



The Ideal Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds: Response to Covach

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[1] When Cage composed *4'33"*, he composed the physical background which informs all musical experience; the noise which is the degree zero and condition of possibility for any musical experience. He did this, in that piece, on a largely physical level, although his other "silent" pieces have more philosophical intentions.⁽¹⁾ Perhaps there is something of this in John Covach's paper, "Deconstructing Cartesian Dualism in Musical Analysis". In this brief commentary, I would like to suggest some of the directions in which this paper's considerable phenomenology may be taken.

[2] John Covach speaks of "musical worlds" which, if they are to be true to their Heideggerian parentage, must be prior to any musical object; they are "ready-to-hand", an environment, rather than "present-at-hand" as objects of our reflective judgement. The musical world is thus not composed of musical objects (i.e. "pieces of music") at all, but pre-musical phenomenological structures of some kind—indeed, perhaps, the non-musical as such.

[3] For this reason, at least one of the problems raised at the end of the paper is not a problem at all, but a solution. John Covach writes that "There are a number of other kinds of music . . . for which the idea of a musical "work' does not apply" (paragraph 20). Indeed, we should be looking to such musics for examples of a musical world prior to the Work; the music of India, which is entirely improvised, might serve as an example. It is predicated upon a series of complex combinatorial rules (the *talas* and *ragas* and their permutations) which in turn serve to illuminate the pure, cosmic resonance (the OM). This tradition actually enshrines the opposite kind of movement from that of Western Classicism; its conventions serve to draw the performance into the musical world, the ontological condition of possibility for music, the non-musical, the pure vibration. Indian musical practice, one might even say, is more authentic than that of the West. It certainly has its own share of being-towards-death.⁽²⁾

[4] The musical world, prior to any music whatever, produces out of itself musical structures, conventions and so forth. These conventions may contribute towards what we might call an "authentic" musical practice (withdrawing the music into its own ontological foundations even as it appears), or they may hypostatize it into an object for a subject. Yet how can the musical world found the structurality of music?

[5] The musical world is a kind of ideal space. Let us say that it is a stage, in the theatrical sense. The musical world is then a *mise en scene*, a stage-setting, which is always there, and always changing, on which performances take place. We should also take note of Heidegger's example of the actor in the No drama who, with a single gesture on an empty stage, brings forth a world. The stage is empty—the metaphor must not be taken to mean that the musical world fills the stage with past musical experiences. The musical world *is* the stage, the performance space, the ideal "4'33'" which forms the necessary context for musical experience. This experience, then, is like the gesture of the actor.⁽³⁾ It uncovers (and conceals) the world of the music.

[6] It is absolutely essential that this space is not considered to be a static space. "How do our musical worlds change as our experience grows?" (paragraph 20) is a valid question, but its answer is already at hand. The metaphor of the stage must be carried to a more abstract level, and we can see that it must be a mobile space, if only because *Dasein* is necessarily temporal, and so therefore is all musical experience. This much is fairly obvious; yet how will the current musical experience transform our musical world?

[7] Perhaps we need to be clear about what we mean by a musical world. John Covach defines it as follows: "a number of other works that form a kind of background—a body of other pieces that create a purely musical context for some particular piece" (paragraph 16). On my reading, which is admittedly thoroughly Heideggerian, the musical world cannot be precisely as it is described here since, if it were, the condition of possibility for works would simply be other works, which leads to an ontological infinite regress and a hermeneutic circularity.

[8] Let us consider how a musical world might function. It is certainly constituted from musical experiences (what else could constitute it?), yet it does not contain works of music. It is, rather, a space created by *experiences* of music, engagements with music as "equipment", as environment. Thus, it is an *aesthetic* space. These experiences cannot be differentiated—again, we are speaking of a space, not its contents, and the musical world is not a taxonomy of previous experiences, which may be recalled individually at will. They instead combine to form a space or stage in which other musical experiences may "take place".

[9] This immediately points to a solution to the problem of the mobility of this space. There is something like a dialectic (although not in the Hegelian sense) at work between the space and its contents, and this dialectic takes the form of the ontological difference. This much is clear. Yet this difference is also a deferral⁽⁴⁾ or referral which captures both the space and its object in a process of change. As the space effects the object (radically; the space enables the object to be what it is), so the object effects the space. For what cannot be objectified in the experience of the piece of music itself goes to mutate the space, the musical world itself. That which can be objectified will be removed from musical experience altogether, and passed into a different mode of thought, such as the mathematical, cultural or historical.

[10] What we are speaking of, then, is a staging of the musical work in which work and stage undergo a metamorphosis at one another's hands (to mix a metaphor). The purely subjective-experiential space is infolded within the musical work; it is its secret, what Adorno would call its "enigma", the kernel of non-music within music, which makes that music possible.⁽⁵⁾ Perhaps this is one way in which we could escape the solipsism which threatens this project. While the musical world is experiential, it is also in the realm of ideas, and these ideas may be (are necessarily?) ideological. Thus we get to Adorno via Heidegger, in spite of Adorno's protestations to the contrary. That contradictory kernel could easily be seen quite simply as the contradiction which, in the course of negative dialectics, comes to be a negative kind of truth, an escape from ideology which is wholly negative. Thus, the musical world, although still subjective, is nevertheless social and political.

[11] It is to be hoped that some of these ways of thinking may be helpful to those engaged in the relationship between fundamental ontology of music and its relation to hermeneutics. Anyone interested in discussing any of these issues is welcome to contact me by e-mail.

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Footnotes

1. Cage “wrote” two further silent pieces, entitled *0'00"* and *0'00"##2*. In *For The Birds* (with Daniel Charles: Boston, M. Boyars, 1981), their implications are discussed at some length.

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2. It occurs to me that this is something like what Heidegger meant by the authenticity of *Dasein*; to be in a world whose phenomenological structure is one of *aletheia*, of withdrawing into its Other as it reveals itself. Perhaps this is close to the deep meaning of Being-towards-death.

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3. The phenomenological structure described here must be carefully understood; the actor is nothing (as the musicians are nothing) as far as the piece of music *per se* is concerned. Only the gesture, the physical sign, is important. The gesture without actor is pure movement, the irriducible vibration of air which is not the same thing as “music” at all.

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4. The idea of difference as deferral is evident in Heidegger’s early work, and was brought out by Derrida, who is usually credited with inventing it. See “Differance” in Derrida, Jacques, *Margins: Of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).

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5. See “How Marx Invented the Symptom” in Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) for a discussion of this idea from another, very thought-provoking angle.

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