

# Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

---

Volume 18 *Volume 18 (2020)*

Article 15

---

1-23-2020

## Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence

Erik Anderson

*Drew Univeristy, NJ*, eanderso@drew.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics)



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anderson, Erik (2020) "Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 18 , Article 15.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics/vol18/iss1/15](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol18/iss1/15)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact [mpompeli@risd.edu](mailto:mpompeli@risd.edu).



[Home](#)

Volume: 18 (2020), ARTICLES

[The Journal](#)

## Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence

[About CA](#)

Erik Anderson

[Submissions](#)

[Contact CA](#)

### Abstract

We enjoy sounds. What about silence: the absence of sound? Certainly not all, but surely many of us seek out, attend to, and appreciate silence. But, if nothing is there, then there is nothing to possess aesthetic qualities that might engage aesthetic interest or reward aesthetic attention. This is at least puzzling, perhaps even paradoxical. In this paper, I attempt to dispel the sense of paradox and provide a way to understand aesthetic appreciation of silence. I argue that silence can have an aesthetic character and can sustain the kinds of rich experiences apt for aesthetic assessment and appraisal.

[Editorial Board](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Browse Archive](#)

### Key Words

aesthetic appreciation; aesthetic experience; aesthetic quality; John Cage; paradox of silence; silence; soundscape

[Donate to CA](#)

Search ...

Search

### 1. Introduction

We enjoy sounds. What about silence? Do we also enjoy silence? Certainly not all—maybe not even most—but surely many of us seek out, attend to, and appreciate silence. We move to the country, backpack in the wilderness, or simply retreat to a quiet corner of the house. This might seem odd. What's there to enjoy? If silence is the absence of sound, then there is nothing there to appreciate. If nothing is there, then there is nothing to possess aesthetic qualities that might engage aesthetic interest or reward aesthetic attention. This is at least puzzling, perhaps even paradoxical. In this paper, I attempt to dispel the sense of paradox and provide a way to understand aesthetic appreciation of silence.

Search Archive

Search

Over the last few decades, philosophical aesthetics has dramatically expanded its range of inquiry from the traditional topics of fine arts and natural environments to previously ignored areas, including mass art, swamps and bogs, rock music, the everyday, food, sex, wine, itches and scratches, video games, trash, and almost everything under the sun, including darkness. As people are starting to recognize problems with noise and opportunities for quiet, now is the time to extend philosophical aesthetics to include appreciation of silence. Popular culture has seen a recent surge of interest in silence, including interest in mindfulness meditation, forest bathing, the quiet person, the health benefits of silence, digital detox retreats, neurological regeneration, negative effects of noise, the fostering of creativity, silence as a way of life, and silence as political gesture.[1] The Finnish Tourist Board employed the slogan, "Silence Please!" in its 2011 marketing campaign aimed at attracting visitors with the allure of natural silence and beauty. The campaign cited a statistic from the European Environment Agency, according to which, "Over 80% of Finland is categorised as a silent area." [2]

I will argue that silence and silences can have an aesthetic character and can sustain the kinds of rich experiences that are apt for aesthetic assessment and appraisal. In the first two sections, I argue that we never experience absolute silence but that there is silence enough for us to attend to and appreciate. I then go on to argue that we can have rewarding and meaningful aesthetic experiences of silence. Lastly, I explore the aesthetic value of silence and suggest that it is potentially salutary and part of a flourishing life.

## 2. No absolute silence

Early in his 1961 collection, *Silence*, John Cage recounts his first experience with the anechoic chamber at Harvard.

I ... heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds.[3]

Oddly enough, even in an environment designed for silence, Cage finds none. Initially, this might be surprising. But a moment's reflection shows that our very capacity for auditory experience requires functioning nervous and circulatory systems.[4] What is required for processing sound is itself something that produces sound, although we might not be able to hear it. We will never experience absolute silence.[5]

Silence can be distinguished from quiet. I can ask my students to talk quietly with one another but I can't ask them to talk silently. Silence implies quiet but quiet doesn't imply silence. Silence is the "absolute zero" in the sound scale. Silence is binary: on/off. Quiet, by contrast, comes in degrees. It can be close to but is not necessarily equal to zero sound.

