

Participating in Silence

Nakia S. Pope
Winthrop University

My office is loud. My confession is that I had never listened to John Cage's *4'33"* before I first read Peter Nelsen's essay. In fact, at first I didn't know what he was talking about. I figured it out relatively quickly, given Nelsen's wonderful writing, but I had no knowledge or experience of the piece prior to the essay. So what did I do then? Like any good student, I went to YouTube. There, multiple versions of *4'33"* await. I watched and listened to two: one on the piano and the other performed by a full orchestra. That's when I realized: my office is loud. An intake vent lurks in one corner of the ceiling. The actual vent sits in another. Both make lots of noise on a day when the heat is running.

According to Nelsen, Cage wants us to attend to the ambient sounds that constantly surround us, yet we neglect this attentiveness unless forced to by a purposeful silence. Nelsen wants to extend this attentiveness to his students — current or future teachers all — so that they remain attentive to the personal, emotional, and aesthetic aspects of teaching, all of which are easily lost in the instrumental, technocratic culture of contemporary American schooling. He is rightly sensitive to the oppressive tinge of a concept like silence, noting that silence is often that which we try to uncover, avoid, and eliminate because it is often deployed against those who lack power. He is also rightly sensitive to the difficulty in cultivating this attentiveness, given the expectations that exist within our current grammar of schooling.

I am in agreement with all of this. While I am thus tempted to then leave the rest of my response as a blank white page, I am unable to break with the expectations of this forum to do so. Thus, I would like to point out a few things to extend Nelsen's line of thought, with some help from Phillip Jackson.

First, silence is localized. The world was not silent in *4'33"*. The performer was. Someone, something is silent. That seems to be a significant point of the piece. Sounds exist that we cannot hear, which we ignore. When those who are expected to perform are silent, other things can be heard. This speaks to the relationship between silence and power that Nelsen later mentions in the essay. Thus, I am not so sure silence itself is the issue. What is really at stake is who is being quiet.

Second, art is transaction. Cage illustrates this well. What *4'33"* does is create a space in which audience, performer, composer, and a host of other environmental factors come together to produce an experience. *4'33"* only seems to make sense when there is an audience, when it is publicly performed. As Phillip Jackson reminds us, for John Dewey, "The true work of art is not the object that sits in a museum nor the performance captured on film or disc. Rather, it is the experience occasioned by the production or experience of appreciating objects or performances."¹ As a work of art, *4'33"* is a blank, silent space. It consciously seeks to create *an* experience.

Failure of the work is, fundamentally, failure of appreciation. If the performance fails, it's because the audience fails along with it. Dewey suggests that there is an element of this in any aesthetic experience.

Third, blank spaces are participatory. What 4'33" creates is a sonically blank space. What happens then, is that the "other" sounds that normally exist underneath the music of a performance are amplified in perception. We attend to them because we are forced to, in a sense, by the conflict of expectations created by 4'33". As Nelsen points out, many of those sounds are ones created by the audience and its attentiveness (or lack thereof) — the clearing of throats, the rustle of clothing, the huffs as disappointed concert-goers get up and leave. These sounds are only present because of the audience; they can only be heard because the performer is silent. The audience fills in the empty space created by the performer, which is exactly what makes 4'33" function. Blank spaces allow the audience to transact more fully with the work. Yet, this may not happen if the audience is not prepared.

Fourth, attentiveness has its own instrumental quality. It may need tools to happen. Nelsen says we cannot demand our students attend in the same way that Cage demanded his audience attend to the silence created by his public performance. In many ways, this ethical claim Nelsen makes was the most challenging of the essay. It seemingly rests on the distinction between the different types of power relations present between artist and audience as opposed to student and teacher. I freely grant that those differences exist and that the teacher–student relationship carries with it a different set of ethical obligations than artist–audience. But those differences are pedagogical; they center on the obligations toward preparation of the other for the experience that is to be had. Cage had no obligation to prepare his audience for what was going to happen, nor did he have any obligation to assist them in reflecting on what had happened once it was over. I even find the idea that he demanded attentiveness somewhat problematic. He certainly manipulated the expectations of his audience to create the conditions where attentiveness was foregrounded. Yet I am sure there were many present who failed to take advantage of the conditions that were created. Some complained, some daydreamed, others left. This may be a semantic distinction — between "demanding" and "creating conditions" — but one I think may have some purchase. Teachers, I think, have to create conditions where certain taken-for-granted features of the world are problematized. This problematization seems to be a fundamental obligation of not just philosophy teachers, but *all* teachers. This is another very Deweyan point. Thinking only happens when there is a problem. Growth, the end-that's-not-an-end of education, occurs through the continuous reconstruction of experience through conceptual tools developed by thought. This, a fundamental obligation of teachers is to problematize experience in order to engender thought and, therefore, growth.

I also think it certainly falls within the realm of ethical teacher behavior to problematize experience using the expectations of students. That seems to me to be what good teachers do. They take the taken-for-granted aspects of experience that students bring with them to the classroom and they help students reconstruct that experience to generate new meaning. This help comes in the form of cognitive and

other sorts of assistance, in helping the students reframe and rename elements of experience using a new, broader set of conceptual tools. If a teacher fails to help students develop those tools, then she is not doing her job. To put it in Nelsen's terms, the difference between 4'33" and good teaching is that, in good teaching, speaking comes after the silence; a dialog happens that allows both teacher and student to reconstruct their own experience, given the divergent sort of experience itself and the tools provided to facilitate such reconstruction. My guess is that Cage *hoped* such dialog would happen among his audience after 4'33"; the difference is I don't think he had much of an obligation to facilitate it. Nelsen, and all of us, clearly do have an obligation to not only pose problems to our students, but to help them, if not solve the problem, at least attend to its presence.

This distinction I am trying to make between the ethical obligations of artists and teachers rests on a larger question that, I believe, lurks within Nelsen's essay as well: What sets the art experience (experience of or with works of art) apart from the educational experience? The aesthetic experience is educative. Echoing what Nelsen notes in his essay, Jackson, again working from Dewey, says that aesthetic experiences can also be called educative because of "their liberating effect on future experiences."² All aesthetic experiences are educative, in that they engender change in self and environment. Yet, as Jackson says, nonaesthetic experiences are educative, too: "many other objects and many other forms of encounter also yield educational dividends."³ We want our classroom experiences to be educational. Do we want them to be aesthetic? Can they be? When they are, do we miss other opportunities? Nelsen's essay, in examining the real classroom issue he faced, comparing his own silence with the silence cultivated in 4'33", and arguing for attentiveness as an educational goal (all within a Deweyan framework), invites us to attend to this tension between the aesthetic and the educational.

1. Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 5.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. *Ibid.*