



No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33" (Icons of America)

By Kyle Gann

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First performed at the midpoint of the twentieth century, John Cage's 4'33", a composition conceived of without a single musical note, is among the most celebrated and ballyhooed cultural gestures in the history of modern music. A meditation on the act of listening and the nature of performance, Cage's controversial piece became the iconic statement of the meaning of silence in art and is a landmark work of American music.

In this book, Kyle Gann, one of the nation's leading music critics, explains 4'33" as a unique moment in American culture and musical composition. Finding resemblances and resonances of 4'33" in artworks as wide-ranging as the paintings of the Hudson River School and the music of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, he provides much-needed cultural context for this fundamentally challenging and often misunderstood piece. Gann also explores Cage's craft, describing in illuminating detail the musical, philosophical, and even environmental influences that informed this groundbreaking piece of music. Having performed 4'33" himself and as a composer in his own right, Gann offers the reader both an expert's analysis and a highly personal interpretation of Cage's most divisive work.

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Editorial Review

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Starred Review To many music-lovers' chagrin, the most famous twentieth-century American classical music composition is, very probably, John Cage's 4' 33" (1952), consisting of three movements whose timings amount to 4 minutes and 33 seconds of . . . music? The question mark arises because not a note is sounded by its performer. It is completely silent. Or is it? For no matter where or how it is played, even in a recording (23 of which Gann lists in an appendix), there are always sounds to be heard. Said by many to be a work of philosophy rather than music, it is, Gann demonstrates, clearly the latter, though Cage was becoming intrigued with Zen when he composed it. And if one of its points is that all sounds are musical, it is fraught with further music-cultural meaning as the culmination of a musical avant-garde extending from Erik Satie in late-nineteenth-century Paris through 1920s Dada to the association of advanced music with abstract expressionist painting after World War II; as the progenitor of at least two styles of subsequent art music, minimalism and environmental sound; and as an astonishing inspiration to a panoply of rock bands. Deftly profiling Cage and his influences in the process, Gann entrancingly communicates his love and fascination with Cage's musical milestone in a spellbinding chapter of high-cultural history. --Ray Olson

Review

"Gann's book perfectly proves Cage's belief that putting a frame around silence can be as rewarding as music itself.' (Andrew Male, Mojo) '4'33", Gann argues, though often suspected of being merely a 'provocative stunt', is actually one of the best understood and most influential works of avant-garde music... In describing the piece's premieres and reception, Gann recaptures its 'Promethean' impact, which cost Cage some friends and prompted his mother to ask, "Don't you think that John has gone too far this time?" (The New Yorker)"

About the Author

Kyle Gann is Associate Professor of Music at Bard College, a composer, and former new-music critic for the *Village Voice*. He lives in Germantown, NY.

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