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ABSTRACT

What is John Cage's 4' 33"? This paper disambiguates this question into three sub-questions concerning, respectively, the work's ontological nature, the art form to which it belongs, and the genre it is in. We shall see that the work's performances consist of silence (rather than containing environmental sounds), that it is a work of performance art (rather than music), and that it belongs to the genre of conceptual art. Seeing the work in these ways helps us to understand it better, and promises to assuage somewhat the puzzlement and irritation of those who are at first resistant to its charms.

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1. Introduction

On August 29, 1952, at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York, David Tudor sat down at the piano, closed its lid over its keys, and looked at a stopwatch. After thirty seconds had elapsed, he raised the piano lid and lowered it again, repeating these actions after a further two minutes and twenty-three seconds. After another one minute and forty seconds had passed, Tudor raised the piano's lid for a final time, and then stood up to receive applause. His performance was over.¹

Famously—notoriously, some would say—Tudor had just premiered John Cage's 4' 33". The best known, so-called 'tacet', edition of the work's score is pleasingly easy to follow, even for those with a minimal grasp of musical notation: on a single sheet, the work's three movements are numbered, and beneath each number there just occurs the word 'tacet'. At the bottom of the page, Cage [1960] explains that '[t]he title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. ... However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.'²

Decades on from the work's premiere, we have a pretty good idea of what 4' 33" is about. It seems that Cage's main aim for the piece was for its performance to prompt audiences to attend to the kinds of environmental sounds normally regarded as

¹ Here I take Kyle Gann's [2010: 2–3] word for what happened.

² Cage's stipulation in the 'tacet' score that performances of different lengths should have different titles is just his vivid way of making the point that properly formed performances of the work can vary in their temporal extent. Contrary to Gann's suggestion [2010: 185], it does not imply that each such performance is a performance of a new piece. (In what follows, I abide by convention and call the work '4' 33"', while recognizing that a performance of it can last any length of time.)

ambient in performance environments: that is to say, the kinds of sounds that, if they occur during the performance of a conventional piece of music, are regarded as distracting and irrelevant to the work performed.³ Cage wanted to remind us of the ubiquity of such sounds and, as he put it, nudge audience members towards appreciating them as ‘just sounds’, ‘liberat[ing] [these sounds] from abstract ideas and ... let[ting] them be physically uniquely themselves’ (quoted in Griffiths [1981: 124]). When we listen to sounds in this way, we supposedly hear the sounds ‘as such’ [Carroll 1994: 93], ‘for the pure sounds they are’ [Kania 2010: 348].⁴ Such an appreciation of sounds *as* sounds reveals what Stephen Davies [1997: 451] calls their ‘naked aesthetic properties’. These are those properties that a sound reveals to someone when she attends to its auditory appearance without bringing to bear artistic concepts (such as ‘music’, ‘pitch’, ‘melody’, or, indeed, ‘art’).

Cage also had two subsidiary aims for *4'33"*. First, he wanted to compose a work from which all traces of his ego were removed. He had long been interested in using chance procedures in composition in order to avoid prescribing what the sonic profile of a work's performance should be. For example, in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951), a piece for pairs of performers at twelve radios, Cage's score directs the performers to manipulate the volume and tuning controls in certain specific ways, thereby enabling the sonic profile of a performance to be influenced by matters beyond his control. In effect, the score for *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* instructs the performers to use their radios to collect sounds and, as an ensemble, combine them into a complex sound sequence; but these instructions are essentially indirect, specifying only the procedures for finding and giving some structure to these sounds, not the resultant sound sequence's auditory appearance.

4'33" is designed to annihilate even this attenuated level of authorial control over the sounds its performances draw our attention to. Its performers do not follow procedures of any kind for giving structure to the sounds that occur within their performance's temporal boundaries [S. Davies 1997: 458]; Cage just directs them to remain silent, with a view to prompting their audience to attend to whatever sounds take place around them. It is this ultimate ceding of control over the sounds that the audience attends to that Cage was aiming for in *4'33"*, and his achievement of this was something that he himself found valuable in the piece.⁵

Second, in encouraging audiences to appreciate aesthetically what he called ‘accidental sounds’ [Kostelanetz 1988: 65], Cage hoped to bring them to see the limitations inherent in traditional—and, as he would claim, overly egotistical—musical works. His hope was that people would move on from listening to Bach, Beethoven, and the rest to listening to ordinary, uncomposed, undomesticated sounds. This explains why it is

³ My use of ‘environmental sounds’ here encompasses sounds such as the sound of rainfall, or of air conditioning, traffic noise from outside the auditorium, and noises made by audience members.

