Chapter 2: A Silent Prayer

Wolterstorff & Begbie

Even when 4’33” [*four thirty-three*] finally became a topic of conversation in theological circles, it was swiftly dismissed. In 1987, Yale theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote, “All the standards of craftsmanship in the art of the musician are irrelevant in the face of some of the music of John Cage.”¹ For Wolterstorff, 4’33” ignored artistic integrity. Cage composed with “total subservience to materials,” and 4’33”, a composition misunderstood as completely silent, championed “de-aestheticization,” – artistic purposelessness that evoked dissatisfaction in audiences.² In 1991, theologian of music Jeremy Begbie popularized Wolterstorff’s outlook, describing it as “the ‘Cage’ attitude:” a theologically antagonistic aesthetic disposition that eliminates human freedom and intent in art.³ For Wolterstorff and Begbie, Cage musically undermines God’s intention for humanity to create and order the materials of the earth. Cage’s methods amount to the practice of musical abandonment and theological nihilism. What they fail to recognize, however, is how a work like 4’33”, in its silent withdrawal [of what is traditionally considered music] exposes music as present in every place. They also fail to

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² Ibid., 63, 96.
understand how the piece gestures toward an acoustical incomprehensibility given from beyond the genius of human imagination.

To date, Begbie’s position on Cage remains unchanged. In fact, Begbie’s view has garnered wide, uncritical acceptance in English-language discourse about music and theology. Yet Begbie’s musical bias amounts to more than theological rejection of one of the most influential composers of the 20th century and of Western tonality in general. Begbie also draws boundaries around the musical activity of God. He and forebears like Wolterstorff also misconstrue the musical and theological pregnancy of a watershed piece like 4’33”, especially with respect to the religious devotion of Cage during his childhood and the theologically suggestive dimensions of how 4’33” came into being. The following chapter will underscore the theologically unconsidered roots of Cage’s religious biography, and will revisit a symposium that was formative in the development of 4’33” – The

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6 Notably, Begbie admits that the openness suggested by Cage’s music might attract some Christians. Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 251. Yet he worries that “the cost is an evacuation (or near evacuation) of the notion of music as constructive, of the idea that human shaping could be fruitful and enriching.” See Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* *Theology, Music, and Time*, 194.
Creative Arts in Contemporary Society conference held in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1948 – in order to show how closely knit the theological is to music like Cage’s.

**Cage, Faith & Music**

Cage studied Greek and the New Testament as a young boy. He also learned Hebrew with a local rabbi. Cage dedicated himself to the reading of sacred scripture and to volunteering in congregations, as he had an ambition to become a Methodist Episcopal minister like his grandfather, Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage. He even went so far as to serve as an acolyte at mass at St. Alban’s, a Liberal Catholic Church in the Hollywood Hills near Franklin Avenue, and his ecclesial enthusiasm distressed his parents. They said that he would have to choose between the parish and them. Cage decided for the church. Yet the St. Alban’s priest, Father Tettemer, advised him otherwise, saying, “[t]here are many religions. You only have one mother and father,” and he told Cage to go back home.

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Incidentally, the Christian tradition of Methodism permeates Cage’s early life, his genealogy, and even his first marriage. See below from Revill, *The Roaring Silence*, 17-19 and Silverman, *Begin Again*, 21.

His grandfather, Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage (dates unpublished), and great-grandfather, Adolphus Cage (1819–1905), were both Methodist Episcopal preachers. Gustavus was ordained an Elder in the church. Cage’s parents, John Milton Cage and Lucretia Harvey, met while Lucretia played piano at a First Methodist Episcopalian Church in Colorado. It would be Lucretia’s third marriage. Cage would be her third-born son. Gustavus Adolphus Williamson III was stillborn. Revill writes, “Gustavus Adolphus Williamson IV, their second son, was born deformed, with a head larger than his body, and died at two weeks. Then in Los Angeles’ good Samaritan Hospital, at five o’clock in the morning of September 5, 1912, John Milton Cage junior was born.” See also Silverman, *Begin Again*, 4-5.

