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Listening for Silence: Notes on the Aural Life

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Mark Slouka (1958–) is the author of *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* (1995), a critical examination of the Internet and its political promises. He has also written *God's Fool* (2002), a novel about the 19th century Siamese twins Chang and Eng, and a collection of stories titled *Lost Lake* (1998). The following piece, first published in *Harper's Magazine*, draws on Debussy, Melville, Cage, and others to offer a compelling meditation on silence—and the loss of silence—in contemporary life. The essay extends and updates R. Murray Schafer's groundbreaking examination of silence, noise, and the modern soundscape; and it helps to explicate the fascination with silence that runs throughout modern music, from Cage and Feldman to Radu Malfatti and the "onkyo" improvisation scene in Japan.

Music, Claude Debussy once famously remarked, is the stuff between the notes, an observation that resonates, pardon the pun, from the flawless spacing of a Billie Holiday tune to the deletions—whether generous or cruel—in our daily lives. Essentially neuter, neither balm nor curse, silence, like light or love, requires a medium to give it meaning, takes on the color of its host, adapts easily to our fears and needs. Quite apart from whether we seek or shun it, silence orchestrates the music of our days.

I'm well aware, of course, that one man's music is another man's noise, that the primary differences between a cork-lined room and solitary confinement are the lock on the door and the sensibility of the inmate. I wish not to define silence but to inquire about its absence, and I ask the question not to restate the obvious—that silence, in its way, is fundamental to life, the emotional equivalent of carbon—but because everywhere I turn I see a culture willing to deny that essential truth. In my idle moments I picture a god from my son's book of myths (with an Olympian straw and sucked-in cheeks) drawing the silence out of the land, and if the conceit

is fanciful, the effect, sadly, is not: as silence disappears, the world draws tighter, borders collapse, the public and the private bleed and intermix. Victim to the centripetal pull, the imagination crackles with the static of outside frequencies, while somewhere in the soul—listen!—a cell phone is chirping. Answer it quickly, before someone else does.

At the close of the millennium, a new Tower of Babel, monolingual (despite the superficial mixture of tongues), homogeneous (because almost invariably pitched in the vernacular of the marketplace), casts its shadow over the land. Ubiquitous, damn-near inescapable, it is rearranging the way we live, forcing crucial adjustments in our behavior, straining our capacity for adaptation. If it continues to grow, as I believe it will, future generations may one day distinguish our age not for its discovery of Elsewhere, as E. B. White called the world beyond the television screen, but for its colonization of silence.

Ensnared in webs of sound, those of us living in the industrialized West today must pick our way through a discordant, infinite-channeled auditory landscape. Like a radio stuck on permanent scan, the culture lashes us with skittering bits and bytes, each dragging its piece of historical or emotional context: a commercial overheard in traffic, a falsely urgent weather report, a burst of canned laughter, half a refrain. The pager interrupts lectures, sermons, second acts, and funerals. Everywhere a new song begins before the last one ends, as though to guard us against even the potential of silence. Each place we turn, a new world—synthetic, fragmented, often as not jacked into the increasingly complex grid that makes up the global communications network—encroaches on the old world of direct experience, of authentic, unadorned events with their particular, unadorned sounds.

Although a great deal has been said about our increasingly visual age, the changes to our aural landscape have gone relatively unremarked. The image has grown so voracious that any child asked to sum up the century will instantly visualize Einstein's hair and Hitler's mustache, mushroom clouds and moon landing; this despite the fact that each of these visual moments has its aural correlative, from the blast over Hiroshima to the high-pitched staccato ravings of the Führer, to Neil Armstrong's static-ridden "giant leap for mankind."

But make no mistake: sound will have its dominion. The aural universe, though subtler than the one that imprints itself on our retina, is more invasive, less easily blocked. It mocks our sanctuaries as light never can. If my neighbor decides to wash his car in front of my study window, as he does often, I can block out the uninspiring sight of his pimpled posterior by drawing the shades; to block out his stereo, I must kill noise with noise. We hear in our sleep. There is no aural equivalent for the eyelid. In our day, when the phone can ring, quite literally, anywhere on the planet, this is not necessarily good news.

