

JOHN CAGE RADIO WITH OUT VOICE

1. One¹² 4:52

2. Radio Music 6:15

3. Sculptures Musicales 5:30

4. Speech 42:18

Total playing time 58:56

We hear over the radio a conversation sticking... (John Cage, X)

John Cage's Enduring Fascination with the Airwaves

Radio: reception and transmission of electromagnetic waves, often carrying sound; to carry or disseminate a message; the activity, industry and means of public sound broadcasting.

Radio-voice-sound: three words, both nouns and verbs, things and actions, that are so interdependent upon each other as to be almost synonymous, weaving an intricate and endless dance of dissemination and reception, decentering fixed notions of time and place, authorship and audience, listening and performing.

Battling competition from film, television and the internet, radio has adapted and continued to thrive throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Providing information and entertainment in equal measure, it is the medium that simply refuses to die. Playing in homes, offices, shops and cars, portable and affordable, for many, it is the soundtrack to (and of) everyday life, but it also plays a pivotal role in the 20th century experimental music tradition in Europe and the USA, occurring in a hugely diverse array of musical repertoire from the concert hall to sound art, and from the smallest chamber pieces to the largest symphonic creations and multimedia extravaganzas. Radio is a medium that depends on the disembodied, yet always present, human voice for the vast majority of its content. From the dissemination of broadcast news, drama, advertising, discussion programmes, lectures and educational content, to the huge quantity of vocal music—pop and classical—and (its spoken) accompanying DJ culture, whenever we listen to radio, we are listening to a medium, primarily of the human voice. And when the music is purely instrumental, or indeed electronic, there is always the announcer, offering the listener pertinent facts, explaining, introducing, and curating content via the spoken voice, thus to use radio is to use voice. As a portable disseminator of unstable and unpredictable archives, its restless undecidability, exponentially amplified through the presence (and absence) of the non-place/all-place and non-time/all-time of static, makes it a potent agent of radical decentering in any performative act in 'an infinite play of interpenetration.'

(Cage, 1961, 59) The cultural critics Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds both maintain that 'crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint...We aren't only made aware that the sounds we are hearing are recorded, we are also made conscious of the playback systems we use to access the recordings.' (Fisher, 2014, 21) Static serves the same function for radio as crackle does for the record. For the radio performer (and listener), time is a scrambled plurality of threads, mixing the voices of the dead with those of the living, exemplified by radio playlists and endless 'greatest hits' and review shows that feed into DJ culture's obsession with curating and archiving, testifying 'both to the fixity and the fragility of the past,' (Cox, 2014, 166) and reorganising 'the linearity of auditory history.' (ibid) If, as listeners, we can simply tune into the past, then we have no need to remember it ourselves, the signal is always there, waiting, whether as programmed content or the deep time of static.

Into this sonic melee enter John Cage (1912-1992), who, despite his often-quoted ambivalence, not to say hostility, to both records and radio, was an inveterate user of technology throughout his creative life, utilising computers as compositional aids, and writing pieces for the phonograph, magnetic tape, electronics and radio on numerous occasions, not to mention the many works for indeterminate forces, all of which could use radio in performance (as we have done in the recording of Sculptures Musicales). His radio 'musics' begin with his Imaginary Landscape No. 1 (1939)—not actually written for radio, but to be performed in a radio broadcast studio. Following the first Imaginary Landscape Cage wrote a substantial number of compositions that incorporated radio, exploiting the medium's inherent mutability and potential for radical disruption within their musical frameworks. A selection of notable works includes: Credo in Us (1942); Imaginary Landscape no.4 (1951); Water Music (1952); Speech (1955), Radio Music (1956); Music Walk (1958), Water Walk (1959) and WBAI (1960), and radio continues to appear in cage's works throughout the intervening decades up until the Europeras of the 1990s. Cage also composed five radio plays, wrote commissions specifically for radio stations. Within live performance, radio functions in several different ways for Cage: as medium; as didact, as 'instrument;' as source material; and as radical disruptor, operating through silence, speech, noise, music, and static. What Cage does not do, unlike in Karlheinz Stockhausen's Spiral, is to have his performers interact with radio content.

