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John Cage's *4′33″* as a Zen Experience: Interpreting Experimental Music Through Mahāyāna Concepts

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between John Cage's seminal work *4′33″* and the philosophies of Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism, while reflecting on the limitations of Western philosophical frameworks in cross-cultural musical analysis. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on musical structure, performance practice, audience perception, and interpretations through Western theories such as those of Ludwig Wittgenstein and postmodernism, with limited attention to the influence of Eastern philosophy on Cage's creative thought. Drawing on Mahāyāna concepts including emptiness, dependent origination, and the Two Truths, this study argues that the work's use of silence encourages contemplation of the impermanence and relational nature of all phenomena. The paper further critiques the tendency to impose Western theoretical models upon Eastern thought, advocating instead for an experience-centred approach to cross-cultural analysis. It contends that *4′33″* is not merely an experimental musical work, but also a practical manifestation of Zen philosophy at the auditory and perceptual levels.

Keywords: John Cage; *4′33″*; Zen Buddhism; Mahāyāna; Śūnyatā; Madhyamaka; cross-cultural interpretation

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, scholarship on Zen Buddhism in the West has continued to develop through philosophical, doctrinal, historical, and cross-cultural approaches (Swanson 1997). A significant body of research has attempted to understand the development of Zen Buddhism and its manifestations in the literature and art from the perspectives of intellectual history and culture. However, although Zen philosophy has exerted a certain influence on Western culture, its relationship with modern and contemporary music, particularly experimental music, has received comparatively less systematic attention. As an experimental composer deeply inspired by Zen, John Cage's works, characterised by chance, non-intentionality and a rebellion against the norms of Western traditional music, have been widely discussed in academic circles. Yet such discussions have largely remained at the level of intellectual influence, aesthetic orientation, or cultural symbolism, without sufficiently explaining how Zen-related ideas operate through specific compositional procedures, performance mechanisms, and modes of listening. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the role of Zen Buddhism in Cage's creative practice by focusing on the relationship between compositional intention, musical generation, and auditory experience.

At the level of ideological and historical construction, Western scholars have predominantly focused on Zen Buddhism prior to the Middle Tang Dynasty, systematically

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examining its core doctrines, sectarian evolution, and historical events (Li 2004). Some scholars have attempted to combine Zen Buddhism with artistic practice. For instance, Leighton (2008) explored the relationship between artistic expression and Zen meditation through an analysis of Bob Dylan's works, whilst Heine (2009) also noted that Dylan's artistic creation exhibits an affinity with the Zen Buddhist worldview. However, such research has largely remained at the level of intellectual influence, cultural reception, or symbolic affinity, with comparatively less attention paid to how Zen-related ideas become operative within artistic form and perceptual experience, particularly in experimental music. This suggests the need for a more work-centred analytical approach that connects philosophical ideas with compositional mechanisms and auditory experience.

Among the many Western artists associated with Zen Buddhism, John Cage is widely regarded as one of the most representative composers. Through his engagement with the ideas of D. T. Suzuki and his reading of Asian philosophical and religious texts, Cage gradually incorporated Zen-related attitudes into his creative thought (Cage 1961). Existing research has generally focused on the elements of chance, non-intentionality and the reflection on Western musical traditions found in Cage's works (Skurvida 2025), whilst acknowledging the significant role Zen played in the formation of his thought. However, most of these studies interpret Zen as a form of intellectual influence or aesthetic inclination, and there remains a lack of systematic analysis of how these ideas are translated into concrete compositional procedures, performance mechanisms, and the reorientation of auditory experience within specific works.

This issue is particularly evident in studies of *4′33″* (1952). As one of Cage's most representative works, *4′33″* is frequently employed to discuss the ontological boundaries of music, the significance of silence, and the reconstruction of auditory experience. Some studies interpret it through Western philosophical frameworks. For instance, research influenced by the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein links the work to the proposition that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent (Fielding 2014, pp. 157, 167). Such interpretations, which emphasise questions concerning language, expression, and the limits of representation, provide valuable insights into the philosophical significance of the work. However, when treated as the primary interpretative framework, this approach may risk reducing *4′33″* to a theoretical problem concerning language and meaning, while paying insufficient attention to its dimension as a temporal, performative, and perceptual practice.