I have nothing against my aural canal. I adore music (though I make it badly). I have nothing against a good party, the roar of the crowd. But I make a distinction between nourishment and gluttony: the first is a necessity, even a pleasure; the second, a symptom. Of what? In a word, fear. One of the unanticipated side effects of connectedness. Perhaps because it's never enough, or because, having immersed ourselves in the age of mediation (as Bill Gates refers to it), accustomed ourselves to its ways and means, we sense our dependency. Or because, finally, like isolated apartment dwellers running the TV for company, we sense a deeper

isolation beneath the babble of voices, the poverty of our communications. So, adaptable to a fault, we embrace this brave new cacophony, attuned, like apprentice ornithologists, to the distinguishing calls of a mechanical phylum. Capable of differentiating between the cheeps and chimes of the cell phones, portable phones, baby monitors, pagers, scanners, personal digital assistants, laptop computers, car alarms, and so on that fill our lives, we've grown adept, at the same time, at blocking them out with sounds of our own, at forcing a privacy where none exists.

At the supermarket, a middle-aged man in a well-cut suit is calling someone a bitch on the phone. Unable to get to the ricotta cheese, I wait, vaguely uncomfortable, feeling as though I'm eavesdropping. At the gym, the beeps of computerized treadmills clash with the phones at the front desk, the announcements of upcoming discounts, the disco version of Gordon Lightfoot's "If You Could Read My Mind." A number of individuals in Walkman earphones, unaware that they've begun to sing, bellow and moan like the deaf.

"I love a wide margin to my life," Thoreau remarked, quaintly, referring to the space—the silence—requisite for contemplation, or, more quaintly, the forming of a self. A century and a half later, aural text covers the psychic page, spills over; the margin is gone. Walking to work, we pass over rumbling pipes and humming cables, beneath airplane flight corridors and satellite broadcasts, through radio and television transmissions whose sounds, reconstituted from binary code, mix and mingle, overlap and clash, and everywhere drifts the aural refuse of our age.

Thus may the stuff between the discordant notes of our lives require—and I'm not unaware of the irony here—a few words in its defense. Begin anywhere. The cottage in which I spend my summers is silent yet full of sound: the rainy hush of wind in the oaks, the scrabble of a hickory nut rolling down the roof, the slurp of the dog in the next room, interminably licking himself . . . I've never known perfect silence. I hope to avoid making its acquaintance for some time to come, yet I court it daily.

My ambivalence toward silence is natural enough: the grave, the scythe, the frozen clock, all the piled symbols of death, reinforce an essential truth, a primal fear: beneath the sloping hood, death is voiceless. Silence spits us out and engulfs us again, one and all, and all the noisemakers on Bourbon Street, all the clattering figurines in Cuernavaca can't undo the unpleasant fact that *el día*, properly understood, always ends in *la muerte*, that quiet, like a pair of great parentheses around a dependent clause, closes off our days. Sorry.

But if it's true that all symphonies end in silence, it's equally true that they begin there as well. Silence, after all, both buries and births us, and just as life without the counterweight of mortality would mean nothing, so silence alone, by offering itself as the eternal Other, makes our music possible. The image of Beethoven composing against the growing void, like all clichés, illuminates a common truth: fear forces our hand, inspires us, makes visible the things we love.

But wait. Does this mean that all is well? That the pendulum swings, the chorus turns in stately strophe and antistrophe, the buds of May routinely answer winter's dark aphelion? Not quite. We are right to be afraid of silence, to resist that sucking vacuum—however much we depend on it—to claw and scratch against

oblivion. The battle is in deadly earnest. And therein lies the joke. Resistance is one thing, victory another.

Left partially deaf by a childhood inflammation of the mastoid bones, Thomas Edison throughout his life embraced the world of silence, reveled in its space, allowed it to empower him; as much as any man, perhaps, he recognized silence as the territory of inspiration and cultivated its gifts. Deafness, his biographers agree, acted like an auditory veil, separating him from the world's distractions, allowing him to attend to what he called his business: thinking.

I mention these facts, however, not for the small and obvious irony that a man so indebted to silence should do more than any other to fill the world with noise—but to set the context for a scene I find strangely compelling. In June 1911, hard at work on what would eventually become the disk phonograph, Edison hired a pianist to play for him (as loudly as possible) the world's entire repertoire of waltzes. And there, in the salon at Glenmont, either out of frustration at not being able to hear the music to his satisfaction or, as I'd like to believe, out of sudden desperate love for the thing he'd missed (as charged as any of love's first fumbblings), the sixty-four-year-old Edison got on his hands and knees and bit into the piano's wood, the better to hear its vibrations. Will Edison's fate be our own? Afloat in the river of sound loosed upon the world by Edison's inventions, having drunk from it until our ears ring, we now risk a similar thirst.

