this motif, its redundant use of notes can almost qualify as the Pearsall’s
description. The motif also provides an aspect of the texture in the piece. Beethoven also uses
silence, the absence of notes at the very end of the movement, where the same chord is
repeated once after a silent moment. I would claim that this piece will be different without the
emphasis of this tension between sonority and silence that appears at the end of the piece.

I performed this piece once in front of an audience. The audience could not wait until
I played the last chord, and they started to clap before I ended the piece. I think this
experience was interesting in terms of ontology of a piece of music. When does music end?
When does music become so-called “silence”, and when does a rest or sustain become no
longer a part of music? I could say that the piece ends after the last chord is sustained as long
as noted, but what if I prolonged the length of the notes and never moved my foot from the
sustain pedal? The decaying vibration becomes smaller and smaller, and there will be a
liminal moment where our cognition can’t really differentiate sonority and silence.
Throughout this project, I want to address such a moment and to find a term that makes it
effable.

Details of Compositions

In an anechoic room, John Cage experienced the impossibility of silence; sound as a
musical element can be found within our body. What his words suggest is that silence and
sonority are not qualitatively different but quantitatively. We are not usually aware of the
sound of breathing or heartbeats, let alone nervous system or blood circulation. In certain
circumstances, however, we become aware of these internal sounds because of alternations in
both physical and mental conditions. Alternating states of the mind and cognition that allow
the lister to sometimes dismiss and sometimes notice silence or passages embedded in the
texture. These are what I am interested in exploring in my compositions: exploring the use of
the presence of absence of sound.

Research

John Cage is the biggest inspiration for this project. Although his perspective of and
approach to silence differ from mine, he is my spiritual teacher who turned my interest to
silence. His early works, namely Dream and In a Landscape, are the pieces of music that
inspired me the most among his works. They, despite its sonority, evoke silence, or quietness
when I hear them. Rather than the art of rhetoric, these pieces provide the art of textuality.
Moments of silent expressions are, I consider, essentially textual.

Therefore, my research will start from John Cage. I will look into his thoughts and
ideas regarding silence. I will, then, expand my focus over what influenced him and what was
influenced by him. These can be individuals and specific theories or philosophies. Through
this research, I will find the attempts made by previous artists to address something similar to
what I am trying to share with other people: the art of textuality, liminality, or silent
expressions. I don’t quite have the term to specifically point out what it is.
Other than Cage, I will also look into the aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony and Zen Buddhist practices that recognize the presence of blank space to accentuate the presence of simplicity. It can be sometimes frustrating that theories and artists I encountered in the discourses of music and other art forms are essentially Western-centric. I want to incorporate non-Western artistic traditions into this project.

**Paper/Statement**

For the writing aspect of this project, I will write a 10-15 page paper to provide my comprehension and perspective of the topic as well as what I intend to do in my compositions. I will explain what I have learned through the research and present my view of the silent expressions, such as how I come to think of such expressions in a certain way after exploring previous artists’ use of expressions that are relevant to my subject. For the statement portion, I will provide what I did in the compositions: how ideas are organized and musically demonstrated.

**The Venue of Presentation and Demonstration**

There will be two venues for demonstrating, to the public, what I gained through this project. I will have two separate sessions to perform an academic aspect and a more art-oriented aspect of the project. I plan to have a presentation followed by a recital with an intermission between the two separate sessions. For the presentation, I can use the equipment already set in the classroom and will not need any other specific technology. Neither does the recital; I will keep the setting simple not using any advanced technology but plain musical sources.

**Funding**

I will not need a huge amount of expense for this project. For the research part, I may have to have a budget for necessary sources (books, scores, online articles, and recordings) through school. I will be using my instruments and possibly school-owned instruments. I am planning to perform some pieces with one or two other people but not going to ask them to play something that they don’t play. These people may ask for payment. If that is the case, then I hope the school can help with this situation. As for the performing musicians, I am going to ask Charles Ramsey to join me.

For advisors, it would be best if I could have, as my advisors, Forrest for more musical and philosophical aspects and Marc for more academic aspects of my project since this project will entail both musical and scholarly approaches.

**Assessment**

Criteria for assessment of each part of this project.
Presentation - 40%
  ● What is presented is relevant to my subject.
  ● What is presented helps understanding what I am trying to address.

Paper - 40%
  ● How well I comprehend and express the subject in my words.
  ● How detailed I explain about my intentions in the compositions.

Compositions - 20%
  ● How well I realize what I state in the paper.
  ● If I succeed demonstrating what I refer to by “silent expressions” or “passages that become the part of the texture”.

Timeline

1) **9/30-10/6**: John Cage’s biography
   - How do people evaluate and criticize John Cage’s works?
   - How do people evaluate his musical thoughts and philosophical background of his works?

2) **10/7-10/13**: John Cage’s autobiography
   - What did Cage himself say about his works and processes of music-making?
   - What and who influenced Cage?

3) **10/14-10/20**: John Cage’s autobiography
   - On *Chance* and Asian philosophies and how they connect to Cage’s works.
   - Specific concepts that Cage have encountered (a Hindu concept of *mokṣa*, for example).

4) **10/21-10/27**: Read studies about *4’33”*
   - How is the piece analyzed, evaluated, and criticized?

5) **10/28-11/3**: Analyze Cage’s early works: *Dream, In a Landscape*
   - How did he approach “silence” in these pieces before he came to be aware “music is the environment”?
   - Was he aware of “silence” in these pieces?

6) **11/4-11/10**: Cage-related individual/performance: *Yoko Ono*
   - How did Cage, one of her advisors, influence Ono?
   - How could I make connections between her works and Cage’s?
7) 11/11-11/17: Cage-related individual: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy
   - What did Cage learn from his philosophy?
8) 11/18-11/24: Cage-related individual/performance III
   - Not decided yet.
9) 11/25-12/1: Cage-related individual/performance IV
   - Not decided yet.
10) 12/2-12/8: Zen Buddhist philosophy and arts.
    - How did Zen influence Cage?
    - In which piece, this influence is observable, if any?
11) 12/9-12/15: Zen art
    - How does it manifest “silent” elements in Zen monks works?
12) 12/16-12/22(Winter Break): Japanese aesthetics (Wabi and Sabi)
    - How do these concepts relate to my attempt to apply “silence” in music?
    - Interactions of Presence and Absence
13) 12/23-12/29(Winter Break): Same as Above.
14) 12/30-1/5: Same as Above.
15) 1/6-3/2: Prepare for the products: compositions, a paper, presentation.

Bibliography


