

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 4'33'', Ideas, and Medium in Appreciating Conceptual Art

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How does John Cage's conceptual work 4'33'' communicate its meaning and how can we appreciate it? In this paper, I develop two competing interpretations to tackle these questions. First, drawing on Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens's account of conceptual art ('conceptualism') and on Cage's commentary on 4'33'', I elaborate an overlooked idea that the work creates a new art form of conceptual music, which can be appreciated exclusively through the ideas it conveys. However, I argue that the conceptualist interpretation of 4'33'' does not help us understand the work's point, because it reveals a set of inconsistent claims about music and listening. The second interpretation draws on Julian Dodd's view that the physical medium is irreducible in appreciating conceptual artworks ('experientialism'). I develop this view by introducing a notion of a gesture to expand on how the performance of 4'33'' contributes to its aesthetic appreciation and propose an alternative interpretation of the work's meaning.

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**Keywords:** conceptual art; performance art; gesture; silence; Cage

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## I. Introduction

The presentation of works of conceptual art is often accompanied by misunderstanding. During the premiere of Cage's 'silent' piece 4'33'' consisting of no intentionally composed sounds, the audience sitting in the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock was irritated by 'not hearing anything'.<sup>1</sup> A subsequent discussion revealed that the audience was angry. One local artist even stood up and suggested: 'Good people of Woodstock, let's drive these people out of town [...]'.<sup>2</sup> Cage felt he was misunderstood and after the recital he repeatedly insisted that the first listeners

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<sup>1</sup> In a loose anecdotal language, the difference between 'not hearing anything' and 'hearing silence' is obscured. Strictly speaking, the two phrases refer to different experiences. Hearing silence is an auditory experience with an absence of sound, whereas not hearing anything refers to an absence of auditory experience (as in the case of deafness). The phrase 'hearing nothing', as I use it here, refers to an auditory experience of hearing no music (or the silence of music) during a concert.

<sup>2</sup> David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage; A Life* (New York: Arcade, 2014), 156.

missed the point. There's no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.<sup>3</sup>

The piece was not intended to be silent: silence did not exist, Cage claimed, there were only sounds and sounds were music. Despite a discrepancy between what Cage intended to show and what the original audience actually perceived, Cage (and many after him)<sup>4</sup> believed that he established that sounds can be music and that we cannot hear silence. If the first audience did hear silence, they were mistaken in what they thought they heard.

Cage clearly did not present music in the traditional sense during the piano recital, and this could be a source of the confusion for the first listeners. However, even if we consider the work as conceptual, it is not clear that the first or other uninstructed listeners of 4'33" were plainly mistaken about the meaning of the work they were experiencing at the concert. Accepting Cage's idea as *the* point of the work we should appreciate suggests that the meaning of an artwork can be 'closed', and that the meaning is limited to a single idea determined by an artist. Nevertheless, this is problematic. Even if all works of art embody some ideas, surely they are not like maps, diagrams, or theoretical works that contain information or thoughts that we can easily decipher from them.<sup>5</sup>

It is also not clear what the idea of 4'33" is. According to an established view, Cage's idea was to emphasize that appreciating the aesthetic qualities of environmental sounds would enrich our experience with the audible world. However, this does not seem to be precisely what Cage says. Cage's point is more controversial, namely, that sounds heard during the performance of 4'33" are music and should be listened to as such.<sup>6</sup>

This anecdote takes us into the heart of the debate of how works of conceptual art communicate their ideas, and how we appreciate them. There are two ways of thinking about these questions with respect to 4'33", which correspond to two influential accounts of conceptual art presented in recent literature, Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens's 'conceptualism'<sup>7</sup> and Julian Dodd's 'experientialism'.<sup>8</sup> Conceptualism and experientialism both agree on the fact that conceptual artworks are primarily appreciated for the ideas they convey, but they differ substantially in their view with regard to the role of the medium of a conceptual work for the appreciation of the latter. In that respect, the two positions ground two competing interpretations of how we appreciate 4'33", which I will develop in this paper.

According to the first, conceptualist reading of 4'33", Cage's silent piece establishes a new art form of *conceptual music* that can be appreciated exclusively through the ideas it conveys.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with CAGE* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 65–66.

<sup>4</sup> For example, from a gallery label of the Museum of Modern Art that holds one of the versions of the score of 4'33", we learn that 'the audience waited in anticipation of the performance: their expectations of a conventional concert were shattered, but music was made'. See <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/163616>.

<sup>5</sup> See Carolyn Wilde, 'Matter and Meaning in the Work of Art: Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*', in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 119–37.

<sup>6</sup> See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Hanover, PA: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 7: 'For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment.'

<sup>7</sup> Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Julian Dodd, 'The Ontology of Conceptual Art: Against the *Idea Idea*', in *Art, Mind and Narrative: Themes from the Work of Peter Goldie*, ed. Julian Dodd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 241–60. 'Conceptualism' and 'experientialism' are terms I decided to use for the sake of brevity and clarity, to refer to Goldie and Schellekens's and Dodd's positions, respectively.