The use of radio within an established musical tradition forces listeners, performers and composer to confront the very concept of western concert music itself, questioning notions of plurality, fragmentation and decentring in its production and reception, its performance and dissemination. Like using a billboard to critique the role of advertising in modern society, Cage uses radio—as a medium of principally other people's music within his own works and in a live concert hall setting, to problematise and radically undermine the traditional western concert experience. More broadly, radio resonates with concepts of the archive—as a portable technological device that broadcasts curated and structured content; with signals and dissemination-how we access, receive and consume that curated content; with process and structure; and with the liminal spaces of transmission, distortion and the swirling mists of static, while as performers, we must grapple with translation and interpretation of Cage's radio scores. These works also raise questions of affordance, which, in Robert Macfarlane's words, pertains to 'the quality of an environment or object that allows an individual to perform an action on, to or with it.' (Macfarlane, 2016, 20) In Cage's radio musics, the performer fulfils all of these criteria, while the listener too engages with this sound environment.

In Silence—his first published collection of articles—in typically uncompromising style, Cage articulated his aspirations for the inclusion of technology in the creative arts as an agent for radical change, writing in 'The Future of Music: CREDO' that 'centers of experimental music must be established. In these centers, the new materials, oscillators, turntables, generators, means for amplifying small sounds, film, phonographs, etc., available for use. Composers at work using twentieth-century means for making music. Performances of results. Organization of sound for extra-music purposes (theatre, dance, radio, film).' (Cage, 1961, 6) Music, or perhaps 'sound' would be a more appropriate term for Cage, was expected to move with the times, as a forward looking, constantly evolving, dynamic and technologically enabled artform, not as an ossified exhibit in the museum of 'dead' culture.

But why should Cage refer to a conversation *sticking* in X? (Cage, 1987, 58) Sonically, the word 'sticking' conjures up breaks and silences, repetition and overlapping, distortion and misunderstanding, all of which function to decenter our sense of control as performers

and listeners in a landscape where indeterminacy—of time, location, station, reception, forces—plays a fundamental role. Cage discussed the nature of the medium, especially pertaining to its place in the environment, its *affordances* in other words, at some length in a series of radio conversations¹ with Morton Feldman during the 1960s called *Radio Happenings*:

MF: Well, this weekend I was on the beach.

JC: Yes.

MF: And on the beach these days are transistor radios...blaring out rock 'n' roll...all over.

JC: Yes. And you didn't enjoy it

MF: Not particularly. I adjusted to it.

JC: How?

MF: By saying that ... well, I thought of the sun and the sea as a lesser evil (both laugh).

JC: Well, you know how I adjusted to that problem of the radio in the environment, very much as the primitive people adjusted to the animals which frightened them...They drew pictures of them on their caves. And so, I simply made a piece using radios. Now, whenever I hear radios—even a single one, not just twelve at a time, as you must have heard on the beach, at least—I think, "Well, they're just playing my piece" (both laugh). [Cage is referring Imaginary Landscape No. 4 here]

^{1.} The 'Radio Happenings' were a series of five broadcast conversations held by Cage and Feldman for New York's WBAI radio station from July 1966 – January 1967.

And later in the same conversation:

JC All that radio is, Morty, is making available to your ears what was already in the air and available to your ears but you couldn't hear it. In other words, all it is, is making audible something which you're already in. You are bathed in radio waves—TV, broadcasts, probably telepathic messages, from other minds deep in thought (both laugh).

MF Listening to radio at the same time.

JC And this radio simply makes audible something that you thought was inaudible.

(Cage & Feldman, 1993, 19)

Those fragments of radio programming that Feldman experienced on the beach are synonymous with Cage's 'conversation sticking' in that his listening experience was decentered: nothing made sense as he moved through a continuously changing landscape of resonating and overlapping sounds, and yet, he admits that he adjusted to it. Conversation, speech, signals: although this broadcast logosphere can overwhelm the listener, as Cage comments, it also makes available what is already there, we just have to tune in or out, depending on the circumstances.

One12 (1992)

Published posthumously, although premiered by Cage on June 12th 22, 1992, at Perugini, Italy, *One* ¹² is one of Cage's final 'number pieces,' with the number here denoting that it is the twelfth piece for a solo player. There is no score as such, just a few spidery—practically indecipherable—lines of Cage's handwriting instructing the player how to generate their performance materials using the I-Ching. These performance materials consist of 640 random numbers between one and twelve, to which various processes are applied: number 1 should be an 'empty' word; numbers 2-11 should be whispered

