



The Use of Silence in Classical Music: Perspectives on Listening and Understanding



Written by

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Horizon Research Publishing, USA

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Listening and Understanding**

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To my beloved daughter Ludovica Ginevra: to the silent poetry of her invisible life.

To the Reader

Who is this book for? For many, we hope. Readers interested in music will find an unusual point of view on some well known pieces. Lovers of silence will perhaps discover that music can help us understand it better. Students will acquire material and inspiration to dive deeper in various directions. Lastly, fellow musicologists and aesthetics scholars will find a series of interpretative analyses and hypotheses that are fully argued and unambiguous; as such, they are open to discussion, criticism and improvement. This hope – that the book can resound in people with differing interests and abilities – is based on a number of reasons.

The first is that silence is an interdisciplinary theme. Its ties to other arts, communication and personal experience are many. The roads that lead to understanding this topic are therefore numerous and differ greatly from one another.

The second is that music, even when talked about specifically, will always be *close to us all*. To understand the silences and the emotions of the *St. Matthew Passion* by Bach it is not necessary to be a musicologist but just a sentient being, and let yourself listen.

The final reason for my hope is down to language. For some time I have been in search of a way to talk about music and my professional experiences as a musician and scholar, which is also understandable to “unauthorized personnel”. The concepts are specific, but the words aim to appeal to all readers. Imagination, a memory of the world, and personal experience are used as *organs of knowledge*, to build bridges between different sensitivities and abilities.

After all, life offers us examples of this possibility in a number of ways. A great chef becomes great through study and hard professional training, but the dishes they offer can be appreciated by a broad spectrum of people – from simple lovers of fine dining, to experts who can list all the ingredients with just a sniff.

Contents	Page No.
To the Reader	II
Introduction: Music and Silence	1
Fragility	2
Marginality	2
Splendour.....	3
Plurality	4
Concentration	5
Crossed Perspectives	6
Classical Music.....	7
Part One: The Frame	9
1.1. Presuppositions and the Subject of the Investigation	10
1.1.1. The Aesthetic Dignity of Silence	10
1.1.2. The Question of Research	10
1.1.3. Organic Unity.....	11
1.1.4. Multidimensionality	11
1.1.5. Musical Silence as a Point of Intersection.....	12
1.1.6. Structure and Expression.....	13
1.2. Methods of Investigation	13
1.2.1. Every Piece is a Backdrop for its Own Silences	13
1.2.2. Tonality and Repertoire.....	14
1.2.3. Classifications	15
1.2.4. Examples	16
1.2.5. Subtlety.....	17

Contents

1.3. Integrations to the Frame	17
1.3.1. Hearing	17
1.3.2. Rhetoric and Functions.....	18
1.3.3. Two Key Concepts	18
1.3.4. Rests and Silences	19
Part Two: Differing Silences	21
2.1. Silence... and, One.....	22
2.2. Silence in the Listener: Bach, Fantasia BWV 906	22
2.3. Silence that Surrounds Music: Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 3.....	23
Part Three: Functional Silences	27
3.1. Silence in Music: The Pause.....	28
3.2. The Spatial Silence: Vivaldi, Trio Sonata Op. 1, No. 12 “ <i>La Follia</i> ”	29
3.3. Scenographic Silence: Allegri, <i>Miserere</i>	32
3.4. Rationalistic Silence: Mozart, Sonata KV 296 for Piano and Violin.....	34
3.5. The Syntax of Silence: Mozart, Sonata KV 533 for Piano.....	36
3.6. Silence and Energy: Beethoven, 9th Symphony.....	38
3.7. Silence and Form: Chopin, Ballade No. 1, Op. 23	40
3.7.1. The Introductory Largo: A Crescendo of Silence	40
3.7.1.1. The First Refrain	41
3.7.1.2. The Refrain as a Place of Silence.....	42
3.7.1.3. The Second Refrain: From Silence to Scream	43
3.7.1.4. The Third Refrain: From Fullness to Silence.....	43
3.7.1.5. Silence as a Formal Barycentre	44

