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GROOVING IN SILENCE

The idea of finding the recording of silence interesting could amuse some, as would indeed the sight of Marcel Duchamp's *Air de Paris*. And yet, the same could go into raptures in front of a group portrait of their offspring, or simply by listening to their favorite music. But it is precisely our subject: silence being recorded, or, when in thoughts associated with an object, can be set, identified, delimited. Silence then becomes a space out-of-nature, ready to dissolve back into it, as does the old family portrait in one's memory, as does music in the world's echo. It raises embarrassed smiles because it absorbs everything but one's fear of oneself.

Let's appropriate Debussy's proposition "Music is the pause in between notes", and freely stretch the length between them until the silence becomes concrete enough that their original note of emission, the 'Anakrousis', vanishes in ether. The two framing notes can take any shape external to the music; in fact, they operate as simple markers creating boundaries. The last spoken word before a silence then broken when speech is resumed, the sound of the amp switch-on and the following switch-off, the turntable's arm landing on the black and then going back to rest; all will do the trick. Therefore, and unquestionably, each recorded pause becomes music; silence not as noiselessness, but as the locus of all sound-ing possibilities, of all dreamt music.

And, as for music, silences come in all forms and styles: more or less evocative, at times loud or of different strength, conceptual or traps, without forgetting those that one needs to fill up.

The following examples demonstrate the wide diversity of recorded silences and silent records. They mainly flourish in the field of experimental music.

Pause

As early as 1897, ALPhonse Allais, boldly signs an empty 9 bar score *Marche funèbre pour les obsèques d'un grand homme sourd*.^A Behind the obvious farce lies a militant vision, premise of Conceptual Art, that attempts to shake the establishment out of its dusty conservatism; humor as a weapon of infiltration.

Since from *Das Schweigen*, and Joseph Beuys' *Plight*, to the deaf-mute artist Joseph Grigely's *Post-it*, as with artist's records, one would need numerous volumes to list all the artistic silences, we therefore will focus on silent records and recorded silences.

Pause

In 1951, inspired by an anechoic chamber experience, acknowledging that absolute silence is unlikely to be achieved, John Cage composed *4'33"*,¹ a piece in three movements in which the musician does not play, but merely punctuates the parts by opening and closing the piano lid. In this case the environment becomes the music. Cage will revisit this principle twice. In 1962, with *o'oo"*² (also known as *4'33" n°2*), a musician executes a 'disciplined action', excluding any type of musical performance, in an exaggeratedly amplified space. In 1989, John Cage comes back with *One³ = 4'33" (o'oo") + ♪*,³ where a performer flirts with feedback without ever reaching it. The room's very acoustic and the amplified noises emitted by the public on the verge of a sound cataclysm, produce the live music as if gagged electronic birds were ready to be un-caged.

The first performer of the 1962 *4'33"*, David Tudor, would receive an unexpected tribute by composer Györgi Ligeti, with *3 Bagatelles, pour David Tudor*,⁴ a deaf piano piece in three parts.

Sonic Youth, under the Ciccone Youth moniker, engraves on their *The Whitey Album*, a ‘radio edit’ of 4’33”, lasting precisely one minute 33 seconds, and titled (*Silence*).⁵

Was John Cage aware that Yves Klein had already composed his first *Symphonie Monoton-Silence*⁶ in 1947-48?

This piece, for orchestra, begins with a single note, followed by a pause from the performing ensemble. As a matter of interest, the spectral composer Alain Bancquart is in charge of recruiting the musicians for the premiere in 1960.

In 1962, Pierre Henry gives Yves and Rotraut Klein the *Symphonie Monoton n°2*⁷ as a wedding present.

In 2011, the artist Christian Viallard invites eighteen musicians to play his *Asymphonie Monoton Silence*,⁸ each in separate places and at different times. The sum of the recordings being only later assembled and played in a single exhibition space.

Did Yves Klein and John Cage know that Erwin Schulhoff, the Czech composer, had written his *In Futurum*⁹ in 1927?

Erwin Schulhoff’s complex score for still piano, consists of pauses, half pauses, quaver and crotchet rests, to be rigorously played by each hand. Can one not hear here Debussy’s quoted quote?, – he had indeed been his teacher. It comes as no surprise that Erwin Schulhoff had ties with the Dada movement.

Supposedly in 1959, Yves Klein thunders once more with *Musik der Leere / Tanz der Leere*,¹⁰ where the toneless recording of the vinyl’s eight pieces silently echoes his *Saut dans le vide*,^C or even his immaterial fire sculptures. However, it is more likely that this record interpreting Klein’s compositions is in fact the creation of his German friend Charles Paul WiLP, which he had dubbed ‘The Prince Of Space’ in 1960. The disc was most probably issued in the early 70’s, without the consent of the then dead International Klein Blue inventor’s family.

