

Dear Samuel,

we haven't spoken about silence yet.

I think, after our August silence, it might be the right moment to ask you to say a few things about silence.

As you know, for me silence is a key concept / experience / focus.

Does it have a similar importance to you?

Yours,

Antoine

Dear Antoine,

Thinking your question over, I realized that silence does not play a very central role in my work, though of course it can play an important role.

At the same time, of course, the work of John Cage is an important reference for me, as he is for you; likewise, in the past few years, your own work and that of other composers associated with Wandelweiser has become an important reference for me, too. And I'm very aware that silence is an important aspect in all that work. So that made me wonder why it seems less of a concern for me.

It seems that in many works, I've been interested in the almost complete polar opposite of silence. I don't mean unbearably loud noise; I mean textural saturation. For example, one of the fundamental ideas of one of my most important works, *20 Worlds* (2005) for two pianos, was that the score would not allow for a single silence or rest, and theoretically speaking it is even a piece without beginning or end. It's a piece of sheer movement.

It seems to me that this may well be some sort of equivalent to what silence does in other work. There was an attempt in a work like *20 Worlds* to get to a sense of pure motion, that would not necessarily be actually going somewhere. Which means that for all the acoustic and contrapuntal richness of that piece, its layering of textures and constant variation, its sense of chaos perhaps even, there is a kind of stillness underlying all that.

Possibly, then, what I see in how silence is used in the work of others is something I translate as "stillness" in a piece, which for me would be the way in which the piece manages to clearly define the focus of the listener.

I think I'm not interested in the stillness as such, though. For me, this stillness, or this definition of focus, is like the clearing, the empty place, in which experiences can be encountered. Likewise, in listening to "silent" pieces, what interests me is not the silence as such, but what it might bring about, an experience that itself is not silent at all.

But it's probably not true that silence and consistent saturation really work in the same manner, and it would be worth investigating the difference more deeply. For one, your question made me realize

that I tend to be a bit wary about silence, since I feel stressing it may lead to a kind of mysticism that feel I need to be careful with. There exist whole discourses of Nothingness as something like the core of being, which, I feel, are in danger of actually elevating nothingness into a thing and fetishizing it. And silence always runs the risk of being interpreted as pointing towards such nothingness. The danger here is that silence becomes no longer productive, no longer the open place, but becomes a mere nihilistic effect of solemnity, which would render it sterile in my view. But it may generally not even be possible to decide whether or not a silence is of the productive or of the sterile kind. That tension itself might well be one of the things that makes silence such a fertile site.

Your question also makes me wonder if between us, this might be a difference of sensibility? Is it possible that you are more interested in, or perhaps less wary of, mysticism? I'm also thinking here about how you have been engaged with Juan de la Cruz, whose work I have not (yet) made a deep connection with myself. So I wonder if we are actually looking at these things differently, or perhaps not. If we do have a difference here, that wouldn't hurt, I think – so far, we've found ourselves basically agreeing on everything! So I would be curious to hear some of your thoughts on this.

Finally, I also realized that silence, though never a central concern, does play an important role in quite a few works. I think that if I do use actual silence, it tends to mark a moment that should somehow brim with potential. In my work, after a silence (or some "silence-like" moment), something starts; and I'm interested in that moment, the impossible moment when something begins. This was a driving concern in my piece *Krise* (2002), in which the piece consistently starts again and again, not from a strict silence but from a silence-like note A flat; every new "scene" then was to start explosively with a quasi-random collection of materials, from which performers half-improvisingly would gradually retreat to the A flat sound again. Likewise, one of my most important pieces, *Worlds and Harmony* (2006-2008) was constructed around the idea of a (relatively) long silence happening at about 1/3 of the piece, from which "suddenly" the entire 12-piece ensemble was to start with a beautiful, rich, soft, dense polyphony, starting a long stretch of near total counterpoint of about 20 minutes. (I'm sad to have to admit that the piece has never been performed so far, the ensemble for which it was composed having folded right as I was finishing it.)

Another use that I have found in my work is silence as a limit: quite a few pieces, especially those involving strings, gradually disappear into (almost) nothingness. Here, silence is a horizon; I don't want to evoke actual nothingness, but a retreat into ever grander, hence ever more elusive, potential.

For now, that's what roles I can think of that silence have played in my work. But I'd like to ask your own question back to you now. Would you like to elaborate on your experience of, or with, silence?