

of SILENCE and SOUND

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Confirmative Praxis Report

MA Contemporary Dialogues: Sound

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Note to reader

I have used an autoethnographic approach to writing my report. My report has been undertaken as a creative endeavour which hopefully displays my journey through this module, using, at times, a Rhizomatic form of presentation. This style of presentation reflects my mindset generally and during the period of my MA. My work during my MA has at times, therefore taken in the poetic as opposed to the purely explanatory.

The current ongoing covid pandemic, and the considerable disruption caused to my daily life, has led to a fragmented work schedule with time available to concentrate on my MA often limited or disrupted. To help balance this out, I've taken advantage of the extended hand-in date. On the plus side, I think the extra time has allowed for a longer 'percolation' time for ideas to develop which I feel has at times been useful.

I hope this comes across in my confirmative praxis. I'm hoping here that the 'story within a story' is noticeable. I consider my Confirmative Praxis to be a platform for discussion that doesn't need to be fully resolved and feel that my Praxis is not a fixed thing. It is continually in flux.

Access to my complete library of work completed during the period of this, and the Explorative Praxis module, can be found in my portfolio/appendix.

The sound spectrum (Goldsmith, 2017, pg.1)

	<u>Frequency in hertz</u>
Low-frequency volcanic activity	0.01
Airborne infrasound from sea waves.	0.20
Lower limit of elephant hearing.	16
<u>Minimum audible tone</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>Lowest piano key</u>	<u>27.5</u>
<u>Lowest recorded note sung</u>	<u>41</u>
<u>Middle C</u>	<u>261.626</u>
<u>Piano key A above middle C</u>	<u>440.000</u>
<u>A above middle C on Bach's organ</u>	<u>480</u>
<u>Highest recorded sung note</u>	<u>1,865</u>
<u>First part of blackbird song</u>	<u>2,500</u>
<u>Highest piano key</u>	<u>4,186.01</u>
<u>Highest audible tone, aged 80</u>	<u>8,000</u>
<u>Highest audible tone, aged 10</u>	<u>20,000</u>
Dental cleaning	25,000
Typical ultrasonic welder	30,000
Ultrasonic parking sensor	40,000
Upper limit of a dog hearing	60,000
Typical bat scan frequency	80,000
Upper limit of bat hearing	110,000
Upper limit of beluga whale hearing	123,000
Typical foetal scan	15,000,000
Acoustic microscope	8,000,000,000

Introduction

On March 23rd, 2020 everything stopped. Life stopped. Every aspect of daily living was affected. The reason for this was **Covid 19** and the ensuing pandemic. It led to the most draconian measures ever seen in peacetime. **Lockdown!** Hospital admissions due to the virus skyrocketed as the NHS battled to cope with increasing demand. The United Kingdom joined France, Spain and Italy and within days, many other countries across the world in trying to combat the threat. Only emergency services and keyworkers were allowed to stay open while the rest of us were told to remain at home and isolate mixing only with those people we lived with. We were only allowed to exercise for short periods locally and could otherwise only leave the house for essential reasons i.e., Food shopping, emergencies etc. Overnight, a previously unknown silence fell over the world (Channel 4 news, 2020).

‘One of the few upsides of lockdown was that, if a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square, you had a chance of hearing it. City dwellers across the globe delighted in the silence, the freedom from the incessant rumble of traffic, and the joy of birdsong’ (Ball, 2020).

During the ‘new normal’, a new quiet had descended. The reduction in human activity (Human-induced vibrations, known in the trade as cultural noise) stopped the earth buzzing so much (Sample, 2020). This re-ignited my interest in silence, the subject of the final dissertation of my BA.

Considering this, perhaps unusually, my Explorative Praxis was very focused on Sound texture. The module took on a Rhizomatic line of inquiry. The resulting body of work was both expansive and what I would term ‘Texturally and sonically dense’. The work included many varied, distinct sound voices, which were not easy to categorise into sets or groups. It wasn’t until I was listening back to my recordings that I became increasingly aware of the silences between the sounds. I initially considered my Explorative Praxis as sketches to develop sound ideas, a thinking through of ideas.