Compare a performance of 4'33" in which the musicians simply do not produce any sounds intentionally (they keep silent) to a performance of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, or even to other works by Cage, such as *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, where every detail in the execution of the work affects whether the performance is authentic or 'true' to the score. The way in which 4'33" is performed does not seem, at first glance, to be relevant to our appreciation of it as an artwork. We do not appreciate the work by appealing to its aesthetic, sensory qualities; rather, we appreciate it intellectually, for the idea it communicates. It seems that it would not matter if no performance of 4'33" took place at all, because its idea could still be conveyed to us.

According to conceptualism, conceptual artworks are 'works in ideas', not in a physical medium, and they are therefore appreciated for and through the ideas they communicate. In this view, the grasping of an artistic statement is at the core of the experience with the work. To get the idea is to know the work.<sup>9</sup> A physical manifestation (or 'materialization') of the work (performance in the case of 4'33") is merely an instrument of producing the work, serving as a 'mere means' of conveying the idea of the work to us.<sup>10</sup> As a work of conceptual music, 4'33" can be appreciated *purely* for its intellectual qualities.

An alternative interpretation of 4'33" can be developed within experientialism. On that view, 4'33" is more adequately appreciated as a work of performance art. Consider the premiere again: David Tudor closed and opened the piano lid to indicate the beginnings and endings of its three parts, he measured the lengths of each movement with a stopwatch when following the score, and he stood up at the end of the performance to receive applause. Insofar as these were the only perceptible elements of the work, the actual performance played an important role in the reception and classification of the work as a work of performance art.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, 4'33" was originally presented as a work for a repeated performance, as its score indicates. Presumably, if the work was intended to be performed, it was meant to be attended to as such. The performance therefore plays an important role in the *appreciation* of the work as well. According to experientialism, we do not appreciate the conceptual works *exclusively* through the ideas they convey. The physical presence of a conceptual work (in this case, a performance) is important as well. In this view, we need to experience a performance of 4'33" in order to fully appreciate it.

In the following, I will argue that a conceptualist reading of 4'33" is not satisfying, despite being explicitly supported by Cage's commentary. Nevertheless, it is beneficial to consider it, because it shows that conceptualism is problematic not only from an ontological point of view, but also from the point of view of aesthetic appreciation of works of conceptual art.<sup>12</sup> If the medium of the work is its idea, the work should be appreciated through pondering the idea. However, such approach (leading to a deeper analysis of Cage's music aesthetics) might, in fact, devalue the work, because it results in the view that appreciating 4'33" by reflecting on its ideas means to appreciate an inconsistent set of beliefs about music and listening. Yet if a conceptual work is a good one (and 4'33" clearly is), then it does not achieve its purpose by expressing ideas in a propositional sense, and it should be appreciated in a broader way than merely intellectually.

<sup>9</sup> Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, 76–78.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> See Kendall L. Walton, 'Style and the Products of the Processes of Art', in *Marvelous Images: On Values and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 224; Daniel Herwitz, 'The Security of the Obvious: On John Cage's Musical Radicalism', *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988): 792; Stephen Davies, 'John Cage's 4'33": Is It Music?', in *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26–28; Julian Dodd, 'What 4'33" Is', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2018): 629–41.

<sup>12</sup> See also Dodd, 'Ontology of Conceptual Art', 249–50.

In turning to the second, experientialist interpretation of 4'33", I appeal to two suggestions. First, I draw on Dodd's account of the role of a medium in appreciating conceptual artworks and on his argument that 4'33" is a silent rather than a sonically replete work. I expand that account by drawing on Jérôme Dokic's proposal that the meaning of 4'33" is shown rather than referred to, thereby introducing into the debate a notion of a gesture, to appeal to the analogy between how gestures and performance artworks exhibit their meaning. In the same line of thought, I propose an alternative interpretation of 4'33", according to which the point of the work corresponds to its content, as a work that is about intentional silence.

## II. The Conceptualist Interpretation of 4'33"

The conceptualist interpretation of 4'33" has a solid ground in Cage's commentary on the work. Although Cage presented his 4'33" within the musical tradition, he treated it as a conceptual work, for which neither its performance nor its score are necessary. As he sometimes talked about the work, it can achieve its purpose purely through our intellectual engagement.

He indicates this already in the third, so-called 'tacet', version of the score, issued in 1961. The score was presented without a title and consisted of a verbal instruction *tacet* for all the three movements of the work, numbered by roman numerals and of an explanatory note. In contrast to the previous two versions of the score, as the note indicates, here it is completely irrelevant how an instruction 'tacet' is performed, as long as it is in silence ('the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time'). Performers may perform the work on any instrument, they do not have to follow either the score or the time, and only minimal indications of beginnings and endings of the three parts of the work, if any, seem to assure the listener that the work is being performed.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Cage later encouraged private 'performances' of 4'33" (there is no audience except the performer alone), during which an *intention* to perform the work is not necessarily accompanied by any gestures that would display that intention. There are no features of the work that could be accessed and attended to through perception, nothing indicates that a work is being performed. In his book *Silence* (1961), Cage already speaks of spending 'many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece, transcriptions, that is, for an audience of myself, because they were much longer than the popular length which I have had published',<sup>14</sup> indicating that no musical instrument need be available (a human voice is perhaps a silenced instrument in this case). The boundary between performing a work according to the score ('by heart') and merely attending to the idea conveyed by it (listening to environmental sounds) is completely blurred.