At the same time, whilst some studies have mentioned the influence of Zen Buddhism on Cage, they tend to remain at a general level, lacking an analysis of the mechanisms through which these ideas are translated into practice in his specific works. Consequently, a key question remains unanswered: How can the relationship between Zen-related thought, Cage's compositional practice, and the listening experience of *4′33″* be understood? This question not only highlights the shortcomings of existing research regarding the pathway from thought to practice, but also provides a crucial entry point for reinterpreting *4′33″*. Consequently, this paper draws upon selected concepts from Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly emptiness, dependent origination, non-duality, and the Two Truths, together with perspectives associated with Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy, as an interpretative framework for analysing *4′33″*. It should be emphasised that this paper does not argue that Cage was directly and systematically influenced by any specific Buddhist philosophical system. Rather, it distinguishes between Cage's historically documented engagement with Zen, particularly through D. T. Suzuki, and the present study's analytical use of broader Mahāyāna concepts. These concepts are employed not as evidence of direct philosophical influence, but as interpretative tools for explaining how the work reorganises auditory experience and perceptual structure. Through this approach,

Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism are no longer viewed as mere sources of inspiration, but as interpretative resources for understanding the experiential dimensions of the work.

In light of the above, this study will focus on the following research questions. First, in what sense can *4′33″* be understood as an experiential practice rather than a purely conceptual proposition? Second, how can selected concepts from Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism function as an interpretative framework for explaining the work's reconfiguration of auditory experience? Third, to what extent does this interpretative approach differ from a Wittgensteinian interpretative model centred on the limits of language and expression? Consequently, this paper combines a literature review with contextual analysis and work-centred analysis to systematically examine the creative context, performance methods and auditory structure of *4′33″*. It first examines Cage's writings, particularly Silence and "Lecture on Nothing," before analysing the work's performance structure, including its temporal organisation, performative actions, and the emergence of environmental sounds. On this basis, selected concepts from Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism are introduced as interpretative categories and subsequently compared with a Wittgensteinian account of silence. The paper aims to propose, from a cross-cultural perspective, an experience-centred interpretative approach, thereby providing both a new theoretical framework and methodological insights for understanding the relationship between Zen thought and experimental music.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Suzuki and the Paradox of Zen Buddhism

When exploring the relationship between Cage and Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki is undoubtedly a key figure (Kostelanetz 1993). Although Pritchett (2004) argues that Cage's earliest exposure to Zen thought can be traced back to R. H. Blyth, existing research generally holds that Suzuki's influence on Cage's thought and creative practice was more profound (Sota 2015). By comparison, whilst Blyth played a pioneering role in the early introduction of Zen, there is a lack of clear evidence of his direct influence on Cage's creative practice, and he is rarely mentioned in Cage's later writings and works. Accordingly, the present discussion focuses primarily on Suzuki because of his more substantial and historically documented influence on Cage's compositional thought.

Scholarly assessments of Suzuki's interpretation of Zen reveal notable divergence. On the one hand, some scholars point out that although Suzuki wrote in English and exhibited a marked Westernisation in his expression, his thought remained rooted in the core tenets of Buddhism (J. Morris 2021). On the other hand, since Hu Shih's criticism of Suzuki in 1953 (Sellmann 1995, pp. 97–104), a counter-narrative regarding his modernisation of Zen has gradually emerged within the academic community. Some studies argue that the Zen Buddhism disseminated by Suzuki, whilst emphasising universal spirituality and Eastern essence, has diluted its original historical context and philosophical complexity (Lazopoulos 2015), and has even been regarded as a product of Buddhist modernism. Furthermore, other research links his thought to modern Japanese ideology, pointing to its underlying nationalist tendencies. Taken together, these debates suggest that Suzuki's interpretation of Zen should be understood not as an uncontested representation of traditional Zen, but as a historically influential yet critically debated form of cross-cultural mediation.

At the same time, the de-religionisation of Suzuki's Zen has also sparked debate. Sharf (1994) points out that Suzuki's emphasis on non-sectarian experience requires careful interpretation, whilst Satō (2010) defends his academic contributions. These debates reflect broader differences in how Zen has been interpreted across cultural contexts. Whilst Suzuki's interpretation has often been associated with a more universal and experiential understanding of Zen, existing scholarship also emphasises that such interpretations

should be situated within their historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, Suzuki's interpretation of Zen as a way of life is, to a certain extent, both a result of cultural translation and grounded in historical reality (Shuttleworth 2025).