On his CD 4’33”/o’oo”,¹¹ Mattieu Saladin amplifies the recording of 4’33”, published in 1972 by the Milanese label Cramps and performed by Gianni-Emilio Simonetti, thus cunningly applying the o’oo” principle to 4’33”. Retail price: 4€33.

Finally, to conclude with 4’33”, the 2006 release by Ensemble 0 of their CD 4’33”,¹² containing five versions for diverse instruments and contexts, should have made some noise, but unfortunately, fell on silent ears.

Pause

In 1969 Yoko Ono and John Lennon's *2 Minutes Of Silence*,¹³ the aborted cry "against all violence and death", especially the one of the lost child in a third miscarriage, would take a more political dimension. The front cover of *Unfinished Music No. 2: Life With The Lions* shows Yoko Ono in a hospital bed ward after the sad event.

Once more, with *The Nutopian International Anthem*,¹⁴ a three seconds dumb hymn to the country of Utopia, – a refuge where no one has to declare his nationality, speechless John Lennon and his partner, address their struggle to obtain a visa from the US government.

In 1998, Soundgarden releases a cover version of *One Minute Of Silence*,¹⁵ an explicit inclination to the sole John Lennon, since Yoko Ono's minute of silence sounds amputated.

Pause

Another rather political work emerges in 1978, with Crass' first opus: *The Feeding Of The Five Thousand*, it begins with one of the most muffling muteness of the punk era: *The Sound of Free Speech*.¹⁶ The track is a protest against the censorship, by the pressing plant, of the song *Asylum*. Eve Libertine's lyrics are ultimately available on the re-issue and *The Sound of Free Speech* is thereafter discarded and imprisoned in forgetfulness.

In 1991, shortly preceding his utter 'tacet', John Cage supports the German squat Komista in Hanau. He composes *Five Hanau Silence*,¹⁷ a collage and stratification of five recordings of the city's deserted locations chosen for their historical relevance to the libertarian ideology. Eventually, the squat is taken by the authorities and turned into five car parks, where the cultural and political vortex of the gentrified municipalities still resonates.

On his CD *J'adore et j'en peux plus...*,^D Jean-Jacques Palix adumbrates a dialogue between Serge Daney and Guy Debord, eloquently titled *Pub*.¹⁸ A consumer vacuum, neither audio nor visual, fills up your brain, prompt to record the advertising's essence: a deviously encrypted subliminal message.

In another vein, Gerry and the Holograms muzzle the orchestra for *The Emperor's New Music*¹⁹ in 1979, glueing the lacquer to its cover, therefore and forever inaudible.

In 1980, silence as a catharsis is put to test by Whitehouse, with their live version of *Birthdeath Experience*,²⁰ contiguous to their song *Coitus*, which, peppered with gestural vituperations on stage, provokes more violence and fights in the public than their brutal extreme music that on the contrary seems to canalize the audience's rage.

More peaceful, even therapeutic, *Silence [A suitable place for those with tired ears to pause and resume listening later]*,²¹ Robert Wyatt's excerpt from the CD *Cuckooland*, is, hence the title, a thirty-seconds soothing prescription for your ears.

In 1991, the resolutely nihilist The New Blockaders sign a resolutely blank cassette tape named *Simphonie In Ø Minor*,²² the pendant to their *Simphonie In X Major*,²³ a composition of tempestuous 'musique concrète'. The accompanying booklet advocates a maximum volume and an inflated equalization of the low and high frequencies for optimum listening. The diptych was published by the evocatively named label Hypnagogia. The most knowledgeable ears would appreciate the subtle pitch variation induced by the title: void alteration in minor mode.

Pause

The lack of groove incites the diamond's hazardous navigation on an ocean of nil, and the examples are numerous. Christian Marclay's conceptual *Record Without A Groove*,²⁴ *Do Nothing*²⁵ from Due Process, or again Gerogerigegege's *Zero Song Flexi*,²⁶ which message "silence is the best music", keeps the hope of a universal song. *Record 1*²⁷ by Telium Group, reveals a sliding oblivion, besides, the B side of *How To Destroy Angels* by Coil, is an "invitation au voyage" into an *Absolute Elsewhere*.²⁸

For others, such as The Haters, silence is a field where musical sprouts await their sower. In 1983, the *untitled*²⁹ single instructs: "Complete this record by scratching it". The voiceless groove turns into a rhythmic playground, where the marks sound as many low and dry impacts on the speakers. One can suddenly empathize with the jubilation Norman McLaren must have felt when, in 1948, he composed *Rhythmic*,³⁰ the music for the eponymous film, entirely made of meticulously placed scores on the celluloid optical sound track.