Last but not least, Cage explicitly says that a performance of the work is not essential to it. He describes 4'33" as an *idea* or a listening strategy, to be employed in everyday life, as an intentional stance that is separate from actually performing the work.<sup>15</sup> The work is 'not needed anymore'.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, he uses 4'33" as a tool to enrich his own aesthetic experience with the audible world and enhance the exercise of his profession as a composer:

<sup>13</sup> Thomas M. Maier observes that the very differences between the three versions of the score indicate Cage's gradual shift from perceiving 4'33" as a composition of three parts intended for presentation, to the point of the work conceptually emancipated from a formal framework of the score prescribing its actual performances. See his *Ausdruck der Zeit: Ein Weg zu John Cages stillem Stück* (Saarbrücken: Pfau, 2001), 157–58, 167–68. Cage confirms this in 1966; see Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 12, where he says that the work 'no longer has three parts'. The shift in interpreting the work as conceptual is not a later amendment of Cage, related to the *point* of the work and not to the *work* as such: the shift belongs to the work's interpretation as far as the *tacet*-version of the score is concerned.

<sup>14</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 276. Cage's identification of a 'transcription' of the work with 4'33" is not problematic. The three versions of the score are 'transcriptions' of the same work, although the third is substantially different.

<sup>15</sup> See Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 186.

<sup>16</sup> 'I wrote the piece in 1952. Now we have 1966. Today I don't need the piece anymore.' Kostelanetz, *John Cage*, 12.

Well, I use it [4'33"] constantly in my life experience. No day goes by without my making use of that piece in my life and in my work. I listen to it every day [...] I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention toward it. I realize that it's going on continuously. So, more and more, my attention, as now, is on it.<sup>17</sup>

Cage would clearly endorse the thought that neither a score nor a performance were forms or media specific to 4'33". The score and the performance are of course important in that they are means of conveying the idea in an artistic fashion; after all, 4'33" is a work of art, not a theoretical work. But they might be thought of as mere means of the work in that the work can achieve its purpose 'conceptually'. We can grasp its idea intellectually and use it practically in listening without having to execute the instructions prescribed in the score, attend one of its performances, or reflect on the idea every time we apply it. Once we grasp the idea, we can put it to practical 'use' continually in everyday life. In this sense, Cage's work is an example of a meta-musical work, introducing a new conceptual art form: conceptual music. As such, it is a work that allows a musical experience without having to be experienced as a work itself, and the way to open that kind of experience is to understand its 'concept' or idea. By inducing a kind of understanding concerning music and listening, the work as such is 'needed no more'.

### **II.1. What Does It Mean to Appreciate an Artwork for Its Idea?**

If works of conceptual art are appreciated for and through the ideas they convey, a dominant way of being acquainted with an idea of a work is to examine the artist's commentary related directly to the work (as in the case of Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree*) or to analyse the work with the help of an independent text by the artist in which the artist explains his or her pursuits (as in Joseph Kosuth's 1969 text *Art After Philosophy*). An assumption of conceptualism is that if our appreciation of works of conceptual art draws on ideas as their media, the ideas *should* be graspable, determinate in a sense that we can explain what we appreciate when we appreciate the respective work. The result is a propositionally articulated idea of the work.

However, this might be too strict a reading of Goldie and Schellekens's account of the 'idea' as the medium of the artwork, as they are unclear about what the 'ideas' of the work are. Ideas, constituting the artistic statement of the work, may take the form of complete propositions, but more intuitively, they should be understood in a loose, nonpropositional sense of an 'artistic statement': whatever the artist presents for our appreciation.<sup>18</sup> In this loose sense, the idea of 4'33" is to 'reflect on the world of music'.<sup>19</sup> The meaning of the work in the nonpropositional sense is clearly communicated to us through the score of the work. The score does not present music, yet it brings us to think about music – in Duchamp's words, it 'brings us towards other regions more verbal'.<sup>20</sup>

Although I agree that an artwork's idea should be understood in a loose sense, it is unclear whether conceptualism can escape the propositional reading if the work's 'idea' is its medium, that is, if this is what *radically distinguishes* a conceptual from a traditional artwork. Traditional artworks also present 'ideas' in the loose sense of artistic statement, therefore the

<sup>17</sup> Richard Fleming and William Duckworth, *John Cage at Seventy-Five* (London: Associated University Press, 1989), 21–22.

<sup>18</sup> However, see Elisabeth Schellekens, 'Conceptual Art', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, winter 2017 ed. (Stanford University, 1997–), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/conceptual-art/>, who seems to support the former. Dodd develops this worry in more detail in 'Ontology of Conceptual Art', 252–54, and ascribes to conceptualism the nonpropositional reading of the *idea* idea.

<sup>19</sup> Davies, 'John Cage's 4'33"', 26.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Goldie and Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, 90.

presentation of artistic statement does not seem to be a sufficient criterion to classify a work as a work of conceptual art.

When we look at Caravaggio's painting of St Matthew (*The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, 1602), we immediately see *what* it represents: St Matthew the evangelist, writing and an angel divinely inspiring him. The original version of the painting (known as *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, 1602) represents the same content, yet, in a different way. This painting depicts an angel touching St Matthew's hand, as if the saint were a child learning to write. The content in both paintings is (roughly) the same: there are two figures depicted in a mutual relation. Yet the meaning of the paintings – Caravaggio's statement concerning a way in which St Matthew approaches us – is very different. The second version of the painting replaces the original, which was rejected because the look of the saint was, contrary to conventions, 'too human'.