Silverman notes that Xenia Kashervaroff, Cage’s wife, was “a daughter of the Archpriest of Eastern Orthodox Russian-Greek Church of Alaska, Father Andrew Petrovich Kasheveroff…Xenia’s prominent religious background may have figured in Cage’s attraction to her. But she was not exactly ‘her father’s daughter.’”
Cage heeded TETtemer’s counsel, and music gradually became the vocation to which he devoted himself entirely.³ At the age of five, Cage had taken piano lessons from his Aunt Phoebe, and he was playing the music of composer Edvard Grieg before the sixth grade. At twelve, the precocious musician founded a radio program on a Hollywood affiliate KNX, and he featured Boy Scout performers and occasionally himself on piano.⁹ The show ran for two years with notable popularity, but was canceled only two weeks after the local Boy Scout organization took control. Graduating valedictorian of his high school (and incidentally with honors in Latin and Greek), he attended Pomona College in 1929, but, with some financial help from mom and dad, left for Paris in the spring of 1930, where he apprenticed in architecture with architect Ernö Goldfinger (1902-1987).¹⁰ Cage also delved into painting lessons at the Paris Conservatoire, where an instructor bid him attend a Bach festival. Cage went and absorbed the music of the baroque master as well as Stravinsky, Alexander Scriabin, and Paul Hindemith. When Goldfinger explained to Cage that the field of architecture required committing the whole of one’s life, he left his apprenticeship, saying he had many interests to pursue.

In 1931, Cage drifted through Italy, Spain, Germany and North Africa. He tried composing music by attempting to advance Bach’s techniques with elaborate mathematically based compositional systems, but the results sounded rather unpleasant to

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¹⁰ Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 40-1. Gann notes that Ian Fleming “would base one of his most infamous James Bond villains on Goldfinger’s name and personal characteristics” (42).
Cage’s own ears. Returning to Los Angeles in the fall of 1931, he wrote what music critic, historian, and composer Kyle Gann calls “proto-minimalist” string music set to Aeschylus’s *The Persians* in Greek, and composed a longer piano work with voice from the first chapter of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, all of which survive, even though the works were temporarily lost.

Cage arrived back in America just in time for the Great Depression. His parents were forced to give up their house and move into an apartment. He worked as a gardener, exotic meal cook, dishwasher, library researcher, and modern art and music lecturer for housewives, familiarizing himself with relevant subjects each week in the public library. Through those early experiences and odd jobs, he became persuaded that he possessed musical talent. Gann reports Cage humorously recalling that people liked his music better than his paintings.\(^{11}\) The budding composer began to teach music with his Aunt Phoebe, which included teaching a UCLA extension course, “Musical Accompaniments for Rhythmic Expression,” that “met at Van Nuys elementary school from January 25 to May 10 from 4:00pm – 6:00pm in the afternoon; fifteen Tuesdays for twelve dollars.” Aunt Phoebe and Cage “encouraged the students to experiment with all kinds of sound-sources – Balloons squeezed with wet fingers, filled with rice and shaken, or radiators struck with tires. Cage removed the cover of the upright piano and tied the strings with various objects.”\(^{12}\) One can see here early signs of his later experimental projects, such as prepared piano, and his pedagogical style implies a musical perspective that sees unity between the things of everyday life and music.

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\(^{11}\) Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 43.

An interest in the music of modern composer Arnold Schoenberg also began to grow in Cage during that time. When he planned to debut Schoenberg’s op. 11 to his educational housewife group, however, the pieces proved too difficult to play. By coincidence, the pianist who premiered the work in the U.S., Richard Buhlig, lived in Los Angeles. Cage asked him if he would offer a guest performance, but Buhlig declined. He did, however, agree to become Cage’s composition teacher. In 1933, Buhlig sent a clarinet piece written by Cage to Henry Cowell for possible inclusion in Cowell’s *New Music Edition*. Cowell didn’t publish the work, but he featured it in a concert.  

Cowell also introduced Cage to Adolph Weiss, the first American-born student of Schoenberg.  

Cage hitchhiked to New York to study with Weiss, and he covered his living expenses by washing walls at a Brooklyn YWCA.

In 1933, Schoenberg relocated to the United States after the Nazi party threatened Jewish professors with expulsion, a development that provided Cage an opportunity to study with him. At that time Cage also began to experiment with homosexual relationships, even though he married Xenia Kashevaroff, a recent Reed College graduate cum sculptor, collage artist, and bookbinder he met while working in his mother’s arts and crafts store, in a sunrise ceremony in the Yuma, Arizona desert in 1935.