Nevertheless, there are English language contexts of use in which this conception isn't right. Ordinary language is imprecise and won't conform to the distinction between silence and quiet once it's made precise. The Finnish Tourist Board, for example, cites a statistic according to which "Over 80% of Finland is silent." If silence is an on/off concept, this clearly can't be literally true. Nevertheless, we can make do with something less demanding. Julian Dodd, following Roy Sorensen, suggests that "what counts as silent is something short of an absolute absence of sound, just as what counts as a straight line in nature is some way short of what would count as such in a geometry class." [6]

I will take this suggestion and allow, despite what was said two paragraphs earlier, that we can speak of the relatively silent, as opposed to the absolutely silent. Thus persons, places, situations, and processes that make very little sound might equally be described as "relatively silent" or "relatively quiet." A silent retreat, for example, is only relatively silent. Or we might say that one of the things we enjoy about silent retreats is the relative quiet, even if a plane occasionally flies by overhead.

At a silent retreat, I can *encounter* silence but I can also *participate* in or create silence by refraining from making sounds, even if, as mentioned, a silent retreat is not absolutely silent. Silence is not a thing; it is rather *of things*. [7] The silences we encounter are the silences of things that participate in or remain silent. For example, the silence encountered at a silent retreat is the silence we participate in by refraining from talking.

Here it might be helpful to head off potential objections regarding the possibility of absolute silence. Can't I be absolutely silent simply by not talking? Not really. I can be 100% not talking, but I can't be 100% silent altogether. But then, is the term without application? Can anything or anywhere be absolutely silent? Well, it's surely not a metaphysical impossibility. I suppose we could say that outer space is totally silent, as there is no medium there to transmit a wave detectable by our ears. But outer space should be seen as analogous to a giant and more extreme version of Cage's anechoic chamber. Even in outer space we would still hear our nervous system and our circulatory system.

Then suppose our ears were not sensitive to *those* kinds of sounds, from our own bodies, and instead consider a situation in which our ears were sensitive to a certain range of sounds but that in that situation there simply were no instances of those sounds to hear. In that case, wouldn't there be total silence for listeners like that? This kind of situation seems not merely metaphysically possible but physically possible. And it's obviously not a necessary truth that space is empty of sound waves. There might have been something there, or we might have had some other kind of ears that would allow us to detect plasma waves or solar wind or something.[8]

Furthermore, pressing the objection just a bit, lack of a medium is not necessary for absolute silence. There is total silence when there is a medium but no wave disturbance or at the displacement node of a standing wave where the intensity of the wave is zero. The latter is a dead spot. Dead spots can also result from destructive interference when the net wave amplitude drops to zero. Theoretically, these could occur instantaneously at isolated points in space. It may happen all around us and regularly, although we wouldn't notice. And, of course, there is a possible world occupied by exactly one hydrogen atom that makes no sound, even if there is no one to hear it. Aren't all these examples of absolute silence?

The reply to such worries is simply that, although theoretically such things could happen, none are examples of silence that could be part of our experience. There is no absolute silence or, in any case, as Cage observes, we never experience it. But we do encounter and participate in relative silence and, as I will argue in the next section, this provides silence enough for us to appreciate.

### **3. Silence enough**

We (some of us) seek out and attend to what are less-than-absolute silences, in the form of partial, intermittent, and temporary absences of sound. What counts as silence in these cases is contextual and is short of absolute silence.[9] When we escape noisy New York City for the silence of Long Lake deep in the Adirondacks, there are still sounds there: the water gently dripping from the oars, the eerie call of the loon in the distance, the wind rippling the water, my squeaky life vest, my breath . . . It is not absolutely silent. Nevertheless, such sounds might help to draw attention to the relative silence there is. When we eat in silence at a silent retreat, forks and knives clink against plates and each other and coffee cups do the same. Refraining from making loud noises in such settings helps us to focus on the silence. In another setting, a jet flying overhead might even be a

welcome reminder of the fact that one is deep in the silent wilderness.

In other cases, silence might consist in the silence of some but not all of a group of things. McCoy Tyner sat out "Chasin' the Trane" while the rest of the band played; his absence is surprising and contributes a thrilling sense that the remaining trio has jumped without a net. Only some of the volcanoes were erupting while others remained silent, thus producing an air of ominous foreboding on the surrounding islands. These cases don't involve absolute silence because the things being silent are accompanied by things making sound. But the absences make an aesthetic difference we can notice and attend to.

There are also silences in which every member of a group is silent in some relevant respect. No one spoke at the silent retreat but we all appreciated the unanticipated sense of intimacy this silence fostered. All the musicians refrained from playing their instruments for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, alternately bewildering and infuriating the uninitiated members of the audience. The peepers all stopped calling when they heard us coming up the trail, thus alerting us to their charming presence, that had previously gone unnoticed. The members of these groups are silent in some respects but not others. People audibly shuffled their soles on the floor while walking the halls at the retreat. Although the musicians didn't play their instruments, one of them sniffled with a cold and another's phone rang. Some of the peepers plopped into the water as they fell silent. That these partial silences don't involve absolute silence is not a barrier to our attending to and appreciating them.

