

Music, Silence, and the Built Environment

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Research Topic and Working Definitions

In this project I propose – as a performer and sound artist – to examine the complex relationship between music, architecture, and silence.

Music will be confined for the purposes of my research, as live, and primarily acoustic. It can be amplified, but involves performers. Music is here produced by real instrumentalists (often a pianist) who are physically present in a space.

Architecture is defined as the built, designed environment; the physical constructed context in which events (life, music, habitation, transit) take place. The concept of “sonic architecture” takes this several steps further and may not involve traditional physical boundaries.

Silence is frequently said to be the absence of sound, but can also be the opposite of music, or in cultural, emotional terms, “peace,” “rest,” “calm,” etc. Silence can be defined in religious terms as well, for purposes of reflection, meditation, and connection with the divine. Due to the complexities of our industrialized lifestyle, silence also seems – on a quotidian level, and in daily life – unattainable. Indeed, in purely scientific terms, silence is an unachievable goal.

Space: Music, silence, and architecture share and manipulate the same physical space, but do so in entirely different ways, expressed or implicit, conscious or unconscious.

Time: Essential for music and silence, but absent from architecture, is the analogous dimension for music’s lack of physicality.

Research Context

I will explore the triangular intersection of music, silence, and architecture with socially relevant viewpoints to be considered from architectural theory, sociology, and sonic art. As a professional performer, I will use piano music as one of my tools to investigate silence and the architecture which frames it.

How can the performer control (or not) the feeling of musical silence? What techniques can be implemented: can we define a vocabulary of silence?

My own experience with silence began in 1991 when I recorded “Winter Music” under the direction of John Cage. As performer and coordinator of the seven pianists involved, I became extensively engaged in the relationship of the piano notes (very

sparse, in the manner of Morton Feldman) and the silences. Working in the acoustically legendary Jordan Hall at the New England Conservatory, we began to perceive the strong influence of the architecture on the piece of music. The arrival of a noisy seagull during the third night of recording was viewed as an interruption by all except Cage, of course.

My hypothesis is that it should be possible to consider the needs of various spaces and try to set out some guidelines for dealing with them. Music *in a space* is inherently transient, and appropriates constructed space in an impermanent (and non-invasive) way. Once the sound is gone, it is gone. This is in contrast to the invasive and colonizing effect of sound *on our bodies*, over which we have so little control that it can (in extreme cases) be characterized as “acoustic rape” (Went 2019). But whatever its traces on our ears, our brains, and our bodies, a concert leaves no tangible trace on the building— there is no imprint, no scar, no aging, no patina of leftover notes: “The inaudibility of the greatest part of history cannot be overcome, since the sounds of history have irrevocably died away” (Müller 2012). Nonetheless it could be intriguing to try to apply some of the methodologies of forensic architecture as illustrated by Goldsmiths at the University of London, to this project (see appendix). Sound and silence have the potential to leave historical and metaphysical traces. As David Toop writes in *Haunted Weather* (2010: p. 93), “Washed by infinitely subtle traditions of tone that linger after the echoes of repetition, the room becomes silent sound, the memory of sound and the future of sound.”

John Cage launched the debate on silence with his legendary visit to the Harvard anechoic chamber, but he also focused on questions of permission and artistic *ingerance*. I would argue that the performer must consider silence not just from a musical, but also architectural point of view. Questions of borders in public space are more and more urgent, as (especially) the urban sphere becomes more circumscribed and less free and people are pressured into silence (camera surveillance, stricter rules, police presence). This question of borders is of crucial importance: “Even places that seem to function properly, like shopping malls and airport terminals, can only uphold that image by manipulating and conditioning the users and even more importantly, by excluding the ones that do not fit the ideal picture” (Venhuizen, 2017). And exclusion is also a manifestation of silence.

