



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC AND THE POLITICAL: PERFORMATIVITY IN THE ART OF JOHN CAGE

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Introduction

In his book *For the birds*, American artist John Cage (Los Angeles, 1912–New York, 1992) remembers that, during a presentation of *Musicircus* (1967) in Paris, a young man of the audience said to him that if ever he came back to Europe, the young man and his friends *would join him in the revolution*. The adjudication of a political nature to the art of a composer like John Cage might come as a surprise to many. How can an art form based on chance, silence and noise be political? What elements in the art of Cage moved this young man, along with many other members of his generation, to find in it a subversive gesture, a social commentary?

In this text, I am interested in analyzing the relationship between experimental music and the political, understanding this term as the creation and maintenance of human communities, and as the power struggles that take part in all social relations. Specifically, I will highlight the existence of political and ethical concerns in Cage's artwork, discussing how a political message can be conveyed through music, without words, and whether an artistic performance can foster social change. In other words, through an examination of Cage's work, I will address the following questions: Is music a practice to which a political nature may be attributed? Can music contribute to the transformation of society?

To answer these questions I will explore the performative nature of Cage's music. In this article, I will use performativity as a lens of analysis to focus on two aspects of music: a) the capacity that music has to provoke effects on the bodies of its listeners, including their emotions, and b) the "theatrical" quality of music.¹

A hypothesis that I aim to defend in this text is that addressing these two issues in music allows us to understand the connections between music and other social practices, as well as its critical potential, thus revealing the ties that bind music to the history of the disciplining of the act of listening and, in general, of the disciplining of bodies. Using performativity as a lens of analysis might help us understand music's political effects because, as Alejandro L. Madrid (2009) argues, this perspective implies substituting the question "What does music mean?" for "What does music *do*?" and, even more importantly, "What does music allow people to do?" In this sense, an analysis on music's performative elements attends to the corporeal, contingent and communal aspects of music, instead of its structural and semiotic components. This leads us to conceive music as a material experience that includes both audible and inaudible elements.

For the above, the work of John Cage is ideal because, as we will see, Cage stresses not only the impact that attentive practices of listening and participatory artistic creation can have on our lives, but also the "theatrical" quality of a musical event.² Indeed, his music would seem to be based upon the recognition (not to mention a vast exploration) of the *performativity* of music, precisely in the two senses that we have already mentioned.

It is well known that in the field of philosophy, English author J. L. Austin introduced the term "performative" to name certain speech acts in which an utterance is used to perform an action, instead of making factual assertions about the world. In his series of lectures, published as *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), Austin proved that there are certain statements that cannot be judged in terms of *true or false*, but need to be judged in terms of their capacity (or incapacity) to produce effects. In other words, Austin coined the term "performative" to name those speech acts that do not describe, report or "constate anything at all," but those in which "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which [...] would not *normally* be described as saying something" (Austin 1962, 5). Although Austin's theory was centered solely in language, his ideas have proved to be applicable to other fields (see Johnson 2014; Schechner 2013; Butler 1990). As French philosopher Jacques Derrida famously arguments in his text *Signature, Event, Context* (1972), one of the most interesting aspects of Austin's theory is that it posits an original notion of *communication*. In Derrida's own words:

Austin's notions of illocution and perlocution do not designate the transport or passage of a content of meaning, but in a way the communication of an original movement [...], an operation, and the production of an effect. (Derrida [1972] 1982, 321)

Derrida goes even further, asserting that in the case of the performative, *to communicate* means *to communicate a force*. As Jerade (2020) has shown, it is precisely the concept of *force* that led Derrida to a "productive misreading" ("*una incomprensión (aunque muy productiva)*," Jerade 2020, 153) of

Austin's theory. Whereas Austin links the force of the performative to the *intentions* of the interlocutors and their conscious use of conventions, Derrida traces it to language "iterability": the structural possibility that a speech act has to be repeated, or *quoted*, in different contexts, and the written text's guaranteed capacity to produce meaning even in the absence of its author and its intended addressee. As we will see, Derrida's interpretation on the performative will prove to be useful in this text to analyze John Cage's art (and, ultimately, to reflect on the performativity of music), since both of them reject personal intentionality as the preeminent element from which to study language's or art's capacity to produce effects, emphasizing instead the importance of the repetition and displacement of conventional elements.

Focusing on performance art, and drawing on Austin's and Judith Butler's ideas on the performative and performativity, Erika Fischer-Lichte developed what she coined an *aesthetics of the performative*. In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: A new aesthetics* (2004), she argues that performance art shares two fundamental aspects with performative utterances (and with performativity in the sense used by Butler): it is auto-referential, and it triggers a transformation in the world (be it in the relationship between different people or in the social identity of a person). Following Butler's claim in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Fischer-Lichte posits that the opposite of the notion of *performativity* is *expressivity*.³ In the case of performance art, this implies understanding art as an *event* open to interaction with the public, instead of as an autonomous and finished *object*, thus highlighting the *materiality* of the experience (linked to the co-presence of the body of the artist and the bodies of the public), instead of its *semiotic* components. In performance art, the central element is the effects, transformations, and social relations that this type of art generates, and not the communicative intentions of the artist or the construction of symbols to be interpreted by the public.