‘Here is the surprising thing: music does not have to be enjoyed’. (Ball, 2010, 5)

In music, when no notes are played it is called a rest. ‘In music every rest, when no notes are played, is a silence’. (Gittleman, 2017)

‘There is something suggestive in the biologists’ report that the dolphins communication takes place, not in their sounds, but in the length of silences between the sounds’. (Takemitsu, 1995. 88)

Enforced Leisure Time.

Details of the first performance of 4’33’’ give useful context. This took place in 1952 at the open-air Maverick Concert Hall just south of Woodstock, New York.

You can buy 4'33" on iTunes. (Bloom, 2011.)

"Sound gives a certain coherence to our lives"- Philip Ball – The Music Instinct – Pod cast pt.1 (2010) YouTube.

Within my praxis and research, in looking at silence, I am seeking to understand and respond to it.

We are conditioned to what we've heard already.

I could at least start to wonder about silence.

Western music is a small part of the musical universe.

Suddenly, my praxis was relegated to something to do if I had the time, worked around the new responsibilities of Lockdown. Due to this, the only way I could work was by using my headphones.

Due to the utilitarian approach of university work, I undertook the mammoth task of unpicking my 20,000-word notes.

Aims and Context

The plan and intention of my Confirmative Praxis is to chronicle my journey, both through theoretical literature and my own practice, Silence and Sound. The Challenge is to bring my MA to a 'logical' conclusion? I've aimed to contextualise my own praxis using the ideas and theories analysed in this report. 'I consider most of my works as experimental proposals of concepts' (Takemitsu, 1995, 70) and not programmatic artefacts. My report is a philosophical investigation using some of the theories of some quite complex thinkers. I'm 'having a go' at Philosophising (you have to start somewhere!). Just start and you'll get better with time'. Text never sits outside the work. I have used my Confirmative Praxis as a platform for discussion that doesn't need to be fully resolved. Due to the utilitarian approach of university work, I undertook the mammoth task of unpicking my 20,000-word notes. My writing during this module has involved both expansion and retraction. I don't want to get into any plausibility arguments about my findings within the vast and fascinating topic of silence. All the ideas I have explored (both my own and others) are just that – ideas.

Due to the approach to experimentation used, the parameters within which I work can be expansive to say the least. Contextually, I consider my work of this period to have evolved out of the 'silence' of the Covid Pandemic Lockdown and perhaps initially trying to fill out this silence with sound. I started researching specific concepts to a reasonable extent, trying to get a good working knowledge of them i.e., The Rhizome, Cage and Takemitsu' etc. I realise that I have only a partial understanding of some of these concepts at the moment. The more I read the more I should be able to understand.

The two Key theorists I have researched are Toru Takemitsu and John Cage. I chose Takemitsu and Cage because they have both undertaken an in-depth study and consideration of ideas on silence and sound. This resonated with me. These two critical and philosophical theorists have helped me to both conceptualise and contextualise my praxis during this module. The two key critical texts studied are 'Confronting Silence' by Takemitsu and Silence: Lectures and writings by Cage. Both these seminal books have proved a rich, sometimes dense source of thought and information.

Chapter 1

‘Rules for music proliferate, but the question of sound remains obscure’

(Takemitsu, 1995, p.28)

Toru Takemitsu: Silence and Philosophical interpretation.

Takemitsu, T. (1995) *Confronting Silence: Selected Writings*. Translated by Y. Kakudo and G. Glasgow. USA: Scarecrow press.

‘There is something suggestive in the biologists’ report that the dolphins communication takes place, not in their sounds, but in the length of silences between the sounds’.

(Takemitsu, 1995, p.88)

Having read Takemitsu’s ‘Confronting Silence’ I was left with one overriding question. The question of translation. It has been translated from Japanese into English. In the book Takemitsu often states the untranslatable nature of some of the traditional Buddhist ideas in the text. A book translated from an author trying to explain the un-translatable. ‘What gets lost in translation – and what, no less importantly, gets found?’ (Hutchinson, 2018, p.104).

Quotes

Translators’ Preface:

‘... the possibility of noise as an element of composing ...’

‘The desire of this composer to express thoughts in prose as well as music – indeed the importance of words in his own compositional technique (as he describes in *Dream and Number*) reminds us of nineteenth-century European composers and was not typical of Japanese composers before the second half of the 20th century’

(Glasgow & Kakudo, 1995, xiv).

