

Michał Palmowski

"4'33" : John Cage's Utopia of Music

Studia Humanistyczne AGH 15/2, 17-25

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Michał Palmowski*

Jagiellonian University in Krakow

4'33'': JOHN CAGE'S UTOPIA OF MUSIC

The present article examines the connection between Cage's politics and aesthetics, demonstrating how his formal experiments are informed by his political and social views. In *4'33''*, which is probably the best illustration of Cage's radical aesthetics, Cage wanted his listeners to appreciate the beauty of accidental noises, which, as he claims elsewhere, "had been dis-criminated against" (Cage 1961d: 109). His egalitarian stance is also reflected in his views on the function of the listener. He wants to empower his listeners, thus blurring the distinction between the performer and the audience. In *4'33''* the composer forbidding the performer to impose any sounds on the audience gives the audience the freedom to rediscover the natural music of the world. I am arguing that in his experiments Cage was motivated not by the desire for formal novelty but by the utopian desire to make the world a better place to live. He described his music as "an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord" (Cage 1961b: 12).

Keywords: John Cage, utopia, poethics, silence, noise

The present article is a discussion of the ideas informing the radical aesthetics of John Cage's musical compositions. Joan Retallack (2003) has described Cage's aesthetics as *poethics*, thus indicating the fact that for Cage aesthetic (or poetical) concerns were very closely related to political and ethical ones. This view is corroborated by other critics. Nyman notes that "it would be foolish to try and separate sound from the aesthetic, conceptual, philosophical and ethical considerations that the music enshrines" (Nyman 1974: 2). For Cage the ultimate question was not how to create a beautiful (aesthetically pleasing) work of art (which is a legitimate aesthetic concern), but how to create a work of art that would eventually transform society (which is both a political and ethical problem, since it entails both the practical question of how to effect a change, and the philosophical one of what direction this change should take). Herve Vanel recalls a 1972 interview with John Cage (conducted by Hans G. Helms) in which Cage claimed that "he had written music first 'in order to produce a revolution in the mind' and then with the hope that, ultimately, 'it could further the revolution in society'" (Cage 2008: 116). This statement shows clearly that Cage was a utopian thinker, motivated primarily by a desire to change the world, and hence there is a certain political dimension to his music.

* Corresponding author: Michał Palmowski, Instytut Filologii Angielskiej Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, al. Mickiewicza 9a, 31-120 Kraków; e-mail: michal.palmowski@uj.edu.pl.

This political dimension becomes much more explicit in the late 1960s¹ when, as Richard Kostelanetz writes, “Cage propagated a mix of ideas taken mostly from Marshal McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller [...], Norman O. Brown, and Richard Theobald” (1996: 22). Still, I shall argue that it is implicit in his earlier compositions as well, as it is communicated by their experimental form. Thus what Cage said about his 1969 *HPSCHD*, that it is “a political art, which is not about politics but political itself” (after Kostelanetz 1996: 102), is directly applicable not only to this particular work, in which the audience was plunged into “a sea of sounds that had no distinct relation to one another, an atonal and astructural chaos so continually in flux that one could hear nothing more specific than a few seconds of repetition” (Kostelanetz 1996: 99), but to his all artistic experiments.

The somewhat confusing distinction made by Cage between “art which is about politics” and “art which is political itself” begs an explanation. “Art which is about politics” would concern itself with the process of forming a government and electing a parliament, specific policies implemented by this government and specific laws passed by the parliament. This is not what Cage was interested in. “Art which is political itself” is not a commentary on what politicians say or do but a real revolutionary change. As an anarchist, Cage wanted “to get rid of politics” and “to drop the question of power” (after Kostelanetz 1996: 102), and he wanted to realize these objectives, which are essentially political, by means of his art. Furthermore, his art is political if by “political” one means “pertaining to public affairs” (from *polis*) or “of citizens, civic, civil” (from *politicus*; Online Etymology Dictionary). In this sense, all art which attempts to change the world, or concerns itself with people living together as a community, rather than separate individuals, is political.

Cage was deeply interested in how people could live better, more satisfying lives together, as individuals interacting with one another within a certain community, and as communities interacting with one another within the world. He was a social dreamer dreaming about and believing in the possibility of a big change, and he believed that this change might be effected by music. The precise shape of the future utopia to which his music would lead is impossible to ascertain, yet by analyzing the *poethics* of his experimental music it should be possible to outline its contours. As Bernstein argues, Cage “created works modeling desirable political and social structures” (2001: 40).

