

# SOUND AS SILENCE: Nothingness in the Music of Anton Webern and John Cage

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When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.<sup>1</sup>

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the rise of modern science, the world has no longer been experienced as an ‘enchanted garden,’ where nature was meaningful and governed by intrinsic value-filled orders. Evoked by this disenchantment with the world, the senses of loneliness and homelessness are well-captured in French philosopher Blaise Pascal’s writings, which—centuries later—are escalated further by existential ideology’s disenchantment with being. In *Being and Nothingness*, inspired by the question concerning being raised in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Sartre presents nothingness as the foundation for being and the origin of its nihilation, *i.e.* the non-being. The experience of nothingness makes possible being’s encounter with its non-being through the consciousness of freedom. The realization that there is nothing other than the nothingness separating being from non-being is the source of forlornness—anguish<sup>2</sup> in Sartre’s terminology—inherent to being itself.

1 Blaise Pascal, and Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Pascal’s Pensées; Introduction by TS Eliot*, (EP Dutton), 1958.

2 Charles B. Guignon, and Derk Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 325.

The notion of the silence of the infinite space invoked by Pascal, however, sheds light upon a broader interpretation of Sartrean nothingness beyond the paradigm of being; namely, to the world of sound. In this essay, I extend the notion of nothingness to silence in contrast with sound and discuss silence as an act of expression and artistic interrogation in contemporary classical music. I propose beginning our discussion with a reconstruction of Sartre's deduction for nothingness through a regressive course of arguments that traces back to being's relation to the world. From there, I provide an exposition of sound based on the concept of a total sound-space<sup>3</sup>—bound by our pure auditory experience while silence as the non-being of sound originates from Sartrean nothingness. I then distinguish between absolute and relative silence, being primarily concerned with the latter, and further explicate the relation of sound to silence as analogous to that of being to non-being. Observing, of course, that varying techniques in music approach silence differently, I focus specifically on contemporary repertoires and analyze the role of silence in the third movement of *Five Pieces for Orchestra* by Anton Webern and *4'33"* by John Cage as an embodiment of nothingness in the sound-space.

## 2. NON-BEING AND THE ORIGIN OF NOTHINGNESS

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces his discussion of being with the recognition that being—as the totality “man-in-the-world”<sup>4</sup>—is a synthetic relation between *man* and *world*.<sup>5</sup> This relation can only be established in the being by a self-interrogating question,<sup>6</sup> but even the question presupposes both “a being who questions and a being [that] is questioned,”<sup>7</sup> and an expected reply from the being in question of either an affirmation of yes or a negation of no (hence, the question itself permits the possibility of a negative reply).<sup>8</sup> In the case of being, such a negation would imply the objective existence of a non-being, that is, an absence of a synthetic self-relation between being and the being-in-the-world, be it non-knowing with the interrogative attitude, non-existence of a transcendent being, or the non-being of limitation.<sup>9</sup> The permanent possibility of non-being conditions the inquiry about being by limiting its reply (*i.e.* being *is* but *nothing* outside of being, and is, therefore, encompassed with non-being).

The negation is not merely a quality of judgement following a pre-judicative attitude, but rather, a consequence of the apprehension of nothingness that always appears

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “total sound-space” refers to John Cage's discussion of sound: John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings*, (Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Charles B. Guignon, and Derk Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 310.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg. 310.

<sup>6</sup> The term “being” here refers to Heidegger's Dasein in *Being and Time*, *i.e.* the being to whom the meaning of being is concerned: Charles B. Guignon, and Derk Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 216-217.

<sup>7</sup> Guignon and Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 310.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg. 310.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg. 311.

within the limits of expectation.<sup>10</sup> For instance, a café is full positivity by itself, but when Sartre enters it with the expectation of meeting Pierre there only not to find him, the café recedes into nothingness as the undifferentiated ground in his search for Pierre.<sup>11</sup> In seeking Pierre out, Sartre adopts the attitude of interrogation in expectation of one reply of two possibilities; that is, the presence or the absence of Pierre such that nothingness is not subjective, but rather, a “real event” objectively grounding the negation. Therefore, nothingness is the origin and foundation for the negation.