The relative silence of a wilderness area, such as the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area outside of Boulder, Colorado, is spread across a broad region. We escape there in part to enjoy the sounds of nature but also the silence. In this case, the silence is a matter of the absence of human-made sounds, including voices, vehicles, construction, and noise from activities like mining and mechanized agriculture. Similarly, there is relative silence far out on a large and isolated lake or in the middle of the ocean, although the waves may lap. In these cases, too, we soak in the relative silence and it provides an aesthetic reason for being there.

Silences can also be less than absolute in the temporal, as opposed to sonic-intensity, sense. The duration of silences varies widely. The tiny silences between musical notes last for less than a second; a moment of silence at a wedding lasts for a minute or two; a silent retreat lasts for a few days; our trip to

the wilderness may last for a week or two; and the silence in outer space may last billions of years. The environmentalist John “Planetwalker” Francis remained silent for seventeen years, traversing the Americas on foot to promote his cause.[10]

That there is no absolute silence does not prevent us from enjoying what silence there is. There is silence enough to attend to. In “A Social—and Personal—History of Silence,” Jane Brox describes the silence in her old country house:

I live in a quiet house. On a winter’s day, I can hear snow landing on the windowpanes and flames muttering on the stove, tires hissing on the wet street, my cats shifting in their beds. When the weather grows warm, I open the windows, and sometimes a little talk from passersby floats in. Even then, the quiet feels spacious—a place in which my thoughts can roam as I work.[11]

Brox, too, is not describing a situation in which there is absolute silence but rather one in which there is relative silence. What is important in such cases is the space that opens up, one that affords listening but doesn’t force it.[12] The point here isn’t that the silence frees Brox up to hear these other sounds but rather that she is able to experience the silence itself.

Similarly, walking in a remote wilderness area, I might stop, turn to my companion, and say, “Hear that? Listen to the silence.” At that point, we might notice the wealth of natural sounds made audible by the absence of human noise. But we might also, once our attention has been drawn there, simply savor the silence itself that had previously gone unnoticed. In the latter case, the ambient sounds recede into the background as the silence comes to the fore. *This* was what we came for.

Such examples help to show that in our ordinary manner of thinking and speaking, although there is no absolute silence, there is relative silence—and that is silence enough. An interruption of the relative silence helps draw our attention to it. Or perhaps better: Hearing sounds we know we wouldn’t otherwise notice draws our attention to the silence. In the next section, I will argue more specifically that there is silence enough to appreciate aesthetically.

#### **4. Aesthetic appreciation of silence**

There is silence enough to attend to. Can we appreciate it? If so, how?

##### *a. Instrumental appreciation*

We certainly appreciate silence instrumentally. For someone who spends all day at a noisy construction site, the main attraction of silence might well be the welcome contrast it

provides and the profound sense of relief it offers. A sense of relief is part of the pleasure of escaping a children's birthday party or the loud city or the factory or the neighbor's leaf blower or the constant oppressive drone of twenty-first century audiovisual media. For anyone, really, an escape from the noise to the quiet of the woods or the beach or the like provides a welcome break from the frenetic pace and the sensory overload of our everyday lives.

We also flee the noisy traffic, rumbling construction, loud conversations, and general hustle-bustle in order to experience a soundscape otherwise ignored. Free from the noise, we can hear the crickets and the frogs and the birds and the surf and the wind and the thunder and the rain. We might even enjoy the sound of a jet far overhead or the rumble of a tractor over the next hill or the gentle tings of a wind chime. In more extreme cases, we might enjoy the occasion to listen to our heartbeat or the ringing in our ears.

Often a crucial element of the reward is the pleasure of solitude, the absence of other people. A friend of mine used to like to joke, "I don't hate people; I just feel better when they're not around." But the experience of silence can also be shared. At a silent retreat, for example, it is the lack of chatter, not the lack of other people, that is enjoyed together. This experience can be uniquely emotionally powerful. A shared silence provides a kind of intimacy that is especially meaningful, and one may take aesthetic pleasure in that. It is properly described as enjoying the silence together. Good friends know that they can feel comfortable enough to enjoy long silences together.

A growing body of empirical research points to the positive health value of the experience of silence and the negative health effects of noise.[13] Exposure to silence contributes to neural regeneration.[14] Appreciation of silence, we are learning, promotes human flourishing. Silence provides the ideal occasion to observe, ponder, and appreciate that one exists. It is the most natural occasion for primordial wonder.