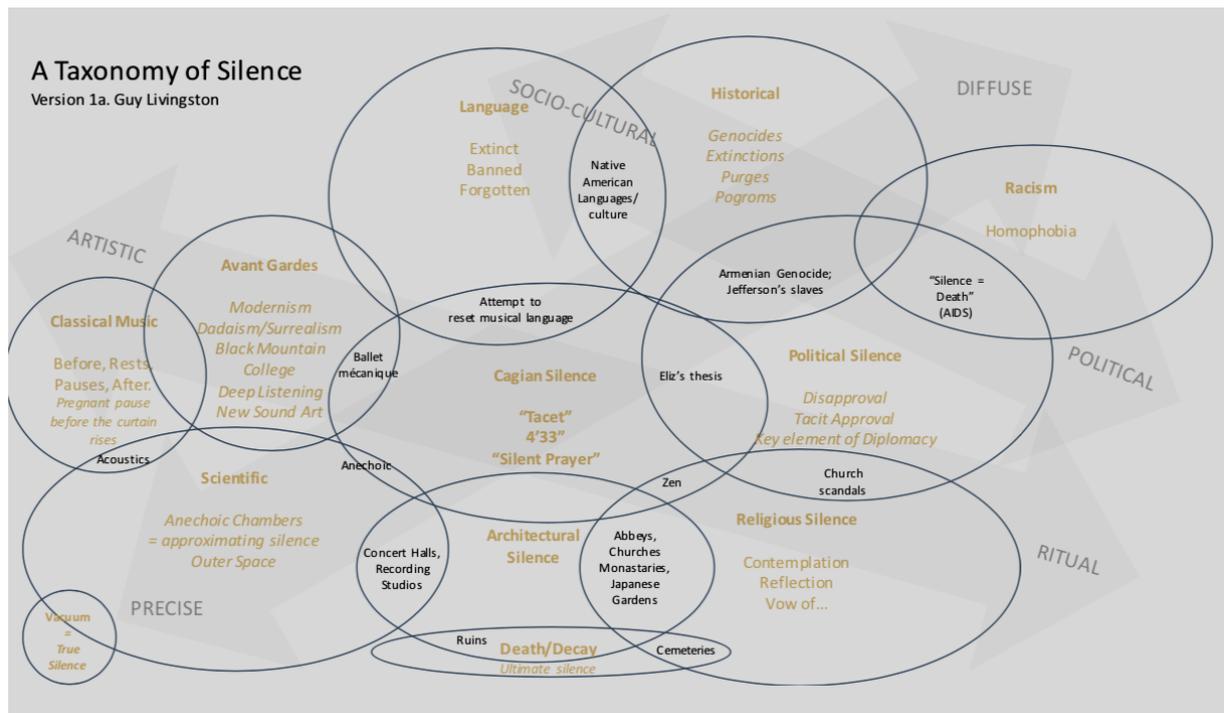
One sound artist who has done work on concepts of periphery, edge, and border of the acoustic space, is Brandon LaBelle, see for example his *Stranger Recordings*, for Documenta 14 Radio with Anna Bromley (2017). LaBelle’s books highlight the political

element of sound as politically transformative in society, as he brings marginal, background, and invisible/unheard sounds to the foreground.¹ However, there are few texts from the performance/social perspective. I believe this is an interesting gap in the literature which merits attention. It would be fascinating to document more recent (and improvised, lower budget, more accessible) spaces, which have less elite status, but potentially higher societal value due to the reduced entry barrier. Music in hospitals, for example, falls mostly under the radar, being dismissed with equal suspicion by the medical and the musical professions.

Musical silence in architecture has hardly been considered at all, except by a small group of artists, radio makers, and composers. The 60-year old ideas of Cage overwhelm the discussion, but critic Kyle Gann's *No Such Thing as Silence* offers some brilliant potential jumping-off points, as does the work of LaBelle and Voegelin (*Listening to Noise and Silence*), coming from the sound art and radio perspectives. This seems work to build on.

We are all familiar with the truism that "there is no such thing as silence." In the natural world there is no silence, so in order to even produce silence (in our atmosphere and on our planet), we need to construct a border around the observer, in this case the listener. Silence needs a container, and that container is generally architecture. But Cage himself rarely or only obliquely addressed the context, the place, the locus of the listener to silence. He did not go much beyond the oft-repeated tale of the anechoic chamber. I will take Cage's ideas, as analyzed by Gann, and incorporate new concepts about the built environment to understand musical silence in better ways.

¹ Other artists who are working in this thematic intersection of fields include sound-artist Pedro Rebelo (SARC, Belfast); flutist Cléo Palacio-Quintin (Montréal); sculptor and landscape architect James Turrell; and conceptual artist Doug Wheeler, who recently installed an anechoic room inside the Guggenheim Museum.