Following his education with Schoenberg at UCLA, Cage worked for the Works Progress Administration and taught at Mills College in Oakland, California and the

\[13\] Ibid., 44.
\[14\] Revill writes, “Despite his Teutonic name, Adolf Weiss had been born in Baltimore in 1891…” *The Roaring Silence*, 45.
\[15\] Ibid., 45.
\[16\] The historical dates are not clear. By Cage’s account, he studied with Schoenberg at the University of Southern California and later at UCLA. Yet Revill notes that the contact between Schoenberg and Cage “is not formally documented.” See Ibid., 47.
Cornish School for the Fine Arts in Seattle, Washington. Notably, Cage met and befriended choreographer Merce Cunningham at the Cornish School. Cunningham and Cage would eventually become lifelong partners and artistic collaborators. In 1937, he and Xenia relocated to Chicago when Hungarian-born painter, sculptor, and photographer László Maholy-Nagy (who helped introduce Bauhaus to the United States) invited Cage to teach experimental music. Cage had a stint as a music critic for Modern Music, and accompanied dance classes at the University of Chicago.¹⁷ He also befriended painter Max Ernst. Ernst invited Cage and Xenia to New York with an understanding that Cage would perform Art of This Century, a new art gallery owned by Ernst’s companion, Peggy Guggenheim. The Cages made the visit in 1943 after John had managed to avoid the draft because his father had invented a radar system that alerted surprised soldiers to the 1941 ambush of Pearl Harbor. The enlisted were training with the equipment on that fateful day. Cage ended up performing at the Museum of Modern Art, and LIFE magazine covered the show in a full two-page spread.¹⁸ Guggenheim was incensed, and even though she was their host, she insisted that the couple end their trip early.

Though the end of the New York stay soured, Cage had kept company with artists like Edgar Varèse, André Breton, and Piet Mondrian, and he performed on one of the city’s most artistically significant stages during his stay. According to Gann, after the fallout with Guggenheim, the Cages stayed with the mythologist Joseph Campbell and his wife, Jean Erdman, who was a professional dancer. It was through Erdman that Cage became reacquainted with Cunningham. Gann writes that Cage, Cunningham, and Xenia began to experiment in a ménage à trois. The composer found that he preferred Cunningham to his

¹⁷ Ibid., 61.
¹⁸ Ibid., 63.
then wife.¹⁹ In 1945, the Cages divorced, and John became musical director of the newly instituted Merce Cunningham Dance Company.²⁰ Musical historians suggest the titles of his works seem to indicate psychological distress at the time – Tossed as It Is Untroubled (1943), The Perilous Night, Roof of an Unfocus, A Valentine Out of Season (all 1944), Daughters of the Lonesome Isle (1945). At the urging of friends who were concerned for his mental health, Cage made an unhelpful visit with a psychoanalyst. He would eventually find a way to thrive again through the study of South and East Asian philosophy and religion, as well as of Christian mysticism. He also advanced his musical craft through an especially prolific stay at Black Mountain College. The next chapters explore those periods of his life and their critical influence upon the formation of 4’33”. For now, this brief biography intends to introduce the reader to Cage’s development into a modern composer of extraordinary renown, in order to counter the caricatures made by theological minds such as Begbie and Wolterstorff, who reduce Cage’s experimentation to reckless musical nihilism.

The Stage of 4’33”

By 1952, Cage had already been working as a professional composer for approximately fifteen years.²¹ He was quite well known, though not financially secure. Patrons, including Cage’s former teacher Henry Cowell, invited Cage to perform any piece of his choosing at an outdoor amphitheater in the Catskill Mountains of New York to raise gifts for the Benefit Artists Welfare Fund. They probably could not have imagined that

¹⁹ Gann, No Such Thing as Silence, 64.
²⁰ Ibid.
Cage would unveil a seemingly silent work that would redirect the attention of listeners to a world of given music. Indeed, a Pierre Boulez sonata – Premier Sonata – was the intended showcase piece for the evening.

For the penultimate performance, pianist David Tudor took the stage, sat down at the piano bench, and opened a score to debut a work from Cage, incorrectly listed as follows:

4 pieces ............... john cage
4’ 33”
30”
2’ 23”
1’ 40”

Setting his stopwatch at the piece’s beginning, and opening and closing the instrument’s fallboard as well as turning pages to mark transitions between movements, Tudor never pressed a key. Not a single note sounded from the keyboard. Tudor quietly and brazenly introduced one of the 20th century's most controversial and most influential musical compositions – 4’33” [four thirty-three].

22 The mistake is titling the piece as four separate pieces rather than one work with four movements. Revill, The Roaring Silence, 11. For a scanned image of the original program, see Gann, No Such Thing as Silence, 6.