#### *b. Aesthetic appreciation*

I've established that we can attend to silence and that we can appreciate it instrumentally, but what about aesthetically? I enter the anechoic chamber; I experience the silence. Is it also possible for this experience to be an *aesthetic* experience?

This might be taken to mean a couple of different things: We might be asking something about the internal affective and cognitive states of a perceiver. In that case, our question would be something like: Is there special way of attending to silence



that results in or amounts to having an aesthetic experience? Alternatively, we might be asking something about the external states of the perceiver's environment, including properties and relations of the objects attended to. In that case, our question would be something like: Do silences have aesthetic properties that can be part of the content of experiences? I think that on either reading of the question, the answer is yes. And, moreover, some ways of appreciating silence are more rewarding than others. In particular, the manner of attending to quiet that incorporates a mental stillness is a better way to appreciate silence than others.

What exactly are we supposed to do in order to appreciate silence aesthetically? Is there a special attitude we adopt? According to Iseminger, what is involved in aesthetic appreciation generally is "finding the experience of a state of affairs to be valuable in itself."<sup>[15]</sup> Can we appreciate silence in this way or must its value for us always be instrumental?

Silent retreats supply a good illustration. Here, the silence is largely a matter of the absence of speech, which provides the opportunity to listen, either to ordinarily ignored non-speech sounds or to nothing at all. The absence of conversation might call our attention to the passage of time or to ourselves or to own auditory capacities. Such retreats typically include media blackouts that provide, if not necessarily a reduction in audible noise, at least a reduction of the information noise that accompanies the constant media hum of ordinary life. This enhances the capacity, or at least furthers the opportunity, to attend to the silence. Obviously, a silent retreat is not totally silent. The silence is intermittently interrupted by the ring of the bell indicating that a session has finished. This punctuates the silence and draws our attention to it once it returns. Similarly, the silence is broken by the sounds of the dining hall or the wind and rain at the windows and the roof, or the crickets or tree frogs or birds. All of the oft-ignored sounds of daily life come into awareness once we are afforded the opportunity to listen. But these sounds recede to the background when the silence itself moves to the fore. We notice especially the absence of the constant din of chatter, and we savor it.

Assuming that we can attend to silence with the appropriate state of mind, are there properties of silence that we would want to call uniquely aesthetic? In other words, what about the content of the experience of silence might make it count as aesthetic? As a step in this direction, consider Robert Stecker's "minimal conception," according to which an aesthetic experience is,

the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities, or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience.[16]

So can we find in silence forms, qualities, and meaningful features we can attend to for their own sake or for the sake of the experience itself?

I think that we can. Further, if so, then that would also point us toward an answer to the equally important question of why and how the aesthetic experience of silence can be valuable. Here, too, I follow Stecker in holding that,

one does not have [aesthetic] experiences, without one valuing them in one way or another . . . aesthetic experience is always valued for itself, though the valuing needn't be positive.[17]

Wilderness areas provide refuge from the all too familiar din of modern civilization. We delight in the multifarious absences: of the clamor of construction, of the roar of emergency vehicles, of the constant drone of traffic, and of the noisy neighbors. On a windless night, after the birds have gone to sleep, there is dead silence. It is then possible to appreciate the silence itself, for its own sake and for the sake of that very experience. At such times, the silence can be sublime, suggesting both mortality and infinite potential. At other times, especially when alone or at night, the silence there can be mysterious, alienating, or unnerving.

Beyond these kinds of qualitative properties, silences take various forms, delineated by their borders. A silence can be short and intermittent or lengthy and continuous. A prolonged silence between movements of a symphony might provide a sense of relief and a moment for reflection, while the very brief silence between numbers at a jazz performance might produce a thrilling sense of urgency. A pregnant pause in conversation can indicate irony, a warning, or a pun. In a jazz quartet, the silence of the pianist sitting out is sonically very different from the silence of the drummer sitting out.

The use of silence in Gustav Mahler's Second Symphony, "Resurrection," is especially illustrative. Mahler called for a five-minute silent pause following the First Movement, the "Funeral Rites." Because of the extended duration of the pause, which is apt to cause misunderstanding, there is an ongoing debate about whether conductors should honor Mahler's instructions. But the pause serves a significant aesthetic function. The First Movement is, according to one critic, "a massive and terrifying portrait of death." [18] Mahler called for the pause "in expectation that the audience would need to recover from the

intensity and scope of what they had just heard.”[19] As Andrew Davis, Chief Conductor for the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, puts it, the pause provides the occasion to “stare into the face of emptiness.”[20] If all of this is right, we have a period of silence just as meaningful as the sounds that constitute its temporal borders and serve as its host. The silence provides the occasion to attend to an absence and to confront the looming specter of our own ever-nearer and inevitable absence. The silence might be described variously as haunting, ethereal, a profound relief, or perhaps consoling or comforting.