Research Questions

The issue of exploring, investigating, and experimenting with music, silence, and specific spaces within the above context, leads me to the following main research question:

How can musicians redefine silence via live performance and understanding of the built-environment/space around them?

Subsidiary questions are:

- How does music and its quality (rests, spaces, absence, stillness, anticipation) create a time for architectural silence?
- How does architectural space and its quality (edges, borders, reflections, walls) create a space for musical silence?
- What is the societal value of silence and how can we experience it through music and the built environment?

Key Objectives

- To create a taxonomy of silence
- To examine the triangle of music, silence, and architecture
- To study the influence of the built environment on the experience of silence in music
- To study the influence of music on the silent experience of the built environment

- To examine the borders (physical, cultural, and social) which define our experience of silence
- To study audiences' and performers' experiences of silence.

Research Method

- *Examining different spaces* is intended to lead to outcomes which build on my artistic skillset. My artistic practice as a pianist and radio-maker will influence all aspects of this process.
- *Artistic experimentation*. Some of the planned artistic experiments involve my current studio space, in the former US embassy building (The Hague), which has long been associated with silence and secrets. The building is also linked with "listening" and was used as a communications center by the CIA, NSA, and FBI for decades. So I am planning a sound-art installation involving some of the strange history of the building. My piano is also there, and I have begun experimenting with performances of John Cage's *Winter Music*, which involves long silences.
- *Radio series*. I am working with ConcertZender Radio in Utrecht on a radio series about silence (broadcast planned in 2020).
- *Literature*. Studying the ideas presented above in the existing literature.
- *Interviews*. I will interview architects, acousticians, musicians, and theorists, in order to assemble a broader collection of the latest ideas, through which I can form my own hypotheses.
- *Audience participation*. Via my outcomes (see below), I will test my ideas on audiences, and gauge the reactions of public and experts alike. Thus the outcomes will serve as artistic practice experiments to evaluate my theoretical approach.

Research Outcomes

- **Sound installation(s)** in non-musical architectural environments, investigating the relation between music/silence and the built environment;
- **Piano performances** of commissioned compositions/works in public spaces which will offer audiences a chance to experience some of the effects of silence and the context that surrounds them. Each performance will be linked to a specific building or space. These performances will fulfill the dual role of data collection and pedagogical diffusion;
- **A radio series** for the general public, to explore the topic historically;
- Site-specific **podcast/audio walks** to experiment with listener perceptions of frame and border, and their influence on silence;
- Written **articles** for at least four publications, including *New Music Box (New York)*, *New Perspectives (Prague/The Hague)*.

Contribution to Knowledge

- In pre-industrial times, silence used to be represented by nature (forests, deserts), by the natural environment. But now, in our urbanized world, the built environment is necessary to create silence, just as it creates the noise and the music of our lives. Using my musical practice as a launching pad for my studies, I hope to gain insight into silence, which can be shared via a variety of multi-disciplinary outcomes. It seems to me that I can already hypothesize a cultural and societal loss of the ability to understand silence, due to the confusion of the structures around us (including societal structures, not just physical structures). Transcending these societal structures (and strictures) is potentially a job and an opportunity for performers. Silence is not obvious, accessible, nor easy to understand. Most people pass by silence, ignore it, or are made uncomfortable by it. Interpreting, translating, illustrating silence: this is the impact of my research. As an artist, can I make scholars and audiences hear silence better? My goal will be to use the outcomes of concerts and radio/sound installations as ways to interpret – for fellow musicians and for non-musicians – silence in an evolving world.
- Texts on the subject are written from an architectural standpoint (utopian and frequently over-enthusiastic) or from an acoustic standpoint (technical) or an engineering standpoint (nuts and bolts), or the musico-historical standpoint (as above). In the last decade many provocative and innovative voices have arrived, from a sound art, radiophonic, or political standpoint. These voices, more oriented towards analyzing space via artistic practice, offer paths I would try to follow.
- By examining in detail the emotional and intellectual responses to silence in multiple contexts, I will evaluate audience understanding, as well as performer understanding, of the different types, arrays, and levels of silence.
- While the concert spaces have been extensively covered (see e.g. *The Lively Audience* and a limitless number of books on opera houses, audiences, and sociology), other, alternative spaces, are far less so. Resources here will include LaBelle's *Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* and Chris Small's *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. There is much to be addressed about contemporary performance spaces, which has not been well-documented yet in academia. The constant evolution of technology and audience search for novelty have probably both motivated these evolutions.
- Some scholars have directly addressed the musical silence topic, but without examining it in the depth it deserves, for example Siccardi (*Silence in Architecture and Music*) whose thesis makes salient points on Loos, Schönberg, and Liebeskind,

but focuses more on the historical points than on the aesthetics of silence itself, and hardly mentions the performer at all.

