

PATRICK SIMPSON
#12 SCRIPT

On Silence

When was the last time you were in silence?

[4'33" in amphitheater]

[Me: "Much quieter performance than our last few."

Reece: "Yeah."]

Reece and I were performing 4'33", a piece by John Cage. It consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence.

[Reece: "But, it's like... it's kind of a feeling of—I almost feel like I'm floating, like if you sit here, and you're just, you close your eyes and you're sitting still, it almost feels like you're floating. I can't explain why, it just does."]

If you don't remember or haven't listened to the last episode, Reece is a junior at Carmel High School, a bari sax player, amateur composer, and overall lover of music. I asked him what the quietest place he knew was, and he brought me out here.

["Um, yes, we are at the Monon Center's outdoor playground, down by the water and the path that goes over the pond. And uh, the amphitheater here is my favorite spot."]

When 4'33" premiered back in August of 1952, just outside of Woodstock, New York, it was in an outdoor concert hall not entirely unlike this amphitheater here in Carmel. On that night, in front of an audience including some of the most prominent musicians and composers of the time, the pianist David Tudor sat down, closed the lid of the piano, and started a stopwatch. After 33 seconds he reset the stopwatch, opened the lid, closed it, and started the stopwatch again. After another two minutes and 40

seconds, he did it all again, with the third and final silence being one minute, twenty seconds long.

What was heard that night wasn't really silence though, just as my performance with Reece wasn't either. What we heard was a layer of ambient sound that's always surrounding us, but we don't always take the time to notice.

["There's quite a few cars in the background, but, they're kind of overtaken by the sound of the rustling grasses, and uh, the birds, the ducks, just, it's peaceful. And then there's the cars in the background."]

Now, we've talked about the blurry, or even nonexistent line between noise and music on this podcast before, and I even included Cage and what I called a "portion" of 4'33" at the end of the noise episode, but I've never really gone into the idea of silence before. So this episode isn't really about music; it's about what it means to do nothing except listen. To listen deeply and, hopefully, to learn to be a little more engaged with the world.

I'm Patrick Simpson, and this is Melomania.

[John Cage - Imaginary Landscape No. 4, performed by the Maelstrom Percussion Ensemble]

[John Cage interview, emerging from the noise: "... conversations with American artists over seventy. I'm Connie Goldman, and this is composer John Cage."]

John Cage: "I searched for another reason for making music than communicating my feelings. And I found it, through an Indian musician who was disturbed over the effect that Western music was having on Indian music. And she studied Western music in a concentrated fashion for about nine months here in New York, and she studied, among

other teachers, she studied with me a survey of contemporary music and counterpoint.

And I asked her what her teacher had said was the purpose of music. And she said 'to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences.'"]

[Imaginary Landscape No. 4 swells up again]

In the late 1940s, Cage became interested in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism.

He attended lectures with the zen master D. T. Suzuki at Columbia University and began to devise a system of composing in which he would not make any choices, instead leaving the music up to chance.

["The central piece in that change is called 'The Music of Changes.'"]

[Cage - Music of Changes, performed by David Tudor]

["The title is also derived from the ancient Chinese book, in which you obtain the answer to a question by tossing three coins six times or the arrow stick, which is called 'The Book of Changes,' the *I Ching*."]"]

The oldest of the Chinese classics, the *I Ching* produces seemingly random numbers that were believed to show divine intent. Cage used it to compose "Music of Changes," which you're hearing now, and many other pieces after this.

["And when I found that book in, early 50s, I began almost immediately making a way of composing, which was through the use of chance operations, and I shifted my whole um, work from making choices, to asking questions and then taking the answers that were provided by chance operations."]"]

For Cage, Western music was too egotistical; it was about expressing your ideas, emotions, and individuality. It was a form of language, of communication. But all Cage wanted were sounds, with no intention behind them.