Another idea of Fischer-Lichte about the term performativity worthy of attention here is that it is a notion that has been strategically useful for questioning conceptual binaries inside Western philosophy: Austin used it to question the apparent dichotomy between language and action; Butler used it to challenge the gender and sexual binaries (as well as the dichotomy between nature and culture); and Fischer-Lichte used it to question the categories of traditional Western aesthetics, which include binaries such as *artist/public*, *subject/object*, and even the separation of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Finally, it is important to note that, in the same manner as Derrida, Fischer-Lichte considers that the term *performativity* implies conceiving the effects or transformations produced by something (be it the utterance of a performative statement, a performance art event, or the repetition of certain behaviors that performatively produce identities) as dependent upon a social context. It is this context that confers efficacy to certain actions in order for them to produce changes on the level of social identities and social relations. From this perspective, it is not words, corporeal actions, artistic events, or music that possess in themselves a magical capacity to produce effects, but instead it is their occurrence in a particular context that infuses them with this force—and, at the same time, that explains why certain actions trigger social transformations in some occasions and fail to produce them at other times.

This article aims to explore the critical and political possibilities of music, taking John Cage's art as the object of study, and using performativity as the lens of analysis. In the first section of this paper, I will focus on Cage's ideas on the act of listening. I will link his interests in *silence* and *noise* with his desire to transform our listening habits, a process that he deemed necessary in order for Western civilization to generate a positive relationship with Otherness (and, specifically, with non-human agents and non-Western cultures). I will argue that increasing the importance of silence in music (one of Cage's greatest artistic legacies) implies a destabilization of traditional roles and notions within Western musical experience. The second section of this text will focus on other strategies that Cage used to question Western art, as well as their ontological and aesthetic consequences. In the third part, I will argue that Cage's artistic experiments have political resonances that are in close proximity with his anarchist convictions. I will also argue that Cage's musical events, more than political metaphors, actually produce social situations of an anarchic and egalitarian nature.

In short, with this text, I wish to explore some of the philosophical inquiries that arise from experimental music and *performance art*. How is music, without words, capable of producing and enacting political thought? How does experimental music lead us to imagine other possible worlds?

I. Listening as a political act

One of the main undertakings of John Cage was the experimentation with new listening practices. On multiple occasions, he stated that, in general terms, his work centered on the desire to *open our ears* (Cage 1961, 10, 117; Cage 1981, 21, 61, 77, 203–204). In sum, he wanted to produce a meditative, corporeal, detached and transpersonal manner of listening, in which our ears could focus on the *activity of sound* in itself, instead of making an effort to try to decipher its meaning (Sevestik 1992; Cage 1961 and 1981; Clarkson 2001; Nyman 1999; Celedón 2016). In this section of the article, I will argue that this alteration should not be taken as an end in itself, but instead as a means to achieve a more significant transformation, namely the modification of the sensorial and conceptual frameworks that we use when dealing with Alterity (i.e. non-human agents, non-Western cultures and oppressed cultures within our own society). In this sense, I think that one of the best descriptions that can be made of John Cage's art is the word "poethic," coined by American writer Joan Retallack to portray Cage's work (Retallack 1996, 173). Accurately, this term manages to denote the existence of a personal artistic style alongside major ethical and political concerns.

It is important to mention that Cage's desire to generate new modes of listening is linked to three concerns: a) his preoccupation with the capacity music has to effectively provoke emotions on its listeners; b) his interest in including noise and silence in music; c) his conception of listening as an *action* that transcends the limits of Western harmony and musical theory. I believe it is possible to connect these concerns with desires of freedom, equality, and justice. The art made by Cage challenges notions that have held an enduring role in the Western musical tradition (as well as in its aesthetics), while seeking to broaden our perception and enjoyment of elements historically left aside.

Like many composers of his generation, John Cage maintained a certain wariness in regards to the capacity that music has to induce emotions in its listeners. He even described that ability as a way of “rousing rabbles” that “seems on the surface human, but [...] animalizes” (Cage 1961, 250). I consider that Cage’s rejection of musical sentimentalism may be taken as a response towards three experiences:

First of all, without a doubt, it is a manifestation of his sustained studies of Zen Buddhism and other Oriental philosophies⁴ (see Pritchett 2009; De Visscher 1989; Cage 1990; Kahn 2001). In Cage’s view, these schools of thought teach that emotions and taste are nothing but expressions of a *hardened ego*, which impede the experimentation of the constitutive flow of reality (Pardo 2014). To balance this situation, these philosophies recommend meditational practices that induce a partial oblivion of the ego, a project that Cage explicitly incorporated into his music since the 1950s (Clarkson 2001; Cage 1981, 120; Pardo 2014, 37).

Second, Cage’s position regarding the sentimentality of music is related to his declared failure to provoke in audiences the emotions he intended to produce. As Julia Robinson (2009) has shown, the distance between audience reactions and the composer’s intended emotions in *The Perilous Night* (1944) performance, was a turning point in Cage’s life. Indeed, reflecting on this experience, Cage compares the “whole musical situation” to the Tower of Babel, concluding that “all artists must be speaking a different language, and thus speaking only for themselves” (Tomkins quoted in Robinson 2009, 66). In other words, for Cage, if emotions are not totally communicable through music, then insisting on musical sentimentality would seem to be pointless.

Third, and finally, I consider that Cage’s reservations regarding the affective agency of music is a response to all that the collective experience of World War II and the emergence of totalitarian states meant to his generation. Although it is true that the vast majority of Cage’s commentaries about the sentimentality of music present explicit connections with Buddhist ideas, I believe that the experience of fascist regimes in Europe, with their notorious use of propagandist music, must not be taken lightly. There are at least three pieces of evidence that serve to prove the validity of this interpretation. First of all, it is important to note that Cage was one of the students of Jewish composer Arnold Schoenberg, who migrated to America escaping the advance of Nazism in Europe. Secondly, Cage composed a piece of music titled *In the Name of the Holocaust* (1942), a wartime tribute to the victims of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Lastly, it is known that Cage wrote a text in which he explicitly links his interest in silence and subtle sounds with the experience of war. In that work, Cage suggests a connection between silence and *eternal truths*, truths that he considered alien to social conflicts:

Half-intellectually and half sentimentally, when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendships. Permanent, I thought, values, independent at least from *Life*, *Time* and *Coca-Cola*. (Cage quoted in Kahn 2001, 185)

The ideas stated by Cage in this passage suggest a link between the experience of war, his spiritual quest, and his repulsion for what he named a “heavy use of emotions” in music (Retallack 1996, 222). It reveals a desire to generate an art form that shuns the nationalistic grandiloquence of Romantic art, to focus, instead, on the beauty of what is small and quotidian, which he associates with eternal ideals (not to mention divinity itself).