23 Emphasizing the charity-driven context in which 4’33” debuted, Kyle Gann debunks the myth that 4’33” brought monetary gain to Cage: “the piece wasn’t commissioned. The concert was a benefit for a good cause. The money people paid to hear David Tudor play did not go to Cage, or even to Tudor.” Kyle Gann, No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4’33” (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 13.

Likewise, Alex Ross also writes emphatically, “The Maverick concert was a benefit; Cage earned nothing from the premiere of 4’33” and little from anything else he was writing at the time.” Alex Ross, "Searching for Silence," The New Yorker 86, no. 30 (October 4, 2010), 52-55, 58-62 original pagination. Online archive accessed June 6, 2015 http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/searching-for-silence.

Ross continues with astonishment, “He had no publisher until the nineteen-sixties...From the mid-fifties until the late sixties, he lived in a two-room cabin measuring ten by twenty feet, paying $24.15 a month in rent. He wasn’t far above the poverty level, and one year he received aid from the Musicians Emergency Fund. For years afterward, he
performance of 4’33” stunned the audience with its apparent silence. Yet what they failed to notice were the missing notes provided by nature.

Oak, maple, hemlock, and shagbark hickory trees introduced an ambient chorus of rustling leaves. Raindrops against the roof added percussion during the second movement. Nearby critters chimed in with ornamentation. The murmurs of confusion from the audience provided further improvised figures until the finale. When Tudor stood to indicate completion of the piece (after four minutes and thirty-three seconds had passed), Maverick Concert Hall, a rugged barn-like structure with an upper paneling of windows reminiscent of honeycomb, had been transformed into a gateway for music without boundary or distinction from life.  

Adoration, however, did not gush from those in attendance. Instead, they sat stunned, perplexed, and pissed in reaction to what they had heard. Earle Brown, as reported by Cage biographer David Revill, remembers, “A hell of a lot of uproar...it infuriated most of the audience.” It is now oft-quoted lore that one audience member who was an artist shouted with vehemence, “Good people of Woodstock, let’s run these people out of town.” Kenneth Silverman puts his own twist on the

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counted every penny. I recently visited the collection of the John Cage Trust, at Bard, and had a look at his appointment books. Almost every page had a list like this one:

- .63 stamps, 1.29 turp., .25 comb,
- 1.17 fish, 3.40 shampoo, 2.36 groc,
- 5.10 beer, 6.00 Lucky
- ‘I wanted to make poverty elegant,’ he once said.”

24 The recreation here of Tudor’s premiere performance of 4’33” is indebted to Gann, No Such Thing as Silence, 1-4. See also Silverman, Begin Again, 118-19.
25 Revill, The Roaring Silence, 166.
26 Ibid., 165-66. See Gann, No Such Thing as Silence, 8. See also, Ross, “Searching for Silence.” A video of David Tudor remembering this disruption in the
shock value of 4'33” by writing that the piece also made it into Walter Winchell’s gossip column, “which also reported scandalous news of the genitaly reassigned Christine Jorgensen.” 27 Few could have imagined that the piece would become Cage’s most famous work, and a landmark in the history of musical composition. 28 Perhaps none would have surmised its theological origins and promise.

The Vassar Lecture

The first public mention of ideas that would eventuate in 4'33” took place at a national intercollegiate arts conference, The Creative Arts in Contemporary Society, from February 27–29, 1948, at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. The performance is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HypmW4Yd7SY. [last accessed May 27th, 2015].

27 Silverman, Begin Again, 119.


In “Expanding Horizons: The International Avant-garde, 1962–75,” however, Richard Toop writes, “To the end of his life, Cage insisted that his most important contribution was the ‘silent’ piece 4’33”, but in terms of influence on musical practice Cartridge Music (1960) may have stronger claims.” Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople, ed. The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 465.

Robert P. Morgan also notes, “While 4’33” may well exemplify Cage’s musical philosophy more purely than any other composition (he still considers it his most significant work), it brought him to a difficult impasse. Either he could give up composing entirely, on the ground that if all sounds can be viewed as music, musical ‘composition’ is hardly necessary—or he could devise methods for preserving the activity of composition (and performance) as redefined by this conception of radical intentionlessness. Cage, of course, chose the latter course....” Robert P. Morgan, Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America, The Norton Introduction to Music History (New York: Norton, 1991), 363.
occasion was entirely organized by undergraduate women. John Cage joined Harvard literary scholar F.O. Matthiessen, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, novelist Irwin Shaw, painter Ben Shahn, poet Malcolm Brinnin, and Yale philosopher Paul Weiss for the weekend. The Vassar Miscellany News described the event as an “attempt to see the arts not as isolated aesthetic problems, but as fields of human endeavor inextricably connected with politics, science, and sociology.” Student reporter Carol DeCamp enthusiastically wrote that the “destination [for the proceedings] is not just this Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, but every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from now on.”

