

# Florian Tuercke

## 4'33" for Street Music, 4'33" for Mariachi

by Sandra Naumann

In *4'33" for Street Music* and *4'33" for Mariachi*, Florian Tuercke adapts John Cage's probably best known work to public space. He relocates the so called silent piece from the concert hall to the streets of Mexico where he has it performed by buskers and mariachi. The result is two video pieces that draw out entirely new meanings from Cage's model.

Let us therefore take a short look at Cage's composition. *4'33"* is his first piece entirely without intended sounds. For 4 minutes and 33 seconds the respective interpreter doesn't play a single note, as stipulated by Cage in his composition.<sup>1</sup> At the premiere in Woodstock, New York on August 29, 1952, the pianist David Tudor measured the exact time of the three movements with a stopwatch, marking the beginning and the end by closing (at the beginning of a movement) and then opening (at the end of a movement) the keyboard lid: an "unheard-of" concert, that caused serious audience perturbation, as Cage remembers: "People began whispering to one another, and some people began to walk out. They didn't laugh – they were just irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they are still angry."<sup>2</sup>

Cage was however not trying to provoke people, but questioning the notion of the artwork and revaluing musical material. By making the absence of intended sounds the actual object of the composition he undertakes a radical revaluation of silence – and therefore of sound as its complement. Sounds need to be bordered by silence in order to be audible and precisely this dependency becomes distinctly manifest when sound is entirely absent.

By means of this vacuum attention is redirected to the usually neglected elements of musical performance, to all the rituals that accompany a concert, from the opening of the lid to turning the pages. At the same time it constitutes a background for the random sound events in the auditorium – the rain tapping against the windows, the creaking of chairs on the wooden floor, the rustling of clothes – which now fills the apparent silence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, we are talking about scores in the plural. The original score was lost and there have been diverse reconstructions by David Tudor and several versions by Cage that vary in the length of the three movements, in the instrumentation and the form of notation (on note paper, as graphic notation, and in various worded versions). On the various scores cf. Jan Thoben, *John Cage's silent scores*. In: Inke Arns, Dieter Daniels (Ed.), *Sounds like Silence*. Exhibition catalogue. Leipzig: Spector 2012 (in preparation).

<sup>2</sup> *John Cage in conversation with Michael John White* (1982). In: Richard Kostelanetz (Hrsg.), *Conversations with Cage*. New York: Limelight Editions 1988, p. 66.

As Cage always emphasised, there is no real silence, nor any strict distinction between silence and sound.<sup>3</sup> He understands 4'33" as a musical complement to Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, which he describes as "airports for the lights, shadows, and particles",<sup>4</sup> made visible solely by virtue of the absence of ulterior "content". Cage's pieces are never "silent" just as Rauschenberg's white paintings are never "empty". Both operate as the surface from which the non-intentional events that surround them emerge into sensibility.

This is the matter that Florian Tuercke's 4'33" adaptations take to the limit by transferring the piece to the streets of Mexico City. He originally went there to realise his long term project *URBAN AUDIO* (since 2005). In the project he investigates compositional phenomena in the acoustic structure of urban space, transforming traffic sounds into drone-like soundscapes by means of self-made string instruments, like an alchemist.<sup>5</sup> He was so surprised by the city's own musicality that such a transformation seemed to him superfluous. A new strategy imposed itself in the face of the omnipresent music; the radio sounds hurtling out of passing buses, the pop songs buzzing out of speakers in front of all the little shops, the melodic singsong of the street vendors, and not least of all, the playing of countless street musicians. The strategy was to frame all this in the form of the "silent piece".

Florian Tuercke approached various street musicians ranging from hurdy-gurdy men to punk rock duo, beatboxer and a folk group to perform Cage's piece and have sound and image recorded for 4'33" for *Street Music*. The auditors' attention is diverted from the music they are playing to the street noises that would otherwise be drowned out: the chattering of passers-by, the noise of cars and the music being played by the competition in the background. By recording video as well as audio, Tuercke brings to prominence, in addition to the sound, the extra-musical elements connected with music performance as such. The instruments, clothing and carriage of the musicians indicate which genre they belong to and evoke a concrete notion of the music they usually play.

