

# A “SOUND” APPROACH JOHN CAGE AND MUSIC EDUCATION

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## Abstract

*In this paper, I apply John Cage’s wide musical embrace of sound to the field of music education and explore its curricular and practical implications. In particular, I ask music teachers to consider themselves teachers of sound, or “sound teachers.” I argue that privileging sound as our chief concern leads us to reconsider the ways we speak about music, the offerings we include in our music curricula, and the ways we teach (about) sound. In particular, I suggest that application of Cage’s ideas compels us to permit still more genres and styles in the classroom and curriculum, to emphasize activities that allow students to manipulate a diverse palette of sound types (for example, electronic composition), and to teach in ways that expand and diversify rather than narrow and limit students’ relationships with sound. I close by considering how Cage’s ideas of “purposeless play” and “purposeful purposelessness” orient our goals toward making students more attentive to and invested in the world of sound and the sound of the world.*

Keywords: John Cage, sound, music curriculum, composition

Once, while I was living in Nashville, Tennessee, I received a call from a musician friend who was in town to put the finishing touches on his latest record.

He invited me to come over to the house where he and his colleagues were gathered so that I could watch them work. The album had already been written, arranged, and recorded; all that remained was mixing and mastering. I listened attentively as my friend discussed important decisions with his producer. On one song, they had recorded a track of “party noise” that they hoped would add to the song’s overall festive atmosphere. The producer confessed that he had lost faith in the party noise: it now seemed gimmicky and distracting and he urged my friend to consider dropping it. On another tune, they discussed the mixing of the piano track and one person insisted that it needed to move “farther back” and “to the left.” Following this suggestion, one producer worked his magic at the computer, adjusting the gain and the panning accordingly—and, to my amazement, the track immediately sounded better, though I was not sure I understood exactly why.

I had completed my Bachelor of Music degree not too long before and felt rather proud of and quite secure in my musical knowledge. Watching these musicians work, though, I suddenly felt that I knew much less about music. More specifically, I became aware that these musicians knew things about the finer qualities of texture and timbre that exceeded my classical training. I could have identified the applied dominants without blinking; I could have transcribed the salient rhythmic figures in a flash. In front of that mixing board, however, I would have been helpless—I simply did not know enough about *sound*.

## MUSIC AND SOUND

What should one make of the distinction between music and sound? Where does one end and the other begin? What does it mean to *know* music or *know* sound? John Cage intended to blur the boundaries between the two and to turn our attention to pure *sound* as the fundamental concern of the musical medium, rather than technical concerns like intervals or intonation or even affective concerns like meaning or feeling. For Cage, the central task of the musician was manipulating, listening to, and delighting in sound—nothing more and nothing less.

For many musicians and music teachers, this pure attention to sound, without consideration of its inherent meaning or emotional content, may seem quite foreign. Consider, for example, the definition of music offered by Bennett Reimer in *A Philosophy of Music Education*:

Music can be described as sounds organized to create meanings inherent within the ways and means the sounds are organized, including all manner of additional meanings as they influence and are encompassed within

that inherence. To simplify even further: Music can be described as sounds organized to be inherently meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

This is a narrow definition. That music involves “sounds organized to be inherently meaningful” may seem reasonable enough; however, as Lucy Green<sup>2</sup> acknowledged (Reimer, too, in turn<sup>3</sup>), not all of music’s meaning can be described as “inherent,” given that music also points to external referents and that interpretations of music’s meaning depend on sociocultural factors that interpreters bring to the music. Thus, in Green’s view, music has not only “inherent” meanings but also “delineated” ones. Neither of these conceptions of meaning, however, gives much weight to the pure sonic properties of music. Cage placed much greater emphasis on simply enjoying sounds for what they are:

A sound does not view itself as thought, as ought, as needing another sound for its elucidation, as etc.; it has no time for any consideration—it is occupied with the performance of its characteristics: before it has died away it must have made perfectly exact its frequency, its loudness, its length, its overtone structure, the precise morphology of these and of itself.<sup>4</sup>

Cage, it would seem, had little need for the elements of “meaning” that others might deem a prerequisite for “music,” focusing his interests on the pure qualities of *sound*. Reimer engaged Cage’s ideas directly, suggesting that “he wanted very much for respondents to be more participatory in the making of their own meaning from sounds than he believed traditional music allowed them to be.”<sup>5</sup> At first glance, this interpretation may seem too convenient a parsing of a radical perspective, a tidy retrofitting that allows Cage’s ideas to align with Reimer’s philosophy. But even Cage made similar acknowledgements regarding the role of meaning/feeling:

One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments. . . . Emotion takes place in the person who has it. And sounds, when allowed to be themselves, do not require that those who hear them do so unfeelingly.<sup>6</sup>

This statement of Cage’s appears somewhat contradictory, as he dismisses “man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments” on one hand while explicitly making room for listener’s emotions on the other. Note, though, that Cage located feeling (and, by extension, meaning) within the listener. Though Cage the listener may not have needed for sounds to “mean” in the ways Reimer and Green discuss, Cage the philosopher has left room for listeners to experience such meanings, with the reminder that such meanings ultimately are constructed

within the listener's mind. This is reflected in Green's suggestion that, "although some delineated meanings maintain themselves only by virtue of collective definition, delineated meaning is, to individuals, whatever they make it."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the notion that musical meaning is "whatever [individuals] make it," and its anarchic implications, could prompt understandable anxiety. While it is true, I believe, that listeners enjoy broad freedom as they "mean" in response to music, it is important also to acknowledge the social world that inevitably mediates the work of individual meaning-makers. Green elsewhere asserted that "musical meaning, inherent and delineated together, is a social construct, collectively defined through history,"<sup>8</sup> and that "music, in order to be understood as music, must conform to collective definitions of what counts as music."<sup>9</sup>

I take some exception to the latter claim, given that social constructs, though real and powerful, remain vulnerable to acts of subversion. Consider, for example, the recent evolution in our understanding of the words "sex" and "gender": the practice of using these terms interchangeably is dying away as we come to understand one as a biological genotype and the other as a matter of psychology, of identity and/or performance.<sup>10</sup> The evolution of these collective understandings has no doubt depended on the voices of individuals whose active subversion of prevailing social norms helped to catalyze their transformation. Similarly, to present all sounds as candidates for musical understanding is to subvert "collective definitions of what counts"—though, of course, subversion of a norm inherently acknowledges that norm's existence and, for acts of subversion to enable evolution of norms, they must be ratified by the broader culture.

Individuals have broad capacity and license to make meaning of music (and sound)—including meanings that are idiosyncratic, divergent, or subversive. The same is true of individuals' agency in defining which sounds are musical for them. (What could stop them, after all?) I hasten to acknowledge, though, that these meanings and definitions cannot help but be influenced and bounded by, developed in response to, and subject to the affirmation of—that is to say, mediated by—the social world. To subvert a shared sense of what music means or a shared definition of what counts as music is, indeed, to acknowledge the "collective definitions" that already exist.

Ultimately, musical experiences arise from the interaction among these various elements: the "precise morphologies" (Cage's term) of sonic phenomena, the meanings inherent in the organization of the materials, and the meanings the materials delineate by referring outside themselves—all shaped by the experiences of individuals who bring meaning to and extract meaning from experiences they deem musical. I am not ready to follow Cage all the way to "clearing my mind of music" and focusing only on music's sonic properties. Attending only to the sonic contours of music limits the musical experience as much as

failing to attend to them does. Still, the push to attend specifically to sounds in music—to “let sounds be themselves”—has the power to free the listener and the meaning-maker. It can emancipate sound from narrow definitions of “music” and limited conceptions of what makes music “good” or “right.” Further, this careful attention to music’s sonic properties yields the kinds of knowledge about sound that I was embarrassed to lack when I visited my friend in the studio.

## MUSIC TEACHERS AND SOUND TEACHERS

Given the possibilities inherent in emancipating “sound” from constrained definitions of music and its meaning, I present the concept of “sound teachers” as an illuminating lens for viewing the process of music teaching and learning, as a heuristic device that can challenge and refresh our beliefs and practices as music teachers. I suggest that re-imagining ourselves as sound teachers frees us from the narrow concepts that have defined school music and music teaching, opening us to new ways of thinking about our roles in classrooms and our goals for students’ learning in music.<sup>11</sup> Using Cage’s ideas as a framework, I challenge us to re-consider what we say (the beliefs and positions that we espouse and promote as music educators), what we offer (the course and program offerings that comprise music education and/or school music), and how we teach (the pedagogical approaches we develop and/or select in our efforts to foster musical growth for students).

## WHAT WE SAY

My eighth grade language arts teacher was one of my very favorite teachers. In addition to a passion for literature and grammar, as well as a zest for sharing them with young people, she possessed a certain refined taste, especially in music, that I admired. Often, as my class walked to lunch in the cafeteria, I would linger at the back of the line, forgoing conversations with my classmates in favor of chatting with this teacher, who usually had something to report about the music at her church that weekend or wanted to know what pieces we were studying in orchestra at the time.