⁴ As Cage himself puts it, controversially, ‘there's no such thing as silence. What [the audience] thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out’ [Kostelanetz 1988: 65]. As Roy Sorensen [2009: 144] observes, the first sentence of this quotation is false: where there are no sound waves, there are no sounds; so the vast majority of the universe, since it contains no sound waves, is silent. Despite this, what Cage says here describes nicely what I take the central point of *4'33"* to be.

⁵ ‘I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like the most, is the silent piece ... I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer’ (Cage, quoted in Kostelanetz [1988: 188]).

important that performances of 4'33'' take place in settings usually reserved for performances of traditional works of music: the attuned audience member is supposed to realize that the sounds Cage is interested in are intended by him to take the place of the sounds constitutive of performances of traditional works of music.⁶

Let us return to the work's main aim: that of bringing to our attention, and thereby enabling us to aesthetically appreciate, the kinds of sounds that are normally regarded as ambient in performance settings. How does a performance of 4'33'' accomplish this? Here the metaphor of *framing* is helpful, although, as we shall see in section 3, it soon demands further elaboration and disambiguation. For now, though, we can just say this: in a similar way to that in which a picture frame draws our attention to what lies within it, the pianist's silence and aforementioned actions function as a 'notational device' [Carroll 1994: 94] by jointly compelling the audience—'by subtraction, so to speak' [ibid.]—to attend to those environmental sounds occurring as the performance unfolds. The pianist's performance, in effect, *encloses* these sounds within the audience's collective attention (Gann 2010: 11). To cash the metaphor somewhat, the relevant gestures, inactivity, and silence, within a setting in which the performance of traditional works of music is standard, render the audience unusually conscious of, and sensitive to, the environmental sounds occurring during the work's performance; and this, if things go well, opens the door to their appreciating these sounds aesthetically, although not artistically.

Tellingly, 4'33'' has received mixed reviews over the years. As Cage himself testifies, its initial reception was characterised by puzzlement and irritation,⁷ and the outrage—or, at least, bewilderment—does not seem to have substantially abated.⁸ Indeed, when BBC television broadcast an orchestral performance of the piece from the Royal Albert Hall in 2012, the work was described on the corporation's website as 'absolutely ridiculous', 'a gimmick', 'stupid', and 'the Emperor's new clothes' by vexed licence fee payers [Gann 2010: 15]. My suggestion is that some of this ire is generated by a misunderstanding of what sort of thing 4'33'' is. Coming to the work under a misapprehension as to its nature, auditors tend to misunderstand it and, as a consequence, fail to see the value in it. If I am right, determining what kind of thing 4'33'' is, besides being philosophically valuable for its own sake, will enable us to see this work aright, and thereby appreciate it for the delightful work that it is.

2. Questions and Spoilers

What sort of thing is 4'33''? We know already, merely by reading Cage's words at the bottom of the work's 'tacet' score, that it is a work for performance. But what *sort* of thing is it? At once, this question requires disambiguation. One thing we might be using these words to ask is what the work's *ontological nature* is. If it is this that we are interested in, then we will expect a complete answer to involve the assignment of 4'33'' to

⁶ 'I said that the purpose of this purposeless music would be achieved if people learned to listen; that when they listened they might discover that they preferred the sounds of everyday life to the ones they would presently hear in the musical program; that that was alright as far as I was concerned' (Cage, quoted in [Griffiths 1981: 124]).

⁷ Rather sadly, Cage says this: 'I had friends whose friendship I valued, and whose friendship I lost because of that. They thought that calling something you hadn't done, so to speak, music, was a form of pulling the wool over their eyes, I guess' (quoted in Gann [2010: 4]).

⁸ 'They didn't laugh', Cage continues, 'they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it thirty years later: they're still angry' (quoted in [Gann 2010: 4]).

an ontological category, along with some further explanation of what the work is like and how it differs from other candidate entities with which we might have been tempted to identify it.

However, in asking what sort of thing 4'33'' is, we might be asking what *art kinds* the work falls under. If it is this that interests us, then we will want to know what *art form* the work is a member of and what *genre* it exemplifies. Art forms—such as music, literature, and painting—are artistic categories that explain why works of that kind are produced by working (in certain ways) with certain artistic media, and not others [Lopes 2007: 247]. Vermeer used brushstrokes to work with paint on canvas, rather than manipulating iron, bronze, or marble, to produce *Girl with a Pearl Earring* because he was producing a painting, not a sculpture; Philip Roth used words to produce a text, rather than paint-loaded brushstrokes on canvas, to produce *American Pastoral* because he was producing a novel, not a painting. Art forms are not cross-media; they are ways of manipulating certain media, and are hence tied to those media.

