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Silence, Music, Silent Music

Edited by

NICKY LOSSEFF and JENNY DOCTOR

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Coming to academia rather late in life, **Tom Dixon**'s research combines interests in 'early music' with music's philosophical and religious aspects. Pursuing these themes in the thought of the English religious author, Peter Sterry, resulted in an MA thesis (Lancaster University, 2002) and a PhD dissertation (University of Manchester, 2005). He has presented aspects of his research at academic conferences, including invited papers at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, at All Souls' College, Oxford and at a conference on 'Music and Aesthetics' in Venice. Work in progress includes an exploration of the historical, cultural and educational contexts of Sterry's 'musical model', and research on music in the papers of the mid-seventeenth-century 'intelligencer', Samuel Hartlib. He currently holds a temporary teaching fellowship in the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures at the University of Manchester.

Matthew Hill is Associate Professor of Music at Goshen College in Indiana, where he teaches piano, music history and humanities. He has written for *Clavier*, and lectures and presents master classes at the Goshen College Piano Workshop. Matthew has been a guest presenter for the Great Lakes Chapter of the College Music Society and at 'Couleurs dans le vent: Celebrating the Music of Olivier Messiaen', an international conference held at the University of Kansas in 2002. In October 2006 he presented a series of master classes and a recital performance at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music in Chengdu, China; he has performed at the White House in Washington DC, as accompanist for the Wausau Conservatory Choraliers Children's Choir, and has been heard on Wisconsin Public Radio. Matthew has a doctorate in piano performance from the University of Wisconsin-Madison under pianist Howard Karp, and has also studied with the renowned Beethoven interpreter Claude Frank.

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Ed Hughes is a composer and currently lectures in the Music Department at Sussex University, where he has developed new courses in music and film. He has previously lectured for the British Film Institute Education Department at the National Film Theatre. In the last two years, he has received major commissions from the Brighton Festival and the City of London Festival for The Opera Group. He has written scores for films such as *Battleship Potemkin*, *I Was Born, But...*, *Pacific 231* and *Rain*, as well as work on *Playing a Part: the Story of Claude Cahun* (a documentary by Lizzie Thynne). Previous commissions include *I Fagiolini*, London Sinfonietta, CHROMA, Opus 20 String Ensemble, Bath Camerata, Sinfonia 21, Bath International Music Festival, Bath Film Festival, Schubert Ensemble (for Chamber Music 2000) and Arts Council of England (for New Music Players, which he founded as artistic director). Performances have also been given by distinguished pianists, including Richard Casey, Stephen Gutman, Thomas Adès, Ian Pace and Michael Finnissy. His work is recorded by Opus 20 (DGM label), New Music Players (London Independent Records), the Schubert Ensemble (NMC) and the BMIC (for Unknown Public).

Stan Link is currently the Assistant Professor of the Composition, Philosophy and Analysis of Music in the Composition–Theory Department at the Blair School of Music of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. He teaches music composition, theory, interdisciplinary arts courses and a course on film soundtracks. He has held other academic posts at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, and at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Stan holds a Bachelor of Music in Composition and Music History from Oberlin Conservatory, and received his MFA and PhD from Princeton University. Some of his work on film music and sound appears in the journals *Screen* and *American Music*. Further scholarly publications include articles in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Mikropolyphonie*, *Computer Music Journal* and *Music Theory Spectrum*. He is an active composer of acoustic and electro-acoustic music, with musical compositions performed in Europe, Australia and across the USA.

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We are delighted that Geoffrey Clarke was willing to permit his etching, *Pilgrim* (1950), to appear on the cover of this book, and thank him most warmly for this privilege. The image appeared in an exhibition catalogue of Geoffrey Clarke's etchings that was published in 2006; we are grateful to the exhibition curator, Gordon Cooke of the Fine Art Society, and to the printer, Wooter Rummens of Die Keure, for making the image available for our use. We warmly thank Dr Judith LeGrove, cataloguer of Geoffrey Clarke's works, for her rediscovery of the etching and for bringing the catalogue to our attention.