The renouncement of sentimentality is bound to an important conceptual development in John Cage’s work. Instead of assuming art as a medium for expression, he conceives art as a tool for *self-alteration* (“auto-alteración,” in Pardo 2014, 28). This conceptual turn reveals an implicit acknowledgment on behalf of Cage regarding the corporeal agency of music, thus making it possible to propose a connection between his work and *performance art* (see Fischer-Lichte 2004). And although conceiving art as a practice for self-alteration responds primarily to Cage’s spiritual aspiration to unify the conscious and unconscious parts of the self, a project in which he followed Carl Jung and Daisetsu T. Susuki (Clarkson 2001; Kahn 2001), social concerns can also be traced in this conceptualization of art. As Austin Clarkson (2001) and Douglas Kahn (2001) have exposed, Cage believed that only through spiritual transformation could there come about a significant transformation of society.

Cage’s silent pieces are probably the compositions in which his desire to modify sensibility is most explicitly shown. In these compositions, he questions our conceptions of silence, noise, and music, as well as the role that listeners have in the Western tradition (see Clarkson 2001; Kramer 1988, 383–384; De Visscher 1989). To fully understand Cage’s idea of silence it is essential to consider his visit to Harvard University’s anechoic chamber in 1951, an experience that profoundly influenced him. Cage mentions that, far from what could be expected, he heard two sounds inside the anechoic chamber: one had a low frequency and the other a high frequency. After consulting with the operators, he learned that these were sounds generated by his own body: one by his nervous system and the other by the circulation of his blood (Cage 1961).

This experience taught Cage that even in a room designed to be acoustically secluded, we perceive sounds. Furthermore, the visit to the anechoic chamber showed him that it is physiologically impossible for us (humans) to perceive *absolute silence*. This led Cage to conclude that ontological silence does not exist, which for him was equivalent to denying the possibility of *nothingness* and *emptiness* (Cage 1961). Or, put more precisely, it was a way of asserting the *interpenetration* between being and nothingness. Carmen Pardo cleverly states that Cage’s work leads us to conceive and perceive a *sonorous silence* (“silencio sonoro,” in Pardo 2014, 59), an idea that will have important consequences for music.

“4’33” (1952) was composed by Cage as a musical piece intended to share his recent discovery of the inexistence of silence. In this composition, musical silence works as an aperture for ambient sounds. Even though pianist David Tudor premiered the piece, the composition can be performed with any instrumentation. The only instruction that the score provides is that the musician(s) remains in silence during the performance of the piece, allowing the audience to listen to the *non*

intentional sounds that emerge in the concert hall (e.g., the coughing of the audience, squeaking of the seats, cars passing nearby, bird songs, raindrops striking the ceiling, etc.).

Although Cage argues that absolute silence does not exist, he does not aim to suppress the conceptual distinction between *silence* and *sound*; he instead proposes to subtly change their habitual meanings. Cage suggests changing the definition of silence from the *absence of sound* to certain *non intentional sounds* (Cage 1961). With this conceptual change he distinguishes *silence* and *sound* in relation to human will. While sounds that are deliberately produced receive the name of “sounds,” those that randomly emerge are classified as “noise” or even as “silence.” Cage’s art highlights that the concept of *silence* does not designate a truly existing sonorous vacuum, but instead refers to sounds that we usually ignore. In this sense, silence is revealed to be not an acoustic phenomenon, but the result of a mental process. Or, in Gustavo Celedón’s words (2016), the silence in Cage’s work is not ontological, but rather *logical*.

Although *4'33"* was composed during a period in which Cage was primarily interested in Oriental religions and in psychological and spiritual transformation, it is possible to interpret this musical piece in an ethical-political perspective. As a composition that aims to induce the audience to listen to silence, it implies a broadening of art to include components that our culture has refused. If to Cage’s notion that silence is not real but rather in the mind we add the argument that conceptual categories are the result of cultural legacy, we may conclude that where *silence* appears it is because a *silencing* has taken place. Following this idea, an art form that proposes listening to silence can be read as an act of justice that strives for a sensorial aperture to elements historically left aside.

The ideal of justice also appears in Cage’s pursuit to create music founded on the inclusion of noise, which dates back to his first compositions for percussion and his pieces for prepared piano in the 1930s. His interest in noise responds to the fact that it transcends the traditional rules of European harmony and musical theory, which Cage considers to be based on a Western Classical dualistic viewpoint⁵ which rejects both the sounds emitted by non-human agents as well as the music of other cultures (Cage 1961, 1981; Pardo 2014; Retallack 1996). In his book *Silence*, Cage writes:

If my head is full of harmony, melody, and rhythm, what happens to me when the telephone rings, to my peace and quiet, I mean? And if it was European harmony, melody, and rhythm in my head, what has happened to the history of, say, Javanese music, with respect, that is to say, to my head? (Cage 1961, 42)

This quote serves as a testimony of the links between Cage’s interest in noise and his criticism towards Eurocentrism. It manifests Cage’s acknowledgement of the risks posed by aesthetic principles inherited from the past, which when not critically treated can produce exclusion and silencing.

