

Unheard Music

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Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
are sweeter.

--John Keats

John Cage: *4'33"* (1952). The classic. In three movements. Premiered by David Tudor on piano, although it sounds pretty good even in transcriptions. Not to be confused with either the showier *0'00"* (1962), "to be performed in any way by anyone" "in a situation provided with maximum amplification," or the watered-down *Tacet* (1960), which "may be performed by (any) instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time." Recommended recordings: Frank Zappa's acoustic rendition on *A Chance Operation* [Koch 7238], or Lassigue Bendthaus' electronic version on *Render* [KK Records 115]; the definitive recording of *0'00"* is by Peter Pfister [hat ART CD 2-6070]. For real range and lots of artistic license (well, lots of license at least), check out Roel Meelkop's compilation of nine different performances on *45:18*. [Korm Plastics 3005]

Alphone Allais. *Marche funèbre pour les funérailles d'un grand homme sourd* (1897). The great granddaddy of silent pieces. Allais -- something of a cross between Erik Satie, Raymond Roussel, and Joel Stein -- is probably best known for pioneering fiction structured on holorhymes, but he was also a composer. Sort of. The first movement of his *Funerary March* is simply nine empty measures [see the *Album Primo-Avrilesque* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1897)]. No recording, to date, but a scaled down version for string quartet was premiered at the FestivalManké (Nice) in 2000, under the direction of Ismaël Robert (who perhaps took a cue from Henry Flynt's 1961 Fluxus score, which reads: "The instructions for this piece are on the other side of this sheet." The other side, of course, is blank).

Stephen Vitiello. *Fear Of High Places And Natural Things* (2004). Like a substantially more animated dance mix of Allais' *Marche*, Vitiello's installation at the Long Island City Sculpture Center visualizes sound in a mute choreography. An array of speaker cones hung from above in a semi-circle pulse and bulge, deforming

with the powerful sounds that they're making. But try as you might -- head cocked, ear cupped -- you can't hear a thing: those sounds are at such a low frequency they can't be heard by human ears. The huffs and puffs of expended air, however, can actually be felt as the woofers pant with the exertion, dancing on, without a sound, eternally suspended in the *grand jeté* of their aerial ballet.

James Whitehead (aka Jliat): *Still Life #5* (2000). Six types of silence, all sounding the same but all empirically different. And potentially damaging to boot. The medium is the message, and in the case of the 16 bit 44.1khz compact disc the message can have 65,536 types of silence, none of which are the same: different data but all sounding null. In *Still Life*, Whitehead wrote those data directly to a PCM file, creating 6 ten-minute pieces with all of the values in a given track set to the same binary values. As Whitehead explains:

pausing the playing of a track will show this to be so, for the data being played is halted and the CD system jumps back to zero -- resulting in a click (if the value 'playing' was not zero or near to it). Interestingly this click is heard but is not actually on the recording -- it physically doesn't exist! It is the interference of the continuous stream of data which causes the sound.

The second track, "Swing" [+16383], is my favorite. Best of all, since the cd player translates every one of the continuous set of binary values to DC voltage, playing the disc can actually damage the speaker system coils and electronics in DC coupled equipment. Play at your own risk. [Edition... 011]

Ken Friedman: *Zen for Record* (1966). Blank phonograph record in homage to Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1964): a 16mm film consisting only of clear leader (often claimed to be an hour long, the screening I saw was advertised as 10 minutes, though it clocked in at closer to 8). Not to be confused with Christine Kozlov's *Transparent Film #2* (16mm) from 1967. The incidental soundtrack to Paik's film is a lot louder than Friedman's disc. If you get a chance, sit near the projectionist; even after only eight minutes you'll never forget the nervous clack and twitter of the shutter, blinking like a blinded Cyclopes in the noonday sun....