Maybe the difference between traditional and conceptual works resides in the fact that we can appreciate the traditional work even if we are *not familiar* with its artistic statement, because we can still aesthetically appreciate its sensory content (we like the subject, the arrangement of colours, and so on). Even if we do not know exactly *why* Caravaggio painted St Matthew in such and such a way, we can enjoy the way he painted the evangelist. Of course, some background knowledge substantially helps us appreciate the work better (a standard example to illustrate this could be van Gogh's *Chair*).<sup>21</sup> But we do not *have to* know exactly why the artist presented what he did to appreciate the work as having artistically valuable content. On the contrary, in conceptual art, the two ways of approaching the work (*what* and *why*) are more closely related. There are cases in which, even if we can perceive that the presented content is the content of an artwork, we cannot easily recognize *why* the presented content is artistic (we do not appreciate that content as having an artistic value for us) precisely because we do not understand why an artist presents that content as a work of art. In other words, to appreciate works of conceptual art we need to know what 'concept' or 'idea' they convey, to evaluate whether the idea is enriching. What the work means is more crucial than what content the work presents.

So, if the 'idea' of a work translates in the loose sense as artistic statement, the difference between works of traditional and conceptual art is a matter of degree in which the material presence (in the case of traditional artworks) or the idea (in the case of conceptual artworks) dominates in appreciating the particular work. If there is a continuity between works of traditional and conceptual art (as far as both present an artistic statement), there is no need to renounce the role of the medium in appreciation of 'conceptual' works altogether. However, if the traditional and conceptual works are radically different, then the idea, which is supposed to be the medium of conceptual artworks and not of traditional works, should be understood in quite a narrow, propositional sense.

As a consequence, if we interpret 4'33" as a work of conceptual music, a loose understanding of Cage's artistic statement is not sufficient. Therefore, to make sense of the conceptualist interpretation of 4'33", let us now have a look at what could be considered as the idea of the work in the propositional sense, by analysing Cage's commentary and other written work concerning 4'33" and his music aesthetics in general.

## **II.2. The 'Idea' of 4'33": Cage's Aesthetics**

Cage makes many claims concerning his understanding of music in his texts, related either to the practice of composing music or to listening practices. Many claims are controversial, but here I will focus only on one principle, which seems to be very important for Cage, and also for the question of the aesthetic appreciation of 4'33", yet it is rarely discussed in

<sup>21</sup> See Wilde, 'Matter and Meaning' that develops this line of thought in more detail.



the literature.<sup>22</sup> Cage seems to endorse an idea that is inconsistent and inapplicable, and therefore hard to appreciate – namely, that we can listen to sounds as music without having expectations.

At the centre of Cage's music aesthetics is a criticism of Western tonal music, in which the aesthetic quality of sounds depends on intentionally composed and perceived relations between tones. According to Cage, however, an intentional arranging of sound material communicates the ideas of a composer and prescribes ways of listening and feeling emotions to the listener. For this reason, sounds lose something of their *original* aesthetic quality. The composer should therefore renounce the intention to present any ideas about music and listening to enable the listener to experience the 'pure', unrelated sounds. An important consequence of this idea concerns the listeners, who should attend to any audible events without expecting anything and without evaluating what they hear according to their musical habits or preferences that amend the listening experience of 'sounds themselves'.

According to Cage, expectations add a content that we *hear in* sounds, but that is not actually *in* sounds: 'I learned that the intervals have meaning; they are not just sounds but they imply in their progressions a sound not actually present to the ear. Tonality. I never liked tonality.'<sup>23</sup> Cage develops his point further, using the example of a deceptive cadence: 'Progress in such a way as to imply the presence of a tone not actually present; then fool everyone by not landing on it – land somewhere else. What is being fooled? Not the ear but the mind. The whole question is very intellectual.'<sup>24</sup> Cage's intention here could be illustrated by considering a work abounding with deceptive cadences, Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. There will be tones, which the listener will hear as dissonant, not progressing to an expected harmonious resolution (tones not actually present in hearing but implied in the mind), progressing 'somewhere else' instead, to another discord, which, insofar as it fails to meet the listener's expectations ('fooling everyone'), feels to be somehow incomplete and in that sense, creates a sense of its being 'improper'.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, when we listen to Bach's first prelude of *Well Tempered Clavier*, we hear the tones as progressing harmoniously, fulfilling by their presence the listener's expectations, thus feeling to be 'right'. In Cage's view, tones should not be appreciated in this way, on the basis of their mutual relations, used by a composer as an instrument of creating a musical emotion (in our examples, a feeling of tension or a quietude). If we evaluate tones based on whether they generate an appropriate or inappropriate response to an expectation raised by a preceding phrase of tones, we do not appreciate them for their own audible qualities as sonic events. Consequently, if we ascribe aesthetic value to tones not on the ground of their audible qualities, but on the ground of the emotional valence that we *hear in* tones, we do not appreciate *what* we hear, but *how* we hear it; we appreciate the tone as it is mediated by our expecting mind. Cage's idea here is that if we learn to appreciate tones without attributing a 'value' (a tone feels 'right' or 'improper') in accord with our listening habits, we can learn to hear tones in a straightforward manner, as we hear sounds: 'I begin to hear the old sounds [that is, the intervals] – the ones I thought worn out [...] by intellectualization – [...] as though they are not worn out. [...] They are just as audible as the new sounds [that is, noises].'<sup>26</sup> Because there is no intrinsic emotion or meaning in sounds as such (noises 'had not been in-tellectualized [*sic*]'), Cage recommends that listeners should *actively* free themselves from their listening habits by listening to noises that do not evoke any kind

<sup>22</sup> See Herwitz, 'Security of the Obvious'.