The negation presupposed by the question concerning being necessitates the objective existence of nothingness. Nothingness, however, is neither *causa sui*—since it does not nihilate itself—nor derived from being (which in its own right possesses full positivity and lacks structure, thereby making it non-relational to nothingness). From this deduction it follows that nothingness originates only from the being for whom the nothingness of being remains in question.<sup>12</sup> In the state of self-detachment, the being whose questions could nihilate nothingness in relation to himself disassociates from the causal series, and then nihilates himself from nothingness anticipating the possibility of non-being from its own being.<sup>13</sup> In other words, nothingness comes to things through their own being, which then, logically, means that their nothingness must belong to them.

### 3. SILENCE AS NON-BEING OF SOUND

Given that being is such that nothingness comes to the world as the origin of its own non-being, a parallel relation can be reasoned to the auditory world, wherein nothingness can be elicited from sound as the origin of silence. To begin with, sound exists as a particular relation to the total sound-space, bound by our pure auditory experience. The relation of a particular sound to the sound-space is defined by five specific determinants: frequency (pitch), amplitude (loudness), overtone structure (timbre), duration, and morphology (how the sound begins, goes on, and dies away).<sup>14</sup> Since even one alteration of at least one of the five determinants changes how sound is perceived, the relation of sound to the sound-space must be fluid. Therefore, sound could be regarded as a continuum within the total sound-space for which the five determinants are limited by our own sense of audibility.

Now that sound has been presented as a relation to the sound-space, a question concerning sound—corresponding to the question concerning being—could be formulated as follows: is there any five-determinant combination that can determine

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Pg. 313.

<sup>11</sup> Guignon and Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 316.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, Pg. 319.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, Pg. 320.

<sup>14</sup> John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings*, 9.

a particular sound in relation to the sound-space? Following the deduction, the question itself permits a reply that entails the possibility of a negation: no, such a relation does not exist. What gives rise to such a negation is *silence*, *i.e.* the sound lacking the five-determinant relation to the sound-space. In the auditory world, this negation implies the objective existence of silence, and it thus follows that sound encompassed with silence in that sound—as a continuum—is defined by its (changing) relation to the sound-space (but nothing outside of it). Hence, silence is the *non-being* of sound with three possible forms: the non-being of knowing if a relation exists, the possibility of non-being of the sound in question, and the non-being of limitation.<sup>15</sup> As previously discussed, a negation is not simply a quality of judgement, but a consequence of the apprehension of nothingness due to the limits of expectation.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, silence, as the negative reply to the question concerning sound has its origin and foundation in Sartrean nothingness.

From here, I would like to pause the regressive deduction to distinguish between two types of silence: absolute silence and relative silence. Silence characterized by the lack of relation seems to imply an absence, or the non-existence of the five-determinant combination, which is the clearly defined opposite of the presence or the existence of such without any quantifiable parameter, which in turn, could scale the “level of existence”. Therefore, silence as the lack of relation to the sound-space seems to be dialectically absolute. In reality, however, we cannot perceive any such sound as *absolute silence*. Even if one enters into a sound-proof or anechoic chamber, he can still hear at least two kinds of sound produced by himself: his nerve’s systematic operation and his blood’s circulation,<sup>17</sup> which both have their own relations to the sound-space—“[t]here is always something to listen to.”<sup>18</sup> However, we do perceive silence, or the absence of perceivable sound on various occasions; for example, at a concert between two movements of a symphony, or simply when we enter a quiet library from a busy street. At those moments, no sound from the five-determinant relation comes into the presence of our auditory experience (at least temporarily) because the sounds presented to, and expected by, us—the orchestra or the street sound—disappear, and the sounds outside of our expectation have not yet come into our awareness. It is not difficult to notice that the brief pause of the orchestral sound between movements is filled with the audience’s breathing, or perhaps the rustling of clothes, and even a quiet library might be filled with the sound of air flow produced by the ventilation system. Just as the room tone in a movie scene, these sounds normally fall into the background of our unconsciousness where we fail to map them into the sound-space by the five-determinant relations and take them as the silence—the lack of relation to the sound-space. The notion of *relative silence*,

15 I made a reference to Sartre’s characterization of three types of non-being: Guignon and Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 311.