Genres, by contrast, are artistic categories—such as tragedy, comedy, noir, and satire—that group together works, not according to the media that these works are in (and how they are used), but according to certain of the purposes with which these works were produced. More precisely [Abell 2015: 32],

a genre is a category of works determined by the purpose for which they are produced and appreciated, where the means by which they pursue that purpose rely at least partly on producers' and audiences' common knowledge that the works are produced and to be appreciated for that purpose.

Some Like It Hot, for example, is a comedy because it is intended to be found funny at least partly as a result of the film's makers and its audiences having common knowledge that it aspires to this very purpose (where such common knowledge consists, not merely in the fact that both its makers and its audiences are aware of this purpose, but that each group is aware of the other's awareness of it). Part of the reason why the film achieves its comic purpose is that its audiences know that it is supposed to make them laugh, and will therefore see the funny side of situations that they might otherwise take more seriously, and because the film's producers know that its audiences will do this, and 'can thus exploit the comic potential of subjects, situations, or actions that might otherwise seem tragic, or mundane, or offensive' [ibid.: 32–3].

Crucially, for our purposes, genres differ from art forms in the way in which they are related to artistic media. While art forms group together works according to the media they are in, genres do not. Genres, unlike art forms, can be *cross-media*. Novels and films can be noirs; films, plays, and graphic novels can be tragedies; and so on. Merely assigning a work to a genre does not in itself determine the media used in its production.

Having disambiguated our question into the ontological question, the art form question, and the genre question, I shall now let slip some spoilers by briefly describing the respective answers to be defended in the remainder of this paper. 4'33'' is a type whose tokens are performances in which its performers are silent (as opposed to being a type whose tokens are performances comprising the sounds audible during these performances); it is not a work of music, but a work of performance art; and it belongs to the genre of conceptual art. These latter two assignments, in particular, are key in giving us the materials with which to potentially defuse much of the hostility that 4'33'' has aroused.

3. The Ontological Question

4'33'' is a repeatable work for performance: a work that admits of multiple performance 'by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists' [Cage 1960]. In what follows, I adopt the hegemonic conception of the ontological nature of such repeatable artworks, presuming such works to be types of some kind. Even with this assumption in place, however, a substantial ontological matter remains unresolved: what *sort* of type is 4'33''?

The literature would seem to suggest two options here. On the one hand, we might regard 4'33'' as a literally silent work, as Cage's talk of his 'silent piece' suggests [Kostelanetz 1988: 188]. On this view—assumed, rather than argued for, by Roy Sorensen [2009: 142–3]—the work is a type tokened by performances in which musicians follow Cage's instructions to remain silent. The environmental sounds within the audience's earshot during a performance, although framed by that performance, do not belong to it; they occur as the performance takes place.⁹ Call the work, thus construed, *the silent work* or, for short, *S*.

The standard view among philosophers and musicologists, however, is that 4'33'' is not *S*, but is what I shall call *the sonically replete work* [S. Davies 1997: 448–9; Kania 2010: 345–8]. According to this alternative ontological proposal, the work is a type whose tokens include within themselves the very sounds that they frame. Consequently, on this second view, the analogy between a performance of the work and a picture frame becomes altogether more precise. Specifically, the performer is akin to an artist who presents an empty picture frame and specifies that her artwork is whatever can be seen through it [S. Davies 1997: 459]. Analogously, if the work is sonically replete, then the sounds occurring as a performance of 4'33'' take place belong to the performance as its content.¹⁰

Let us call the work, thought of in this alternative way, *R*; and, to highlight the more exact analogy obtaining between a performance of *R* and a picture frame, let us say that such a performance does not just frame environmental sounds (as a performance of *S* does), but *p-frames* them: that is, frames them by encompassing them within its content. It is a commonplace to point out that performances of 4'33'' frame environmental sounds, but saying that performances p-frame such sounds is not philosophically innocent, since doing so would commit us to taking 4'33'' to be *R*, not *S*.

So, is 4'33'' *S* or *R*? I think that it is *S*, but, before I get on to justifying this heterodox interpretation, let me say three things to clarify what I mean by 'silence', thereby clearing away potential misunderstandings concerning my eventual construal of 4'33'' as the silent work. In the next three paragraphs I shamelessly piggyback on observations made by Sorensen [2009].

First, I regard the token performances of the work as silences *on the part of individual musicians* (or collective such silences, if we are dealing with ensemble performances). This way of putting it respects a couple of important features of silence. Silences are *of* things, in the sense of being ontologically dependent upon them: they are not free floating. Relatedly, the silence of something—whether of a person, a place, a

⁹ 'Of course, there was the usual coughing and shuffling plus noises that wafted in from outside. But the audience did not count these sounds as part of the performance, just as these sounds do not count as part of the performance in the case of conventional music' [Sorensen 2009: 142–3].