<sup>23</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 116.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> The tones of a deceptive cadence are, of course, correct: they are intentionally used by Wagner to create in a listener a feeling of an unfulfilled desire, 'incompleteness' or ambiguity, which is precisely the effect *Tristan* is valued for.

<sup>26</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 117.

of musical expectations. In this way, listeners will be able to listen 'directly', in a nonevaluative way, that is, in Cage's view, in an aesthetically proper and correct way.

Cage's observations concerning the fact that the tones we hear are 'interpretations', based on previous expectations, are correct, as was corroborated by Leonard B. Meyer, David Huron, and others.<sup>27</sup> Yet Cage does not seem to be right in supposing that it is possible to hear without our structuring or evaluating sounds that we hear *at all*, even if sounds are released from tonal relationships. The problem is that there is no nonevaluative listening, and no aesthetic position free from aesthetic evaluation. To begin with the latter, the *preference* for (that is, the appreciation of) the nonevaluative listening and for unrelated sounds is in contrast with Cage's claim that his music enables an *immediate* encounter with sounds, which are not presented through *any* preferences of a composer. However, there is no music without aesthetic preferences: Western music prefers tonal relations, Cage's music prefers sounds and noises. Strictly speaking, a nonevaluative position cannot be aesthetic, precisely because it cannot evaluate or prefer any form of listening or music making over another. A consistently nonevaluative position would have to equally accept *any* kind of listening experience, and any possible composition of sound material, for which reason it could not ground an artistic practice proper.

So, one reason for the impossibility to apply Cage's idea of 4'33" in listening is that we either perceive the environmental sounds during 4'33" as music, but then their qualities are transfigured, to use Danto's term; we perceive the 'added' artistic value of sounds.<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, we can perceive the aesthetic qualities of sounds as they are immediately given to us in perception, but then we no longer perceive the work of art.<sup>29</sup> The problem is similar to the paradox of spontaneity.<sup>30</sup> The command 'Be spontaneous!' is self-refuting, because it is not possible to act spontaneously in obeying a command. Similarly, it is not possible to execute Cage's instruction to 'listen to environmental sounds as music'.

Besides, a nonevaluative listening is practically not possible. A listener of Cage's music would have to be active in order to listen in a passive (nonevaluating) way, to avoid expectations that naturally arise in listening. For example, in Cage's *Music of Changes*, no relations between sounds are heard as resulting from an intentional organization by a composer. On the contrary, the lack of audible relations can be clearly perceived as an artistic intention. Yet the listening is infused with expectations unwittingly entering the listening experience (for example, the sound will unfold or stop, or it will be followed by a sound or by a silence), and 'creating' the missing relations, even if the listeners attend to the intrinsic qualities of sounds. The evaluation of sonic qualities might be overcome, but it cannot be prevented.

Another related complication concerning hearing silence ensues. Cage claims that silence is unattainable by human ear, which always *detects* sounds, as if listening were a mechanical process that strictly corresponds to the richness of acoustic reality. At the same time, however, he considers listening as an attentive activity, a *performance* by the listener,<sup>31</sup> different from

<sup>27</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>29</sup> See Davies, 'John Cage's 4'33"', 17–18.

<sup>30</sup> I thank Vojtěch Kolman for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>31</sup> 'Birger Ollrogge: "So it's exclusively the reader or the listener of your music who is doing something with your works?" – Cage: "Yes, the response, I think, finishes it. [...] I myself enjoy a complex situation in which I can place my attention one place or another. I then am drawn inevitably to the nature of my experience as coming from my center rather than from some other center. I think each person should listen in his own way.'" Kostelanetz, *Conversing with CAGE*, 240. 'New music – new listening: just an attention to the activity of sounds.' Cage, *Silence*, 10.



a mere detection of audible stimuli. The latter view naturally leads to saying that the listener could turn away his or her attention from the sounds detected, and intentionally focus, at least for a short moment, on silence, which sometimes dominates in the aural field despite being relative.

Now, this interpretation, that 4'33" is hard to appreciate conceptually because it puts forward an inapplicable and inconsistent idea, might be taken to imply too strict a criterion for conceptualism. Namely, if 4'33" were a work of *conceptual music*, it should present as its point a set of *consistent* ideas about music and listening that could be appreciated conceptually (or, rationally). However, conceptualism might include appreciating *paradoxical* ideas (such as when we appreciate Zen koans, questions that cannot be rationally answered).<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, we might value works presenting contradictions, pointing to the bounds of rationality or expression. My point is that we do not appreciate the propositionally articulated ideas expressing inconsistency themselves. The analogy with koans might be helpful. Although koans are expressed in concepts, they are not appreciated *for the inconsistencies* they bring. Rather, they are appreciated for pointing (*through* the inconsistencies) to a 'meaning', which defies being captured rationally in concepts and thus defies being correspondingly appreciated. The point of a koan is to abandon rational thinking about the question. Cage also presents a set of inconsistent instructions, and the listener cannot follow them. In that sense, although the instructions are propositionally expressed, the idea of the work *as such* is not (and is not to be) appreciated rationally.