16 See note 10 above.

17 John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings*, 13.

18 Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove P, 1967), 35/155.

therefore, describes sounds that we are unaware of, all of which characterized by the absence of a perceivable relation to the sound-space whereby they manifest themselves as silence in our auditory experience. Note that any sound categorized as relative silence always has the potential, given that we are able to adjust our expectation and actively hear it, to become sound to our ears with its own relation to the total sound-space. Since it is the relative silence that we hear as silence, the rest of this paper only concerns itself with relative silence.

Given that silence has its origin and foundation in nothingness, nothingness must objectively exist in order to make our apprehension of silence possible. Similar to the case of being, I argue that nothingness comes into the sound-space as the origin of silence, or of the non-being of sound, precisely through sound itself. On one hand, silence cannot be derived from sound. It would be inconceivable that a particular sound of full positivity in its five-determinant relation at the same time maintains in our awareness a representation of silence as its non-being.<sup>19</sup> The notion of (relative) silence asserts that silence by nature has the potential to possess a relation to sound-space as a continuum. As a result, every heard sound becomes based on a subjective situation constructed essentially by the relationship between sound and another sound (*i.e.* the sound of relative silence, rather than an objective situation where sounds are the negative of silence or vice versa<sup>20</sup>). One should be able to think of sound “without considering it negatively,”<sup>21</sup> that is to say, sound is not conceived as an absence or nihilation of silence. Rather, a particular sound is heard against its (relative) silence in that our perception distinguishes it with the full positivity by our awareness of it. This distinction asserts that we cannot both perceive and be unaware of a particular sound; ergo, it is non-relational to silence, or to its non-being.

On the other hand, silence is not *causa sui*. The property of “nihilating itself”<sup>22</sup> cannot be granted to silence because silence cannot be perceived alone—we always *listen* to something whose existence as a continuum establishes our expectation, such as the sound of our nerve’s system operation and the blood’s circulation in an anechoic chamber. Even when all sounds actively heard by us suddenly disappear, what has blended into the background of silence immediately emerges in our awareness as the new continuum in the sound-space. Therefore, a sound that recedes to silence, as soon as it is left by itself, will be heard as the sound of full positivity with a specific relation to the sound-space. The interrelation of sound and silence can be considered bi-directional, where silence allows sounds to appear, yet, at the same time depends on the presence of sound to remain its non-existence to our perception.

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19 I made a reference to Sartre’s argument that non-being is not derived from being: see note 12 above.

20 “Subjective situation” and “objective situation” are the phrases used by John Cage in the discussion of silence: John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings*, 14.

21 Eric De Visscher, “There’s no such thing as silence...”: John Cage’s Poetics of Silence”, in *Interface* 18.4 (1989), 259.

22 Guignon and Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 318.

This “symbiosis of opposites”<sup>23</sup> can be simplified to the fact that something requires nothingness in order to appear and that nothingness requires something in order to maintain its nothingness. The deduction reveals that silence is neither derived from sound nor self-caused, and it follows that nothingness as the origin of silence must be embodied in sound itself as a potential or possibility of becoming its non-being (*i.e.* the silence).

#### 4. SILENCE IN WEBERN, FIVE PIECES FOR ORCHESTRA, III AND CAGE, 4'33”

In modernist music repertoires, silence is considered to be state of “a sonic and/or conceptual ideal”<sup>24</sup> to which a work aspires. The purity, complexity and fragmentary in the sonic state of silence becomes a new compositional focus. Drawn by the perishability of sound and the proximity to nothingness that is feared and simultaneously aspired to, in silence, modernist composers aim to achieve such a state through musical languages. Now given that silence as the non-being of sound has its origin and foundation in Sartrean nothingness, in this section, I discuss the approach to silence in contemporary classical music; specifically, in the third movement of *Five Pieces for Orchestra* by Anton Webern<sup>25</sup> and *4'33”* by John Cage<sup>26</sup> as a way of evoking an experience of Sartrean nothingness.

