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Rereading 4'33" as Sonic Citizenship

On the conceptual framework

for urban sounds

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Anette Vandsø

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# Rereading 4'33" as Sonic Citizenship

## On the conceptual framework for urban sounds

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### Anette Vandsø

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### I. The soundscape metaphor

While the soundscape theory, that conceptualizes our auditory environment as a sonic landscape of sorts, has faced many criticisms directly arguing 'against soundscape',<sup>1</sup> it remains the foundational framework for numerous contemporary studies of historical and current sonic environments,<sup>2</sup> and the term 'soundscape' still serves as *the* framing metaphor used about sonic environments. In this paper I aim to suggest that other framing metaphors are possible by delving into the very argument the Canadian composer Murray R. Schafer made, when he introduced the term 'the soundscape' in the opening pages of his seminal book *The Tuning of the World*.

In these pages Schaefer develops his metaphor via an account of a history of music, in which musical art works of the 20th century 'gradually open up towards their surroundings' to 'allow the introduction of a whole new world of sound outside them'.<sup>3</sup> A key example – and the *only* specific piece Schafer mentions in this narrative – is the American composer John Cage's 4'33" (four minutes and 33 sec-

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1 See for instance: T. Ingold, *Being Alive*, (Routledge, 2011), 136-139. T. Ingold, 'Against soundscape' in A. Carlyle (Ed.), *Autumn leaves: sound and the environment in artistic practice*, (Double Entendre, 2007), 10-13.

2 Soundscape theory is for instance an integral part of the development of an ISO standard (e.g. Brown, Kang, 'Towards standardization in soundscape preference assessment', *Applied Acoustics*, 72:6 (2011), 387-392) and for many online presentations of field recordings, e.g. M. Droumova, 'Soundmapping as critical cartography: Engaging publics in listening to the environment', *Communication and the Public*, Vol. 2:4 (2017), 335-351.

3 M.R. Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Knopf, Michigan, 1977) 5.

onds) (1952) [fig.1.] where 'we hear only the sounds external to the composition itself, which is merely one protracted caesura.'<sup>4</sup>

Based on this brief history of music, Schafer concludes his overall conceptualization of our sonic environment as a 'macro cosmical composition'. This governs his call to action – that we need to 'tune the world' through careful acoustic design, akin to how we would tune an orchestra – as well as the methodology developed in the World Soundscape Project, which includes sound mapping via sound recordings, or other modes of ear witnessing, and categorisation.<sup>5</sup>

The underlying assumption in Schafer's analysis is, that we can experience and analyse the sonic environment from afar, much like we would perceive a landscape, that only becomes a landscape, when we witness it at a distance – or as a we would perceive a piece of music played by an orchestra, that is distinct from and different to us. With this paper I speculate: *what if Schafer had interpreted John Cage's 4'33" differently?* What if Cage's small piece was an exposure of the social fabric of background soundings and of our messy, fragile relationship to them, rendering any clear-cut distinction between ourselves and the sounds, as well as their distance form us impossible? I wish to present such an analysis in the following paper to suggest that had Schafer done a similar analysis, he would have ended up with a different framing metaphor: that of sonic citizenship.

## II. The background of attention as a battleground

Schafer's narrative in these opening pages is hard to counter: The musical field at that time *does* seem to open our senses to a sonic world that is right out *there*, ready for us to describe and categorize. And when Cage instructed the instrumentalist(s) to play nothing for the entire duration of the piece, his intention was indeed to allow the audience to experience the incidental background soundings with the aesthetic attentiveness they would normally apply to music. He hoped with that this would allow them able to experience 'unsuspected beauty in their everyday life [...] with some therapeutic value for city dwellers', as Cage stated.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, according to sound scholar Douglas Kahn, these Cagean sounds, positioned at the 'amplified threshold of their disappearance – silence, small and barely audible sounds' result in the 'social, political, poetic, and ecological aspects' correspondingly disappearing.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid. 6.

6 Quoted in 'Percussionist', *Time* (22 February 1943): 70; cited in Patterson, 'Appraising the Catchwords', 108-109, as cited in D. Kahn, 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing', *The Musical Quarterly*, 81:4 (1997), 556-598, 578.