¹⁰ For reasons that need not detain us right now, Andrew Kania believes that some performances of 4'33'' might exclude certain occurrent sounds [2010: 346–8], but his view is certainly akin to Davies's in so far as it takes the sounds framed by a performance to belong to that performance.

situation, a process, or an orchestra—is located roughly where the entity whose silence it is located. It is present where the thing’s sounds would have been [ibid.: 139]. These two facts explain how there may be silence in the presence of sound. I may be silent in an otherwise noisy environment, such as when I noiselessly contemplate my team’s poor performance as I watch a football match; and when it was performing 4’33’’ in the Royal Albert Hall in 2012, The BBC Symphony Orchestra was silent on stage, although the auditorium hosted sounds of various kinds.

The second feature of silence that I want to stress is that it can genuinely be heard [ibid.: 126–32]. We do not just hear sounds; we hear silence, the absence of sounds. True enough, there is no auditory sensation of silence [ibid.: 131]; but we can nonetheless hear a period of silence between sounds. When, in the middle of the night, a burglar alarm is finally switched off after ringing for hours, we hear the silence and luxuriate in it as we fall asleep. The silence that we hear is not represented by any sensation.

The third and final thing I want to say about silence is that, in normal contexts (such as those in which we describe performers while they perform 4’33’’), what counts as silent is something short of an absolute absence of sound, just as what counts as a straight line in nature is some way short of what would count as such in a geometry class [ibid.: 142–4]. Given this fact, it can be literally true that a musician performing 4’33’’ is silent, even though her blood in circulation makes a very quiet noise.

When I say that 4’33’’ is *S*, a work whose tokens are silent performances by musicians, I thus claim that these silent performances are ontologically dependent upon the musicians concerned, that they are located roughly where the said musicians are located, that they can be heard by audiences, and that they count as silences according to our customary, less-than-the-strictest, standards. Thus construed, such silences can be unproblematically experienced, not just in concert halls when 4’33’’ is being performed, but in the countryside at the dead of night, in examination halls, and in performances of plays by Harold Pinter.

Now that we have cleared up the nature of the claim that 4’33’’ is a silent work, why should we prefer it to a conception of the work as sonically replete? I shall get on to this presently, but first of all, in order to reassure readers familiar with Davies’s dismissal of my preferred ontological proposal, let me explain why he is wrong to think that Cage clearly committed himself to the work’s being *R*, rather than *S*.

Davies asserts that there is ‘no doubt’ that Cage intended 4’33’’ as *R*, rather than *S* [S. Davies 1997: 448–9]; but he is wrong about this. The evidence he provides for this bold claim is Cage’s description of the piece as ‘becom[ing] in performance the sounds of the environment’ [Kostelanetz 1988: 188]. But these words are far from conclusive, since they are, perhaps, better interpreted as loose talk from a non-philosopher keener to convey the work’s *point*—namely, bringing the audience to attend to the kinds of environmental sounds customarily ignored in performance environments—than to put his finger on the work’s ontological nature. And, in any case, Cage calls 4’33’’ his ‘silent piece’ [ibid.] and, as Davies himself admits, also says that he wanted to compose a piece of silence [S. Davies 1997: 454]. Perhaps, too, Cage’s claim that there is ‘no such thing as silence’ expresses some awareness, albeit dim, of the distinction between silence in the everyday sense and silence according to the very strictest standards. In other words, Cage might have wanted performances of 4’33’’ that are silent in a less strict sense to bring audiences to appreciate what he took to be the impossibility of there being silence according to the strictest of standards. (This last modal claim of his is false, of course, but he was evidently unaware of this fact.)

So, Cage's own testimony about 4'33'' does not commit him to thinking of it as *R*, rather than *S*. But in addition to this, we should also bear in mind that, contrary to what Davies says, identifying the work with *S* is compatible with its being able to achieve what Cage intended for it. Davies thinks that if we take the work to be silent, then the environmental sounds heard during a performance become 'irrelevant to, and distractions from, the work' [ibid.: 448]. Obviously, if this were so, then Cage's aim of drawing our attention to such sounds would be stymied. If the audience were to regard the environmental sounds occurring during a performance of the piece as distractions from, and irrelevant to, the performance—as they would, if such sounds occurred during a performance of a symphony or string quartet—then they would try to ignore them in order to focus on the silent performance of the musicians, not take up the invitation to attend to these sounds, as Cage wants them to do. But, in fact, identifying 4'33'' with *S* does not have this troublesome implication. While listeners new to the piece might, for a very short while, try to pay close attention to the performance's content, they will soon discern that, since this content consists in silence, there is nothing there that rewards such attention. And it is just this realization that will prompt them to direct their focus onto things outwith the performance's content: the sounds occurring around them. These environmental sounds do not, then, distract our attention from the performance's content; on the contrary, this content, once grasped, compels us to look beyond itself, to the sounds of the environment, for aesthetic interest.

