

INTRODUCTION

A CALL FOR SILENCE

It's getting harder and harder to find quiet. It's not just that the world is louder now than it was when Lucy first stepped out onto the veldt, but that we have become increasingly suspicious of a priori distinctions between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' events; between foreground and background; between privileged 'sound' and disenfranchised 'noise.' If we no longer trust the divisions our culture has handed us, we have no choice but to listen to everything. The hi-fi-guy's obsession with the 'signal to noise to ratio' is becoming figuratively, and mathematically, irrational: what to do as the numerator approaches infinity while the denominator slips away toward zero? One man's noise is, we discover, another man's signal. The ticks and skips of vinyl are no longer distractions, speed bumps on the road to musical enjoyment; they are the music itself, the material of a new CD. And the glitch of one errant CD begets the next CD.

To be sure, while noise has tiptoed across the border into signal, there has been the occasional reverse migration: my corner bar in Amsterdam, close by the Concertgebouw, was much loved by musicians because it was the only pub in town that played no music – occasionally some of signal's most skilled craftsmen spurn their own product as noise. Whether John Cage's *4'33"* was the catalyst or merely the first (in)audible public symptom, since that 1953 performance in Woodstock, non-intentional sound has been getting louder. There seems to be a growing love for the ephemeral, the ancillary, the residual, the inadvertent.

This could be the end game of Postmodernism's elevation of ornamentation (noise) over structure (signal). Or a pragmatic reaction to the glut of CDs and the near perfection of recording technology: the only thing left to record is the un-recordable. But as a diasporated New Yorker, prone to fits of post-9/11 sentimentality, I like to think of it as the latest manifestation of the old roué's quip that "a drink before and a cigarette after are the three best things in life."

The most important moments of our lives often lie in an unspoken ellipse.

The emotions called up by the hole in the skyline at the tip of Manhattan are vastly more profound than any provoked by what used to fill it – or by whatever will replace it. Cage's *4'33"* and Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* were exercises not in nihilism, but in sensitivity to traces of things past or passing.

This CD began with an invitation by Phil Hallett to curate the first volume in a new series planned by Sonic Arts UK. After some weeks of fruitless puzzling over possible rubrics, I asked my wife, in a tone of mild desperation, what I should do; she responded sensibly, "what would you like to listen to?" "Nothing!" came my testy reply. An arched wifely eyebrow argued (silently) that there was something to be said for following my instincts. That night I dreamt of absences of sound, of not-quite silences, of homages to the unnoticed: groove grit, tape hiss, CD glitch, the snap crackle-pop of optical film soundtracks, the static between radio stations, cell phone break-up, guitar hum, audience anticipation, reverberation tails, room tones, the calm before a storm, residual files from de-noising software, PA systems just below feedback, coughs recovered from the editing room floor.

Our *Call For Silence* brought forth a deluge of over a hundred extraordinarily imaginative submissions. What you have on this CD are 34 visions of silence, ranging from almost inaudible to all-too-audible (from 0000000000000000 to 1111111111111111); suggestions for listening to that which might otherwise pass you by; reminders that those fleeting seconds between tracks are also moments to be lived, even loved.

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