Steve Reich: *Pendulum Music* (1968). Like your high-school physics lab, but without fudging the results. Several microphones (no input) are suspended from a cable over a loudspeaker, with amplifiers arranged so that they generate feedback only when the microphone and loudspeaker are in alignment. The mics are set swinging along their pendular paths, honking briefly each time they pass the speaker and coming naturally to a droning stop. Premiered in Boulder by Reich and William Wiley, the performers for the 1969 Whitney concert were Reich, Bruce Nauman, Michael Snow, Richard Sierra, and James Tenney. Two good recordings from the Ensemble Avantgarde (two versions) [Wergo 6630-2] and Sonic Youth on *Goodbye 20th Century* [SYR4].

Matmos: "Always Three Words" (1998). First word: 4-channel tape recorder. Second word: walkie-talkie (no input). Third word: another walkie-talkie (no input). Both of the hand-held walkie-talkies are put in transmit mode and moved over the recorder; producing interference which can be manipulated with gestural sweeps. Last word: smart and funny and it's got a beat. [*Quasi-objects*, Vague Terrain 001]

Mike Batt: "One Minute Of Silence" (2002). The kind of thing that gives the avant-garde a bad name. Third-rate excerpt from Cage's *4'33"*, impatiently arranged by British impresario Batt and included on the album *Classical Graffiti* by The Planets. An imposter child of Silence and slow Time, Batt was promptly sued by Cage's publisher for copyright infringement. [EMI 5 57316 2]

No Noise Reduction. "0'0,060" For a Rock and Roll Band" (1995). Rowdy post-punk thrash from Tina and The Top Ten, featuring the enthused guitars of Johnny Santini and Paulo Feliciano, with all the amps set to 11. The precision edit, by Portuguese conceptualist Rafael Toral captures the band at their top volume full blast blow-out for exactly 60 milliseconds -- just long enough to jolt you up out of the mosh pit and give a palpable sense of the band's early exuberance and de-skilled attack. The rest of the piece is an ironically skillful 15 seconds and 40 milliseconds of silence. Careful

listening reveals that band-member Mimi is sitting those milliseconds out, and unfortunately is not heard on this track. [Moneyland records, MR0495]

Yves Klein. *Symphonie Monoton-Silence* (1957). Meant to provide a sonic equivalent of his monochromes paintings, the second movement of Klein's *Symphony* consists of twenty minutes of silence -- just enough time to give the audience a chance to shake the sense of ringing from their ears: the first twenty minutes consists of a sustained D-major chord. The work was originally conceived for full Wagnerian orchestra, but performed in 1960 at the Galerie Internationale d'Art Contemporain by a small chamber orchestra who memorized the score on short notice (though perhaps after peeking at the scrupulously notated version prepared by Pierre Henry a few years earlier). There is also a later, atmospheric version scored for mixed choir, strings, flutes, oboes, and horns. Not to be confused with the similar sounding conclusion to Guy Debord's film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952), which stretches aggressively on for a full four minutes longer. Though he denies any influence, Klein, not coincidentally, was present at the premier screening. There are rumors that Klein also issued a completely silent recording, in 1959, of a *Concert de vide* [*Concert of Vacuum*] (not to be confused with Sir Malcolm Arnold's roughly contemporaneous concert of vacuum *cleaners* [Op. 57, 1956]).

David Hoyland. "A Minutes Silence for the Queen Mum" (2002). The inverse of Klein's *Symphonie*, in some respects. Or disrespects. The unpatriotic Brits at this football match cheat the Queen out of about 12 seconds, but the pompous anthem that follows, with its slightly sour brass, makes one nostalgic for every second of preceding quiet. The unshielded mic picks up a lot of wind noise, so this lo-fi recording is primarily of documentary historical interest. [Sonic Arts Network SA301-2]

John Cage: *Silent Prayer* (1949, unrealized). Hints at the neo-dada origins of *4'33"* and its latent corporate critique. Cage's plan was to "compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be three or four and a half minutes in length -- those being the standard lengths of 'canned music'." Cage, that

still unravished *mariée*, would have *mise a nu* canned music and translated it into a Duchampian "*hasard en conserve* [canned chance]." Always seemed to be playing in the elevator in my old building.