Contents

3.8. Silence to Effect: Gershwin, Three Preludes.....	44
Part Four: Expressive Silences.....	47
4.1. Evoked Silences.....	48
4.1.1. The Evocation of Silence: Bach, <i>Orgelbüchlein</i>	48
4.1.2. The Silence of <i>Logos</i> : Bach, Violin Sonatas and Partitas.....	48
4.1.3. Silence and Beauty: Horowitz Plays Scarlatti.....	50
4.1.4. The Theatre of Thought: Gilels Plays Mozart.....	51
4.2. Silence and the Shadows	53
4.2.1. The Silence of Shadows: Bach, the <i>St. Matthew Passion</i>	53
4.2.2. The Enigmatic Silence: Mozart, 12 Variations on “ <i>Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman</i> ”	56
4.2.2.1. Brilliant Style	56
4.2.2.2. The Enigmatic Silence	57
4.2.2.3. Coming out of the Silence.....	59
4.2.3. The Shattered Silence: Mahler, 5th Symphony	60
4.3. Silence and the Imaginary	62
4.3.1. The Memory of Silence: Wagner, <i>Tannhäuser</i>	62
4.3.2. The Silence of Absence: Debussy, <i>Des pas sur la neige</i>	64
4.3.3. The Imaginary Silence: Bartók, <i>The Night’s Music</i>	66
4.3.3.1. The New Idea of Nocturne	66
4.3.3.2. Sonorous Presences	67
4.3.3.3. Involuntary Polyphony	67
4.3.3.4. Music in Layers.....	68

Contents

4.3.3.5. The Eclipse of the Eye	69
4.3.3.6. A Voice Swallowed by Silence	69
Part Five: Playing Silence	71
5.1. The Eloquent Silence: Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 7	72
5.2. The Disturbing Silence: Backhaus Plays Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 7	73
5.3. The Architectural Silence: Kempff Plays Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 7	77
5.4. The Rediscovered Silence: Gilels Plays Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 7	79
5.5. The Measure of Silence: Gulda Plays Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 7	82
Conclusion	85
References	87
Acknowledgments	91

Introduction: Music and Silence

Fragility

Marginality

Splendour

Plurality

Concentration

Crossed Perspectives

Classical Music

Fragility

Has it ever crossed your mind? Silence is a fragile quality, given that it is *easily broken*. It takes so little: a whisper, a creak, the fateful coughing fit between one concert piece and another. Worse still, there's the unwrapping of a sweet with the presumption of doing it "without disturbing" yet actually drawing the torture out into a lengthy agony... and the silence has been broken, lost, and violated. One of the characteristics of silence is its being *permanently at risk*. Lévinas argues that freedom consists in knowing that freedom is in peril (Lévinas, 1961). Perhaps, truly experiencing silence is to know that silence too is in peril.

There is another way in which silence is fragile; silence *cannot be strengthened*. Many things can be made stronger – a table, a house, an opinion – but not silence, because silences cannot be added together or multiplied. From this perspective sound and silence are asymmetric. Noises, voices and the sounds of instruments join together; a choir sings louder than a single voice. Silence, is silence. It is true that silence in the plural differs from the singular and that the silence of many can be particularly impressive, but it is its intensity and depth that increase, *not its force*. The silence of a hushed multitude is as defenceless as that of a single person. A thousand arms offer better defence than just two; however, the silence of an entire stadium is shattered by the sound of a coin falling down the steps just as that of an individual would be.

In contexts in which it is precious – in music, for example – silence is like a stake consistently laid on the line, and a unique species *living with the risk of extinction*.

Marginality

The opinion that music and silence are profoundly linked is widespread (Migliaccio, 2004; Brunello, 2014), and in some cases

silence has become a part of the poetic nucleus of composers, such as John Cage (1961).