Contrary to the interpretation I am defending, musicologist Douglas Kahn argues that, as opposed to Cage’s own critical claims, his art accomplishes a silencing of the social that is analogous to the censorship effectuated in the United States during the postwar period. Kahn recalls that Cage’s

oldest project for composing a silent piece appears in a text written in 1948. In that document Cage imagines a piece named *Silent Prayer* that would have a duration of approximately four minutes and a half of sustained silence (Kahn 2001, 169). The most interesting aspect of the imaginary composition is that Cage wanted it to be performed in the broadcastings of Muzak, a pioneer company in the commercialization of background music. Thus, Kahn considers that tracing the origins of Cage's silent music to *Silent Prayer* (1948) highlights a connection between his interest for silence and a desire to *silence the social*.

Kahn's argument is also constructed from the acknowledgment of the existence of some writings in which Cage favors the efforts made by James Petrillo (former president of the American Federation of Musicians) to control the production and broadcasting of recorded music (Kahn 2001, 175). Developing this idea, Kahn suggests that even though Cage managed to attract attention to the unexplored possibilities of listening (which Kahn certainly recognizes as an important accomplishment in an ocular-centric civilization), Cage's conception of listening has a limited perspective, as it does not take into consideration the elements that precisely make it possible for sound to acquire meaning and complexity, and to generate social bonds between people. In other words, Kahn sustains that, more than a sensorial aperture, Cage's pieces effectuate an actual silencing of the social nature of music.

Although I agree with Kahn's appreciation that many of Cage's compositions imply silencing strategies, I find his comparison with the censorship policies followed by the American government during the postwar years to be excessive. The silencing strategies used by Cage are intended to facilitate an aperture to what has historically been denied in the West (particularly natural sounds and non-Western musical traditions). In this sense, more than a silencing of the entire social nature of music, it is a silencing specifically directed at those elements that hinder us from fully listening to Otherness. Both in *Silent Prayer* as in *4'33"*, silence is intended as a medium to intensify our attention to our surroundings, as well as to question our responsibility, as listeners, in the production of the musical experience itself. It is an exploration that is deeply connected to Cage's ecological concerns, which today seem visionary.

Another important aspect that needs to be taken into account is that, in *4'33"*, the silencing is only directed at the pianist (or the musicians that perform the piece) and not the audience, a gesture that implies the suspension of what Jacques Attali (2009) has described as a *monologue* peculiar to Western Classical musical tradition but by no means shared by all other musical cultures. In this sense, the silencing that occurs in *4'33"* can be taken as a counteraction to a previous silencing: a history of the disciplining of bodies that took place in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries (see Fischer-Lichte 2004, 122).

Another feature that I find relevant in Cage's art is that to consider noise as music and silence as sound serves to destabilize those very concepts, thereby manifesting that they are not politically neutral terms. Noise, music and silence are not words that name objective phenomena of a non-historical nature; rather, they denote sounds that a particular culture deems unworthy of attention, and even annoying. In this sense, and using J. L. Austin's terminology, we may affirm that, more

than functioning in utterances that *constate* facts, these words are usually used in performative utterances, with a perlocutionary force. The many times in which the word *noise* has been used to contemptuously refer to the music made by oppressed groups within a society would seem to prove this idea to be true. Thus, the practice of composing pieces in which noise and silence can be enjoyed as music makes evident the contingent and modifiable nature of the notions that we use to evaluate the experience of sound.

The protagonist role that audience members have in *4'33"* is related to Cage's view regarding the act of listening. In the book *A Year From Monday* (1967), he states: "We do our own listening: it is not done to us" (126). This quotation notoriously manifests that, for Cage, listening is a voluntary action, not something that is passively experienced. Consequently, the possibility exists for altering its mode of operation. More importantly, to think of listening as an action stresses its ethical and political nature, since it is an activity for which we possess responsibility. I believe that, for this same reason, Cage shares the idea of English theorist Salomé Voegelin (2010) in that listening is not just a "physiological fact," but "an act of engaging with the world" (3).

II. Destabilizing the *artist/performer/audience* relationship

As discussed in the previous section, Cage's art constantly asks ontological questions regarding the nature of music and art. Of these questions, one of the most significant is related to the autonomy of an art piece, particularly in terms of the roles that artists and audience have in the generation of an artistic experience. In a vast number of Cage's compositions, both the members of the audience and the performers assume a major creative responsibility, confusing the limits that divide the activities of *composing, performing, and listening*. In Cage's music, listeners are transformed into performers, performers into composers, and the composer into a person who asks questions.

To fully understand the destabilization of roles that takes place in Cage's art, it is essential to be aware of the influence that Marcel Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas had on his thinking. From Duchamp, Cage learned that it is not the artist who finishes the work of art, but the people who observe and/or listen to it (Scheffer 1995). In Douglas Kahn's view (2001), this is equivalent to "shifting the production of music from the site of utterance to that of audition" (158). In other words, Cage states that the only fundamental element for a musical experience to happen is the existence of a person willing to *listen* to the surroundings.

On the other hand, in his book *For the birds* (1981, 153), Cage notes that Wittgenstein's quote "meaning is use" influenced him greatly. When applied to the realm of art and aesthetics, Wittgenstein's formula implies that the meaning of a work of art is not limited to the meaning that its creator assigned to it, nor to the intentions that the artist had in the moment of its production. Indeed, its meaning equally depends upon the persons that perceive and evaluate the work of art. Thus, it is inadequate to consider the artist as the only creator of the art piece, and the audience/spectators as passive receivers. The application of Wittgenstein's ideas to art entails a

questioning of the classic dichotomy *artist/audience*. The notion of authorship is destabilized, contributing to a more creative role for the audience and performers.