Reynols: *Blank Tapes* (1999). Yep. Pieces made by the digital and analog processing of blank magnetic tapes. But special blank tapes, some of which had been saved, with a kind of touching sentimentality, since 1978. A lot noisier than the Argentine trio's first release, *Gordura Vegetal Hidrogenada*, which was a "dematerialized cd" (it came as an empty jewel case, reprising Psychodrama's 1984 release *No Tape*, a cassette shell that did not, as promised, contain any tape [the band's best release to date]). That (lack of a) debut cd was appropriate for a group whose leader, Miguel Tomasin, occasionally asserted that they don't exist. Tomasin, whose Down's Syndrome misprisions were taken as oracular pronouncements by his partners Alan Curtis and Roberto Conlazo, also regularly announced that the United States doesn't exist either. Which substantially cut down on his touring there. As Tomasin also says: *todo afrazarmo de lo spolido cintas*. [TrenteOiseaux 002]

Peeter Vähi. *Supreme Silence* (1999). The third movement of this Estonian composer's piece is indeed scored for silence, which was probably a nice break for Kristjan Järvi and the men of the Estonian National Choir. Not to mention the listener who has to sit through the new age orientalist mysticism of the other movements (the first of which, just to give you an idea, is entitled "Mandala Offering."). Fine silence, to be sure, piping to the spirit ditties of no tone, and it's nicely recorded on this disk, but "supreme" is probably overstating the case. [CCnC 182]

*0: *0.000* (2002). Actually not so rigorous as the title (or the pseudonym of Nosei Sakata) suggests, but rather the subtle hum and the molecular waver of air from frequencies just beyond the threshold of human perception: an ultrasonic 20200hz and a subsonic 14hz (or, in the case of one raucous track, the overtone produced when the two are combined). Though even that relatively lower frequency isn't likely

to be reproduced on most sound systems. If you've got a good stereo, turn it up really loud and see how the neighbor's dog reacts. [Mu-Label 002]

Mieko Shiomi: *A Musical Dictionary of 80 People Around Fluxus* (2002). Music worthy of the OuLiPo, in which Shiomi "describes" each of those people either by realizing one of their works, putting a signature compositional method into practice, or through a general pastiche of technique or timbre, but in all events using only the pitches available from the letters in the dedicatee's name. The disc from Galerie Hundertmark doesn't match the rigor of its concept with musicianship -- a few selections feature Shiomi's lackluster keyboard work, while others are left to an equally impassioned computer driven synthesizer. "Oh no" you're thinking, "eighty people?" Oh, yes, but the best piece is #56, for Yoko Ono, whose name wisely refused to supply any notes. [? Records 10]

Though we're still waiting for the definitive recording, the anti-expressivist wing of the Japanese onkyo school of minimal gesture has been moving toward working entirely with non-networked equipment. Think of it as applied zen. Recent performances have matched Otomo Yoshihide and Akiyama Tetzui on empty turntables with Sachiko Matsubara at the sampler, but with no samples (only its sine wave test) -- all mixed together by Toshimaru Nakamura's mixer without any input. Then again, it may be better to meditate on the idea than to actually listen; try to imagine the hand of one clap sounding (in applause).

Institut für Feinmotorik: *Penetrans* (2002). Following Martin Tetreault's minimalist work directly with tone-arm pickups, this Southern German collective of turntablists spin their machines without any records. Though the record players are well prepared, in the Cagean sense of the term, with household items (rubber-bands, tape, a toothbrush, *et cetera*). As the hearts of the *hochwertige Discoplattenspieler*s beat away, a few wheeze and cramp with the repetitive stress, some begin to click and thrum, and before you know it the resultant low-tech techno creates a wry roots electronica. Most astonishing of all, though, is that what might have been an inspired conceptual gesture or a 'pataphysical investigation into "precision

motoricity" has been going on for years now and led to nine (!) albums. Put on your narrow black rimmed glasses and check one out. [Staubgold 25]