‘I believe what we call ‘expression’ in art is really discovery, by one’s own mode, of something new in the world’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.3)

‘Hasn’t art been the human creature’s rebellion against silence?’ (Takemitsu, 1995, p.17)

‘Confronting silence by uttering a sound is nothing but verifying one’s own existence. It is only the singling out of oneself from the cavern of silence that can really be called singing’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.17)

These days too many arts have left the meaning of silence behind'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.17)

'Confronting silence with silence' (Takemitsu, 1995, p.17)

'What is important is the way we recognise sound' (Takemitsu, 1995, p.17)

On John Cage.

'Rules for music proliferate, but the question of sound remains obscure'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.27)

'We tend to grasp music within the confines of the smothering superficial conventions of composed music. In the midst of all this the naïve and basic act of a human being, listening, has been forgotten. Music is something to be listened to, not explained. John Cage is trying to reconfirm the significance of this original act. For that reason, it is impossible to analyse John Cage's amplified sound by electronic means. Listening to his sounds is what John Cage's music really is. That is what any music is'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.27)

'It recalls the Noh drama where slow, nearly imperceptible movement is used to express speed' (Takemitsu, 1995, p.32)

Between the complex sound – so strong that it can stand alone – and that point of intense silence preceding it, called *ma*, there is a metaphysical continuity that defies silence'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.51)

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'Conventional music expressed concrete images by means of abstract musical sounds. Conversely, musique concrete tried to express an abstract image by means of everyday concrete sounds. Musical sounds have always been musical by traditional definitions. Schaeffer's idea of objet sonore represented the final phase in the definition of that tradition. In such, it needs no explanation'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.28)

'In addition, it is a lifelike event, beyond aesthetics – without conclusion'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.28)

'I was thinking about music, or I should say more precisely, I was thinking about sounds themselves quite apart from any obscure meaning or function in music'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.80)

'Sound is a continuous, unbroken movement. If we understand it that way, conventional notation, which divides sound into discrete measures, is fruitless' (Takemitsu, 1995, p.81)

(I feel this is true of silence, digital or otherwise. Me)

‘Among those people who have no written language there is a much closer relationship between sounds and the meaning or content of those sounds’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.83)

‘In music not all sounds are restricted to being functional. As all living things have their own innate cycles, visible and invisible, so it is with sounds. Each sound has its own beautiful form and order, like a living cell. Sounds undergo constant change in perspective of time. Their division into regular and irregular sounds has nothing to do with real nature’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.84)

(I feel that if you replace the word sound in the place of the word silence in this quote, it makes the same sense)

In the flow of Japanese music, for example, short, fragmented connections of sound are complete in themselves. Those different sound events are related by silences that aim at creating a harmony of events’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.84)

‘Listening is as real as making sound’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.85)

‘A title (of a piece) should be precise but not limiting, strongly evocative, but still leaving some room for imagination’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.86)

(I strongly agree with this within my own praxis).

‘There is something suggestive in the biologists’ report that the dolphins communication takes place, not in their sounds, but in the length of silences between the sounds’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.88)

(Introduction?)

‘A composition should not give the impression it is complete in itself. Which is more pleasurable, a precisely planned tour or a spontaneous trip?’. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.88)

(Introduction?)

‘Many contemporary composers have been building walls of sounds following their own clever devices. But then, who lives inside those rooms?’ (Takemitsu, 1995, p.88)

‘Through these hearings the work gradually changed character within me.’ (Takemitsu, 1995, p.89)

(Introduction?)

‘...the traditional idea of *ma*, which exists at the performers discretion...’ (Takemitsu, 1995, p.96)

'I know no other artist-revolutionary with the elegance of John Cage'. (Takemitsu, 1995, p.137)

Chapter 2

‘THE ACT OF LISTENING IS IN FACT AN ACT OF COMPOSING’.

‘There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.’

— John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and writings* (Cage, 2013).

John Cage – Silence and Duration.

Cage, J. (2013) *Silence: Lectures and writings* by John Cage, 50th anniversary edition. Connecticut: Wesleyan university press.

John Cage.

In some ways I was hoping to avoid the 20th century classical composer John Cage within my research. This proved to be difficult as so much written on the subject silence mentions Cage. His ideas on silence are influential even today. His composition, 4’33’, considered by some to be the most important composition of the 20th century, perhaps the most divisive, is still the subject of much debate today. It is hard to recall any other classical composer or classical musical work produced during the 20th century that is still so evocative, analysed and discussed. Reading his lectures and writings, Cage is an idiosyncratic, at times difficult theorist and philosopher to understand. Both catalyst and agitator, Cage sought to stimulate new ideas and methods within musical composition.