7 Ibid., 557.

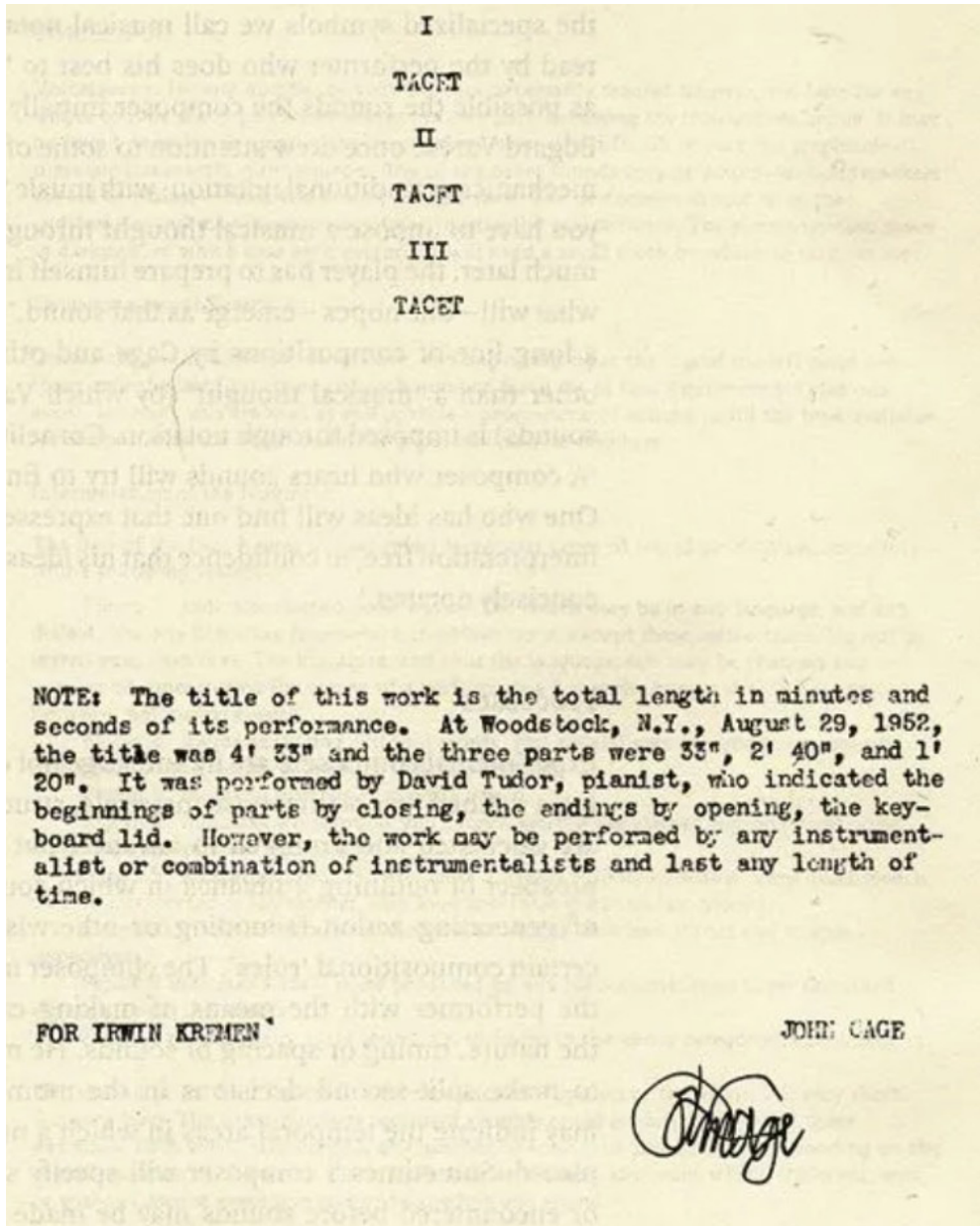


Fig. 1: John Cage: 4'33", 1952, Edition Peters, 1960 (Tacet version).

For these reasons, it is not strange Schafer would present 4'33" as *the* quintessential soundscape piece, as the social fabric of sounds is not obvious in this piece. However, as Brandon Labelle argues, when we consider the broader context of 4'33", these social and political dimensions may reappear.<sup>8</sup> It so happens that given the actual context of Cage's aesthetics of silence, these social and political dimensions are quite easy to see: When Cage presented his idea to make a completely

8 B. Labelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (Bloomsbury, 2015).



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Fig. 2: Brochure for Muzak, 1959. Recorded Sound Devison. Muzak LLC.

silent piece at a conference in 1948, it was presented a direct gesture towards Muzak. Cage proposed creating ‘a piece of uninterrupted silence’ that he would sell to Muzak Co. He mentioned that it would be 3 or 4½ minutes long—‘those being the standard lengths of “canned” music’ – and that its title would be *Silent Prayer*, as

he said.<sup>9</sup> Muzak was a heavily debated topic at that time, so the audience would easily understand what Cage meant.

Muzak, which is still the derogatory word we use for built sonic environments with background music, was the name of the pioneering streaming service that used radio to distribute functional background music to its subscribers [fig.2.] Around the late 1940s there were around 7.000 subscribers including retail stores, banks, transportation, and factories.