Tacked to the wall above my desk, staring out from a page torn from the back of *The New York Times Magazine*, are the faces of seventeen men and women whose portraits were taken by KGB photographers more than half a century ago, then filed, along with hundreds of thousands like them, in the top-secret dossiers of Stalin's secret police. Over the years, I've come to know the faces in these photographs nearly as well as I know those of the living. I study them often—the woman at the left whose graying hair has begun to loosen, the beautiful young man at the right, the fading lieutenant at the bottom corner whose cheeks, I suspect, had the same roughness and warmth as my father's—because each and every one of them, within hours of having his or her picture taken, was driven to a forest south of Moscow and executed; because all, or nearly all, knew their fate at the time their pictures were taken; and because, finally, having inherited a good dose of Slavic morbidity (and sentimentalism), I couldn't bear to compound the silence of all of those lives unlive by returning them—mothers and fathers, sons and lovers—to the oblivion of yet another archive, the purgatory of microfiche. On my wall, in some small measure, they are not forgotten; they have a voice.

Today, as the panopticon reveals to us, as never before, the agony of our species, the lesson is repeated daily. We read it in the skulls of Srebrenica, growing out of the soil, in the open mouths of the dead from Guatemala to the Thai-Cambodian border, whose characteristic posture—head back, neck arched—seems almost a universal language: the harvest of dictatorship, properly understood, is not death, but silence. Mr. Pinochet's "los desaparecidos" (like Slobodan Milosevic's, or Heinrich Himmler's), are really "los callados" (the silenced), the snuffing of their voices only the last, most brutal expression of a system dependent on silence as a tool of repression. The enforced quiet of censorship and propaganda, of burning pages and jammed frequencies, is different from the gun to the temple only in degree, not in kind.

And yet who could deny that silence, though both the means and end of totalitarian repression, is also its natural enemy? That silence, the habitat of the imagination, not only allows us to grow the spore of identity but, multiplied a millionfold, creates the rich loam in which a genuine democracy thrives. In the silence of our own minds, in the quiet margins of the text, we are made different from one another as well as able to understand others' differences from us.

In the famous John Cage composition *4'33"*, the pianist walks on stage, bows, flips the tail of his tuxedo, and seats himself at the piano. Taking a stopwatch out of his vest pocket, he presses the start button then stares at the keys for precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds. When the time is up, he closes the piano and leaves the stage.

Nearly half a century after it was first performed, *4'33"* rightly strikes us as hackneyed and worn, a postmodern cliché intent on blurring a line (between art and non-art, order and disorder, formal structure and random influence) that has long since been erased. As simple theater, however, it still has power. Cage's portrait of the artist frozen before his medium, intensely aware of his allotted time, unable to draw a shape out of the universe of possibilities, carries a certain allegorical charge, because we recognize in its symbolism—so apparently childlike, so starkly Manichaeian—a lesson worthy of Euripedes: art, whatever its medium, attempts to force a wedge beneath the closed lid of the world, and fails; the artist, in his or her minutes and seconds, attempts to say—to paint, to carve; in sum, to communicate—what ultimately cannot be communicated. In the end, the wedge breaks; the lid stays shut. The artist looks at his watch and leaves the stage, his "success" measurable only by the relative depth of his failure. Too bad. There are worse things.

But if silence is the enemy of art, it is also its motivation and medium: the greatest works not only draw on silence for inspiration but use it, flirt with it, turn it, for a time, against itself. To succeed at all, in other words, art must partake of its opposite, suggest its own dissolution. Examples are legion: once attuned to the music of absence, the eloquence of omission or restraint, one hears it everywhere—in the sudden vertiginous stop of an Elizabeth Bishop poem; in the space between souls in an Edward Hopper painting; in Satchmo's mastery of the wide margins when singing "I'm Just a Lucky So and So." In the final paragraph of Frank O'Connor's small masterpiece "Guests of the Nation," an Irish soldier recalls looking over patch of bog containing the graves of two British soldiers he's just been forced to execute, and observes, simply, "And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again." Such a black hole of a line, dense with rejected possibilities, merciless in its willingness to sacrifice everything for a quick stab at truth.

