

EXTENDING THE SILENCE

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The Inuit people have many ways to describe the qualities of snow and ice. Survival depends upon maintaining an intimate relationship with these elements, in all their textures and temperatures and tendencies.

Silence seems to hold a similar place in the culture of the Music for People organization. During my first MfP improvisation weekend, in October of 2005, the word always seemed to be spoken with reverence. Silence was explored in every session, both as an idea, and in its relationship to each improvisation. Musicians were often congratulated for the times they *didn't* play. One improviser seemed to use her silence first as a weapon, and then as tool for exploring her relationship to the group.

Here is a non-linear diary of silences I've experienced, both in and outside the workshop. Circling around some personal ideas about silence, I hope to approach its universal quality.

The Nature of Silence

The complete absence of sound does not exist – at least not for a living human being on the planet earth. In an anechoic chamber, we hear the singing of our own blood. Even the deaf experience the vibrations of sound, “hearing” with their whole bodies.

So if silence is not the absence of sound, what is it?

The Silence of Nature

Saturday morning, October 15. The sun comes out for the first time after six days of rain. The light is achingly beautiful, and the steady textural sound of raindrops has been replaced by the random articulations of the wind.

A reluctant violinist plays a solo. His piece is short, taut, pierced through with “silences” – which are actually the rustling of the trees, the surprise twitter of a bird.

I can no longer remember any of the sounds of the instrument; I only remember the sounds of nature. It is as if the music has created a perfect frame for the essence of a particular moment in time.

So which kind of sound is silence? The sound of the violin strings? Or the sound of the rustling leaves?

Silence as Music

To my mind, John Cage's famous piece, 4'33" worked exactly once. The first time it was performed, the audience was poised, listening for the pianist's fingers to strike the keys.

But once we know that we are going to be listening to exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds of a pianist *not* playing, the element of surprise is gone. Is that period of time silence? Is it music? I am not sure. I only know that I am not very interested in it.

The surprise of silence requires an aural image. Consciously or unconsciously, we expect to hear *something* – and, instead, we hear what seems to be *nothing*.

Last winter I experienced the silence of Lake Michigan. Over the years, I have spent thousands of hours encompassed by its sound, in all seasons. Lake Michigan has never, in my memory, frozen *over*. It is just too big.

But one February day, as I approached the lake, I heard – nothing. The place where I walked had always broadcast the sound of water. That day, the water made no sound. There were other sounds: the wind in the bare trees. My breath. But no sound came from the lake, a sheet frozen out to the horizon.

That was silence.

Suddenly, a thunderous crack! reverberated along miles of icy sounding board - and the lapping sound of water returned.

I will probably never hear that silence again. But I will never forget it.

Silence in Music

Silence, in music, can be an event. Once, on piano, I reined in a Haydn trio to a grand pause – and the violinist turned to stare at me. It is one thing to surprise an audience, but to catch the attention of a tired freelancer is an event of a different order.

Dramatic silences articulate and satisfy the overarching rhythm of the whole. They are both shocking and inevitable, and when the sound returns, it is pure satisfaction. It is like a triumphal thump on the back after the ball has plummeted into the bleachers.

But a different kind of silence occurs when the music goes on after one or more players have dropped out. The textural change creates a sense of silence *within* the continuing sound.

This is like the silence of a baseball team, watching the ball as it is tossed from catcher to pitcher, or flung in a surprise throw to second base. Poised and ready to enter the play, the players support the suspense that gives the musical game its life.

Later Saturday morning, group improvisation: A pianist speaks about the effort of not playing during part of the piece. "I wanted to do something different," she says, "so I just stopped. It was scary!"

The audience leaps in with congratulations. People agree that her silence energized the piece.

David Darling says that to stop playing can be an audience revivification tactic. "You can tell when your audience has stopped listening," he relates. "When I was with the Paul Winter Consort, I sat across from the guitarist Ralph Towner. Whenever the audience stopped listening, Ralph would stop playing. It always caught their attention. Then, when he had them back, he'd start playing again."

Silence in Teaching

Inviting a silence, and listening for what the student brings to it, is an essential part of the teacher's role.

When I entered graduate school in education, I had already been teaching for ten years. I knew that it was my responsibility to impart skills and knowledge and enjoyment to my students. I did a lot of talking and demonstrating and hands-on playing with them, and I thought I was good at it.

Then I was introduced to the concept of research. Research seemed to be the opposite of teaching. Instead of imparting information, you asked questions,

made observations, and *gathered* information. Instead of teaching your students what *you* knew, you attempted to learn what *they* knew.