The symposium did not actually attain intellectual immortality. Yet it stands as a remarkable gathering of American post-war literati who mused about the unity between art, life, and liberty, doing so at times with notable theological engagement.

The conference also provided a forum for Cage to introduce an inchoate musical hope entitled Silent Prayer, which anticipated 4'33” - a monumental work of musical withdrawal and exposure that indicates the presence of theological mystery beyond what Cage had dared to conceive. Retracing the aesthetic and theological points of overlap in his presentations and those of others will provide an insightful set of coordinates within which to locate the beginning stages of Cage’s musical ingenuity with respect to 4'33” and depart from for imagining the theological charity I am suggesting that the piece showcases and exemplifies.

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Conversations began on Friday evening, February 27 at 8:15pm. Matthiessen gave the keynote address. He had become well known as a scholar with *American Renaissance* (1941), a founding text for the field of American Studies. The monograph pours over author intentionality and the very identity of literature within the mid-19th-century half-decade that birthed the American masterpieces *Representative Men* (1850), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *Walden* (1854), and *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Matthiessen explores how those works emerged out of epistemologies other than the scientific, how the novels expound upon ways of knowing that dream about the eternal. In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen shows how “Hawthorne is sharing here [in a diary entry about how his wife inspires him to view life as more than finitude] in the basic recognition of Christianity that man can be both in time and out of it, part of the flux, yet penetrating to the eternal.” Matthiessen clarifies the aspirations of groundbreaking American literature with theological suppositions. The method was unsurprising for an author for whom theology was more than an academic disposition. He had just arrived at Vassar from a Presbyterian Church of America


32 As Matthiessen pithily summarizes, “The double aim, therefore, has been to place these works both in their age and in ours.” See F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, A Galaxy Book (London, New York [etc.]: Oxford U.P., 1968), vii-viii.

Sadly, Matthiessen would commit suicide only two years after this conference. More recently, F. O. Matthiessen has been remembered through the endowed LGBT chair at Harvard, the F.O. Matthiessen Visiting Professorship of Gender and Sexuality.

[P.C.A.] annual meeting in Chicago, where he represented Massachusetts as a Vice President.34

The next morning, from 9:00–10:30am, Merce Cunningham and Irwin Shaw led the Drama and Dance Panel. Cunningham’s Dream, *Le Piège de Méduse* [The Ruse of Medusa], *The Monkey Dances, Orestes* and *A Diversion* were performed that year to the accompaniment of music composed by John Cage using chance techniques.35 *Dream* made Cage’s prepared piano come alive.36 *Le Piège de Méduse* was staged only once at Black Mountain College in Black Mountain, North Carolina.37 Elements of *Le Piège* morphed into movements for *The Monkey Dances*. *Orestes* is the only work of Cunningham’s to draw upon Greek mythology.38 While Cunningham is reported to have said at Vassar that “the meaning of dance is in the doing and that it should not try to put across an idea,” Cunningham’s choreography during that period winks at the theological. This is not only apparent in the mythological dimensions of *Orestes*, but also in later performances of *A Diversion*, which would include performance notes framing the dance as “[a] suite in five parts, which may be taken as referring to the

34 "Prof. F.D. Matthiessen, Ben Shahn and Irwin Shaw Highlight Plans for February Arts Conference’,” *Vassar Miscellany News*, February 4, 1948, 3.
36 A prepared piano has strings altered by the placement of different objects upon them.
37 Black Mountain College is now a museum and arts center, but was once an educational institution centered in curriculum and community dedicated to progressive music, art, and drama.
38 In the tragedy of Orestes, Orestes avenges the death of his father Agamemnon by committing matricide against Clytemnestra.
Krishna and the Gopis.” Cunningham explores religious themes and mystery with a curiosity that is more than casual.

