

THIRD EAR

In our empty public spaces, listening to the Great Diminuendo

By **Jeremy Eichler** Globe Staff, Updated April 9, 2020, 4:00 p.m.



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And so the country's epidemiological fortunes now lie in the hands of Dr. Anthony Fauci. But how about our acoustic fortunes?

At the moment, I submit to you, they owe a profound debt to the music of John Cage.

And when I say music, I mean that in the most open-spirited of ways — as Cage himself clearly did when he had pianist David Tudor walk onto the stage of the Maverick Concert

Hall in Woodstock, N.Y. on Aug. 29, 1952, and now-famously “perform” a work that consisted of roughly 4½ minutes of complete silence.

Nothing. Crickets. Real silence ... *or* was it?

Actually, thanks to the transfiguring qualities of human attention, and the simple yet utterly brilliant reframing achieved by Cage’s Dada-jest-cum-deep-philosophical-statement, listeners in the hall that day became newly aware of the environmental sounds around them. During the duration of this very first performance of what would become Cage’s most iconic work — known of course as “4’33,”” after its prescribed length — the audience actually *listened* to the wind rustling in the trees outside the hall, the patter of the rain on the roof, and eventually, the sound of their fellow audience-members walking out. No matter! The point was made: the soundscape itself had *become* the music.

With an estimated half of humanity now on lockdown — which means the halting of all that traveling, commuting, shopping, gathering, and construction — we are now living inside a global, unprecedented performance of Cage’s “4’33.”” His silence piece has been placed on repeat. Our ears, when we can pull them away from Spotify or Netflix or the latest family argument, can now potentially start hearing the sounds around us in newly sensitized ways.

And so I’ve spent this past week trying to get my own ears around the contours of this vast collective diminuendo, searching for it on walks outside, tracking the excitement — and the action plans — it has generated across the Internet, and speaking with naturalists, musicians, and acoustic ecologists about what it all might mean. Taking a cue from Cage, who wryly chose to divide his silence work into three separate movements, I’ve divided this week’s silence column into three parts.

I. The Cities

Almost overnight, a group of European scientists has launched the [Silent Cities](#) project, with the goal of documenting the extraordinarily rare soundscapes now emerging as

bustling urban centers lose all of their bustling. In effect these researchers are studying nature's urban sotto voce — all those subtle sounds that are typically masked by human activity. The scientists have now issued an international call to researchers around the globe, urging them to take to city streets with their recording devices to gather data that could enable discoveries for years into the future. So far, as one researcher in Bristol, England, confirmed over e-mail, more than 100 researchers [spread across six continents](#) have responded to the call. Artists too are now getting in on the act, as the avant-garde performance center Issue Project Room in Brooklyn has begun commissioning for its [Isolated Field Recordings Series](#).

Elsewhere on the Web, as roving independent sound artists have been uploading recordings from the closure to [individual websites](#), many other soundscapes are being aggregated on a site called Radio Aporee (www.aporee.org), so with a few clicks you can pull up the sound of an [emptied market in Berlin](#), an uncommonly peaceful [city park in Lisbon](#), or a desolate [Manhattan subway station](#) just before rush hour. Some sound artists have uploaded multiple recordings made from the same location over time, so you can hear the diminuendo playing out before your ears. And not always with the expected results.

It turns out, for instance, that social inequality is sonically tenacious: typical city noise can mask the under-chorus of homeless life. As city residents slip indoors, several recordings convey the sounds of those still on the streets because they have nowhere else to go. Other recordings capture the clangor of political protest, the [sound escaping from the windows](#) of apartments in São Paulo as residents bang pots as part of a coordinated protest of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's reckless [minimizing](#) of the crisis.

There is of course a much more direct way of noting the shifting soundscapes of cities: open a window, or take a stroll. I made no recordings on my own walks this week through Boston's parks and my local neighborhood streets, but it was hard not to notice something else that seems to have sprung up overnight: the remarkable singing of all those birds.

II. *Nature*

It is surely a somehow Cagean irony that public life has closed down precisely during the early-spring weeks when the birds are ready to celebrate. They are migrating to town, setting up shop, and letting it rip.

“It’s really rock ‘n’ roll out there,” the [acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton](#) told me by phone from his home in Washington state. As Hempton explains it, nature has not exactly been turning up the volume these days; it just has much less competition.

He compares the broader natural soundscape to a symphony orchestra which is usually required to perform next to a roaring vacuum cleaner. Now, someone has just pulled the plug. The orchestra is playing just as before — but the music is suddenly a revelation, and it’s hard *not* to notice.

“It’s coming from all parts of the world on the Internet, everybody is so surprised by how gorgeous this sound is,” Bernie Krause, who has been recording natural environments for more than 40 years, told me from his home in Sonoma County, Calif. “I don’t know why they’re surprised — it’s been there for the last 550 million years, since organisms evolved and started making noise.”

If Krause sounds a little cranky about the matter, he can be forgiven. The power of listening to nature as a scientific tool — tracking the fate of ecosystems through their shifting acoustic profiles — has been [the guiding idea](#) animating his work for decades, and it’s an idea that has spawned [an entire new field of bioacoustics](#).

But listening to nature for Krause is more than just another scientific instrument. It is a kind of ethical imperative that reinforces an awareness of interconnections that are critical to grasp if we are to survive as a planet.

“From all of this [pandemic],” he adds, “we’re learning the hard way that nature bats last. Viruses don’t understand borders or walls. Neither does climate. Every action we take, every decision we make, is a piece of fabric that links to all the other parts of a larger

system. The further we draw away from the natural experience — the more we tune it out and turn it off — the more pathological we become as a culture.”

III. Nature and Us

The other day, David Rothenberg, a jazz clarinetist more attuned to nature than most, stood in New York’s Fahnstock State Park and dropped a microphone into a pond. This was not an unusual activity for Rothenberg; he has become obsessed with the mysterious sound worlds lurking in the depths of ponds. The unusual part was what he heard: the rhythmic da-da-da-daga-da of an underwater boatman beetle, [rendered with startling clarity](#). Typically, when he listens at this particular spot, the insects’ riot of aquatic rhythm is muffled by the sound of passing airplanes.

So Rothenberg too has been appreciating this chance to listen more closely. But he typically does so from a different angle. The goal, his work suggests, is not hearing nature as a pristine symphony which we passively experience from the other side of the footlights. We need to be involved in the co-creation of the music. And he has taken that imperative to heart with rather astonishing literalness. Over the course of his career, Rothenberg has [jammed underwater with humpback whales](#), he has soloed over the pulsating drone of cicadas, and he has more recently been forming [ad hoc ensembles with the nightingales](#) that nest in the parks of Berlin.

“It’s easy to say we’re ruining everything,” he told me. “But I think there’s only hope for humanity if we can imagine a soundscape of nature in which we also have a place.”

Like everyone else, Rothenberg’s work has been affected by the closures, with gigs canceled and travel aborted. So he also plans to do what everyone else is doing: telecommute.

Any day now, he says, the same nightingales with which he’s jammed in the past will migrate back to Berlin for the spring. He has a plan for a friend in the city to track them

down and then call Rothenberg on speakerphone from a spot beneath their trees. The jam, in other words, will continue between Cold Spring, N.Y., and Berlin.

If it all sounds delectably improbable it may also be a perfect image — and soon a perfect sound? — to bring some much-needed levity to this moment, perhaps even a touch of wonder.

Ultimately, it all reinforces what would have been Cage's message for this great diminuendo: it's not actually about the silence — but about everything we can hear.

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