Musician Michael Nyman (1999) states that the production of a more profound commitment and responsibility from listeners and performers is one of John Cage's most important legacies. Nyman (1999) claims that Cage was the inventor of an art movement (*experimental music*⁶) inside Western art tradition, which he opposes to the *Avant-garde* movement of continental Europe. Some of the principal features that Nyman attributes to experimental music are: a) compositions conceived as processes producing *events* rather than objects; b) special emphasis placed on the alteration of perception; c) notations that do not depend upon professional specialization or expertise; d) the avoidance of harmonic climax; and e) the induction of a corporeal mode of listening, versus the capitulation to structural listening promulgated by the European Avant-garde music movement.

Nyman links the action-nature of experimental music compositions to a change in how sheet music is understood, thus heightening the performers' creative roles:

Experimental music [...] engages the performer at many stages before, above and beyond those at which he is active in some forms of western music. [...] For while it may be possible to view some experimental scores only as concepts, they are, self-evidently (specific or general), directives for (specific or general) action. (Nyman 1999, 14)

In Cage's view (1967), the exploration of other forms of musical notation responds to his desire to create scores that make *suggestions* to the musicians, instead of giving them *orders*. These notational forms are designed to give place to very different performances of the same piece, diminishing the subordination of performance to composition (Cage 1981, 59–60).

Some of Cage's compositions in which this exploration is notoriously undertaken are *Winter Music* (1957) and *Concert for piano and orchestra* (1957–1958). The first of these consists of twenty unnumbered pages, plus the instructions on how to decipher the composition (Database of Works 2016). These pages can be entirely or partially performed by a variable number of pianists. The musicians decide the total length of the piece. Each of the score's sheets contains various systems of bars; the performers have to decide their order, plus the dynamics and even the velocity of the musical notes.

Concert for piano and orchestra consists of 63 pages to be fully or partially performed, in any order, by an orchestra with or without a director. The piece can be taken as a compilation of all the compositional procedures that Cage knew; merely the soloist part for piano was created using 84 different compositional techniques (Database of Works 2016). The musicians determine the length of each of the different systems of the piece, but this can change during its performance, because it depends on the movements of the orchestral director. If using a director, the score requires the director to act as a metronome, simulating with their arms the movements of a clock. Furthermore, the score provides precise instructions about the pace in which the director should move their arms, specifying the differences between the "clock time" (i.e., the time which the director should

take to perform each movement) and the “effective time” (i.e., the position which their arms will be marking, and that the musicians will use as reference for their own performance) (Thomas and Iddon 2017). It is noteworthy that dancer Merce Cunningham acted as the orchestral director in the premiere of this piece, producing, in Cage’s own words, an irregular pace that allowed the musicians to feel free from the “clock time” (Cage 1981, 109).

As we have just seen, *Winter Music* and *Concert for piano and orchestra* share the characteristic of letting performers decide elements that are crucial for the musical experience. Both compositions leave undecided the ensemble, order, length and even the structure of the piece. In these pieces the performers acquire the status of *co-creators*. The open nature of the instructions compels the musicians to decide elements that determine the nature of the piece, whereby they no longer maintain a secondary role, but rather acquire a protagonist role.

Furthermore, the two compositions recently mentioned presuppose an important turn regarding the way in which Western tradition imagines the relationship between composer and music. In his book *For the birds*, Cage recalls that, in the past, music was believed to live in people’s souls and, especially, in composers’ spirits, an idea that was linked to supposing that music emerged when written, that is to say, *before* the music was actually audible (Cage 1981, 77). Instead, Cage’s conception of music may be described as materialistic and realistic. In *indeterminate* compositions (another term that Cage used to denote his music), it is impossible to reckon an imaginary (or internal) listening that precludes the real performance of the pieces, since their nature is determined while being performed. In other words, Cage’s music supposes an ontology radically different from that of Western music composed in past centuries, because performance is constitutive to music itself. Definitive criteria for judging one performance as more accurate, precise or authentic than the others are suppressed.⁷ Paraphrasing philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre ([1945] 2007), in Cage’s music *existence precedes essence*.

Austin Clarkson (2001) argues that Cage’s *experimental music* implies a shifting from the *representational* art paradigm, to a *presentational* one. Clarkson suggests a parallel between elements that exist in the musical tradition and the distinction that linguists make between *representational* and *presentational* aspects of language. He argues that music has “translated” presentational aspects of language (intonation, gesture, and emphasis) into historically *sedimented* properties (such as harmony, melody, and rhythm) that can thus be taken as *representational* components within the musical tradition. Instead, Cage’s music prioritizes elements that are “even more elusive” (Clarkson 2001, 67). While in the *representational* paradigm musical meaning emerges from the relationship between a *signifier* and a *referent* (in which musical scores play a fundamental role), in the *presentational* scheme musical meaning depends solely upon the effects it generates.

For Clarkson, a consequence of this is that, in *presentational* modes of music-making, a combination of individual and social meanings is provoked. More importantly, he defends that it is the “unanalyzable quality” of sound in this type of musical events that generates a particular form of communication based on a “communal flow of felt meanings” (Clarkson 2001, 77–78). In other

words, experimental music triggers communal feelings on the basis of a pure shared sensorial experience, making evident the binding force that sound and collective listening practices possess.

The ontological questions regarding music that Cage posed, reviewed in this section, serve as a reminder of the political nature of music. If experimental music is indeed *presentational*, as Clarkson states, both its “essence” (in the sense coined by Sartre) and its meaning are the result of a social event. Experimental music would thus seem to be an excuse for a collective gathering to which transformative possibilities are ascribed. Its function then would seem to be in close relation with ritual; its critical and political possibilities depending both upon the repetition (or, in this case, destabilization) of symbolically charged elements, and upon the importance that sensorial experiences have to produce *a common*.