Furthermore, the spread of Zen in the West is closely linked to the post-war cultural context (Yang 2007). Changes in social structures and spiritual crises following the Second World War fuelled counter-cultural movements (Gioia 2022), and Zen thought was widely incorporated into literary and artistic creation (Zhang 2024, pp. 1–16). However, this process of dissemination has also been accompanied by issues of translation and conceptual transformation. For instance, Suzuki's analogy of emptiness to God or the Absolute Spirit in different contexts, and semantic shifts in the translation of Buddhist scriptures (Cao 2024, p. 728), may both lead to misunderstandings. Consequently, in the course of disseminating Zen in the West, Suzuki both fostered cross-cultural dialogue and sparked controversies regarding simplification, misinterpretation and ideology. More importantly, Suzuki's interpretation became one of the principal intellectual channels through which Western artists, including Cage, first encountered Zen Buddhism. This historical context therefore provides an essential foundation for understanding Cage's subsequent engagement with Zen thought.

2.2. Zen Buddhism in Cage's Compositional Practice

Cage's own writings provide a more direct basis for understanding the relationship between Zen and his compositional thought. In the Foreword to Silence, Cage explicitly acknowledges Suzuki, indicating that Suzuki was not merely associated with him retrospectively by later scholars, but formed part of the intellectual context that Cage recognised. At the same time, Cage's writings repeatedly turn away from music as the controlled expression of a composer's intentions and towards an openness to sounds as they occur. These statements are important for the present argument because they show that Cage's concern was not primarily to formulate an abstract philosophical proposition about silence. Rather, he sought to establish compositional conditions in which sounds could be encountered without being fully subordinated to predetermined musical intention, thereby shifting attention from intentional musical production to the experience of listening itself. Piekut (2014) further notes that, through the manipulation of chance, Cage transformed a Zen-related attitude of observation into a compositional strategy and a generative mechanism for musical structure, thereby creating the possibility of a non-goal-oriented mode of perception. This transformation is particularly evident in specific works. For instance, *4′33″* suspends intentional musical production and redirects attention towards environmental sounds and the listener's own perceptual activity, thereby foregrounding the listener's auditory experience and revealing the experiential dimension of sound (Piekut 2014, pp. 769–824). *Imaginary Landscape* series (1939–1952) similarly embodies an openness to fleeting and partially uncontrollable sonic events (Nicholls 2002). This compositional approach departs from traditional Western compositional logic by shifting music from a fixed work-object towards a process of experience (Tan 2020). However, Cage's engagement with Zen was not a direct reproduction of Buddhist doctrine, but a creative transformation within a Western experimental context (S. Morris 2022). Through this process, selected Zen-related ideas were reconfigured within Cage's work as compositional strategies and modes of auditory attention, rather than as direct expressions of Buddhist doctrine, thereby acquiring a distinctive practical dimension in experimental music.

2.3. Interpretations and Limitations in Cage Studies

Although existing research has explored the relationship between Cage and Zen from multiple perspectives, there remain significant limitations overall. Firstly, most studies

tend to interpret the works from a philosophical or symbolic perspective, whilst paying insufficient attention to how performance mechanisms shape auditory experience in specific works. Taking *4′33″* as an example, the piece is often regarded as an embodiment of Zen philosophy (Pritchett 1993, p. 223). Relevant studies suggest that its nothingness is transformed into a spatialised perceptual experience (Peng 2019), or that it constructs a practical Zen experience by altering mechanisms of attention. Furthermore, some scholars have analysed the evolution of Cage's understanding of Zen from a diachronic perspective, correlating it with Zen cognitive models (Fan 2021).

However, these studies remain largely confined to the conceptual level, lacking in-depth analysis of the relationship between auditory mechanisms and Zen. At the same time, there is a tendency in cross-cultural research to symbolise or oversimplify Zen, thereby overlooking its operational nature in concrete practice (S. Morris 2022). Furthermore, some scholars have pointed out that Cage's understanding of Zen is essentially a creative misreading. That is, a reconstruction within a specific cultural context. In recent years, although interdisciplinary research has broadened interpretative perspectives, such as ecological aesthetics (Jaeger 2013), spatial and visual analysis (Whittington 2013, pp. 12–21), and the reconfiguration of subjectivity (Molina Barea 2020), it still generally lacks a systematic analytical approach centred on specific works. Even James Pritchett, in his research, has long focused on Cage's compositional practice whilst delving less deeply into Zen elements. It was only in his later work that he re-emphasised their significance.