In the twentieth century, utopia was frequently envisioned as an essentially classless society, characterized by perfect equality, the ultimate fulfillment of the noble ideals of democracy. Interestingly enough, this aspect of utopia is reflected in Cage’s thinking about music. Cage believed that contemporary music was based on discrimination, and as a composer he wanted to fight against this discrimination. In *Lecture on Nothing*, he writes:

Noises too

, had been dis-criminated against ; and being American,
 having been trained to be sentimental, I fought for noises. I liked being
 on the side of the underdog.

(Cage 1961d: 117)

This position had far reaching implications for Cage’s music. He puts an equals sign between noises and music, and he announces triumphantly:

¹ For the development of Cage’s political ideas see e.g. Kutnik 1997: 165–187 (*Coś innego niż składnia*), or Luty 2011: 204–216.

I ever found pickup arm really shocking,	was that produced by of a phonograph and then and thunderous	means of coil wire amplified.	The most amazing noise attached to the It was shocking,
--	--	----------------------------------	---

(Cage 1961d: 117)

It may be argued that it also means putting an equals sign between music and silence. In a perfectly democratic world, everybody and everything is equal. Cage seems to act like a disciple of Walt Whitman, who in *Song of Myself* exclaimed: "I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms!" (Whitman 1960: 67).

Similarly to that of Whitman, Cage's poethical position is also motivated by ethical considerations. Accepting noise and accepting silence, not discriminating against them, means accepting the world as it is. Paradoxically, it is only by surrendering the desire to improve the world by imposing an artificial order upon it that one can achieve a change. One changes oneself and realizes that the world is already perfect as it is, which is a necessary precondition for any real social changes to take place. This is what Cage learnt from his encounter with eastern religions (Pritchett 1993: 170).

The other important consequence of Cage's egalitarian views concerns the relation between the artist/performer and the listener. He challenges the traditional notion of the listener being merely a passive recipient of the art created by somebody else. This means dismantling the traditional power structures, which Cage identifies as the main source of people's oppression. In *The Future of Music* he writes, "The masterpieces of Western music exemplify monarchies and dictatorships. Composer and conductor: king and prime minister. By making musical situations which are analogies to desirable social circumstances which we do not yet have, we make music suggestive and relevant to the serious questions which face Mankind" (Cage 1979: 183). And in his *Lecture on Nothing*, he analyzes the same problem from a much more practical perspective: "The reason they've no music in Texas is because they have recordings in Texas. Remove the records from Texas and someone will learn to sing" (Cage 1961d: 126). A similar idea was expressed by Barnett Newman: "We must spread culture through society. Only a society entirely composed of artists would be really worth living in. That is our aim, which is not dictated by expediency" (after Rosenberg 1978: 231).

This might be said to constitute the essence of Cage's utopian politics of music, whose best expression is probably his most famous piece *4'33"*, which was four minutes and thirty-three seconds of almost complete silence. James Pritchett describes its 1952 premiere:

David Tudor sat at the piano, opened the keyboard lid, and sat silently for thirty seconds. He then closed the lid. He reopened it, and then sat silently again for a full two minutes and twenty-three seconds. He then closed and reopened the lid one more time, sitting silently this time for one minute and forty seconds. He then closed the lid and walked off stage. (Pritchett 1993: 167)

The piece is frequently treated as a radical gesture empowering the listener. The composer forbidding the performer to impose any sounds on the audience gives the audience the freedom to rediscover the natural music of the world. Cage frequently emphasized that there was no such thing as complete silence; we live immersed in all kinds of sounds to which we normally do

In *A Year from Monday*, Cage describes another artistic project of his which ended in what may be described as an embarrassing failure (Cage 1969a: 141), and which also might throw additional light on certain assumptions underlying *4'33"*. In 1965 he gave an improvised talk in New York. Everything that he said was modulated by sophisticated electronic equipment to the point that it was incomprehensible to the audience. Many people would consider this a terrible nuisance but Cage was interested in sounds as sounds rather than vehicles of ideas, so the electronic modulation was most welcome as it freed the words from the dead weight of meaning, turning them into pure sounds, into music.