I still remember one of this teacher’s trademark lines: “Rap music is an oxymoron.” Every time she said this, I chuckled—my classmates did, too—because it was pithy and clever. (I also happened to agree with her assessment at the time, though my tastes have changed.) As I reflect on this now, I still find charm in her comic delivery, but I find the underlying notion deeply troubling. How can one dismiss an entire genre or style as “not music”? This teacher certainly meant no harm; she was simply articulating a personal preference. But are there not music educators who are guilty of this dismissal? Have we not categorically dismissed

certain musics as not music, or as not *real* music—not worthy of study in our classrooms?

Consider John Cage's most famous sound experiment, 4'33". Although the piece is widely misunderstood as a musical gag, Cage actually intended to reframe the audience's relationship with the ambient sounds of their lives. As Kyle Gann put it, 4'33" was an act of

enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention in order to open the mind to the fact that all sounds are music. It begged for a new approach to listening, perhaps even a new understanding of music itself, a blurring of the conventional boundaries between art and life.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, 4'33" was not an incendiary gimmick, but rather a reminder that, even without our prodding, the world is profoundly musical. To return briefly to the matter of music and its meanings, Keith Swanwick has suggested that music is an act of "expressively organizing undesignated sounds."<sup>13</sup> Such activity need not be restricted to those who identify as composers or as specialized musicians; rather, the nudge of 4'33" prompts all individuals to listen attentively to their environments, embracing and appreciating all sounds, however designated, for their musical qualities.

I wish to push past the notion of conferring musical status on "found sounds" and toward an ecumenical embrace of all sounds, including the sounds of unfamiliar musical styles and genres, that extinguishes the possibility of reflexively imposing our preconceived notions of what does and does not qualify as music. A wide embrace of sound(s) prevents us from dismissing entire genres or styles as not music, as my eighth grade teacher did, simply because we do not think we like them. Rather, I believe this embrace compels us to attend to all sounds and musics in terms of their "precise morphologies." In fact, suspending one's musical predispositions and choosing instead to attend first to the precise morphologies of a new or unfamiliar style may be the surest pathway to embracing more musics and consequently enjoying the richness of a more eclectic musical life.

Again, one cannot discount the mediating social world of meaning that surrounds these new and unfamiliar styles, the engagement of which is an inevitable part of coming to know these musics, nor do I feel that letting "sounds be themselves" is sufficient to constitute the whole of musical experience. I do, however, wish to suggest that approaching new genres or styles of music with the same kind of sonic curiosity one would employ in a Cageian let-sounds-be-themselves experiment may be a useful work-around that could help keep one's preconceptions, however received or constructed, from forestalling engagement with a new music.

Though there are many genres and styles we too readily have dismissed or failed to consider on their own idiomatic terms, hip-hop is one striking example of a music that has struggled to find its place in school music programs.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps one might object to including such music in school on the basis of its subject matter, which is sometimes sexually suggestive, misogynistic, and/or violent.<sup>15</sup> (One raising such an objection might do well to review the lyrical content of his/her favorite Italian madrigals, but this is ancillary to the present discussion.) Such objections may be worthwhile and deserving of debate, but I suspect that subject matter is not the only barrier blocking hip-hop from inclusion in school settings. Instead, limited definitions of music (which are steeped in our near-exclusive attention to Western art music) and failure to engage the idiomatic sonic phenomena of hip-hop stand in the way of accounting for the kinds of musicality that are possible in the hip-hop paradigm.

The musician who analyzes hip-hop with Western ears and mindset, looking for melodic contour or searching for augmented sixth chords, may very well find it wanting, but such an analysis misses the point of the entire genre. Close examination of the backing tracks used in hip-hop music, for example, reveals that producers are attentive to issues of timbre and texture in ways that might baffle the typical classically-trained musician (much as I was baffled by what I observed when my friend mixed and mastered his record). Similarly, rap lyrics evince a thoroughly musical approach to language,<sup>16</sup> with their sensitivity to cadence and rhythmic vitality, as well as the use of assonance, consonance, interior rhyme, and other devices.<sup>17</sup> For the inexperienced hip-hop listener, approaching the sounds of hip-hop with curiosity may be an important stop—though not the only one—on the journey toward appreciating the musicianship of hip-hop artists.