In his works, Anton Webern appeals to nothingness not by patches of quietness gapped in rests and pauses as the Classic and the early Romantic composers do, but rather, in relying on musical means to evoke the sense of silence as in the third movement of *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (which depicts a mountain vista). With the dynamic marking *pianississimo*,<sup>27</sup> the opening Campanella<sup>28</sup> creates a sense of stillness, which swells with the shimmering sound made by mandolin, guitar, harp, and celesta. Each individual tone in the opening sound's chromatic cluster<sup>29</sup> is struck repeatedly or rolled on strings, and creates in effect a sustained, yet vibrating sonority.<sup>30</sup> Since all but one of the tones of the cluster are a semitone apart from each other, the sound creates a seemingly chaotic silence, but accurately conveys the sound of nature and the serenity residing in the mountain. The violin enters later with a slightly louder dynamic playing a fragmented four-note melody, which is then echoed by a muted

23 “Symbiosis of opposites” is a phrase Deborah Weigel uses in the discussion of Cage's notion of silence: Deborah Weigel, and John Cage. “Silence in John Cage and Samuel Beckett: 4' 33” and “Waiting for Godot.” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 12 (2002), 6.

24 David Metzger, “Modern Silence,” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2006): 333.

25 Anton Webern, “Sehr langsam und ausserst zart”, track 15 on *Webern: Passacaglia / Symphony / Five Pieces*, Ulster Orchestra, Takuo Yuasa, Naxos 8.554841, 2001, compact disc.

26 John Cage, “4'33””, track 14 on *CAGE, J.: Primitive / In a Landscape / A Room / Variations I / Waiting / 4' 33” / Dream / Suite for Toy Piano (Happy Birthday John!) (Cage, Sacchi)*. John Cage. Floraledda Sacchi. Amadeus Arte AAP12001, 2012, compact disc.

27 Musical term, meaning “very very softly”.

28 A percussion instrument, meaning “little bell”.

29 Musical term, referring to a chord made of several tones in a pitch class.

30 David Metzger, “Modern Silence,” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2006): 340.

horn. As the echo fades away, the previous sonority of stillness gradually converges to silence. The rest of the movement is a continuation of the dwindling of soft sonority with the nothingness. Webern creates the sounds that appear to be fragile in the beginning—with their softness and extreme instability due to the semitones—but as they keep vibrating as the only sound in the piece, we hear them struggling to escape from silence before finally give in. In this piece, the silence is heard with sonic density. The musical means used by Webern to capture the quality of silence become interpreted as stillness, softness, hush, and fragmentation.<sup>31</sup> When something elicits nothing, silences itself becomes the act of expression itself.<sup>32</sup> Webern's piece (1913) premiered much earlier than the publication of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), but it demonstrates at the very least that the once clear distinction between sound and silence had already been blurred well before the French philosopher's investigation of the phenomenon. Retrospectively, Webern's approach to silence through sound could be regarded as a way to evoke the nothingness that Sartre later systematically derives from his notion of being. As a proximity to nothingness, the dwindling soft sonority in the music can easily fall out of our awareness along with silence, but they could always be dissected from silence by its constantly vibrating and changing texture. However, whether it is heard as sound or silence, the nature of the sound itself does not change, since it either possesses or has the potential to possess the definite five-determinant relation to the total sound-space. Therefore, this particular piece by Webern alludes to the later recognition that nothingness as the origin of silence comes from nowhere else but sound itself.

Silence, as realized in later modernist styles, transcends from an act of expression to an attitude of interrogation. John Cage, for example, was the first composer who sought the state of pure silence in his works, and his legendary piece *4'33"* (1952)<sup>33</sup> does not contain even a single note—ushering in four minutes and thirty-three seconds of essential silence as its title indicates. In the text *Silence*, Cage makes a distinction between the intentional and unintentional sound.<sup>34</sup> For a listener, what we traditionally regard as *intentional* is the sound heard with a particular relation to the sound-space, while what regarded as *unintentional* we are unaware of (and it consequently recedes into silence). The sound made by the orchestra at a concert according to the notes on music sheets is the intentional making, while the other sounds, for instance, breathing and clothes rustling, are the unintentional. In *4'33"*, by excluding the instrumental sounds that are normally conceived as intentional, Cage alters the audience's expectation by switching the unintentional sound in the surrounding environment to the intentional—he invites the silence into our auditory

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31 Ibid, Pg. 334.