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Introduction

> We do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.
>
> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

To reach George Eliot's roar on the 'other side of silence' requires a state of mind so finely tuned as to produce a terminal oversensitivity to the mechanics of human life. Yet it also invokes something of the acutely meditative, an alternative to desensitization and a desire to rise above the quotidian that links to other types of transcendence and to stillness. Overcoming the mundane requires an ability to move through sound to silence – a journey Eliot equated with the journey to death.

Like Eliot's undifferentiated 'roar' on the other side of silence, music often functions in philosophical discourse as a metaphor for the unsayable. It is semantically slippery; we can never know its meaning. At best, as an object of fantasy, it might become a discourse of ideas – whether motivic, psychological or narrative depends on the consumer's taste. But it seems strange that in this history of ontological elusiveness, the most obviously intangible aspect of music – its silences – have so seldom been addressed. Music's meanings are obscure, but at least sounds leave traces onto which we can project meaning: a 'something' that both defines and limits what we can say. Silence, in comparison, offers the limitless. It confronts us, perhaps it even 'roars'; in negotiating its hazy boundaries we may meet, head-on, chasms that open up within ourselves. The unsaid and the unsayable – and undifferentiated time – gape before us.

Dictionary definitions of silence privilege its negative qualities: absence of sound, prohibition on speech, refusal to communicate.[1] These negative characteristics reflect a rather narrow European perspective, where silence is too easily equated with the passive, the submissive and the void. The idea that silence can be perceived as a form of communication – expressing reflection, for instance, as it might in Japanese culture – is less widespread in Western social contexts. However, the overarching theme that emerges from this collection of essays is that musical silences are cognitive in the deepest sense. From performers communicating through musical rests and

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[1] *The Oxford Dictionary of English* gives: 'complete absence of sound ... the fact or state of abstaining from speech ... the avoidance of mentioning or discussing something'; see 'Silence *noun*', in *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, rev. ed., ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed in *Oxford Reference Online*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com>, (accessed 24 March 2006).

composers drawing on meditative silences as fundamental compositional elements, through film sound designers layering and juxtaposing music and its absence, to mystics hearing a silent form of 'music', it is clear that in human perception silence in relation to music does not exist as a vacuum. Perhaps this is why Susan Sontag scorned late twentieth-century modernist art's 'appeals to silence'.[2] Unable to recognize endeavours to abstract music towards silence as generative of the open and non-prescriptive, she instead saw it as ultimately self-annihilating: Sontag did not look beyond silence as absence, thereby confirming her roots as a thinker schooled in European ideas. Embracing silence as a positive, active entity was simply not in her thought spectrum. But then, Western musicians are trained to recognize codes of organized sounds – and Western music curricula do not usually include the reading of silences.

For many composers, silence within their music does not represent a single idea. Silence can stand as the softest kind of music, and it can also exist as the nothingness represented by rests, which the activity of performance must challenge to be alive. There might be a sense of silence that 'is' music unsounded, a kind of ideal condition of music to which a composer's contemplations and compositions might aspire; and there might also be a sense that silence is a sea on which rafts of sounds float.[3] As in film, silence in music may play a diegetic role, a specific part of the action; or silence may be masked by music that in sounding, takes over silence's usual role. At first sight, these ideas stand separately from each other. But, in fact, it is 'the ways in which various silences and hearings of silence point to each other'[4] that may be perceived as significant. Moreover, they meet in the silences that frame occurrences of music, and also in the contextual, often structural, silences within music. What all these silences have in common is their fecundity: they are pregnant with unanswerable questions.

It is tempting to imagine that readings of these silences are easier to grasp the more silences are bound to their immediate contexts. However, as Stan Link has suggested, 'silence is where *we are*, not where it is. ... Our impression of the input and meaning of silence in a musical context is therefore heightened by a sense of transcendence: the ideal silence banishing the real'.[5] The problem with such contextual silences is that they are still temporally bounded by music; when glimpsed, there may not be enough time to transcend the moment before music again interrupts. But sometimes contextual silences do produce those extraordinary moments where everything stops, so that – *what*? – so that *something else* might begin. In these cases, the contextual silences of heard music may bring us face to face with the eternal silences of the

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[2] Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969; London: Vintage, 1994), 3–34.