Cunningham’s co-panelist Shaw was at the time completing his panoramic and wildly successful first novel, *The Young Lions* (1948). The novel produces a moral allegory out of the lives and identities of three male protagonists undergoing the complexities and tragedies of World War II. Shaw focuses upon the Jewishness of protagonist Noah Ackerman, as Noah comes to terms with his religious and cultural identity in defining himself as a poet and a soldier. In Ackerman, Shaw invites readers to see anti-Semitism as un-American, and Jewish identity becomes for the author a hope beyond what humanity can fathom and a connection that abides beyond finite lives. All three figures, Shaw, Cunningham, and Matthiessen, explore in their works connections between identity, creativity, human life, and even supernatural belief.

Following Student Discussion Groups and lunch, the Saturday afternoon 2:00pm Art and Music panel began. John Cage spoke with social realist painter Ben Shahn. At that time, Shahn had succeeded as a rare breed of artist able to produce

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40 *The Young Lions* was made into a film that Shaw disdained.
and sell works for galleries, public exhibitions, and private collections, as well as more populist outlets and venues like magazines, advertising campaigns, and corporate buildings – all without compromising his artistic vision. One piece that stands out as an example of Shahn’s skillfulness in blending the creative and the commercial is *Silent Music* (1948), completed in the same year as the Vassar conference. *Silent Music* is also remarkable as a portrait, whose outline Cage’s conceptual *Silent Prayer* seems to describe, and whose image previews 4’33” in an uncanny way.

[Figure 3.3, Ben Shahn’s *Silent Music.*]

Connoisseur and critic of the arts James Thrall Soby notes that *Silent Music* was “originally conceived as a drawing for the Columbia Broadcasting System’s folder, ‘The Empty Studio.’”

45 Both the title and its depiction – a canvas absent of

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musicians and cluttered with empty chairs and music stands – suggest that music still fills a space without performers, an idea that anticipates the ubiquitous music celebrated by 4’33”. Music persists and echoes in all kinds of places, even those without human authors. Of the painting, Shahn states, “The emotion conveyed by great symphonic music happens to be expressed in semi-mathematical acoustic intervals, and this cannot be transposed in terms of ninety portraits or caricatures of performers.”

While Shahn speaks about a mathematical volume underlying the affect of symphonic works in his painting, he opts instead for presenting stick figure music stands and chairs that parenthetically reference the powerful immanence of music in every place, even in “empty studios.”

It is also worth mentioning that, like Shaw, Shahn was Jewish. His 1948 Allegory is a fiery red painting of a giant geometric lion protecting supine persons enveloped by fire. The work is based upon a Chicago fire that killed four children, and simultaneously suggests the artist’s outrage at the immolation of his “own [Jewish] brothers and sisters.”

Like Shaw and his explorations of Jewish identity in The Young Lions, Shahn engaged the cultural devastation of anti-Semitism and the communicative power of art to articulate the social significance of a religious people. Moreover, Shahn’s Allegory seems to raise a question regarding divine activity in the midst of life, a question posed differently by Cage, and in fact, refuted by him since he

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46 Shahn as quoted by Soby. Ibid., 47.
recommends music, not a belief in God, as a guide to serenity and consciousness in
this life.

Returning to Silent Music, it is also relevant to see that, on the one hand,
Shahn’s piece communicates an independence of music from human authorship. On
the other hand, the painting suggests a definition of music based upon space. Apart
from any intention of doing so, Shahn’s visual expression in Silent Music provides a
preliminary glimpse of compositional ambitions expressed by Cage’s Vassar talk.
Shahn’s work acts as a hinge that links the unusual explorations of religion, culture
and art pursued by the Vassar conference panelists to the particular evolution of
ideas that would be transformed into 4’33”.

Cage followed Shahn with his contribution to the panel, “A Composer’s
Confessions,” in which he primarily presented a biographical account of his maturing
into a professional composer, and also discussed ideas for a work-in-progress that
would come to be reinvented as 4’33”. Cage calls the musical concept Silent Prayer.48
In the concluding paragraph of his lecture, he articulates the content of that spiritual
and theoretical petition by combining interior humanistic faith and musical hope:

Each one of us must now look to himself. That which formerly held us together
and gave meaning to our occupations was our belief in God. When we
transferred this belief first to heroes, then to things, we began to walk our
separate paths. That island that we have grown to think no longer exists to
which we might have retreated to escape from the impact of the world, lies, as
it ever did, within each one of our hearts. Towards that final tranquility, which

48 John Cage and Richard Kostelanetz, John Cage, Writer: Previously Uncollected
Pieces, 1st ed. (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993), 27. For historical contextualization
and interpretations of Cage’s announcement that he would shop Silent Prayer to the Muzak
corporation as “a piece of uninterrupted silence,” see Gann, No Such Thing as Silence,
126-34, 76. and Seth Kim-Cohen, In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic
Art (New York: Continuum, 2009), 18-22.
today we so desperately need, any integrating occupation—music is one of them, rightly used—can serve as a guide.\textsuperscript{49}