The increasing use of Muzak's products to manage and monetize the public domain instigated heated debates and even legal lawsuits: In 1949, lawsuits concerned the Grand Central Terminal in New York,<sup>10</sup> and the year after, citizens protested the use of Muzak in Washington D.C.'s Capital Transit's newly radio equipped busses. In hundreds of letters to the Washington Post, as well as during subsequent hearings and lawsuits, citizens protested the proliferation transit-casting to a captive audience of specific segments near selling points,<sup>11</sup> and advocated for the right to an unannoyed journey, and ultimately for the 'freedom of attention.'<sup>12</sup>

In 1952, the very year Cage completed his 4'33", the right to freedom of attention was lost as the Supreme Court ruled that transit-casting was 'not inconsistent with public convenience, comfort and safety'.<sup>13</sup>

The debates and legal struggles, along with Cage's gesture towards Muzak, demonstrate how the attentional background had become a messy topos. It was increasingly designed, built, and saturated by laws and regulations with the intention to protect and/or enable certain actions from the citizens. In response, citizens attuned themselves to these background soundings via conscious or unconscious acts of listening, or instructions to listen such as Cage's 4'33", sound productions, or even lawsuits. Therefore, the debates over background music did not just concern the question of noise or silence/silencing. Rather, it dealt with questions of citizens' collective patterns of attention, intentionality and subject formation.<sup>14</sup> Annahid Kassabian describes Muzak as an example of the distributed

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9 J. Cage, 'A Composer's confession', *Musicworks*, 52 (1992), 6-15.

10 M. F. Jordan, 'Canned Music and Captive Audiences. The Battle Over Public Soundspace at Grand Central Terminal and the Emergence of the New Sound', *The Communication Review*, 17 (2014) 286-310. DOI: 10.1080/10714421.2014.960734.

11 K. Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 130-135, and A. Russo, 'An American Right to an 'Unannoyed Journey'? Transit Radio as a Contested Site of Public Space and Private Attention, 1949-1952', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, 29:1 (2009), 1-25.

12 Quoted in Albert Bard, 'The Right to an 'Unannoyed Journey'', *The American City*, February 1950, cited in Russo, 2009, 2.

13 Ibid.

14 To see a more unfolded analysis of the question of subject formation, transindividuation and Muzak in relation to 4'33" see: A.Vandsø, 'Silence! The background of attention as a battlefield', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 65, 2022.

subject formation of ubiquitous listening.<sup>15</sup> With Muzak, the subscribers aimed to *produce* certain kinds of citizens – consumers, factory workers and commuters – through ambient bio governmentality. This included structuring the monotonous temporality of factory work or commuting with a time slot of Muzak, followed by silence and/or commercials. Additionally, it involved using the affect of a soothing music designed to remain below the threshold of conscious attention.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Sonic citizenship

While Muzak was designed *not* to be listened to, to stay in the *background* of our field of attention, 4'33" is designed to bring forth this attentional background, as suggested by Sabino Sanio.<sup>17</sup> 4'33" can thus be read as a micropolitics of attention that reinstalls the skill of listening at a time where built sonic environments with Muzak, as well as the general noise levels, would afford citizens not to listen to, or to mask, the background soundings.

As a listening practice, 4'33" does not expose a sonic world 'out there' for us to 'tune', as Schafer would want it. Rather, 4'33" is an act of attunement to those changed conditions. Cage said that the duration of the unrealized *Silent Prayer* was a reference to the typical length of 'canned music' (e.g. Muzak), and it is hard not to read the title 4'33" [four minutes and 33 seconds] as a similar nod to the reproductive technologies that enabled Muzak, namely the 78-inch disc, which allowed just under five minutes sound.<sup>18</sup>

Karin Bijsterveld has described how, as early as 1887, factory noise was a matter of concern in a European context and soon in the US as well. This involved new regulations, new technologies as well as new everyday sonic practices where factory workers would respond to their noisy environments, for example by singing.<sup>19</sup> Given these historical contexts, both Muzak and the general problems with noise, what 4'33" brings forth is not just sounds, as a soundscape. Rather it is the attentional background as a messy and conflictual topos with multiple stakeholders. A background that involves collective patterns of attention and intention, as well as the entire attention ecology that produces these collective patterns. This, in effect,

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15 A. Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*, (University of California Press, 2013), xii.

16 H. Pivo, 'Selling Silence, Controlling Chaos: John Cage's Interventions into Muzak', *Public Art Dialogue*, 9:1, (2019), 95-118.