2.4. Research Gap and Analytical Direction

In summary, whilst existing research has made significant progress in terms of philosophical interpretation and cross-cultural analysis, there remains a lack of systematic exploration into how Zen Buddhism is specifically manifested in Cage's music through sound structures, compositional mechanisms and the process of auditory experience. In particular, studies of *4′33″* often situate the work within the frameworks of the philosophy of language or semiotic interpretation, whilst its dimension as an experiential practice has yet to be fully revealed. On this basis, this paper argues that it is necessary to adopt a specific work analysis as the central approach, proceeding from musical practice to explore the actual modes of operation of Zen Buddhist thought within Cage's compositions. In this process, this paper will take *4′33″* as its primary object of analysis and, drawing on selected interpretative concepts from Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, particularly the Diamond Sutra, one of the foundational scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism that emphasises non-attachment and the relinquishing of attachment to fixed forms, together with the Heart Sutra, to interpret its manifestation in auditory experience. At the same time, this study critically reflects on potential interpretive distortions arising from cross-cultural translation by situating them within specific historical and intellectual contexts, and proposes an experience-centred interpretative approach that distinguishes historical influence from philosophical interpretation.

3. Work Analysis of *4′33″*

3.1. Overview of the Work and Performance Practice

Existing research on *4′33″* has largely focused on its conceptual art attributes, linguistic-philosophical interpretations, or symbolic significance within a postmodern context, such as linking it to Ludwig Wittgenstein or postmodern theory (Fielding 2014, pp. 157–67), whilst paying comparatively less attention to the work's compositional practice, performance mechanisms, and auditory experience. The composition of *4′33″* emerged within a broader post-war intellectual environment in which established artistic conventions were increasingly questioned and Zen Buddhism attracted growing attention among American

artists and intellectuals. D.T. Suzuki, as one of the key scholars responsible for introducing Zen to the West, provided an important intellectual context for Cage's engagement with Zen.

After attending Suzuki's lectures in the early 1950s, Cage began to systematically engage with and gain a deep understanding of Zen philosophy. With regard to Cage's assimilation of Zen thought, Larson (2012) observes that he articulated a desire to sustain inner calm in the midst of uncertainty. Although Cage's interest in Eastern thought had earlier been encouraged through his contact with Gita Sarabhai, his engagement with Suzuki's lectures marked a decisive stage in the development of his Zen-inspired compositional thinking. Larson argues that Cage gradually came to understand creative freedom as requiring a reduction in attachment to personal preference and self-centred intention. According to Larson (2012), it is evident that Cage gradually came to recognise that his creative anxiety stemmed largely from being dominated by the self. When his work or his own person faced rejection, he would sink into disappointment and self-doubt. From this perspective, Zen encouraged Cage to move away from self-expression and intentional control towards a more receptive mode of artistic practice. This also enabled John Cage to gradually grasp a philosophical perspective distinct from that of the West, one that questioned dualistic oppositions and privileged openness to contingent experience. For Cage, this transformation extended beyond philosophical reflection and increasingly informed his compositional practice through the reduction in subjective control and the introduction of non-intentional procedures.

Cage's encounter with the anechoic chamber provides a more immediate experiential context for the emergence of *4′33″*. For years, he had been interested in the possibility of absolute silence. However, when he entered an anechoic chamber at Harvard University, he reportedly heard two sounds: one high and one low. He was informed that the high sound was associated with the activity of his nervous system, whereas the low sound was related to the circulation of his blood. Regardless of the later scientific debate concerning the precise physiological sources of these sounds, the experience convinced Cage that absolute silence was unavailable to human perception. Even in a space designed to exclude external sound, listening continued to disclose sonic events. The importance of this episode lies in the way it transformed silence from an assumed absence of sound into a condition of intensified auditory attention. Cage's discovery was therefore experiential before it was theoretical: silence did not present itself as an empty acoustic field, but as a situation in which previously unnoticed sounds became perceptible. This insight provides an important context for *4′33″*. By suspending intentional sound production at the piano, the work does not create literal silence. However, it establishes a temporal and performative frame within which contingent bodily and environmental sounds can enter the listener's awareness. The relationship between apparent silence and the emergence of contingent sound can be interpreted through Mahāyāna concepts such as emptiness and dependent origination. From this perspective, silence is not an independently existing void, just as sound does not possess a fixed or self-sufficient identity. What is heard arises through changing conditions, including the performance space, the movements and bodies of those present, and the listener's shifting attention. The Mahāyāna concepts employed here therefore function as an interpretative framework for understanding Cage's experiential reorientation of listening, rather than as evidence that Cage consciously formulated this experience through systematic Madhyamaka or Heart Sutra philosophy.