Bringing this concept into my studio was a revolutionary experience. When I took the time to allow my students reflect their understanding, I was humbled. I saw that most of my information had been delivered to them in a foreign language, pitched to the wrong developmental level – and that I had been too busy *teaching* to notice.

I found that the less I talked, the better I could understand the language of each student. I delivered less information. But during the moments when I actively taught them something, I knew that my students would be able to use the information.

Friday evening, October 14: An MfP graduate facilitates this session. Our task is to concentrate on drone. My group begins with a drone. But then, something new comes into the piece and I follow it. The process feels organic, healing.

After the piece, affirmations of its beauty are made. I see the teacher hesitate. Then he says, "I didn't hear the drone all the way through the piece."

The silence is mine. "I completely forgot about the assignment," I admitted.

Later, he asks me if it had been OK to bring up the discrepancy between assignment and result. I assure him that it was the perfect thing to do. As a teacher, how else could he know whether or not I understood the concept of drone? And as a student, my tendency to lose the context in the creative flow was reflected back to me.

Silence as a Weapon

Saturday afternoon, October 15: There are more pianists than pianos. One participant, having crawled over a figurative pile of bodies to get to the bench, barely touches the keyboard during her group's improvisation. At the end, she bursts out, "Don't you dare ask why I didn't play!"

The discussion that follows is interesting. "I just wasn't going to fill up all the space," she explains, "and everyone else kept playing, so I couldn't come in." Other players express the feeling that their own musical invitations had been rebuffed. It becomes clear that, while the pianist had been waiting for someone to drop out, the others had been waiting for her to drop in.

I am reminded of the daily drama I see at home between our dog and our cat. His tail wags, hers twitches. He reaches out a paw to play, she reaches out a paw to bat him away. Same kinds of movements, different meanings.

Silence requires a listening for what is actually there in the moment, not for what we want or expect to hear. As human beings, we have the capacity to understand that a moving tail can mean a variety of things. It is up to us to listen into the particular meaning of the moment, to respond creatively, and, when necessary, to expand our vocabulary of relationship.

Group improvisation is a perfect way to trigger emotional material – and an equally perfect way to work it through. But although emotions can color silence, the essence of silence is not emotional. Emotions are inherently noisy; they distract from inner stillness. An ensemble can constellate only the silence equal to the stillness of its noisiest member.

Silence as the Space Between

If movement is sound made visible, then stillness is visible silence. I once had a piano teacher whose body seemed to operate mostly out of stillness. When I asked him where he held his tension, he replied, "I relax between each note."

It seemed to me like a Zen koan. How could you relax between each note of a breakneck Chopin etude? But after carrying this koan for many years, I am beginning to understand it.

When I was in labor, each contraction was an experience of bone-cracking pain. But between the contractions, there was *no* pain. I slept. Even when there was only a fraction of a second between the contractions, I was able to sleep - because between the contractions was *silence*.

The Dimensions of Silence

Silence and sound together create the rhythm of time. Yet, when we enter the realm of silence, we enter a dimension that exists outside of time.

We have all experienced timeless moments that lift us out of ordinary reality. And, remembering back to them, they seem to happen in a kind of cinematic freeze frame. The moment can arise from any source. A touch. A vision. A smell. A sound.

From the experience of playing that Haydn trio, I remember only the eyes of the violinist - until the silence is broken by applause. From the extraordinary MfP violin solo, I remember only the wind and that one errant bird - until someone begins to speak.

Sometimes, a silence can be epic. In the seventies, when Rostropovich first emigrated to the U.S., he taught a master class at Harvard's Sanders Theatre. The master's attitude was gracious and a little ho-hum; he was doing his obligatory rounds in his new country.

YoYo Ma, unknown to the famous cellist, was on the roster. As *this* college student's bow ripped into the first notes of the Dvorak cello concerto, the Russian's back snapped to attention. He wheeled around to gaze at the young cellist's inclined face. The only sound I can remember, after that astonishing attack, is the caught breath of twelve hundred people - until YoYo dropped his bow arm, lifted his head, and allowed his eyes to meet the eyes of the older master.

The Circle of Silence

If sound is the auditory experience of vibration, then it follows that silence must occur when the experience ceases to be an auditory one. Perhaps silence is what happens *between* the vibrations.

Current research in physics suggests that the parts of the atom are much farther apart than had previously been imagined. Everything that we perceive as solid matter is actually a series of vibrational interference patterns. We are 99.9999% made of empty space.

That space is the ground of vibration; it surrounds and encompasses us. That space is our context, our substrate, the place we come from and the place we return to. That space is silence.

That silence is *us*.

And when we listen for the silence, we will know what to play.