[Imaginary Landscape No. 4 fades out]

So then, how does silence play into this? Well, what Cage realized is that silence doesn't really exist, at least not literally. He had this epiphany in what's called an anechoic chamber, a room that's designed to absorb all sounds. It is as close to complete silence you can get. But what Cage discovered, is that there were still sounds. He heard two, one high, and one low. An engineer told him the high one was his nervous system, the low his blood circulation.

And it's true, even in this soundproof booth where I'm recording, there are sounds. There's the low hum of the hard drive of the computer I'm recording to...

[Hum of the hard drive]

There's this quiet, high-pitched beeping sound that comes from the monitor speakers...

[Monitor speaker beeping]

And if you get close enough, you can even hear my heartbeat...

[My heartbeat]

It's faint, but it's there.

There's no escaping sounds. So what silence is, at least for Cage, is the absence of intentional sound, of organized sound. 4'33" is just that—a frame in which we can appreciate that absence. Silence, he wrote once, "is a change of mind, a turning around."

[Imaginary Landscape No. 4 fades back in, along with the sound of New York City]

[Cage: "I knew that in the 20th century, we had to be able to live in New York City. So I thought, a sober and quiet mind, in this day and age, will have to be sober and quiet in a

noisy situation. And it's that, that has been my guiding principle, so that finally, those noises, and now even these—constant ones—now strike me as being divine influences.

Because we become quiet in our minds, that is to say free of our likes and dislikes, in order to receive whatever the environment gives us, as something good.”]

And it's something we get less and less of every day. Or really, when I say “we,” I actually mean “me.” I have this constant stream of audio flowing into my ears...

[Audio montage of information overload]

... and if you're listening to this, you do too. Or if it's not podcasts, it's music, or YouTube videos, (speeding up) or email, or Twitter, or the latest headlines, or cable television, or...

[AM radio static overwhelms all other noises]

As I'm writing and producing this episode, I'm a little more than two months away from my high school graduation. Another couple of months after that, I'll be going to college. In this little time I have left, I've been learning to spend more and more of it just... listening. Taking in this school, this town, my home... taking all of it in before it ends.

[Field recording of myself: “We are at four minutes, forty-eight seconds on this recording... and I am out in this, grassy clearing area, kind of a ditch. It's surrounded by a brick wall, it's near the Freshman Center. It's kinda cold. But, until yesterday, when I was just walking around here, I didn't even know this little area existed, and it was kind of weird because, it's like, there's like a whole grassy field here, and then right there is a neighborhood... just gotta get inside pretty soon, because it's getting cold, and the wind

is blowing. But before I do that, I'm going to conduct a performance of 4'33" right here, Carmel Indiana, outside of Carmel High School, in this grassy clearing area.

rustling of leaves

"... gotta get my timer out—oh! It's wet, it's wet, can't sit, can't sit. *laughs* Gotta be on my feet. Okay... stopwatch on, and we are starting, now."]

The morning after my interview with Reece, as he and I were warming up for jazz rehearsal at 7 am, Reece wearily told me that he "really needs some 4'33" right now," and I laughed, but he was right. It helps to learn to listen to nothing, to revel in silence. Because if we can't do that, then eventually, it all becomes noise.

[John Cage - In a Landscape]

Melomania is written and produced by me, Patrick Simpson. The tracks that I used are, in order of appearance, John Cage's Imaginary Landscape No. 4, Music of Changes, a couple renditions of 4'33" of course, and what you're hearing right now is one of his early piano works, In a Landscape. Melomania is a production of 91.3 WHJE, broadcasting from beautiful, downtown, Carmel Indiana. Thanks for listening.

A note on the formatting: Usually, I write these scripts in all-caps. It's just the way we were taught to format radio scripts, the way I've been doing it since my freshman year. But this time, I decided not to. It felt like I was yelling. This episode is also the first where I did not put any effects or compressors on my voice; what you hear is what I recorded straight into the microphone.