For Cage, music offers guidance to a “final tranquility, which today we so desperately need.” Whereas Shahn’s canvas portrays an invisible wonder produced by symphonic logic that eludes the eye but mesmerizes the ear, it is as if the unseen wonder of music on Shahn’s canvas is described in Cage’s lecture. In Cage’s Silent Prayer, perceiving the invisibility of music culminates in self-actualization. Yet, after Vassar, as Cage encounters East and South Asian philosophies and religion and Robert Rauschenberg’s White Paintings, as subsequent chapters explore, Cage’s spoken assertions evolve into the quiet 4′33″, a composition where music no longer resides in the interior of human consciousness or even within the work itself, but rather within the spatiality of the world. 4′33″ denies musical performance in order to affirm musical apophasis as Cage discovers that music is given everywhere.

At first glance, the above quotation from Cage and its dismissal of traditional belief in God seems to confirm suspicions from critics like Wolterstorff and Begbie that Cage’s music has nothing to say theologically. Cage’s inchoate remarks, however, provide only a vanishing point for a musical piece – 4′33″ – that speaks volumes. And 4′33″ discloses a world of sounds pulsating with theological enormity that can neither be predicted nor fully captured by words.

American poet and literary critic, as well as former member of the Vassar English department, John Malcolm Brinnin closed the Saturday proceedings from 8:15–9:30pm, just before the 10:30pm “Informal Dance and Smoker” got underway. Brinnin was a formidable poet of his era, but he would be most remembered for first

\textsuperscript{49} Cage and Kostelanetz, \textit{John Cage, Writer}, 44.
bringing Dylan Thomas to the United States.\textsuperscript{50} Still, his poetry endures, and some of Brinnin's stanzas, such as the last three found in his \textit{At Land's End} from the 1951 collection, \textit{The Sorrows of Cold Stone}, capture an invisible power also parallel to the tranquility of Cage and the invisibility of Shahn:

\begin{verbatim}
XI
What do these ribs ache for—
Heart's blood? Mind's eye?
Pride of immortal soul?

XII
What do they cradle?
Love?
Time?
Air?

XIII
Air.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{verbatim}

The first line, "What do these ribs ache for," alludes to the biblical book of Genesis. The reference brings to mind the crafting of Eve from Adam's rib as Elohim tries to find a suitable partner for the man he has made (Genesis 2:20-23). Brinnin appears to retrieve and evoke something like the conundrum of human loneliness and longing presented in the Tanakh narrative.\textsuperscript{52} Yet Brinnin departs from the biblical story,


\textsuperscript{52} Stanza II of the poem also deploys imagery from the Tanakh:
where companionship as embodied by the creation of Eve is the remedy. Brinnin’s aching body finds satisfaction in “Air”, an intangible ubiquity that we share and upon which our lives depend. Air refers not only to oxygen, but also implies an atmospheric freedom that gives life and enables artistic endeavors. Importantly, Brinnin does not poeticize about the power of self-actualization or spiritual interiority. Neither the “[m]ind’s eye” nor “[p]ride of immortal soul” provide what his verse yearns for. Rather, air in Brinnin’s poem gestures toward a ubiquitous generosity upon which life absolutely depends, a generosity everywhere accessible and beyond human authorship and control, a generosity not unlike the musical generosity that Cage approaches inchoately and imprecisely by describing it as a “final tranquility” in Silent Music, a generosity that Cage will eventually frame with bold expression in 4’33”, a generosity that I will interpret as theologically profound. But for now, let us continue to finish our look back at Vassar.

For the final day, at 9:30am on a Sunday morning, Weiss provided summary and discussion. He spoke about freedom providing the conditions for every event in life, and drew from the insights of his earlier works, such as the following passage from Nature and Man:

Whatever necessities there are, result from the exercise of freedom. A thunderclap, the moving of a billiard ball, an impulsive act or an act of design are on a par because they are all the outcome of free occurrences by which

So was the Ark a-waste on a plateau:
Processional giraffe, lynx, ocelot
Printing the sand below.