Cage was very keen to make the point that a performance of 4'33'' will 'accept ambient sounds and not be interrupted thereby' [Kostelanetz 1988: 210]. But here, too, we can do justice to the literal content at which Cage is gesturing without thereby committing ourselves to the idea that these sounds literally become parts of the performance: in other words, without having to say that these sounds are *p*-framed, rather than simply framed. For the substantial claim beneath the figurative talk of a performance's 'accepting' environmental sounds is just the fact that I elucidated in the previous paragraph: namely, that these environmental sounds are not noises competing for our attention with the performance, but are instead the things the performance directs our attention *towards*. This being so, it follows that these sounds do not interrupt the performance, but form its subject matter. They are things that the performance is *about*, rather than things entering into its being. No commitment to the work's being *R* is required.

So, treating 4'33'' as *S* is no less compatible with what Cage says than is identifying it with *R*; and doing so coheres equally well with what Cage intended for the work. But are there any positive reasons for *preferring* the ontological proposal that the work is *S*? Yes. Two.

First, only if we treat 4'33'' as the silent work can we acknowledge that it is a work for performance by musicians, as Cage says it is. As we noted in [section 1](#), the score of 4'33'' states that it 'may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists' [Cage 1960]: that is to say, Cage makes it clear that the work's tokens are performances by the musicians on stage.¹¹ However, if the work were *R*, this could not be true: its tokens could not be performances. Here is why.

¹¹ Here I take Cage at his word that 4'33'' is a work for performance by musicians. I am justified in doing so because this much is stated by Cage in his scored instructions for instancing the piece, and because convention has it that we interpret scored instructions literally and treat them as authoritative. This marks a clear contrast between what Cage says here and other remarks by him that I have read less literally or taken with a pinch of salt. These other remarks, since they are statements of his *about* the work, rather than scored instructions, lack the authoritative status of the latter.

If 4'33'' is *R*, and the sounds occurring within a token's temporal boundaries actually belong to it, then it follows that this token comprises sounds that are neither produced, nor combined, nor in any way structured by the work's performers: the musicians on stage who follow Cage's scored instructions for instantiating the work. But if this is right, then the sounds forming the content of the token are not *performed* sounds; and, in turn, if this right, then the token is not, properly speaking, a *performance* at all, but a mere aggregation of sounds that unfolds as the musicians are silent. The principle at work in what I have just said is this: a work-token comprising sounds is a performance of that work only if these sounds are performed sounds in the sense just introduced. Since tokens of *R* fail to meet this condition, 4'33'', if *R*, is not tokened by performances, and so is not itself a work for performance. Given what Cage says about 4'33'', this is a *reductio* of the proposal that 4'33'' is *R*.

Compare this sorry state of affairs with what transpires if we take 4'33'' to be *S*. If 4'33'' is the silent work, then it is *plainly* a work for performance. *Qua S*, the work is a type whose tokens are performances by musicians in which they follow Cage's instructions by keeping silent. The musicians genuinely perform the work by doing precisely what Cage says they should do in order to perform it.

Coupled with this reason to prefer the treatment of 4'33'' as *S* is another, this time to do with the work's aim of getting its audiences to appreciate the sounds framed by a performance *as* pure sounds. As we saw in [section 1](#), the audience is supposed to appreciate the sounds that they hear during a performance for the pure sounds they are, without bringing them under artistic concepts. If, however, 4'33'' were *R*, this ambition would be severely compromised. For if 4'33'' were *R*, then an understanding listener would know this: she would hear the sounds as belonging to the performance and, in so doing, would hear them as constituents of an artistic enterprise. She could not help but listen to them, not as undomesticated environmental sounds, but rather as items elevated to the status of art [Carroll 1994: 95–6].

Identifying 4'33'' with *S* avoids this problem. The environmental sounds framed by a performance do not belong to that performance: although these sounds are framed by a work of art, they are not *p*-framed by one. So, at the same time as appreciating the performance of the musicians as artistic, the audience can appreciate the environmental sounds that this performance draws our attention to for the naked, non-artistic, sounds that they are.

