

THE SAYLOR FOUNDATION'S GUIDED LISTENING 4: JOHN CAGE AND POSTMODERN MUSICAL AESTHETICS

Introduction: In 1952, the American composer John Cage wrote *4'33"* (Four Minutes, Thirty-three Seconds). It was scored for any instrument (or combination of instruments), and Cage instructs the performers not to play their instruments for the entire duration of the piece. Although the sounds heard by the audience during the performance (coughing, car horns, heating and air conditioning noises, etc.) are not conventionally thought of as "musical," Cage evidently intended this piece to be heard as music. In fact, the piece came to define his fundamental philosophy that *any* sounds constitute music. Over the years, *4'33"* became Cage's most famous and most controversial composition, and in the composer's estimation, his most important work.

Instructions: Please view the [live, televised performance of 4'33"](#)* and listen to the commentary on the YouTube video. You may also refer to [Larry Solomon's article on the work](#),* "John Cage's 4'33": The Sounds of Silence." Draw from the materials from our course to guide your listening/viewing experience, and write down a brief answer to each of the following questions.

- What, in *4'33"*, suggests the idea of music? What do you suppose Cage is trying to tell us about the way in which we experience music?
- What do you think Cage's work suggests about the relationship between music and everyday life?
- What does this work suggest about Western notions of musical talent and the skill set expected of performers and listeners?
- At the conclusion of the performance, the audience applauds warmly as the performers take their bows. Also, as stated on the YouTube video, this recorded performance was on the list of "Top 10 classical music videos on the WeShow Awards-US Edition." What do you think contemporary musicians and listeners appreciate about this work? If you were in the audience for the live performance, what would have been your reaction?
- Does this work challenge any assumptions about the definition of music you had before taking this course? If so, how?

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