In the next section, I will comment upon Cage’s pieces in which these presentational aspects acquire a more explicit political nuance. In these pieces, Cage’s experimental tendencies are merged with his anarchist convictions in order to produce events that suppose an ephemeral (but significant) modification of social roles and social relations. Reinserting Alejandro L. Madrid’s approach: What does this anarchic, presentational music allow people to *do* that was not previously possible in the Western classical tradition?

III. Performing an ideal society

John Cage’s questioning of traditional notions and roles in art cannot be dissociated from political concerns. His artistic experiments can be taken as a manifestation of his desire to promote freedom, cooperation and mutual recognition, three ideals deeply connected with his declared anarchist position (see Cage 1967 and 1998; Montague 1985; Retallack 1996; Sweeney Turner and Cage 1990). It is worthwhile to note that, although ethical and political concerns may be traced throughout all of Cage’s experimental work, these became more explicit starting in the 1960s.⁸

In *A Year From Monday* (1967, 59), Cage states that the use of social criteria (instead of aesthetic criteria) is more apt in order to evaluate the *contemporary* nature of art. He particularly highlights an artwork’s ability to include (or not) the audience’s actions. This commentary can easily be connected with Cage’s stated rejection of art becoming a “policing activity” (Cage 1967, 147; Retallack 1996), in which some people (namely, artists and critics) dictate to the rest how to behave and feel.

A consequence that derives from this idea is a fading of the boundaries that distinguish aesthetics, ethics and politics, which Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004) tags as a particular operation of *performance art* (in which she places John Cage’s work). She argues that *performance art* has a radically different nature from that of Western art produced in past centuries, thus making necessary the creation of new aesthetic categories fit to describe its operations and pursuits. One of the most important of these inflections is that *performance art* aesthetics is based on the concept of “event,” which implies thinking of art far from the old *locus* of inert objects to be contemplated in a reverential manner. Fischer-Lichte defends the idea that *performances* are artistic events with particular characteristics.

The most important for her are: a) the emergence of an “autopoietic feedback loop”, b) the destabilization of binary oppositions (such as *aesthetics/politics*; *artist/audience*; *signifier/signified*), and c) the production of liminal situations that trigger changes in social identities (Fischer-Lichte 2004).

In close proximity with Fischer-Lichte’s ideas, the political turn in Cage’s work coincides with his aspiration to create an art form closer to theatre. One of Cage’s older pieces where we can trace this desire is *Theatre Piece* (1952), appraised by some critics (for example, Alex Ross, Daniel Charles, Patrice Pavis, and Gary Botting) as one of the first *happenings* to ever take place (see Ross 2007; Pavis 1996; Cage 1981). *Theatre Piece* was performed by Cage and his colleagues at Black Mountain College (North Carolina, USA). It was an integration of multiple artistic actions, performed simultaneously and without any script previously decided (Database of Works 2016). An interesting characteristic of the event was the utilization of a non-conventional performative space: the audience was distributed into four triangles of seats that pointed to the center, and the artistic actions were performed around and amongst them (Cage 1981, 165).

The title of the performance (*Theatre Piece*) makes evident the fact that the *Cageian* concept of *theatre* is quite different from the habitual meaning of the word. Cage’s idea of theatre was profoundly influenced by the thoughts of Antonin Artaud, from whom he took the notion of a *multidimensional theatre* and the inspiration to alter the performative space with the intention of completely immersing the audience in the scene (Artaud [1938] 2013; Cage 1981). Influenced by Artaud, Cage imagines theatre as an art form that is closer to *life* than music ever will be. He argues that music is based on an “imaginary separation of hearing from the other senses,” ignoring the vast majority of sensorial stimuli (Cage 1961, 14, 31). Oppositely, he considers theatre as an art form that depends upon a simultaneous operation of the senses, a feature that he recognizes as a continuation of our quotidian behavior.

Jean-Jacques Lebel finds strong political resonances in artistic *happenings*. He argues that wandering freely in the performative space allows participants to be perceived and to perceive others as elements of the artistic event, thereby establishing a *subject/subject* relationship between participants (Lebel 1966). In a similar fashion, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004) considers that the alteration of the participants’ identities in *performance art* is related to the creation of communities. Fischer-Lichte indicates that, inasmuch as these communities are based upon a “bodily co-presence,” the limits that distinguish the *public* and *private* spheres are temporarily upset. In *performance art*, the actions made by each person are experienced as a collective event, suggesting the inexistence of clear limits between aesthetics, ethics, and the political (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 40, 51).

Some of Cage’s pieces that possess a notorious performative quality are: *Musicircus* (1967), *33 1/3* (1969), and the orchestral version of *Cheap Imitation* (1972). *Musicircus* was premiered in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, on November 17, 1967. As expressed in the *John Cage Official Website*, it is a piece “For any number of performers willing to perform in the same place at the same time.” In fact, this piece is nothing more than an invitation to any number of musicians (both professional

and amateur) to perform whatever music they want simultaneously. Ideally, the piece should be performed in a large space, in order to allow the musicians to distribute themselves in distant places thereby marking the movements and location of the audience as part of the aesthetic experience. In other words, *Musicircus* is a hybrid between a piece of music, a performance and a soundwalk. In an article published by *The Guardian* newspaper, British composer and musicologist Peter Dickinson remembers some of the instructions that John Cage expressed for a *Musicircus* performance in London in 1972:

- There should be food and drink as at a real circus: ideally all the senses should be employed.
- Use the greatest possible variety of participants—church groups, children's choirs, etc.
- Dancing can be included.
- Since there is no score, no performing fees have to be paid.
- Do not charge admission; no fees are to be paid to participants; use only people who are willing to take part.
- The piece 'should be fun'—people 'should get the joyousness of the anarchic spirit'.
- Don't pay any attention to the discrepancy between, say, a clavichord recital and a jazz band—at one occasion people went along and put their ears to the clavichord!
- Limit the time for a rock group because of the din, but amplification is allowed if the group normally uses it.
- *Musicircus* is a whole evening on its own: five hours would be a 'reasonable' duration.

