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Autor: Shono, Taiko
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A DEVICE THAT LETS US LISTEN TO MA (間)

Taiko Shono

I once met a composer in a New York “forest.” He lived in the center of New York City, but entering his flat, I felt as if I were being engulfed by a small forest. He had placed over two hundred plants all around his flat. It struck me that in one corner, several pots and small stones were arranged as in a *tsubo-niwa*, a traditional Japanese courtyard garden. When I asked him about the intention behind such an installation, he answered that with this setup he could notice by chance changes in the plants’s performance—their sometimes unexpected growing or withering. He added that this setup always gave him a sense of something happening beyond his control. Indeed, this composer was John Cage.

John Cage is perhaps best known for his “chance music” compositions, which acquaint listeners with the sounds of the here and now, just as they are. These also best reveal the profound influence of Zen Buddhist thought in his work. His well-known piece 4’33” (1952) instructs performers not to play anything for four minutes and thirty-three seconds so that the audience may instead listen to the sounds of the immediate environment. At its premiere, it is said, the audience listened to the sound of rain on the rooftop, the guests’s restless stirring in the seats, and other sounds in- and outside the concert hall. In this way, with each performance, listeners are guaranteed a one-time-only encounter with these particular sounds.

4’33” has had a major impact not only on contemporary music but also many other artistic forms. The fact that it is divided into three movements, however, is surprisingly little known even though this articulation is of central importance to the piece. Cage leaves the means of indicating the beginning and end of each movement up to the performer. During its premiere, pianist David Tudor signaled beginnings and endings by shutting and opening the piano lid. At first the piano lid had been opened like at an ordinary concert, then he indicated the beginning of the movement by closing it and the end of the movement by opening it. Scores currently in circulation read “I,” “Tacet,” “II,” “Tacet,” “III,” “Tacet,” the numerals and repeating term *tacet* (signaling “silence,” an important term for Cage) descending on a single vertical sheet of paper. Western musical notation usually represents the passage of time along a horizontal axis, with the vertical axis showing the overlap of simultaneously

occurring sounds. The original score of 4'33" which was used at its premiere was also written horizontally. The fact that Cage later changed its orientation so that the passage of time is shown vertically seems to indicate that, in this piece, time is not simply moving forward steadily like the hands of a clock—something deeper is occurring.

There is a parallel between the division of Cage's piece into movements and the concept behind the *shishi-odoshi* found in Japanese gardens. *Shishi-odoshi*, which literally means "scare the deer," describes a hollow bamboo stalk into which water trickles (see "The Nature of Intervals," page 40). When the bamboo stalk fills up, its balance shifts and it pivots to hit a rock, making a dull "thud" sound. The water spills out and the cycle repeats. Originally intended as an agricultural implement to drive away animals and birds, as the name suggests, it was repurposed as a garden accoutrement by Ishikawa Jozan at his retirement villa in Kyoto, which was built in 1641 and is known as *Shisen-dō*. When it was transformed from an agricultural implement into a sound device, it changed from a producer of positive sounds to a generator of negative spaces. This produced an inversion of the standard figure-ground relationship. Rather than listening to the sound of the bamboo piece striking the rock, we are meant to listen to the intervals between the strikes.

In Japan, we express this interval with the word *ma*. This term does not describe mere emptiness but rather expresses a profound concept that includes the possibilities of abundant experience and imagination. At first, we await the next "clack" of the *shishi-odoshi*. But as we repeat this act of waiting for the next sound, our listening sense is awakened little by little. The intermittent "clack" draws our attention to the rustling of leaves, the whistling wind, the babbling of a brook, or whatever sounds were already present in the garden. It even partitions the flow of time—something which usually goes unnoticed. And so the steady stream of noise filling the intervals is revealed as the vivid soundscape that it is.

Shisen-dō is also a Zen temple, and this brings us back to 4'33" and the realization that what inspired the segmentation of time in Cage's piece is also what inspired Ishikawa Jozan to put a *shishi-odoshi* in his garden: the idea of a device that lets us listen to *ma*.

This way of listening enables us to connect with the environment and, in time, with the world beyond our immediate surrounds. As a soundscape designer in the next generation after John Cage, I wish to bring this experience of active listening to those members of the public who have no interest in contemporary classical music. Toward this end, I design soundscapes, permanent installations in public spaces, which strive to bring people into creative contact with the surrounding environment through sounds I create using elements on site: rain, wind, waves, spring water, etc.

Shishi-odoshi, 4'33," and my soundscape designs share the aim of making the public aware of something which may be present yet typically goes unnoticed.



SEQUENTIAL LISTENING

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