However, it does not appear that silence has a central role in musical theory, critique, or analysis, or for that matter in the history or didactics of music. In the field of teaching classical piano, for example, I have heard *lifting the finger from the key* (the action with which one ceases a sound after having produced it) approached as an important part of piano technique only by the pianist Riccardo Zadra. Similarly, only the clarinettist François Benda has, to my knowledge, spoken in detail about how to “play” pauses in different contexts. In musical theory the situation is no different; a well-known manual on harmony such as that of Walter Piston (1941), which is a wide reaching text, does not even attempt to apply its approach to the use of pauses and rests.

But the field most in need of being unearthed is the analysis of repertoire: who would write a history of silence in music? Silence – most fragile of things – waits in the wings. It hides in the cracks (Gasparini, 1998); it fades into the background; it tends to vanish beneath the lumbering presence of sound.

Splendour

Yet there are many reasons why we should concern ourselves with silence; fragility and marginality are not the only *residual* qualities that, when transformed into values, render it precious. There is another that comes from visual experience: in silence, things sparkle. This phenomenon can be seen in the works of the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi: a bottle, a funnel or a vase – everyday objects we distractedly see each day – take on a subdued splendour as the artist *immerses them in a world of silence*, and they become full of meaning.

An even more impressive example comes from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In the final part of the film, following an orgy of sounds, colours, shapes and noises flying off towards *Jupiter and Beyond The Infinite*, there is a long section in which all background noise is completely absent, and movements are reduced to a minimum. The effect is paradoxical and estranging, yet the colours take on an unprecedented prominence and brightness. One reason is that in fact the silence, which acts as a *dark background* through contrast *draws to evidence both colours and forms*.

In late antiquity, Neoplatonic tradition added the classical idea of beauty being found in the proportion of a part to other parts, the idea of splendour as beauty – like light that is emitted and spread from within (Tatarkiewicz, 1980). Silence undoubtedly has much in common with the latter. Admittedly, music is listened to, not seen, yet silence plays an important role in the splendour that irradiates from it.

Plurality

There is silence and silence, we all know that (Gasparini, 2012). Even in everyday life each silence differs from the next. The first step, therefore, is to consider silence *in the plural*: the diversity of silences implied in music is striking. There is the silence that surrounds sounds and the one inside the listener, the silence of the audience and that of the performer. There is also the infinite variety of silences *inside the music*; they range emotionally from surprise to deep sentiments, they are used as building blocks for rapturous contemplation, and they can be firmly intended or gently evoked. Seen this way, silence is made up much like light in a prism, capable of emitting a myriad of differing tones. “Music and silence” (a noble argument, more adapt for an exquisitely philosophical investigation) will therefore not be our

theme, rather “the silences in the music”. Much like the fearful demons in the Gospel of Mark, when called upon to identify themselves, the silences in music might well reply:

My name is Legion, for we are many.
(Mark, 5:9)

Concentration

The silences in music, however, are not the same as those in day to day life. Roger Scruton (2009) reminds us that music begins where natural sounds finish. Musical notes are sounds that are *free from their physical causes* (a glass that falls and breaks, a breath of wind passing dunes in the desert, the meow of a hungry cat). They are recomposed in a space that is subject to laws that differ from those which govern the movement of bodies. This separation, this clean cut from any concrete reality, opens and inaugurates a new space that is expressive, figurative, metaphoric (I am using my own words, but hope to have remained true to the heart of the idea).

One of the most significant consequences of this artificiality of music, we will add, is its extraordinary power to *concentrate emotions and experiences*. A piece of music is a universe in which everything is significant, every detail is full of meaning, every link counts, and chance is virtually abolished (at least if we consider tonal music composed between the end of the sixteen-hundreds and the end of the eighteen-hundreds).

The result: a ten-minute or half-hour piece of music can give us the impression of involving and recapitulating a number of emotional, intellectual, sentimental and cognitive experiences that our everyday lives would take weeks, months or years to put together. *Music concentrates the experience*.

