

# Is This Music?

John Cage (1912-1992)

*Four Pieces for Piano*

4'33" of silence

## HISTORIC FIRST PERFORMANCE

"Good people of Woodstock, let's run these people out of town" (artist at the premiere performance of 4'33").<sup>1</sup>

The first performance of John Cage's 4'33" created a scandal. Written in 1952, it is Cage's most notorious composition, his so-called "silent piece." *The piece consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds in which the performer plays nothing.* At the premiere some listeners were unaware that they had heard anything at all. It was first performed by the young pianist David Tudor at Woodstock, New York, on August 29, 1952, for an audience supporting the Benefit Artists Welfare Fund—an audience that supported contemporary art.

Tudor placed the hand-written score, which was in conventional notation with blank measures, on the piano and sat motionless as he used a stopwatch to measure the time of each movement. The score indicated three silent movements, each of a different length, but when added together totaled four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Tudor signaled its commencement by lowering the keyboard lid of the piano. The sound of the wind in the trees entered the first movement. After thirty seconds of no action, he raised the lid to signal the end of the first

movement. It was then lowered for the second movement, during which raindrops pattered on the roof. The score was in several pages, so he turned the pages as time passed, yet playing nothing at all. The keyboard lid was raised and lowered again for the final movement, during which the audience whispered and muttered.<sup>2</sup>

Cage said, "People began whispering to one another, and some people began to walk out. They didn't laugh—they were just irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later; they're still angry."<sup>3</sup>

Maverick Concert Hall, the site of the first performance, was ideal in allowing the sounds of the environment to enter, because the back of the hall was open to the surrounding forest. When Tudor finished, raising the keyboard lid and himself from the piano, the audience burst into an uproar—"infuriated and dismayed," according to the reports.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the midst of an *avant garde*\* concert attended by modern artists, 4'33" was considered "going too far."<sup>5</sup>

text from: [solomonsmusic.net](http://solomonsmusic.net)

\* original or experimental ideas/techniques

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1. Revill, David (1992). *The Roaring Silence*. New York: Arcade.

2. Tomkins, Calvin (1965). *The Bride & the Bachelors*. New York: Penguin/Viking.

3. Kostelanetz, Richard (1988, ed.). *Conversing with Cage*. New York: Limelight.

4. Revill, David (1992). *The Roaring Silence*. New York: Arcade.

5. Tomkins, Calvin (1965). *The Bride & the Bachelors*. New York: Penguin/Viking.

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"Not one sound fears the silence that extinguishes it. And no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound."

Cage, John (1961). *Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.