or vocalized vowels or consonants derived from each number; 12 should be a spoken 'full' word (noun/verb/adjective/adverb). Duration is completely free, although Cage's performance lasted approximately thirty minutes, while there is also much leeway concerning amplitude—there are no instructions for number 1, 2-11 whispered or sung, but no dynamic range is indicated, and number 12, although spoken, again has no indicated dynamic envelope. This high degree of performer agency and the affordances offered by One^{12} allow for an extremely varied interpretative approach, covering everything from slow, Zen-like contemplation, to fast and furious, proto-Beckettian realisations. There are also resonances with radio, the constant repetition of numbers brings to mind the radio cyphers of WWII, while the fragmentation of the words that are fundamental to every iteration of One^{12} are another embodiment of Cage's radiophonic 'conversation sticking.' There are resonances with Cage's *Telephones and Birds* (1977), where recordings of telephonic public address systems are combined with birdsong and broadcast through space. Ultimately, it reminds us that to compose with radio *is* to compose with voice, maybe the converse is true also.

Radio Music (1956)

'...having written radio music has enabled me to accept, not only the sounds I there encounter, but the television, radio and Muzak ones, which nearly constantly and everywhere offer themselves. Formerly, for me, they were a source of irritation. Now, they are just as lively as ever, but I have changed. I am more and more realizing, that is to say, that I have ears and can hear. My work is intended as a demonstration of this; you might call it an affirmation of life...machines are here to stay, or for the time being. They can tend toward our stupefaction or our enlivenment. To me, the choice seems obvious and, once taken, cries out for action.' (Kuhn, 2022, 189)

Cage's compositional practice during the 1950s was dominated by his development of chance procedures, most notably using the ancient Chinese divination method, the I Ching, where coins or reeds are tossed in order to make decisions or determine outcomes. Cage used the I Ching widely, generating the frequencies and duration of *Radio Music*

using this method, thus, *Radio Music* dispenses with conventional Western music notation, instead, consisting of lists of numbers for each of the eight parts that represent radio frequencies that are to be tuned into during a performance. Of Cage's radio pieces, only *Radio Music* and *Speech* use this method of notation, the others relying on variations on conventional notation, graphic notation, text notation, or simply leave the radio's use entirely to the players' discretion, as part of a larger sound field. Both *Radio Music* and *Speech* can also be considered as using forms of proto time-bracket notation:² thus, *Radio Music*'s, duration can be thought of as one giant, time bracket lasting six minutes and filled with a multiplicity of radio events and optional silences.

Radio Music is a compact work, with a fixed duration, what is not fixed however, is the number of players (1-8, from solo to octet), the application of silence between sections there is a separate symbol for silence that is to be included during a performance—or the duration of individual tunings within the performance. Cage asks that each tuning event be played at maximum volume, while the performance should commence with minimum volume, although in practice, marked variations occur even with this seemingly simple instruction, depending on signal strength and location. This potential problem was made abundantly clear at the world premiere of Cage's Imaginary Landscape No. 4 (1951) for twelve radios, where the reception was so poor that the performance was almost inaudible. In conversation with Richard Kostelanetz some years later, Cage remarked 'the radio piece [Radio Music] was written more or less to please the people who were disturbed over the Imaginary Landscape No. 4 because it was so quiet. I forgot what I did, but it can be played so as to be loud.' (Kostelanetz, 1996, 69) Listeners and players experience Radio Music as auditory collage of broken fragments, ranging from the hauntological sonic signatures of static, buzz and whine, to spoken words and music from multiple genres. It demonstrates chance as a creative strategy through its real-time superimposition of multiple broadcast programmes, while at the same time emphasising the ultimate alterity of the medium itself, through its ability to project the disembodied

^{2.} Time brackets indicate durations—sometimes variable, sometimes exact—in which events—often, but not always prescribed—should take place. In later time bracket works (1983 onwards), events are often, but not always, surrounded by "silence" (ambience). Cage also deployed what I would call 'proto' time-bracket notation in several works form the 1960s, such as *Radio Music* and *Speech*, and *Theatre Piece* (1960). For more on time-brackets, see Cage's *Composition in Retrospect* (1993).

voices of different 'live' locations and times, as well as a panoply of different historical eras and cultural voices through the artistic variety on air during any given performance.