"Silence," wrote Melville, only five years before withdrawing from writing more or less for good, "is the only Voice of our God." The assertion, like its subject, cuts both ways, negating and affirming, implying both absence and presence, offering us a choice; it's a line that the Society of American Atheists could put on its letterhead and the Society of Friends could silently endorse while waiting to be moved by the spirit to speak. What makes the line particularly notable, however, is that it appears in *Pierre, or, the Ambiguities*, a novel that, perhaps more than any other

in American literature, calls attention to its own silences, its fragility. Offering us a hero who is both American Christ and Holy Fool, martyr and murderer, writer and subject, Melville propels him toward his death with such abandon, with such a feel for what Thomas Mann would one day call "the voluptuousness of doom," that even his language gets caught in the vortex: in one particularly eerie passage we watch the same sentence, repeated four times, pruned of adverbs, conjunctions, dependent clauses, until it very nearly disappears before our eyes.

There's nothing safe about this brinkmanship, nothing of the deconstructionists' empty posturings. "He can neither believe," Hawthorne wrote, "nor be comfortable in his unbelief." Melville had simply allowed his doubts to bleed into his art. As they will. Having "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated," he quite naturally took his writing with him.

Reading *Pierre* is an uncomfortable business, akin to watching an artist painstakingly put the finishing touches on his own epitaph. One naturally hopes for a slightly more redemptive vision, a vision that shifts the stress from the inevitability of doom and the triumph of silence to the creative energy these release to the living. Within Melville's own work, we don't have far to look. In *Moby Dick*, the book he wrote just before *Pierre*, Melville also engineered an apocalypse yet managed to remain far enough away to avoid its pull, to save something, to offer us a metaphor that captures perfectly the tensions essential to our work and our lives. Something survives the *Pequod's* sinking; though silence may reign over the waters, the vortex eventually slows. The coffin bursts to the surface. And on that coffin are the hieroglyphics of our art.

If one of the characteristics of capitalism is that it tends to shut down options, narrow the margins, then perhaps what we are seeing these days is one of the side effects of the so-called free market: most of the noises we hear are the noises of buying and selling. Even the communication between individuals has been harnessed to the technologies that make them possible: to be deprived of the fax machine, the cell phone, the TV, the pager, etc., is to be relegated to silence. Communication, having been narrowed into whatever can be squeezed into binary code, has been redefined by the marketplace into a commodity itself.

Yet capitalism, we know, always tries to feed the hungers it creates, to concoct its own antidotes—so long as the price is right. As the vast silences of the republic are paved over by designer outlets and shopping malls, a kind of island ecosystem remains, self-conscious in its fragility, barely viable. The proof is detectable in any upscale travel magazine: there you will find exclusive spas advertising the promise of silence—no pagers, no cell phones, just the sounds of lake water lapping—as though silence were a rare Chardonnay or an exclusive bit of scenery, which, of course, is precisely what it now is.

That silence, like solitude, is now a commodity should not surprise us. Money buys space, and space buys silence; decibels and dollars are inversely proportional. Lacking money, I've lived with noise—with the sounds of fucking and feuding in the airshaft, MTV and Maury Povitch coming through the walls, in apartments with ceilings so thin I could hear the click of a clothes hanger placed on a rod or the lusty stream of an upstairs neighbor urinating after a long night out. I've accepted this, if not gracefully at least with a measure of resignation. The great advantage that money confers, I now realize, is not silence per se but the *option*

of silence, the privilege of choosing one's own music, of shutting out the seventeen-year-old whose boombox nightly rattles my panes.

But if the ability to engineer one's own silence has been one of the age-old prerogatives of wealth, it's also true that the rapidly changing aural landscape of the late twentieth century has raised the status (and value) of silence enormously. As the world of the made, to recall e. e. cummings, replaces the world of the born, as the small sounds of fields at dusk or babies crying in the next apartment are erased by the noise of traffic and Oprah, as even our few remaining bits of wilderness are pressed thin and flat beneath satellite transmissions, Forest Service bulldozers, and airplane flight corridors, we grow sentimental for what little has escaped us and automatically reach for our wallets. Like a telltale lesion that appears only on those who are desperately ill, value—even outrageous value—often blossoms on things just before they leave us, and if the analogy is an ugly one, it is also appropriate; the sudden spasm of love for the thing we're killing, after all, is as obscene as it is human. As we continue to pave the world with sound, we will continue to crave what little silence escapes us, an emptiness made audible by its disappearance.