This piece is performed on the piano, lasts *4′33″* from start to finish, and is divided into three movements. The division into three movements allows the work to retain the temporal framework of traditional music, whilst eliminating any predetermined sonic content within that framework, thereby transforming time itself into the central dimension of

the auditory experience. Apart from Tudor opening and closing the piano lid to mark the beginning and end of each movement, there are absolutely no other actions and no sounds produced by the piano. This action not only marks the boundaries of the movements but also constitutes a minimalist performance act, enabling the audience to establish a perception of the performance as it unfolds through the interplay of sight and sound. In this process, the listener ceases to be a passive recipient and becomes part of the sound-generating process; shifts in auditory attention therefore constitute the actual content of the work. This stands in contrast to the role of the audience in classical music, where they are listeners rather than creators of music. More broadly, Cage challenged the goal-oriented and composer-centred assumptions that characterised much of the Western classical tradition, advocating instead a mode of musical experience that reduced intentional control and allowed sounds to emerge according to the conditions of performance. This compositional strategy may be interpreted through the Zen Buddhist concepts of non-attachment and dependent origination. Zen emphasises letting go of attachment to the self, form and goals, enabling the individual to engage directly with phenomena in the present moment and experience the inherent existence of sounds or events. Within the interpretative framework adopted in this study, *4′33″* can therefore be understood as directing attention towards ambient sounds rather than predetermined musical materials. In other words, music is no longer bound by the composer's intentions or traditional structures, but is allowed to unfold through contingent relationships between performers, listeners, and the surrounding environment, its existence arising from conditions and lacking a fixed inherent nature. This practice reorients musical experience away from fixed musical objects towards contingent auditory events, which may be interpreted, within the present analytical framework, as corresponding to Mahāyāna ideas of dependent origination and emptiness.

From the day of the premiere and for several weeks afterwards, there was a steady stream of critical reports in the news and newspapers, and even several of Cage's close friends severed ties with him (Larson 2012). Yet Cage remarked that silence did not exist at all. In his Lecture on Nothing (1959), he further elaborated the ideas underlying the work, declaring: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." Rather than presenting silence as the absence of communication, this statement redirects attention from intentional expression towards the act of listening itself. From this perspective, *4′33″* does not ask the audience to search for hidden meanings behind silence. Instead, it invites listeners to attend to sounds that normally remain outside conventional musical awareness. The work therefore challenges habitual distinctions between music and non-music, not by abolishing these categories conceptually, but by allowing listeners to experience how such distinctions emerge through the act of listening. On the other hand, because we are aware of the limits of our own auditory experience, listeners may initially experience unfamiliarity or resistance when confronted with sounds that fall outside conventional musical expectations.

However, once these external sounds, such as the audience's coughs, the scraping of chairs and the sound of breathing, are incorporated into the listener's auditory experience, they become part of the listener's experience of the work, challenging conventional distinctions between music and non-music. Furthermore, through sustained listening, the work encourages audiences to recognise that musical experience extends beyond intentionally produced sounds to include contingent environmental events. Within the interpretative framework adopted in this study, this openness to contingent sound may be understood in relation to Mahāyāna ideas of dependent origination and emptiness. Rather than revealing a hidden metaphysical reality, the work invites listeners to experience how sounds arise through changing conditions and shifting attention.

Accordingly, it may be argued that what Cage sought to present to the audience was not Tudor's every movement on stage, nor whether he would actually produce a sound

from the piano, but rather whether listeners attended to the often-overlooked sounds within the concert hall, such as the murmur of conversation, the opening and closing of doors, or the sound of a cough. These everyday sounds not only reflect Cage's pursuit of expanding the boundaries of music to include environmental sound, but also provide a basis for interpreting the work through Buddhist perspectives that emphasise everyday practice. Within the interpretative framework adopted in this study, this openness to ordinary sounds may be understood in relation to the Diamond Sutra's concept of non-attachment (anupalambha), which encourages engagement with phenomena without fixation upon predetermined forms or expectations. Similarly, had Cage explicitly explained the intended philosophical significance of the work before the performance, audiences would likely have approached the surrounding sounds with predetermined expectations. Such expectations would have altered the openness of the listening experience that the work seeks to establish. This perception of wholeness is not an abstract philosophical experience, but is realised through an open acceptance of environmental sounds within the concrete act of listening.