Still, the audience apparently did not share his passion for these new sounds, which had only been made possible very recently thanks to new technologies. Cage observes calmly:

After it became evident what they were “in for,” quite a number of people present went away. Those who remained enjoyed themselves, sat in pairs and informal circles, sent delegates off to the town below. These returned with refreshments, six-packs of beer, etc. (Cage 1969a: 141)

From this account one might actually get an impression that the artist did not have any problems with his audience talking and drinking beer, but one needs to remember that Cage’s philosophy of music is based on the idea that listening is the most important human activity. This means that one should listen to accidentally produced sounds, which traditionally have been viewed as disturbances (according to Cage they add to the beauty of the performance rather than detract from it), but it certainly does not mean that the audience is free to do whatever they feel like doing. Listening always requires discipline and commitment. One needs to put one’s ear to the sound and to take one’s mind off it. For listening, according to Cage, is the opposite not only of talking but also of interpreting (that is, thinking about sounds). As he explains,

The wisest thing to do is to open one’s ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly be-fore one’s thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical.

(Cage 1969c: 98)

Hence it has to be concluded that Cage tolerates his audience’s “unprofessional” behavior but he does not approve of it. While discussing this particular performance, he makes one more interesting observation, again indicating his audience’s failure to understand his artistic intention:

I arranged the folding chairs so that they were not in rows but, to all appearances, haphazardly placed. I was surprised to see shortly after the performance began that the audience had arranged itself in rows. They were seated facing in the direction of the roofed-over stairwell, one flight above them at one corner of the building, where David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, Robert Ashley (later Robert Rauschenberg) and I were seated in the midst of electronic equipment. (Cage 1969a: 141)

Cage wants to abolish the traditional seating arrangement as representative of the traditional idea of the relationship between the artist/performer and the audience. In 1952 at Black Mountain College, he organized an event “that involved the paintings of Bob Rauschenberg, the dancing of Merce Cunningham, films, slides, phonograph records, radios, the poetries of Charles Olson and M. C. Richards recited from the tops of ladders, and the pianism of David Tudor, together with

[Cage's] Juilliard lecture" (Cage 1961c: x). He adds that "the audience was seated in the center of all this activity [facing itself]" (Cage 1961c: x). The arrangement might have had symbolical significance: by placing his audience in the center Cage might have wanted to shift attention from the artist to the audience. It is what happens to the audience that really matters. He also adds that later that summer he visited a synagogue and discovered that this was the way the congregation was seated there, thus implying a secret connection between his artistic events and religious rituals.

In *Composition as Process* (Cage 1961b: 18–56) he claims that it would be a good idea for performers to merge with the audience (this is how he envisages the future of music). The physical separation of the audience and the performers is a reflection of their separate roles, an indication of their different ontological status. This Cage wants to change (on this particular occasion part of the plan was to get somebody from the audience talking). In *Composition as Process* Cage indicates the need for a complete reorganization of the space of a concert hall. "There is the possibility," he says, "when people are crowded together that they will act like sheep rather than nobly. That is why separation in space is spoken of as facilitating the independent action [...]" (Cage 1961b: 9). He recommends separating players from each other, so they can play independently from the group. The same principle applies to the audience. Thus the ideal seating is not the one that would separate the audience from the performers but the one that would separate one individual from another, so that each person could experience music in his or her own way. In *Composition as Process* Cage speaks with a mixture of contempt and disgust about people being huddled together in a concert hall. This disgust with a large group of people doing the same thing in the same place at the same time is reflected in an amusing anecdote describing his college education: Cage writes that he was shocked "to see one hundred of my classmates in the library all reading copies of the same book. Instead of doing as they did, I went into the stacks and read the first book written by an author whose name began with Z" (Cage 1990).

That is why the discovery that his audience huddled itself together facing the performers couldn't have been a pleasant one, though probably shouldn't have come as a complete surprise. His audience felt more comfortable in the traditional seating arrangement, reflecting the traditional division of roles. They wanted the difference between them and the artists to be reasserted. Apparently, they didn't want to be part of Cage's utopia of sound, in which everybody is an artist.

A similar problem is encountered while studying the reception of 4'33". The radically democratic spirit of the work – everything is music and everybody is an artist – is largely ignored. Most often it is reinterpreted in the following fashion: everything that happens during a concert is music, even when it seems like noise, and John Cage is an avant-garde artist who made us realize this. It is as if someone had quickly rearranged haphazardly placed chairs into neat rows, reaffirming thus the difference between the artist and the audience, which threatened to collapse.

This was probably inevitable. All art is based on an essential inequality between the artist who creates and the audience that contemplates the created work. This difference constitutes one of the basic conditions which make art possible. Any attempt to discuss Cage as an artist and his different activities as art (be it music, literature, or performing arts) is bound to reaffirm this distinction. Taking 4'33" seriously, that is to acknowledge the fact that accidental noises are as good music as Beethoven's *9th Symphony* (or even better because freed from desire)

would put an end to playing music in concert halls. The possibility which Cage accepted, and even welcomed, was believing that life is far better than art. But the fact is that Cage's 4'33" is still being played in concert halls.