It could be said that John Cage’s theories on silence are of more interest than any other ideas in this prolific thinker’s canon. Indeed, in 1952 came a culmination of this particular line of inquiry, the seminal modernist composition 4’33”. This composition sought to consider the idea that silence does not exist. Cage states: ‘There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.’ (Cage, 2013). While much of Cage’s other musical work doesn’t enjoy regular listening, what is it about 4’33”, a divisive, often misunderstood and much debated piece, that make it as potentially relevant today, almost 70 years since its first performance.

One of John Cage’s interests in silence was within the realms of duration.

4’33” was about environmental silence.

Shortest silence I found was at the beginning of Beethoven's 5th Symphony – duration = 14 100th of a second. (Gittleman, 2017)

Longest silence I found was John Cage's 4'33" – duration = 4 minutes 33 seconds performed in 3 movements. (Gittleman, 2017)

Due to working exclusively within my DAW, the silences produced were digital silences. If any of my works were performed within a 'live' setting these sounds would become environmental silences.

Cage, J. (2013) Silence: Lectures and writings by John Cage, 50th anniversary edition. Connecticut: Wesleyan university press.

Quotes:

'What is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposeless or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life--not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.'

— John Cage, Silence: Lectures and writings. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.'

— John Cage, Silence: Lectures and writings. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all. This puts one in accordance with nature, in her manner of operation.'

— John Cage, Silence: Lectures and writings. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'So, somebody has talent? So what? Dime a dozen. And we're overpopulated. Actually, we have more food than we have people and more art. We've gotten to the point of burning food. When will we begin to burn our art'? (Cage, 2013, p.)

'Nothing more than nothing can be said.

We make our lives by what we love.

Being American, having been trained to be sentimental, I fought for noises ... when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to me to be no truth, no good, in anything big.

Somebody asked Debussy how he wrote music. He said: "I take all the tones there are, leave out the one's I don't want, and use all the others". Satie said: "When I was young, people told me; you'll see when you're fifty years old. Now I'm fifty. I've seen nothing".

Slowly as the talk goes on, we are getting nowhere – and that is a pleasure'

'It is not irritating to be where one is, it is only irritating to think one would like to be somewhere else. If anybody is sleepy, let him go to sleep'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

All I know about method is that when I'm not working, I sometimes think I know something, but when I'm working, it is quite clear I know nothing'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'If my work is accepted, I must move on to the point where it is not'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'Whereas what we need is to fumble around in the darkness, because that's where our lives (not necessarily all of the time, but at least some of the time, and particularly when life gets problematical for us) takes place'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'Composing's one thing, performing's another, listening's a third. What can they have to do with one another'? (Cage, 2013, p.)

'It is better to make a piece of music than to perform one, better to perform one than to listen to one, better to listen to one than to misuse it as a means of distraction, entertainment, or acquisition of "culture"'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'As far as consistency of thought goes, I prefer inconsistency'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'The world is teeming; anything can happen'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

'The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all. This puts one in accordance with nature, in her manner of operation'. (Cage, 2013, p.)

John Cage.

When the White Paintings were shown at The Stable Gallery, Rauschenberg's friend, composer John Cage wrote a statement accompanying them. And the statement went in part:

'To whom: no subject, no image, no taste, no object, no beauty, no message, no talent, no technique, no why, no idea, no intention, no art, no object, no feeling, no black, no white, no and.' (MoMA, 2017,4/29).

Conclusion

I feel, within my report, on silence, the considerations of Takemitsu and Cage could be seen as purely arbitrary. For instance, I could have just as easily chosen a study of Beethoven (the shortest musical silence I could find was at the beginning of his 5th symphony. It is 14,100th of a second long) and Bach (a composer who used little silence. A notable exception being a short silence that appears in *Sind Blitze, Sind Donner* from *St Mathew Passion* BWV 244 written in 1727, Schoenberg and Schaeffer or for more contemporary twist Adele (there is a beautifully intimate pregnant pause at 1.09 in the official video for *Hello*) and Metallica (the unexpected silences throughout *Sad but True* wrong footing many radio DJ's into thinking the track has finished) and many other composers?