Indeed, this work clearly lends itself to more than one analytical perspective. While previous studies have approached *4′33″* from various philosophical and cultural perspectives, this study focuses specifically on Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhist concepts because they provide a useful interpretative framework for examining the relationship between silence, sound, and auditory experience. Rather than suggesting that Cage directly adopted specific Mahāyāna doctrines, this approach examines how concepts such as emptiness and dependent origination may illuminate the experiential mechanisms through which the work reorganises listening. For instance, in the philosophy of the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka school, Nāgārjuna proposed the concepts of emptiness and the wisdom of emptiness, arguing that all phenomena lack inherent nature, their existence arises through dependent origination and is merely a conventional designation (an arrangement of language and concepts), rather than an inherent entity. From the perspective of Madhyamaka philosophy, the generation of sound in the work can be understood as a dynamic process that does not adhere to a fixed form. The existence and disappearance of sound also have no inherent nature. The silences in the performance allow the listener to perceive the dependent origination and transience of environmental sounds. Moreover, the Madhyamaka school holds that the function of emptiness lies in dispelling attachment and prejudice, thereby leading to the realisation of the true nature of all phenomena. Within the present analytical framework, this idea can be used to interpret how *4′33″* challenges habitual assumptions about musical categories and redirects attention towards the conditions through which sound becomes perceptible.

Furthermore, the work can be understood in conjunction with the Madhyamaka doctrine of the Two Truths. From the perspective of the Conventional Truth, these ambient noises are concrete, perceptible phenomena, much like the various things arising from causes and conditions in our daily lives. These sounds exist as temporarily occurring phenomena, yet possess no fixed inherent nature. They merely manifest in dependence on conditions. The work seeks to direct the audience's attention towards these everyday phenomena, revealing how sound becomes meaningful through specific perceptual and situational conditions, whilst simultaneously making the audience aware that their habitual selective attention to sound is, in fact, a form of attachment to and conceptualisation of the world. On the level of Ultimate Truth, the work may be interpreted as challenging the assumption that musical categories possess fixed boundaries or independent existence. Tudor's act of remaining silent effectively reveals that the boundary between music and non-music is not absolute; both sound and silence are phenomena arising from conditions, neither existing nor non-existing. Through this reorientation of listening, *4′33″* provides

an experiential context in which listeners may perceive the relational and contingent nature of sound, corresponding to the Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness.

3.2. The Perspective of Western Philosophy on 4′33″

In analysing these diverse interpretative perspectives, it is necessary to consider the methodological assumptions underlying different approaches to *4′33″*. This is not only because Suzuki Westernised Zen Buddhism, but more importantly because current interpretations of this work also draw upon the perspectives of Wittgenstein and Jean-François Lyotard. This study does not seek to reject these approaches; rather, it aims to examine the extent to which they illuminate, or potentially overlook, the experiential dimension of the work. When employing Western philosophical frameworks to interpret *4′33″*, there is a possibility that analytical attention may shift towards questions of language, representation, and conceptual meaning, while the work's performative and perceptual dimensions receive comparatively less attention. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the value of Western theoretical tools, this study adopts a pluralistic interpretative approach that considers both philosophical analysis and the concrete experience of listening, particularly the ways in which Zen-related perspectives may contribute to understanding the work's auditory structure and performance practice.

In his article "An Aesthetics of the Ordinary: Wittgenstein and John Cage" (2014), James Fielding argues that *4′33″* is not merely silence; it resonates with the concept of silence in Wittgenstein's early philosophy, specifically Proposition 7 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (2023): "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." By refraining entirely from playing conventional musical notes, Cage compels the audience to confront environmental sounds directly, thereby prompting a renewed perception of music's boundaries and mode of existence. Fielding's interpretation provides an important philosophical perspective for understanding the work, particularly its challenge to conventional assumptions about music and silence. At the same time, certain parallels may also be observed between Wittgenstein's notion of silence and aspects of Zen Buddhist thought. From the perspective of both Wittgenstein and Zen Buddhism, the metaphysical or ultimate dimension of reality is understood as exceeding ordinary language and conceptualisation. Zen Buddhism holds that the essence of Zen, that is, one's inherent nature, is ineffable. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, introduces the notion of Schweigen (silence), not merely as the absence of speech, but as an acknowledgement of the limits of linguistic expression (Wittgenstein 2023). For this reason, some scholars have noted a resemblance between Wittgenstein's concept of silence and the notion of "silent eloquence" (moran wuyan, 默然無言) in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Nevertheless, these similarities should not obscure the important philosophical differences between the two traditions. In Zen, the emphasis lies on the direct realization of one's mind and nature. As stated in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, awakening and delusion lie within oneself, gain and loss depend on oneself* (miwuzairen, sunyiyouji 迷悟在人, 損益由己). Wittgenstein, in contrast, centers on the problem of language, suggesting that philosophical problems arise from the confusions and misuses of language.

