

Experimental Music and the Anthropocene: From Thoreau to Cage and Werder

Dr Ben Byrne



Amager Fælled, Copenhagen



Actualisation of Manfred Werder's *2005(1)* recorded at Amager Fælled in Copenhagen on Friday June 19 2015

Since the Industrial Revolution there has been pronounced and continuing change in sonic ecosystems around the world as a result of human activities, part of what is now sometimes referred to as the Anthropocene. This change has been documented by numerous authors – Henry David Thoreau, Emily Thompson and R Murray Schafer, to name only a few. How, though, is it possible to engage with this change, both in order to hear it and to find ways to address it? Tracing lines of flight from Thoreau's journals to John Cage's writings and Manfred Werder's text scores, I have found that experimental music addresses this question by developing listening practices that raise awareness of and engagement with listeners' environments. Actualising Manfred Werder's text score *2005(1)* has demonstrated to me that such listening practices can place listeners within their environments and so offer not only a way of hearing environmental change but a way of reconceiving the relationship of listeners to their environments.

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* records his time living at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. He built himself a cabin on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson and lived there, attempting a simpler life. Notably, one whole chapter of the book is dedicated to the sounds he heard while living there and the thoughts they engendered in him. He writes particularly of hearing the whistles of trains through the woods, remarking that the 'startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village day'. Though along with the trains of progress, he heard the voice of the woods themselves. He tells of an experience hearing the tolling of church bells:

All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood, the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph.

He heard the space of the forest in the music of the bells. 'Nature makes no noise', he found, 'the howling storm – the rustling leaf – the pattering rain – are no disturbance, there is an essential and unexplored harmony in them'. This would seem merely an interesting anecdote but for the fact that it is echoed in Henri Bergson's assertion that disorder is merely a different order than that which was being sought, which in turn resounds in John Cage's conception of experimental music.

The 'silent piece' 4'33" is arguably the most well known of Cage's works, the story of its premiere retold throughout sound studies and the piece credited with reconceptualising the relationship between composer, performer and audience in the concert hall. However, Cage too ventured into the woods. In his famous book *Silence* he notes:

I have spent many pleasant hours in the woods conducting performances of my silent piece – transcriptions, that is, for an audience of myself, since they were much longer than the popular length which I have had published. At one performance, I passed the first movement by attempting the identification of a mushroom, which remained successfully unidentified. The second movement was extremely dramatic, beginning with the sounds of a buck and a doe leaping up to within ten feet of my rocky podium. The expressivity of this movement was not only dramatic but unusually sad from my point of view, for the animals were frightened simply because I was a human being. However, they left hesitatingly and fittingly within the structure of the work. The third movement was a return to the theme of the first.

Cage hears music in the life of the woods. He listens to his encounters as if but part of a melody 'echoing from vale to vale', an expression of the indissoluble relations of time and place, of which he, as a listening subject, is part. Subject, that is, to the woods as much as they were subject to him, for, like Thoreau, he both hears the impact of humanity on nature and that of nature on humanity. While one hears the whistles of the trains call all to attention and other hears the way the deer are startled by his intrusion into the woods, both attempt to express the profound experience of being in nature. The music Cage hears, moreover, is specific to his experience as a listener, as he articulated with his famous line 'I have become a listener and the music has become something to hear'.

Listening is central too to the work of Swiss composer Manfred Werder, a member of the Wandelweiser collective of composers, improvisers and performers. The group, though sonically and philosophically diverse, shares an interest in the work of Cage, particularly with respect to the role of silence in music. This is clearly demonstrated by Werder's piece *2005(1)*. The work's text score includes only the words ort, zeit, klänge, or, place, time, sounds. Werder prefers not to offer much direction beyond the score itself and instead is interested in the ways in which musicians interpret the score for what he calls 'actualisations' of the piece. He has, however, said of the work, 'I wanted to mark in the score that which emerges through the absence of produced sounds'. Cage's incorporation of all sound into music with his 'silent piece' has come frequently to be heard as an 'end of history', a conceptual and aesthetic point in music from which it is impossible to continue. Although many writings on experimental music and sonic art hinge on Cage's contribution and resounding influence, it is nonetheless considered as some kind of 'crisis'. Werder's work, however, engages with the implications of Cage's findings and offers new possibilities.

2005(1) has been performed around the world by numerous musicians in a wide variety of ways. Indeed, the Another Timbre label has established an online project dedicated to publishing recordings of different interpretations of the piece. Many of the actualisations are based on field recordings but a number employ acoustic instrumentation, musique concrète, the manipulation of electronics and other approaches, each involving composition, performance and listening, to varying extents.

I performed and recorded my own actualisation of *2005(1)* in Amager Fælled, a commons on the island of Amager, while attending the Fluid Sounds 2015 conference in Copenhagen. I stood with my back to the path and hit record on my portable audio recorder, listening to the sounds around me. The traffic, hum of the city and wind in the trees sounded inseparable. I identified the sounds of people going past behind me occasionally, a variety of birds and a train passing nearby. I became more and more aware of the construction site before me, ominously silent. But most of what I heard I could not, cannot, differentiate. It is too complex. The conscious performance of listening in that place and time made me aware of the interrelationships between the landscape, weather and wildlife, as well as the approaching city and myself as a listener. After finishing my performance, I turned to find someone standing at the edge of the path, watching and listening, prompted by my presence and conspicuous recording equipment, no doubt. She smiled and walked away. Although my experience was individual, someone else encountered it and experienced it themselves, as you can do now with the help of this text and the accompanying recording. My presence had an impact. I was part of the contingencies around me. I was part of the environment.

According to Cage's definition, music is experimental if its outcome is unknown. As he has noted, the experience for each listener is different and so even if a work is rigorously determined by a composer, it may not be so for audiences – 'a composer knows his work as a woodsman knows a path he has traced and retraced, while a listener is confronted by the same work as one is in the woods by a plant he has never seen before'. All the more, if a piece is indeterminate – as is the case with many of Cage's works and with *2005(1)* – the outcome is unknown to all. In both cases, experimental music offers listeners a chance to hear music for themselves, to avoid labeling anything as extra-musical. Experimental music is music that is determined only in the listening of particular subjects, music that resists being treated as a discrete, reproducible commodity and is, instead, specific to time, place and perspective, developing listening practices that can help not only to hear humanity's impact on the environment but to hear ourselves as part of that environment, to hear environmental change as change that involves everyone.