17 S. Sanio, *Alternativen zur werkästhetik. John Cage und Helmut Heissenbüttel*, (Saarbrücken: Pfau, 1999); M. Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, (Stanford University Press, 2005)

18 Gann, *No Such Thing*; Pivo, 'Selling Silence'.

19 K. Bijsterveld, 'Listening to Machines: Industrial Noise, Hearing loss and the cultural meaning of sound', in J. Sterne (ed.) *The Sound Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2012), 152-167



Fig 3. John Cage performs 4'33" in Harvard Square, picture from Nam June Paik Tribute to John Cage, 1973/1976, MoMa collection, Copyright Estate of Nam June Paik.

relates to the subject formation that takes place in the interaction between citizens and the background that to some extent produces them and is produced by them – because, as we have learned from 4'33", our relationship with background sounds is depended on how we listen to them.

In this context, the listener is not merely a listener within the non-space or art, but also a citizen in the context of the nation with its laws and regulations. A citizen who responds to given circumstances, for instance, through strategies for listening, protesting, or on more subconscious levels, attuning themselves to the messy and fragile sonic environment that surrounds them.

The perspective of sonic citizenship is enhanced in Cage's own public performances of 4'33" in urban settings, for instance Harvard Square [fig.3].

The existing literature on sonic citizenship revolves around the question of the subject's relation to the collective: how communal singing<sup>20</sup> or transliminal listening<sup>21</sup> gives the sense of belonging, at times in a precarious situation where for

20 H. Phelan, 'Sonic Citizenship- Right and rites of belonging in Ireland, in *Making Congregational Music Local Christian Communities Worldwide*' (Routledge, 2018) and T. Damsholt, 'The Sound of Citizenship', *Ethnologia Europaea* 38:1, (2008), 56-65.

21 V. Andresani, *Inventing Havana in Thin Air: Sound, Space, and the Making of Sonic Citizenship* (Simon Fraser University, 2017)



instance the question of an actual citizenship is at stake, or how residents in larger building complexes navigate the messy controversies concerning neighbor noise.<sup>22</sup> With colleagues from Center for Sound Studies (AU), Morten Breinbjerg and Marie Højlund, I have elsewhere described sonic citizenship as a general framework that enhances the messy, fragile reactive relation at play between situated listeners and their sonic environments, which always in various ways involves the collective: laws, regulatives, norms, specific communities or patterns of production or reception of sound as well as the sense of belonging.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV. Behold the orchestra!

What I propose is not a 'correct' reading of 4'33" (as shown elsewhere, 4'33" is a gesture that can and has been interpreted in many ways).<sup>24</sup> Rather, I suggest that 4'33" in its historical context reveals the fragile and messy situated relationship we have to our sonic environment, which cannot be grasped by the soundscape metaphor, but easily seen through the lens of sonic citizenship.

*So, what if Schafer had included this messy context in his analysis?* After Schafer's brief account of the history of music and his reference 4'33" in the opening pages of the *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer concludes that:

*Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music. Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe! And the musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!*<sup>25</sup>

Following my analysis and sonic citizenship as a proposed framework for understanding our sonic environment, Schafer would not have built his theory on the idea of a 'sonic universe' with its all-encompassing view from nowhere. Instead, he would have focused on latter part he mentions, namely – 'the musicians, anyone and anything that sounds' – and listens, we might add.

Such a conceptual framework would take its offset in the subjects relation to the communal, collective aspects of 'the orchestra', that on the one hand superimposes rules and restrictions on its musicians, while at the same time giving them the

22 E-S. Kim, 'Sound and the Korean Public: Sonic Citizenship in the Governance of Apartment Floor Noise Conflicts', *Science as Culture* 25:4 (2016) 538-559. DOI: 10.1080/09505431.2016.1193132.

23 M. Breinbjerg, M. Højlund, M., A Vandsø, 'Det soniske medborgerskab: Om rodede og skræbelige mellemværender med lyd', *Kulturstudier*, 12:2 (2021) 94-117. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ks.v12i2.129569>

24 A. Vandsø, *Musik som værk og handling*, (Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2016)

25 Schafer, *The Tuning*, 5.

joy of belonging and the possibility of being heard.<sup>26</sup> Instead of arguing in favour of 'a tuning of the world,' e.g. the orchestra, the focus of such a framework, would be the constant *attunement*, through which the musicians navigate in relation to sound and the collective on a conscious or unconscious level. With this metaphor of sonic citizenship our sonic environment is not regarded as a landscape, that we can view from afar. Instead, this metaphor focusses on the situated perspective of the subject as an active listener and thus producer of sound, who is also always also situated in social contexts.

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26 This is a nod to S. Rosenfeld, 'On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear', *American Historical Review*, (2011), 316-334. A text I would include in a canon of sonic citizenship-texts.

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