This is also true for silences. In the emotionally concentrated context of music, a pause of just a few seconds can sound and resound like *an abyss* of silence, *an inferno* of silence, *an ocean* of silence. And the concentration is not only quantitative: musical silences have a specific weight that is far greater than that of everyday life. In music there are no absent-minded silences, distracted silences, ignorant silences, or banal silences. The silences in music are numerous and diverse, it is true, but they are all without exception *on the side of fullness of meaning*.

Crossed Perspectives

So, how shall we proceed? *We will be taking a closer look at pieces we already know*, to find out if there is silence in their fibre. In truth, this requires asking ourselves a few questions. “In this piece, does silence play a meaningful role or not?” The answer here cannot be taken for granted, as magnificent pieces exist in which it does not – a clear example: the first Prelude and Fugue of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. If the answer is yes, the next question must be: “Which silences do we regard?”, after which we must then ask: “Which types of silence are they, what are their functions, and how are they used?”, and so on.

Hence, throughout this research, silence is understood *as a possible viewpoint on music*. Through it we can reconsider pieces, which perhaps we think we know well, from a new angle, using a perspective from which we not only listen to sounds, but also – and more importantly – *listen to silences*. The dynamics of silences is, therefore, a possible key to better understanding and interpreting music in its complexity and richness. As we hope to demonstrate, silences are an integral part of the architectural, expressive and communicative strategies of composers; in some cases they are also a key for

interpretation that we can use to unlock deeper understanding of the pieces. The very principal of tonality takes elements as being tightly interconnected; likewise the interaction between silence and other expressive components is of great importance. An investigation that puts silences rather than sounds first can expose unexpected aspects of the heritage that makes up our musical traditions.

The opposite is also true. As fascinating as silence is, its core is both formless and elusive and it evades us or dissuades us from approaching it head on, directly. To get close to it, to question it, to understand it there is need of a method, be it a procedure, a discipline or a language (Demetrio, 2012; Comolli, 2012; Mancino, 2013). All in all, *a point of view* is required, whether it be a philosophy, a form of meditation or a study in communication. Music can truly be one of these viewpoints, a possible doorway into the world of silence (Picard, 1954). In a turnaround of the situation, we can therefore say that *it is music that can better our understanding of silence*. Holding sounds up to the light, examining the cracks and interrogating the pauses can help us paraphrase Duccio Demetrio's apt expression, to... bring silence out of silence.

Classical Music

In this book we will study examples taken from that shared heritage which is commonly known as “classical music”. This expression is not meant as an historical category to indicate the period of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, rather, it is the general meaning which indicates a vast repertoire covering almost three centuries. What follows is particularly valid for *tonal music*, which is neither “music” nor *all* the music in the world. For the sake of simplicity, however, we choose to use the single word “music”, to refer to “that form of tonal

music commonly known as classical music” – an expression that we, and hopefully you the reader, are happy to abbreviate.

Overview of the Book

A new and original approach to classical music – listened to, explained and described from the point of view of silence. The pianist and musicologist Emanuele Ferrari shows us the importance and many meanings that the pauses and silences in music can have. Pieces we thought we knew, like Beethoven's Ninth or Chopin's First Ballade, take on an entirely new aspect, as though we were listening to them for the very first time. This book offers new avenues to scholars, and offers the public an extraordinary opportunity to see deep inside the forges of the great composers.

About the Author

Emanuele Ferrari is a pianist and researcher in musicology and the history of music at Università di Milano-Bicocca. He has given concerts, concert-lessons, master classes, lectures and presentations at conferences, and published papers in Italy, Switzerland, France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Cyprus, Columbia, Brazil and the United States. He is one of the founders of the Academy of Silence (Accademia del Silenzio). For his work he has been awarded the Silver Award at the Reimagine Education Awards 2016.

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