Way before The Haters, the French lettrist Maurice Lemaître, painter-thinker, philosopher-poet, economist libertarian, and a transversal artiste who explored all disciplines, – when he didn't go as far as inventing the missing ones, such as the Syncinéma with his 1951 *Le film est déjà commencé?*³¹–, offers in 1971, the possibility for the public to appropriate his work. And to do so, in the form of a 7 inch soiled by virgin grooves, *Le crochet [Œuvre sup]*,³¹ that invites "the listener (...) to etch on both sides his own record" for 2'18" minutes, the duration of a pop song of the era.

On *Snap, Crackle & Pop*,³² Immedia facilitates the task by providing a silent side already scratched and the other spared. The sleeve, punched by a metal eye-let, optimizes the deterioration of the surface.

In 1986, The Haters produce *Wind Licked Dirt*³³ and solve once and for all the transhistorical problematic of dust on wax. In this instance, it becomes desirable as it's packaged in, and one needs to rub it on the surface to be able to hear any music. Also available on tape and CD.

Pause

In the domain of praise, mourning and testimony, there are some heavily loaded historical silences, which allow us to recollect when we could not participate.

Jonty Semper condescendingly unveils to the popular masses' ears *The One Minute Silence From The Funeral Of Diana, Princess Of Wales*,³⁴ an in situ recording of the 60 seconds of shaken prayers after Lady Di's funeral.

Soon after, he reiterates with the anthology *Kenotaphion*,³⁵ a double CD, compiling all he could gather of the two minutes of silence following the memorial armistice celebration at the London Cenotaph. This florilege of eighty and more documents is meticulously annotated, citing each track's source, for a potentially enhanced listening. The package includes the essay: *Silence And History* by Dr Adrian Gregory.

With *4 Rooms*,³⁶ Jacob Kirkegaard persists with the art of deadly silence, when capturing the indiscernible residual radiations in four Chernobyl rooms, once public and lively spaces. Each recording is then played in its original room and cut once more. The process is repeated ten times, the layering thus creating volume.

Pause

After this light hearted experiment, lets get back to the realm of ALPhonse Allais' s influence and his numerous recipients.

In 1970, Michael Viner manages the impressive feat of having *The Best Of Marcel Marceao*³⁷ published by MGM. Each side is a nineteen minute void concluded by a minute of clapping. The name of the renowned mime had to be altered for obvious infringement matters.

Which in turn questions silence reproduction rights as imposed by Barclay on its jukebox test record *Disque de silence*^{G38} with the menacing warning “Public broadcast prohibited”.

The *Nothing Record Album*³⁹ by No Artist partially answers by using fake quotes from characters promoting hilariously titled vacant tracks. It was released anonymously, pirating all possible silences and its immaculately blank lyrics sheet completes a perfectly white large poster. The album can be played at any speed, this obviously considerably increases the cochlea’s pleasure and, as Stevie Wonder accurately advertises in the liner notes: “it sounds as good as it looks”.

Indisputably serious is the reverence to ex French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing by the Valerie Gees’s Car Band (aka Hector Zazou & M. Mader), on the B side of their *Un Président pour le France*,^H published after his election failure. Titled *Pensées et maximes de V.G.E.*¹⁴⁰ this seven minutes long nought probes the depth of thought and program of the exiting president.

Last but not least, Anla Courtis’ Burt Reynolds Ensemble, invents the absent silence when concocting *Gordura Vegetal Hidrogenada*:⁴¹ a desperately empty box, serving a consolation note “this CD evaporated 15 seconds ago”.

But above all, there is the conceptual non-existing record, by the fundamental Die Tödliche Doris. 9th episode in the series of opus by the pioneering and facetious Berliner collective, the immaterial *The Invisible Record*,⁴² is the result of the combined playing of the albums *Unser Debut* and *Sechs*. One is a commercial pop parody when the latter is an abstract experimental work. Both were cut at the same time, each tune corresponding in length and sharing audio and textual similarities. But it only is after each album’s release that Die Tödliche Doris announces, via a poster, an intermediary fifth album. The lot forms a trilogy closed by an open door on parallel universes. This invisible record signs the retirement of the band, all having been musically said, according to Wolfgang Müller, with the absence of sound and the disappearance of the medium.

The ‘rest’ is history.

Long Pause

My old 1949 *Symphonie Monoton*, (...) was destined to create “the After-Silence”: after all had ended, in each and all of us, who were present at this manifestation. The silence... It precisely constitutes my symphony, not the sound itself, of during-after execution. It is this such marvelous silence which gives “chance” and which even sometimes, allows the possibility to truly be happy, if only for one moment, for a moment of immeasurable length. To defeat silence, to dismember it, take its skin and dress with it to never be spiritually cold again.