*c. The Silent Sonata: Cage's 4'33"*

Silence can exhibit and express aesthetic qualities but has no qualitative character of its own; there is nothing analogous to the black of darkness. Nevertheless, we can still appreciate a period of silence appropriately framed, perhaps in a way analogous to how we appreciate a framed work of art, like Ad Reinhardt's all black *Abstract Painting*. Cage's *4'33"* is the obvious example, although he compares his work not to Reinhardt's black paintings but to Rauchenberg's *White Painting*. [21]

There is a long-standing debate about the ontological status of Cage's "silent work," and this matters for how we are to think about its aesthetic character and about silence more generally. What does *4'33"* consist of? Does the piece consist of a period of silence lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds? Or does it consist of the ambient sounds in the performance space made audible by the silence of the performers during that increment of time?

The question about content is distinct from the question about what the audience is supposed to attend to during a performance of the work. We really have two questions: (1) what is the content of *4'33"*?; and (2) what are we supposed to listen to during a performance of *4'33"*?

Ordinarily, the answers will be the same: what we are to attend to *just is* the content of the work. Other sounds that occur during a performance are extraneous distractions. The content of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the same as what we are to attend to. But Cage's piece, trafficking as he does in irony, presses us to call into question this ordinary assumption. What we are supposed to attend to at a performance of *4'33"* might come apart from the content. Thus, one might, in effect, take the whole piece to be a kind of aesthetic device, the content of which is itself uninteresting, but that draws our attention to

something that *is* worthy of attention. Something like this position is defended recently by Julian Dodd:

While listeners new to the piece might, for a very short while, try to pay close attention to the performance's content, they will soon discern that, since this content consists in silence, there is nothing there that rewards such attention. And it is just this realization that will prompt them to direct their focus onto things outwith the performance's content: the sounds occurring around them. These environmental sounds do not, then, distract our attention from the performance's content; on the contrary, this content, once grasped, compels us to look beyond itself, to the sounds of the environment, for aesthetic interest.[22]

This provides Dodd with the framework to argue, contrary to prevailing opinion, that *4'33"* really does comprise silence and not the ambient sounds during its performance.[23]

I think Dodd is right that the content of *4'33"* is the silence itself rather than the ambient sounds in the performance hall. But I disagree with what he seems to take for granted, namely, that in silence "there is nothing there that rewards attention." The silence of *4'33"* is tantalizingly puzzling, deliciously infuriating, and endlessly amusing. We can compare and contrast the aesthetic qualities of various performances of the piece, despite their all consisting in silence. A performance in front of an unsuspecting audience might be bewildering; a performance of the same piece during a silent retreat might be exhilarating; while a third performance might be amusing if performed for an audience on a runway at JFK Airport. By contrast, the ambient sounds of the performance space have none of these qualities.

The aesthetic rewards of silence are not confined to ironic or sophisticated contrivances like Cage's. Ian Phillips mentions compelling examples from the music critic Alex Ross that highlight the expressive power of silences in musical performances.[24] He cites thundering silences and animating silences and beautifully hushed silences employed as meaningful musical devices. Earlier, we noted that a long pause between movements in Mahler's Second Symphony provided both profound relief and the opportunity to stare into the abyss.

## 5. Context and degree of freedom

In the main, I want to recommend the experience of silence as something positive. But if 'aesthetic' is understood as *aesthesis* and hence value-neutral, the aesthetics of silence should include negative experience, also.[25] After all, silence can be . . . disquieting . . ., as when one endures the cruelty of the silent treatment. Similarly, when Rachel Carson, in *Silent Spring*, draws our attention to the disappearance of birds singing, we

experience this silence as ominous and eerie. And the painful sorrow we feel in the absence of a loved one's voice is something we experience as a part of grief. Of course, it could go either way. Dan Moller, in "The Boring," offers a wonderful illustration: "the awkward silence in the car on the way home from the first date is the glorious silence on the way home from the fourth or fifth." [26]

The most basic thesis would be that the aesthetic character of silence, whether negative or positive, is determined by what is absent or by what disappears. This thesis is highly plausible if, as we would expect, the aesthetics of silence is grounded in the metaphysics. As I argued earlier, silences are ontologically dependent. They are *of things* and are located roughly where the silent things are or perhaps where the sound would've been. [27] The semantic and/or aesthetic features of silences will then depend on what is absent.