32 Ibid, Pg. 336.

33 The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of the performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4'33" and the three parts were 33", 2'40", and 1'20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist, or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.

34 John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings*, 14.

experience as sounds. Since silence cannot be perceived by itself, the audience are encouraged to listen actively to those sounds that might otherwise be silence for them. Here, standing on the borderland between sound and silence, Cage captures their structural alteration by being conscious of their intimate relationship, thereby demonstrating the relation between being and non-being. Just like the consciousness of being, the consciousness of sound in this piece suspends the presupposed distinction between the intentional and unintentional sound, and in that act, the supposedly unintentional sounds that once were the non-being of sound are now made aware by us and determined by their specific relation to the sound-space as the new continuum in our auditory experience. Since there is nothing that separates sound from silence, as illustrated in this piece by Cage, nothingness slips into the cleavage introduced by the suspension of consciousness. The notion of nothingness, then, elucidates the (non-)identity of silence with sound: silence is the being of sound, in the mode of not being it.

## 5. IMPLICATION

What are the implications of the abstract dialectic of nothingness in the world of sound to our auditory experience in daily life? Can the interplay between sound and nothingness go beyond the notion of silence? I would like to offer some preliminary sketches to answer these questions in this final section.

In the history of western music, silence has never been equal to sound until the rise of modernism in the early twentieth century. The moments of silence in music had been generally considered as “supposed non-sound”, which inevitably served as the backdrop against which ‘real sound’ could be presented and dissected.<sup>35</sup> Those silent moments in music tend to be experienced as expressive quietness; for example, the tense pauses in the opening measure in Haydn’s *String Quartet*, Op. 76, No. 5 “Finale,” or the quiet stillness in Introit of Berlioz’s *Requiem*. Later, as composers gradually shifted away from the conventional musical elements—such as harmony, melody, or texture—that the classical and romantic period exploited, music was taken to a broader sonic aspect, where silence as the previously supposed absence of expressive utterances became an act of expression itself. With the realization that sound is inseparable from silence, modern composers began to welcome silence in their works. As the boundary between sound and silence is blurred, so does the boundary between what is music and what is not—from Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone theory to the later serialism led by Boulez. Composers constantly challenged these originally absolute binary distinctions, all of which arguably relate to the existential notion of nothingness, which derived an even broader implication: there is nothing separating something from nothing. As a result, in terms

<sup>35</sup> David Metzger, “Modern Silence,” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2006): 336.



of our own auditory experience, music seems to become an arbitrary limitation to how we perceive the sound in the world. Cage describes music as “an organization of sound,”<sup>36</sup> but what is organization? When we contemplate the question, it seems that everything could be an organization; for example, nature, industry, society, and therefore, anything could be heard as music—as Cage writes himself:

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.<sup>37</sup>

All sounds, including “noise,” are music. The notion of noise, however, has not been mentioned or discussed in this paper. It is not normally active in our perception because it is too disturbing to be aware of constantly, so it lacks a definite relation to the sound-space, (at least for most of us). At the same time, it is not part of relative silence either because we might find it disturbing even if we are not completely aware of it. Thus, “[n]oise is the last thing that separates us from silence.”<sup>38</sup> Given the analogy between the dialectic of being and nothingness and that of sound and silence, an interesting topic left for future discussion might be centered around the notion of noise (an unescapable element from our normal auditory experience) and how it fits into this essay’s conceptual scheme of sound and silence, relates to Sartre’s understanding of nothingness, and whether or not there is a defining quality to noise such that it does not fall into pure value judgement. ♦

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<sup>36</sup> John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> David Metzger, “Modern Silence,” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2006): 369.

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