Ervín Schulhoff: "In Futurum" (1919). Manic, anxious silence. The influence of early jazz and dada cabaret songs is palpable in the third movement of the Czech modernist's *Five Picturesques* for piano. Though entirely silent, the score bristles with notation: from long, angst-filled tacets to jittery quintuplet rests. The counting is tricky, and with any but the most accomplished pianist it can detract from the work's potential for emotional outpouring; according to the composer's headnote, the piece is to be played with as much heartfelt expression as desired — always, all the way through ["tutto il canzone con espressione e sentimento ad libitum, sempre, sin al fine!"].

Language Removal Service. *Static Language Sampler* (2003). State of the art in speech elimination, LRS cleans and purifies recordings of all language. Sources from their ever expanding archive include entries from various categories: "divas" (Callas, Monroe, Deitrich), "critics" (Susan Sontag, Noam Chomsky), "musicians" (Mingus, Monk, Cage), "artists" -- well, I guess they're actually all divas once you think about it. In all events, LRS takes out the words but leaves all the other sounds untouched: air whistling in buccal cavities, the pool and drain of saliva and phlegm, the glottal pops and deglutinations that punctuate the inframince spaces between even the most rapid speech. With that speech liberated from the distracting clamor of language, the cleansed recordings let ye soft pipes play ever on. With a good pair of headphones you can almost imagine the aolean echo of inspiration and the calcinated drip off stalactites in the caverns of bucolic grottos.... [promotional cd]

Matt Rogalsky. *S* (2002). Like the LRS but even cleaner. Rogalsky plays Doktor Murkes with this project, actually collecting the *gesammeltes schweigen* [collected silence] that Heinrich Böll's character supposedly splices together on tape. Doktor Murkes works in a radio studio, and *S*, not coincidentally, compiles all of the silences in one day of BBC radio broadcast. Testing both the proposition that "the tedium is the message" (as Darren Wershler-Henry phrased it) and that "silence is golden," the

result was released as a limited edition boxed set (24 audio cds and a cd-rom documentation) priced at £300. No doubt feeling some pressure from the masses, Rogalsky later used filtering software to distill the set into a single disc of excerpts -- a "best of" album, of sorts, containing only the quietest silences -- which was later released in a more democratic unlimited edition (though still kinda pricey at £15). Although they congratulated themselves on treating the whole project lightheartedly, the BBC did assert its rights to the silences, risking a showdown with Cage's publisher.

Tac. *Lapse of silence* (2003). A project of such conceptual integrity that the already very quiet recordings are not compromised by audible events. The result is a sort of "virtual aurality" untainted by sound. A distinctly romantic pastoralism, however, can nonetheless be felt. With a clear echo of Yoko Ono's 1963 *Tape Piece I* ("Stone Piece: take the sound of the stone aging"), the seven brief tracks on *Lapse* document the sounds of shadows moving, sun shining, ice melting, water evaporating, grass growing, candles burning, and -- in a nice nod to Cage -- mushrooms dropping spores. Limited to an edition of only 50, the 3" CDR comes in a unique sculptural encasement of *papier-mâché* and eggshells.

Jens Brand. *Stille-Landschaft* [*Silence-Landscape*] (2002). Real, authentic, documentary silence. The soundtrack to Brand's video installation (a full-circle pan across a desert landscape) is almost as empty as the view, which records a spot in Botswana that is one of the few places in the world where -- at certain times -- there is indeed almost absolute silence. Since the only way to really hear what was there is to not hear it, a full appreciation of the soundtrack requires its site specific installation in an anechoic chamber. Brand's video art is less in the tradition of the 19th century landscape painting or the spectacle of the panorama than the philosophical proposition: if there are no trees in the forest to fall...?