- Music and architecture are frequently paired – most frequently by architects, who tend to wax poetic on the topic, far less frequently by musicians, who tend to dismiss it. I plan to fill this gap by examining both perspectives, attempting to create a multidisciplinary perspective.

My Skills

As a pianist, I have performed in major spaces famous for their acoustics: Jordan Hall in Boston; the big and the small halls at Moscow Conservatory, Symphony Hall in Chicago, Canterbury Cathedral, Lincoln Center, etc. But in addition, I have a long involvement with hospitals and palliative care environments over the last nine years. As the director of a small non-profit, engaging with patients in resource-poor government hospitals, I tried to break down some cultural and economic borders. Producing over 100 concerts/masterclasses/workshops in these healthcare situations gave a balance to more entertaining events I was organizing during the same period - deep underground in a champagne manufacture; in a swimming pool; or musically animating 24 chapels of a medieval cathedral. These non-conventional spaces also brought up social questions of silence and music in the context of the built environment, building upon my architectural studies as an undergraduate at Yale University.

(Societal) Relevance

- Why is silence important now? In an era of burnouts and ADD, the social relevance of silence goes far beyond meditation or mindfulness. Yet traditional buildings with silent programming designed in (churches, convents, temples) seem increasingly irrelevant to society. Indeed we have developed a discomfort with silence in our modern age. We don't know how to react to silence nor its components: stillness, reflection, quiet, tranquility. Silence is fragile *and fragility*, and forces us to confront our inner selves.
- My research is not only relevant to musicians. Composers, urban sociologists, engineers, and architects are concerned with some of the same practical and theoretical issues. I recently spoke with a protestant preacher who felt that silence has been one of his most important topics in the last decade. He talked of the social relevance of silence going far beyond meditation or mindfulness. And anyone who has experienced an anechoic chamber or a stay in a monastery learns that silence forces us to confront ourselves, our inner selves. As Murray Schafer pointed

out, in the anechoic chamber our reflections are lost – we have no proof of our existence.

- Architecture is about creating borders in space; these borders, whatever their design functionality or ornamental value, also have acoustic effects; amplifying, diffusing, reflecting or dampening sounds. The borders that architecture provides are a listener/location-specific frame around this silence, an essential one, sometimes as much for what they keep out as what they keep in. As we move around in space, these borders change our experience, reflecting, refracting, closing or opening the musical frame. Music, in the built environment, is affected by the borders of the architecture around it. In Carnegie Hall, these distortions are experienced as perfect for classical music, but other types of music are not favored. David Byrne, speaking of Carnegie, writes (2012), “this acoustic barrier could be viewed as a subtle conspiracy, a sonic wall, a way of keeping the riffraff out.” And to his regret, it turned out to be an awful acoustic for one of his (post-Talking Heads) concerts. Meanwhile, no classical musician would feel comfortable in his favorite venue, CBGB, an underground club with all the warmth of a garage (and not much larger). The artistic responses to that space launched his brand of 1980’s alternative electronic rock music. As mentioned above, the issue of inclusion/exclusion and its relationship to silence will be examined in the context of health-care situations.
- Much of the current debate on the social relevance of silence is from a political viewpoint, and there is every reason to open that debate further. For example, drawing on the language theories of Wittgenstein and the writings of John Cage, international relations and counter-terrorism expert Elisabeth Schweiger (*Listening to Silence*, 2018) analyzes recent decisions of the International Court of Justice and their use of silence. Context becomes crucial as the stakes are inevitably high. Silence can communicate acceptance, tacit approval, disapproval, or complete disagreement, depending on the situation in which it is used. Silence is often used as an anti-language (Halliday, 1976) or an expression of power. The merging of musical ideas of silence with political ideas is a compelling one.

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