It bears mention that Cage did not toil alone in his efforts to engage with sound on its own terms. Certainly, R. Murray Schafer has written not only about careful attention to (and curation of) the ubiquitous soundscapes that surround us,<sup>18</sup> but also about pedagogical practices that help students think about music by “playing” with sound.<sup>19</sup> In the area of music theory, whereas structuralist techniques such as Schenkerian analysis take a score-oriented approach to understanding a piece’s fundamental material,<sup>20</sup> semiotic- and gesture-oriented approaches pursue more directly the question of how musical material gives rise to the listener’s sonic and affective experience. Oded Ben-Tal defined musical gestures, for example, as “short, self-contained, sonic units that are perceived to have a clear emotional or conceptual signification,” noting that the “link between action (physical or musical) and expression is what makes gestures such an attractive proposition for writers about music.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, semiotic approaches attend to the meaning evinced by aural “signs”—a sign being “anything that is perceived by an observer which stands for or calls to mind something else and by doing so creates an effect

in the observer.”<sup>22</sup> These approaches remove notation as an intermediary and allow theorists to engage sound and its effects on listeners directly, which may in turn expand music theory’s ability to engage an expanding range of musical styles and genres. Whereas Schenkerian analysis, being grounded in teasing out a piece’s fundamental material from the score, may miss the mark on understanding genres like hip-hop (and numerous others), alternate approaches—anchored in musical gesture, semiotics, and hermeneutic analysis—may find application in a broader variety of musics. These tools for studying music and its meaning can empower teachers to embrace the precise morphologies of a broader variety of sound types for inclusion in the classroom.

The overall implication is clear: a wider embrace of sound compels an embrace of more, and more varied, musics. As teachers of sound, we should resist the notion that any genre or style may quickly be dismissed as not music, and we should commit ourselves to helping our students to experience as full a complement of sound types as possible, considered in their own sound terms.

## WHAT WE OFFER

Cage’s emancipatory ideas about sound affect not only what we say and believe, but also what we offer as part of our school music programs. Considering ourselves teachers of sound requires that we ask whether students are afforded the broad and diverse experiences with sound that they deserve from their school music experiences.

Scholars already have documented the problems associated with a music education system focused exclusively on large performing ensembles.<sup>23</sup> These arguments generally have focused on the power dynamic that has defined too many large ensembles, in which teachers possess all executive and creative agency and students function simply as cogs in the teacher-directed musical machine. David Williams noted that “the large-ensemble model places complete control in the hands of the teacher, a concept borrowed from professional orchestras where the conductor is in command, and the main goal is excellent performance,” and that such an approach “seems outdated in light of the wealth of research concerning constructionist learning theory and inquiry-based learning.”<sup>24</sup> Cage, too, expressed frustration with the undemocratic nature of such music-making, saying, “I know where I want group activity to go. I want it to go away from leadership in all its various aspects.”<sup>25</sup> These powerful arguments about the potential pitfalls of the traditional ensemble learning environment are only strengthened by assessing whether an exclusive focus on ensemble performance meets the obligations of teaching sound.

Even the ensemble conductor who dedicates herself to programming diverse repertoire and exploring a wide range of musical styles with her students cannot



avoid the limitations the traditional ensemble types place on the sound palette. As John Kratus noted, the repertoire performed in schools “represents a small and shrinking slice of the musical pie.”<sup>26</sup> Restated in sound-teacher terms, traditional school music introduces students to relatively few neighborhoods in the larger world of sound. Cage, for example, lamented the way that choirs—as they traditionally are structured—limit the possibilities of the individual singing voice, which he felt was “the most flexible instrument there is, even exceeding the stringed instruments.”<sup>27</sup> Though many treasure the powerful collective experience of ensemble singing and playing, it is true that many standard modes of ensemble music-making necessarily focus on converging on a prescribed, even “right,” sound, rather than offering opportunities for rich, divergent sound exploration and play. If music teachers are teachers of sound, they should be committed to allowing for this flexibility of sound, providing students experiences with a broader range of sound sources, textures, timbres, and so forth.

Music teachers can respond both by expanding the types of classes that are available in the curriculum and by refreshing the courses we currently offer, which already provide meaningful experiences for many students. New types of music courses—popular/vernacular music ensembles, songwriting, music production/technology—not only challenge the potentially autocratic learning environments of large ensembles by placing more creative power in students’ hands, but also expand the palette of sounds that are available for students to explore, manipulate, create, and perform. This expansion of sound types may help music teachers to reach students that the current school music model does not serve,<sup>28</sup> but also can empower all students to develop ever deeper, more varied, more meaningful relationships with sound. Of course, playing and singing in ensembles remains a powerful experience for many and there are plenty of opportunities to refresh the sound experiences for students in these classes.