At the Werkleitz Festival five of these videos will be shown simultaneously on screens placed in adjacent shop windows. The sound will be transmitted to the outside via shaker, carrying the work into public space. The simultaneity gives an impression of the diversity of the ambient sound that passers-by move through without consciously perceiving it. The videos function like acoustic spotlights pointing at different sound environments made to merge together into a single sound space.

What interests Tuercke are precisely these walls of urban noise originating as a by-product from a large number of unintentional contributors engaged in other activities. He perceives acoustic urban space as a musical structure, as a "human-made (collateral) composition, which only attains to a certain interesting complexity in the dense environs of the city."<sup>6</sup>

---

3 »There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound.« (John Cage, *45' for a Speaker*. In: John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1961/1973, p. 191.)

4 John Cage, *On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work*. In: John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1961/1973, p. 102.

5 Cf. Matteo Marangoni, *Urban Audio, composing with traffic*.

[http://www.neural.it/art/2011/09/urban\\_audio\\_composing\\_with\\_tra.phtml](http://www.neural.it/art/2011/09/urban_audio_composing_with_tra.phtml) [10.07.2012]

6 Florian Tuercke in an E-Mail-Interview from 17 July, 2012.

This complexity of mutually entangled and overlapping actions and interactions becomes especially manifest in the second video piece *4'33" for Mariachi*. Once again, Tuercke has a group of musicians perform Cage's "silent piece" in public space, though in changed circumstances. He adopts Cage's division into three movements and records them at three different locations, all related to different forms of locomotion: in a pedestrian zone, an underground station and at a busy intersection. Tuercke refers to an interview Cage gave shortly before his death, in which he states: "The sound experience, which I prefer to all others, is the experience of silence. And this silence, almost everywhere in the world now is traffic ..."<sup>7</sup>

Cage himself performed the piece on his 60th birthday in 1972 in two versions in public space: on the piano on Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then in various parts of Manhattan. Therewith, according to Cage, the whole island becomes a concert hall.<sup>8</sup> Paik documented these performances for his video *A Tribute to John Cage* (1973), putting the separately recorded movements together to complete the piece. Tuercke adopts this principle, transposing his *4'33" for Mariachi* into a medial form of performance.

In contrast to Cage, who determined the coordinates for his performances randomly by means of the Chinese oracle *I Ching*, Tuercke selected according to sound qualities. In the pedestrian zone, there is the chattering of passers-by, church bells, and various megaphone announcements; in the underground the distorted sounds of radios, and at the intersection cars rushing past, their horns and sirens.

He also choose sites with enormous urbanistic and historical significance for the city: Zócalo, the Metro Station Bellas Artes and the intersection Hidalgo / Paseo de la Reforma. All are located along the main traffic artery Paseo de la Reforma, are closely tied to colonial history and the Mexican independence movement. Mariachi music also has an important status in the country's culture. As a genre within Mexican folk music it is traditionally performed in folk costume and is a standard component of all types of celebration. Mariachi ensembles first entered the capital in the wake of the revolution and the subsequent urbanisation. Via records, radio and cinema they not only attained popularity beyond national borders, but became a symbol of the nation itself. Against this background a political dimension shines through into Tuercke's piece that is not built into the original. By transporting an old standard from the Western avant-garde into a culture where Cage's work is less well known than in Europe and the US and where the happenings are not recognised by passers-by as musical performance, the work acquires an absurd and involuntarily comic aspect. For Tuercke, both his adaptations are therefore homage and parody at once: Cage for chuckling as well as listening. *Happy New Ears!*<sup>9</sup>

Author: Sandra Naumann (DE) is a media historian and independent curator for e.g. transmediale, CTM, sound:frame, Shift, Elektra, Experimenta and others.

---

<sup>7</sup> John Cage in the Film *Écoute* by Miroslav Sebestik from 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Cage in Paik's video *A Tribute to John Cage* (1973).

<sup>9</sup> The title of an essay by John Cage from 1963, in: *A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1967, p.30–34.

