

The silence between, before and after: A concert analysis

LUKE VILLAVICENCIO

Special to The Leader

“Music is the silence between the notes.”

– Claude Debussy

Rosch Recital Hall, Oct. 22 — You could hear a pin drop.

The crowd is quiet and the Ekstasis Duo, made up of Fredonia's own Dr. Natasha Farny (cello) and Dr. Eliran Avni (piano), has taken the stage, yet, for a gorgeous moment outside of time, neglects to play.

Farny is staring passionately into the balcony as if she's seen the bittersweet ghost of a dear friend. Avni is delicately scanning the ivory-painted keys, planning the powerfully graceful route his hand will take during the next 10 minutes of Sergei Prokofiev's “Ballade in C minor”.

Despite this extended silence and stillness, they still have everyone's attention; we are all frozen with them.

This intentional inflection is a beautiful example of a concept known as framing. Silence is to music as the wooden frame or plain beige wall is to a painting, hence “framing.” In the case of music you can have smaller sections of a larger piece each in their own little frame, thereby complementing the sound with the lack of sound.

“I love the energy that one can create when one takes risks like this,” said Farny, “allowing for the space [between the notes] to happen.”

Preceding and appending a piece of music with complete silence can create a great contrast between the music and everything else — such as the daily stresses of the audience or even simply the pop song you've had stuck in your head. It adds professionalism through the means of attention that separates the concert hall musician from the buskers at Penn Station.

In a conversation with the head of Fredonia's composition department, Dr. Rob Deemer, the compositional perspective of the inclusion of silence in music was brought to light: “As a composer, I think silence is both an important ingredient in music but also one that depends a lot on the style and context of the piece... However, I try my best to make sure that the music that I'm writing is connected in some way to life itself and specifically how we as humans live and breathe, which necessitates us being quiet from time to time.”

As composers and performers, we are enamored with the sound we create — if you hear a critic talk about a performance, they'll likely talk about the effective use of each instrument and the beautifully-crafted melody in one particular movement. But it's the silence that comes somewhat unexpectedly right when we are engaged in some climax or expressive figure that creates that almost unexplainable feeling. The performers are frozen in place. The audience is frozen with them, ironically holding our breath while the music breathes.

There is a famous, or infamous, depending on who you ask, piece of music written by the composer John Cage in 1952 simply titled 4'33" (four minutes and thirty-three seconds) named

after its duration.

If you are unfamiliar with this composition, it is a piece of music without any playing: four-and-a-half minutes of silence. This, of course, was extremely controversial from the day it premiered to this day, as it lives on as a joke of sorts with most music students.

The writer, music critic, musicologist and professor of music at Bard College, Kyle Gann, writes in his book “No Such Thing As Silence” a quote from Cage about the very first time this piece was performed as well as the following days. “They didn't laugh — they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry.”

Gann goes on to say how people got up to leave during the performance because of how mad they were — they viewed this intentional silence as a waste of time despite its clear purpose to deliver a message. “To Cage, it seemed, at least from what he wrote about it, to have been an act of framing, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention.”

While I'm not going to sit here and justify 4'33" as music (I would but The Leader might send me a bill for the cost of all the extra paper and ink (Kyle Gann did it much better than I could anyway)), I will say that it is extreme while also making a necessary point about the value of silence, rather, the value of sound in context to silence.

This was not Cage's main intention as the piece was rooted in his theory that any auditory experience can count as music and that the small sounds that sprouted during the “silence” were music, but in the context of our modern, boisterous world, the interpretation of the piece changes, at least to me.

In my milling about in the world I often try to avoid, I've noticed something in most people within the millennial generation and younger: everyone has earbuds in their ears. This isn't going to turn into a curmudgeon lecturing “the kids these days” on attention spans, reliance on devices and whatnot, I simply wish to bring attention to this new need for constant sound or background noise.

This, like all habits and dependencies, has psychological reasoning. In a Huffington Post article on background noise, it was denoted that this is caused by avoidance. “Background noise may be used in an attempt to distract from or avoid unpleasant emotions and thoughts.”