Courses that target electronic music/music production are perhaps one of the strongest steps forward available. Cage placed great faith in the promise of electronic sound sources, predicting a future filled with “music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard” and that the traditional emphasis on harmony would prove “inadequate for the composer, who will be faced with the entire field of sound.”<sup>29</sup> Though synthesized sound is not an especially new phenomenon, recent advances in affordable, user-friendly platforms for electronic music-making (such as Apple’s GarageBand software or Image-Line’s FL Studio) seem to resonate with Cage’s predictions. Increasingly, these technologies allow students to be “faced with the entire field of sound,”<sup>30</sup> and courses that make use of these technologies enable students to work with a broader array of sound types, colors, textures, and so forth.

The profession is moving in this direction, but not without growing pains. A recent article by Williams, for example, presented the case for honoring the iPad as a legitimate instrument, and the existence of this argument alone demonstrates how electronic sound sources have grown in prominence and stature.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, though, Williams constructs his case for the iPad's admission to the pantheon in part by appealing to the similarities between the device and other acceptable instruments. The iPad deserves "real instrument" status, he argues, because it requires devoted practice and the development of technical proficiency just as other instruments do. Though this may be true, it trades one performance-oriented paradigm for another, rather than celebrating the electronic instrument for its distinct advantages as a vehicle for imagination and creation in sound. This argument clings to narrow conceptions of musicianship that place performing proficiency at the center to the exclusion of other modes of music making.

Remember that Cage celebrated electronic music because it made it "possible for composers to make music directly, without the assistance of intermediary performers."<sup>32</sup> I do not suggest that we banish technical performance skills from our musical lives or our teaching, nor do I think that the ability to make music directly should mean that composers no longer collaborate with performers. Nevertheless, music educators should acknowledge the musicianship of those—like hip-hop beat producers—who create music without intermediary [human] performers. Imagining and creating sound are sufficiently musical acts on their own, without performing proficiency as a prerequisite. A student musician who manipulates sound by programming instrument parts in an electronic track is not less of a musician because she cannot or does not play the instruments herself.

In re-imagining course offerings, music/sound teachers should be careful not to limit the many different dimensions of music making and sound manipulation by placing them into separate silos. Evan Tobias, who studied the experience of students in a high school songwriting and technology course, pointed to the importance of "hyphenated musicians" and "hybrid spaces."<sup>33</sup> Students in his study saw themselves as "hyphenated musicians" in that they played multiple, overlapping musical roles (for example, "songwriter-engineer," "composer-vocalist"). The classroom setting that served these students best, then, was a "hybrid space" that allowed for multiple, overlapping modes of musical engagement within the same course. There is important resonance with Cage's perspective here. A broad embrace of sound and the resulting conception of being a sound teacher requires teachers to consider the many shifting and overlapping roles of the sound creator/manipulator. Student musicians likely do not see themselves exclusively as choral singers, or clarinet players, or singer-songwriters, or sound engineers, or beat producers; rather, students constantly shift between and combine roles as the

situation requires. Even a new and seemingly progressive course offering such as a class in music production may not satisfy the holistic needs of students of music/sound. Perhaps re-imagining music classrooms as the hybrid spaces that Tobias recommends better satisfies the needs of the musician who is “faced with the entire field of sound.”<sup>34</sup>

Of course, the teacher must maintain some sort of curatorial role in whatever hybrid space she creates, as even the most of hybrid of spaces can never be all things to all people. The entire field of sound is prohibitively broad and no classroom can be adequately suited to the exploration of every musical style or skillset. Teachers and students will have to collaborate in selecting focal areas of interest, but should also be wary of compartmentalizing musical activities in a way that lacks hybridity and overly narrows the field of sound.

## HOW WE TEACH

Using the lens of sound teaching to view our practice as music teachers requires us to reconsider not only what constitutes our curricula, but also how we teach whatever courses we offer. As in so many things, much depends on execution. What pedagogical practices best reflect our commitment to teaching sound?