To sum up, the hegemonic ontological proposal for 4'33''—the thesis that the work is sonically replete—is incorrect. Nothing that Cage says about the work, or intends it to do, favours this proposal over the rival proposal that takes the work to be silent. Furthermore, there are two powerful reasons for giving the work what we may dub 'the silent treatment'. In short, 4'33'' is not *R*; it is *S*.

4. The Art Form Question

Art forms, we agreed in [section 1](#), are artistic categories that group works together according to which media were used to produce them and how these media were worked in doing so. Unlike genres, art forms are tied to certain artistic media. So, to what art form does 4'33'' belong? The obvious answer is: music. Performances of 4'33'' are by musicians and occur in venues in which musical works are performed; the piece is often performed in programmes alongside performances of traditional musical works; the work's score can be bought from music shops; and Cage, after all, undoubtedly composed some works of music. In this section I shall explain why this *prima facie* answer is wrong.

Composers compose repeatable works of music by working with—that is to say, *organizing*—sound. Here I agree with both Levinson and Davies that a work's being organized sound is a necessary condition for its being a work of music [S. Davies 1997: 456–7; Levinson 1990: 270n3]. The composer of a repeatable work of music organizes sound by specifying, typically in a score, what performers should do to produce a sound-event that is a properly formed performance of the work. Consequently, the performers, in performing such a work, collectively construct a complex sound sequence, and, since they do this by carrying out the composer's instructions, the composer, via the performers' actions, counts as organizing these sounds himself.

4'33" is a repeatable work. So, did Cage organize sound in writing 4'33"? No, but the reason why not will depend on the answer we give to the ontological question. If, as I have recommended, 4'33" is *S*, the silent work, then the reason why the work cannot be organized sound is obvious. 4'33" cannot be organized sound because its performances are periods of silence on the part of the performers, not sound-events: these performances do not contain sounds within their content, organized or not. But what if someone were to resist this minority ontological proposal, preferring to follow philosophical orthodoxy in taking 4'33" to be the sonically replete work, *R*? If the work is *R*, then a performance of it p-frames the sounds that occur within its temporal boundaries: it includes these sounds as its content. So, if we are to establish the conclusion that 4'33" is not music, even when construed as *R*, we must explain why a performance of the work, thus construed, nevertheless falls short of *organizing* the environmental sounds that make up its content.

For a performance of *R* to p-frame the environmental sounds that it frames—that is, to include these sounds within its content—is for the performance to *appropriate* these sounds. This is all that 'appropriation' can mean in this context. Andrew Kania [2010: 346] thinks that explaining why a performer of *R* does not organize these sounds would have to amount to explaining why they are not appropriated by her; and, quite rightly (since a performance of *R*, in p-framing the said sounds, thereby appropriates them), he goes on to express a healthy scepticism about whether this can be done.

However, appropriation is not the crux of the issue here, since merely appropriating sounds is insufficient for organizing them. To see this, imagine a variant of *Imaginary Landscape No. 4: Simple Imaginary Landscape*. This work is for a single performer, who manipulates a radio—automatically tuned to a certain frequency and set to a certain volume—by simply turning it on for a set period of time. Imagine, further, that, as luck would have it, the volume of the radio is set so that the sounds emitted by the radio happen to exactly match, in all audible respects, the sounds produced at the transmitting source. All of this ensures that the performer of *Simple Imaginary Landscape* uses her radio to appropriate, with perfect and astonishing accuracy, the source sounds. Will she thereby count as having *organized* these sounds?

I think not, and this for the reason that merely presenting a group of things as they are is not to organize them. (I do not organize my wardrobe by just opening the door and pointing to what is inside.) Organizing sounds is a matter of either producing a structured sound sequence (as performers of traditional works of music do), or else giving some structure to appropriated sounds (as the performers of *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* do). But such structuring of the sounds by the performer is precisely what is absent in the case of a performance of *Simple Imaginary Landscape*. She is a mere cipher of sound. From this it follows that, even if we were happy to describe the framing of sounds by a performance of 4'33" as the appropriation of these sounds, this would not entail that the framed sounds had been organized by its performer or performers.