Sculptures Musicales (1989)

Written for neither voice nor radio, *Sculptures Musicales* is one of Cage's many pieces where process rather than specific content is the fundamental concern. Echoing the sculptural sonorities Cage had already explored in the *Ryoanji* pieces (1983-85, named after the rock garden in Kyoto, Japan), *Sculptures* is an exploration of the listening experience of multiple, simultaneous, resonating sound sources. In conversation with Joan Retlallack, in reference to the basis of the composition, Marcel Duchamp's *sculpture sonore*, Cage commented 'He [Marcel] tells us that we have to have at least three of these [sound sources], and each one is different, in order to have a sculpture, which is true. If you have two sounds, you only have a straight line between them; but if you have three, you inevitably have a sculpture you can walk around in. And you can hear differently.' (Retallack, 1996, 206) In the score (which is a single page of instructions) Cage, quoting Duchamp, describes it as "sounds lasting and leaving from different points and forming a sounding sculpture which lasts."

It's a composition where the liminal qualities of sound are emphasised, with hard-edges defining the beginning and closing of each sculptural sonic event, rather like switching a radio on and off. There should be no repetition, or variation, with each sculpture consisting of at least three constant sounds. In a 1989 letter to the composer Takehisa Kosugi, prior to the world premiere, Cage notes that players should 'each of you in turn deciding how many sculptures and when they start and stop... There will be a minimum of 2 sculptures, but there could be several. There is no limit.' (Kuhn, 2022, 571-572) Cage does not specify the duration or forces involved either, instead leaving the agency to determine each sculpture up to the performers, although he does welcome acoustic and/or electronic sound sources, which is why we have used radio static in this recording, as well as a diverse array of percussion instruments (picture below). Sculptures is at its most

radiophonic in its use of resonance, for as each sound event reverberates, the listener should imagine a landscape to be traversed. Each sculpture exists in three-dimensional space as well as temporal space, and as the word *sculpture* suggests, could be walked around or through, or even above or below. Once again, it brings us back to Feldman on the beach, moving through a sea of radiophonic resonances, where sound as well as listener is on the move, momentarily blocked by stationary or mobile bodies, then freed to blare out, suddenly muffled or silenced. It has much in common with *Four* ⁶ (1992), one of the late 'number pieces,' whose performers determine their own lexicon of fixed, sonic

events, but unlike Sculptures, they take place within set time-brackets. There is something deeply ritual about the deliberate striking of each sculpture and its concluding period of sharply defined silence. An almost Zen moment on which to meditate on the unique individuality of every sound experience, where, simultaneously, each is both first and last.

Speech (1955)

Composed the year before Radio Music as though in the manner of a warm up exercise, Speech (1955) for five radios and newsreader, and with a fixed duration of forty-one minutes, utilises very similar notation and performance processes, to those of the later composition.



Both pieces have fixed duration and both use I-Ching generated frequencies, although in *Speech* Cage used the I Ching to generate the work's very precise event timings—given to three decimal places. Despite this exactitude, player synchronicity however is dispensed with. Cage's instructions state that 'O' is movable in each part. The degree to which 'O' is movable differs between the six parts: for Radio 1 Cage writes 'Let movable O' be a point between actual O' and 26.61"' while the newsreader's part states 'Let movable O' be any point between actual O' and 1' 9.155" thus, increasing the indeterminacy of this aspect of *Speech* in performance. Cage would use a similar process in *Four*⁶, where, again, there is no requirement for the players to begin synchronously, while the time-brackets themselves have variable start and stop times in the later work.

Unlike Radio Music, dynamics and interpretation for each of Speech's events are precisely indicated, using a mixture of English instructions ('FADE IN: FADE OUT') and Italian terms ('CRESCENDO, ESPRESSIVO'). The dynamic variability in Speech gives a much more nuanced soundscape than that of Radio Music, where nearly everything is played at full volume. Oddly, despite being the only 'live' part, with the performer speaking from 'two publications (designated A and B), newspapers or news magazines' (Cage, 1960, 1)—this recording uses The Times and The Monmouthshire Beacon—the newsreader's part is the only one to have no dynamic indications. The 'live' performer has agency over the amplitude of their performance, while the radio operators impose dynamics on top of broadcast performances that are already dynamically varied, in another of Cage's oppositional doubles. We can see this same doubled process in operation through his use of indeterminacy: in both Radio Music and Speech, Cage has employed chance procedures in the construction of the scores— I-Ching generated radio frequencies, and in Speech to generate timings also, that have added variability built in through the use of movable O'-coupled with performative indeterminacy dependent on location, time and reception. Doubly indeterminate then, with each iteration unrepeatable due to the twin vagaries of radio programming and the choices of the individual player in performance. Ultimately, all of these pieces are unknowable due to their deliberate undecidability.

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