[3] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), trans. Carolyn Abbate as *Music and the Ineffable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Chapter 4 'Music and Silence', 132.

[4] See Chapter 4 (Link).

[5] Stanley Boyd Link, 'Essays towards Musical Negation' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1995), 5–6.

infinite spaces that so frightened the French philosopher, Pascal;[6] but they may also indicate the kinds of silences that have analogies in speech: silences of assent, of contemplation, of trauma. In other words, at the moment of musical silence we may reach into ourselves, but that may be precisely what enables us to 'make a reading' of the music.

Silence and Music

In this book, we've begun to feel our way into a new branch of musicology, in which different disciplines – history, music analysis, psychology, cognition, performance practices, social practices, music therapy, religious studies, philosophy – intersect in considering the multiplicity of relationships that exist between music and silence. We've discovered no model that could guide this process of intersection to full effect, to define what this field might encompass or 'mean'; the essays in this book begin to explore some of the possibilities. By approaching music's relation to silence from different points of view, the essays question the obvious, the invisible. And by looking at the obvious through different lenses, the responses attempt to break through the rather rigid bounds that still confine the field of musicology, often wandering into realms of the personal or spiritual that may embarrass many who protect as paramount 'objectivity' in the discipline. But we strongly affirm this trajectory into the unsayable, remembering the words of Philip Brett:

> Our scholarship always reflects our selves however hard we try to objectify it. The truths we discover and reveal are never so much about a historical situation as they are about our own situations, tastes and perceptions. Once acknowledged, this idea actually facilitates the Platonic search for, and dialogue with, the past and its denizens characteristic of genuine scholarship. And it leads to the further acknowledgment that critical judgments, however 'right' they feel, are only further aspects of the training, personality, associations and predilections of each of us.[7]

Perhaps a reason why engagement with this rich, interdisciplinary field has not been properly initiated before now is because it involves the subjectivity of the personal, the psychological and the spiritual as well as the objectivity of the analytical and theoretical. In moving from sound to silence and back again, the traveller thus challenges not only traditional academic boundaries of discipline, but also those of personal views and beliefs.

Thus, in considering a book on music and silence, we wished to provide both a substantive platform of diverse topics and a variety of perspectives, personalities and

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[6] The full passage is from *Pensée* 68: 'When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after – *as the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day* – the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright.' Blaise Pascal, *Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets* (1665), trans A. J. Krailsheimer as *Pensées* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 48.

[7] Philip Brett, Review of *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, vols. 1–2, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 119/1 (1994), 145.

approaches. A single volume can only begin the process of opening up and launching this field of study, and we have chosen to do so with twelve interrelated essays. They are presented within the volume in groupings that give alternative views on music and silence in relation to the world around us: (1) the paradox of music evoking silence as a means of perceiving beyond reality, in Olivier Messaien's exploration of spiritual, aesthetic and compositional expression; (2) the power of silence in the context of modern reality, considering the music of Anton Webern, Charles Ives and Tōru Takemitsu; (3) music as silence in the constructed realities of film; (4) music as perceived in altered realities in music therapy; (5) the impossibility of silence in physical reality, considering the music and philosophies of John Cage; (6) performing silences in musical reality, both medieval and modern; and, ultimately, (7) the contemplation of silent music in reaching beyond reality.[8] Despite the relative scarcity of musicological literature that explicitly discusses silence and music to date, the composite bibliography provides both substantial evidence of the 'existence' of this field, and what we hope will prove to be a useful tool for its further interrogation by future scholars.