(Dickinson 2014)

As this quote makes explicit, the instructions that Cage offered transcended the traditional role assumed by composers. His instructions do not only refer to aesthetic aspects (such as what type of participants should be invited, or the possibility of including dancers in the artistic event), but also include explicit indications related to economic aspects and, even, to its political intentions.

On the other hand, *33 1/3* (1969) is an art installation formed by a dozen turntables, speakers, and about 250 LPs, distributed in a room. The intention of this piece is to permit people to manipulate the devices in order to produce an original acoustic experience. It is noteworthy that *33 1/3* counteracts Cage's rejection for musical records, a technology that he accused of converting music (a temporal, lively and social art) into a lifeless object (Cage 1967; Nyman 1999). Lastly, *Cheap Imitation* (1972) is a piece that Cage composed consulting the *I-Ching*. There exist multiple versions of this composition; the one that interests us here is a version for a variable large ensemble, which may have an extension of up to 95 performers. A fascinating component of this orchestral version is that it specifies *not to use* a musical director. In Cage's own view, this makes the piece an arduous challenge for the musicians, impelling them to more attentive listening and to organize themselves in an atypical manner (Cage 1981, 183–184).

Drawing on the ideas of Fischer-Lichte (2004), it is possible to assert that these pieces imply both a destabilization of old dichotomies and a negotiation of participant identities. Participants in *Musicircus* and *33 1/3* are not mere listeners/observers, since their actions produce the artistic event. Following this idea, the two events involve a modification of their status as audience, since their function entails recognizing them as *performers*. Furthermore, these three pieces imply, once again, a subversion of the limits that demarcate aesthetics and politics, because the pieces respond to Cage's desire to produce anarchic situations in which leaderless communities can emerge. Indeed, in these pieces, the participants' actions are spontaneous and unconduted, while promoting cooperation and a sense of community.

Cage's own political view of music is clearly expressed in the following fragment:

I believe that a characteristic that distinguishes music from other arts is that music frequently requires many people. Musical performance is a public occasion, a social occasion. Taking this into account, it is possible to consider the performance of a musical piece as a metaphor of society, a metaphor of the society that we dream of. Although we do not live today in a society that we consider good, we could make a musical piece in which we would like to live. I am not saying this literally, but metaphorically. It is possible to take a musical piece as a representation of a society in which you would like to live. (Cage and Retallack 2012)

Even though I deem Cage's remark as significant regarding the social nature of music, I consider him to be mistaken in conceiving his own music in terms of representation and metaphor. In my own perspective, his art achieves something that is far more radical: it actually fosters the emergence of leaderless communities (though certainly small and contingent). His anarchic pieces are not solely a metaphor of a *desirable society*; they presuppose the creation of new social relations, of a more egalitarian and libertarian nature. Put more assertively: many of Cage's pieces do not simply *represent* a better society, but actually *perform* and materialize this ideal.

Conclusions

In the introduction to this essay, I pointed out that my intention was to reflect upon music's capacity to convey political messages and to stimulate social transformation. I also presented two hypotheses: 1) studying music using performativity as a lens of analysis may contribute to highlighting its critical possibilities and some operations that usually go unnoticed; and 2) John Cage's work implies a recognition of musical performativity, understanding this term both for its corporeal agency and its "theatrical" (or scenic) quality.

As a result of this attempt to study the performative aspects of Cage's music, I would suggest for further research a more focused application of J. L. Austin's conceptual distinction between "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" acts to the realm of music. This would potentially contribute to a better understanding of music's agency over the bodies of its audience, and thus its political functions. Now then, is it even possible to differentiate between "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" aspects of music, or are these language categories not suitable for describing the

corporeal agency of music? Even though music is not representational in the manner of certain speech acts, the question remains open as to whether studying the performative aspects of music may reveal analogies between music and language.

One of the most important conclusions we can reach from the arguments presented in this text is that the critical and transformative possibilities of music are deeply connected with an act of quotation (and displacement) of conventions inherited from the past. If it is true that we are able to read political commentaries in Cage's work, it is in great measure due to the appearance of unexpected elements in symbolically charged contexts (e.g., a dancer acting as an orchestral director; a pianist that keeps silent during a solo recital; popular and academic forms of music being simultaneously performed in a circus atmosphere), thus quoting tradition in order to subvert its norms. The most striking aspect of this operation is that it reveals art's codependency with other social practices and areas of thought, blurring the frontiers that separate aesthetics, politics, and ethics.

Perhaps this relation between the critical possibilities of music and the act of quotation may point to future developments for the study of the performativity of music. How can the discussions between philosophers regarding the performative character of language (in particular, the Derrida/Searle discussion on the relationship between the "force" of performative speech acts, social conventions, and the possibility to fully demarcate contexts and personal intentions) be translated and applied to music's corporeal agency, to music's affective force and to the political resonances of questioning its conventions from within?

In this text, I also posited that Cage's music has a political nature because it aims to alter perception and sensibility (with a particular focus on listening), as well as to modify art's conventional social relations. I consider worthy of note that his project of generating other modes of listening is deeply connected to the pursuit of inducing a sensorial aperture to Alterity. Cage's approach to music suggests that art's concepts and practices can generate prejudice, silencing, and exclusion when not treated critically, thus hindering the perception of sounds emitted by non-humans agents and of the richness of the music of other cultures. Following this idea, we can conclude that the political nature of music depends greatly upon its relation with the history of the disciplining of the act of listening. An art that includes noise and silence reveals the manners in which music conditions our perception of sounds, while inducing a reevaluation of the concepts that we use to describe them, and allowing us to find joy in sounds that we previously deemed annoying. In summary: if the pursuit of altering sensitivity has an ethical-political nature it is because, as Cage himself suggests, ethnocentrism is not only expressed in our conceptual frameworks, but also in our sensorial frameworks.