So why, even if 4'33" is *R*, does it not count as organized sound, and hence as music? For the same reason that *Simple Imaginary Landscape* doesn't. By contrast with *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, neither 4'33", nor *Simple Imaginary Landscape*, involves its performers in giving any structure to the sounds they frame. A performer of *Simple Imaginary Landscape* merely presents—without shaping, combining, or otherwise structuring—the sounds she appropriates. Performers of 4'33", meanwhile, follow Cage's instructions in doing nothing to intervene in any way in the unfolding of the complex sound sequences that take place within their performances' temporal boundaries. Consider, once more, Cage's account of the premiere of 4'33": the sound of the wind blowing and that of the rain pattering on the roof are environmental sounds that would have occurred as they did *anyway*, even if Tudor had not been premiering 4'33"; and while the same is not true of sounds made by audience members in responding to the work's performance (such as the sounds made by people walking out in protest), it remains the case that Tudor just let these sounds happen. It is the fact that performers of 4'33" withhold from giving any structure to the sounds that occur during their performance, rather than any fact explicated by the concept of appropriation, that explains why they do not count as organizing these sounds.¹²

So, 4'33" is not itself a work of music, since its performers do not organize sounds. What art form does it belong to, then? Davies is right to describe the work as 'an example of performance art' [S. Davies 1997: 461], since it is altogether more illuminating to place it alongside other performance artworks, such as Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*.¹³ In this respect, it is significant that Allan Kaprow, the originator of 'the happening', was one of Cage's students. So, my positive proposal is this. While 4'33" is certainly *about* music (among other things), and while it is essential that the work's performers are musicians (since its ironic effect trades on this [ibid.: 455–6]), it is, in fact, a repeatable work of performance art: a kind of multiply performable happening [ibid.: 460].¹⁴ Since the happening is usually seen as a creature of the 1960s, we could on this basis describe the work as being at least ten years ahead of its time.¹⁵

¹² It is, of course, true that a performance of the work obeying Cage's score will be divided into three movements. Does this not structure the sounds taking place by splitting them into three distinct stretches? No. The sounds themselves are not given any structure by a performance of the work being divided in this way. The three movements constitute three temporally extended acts of drawing the audience's attention to the sounds occurring around them: to, in this way, switch in and out of pointing to whatever sounds occur is not to give these sounds structure; it is not to *do* anything to or *with* them. (An analogy might help. A football match is divided in two by the half-time interval; the match itself—as opposed to my experience of it—does not have an additional interval if I cease to pay attention to it for five minutes.)

¹³ I resist adopting Kania's suggestion that 4'33" is a work of non-musical sound art [2010: 348–9]. First, our understanding of this (putative) category of art is as yet fairly dim; second, and more significantly, insofar as works of non-musical sound art are 'sonic artworks' [S. Davies 2012: 553n3], assigning 4'33" to this category would seem to require us to view 4'33" as itself a sonic artwork: i.e. as *R*, rather than as *S*.

¹⁴ Exactly like *Interior Scroll*, in other words. According to Quinn Moreland [2015], *Interior Scroll* was premiered on August 29, 1975, and then performed again in 1977.

¹⁵ While I agree with Davies that 4'33" is a work of performance art, I disagree with his claim that it is also 'a piece of theatre' [ibid.:460]. If his thought, in describing the piece in these two ways, is that the category *theatrical work* encompasses all works of performance art, in addition to works of traditional theatre, I think that he is wrong: while Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* arguably draws on conventions of staging associated with traditional theatre, the same is not true of Acconci's *Following Piece*. Furthermore, there seems little to be gained by describing 4'33" as 'theatrical': the staging conventions that it exploits are exclusively those of Western art music. David Davies, too, briefly claims that 4'33" is a repeatable work of performance art, rather than a work of music [2011: 215–16]. Here he follows Stephen Davies's reasoning, which also leads him to endorse the (in my view, false) claim that the work is a work of theatre.

5. The Genre Question

Let us now consider what genre 4'33'' belongs to. A genre, to recapitulate, is an art kind that groups together works according to the purpose for which they are produced and appreciated, not according to the media with which they are created. This explains why genres, unlike art forms, can be cross-media.

It is plausible to think that conceptual art is one such cross-media genre [Dodd 2016: sec. 6]. The characteristic purpose of conceptual artworks would seem to be that of affording us intellectual, rather than aesthetic, interest [Goldie and Schellekens 2010: 112]. Consider, for example, Robert Barry's *Inert Gas: Helium* (1969), in which the artist released two cubic feet of helium into the atmosphere. This event held little, if any, aesthetic interest. Indeed, considered as an intervention into the debate as to the nature of artistic appreciation, this would seem to be a major part of its point. In appreciating Barry's work, we need only consider what he did and think through its implications for the nature of art: specifically, by virtue of using an imperceptible material, Barry invited us to contemplate the possibility that artworks need not possess aesthetic properties and that the appreciation of such artworks need not involve us in a perceptual encounter with them [ibid.: 25].

