

Do We Actually ‘Hear’ Silence?

July 12, 2023

At a concert hall near Woodstock, N.Y., in August 1952, the pianist David Tudor played John Cage’s three-movement composition *4’33”*. Doing so did not require enormous jumps with the right hand. Most people could play the piece with equal skill. Tudor set a stopwatch for 33 seconds and sat in front of the piano without touching the keys. He opened and shut the lid before sitting for another two minutes and 40 seconds and then did so again for a final interval of one minute and 20 seconds. Then he bowed and left the stage.

As Cage put it, *4’33”* was a “silent piece.” The composer wanted to push the audience members to listen to the other sounds that surrounded them. “There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time,” Cage later said. “There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.”

The way we traditionally think of listening is that we hear a noise, a song, our friend’s voice, a car honking. But those sounds are inevitably punctuated with silent pauses that mark an absence of acoustic waves. Silence is integral to our everyday experience: the awkward pause in a conversation, the second after a thunderclap, the moment after a piece of music ends before the applause begins. The term “deafening silence” is even a common figure of speech.

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