Certainly, adopting this sound-teaching perspective compels us to consider how composition is taught in classrooms. When I reflect on my attempts to introduce composition to my former middle school chorus students, I confess that they were not very “sound” (pun intended). I assigned students “mini-composition” tasks with too many parameters—a designated number of measures, an assigned pitch range, a given set of rhythmic values that must be used at least once in the composition. Maud Hickey called this “rules-bound” composition, explaining that “exercises that require students to follow the rules of common practice might work well in theory class or in order to teach about these rules, but they will not likely result in very creative musical compositions.”<sup>35</sup> I now realize that these exercises served very well to reinforce my teaching of basic notation (which, in turn, helped me prepare students for adjudicated sight reading experiences), but enhanced students’ creativity in sound very little, if at all. My feedback to students on these assignments almost uniformly related to whether measures contained the correct number of beats, whether noteheads were clearly placed on lines and spaces, whether stems pointed the correct direction. Rarely, if ever, did I discuss with students their musical intentions or their audiated compositional ideas.<sup>36</sup> Here is where one very narrow understanding of music and music teaching (fueled by the pressure of performing well in adjudicated environments) stood in the way of a more holistic embrace of sound. From one angle, these

limited exercises served their limited purpose; however, if the goal was to nurture and enhance students' meaningful relationship with sound, such activities were hardly a smashing success.

Cage's comments regarding music composition can ground our practice as teachers of sound: "And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes *but dealing with sounds*."<sup>37</sup> This, it should be noted, is misleading: all music involves some level of purposes, including indeterminate works (which still are conceived by composers) and found-sound listening experiences (which are pursued with intention by their initiators). Still, the reminder to ensure that sounds are the primary concern in composition activities is apt. I would never propose that teachers give no guidance or supporting structure for student compositions—this hardly amounts to teaching at all—but imposing too many parameters focuses the process too much on purposes and too little on sounds. Perhaps the lessons of 4'33" again find resonance here, in that the process of teaching music composition might begin with simple attention to sound and its properties: listening for attack and release, duration, volume, pitch level, and overall shape.<sup>38</sup> And then, teachers should think twice before requiring that compositions begin and end on "do," for example, or that they use certain instruments, or that only certain rhythmic figures be allowed. Teachers should be wary of the way each parameter imposed might limit the field of sound, might impose—however subtly—one set of musical understandings at the expense of another, might fail to "let sounds be themselves."<sup>39</sup> Again, the assertion is not that structure and parameters be abandoned altogether, but rather that teachers choose carefully, allowing students to experience as much of "the entire field of sound"<sup>40</sup> as possible.

Teachers also should consider the implications of a sound-oriented approach in the courses we already offer. Despite the concern expressed about large-ensemble performance above, perhaps teachers of these classes can refresh their practices in a way that values an expansive relationship with sound, rather than imposing one "ideal sound," usually informed by one narrow conception of what constitutes good music or, for that matter, music at all.

Consider, for example, the process of learning to perform in a choral ensemble. Choral conductors are expected to come to their work with a "tonal concept" in mind—a set of preferences about vowel shapes, placement, darkness or brightness of tone, use of vibrato—that they then lead the choir to realize in performance. In Patricia O'Toole's description, such a choral conductor has engaged in a "construction of the aesthetics of the music entirely independently of the experience and talent of [the] choir," and the ensemble's sound is "not crafted from within the choir's collective knowledge and experiences."<sup>41</sup> As a result, there is a right sound, a right way to use one's voice. For some singers, the

main learning outcome from four years singing in, say, a high school choir is a rich knowledge of how to fulfill one conductor's tonal expectations—a constricting, not an expanding, of the relationship with sound. Of course, choral conductors encourage some sounds over others out of a legitimate concern for vocal health or performance practice, but I also suspect that some sounds get dismissed as unhealthy or incorrect simply because they are foreign or unfamiliar to the classically-trained conductor. Choral teachers can counteract this problem, in part, by making repertoire selections that encourage a wide range of vocal colors and techniques and some choirs are beginning to embrace this more diverse conception of choral tone to great effect. Choral classrooms might also incorporate different approaches to communal singing, such as Bobby McFerrin's "circle singing" concept, which values individual improvisation and exploration, rather than conformity to a single right choral sound.<sup>42</sup>

Similar opportunities for expanding notions of sound exist in instrumental contexts. The Honk! Festival of Activist Street Bands, for example, features bands that explore a wide variety of sound types in their playing, "borrowing repertoire and inspiration from a diverse set of folk music traditions."<sup>43</sup> Such an approach seems to focus on diversifying sound, not forcing it to converge around a single ideal. Schafer, too, wrote extensively about the importance of soundscapes and his experience leading students in soundscape-based composition exercises.<sup>44</sup> Daniel Albert has written about his experiences working with composer Michael Colgrass, who uses graphic notation to help school ensembles create their own soundscapes on the spot, allowing them to explore a wide range of sounds and develop a more meaningful relationship with creativity in sound.<sup>45</sup> These and other approaches can help ensemble music-making to be an open, creative experience in sound, rather than an overly restrictive, convergent task.