Santiago Sierra's *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal* (2002) works in a similar way [ibid.: 121–3]. Notoriously, prominent members of London's art world were invited to the opening of the Lisson Gallery's new extension but, on arrival, were unable to enter. The gallery was completely boarded up by corrugated iron. After a while, Sierra himself emerged from the building to tell the guests that this was a work of art, and he was later quoted as saying that its point was to get its victims to experience what it is like to be prevented from entering somewhere for politico-economic reasons: a feeling shared by many ordinary people in Sierra's native Argentina, following the collapse of the peso. Once again, the details of the boarded-up gallery's perceptual appearance are insignificant: anyone who dwelt on these features would have missed the point of the work entirely. The work's purpose was not aesthetic, but was broadly cognitive in nature: namely, to bring its 'victims' to understand such a phenomenon of economically driven exclusion 'from the inside', so to speak.

Conceptual artworks, so it seems, have a characteristic purpose of counteracting the expectation that we should appreciate them aesthetically, and of prompting us into considering matters of a more intellectual nature. Furthermore, as is the case with all genres, how conceptual artworks pursue that purpose relies partly on audiences recognizing that the works are produced to be appreciated in just this way. Someone who views Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) without sharing common knowledge of its conceptual purpose might yet get an inkling of what is going on with this work; but she will most likely be floored by its aesthetic nondescriptness. Only once she appreciates that it has been exhibited for a conceptual purpose will the piece begin to work on her in the intended fashion, pushing her into the kind of extended contemplation of the nature of creativity in art-making that, no doubt, Duchamp playfully meant to encourage.

So, my suggestion is that conceptual art is a genre; and one of the pleasing things about this hypothesis is that it nicely accounts for an apparent truism about conceptual artworks: namely, that they are ontologically diverse. Conceptual artworks can be material objects (for example, *Fountain*), events (such as *Inert Gas: Helium*), and types of physical particular (such as Barry's *All the things I know but of which I am not at the*

moment thinking) (1969).¹⁶ The assumption that conceptual art is a genre explains this, precisely by acknowledging that there can be cross-media genres. Conceptual art, like tragedy, noir, and the rest, is a genre that crosses media.

In light of this, my answer to the genre question should now be obvious: *4'33''* is a work of conceptual art, as Davies himself occasionally suggests [S. Davies 1997: 462]. The artistic value that it possesses consists in the intellectual interest that it affords us (that is to say, in its getting us to see that sounds are ubiquitous and can be appreciated aesthetically *as sounds*). While it is true that a performance of the work, if properly understood, will bring us to aesthetically appreciate the environmental sounds that it frames, the work, *qua* silent work, is not *itself* appreciated aesthetically; it is 'hear through' and thereby in itself aesthetically inert. In writing *4'33''*, then, Cage was in the same line of business as his friend, Duchamp, whom he first met in the 1940s.

6. Coda: Our Relationship with *4'33''*

I have answered my questions. *4'33''* is a truly silent work that is both a piece of performance art (rather than a work of music) and an example of conceptual art. I shall end by briefly outlining how this knowledge might help audiences to understand, and hence appreciate, the work better.

As Cage himself reports, much of the annoyance that audiences feel towards *4'33''* is based on the assumption—no doubt, at times encouraged by Cage himself—that we should assess the work as a work of music. Regarded as music, *4'33''* seems like a cheap gimmick or a cheat, which thereby short-circuits audiences' appreciation of it. However, once we assign *4'33''* to the art form *performance art* and to the genre *conceptual art*, much of this resentment should dissipate. In this respect, it is telling that, while scorn for avant-garde music is still rife, scorn for avant-garde art is much less well entrenched [Ross 2010: 266–7].

Contemporary audiences are now familiar enough with conceptual art to see that appreciating conceptual works of performance art lies in grasping their intellectual conceit, not in valuing them for any aesthetic properties that they happen to have. Once audiences regard *4'33''* in this way, they will begin to make sense of it and, in so doing, stand more of a chance of appreciating it for the fascinating, rewarding, witty piece that it is. This might be one of those rare occasions when a dose of philosophy cures an art-world illness.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Barry presented this latter work to the art world by writing those very words on a wall in New York City. That the work is the type of which this first inscription was a token is suggested by his own description of it as 'dimensions variable, printed text on paper, painted text on wall' (See, for example, <http://olumsal.tumblr.com/post/24021738876/robert-barry-all-the-things-i-know-but-of-which-i>).

¹⁷ Three anonymous referees gave me extremely detailed and helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper. Generous audiences at the University of Leeds, The London Aesthetics Forum, and Southern Methodist University also gave me much to think about when I gave talks on this topic. I am especially grateful to Michael Morris and, above all, Sherri Irvin for advice on some of the chewier bits.

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