Pierre Huyghe. *Partition du Silence* [*Score of Silence*] (1997). Who says you can't get something for nothing? Huyghe took a digital recording of Cage's 4'33" and used computer software to enlarge the scale of the digital print. Like blowing up a

photograph to reveal what couldn't be seen, the result of Huyghe's magnification amplified what was previously inaudible. Huyghe then scored those sounds using traditional musical notation to create a playable transcription of Cage's piece. Like a map drawn to a scale that's greater than one-to-one, the *Score* is thus -- simultaneously -- a grossly inaccurate distortion and a minutely faithful facsimile.

In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg convinced Willem de Kooning to give him a drawing, which Rauschenberg promptly and studiously erased (playing out a dada performance from decades earlier, in which André Breton chased Francis Picabia around a sheet of paper, immediately erasing whatever Picabia drew, as soon as it appeared). Now you can hear the conversational version. Finding that he had accidentally erased an interview he'd just conducted with J. G. Ballard, Jeremy Millar exhibited it as the *Erased JG Ballard Interview* (Nothing Exhibition, Rooseum, 2001). Just enough metallic hiss to make Reynolds reunite and head back to the studio. While it's nice to see a stupid mistake transformed into a genius installation, it would have been better if he'd wiped out a specially commissioned electroacoustic composition from someone at Dartmouth.

Alvin Lucier. "Quiet Coffee." Under-caffeinated composition by the master of conceptual music. I suppose it's the sonic equivalent to those sleepy early morning moments lost staring at the steam rising from the coffee mug, but to be honest, I can't hear much going on here -- even wide awake with headphones and the volume turned up all the way. But it does give me an excuse to mention the collection *A Call for Silence*, curated by Nicolas Collins for Sonic Arts Network. Though it often confuses quiet with silent, the compilation highlights include Christian Marclay's *Unused Space*, which would make a good encore for an Institut für Feinmotorik show, and Matt Rogalsky's "Two Minutes and Fifty-Five Seconds..." in which he bullies George W. Bush into rushing through a patriotic performance of Cage's masterpiece and gets him to say a lot more than usual in the process. The cd also contains a couple of tracks in homage to Lucier's famous *I Am Sitting In A Room*: the Kaptial Band's raucous party game "How Many People Are In This Room" and Richard Beard's contrarian "I Am Not Sitting In A Room." The latter is not quite silent either -- you can hear the tick-tock allusion to Lucier's *Clocker* as well as some shuffling

and fidget -- but it demonstrates with conviction that Beard isn't going to take this kind of avant-garde nonsense sitting down. [SA301-2]

John Levack Drever. "Pastoral Pause." Another track of note from the *Call for Silence* cd, this is ominous, edge-of-your-seat silence recorded on location in Dartmoor. A sudden epic opening, *in medias res*, just moments after a car has passed over a cattle grid in the sonic foreground: the drum-roll clang and reverb of the grating die with a quick decay and the motor fades into the distance, replaced with some solitary birdcalls, the sluice of a rill, and the sound of wind over an unimpeded expanse (Drever's work is not for the agoraphobic). But wait, what was that? A noise in the distance? The approach of another car? Who could be coming? Et in Arcadia Ego? The suspense builds, but we never hear what happens when it gets to the crossing. With an echo of the crop-duster scene in *North By Northwest*, this is environmental art reimagined as a horror movie. Terrifying.

Braco Dimitrijevic: *Njeqove Dovke Glas* [*His Pencil's Voice*] (1973). Pre-post-historical work from the Sarajevo-born conceptualist, who has written: "I want a style as neutral as possible, a kind of universal writing." In this case, the writing was done with a sharpened pencil on a piece of white cardboard, creating a unique variable speed phonograph record (16, 33, 45, or 78 rpm). I've never heard this one (well, you know what I mean), but apparently the album was exhibited in Zagreb and Chicago in the '70s.

Vasilii Gnedov: "Smert' Iskustvo" ["Poem of the End"] (1913). Sound poetry reduced to the blank page. Grab a sheet of paper and give a performance yourself.