See Brinnin, The Sorrows of Cold Stone, 14, 16.
indeterminate possibilities are made into determinate actualities.53 His description of freedom, especially with regard to “indeterminate possibilities” being made into “determinate actualities,” is like Brinnin’s air, but with meticulous philosophical clarification. For Weiss, freedom is the air that makes the world come alive. He does write in his 1947 work, Nature and Man, that “Philosophy is Godless cosmology. This is true even when its discourse is pious and its ostensible topic [is] God. The philosophic mind senses the unity behind different inquiries.” Even so, Weiss’s insistence upon freedom as foundational to every act in life is nevertheless theologically suggestive, and more recent commentators, such as French Catholic phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, shed philosophical light upon the theological dimensions of freedom.54 Weiss’s view also provides a segue for thinking about Cage’s vision and eventual expression of music as free in 4’33”. Soundscapes undetermined by human intention and authorship exemplify a radical freedom active in the world.

For Marion, freedom vivifies life and acts without human control. Freedom “precedes” any decision to exercise it. In its anticipatory role, freedom “exposes” humanity to the radical potential of “as if.”55 Marion draws from Immanuel Kant, who

53 Paul Weiss, Nature and Man (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1947), 18. Weiss ends his discussion of “Necessity and Freedom” with the following meditation: “A world of necessity without freedom is a world in which logicians dwell. It is a world in which there are logical connections between existents, but no real movement from one to the other. A world in which there is freedom without necessity is a world in which romantics live. There is movement and life in it, but nothing definite and fixed before or after. Our world is more complex. To be at home in it we must be both rational and practical, constrained yet free, humble and adventurous, beings who know that they have been determined to determine for themselves what they will be” (19).

54 Ibid., 210. For other entries from Weiss discussing God, see index, page 276.

describes freedom as “the possibility of all experience.”\textsuperscript{56} For Kant, “freedom and nature, each in its full significance, would both be found in the same actions, simultaneously and without any contradiction, according to whether one compares them with their intelligible or their sensible cause.”\textsuperscript{57} In other words, freedom shares symbiosis with nature, and causality operates through both.

Yet Marion removes the condition of causality for understanding freedom. He also neutralizes Kant’s description of freedom as a “pure transcendental idea,” a concept prior to human experience. For Marion, freedom escapes and anticipates “all theory subsequent to and before it,” including Kant’s and even his own.\textsuperscript{58} For Marion, freedom “only comes to a decision by itself,” and is ultimately “imprescriptible.”\textsuperscript{59} Yet freedom touches us, and we dance with it in our actions and experiences.

Many exercises of freedom lead to 4’33” including Cage’s early religious and musical development, as well as the Vassar symposium. We may also count among them, as subsequent chapters show, his study of East and South Asian religion and philosophy, and his inspiration from Rauschenberg’s \textit{White Paintings}. As such, the insistence upon human authorship as necessary for musical ingenuity, as asserted by thinkers such as Wolterstorff and Begbie, is mistaken, a misunderstanding that becomes especially clear when one considers a surprising philosophical root for their stance. Nietzsche once wrote that music is “the direct copy of the will itself, and therefore represents the metaphysical of

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 537.
\textsuperscript{58} Marion, \textit{Prolegomena to Charity}, 52.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 47.
everything physical in the world, and the thing-in-itself of every phenomenon.”

Nietzsche’s words effectively provide a historical articulation of Wolterstorff’s and Begbie’s Christian insistence upon human authorship as foundational to the meaning of music, a meaning that captures the essence of all things. Yet music does not mimic the will; it is not merely human made, but flourishes as an expression of an ultimately indescribable freedom. Freedom is not human, but is atmospheric, and is deeper than intellection. Neither does music voice a metaphysical essence, undergirding all that is in an imperceptible key. Rather, music permeates life as a given from an incomprehensibility to be freely encountered and whose charity is to be freely shared.

The Vassar conference occasioned a remarkable dialogue that explored the unity between art and life, and shared intuitions about how theology informs human identity within a living world inseparable from the aesthetic. Though Cage’s presentation proposed a musical reliance and self-actualization to replace superstitions such as dependence upon God, his ideas would eventually evolve into a monumental act of musical withdrawal – 4′33″. The “silent” composition would seduce attention outward by exposing soundscapes surrounding every moment, soundscapes that imply infinite magnitude. Whereas thinkers like Begbie have dismissed Cage’s music as nihilistic and have misunderstood a precedent like 4′33″ as forfeiting music and its formation altogether, Cage’s 4′33″ celebrates musical life far beyond the creativity of human authorship. Music is everywhere sounds are, and that ubiquity intones an incomprehensible generosity.

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