But context matters, too. The semantic features of silences will also depend on historical, cultural, and socio-linguistic factors. As Sorensen puts the point:

Since silence conveys nothing on its own, it is usually sensitive to context. Depending on the circumstances, silence can convey assent, dissent, or uncertainty. Its message is heavily context-dependent. Silence can be an expression of respect. One of the rituals of Armistice Day is a two-minute silence held at 11 a.m., 'the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month' (the time at which the 1918 armistice went into effect, bringing World War I to a close). [28]

Context helps to direct our attention to the relevant absence, in this case, the absence of the fallen heroes. Accordingly, we can modify the basic thesis to respect these contextual features. The semantic-cum-aesthetic features of the silence are determined by what is absent, together with contextual factors that fix the identity of the silence.

Context dependence is not unique to silence. In a well-known and influential paper, Kendall Walton argues that aesthetic features of artworks are category-dependent. in the sense that the identity of the work and hence its aesthetic features depend on how the work is conceptually situated among the other elements of an appropriate comparison class, such as genre or oeuvre. [29] This is why fans of swing music might find a bebop work, like "Salt Peanuts," turgid and tedious— "How are we supposed to dance to this?"—while bebop fans might find a modal jazz piece like Coltrane's "Impressions" bland and inexpressive—"Where's the key? It sounds like four guys playing four different songs."

This line of argument can be extended to other areas of aesthetic appreciation. Allen Carlson, for example, extends Walton's reasoning to the aesthetics of nature and environments where the relevant categories are supplied not by art history or art theory but by the natural sciences, like geology and biology.[30] Accordingly, appropriate appreciation of whales requires comparison to members of the class of mammals, to which they belong, rather than to the members of the class of fish, to which they do not.

Is aesthetic response to silence category-driven in this way? Surely it can be. Consider the use of silence in music.[31] The five-minute silence following the first movement of Mahler's Second Symphony comes as a relief, while the only slightly-shorter silence of Cage's silent piece causes anger and consternation. Music-historical and music-theoretical knowledge can provide appropriate conceptual framing in these sorts of cases. Similarly, our appreciation of the natural silence deep in a rainforest might be driven by an understanding of the sound-dampening properties of the foliage, an understanding of basic acoustics, or perhaps wave-mechanics.

But it would be too strong to claim that this sort of knowledge is necessary in all cases. Once the silence in the forest has been pointed out, we don't need a scientific understanding in order to appreciate it aesthetically; that might even be distracting.[32] I don't think a strong cognitivist position is a good fit for the aesthetics of silence. Instead, I encourage a moderate non-cognitivist position together with the view that aesthetic appreciation of silence is something we can cultivate with practice.

Of course, surely appreciation of silence admits of a considerable degree of freedom, depending, for example, on conditions of observation and the perceptual capacities and cognitive make-up of observers. But this does not make the aesthetics of silence uniquely "observer relative." True, aesthetic response to silence depends on the sonic context in addition to the beliefs, expectations, intentions, and general psychological profile of the listeners. But this is to be expected. The Grand Tetons are magnificent in Wyoming but barely noticeable in Nepal. And they are magnificent, in neither case, if our eyes are closed or we're not paying attention or are distracted by reports of recent attacks by Grizzly Bears.

## **6. Conclusion**

Interest in the psychological and physical health benefits of silence has been gaining momentum in recent years, as worries

about overstimulation and media saturation rise in the public consciousness.[33] Finland proudly adopts silence as part of its national identity for its tourism literature. But the appreciation of silence as an aesthetic delight valuable for its own sake is something that has been under-explored. One reason for this is, no doubt, that, people already know how to do it; we don't need instructions.

Nevertheless, it's not *that* simple. The value is not always immediately apparent. Cage's *4'33"* is mystifying to the uninitiated. A typical response is anger, which was precisely how it was received at the debut performance, in Woodstock in 1952. Cage recalled much later that "they didn't laugh—they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry." [34] Cage adds that he even lost friends because of what happened that night.

This response is not surprising. Challenging works and performances from Duchamp, Stravinsky, Picasso, Dylan, Coltrane, The Sex Pistols, and Snoop Dogg have also produced uproars. Eventually we work out strategies that help us to overcome the consternation and to learn to appreciate (or not) such works. Part of this process has to do, no doubt, with our recognition that works of art like these are designed with the intention to produce a certain kind of response in an audience.