Yves Klein, in *Le vrai devient réalité*, p. 285

This text was translated from French by Aurélie Noublanche Ben Barek with Claudia Squitieri and the author.

- A. Funeral March of a Great Deaf Man
 - B. Void Music / Dance Of The Oblivion
 - C. The Leap Into The Void
 - D. I Love It And Can't Bare It Anymore...
 - E. Has The Film Already Started Yet?
 - F. The Hook [Master P]
 - G. Record Of Silence
 - H. A President For France
 - I. Thoughts And Maxims of V.G.E.
-
1. John Cage, *John Cage*, LP, Cramps Records, Nova Musicha n.1, Italy, 1974
 2. John Cage, *Music For Five*, 2CD, hat ART, Switzerland, 1991
 3. No publication known to date
 4. György Ligeti, Fredrik Ullén, *The Complete Piano Music*, Volume 1, CD, BIS, Sweden, 1996
 5. Ciccone Youth, *The Whitey Album*, LP, Enigma Records, USA, 1988
 6. No publication known to date
 7. Various artists, *Klein et la musique*, CD, Centre Pompidou/Muza/Ensemble, France/Luxembourg, 2006
 8. Christian Viillard, *Asymphonie Monoton Silence*, DVDR, label unknown, France, 2011
 9. No publication known to date
 10. Yves Klein, *Musik der Leere / Tanz der Leere*, LP, Sight & Sound Production/Resco, Germany, n.d.
 11. Matthieu Saladin, *4'33"/0'00"*, CDR mini, Editions Provisoires, France, 2008
 12. John Cage / Ensemble 0, *4'33"*, CDR, Onement, France, 2006
 13. John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Unfinished Music N° 2: Life With The Lions*, LP, Zapple, USA, 1969
 14. John Lennon, *Mind Games*, LP, Apple Records, UK, 1973
 15. Soundgarden, *Ultramega OK*, LP, SST Records, USA, 1988
 16. Crass, *The Feeding Of The Five Thousand*, 12" EP, Small Wonder Records, UK, 1978
 17. John Cage & Sterneck / KomistA, *Five Hanau Silence*, 7" EP + book, KomistA, Germany, 1992
 18. Palix, *J'adore et j'en peux plus...*, CD, Song Active Production, France, 1992
 19. Gerry and The Holograms, *The Emperor's New Music*, 7", Absurd Records, UK, 1979
 20. Whitehouse, *Birthdeath Experience*, LP, Come Organisation, UK, 1980
 21. Robert Wyatt, *Cuckooland*, CD, Hannibal records, UK, 2003
 22. The New Blockaders, *Simphonie in Ø Minor*, Cassette LP, Hypnagogia, UK, 1991
 23. The New Blockaders, *Simphonie in X Major*, LP, Hypnagogia, UK, 1991
 24. Christian Marclay, *Untitled (Record Without A Groove)*, LP, Ecart Editions, Switzerland, 1987
 25. Due Process, *Do Nothing*, LP, RRRecords, USA, 1988
 26. The Gerogerigegege, *Zero Song Flexi*, Flexi-Disc, Vis A Vis Audio Arts, Japan, 1993
 27. Telium Group, *Record 1*, 7", Magnatone Products, USA, 1991
 28. Coil, *How To Destroy Angels*, 12", Laylah Anti-Records, Belgium, 1984
 29. The Haters, *The Haters*, 7", Jupiter-Larsen, Canada, 1983

30. Various artists, *Music of The N.F.B.: Volume 1*, 2LP, National Film Board Of Canada, Canada, 1977
31. Maurice Lemaître, *Poèmes et musiques lettristes*, 3x7", Lettrisme éditions, France, 1971
32. Immedia, *Snap, Crackle & Pop*, 10", label unknown, UK, 1998
33. The Haters, *Wind Licked Dirt*, LP, RRRecords, USA, 1988
34. Jonty Semper, *The One Minute Silence From The Funeral of Diana, Princess Of Wales*, 7", Charrm, UK, 2001
35. Jonty Semper, *Kenotaphion*, 2CD, Charrm, UK, 2001
36. Jacob Kirkegaard, *4 Rooms*, CD, Touch, UK, 2006
37. Marcel Marceao, *The Best of Marcel Marceao*, LP, MGM Records, USA, 1970
38. Artist unknown, *Disque de silence*, 7", Barclay, France, n.d.
39. Artist unknown, *The Nothing Record Album*, LP, Solid Gold Records, Canada, 1974
40. Valerie Gee's Car Band, *Un Président pour la France*, 7", Virgin/Invisible, France, 1981
41. Burt Reynolds Ensemble, *Gordura Vegetal Hidrogenada*, CD, label unknown, Argentina, 1995
42. Die Tödliche Doris, *The Invisible record*, Ø, Ata Tak, Germany, 1986