It is clear that Wittgenstein's silence is founded upon the logical framework of the philosophy of language; its purpose is to establish the boundary relationship between language and the world by clarifying the limits of what can be said, thereby indirectly revealing the existence of what cannot be said. In this sense, Wittgenstein's silence functions primarily as a conceptual and epistemological boundary concerning language and meaning. By contrast, *4′33″* may be interpreted as adopting a different orientation: rather than defining the limits of expression, it creates a practical situation in which listening itself becomes the focus of experience. By eliminating musical sounds in the traditional sense, it

prompts the listener to perceive directly the emergence and dissipation of ambient sounds, liberating sound from prescribed musical structures and revealing its contingent and non-essential nature. Consequently, in methodological terms, *4′33″* is closer to an experiential approach to perception, a characteristic that corresponds to some extent with the practices of Zen Buddhism. That is to say, it does not seek to grasp reality through linguistic or conceptual analysis, but rather to explore how meaning emerges through direct engagement with present auditory experience. It is thus evident that Wittgenstein's silence points to the limits of language, whilst Cage's silence points to the unfolding of experience. Although the two approaches share an interest in the relationship between silence and what exceeds ordinary expression, they differ fundamentally in their methodological orientations: one begins with linguistic analysis, while the other begins with perceptual experience.

However, it is precisely within this difference that a key methodological question arises. When different philosophical traditions are employed to interpret *4′33″*, how can the historical context of Cage's engagement with Zen be distinguished from the analytical frameworks later applied to the work? In other words, how can interpretation avoid conflating historical influence with philosophical reconstruction? This question must be examined within the broader context of the cross-cultural transmission of Zen Buddhism, where concepts are often reinterpreted through new intellectual frameworks. The history of modern Zen scholarship illustrates this complexity. Thinkers such as Nishida Kitarō sought to place Zen into dialogue with Western philosophy by engaging with phenomenology and German idealism, thereby creating a philosophical synthesis between Eastern Buddhist thought and Western rational traditions. This process contributed significantly to cross-cultural philosophical exchange, yet it also demonstrates that the transmission of Zen inevitably involves processes of reinterpretation rather than simple preservation of original meanings. Accordingly, when Wittgensteinian or postmodern approaches are applied to *4′33″*, the central methodological issue is not whether these interpretations are legitimate, but rather what dimensions of the work they illuminate and what aspects may remain less fully explained. Such approaches provide valuable insights into questions of language, meaning, and representation; however, they may place greater emphasis on conceptual structures than on the experiential and performative dimensions through which Cage's work operates. Therefore, the present study does not seek to replace Western philosophical interpretations with a Zen-based approach, but rather to complement existing scholarship by highlighting how *4′33″* functions as an experiential practice of listening. From this perspective, the work may be understood not only as a philosophical reflection on silence, but also as a reconfiguration of auditory experience through performance, attention, and the contingent emergence of sound.

Nevertheless, Nishida's philosophical perspective also provides a valuable point of reference for understanding *4′33″*. Although the Logic of Place emphasises the unity of absolute reality and subjective experience, its understanding of emptiness is more closely associated with concrete lived experience than with abstract metaphysical speculation. Rather than referring to an absolute nothingness beyond the world, emptiness may be understood as an experiential mode of engaging with reality through attentive awareness of everyday phenomena. A similar emphasis appears in the writings of the Caodong master Hongzhi Zhengjue, who described the natural unfolding of experience as follows: "the water is clear to the bottom, and the fish move as fish; the sky is vast and transparent, and the birds fly as birds" (shuiqingchedixi, yuxingsiyu, kongkuotoutian, niaofeiruniao 水清徹地兮, 魚行似魚; 空闊透天, 鳥飛如鳥). Here, ordinary phenomena are not objects requiring conceptual interpretation, but events encountered directly through awareness. Within the interpretative framework adopted in this study, this perspective helps explain the listening experience created by *4′33″*. Audience members often enter the concert hall