But what are we to say when the relevant guiding artistic intentions are lacking? Can those instances of silence exhibit the "features of unity, complexity, and intensity . . . that reward disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation"? [35]

I have claimed that people regularly seek out and appreciate silence in places like wilderness areas and at silent retreats. In the previous section, I gave examples of experiences of silence involving a wide range of aesthetic properties and that produce a wide range of aesthetic experiences. Silences can be calming and soothing or unnerving and frightening. They can be intermittent, momentary, brief, or prolonged. Silence at the beach is hard to hear when the surf is high. It might be complemented, for some time, by the lapping of waves but then, at some later time, give over altogether to the roaring, crashing surf. The silence in the backyard might be unpleasantly interrupted by the neighbor's leaf blower or lawn mower but we welcome it when it returns after the yard work is finished. Silences can vary from the total silence of outer space that we never experience to the respectful quiet of a study nook in the library to the noisy silence outside Cage's New York City

apartment. When I ask for silence in the classroom, if we take a moment, we can savor it. Silences in conversation are especially pregnant with meaning. They can be cruel, sarcastic, respectful, and humorous, like the pause before a pun.

When we enjoy the silence, there is no aesthetic object in the ordinary sense but neither do we just aimlessly space out. To appreciate silence the way I recommend, we need to be attentive and to value both what we're attending to and how we attend to it. That is, we need to value both the silence and our experience of it.

Note that what we do is teachable. I might direct your attention to the silence, not for some other purpose but as something to appreciate for its own sake. We do this all the time. We ask our children to quiet down in the arboretum or the botanical garden or on a quiet forest path. Some of this is out of respect for others who want to enjoy the quiet tranquility but it is also to teach our children, by showing them how to do that very thing themselves.

As Cage advised, we can find silence even in traffic noise. He could well have been joking about the traffic. I advise seeking at least relative silence. Listen to it, not the other stuff. Let the sounds recede to the background and allow the silence to come to the fore. There are still sounds, even if just your heartbeat or the ringing in your ears. Let those go. Allow the mind to still. Don't enter into a trance. Don't allow yourself to daydream. Focus on the silence in the fore, and let the daydreams recede and pass.

Out in the open, freed from sounds, silences can exhibit emotion properties, such as when they are melancholic or alienating or comforting or liberating. A shared silence at the retreat might be reverential. At night in the desert the prolonged quiet can be sublime, in the Kantian sense.

Listening to silence with a still mind, the most meaningful comes to the fore. It is not surprising, then, that many of us find the experience of silence deeply moving. This needn't involve anything mysterious or paradoxical, even though initially it might seem as though there is nothing there to appreciate. On the contrary, silence exhibits a rich aesthetic character that we can appreciate for its own sake, if we attend to it in the right way. It is time we give silence its due.[36]

Erik Anderson  
eanderso@drew.edu



Erik Anderson is Chair and Professor of Philosophy at Drew University in Madison, NJ. His research interests include aesthetics and metaphysics.

Published on January 23, 2020.

Cite this article: Erik Anderson, "Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020), accessed date.

## Endnotes

---

[1] On silence as a way of life, see Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010).

[2] VisitFinland, "Slow Life," <https://www.visitfinland.com/article/slow-life/>, accessed July 9, 2019.

[3] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 8.

[4] This is a contentious point in philosophy of mind. Is it a truth of metaphysics that I must be embodied in order to have sensory experience? Gertler offers a Cartesian-style argument against this claim. I take it that Cage is not addressing a metaphysical issue of this kind, and that he is instead restricting his observations to what can be said about the lives of ordinary human beings. Brie Gertler, "In Defense of Mind-Body Dualism," in *Reason and Responsibility* 13th edition, eds. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (New York: Cengage, 2007), pp. 285-96.

[5] For an extended treatment of Cage on this point, see Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press, 2010).

[6] Julian Dodd, "What 4'33" Is," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 96 (2018), 629-641; ref. on p. 634; Roy Sorensen, "Hearing silence: The Perception and Introspection of Absences," in *Sounds and Perception*, eds. Matthew Nudds and Casey O'Callaghan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 126-145.

[7] Here, too, I follow Sorensen and Dodd.

[8] Douglas Kahn makes a similar point about sounds otherwise undetectable to unaided human hearing. "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly*, 81 (1997), 556-98.

[9] Again, I follow Sorensen and Dodd. See too, Ian Phillips, "Hearing and Hallucinating Silence," in *Hallucination*, eds. Fiona Macpherson and Dimitris Platchias (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 333-360.

[10] John Frances, *Planetwalker: 22 Years of Walking, 17 Years of Silence* (National Geographic, 2009).