To sum up, if Cage's listening strategy as the point of the work of 4'33" consists in a non-evaluative listening without having expectations, it is hard to appreciate the work, mainly because we cannot reasonably follow the instruction. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suppose that the work does not achieve its purpose by appreciating its idea about music in a 'purely conceptual' way, and that it is more appropriate to interpret 4'33" as a work of performance art that needs to be experienced than as a work of conceptual music. By focusing on the work's performative aspect, we as listeners are not limited to the acceptance of either of Cage's ideas, and may appreciate the work on the basis of the experience enabled to us by its medium, the performance.

### III. 4'33" as a Performance Work

There are several reasons why experientialism is helpful in approaching conceptual art in general. Most importantly, we do need a medium to appreciate works of conceptual art *as artworks* (in contrast to, say, theoretical works, or other things conveying information such as maps, diagrams, or tables). Next, we need not think of the 'conceptuality' of the works in a narrow, propositional sense. Works can have their 'meaning' in a loose sense as 'that which the artist presents to us as the focus of our appreciative attention'.<sup>33</sup> Finally and importantly, these works can be considered as *continuing* in the artistic tradition, and not as breaking with it. In general, artworks embody thoughts or ideas, and if they achieved their purpose solely by the fact that their ideas are adopted, they would be 'little more than a historical curiosity'.<sup>34</sup>

#### III.1. Two Alternatives of Conveying Ideas: Carroll and Ravasio

According to Dodd, 4'33" is a silent, rather than 'sonically replete' work: its score notates with silences (not with sounds), and these instructions are authoritative for instancing the work, as well as for interpreting it. The content of the work is literally silence: individual

<sup>32</sup> I thank one of the reviewers of this journal for raising this objection.

<sup>33</sup> Dodd, 'Ontology of Conceptual Art', 253.

<sup>34</sup> Wilde, 'Matter and Meaning', 136.

performances of 4'33" do include intentional silence on part of the musicians, but they do not include environmental sounds that occur during the performance.<sup>35</sup> With regard to the *point* of the work, Dodd accepts a standard interpretation: the work is about attuning our attention to the presence of 'naked', unmusical, environmental sounds, to enrich our aesthetic experience with the audible world.<sup>36</sup> However, two things remain unclear. First, *how* the literally silent work conveys an idea *about sounds* (rather than about anything else) to us.<sup>37</sup> Second, why think that the point, somewhat ambiguously indicated by Cage, is the only meaning that we can attribute to the work. Before I develop my proposal to treat 4'33" as a gesture, which shows its meanings (plural), I will consider two alternative ways in which 4'33" can be thought to convey ideas.

The first alternative comes from a suggestion by Noël Carroll that the work is an 'exercise in exemplification'.<sup>38</sup> Carroll draws on Nelson Goodman's notion of exemplification, one of the two fundamental forms of reference together with denotation.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as the work is presented within a *context* of musical practice, Carroll suggests, the work exemplifies (highlights, or symbolizes) aesthetic qualities of ambient sounds or noise. Silence is a compositional device that frames ubiquitous sounds, thereby compelling the listener to attend to the aesthetic qualities of sounds. In this way, Cage conveys his idea to the listener.

According to Goodman, a sample 'exemplifies' by highlighting *some particular* qualities. He gives an example of a tailor's swatch, which exemplifies some of the qualities of a fabric, such as structure of weaving, colour, and pattern, but not others, such as size or shape. When the tailor shows us a swatch, we understand immediately what is presented to us: what we have is a sample, not a bundle of the pieces of cloth out of which our new dress will be sewn.

Nevertheless, such an 'intuitive' understanding does not seem to operate when we encounter Cage's 4'33" for the first time without any background knowledge of the work. Environmental sounds fail to function as samples of musical sounds, because no particular environmental sound qualities are emphasized as constitutive, in our case, as aesthetic. All kinds of noises are included in the sample; no sound is excluded.<sup>40</sup> Noises do not acquire the function of a symbol if there are no particular sound qualities that they symbolize as aesthetic.<sup>41</sup> This would explain why the first listeners of 4'33" missed its point, despite knowing that Cage was an avant-garde composer, and despite expecting a piece of unconventional music.

A similar reservation concerns an alternative proposal put forward by Matteo Ravasio, who provides a slightly different framing of aesthetic sensitivity. In his view, 4'33" belongs to a subgenre of conceptual art – parasitic conceptual art – and as such achieves its intellectual purpose by being intentionally related to (by 'parasiting' on) an established art form (music), which prescribes a form of aesthetic attention to sounds.<sup>42</sup> This relation generates specific expectations concerning the content of the work: that musical sounds will be produced. The frustration of these specific expectations then invites the listeners to attune their attention to environmental sounds. Ravasio's suggestion is appealing, for the generation of *specific* expectations seems to be crucial for appreciating the point of the work, which has to frame

<sup>35</sup> Dodd, 'What 4'33" Is', 633–36.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 629–30.