All of these approaches to sound teaching reframe the role of the teacher, making her less like a director and more like a producer, as suggested by Clint Randles. In acting as a producer, the teacher's aim is "not to dictate how something should sound through her personal interpretation," but to "discover what each student needs in order to find fulfillment in bringing his or her own personal creations to life."<sup>46</sup> Teachers of sound should seek not to impose one correct idea, but rather to accompany and guide students as they explore and refine their own individual relationships with understanding, creating, manipulating, and performing sound.

Considering the principles and practices of sound teaching also requires that music teacher educators consider how well preservice teachers are prepared for this expanded, re-imagined role. Given that many music education majors' undergraduate experiences remain highly Eurocentric,<sup>47</sup> perhaps music teachers' preparation for the classroom fails to equip them with the tools necessary to

be sound teachers. Preservice music teachers need exposure to and experience with a wider variety of musics during their undergraduate years, as well as the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to coach musical activities other than traditional performance.

### “PURPOSEFUL PURPOSELESSNESS”/“PURPOSELESS PLAY”

On a broader philosophical level, re-imagining ourselves as Cage-inspired sound teachers inspires us to re-examine the broader aims of our teaching. What are the long-term goals we hold for our students? Long after they have left school music, what lasting influences do we hope to have had?

Some have expressed concern that our current model fails to result in the lifelong musicianship we hope to inspire. Williams has noted the “convincing empirical evidence [that] a very large percentage of students that begin participation in secondary school ensembles cease their musical involvements while still in school or soon after leaving high school,” and recommended that “considerable thought should be given to the enhancement of lifelong musical skills when developing new models of music education.”<sup>48</sup> Certainly, this statement seems to ring true—what music teacher would not hope that her teaching had helped students to nurture and maintain a lifelong relationship with music making? From a Cageian perspective, a sound teacher perspective, the goals may be even broader.

Cage said, “I’m out to blur the distinctions between art and life, as I think Duchamp was. And between teacher and student. And between performer and audience, etcetera.”<sup>49</sup> Returning to his comments about writing music illuminates his perspective even further:

And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.<sup>50</sup>

For Cage, the purpose of music was simply to engage in the purposeful purposelessness or purposeless play of enjoying the unique pleasures of sound. And the idea that motivated experimental pieces like *4’33”* and others of his indeterminate works was a belief that the composer need not manipulate the world into beauty, because the sound of the world is already a genuine delight, waiting for human attention.

For sound teachers, then, the aim of teaching is to equip students not just to be music-makers, but also music observers and music finders. Undoubtedly,

students should engage students in the praxis of music-making—playing, singing, composing, arranging, improvising, recording, and mixing—and music teachers rightfully hope that such activities continue beyond students’ K–12 schooling. But music teachers also have a responsibility to engage in what Schafer called “ear cleaning,”<sup>51</sup> such that students learn how to listen more attentively to the ambient sounds of their worlds.

This is a spiritual aim. By helping students to deepen and diversify their meaningful relationships with sound, sound teachers join Cage in attempting to bring art and life ever closer together. Sound teachers not only help students acquire a set of skills or practices, but also help them to affirm life—to experience an increasing share of their lives as musical, as beautiful, as profound. A sound approach, indeed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 152.

<sup>2</sup>Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5–7.

<sup>3</sup>Bennett Reimer, “Once More With Feeling: Reconciling Discrepant Accounts of Musical Affect,” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 12, no. 3 (Spring 2004), 4–16.

<sup>4</sup>John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 50th anniversary ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 154.

<sup>6</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Lucy Green, *Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology and Education*, 2nd ed. (Bury St Edmunds, UK: Abramis, 2008), 50.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>10</sup>I am grateful to my friend and teaching colleague Katie Dukes for a conversation that helped me settle on drawing this parallel.

<sup>11</sup>Admittedly, the concept of being a “sound teacher” is limited in a world where sound and moving image are drawn into ever-closer union—music videos by the band OK Go and Beyoncé’s “visual album” *Lemonade* are rich examples—and future examination of how music educators are to function in a truly multimedia environment is necessary. Nevertheless, the scope of this paper is restricted to “sound teaching,” which I still feel is a timely and relevant lens to employ in examining music education practice.