The Paradox of Music Evoking Silence: the Attempt to Perceive Beyond Reality

It is notable that a number of composers have consciously sought to express their silent contemplations of the spiritual through composed sound: John Tavener, Tōru Takemitsu, Olivier Messiaen and Federico Mompou spring to mind as examples. Their written 'testaments' have similarly arisen through contemplations of silence. Tavener's *The Music of Silence* is replete with references to René Guénon and other philosophers of Nothingness, in his search for 'metaphysical meaning behind the notes', his rejection of modernism in music and his return to traditional social and musical sources as purer means of achieving spiritual expression. Takemitsu's *Confronting Silence* reflects on the historical place of the Japanese aesthetic *ma*, the space and silence between events, in his cultural background, as well as in his musical expressions.[9] Similarly Messiaen explained in written notes that the

[8] The absence of a chapter on the experience of music and silence in relation to hearing loss and deafness may strike the reader as notable; the extensive literature in the fields of medicine and deaf Studies has not been paralleled in any way in musicological literature, after all. Either we could have explored the obvious (Beethoven, Evelyn Glennie – both of whom developed hearing losses after knowing sounding music and whose 'deaf' experience was/is informed by having been part of the world of hearing); or, we could have explored ways in which people who are profoundly deaf from birth experience vibration as music through particular sections of the cortex, by summarizing the medical perspectives currently available. However, after giving it deep thought, we decided that this potentially enormous topic could not be covered in a meaningful way in a single chapter. It is a subject that deserves a book-length study of its own.

[9] John Tavener, *The Music of Silence: a Composer's Testament*, ed. Brian Keeble (London: Faber and Faber, 1999); Tōru Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Yoshiko Kakudo and Glenn Glasow (Berkeley, CA: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995).

seventeenth of his *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jesu*, the 'Regard du silence', is about the silence–sound paradox, 'each silence from the crib reveals sounds and colours which are the mysteries of Jesus Christ'. Mompou, too, was spiritually inspired to explore music's relationship with silence. Between 1959 and 1967, he composed *Música callada* ('silent music'), a piano work in four volumes on texts of the mystic Catholic explorer, St John of the Cross. This work distilled Mompou's search for purity of expression: like Webern, he found that maximum expression paradoxically led to minimal compositional means.

> This music is silent because it is heard in one's inner self. Restraint and discretion. The emotion remains hidden, and the sounds only take shape when they find echoes in the bareness of our solitude. This music is silent because it is heard inwardly. Restraint and reserve. Its emotion is secret and only takes sonorous form when it finds echoes in the great cold vault of our solitude. I desire that in my silent music, this newborn child, we should be brought closer to the warmth of human life and to the expression of the human heart, that is always the same and yet always being renewed.[10]

Through spiritual questioning and contemplation, each of these composers found himself at that elusive border between music and silence, uncovering silence as the ultimate means of expression and transcendence.

It is easy to dismiss attempts to write music 'that lies on the other side of silence' as at worst insincere, and at best naïve. It can never be more than music, after all. The transcendence claimed by composers such as Tavener, Takemitsu, Messiaen and Mompou is a reflection of a mental state, deeply connected with musical languages familiar from other contexts associated with the introspective or the religious. Such musics might induce a feeling of tranquillity in listeners, or even encourage a 'silence of the mystic', but, it may be argued, they cannot ever reach across to the 'other side', other than as an agency of human transformation (though this might be important enough in itself). However, the idea that music can *express* aspects of the condition of silence is less an act of delusion than one of humility; it acknowledges that all forms of mystical knowledge, however transcendent they appear, must take place through a form of human endeavour that is familiar. Art in itself is neither a direct fruit of transcendent knowledge nor a form of contemplation; but it can be the fruit of that contemplation, since contemplation leads from silence to that which is apprehensible.

Messiaen's exploration of cognitive silence in the 'Regard du silence' is examined in this volume by Matthew Hill (Chapter 2), who studies correlations between musical portrayal and Catholic dogma that Messiaen articulated in prose programme notes

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[10] 'Esta música es callada porque su audición es interna. Contención y reserva. Su emoción es secreta y solamente toma forma sonora en sus resonancias bajo la gran bóveda fría de nuestra soledad. Deseo que en mi música callada, este niño recién nacido, nos aproxime a un nuevo calor de vida y a la expresión del corazón humano, siempre la misma y siempre renovando.' Federico Mompou, extract from speech made when entering the Academia de Bellas Artes de san Jorge, in *Discurso leído en la solemne recepción pública de D. Federico Mompou: Dencausse el día 17 de mayo de 1952* (Barcelona: Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Jorge, n.d.), 8.