

2019

silences [score]

Sage J. Harlow
sagebbbt@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Harlow, S. J. (2019). silences [score]. *Sound Scripts*, 6(1).
Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol6/iss1/14>

This Refereed Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol6/iss1/14>

silences¹

For two or more players (any instrumentation).

Duration: variable.

Sage J. Harlow (Sage Pbbbt)
© 2018

SagePbbbt.com

intent

The piece consists of nine (or ten) sections alternating between free and scored; the scored sections all consist of silences of different qualities asking the players to explore ways to facilitate the scored silences. In composing with scored silences, the piece attempts to challenge the idea of silence as a transcendental signifier (or of signifying nothing) and seeks to question the assumption that a piece *can* convey particular experiences for an audience—silences, in particular, can evoke vastly different responses in people experiencing the ‘same thing’. In this sense, one might read the piece as ‘impossible’ and/or an exploration of the impossibilities of communication, but hopefully one that pushes the players (and perhaps audience) to explore these impossibilities with more rigour or attention to detail.

SCORE

a welcoming, open silence

free

an amusing, unexpected silence

free

individual, introspective silences

free

an uncomfortable silence that feels too long

free

an ambiguous silence

(end)

Some Notes on *Silences*

Silences feels markedly different from other pieces that I have written in which I have kept the score as pared down as possible to facilitate open-ended readings, and to separate a site of invitation and a site of reflection, consideration and intent. I have often write separate “notes” to scores, but make it clear that these represent my own reflections on the score, and that performers should feel free to ignore them and explore another manifestation of the score. In this case, however, it felt important to include the “intent,” perhaps because it seemed absolutely possible that the intent would not translate from the score itself. Which somewhat undermines my assertion that pieces should “stand by themselves.” I still feel that the score—inclusive of the “intention”—feels very open-ended, functioning more as an invitation to explore rather than a set of prescriptive instructions. To refer to the theme of the 2017 Totally Huge New Festival Conference, this work opens to many different experiential “truths” while at the same time demanding that the players (and perhaps audience) explore the limits of communication—the means by which we generally agree upon “truth.”

This piece took partial inspiration from John Cage’s *4’33”* as well as Craig Dworkin’s *Unheard Music* (2009) which catalogues a number of “silent” pieces and describes them in some detail.² For me, the pieces in Dworkin’s book fall into a number of rough categories:

1. silent scores, or scores with silent sections (John Cage, Alphonse Allais, Mike Batt, (Leif Elggren, Per Jonsson and Kent Tankred), Yves Klein, Peter Váhi, Mieko Shiomi, Eirín Schulhoff, Baudouin Oosterlynck, Vasilii Gnedov);
2. recordings of “silence” (Pavel Büchler, Ken Friedman, David Hoyland, Jonty Semper, Reynolds, Pavel Büchler, Christopher DeLaurenti, The Phantom Pregnancies, Matt Rogalsky, TAC, Jens Brand, John Levack Drever, Jacob Kirkegaard);
3. recordings that leave only the silence (Nick Thurston, Language Removal Service, George Maciunas, Alvin Lucier);
4. pieces or recordings that we cannot hear (Stephen Vitiello, James Whitehead, Jarrod Fowler, Tellium Group, Linear Regressionists, Coil, *0);
5. pieces that consists of noise or sound, but lack agency (Christian Marclay, W. Mark Sutherland, Steve Reich, Matmos, Coil, Institut für Feinmotorik, Richard Eigner, Joseph Beuys, Ulrichs, Braco Dimitrijevic, Nick Thurston); and
6. recordings of sounds not usually heard (Haco, Mattain and Taco Unami).

None of these pieces compose with different silences sitting against each other, or explore the contexts that *contribute* to the silences that they consist of or encompass (though some explore the context of one particular context).

My interest in “silences” feels markedly different to most of these pieces in that it explores the emotional, performative aspect of various silences *in context*. In some ways, the focus lies on the context, most of which the performers must create in their improvisation (or devising). Presumably, the “amusing, unexpected silence” has these qualities because of the sounds preceding it—in another context this “same silence” would have different qualities. In this sense, the score plays with ideas of presence and absence and the visceral, emotive experiences of players and audience in a way which many other silent pieces do not—either because they explore silence as a conceptual idea and/or in the abstract.

With this piece, I wish to queer the idea of silence as a transcendental signifier—even if that transcendental signifier signifies “nothing.” I wish to invite an exploration of the messy, context-ridden silences of actual performances. And to invite an exploration of these

contexts to try and facilitate the kinds of silences that the score demands. In this way, the focus lies not on the silences but on the sounds that create (or facilitate) them and a foregrounding of these contexts as spaces of potential for manifesting a wide-variety of silences that “sound differently” even though, out of context, they might “sound the same.”

Endnotes

¹ An earlier version of this score and associated notes appears in Sage J. Harlow, *Giving Voice To the Extra-Normal Self With the Extra-Normal Voice: Improvised Exploration Through the Realms of Shamanic Chaos Magick, Insight Meditation and Gender Performance*, doctoral thesis (Perth: WAAPA @ Edith Cowan University, 2018), pp. 212–215; currently under review. All scores available online via my website SagePbbbt.com/scores

² Craig Dworkin, *Unheard Music: Information as Material* (Germany: www.informationasmaterial.com, 2009); several versions of this essay available online; see eclipsearchive.org/Editor/DworkinUnheard.pdf or www.ubu.com/papers/dworkin_unheard.html.