All composers use silence. During my research I could not find any composer whose work is not at least framed by silence. (BA story: precious little silence). The use of silence appears to be as personal to a composer as DNA or a fingerprint.

The difference is that Takemitsu/Cage spent time in written consideration of the subject of sound.

Takemitsu: Perhaps more accessible within the realms of Avant Garde composers.

Cage: I feel 4'33" to be a very good (if not extreme) starting point for the consideration of silence but due to its notoriety as a gimmick (despite Cage's claims to the contrary), this piece instantly stops the conversation for many. I've found Cage sometimes obscure and difficult to follow whereas Takemitsu, although still classed as an Avant Garde composer, slightly easier.

You can even buy 4'33" on iTunes.

I feel the Rhizomatic approach to exploration and as a line of inquiry was both, at various times, a good and not so good idea within the confines of this module. Used as a metaphor, although definitely not the intended idea by Deleuze (Harris 2017), it proved useful for the expansive exploration of the previous module. But trying to study and incorporate the theories of such a notoriously difficult thinker per se, within in my own praxis was perhaps pure folly. With hindsight, especially within the realms of keeping my MA focussed and on track. Personally, I feel that a Rhizomatic approach in the age of the internet and 'information overload', is not to be taken lightly!

My experience of *The Rhizome*: My eyes were so open it was like looking down into a hole, a tunnel. There were no barriers. I had to stop myself from tumbling down inside this rabbit hole. I now know how Alice felt.

In summary, my biggest takeaway from university is the perennial that we know nothing for sure. It has definitely been like peeling an onion. Nothing is certain or written in stone.

Having been swept away (and often smashed against the rocks or beached) in the uncharted waters of new thoughts, theories, concepts and philosophies during my 6 years at university, the Rhizome seems a fitting analogy (a thing which is comparable to something else in significant respects) to this journey. Always and...and...and...and, never fully arriving anywhere, and if looking like arrival at a destination is imminent, continually being drawn to the far-off horizon. We never arrive. We never know. It's not about the arriving but about the journey.

Glossary of key terms

The Rhizome:

A concept developed by Philosopher Gilles Deleuze and Psychotherapist Felix Guattari. A structureless multiplicity – Helps to show how everything can be multiple and interrelated. De-centralisation. Key ideas: Freedom, Difference, Non-Linear, Everything. The Rhizome has no End or beginning, it is always in the middle and is non-hierarchical.

A Thousand Plateaus:

Book written by Deleuze and Guattari (in 1980) in which The Rhizome (among many other concepts) is discussed. Over 600 pages long. Translated in 1987 by Brian Massumi.

Ma:

A Japanese concept of negative space. A pause in time; an emptiness in space. Focusing on the importance of negative space with artworks and life. In Buddhist philosophy, Ma is impossible to put into words.

Plenum:

A completely filled space. A place where movement is possible only if matter moves simultaneously. Idea of silence used within the concepts of Takemitsu.

Vacuum:

Nothingness. A place totally devoid of matter. A void. The opposite of plenum.

Tacet:

Musical Terminology. Latin Term when translated into English meaning 'is silent' Also known as a rest but typically used for longer periods when instruments are required to remain silent.

Rest:

Musical Terminology. A sign within a musical score specifying an absence of sound. Corresponds to specific note values to denote the duration of silence.

Program Music:

Musical Terminology. Opposite of abstract music. Having some extra-musical idea and descriptive. Having a narrative other than just musical.

Autoethnography:

Qualitative research. Involving self-reflection and also personal and anecdotal experience. Autobiographical. Connecting to wider understandings and meanings. Describing and analysing personal experience to understand experience. Exploring dilemmas and engaging the reader in interplay with the writer.

Crabgrass:

A rhizomatic weed that roots freely. A pest on cultivated land. A creeping grass.

And:

Used to connect words of the same part of speech, clauses, or sentences, that are to be taken jointly. Used to introduce an additional comment or interjection. Used as a function word to indicate connection or addition especially of items within the same class or type.

Autodidactic:

From the Greek for Self-Taught. Lifelong Learner. Learning on your own away from the traditional educational settings. Self-led Learner. Focused on the personal development of new knowledge.

Material:

Cagean term for both sound and silence.

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