<sup>12</sup>Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33”* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>13</sup>Keith Swanwick, “Music Education Liberated from New Praxis,” *International Journal of Music Education* 28 (1996), 17. doi:10.1177/025576149602800102

<sup>14</sup>Adam J. Kruse, "Toward Hip-Hop Pedagogies for Music Education," *International Journal of Music Education*, Published electronically November 13, 2014. doi:10.1177/0255761414550535

<sup>15</sup>Patricia Shehan Campbell and Ann Clements, "Global Music: Rap, Rock, Race, and Rhythm: Music And More in a Methods Class," *The Mountain Lake Reader*, Spring 2006, 16–23.

<sup>16</sup>For a thoughtful celebration of hip-hop artistry and of its essentially postmodern nature see Richard Schusterman, "The Fine Art of Rap," in *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 201–235.

<sup>17</sup>Of course, many are genuinely troubled by the misogyny, violence, homophobia, and other problematic traits of some hip-hop lyrics. These issues are hardly exclusive to hip-hop, but I do acknowledge that they deserve thoughtful debate. That particular conversation, though, is beyond the scope of this argument.

<sup>18</sup>R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994).

<sup>19</sup>Schafer, *Creative Music Education: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher* (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1976).

<sup>20</sup>See Joseph Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (Winter, 1980): 311–331.

<sup>21</sup>Oded Ben-Tal, "Characterising Musical Gestures," *Musicae Scientiae* 13, no. 3 (November 2012): 251.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Turino, *Music As Social Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>23</sup>John Kratus, "Music Education at the Tipping Point," *Music Educators Journal* 94, no. 2 (November 2007): 42–48, doi:10.1177/002743210709400209; David Williams, "The Elephant in the Room," *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 1 (September 2011): 51–57, doi:10.1177/0027432111415538

<sup>24</sup>Williams, "The Elephant in the Room," 53.

<sup>25</sup>Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 33.

<sup>26</sup>Kratus, "Music Education at the Tipping Point," 45.

<sup>27</sup>Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 33.

<sup>28</sup>Williams, "The Elephant in the Room," 4.

<sup>29</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 3–4.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>31</sup>Williams, "The iPad is a REAL Musical Instrument," *Music Educators Journal* 101, no. 1 (September 2014): 93–98, doi:10.1177/0027432114540476

<sup>32</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 4.

<sup>33</sup>Evan S. Tobias, "Hybrid Spaces and Hyphenated Musicians: Secondary Students' Musical Engagement in a Songwriting and Technology Course," *Music Education Research* 14, no. 3 (2012): 329–346, doi:10.1080/14613808.2012.685459

<sup>34</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 4.



<sup>35</sup>Maud Hickey, “Creative Thinking in the Context of Music Composition,” in *Why and How to Teach Music Composition: A New Horizon for Music Education*, ed. Maud Hickey (Reston, VA: MENC: The National Association for Music Education, 2003), 42.

<sup>36</sup>In fact, given the way I approached these and other exercises, I cannot be sure that these students had developed the skill of audiating their own musical ideas.

<sup>37</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 12, emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup>Again, Schafer’s work—particularly in his *Creative Music Education*—provides helpful models for teachers.

<sup>39</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 10.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>41</sup>Patricia O’Toole, “I Sing in a Choir but I Have ‘No Voice!’” *Visions of Research in Music Education* 6, no. 4 (2005): 11–12.

<sup>42</sup>Katharine Schwab, “Circle-Singing Leader Embraces All Voices,” *The Seattle Times*, September 2, 2014, [http://seattletimes.com/html/thearts/2024421845\\_circlesingingxml.html](http://seattletimes.com/html/thearts/2024421845_circlesingingxml.html)

<sup>43</sup>Honk! Festival of Activist Street Bands, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.honkfest.org/>

<sup>44</sup>Schafer, *The Soundscape*; Schafer, *Creative Music Education*.

<sup>45</sup>Daniel J. Albert, “Musical Adventures with Michael Colgrass,” *The Instrumentalist* 63, no. 6 (January 2009): 22–28, 51–52.

<sup>46</sup>Clint Randles, “Music Teacher as Writer and Producer,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 46, no. 3 (2012): 45, doi:10.1353/jae.2012.0019

<sup>47</sup>Jui-Chi Wang and Jere T. Humphreys, “Multicultural and Popular Music Content in an American Music Teacher Education Program,” *International Journal of Music Education* 27, no. 1 (February 2009): 19–36.

<sup>48</sup>Williams, “The Elephant in the Room,” 55.

<sup>49</sup>Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 24.

<sup>50</sup>Cage, *Silence*, 12.

<sup>51</sup>Schafer, *Creative Music Education*, 49.