<sup>37</sup> See Matteo Ravasio, 'What 4'33" Also Is: A Response to Dodd', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2019): 396.

<sup>38</sup> Noël Carroll, 'Cage and Philosophy', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 95.

<sup>39</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>40</sup> Carroll accepts Cage's interpretation of the work that the ambient sounds do belong to its performance (noises are the content of the work).

<sup>41</sup> See Jérôme Dokic, 'Music, Noise, Silence: Some Reflections on John Cage', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3 (1998): 110.

<sup>42</sup> Ravasio, 'What 4'33" Also Is', 398.

our sensitivity to sounds in contrast to anything else. Nevertheless, this proposal does not sufficiently explain the fact that despite generating specific expectations, 4'33" and many other conceptual works have never been understood so straightforwardly. Beginning with its premiere and until today, 4'33" has been sometimes received as a joke, by listeners who were not previously instructed about its point, or who do not consider it as convincing.<sup>43</sup> The irritation of an audience is an important signpost to account for how 4'33" communicates ideas, and points to a fact that the mechanism of expectations is not *the only* relevant mechanism at work.

### **III.2. Showing the Meaning through Performance: 4'33" as a Gesture**

In my view, the aspect of ongoing frustration can be taken into account by re-introducing into the debate on the meaning of conceptual works the analogy with how gestures receive and express their meaning. A general and detailed analysis of an artistic gesture as a special subclass of ordinary gestures is beyond the scope of this paper. My point is, simply, that we can understand the meaning of 4'33", and some other conceptual works of performance art, by drawing an analogy to the way in which we apprehend (or fail to apprehend) the meaning of other gestures.

My proposal is that Cage's idea is not *referred to* (via exemplification, as Carroll suggests) or even more directly, 'articulated' (in a commentary), but rather, as Jérôme Dokic notices, it is 'shown'.<sup>44</sup> Although Dokic loosely refers to the early Wittgenstein as his inspiration, Wittgenstein's later remarks that architecture or music are gestures that express thoughts by showing them,<sup>45</sup> seem to be even more relevant here.

The term 'gesture', as I use it here, is not meant to signify a 'merely symbolic', insincere act, which has no significant meaning or impact (as when used in a phrase 'just a political gesture'), or as a rhetorical figure. On the contrary, it is used without negative connotations in a more general sense of a meaningful, intentional act. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a 'gesture' can refer either to a movement we make with our hands, head, or face to show a particular meaning (waving a hand to say goodbye), or to anything we do or say to show a feeling or intention (sending flowers to express sympathy). Although works of conceptual art may *involve* movement and physical gestures in the first of indicated senses (performance works involve the performer's bodily movements, conventional gestures included), the second meaning is crucial here.

In the former respect, works of performance art may be considered to be in a clear continuity with traditional works of art, which also involve gestures creating a novel meaning (for example, as represented in a painting). Yet to the extent that they consist of actual movement or action, they *are* gestures themselves, and perhaps in a more explicit or direct way than architecture or music, as Wittgenstein indicates.

In this vein, 4'33" can be regarded as having a symbolic meaning in parallel to how gestures have their meaning, by introducing into the art context gestures that are prescribed by the score and accompany its every performance: negative gestures of not performing music.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> For various comments concerning the 2004 performance at London's Barbican Centre see a short note by BBC News, 'Radio 3 Plays Silent Symphony', 19 January 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3401901.stm>.

<sup>44</sup> Dokic, 'Music, Noise, Silence', 110–11.

<sup>45</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, in *Werkausgabe*, vol. 8, *Bemerkungen über die Farben, Über Gewißheit, Zettel, Vermischte Bemerkungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), 481, 510, 548–49, 553–54.

<sup>46</sup> See EBU Euroradio Orchestra, 'Tribute to John Cage's 4'33"', dir. Emil Tabakov, video, 4:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OovYr0w7BMA>, in which the orchestra members emphasize the act of not playing their instrument.

If intentional silences (of quite a long duration) form an intrinsic content of this work, as Dodd persuasively argues, then this content is perceptible as intentional and meaningful only when it is accompanied by physical gestures embodying the silence, thereby visually helping us to attend to the performer's intention to sustain the silence. (It is problematic to say that we can attend to silences of such a length in a purely acoustic way.<sup>47</sup> A recording or a radio broadcast will thus not allow us to appreciate the work.) Therefore, the work needs to be experienced 'live', so that the listener's attention can be appropriately shifted to the very act of not playing an instrument as an intentional act of producing artistic content – silence. In this way, the audience can appreciate the silences, sustained and incorporated by intentionally produced gestures by musicians on stage. Within an earnest, devoted performance, attending to the gestures of the performers creating musical silence can possibly arouse sensitivity in the perceiver, not only to appreciate the meaningfulness of this act as artistic. Attending to the gestures can also stimulate sensitivity of the senses to grasp anything there is to be perceived including sounds, which are dominating due to the musical context of presentation. This reading leaves open to interpretation what idea is shown here: whether the idea is, as Cage claims, that environmental sounds popping up in silence are music, or merely that sounds are aesthetically interesting, or whether the idea is that the intentional silence opens our minds to asking what music is.