expecting Tudor's gestures to produce conventional musical sounds. These expectations arise from established musical conventions and habitual modes of listening. When such expectations are suspended through the performer's silence, listeners are encouraged to redirect their attention from anticipated musical events towards the sounds already present within the performance environment. In this sense, the work does not require listeners to arrive at a predetermined philosophical insight; rather, it creates the conditions under which ordinary sounds may be experienced with renewed attention. This experience-oriented understanding is closer to the Zen tradition represented by Hongzhi and, to some extent, resonates with Nishida's emphasis on lived experience, while remaining distinct from interpretations primarily centred upon language or conceptual analysis.

Overall, interpreting *4′33″* through Wittgensteinian or other postmodern perspectives may be understood as part of a broader process of cross-cultural philosophical interpretation, comparable in certain respects to Nishida's engagement with Zen and Western philosophy. However, such an interpretative process should not be regarded as either inherently reductive or inherently faithful. However, its philosophical value depends upon how the analytical framework is employed. When these theories are adopted as dialogical interpretative resources that remain attentive to the historical and experiential context of Cage's engagement with Zen, they enrich our understanding of the work by revealing its multiple meanings across different intellectual traditions. By contrast, when any single philosophical framework—whether Western or Eastern—is treated as exhaustive, there is a risk that other important dimensions of the work may receive less attention. The present study therefore argues for a pluralistic interpretative approach, one that combines historical context, philosophical analysis, and experiential listening. From this perspective, Zen- and Mahāyāna-informed concepts are not intended to replace existing Western philosophical interpretations, but to complement them by illuminating the performative, auditory, and experiential dimensions of *4′33″* that have remained comparatively underexplored.

4. Conclusions

This study has argued that *4′33″* is understood as an experiential practice of listening rather than merely as a conceptual proposition concerning silence. By suspending intentional musical production and redirecting attention towards environmental sounds, the work creates conditions in which listening itself becomes the central mode of musical experience. Rather than presenting silence as the absence of sound, Cage establishes a performative situation in which contingent sounds emerge through the interaction between performers, listeners, and the surrounding environment. Within this context, the work encourages audiences to reconsider conventional distinctions between sound and silence, music and non-music, thereby addressing the first research question concerning the experiential nature of *4′33″*.

To explain this experiential reconfiguration of listening, this study has employed selected Zen- and Mahāyāna-informed concepts as an interpretative framework while carefully distinguishing them from Cage's historically documented engagement with Zen Buddhism. From a historical perspective, Cage's encounter with Zen occurred primarily through D. T. Suzuki within the broader post-war intellectual climate, which encouraged his movement away from subjective self-expression towards openness, contingency, and non-intentionality. At the analytical level, however, concepts such as emptiness, dependent origination, and the Two Truths are employed not as evidence of Cage's direct philosophical commitments, but as interpretative resources for explaining how *4′33″* reorganises auditory perception and experiential listening. This distinction between historical influence and philosophical interpretation provides a clearer methodological foundation for cross-cultural analysis and answers the second research question.

The third research question concerns the relationship between this interpretative framework and existing Western philosophical approaches, particularly Wittgensteinian interpretations. Rather than rejecting these perspectives, this study argues that they illuminate different dimensions of the work. Wittgenstein's philosophy primarily examines the limits of language and representation, whereas the Zen- and Mahāyāna-informed framework adopted here places greater emphasis on the performative and experiential dimensions of listening. Accordingly, these approaches should be understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. By distinguishing historical context from philosophical reconstruction, the present study demonstrates how different intellectual traditions can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of *4′33″* without reducing it to a single theoretical framework.

Overall, this study contributes to existing scholarship by proposing an experience-centred and cross-cultural interpretative approach to *4′33″*. Rather than treating Zen merely as a source of intellectual influence or cultural symbolism, it demonstrates how selected Mahāyāna concepts can function as analytical tools for understanding the work's auditory organisation and listening experience, while remaining distinct from claims concerning Cage's direct philosophical intentions. More broadly, this approach contributes to ongoing discussions of experimental music, intercultural aesthetics, and philosophical interpretation by illustrating how multiple intellectual traditions may illuminate complementary aspects of musical experience. Future research may further explore the relationship between Cage's experimental practice and other philosophical or religious traditions, thereby extending the possibilities for cross-cultural studies of listening, performance, and musical meaning.

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