In this article, I have examined the argument that the act of destabilizing binary oppositions is a crucial operation in Cage's art, a characteristic that enables us to place his work both as part of the *performance art* movement (Fischer-Lichte) and as part of the *happening* art form (Lebel). Some of the conceptual oppositions that Cage subverts are: *silence/sound*; *noise/music*; *music/theatre*; *composing/performing/listening*; *artist/audience*; *creator/listener*; *art/politics*; *object/process*;

quotidian/artistic. By effecting this conceptual earthquake, Cage's work makes evident that certain notions that seem politically innocent (such as *silence* or *noise*) are not so, in as much as they have a historical nature. Even more importantly: destabilizing binary oppositions allows us to realize that the limits between politics, aesthetics, and art are much less rigid, stable, and clear-cut than what was believed during most of the Modernity. Cage's work notoriously demonstrates that listening is an activity for which we are partially responsible, thus highlighting its political nature.

Finally, another conclusion of this text is that both the political and critical possibilities of music do not depend exclusively upon its capacity to form metaphors, but also upon its potential to perform atypical social relations (e.g. an orchestra organizing itself without the need of a director; attendees assuming themselves as the performers of an experimental musical event; musicians deciding compositional aspects of a piece). My above analysis of Cage's art reveals that if music is indeed political in nature, it is because, as a social activity, it presupposes a collaboration between many persons and a distribution of functions, all of which necessarily encompass relations of power. For the same reason, understanding music solely as a representation or an act of communication fails to fully describe the operations that it actually entails and accomplishes. Understanding the performativity of music helps us apprehend some of these operations.

Notes

¹ It is noteworthy that the notion of performativity in music may have at least two other meanings: a) the occurrence of instances of musical experience that auto-referentially define what counts as music, and b) the questioning or challenging of conceptual binaries. Both of these phenomena appear frequently in John Cage's art as is evident in this paper.

² I am aware of the misleading separation that the term "theatre" supposes between reality and fiction, and therefore its inefficacy to help us fully grasp what takes place in Cage's art. In this context, I am using "theatrical" simply to highlight the scenic quality of music.

³ For example, as Butler has argued in the area of gender, the notion of expressivity would imply thinking of gender or sex as essences or interior realities that are expressed through corporeal acts, and not produced by the reiteration of corporeal and discursive acts.

⁴ I am aware that the term "Oriental philosophies" is quite ambiguous. If I have decided to use it, it is because Cage himself uses it in his "Autobiographical Statement" (1990). With this term, he particularly addresses Buddhism (both Zen, Chinese and Tibetan), Taoism, the ideas of Indian philosopher Anandas Coomaraswamy and the I Ching.

⁵ Specifically, Cage affirms that European musical theory supposes a division between notes (which exist only in the mind, and thus have an ideal nature) and sounds (which exist in the world, and thus have a physical or corporeal nature). Furthermore, for Cage, the Western classical musical tradition centers its attention on the relationship between notes (intervals and chords) that is regulated in a dialectical logic of moments of tension and relief. As Cage pointed out in many of his writings, even a radical reformer such as his teacher Arnold Schönberg did not abandon this dialectical logic.

⁶ It is relevant to point out that the term experimental music was coined by Cage, conceiving it as the triggering of actions with outcomes that are "not foreseen" (Cage 1961, 69). In other words, Cage's concept of the experimental is not defined by the possibility of success or failure, but instead by the indeterminate nature of an event (see Nyman 1999; Cage 1961).

⁷ In his book *Silence* (1961), Cage explicitly comments, regarding his pieces *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*: “Value judgments are not in the nature of this work as regards either composition, performance, or listening. [...] A ‘mistake’ is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is” (59). Paradoxically, this idea did not stop Cage from judging certain performances of his music as better (more indeterminate) than others (see Cage 1981; Retallack 1996; Barret 2013).

⁸ Although Cage identified the reading of Marshall McLuhan’s and Buckminster Fuller’s texts as the origin of this shift, it is likely that this also had to do with the social effervescence in the United States during the 1960s (particularly the youth movements, the Civil Rights movement, and the United States interventions in Latin American countries). Of these three, the influence of the Civil Rights movement is less explicit in Cage’s writings, although mentions of the need for racial desegregation appear in a few passages in *A Year From Monday* (1967) and *For the birds* (1981). He also collaborated with many Black artists during his lifetime, including dancer Syvilla Fort and experimental jazz player Sun Ra. As for the interest that John Cage felt towards Latin America, I recommend Vaughn Anderson’s text “Revision of the Golden Rule: John Cage, Latin America, and the Poetics of Non-Intervention” (2017). As Anderson makes evident in his article, Cage’s positive reception in Latin American countries as a radical artist had much to do with his explicit repulse against the American military interventions in Latin America during the Cold War era.

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Biography

Ricardo Lomnitz (1994) is a philosopher, musician and sound artist from Mexico City. He received a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, with a thesis about the political implications of John Cage's music. He has composed music for film, dance, and theater productions, including *La Visita* (dir. Clarissa Malheiros, 2022), *Medea* (dir. María Sánchez and Susana Franck, 2021) and *La Peor Señora del Mundo* (Seña y Verbo, Mexican Theater of the Deaf, 2020). As a philosopher, he is interested in analyzing the political nature of music and listening, the eco-musical explorations, the connections between aesthetics, ethics, and politics, and performance theory.

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