The alternative to talking about Cage as an artist is to talk about him as a utopian thinker who believes that the things that everybody considers impossible are possible, and that we already live in a utopia, the only problem being that people usually do not realize this. Cage famously described his music as "an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord" (Cage 1961b: 12). Socially concerned critics have frequently accused Cage of having no social agenda and dismissed him as a typical example of an avant-garde artist living in an ivory tower, completely divorced from everyday life, more interested in his artistic experiments than the real problems of real people. Still, most of his music was conceived as a genuine attempt to make the world a better place to live. Cage's solution to the manifold social problems of his times was to encourage people to listen to the actual sounds.

"Remove the records from Texas," Cage postulates, "and some will learn to sing. Everybody has a song which is no song at all: it is a process of singing: and when you sing you are where you are" (Cage 1961d: 126). This non-art (no song at all) that Cage seems to be advocating is not something that can be measured by aesthetic criteria; it is the experience, not the final product, that matters, and this experience is intended to help people rediscover their true selves and accept the world in which they live as it is.

REFERENCES

- Bernstein, David W. 2001. *'In Order to Thicken the Plot': Toward a Critical Reception of Cage's Music*, in: David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (eds), *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 7–40.
- Cage, John. 1961a. *Composition as Process*, in: idem, *Silence. Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 18–56.
- Cage, John. 1961b. *Experimental Music*, in: idem, *Silence. Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 7–12.
- Cage, John. 1961c. *Foreword to Silence. Lectures and Writings*, in: idem, *Silence. Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. ix–xii.
- Cage, John. 1961d. *Lecture on Nothing*, in: idem, *Silence. Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press pp. 109–126.
- Cage, John. 1961e. *Silence. Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Cage, John. 1969a. *A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Cage, John. 1969b. *How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run*, in: idem, *A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 133–141.
- Cage, John. 1969c. *Juilliard Lecture*, in: *A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 95–104.

- Cage, John. 1979. *The Future of Music*, in: idem, *Empty Words. Writings 73–78*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 177–191.
- Cage, John. 1990. *An Autobiographical Statement*, http://johncage.org/autobiographical_statement.html [30.03.2015].
- Kostelanetz, Richard. 1996. *John Cage(ex)plain(ed)*, London: Prentice Hall International.
- Kutnik, Jerzy. 1997. *Gra słów. Muzyka poezji Johna Cage'a*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.
- Luty, Jerzy. 2011. *John Cage. Filozofia muzycznego przypadku*, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT.
- Online Etymology Dictionary. <http://www.etymonline.com> [03.05.2016].
- Nyman, Michael. *Experimental Music. Cage and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pritchett, James. 1993. *The Music of John Cage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Retallack, Joan. 2003. *The Poetical Wager*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rosenberg, Harold. 1978. *Barnett Newman*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Ross, Alex. 2010. *Searching for silence. John Cage's art of noise*, New Yorker, October 4, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/searching-for-silence> [30.03.2015].
- Vanel, Herve. 2008. *John Cage's Muzak-Plus: The Fu(rni)ture of Music*, "Representations" 102, 1, Spring: 94–128.
- Whitman, Walt. 1960. *Leaves of Grass*, New York: The New American Library of World.

4'33": MUZYCZNA UTOPIA JOHNA CAGE'A

Artykuł omawia związek pomiędzy muzycznymi eksperymentami Johna Cage'a a jego przekonaniem społeczno-politycznym. W 4'33", które są prawdopodobnie najlepszą ilustracją radykalnej estetyki Cage'a, kompozytor chciał, aby jego słuchacze docenili piękno przypadkowych dźwięków, które tradycyjna muzyka, jego zdaniem, dyskryminuje. Egalitaryzm Cage'a znalazł również swoje odzwierciedlenie w jego poglądach na relację pomiędzy artystą-wykonawcą a odbiorcą sztuki. Cage konsekwentnie dążył do zatarcia granicy pomiędzy tymi dwoma podmiotami muzycznego wydarzenia, które powinny uczestniczyć w nim na tych samych prawach. To dążenie wiązało się z jego pragnieniem przekształcenia świata we wspólnotę artystów, czerpiących radość z jego poznawania.

Słowa kluczowe: John Cage, utopia, muzyka, cisza, hałas