

Thoughts on Silence in Music

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Shortened version taken from the original paper "The Notion of Silence in Music: A Choral Conducting Perspective" by Burak Onur Erdem, written in 2012.

Silence is a musical phenomenon. Musical silence has its specific characteristics, effects and meaning. For all musicians, it is crucial, because the musical motion begins, continues and ends with silence itself. Silence is an integral part of conducting and conducting in itself is a silent act of music making.

I have written this paper presenting a study of various forms of silence, whether notated or not, that are utilized in music, concentrating on choral performance and conducting. Here, I would like to share a glimpse of the content and if you are interested, you can read the complete edition **on this link**.

Silence in music can be an extremely effective way of expression. It can have different characteristics. Silence may hold tension or may symbolize resolution. Sometimes it implies a hidden crescendo, other times it refreshes the memory of the listener for the beginning of a new section. Although silence is mostly engaged with expectation, it can also mean closure for a phrase or simply contribute to a melodic structure. No need to mention that silence before and after the music is as important as the sound itself.

Performers use silence in various ways. Considering how performers experience the silent moments in music, one may come up with common features of musical performances with regard to those moments. An example could be the tension in the hands of a conductor, when the piece finishes. Another could be the sway in the body of a pianist during a long rest

in a sonata. Thus, silence can also take many physical forms in the body of the performer, which is quite interesting from a conductor's point of view, since conducting implies the realization of the music with non-verbal gestures of the body.

The Oxford English Dictionary, among others, defines silence as the complete absence of sound. It is rather interesting for a concept to be defined by the absence of anything. That would mean silence is approached from the perspective of sound or, expressed more technically, it is the negation of sound. The same is also valid vice versa. Just as silence can only be defined with regard to sound, sound can also occur merely over a silent basis. Thus, sound and silence are by definition bound together, like day and night.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that these concepts are always relative to each other. The late sunset can be perceived darker than the day, but it is actually brighter than midnight. The same idea applies to sound and silence. A quiet whispering in the concert hall may be considered silent in comparison to the sounds of the city, but it may be disturbing in a classical concert hall setting. However, more than that, the interesting part about this analogy is that both include elements of its counterpart. The day is never fully bright. There are shadows, maybe clouds, or different colors. Similarly, the night also involves light in itself. One may perceive a space to be completely dark in the night, whereas it may turn out that there are many things to see when the eyes are used to the darkness. Turning back to sound and silence, the crucial point we want to make is that silence contains sound in it, and vice versa. As in the example of John Cage's *4' 33''*, the piece about silence is eventually not silent at all, considering all the different noises and sounds in the environment. Correspondingly, there are also elements and tastes of silence in the sound. They are inseparable from this point of view.

That leads us to the idea that silence is not an absolute concept, but a relative one, which contains different levels and layers. As Zofia Lissa argues, there is never absolute silence, even in nature (1964: 445). Furthermore, silence also has a lot to do with human perception. Elisabeth Hellmuth Margulis puts forward the concept of perceived silence, which does not necessarily require acoustical silence (2007: 247). The threefold relationship between perceived, acoustical and notated silence will be examined under the next section on musical silence, but it is important to note that the perception of silence can vary according to the surrounding events of the environment we are in.

Silence is meaningful. This is expressed exactly the same way by William J. Samarin, as he continues saying that silence is an absence with a function, like the zero in mathematics. (1965: 115) Silence has particularly crucial meanings in some cultures. That is to be seen by Ron Scollon's statement about how a silent moment may indicate failure in speech within an American context, (1985: 26) whereas Senko K. Maynard mentions that Japanese culture is skewed toward silence (1997: 153). Indeed, silence is an important part of Eastern cultures, especially within religious rituals. Explaining the Tibetan Buddhist meditation *mahamudra*, Brown and Thurman write that cutting off the spoken word and recitation, namely silence, makes one intensely aware of mental chatter. (2006: 172) This idea of the ability of silence to make the mind more aware shows that it has a direct relationship with human perception. This sensitivity in perception can be true for both physical sounds and mental activity. Thus, it would not be wrong to conclude that silence brings about a more careful way of listening. Listening to both quiet and loud sounds has to do with silence (Voegelin 2010: 100). If silence is strongly related to the act of listening, then it is not a surprise that it is used for generating a more intensive concentration in both speech and

music.

Overall, considering silence is not the absence of sounds and it is rather a state of perception, we end up with the idea that its definition should be refined carefully. In my attempt to study closely what silence may mean in music, I have come up with a draft categorisation of functions of silence, which may be summarized as following: There is silence before the music and after the music, both are usually not notated but they have specific functions with regard to the sound content.

There is also silence within the music, which is open to much closer examination. Here, it is important to return to Margulis' concepts of acoustical, perceived and notated silence. Not all the silent moments within the duration of the music can be notated. Notated silence is normally expressed by rests. However many other occasions in music result in silence. For example, the end of a fermata or a transition to another section creates silent spots in the music. Similarly, a voiceless consonant can lead to a sharp move to silence. Whether notated or not, silence is an integral part of the duration of the actual music. My attempt to derive some categories out of this resulted in the following: Transitional or closural silence, breathing silence, relieving or tense silence, textual silence and localized silent spots. If you are interested in reading more about this, you are more than welcome to check out the original paper **here**.

Whatever the model of categorization is, it is clear that different characteristics of silence demand different ways of performance. A transitional silence cannot be conducted as a closural one. Similarly, a breathing silence should not be more interrupting than a tense silence. To conclude, it would not be wrong to claim that concentrating on silence could provide a much more comprehensive musical experience and must be elaborated carefully in musical analysis and performance.

References

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