This is completely understandable but can go on to have very negative effects on your mental health, in a way similar to the common coping mechanism of ‘bottling it up’; your emotions are left unaddressed and may continue to fester.

The article states, “Basically, you aren't able to work through the anxiety; you're just pushing it under the rug again and again. While this is certainly understandable, it's not the most helpful.”

I didn't initially intend for this article to tangentially arrive at a call to action for those who may be dealing with heavy conflicts and pressures, but mental health in college students is commonly considered to be poor (I refuse to attempt to choose just one source for this as I'd wager there are no sources proving



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the opposite). As an advocate for therapy and constantly bettering oneself, I feel this topic I've stumbled on (not unlike how one may stumble on the anxieties they've pushed under the rug) is worth a world of attention. I'll also add that you don't even need to muster up the confidence to pay a stranger to confide in, I encourage the idea that therapy exists sometimes the strongest within those we love.

I, myself, have been working on my mental health and anxieties more than I have in the past and I'm finding that the fear of silence, sometimes referred to as sedatephobia, that I and many others experience when left in a room with nothing but our thoughts is beginning to fade. Through addressing my emotions as they arise and intentionally exposing myself to the silence, I've come to love and look forward to it.

I'll bring it back to the idea of framing; in indulging in silence from time to time, you're framing the moments in your life; you're allowing the beauty of your existence, the sounds of your world, to breathe. And you guessed it — that breathing room only makes it more beautiful (or at the very least more tolerable).

In music, adding more silence to your life makes music more beautiful when you once again get a chance to listen to it. Many of us can't just go for a quiet walk, cook dinner, clean or relax without having one of our favorite playlists on.

But we can gain a new appreciation for music if we deprive ourselves of it to put an end to our glutinous consumption of music and gratuitous dissociation with the world around us.

The final piece of the concert, a Ritournelle by Vítězslava Kaprálová, ends strongly with two accented notes on the cello and two chords hammered fortissimo on the piano in perpetuity.

Then, once again, silence.

Avni's hands are floating above the keys he was just touching and Farny has her bow held in the air as we all feel the spirit of the final notes drift away like the snow-white rosin dust coming off of the horse hairs that then slowly disappear into the atmosphere of the recital hall.

We're all caught, for the final time that night, holding our breath.

Though the applause and a standing ovation eventually broke the silence, these moments got me thinking about the famous quote by Claude Debussy that I began with: it sounds rather incomplete.

In my pre-professional opinion, he should have said that music is the silence between, before and after the notes. If you're listening to music all day and then you go to a concert, you're just continuing the noise that has permeated your day, right?

While I don't have a fully-fledged theory of what is or isn't music, I can say that it definitely has to do with the value of the sounds. Similar to how dining hall food may get old after a while of eating it, or how words that get frequently repeated may lose meaning after a while, music, after being played all the time, may lose its value (unless you're using music as a way to hide from your emotions as we talked about).

If what someone would usually have considered a beautiful melody was played on repeat every hour of every day of the year, they wouldn't consider it beautiful anymore; they'd either go insane or their mind would eventually register it as just noise. There's a reason why we call them "pieces" of music or "pieces" of art and that's because we can only enjoy them in pieces. If there were, say, a whole metaphorical Art, we'd just feel bloated and not want anymore.

These thoughts that I've expressed, funnily enough, all stem from my earbuds dying early in my senior year of high school. I made the fifteen-minute walk to and from school every day in silence and boy did they fly by. I simply took in the sound of the wind rustling, the leaves and cars flying past me, the birds and squirrels quietly minding their business, similar to myself. So I'll leave you with this: let your earbuds die.

Upcoming Fredonia School of Music Events (all in Rosch Recital Hall):

Brass Chamber Ensembles & Brass Choir – Mon, Oct. 30, 2023 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Student Composers Concert 2 – Tue, Oct. 31, 2023 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

8th Annual Claudette Sorel Piano Competition – Sunday, Nov. 5, 2023 12 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Fredonia Percussion Ensemble – Mon, Nov. 6, 2023 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Guitar Chamber Ensembles – Thu, Nov. 9, 2023 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.