Although the specific movements or actions the gestures involve are determinate and clearly perceptible (Tudor sits behind the piano, opens the piano lid, and does not hit a single key), the meaning of these gestures taken as a whole is ambiguous (Why is he doing it?). The response of an audience to works such as 4'33" can remain negative, in case the listeners are uninstructed, they are not open to accepting the movements or actions as expressing a symbolic meaning, or they cannot bear the ambiguity of the gesture. Another option, suggested by the art community, is that the gesture may be accepted as meaningful, but its meaning remains unexplained in words and the response to it is equally symbolic.<sup>48</sup> These factors are important to consider in an analysis of the meaning of 4'33", if it is to be true to the reality of the work's reception.

By introducing the notion of a gesture into the debate on the meaning of this conceptual artwork, two claims are nicely brought together. First, it is crucial to consider the role of the physical appearance (medium) of the work, together with the art context, in which the work is presented. Not any purposeful movement or action (such as walking), under any circumstances, bears a genuinely expressive power of a gesture, but only those containing a moment of novelty, unexpectedness, or, as Wittgenstein calls it, 'incalculability' (*Unberechenbarkeit*),<sup>49</sup> especially when it comes to artistic gestures. At the same time, any gesture can fail to communicate. This aspect might help us explain why 4'33" was not understood at first: Cage's gesture of performing 4'33" is, perhaps, *too* unpredictable. It might be viewed positively, as creating an inspiring, jolly event in which one is happy to take part, even if one does not fully understand why. At the same time, the gesture might be regarded as challenging the listener's art-moral preconceptions (it is a bad joke to collect money from the audience and perform nothing), and therefore it can remain unacceptable for some. Second, the meaning of a work of art, as well as the meaning of a gesture, cannot be reduced to artist's ideas or

<sup>47</sup> Although we can hear relative silence in contrast with sound, I do not follow Dodd in accepting Sorensen's view that silences can be literally, directly heard in the same way as sounds. For a detailed analysis of Sorensen's view see my paper 'Can We Hear Silence?', *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 33–53.

<sup>48</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 481. To give just three recent examples of a symbolic reaction: Richard Kostelanetz, *In Memory of John Cage* (2009), Philip Corner, *Some Silences* (2011), Conny Blom, *4'33 Minutes of Stolen Silence* (2006).

<sup>49</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, 554.

intentions, which are not straightforwardly grasped or read off a gesture. Rather, any gesture, as well as any work of art, is potentially open to new interpretations.

More broadly, gestures are symbolic in that they do not designate directly or articulate propositionally their meaning. They show their meaning, which depends on the context of presentation and on the reception of the gesture. Gestures are not universal (unlike some facial expressions), and we learn their meaning (such as that nodding expresses agreement or disagreement). They can also have more than one meaning, depending on the culture in which they are used (the V sign meaning 'number two', or 'victory', can be also used as an insulting gesture in some countries). Gestures can take on new meanings in different contexts (a 'time out' gesture used during a football match or shown by – or even to – a teacher in a classroom).

The way gestures are made is important to understanding what they communicate to us: compare sending a fresh bouquet to sending dead flowers to someone. In our case, the fact that silences are indicated in the score of *4'33"* informs us that they have a meaning especially within the context of their presentation. Some gestures do have a conventionally established meaning in a given culture (pointing with an index finger or with a chin), or in a given community (in case of gestures employed within sign languages).

However, gestures in conceptual artworks are interesting for their provocative, unresolved nature, for the fact that their meaning has to be specified if they are to make any sense, even if 'specification' of their meaning would not be articulate but symbolic (producing another gesture). In the moment of their first presentation, a reference framework (socio-historical and cultural background) is being established. Therefore, it is understandable that their meaning is not easily interpreted immediately, and that they can remain meaningless if the original reference framework is unfamiliar. Although the meaning of a physical, quotidian gesture can be well established, complex gestures of conceptual art are not 'complete', 'determinate', or 'resolved', and they will arouse our interpretive interest. In this sense, a work such as *4'33"* does not have a single meaning or point: works of art, like some other gestures (as in sign poetry), have a creative potential.

Nowadays, when the work is perceived against the background of an increasing level of noise (auditory and digital) and with a corresponding demand for silence, an idea that is contrary to Cage's initial claim that there's no such thing as silence may paradoxically become associated with the work and with Cage's artistic achievements. Although the silence of four and a half minutes, as the standard for interpreting the piece still has it, may not be objectively and absolutely audible, experiencing the very content of the work – intentional silence – can be unexpectedly pleasing. To conclude, as far as the content of the silent work is concerned, we can happily appreciate its relevance as a symbol of precisely that – silence.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In the paper I suggested that, as a work of performance art, *4'33"* does not have to present a propositionally articulated meaning or statement, and its interpretation does not rely solely on a conceptual understanding. *4'33"* is conceptual in a broad sense of the term: it opens questions important to us, such as what music is and whether we can listen to silence. As such, it needs a medium, a performance that allows the listener to experience its content and the qualities it has. As a work of art, it also cannot be reduced to the idea proposed by Cage, but it remains open to other interpretations of its meaning. We need to experience the artwork in order to appreciate it, and the experience can expand the range of interpretations of what the idea of the work is. The one I suggest is that the work enables its audience to appreciate the quality of intentional silence by attending to the gestures of not-producing music.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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