[11] Jane Brox, "A Social—and Personal—History of Silence," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/kinds-of-silence>.

[12] On the notion of "affording listening," see Phillips, "Hearing and Hallucinating Silence."

[13] See, for example, Rebecca Beris, "Science Says Silence Is Much More Important to Our Brains than We Think," *Lifhack*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.lifhack.org/377243/science-says-silence-much-more-important-our-brains-than-thought>; Daniel B. Gross, "This Is Your Brain on Silence." *Nautilus*, August 24, 2014, <https://nautil.us/issue/16/nothingness/this-is-your-brain-on-silence>; Carolyn Gregoire, "Why Silence Is So Good for Your Brain," *Huffington Post*, January 9, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/silence-brain-benefits\\_n\\_56d83967e4b0000de4037004](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/silence-brain-benefits_n_56d83967e4b0000de4037004); and, David R. Vago and Fadel Zeidan, "The Brain on Silent: Mind Wandering, Mindful Awareness, and States of Mental Tranquility." *Annals of The New York Academy Of Sciences*, 1373, (2016), pp. 96–113.

[14] Imke Kirste, Zeina Nicola, Golo Kronenberg, Tara L. Walker. Robert C. Liu, and Gerd Kempermann. "Is silence golden? Effects of auditory stimuli and their absence on adult hippocampal neurogenesis," *Brain Structure and Function*, 220 (2015), 1221-28.

[15] Gary Iseminger, "The Aesthetic State of Mind," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 98–110; ref. on p. 99.

[16] Robert Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value," *Philosophy Compass*, 1 (2006), 1-10; ref. on p. 4. Malcolm Budd offers something similar: "a response [is] aesthetic insofar as the response is directed at the experienced properties of an item, the nature and arrangements of its elements or the interrelationships among its parts or aspects, and which involves a felt positive or negative reaction to the item, considered in itself ... so that what governs the response is whether the object is intrinsically rewarding or displeasing to

experience in itself." *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 213.

[17] Robert Stecker, "Aesthetic Experience," p. 9.

[18] Matthew Hodge, *The Mahler Symphonies Guided Tour*, November 12, 2016, <https://relentlesspursuit.wordpress.com/2016/11/12/the-mahler-symphonies-guided-tour-symphony-no-2-resurrection-movement-ii/>

[19] George Grella, *New York Classical Review*, Oct. 29, 2018, <https://newyorkclassicalreview.com/2018/10/bychkov-czech-philharmonic-stake-a-mahler-claim-with-a-memorable-resurrection/>

[20] Andrew Davis, *Mahler's Symphonies: an online guide*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.mso.com.au/media-centre/news/2014/11/mahler-s-symphonies-an-online-guide/>

[21] See Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press, 2010), p. 160.

[22] Dodd, "What 4'33" Is," p. 635.

[23] Stephen Davies defends the "ambient sounds" position in "John Cage's 4'33": Is it music?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (1997), 448-62.

[24] Phillips, "Hearing and Hallucinating Silence," p. 335.

[25] Special thanks to an anonymous referee for this point and for some of the examples that follow.

[26] Dan Moller, "The Boring," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, (2014): 181-91, quotation, p. 189.

[27] Sorensen, "Hearing silence," pp. 139-40.

[28] Sorensen, "Hearing Silence," p. 145.

[29] Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review*, 79 (1970): 334-67.

[30] Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 54-71.

[31] See for example, Jennifer Judkins, "The Aesthetics of Silence in Musical Performance," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 31 (1997): 39-53; and Andrew Kania, "Silent Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68 (2010); 343-53.

[32] For a moderate non-cognitivist position, see Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and*

the Arts, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 244-66.

[33] Dana Klisanin, "Media Saturation and Your Health," *Psychology Today*, August, 14, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/digital-altruism/201308/media-saturation-your-health>

[34] Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversations with Cage*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 65.

[35] I borrow this language from Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 172-3.

[36] I would like to thank two anonymous referees, Jill Cermele, Adam Goldstein, Seung-Kee Lee, Denise Vigani, and especially Kevin Melchionne for their many thoughtful comments and helpful suggestions.

Volume: 18 (2020), ARTICLES | Author: Erik Anderson

[Publisher](#) | [Permission to Reprint](#) | [Links](#) | [Privacy](#)

The author retains copyright for the article.

Downloading, copying in whole or in part, and distribution for scholarly or educational purposes are encouraged, provided full acknowledgement is made to *Contemporary Aesthetics* and to the authors of articles.

© 2022 *Contemporary Aesthetics*

ISSN 1932-8478